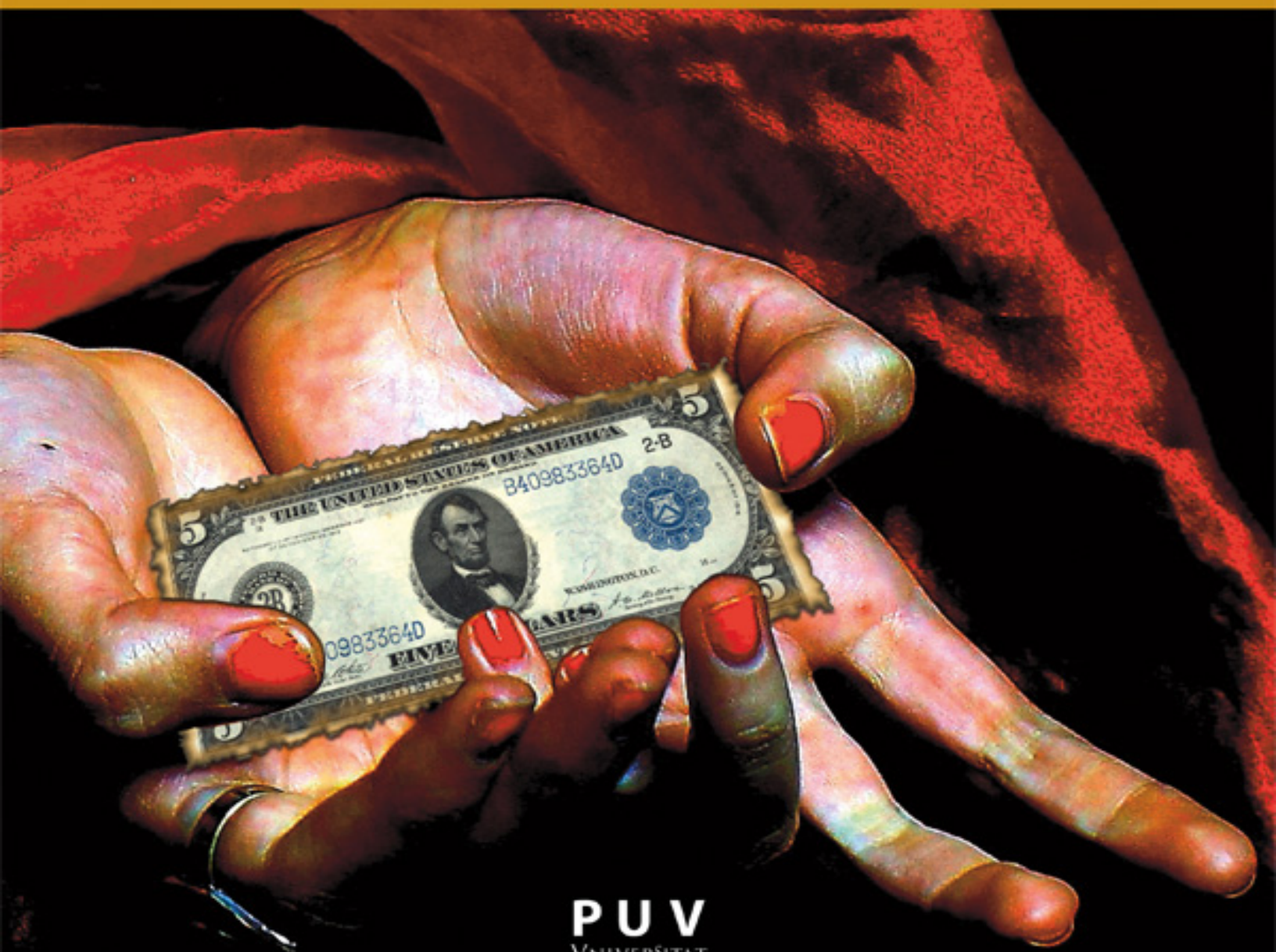


THOMAS S. HARRINGTON

LIVIN' LA VIDA BARROCA

AMERICAN CULTURE IN AN AGE OF IMPERIAL ORTHODOXIES



P U V
UNIVERSITAT
ID VALÈNCIA

LIVIN' LA VIDA BARROCA

AMERICAN CULTURE
IN AN AGE OF IMPERIAL ORTHODOXIES

Biblioteca Javier Coy d'estudis nord-
americans

<http://www.uv.es/bibjcoy>

Directora
Carme Manuel

LIVIN' LA VIDA BARROCA
AMERICAN CULTURE
IN AN AGE OF IMPERIAL ORTHODOXIES

Thomas S. Harrington

Biblioteca Javier Coy d'estudis nord-americans
Universitat de València

Livin' la Vida Barroca:
American Culture in an Age of Imperial Orthodoxies
©Thomas S. Harrington

1ª edición de 2014
Reservados todos los derechos
Prohibida su reproducción total o parcial

ISBN: 978-84-9134-156-7

Imagen de la portada: Sophia de Vera Hóltz y Celso Hernández de la Figuera
Diseño de la cubierta: Celso Hernández de la Figuera

Publicacions de la Universitat de València
<http://puv.uv.es>
publicacions@uv.es

Table of Contents

Preface

Livin' la Vida Barroca

Who's Gonna Tell the Kids

Liberal Boomers and Courage

Unequal Charges: When Balanced is Not Fair

Junk by Design

Georges Duhamel on the Writing of Literature (and Life?)

I'm in a Good Place

Netanyahu: the Intellectual Father of the "War on Terror

Necessary Melancholy?

Where We Are: America the Baroque

Dignity: An Idea Gone Missing in the Land

Not So Different After All?

Controversialization: A Key to the Right's Continuing
Domination of Public Debates

Language, "Promontory Views" and American Perceptions of
the World

A Liberal Culture "Stuck to the Metaphor" of its Own Virtues

Seeing and Unseeing in Big Media

Sooner or Later Our Children Will Ask: “How Did This Happen?”

