

**Remembrance of Empires Past:
9/11 and the End of the Cold War**

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Two years ago, I spent the better part of a humid late summer interviewing three of modern conservatism's aging grandees – William F. Buckley, Irving Kristol, and Norman Podhoretz. I was writing an article for *Lingua Franca* on the defections to the Left of younger right-wing intellectuals, and wanted to hear what the movement's founding fathers thought of these turncoats. After months of research, I was struck by the ex-conservatives' contempt for the free-market global order taking shape in the wake of the Cold War. But no amount of reading could have prepared me for the ambivalence, even hostility, toward market triumphalism that Buckley and Kristol themselves voiced during our conversations.

It is, of course, hardly news that conservatives have misgivings about the market. Anxious hand-wringing about capitalist instability has been a staple gesture of the conservative intellect since the early nineteenth century. But Buckley and Kristol were saying something quite different to me. For them, the problem with the market was not that it promoted instability or dissolved tradition; it was that it did not provide the passion and élan, the gravitas and authority, that the exercise of American power truly required, at home and abroad. Simply put, the free market was too bloodless a notion upon which to found a national order, much less a global empire.

“The trouble with the emphasis in conservatism on the market,” Buckley told me, “is that it becomes rather boring. You hear it once, you master the idea. The notion of devoting your life to it is horrifying if only because it's so repetitious. It's like sex.” Conservatism, Kristol complained, “is so influenced by business culture and by business modes of thinking that it lacks any political imagination, which has always been, I have to say, a property of the Left.” Almost wistfully, he added, “If you read Marx, you'd learn what a political imagination could do.” Marx had inflamed the imagination not only of the Left, but also of the Right, sustaining the conservative movement through its lonely years in the wilderness. But when the Soviet Union collapsed, the movement was “deprived of an enemy,” and all that was left were uninspired “fights over the extent of the free market.”¹

Kristol confessed to a deep yearning for an American empire: “What's the point of being the greatest, most powerful nation in the world and not having an imperial role? It's unheard of in human history. The most powerful nation always had an imperial role.” But, he continued,

¹ Corey Robin, “The Ex-Cons: Right-Wing Thinkers Go Left!” *Lingua Franca* (February 2001), pp. 32-33; Irving Kristol, interview with author (Washington, August 31, 2000).

previous empires were not “capitalist democracies with a strong emphasis on economic growth and economic prosperity.” Because of its commitment to the free market, the United States lacked the fortitude and vision to wield imperial power. “It’s too bad,” Kristol lamented. “I think it would be natural for the United States . . . to play a far more dominant role in world affairs. Not what we’re doing now but to command and to give orders as to what is to be done. People need that. There are many parts of the world – Africa in particular – where an authority willing to use troops can make a very good difference, a healthy difference.” But with public discussion moderated by accountants – “There’s the Republican party tying itself into knots. Over what? Prescriptions for elderly people? Who gives a damn? I think it’s disgusting that . . . presidential politics of the most important country in the world should resolve around prescriptions for elderly people. Future historians will find this very hard to believe. It’s not Athens. It’s not Rome. It’s not anything.” – Kristol thought it unlikely that the United States would take its rightful place as the successor to empires past.²

Though Kristol and Buckley do not represent the entire conservative movement, much less elites as a whole, their anxious meditations about the tensions between imperial politics and market ideology speak to a genuine problem that America’s leaders have been wrestling with since the end of the Cold War – a problem, these leaders hope, resolved by the events of September 11. The collapse of communism left the United States defending the most powerful empire in history with an ideology – the free market – resolutely hostile to all forms of politics. According to its visionaries, the free market is a harmonious, virtually self-reproducing order, promising an international civil society of voluntary exchange and non-coercive rule, requiring little more from the state than the occasional enforcement of laws and contracts. Reconciling this free-wheeling vision with the reality of imperial over-reach – the United States today has a military presence in more countries than at any time since the Second World War³ – has proven to be an inordinately difficult task for America’s leaders. Not only does the idea of a global free market fit uneasily with the coercive exercise of imperial power, but it also fails to provide the home population of that empire with a compelling reason for participating either in its defense or in the reproduction of its civic life. Perhaps for that reason, the lead item of American intellectual complaint throughout the 1990s has been that the United States is insufficiently

² Kristol interview.

³ Ewen MacAskill, “From Suez to the Pacific,” *The Guardian* (March 8, 2002).

civic-minded or martial, that its leaders and citizens are too distracted by glittery prosperity and showy affluence to take care of its inherited institutions, common concerns, and world-wide defense.⁴

For many elites and intellectuals, the attacks of September 11 and the war on terrorism are supposed to have resolved these tensions. September 11, we are told, shocked America out of its complacency, forcing its citizens to look beyond the borders of the nation, to understand at last the very real dangers that confront a world power. It has reminded men and women of the goods of civic life and of the value of the state, putting an end to that perilous fantasy of creating a public world out of private acts of self-interested exchange. It has restored to America's woozy civic culture a sense of depth and seriousness, of things "larger than ourselves." Most critical of all, it has given the United States a coherent national purpose and focus for imperial rule. The dispensation emerging from 9/11 envisions not a discrete war but a permanent world order, a Pax Americana stretching indefinitely, perhaps permanently, into the future. This new order will take many years to create, but they will be years profitably spent in the pursuit of a higher calling, of a vision more profound and dear than the Clinton Administration's pallid quest for an "enlargement of the world's free community of market democracies."⁵

Like any historical moment, 9/11 – not the terrorist attacks or the day itself but the imperial political culture it appears to be spawning – has multiple dimensions. Some part of this new political order is due, of course, to an unprecedented (in terms of US history) attack on civilians and catastrophic loss of human life, and the efforts of US leaders to provide some measure of security to an apprehensive citizenry. Some part of it, as some have suggested, flows from the subterranean political economy of oil, from the desire of corporate elites to secure access to the tremendous energy reserves lying beneath and around Central Asia. But while these factors play a considerable role in determining the direction of US policy, they do not explain entirely the politics and ideology of the imperial moment itself. To understand that

⁴ See Robert Putnam, *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2000); Dinesh D'Souza, *The Virtue of Prosperity: Finding Values in an Age of Techno-Affluence* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2000); John B. Judis, *The Paradox of American Democracy: Elites, Special Interests, and The Betrayal of the Public Trust* (New York: Pantheon, 2000); Donald Kagan and Frederick W. Kagan, *While America Sleeps: Self-Delusion, Military Weakness, and the Threat to Peace Today* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2000).

⁵ This was how President Clinton's National Security Advisor defined the object of American foreign policy in 1993. Anthony Lake, speech at Johns Hopkins University, in *The Clinton Foreign Policy Reader: Presidential Speeches with Commentary*, ed. Alvin Z. Rubinstein, Albina Shayevich, and Boris Zlotnikov (Armonk: M.E. Sharpe, 2000), p. 22.

dimension, we must look to the impact on American elites of the end of the Cold War, of the loss of communism and the ascendancy of the free market as the organizing principle of the domestic and international order.

As my interviews with Kristol and Buckley made clear – and as the fevered debates about US foreign policy and American political culture in the 1990s demonstrate – the end of the Cold War produced a profound dissatisfaction among certain cultural and political elites in the US. For neoconservatives – men like Paul Wolfowitz, Richard Perle, Kenneth Adelman, Frank Gaffney, the Kristols and the Kagans – who thrilled to Ronald Reagan’s dark crusade against the Evil Empire, all that was left after the Cold War was Reagan’s other passion – his sunny entrepreneurialism, his market *joi de vivre* – which found a welcome home in Bill Clinton’s America. While neocons are certainly not hostile to capitalism, they do not believe it is the highest achievement of human civilization. Their vision is more exalted. They aspire to the epic grandeur of Rome, the ethos of the pagan warrior – or moral crusader – rather than that of the comfortable bourgeois. And since the end of the Cold War, it has been these neoconservative voices that have provided the *basso profundo* for a swelling chorus on behalf of American empire.

This chorus, which has come to include more liberal and progressive voices, is internationalist, humanitarian, and, despite its tone of hard-bitten realism, utopian. It believes that American power can shape the world for the better, that it can determine the outcomes of history. Though they have complete faith in American power, in its capacity to do good throughout the world, members of the chorus are uncomfortable with using it for the mere extension of the free market. They seek to create an international moral order that will be a monument for the ages. For conservatives in particular, 9/11 offers an imperial counterweight to the market triumphalism of the Clinton years, an opportunity to create a domestic and international political culture that is about something more than money and markets.

But, as I will suggest, this envisioned imperium may not provide such an easy resolution to the political and cultural challenges confronting the United States since the end of the Cold War. Already, the American empire is coming up against daunting obstacles in the Middle East, suggesting just how elusive the reigning idea of the new imperialists – that the United States can govern events, that it can make history – truly is. Domestically, the cultural and political renewal that many imagine 9/11 has occasioned is proving a difficult achievement, the victim of

a free-market ideology that shows no sign of abating. While it is still far too soon to make any definitive assessment of the current situation, there are already enough signs to suggest that 9/11 will not – and perhaps cannot – fulfill the role ascribed to it by our imperial soothsayers and cultural seers.

