

Deconstructing George W. Bush: Some Observations¹

While George W. Bush has sometimes been derided as simple by his detractors, his administration has triggered a voluminous literature which could suggest otherwise. Who is this man, and where is he leading us? The diagnoses diverge. An ambitious work by Walter Russell Mead, a senior fellow for U.S. Foreign Policy at the Council of Foreign Relations, stresses continuity. He discerns a coincidence of deep-seated trends in American diplomacy, namely a competition, within the administration, between a Jeffersonian careful and pragmatic approach, symbolized by former Secretary of State Colin Powell, and a Jacksonian drive for unilateral supremacy.² According to Russell Mead, while the attacks of 9/11 "... represented a new kind of warfare and a new threat to American security, the subsequent debates over American foreign policy fell into patterns as old as the republic itself."³

Other readings have suggested a derailing of U.S. diplomacy. In this perspective, the United States is repeating a scenario it played at the end of the 19th century, with the annexation in particular of the Philippines after the Spanish American War. They point out the acute historical amnesia, "a seeming ignorance of the important lessons that Americans drew from this brief and unhappy experiment in creating an overseas empire".⁴ The Philippines then was bogged down in a war, which lasted fourteen years. "Before it was over, about 120,000 American troops were deployed and more than 4,000 died; more than 200,000 Filipino civilians and soldiers were killed."⁵

¹ This essay is an attempt to isolate some factors, which we believe are relevant to explain G.W. Bush's conduct particularly as it relates to the conduct of foreign policy. It downplays the oft exaggerated influence of the neo-cons, and instead seeks to stress the dominant influence of some deep-seated trends in U.S. diplomacy as they have been accentuated by the conjunction of momentary circumstances. For practical reasons and for clarity, we have opted to keep citations to a minimum.

² Walter Russell Mead, *Special Providence. American Foreign Policy and how it Changed the World*, New York, Routledge, 2002, p. 308

³ *Ibid*, p. 338.

⁴ John B. Judis, *The Folly of Empire. What George W. Bush could learn from Theodore Roosevelt and Woodrow Wilson*, New York, Scribner, 2004, p. 3.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 2.

These approaches bring back to mind the civilizing ideology of the Progressive era, and how it led the best to failure, citing Woodrow Wilson's frustrated attempts to "teach the Mexicans how to elect good men".⁶ Digging elsewhere, others have drawn an interesting parallel between the Bush administration's foreign policy and that of the European powers at the turn of the 20th century. As he discusses the Southern conservatives' current control of the GOP, Michael Lind evokes the examples of Britain, France, Germany and Japan before the First World War, where pre-modern elites, " (...) threatened with irrelevance and extinction by industrial progress and democracy, managed to retain political power and to enlist the new techniques of science and industry to promote pre-modern aristocratic goals of plunder and martial glory – (...) by appealing to ethnic bigotry and supernatural religion."⁷ Similarly, Carnegie fellow Anatol Lieven draws a parallel between the political culture of the George W. Bush administration and the 1914 European exploitation of nationalism.⁸ Finally, other scholars have voiced some concern about a possible drift into religious fanaticism.⁹

Such analogies certainly add perspective, but they do leave some questions. It is far from certain that, as Lieven seems to suggest, the

⁶ Another succinct interpretation of G.W. Bush as fundamentally inspired by Woodrow Wilson is offered by David M. Kennedy, "What 'W' Owes to 'WW' ", *The Atlantic Monthly*, Vol 295, No. 2, pp. 36-39.

⁷ Michael Lind, *Made in Texas. George W. Bush and the Southern Takeover of American Politics*, New York, Basic Books, 2004, p. 166.

⁸ Anatol Lieven, *America Right or Wrong. An Anatomy of American Nationalism*, New York, Oxford University Press, 2004, pp. 22 ff. Note in particular " (...) As with their equivalents in the Europe of the past, the nationalist Right in the United States and the dominant forces in the Bush administration absolutely and sincerely identify themselves with their nation, to the point where the presence of any other group in government is seen as an usurpation, as something profoundly and inherently 'un-American' They feel themselves to be as much 'America' as the Kaiser and the Junkers felt themselves to be 'Germany' and the Tsar and the Russian noble elites to be 'Russia' "(p. 24)

⁹ Samuel Huntington is probably the best known proponent of this thesis: Samuel Huntington, *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of world order*, New York, Simon and Schuster, 1996, but many neo-cons subscribe to this thesis. Even a historian as seasoned and astute as Arthur M. Schlesinger, raises this possibility: see his *War and the American Presidency*, New York, W.W. Norton, 2004, p. 2004, p. 116.

United States may repeat the fatal errors of Europe, because it has been “spared by history”.¹⁰ Nations have different ways of processing collective memory, according to their particular ideologies. In this respect, the United States has shown a propensity to repetition. This is evident in respect to policy, as implied by the above parallels with the turn of the 20th century. It also surfaces in public discourse. The rhetoric on the spreading of “liberty” used by GW Bush’s administration, for instance, is an uncanny replay of Rostow’s “Stages of Economic Growth”, which scholars and politicians absorbed and endorsed in the sixties and early seventies, before it became patent that these stages just do not fit the realities of developing nations.