Quick! Look Over There!

On Bumper Stickers That Say “Coexist”

If Everyone Has a Price, Who Will Fight for Justice?

The Partisanship Canard

Tribalism is Dead, Long Live the Tribe

Ballots and Democracy: Big Media is Just Not that Into It

Learned Helplessness and the Imperial Condition

The Doctrine of “Reasonable Doubt”: Universal Principle or Perk of the Powerful?

Junk Food for the Mind

Preemptive Strikes of the (Pseudo) Progressive Kind

One Thing You Can’t Hide... Is the Authoritarian Inside

Uniformed Impunity: We’re Probably Closer to the Beginning than to the End

Anger and Angry People

“Keeping US Safe”: From the Task of Engaging and Managing our Own Anxieties

Orthodoxies and Adolescents

Technocrats

More Intellectual Dishonesty at the *New York Times*

A Better Question Might Be, “How Isn’t it Fascism?”

If the Cords of Culture are Cut, How Will We Access the Potential Sources of Our Renewal?

“Mistakes Were Made”: One-Time Object of Derision Now a Core Template of Our Social Behaviors

Customers or Citizens?

Being (or Not) in the “Place of the Soul”

No, It Has Not “Always Been This Way”

Recognizing the Importance of Goldwater, or Learning to Analyze and Practice Progressive Politics in their Historical Dimension

“Take Responsibility for My Vote and Its Policy Consequences?”

Obama’s Dog Whistle Politics (Zelig at the Top of his Game)

The Truth or the Tribe?

Israel Has Been “Singled Out” in the US for a Very Long Time

The “Powell Memo” of 1971: The Foundation of the Right’s Current Domination of US Politics

The Victory of Obama or the Definitive Triumph of the Politics of Illusion and Moral Disengagement in the United States

Is the US of Today Really Spain?

