



BARRIE MAGUIRE

# WHAT HAPPENED TO AMERICA?

BY ELIOT WEINBERGER

In the last fifty years, we have grown accustomed to governments whose policies on specific issues may be good or bad, but which essentially institute incremental changes to the status quo. The major exceptions have been Thatcher and Reagan, but even their programs of dismantling systems of social welfare seem, in retrospect, mild compared to what is happening in the United States under George Bush — or more exactly, the ruling junta that tells Bush what to do and say.

It is unquestionably the most radical government in modern American history, one whose ideology and actions have become so pervasive, and are so unquestionably mirrored by the mass media here, that the population seems to have forgotten what "normal" is.

George Bush is the first unelected President of the United States (with exception of the unique circumstances of Gerald Ford's Presidency following Nixon's resignation), installed by a right-wing Supreme Court in a kind of judicial coup d'etat. He is the first to actively subvert one of the pillars of American democracy: the separation of church and state. There are now daily prayer meetings and Bible study groups in every branch of the government, and religious organizations are being given funds to take over educational and welfare programs that have always been the domain of the state.

It is the first administration to openly declare a policy of unilateral aggression, a *Pax Americana* where the presence of allies (whether England or Bulgaria) is agreeable but unimportant; where international treaties no longer apply to the United States; and where — for the first time in history — this country reserves the right to non-defensive "pre-emptive" strikes against any nation on earth, for whatever reason it declares.

It is the first — since internment of Japanese-Americans in World War 2 — to enact special laws for a specific group. Non-citizen young Muslim men are required to register and subject themselves to interrogation. Many hundreds have been arrested and held without trial or access to legal assistance — a violation of another pillar of American democracy: *habeus corpus*. In Guantanamo Bay, where it is said execution chambers are being prepared, hundreds of foreign nationals have been kept for nearly four years in a limbo that clearly contravenes the Geneva Convention, as well as covertly transporting prisoners to other nations for torture.

Similar to the Reagan era, it is an administration openly devoted to helping the rich and ignoring the poor, one that has turned a budget surplus into a massive deficit through its combination of enormous tax cuts for the wealthy (particularly those who earn more than a million dollars a year) and increases in defense spending. (And although Republicans always campaign on "less government," it has created the largest new government bureaucracy in history: the Department of Homeland Security.) The *Financial Times* of England, hardly a hotbed of leftists, has categorized this economic policy as "the lunatics taking over the asylum."

But more than Reagan, whose policies tended to benefit the rich in general, most of Bush's legislation specifically enriches those in his lifelong inner circle from the oil, mining, logging, construction, and pharmaceutical industries. At the middle level of the bureaucracy, where laws may be issued without congressional approval, hundreds of regulations have been changed to lower standards of pollution or safety in the workplace.

Billions in government contracts have been awarded, without competition, to corporations formerly run by administration officials. In a country where the most significant social changes are enacted by court rulings, rather than by legislation, the Bush administration has been filling every level of the complex judicial system with right-wing ideologues, especially those who have protected corporations from lawsuits by individuals or environmental groups, and those who are opposed to women's reproductive rights.

Most of all, America doesn't feel like America any more. The climate of militarism and fear, similar to any totalitarian state, permeates everything. Bush is the first American President in memory to swagger around in a military uniform, though he himself — like all of his most militant advisers — evaded the Vietnam

War. (Even Eisenhower, the most successful general of World War 2, never wore his uniform while he was President.)

In the airports of provincial cities, there are frequent announcements in that assuring, disembodied voice of science-fiction films: "The Department of Homeland Security advises that the Terror Alert is now... Code Orange." Every few weeks there is an announcement that another terrorist attack is imminent, and citizens are urged to take ludicrous measures, like sealing their windows, against biological and chemical attacks, and to report the suspicious activities of their neighbors.

The Pentagon institutes the "Total Information Awareness" program to collect data on the ordinary activities of ordinary citizens (credit card charges, library book withdrawals, university course enrollments) and when this is perceived as going too far, they change the name to "Terrorist Information Awareness" and continue to do the same things. Millions are listed in airport security computers as potential terrorists, including antiwar demonstrators and pacifists. Critics are warned to "watch what they say" and lists of "traitors" are posted on the Internet.

The war in Iraq has been the most extreme manifestation of this new America, and almost a casebook study in totalitarian techniques.

First, an Enemy is created by blatant lies that are endlessly repeated until the population believes it: in this case, that Iraq was linked to the attack of the World Trade Center, and that it possesses vast "weapons of mass destruction" that threaten the world.

Then a War of Liberation, entirely portrayed by the mass media in terms of our Heroic Troops, with little or no imagery of casualties and devastation, and with morale-inspiring, scripted "news" scenes — such as the toppling of the Saddam statue and the heroic "rescue" of Private Lynch.

Finally, as has happened with Afghanistan, America has received very little (factual) news of the chaos that has followed the Great Victory.

It is difficult to speak of what is happening in America without resorting to the hyperbolic clichés of anti-Americanism that have lost their meaning after so many decades, but that now have finally come true.

