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The Culture of Force

Commentators are divided on whether the Bush II administration's force-based foreign policy is a continuation or a break with post-World War II American practice. They are also divided on the extent of popular support for the wars on Afghanistan and Iraq and for the constant use of the threat of intervention elsewhere, most prominently in Iran. Can we make any headway on this second issue—popular support—if we move beyond polling data into the kind of cultural analyses largely invisible in the mainstream media but highly developed by cultural academics? Can we use culture to move from the said to the unsaid—from spoken motives like “cultural values” to tangled motives that work in silence? In the presidential election of 2004, was the pro-war vote more fundamentally a racial vote? Commentators largely ignored this possibility. Was an unspoken racial dimension to the vote in turn tied to a post-Cold War middle-class economic anxiety? Answers begin with the relation of Bush II's war cabinet to the American past.

A Continuing Cold War

The Bush II administration is now identified with its extremely aggressive doctrines of preeminence (the blocking of all potential rivals to American power) and of preventive war (attacking an enemy before the threat fully materializes). George W. Bush defined preemption as the replacement for the postwar bulwarks of deterrence and containment, which has understandably led many observers to focus on the “Vulcans” as breaking with the past and representing a resort to open domination that, in the post–World War II world, is fundamentally new.¹

In fact, this break is more a question of tone and terminology than of substance. The United States may have intervened in the name of deterrence rather than preemption, but intervene it has, more or less continuously, since World War II.² Nor is the doctrine of American preeminence particularly novel. It’s worth remembering Cold War architect George Kennan’s description of the American position in the world in a then-secret State Department policy planning study of February 24, 1948.

We have about 50 percent of the world’s wealth but only 6.3 percent of its population. This disparity is particularly great between ourselves and the peoples of Asia. In this situation, we cannot fail to be the object of envy and resentment. Our real task in the coming period is to devise a pattern of relationships which will permit us to maintain this position of disparity without positive detriment to our national security. To do so, we will have to dispense with all sentimentality and day-dreaming; and our attention will have to be concentrated everywhere on our immediate national objectives. We need not deceive ourselves that we can afford today the luxury of altruism and world-benefaction.³

No member of the Bush II administration has elevated American national self-interest more ruthlessly than Kennan did, or more completely in opposition to the rest of the world. Methods, mechanisms, and, to some extent, scope have certainly changed since 9/11.⁴ But foreign policy *goals*—control of strategic resources and geopolitical preeminence—have not. Bush II continues the Cold War U.S. policy goal of maintaining global economic disparity and U.S. economic preeminence. The goal, again, remains a preeminence guaranteed by maintaining disparity.⁵

A Composite Imperialism

The Bush II administration may continue the Cold War's implicit doctrine of preeminence, but it is reluctant to call this approach "imperialism." During his 2000 campaign, George W. Bush declared, "America has never been an empire. We may be the only great power in history that had the chance, and refused."⁶ In his infamous speech on May 1, 2003, when he declared "major combat operations in Iraq" to be over, Bush insisted that Operation Iraqi Freedom was a war on terror utterly devoid of imperial aims:

No act of the terrorists will change our purpose, or weaken our resolve, or alter their fate. Their cause is lost; free nations will press on to victory.

Other nations in history have fought in foreign lands and remained to occupy and exploit. Americans, following a battle, want nothing more than to return home. And that is your direction tonight.⁷

The columnist Max Boot commented on a similar moment, this time involving the secretary of defense.

When asked on April 28, 2003, on the Arabic satellite television network al-Jazeera whether the United States was "empire building," Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld reacted as if he had been asked whether he wears women's underwear. "We don't seek empires," he replied huffily. "We're not imperialistic. We never have been."⁸

The Bush II administration has said repeatedly: We're absolutely, positively not imperialistic and we never have been. For their sympathizer Boot, imperialism would be oddly a little like cross-dressing, perhaps because in his mind it is too much like explicit domination.

As this rejection of imperialism echoed in the political and media arenas, foreign policy journalists and academics were rehabilitating it. By early in George W. Bush's second term, his supporters had settled on a composite position that, like rebar concrete, was stronger than either of its separate ingredients.

The first ingredient was an idealism centered on the terms *liberty* or *freedom* and *democracy*. This idealism was canonized in one of the prime justifications for the invasion of Iraq—to liberate the Iraqi people from the murderous despot Saddam Hussein and to establish democracy. This position is associated with the administration's neoconservative intellectuals,

emblemized by Paul Wolfowitz at the Pentagon but embodied in a network of like-minded advocates at think tanks and publications led by the *Weekly Standard*. A confident expression of it appeared in a *Washington Post* column by Robert Kagan following Bush's second inaugural:

Bush's goals are . . . deeply American, for the United States is a revolutionary power. Bush has found his way back to the core, universalist principles that have usually shaped American foreign policy, regardless of the nature of the threat. "The great struggle of the epoch [is] between liberty and despotism," James Madison asserted in 1823, and Americans from the founders onward have viewed the world in terms of that struggle.⁹

America's revolutionary mission requires force only because the tyranny afoot in the world thrusts force upon us. Unchallengeable, untouchable, "unipolar" American military power, the "full spectrum dominance" of the "sole remaining superpower," is always, in this position, in the service of spreading liberty and democracy. Our idealism requires the use of military force because it is so intensely idealistic. While others shrink before the action required to make our vision real, we do not. The more idealistic we are, the more true to our idealism, the more we will be called upon to use force.¹⁰ All imperial powers have proclaimed their idealism—the British Victorians were especially good at this—and the American version has come to settle on the twinned concepts of liberty and democracy.

