

The American Empire: Triumph of Triumphalism

By Hamid Dabashi*

All hurricanes are acts of God because God controls the heavens. I believe that New Orleans had a level of sin that was offensive to God and they were recipients of the judgment of God for that.

—John C. Hagee (*The Founder and Senior Pastor of Cornerstone Church in San Antonio, Texas*)¹

[In h]is latest book, Jerusalem Countdown: A Warning to the World, [John Hagee] interprets the Bible to predict that Russian and Arab armies will invade Israel and be destroyed by God. This will set up a confrontation over Israel between China and the West, led by the anti-Christ, who will be the head of the European Union, Pastor Hagee writes. That final battle between East and West—at Armageddon, as the actual Israeli location of Meggido is known in English—will precipitate the second coming of Christ, he concludes.

—Richard Allen Green²

I am very proud to have Pastor John Hagee's support.

—John McCain (*The Republican presumptive nominee for the U.S. presidential election 2008*)³

The fifth anniversary of the U.S.-led invasion and subsequent occupation of Iraq in March 2003, in anticipation of the seventh anniversary of the U.S.-led invasion of Afghanistan in October 2001, and in commemoration of the second anniversary of the Israeli invasion of Lebanon in July 2006, occasions a moment to redirect our attention from the terrors of death and destruction that the U.S. and Israel have caused in these countries (and in occupied Palestine) and wonder what precisely is the nature and disposition of this imperial project. Whatever the U.S. is up to in Afghanistan and Iraq (and perhaps in Iran), and whatever Israel is plotting in Lebanon and Palestine (and perhaps Syria), it is ultimately the domestic echoes of all this globalized warmongering in the United States—particularly in a presidential election year—that will have a definitive impact on the nature and disposition of this empire. The

* Hamid Dabashi is the Hagop Kevorkian Professor of Iranian Studies and Comparative Literature at Columbia University. This essay is based on a talk delivered at Harvard Law School on Monday 17 March 2008, commemorating the Fifth Anniversary of the US-led invasion of Iraq. I am grateful to *Unbound: Harvard Journal of Legal Left* and the other Harvard organizations sponsoring my talk.

¹ *Pastor John Hagee on Christian Zionism*, NPR, September 18, 2006, available at <http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=6097362> (last visited Apr. 20, 2008).

² *Evangelical Christians plead for Israel*, BBC NEWS, July 19, 2006, available at <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/americas/5193092.stm> (last visited Apr. 20, 2008).

³ *Mega-Church Pastor in Texas Backs McCain*, THE NEW YORK TIMES POLITICS BLOG, February 27, 2008, available at <http://thecaucus.blogs.nytimes.com/2008/02/27/mega-church-pastor-in-texas-backs-mccain/> (last visited Apr. 20, 2008).

barometer of the overheated U.S. imperial imagination is nowhere better gauged and measured, felt and palpable, than inside a country now in the full swing of casting its political future over the next generation.

Provincialism at Large

The most striking aspect of the contemporary era in the United States, compared even with the 1970s, let alone with the era of the civil rights movement in the 1960s, is its vituperative provincialism, a belligerent parochialism even beyond the pale of what the great American historian Richard Hofstadter diagnoses and theorizes in his Pulitzer Prize-winning landmark study *Anti-Intellectualism in American Life*,⁴ with its theoretical roots extended all the way back to Alexis de Tocqueville's prophetic work, *Democracy in America*.⁵ An alarming combination of religious fanaticism, political fascism, and unbridled corporate greed has emerged as the defining moment of a potentially cosmopolitan culture now at the thither end of its own worst nightmares. Xenophobia of the most racist disposition, fear of foreigners of all colors and climes (as perhaps best captured in Zack Snyder's phantasmagoric film *300*,⁶ and, above all, the frightened and captured imagination of an entire nation are now all in full display and perhaps nowhere better evident than in an anti-immigration and anti-immigrant sentiment and mentality that is diametrically at odds with the very fabric of a nation of immigrants. The colorful rainbow of recent and arriving immigrants (legal and illegal) seem to remind this culture of cruelty and intolerance of the factual promise of its own worldly and cosmopolitan character, now blindfolded and hijacked by a band of religious zealots and ideological fanatics of the Christian imperialist persuasion. Underlying this frightful gathering of political absolutism, religious fanaticism, and global warmongering is the calamity of a corporate culture that breeds fraudulent career opportunists like Bill and Hillary Clinton who aspire to become public "servants" only to amass more than one hundred million dollars in private wealth (in just eight years) in a country where nearly 33 million inhabitants live below the poverty line,⁷ even more millions can scarcely hold themselves above it, and close to 30 million depend on food stamps if they are not to starve to death.⁸

⁴ For the most recent edition of his classic study see Richard Hofstadter, *Anti-Intellectualism in American Life* (1964).

⁵ For the most recent edition see Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America* (Penguin Group, 2003).

⁶ *300* (WARNER BROS. 2006). For my analysis of this film see Hamid Dabashi, *The 300 Strokes*, AL-AHRAM WEEKLY, August 2-8, 2007.

