

INTRODUCTION
HOW THE SECULAR AND RELIGIOUS
RIGHT CAPTURED AMERICA

After the tragic events of September 11, 2001, nearly all Europeans felt profound sympathy for the United States. The Director of *Le Monde*, Jean-Marie Colombani, summed up the outpouring of solidarity in his editorial (leader) next day entitled: “We are all Americans.” Only a tiny minority reacted to the terrorist attack with a shrug and a comment to the effect that it was horrible for the victims, but the US “had it coming.” Within a few short years, however, this affection and fellow-feeling of the vast majority had transmuted like gold into lead. Dismay, distrust, and what the late journalist-novelist Hunter S. Thompson might have called “fear and loathing” of the United States government predominated.

These all-too-common sentiments relate much less to a change of heart toward the American people than to the actions of President George W. Bush and his entourage. People were naturally encouraged by the outcome of the 2006 mid-term elections that returned the Democrats to power in the Congress. As I write, the campaign for the next

presidential election in 2008 is in full flow, and many await the exit of Bush and the defeat of the Republicans, when the United States will return, or so they believe, to normal.

Would it were so! I too would like to believe that the first years of the twenty-first century have been a cruel aberration that will vanish from memory as a bad dream evaporates in the morning. I fear, however, that it will be much more difficult than that and the point of this book is to explain why. *Hijacking America* is thus not about the “war against terror,” the “axis of evil,” or other staples of the Bush–Cheney foreign or domestic programs but rather about the political, intellectual, and cultural climate that has made them possible.

I want to argue that a long-term, successful rightward shift of American culture has been underway since at least the 1970s; that its guiding spirits have acquired lasting power over policy; that this new belief system, both secular and religious, is unlikely to change fundamentally simply because one party, or one President, is in power rather than another. “Neo-liberalism” and “neo-conservatism” are the words most frequently chosen to describe this system and these terms refer to a coherent set of principles and ideas (we will look at the nuances between them shortly). This culture has been patiently constructed; it permeates the whole of American society from the leadership to the bottom rungs of the social ladder and it is not called into question because its assumptions are usually unspoken. They have nonetheless moved the center of gravity of American politics much further to the right.

This culture is significantly based on lies and the new center of gravity has increasingly made a weird kind of politics possible. The United States can be a mystifying place even for Americans because the usual rules of Western democracies often seem not to apply. We know, of course, that all heads of State keep secrets and often lie, especially when they feel sure they can get away with it. None, however, approaches the

dazzling heights of deceit scaled in recent American times. Had Congress undertaken any meaningful investigations between 2002 and 2007, President George W. Bush would almost certainly have been found guilty of “high crimes and misdemeanors” and impeached (leaving the presidency to Dick Cheney who would then have had to be impeached in his turn . . .)

In contrast, the closing years of the second millennium witnessed Republican legislators falling over themselves to impeach Bill Clinton for lying about sexual hanky-panky with a plump and eager young woman. How great a threat to the nation was that? What else was a gentleman and a roving husband to do?

Few, on the other hand, now seem to care about stolen elections, exposing one’s own intelligence agents to possible assassination, and lying to the American people and to Congress on the broadest possible scale in order to trick them into supporting a costly, futile, and criminal war. Some critics argue that the American public has grown blasé about deceit in high places and may even have come to expect it, although this was surely not the case until quite recently.

Lyndon Johnson and Richard Nixon were hounded out of office because of their lies on matters foreign (Vietnam) or domestic (Watergate). Ronald Reagan, although he squeaked through in the end, had a queasy period for deceiving Americans about selling weapons to Iran and using the revenues to pay for the illegal military invasion of Nicaragua by the “Contras.” As for Clinton, it is hard to say whether the public was more disgusted by his behavior or by the Republican–Roman circus of attempted impeachment, but everyone could agree that the scandal cost him precious time, better employed dealing with the country’s urgent business. For Bush and Cheney, however, lying is more like a way of life.¹

The long-term costs of these lies are incalculable both for Americans and for their victims beyond US borders. The Bush administration often combines unprecedented, disarming frankness with calculated deception. As the British journalist Michael Kinsley memorably phrased it:

Bush II administration lies are often so laughably obvious that you wonder why they bother. Until you realize: They haven't bothered. If telling the truth were less bother, they'd try that too. The characteristic Bush II form of dishonesty is to construct an alternative reality on some topic and to regard anyone who objects to it as a snivelling dweeb obsessed with "nuance."²

From their point of view, the method has paid off. The Bush–Cheney (always keep a close watch on Cheney) presidency has used the Big Lie of a winnable war on terror in Iraq, not just to kill thousands of young Americans and hundreds of thousands of Iraqis, but also to reduce dramatically the civil rights of the American people established at the time of, and thanks to, the American Revolution.