Acknowledgments

Conversation has always been my magic elixir, the substance that brings moments of emotional and conceptual clarity to the otherwise inchoate mass of feelings and thoughts I so often carry inside me. And since writing is, at its core, about trying to capture such epiphanies, this book owes its existence to those friends who, in the spirit of love, companionship, or at times I suspect, mere forbearance, have helped me to “knead the dough” over and over again during our many encounters. To all of you (and you know who you are!), I am very, very grateful.

I’d like to give special thanks to a number of people in this group. I am very grateful that Jim Barrett, true friend, incandescent spirit and wordsmith extraordinaire, encouraged me to make my private musings on American culture available to a larger audience and that, further down the road, Carme Manuel was willing and able to help turn Jim’s vision into a reality.

I am indebted to Tom Walsh for demonstrating time and again over many years the immense grace and power of a life and a pen that draws from the head *and the heart* as opposed to just the former.

Similar gratitude flows to Tim Sciarillo who’s been tenaciously needling me into ever-greater levels of consciousness and critical awareness since the day many years back when fate (and the Dean of Housing) first brought us together.

I feel only mystery and wonder (if there any more sublime expression of gratitude?) before the fact that Itamar Even-

Zohar, a true visionary and a polyglot of the type that this world may never see again, decided for some strange reason two decades ago to begin sharing his cosmic levels of knowledge and humor with me.

I would be a very different thinker and writer without my dialogues with Gustavo Remedi who, during our 15 years spent working together, constantly and joyfully challenged me to consider new things in completely new ways.

But I fear I might not have been able to listen to either of these extraordinary people had my Galician “brother” Alberto Sacido, not previously showed me the importance of coming to the table, in good times and bad, to feed the body and renew the mind through shared words.

I cannot imagine my life today without the many gifts bestowed on me by Pau Estrada, Jaume Subirana and Josep Maria Solé Sabaté who, by handing me the keys to so many fascinating rooms and spaces within Catalan life, forever changed my way of looking at the world as well as my place within it.

I would be similarly adrift without my sister Christine, whose fearsomely well-organized intellect is only superseded in power by the ever-mindful love and care she bestows on those lucky enough to form part of her world.

And then there’s Kathy, who counts among her many, many loving gifts the rare ability to combine gracious, open-ended listening with timely, specific and ever-incisive questioning. During these last few years, no one has been more central to the process of turning notions into ideas, and ideas into essays, than she.

But at the root of my gratitude before life is the dialogue—which sometimes takes place in words but even more often, as luck would have it, in other much more powerful and ineffable codes—with my children Sophia, Lily and Luke. It is

the need to honor their lives, both their miraculous present and promising future, that keeps the search for clarity and truth, and yes, laughter and joy, at the forefront of my vital concerns.

Preface

Until quite recently, Irish-Americans tended to marry late, a practice that, in turn, created extraordinarily long generations within many families of that ethnic group. I grew up sharing every Sunday dinner, and in the summer a great deal more than that, with three grandparents born in 1890.

Spending time together in our family was mostly about talking, or if you were young, listening and using your imagination to create movies in your mind out of the word-pictures that flowed non-stop from the mouths of Gram, Grammy and Banky, my uncles and aunts, and their never-ending retinue of show-up-at-the-backdoor friends. Their stories became my stories and thus I, like them, came to view all that occurred from 1895 onward as an integral part of my own life experience.

I do not know how common such customs were among other Americans of my generation. What I do know is that by the time I graduated from college in the early eighties, very few of my classmates and friends were actively laying claim to this tradition of historically minded alchemy.

In the late seventies, Jimmy Carter had grasped that our long national adolescence was coming to a close. He asked us, in effect, to decide what kind of nation we wanted to be when we grew up.

Alarmed by the question and its implications, the country elected Ronald Reagan who told us to go back to doing what we had been doing and that, insofar as we had problems as

a people, it was with overly introspective officials like his predecessor in the White House.