⁷ Steve Schifferes, *Poverty Hits One Million More Americans*, BBC NEWS, Sept. 25, 2002, available at <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/business/2280038.stm> (last visited Apr. 22, 2008).

⁸ Erik Eckholm, *As Jobs Vanish and Prices Rise, Food Stamp Use Nears Record*, N.Y. TIMES, March 31, 2008, available at http://www.nytimes.com/2008/03/31/us/31foodstamps.html?_r=2&oref=slogin (last visited Apr. 22, 2008). On the Clintons' wealth, see *Clintons' earnings exceed \$100m*, BBC NEWS, April 5, 2008, available at <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/americas/7331834.stm> (last visited Apr. 20, 2008).

Nothing is more definitive of this frightful picture of globalized provincialism than a rampant religious fanaticism that is eating into the very moral and normative fabric of a civil society constitutionally at odds with the theocratic tendencies that are now endangering its historic fate. More than four decades ago, Robert Bellah proposed the idea of “civil religion America” by suggesting a normative morality that was irreducible to any particular religion or organized church.⁹ Today that idea (and practice) is categorically eclipsed by the pestiferous calamity of very powerful evangelical zeal with an absolutist and triumphalist writ written into the fabric of its fanaticism. What we are witnessing today in the United States (and by extension the countries and cultures it opts to invade, destroy, occupy, and leave in ruins) is the active transmutation of a variety of cosmopolitan cultures around the globe—*cosmopolitan* not by virtue of an outdated and meaningless proposition colonially code-named *Westernization*, but *cosmopolitan* by virtue of the historical worldliness of all human conditions and the living cultures they create—into xenophobic tribalism of one sort or another. That fanatical tribalism today in the United States spells out the particulars of Christian fundamentalism in general, and Christian Zionism in particular. It thus actively invokes the idea of a *Christian* empire, in strategic alliance with a *Jewish* State, now targeted most immediately against a belligerent *Islamic* republic, and in a more distant relationship with a *Hindu* fundamentalism in India and a *Buddhist* separatism extending from Sri Lanka to Tibet.

Perils of Historical Amnesia

What today seems to obscure a clear recognition of this overriding parochialism is an endemic historical amnesia in the United States, where the rapid succession of news—of one calamity in Iraq succeeding another in Afghanistan, and yet another in Palestine—is commensurate with a chronic Attention Deficit Disorder. Consider a recent exchange between Senators McCain and Obama, in the course of the U.S. presidential campaign of 2008. On February 26, 2008, in a debate with Senator Clinton, Senator Obama stated that if, after he withdrew the U.S. forces from Iraq (should he be the next President of the United States), he were to find out that “al-Qaeda is forming a base” there, he would not hesitate to send the U.S. military back into Iraq. The next day, Senator McCain criticized Senator Obama for that statement. Seeking to portray Obama as naïve and ill-informed on international affairs (particularly on the so-called “War on Terror”), Senator McCain said, “I have some news—al-Qaeda is in Iraq. It’s called: ‘Al-Qaeda in Iraq.’” The following day, Senator Obama retorted: “I have some news for John McCain . . . there was no such thing as Al-Qaeda in Iraq until George Bush and John McCain invaded Iraq.”¹⁰

⁹ For more on Robert Bellah’s notion of “civil religion,” see Robert Bellah, *Civil Religion in America*, 96 J. AM. ACAD. ARTS & SCI. 1, 1-21 (1967). See also ROBERT N. BELLAH, *BEYOND BELIEF: ESSAYS ON RELIGION IN A POST-TRADITIONALIST WORLD* (1991).

¹⁰ For more on this exchange see John M. Broder and Elizabeth Bumiller, *McCain and Obama Trade Jabs on Iraq*, N.Y. TIMES, Feb. 28, 2008.

In the same spirit of remembering and reminding, one could also offer an additional piece of news for both Senators McCain and Obama: that there was no al-Qaeda, or Taliban, or a bellicose Saddam Hossein armed to the teeth with U.S. and E.U.-supplied chemical and other weapons, until the United States government created these monsters in collaboration with Pakistani intelligence, Saudi money, and Israeli strategic support. This is only a small dose of historical record and remembrance.

This chronic Attention Deficit Disorder, and the absolutist fanaticism it (perhaps inadvertently) serves, require a relentless, repeated, and critical re-articulation of recent history—and that task will always have to begin with an active decoding of the events of September 11th, 2001, which has now assumed iconic and sacerdotal significance, beyond the reach of any deconstructive reading. One reason that there is now an overabundance of rather outlandish conspiracy theories about 9/11 attracting increasing attention in the United States¹¹ is precisely that the official story that the Bush administration and its neocon chicanery have crafted is itself the supreme conspiracy theory, leaving much room and hope for critical reconsiderations. A legitimate criticism of that official reading that does not degenerate into conspiracy theories (that 9/11 was an inside job), but that places the United States' role as an imperial source of menace, mayhem, and degenerate imperialism in proper historical context, is a matter irreducible to the so-called critique of the American "foreign policy." If anything, the post-9/11 era is the end of *foreign policy*, for there is, as Amy Kaplan (and before her W. E. B. Dubois) aptly demonstrated in her exquisite book, *The Anarchy of Empire in the Making of U.S. Culture*, an active correspondence between the U.S. domestic and foreign affairs, local and globalized cultures.¹² The retelling of the American imperial tale around the globe is one crucial way of articulating its own cosmopolitan manner of resisting and overcoming this imperialism. The historical fact is that the American culture goes imperial in its worst parochial denomination, and resists it with its most cosmopolitan disposition.

