

The Rise of Pseudo Fascism

David Neiwert

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Introduction

This essay started out as a kind of extended review of Robert O. Paxton's 2004 book, *The Anatomy of Fascism*. At least, that was what I had in mind when I sat down to go through Paxton's text carefully. But it pretty quickly grew into something else.

I had heavily referenced one of Paxton's preceding essays, "The Five Stages of Fascism," in my extended blog essay "Rush, Newspeak, and Fascism"¹. In many ways, *Anatomy* was an extended version of Paxton's earlier essay, with essentially a great deal more substantiation and historical evidence. And in reviewing it, I hoped to update readers on the trends I discussed in that earlier piece.

Paxton also explores in more detail both the history of fascism in America as well as its potential for emerging as a potent political force sometime in its future. Interestingly, he identifies both the United States and Israel as being among the few nations remaining capable of being host to real fascism.

But Paxton concludes – as did I in the "Rush" essay – that we are not there, at least not yet, saying the nation would "have to suffer catastrophic setbacks and polarization" for such a transformation to occur. Nonetheless, he sees real danger in what he calls "movements that employ authentically American themes in ways that resemble fascism functionally."

It was this latter stipulation that sparked my examination of the changing nature of the American political landscape that I describe in this essay. Because it became clear that forces on the ground, particularly the pressure cooker of a national presidential election, were moving much more rapidly in driving mainstream conservatism farther to the right and closer, perhaps inexorably, to fascism.

The key was in comparing Paxton's list of "mobilizing passions" that form the essence of fascism with current events, and realizing that conditions had changed noticeably if not dramatically in the period of just a little over a year. It became clear that, at the point at which Paxton was composing his text, the underlying conditions were changing in a way that made American "conservative movement" politics take on the striking resemblance of fascism. The ground was shifting on us, rapidly.

I had remarked, in "Rush," that the mainstream right had over the previous decade been establishing much greater interaction with the extremist far right, particularly the proto-fascist Patriot movement, in ways that suggested the kinds of significant internal shifts we saw in the early 1970s as a result of Nixon's "Southern Strategy": crafting their appeals through the use of far-right echo chambers; picking up themes, ideas, and agendas from the racist and anti-Semitic right in a way that disguised their noxious roots; and transmitting these "memes" into the mainstream of American political discourse.

¹<http://www.cursor.org/stories/fascisminroduction.php>

But what we saw, beginning in late 2003 and continuing all through that summer and fall, was more than just a blurring of traditional lines. What we saw was a mainstream political movement take on so many traits of classical fascism that the resemblance was more than remarkable: it was deeply disturbing.

It was almost as though the “conservative movement,” in its final drive to not merely obtain power but to cement it permanently, transformed itself into a simulacrum, or a hologram, of fascism: structurally almost identical, particularly in the kind of appeal it presented as a perverse form of populism, but lacking in the genuinely black core of violence and seething hatred that is, in the end, what makes fascism fascism.

It was a decidedly new phenomenon related to fascism, which meant that there needed to be a term to describe it: something that looks and talks and sounds like fascism, even when it is decidedly not fascism. I had long evening conversations and a few e-mail discussions with friends who have been following this train of thought with me, and we turned over many ways of describing the phenomenon: – proto-fascism? (nah; already in use to describe genuinely fascist but decidedly germinative movements) – quasi-fascism? (not quite, but close); – happy-face fascism? – friendly fascism? – postmodern fascism? Para-fascism came close, but it didn’t quite express clearly enough the sense that this was not genuine fascism.

I finally settled on “pseudo fascism,” because I thought it both made clear both the resemblance to fascism and the lack of genuineness to it. Even, then it’s a flawed way of putting it, since it implies an intent to deceive, a covering up of an intended purpose.

And as it unfolds and manifests, I don’t think it’s clear at all that the grand viziers of the conservative movement are either that smart or that evil or that competent. I believe that, as Digby suggests, they have been tapping into forces they little comprehend in shaping their movement this way, and that one day it will bite them, and us all, in the ass.

It’s almost as if the right, as it rushes to satisfy some of its most privileged impulses, is doomed to drag us into the swamps of fascism. It’s up to the rest of us, as always, to keep them from dragging us there.

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David Neiwert
Seattle
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Part 1: The Morphing of the Conservative Movement

When trying to make sense of the seemingly inextricable political morass into which we've descended, one of the real keys to understanding our situation is realizing that conservatism and the "conservative movement" are in fact two entirely different things.

Conservatism, like liberalism, is not a dogmatic philosophy, but rather a style of thought, an approach to politics or life in general. It stresses the status quo and traditional values, and is typified by a resistance to change. Likewise, liberalism is not relegated to a discrete "movement" but rather describes a general politics that comprises many disparate concerns.

The "conservative movement," however, is a decidedly dogmatic political movement that demands obeisance to its main tenets (and exiles those who dissent) and a distinctly defined agenda. Movement followers proudly announce their membership. (In contrast, there is no "liberal movement" worth speaking of – just a hodgepodge of loosely associated interests.) Importantly enough, their *raison d'être* has transformed from the extenuation of their "conservative" impulses into the Machiavellian acquisition of power, usually through any means necessary.

The presence of this discrete movement, in fact, is something that nearly everyone who follows the contours of the political landscape is well aware of. Recall, for instance, the recent *New York Times* piece² outlining the work of a fellow named Rob Stein, who has carefully examined the structure of the movement and its effectiveness:

The presentation itself, a collection of about 40 slides titled "The Conservative Message Machine's Money Matrix," essentially makes the case that a handful of families – Scaife, Bradley, Olin, Coors and others – laid the foundation for a \$300 million network of policy centers, advocacy groups and media outlets that now wield great influence over the national agenda. The network, as Stein diagrams it, includes scores of powerful organizations – most of them with bland names like the State Policy Network and the Leadership Institute – that he says train young leaders and lawmakers and promote policy ideas on the national and local level. These groups are, in turn, linked to a massive message apparatus, into which Stein lumps everything from Fox News and the *Wall Street Journal* op-ed page to Pat Robertson's "700 Club." And all of this, he contends, is underwritten by some 200 "anchor donors." **"This is perhaps the most potent, independent institutionalized apparatus ever assembled in a democracy to promote one belief system," he said.**

When movements like this take shape and gain real power – and especially when they consolidate complete control of the reins power, as the conservative movement has done in the past four years – they often take on a real life of their own, mutating into entirely separate entities that

²<http://query.nytimes.com/gst/abstract.html?res=FA0D12FB385E0C768EDDAE0894DC404482>

often bear little resemblance to their root values. In the process, they almost always become travesties of their original impulses.

Certainly, one only needs review the current state of affairs to recognize that the “conservative movement” – especially as embodied by the Bush administration – has wandered far astray³ from its original values. Just how “conservative” is it, after all, to run up record budget deficits? To make the nation bleed jobs? To invade another nation under false pretenses? To run roughshod over states’ rights? To impose a radical unilateralist approach to foreign policy? To undermine privacy rights and the constitutional balance of power? To quantitatively worsen the environment, while ignoring the realities of global warming? To grotesquely mishandle the defense of our national borders?

Mind you, it is not merely liberals who have observed this transformation. It includes a number of longtime conservatives⁴ who remain true to their principles as well.

The “conservative movement,” in the course of this mutation, has become something entirely new, a fresh political entity quite unlike we’ve ever seen before in our history, but one that at the same time seems somehow familiar, as though we *have* seen something like it.

What’s become clear as this election year has progressed – and especially in the wake of the Republican National Convention – is the actual shape of this fresh beast.

Call it Pseudo Fascism. Or, if you like, Fascism Lite. Happy-Face Fascism. Postmodern Fascism. But there is little doubt anymore why the shape of the “conservative movement” in the 21st century is so familiar and disturbing: Its architecture, its entire structure, has morphed into a not-so-faint hologram of 20th-century fascism.

It is not genuine fascism, even though it bears many of the basic traits of that movement. It lacks certain key elements that would make it genuinely so:

- Its agenda, under the guise of representing mainstream conservatism, is not openly revolutionary.
- It is not yet a dictatorship.
- It does not yet rely on physical violence and campaigns of gross intimidation to obtain power and suppress opposition.
- American democracy has not yet reached the genuine stage of crisis required for full-blown fascism to take root.

Without these facets, the current phenomenon cannot properly be labeled “fascism.” But what is so deeply disturbing about the current state of the conservative movement is that it has

³See http://dneiwert.blogspot.com/2004_07_18_dneiwert_archive.html#109020426878537766

⁴See http://seattlepi.nwsourc.com/opinion/190575_focus19.html

otherwise plainly adopted not only many of the cosmetic traits of fascism, its larger architecture – derived from its core impulses – now almost exactly replicates that by which fascists came to power in Italy and Germany in the 1920s and '30s.

It is in this sense that I call it Pseudo Fascism. Unlike the genuine article, it presents itself under a normative, rather than a revolutionary, guise; and rather than openly exulting in violence, it pays lip service to law and order. Moreover, even in the areas where it resembles real fascism, the similarities are often more familial than exact. It is, in essence, less virulent and less violent, and thus more likely to gain broad acceptance within a longtime stable democratic system like that of the United States.

And even in the key areas of difference, it is not difficult to discern that those dissimilarities are gradually shrinking, and in danger of disappearing.

That this is happening should not be a great surprise. After all, as I've already explored in great detail in "Rush, Newspeak and Fascism", the mainstream conservative movement has increasingly had contact with the genuine American proto-fascists of the extremist right over the past decade or more, particularly in the trafficking of ideas, agendas and the memes that propel them.

As I warned then, the danger was one of a kind of political gravitational pull: The more extremist ideology crept into the mainstream, the more it would transform the nature of the mainstream. The model of this effect is the Southern Strategy; initially deployed by Richard Nixon in 1968 and 1972, its long-term effect was to transform the GOP from the Party of Lincoln to the Party of Strom Thurmond, from a bastion of progressivity on race to the home of neo-Confederates who argue for modern secession and a return to white supremacy.

The final morph into Pseudo Fascism occurred under the dynamic under which the "conservative movement" operated after taking control of all three estates of American government in 2000. By seizing the presidency through means perceived by nearly half the nation at the time as illegitimate, conservative-movement ideologues were forced to govern without anything approaching a popular mandate. But rather than responding by moderating their approach to governance, the Bush administration instead acted as though it had won in a landslide, and proceeded to follow an openly radical course:

- Instituting a massive transfer of the tax burden from the upper class to the middle, an approach that deepened the nation's economic malaise.
- Appointing radical right-wingers to key positions in the nation's court system; shifting the emphasis in national security from terrorism to missile defense, a policy that left us vulnerable to the Sept. 11 attacks.
- Instituting, in the wake of those attacks, the radical "Bush Doctrine" of unilateralist pre-emption.

- Further using the attacks to undermine civil liberties under the Patriot Act and creating a policy of incarcerating citizens indefinitely as “enemy combatants”.
- Invading another nation by raising the false specter of the “imminent threat” of weapons of mass destruction.
- Allowing intelligence officials to run amok, violating the Geneva Convention in interrogations at Bagram, Guantanamo and Abu Ghraib.
- Fighting, for clearly political reasons, every effort to have a thorough examination of the causes of the 9/11 security failures.
- Moreover, at every step of nearly every policy it has pursued, the administration has erected obstacles to transparency, making clear it intends to operate in utter secrecy whenever possible.

The radical course followed by the Bush administration was, in fact, guaranteed to further divide the nation rather than unify it in a time of need. Moreover, the administration clearly proved itself wrong on so many major counts – the economy, the pre-Sept. 11 handling of the terrorist threat, the rationale for war, the postwar occupation of Iraq – that under normal circumstances, their competence above all should have come into serious question.

Maintaining power and instituting their agenda in this kind of milieu meant, for the conservative movement, a forced reliance on sheer bluff: projecting “strength and resolve” while simultaneously attacking their political opponents as weak and vacillating. To pull this bluff off, it required the assistance of a compliant press eager to appear “patriotic,” and it received it in spades.

Mostly, it has succeeded in doing this by a constant barrage of emotion-driven appeals to the nation’s fears in the post-9/11 environment:

- Calling 9/11 “the day that changed everything,” the Bush regime and its conservative-movement supporters have consistently projected a sense of overwhelming national crisis that requires reaching beyond traditional solutions and instituting a number of clearly radical steps.
- Conservatives have continually stressed the primacy of Americanness, a group identity to which we are obligated, as “patriots,” to subordinate all kinds of civil rights and free speech.
- They have consistently emphasized the nation’s victimhood in the 9/11 attacks – and attacked any suggestion of a more nuanced view as “unpatriotic” – and have further argued consistently that the 9/11 attacks justify nearly any action, regardless of legal or moral limits (see, e.g., Abu Ghraib), against America’s enemies.

- A favorite conservative theme is a dread of national decline under the corrosive effects of liberalism, often identifying it with equally dreaded alien influences. (See, e.g, Sean Hannity’s bestselling screed, *Deliver Us From Evil: Defeating Terrorism, Despotism, and Liberalism*.)
- They have consistently argued for a closer integration of a purer American community under the aegis of “national unity.” However, this unity is not a natural one reached by compromise; rather, it can only be achieved by a complete subsumation of American politics by the conservative movement, creating essentially a one-party state. Citizens can join by consent if they like, or they can face exclusion as a consequence.
- While denouncing their opponents – especially Democratic presidential candidate John Kerry – as “weak on terror,” conservatives have consistently portrayed George W. Bush as the only person capable of making the nation not only secure from terrorists, but the dominant political and cultural force in the world, a role often portrayed in terms of a national destiny as the “beacon of democracy.”
- Most of all, they have stressed Bush’s superiority as a president because of his reliance on his instincts and “resolve” and his marked refusal to engage in abstract reasoning.
- At times, conservatives have even trod into arguing in favor of a war ethos (see, for instance the popular bumper sticker: “War Has Never Solved Anything, Except for Ending Slavery, Fascism, Nazism and Communism”⁵; at other times – as in all the talk about “shock and awe” in the Iraq invasion – they have even suggested there is a kind of beauty to violence, especially in the service of the imposition of American will.
- Finally, in defending the administration’s actions – particularly in invading Iraq under the pretense of a nonexistent “imminent threat,” and for encouraging conditions that led to international-law violations at Abu Ghraib – many conservatives have simply dismissed the critics by invoking 9/11 and the larger right, by sheer virtue of our national military power, to dominate other nations and individuals with no restraint. (The conservative movement’s chief mouthpiece, Rush Limbaugh⁶, was especially noteworthy in this regard, dismissing the Abu Ghraib as similar to fraternity hazing, and responding to a report that Iraqi Prime Minister Allawi had summarily executed six insurgents: “Good. Hubba-hubba.”)

All of these appeals have come wrapped in the twin themes that are central to the appeal of the conservative movement:

- An insistence that the movement represents the only “real Americans.”
- Pervasive expressions of contempt for the weak.

⁵protestwarrior.com/Merchant2/merchant.mvc?Screen=PROD&Product_Code=0005&Category_Code=B

⁶See <http://mediamatters.org/items/200407190006>

These latter traits, in particular, expose the underpinnings of the “conservative movement” for their genuinely corrosive and divisive nature.

But does all this add up to fascism?

Not in its fullest sense. But it does replicate, in nearly every regard, the architecture of fascism in its second stage of growth – the stage at which, in the past, it has obtained power.

All that is needed for a full manifestation of American fascism, at this point, is for a genuine crisis of democracy to erupt. And if that occurs, it is almost inevitable that the differences between fascism and pseudo-fascism will vanish.

Part 2: The Architecture of Fascism

The conservative movement's transformation into pseudo-fascism isn't immediately discernible because there's nothing recognizably exceptional about any single aspect of it. Indeed, most of it seems all too familiar.

Part of the problem, of course, is that we've come to think of fascism as primarily a European phenomenon. That's partly because fascism reflects the respective national identity of the nations where it arises; Nazism, for instance, was full of Germanic symbolism, and Italian fascism likewise suggested its national heritage. Its appearance in America, as such, will have little immediate resemblance to those earlier permutations.

Another reason it's unlikely to be recognized is that part of the mythology that has sprung up around fascism is that it is dead – that it died in that Berlin bunker in 1945. But as reader Dante M writes:

Classical fascism is dead, and has been for a long time, despite the fevered wishes of skinheads and American Nazi Party members. But *fascism* as an ideology remains: it's the Devil of the 20th Century, and its best trick was fooling people into thinking it doesn't exist anymore, or that it was defeated in 1945, or that they'd know it when they see it (propaganda is another boogeyman that people are confident that they recognize on sight, even though the best propaganda never gets seen for what it is). Maybe fascism is a natural human reaction to hard times – a push for the certainty that is so missing from modern (and postmodern) life: People. Nation. Leader.

The idea has evolved to fit the times, which is something that most people don't recognize – you say "Fascist" and they will conjure up recognizable images (Hitler, mass rallies, WW II, etc.). Or else it's a slur without much thought behind it. No serious, practicing neo-fascist would ever use that word to describe themselves – only the most diehard Hitler worshippers would proudly tag themselves as "fascists." I'd even wager that the most actually fascist of reactionaries would be offended if you called them that. They'd say they were patriots, and then call you a traitor.

Even the Nazis and the Fascists of Italy used a lot of tactics *before* assuming power, which is why fascism presents such a protean, serpentine aspect – that's key to understanding them. The goal of the fascist is the assumption of absolute power – the one-party police state. That's what they've always been about. Everything else is secondary to that objective...

Fascism is a poisonous ideology that grows and adapts to its circumstances – Eurofascism reflected European vices; American fascism is similarly home-brewed. Therein lies the challenge in identifying it and combating it. Fascism always wraps itself in the flag, always seeks absolute power, always brands opponents as traitors, always relies heavily on propaganda for dissemination of its ideas, always invokes subversive enemies (at home and abroad), always embraces militarism and permanent war, always favors politicizing of police functions (and expanding them and the surveillance

state), always scorns intellectuals, artists, and bourgeois democratic values, always is hostile to leftist and labor movements, and is obsessed with idealized images of a mythic “better time” of the past (while at the same time destroying that past, and the nation as a whole).

