

Abstract:

This piece seeks to update an earlier work that sought to explain the Globalization of the Monroe Doctrine in the Wilson era as a product of collective fear (*La mondialisation de la doctrine Monroe à l'ère wilsonienne*, Lausanne, Payot, 1988)

Fear is a crucial element of collective thought, yet it remains unrecognized in the study of the formulation and implementation of U.S. foreign policy. The goal of this project is to explain why, and in what way, fear operates to influence the conduct of US foreign policy. Fear, we explain, originates in the national identity as it was defined originally. Today, other factors, intellectual and political, are compounding this feature. The weight of the South accounts for a fierce defense of traditional values, which are perceived as endangered by intellectual relativism and lax social mores. The growing strength of a religious thought committed to biblical prophecies and concerned that world events are a retribution for earthly transgressions greatly accentuates this fear. Finally, the end of the cold war has operated in a significant way to interiorize the critical thinking on the world that for the best of the 20th century had been focused on successive foreign foes. The resulting democratic malaise has introduced major misgivings about the good functioning of the political system and made more widespread the beliefs in a domestic conspiracy. This set of factors has induced an activist foreign policy, which situates itself within the American diplomatic tradition, and does not therefore represent a break as is commonly believed.

Sections:

Introduction

The Genealogy of a Collective Fear: Utopia and Time.

The "Other" in the melting-pot: Component and Threat

Confronting the World. Basic Impulses of US Foreign Policy

(Dis)Continuities

The Seal of Southern Memory

A Pyrrhic Victory

Peace as Disorder

**The Democratic Predicament Displaces Conspiracy Theories
from the Margins to the Mainstream**

IN THE SHADOW OF MARS

THE FACE OF FEAR IN GEORGE W. BUSH'S AMERICA

“What man cannot understand he fears”,
Clodd

“ Un coup de dés jamais n’abolira le hasard”^{*}
Mallarmé

In 2002, Carnegie fellow Robert Kagan extolled the U.S. Martian qualities while disparaging essentially as decadent, or postmodern, the Venus-like disposition of pacifist prone Europeans.¹ The clever piece generated a flow of comments, in the U.S. and abroad. Pursuing the analogy, one might dwell some more on Mars' character in mythology: hated by all other gods, he was driven by fury, and ultimately cursed by defeat. The planet's moons are Phobos (horror) and Deimos (terror), twins fathered by Mars. They represent the underside of *Paradise and Power*. Fear, while not the sole vector of U.S. diplomacy, offers today a significant insight into Washington's behavior on the world scene. A Hobbesian arena it is indeed.

Referring to one of the pioneers in the study of fear as a motor of history seems an appropriate way of introducing this theme. Jean Delumeau's splendid work on early modern Europe takes us deep into a universe permeated by an atmosphere of Armageddon, faced from without by Turkish advance, and threatened within by growing apostasy. In this troubled arena, an increasingly centralizing secular and religious power sought domination and conquest. He describes in detail an environment that generated a logic of internal suspicion in many ways suggestive of our times.²

* A throw of the dice will never abolish chance.

¹ Robert Kagan, *Of Paradise and Power, America and Europe in the New World Order*, New York, Knopf, 2003.

² Jean Delumeau, *La peur en Occident (XVIème-XVIIIème siècles)*, Paris, Fayard, 1978. See p. 513 for a statement that could well be transposed as applying to our times: “ A power, both religious and secular, more and more annexionist and centralizing, (a power) that increasingly fears deviations; an atmosphere of Armageddon coupled with the certainty that God seeks revenge for his people's betrayals through collective punishment...”

This analogy should not blur the distinctions between our two dissimilar universes. Rather, it serves to point out, first, that what we often conceive as our rational world, with unrivaled power, is not immune to those fears that the West harbored well before the advance of technology. Second, it presents a refreshing antidote to the worn parallels of contemporary times. Fear has a genealogy specific to every nation and its times. Our post cold war days have little to do with events leading to and following World War II, notwithstanding what policymakers, commentators, even intellectuals, would have us believe.

References to World War Two provide favorite metaphors for the G.W. Bush administration, from the “axis of evil” to the most recently coined “islamofascism”, a term fast abandoned for its potential repercussions. They evoke resolve, commitment and strength.³ But how effective is this official rhetoric in concealing the overwhelming sense of vulnerability that has gripped the collective unconscious since the events of 9/11? Signs that the political establishment shares a widespread fear are manifold. On the Mexican-US border, a wall is being erected. Like in Israel and Berlin, walls, even in recent history, are constructed out of fear. Extraordinary powers have been taken by the authorities to monitor the mail, the telephone conversations, even the library records, of private citizens. Levels of concern are periodically posted to warn the puzzled public, who has little clue as how best to proceed normally with everyday life when the threat level abruptly rises from yellow to orange. The airports present daily spectacles of bemused passengers and security personnel, grappling alike with constantly changing rules, which expose not mastery, but perplexity about imminent threats. Notwithstanding the rhetoric, this is no D-Day in Normandy...

³ On this, see Marianna Torgovnick, *The War Complex. World War II in our Time*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 2005, especially pp. 41-43. A sobered Fukuyama offers a sound critique of the neo-con perspective, which relied heavily on these metaphors as well as on a misinterpretation of the Cold War: Francis Fukuyama, *America at the Crossroads: Democracy, Power, and the Neoconservative Legacy*, New Haven, Yale University Press, 2006. See also Stephen Holmes, “Neo-Con Futurology”, *The London Review of Books*, 5 October 2006, pp. 13-16 and Stanley Hoffman, “The Foreign Policy the U.S. Needs”, *The New York Review of Books*, August 10, 2006, Vol. 53, No. 13, <http://www.nybooks.com/articles/19217>.

Why is fear a useful focus to understand the foreign policy of G.W. Bush? Some words, first, on the crowded terrain of the literature devoted to this subject, which however valuable, leaves significant ground uncharted.

Many angles have been used to dissect and discuss the peculiarities of George W. Bush's foreign policy. Some have drawn on specific personality traits of political actors, as well as the influence of their respective pasts. Others have identified a political culture -- the deeply ideologized outlook of the "neo-cons" that kept officials focused on a pre-determined agenda. Together, these factors would account for the Manichean vision of the world that led to the invasion of Iraq and could still hold further adventures... Yet others have dwelled on the inherent shortcomings of large bureaucracies, and on the ordinary rivalries they generate to explain why warnings were not heeded.