9/11: The Dream

One of the stranger recriminations heard after September 11 was the charge, leveled by conservatives and liberals alike, that the American Left welcomed the terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon.⁶ For the simple fact is that if there is any quarter from which expressions of covert satisfaction over 9/11 have issued, it is surely that of mainstream pundits and politicians. Voicing what seems to be a widespread sentiment among America's ruling elites, journalists and intellectuals have welcomed 9/11 as an occasion for America's cultural, political, and international renewal after a decade of wandering uncertainty and moral decline. The fires of the World Trade Center were still burning and bodies had scarcely been recovered when Frank Rich announced in *The New York Times* that "this week's nightmare, it's now clear, has awakened us from a frivolous if not decadent decadelong dream." Writing from the opposite end of the political spectrum, David Brooks was buoyed by the fact that "violence has come calling" and that "it is no longer possible to live so comfortably in one's own private paradise" as Americans had throughout the Clinton years. And while the specific source of Christopher Hitchens' elation may have been peculiarly his own, his self-declared schadenfreude was not: "I should perhaps confess that on September 11 last, once I had experienced all the usual mammalian gamut of emotions, from rage to nausea, I also discovered that another sensation was contending for mastery. On examination, and to my own surprise and pleasure, it turned out to be exhilaration. Here was the most frightful enemy – theocratic barbarism – in plain view. . . . I realized that if the battle went on until the last day of my life, I would never get bored in prosecuting it to the utmost."⁷

⁶ Todd Gitlin, "America's Left Caught Between a Flag and a Hard Place," *San Jose Mercury News* (November 2, 2001); Michael Kelly, "Pacifist Claptrap," *The Washington Post* (September 26, 2001), p. A25; Michael Kelly, "The Left's Great Divide," *The Washington Post* (November 7, 2001), p. A29; Christopher Hitchens, "Against Rationalization," *The Nation* (October 8, 2001), p. 8; Hitchens, "Blaming bin Laden First," *The Nation* (October 22, 2001), p. 9.

⁷ Frank Rich, "The Day Before Tuesday," *The New York Times* (September 15, 2001), p. A23; David Brooks, "The Age of Conflict: Politics and Culture after September 11," *The Weekly Standard* (November 7, 2001), p. ???; Christopher Hitchens, "Images in a Rearview Mirror," *The Nation* (December 3, 2001), p. 9.

Future historians, I suspect, will look back upon these and other similar reactions to September 11 with some bewilderment. Not just because so many cultural spokespeople have opened their arms to the political fallout from mass death. More significant is that September 11 has given pundits and politicians an opportunity to air their apparently long-brewing contempt for the very peace and prosperity that preceded it. On September 12, one might have expected expressions of sorrow, perhaps bittersweet, over the bursting of bubbles – economic, cultural, and political. But instead, many liberals and conservatives saw 9/11 as a thunderous moral judgment upon – and necessary corrective to – the frivolity and emptiness of the 1990s. We would have to reach back almost a century – to the opening days of the First World War, when the “marsh gas of boredom and vacuity”⁸ enveloping another free-trading, globalizing fin de siècle exploded in an orgy of welcome destruction – to find a remotely exact parallel to our present moment.

To understand this spirit of quiet rejoice, we must return to the waning days of the Cold War, those years between the late 1980s and early 1990s when American elites first realized that the United States could no longer define its national mission in terms of the Soviet menace. While the end of the Cold War unleashed a wave of triumphalism in the United States and Western Europe, it provoked among elites an anxious uncertainty about US foreign policy. With the defeat of communism, many asked, how should the United States define its role in the world? Where and when should it intervene in foreign conflicts? How big a military should it field? Underlying these arguments was a deep unease about American power, both its size and its purpose. The United States seemed to be suffering from a surfeit of power, which made it difficult for elites to formulate any coherent principles to govern its use. Against – and for – what was the United States defending itself, now that communism was dead? As Richard Cheney, the first President Bush’s Secretary of Defense, acknowledged in his February 1992 testimony before the House Armed Services Committee, “We’ve gained so much strategic depth that the threats to our security, now relatively distant, are harder to define.” Almost a decade later, the United States would still seem, to its leaders, a floundering giant. As Condoleezza Rice noted during the 2000 presidential campaign, “The United States has found it exceedingly difficult to define its ‘national interest’ in the absence of Soviet power.” So uncertain about the national

⁸ George Steiner, *In Bluebeard’s Castle: Some Notes Toward the Redefinition of Culture* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1971), p. 11.

interest did political elites become that a top Clinton defense aide – and subsequent dean of Harvard’s Kennedy School – would eventually throw up his hands in defeat, declaring that the national interest was whatever “citizens, after proper deliberation, say it is” – an astonishing abdication by a national leader, a statement that would have been simply unthinkable during the Cold War reign of the Wise Men.⁹

When Clinton assumed office, he and his advisers took stock of this unparalleled situation – where the United States possessed so much power that it faced, in the words of Clinton National Security Advisor Anthony Lake, no “credible near-term threat to [its] existence” – and concluded that the primary concerns of American foreign policy were no longer military but economic. After summarily rehearsing the possible dangers to the United States of ethnic and religious conflict, and nuclear proliferation, President Clinton declared in a 1993 address, “We still face, *overarching everything else*, this amorphous but profound challenge in the way humankind conducts its commerce.” The great imperative of the post-Cold War era was to organize a global economy where citizens of the world could trade across borders. For that to happen, the United States had to get its own economic house in order – “renewal starts at home,” said Lake – by reducing the deficit (in part through reductions in military spending), lowering interest rates, supporting high-tech industries, and promoting free trade agreements. In addition, every other nation would also have to conduct a painful economic overhaul in order to promote a genuine international order of free exchange. Thus, according to Lake, the primary goal of the United States was the “enlargement of the world’s free community of market democracies.”¹⁰

Clinton’s assessment of the challenges facing the United States was partially inspired by political calculation. He had just won an election against a sitting president who had not only led the United States through victory in the Cold War but had also engineered a stunning rout over the Iraqi military. Witnessing Bush’s political denouement after the Gulf War, Clinton concluded that electoral success depended upon economic reform, that it was “the economy,

⁹ Cheney cited in Kagan and Kagan, p. 294; Condoleezza Rice, “???” *Foreign Affairs* (June 2000), pp. ??; Joseph S. Nye, Jr., *The Paradox of American Power: Why the World’s Only Superpower Can’t Go It Alone* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), p. 139.

¹⁰ *The Clinton Foreign Policy Reader*, pp. 9, 20, 22-23. It should be pointed out that after several years of reduced military spending, Clinton, in his second term, steadily began to increase military appropriations. Between 1998 and 2000, military expenditures went from \$259 billion to \$301 billion. This increase in spending coincided with a reconsideration of the dangers confronting the United States. In his last years in office, Clinton began to sound the alarm more forcefully against the threat of terrorism and rogue states. The contrast between the rhetoric of the early and later years of the Clinton Administration is quite significant. See *Clinton Foreign Policy Reader*, pp. 36-42; Paul-Marie de la Gorce, “Offensive New Pentagon Defence Doctrine,” *Le Monde Diplomatique* (March 2002).

stupid!” A southern governor with no foreign policy experience – and a draft dodger to boot – Clinton reasoned that his victory over Bush meant that questions of war and peace no longer resonated with American voters the way they might have in an earlier age. In this new era, economic well-being was the sole concern of the public.¹¹

But Clinton’s vision also reflected a conviction, common to the 1990s, that the globalization of the free market had undermined the efficacy of military power and the viability of traditional empires. Clinton and his advisers believed that force and violence were no longer the sole, or most effective, instruments of national will. Power now hinged upon economic performance, the dynamism of a nation’s prosperity, and the attractiveness of its culture. As Joseph Nye, Clinton’s assistant secretary of defense, would come to argue, “soft power” – the cultural capital that allegedly made the United States so admired around the globe – was as important to national preeminence as military power. In perhaps a first for an administration official, Nye invoked Gramsci to explain that the United States would only maintain its authority and economic well-being if it persuaded – rather than forced – others to follow its example. “If I can get you to *want* to do what I want,” wrote Nye, “then I do not have to force you to do what you do *not* want to do.”¹² To maintain its position in world affairs, the United States would have to out-compete other national economies, all the while ensuring the spread of its free-market model and pluralist culture. The greatest dangers confronting the United States were that it would not reform its economy, that it would shun outsiders and adopt a narrow, intolerant culture, or that it would abuse its military superiority in such a way as to provoke international hatred. The problem confronting the United States after the Cold War, then, was not that it did not have enough power, but that it had too much. To render the world safe for globalization, the United States would have to be defanged, or, at a minimum, significantly curtailed in its imperial aspirations.

For the Clinton Administration, the end of the Cold War promised to bring the world just slightly closer to that utopia envisioned by modern dramaturges of the free market – a world where men and women would enjoy the fruits of law and order, the predictable routines of

¹¹ David Halberstam, *War in Time of Peace* (New York: Scribner, 2001), pp. 22-23, 110-13, 152-53, 160-63, 193, 242.

¹² Nye, pp. 8-11, 110. Indeed, on occasion, Clinton even went so far as to suggest that pouring so much money into fighting the Cold War was, if not exactly a waste, then at least an unnecessary strain on the nation’s vital resources. “The Cold War,” he said at American University in 1993, “was a draining time. We devoted trillions of dollars to it, much more than many of our more visionary leaders thought we should have.” *Clinton Foreign Policy Reader*, p. 9.

middle-class society, and where they could make money and take care of life's homelier pleasures without interference from an activist, redistributive state.¹³ To the extent that peace and prosperity in the United States seemed to confirm the wisdom of his policies, Clinton was able to sell the free market – and the astounding affluence it produced – as the preeminent good of American political culture.

For many American intellectuals and politicians, particularly those conservatives who yearned for and then celebrated socialism's demise, Clinton's promotion of affluence and easy-going prosperity – not to mention his foreign policy – was a horror, a politics of unfathomable shallowness and unparalleled decadence. The free market was no utopia – not because of galloping inequality, sweatshops, or the evisceration of safety nets and loss of economic security, but because of the very ease and comfort many liberals and conservatives presumed the market had brought about. Economic growth produced a society without difficulty and adversity. Material satisfaction induced a loss of social depth and political meaning, a lessening of resolve and heroic verve. “In that age of peace and prosperity,” David Brooks would write, “the top sitcom was *Seinfeld*, a show about nothing.” Or, as Jonathan Franzen, the literary voice of the age, would describe it, “[get quote from *Nightline*].”¹⁴ Intellectuals and elites worried that respect for the state and its institutions was dwindling, as was political participation and local volunteerism.¹⁵ Indeed, one of the most telling signs of the waning imperative of the Cold War was the fact that the 1990s began and ended with two incidents – the Clarence Thomas/Anita Hill hearings, and the Supreme Court decision during the 2000 presidential election controversy – casting scandalous suspicion on the nation's most venerated political institution. Thus, whether power in the post-Cold War era was hard or soft, it seemed to many elites that the United States – with its dwindling civic infrastructure, vapid mass culture, and crumbling political institutions – was in danger of losing both.

