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**Sheldon S. Wolin: Democracy Incorporated**

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## Myth in the Making

i

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.<sup>1</sup>

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*<sup>2</sup>

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;<sup>3</sup> 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.<sup>4</sup> 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.<sup>5</sup> 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.<sup>6</sup> 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."<sup>7</sup>

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?<sup>8</sup> 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.<sup>9</sup> 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.<sup>10</sup>

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.<sup>11</sup> 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.”<sup>12</sup>

iii

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.”<sup>13</sup> 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,

summoning them as participants in a sacrament of unity and in a crusade to “rid the world of evil.”<sup>14</sup> Holy American Empire?

iv

Myth, in its original form [in ancient Greece], provided answers without ever explicitly formulating the problems. When [Greek] tragedy takes over the mythical traditions, it uses them to pose problems to which there are no solutions.

—*Jean-Pierre Vernant*<sup>15</sup>

Let us weigh the gain and the loss in wagering that God is. Let us estimate these two chances. If you gain, you gain all; if you lose, you lose nothing. Wager, then, without hesitation that He is.

—*Blaise Pascal*<sup>16</sup>

May God continue to bless America.

—*President George W. Bush*

In the aftermath of September 11 the American citizen was propelled into the realm of mythology, a new and different dimension of being, unworldly, where occult forces were bent on destroying a world that had been created for the children of light. Myth recounts a story, in this case of how the armies of light will arise from the ruins to battle and overcome the forces of darkness. Myth presents a narrative of exploits, not an argument or a demonstration. It does not make the world intelligible, only dramatic. In the course of its account the actions of the myth’s heroes, no matter how bloody or destructive, acquire justification. They become privileged, entitled to take actions that are morally denied to others. No need to tally the Iraqi civilian casualties.

Myths come in many sizes and shapes. Our concern is with a particular species, the cosmic myth, and with a unique permutation that occurs when the cosmic myth is combined with secular myth. A cosmic myth might be defined as a dramatic form with epical aspirations. Its subject is not a simple contest but an inevitable, even necessary showdown be-

tween irreconcilable forces, each claiming that ultimately its power draws upon supernatural resources. Their capabilities far exceed the scales of ordinary politics. Typically, one force portrays itself as defending the world, and it depicts the other as seeking to dominate it by a perverse strategy that thrives on chaos. Although each possesses a different form of power from its rival, each claims that its power alone is drawn from a sacred source, that therefore it alone is blessed while its foe is diabolical. Not only are the claims of each party mutually exclusive of the other and impossible to disprove; each is intolerant of opposition (= doubt) and distrustful of a free and genuinely democratic politics.

In his State of the Union address of January 2007 President Bush, having suffered a clear defeat in the midterm elections of 2006 and a popular repudiation of his Iraq policies, responded by, in his turn, repudiating that most down-to-earth democratic process and called for increasing the troop levels in Iraq by more than twenty thousand troops. Defiantly the decider decided to transcend mere elections, ignoring their legitimizing role, and to substitute a mythical representation of the stakes. If American forces were to “step back before Baghdad is secure,” he warned, then chaos would threaten the world.

[T]he Iraqi government would be overrun by extremists on all sides. We could expect an epic battle between Shia extremists backed by Iran and Sunni extremists aided by Al Qaeda and supporters of the old regime. A contagion of violence could spill out across the country, and in time the entire region could be drawn into the conflict.

For America this is a nightmare scenario. For the enemy, this is the objective. Chaos is their greatest ally in this struggle. And out of chaos in Iraq, would emerge an emboldened enemy with new safe havens, new recruits, new resources and an even greater determination to harm America.

The president then presented his contribution to the structure of inverted totalitarianism and in the process demonstrated that even when all of the main elements of a “free society” are in place—free elections, free media, functioning Congress, and the Bill of Rights—they can be ignored by an aggrandizing executive. First he emphasized

that the battle against chaos had no discernible end. “The war on terror,” he declaimed, “is a generational struggle that will continue long after you [i.e., Congress] and I have turned our duties over to others.” He then threw down the gauntlet to the vast majority of Americans and Congress by declaring that he would seek authorization from Congress to increase the army and Marine Corps by ninety-two thousand over five years, and, equally significant, he pressed Congress to assist in devising “a volunteer Civilian Reserve Corps.” That corps would, in effect, function as a private army. He envisaged a corps of “civilians with critical skills to serve on missions abroad when America needs them.”<sup>17</sup> A praetorian guard for the new empire?

v

In the early part of the twentieth century the great social and political theorist Max Weber wrote feelingly of the “disenchantment of the world” brought about by the triumph of scientific rationalism and skepticism. There was, he contended, no room any longer for occult forces, supernatural deities, or divinely revealed truth. In a world dominated by scientifically established facts and with no privileged or sacrosanct areas, myth would seemingly have a difficult time retaining a foothold.<sup>18</sup> Not only did Weber underestimate the staying power of credulity; he could not foresee that the great triumphs of modern science would themselves provide the basis for technological achievements which, far from banishing the mythical, would unwittingly inspire it.