Yes, to come of age in the eighties was to be told, again and again by the makers of public opinion, that the past did not really matter, that, in fact, only navel-gazing losers spent their time and energy trying to decipher its inevitably depressing lessons.

So, armed with little more than the puerile hope some day becoming a latter-day Hemingway Hero, I ventured to the Iberian Peninsula where I found, to my delight, that the tradition of sitting around and telling stories about the past was in surprisingly good health.

In time, I moved from the realm of personal and familial accounts to that of collective narratives, with a special emphasis on the stories that Basques, Catalans, Castilians, Galicians and Portuguese—and in a somewhat less sustained and vigorous fashion, Asturians, Valencians, Mallorcans and Canary Islanders—had generated to explain their unique “places” in the world.

In the mid-eighties and early nineties the drive to generate and disseminate new and/or recycled social “truths” was quite palpable to most astute observers of Spanish and Portuguese culture. For a long time, I contented myself with believing that this was a peculiar trait of, as taxonomically oriented social scientists like to say, “societies in transition.”

As my studies on the theory and practice of nation-building deepened, however, I came to realize the artificiality of this distinction. As my dearly admired mentor Itamar Even-Zohar has convincingly shown, “culture-planning”—the orchestrated efforts of social elites to generate cohesion and proneness-to-act among otherwise unruly and heterogeneous national populations—is a ubiquitous, if also often largely unexamined, activity in every society. Indeed, it is precisely in those places where

the population has the lowest consciousness of its presence that it can usually be found in its strongest and most well-organized condition.

I thus began to realize that I was probably wrong when I concluded earlier on that the art of storytelling was dead in the USA. My mistake, it seems, was in hoping to find it in the places—such as the dinner table and the back porch—where I had seen and heard it in my childhood.

In today's USA we have storytellers in abundance. However, they are now mostly found in offices in Hollywood, Washington and New York. Indeed, it is thanks to the very effective messaging generated by these powerful cultureplanners in regard to the supposedly unique levels of "freedom" "individuality" and "choice" in our polity, that most Americans, even educated ones for whom skeptical curiosity is supposed to be a way of life, cannot even begin ask, never mind answer, important questions regarding the role of propaganda in our society.

One of the main goals of this book, then, is to try and stimulate others to recognize and dissect the function of elite-generated culture-planning in our civic spaces. It is, I believe, only when less economically privileged Americans gain a clear understanding of what Bourdieu liked to call the "structuring structures" of public discourse, that they will be able to create countervailing institutions capable of generating a more democratic and dignity-driven culture in their midst.

Conjoined to this hope of changing, in some small way, the tone and content of our dominant social pedagogies, is a more deeply personal, and some might even say, vain motive.

During the last 90 years or so, the so-called Western world has been afflicted with intermittent and inevitably murderous bouts of authoritarianism. At the end of each of these feverish episodes of mendacity and human

destruction, attempts are inevitably made to explain how such gruesome things were allowed to take place within what people liked to think of as civilized societies. And at the end of each such inquest we are told, in effect, “no one truly understood what was happening” and that as a result, “no one could have foreseen or prevented” the catastrophe that eventually took place.

Within the last ten years alone we have seen our government and press establishment tell us, again and again, that “no one could have foreseen” the coming of September 11th, the fact that Saddam had no weapons of mass destruction, that human privacy would be abolished or that Obama would turn out to be a corporate and military puppet.

The people that say and repeat these things are lying to us, and most of all, to themselves. What they would be saying, were they more honest, is something like this: “Many people saw these things coming and said so quite clearly. However, we elite opinion-makers—deeply and comfortably embedded within the normalizing master narratives generated by our friends and colleagues to explain the how the world ‘really works’—chose not to pay them heed. Indeed, we not only did not listen, but frequently mocked such people as nuts, cynics and conspiracy theorists.”