¹³ As Ronald Reagan himself declared, vis-à-vis, the Western hemisphere, in 1983, “I have a vision of a united hemisphere, united not by the arbitrary bonds of state but by the voluntary bonds of free ideals.” John R. MacArthur, *The Selling of “Free Trade”: NAFTA, Washington, and the Subversion of American Democracy* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000), p. 96.

¹⁴ Brooks, “The Age of Conflict,” p. ??; Franzen cite???

¹⁵ Robert Putnam, *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2000); John B. Judis, *The Paradox of American Democracy: Elites, Special Interests, and The Betrayal of the Public Trust* (New York: Pantheon, 2000).

For influential neocons of *The Weekly Standard* persuasion, Clinton's foreign policy was even more of an anathema. Not because the neocons were unilateralists arguing against Clinton's multilateralism, or isolationists or realists critical of his internationalism and humanitarianism.¹⁶ It was because Clinton's foreign policy was, for them, too driven by the imperatives of free-market globalization. Despite their aggressive embrace of capitalism, many conservatives saw Clinton's foreign policy as proof of the oozing decadence taking over the United States after the defeat of the Soviet Union, a sign of weakened moral fiber and lost martial spirit. In an influential manifesto published in 2000, decrying the alleged decline of American military might, Donald and Frederick Kagan could barely contain their hostility for "the happy international situation that emerged in 1991," which was "characterized by the spread of democracy, free trade, and peace," and which, they added contemptuously, was "so congenial to America" with its love of "domestic comfort." After 9/11, many conservatives would interpret the terrorist attack as punishment for a decade of self-indulgence, for those years when Americans cared more about material well-being than duty to country and imperium. As Lewis "Scooter" Libby – according to *The New York Times*, "Dick Cheney's Dick Cheney" – put it, the United States made it "easier for someone like Osama bin Laden to rise and say credibly, 'The Americans don't have the stomach to defend themselves. They won't take casualties to defend their interests. They are morally weak.'"¹⁷

Though conservatives are often reputed to favor wealth and prosperity, law and order, stability and routine – all the comforts of bourgeois life – the fact is that most of Clinton's

¹⁶ Indeed, the Clinton Administration's many pronouncements on the issue of multi- and unilateralism sound remarkably similar to those of the Bush Administration. In an address to the United Nations in 1993, Clinton stated, "We will often work in partnership with others and through multilateral institutions such as the United Nations. It is in our national interest to do so. But we must not hesitate to act unilaterally when there is a threat to our core interests or to those of our allies." That same year, Anthony Lake, his national security advisor, declared, "We should act multilaterally where doing so advances our interests – and should act unilaterally when that will serve our purpose." In 1994, Clinton affirmed that he sought US "influence over" multilateral decisions and operations. In 1995, he declared, "We will act with others when we can, but alone when we must." More recently, Clinton's assistant secretary of defense has declared, against the counsel and advice of classic balance-of-power realists, that the United States should maintain its monopoly of power as the surest path to peace. As for the debates between realists and humanitarians, internationalists and isolationists, the fact is that many of the neoconservative critics of the Clinton Administration are as committed to humanitarian, internationalist intervention as the Clinton Administration was. *The Clinton Foreign Policy Reader*, pp. 6, 16-17, 26, 28; Nye, p. 15; Robert Kagan and William Kristol, "The Present Danger," *The National Interest* (Spring 2000), pp. ?? [get dates/pages]; Paul Wolfowitz, "???" *The National Interest* (??), pp. ?? [get date/pages]; "Paul Wolfowitz, velociraptor," *The Economist* (February 9, 2002), pp. ???; Nicholas Lemann, "The Next World Order," *The New Yorker* (April 1, 2002), p. 42; Robert Kagan, "Fightin' Democrats," *The Washington Post* (March 10, 2002).

¹⁷ Kagan and Kagan, pp. 1-2, 4; Libby cited in Lemann, p. 48.

conservative foreign policy critics hated him precisely for his fundamentalist commitment to these very virtues. The free-market obsessions of the Clinton Administration betrayed an unwillingness to embrace the murky world of power and violent conflict, of tragedy and rupture. His foreign policy was not just unrealistic; it was insufficiently dark and brooding. “The striking thing about the 1990s zeitgeist,” complained Brooks, “was the presumption of harmony. The era was shaped by the idea that there were no fundamental conflicts anymore.” Conservatives thrive on a world filled with mysterious evil and unfathomable hatreds, where good is always on the defensive and time is a precious commodity in the cosmic race against corruption and decline. Coping with such a world requires pagan courage and an almost barbaric *virtú*, qualities conservatives embrace over the more prosaic goods of money, peace, and prosperity. It is no accident that Paul Wolfowitz, the darkest of these dark princes of pessimism, was a student of Allan Bloom (in fact, Wolfowitz makes a cameo appearance in *Ravelstein*, Saul Bellow’s novel about Bloom), for Bloom – like many other influential neoconservatives – was a follower of the political theorist Leo Strauss, whose quiet odes to classical virtue and ordered harmony merely veiled his subterranean, Nietzschean vision of torturous conflict and violent struggle.¹⁸

But there was another reason for the neocons’ dissatisfaction with Clinton’s foreign policy. Many of them found it insufficiently visionary and consistent. Clinton, they claimed, was reactive and ad hoc rather than proactive and forceful. Despite Clinton’s far-flung rhetoric, conservatives dismissed him and his advisers as foreign policy lightweights, unwilling to imagine a world where the United States shaped rather than responded to events. Breaking again with the usual stereotype of conservatives as non-ideological muddlers, figures like Wolfowitz, Libby, Richard Perle, Donald Rumsfeld, the father-son teams of the Kagan and Kristol families, called for a more ideologically coherent, morally grounded, martial projection of US power, where the “benign hegemony” of American might would spread “the zone of democracy” rather than just extend the range of the free market. They wanted a foreign policy that was, in the words of praise that Robert Kagan recently used to describe Senator Joseph Lieberman, “idealistic but not naïve, ready and willing to use force and committed to a strong military, but also committed to using American power to spread democracy and do some good in the world.” As early as the first Bush Administration, these neocons were insisting that the United States

¹⁸ Brooks, “The Age of Conflict,” *The Weekly Standard* (November 5, 2001), p. ??; Steven Mufson, “The Way Bush Sees the World,” *The Washington Post* (February 17, 2002), p. B1; “Paul Wolfowitz, velociraptor,” *The Economist* (February 9, 2002).

ought, in Cheney's words, "to shape the future, to determine the outcome of history," or, as the Kagans would later put it, "to intervene decisively in every critical region" of the world, "whether or not a visible threat exists there." They criticized those Republicans, in Robert Kagan's words, who "during the dumb decade of the 1990s" suffered from a "hostility to 'nation-building,' the aversion to 'international social work' and the narrow belief that 'superpowers don't do windows'."¹⁹ What these conservatives longed for, in other words, was an America that was genuinely imperial – not just because they believed it would make the United States safer or richer, and not just because they thought it would make the world better, but because they wanted to see the United States *make* the world. Conservatives sought to literally create history – to commit, in other words, the very sins that they have long accused Marxists and other ideologues of committing: hubris, worship of state power, and utopian aspiration.

Given this widespread dissatisfaction and loathing of the Clinton years – shared by conservatives and liberals alike – it's no wonder that so many have welcomed 9/11 as a deliverance from the miasma of the 1990s. Whatever the efforts of poets, theologians, and moralists to consecrate the day's sacred meaning – to wrest 9/11 from the apparatchiks of the profane – politicians and pundits have seized upon it as an opportunity to resolve tensions unleashed by the defeat of communism and the triumph of capitalism. Culturally, elites hope 9/11 will restore to a society dizzied by mammon a sense of the tragic and the grave. Thanks to the terrorist attacks, says Brooks, "commercial life seems less important than public life. . . . When life or death fighting is going on, it's hard to think of Bill Gates or Jack Welch as particularly heroic." The war on terrorism has restored to America that "tragic view of life" that Reinhold Niebuhr assiduously cultivated during the Cold War but which was so "easy to ignore during the decade of peace and prosperity."²⁰

Politically, pundits and elites imagine that 9/11 will lend to the state a dignity and authority lost to the stock market during the Clinton years, to revive within the American public a sense of imperiled commonality. Government, writes Jacob Weisberg, "is now seen not just as capable but also as *uniquely* capable of performing a great variety of urgent tasks: fighting our

¹⁹ Lemann, pp. 43, 47-48; Hersh, p. 61; Robert Kagan, "Fightin' Democrats"; Kagan and Kagan, pp. 293, 295.

²⁰ Brooks, "The Age of Conflict," p. ??.

enemies abroad, stimulating our flagging economy, rescuing bankrupt airlines, rebuilding the ruins in New York City, protecting us from bioterror and making the skies feel safe again.” For some, September 11 has restored to the American state that sense of Bismarckian grandeur destroyed by Republican visigoths in Congress and sexual antics in the White House. The war on terrorism has fostered, *Washington Post* columnist Michael Kelly writes, a “salutary . . . re-legitimization of central institutions” of government, lending authority, adds Brooks, to “the armed forces, the FBI, the CIA, the CDC, and so on.” For others, the new-found communalism of American politics promises to inaugurate an age of economic generosity and social provision, returning the United States to the heyday of New Deal activism and Great Society largesse. “Wartime mobilization,” writes Robert Putnam, can “spark progress toward social justice and racial integration.” Historian Michael Kazin speculates that just as the Second World War helped advance the Left’s “cherished causes of industrial unionism and racial tolerance,” so might the war on terrorism today “stir a desire to ease domestic injustices.” *Nation* editor Katrina vanden Heuvel and political scientist Joel Rogers celebrate the fact that September 11 and the war on terrorism have made “the idea of a public sector, and the society that it serves, attractive again.”²¹ Whether on the Left or Right, intellectuals are hopeful that the time is ripe for bringing the state back in from its decade of humiliating exile.

