

## Myth in the Making

i

Robert S. Mueller III [director of the FBI] and Secretary of State Powell read from the Bible. Mr. Mueller's theme was good versus evil. "We do not wrestle against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers over the present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places," he said, reading from Ephesians 6:12–18.

Mr. Powell, who followed, touched on trust in God. "Therefore do not be anxious about tomorrow, for tomorrow will be anxious about itself," Mr. Powell said, reading from Matthew 6:25–34.<sup>1</sup>

In choosing [the World Trade Center] as their target the terrorists perversely dramatized the supremacy of the free market and of the political system intimately associated with it in the United States and elsewhere, democracy, as defining features of the world of the twenty-first century.

—*Michael Mandelbaum*<sup>2</sup>

If the burning of the German Parliament (Reichstag) in 1933 produced the symbolic event portending the destruction of parliamentary government by dictatorship, the destruction of the World Trade Center and the attack upon the Pentagon on September 11, 2001, were a revelatory moment in the history of American political life.

What did the selected targets symbolize? Unlike the Reichstag fire the attacks were not aimed at what could be characterized as the architecture of constitutional democracy and the system of power that it represented. Neither the congressional buildings nor the White House was

attacked;<sup>3</sup> nor were the symbols of democracy, not the Statue of Liberty, the Lincoln Memorial, or Independence Hall. Instead the buildings symbolic of financial and military power were struck practically simultaneously. Once the United States declared war on terrorism, attention naturally focused on the projection abroad of the actual forms of globalizing power symbolized by the targets of 9/11. Yet the impact of 9/11 may prove equally significant in accelerating the threat to the domestic system of power whose architectural symbols were ignored.

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On cue to 9/11 the media—television, radio, and newspapers—acted in unison, fell into line, even knew instinctively what the line and their role should be.<sup>4</sup> What followed may have been the modern media's greatest production, its contribution to what was promptly—and darkly—described as a “new world.” Their vivid representations of the destruction of the Twin Towers, accompanied by interpretations that were unwavering and unquestioning, served a didactic end of fixing the images of American vulnerability while at the same time testing the potential for cultural control.

The media produced not only an iconography of terror but a fearful public receptive to being led, first by hailing a leader, the mayor of New York, Rudolf Giuliani, and then by following one, the president of the United States, George W. Bush.<sup>5</sup> As one pundit wrote approvingly, “the fear that is so prevalent in the country [worked as] a cleanser, washing away a lot of the self-indulgence of the past decade.” Washed in the blood of the lambs . . . Actually, those who could afford self-indulgence would continue to do so while those who could not would send their sons and daughters to Afghanistan and Iraq.

September 11 was quickly consecrated as the equivalent of a national holy day, and the nation was summoned to mourn the victims. Soon thereafter, when memory receded, the date itself was perpetuated and made synonymous with terrorism.<sup>6</sup> On the second anniversary of the event “a senior White House official” explained the two different rituals of grieving adopted by the president: “Last year you had an open

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wound, physically and metaphorically. This year it is about healing—you don't ever want to forget, and the war goes on, but the spiritual need is different."<sup>7</sup>

September 11 was thus fashioned into a primal event, the principal reference point by which the nation's body politic was to be governed and the lives of its members ordered. From the crucified to the redeemer-nation.

But was it "holy politics" or wholly politics?<sup>8</sup> How was it possible for a notably gimlet-eyed administration, flaunting its prowess for unchristian hardball politics, to overlay its unabashed corporate culture with the cloak of piety without tripping itself up? To be sure, its devotional mien would occasionally be joked about. The jokes, however, would trail off, as though the jokesters themselves were uneasy about mocking some higher powers. That the overwhelming majority of Americans declare they "believe in God" is likely to give pause to expressions of irreverence.

In attempting to characterize an emerging symbolic system reported as "a spontaneous outpouring," one must bear in mind that, although pressures from the administration were undoubtedly at work, television largely conscripted itself. Unprompted, stations replayed endlessly the spectacle of the collapsing Twin Towers while newspapers, in a macabre version of Andy Warhol's prediction of fifteen minutes of fame for everyone, published continuing stories of heroism and self-sacrifice by firemen and police and thumbnail biographies of individual victims.<sup>9</sup> The media then announced, disingenuously, that "9/11 had forever been printed on the national consciousness." Which is to say, the date was enshrined and readied, not merely to justify but to sanctify the power of those pledged to be its avengers.<sup>10</sup>

In a society where freedom of speech, media, and religion are guaranteed, where quirkiness is celebrated, why was the result unison? How is it that a society that makes a fetish of freedom of choice can produce a unanimity eerily comparable to that of a more openly coercive system? Is it a process like the "hidden hand" of Adam Smith's free market where, unprompted by any central directorate, the uncoordinated actions of individuals, each concerned to advance his self-interest, nonetheless produce an overall effect that is good for all?

Smith's model assumes that all of the actors are similarly motivated by rational self-interest, but the aftermath of 9/11, its production and reproduction, is remarkable for the incongruity of the actors, for the diversity of motivations that nonetheless were combined to perpetuate a spectacular moment that permitted only one response. September 11 became that rare phenomenon in contemporary life, an unambiguous truth, one that dissolved contradictions, the ambiguities of politics, the claims and counterclaims of political ideologies and pundits. Critics transformed themselves into penitents defending a preventive war as just and celebrating a constitution sufficiently flexible to be suspended at the pleasure of the chief executive. The truth of 9/11 did more than set free the nation's citizens; it rendered them innocent, able to repress their involvement in the vast expanse of power of empire and globalization, and to ask plaintively, "Why does the rest of the world hate us?"

What explains and promotes such unanimity? In an earlier time it was common to liken the free circulation of ideas to competition in a free marketplace: the best ideas, like the superior product, would prevail over inferior competitors. In the highly structured marketplace of ideas managed by media conglomerates, however, sellers rule and buyers adapt to what the same media has pronounced to be "mainstream." Free circulation of ideas has been replaced by their managed circularity. The self-anointed keepers of the First Amendment flame encourage exegesis and reasonable criticism. Critics who do not wish to be considered as "off-the-wall" attract buyers by internalizing co-optation. Accepting the conventions of criticism entails accepting the context created and enforced by the "house" voices. The result is an essentially monochromatic media. In-house commentators identify the problem and its parameters, creating a box that dissenters struggle vainly to elude. The critic who insists on changing the context is dismissed as irrelevant, extremist, "the Left"—or ignored altogether. A more sophisticated structure embraces the op-ed page and letters to the editor. In theory everyone is free to submit articles or letters, but the newspaper chooses what suits its purpose with meager explanation of standards for acceptance—although it is obvious that the selected opinions represent limits set by the editors. From the paper's viewpoint the best of all worlds is attained when the authors of op-ed pieces or letters criticize

not the paper but its pundits, who are carefully selected according to a Dorothy Parker principle of representing all opinions in the range between A and B.<sup>11</sup> The point is the appearance of freedom: critics are encouraged to “score points.” to trade insults, although these jabs do not add up to anything beyond venting.

The responsibility of the responsible media includes maintaining an ideological “balance” that treats the “Left” and the “Right” as polar opposites as well as moral and political equivalents. Over the years the *New York Times* has faithfully discharged that responsibility. In 1992 it featured a story about South Africa, still struggling with the effects of apartheid. The reporter interviewed some young black people who favored a war to “end the colonial settler regime.” That sentiment gave the *Times* reporter the sense that he was caught in “some cold war time warp.” It inspired him to balance off the anticolonial rebels by inserting a description of an Afrikaner neo-Nazi gang who wanted “a people’s army.” His conclusion: “the two groups have much in common.” One of their commonalities, he discovered, was the small numbers in each group. After “a two-hour conversation” with the blacks he was ready with his conclusion: the conversation was “a refresher course in the ideological lexicon that has been discredited from Moscow to Mogadishu.”<sup>12</sup>

iii

By the most recent count, more than three thousand innocent persons were murdered on September 11 without apparent provocation or justification. The damage to property and the impact upon the city of New York and upon the general economy were enormous. These facts, at once familiar yet impossible to fully comprehend, had a stark and brutal immediacy. Quantitatively they were as crudely “real” as reality is ever likely to be. Since then the reality of that day has been reproduced in a variety of guises and practical applications that are, in their own way, as amazing as the event invoked to justify them.

The nation was immediately declared to be at war against an enemy whose nature, number, and location were largely unknown. Nonethe-

less, “enemy aliens” were rounded up and held under constitutionally dubious conditions. The nation’s population was periodically placed on a state of alert. The powers of government were expanded and made more intrusive, while simultaneously its social welfare functions were radically scaled back. Amidst a faltering economy, widening disparities between social classes, and escalating national debt, the administration responded by promoting its own version of “class actions.” It became more aggressively biased in favor of the wealthier, while, equally significant, the less wealthy and poor remained politically apathetic, unable to find a vehicle for expressing their helplessness. A provocative foreign policy was adopted with the aim of releasing American power from the restraints of treaties and of cooperation with allies. “At some point,” a senior administration official warned, “the Europeans with butterflies in their stomachs—many of whom didn’t want us to go into Afghanistan—will see that they have a bipolar choice: they can get with the plan [to invade Iraq] or get off.”<sup>13</sup> New enemy states were identified, not as hostile or enemy but as “evil,” and threatened. The notion of preemptive war was embraced and put into practice against Iraq.

The general effect of this expansion of powers created a new world where everything became larger-than-life, strange, filled with huge powers locked in a contest that would determine the fate of the world: “Axis of Evil,” “weapons of mass destruction,” “civilization against barbarism.” The reality of September 11 became clothed in a myth that dramatized an encounter between two world-contending powers and prophesied that after severe trials and marvelous events the power blessed by the Creator would triumph over the evil power.

The mythology created around September 11 was predominantly Christian in its themes. The day was converted into the political equivalent of a holy day of crucifixion, of martyrdom, that fulfilled multiple functions: as the basis of a political theology, as a communion around a mystical body of a bellicose republic, as a warning against political apostasy, as a sanctification of the nation’s leader, transforming him from a powerful officeholder of questionable legitimacy into an instrument of redemption, and at the same time exhorting the congregants to a wartime militancy, demanding of them uncritical loyalty and support,

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summoning them as participants in a sacrament of unity and in a crusade to “rid the world of evil.”<sup>14</sup> Holy American Empire?

iv

Myth, in its original form [in ancient Greece], provided answers without ever explicitly formulating the problems. When [Greek] tragedy takes over the mythical traditions, it uses them to pose problems to which there are no solutions.

—*Jean-Pierre Vernant*<sup>15</sup>

Let us weigh the gain and the loss in wagering that God is.  
Let us estimate these two chances. If you gain, you gain all; if you lose, you lose nothing. Wager, then, without hesitation that He is.

—*Blaise Pascal*<sup>16</sup>

May God continue to bless America.

—*President George W. Bush*

In the aftermath of September 11 the American citizen was propelled into the realm of mythology, a new and different dimension of being, unworldly, where occult forces were bent on destroying a world that had been created for the children of light. Myth recounts a story, in this case of how the armies of light will arise from the ruins to battle and overcome the forces of darkness. Myth presents a narrative of exploits, not an argument or a demonstration. It does not make the world intelligible, only dramatic. In the course of its account the actions of the myth's heroes, no matter how bloody or destructive, acquire justification. They become privileged, entitled to take actions that are morally denied to others. No need to tally the Iraqi civilian casualties.

Myths come in many sizes and shapes. Our concern is with a particular species, the cosmic myth, and with a unique permutation that occurs when the cosmic myth is combined with secular myth. A cosmic myth might be defined as a dramatic form with epical aspirations. Its subject is not a simple contest but an inevitable, even necessary showdown be-

tween irreconcilable forces, each claiming that ultimately its power draws upon supernatural resources. Their capabilities far exceed the scales of ordinary politics. Typically, one force portrays itself as defending the world, and it depicts the other as seeking to dominate it by a perverse strategy that thrives on chaos. Although each possesses a different form of power from its rival, each claims that its power alone is drawn from a sacred source, that therefore it alone is blessed while its foe is diabolical. Not only are the claims of each party mutually exclusive of the other and impossible to disprove; each is intolerant of opposition (= doubt) and distrustful of a free and genuinely democratic politics.

In his State of the Union address of January 2007 President Bush, having suffered a clear defeat in the midterm elections of 2006 and a popular repudiation of his Iraq policies, responded by, in his turn, repudiating that most down-to-earth democratic process and called for increasing the troop levels in Iraq by more than twenty thousand troops. Defiantly the decider decided to transcend mere elections, ignoring their legitimizing role, and to substitute a mythical representation of the stakes. If American forces were to “step back before Baghdad is secure,” he warned, then chaos would threaten the world.

[T]he Iraqi government would be overrun by extremists on all sides. We could expect an epic battle between Shia extremists backed by Iran and Sunni extremists aided by Al Qaeda and supporters of the old regime. A contagion of violence could spill out across the country, and in time the entire region could be drawn into the conflict.

For America this is a nightmare scenario. For the enemy, this is the objective. Chaos is their greatest ally in this struggle. And out of chaos in Iraq, would emerge an emboldened enemy with new safe havens, new recruits, new resources and an even greater determination to harm America.