Fascism continues to live on because it derives from the meeting of human traits as ancient as Cain and the relatively recent rise of mass politics. It is, moreover, a phenomenon specifically associated with crises of democracy; so as long as there are democratic states – and the possibility of their failure – then the potential for fascism remains with us.

The most serious problem with recognizing fascism’s presence, however, comes from the widespread abuse of the term. As I explained previously, in “Rush, Newspeak and Fascism”⁷:

“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.

... 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 [Rush] 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 of the basic tenets of 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 it is that makes 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.

Carefully examining the history of fascism begins to give us perhaps a better understanding:

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

⁷“Rush, Newspeak and Fascism”, Introduction

anti-communism.” There were very few attempts to systematize the ideology of fascism, though some existed (see, e.g. Giovanni Gentile’s 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.

Robert O. Paxton, in his landmark study *The Anatomy of Fascism*, neatly sums up the place of fascism in the history of politics as the emergence of a “dictatorship against the Left amidst popular enthusiasm.” But what are its guiding principles?

In reality, there really are none. Fascism in the end is the manifestation, in the context of modern mass politics, of the raw will to power, the drive to achieve totalitarian control over others through any means necessary or possible.

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

Over the years, there have been many attempts to define and describe fascism. Chip Berlet, the researcher from the Cambridge, Mass., think tank Political Research Associates, describes it thus:

Fascism demands racial, ethnic, or cultural unity and the collective rebirth of a nation while seeking to purge demonized enemies that are often scapegoated as subversive and parasitic. Fascism is a form of authoritarian ultra-nationalism that glorifies action, violence, and a militarized culture. Fascism can exist as an ideology, a mass movement, or a form of state government. Fascism attacks both liberal democratic pluralism and left-wing revolutionary movements while proposing a totalitarian version of populist mass politics. Fascism parasitizes other ideologies, juggles many internal tensions and contradictions, and produces chameleon-like adaptations based on the specific historic symbols, icons, slogans, traditions, myths, and heroes of the society it wishes to mobilize.

Probably the most concise definition comes from Oxford political-science professor Roger Griffin⁸, who calls it “**palingenetic ultranationalistic populism**”. In one key essay, Griffin offers the following 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

⁸<http://www.brookes.ac.uk/schools/humanities/staff/FAECRG2.htm>

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.

Fascism, according to some who have studied it, is a kind of “political religion” – that is, it coalesces around a “sacralisation of politics” that acts as a substitute faith for its followers. According to Italian political theorist Emilio Gentile, who studied the totalitarian movements of interwar Europe, this sacralisation takes place when:

... more or less elaborately and dogmatically, a political movement confers a sacred status on an earthly entity (the nation, the country, the state, humanity, society, race, proletariat, history, liberty, or revolution) and renders it an absolute principle of collective existence, considers it the main source of values for individual and mass behaviour, and exalts it as the supreme ethical precept of public life.

This imparts to fascism a particular trait that Paxton describes as one of the real telltale signs of its presence:

... [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.

What really sets fascism apart from nearly all other kinds of politics, however, is that, at its core, it is not about thought. It’s all a matter of the gut. Milton Mayer describes this in *They Thought They Were Free: The Germans 1933-1945* (p. 111):

... Because the mass movement of Nazism was nonintellectual in the beginning, when it was only practice, it had to be anti-intellectual before it could be theoretical. What Mussolini’s official philosopher, Giovanni Gentile, said of Fascism could have been better said of Nazi theory: “We think with our blood.”

In his remarkable essay on “Ur-Fascism,” Umberto Eco suggests the extent of this attribute of fascism by its reappearance in most of the traits by which he describes fascism, including “action for action’s sake,” “the rejection of modernism” “fear of difference,” and the notion that “life

is permanent warfare.” Swedish political scientist Harald Ofstad likewise has zeroed in on “the contempt for weakness” as the essence of the norm in a fascist society.

However, it is Paxton’s study that draws out this point in the greatest detail. Indeed, he describes the centrality of emotion – and not any intellectual forebears – as forming the basic architecture on which the fascist argument rests (pp. 40-41):

To focus only on the educated carriers of intellect and culture in the search for fascist roots, furthermore, is to miss the most important register: subterranean passions and emotions. A nebula of attitudes was taking shape, and no one thinker ever put together a total philosophical system to support fascism. Even scholars who specialize in the quest for fascism’s intellectual and cultural origins, such as George Mosse, declare that the establishment of a “mood” is more important than “the search for some individual precursors.” In that sense, too, fascism is more plausibly linked to a set of “mobilizing passions” that shape fascist action than to a consistent and fully articulated philosophy. At bottom is a passionate nationalism. Allied to it is a conspiratorial and Manichean view of history as a battle between the good and evil camps, between the pure and the corrupt, in which one’s own chosen community or nation has been the victim. In this Darwinian narrative, the chosen people have been weakened by political parties, social classes, unassimilable minorities, spoiled renters, and rationalist thinkers who lack the necessary sense of community.

These “mobilizing passions,” mostly taken for granted and not always overtly argued as intellectual propositions, form the emotional lava that set fascism’s foundations:

- a sense of overwhelming crisis beyond the reach of any traditional solutions;
- the primacy of the group, toward which one has duties superior to every right, whether universal or individual, and the subordination of the individual to it;
- the belief that one’s group is a victim, a sentiment which justifies any action, without legal or moral limits, against the group’s enemies, both internal and external;
- dread of the group’s decline under the corrosive effect of individualistic liberalism, class conflict, and alien influences;
- the need for closer integration of a purer community, by consent if possible, or by exclusionary violence if necessary;
- the need for authority by natural leaders (always male), culminating in a national chief who alone is capable of incarnating the group’s destiny;
- the superiority of the leader’s instincts over abstract and universal reason;
- the beauty of violence and the efficacy of will, when they are devoted to the group’s success;
- the right of the chosen people to dominate others without restraint from any kind of human or divine law, right being decided by the sole criterion of the group’s prowess in a Darwinian struggle.

If these “mobilizing passions” seem familiar, they should: They have been adopted, as I described in Part 1, by the American conservative movement – embodied by the Republican Party – as the very architecture of its agenda since the advent of the invasion of Iraq, and particularly as the core of its 2004 campaign for the presidency.

This is not a mere coincidence, and the danger it represents – obviously – is profound.

Part 3: The Pseudo-Fascist Campaign

Its whole purpose being the acquisition of raw power through any means necessary, the discrete “conservative movement” and its dealings can at times be extremely disorienting. The proliferation of Newspeak as a political propaganda strategy by the American right, in particular, has created a milieu in which up is down, wrong is right and ignorance is strength.

At times, it seems as if factuality has no real basis. Truth has no objective value; it is instead a mutable thing, readily manipulated through repetition of propaganda talking points.

Think back, if you will, to the 2000 election fiasco in Florida, resulting in the abominable *Bush v. Gore* ruling (whose continuing significance was recently limned in detail by Jeffrey Rosen of the New Republic⁹). Al Gore, you may remember, chose – instead of calling for an extralegal statewide manual recount, which would have been the fairest solution – to follow Florida state law to the letter and filed for recounts in only a handful of given counties.

This led, of course, to Republicans claiming that Gore tried to “steal” the election by “cherry-picking” enough votes in a handful of counties. It’s a popular meme that maintains a steady life on the right today.

But if Gore had chosen the other course – calling for a statewide manual recount in all counties – Republicans would have just as certainly attacked him for failing to follow the letter of Florida law.

The truth – that Gore had legitimate reasons for following either course – had no chance in this case. What mattered was that regardless of his choices, Republicans were prepared to accuse him of trying to “steal” the election.

Then, of course, they proceeded to march forth and steal the election themselves.

Determinedly fair-minded liberals were largely left utterly baffled by this bizarre twist of events. They have been even more baffled by the subsequent course of the Bush presidency, in which – despite a manifest lack of a mandate – a radical right-wing agenda has marched relentlessly forward, culminating in the disastrous invasion of Iraq. Throughout it all, the steady drumbeat of the right has been to blame everything wrong with the world on liberals.

Today we have a milieu in which this administration’s manifest incompetence is hailed as moral clarity; in which the torture of prisoners at American hands is dismissed as a fraternity prank; in which the internment of Japanese Americans in World War II is defended as a necessary step (that may need to be repeated); in which a policy to further denude America’s forests is called the Healthy Forests Initiative, and the evisceration of the nation’s public education system is named No Child Left Behind. We’re relentlessly sold an image of Bush himself as strong and resolute, and yet when he appears for a national debate on TV, what we see instead is a “peevish

⁹See http://www.truthout.org/docs_04/092904X.shtml

and bored”¹⁰ caricature of a leader, a man more likely to remind us the feckless pointy-haired boss we all once had than an actual president.

At times it seems, when dealing with the modern conservative movement, as if we’ve entered a gigantic and remorseless mirror funhouse. Or more to the point, a dark and labyrinthine cavern, twisting in an endless maze, whose architecture we can only vaguely discern through upheld torches.

Every now and then, though, someone within the movement hierarchy – often one at the very top – will let slip a bit of the curtain, flashing a little light on the vastness and shape of the metastatic architecture of the conservative movement. When it happens, it can be a little like the scene in *Aliens* when Ripley’s flamethrower lights up the interior of the lair into which she has wandered.

The mutability of truth is what has made confronting the conservative movement so maze-like – you never know what kind of bizarre argument they’re going to come up with next. At times they even turn established historical consensus on its head. First we get Ann Coulter penning a defense of McCarthyism in her book *Treason*; then we get Michelle Malkin justifying the forced incarceration of 122,000 Japanese Americans with *In Defense of Internment*. What’s next? A text outlining the virtues of fascism? (Calling Michael Ledeen!¹¹)

But the movement not only makes reality a function of the movement’s agenda; its agenda itself can shift rapidly according to the strategic needs of the movement in its acquisition of power. Thus, as described in Part 1, the conservative movement has come to resemble nothing so genuinely conservative at all but rather something starkly radical: profligate spending; incautious and expansionary wars, pursued unilaterally; the steady dumbing-down of the nation’s education system. The neo-Confederate-laden GOP no longer has even a passing resemblance to the “party of Lincoln.” Even at the micro-political level, in interpersonal debate, the famous conservative carefulness, politeness and reserve has utterly vanished.

The conservative movement, as such, is an ever-shifting beast. Its drive is power, and as such it has gradually adopted the familiar architecture of another power-mad phenomenon of mass politics: fascism.

In *The Anatomy of Fascism*, Robert O. Paxton explains how fascism similarly adopted and dropped ideologies at will, according to its power needs (pp. 16-17):

In a way utterly unlike the classical “isms,” the rightness of fascism does not depend on the truth of any of the propositions advanced in its name. Fascism is “true” insofar as it helps fulfill the destiny of a chosen race or people or blood, locked with other peoples in a Darwinian struggle, and not in the light of some abstract and universal reason. The first fascists were entirely frank about this.

¹⁰See <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/politics/administration/whbriefing/>

¹¹<http://www.amconmag.com/06.30.03/feature.html>

We [Fascists] don't think ideology is a problem that is resolved in such a way that truth is seated on a throne. But, in that case, does fighting for an ideology mean fighting for mere appearances? No doubt, unless one considers it according to its unique and efficacious psychological-historical value. The truth of an ideology lies in its capacity to set in motion our capacity for ideals and action. Its truth is absolute insofar as, living within us, it suffices to exhaust those capacities. [A. Bertele, *Aspetti ideologici del fascismo*, Turin, 1930]

The truth was whatever permitted the new fascist man (and woman) to dominate others, and whatever made the chosen people triumph.

Fascism rested not upon the truth of its doctrine but upon the leader's mystical union with the historic destiny of his people, a notion related to romanticist genius, though fascism otherwise denied romanticism's exaltation of unfettered personal creativity...

Fascist leaders made no secret of having no program. Mussolini exulted in that absence. "The Fasci di Combattimento," Mussolini wrote in the "Postulates of the Fascist Program" of May 1920, "... do not feel tied to any particular doctrinal form." A few months before he became prime minister of Italy, he replied truculently to a critic who demanded to know what his program was: "The democrats of *Il Mondo* want to know our program? It is to break the bones of the democrats of *Il Mondo*."

This fist-shaking style of response to normative political discourse, in fact, was one of the real hallmarks of fascism. It signaled, above all else, the rightness of power by virtue of its naked use to intimidate and silence dissent. To the fascist leader, diplomacy is a parlor game for the weak; what counts is the raw will of the man of action. Whether he is right is moot; what counts is his strength and resolve in the exercise of power.

The Ripleyesque moment when this aspect of the conservative movement's core was revealed came earlier this summer, when Vice President Dick Cheney told Sen. Patrick Leahy¹², in an exchange over policy disagreements and the rhetoric used in them: "Go fuck yourself."

Coarse language and threats have always been part of the political scene, and their appearance in rancorous exchanges between politicians is woven into American lore. But it is rare for someone as high-ranking as the vice president to use them, especially on the floor of the Senate, and in such decorous confines they are almost always accompanied by later apologies, especially in cases where an obscenity was used.

What was remarkable about this case was that there was no apology at all. Instead, Cheney defended the use of the epithet¹³:

¹²See <http://www.washingtonpost.com/ac2/wp-dyn/A3699-2004Jun24?language=printer>

¹³<http://www.washingtonpost.com/ac2/wp-dyn/A6025-2004Jun25?language=printer>

“I expressed myself rather forcefully, felt better after I had done it,” Cheney told Neil Cavuto of Fox News. The vice president said those who heard the putdown agreed with him. “I think that a lot of my colleagues felt that what I had said badly needed to be said, that it was long overdue.”

“Ordinarily I don’t express myself in strong terms, but I thought it was appropriate here.”

This wasn’t just an “isolated event.” By the terms of his defense, Cheney’s non-apology clearly signaled that this kind of response to critics of the conservative agenda was appropriate for movement followers as well. And indeed, one didn’t have to look far to see the way Cheney’s response filtered down to the rank and file¹⁴, as from this story about a Cheney campaign stop in Ohio:

Seventy-year-old Florence Orris, among those at the Parma rally, said she’s backing Bush because of his integrity and strong faith. “Any man who has the courage to speak about our Lord has my vote,” Orris said. She lamented the “ugly” tone of the campaign but nonetheless said she didn’t blame Cheney for blurting out an expletive during an angry encounter with Sen. Patrick Leahy on the Senate floor last month.

“I’m almost getting to that point with my Democratic friends,” she declared. “One of them told me this week she hates President Bush.”

Lord knows, after all, that we never heard such vile language about President Clinton.

The flash of Cheney’s signal to the troops illuminated clearly the fact that the conservative movement had developed an architecture to its argument – that is, the core of its appeal to the masses – that was indistinguishable from that of fascism. This became especially clear when considering how neatly it wrapped up, in those three short words, so many of the “mobilizing passions” that form the fascist appeal (described in Part 1).

Present in the thrust of this singular episode were the right to dominate others without normative restraints; the threat of exclusionary violence for those who fail to integrate with the movement community; the victimhood (at the hands of nasty liberals) that justifies any action; the beauty of violence and efficacy of will; and the superiority of the leader’s instincts over logic and reason. Indeed, if there was any way of summing up Cheney’s response, it was that it expressed a deep and abiding contempt for the weak, and the assertion of the right of power over it.

Cheney’s remark was just the flash that initially revealed this architecture. The clearer view came a few weeks later, at the Republican National Convention in New York City. While anyone audacious enough to protest the proceedings outside was subject to the classic lockup treatment¹⁵, often in scenarios straight out of a totalitarian state, those partaking of the big

¹⁴http://abcnews.go.com/wire/Politics/ap20040703_618.html

¹⁵See <http://www.scripsit.com/journal/A31.html>

pep rally inside were treated to a whole menu of classically fascist mobilizing passions, played out on national television.

Foremost among the appearances of these passions was the convention's most memorable moment: When California Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger told the assembled faithful, **“For those critics who are so pessimistic about our economy – dont be economic girlie men.”**

Sidney Blumenthal remarked in Salon¹⁶ on the deeper implications of this speech:

Having established his citizenship, Schwarzenegger felt entitled to articulate the Republican credo – of power over weakness. “If you believe this country, not the United Nations, is the best hope for democracy, then you are a Republican.” Thus the immigrant blasted internationalism. “If you believe that we must be fierce and relentless and terminate terrorism, then you are a Republican.” Thus he declared the Democrats soft. “And to those critics who are so pessimistic about our economy, I say: Don't be economic girlie men.”

So beyond unilateralism, jingoism and social Darwinism lies sexual apprehension. Those who aren't with the program are queer. But the anxiety is even deeper than that of homosexuality. “Girlie man” is a peculiar accusation for being effeminate. It reveals fear of women and their complex values. The name-calling is a frantic effort to suppress nuance, which the action hero fears he may harbor within.

Like Cheney's remark, this brief moment neatly captured a range of emotional appeals from the fascist blueprint: contempt for the weak, the superiority of instinct over reason, the efficacy of will. It also raised the virtue of virile, masculine leadership, as opposed to “effeminate” policy built on wisdom. This mindset disdains intellectual rigor as an affectation of vacillating liberalism.

As Umberto Eco described it¹⁷:

The critical spirit makes distinctions, and to distinguish is a sign of modernism.

In modern culture the scientific community praises disagreement as a way to improve knowledge. For Ur-Fascism, *disagreement is treason*.

We have been hearing, of course, a steady drumbeat from the media's rabid right – Rush Limbaugh, Ann Coulter, Michael Savage, Sean Hannity, and many more – accusing liberals of overt treason and complicity with “the enemy.” This raging anti-liberalism – another key feature of fascism – was prominent in Schwarzenegger's speech as well. He even resorted to a well-worn far-right canard when he described Hubert Humphrey's politics as something “that sounded like socialism.”

¹⁶http://www.salon.com/opinion/blumenthal/2004/09/01/arnold_speech/index.html

¹⁷http://www.themodernword.com/eco/eco_blackshirt.html

It was an even more prominent feature of Zell Miller's speech the following night¹⁸. Though Miller, nominally at least, is a Democrat, the entirety of his speech was a raging attack, not merely on John Kerry, nor on Democrats, but on liberalism in general. At times – especially as he attacked liberal “pacifists” – he seemed almost to be extolling the aesthetic (or at least utility) of war. Liberals, he contended, are incapable of keeping our families safe. A vote for George W. Bush was a vote for strength and resolve. The weak and vacillating Democratic nominee stood in stark contrast: “From John Kerry, they get a ‘yes-no-maybe’ bowl of mush that can only encourage our enemies and confuse our friends.”