But it is in the international arena that pundits and elites believe the most wide-ranging transformation will be wrought. 9/11 and the war on terrorism have brought a new-found clarity to American foreign policy: Gone are the days of Clintonite fumbling; now the United States truly knows what its interests are. As Condoleezza Rice told *The New Yorker*, “I think the difficulty has passed in defining a role. I think September 11th was one of those great earthquakes that clarify and sharpen. Events are in much sharper relief.” Commentators now envision an American public recalled to a consciousness of a world beyond its borders, to the obligations of imperial duty, and to a willingness to sustain casualties on behalf of global order. Prior to 9/11, the argument goes, Americans were focused on internal domestic questions and

²¹ Jacob Weisberg, “Feds Up,” *The New York Times Magazine* (October 21, 2001), p. 22; Michael Kelly, “The Left’s Great Divide,” *The Washington Post* (November 7, 2001), p. A29; Brooks, “The Age of Conflict,” p. ???; Robert Putnam, “Bowling Together,” *The American Prospect* (February 11, 2002), p. ??; Michael Kazin, “The Nation: After the Attacks, Which Side is the Left On?” *The New York Times* (October 7, 2001), Section 4, p. 4; Katrina vanden Heuvel and Joel Rogers, “What’s Left? A New Life for Progressivism,” *The Los Angeles Times* (November 25, 2001), p. M2. Also see Bernard Weinraub, “The Moods They Are A’Changing in Films: Terrorism is Making Government Look Good,” *The New York Times* (October 10, 2001), p. E1; Michael Kelly, “A Renaissance of Liberalism,” *The Atlantic Monthly* (January 2002), pp. 18-19.

had little stomach for bloated defense budgets and foreign adventures that would carry a heavy loss of American lives. Questions of foreign policy simply did not interest them. Nye cites television executives who claim they closed foreign bureaus and cut foreign news coverage after the Cold War because “young adults cared more about the Zone diet than the subtleties of Middle East diplomacy” and because the nation was suffering from “a national fog of materialism and disinterest and avoidance.” But with the “September 2001 wake-up call,” Nye writes, “Americans are unlikely to slip back into the complacency that marked the first decade after the Cold War.” We now understand, in the words of Brooks, that “evil exists” and that “to preserve order, good people must exercise power over destructive people.”²²

Conservative foreign policy mavens believe that with 9/11, they have struck a vast vein of political gold, and they make no bones about their intention to mine its entire inventory. “It’s taken us 13 years to get here, but we’ve arrived,” declared Frank Gaffney, a prominent conservative defense intellectual, at a fancy Washington dinner in December 2001 honoring the “Keepers of the Flame,” those quiet warriors on the Right who struggled for a more robust foreign policy during the disastrous Clinton years.²³ At the most obvious level, 9/11 has confirmed what the conservatives have been saying for years: The world is a dangerous place, filled with forces hostile to the American state who will stop at nothing to see it felled. But, more important, 9/11 has given conservatives an opportunity – and audience – to articulate and defend, without embarrassment, a vast vision of global American power. Not only does the United States now know its interests, they claim, but it also has the license and credibility to act the part of a new imperium. According to a *Wall Street Journal* editorial writer, 9/11 proves that the United States is most threatened by its own “insufficient . . . involvement and ambition” in the world. “The solution,” he adds, “is to be more expansive in our goals and more assertive in their implementation.”²⁴

In the post-9/11 era, the United States will no longer have to merely respond to immediate threats, to “wait upon events while dangers gather,” as President Bush put it in his 2002 State of the Union Address. It will now “shape the environment,” anticipate threats, thinking not in months or years, but in decades, perhaps centuries. The goal here is what

²² Lemann, p. 44; Joseph S. Nye, Jr., *The Paradox of American Power: Why the World’s Only Superpower Can’t Go It Alone* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), pp. ix, 168.

²³ Julian Borger, “Washington hawks get power boost,” *The Guardian* (December 17, 2001), p. ??.

²⁴ Emily Eakin, “All Roads Lead to D.C.,” *The New York Times* (March 31, 2002), Week in Review, p. 4.

Cheney, acting on the advice of Wolfowitz, first outlined in the early 1990s: To ensure that no other power ever arises to challenge the United States, to ensure that no regional powers ever attain the kind of preeminence in their local theaters that would prevent the United States from forcefully acting any and everywhere. The emphasis, then, is on the preemptive and predictive rather than the reactive, to think in the Hegelian terms of becoming rather than in the more staid Anglo terms of being. As Richard Perle put it, vis-à-vis Iraq, “What is essential here is not to look at the opposition to Saddam as it is today, without any external support, without any realistic hope of removing that awful regime, but to look at what could be created.”²⁵

Unlike empires past, this empire will be guided by a benign, even morally beneficial vision – worldwide improvement. An empire, observes conservative commentator Robert Kaplan, would be “in some ways the most benign form of order.” Because of America’s sense of fair play and benevolent purpose – unlike Britain or Rome, the United States has no intention of occupying or seizing territory of its own – this new empire will not generate the backlash that all previous empires have generated. As a *Wall Street Journal* writer says, “We are an attractive empire, the one everyone wants to join.” In the words of Rice, “Theoretically, the realists would predict that when you have a great power like the United States it would not be long before you had other great powers rising to challenge it. And I think what you’re seeing is that there’s at least a predilection this time to move to productive and cooperative relations with the United States, rather than to try to balance the United States.”²⁶

With the successful overthrow of the Taliban in December 2002, this breathlessly utopian vision has found its full wings. Emboldened by US success in Afghanistan – according to one former high-level intelligence official, Bush’s advisers “won in Afghanistan when everybody said it wouldn’t work, and it’s got them in a euphoric mood of cockiness” – the Bush Administration has begun to think bigger and bigger, transforming the war on terrorism into, first, a struggle against an “axis of evil,” with Saddam Hussein targeted as the primary spoke of that axis, and, now, into a worldwide crusade for extending “the zone of democracy.”²⁷ With

²⁵ Lemann, pp. 43-44; Hersh, p. 61; George W. Bush, “State of the Union Address,” *The New York Times* (January 30, 2002), p. A22; Mufson, p. B1; Keller, p. A23.

²⁶ Eakin, “All Roads Lead to D.C.,” p. 4; Lemann, p. 44.

²⁷ It would be a mistake to read the Bush Administration’s decision to target Hussein as a mere response to a dangerous threat to US national security. A close reading of the press reports demonstrates little evidence that Hussein is a threat to US interests, and much to suggest that the Bush Administration has willfully targeted him for the sake of fulfilling their vision of a world order. Indeed, according to one administration official, prior to 9/11, Rice claimed that Saddam was “a small problem – chump change,” and Cheney told NBC News on September 16

Hussein fully out of the way and forward bases and military advisers in a region stretching from Africa to Asia, the United States will be in a position to leverage its imperial power on behalf of a goal sought by conservatives from practically the moment the Berlin Wall fell: to shape the environment, to make the future.²⁸ As Libby explains it, the significance of defeating the Taliban was not the destruction of al Qaida or the elimination of terrorism. It was that “we have opened new prospects for relations not only with Afghanistan, as important as it was as a threat, but with the states of Central Asia, Pakistan, Russia, and, as it may develop, with the states of Southwest Asia more generally.”²⁹ The United States has even gone beyond its post-Cold War doctrine of being able to fight and win in “two major regional conflicts.” Now it seeks, in Rumsfeld’s words, “deterrence in four critical theaters, backed by the ability to swiftly defeat two aggressors at the same time, while preserving the option for one massive counter-offensive to occupy an aggressor’s capital and replace the regime.”³⁰

If there was any doubt before, it is now clear, according to the most informed reports, that the Bush Administration has moved far beyond 9/11, Osama bin Laden, al Qaida, or even terrorism and rogue states. While 9/11 continues to be invoked as a concrete reminder of what might befall the United States should it not act proactively³¹, Bush’s advisers – not to mention

that “Saddam Hussein is bottled up at this point.” More recently, British Foreign Secretary Jack Straw provided to senior MP’s a high-level report allegedly demonstrating the danger posed by Hussein; the MP’s came away, according to the London *Observer*, singularly unimpressed. Said one, “They [the British government] will have to do a lot better if they are going to get the widespread support they need for a move against Iraq.” Since 9/11, the United States has been trying to find a link between terrorism and Saddam, and has failed. “We looked for any shred of evidence that would bear on” Iraq having a role in the anthrax attacks, one senior intelligence official told *The New York Times*. “It’s just not there.” According to a top federal scientist involved in the anthrax investigation, “I know there are a number of people who would love an excuse to get after Iraq,” and that goal shaped the investigation. But it was not to be fulfilled. The final decision to target Hussein, then, reflects more an assertion of the Administration’s will, and their success in Afghanistan, than a response to immediate danger. Indeed, everything about this new Bush Doctrine suggests that assessments of threats cannot be based on hard facts and immediate evidence but on hypothetical scenarios and future speculations. See Hersh, pp. 59, 61; Kamel Ahmed, “Blair Opts For Delay on Iraq,” *The Observer* (March 31, 2002); Robin Wright, “Bush’s Team Targets Hussein,” *Los Angeles Times* (February 10, 2002); William J. Broad and David Johnston, “U.S. Inquiry Tried, but Failed, to Link Iraq to Anthrax Attack,” *The New York Times* (December 22, 2001), p. A1; Michael Gordon, “Cheney Rejects Criticism By Allies Over Stand on Iraq,” *The New York Times* (February 16, 2002), p. A8.

²⁸ See Elisabeth Bumiller, “Bush Vows to Aid Other Countries in War on Terror,” *The New York Times* (March 12, 2002), p. A1; Esther Schrader, “U.S. boosting Allies’ Military Aid,” *Los Angeles Times* (March 7, 2002), p. ??; MacAskill, “From Suez to the Pacific,” *The Guardian* (March 8, 2002); Raymond Bonner, “U.S. and Philippine Governments Revive Old Relationship,” *The New York Times* (March 4, 2002), p. A11.

²⁹ Lemann, p. 48. Libby’s emphasis on relationships with this particular region of the world is significant, for it is the very region where the United States has seen the greatest decline in the number of its overseas bases, its “forward presence,” since the Vietnam War. See “U.S. Military Bases and Empire,” *Monthly Review* (March 2002).