Thirteen years ago, the US inaugurated “the West’s” latest cycle of industrial-scale destruction, this time in the Middle East. Most of us cannot still cannot bring ourselves to say that this is what our government has done, nor admit the obvious similarity of these actions to those taken in the name of “securing the homeland” by figures of the mid-20th century whom we like to parade before our young as the incarnation of pure evil.

As our attempts to bomb, starve and terrorize people in that region into submission fail, as they must, our

government will, like all stumbling imperial governments before it, step up its already vigorous efforts to monitor and quash dissident opinion at home. Still more careers, lives and families will be shattered as a result.

And when it is all over, presuming, that is, that the planet is not destroyed in the process, my children's children will no doubt be told in school that "no one really saw it coming" and that "no one really understands to this day" how the "freedomloving American people" let this occur.

And, if by chance, one of those precious children visits their Grandpa after school and asks if that's how it really was, if everyone really was asleep at the wheel, the old man will at least have something a bit more concrete than an Irish word-picture to hand to his curious offspring.

6 January 2014

Livin' la Vida Barroca

With a bit of foreign travel looming on the horizon, it was time to renew the passport of my youngest child. I gathered the requisite papers and brought them to the post office. A few weeks later, the coveted document arrived.

I opened it up, expecting to find what I always had found inside US passports: a dry one-page recitation of personal data followed by numerous empty pages for recording the traveler's entries and exits from various countries.

The moment my eyes focused on the inside flap, however, I was reminded of my continuing lack of post-September 11 imagination. How foolish of me not to realize that in times like these passports can, and should be, a full-blown propaganda documents, replete with the cheesiest and most hackneyed evocations of national grandeur. Page 1: a quote from *The Star-Spangled Banner* in a lithograph-like image of *The War of 1812*. Page 2: Lincoln's famous quote about "government of the people, by the people and for the people." Pages 3-4: a multicolor image of an eagle and a flag towering over the image and personal information of the passport's bearer. And on and on for 24 more pages with graphic backdrops such as Mt. Rushmore, the Liberty Bell, and yes, buffaloes roaming across the open plains.

When most Americans think of the Baroque it is probably an association with French music or Latin American architecture. It is certainly not inaccurate to do so. But it is important to remember that the Baroque was, and is, much more than this.

The term has its roots in the Iberian Peninsula of the late 16th and 17th centuries, a time when Spanish and Portuguese empires were both hugely important and visibly decadent. In the late 15th and early 16th centuries these two relatively underpopulated and unsophisticated kingdoms had leapt to world prominence on the basis of their ferocity (honed in the centuries-long frontier struggle against the Muslim “heathen”) and their precocious understanding of naval technology. Between 1470 and 1550 these came to control much of Africa, all of Central and South America, and substantial pieces of Europe (much of southern Italy, the Low Countries and a good part of today’s Germany and Austria). But no sooner did they establish control of these places than, as could be expected, resistance to their rule began to grow.

In the Americas, the Iberians’ relative military and naval superiority allowed them to overwhelm the opposition until the beginning of the 19th century. In Europe, however, things were far more complicated.

There, especially in the lands of northern and central Europe, the opposition to Iberian rule was not only military, but also ideological. The Reformation, which we now tend to think of in almost wholly theological terms, was in fact a movement with an enormous geopolitical subtext. For the Dutch and for the Germans, becoming Protestant was not only a matter of talking more clearly and directly to God, but also ridding themselves of their Spanish overlords and their Italian ecclesiastical agents.

The Spaniards reacted to the challenge of the Reformation and its incipient embrace of empiricism, by instituting the Counter-Reformation, the upshot of which was an effort to repackage—but in no way fundamentally alter—the now time-worn tenets of their Church-centered philosophy of cultural hegemony. It was what we might call today a

campaign of cultural “re-branding.” As such, it was largely circumscribed to the realm of the aesthetic.

