

*Rush, Newspeak and Fascism:
An Exegesis*

By David Neiwert

Introduction

Is fascism an obsolete term? Even if it resurrects itself as a significant political threat, can we use the term with any effectiveness?

My friend John McKay, discussing the matter at his weblog *archy* [<http://johnmckay.blogspot.com/>], wonders if the degraded state of the term has rendered it useless. After all, it has in many respects become a catchall for any kind of totalitarianism, rather than the special and certainly cause-specific phenomenon it was. Anyone using the word nowadays is most often merely participating in this degradation.

Nonetheless, I think Robert O. Paxton has it right in his essay “The Five Stages of Fascism”:

We cannot give up in the face of these difficulties. A real phenomenon exists. Indeed, fascism is the most original political novelty of the twentieth century, no less. ... If we cannot examine fascism synthetically, we risk being unable to understand this century, or the next. We must have a word, and for lack of a better one, we must employ the word that Mussolini borrowed from the vocabulary of the Italian Left in 1919, before his movement had assumed its mature form. Obligated to use the term fascism, we ought to use it well.

The following essay is devoted to that idea. Its purpose is, if nothing else, to give the reader a clear understanding of fascism not merely as an historical force but a living one.

The essay originally appeared as a series of posts at my weblog *Orcinus* [<http://dneiwert@blogspot.com>], sparked by an erroneous report of something Rush Limbaugh reportedly had told his radio audience. The error was soon corrected, but the remarks had in any event stirred me to write about my concerns about the way the political climate in America is heading, based on material and information I’d been gathering on a variety of issues pertaining to the radical right and its increasing ideological traffic with mainstream conservatism.

Because *Orcinus* is generally intended as an actual journal — a place for me to work out writing ideas and to post original source material on news stories and events that interest me — much of what appeared on the blog was in many ways a rough draft. Moreover, since it is a public enterprise, I obtained much feedback during the course of writing it, some of which affected the content and nature of the essay and appears in the current text.

The version that appears before you is, of course, considerably edited and rewritten. There is a good deal of new material that did not appear anywhere on the blog. Whole sections have been rearranged and edited down, and the order of the argument is not exactly what appears on the blog. In this respect, it may be an instructive exercise for anyone interested in the writing process to compare the two; but in any event, this version is the definitive edition, since a number of errors and repetitions, as well as logical missteps, can be found in the rough draft, naturally.

While I establish early in the essay that this is an attempt at a “scholarly” discussion of fascism, I should however clarify that I am in fact merely a journalist, not a scholar, nor do I pretend to be one. The following essay is more in the way of a journalistic survey of the academic literature regarding fascism, and an attempt at a kind of lay analysis of the literature’s contents as it relates to the current political context. However, none of the ideas regarding the core of fascism, nor its many accompanying traits, are my own. “Rush” is mostly drawn from a body of scholarly work on fascism that’s broadly accepted as the important texts on the subject, and I’ll urge anyone interested in examining the matter seriously to read them. There’s a bibliography at the end.

The core of my interest in fascism is closely connected to my work in trying to understand the motivations of right-wing extremists, because my experience was that in most regards many of these folks were seemingly ordinary people. And I was furthermore intrigued by the historical phenomenon of the Holocaust, particularly the problem of how a nation full ordinary people could allow such a monstrosity to happen. I'm interested in fascism as a real-world phenomenon and not an abstract and distant concept.

As such, I'm hoping this essay if nothing else helps advance a wider understanding of fascism in the general public, because I've come to understand that this awareness is essential if we are to combat it.

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My fellow bloggers who contributed ideas and points that became part of the text, including John McKay at *archy*; James R. Maclean at *The Watch* [<http://mars-or-bust.blogspot.com>]; Richard Einhorn at *Tristero* [<http://tristero.blogspot.com/>]; Dave Johnson at *Seeing the Forest* [<http://seetheforest.blogspot.com>]; and Gil Smart at *Smart Remarks* [<http://smartremarks.blogspot.com/>]

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I: Projecting Fascism

Rush Limbaugh likes to call himself “the most dangerous man in America.” He offers this epithet tongue in cheek on his radio program, but the truth is, he isn’t kidding.

Over the decade and more that Limbaugh has ruled America’s talk-radio landscape, it has become inescapably clear that he is, if nothing else, certainly the most dangerous demagogue in America, maybe in history.

In terms of his breadth of reach as a political propagandist, he has no real parallel in American history. The closest might be the Rev. Charles E. Coughlin, known to his radio audience of the 1920s and ‘30s as “Father Coughlin.” Coughlin started out as an anti-communist firebrand, and by 1930, his weekly broadcasts reached an audience estimated at 45 million. (Limbaugh claims a weekly audience of 20 million.) He was a major supporter of Franklin Roosevelt in 1932, but turned on FDR shortly afterward and became a severe critic of the administration through most of its tenure.

Coughlin, who was attracted to the Jewish conspiracy theories promulgated by Henry Ford’s 1932 anti-Semitic tome, *The International Jew*, became increasingly extremist in his tone and delivery, accusing FDR of being a tool of the evil cabal that secretly ran the world. He was a significant spokesman for the “America First” movement, which advocated American non-involvement in the growing strife in Europe and Asia. And he was an inspiration for a whole generation of anti-Semites who went on to found such movements as Christian Identity and Posse Comitatus.

Limbaugh, in contrast, has always carefully eschewed conspiracy theories and anti-Semitism. Through most of the first decade of his radio career, his primary shtick has been to rail against the government and its supposed takeover of our daily lives. This anti-government propaganda has served one main purpose: To drive a wedge between middle- and lower-class workers and the one entity that has the capability to protect them from the ravages of wealthy class warriors and swarms of corporate wolves.

Limbaugh likes to bill himself as an “entertainer,” but he is more accurately understood as a propagandist. He shows no interest in actually furthering the public debate: opposing views are rarely if ever invited onto his show, and when they are they invariably receive the kind of ham-handed mistreatment that has become common on Limbaugh’s television counterpart, Bill O’Reilly’s Fox talk show.

And there can be little doubt as to the effectiveness of Limbaugh’s propaganda: In the intervening years, it has become an object of faith, particularly in rural America where Limbaugh’s broadcasts can often be heard multiple times throughout the day, that the government is in itself evil, a corrupt entity, something to be distrusted and feared, and certainly incapable of actually solving problems.

Now that the president he supported — George W. Bush — is running the show, however, Limbaugh’s anti-government bent has faded quickly and quietly to the background. After all, being anti-government seems practically anti-Republican these days, considering the GOP owns all three branches of government and virtually controls the Fourth Estate as well.

Mind you, in Limbaughland, there are still “evil” people in government — but they’re all *liberals*. Indeed, the demonization of all things liberal has always been a component of Limbaugh’s routine. But now it has become his focus. And it is in that shift, taking place in a context of rising extremism, that he has become openly divisive, and truly dangerous.

Limbaugh has in recent months been one of the national leaders in the right-wing campaign to characterize opposition to President Bush’s questionable policies as “anti-American,” a campaign that is

closely associated with broader conservative attacks on the underlying ideals of multiculturalism. But Limbaugh has taken the rhetoric another step by associating liberals with Nazis and other fascist regimes.

Consider, for instance, this essay, which appeared on Limbaugh's Web site on April 17, 2003:

Little Dick Promises Fascism If Elected

Congressman Dick Gephardt (D-MO), a Democratic presidential candidate, wants to repeal President Bush's income tax cuts under the guise of helping employers provide health insurance to workers. Yes, if employers agree to pay 60% to 65% of health care costs, Big Brother will steal some money out of those employees' paychecks and give it to the company. Dickonomics sees the government funding and controlling private businesses!

That's fascism — a term thrown around by people who don't have the intellectual chops to defend their ideas, but Gephardt's plan has features of that discredited ideology. Merriam-Webster: "**Fas • cism:** A political philosophy, movement, or regime that exalts nation and often race above the individual and that stands for *a centralized autocratic government headed by a dictatorial leader, severe economic and social regimentation, and forcible suppression of opposition.*" [Italics added.]

This is a classic case of Newspeak — diminishing the range of thought (it's telling that Limbaugh originally filed this under "Making the Complex Understandable") by nullifying the meaning of words. Democracy, according to Limbaugh, is fascism.

In fact, even as he ironically sneers at "people who don't have the intellectual chops to defend their ideas," he resorts to the notoriously inadequate dictionary definition of fascism in order to stand the meaning of the word on its head.

Observe how Limbaugh abuses the definition he gives here by only emphasizing a couple of its aspects (centralized government and economic regimentation — neither of which are actually applicable here, no more so than they would be to a hundred thousand other government programs) and utterly ignoring those aspects of it that clearly are not present in Gephardt's proposal (exalting nation and often race above the individual, forcible suppression of the opposition — traits which, in fact, are often present in Limbaugh's own diatribes).

Any serious consideration of Limbaugh's accusations of incipient fascism on the part of Gephardt will recognize that at the core of his argument is the suggestion that the current American bureaucracy itself, and indeed the bulk of Western civilization, particularly in its ability to tax and redistribute income, is "fascist" — a claim that any reasonable person can see as plainly false.

Moreover, Limbaugh's "intellectual chops" notwithstanding, the many shortcomings of the ridiculously vague Merriam-Webster definition become self-evident when contrasted with a scholarly approach, as we shall see. Utterly lacking from the definitions are the definitive aspects of fascism as described by serious political scholars: its populism, particularly its claim to represent the "true character" of the respective national identities among which it arises; and its mythic core of national rebirth — not to mention its corporatist component, its anti-liberalism, its glorification of violence and its contempt for weakness.

There is nothing in Gephardt's plan that even remotely suggests such behavior — it is in fact clearly far removed from genuine fascism, especially if it were to live up to Limbaugh's rather absurd claims that it would ultimately lead to a wholesale government takeover of corporations, which is in any event a communist and not a fascist behavior (fascism, as we will see, has a clear component of open corporatism).

Rather, if we were to look for these well-established earmarks of fascism, we would find them in Limbaugh's essay and numerous other of his outpourings. Limbaugh, indeed, constantly claims to be the voice of "real Americans" and regularly calls for a rebirth of the "American spirit" to be achieved by the destruction of all things liberal.

In any event, this is not the first time Limbaugh has misused the term. One of his most famous epithets is "feminazi," which juxtaposes liberal feminism with Nazism. He has referred at various times to "liberal compassion fascists," and on other occasions has explained to his national audience that Nazis in fact were "socialists." This is, of course, the kind of twisting of terminology that is the essence of Newspeak.

Limbaugh's rhetoric, in fact, is almost a model of how Newspeak works: It renders language meaningless by positing a meaning of a word that is in fact its near or precise opposite.

Conservatives, led by Limbaugh's blazing example, in the past decade have become masters of Newspeak, the Orwellian twisting of language that not only propagandizes but actually distorts reality. As a character in *1984* puts it:

"You believe that reality is something objective, external, existing in its own right...But I tell you, Winston, that reality is not external. Reality exists in the human mind, and nowhere else. Not in the individual mind, which can make mistakes, and in any case soon perishes; only in the mind of the Party, which is collective and immortal. Whatever the Party holds to be truth is truth. It is impossible to see reality except by looking through the eyes of the Party."

Another character explains its long-term purpose:

"Don't you see that the whole aim of Newspeak is to narrow the range of thought? In the end we shall make thoughtcrime literally impossible, because there will be no words in which to express it."

Newspeak permeates the political environment right now. The core agenda of the Bush administration, mouthed by a hundred talking heads on cable TV, is now neatly summed up by two of the core truisms of Newspeak:

"War is peace." [The purpose of the Iraq war, and the War on Terror generally, is to ensure peace and security at home, we are told.]

"Ignorance is strength." [Consider the way Bush's fumbled syntax and express anti-intellectualism is integral to his crafted image of homespun integrity.]

Newspeak serves two functions:

- It deflates the opposition by nullifying its defining issues, and throws the nominal logic of the public debate into disarray.
- It provides rhetorical and ontological cover for its speakers' own activities and agenda.

Consider, for instance, Limbaugh's evidently groundless claims that Gephardt's proposal calls for forcible oppression of the opposition. Contrast that with one of the more recent on-air outbursts by Limbaugh:

“Tim Robbins, who thinks he can say any thing at any time . . . I have a question: How is it that Tim Robbins is still walking free? How in the world is this guy still able to go to the National Press Club and say whatever he wants to say?”¹

By carefully observing the machinations of the current spate of Newspeak emanating from transmitters like Limbaugh, however, it's possible to get a clear view of the movement's underlying agenda. This is possible when the meaning of Limbaugh's obfuscations are placed in their psychological context, because they constitute a fairly clear case of projection.

Indeed, one of the lessons I've gleaned from carefully observing the behavior of the American right over the years is that the best indicator of its agenda can be found in *the very things of which it accuses the left*.

This is known as “projection.” One of the first to observe this propensity on the right was Richard Hofstadter, whose *The Paranoid Style in American Politics* remains an important contribution to the field of analyzing right-wing politics:

The enemy is clearly delineated: he is a perfect model of malice, a kind of amoral superman—sinister, ubiquitous, powerful, cruel, sensual, luxury-loving. Unlike the rest of us, the enemy is not caught in the toils of the vast mechanism of history, himself a victim of his past, his desires, his limitations. He wills, indeed he manufactures, the mechanism of history, or tries to deflect the normal course of history in an evil way. He makes crises, starts runs on banks, causes depressions, manufactures disasters, and then enjoys and profits from the misery he has produced. The paranoid's interpretation of history is distinctly personal: decisive events are not taken as part of the stream of history, but as the consequences of someone's will. Very often the enemy is held to possess some especially effective source of power: he controls the press; he has unlimited funds; he has a new secret for influencing the mind (brainwashing); he has a special technique for seduction (the Catholic confessional).

It is hard to resist the conclusion that this enemy is on many counts the projection of the self; both the ideal and the unacceptable aspects of the self are attributed to him. The enemy may be the cosmopolitan intellectual, but the paranoid will outdo him in the apparatus of scholarship, even of pedantry. Secret organizations set up to combat secret organizations give the same flattery. The Ku Klux Klan imitated Catholicism to the point of donning priestly vestments, developing an elaborate ritual and an equally elaborate hierarchy. The John Birch Society emulates Communist cells and quasi-secret operation through “front” groups, and preaches a ruthless prosecution of the ideological war along lines very similar to those it finds in the Communist enemy. Spokesmen of the various fundamentalist anti-Communist “crusades” openly express their admiration for the dedication and discipline the Communist cause calls forth.²

Self-proclaimed anti-authoritarians such as Limbaugh thus adopt the language and style of authoritarians themselves, and engage in Newspeak-laden propaganda whose sole purpose is to appeal to persons with totalist propensities. The anti-Gephardt essay is a classic example.

Remember how during the Florida fiasco the GOP and its many talking heads regularly accused Al Gore of attempting to steal the election through court fiat? Remember how such moral paragons as Newt

¹ See “Quick Takes: There he goes again; read it and weep, Rush,” *Chicago Sun-Times*, April 17, 2003.

² See Richard Hofstadter, “The Paranoid Style in American Politics,” *Harpers Magazine* November 1964, pp. 77-86. Available online at http://karwos.gso.uri.edu/JFK/conspiracy_theory/the_paranoid_mentality/The_paranoid_style.html.

Gingrich, Tom DeLay, Dan Burton and Bob Livingston (not to mention John Fund and Andrew Sullivan) roared in outrage over Bill Clinton's supposed amorality? The list could go on almost indefinitely.

When the right accuses liberals of "fascism," it almost always does so in an effort to obscure its own fascist proclivities — and it reminds the rest of us just whose footsoldiers are in reality merrily goosestepping down the national garden path.

II: Understanding Fascism

“Fascism” has come to be a nearly useless term in the past 30 years or so. In many respects, leftists are most responsible for this degradation; it became so common to lob the word at just about anyone conservative or corporatist in the 1960s and 1970s that its original meaning — describing a very distinct political style, if not quite philosophy — became utterly muddled, at least in the public lexicon.

A recent example of this was the report at a liberal Web site (Take Back the Media) that Rush Limbaugh had characterized antiwar protesters as “fascists and anti-American.” Indeed, it was this report that inspired me to write at *Orcinus* about Limbaugh and the real nature of fascism. But the report was wrong.

Here’s the actual quote:

“It’s beyond me how anybody can look at these protesters and call them anything other than what they are: Anti-American, Anti-Capitalist Marxists and Communists.”

Limbaugh was clearly smearing the antiwar dissenters, and that was outrageous enough. But he wasn’t calling them fascists — rather their apposite.

It is clear that liberals are every bit as prone to confusing fascism with totalitarianism as are conservatives. The difference, perhaps, is that the latter often do so deliberately, as a way of obscuring the genuine fascism that sits at their elbows.

As “fascism” has been bandied about freely, it has come loosely to represent the broader concept of totalitarianism, which of course encompasses communism as well. Right-wing propagandists like Limbaugh clearly hope to leap into that breach of popular understanding to exploit his claim that those on the left, like Dick Gephardt or “feminazis,” are “fascists.” It’s also clear as he denounces antiwar liberals as “anti-American” that he is depicting them as enemy sympathizers with the forces of “Islamofascism.”

Most Americans have a perfectly clear idea what comprises communism (though in many cases it is fairly distorted), largely because it is an ideology based on a body of texts and revolving around specific ideas. In contrast, hardly anyone can explain what comprises fascism, mainly because all we really know about it is the regimes that arose under its banner. There are no extant texts, only a litany of dictatorships and atrocities. When we think of fascism, we think of Hitler and perhaps Mussolini, without even understanding what forces they rode to power.

At the same time, it’s important that Americans of all stripes — liberal or conservative — have clear view of what fascism is, because it is not an extinct political force, and it is above all else innately anti-democratic and anti-American in spirit. This essay is in some regards a plea, particularly to those on the left who have used the term willy nilly to score shrill partisan political points, to cease abusing the word “fascism,” learn what it means, and apply it only when it’s appropriate. (I have absolutely no hopes of persuading those on the right, particularly since they comprise a large part of the problem.)

It has always seemed to me that Americans view Nazism almost as some kind of strange European virus that afflicted only the Germans, and only for a brief period — this by way of rationalizing that It Couldn’t Happen Here. But it also seems clear to me this is wrong; that the Germans were ordinary, ostensibly civilized people like the rest of us. And that what went wrong in them could someday go wrong in us too.

I described some of this in the Afterword of *In God’s Country: The Patriot Movement and the Pacific Northwest*, reminiscing about a professor’s midafternoon lecture:

When he was a young man, he told us, he served in the U.S. Army as part of the occupation forces in Germany after World War II. He was put to work gathering information for the military tribunal preparing to prosecute Nazi war criminals at Nuremberg. His job was to spend time in the villages adjacent to one concentration camp and talk to the residents about what they knew.

The villagers, he said, knew about the camp, and watched daily as thousands of prisoners would arrive by rail car, herded like cattle into the camps. And they knew that none ever left, even though the camp never could have held the vast numbers of prisoners who were brought in. They also knew that the smokestack of the camp's crematorium belched a near-steady stream of smoke and ash. Yet the villagers chose to remain ignorant about what went on inside the camp. No one inquired, because no one wanted to know.

"But every day," he said, "these people, in their neat Germanic way, would get out their feather dusters and go outside. And, never thinking about what it meant, they would sweep off the layer of ash that would settle on their windowsills overnight. Then they would return to their neat, clean lives and pretend not to notice what was happening next door.

"When the camps were liberated and their contents were revealed, they all expressed surprise and horror at what had gone on inside," he said. "But they all had ash in their feather dusters."³

That story neatly compresses the way fascism works: in a vacuum of denial.

The gradual mechanism by which this phenomenon gradually crept over Germany was vividly described in *They Thought They Were Free*, a book by Milton Mayer about "how and why 'decent men' became Nazis":

What happened here was the gradual habituation of the people, little by little, to being governed by surprise; to receiving decisions deliberated in secret; to believing that the situation was so complicated that the government had to act on information which the people could not understand, or so dangerous that, even if the people could understand it, it could not be released because of national security. And their sense of identification with Hitler, their trust in him, made it easier to widen this gap and reassured those who would otherwise have worried about it.⁴

So if it could happen to the Germans, it could happen to us, particularly to the extent that we remain in denial about it. But how are we to tell if it is happening, since it seems to happen so gradually that the populace scarcely recognizes it?

It's worthwhile to begin by examining the historical record, because there, at least, we can get a reasonably clear picture of just what fascism really was and is.

In a historical sense, fascism is maybe best understood as an extreme reaction against socialism and communism; in its early years it was essentially defined as "extremist anti-communism." There were very few attempts to systematize the ideology of fascism, though some existed (see, e.g. Giovanni Gentile's

³ See the author's *In God's Country: The Patriot Movement and the Pacific Northwest* (Pullman: Washington State University Press, 1999), pp. 319-320.

⁴ Milton Sanford Mayer, *They Thought They Were Free: The Germans, 1933-35* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1966).

1932 text, *The Philosophical Basis of Fascism*). But its spirit was better expressed in an inchoate rant like *Mein Kampf*.

It was explicitly anti-democratic, anti-liberal, and corporatist, and it endorsed violence as a chief means to its ends. It was also, obviously, authoritarian, but claiming that it was oriented toward “socialism” is just crudely ahistorical, if not outrageously revisionist. Socialists, let’s not forget, were among the first people imprisoned and “liquidated” by the Nazi regime.

But fascism is more than just a reaction. It is a political force with a distinct set of characteristics.

One of the more popular recent essays on the subject was written by Umberto Eco, who is a cultural scholar, of course, though not what I would consider a genuine expert on fascism. Nonetheless, his piece, “Eternal Fascism: Fourteen Ways of Looking at a Blackshirt” is on the right track, and as good a place as any to start.⁵

Eco identifies a series of traits that sum up the essence of what he calls “Ur-Fascism,” that is, the beast that has always been with us and will always be. Now, although this piece was written in 1995, let’s see how many we can recognize today:

The cult of tradition.

[Who are the folks who beat their breasts (and ours) incessantly over the primacy of ‘traditional Judaeo-Christian culture?’]

The rejection of modernism.

[Think ‘feminazis.’ Think attacks on the NEA. Think attacks on multiculturalism.]

Irrationalism.

[G.W. Bush’s anti-intellectualism and illogical, skewed speech are positively celebrated by the right.]

Action for action’s sake.

[Exactly why are we making war on Iraq, anyway?]

Disagreement is treason.

[“Liberals are anti-American.”]

Fear of difference.

[Again, think of the attacks on multiculturalism, as well as the attacks on Muslims and Islam generically.]

Appeal to a frustrated middle class.

[See the Red states — you know, the ones who voted for Bush. The ones where Limbaugh is on the air incessantly.]

Obsession with a plot.

[Limbaugh and conservatives have been obsessed with various “plots” by liberals for the past decade — see, e.g., the Clinton impeachment, and current claims of a “fifth column” among liberals.]

⁵ First published in the *New York Review of Books*, June 22, 1995, then reproduced in *Utne Reader*, November-December 1995, and widely available on the Web as well at http://www.themodernword.com/eco/eco_blackshirt.html.

Humiliated by the ostentatious wealth and force of their enemies.
[Think Blue states vs. Red states.]

Pacifism is trafficking with the enemy.
[The very essence of the attacks led by talk-radio hosts against antiwar protesters.]

Life is eternal warfare.
[This perfectly describes the War on Terror.]

Contempt for the weak.
[Think both of conservatives' characterization of liberals as "weak spined," as well as the verbal attacks on Muslims and immigrants from the likes of Limbaugh and Michael Savage.]

Against 'rotten' parliamentary governments.
[Remember all those rants against 'big government'?]

Ur-Fascism speaks Newspeak.
[Perhaps the most noticeable trait in the current environment. The destruction of meaning by creating "empty phrases" combining opposite ideas has, as we have seen, become a prominent strategy deployed by the conservative movement.]

Now, I know a quick reading — the kind Limbaugh prefers, prone to miscomprehension and mischaracterization — might suggest otherwise, but this demonstration isn't really an attempt to argue that Limbaugh is a fascist.

It *is* uncanny just how closely he and his conservative-movement cohorts fit the description provided by Umberto Eco's 14 points. But therein lies the problem: Eco's essay is useful, but not authoritative by any means, in no small part because the study of fascism isn't really within his field of academic expertise. And it has some flaws, not the least of which is that some (not all) of the traits he describes as endemic to fascism could be ascribed to other totalitarian philosophies as well, notably communism. The truth is, a deep conservative might fit Eco's description and still he might not be a fascist.

What this exercise reveals is not so much that Limbaugh is a fascist, but rather, that he is making a career out of transmitting the themes and memes upon which fascism feeds to a mainstream conservative audience. After all, in its developmental phase, fascism in many ways is comprised of relatively mundane ideas and behaviors, which isolated seem unremarkable enough, but which in combination are both potent and lethal.

In turning to history for guidance, it's important not to confuse fascism as a movement with fascism as a power. If we think that we can only identify the rise of fascism by the arrival of its mature form — the goosestepping brownshirts, the full-fledged use of violence and intimidation tactics, the mass rallies — then it will be far too late. Fascism sprang up in fact as a much more atomized phenomenon, arising at first mostly in rural areas and then spreading to the cities; and if we are to look at those origins, then it's clear that similar movements can already be seen to exist in America.

Fascism as we will see springs from very ancient sources; its antecedents have appeared throughout history. It adapts to changing conditions. As the French specialist on the extreme right Pierre-André Taguieff puts it:

Neither "fascism" nor "racism" will do us the favour of returning in such a way that we can recognise them easily. If vigilance was only a game of recognising something already well-known, then it would only be a question of remembering. Vigilance would be reduced to a social game using reminiscence and identification by recognition, a

consoling illusion of an immobile history peopled with events which accord with our expectations or our fears.⁶

What's necessary for assessing the genuine potential for fascism in America is identifying the core components of fascism itself: the ancient wellsprings from which it came and which remain with us today. Then we need to see how we are doing in keeping those forces in check.

⁶ Cited in Roger Griffin, "Paper tiger or Cheshire cat? A spotter's guide to fascism in the post-fascist era," *Searchlight*, November 2002.

III: The Core of Fascism

One of the problems with the easy bandying of the term “fascist” nowadays is that, by being loosely attached to figures who are only conservative — including people like Rush Limbaugh and George W. Bush — it obscures the actual mechanism by which genuine fascism manifests itself. It also lends itself to a hysterical assessment when clarity and focus are what’s really needed.

Let’s take a hard look today at the actual nature of fascism, by way of understanding not just who really fits the description in today’s world, but how much danger to the nation in the post-9/11 environment they actually represent.

As I mentioned, a definition is much easier in the case of communism than it is for fascism. My friend and fellow blogger John McKay points out that the work of defining fascism has spun its own cottage industry of competing models:

Defining Fascism is a very slippery business. I spent most of a graduate seminar a decade ago studying and dissecting this question. There is no agreed upon and authoritative one-sentence definition for Fascism. In fact, fighting over one is a still-healthy cottage industry that provides employment for plenty of historians and political scientists. My own take on it is to emphasize two points that lead to this slipperiness.