Finally, struggling to make sense of a behavior that to many seems an aberration in diplomacy, others have adopted a long-term perspective. Is this conduct reminiscent of the nationalist drift that overcame European nations at the turn of the 20th century, as speculated by Michael Lind and Anatol Lieven?⁴ Is the Texan President replaying a scenario of conquest that harks back to Jackson's days? What analogy can be drawn with the Philippines and McKinley? And finally, wherein lies really what would seem an obvious connection with President Woodrow Wilson's messianist impulse to reform the international arena?⁵

George W. Bush's diplomacy is indeed reminiscent of several epochs in U.S history, as noted by Walter Russell Mead in his vast and penetrating survey of this country's relationship with the world.⁶

⁴ Michael Lind, *Made in Texas. George W. Bush and the Southern Takeover of American Politics*, New York, Basic Books, 2004, p. 166; Anatol Lieven, *America Right or Wrong. An Anatomy of American Nationalism*, New York, Oxford University Press, 2004, pp. 22ff.

⁵ John B. Judis, *The Folly of Empire. What George W. Bush Could Learn from Theodore Roosevelt and Woodrow Wilson*, New York, Scribner, 2004, also develops the parallel with the Filipino occupation, pp. 2-3. Another succinct

⁶ Walter Russell Mead, *Special Providence. American Foreign Policy and How it Changed the World*, New York, Routledge, 2002.

Current administration's policies are indeed a blend of tendencies both characteristic and traditional. We propose to further explore how a unique conjunction of intellectual influences has operated to produce the fear that has been present during G.W. Bush's activist diplomacy.

Prominent in this cultural landscape is the Southern element, with its strong emphasis on religion and its ever-present awareness of the lost cause, as is its corollary, the strong conservative populist thinking that developed originally as a backlash to the civil rights movement of the sixties and that resolutely combats what it perceives as a widening degeneracy. This thinking has been considerably reinforced, since the end of the cold war deprived the West of an enemy and brought about not quietude, but the interiorization of a threat all the more alarming that it is perceived as only vaguely defined yet pervasive. To quote the title of a work on the subject, *The Hatred of Democracy*, – a radical questioning of the system's legitimacy and of the disorder it creates, is the murky heir to the East-West contention.⁷

The fact that the Middle East is the theater of major international action serves to multiply feelings of awe because this region is central to those biblical prophecies that tell of the final encounter between Christ and his nemesis. And finally, globalization with its accompanying tides of immigration, has triggered the reformulation of a question that is central to U.S. identity: who belongs in this mythical "melting-pot"? And how can boundaries be traced? There is, we explain, an equivocation in the founding allegory -- in the very definition of what it means to be an American. And from the depths of this elusion, have sprung the many perceived foes, labeled un-American, that this culture has grappled with, and sometimes battled against, throughout its history.

We explain below what circumstances have triggered this radical questioning at various junctures throughout U.S. history. Today, while the events of 9/11 arguably introduced a novel phase in US diplomacy, it conjured up anxieties that are central to US identity and

⁷ Jacques Rancière, *La haine de la démocratie*, Paris, La Fabrique editions, 2005.

pushed old triggers that led to similar adventures like the one US troops are confronted with in Iraq. That is what explains the surfacing of old patterns in this nation's foreign policy. As Walter Russell Mead writes, while the attacks in New York and Washington "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."⁸

This project, then, examines the workings of collective thought to explain a pattern that remains not fully understood because the field of U.S. foreign relations is regrettably closed to American studies, which has been characterized by remarkable recent advances. Collective memory, in particular, offers a useful perspective to apprehend this mechanism. For it is when outside events are perceived as reproducing an old threat that collective thinking works to translate, and then position, the current environment within the framework of a certain vision of the world. Decoding the nature of a specific fear therefore entails replacing it in the context of collective memory. It is memory's filtering of the world that retrieves events from randomness, gives them depth and substance, and ultimately reclaims them as part and parcel of a national odyssey. It is, essentially, as Marc Augé points out, an exercise in translation. It involves decoding circumstances in the light of a particular tradition, to discern why certain events act as catalysts in triggering behavior. That is why it also corresponds to and entails a specific mapping of the world.⁹

The exploration of collective memory has been a fruitful field of study in recent years.¹⁰ Put forth by the *Annales* school as valuable material for understanding societies, the topic was subsequently probed by historians of the holocaust and informed a burgeoning subfield – the study of trauma, opening the topic to the insights of psychology. The study of fear has also inspired useful readings of collective thought in the United States. Corey Robin and Peter Knight among others have explored the topic at length with valuable results, which we outline

⁸ *Special Providence...*, *op. cit.*, p. 308

⁹ Marc Augé, *Les formes de l'oubli*, Paris, Payot, 1998, pp. 12-13.

¹⁰ There are too many works on the topic to be singled out here. A good survey of the progress in this field is that of Francois Hartog, *Régimes d'historicité. Présentisme et expériences du temps*, Paris, Seuil, 2003.

below. Finally, one must not forget the insights of the growing body of works devoted to conspiracy theories. Conspiracy has been a hallmark of the literature and politics in the United States ever since the foundation. In effect, conspiracy theories, long identified by the late Richard Hofstadter as a feature of American culture, have moved from the periphery to mainstream interpretations.

The scholarly literature on U.S. foreign policy has been oddly removed from developments in intellectual history. This perhaps is partly due to the particular journalistic type of investigation that prevails in Washington, D.C., with its characteristic emphasis on the short-term. But it is mostly a consequence of the fact that in this arena, the United States has long been – and continues to be -- captive of the myth of exceptionalism. We explain below what this myth entails, how it was constructed, and how Washington's diplomacy was shaped as a result since the foundation.

The Genealogy of a Collective Fear: Utopia and Time.

What are the essential underlying reasons that account for a fear particular to U.S. nationalism? Its origins lie, in the very founding utopia of the nation, and more precisely in its incongruous premises: escaping European nationalisms, through the establishment of a nation comprised of all others, while aspiring at universalism. The discrepancy between a national project, which by definition is particularistic, and its universal intent, has been central to the misunderstandings of the U.S. and foreign countries. Apprehensions have occasionally surfaced revolving around the seeming unwillingness of the outside world to approve of US actions that are understood as based on universal values. Benjamin Barber has noted 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.”¹¹) Oblivion, however, is a necessary

¹¹ Benjamin Barber, *Fear's Empire. War, Terrorism, and Democracy*, New York, W.W. Norton and Co., 2003, p. 36 (emphasis ours). See also Anatol Lieven, *America Right or Wrong. An Anatomy of American Nationalism*, New York, Oxford University Press, 2004, p. 46, who quotes this comment from Max Lerner writing in the fifties: “One of the American traits is the recoil from the unfamiliar... This seems all the more curious when one remembers that America itself is 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

component of a national project whereby foreign nationals are reprocessed into Americans. For becoming “American”, presupposes a foreign past, and then a relinquishing of ties. A brief look follows at the conundrum presented by the saga of the foundation.