The following paper seeks to distinguish some relevant factors, which permitted a G.W. Bush presidency. Among the composite pieces of the puzzle: G.W. the man, the political dynamics, which surround him, and the powerful machine that helped him into office. No less relevant, is the political culture that dominates his administration and permeates his electorate, especially the rising influence of the South, and its implications. Finally, the wider context of the collective unconscious must be addressed. This deeper angle best puts into perspective the recent success of G.W. Bush and the ideology he represents. A section entitled *Fear*, ties the individual, and the machine, to a long-term, and largely instinctual impulse of nationalism to resist the penetration and encroachment of a hostile outside world. Because the anxiety of being infiltrated calls attention to those margins underscored by Derrida, we thought it appropriate to entitle this contribution *Deconstructing George W. Bush*.

The Man.

Who is George W. Bush and what does he represent? The image seems disarmingly simple. Until recently, many believed the nasty rumor that, except for Bible, the President did not read: not the newspapers, not books. Since he has been touting former Soviet émigré Natan Sharansky’s *The Case for Democracy*, who “thinks like

¹⁰ *America Right of Wrong...*, *op. cit.*, p. 28.

me”, we now know that he does.¹¹ Some observers paint the picture of an insular Texan, possessing scant knowledge, or even awareness, of foreign countries, and having little inclination to venture out of the U.S. As International Herald Tribune editor Walter Wells explained to his colleague of *Le Monde* at the moment of transatlantic tensions over Iraq, “To distrust the French is almost part of the American DNA. And all the more so when the DNA in question is that of a man as closed to the world and as homebody a person as George Bush can be.”¹² George W is “a doer, not a thinker”.¹³ He is depicted as self-assured and rigidly dogmatic. As a Christian born-again in 1985 during a walk on the beach with Billy Graham, his religious convictions -- the tendency to perceive events as trials presented by God -- contribute greatly to his inflexibility. As one commentator put it, “We have grown accustomed to frequent assertions of the President's own faith, often by way of explaining what might otherwise seem an eerie absence of prudent doubt”.¹⁴ His perspective frames events as revelations, and this is particularly pronounced in the case of the nationwide crisis triggered by September 11. George W. himself links the war against Iraq, and his world-wide “crusade” for the spreading of democracy as an attempt to implement his religious beliefs, a response to a calling from above. As he told Bob Woodward when pressed about whether he had conferred with his father about invading Iraq: “You know, he is the wrong father to appeal to in terms of strength. There is a higher father that I appeal to.”¹⁵ September 11, he confessed, prompted in him the

¹¹ Carlin Romano, “In a Blink, Bush Becomes Reviewer in Chief”, *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, February 11, 2005, p. B14.

¹² Jean-Marie Colombani, Walter Wells, *France Amérique, Déliaisons dangereuses*, Paris, Éditions Jacob-Duvernet, 2004, p. 13. See also pp.17, 20, 23. A complete, if frightful, description of GW ‘s mindset is given by Michael Lind, *Made in Texas...*, *op. cit.*, pp. 76 ff.

¹³ Ivo H. Daalder and James M. Lindsay, *America Unbound. The Bush Revolution in Foreign Policy*, Washington, D.C., Brookings Institution Press, 2003, p. 35. See also p. 41, Bush as a “gut player”.

¹⁴ Joan Didion, “Mr. Bush and the Divine”, in *The New York Review of Books*, November 6, 2003, Vol. 50, No. 17, <http://www.nybooks.com/articles/16749>. See also Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., *War and the American Presidency*, *op. cit.*, p. 35: “President Bush radiates a serene but scary certitude when confronted with complicated problems or disagreement (...) Friends attribute this serenity to his religious faith.”

¹⁵ Bob Woodward, *Plan of Attack*, New York, Simon and Schuster, 2004, p. 421.

sense of a “larger obligation... a large and different kind of war... like a front ”. ¹⁶ George W. Bush’s vision of the world is close to Thomas Hobbes’ state of nature. The unilateralist role he endorses for the U.S., and which is shared by most of his advisors, shows a belief that nation-states remain the key players in the international arena. Maintaining and exerting power is a priority, while international forums, as well as diplomacy, have until now tended to be shunned as the weapon of the weak and timid, as Carnegie fellow Robert Kagan suggested in his clever but excessively touted essay *Of Paradise and Power. Europe and America in the New World Order*.¹⁷

So, G.W. as a modern crusader? The straightforward portrait has more than one shade. The persona of G.W. Bush is more nebulous than is commonly acknowledged. Part of the doubts surrounding the man lie in the censured and incomplete news reports released to the press.¹⁸ Then there is the barricade of advisors, the talented brains with which GW surrounded himself to compensate for his shockingly poor knowledge of foreign affairs, as some have suggested.¹⁹ Many of those startled by the abrupt unilateralist turn, and the embracing of a sweeping messianism, are prompt to surmise that the President is a stooge of his political entourage, or a creation of his counselor Karl Rove.²⁰ As he rides the tide of the conservative right, which his father initially shunned, then courted too late at the cost of his reelection, it is tempting in effect to discern the manipulator, manipulated in turn by the cunning efforts of the Republican machine.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁷ Published in New York by Alfred A. Knopf in 2003. Read Timothy Garton Ash’s interesting comments on the underlying sexual imagery of this analogy, in Timothy Garton Ash, “Anti-Europeanism in America”, *The New York Review of Books*, Vol L, No. 2, February 13, 2003, p. 32: “The American is a virile, heterosexual male; the European is female, impotent, or castrated.” The main elements of the hegemonist perspective are discussed by Ivo Daalder and James M. Lindsay, *America Unbound...*, *op. cit.*, pp. 41-45.

