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Morality & Politics

The Challenge Confronting Conservatives: Sustaining a Republic of Hustlers

By Walter A. McDougall

At our 2009 annual meeting, the Scholars Council of the Library of Congress was exposed to some surreal juxtapositions. First, the Librarian James Billington described the cultural impact of the global financial meltdown. University and public libraries lost a third to a half of their endowments or budgets, forcing them to lay off staff, suspend acquisitions, and eliminate whole collections. The Library of Congress was in better shape since it serves at the pleasure of the only institution empowered to authorize the printing of money. But without budget increases the Library can no longer keep up with the flood of new data and media in the digital age. Hence we were asked: what materials would statesmen and scholars twenty-five years from now rue us for *not* having collected today?

Next, we were given a briefing on the Library's latest triumph, the World Digital Library. This miraculous project offers on-line, virtual-reality, access to the greatest manuscripts and artifacts from every civilization and historical era. A thousand items were already posted—some of them rare books hundreds of pages long—and tens of thousands of items are already projected. So even as we live in an age when all the music ever recorded will soon fit on a single I-Pod, we will soon live in an age when every artifact from Hammurabi's Laws to a 1906 film of Ellis Island can be downloaded on your Blackberry.

Imagine, therefore, how discordant our next impression seemed. When the council was asked what new missions the Library might perform, a British professor asked sternly why the Library could not do something to uplift America's deplorable popular culture. Dr. Billington always speaks of the Library mission to "bring Athens to Rome," but could it not use its resources and political ties to bring a bit of Rome to the barbarians?

Finally, even as we pondered the co-existence of a bankrupt American economy, a miraculous American technology, and a philistine American public, we were asked what issue we would raise if given access to members of Congress. I had an answer to that one. I would summon the committees responsible for foreign affairs and

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defense and insist they stage a Great Debate of the sort that occurred in the late 1940s. At that time the question was whether the Truman Doctrine, which rhetorically committed the U.S. to defend all countries on earth, was really in the national interest, and if so, how the government proposed to do it and pay for it. Today the question would be whether the pledge of recent administrations to eliminate terrorism and tyranny everywhere and democratize the Middle East is really in the national interest, and if so, how to do it and pay for it. In short, let's get a grip on our pretentious rhetoric before it carries us over the cliff. Of course, Congressmen—by definition skilled hustlers in America's free market of power—are themselves too dependent on pretense to expose it.

I enjoy those annual meetings, not least because we always get a VIP tour of some part of the Library of Congress: on this occasion the rare book room. But I left convinced we are living in what Arnold Toynbee called the Indian Summer stage of civilization.

The situation in which we find ourselves did not arise overnight. In 1999 the Philadelphia Society asked me to give the luncheon address before a presumably like-minded crowd. Since I had recently published *Promised Land, Crusader State*, they wanted me to discuss "The Crusader State in the 21st Century." 9/11 still lay in the future, of course, so I puckishly likened the Clinton administration's feckless humanitarian interventions to medieval crusades, and finished as follows:

> To preach a crusade is a dangerous thing, for you may just succeed in launching one, in which case you may inspire fanaticism and black-and-white judgments, and so lose the ability to keep the violence proportional and channeled toward realistic ends. Preaching crusades can also risk the opposite outcome. Like the football coach whose pep talks wear thin, a President who turns every cause into a holy one, every enemy into a Hitler, and every conflict into a genocide, may soon find his audience sinking, exhausted and disbelieving, into the very cynicism he hopes to surmount.
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> One of my Lenten disciplines this year was to re-read the works of George Orwell. His description of the political debasement of the English language was chilling in light of the linguistic gymnastics of our present leaders. But what struck me most was that his empire of Oceania ruled by Big Brother in *1984* represented the pure Crusader State. Oceania is always at war, but for no specific reason, and against enemies that are constantly shifting, but always depicted as utterly evil. The wars are low-level affairs fought on distant fronts, but just enough terrorist strikes occur in London itself to stoke the fury and fear of the home front. Nor can the war ever be won, for the permanent Crusade is what justifies Big Brother's rule.
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> When must the United States act, when must it lead—and when not? There is no simple answer, especially when our strategic and moral calculus is complicated by lack of trust in a President's motives. . . . As C. S. Lewis wrote, "Lilies that fester smell far worse then weeds. The higher the pretensions of our rulers, the more meddlesome and impertinent their rule is likely to be and the more the thing in whose name they rule will be defiled." That is why American crusaders may someday lament, with the 13th century poet Rinaldo d'Aquino: "Alas, pilgrim cross, why have you thus destroyed me?"[1]

