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Sheldon S. Wolin: Democracy Incorporated

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Myth in the Making

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Robert S. Mueller III [director of the FBI] and Secretary of State Powell read from the Bible. Mr. Mueller's theme was good versus evil. "We do not wrestle against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers over the present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places," he said, reading from Ephesians 6:12–18.

Mr. Powell, who followed, touched on trust in God. "Therefore do not be anxious about tomorrow, for tomorrow will be anxious about itself," Mr. Powell said, reading from Matthew 6:25–34.¹

In choosing [the World Trade Center] as their target the terrorists perversely dramatized the supremacy of the free market and of the political system intimately associated with it in the United States and elsewhere, democracy, as defining features of the world of the twenty-first century.
—*Michael Mandelbaum*²

If the burning of the German Parliament (Reichstag) in 1933 produced the symbolic event portending the destruction of parliamentary government by dictatorship, the destruction of the World Trade Center and the attack upon the Pentagon on September 11, 2001, were a revelatory moment in the history of American political life.

What did the selected targets symbolize? Unlike the Reichstag fire the attacks were not aimed at what could be characterized as the architecture of constitutional democracy and the system of power that it represented. Neither the congressional buildings nor the White House was

attacked;³ nor were the symbols of democracy, not the Statue of Liberty, the Lincoln Memorial, or Independence Hall. Instead the buildings symbolic of financial and military power were struck practically simultaneously. Once the United States declared war on terrorism, attention naturally focused on the projection abroad of the actual forms of globalizing power symbolized by the targets of 9/11. Yet the impact of 9/11 may prove equally significant in accelerating the threat to the domestic system of power whose architectural symbols were ignored.

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On cue to 9/11 the media—television, radio, and newspapers—acted in unison, fell into line, even knew instinctively what the line and their role should be.⁴ What followed may have been the modern media's greatest production, its contribution to what was promptly—and darkly—described as a “new world.” Their vivid representations of the destruction of the Twin Towers, accompanied by interpretations that were unwavering and unquestioning, served a didactic end of fixing the images of American vulnerability while at the same time testing the potential for cultural control.

The media produced not only an iconography of terror but a fearful public receptive to being led, first by hailing a leader, the mayor of New York, Rudolf Giuliani, and then by following one, the president of the United States, George W. Bush.⁵ As one pundit wrote approvingly, “the fear that is so prevalent in the country [worked as] a cleanser, washing away a lot of the self-indulgence of the past decade.” Washed in the blood of the lambs . . . Actually, those who could afford self-indulgence would continue to do so while those who could not would send their sons and daughters to Afghanistan and Iraq.

September 11 was quickly consecrated as the equivalent of a national holy day, and the nation was summoned to mourn the victims. Soon thereafter, when memory receded, the date itself was perpetuated and made synonymous with terrorism.⁶ On the second anniversary of the event “a senior White House official” explained the two different rituals of grieving adopted by the president: “Last year you had an open

wound, physically and metaphorically. This year it is about healing—you don't ever want to forget, and the war goes on, but the spiritual need is different."⁷

September 11 was thus fashioned into a primal event, the principal reference point by which the nation's body politic was to be governed and the lives of its members ordered. From the crucified to the redeemer-nation.

But was it "holy politics" or wholly politics?⁸ How was it possible for a notably gimlet-eyed administration, flaunting its prowess for unchristian hardball politics, to overlay its unabashed corporate culture with the cloak of piety without tripping itself up? To be sure, its devotional mien would occasionally be joked about. The jokes, however, would trail off, as though the jokesters themselves were uneasy about mocking some higher powers. That the overwhelming majority of Americans declare they "believe in God" is likely to give pause to expressions of irreverence.

In attempting to characterize an emerging symbolic system reported as "a spontaneous outpouring," one must bear in mind that, although pressures from the administration were undoubtedly at work, television largely conscripted itself. Unprompted, stations replayed endlessly the spectacle of the collapsing Twin Towers while newspapers, in a macabre version of Andy Warhol's prediction of fifteen minutes of fame for everyone, published continuing stories of heroism and self-sacrifice by firemen and police and thumbnail biographies of individual victims.⁹ The media then announced, disingenuously, that "9/11 had forever been printed on the national consciousness." Which is to say, the date was enshrined and readied, not merely to justify but to sanctify the power of those pledged to be its avengers.¹⁰

In a society where freedom of speech, media, and religion are guaranteed, where quirkiness is celebrated, why was the result unison? How is it that a society that makes a fetish of freedom of choice can produce a unanimity eerily comparable to that of a more openly coercive system? Is it a process like the "hidden hand" of Adam Smith's free market where, unprompted by any central directorate, the uncoordinated actions of individuals, each concerned to advance his self-interest, nonetheless produce an overall effect that is good for all?