Consider the challenge of living up to a utopia invented in Europe, that insinuates you straight into a contradiction, telling you that you started again in a new world from perfection, yet simultaneously prodding you into progressing.¹²

The foundational myths of the United States are drawn from a variety of sources that are, as cultural legacies often go, in many ways incongruous. They merge elements of opposing viewpoints, ideas borrowed from the Florentine apologist of absolute rule, Nicolás Machiavelli, from the philosophical criticism derived from the 17th century British revolutions, and concepts from advocates and theorists of the Enlightenment. This loose set of strands was subsequently woven into a tight narrative against the background of the old world's malaise with government. It was the myth of the *bon sauvage* believed to embody the innocence of nature against the corrosive effects of history that gave substance to the grievances of the first U.S. founders and inspired their experiment. The myth had a long tradition, going back to Montaigne, and persisting well into the 18th century with Rousseau, Montesquieu, and others, using the inverted mirror to critique political corruption, and sometimes to mock, the sophistication of European capitals.¹³

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.”

¹² Attributed to Richard Hofstadter and quoted in Joyce Appleby, *A Restless Past. History and the American Public*, Lanham, Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 2005, p. 98.

¹³ We discuss the scholarly literature on the mythical foundations of American nationalism in *La mondialisation de la doctrine Monroe*, Lausanne, Payot, 1988, pp. 7 ff. No listing can be complete without a mention of the immense contribution by J.G.A. Pocock, *The Machiavellian Moment. Florentine Political Thought and the Atlantic Republican Tradition*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1975. Works on recent scholarly developments include David W. Noble, *Death of a Nation. American Culture and the End of Exceptionalism*, Minneapolis (MN), University of Minnesota Press, 2002. Joyce Appleby, *A Restless Past...*, *op.cit.* Eric Foner, *Who Owns History? Rethinking the Past in a Changing World*, New York, Hill and Wang, 2002. Michael Kazin and Joseph A. McCartin, Eds,

But where lay the escape from European corruption, and its corroded history, and where could be found the cradle of its antithesis? The solution lay in space, which, in more than one way, afforded the support for US identity.

The notion of space was instrumental in the design of a political system erected against the corrosive nature and the entropy thought to be inherent in time. It served as a metaphor to formulate a political system purported to balance executive, legislative and judicial powers. It was believed that this equilibrium would prevent the ascendance of tyranny such as had occurred in Britain prior to the 17th century turmoil when the Monarchy had shunned Parliament, and later, the subjects in the colonies who bemoaned, and ultimately opposed, taxation without representation. The political system was closely designed to copy those laws of nature that in Newton's days were believed to be universal and unchanging. It would mirror the earth's faultless movement and be resistant to anarchy.

Space played a major role also in a concrete sense. The new land of abundance lay far away. An early axiom of U.S. foreign policy was its separation from affairs European. This was first formulated in George Washington's Farewell message to Europe, then by Monroe's declaration of America to Americans. Isolation was deemed necessary to escape Old World corruption. Until globalization set in, in the early decades of the 20th century, Washington lived and behaved comfortably according to this principle.

Land was also a guarantee against disunity. It was plentiful in the new world, an opulent host for the motley groups that arrived in successive waves. Each of these spoke different languages. They held different creeds. They had divergent notions of liberty, communitarian versus individual, for instance. So space provided them with more than room enough to settle. Its abundance permitted it to be used as a buffer, safeguarding them from conflicts that proximity could generate. There was little in common among early settlers. When the rowdy Scotch-Irish who had spent centuries

fighting on the Scottish-English border before venturing into Ireland to continue their struggle, disembarked in the port of Philadelphia, they alarmed the placid Quakers, who egged them on towards less hospitable quarters on the frontier.¹⁴ As argued by the late historian Robert Wiebe, the homogeneity of the U.S. traditionally depended on the availability of land. In what he dubbed “the segmented society”, proximity caused clashes and a profound questioning of collective identity.¹⁵ In recent years, works have appeared that explore in great depth the contradictions and elusions cloaked by the semantics of liberty and freedom, the twin pillars of US identity.¹⁶ Corey Robin argues perceptively in this regard that the ideal of liberty has generated “more fear than it has freedom”. The quest for liberty has brought about such autonomy that worries have periodically mounted about the potential that individuals fall sway to some form of autocracy.¹⁷

Social and political strife found occasional outlets in the latest influxes of immigrants. Most notable in U.S. history, was the formation of the first nativist American party, the *Know-Nothings* in the 1850s, which targeted Irish Americans. Its origins lay in the simmering regional tensions that would soon come to a head with the Civil War, but the presence of foreigners acted as a catalyst. They were believed to be

¹⁴ We owe James Webb a captivating work on the subject: *Born Fighting, How the Scots-Irish shaped America*, NY, Random House, 2004.

¹⁵ Robert Wiebe, *The Segmented Society. An Introduction to the Meaning of America*, London, Oxford University Press, 1975.

¹⁶ This is explored in depth by David Hackett Fischer, *Liberty and Freedom, A Visual History of America's Founding Ideas*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2005. This masterpiece builds on Hackett Fischer's earlier work that explores similar themes: *Albion's Seed: Four British Folkways in America (America: A Cultural History)*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1989. The works of Eric Foner are equally insightful contributions. See Eric Foner, *The Story of American Freedom*, NY, WW Norton and Co., 1998

¹⁷ Corey Robin, “Why do Opposites Attract? Fear and Freedom in the Modern Political Imagination”, in Nancy Lusignan Schultz, *Fear Itself, Enemies Real and Imagined in American Culture*, West Lafayette, IN, Purdue University Press, 1999, p. 20. Robin's piece is a critical synthesis of the contributions of prominent political thinkers on the question, from Locke, Burke and Tocqueville to Dewey and Schlesinger.

the scheming agents of a medieval power, Rome, intent on subjugating the new world.¹⁸

The First World War triggered a similar crisis. Contentions over the conflict induced painful feelings of disintegration. Many were maligned as “hyphenated Americans”, an insulting epithet essentially denoting treason, and applied mainly to citizens coming from Germany and the Central Powers. The “hyphenated American” was sought to be conniving with the enemy against the U.S. Victory assuaged those fears, but alarm soon sprang back from the Communist threat, and its presumed un-American infiltrators, leading to the well-known excesses of the McCarthy era.