¹⁸ See the example of torture in Seymour Hersh, *Chain of Command. The Road from 9/11 to Abu Ghraib*, New York, HarperCollins, 2004. Pp. 11ff.

¹⁹ James Mann, *Rise of the Vulcans. The History of Bush’s War Cabinet*, New York, Viking, 2004, p. 255.

²⁰ James Moore and Wayne Slater, *Bush’s Brain. How Karl Rove Made George W. Bush Presidential*, Hoboken (NJ), John Wiley and Sons, 2003. Lou Dubose and Jan Reid, *The Hammer. Tom Delay: God, Money, and the Rise of the Republican Congress*, New York, Public Affairs, 2004, p. 83.

Some analysts put his decision to topple Saddam Hussein and to invade Iraq in a family perspective: GW wanted, they assume, to “finish the job” that some contend cost his father his reelection.²¹ Some of the takes on his accession to the presidency underscore the family background and its schemes. Garry Wills, among many others, notes the competitive disposition, which is ingrained within the family, and expresses itself most outwardly in sports.²² Add to this vying streak the ambitious resolve – the patient and constant efforts of mother Barbara to weave the family into the social network, and establish the Bushes in Texan society, carefully entering personalities on her index card files, with detail as to particular tastes and birthdays. For some critics, like the seasoned political writer Kevin Phillips, the family’s path to power has been less than straightforward.²³ The question, which now comes up, is whether this background political and financial networking was enough to land GW a plausible chance to covet the highest public office in Washington, DC. His political success was unpredicted even by his closest family members – “It was a big surprise” --, whereas his driven younger brother Jeb had shown to be hard-working, and meticulous in his political ambitions.²⁴ The following section explores some longer-term factors that played a role in the election of GW Bush.

The Emergence of Southern Conservatism.

“Made in Texas” is the engrossing account of a state of acute contradictions, a state that can produce the brightest public servants,

²¹ See Kevin Phillips, *American Dynasty. Aristocracy, Fortune and the Politics of Deceit in the House of Bush*, New York, Viking, 2004, p. 294. Jean-Marie Colombani, Walter Wells, *France Amérique, Déliaisons dangereuses*, *op. cit.* p. 24.

²² Gary Wills, *Under God. Religion and American Politics*, New York, Simon and Schuster, 1990, p. 77: “The Bush family tradition is maintained among the President’s children, who speak of a mysterious Ranking Committee that handicaps all the relatives on the prowess in various sports. Jeb Bush says its proceedings are as secret as those of Skull and Bones, his father’s Yale secret society.”

²³ Kevin Phillips, *American Dynasty....*, *op. cit.*

²⁴ Peter Schweizer and Rochelle Schweizer, *The Bushes. Portrait of a Dynasty*, New York, Anchor Books, 2005, p. 426.

like Edward M. House, Wilson's advisor, Lyndon Johnson, or Ross Perot.²⁵ It can also generate the worst parasites, people who harbor beliefs more similar to conquistadors than to the traditional North-Eastern gentry, and plunder the natural wealth the area has to offer. It is a universe petrified in archaic privileges, and profoundly self-assured. It is a land where Southern hospitality somehow coexists with the most perverse racism, a place with pockets where lynching was particularly fierce. It is an area deeply steeped in a religion that can slide into fanaticism. Several studies have appeared in recent years, which concentrate on the consolidation, within the Republican party, of a peculiar Southern brand of thinking, which has replaced the more moderate tone of the former North-Eastern Republican establishment, and introduced some radically different doctrinal tenets. In this perspective, GW was elected because he clearly incarnates these views. He did not, of course, introduce them. For several years, at least since the 1994 Gingrich "revolution" that swept a majority of Southern Republicans into Congress, and gave the House a Speaker dismaying in his histrionics, the Southern thinking has been dominant.²⁶ Speculations vary as to whether this trend is here to stay or whether it is a short-lived artificial political maneuver.

In his engaging account of increasing Southern influence in the shaping of U.S. culture and politics, Peter Applebome introduces us by way of witness to a massive 1990s gathering of the Southern Baptist Convention, which, since its 1845 foundation in Augusta, Georgia, has grown to some 16 million members, emerging as a genuine broker in politics and exerting considerable societal leverage. He paints the colorful, slightly gaudy, assembly, the oversized late 50's cars with their bumper stickers against abortion and for the abolition of the central government; and as you read, you can almost hear the blaring country music, the religious songs. Dixie Rising has transformed the United States, fashioned its ideas and values to fit the mold of the ever unchanging South, to echo its age-long discontent with the suppression of segregation, and the invasion and stifling of states' rights by a corrupt and alien central government.

²⁵ Michael Lind, *Made in Texas...*, *op. cit.*

²⁶ Read the interesting inside account in Lou Dubose, Jan Reid, *The Hammer...*, pp. 83 ff.