The first is a point you already made: Fascism is mostly reactive in nature. It is more defined by what it is against than by what it is. First and foremost, it is anti-liberal. This is not necessarily the same thing as being conservative. We too often define political positions as a scale between two polar opposites, when reality is broader and sloppier than that. So, while Fascism is a thing of the right, it is not just extremism beyond normal conservatism. Next, it is anti-pluralist, which usually means nationalist, racist, and/or unilateralist. Fascists don’t like to share.

Second, it is not just one thing. There have been many forms of Fascism. The popular image of Fascism is simply Nazism. Some scholars debate whether Nazism is one variety of Fascism or a separate (though related) phenomenon. I lean toward the variety school. During its heyday in the thirties, there were scores of Fascist parties in over a dozen countries. These evolved from earlier political movements and some survive in successor movements. The use of pronouns like proto-, post-, and neo- helps a little in sorting them out, but only a little. One reason for its persistence is its mutability. Most political societies can produce a fascism.

The first attempts to study fascism were largely conducted from a Marxist point of view, which predictably explained it primarily as a reaction against the “communist revolution.” In many ways, that’s what it was — though of course, it was also a great deal more. Many of these early studies, not surprisingly, reduced fascism to an aggressive form of capitalism. In the years after World War II, when fascism had largely been eradicated as a form of governance, studies of it expanded the definition considerably and created a far more realistic, nuanced and accurate understanding of it.

The bulk of these studies essentially defined it descriptively — that is, as a series of various traits that were found to be pervasive among fascist systems. (This was the approach Umberto Eco attempted in his “Ur-Fascism” essay.) The best-known and -regarded example of this approach is Stanley Payne’s work, which offers a “typological definition” of fascism:

A. The Fascist Negations:

- Antiliberalism
- Anticommunism
- Anticonservatism (though with the understanding that fascist groups were willing to undertake temporary alliances with groups from any other sector, most commonly with the right)

B. Ideology and Goals:

- Creation of a new nationalist authoritarian state based not merely on traditional principles or models
- Organization of some new kind of regulated, multiclass, integrated national economic structure, whether called national corporatist, national socialist, or national syndicalist
- The goal of empire or a radical change in the nation's relationship with other powers
- Specific espousal of an idealist, voluntarist creed, normally involving the attempt to realize a new form of modern, self-determined, secular culture

C. Style and Organization:

- Emphasis on esthetic structure of meetings, symbols, and political choreography, stressing romantic and mystical aspects
- Attempted mass mobilization with militarization of political relationships and style and with the goal of a mass party militia
- Positive evaluation and use of, or willingness to use, violence
- Extreme stress on the masculine principle and male dominance, while espousing the organic view of society
- Exaltation of youth above other phases of life, emphasizing the conflict of generations, at least in effecting the initial political transformation
- Specific tendency toward an authoritarian, charismatic, personal style of command, whether or not the command is to some degree initially elective⁷

Payne's approach is useful, in the same way that Eco's is — it contains important descriptive information that helps us get a sense of the multifaceted phenomenon that fascism in fact is. (Payne's typology is also a good deal more systematic and logically coherent than Eco's.) But these approaches share a similar flaw — that is, a number of the traits described in these systems also can clearly describe not only communism, which is by its nature apposite to fascism, as well as other political ideologies. In that sense, it's clear these traits tend to be endemic to totalitarianism broadly — they're going to be woven into what is fascist, but they won't be unique to it.

⁷Stanley Payne, *Fascism: Comparison and Definition* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1980), p. 7.

Much wrangling has ensued (Payne's *Fascism: Comparison and Definition* was published in 1980). The long and short of it is that the consensus (and debate) since the early 1990s has tended to revolve around the work of Oxford professor Roger Griffin, who lectures on the History of Ideas at the school. His 1991 text, *The Nature of Fascism*, is considered by many to be the definitive work on the subject.

Griffin has essentially managed to boil fascism down to a basic core he calls **palingenetic ultranationalist populism**. (*Palingenesis* is the concept of mythic rebirth from the ashes, embodied by the Phoenix.) One of Griffin's essays on fascism opens with this useful definition:

Fascism: modern political ideology that seeks to regenerate the social, economic, and cultural life of a country by basing it on a heightened sense of national belonging or ethnic identity. Fascism rejects liberal ideas such as freedom and individual rights, and often presses for the destruction of elections, legislatures, and other elements of democracy. Despite the idealistic goals of fascism, attempts to build fascist societies have led to wars and persecutions that caused millions of deaths. As a result, fascism is strongly associated with right-wing fanaticism, racism, totalitarianism, and violence.⁸

Griffin, of course, is an academic, but once you wade through the definitions and link it all together, it makes a great deal of sense, and actually provides some sharp definition to an otherwise murky phenomenon. In general, I've found all these studies, while often competing in nature, to be useful each unto themselves. (Another text I've obtained, an English translation of Harald Ofstad's *Our Contempt for Weakness: Nazi Norms and Values — and Our Own*, which is not generally available, has also proved very insightful and helpful, but it's hard to recommend since few readers can get it.)

It's clear that Griffin's work gives the most concrete handle on fascism as a phenomenon, especially since he manages to drill down to its animating core. For the most part, other approaches to fascism mostly offer useful descriptive traits that clearly complement Griffin's central concept. What makes Griffin's argument so compelling is that the tripartite components of Griffin's core — palingenesis, ultranationalism and populism — are nearly unique to fascism and appear mostly secondarily if at all among the other kinds of totalitarianism.

What is particularly useful about Griffin's model is that it does not, like Payne's and Eco's, necessarily draw on the manifestation of a fully matured fascism for its examples. Thus, using these older analyses, we're inclined to see fascism *only as it replicates these older and mature forms*. As Pierre-André Taguieff suggests, fascism will not return in a form we can readily recognize.

Griffin recently assessed the potential for a resurgence of fascism in an article in the British antifascist magazine *Searchlight* titled "Paper tiger or Cheshire cat? A spotter's guide to fascism in the post-fascist era." He points out that if we look for fascism using the Payne or Marxist models, we'll mostly be looking for it as a mature phenomenon:

Certainly any definition that stresses the style, policies or organisation of interwar fascist regimes — the charismatic leader, the uniformed choreography of "aesthetic politics", the territorial expansionism or Kafkaesque agencies of ministerial propaganda and state terror — makes contemporary fascism dwindle to practically microscopic insignificance.

But ...

⁸ Roger Griffin, *Fascism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), a "documentary reader of primary sources," available online at <http://www.brookes.ac.uk/schools/humanities/staff/FAECRG2.htm>.

If fascism is defined in terms of a core ideology of ultra-nationalism that aspires to bring about the renewal of a nation's entire political culture, then the picture changes. The features so firmly associated with it in the popular historical imagination cease to be definitional. Instead they can be seen as external and time-bound manifestations of the central ideological driving force that is its only permanent feature: the war against the decadence of society and the struggle for national rebirth.⁹

If we think of fascism in these terms, a much clearer picture of it emerges. For one thing, we can recognize its antecedents throughout history, while also perceiving how the forces of industrialization and modernization reshape these ancient impulses into the thoroughly modern creature that fascism is. More to the point, we get a much clearer picture of the actual presence of latent fascist forces at work around the world.

Griffin's definition tends to confirm the characterization of Islamic fundamentalists as "Islamofascists," but makes clear that there is one important difference: while fascism has typically sought to achieve "national rebirth" by fusing a mythologized notion of "traditional values" with modernist idealism, Islamists are irrevocably antimodern in their worldview. (Of course, this could be, as it is among far-right Christian Identity extremists, more a pose to recruit and discipline the faithful than a core principle, and thus it may be discarded when no longer convenient.)

It also confirms that such forces are at work in the United States — though not, importantly enough, in the form of such mainstream GOP figures as Rush Limbaugh and George W. Bush. We may hear Republican luminaries from time to time refer to the theme of national rebirth, but not frequently enough that it's become a major theme (yet); and their nationalistic and populist tendencies are well-known, but both are mitigated to a great extent by their steadfast refusal to partake of the conspiracy theories and anti-Semitism and other forms of extremist thinking common to populists.

However, as the little Eco exercise demonstrated, there are enough similarities between these figures and the behavior of historical fascists to throw up a warning sign. And as we'll see, they do indeed play an important role in the potential for a resurgence of genuine fascism in America.

⁹ Roger Griffin, "Paper tiger or Cheshire cat? A spotter's guide to fascism in the post-fascist era," *Searchlight*, November 2002.

IV: Tracking Fascism

Although Roger Griffin's definitive work brought the scholarly debate over a generic definition of fascism to a new level, the debate did not end there. It gained fresh life, in fact, and has produced some perhaps even more helpful insights.

One of these came from Robert O. Paxton, who is Mellon Professor of Social Sciences Emeritus at Columbia University. His essay "The Five Stages of Fascism," which appeared in the March 1998 edition of *The Journal of Modern History*, proposed an even more helpful model for understanding the phenomenon.

This was brought to my attention by *Orcinus* reader Christopher Skinner, who noted:

Paxton's approach allows a certain degree of reconciliation among thinkers, particularly between those who see fascism as an ideology and those who see it as a *mélange* of uneasy alliances. Paxton admits that he was, until very recently, a firm believer in the notion that fascism was not an ideology. But by suggesting a dynamic model that "begins at the beginning," Paxton reminds us that fascism is not unlike an elementary particle to which we must apply Heisenberg's Uncertainty Principle. The more thoroughly we study a particular fascist movement at a given moment, the less likely we are to be able to judge the arc of its overall progress, and the more we study the ultimate impact of a movement, the less likely we are to examine its particulars. Many historians, for example, who study the "arc" of movements, have treated Nazi Germany as the touchstone for a "true" fascism. All other movements are seen as not fully "worked out," and therefore, not fully fascist.

While Griffin's insistence that fascism is an ideology is certainly helpful in ascertaining the core impulses that drive fascism, it is somewhat problematic in that it is a very static analysis. Yet history demonstrates that fascism itself, as Mr. Skinner suggests, has behaved more like a mutagen, shifting shapes constantly while maintaining certain core animating impulses. Paxton's essay, however, comprises an important contribution to the literature, and offers a very useful model for moving beyond the swamp of merely defining fascism toward a practical understanding.

Paxton, as Mr. Skinner noted, offers a sort of middle pathway, identifying a central organizing principle — "each national variant of fascism draws its legitimacy ... not from some universal scripture but from what it considers the most authentic elements of its own community identity" — that is closely akin to Griffin's "palingenetic populist ultranationalism", while at the same time constructing a five-step arc of motion for fascism that recognizes its essentially mutative nature.

Significantly, Paxton agrees with both Griffin and Pierre-André Taguieff in their suggestion that fascism is unlikely to return in an easily recognizable form:

... [O]ne can not identify a fascist regime by its plumage. George Orwell understood at once that fascism is not defined by its clothing. If, some day, an authentic fascism were to succeed in England, Orwell wrote as early as 1936, it would be more soberly clad than in Germany. The exotic black shirts of Sir Oswald Mosley are one explanation for the failure of the principal fascist movement in England, the British Union of Fascists. What if they had worn bowler hats and carried well-furled umbrellas. The adolescent skinheads who flaunt the swastika today in parts of Europe seem so alien and marginal that they constitute a law-and-order problem (serious though that may be) rather than a recurrence of authentic mass-based fascism, astutely decked out in the patriotic emblems of their

own countries. Focusing on external symbols, which are subject to superficial imitation, adds to confusion about what may legitimately be considered fascist.

...[E]ach national variant of fascism draws its legitimacy, as we shall see, not from some universal scripture but from what it considers the most authentic elements of its own community identity. Religion, for example, would certainly play a much larger role in an authentic fascism in the United States than in the first European fascisms, which were pagan for contingent historical reasons.

... The great “isms” of nineteenth-century Europe — conservatism, liberalism, socialism — were associated with notable rule, characterized by deference to educated leaders, learned debates, and (even in some forms of socialism) limited popular authority. Fascism is a political practice appropriate to the mass politics of the twentieth century. Moreover, it bears a different relationship to thought than do the nineteenth-century “isms.” Unlike them, fascism does not rest on formal philosophical positions with claims to universal validity. There was no “Fascist Manifesto,” no founding fascist thinker. Although one can deduce from fascist language implicit Social Darwinist assumptions about human nature, the need for community and authority in human society, and the destiny of nations in history, fascism does not base its claims to validity on their truth. Fascists despise thought and reason, abandon intellectual positions casually, and cast aside many intellectual fellow-travelers. They subordinate thought and reason not to faith, as did the traditional Right, but to the promptings of the blood and the historic destiny of the group. *Their only moral yardstick is the prowess of the race, of the nation, of the community. They claim legitimacy by no universal standard except a Darwinian triumph of the strongest community.* [Emphasis mine]¹⁰

We’ve already seen that a whole panoply of fascist memes are at play in the current political environment, appearing throughout mainstream conservative rhetoric (Rush Limbaugh’s particularly) and manifested in the Bush administration’s agenda. The last two sentences of Paxton’s description ring a particular bell in the current environment.

Nothing could better describe the Bush administration’s approach to governance, particularly to waging war, than as one in which “thought and reason are subordinated to faith.” And the Bush Doctrine, boiled down, ultimately bases its morality on a belief in the superiority of American values, and argues for waging war essentially as a “triumph of the strongest community.”

This is not to argue that the Bush Doctrine is fascist *per se* — but rather, that it has enough elements in it to appeal strongly to the right-wing extremists who are increasingly becoming part of the mainstream GOP fold. It plays out in such manifestations as its utter disregard — indeed, clear contempt — for the United Nations and multilateralism generally, a stance that resonates deeply with the John Bircher crowd. And an environment in which extremist memes are encouraged by mainstream conservatives suggests that an alliance is taking shape between the sectors.

Likewise, the Bush administration and its supporters, particularly those in the “transmitter” crowd — Rush Limbaugh and talk radio, Fox News, the Free Republic — have begun deploying the very same “mobilizing passions” in recent weeks in countering antiwar protesters that Paxton identifies as comprising the animating forces behind fascism. Again, these kinds of appeal clearly resonate with the proto-fascist Patriot element that have been increasingly finding common cause with the Bush regime. As Paxton describes it:

¹⁰ Robert O. Paxton, “The Five Stages of Fascism,” *The Journal of Modern History* 70 (March 1998): pp. 3-5.

... Feelings propel fascism more than thought does. We might call them mobilizing passions, since they function in fascist movements to recruit followers in fascist movements to recruit followers and in fascist regimes to “weld” the fascist “tribe” to its leader. The following mobilizing passions are present in fascisms, though they may sometimes be articulated only implicitly:

1. The primacy of the group, toward which one has duties superior to every right, whether universal or individual.
2. The belief that one’s group is a victim, a sentiment which justifies any action against the group’s enemies, internal as well as external.
3. Dread of the group’s decadence under the corrosive effect of individualistic and cosmopolitan liberalism.
4. Closer integration of the community within a brotherhood (*fascio*) whose unity and purity are forged by common conviction, if possible, or by exclusionary violence if necessary.
5. An enhanced sense of identity and belonging, in which the grandeur of the group reinforces individual self-esteem.
6. Authority of natural leaders (always male) throughout society, culminating in a national chieftain who alone is capable of incarnating the group’s destiny.
7. The beauty of violence and of will, when they are devoted to the group’s success in a Darwinian struggle.¹¹

Going down Paxton’s list, it is fairly easy to identify these “passions” at play today, particularly in the debate over the Iraq war and the attacks on dissenters that occurred during it.

1. **[Group primacy]:** See, again, the Bush Doctrine. An extension of this sentiment is at play among those jingoists who argue that Americans may need to sacrifice some of their civil rights — say, free speech — during wartime.
2. **[Victim mentality]:** This meme is clearly present in all the appeals to the victims of Sept. 11 as justifications for the war. It is present at nearly all levels of the debate: from the White House, from the media, even from the jingoist entertainment industry (see, e.g., the lyric of Darryl Worley’s extraordinarily popular country-western hit, “Have You Forgotten?": “Some say this country’s just out looking for a fight / Well after 9/11 man I’d have to say that’s right.”).
3. **[Dread of liberal decadence]:** This meme has been stock in trade of the talk-radio crowd since at least 1994 — at one time it focused primarily on the person of Bill Clinton — and has reached ferocious levels during the runup to the war and after it, during which antiwar leftists have regularly and remorselessly been accused of treason.
4. **[Group integration]** and 5. **[Group identity as personal validation]** are, of course, among the primary purposes of the campaign to demonize liberals — to simultaneously build a cohesive brotherhood of like-minded “conservatives” who might

¹¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 6-7.

not agree on the details but are united in their loathing of all things liberal. It plays out in such localized manifestations as the KVI Radio 570th On-Air Cavalry, which has made a habit of deliberately invading antiwar protests with the express purpose of disrupting them and breaking them up. Sometimes, as they did recently in Bellingham, this is done with caravans of big trucks blaring their horns; and they are also accompanied by threatening rhetoric and acts of physical intimidation. They haven't yet bonded in violence — someone did phone in a threat to sniper-shoot protesters — but they are rapidly headed in that direction.

6. **[Authority of leaders]:** This needs hardly any further explanation, except to note that George W. Bush is actually surprisingly uncharismatic for someone who inspires as much rabid loyalty as he does. But then, that is part of the purpose of Bush's PR campaign stressing that he receives "divine guidance" — it assures in his supporters' mind the notion that he is carrying out God's destiny for the nation, and for the conservative movement in particular.
7. **[An aesthetic of violence]:** One again needs only turn to the voluminous jingoes of Fox News or the jubilant warbloggers to find abundant examples of celebrations of the virtues — many of them evidently aesthetic — of the evidently just-completed war.

Again, the purpose of the above exercise is not to demonstrate that mainstream conservatism is necessarily becoming fascist (though that is a possibility), but rather to demonstrate how it is becoming hospitable to fascist motifs, especially as it resorts to strong-arm tactics from its footsoldiers to intimidate the political opposition. This underscores the real danger, which is the increasing empowerment of the extremist bloc, particularly as it has been blending, as we shall see, into the mainstream GOP. The increasing nastiness of the debate over Bush's war-making program seems to be fertile territory for this trend.

More than anything, the exercise underscores just to what extent fascism itself is comprised of things that are very familiar to us, and in themselves seem relatively innocuous, perhaps even benign. More to the point, this very familiarity is what makes it possible. When they coalesce in such a crucible as wartime or a civil crisis, they become something beyond that simple reckoning.

Can fascism still happen in America? Paxton leaves little doubt that the answer to this must be affirmative:

... Fascism can appear wherever democracy is sufficiently implanted to have aroused disillusion. That suggests its spatial and temporal limits: no authentic fascism before the emergence of a massively enfranchised and politically active citizenry. In order to give birth to fascism, a society must have known political liberty — for better or for worse.¹²

Indeed, Paxton identifies perhaps the origins of fascism in America:

... [I]t is further back in American history that one comes upon the earliest phenomenon that seems functionally related to fascism: the Ku Klux Klan. Just after the Civil War, some Confederate officers, fearing the vote given to African Americans by the Radical Reconstructionists in 1867, set up a militia to restore an overturned social order. The Klan constituted an alternate civic authority, parallel to the legal state, which, in its founders' eyes, no longer defended their community's legitimate interests. In its adoption of a uniform (white robe and hood), as well as its techniques of intimidation and its

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 11.

conviction that violence was justified in the cause of the group's destiny, the first version of the Klan in the defeated American South was a remarkable preview of the way fascist movements were to function in interwar Europe.¹³

There is strong historical corroboration for Paxton's thesis here. Adolph Hitler reportedly was a great admirer of the Ku Klux Klan, particularly its post-1915 edition, which was obviously modeled on the original as well, in its treatment of the races and glorification of the white race. Indeed, Hitler would mock American critics of his program against the Jews by pointing to this nation's own history of lynching and Klan activities.

The latter Klan was even more pronouncedly fascist in its character than the original, particularly in its claim to represent the true national character: "100 percent Americanism" was the organization's chief catchphrase. Its origins — its first members were the mob that lynched Leo Frank — were openly violent. Though this manifestation of the Klan — which spread to every state, counted membership of up to 4 million, and elected seven governors, three U.S. senators, half the 1924 Indiana state legislature, and at one point controlled the political levers in Oregon as well — petered out by the early 1930s, its spirit remained alive in such clearly proto-fascist organizations of the 1930s as the Silver Shirts of William Dudley Pelley.¹⁴

It is this lineage, in fact, that helps us identify the Patriot/militia movement as proto-fascist in nature. Much of the political agenda, as well as the legal/political theories, espoused by the Patriots actually originated with the far-right Posse Comitatus, whose own originators themselves were former participants in both the 1920s Klan and Pelley's Silver Shirts. (The definitive text on this is Daniel Levitas' excellent *The Terrorist Next Door: The Militia Movement and the Radical Right*.)

It is worth remembering that before World War II, there were in fact active fascists openly at work in America, and they were not all German-American Bund members. Indeed, what's striking about groups like the Silver Shirts is just how ordinary-American their character seemed. (The similarities to the Patriot movement of the 1990s is also striking.) Pelley himself was a bit of an eccentric and slightly loopy, but the rank and file of his followers were often the same "100 percent Americanists" who had filled the ranks of the Klan a decade previously. Of course, Rush Limbaugh's predecessor, Father Coughlin, was also a major figure in fascist America as well.

But fascism has always previously failed in America, and Paxton's analysis points with some precision to exactly why. Much of this has to do with the fact that fascism is an essentially mutative impulse for the acquisition of power — it abandons positions as fresh opportunities for power present themselves. This is particularly true as it moves from its ideological roots into the halls of government. In the end, the resulting political power is often, as Griffin puts it, a "travesty" of its original ideology. Paxton describes it thus:

In power, what seems to count is less the faithful application of the party's initial ideology than the integrating function that espousing one official ideology performs, to the exclusion of any ideas deemed alien or divisive.

Paxton identifies five stages in fascism's arc of flight:

- The initial creation of fascist movements

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 12.

¹⁴ See David A. Horowitz, ed., *Inside the Klavern: The Secret History of a Ku Klux Klan of the 1920s* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1999), p.4.

- Their rooting as parties in a political system
- The acquisition of power
- The exercise of power
- Radicalization or entropy¹⁵

In the United States, as in France and elsewhere, fascism typically failed in the second stage, because it failed to become a cohesive political entity, one capable of acquiring power (though as I just noted, there was even some danger of this in the 1920s as the Klan in fact obtained some short-lived political power):

The second stage — rooting, in which a fascist movement becomes a party capable of acting decisively on the political scene — happens relatively rarely. At this stage, comparison becomes rewarding: one can contrast successes with failures. Success depends on certain relatively precise conditions: the weakness of the liberal state, whose inadequacies seem to condemn the nation to disorder, decline, or humiliation; and political deadlock because the Right, the heir to power but unable to continue to wield it alone, refuses to accept a growing Left as a legitimate governing partner. Some fascist leaders, in their turn, are willing to reposition their movements in alliances with these frightened conservatives, a step that pays handsomely in political power, at the cost of disaffection among some of the early antibourgeois militants.¹⁶

In the 1930s, the ascendant liberalism of FDR effectively squeezed the life out of the nascent fascist elements in the U.S. This was particularly true because FDR openly shared power with the Right, appointing noted Republicans to his Cabinet and maintaining a firm coalition with arch-conservative Southern Democrats. The mainstream right thus had no incentive to form a power-sharing coalition with fascism. At the same time, liberalism gained a significant power base in rural America through the many programs of the New Deal aimed at bolstering the agricultural sector. This too may have been a critical factor in fascism's failure.

Significantly, Paxton points out that fascism in Europe took root in a neglected agricultural sector — something that did not happen in the United States in the 1930s. Indeed, it gained its second-stage power in the crucible of organized thuggery against liberals:

...[I]t was in the countryside that German Nazism and Italian Fascism first succeeded in becoming the representatives of an important social and economic interest. The comparison between the success of rural fascism in German and Italy and its relative failure in France seems to me a fruitful one.

... All three of these countries experience massive strikes of agricultural workers: east-Elbian Germany during the postwar crisis in 1919-23; the Po Valley and Apulia in Italy in 1920-21; and the big farms of northern France and the Paris Basin during the two summers of the Popular Front; in 1936 and 1937. The German strikes were broken by vigilantes, armed and abetted by the local army authorities, in cases in which the regular authorities were too conciliatory to suit the landowners. The Italian ones were broken by Mussolini's famous blackshirted squadristi, whose vigilantism filled the void left by the apparent inability of the liberal Italian state to enforce order. It was precisely in this direct

¹⁵ Paxton, *op. cit.*, p. 11.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 12-13

action against farm-worker unions that second-stage fascism was born in Italy, and even launched on the path to power, to the dismay of the first Fascists, intellectual dissidents from national syndicalism.¹⁷

Paxton compares this to France, where fascism likewise failed:

... It was the gendarmerie, even with Leon Blum in power, who put down the agricultural strikes in France. The French landowners did not need the chemises vertes. The authority of the state and the power of the conservative farmers' organizations left hardly any space in the French countryside for the rooting of fascist power.¹⁸

Fascism as a political force suffered from the same sort of bad timing in the United States when it arose in the 1920s — conservatives were in power and had no need of an alliance with fascism, and there was no great social crisis. When it re-arose in the 1930s, the ascendance of power-sharing liberalism that was as popular in rural areas as in urban, again left fascism little breathing room.

And in the 1990s, when proto-fascism re-emerged as popular movement in the form of the Patriots, conservatives once again enjoyed a considerable power base, having control of the Congress, and little incentive to share power. Moreover, the economy was booming — except in rural America.

Unsurprisingly, that is where the Patriots built their popular base. Importantly, much of that base-building revolved around a motif that created a significant area of common interest with mainstream conservatives: hatred of Bill Clinton. And it was there that the alliance between right-wing extremists and mainstream conservatives first took root and flowered.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 13-14.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 14.

V: Proto-Fascism in America

It's clear by now, I hope, that fascism isn't something peculiar to Europe, but in fact grew out of an impulse that appears throughout history in many different cultures. This impulse is, as Roger Griffin puts it, "ultra-nationalism that aspires to bring about the renewal of a nation's entire political culture."

We needn't look far to find this impulse at play in the American landscape — social, religious and political renewal all appear as constant (though perhaps not yet dominant) themes of Republican propaganda now. But it is especially prevalent on the extremist right; indeed, it's probably a definitive trait.