Miller expanded on this theme in suggesting that merely running against Bush in the election was a kind of treason, claiming that “our nation is being torn apart and made weaker because of the Democrats’ manic obsession to bring down our Commander in Chief”.

Miller's characterization of the opposition to Bush thus deftly identified it with attacks on the national interest by referring to him as “the Commander in Chief.” It's a sly way of associating Bush's political enemies with our national enemies – Democrats with Al Qaeda. Dissent is treason, indeed.

Of course, only a few short days later¹⁹, Cheney himself made this suggestion explicit at a campaign stop, saying: “It's absolutely essential that eight weeks from today, on Nov. 2, we make the right choice, because if we make the wrong choice then the danger is that we'll get hit again and we'll be hit in a way that will be devastating from the standpoint of the United States.”

But Cheney's speech to the RNC²⁰ was also rife with these memes: The “strength” and “resolve” of the Bush leadership, contrasted with the weak and vacillating liberal Kerry contingent. Above all, Cheney hammered home the theme that post-Sept. 11 America faced a historical crisis of catastrophic dimensions, one that demanded exceptional responses:

Sept. 11th, 2001, made clear the challenges we face. On that day we saw the harm that could be done by 19 men armed with knives and boarding passes. America also awakened to a possibility even more lethal: this enemy, whose hatred of us is limitless, armed with chemical, biological, or even nuclear weapons.

Just as surely as the Nazis during World War Two and the Soviet communists during the Cold War, the enemy we face today is bent on our destruction. As in other times, we are in a war we did not start, and have no choice but to win. Firm in our resolve, focused on our mission, and led by a superb commander in chief, we will prevail.

The culmination of these passion-laden appeals came with the RNC acceptance speech from George W. Bush himself²¹, in which the attacks on liberals were given a few requisite lines,

¹⁸See <http://www.cbsnews.com/stories/2004/09/01/politics/main640299.shtml>

¹⁹See http://dneiwert.blogspot.com/2004_09_05_dneiwert_archive.html#109466044209644952

²⁰<http://www.cbsnews.com/stories/2004/09/01/politics/main640295.shtml>

²¹<http://www.cbsnews.com/stories/2004/09/02/politics/main640596.shtml>

while the recurring themes of “strength” and “resolve” were driven repeatedly home, capped by an appeal to a vision of American exceptionalism and manifest destiny:

Now, because we have faced challenges with resolve, we have historic goals within our reach, and greatness in our future. We will build a safer world and a more hopeful America and nothing will hold us back.

These themes have been the centerpiece of the Bush campaign since the convention – Kerry an effete, vacillating “flip-flopper,” Bush a virile, strong, resolute leader. Kerry a pointy-headed liberal, Bush a plain-spoken man of the people. And for awhile, it appeared to be working.

But then came the first presidential debate, and Americans were hit upside the cognition with the dissonance transmitted over their television sets: It was Kerry who looked strong and resolute, while Bush was not only weak and vacillating, he was forced to fall back to his mantra of strength and resolve and “hard work,” all of which were plainly belied by the image the man himself presented.

Digby²² had one of the most incisive takes on this:

George W. Bush is a man with two faces— a public image of manly strength and a private reality of childish weakness. His verbal miscues and malapropisms are the natural consequence of a man struggling with internal contradictions and a lack of self-knowledge. He cant keep track of what he is supposed to think and say in public.

There is no doubt that whether it’s a cowboy hat or a crotch hugging flightsuit , George W. Bush enjoys wearing the mantle of American archetypal warriors. But when he goes behind the curtain and sheds the costume, a flinty, thin-skinned, immature man who has never taken responsibility for his mistakes emerges. The strong compassionate leader is revealed as a flimsy paper tiger.

On Thursday night, the president forgot himself. After years of being protected from anyone who doesn’t flatter and cajole, he let his mask slip when confronted with someone who didn’t fear his childish retribution or need anything from him. Many members of the public got a good sharp look at him for the first time in two years and they were stunned.

That is, perhaps, the important thing to remember about both the undercurrent with which we are faced: Fascism, at its core, is a fraud. It promises the triumphal resurrection of the nation, and delivers only devastation. Strength without wisdom is a chimera, resolve without competence a travesty.

²²http://digbysblog.blogspot.com/2004_10_03_digbysblog_archive.html#109686081397041799

And a hollow, pale imitation of a fraud – which is what the pseudo-fascism now being practiced by the conservative movement amounts to – can be readily revealed for what it is, if its opponents have the strength of character to stand up to them.

For all his other failings, John Kerry did so last week in the debates, and in the process exposed Bush, and the entire architecture of his appeal, for a weak, hollow fraud. The only response that the Bush team is likely to muster henceforth is a kind of impotent screaming, raising the volume of the “flip-flop” attacks on Kerry, throwing more shit on the wall in the vague hope that something will stick.

In a normal political environment, this might not be a problem. But the conservative movement controls all the reins of power now. It is not about to relinquish any of them willingly. And it has the devout backing of a substantial portion of the American populace, even if it eventually proves to be a minority.

These people have no intention of sharing power with liberals. Indeed, their entire agenda, in the end, is devoted to eliminating liberalism completely. By any means necessary.

We may have finally illuminated the lair at the center of the labyrinth, but we’ve only begun fighting our way out.

Part 4: The Apocalyptic One-Party State

*We don't want to get rid of all liberals. I want to keep a couple, for example, on every major U.S. college campus so that we never forget who these people are.— Rush Limbaugh*²³

When confronted with eliminationist fantasies like Limbaugh's, mainstream conservatives are quick to say that it's just intended as humor. (As though suggesting we eliminate about half the country were something to joke about.)

But as Phillip Miller²⁴ has observed, there's a deeper resonance to these kinds of "jokes":

Or when they say things that are sort of Nazi-like, which many of them do. When Limbaugh says, for example, don't kill all the liberals so we can have some around for display, you can't help but think of the Nazis, where they wanted to kill all the Jews and then have a Jewish Museum that people could go and look at.

And that was Hitler's particular interest.

That's what I thought of right away when I read that. There are a lot of instances where their rhetoric reminds you of Nazi rhetoric.

This is how pseudo-fascism works: It's not *real* fascism. A real fascist would speak explicitly of rounding up liberals and sending them off to concentration camps. Pseudo-fascists don't; they offer instead a pale imitation that only hints at such action. And then they claim it's just a joke.

The real problem with this is that a lot of other movement conservatives say the same sort of thing – and no one thinks for a moment they're joking.

We've seen a lot of examples of an openly stated desire to do away with liberalism, particularly by accusing liberals of treason and equating them with "the enemy," in the past couple of years. This has been most notable in the field of conservative-movement book titles, ranging from Ann Coulter's *Treason: Liberal Treachery from the Cold War to the War on Terrorism* to Sean Hannity's *Deliver Us From Evil: Defeating Terrorism, Despotism and Liberalism* to Michael Savage's *The Enemy Within: Saving America from the Liberal Assault on Our Schools, Faith, and Military*. The crass intimidation inherent in these attacks cannot be clearer; and if you go to places like Savage's Web site, "Your Gear for Liberals to Fear"²⁵ is only a click away.

These all may seem relatively minor when taken individually, until you calculate their widespread effect. The eliminationist message coming from movement conservatives isn't relegated to the

²³See http://www.rushlimbaugh.com/home/daily/site_091704/content/rush_on_a_roll.guest.html

²⁴<http://www.alternet.org/story/18141>

²⁵See <http://www.homestead.com/prosites-prs/index.html>

fringes, but is broadcast to millions of people. In the arena of mass politics, this can have a profound effect.

The way this plays out on the ground is an increasingly widespread intolerance, particularly in areas where conservatives dominate, for any vestige of liberalism. Small acts of nastiness and mean-spiritedness become common, and after awhile begin adding up. There's nothing organized, just an environment where politics actually begin to poison our community wells.

But while the eliminationist motif plays out on the local micro-level, it also manifests itself at the national level, particularly in the strategies employed by movement-conservative leaders.

Indeed, if one were to search for evidence of a totalitarian impulse in the modern American political arena, it would be hard to find a clearer example than the discrete conservative movement's drive toward creating a one-party state.

Take, for instance, Republican poobah Grover Norquist²⁶, who has a noted propensity for indulging in the same fantasies. On more than one occasion, Norquist has made clear that he intends to ride the conservative movement to the transformation of America into a one-party state – and using any means necessary to achieve that end.

There was, for instance, the time that the Denver Post reported²⁷ the following from Norquist:

“We are trying to change the tones in the state capitals – and turn them toward bitter nastiness and partisanship,” said Grover Norquist, a leading Republican strategist, who heads a group called Americans for Tax Reform.

“Bipartisanship is another name for date rape,” Norquist, a onetime adviser to former House Speaker Newt Gingrich, said, citing an axiom of House conservatives.

In the same article, Norquist made clear that he saw Texas as a model for the rest of the country, as a place where Republicans would dominate the political scene in ruthless fashion. First to go, he said, were people like Rep. Charles Stenholm, a moderate Democrat:

...[I]t is exactly the Stenholms of the world who will disappear, ... the moderate Democrats. They will go so that no Texan need grow up thinking that being a Democrat is acceptable behavior.

Considering what's taken place in Texas since Norquist made these remarks – particularly the outrageous forced redistricting²⁸ of the state that was clearly intended to gerrymander the GOP into long-term political dominance – it's more than evident he wasn't just joking. (Fortunately,

²⁶http://www.mediatransparency.org/people/grover_norquist.htm

²⁷<http://tanque.org/peptide/norquist.html>

²⁸See http://www.truthout.org/docs_04/071304E.shtml

it now appears that Rep. Tom DeLay, the plan's mastermind, may finally pay²⁹ a political price for this atrocity.)

The drive to create this one-party state is, in fact, well within reach for Republicans. Robert Kuttner³⁰ explored the many facets of this campaign for *American Prospect* recently and concluded:

We are at risk of becoming an autocracy in three key respects. First, Republican parliamentary gimmickry has emasculated legislative opposition in the House of Representatives (the Senate has other problems). House Majority Leader Tom DeLay of Texas has both intimidated moderate Republicans and reduced the minority party to window dressing, rather like the token opposition parties in Mexico during the six-decade dominance of the PRI.

Second, electoral rules have been rigged to make it increasingly difficult for the incumbent party to be ejected by the voters, absent a Depression-scale disaster, Watergate-class scandal or Teddy Roosevelt-style ruling party split. After two decades of bipartisan collusion in the creation of safe House seats, there are now perhaps just 25 truly contestable House seats in any given election year (and that's before the recent Republican super gerrymandering). What once was a slender and precarious majority – 229 Republicans to 205 Democrats (including Bernie Sanders of Vermont, an independent who votes with Democrats) – now looks like a Republican lock. In the Senate, the dynamics are different but equally daunting for Democrats. As the Florida debacle of 2000 showed, the Republicans are also able to hold down the number of opposition votes, with complicity from Republican courts. Reform legislation, the 2002 Help America Vote Act (HAVA), may actually facilitate Republican intimidation of minority voters and reduce Democratic turnout. And the latest money-and-politics regime, nominally a reform, may give the right more of a financial advantage than ever.

Third, the federal courts, which have slowed some executive-branch efforts to destroy liberties, will be a complete rubber stamp if the right wins one more presidential election.

Taken together, these several forces could well enable the Republicans to become the permanent party of autocratic government for at least a generation.

As Kuttner suggests, these gains will be completely consolidated by a George Bush win in the coming presidential election. That makes its outcome truly vital:

Benjamin Franklin, leaving the Constitutional Convention in Philadelphia, was asked by a bystander what kind of government the Founders had bestowed. "A republic,"

²⁹See <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/articles/A18545-20040ct8.html>

³⁰<http://www.prospect.org/print/V15/2/kuttner-r.html>

he famously replied, “if you can keep it.” There have been moments in American history when we kept our republic only by the slenderest of margins. This year is one of those times.

Another aspect of the completeness of this consolidation is the recent domination of the lobbying industry of Washington’s K Street by movement conservatives, as Nicholas Confessore recently explored³¹ for *Washington Monthly*:

If today’s GOP leaders put as much energy into shaping K Street as their predecessors did into selecting judges and executive-branch nominees, it’s because lobbying jobs have become the foundation of a powerful new force in Washington politics: a Republican political machine. Like the urban Democratic machines of yore, this one is built upon patronage, contracts, and one-party rule. But unlike legendary Chicago mayor Richard J. Daley, who rewarded party functionaries with jobs in the municipal bureaucracy, the GOP is building its machine outside government, among Washington’s thousands of trade associations and corporate offices, their tens of thousands of employees, and the hundreds of millions of dollars in political money at their disposal.

Confessore details some of the ruthless tactics employed by Republicans in their attempts to drive out liberal lobbyists on K Street, beginning shortly after the GOP gained control of Congress in 1994:

... One way was to start ensuring that the new GOP agenda of radical deregulation, tax and spending cuts, and generally reducing government earned the financial support they thought it deserved. In 1995, DeLay famously compiled a list of the 400 largest PACs, along with the amounts and percentages of money they had recently given to each party. Lobbyists were invited into DeLay’s office and shown their place in “friendly” or “unfriendly” columns. (“If you want to play in our revolution,” DeLay told *The Washington Post*, “you have to live by our rules.”) Another was to oust Democrats from trade associations, what DeLay and Norquist dubbed “the K Street Strategy.” Sometimes revolutionary zeal got the better of them. One seminal moment, never before reported, occurred in 1996 when Haley Barbour, who was chairman of the Republican National Committee, organized a meeting of the House leadership and business executives. “They assembled several large company CEOs and made it clear to them that they were expected to purge their Washington offices of Democrats and replace them with Republicans,” says a veteran steel lobbyist. The Republicans also demanded more campaign money and help for the upcoming election. The meeting descended into a shouting match, and the CEOs, most of them Republicans, stormed out.

³¹<http://www.washingtonmonthly.com/features/2003/0307.confessore.html>

Significantly, Confessore reaches the same conclusion as Kuttner, namely, that a Bush win means the long-term consolidation of the right's power:

But most Republicans seem confident that the strength they gain by harnessing K Street will be enough to muscle through the next election – so confident, in fact, that Bush, breaking with conventional electoral wisdom, has eschewed tacking to the political center late in his term. And if the GOP can prevail at the polls in the short term, its nascent political machine could usher in a new era of one-party government in Washington. As Republicans control more and more K Street jobs, they will reap more and more K Street money, which will help them win larger and larger majorities on the Hill. The larger the Republican majority, the less reason K Street has to hire Democratic lobbyists or contribute to the campaigns of Democratic politicians, slowly starving them of the means by which to challenge GOP rule. Already during this cycle, the Republicans' campaign committees have raised about twice as much as their Democratic counterparts. So far, the gamble appears to be paying off.

The “machine” that Confessore describes, in fact, has more than a passing resemblance to the political apparatus erected in other totalitarian states, notably Soviet Russia – though in this case, it is a decidedly right-wing brand of totalitarianism. This was described recently by Jerry Landay, writing for Media Transparency, who detailed the power structure that has been propelling this drive toward a one-party state, labeling it “The Apparatus”³².

Landay details the network of non-profit foundations and think tanks that comprise the body of this party apparatus (which I briefly described in Part 1):

Rob Stein, an independent Washington researcher, follows the money flow to the radical activist establishment. He estimates that since the early 1970s at least \$2.5 to \$3 billion in funding has been awarded to the 43 major activist organizations he tracks that constitute the core of the radical machine.

He terms the big 43 the “cohort” – an “incubator of right-wing, ideological policies that constitute the administration's agenda, and, to the extent that it has one, runs its policy machinery.”

He calls the cohort “a potent, never-ending source of intellectual content, laying down the slogans, myths, and buzz words that have helped shift public opinion rightward.” The movement's propulsive energies are largely generated within the cohort.

Stein describes it as movement conservatism's “intellectual infrastructure” – multiple-issue, non-profit, tax-exempt, and supposedly non-partisan. The apparatus includes think tanks, policy institutes, media-harassment enterprises, as well as litigation firms that file lawsuits to impose their ideological templates on the law.

³²See <http://www.mediatransparency.org/stories/apparat.html>

They mastermind the machinery of radical politics, policy, and regulations. They include campus-based centers of scholarship, student associations, and scores of publications. The shorthand of their faith is well known: less government, generous tax cuts for the privileged, privatization or elimination of Social Security and Medicare, rollbacks of environmental safeguards, major curbs on the public's right to go to court, and a laissez-faire free market system unfettered by regulations or public-interest accountability. Bush campaigns to advance the ideological agenda of the right, and the radical front in turn campaigns for Bush.

Most studies of the growth of movement conservatism have traced the money flow to a handful of right-wing foundations funded by ultra-conservative millionaires, but Landay observes that the base has now expanded exponentially:

In the early 1970s, when the movement was spawned, most of the seed funding came from a relative handful of private foundations established by far-right industrialists and inherited wealth.

They included, most notably, the Lynde and Harry Bradley Foundation of Milwaukee, the John M. Olin Foundation of New York City, the quartet of foundations controlled by Richard Mellon Scaife of Pittsburgh, the Smith Richardson Foundation (Vicks), the Castle Rock Foundation (Coors beer), and the Koch family foundations (energy).

Today, the right's funding base has hugely expanded. The NCRP now identifies a total of 79 private foundations that make grants to right-wing political action groups. The NCRP estimates that those foundations granted some \$253 million to the 350 activist organizations between 1999 and 2001 alone.

Scores of for-profit corporations add millions more to the funding stream. These include Time-Warner, Altria (Philip Morris), AT&T, Microsoft, Pfizer, Eli Lilly and other members of the pharmaceutical industry, the two titans of the military-industrial complex Boeing and Lockheed Martin, as well as telecommunications, banking, real estate, and financial interests. Precise information on corporate contributions to tax exempt organizations is scarce since the IRS does not require their public disclosure.