To state the obvious (and to refresh the historical memory): there is no structural, causal, or thematic correspondence between the criminal events of 9/11 perpetrated by a band of militant adventurers and the descent of the army of Attila the Hun upon the people of Afghanistan and Iraq (in October, 2001 and March 2003, respectively). (On any anniversary of the Iraq or Afghan War it is imperative to link them together, to see them as part and parcel of each other in the American imperial project, and by way of paying penance for such naïve observers as Richard Falk who thought the Afghan War was the case of a "Just War."¹³) The liberal bravura of taking issue with

¹¹ See, e.g., JAMES H. FETZER, ED., *THE 9/11 CONSPIRACY* (2007).

¹² AMY KAPLAN, *THE ANARCHY OF EMPIRE IN THE MAKING US CULTURE* (2005).

¹³ See Richard Falk, *Defining a Just War*, *THE NATION*, Oct. 11, 2001. "I have never," Richard Falk writes in this essay exactly a month after 9/11/01, "since my childhood supported a shooting war in which the United States was involved, although in retrospect I think the NATO war in Kosovo achieved beneficial results. The war in Afghanistan against apocalyptic terrorism qualifies in my understanding as the first truly just war since World War II." This is a sign of sheer historical blindness to the overriding imperial design of American military involvements, even in Kosovo.

the Bush administration and asserting that there was no link between Iraq and 9/11, or between Iraq and al-Qaeda, detracts attention from the more fundamental fact that there was no link between 9/11 and the U.S.-led invasion of Afghanistan, even if indeed Osama bin Laden and his al-Qaeda operation were responsible for the atrocities of 9/11 (which is to this day a mere military and propaganda conjecture—on the part of both the U.S. and Osama bin Laden—that has assumed iconic sanctity and is thus beyond the pale of reasonable doubt).

The re-emergence of U.S. militarism after the so-called Vietnam Syndrome of the 1970s was well underway long before the events of 9/11 and soon after the end of President Jimmy Carter's administration (1976-1980) and his military fiasco on April 24, 1980, during the so-called Operation Eagle Claw (or Operation Evening Light) when the U.S. military tried in vain to rescue the American hostages in Tehran. Beginning with the U.S. invasion of Grenada on October 25, 1983, continuing with the criminal (according to the International Court of Justice) U.S. involvements in Nicaragua in the mid-1980s, and kept apace for the rest of the Reagan administration (1980-1988), this re-emergence of U.S. militarism came to full fruition during the First Gulf War under George Herbert Walker Bush in 1990-1991. The Clinton administration's military thuggery around the globe (in Afghanistan, Iraq, Libya, and Sudan—including the bombing of an Aspirin Factory in Sudan on August 20, 1998) continued on the same path of military recovery from Vietnam Syndrome—and it is to that "recovery" that the events of post-9/11 will have to be linked. The events of 9/11 may have anachronistically and *ex post facto* assumed iconic significance, but they did nothing but exacerbate the aggressive re-militarization of American foreign/domestic disposition that has been underway since late in the Carter and early in the Reagan administrations.

The Islamic Revolution in Iran (1977-1979) and the Soviet invasion and occupation of Afghanistan (1978-1989) are the most immediate points of departure for our understanding of the current cycle of post-Vietnam Syndrome U.S. military adventurism, which is entirely independent of the events of 9/11. The widespread regional appeal of the Iranian revolution of 1977-1979 deeply troubled the Washington Middle East establishment.¹⁴ The U.S.-sponsored creation of the Afghan Mojahedin/Taliban (with the assistance of Saudi money and Pakistani intelligence) on the Western frontiers of the Iranian revolution sought (1) to create a Sunni Wahabi barrier against the spread of the Shi'i radicalism embedded in that revolution and (2) to use the same fervent Sunni militancy to expel the Soviets out of Afghanistan. The massive arming of Saddam Hussein by the U.S. and its European allies during the eight brutal years of the Iran-Iraq war (1980-1988) sought to do the same on the Eastern borders of that increasingly Islamized revolution. The strategy worked, the Soviets were expelled, and the multifaceted cosmopolitan disposition of the Iranian revolution could not spread its revolutionary wings and thus soon degenerated into an

¹⁴ For more on my reading of the relationship between the Iranian revolution of 1977-1979 and the seismic changes in the region, see the new Introduction to HAMID DABASHI, *THEOLOGY OF DISCONTENT: THE IDEOLOGICAL FOUNDATIONS OF THE ISLAMIC REVOLUTION IN IRAN* (2006).