If the first element of the Bush II position is idealism, the second toughens that up with open imperialism. This has been the function, most loudly, of the British historian Niall Ferguson, who has been reborn in East Coast academic and media circles as an Old World tutor to inhibited New World idealists. In two simultaneous tomes, *Colossus* and *Empire*, and many opinion pieces in the mainstream media, Ferguson argues that the United States is an imperial power and that it's a good thing too.¹¹

For one thing, it is eminently desirable that free markets, the rule of law and democracy should be introduced in countries currently languishing under rogue regimes. For another, regime changes of the sort we have seen in Afghanistan and Iraq are an indispensable element of the war against terrorism. Terrorists are sustained by dictatorships and flourish in conditions of anarchy. The terrorist threat will never be contained if the U.S. does not eradicate breeding grounds. And a strategy of global containment is not really a major departure in policy.¹²

Ferguson takes the Bush II administration's stated idealism about the spreading of "free markets, the rule of law and democracy" throughout the world, and then argues that imperialism is simply the means to implement it. To be idealistic about world democracy is to be, necessarily, imperialist. Imperialism for Ferguson is a franker word for the idealist vision of democratic capitalism on a global scale.

Other advocates of open imperialism were more explicit about the use of force. Not long after 9/11, Kennedy School of Government professor Stephen Peter Rosen wrote that

a political unit that has overwhelming superiority in military power, and uses that power to influence the internal behavior of other states, is called an empire. Because the United States does not seek to control territory or govern the overseas citizens of the empire, we are an indirect empire, to be sure, but an empire nonetheless. If this is correct, our goal is not combating a rival, but maintaining our imperial position, and maintaining imperial order. Planning for imperial wars is different from planning for conventional international wars. . . . The maximum amount of force can and should be used as quickly as possible for psychological impact—to demonstrate that the empire cannot be challenged with impunity. . . . Imperial strategy focuses on preventing the emergence of powerful, hostile challengers to the empire: by war if necessary, but by imperial assimilation if possible.¹³

Rosen describes the imperial logic of unchallengeable supremacy without reference to standard ideals. We may want to claim that Rosen is the true face of Bush II imperialism and that Ferguson's capitalist democracy is the mask. But in fact Rosen's view has almost disappeared from circulation, while Ferguson's resonates with the official rhetoric of Bush II foreign policy. Rosen is correct about the logic of domination, a point to which I will return. But Ferguson is correct in articulating the political claims of that foreign policy, and it is the latter that accounts for its acceptability.

Even this brief sketch is enough to suggest the exceptional cultural power of the Bush II position on current affairs. It has fused two elements that in the Vietnam-era framework had belonged to opposite sides. In a longer view, the Bush II position could be said not to have replaced the humanitarianism of Woodrow Wilson with the big stick of Teddy Roosevelt but to have finally blended the two. It borrows idealism from doves and force from hawks. It yokes force to its version of idealism, and grounds idealism

in force. Thus it can take what a large part of the U.S. public perceives to be wars for oil, wars for power, wars for control, and recast them as wars against terror, wars against force, wars against oil or against power or against control when in the wrong hands. While Reagan was an aggressive ideological hawk, and Bush I was a prudent, Realpolitik hawk, and Clinton was a self-canceling opportunistic humanitarian with neoliberal economic goals, Bush II is an idealist hawk, a militaristic idealist. The Bush II crew have managed a synthesis of hawk and dove, might and right that is more successful than any attempted by its immediate predecessors.

The real distinction of Bush II foreign policy is not the development of a doctrine of preemption, as that was merely dusted off after a brief stay in the attic with other Cold War relics. This distinction lies in its *rhetorically* successful synthesis of the idealist and imperialist tendencies in American culture, certainly the first since the Eisenhower administration. Bush II is the first American administration to ascend successfully to the Victorian imperial throne, where an elaborate civilizing mission is paired with military and economic colonization.

I am not suggesting that this position is desirable or coherent or has solved any actual problems in international affairs. I am saying, however, that both elements of this compound need to be taken seriously if we are to understand its cultural sources and influence. We cannot simply declare that Ferguson equals Rosen and Wilson equals Roosevelt and that idealism should be unmasked as imperialism, for in the United States idealism and imperialism have a necessarily supplemental relation to one another (in the Derridean sense). Not only does the *domestic* power of Bush II foreign policy depend on its compound elements: they give it a strength far beyond what its critics have granted, focused as they understandably are on its double standards and unilateralism and disastrous effects.

The Embrace of Force

There is much more to be said about the origins and effects of Vulcan foreign policy thought, but I turn instead to the question of its cultural base. Bush's victory in 2004 came as an electric shock to many: what ideology or mass delusion had allowed a majority of voters to ignore the overwhelming evidence of Bush II foreign policy failure? The postelection period did not provide an explanation that would allow antiwar voters to understand

voters who seemed not only to be ignoring the war but also to have voted for it.

To put this question another way, why do a large number of voters appear to accept the conjunction of idealist goals and imperial means? How could Americans think that freedom and democracy can in fact be installed through invasion? Why do so many Americans agree that peacemaking can come through war?

There are many factors at work here. Most of the older voters with whom I've spoken focused on the decline of the educational system, which they feel has produced, as one put it, "political stupidity." The media is a major target of wrath and contempt: its news broadcasts have the look and sound of trailers for action films, and its sanitized representations of the war, and nationalist lack of basic objectivity in foreign affairs, offers no counterweight to the blatant propaganda efforts of Republican supporters.¹⁴

But the decline of school and television and the rise of right-wing propaganda machines would have less effect were it not working with a popular openness to the use of force. This factor was vividly displayed in the results of a poll taken simultaneously in a number of countries as the United States was building toward the Iraq invasion. The results are displayed in Table 1.¹⁵

Many countries parted company with the United States on the most basic question of Iraq's danger to the world, but Britain and Germany had equally high threat responses to the mention of Iraq. The next question was whether this threat should be treated by removing Saddam Hussein rather than merely disarming him. The proportion of the public favoring removal stayed very high in Britain and Germany and, we can assume, in America. The final question is equally important: once large majorities have decided that a threat exists and that the only solution is to remove the leader, is the necessary means of removal the use of force? Here the countries split: while 62 percent of Americans were willing to remove Hussein through force, only 26 percent of Germans agreed with that approach.¹⁶ These numbers suggest that Americans have a much *higher* acceptance of the use of force to address the *same* level of perceived threat.