None of this growth and consolidation of power, of course, would be possible without the participation of the media, both passively and actively. This has been made possible by a two-pronged attack: Placing movement conservatives, through assiduous promotion and manipulation, in influential positions among the media punditry; and maintaining a loud and merciless campaign against a mythical "liberal media bias" that includes waging campaigns intimidation against any person who dares stray from the party line.

Landay describes how the movement apparat has worked at placing its mouthpieces in key media positions, to the point that they are now able to dominate the national discourse:

The positioning of these right wing operatives within the “mainstream” media surely puts the lie to the old “liberal media” canard, which despite its demonstrable falsity is still standard cant for the conservative propaganda mill. This myth serves to divert attention from the stunning dominance of the right wing in media.

A look at the 15 most widely syndicated newspaper columnists makes the point: Nine – 56 percent – are solidly right-wing. Of the remaining six, only three are solidly liberal – Molly Ivins, Nat Hentoff, and Ellen Goodman.

The far right machine also controls the microphone. The top 27 syndicated on-air hosts are right-wing. There is not one liberal voice among them. Journalists and personalities of the right reach millions of people through hundreds of radio and television stations, and cable channels.

Of course, in the name of providing balance, what the media chieftains who have overseen this trend have in fact done is, in the name of displacing an alleged “liberal bias,” erected in its place a *de facto* conservative bias. The object, of course, should be eliminating *any* bias – but then, that would put attack dogs like Coulter and Hannity out of business.

In place of objectivity – in which journalists independently examine the truth of the matter on which they are writing and report *that* – we’ve been treated to a deluge of “he said/she said” journalism³³, in which factually true statements are “balanced” by factually false counters, and both are presented merely as equivalent viewpoints.

Paul Glastris³⁴ earlier this summer discussed the media’s timidity in confronting this failure:

Yet even when journalists’ own evidence plainly shows that one party has become more moderate and the other more ideologically extreme, they can’t bring themselves to say so.

The point is not necessarily that the Republicans have done wrong by being partisan and ideological. The point is that they have clearly taken the lead in dismantling bipartisanship by uniting around a radically conservative agenda and consciously – even gleefully – defying the old unwritten rules of politics that once kept partisanship and ideology in check. The same simply does not hold true on the other side of the political spectrum. You can say a lot of things about the Democrats. You can say the party’s grassroots loathes Bush just as intensely as Republicans loathed Clinton. You can say Democratic members of Congress have, belatedly, become less naive about making deals with the Bush administration. But you can’t say Democrats have moved farther to the left. They have recognized a radical presidency for what it is – but that does not make them radical as well.

Reporters for mainstream outlets have a difficult job trying to write about one of the most divisive of subjects, politics, in a way that does not alienate their heterogeneous

³³See <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/articles/A27208-2004Aug23.html>

³⁴<http://www.washingtonmonthly.com/features/2004/0406.glastris.html>

readership or call forth too many outraged emails challenging their fairness. But they ought to find a way to acknowledge the obvious truth that Republican radicalism is driving the polarization of American politics. That goes double for those journalists and pundits most pained by the loss of bipartisan civility in Washington. They do their cause no good by clinging to the fiction that America's political polarization is equally the fault of both parties. Moderation and compromise can return to the nation's capital only if and when the GOP itself moves back to the civil center – which, over the long term, is probably in the party's electoral interest as well. Some tough love and honest talk from the nation's top political writers might hasten that day.

There have been recent signs that journalists are becoming more aware of the extent and nature of the problem – particularly the current controversy over Mark Halperin's memo³⁵ to the staff at ABC News, warning them not to fall into the trap of assuming that the levels of mendacity from the two presidential campaigns were equivalent. As Josh Marshall notes³⁶, this was “simply a news organization trying to grapple with the same reality that every respectable news outlet is now dealing with – how to report on the fusillade of lies the Bush campaign has decided to use against John Kerry in the final weeks of the campaign.”

But led by the Drudge Report and a number of prominent right-wing bloggers³⁷, the right has again unleashed one of its massive intimidation campaigns aimed at forcing ABC News to toe the conservative-movement line, in much the way that Landay described in his Media Transparency piece:

The apparat's media-attack organizations are charged with keeping journalists in line, mobilizing the base to wage harassment campaigns against media organizations and reporters they dub as too “liberal.” Journalists who dare criticize the Administration are priority targets for abuse. For that reason, among others, Americans learn almost nothing from mainstream media about the apparat, whose media-attack operations effectively silenced Hillary Clinton's charges of a “vast right-wing conspiracy” operating against her husband's administration.

The terrorist attacks of Sept. 11, 2001, the resulting “war on terror” and subsequent invasion of Iraq all played major roles in fomenting this syndrome. At each step of the drama, liberals (increasingly defined as “anyone not in line with conservative movement dogma”) in the media and elsewhere were accused of aiding and abetting the enemy, and increasingly became identified with the enemy. Manipulating a traumatized national psyche, the conservative movement throughout the drama began responding to its critics by mobilizing intimidation campaigns both from above and below, further shutting liberals off from national discourse, and doing

³⁵See <http://www.drudgereport.com/mh.htm>

³⁶http://www.talkingpointsmemo.com/archives/week_2004_10_03.php#003635

³⁷See <http://powerlineblog.com/archives/008122.php>

their utmost to silence dissent, especially as its initiatives on a variety of fronts began producing grotesque disasters.

These campaigns played a decisive role in the way American journalists covered the misbegotten decision to invade Iraq, an invasion we now know was based on false pretenses. Michael Massing in the *New York Review of Books*³⁸ described, in massive detail, the way the this syndrome worked:

In the period before the war, US journalists were far too reliant on sources sympathetic to the administration. Those with dissenting views—and there were more than a few—were shut out. Reflecting this, the coverage was highly deferential to the White House. This was especially apparent on the issue of Iraq’s weapons of mass destruction—the heart of the President’s case for war. Despite abundant evidence of the administration’s brazen misuse of intelligence in this matter, the press repeatedly let officials get away with it. As journalists rush to chronicle the administration’s failings on Iraq, they should pay some attention to their own.

The media were especially manipulated, he reports, by intimidation from within the ranks of journalists and without:

On December 12, for example, *The Washington Post* ran a front-page story by Barton Gellman contending that al-Qaeda had obtained a nerve agent from Iraq. Most of the evidence came from administration officials, and it was so shaky as to draw the attention of Michael Getler, the paper’s ombudsman. In his weekly column, Getler wrote that the article had so many qualifiers and caveats that

the effect on the complaining readers, and on me, is to ask what, after all, is the use of this story that practically begs you not to put much credence in it? Why was it so prominently displayed, and why not wait until there was more certainty about the intelligence?

And why, he might have added, didn’t the *Post* and other papers devote more time to pursuing the claims about the administration’s manipulation of intelligence? Part of the explanation, no doubt, rests with the Bush administration’s skill at controlling the flow of news. “Their management of information is far greater than that of any administration I’ve seen,” Knight Ridder’s John Walcott observed. “They’ve made it extremely difficult to do this kind of [investigative] work.” That management could take both positive forms—rewarding sympathetic reporters with leaks, background interviews, and seats on official flights—and negative ones—freezing out reporters who didn’t play along. In a city where access is all, few wanted to risk losing it.

³⁸http://www.nybooks.com/articles/article-preview?article_id=16922

As Massing explains, the mobilization of the conservative-movement rank and file in shouting down these reservations played a crucial role:

Such sanctions were reinforced by the national political climate. With a popular president promoting war, Democrats in Congress were reluctant to criticize him. This deprived reporters of opposition voices to quote, and of hearings to cover. Many readers, meanwhile, were intolerant of articles critical of the President. Whenever *The Washington Post* ran such pieces, reporter Dana Priest recalls, “We got tons of hate mail and threats, calling our patriotism into question.” Fox News, Rush Limbaugh, and The Weekly Standard, among others, all stood ready to pounce on journalists who strayed, branding them liberals or traitors—labels that could permanently damage a career. Gradually, journalists began to muzzle themselves.

David Albright experienced this firsthand when, during the fall, he often appeared as a commentator on TV. “I felt a lot of pressure” from journalists “to stick to the subject, which was Iraq’s bad behavior,” Albright says. And that, in turn, reflected pressure from the administration: “I always felt the administration was setting the agenda for what stories should be covered, and the news media bought into that, rather than take a critical look at the administration’s underlying reasons for war.” Once, on a cable news show, Albright said that he felt the inspections should continue, that the impasse over Iraq was not simply France’s fault; during the break, he recalls, the host “got really mad and chastised me.”

“The administration created a set of truths, then put up a wall to keep people within it,” Albright says. “On the other side of the wall were people saying they didn’t agree. The media were not aggressive enough in challenging this.”

Part of the reason they were cowed, of course, was the sheer volume of utter nastiness directed at war dissenters, which reflected just how thoroughly movement followers were being energized by the direct appeals to their fears and insecurities in the post-9/11 world.

This in turn was due in large part to the way the Bush administration has approached the “war on terror,” not merely as matter of national security, but as an apocalyptic confrontation between good and evil. In this way, movement conservatives have had free rein to portray their opponents as agents of the dark side and themselves as the champions of goodness and light. In a nation still reeling psychologically from the trauma of the attacks, this characterization of reality found a receptive audience with a sizeable portion of the populace.

In his piece for *The Nation* titled “American Apocalypse”³⁹ (essentially an essay-length version of his incisive text *Superpower Syndrome: America’s Apocalyptic Confrontation with the World*, the famed psychiatrist Robert Jay Lifton observed this dynamic in action:

Warmaking can quickly become associated with “war fever,” the mobilization of public excitement to the point of a collective experience of transcendence. War

³⁹<http://www.thenation.com/doc.mhtml?i=20031222&c=2&s=lifton>

then becomes heroic, even mythic, a task that must be carried out for the defense of one's nation, to sustain its special historical destiny and the immortality of its people. In this case, the growth of war fever came in several stages: its beginnings, with Bush's personal declaration of war immediately after September 11; a modest increase, with the successful invasion of Afghanistan; and a wave of ultrapatriotic excesses – triumphalism and labeling of critics as disloyal or treasonous – at the time of the invasion of Iraq. War fever tends always to be sporadic and subject to disillusionment. Its underside is death anxiety, in this case related less to combat than to fears of new terrorist attacks at home or against Americans abroad – and later to growing casualties in occupied Iraq.

The scope of George Bush's war was suggested within days of 9/11 when the director of the CIA made a presentation to the President and his inner circle, called "Worldwide Attack Matrix," that described active or planned operations of various kinds in eighty countries, or what Woodward calls "a secret global war on terror." Early on, the President had the view that "this war will be fought on many fronts" and that "we're going to rout out terror wherever it may exist." Although envisaged long before 9/11, the invasion of Iraq could be seen as a direct continuation of this unlimited war; all the more so because of the prevailing tone among the President and his advisers, who were described as eager "to emerge from the sea of words and pull the trigger."

The war on terrorism is apocalyptic, then, exactly because it is militarized and yet amorphous, without limits of time or place, and has no clear end. It therefore enters the realm of the infinite. Implied in its approach is that every last terrorist everywhere on the earth is to be hunted down until there are no more terrorists anywhere to threaten us, and in that way the world will be rid of evil. Bush keeps what Woodward calls "his own personal scorecard for the war" in the form of photographs with brief biographies and personality sketches of those judged to be the world's most dangerous terrorists, each ready to be crossed out if killed or captured. The scorecard is always available in a desk drawer in the Oval Office.

The apocalyptic foundations of the Bush "war on terror" have been undergirded throughout by a closely related feature of Bush's carefully constructed image: namely, his fundamentalist religiosity. In the face of a distinct lack of actual charisma, this image has served as a way for Bush to inspire extreme devotion to his every pronouncement and policy among movement followers. After all, he is being divinely guided in his every step, according to the mythology in which the movement has shrouded him.

Ron Perlstein rather tellingly described this dynamic in action for *Village Voice* in a July piece titled "The Church of Bush"⁴⁰, which explore how Team Bush goes about building this foundation:

⁴⁰<http://www.villagevoice.com/issues/0429/perlstein.php>

On July 15, the Bush-Cheney campaign organized 6,925 “Parties for the President” in supporters’ homes nationwide. I chose to attend in Portland, Oregon. The right love to believe the whole world is against them. In a county where Ralph Nader got a quarter of the votes of George Bush and Al Gore well over double, the sense of martyrdom is especially fragrant: Portland’s conservatives are like others anywhere, only more so. One leader told me that here, it’s the conservatives who are oppressed by the gays.

Readers of this series will recognize several pseudo-fascist “mobilizing passions” (described in Part 1) at play here, notably the overwhelming sense of victim and persecution at the hands of the enemy, both within and without. This crops up continually:

Says Delores: “There is an agenda—to get rid of God in our country.”

Chirps the reporter: Certainly not on the part of John Kerry, who once entertained dreams of entering the priesthood.

I’m almost laughed out of the room.

I ask why Kerry goes to mass every week if he’s trying to get rid of God. “Public relations!” a young man calls out from across the room. “Same reason he does everything else.” Cue for Delores to repeat something a rabbi told her: “We have to stand together, because this is what happened in Europe. You know once they start taking this right and that right. And you have the Islamic people . . . ”

She trails off. I ask whether she’s referring to the rise of fascism. “We’re losing our rights as Christians: yes. And being persecuted again.”

In the end, Perlstein concludes:

Conservatives see something angelic in George Bush. That’s why they excuse, repress, and rationalize away so much.

And that is why conservatism is verging on becoming an un-American creed.

In more recent weeks, the tempo and tenor of this appeal to apocalyptic fundamentalism has stepped up. Now conservatives are releasing, as a counterpoint to Michael Moore’s *Fahrenheit 9/11*, a pro-Bush movie titled *George W. Bush: Faith in the White House*, which Frank Rich at the *New York Times*⁴¹ describes in stomach-churning detail (via Jenny Greenleaf at *The American Street*)⁴²:

⁴¹<http://www.nytimes.com/2004/10/03/arts/03rich.html?oref=login&pagewanted=1&8hpib>

⁴²<http://www.reachm.com/amstreet/archives/2004/10/03/the-passion-of-the-bush/>

More than any other campaign artifact, it clarifies the hard-knuckles rationale of the president's vote-for-me-or-face-Armageddon re-election message. It transforms the president that the Democrats deride as a "fortunate son" of privilege into a prodigal son with the "moral clarity of an old-fashioned biblical prophet." Its Bush is not merely a sincere man of faith but God's essential and irreplaceable warrior on Earth. The stations of his cross are burnished into cinematic fable: the misspent youth, the hard drinking (a thirst that came from "a throat full of Texas dust"), the fateful 40th-birthday hangover in Colorado Springs, the walk on the beach with Billy Graham. A towheaded child actor bathed in the golden light of an off-camera halo re-enacts the young George comforting his mom after the death of his sister; it's a parable anticipating the future president's miraculous ability to comfort us all after 9/11. An older Bush impersonator is seen rebuffing a sexual come-on from a fellow Bush-Quayle campaign worker hovering by a Xerox machine in 1988; it's an effort to imbue our born-again savior with retroactive chastity. As for the actual president, he is shown with a flag for a backdrop in a split-screen tableau with Jesus. The message isn't subtle: they were separated at birth.

... It's not just Mr. Bush's self-deification that separates him from the likes of Lincoln, however; it's his chosen fashion of Christianity. The president didn't revive the word "crusade" idly in the fall of 2001. His view of faith as a Manichaean scheme of blacks and whites to be acted out in a perpetual war against evil is synergistic with the violent poetics of the best-selling "Left Behind" novels by Tim LaHaye and Jerry Jenkins and Mel Gibson's cinematic bloodfest. The majority of Christian Americans may not agree with this apocalyptic worldview, but there's a big market for it. A Newsweek poll shows that 17 percent of Americans expect the world to end in their lifetime. To Karl Rove and company, that 17 percent is otherwise known as "the base."

What's important to understand is what the nature of these appeals – and their self-evident success – tells us simultaneously about the nature of the audience. Because the very nature of fundamentalist apocalypticism is profoundly dualist – entirely contingent on a black-and-white Manichean worldview – it is clear that the majority of at least the religious followers of the conservative movement are what is known as "totalists".

Fundamental to understanding totalitarianism is realizing that, contrary to the "brainwashing" model in which the totalitarian regime is imposed on a society from without and against their will, the reality is that nearly every totalitarian regime in history has succeeded because of the avid and willing participation of citizens eager to be its subjects. These people are, in the coinage of the famed psychologist Erik Erikson, "totalists."

I discussed Erikson's work previously in "Rush, Newspeak and Fascism,"⁴³ but it's worth remembering in this context how totalism works, as described by Dick Anthony and Jerome Robbins

⁴³See Chapter XI

in their essay “Religious Totalism, Violence and Exemplary Dualism: Beyond the Extrinsic Model”:

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 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.

As I observed then, any implication contained in all this that the conservative movement’s followers will be essentially dysfunctional people is little source of comfort 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.

The conservative movement's straightforward appeal to a dualist and apocalyptic mindset is, in fact, the cornerstone of its drive to create a one-party state – because nurturing such a mindset among the masses is absolutely essential to establishing that kind of totalitarian political control.

This program is neither accidental nor random in its nature. It appears rather to be very carefully designed according to certain key principles of communication.

A more careful examination reveals that what it most closely resembles, in fact, is a program of psychological warfare, waged not against opposing nations but the American populace itself.

Part 5: Warfare by Other Means

Americans, particularly fundamentalist Christians, have always had a certain predilection for apocalyptic beliefs. How many times, after all, have you heard that the world was coming to an end soon in the years you've been alive? If you're typical, it's been a lot.

A lot of these beliefs have been bubbling to the surface in large numbers in recent years, particularly as we approached the millennium. Remember all the fears about Y2K? Remember all the conspiracy theories by right-wing extremists that President Clinton intended to use the "Y2K meltdown" to install martial law? Remember the "Y2K survival kits" being sold by Patriot movement types, and the stores of generators and large bags of beans, rice and canned goods that turned out not to be needed?

Most of these fears receded to just below the surface after Y2K turned out not to be the apocalypse after all. But then came the advent of the "war on terror" on Sept. 11, 2001.

The scenes that played out on our television screens that day, and in the ensuing weeks, were like something out of an end-of-the-world movie. They were so intense in nature that at times they seemed surreal. It is almost natural, really, that they inspired a fresh wave of apocalypticism.

