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John Brenkman: The Cultural Contradictions of Democracy

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A dialogue, which is the highest form of communication we know, is always a confrontation of irreducibly different viewpoints. —OCTAVIO PAZ

INTRODUCTION: POLITICAL THOUGHT IN THE FOG OF WAR

War and Democracy

Since September 11, 2001, the fog of war has enveloped political thought. Bright hopes of perpetual peace and prosperity collapsed in the debris of the World Trade Center. The fog grew thicker with the invasion of Iraq in 2003, as the nations of the Atlantic alliance collided over policy and principle, law and interests. By the time the postwar in Iraq became a civil war and produced more casualties than the war, the dominoes that neoconservatives dreamed would democratize the Middle East were falling helter-skelter into new uncertainties. On the other side of the debate, the most dire antiwar prophecies seemed exaggerated if not hollow, when Iraqis managed to hold elections for the first time in decades. Neither the advocates nor the opponents of the war in Iraq had any sure insights into the uses of war on behalf of democracy. When, by the fall of 2006, the number of Iraqis being killed every month as a result of civil strife exceeded the number of Americans who had been killed in the September 11 attacks that had supposedly justified the invasion of Iraq, American policy was losing its political as well as moral bearings.

Combatants easily lose their sense of direction in the midst of battle, confuse comrade and foe, mistake progress for setback and setback for advantage, and retreat when on the verge of victory or hurl themselves into certain devastation convinced of their invincibility. Nor does war spare political thought from disorientation and uncertainty. Fundamental questions of war and democracy had scarcely begun to emerge

into public awareness after September 11 when they were swept up in the whirlwind of preemptive war in Iraq. Among those fundamental questions are:

What role do arms have in a democracy?

How does military power alter, as well as protect, the polity that uses it?

What is the possibility and even the meaning of the international rule of law?

Can force effectively spread liberty and democracy abroad?

The spectacularly successful interventions that overthrew the Taliban and then Saddam Hussein were quickly compromised by the occupations of Afghanistan and Iraq. A pattern emerged. *The United States overestimates the effectiveness of military might and underestimates the ordeal of democracy.* Responsibility for the appalling shortcomings of the postwar rebuilding of Afghanistan and Iraq falls squarely on the presidency of George W. Bush—but not exclusively. The crisis runs deeper than any one administration when the world's oldest democracy and sole superpower does not comprehend the wellsprings of democracy or understand the nature of might. Opponents of Bush, neoconservatives, and the Republican Party delude themselves when they are satisfied merely with opposition to administration policy. The fundamental questions of war and democracy are even more difficult to answer today than on September 11, 2001. The threat of terrorism has likely grown rather than shrunk since 2001, and the Middle East has been turned into a laboratory of democracy where any failed experiment risks producing civil war, dictatorship, theocracy, or worse.

Diplomatic and military decisions are prepared and justified by a discourse authored by many hands: historians and ideologues, politicians and journalists, scholars and pundits. A range of discourses, from think-tank manifestos to “Great Power” historiography, from secret reports to presidential speeches, from strategic studies to op-ed pieces, produces the intellectual—but also the symbolic—webbing of the decisions and actions taken in foreign affairs. Since September 11, this symbolic-conceptual webbing has teemed with terms like “lone superpower,” “hyperpower,” “liberal imperialism,” and “progressive interventionism,” and slogans like *war on terror* or *power-vs-weakness* and *Hobbesian-vs-Kantian*. All these slogans imply some understanding of power; they all

imply, to draw on a distinction made by Hannah Arendt, some understanding of political *power* and military *might*. Metaphors as well as ideas are at work in foreign policy discourse, for not only are there conceptions of power—and various methods of analyzing, say, the relative power of states or calculating their interests—but there is also an *imagination* of power. When it comes to military force no one can truly know how its use will enhance or diminish the power of the state that wields it. Might exists primarily in potential, and therefore it always exists in the imagination.

In liberal democracies all newly elected leaders, all new heads of state, find themselves suddenly in possession of power. And, inversely, they find themselves possessed *by* power. There is an inescapable ambivalence in the enjoyment of power. Max Weber turned to a bodily image when he identified the greatest of the “inner enjoyments” of the vocation of politics: “the feeling of holding in one’s hand a nerve fiber of historically important events.”¹ To *enjoy power*—or to *be empowered*—is at the same time to be enjoyed *by* power. Having the means of coercion and violence in your grasp puts you in the grip of those very means of coercion and violence. That is why Weber, attentive to the insights of Nietzsche and riveted to the upheavals of war and revolution in his own time, insisted that the ethics of political life must include an awareness of politics’ inherent potential for tragedy. Such an awareness alone tempers the intrinsic temptation to a kind of power beyond responsibility.

To become president of the United States in 2001, as happened to George W. Bush, was to find oneself suddenly in possession of power-beyond-responsibility, since the American body politic itself had been in the grip of power in excess of responsibility for a decade. The collapse of the Soviet Union left the United States with unmatched military might. It faced historic questions: *For what ends does the nation possess such means of violence? Should this nation, or any nation, have unmatched military might? What responsibilities attend overweening power?* The body politic never answered these questions or even seriously debated them. There were, of course, many discussions in the government, foreign policy think tanks, and opinion and policy journals, but the presidential

¹Max Weber, “Politics as Vocation,” in *From Max Weber: Essays in Sociology*, ed. and trans. H. H. Gerth and C. Wright Mills (New York: Oxford University Press, 1946), p. 115.

campaigns of 1992, 1996, and 2000 avoided the controversy altogether. It became commonplace to refer to the Gulf War as the watershed of the United States's emergence as sole superpower, and politicians and theorists coined such grandiose names for the new era of American supremacy as the New World Order, the end of history, *hyperpuissance*, Empire. None of the labels took into account the stark fact that the American body politic remained silent and indecisive.