Today, the peril is widely seen as originating with the Muslims, as well as with the swelling Latino population portrayed in the news as an assault on the U.S. middle class. Nor is this fear only the fixation of CNN's Lou Dobbs. After voicing concerns about what he dubbed the “clash of civilizations”, Harvard Professor Samuel Huntington authored a new work sounding the alarm around the ever-increasing influx from the South, which, according to him, threatens U.S. identity.¹⁹

The “Other” in the melting-pot: Component and Threat

The recurring feeling of hostility against the United States as well as the questioning of allegiance translates a conundrum inscribed at the very heart of U.S. nationalism. While the alien other is a necessary ingredient of the diversity that founds the U.S. experience, he is at the same time an intruder and potential threat. Traditionally touted as a land of asylum, the nation has encountered trouble defining the borders of identity, which is one of a process constantly in the making: immigrant groups enter the land of “asylum”, a cornerstone of national myths, and they are reprocessed as Americans.

¹⁸ A thorough reading on the subject is that of David H. Bennett, *The Party of Fear. The American Far Right From Nativism to the Militia Movement*, New York, Vintage Books, 1995, pp. 93 ff.

¹⁹ Samuel P. Huntington, *Who Are We? The Challenges to America's National Identity*, New York, Simon and Schuster, 2004.

We owe Ali Behdad a most perceptive study on the function and role of immigration in the U.S. narrative. He argues convincingly that the narrative of exclusion reinforces the myth of the melting-pot: "Whether a corrupter of our principled prosperity or the enabler of our democratic capitalism, the immigrant is at once a critical supplement and a threatening other through whom American identity is imagined and reproduced."²⁰ The foreigner is both an essential ingredient of the melting-pot narrative, since it proves the integrating capability of society, and an invalidating factor, one that threatens and puts cohesion into question. Before becoming American, the foreigner is per force an alien. Behdad adds that these mutually incompatible elements do not cancel each other out but rather reinforce each other: "(...) competing perceptions of national identity (...) instead of undoing or undermining one another coexist and reinforce one another..."²¹

Confronting the World. Basic Impulses of US Foreign Policy

Since the advent of globalization in the years following World War I, the relationship of the U.S. with the world has been charged with this ambivalence. We underscored above the concern triggered periodically by large immigrant groups because such movements put into question the very meaning of U.S. identity. Similar reactions have extended to the conduct of foreign affairs. More often than not, quarrels, and even misunderstandings with other nations, have been construed as expressions of hostility. And since the basic U.S. creed is universalistic and missionary in nature, the concrete impulse has been to charge ahead. As John Lewis Gaddis observes, "For the United States, *safety comes from enlarging, rather than contracting,*

²⁰ Ali Behdad, *A Forgetful Nation. On Immigration and Cultural Identity in the United States*, Durham, NC, Duke University Press, 2005, p. 17. Behdad adds that this process is accomplished "through historical amnesia". This is an important point to understand the repetitive pattern in U.S. diplomacy.

²¹ *Ibid.* See also, p. 32: "(...) American society has been able to manufacture a powerful form of cultural equivocation, which can obscure differences by rhetorical practices and allow the citizenry to have it both ways. The opposing poles of identification, in other words, not only coexist as in an antinomy but also reproduce and reinforce one another, ensuring a continuing fluctuation between the myth of immigrant America and its nativist opposite (...) These countervailing dispositions – one reviling the foreigner and the other embracing the immigrant -- lay bare an irreconcilable difference at the core of civic identity in America."

its sphere of responsibilities."²² This reflex, moreover, is not driven by an urge to build empires but by an attempt to secure borders. 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 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."²³

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 two faces of the same medal, argues a recent valuable contribution on U.S. diplomacy, *The Dominion of War*. "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..."²⁴

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

²² John Lewis Gaddis, *Surprise, Security and the American Experience*, Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 2004, p. 13 [emphasis his]

²³ Benjamin Barber, *Fear's Empire...*, *op.cit.*, p. 36.

²⁴ 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).

actual dangers but also to *perceived* threats (...) above all, in the overwhelming majority of cases American leaders *believed* the threats to be real.”²⁵

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.”²⁶

Today, other factors have exacerbated this trend: we turn now to a brief discussion of the rise of the South in the political configuration of the country, the religious impetus in policy making, and, finally, the deep-seated malaise born from the legacy of the cold war.

(Dis)Continuities

As outlined above, we can clearly relate U.S. diplomacy today to established patterns. We can also trace current behavior to a conundrum inscribed at the heart of U.S. nationalism, and to its traditional unease with globalization. However, the new political configuration has transformed the way Washington views the world. Essential factors are the consolidation of a conservative vein of populism, its coalescing with the Christian religious coalition, and its emergence today as a central player in politics.

These trends are the result of developments, which have their origins in the 1960s. First organized and given a voice by George Wallace “who tapped in the fears and resentments of white America in a way

²⁵ 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.

²⁶ 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.

that has defined the political landscape (...) ever since",²⁷ they were later consolidated in the Reagan Era. They mark the successful emergence of a Southern perspective in diplomacy. This is not merely a unique conjunction of circumstances. While the G. W. Bush administration's behavior has presented an extreme scenario, it is not at all certain that a different set of characters can transform a collective vision that is nourished by a set of long and medium term trends. Moreover, we will argue that the end of the cold war, as perceived in this country, has very detrimental implications for the conduct of diplomacy, especially in the context of a globalized world.

The Seal of Southern Memory.

This beautiful passage by David Goldfield introduces us to the strange and peculiar Southern vision of the world: "There is a war going on there. It is an ancient conflict, as war and time go in this country. The Civil War is like a ghost that has not yet made its peace and roams the land seeking solace, retribution, or vindication. It continues to exist, an event without temporal boundaries, an interminable struggle that has generated perhaps as many casualties since its alleged end in 1865 as during the four preceding years when armies clashed on the battlefield."²⁸ Elsewhere, he writes: "Southerners tend to live in multiple time zones. Past, present and future are conflated, and the past is the most important of all. We are comfortable with this; it has become second nature"²⁹

Southern thought has become a fertile field for study, since the publication of John Cash's groundbreaking *The Mind of the South* in 1941, and many of the most valuable recent contributions in U.S. history are on the subject. While some authors argue that the South has spread its characteristic vision of the world through population mobility, many concur that there remains a distinct regional disposition, fed by rituals and commemorations, which elude past defeats: the struggle to maintain the states' rights in choosing a way

²⁷ Peter Applebome, *Dixie Rising. How the South is Shaping American Values, Politics and Culture*, San Diego Harcourt, Brace and Co, 1996, p. 91.