The talk received a standing ovation from most of the audience, but on the way out I was almost mugged by Straussian neoconservatives who (we later learned) were already plotting a crusade in Iraq, as well as some Catholics offended by my critique of the medieval crusades! I left confused and dismayed by the evident crack-up of the conservative coalition, and have never returned to the Philadelphia Society. The moral of the story is never take an audience for granted unless the organization's leaders have followed the example of William F. Buckley, Jr., when he began his career by founding a conservative club for Yale undergraduates. Just seven prospective members showed up, but Buckley, undeterred, made it his first priority to *purge the ranks*. His challenge in the late 1940s was to *define* a politically and culturally potent brand of American conservatism. Having come full circle, conservatives face the same challenge today, but in much worse circumstances. After World War II—a true unipolar moment if there ever was one—U.S. military, economic, and ideological power were at their peak, and almost all citizens believed in an American heritage worth conserving. In today's faux unipolar moment, American power is spent, its future already mortgaged out two generations, and citizens may be excused for demanding change rather than conservation. Moreover, I would contend that much of what has passed for conservatism over my lifetime has been a masquerade or else an

unwitting enabler for public and private pretense and prodigality that have almost reached fatal proportions. Back in the 1960s Illinois Senator Everett Dirksen would drawl, "A billion here, a billion there, and pretty soon we're talking real money." Today we read Charles Morris on *The Two Trillion Dollar Meltdown: Easy Money, High Rollers, and the Great Credit Crash* (Perseus, 2008), Joseph Stiglitz on *The Three Trillion Dollar War: The True Cost of the War in Iraq* (Norton, 2008), Andrew Bacevich on *The Limits of Power*, which foresees the suicide of American Exceptionalism, and Niall Ferguson on *The Ascent of Money*, which foresees another Great Depression during which "there will be blood." If in fact our Republic of Hustlers has degenerated in our time into a monstrous Ponzi scheme, then what is it that conservatives would want to conserve? If in fact today's festering lilies sprang from bad seeds planted far back in American history, then what is it that conservatives would want to restore? If in fact the prudential, immediate goal of conservatives is simply to defend what remains of our heritage and forestall a slide into anarchy, then what is it conservatives can do, paradoxically, to sustain the very Republic of Hustlers they damn?

I don't even know which of those questions is the apt one, much less what its answer may be. I'm not even sure anymore whether I qualify as conservative. I did learn, however, while preparing this article, that extensive psychological surveys reveal that self-defined conservatives are happier people than self-defined liberals. Conservatives are also more generous and humorous, have healthier marriages and even have better sex. Another thing I have learned is how strange it can be to meditate on one's own intellectual history. To re-read stuff you wrote long ago and remember the mentors, milieus, and issues that influenced you over the stages of life, is like conducting an archeological dig into the ruins of selves that no longer exist but are the unmistakable ancestors of your present self.

My parents were Eisenhower Republicans: white bread, Middle West, middle class, non-ideological, and thoroughly secular. Indeed, I now realize my first experience of American pretense were the saccharine Methodist church services we attended on Christmas or Easter because the grandparents were visiting. I grew up apolitical and remained so as late as 1968 when I graduated from Amherst College and joined the Army. Two years later I returned from Vietnam holding flag-waving militarists and flag-burning hippies in equal contempt. I remember being the only person I knew who thought Gerald Ford vs. Jimmy Carter was an excellent choice because both seemed to me refreshingly decent and moderate. Then I completed my Ph.D. and—in retrospect, incredibly—was hired by the history department at U.C. Berkeley.