Islamist theocracy and commenced a fiercely fanatical reign of terror, systematically destroying all its non-Islamist (both nationalist and socialist) rivals. But the strategic victory of the U.S., Israel, and their European allies was not to last. The two monsters they had created—Osama bin Laden, his al-Qaeda, and the Taliban that embraced them on one side and Saddam Hossein on the other—now came back to haunt their creators. No sooner had the Soviets left Afghanistan and the Soviet Union collapsed than the first American sites inside and out of the country were targeted by the combined forces of the Taliban and al-Qaeda—in New York in 1993, in Saudi Arabia in 1996, in East Africa in 1998, and in Yemen in 2000. No sooner had the Iran-Iraq war ended in 1988 than Saddam Hossein, emboldened by the U.S. support throughout the war, invaded Kuwait in August 1990. Forcing Saddam Hossein to leave Kuwait in the First Gulf War (1990-1991) was the easy part of the U.S. conundrum in the region. It was Osama bin Laden and his al-Qaeda terror organization that proved to be the more shadowy reflection of the U.S. imperial imagination. The events of 9/11 were subsequently narrated officially in a manner that linked them to that shadowy organization, and yet they remained nothing but the blowback consequences of the U.S. military adventurism in the region since the Islamic Revolution in Iran and the commencement of the Reagan administration.

Imperialism of the Parochial

This is the most immediate short-term memory of this catastrophe. But the more enduring question remains if this renewed post-Vietnam Syndrome resurrection of U.S. militancy will amount to a full-fledged imperial project. The combined calamity of Neo-conservatism and Neo-liberalism makes one thing clear: if anything, this is an empire with no commanding ideology; an empire with no hegemony. A constellation of bankrupt, pathetic, and provincial doctrines and dogma do not make a legitimizing ideology of domination. Francis Fukuyama and Samuel Huntington—the best and most recent examples of the intellectual poverty that, from Tocqueville to Hofstadter, has been recognized and diagnosed in this country—protest too much. The period of Civilizational thinking is over, and the aggressive provincialism of the United States has in fact acted as catalyst for all other cosmopolitan cultures around the globe to degenerate into equal provincialism at the mercy of American parochialism. The *Islamic* republic and the *Jewish* state mirror and reflect the *Christian* predilection of this Empire they alternately oppose or befriend, and they all wish to clone themselves around the globe. Thus we have the fundamental problem of Israel with Lebanon, the long-term project of the Islamic Republic of Iran for Iraq, and the possibility of a cross-sectional coalition in Palestine. Iraq, Lebanon, and Palestine can potentially be sites of a cosmopolitan political culture in which Islam (Mahdi's Army in Iraq, Hezbollah in Lebanon, Hamas in Palestine) remains integral but not definitive. That mere possibility is precisely the mutual nightmare of both the Islamic Republic and the Jewish state—and above all the Christian imperialist United States, with all of

them having degenerated into fanatical religious states seeking to clone themselves around the region.¹⁵

As a potential ideology of domination, Neo-conservatism (à la William Kristol's Project for the New American Century)¹⁶ has done nothing but make Americans detested the world over, and, along with Israel, considered (global poll after global poll) to be the chief sources of menace and mayhem around the globe.¹⁷ American imperialism (under the banal disguise of globalization) is universalizing the most provincial aspects of American culture, destroying cosmopolitan cultures and nourishing tribalism and religious fanaticism with a militant triumphalism run amuck, squarely embedded in the heartbeat of its Christian (and Christian Zionist in particular) fundamentalism.¹⁸

Visions of the Empire

If the bankrupt, shallow, and provincial hallucinations of the Project for the New American Century make no sense and do nothing but increase the global fear and loathing of the United States, how else are we to understand the American empire and the triumph of triumphalism it has occasioned all over the world? Any discussion of the American imperial project today must begin with Antonio Negri and Michael Hardt's pathbreaking book on the subject. In *Empire* (2000) they argue that the period of classical imperialism has, in fact, ended, and the time of Empire as the new political order of globalization has begun: *Empire without Imperialism*.¹⁹ Negri and Hardt further elaborate that this new Empire draws from U.S. constitutionalism, from hybrid identities, and also from expanding frontiers. They argue that notions such as sovereignty, the boundaries of the nation-state, and the institutions of civil society have all transformed, as have the modalities of racism, gender politics, labor migration, transnational corporations, and post-industrial forms of labor. Paramount to Negri and Hardt's conception of Empire is that of the absence of active imperial agency and the presence of a *condition* of world dis/order with militant and powerful economies and militaries seeking to take advantage of their heavy weight to control the flow of military power and economic prowess. "Globalization," as such, is the ideology of this Empire.

¹⁵ I have developed this theme extensively in my forthcoming book, HAMID DABASHI, *ISLAMIC LIBERATION THEOLOGY: RESISTING THE EMPIRE* (2008).

¹⁶ To learn more about the Project for the New American Century (claiming the entirety of a century exclusively for Americans) see Project for the New American Century, Home, available at www.newamericacentury.org (last visited Apr. 19, 2008).

¹⁷ See, for example, *US biggest global peace threat*, BBC NEWS, June 14, 2006, available at <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/americas/5077984.stm> (last visited Apr. 20, 2008). "People in European and Muslim countries," the survey shows, "see US policy in Iraq as a bigger threat to world peace than Iran's nuclear programme." *Id.*

¹⁸ To learn more about Christian Zionism, see STEPHEN SIZER, *CHRISTIAN ZIONISM: ROAD-MAP TO ARMAGEDDON?* (2005).