²⁸ David Goldberg, *Still Fighting the Civil War. The American South and Southern History*, Baton Rouge, Louisiana State University Press, p. 1.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 15. See also p. 298: "[...] the southerner is either fixated upon the past and therefore immobilized by it, or is a total amnesiac and therefore destructive."

of life (the Southern interpretation of the Civil war), and the reviled era of Civil Rights.³⁰

The Southern perspective of the world is imbued with religion. David Blight, author of a superb work on the Civil war in American memory, underscores this aspect: “[...] for many Southerners, (THE LOST CAUSE)... became a natural extension of evangelicalism”.³¹ In David E Harrell's words, The section's unique regional history – its self-conscious encounter with slavery, and race relations, its defeat, its crushing poverty after the war, its bumpkin image – turned the South toward God. From this crucible of hardship and pain emerged the Southern evangelical tradition.³² The growth and resilience of the Southern Baptist Convention (SBC), founded in Augusta, Georgia, in May 1845, which counts 16 million members testifies to this area's religious vigor. While there are several other denominations, there is a distinctive Southern approach, characterized by an emphasis on the individual's direct communication with God, less reliance on social reform and a tendency to interpret the Bible literally.³³

For Southerners, the appeal of millennialism – entailing expectations of imminent disruption prior to, or following, a period of 1000 years – can be understood as providing a metaphor for a return to a lost idealized time. It also provides the sense of an exclusive community after the tearing of ties resulting from the 1960s civil rights period.³⁴ Their embracing of the Reagan-Bush agenda was motivated by a deep desire to restore order, or in Ellen M. Rosenberg's terms, by the

³⁰ In *Dixie Rising. How the South is Shaping American Values, Politics and Culture*, San Diego Harcourt, Brace and Co, 1996, Peter Applebome argues that the South has come to influence significantly American culture. A discussion of this position can be found in Kevin Phillips, *American Theocracy. The Peril and Politics of Radical Religion, Oil, and Borrowed Money in the 21st Century*, New York, Viking Penguin, 2006, p. pp. 139-141.

³¹ David Blight, *Race and Reunion. The Civil War in American Memory*, Cambridge, The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2001, p. 258. Emphasis his.

³² David Edwin Harrell, “Introduction”, in David Edwin Harrell, Jr., ed., *Varieties of Southern Evangelicalism*, Macon (GA), 1981, p. 3.

³³ *Ibid.*, p. 2. See also Martin E. Marty, “The Revival of Evangelicalism and Souther Religion”, in *ibid.*, p. 15.

³⁴ This is the perceptive interpretation of Helen Lee Turner, “Myths: Stories of This World and the World to Come”, in Nancy Tatom Ammerman, *Southern Baptists Observed. Multiple Perspectives on a Changing Denomination*, Knoxville, The University of Tennessee Press, 1993, pp. 98-123.

“construction of a vanished imaginary South, an authoritarian world in which women, children and blacks held their place.”³⁵ Thus, the adoption of an agenda that ensures the preservation of traditional mores continues a long-established Southern pattern of ensuring stability over new social trends.

Religion is paramount in the world interpretation offered by the current administration. It lends an apocalyptic tone to the interpretation of events that are construed as a direct transcription of the Bible. George W. Bush's administration and the U.S. Congress have been dominated by a strong “born again” perspective, which translates the growth of evangelical thought in the U.S. today. While this trend may be exacerbated in the specific configuration of G.W. Bush's administration, it reflects the national disposition. Religion has been paramount in fostering and anchoring fear in the collective psyche. As incarnated by the proponents of the Christian Right, faith is an alternative formulation of civic religion. Indeed, argues one scholar of the movement, the New Religious Right “[...] is nationalistic in intention before it is religious or even Christian.”³⁶

Some additional remarks on the place of religion help to highlight the all-pervasiveness of this phenomenon. First of all, religious practice in this country has always been disestablished. Beginning with the First Great Awakening in the 1740's, the various congregations moved away from established churches, adopted an unmediated and spontaneous relationship to God, and accordingly, began to show a certain tendency to view the workings of the supernatural in everyday life.³⁷ This was prompted partly by the scorn towards European strict

³⁵ Ellen M. Rosenberg, “The Southern Baptist Response to the Newest South”, in *Ibid.*, p. 150

³⁶ Walter H. Capps, *The New Religious Right: Piety, Patriotism and Politics*, Columbia, University of South Carolina Press, 1990, p. 208. On religion as an alternative model of the civic system of beliefs, see p. 195.

³⁷ Mark A. Noll, *The Scandal of the Evangelical Mind*, Grand Rapids (MI), William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1994, p. 61, situates this transformation as dating from the awakening of the 1740s. This moment, he writes, “[...] promoted a new style of leadership – direct, personal, popular, and dependent much more on a speaker's ability to draw a crowd than upon that speaker's place in an established hierarchy.” In addition, “the revival undercut the traditional authority of the churches (...) the combined effects of these two matters (...) was to plant the seeds of individualism and immediatism”. Noll is an Evangelical Christian, yet a fierce critic of the anti-intellectualism, immediatism and interpretation of circumstances as a strict rendition of the Bible.

hierarchies. In contrast, laymen regularly scouted the frontier to preach and convert. The numerous denominations that sprung up between Independence and the Civil War -- Adventists, Mormons, Cumberland Presbyterians, and others – were the result of this belief in the unmediated relationship with God, which would subsequently account for a continuous splintering of denominations.³⁸ It also gave religion a populist and anti-intellectual character. As argued by James Morone, “In other nations, a handle of stable faiths claim a fixed social place; in the United States, religions restlessly shift, split, and spread in a kind of ecclesiastical uproar. The nation develops not from religious to secular but from revival to revival.”³⁹

The evolution of religion in the new world developed closely in tune with socio-political currents. It was inspired by liberalism and freedom.⁴⁰ It also mirrored the formation of national identity: just as the immigrant shed his past to become American, the faithful were to be “born again” in their relationship to God.⁴¹ The religious component operated therefore to reinforce the general acculturation process.