Conversations with Bush voters confirm the importance of force. One of these was reported to me by a friend whom I'll call Naguib, a partner in a large and wealthy Los Angeles law firm. He was asking the firm's managing partner, whom I'll call Jerry, about his preference for George W. Bush:

Table 1. The Iraqi Divide

	U.S. %	Britain %	France %	Germany %	Russia %	Turkey %
<i>How much of a danger is Iraq?</i>						
Great/moderate	84	85	67	82	55	48
Small/none	7	10	30	14	28	40
Don't know	9	5	3	4	17	12
	100	100	100	100	100	100
<i>Saddam Hussein . . .</i>						
Must be removed	n/a	75	63	75	42	44
Can be disarmed		20	32	19	32	40
Don't know		5	5	6	26	16
	100	100	100	100	100	100
<i>Which explains American use of force?</i>						
The U.S. believes Saddam is a threat	67	45	21	39	15	n/a
The U.S. wants to control Iraqi oil	22	44	75	54	76	
Don't know	11	11	4	7	9	
	100	100	100	100	100	100
<i>Using force to remove Saddam</i>						
Favor	62	47	33	26	12	13*
Oppose	26	47	64	71	79	83*
Don't know	12	6	3	3	9	4*
	100	100	100	100	100	100

Source: Pew Research Center for People and the Press, "What the World Thinks in 2002: How Global Publics View Their Lives, Their Countries, the World, America," December 4, 2002, <http://people-press.org/reports/display.php3?ReportID/165>.

*Turkish respondents asked about allowing the U.S. and its allies to use bases in Turkey for military action.

"Say you were looking for a replacement for yourself as managing partner of this firm, Jerry. Would you pick John Kerry or George W. Bush?"

"Kerry, of course," Jerry replied. "He's much smarter than George Bush."

"What if you had to pick a new CEO for one of our clients. Would you pick John Kerry or George W. Bush?"

"Kerry. He's much better at processing information and making decisions with it on his own."

The examples proceeded through other positions, including finding a principal for Jerry's children's private school. Kerry, it turns out, would make a better managing partner, CEO, restaurant supervisor, caterer, baseball team owner, and school principal.

“So why, Jerry, when it comes to picking the CEO of the country, do you go for the one and only time with George Bush?”

“Two reasons. One, he’ll cut my taxes. Two, he’s put the world on notice that anything they do to us, we’ll do back to them ten times worse.”

Bush won the force vote by a landslide (i.e., 85 percent of those who thought the war in Iraq was “worth it” voted for him). His campaign built around him an impregnable image of a decisive man of action willing to use force whenever necessary. Many men—the media examples were almost always white men—admired this posture: Steve Pasternak, a retired utility worker in Scranton, Pennsylvania, said he’d vote for Bush because “he thinks like sportsmen do. He’s a hunter going after the people who need to be hunted.”¹⁷

The Bush campaign’s greatest single success was to create this nearly universal perception. When in late October 2004 I asked three hundred students in a lecture course how many thought Kerry would be willing to use force against an attacker, nearly everyone raised their hand (the class later voted about four to one for Kerry). When I asked them how many thought Kerry would be more likely to use force than Bush, not a single person out of three hundred raised their hand. Similarly, Jerry’s comment captured a widespread perception that Bush would resort to force first, and would resort to more force, and would be happy to resort to overwhelming and even unfair force to destroy any imaginable enemy while terrifying any potential attackers in the process. What people see in Bush the hunter is that he fights force with force and also fear with fear, and that he defeats terror by spreading terror. Naguib summarized Jerry’s position as “I vote for my guy because he’s crazier than their guy.” Jerry affirms an informal Powell Doctrine of using overwhelming force—or its threat—as a permanent stance in foreign affairs. This stance seeks to strike terror in the enemy’s heart and is itself a kind of terrorism. We can tentatively conclude, on the way to further research, that on an only partially unconscious level many of Bush’s supporters in the war on terror were voting for Bush as terrorist.

Analysts initially read the 2004 election results as a triumph of conservative appeals to “moral values,” but subsequent polling suggested that security was the greater concern.¹⁸ Threats can produce many possible responses, including attempts to understand the causes and sources of the threats. Polling data and interviews all suggest that for Bush II support-

ers, force appeared to be the major—perhaps the only—viable solution to rising security concerns. This response persists after the election: in November 2004, around two-thirds of Americans still expressed a willingness to “support curbing civil liberties because of terrorism, a majority that had to cross party lines.”¹⁹ In December 2004, the same majority (two-thirds) thought that the war in Iraq made the United States safer even when they also thought the costs of the war are “unacceptable,” again suggesting that for this large group of Americans, force remains the default solution to threats.²⁰

Race and Force

But who comprises this majority? Media commentary tends to focus on the benighted little people, those we used to call “Reagan Democrats,” who vote against their class interest in favor of right-wing moral values. Thomas Frank’s *What’s the Matter with Kansas* (2004) became the new locus classicus of an argument owned in the Bush I years by Thomas Edsall, E. J. Dionne, Mickey Kaus, Stanley Greenberg, and other New Democrats; the book attracted celebratory interest from frustrated liberals and leftists ranging from Jon Stewart to Slavoj Žižek. In these accounts, the Republican’s grassroots are these lower-middle-class masses, not well educated and, in this portrait of them, rather easily duped by the Father Coughlin tirades of Rush Limbaugh and his legion of clones. Some analyses deploy standard middle-class dismissals of the retromasculinity of blue-collar culture: it was a rare piece that did not find some youngish, muscular Republican to say something like “We can’t be girly men about the war on terror.”²¹ Others conduct more in-depth fieldwork in the heartland of darkness: Charles Simic’s tour of the New South’s wasteland of Wal-Mart-blasted towns and bloodthirsty Christian dogma was perhaps the most eloquent.²² The red state/blue state polarity also feeds these premonitions of a munchkin apocalypse.