The constant agitprop of Berkeley radicals was designed to raise people's consciousness. And it did: it turned me into a conservative. So did the hostility of a powerful faction in the department that wanted me fired because they opposed diplomatic history on principle. My position was known as the death seat. Then my first wife left me. It was in that slough of despond, from 1978 to '81, that I experienced my adult conversion that turned me into that rarest of birds: a born-again Episcopalian who, because he actually believed the creed, attended an orthodox Anglican parish and devoured the works of C. S. Lewis, G. K. Chesterton, Charles Williams, and the Oxford Movement. Over those same years I became politically self-aware and was a vocal member of the tiny minority in Berkeley that cheered Ronald Reagan's landslide. Finally, over those same years I researched the space book that eventually won me tenure and a Pulitzer Prize. The book was not tendentious, but was certainly influenced by new faith and politics. I contrasted the prudent humility, economy, and limited-government ethic of the Eisenhower administration with the technocratic arrogance, pay-any-price profligacy, and prestige-mongering of the Kennedy administration. It was then that I stumbled on a little-known book by Daniel Boorstin,[2] which argued that authentic experiences in American life were being replaced, one by one, by canned images: what we would call "virtual reality." It was also then that I first suspected that Americans were prone to idolatry, for instance in their worship of technology and the technological fix, which struck me as merely a democratic version of the Soviet command economy and R&D. I later realized that big-government engineering was not even well suited to space exploration after

NASA decayed into a venal, mediocre bureaucracy. But I realized at once that Kennedy, Johnson, and their Best and Brightest had succumbed to hubris when they tried to "engineer" urban renewal, wars on poverty, and not least the winning of hearts and minds and guerilla wars in the Third World. The Pulitzer committee must have mistaken my book to be a leftist critique of the military-industrial complex, but one of my erstwhile colleagues at the Air and Space Museum cried, "McDougall won the Pulitzer? But it's a conservative book!"

I kept a pretty low profile in the 1980s—that's just my personality. But I did relish being a Berkeley conservative. I wrote op-eds, contributed to *National Review*, co-edited a book on Reagan's Grenada invasion with Paul Seabury, and was recommended by Seabury to the editors at *Commentary* for whom I wrote articles and book reviews over a span of time that survived the end of the Cold War and lingered into the mid-1990s. By then I had accepted an endowed chair at Penn, said a long good-bye to California and the Pacific Rim in the book *Let the Sea Make a Noise: A History of the North Pacific from Magellan to MacArthur*, and begun teaching U.S. diplomatic history as well as European. That in turn inspired *Promised Land, Crusader State: An American Encounter with the World Since 1776*, which appeared in 1997 and accomplished the next refinement of what I still deemed my conservatism. Teaching, and then summarizing in print, the whole sweep of U.S. foreign relations obliged me to pay serious attention to the first 125 years of American history. During that long period, the nation, while never isolationist, pursued a coherent grand strategy inspired by Washington's Farewell Address, John Quincy Adams's Monroe Doctrine, and Manifest Destiny expansion, while eschewing a large standing military and crusades to export American values and institutions. I understood why all that gave way to global assertiveness in the twentieth century, but I rued Wilsonianism. To be sure, I granted that Wilson's ideals could serve as benign propaganda for a hard-headed strategy like containment and deterrence. But liberal internationalism and its corollary, nation-building and the export of democracy, struck me as self-righteous, self-defeating pretense. Indeed, a colleague at the Foreign Policy Research Institute recently reminded me that I had written in *Promised Land*: "No international bureaucracy, much less a single nation, however powerful and idealistic, can substitute itself for the healthy nationalism of an alien people. Almost everyone agrees, for instance, that Saddam Hussein is bad for his country. But can Americans be better Iraqis than Iraqis themselves, or presume to tell the Chinese how to be better Chinese? If we try, we can only be poorer Americans."[3]

That was back in the 1990s, remember, when others, too, called for the United States to become a normal nation again after the Cold War, or decried Clinton's notion of foreign policy as social work, or insisted Superpowers don't do windows. I was hardly out of the mainstream.