Griffin argues that current-day fascism is "groupuscular" in nature — that is, comprised of smallish but virulent, potentially lethal and certainly problematic "organisms":

After the war the dank conditions for revolutionary nationalism "dried out" to a point where it could no longer form into a single-minded slime mould. Since party-political space was largely closed to it, even in its diminutive versions, it moved increasingly into disparate niches within civic and uncivic space, often assuming a "metapolitical" mode in which it focussed on changing the "cultural hegemony" of the dominant liberal capitalist system. ... Where revolutionary nationalism pursued violent tactics they were no longer institutionalised and movement-based, but of a sporadic, anarchic, and terroristic nature. To the uninitiated observer it seemed that where once planets great and small of ultra-nationalist energies had dominated the skies, there now circled an asteroid belt of fragments, mostly invisible to the naked eye.¹⁹

When we consider some of the other historical traits of fascism, including those it shares with other forms of totalitarianism, then it becomes much easier to identify the political factions that are most clearly proto-fascist — that is, potentially fascist, if not explicitly so. (As Paxton argues, its latent expression will not necessarily represent its mature form.) Surveying the American scene, it is clear that just such a movement already exists. And in fact, it had already inspired, before 9/11, the most horrendous terrorist attack ever on American soil. It calls itself the "Patriot" movement.

You may have heard that this movement is dead. It isn't, quite yet. And its potential danger to the American way of life is still very much with us.

Those who have read *In God's Country* know that I conclude, in the Afterword, that the Patriot movement represents a genuine proto-fascist element: "a uniquely American kind of fascism." Let's explore this point in a little more detail.

As Griffin suggests, the "groupuscular" form that postwar fascism has taken seems to pose little threat, but it remains latent in the woodwork:

But the danger of the groupuscular right is not only at the level of the challenge to "cultural hegemony". Its existence as a permanent, practically unsuppressible ingredient of civil and uncivil society also ensures the continued "production" of racists and fanatics. On occasion these are able to subvert democratic, pacifist opposition to globalisation, as has been seen when they have infiltrated the "No Logo" movement with a revolutionary, violent dynamic all too easily exploited by governments to tar all protesters with the same

¹⁹ Griffin, "Paper tiger or Cheshire cat?", *op. cit.*

brush. Others choose instead to pursue the path of entryism by joining mainstream reformist parties, thus ensuring that both mainstream conservative parties and neo-populist parties contain a fringe of ideologically “prepared” hard-core extremists. Moreover, while the semi-clandestine groupuscular form now adopted by hard-core activist and metapolitical fascism cannot spawn the uniformed paramilitary cadres of the 1930s, **it is ideally suited to breeding lone wolf terrorists and self-styled “political soldiers” in trainers and bomber-jackets dedicated to a tactic of subversion known in Italian as “spontaneism”**. [Emphasis mine] By reading the rationalised hate that they find on their screens as a revelation they transform their brooding malaise into a sense of mission and turn the servers of their book-marked web groupuscules into their masters.

Griffin identifies this manifestation of fascism not only in Europe but in the United States:

One of the earliest such acts of terrorism on record harks back to halcyon pre-PC days. When Kohler Gundolf committed the Oktoberfest bombing in 1980 it was initially attributed to a “nutter” working independently of the organised right. Yet it later transpired that he had been a member of the West German groupuscule, Wehrsportgruppe Hoffmann. It also emerged at the trial of the “Oklahoma bomber”, Timothy McVeigh, that he had been deeply influenced by the USA’s thriving groupuscular right subculture. His disaffection with the contemporary state of the nation had been politicised by his exposure to the shadowy revolutionary subculture created by the patriotic militias, rifle clubs and survivalists. In particular, his belief that he had been personally called to do something to break ZOG’s (the so-called Zionist Occupation Government) stranglehold on America had crystallised into a plan on reading *The Turner Diaries* by William Pierce, head of the National Alliance.²⁰

Conservatives have successfully re-airbrushed the Oklahoma City bombing as the act of a single maniac (or two) rather than the piece of right-wing terrorism it was, derived wholly from an ideological stew of venomous hate that has simultaneously been seeping into mainstream conservatism throughout the 1990s and since.

The Patriot movement that inspired Tim McVeigh and his cohorts — as well as a string of other would-be right-wing terrorists who were involved in some 40-odd other cases in the five years following April 15, 1995 — indeed is descended almost directly from overtly fascist elements in American politics. Much of its political and “legal” philosophy is derived from the “Posse Comitatus” movement of the 1970s and ‘80s, which itself originated (in the 1960s) from the teachings of renowned anti-Semite William Potter Gale, and further propagated by Mike Beach, a former “Silver Shirt” follower of neo-Nazi ideologue William Dudley Pelley.²¹

Though the Patriot movement is fairly multifaceted, most Americans have a view of it mostly through the media images related to a single facet — the often pathetic collection of bunglers and fantasists known as the militia movement. Moreover, they’ve been told that the militia movement is dead.

It is, more or less. (And the whys of that, as we will see, are crucial here.) But the Patriot movement — oh, it’s alive and reasonably well. Let’s put it this way: It isn’t going away anytime soon.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 20.

²¹ Daniel Levitas, *The Terrorist Next Door: The Militia Movement and the Radical Right* (New York: Thomas Dunne Books/St. Martin’s Press, 2002).

The militia “movement” was only one strategy in the broad coalition of right-wing extremists who call themselves the “Patriot” movement. What this movement really represents is the attempt of old nationalist, white-supremacist and anti-Semitic ideologies to mainstream themselves by stripping away the arguments about race and ethnicity, and focusing almost single-mindedly on their underlying political and legal philosophies — which all come wrapped up, of course, in the neat little Manichean package of conspiracy theories. In the process, most of their spokesmen carefully eschew race talk or Jew-baiting, but refer instead to “welfare queens” and “international bankers” and the “New World Order”.

Forming militias was a strategy mainly aimed at recruiting from the mainstream, particularly among gun owners. It eventually fell prey to disrepute and entropy, for reasons we’ll explore in a bit. However, there are other Patriot strategies that have proved to have greater endurance, particularly “common law courts” and their various permutations, all of which revolve around the idea of “sovereign citizenship,” which makes every white Christian male American, essentially, a king unto himself. The movement is, as always, mutable. It includes a number of “constitutionalist” tax-protest movements, as well as certain “home schooling” factions and anti-abortion extremists.

As I explained it in the Afterword of *In God’s Country*:

... [T]he Patriots are not Nazis, nor even neo-Nazis. Rather, they are at least the seedbed, if not the realization, of a uniquely American kind of fascism. This is an overused term, its potency diluted by overuse and overstatement. However, there can be little mistaking the nature of the Patriot movement as essentially fascist in the purest sense of the word. The beliefs it embodies fit, with startling clarity, the definition of fascism as it has come to be understood by historians and sociologists: a political movement based in populist ultranationalism and focused on an a core mythic ideal of phoenix-like societal rebirth, attained through a return to “traditional values.”

As with previous forms of fascism, its affective power is based on irrational drives and mythical assumptions; its followers find in it an outlet for idealism and self-sacrifice; yet on close inspection, much of its support actually derives from an array of personal material and psychological motivations. It is not merely an accident, either, that the movement and its belief systems are directly descended from earlier manifestations of overt fascism in the Northwest — notably the Ku Klux Klan, Silver Shirts, the Posse Comitatus and the Aryan Nations. Like all these uniquely American fascist groups, the Patriots share a commingling of fundamentalist Christianity with their ethnic and political agenda, driven by a desire to shape America into a “Christian nation.”²²

Griffin, in *The Nature of Fascism*, appear almost to be describing the Patriot movement two years before it arose, particularly in his description (pp. 36-37) of populist ultra-nationalism, which he says “repudiates both ‘traditional’ and ‘legal/rational’ forms of politics in favour of prevalently ‘charismatic’ ones in which the cohesion and dynamics of movements depends almost exclusively on the capacity of their leaders to inspire loyalty and action ... It tends to be associated with a concept of the nation as a ‘higher’ racial, historical, spiritual or organic reality which embraces all the members of its ethical community who belong to it.”

But by remaining in this “groupuscular” state, the Patriot movement cannot be properly described as full-fledged fascism. Certainly it does not resemble mature fascism in the least. My friend Mark Pitcavage explains:

²² Author, *op. cit.*, pp. 320-321.

... “[T]hough it definitely has nationalistic and *völkisch* elements,” the Patriot movement does not meet “the key standard: a corporatist-statist authoritarianism. Indeed, it often seems antithetically opposed to such arrangements (and often believes that this is the arrangement the U.S. government has).”

What this view, while accurate, misses is Paxton’s point: Fascism, by nature, is essentially mutative. Italian, German and Spanish fascism all lacked any corporatist-statist leanings in their developmental stages as well — and indeed could have been described as antithetically opposed to authoritarianism. The wheat bundle which is the central image underlying the word *fascismo*, after all, suggested a national unity in which all parts had a voice and a role. In the end, this image was a travesty.

A second missing characteristic might be more telling: leadership under a central, authoritarian figure. The lack of such a personage is what leads Chip Berlet to define the Patriot movement as “proto-fascist.” Berlet, an analyst at the Cambridge, Mass., think tank Political Research Associates, says: “This is a kind of right-wing populism, which historically has been the seedbed for fascist movements. In other words, if you see fascism as a particularly virulent form of right-wing populism, it makes a lot more sense. It’s missing a couple of things that are necessary for a fascist movement. One is a strong leader. It doesn’t mean they couldn’t get one. But until they get one it isn’t fascism.”

Berlet takes little comfort in the difference in terms: “This is one trigger event away from being a fascist movement,” he says. “There’s no guarantee it’ll go that way. You would need a very charismatic leader to step forward. But it could happen at any time.”

The Patriot movement certainly *is* in a down cycle, and has been since the end of the 1990s. Its recruitment numbers are way down. Its visibility and level of activity are in stasis, if not decline. But right-wing extremism has always gone in cycles. It never goes away — it only becomes latent, and resurrects itself when the conditions are right.

And during these down periods, the remaining True Believers tend to become even more radicalized. There is already a spiral of violent behavior associated with Patriot beliefs, particularly among the younger and more paranoid adherents. As Griffin suggests, we can probably expect to see an increase in these “lone wolf” kind of attacks in coming years.

But there is a more significant aspect to the apparent decline of the Patriot movement: Its believers, its thousands of footsoldiers, and its agenda, never went away. These folks didn’t stop believing that Clinton was the anti-Christ or that he intended to enslave us all under the New World Order. They didn’t stop believing it was appropriate to pre-emptively murder “baby killers” or that Jews secretly conspire to control the world.

No, they’re still with us, but they’re not active much in militias anymore. They’ve been absorbed by the Republican Party.

They haven’t changed. But they are changing the party.

VI: Crossing the Lines

The line between right-wing extremists and “the conservative movement” has been increasingly blurred in the past 10 years. The distance between them now has grown so short in some cases as to render them nearly indistinguishable at times.

Certainly it is hard to distinguish between George Bush’s contempt for the United Nations and the kind that a John Bircher might harbor. Moreover, Bush panders to these sentiments; he reportedly waxed nostalgic before a group of visiting Southerners about the old “Get us Out of the U.N.!” billboards that were common in Bircher country.²³

This, in addition to sloppy thinking, is why some on the left will offhandedly label Rush Limbaugh or George W. Bush “fascists.” I’m here to explain why, despite all appearances, they aren’t. Yet. And how we’ll know when they are.

I first covered neo-Nazis in Idaho beginning in the late ‘70s and early ‘80s. Back then, even in a reactionary Republican state full of John Birchers, it was relatively easy (though not always so) to distinguish between the mainstream conservatives and the far right.

But that all changed during the 1990s. Responding to the serious law-enforcement crackdown on their activities, the white supremacists in the Christian Identity movement — which was the driving ideology at Hayden Lake — began morphing in the early part of the decade into the Patriot, or militia, movement. This was essentially an effort by Identity leaders to mainstream their belief system, primarily by locking away or disguising the racial components of their belief systems and instead emphasizing their political and legal agendas, all of which are bound up in the movement’s *métier*, conspiracy theories.

And the Patriot movement has thrived during that period on its mutability, its ability to confront a broad range of issues with its populist appeal, all wrapped in the bright colors of American nationalism. In the Patriot movement, just about any national malady — unemployment, crime, welfare abuse, drugs, abortion, even natural disasters — can be blamed on the “un-American” federal government or the New World Order. If you don’t like gun control, or the way your kids are being taught in school, or even the way the weather has affected your crops this year, the Patriot movement can tell you who’s to blame.

Of course, no discussion of the Patriot movement would be complete without mentioning the important role played in this crossover by its Southern component, the neo-Confederate movement. (Indeed, there are a number of figures prominent among neo-Confederates, particularly Kirk Lyons, who are closely associated with the Identity movement.) Its resurgence in the South was closely associated with the rise of the Patriot movement nationally.

At roughly the same time, movement conservatives — driven to apparent distraction by the election and then sustained success of Bill Clinton — became more ideologically rigid and fanatical. And it was in this meeting ground of Clinton-hatred that mainstream conservatism and right-wing extremism became much closer.

To the far right, Clinton embodied the totalitarian threat of the New World Order, a slimy leader in the conspiracy to enslave all mankind. To conservatives, he was simply an unanswerable political threat for whom no level of invective could be too vicious. Moreover, he was the last barrier to their complete

²³ See Gene Owens, “Bush talks to friends off the cuff,” *Mobile Register*, Feb. 28, 2003. Available online at http://www.al.com/news/mobileregister/gowens.ssf?/xml/story.ssf/html_standard.xml?/base/news/104644014425860.xml

control of every branch of the federal government. These interests coalesced as the far right became an echo chamber for attacks on Clinton that would then migrate into the mainstream, ultimately reaching their apex in Clinton's impeachment.

Ideas and agendas began floating from one sector to the other in increasing volume around 1994. I noticed it first in the amazing amount of crossover between militia types and the anti-Clinton vitriol out of D.C. that eventually built into the impeachment fiasco. In fact, it was clear that what I was seeing was that the far right was being used as an echo chamber to test out various right-wing issues and find out which ones resonated (this was especially the case with Clinton conspiracies). Then if it stuck, the issue would find its way out into the mainstream.

This crossover is facilitated by figures I call "transmitters" — ostensibly mainstream conservatives who seem to cull ideas that often have their origins on the far right, strip them of any obviously pernicious content, and present them as "conservative" arguments. These transmitters work across a variety of fields. In religion, Pat Robertson and Jerry Falwell are the best-known examples, though many others belong in the same category. In politics, the classic example is Patrick Buchanan, while his counterpart in the field of conservative activism is Paul Weyrich of the Free Congress Foundation.

In the media, Rush Limbaugh is the most prominent instance, and Michael Savage is a close second, but there are others who have joined the parade noticeably in the past few years: Andrew Sullivan, for instance, and of course Le Coulter. On the Internet, the largest single transmitter of right-wing extremism is FreeRepublic.com, whose followers — known as "Freepers" — have engaged in some of the more outrageous acts of thuggery against their liberal targets.

And finally, there's Fox News, which bills itself as "balanced," but which in fact is a virtual data center for transmitting extremist material into the mainstream. One of the most egregious examples of this was Fox's broadcasts, on several occasions in 2000–2001, of an anti-tax protester named Bob Schulz. Schulz operated a snake-oil outfit called We The People Congress which operated on the old Posse Comitatus theory that the 16th Amendment — the one approving the income tax — was never properly approved. The same theory was also the main serving of a number of Patriot outfits.

However, the really interesting — and equally enigmatic — meeting-ground between the far right and the apparent mainstream comes in the field of money. Namely, the funding of the far right tends to be relatively mysterious, since many of them work under the aegis of a religious organization and are thus exempt from reporting the identities of contributors. But it was interesting to see the money flowing from ostensibly mainstream rightist organizations into several neo-Patriot outfits who specialized in spreading numerous conspiracy theories that were clearly Patriot in origin. Most noteworthy of these was the Western Journalism Center and WorldNetDaily, originally financed by Scaife. Moreover, there was a lot of Scaife money underwriting publication of the anti-Clinton material I saw distributed at militia meetings.

Scaife was probably the most visible case. Many observers, myself included, suspect strongly that outfits like Militia of Montana and Bo Gritz's operations in Idaho and Nevada are being funded by right-wing sugar daddies who make their livings in real estate or development, perhaps manufacturing. Vincent Bertollini, the right-wing Silicon Valley millionaire who underwrote Richard Butler at the Aryan Nations for a number of years, is another such case — though as it happens, he is currently on the lam from a drunk-driving charge that is likely to land him in the slammer.

A classic example of the way the far right gets quietly funded by wealthy corporatists from the mainstream cropped up a couple of years ago, when a wealthy Massachusetts lawyer named Richard J. Cotter bequeathed some \$650,000 of his estate to various white-supremacist causes. It's more than likely he quietly slipped them money while he was alive, too. There are other similar cases — and these are only the ones that happen to become public.

These likely are people who are not public about their beliefs but are sympathetic to Patriot causes, and more importantly, see right-wing extremists as a useful lever, a threat that helps keep “leftists” in line. As Matthew Lyons of Political Research Associates has often argued (especially in the book he co-wrote with Chip Berlet, the excellent *Right Wing Populism in America: Too Close for Comfort*), the extremist right has long been a very useful tool of the corporatist right deployed purposely for precisely this function, as well as to drive wedge issues such as race between labor unions and working-class people.

It seems clear to me that by any reasonable definition, George W. Bush is a corporatist, not a fascist. It seems unlikely, of course, that he or his family are the kinds of corporatists who would financially underwrite far-right organizations today, given that the discovery of such would doom any political legitimacy for the Bushes. (And besides, they’ve already done their part underwriting — and making millions off — the Nazi war machine earlier this century.²⁴)

What is also clear, however, is that Bush and his cohorts have not the least compunction about allying themselves with the thuggish and potentially violent component of the extremist elements that have now been subsumed by the Republican Party. This became abundantly clear in the 2000 election, and particularly in the post-election fight in Florida. Don Black’s Stormfront people were there providing bodies for the pro-Bush protests, and his Web site proudly announced their participation. And as the *Village Voice* reported at the time:

On November 13, Black helped an angry crowd drive Reverend Jesse Jackson off a West Palm Beach stage with taunts and jeers. “He wasn’t being physically threatened,” Black says, in a later interview.²⁵

No one from the Bush camp ever denounced the participation of Black and his crew or even distanced themselves from this bunch, or for that matter any of the thuggery that arose during the post-election drama. Indeed, Bush himself later feted a crew of “Freeper” thugs who had shut down one of the recounts in Florida, while others terrorized his opponent, Al Gore, and his family by staging loud protests outside the Vice President’s residence during the Florida struggle.

These failures were symptomatic of a campaign that made multiple gestures of conciliation to a variety of extreme right-wing groups. These ranged from the neo-Confederates to whom Bush’s campaign made its most obvious appeals in the South Carolina primary to his speaking appearance at Bob Jones University. Bush and his GOP cohorts continued to make a whole host of other gestures to other extremist components: attacking affirmative action, kneecapping the United Nations, and gutting hate-crimes laws.

The result was that white supremacists and other right-wing extremists came to identify politically with George W. Bush more than any other mainstream Republican politician in memory. This was embodied by the endorsement of Bush’s candidacy by a range of white supremacists, including David Duke, Don Black and Matthew Hale of the World Church of the Creator. This identification even cropped up in odd places like the neo-Nazi flyers that passed around in Elma, Washington, in November 2000 that proclaimed Bush their group’s “supreme commander.”²⁶

²⁴ See Carla Binion, “Nazis and Bush family history: Government investigated Bush family’s financing of Hitler,” *Online Journal*, Dec. 21, 2000 [<http://www.rememberjohn.com/Nazis.html>]. This online publication is highly partisan, but Binion’s article is scrupulously factual and accurate in every detail.

²⁵ See Donna Ladd, “Conservatives, White Supremacists, Take to Florida Streets,” *Village Voice*, Nov. 15, 2000, available online at <http://www.villagevoice.com/issues/0046/ladd2.php>.

²⁶ See Terry Loney, “Elma pastor says Nazi flier the work of ‘cowards’ opposed to his ministry,” *Aberdeen Daily World*, Dec. 1, 2000.

However, the signal event of 2000 that went under everyone's radar was Patrick Buchanan's bid for the presidency on the Reform Party ticket. It was this move which drove everyone from the Patriot movement firmly into the arms of George W. Bush and the Republican Party.

Right-wing extremists, for the most part, are only a tiny portion of the electorate; they usually represent at best about 3 or maybe 4 percent of the vote. During the 1990s, these voters gave Ross Perot's Reform Party nearly half its total base. This was critical in the 1992 election, when George H.W. Bush saw much of his conservative base go to Perot. It didn't matter quite so much in 1996 — Clinton defeated the GOP's Bob Dole quite handily, with or without Perot's help — but the lesson was clear. That 3-4 percent was killing the GOP.

So in 2000 came the Buchanan takeover of the Reform Party. He managed to do this with a maximum of acrimony, so that the party became split into its Buchananite wing — which largely was the white-nationalist faction — and its Perotite wing. Buchanan's side won the war and got to carry the party's banner in the national election.

And then Buchanan selected a black woman as his running mate.

The white nationalists who had been Buchanan's footsoldiers abandoned him immediately. And where did they flee? The GOP, of course. As David Duke's manager explained it to a reporter: "[A]fter Buchanan chose a black woman as his veep he now thinks that 'Pat is a moron' and 'there is no way we can support him at this point.'"²⁷ The Democrats — with a Jew as the running mate — were threatening at the time to win the race outright. The combination of all these factors herded the far right handily into voting Republican.

If someone had intended to sabotage the Reform Party and drive its voters back to the GOP, they couldn't have done a more perfect job of this than Buchanan did. While no one can say whether Buchanan's moves were made with this end in mind — it certainly is feasible he believed his own bullshit — neither does it seem beyond the pale for an old Nixon hand to take a political bullet for the home team.

In any case, what we've been seeing in the field since 2000 is that much of the dissipation of the energy in the Patriot movement is directly related to the identification by right-wing extremists with George W. Bush. The announced reason (according to the *New York Times*) for the disbanding of Norm Olson's Michigan Militia, for instance, was the belief among members that Bush had the country headed back in the right direction, as it were:

Mr. Olson attributed the dwindling membership to the election of President Bush. "Across the nation, there is a satisfaction among patriots with the way things are going," he said.²⁸

It was in this election that large numbers of former Patriots — many of them disillusioned with the movement after the failure of the "Y2K scare" to materialize, but still maintaining their attitudes about government, liberalism and conspiracies, and disenfranchised by Buchanan's campaign — turned to the politics of the Bush team, which made all the right gestures to make them feel welcome.

²⁷ Toby Rogers, "White Supremacists Duke & Hale Lending Their Support to George W. Bush," *Greenwich Village Gazette*, Aug. 8, 2000.

²⁸ Keith Bradsher, "Citing Declining Membership, A Leader Disbands His Militia," *New York Times*, April 30, 2001.

Thus, even though the Patriot movement never even came close to achieving any kind of actual power — outside of a handful of legislators in a smattering of Western states — the absorption of its followers into mainstream conservatism successfully brought a wide range of extremists together under the banner of Republican politics, embodied in the defense of the agenda of President Bush and in the hatred of all forms of liberalism.

Then, after Sept. 11, the attacks on liberalism became enmeshed with a virulent strain of jingoism that at first blamed liberals for the attacks, then accused them of treasonous behavior for questioning Bush's war plans. Now we're seeing a broad-based campaign of hatred against liberals — particularly antiwar dissenters — that serves two purposes: it commingles mainstream pro-Bush forces in direct contact, and open alliance with, a number of people with extremist beliefs; and it gives the extremist element of Patriot footsoldiers who turned Republican in 2000 an increasingly important role in the mainstream party.

Namely, they are increasingly starting to look like the “enforcers” of the Bush agenda, intimidating and silencing any opposition. In the process, this element gains power and influence far beyond what it could have had as a separate proto-fascist element.

By first subsuming the Patriot element under the Republican banner, the Bush regime has effected an apparent alliance — not explicitly, but systemically. And it is clear that while Bush's charisma may not appeal to everyone, he has the power to electrify this base.

It's difficult to say whether this absorption has mitigated the extremist impulses of the former Patriot footsoldiers, though it probably has. Certainly it has had the predictable effect of making a travesty of the Patriots' original ideology: those who once were rabid anti-government activists have become equally rabid defenders of the government of the Bush regime. Their presence at the large “pro-war” rallies which existed primarily as an invasion of preplanned antiwar protests was noteworthy.

More important is the effect that the absorption has had on the larger Republican Party. Just as the Southern Strategy changed the very nature of the GOP from within, so has this more recent absorption of an extremist element transformed its basic nature. Now, positions that at one time would have been considered unthinkable for Republicans — unilateralist foreign policy, contempt for the United Nations and international law, a willingness to use war as a first resort, a visceral hatred of even the hint of liberalism — are positions it touts prominently.

Now its agenda aligns with the base impulses Robert O. Paxton identifies as fascist, and which drove the Patriot movement: national identity *über alles*; a claim of victimization; hatred of liberalism; reigniting a sense of national destiny and a closely bonded community; an appreciation of the value of violence; and of course, all of this uniting under the divinely inspired banner of George W. Bush, the Frat Boy of Destiny.

In a sense, this turns the scheme of Paxton's second stage of fascism on its head. That is, the proto-fascists of the Patriot movement, rather than obtaining power by the ascension of their own political faction in an alliance with conservatives, obtain power through absorption, from within conservatism. Forming alliances first in hatred of Clinton and Gore, and then in defense of Bush's war, the conservative movement has, perhaps unthinkingly, allowed itself to be transformed from within.

Possibly all this commingling has had a moderating effect on the extremists. But it is mainstream conservatism that demonstrably has undergone the most dramatic change in this cauldron: It seems to increasingly view the Left as an unacceptable governing partner. And in doing so, it has effectively ended a longtime power-sharing contract between liberals and conservatives in America. It has become common for conservatives to openly reject any hint of liberalism, and to demonize liberals as a caustic and ultimately unacceptable force in society.

The impetus for these attacks comes from the hectoring likes of Rush Limbaugh and the truly noxious Ann Coulter, Fox News and the Free Republic. They are all people who take extremist ideas and dress them in mainstream clothing, straddling both sectors, and transmitting information between them. I call them “transmitters.”

VII: The Transmission Belt

“Hitler was more moral than Clinton,” intoned the nice-looking, dark-haired man in the three-piece suit. “He had fewer girlfriends.”

The audience laughed and applauded, loudly.

A remark like that might hardly have raised an eyebrow in post-Monica America, particularly in the meeting-halls of mainstream conservatism, where it often seemed, by the end of Bill Clinton’s tenure in the White House, that no hyperbole is too overblown in the campaign to depose him — mostly, it seems, by convincing the rest of us that he was too grossly immoral to continue to hold the presidency.

As the scandal wore on, the volume, intensity and downright nastiness of his critics reached impressive levels. It wasn’t unusual to hear of congressmen calling him a “scumbag” and a “cancer on the presidency,” or for mainstream conservative commentary to refer to him, as *Orlando Sentinel* columnist Charley Reese did at one point, as “a sociopath, a liar, a sexual predator, a man with recklessly bad judgment and a scofflaw.” Even right-wing scribe Andrew Sullivan played the armchair psychologist on national television, describing Clinton as “sociopathic.”