The president then presented his contribution to the structure of inverted totalitarianism and in the process demonstrated that even when all of the main elements of a “free society” are in place—free elections, free media, functioning Congress, and the Bill of Rights—they can be ignored by an aggrandizing executive. First he emphasized



that the battle against chaos had no discernible end. “The war on terror,” he declaimed, “is a generational struggle that will continue long after you [i.e., Congress] and I have turned our duties over to others.” He then threw down the gauntlet to the vast majority of Americans and Congress by declaring that he would seek authorization from Congress to increase the army and Marine Corps by ninety-two thousand over five years, and, equally significant, he pressed Congress to assist in devising “a volunteer Civilian Reserve Corps.” That corps would, in effect, function as a private army. He envisaged a corps of “civilians with critical skills to serve on missions abroad when America needs them.”<sup>17</sup> A praetorian guard for the new empire?

v

In the early part of the twentieth century the great social and political theorist Max Weber wrote feelingly of the “disenchantment of the world” brought about by the triumph of scientific rationalism and skepticism. There was, he contended, no room any longer for occult forces, supernatural deities, or divinely revealed truth. In a world dominated by scientifically established facts and with no privileged or sacrosanct areas, myth would seemingly have a difficult time retaining a foothold.<sup>18</sup> Not only did Weber underestimate the staying power of credulity; he could not foresee that the great triumphs of modern science would themselves provide the basis for technological achievements which, far from banishing the mythical, would unwittingly inspire it.

The mythical is also nourished from another source, one seemingly more incongruous than the scientific-technological culture. Consider the imaginary world continuously being created and re-created by contemporary advertising and rendered virtually escape-proof by the enveloping culture of the modern media. Equally important, the culture produced by modern advertising, which seems at first glance to be resolutely secular and materialistic, the antithesis of religious and especially of evangelical teachings, actually reinforces that dynamic. Almost every product promises to change your life: it will make you more beautiful, cleaner, more sexually alluring, and more successful. Born again, as

it were. The messages contain promises about the future, unfailingly optimistic, exaggerating, miracle-promising—the same ideology that invites corporate executives to exaggerate profits and conceal losses, but always with a sunny face. The virtual reality of the advertiser and the “good news” of the evangelist complement each other, a match made in heaven. Their zeal to transcend the ordinary and their bottomless optimism both feed the hubris of Superpower. Each colludes with the other. The evangelist looks forward to the “last days,” while the corporate executive systematically exhausts the world’s scarce resources.

Virtual reality has about it the character of unreality, of transcending the ordinary world and its common smells and sights, its limiting rhythms of birth, growth, decline, death, and renewal. For Americans, the chosen people of advertising, technology, capitalist orthodoxy, and religious faith, the greatest triumph of virtual reality is war, the great unexperienced reality. Ever since the Civil War Americans have fought wars at a distance: in Cuba, the Philippines, France, on almost every other continent in World War II, then in Korea, Vietnam, the Middle East. War is an action game, played in the living room, or a spectacle on a screen, but, in either case, not actually experienced. Ordinary life goes on uninterruptedly: work, recreation, professional sports, family vacations. After 9/11 terrorism becomes another virtual reality, experienced only through its re-created images, its destructiveness (= wonders) absorbed through the spectacle of the occasional and hapless terrorist or captive journalist put on public display. In contrast, official policy decrees that the coffins of dead soldiers are not to be seen by the public.

vi

In an age poised between the scientific rationalism of modernity and a deeply skeptical postmodernity for which truth or fact is simply “another story” and irony a badge of courage, myth is no straightforward matter, no “easy sell” to a generation for whom cynicism is second nature. For reality to be transmuted into popular mythology certain conditions had to obtain, or be created; only then could the mythic become a defining element in both the popular understanding of the

post-September 11 world and the self-justifying rhetoric of the governing elite. That susceptible public is one whose secularism is continually overestimated and its credulousness underestimated, especially by liberals. There were many who believed in a virtual reality and marvels long before they were simulated. Additionally, when myth emerges, not in a prescientific or pretechnological world, but in a power-jaded world accustomed to scientific revolutions and technological marvels (cloning, man on the moon), and, at the same time, credulous—for such an audience myth has to portray prodigies of power that are both familiar and uncanny. Not space aliens armed with the weaponry of a more advanced civilization, an “above world,” but their opposite: primitive, satanic, invisible denizens of an “underworld” who (through devious money-laundering schemes) are able to purchase and operate contemporary technology. The power-jaded world, so jaded it names its own mythical champion “Superpower” after a comic strip character, will engage terrorism for control of the world. Before that contest can be cleanly represented, before power can be mythified, it needs a new world, a fresh context at once mythical and believable, though not necessarily credible.

When myth begins to govern decision-makers in a world where ambiguity and stubborn facts abound, the result is a disconnect between the actors and reality. They convince themselves that the forces of darkness possess weapons of mass destruction and nuclear capabilities; that their own nation is privileged by a god who inspired the Founding Fathers and the writing of the nation’s constitution; and that a class structure of great and stubborn inequalities does not exist. A grim but joyous few see portents of a world that is living out “the last days.”

That disconnect raises the question of what kind of politics could best restore reality, could press decision-makers to take account of it. Is it a politics dominated by a combination of the elite and the elect? or a politics more closely connected, not with “the” reality nor with those who are convinced of their power to remake reality on their own terms—a politics, rather, involving and representing those for whom reality is more stubborn, more a fact of life that has to be engaged daily?

Totalitarianism's Inversion:  
Beginnings of the Imaginary of a  
Permanent Global War

i

The fact of the matter is that there is a little bit of the totalitarian buried somewhere, way down deep, in each and every one of us. It is only the cheerful light of confidence and security which keeps this evil genius down. . . . If confidence and security were to disappear, don't think that he would not be waiting to take their place.

—George Kennan (1947)<sup>1</sup>

Is an American version of totalitarianism plausible, even conceivable? Or is inverted totalitarianism merely a contemporary libel imposed on an innocent past; or, perhaps, like profane love, an identity which cannot be acknowledged by a public discourse that assumes totalitarianism is the foreign enemy?

Underlying those questions is an important preliminary consideration: how would we go about detecting the signs of totalitarianism? how would we know what we are becoming? how, as a citizenry, would we set about separating what we are from the illusions we may have about who we are?

One could start by scrutinizing certain actions of the current administration (denial of due process, torture, sweeping assertions of executive power) and then decide whether they add up to, or are indicative of, a system that, while unique, could fairly be labeled totalitarian. One might go further and ponder the behavior of friends, neighbors, associates, and public figures, including politicians, celebrities, officials, and the police, and decide whether their actions contribute to or have a

place in a totalitarian scheme. Proceeding in this way would, however, not quite resolve the problem.

It is not alone what we observe but what we are becoming. What formative experiences of recent years could have made us, as a citizenry, contributors to the tendencies toward a totalitarianism? That question suggests a direction. That possibility, in turn, implies a past, a history of what we may have collectively experienced, sublimated, and perpetuated. In thus lending contemporary events historical depth we reset the limits of the plausible regarding what we are becoming as a people that could dispose us twice to approve an administration which has expanded presidential power beyond that claimed by any previous president, and to support a war founded on lies to the Congress and the public, a war that bears responsibility for the deaths of thousand of innocents, reduced to rubble a nation which had done us no harm, and burdened coming generations with a shameful and costly legacy—without generating massive revulsion and resistance.

*Antecedents* and *precedents*: both notions perpetuate past experiences. They raise the query, “What went before” that might have continuing effects? Plausibly one could ask, were there antecedents of inverted totalitarianism that could become precedents, and could some antecedents derive from opposed doctrines and political alignments, liberal as well as conservative, Democratic as well as Republican?

ii

More than a half century ago, and in sobriety, totalitarianism was imagined in a form that seemed plausible despite a political setting where there was virtual unanimity that totalitarianism was the exact antithesis of the nation’s understanding of itself. More than a half century ago, in the immediate aftermath of the Second World War, a war in which our main enemies were understood to be totalitarian regimes, Edward Corwin, a distinguished constitutional scholar of his day and no sci-fi enthusiast or radical, published a short book titled *Total War and the Constitution* (1947). Like many of his contemporaries Corwin was responding to the novel possibility of nuclear war. He tried to imagine

the kind of national transformation likely to occur in the event of a nuclear threat. There would be, he speculated, a streamlining of the system of constitutional government into a "functional totality":

the politically ordered participation in the war effort of all personal and social forces, the scientific, the mechanical, the commercial, the economic, the moral, the literary and artistic, and the psychological.<sup>2</sup>

Corwin depicted total mobilization of all "forces" as an instinctive reaction to a threat of annihilation emanating from "outside." In short, not a totalitarianism taking shape gradually but one mobilized as an immediate reaction setting off a radical transformation of the old structure of governance and the imposition of a new and, one would hope, temporary political identity. Corwin had depicted a totalitarian system resulting from a series of deliberate, self-conscious actions, a deviation provoked by an emergency of uncertain duration rather than an inversion evolving from a succession of seemingly unrelated, heedless decisions.

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Why should a sober and highly respected constitutional authority indulge in this particular flight of fancy? In depicting a state of war in the nuclear age, Corwin ventured beyond the actual mobilization of American society during the Second World War, beyond what Americans had experienced but not beyond what was known. Corwin's formulation could be described as an act of political imagination, a self-conscious projection of a state of affairs that did not in fact exist, involving an unidentified enemy at a time when no other nation possessed nuclear weapons. Yet he also extrapolated some elements (e.g., nuclear bombs) that did exist. Above all, looking backwards, he assumed that the recent wartime mobilization constituted the meaning of "total."

I want to pause over the idea of "political imagination" and its product, the "political imaginary." My concern is not so much with an individual thinker's formulation as with the consequences when a particu-

lar political imaginary gains a hold on ruling groups and becomes a staple of the general culture; and when the political actors and even the citizens become habituated to that imaginary, identified with it.

Bearing in mind that totalitarianism is first and foremost about power, we can see that the ideas of imagination and of the imaginary, while pointing toward the fanciful, are power-laden terms, striking because they seem to join power, fantasy, and unreality. Consider the following standard dictionary definitions:

imagination: The power which the mind has of forming concepts beyond those derived from external objects . . . a scheme, plot; a fanciful project.

imaginary: existing only in imagination . . . not really existing.<sup>3</sup>

The idea of an imaginary has special relevance to a society where continuous technological advances encourage elaborate fantasies of individual prowess, eternal youthfulness, beauty through surgery, action measured in nanoseconds: a dream-laden culture of ever-expanding control and possibility, whose denizens are prone to fantasies because the vast majority have imagination but little scientific knowledge.

A political imaginary involves going beyond and challenging current capabilities, inhibitions, and constraints regarding power and its proper limits and improper uses. It envisions an organization of resources, ideal as well as material, in which a potential attributed to them becomes a challenge to realize it. What is conceived by the imagination is not a mere improvement but a quantum leap that nonetheless preserves elements of the familiar. For example, in his imaginary, *The Secret of Future Victories* (1992), a four-star general imagined an attack by the Soviet bloc which would be met by an American force that “draws adroitly on advanced technology, concentrates forces from unprecedented distances with overwhelming suddenness and violence, and blinds and bewilders the foe.”<sup>4</sup>

As the quotation suggests, while a strong element of fantasy may figure the imaginary, there is likely to be a significant “real,” verifiable element as well. Postmodern weaponry has in fact demonstrated its “Star Wars” potential, and suicide bombers do blow up schoolchildren.

I want to sketch two contrasting types of imaginary. One I shall call the “power imaginary,” the other the “constitutional imaginary.” On the face of it, the two seem mutually exclusive; I shall treat them as cohabiting uneasily. The constitutional imaginary prescribes the means by which power is legitimated, accountable, and constrained (e.g., popular elections, legal authorization). It emphasizes stability and limits. A constitution partakes of the imaginary because it is wholly dependent on what public officials, politicians in power, and, lastly, citizens conceive it to be, such that there is a reasonable continuity between the original formulations and the present interpretations. The power imaginary seeks constantly to expand present capabilities. Hobbes, the theorist par excellence of the power imaginary and a favorite among neocons, had envisioned a dynamic rooted in human nature and driven by a “restless” quest for “power after power” that “ceaseth only in death.” But, according to Hobbes, unlike the individual whose power drives cease with death, a society can avoid collective mortality by rationalizing the quest for power and giving it a political form. Hobbes proposed to combine a constitutional with a power imaginary. It took the form of a permanent contract, a constitutional imaginary, which provided the basis for the power imaginary. The individual members of society, driven by fear and insecurity, agree to be ruled by an absolute sovereign or chief executive in exchange for assurances of protection and domestic peace.<sup>5</sup> He becomes the custodian of the power imaginary, “the great Leviathan,” as well as the final interpreter of the constitutional imaginary.

The main problem is that pursuit of the power imaginary may undermine or override the boundaries mandated in the constitutional imaginary. A power imaginary is usually accompanied by a justifying mission (“to defeat communism” or “to hunt out terrorists wherever they may hide”) that requires capabilities measured against an enemy whose powers are dynamic but whose exact location is indeterminate. The enemy’s aims and powers may have some verifiable basis, but they are typically exaggerated, thereby justifying a greater claim on society’s resources, sacrifices by society’s members, and challenges to the safeguards prescribed in the constitutional imaginary.<sup>6</sup>



One consequence of the pursuit of an expansive power imaginary is the blurring of the lines separating reality from fancy and truth telling from self-deception and lying. In its imaginary, power is not so much justified as sanctified, excused by the lofty ends it proclaims, ends that commonly are antithetical to the power legitimated by the constitutional imaginary. At present, according to one apologist, "empire has become a precondition for democracy." The United States, he continues, should "use imperial power to strengthen respect for self-determination [and] give states back to abused, oppressed people who deserve to rule them for themselves."<sup>7</sup> Thus, instead of imperial domination as the antithesis of democracy or of imposed government as the opposite of self-government, we have a fantasy of benevolence, of opposites harmonized through the largesse of a superpower.