September 11 changed all that, though not because a great national debate finally occurred. Such a debate did not occur. Rather, after the Taliban and al Qaeda were routed in Afghanistan, the Bush administration was emboldened to advance an answer to the historic post-Cold War questions. In the 2002 document called *The National Security Strategy of the United States*, President Bush called upon the United States to embrace the role of supreme global power. With this appeal came the declaration of America's unique right over other nations, a threefold right to preemptive war, the overthrow of regimes considered hostile, and immunity from treaties and constraints imposed on other nations.

Hobbes versus Kant?

The doctrine of unilateralism and preemption contributed perhaps more than anything else to the showdown between the United States and major European allies, especially France and Germany, in the buildup to the war in Iraq. The U.S.-European divergence seemed neatly to confirm Robert Kagan's diagnosis that "Americans are from Mars and Europeans from Venus." Kagan is a particularly pertinent reference point, since the vision put forth in the Bush doctrine finds its intellectual backing in that strand of contemporary conservative thought represented by Kagan and preoccupied with the theory of "great powers." In his book *Of Paradise and Power*, which grew out of the essay "Power and Weakness" that stirred considerable discussion in the United States and Europe in the summer of 2002, Kagan ostensibly attempts to explain the markedly different views of Americans and Europeans in foreign affairs, in particular, the American inclination to unilateralism and force and the European preference for internationalism and negotiation in responding to crises: "On the all-important question of power—the

efficacy of power, the morality of power, the desirability of power—American and European perspectives are diverging. Europe . . . is entering a post-historical paradise of peace and relative prosperity, the realization of Kant’s “Perpetual Peace.” The United States, meanwhile, remains mired in history, exercising power in the anarchic Hobbesian world where international laws and rules are unreliable and where true peace and security and the defense and promotion of a liberal order still depend on the possession and use of military might.”² Kagan makes many interesting arguments and observations on U.S.-European relations, all more or less debatable, but it is the axioms that frame his whole discussion which throw a light on the mentality of the Bush administration and its understanding of power and military force. The fundamental axiom is simply a tautology: weak is weak, strong is strong: “When the United States was weak [in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries], it practiced the strategies of indirection, the strategies of weakness; now that the United States is powerful, it behaves as powerful nations do. When the European great powers were strong, they believed in strength and martial glory. Now, they see the world through the eyes of weaker powers. These very different points of view, weak versus strong, have naturally produced differing assessments of threats and of the proper means of addressing threats, and even differing calculations of interest.”³ The tautology radiates out into the entire essay as the words *nature, normal, perfectly normal, predictable, naturally* alight on every aspect of current American policy just to say that a powerful nation does as powerful nations do. Policy flows from might. This axiom, presented by Kagan in the flat, frankly amoral tones of the historian of “great powers,” undergirds the moral hyperbole by which the politicians Bush and Cheney justify the ambitious designs of the new National Security Strategy.

Is it really Kantians versus Hobbesians, Venus versus Mars? Both slogans are catchy, and Kant-versus-Hobbes has even caught on among serious political philosophers. But these oppositions do not hold up philosophically or politically. It is hard to imagine a thinker less venerable than Kant. And, just as strikingly, there is nothing at all martial about

²Robert Kagan, *Of Paradise and Power: America and Europe in the New World Order* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2003), p. 3.

³*Ibid.*, pp. 10–11.

Hobbes. For starters, Hobbes fled England during the Civil War and wrote *Leviathan* in Paris in order to exorcise his horror at the image of civil order breaking down. Such a breakdown exposes a “state of nature” in which every man would have the right to do whatever he deems necessary “for the preservation of his own Nature; that is to say, of his own life.” A commonwealth, Hobbes reasoned, arises from the fear of death that pervades the hypothetical state of nature, that is, the “condition of Warre of every one against every one.”⁴

Contrary to Kagan’s depiction, Hobbes’s view of international relations little resembles that of the neoconservatives. “An anarchic Hobbesian world where international laws and rules are unreliable” is in fact not Hobbesian at all. Hobbes considered states to be *less* prone to violence than individuals, primarily because a ruler has responsibility for the peace and security of his subjects, and thus was inclined in Hobbes’s view to be measured in assessing when their benefit and general welfare was best served by war or conquest.