³⁰ de la Gorce, “Offensive New Pentagon Defence Doctrine.”

³¹ Just before Bush’s state of the union address, Karen Hughes went so far as to claim that “we now believe as many as 100,000 terrorist killers were trained in Afghanistan and I think that illustrates the scope of the problem,” a

legions of politicians, pundits, and intellectuals – have seized upon 9/11 as an opportunity to resolve the political morass engulfing the United States since the end of the Cold War. Post-9/11, the United States is said to be prepared to fulfill the obligations of empire, to embrace and defend a national mission transcending the mere extension of the free market. Indeed, the rapidity, and unblinking ease, with which many outside the Bush Administration – particularly intellectuals – have accepted the notion of an American imperium has been truly astonishing. “People are now coming out of the closet on the word empire,” Charles Krauthammer accurately observes.³² No longer hamstrung by the numbing politics of affluence and prosperity, the political and cultural leaders of the United States can look to a public that will respond to the themes of national sacrifice, tragic destiny, violent confrontation, and evil. For conservatives in particular, this is a heady time, a moment when their simultaneous commitment and hostility to the free market may finally be satisfied. With danger and security, threat and safety, the watchwords of the day, the American state can be newly sanctified – without opening the floodgates to economic redistribution and social welfare. 9/11, they believe, may at last resolve those cultural contradictions of capitalism that Daniel Bell noticed long ago but which have only truly come to the fore since the defeat of communism.

9/11: The Reality

It is obviously too soon to make any assessment of the domestic and international situation of the United States, post-9/11, but mounting evidence suggests that the American empire envisioned by conservatives and liberals is encountering more than a few obstacles, at home and abroad. In order to field the worldwide empire imagined by neoconservatives, US leaders will have to

comment that provoked intelligence officials and experts to laugh with scorn. “I think that may well be a decimal place too high, declared one expert, “especially if you’re talking about people who got real terrorist training, rather than just got their picture taken on a knocked-out tank.” Calvin Woodward, “Bush Sees Widespread Terrorism,” AP Wire Service (January 29, 2002).

³² Eakin, “All Roads Lead to D.C.,” p. 4. Also see Alexander Stille, “What Is America’s Place in the World Now?” *The New York Times* (January 12, 2002), p. B7. This unquestioned embrace of American imperialism was brought home to me in February 2002 in that most unassuming of arenas – a faculty seminar. After a somewhat renowned professor – a liberal humanist who contributes to publications like *Dissent* and *London Review of Books* – presented a fascinating paper on one of Edmund Burke’s speeches about the British in India, he was asked what the relevance of Burke’s views were for today. Without missing a beat, this professor explained that now that the United States had assumed the duty of imperial power, it should turn to Burke for some guidance on how to exercise that power wisely and humanely. Though American intellectuals and academics have never been shy about defending state power in the past, this interchange struck me as quite different from the comments one might have heard during the Cold War. There was no overwrought effort to justify American imperialism, no attempt to prettify or deny it, no invocation of the terrible threats the United States was confronting; the American imperium was merely accepted as a given, much like, one imagines, the British Empire was during its heyday.

overcome, or at least provide a more realistic strategy for coping with, what seems to be the insurmountable problem of blowback. But instead of confronting this issue, the Bush Administration dismisses it out of hand, blithely affirming that its ability to control events extends to its being able to put down any opposition to that ability. In addition, since 9/11, whenever the US military has faltered, support for aggressive intervention, both in the United States and Western Europe, has dissipated, suggesting that the domestic base for such an empire is rather thin. Finally, and perhaps most important of all, as almost every sober – and by no means “anti-American” – analyst of the current situation has pointed out, the United States finds itself today the object of such intense worldwide hatred in part because of the imperial power and economic hegemony that it has wielded in the not so distant past and continues to wield today. The only long-term solution to the problem of terrorism, they claim, is to pursue a combination of criminal indictments and prosecutions and political and economic reforms of the sort that would distribute power more equitably, both within and between states. Much that the United States is currently doing, these analysts fear, will only exacerbate international hostility and further terrorism. Far from pursuing a prudent peace to security, the United States is embarking upon a reckless path toward danger and instability, a path, these analysts claim, that will ultimately redound to the detriment of America itself.

One of the most disturbing aspects of the new imperial vision is its total disregard for the problem of blowback, which Chalmers Johnson described to such devastating effect in his prescient book, published before 9/11. In *Blowback*, Johnson cites a 1997 Pentagon report, which states, “Historical data show a strong correlation between U.S. involvement in international situations and an increase in terrorist attacks against the United States. In addition, the military asymmetry that denies nation states the ability to engage in overt attack against the United States drives the use of transnational actors [i.e., terrorists].”³³ If this report is correct, it means that a major element of the neocon strategy – increased military involvement focused on preventing the rise of regional hegemonies that could contest the power of the United States – will only increase the likelihood that states and non-states will rely upon terrorist attacks against the United States in the future. Practically every commentator has pointed out that 9/11 taught Americans they are not invulnerable, that in an interdependent, global world, it is simply

³³ Chalmers Johnson, *Blowback: The Costs and Consequences of American Empire* (New York: Henry Holt, 2000), p. 9.

impossible to guarantee total immunity from terrorist attack. This permanent vulnerability to terrorist attack – not just on American soil but in the approximately sixty countries and territories around the world where the United States has overseas military bases³⁴ – plus the realities of blowback, suggest a future that can only be more dangerous for Americans, at home or abroad.

Indeed, in the very same month that the neocons and their media allies were going public with their vast new vision of American imperial power, the United States military was announcing that it was making plans for a radical reduction in the number of US troops in Saudi Arabia because, according to one senior officer, the US presence is “destabilizing to the government” and because, according to a base commander there, American troops are “sitting ducks.” In that same month, a Japanese district court found a United States serviceman stationed in Okinawa guilty of raping a young woman, merely the latest in a long string of criminal convictions against the 26,000 American troops in Okinawa (between 1972 and 1995, US troops stationed there have been connected to 4,716 crimes), which have fanned widespread anti-American opposition within Okinawa and Japan.³⁵

Despite the history of blowback, the Administration, its intellectual gurus, and its media defenders blithely dismiss it as a threat to imperial power. Intellectually, the notion of blowback simply does not jibe with how many influential intellectuals and policy-makers understand the nature and origin of terrorism. Indeed, with terrorism classified by these elites as a symptom of either unfathomable evil or antimodernist hostility to Western values, it does not – and cannot – register as a reaction to imperial power. But even when there is a clear record of reactive hostility to US intervention – for instance, the bombings throughout the 1990s of American bases and ships around the Arabian peninsula – the Administration pooh-poohs the possibility of blowback. Because the widely anticipated opposition to US action against the Taliban has not yet materialized, the Administration no longer believes, according to a former high-level intelligence official, that it must take counsels of prudence seriously. “They went against the established experts on the Middle East who said it [the bombing of Afghanistan] would lead to

³⁴ As a 1970 report to a Senate Foreign Relations subcommittee noted, “Overseas bases, the presence of elements of United States armed forces, joint planning, joint exercises, or excessive military assistant programs . . . all but guarantee some involvement by the United States in the internal affairs of the host government.” Report and figures on overseas bases cited in “U.S. Military Bases and Empire,” *Monthly Review*.

³⁵ Elaine Sciolino with Eric Schmitt, “U.S. Rethinks Its Role in Saudi Arabia,” *The New York Times* (March 10, 2002), p. A24; Howard W. French, “Airman’s Rape Conviction Fans Okinawa’s Ire Over U.S. Bases,” *The New York Times* (March 29, 2002), p. A3; “U.S. Military Bases and Empire,” *Monthly Review*. For an extensive discussion of the US presence in Okinawa and the backlash that presence has ignited, see Johnson, pp. 34-64.

fundamental insurrections in Saudi Arabia and elsewhere. Not so, and anyone who now preaches any approach of solving problems with diplomacy is scoffed at. They're on a roll." Thus, even though it took Osama bin Laden some ten years after the stationing of US troops in Saudi Arabia to exact his final revenge against the United States, and even though the Administration prides itself on thinking in terms of decades, the failure for blowback to materialize within three months is taken as proof positive that it is not a threat – a point reinforced by a December presentation at the White House by Middle East historian Bernard Lewis. According to one White House staffer, Lewis said, "In that part of the world, nothing matters more than resolute will and force," which, according to the author of an eye-opening *New Yorker* report, means, "the United States needn't proceed gingerly for fear of inflaming the 'Arab street,' as long as it is prepared to be strong."³⁶

In and of itself, blowback might not prove such a formidable problem, at least not in the short term; after all, other empires have weathered it for at least some period of time. What makes blowback such a destabilizing factor in the current situation is that despite all the talk of the United States being prepared to take casualties in the war on terrorism, at moments when that war has seemed to blunder or miscarry, nay-sayers in the media and even the Democratic party – not to mention the legions of opposition in Western Europe – have emerged to criticize the Bush Administration. In late October and early November, after a mere few weeks of bombing had failed to dislodge the Taliban, critics started murmuring their fears of a Vietnam quagmire.³⁷ More recently, Europeans have voiced their growing discomfort with the Bush Administration's Axis of Evil lodestar, as have some of the more bellicose commentators in the US media. Democrats have begun, however tentatively, to probe the edges of acceptable criticism of the war, trying to identify Bush's weak spots in order to offer some form of loyal opposition.³⁸ As

³⁶ Hersh, pp. 61-63, Lemann, p. 47.

³⁷ Eric Schmitt and Steve Lee Myers, "U.S. Steps Up Air Attack, While Defending Results of Campaign," *The New York Times* (October 26, 2001), p. B1; Susan Sachs, "U.S. Appears to Be Losing Public Relations War So Far," *The New York Times* (October 28, 2001), p. B8; Warren Hoge, "Public Apprehension Felt in Europe Over the Goals of Afghanistan Bombings," *The New York Times* (November 1, 2001), p. B2; Dana Canedy, "Vietnam-Era G.I.'s Watch New War Warily," *The New York Times* (November 12, 2001), p. B9.