But how did the spirit of the South spread its values and unresolved issues to the North? In his account, Applebome emphasizes the role played by population mobility. He argues that the massive departure of some 4,5 million Blacks to the North in the first half of the 20th century, a migration, he writes, “virtually without parallel in American history”, was to change drastically the country’s landscape by turning race into a national issue. The exodus of another 4,6 million whites from the South during the same period also contributed to the dissemination of the Southern way of life: “Like the carriers of a dominant gene, they didn’t stop being Southerners. They brought their music, their values, their evangelical religion, their history as the people of the nation’s most violent region, and a whole panoply of Southern-fried virtues and sins.”²⁷

But it was not the exuberance of a God fearing, family value loving crowd that lent it political clout. This came from a coolly devised stratagem of two people, neither of them protestant, along with some grass-roots militants. As Michael Lind explains, “Today’s religious right, far from being a spontaneous rebellion on the part of “people of faith” as Christian Coalition leaders Pat Robertson and Ralph Reed would have it, was engineered from above by Howard Phillips, a Jew, Richard Viguerie, a Catholic, and other grass-root activists in the 1970s.”²⁸ After the dissolution of the Moral Majority by Jerry Falwell revealed its decline at the end of the 1980s and beginning of the 1990s, it was vigorously revived by Marion “Pat” Robertson, founder of the Christian Coalition in 1989.²⁹ Born-again Christians like George W. Bush and Tom Delay, known as *the Hammer* on the Hill, have known how to capitalize on this constituency. Doug Wead, who acted as 1988 campaign liaison to the Christian right, commented not without cynicism on George W’s capacity to tap into this part of the electorate: “(...) unlike some, he also knows the numbers, he knows

²⁷ Peter Applebome, *Dixie Rising. How the South is Shaping American Values, Politics and Culture*, San Diego, Harcourt Brace and Co., 1996, p. 10.

²⁸ Michael Lind, *Up From the Conservatism. Why the Right is Wrong for America*, New York, Simon and Schuster, 1996, pp 76-77. Lind also mentions the key role of the Christian Coalition’s executive director, Ralph Reed: “(...) a former college Republican leader whose chief accomplishment has been to make the Christian Coalition less of a religious pressure group and more of a movement supporting conventional economic conservative causes like tax cuts” : *ibid*, p. 77.

²⁹ *Ibid*, pp. 97 ff.

how important faith is to millions of people in the United States. Ninety-five percent believe in a personal God in the United States. It's a very high number.... Every subculture has its own language and its own inflection. Even, sometimes, it's the emphasis of a syllable in a word, or you could have one word out of order, and instantly you recognize someone from your own subculture. And the evangelical subculture is no different. When G.W. meets with evangelical Christians, they know within minutes that he's one of theirs. Now, most presidential candidates, they have to probe, and they have to look, try to find common denominators that they can say, "Well, he's kind of ours, he just doesn't know it"; or, "He's ours but he doesn't understand the culture." And with G.W., they knew it was real. I don't know how to explain that without defining the whole subculture itself, which you can't do in 30-second answers. But they knew it."³⁰

The political perspectives of the Christian Right are rooted in the Goldwater tradition. Nourished by a profound hostility to the central government 's push of the Civil Rights Act, which made de facto racial segregation illegal, Barry Goldwater's presidential campaign in 1964 paved the terrain for the GOP's Southern strategy.³¹ The once solid democratic South would henceforth veer towards the Republican party, in two subsequent major stages, during Nixon in 1972, and then decisively under Reagan in 1980.

In contrast to the rest of the nation usually portrayed as forward oriented and having poor historical awareness, the South looks back, never forgetting what it lost with the Civil War. "Rather than being pastless, the South is a place that at the end of the twentieth century, amazingly, is still fighting most of its oldest battles – over state rights, the Confederate flag, integration, the meaning of its own history. Rather than memoryless, it's a place where blacks and whites compulsively reenact their separate histories as if to forever reconfirm Faulkner's famous remark that the South is a place where 'the past is never dead, it isn't even past'. Rather than neutered, it is still the most conservative place of America, still drenched in religion, still carrying the banners of the antebellum Old South states' rights crusades and

³⁰ Quoted in Joan Didian, "Mr. Bush and the Divine", *op. cit.*

³¹ John Micklethwait and Adrian Wooldridge, *The Right Nation. Conservative Power in America*, New York, The Penguin Press, 2004, pp. 54 ff.

the New South booster ideology of the 1880s, still in thrall to individualism in its most extravagant sense.”³²

Unable to preserve its de facto segregation after the passing of Civil Rights Acts under Johnson, the South still continues to lament the stealing of a way of life. Southern thinking incarnates a fierce defense of states’ rights, a visceral and obdurate hostility to the Central government, a commitment to individual liberty rather than equality, and stubborn patriotism.³³ Foreignness is generally perceived as an attribute to be abhorred, intellectual elitism that hints of Ivy League Schools is likewise shunned in favor of the rough spirit of the grassroots and the crude talent it nurtures. For alongside the rancor nourished by the indelible seal of Confederate defeat, a raw optimism also permeates this vision of the world, which salutes an America where opportunity consecrates effort, and nourishes contempt for those left behind, those “Welfare Queens” once derided by Reagan, who, while responsible for their plight, seek undue compensation from the state. This last part – scorn and condescension for the common laborer – is a contribution of the corporatist philosophy, the fruit of its ally in the GOP front, and a more recent phenomenon since it dates from the 1970s and 1980s.

Also partners in this motley GOP alliance are the Libertarians. The libertarians, who converge around the Cato Institute, an influential think-tank founded in the 1970s, are avowed enemies of the state, the role of which they wish reduced to a minimum. In Washington, they play an active role in pushing their agenda of economic deregulation, but downplay other issues, which are too controversial for the grass-root electorate such as their support for gays and abortion as well as their favorable stance on the legalization of marijuana.