But the scene above took place four years before Monica, in 1994, long before Clinton handed his enemies a scandal on a platter that seemingly made such references acceptable. It was not at a Republican caucus or Christian Coalition meeting, but at a gathering of right-wing “Patriots” who had come to hear about forming militias and common-law courts and defending their gun rights — indeed, their families — from the New World Order. They numbered only a hundred or so and only half-filled the little convention hall in Bellevue, Washington, but their fervor saturated the room with its own paranoid energy.

And the speaker, who could have passed even then for a local Republican public official — actually, he was nominally a Democrat — in fact was one of the nation’s leading Patriot figures: Richard Mack, then sheriff of Arizona’s mostly rural Graham County. As a leader in the fight against gun control (his lawsuit eventually led to the Supreme Court overturning a section of the so-called Brady Law), Mack was in high demand on the right-wing lecture circuit as he promoted the militia concept to his eager acolytes. He usually sprinkles his “constitutional” gun-rights thesis with his theories on church-state separation — it’s a “myth,” he claims — and “the New World Order conspiracy.”

The similarities between Mack’s 1994 sentiments and the hyperbole directed at Clinton in 1998 are not accidental. Rather, they offer a stark example of the way the far right’s ideas, rhetoric and issues feed into the mainstream — and in the process, exert a gravitational pull that draws the nation’s agenda increasingly rightward. For that matter, much of the conservative anti-Clinton paroxysm could be traced directly to some of the smears that circulated first in militia and white-supremacist circles.

It’s also important to understand how the migration of these ideas occurs. Richard Mack, for instance, doesn’t compare Bill Clinton’s morality to Adolph Hitler’s at every speaking opportunity. His remark didn’t show up, for instance, when he had his moment in the sun with the National Rifle Association.

It just pops out when he’s in front of an audience of Patriot believers. That’s when he knows it will gain the most appreciation. It mixes well with the fear of the New World Order he foments, in his quiet, almost sedate speaking tone.

Mack is a **transmitter** — someone who treads the boundaries of the various sectors of America’s right wing and appears to belong to each of them at various times. Mack’s gun-control message still sells well with mainstream, secular NRA audiences. His claims that church-state separation is a myth resonate

nicely with the theocratic right crowd as well. And he cultivates a quasi-legitimate image by taking leadership positions in groups like Larry Pratt's Gun Owners of America. But he is most at home in his native base: the populist right, the world of militias, constitutionalists and pseudo-libertarians. Mack even occasionally consorts with the hard right, as when he grants front-page interviews to the Christian Identity newspaper *The Jubilee*.

At the same time he tours the countryside preaching the Patriot message, Mack cuts a seemingly mainstream conservative figure. As one of the key players in the effort to overturn the Brady Bill gun-control law — which Mack claims infringes on his rights as sheriff — he gained his highest public notice in 1995 when the National Rifle Association honored him as their Law Enforcement Officer of the Year. The image boost let him tour nationwide, speaking at numerous Patriot gatherings and hawking his books (*From My Cold Dead Fingers* and *Government, God and Freedom*).

Mack's Clinton-bashing was mostly a gratuitous nod to one of the Patriot movement's favorite themes: an almost pathological hatred of the former occupants of the Oval Office, manifested as a willingness to believe almost any slander directed at "Billary," as they like to refer to the Clintons. Had you gone to any militia gathering — held usually in small town halls or county fairgrounds, sometimes under the guise of "preparedness expos," "patriotic meetings" or even gun shows — you could always find a wealth of material aimed at proving Clinton the worst kind of treasonous villain imaginable. Bill and Hillary Clinton, after all, occupy a central position in Patriots' "New World Order" paranoid fantasy.

"For those in this right-wing conspiracist subculture, Clinton as President represents a constitutional crisis because he is seen as a traitor betraying the country to secret elites plotting a collectivist totalitarian rule through a global New World Order," observes Chip Berlet of the Cambridge, Mass., think tank Political Research Associates. "Stories of Clinton's alleged sexual misconduct buttress this notion because they demonstrate symptoms of his liberal secular humanist outlook, which ties him to what is seen as a longstanding conspiracy against God, individual responsibility, and national sovereignty." The Clintons' conspiracy is believed to have its roots in global Communism and, ultimately, the "international bankers" (read: Jews) who pull all the world's political strings.

Go to the Militia of Montana's table at any Patriot gathering and you can find, alongside Army manuals on "Booby Traps" and guerrilla-warfare manuals like *The Road Back*, a healthy selection of books and tapes devoted to Clinton's many perfidies:

- *Black Helicopters Over America: Strikeforce for the New World Order*, Jim Keith's militia classic that, besides postulating global preparations for the enslavement of mankind, identified Bill Clinton as an "obvious socialist and possible Soviet agent" whose administration has "ushered in the New World Order."
- "Executive Orders for the New World Order," MOM's popular pamphlet with a list of presidential orders — mostly related to national emergencies under the aegis of that X-Files bugaboo, the Federal Emergency Management Administration — which ostensibly show how Clinton has prepared for the NWO takeover.
- *Big Sister is Watching You*, a supposed expose of Hillary's secretive clique of "Feminazis" (with several suggestions that a witch's coven might be lurking in the White House). The MOM catalog describes it thus: "These are the woman who tell Bill Clinton what to do: Lesbians, sex perverts, child-molester advocates, Christian haters and the most doctrinaire of Communists, whose goal is to end American sovereignty and bring about a global Marxist paradise."
- *Martial Law Rule*, an "exposé" by Oregon white supremacist Robert Wangrud, of Clinton's continuing imposition of "martial law" in the U.S. (which he claims began

under Lincoln and has remained in place since). Elsewhere, Wangrud has been known to argue that civil-rights legislation constitutes the treasonous act of “race betrayal.”

- *The Death of Vince Foster* and *The Clinton Chronicles*, the now-infamous creations of Citizens for Honest Government which supposedly laid bare Clinton’s involvement in the murder of his aide as well as a web of drug-running and murders in rural Mena, Arkansas.

Indeed, the militia movement provided most of the early audience for *The Clinton Chronicles*; large stacks of the books and videos sold well at Patriot gatherings, and the Mena tales continue to be regarded as articles of faith. The wild and bizarre accusations — easily refuted both in mainstream media and by a congressional investigation — gained an extended half-life in a milieu where counter-evidence is only considered further proof of a conspiracy. This echo effect resonated long enough that the claims were certain to regain currency in the mainstream — and eventually, they did.

This is how the Patriot movement pulls the national debate towards its own agenda. Regardless of how far-fetched or provably false their claims or ideas might be, they stay alive in the everything-fits conspiracist mindset of the far right. The ideas that have a long-term resonance are transmitted to the mainstream, stripped of their racial or religious origins — which often are the swamps of supremacist Christian Identity belief — by being presented as purely “political” claims or conjecture. As the ideas gain more traction in the mainstream, the far right’s agenda becomes realized incrementally.

David Duke knows all about this technique — it is one he has mastered over the years as one of the nation’s leading white-supremacist figures. For years — especially during his Populist Party presidential bid in 1988 and his nearly successful U.S. Senate campaign in 1990 — Duke denied being a white racist, despite his background as a KKK leader.

Finally, in his 1996 Senate race (which he lost), Duke abandoned his pretense and began campaigning almost exclusively on the issue of “saving white heritage” and other “racial realities”; his campaign literature listed his former Klan leadership, and his Web site contained Duke’s favorite theories on racial separation. Noting wryly the similarities between the 1996 GOP platform and his own 1988 presidential platform — anti-immigration, anti-affirmative action, anti-welfare, anti-abortion — Duke made it clear he saw no reason not to revert to his true self, since he was driving the debate: “The nation has come to me,” he observed.

The Patriot movement (which has deep roots in white supremacy, but is a separate phenomenon) effects its agenda in much the same way. A network of transmitters — those people who maintain mainstream positions and public images but who have a foot firmly planted in the Byzantine gardens of the far right — carry into mainstream settings the Patriots’ uniquely reactionary positions in the national debate, whether the topic is gun control, environmental policy, education or abortion, and the ripples draw the debate in their direction. And deposing the epitome of evil itself — Bill Clinton — has, naturally, always been near the top of the list.

Consider, if you will, the “Clinton Body Count.”

Everybody who’s on e-mail, probably, has received a version of this urban legend at some time or another. Friends, or friends of friends, pass it along like one of those dreaded chain e-mails, or the latest Monica Lewinsky joke.

It’s gruesome — all those dead people associated somehow with Bill Clinton. (You’d think he was someone famous who came into contact with a lot of people or something.) In some cases, the count is as high as 80. Some of them you know about, like Vincent Foster. But what about that former intern, gunned down in a mysterious Georgetown coffee-shop killing? Or those two little boys found dead on

the railroad tracks in Arkansas? Obviously, one is meant to conclude that that Bill Clinton is nothing less than a murderous, bloodstained monster.

The “body count” is one of the Internet’s versions of an urban legend, built around the creepy supposition that Clinton is somehow responsible for the deaths of any people who’ve had dealings with him — and many more who haven’t, but who’ve been connected to him through the conspiracy grapevine. These include not only Commerce Secretary Ron Brown (offed for knowing too much, the body-counters suggest) but also some obscure figures vaguely related to the Mena, Arkansas, operations detailed in *The Clinton Chronicles*.

The Clinton Body Count also happens to be one of the Patriot movement’s hoariest traditions. It appears to have originated with (now-discredited) militia leader Linda Thompson’s 1993 essay, which detailed 29 deaths linked to the then-new president. The concept flourished among the movement, showing up at a lot of homemade Web sites, like the 1994 version at a Web site called The Patriot, with 28 bodies and three “ongoing” cases, some different from Thompson’s. Soon the list was growing exponentially, especially as the non-militia types who shared a hatred of Clinton joined in the fun, and more Clinton-haters linked more conspiracies to the president over the years.

Nowadays, there are at least 30 sites keeping track of the Clinton Body Count. One current site, operated by a believer in a wide range of Clinton conspiracies, lists 52 bodies. Another racks up a total of 79. And now you can read about it at mainstream conservative Web sites like radio commentator Ken Hamblin’s — not to mention “conservative” Web sites like The Free Republic, which features entire sections of its forum devoted to “Suspicious Deaths” and the “Clinton Death Squad.” And, lest we forget, Clinton’s supposed onetime paramour, Gennifer Flowers, keeps a version of the Clinton Body Count on her Web site, linked alongside copies of her taped conversations with Clinton, a CD of her singing debut, and glamour pix.

Of course, to believe any of these lists, you also have to believe in virtually all of the conspiracies, assassinations and misdeeds in which the Clintons are alleged to have taken part: Mena, Vince Foster, Ron Brown, and the Georgetown Starbucks murders (not to mention the larger New World Order plot, which links him retroactively to JFK’s assassination). You also have to believe that all those dead military personnel were once his “bodyguards.” In short, you have to believe that he is probably the anti-Christ.

This happens to be a view not in short supply these past eight years, judging by the flow of rhetoric, first from the Patriots, and then from more mainstream sources, of the past eight years. It has, of course, been debunked roundly on several occasions, but then, so have most of the Patriots’ other conspiracy theories. That doesn’t stop them from purveying them anyway.

The White House tried to draw attention to the flow of what it called “fringe stories” into the mainstream in a 331-page report obliquely titled *The Communication Stream of Conspiracy Commerce*, which posited that the scandals the Clintons faced were manufactured by his political enemies out of groundless rumors that bubble up from the extreme right.

However, the report suffered from several fatal flaws. On the all-important public-relations front, it cast all this anti-Clinton activity in a conspiratorial light — while the campaign in fact has been fairly open and public in its desire to end Clinton’s presidency, and was often spontaneous in nature and uncoordinated.

Conservative commentators had a field day, accusing the White House of finding conspiracies under rocks, comparing the report to Nixon’s “enemies” list and offering the Clintons rides in black helicopters. Some even accused the White House of embarking on a conspiracy of its own — attempting to intimidate its enemies by linking them to wackos: conspiracies within conspiracies within conspiracies within conspiracies.

More important, the report missed its own target. While it accurately detailed the way groundless stories like the Vince Foster suicide/murder circulated outside of the normal media venues with helpful nudges from well-moneyed enemies like Richard Mellon Scaife, it cast its net only as wide as conservative think tanks and largely mainstream circles, treating the venues for the false stories as merely “fringe” elements and failing to recognize the interaction of larger segments of conservatism in the stories’ spread.

In any event, the very trend it described had come to full flower by 1998. The rhetoric once common among the militia had become indistinguishable from that bandied about on Rush Limbaugh’s radio program or, for that matter, on Fox News cable gabfests or MSNBC’s *Hardball*. The migration of the accusations against Clinton from the far right to the mainstream was instructive, because it indicated how more deeply enmeshed conservatives became during the 1990s with genuine extremists.

And in subsequent years, this commingling of ideologies has begun to play a role in the presidency of George W. Bush, as well. As we’ve already discussed, many of these same far-right factions are now involved in demonizing liberals who dissent from Bush’s Iraq war plans.

Chip Berlet’s model of the American right is accurate and helpful in understanding this transformation. He divides the right into three sectors:

- **The secular conservative right.** This is comprised of mainstream Republicans and white-collar professionals, glad to play government critic but strong defenders of the social status quo.
- **The theocratic right.** So-called ‘conservative Christians’ and their like-minded counterparts among Jews, Mormons and Unification Church followers, as well as Christian nationalists. Some of the more powerful elements of this faction argue that the United States is a “Christian nation,” and still others — called “Reconstructionists” — argue for remaking the nation as a theocratic state.
- **The xenophobic right.** These include the ultra-conservatives and reactionaries who make broad appeals to working-class and blue-collar constituencies, particularly in rural areas, with a notable predilection for wrapping themselves in the flag. [See Pat Buchanan.] This faction ranges from the relatively mild-mannered Libertarians — who also have made big inroads into the computer-geek universe — to the more virulent and paranoid militia/Patriot movement, and finally to the hard right: the neo-Nazis, Klansmen, Posse Comitatus and various white supremacists — including some of the nastier elements of the Patriot movement — all of whom wish nothing more than to tear down modern democratic America and start over. This is the faction where some of the more insidious ideas (like bizarre tax-protest theories) and conspiracies (from black helicopters to the Protocols) originate, making their appearance in mainstream settings somewhat disturbing.²⁹

Transitional figures like Richard Mack and Rush Limbaugh play a central role in the way the right’s competing sectors interact. By transmitting ideas across the various sectors, they gain wider currency until they finally become part of the larger national debate. Secondarily, shape-shifters like Mack are increasingly important for the xenophobic right, because they lend an aura of mainstream legitimacy to ideas, agendas and organizations that are widely perceived otherwise as radical.

²⁹ See Public Research Associates’ “Sectors of the US Right – Active in the Year 2003,” available online at http://www.publiceye.org/research/Chart_of_Sectors.htm.

Transmitters operate in an array of related venues, often coordinating messages with their allies and timing the release of information for maximum emotional effect. There is a broad array of arenas in which they primarily operate: politics and public officialdom, including the military and law enforcement; the mainstream press; radio and the Internet; and religion.

Indeed, what fascinates Berlet about the interaction of the sectors is watching “the transmission belt — how stuff gets essentially a trial run in the Christian right or even the far right, and the messages will get refined, and then they’ll be picked up by these intermediary groups and individuals, and refined some more, and then there’ll be a buzz that’s created, and then that gets media attention in the mainstream press.

“That isn’t some conspiracy theory out of the White House. That’s how this stuff works, and it’s always worked this way. The joke is that it’s not a conspiracy — it’s the way people organize each other.”

VIII: Official Transmitters

The strange thing about watching Trent Lott's slow-motion toppling late last year was that the whole uproar was about something that was not particularly new or unknown about Lott.

Lott's lack of judgment, like that of many Republicans, is embodied in his dalliances with right-wing extremists, which had been well observed previously. In Lott's case, he had an open alliance with the Southern variant of extremism, embodied in the neo-Confederate movement, a band of Southern revivalists who unabashedly argue for modern-day secession by the former Confederate States: "The central idea that drives our organization is the redemption of our independence as a nation," says the mission statement for the League of the South.

Of course, like most right-wing extremists, they also pathologically hated Bill Clinton: "Impeach Clintigula Now!" shouted a typical banner from a Neo-Confed site. As with their militia brethren elsewhere in the country, the hatred of the former president proved a potent recruiting tool, particularly for making inroads into mainstream conservatism.

Lott contributed a regular column to the neo-Confederate *Citizen Informer* magazine, usually pontificating on mainstream issues — while being joined by other columnists who would rant about "Aracial Whites" and discuss the logistics of secession. The CofCC and other Neo-Confeds have a fondness for Mississippi's senior senator dating back to his efforts to rehabilitate the name and reputation of Jefferson Davis, and the senator in return has lent them both his ear and the air of legitimacy that his name as a columnist gives their magazine. He also told CofCC gatherings that they "stand for the right principles and the right philosophy."

When finally called out on this behavior, amid the counteraccusations that flew during the Clinton impeachment, Lott offered a startlingly misleading denial: "This group harbors views which Senator Lott firmly rejects. He has absolutely no involvement with them either now or in the future." Of course, the questions were about his *past*.

This all finally caught up with Lott after his now-infamous bout of nostalgia at Strom Thurmond's farewell banquet. But in addition to the collective amnesia that had let Lott slide through beforehand, the really curious thing about the way the Lott matter eventually played out was the compartmentalization of its resolution: All neat and tidy, with no ramifications for anyone else — including, say, Attorney General John Ashcroft, who has had his own dalliances with neo-Confederates. It had the distinct flavor of a political hit by Team Rove, rather than signifying any sea change on the part of the GOP.

This no doubt serves the purposes of Republican strategists, who are hoping to remake the party's image so that it can finally shake the shadow of the Southern Strategy. But they have to do so carefully without upsetting their Southern base too deeply, and the Bush administration's later attacks on affirmative action, as well as its resurrection of such nominations as Charles Pickering's, may have gone a long way to mollify those voters.

In any case, these strategists are probably not really aiming to make significant inroads into the minority communities, particularly not with blacks. Instead, their obvious target in remaking their image is moderate white suburban voters, whose reluctance to vote Republican is often associated with the GOP's lily-white racial image. But the affirmative-action and other recent moves have made clear that the Bush team is primarily interested in empty symbolic gestures — like Lott's fall — to appeal to these voters.

The larger reality is that the Republican Party, and mainstream conservatism generally, has for some time now engaged in such dalliances with extremists across a broad range of issues, and in a number of different sectors and political blocs. Lott was merely the tip of the iceberg.

Lott, and politicians like him, play an important role for right-wing extremists. They are **transmitters**, figures who straddle both the mainstream and extremist sectors of the right. They help lend such segments as the neo-Confederates a veneer of legitimacy that they otherwise would utterly lack. And they help get their ideas, and ultimately their agendas, into the mainstream.

Let's examine the different kinds of transmitters:

Politicians and public officials

Lott was far from alone among Republicans in maintaining ties to neo-Confederates and other Southern racists. Rep. Bob Barr of Georgia, chief sponsor of a 1997 bill to impeach Clinton, also made appearances before the CofCC, and over the years has had open associations with the populist-right John Birch Society, as well as a striking penchant for placing the militias' issues — gun control, tearing down the United Nations, fighting “globalism” — atop his list. Ex-Mississippi Gov. Kirk Fordice maintained open ties with the CofCC and other neo-Confederate factions. And Louisiana Gov. Mike Foster — who was President Bush's campaign chair in that state — maintained an interesting relationship with white supremacist David Duke: He liked to buy Duke's mailing lists. (He also tried to conceal his purchase of the lists and was caught and fined for it.)³⁰

The South, however, was only one of many staging grounds for ostensibly mainstream conservative politicians to commingle with right-wing extremists. In fact, it happened in every corner of the country. In New Hampshire, Republican Sen. Bob Smith made open alliances with the Patriot/militia-oriented Constitution Party (indeed, he nearly ran for president on the party's ticket). Former Rep. Helen Chenoweth of Idaho, who chaired a natural-resources subcommittee and was one of the first to join Barr as an impeachment co-sponsor, had long associations with her home district's militiamen — and you can still buy her anti-environmental video, “America in Crisis,” from the Militia of Montana. Former Republican Rep. Steve Stockman of Texas likewise made open alliances with several Texas Patriot groups, and defended their agenda in Congress. Republican Rep. Ron Paul of Texas continues to peddle pseudo-Patriot “New World Order” conspiracy theories to his constituents.

Probably not surprisingly, nearly every single noteworthy transmitter in politics is a conservative Republican. The only exception was ex-Rep. James Traficant, an Ohio Democrat who was recently drummed out of Congress in the wake of his corruption convictions. Traficant trotted out a broad range of Patriot theories and agenda items during his career, but he was a near-total pariah in his own party. (Indeed, before his convictions, Republicans attempted to persuade him to change aisles.)

The spectrum of transmitters also includes a bevy of local and state officials who tread comfortably in multiple universes. Several state legislatures, notably Montana's, have had significant Patriot presences among their ranks, all of them ultraconservative Republicans. And then there was the GOP's 1996 nominee for governor in Washington state: Ellen Craswell, a religious conservative who argued for remaking America as a “Christian nation” and blamed a horrendous January 1993 storm in Seattle on God's wrath for the Clintons' inauguration, which had taken place that day. Craswell later left the GOP to play a prominent role in the pro-militia U.S. Taxpayers Party and its Washington offshoot, the American Heritage Party (both of which later morphed into the Constitution Party), but reportedly has since returned to the fold.

There are also political organizations that often transmit far-right memes in mainstream settings. The most notable of these is the Free Congress Foundation, run by right-wing guru Paul Weyrich, who was

³⁰ See “Election Turmoil: Purchase of Duke mailing list raises eyebrows,” Southern Poverty Law Center *Intelligence Report*, Summer 1999.

one of the architects of the Reagan Revolution, a founder of the Heritage Foundation, and reputedly someone who still enjoys considerable influence even in the current White House. Weyrich's far-right dalliances have been mounting lately, as the Southern Poverty Law Center recently detailed in a scathing report.³¹

Other groups that transmit far-right memes into mainstream include Larry Pratt's Gun Owners of America, whose connections to the extremist right have been thoroughly documented; Gary Bauer's co-production with James Dobson, the Family Research Council, which spread numerous anti-homosexual memes that originated on the far right; the anti-affirmative action group Center for Individual Rights, which has its origins with the white-supremacist Pioneer Institute, but also has been the "driving force" in the campaign against the University of Michigan's AA program; so-called "Wise Use" groups, which spread anti-environmentalist conspiracy theories into the mainstream; and Operation Rescue (now called Rescue America), which openly consorted with a number of violent anti-abortion extremist groups, and sympathized with their calls for the murder of abortion providers. A complete list of such transmitter organizations, which would include advocacy groups across a broad range of issues, would make even more clear how these groups pick up ideas and themes from extremist organizations and repackage them as mainstream conservative talking points.

Religious figures

Among the leaders of America's religious right, Pat Robertson enjoys a uniquely powerful position, both as overseer of a large broadcasting and evangelical empire, but also as the first fundamentalist Christian leader in recent times to make a significant run for the presidency. He also has a pronounced history of transmitting far-right themes into the mainstream, most especially his frequent claims that America is a "Christian nation," and similar advocacy of installing a theocratic government.

His most notorious instance of trafficking extremist material came with the publication of his 1992 tome, *The New World Order*, which of course enjoyed a considerable audience on the extremist right. The book is literally riven with conspiracist allegations and references, including his invocation of the well-known Patriot belief that the Freemason conspiracy is "revealed in the great seal adopted at the founding of the United States."

Two articles — one by Michael Lind and another by Jacob Heilbrunn — in the *New York Review of Books* demonstrated conclusively that the bulk of the concepts in the book were clearly drawn directly from such notorious anti-Semitic works as Nesta Webster's *Secret Societies and Subversive Movements* and Eustace Mullins' *Secrets of the Federal Reserve*. What's truly remarkable about Robertson's tactic is that he soft-pedals these well-worn tropes in the cloak of references to "international bankers" and the like, much the same way the Patriot movement cloaks its own conspiracy theories.

Robertson's cohort in right-wing evangelizing, Jerry Falwell, likewise has a history of trotting out far-right themes, including the time he attempted to demonstrate that the Antichrist was a Jewish man currently alive. Falwell likewise was closely involved in promoting *The Clinton Chronicles*, which spread far-right conspiracy theories about the former president. Recently, of course, Falwell has again been in the news, first creating a national uproar by suggesting that gays, and lesbians and liberals in general were responsible for the Sept. 11 attacks, then creating an international uproar by proclaiming that Mohammad, Islam's chief prophet, was a "terrorist."

³¹ See "Mainstreaming Hate: A key ally of Christian Right heavyweight Paul Weyrich addresses a major Holocaust denial conference," *Southern Poverty Law Center Intelligence Report*, Fall 2002, available online at <http://www.splcenter.org/intelligenceproject/ip-4w5.html>.

Robertson and Falwell, however, are merely to the religious right what Limbaugh is to the army of imitators who fill the ranks of the rest of talk-radio land. The nation's fundamentalist pastors often play similar roles, repeating themes and ideas that originally circulated among extremists, but presenting them in mainstream contexts which lend them a sudden facade of legitimacy.

Perhaps the most significant sector of these fundamentalists are the Christian Reconstructionists, whose agenda is openly theocratic. Their stated purpose is to install a "Christian" government that draws its legal foundations from Scripture, not the Constitution. Their radical agenda, however, is endorsed by a broad array of conservative politicians, notably by the powerful Council for National Policy, which boasts a membership from across a range of mainstream conservatism, but which in fact was co-founded by R.J. Rushdoony, one of the leading lights of Reconstructionism.

This sector is gaining increasing significance as a meeting-ground for mainstream conservatism and right-wing extremism precisely because of the emphasis being placed on his own fundamentalist beliefs by President Bush. As I'll discuss later, the commingling of the two sectors is occurring at an increasing rate because of this, and it may wind up playing an important role in how the Bush camp responds to criticism of its policies — particularly its war plans — and potential threats to its hold on power.

Finally, there are **the media transmitters**. But they have earned a chapter unto themselves.

IX: Media Transmitters

As seemingly psychotic cranks go, Ann Coulter has carved out a nice little career for herself as an obsessive hater of all things liberal, flavoring her television appearances with a frothing, twitchy dyspepsia that seems to infect everyone on the sound stage.

Along the way Coulter, like many of her media compatriots on the right, first developed a significant role in transmitting memes from the extremist Clinton-hating right into the mainstream of conservatism, and since then has expanded into other fields. During that process, she's been important in bringing the two sectors even closer together.

Of course, Coulter has built much of her reputation on being outrageous, as on the recent occasion when she penned a column about Muslims that concluded: "We should invade their countries, kill their leaders and convert them to Christianity."³² Unsurprisingly, she has indulged in a litany of Clinton-hating memes that originated in the extremist right, ranging from equating him with Hitler, to hinting before Y2K that he intended to declare martial law, to indulging in later-disproven rumors that he had fathered an illegitimate black child.