³⁸ Suzanne Daley, "Many in Europe Voice Worry U.S. Will Not Consult Them," *The New York Times* (January 31, 2002), p. ??; Suzanne Daley, "French Minister Calls U.S. Policy 'Simplistic'," *The New York Times* (February 7, 2002), p. A14; Karen DeYoung, "War's Black and White Phase Turns To Gray," *Los Angeles Times* (February 12, 2002), p. A1; Robert Kuttner, "Bush blunder shows it's time for dissent," *Boston Globe* (February 13, 2002); David E. Sanger, "Allies Hear Sour Notes in 'Axis of Evil' Chorus," *The New York Times* (February 17, 2002), p. A18; Chris Matthews, "A Wayward Crusade," *MSNBC* (February 14, 2002); Todd S. Purdum, "Democrats Starting to Fault President on the War's Future," *The New York Times* (March 1, 2002), p. A1; Elisabeth Bumiller, "Out of the

the United States sets its sites on Iraq, press reports from an increasingly chaotic Afghanistan – plus the cautionary statements of experienced military advisers – suggest that the reality of “shaping the environment” may not be as enthralling as the theory. Indeed, former Clinton Administration official Richard Holbrooke has gone so far as to claim that Afghanistan “is in extreme danger of falling back into the hands of warlords and drug lords and terrorists. And if this happens, Afghanistan will once again become a sanctuary for attacks against the United States.”³⁹

True, none of these critics has yet to challenge the full-throttle military premise of Bush’s policies, but their periodic appearance, particularly in times of trouble or defeat, suggest that the Administration’s vision is politically compelling only so long as it is successful. And, of course, this is as it must be: Because the centerpiece of the neoconservative promise is that the United States can govern events – that it can determine the outcome of history – their entire vision stands or falls on success or failure. Any suggestion, any hint, that events lie beyond their control, their vision collapses. Indeed, it only took a week in late March 2002 of horrific bloodshed in Israel and the occupied territories – and the resulting accusations that “Bush fiddles in the White House or Texas, playing Nero as the Mideast burns” – for the planned empire to start, if not unraveling, then at least to be seriously called into question. No sooner had violence in the Middle East begun to escalate, when even the Administration’s putative defenders began jumping ship, suggesting that any invasion of Iraq would have to be postponed indefinitely. As one of Reagan’s high-level national security aides put it, “The supreme irony is that the greatest power the world has ever known has proven incapable of managing a regional crisis.” The fact, this aide added, that the administration had been so maniacally “focused on either Afghanistan or

Shadows, but Lawmakers Complain They Are Still in the Dark,” *The New York Times* (March 11, 2002), p. A16; Sheryl Gay Stolberg, “Daschle Wants President to Tell Congress More About His Plans for War,” *The New York Times* (March 4, 2002), p. A10; Robert C. Byrd, “Why Congress Has to Ask Questions,” *The New York Times* (March 12, 2002), p. A27.

³⁹ James Traub, “Questions for Richard C. Holbrooke,” *The New York Times Magazine* (March 24, 2002), p. 20. Also see Anton Ferreira, “Confusion Reigns in Afghanistan, U.S. Says,” Reuters News Service (February 11, 2002); Michael Evans, “Marines to face guerilla war as Taleban fighters change tactics,” *The Times* (March 21, 2002); Andrew Buncombe, “British forces caught in attack by Taliban,” *The Independent* (March 22, 2002); Ben Fenton, “General warns of unwinnable guerilla war,” *The Daily Telegraph* (March 22, 2002); Jeffrey Gettleman, “Empty American Promises Embitter an Afghan Village,” *Los Angeles Times* (March 26, 2002).

Iraq” – the two key outposts of imperial confrontation – while the Middle East was going up in flames “reflects either appalling arrogance or ignorance.”⁴⁰

Ironically, insofar as it abides by the political imperatives of success and failure – that is, insofar as it avoids those conflicts, such as that between the Israelis and Palestinians, where it might fail – the Bush administration is forced to forgo the very logic of imperialism that it seeks to avow. In other words, the neoconservative ideology of empire, premised as it is on the ability of the United States to control events, cannot accommodate failure, but by avoiding failure, the imperialists are forced to acknowledge that they cannot control events. As former Secretary of State Lawrence Eagleburger has observed of the crisis in the Middle East, Bush realizes “that simply to insert himself into this mess without any possibility of achieving any success is, in and of itself, dangerous, because it would demonstrate that in fact we don’t have any ability right now to control or affect events”⁴¹ – precisely the admission that the neocons cannot afford to make. This catch-22 is no mere problem of logic or consistency: It betrays the essential weakness and fragility of the imperial position itself.

In a series of understated, trenchant articles, figures like Stanley Hoffman, Tony Judt, Paul Kennedy, and Michael Howard – all, not coincidentally, born to European empires in their sunset years – have warned that reducing terrorism does not entail spectacular wars or empires, that there is a contradiction between trying to reduce terrorism and waging war against it. In fact, Howard has stated vis-a-vis of the Bush Administration campaign against rogue states like Iraq that allegedly sponsor terrorism, “I can think of no policy more likely not only to prolong the war [against terrorism] indefinitely but to ensure that we can never win it.” Fighting terrorism requires quiet, patient, methodical criminal investigations and prosecutions before international criminal courts – both of which depend upon the cooperation and good will of international institutions and nations throughout the world – and, more important, a fundamental redistribution of economic and political power. As Kennedy has written, Americans “comprise slightly less than 5 per cent of the world’s population; but we [he has adopted the US as his country] 27 per cent of the world’s annual oil production, create and consume nearly 30 per cent of its Gross World Product and – get this – spend a full 40 per cent of all the world’s defence expenditures.” Such a monopoly of wealth and power, he concludes, leaves “a heavy footprint”

⁴⁰ Robin Wright, “Urgent Calls for Peace in Mideast Ring Hollow as Prospects Dwindle,” *Los Angeles Times* (March 31, 2002).

⁴¹ Wright, “Urgent Calls for Peace in Mideast Ring Hollow as Prospects Dwindle.”

throughout the world, which many have not particularly welcomed.⁴² But the Bush Administration's policies only deepen that footprint, arousing hostility even further.

The Bush Administration has thus made an extremely dangerous gamble: turning a horrific atrocity of mass death – an event that shocked the conscience of the world and awakened many Americans to the fact that people around the world simply detest them – into an opportunity for not only continuing, but actually extending, the very policies that gave rise to 9/11 in the first place. While cynical Machiavellians may argue that this is precisely what the Bush Administration seeks – occasional future terrorist attacks on Americans, which would justify war without end – a more accurate reading of the Administration suggests that the neocons in charge are so taken by the idea of US power, and so sure that evil lies at the heart of terrorism, that they simply refuse to accept the prudential calculus laid out by Howard et al. But what the neocons don't realize is that most Americans actually believe that terrorism will be reduced, not increased, by US actions and policies. Once that assumption is challenged by future terrorist attacks, whether in the United States or abroad, the Bush vision will start to unravel. In the same way that many Israelis have lost faith – after eighteen months of heavy Israeli incursions in the West Bank and Gaza, after close to 1500 dead on both sides of the conflict – in the possibility of a military solution to the problem of terrorism, so too will Americans.

On the domestic front, there is little evidence to suggest that the 9/11 political and cultural renewal imagined by most commentators – the revival of the state, the return of shared sacrifice and community, the deepening of moral awareness – has taken place, or will take place. September 11 may have increased popular trust in government and interest in public affairs⁴³, but it has done little to displace among elites the free-market ideology that makes government action – outside the realm of national security – an instant source of suspicion. So long as the nation's

⁴² Michael Howard, "Stumbling Into Battle," *Harper's* (January 2002), pp. 13-18; Paul Kennedy, "Has the US Lost Its Way?" *The Guardian* (March 2, 2002); Stanley Hoffman, "On the War," *The New York Review of Books* (November 1, 2002), pp. 4-6; Tony Judt, "America and the War," *The New York Review of Books* (November 15, 2001), pp. 4-6; Tony Judt, "'The War on Terror'," *The New York Review of Books* (December 20, 2001), pp. 102-3. Also see Benjamin Schwarz and Christopher Layne, "A New Grand Strategy," *The Atlantic* (January 2002), pp. 36-42.

⁴³ According to a national poll conducted by Putnam and his colleagues during the months preceding and following September 11, 51 percent of Americans claimed that their trust in the national government had increased following the terrorist attacks, while only 7 percent said that it had decreased. At the same time, as Putnam himself admits, this has not translated into any concrete action. "Generally speaking, attitudes (such as trust and concern) have shifted more than behavior has." Putnam, "Bowling Together," p. ???.

dominant political language and practices glorify the market, elevating the spontaneous actions of individuals and the interests of the self-interested to the status of public goods, no amount of civic cheerleading or wartime patriotic fervor can create a genuine *civitas*. We may live in a post-modern age, but no one is *that* post-modern: There is still a lived reality for all to see, and if it contradicts the claims of national leaders, the calls for shared sacrifice and common purpose will be heard for what they are – cheap rhetoric rather than genuine public philosophy.

Prior to September 11, President Bush pushed through Congress the most extensive tax cut since the early days of the Reagan Administration. After September 11, there were few public calls, save the casual suggestions of Edward Kennedy and Dennis Kucinich, for repeal of the tax cuts, reflecting a residual antipathy for government spending, even during a recession and in the midst of a national security crisis. Indeed, congressional Republicans used 9/11 as an opportunity to push through even more tax cuts for the wealthy. And while congressional Democrats were attempting to leverage a stimulus package that would have included more extensive unemployment benefits, one of their leading standard-bearers, Joseph Lieberman, announced on television that preserving tax cuts, which he had initially voted against, was more important than extending unemployment benefits. In “a perfect world,” he declared, the government would do both, but since this was not a perfect world, “the most important thing is for the government to act in a way to help the business community, the private sector, again.”⁴⁴ While repealing tax cuts in the midst of a recession may not have been the wisest course of action, the refusal of most political leaders even to consider it – or, conversely, to prime the pump through government spending – indicates just how little public discussion about the relationship between market and state has changed, post-9/11.

