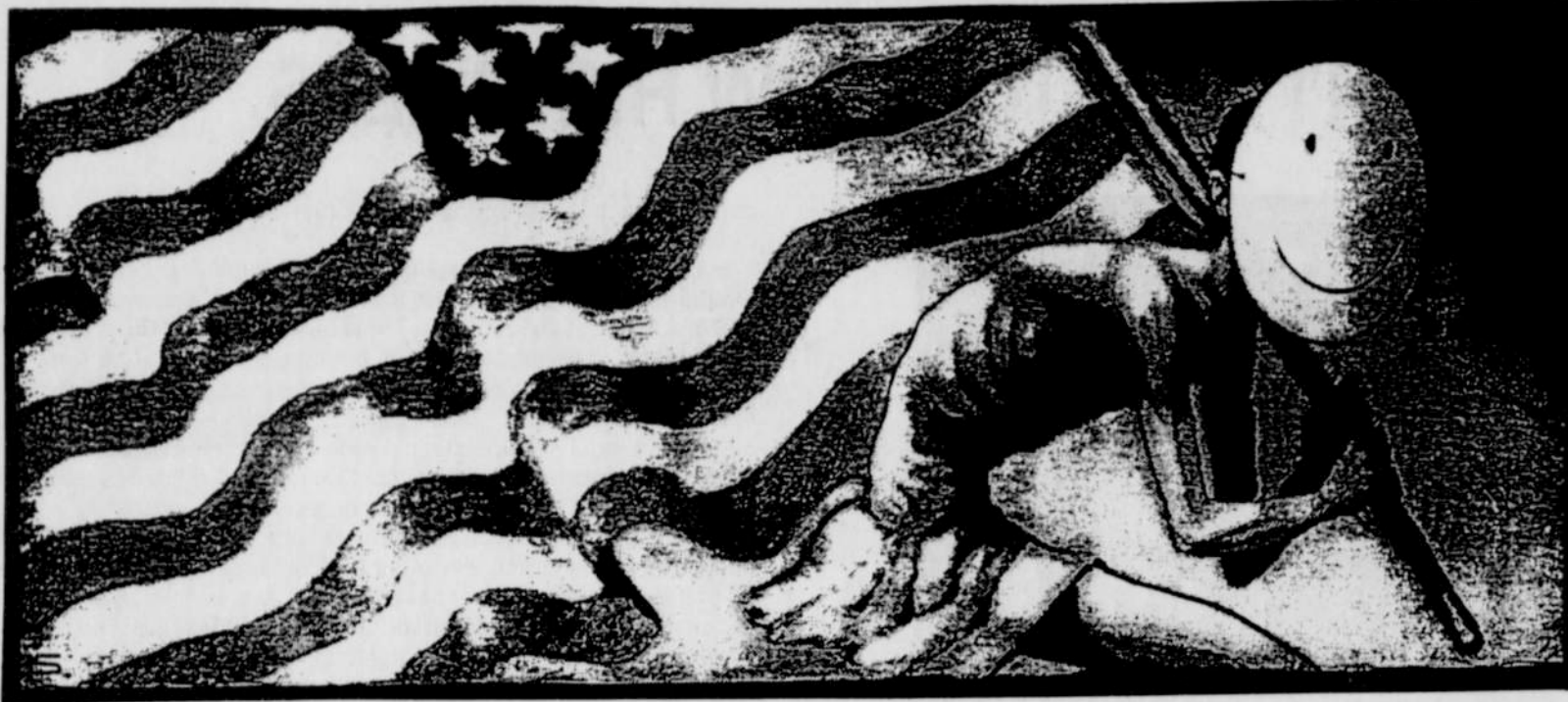


ALL THE POWER



DAVID SHANNON

BY MICHAEL PAUL McCUSKER

A dictator's dictum (a fascist mantra):

"With unity as the end, the use of every means is sanctified, even cunning, treachery, violence, prison, death. For all order is for the sake of the community, and the individual must be sacrificed to the common good."

This was the manifesto of a fictional character, a highly popular governor of a New England state just prior to Pearl Harbor who seemed to believe that the "tide in the affairs of men" had turned for him. He meant to use a labor strike, which he fueled from both sides, to declare martial law and take over radio stations, power plants and railways.