³² Peter Applebome, *Dixie Rising, op. cit.*, p. 14. Others have corroborated this observation by noting the belligerent character of the so-called “Scotch Irish” who settled the frontier. See David Hackett Fischer, *Albion’s Seed, Four British Folkways in America*, New York, Oxford University Press, 1989, pp. 605 ff.

³³ Read a concise summary of these perspectives, which includes the points that sets them apart from classic conservatism as defined by Edmund Burke in John Micklethwait and Adrian Wooldridge, *The Right Nation...*, *op.cit.*, pp. 11-15.

The Machine

How genuine is this coalition of unlikely consorts? How close are the values of the pious common folk of believers with those of giant corporations? How does one reconcile two sides of the electorate with such strongly held opposing viewpoints? One group upholds the values of rich corporations. Another stresses “family values”, urges government to take an active stance in opposing abortion, gay unions, and exchanging the teaching of evolution for the doctrine of creationism. And finally, the libertarian constituency resists the state’s encroachment on the private lives of its citizens. How real is this GOP alliance and how straightforward this much touted southernization?

Since the 1960s, at least, the conservatives have been working hard to imitate the Democrat’s successful strategy, which consecrated them for long as clear winners in the power game. Like the Democrats before them, they established powerful think-tanks, accumulated thousands, millions, of dollars, thanks to clever mail targeting of potential supporters in the fight against “liberalism”. Irving Kristol, a former Leninist, was a pioneer in this effort. Like him, many of those wrongly dubbed “neo-conservatives” are missionaries in this venture.³⁴ During the mass protests of the 1960s and 1970s, asserting civil rights and expressing opposition to the Vietnam war, many radicals found a *raison d’être* in fighting the erosion that in their perspective was gnawing at America’s heart. As Michael Lind observes so astutely, their brand of conservatism is an “inverted Marxism”, “a “countercommunism that replicates, down to rather precise details of organization and theory, the communism that it opposes.”³⁵ Illustrative in this respect, are some idiosyncracies of Grover Norquist, a central figure in Washington, DC’s GOP establishment, who maintains a portrait of Lenin in his living-room,

³⁴ A better term would be “neofundamentalists”, as proposed by Tzvetan Todorov, *Le nouveau désordre mondial. Réflexions d’un Européen*, Paris, Robert Laffont, 2003, p. 27, or “transformationalists” as proposed by David J. Rothkopf, “Inside the Committee that Runs the World”, *Foreign Policy*, March/April 2005, p. 31.

³⁵ Michael Lind, *Up From Conservatism...*, *op. cit.*, pp. 96, 94.

and indulges in the writings of 19th century Italian socialist Gramsci.³⁶ The combination of this missionary spirit and of cold-blooded hegemonism represented among others by Dick Cheney and Don Rumsfeld can be dangerous.³⁷

Fear

George W. Bush's reelection in 2004 (or his first victory as others would have it), bewildered observers, especially foreign -- a category which today includes most Americans in the big cities of the North-Eastern and West Coasts. It indicates, however, that there is more than meets the eye. GW Bush's rhetoric resonates strongly in the heartland of this country. It hits a mythical and mystical chord that runs deep in American collective consciousness. Those who are mystified and remark, quite correctly, that much of his support in the "red states" comes from people who have most to lose from his financial cutbacks, should pick up *What's the Matter with Kansas?* It is the powerful, if baffling, account of how perceptions can distort issues to the point of overriding pragmatic interests. The humble people it depicts are not so much dejected by the economic downturn they face. Instead of voting for concrete issues, which concern them, it is an outlandish anger that dictates their vote. They are enraged by what they perceive as the encroachment of a "foreign" world. They scorn the spreading mores of the "latte drinking, Volvo driving and New York Times reading" of an effete east and west coast elite.³⁸ They resent the devious spreading of an un-American way of life.

³⁶ David Brock, *Blinded by the Right. The Conscience of an Ex-Conservative*, New York, Random House, 2002, pp. 71, 72.

³⁷ A forthcoming book explores the current dynamics of the President's national security team and reveals some rifts that are tearing the GOP establishment. See a preview in by David J. Rothkopf, "Inside the Committee that Runs the World", *op. cit.*, pp. 30-40.

³⁸ Thomas Frank, *What's the Matter with Kansas? How Conservatives Won the Heart of America*, New York, Metropolitan Books, 2004: "The red-state/blue state divide ... helped conservatives perform one of their dearest rhetorical maneuvers, which we will call the *latte libel*: the suggestion that liberals are identifiable by their tastes and consumer preferences and that these tastes and preferences reveal the essential arrogance and foreignness of liberalism. While a more straightforward discussion of politics might begin by considering the interests that each party serves, the latte libel insists that such interests are

This reading, then, points toward a collective pathology. It highlights the emergence, or re-emergence, of a particular vision of a world hostile and intent on infiltrating the U.S. Its best-known episode perhaps is the McCarthy era. But analogous fears have mounted in this country periodically, in direct connection with changes in the environment.³⁹

Fear is a familiar specter for theorists of American identity. Locke thought it essential as a drive for the construction of democracy, and an observer as astute as Tocqueville remarked that in contrast to medievalism or an aristocratic system, which each provide a clear structure for individuals, democracy carries within it the threat of collapse. He worried about the “internal anxiety” congenial to this system. He argued therefore in favor of maximizing its positive attributes. One should, he asserted, cultivate a “healthy fear of ourselves”, because this emotion would “ (...) lead us to guard against external influence and thereby enable us to exercise our freedom.”⁴⁰ A fear directed or projected outwardly would presumably if not liberate, at least alleviate, this propensity of the individual to entropy in a democracy. Years later in the context of the Cold War,

irrelevant. Instead it's the places that people live and the things that they drink, eat, and drive that are the critical factors, the clues that bring us to the truth. In particular, the things that *liberals* are said to drink, eat, and drive: the Volvos, the imported cheese, and above all, the lattes”: pp. 16-17.