Leviathan

Although Hobbes’s ideas do not truly support the neoconservatives’ vision of power, there is surely something that prompts Kagan and others aptly to consider the Bush doctrine Hobbesian. What stirs their imagination is the image of the body politic as leviathan. This image evokes something that is conveyed less in Hobbes’s own words than in the famous engraving that graced the first edition of *Leviathan*. The monarch, his body composed of nothing but the multitude of his subjects, a scepter in one hand and a sword in the other, wearing a crown, rises above the land, whose gently rolling hills and little villages are at once the realm his outstretched arms protect and a kind of robe spread out around him. The undulations of the hills also suggest the waves that are the element in which the biblical leviathan lives. For the leviathan, as Melville well knew, is a sea monster, the whale as grasped in the ancient Hebrew imagination. There, in the more symbolic stew of Hobbes’s thought, where body politic, sea monster, and monarch blend together,

⁴Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan*, ed. C. B. Macpherson (New York: Penguin, 1968), p. 189 [ch. 14].

the Anglo-Saxon political imagination has found, precisely, an *image* of state power. The state is a monster, the One preventing the anarchy of the Many, that floats unperturbed in the sea or sails the oceans of the world to keep its multitude at peace, prosperous, and safe. That Britain—the island commonwealth, the commonwealth as island—would imagine the body politic a great sea monster makes nearly immediate sense. Hobbes has not, however, enjoyed extensive influence on American political thought. The American imagination of power has historically been more isolationist (the stay-at-home leviathan of the Monroe Doctrine) and territorial (the land-bound behemoth of Manifest Destiny). So how has the Hobbesian image come to fit America?

In a news conference in April 2004, as Iraq was being shaken by the simultaneous insurgencies of Sunnis in Falluja and militia loyal to Moktada al-Sadr in the Shiite South, and as the 9–11 Commission was probing how much warning the administration had prior to the al Qaeda attacks, President Bush uttered, as though revealing something for the first time, an astonishing anachronism. “We can no longer hope,” he declared, “that oceans protect us from harm.” Americans have, of course, been quite aware that oceans do not protect us from harm ever since 1957, when the Soviets sent the first Sputnik into space and raised the specter of intercontinental ballistic missiles raining nuclear warheads on American cities. Bush’s own chief preoccupation in defense matters *before* September 11 had been the renewal of Star Wars, the missile shield project that was predicated on just such vulnerability across oceans. Not only had Americans known for nearly fifty years that the Atlantic and Pacific afforded no guarantee against attack, but the September 11 attacks themselves, though they were an unprecedented assault by foreigners against American civilians at home, did not originate from abroad: the planes all took off on American soil.

Was Bush’s anachronism then simply a historical lapsus? Not at all. For what it did, like so many other carefully crafted misstatements and innuendoes of that moment, was to associate the September 11 attacks carried out by al Qaeda with the presumed weapons of mass destruction in the hands of the United States’s self-styled enemy Saddam Hussein. The anachronistic image of the protective oceans created a link between September 11 (attack on U.S. soil) and Saddam Hussein (weapons of mass destruction). According to polls, by the time the war in Iraq began

45 percent of Americans believed Saddam Hussein had planned September 11, just as many believed that his missiles with their range of a few hundred kilometers could reach the United States.

The war on terrorism and the war in Iraq had nothing to do with one another. We are engaged in the first because we have to be; we engaged in the second because the Bush administration wanted to, and could. They *could* because they took office in possession of unmatched military might. The attack on the Twin Towers and the Pentagon showed our vulnerability; the invasion of Iraq was meant to show our superior strength. The illusion of invulnerability that had shattered on September 11 was quickly transformed into an illusion of insuperability in preparation for war in Iraq. Put the two scenarios together and America becomes Hobbesian: the American body politic, no longer unperturbed floating in its oceans, gets transformed in the political imagination into the unvanquishable monster sailing the seas of the world. Shock and awe in Iraq answered, in symbol and fantasy, the shock and awe of September 11. Americans were called upon to see America the global power in leviathan imagery: “When he raiseth up himself, the mighty are afraid. . . . The sword of him that layeth at him cannot hold: the spear, the dart, nor the habergeon. . . . Upon earth there is not his like, who is made without fear” (Job 42:25–33).

The new national leviathan, however, hardly seems like one “who is made without fear.” After September 11, political leaders and the media cultivated and relentlessly fertilized an all-pervasive fear within the American body politic. The sense of vulnerability and dread often seemed far more intense in the country at large than among the New Yorkers who had actually witnessed the destruction in their own city. Small towns in rural areas believed themselves to be targets in imminent danger when they learned that the federal government was furnishing local authorities with gas masks or special medical supplies. Unlike Roosevelt declaring that the only thing to fear was fear itself or Churchill exhorting Londoners to persevere in the face of the bombings that nightly ravaged their city, President Bush used September 11 to stoke citizens’ fear for their lives. The most striking characteristic of the national mood between September 11 and the invasion of Iraq was how this excessive fear was strangely combined with inordinate confidence that military might could guarantee international and national security. Even as the

administration purveyed fear and vulnerability, it promised that the army would topple dangerous tyrants armed with weapons of mass destruction and create new democracies. Therein is the mainspring of the administration's pseudo-Hobbesian vision and rhetoric. The national leviathan fuses an all-pervasive amorphous fear of death and an overweening faith in military power.

What are the origins of this combination of fear and hubris? Why was this combination so effective in cementing public opinion in support of the war? The answer undoubtedly has a lot to do with the post-Vietnam demise of a military of citizen-soldiers. Having first professionalized and now increasingly privatized the nation's armed forces, the Pentagon has so separated citizens from soldiers that citizens are free to indulge in debilitating fear while fully expecting their soldiers to bravely conquer all. Another factor is the tendency within contemporary culture to privilege the figure of the *victim*. Symbolizing oneself as a victim lends an aura of moral rightness, a privileged viewpoint on what is just and unjust—and considerable entitlement and ultimately a certain license. The shock of September 11 was from the beginning nurtured into this dangerous mix of victimage, righteousness, and license. The leviathan motif expresses well the post-September 11 fear. This cultivated fear, this exaggerated yet real fear of death, has been integrated into the symbolic-discursive webbing of foreign policy. A wounded, half-blind leviathan thrashing about in geopolitical seas does not see the fragility of democracy at home and the difficulty of inaugurating it abroad.