This might have worked had the German and Dutch complaints with the Spanish been aesthetic. Rather, they were bound up in much more essential questions of dignity and self-determination. There thus ensued what the Spanish nowadays call a “dialogue of the deaf.” On one hand, we have the Spaniards and Portuguese (the kingdoms were united between 1580 and 1640), with their ostensibly sophisticated and worldly Jesuits at the fore, inventing new ways to sell old imperial and theological wine. On the other, we have the rebel elites of Holland and numerous German kingdoms who had long-since decided that their social and commercial dreams could never be realized within the framework of a Catholic empire led from Madrid.

Unable to entertain, never mind admit, the validity of the ideological or territorial claims of their unruly northern subjects, the Spanish Hapsburgs and their official creators did what all frustrated ideologues do in times of crisis: they pumped up the volume. It is in this act of historical desperation that we find the core logic of the Baroque. “If only we can say it more colorfully, more artistically, more ingeniously we will win them back.”

But of course, with the intended Northern audience long since inured to the siren song of the South, the only people left to listen to the ever more extravagant claims of cultural superiority were the captive citizens of the Iberian Peninsula itself! And so it was.

From the 1580s onward, precisely the moment when the first cracks in the façade of the omnipotent empire began to show, the Spanish political and intellectual class plied the populace with an unremitting diet of selfaggrandizement, punctuated only by the lacerating ironies of Miguel de Cervantes. This constant stream of church-state propaganda kept viceroys and their armies well-motivated for a good

long time. But it did nothing to prepare Spain for the challenges of modernity. Indeed, the implied demand that even the best Spanish thinkers work and create within the ever more narrow alleys of patriotic and theological self-affirmation (as opposed to the expansive fields of free inquiry), virtually assured the country's relegation to the dustbin of history.

There was a time in the not very distant past when the US leadership class believed the essential vitality of the US cultural political heritage. But judging from the design of my child's new passport, they no longer trust in its ability to speak for itself. It appears we too are now denizens of the new Baroque, destined, like the Spaniards before us, to live out our decline in a propagandistic netherworld designed (so they tell us) for the benefit of others.

12 August 2008

Who's Gonna Tell the Kids?

Who is going to fill the American people in on the truth and significance of what's going on in Georgia? From all indications, no one in the national press corps is up for the job.

The op-ed fraternity, dutifully echoing the Bush administration, is running with a narrative that goes something like this: Georgia, led by an urbane young man (Saakashvili) who seeks nothing more than peace and prosperity for his plucky little nation, has been brutally attacked by a Russian bear bent on meting out wanton destruction. The reporter class, ever attentive to their appointed task of providing evocative vignettes and images to justify the storylines dreamed up by their superiors (a group that includes the aforementioned pundits as well as "government officials" and serious-appearing right wing think tank hacks), has gone about their task with the brainless dedication we've come to expect from them. Now it's time for Americans to do what most of them believe (in the face of abundant statistical evidence to the contrary) they do best: provide the poor and besieged around the world with "humanitarian aid."

In a functioning democracy with a more or less empirically-based media system, this little bedtime story would be quickly superseded by real reportage, and from there, a mainstream narrative that would go something like this.

In the wake of September 11, Cheney and the neocons at the White House decided they would use the crisis as a pretext for implanting US bases throughout the “new” republics of the Caucasus and Central Asia. The strategic intent of this move, accomplished largely through the buying off of corrupt dictators, was twofold. a) To project US military power into a region of enormous and still relatively untapped mineral wealth. b) Continue the process, begun in the late 1990s with the rapid eastward expansion of NATO, of militarily encircling Russia so that it would never again be able to seriously challenge US hegemony in the world. An integral element of this strategy was using the CIA and other US government funded agencies to catapult US-friendly “democrats,” such as the Columbia-trained yuppie, Saakashvili, to power in the satellite Republics of the former Soviet Union. And as is the custom with this particular White House crowd, they made sure that the Israelis were deeply involved with their covert operatives at every level of this strategic effort.

Putin, it appears, was fully aware of this neo-con agenda from the beginning. And as a keen reader of human psychology, he also understood the fundamentally priapic character of its key architects. You can’t keep a hard-on forever, he reasoned, especially when you are trying to stick it in every available strategic “orifice” between Ankara and Indonesia. And so he watched and waited, playing Rope-a-Dope with the US for seven long years.