In truth, the scenes constituted a real psychological trauma for nearly all Americans. Trauma produces real vulnerability, especially to manipulation.

And the conservative movement, reveling in a tidal wave of apocalyptic fears, proved adept at manipulating the public in a way that stoked their fears and made them positively eager to participate in an ultimately totalitarian agenda. Indeed, the exploitation in many ways bears all the earmarks of psychological warfare – waged, in fact, against the American public.

The renowned psychiatrist Robert Jay Lifton, in his *Superpower Syndrome: America's Apocalyptic Confrontation with the World*, provides an incisive analysis of the state of the post-9/11 American psyche and the Bush administration's unmistakable manipulation of it for their own political purposes:

As a result of 9/11, all Americans shared a particular psychological experience. They became survivors. A survivor is one who has encountered, been exposed to, or witnessed death and has remained alive. The category extends to those who were far removed geographically from the World Trade Center and the Pentagon, because of their immersion in death-linked television images and their sense of being part of a painful national ordeal that threatened their country's future as well as their own. How people deal with that death encounter – the meaning they give it – has enormous significance for their subsequent actions and for their lives in general.

Lifton identifies certain common themes in the psychology of survivors:

- Death anxiety, especially pronounced for people who witnessed the attacks or associated deaths personally, and which includes a fear of recurrence:

By and large, the nearer one was to the attack – whether at the World Trade Center or the Pentagon – the greater one’s death anxiety. The fear level in New York City differed considerably from that in most other parts of the country, as indicated by studies of trauma symptoms there. But elements of death anxiety span the United States, affecting leaders and ordinary people alike, linking the two in what could be called a common pathway of vulnerability. However muted, such anxiety and vulnerability do not disappear.

- Death guilt, or “survivor guilt” which “has to do with others dying and not oneself.”

Death guilt has to do with our sense of responsibility, as cultural animals, to help others stay alive, even when they are strangers. We can speak of an animating form of guilt, as some Vietnam veterans experienced, when self-condemnation is transformed into a sense of responsibility to oppose violence and enhance life. But death guilt can be volatile and destructive when suppressed, and can be transformed instead into impulses toward further violence.

- Psychic numbing, “the inability, or disinclination, to feel, a freezing of the psyche.”

Immediate psychic numbing can later give way to enhanced sensitivity and responsiveness, or it can extend into depression, withdrawal, or aggressive behavior.

The repeatedly televised images of planes crashing into the Twin Towers, powerful as they were, could seem wildly fantastic, almost imaginary “virtual” in their distance from individual death and suffering. Subsequent images did convey pain and loss but the coverage, as intense as it was, proved narrow, providing little in the way of cause or meaning. One could say that Americans were brought into the 9/11 experience in a way that was both vividly actual and unreal. Yet struggles with feeling and not feeling took place nationwide.

- Suspiciousness: in which survivors are “alert to issues of authenticity.”

All of this is part of a struggle to overcome the counterfeit universe to which survivors were exposed during their death encounter, a universe of moral inversion in which large-scale killing and absurd dying were the norm. They can find it extremely difficult to believe in the efforts of anyone, certainly those of uncomprehending outsiders, to restore a moral universe. In the process, some survivors can become newly aware of ethical distinctions in their lives, but many others experience instead profound suspiciousness toward the outside world and a deep reluctance to engage in cooperative enterprises.

- Finding “meaning and mission” from the ordeal:

The survivor mission is a form of witness. In what one says and does, one is retelling the story of the death encounter, elaborating a new narrative from it. One can be energized by it in ways that contribute to society. But there can be false witness as well.

Lifton then illustrates this “false witness” with the case of the American soldiers who participated in the 1968 massacre at My Lai, themselves survivors of exceptional violence, who were exhorted the night before the massacre to seek meaning in their comrades’ deaths through body counts of “gooks.”

Much of the American response to 9/11, Lifton says, has “been a form of false witness”:

America has mounted a diffuse, Vietnam-style, worldwide “search and destroy mission” on behalf of the 9/11 dead. Here, too, we join the dance with our al-Qaeda “partner,” which brings fierce survivor emotions and considerable false witness of its own.

The survivor’s quest for meaning can be illuminating and of considerable human value. But it can also be drawn narrowly, manipulatively, and violently, in connection with retribution and pervasive killing.

Lifton then goes on to examine these traits not only in the context of the public reaction but in that of American leadership, Bush particularly. He limns, quite correctly, the following in Bush:

- Anxiety and belligerence, noting that “when leaders respond belligerently, they may tap the potential of their people for amorphous rage.”
- A sense of “failed enactment,” particularly in the context of Bush’s manifest failure to respond to multiple warning signs.
- Selective numbing and feeling, the epitome of which is Bush’s invasion of Iraq, which turned a blind eye to such deadly reverberations of the war as increased terrorist recruitment, new forms of Middle East chaos, and the acceleration of nuclear-weapons programs in nations who might readily conclude that having them would deter a U.S. invasion.
- Suspiciousness, one of the hallmarks of Bush’s foreign policy and especially his dealings with the United Nations.
- The grandiose mission of “defeating evil itself” through the “war on terror.”

With 9/11, everything fell into place for him. He became a confident “wartime president.” He and his speechwriters were unfortunately accurate in their initial labeling of his approach to terrorism as a “crusade.” That word suggests a Christian holy war (deriving as it does from the Latin *crux*, or cross), which is the kind of mission the president seems to have imagined himself on. ...

This was by no means the only form of survivor mission possible for an American president or the American people. Combating terrorism has to be part of a survivor response, but the task could have been undertaken with greater restraint in the use of force, and with a focus from the very beginning on international cooperation. The survivor mission embarked on by Bush and his survivors strongly affected the meaning structures of Americans in general. While many have drawn more reflective and nuanced meanings from 9/11, there has been little encouragement from above for any deviance from the narrowly grandiose presidential survivor mission.

...[The occupants of the White House] remain committed to a prior vision of American world dominance, now energized and in their eyes legitimized by their 9/11 survivor mission.

Rather than helping Americans overcome the trauma of 9/11, then, the Bush administration – by wallowing in the worst attributes of the survivor’s syndrome – has in fact ensured that the nation has not healed, nor even begun to do so. And it is clear that a political agenda has been in play every step of the way:

This administration, at its worst, has wavered between excessive secrecy and sudden, dire warnings of the “inevitability” of terrorist attacks with weapons of mass destruction on our soil – warnings that often seem timed to deflect embarrassing criticism about official measures taken to prevent or prepare for terrorism. On other occasions, the administration has spoken in more even tones. But there remains much uncertainty about the connection between what the administration says and what it does about terrorism, and the relationship of these words and actions to the dangers Americans perceive themselves to face.

Americans therefore have been left with a mixture of enthusiasm, confusion, anxiety, and anger in relation to the official survivor mission their government has embraced in their name following upon 9/11.

Lifton particularly examines the National Security Strategy⁴⁴ – known unofficially as the “Bush Doctrine” – announced by the White House in 2002 and finds its essence an apocalyptic vision of world domination:

The Bush administration’s projection of American power extends not only over planet Earth, but through the militarization of space, over the heavens as well. Its strategists dream of deciding the outcome of significant world events everywhere. We may call this an empire of fluid world control, and theirs is nothing less than an inclusive claim to the ownership of history. It is a claim never made before because never before has technology permitted the imagining of such an enterprise, however illusory, on the part of a head of state and his inner circle.

⁴⁴<http://www.whitehouse.gov/nsc/nss.html>

...Yet a sense of megalomania and omnipotence, whether in an individual or a superpower, must sooner or later lead not to glory but collapse. The ownership of history is a fantasy in the extreme. Infinite power and control is a temptation that is as self-destructive as it is dazzling ...

Lifton's diagnosis: Bush and the conservative movement have propelled the nation into a potentially disastrous, perhaps even fatal, mindset:

In speaking of superpower syndrome, I mean to suggest a harmful disorder. I use this medical association to convey a psychological and political abnormality. I also wish to empathize a confluence of behavior patterns: in any syndrome there is not just a single tendency but a constellation of tendencies. Though each can be identified separately, they are best understood as manifestations of an overarching dynamic that controls the behavior of the larger system, in this case the American national entity.

The dynamic takes shape around a bizarre American collective mindset that extends our very real military power into a fantasy of cosmic control, a mindset all too readily tempted by an apocalyptic mission. The symptoms are of a piece, each consistent with the larger syndrome: unilateralism in all-important decisions, including those related to war-making; the use of high technology to secure the ownership of death and of history; a sense of entitlement concerning the right to identify and destroy all those considered to be terrorists or friends of terrorists, while spreading "freedom" and virtues seen as preeminently ours throughout the world; the right to decide who may possess weapons of mass destruction and who may not, and to take military action, using nuclear weapons if necessary, against any nation that has them or is thought to be manufacturing them; and underlying those symptoms, a righteous vision of ridding the world of evil and purifying it spiritually and politically.

As Lifton has observed elsewhere⁴⁵, the ascendant apocalypticism has manifested itself in popular culture as well, most notably in Mel Gibson's controversial film version of *The Passion*, the defense of which earlier this year was a significant conservative-movement cause.

Lifton observed then that the film celebrates the violence of apocalypticism in a way fully consonant with the mindset promoted by the conservative movement in the wake of 9/11:

It is violence that cannot be transcended by compassion and love. Rather, the camera is enthralled by every detail of cruelty, every vicious blow, every bloody wound. Precisely these brutal images are what the camera loves. The violence itself becomes transcendent, hyper-real. And this display of sadism is in the service of an ideology of purification.

⁴⁵See <http://www.alternet.org/story/18084>

The Passion of the Christ, then, says a good deal more about the violence of the present-day apocalyptic imagination than it does about the experiences of Jesus in the first century. Hence the crude depiction of a sadistic Jewish rabble demanding crucifixion. Within a Christian apocalyptic narrative, Jews tend to be featured either as foils for world redemption who must gather in Israel and convert or be annihilated, or as the evil perpetrators depicted in the film who, in collusion with the devil, reject and kill the true messiah.

The problem of *The Passion of the Christ* goes far beyond the individual psyche of Mel Gibson, or even questions of biblical interpretation. The crucifixion here becomes a vehicle for a contemporary mentality that is absolute and polarizing in its starkly violent vision of world purification – a vision that fits well with an apocalyptic, all or nothing “war on terrorism.”

The primary vehicle for spreading this apocalyptic version of reality has been the media, which have largely converted (as we saw in Part 4) into propaganda organs for the conservative movement. It’s important to understand this mechanism and how it continues to affect the body politic.

Primarily, propaganda succeeds by taking advantage of the public’s limited ability to absorb all the details of the often complex problems that confront modern society. As Anthony Pratkanis and Elliot Arosen explained in *Age of Propaganda: The Everyday Use and Abuse of Persuasion*:

Given our finite ability to process information, we often adopt the strategies of the peripheral route for simplifying complex problems; we mindlessly accept a conclusion or proposition – not for any good reason but because it is accompanied by a simplistic persuasive device.

Back in the 1930s, the short-lived Institute for Propaganda Analysis⁴⁶ came up with the seminal catalog of these persuasive devices (since superseded by more complex catalogs) that remains a useful guide even today. These propaganda techniques⁴⁷ are:

- Name Calling, or hanging a bad label on ideas or persons.
- Card Stacking, or the selective use of facts or outright falsehoods.
- Band Wagon, or claiming that everyone like us thinks this way.
- Testimonial, or the association of a respected or hated person with an approved or despised idea, respectively.

⁴⁶See <http://www.propagandacritic.com/articles/intro.ipa.html>

⁴⁷http://mason.gmu.edu/~amcdonal/Propaganda_Techniques.html

- Plain Folks, a technique whereby the idea and its proponents are linked to “people just like you and me.”
- Transfer, or an assertion of a connection between something valued or hated and the idea or commodity being discussed.
- Glittering Generality, or an association of something with a “virtue word” to gain approval without examining the evidence.

It isn't hard to see each and every one of these techniques being wielded, in some cases overwhelmingly, by the conservative movement in their defense of the Bush “war on terror” and, for that matter, nearly every aspect of their agenda. The very justification for the invasion of Iraq, in fact, is a classic case of “card stacking,” while the nation simultaneously has been inundated with glittering generalities about Bush's “strength and resolve,” bandwagon clarion calls, assertions of being “just plain folks,” and testimonials both in favor of the Bush agenda and attacking that of liberals. Likewise, name-calling and transfers have been rampant in the attacks on liberals, along with plenty of card stacking.

The clearest case of the Bush administration's resort to propaganda techniques was the career of the thankfully short-lived Office of Strategic Information⁴⁸, which was closed down⁴⁹ shortly after it became clear it was preparing to disseminate outright disinformation in support of the Iraq invasion.

But the OSI's demise was certainly neither the beginning nor the end of the administration's use of propaganda to obtain public support for its misbegotten invasion. Indeed, as the situation has grown progressively worse in Iraq over the past year, the campaign has intensified, to the extent that it is now clear this is no ordinary disinformation campaign.

It has, in fact, all the earmarks of psychological warfare.

Typically, such operations by the American military and its civilian cohort have been relegated almost strictly to overseas campaigns; most of the techniques were designed for that purpose. But there has always been an element of it aimed at the home front as well.

The development of psychological-warfare techniques by the American military dates back to the 1920s, though they did not become an explicit part of military strategy until after 1945 and the end of World War II and the onset of the Cold War, in which they played a major role. Christopher Simpson, *Science of Coercion: Communication Research and Psychological Warfare 1945-1960*, describes in detail the often secretive development of these techniques.

Simpson, through a series of FOIA requests, managed to obtain a number of key documents from the military bureaucracies responsible for creating psych ops. One of the more revealing of these documents read:

⁴⁸See <http://www.propagandacritic.com/articles/examples.osi.html>

⁴⁹See <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/americas/1843201.stm>

Psychological warfare employs all moral and physical means, other than orthodox military operations, which tend to:

- a. destroy the will and the ability of the enemy to fight
- b. deprive him of the support of his allies and neutrals
- c. increase in our own troops and allies the will to victory

Psychological warfare employs any weapon to influence the mind of the enemy. The weapons are psychological only in the effect they produce and not because of the nature of the weapons themselves. In this light, overt (white), covert (black), and gray propaganda; subversion; sabotage, special operations; guerrilla warfare; espionage; political, cultural, economic, and racial pressures are all effective weapons. They are effective because they produce dissension, distrust, fear and hopelessness in the minds of the enemy, not because they originate in the psyche of propaganda or psychological warfare agencies.

Simpson goes on to explain that

psychological warfare and psychological operations encompass this range of activities, as specified by the Army and the National Security Council. Several points should be underlined. First, psychological warfare in the U.S. conception has consistently made use of a wide range of violence, including guerrilla warfare, assassination, sabotage, and, more fundamentally, the maintenance of manifestly brutal regimes in client states abroad. Second, it also has involved a variety of propaganda or media work, ranging from overt (white) newscasting to covert (black) propaganda. Third, **the targets of U.S. psychological warfare were not only the “enemy,” but also the people of the United States and its allies.**

Simpson explains that nearly all of the knowledge underlying the development of psych-ops techniques is derived from communications studies, in particular the work of the pioneering communications theorists Harold Lasswell and Walter Lippmann. This fact in itself gives us a hint about the elitist underpinnings of the techniques:

Lippmann and Lasswell articulated a very narrow vision that substituted, for communication as such, one manifestation of communication that is particularly pronounced in hierarchical industrial states. Put most bluntly, they contended that communication’s essence was its utility as an instrument for imposing one’s will on others, and preferably on masses of others. This instrumentalist conception of communication was consistent with their experience of war and with emerging mass communication technologies of the day, which in turn reflected and to an extent embodied the existing social order.

This view of communication as domination has in fact become a central component of communications theory in American academia, and has become woven into the very fabric of modern consumer society. As Simpson explains [p. 20]:

The mainstream paradigm of communication studies in the United States – its techniques, body of knowledge, institutional structure, and so on – evolved symbiotically with modern consumer society generally, and particularly with media industries and those segments of the economy most dependent on mass markets. Communication research in America has historically proved itself by going beyond simply observing media behavior to finding ways to grease the skids for absorption and suppression of rival visions of communication and social order.

Clearly, social communication necessarily involves a balancing of conflicting forces. A “community”, after all, cannot exist without some form of social order; or, put another way, order defines the possible means of sharing burdens. Lasswell and Lippmann, however, advocated not just order in an abstract sense, but rather a particular social order in the United States and the world in which forceful elites necessarily ruled in the interests of their vision of the greater good. U.S.-style consumer democracy was simply a relatively benign system for engineering mass consent for the elites’ authority; it could be dispensed with then ordinary people reached the “wrong” conclusions. Lasswell writes that the spread of literacy

did not release the masses from ignorance and superstition but altered the nature of both and compelled the development of a whole new technique of control, largely through propaganda ... [A propagandist’s] regard for men rests on no democratic dogmatism about men being the best judge of their own interests. The modern propagandist, like the modern psychologist, recognizes that men are often poor judges of their own interests ... [Those with power must cultivate] sensitiveness to those concentrations of motive which are implicit and available for rapid mobilization when the appropriate symbol is offered ... [The propagandist is] no phrasemonger but a promoter of overt acts.

This elitist view of the role of communication as a means to control and dominate the masses was at the core of the development of psychological warfare techniques by the American military. For the most part, this was couched in terminology that directed the efforts towards nations with whom we were at war or involved in conflicts.

But at other times, it was clear that the American public was viewed as a potential target as well. This was made manifest by the willingness of psych-ops researchers to use Americans as guinea pigs in their experiments. The classic case of this was an early-1950s project by University of Washington sociologists called Project Revere, which Simpson describes in detail:

Briefly, Project Revere scientists dropped millions of leaflets containing civil defense propaganda or commercial advertising from U.S. Air Force planes over selected cities

and towns in Washington state, Idaho, Montana, Utah, and Alabama. They then surveyed the target population to create a relatively detailed record of the diffusion of the sample message among residents.

One of the architects of this study was a sociologist named Melvin Defleur⁵⁰, who eventually became one of the leading figures in communications studies and theory, and whose theories on news diffusion are taught in today's journalism and comm-school courses.