Polling data does not support this view of a benighted Bush-loving working class. According to CNN’s exit poll, those with family incomes below \$15,000 a year (technically living in poverty) voted two to one for Kerry. Those with incomes between \$15,000 and \$30,000 voted for Kerry 57 percent to 42 percent. These are not overwhelming numbers, but they’re not bad for a mediocre candidate with a singularly weak critique of Bush II’s upper-class politics. Bush’s majority began to appear in the group earn-

ing between \$50,000 and \$100,000 per year, and it increased in higher brackets. Andrew Hacker writes, "The majority that the Bush-Rove campaign mustered came from the center of the middle class. By my calculation, their median family income was a quite modest \$60,725, yet still enough to live respectably in middle America."²³ Many analysts have performed ingenious gyrations to explain middle-class support for upper-class Bush II,²⁴ but the Gordian knot can be cut by shifting from class to race.

The most glaring Bush-Kerry divide was that between white voters and voters of color. The most famous case is, of course, African American voters, who voted for Kerry by a factor of almost nine to one. Asian Americans voted for Kerry 59 percent to 41 percent, Hispanics by 53 percent to 44 percent (down from Gore's 62 percent of Hispanic voters in 2000). By contrast, white women as well as white men voted in substantial majorities for Bush. Women overall wound up in Kerry's camp only because of solid Democrat voting by women of color, 75 percent of whom voted for Kerry. Race was a stronger determinant than gender among men as well: while white men voted nearly two to one for Bush (62 percent to 37 percent), men of color voted two to one for Kerry (67 percent to 30 percent).²⁵ It's worth recalling the history as well: white men have not offered a majority to a Democratic presidential candidate for over a quarter century (they went narrowly for Jimmy Carter in 1976).²⁶ We have already noted the much smaller disparities by income. Even this brief look at the numbers suggests that the Bush II majority is distinctly a white majority; for the 23 percent of voters who are not white, Bush II's appeal is greatly reduced.

These racial differences rest on many factors, but war policy is an important one. In July 2004, at a time when 36 percent of all respondents said that the war in Iraq was "worth the costs," only 8 percent of African American voters agreed.²⁷ In October 2004, Latino voters held the war in Iraq to be "a mistake" by a two-to-one margin. Latino voters also preferred Kerry's somewhat less aggressive approach to terrorism by 46 percent to 38 percent.²⁸ Although more careful data analysis would be required for a definitive conclusion, it would appear that war policy was a significant contributor to the vote's racial divide.

At this point we can venture as guess as to why, and the answer can be crudely summarized in a familiar question: who does and who does not enjoy playing cowboys and Indians? When Jerry supported the force solution in the conversation I cited above, he said, "Anything they do to us, we'll do back to them." This position can feel secure only if one is completely

sure one belongs to “us” rather than to “them.” Jerry apparently knows that he will never be the “them” that will be targeted by maximum force from his own government. Other American populations cannot be so sure. This is almost certainly the case for blacks and Latinos, who are disproportionately likely to be the subject of police action, criminal procedure, and prison and who are overrepresented in the military and in its lower ranks. It is also true of Asians: large proportions of immigrants experience differential treatment and various forms of everyday discrimination. In the middle class, African Americans still live the knowledge that twice the proportion of whites feel that antiblack discrimination is no longer a factor in black life.²⁹ Just as African Americans are far more likely than whites to see slavery as a central and still-reverberating feature of U.S. democracy, Latinos have better memories than whites of the American colonization of the U.S. Southwest. The racial divide on American war reached one crescendo with Muhammad Ali’s refusal to be drafted into the U.S. Army to fight in Vietnam, in part on the grounds that “No Vietcong ever called me nigger.” Though rarely spoken so directly today, racially differentiated memories continue to create major differences in the interpretation of war aims.

Majority support for the American use of force is, numerically and culturally, the support of a white majority.

War Democracy

A further question arises: why would even a white majority look to force for the correct resolution of conflict? Much of the answer lies in American diplomatic history itself, in which expansionism has gone hand in hand with innocence, in which the holy “city on a hill” conquered and laid claim to others’ lands only for mankind’s greater good. In this sense Robert Kagan is right to say that Bush II’s foreign policy lies in the American grain, extending back before Roosevelt and Wilson to the Philippines and, before that, to the wars on Native Americans that were central to westward expansion, back through the Monroe Doctrine and even beyond that to the Pequot Wars that began in 1637, only seven years after the founding of the Massachusetts Bay Colony by John Winthrop. The idealism of Bush II’s principals depends not so much on simple denial of bloody conquest as on a harnessing of the bloody conquest/idealism blend that forms the mainstream U.S. foreign policy tradition. Support for force depends on this continuous blending of American ideals with war.

This blending was clearly identified in the formative Vietnam years of the Bush II principals by revisionist historians. An early and crucial text was William Appleman Williams's *The Tragedy of American Diplomacy* (1959), a sustained analysis of underlying United States Realpolitik. Of the Founding Fathers, for example, Williams wrote that while "the classical ideas about [the idealistic impulses] of American foreign policy are not all wrong . . . the vigorous expansionism manifested in the Monroe Doctrine was only the continuation and maturation of an attitude held by the Revolutionary generation. . . . Americans thought of themselves as an empire at the very outset of their national existence—as part of the assertive self consciousness which culminated in the American revolution."³⁰

The 1960s produced many classic works that challenged the purity of American idealism while at the same time acknowledging idealism's genuine influence; Richard Drinnon's *Facing West: The Metaphysics of Indian-Hating and Empire Building* (1980) is an exemplary case of taking the metaphysics seriously. The same goes for Richard Slotkin's *Regeneration through Violence* (1973), in which regeneration and violence are twinned at every crucial juncture. The Bush II principals, by all accounts locked in agonistic relation with 1960s revisionism, learned both the supplemental relation between idealism and imperialism *and*, in opposition to the revisionists, the need to keep idealism always in the forefront. We see this reflexive linkage of violence to regeneration even in somewhat thoughtless moments like Donald Rumsfeld's response to a question about the looting and mayhem in occupied Baghdad: asked about the plundering of Iraq's National Archeological Museum, Rumsfeld replied, "Free people are free to make mistakes and commit crimes and do bad things."³¹

The most important *cultural* result of the American relation to violence is this mush of democracy and war. At every juncture, the spread of the American system involved armed conflict. War was accompanied by ideas about the otherness or inferiority of the opposition—Native, Russian, Mexican, French, and Spanish, just to name a few major groups on the North American continent itself. The silent trauma in all this is that the opposition did *not* grant the superiority of American freedom and democracy and consent to their own defeat by it. Each and every opponent put up a struggle; in the Native case, that struggle that lasted for centuries. This rejection—the rejection of the American's natural rights and natural excellence—guaranteed that American-style freedom and democracy would always arrive at gunpoint, with bloodshed that questioned the purity of the American cause.