Smith's model assumes that all of the actors are similarly motivated by rational self-interest, but the aftermath of 9/11, its production and reproduction, is remarkable for the incongruity of the actors, for the diversity of motivations that nonetheless were combined to perpetuate a spectacular moment that permitted only one response. September 11 became that rare phenomenon in contemporary life, an unambiguous truth, one that dissolved contradictions, the ambiguities of politics, the claims and counterclaims of political ideologies and pundits. Critics transformed themselves into penitents defending a preventive war as just and celebrating a constitution sufficiently flexible to be suspended at the pleasure of the chief executive. The truth of 9/11 did more than set free the nation's citizens; it rendered them innocent, able to repress their involvement in the vast expanse of power of empire and globalization, and to ask plaintively, "Why does the rest of the world hate us?"

What explains and promotes such unanimity? In an earlier time it was common to liken the free circulation of ideas to competition in a free marketplace: the best ideas, like the superior product, would prevail over inferior competitors. In the highly structured marketplace of ideas managed by media conglomerates, however, sellers rule and buyers adapt to what the same media has pronounced to be "mainstream." Free circulation of ideas has been replaced by their managed circularity. The self-anointed keepers of the First Amendment flame encourage exegesis and reasonable criticism. Critics who do not wish to be considered as "off-the-wall" attract buyers by internalizing co-optation. Accepting the conventions of criticism entails accepting the context created and enforced by the "house" voices. The result is an essentially monochromatic media. In-house commentators identify the problem and its parameters, creating a box that dissenters struggle vainly to elude. The critic who insists on changing the context is dismissed as irrelevant, extremist, "the Left"—or ignored altogether. A more sophisticated structure embraces the op-ed page and letters to the editor. In theory everyone is free to submit articles or letters, but the newspaper chooses what suits its purpose with meager explanation of standards for acceptance—although it is obvious that the selected opinions represent limits set by the editors. From the paper's viewpoint the best of all worlds is attained when the authors of op-ed pieces or letters criticize

not the paper but its pundits, who are carefully selected according to a Dorothy Parker principle of representing all opinions in the range between A and B.¹¹ The point is the appearance of freedom: critics are encouraged to “score points.” to trade insults, although these jabs do not add up to anything beyond venting.

The responsibility of the responsible media includes maintaining an ideological “balance” that treats the “Left” and the “Right” as polar opposites as well as moral and political equivalents. Over the years the *New York Times* has faithfully discharged that responsibility. In 1992 it featured a story about South Africa, still struggling with the effects of apartheid. The reporter interviewed some young black people who favored a war to “end the colonial settler regime.” That sentiment gave the *Times* reporter the sense that he was caught in “some cold war time warp.” It inspired him to balance off the anticolonial rebels by inserting a description of an Afrikaner neo-Nazi gang who wanted “a people’s army.” His conclusion: “the two groups have much in common.” One of their commonalities, he discovered, was the small numbers in each group. After “a two-hour conversation” with the blacks he was ready with his conclusion: the conversation was “a refresher course in the ideological lexicon that has been discredited from Moscow to Mogadishu.”¹²

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By the most recent count, more than three thousand innocent persons were murdered on September 11 without apparent provocation or justification. The damage to property and the impact upon the city of New York and upon the general economy were enormous. These facts, at once familiar yet impossible to fully comprehend, had a stark and brutal immediacy. Quantitatively they were as crudely “real” as reality is ever likely to be. Since then the reality of that day has been reproduced in a variety of guises and practical applications that are, in their own way, as amazing as the event invoked to justify them.

The nation was immediately declared to be at war against an enemy whose nature, number, and location were largely unknown. Nonethe-

less, “enemy aliens” were rounded up and held under constitutionally dubious conditions. The nation’s population was periodically placed on a state of alert. The powers of government were expanded and made more intrusive, while simultaneously its social welfare functions were radically scaled back. Amidst a faltering economy, widening disparities between social classes, and escalating national debt, the administration responded by promoting its own version of “class actions.” It became more aggressively biased in favor of the wealthier, while, equally significant, the less wealthy and poor remained politically apathetic, unable to find a vehicle for expressing their helplessness. A provocative foreign policy was adopted with the aim of releasing American power from the restraints of treaties and of cooperation with allies. “At some point,” a senior administration official warned, “the Europeans with butterflies in their stomachs—many of whom didn’t want us to go into Afghanistan—will see that they have a bipolar choice: they can get with the plan [to invade Iraq] or get off.”¹³ New enemy states were identified, not as hostile or enemy but as “evil,” and threatened. The notion of preemptive war was embraced and put into practice against Iraq.

The general effect of this expansion of powers created a new world where everything became larger-than-life, strange, filled with huge powers locked in a contest that would determine the fate of the world: “Axis of Evil,” “weapons of mass destruction,” “civilization against barbarism.” The reality of September 11 became clothed in a myth that dramatized an encounter between two world-contending powers and prophesied that after severe trials and marvelous events the power blessed by the Creator would triumph over the evil power.

The mythology created around September 11 was predominantly Christian in its themes. The day was converted into the political equivalent of a holy day of crucifixion, of martyrdom, that fulfilled multiple functions: as the basis of a political theology, as a communion around a mystical body of a bellicose republic, as a warning against political apostasy, as a sanctification of the nation’s leader, transforming him from a powerful officeholder of questionable legitimacy into an instrument of redemption, and at the same time exhorting the congregants to a wartime militancy, demanding of them uncritical loyalty and support,