But a certain cabal deemed my book "inconvenient." Not wrong-headed, inaccurate, or irrelevant: just inconvenient. I had argued for a more humble American foreign policy whereas the cabal was beating the drums for a proud, ambitious, militant one. I have since pieced together the chain of interlocutors through which the word "inconvenient" moved from its author to the person who conveyed it to me. I won't name names, but readers may guess who some of them were. They were the ones who tried to spike good reviews of the book, ordered their minions to nip at my heels in print or gatherings like the Philadelphia Society, and in one prominent case would devote years to writing a two-volume history of U.S. diplomacy meant to refute McDougall's interpretation of what it originally meant to be American, and therefore, under the doctrine of original intent, what it means today to be conservative.

I refer, needless to say, to the neoconservatives who—as I first learned from James Kurth—are neither new nor conservative. But even as they burned our bridge from their end I inadvertently kindled flames on my end in the last piece *Commentary* ever asked me to write. I had the chutzpah to comment unfavorably on a narcissistic essay by Norman Podhoretz in which he recalled his circuitous path from Trotskyite Bolshevism to neoconservatism. It was then that I learned that it isn't enough to occupy the same political space as the neocons; you must have arrived there by the same path. That is why people whose traditionalism, libertarianism, or Christianity informed their

conservatism were suspect in the eyes of elite refugees from the Left.

We know who won out in the middle run. Whether or not they "hijacked" the G. W. Bush administration after 9/11, the neocons certainly got their way for five years: years during which the United States got bogged down in two unwinnable, unendable wars that have exhausted the Army and helped to double the national debt. They pretended they hadn't been scheming to invade Iraq since the 1990s. They pretended the invasion was all about weapons of mass destruction rather than terrorism, oil, the Bush family feud with Saddam, Karl Rove's re-election calendar, Israel, or democratizing the Middle East. They pretended it could all be done quickly and on the cheap. They pretended they had a game plan for a new Iraqi regime. Like most war parties in American history they hustled the Congress, the public, and some foreign allies only to hustle themselves in the end.

Happily—we conservatives specialize in happiness—I spent the Global War on Terror on the sidelines. Earlier in 2001 I had stepped down as editor of *Orbis* and immersed myself in a new narrative of American history. Since I've now published two fat books that only get down to 1877, chances are slim I shall ever finish the project. But it has been very rewarding. First, my study of colonial and early national history has taught me an immense amount about America's origins and character, indeed taught what I needed to know in order to understand what sort of world power the U.S. became after 1898. Second, the project gave me an excuse to sit out contemporary debates on terrorism, the Bush Doctrine, and the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq. However, having learned what I did about America, I am now eager to revisit *Promised Land, Crusader State* and carry its analysis down to the present.

Freedom Just Around the Corner: A New American History 1585-1828, appeared in early 2004 and was influenced by the mood of the first half of the last decade, when memories were fresh of the hegemony, prosperity, and careless corruption of the Bill Clinton era, and the early successes of the War on Terror warranted optimism.[4] Of course, *Freedom* was also a success story in that it told of the spectacular growth of the thirteen colonies, nearly miraculous achievement of independence and a constitutional republic, and frenetic territorial, demographic, and economic growth down to the election of Andrew Jackson. The story was loaded with hustling, because colonists began scoffing law and authority in the name of liberty and wealth from the moment they debarked in North America. But I was smitten by Americans' virtues and vices alike, and wondered at their genius for making both serve the national purpose. *Throes of Democracy*, by contrast, appeared in early 2008 and was influenced by the mood of the last half of the decade, when the Bush Doctrine, Global War on Terror, crusade to rid the world of tyranny, and campaign to democratize the Middle East had bred disaster more swiftly and irreversibly than even I had feared.[5] Of course, *Throes* was also a far gloomier tale than *Freedom* because it covered the decades when the blithe hustling, mobbing, lawless Americans fell through pretense and pride over slavery into the slaughter of Civil War, followed by Reconstruction, their first failed experiment in nation-building.