The result is not only a legacy of secret shame that I can only point to here—a legacy propelling the furious denials and extravagant self-righteousness of American foreign policy proclamations, a legacy of which the Bush II administration is a particularly explicit heir. The result is not only the apparent dissociation from reality that many have found typical of the Bush II administration’s relation to the effects of their own actions. The result is also the nearly complete absence of the popular experience of peaceful democracy—of conflicts resolved through democratic deliberation. Democracy is always associated with war, and most of us have come to expect war democracy, accept war democracy, see war democracy as a familiar and expected condition, as the condition of American existence.

The Abdication of the Middle Class

The place of a white majority in a war democracy brings us to the role of the middle class in maintaining this condition. Its spokespersons focus on the role of the lower orders in sustaining militaristic culture, but this wrongly deflects attention from their own role.

One of my favorite students at the University of California at Santa Barbara is a Texas Republican named Ally. After the election she couldn’t help gloating to me via e-mail. “Poor Kerry,” she said, “as we say in Texas, all hat and no cattle.” I found this too irritating to answer and instead muttered to myself about how their two service records made her metaphor exactly backwards, and other gloomy and helpless thoughts.

Three months later I was showing students in my “Global California” class on a clip from the documentary *Berkeley in the 60s* (1990). The most noncommittal of the on-camera participants in the Free Speech Movement of 1964 recounted that what finally made him side with the students was the low quality of information coming from the administration. “I would listen to Mario Savio about what had happened in the meetings,” John Gage recalled, “and as far as I could tell he was telling the truth about what happened. I would compare that to the administration’s statements—muffled, guarded. I finally decided that I couldn’t trust what they said.”³²

This suddenly sounded very much like what Bush partisans said about Kerry—“no cattle” in the sense that he flip-flopped and changed his mind and always had to explain, that whenever he talked he was muffled and guarded. Even when he wasn’t—and Kerry was often quite clear in the debates—Bush could come back by reminding the audience that Kerry had,

for example, voted to authorize the war but now he was complaining about it, so where did he really stand?³³ Bush supporters repeatedly mentioned this problem with Kerry: “Bush has his flaws. But there’s no question that when he says he’s going to do something, he does it. That’s what I like about him.”³⁴

Kerry was muffled and guarded not because he lacked personal integrity but because of the divided commitments of his social position. What professionals, managers, and other white-collar middle-class folks (I will refer to them as the “professional-managerial class” [PMC]) don’t see is the extent to which the Right has succeeded in making this tone a class marker of the “liberal elite.” The PMC also doesn’t grasp the kernel of truth in the otherwise empty charge: the PMC *is* divided, and *sounds* divided, and *can’t* act with the kind of clarity Americans seek in a president. Ironically, it is Bush’s undivided service to “the haves and the have mores” that allows him to produce the plain speech of the regular folk.

The PMC has always been caught in the middle; it evolved as the “third class” between capitalist and proletariat. Its knowledge work is hired by capital—corporations, law firms, hospital chains and clinics, engineering firms, aerospace and network equipment companies, and so on. Its reform movements—which it sees as virtually coextensive with itself—try to bridge capital and labor, manager and managed. These efforts generally fail: the idea of the PMC was born from the failure of middle-class 1960s movements to form successful alliances with their blue-collar counterparts. But paired economic and social changes in the past twenty-five years have made the PMC even more fragmented and confused than before. Kerry is one example: someone with lots of cultural capital but little financial capital, a highly successful lawyer and politician and noted liberal, he came into enormous financial capital by marriage not long before his presidential bid. Some of his muffled and guarded performances concerned his wife’s willingness to make public disclosures about her wealth. His failure to forge a class politics of the directness found in his nearest Democratic rivals, John Edwards and Howard Dean, to say nothing of the Democratic Left, connoted similar compromises.

Guarded economic language conceals a major economic change. Since 1980 the PMC has become increasingly divided between, crudely speaking, fields that have capital markets and those that don’t. The PMC was always a composite (the noted sociologist Erik Olin Wright has a nine-class model that maps these internal divisions), but salary and status gaps between

teachers and social workers on the one hand and doctors and lawyers on the other have been widening steadily. The sociologist Steven Brint describes the former group as “social trusteeship” professions, and their decline in financial terms has paralleled the decline in the status of their public service functions. The corporate professions, on the other hand, have never done better.³⁵ “Rich man poor man” plots can be generated without differences of fate or character or behavior, but simply by one brother choosing to practice law and the other to teach.

The result is that the way of life of the top professions depends more visibly than ever on maintaining income and wealth disparities in relation to the rest of the world. What Kennan and few others admitted sixty years ago has become much more widely understood. This way of life also depends on maintaining disparities between the top professions and the rest of the citizenry, including other, less favored professionals. The gulf between the incomes of CEOs and line workers or, less dramatically, doctors and nurses is wider than at any time since such records have been kept. The wealth gap is even more astonishing: different classes and races live in different economies, and perhaps eventually different societies, one superimposed directly over the other. To make matters more interesting, these gaps cannot be justified on grounds of merit, economic efficiency, the work ethic, or any other canonical American value. But the upper PMC’s approach remains no apologies, no tears.³⁶

A recent example is the spectacle of California governor Arnold Schwarzenegger cutting health and human services rather than raising the state income tax from 9.3 to 10 percent on incomes over \$560,000 (and to 11 percent on incomes over \$1 million), a move that would nearly halve the state deficit by asking California’s top 1 percent by income to return to the state about \$3 billion of the approximately \$12.75 billion it received in Bush II federal tax cuts.³⁷ Maintaining their greatly disparate income involves the upper middle classes in ever deeper unions with what used to be the purely plutocratic politics of enemies of the federal income tax such as Steven Forbes.