I want to suggest that an American imaginary, centered on the nation's projection of unprecedented power, began to emerge during World War II (1941–45). However, that shift was as significant for the imaginary it displaced as for the one it established. Before the war, during the first two terms of FDR's presidency (1933–41), a substantial attempt was made to establish a liberal version of social democracy. Looking back upon that experience, one has difficulty recognizing an America in which, unapologetically, public debate and discussion centered on matters such as planning; focusing resources on the poor and unemployed; bringing radical changes to agriculture by limiting production; regulating business and banking practices while not fearing to castigate the rich and powerful; raising the standard of living of whole regions of the country; introducing public works projects that created employment for millions and left valuable public improvements (libraries, schools, conservation practices, subsidies to the arts); and promoting all manner of participatory schemes for including the citizenry in economic decision-making processes.

However, the combination of expanded state power and genuine mass enthusiasm for the new president gave pause to some observers.<sup>8</sup> At FDR's inaugural address in 1933 Eleanor Roosevelt found the enthusiasm of the crowd "a little terrifying because when Franklin got to that part of the speech when he said it might become necessary for him to

assume powers ordinarily granted to a president in war time, he received his biggest demonstration.”<sup>9</sup>

At the time the country's economy was in desperate straits. Millions were unemployed and hungry; agricultural prices had fallen so low that products were not marketed and countless farms were being foreclosed, sparking violent protests; manufacturing had come to a virtual halt and the fortunate few who were employed received meager wages. In the background, Hitler had assumed office, while Mussolini was firmly ensconced in power. A distinctive power vocabulary began to take hold suggesting that the world was witnessing the emergence of a novel, more expansive power imaginary. Usages such as “dictatorship,” “totalitarianism,” and “mobilization” were not uncommon. Although the carnage of the First World War remained a fresh memory, there arose a spontaneous belief, shared among politicians, pundits, business leaders, and the public, that the nation's economic crisis qualified as the equivalent of a state of war which justified an unprecedented expansion of state power in peacetime.

Early in the New Deal in what some Americans saw as “economic nihilism” threatening the nation, there was a clamor for a different imaginary that was clearly at odds with the constitutional imaginary. Congressman Hamilton Fish referred approvingly to FDR's administration as “an American dictatorship.” Al Smith, a former Democratic presidential candidate, seemed to be appealing to experience when he demanded hyperbolically, “What does a democracy do in a war? It becomes a tyrant, a despot, a real monarch. In the [First] World War we took our Constitution, wrapped it up and laid it on the shelf and left it there until it was over.” The Republican presidential nominee in 1936, Governor Alf Landon, declared: “Even the hand of a national dictator is in preference to a paralytic stroke. . . . If there is any way . . . a Republican governor in a mid-western state can aid [the president] in the fight, I now enlist for the duration of the war.”<sup>10</sup>

What was unusual or perhaps naive about such reactions was that the United States had not experienced the actuality of war at home since 1865. For the vast majority of Americans modern warfare was, in large measure, imagined rather than actually felt or observed firsthand. Similarly, dictatorship had never been established. In 1933 there was

not yet a common awareness of the brutality of Mussolini's regime or of the deadly effects of the liquidation of the kulaks and forced collectivization in the Soviet Union.<sup>11</sup>

Although the Roosevelt administration was granted exceptional powers to deal with the crisis, and although it attempted to raise wages and to control manufacturing, retailing, and agricultural output, many of its programs were voluntary or required the cooperation of trade associations and agricultural groups. There was certainly far more chaos, improvisation, and haphazard enforcement than regimentation, yet it was also clear that a new power imaginary had come into existence. The everyday vocabulary of government officials, politicians, publicists, and academics bandied expansive power terms and envisioned new scales of operation: national planning, mobilization of labor, controls over agricultural production, consumer protection.<sup>12</sup> In some official circles there was even talk of "socialism." The vision of power was, however, strictly domestic and mostly involved economic relations; the influential economists favored economic nationalism rather than globalism.<sup>13</sup> There was no attempt to control education, culture, newspapers, or radio broadcasting. There was no foreign enemy. Although capitalist greed was often attacked,<sup>14</sup> FDR and most of his closest advisers believed that the aim of the New Deal was to save the capitalist system from unreconstructed capitalists. Government regulation, instead of being the enemy of capitalism, was conceived as the means of saving it by promoting employment, decent wages, education, and a cushion against the cyclical swings endemic to capitalism.

v

But while the New Deal imaginary stimulated hopes of fundamental social and economic reforms within the framework of capitalism, it also aroused panic among business and financial leaders and provoked a counterimaginary. Once the economy appeared to be recovering, a powerful public relations campaign was mounted. The New Deal was depicted as the creature of leftist forces bent on transforming the country's economy.

The alarums sounded by business and financial leaders were not without foundation. The 1930s were years of extraordinary political ferment, most of it directed against the economic status quo. There were substantial numbers of communists as well as socialist followers of Norman Thomas, but perhaps more important were the popular political movements that openly challenged the political and economic power of capital.

The most important of these was the Share-the-Wealth movement of Huey Long, the Townsend movement for old-age pensions, and the National Union for Social Justice, galvanized by the Catholic priest Father Coughlin, that called for a guaranteed annual wage, the nationalization of public utilities, and the protection of labor unions. The striking feature of the three movements was their success in mobilizing the support of the poor, the unemployed, the workers, small-business owners, and members of the middle class, *and* accomplishing much of this mobilization through the new medium of national radio.<sup>15</sup> The fact that millions of citizens were stirred to support leaders and become emotionally and practically involved in movements outside the main political parties lent a different, potentially more populist meaning to "mobilization." An American version of a demos, demagogic warts and all, had emerged. Huey Long's movement centered its protests on the maldistribution of wealth. He called for taxation that would eliminate all income over a million dollars and inheritances over five million. There were to be homestead allowances of five thousand dollars to every family and a guaranteed annual income of at least two thousand, old-age pensions, limitations on the hours of labor, and college education for the qualified. In a few short years he succeeded in actually changing and improving the lives of poor people, but primarily by means of corruption, intimidation, and personal charisma.<sup>16</sup> A plausible case could be, and has been, made that he had created, if briefly, a thin form of fascism. But it might also be argued that all three movements were versions of a "fugitive" democracy which, while destined to be short-lived because of its reliance on the limited resources of ordinary people, succeeded nonetheless in challenging the democratic credentials of a system that legitimates the economic oppression and culturally

stunted lives of millions of citizens while, for all practical purposes, excluding them from political power.<sup>17</sup>

Each movement was received coolly by the New Deal leadership and kept at arm's length, despite agreement with many of the proposals put forward by the dissidents. The lesson for the political establishments of the major parties was that "mobilization" should be carefully controlled so as to preclude its becoming a challenge to the far narrower notions of popular participation represented by the two major party organizations.

By the late 1930s the question beginning to emerge was whether liberalism with a primarily domestic focus would survive and flourish once the New Deal was suspended by World War II; and whether its counterimaginary of a state-regulated capitalism would survive after the shooting war ended or, instead, give way to a radically altered power imaginary for a new kind of war that followed, and for the kind of demos needed for its support.<sup>18</sup>

vi

A clue to the modest influence of foreign affairs in the political imaginary before World War II was suggested in some remarks of 1941 by Senator Robert Taft, a major Republican spokesman for isolationism and a constrictive view of American power:

Frankly, the American people don't want to rule the world, and we are not equipped to do it. Such imperialism is wholly foreign to our ideals of democracy and freedom. It is not our manifest destiny or our national destiny.<sup>19</sup>

Before the end of the twentieth century Taft's insular vision would be abandoned by conservative elites. President Reagan assured the nation that it had the "power to begin the world over again."<sup>20</sup> The old imaginary, confined to a continent, was defeated by World War II when the global reach of American power was first explored, and the New Deal dream of a planned and more equitable economy was temporarily, if unintentionally, realized by wartime austerity. American military

power was engaged on every continent, save for Latin America. Its economic resources were expanded to support not only American forces but those of its allies.

On the "home front" of World War II the entire society was, for the first time, mobilized for a lengthy period. The government sought to organize all of society's resources under central control and direct them toward the single purpose of defeating the enemy. It represented the break as a change from peacetime "normalcy" to wartime "emergency," although what was passed off as "normal" had been the New Deal regulatory state of the 1930s. Censorship and a military draft were introduced. Resources were allocated and assigned priorities, not by the market but by the government. Class distinctions seemed suspended as a wartime egalitarianism was imposed. Wages, profits, and prices were controlled, and all citizens were subjected to food rationing. Nonetheless, domestically the formal constitution of the system remained largely untransformed.

While an impressive systematization of governmental regulatory power had been introduced and executive authority expanded, the enlarged scope of government's legal powers was understood as temporary, confined to the duration of the "wartime emergency." With the possible exception of a somewhat deferential judiciary, the constitutional order functioned more or less normally. Congress met uninterruptedly and did not refrain from criticizing the conduct of the war; the two political parties continued their contests for office; and elections remained free. Except for the shameful "relocation" of Americans of Japanese ancestry, very few governmental actions could be described as dictatorial. Although an enlarged power imaginary had clearly taken hold, it lacked mythological status. Perhaps this was due to the fact that at the time the nature of the enemy was not truly comprehended.<sup>21</sup> The Nazi concentration camps and the murder of millions of Jews, Gypsies, homosexuals, and Jehovah's Witnesses were not major themes of wartime propaganda.

Or perhaps the imaginary was restrained by an inhibition that could be relaxed only after the war was over. The wartime American imaginary had been incomplete, not only because it was assembled hastily in response to a war that the United States had not instigated, and

which, before December 7, 1941, was strongly opposed, but also because wartime expediency dictated the suppression of hostility toward a major ally whom many politicians and pundits considered to be at least as evil as the Nazis.

vii

For the imaginary spawned by World War II contained one embarrassment: the alliance with the communist dictatorship of the Soviet Union, without whose contributions and horrific sacrifices the Allied victory would have been highly problematic. Distrust of this ally had its beginnings as far back as the Bolshevik Revolution of 1917 and the “red scare” of the 1920s.<sup>22</sup> The motive at that time was not solely geopolitical worries about the Bolshevik regime but that regime’s candidacy as an alternative to capitalism.<sup>23</sup>

The wartime imaginary was not abandoned after 1945 but reconceived as a “Cold War” between the United States and the Soviet Union, a showdown between capitalism and anticapitalism. The undeclared stake concerned domestic policy. Would the egalitarian tendencies encouraged by the New Deal and its accompanying faith in governmental regulation of the economy be resumed after World War II? The policy-makers of the Cold War would decide that issue by assigning a huge proportion of the nation’s resources to defense rather than welfare.

The Cold War consolidated the power of capital and began the reaction against the welfare state *but* without abandoning the strong state. What was abandoned was all talk of participatory democracy. “Mobilization” was participation’s sublimation. The propaganda of business interests depicted the combination of social democracy and political regulation of the economy as simple socialism and therefore the blood relative of communism.<sup>24</sup> The new state would continue to promote business but without requiring it to be socially responsible. Rearmament would be financed to an important extent by cuts in social spending, while the costs of national security would be largely borne by the less well-off.<sup>25</sup> The lasting effects of the Cold War encounter included not only the elimination of the USSR but also the containment and

rollback of the social and political ideals of the New Deal. The unifying ideology for the masses was a “dematerialized” one, a combination of patriotism, anticommunism, and—in the new nuclear era—fear.

The Democrats, the party most closely identified with New Deal social and economic reforms, were the original, most enthusiastic cold warriors. A new species of liberalism came into being: the “Cold War liberal” who was resolutely anticommunist and convinced that “national security” constituted the nation’s highest priority.<sup>26</sup> The Cold War liberal even discovered the political utility of a civil religion. He was prepared to put aside the secularism and rationalism that, historically, had been among liberalism’s defining elements and to seek validation for liberal anticommunism abroad and at home by appealing to theology, most notably that of Reinhold Niebuhr’s Christian realism. Niebuhr was notoriously pessimistic, subscribing to a view that stressed the dark side of human nature. Sobered by Niebuhr’s pessimism, the Cold War liberals set about to scale down liberalism by relocating it in what an admirer of Niebuhr christened “the vital center.” “The old liberal,” according to one of the leading neoliberals, viewed “man as perfectible, as endowed with sufficient wisdom and selflessness to endure power and to use it infallibly for the general good,” while the new liberal has been “reminded” by totalitarian regimes “that man was, indeed, imperfect and that the corruptions of power could unleash great evil in the world. We discovered a new dimension of experience in the dimension of anxiety, guilt, and corruption.” The new liberal was fired less by hopes for socioeconomic reform than by the wish to distance himself from “the Left” and populist democracy and to celebrate a new, more clear-eyed elite, one committed to the Cold War, lukewarm or indifferent toward social democracy, and increasingly unreceptive to egalitarian ideals. “I am persuaded, too,” wrote the theorist of the “vital center,” “that liberals have values in common with most members of the business community—in particular a belief in a free society.”<sup>27</sup> The bonds between liberalism and democracy began to unravel.

The Cold War (1947–91) provided the framework for a radically new imaginary of a war that was “cold” in the sense of being calibrated to stop short of actual battle. To champion that oxymoron required



hyperbole. Its proponents proclaimed it a “total war” of global dimensions and of uncertain but prolonged duration.<sup>28</sup> Rearmament was institutionalized as a huge, albeit controversial, and permanent part of the nation’s economy and annual budget. A “defense establishment,” comprising the economy, the military, and the state, came into being. It would alter the political identity of the society for decades to come. For the first time, too, “war,” for the most part, would be fought without actual battles and against an enemy who operated secretly, “undercover.” Although few Americans encountered the enemy, they were assured by politicians, publicists, preachers, and the FBI that he was “hidden” and had to be confronted abroad and rooted out at home. New categories of “loyalty,” “internal security,” and “subversion” were introduced and given the status of legal standards.