Since that book appeared the other shoe dropped: no, not another 9/11 type attack as we feared, but a far more damaging, self-inflicted attack centered on Wall Street launched by the purveyors of sub-prime mortgages, the investors who bid up the baskets of rotten apples thinking to make a killing in the real estate bubble, the foolish central bankers and regulators who encouraged the hustle, and the mercenary members of Congress who had sweetheart relationships with all the above. Now, in both of my volumes I had stressed the phenomenon of creative corruption in American life. In every era America's leaders, the ones inventing everyone's future, evinced the qualities of the hustler and dodger, finding ways around obstacles to change and growth whether or not they conformed to ethics and laws. Whenever such corruption was perceived as damaging to society and of benefit only to the hustler, then American public opinion damned it and demanded the guilty be scourged. But more often the great scams in American politics and business, from the Transcontinental Railroad to urban machines, could be perceived as socially beneficial, for instance by opening up new opportunities for the many or keeping immigrants under control. In those cases Americans winked at the means employed to pursue the

ends, or else applauded the authors of creative corruption, just as their colonial forbears had smuggled, cooked the books, and rioted against customs agents and Redcoats rather than obey the Navigation Acts.

The message today is clear. Not only do the real estate bubble, sub-prime scandal, Fannie Mae and Freddie Mac monkey business, and allegedly philanthropic Ponzi schemes like Bernie Madoff's clearly fall into the category of destructive corruption, their scale has increased by many orders of magnitude from the hundreds of millions of dollars lost in the S&L bailouts and insider trading scandals, to the billions lost in the junk bond and Enron scandals, to the trillions lost in the sub-prime lending scandal. Typically, the sub-prime mortgage scam masqueraded as a charitable, patriotic enterprise insofar as it helped millions of indigent citizens to realize their American Dream of home ownership. Typically, government functioned as an accessory to the crime. Thus did former Fed Chairman Alan Greenspan confess to the error of trusting banks to regulate themselves, and former Treasury Secretary Larry Summers confess that the illusion of virtue made it impossible to regulate Fannie Mae and Freddie Mac. Typically, as Warren Buffett remarked, the innovators of the get-rich-quick scheme were followed by the imitators and at last by the idiots such that sub-prime loans by 2005 totaled $625 billion, or 20 percent of all new mortgages.

Needless to say, the speculative greed of the many—the suckers—is what enables the few to pull off their uncreative destruction. But not only the greedy get hurt when one of these bubbles bursts or scams explodes. Widows and orphans, pensioners, the unemployed, and the destitute, not only in the U.S. but around the world, suffer the most when Americans contrive to wreck their own economy for a season. Consequently, the hustling and corruption that Samuel Huntington once argued were natural and even healthy companions of social progress, and which I once celebrated as a sort of shady virtue that helped explain America's spectacular growth, now appear to me as a vice and, at its worst, a sin whose wages are death. Surely that is part of what *Moby-Dick* was all about. But even more prophetic was Melville's *The Confidence Man: His Masquerade*, a satirical exposé of the crooked national soul that was published in 1858, just three years before Americans took to drowning each other's sins, both southern and northern, in each other's blood.

Of course, the orthodox Yankee strain of American Civil Religion had no difficulty absorbing that national Calvary. In analogies made *ad nauseam* in Walt Whitman's war poetry and northern war sermons, the Union dead were like countless Christs, Lincoln was the martyred Christ killed on Good Friday, and the Civil War's bloodshed was the atonement that purged America's original sin of slavery and purified her for the divinely appointed mission to redeem the world. Of course, nothing could be more heretical. In the Bible Jesus is the spotless, immaculate Lamb of God, who volunteered to shed his own blood, out of infinite love, in order to cleanse the sins of others. The Union dead in the Civil War were flawed creaturely beings who involuntarily shed their blood while striving, out of hatred and fear, to shed the blood of their countrymen, in order to cleanse their own national sins. That is not to say that angels weren't in that whirlwind. On the contrary, Lincoln's Second Inaugural Address might have been truly inspired. But that would only prove that Lincoln was right to pay obeisance to the inscrutable sovereignty of the Almighty rather than identify the United States, much less himself, with divinity.