This is the first regime in well over two hundred years to allow searches and seizures in people's homes without judicial warrant. New methods of broad electronic surveillance and trawling for information among ordinary Americans destroy the Fourth Amendment which forbids not only "unreasonable searches and seizures" but also requires a precise description of the "place to be searched, and the persons or things to be seized." This Presidency has even dared put an end to habeas corpus and authorize torture of anyone considered an enemy. If your aim is to throttle democracy, lies can work.

Without indulging to the slightest degree in conspiracy theory, nor even evoking the petroleum connection, anyone interested can verify that the Bush–Cheney clan

- wanted and planned to invade Iraq long before September 11, 2001;
- manipulated the intelligence community and distorted its research in order to justify this intervention;
- knew there were no weapons of mass destruction in Iraq;
- knew there was no connection between the secular Arab regime of Saddam Hussein on one hand and Osama bin Laden and the religious fanatics of Al Qaeda on the other.

Politics are debased. The hope that Keynesian policies as practiced during the New Deal and the post-war period might still be applied grows ever more faint. No critical, credible, alternative project exists on the left and there would be few progressive organizations to sustain it if it did. The Democratic Party no longer pretends that it is social-democratic or that it seeks to protect the poor and vulnerable. Anywhere but the United States, this party would be seen as a right-of-center organization, with many of its members engaged in pushing the party further rightwards. Past or present “conservative” European leaders like Angela Merkel or Jacques Chirac are probably more progressive than most Democrats, with some honorable exceptions, like the members of the Congressional Progressive Caucus.

The financing system ensures that Democrats running for election are just as beholden to big corporate money as the Republicans. The problems and the opinions of the working class no longer count for as much with the size of that class dwindling. The North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) and similar free-trade pacts have wiped out many workers’ jobs and for the past twenty-five years, successive administrations (including Carter’s and Clinton’s) have gutted the welfare system. Some parts of some American cities resemble nothing so much as the Third World, as anyone could observe when Hurricane Katrina struck New Orleans.

The two-party system nonetheless remains intact and so far no significant popular political forces of revolt are pushing politics to the left.

Since the fateful attack on the Twin Towers and the launching of its unnecessary but costly wars, the American executive has consistently ignored and downgraded the legislative branch. The executive continues, for example, to build permanent military bases in Iraq, which the Pentagon plans to use indefinitely, although Congress has specifically prohibited further spending on them.

The “War on Terror” has been a godsend to the neo-conservative leadership, for the excellent reason that it cannot be won. The country remains on a war footing, spending tens of billions of dollars, feeding enormous contracts to corporations like Cheney’s Halliburton; handing over ever-greater powers to the “wartime President.” Americans and Iraqis continue to die for nothing. As virtually everyone now admits, the situation in that martyred country is far worse than when the United States arrived and the US itself is less secure than it was prior to the invasion. In spite of the embargo, Iraq functioned, though no one denies either that Saddam Hussein ran a repulsive dictatorship.

It remains to be seen if the Democrats, with their recaptured majority in Congress, will investigate the many impeachable offences committed by the Bush–Cheney axis and inquire into the commission of war crimes in Iraq, Guantanamo, and elsewhere. Democrats do not now, it is true, command the necessary two-thirds majority in the Senate for impeachment, but the crucial question is that of courage. The party leadership seems already to have decided it must not “look backwards.” The corporate-controlled media are bored with the whole business, explaining that the public has “moved on.” Aside from a few independent journalists, websites, and citizens’ groups, there is at present no public outcry for such investigations.