¹⁹ See generally ANTONIO NEGRI & MICHAEL HARDT, *EMPIRE* (2000).

Both the Afghan and the Iraq wars, since 2001 and 2003, respectively, have obviously challenged Negri and Hardt's proposition: what we are witnessing here is blatant and full-throttle imperial agency at work. One may consider the fact that Negri and Hardt's book was published in 2000, having been written between the First Persian Gulf War (1990-1991) and the Kosovo War (1996-1999), when the world was still in a state of post-two-superpower limbo. As such, their ideas were formed in the period right after the collapse of the Soviet Union in the late 1980s and during the commencement of George Herbert Walker Bush's "New World Order," which as a proposition was rooted in the early 1900s Cecil Rhodes idea and resuscitated in the early 1990s by President Bush, who suggested that it constituted a new vision of world power relations. The events of 9/11 and after have indeed changed many of those conditions and require a re-reading of the ideas of empire and imperialism.

Of more immediate and detailed concern would be the extraordinary work of Chalmers Johnson in his *Blowback Trilogy*, in which he, speaking as a courageous U.S. patriot, seems deeply frightened and concerned about his country's foreign policy disasters under successive U.S. administrations, which have *ipso facto* resulted in the formation of a globalized empire and the endangerment of American civil liberties.²⁰ The problem with Chalmers Johnson's heartfelt and persuasive argument is that he is fixated with the CIA, its clandestine activities, and their catastrophic blowbacks; for him, this form of blatant imperialism is an aberration from American republicanism. Johnson's diagnosis, however, is predicated on a very limited vision of the economic and political machinery behind imperial design, and, in turn, the normative ethos it occasions. Chalmers' fetishization of the CIA as the main culprit comes at the expense of a more universal perspective that includes CIA covert operations but is not limited to them. Despite its notorious covert activities, the CIA (or at least most of its operations) is still very much an organ of the U.S. government and generally under congressional oversight.

Niall Ferguson's *Colossus: The Price of America's Empire*, meanwhile, goes for the most obvious evidence of empire, citing the American military, economic, and even popular cultural domination of the globe and calling the U.S. version of the imperial phenomenon "the Imperialism of anti-Imperialism."²¹ Ferguson looks at the history of the U.S. and demonstrates how the L word (liberty) has stood for the E word (Empire), concluding that the U.S. should come out of this narrative closet and declare itself an Empire—for, according to Ferguson, empires are actually good for the world. What Ferguson reformulates is, in fact, the gist of the argument provided much earlier by the great Scottish historian of empire, V. G. Kiernan, minus, of course, Kiernan's unflinching solidarity with scattered manners of opposing the

²⁰ Chalmers Johnson's BLOWBACK TRILOGY began with his BLOWBACK: THE COSTS AND CONSEQUENCES OF AMERICAN EMPIRE (2000), and after the events of 9/11 continued with THE SORROWS OF EMPIRE: MILITARISM, SECRECY, AND THE END OF THE REPUBLIC (2004), followed by NEMESIS: THE LAST DAYS OF THE AMERICAN REPUBLIC (2006).

²¹ See NIALL FERGUSON, COLOSSUS: THE PRICE OF AMERICA'S EMPIRE (2004).

predatory monster.²² The same argument is also made by Michael Mann in his *Incoherent Empire*, in which he demonstrates that emerging American imperialism amounts to nothing more than a new militarism without the necessary ideological wherewithal of sustaining an enduring or convincing empire.²³ It can easily destroy, but can never conquer, rendering it a closet empire with all of the incumbent terrors of an inner urge to come out and flex its military muscles, but perhaps with a Protestant inhibition to admit to its follies.

In seeking to explain the U.S. as being an empire despite itself, or a reluctant empire, or an empire caught in the delusion of spreading “the good word”—in this case “liberty”—all point to fundamental facts about American imperialism: its strategic asceticism and its perhaps Protestant (Calvinist) predilection to avoid admission of wealth through ostentatious living, mixed with a Spartan proclivity towards brevity of immediate purpose. In this sense, American imperialism stands in exact contradiction to, say, the Persian, the Roman, or even the British Empire—empires that thrived on putting up spectacular shows of their military wherewithal. Consider the fact that contrary to the Soviets, there is no military parade (say on Fourth of July) in the United States. One can also suggest that U.S. imperialism is different from its European predecessors in very much the way American football is different from European soccer. Just like soccer, European imperialism functioned through gradual and systematic territorial conquest, while the U.S. version works on the model of a quarterback surgically throwing the ball to a teammate far into the enemy’s territory without physically having control over the land in between the quarterback and the wide receiver. This is analogous to the New York Giants’ Eli Manning avoiding a sack and, while still scrambling, managing to complete a rather awkward pass to wide receiver David Tyree, who makes a leaping catch (32-yard completion) to put them at New England’s 24 yard line; four plays later, New York wide receiver Plaxico Burress catches the winning touchdown with 0:35 left. There is no need for the distance between Eli Manning and David Tyree to actually be controlled by the Giants—just the elliptical curve between the quarterback and the wide receiver. The predominance of football metaphors in American warfare, is of course, very obvious; they were perhaps best used by General Norman Schwarzkopf during the First Persian Gulf War (1990-1991) when explaining to reporters his strategies for forcing the Iraqi army out of Kuwait.²⁴

Another way of looking at U.S. empire-building is through the lens of John Ford’s epic films, in which we see the Homeric projection of a European dream of an ideal

²² For the most recent edition of V.G. Kiernan’s classic 1978 masterpiece, see V.G. KIERNAN, *AMERICA: THE NEW IMPERIALISM* (2005). This edition has an excellent new preface by Eric Hobsbawm, which updates Kiernan’s observations in light of the aftermath of the events of 9/11.