"The strike gave him his pretext. He had pretended to mediate, but underneath he had been inflaming one side against another.... He would speak over the radio to all his people (organized into "unions" all over the country). He believed the whole country was tired of its outworn institutions and was ready to tear them down and follow him."

He had formed his unions, or "cells" as he called them, "in every town and village.... He had his campaign mapped out to the last detail.... Sometimes he tried to justify himself. He saw how disunited we were, how we weakened ourselves in a crisis with our quarrels, our violent opposite ways of thinking. He had forgotten what we had once known, that that disunity was our real greatness, the measure of our dignity as a free people."

The book this is from was written in 1942 by I. A. R. Wylie, *Keepers of the Flame*. It was made into a movie with Katharine Hepburn and Spencer Tracy. Book and movie begin at the death of the governor just before he reached for ultimate power. He had organized his patriotic "unions" all over the USA and was just about to "seize the moment" when he was killed during a storm — his car crashed into a flooded river that had collapsed a bridge. Not exactly an accident, but a happy ending for book and movie.

The Man On The White Horse, the strong, powerful, capable, charismatic, even seemingly omnipotent leader who simplifies the complex into ready solutions has always been an attractive figure, and too often a figure of menace and devastation once he has grasped power. It has been a recurrent theme in American literature and politics, generally through fear of his rise rather than hope for it. George W. Bush, when he claims he is God's Chosen Man to rule the USA and encompass the world with his reign is not the first American leader who has attempted to fit into britches much bigger than those he has been granted. Particularly in the years preceding World War 2 it was popular to caricature ruthless power-hungry men after Louisiana Governor (later U.S. Senator) Huey Long, aptly called the "kingfish" for his ambitions of being crowned a populist king. He revealed his own stratagem inadvertently when he said that fascism would attack democracy wrapped in the flag.

This new millennial period of U.S. history is one of intense spiritual and social decline, perpetrated by intellectually dishonest and avariciously ambitious leaders who celebrated the end of the Cold War a decade ago by beginning to dismantle any final pretense of Constitutional democracy while publicly ballyhooing it as if it were a tawdry commercial for a second-rate product. Listening to George Bush and Donald Rumsfeld as well as the country's political and military leaders is like reading a 5th grade history textbook about the greatness of America and the heroes who have made it great with the blessing of God. They separate patriots from nonpatriots and weave into their stern platitudes clumsily crafted slogan-speak earlier used in old communist agit-prop such as their favorite, "Freedom loving peoples of the world," which they repeat nearly as constantly as "God bless America."

The keystone of the Bush Administration is the USA Patriot Act, which has been dusted off from the Nixon era's appalling Huston Plan that was designed to eradicate domestic dissent but never fully activated because Watergate got him first. Denial of representation by an attorney, suspension of attorney/client privacy, arrest and secret imprisonment without charges, these sections of the USA Patriot Act (soon to be cemented by its successor Patriot Act 2) are legislative outlines of a police state, for now narrowly targeted on a minority (Muslims, with middle American support) but soon will broaden to cover the entire society. Precedents are being set and virtually occur unopposed: arrests without trial or right of attorney; people jailed for more than a year without charges filed or indictments; secret interrogations that might or might not include torture, we are not allowed to know. All this is being conducted in the of so-called Homeland security against terrorism, but soon enough even that pretext will be discarded to reveal a perpetual iron heel.

Our ancestors, as imperfect as they were, fought a revolution and conceived a Constitution, as imperfect as it is, because they thought of the future. The USA Patriot Act turns

the clock back to the past in direct refutation of the hopes and ideals that fired the first generation.

The "abyss from which there will be no resurrection" that Jefferson proclaimed federalism had fallen into with his election in 1801, has not been so deep — a new more virulent strain of federalism has crawled up from its crypt in a intensively post-modern form of concentrated wealth clustered with political power fueled by ultra right-wing ideologies.

Joseph Ellis wrote that the election of 1800 became "the revolution of 1800 when the money changers were driven from the American temple." Martin Van Buren said in a Senate speech in 1828 that Hamilton and the Federalists had been covert monarchists who hijacked "the Spirit of '76" and sold the soul of the American Revolution to investment bankers. (Ellis) He might have been describing the nouveau Federalists who have re-emerged at the beginning of the 21st century.