And yet, that is just what the high priests and prophets of American Civil Religion, from Philip Freneau and Tom Paine, to John O'Sullivan and Walt Whitman, to Benjamin Strong and Woodrow Wilson, have done: endow the United States and/or the American people with messianic qualities and therefore interpret American history as a progressive revelation. Since the late eighteenth century Deists, Masons, Protestants of all sorts, and at last even Roman Catholics have kept the torch of this Civil Religion lit and advancing into the future. In our day the neocons fulfill that priestly function. Thus has William Kristol preached since the 1990s that pursuit of national greatness and the militant export of Americanism would also, through some unspecified alchemy, elevate and reform our domestic soul and society. Thus has Robert Kagan praised Americans for the fact that their national creed does *not* acknowl-

edge original sin, but calls the nation and all mankind to perfection. Thus has David Gelernter proclaimed *Americanism*, in his book of 2007, to be nothing less than *The Fourth Great Western Religion*.[6] He even insists that this Americanism, or American Zionism, or New American Covenant, is *not* an idolatrous civil religion, but a genuine Biblical religion that simply transcends Judaism, Christianity, and what he calls Puritanism. Thus has Zealous Nationalism, as analyzed by Robert Jewett in his 1973 classic *The Captain America Complex*, affixed itself to the American flag.

So what have I learned by writing *Freedom Just Around the Corner* and *Throes of Democracy*? Evidently, to judge by the reviewers, what I have learned is ironic, irreverent, cynical, and quirky. I'm not going to go into detail here. First, because it would bore those who have read my books. Second, because it would give others an excuse not to read them. Suffice it to say, I learned that Americans have always been hustlers both in the positive and pejorative senses; that they have almost always justified their ambition, avarice, expectations, and contempt for constraints by selective, self-serving appeals to Providence; that they are expert at the self-deception, pretense, amnesia, and procrastination that help a vast, diverse democracy to cohere; that their sacred lives, liberties, and pursuits of happiness amount to feeling good about doing well; that they perfected the worship of both God and Mammon through a chiliastic American Civil Religion conflating material plenty with spiritual grace, and have thereby managed to dispense with tragedy, irony, limits, and original sin; that they respond ferociously to any person, institution, law, ideology, or foreign power that dares interfere with their headlong flight into a future; that they make it an article of faith that change is good; hence that the only acceptable conservatism—at least since the Civil War—is one that conserves all the above against those who critique it from the Left or the Mugwump Right. That is not to say the American Civil Religion is inflexible. On the contrary, like the imperial cult of the Roman Empire it devours all new gods and cults in the name of tolerance so long as they burn incense to the overarching civil faith that guarantees free exercise of sectarian faiths. In their Enlightenment-scientific-technological-engineering-business-consumer mode, Americans are a vast Masonic Lodge, with every citizen a master builder helping to finish that unfinished pyramid under the All-Seeing Eye that appears on our dollar bill and Great Seal. In their Reformation-theological-teleological-mystical-magical-missionary mode, Americans are the New Israel marching together into a New Promised Land that someday will unite the whole human race.

Now, a faith that one's nation is "under God" and possessed of a Providential mission can be a mighty force multiplier in time of war, and source of patience, forbearance, and charity in time of domestic travail. But the belief that one's nation is under divine protection can also breed a dangerous complacency that encourages national procrastination and in fact tempts the Lord thy God, over and over again. And the belief that one's nation has a mission can breed hubris of the sort that causes one's legions to be dispatched "a bridge too far" over and over again.

So is McDougall a paleoconservative in despair like Poe, despondent like Melville, or cynical like Twain? So some have said. But while writing these books I have taken heart from the discovery that McDougall isn't so strange. On the contrary I have noticed the great cloud of witnesses who have explored the same American shores as I have on what Harvey Sicherman has called "Walter's voyage of self-discovery," and have come to similar conclusions about what makes Americans tick. There's Harriet Martineau and Philip Schaff, Nathaniel Hawthorne and Orestes Brownson, Henry Adams and G. K. Chesterton, George Santayana and Randolph Bourne, Irving Babbitt and H. L. Mencken, Reinhold and Richard Niebuhr, George Kennan and John Lukacs.