Much of the work of these academics in both the fields of communication and psychological warfare is relatively benign and has practical applications. However, it also has terrific potential for abuse, particularly in the hands of a Stalinist movement intent on the use of propaganda techniques as a means for acquiring power – the situation which America now confronts in the form of the conservative movement.

The war in Iraq and the means of influence used to justify it provide the most stark example of this. As the retired military-intelligence analyst Sam Gardiner recently explained⁵¹ in Salon, the main subject of psychological warfare surrounding the invasion of Iraq was in fact the American public:

The Army Field Manual describes information operations as the use of strategies such as information denial, deception and psychological warfare to influence decision making. The notion is as old as war itself. With information operations, one seeks to gain and maintain information superiority – control information and you control the battlefield. And in the information age, it has become even more imperative to influence adversaries.

But with the Iraq war, information operations have gone seriously off track, moving beyond influencing adversaries on the battlefield to influencing the decision making of friendly nations and, even more important, American public opinion. In information denial, one attempts to deceive one's adversary. Since the declared end of combat operations, the Bush administration has orchestrated a number of deceptions about Iraq. But who is its adversary?

As Gardiner explains, the use of psych ops has not been relegated strictly to the military. The Bush White House has also engaged in these tactics:

... The White House is also using psychological warfare – conveying selected information to organizations and individuals to influence their emotions, motives, objective reasoning and ultimately behavior – to spread its version of the war. And the administration's message is obviously central to the process. From the very beginning,

⁵⁰http://www.fact-index.com/m/me/melvin_defleur.html

⁵¹See http://www.salon.com/opinion/feature/2004/09/22/psychological_warfare/

that message, delivered both directly and subtly, has been constant and consistent: Iraq = terrorists = 9/11.

The president tells us that we are fighting terrorists in Iraq so we don't have to fight them here in the United States. But I know of no one with a respectable knowledge of the events in Iraq who shares that view. My contacts in the intelligence community say the opposite – that U.S. policies in fact are creating more terrorism.

Nonetheless, the American public is largely oblivious to this fact, instead seeing Bush's "strong and resolute" actions as making headway against terrorism. As Gardiner explains, the "repetition of the terrorist argument is utterly consistent with the theory that one can develop collective memory in a population through repetition." This hardly the only time this technique has been used by the conservative movement, either; how many times have we heard talking points reiterated ad nauseam by conservatives (from "It's not the sex, it's the lies" to "Al Gore invented the Internet" to "Kerry is a flip-flopper") until they eventually become accepted as truth?

Gardiner, in an earlier study⁵², provides even more detail about the mendacity underlying these manipulations of the American public:

The concepts of warfare got all mixed up in this war. ... [W]hat has happened is that information warfare, strategic influence, strategic psychological operations pushed their way into the important process of informing the peoples of our two democracies. The United States and the UK got too good at the concepts they had been developing for future warfare.

... From my research, the most profound thread is that WMD was only a very small part of the strategic influence, information operations and marketing campaign conducted on both sides of the Atlantic. ... My research suggests there were over 50 stories manufactured or at least engineered that distorted the picture of Gulf II for the American and British people.

It would be one thing if all this manipulation were actually for the benefit of the American public. But it has occurred in fact solely for the benefit of the conservative movement and its agenda – an agenda that, at its core, is profoundly anti-democratic.

The danger of placing the capacity for employing these techniques in the hands of a movement whose entire *raison d'être* is the acquisition of power through any means could not be more apparent. After all, we've seen it happen before, with disastrous – even apocalyptic – results.

The communication-as-domination model, you see, was developed by Lasswell and Lippmann in the 1920s and was promptly adopted by none other than Germany's Nazi propagandists, as Christopher Simpson explained:

⁵²http://www.usnews.com/usnews/politics/whispers/documents/truth_1.pdf

Lasswell and Lippmann favored relatively tolerant, pluralistic societies in which elite rule protected democracies from their own weaknesses – a modern form of noblesse oblige, so to speak. But the potential applications of the communication-as-domination zeitgeist extended far beyond the purposes they they would have personally approved. Nazi intellectuals believed to be instrumental in many aspects of communications studies throughout the 1930s, both as innovators of successful techniques and as spurs to communication studies outside of Germany intended to counteract the Nazi party’s apparent success with propaganda.

Indeed, the most famous advocate of the use of these techniques in the 1930s was none other than Josef Goebbels, the Nazis’ propaganda chief. Another advocate of the Lippmann approach was Otto Ohlendorf⁵³, who ran a Nazi office on polling techniques and communications before becoming one of the top commandants of the SS and a genocidal war criminal.

Today’s conservative-movement propagandists operate somewhat differently, of course. Instead of manipulating a vulnerable public, traumatized by war and economic depression, by scapegoating Jews and proffering an apocalyptic vision of world domination as a response to the threat to the purity of the Aryan race, today’s pseudo-fascists instead scapegoat liberals, and manipulate a traumatized post-9/11 populace through an apocalyptic vision of world domination excused by the supposed threat to American freedom.

It is, like all of pseudo-fascism, structurally similar to the real thing, but different in content and substance in certain key ways. In this way, it appears less menacing.

The danger, however, lies in the way those differences are gradually being eroded.

⁵³http://www.archives.gov/iwg/research_papers/ohlendorf_irr_file.html

Part 6: Breaking Down the Barriers

One of the gross misconceptions about fascism that persists on both right and left sides of the political aisle is the notion that it can be reduced to a single core ideological principle, much like communism or anarchism, by which we can define it. This is why so many people reach for easy dictionary definitions when trying to deal with it.

But as Robert O. Paxton has demonstrated authoritatively in *The Anatomy of Fascism*, the mutative nature of fascism makes such definitions nearly impossible, and almost invariably off the mark. Probably the closest we've come to it is Roger Griffin's "palingenetic ultranationalist populism", which represents the traits that remain constant in fascism through all the stages of its development. Paxton himself has noted a similar constant, namely, the fascist insistence that it alone represents the authentic identity of the nation in which it arises.

The resemblance of the conservative movement's ideological underpinnings to these core traits of fascism is in many ways startlingly clear – but there are also noticeable differences. The ultranationalism and selective populism are unmistakable, but the palingenesis (that is, the aspects of its appeal that are based on the myth of a phoenix-like national rebirth) is somewhat subdued, largely because the ashes from which it is arising – those of Sept. 11 – were relatively limited in the scope of their devastation.

Likewise, the claim to represent the authentic national identity is rampant in the conservative movement, ranging from the White House to media figures to the average red-state voter. However, it actually appears throughout the political spectrum – at significantly lower volumes, certainly, but it nonetheless cannot be said to be a trait unique to the conservative movement.

It is for this and similar reasons that I call it pseudo-fascism: The familial resemblance of fascism's architecture is unmistakable, but it is not fully fleshed out. It is like a hologram, a skeletal outline, of fascism.

Fascism is not a single, readily identifiable principle but a political pathology, best understood (as in psychology) as a constellation of traits, many of which I have already outlined (particularly in Part 2). Taken individually, many of these traits seem innocuous enough, even readily familiar, part of the traditional American political hurly-burly. A few of them are present throughout the political spectrum – but definitely not all of them.

It is only when taken together in sum does the constellation become clear. And when it comes together, it is fated to take on a life of its own.

Let's consider again the nine "motivating passions" of fascism identified by Paxton:

- 1. – a sense of overwhelming crisis beyond the reach of any traditional solutions;**

As I already observed in Part 1, this trait has been especially rampant as one of the clarion calls of movement conservatives since the terrorist attacks of Sept. 11, 2001:

Calling 9/11 “the day that changed everything,” the Bush regime and its conservative-movement supporters have consistently projected a sense of overwhelming national crisis that requires reaching beyond traditional solutions and instituting a number of clearly radical steps.

The difference in pseudo-fascism – and this is a significant one – is that the solutions posed for confronting this crisis have not so far resulted in calls for disposing with democratic institutions. Instead, they have been more in the fashion of gradual erosion of them: chewing away at civil liberties through the Patriot Act and the emergence of the executive power to detain citizens⁵⁴ under “enemy combatant” designations. Most notably, there have been anti-democratic campaigns to erode Americans’ voter rights⁵⁵ closely associated with conservative-movement operatives.

However, as long as they continue to operate, at least outwardly, on the basis of a respect for democracy, this cannot be said to be a genuinely fascist trait on the part of movement conservatism.

2. – the primacy of the group, toward which one has duties superior to every right, whether universal or individual, and the subordination of the individual to it;

The conservative-movement similarity:

Conservatives have continually stressed the primacy of Americanness, a group identity to which we are obligated, as “patriots,” to subordinate all kinds of civil rights and free speech.

This has been especially the case since Sept. 11, as the movement’s bandwagon jingoes have quickly and fiercely denounced anyone who had the audacity to wonder about how American policy might have contributed to the root causes of terrorism. They have argued that privacy rights and racial profiling should be willingly sacrificed in the pursuit of national security (in some cases, even defending the World War II internment of Japanese Americans in the process), without presenting a scintilla of evidence that such measures would actually enhance security.

This mode of thought is not altogether absent elsewhere in the political sphere, but it is quite pronounced among movement conservatives.

3. – the belief that one’s group is a victim, a sentiment which justifies any action, without legal or moral limits, against the group’s enemies, both internal and external;

Again, this is a pronounced tendency among conservatives:

⁵⁴See <http://www.reachm.com/amstreet/archives/2004/02/02/slouching-towards-manzanar/>

⁵⁵See http://dneiwert.blogspot.com/2004.10.17_dneiwert_archive.html#109830622308006215

They have consistently emphasized the nation's victimhood in the 9/11 attacks – and attacked any suggestion of a more nuanced view as “unpatriotic” – and have further argued consistently that the 9/11 attacks justify nearly any action, regardless of legal or moral limits (see, e.g., Abu Ghraib), against America's enemies.

This motif is almost utterly absent elsewhere in the political spectrum. While many liberals also gladly participate in the belief that America is primarily a victim in the war on terror, it is a common charge against liberals is that they are “traitors” for even suggesting that America needs to operate within the larger framework of the international community.

4. – dread of the group's decline under the corrosive effect of individualistic liberalism, class conflict, and alien influences;

As I pointed out:

A favorite conservative theme is a dread of national decline under the corrosive effects of liberalism, often identifying it with equally dreaded alien influences. (See, e.g, Sean Hannity's bestselling screed, *Deliver Us From Evil: Defeating Terrorism, Despotism, and Liberalism.*)

There have been many other iterations of this meme as well, such as Michael Savage's *The Threat Within*, which argues that the nation's real enemy is liberalism, or Rush Limbaugh's incessant harangues blaming liberals for everything wrong with the country. Pundits like Savage and Michelle Malkin have built careers out of denouncing the threat posed by illegal immigration and have connected it frequently to the terrorist threat.

Obviously, this meme does not appear among liberals in any shape (nor for that matter among any non-movement conservatives, except for the extremists of the racist and Patriot far right). Indeed, it's difficult to even find a liberal mirror to the conservative argument, to wit, that conservatives are at the root of all the nation's ills.

5. – the need for closer integration of a purer community, by consent if possible, or by exclusionary violence if necessary;

Movement conservatives clearly have made use of this meme:

They have consistently argued for a closer integration of a purer American community under the aegis of “national unity.” However, this unity is not a natural one reached by compromise; rather, it can only be achieved by a complete subsumation of American politics by the conservative movement, creating essentially a one-party state [see esp. Part 4]. Citizens can join by consent if they like, or they can face exclusion as a consequence.

This “motivating passion” is not entirely absent from liberalism or centrism; the speeches by Democrats like Barak Obama and John Edwards at their national convention likewise stressed themes of national unity. But their argument was clearly an inclusive one – saying, in essence, that everyone across the political spectrum was an American, and that all of us need to pull together as a nation. The conservative-movement argument, in stark contrast, is not inclusive in the least; the kind of “unity” it promotes is one in which Americans can come together only under the banner of their ideology; otherwise, they will face exclusion. In many instances, this exclusion is cast in terms explicitly threatening violence.

In this instance, the fascist propensities of the conservative movement are particularly clear.

6. – the need for authority by natural leaders (always male), culminating in a national chief who alone is capable of incarnating the group’s destiny;

The conservative-movement similarity:

While denouncing their opponents – especially Democratic presidential candidate John Kerry – as “weak on terror,” conservatives have consistently portrayed George W. Bush as the only person capable of making the nation not only secure from terrorists, but the dominant political and cultural force in the world, a role often portrayed in terms of a national destiny as the “beacon of democracy.”

This motif is, however, much less clear in certain regards. The conservative movement not only has highly placed women in media roles (see, e.g., Coulter and Malkin) it also has had women in key positions in the administration (e.g., Condoleezza Rice, Karen Hughes and Christine Todd Whitman). But even this aspect tends toward a strongly male hierarchy; the movement’s female pundits have a notable propensity for attacking women’s rights (Coulter has even suggested they not be allowed to vote), while those in key positions are either moved out eventually (as were Hughes and Whitman) or given primarily roles as spokespersons for policies determined by the men in charge of the show (see Rice). Meanwhile, derision of the opposition often deploys rhetoric that expresses an overt hostility to a “feminine” approach, as in Arnold Schwarzenegger’s convention speech urging people suffering under the Bush economy not to be “girlie men.”

The claims of the exclusiveness of their ideology’s ability to “lead America to its destiny,” however, have become striking in the past year, especially as Bush has defended his approach to the “war on terror” and the invasion of Iraq in the framework of the “new American century” envisioned by his top policy advisers, in which the United States dominates global affairs for the foreseeable future. Bush calls this “a calling from beyond the stars.” The innate similarity of this style of leadership to the fascist vision of “national destiny” could not be more clear.

7. – the superiority of the leader’s instincts over abstract and universal reason;

This aspect of the fascist appeal is particularly pronounced in the 2004 Bush presidential campaign:

Most of all, they have stressed Bush's superiority as a president because of his reliance on his instincts and "resolve" and his marked refusal to engage in abstract reasoning.

Democrats have likewise stressed John Kerry's strength and resolve (largely to counter Bush's claims) but there is a distinct difference: Kerry clearly makes the case that he applies thought, reasoning, facts and logic to reach his conclusion, while Bush's campaign emphasizes his instincts. This is especially underscored by the Bush attacks on Kerry as a "flip-flopper" for having actually used reasoning to change his mind on certain policies; Bush's "stubborn resolve", as well as the overt anti-intellectualism of the way he mangles the language and produces bizarre malapropisms, is contrastingly sold as a virtue.

Of all the similarities to the motivating passions of fascism, this one is the most pronounced and unmistakable.

8. – the beauty of violence and the efficacy of will, when they are devoted to the group's success;

As I argued earlier:

At times, conservatives have even trod into arguing in favor of a war ethos (see, for instance the popular bumper sticker: "War Has Never Solved Anything, Except for Ending Slavery, Fascism, Nazism and Communism"); at other times – as in all the talk about "shock and awe" in the Iraq invasion – they have suggested there is a kind of beauty to violence, especially in the service of the imposition of American will.

However, this motif is relatively subdued when it comes to the conservative movement. Certainly there is relatively little promotion of an ethos of violence, except when conservative pundits talk reflexively about nuking the enemy or doing away with them altogether. And the Bush administration still pays lip service to the pain and sorrow associated with war, though interestingly enough that concern is only expressed in the context of American servicemen and not Iraqi civilians.

Genuine fascism, in contrast, positively gloried in violence as a *domestic* solution as well as an international one, advocating the thuggish tactics of SA Brownshirts in silencing the Left. So far there have only been hints of this in the conservative movement. Until it becomes more explicit, this particular fascist passion cannot be said to concretely exist in the current setting.

9. – the right of the chosen people to dominate others without restraint from any kind of human or divine law, right being decided by the sole criterion of the group's prowess in a Darwinian struggle.

There are some clear similarities here:

...[I]n defending the administration's actions – particularly in invading Iraq under the pretense of a nonexistent “imminent threat,” and for encouraging conditions that led to international-law violations at Abu Ghraib – many conservatives have simply dismissed the critics by invoking 9/11 and the larger right, by sheer virtue of our national military power, to dominate other nations and individuals with no restraint. (The conservative movement's chief mouthpiece, Rush Limbaugh, was especially noteworthy in this regard, dismissing the Abu Ghraib as similar to fraternity hazing, and responding to a report that Iraqi Prime Minister Allawi had summarily executed six insurgents: “Good. Hubba-hubba.”)

There are other ways this trait manifests itself as well. The Bush administration's hostility to international and the international criminal courts was well established even before 9/11, and has become pronounced in the ensuing years. Its contemptuous treatment of the United Nations is consonant with this.

It's important to observe, however, that in the case of the conservative movement, “Darwinian” does not accurately describe their view of the natural world order. Theirs is more of a religious view akin to Manifest Destiny, a belief in American exceptionalism viewed through a prism of apocalyptic fundamentalist Christianity. In the end, the outcome is not remarkably different – it still describes the world in competitive instead of cooperative terms, and the destructive outcome of putting it into practice is at least as great.

Nonetheless, the conservative movement exhibits many of the attributes of this passion, particularly in its assertion of the right to operate without restraint, justified by the horrors of 9/11. Otherwise, how could we have invaded another nation under false pretenses and in violation of international law?

Now, in reviewing these nine “motivating passions,” it's clear that all of them are present, at least in rough form or outline, in the post-2000 conservative movement. But as we've seen, some of these similarities are not altogether clear, either.

All told, of the nine “passions,” the presence of five of them is strong and clear, and in the case of two of these there are not even any mitigating factors. In two instances, the presence is mixed and mitigated somewhat, and in two others the similarity is not particularly strong.

There are other lesser, more stylistic similarities to fascism that have been reared their head in the conservative movement as well:

- A propensity to view the weak with contempt; to associate weakness with femininity; and to excoriate the feminine and glorify the masculine. “Girlie men” was only the tip of the rhetorical iceberg in this regard.

- A fondness for depicting their enemies and their opposition as animals – typically either vermin or vicious killers. The most recent iteration of this theme is the new GOP “wolves”

commercial⁵⁶, the underlying nature of which Eric Muller⁵⁷ recently illustrated nicely. See also, by way of example, the Grover “Projection is My Middle Name” Norquist essay about how nasty liberals were going to be in the 2004 campaign, titled “Cornered Rats Fight Hard.”⁵⁸

– A resulting eliminationist rhetoric advocating the utter exclusion of entire blocs of the electorate, especially immigrants and the gay and lesbian community, as well as, on an even broader scale, liberals generically.