We have, then, an upper middle class that increasingly sacrifices its professional and political independence to its economic interest in large economic disparities. At the same time, the social trusteeship professions, which lack the financial incentives to adopt right-wing politics, are increasingly overshadowed by the upper professions. This is why the most powerful movements within the PMC since 1980 have taken the supposedly

non-PMC form of union movements; nurses and teachers have been effective only when they have replaced the solitary voice of the independent expert with collective action. These professional unions have been specially targeted by Republicans precisely because they are the unruly remnant of a PMC that has in its higher strata largely been subdued: Ronald Reagan's destruction of the air traffic controller's union launched the economic agenda of his presidency, while Governor Schwarzenegger has been attempting to terminate the pensions of state employees (CalPERS, the best known, is the largest pension fund in the United States) and replace them with defined contribution plans, thus liquidating a labor-friendly organization with a mostly white-collar membership. If this effort ever succeeds, it will mute one of the country's most independent insider voices for corporate reform.

Maintaining economic disparity also involves the top PMC in supporting the culture of force. It is hard to imagine a self-managed, multilateral planet of equitable development in which the economies of China and India and the European Union would not rapidly overtake or at least rival that of the United States. There would be no lopsided advantage in intellectual property, no clear superiority in scientific research: to the contrary, the relatively small population of the United States would likely suffer declining relative output, leading to a redistribution of wealth toward the global South, without special government intervention. The American PMC would face head-to-head competition with much larger and probably better-trained counterparts abroad. It would need to develop equitable alliances with previously subordinate countries in regions like Latin America, a task for which it is not well prepared. In short, the American PMC would be competing without systematic advantages virtually for the first time; its assumptions of natural superiority would be tested as never before. Such considerations make the upper PMC a natural constituency for the doctrine of preeminence. The Bush II administration says to it, "Whatever they take from us, we will take ten times more." Bush's "have mores" are in effect voting for this.

But what about the middle middle class, Bush's *mass* base? For several decades in the middle of the twentieth century, large-scale government support for health, education, and incomes eased the economic anxiety that racially inclusive social betterment historically aroused in the white middle and working classes. Now that these supports have been downsized and discredited, middle-middle-class white folks face a more traditional choice.

They can either try to bind with upper professionals and managers and rise as the top continues to rise; or they can decide that they themselves are paying for the rising of the top and politically break with them. The latter choice is not very likely. To break with the top would mean breaking with the low-tax Republicanism that they have been told is the source of safe exurban communities, overwhelmingly white schools and malls, and no-contact SUV transportation. Here we encounter the middle's structure of feeling—a desire for open-space suburban mobility, for insulation from a crumbling infrastructure, for access to the upper-class imagery found in the resegregated neighborhoods, churches, and schools of the Reagan-Bush era. For the middle to break with the top professionals would be for it to break with the current form of its hope to escape a globalization process that it knows perfectly well is taking its jobs. The middle's Republican vote is not a vote against abortion and the secular state per se but is a vote for its domestic security, and this, to repeat, is currently indivisible from white supermajority communities and economic disparity. It is not cultural values or fear of terrorism as such that attract the middle into the Republican camp, but racialized economic desires. And the satisfaction of these desires entails the use of force.

In practice, the current situation means that a progressive revival will not result from attempts to move the middle middle class through the looking glass of cultural values to the bedrock of economic interests (Thomas Frank) or through conservative to progressive cultural values (Howard Dean, George Lakoff). The reason is that the middle middle's cultural values and economic interests are *already* woven together, and they aim at the racial and economic disparity they associate with life “on Paradise Drive.” Bush Republicanism rests on two durable and mutually reinforcing cultural composites—“democratic” imperialism and free-market affluence—that reinforce each other so readily because they share a tacit picture of both neighborhood and nation as a white supermajority enclave surrounded by conflict-ridden, impoverished racial Others where continuing economic superiority requires the use of force. Dean and Lakoff's solution does not soften this cultural bedrock; Frank's solution—the middle middle class voting its (short-sighted) economic interests—has unfortunately already happened.

What kind of discourse could turn this situation around? Multilateralism and global justice are not likely to work with that majority of a middle class that so often sees the success of poorer countries—like that of immigrants

and of people of color—as coming at its own expense. The middle will need to recover the conditions of its independence from the top, which means regaining its world of work and production, its creativity in relationships, in technology, in the arts. The middle will need to recover its understanding of the public services and the social systems that in the mid-twentieth century made its partial independence a reality for the first time in history. This recovery will rest in large part on analyzing the creative labor, the popular culture, and the democratic action of these middling classes. Luckily, these are analyses for which cultural study is fully equipped.

Notes

- 1 *Preeminence* has been traced to Paul Wolfowitz and I. Lewis Libby (now undersecretary of defense and Cheney's chief of staff), author of the *Defense Planning Guidance 1992–1994*, which called not only for blocking any enemy nation's attempt to achieve "great power status" but also for blocking challenges to U.S. leadership from industrialized allies, in order to "preclude the emergence of any potential future competitor." The original document is classified but is thought to form the basis of identical calls in *Rebuilding America's Defenses: Strategy, Forces and Resources for a New Century* (Project for the New American Century, September 2000).

The first full articulation of the doctrine of preventive war (without its name) appeared in George W. Bush's commencement address at West Point, June 1, 2002. The key paragraph reads as follows: "For much of the last century, America's defense relied on the cold war doctrines of deterrence and containment. In some cases, those strategies still apply, but new threats also require new thinking. Deterrence—the promise of massive retaliation against nations—means nothing against shadowy terrorist networks with no nation or citizens to defend. Containment is not possible when unbalanced dictators with weapons of mass destruction can deliver those weapons on missiles or secretly provide them to terrorist allies. We cannot defend America and our friends by hoping for the best. We cannot put our faith in the word of tyrants who solemnly sign nonproliferation treaties and then systemically [*sic*] break them. If we wait for threats to fully materialize, we will have waited too long." Text available at www.whitehouse.gov/news/releases/2002/06/20020601-3.html.