This second Bush administration is perhaps the most radical and reactionary in American history. The Bushies are also more arrogant than any other previous administration as they trample over rights in blatant contempt of democracy, flexing naked power and corporate profit (they are being called the "Mayberry Machiavellis"). Perhaps their swagger and rush to consolidate all power into their hands as quickly as possible is because they occupy the Presidency under false terms — they certainly wish for us to forget Bush was not elected, and seek to dismantle any possibility of recall or impeachment.

Our current government perpetuates political and Constitutional paralysis. It attempts to make itself seemingly omnipotent to such a degree that any dissent to its policies, actions or decrees is treated as treachery, or at the least as unpatriotic. If someone disagrees with our bellicose and insensitive President or tries to curb the power of the Pentagon that person is treated as a terrorist; such is the noxious decline of our current national dialogue. These policies are rapidly changing our nation into an autocracy. The reascent of the military is especially ominous, not entirely for the threat of perpetual war or the increased threat of nuclear holocaust but for the obliteration of civil law and the assumption of military rule which considers citizens only as economic and utilitarian objects of no personal worth or independence.

It is exactly that which our vaunted ancestors attempted to break away from and remain free from, though of course some of them wanted only to substitute themselves as the local authority in the absence of a King's power.

Jonathon Swift wrote in a letter to Bollingbrook in 1729: "...for I will venture all I am worth that there is not one human creature in power who will not be modest enough to confess that he proceeds wholly upon a principle of corruption."

The owners of capital own the media, the Congress, the armed forces and every instrument of state, in the view of V.I. Lenin, who was certain that liberation of the appeased classes was impossible without a violent revolution and destruction of the apparatus of the state. Karl Marx spoke about the inevitability of history as if it is a primary momentum that by its own "iron necessity" progresses toward the breaking of nations and the obliteration of the rich and powerful.

Marx, Lenin and their communism are considered as history's failures and false prophets. The perestroika of the late 1980s had more as a motive the saving of a dying system rather than evolving into another, yet the consequence might well be revolutionary and superior in the long run to the ruthless aspects of capitalism which are grossly apparent since the demise of communist Russia. In the 1930s the Great Depression was thought to spell the doom of capitalism. Many Americans believed that U.S. society was not merely doomed but did not deserve to survive because it had failed the aspirations of its people; its institutions were not just unworthy of preservation but should be eradicated. Capitalists were under attack, their values repudiated, their careless unconcerned greed held responsible for the ruin of society. Bankers and businessmen were found as guilty of crimes as the 1950s were to despise domestic communists (many of whom were Party members in the 1930s and upon whom revenge fell twenty years later).

The American dream so extolled by the flim-flammers appeared flawed and fatally cracked during the Depression's early years and radical reformers tried to dismantle the doomed structure. Most Americans, however, did not believe their system was mortally ill. Its decline was far more astonishing than its subsequent recovery.

Seventy years ago, when Franklin Delano Roosevelt became President in 1933, he said at his inauguration that there was nothing for Americans to fear but fear itself, and he set off on the busiest 100 days of a Presidency bringing in as he had promised in his campaign a "new deal for the American people." Roosevelt perceived that democratic capitalism could only survive and prosper if the basic principles of democracy were applied to achieve economic and social justice as well as civil and political freedom. (Mikhail Gorbachev might have also discerned the same about the basic tenets of communism; he turned to democratic reforms to preserve the fundamentals of state socialism in somewhat the same manner FDR utilized what his enemies called "socialist" reforms to save democracy in the USA.)

Democracy, which is a pragmatic compromise between the longing for freedom and the urge to subjugate it, is incomplete in its concentration on political rights without enough attention placed upon economic or social rights. At the heart of radical myth is the claim there are no neutrals in the great struggle to eliminate tyranny and poverty (or to maintain them) but in real life most people prefer to be neutral. They would rather work to improve their lot within a familiar framework than risk the imponderables of a new one. It is not so much poverty, inequality or repression that incite public clamor for change but more usually the fear of losing comforts already attained.

Underneath the plethora of serious problems battering the nation is the most important of all: the growing inequality of class in a society that smugly and blindly claims to be classless. The nation's stagnating productivity of virtually everything but military products is the major cause of the economic decline that has backlashed in domestic xenophobia against the poor and racial minorities who are both economically and politically crippled by the downturn and who are expected to pay for the deficit caused by the irresponsible avarice of those who manage the economy. In the meantime the working class is reduced to what might be considered post-industrial serfdom — as jobs disappear welfare and unemployment insurance is ripped away from the laid-off workers, and those who do work are denied living wages or union protection from abuse or threatened job losses to keep them in line.