All these similarities are strong enough to make clear that what the conservative movement has become is, in its basic architecture, a kind of precursor to fascism. But the differences are significant enough that it cannot be accurately described as the real thing.

The differences are even clearer in certain other aspects of the historical framework of fascism that have been identified by people like Paxton and Griffin. I briefly described these differences in Part 1:

– Its agenda, under the guise of representing mainstream conservatism, is not openly revolutionary.

This is in large part due to the movement’s origins in conservatism, which has traditionally been the defender of the status quo. What is noteworthy about the conservative movement, though, is that beneath the conservative mask, its agenda is deeply radical, if in many regards reactionary. This is especially the case in its approach to foreign policy, which seeks to embark the nation for the first time in its history on a unilateralist campaign of world dominance.

It is clear, too, that George Bush and his wrecking have intended a radical makeover of the approach to governance and policy from the start of his administration. This turn is not a product of Sept. 11; the latter, instead, has provided Bush cover for an agenda he intended from his first day in office.

– It is not yet a dictatorship.

This difference is related to some extent to the mechanics of how fascism traditionally has acquired power. In the past, fascism arose as a discrete movement that rose to power from the ground up. Contrastingly, in this instance, the mechanics involve a subtle but unmistakable transformation from within an already established force in the political system – namely, the conservative movement.

However, this movement, unlike fascism, has never openly espoused the virtues of authoritarian dictatorship (though there was Bush’s onetime joke⁵⁹ that “ If this were a dictatorship, it would

⁵⁶See http://dneiwert.blogspot.com/2004_10_17_dneiwert_archive.html#109848535995136557

⁵⁷See http://www.isthatlegal.org/archives/2004_10_01_isthatlegal_archive.html#109862905192676005

⁵⁸See http://www.taemag.com/issues/articleid.17898/article_detail.asp

⁵⁹See <http://transcripts.cnn.com/TRANSCRIPTS/0012/18/nd.01.html>

be a heck of a lot easier, just so long as I'm the dictator"). It continues to operate within the framework of a democratic republic.

At the same time, the movement's growing hostility to democratic institutions has been noteworthy – ranging from real-world manifestations such as the Bush v. Gore decision, which undermined individual voting rights, to Tom DeLay's Texas redistricting program and the recall of California Gov. Gray Davis to the ongoing vote-suppression tactics being used in the current election. This hostility has theoretical underpinning in the conservative movement, particularly noteworthy in Antonin Scalia's discussions⁶⁰ of the "tendency of democracy to obscure the divine authority behind government" and the need "to combat [this tendency] as effectively as possible".

- It does not yet rely on physical violence and campaigns of gross intimidation to obtain power and suppress opposition.

Clearly, there have been hints of such inclinations, ranging from the intimidation of voters in 2000 in Florida to campaign thuggery associated with Arnold Schwarzenegger's California campaign, to minor incidents of violence and intimidation in the current campaign. However, none of this has received explicit encouragement from the movement. What has occurred instead is the gradual creation of an environment where these kinds of thuggish tactics are considered everyday expressions of heated political views. Simultaneously, the environment is such that liberals and other opponents of the movement are responding in kind – which only stokes the flames higher and justifies in the minds of movement followers their own innately violent responses.

- American democracy has not yet reached the genuine stage of crisis required for full-blown fascism to take root.

Paxton makes a special point of the fact that fascism is almost purely a product of the failure of democracy; for this reason, it only appears in formerly democratic states. Nearly every scholar of fascism makes clear that it has only successfully seized power when these democratic states reach real stages of crisis.

There is little doubt that the events of Sept. 11, 2001, first created the conditions under which democracy in America could face a crisis. The eternal war of the "war on terror" created an executive branch with extraordinary powers exceeding those of any previous "wartime president," if only because the war itself was both universal and endless, strangely amorphous, almost mythical, and yet all too real in the deaths it produces. Moreover, it has occurred at a time when the nation is more bitterly and rancorously divided and politically volatile than any time in the memory of most Americans living today. The levels of distrust and conflict exist both on a national scale and the deeply personal one⁶¹.

⁶⁰<http://www.firstthings.com/ftissues/ft0205/articles/scalia.html>

⁶¹See http://dneiwert.blogspot.com/2003_11_23_dneiwert_archive.html#106970848149574609

The role of a discrete conservative movement in metastasis in this environment has been profound. Nearly all of the rancor and nastiness in the national discourse is closely associated with its rise in the 1990s, particularly under the banner of the propaganda war waged by Rush Limbaugh and his minions, who as I've described at length previously⁶² showed no hesitation in adopting ideas and memes straight out of the American far right, building ideological and political bridges with these extremists. The effect was a gravitational pull that dragged the movement further rightward almost naturally. It also introduced a level of eliminationist nastiness previously unseen in mass media.

The resulting milieu is one in which this nastiness has grown rampant on both sides, to the point where it's become indistinguishable who's nastier. Violence has raised its head on both sides of the aisle. And there's no particular end in sight.

In the end, though, we still have not reached an actual state of crisis. The potential is there for one as never before in our history; whether we reach it or not ultimately will depend on us as citizens.

Pseudo fascism has not arisen because of any conspiracy by closet fascists lurking in the conservative movement, but rather by the inexorable pull of the forces latent in the American body politic, combined with an unchecked lust for power and certain historical events of politically earth-shaking moment, all of which have caused it to coalesce in this fashion.

Yet because of the seeming familiarity of so many of its traits, the appearance of a fascist architecture on the political scene does not seem immediately threatening – especially in the hollow, not fully-fleshed-out form that has manifested itself in the American conservative movement. It's only when we stand back and recognize the larger shape that the danger becomes clear.

Pseudo fascism, as it is now, is still a political pathology, but a manageable one. The real danger comes when the differences begin disappearing, when the barriers begin coming down. To the extent that this occurs, the hologram will begin taking on the real substance of fascism.

To the extent that the nation finds itself in the throes of a real crisis of governance; that we demand utter fealty to the national identity, even at the expense of democratic institutions or democracy itself; that we identify liberalism as the root of all evil in America, as a domestic enemy little distinguishable from those from abroad; that we justify acts of monstrousness by pointing to our own victimhood; that we rely on the “strength” and instincts of our leaders instead of their wisdom and powers of reason; that we allow violence to become part of the political landscape; and that we pursue an insane apocalyptic vision of world domination – then, to that same extent, we put flesh to the fascist bones and make it real.

Can it happen in America? The truth is this: America is one of the nations in which fascism may yet manifest itself in this era of mass politics. Preventing this from happening hinges on the extent to which Americans themselves stand up to it.

⁶²See “Rush, Newspeak and Fascism”

Part 7[Conclusion]: It Can Happen Here

Almost certainly, Sinclair Lewis' *It Can't Happen Here*⁶³, published in 1935, is his most peculiar novel. For one thing, it's the closest thing to speculative fiction he ever wrote. It describes the rise to power of an American fascist named Buzz Windrip, who arrives on the political scene to rescue America from a plague of labor unions, welfare cheats, godless atheists, and gun-grabbing Jews.

It's an intriguing enough premise – one to which, obviously, Philip Roth owes at least a small debt in his new *The Plot Against America*, which follows a similar premise – but, to be honest, Lewis fails to make it very compelling. Certainly it lacks the power of later visions of a totalitarian society like *Brave New World* or *1984*.

In most respects, it's one of his weakest works; it lacks most of the human detail and probing realism of his greatest novels. It also was written after he had been awarded the Nobel⁶⁴, and actually marked the beginning of his decline as a writer.

Nonetheless, it's intriguing because Lewis was writing in a time when fascism was still a very familiar thing, and before it had mutated into the Holocaust Horror we think of when we think of fascism today. And the book is, of course, a denunciation of fascism and its potential in America. Lewis may have lost his writer's touch, but he still understood Main Street better than most, and some of his detail is very telling indeed, at least in a political sense. Regardless of what he had lost as a writer at this point, his insight was still intact.

The title comes from an exchange in Chapter 2⁶⁵:

“... Wait till Buzz takes charge of us. A real Fascist dictatorship!”

“Nonsense! Nonsense!” snorted Tasbrough. “That couldn't happen here in America, not possibly! Were a country of freemen.”

“The answer to that,” suggested Doremus Jessup, “if Mr. Falck will forgive me, is 'the hell it can't!' Why, there's no country in the world that can get more hysterical – yes, or more obsequious! – than America. Look how Huey Long became absolute monarch over Louisiana, and how the Right Honorable Mr. Senator Berzelius Windrip owns HIS State. Listen to Bishop Prang and Father Coughlin on the radio-divine oracles, to millions. Remember how casually most Americans have accepted Tammany grafting and Chicago gangs and the crookedness of so many of President Harding's appointees? Could Hitler's bunch, or Windrip's, be worse? Remember the Kuklux Klan? Remember our war hysteria, when we called sauerkraut 'Liberty cabbage' and somebody actually proposed calling German measles 'Liberty measles'? And wartime censorship of honest papers? Bad as Russia! Remember our kiss-

⁶³<http://etext.library.adelaide.edu.au/1/lewis/sinclair/happen/>

⁶⁴See <http://encyclopedia.thefreedictionary.com/Sinclair%20Lewis>

⁶⁵<http://etext.library.adelaide.edu.au/1/lewis/sinclair/happen/chapter2.html>

ing the – well, the feet of Billy Sunday, the million-dollar evangelist, and of Aime McPherson, who swam from the Pacific Ocean clear into the Arizona desert and got away with it? Remember Voliva and Mother Eddy? ... Remember our Red scares and our Catholic scares, when all well-informed people knew that the O.G.P.U. were hiding out in Oskaloosa, and the Republicans campaigning against Al Smith told the Carolina mountaineers that if Al won the Pope would illegitimatize their children? Remember Tom Heflin and Tom Dixon? Remember when the hick legislators in certain states, in obedience to William Jennings Bryan, who learned his biology from his pious old grandma, set up shop as scientific experts and made the whole world laugh itself sick by forbidding the teaching of evolution? ... Remember the Kentucky night-riders? Remember how trainloads of people have gone to enjoy lynchings? Not happen here? Prohibition – shooting down people just because they MIGHT be transporting liquor – no, that couldnt happen in AMERICA! Why, where in all history has there ever been a people so ripe for a dictatorship as ours! We're ready to start on a Children's Crusade – only of adults – right now, and the Right Reverend Abbots Windrip and Prang are all ready to lead it!"

It isn't hard to hear not just precursors but parallels to today's political milieu. Especially noteworthy: the reference to "Liberty measles" ("Freedom fries," anyone?), as well as the "wartime censorship of the papers".

But Lewis was speaking of the kinds of character traits that a nation has to have to lead it into fascism, and how despite (and in fact, largely because of) our blithe self-denials, we remain vulnerable to this peculiar brand of totalitarianism, much more so than other kinds. The names have changed, but the traits are still with us. How many doubt that Rush Limbaugh is just a fresh incarnation of Father Coughlin?⁶⁶ That the Republican warnings about what Al Smith might do to people's religious beliefs are being recycled as RNC flyers intimating that Democrats intend to ban the Bible this year?

As it happens, most serious scholars of fascism agree with Lewis, ranging from Stanley Payne (who is more skeptical, however, than most) to Roger Griffin to Robert O. Paxton. In his *The Anatomy of Fascism*, Paxton writes [pp. 201-202]:

The United States itself has never been exempt from fascism. Indeed, antidemocratic and xenophobic movements have flourished in America since the Native American party of 1845 and the Know-Nothing Party of the 1850s. In the crisis-ridden 1930s, as in other democracies, derivative fascist movements were conspicuous in the United States: the Protestant evangelist Gerald B. Winrod's openly pro-Hitler Defenders of the Christian Faith with their Black Legion; William Dudley Pelley's Silver Shirts (the initials "SS" were intentional); the veteran-based Khaki Shirts (whose leader, one Art J. Smith, vanished after a heckler was killed at one of his rallies); and a host of others. Movements with an exotic foreign look won few followers, however. George

⁶⁶See "Rush, Newspeak and Fascism", Chapter I

Lincoln Rockwell, flamboyant head of the American Nazi Party from 1959 until his assassination by a disgruntled follower in 1967, seemed even more “un-American” after the great anti-Nazi war.

Much more dangerous are movements that employ authentically American themes in ways that resemble fascism functionally. The Klan revived in the 1920s, took on virulent anti-Semitism, and spread to cities and the Middle West. In the 1930s, Father Charles E. Coughlin gathered a radio audience estimated at forty million around and anticommunist, anti-Wall Street, pro-soft money, and – after 1938 – anti-Semitic message broadcast from his church on the outskirts of Detroit. For a moment in early 1936 it looked as if his Union Party and its presidential candidate, North Dakota congressman William Lemke, might overwhelm Roosevelt. The plutocrat-baiting governor Huey Long of Louisiana had authentic political momentum until his assassination in 1935, but, though frequently labeled fascist at the time, he was more accurately a share-the-wealth demagogue. The fundamentalist preacher Gerald L.K. Smith, who had worked with both Coughlin and Long, turned the message more directly after World War II to the “Judeo-Communist conspiracy” and had a real impact. **Today a “politics of resentment” rooted in authentic American piety and nativism sometimes leads to violence against some of the very same “internal enemies” once targeted by the Nazis, such as homosexuals and defenders of abortion rights.**

Of course the United States would have to suffer catastrophic setback and polarization for these fringe groups to find powerful allies and enter the mainstream. I half expected to see emerge after 1968 a movement of national reunification, regeneration, and purification directed against hirsute antiwar protesters, black radicals, and “degenerate” artists. I thought that some of the Vietnam veterans might form analogs to the Freikorps of 1919 Germany or the Italian Arditi, and attack the youths whose demonstrations on the steps of the Pentagon had “stabbed them in the back.” Fortunately I was wrong (so far). Since September 11, 2001, however, civil liberties have been curtailed to popular acclaim in a patriotic war upon terrorists.

Paxton, correctly I think, identifies today’s far-right militia/Patriot and white-supremacist organizations – who remain largely relegated to the fringe in the national conception of things – as the remnants of genuine proto-fascism in America. (Proto-fascism, of course, is genuinely fascist at its core – in contrast to pseudo-fascism, which has the outward structural appearance of fascism but is different in its underlying nature.)

Paxton’s assumption is that any American fascism will arise under the same mechanism as that of fascisms of the past: as a discrete movement that moves in to take advantage of political space created by the failures of the traditional political powers. That is, under this conception, it would have to emerge as a third party that displaces the Republican and Democratic parties.

What he doesn’t seem to consider, in fact, is the possibility of an alternative mechanism: namely, the transformation of an existing party into a fascist entity from within – not necessarily by

design, but by a coalescence of political forces already latent in the landscape. This possibility, actually, is raised by the fact that, as Paxton describes in detail, fascism is not so much an ideological “ism” but a constellation of traits that takes on a pathological life of its own. And these traits, as he details, are very much present, historically speaking, in American political life.

In fact, this very mechanism was raised by the one of the significant American fascist “intellectuals” who arose in the 1930s. His name was Lawrence Dennis⁶⁷, and in 1936 – a year after Lewis’ novel – he wrote an ideological blueprint titled *The Coming American Fascism*.

Dennis predicted that, eventually, the combination of a dictatorial and bureaucratic government and big business would continue exploiting the working middle class until, in frustration, it would turn to fascism. What’s especially noteworthy were the kind of conditions he foresaw for this to happen:

Nothing could be more logical or in the best political tradition than for a type of fascism to be ushered into this country by leaders who are now vigorously denouncing fascism and repudiating all that it is understood to stand for...

And, needless to add, these principles would mean the replacement of the existing organizational pattern of public administration by that of a highly centralized government which would exercise the powers of a truly national State, and which would be manned by a personnel responsible to a political party holding a mandate from the people. This party would be the fascist party of the United States-undoubtedly called, however, by another name...

Yet how infinitely better for the in-elite of the moment to have fascism come through one of the major parties of the moment than to have it fight its way to power as the program of the most embittered leaders of the out-elite. ...

This description has an ominous ring in an era in which the dominant party in power in America is frenziedly declaring war on “Islamofascism” while itself taking on many of the traits of fascism itself⁶⁸. It’s unlikely that Dennis’ thinking guided any of the intellectuals in today’s mainstream conservative movement, though it is worth noting that his work is enjoying a renaissance in the paleo-conservative movement, particularly in such places as *The Occidental Review*⁶⁹, the far-right publication sponsored by William Regnery⁷⁰.

Rather than being guided consciously (and there certainly is no evidence whatsoever for an ideologically fascist conspiracy), this transformation is occurring almost spontaneously, as the forces that fascism comprises gradually come together under their own gravity.

⁶⁷<http://www.theidylic.com/ldennis/pages/aboutld.htm>

⁶⁸See http://dneiwert.blogspot.com/2004_10_03_dneiwert_archive.html#109596147171278590

⁶⁹<http://theoccidentalquarterly.com/vol1no1/ks-dennis.html>

⁷⁰See <http://www.splcenter.org/intel/intelreport/article.jsp?aid=479>

The primary impetus has been the change under which conservatism became a discrete movement intent on seizing the reins of power. In the process, the means – that is, the obtaining of power – became the end. And once the movement became centered around obtaining power, by any means necessary, then ideology became fungible according to the needs of its drive to acquire power, just as it was with fascism. This virtually guaranteed it would become a travesty of its original purpose. The nature of today’s “conservative movement” is no more apparent than in how distinctly un-conservative its actual conduct has been: busting budgets, falling asleep at the wheel of national security, engaging wars recklessly and without adequate planning.

Two things occurred to the conservative movement in this drive for power:

- It increasingly viewed liberals not merely as competitors but as unacceptable partners in the liberal-conservative power-sharing agreement that has been in place since at least the New Deal and the rise of modern consumer society. Ultimately, this view metastacizes into seeing liberals as objects to be eliminated.
- It became increasingly willing to countenance⁷¹ ideological and practical bridges⁷² with certain factions of the extremist right. This ranged from anti-abortion and religious-right extremists to the neo-Confederates who dominate Republican politics in the South to factions of the Patriot/militia movement.