The constitutional imaginary underwent profound changes as it adapted to the new power imaginary and its totalizing categories. For almost a half century the new war was defined in starkly Manichaean terms, as an epical struggle for the fate of the world between totalitarian dictatorship promoting atheism and communism, and the freedom-loving, God-fearing capitalist democracy of the United States and its Western European allies.<sup>29</sup> Public officials insisted that the Cold War was “in fact a real war” against an enemy bent on “world domination.” One high-ranking official declared that the United States was “in a war worse than any we have experienced . . . not a cold war but a hot war.” Henceforth the nation must disavow the “sharp line between democratic principles and immoral actions” and be ready to fight “with no holds barred.”<sup>30</sup>

## viii

The prime example of a power imaginary and the best indicator of the turning point from a politics of social reform to the pursuit of a global politics is an official report to President Truman by the National Security Council in April 1950. A leading scholar has described NSC-68: *United States Objectives and Programs for National Security* as “the bible of American national security and the fullest statement of the new

ideology that guided American leaders" during the Cold War.<sup>31</sup> It was also prophetic of how "mobilization" would provide the form by which totalizing power would become normalized.

The highly charged language of NSC-68 seems out of character for a classified "top secret" policy paper composed by and for policy-making elites. One expects a document for the sober. While there are plenty of economic statistics and military strategies, the report contains myth making of epical proportions and high melodrama as well. "The issues that face us," the document announced sweepingly, "are momentous, involving the fulfillment or destruction not only of this Republic but of civilization itself."

NSC-68 begins with the favorite ploy of many myths, a dualism where innocence and virtue are confronted by unnuanced evil.<sup>32</sup> The postwar world is, unqualifiedly, polarized: "power [has] increasingly gravitated to . . . two centers."

[While] the fundamental purpose of the U.S. is to assure the integrity and vitality of our free society, which is founded upon the dignity and worth of the individual . . . the Soviet Union, unlike previous aspirants to hegemony, is animated by a new fanatic faith, antithetical to our own, and seeks to impose its absolute authority over the rest of the world. Conflict has, therefore, become endemic and is waged, on the part of the Soviet Union, by violent or non-violent methods in accordance with the dictates of expediency. With the development of increasingly terrifying weapons of mass destruction, every individual faces the ever-present possibility of annihilation should the conflict enter the phase of total war.<sup>33</sup>

The shape of the power imaginary is dictated not only by the threat posed by the USSR but by the nature of its power dynamic, which is described as "inescapably militant because it possesses and is possessed by a world-wide revolutionary movement." It rules by enslaving: "The system becomes God and submission to the will of God becomes submission to the will of the system."<sup>34</sup> Its tactics display "extraordinary flexibility," which "derives from the utterly amoral and opportunistic conduct of Soviet policy" and from the "secrecy" of its operations.<sup>35</sup> At present, its power outstrips that of the United States. Even our advan-

tage in nuclear weapons is temporary. The conclusion is that if a freedom-loving democracy is to survive, it must organize its resources and accept “the responsibility of world leadership.”<sup>36</sup> This means mustering “clearly superior overall power in its most inclusive sense.”<sup>37</sup> How totalizing a Cold War becomes is suggested in a summary of American strategy:

Intensification of affirmative and timely measures and operations by covert means in the fields of economic warfare and political and psychological warfare with a view to fomenting and supporting unrest and revolt in selected strategic satellite countries.<sup>38</sup>

On occasion the NSC report avowed that the aim of mobilization was limited to “containment” of Soviet power so as to avoid a shooting war. Given the report’s repeated emphasis on the “dynamic” character of *both* Soviet and American power, “containment” served to cloud the main consequence of seeking American global dominance. The United States had adopted the same goals as the Soviets: global supremacy and a regime change by means of subversion. “We should take dynamic steps to reduce the power and influence of the Kremlin inside the Soviet Union and other areas under its control. . . . In other words, it would be the current Soviet cold war technique used against the Soviet Union.”<sup>39</sup> Thus a fanatical, repressive, totalitarian regime sets the standard of power a free society must surpass if civilization is to be preserved.

At the same time that the report calls for establishing nuclear superiority and for subverting the Soviet regime, it reasserts American innocence, even anticipating April 2003 in Iraq, by repeatedly insisting that our efforts will not hurt the Soviet people, although the document expresses hope that the Soviet people will take the initiative against their government.<sup>40</sup>

Not least, the new imaginary of global power accompanies an estimate of America’s power—its industrial capacity, its nuclear advantage—with a scrutiny of our weaknesses. Some measure of regime change at home will be required to overcome our “lack of will” and difficulty in pursuing a set purpose.<sup>41</sup> “A large measure of sacrifice and discipline will be demanded of the American people. They will

be asked to give up some of the benefits which they have come to associate with their freedoms.”<sup>42</sup> The demands of “internal security” include increased taxes, reduced federal spending except for defense, and acceptance of a lower standard of living.<sup>43</sup> “The democratic way” requires a changed civic culture so that citizens are less naive, more discriminating:

[In] the search for truth [the individual] knows when he should commit an act of faith; that he distinguish between the necessity for tolerance and the necessity for just suppression. A free society is vulnerable in that it is easy for people to lapse into excesses—the excesses of a permanently open mind wishfully waiting for evidence that evil design may become noble purpose, the excess of faith becoming prejudice, the excess of tolerance degenerating into indulgence of conspiracy and the excess of suppression when moderate measures are not only more appropriate but more effective.<sup>44</sup>

The report cautions that a public relations strategy at home must counter “any adverse psychological effects” of the “dynamic steps” needed: “in any announcement of policy and in the character of the measures adopted, emphasis should be given to the essentially defensive character and care should be taken to minimize, so far as possible, unfavorable domestic and foreign reactions.”<sup>45</sup>

ix

Unquestionably the Soviet Union was a brutal murderous dictatorship that sought to expand its influence and power globally by encouraging communist parties in Greece, Western Europe, and Asia, supporting “satellite regimes” in central Europe, liquidating all opposition at home, and engaging in espionage. There was, then, a significant element of reality to what became the Cold War imaginary.

But why the insistence by American political, economic, and opinion-making elites on declaring a “war” instead of invoking the notion of, say, “a Great Power rivalry”? Was it that in combating an evil enemy,

“rivalry” smacked of appeasement or, worse, of moral equivalence? Although doubtless there are other possible answers to that question, I would suggest that what attracted decision-makers to choosing “war” is that Americans of the twentieth century had no direct experience of it and hence were receptive to having warfare imagined for them—and Hollywood happily obliged with “war movies.” Save for actual combatants sent overseas and economic shortages at home, World War II was unexperienced. After 1945 “war” was akin to a tabula rasa on which opinion-makers and governmental decision-makers were free to constitute its meaning in terms that pretty much suited their purposes, allowing them to set the character of public debate and to acquire a vastly enlarged range of governmental powers—powers that, when they did not violate the Constitution, deformed it. For almost a half century, from the late 1940s to the early 1990s, war served as the omnipresent background in the imaginary constructed by news- and movie-makers, television producers, and the rhetoric of politicians. The meaning of war was given a plasticity that allowed the new image-makers to set its parameters as they pleased.

“War” also had its effects upon politics, causing a shift in emphasis from socioeconomic issues to ideological ones where partisanship had far fewer material consequences. During the 1950s the ideological battles were centered on “loyalty,” “subversion,” “communism,” and civil rights. While politics of the decade seemed intense, it was also narrower: socioeconomic problems were subordinated to ideological battles in which anticommunist ideologues did their best to link liberalism, the main force behind socioeconomic reform, with communism.<sup>46</sup>

Nowhere was this more apparent than when the authors of NSC-68—after first declaring “that the integrity and vitality of our system is in greater jeopardy than ever before in our history”—then remark: “Even if there were no Soviet Union we would face the great problem of the free society of reconciling order, security, the need for participation, with the requirement of freedom. We would face the fact that in a shrinking world the absence of order among nations is becoming less and less tolerable.” We have “an uneasy equilibrium without order” causing men to doubt “whether the world will long tolerate this tension without moving toward some kind of order, on somebody’s terms.”<sup>47</sup>

Elsewhere the report acknowledges that at present the Soviets are not planning to actually attack the United States and its allies, although, the authors hasten to add, “the possibility of such deliberate resort to war cannot be ruled out.”<sup>48</sup> In the last analysis the “fact” of “the absence of order . . . imposes on us the responsibility of world leadership.” Even were we to win a “military victory” over the Soviets, that “would only partially and perhaps only temporarily affect the fundamental conflict.” There would be “the resurgence of totalitarian forces and the re-establishment of the Soviet system, or its equivalent. . . . We have no choice but to demonstrate the superiority of the idea of freedom.”<sup>49</sup>

It was not alone the designation “war” that mattered but equally its “cold,” enveloping character. As Hubert Humphrey, Democratic senator and presidential nominee, noted approvingly, “it is hard to tell . . . where war begins and where it ends.”<sup>50</sup> Secretary of State Dulles noted that while “in the present state of world opinion we could not use an A-bomb, we should make every effort now to dissipate this feeling.”<sup>51</sup> Just as terrorism would later become useful to American policymakers for its “fear factor,” so during the Cold War the stockpiling of atomic weapons served that same end of normalizing an atmosphere of fear. As then Vice President Nixon explained, “tactical atomic explosives are now conventional.”<sup>52</sup> When the Cold War threatened to become too normal and abstract, *déjà vu* all over again, there would be “war scares,” including air raid drills during which children practiced protecting themselves from nuclear attacks by huddling under their schoolroom desks.<sup>53</sup>

Perhaps the most unnerving example of the mentality at work constructing a Cold War power imaginary was the doctrine of “Mutual Assured Destruction” formulated in the aftermath of the Cuban Missile Crisis of 1962. Instead of targeting an enemy’s military facilities “each side should target the other’s cities” in order to cause the most casualties possible. “The assumption behind it,” according to one historian, “was that if no one could be sure of surviving a nuclear war, there would not be one.”<sup>54</sup> If there had been one, incinerated parents could die comforted with the knowledge that, thanks to school desks, their children would have been spared.

The development of an extended relationship between the military and the corporate economy began in earnest. National defense was declared inseparable from a strong economy. The fixation upon mobilization and rearmament inspired the gradual disappearance from the national political agenda of the regulation and control of corporations. The defender of the free world needed the power of the globalizing, expanding corporation, not an economy hampered by “trust-busting.” Moreover, since the enemy was rabidly anticapitalist, every measure that strengthened capitalism was a blow against the enemy. Once the battle lines between communism and the “free society” were drawn, the economy became untouchable for purposes other than “strengthening” capitalism. The ultimate merger would be between capitalism and democracy. Once the identity and security of democracy were successfully identified with the Cold War and with the methods for waging it, the stage was set for the intimidation of most politics left of right.

Throughout the 1950s there was a steady erosion in the power of various nongovernmental groups and institutions. Universities and government initiated what would prove to be an intimate relationship.<sup>55</sup> While the political influence of trade unions was strong during the Truman years, a long and seemingly irreversible decline set in even before the Republican victory of 1952. The Taft-Hartley Act (1947) outlawed the closed or union shop. An independent trade union movement, with its disruptive “weapons” of strike and boycott, was portrayed as a potential threat to the mobilization of America’s economic power, especially if, as was frequently alleged, communists had “penetrated” unions involved in war production.

There was much talk about molding a new type, “the citizen soldier” who would be a model of discipline, physical fitness, patriotism, and work habits that would carry over and create a more reliable workforce.<sup>56</sup> Even before World War II ended, there were repeated efforts to preserve the draft and several attempts to create a system of “universal military training” (UMT) aimed at requiring all young men, after high school or having reached their eighteenth birthday, to undergo a brief period of military training followed by longer service in the organized

reserves or National Guard. The concern was to create a prepared nation, one that would be forever ready and never again caught by surprise. For the first time a totalitarian imaginary emerged, but because traces of the World War II sensibility persisted, critics, especially those in the academy, preferred the euphemism “garrison state.”<sup>57</sup>

xi

A crucial element in the imaginary inspired by the Cold War had been absent from the imaginary accompanying World War II. Practically speaking, no significant ideological opposition had developed to a war that began with the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor and with the Germans immediately joining in by declaring war against the United States. There was no internal enemy to fight, no suspected disloyal elements to expose, as there had allegedly been with German Americans during World War I. The glaring exception was the internment of several thousand Americans of Japanese descent, most of whom were “relocated” in Western deserts far from public view. Nationalism and patriotism, rather than ideology, sufficed to control the population and gain its support. Patriotism required no collective self-examination, only the spontaneous response to the simple fact that we had been attacked.<sup>58</sup>

This changed dramatically with the advent of the Cold War when the power imaginary turned inwards. Communism was depicted as a domestic contagion to be eradicated as well as a foreign threat to be combated. The appearance of a new set of political actors—the FBI, the House Un-American Activities Committee, loyalty and security boards to eliminate the “disloyal” from government service—marked a new form of governmental power: thought policing to enforce ideological conformity. Disloyalty became a broad-brush category that included communists, alleged communist sympathizers, and those who refused to expose colleagues or acquaintances who were communists. *Rouge et noir*: “blacklists” were drawn up by authorities to identify and root out suspected “reds” and their sympathizers in the entertainment industries, in the media, and among intellectuals. Opposition required un-



usual courage. For the first time in the nation's history universities became the object of a widespread purge. "Loyalty oaths" were introduced as a precondition of employment in many state institutions of higher learning, while some intellectuals and academics were recruited as government agents to report on the political activities of colleagues.<sup>59</sup> The Internal Security Act (1950) established six concentration camps. Police and federal law enforcement authorities undertook the systematic surveillance of suspect political activity. Not surprisingly, homosexuals were singled out and were said to be entrenched in the State Department. A 1950 Senate report bore the title *Employment of Homosexuals and Other Sex Perverts in Government*.<sup>60</sup>

The domestic version of anticommunism was aimed at even larger targets alleged to be connected: social democracy, trade union power, anticapitalist beliefs associated with the New Deal, and the political liberalism identified with academia and the media. The targets were (in the language of the times) "smeared" as being either communist or sympathetic to communism, disloyal, or, at the least, "soft" on communism. There was much discussion of how educational reform might serve to "strengthen national security" by instructing the citizenry in the meaning of democracy and the importance of patriotism.<sup>61</sup>

Certain elements in the domestic side of the Cold War imaginary displayed an uncomfortable similarity to elements of the Soviet regime: purges; loyalty tests; violations of due process; criminalization of a political party for its beliefs rather than its actions; development of an elaborate, largely secretive agency with a global network of spies and assassins (CIA), dedicated to subverting regimes deemed unfriendly or uncooperative and installing sympathetic ones. A study group reporting to President Eisenhower urged explicitly that the United States not only follow the Soviet example but seek to surpass it:

We are facing an implacable enemy whose avowed object is world domination by whatever means and at whatever cost. . . . [T]here are no rules in such a game. Hitherto acceptable norms of human conduct do not apply. We must develop effective espionage and counterespionage services and must learn to subvert, sabotage, and destroy our enemies by more clever, more sophisticated, and more effective means than those used against us.<sup>62</sup>

Thus anticommunism as mimesis: the character of the enemy supplied the norm for the power demands that the democratic defender of the free world chose to impose on itself.

xii

The phenomenon that best captured the transformation of the nation was the pandemic of the 1950s known as McCarthyism. In a short-lived career that began and ended in obscurity, Senator Joseph McCarthy turned anticommunism into a spectacle: thanks to television, a nation watched the drama of disloyalty and betrayal unfolding.