The quintessential Coulter "transmission" remark, though, came after Sept. 11, in an interview with the *New York Observer*:

"My only regret with Timothy McVeigh is he did not go to the New York Times Building."³³

Most of the commentary about this remark focused on its seeming endorsement of terrorist violence, which her defenders, such as the *Wall Street Journal* op-ed page, dismissed airily as merely lacking in humor: "Why would anybody even pretend to believe that Ms. Coulter wishes any real harm to the New York Times or wishes to convert all Muslims forcibly to Christianity?"³⁴ (Peculiarly, this piece ran *on the same day* as Coulter's *Observer* interview.)

This line of defense is nearly identical to that deployed by Rush Limbaugh when he tries to claim that he's merely an "entertainer" — something along the lines of, "Why would you take them seriously in the first place?" Well, I don't know, you tell me: Why would anyone take them seriously? Just because they have audiences of millions who hang on their every word as Received Wisdom? Just because every major broadcast and cable-news network has presented them, and people like them, as serious thinkers whose words are worthy of the public's consideration?

More to the point, exactly which parts of Ann Coulter are we *not* supposed to take seriously? Just those parts when she writes like a banshee from hell? And how, exactly, are we supposed to discern those parts from the rest? Where does the 'fierce raillery' about which 'everybody laughs afterwards' end? And does that mean talking about blowing up hundreds of New Yorkers is supposed to be humorous?

³² Ann Coulter, "This Is War," *National Review*, Sept. 13, 2001, available online at <http://www.nationalreview.com/coulter/coulter091301.shtml>.

³³ George Curley, "Coultergeist," *New York Observer*, Aug. 26, 2002, available online at <http://www.observer.com/pages/story.asp?ID=6258>.

³⁴ Melik Kaylan, "Dr. Johnson, Meet Ann Coulter!", *Wall Street Journal*, Aug. 26, 2002, available online at http://online.wsj.com/article_email/0,,SB1030311351712914555,00.html.

In any event, there should have been no question that this remark was beyond the pale of acceptable public discourse, much more so than anything Trent Lott has ever said. Coulter should have become a pariah, at least on the public airwaves. Indeed, I should have expected not merely journalists to denounce her for this remark, but fellow conservatives as well. That this hasn't happened — that in fact that conservatives have defended her avidly, and indeed she seems to be back on the air more than ever — is significant in its own.

However, there are even more consequential subtexts here.

First, Coulter is clearly suggesting here that the only thing wrong with McVeigh's attack was his choice of targets. Coulter would have preferred the NYT Building; but she otherwise appears to be suggesting that bombing government employees (including a day care full of toddlers) was acceptable as well. I would argue that this aspect of her remark is even more egregious, and should earn her the permanent scorn of every decent American.

The important point that all of the postmortems about Coulter's remark missed, however, was the very context that was its foundation: Namely, a recognition that the extremist right of Timothy McVeigh was allied with, and indirectly doing the bidding of, ostensibly mainstream conservatives like herself.

In many ways, Coulter's remark is just an acknowledgement of the relationship. I'm certain it will gain her even more fans among the Patriot crowd. And that's how the ties grow stronger.

A number of analysts have noted over the years that violent right-wing extremists have often been viewed by mainstream conservatives as useful tools for enacting their own agenda. The history of this dates back as far as monarchists' attacks on liberal thinkers in the 16th and 17th centuries, and includes the American lynching phenomenon of 1870-1930, as well the McCarthyite/Bircher exploitation of the Communist threat and the opposition to desegregation and the civil-rights movement.

As I've been documenting, for the past six years or so this uneasy alliance is re-emerging, as ideological and political traffic between movement conservatives and right-wing extremists becomes increasingly common. Sometimes this happens almost accidentally, often in the meeting-ground of personal ambition and lurking agendas, as when David Horowitz published the views of white supremacist Jared Taylor at his *Frontpage* Webzine.³⁵ Sometimes, as with Coulter, it is done with apparently full intent.

Her McVeigh remark really makes the relationship quite clear, depending of course on the extent to which mainstream conservatives view Coulter as one of them. Judging by their continuing silence about her obvious extremism, I'd have to assume that most of them are happy to claim her.

This kind of meshing of mainstream corporate interests with right-wing thuggery is in fact a hallmark of incipient fascism. A compliant media that portrays this kind of phenomenon as unremarkable is also important in its development.

And that is the role that **media transmitters** like Coulter play: Not only do they inject the extremist meme into mainstream conservatism, they also condition the mainstream to think of extremists in a generous and even collegial light. Simultaneously, they persuade extremists who might otherwise align themselves with marginal and powerless fringe groups to instead perceive that mainstream conservatives are capable of addressing their issues, thereby drawing them into the political ranks of mainstream conservatism.

³⁵ David Horowitz, "My argument with white nationalists," *Salon*, Sept. 3, 2002, available online at http://archive.salon.com/news/col/horo/2002/09/03/white_nationalism/index_np.html.

For all her notoriety, Coulter is in some ways a minor player as a media transmitter. Let's look a little further at the various sectors of the media where transmitters operate:

A. Radio

While many of his critics would like to lump conservative radio-talk megastar Rush Limbaugh in with some of his contemporaries on the hard right, the Big Fat Idiot appears mostly to be a secular conservative who only occasionally treads into xenophobic or theocratic dogma. However, Limbaugh artfully presents ideas from the hard right for legitimate consideration by the mainstream, and thus plays a major role as a transmitter of ideas from other sectors — especially in light of his considerable reach.

Limbaugh's transmissions are clearest when he's at his most shrill, decrying bureaucrats in Washington who "would just as soon do away with democracy" and similar hyperbole. "The second violent American revolution is just about—I got my fingers about a quarter of an inch apart — is just about that far away," he told a *Washington Post* reporter, describing the sentiments behind the Patriot movement. "Because these people are sick and tired of a bunch of bureaucrats in Washington driving in to town and telling them what they can and can't do with their land." It's a line that would have played well at a militia meeting.

At other times, Limbaugh has dabbled in wink-and-nudge racism: On his thankfully short-lived TV program, for instance, Limbaugh one night promised to show his audience footage of everyday life among welfare recipients. He then ran video of the antics of a variety of great apes — mostly orangutans, gorillas and chimpanzees — hanging about zoos. The audience, of course, applauded and laughed.

Limbaugh also sounds themes that often are taken whole from stories circulated first among the Patriot right: Clinton body counts, education conspiracies, phony medical and environmental tales. Perhaps this is most important role: As a font of outright misinformation. (Limbaugh has never, to my knowledge, issued a correction for any of his voluminous factual errors.)

Limbaugh likes to dress himself up in public as an "entertainer," but what he really is above all, as I've observed, is a **propagandist**. This is apparent from many aspects of his programs, ranging from his refusal to engage in any kind of open or honest debate to the endless spew of disinformation that flows into his microphone. The latter is perhaps the most telling, because this is the essence of Newspeak: to render the meanings of words empty by assaulting them with falsification.

Just as significant on the airwaves are the horde of Limbaugh imitators who appear willing to say anything outrageous in the hope of garnering higher ratings. Foremost among these is Michael Savage, the obnoxiously xenophobic hater who recently was awarded a slot on MSNBC's Saturday lineup.

Savage is particularly gifted at presenting overtly racial appeals in soft wrapping, so that his listeners know what he means, even if he can't be pinned down for it later. But at times his appeal to racism is nearly naked. When he calls for the deportation of all immigrants, and the internment of Muslim-Americans, it isn't hard to discern a racial purpose to it all.

Perhaps just as disturbing about Savage is the eliminationist tone of much of his rhetoric, much of it aimed not at a racial or ethnic group but at liberals generally: "I say round them up and hang 'em high!" and "When I hear someone's in the civil rights business, I oil up my AR-15!" Here was a recent rant aimed at liberal critics:

"I'm more powerful than you are you little hateful nothings. You call yourself this for that and that for this. You say you represent groups, you represent nobody but the perverts that you hang around with and I'm warning you if you try to damage me any further with lies, be aware of something: that which you stoke shall come to burn you, the ashes of the

fireplace will come and burn your own house down. Be very careful, you are living in incendiary times. You can't just throw things at people and walk away thinking that you had a little fun. I warn you; I'm gonna warn you again, if you harm me and I pray that no harm comes to you, but I can't guarantee that it won't."³⁶

The level of intolerance and the implied threat in remarks like these — and they are common in his diatribes — raise reminders of similar eliminationism that ran rampant in Germany in the 1930s.

Another Limbaugh-wannabe with a more modest reach is Chuck Harder, a Florida-based talk-show host whose topics range from United Nations takeovers to the coming Y2K Apocalypse — as well as the full complement of Clinton scandals. In the past, Harder has broadcast daily updates from the Freemen standoff in Montana, and once featured renowned anti-Semite Eustace Mullins — one of the radical right's revered figures — as an “expert” on the Federal Reserve.

B. Cable TV

Among transmitters of memes that originated in the far right, one entity stands in a class all its own: Fox News.

The cable-news behemoth touts itself as “fair and balanced,” but no one has ever really figured out just whom they think they're kidding. Probably the dittoheads who buy up Ann Coulter books.

Well, an open bias is one thing. But broadcasting far-right conspiracy theories is another. And that's what Fox has done on numerous occasions.

The most noteworthy of these — though it received almost no attention at the time — occurred Feb. 21, 2001, when Brit Hume interviewed a fellow named Bob Schulz of We the People Foundation. Schulz was propounding on television a tax scheme that is built upon a hash of groundless conspiracy theories which have their origins in the far-right Posse Comitatus and other extremist “tax protest” schemes. It was, in fact, remarkably similar to the Montana Freemen's theories as well.³⁷

Here's the transcript of Hume's interview [from the videotape excerpt provided at the time by Fox News]:

Brit Hume: ... Coming to the conclusion that there is no law on the books that actually requires them — or most others for that matter — to pay income taxes. Most astonishing, noted the Times, those companies were not only not being pursued by the IRS, but some of them have actually collected refunds on taxes previously paid but now they claim were never owed. So is there something to their argument? Bob Schulz thinks so. He's the leader of a small but vigorous movement that is seeking to convince Americans that the income tax is a massive fraud on the public. He joins me now from Albany, N.Y.

Well, this will come as quite astonishing news to a great many Americans, Mr. Schulz — what's the basis of the claim?

³⁶ Transcript of Savage's nationally syndicated radio talk show, “The Savage Nation,” Thursday, June 13, 2002, available online at <http://www.savagestupidity.com/pr-6-22-2002-threat.html>. See also David Gilson, “Michael Savage's long, strange trip,” *Salon*, March 5, 2003, available online at <http://www.salon.com/news/feature/2003/03/05/savage/>.

³⁷ For a thorough examination of Schulz's campaign, see the report by noted author Daniel Levitas, “Untaxing America,” in the Southern Poverty Law Center's Winter 2001 *Intelligence Report*.

Bob Schulz: There is a very substantial, credible body of evidence by as many as 87 researchers that has concluded that the 16th Amendment was fraudulently certified in 1913, and that in fact three-fourths of the states had not approved or ratified, properly ratified the 16th Amendment, the income-tax amendment.

Hume: And what have the courts ruled on that matter?

Schulz: The courts have not ruled on the fraudulent ratification of the 16th Amendment. Bill Benson, the individual, the professional who went around to the archives of all 48 states that were in existence in 1913, obtained 17,000 notarized and certified documents relating to the ratification process in that state, he put his report together and went to court with it, and the courts ruled it's a political question for Congress. He then took the issue to Congress, and Congress said it's an issue for the courts.

Hume: And so basically it stands because the folks who could have upset it have let it stand.

Schulz: Right.

Hume: Right. Now let me ask you about the tax code itself. Now, I know that you contend that within the tax code there is a definition of what is called taxable income, and that somehow, although it appears to apply to all income from all sources, it does not, because of what is called Section 861. Can you explain what Section 861 is?

Schulz: Yeah. There is no law, no statute, or regulation that requires most citizens to file a tax return — most U.S. citizens to file a tax return or to pay the income tax. As an example, under Section 861 of the federal code of regulations, it says clearly that there's a list of income items, and unless the item of income comes from one of the sources which the code lists, then the code doesn't apply to the, um ...

Hume: — To the taxpayer in question.

Schulz: Right. And so all of those sources are foreign sources. Unless you are a foreigner working here, or a U.S. citizen working or earning your money abroad, then the tax code does not apply to you. That's clear in the code.

Hume: Now, I work for Fox News Channel, which was — is a division of a company that has its headquarters overseas. It is a domestic enterprise. And it is from that that I realize my income. Now if I were to take the position this year that I was owed a refund because the taxes that the company does withhold — and I don't think I can convince them not to — that I was owed a refund, and applied for that, would I get it?

Schulz: Um, heh, it might be difficult, because of the size of your corporation. Clearly, the federal government is nervous, Brit. A growing number of employers — so far they're small employers — have taken this position and have received refunds back for the money they're withheld from the paychecks of their employers. So far, no large company has taken this position.³⁸

³⁸ Author's transcript, taken from Fox News Webcast.

This wasn't the only occasion when Fox interviewed Schulz. When he staged a "hunger strike" (there's no evidence he actually went without food) later that year, Fox's *Hannity and Colmes* interviewed him, and were only a little less credulous than Hume.

[Schulz, for those interested, gave up his "hunger strike" after the intervention of Republican Rep. Roscoe Bartlett of Maryland, who at first promised to give Schulz's group a briefing on tax laws with IRS officials, but even called that off when Schulz announced the meeting would be "putting the IRS on trial." Last anyone heard of Schulz, last November, he was threatening the federal government with a "final warning" to all branches of government to "obey the Constitution, or else." Um, OK, Bob.]

Then there's Bill O'Reilly, the former tabloid-TV-show host who now poses as a "journalist" as the chief talking head at Fox. O'Reilly in particular has a penchant for conspiracy theories.

O'Reilly, who especially prides himself at "no spin" broadcasts, bristles at such suggestions. So let's roll the tape, courtesy of the fine folks at WorldNetDaily, the Web site where O'Reilly's online column originally appeared, and with whom O'Reilly has had a long association. (Its own significant role as a transmitter is discussed below. WND has long been a clearinghouse for a number of other "New World Order" style conspiracy theories.)

This is from a piece dated March 21, 2001, titled "Oklahoma City blast linked to bin Laden":

A former investigative reporter for the NBC affiliate in Oklahoma City last night told Fox News Channel's Bill O'Reilly she has gathered massive evidence of a foreign conspiracy involving Saudi terrorist leader Osama bin Laden in the 1995 bombing of the federal building that killed 168 people.

This wasn't the only time O'Reilly touted this theory. From a story by NewsMax (another conspiracism-rich Web publication) later that year, titled "McVeigh's Trial Attorney Alleges FBI Blocked Conspiracy Probe":

During an interview Monday night on Fox News Channel's "The O'Reilly Factor," host Bill O'Reilly asked Jones whether he believed McVeigh had acted alone.

It is worth noting, however, that this time O'Reilly at least interviews the source of all these theories — McVeigh's attorney, Stephen Jones.

It has remained an O'Reilly favorite. From a Fox transcript of May 8, 2002, "Are the OKC Bombing & 9/11 Linked?":

Last year, we interviewed investigative reporter [Jayna] Davis from Oklahoma, who believes there was a tie-in between the bombing in Oklahoma City and 9/11.

Joining us now from Washington is Larry Johnson, the former deputy director of the State Department's Office on Counter-terrorism under Presidents Bush and Clinton.

So you think there's some validity to this?

LARRY JOHNSON, FORMER STATE DEPARTMENT COUNTER-TERRORISM OFFICE DEPUTY DIRECTOR: I was skeptical at first, Bill. I took the evidence, I looked at it, and I started talking to some of the witnesses. Where there's smoke, there's fire. You've got several things going on here that have not been thoroughly looked at and need to be checked out.

O'Reilly's record extends well beyond his propensity for right-wing conspiracy theories. There have been such slips, for instance, as when he recently referred to Mexicans as "wetbacks."

O'Reilly also has been sounding an ominous theme that likewise is becoming popular on the Patriot right: That liberals who criticize Bush's war efforts are "traitors." His recent remarks were especially noteworthy:

Americans, and indeed our foreign allies who actively work against our military once the war is underway, will be considered enemies of the state by me.

Just fair warning to you, Barbra Streisand and others who see the world as you do. I don't want to demonize anyone, but anyone who hurts this country in a time like this, well, let's just say you will be spotlighted.³⁹

This, from the same fellow who accused Clinton of malfeasance during the Bosnian campaign, and who undermined our position abroad by openly suggesting that Clinton's missile attacks on Al Qaeda were an attempt to 'wag the dog.'

These, of course, are mere samplings. If you happen to watch Fox News with any regularity, these far-right themes come popping out from all kinds of corners, usually uttered by spokesmen from transmitter political organizations such as those I identified in the last installment. (The popular *Hannity and Colmes* program is also a rife with this kind of rhetoric.) The result is a steady drip of extremist memes blending into the day's Republican talking points.

C. The Internet

Anyone who's followed the conservative movement's growth in the past five years is well familiar with the Free Republic [<http://www.freerepublic.com>], the ultra-conservative website that is in a class all its own in transmitting the extremist agenda into mainstream conservatism.

Free Republic (like the Patriot movement) avoids wading into racial or religious discussions, and presents itself as purely a "conservative" political forum, but it has become one of the chief breeding grounds for conspiracy theories on the right. During Bill Clinton's presidential tenure, many of these involved his alleged plans for overthrowing democracy and installing a "New World Order" dictatorship. Any number of extremist memes have over the years received extensive play at the site, including several post-9/11 threads blaming the entirety of that disaster on Clinton. In recent months, the site has gradually shifted its focus to a bellicose defense of President Bush's Iraq war plans, with an emphasis on intimidating liberal antiwar protesters.

The most significant part of the Web site's reach, though, is the kind of following it has created. Self-labeled "Freepers" have in recent years become increasingly organized manifestations of some of the extreme sentiments that circulate at the site, to the point of having serious real-world effects: Freepers played significant roles in several incidents involving thuggery and intimidation during the post-election Florida debacle, including disrupting an appearance by Jesse Jackson (in concert, as it happens, with white supremacists) and engaging in noisy, intimidating protests outside of Al Gore's vice-presidential residence.

³⁹ Bill O'Reilly, *The O'Reilly Factor*, Fox News, Feb. 26, 2003. Transcript available online at <http://www.informationclearinghouse.info/article1749.htm>.

Not quite as potent but certainly as vivid of transmitters of far-right memes are a couple of well-read Webzines: NewsMax [<http://www.newsmax.com>] and WorldNetDaily [<http://www.worldnetdaily.com>]. Both have at various times been funded by right-wing guru Richard Mellon Scaife, who has on several occasions displayed his own predilection for extremist beliefs. Certainly these two Webzines reflect that. (Both magazines, incidentally, also carried breathless coverage of Bob Schulz's anti-tax campaign.)

WorldNetDaily in particular has been extremely conspiracy-prone over the years. In the run-up to Y2K, for example, its major theme was the Patriot belief that Clinton intended to use the social chaos certain to proceed from the looming technological disaster as a pretext for declaring martial law and thereby establishing his dictatorship. Of course, one of the chief promoters of this theory was the zine's editor, Joseph Farah, who penned numerous columns on the subject.⁴⁰

NewsMax has similarly been a major conduit of extremist anti-Clinton propaganda, especially since its reins were taken over by Christopher Ruddy, the Scaife-funded 'investigative reporter' who devoted years to proving Clinton had Vince Foster murdered (though of course he also pursued dozens of other Clinton conspiracy theories, all equally groundless). In recent months NewsMax has shifted its focus to attacks on Muslims and liberals as "traitors," while loudly defending President Bush's war plans.

D. The Press

The *Wall Street Journal* remains a well-respected paper within journalistic circles for its reporting staff, but the paper's editorial page has for the better part of a decade become one of the real scandals of newspapering, particularly its rampant unethical behavior in publishing material that is provably false and often little more than thinly disguised smears of various liberals, particularly Clinton during his tenure, and refusing at time to correct even gross errors of fact. Not surprisingly, many of these false memes were generated by right-wing extremists of various stripes and then given the mantle of respectability by the WSJ.

This propensity had manifested itself well before Clinton — as when, for example, it championed the work of Charles Murray, co-author of the now-infamous *The Bell Curve*. As Lucy Williams explained it in her analysis of the way conservatives treated Murray:

By articulating a definition of poverty that associated it explicitly with illegitimacy, then associating illegitimacy with race, the Right made it acceptable to express blatantly racist concepts without shame.³⁸ For example, when Charles Murray wrote *The Bell Curve* ten years after *Losing Ground*, he argued that welfare should be abolished, not simply because of the economic incentives it creates, but because it encourages "dysgenesis," the outbreeding of intelligent whites by genetically inferior African Americans, Hispanics, and poor whites.⁴¹

Likewise, the WSJ indulged all kinds of extremist propaganda in its pursuit of Clinton. One of its chief sources was Floyd Brown, a longtime enemy of Bill from Arkansas days. Brown was responsible for the circulation of much of the early Whitewater dirt on Bill Clinton, mostly through Citizens United's top investigator, David Bossie (who later gained notoriety as the erstwhile chief investigator for Rep. Dan Burton's campaign-finance probe, and has in recent months been turning up as a pundit on Fox News).

⁴⁰ See, e.g., Farah's Dec. 13, 1999, column, "Y2K, FEMA and 'domestic terror' ", available online at http://www.worldnetdaily.com/news/article.asp?ARTICLE_ID=14871.

⁴¹ Lucy A. Williams, "Decades of Distortion: The Right's 30-year Assault on Welfare," December, 1997, *Political Research Associates Report*, available online at <http://www.publiceye.org/welfare/Decades-of-DistortionTOC.htm#TopOfPage>.

Brown's credibility was already of questionable value; by 1998, this had become unmistakable. For instance, at Brown's Citizens United Web site — in addition, naturally, to a bevy of Monica-related impeachment screeds — you could find screaming exposes of the Clintons' alleged involvement in the United Nations one-world-government plot. A streaming banner on the site shouted: "Secret United Nations Agenda Exposed In Explosive New Video!" (The video in question prominently featured an appearance by then-Sen. John Ashcroft.) A little further down, the site explains: "This timely new video reveals how the liberal regime of Bill Clinton is actively conspiring to aid and abet the United Nations in its drive for global supremacy." For those who follow the militia movement, these tales have more than a familiar ring.

Yet in 1994, members of the WSJ's editorial board sat down with Brown and examined his anti-Clinton information — which in nature was not appreciably different from what he was flogging four years later — and shortly thereafter, nearly half of the *Journal's* editorial page was devoted one day to reprinting materials obtained from Brown. Moreover, the WSJ continued to recycle the allegations from that material for much of the following six years.

The other major organ that transmits right-wing memes is the Moonie-owned newspaper *The Washington Times*, which suffers from a variety of ethical maladies. Most of these are related to spreading extremist memes about Bill Clinton, as well as championing various white-nationalist causes exuding from the neo-Confederate movement (two senior editors have long associations with the movement). But the conspiracy-mongering has continued well since Clinton left office, with a stream of recent pieces suggesting that Al Qaeda and not white supremacists were really behind the Oklahoma City bombing.⁴²

E. Pundits

These are the rich orphans of the media business — some of them are former reporters, some are former political operatives, and some are just propagandists in the Limbaugh mold. Their ranks are filled with all kinds and shapes of transmitters, many of whom gladly resort to extremist memes because of their outrageousness quotient — and if there's any way to make your reputation as a pundit, it's to say something that makes headlines. No publicity is bad publicity, as they say.

These range from ex-liberals like Andrew Sullivan and Christopher Hitchens, who gladly traded in several extremist memes about Clinton in the course of excreting their voluminous bile toward him, to barely concealed extremists like David Horowitz and Michael Savage. In between, it was never unusual to hear the late Barbara Olson repeat a Patriot legend, or even now for Peggy Noonan to indulge in plainly irresponsible speculation about Muslims.

The most notorious of them, though, is Ann Coulter, whose behavior continues to provide us with nearly perfect models of how transmitters work, and why they are so effective. Indeed, there seems to be no end in sight.

⁴² See, for example, Frank Gaffney, "Lurking in the Jayna Davis Files," *Washington Times*, Nov. 19, 2002.

X: Reaching the Receivers

I was driving around Billings, Montana, in the middle of a nasty blizzard in a cheap little rented car and trying to figure out what in the hell was going on when the Voice On Loan From God hit me.

There are, I suppose, things that you have to admire about Rush Limbaugh, and one of them is his voice. It is absolutely distinctive. I can hear it through a rolled-up car and know whom the driver is listening to. But that afternoon in early March 1996 I heard him talk and it came as something of a revelation.

I actually have made a habit over the years of listening to Limbaugh because I want to know what he's saying. More to the point, I spend a lot of time driving around rural backcountry, and you have to know that Limbaugh is just about the only constant thing you can find on the radio out there. There's country music, but in the open range even it can be spotty reception-wise. Rush, however, is everywhere.

He is inescapable. He seems to be on at nearly all times of the day too. And sometimes the country music (especially the gawdawful crap they call 'new country') gets bad, and the tape collection gets old, and listening to Rush rumble away in that nice baritone is not all that bad to listen to, especially if I'm in the mood for the artistry of his awfulness. He makes me laugh, though not in ways he intends, I'm sure.

There wasn't anything new or remarkable about that day's broadcast. It just answered a question I had been trying to understand.

I was in Billings because a few days before, the FBI had arrested two leaders of the Montana Freemen at their compound near Jordan, Montana. I attended their initial hearings at the federal courthouse, drove up to Jordan for a day, then drove back to Billings for more courtroom action at the arraignments.

This was quite a bit of driving, especially with the ice and snowstorm that had come through about a week before and was continuing to pile up. However, these had become familiar roads to me. I had been out this way only two months before, talking to people in Roundup and Jordan about the eruption of the Freemen on the local scene and trying to get a sense of what was happening to these rural societies.

Mostly I was trying to get a handle on the seething, venomous hatred of the government that was seeping out in the bile of movements like the Freemen, but was much, much more widespread. Almost literally anyone you talked to in rural America was bitter with their hatred of the "gummint" in nearly all of its forms, particularly the federal one. Certainly it had been on full display in the federal courtroom in Billings, where LeRoy Schweitzer and Dan Petersen had done their best to disrupt the hearings with their insistence that the entire proceedings against them were illegitimate.

I was no stranger to feelings of hatred of the government, for reasons I explained in *In God's Country* [short version: federal bureaucrats were responsible for the death of a great-aunt with whom I was close]. But this went beyond even that. It was blind, irrational, utterly visceral hatred that went beyond even the worst things I had heard from the mouths of Birchers when I was growing up. In fact, it reminded me of talk I had heard in only one other place previously: the Aryan Nations compound in Hayden Lake. The conspiracy theories, the pseudo-legal 'constitutionalism', as well as the barely concealed race-baiting and anti-Semitism were all present. The only thing missing was the usual accompaniment of Nazi worship and cross-burning.