The combination of these two forces exerted a powerful rightward pull on the movement, to the point where extremist ideas and agendas have increasingly been adopted by the mainstream right, flowing into an eliminationist hatred of liberalism. In the process, their own rhetoric has come to sound like that on the far right. A lot of the dabbling in far-right memes has been gratuitous, intended to “push the envelope” for talk-radio audiences in constant need of fresh outrageousness.

Fully enabled, free of any of the traditional checks on its power, by the earth-shaking effects of Sept. 11, the movement morphed into a genuinely radical force. And in its outward shape, it has come to resemble fascism, particularly in the way it has adopted nearly all of the “mobilizing passions” of fascism to some degree, whether greater or lesser.

But at its core, it is not fascism. At least not yet. Remember Paxton’s rather clear description of fascism in the context of the history of ideologies: it is, in essence, “dictatorship against the Left amidst popular enthusiasm.” Well, there can be little doubt of its overt anti-leftism; increasingly the mainstream right’s entire *raison d’etre* is, in Mussolini’s phrase, “to break the bones of the Democrats of *Il Mundo*”. But it is not yet a dictatorship, though the conservative movement’s efforts to create a one-party state⁷³ approach that. Neither does it enjoy true popular enthusiasm. Sure, they have a sizeable and boisterous following, and their increasing

⁷¹“Rush, Newspeak and Fascism”, Chapter VI

⁷²ibid., Chapter VII

⁷³See http://dneiwert.blogspot.com/2004_10_10_dneiwert_archive.html#109694976530359103

conversion of mass media to a propaganda arm of the right is a serious problem that does not bode well for stopping them from actually gaining a majority following.

Put it this way: The fact that nearly half the country is willing to endorse the manifest incompetence of a man like George W. Bush, by returning him to the Oval Office for another four years, is not a good sign in this regard. The remarkable levels of delusion and misinformation⁷⁴ among Bush supporters is another confirmation that this is not a healthy political milieu.

At every step, rather than disconfirming the trend, the Bush White House confirms it. First we have the Bush campaign's bizarre authoritarian behavior surrounding his public appearances. Non-Bush supporters (and even those deemed insufficiently supportive) are prevented from entering⁷⁵, and even ostensibly neutral messages like "Protect Our Civil Liberties" are cause for being ejected and threatened with arrest⁷⁶.

Then, Chris Suellentrop at Slate recently uncovered the "Bush Pledge,"⁷⁷ a pledge of allegiance to Bush himself that thousands of Republicans have apparently taken:

"I want you to stand, raise your right hands," and recite "the Bush Pledge," said Florida state Sen. Ken Pruitt. The assembled mass of about 2,000 in this Treasure Coast town about an hour north of West Palm Beach dutifully rose, arms aloft, and repeated after Pruitt: "I care about freedom and liberty. I care about my family. I care about my country. Because I care, I promise to work hard to re-elect, re-elect George W. Bush as president of the United States."

Billmon⁷⁸ (as always) put it best:

The truly sinister thing – and the reason why that Slate story made the hair stand up on the back of my neck – is that even as these people move, like sleepwalkers, towards a distinctly American version of the cult of the leader, most of them honestly appear to have no idea what they're doing, or creating. I'm not even sure the Rovians themselves entirely understand the atavistic instincts they've awakened in Bush's most loyal followers. But the current is running now, fast and strong. And we're all heading for the rapids.

Likewise, the continuing trend toward disproportionately ugly and violent behavior⁷⁹ related to the election, especially on the part of Bush supporters⁸⁰, and in some cases directly related to the Republican campaigns⁸¹, is even further cause for concern. Because it is the point at which

⁷⁴See http://www.pipa.org/OnlineReports/Pres_Election_04/html/new_10_21_04.html#1

⁷⁵See http://www.zwire.com/site/printerFriendly.cfm?brd=2259&dept_id=455154&newsid=13207582

⁷⁶See http://dneiwert.blogspot.com/2004_10_17_dneiwert_archive.html#109830472470609571

⁷⁷<http://www.slate.com/id/2108852/>

⁷⁸<http://billmon.org/archives/001639.html>

⁷⁹See http://dneiwert.blogspot.com/2004_10_24_dneiwert_archive.html#109889220177028152

⁸⁰See http://dneiwert.blogspot.com/2004_10_24_dneiwert_archive.html#109902858778994384

⁸¹See http://dneiwert.blogspot.com/2004_10_24_dneiwert_archive.html#109920187443173126

violence becomes an organizational response that the conservative movement will cease to be pseudo-fascist.

Regardless of the mechanism, Paxton is clear that not only can fascism take root in America, but that it will also take a peculiarly American shape:

The language and symbols of an authentic American fascism would, of course, have little to do with the original European models. They would have to be as familiar and reassuring to loyal Americans as the language and symbols of the original fascisms were familiar and reassuring to many Italians and Germans. No swastikas in American fascism, but Stars and Stripes (or Stars and Bars) and Christian crosses. No fascist salute, but mass recitations of the pledge of allegiance. These symbols contain no whiff of fascism in themselves, of course, but an American fascism would transform them into obligatory litmus tests for detecting the internal enemy.

Around such reassuring language and symbols in the event of some redoubtable setback to national prestige, Americans might support an enterprise of forcible national regeneration, unification, and purification. Its targets would be the First Amendment, separation of Church and State (creches on the lawns, prayers in the schools), efforts to place controls on gun ownership, desecrations of the flag, unassimilated minorities, artistic license, dissident and unusual behavior of all sorts that could be labeled antinational or decadent.

It's worth observing, of course, that nearly all of these themes have played significant roles in the campaign waged by the conservative movement in 2004 – particularly in the monumental attacks on gays and lesbians under the pretense of stopping gay marriage, coinciding with a de facto antagonism to church-state separation, represented by the Republican National Committee's hiring of David Barton⁸², a noted anti-separation extremist, as a campaign consultant and speaker at RNC events.

What's still lacking, however, from the basic recipe for genuine fascism is the emergence of a genuine crisis of democracy. Just such an opportunity recently presented itself during the 2004 election. Because of the extreme volatility of the political environment, the potential for such a crisis erupting existed (to a greater or lesser degree) in nearly all of the likely scenarios possible in the election, regardless of how it played out:

Bush wins legitimately and cleanly. Under this scenario – which, of course, is the one that actually emerged in the aftermath – the conservative movement gains a death grip on the reins of power. Democrats will be gerrymandered and maneuvered into meaninglessness, paving the way for an essentially one-party state. And unencumbered by the need to win re-election, as well as empowered by an actual mandate, Bush's radical social and political agenda will begin to take effect. Democratic institutions across the board will suffer.

⁸²See http://www.beliefnet.com/story/154/story_15469.html

Kerry wins cleanly. In this event, there would have continued to be heated opposition to any reforms he might have attempted, waged often through the propaganda organs of the mainstream press. There would have been continuous claims that Kerry won illegitimately. Moreover, the True Believers of the conservative movement – many of whom have become radicalized to an unusual level over the course of the campaign – would act out their resistance to a Kerry regime violently. This scenario would have likely produced a sharp spike in domestic terrorism, and further divisiveness from the conservative movement, much of it centered around Kerry’s supposed “treasonousness.” The rhetoric almost certainly would have become truly violent if the debate had begun to focus on the United Nations.

Bush maintains power illegitimately. This was the most potentially troubling of the scenarios. Considering their manifest willingness to do anything to win – even litigate their way into the White House in the face of a popular-vote loss – the Bush campaign was nearly limitless in what it would attempt to maintain its hold on power. Lying in wait for a close election: massive lawsuits contesting election results because of alleged “voter fraud” in heavily minority precincts, or the possibility of Republican state legislatures overriding the outcome of their elections (if pro-Kerry) and selecting in their place a Republican slate of electors (an outcome made possible by the Supreme Court during the 2000 Florida debacle, when it ruled that legislatures had rights superior to those of individual voters when it came to seating its electoral-college slate. Recall, if you will, Antonin Scalia’s chilling remark: “There is no right of suffrage under Article II,”⁸³ meaning, there is no constitutional right to vote for president.

Major terrorist attacks occur during the election. As Richard Hasen pointed out in *Slate*⁸⁴, this was “the true nightmare scenario”: An attack on a major city in a battleground state could have prevented thousands, even millions of voters from making it to the polls, triggering a political and legal fight over how to handle the matter afterward. It’s worth noting, of course, that not only were Oklahoma City-style domestic terrorists the potential perpetrators of such acts, they were, under the charged milieu of the election, those most likely. But if such an attack had occurred, the presumptive suspects of course would have been al Qaeda.

Terrorist attacks needn’t occur only on Election Day to have a potentially profound impact on American society. Indeed, if they are severe or frequent enough, it is clear that they would clearly represent a continuing source of crisis for democracy. Bush’s re-election, in fact, enhances the likelihood of another terrorist attack, if for no other reason than that he has displayed beyond any serious doubt an incapacity for understanding the nature of terrorism. He continues to respond symmetrically to what everyone knows is an asymmetrical threat.

Exposed, as we are, by the ineptitude of the Bush administration, our vulnerability to the power of terrorism to spark a crisis of democracy remains profound.

⁸³<http://www.fairvote.org/righttovote/broder.htm>

⁸⁴<http://slate.msn.com/id/2108339/>

In other words, it's clear that the "crisis of democracy" necessary to create a genuinely fascist dynamic is a real potential that lies around many corners on our current path. The key, then, is to finding the path that does not take us there.

If fascism is indeed latent in our political landscape and rising to the surface, then the critical question becomes this: How do we prevent it from doing so?

First, it's important to understand the conditions under which fascism's attempts to take root and gain power have failed. I described some of these in Part IV of "Rush, Newspeak, and Fascism," referencing Paxton's work on the failure of French fascism. Put briefly, fascism only obtained power by forming alliances with mainstream conservatives – and there was no "political space" for that in France. The same, I explained, was true of the previous failure of American fascism:

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.

What the current pseudo-fascist phenomenon represents is a different kind of mechanism, one in which the political space is created not apart from the major parties, but from within one of them – the one that had been traditionally hospitable to the traits that constitute fascism. This tendency dates back to the days of the America First Committee⁸⁵.

This tendency has finally metastasized into a genuinely dangerous situation, one in which the GOP has become host to a Stalinist movement that exhibits so many of the traits of fascism that the resemblance is now unmistakable.

This means a complete reconfiguration of the calculations of any "political space" that might be created by a serious crisis of American democracy. Instead of creating an opportunity for a fascist movement to gain legitimacy through an alliance with conservatives, what such a crisis instead creates is a situation in which the latent fascist elements come to the surface and, in turn, come to dominate the nature of a party already in power.

This makes any potential for a crisis of democracy potentially more dangerous in terms of the opening it creates for fascism, because it can manifest itself much more rapidly, and without any requisite shift in the political space. This is especially the case for an entity like the conservative movement, which already in so many ways dominates the American political landscape now.

⁸⁵See http://dneiwert.blogspot.com/2003.09.28_dneiwert_archive.html#106493942821840150

By far, of the potential scenarios for a crisis of democratic institutions outlined above, the most likely to have produced a real outbreak of fascism was the third one, in which Bush again took charge of the Oval Office through litigation or some other abrogation of the norms of democratic rule.

As it happens, this possibility has not yet been entirely ruled out. There have been a number of pieces of anecdotal and statistical evidence indicating widespread vote-counting fraud in Ohio (as well as suggestions of same in Pennsylvania and Florida), though nothing has yet surfaced in the way of hard evidence, only red flags. Certainly such a revelation, if it can demonstrate to have turned the outcome of the vote, would raise serious questions about the legitimacy both of Bush's victory and his "mandate."

If it emerges that Bush has claimed the White House illegitimately a second time – and particularly if Bush has done so by once again disenfranchising voters – then there will be a strong, perhaps violent reaction from the left, who will have (quite rationally) come to the conclusion that Bush and his regime not only have no respect for democratic institutions, but that they intend to undermine if not destroy them outright.

The danger lies with that reaction, which in this scenario would almost certainly produce mass protests: marches, demonstrations, anti-Bush rallies. These would almost certainly be accompanied by a nominal level of violence: arrests, police confrontations, some provocation-related violence, property damage. This violence would then become justification for violent counters – the organizational groundwork for which has already been laid in the form of such anti-liberal provocateurs as the Freepers and Protest Warriors.

The reaction to a second Bush term under illegitimate conditions, then, would likely spark a counter-reaction that would manifest condoned, organizational violence, the lack of which is one of the distinguishing characteristics of pseudo-fascism. This is the scenario in which the danger of fascism lies closest to the surface.

The prospects under a Bush-victory scenario – which is to say, the reality we're faced with – are not much brighter: Bush with a mandate will be Bush Unleashed, and the volatility of this election will likely release a lot of pent-up frustrations at liberals, but it's difficult to say how high the levels of violence are likely to be. On the other hand, the conservative movement's totalitarian impulses, particularly in gerrymandering the political system a la Texas, to ensure the GOP's continued political dominance, raise the chilling prospect of, at the very best, a Stalinist/PRI-style one-party state, where every person in the government is first a member of the party. This shift will be more incremental in nature, but there is also bound to be a breaking point at which a cumulative reaction arises against it.

Secondarily, but perhaps more dangerously, it is possible that the right's extremist wing will interpret Bush's "mandate" as a green light to act out violently the demonization and increasingly eliminationist rhetoric directed at liberals over the past decade. This tendency will become not merely dangerous, but a sign of an actual manifestation of fascism, if it becomes officially condoned or encouraged.

The prospect for a Kerry win was the most promising, but also the most troubling. Certainly the likelihood of large contingent of radicalized, Patriot-style extremists bent on opposing his presidency is a daunting thought, but unfortunately, the extraordinary penetration of the “Kerry is a traitor” meme to a broad segment of the voting population was a certain recipe for producing these kinds of radicals had Kerry in fact won.

On the other hand, there are many indications that the extreme pressures under which the conservative movement has cobbled together its innately limited ruling coalition may in turn cause that coalition to crack apart. As the *Washington Monthly*⁸⁶ recently observed, the gap between the religious right and the neoconservatives who rule the White House roost is growing. Even Bush’s victory may not ensure the alliance will hold together.

If a Republican internal civil war occurs, one of the dynamics likely to emerge will be a split between the “theocons” of the religious right, who appear inclined to form an alliance with the “paleocons” who are agitating for immigration reform, while the neoconservative faction is likely to gravitate in the direction of traditional, non-movement Republicans.

Regardless of which of these outcomes emerges Tuesday and afterward, it is clear that the forces which the conservative movement has put in motion are going to have harmful consequences in the long term, particularly when it comes to attacks on democratic institutions like voting and privacy rights. Even more egregious is the larger harm to the health of the body politic; the divisiveness sown by conservative ideologues is not going away any time soon, regardless of how thoroughly they may be repudiated. If they are not, then it will worsen.

On the meta level, preventing fascism means averting a crisis of democracy, and dismantling the fascist architecture of the conservative movement by repudiating its tenets. Bush’s victory (legitimate or not) demands we resist the urge to give in to violence and anger. It will be understandable, of course, but progressives have to understand that it will only fuel a fascist nightmare by giving movement ideologues the pretext to unleash the dogs. One suspects, in fact, that they are prepared to unleash them even now, without the pretense.

If there is going to be any healing, it will have to begin after the attack style of politics – in which the smearing an opponent substitutes for the lack of any substance or accomplishment – has been relegated to the ashheap of history. Bush’s victory on the backs of just such a campaign ensure that it will survive at least another election cycle and probably longer. It will probably not even begin to disappear until the nation’s mass media are effectively reformed⁸⁷ and the trivialization of the national discourse ceases.

But there is also the personal level at which we have to deal with this as well. As I’ve discussed previously⁸⁸, the influence of this movement has pervaded our personal lives and relationships as well. Families, longtime friends, and communities are being torn apart by the divisive politics of resentment and accusation that have become the core of the conservative movement’s appeal.

⁸⁶See <http://www.washingtonmonthly.com/features/2004/0410.wallace-wells.html>

⁸⁷See http://dneiwert.blogspot.com/2004_05_02_dneiwert_archive.html

⁸⁸See http://dneiwert.blogspot.com/2003_11_23_dneiwert_archive.html#106970848149574609

One of the realities about coming to terms with fascism is that it is not an immediately demonizing force – that is, instead, one of its long-term effects. Conservative-movement adherents are still human beings, and seeing them in terms of participating in a kind of fascism should not render them into mere discardable objects. It’s much clearer if we understand that many of them are simply responding naturally to the psychological manipulation⁸⁹ inherent in the movement’s appeal inherent in the movement’s appeal.

Recognizing what we are up against – namely, a kind of fascism – is critical to dealing effectively with it, because even if wielding the term in discourse can be unhelpful (it remains a loaded term easily misinterpreted), this model gives us a key to understanding the thought – or rather, emotive – processes that are the core of the pseudo-fascist appeal. Getting our opponents to see that, for example, dissent is not treason but patriotism, requires getting them to let go of their preconceptions. It means, in the end, getting them to see us as human beings too. And when we do that, the fascist facade will crumble.

This is, of course, easier said than done. It often is simply impossible. But maintaining this approach, standing firm, and refusing to descend into eye-for-an-eye contemptuousness is, in the end, our only way out of the dark, cavernous maze into which our national politics have descended.

David Neiwert is a freelance journalist based in Seattle. His reportage for MSNBC.com on domestic terrorism won the National Press Club Award for Distinguished Online Journalism in 2000. He is the author of *Death on the Fourth of July: The Story of a Killing, a Trial, and Hate Crime in America* (Palgrave/St. Martin’s, 2004), *In God’s Country: The Patriot Movement and the Pacific Northwest* (1999, WSU Press), as well as the forthcoming *Strawberry Days: How Internment Destroyed a Japanese American Community* (Palgrave/St. Martin’s Press, due for release June 2005). His freelance work can be found at Salon.com, the Washington Post, MSNBC and various other publications. He can be contacted at **dneiwert@hotmail.com**.

⁸⁹See http://dneiwert.blogspot.com/2004_10_17_dneiwert_archive.html#109755467135245579