McCarthy was remarkable for a simple but matchless talent: he lied endlessly and spectacularly. No matter how often the lies were brought to light, he plunged on, exposing one after another alleged spy, traitor, red, or pinko, and in the process recklessly damaging or ending careers. His sheer destructiveness did not stop with the charges thrown at obscure officials or hapless academics or Senate colleagues. His accusations of communist or Soviet sympathies extended to cabinet officers and some of the country's most revered icons, including General (later Secretary of State) George Marshall, President Dwight Eisenhower, and the U.S. Army itself. With very few exceptions the media caved in or kowtowed.

The fact that the Soviet regime was dogmatically atheist made it easy for the anticommunist crusade to gain the blessing of the hierarchy of the Catholic Church and its unwavering support. A cardinal and an archbishop attained celebrity status through their fiery sermons and broadcasts in support of McCarthy and denunciation of communism. The pope blessed McCarthy's marriage; even after the senator had died in disgrace, a "McCarthy Mass" was celebrated annually at St. Patrick's Cathedral.<sup>63</sup>

A new messianism and the reaffirmation of a civil religion began to figure in the power imaginary, and it would later register in a wondrous afterglow with which a reputable historian could look back upon the Cold War. He wrote that the triumph of the American vision of "a society in which universal morality, state morality, and individual mo-

rality might all be the same thing” pointed to a superhuman agency at work: “At which point God, or at least His agents, intervened to to make that vision an unexpected—and to the Kremlin a profoundly alarming—reality.”<sup>64</sup>

## xiii

That a political figure as bizarre, crude, and unscrupulous as McCarthy could generate the tidal wave of McCarthyism was no doubt due in part to the support he received from reputable politicians, such as Senator Taft, and from influential intellectuals, such as William Buckley, but it was the Cold War itself that lent resonance to his antics and an inward turn to what seemed primarily a matter of foreign and defense policy. Many of the public officials, trade union leaders, intellectuals, and academics who were villified or purged actually adhered to the social democratic ideals and programs of the New Deal; this suggested that a domestic power struggle was in the making that would redefine American politics for the next half century or more. Put simply: New Deal values of social democracy were effectively purged from the national power imaginary. Notable casualties of that drama were Lyndon Johnson and Hubert Humphrey, both Democrats who believed deeply in social programs but found themselves forced to shoulder a Cold War that had turned hot in Vietnam and left little or no public resources for social spending. The populist surge of the 1930s that had carried over into support for the democratized effort of World War II was reconfigured.

The Cold War effected a radical change in the American political identity to accompany the new power imaginary. One of the major themes of Cold War propaganda was that although the American economy far outstripped that of any other nation or combination of nations, Americans would be required to forgo the prospect of substantial and steady improvement in their social, economic, cultural, and political prospects. In confidential discussions public officials pondered how to get “our people” to recognize “that the cold war is in fact a real war in which the survival of the free world is at stake.” The effort would require

“sacrifice,” “unity,” and “tenacity of purpose.” The meaning of “sacrifice” was cast in the bureaucratic euphemism of “significant domestic financial and economic adjustments.”<sup>65</sup> Less opaque, one official estimate was that if a nuclear war broke out, it was possible that ten million Americans might die.<sup>66</sup>

All of the elements aimed at the “mobilization” of society—from proposals for universal military training to the institutionalization of a huge defense economy that represented a business version of a New Deal; from loyalty purges and red scares to government-sponsored propaganda to promote political orthodoxy (“Freedom Trains” displaying the artifacts illustrative of the saga of freedom in America)—spelled the transformation of popular participation, from New Deal experiments in participatory democracy to a populism exchanging socioeconomic power for loyal conformism, hope for fear.<sup>67</sup>

Two crucial consequences of the Cold War upon domestic politics contributed major elements to the power imaginary evolving from the conflict. One was the shrinking place occupied by politics and the enlargement of state power. The growing dominance of foreign policy and military strategy altered the scope and status of public participation. Public officials, experts, and pundits were quick to declare these to be privileged subjects where partisan politics should defer to national unity and experts should decide among themselves. The second development was intimately connected with the priority of foreign policy and military preparedness: the emergence and legitimation of elitism, of a political class, “the best and the brightest.” The social science literature of the period was heavy with discussions of elitism, and few questioned its legitimacy.<sup>68</sup> That direction was bolstered by the invention of “voting studies” touted as the social scientific investigation into the behavior of the voter. The electorate was not infrequently portrayed as inattentive to politics, ill-informed, and indifferent—qualities that some academics considered functionally useful.<sup>69</sup> The clear implication was that elitism was the antidote to mass ignorance and essential to victory in the struggle for freedom. Elitism signified a privileged claim to power on the part of those who not only manifested proven intelligence, experience, and sterling character but also, unlike the fantasy-prone masses, were “realists.”<sup>70</sup> A whole ideology emerged to legitimate elitism: the “real-

ists” and “neoliberals” such as Niebuhr, George Kennan, and Arthur Schlesinger, Jr.

That war was “cold” only in the sense that the two antagonists did not engage each other in a shooting war. During that era, which lasted until the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1987, the United States fought two very hot wars, first in Korea, then in Vietnam. It suffered a stalemate in one and defeat in the other, both by Soviet proxies. If we add the defeat in Iraq, we might be tempted to redefine superpower as an imaginary of power that emerges from defeat unchastened, more imperious than ever. Nonetheless, with the “defeat” or collapse of the USSR and the emergence of the United States as the sole standing Superpower, the imaginary constructed after 9/11 perpetuated elements designed during the Cold War. The new imaginary, too, depicted a foe global, without contours or boundaries, shrouded in secrecy. And like the Cold War imaginary, not only would the new form seek imperial dominion; it would turn inwards, applying totalitarian practices, such as sanctioning torture, holding individuals for years without charging them or allowing access to due process, transporting suspects to unknown locations, and conducting warrantless searches into private communications. The system of inverted totalitarianism being formed is not the result of a premeditated plot. It has no *Mein Kampf* as an inspiration. It is, instead, a set of effects produced by actions or practices undertaken in ignorance of their lasting consequences. This is the achievement of a nation that gave pragmatism, the philosophy of consequences, to the world.

CHAPTER THREE

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Totalitarianism's Inversion,  
Democracy's Perversion

i

By God, we've killed the Vietnam syndrome once and for all.  
—George H. W. Bush (1991).<sup>1</sup>

Our nation stands alone right now in terms of power.  
And that is why we have got to be humble.  
—Presidential candidate George W. Bush<sup>2</sup>

Totally united.  
—Bumper sticker

In some respects, Nazi expansionist policy accelerated the process of internal dissolution, because the methods of rule in the occupied territories were subsequently transferred to the Reich itself and contributed to the progressive destruction of public administration, which became more and more controlled by party functionaries.  
—Hans Mommsen<sup>3</sup>

We are not just any hegemon. We run a uniquely benign imperialism . . . it is a fact manifest in the way that others welcome our power.  
—Charles Krauthammer<sup>4</sup>

Save for the shameful “relocation” of American citizens of Japanese ancestry, very few governmental actions during World War II could be described accurately as repressive. Perhaps that was why Corwin's *Total War and the Constitution* had not entertained the possibility that, in-

stead of a sweeping regulation of economy and society, a rapid increase in the size of the federal bureaucracy, and a unified front to a singular outside threat, totality might take the form of a convergence: between an external threat, part real, part imaginary, part concocted, and the indirect totalizing “forces” already at work “inside.” Under that scenario a significant portion of the resources of society might be focused upon a single great objective, say a war on terrorism, with no *apparent* drastic reconstitution of the current system or ruffling of everyday life. Because significant change would then appear as a modest accentuation of previous tendencies, it could gain the protective cover of “continuity” or “precedent.” If most lives were lived normally—if, in other words, radical change, by gradually meshing with normalcy so that, for example, “yellow alerts” seemed familiar and reassuring rather than exceptional—normalcy would then have ceased to serve as a restraint and measure of sanity.

The acceptance of restraints on personal freedom and being resigned to political impotence: such possibilities are not wildly implausible for a society that is accustomed to exchanging new habits for old, to adapting to rapid change, uncertainty, and social dislocation, to having one’s fate determined by distant powers over which one has no control (globalization, market “forces”). Especially plausible for a society addicted to a virtual reality where cosmic mayhem rules: where planets are routinely destroyed every evening, environmental catastrophes are created by (what else?) “blockbusters,” and whole civilizations wiped out—a virtual reality readily available on several channels, a daily “experience.”<sup>5</sup> If we have already had the preview, what’s unusual about the projection of overwhelming power even if it exceeds anything classic totalitarians might have achieved or even imagined? After all, it may be simply a question of virtuality: of genre, not genus.

ii

Notwithstanding these possibilities, to liken American democracy to a dictatorship, our constitutional system to a totalitarian one, is to invite outrage tempered by disbelief. Only a visceral Bush-hater would dis-

cern similarities between an American president and the Nazi *Führer* or argue that American democracy displays totalitarian tendencies. Because so much rides on the plausibility of what follows, my hope is that skeptical readers will resist the impulse to dismiss it and persevere instead. And this for a particular reason beyond the foreign and domestic record of the present administration.

The stakes in this volume are two: the first is prompted by President Bush's remark that the United States is "the greatest power in the world." Not only must we ask how this "greatest power" is constituted; we must also question the process by which it is legitimated. Does, or can, our Constitution, which typically has been understood as intending to limit power, actually authorize power of the magnitude being claimed by the president, or is an extraconstitutional justification being claimed? In light of the lofty, even sacred place that the "original Constitution" occupies in the ideology of the administration's most fervent supporters, that question should be of some interest, particularly to those who consider themselves conservatives.

The president frequently declares that our system is a democracy. The traditional understanding of democracy is that it is a system by which the citizenry delegates power to the government, and hence the latter has only such powers as are delegated to it. How, and when, did the people delegate "the greatest power in the world" to their government? If the people did not have that power in the first place, where does it come from? or has there been an acquisition of powers unanticipated in the founding document or in the theory of democracy, and are such powers inherently antagonistic to the spirit and logic of both constitutionalism and democracy?

Our second concern relates to an equally fundamental and jeopardized institution: can the citizen relearn the demands that democracy places on its highest, most difficult office — not, as commonly supposed, on the office of the president, but on that of the citizen? And that question has a practical corollary: the reinvigoration of citizenship requires more than a civics lesson. It would necessitate a reordering of basic power arrangements and a different understanding of civic commitments from that of spectator.



My main point will not be that the Bush administration was a facsimile of the Nazi dictatorship, or that the unremarkable George W. Bush resembled the charismatic *Führer*, or that his supporters were Nazi-philosophers who dreamed of a racist nation of goose-steppers. Rather, in coining the term “inverted totalitarianism” I tried to find a name for a new type of political system, seemingly one driven by abstract totalizing powers, not by personal rule, one that succeeds by encouraging political disengagement rather than mass mobilization, that relies more on “private” media than on public agencies to disseminate propaganda reinforcing the official version of events.

In classic totalitarianism the conquest of total power did not result from a coalescence of unintended consequences; it was the conscious aim of those who led a political movement. The most powerful twentieth-century dictatorships were highly personal, not only in the sense that each had a dominant, larger-than-life leader, but each system was peculiarly the creation of a leader who was a self-made man. Mussolini, Stalin, and Hitler did not just invent their personae; they literally built the organizations of their respective dictatorships. Each system was inseparable from its *Führer*, or *Duce*. Inverted totalitarianism follows an entirely different course: the leader is not the architect of the system but its product. George W. Bush no more created inverted totalitarianism than he piloted a plane onto the USS *Abraham Lincoln*. He is the pliant favored child of privilege, of corporate connections, a construct of public relations wizards and of party propagandists.