The Neoconservative Illusion

The neoconservatives confuse power and might. Hannah Arendt makes the distinction in the sharpest of terms. *Power* “corresponds to the human ability not just to act but to act in concert.” It is utterly distinct from might and violence. Might is the capacity for violence, and violence itself marks the breakdown of power, whether within the polity (where “violence functions as the last resort of power against criminals or rebels—that is, against single individuals who, as it were, refuse to be overpowered by the consensus of the majority”) or externally in war, where in fact strength or might does not in itself secure power: “as for

actual warfare, we have seen in Vietnam how an enormous superiority in the means of violence can become helpless if confronted with an ill-equipped but well-organized opponent who is much more powerful.”⁵

From the Arendtian standpoint, all the tautologies of the neoconservative hawks exemplified by Robert Kagan’s writings are false. Policy does not flow naturally, normally, predictably, from might. The nature of the polity is not immune to the effects of wielding the available means of violence. The unilateral exercise of force does not necessarily defend and protect the polity. That the colossal failure of America’s anticommunist foreign policy in Vietnam, which stimulated the creation of neoconservatism in the first place, might turn out to be the very model of their own deepest errors is more than an exquisite irony. It risks becoming a historic tragedy. The consequences of the neoconservatives’ conflation of power and might are seen not simply in theory but in practice. The crisis-ridden occupation of Iraq exposed the fundamental flaws in neoconservative thought, especially its Great Power discourse. The neoconservative hawks seem to have seriously believed that once American military might overthrew Iraqi tyranny, Iraqi democracy would spontaneously flower in its place; meanwhile, the more hard-nosed members of the administration assumed, just as naïvely though callously, that a strongman allied with the West could always step in to impose order if need be. The two attitudes resulted in gross negligence when it came to planning the occupation. Defense Department planning, directed by Donald Rumsfeld’s undersecretary Douglas Feith, thoroughly ignored the need for civil order. The American occupation created the conditions for Hobbesian anarchy *inside Iraq*. Iraq turned into a breeding ground for Islamic terrorism because it lacked civil order and was awash in weapons and rife with contending factions. The Coalition Provisional Authority headed by L. Paul Bremer III replaced Saddam Hussein’s rogue state with an insecure failed state.

Iraqis owe their tyrant’s overthrow to the Americans, but those Iraqis who heroically risked life and limb in an effort to salvage a democratic path owe Americans little else. For months on end after the invasion, Iraqis were driven to arm themselves and ally, often unwillingly, with

⁵Hannah Arendt, “On Violence,” in *Crises of the Republic* (New York: Harcourt Brace & Company, 1972), pp. 143, 150.

militias or mullahs in the face of absolute uncertainty over their own safety. They felt the naked insecurity of the state of nature. The millions who exercised their right to vote under threat of death added a new and poignant symbol to democratic imagery—and, indeed, to the Hobbesian image-bank too: their ink-stained fingers are forever an emblem of individuals mastering the fear of death in order to create a civil order that might protect them all. What these Iraqis have Rumsfeld and Bush, Feith and Bremer, to thank for is leaving them unprotected. Fear and death swirled around their first election and continued to plague their civil covenant.

The neoconservative understanding of power also fails to comprehend that the might which a democracy possesses and uses can flow back—or blow back—to alter the very nature of its own democratic institutions. The neoconservatives conceive of the nation's liberal order and rule of law as an unalterable internal feature of American democracy, while armed force is simply the means of protecting the nation against external threats. The illusion that American democracy itself cannot be harmed by the might it wields abroad has proved costly. Consenting to war is the most serious decision that citizens have to make. When the reasons by which citizens are persuaded to give their consent are, as with Iraq, erroneous (weapons of mass destruction) and deceptive (Iraqi ties to al Qaeda), the very fabric of democratic deliberation is damaged. The insistence that the errors and deceptions did not ultimately matter, since the result was good, even further undermined the very principle of accountability; a re-elected George Bush retained or promoted all the officials most responsible for the errors and deceptions. The posture that right-or-wrong we are right weakened the value put on truth in public affairs; the administration successfully fostered, with the help of the Fox-led media, a hatred of dissent, all the more intensely when the dissenters accurately exposed administration falsehoods. The willful distortion of international and domestic law through *enemy combatants*, *detainees*, *homeland security*, *coercive interrogations*, *extraordinary rendition* eroded civil liberties and the rule of law at home just as it severely damaged the United States's moral standing abroad. And the transformation of the border into a digital fortress that indiscriminately makes every visitor and immigrant a suspect has estranged the very foreigners most likely to value the United States as a symbol and example

of a democratic way of life. So many essential features of American democracy—open deliberative politics, a public sphere valuing debate and truthfulness, due process, the furnishing of a symbolic and real haven of freedom for people around the globe—have been strained and damaged by the use of force in Iraq.