Like many members of the US neo-con fraternity that invented him, and has sustained him up until now, Saakashvili appears to be long on swagger and short on smarts. And as has occurred with many foolish CIA assets in the past, he apparently began to see himself through the hagiographic prism of the propaganda his handlers regularly churned out on his behalf. No doubt remembering how the summer timing of Israel’s rape of Lebanon two years ago

helped to cushion the public relations fall-out from the event, Handler and Asset apparently decided that now was the time to poke the Russian bear in the eye. And so they planned a lightning strike to seize South Ossetia. Putin was ready. He came off the ropes and struck back with a clean and crisp left hook to the jaw that left the Asset (and by extension, his handlers) crumpled on the canvas. End of match.

With this single, expertly landed blow, Putin has laid bare for the world to see the enormous gap between neo-con fantasies of domination and real US power. The setback has also made manifest the almost complete bankruptcy of the current US leadership class on issues of international law and morality.

When Bush, seeking to put the best face on the enormous strategic setback just handed to him by Putin, proclaimed the Russian use of force as “unacceptable” a wave of uncontrollable, if profoundly bitter, laughter swept through the chanceries and more important news rooms of the world. The only ones able to keep a straight face through it all have been the eternally-immune-to-irony-acolytes of power in the US media.

The US has just suffered a debacle that, when viewed through the lens of history, may very well be seen as a key turning point not only in its trajectory as a Great Power, but also the definitive end of its long-held image (warranted or not) as an agent of constructive change in the world.

Who's gonna tell the kids?

15 August 2008

Liberal Boomers and Courage

What is it about liberal boomers and courage?

I guess the short answer would be that they OD'd on the John Wayne-style propaganda of the fifties and early sixties and decided that, as Dick Cheney once said, they had "other priorities" for themselves and their children. As a late boomer myself, I very much understand this rejection of the hyper-masculinized, faux patriotic tripe turned out by the media elites born in the teens, twenties and thirties. Indeed, given that the ghost of this childish propaganda still gallops quite happily across great swathes of the nation, I applaud the ongoing efforts of Glenn Greenwald and others to demonstrate how flimsily contrived so much of it really was.

What is less clear to me, however, is how and why this intelligent reaction against a cartoonish and bellicose conception of bravery—one which sadly still has much relevance on the Fox-consuming Right—morphed, on the so-called Left, into a snoring indifference toward the very ideas of courage and courageous actions. Look around.

When was the last time you heard a well-known person of the Left (or what passes for it today) talk about courage or taking a stand on principle in the face of overwhelming political odds simply because it is the right thing to do?

No, the generation that slept and munched-out below posters bearing Che Guevara's "I'd rather die on my feet than live kneeling down," that used to tell stories of Allende's machine gun-vs-dive-bomber defense of the Moneda Palace, now prattles earnestly on about requiring a

veto-proof majority, about Obama's need to "say certain things" (a.k.a. placate powerful interests) to get into office, and about "not letting the perfect become the enemy of the possible."

The political and social sub-culture that used to loudly proclaim its inconformity with existing frames of reality, now assiduously hectors itself and others about the need to work within the set of options provided by a carefully circumscribed political and media system.

That the same system is, arguably, several times more corrupt and schlerotic than the one they once fantasized about overthrowing, or at least radically modifying, seems to matter little. It's as if they were still bent, in their late 40s, 50s and early 60s, on apologizing to their now-sainted daddies of the "Greatest Generation" for having questioned their incandescent imperial wisdom all those years ago. "Look at me Dad, I'm serious the way you and your martini-drinking World War II vet buddies were serious. Really Dad. We can do Empire too!"

Some one needs to remind these folks that, believe it or not, young people sometimes get it right when they sense a great and gathering stench over the land and that while a detailed study of one's "pragmatic possibilities" is generally advisable, it is seldom what allows people to change the course of history or even the course of their own lives.