The classic totalitarian regimes, Stalin’s Russia, Mussolini’s Italy, and Hitler’s Germany, were, importantly, the creation of a charismatic leader and unimaginable without his imprint. Inverted totalitarianism, on the other hand, is largely independent of any particular leader and requires no personal charisma to survive: its model is the corporate “head,” the corporation’s public representative. Among the classical dictatorships only Stalin died while still in power, although his dictatorship did not survive the century. In the inverted system the leader is a product of the system, not its architect; it will survive him. While Hitler, Mussolini, and Stalin were the principal authors of schemes that eventually led to disastrous overreaching, those who counsel the titular head of Superpower, the equivalents of the CEO, supply the hubris that

confuses opportunity with capability and grossly underestimates the resources needed to accomplish the grandiose end of world hegemony.

One prominent Washington insider, notable for his influence and close ties with the Bush inner circle, declared that he looked forward to the day when the national government will have been ruthlessly shrunk so that its pathetic remains can be washed down a bathtub or (the versions vary) flushed down a toilet.<sup>6</sup> Whatever its sound-bite value, that fantasy imagines either that the military will go the way of other major political institutions, or, while the latter are flushed, the armed forces remain. In either case, since nothing is intimated about the structure of corporate power, presumably it survives, flushed by success, as it were, protected by a now privatized military. Such fantasies ignore the facts of huge defense spending accompanied by an aggressive foreign policy, a fervent nationalism, and a military that, unlike the German *Wehrmacht* in its contempt for business values, cohabits comfortably with corporate America.<sup>7</sup> Be careful what you flush.

What we are in fact witnessing is something new, a conservative form of *étatisme* that, while it is hostile toward social spending, is eager to intervene in the most personal of affairs: sexual relations, marriage, reproduction, and family decisions about life and death. The case of Terri Schiavo was the perfect illustration of a conservative version of *étatisme*. The Republican-dominated Congress was hurriedly called in to special session; Dr. Frist, the Senate majority leader, offered his professional judgment from a distance; the president flew back to Washington; evangelicals and Catholic groups besieged the media, Congress, and the Florida legislature—and all for the cause of a person whom medical opinion had pronounced to be hopelessly brain-dead. What was significant was not the particular case but the tacit threat of quickly mobilized power, public and private, and orchestrated zeal. Intelligent design?

iii

An inversion is conventionally defined as an instance of something's being turned upside down. Unlike the classic totalitarian regimes which lost no opportunity for dramatizing and insisting upon a radical

transformation that virtually eradicated all traces of the previous system, inverted totalitarianism has emerged imperceptibly, unpremeditatedly, and in seeming unbroken continuity with the nation's political traditions. For our purposes an inversion occurs when seemingly unrelated, even disparate starting points converge and reinforce each other. A giant corporation includes prayer sessions for its executives, while evangelicals meet in "franchised" congregations and millionaire preachers extol the virtues of capitalism.<sup>8</sup> Each is a reliable component in a system of which the administration is the public face. An inversion is present when a system, such as a democracy, produces a number of significant actions ordinarily associated with its antithesis: for example, when the elected chief executive may imprison an accused without due process and sanction the use of torture while instructing the nation about the sanctity of the rule of law. The new system, inverted totalitarianism, is one that professes to be the opposite of what, in fact, it is. It disclaims its real identity, trusting that its deviations will become normalized as "change." Again exactly the opposite of the classic totalitarians, who, far from disguising their break with the constitutional system of the past, celebrated it.

What is typically meant by "totalitarianism"? First and foremost, it is the attempt to realize an ideological, idealized conception of a society as a systematically ordered whole, where the "parts" (family, churches, education, intellectual and cultural life, economy, recreation, politics, state bureaucracy) are premeditatedly, even forcibly if necessary, coordinated to support and further the purposes of the regime. The formulation of those purposes is monopolized by the leadership. In classical totalitarian regimes it was assumed that total power demanded that the entirety of society's institutions, practices, and beliefs had to be dictated from above and coordinated (*gleichgeschaltet*), that total power was achievable only through the control of everything from the top. In actual fact, no totalitarian regime succeeded in perfectly realizing that vision. Although each of the classic forms of totalitarianism was rife with corruption, plagued by incompetence, and corroded by cynicism, they did not fail for lack of trying.

Inverted totalitarianism works differently. It reflects the belief that the world can be changed to accord with a limited range of objectives,

such as ensuring that its own energy needs will be met, that "free markets" will be established, that military supremacy will be maintained, and that "friendly regimes" will be in place in those parts of the world considered vital to its own security and economic needs. Inverted totalitarianism also trumpets the cause of democracy worldwide. As we shall point out in later chapters, "democracy" is understood as "managed democracy," a political form in which governments are legitimated by elections that they have learned to control, the most recent example being the presidential election in Egypt in September 2005. President Mubarak, who had served for more than two decades, easily triumphed over a dozen rivals. Intimidation, corruption, unequal access to the media, and similar tactics reportedly were widespread.

Managed democracy is centered on containing electoral politics; it is cool, even hostile toward social democracy beyond promoting literacy, job training, and other essentials for a society struggling to survive in the global economy. Managed democracy is democracy systematized.

The United States has become the showcase of how democracy can be managed without appearing to be suppressed. This has come about, not through a Leader's imposing his will or the state's forcibly eliminating opposition, but through certain developments, notably in the economy, that promoted integration, rationalization, concentrated wealth, and a faith that virtually any problem—from health care to political crises, even faith itself—could be managed, that is, subjected to control, predictability, and cost-effectiveness in the delivery of the product. Voters are made as predictable as consumers; a university is nearly as rationalized in its structure as a corporation;<sup>9</sup> a corporate structure is as hierarchical in its chain of command as the military. The regime ideology is capitalism, which is virtually as undisputed as Nazi doctrine was in 1930s Germany. The political challenge has been to harness these various dynamics: a military that wants ever more futuristic technology and more deadly weaponry; a corporate economy that is continually searching for new markets and outlets; churches that are on the prowl for converts; news and entertainment media as eager to expand their market share as they are to pay court to the political establishment; and an intelligentsia avid to secure a measure of status by cozying with executives, politicians, and generals, and, no doubt, "speaking truth to power."

The genius of the Republican Party is to perceive the possibilities present in these systematizing and dynamic institutions and to combine them into something entirely new in U.S. politics, a dynamic reactionary movement professing to be a party of conservatism dedicated to small government, fiscal austerity, and a return to our Ur-myth, the "original Constitution of the Founders." Not least a party that has developed an impressive system for recruiting future apparatchiks.

Although I shall indicate some similarities between the American political system and Nazi Germany, my main argument is that while both systems belong to the same genus of totalitarianism, they represent different versions with some parallels and occasionally striking similarities. For example, the Nazi ideology of *Lebensraum* was the official justification for conquering peaceful neighboring countries and extending German hegemony. According to the doctrine, Germany needed "living space" to accommodate the dynamics of a superior master race that, if it was to avoid lapsing into decadence, had to provoke the challenges of war. That doctrine bears a striking similarity to the Bush doctrine of preemptive war.

Preemptive war entails the projection of power abroad, usually against a far weaker country, comparable, say, to the Nazi invasion of Belgium and Holland in 1940. It declares that the United States is justified in striking at another country because of a perceived threat that U.S. power will be weakened, severely damaged, unless it reacts to eliminate the danger before it materializes. Preemptive war is *Lebensraum* for the age of terrorism. The global character of terrorism offers endless opportunities for the preemptor to invade other countries on the grounds that they "harbor" terrorists. The neoconservative ideologists had, however, selected Iraq for invasion shortly after the end of the first Gulf War; indeed, they had been arguing that the only means by which America could expiate the shame of Vietnam and prove its mettle was in battle against other states.<sup>10</sup>

It can be objected, nonetheless, that unlike the Polish army in 1939, which the Nazis claimed was about to strike, terrorists are capable of terrible harm. However, Bush's declaration of a "war" on terrorism was fraught with serious constitutional implications; and whether or not it is legally justified, there is no guarantee that such a war could be won

in any conventional sense. It was not Poland that brought about the defeat of the Nazi war machine but hubris, overreaching, the decision to launch two unwinnable wars virtually simultaneously, first against the Soviet Union, then against the United States. The doctrine of preemptive war seems irrelevant if the foe is not another state, and when, typically, collection of evidence that proves a conventional state is "harboring" terrorists takes time.

In the case of Iraq the script for applying the preemptive doctrine produced a disaster. Following the invasion of April 2003 and the rapid defeat of an army that mostly disappeared, the United States and its allies found their forces, as well as the Iraqi population, under continuous attack by an enemy whose exact identity seemed elusive. While failing to link Saddam and terrorists, the United States succeeded in provoking the very terrorism that it had failed to find. The misadventure in Iraq suggests that the difference between an expansive doctrine of *Lebensraum* and Superpower's expansive doctrine of globalization is that the one was genocidal in intention and results, while the other had the more modest goals of reorganizing the Middle East, ensuring oil supplies, and securing Israel. Instead of laying waste to a whole continent and killing millions, Superpower's toll—thousands of innocent lives, widespread economic devastation and social dislocation, and years of military occupation—was unintended rather than deliberate.

Over time, perhaps, and with good fortune, the contrasts between classic and inverted totalitarianism will emerge more sharply. Under the one the lives of ordinary people were relentlessly drab, unpromising, and harsh, save for the few able to collaborate successfully.<sup>11</sup> Under the inverted form there is a good chance that eventually ordinary lives will be materially tolerable and safer; whether the regime will be democratic is problematic. The main reason for believing that the future might bring material improvement and social stability is that these objectives suit the needs of a conqueror concerned to avoid actually governing conquered land. A globalizing power wants military bases abroad, trading partners, markets, and consumers: suzerainty, not an old-fashioned empire.

The benignity of inverted totalitarianism as contrasted with the harshness of classic totalitarian regimes is revealed in the ecumenical

character of the one and the xenophobia of the other. The three classic totalitarianisms, while extending their domination over other societies, never sought to incorporate them in the sense that, say, the Romans did when they extended Roman citizenship to conquered peoples. Instead Hitler and the other dictators strove to keep *die Heimat* clean of foreigners while glorifying its own native-born, and making citizenship seem precious by reserving virtually all positions of power and wealth for its own subjects. In contrast, globalizing superpower blurs the distinction between homeland and *Ausland*: it enthusiastically exports culture and jobs—while missing no opportunity to weaken trade union power at home and abroad—and just as enthusiastically welcomes skilled and unskilled foreign workers, especially if the unskilled understand that they are “guests,” with few legal or political entitlements, rather than future citizens.

Nazism and Italian fascism both barely concealed their intention of dismantling the existing parliamentary governments of their countries; both recognized that their goal of total power depended upon the elimination of freely competing parties and fair elections. The Bush administration, having failed to make the case that its invasion of Iraq was a response to an imminent threat of “weapons of mass destruction,” shifted its rationale to one of bringing “democracy” to a nation despoiled by tyranny. What ensued was a curious variation on Corwin’s scenario that threat of nuclear war would produce domestic totalizing powers and suspension of constitutional democracy at home in order to obliterate an enemy abroad; instead, the nuclear threat allegedly posed by Saddam Hussein’s regime was invoked to justify an invasion for the purpose of imposing democracy *ab nihilo* upon a society that, while it most likely wanted to be rid of Saddam Hussein, had expressed no clear wish to be democratized, especially if that meant secularization. Meanwhile, at home, the war against Iraq is declared by the Bush administration to be simultaneously part of the ongoing war against terrorism, although the evidence of links between Saddam and al Qaeda appears to be as slender as the evidence that Saddam possessed weapons of mass destruction. And, it might be added, almost as dubious as the evidence supporting Hitler’s claim of 1939 that the Poles were poised to invade Germany.

Thus far the promoters of American superpower have evinced no interest in abolishing a system that enables them to maximize power: a free politics, under the right conditions and controls, interposes no barriers to their kind of totalizing powers and may even serve as their auxiliary. The “right conditions” refers to the porousness of institutions that enables a different form of power—one ostensibly nonpolitical in its origins, unbound to constitutional limits or to democratic processes (call it “corporate power”)—to turn access or simple influence over legislators and policy-makers into copartnership: not as in a corporate state of Mussolini’s fantasies but as in the incorporated state. Why negate a constitution, as the Nazis did, if it is possible simultaneously to exploit porosity and legitimate power by means of judicial interpretations that declare huge campaign contributions to be protected speech under the First Amendment, or that treat heavily financed and organized lobbying by large corporations as a simple application of the people’s right to petition their government?

To invert Marx: the first time, totalitarianism as tragic farce; the second, as farcical tragedy.

iv

[If] political preferences are simply plugged into the system by leaders (business or other) in order to extract what they want from the system, then the model of plebiscitary democracy is substantially equivalent to the model of totalitarian rule.

—Robert Dahl<sup>12</sup>

Within minutes of the strikes [of 9/11], U.S. law-enforcement and intelligence-gathering authorities mobilized to find the culprits and prevent another attack. They ramped up the tapping of Americans’ phone calls and voice-mails. They watched Internet traffic and e-mails as never before. They tailed greater numbers of people and into places deemed off-limits, such as mosques.



They clandestinely accessed bank accounts and credit card transactions and school records. They monitored travel. And they broke into homes without notice, looking for signs of terrorist activity and copying entire file cabinets and computer hard drives.

Authorities even tried to get inside peoples' heads, using supercomputers and "predictive" software to analyze enormous amounts of personal data about them and their friends and associates in an effort to foretell who might become a terrorist, and when.

— Josh Meyer, *Los Angeles Times*<sup>13</sup>

Unlike classical totalitarian regimes, which boasted of their totalitarian character, inverted totalitarianism disclaims its identity. Doubtless most Americans would indignantly protest that their political institutions and Constitution are the antithesis of a totalitarian regime. The contrast—at one extreme my claim that a species of totalitarianism is coming into being and, at the other, a claim by the putative totalitarians and the citizenry that theirs is an exemplary democracy; or, stated differently, the polarity between my denial that ours is a democracy and their denial that that system is totalitarian—may be too stark. Perhaps the actuality is a combination of both elements, which suggests that they are not mutually exclusive.