Perhaps one can only recite facts and I have mentioned only a few of them here. This is, quite simply, the most frightening American administration in modern times, one that is appalling both to the left and to traditional conservatives. This junta is unabashed in its imperialist ambitions; it is enacting an Orwellian state of Perpetual War; it is dismantling, or attempting to dismantle, the most fundamental tenets of American democracy; it is acting without opposition within the government, and is operating so quickly on so many fronts it has overwhelmed and exhausted any popular opposition.

Perhaps it cannot be stopped, but the first step toward slowing it down is recognition that this is an American government unlike any other in this country's history, and one for whom democracy is an obstacle.

Eliot Weinberger wrote this article for *Vorwaerts*. His political articles, in 18 languages, have been published as a book in the United States, titled *9/12* by Prickly Paradigm Press.

# HAPPY BIRTHDAY BABY

A friend from Redding, California visiting a mutual friend in Portland brought him, three bottles of locally produced red wine and a couple of issues of the 'People's Press' to Astoria. Published by Del and Suzy Coffee in Manton, California, and distributed in several Northern California cities and town, The 'People's Press' celebrated its second anniversary last spring in an editorial...

BY SUZY COFFEE

When I announce to you that the *People's Press* turned two years old on March 24th, I say it with the gushing starry-eyed indulgence of a proud and beaming parent.

When Del and I first started up the paper two years ago, we realized a long held dream. First published five days after the American invasion of Iraq, the only thing I knew about issue #1 of the *People's Press* was that it was filling a need; a local public, as well as a personal need to speak out freely without corporate-government media censorship. I couldn't know at the time what shape the paper would take as it "grew up" within the communities it served. Del and I were eager to find out.

Two years later, we are still thrilled and inspired to be exercising our First Amendment right through this local, free independent news-magazine. More than ever, I believe that if we do not exercise this fundamental freedom, then we will surely lose it.

The thing is, I love free speech. As a woman living in Patriarchal America, I have felt the strong cultural pressure to be silent, and to acquiesce to male authority. Being able to speak freely is for me like being able to breathe. And this makes sense, since air is the conductor of sound and ultimately, speech.

When you think of it, speech is the primary medium by which human beings communicate and connect with each other. Speech is a powerful tool of evolution. It fosters relationship among us, and builds community. I will go so far as to name *free* speech as the mother of all freedoms. The creators of the Constitution knew what they were doing by making free speech a first and foremost right of the people.

It figures that corporations would put a gag on free speech. Having purchased American media, they can do what they want. They have shareholders to consider, protect, and enrich. American media today aren't just supportive of the conservative right agenda, they *are* it. To boot, corporations want to *control*, which they shamelessly do with the public information they now own. Ignorance breeds fear and isolation; a divide and conquer strategy that has been historically effective in controlling the masses.

As a counterbalance to the blatant self-interest of corporate media, the *People's Press* remains a viable medium for genuine human communication. We "uncork" the flow of information that mainstream media have captured and hoarded. On its pages we have shared, debated and digested new information, which has inspired and armed us for action. As editor, I have consistently sought publication of local activists, community members and friends who *are* the *People's Press*, as are the faithful readers.

As a small, independent local free news-magazine, competing with corporate commercialized media feels like Davey going up against the mighty Goliath. The key to success, I have found, is in steady, unwavering persistence. "Just keep publishing" has been our mantra for the last two years. Consequently, the *People's Press* has been around long enough now to see with a bit of hindsight, often a valuable perspective.

I can give first hand testimony that free and open communication does indeed build community. Personally and locally, I have watched people (in ever growing numbers) come together, coalesce and begin to take action. All of this has occurred because of a freer flow of information that has been "broadcast" by American citizens themselves. And what is happening locally, is happening on a larger collective scale, all across the nation and world.


Through the *People's Press*, I have witnessed, in fact, a *whole community* of peace and justice minded people steadily. It is a solidarity; a coalition of people who reject the social, economic and cultural takeover of American government by a powerful concentrated corporate elite, and are taking matters into their own hands.

With every issue of the *People's Press*, Del and I continue to feel the exhilaration of being a part of this cohesive and hopeful group. And we are honored to provide a vehicle through which the voice of the people can be expressed. Living up to our Mission Statement to provide an alternative voice to corporate media, a forum for social and political change, where diverse groups can debate issues, build consensus and pull together for the cause of justice and peace, we remain dedicated to this dynamic and satisfying work.

I am eager today to see what, in the years ahead, the *People's Press* will grow into. I do know that at this very moment, working together, we are already beginning to make a tangible difference and mark.

Turning the tide is what we are after.

The *People's Press* is published every other month and is distributed in Manton, Shingletown, Redding, Red Bluff, Chico, Weaverville, Dunsuir, Mt. Shasta and Montgomery Creek, California. Its address is P.O. Box 514, Manton, California 96059 ([peoplespress@jett.net](mailto:peoplespress@jett.net)). Fax/home (530) 474-3961.



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