³⁹ The fear of infiltration or contamination through something foreign has been constant in U.S. history. It is generally triggered by a diplomatic crisis or a war. Past examples of this are the hysteria surrounding the so-called “hyphenated-American” during the first World War, those, especially German, suspecting of conniving with their mother country against the U.S., and the more widely known McCarthy era. These episodes of strong vulnerability are generally accompanied by stringent measures restricting freedom of speech. On this, see Geoffrey R. Stone, *Perilous Times. Free Speech in Wartime. From the Sedition Act of 1798 to the War on Terrorism*, New York, W. W. Norton and Company, Inc., 2004. Today, this fear revolves around the alleged “clash of civilizations”, which as Carlos Fuentes observes, “(...) is more than a myth. It is a phantasm.”: Carlos Fuentes, *Contra Bush*, Bogotá, Aguilar, 2004, p. 151.

⁴⁰ For a discussion on the concept of fear as it relates to democracy and as perceived in political theory, see Corey Robin, “Why do Opposites Attract? Fear and Freedom in the Modern Political Imagination”, in Nancy Lusignan Schulz, *Fear Itself. Enemies Real and Imagined in American Culture*, 1999, West Lafayette, IN, Purdue University press, pp. 3-22.

Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., reiterated Tocqueville's apprehension. As he expressed it in 1949 in *The Vital Center: The Politics of Freedom*, the paramount threat to the United States was not the outer contest with the Soviet Union. Crucial, in his perspective, was the fight against the possible incarnation, and inside projection, of the enemy within, the domestic impulse to drive out anxiety by submitting to autocratic forces and becoming traitors to freedom. For Schlesinger, it was important to wage the cold war conflict not because of the Soviet Union's expansionist ambitions *per se*, but as a potentially corrosive internalized threat against U.S. democracy. More than defeating Moscow, it was important to overcome the conflict that the Soviet Union instilled in the hearts of American citizens. The conflict held into the balance more than an international balance of powers: the *domestic* defense of American freedom.⁴¹

When he wrote, Arthur Schlesinger was undoubtedly influenced by the threats of communist infiltration looming in 1949, just like Tocqueville before him by the revolution stirrings of his time. He had nevertheless detected the particular vulnerability that foreign events induced in the U.S. collective consciousness.

There are additional reasons besides the nature of the democratic system that account for an anxiety peculiar to U.S. nationalism. In contrast to other countries, the United States identity is not particularistic: you do not inherit it the way you are born French or German.⁴² It involves what is perceived and articulated as worldwide values, which include essentially, freedom and liberty. Lieven notes that "what is unusual about America is the sheer unanimity of beliefs in these guiding national principles."⁴³

Recent historical contributions, however, have underscored that these vague concepts of liberty and freedom, which underpin the U.S. nationalist discourse present an elusiveness, which cloaks many diverse, and in fact divergent meanings according to their origin, and that these discrepancies have always represented a source of

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 14-16.

⁴² Samuel Huntington, quoted by Anatol Lieven, *America Right or Wrong...*, *op. cit.*, p. 50.

⁴³ *Ibid*

conflict.⁴⁴ Notwithstanding the universal scope of the nationalist rhetoric bolstered by the force of religion, there persists in the background alternative and competing readings of what this nationalist project really signifies (as shown most dramatically by the contending stances during the Civil War). It seems clear, straightforward, and inspired by universal values. This universalistic rhetoric clashes with other particularistic projects. For the majority of Americans are presented with a fundamental conundrum: why does the outside world quarrel with the defense of universal values? Why does it not reconcile itself with the rule of American democracy, which incarnates progress? Many popular misgivings and occasional resentments against foreign countries originate in this incomprehension. There subsists indeed an underlying tendency, to view diverging opinions on the world scene as expressions of an unfriendly world opposed to the progress of democracy.

The ambiguous character of the national discourse explains, therefore, the curious disposition of Americans to be “fearful of the otherness of the world, and oddly oblivious to the fact that they embody that otherness in their own diversity”.⁴⁵ The fact that the American identity is not past but future oriented, and that being American is something never really acquired, and continuously to be accomplished, accentuates these qualms, because they remain ever present in the pursuit of national aims, whether domestic or international.