²³ See MICHAEL MANN, *INCOHERENT EMPIRE* (2003).

²⁴ Gen. Schwarzkopf used terms such as “the ground game” in these reports, and it was noted that commanders used the expression “Hail Mary” as a code for the U.S. ground offensive that drove the Iraqi army from Kuwait. See Ted Brock, *Blitzing the English Language*, in *TOTAL FOOTBALL II: THE OFFICIAL ENCYCLOPEDIA OF THE NATIONAL FOOTBALL LEAGUE* 509 (Bob Carroll et al. ed. 1999).

Empire yet to come, informed by an Irish boy's memories of his parents' formative destitution. The Monument Valley serves as Ford's uncharted territories of the world to conquer—a *terra incognita* of an empire to build—with John Wayne as his contemporary Ulysses. John Ford's vision of the American Empire is in sharp contrast to David Lean's portrayal of the British Empire, in which—from *Lawrence of Arabia* (1962), to *Ryan's Daughter* (1970), to *A Passage to India* (1984)—he reflects back on and is totally preoccupied with the pathologies of an Empire that is forever lost, using Arabia, Ireland, and India as the sites of his nostalgic reflections. As much as Ford's vision of the Coming American Empire is bright, wide-eyed, and hopeful, David Lean's vision of the Lost British Empire is sad, seditious, pathological, and contorted. Both Ford and Lean's respective visions of empire are yet again sharply different from those in Akira Kurosawa's *Dreams* (1990) and *Rhapsody in August* (1993), through which he evokes post-nuclear holocaust contemplation on the inner terrors of violence at the heart of any imperial project. When we compare these three great visions of epic power, John Ford's stands out as the festive celebration of an emancipatory mission to liberate, civilize, and set right the course of history.

Fear of Fascism at the Home Front

As much as Ford's vision of the American empire is life-affirming, broad-chested, and bright, the contemporary grasp of the American empire is deeply dire, dark, and apprehensive. There is no understanding the American imperial project without simultaneously coming to terms with the transmutation of American politics, state apparatus, economy, and society in effectively imperial terms—a fact that is totally eclipsed if our analysis of U.S. imperialism is limited to a critique of so-called “American foreign policy.” American foreign policy is American domestic policy and vice versa, as the most perceptive observers of American imperialism, from W. E. B. Dubois to Amy Kaplan, have agreed.

The specter of fascism is now fast upon the United States, and signs of its recognition are evident in the most insightful studies that have come out since the apocalyptic reading of the events of 9/11 commenced by Christian fundamentalists. Consider a groundbreaking (but scarcely noted) short volume by Heinrich Meier, *Carl Schmidt and Leo Strauss: The Hidden Dialogue*,²⁵ which exposes the degree to which the Nazi political theologian Carl Schmidt's seminal work, *The Concept of the Political*,²⁶ particularly in its categorical opposition to liberalism, is in fact indebted to Leo Strauss, the guru of the Neo-Conservatives, who had come to the same anti-liberal conclusions though through philosophical reasoning rather than theological speculations. If you are still not quite sure who is this Leo Strauss and what is his connection to the Neoconservative cabal that has brought this nightmare upon the United States, then you should take a look at the revelatory pages of Anne Norton's *Leo Strauss and the*

²⁵ See HEINRICH MEIER, *CARL SCHMIDT AND LEO STRAUSS: THE HIDDEN DIALOGUE* (University of Chicago Press 1995) (1988).

²⁶ CARL SCHMIDT, *THE CONCEPT OF THE POLITICAL* (J. Harvey Lomax ed., University of Chicago Press 1995) (1932).