Revivalism in U.S. religious history has been linked to socio-political upheavals. The last third of the 19th century was critical in the response it fostered to drastic changes in the social setting.

The period after the Civil War was a particularly trying time for Protestantism: urbanization, secularization and the potential divisive effects of Darwin's teachings and of other versions of the doctrine of evolutionism transformed the social and cultural environment. The change in the population's composition was an equally daunting challenge: while the number of Protestants tripled between 1860 and 1900 (from five to sixteen million), that of Catholics quadrupled (from

³⁸ See Kevin Phillips: “The Sect-Driven Dynamic of American Religion”, in *American Theocracy. The Peril and Politics of Radical Religion, Oil and Borrowed Money in the 21st Century*, New York, Viking, 2006, pp. 104 ff.

³⁹ James Morone, *Hellfire Nation, The Politics of Sin in American History*, New Haven, Yale University Press, 2003, p. 3.

⁴⁰ Marc Noll, *The Scandal...*, *op. cit.*, p. 75.

⁴¹ On this and on the Lockean foundations of religion, see Alan Wolfe: “Religious Diversity, The American Experiment That Works”, in Michael Kazin and Joseph A. McCartin, Eds, *Americanism...*, *op. cit.*, pp. 161, 157 ff.

three to twelve million).⁴² The last decades of the 19th century were a time of upheaval and prepared the ground for another revival, which remains closely associated with The Great Commoner, William Jennings Bryan, President Wilson's first secretary of state. To counter Darwin's threat, religious leaders consolidated the doctrine of inerrancy, the belief in the literal truth of the Bible. Imported from England and Ireland and associated with the Anglo-Irish Nelson Darby (1800-1882), the doctrine of dispensationalism divided world history in seven stages each of them ending in upheaval and ruin, prompting divine intervention. Pentecostalism also emerged during the progressive era. By asserting that individuals could experience physically the Holy Spirit, and communicate verbally with him, it confirmed the premise of an unmediated relationship with the Almighty.

Some have argued that secularization, as well as intellectual challenges, represented, in no small measure by the birth of the modern university, emptied evangelicalism of rationalism, and led it to shed all the "common-sense" Baconian principles that had previously influenced it.⁴³ The "anti-modernist federation became known as the 'fundamentalists'".⁴⁴ Fundamentalism was to have a determining impact on evangelical thought during the second quarter of the twentieth century. Anti-modernist, and doctrinally orthodox, it managed to influence evangelicalism, "[...] an essentially experiential, populist, sectarian, millenarian, anticreedal, doctrinal innovative, and often socially radical religious impulse."⁴⁵

⁴² George M. Marsden, *Understanding Fundamentalism...*, *op.cit.*, p. 14.

⁴³ Marc Noll, *The Scandal...*, *op. cit.*, pp. 113 ff. Two important historians of fundamentalism, Ernest Sandeen and John Marsden concur with this unfavorable view. For a succinct discussion of these interpretations, see Joel A Carpenter, *Revive Us Again. The Reawakening of American Fundamentalism*, New York, Oxford, 1997, pp.13-16, 236-237.

⁴⁴ The term was coined in 1920 by Curtis Lee Laws, editor of the Baptist paper the *Watchman-Examiner*. It was based on *The Fundamentals*, a series of twelve booklets published between 1910 and 1915 by a revivalist network that had formed around the era's greatest evangelist, Dwight Moody: Joel A Carpenter, *Revive Us Again...*, *op. cit.*, pp. 6-7.

⁴⁵ Donald Dayton, quoted in *ibid.*, p. 237. Dayton quarrels with Marsden *Fundamentalism and American Culture* for its portraying of fundamentalism as equivalent to evangelicalism.

Religion continues today for most Americans to have a significant role in politics.⁴⁶ The Christian Right has merged forces with the Republican Party and it has supported the messianist international agenda of President George W. Bush. Like in earlier times, the New Religious Right emerged as a response to the forces of secularization and combated abortion issues, same sex marriage, evolutionism vs. Intelligent Design and/or Creationism. It also showed an attempt to control the increasing variety of religious practices in the United States. “[...] The movement stands as a bold and unequivocal defense of *homogeneity*. Knowing that heterogeneity encourages relativism in religious belief and ethical standards, the movement argues the case for absolutes again.”⁴⁷

Dispensationalism, a doctrine adopted by many adepts of American evangelicalism, especially among nondenominational churches, divides world history in seven stages each of them ending in upheaval and ruin, prompting divine intervention. According to this belief, we live in the sixth stage, also heading towards catastrophe.⁴⁸

⁴⁶A July 2006 poll by the Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life did find that Americans were divided over the extent religious considerations should play in politics: 51% of those polled answered positively against 46%. Nevertheless, a little more than half (52%) considered that Bush mentions his faith the right amount, while 14% considered he did so too little. 24% of respondents opined that he spoke of his faith too much, a percentage much higher than in 2003 (14%) <http://pewforum.org/religion-politics/>. Poll results after the 2006 midterm elections indicated that those Christians who had defected the Republican Party had done so because of a perceived drift from spirituality into materialism. See David Kuo, “Putting Faith Before Politics”, *The New York Times*, November 16, 2006. <http://www.nytimes.com/2006/11/16/opinion/16kuo.html?pagewanted=1&ei=5087%0A&em&en=9561cf97340f896b&ex=1163912400>. While Kuo quotes estimates according to which nearly 30% of evangelicals – the “true Republican base” – voted Democratic, others assert that white and born again Christians in their great majority voted Republican, showing a pattern reminiscent of the 2004 Presidential elections: see Laurie Goodstein, “Religious Voting Data Show Some Shift, Observers Say”, *The New York Times*, November 9, 2006, <http://www.nytimes.com/2006/11/09/us/politics/09relig.html?ref=politics>. It was estimated, writes Goodstein, that 70% of white evangelicals and born again Christians voted Republican (72% in 2004), and that these made up 24% of those who voted compared to 23% in 2004. On the other hand, the Democrats managed some gains among white mainline Protestants and Roman Catholics.

⁴⁷ Walter H. Capps, *The New Religious Right...*, *op. cit.*, p. 19.

⁴⁸ George M. Marsden, *Understanding Fundamentalism and Evangelicalism*, Grand Rapids (MI), William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1991, pp. 40-41. For a description of the various types of Christian millennialism, see, *Conspiracy Theories. Secrecy and Power in American Culture*, Minneapolis (MN), University of Minnesota Press, 1999, pp. 153 ff.