⁴⁴ David Hackett Fischer, *Liberty and Freedom. A Visual History of America's Founding Ideas*, New York, Oxford University Press, 2005, is an encyclopedic account of the various clashing notions of liberty and freedom. This book complements an earlier one where Hackett Fischer traces the four distinct traditions, which fashioned American collective thought: David Hackett Fischer, *Albion's Seed. Op.cit.*

⁴⁵ Benjamin Barber, *Fear's Empire. War, terrorism, and Democracy*, New York, W.W. Norton, 2004, p. 36. Lieven quotes Max Lerner's similar comments dating from the 1950s: “One of the American traits is the recoil from the unfamiliar... This seems all the more curious when one remembers that America is itself a ‘nation of nations’ and contains a multitude of diverse cultural traditions. Yet this fact only serves to increase the bafflement of Americans abroad: since he has seen people of foreign extraction in his own country abandoning their customs and becoming ‘Americanized’, he cannot understand why people of foreign countries should not do the same.” *America Right or Wrong...*, *op. cit.*, p. 46.

The American psyche today is gripped by an acute sense of crisis, owing to the mounting fear of national disintegration. Consider the repercussions of the collective identity crisis, which accompanied the century's end. As painfully evident during the 1992 commemoration ceremonies of the discovery of America, the long steadfast myth of a harmonious melting-pot was crumbling. At the time, the rueful procession of Indian natives on the Washington mall showed yet another group victimized by the settlement. It also revealed a major paradigm shift: the departure from the idealized version of an exceptional people and the consolidation of a multiculturalist understanding of America. In the 1990's, the contention over the teaching of U.S. history epitomized this divide between on the one side those favorable to the transmission of the traditional narration, those who wanted so-called "facts", and on the other, those arguing for a description closer to the fragmented social reality.⁴⁶ The fashion of political correctness showed a perspective torn between these two stances – an implicit awareness of differences combined with an effort to silence it.

What all these debates ultimately conveyed was a significant shift in the place of fear within the American psyche. Indeed, argues Corey Robin in a recent contribution, fear in the last two decades has mutated into anxiety. Whereas the culture of liberalism in the sixties and seventies centered around questions of equality and racial integration, and addressed "the distribution of power and resources or the aggressive contest for equality and expropriation", the emerging characteristic of contending debates involved now "those who agitated questions of membership and exclusion – of who belongs and who does not, and the unrelenting anxiety over borders (of self and society, group and nation)..."⁴⁷

⁴⁶ See Eric Foner, *Who Owns History?, Rethinking the Past in a Changing World*, New York, Hill and Wang, 2002, xv-xvii. Joyce Appleby, *A Restless Past. History and the American Public*, Lanham (MD), Rowman and Littlefield, 2005, pp. 6ff. For a masterful account of the fragmentation of exceptionalism in American studies, see David W. Noble, *Death of a Nation. American Culture and the End of Exceptionalism*, Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 2002.

⁴⁷ Corey Robin, *Fear. The History of a Political Idea*, New York, Oxford University Press, 2004, p. 139. See also p. 140, where he describes this change of paradigm from "vertical" to "horizontal" cleavages: fear in the 1960s "arose from and reinforced society's vertical cleavages. Fear was a "tool of the powerful

Fear, then, an integral offshoot of the US national identity as defined by the traditional rhetoric, is compounded today by the feeling of dissolution, which permeates political and social perspectives. This feeling originates in an obsession with the porous nature of the national borders.

There was a time in the 1990s when stories of black helicopters intent on annexing the United States seemed the bizarre fabrication of a paranoid right-wing minority fringe. One read about it in disbelief in the newsletter of the Southern Poverty Law Center under the Clinton administration during the years of Janet Reno as Attorney general. The Black Helicopters were allegedly commandeered by the United Nations, and one was bewildered by the deep insularity, and the hostility, that was growing in some spots of the heartland.

A political establishment guileless in overtly shunning the United Nations and most other international jurisdiction has since eclipsed the Black helicopter surreal analogy. GW's brain trust couches equivalent feelings in more learned and sophisticated terms. In effect, fear has moved from the fringe of the electorate to the mainstream.

The obsession with borders also characterizes George W. Bush's diplomacy.

Space.

In the American narrative, space has traditionally provided a bulwark against entropy. It nourished the major myth of the Frontier according to which the existence of a "waste land" to the West guaranteed the subsistence of this novel and allegedly exemplary way of life. And the abundance of land did in effect protect what the late historian Robert Wiebe characterized as a "segmented society", one able to sustain the myth of harmony as long as immensity permitted different groups

against the powerless (...) But contemporary theorists of identity conceive of society as horizontally, which is why anxiety is their preferred emotion. We are divided into groups not at the bottom and at the top, they argue, but at the centers and the margins."

to coexist without infringing upon one another.⁴⁸ Sudden waves of immigration periodically triggered the fear of the un-American, and were traditionally instrumental in feeding the agendas of anti-alien parties.⁴⁹ Today, similar apprehensions color the perspectives of those in academia who resent what they perceive as the dissolution of the American nation because of the soon overwhelming latino population.⁵⁰ In the political and social climate generated by the September 11 events, apprehensions revolving around the un-American are again paramount. How else can one explain the unfathomable abuse of the rights of foreign detainees, some or many of whom, have not even been charged of any specific wrong-doing? 9/11 brought back to the surface age old concerns of foreign hostility. Neo-con commentator Norman Podhoretz sounds the alarm for what he dubs *World War IV*: a “new enemy... attacked us on our own soil—a feat neither Nazi Germany nor Soviet Russia ever managed to pull off.”⁵¹