There's Russell Kirk, who wrote in *The Wise Men Know What Wicked Things Are Written On the Sky*: "In international affairs . . . the United States needs to beware of what Sir Herbert Butterfield calls 'righteousness'. . . . Even a massive assertion of American power, a crusade for 'human rights', might destroy more than it could restore." Kirk also quoted Boorstin to the effect that the U.S. Constitution is "not for export," and warned that freedom in the abstract is "the liberty in whose name crimes are committed."[7]

There's Angelo Codevilla, whose recent book *Advice to War Presidents: A Remedial Course in*

Statecraft reinforces my point about how Americans twist their language in order to deceive themselves: ". . . when reality is bitter, when the things that are differ from what we wish, we sugarcoat them with euphemisms or put our own wishes' names on them. Thus, hoping to transform our surroundings, we fool ourselves . . . ."[8] There's Cambridge Professor David Runciman, whose new book *Political Hypocrisy: The Mask of Power, From Hobbes to Orwell and Beyond* echoes another of my points with his cardinal rule that "liberal democratic politics are only sustainable if mixed with a certain amount of dissimulation and pretence."[9]

There's Darrin McMahon's 2006 book *Happiness: A History*, which traces the prevalent unhappiness of Americans to the "enlightened optimists" of the eighteenth century who drew on Newton and Locke to justify jettisoning Christian anthropology in favor of a human race "unstained by original sin, programmed for pursuit of pleasure, and ready, willing, and able to improve their earthly lot." The central question for Western Civilization ceased to be "How can I be saved?" and became instead "How can I be happy?" Pursuing their happiness, Americans chained themselves to a hedonistic treadmill.[10]

Not least, there's Claes Ryn, whose *America the Virtuous* diagnosed our contemporary maladies in both foreign policy and domestic life even as I was seeking their germs in history. He traced those maladies to the hegemony of a neo-Jacobin ideology, which I think I am safe in saying overlaps if not coincides with what I call the Civil Religion or Crusader State. Ryn asks, "What is neo-Jacobin moralism and ideology if not a sanction for imperialism?" Precisely so. We Americans pretend we're a peace-loving people and that our wars have all been foisted upon us. But the United States, as Ryn explains, is an Enlightened or Ideological Republic that has slipped its constitutional moorings, and become a Fighting Faith.[11] To that I would add that the United States is the flip-side of a Divine Right Monarchy, which is to say a Divine Right Republic which—like Oliver Cromwell's Commonwealth, the Dutch United Provinces, and Puritan New England before it—has behaved as if its wars were all holy wars.

But what if they really *have* been holy wars, or Americans just *believe* they have been? What, in short, if Robert Kagan is correct that the U.S. has always been a Dangerous Nation destined to overthrow despotism everywhere? What if, as he only half-jokingly claimed, George Washington was a neocon? If that is the case, then must we self-styled conservatives all join the crusade because, in America, to be conservative is to be radical? Or let us say Kagan's history is bogus, but his neo-Jacobin or neo-Cromwellian War Party ethos has nonetheless conquered the political and cultural heights and achieved an Establishment status that only the Loony Left challenges? If that is the case, then must traditional conservatives resign ourselves to a tactical alliance with whichever faction we deem the lesser of two evils?

What does an earnest conservative do when he discovers that the country he loves has defined love of country as something false, something spoon fed (quoting Claes Ryn again) to a "morally and culturally deteriorating society" by a long-distance "plebiscitary regime" that fashions its own reality like Big Brother's Ministry of Truth? What if, in the American public square—governed as it is by hustle, pretense, demagogy, and vanity—we have reached the point at which *the sham is authentic and the authentic is sham*?