This belief receives all the more attention today that the main focus of international politics is today the Middle East. According to Kevin Phillips: "While American religious tendencies toward parochialism and moral or political crusades mattered little in 1890, 1914, or even during the Cold War, they take on much greater importance now as Christian, Jewish and Muslim holy lands occupy absolute center stage in world politics and as sites of military confrontation."⁴⁹

Adding to this, globalization has greatly increased the diversity of religious denominations. In a proselytizing effort, modern technologies are routinely used to diffuse the Protestant religious creed. Today, televangelists, religious websites and evangelical blogs abound. Many also include a deciphering of foreign developments. Posted by Todd Strandberg, a supply sergeant at Offutt Air Force Base in Nebraska, who believes the news media represents the work of the devil, the rapture index, or "prophetic speedometer of end-time activity", which he compares to a "Dow Jones Industrial Average of end time activity" and claims to evaluate critical factors in hastening the end of the world, is considered serious in 2006.⁵⁰

A Pyrrhic Victory

How does the Southern religious perspective fit into today's narrative about the nation? To weigh its full meaning, it is necessary to replace it within a particular, and skewed, understanding of the Cold War and of its ending.

A fundamental misunderstanding of the dynamics of the Cold War today compounds the feelings of awe, which we describe above. The end of the confrontation was construed as an unmitigated victory for Washington, with scant attention to the Soviet Union's implosion. Triumph, however, would prove deceptive.

It is worth noting that this collective misunderstanding preceded the dissolution of the Soviet Union, and was the product of the *Great Communicator's* legacy. Coming after Jimmy Carter's candid

⁴⁹ Kevin Phillips, *American Theocracy...*, *op. cit.*, p. 103.

⁵⁰ <http://www.raptureready.com/rap2.html>. For information on Strandberg, see the interview in the *Mother Jones* issue of September/October 1998, <http://www.motherjones.com/news/qa/1998/09/tough.html>.

assessment of the malaise resulting from the Vietnam fiasco, it was Ronald Reagan who in the 1980s successfully sought to erase all feelings of guilt and inferiority accumulated after the disgraceful defeat. Witness his achievement in realigning political forces into a winning coalition against the formidable counterculture of protest spawned by the war. Reagan energized his followers with resplendent allegories. He spoke again of the shining “city on the Hill” and brought back the notion of “good” battling “evil”. It was “morning in America”, a new chapter in the nation’s life. The founding myths, again consecrated, managed largely to eclipse the Iran-Contra Scandal. We owe sociologist Jean Baudrillard a perceptive comment on Reagan’s contribution to the U.S. symbolical legacy: “In Reagan, a system of values that was formerly effective turn(ed) into something ideal and imaginary. The image of America bec(ame) imaginary for the Americans themselves at a point when it (was) without doubt profoundly compromised”.⁵¹

The belief that decisive power sufficed to wipe away foes on the international arena was one nefarious consequence of what was a facile, if soothing reading of the world.⁵² In effect, Reagan supporters defected from the G.H.W. Bush camp after the first Gulf War because he had demurred from removing Saddam Hussein. It was this movement that brought G.W. Bush into power in the year 2000 with an agenda they had continued to press for during Clinton’s two terms as President. Intervention into Iraq had been long on the agenda of this political coalition, well before the September 2001 attacks on the World Trade Center.

Peace as Disorder.

The optimism and confidence that colored collective perspectives as the Soviet Empire dissolved were not conducive to tackle the challenges that lay ahead.

⁵¹ Jean Baudrillard, *America*, London, Verso, 1988, p. 114. We discuss Reagan’s symbolical legacy in “Soothing Echoes from the Land of the Free: Reagan’s Vision of the World Between Myth and Reality”, 1994, www.symbology.org.

⁵² There is no room here to discuss how military power came to embody the myths that space embodied at the origins of the foundation.

Apocalyptic scenarios are not just the product of extremist religious perceptions. They also reflect the considerable malaise of U.S. democracy since the end of the Cold War.

The disappearance of the Soviet Union took away a mental landscape that had defined U.S. identity for a half a century. Compounding this loss of bearings was the novel texture of the international arena, a fluid, disorderly planet introducing players, threatening not through military might, but through the agile and clandestine manipulation of rudimentary explosives. Globalization was the heir of the two-block confrontation that with hindsight appeared as the guarantor of stability, for the tight networks of allies and cronies cultivated on each side had prevented, if not the brink of collision in Cuba, at least a major disaster. The monster now presented an entirely different challenge: it was disorderly, and uncontainable.

A deep malaise was to beset a nation whose identity had been built around space. The disorder of the planet indeed precipitated a profound turmoil in the U.S. identity.

With the Soviet Union gone, questions of social justice and sharing receded. And melancholy for a system gone awry was to coexist awkwardly with the celebratory mood of relief from the threat of a powerful foe. Common misgivings went beyond Plato's old derision of democracy as a system that purports to cancel out natural and ineradicable inequalities. For instead of erasing social disparities, democracy, with its sets of rules designed to defend each group within the community of equals, produced widespread social fragmentation. Alain Brossat comments that these are not merely distinct but directly antagonistic propensities in modern democracies.⁵³ They feed each other mutually, causing an ever-shrinking space for public participation.

⁵³ Alain Brossat, *La démocratie immunitaire*, Paris, La dispute, 2003, p. 15. Dominique Schnapper describes the evolution of this propensity of democracies to deny limitations: Dominique Schnapper, "La démocratie ou le refus des limites", in Alain Badiou, François Jullien, Hubert Reeves, et al., *De la Limite*, Marseille, Editions Parenthèses, 2006, pp. 129-145.

By the 1990s, the place of fear in the U.S. psyche had shifted significantly, producing, as Corey Robin argues, 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 now involved “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)...”⁵⁴

The outside enemy had vanished only to reemerge in the domestic arena to sap the foundations of U.S. democratic liberalism.⁵⁵ As political philosopher Jacques Rancière observes, “once political contentions (were) erased, the racism to emerge was the loathing of the other. The political culture of conflict may have had disheartening consequences. But it also provided a means to regulate what lies beyond politics: the identification of the other with the object of hatred. Feelings of identity are woven in fear [...] The political [...] construction of the other was also a means to civilize this fear”.⁵⁶

Such was the major pitfall introduced by the waning of the socialist experiment. “[...] The disappearance of Marxism deprives us of an essential asset: a critical outlook on the world. If there is nothing beyond democracy, [...], we desperately lack a contrast, a distance to

⁵⁴ 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 in the 1960s “arose from and reinforced society’s vertical cleavages”. Fear was a “tool of the powerful against the powerless [...] But contemporary theorists of identity conceive of society as horizontal, which is why anxiety is their preferred emotion. We are divided into groups not at the bottom and the top, they argue, but at the centers and the margins.”