Politics of American Empire,²⁷ or at least read Earl Shorris' "Ignoble Liars: Leo Strauss, George Bush, and the Philosophy of Mass Deception."²⁸ If you think the comparison between Nazi Germany and Bush's America is too outlandish, or perhaps the feverish nightmares of a recent immigrant American with a first name not too dissimilar to Barack Obama's (hidden and denied) middle name, then I draw your attention to Naomi Wolf's extraordinary text, *The End of America: Letter of Warning to a Young Patriot* in which we read the warning signs from one of the finest political theorists of her generation's caring intellect.²⁹ By shifting her bone of contention away from women's rights and towards civil rights, Naomi Wolf goes through a sustained course of argument documenting what she calls the "fascist shift" initiated during the eight nightmarish years of the Bush administration. Pointedly addressed to a young Vietnamese-American, Wolf's daring argument outlines the "Ten Steps to Fascism" that are already fast upon us. She speaks bravely of the fragility of democracy as an ideal, and then presents the roadmap of a descent to fascism: "Invoke an External and Internal Enemy," "Establish Secret Prisons," "Develop a Paramilitary Force," "Surveil Ordinary Citizens," "Infiltrate Citizens' Group," "Arbitrarily Detain and Release Citizens," "Target Key Individuals," "Restrict the Press," "Cast Criticism as 'Espionage' and Dissent as 'Treason,'" "Subvert the Rule of Law." Of this book, Michael Ratner of the Center for Constitutional Rights has said: "You will be shocked and disturbed by this book. Most Americans reject outright any comparison of post 9/11 America with the fascism and totalitarianism of Nazi Germany or Pinochet's Chile. Sadly, the parallels and similarities, what Wolf calls the 'echoes' between those societies and America today, are all too compelling."³⁰

What is perhaps most frightful is the fact that the evident parameters and emerging institutions of this potential fascism are now being woven into the fabric of American capitalism. "The war on terror" sells, and it sells well. Consider Solomon Hughes' *War on Terror, Inc.: Corporate Profiteering from the Politics of Fear*, in which he demonstrates how the war on terror has enlarged the role of the private enterprise by extending market thinking and market forces into the domains of public policy.³¹ Supplying the additional private army that made the invasion of Iraq plausible and possible; providing databases of people deemed national security threats; hiring front-line mercenaries; guarding key installations and VIPs; managing prisons, torture, and law enforcement; controlling information available to the media; gathering intelligence at home and abroad through blanket surveillance of the civilian population; providing Psy-Op scholarship (as perhaps best represented by Seyyed Vali Reza Nasr and Abbas Milani) and Propaganda War (again best represented by Fouad Ajami,

²⁷ ANNE NORTON, *LEO STRAUSS AND THE POLITICS OF AMERICAN EMPIRE* (2005).

²⁸ Earl Shorris, *Ignoble Liars: Leo Strauss, George Bush, and the Philosophy of Mass Deception*, HARPER'S, Jan. 2004.

²⁹ NAOMI WOLF's extraordinary text, *THE END OF AMERICA: LETTER OF WARNING TO A YOUNG PATRIOT—A CITIZEN'S CALL TO ACTION* (2007).

³⁰ *Id.* at Back Cover.

³¹ SOLOMON HUGHES, *WAR ON TERROR, INC.: CORPORATE PROFITEERING FROM THE POLITICS OF FEAR* (2007).

Azar Nafisi, Hirsi Ayaan Ali, Irshad Manji, etc.)³² are all examples of the role of private enterprises in the war on terror. This is no longer just a country whose economic fore-structure is capitalist. This is capitalism running amuck and eating into the heart of the civil society that once harbored it.

Equally compelling in the rising specter of American fascism is the structural link between Christian Zionism (widely embraced by the pro-Israeli industry) and the right wing of the Republican Party. In his *American Fascists: The Christian Right and the War on America*, Chris Hedges' point of departure is Pat Robertson's pronouncement almost a quarter of a century ago that the U.S. was a Christian nation that should be at the center of a vast (global) Christian empire.³³ Chris Hedges is unrelenting in his cry against the terror of Christian fundamentalism that, in his judgment, is poised to transform American society into a closed and hermetically sealed web of unbridled fanaticism and xenophobia. He narrows in on hundreds of U.S. senators and members of Congress who have received 80 to 100 percent rates of approval from extremely influential Christian Right advocacy groups, on the curriculum of Christian schools, and on a myriad of radio and television stations, all giving rise to a chorus of apocalyptic violence in anticipation of the Second Coming. Hedges compares the Christian Right movement to the Fascist movements in Germany and Italy in the 1920s and 1930s. All it will take, he is convinced, is one more national crisis like 9/11, and the Christian Right is well poised to destroy American democracy.

One need not look around too much to see the justification for Chris Hedges' concerns. John Hagee, the founder and senior pastor of Cornerstone Church in San Antonio, Texas and one such Christian fundamentalist (a devout Christian Zionist, too), has said of the Hurricane Katrina that it was an act of God, punishing New Orleans for "a level of sin that was offensive to God"—with a particular reference to a "homosexual parade." Next to homosexuals comes Islam, of which John Hagee has said: "those who live by the Qur'an have a scriptural mandate to kill Christians and Jews." He proceeds to characterize the military threat posed by Muslims: "There are 1.3 billion people who follow the Islamic faith, so if you're saying there's only 15 percent that want to come to America or invade Israel to crush it, you're only talking about 200 million people. That's far more than Hitler and Japan and Italy and all of the axis powers in World War II had under arms." As for Catholicism, it is, for Reverend John Hagee, "the Great Whore," the "apostate church," the "anti-Christ" and a "false cult system." As a Christian imperialist, John Hagee is a fierce supporter of the Jewish state and, much like many American evangelicals, he believes that God granted the state's land to the Jewish people and that, therefore, Christians are subject to a Biblical duty to support the Jews and the Jewish state. His latest book, *Jerusalem Countdown: A Warning to the World*, presents a Biblical interpretation predicting an invasion of Israel by Arab and Russian armies, which God later destroys. These events

³² For more on these characters see Hamid Dabashi, *Thinking beyond the US invasion of Iran*, AL-AHRAM WEEKLY, Feb. 8-14, 2007, and Hamid Dabashi, *Native informers and the making of the American empire*, AL-AHRAM WEEKLY, June 1-7, 2006.