The thing about government-bashing out West is that nearly anyone who has lived here for any length of time, particularly if they have deep family roots, has directly benefited from government programs that are in fact responsible for their very presence on this land. It's a decidedly mixed bag that has always created a love/hate relationship between the government and the ranchers and farmers who have been its main beneficiaries, and sometimes its victims.

In eastern Montana, for instance, this goes back to the homesteading programs of the post-1910 period sponsored by the federal government, in close cooperation (as it were) with the railroads. These were essentially scams which helped fill out millions of acres of empty space in the West but which more often than not proved financially disastrous for the homesteaders. [For a terrific account of this, read Jonathan Raban's *Bad Land: An American Romance*.]

The federal government builds our roads, pays for our schools, constructs our water-supply and irrigation systems and the dams that make them go. We're actually terribly dependent on the gumint, which chafes rather nastily against Westerners' own deeply mythologized self-reliance and independence.

The sheer venom that was emerging from the Patriot movement, however, was in another universe. Built around cockamamie theories and wild-eyed fire-breathing rhetoric, and unmoored from any real semblance of reality, it was so wildly out of left field that it was an incongruous thing to be taking root in a place like Montana where common sense was most often the real coin of the realm. It was a disturbing thing to see how many people with ordinary working-class, agricultural backgrounds — people who before had always been normal contributors to society, sometimes, as in the case of a couple of at least one elderly Freeman, Emmett Clark, with a rock-solid reputation in the community — were being drawn into the Patriot movement and embracing at least its rhetoric, if not its agenda.

How had this happened? What was encouraging people to make this leap? I was puzzling over this that day in Billings, tootling around in a front-wheel drive Chevy that actually handled the snow just fine, and listening to Rush on the radio.

On that day, I had decided to try listening to Rush as though I were someone like Dan Petersen or some other working-class stiff from Jordan — not particularly educated, prone to a visceral kind of patriotism and similar politics, and insistent on my identity as an independent Westerner. Doing that, I got an answer, or at least part of one.

Limbaugh was holding forth that day on the subject of federal bureaucrats who he claimed were attempting to ignore the will of the people on matters relating to control of federal lands as well as the tax bureaucracy. At the apex of the rant, Limbaugh began speculating about the motives of these bureaucrats: *they didn't care about "democracy"; they would probably just as soon dispose of it, and any kind of responsiveness to the public, altogether if given the opportunity; they would be happier in a dictatorship, which was what they were establishing anyway*, Rush informed us.

Suddenly I had a very clear picture about how hatred of the government had reached such illogical and hysterical heights. Americans were being told, relentlessly and repeatedly, that not only was government a bad thing, it was inherently evil, indeed conspiring to take away their freedom and enslave them. The person telling them this was a mainstream conservative. He was giving them essentially the same message being spread by the Freemen and militias, but this time with the mantle of mainstream legitimacy. Rush was taking people up to the edge of Patriot beliefs and more or less introducing his listeners to them. And if they were people like those in Montana (or anywhere else the Patriot movement set up shop, which was largely every corner of the country), who already Patriots for neighbors, they would take the next step themselves.

Limbaugh's defenders, like Ann Coulter's, will no doubt defend this kind of talk as simple hyperbole intended to emphasize his point and inject some humor. That of is utterly disingenuous; why say something if at some level you don't mean it? Moreover, it overlooks the effect that it has on their audiences, who may not be as sophisticated or as inclined to distinguish the hyperbole from the supposedly reasonable discourse. Indeed, the bulk of Limbaughites I have met tend to take his every utterance as virtual Gospel.

Thus, Limbaugh might claim that he's merely being critical of government, but this rhetoric treads beyond such perfectly acceptable (in fact desirable) robust political speech, to the kind that argues for the

overthrow and utter dismantling of the system. And that is, if anything, the dividing line between being a politically active citizen and being an extremist, right or left. Limbaugh blurs that line constantly.

It was this kind of irresponsible demagoguery to which President Clinton referred in his remarkable address in Minneapolis a few days after the Oklahoma City bombing:

In this country we cherish and guard the right of free speech. We know we love it when we put up with people saying things we absolutely deplore. And we must always be willing to defend their right to say things we deplore to the ultimate degree. But we hear so many loud and angry voices in America today whose sole goal seems to be to try to keep some people as paranoid as possible and the rest of us all torn up and upset with each other. They spread hate. They leave the impression that, by their very words, that violence is acceptable. You ought to see — I'm sure you are now seeing the reports of some things that are regularly said over the airwaves in America today.

Well, people like that who want to share our freedoms must know that their bitter words can have consequences and that freedom has endured in this country for more than two centuries because it was coupled with an enormous sense of responsibility on the part of the American people.

If we are to have freedom to speak, freedom to assemble, and, yes, the freedom to bear arms, we must have responsibility as well. And to those of us who do not agree with the purveyors of hatred and division, with the promoters of paranoia, I remind you that we have freedom of speech, too, and we have responsibilities, too. And some of us have not discharged our responsibilities. It is time we all stood up and spoke against that kind of reckless speech and behavior.

If they insist on being irresponsible with our common liberties, then we must be all the more responsible with our liberties. When they talk of hatred, we must stand against them. When they talk of violence, we must stand against them. When they say things that are irresponsible, that may have egregious consequences, we must call them on it. The exercise of their freedom of speech makes our silence all the more unforgivable. So exercise yours, my fellow Americans. Our country, our future, our way of life is at stake.

Though Clinton certainly never identified Limbaugh as one of those “angry voices,” almost immediately Limbaugh responded with cries of censorship and claims that Clinton was attempting to silence him. The protests have continued so steadily that the claim that Clinton blamed Limbaugh has become a stock theme about the supposed perfidy of liberals.

Indeed, Ann Coulter herself continued this meme in her book, *Slander: Liberal Lies About The American Right*, pp. 92-93: “When impeached former president Bill Clinton identified Rush Limbaugh as the cause of the Oklahoma City bombing, he unleashed all the typical liberal curse words for conservatives. He blamed ‘loud and angry voices’ heard ‘over the airwaves in America’ that were making people ‘paranoid’ and spreading hate.”

Methinks the lady doth protest too much.

Of course, Clinton did not name anyone, even though the voices he probably had more in mind were those belong to the likes G. Gordon “Head Shots” Liddy and some of the more vicious Patriot types like Chuck Harder, who constantly hawked Patriot conspiracy theories outright, alongside a full dose of rhetoric about the violent resistance of federal agents. But in fact Clinton used very general terms probably because he recognized the reality as well, which was that characters like Limbaugh and his fellow movement arch-conservatives have been irresponsible as well — perhaps not to the same degree, except for the fact that the reach of transmitters like Limbaugh is so massive.

And the bitter truth, for people like Limbaugh, is that Clinton was right: Words have consequences. When you carefully tailor memes and ideas that promote an essentially extremist worldview to fit a mainstream audience, you're spreading poison into the community that can have extremely violent consequences. Anyone who's read *American Terrorist: Timothy McVeigh and the Oklahoma City Bombing*⁴³ has a pretty clear picture of how closely McVeigh's hatred of the government was fanned by both extremist and mainstream voices. And it was to all these voices which Clinton alluded.

Limbaugh's protests notwithstanding, it is not hard to see that while, of course, Limbaugh cannot be blamed directly for Oklahoma City, neither can he be wholly absolved. Whining does not relieve him from the responsibility for his words. Timothy McVeigh, and the wave of Patriot domestic terrorists who followed him, did not occur in a vacuum. They were creatures in a milieu in which Limbaugh and other ostensibly "mainstream" media, political and religious figures helped transmit and reinforce extremist ideas that, when nursed with a violent predisposition, became extremely volatile in real life.

These transmissions have a twofold effect, as I've mentioned earlier: They not only inject extremist ideas into the mainstream, but they brings the two sectors closer together.

Take two neighbors, Joe and Bill. Joe is a good taxpaying family man and a Republican precinct committeeman. Bill is a Patriot who attends Preparedness Expos and "common law court" meetings and has declared his "sovereign citizenship." Now, contrary to popular myths, most Patriots in fact are indistinguishable from any other average American — they hold jobs, raise kids, carpool, attend church. And so in most respects, Joe and Bill get along fine, as most neighbors might, though Joe thinks Bill's ideas are kooky. Then he starts listening to Limbaugh, and after awhile, he begins to think that maybe his government-hating neighbor isn't so kooky after all.

Meanwhile, Bill listens to the same broadcasts and begins to believe that maybe mainstream Republicans are finally starting to "get it." The next time he and Bill talk over the fence, they find they have more to talk about. Pretty soon Joe is heading off with Bill to a Preparedness Expo, while Bill starts volunteering to work as a "poll watcher" for the Republicans in the next elections.

The result is that right-wing extremists wind up exerting a gravitational pull on mainstream conservatism — and by extension, the whole political continuum — that far exceeds their actual size or, for that matter, political viability. That the entire spectrum has shifted steadily rightward in the past 10 years and more could not be more self-evident. And at times, it has come with devastating results, as at Oklahoma City.

If nothing else, Oklahoma City should at least have been a signal to Limbaugh that it was time to tone down the rhetoric, to stop demonizing government employees and federal officials. That, as we have seen, has never occurred. Anti-government bile is still a constant of his radio rants, as anyone reading the transcripts at Web sites like Rush Transcript [<http://rushtranscript.blogspot.com>] can see for themselves. Certainly it was that day in Billings, which was nearly a year after Oklahoma City.

However, since the election of George W. Bush, Limbaugh's anti-government venom is largely reserved for *liberal* officials. In general, Limbaugh has now shifted his focus from demonizing the government to demonizing anything liberal. Of course, this sentiment has always been part of his shtick, but in recent months he has been stepping it up another notch. Not only are liberals to be opposed politically, they are in fact treasonous. This was explicit in his attacks on Sen. Tom Daschle, the leader of the Senate Democrats, and was a continuing theme as antiwar protests grew in volume and intensity, referring to dissenters as, among other things, "anti-American, anti-capitalist Marxists and Communists."

⁴³ Lou Michel and Dan Herbeck, *American Terrorist: Timothy McVeigh and the Oklahoma City Bombing* (New York: Regan Books, 2001)

This is extremely dangerous talk, and not merely because it is divisive. It actually threatens to simultaneously harden the growing alliance between extremist and mainstream conservatives, and create a milieu in which violence against dissenters becomes acceptable. It is when we see this kind of coalescence that we are in real danger of seeing fascism blossom in America.

Of course, Clinton in fact made abundantly clear that day that the proper response is not to shut down those irresponsible voices, to try to silence them. That would be adopting their tactics, and put us on their moral plane.

Let Limbaugh and his cohorts have their say. And let the rest of us be there to counter his disinformation with facts, his false memes with a clear dose of reality.

But pretending that he's only an "entertainer" — or for that matter that he really is wholly mainstream — is no longer an option.

XI: Dualist Receivers

So far, when talking about the “receivers” who comprise the audience of the various “transmitters” of extremist memes into the mainstream, I’ve mainly focused on the mainstream Republicans who make up the mass of the conservative movement in America.

But as I’ve explained, these “transmissions” are two-way affairs, sending messages to both the mainstream and the extremists from whose worldview the memes are drawn: namely, that their formerly unacceptable beliefs are gaining acceptance. It essentially invites them to move into the mainstream without having to change their views.

And so for the past decade and more — and particularly in the past three years — mainstream conservatism has increasingly become home to a variety of right-wing extremists. Conservatives uniformly reject this reality, arguing that their party is not home to a bunch of wild-eyed lunatics; it’s the home of tax-paying, churchgoing, job-holding, productive members of society.

One of the real problems with coming to grips with the right-wing extremists, in fact, is the public image that has grown up around them for the past half-century, but driven home in the militiaman stereotype of the 1990s: A half-educated, beer-swilling, Bible-thumping, child-beating, dentistry-challenged, gun-loving lunatic with both eyes rattling around in his head and a steady stream of hate foaming out of his mouth. Not to mention all those visions of black helicopters dancing in his head.

I have attended a lot of militia and Patriot meetings over the years, and this wasn’t what I found at all. In my experience, the average militia member is a person who very much keeps all the appearances of being a mainstream player in society (as contrasted with, say, the skinheads and neo-Nazis, who more closely fit the description). Most of them are reasonably well educated. A large number of them are veterans. Most of the rest are agrarian or blue-collar workers with families. They all pay their taxes (unless they’ve been drawn in deeply by one of the tax-protest schemes) and vote and attend church.

The false stereotype is built on a sociological approach to these groups, called “centrist/extremist theory,” developed in the 1950s that actually is now largely discredited among sociologists. This theory basically held that these “fringe” groups represented a constituency of largely uneducated classes who were grossly disenfranchised due to this fact, thus leading to their radicalism; their status also ensured that they would remain outside the realm of the mainstream. Well, subsequent data collected through the 1970s and 1980s began to demonstrate the weakness of this model; contrary to its prediction, surveys of “Christian Patriots” found that on average they were better educated than the population at large, and many of these groups’ members actually prove to be highly educated and some of better-than-average means. Take, for instance, the saga of Carl Story and Vince Bertollini, who made millions in the Silicon Valley, moved to Sandpoint and promptly began underwriting the Aryan Nations and other Identity churches in the area. Of course, right now, Bertollini is on the lam and Story has moved away.

Sociology in the meantime has moved on to a broader consideration of the problem, often summarily described as “post-classical theory” and including such models as the “new social movements theory,” all of which recognize that there can be considerable interaction between these groups and the mainstream, and that many of their followers are in fact as mainstream-based as can be. And this is borne out largely by what we’ve seen in terms of the Patriot movement’s spread via mainstream channels.

It is important to note that it is erroneous to conclude that since there are often shared themes on the right that all right-wing groups work together. It is not fair to presume that all conservatives are on a slippery slope toward reaction, nor that all reactionaries are inevitably borne on a transmission belt toward fascism. Migrations do occur, but they occur in both directions, just as on the left.

At the same time, however, it is equally undeniable that these kinds of associations forever alter the nature of the political body in question. The Republicans' Southern Strategy, by aiming to draw white segregationists into the GOP fold, ineluctably transformed the party to the point that calling it the "party of Lincoln" now, particularly in the South, is liable to draw hoots. The associations work both ways, of course; extremists are just as likely to have their anger defused and their extremism tempered by their exposure to mainstream influences. But the overall gravitational pull rightward by the extremist elements has become increasingly disproportionate in recent years.

The problem is that Americans — and the media particularly — have a view of these so-called "fringe" elements as being on the outskirts of society, when in reality they have become wholly interwoven with the rest of this. Much of the blame belongs to "centrist/extremist theory," which gained such prominence in the media in the 1960s that it has never been displaced from the popular understanding of political extremism. C/E theory was an offshoot of the chief sociological model of the '40s and '50s, "Collective Behavior Theory," which stressed irrational dimensions of movements and often saw them as potentially dangerous, temporary aberrations in the otherwise smooth-flowing social system.

Let me recommend a resource for more on this point: Public Research Associates' page on "Studying the Right: A Scholarly Approach," available on the Web at http://www.publiceye.org/Study_right.html, which has a large amount of material on C/E Theory. Chip Berlet, the author, sums it up thus:

Under centrist/extremist theory, dissident movements of the left and right were portrayed as composed of outsiders — politically marginal people who have no connection to the mainstream electoral system or nodes of government or corporate power. Their anxiety is heightened by fears that their economic or social status is slipping. Under great stress, these psychologically fragile people snap into a mode of irrational political hysteria, and as they embrace an increasingly paranoid style they make militant and unreasonable demands. Because they are unstable they can become dangerous and violent. Their extremism places them far outside the legitimate political process, which is located in the center where "pluralists" conduct democratic debates.

The solution prescribed by centrist/extremist theory is to marginalize the dissidents as radicals and dangerous extremists. Their demands need not be taken seriously. Law enforcement can then be relied upon to break up any criminal conspiracies by subversive radicals that threaten the social order.⁴⁴

You can read through the rest of the above piece to see why and how centrist/extremist theory has become discredited. But the *coup de grace* may have been delivered by a study that was important to my own work, James Aho's 1991 text, *The Politics of Righteousness: Idaho Christian Patriotism*. ("Christian Patriots" is what the movement called itself in the 1980s and then morphed into the more secular and simple "Patriot movement" by the early 1990s.) Aho, who conducted a complete study with a full statistical sample, found that while a number of Patriots indeed fit the profile predicted by centrist/extremist theory, the majority did not. He found that they were often well educated (their average education was above the average American's), held regular jobs (though they did experience a higher degree of occupational isolation), and appeared "normal" by most measures:

⁴⁴ Chip Berlet, "Ideological Frameworks and Assumptions," Political Research Associates, available online at http://www.publiceye.org/research/concepts/Frameworks-01.htm#P46_5080.

Idaho's patriots in general do not seem more socially alienated from their communities than cross-sections of Americans or Idahoans. ... Out of the seven alienation variables on which information was gathered, statistical support for the theory of mass politics [another term for C/E theory] is found for only one.⁴⁵

The false stereotypes — beloved among folks on the left for their value in lampooning right-wingers, and equally cherished on the right by conservatives loath to admit their influence — have obscured the extent to which right-wing extremists have woven themselves into the fabric of mainstream conservatism. It's an illusion that has especially manifested itself in rural America, where the extremists' actual numbers are hardly overwhelming, but the number of people who sympathize with them is. I would hate to have counted how many times I (and others who work the field) have heard neighbors, friends and relatives of Patriots say: "Well, I don't buy everything they say, but I think some of it might be true, and I certainly can understand why they'd feel that way" (or some variant thereon). In fact, it's rare when you can find a rural dweller out here who doesn't say something like that.

A deeper examination of the individual psychology of the kind of people who are drawn to extremist movements helps explain further how extremist believers intermingle with those in the larger mainstream. There have been many studies along these lines, but the one that seemed to most accurately describe the people I met in the Patriot movement could be found in the essay "Religious Totalism, Violence and Exemplary Dualism: Beyond the Extrinsic Model," by Dick Anthony and Thomas Robbins (both sociologists; Anthony is from Berkeley and Robbins from Yale).⁴⁶

In this analysis, the Patriot movement and its millennialist relatives are described as "exemplary dualist movements," a direct product of the current larger social malaise:

It has been a staple of recent American cultural analysis and criticism that the contemporary United States increasingly lacks a consensual and compelling social ethic and that in consequence, the 'covenant' uniting the American people has become, in Robert Bellah's words, an 'empty and broken shell.' One consequence of the lack of an integrative ethic, we have intimated above, is a diminished capacity of parents — who are themselves wrestling with the fragmented selves that result from the lack of an integrated ethic — to serve as persuasive role-models or identification figures for their children, and thereby to transmit a coherent set of values. In this context parents may tend to treat their children as 'self-objects' in the sense of evaluating them in terms of tangible, purely external criteria such as their apparent social-academic-vocational 'success' or competence. This pattern enhances the anxiety over the themes of success, competence and power on the part of children, who are more likely to develop a fragmented or polarized self composed of a grandiose, all-powerful or omnipotent self which is split off from a devalued, pathetic, failed self.

Social movements with distinctly dualistic worldviews provide psycho-ideological contexts which facilitate attempts to heal the split self by projecting negativity and devalued self-elements onto ideologically devalued contrast symbols. But there is another possible linkage between these kinds of movements and individuals with split selves in the throes of identity confusion. People with the whole range of personality disorders, which utilize splitting and projective identification, tend to have difficulties in establishing stable, intimate relationships. Splitting tends to produce volatile and unstable

⁴⁵ James Aho, *The Politics of Righteousness: Idaho Christian Patriotism* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1990), p. 161.

⁴⁶ It is included in the collection *Millennialism and Violence* (London: Frank Cass, 1995), edited by Michael Barkun of Syracuse, pp. 10-50.

relationships as candidates for intimacy are alternately idealized and degraded. Thus, narcissists tend to have vocational, and more particularly, interpersonal difficulties as they obsessively focus upon status-reinforcing rewards in interpersonal relations. They have difficulty developing social bonds grounded in empathy and mutuality, and their structure of interpersonal relations tends to be unstable. Thus, individuals may be tempted to enter communal and quasi-communal social movements which combine a more structured setting for interpersonal relations with a dualistic interpersonal theme of 'triangulation' which embodies the motif of 'the enemy of my enemy is my friend.' Such movements create a sense of mutuality by focusing attention on specific contrast groups and their values, goals and lifestyles so that this shared repudiation seems to unite the participants and provide a meaningful 'boundary' to operationalize the identity of the group. Solidarity within the group and the convert's sense of dedication and sacrifice on behalf of group goals may enable him or her to repudiate the dissociated negative (bad, weak or failed) self and the related selfish and exploitative self which they may be aware that others might have perceived. These devalued selves can then be projected on to either scapegoats designated by the group or, more generally, non-believers whose values and behavior allegedly do not attain the exemplary purity and authenticity of that of devotees.⁴⁷

In my experience, this quite accurately describes the dynamic of how and why people are attracted to such hateful beliefs as those held by right-wing extremists, as well as their pale reflections — filtered, as it were, through transmitters — advocated by such receiver types as the Freepers. It also clearly describes the meeting-ground for extremist and mainstream in the black-and-white, Manichean dualism common to all kinds of worldviews; it has always been pronounced both among right-wing extremists and the theocratic right, but of late it has become a staple of mainstream conservatives as well.

Most of all, the suggestion that the movement's primary converts will be essentially dysfunctional people is not much cause for optimism, either, for as they note at the end, this kind of susceptibility to authoritarianism obviously increases during such periods of social chaos as we have had since Sept. 11:

We do not necessarily view the members of exemplary dualist groups as mentally ill or deeply disturbed relative to average levels of developmental maturity in the general population. We do believe that such groups appeal to individuals with certain identity constructions and difficulties. Nevertheless some degree of splitting, projective identification and polarized identity may be 'normal' for most people in mainstream culture.

People with completely holistic selves with an integrated ethical orientation rather than split-off negative external conscience may be relatively unusual, particularly in periods when general meaning orientations in the culture as a whole have declined in coherence and plausibility. ... When mainstream cultural coherence declines, and anomie and identity confusion become more common, active seeking for exemplary dualist involvements is one possible solution to immediate psychic pain.⁴⁸

Indeed, as we will see, this could very well explain why the right is becoming increasingly intolerant of liberalism: It is the one remaining component of society that has so far failed to join up with the dualist worldview being promoted not merely by transmitters like Rush Limbaugh and Ann Coulter, but by the Bush administration itself.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 30-31.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 37-38.

More importantly, it makes clear that the chief driving force against liberalism in America is precisely in the chief meeting-ground of right-wing dualism: fundamentalist Christianity.

XII: Divine Transmissions

The fundamentalist right and the extremist right have always done a certain amount of commingling — witness, for example, Pat Robertson’s “New World Order” skirmish, and the white-hot rhetoric over abortion. And since the early 1980s, conservative Christians have had an explicit alliance with the secular corporatist right; Ronald Reagan and the first George Bush represented this latter bloc, and their alliance with the Christian right was as much tactical as heartfelt.

Not so the presidency of George W. Bush. While secular neoconservatives are in charge of Bush’s foreign policy, on domestic policy the Christian right has been almost completely in charge, beginning with Attorney General John Ashcroft’s numerous assaults on individual and privacy rights, and running through the Ted Olson-led White House, which has endorsed attacks on everything from affirmative action to the Miranda ruling. Most of all, Bush himself has given his own fundamentalist beliefs an extraordinarily high profile — to the point that fundamentalists’ very beliefs are now identified with the president’s agenda.

This is strange, if you think about it. If you look up and down the roster of the Bush administration, what’s clear is that it is dominated by **corporatists**. And when you look at the Bush agenda — from tax policy to “corporate reform” to media ownership to environmental policy to the war in Iraq — nearly every aspect of it is controlled by corporate interests. This is disquieting enough; after all, the historical record is clear on one thing: When fascism has succeeded at Paxton’s “second stage,” it has done so through an explicit alliance with the mainstream corporatist right.

A couple of readers wrote in to point out that Mussolini himself described fascism thus:

“Fascism should more appropriately be called Corporatism, because it is a merger of State and corporate power.”

Of course, this is a typically self-serving (for *Il Duce*) and incomplete definition of fascism; the alliance between fascism and corporatism was essential to Mussolini’s success, and he liked to flatter himself as a kind of captain of industry. Though this alliance was indeed vital, fascism in fact was a complex phenomenon that drew its animating force from its claims to representing a true national identity. Nonetheless, as Matthew Davis wrote in an e-mail:

Any reasonable definition of ‘fascism’ should incorporate a corporatist component — both Mussolini and Franco (and certainly Hitler, who’s not really a pure Fascist) were big on running their country for the benefit of corporate elites, at the expense of labor (sound familiar?). They occupied a grey area where industry wasn’t the direct property of the state, but maintained a hand-in-glove symbiosis. The U.S. under Bush isn’t quite as tight with industry, but it ain’t that far off, either.

This argument, however, also demonstrates the limits of identifying corporatism with fascism. While the Bush regime is devotedly corporatist, it is only in the way it circulates and traffics in fascist memes and Newspeak that it resembles anything fascist. There is so far none of the strict and brutal authoritarianism or police-state tactics that also typify fascist regimes. Perhaps most telling at this stage of things is the extent to which it resorts to thuggery and street violence, or any of the other tactics of threatening intimidation that are associated with genuine fascism — which so far is not to any great or really appreciable degree. That may, however, be changing.

Of course, the identifiable proto-fascist element in America — the Patriot/militia movement and associated manifestations of right-wing extremism, especially anti-abortion extremists — often favors such tactics. And unfortunately, the Bush campaign’s apparent alliance with some of these thuggish

elements in the Florida debacle indicates that, when push comes to shove, they may be precisely the kind of corporatists who wouldn't hesitate a moment to form an alliance with, and unleash the latent violence of, the Patriots and their ilk. When that occurs, real fascism will have arrived.

Much of this proto-fascist element, particularly the disillusioned former militia Patriots, clearly identifies with Bush now and could be considered fully part of the Republican electorate, instead of the maverick Reform Party-type voters they may have been eight years ago. The extent to which this identification deepens in the coming years, and the ends to which it is directed, may well determine whether or not proto-fascism blossoms further inside the mainstream, or is merely further dissipated.

It is clear that it is already deepening in the administration's response to the antiwar protests, and its seeming encouragement of "pro war" responses which simultaneously attacked the antiwar demonstrations. However, there have been no overt signs of an alliance with these elements yet, beyond their sometimes sponsorship by the Bush-connected Clear Channel Communications.

What is most disturbing, however, about the Bush administration, is not merely its devout corporatism, but the way in which it uses **religion** in the service of the corporatist agenda. It does so in a way that explicitly identifies the Bush agenda with God's, and suggests that Bush's every step is divinely inspired. Bush asks his followers to stick with him as an act of *faith* — he's a good man with good advisors and he prays and he's not Clinton, so he must be right.

Consider, if you will, the following item from *Harper's* July 2003:

From "A Christian's Duty in Time of War," a pamphlet published by In Touch Ministries. The pamphlet exhorts its readers to pray for President Bush and to "consider fasting as you beseech the Lord" on his behalf. Thousands of the pamphlets were distributed by unknown persons to U.S. soldiers in Iraq.