⁵⁵ This phenomenon is not limited to the United States. Jacques Rancière, for instance, explains that the widespread presence of Muslim immigrants in France is not a new phenomenon. In the context of the cold war, this group was perceived merely as “proletarian”, whereas now, absent the Soviet bloc, it has become a threatening alien within the French nation: “From an objective point of view, we have hardly more immigrants than thirty years ago. They had then another designation, a political one. They were ‘proletarians’. Since then, they have lost that name, which was politically constructed, and have retained their ‘objective’ character, pertaining to their identity”: Jacques Rancière, *Aux bords du politique*, Paris, Gallimard, 1998, p. 125.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*

see and amend ourselves. The loss devastates us, which is why substitute ideologies, religions and extremisms [...] rush in where Marxism loses ground.”⁵⁷

This development is crucial to understand why a large majority of the country, and its Representatives and Senators in Congress, stood behind the G. W. Bush administration's decision to invade Iraq. It also explains why the Democratic Party was hard-pressed to propose any other options. Instead, many liberal pundits veered into defending a war that put a well-defined foe, with clear-cut goals, on the horizon.⁵⁸

The Democratic Predicament Displaces Conspiracy Theories from the Margins to the Mainstream.

The feeling of being rudderless in a globalized untidy world is compounded by a perceived loss of individual autonomy and agency. Conspiracy theories, once marginal, have as a result moved to the center of common interpretations. Peter Knight notes “[...] the pervading sense of uncontrollable forces taking over our lives, our minds, and even our bodies. The fear of being at the mercy of a complex conspiracy with vague but sinister intentions has become deeply ingrained in the popular imagination. In many ways conspiracy thinking has become not so much the sign of a crackpot delusion as part of an everyday struggle to make sense of a rapidly changing world.”⁵⁹ “The recent surge in conspiracy narratives”, concurs Timothy Melley, “Cannot be explained as a response to some particular political issue, social organization, or historical event [...] It stems largely from a sense of *diminished human agency*, a feeling that

⁵⁷ Pascal Bruckner, *La mélancolie démocratique. Comment vivre sans ennemis?*, Paris, Seuil, 1992, pp. 122-123.

⁵⁸ See Tony Judt's criticism of the stance taken by liberals in the U.S., “Bush's Useful Idiots”, *The London Review of Books*, 21 september 2006. This does not exonerate the administration from propagating unfounded reports on the existence of WMDs in Iraq or on Saddam Hussein's connections with Al-Qaeda.

⁵⁹ Peter Knight, “A Nation of Conspiracy Theorists”, in Peter Knight, Ed., *Conspiracy Nation. The Politics of Paranoia in Postwar America*, New York, New York University Press, 2002, p. 7.

individuals cannot effect meaningful social action, and, in extreme cases, may not be able to control their own behavior.”⁶⁰

Conspiracy theories have a long history in the United States.⁶¹ Now, however, they are particularly acute and widespread. One of the reasons for this is globalization: “[...] the conspiratorial imagination now... betrays an edgy awareness that it is increasingly impossible to maintain a clear sense of what is truly American in the postnationalist new world order of the global economy.”⁶² Moreover, the sense of a clandestine plot is compounded today because of a particular juncture of trends. On the one hand, they coincide with the unraveling of the melting-pot ideal. Since they ignited in the 1990s, the culture wars have divided those who wished for a more faithful rendition of the motley groups making up the U.S., and those who advocated the unrevised traditional narrative. But this traumatic reevaluation of collective identity is belied by the mythical legacy of an exceptional nation inherited from Ronald Reagan, a legacy that well surpasses the hold of any genuine memory, and precludes that diplomacy be based on a candid and cautious analysis of the past.

Since the 9/11 attacks, the percentage of people in the U.S. who believe that these events were in effect carried out by the U.S. government has increased significantly. An August 2006 poll conducted by the Scripps Survey Research Center at Ohio University reported that 36% of respondents believed Washington to have planned the attacks in an attempt to drum up support for the war in

⁶⁰ Timothy Melley, 'Agency Panic and the Culture of Conspiracy', *Ibid.*, p. 62.

⁶¹ Some interesting works explore this factor as it operates in US culture: no listing can be complete without mentioning the late Richard Hofstadter's pioneering *The Paranoid Style in American Politics*, Chicago, Chicago University Press, 1979; Nancy Lusignan Schultz, Ed., *Fear Itself...*, *op. cit.*, contains some very valuable contributions in this respect, as does Robert Alan Goldberg, *Enemies Within. The Culture of Conspiracy in Modern America*, New Haven Yale University Press, 2001, pp. 1-21. For a succinct analysis of the two contending "symbolist" and "realist" schools, see Mark Fenster, *Conspiracy Theories...*, *op. cit.*, pp. 52 ff. Fenster also discusses Richard Hofstadter's groundbreaking work on the subject: *ibid.*, pp. 3 ff. See Corey Robin, *Fear. The History of a Political Idea*, New York, Oxford, 2004. In the area of foreign policy, and excluding the abundant body of conspiracy theories that fuel rather than analyze this reaction, see the early work of James Chace and Caleb Carr, *America Invulnerable, the Quest for Absolute Security from 1812 to Star Wars*, New York, Summit Books, 1988; Benjamin Barber, *Fear's Empire...*, *op. cit.*

⁶² Peter Knight, "A Nation of Conspiracy Theorists", *op. cit.*, p. 5.

Iraq.⁶³ These findings confirmed the conclusions of previous surveys, among which Zogby's May 2006 poll, indicating that 42% of Americans – a very large number -- believed in a major cover-up concocted in Washington.⁶⁴

So it is that the shadow of Mars continues to hang over all current debates on U.S. foreign policy. The U.S. government, and the public denounce different protagonists: Iraq, Iran, the U.S. government, and almost in the background, the “terrorists”. But the predicament is the same.

Laura Garcés, November 2006

⁶³ http://www.newspolls.org/story.php?story_id=55.

⁶⁴ To see a summary of findings, go to http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/9/11_conspiracy_theories, which in addition refers to the various polls performed.