³³ CHRIS HEDGES, *AMERICAN FASCISTS: THE CHRISTIAN RIGHT AND THE WAR ON AMERICA* (2006).

lead up to a conflict between China and the West, which is led by the anti-Christ represented by the head of the European Union, over the issue of Israel. The second coming of Christ will occur at the final battle between the East and the West.³⁴

These are not merely the outlandish figments of a demented imagination. These hallucinations represent a much wider political constituency. Kevin Phillips' *American Theocracy: The Perils and Politics of Radical Religion, Oil, and Borrowed Money in the 21st Century*, which focuses on three concurrent crises of oil supply, religious fanaticism, and national debt, gives a frightful picture of the power of Christian messianism in the making of the American imperial imagination.³⁵ In Kevin Phillips' estimation, the Republican Party has been transformed into "the first religious party in U.S. history." Kevin Phillips' examination of the relationship between oil and religious fanaticism very much presages Paul Thomas Anderson's masterpiece, "There Will be Blood" (2007). Based on Upton Sinclair's *Oil*,³⁶ "There Will be Blood" matches Daniel Day-Lewis' hardheaded capitalist entrepreneurial Daniel Plainview against Paul Dano's deliriously fanatical Eli.

The Exception and the Rule

How does this frightful combination of gargantuan military power and religious fanaticism of the most delirious sort come together? The metamorphosis of humanity into insects. In an interview with Thomas P. M. Barnett for *Squire* magazine, Admiral William "Fox" Fallon, the head of U.S. Central Command, responded to a query regarding a possible war between the U.S. and Iran: "And if it comes to war? Get serious," the Admiral says. "These guys are ants. When the time comes, you crush them."³⁷

Such iniquitous comments by a leading American warlord can be dismissed as "exceptions," as has the practice of torturing people in Abu Ghraib, Guantánamo Bay, Bagram Airbase, and an entire subterranean labyrinth run by the CIA in Europe; as can indeed be dismissed as "exceptional" legal theorists like Alan M. Dershowitz who have sought to legalize heinous acts of torturing people; as can indeed be "exceptional" the massacre of Iraqis at Hadithah, or the rape and murder of Abeer Qasim Hamza al-Janabi by American soldiers in the village of Yusufiyah. "These are all exceptions," ordinary and decent Americans might say to themselves by way of washing their hands and cleansing their souls of these stains on their national character—and it is indeed as states of exception that they ought to be read, and have

³⁴ For these and other John Hagee comments see Richard Allen Greene's article, *Evangelical Christians plead for Israel*, BBC NEWS, July 19, 2006, available at <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/americas/5193092.stm> (last visited Apr. 20, 2008). See also Nick Miles' article in the same vein, *Pro-Israel pressure strong in U.S.*, BBC NEWS, Aug. 11, 2006, available at <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/americas/5258240.stm> (last visited Apr. 20, 2008).

³⁵ KEVIN PHILLIPS, *AMERICAN THEOCRACY: THE PERILS AND POLITICS OF RADICAL RELIGION, OIL, AND BORROWED MONEY IN THE 21ST CENTURY* (2006).

³⁶ UPTON SINCLAIR, *OIL!* (1927).

³⁷ Thomas P. M. Barnett, *The Man Between War and Peace*, *ESQUIRE*, Mar. 11, 2008.

been read by the great Italian legal philosopher Giorgio Agamben. It is not the rule and the condition of normalcy that demands attention, but precisely those fragile moments when nations go tribal, and humanity descends to bestiality. “In every case,” Agamben believes, “the state of exception marks a threshold at which logic and praxis blur with each other and a pure violence without logos claims to realize an enunciation without any real reference [t]he entire Third Reich can be considered a state of exception that lasted twelve years.”³⁸

Marking the anniversaries of wars that the United States has waged around the globe must begin and end with a constant vigilance here at home. This is the front-line of a global assault against the humanity of reason and against the fragile worldly character of cosmopolitan cultures around the world—mostly immediately at home, here in the United States. The Christian fundamentalism at the heart of American imperialism echoes and corroborates the identically ferocious tribalism at the heart of a Jewish state, an Islamic republic, and a Hindu fundamentalism, which have all gathered their storms to divide humanity at large along their basest tribal fears. Opening the windows for fresh air and for bright light, letting the cultivated cosmopolitanism of all cultures and climes, of all peoples and nations, override religious fanaticism of one denomination or another is the sustained course of action that can put up a global resistance to this globalized terrorism—imperial or nativist. Peoples’ faith in an overriding metaphysics of purpose might be integral to their humanity but can never be definitive to it, nor are institutional religions to cultures they inform but can never categorically claim.

³⁸ See GIORGIO AGAMBEN, *STATE OF EXCEPTION* (Kevin Attell trans., University of Chicago Press 2005) (2003)