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# 2004: EMPIRE OR DEMOCRACY?

BY THOM HARTMANN

*"The greatest danger in all political systems is that of executive power. It is equally true there is always a tendency in political institutions toward executive supremacy."*

—CALEB PERRY PATTERSON

*"We loan the power of the people to representatives when we vote; and we can make changes through the vote."*

—ED CHASE

Having lived in Germany and extensively interviewed many (now elderly) former members of Adolf Hitler's Nazi Party (and one spy for him) for a book I was writing on the religion of the Nazis, I can say categorically that Hitler had (or at least his people believed he had) a vision. It was a world at peace (for 1000 years, no less), a world purified of disruptive or "undesirable" people, a world united in what Hitler called "A New Christianity," a world where things worked smoothly and people were happy because of "strong, steady leadership" (even during times of change), a world guided by a leader who held tenaciously to a singular vision.

Hitler's idea was nothing new, really — it was the vision of Empire. Alexander the Great had a similar vision, as did several of the Caesars of Rome, the last Inca Emperor Wayna Capac, several Chinese dynasties, Papal dynasties, and various larger and smaller dynasties from those of the last few centuries in Europe, to those started in Mesopotamia 6000 years ago, morphed into a reactive Islamic empire during the Crusades (eventually the Ottoman Empire), and whose revival now fills the dreams of Al Qaeda.

It also appears, for the first time since George Washington outspokenly warned us of engaging in foreign entanglements abroad, that the neocon vision of Empire has largely taken over an American administration.

Vision is a two-edged sword. The upside of people holding a vision is that they will work to fulfill a vision in a way that mere money can never animate. This is true from companies to nonprofits to churches to nations. A powerful and positive vision is the key ingredient for the success — particularly long term — of any venture.

The downside is when a vision is toxic and dysfunctional (think Jim Jones or Hitler) it can cause generations — centuries — of suffering, war, and desolation.

For a bit over 200 years, the vision held by the majority of Americans and our elected officials was one of egalitarian democracy in a constitutional republic; government of, by, and for the people; and the belief that democracy was a contagious idea. In that, we've been proven right — the UN notes that in 1800 there were only three democracies in the world (none in 1775) and today there are 81 "full" democracies with nearly 100 other nations moving rapidly in democratic directions.

Empire and democracy are mutually exclusive — ultimately a nation must choose one or the other.

Interesting, in all of history, no two fully democratic nations have ever gone to war with each other. Emmanuel Kant was right when he wrote, back in 1795, that the idea of a world of democratic nations, which was only a flickering experiment

in faraway North America and just catching fire in France, might eliminate for all time the scourge of war.

Kant's treatise on the topic, *Zum Ewigen Frieden: Ein Philosophischer Entwurf* (Toward Eternal Peace: A Philosophical Draft), suggested that when a nation was ruled democratically — that is, by the will of the majority of the people — those people would never choose war unless it was in self-defense. Therefore, Kant reasoned, if all nations were democratic, there would never be aggressors (because no majority of citizens would ever vote to send their children off to die), and war would be eliminated.

Kant's prediction didn't come out of the blue. Similar sentiments had been suggested by Adam Smith in his 1776 book, *The Wealth of Nations*, implied by Rousseau and Locke, and were openly advocated by America's Founders, particularly Jefferson, Franklin, Mason, and Madison.

Kant's vision of a world at peace because of universal democracy even directly influenced Madison to demand that the Constitution explicitly specify that the ability to declare war rest exclusively with Congress, the then only directly-elected branch of government. (In those days, nobody ever imagined that in some future time our executive branch would lie to Congress to get war powers.)

Then came the Bush II administration, infected by the Straussian/Machiavellian belief of the "Noble Lie," the paranoid requirement for Absolute Power to maintain security, all reflecting the Project for a New American Century's vision of Empire. They ignored the lessons of history (or simply hadn't bothered to read Kant, Locke, Adams, Jefferson or Madison — or modern history).

The response in the world to Bush's vision of America transforming itself into Empire — preemptive war, absolute good (our empire) versus absolute evil (all others), unchallengeable international military superiority with military bases in over 100 sovereign nations, "you're with us or against us" rhetoric — has been both predictable and tragic.

Stable democracies are recoiling, distancing themselves from us as fast as they can. Evolving democracies are abandoning many of Jefferson's visions of democracy and becoming more repressive and less democratic, following our Guantanamo and Abu Ghraib lead. And dictatorships like China point to our shift toward authoritarianism and conquest of a non-threatening but oil-rich foreign land as justification for internal crackdowns, renewed threats against their neighbors (particularly Taiwan), and a huge military buildup in anticipation of the day when the Chinese Empire may well confront the American Empire for the world's last oil supplies.

Vision is the core of it all, and understanding the power of a shared vision is vital in this critical election year.

Visions are contagious. They animate and empower. They literally transform — from the small (family, community, region) to the entire planet. And they can just as easily be toxic as positive, a reality our Founders both knew and used.

When Attorney General William Wirt delivered Thomas Jefferson's eulogy on October 19, 1826 in the Hall of the U.S. House of Representatives, he noted how Jefferson believed in democracy, national humility, and abhorred empire. Jefferson well understood, Wirt noted, the danger of past empires as well as the dangerous possibility of a future President who may seize more power than the Constitution intended.

"The successful warrior, who desolated whole empires for his own aggrandizement," Wirt wrote about such a dangerous possibility, "the successful usurper of his country's rights and liberties, may have their hours of swelling pride, in which they may look back with a barbarous joy upon the triumph of their talents, and feast upon the adulation of the sycophants that surround them."

In the next paragraph, however, Wirt cited Jefferson's certain knowledge that those who seek empire will not only see their nation's downfall, but their own internal spiritual destruction as well. "...but, night and silence come; and conscience takes her turn. The bloody field rises upon the startled imagination. The shades of the slaughtered innocent stalk in terrific procession before the couch. The agonizing cry of countless widows and orphans invades the ear. The bloody dagger of the assassin plays, in airy terror, before the vision."

Empire, Jefferson believed, always ended in disaster, as the nations oppressed by empire invariably rebel. Wirt summarized Jefferson's sentiments: "Violated liberty lifts her avenging lance, and a down-trodden nation rises before them, in all the majesty of its wrath."

Which brings us to today. The battle of the election of 2004 — from local races to the Presidency — is fundamentally a battle of visions: Empire versus Democracy.

Will we pursue, as most recently did Hitler, the historic — and failed — vision of empire, sustained by the wiping out of the wealth of our commons and our middle class while spilling the blood of our children? Or will we pursue democracy — helping create a humane, multilateral, cooperative world while working for greater social justice at home?

Those of us who share this latter vision of democracy must — in the best grassroots traditions of the historic vision-driven populist, progressive, civil rights, and antiwar movements — help bring it about by awakening our neighbors, friends and co-workers; and by infiltrating the Democratic Party to challenge the corporatist vision of the Democratic Leadership Council (DLC), which is even today struggling to seize the soul of the Democratic Party in service of corporate rule and empire.

Shall we move back to the failed darkness of bloody empire, or forward into the light of worldwide democracy?

The choice, this year more than most in the history of America, is ours.

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