The reassuring view that arms are merely the instrument of a secure democracy in an insecure world is the fateful illusion at the heart of American policy. This illusion has its pseudo-Hobbesian variation in Kagan's equation of political power and military might in the amoral language of Great Power discourse, and it has its romantic-messianic variation in Bush's rhetoric of the axis of evil, the forward strategy of freedom, the end of evil, and so on. In calling this vision of foreign affairs an illusion, I have in mind the sense that Freud gave to the term in *The Future of an Illusion*, namely, an account of reality that coincides with what one wishes reality to be. An illusion in this sense is not necessarily demonstrably false, but wherever reality seems to coincide with one's wishes, doubt and skepticism ought to precede action, especially when the action is making war.

The Frailty of Human Affairs

It is almost impossible for Americans to entertain the idea that their democracy might be fragile. The political system after all has endured for 220 years under the same Constitution. The duration perhaps fosters a false sense of continuity, since there may well be as many discontinuities as continuities between the United States of 1787 and today. Moreover, American democracy has been dramatically depleted or renewed at crucial moments in its history. The 1850s were the darkest decade in America's political life; the crisis that was leading to the Civil War revealed that neither of the great strands of American democratic values, neither liberalism nor republicanism, could light a path to the end of slavery. The 1960s were a moment of extraordinary democratic renewal, though the conservative opinion on the ascendancy today looks back and sees cultural and moral decline. The civil rights movement overturned apartheid in America by using civil disobedience to extend fundamental rights, including voting rights, to blacks, and the antiwar movement initiated another innovation in citizenship as young people organized to

protest the purposes and effects of a war they were called upon to fight in; these movements in turn inspired a new wave of feminism and the creation of movements for gay rights. Democratic renewal lay in the innovation of rights and invention of freedoms. The upheavals of the 1850s and the 1960s are a reminder that even the most durable democracy undergoes erosions and needs reinaugurations.

Hannah Arendt relates the inherent fragility of democracy to the frailty of human affairs, but she also ties this frailty and fragility to the wellsprings of human creativity and political inventiveness. The Greeks founded their *polis*, she argues, in response to the frailty of what they most valued in their pre-polis experience for “mak[ing] it worthwhile for men to live together (*syzen*), namely, the ‘sharing of words and deeds’ [Aristotle].” The polis was “to multiply the chances for everybody to distinguish himself, to show in deed and word who he was in his unique distinctness.” And secondly it was “to offer a remedy for the futility of action and speech; for the chances that a deed deserving fame would not be forgotten, that it actually would become immortal, were not very good.” The polis was the bounded, organized, sheltering space where individuals’ words and deeds could appear and endure. The bid for immortality paradoxically rendered the polis itself mortal: “One, if not the chief, reason for the incredible development of gift and genius in Athens, *as well as the hardly less surprising swift decline of the city-state*, was precisely that from beginning to end its foremost aim was to make the extraordinary an ordinary occurrence of everyday life.”⁶

The Athenian paradox illuminates a dynamic of the political realm in general, namely, that its power and its fragility have the same source. The human gathering that lets speech and action *appear*, that is, manifest themselves *publicly*, to those that gather and participate defines power in the Arendtian sense: “Power is what keeps the public realm, the potential space of appearance between acting and speaking men, in existence.” Forms of government in her definition are “the various forms in which the public realm can be organized.” A political community depends on “the unreliable and only temporary agreement of many wills and intentions.” Therein lies at once the power and the

⁶Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1958), pp. 196–97. My italics.

fragility of political community: “[Power’s] only limitation is the existence of other people, but this limitation is not accidental, because human power corresponds to the condition of plurality to begin with. For the same reason, power can be divided without decreasing it, and the interplay of powers with their checks and balances is even liable to generate more power, so long, at least, as the interplay is alive and has not resulted in a stalemate.”⁷ If a body politic endures, it is not because there is anything unalterable in its institutions and values, but because this pluralistic agreement is continually replenished, renewed, reinaugurated.

Conversely, the body politic becomes more fragile with every separation of decision and participation, every undoing of checks and balances, and every divergence of word and deed. These temptations are all the more insidious because they so easily mask themselves as ways of enhancing power, especially for a political community in the thrall of fear and the fog of war—as when the president usurps the judiciary and its principles to better “protect” the American people, or when the Congress abdicates its role in determining the legitimate cause for war and scrutinizing the conduct of war, or when the press lets itself be embedded in the war machine, or when the Supreme Court refuses to shield reporters from the government and thereby shields government from reporters. Arendt once more: “Power is actualized only where word and deed have not parted company, where words are not empty and deeds not brutal, where words are not used to veil intentions but to disclose realities, and deeds are not used to violate and destroy but to establish relations and create new realities.”⁸

Crises of the Republic

Mindful of the extraordinary legacy of Arendt’s political thought, I hope to preserve something of her spirit of inquiry and interpretation in the following chapters. Trying to reflect on the crises of the republic *in the midst of* those crises is an abrupt reminder that political thought never enjoys a firm grounding. Such intellectual ideals as the unity of

⁷Ibid., pp. 200–201.