The USA has seldom been kind or generous to its poor or minorities. Each time an outcast population struggles for equality the powerful and others who fear diversity or do not wish to share wealth or power attempt to squash individuals and movements responsible, usually in the names of law and order and/or national security. Yet compelling the underprivileged to remain in poverty and dejection is at once volatile and ultimately calamitous to the nation. The real best and brightest are kept out and all of us in the end suffer.

The imbalance that results corrupts the core of our democracy and produces mendacious mediocrity at the upper levels of power. We are governed by pious hypocrites who are mostly white males in a nation in which women are the majority and the great variety of races outnumber Caucasians. Women have made it into the middle levels of politics, as have a few blacks, Hispanics and Asian-Americans: but for the present and most likely beyond the end of the century the top national positions are closed to all but a small club of white males, a minority of upper class men who strain to hold onto power, clinging desperately, defiantly and ruthlessly to their peculiar form of country club apartheid.

Candidates of the political parties appeal to the masses for their votes but usually serve the minority at society's upper end. It is not entirely the fault of office seekers that the system is tilted toward the top. Elites take root in every society and wield disproportionate power unless a counterbalance restrains them. In a democracy that force of resistance is constitutionally the power of ordinary people. Political parties are formed to reflect and channel the passions of ordinary people and publicly represent them fairly, efficiently and powerfully — in theory at least — with a minimum of corruption and disruption. The two party system fails in this purpose. It is too exclusive and compressed, and it eliminates too many people and ideas from the actual process of governance. The parties in reality serve politicians and their favored patrons rather than the voters.

Reflecting the world at large which has generally been divided into rich and poor nations, politics in the USA are an ever-widening bicameral separation between *haves* and *have-nots*, with the Democratic Party accumulating a disproportionate membership of the impoverished that for a long time gave it numerical superiority but recently percolated a major defection of its traditional (white) middle-class base, tremendously benefiting the Republican Party.

The degeneration of the Democratic Party intensifies the problem and leaves a black hole in the center of American politics. The Party's own center has fallen out, deserted to the Republican Superparty, leaving disenfranchised minorities clinging to a disintegrated corona. Perhaps like the Soviet Communist Party its ruins should be abandoned, the surviving fragments reformed into a new party (as in Russia) or a multitude of parties that might at least reflect the disparate new majorities that have moved into the American electorate but so far have not gained real or representative power.

A kinder assessment of the Democratic Party is that it is weak and second rate; and that it must acknowledge it has failed as an alternative to the GOP since Nixon transfigured southern Democrats into Republicans. The response of the Democrats has been to imitate the Republicans, which characterizes the Clinton years. The Democrats, like the Whigs of the 1850s, are a dying party but hopes that a vigorous new party will be reborn to replace it in time for 2004 is exceedingly dismal.

An old joke about the difference between optimists and pessimists might apply to Bush's claim that he is in line with the thinking of the American people. An optimist is certain that the U.S. is the best of all possible worlds: a pessimist agrees. Bush might be right. There is strong evidence that the country is indeed conservative, slow to change and in constant reaction to it. The problem is that blacks and the poor (which includes all other racial minorities in the U.S. as well as a significant number of women) are shoved out by the rightward politicians and party hacks and they drop away, either too disillusioned or too angry to register or vote. So a conservative minority rules in its claim as a majority. Almost 50% of eligible voters did not vote in 2000; a slim majority of them voted for the Democratic candidate Al Gore. The Green Party and Ralph Nader in particular are blamed for taking votes away from Gore, but a real reason the Democrats were flimflammed was that they did not have the courage or intelligence to register the vast numbers of eligible unregistered voters.

George Bush reflects the post-industrial move toward the U.S. becoming the dominant headquarters nation of the world. Intensive technological production has given way to administrative, social and military occupations. Highly skilled workers who once commanded high salaries are rotting in unemployment, welfare or lowpaying unskilled jobs and are among the increasingly homeless. Their skills are obsolete, their knowledge and experience of lessening value in a society increasingly preoccupied with relatively unskilled clerical and service work. Unions are broken because plutocrats are aware that profit margins in a service economy demand a low-wage workforce with few of the medical or retirement benefits that were hardwon by unions in the smokestack industries. Both the value of work and the worker has eroded.