Sound paranoid? Maybe it is, but it was Richard Gamble who suggested in *The American Conservative* that we might have deceived ourselves about Ronald Reagan, no less, because, his virtues notwithstanding, he re-validated our habit of getting and spending and borrowing and calling it the American Dream. "Maybe, the Reagan we think we remember is the very thing most likely to distract us from painful self-examination and serious reckoning with who we are as a people and how we got this way."[12] In another essay called "Wilsonian Slaughter," Gamble warned, "Any effort to build a post-Wilsonian foreign policy will have to deal honestly with American evangelicalism's historic role in reorienting the church and the state toward social activism and global meliorism. Righteous interventionism appeals to our national vanity and piety. We have to face the fact that there is something deeply and authentically American about Wilsonianism."[13]

There it is. In domestic and foreign policy alike the sort of conservatism many of us embrace isn't conservative at all in an upside-down culture that wishes away sin and vice or else redefines

them as civic virtues. Pretense, pride, and greed are authentic American qualities, while humility, sanctity, and thrift are un-American.

That is why it now seems to me that our real culture wars are not being waged between "God and country" conservatism on the one side and multicultural secular liberalism on the other. It now seems to me that our real culture wars are waged between Civil Religion on the one side and Christian orthodoxy on the other.

What would a real conservatism look like today: a spirited, comely conservatism that could demonstrate William F. Buckley's claim that "the wells of regeneration are infinitely deep"? Well, it cannot be just a reactive, resistant conservatism. As a young European historian I used to believe all true conservatism must be reactive because it never occurred to people like Burke or Metternich to be self-conscious conservatives until their legitimate, established order was radically challenged. I added my puckish personal definition to the effect that a conservative is someone who knows that things could be worse than they are—period! But American history has now helped me to realize that conservatism is the genuine flip-side of the counterfeit civil religion exploited by neolibs, radicals, and neocons (in other words, Claes Ryn's New Jacobins). They *promise* vacuous freedom and equality, while they strut proudly, worship the self, and try to bend the *world* to *their* will. Conservatives, by contrast, long to do justice, love mercy, walk humbly, and try to bend the *self* to *God's* will. How glorious it would be if some new revival, some Great Awakening, inspired the Gen X and Gen Y Americans to want to restore a conservative culture, whereupon politics would take care of themselves. But the most likely, if ironic, prospect (as has been the case since Valley Forge) is that the civic virtue of a righteous remnant will provide just enough moral capital to sustain a Republic of Hustlers.

Notes

1. "*La croce salva la giente*," quoted in Jonathan Riley-Smith, ed., *Oxford Illustrated History of the Crusades* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), 105.

2. Daniel Boorstin, *The Image, or, What Happened to the American Dream* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicholson, 1961).

3. Walter A. McDougall, *Promised Land, Crusader State* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1997), 220.

4. Walter A. McDougall, *Freedom Just Around the Corner: A New American History 1585-1828* (New York: HarperCollins, 2004).

5. Walter A. McDougall, *Throes of Democracy: The American Civil War Era 1829-1877* (New York: HarperCollins, 2008).

6. David Gerlernter, *Americanism: The Fourth Great Western Religion* (New York: Doubleday, 2007).

7. Russell Kirk, *The Wise Men Know What Wicked Things Are Written On the Sky* (Washington: Regnery Gateway, 1987), 40-41, 107.

8. Angelo Codevilla, *Advice to War Presidents: A Remedial Course in Statecraft* (New York: Basic Books, 2009), 5.

9. David Runciman, *Political Hypocrisy: The Mask of Power, From Hobbes to Orwell and Beyond* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008).

10. Darrin M. McMahon, *Happiness: A History* (New York: Atlantic Monthly Press, 2006).

11. Claes G. Ryn, *America the Virtuous: The Crisis of Democracy and the Quest for Empire* (New Brunswick and London: Transaction Publishers, 2003).

12. Richard Gamble, "How Right Was Reagan?" *The American Conservative* (May 4, 2009), 6-9. For a more extensive treatment of Reagan's imagination and its impact on American society, see Justin Garrison, "A Covenant with All Mankind: Ronald Reagan's Idyllic Vision of America in the World," *Humanitas* 21:1-2 (2008), 34-63.

13. Richard Gamble, "Wilsonian Slaughter," *The American Conservative* (February 23, 2009), 30-32.