While robust democratic practices would be in contradiction to imperial power and its basic principle of domination and exploitation, democratic myths that have become detached from democratic practice may prove useful to inverted totalitarians. Plausibly, democratic mythology might linger on after democratic practices have lost substance, thereby enabling mythology, passivity, and empty forms to serve a type of totalitarian regime.

Whether democracy and totalitarian rule are necessarily incompatible might depend upon what kind of democracy and what kind of totalitarianism are combined. Recent studies have argued that democracy contributed importantly to the rise of the Nazis and the Fascists, and even served as a preparation. "[F]ascism," according to one prominent scholar of the subject, "is the product of democracies gone wrong, that

had working constitutional systems which they gave up voluntarily.”<sup>14</sup> To expand that interpretation: Hitler and Mussolini did not instantly “overthrow” parliamentary systems but, while cultivating a mass following, exploited popular elections to gain office and, once in power, proceeded to eviscerate the system of parliamentary governance, party competition, and the rule of law.<sup>15</sup> Democracy, according to this line of analysis, signified not an active citizenry but a politically disenchanted and alienated “mass” whose support was useful for conferring legitimacy on dictatorship and extending its control over the population. An artful combination of propaganda flattered the mass, exploited its antipolitical sentiments, warned it of dangerous enemies foreign and domestic, and applied forms of intimidation to create a climate of fear and an insecure populace, one receptive to being led. The same citizenry, which democracy had created, proceeded to vote into power and then support movements openly pledged to destroy democracy and constitutionalism. Thus a democracy may fail and give way to antide-mocracy that, in turn, supplies a populace—and a “democratic” postulate—congenial to a totalitarian regime.

Eventually the dictatorships of Mussolini and Hitler were toppled, not by popular revulsion but by military defeats. Was it democracy that failed, or, instead, was it a failure of certain parliamentary systems to effectively translate democracy into actual practice? One line of argument, aimed at exonerating democracy’s complicity in totalitarian regimes, contends that prior to the totalitarian seizure of power there was a thin democracy that included little beyond voting rights and formal legal guarantees. Democracy failed because of the superficial democratic civic culture in both societies. At the turn into the twentieth century monarchs were still important political actors in both societies. Germany’s Weimar constitution had been in existence for a mere dozen years; Italy’s parliamentary monarchy, while a creation of the nineteenth century, was notoriously corrupt and lacking in public support. Neither country could draw on a fund of democratic political experience or a tradition of participatory politics; its citizenry was prepolitical. The shallowness of democracy’s hold in those countries was underscored by the astonishing rapidity with which Hitler and Mussolini consolidated their dictatorships and opposition collapsed.<sup>16</sup>

The “democracy” that failed in Italy and Germany was primarily an electoral democracy, the most easily managed and transformed into plebiscitary democracy. Mass participation was simulated through appeals to patriotism and nationalism, and satisfied by mass rallies and membership in various auxiliaries (e.g., *Hitler-Jugend*) created by the regime. Fascist and Nazi totalitarianism was made possible by the methodical transformation of passive citizens into ardent followers, uncompromising patriots, willing executioners, and, finally, cannon fodder.

v

Paradoxically, while totalitarian regimes had a strong popular element, their principal institutions were self-consciously antidemocratic. They were notorious for trumpeting the “leadership principle” (*Führerprinzip*), legitimizing the predominance of elites, and elevating the status of the “loyal follower.” Power was monopolized, not shared. In addition to unflinching loyalty a strict orthodoxy was required of those who aspired to powerful positions in the hierarchy; as we would say today, they had “to stay on message.” Further, in both Italy and Germany the most powerful social and economic classes, as well as many of the members of the political elites, were hostile to democracy and, at best, lukewarm toward liberalism. Especially potent was the combination of a prepolitical demos and highly self-conscious, resentful elites convinced of their natural right to rule. Unlike the political elites of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, the elites who gravitated toward totalitarianism were less fearful of the mass than contemptuous of its gullibility.

The denial that democracy could have spawned a totalitarian regime assumes that a “healthy” democracy would abhor a Nazi-style dictatorship and resist being its accomplice. In one sense, a definitional or conceptual one, a true democracy and a dictatorship are mutually exclusive. Our thesis, however, is this: it is possible for a form of totalitarianism, different from the classical one, to evolve from a putatively “strong democracy” instead of a “failed” one. A weak democracy that fails, such as that of Weimar, might end in classical totalitarianism,

while a failed strong democracy might lead to inverted totalitarianism. The latter possibility becomes greater if the strong democracy is shallower than advertised—and greater still if, historically, that democracy was acknowledged rather than embraced by elites.

vi

America must be able to fight Iraq and North Korea, and *also* be able to fight genocide in the Balkans and elsewhere without compromising its ability to fight two major regional conflicts. And it must be able to contemplate war with China or Russia some considerable (but not infinite) time from now.  
—Frederick W. Kagan<sup>17</sup>

Twentieth-century totalitarian systems aspired to total control over every aspect of society and to the elimination or neutralization of all possible forms of opposition. In the German version this served the all-consuming purpose of waging war and expanding beyond established boundaries. In practice control was extended over family life and reproduction, education, economy, all forms of cultural expression, the courts, bureaucracy, and military. By imposing a single ideology the Nazis created a self-justifying regime. The complete rearrangement of German society was the preliminary to their rearranging the world by taking over and administering other countries, using their populations as slave laborers, resettling some peoples and liquidating others. For our purposes the crucial question is, how did both Nazism and fascism, as well as Soviet communism, invent systems of power that, by the standards of the last century, were awesome and incomparable, and, by any standard, lethal?

The answer is this: by forced organization, coordination of power centers, and imposed mobilization and disciplining of the general population, not least by introducing a measure of economic improvement and an atmosphere of fear. In Germany these techniques were accompanied by an official ideology that promised Germans a superior place

in a New Order; in Soviet Russia citizens were told to expect a future society of abundance and equality. From today's perspective, colored as it is by postmodern sensibilities, these older ideologies both demanded, and exacted, severe sacrifices from present generations, raising the question of how such ideologies of postponed and nebulous rewards were able to generate a dynamic instead of provoking widespread active or passive resistance. A short answer might invoke the potency of calibrated doses of fear, combined with excitement at being a part of a great undertaking and expectations about opportunities in the present—a present that, despite its dangers and shortcomings, offered greater hope of advancement than did the dreary existence in the depressed economy of Weimar or the premodern, rigid class society of tsarist Russia.

Unlike the Bolsheviks, Nazis, and Italian Fascists, inverted totalitarianism does not require as the condition of its success the overthrow of the established system. It has no overt plan to suppress all opposition, impose ideological uniformity or racial purity, or seek the traditional form of empire. It allows free speech, venerates the Constitution, and operates within a two-party system that, theoretically, secures a role for an opposition party. Rather than revolting against an existing system, it claims to be defending it. This suggests that a different kind of dynamic is at work, one that for the most part does not depend upon resentments against the prevailing form of government or social system.

Inverted totalitarianism has learned how to exploit what appear to be formidable political and legal constraints, using them in ways that defeat their original purpose but without dismantling or overtly attacking them. One strategy is to exploit institutions to facilitate certain favored forms of power while checking rival ones. Thus it will accept reform of campaign financing that prohibits contributions from trade unions and corporations, knowing that in practice it is relatively easy for corporations to evade such prohibitions. Besides, the same interests that have invested in the political campaigns of senators who sit on the Judiciary Committee receive “returns” on their investment when the politicized courts decide that campaign reforms violate the rights of free speech guaranteed to corporations. Which is one more application of the doctrine that for legal purposes corporations are to be considered persons—

except in those cases where the “persons” agree to a “settlement” whereby the wrongdoers avoid prison terms by paying a large sum to the government while, according to the formula, not “admitting any wrongdoing.” As numerous corporate and political scandals have revealed, corruption is systemic to inverted totalitarianism as it had been with classical totalitarianism.

Our totalizing system, nonetheless, has evolved its own methods and strategies. Its genius lies in wielding total power without appearing to, without establishing concentration camps, or enforcing ideological uniformity, or forcibly suppressing dissident elements so long as they remain ineffectual.<sup>18</sup> However, the parallel lines of classic totalitarianism and inverted totalitarianism occasionally intersect. It is true that aliens, and even some citizens, who are suspected of having “links” to terrorists have been hauled away, kept incommunicado, and even transported abroad to countries with more cost-effective, less tender methods of interrogation, yet such practices are meant more as object lessons than as standard procedures. In the same vein the United States has established only a few extrajudicial courts (e.g., so-called military tribunals) and does not have concentration camps, only some “detention centers” and “brigs” where, under harsh conditions, prisoners may be held without being charged with a specific crime. The point is to preserve an economy of fear and not to saturate the “market.” For what is most revealing of totalitarian tendencies in our inverted regime are not the publicized denials of due process to enemy nationals or to misguided “freedom fighters.” The more important consideration is ensuring domestic tranquillity. But, specifically, against whom?

The United States has the highest rate of incarceration of any country in the world, a prison system with brutalizing conditions, and one that has been significantly privatized.<sup>19</sup> Equally striking, a disproportionately high percentage of the imprisoned are African Americans. Assuming that most of the imprisoned African Americans have committed some crime, their incarceration would appear to contrast with the Nazi policies that herded millions of Jews, Gypsies, homosexuals, political opponents, and Slavs into slave labor camps for no other reason than to satisfy irrational ideological beliefs (“racial purity”) and obtain “free” labor. Or do the high incarceration rates among blacks reflect

not only old-fashioned racism but inverted totalitarianism's fear of political dissidence?

The significance of the African American prison population is political. What is notable about the African American population generally is that it is highly sophisticated politically and by far the one group that throughout the twentieth century kept alive a spirit of resistance and rebelliousness. In that context, criminal justice is as much a strategy of political neutralization as it is a channel of instinctive racism.

Our government need not pursue a policy of stamping out dissidence—the uniformity imposed on opinion by the “private” media conglomerates performs that job efficiently. This apparent “restraint” points to a crucial difference between classical and inverted totalitarianism: in the former economics was subordinate to politics. Under inverted totalitarianism the reverse is true: economics dominates politics—and with that domination come different forms of ruthlessness. It is possible for the government to punish by withholding appropriated funds, failing to honor entitlements, or purposely allowing regulations (e.g., environmental safeguards, minimum wage standards) to remain unenforced or waived. What seem like reductions in state power are actually increases. Withholding appropriated money is an expression of power that is not lost on those adversely affected; waiving minimum wage standards is an act of power not lost on those who benefit and those who suffer.<sup>20</sup> Such strategies play a major role in the incorporation of state and corporate power. Incorporation need not always require, for example, that corporate representatives sit on review committees that judge new drugs or gather in the office of the vice president to consult on energy policies. Power is typically exercised in a context where the participants know their cues. Recently a major television network withdrew a program dealing with Ronald Reagan after the Republican National Committee protested a scene where the former president was portrayed as less than inclusive about homosexuals.<sup>21</sup> This surrender occurred at the precise moment when the Republican-dominated Federal Communications Commission was promoting greater concentration of media ownership and, in the process, ignoring an unprecedented outcry from thousands of citizens.

vii

The fact that politically organized interest groups with vast resources operate continuously, that they are coordinated with congressional procedures and calendars, that they occupy strategic points in the political processes, is indicative of how the meaning of "representative" government has radically changed. The citizenry is being displaced, severed from a direct connection with the legislative institutions that are supposed to "stand in" for the people. If the main purpose of elections is to serve up pliant legislators for lobbyists to shape, such a system deserves to be called "misrepresentative or clientry government." It is, at one and the same time, a powerful contributing factor to the depoliticization of the citizenry, as well as reason for characterizing the system as one of antidemocracy.

How is the role of the citizen being redefined and to whose advantage? Almost from the beginning of the Cold War the citizenry, supposedly the source of governmental power and authority as well as a participant, has been replaced by the "electorate," that is, by voters who acquire a political life at election time. During the intervals between elections the political existence of the citizenry is relegated to a shadow-citizenship of virtual participation. Instead of participating in power, the virtual citizen is invited to have "opinions": measurable responses to questions predesigned to elicit them.

There is an especially revealing contrast between the Nazi use of public opinion surveys and the methods of contemporary pollsters. The Nazis were interested primarily in constructing a "mass" opinion, a monolithic expression of the citizens without qualification or nuance. Hence the plebiscite and its stark choice of "yes" or "no." In contrast, the American method is to prepare for elections by first splintering the citizenry into distinct categories, such as "between 20 and 35 years old," or "white male over 40," or "female college graduate." The potential electorate is thus divided into small subgroups that candidates can then "target" with messages tailored to the "values," prejudices, or habits of the particular category. The effect is to accentuate what separates citizens, to plant suspicions and thereby further promote demobilization by making it more difficult to form coherent majorities around com-



mon beliefs. At the same time, the dicing of the public into ever more refined categories renders their constituent members more easily manipulable: cheaply reproduced in “focus groups,” their conclusions are represented as political reality. The respondents, for their part, are not obligated to act on their opinions: giving an opinion entails no political responsibility.

The advanced stage of the art of opinion construction and its manipulation is indicative of the forces molding the political system. It combines advanced technology, academic social science, government contracts, and corporate subsidies. We shall encounter this same combination of powers in later pages; it plays a vital role in coordinating the powers on which Superpower depends.