MONDAY: Pray that the President and his advisers will be strong and courageous and do what is right, regardless of critics.

TUESDAY: Pray that the President and his advisers will have the unified support of the American people as well as that of other countries around the world.

WEDNESDAY: Pray that the President, his advisers, and their families will be safe, healthy, well rested, and free from fear.

THURSDAY: Pray that the President and his advisers will be successful in their mission and that world peace will be realized.

FRIDAY: Pray that the President and his advisers will recognize their divine appointment and will govern accordingly in compassion, mercy, and truth.

SATURDAY: Pray that the President his advisers will remember to keep their eyes on Almighty God and be mindful that He is in control.

SUNDAY: Pray that the President and his advisers will seek God and His wisdom daily and not rely on their own understanding.⁴⁹

⁴⁹ "Extreme Unction," *Harper's Magazine*, July 2003, p. 17.

Then there were the reports that came leaking out of the annual Conservative Political Action Conference in Crystal City, Va., in late January 2003, like the *Salon* article that offered the following description:

It was like a right-wing version of a Workers World rally, with one crucial difference. Workers World is a fringe group with no political power. CPAC is explicitly endorsed by people running the country. Its attendees are Bush's shock troops, the ones who staged the white-collar riot during the Florida vote count and harassed Al Gore in the vice presidential mansion. Bush may not want to embrace them in public, but they are crucial to his political success and he has let them know, in hundreds of ways, that their mission is his.

...

Rev. Lou Sheldon, the founder of the Traditional Values Coalition and sworn enemy of homosexuality, put it best. Asked if Bush was in sync with his agenda, he replied, "George Bush *is* our agenda!"⁵⁰

It's important to note what the atmosphere was like at the CPAC gathering, especially as a barometer of the conservative agenda.⁵¹ The Clinton-hate remains palpable and is an important trigger topic, but the focus has shifted to two topics: first, the utter demonization of all things liberal, with a rising quota of eliminationist rhetoric:

At a Thursday seminar titled "2002 and Beyond: Are Liberals an Endangered Species?" Paul Rodriguez, managing editor of the conservative magazine *Insight*, warned that the liberal beast wouldn't be vanquished until conservatives learn to be merciless. "One thing Democrats have long known how to do is play hardball," he intoned, urging Republicans to adopt more "bare-knuckle" tactics.⁵²

(Evidently, they've only been playing tiddly-winks up to this point.)

But the other dominating theme, of course, was an exaltation of all things Bush, with a heavy emphasis on the Christian aspect of his "character" and the clear implication of divine Providence in his presidency.

CPAC is an important conjunction of the mainstream and extremist right, so it's very instructive to see the commingling of ideologies at its gathering under a fundamentalist umbrella. Back when I was posting on the conference earlier, a skeptical reader wrote to pose a pertinent question:

My secretary took a couple of days off last week to go to the CPAC convention and she's not particularly religious, not a theocrat by any means or Patriot-type, just a mainstream conservative, so I am more than a little confused by your claims about CPAC.

This is, of course, the entire point: Gatherings like CPAC give a broad range of extremists, posing as ordinary Joes or Limbaughite loudmouths, the opportunity to spread their radical ideas among the whole

⁵⁰ Michelle Goldberg, "Shock Troops for Bush," *Salon*, Feb. 4, 2003, available online at <http://www.salon.com/news/feature/2003/02/04/cpac/index.html>.

⁵¹ Freelance writer Alec Dubro also wrote a terrific piece on the gathering for Tom Paine.com titled "The Great Dividers: Travels Into the Conservative Dream," available online at <http://www.tompaine.com/feature.cfm/ID/7201>.

⁵² Goldberg, *op. cit.*, p.3.

sector of mainstream conservatism. Unassuming conservatives go to these gatherings and come away at least exposed to, if not outright converted to, some of these extremist beliefs. That's how these ideas eventually gain circulation among the broader population, often dressed up in a nice Republican cloth coat.

Next came Bush's relatively mundane appearance before the National Religious Broadcasters in which he touted his "faith-based initiatives." What was noteworthy was that at the same conference, the NRB's president, Glenn Plummer, delivered a scathing attack on Islam, denouncing it as a "pagan religion"⁵³ — which is the kind of talk the Bush team has, up till now, done an admirable job of countering. (Recall that Bush chastised both Falwell and Robertson for similar loose talk in early December.) After all, much of the president's war coalition depends upon Islamic allies, and moreover, an Islam-vs.-West cultural conflict is precisely the trap Osama bin Laden has laid for us. But Plummer's remarks received neither rebuke nor demurrals from the White House.

Then there has been a spate of stories describing Bush's religiosity, notably one from the *Baltimore Sun*, "Christ-centered course of faith-based president worries some":

At the same time, Bush's stepped-up efforts to express his faith coincide with a White House drive to court religious conservatives in advance of the president's 2004 re-election campaign.

The president's top political adviser, Karl Rove, has concluded up to 4 million Christian conservatives who probably would have voted for Bush instead stayed home in the 2000 election. Rove said a year ago that "we have to spend a lot of time and energy" drawing them back into politics.⁵⁴

Of course, this is not the first sign of Bush's predilection for seeing himself in a messianic light. A February 2003 piece in *The Progressive*, "Bush's Messiah Complex," tackles the subject directly.

That Bush believes he was assigned the Presidency from on high comes through in another passage of [former speechwriter David] Frum's book. After Bush's September 20, 2001, speech to Congress, Gerson called up the President to compliment him: "Mr. President, when I saw you on television, I thought—God wanted you there," Gerson said, according to Frum.

"He wants us all here, Gerson," the President responded, according to Frum.⁵⁵

It's clear that not only does Bush see himself as a man on a divine mission, but he actively cultivates this view of his importance among his staff. Moreover, the White House similarly promotes this image to the public, particularly among conservative Christians.

It's important to note that the White House has been very secretive about the nature of Bush's relationship with the religious right. Indeed, his pre-election overtures to the fundamentalists were

⁵³ KTUL News report, "N.R.B. Chief: Islam A 'Pagan Religion,'" Feb. 10, 2003, available online at <http://www.ktul.com/news/stories/0203/73477.html>.

⁵⁴ David L. Greene, "Christ-centered course of faith-based president worries some," *Baltimore Sun*, Feb. 16, 2003.

⁵⁵ "Bush's Messiah Complex," *The Progressive*, February 2003, available online at <http://www.progressive.org/feb03/comm0203.html>.

specifically kept under wraps. It was something that should have been noticed and uncovered at the time, but everyone was too busy unearthing Al Gore “lies.”

I’m thinking specifically of Skipp Porteous’ work at the (apparently now-defunct) Institute for First Amendment Studies. Skipp attempted to find out just what Bush was saying at one of the meetings where many of us suspect he was promising to carry out their agenda once elected — specifically, a meeting of the Council for National Policy in 1999:

To find out what the Republican candidate for president had to say to such a group, the Institute for First Amendment Studies (IFAS) ordered a set of audiotapes of the sessions. Using an approach that had worked several times in the past – tapes are available to members only – the tapes finally arrived, sans the Bush speech.

IFAS contacted Skynet Media, the recording company hired to record CNP meetings. IFAS then learned that it wasn’t the fanatically secretive CNP that decided to delete the Bush tape from the package – the deletion was done on direct order from the Bush campaign. When asked if they actually have the Bush tape, Skynet spokesperson Curt Morse said, “We do,” and also noted it wasn’t available at any price.

When asked about Bush’s speech at CNP, Scott Sforca, a press officer for the George W. Bush for President campaign office, claimed that the meeting “doesn’t ring a bell” with him.

When contacted by The New York Times, CNP executive director Blackwell put it as follows: “[T]he Bush entourage said they preferred that the tape[s] not go out, though I could not see any reason why they shouldn’t.” Blackwell claims that it was a standard speech that he had heard before and since.

Ari Fleischer, a Bush campaign spokesman, told The Times that if anyone was “hoping to hear something that the governor would say that he hasn’t said publicly, then they’re on a wild goose chase.” Fleischer declined to characterize the speech, but said, “When we go to meetings that are private, they remain private.” He added, “As far as we know, there is no tape.”⁵⁶

Of course, any reporter worth their salt would recognize that Fleischer is baldly lying. If it’s only a mundane speech, then what’s the secrecy? Why not just let journalists listen to it?

[Sure. I know the answer. The same one you get to the question: Why doesn’t he just release his military records?]

The sum of all this identification of Bush with a Divine Agenda — which has reached such heights that now conservative Christians are even organizing fasts for Bush — is especially troubling in light of the presence of a proto-fascist element within the ranks of those who openly and avidly support him. While Bush himself may not be charismatic in any kind of classic sense, his adoption of this image may be an effective substitute for rallying a fanatical following — one which is all too willing to discard of such niceties as free speech and constitutional rights in the name of homeland security — in a time of war.

⁵⁶ Skipp Porteous, “Bush’s secret religious agenda,” *Freedom Writer*, March 2000, no longer available online. See also the *New York Times* report on the incident by Jim Yardley, “Bush’s Words to Staunchly Conservative Group Remain a Mystery,” *New York Times*, May 19, 2000, available online at <http://www.nytimes.com/library/politics/camp/051900wh-gop-bush.html>, as well as the ABC News account by Marc J. Ambinder, “Vast, Right-Wing Cabal?,” May 2, 2000, available online at http://abcnews.go.com/sections/politics/DailyNews/council_020501.html.

This was driven home during the run-up to the Iraq war, especially as the rhetoric identifying antiwar dissent as “treason” has reached new levels, as has the open use of thuggery to silence dissent.

The essence of this mindset was described for me by reader John Burns of Raleigh, N.C., in an excellent letter in which he outlined the concept of “a law beyond the law”:

As an attorney, precision in language is, of course, of paramount importance, and accusations of fascism which all too easily fly back and forth do very little to advance reasoned debate.

Nevertheless, there are ominous signs of, if not fascism, then something very closely approximating it. I came across the quotation below in an article in the Fall 2002 issue of *Litigation* magazine, written by Robert Aiken, called ‘Hans Frank: Hitler’s Lawyer.’

“The article concerns the gradual perversion of German Law during the 30s, driven by Hitler and Frank, from a Civil Code based system to one based on the Will of the Fuhrer above all else. What is interesting are the parallels in this statement of the nature of Reich law and the principles put forth by the Christian Reconstructionists who populate the right wing, the Federalist Society and now, more and more, our courts. I think the key element is the idea of a law beyond the law. Here’s the passage, which Aiken takes from Noakes & Pridham, *Documents on Nazism* (1975).

National Socialism substitutes for the conception of formal wrong the idea of factual wrong: it considers every attack on the welfare of the national community, every violation of the requirement of the life of a nation as wrong. In [the] future, therefore, wrong may be committed in Germany even in cases where there is nothing (no written law) against what is being done. *Even without the threat of punishment, every violation of the goals towards which the community is striving is wrong per se. As a result, the law gives up all claim to be the sole source for determining right and wrong. What is right may be learned not only from the law but also from the concept of justice which lies behind the law and may not have found perfect expression in the law.*

Compare this with the remarks of John Ashcroft at Bob Jones University on January 12, 2001:

“There’s a difference between a culture that has no king but Caesar, no standard but the civil authority, and a culture that has no king but Jesus, no standard but the eternal authority. When you have no king but Caesar, you release Barabbas — criminality, destruction, thievery, the lowest and least. When you have no king but Jesus, you release the eternal, you release the highest and best, you release virtue, you release potential.

“It is not accidental that America has been the home of the brave and the land of the free, the place where mankind has had the greatest of all opportunities, to approach the potential that God has placed within us. It has been because we knew that we were endowed not by the king, but by the Creator, with certain unalienable rights. If America is to be great in the future, it will be if we understand that our source is not civic and temporal, but our source is godly and eternal. Endowed by the Creator with rights of life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness. I thank God for this institution and for you, who recognize and commit yourselves to the proposition that we were so created, and that to live with respect to the

Creator promises us the greatest potential as a nation and as individuals.
And for such we must reacquaint ourselves daily with His call upon our
lives.”

Of course, the ideal behind the law in Germany was found only in the pronouncements of the Fuhrer, who, Frank came to believe, was divinely chosen for his role. Perhaps in that paragraph can be found a definition of fascism — the equation of the will of the leader (or the party) with law and the organizing of society around that central principle. This of course leads one to wonder from where Ashcroft and the Christian Reconstructionists would divine the “higher law.” From all appearances, I would say it is from their own interpretation of the Bible. God must have divinely chosen them to pronounce the true law. A scarier prospect one can hardly imagine.

Frank, incidentally, was executed at Nuremburg, but not before salvaging some honor by admitting to his crimes and to the crimes of the Nazis. He is quoted in the trial transcripts as stating that “a thousand years shall pass and still Germany’s guilt will not have been erased.”

This very concept — that the law must accede to a higher authority — is now being circulated by none other than Supreme Court Justice Antonin Scalia. The upshot is that the Supreme Court itself is in danger of aligning itself explicitly with the open use of such thuggery as may be necessary to maintain power.

The main evidence lies within a May 2002 piece by Scalia, “God’s Justice and Ours.” Particularly startling was this:

These passages from Romans represent the consensus of Western thought until very recent times. Not just of Christian or religious thought, but of secular thought regarding the powers of the state. That consensus has been upset, I think, by the emergence of democracy. It is easy to see the hand of the Almighty behind rulers whose forebears, in the dim mists of history, were supposedly anointed by God, or who at least obtained their thrones in awful and unpredictable battles whose outcome was determined by the Lord of Hosts, that is, the Lord of Armies. It is much more difficult to see the hand of God—or any higher moral authority—behind the fools and rogues (as the losers would have it) whom we ourselves elect to do our own will. How can their power to avenge—to vindicate the “public order”—be any greater than our own?”

And this:

The mistaken tendency to believe that a democratic government, being nothing more than the composite will of its individual citizens, has no more moral power or authority than they do as individuals has adverse effects in other areas as well. It fosters civil disobedience, for example, which proceeds on the assumption that what the individual citizen considers an unjust law—even if it does not compel him to act unjustly—need not be obeyed. St. Paul would not agree. “Ye must needs be subject,” he said, “not only for wrath, but also for conscience sake.” For conscience sake. *The reaction of people of faith to this tendency of democracy to obscure the divine authority behind government should not be resignation to it, but the resolution to combat it as effectively as possible.*⁵⁷ [Emphasis mine]

⁵⁷ Antonin Scalia, “God’s Justice and Ours,” *First Things*, May 2002, pp. 17-21. It is available online at <http://www.firstthings.com/ftissues/ft0205/articles/scalia.html>.

As Dave Johnson of the Commonweal Institute correctly suggests, “Scalia appears to think that the way to identify legitimate God-chosen leaders is when they seize power in conflict, demonstrating that God chose them over others.” Scalia’s formula invites all kinds of mischief, including particularly the overthrow of democracy itself. Notably, Scalia reveals an open hostility to democracy anyway when he contends that it tends “to obscure the divine authority behind government.” One indeed wonders if Scalia has read the Declaration of Independence, which enumerated one of the basic principles of American democracy, namely, that “*Governments are instituted among Men, deriving their just powers from the consent of the governed.*”

Under the legal theory Scalia now seems to advocate, a Bush administration that saw itself on a divine mission might find some justification for refusing to relinquish the reins of power to a Democratic election winner in 2004. With the backing of Patriot thugs who shout down political dissenters, and a devotedly pro-Bush military, it would not be hard to imagine who would be most likely to lay claim to being the “hand of God” and thereby winning Scalia’s proclamation as the nation’s true ruler, mere democracy notwithstanding.

This is not to suggest that such an unthinkable scenario is being plotted by the administration. But when the rhetoric starts inviting thuggery, the equation changes dramatically. And events have a way of piling upon themselves inevitably. After all, who could have foreseen the sequence that brought us *Bush v. Gore*?

That ruling was, in many ways, a harbinger, in that it represented a similar capitulation to thuggish, proto-fascist elements. Recall, if you will, that it is a unique ruling in that it has virtually no defenders or supporters outside of a tiny clique centered around the arguments offered by Richard Posner. And the essence of Posner’s defense of *Bush v. Gore* is that, yes, legally it may have been a thoroughly unsound ruling, but the court was acting in a *practical* sense by settling the election decisively, because otherwise incipient social chaos threatened.⁵⁸ It was, you see, justice, not the law.

As it happened, the only sector of the country that was likely at the time to enact any widespread social chaos was the extremist right — the same Freepers and Patriots who are now threatening to string up anyone who questions the Divinely Inspired President’s war plans. In contrast, the left proved thoroughly subdued enough to settle back and live with a Bush administration.

Of course, that’s the way it works when you’re busy achieving justice above the law. That’s because it’s *divine* justice.

⁵⁸This is the essence of Posner’s book, *Breaking the Deadlock: The 2000 Election, the Constitution, and the Courts* (Princeton University Press, 2001). See also Posner’s debate over the ruling with Alan Dershowitz, “The Supreme Court and the 2000 Election”, *Slate*, July 9-16, 2001, available online at <http://slate.msn.com/id/111313>.

XIII: Fascism and Fundamentalism

Over the past two decades, the most important meeting ground for the broad range of rightist beliefs has been in the field of fundamentalist Christianity. Extremists frequently organize around an arcane brand of fundamentalism like Identity; mainstream conservatism has become increasingly identified with mainstream fundamentalism; and even ostensibly secular conservatives like Rush Limbaugh and George W. Bush pay great obeisance both to its belief system and its political agenda.

When mainstream conservatives, religious ideologues and far-right extremists coalesce, it has consequences. The former has real-world power; the latter have agendas. To the extent that connections are made, the more likely those agendas are to actually be enacted. It becomes especially problematic as extremist elements exert an increasing influence on the broader fundamentalist sector, because this means their influence is extending into mainstream conservatism.

A sort of reciprocal danger arises when someone like George W. Bush makes overt political appeals to the fundamentalist views of his followers — particularly in portraying himself as receiving divine guidance. This gives him not only a kind of immunity from fault, giving his every step the Lord's imprimatur, but places him in a charismatic position of dual political and religious leadership. It has the effect of leading individual followers to identify their religious beliefs with Bush's political agenda. It also draws the entire fundamentalist bloc behind him politically. This includes the proto-fascist element, whose impact, as we've seen, can far outweigh their numbers. The more we hear talk about Bush leading a national political and religious rebirth, the more we approach the conditions needed for a genuine fascism to arise.

The Manichean dualism — the cut-and-dried black-and-white worldview — that comprises the totalist mindset is especially evident among fundamentalists. This has the potential to make them, in many ways, ideal footsoldiers for a kind of Christo-fascism, one which backs theocratic impulses and right-wing extremism with actual political power. In the wake of a severe social disturbance like Sept. 11, this kind of dualism's appeal is potent.

I'd earlier discussed totalism as an essential component of the individual mentality underlying right-wing extremism, drawing on the essay "Religious Totalism, Violence and Exemplary Dualism: Beyond the Extrinsic Model," by Dick Anthony and Thomas Robbins, which can be found in the collection, *Millennialism and Violence* (1995), edited by Michael Barkun of Syracuse. But as they explain, the underlying worldview has a much broader audience in the field of mainstream fundamentalism and so-called cults:

Nine characteristics which appear to us to be shared by authoritarian personalities, fundamentalists and authoritarian cults such as Hare Krishna, the Unification Church, etc.:

1. Separatism or the heightened sensitivity and tension regarding group boundaries. This usually includes 'Authoritarian Aggression' which entails rejecting and punitive attitudes toward deviants, minorities and outsiders.
2. Theocratic leanings or willingness to see the state expanded so as to enforce the group's particular moral and ideological preferences at the expense of pluralism or church-state separation.
3. Authoritarian submission entailing dependency on strong leaders and deferential attitudes toward authorities and hierarchical superiors.

4. Some form of conventionalism in terms of both belief and practice. Apparent exceptions such as antinomian groups, for example, the Bhagwan movement of Rajneesh or the quasi-Marxist Peoples Temple of Jim Jones ...
5. Apocalypticism.
6. Evangelism or a focus on proselytization and conversion.
7. Coercive tendencies in terms of either punitive reactions toward internal dissidence and non-conformity (for example, exile from fellowship, shunning, harsh 'self-criticism,' confessional sessions) or willingness to have non-conformists suppressed or discouraged by the state.
8. Consequentialism or a tendency to see moral or ideological virtue producing tangible rewards to believers. This may entail belief in a 'just world' in which the good are tangibly rewarded and the wicked undone on the human plane.
9. Finally, groups whose members tend to score high in authoritarianism or dogmatism tend to have strong beliefs and tend to make doctrinal acceptance a membership criterion. As with 'Moonies' studied by Galanter (among whom strong belief was correlated with feelings of group solidarity and the 'relief effect'), authoritarians and fundamentalists appear to have a strong 'investment' in their beliefs.⁵⁹

Much of Anthony's and Robbins' work builds upon the work of sociologist Robert Lifton and his colleague Charles Strozier, whom they cite extensively:

Both writers have explicitly linked totalism and fundamentalism. Interestingly, they tend to define fundamentalism in terms very close to descriptions of authoritarianism: for example, fundamentalist childrearing practices — allegedly strict, repressive, corporally punitive and guilt-inducing — resemble the familial milieux associated with authoritarian personalities. The emphasis by Lifton and Strozier on fundamentalist scriptural literalism, textual fetishism, obsession with disorder, nostalgia for a strongly ordered golden age less chaotic than the present, and emphasis on restoration keyed to inerrant scriptural texts, appears to evoke classic descriptions of authoritarian personalities.⁶⁰

Of course, it's worth noting that Anthony and Robbins consider the Lifton/Strozier formulation overbroad, and suggest some limits to the connection between totalism and fundamentalism. Nonetheless, the broader connection is otherwise fairly clear.

In the American context, this is significant because experts on fascism, which explicitly relies upon a totalist mindset among its following, have likewise identified religiosity as an important element of any kind of manifestation of it here. Earlier I cited Robert O. Paxton's "The Five Stages of Fascism":

...[E]ach national variant of fascism draws its legitimacy ... not from some universal scripture but from what it considers the most authentic elements of its own community identity. Religion, for example, would certainly play a much larger role in an authentic

⁵⁹ Anthony and Robbins, *op. cit.*, p. 24.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 24-25.

fascism in the United States than in the first European fascisms, which were pagan for contingent historical reasons.⁶¹

While Paxton concludes this mainly by surveying what comprises the “authentic” American experience, there is a historical context that fully substantiates his hypothesis. Earlier forms of fascism in America — particularly the extremists who formed small but widespread societies built around neo-Nazi philosophies and admiration for Hitler, most notably the Silver Shirts, who were led by the crypto-fascist mystical “philosopher” William Dudley Pelley — were explicitly “Christian” in nature.

Pelley’s legions earned their name by wearing silver uniforms modeled after Hitler’s brownshirts and marching through the streets on various occasions. Despite the theater (or perhaps because of it), Pelley drew large numbers of former Klansmen and other white supremacists, particularly those attracted to his anti-Semitic rantings (which included the infamous “Franklin Prophecy” hoax, whose legacy is still with us). Pelley’s support was broad enough that he ran for President in 1936, though he only garnered a tiny portion of the vote. Nonetheless, he maintained some impetus through the later 1930s, especially in working-class and rural districts. A *Life Magazine* spread depicted a gathering of Silver Shirts in Chehalis, Washington, at a local home. The audience and the activity of the meeting resembled nothing so little as a militia meeting in the 1990s.

Karen E. Hoppes, a graduate student at Western Oregon State College, wrote extensively about Pelley in the 1980s, notably her Master’s thesis, “An Investigation of the Nazi-Fascist Spectrum in the Pacific Northwest: 1924-1941.” Hoppes of course addressed the Christian fundamentalism that was a significant feature of Pelley’s “philosophy”:

Finally, the link with fundamental Christianity establishes the uniqueness of American fascism. The majority of fascist groups justified their existence by their desire to change the United States into a Christian society. ... The relationship between the religious identity of these groups and their political demands can be shown by a careful survey of their rhetoric. The Christian fascist does not distinguish between the application of the terms anti-Christ, Jew and Communist. Neither does he distinguish between Gentile and Christian.⁶²

Hoppes particularly notes Pelley’s sermons arguing that “Christians of the United States must put the issue of conniving Jewry above all other issues and treat with it drastically. This means a pogrom ... of colossal proportions.” Observes Hoppes:

For the Christian fascist, this up-and-coming war against the Jew would result in the founding of a new moral community — a Christian America. This community would tie itself to Christian ethics and Christian structure, as interpreted by these Christian fascists. Thus, the link with Christianity provided a unifying element for the membership in American fascist organizations. Members not only prayed with their comrades, but fought the “Christian” battle against the anti-Christ Jew. This gave them a surpassing sense of righteousness. Most of the membership came from the evangelical styled churches, with each Christian fascist group claiming to be under the umbrella of Christian thought and action.

⁶¹ Paxton, *op. cit.*, pp. 3-4.

⁶² Karen E. Hoppes, “An Investigation of the Nazi-Fascist Spectrum in the Pacific Northwest: 1924-1941”, Master’s Thesis, Western Oregon State College, 1983, pp. 10-12.

This uniquely American Christo-fascism was not short-lived, even though Pelley was convicted (on dubious grounds) of sedition in 1942, and by the time he emerged from prison in 1950, his Silver Shirts movement had been long since abandoned and dismantled. However, some of his associates kept the flame alive. The most notable of these was Gerald L.K. Smith, who went on to play a central role in taking over the Christian Identity movement in the 1930s and '40s and remaking it into the proudly racist religion it is today. Likewise, the Posse Comitatus movement — which in turn spawned the Patriot/militia movement of the 1990s — had its ideological origins in “Christian fascism”; one of its founders, Mike Beach, was a former Silver Shirt.

Through most of the intervening years, these extremists were relegated entirely to the fringe. It was easy to distinguish between mainstream conservatives and the participants in the Identity and Posse movements, and only at the edges of both sectors (see, for example, the colorful career of former Rep. George Hansen, R-Idaho) was there much exchange of ideas and agendas. Likewise, there was a tremendous gulf between mainstream Christianity, even the fundamentalist variety, and the Christian fascists.

That began to change in the 1990s, thanks to the confluence of two forces: the emergence of the Patriot movement and the growing revolutionary fervor of conservatives in their drive to dominate the halls of power. The proto-fascist Patriots represented the efforts of Christian fascism to mainstream itself, and their relative success, though fleeting, gave a surprising indication of the presence of a totalist mindset in America, particularly among conservative fundamentalists. Conservatives, looking to broaden their appeal and undercut mainstream liberalism, began adopting more ideas and memes that had their origins in the Patriot movement, thereby blurring the barriers that had once clearly delineated the mainstream and extremist right.