Sealing the borders was an early preoccupation of the Founding Fathers. Separation with the outside world was a physical reality in early days. And this separation was subsequently reinforced by doctrinal pronouncements. To protect their system of freedom, the architects of U.S. foreign policy early invoked a division in world affairs. In 1823, the Monroe Doctrine, which traced a clear separation between North American and European affairs, supplemented Washington’s earlier farewell to Europe. The feeling that the outside world is hostile, and the attempt to lock America out of it persists to this day. America’s uneasiness with globalization is well expressed by Benjamin Barber: “The world beyond America always used to be more than a world away. With it crowding America’s doorstep today, Americans gather nervously in the parlor, hoping they can secure

⁴⁸ Robert H. Wiebe *The Segmented Society: an Introduction to the Meaning of America*, New York, Oxford University Press, 1975

⁴⁹ One of the best works on the subject is David H. Bennett, *The Party of Fear. The American Far Right from Nativism to the Militia Movement*, New York, Vintage Books, 1988 (revised and updated 1995).

⁵⁰ Samuel P. Huntington, *Who are we? The Challenges to American National Identity*, New York, Simon and Schuster, 2004.

⁵¹ Norman Podhoretz, “World War IV: How It Started, What It Means, and Why We Have to Win”, *Commentary*, September 2004, <http://www.commentarymagazine.com/podhoretz.htm>

their safety by locking the doors and thrusting their intimidating smart weapons out of well-secured gunports... They look to coerce hostile parts of the planet into submission with a strong-willed militancy.”⁵²

As implied by the latter observation, unilateral intervention has traditionally gone hand in hand with the attempts to isolate America from the world. In fact, they are the two faces of a medal, argues *The Dominion of War*, a recent important contribution on the subject of US diplomacy: “Those driven by a rage for order need not actually *intend* to expand territorially or acquire greater resources or transform the lives of the peoples they conquer as a primary goal; imperialism can easily arise from isolationist motives...”⁵³ (...) “for the United States”, concurs Yale historian John Lewis Gaddis, “*safety comes from enlarging, rather than contracting, its sphere of responsibilities*”.⁵⁴

Preemption therefore is not some novel aberration introduced by the Administration of G.W. Bush. Such a strategy early became a tool to combat foreign threats, whether authentic or alleged. From the beginning of the Republic, the United States fought foes, some of which were real, but many others imagined. In their early work on the U.S. Quest for absolute security, historians Chace and Carr remark: “ (...) we can see a pattern of behavior in America’s efforts to secure the nation from both territorial and ideological threats. That pattern has consisted of quick and forceful American responses not only to *actual* dangers but also to *perceived* threats (...) above all, in the

⁵² Barber, *Fear’s Empire...*, *op. cit.*, p. 36.

⁵³ Fred Anderson and Andrew Cayton, *The Dominion of War. Empire and Liberty in North America, 1500-2000*, New York, Viking, 2005, p. 422, emphasis theirs. Anderson and Cayton situate the origins of the just war ideology as a legacy of the War of 1812: “ (...) the war’s most significant legacy proved to be a distinctively American just-war ideology. Unlike the members of the Revolutionary generation, who justified taking up arms to defend a fragile liberty against Britain’s seemingly unlimited sovereign power, proponents of war argued that offensive warfare – against the British in Canada, the Creeks in Alabama, and the Spanish in Florida – was justified because conquest would liberate the oppressed and expand the sphere of freedom. It was a justification Americans applied again in their next imperial war – and indeed in every subsequent war in the Republic’s history” (p. xviii).

⁵⁴ John Lewis Gaddis, *Surprise, Security, and the American Experience*, Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 2004, p. 13 (emphasis his).

overwhelming majority of cases American leaders *believed* the threats to be real.”⁵⁵

George W. Bush’s administration has been obsessed with sealing the borders and combating would-be intruders, both domestically and on the world scene. It has fashioned its own brand of diplomacy deeply rooted in the U.S. tradition: isolationism, unilateralism, and multilateralism “à la carte”. In so doing, it is responding also to this “preoccupation with the frontier”, the “major consequence” of which has been a “new political agenda.”⁵⁶

Today, it is difficult to decipher to what extent G.W. Bush’s intervention in Iraq obeyed the predetermined agenda of the “neo-cons” who for long had been pushing for such an outcome. It is also not easy to establish how much one can ascribe to fear. However, as this essay has tried to show, one cannot dismiss the paramount role played by the collective psyche in accepting and supporting what is both new, and yet repeats the American experience – the impulse to establish borders. This may well continue. For as Octavio Paz once remarked, “the end of the Monroe Doctrine means a return to the beginning” --⁵⁷

Laura Garcés, March 2005

⁵⁵ James Chace and Caleb Carr, *America Invulnerable. The Quest for Absolute Security from 1812 to Star Wars*, New York, Simon and Schuster, 1988, p. 15 (emphasis theirs), mention James Polk’s 1846 conquest of California as a primary example of perceived foreign threat.

⁵⁶ Charles S. Maier, “An American Empire? The Problems of Frontier and Peace in Twenty-First Century Politics”, in Lloyd C. Gardner and Marilyn B. Young eds., *The New American Empire. A 21st Century Teach-in on U.S. Foreign Policy*, New York, W.W. Norton, 2005, p. xiv.

⁵⁷ Octavio Paz, “Latin America and Democracy”, in Octavio Paz, Jorge Edwards, Carlos Franqui et al., eds., *Democracy and Dictatorship in Latin America*, New York, Foundation for the Independent Study of Social Ideas, 1981.