Boris Yeltsin was a drunk and a grafter, but his gut-level decision to climb on top of a tank 18 years ago today, changed the course of history. Had David Axelrod and Rahm Emanuel been at his side surely they would have advised against it.

Whether liberal America wants to admit or not, George Bush Jr. modified the core assumptions of American foreign and domestic policy more than any President since Franklin Roosevelt. The results, from our ho-hum embrace of having every word we write online or speak into the telephone

examined by the NSA, to the official doctrine of pre-emptive war (the same thing we found so horrifying and unacceptable when Hitler used it to invade the Sudetenland) and everything in between, are there for all to see.

George Bush was a fool who, at the height of his powers, had only a very slim majority in both houses of Congress. But he did have courage. It was, of course a stupid, ill-informed, racist, delusional form of courage. But guess what? By sticking to these perverse articles of faith, by sending clear and repeated message to his political rivals that he wouldn't retreat from what he wanted, he changed our lives, and our children's lives, forever.

Americans love to believe in the perpetually self-correcting nature of their political system. A look at history in other places, however, tells us that this faith is naïve in the extreme. To gain back what we have lost, indeed to even get back to where we were on September 10th, 2001, is going to take courage, lot's of "take your best shot and I'll still stand my ground" courage. Unfortunately, Obama and his people, almost all good, culturally refined and ambitious baby-boomers, appear to have no understanding of this salient fact.

20 August 2009

Unequal Charges: When Balanced is Not Fair

Tuesday morning, National Public Radio and the *New York Times* had stories about how the presidential campaign is starting to get “rough.” The information adduced to justify the assertion is essentially the same in both reports.

On the one hand, we learn that Republican John McCain has accused Democrat Barack Obama of cavorting with terrorists based on his serving on a community board with a former member of the Weather Underground. On the other hand, we learn that Obama has pointed out that McCain was a member of the Keating Five. In both cases, the reporters treated these charges as essentially equal and thus selfcanceling, stuff to be filed away under “political tactics,” “he said/she said” or the province of mere “strategic gambits.”

It is this type of reporting, devoid of context and the ability to discern the relative historical import of a public figure’s actions, that has rendered the American people stupid in a civic sense. There is no way that serving on a community board with someone whose background involved radical politics is in any way equivalent with a US senator knowingly participating in one of the biggest and most costly influence-peddling scandals in the history of the Congress.

First of all, activists are not always able to choose the people with whom they serve on local boards. Moreover, if this associate, Bill Ayers, had done anything wrong, he had long since paid for it by the time Obama, then a Chicago

community organizer, came along to share the occasional monthly meeting with him.

In contrast, McCain's participation in the Charles Keating affair was completely volitional. As a senator from Arizona, McCain was very happy to help deregulate the banking industry in ways that were destructive to the financial wellbeing of the public, provided that he received financial help for his senatorial campaign in return.

It was only after McCain's perfidy was discovered that he "renounced" his participation in the scheme. And he did so only when censure by his colleagues (or worse) was looming in his future. When we talk about the Keating Five, we are talking about one of the most brazen examples of corruption in one of the biggest financial scandals (the savings and loan crisis of the 1980s) that this country has ever known.

Reading and listening to what passes for the "liberal press" in the popular imagination, you'd never know anything about the key differences in these two examples of presidential campaign tactics.

The political right has understood for years that the goal of "seeking balance" in news delivery (something, by the way, most intelligent adults in other developed countries see as neither possible nor desirable) can be manipulated time and time again in their favor. Conservatives correctly see it as an effective means of making the trivialities they want to circulate significant. They know that the Mara Liassons of the world have no stomach for discerning the truth. Reporters, meanwhile, understand that their desire to remain "in the loop" and out of trouble with the right-wing attack machine is really their paramount concern. Democracy is not possible under these conditions.

10 October 2008