The mythical is also nourished from another source, one seemingly more incongruous than the scientific-technological culture. Consider the imaginary world continuously being created and re-created by contemporary advertising and rendered virtually escape-proof by the enveloping culture of the modern media. Equally important, the culture produced by modern advertising, which seems at first glance to be resolutely secular and materialistic, the antithesis of religious and especially of evangelical teachings, actually reinforces that dynamic. Almost every product promises to change your life: it will make you more beautiful, cleaner, more sexually alluring, and more successful. Born again, as

it were. The messages contain promises about the future, unfailingly optimistic, exaggerating, miracle-promising—the same ideology that invites corporate executives to exaggerate profits and conceal losses, but always with a sunny face. The virtual reality of the advertiser and the “good news” of the evangelist complement each other, a match made in heaven. Their zeal to transcend the ordinary and their bottomless optimism both feed the hubris of Superpower. Each colludes with the other. The evangelist looks forward to the “last days,” while the corporate executive systematically exhausts the world’s scarce resources.

Virtual reality has about it the character of unreality, of transcending the ordinary world and its common smells and sights, its limiting rhythms of birth, growth, decline, death, and renewal. For Americans, the chosen people of advertising, technology, capitalist orthodoxy, and religious faith, the greatest triumph of virtual reality is war, the great unexperienced reality. Ever since the Civil War Americans have fought wars at a distance: in Cuba, the Philippines, France, on almost every other continent in World War II, then in Korea, Vietnam, the Middle East. War is an action game, played in the living room, or a spectacle on a screen, but, in either case, not actually experienced. Ordinary life goes on uninterruptedly: work, recreation, professional sports, family vacations. After 9/11 terrorism becomes another virtual reality, experienced only through its re-created images, its destructiveness (= wonders) absorbed through the spectacle of the occasional and hapless terrorist or captive journalist put on public display. In contrast, official policy decrees that the coffins of dead soldiers are not to be seen by the public.

vi

In an age poised between the scientific rationalism of modernity and a deeply skeptical postmodernity for which truth or fact is simply “another story” and irony a badge of courage, myth is no straightforward matter, no “easy sell” to a generation for whom cynicism is second nature. For reality to be transmuted into popular mythology certain conditions had to obtain, or be created; only then could the mythic become a defining element in both the popular understanding of the

post-September 11 world and the self-justifying rhetoric of the governing elite. That susceptible public is one whose secularism is continually overestimated and its credulousness underestimated, especially by liberals. There were many who believed in a virtual reality and marvels long before they were simulated. Additionally, when myth emerges, not in a prescientific or pretechnological world, but in a power-jaded world accustomed to scientific revolutions and technological marvels (cloning, man on the moon), and, at the same time, credulous—for such an audience myth has to portray prodigies of power that are both familiar and uncanny. Not space aliens armed with the weaponry of a more advanced civilization, an “above world,” but their opposite: primitive, satanic, invisible denizens of an “underworld” who (through devious money-laundering schemes) are able to purchase and operate contemporary technology. The power-jaded world, so jaded it names its own mythical champion “Superpower” after a comic strip character, will engage terrorism for control of the world. Before that contest can be cleanly represented, before power can be mythified, it needs a new world, a fresh context at once mythical and believable, though not necessarily credible.

When myth begins to govern decision-makers in a world where ambiguity and stubborn facts abound, the result is a disconnect between the actors and reality. They convince themselves that the forces of darkness possess weapons of mass destruction and nuclear capabilities; that their own nation is privileged by a god who inspired the Founding Fathers and the writing of the nation’s constitution; and that a class structure of great and stubborn inequalities does not exist. A grim but joyous few see portents of a world that is living out “the last days.”

That disconnect raises the question of what kind of politics could best restore reality, could press decision-makers to take account of it. Is it a politics dominated by a combination of the elite and the elect? or a politics more closely connected, not with “the” reality nor with those who are convinced of their power to remake reality on their own terms—a politics, rather, involving and representing those for whom reality is more stubborn, more a fact of life that has to be engaged daily?