In a genuinely democratic system, as opposed to a pseudodemocratic one in which a “representative sample” of the population is asked whether it “approves” or “disapproves,” citizens would be viewed as *agents* actively involved in the exercise of power and in contributing to the direction of policy. Instead citizens are more like “patients” who, in the dictionary definition, are “bearing or enduring (evil of any kind) with composure; long suffering or forbearing.”<sup>22</sup>

A demotion in the status and stature of the “sovereign people” to patient subjects is symptomatic of systemic change, from democracy as a method of “popularizing” power to democracy as a brand name for a product manageable at home and marketable abroad.<sup>23</sup>

viii

“Superpower” signifies the emergence of a new system. Its guiding purposes are not democratic ones of promoting the well-being of its citizens or involving them in political processes. The new identity and how it is to be measured were stated by the administration: “the United States possesses unprecedented—and unequalled—strength and influence in the world.”<sup>24</sup> Implicit in that declaration is a reformulation of the nation’s identity: it stands for sheer power, economic and military, that is measured by a global standard rather than the nation’s constitu-

tion; freed not only from constitutional democracy but from any truly political character.

Inverted totalitarianism, the true face of Superpower, represents a blend of powers that includes modern as well as archaic ones. It comprises the business corporation—once hailed as “the city of God on earth” and even formally theologized<sup>25</sup>—the organization of science for continuous advance, and the systematic conversion of new scientific knowledge into new technological applications, especially military ones. A common characteristic of each of these powers is a presumption of virtually limitless development. That dynamic governs economic behavior, the pursuit of knowledge, the production of culture, and military weaponry. The paradox is that the inevitable changes accompanying the development of these powers, indeed, changes that are often consciously sought, are promoted by an administration and a political party advertising themselves as “conservative.”

Democracy proposes a radically different conception of power. Democracy is first and foremost about equality: equality of power and equality of sharing in the benefits and values made possible by social cooperation. Democracy is no more compatible with world domination than is “the political,” which is first and foremost about preserving commonality while legitimating and reconciling differences. Both democracy and the political become distorted when the scales are continually expanded. In the United States, from the beginning, there has been a persistent tension between the drive for expansion (the Louisiana Purchase, “Westward, Ho!”) and the struggle to devise new institutions for adapting the practices of democracy and its ethos of political commonality. An enlarged spatial scale both requires and promotes a technology of power that can make occupation and rule effective. America’s westward migration was facilitated by new technology, from the covered wagon, the Pony Express, the railroad, and the telegraph to the Winchester rifle. To the technology of expansion there should be added the ideology of “Manifest Destiny,” which served to legitimate and fuel the “drive” westward. Ideology can be as vital a part of the technology of power as any mechanical invention, provided it is dynamic—that is, if it possesses a “thrust” forward in time (e.g., the “Last Days”) to accompany the occupation of new space. Such an ideology reassures those

who are applying mundane forms of technology that the act of “taking over” what was not previously theirs is “just” by some higher principle. Manifest Destiny, religious conversion, the counterparts to *Lebensraum*, the Redskin to the Jew.

The preconditions for Superpower are the availability of a totalizing technology of power and an accompanying ideology that encourages the regime’s aspirations to global domination. These preconditions were satisfied during the Bush administration. It succeeded in systematizing and exploiting a dynamic complex of powers already existing. Its principal elements include the state, corporate economic power, the powers represented in the integration of modern science and postmodern technologies, a military addicted to technological innovation, and a religious fundamentalism that is no stranger to politics and markets. By “dynamic” I mean to emphasize that they are powers which constantly supersede their own previous limits and are totalizing in the sense that infinity, or the persistent challenging of the constraints of existing practices, beliefs, and taboos, rather than simple superiority, is the driving force. This is accompanied by a systematic effort to establish the conditions that facilitate power and eliminate those which interfere—from government regulations that frustrate entrepreneurial energies to the “wall separating church and state” that constrains religious zealots from purifying schools, placing the Ten Commandments in courthouses, preaching redemption to a captive audience of welfare recipients, sometimes using terrorist violence against medical clinics, and setting the limits of scientific research in the name of protecting “life” before birth but less zealous about promoting health care for the postnatal poor. Such religiosity fits comfortably with a regime promising a “compassionate conservatism” that “will leave no child behind” although, in practice, it frequently fails to provide adequate funds for social and educational programs designed to assist poor families. It does not emulate the rhetoric of Nazis and Stalinists by extolling the values of “hardness” and “steel.” Instead, it coexists easily with a culture of softness, indulgence, and fantasy, of comfortable viewers watching superb athletes perform physical prodigies of grace and violence.

Hitler was a parvenu in relation to the existing political system. He and his intimate circle began as “outsiders” who were not a part of the conventional system of political parties and elites in pre-Hitler Germany. In keeping with that character they adopted unconventional, often illegal, means to gain power. The court circle of George II, in contrast, was composed of highly seasoned political operatives, such as Dick Cheney, Donald Rumsfeld, and Karl Rove, insiders rather than outsiders. Not only were they experienced in government, but most of them were intimately familiar with the inner workings of the corporate world. Their talents lay in managing the dual system of state and corporation. In Hitler’s regime the subjectivity of arrivistes reigned; in Bush’s governing circle the “objectivity” of professional politicians, the aggrandizing of corporate managers on loan, and the stratagems of consultants prevailed. The revolving door of the dual system suggests a certain parity between corporate and state power; the actuality is asymmetrical. While the corporate ethos has overwhelmed the ideal of government as the servant of the people, the old governmental ideals—such as the view that power is to be used for the public good, not for private profit—supply no model for corporate behavior.

One truly fundamental difference between classical and inverted totalitarian regimes is that in the years before assuming power, the Nazis had attracted only limited support from the representatives of “big business.” And during their years of rule it was abundantly clear that capitalism was subordinate to the power of the state and the party. In contrast the Bush administration openly flaunts its connections with corporate powers by appointing their representatives to high positions in government and in the hierarchy of the Republican Party. Another revealing difference: alongside their highly selective celebration of *Kultur* (e.g., Wagner) the Nazis celebrated a certain barbarism that was contemptuous of “civilization,” seeing in high culture an effete decadence that sapped the will to power. The Bush administration’s spokespersons, as well as supporters of the attack on Iraq and the war against terrorism,

portray the United States as the defender of “civilization” against “barbarians” and “apocalyptic nihilists.”<sup>26</sup>

In one instance the distinction between “real” and “inverted” totalitarianism nearly—or, perhaps, ironically—appears to break down. The Nazis came to power by an election in which they won more votes than any rival party, although not a majority. The election, while formally free, was marred by episodes of violence enacted by party thugs. George H. W. Bush was also elected or, better, anointed without a popular majority. Thanks to the manipulation of a dubious electoral process in the state of Florida, an aggressive, experienced, and highly paid “hit team” of lawyers and political consultants, a timid opposition party, and a highly partisan Supreme Court, the high-handed violations of elementary principles of legitimacy were treated as just another bit of dirty politics, easily forgotten in the rush to “get on with the nation’s business.”<sup>27</sup>

Behind the benevolent rhetoric of the Bush administration lies perhaps the most crucial inversion. One of the striking features of the three principal twentieth-century totalitarian regimes was a focus on maintaining their societies in a state of continuous political mobilization. Hitler’s Germany, Mussolini’s Italy, and Stalin’s Soviet Union all held periodic plebiscites in which, unfailingly, more than 95 percent of a mobilized citizenry went to the polls and voted yes. There were endless political rallies, public spectacles, rousing oratorical performances by the leadership, tireless propaganda extolling the leaders, the party, and the ideology, and warnings that heavy sacrifices lay ahead.

In contrast, inverted totalitarianism thrives on a politically demobilized society, that is, a society in which the citizens, far from being whipped into a continuous frenzy by the regime’s operatives, are politically lethargic, reminiscent of Tocqueville’s privatized citizenry. Roughly between one-half and two-thirds of America’s qualified voters fail to vote, thus making the management of the “active” electorate far easier. Every apathetic citizen is a silent enlistee in the cause of inverted totalitarianism. Yet apathy is not simply the result of a TV culture. It is, in its own way, a political response. Ordinary citizens have been the victims of a counterrevolution that has brought “rollbacks” of numerous social services which were established only after hard-fought political struggles, and which the earlier Republican administrations of Eisen-

hower and Nixon had accepted as major elements in a national consensus. Rollbacks don't simply reverse previous social gains; they also teach political futility to the Many. And along the way they mock the ideal and practice of consensus.

Where classic totalitarianism—whether of the German, Italian, or Soviet type—aimed at fashioning followers rather than citizens, inverted totalitarianism can achieve the same end by furnishing substitutes such as “consumer sovereignty” and “shareholder democracy” that give a “sense of participation” without demands or responsibilities. An inverted regime prefers a citizenry that is uncritically complicit rather than involved. President Bush's first words to the citizenry after 9/11 were not an appeal for sacrifice in a common cause but “unite, consume, fly.”

Yet elements of inverted totalitarianism could not crystallize in the absence of a stimulus that would rouse the apathetic just enough to gain their support and obedience. The threat of terrorism supplied that element. It could evoke fear and obedience on demand (“according to unverified reports . . .”) without causing paralysis or skepticism.

What is the temptation of a democracy without citizens?

A clue was suggested in the recent remarks of a member of the president's inner circle: “Even the president is not omnipotent. Would that he were. He often says that life would be a lot easier if it were a dictatorship. But it's not, and he is glad it's a democracy.”<sup>28</sup> Presumably, the nation exhaled.

x

The Nazis developed an extreme form of politicalization. The leadership continuously drummed into its population the necessity of personal sacrifice, of subordinating one's personal concerns to the good of the whole. It was, however, a “politicalization without politics.” It actively suppressed free public discussion, discouraged the airing of policy alternatives, and clamped down upon the expression of group conflicts. Instead of a politics of open contestation and public involvement, the Nazis pursued a vicious politics of cronyism, intrigue, ruthless ambi-

tions, and periodic purges within the party and its various auxiliaries (SA, SS, etc.). There, hidden from view, individuals and cliques fought over the spoils and prerogatives of office.

Inverted totalitarianism reverses things. It is all politics all of the time but a politics largely untempered by the political. Party squabbles are occasionally on public display, and there is a frantic and continuous politics among factions of the party, interest groups, competing corporate powers, and rival media concerns. And there is, of course, the culminating moment of national elections when the attention of the nation is required to make a choice of personalities rather than a choice between alternatives. What is absent is the political, the commitment to finding where the common good lies amidst the welter of well-financed, highly organized, single-minded interests rabidly seeking governmental favors and overwhelming the practices of representative government and public administration by a sea of cash.

xi

The twentieth-century totalitarian systems in Italy and Germany were made possible by the weakness and eventual collapse of parliamentary government and the failure of the conventional political parties to mount and sustain an effective opposition. The latter proved incapable of countering the tactics and appeals of both extreme Right and Left that had made no secret of their ultimate purpose of dismantling elected governments and outlawing the system of free politics. Classic totalitarianism first gained power by capturing the existing system and, once in power, proceeded to destroy it. The break was abrupt and complete.

Inverted totalitarianism has a different background, undramatic, no mass movement driving it, no putsches or Marches on Rome, no abrupt discontinuity. Instead a scarcely noticeable evolution, an undramatic convergence of tendencies and unintended consequences. In historical terms, corporate power itself is at least as old as the "trusts" of the nineteenth century; similarly, the role of big money in corrupting politics was well established by the end of the nineteenth century and had

aroused a whole generation of “muckrakers” in the early years of the twentieth. In the 1920s political scientists were already describing interest groups and lobbies as “the fourth branch of government.” What is unprecedented in the union of corporate and state power is its systematization and the shared culture of the partners.

Inverted totalitarianism begins to crystallize amidst the affluence of the world’s most dynamic economy. In contrast, the Nazis’ ascendancy was aided in no small measure by the severe economic depression, high inflation, and acute unemployment afflicting Germany during much of the 1920s and early 1930s. Once in power they began to mobilize the society for total war. The resulting full employment reduced the regime’s need to exploit economic fears. Where Hitler’s party, the National Socialists, had—for a brief period—made gestures in the direction of socialism and the working classes but remained cool toward capitalism, inverted totalitarianism is just the opposite. It is resolutely capitalist, no friend of the working classes, and, of course, viscerally antisocialist. In contrast to the Nazis, the ever-changing economy of Superpower, despite its affluence, makes fear the constant companion of most workers. Downsizing, reorganization, bubbles bursting, unions busted, quickly outdated skills, and transfer of jobs abroad create not just fear but an economy of fear, a system of control whose power feeds on uncertainty, yet a system that, according to its analysts, is eminently rational.

xii

One of the most revealing contrasts between classic and inverted totalitarianism is in their treatment of what an inspired university president designated “the knowledge industry.” Under classic totalitarianism, schools, universities, and research were conscripted into the service of the regime. Scientific establishments and independent critics were either silenced, purged, or eliminated. Those who survived were expected to faithfully echo the party or government line. The primary task of all educational institutions was the indoctrination of the population in the ideology of the regime.



Inverted totalitarianism, although at times capable of harassing or discrediting critics,<sup>29</sup> has instead cultivated a loyal intelligentsia of its own. Through a combination of governmental contracts, corporate and foundation funds, joint projects involving university and corporate researchers, and wealthy individual donors, universities (especially so-called research universities), intellectuals, scholars, and researchers have been seamlessly integrated into the system. No books burned, no refugee Einsteins. For the first time in the history of American higher education top professors are made wealthy by the system, commanding salaries and perks that a budding CEO might envy. During the months leading up to and following the invasion of Iraq, university and college campuses, which had been such notorious centers of opposition to the Vietnam War that politicians and publicists spoke seriously of the need to “pacify the campuses,” hardly stirred. The Academy had become self-pacifying.