⁸Ibid., p. 200.

theory and practice, the proceduralist commitment to philosophically justified norms, or the pragmatist belief in shared values and tested methods all prove rather feeble when it comes to understanding a democracy at war. The difficulties are all the more acute because the crises of the American republic since September 11 have disguised themselves by masquerading as the self-assured, democracy-protecting, faith-soaked assertion of national strength. The temptations to deception and self-deception are always great in the midst of war, and in some fundamental way they are intrinsic to political life. The public realm, in Arendt's account, is where individuals "disclose themselves as subjects, as distinct and unique persons" through "their deeds and words." It is a space of appearance but not transparency, of self-revealing but not necessarily self-understanding: "Although nobody knows whom he reveals when he discloses himself in deed or word, he must be willing to risk disclosure. . . . It is more than likely that the 'who,' which appears so clearly and unmistakably to others, remains hidden from the person, like the *daimon* in Greek religion which accompanies each man throughout his life, always looking over his shoulder from behind and thus visible only to those he encounters."⁹

While Arendt renewed the import of ancient democracy for modern politics, no one revealed the ethical paradoxes of modern politics more penetratingly than Max Weber. Looking at the professional politician's psychological and ethical existence, Weber identifies the enjoyments of this vocation in the "feeling of power" and "knowledge of influencing men." The aptitude for such a career amalgamates "passion" for a cause, "a feeling of responsibility" for the consequences of decisions and actions, and "a sense of proportion." Passion, responsibility, and proportion are, however, perpetually vulnerable to two essential instruments of political power: *pretending* and *violence*. Since every politician "works with the striving for power as an unavoidable means," he "is constantly in danger of becoming an actor as well as taking lightly the responsibility for the outcome of his actions and of being concerned merely with the 'impression' he makes." The politician is, moreover, drawn into a realm of recurrent ethical paradox, since at bottom "politics operates with very special means, namely, power backed up by *violence*." Whoever

⁹Ibid., pp. 183, 181–82.

holds or vies for political power “lets himself in for the diabolical forces lurking in all violence.”¹⁰

Max Weber and Hannah Arendt are largely irreconcilable thinkers. The sociologist of modernity and the political philosopher of the ancient polis diverge sharply in their understanding of power and violence, and their respective projects are more dissonant than consonant. And yet Weber’s thoughts on the vocation and ethics of modern politics and Arendt’s on the ancient resources of the modern polis create a productive strife, a meaningful dissonance, for an understanding of democracy at war today. Drawing on the contradictory traditions of democratic thought is in fact vital to political thinking. The plurality and debate so essential to democracy render disputes over the meaning of democracy a feature of democracy itself. Just as I draw on the contradictory ideas of politics and power developed by Weber and Arendt, so too I will adhere to the contradictory ideas of freedom found in Arendt and Isaiah Berlin. Arendt’s supreme value is self-rule through participation in a body politic, that is, in government; Berlin’s supreme value is the individual’s freedom from the constraints of others and especially government, that is, the body politic. Therein lies the permanent clash between the civic and the liberal dimensions of modern democracy. As American democracy plunged into war, it fused its justifications for self-defense with the ambition to overthrow tyrannies and spread democracy. Its understanding of self-rule, liberty, and power is at stake in these acts and justifications, just as the acts and justifications are at stake in the understanding of self-rule, liberty, and power.

What then is the vantage point from which I undertake the work that follows? I consider the war against terrorism a necessity in which the democratic world will be engaged for several years. The overthrow of the Taliban in Afghanistan was in my view a justified and measured response to September 11. Moreover, I do not think that the invasion of Iraq to overthrow Saddam Hussein was immoral or illegal. It was, however, ill-advised and ill-conceived, and the failure to secure civil order in Iraq was unconscionable. American arrogance was matched by American ignorance. However, “withdrawal,” “exit,” and “bring the troops home” are the empty slogans of an antiwar movement without a

¹⁰Weber, “Politics as Vocation,” pp. 114, 116, 119, 125–26.

vision of what role the United States needs to play in the Middle East. American policy under Bush has probably spread terrorism more than democracy and intensified rather than diminished international insecurity. By the same token, the status quo ante in the Middle East was untenable, and Islam's geo-civil war could not, and cannot, simply be "contained" on the Cold War model of containing communism.

I also start with the premise that while the flaws in American policy are decidedly the responsibility of the Bush administration, their source lies deep within the body politic itself. Overestimating the effectiveness of military force, Americans dangerously disregard the fragility of democracy at home and the ordeal of democracy abroad. Such disregard for the conditions of democratic life compounds the bad judgments made in Iraq and elsewhere. The next administration can easily temper Bush's brashness and de-emphasize unilateralism, and it is certainly unlikely to look forward to invading and occupying any other country in the axis of evil. The next president might even boldly shut down Guantánamo and undo all the executive orders that have permitted false imprisonment, torture, and "rendition." But will a new president and administration know how to pursue the war against terrorism without exacerbating the breeding grounds and motives of terrorism? Will they know how to lead the world's democracies' response to Islam's geo-civil war without ultimately simply aligning with the friendliest autocrats capable of repressing the restless Muslim masses? Will they know how to repair the American commitment to the rule of law and civil liberty enough to rescue America's standing as an inspiration for those who aspire to freedom and self-rule?