Fundamentalism was particularly ripe territory for this, especially since so many of the issues that attract both mainstream conservatives and extremists — abortion, education, gay rights, taxes — revolve significantly around organizing by conservative Christians. And as we have seen, fundamentalism is particularly hospitable anyway to a totalist worldview. In this kind of crucible, the barriers all but dissolved. The trend has continued into this decade, even as the former footsoldiers of the Patriot movement have returned to the GOP fold, which has further blurred the lines.

It became apparent, for instance, after the recent arrest of right-wing terrorist Eric Rudolph, the man who bombed the Atlanta Olympics as well as a string of abortion clinics and gay bars in the 1990s. A story in the *New York Times* pondered whether Rudolph should properly be called a “Christian terrorist.” It included an interview with one of Rudolph’s local sympathizers:

“He’s a Christian and I’m a Christian and he dedicated his life to fighting abortion,” said Mrs. Davis, 25, mother of four. “Those are our values. And I don’t see what he did as a terrorist act.”⁶³

Both Mrs. Davis and the reporter’s basic question eliminated the distinction between Identity and Christianity — something that has become increasingly easy to do as Identity rhetoric attunes itself to the mainstream, and conservatism itself becomes increasingly bellicose and intolerant. These lines blurred even further as other media reports picked up the “Christian terrorist” idea and played with it.

The more Identity and similar extremist beliefs are identified with fundamentalist Christianity, the greater becomes their ability to influence the agenda of mainstream conservatism. This is why

⁶³ Jeffrey Gettleman and David M. Halbfinger, “Suspect in '96 Olympic Bombing And 3 Other Attacks Is Caught,” *New York Times*, June 1, 2003.

maintaining the delineation is important in terms of containing the forces of fascism that are abroad today.

This point was suggested in a *Washington Post* piece that tackled the same question:

Another expert on such groups, Idaho State University sociology professor James A. Aho, said he is reluctant to use the phrase “Christian terrorist,” because it is “sort of an oxymoron.”

“I would prefer to say that Rudolph is a religiously inspired terrorist, because most mainstream Christians consider Christian Identity to be a heresy,” Aho said. If Christians take umbrage at the juxtaposition of the words “Christian” and “terrorist,” he added, “that may give them some idea of how Muslims feel” when they constantly hear the term “Islamic terrorism,” especially since the Sept. 11 attacks.

“Religiously inspired terrorism is a worldwide phenomenon, and every major world religion has people who have appropriated the label of their religion in order to legitimize their violence,” Aho said.⁶⁴

Uniformly, those who do this name-claiming are in fact radical fundamentalists. Indeed, it is plain now that Democratic societies around the world are up against all the many faces of such extremists. Fundamentalism is, after all, an explicitly anti-modern movement. Religious scholars such as Karen Armstrong in her excellent *The Battle for God: A History of Fundamentalism*, like to point out that the movement arose specifically as a reaction to modernism, or more specifically, as a reaction against the many failures of modern society.

Both Islamic and Christian fundamentalism have been gaining considerable momentum over the past generation, but the ascendance of the radical segment which all fundamentalist movements host has become much more pronounced in Islam. These are popularly referred to as the “Islamofascists,” the factions that would weld a Muslim theocratic worldview to state and corporate power around the world.

But as Rudolph and others (like Tim McVeigh) illustrate, the Christo-fascists are equally eager to bring down democratic society and replace it with theocratic authoritarianism. And while they trail the Islamofascists in influence, their impact on American society has been substantial, if unnoticed by the media.

Annually, right-wing extremists within our borders are responsible for a sizeable number of crimes. These range, as Mark Pitcavage of the ADL points out, from “bombings and bombing plots to assassination plots and murders to weapons and explosives violations to hate crimes to massive frauds and scams (amounting in some cases in the hundreds of millions of dollars) to the myriad of lesser crimes.” Even if you totaled up several years’ worth of criminal activity related to Islamic extremism, it would fail to come close to the levels produced by our own homegrown terrorists.

It’s important to recall, too, that the still-unsolved anthrax attacks of October-November 2001 may well have been the work of a right-wing extremist — perhaps not someone with any organizational connection, perhaps even an idiosyncratic type, but nonetheless with largely right-wing beliefs.

⁶⁴ Alan Cooperman, “Is Terrorism Tied To Christian Sect?,” *Washington Post*, June 2, 2003.

Indeed, leaders of extremist factions have been fairly explicit in advocating “piggyback” terrorism that seeks to increase the levels of chaos in conjunction with international terrorism — creating an echo effect that exponentially enhances the psychological damage inflicted by a Sept. 11-type event. Consider, for instance, a couple of post-Sept. 11 remarks by William Pierce, the late leader of the neo-Nazi National Alliance.

From a radio address: “Things are a bit brittle now. A few dozen more anthrax cases, another truck bomb in a well chosen location, and substantial changes could take place in a hurry: a stock market panic, martial law measures by the Bush government, and a sharpening of the debate as to how we got ourselves into this mess in the first place.”

On his Web site, Pierce declared that “terrorism is not the problem,” adding that the current threat is “the price for letting ourselves, our nation, be used by an alien minority to advance their own interests at the expense of ours” — meaning, of course, Jews.

And when you consider that right-wing extremists have in fact been arrested for the anthrax hoax letters sent to abortion clinics in the same time period — a clear-cut case of “piggybacking” — I think it becomes clear that these extremists have not only the means but probably also the clear intention of amplifying any kind of terrorist attacks perpetrated by Al Qaeda. For that reason alone, they remain a very serious threat indeed.⁶⁵

It is also important to keep in mind exactly what the long-term strategy of the extremist right is: To undermine the existing government and democratic institutions to as great a degree as possible by creating as much social chaos as possible. Terrorism is central to this strategy, because through terrorist acts like Oklahoma City, they intend to make the public come to believe that their government can no longer keep them safe. They then intend to present themselves as the “strong” alternative that will make us secure again — and although swelling their own ranks is key to this strategy, they do not worry about such niceties as seizing power by democratic means.

It boils down to this: The War on Terror, if it is to take on all forms of terrorism that genuinely threaten both American lives and our democratic institutions, is not a war against Islam. It is not even necessarily a war against fundamentalism. Rather, it is against the religious fascism that has embedded itself within the broader fundamentalist sectors of both Christian and Muslim societies.

Call it **fascimentalism**: a political movement that claims to represent a Phoenix-like resurrection of a true national spiritual identity, focused on building a theocratic state that receives its imprimatur from God, ultimately adopting a rule based on scriptural inerrancy, and intent on dominating and imposing its will upon the rest of the world.

In the Islamic world, this movement has manifested itself in the growth of Al Qaeda and the ascendance of such radicals as Abdullah Azzam and Omar Abdul Rahman as major influences in Islamism, as well as the entrenchment of Wahabbism as the chief political power in such states as Saudi Arabia. The consequences of this trend have become obvious to all the world since Sept. 11.

In the Christian world, the trend is much less pronounced but still present. It exists in the increasing identification of mainstream fundamentalism with its more radical components, particularly the anti-abortion and anti-gay rights extremists. It is latent in the openly theocratic approach to governance propounded by Christian Reconstructionists and conservative moralists like Antonin Scalia.

⁶⁵ See the author's article, “Homegrown terror,” *Salon*, Oct. 26, 2001, available online at http://archive.salon.com/news/feature/2001/10/26/far_right/index.html.

And it has gained a popular voice in the violently eliminationist rhetoric increasingly aimed at liberals, particularly those opposed to President Bush's war policies, much of it inflamed by conservative propagandists on talk radio like Rush Limbaugh. This kind of inchoate rage has always needed someone to scapegoat. This time around, it's liberals.

XIV: The War on Liberals

Last summer I drove out to Kalispell, Montana, to give a talk to a community gathering there at one of the local parks. It was organized by a Flathead Valley version of the “Not In Our Town” campaign, and about 200 people showed up for the potluck dinner. Among them were the mayor of Kalispell, the police chiefs of both Kalispell and nearby Whitefish, several pastors and even a couple of local judges. I was one of about five speakers.

Most of the crowd, though, was comprised of local conservationists and environmentalists from around the Flathead Valley. And in many ways, it was on their behalf that I was speaking.

Kalispell made the news last year when a militia outfit called Project 7 was broken up by local police. Its leader, a 38-year-old named David Burgert, was arrested for jumping bail on an earlier conviction for assaulting an officer and resisting arrest; when captured, officers uncovered him in possession of an arms cache of about 30 weapons and some 30,000 rounds of ammo.⁶⁶

What was even more disturbing was the simultaneous discovery of his plans for this materiel: To run amok in a killing spree against local authorities. Burgert had organized a team of about 10 people to target some 26 city and county officials, including some of those same police officials, mayors and judges who came out for the potluck last summer.

Burgert, who received support from the usual far-right suspects, eventually pleaded guilty to federal firearms charges in the case, and faces a maximum 10-year prison term when he’s sentenced in September. But no one has ever been charged in the alleged conspiracy, partly because any evidence that the plot extended much beyond Burgert’s fantasies was not very strong. He has countered by filing a lawsuit against the FBI and Montana’s state Division of Criminal Investigation.

But “Project 7” was at best the tip of the iceberg for what’s been happening in the Flathead Valley in the past couple of years. See if this has a familiar ring to it: A rabid right-wing radio talk-show host has been stirring up a campaign of hatred aimed at local liberals. In this case, though, the threats have gone beyond simply empty words into concrete action involving threats and intimidation.

The talk-show host in question is a fellow named John Stokes, who operates little KGEZ-AM, a radio station south of town next to Highway 93 (in fact, there are reasons to believe he bought the station mainly as a way to scam the state out of millions in condemnation proceedings, but that’s another story). Shortly after Stokes took over in 2000, he began broadcasting right-wing screeds that indeed made Rush Limbaugh sound like “the voice of reason” in contrast. Stokes regularly launched vitriolic attacks on all kinds of liberals; gays and lesbians came in for special scorn (he accused two lesbian activists in Missoula whose home had burned down in an arson of setting the fire themselves), and of course Bill Clinton was a frequent target.

The primary targets of Stokes’ venom, though, were conservationists and environmentalists, for whom not even the most appalling comparison nor the most groundless accusation was adequate: Stokes constantly referred to them as Nazis, and the central thrust of all his attacks was that “greens” were responsible for nearly everything that was wrong with life in Western Montana, particularly the depressed economy. Indeed, Stokes has referred frequently to Patriot conspiracy theories, and not merely on the

⁶⁶ Dan Laidman wrote an excellent account of the incident for *Salon* titled “A kinder, gentler militia?”, July 4, 2002, available online at <http://archive.salon.com/news/feature/2002/07/04/militias/index.html>.

subject of environmentalists (who are viewed by militia types as a cult intent on enslaving the rest of mankind); he's also trotted out Patriot theories on such subjects as taxation and the Constitution.

Unsurprisingly, his audience reflects this kind of proto-fascist orientation. Many of his callers have outright advocated violence against conservationists, and Stokes has encouraged them to do so.

The real-life consequences of all this talk made quite clear that this was not merely "entertainment," and that Stokes' "hot talk" was doing more than just garnering ratings. Beginning in the summer of 2001, local conservationists began receiving a series of death threats, some delivered in person, others by phone. Car windows were smashed in, tires slashed. Strange men would show up in people's yards at twilight, then run off when confronted. People's homes were vandalized. Others would be followed home by men in pickups or on motorcycles. Sometimes the teenage children of the targets were threatened.

And egging all of these people on was John Stokes. Sometimes callers would announce on his show that a local conservationist was on vacation, which would present an opportunity to "visit their home." In others, a caller would simply give the home address of an environmental activist who had just been vilified as "Satanic" on the air by Stokes.

The Montana Human Rights Network, which is run by a sixth-generation Montanan named Ken Toole — a Toole was the state's first governor, and Toole's father was the much-beloved historian K. Ross Toole — kept track of all these incidents and compiled them in a detailed report titled *School Yard Bullies: The Harassment of Conservationists in the Flathead* (which is not available online, but can be obtained by writing to them). Reading the report, the sheer volume of the harassment becomes almost overwhelming — which is exactly what the environmentalist community in the valley has been feeling.

One of the victims of the harassment — an ex-cop named Brenda Kitterman, whose teenage daughter also got caught up in the threats — decided to fight back, and has been one of the prime movers in organizing the "Not in Our Town" campaign. She read *In God's Country* and got in touch with me, asking if I'd talk to the summer potluck gathering. (These kinds of calls are very gratifying, since this was precisely the main reason I wrote the book — to provide an information resource for the communities that are confronted with the Patriot movement and its manifestations.) I periodically give talks like this before various civic groups where these problems arise, and the Flathead Valley is a special place. I naturally agreed.

Stokes of course heard about the Saturday event, and on the Friday before he reportedly urged his listeners to show up at the potluck with their guns, since that was what people like the organizers expected anyway. As it happened, though, he told them to go to the wrong park at a different time — directing them, in fact, to a fundraising event for a couple of young children whose parents had recently died. There were no reports of people with guns showing up there, thankfully. And certainly none of them showed their faces at the park where we were holding the potluck, though the presence of all those police cruisers may have had something to do with that.

It was mostly an informal affair, and I am hardly a gifted (much less confident) public speaker, but it was a rewarding trip anyway, because of course I got to meet a lot of very interesting people. The gathering was filled with the kind of Westerners I have always been comfortable around, and their common-sense worldview is always refreshing.

It occurred to me, though, that what we were witnessing in the Flathead was something like what we saw eight years before, when the Patriot movement was first gathering steam in western Montana: A sort of testing the waters for a right-wing strategy that eventually would be taken to a larger national scale.

Eight years before, I had watched as a venomous attack on the government was promoted — at literally every single militia meeting I ever attended — primarily through a pathological hatred of President Clinton that focused on his supposed immoral nature; and among its target audience, it was a

phenomenally successful strategy. I then watched as that same hatred was transmitted to the nation as a whole and culminated in the national travesty of his impeachment.

So I wondered if soon, apropos of the trend in the Flathead Valley, we would be seeing vitriolic hatred directed no longer at the president, nor even at the government per se, but at liberals generally, scapegoating them specifically for some great national malady. And I wondered if it would begin translating into threats and intimidation.

Well, unfortunately, we're starting to see some of this already manifesting itself in the fast-rising tide of jingoism surrounding the conservative movement's support for George W. Bush's war in Iraq. This means we are indeed entering some very dangerous waters that could sweep us into the dark currents of fascism.

We've been hearing for some time now, from the likes of Rush Limbaugh and James Taranto of the *Wall Street Journal*, that Americans who dissent from Bush's war strategy are being "treasonous," "pro-Saddam" and "anti-American," and from the likes of Andrew Sullivan and David Horowitz that liberals now comprise a "fifth column" of potential traitors who would aid the enemy. Now, from the repulsive Michael Savage sector, we're also hearing that such dissenters are a threat and should be arrested. And finally, President Bush himself has intimated that opposition to his regime's war plans can bring about unhappy repercussions for the dissenters, not from the government, but from "the people" — a hint that has the distinct sound of loosing the dogs.

So far, grass-roots support of the pro-war faction is moderate at best, but it has grown steadily as talk-radio hosts have raised the hyperbole. The massive propagandizing of the right against liberals generally and antiwar elements specifically is an area where a number of disturbing trends are beginning to coalesce:

- The increasing tendency of extremist memes to appear in mainstream discourse as an acceptable version of conservative thinking, propelled especially by the now-apparent bias among most national media outlets favoring conservative propaganda.
- Bush's purposeful projection of religious motivations for his war effort, with overt suggestions that his decisions are divinely guided.
- The extremist right's growing identification with Bush, and their apparent willingness to use thuggish tactics of intimidation on his behalf.
- Likewise, the Bush regime's increasingly apparent willingness to make use of such factions for their own political ends.
- The rising demonization of antiwar liberals, complete with vicious eliminationist rhetoric.
- The constant framing of the war in jingoistic "national renewal" sentiments, both in political and religious terms.
- The dislocation caused by the flailing economy and terrorism fears, both of which raise the conditions under which people become willing to turn to totalitarianism.

These rivulets have been coalescing in a campaign directed against antiwar liberals, and creating a powerful undercurrent that hasn't yet broken through the surface. What hasn't happened yet is that the thuggishness has not directed itself on any kind of large scale at all (there have only been a few isolated incidents); neither has the Bush regime made any kind of open signal that such activities are viewed approvingly.

If they do signal such an alliance, however, then I am convinced that the nation is in serious danger of submerging under a tide of genuine fascism. And as I've been arguing all along, it won't be a fascism we can easily recognize. It won't be German-style or Italian-style; rather, it will be uniquely American — probably, if history is any guide, one with a veneer of Christian fundamentalism, but underneath, one predicated on a coalescence of corporatist power with proto-fascist thuggery.

That said, even though the danger is clear, it's important to understand that **we are not there yet**. More to the point, we can stop this slide. We only need to be aware that it is occurring.

My advice would be nearly identical to that which I give those little community groups like the one in Kalispell: Stand up for democracy. Don't threaten and don't cajole. And don't back down.

Most people — conservatives especially, who view analyses like mine as merely an attempt to smear Republicans — are in denial about these trends. Even in Kalispell, there was resistance from many in the business community that even addressing the problem just gave the extremists free publicity — ignoring, of course, the reality that trying to pretend them away just gives them a free ride. (Sure enough, there was no reportage on the Not In Our Town event from any of the local papers.)

I have been down that path myself. When I was the editor of the little daily paper in Sandpoint, Idaho, back in 1978-79, we made a conscious decision not to cover the activities that were taking place at that little nook in the woods 30 miles south of us called the Aryan Nations, believing that giving them any publicity would just help legitimize them. Five years later — after a campaign of anti-minority harassment and general intimidation finally culminated in a series of bank robberies and murders by a gang of locals who called themselves The Order — the paper's policy had wisely changed.

From my experience and that of nearly every community that has had to deal with right-wing extremism, the notion that paying attention to it — covering both the leaders and the followers in the press, responding to them publicly — only publicizes their kookery is a gross mistake. Remaining silent and refusing to stand up to them is not an adequate response. They mistake the silence for complicity, for tacit approval.

This is equally true of the shape-shifting “transmitters” who take extremist memes and inject them into the national discourse, often under the guise of providing “fiery” rhetoric. When the public starts calling them on the sources of their ideas, and exposing them for the coddlers of hate-mongers, extremists and terrorists that they are, then they inevitably scurry back and hide under the rocks whence they crawled out. This is already starting to happen with Michael Savage; it needs to begin happening with Ann Coulter, Rush Limbaugh, Pat Buchanan and the rest.

Like all bullies, they prove cowards in a real fight. It's time for the rest of America to start fighting.

XV: Waiting for Godwin

One of the great bylaws of the blogosphere is **Godwin's Law**:

“As a Usenet discussion grows longer, the probability of a comparison involving Nazis or Hitler approaches one.” There is a tradition in many groups that, once this occurs, that thread is over, and whoever mentioned the Nazis has automatically lost whatever argument was in progress. Godwin's Law thus practically guarantees the existence of an upper bound on thread length in those groups. However there is also a widely recognized codicil that any intentional triggering of Godwin's Law in order to invoke its thread-ending effects will be unsuccessful.⁶⁷

Of course, a good deal of Usenet etiquette has become the standard for debate in the blogosphere as well, and that is particularly the case with Godwin's Law.

At the very outset, as I began compiling the posts at *Orcinus* that would form this essay, it was fairly clear that virtually the entirety of the series was in gross violation of Godwin's Law. It's pretty hard not to mention Nazis and Hitler, at least by implication, when one's focus is a clearer understanding of fascism and how its essence remains alive in American society.

However, I wrote not so much out of ignorance as impatience with these kinds of protocols. As someone whose reportage on many occasions has been on the subject of very real neo-Nazis, the idea that I'd lose an argument just by writing factually about the undercurrents they represent is nonsensical.

For that matter, I've always viewed Godwin's Law as symptomatic of the larger problem I hoped to confront with this series: Namely, an almost frightened refusal by most Americans, right and left, to come to grips with the meaning of fascism, and how that blind spot renders us vulnerable to it.

When I first began seriously studying fascism some years back, one of the first things that struck me was how little I — or anyone I knew — actually understood what it meant, in spite of the fact that it, alongside Communism, was one of the two major political phenomena of the 20th century, both of them radical anti-democratic movements that the American system was forced to confront and defeat.

Virtually every educated person I know (and many less-educated people as well) has a relatively clear and at least semi-informed understanding of what Communism is, what its origins are, what comprises its ideology. Moreover, wariness of Communist influence is a virtual byword of the American worldview.

In contrast, hardly anyone I know understands just what fascism is. At best, they vaguely comprehend it as a kind of heinous totalitarianism, identified specifically with Nazi Germany and the Holocaust. There is a great deal of confusion about its ideological orientation, embodied in the now-common conservative canard that “Hitler was a socialist.” Mostly it is just flung about — mostly by leftists and thoughtless liberals, but in the past decade by conservatives too — as a catch-all term for totalitarianism, or worse yet, as a substitute for “police state” (which is not the same as fascism).

Hardly anyone can identify any tenets of fascism; most of the time its manifestations are understood almost as extrinsic infestations of a virulent hatred and violence, brought on by such influences as propaganda and “brainwashing.” As I discussed in Part 11, though, this model is faulty; what is now clear about totalitarianism of all stripes is that it arises when certain ideologies and movements interact with

⁶⁷ Cited in *The Jargon Dictionary*, available online at http://info.astrian.net/jargon/terms/g/Godwin_s_Law.html.

personalities configured by 'totalist' predispositions. That is to say, it cannot be imposed from without unless there is concession within; its audience is not a blank slate, but people who willingly join in.

In the case of fascism specifically, the lack of an ideological core or easily recognizable signifiers (beyond, of course, such images from fully developed fascism as goosestepping stormtroopers and mass rallies) is a large part of the reason it's so little understood. This amorphousness, as I discussed back in Part 2, also arises from the fact that although fascism only arose in the 20th century as a political force, it originates in political strains that have deep historic (perhaps even prehistoric) roots, and which very much continue to be with us.

And it is this fact — that even though we think of fascism as a distant and unlikely threat, it sits at our elbows and dines at our tables even today — which makes a realistic discussion of fascism such an uncomfortable thing. Some of the very threads that combine to make a fascist weave are part of the everyday fabric of our own lives. It's much easier to declare an argument over when the issue of fascism arises than to confront the possibility that it lives on, even in a democratic society that we have come fondly to think of as immune from such a disease.

At the same time, I actually rather approve of the sentiment that underlies Godwin's Law. In today's context, Nazism specifically and fascism generally are most often cited by partisans of both sides not with any reference to its actual content but merely as the essence of totalitarian evil itself. This is knee-jerk half-thought. Obviously, I don't agree that the mere reference to fascism, let alone a serious discussion of it, automatically renders a point moot. But a reflexive, ill-informed or inappropriate reference — which describes the bulk of them — should suffice to invalidate any argument.

Without question the worst offenders are those on the left. It began back in the 1960s, when antiwar radicals came to refer to anyone from the Establishment as "fascist," particularly if they were from the police. This bled over into the later view that identified fascism with a police state. The confusion is alive and well today with peace marchers who blithely identify Bush with Hitler and compare Republicans to Nazis. The purpose of these analogies is to shame conservatives, but they instead only give their accusers the appearance of shrill harpies willing to abuse the memory of the Holocaust for cheap political theater.

Most of all, such comparisons obscure the reality of what's taking place. The genuine proto-fascists — namely, the anti-democratic extremists of the Patriot movement, and their thuggish cohorts among the 'Freeper' crowd — are identified with mainstream conservatives instead of being distinguished from them. That in turn gives their coalescence a kind of cover instead of exposing it.

A strategically astute left would try to drive a wedge between the two factions by raising awareness of their growing intersection, particularly in the growing phenomenon of agitation against antiwar protests. Instead, we have a liberalism that thoughtlessly identifies the conservative movement of the early 21st century with mature fascism of the 1930s, thereby only revealing how little aware it is itself of the eternal and mutative nature of fascism, and how little it can recognize it in action today.

The mainstream left has been content to make jokes about the stupidity of militiamen instead of recognizing the actual threat they represent. There has been little recognition of the way the far right is able to insinuate its ideas and agendas into the mainstream; indeed, the left's generally superior, dismissive attitude about right-wing extremists has only helped further their ability to penetrate broader society.

No doubt a large part of the reason for this is itself the degraded state of the word fascism, applied willy-nilly to virtually anyone opposed to their agenda, in much the same way that the right has debased the idea of communism. Fascism has become a black hole of a term instead of the red flag it should be. No one nowadays can recognize the genuine article when it sidles up alongside them.

Of course, as we have seen, liberals are hardly alone in abusing the term. It has become fashionable among conservatives over the past decade — indeed, the Hitler/Nazi comparisons were particularly rampant in the identifiably proto-fascist elements of the far right during the 1990s, when they frequently compared Clinton to Hitler and government workers to Nazi stormtroopers. Likewise, the fascism comparisons have crept into mainstream conservative rhetoric — particularly by the Rush Limbaugh and Freeper crowds — as part of their attempt to paint liberal America as an oppressive police state.

As I observed at the outset, this kind of misuse of the term is decidedly in the mold of Newspeak, since it flatly contradicts the basic nature of its core meaning — that is, while fascism is properly understood as essentially anti-liberal, Limbaugh and his cohorts identify it with liberalism. If the word's meaning was degraded before, this misuse has simply leveled it into meaninglessness.

The combined effect of this left-right punch renders Americans' understanding of the realities of right-wing extremism nil at a critical time when it needs to be acute. The undying forces of fascism have been creeping back into power from the ground level up, and only a clear understanding of the phenomenon will enable us to recognize how this is happening.

So these essays were written in the hopes of resurrecting a proper understanding of fascism — what it really is, how it operates, why it is in fact very much alive and with us today. Part of my purpose, of course, was to persuade liberals to drop the inappropriate references to fascism, mostly by coming to grips with its real nature and not its imagined one.

My deeper purpose, though, was to sound a call to arms for Americans of every stripe who believe in democracy, because ultimately those are the institutions that are most endangered by fascism. Until the strands of far-right extremism that have insinuated themselves into the fabric of mainstream conservatism are properly identified and exposed, they will continue to wrap themselves around it and through it until its corruption is complete. And when that befalls us, it will probably be too late to stop it.

As the War on Terror, instead of combating the rise of fascimentalism, transforms itself into a War on Liberals; as conservatives increasingly identify themselves as the only “true” Americans; as Bush continues to depict himself as divinely inspired, and the leader of a great national spiritual renewal; as the political bullying that has sprung up in defense of Bush takes on an increasingly righteous religious and violent cast; and as free speech rights and other democratic institutions that interfere with complete political control by conservatives come increasingly under fire, then the conditions for fascimentalism will almost certainly rise to the surface.

These conditions remain latent for now, but the rising tide of proto-fascist memes and behaviors indicates that the danger is very real, especially as fascimentalist terrorist attacks take their toll on the national sense of well-being and security. It may take fully another generation for it to take root and blossom, but its presence cannot be ignored or dismissed.

European fascism was a terrible thing. An American fascism, though, could very well devastate the world.

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