- 2 The most comprehensive listing and description of these interventions remains William Blum, *Killing Hope: U.S. Military and CIA Interventions since World War II, Updated through 2003* (Monroe, ME: Common Courage Press, 2003).
- 3 George Kennan, "Policy Planning Study 23: Review of Current Trends in U.S. Foreign Policy; Memorandum by the Director of the Policy Planning Staff (Kennan) to the Secretary of State and the Under Secretary of State (Lovett)," published in *Foreign Relations of the United States*, 1948, vol. 1, 509–29; text available at www.j-bradford-delong.net/movable_type/archives/000567.html (accessed February 16, 2005).
- 4 For a strong case for the novelty of the post-9/11 world—an empire of global scope, a post-Westphalian diplomatic order—among others, see Richard Falk, *The Declining World Order: America's Imperial Geopolitics* (New York: Routledge, 2004).

- 5 In his study of the “Bush war cabinet,” James Mann notes that “the story of the Vulcans serves as a reminder that this bifurcation of history into cold war and post–cold war is ultimately artificial. In their careers, the Vulcans worked on both sides of the arbitrary divide” (James Mann, *Rise of the Vulcans: The History of Bush’s War Cabinet* [New York: Viking, 2004], xlv). This continuity thesis is more persuasive than the claim for the novelty of the Vulcan vision of “an unchallengeable America, a United States whose military power was so awesome that it no longer needed to make compromises or accommodations (unless it chose to do so) with any other nation or groups of countries” (xii). For a comprehensive and compelling study of the consistency and scope of United States global reach, see Chalmers Johnson, *The Sorrows of Empire: Militarism, Secrecy, and the End of the Republic* (New York: Metropolitan Books, 2004).
- 6 Cited in Niall Ferguson, “The ‘E’ Word,” *Wall Street Journal*, June 6, 2003.
- 7 “Bush Makes Historic Speech Aboard Warship,” transcript available at www.cnn.com/2003/US/05/01/bush.transcript/ (accessed February 18, 2005).
- 8 Max Boot, “Neither New nor Nefarious: The Liberal Empire Strikes Back,” *Current History* 102.667 (November 2003), www.mtholyoke.edu/acad/intrel/bush/boot.htm (accessed February 18, 2005).
- 9 Robert Kagan, “A Higher Realism,” *Washington Post*, January 23, 2005.
- 10 For a genealogy and critique of neoconservative thought by two conservatives, see Stefan Halper and Jonathan Clarke, *America Alone: The Neo-Conservatives and the Global Order* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004).
- 11 Niall Ferguson, *Colossus: The Price of America’s Empire* (New York: Penguin, 2004), and *Empire: The Rise and Demise of the British World Order and the Lessons for Global Power* (New York: Basic Books, 2004).
- 12 Ferguson, “The ‘E’ Word.”
- 13 Stephen Peter Rosen, “The Future of War and the American Military,” *Harvard Magazine*, May–June 2002, 29; also available at www.harvard-magazine.com/on-line/050218.html (accessed February 19, 2005).
- 14 We have not sufficiently studied the impact of right-wing radio rants, which have no liberal or Left equivalent. Mark Danner recorded a sample of Rush Limbaugh’s show from the preelection period: “Osama bin Laden cannot launch an attack on the United States of America. Osama bin Laden can only deliver a tape, and on that tape, bin Laden appeals to the very appeasers in this country who would allow him to gain strength by agreeing with what he says and voting for the man who is being quoted by bin Laden. John Kerry, as much as Michael Moore, was quoted by Osama bin Laden in that video that we all saw. . . . Michael Moore is not on the ballot; John Kerry is. Osama bin Laden parroting John Kerry in his tape on Friday. We have a unique responsibility to lead the world in confronting and defeating this evil threat. . . . Returning to the days of appeasement, trying to meet a ‘global test’ of world opinion, ignoring threats from hostile nations and groups is a deadly mistake we simply can’t afford to make. . . . The Democrat Party in this country is eager to point to the things bin Laden said and suggest that he is right—a man who happily murdered three thousand Americans and is eager to do so over and over and over again! You say, ‘Rush, I haven’t heard the Democrats say that.’ Oh, you can find it on their Web sites. You can find people who are going to vote for John Kerry who have said this. You can find people on various Democrat Web sites who are excited bin Laden