In taking democracy at war as my theme, I am looking to understand how political thought faces the difficult questions prompted by September 11 and the war in Iraq. These two unprecedented events have forced new avenues of inquiry and interpretation. Al Qaeda's September 11 attacks were an act of war by a nonstate actor, whereas political thought and foreign policy have long understood war as armed conflict *between* states or, in civil war, *within* a state. Unsettled questions abound concerning sovereignty, the meaning of the "war against terrorism," and its sources of legitimacy. The invasion and occupation of Iraq were no less unprecedented than September 11. The United States under George W. Bush not only justified the invasion of another country on

the grounds of overthrowing tyranny and spreading democracy, but did so under the banner of unilateralism and preemption and in effect as a display of its own global supremacy. This step onto uncertain terrain was taken without public deliberation and decision, for even though the invasion itself had overwhelming public support, the reasons for going to war in Iraq were to overcome the impending if not imminent danger of its weapons of mass destruction and to sever its ties with Islamic terrorism. There were no weapons of mass destruction and no link existed between Iraq and Islamic terrorism until the American invasion and occupation *created* one. Whether the overthrow of tyranny and inauguration of democracy were the real motive of the invasion all along or the rationale retrofitted to an intervention that lost its original justification or, as is most likely, some mix of the two, the United States has been firmly set on a course in which the spreading of democracy is now the principal justification of its foreign policy, and the precedent of unilateral preemptive intervention remains for the moment unchallenged.

This situation poses a major question with which political thought is now grappling: Is there a vision of foreign policy uniquely suited to democracy? I myself am extremely skeptical—and often alarmed—when it comes to various efforts to claim a kind of organic connection between democracy at home and policy abroad. The post-Cold War swing of the pendulum away from *Realpolitik* as practiced by Nixon and Kissinger was undoubtedly an advance; their policies were often diabolic in outcome (as in Cambodia) or in intention (as in Chile), and the end of the Cold War certainly opened the possibility of a more principled adherence to political ideals. Nevertheless, I am going to question at various points the different visions of foreign policy as an organic extension of democracy. I have already begun to criticize how the neo-conservatives' version of American exceptionalism promotes military supremacy as the natural way for a democracy to sustain and protect its liberal order at home. More idealistic visions of democracy's rightful recourse to violence as a means of spreading democracy have also been articulated. Paul Berman, for example, looks to weld liberal idealism to American military supremacy and make the elimination of tyranny the guiding principle of foreign affairs. Against neoconservative and liberal efforts to synthesize military might and democratic ideals, Jürgen Habermas advances the idea of cosmopolitanism. He envisions another

kind of organic relation between democracy and foreign affairs, arguing that the rule-governed, deliberative democratic state should be the model for the international order just as it has been for the transnational order of the European Union. Where Robert Kagan foresees the American leviathan endlessly lashing out to destroy enemies of its democratic commonwealth, Habermas advocates a postnational order whose ultimate goal would be to transform action against terrorists, rogue states, and criminal cartels into the policing of a “global domestic policy.”

Democracy at war stirs turmoil in political thought because the very aim of the internal workings of a democracy is to eliminate or transcend the use of force. Its institutions sustain that “unreliable and only temporary agreement of many wills and intentions” in which the democratic mentality delights. Neither military action abroad nor national-security measures at home foster such delight. On the contrary, military action stirs profound uncertainty, and security measures introduce the risk that the steps taken to protect democracy will dessicate its very values and institutions. By the same token, any realistic assessment of the threats and dangers posed by terrorism, rogue states, and weapons of mass destruction confirms that the security of democratic nations requires concerted action on the international scene backed by the capacity and willingness to use force. It all depends on judgment, and one role that political thought ought to play in the political life of a democracy is to broaden and enrich the capacity for judgment.

The Argument

My intention in the course of writing this book has been to probe the drama of political thought in the face of the war against terrorism, the overthrow of Saddam Hussein, and occupation of Iraq. In each chapter, the uncertain events of contemporary history are measured against, and are used to measure, the ideas that animate democratic traditions and political debate:

“Seized by Power”: From his days as governor in Texas to his role as commander in chief, George W. Bush embraced politics as vocation by eschewing rather than assuming responsibility. The ideological architects of his foreign policy were likewise seduced by the power-beyond-responsibility of American military might. As the United States has

attempted to confront radical Islamism's "ethic of ultimate ends" under the aegis of neoconservative ideas and democratic messianism, it has put its own democratic "ethic of responsibility" at risk.

"The Imagination of Power": The view that American global power exemplifies the "state of exception" as developed in the ideas of Carl Schmitt and Giorgio Agamben has been taken up with renewed intensity after the scandal of Abu Ghraib and Guantánamo. I argue that the conception of sovereignty that emerges from Agamben's appropriation of the Nazi jurist's theory of power is a deceptively appealing criticism of the modern state and a symptom of the malaise of contemporary "radical" political thought.

"September 11 and Fables of the Left": Beyond the ill-tempered response of some leftists immediately after the terrorist attacks against the World Trade Center and the Pentagon, the unprecedented confrontation between Western democracy and Islamic radicalism has brought out how thoroughly the political judgment and imagination of the so-called Left is limited by its underlying sensibility now that the world is no longer defined by the polarities of the Cold War. The faultlines of this sensibility become discernible in Noam Chomsky's moral absolutism and Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri's prophetic lyricism.