The economic front is no more inspiring. Most Americans are working harder for less. Inequalities have never been so deep and pervasive since the late 1920s. The top one percent of Americans has more than doubled its share of the national income since the end of the Second World War; working people's wages, however, have stagnated or declined. The definition of the "poverty line," first established in the 1950s and virtually unchanged since then, seriously underestimates (at 12.5 percent) the number of poor people in the country. One child in four is born into poverty; 45 million Americans have no health insurance. The minimum wage hardly moved in a quarter-century, although the Democrats have now acted to increase it. Poverty is endemic within significant segments of the white majority as well as the black or Latino minorities.

Still there is no popular clamor for economic reform, higher wages, retirement benefits, health coverage, greater equality – much less demonstrations and riots in the streets. With some courageous exceptions, the trade unions are weak and often concentrate – like much of the rest of the American left – on questions of gender and sexual-orientation and racial non-discrimination issues. People seem quite prepared to vote, if they vote at all, against their own interests, and they stubbornly retain their faith in the "market." At least half – especially among the least educated and worst off – do not vote at all.

Corporations continue to rake in record profits: in 2006, Exxon's were \$40 billion. The government still gives flagrant tax breaks and outrageous subsidies to the corporate sector, especially the already opulent oil industry. One financial scandal after another bursts upon the country, the guilty are mostly bailed out with taxpayers' money, the occasional scapegoat goes to jail and the outcry subsides. The salaries of corporate CEOs are now well over 400 times those of their

average employee. The progressive movements of the 1930s that called for greater equality and social justice are long gone.

The crusading press of yesteryear has accepted self-censorship and in any case belongs to the same sorts of corporations as the rest of the economy. Television, from which most Americans get all their news, is supine and replaces real news with the latest celebrity gossip and trivial (though not for the victims) news, endlessly repeated, about the latest storm damage or road-crash. All this provokes a collective yawn. As Gore Vidal says, “America is a quarter of a billion people totally misinformed and disinformed by their government. This is tragic, but our media is – I wouldn’t even say corrupt – it’s just beyond telling us anything that the government doesn’t want us to know.”³

As for popular religion, the Pulitzer Prize winner and former *New York Times* correspondent Chris Hedges sees the radical Christian right as a nascent breed of fascism, American style.⁴ The poor, as well as increasing numbers of the threatened and unstable middle class, are plunged into despair, trapped in soulless communities of a numbing sameness where they feel abandoned, isolated, and lonely. They often find solace in churches that promise community, utopia, and, for many of them, revenge. Most of these church-goers are just lost souls clinging to their often bizarre beliefs; many of them are even earnest idealists or utopians and the majority are sincere believers, certainly not evil people. They are nonetheless easily manipulated.

Some Christian evangelical leaders are downright dangerous demagogues whose dream is to establish a quasi-fascist theocracy in the United States. It is not unfair to draw a comparison with the early 1930s in Germany at the beginning of Hitler’s reign. The Christian right’s leadership knows how to maneuver the masses and are sure that their troops will follow their lead, at least at the beginning; just as those pre-

cursors uncritically followed Hitler, Mussolini, and other dictators.

A triggering event like another terrorist attack on the scale of September 11, a devastating ecological crisis, or an economic meltdown could give them just the chance they pray for. No countervailing force stands against these leaders while the moderating influence of traditional, mainstream Christians diminishes daily. Most American intellectuals and middle or upper middle-class people do not take this threat seriously; for them, the tens of millions of religious people are just “nuts,” or “Jesus-freaks,” not a genuine political force.

You have heard much of this before, at least in broad outline, and except for religion, I do not intend to dwell on these issues in detail. Gross inequalities, endless war, ruling class greed, the desperate situation of increasing numbers of Americans are not my real subject here although they are necessarily the backdrop and figure in the pages that follow.

My purpose is rather to ask *how all this happened*.

How could a few decades suffice to trample into the mud American ideals, expressed in some of the most inspiring political documents ever written? How can the country whose first independent act was to declare that “all men are created equal” now be one of the most unequal societies on earth? Why were those who planned the takeover strategy – for that is what it is – so free to operate? Why have they met so little opposition? What hope is there for change? I hope to show that the battle has been above all cultural and that the strategy of the far right wing has paid. If you can get into peoples’ heads, you need not worry about their hands and hearts. They will follow. Then the leadership can do as it pleases.