- said what he said. They're hoping for an Osama smackdown of Bush, if I may quote one of the things I saw" (cited in Mark Danner, "How Bush Really Won," *New York Review of Books*, January 13, 2005). This is the cultural equivalent of accusing and convicting Kerry of high treason against the state. Knowledge about the effects of these statements would give us a much better idea of where the political culture really stands.
- 15 Pew Global Attitudes Project, *What the World Thinks in 2002* (Washington: The Pew Center for the People and the Press, 2002), 3. Were Father Coughlin and Nazi denunciations of liberals obviously more false and defamatory than this? This is an important topic for further research.
 - 16 The United Kingdom formed a middle case, perhaps complicated by Labour Prime Minister Tony Blair's support for the Bush administration.
 - 17 Kenneth T. Walsh, "What the Guys Want," *U.S. News and World Report*, September 20, 2004, 23.
 - 18 See, for example, Danner, "How Bush Really Won."
 - 19 The figures are 65 percent of those ages 40–57; 69 percent of those ages 58–69; and 71 percent of those ages 70 and above (*USA Today*, November 11, 2004).
 - 20 "While a slight majority believe the Iraq war contributed to the long-term security of the United States, 70 percent of Americans think these gains have come at an 'unacceptable' cost in military casualties. This led 56 percent to conclude that, given the cost, the conflict there was 'not worth fighting'—an eight-point increase from when the same question was asked this summer, and the first time a decisive majority of people have reached this conclusion," John F. Harris and Christopher Muste, "56 Percent in Survey Say Iraq War Was a Mistake," *Washington Post*, December 21, 2004, www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/articles/A14266-38_2004Dec20.html.
 - 21 Walsh, "What the Guys Want."
 - 22 Charles Simic, "Down There on a Visit," *New York Review of Books*, August 12, 2004.
 - 23 Andrew Hacker, Letter to the Editor, *New York Review of Books*, March 10, 2005.
 - 24 Hacker's letter continues on a characteristically disdainful note: "In rallying for Bush and Cheney, [these middle-class voters] were also acclaiming themselves. Indeed, the campaign had told them that they were special citizens deserving special recognition. The choice to support Bush—and Republicans generally—gives quite average Americans a chance to feel superior. On moral terrain, they show singular virtue by not doing such things that will lead them to resort to abortion. . . . They are also fiscally superior. . . . Most have enough health coverage, do not feel their jobs are endangered, and aren't yet worried about their retirement. In short, they can differentiate—and distance—themselves from all those 'losers' that Democratic candidates ask us to worry about. Hence they feel able to disdain the word 'liberal,' since that connotes handouts for complainers who don't show the energy to make it on their own." Hacker offers no evidence for these speculations, which are driven by the kinds of cultural arrogance that the Right has so successfully exploited. The prevalence of this contempt for ordinary heartland folks in Hollywood and other outlets is one of Thomas Frank's strongest points. See also Barbara Ehrenreich, *Fear of Falling: The Inner Life of the Middle Class* (New York: Pantheon, 1989), and, for a current example of the syndrome, the Clint Eastwood film *Million Dollar Baby*, where the protagonist pursues her dreams in Los Angeles while plagued by her Arkansas family, apparently constructed from a checklist of white trash stereotypes.

- 25 Votes for Women 2004 Survey, conducted by Lake, Snell, Perry and Associates, conducted November 1–2, 2004, www.votesforwomen2004.org/. The Hispanic figure comes from Ruy Teixeira's analysis, www.americanprogress.org/site/pp.asp?c=bijRJ8OVFandb=246518 (accessed February 20, 2005). Teixeira notes problems with the data for Hispanics. See also CNN's exit poll, www.cnn.com/ELECTION/2004/pages/results/states/US/P/00/epolls.o.html (accessed February 20, 2005).
- 26 Walsh, "What the Guys Want."
- 27 CBS/BET Poll, conducted July 9–16, 2004, www.cbsnews.com/stories/2004/07/21/opinion/polls/main630986.shtml.
- 28 Richard Morin and Dan Balz, "Most Latino Voters Say War Was Wrong," *Washington Post*, October 28, 2004, A8, www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/articles/A3696-2004Oct27.html.
- 29 Pew Research Center, "Politics and Values in a 51 percent–48 percent Nation," January 21, 2005, <http://people-press.org/reports/display.php3?ReportID=236>.
- 30 William Appleman Williams, *The Tragedy of American Diplomacy*, 2nd ed. (1959; New York: Dell, 1972), 20–21. I am grateful to Philip Golub for this quotation; my understanding of the field of international relations and its intellectual history was much enhanced by a series of conversations with Philip in Paris in the fall of 2003.
- 31 "Rumsfeld Says Iraqis Celebrate Freedom from Fear of Regime," Transcript of Defense Department Briefing, April 11, 2003, <http://tokyo.usembassy.gov/e/p/tp-20030414br.html>.
- 32 John Gage in Mark Kitchell, director, *Berkeley in the Sixties* (First Run Features, 1990).
- 33 There was this exchange during the first debate, where Bush neutralized an effective criticism from Kerry about Bush's blindness:

Kerry: He rushed the war in Iraq without a plan to win the peace. Now, that is not the judgment that a president of the United States ought to make. You don't take America to war unless have the plan to win the peace. You don't send troops to war without the body armor that they need. I've met kids in Ohio, parents in Wisconsin places, Iowa, where they're going out on the Internet to get the state-of-the-art body gear to send to their kids. Some of them got them for a birthday present. I think that's wrong. Humvees—10,000 out of 12,000 Humvees that are over there aren't armored. And you go visit some of those kids in the hospitals today who were maimed because they don't have the armament. This president just—I don't know if he sees what's really happened on there. But it's getting worse by the day. More soldiers killed in June than before. More in July than June. More in August than July. More in September than in August. And now we see beheadings. And we got weapons of mass destruction crossing the border every single day, and they're blowing people up. And we don't have enough troops there.

Bush: . . . First of all, what my opponent wants you to forget is that he voted to authorize the use of force and now says it's the wrong war at the wrong time at the wrong place. I don't see how you can lead this country to succeed in Iraq if you say wrong war, wrong time, wrong place. What message does that send our troops? What message does that send to our allies? What message does that send the Iraqis? No, the way to win this is to be steadfast and resolved and to follow through on the plan that I've

- just outlined. ("Transcript: First Presidential Debate," Text from FDCH E-Media, September 30, 2004)
- 34 Walsh, "What the Guys Want."
- 35 For an orthodox account of growing stratification, see a recent paper by two Federal Reserve economists, Mary Daly and Rob Valletta, "Earnings Inequality and Earnings Mobility in the U.S.," *FRBSF Economic Letter* 2003-28 (September 26, 2003): 1-3. For two book-length accounts that describe the tendency of the top 10 percent to separate from the bottom 90 percent, and the top 1 percent to separate from the next 9 percent, see Doug Henwood, *After the New Economy* (New York: New Press, 2003), and Kevin Phillips, *Wealth and Democracy: A Political History of the American Rich* (New York: Broadway, 2003).
- 36 For a psychologically astute and economically dumb example of the genre, see Michael Lewis, *The New New Thing* (New York: Norton, 2000), which traces Netscape's enormous IPO entirely to Jim Clark and not at all to the hundreds of employees who worked brilliantly and endlessly to make the actual product.
- 37 Michael Hiltzik, "This Solution Would Be Taxing for Only 1 Percent of Californians," *Los Angeles Times*, February 23, 2004.