When proposed government policies touch upon sectors of the economy where there is a national-security interest, free marketeers have been surprisingly effective at stymieing government regulation. In March 2002, for example, 62 senators, including 19 Democrats, rejected higher fuel-efficiency standards in the automobile industry, which would have reduced dependence upon Persian Gulf oil. Missouri Republican Christopher Bond felt so unencumbered by the need to pay homage to state institutions in time of war that he claimed on the Senate floor, “I don’t want to tell a mom in my home state that she should not get an S.U.V. because Congress decided that would be a bad choice.” Even more telling was just how vulnerable proponents of

⁴⁴ [get *Washington Times* cite]

higher standards were to these anti-statist, pro-market arguments. John McCain, a putative maverick with supposedly few qualms about state action, was instantly put on the defensive by the notion that the government would be interfering with people's private market choices. He was left to argue on the Senate floor that "no American will be forced to drive any different automobile," as if that would have been a dreadful imposition in this new era of wartime sacrifice and solidarity.⁴⁵

Even within and around the military, the ethos of patriotism and shared destiny remains secondary to that of the market. As of March 2002, there have been no changes in rates of military enlistment. In a little-noticed article in *The New York Times*, military recruiters confessed that 9/11 had not changed their normal recruitment pitches; they still enticed potential enlistees with the promise of economic opportunity. As one recruiter put it, "It's just business as usual. We don't push the 'Help our country' routine." Recruiters admit that they continue to target immigrants and people of color – on the assumption that it is their lack of opportunity, and not their patriotism, that drives these constituencies to the military. When the occasional patriot bursts into a recruiting office and says, "I want to fight," a recruiter explains, "I've got to calm them down. We're not all about fighting and bombing. We're about jobs. We're about education."⁴⁶

But to fully appreciate the tenacious hold of the free market over public life, we must turn to those particular cases of individual decision, those idiosyncratic tales of personal behavior that somehow illuminate the whole. Consider, for instance, the career of young Kirk Evans. A 19-year-old, skinny slacker "with glasses and a slouch," Evans spent the better part of the late 1990s earning C's and D's in high school and dreaming about being an artist. The summer after he graduated in 2001, he listened to Pearl Jam, didn't work, and read John Grisham novels. But three days into the bombing of Afghanistan, he had his grandmother drive him to the local recruiting station in Bloomington, Illinois. He instantly became a *New York Times* poster child for how 9/11 had changed America, a Gen Xer trying to fill the shoes of the Greatest Generation. "This is the most justifiable war we've gotten into," explained Evans. "It just comes down to bad guys versus guys." But three months after boot camp, Kirk Evans was heading back home.

⁴⁵ David E. Rosenbaum, "Senate Deletes Higher Mileage Standard in Energy Bill," *The New York Times* (March 14, 2002), p. A28.

⁴⁶ Tim Jones, "Military sees no rush to enlist," *Chicago Tribune* (March 24, 2002); David W. Chen, "Armed Forces Stress Careers, Not Current War," *The New York Times* (October 20, 2001), p. B10.

Not because he couldn't hack the army or had second thoughts about the war. It was because his stepfather, a 60-year-old machinist, had died, leaving the family in debt, and because his 77-year-old grandmother, who had assumed financial responsibility for the family, was laid off from her job at a local fountain pen factory (Evans' mother couldn't work because of emphysema and chronic fatigue syndrome.)⁴⁷

Or consider the December announcement of Ken Feinberg, head of the September 11 Victims' Compensation Fund created by Congress, that families of victims would receive compensation for their loss based in part on the salary each victim was earning at the time of his or her death. After the attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon, Congress had taken the unprecedented step of assuming national responsibility for restitution. Though the primary inspiration for this decision was to forestall expensive lawsuits against the airlines industry, many observers took it as a signal of the new dispensation: In the face of national tragedy, political leaders were finally breaking with the jungle survivalism of the Reagan-Clinton years. But even in death, the market – and the inequalities it generates – was the only language America's leaders knew how to speak. Abandoning the notion of shared sacrifice, Feinberg opted for the actuarial tables to figure out appropriate compensation packages. The family of a single 65-year-old grandmother earning \$10,000 a year – perhaps a minimum-wage kitchen worker – would draw \$300,000 from the fund, while the family of a 30-year-old Wall Street hot-shot would get \$3,870,064. The men and women killed on September 11 were not equal citizens of a democracy; they were private earners, and rewards would be distributed accordingly. Even more telling, virtually no one – not even the commentators and politicians who denounced the Feinberg calculus for other reasons – criticized this aspect of his decision.⁴⁸

The tensions between patriotic sacrifice and the market are not merely ideological; they are structural. For so many elements of the war on terrorism comport with the private pursuit of happiness that there is simply no political impetus during this war for challenging the logic or culture of the market. The war on terrorism does not require a massive mobilization of troops or reorientation of production. With an all-volunteer military often drawn from the urban and rural

⁴⁷ Sara Rimer, "A Self-Described Slacker Decides He's Ready to Be a Soldier," *The New York Times* (November 12, 2001), p. B1; Sara Rimer, "Home Hardships End Private's Army Career," *The New York Times* (March 10, 2002), p. 33.

⁴⁸ Diana B. Henriques and David Barstow, "Victim's Fund Likely to Pay Average of \$1.6 Million Each," *The New York Times* (December 21, 2001), p. A1. For an excellent critique, see Eve Weinbaum and Max Page, "Compensate All 9/11 Families Equally," *Christian Science Monitor* (January 4, 2002), p. ??.

poor, and with an increasingly technology-driven military machine, there is no need to call up men and women to serve. Indeed, the few politicians who have talked of reinstating the draft have argued for it solely on the grounds of instilling an ethic of sacrifice. Not surprisingly, such claims have proven insufficiently compelling to counter the fears of politicians that a draft would be unpopular among middle-class voters.⁴⁹ Nor is this the type of war that even demands conscription. Thus far, fighting terrorism has taken one of two forms – massive air bombardment in combination with local proxies on the ground, or highly specialized, small commando teams leading raids or training foreign troops – neither of which requires fresh influxes of American troops.⁵⁰

One would have thought that the prospect of winning a war without a draft or the loss of American lives would have been a source of relief. Oddly enough, it has only raised concern. For without consecrating the cause in blood, observers fear, Americans will have not have their commitment tested, their resolve deepened. Political leaders are nervous about high body counts, but they are also nervous that the public will not be fully committed to the war if the body bags do not start piling up. “Antiseptic, push-button warfare,” writes the *Times*’s R.W. Apple after interviewing several politicians, seems “ignoble” because it removes “the element of potential self-sacrifice from the cruel equation of combat.” While the elimination of risk to Americans would normally be a cause for celebration, “the danger, over the long term, is loss of interest. With much of the war to be conducted out of plain sight by commandos, diplomats and intelligence agents, will a nation that has spent decades in easy self-indulgence stay focused?”⁵¹

Economically, the United States has been, until recently, in a recession, where the greatest imperative has been to stimulate consumer spending, making rationing of the World War II variety a non-option. Subtly rebuking those who pine for the Greatest Generation, Tom Ridge, director of homeland security, claims that it is “a little bit misleading” to suggest that the United States is facing a situation similar to that of the earlier war: “We had an economy, a country that was struggling economically, on its way out of depression, and we didn’t have surplus resources

⁴⁹ Tim Jones, “Military sees no rush to enlist”; Alison Mitchell, “After Asking for Volunteers, Government Tries to Determine What They Will do,” *The New York Times* (November 10, 2001), p. B7.

⁵⁰ Indeed, all signs suggest that the US intends to pursue this tactic in future theaters, whether against terrorist groups or states. As one defense analyst puts it, “They believe they have found the perfect model, and it works. The model is bombing, a modest insertion of Special Forces, plus an uprising.” Seymour M. Hersh, “The Iraq Hawks,” *The New Yorker* (December 24 and 31, 2001), p. 60.

⁵¹ R.W. Apple Jr., “Nature of Foe Is Obstacle In Appealing for Sacrifice,” *The New York Times* (October 15, 2001), p. B2.

so there was the need to ration meat and sugar. It's a little bit different today."⁵² And though President Bush has called for a massive increase in military spending, this infusion of cash into the defense industry will not impose the same transformations on the US economy that earlier wartime production measures did. Indeed, whatever efforts there may have been in the early 1990s to reap the benefits of a peace dividend, the half-century legacy of the Cold War economy persists to this day. The United States can now commit itself to a new, even more visionary project of military intervention – without doing much that is economically different from what it was doing last year. Most men and women will continue to work in non-war-related employment, and their most patriotic duty will remain to shop and to spend, “to go about their business,” in the words of President Bush.⁵³

The fact that the war has not yet imposed the sort of sacrifices on the population that normally accompany national crusades has provoked no small measure of concern among political and cultural elites. Not long after he declared the age of glitz and glitter over, Frank Rich found himself publicly agonizing that “you’d never guess this is a nation at war.” Prior to 9/11, “the administration said we could have it all;” post-9/11, the administration was saying the same thing. Doris Kearns Goodwin complained on *The News Hour*, “???” [get cite]. And a former aide to LBJ told *The New York Times*, “People are going to have get involved in this. So far it’s a government effort, as it should be, but people aren’t engaged.”⁵⁴

In what may be the strangest spectacle of the entire war, the nation’s leaders are now feverishly looking for things for people to do – not because there’s much to be done, but because without something to do, leaders worry, the patriotic ardor of ordinary Americans will grow cold. Since these tasks are unnecessary – and mandating them would violate the norms of market ideology – the best the President and his colleagues can do is to announce web sites and toll-free numbers where enterprising men and women can find information about helping out the war effort. As Bush declared in North Carolina the day after his State of the Union address, “If you listened to the speech last night, you know, people were saying, ‘Well, gosh, that’s nice, he called me to action, where do I look?’ Well, here’s where: at usafreedomcorps.gov. Or you can

⁵² Alison Mitchell, “After Asking for Volunteers, Government Tries to Determine What They Will do,” *The New York Times* (November 10, 2001), p. B7.