"Iraq: Delirium of War, Delusions of Peace": The claims of American unilateralism and the invasion of Iraq unleashed intellectual and diplomatic disputes that suggest that no simple dichotomy of Left and Right explains international politics. Leftists are split on questions of values as well as strategy. Paul Berman's defense of the war in Iraq evoked an idealism of ends (and the supreme value of freedom from tyranny), while Jürgen Habermas's opposition to the war drew on an idealism of means (and the supreme value of the international rule of law). The very idea of an international rule of law in the framework of the United Nations was, by the same token, belittled from the neoconservative perspective of Michael J. Glennon and the neo-Marxist perspective of Perry Anderson. On the diplomatic scene, the Atlantic alliance was shaken by the dispute that pitted Germany and France against the United States and Britain. In scrutinizing this dispute, it becomes apparent that it derived from a complex weave of principles and interests, not a clearcut division between Kantian peacemakers and Hobbesian warriors. Moreover, even as the justifications for the war

were soon exposed as unfounded and erroneous, many of the premises of peace—including the effectiveness of sanctions—turned out to have strengthened rather than challenged Saddam Hussein’s tyranny.

“The Ordeal of Universalism”: While the neoconservatives’ freedom-versus-tyranny theme and Habermas’s postnational cosmopolitanism have the look of a sharp Right-Left dichotomy, neither adequately grasps the international conflicts it is supposed to address. Islam, which is often said to be engaged in a civil war, is embroiled rather in a geopolitical civil war. American policy ran aground in Iraq because it misunderstood this geo-civil war and then exacerbated it by neglecting to secure the country after the invasion. The grand project of overthrowing a tyrant in order to initiate democracies throughout the Muslim world yielded, instead, a civil war within Iraq itself that drew terrorists from all over the world, strengthened the radical regime in Iran, and trained suicide bombers to be sent back to London. As alternatives to the Bush doctrine are sought by Western thinkers and politicians, the interpretation of Europe’s postwar project has become crucial. Is it the delusional Kantian paradise caricatured by Kagan or the beginnings of the “global domestic policy” idealized by Habermas? Or is it, as I argue, an innovative political body—an Empire of Rights—that is still reluctant to embrace its own transformative ambitions? In light of Islam’s geo-civil war and Europe’s halting project of extending democracy and capitalism, I challenge Walter Russell Mead’s vision of a global neoliberal religious conservatism that would unite the capitalist West and conservative Islam.

“Prelude to the Unknown”: Admittedly, this is an equivocal title for a conclusion, but it is true I think to the fact that as American ambitions in Iraq have faltered, the global situation of terrorism, geo-civil war, and tyranny is more desperately than ever in need of vigorous responses. Have the failings in Iraq and elsewhere squandered the very idea that freedom and democracy be the guideposts of American foreign policy? Or, conversely, might the rich tradition of ideas of self-rule (Arendt’s positive liberty) and individual freedom (Berlin’s negative liberty), both of which affirm human plurality, serve as a language of political criticism for assessing the failures and dilemmas of American policy itself?

Threaded throughout the book is a reflection on two political thinkers, Hobbes and Kant, whose ideas are as irreconcilable as those of Arendt, Weber, and Berlin. The evocation of Hobbes and Kant in

debates over American foreign policy has simplified and warped the relation between their respective ideas; irreconcilable though they are, Hobbes and Kant do not conform to the current caricatures, and their relevance for the dilemmas and problems of the present can be startlingly unexpected, when it is recognized that Hobbes's thought hinges just as much on the body politic's founding covenant as on the war of all against all, and that Kant puts the darkness of human nature at the very heart of his reflection on perpetual peace.

The idealistic fervor and self-confident messianism that have infused American declarations of an armed crusade for democracy betray a dangerous disregard for the prospect of tragedy that Weber said inevitably accompanies politics when it turns to violence as a means for achieving its ends. The denial of tragedy amounts to a denial of responsibility. Not just moral responsibility, but ultimately political responsibility. Consider the silence regarding civilian casualties in Iraq. The United States made no effort to estimate civilian deaths, or even to assist Iraqis in accounting for their dead. Neither the press nor the Democrats insisted that an invading force and occupying power had such an obligation and duty. The gross negligence should arouse the intensest moral outrage, but also patriotic outrage. Our country has gone to war not wanting to know what it does. From the day of the invasion right through the destruction and depopulating of Falluja and beyond, America's leaders, its press, its representatives, its public—in short, ourselves—have indulged in this cowardly *wanting-not-to-know*. The silence is a form of lying. But the deception may be nearer self-deception than deceit. For it is well-known in much of the world that America does not have the courage to take a real look at the destructiveness of its own acts. The country's prevaricating silence on the tens of thousands of Iraqis killed is all the starker when juxtaposed to the exaggerated and vociferous fear of death in the United States since September 11. There is no reliable calculus for measuring what damage this kind of irresponsibility does to American interests abroad and the spirit of American democracy at home.

Political decisions and military actions are often thoroughly justified even though they violate valid moral standards. This is why, as Weber argued, politicians and statesmen must take responsibility for the foreseeable consequences of their decisions. A body politic incapable of accepting responsibility for politically justified but morally wrong acts

cannot long operate effectively on the stage of world affairs. A body politic that *wants not to know* the harm it does loses its capacity to judge how its use of force accords with its political goals. How long before such refusal of responsibility and loss of judgment destroy the legitimacy of the foreign policy itself? I do not pose this question in order to launch into a jeremiad. Nor can the question be answered empirically. A body politic seldom has the benefit of reliable warning lights. A different metaphor is perhaps more apt. The body politic's institutions and, in Montesquieu's phrase, the spirit of its laws are its skeleton. Silence, lying, Orwellian misnaming, hypocrisy and hubris, negligence and bravado, wanting-not-to-know: these are all processes that *resorb* a democracy, ravaging the bones at a rate that is unfelt and unseen.