Many people, particularly Europeans, continue to live for the most part in a rational, well-educated world, with public services and at least some social protection. Their societies, despite many injustices, are still relatively liveable. Perhaps as a

result, these people tend to believe that the present calamitous situation of the United States is entirely the doing of Bush and his neo-conservative followers. Logically, then, this situation will cease as soon as the present leadership is ousted, at the latest in 2008, and replaced by more principled officials.

Again, most Europeans who travel to the United States for work or pleasure never venture beyond the Atlantic and Pacific coasts – admittedly more attractive, more Euro-friendly and certainly more fun than the places that lie in between. They have no idea what people are thinking – or not thinking – about in the vast heartland. They do not understand how Americans can have elected the leaders they have wished upon themselves and are sure that any day now they will come to their senses. Such strange behavior is temporary and will cease when a different party or different personnel capture that leadership.

I disagree. Such an optimistic scenario strikes me as both dangerously misleading and a cruel illusion. It also reflects conscious or unconscious social or intellectual snobbery that treats common people as beneath contempt. One cannot simply laugh off the beliefs, attitudes and knee-jerk reactions of tens of millions of people, particularly when they are citizens of the most powerful and arguably the most dangerous country on earth. This is why I try to explain where these belief systems come from and how they are propagated by a reactionary and, yes, sometimes fascist cadre; and fed to ordinary people through highly effective, sophisticated, and long-term strategies that are unlikely to change.

The signs I have tried to identify, whether in the spheres of government, civil society, or religion, point to a conscious long-term effort carried out by ruthlessly efficient, well-funded, and well organized elites. They intend to continue advancing their authoritarian, anti-democratic, corporate-controlled oligarchic State, using reactionary but soul-

satisfying religion as window-dressing and as an element of social control. Having a Bush-type president naturally makes their lives easier but they do not depend upon it.

New facts and fresh evidence are flooding in every day and I have constantly had to confront the temptation to return to sections of this narrative I thought completed in order to be as thorough and timely as the subject deserves. I have succumbed to this temptation more than once, but finally decided I must resist because the need is overwhelming that outsiders – as well as many incredulous Americans – understand the country. That urgency should finally be the guiding principle for a writer who considers herself a “scholar-activist” or “public scholar.”* My entire effort is frustratingly incomplete but rather than trying to attain the unattainable *magnum opus*, and one too weighty to read on the bus, I have opted for getting the word, however imperfect, “out there,” wherever the “there” may be.

Allow me now to take exactly the opposite tack in order to avoid possible misunderstandings. I may be wrong and would be exceedingly pleased if I were. I try to describe a state of affairs that strikes me as a clear, present, and lasting danger to civilization but this fear says nothing about the inevitability of such an outcome. Americans have more than once proven themselves to be inventive, resilient, and just plain smart.

There are dozens – hundreds – of citizens’ organizations that have not given up, working under difficult conditions, goading Congress to do the right thing, informing lazy journalists, promoting citizen action around local, national, and even international issues. There are dozens – hundreds – of faith-based and church groups helping the poor, the

* At its 48th annual Congress in Chicago in March 2007, the International Political Economy section of the International Studies Association was kind enough to present me with its first “Outstanding Public Scholar Award” of which I’m inordinately proud as that is what I’ve always tried to be.

immigrants, the downtrodden, and the environment. This book is almost entirely about the right wing, but that does not mean that the right has no opposition. The country is huge and progressives may be rather thin on the ground, but they do exist and such people and organizations fighting against the dishonoring of their nation deserve all the support they can get. Perhaps, thanks to the coalescing of all these efforts, the great majority of Americans will understand in time where their real interests lie, how the right manipulates them and will turn away from false prophets.

Such an outcome is more likely, however, when one shines a spotlight on the manipulations and that is what I have tried to do here, with no pretensions to being exhaustive. It would be profoundly satisfying to find that this book inspires others to take up and complete the task. It would be even more satisfying if it helped progressives to ask themselves how the right accomplished a cultural takeover no one predicted a few decades earlier, what tools they used, what skills they deployed. Progressives could then put the answers to such questions to good use.

There is nothing especially mysterious about the takeover – those who engineered it used money, willing talent, and organization strategically to promote ideas. Progressives, too, have plenty of willing and articulate talent, they too can organize; there is even money available if funders at last recognize their responsibilities and start supporting the production and dissemination of progressive, enlightened ideas, because ideas have consequences.