⁵³ R.W. Apple Jr., “Nature of Foe Is Obstacle In Appealing for Sacrifice,” *The New York Times* (October 15, 2001), p. B1.

⁵⁴ Frank Rich, “War is Heck,” *The New York Times* (November 10, 2001), p. A23; [get McNeil Lehrer cite]; Mitchell, “After Asking for Volunteers,” p. B7. Also see Michael Lipsky, “The War at Home: Wartime used to entail national unity and sacrifice,” *The American Prospect* (January 28, 2002), pp. 15-16.

call this number – it sounds like I’m making a pitch, and I am. This is the right thing to do for America. 1-877-USA-CORPS.” What are the duties these volunteers can perform? If they are doctors or health care workers, they can enlist to help out during emergencies. And everyone else? They can serve in Neighborhood Watch programs to guard against terrorist attacks – in North Carolina. Or they can report suspicious activities to the authorities.⁵⁵ If the experience of New York after 9/11 gives any indication, the Bush plan does not bode well for volunteerism. After an unprecedented terrorist attack, city officials had to turn away the vast majority of volunteers pouring into New York because they lacked the necessary emergency skills. And after some particularly civic-minded academics argued in *The Washington Monthly* that volunteers could serve on border patrols or guard dams and nuclear power plants, Tom Ridge icily responded, “You just don’t put a volunteer out on the border. There are certain levels of law enforcement where you really want professionals involved.”⁵⁶

This combination of ideological and structural impediments to a revival of wartime civics suggests that any envisioned cultural revival – the return of gravitas, the end of irony, and so on – may be equally fraught with difficulties. Of all the projected transformations, the cultural is the most difficult to predict. Whether measured by polls, novels, newspapers, textbooks, movies, diaries, or letters, cultural sensibilities are so protean and elusive that it will be many years before we can truly know the impact of 9/11 on the public mind. But while we await the verdict of cultural historians, we should be wary of pronouncements of the “we have grown more serious” variety. For though many pundits predicted a greater moral depth after 9/11 – with the sudden swelling of weekend attendance at churches, synagogues, and mosques invoked as exhibit A – it took less than three months before religious observation returned to its pre-9/11 levels.⁵⁷ And whatever historians conclude about post-9/11 American culture, they should make sure to take into consideration the Fox TV show *Celebrity Boxing*, which features cultural heavyweights of the Age of Clinton like Paula Jones (substituting for Amy Fisher, another fading icon of the Cold War’s end) duking it out with Tonya Harding.⁵⁸

⁵⁵ Elisabeth Bumiller, “Bush Asks Volunteers to Join Fight On Terrorism,” *The New York Times* (January 31, 2002), p. A20; Mitchell, “After Asking for Volunteers,” p. B7. Also see David Brooks, “Love the Service Around Here,” *New York Times Magazine* (November 25, 2001), p. 34.

⁵⁶ Mitchell, “After Asking for Volunteers,” p. B7.

⁵⁷ Laurie Goodstein, “As Attacks’ Impact Recedes, A Return to Religion as Usual,” *The New York Times* (November 26, 2001), p. A1.

⁵⁸ Caryn James, “And Now the 16th Minute of Fame,” *The New York Times* (March 13, 2002), p. E1.

There is little doubt that 9/11 will have long-term cultural reverberations in the United States: The six-month anniversary of the attacks brought news of extensive post-traumatic stress disorders and persistent feelings of heightened anxiety and vulnerability, and such emotions, no matter how private, inevitably find their way into public consciousness.⁵⁹ But tragedies and wars lack self-evident meanings, and they seldom fulfill the duties ascribed to them by their public interpreters. State officials and social movements, the distribution of power and resources, dominant ideologies and available civic vernaculars – these are among the many political artifacts that shape and constrain popular perceptions of even the most cataclysmic events. Thus far, political elites have failed to turn 9/11 into the galvanizing instrument of an American renaissance. What’s more, there’s much to suggest that they can’t. For without a wrenching transformation of the economy and a reconsideration of the aggressively free-market ideals that have guided American policy for the last two decades – neither of which seems, at this point, either necessary or likely – there is no incentive for elites or citizens to invent themselves anew.

The Machiavellian Moment

We thus face an extremely dangerous situation. On the one hand, we have a group of political and cultural elites whose vision of American power grows ever more recklessly utopian, who seem increasingly disconnected from any coherent conception of the national interest. On the other hand, we have a domestic population – including citizens and economic elites – that shows little interest in sustaining such a far-flung empire. Rather than resolving the contradictions laid bare by the collapse of the Soviet Union – the tension between the free market and imperial aspiration – the current moment seems to be, if not exactly exacerbating them, then at least doing little to assuage them. The political order projected by Bush and his advisers – and their supporters in the media and academia – is just that: a projection, a jerry-built structure that can only last so long as the United States is able to put down, with minimum casualties, any challenge to its power. If this assessment is correct, we may well be entering one of those famed Machiavellian moments discussed by J.G.A. Pocock a quarter-century ago – those moments in a republic’s history when, as it opts for the grandeur and frisson of empire, it is forced to confront the fragility and finitude of all political forms, including its own.

⁵⁹ Sarah Kershaw, “Even 6 Months Later, ‘Get Over It’ Just Isn’t an Option,” *The New York Times* (March 11, 2002), p. B1.

What we may also be seeing, and I suggest this in only the most tentative of ways, is the slow decomposition of an American ruling class.⁶⁰ Ever since the end of the Cold War – some might even say the Vietnam War – there has been a growing disconnect between the culture and ideology of US business elites and that of political warriors like Perle, Wolfowitz et al. Where the Cold War saw the creation of a semi-coherent class of Wise Men who brought together, however jaggedly and provisionally, the worlds of business and politics – men like Dean Acheson, the Dulles brothers, and, later, William Rogers and Cyrus Vance – the Reagan years and beyond have witnessed something altogether different. On the one hand, we have a younger generation of corporate magnates who, though ruthless in their efforts to secure benefits from the state, have none of the respect or passion for the state that their older counterparts had. While certainly willing to take from the public till, they are contemptuous of politics and government. The new CEOs respond to their counterparts in Tokyo, London, and other global cities, and so long as the state provides them with what they need and does not interfere unduly with their operations, they leave it – particularly in matters of defense and foreign policy – to the apparatchiks.⁶¹ As one Silicon Valley executive said to Thomas Friedman, when asked by Friedman how often he talks about Iraq, Russia, or foreign wars, “Not more than once a year. We don’t even care about Washington. Money is extracted by Silicon Valley and then wasted by Washington. I want to talk about people who create wealth and jobs. I don’t want to talk about unhealthy and unproductive people. If I don’t care about the wealth destroyers in my own country, why should I care about the wealth destroyers in another country?”⁶²

On the other hand, in the case of Perle, Wolfowitz, Rice, Adelman, and Gaffney, we have a new class of political elites who have little contact with the business community, whose primary experiences outside of government have been in either academia, journalism, think tanks, or some other part of the culture industry. As corporate elites set their sites upon an increasingly global economy, these ideologues have been given, it seems, the run of the farm.

⁶⁰ My discussion here is indebted to several conversations with Steve Fraser.

⁶¹ This corporate abdication of government power applies, surprisingly enough, even to those cases – like the Gulf War or the signing of NAFTA – where many had thought they’d seen the heavy footprints of corporate America. According to the best accounts of the Gulf War and NAFTA that I have read, it was political officials, particularly President Bush, who took the initiative, often pressing a reluctant business and military community to follow along. John R. MacArthur, *The Selling of “Free Trade”: NAFTA, Washington, and the Subversion of American Democracy* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000), pp. 137, 170, 174-75, 194; Halberstam, *Peace in Time of War*, pp. 69-70; Kagan and Kagan, pp. 244-50.

⁶² Thomas Friedman, *The Lexis and the Olive Tree: Understanding Globalization* (New York: Farrar Straus Giroux, 1999), p. 373.

Like the Kristols and the Kagans, like Kaplan and Brooks, these are people who traffic in ideas, who see the world as a vast landscape of intellectual projection. Unconstrained by even the most interested of interests, they are free to advance their cause – whether in the Middle East, where their support for Israel and opposition to Iraq⁶³ seems diametrically opposed to the concerns of oil companies, or elsewhere. Like their corporate counterparts, the neoconservatives view the world as their stage, but unlike their corporate counterparts, they are designing that stage for an altogether more theatrical, other-worldly drama. Their end game, if they have one, is an apocalyptic confrontation between good and evil, civilization and barbarism – categories of pagan conflict diametrically opposed to the world-without-borders vision of America’s free-trading, globalizing elite.

⁶³ From the point of view of economic and oil interests, the Iraq question is admittedly complicated. On the one hand, it could be argued that with Hussein out of the way, the United States can then target Iran, thus eliminating any regional challenge to its power and paving the way for total control of Middle Eastern and Central oil supplies. On the other hand, given the close ties between US oil interests and so-called moderate Arab leaders, and the former’s interest in not fomenting further anti-American hostility, which an invasion of Iraq would surely arouse, it would seem that the best foreign policy option for the United States would be to resolve the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, thereby eliminating the major political grievance in the Arab world. Equally important, as almost every informed US politician and commentator prior to Bush’s Axis of Evil speech has claimed, it is in the interests of the United States to keep Hussein in power, if nothing else for the sake of stability, because no one has come up with a plausible scenario for a successor regime. Indeed, after the United States decided not to topple Hussein after the Gulf War, then Secretary of Defense Dick Cheney said, “If we’d gone to Baghdad and got rid of Saddam . . . then you’ve got to put a new government in his place and then you’re faced with the question of what kind of government are you going to establish in Iraq? Is it going to be a Kurdish government or a Shia government or a Sunni government? How many forces are you going to have to leave there to keep it propped up?” Or, as Anthony Zinni, the younger Bush’s current to the Middle East, told a Senate committee in the late 1990s, “I don’t see an opposition group that has the viability to overthrow Saddam. Even if we had Saddam gone, we could end up with fifteen, twenty, or ninety groups competing for power.” Kagan and Kagan, p. 254; Hersh, p. 59.