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The Self and Political Other (work in progress)

Hesiod's Elemental Myth

If we the blissfully liable wards of the state are ever to drill our understanding deeper into the light-swallowing core of American politics – like the grave king said to the white rabbit – it would be prudent to: “Begin at the beginning and go on till you come to the end – then stop.”¹ So, heeding far-sighted counsel, let us begin with one of Homer's less celebrated contemporaries and stop when we arrive at some kind of end that has punctured a vein transporting a current rich enough to reveal the political DNA of who we are, where we've been, and the broken down station that lies at the end of the tracks built by souls lost in time.

In *Works and Days*, the Greek poet Hesiod (circa 700 BC) attempts to illustrate human origins through the “Myth of the Metals”:

The race of men that the immortals who dwell on Olympus made first of all was of gold. [...] A second race after that, much inferior, the dwellers on Olympus made of silver. [...] Then Zeus the father made yet a third race of men, of bronze, not like the silver in anything.”²

Gold, silver, bronze... no... not the forged medallions draped around bare-backed athletes, but rather the elemental ingredients for a natural explanation and continual perpetuation of a social class system. Yet, it is not the class system that pulls our focus, instead it is the ancient concept of “myth” and its power to order and govern societal worldview – whether it is the archaic and classical Greeks or the post-enlightened and postmodern Americans – that beats the heart of the matter.³ To realize, if only in a small dose, the ability of myths to create social institutions that – for better or worse – carry the potential to keep the *demos* (μᾶζες), or the masses bound into the cave, we should consider how this simple Boeotian farmer-poet's noble lie may still shape the contour of the American political horizon nearly three millennia later.

Classical Version: The Noble Lie

Beyond Hesiod's text, it is in Plato's *Republic* (circa 360 BC) that the Myth of the Metals is fashioned into its most acknowledged and influential political incarnation. In Book III, the dispossessed Socrates explains to his interlocutor Glaucon the need to create political rulers who love the *polis* (πόλις), or city because they see the city's advantage as intimately connected with their own. Although a seemingly endless stream of rewards and honors and a tightly disciplined education serves to deepen the rulers' love for the city, Socrates also asserts the political expediency of the classical myth, or the “noble lie” to ensure that the tenuous balance between public and private interest is properly maintained:⁴

“Could we,” I [Socrates] said, “somehow contrive one of those lies that come into being in case of need, of which we were just now speaking, some one noble lie to persuade, in the best case, even the rulers, but if not them, the rest of the city?”⁵

Able to persuade all three classes: rulers (gold), guardians (silver), artisans (bronze), Socrates' noble lie fashions the image that all had sprung from the same patch of earth, an initial step required to proactively repress the natural question: why would I give my loyalty to these individuals as opposed to others? The preliminary stage of the lie

functions most efficiently as a type of “inclusion” mechanism that bands naturally dissimilar human beings together as brothers and citizens in order to defend the motherland from which they were all mythologically conceived. Since the Great Expulsion from the Garden and Cain’s building of the first city (named after his son Enoch), it is the view of both classical and modern political philosophy that all Cities (states being the modern equivalent) have been established through the unjust acquisition of the land and treasure of others.⁶ If the city is the child of injustice, then the city is rightfully subject to domination by right of the stronger and the annexation of its land and treasure by foreign invaders. In the pale light of this political consequence, the first stage of the noble lie provides a natural foundation for the common defense against the eventuality of both internal revolutionaries and external armies by artificially bonding all citizens of the city.

With the foundation of a “shared origins” skillfully laid, the second stage of the noble lie employs Hesiod’s myth to construct a natural, yet mobile class system among these newly formed citizens. The natural inequality of human gifts and talents must be legitimized by being both expressed in the social institutions and reinforced by the laws of the regime. Nonetheless, Socrates does not desire a rigid and fixed class system based solely on affluence or birthright, but rather a more instinctive arrangement that provides mobility based on the virtue of *arête* (ἀρετή), or moral excellence and the unequal distribution of gifts and talents. The unmoving dilemma Socrates’ proposition faces lies in the deepest and darkest recesses of humanity – selfish desire. In every society, the powerful will always hunger and often gain more while the weak are conditioned and often coerced into settling for considerably less. In order to circumvent this injustice and amplify the collective good of the city, in exchange for the privilege of governance the rulers’ private privileges and property must be stripped from them. It is at this point that Hesiod’s myth becomes most convenient as it supplies a divinely endorsed and natural explanation for a mobile class system that allows its citizens to pursue the end that best fits their natural talents.⁷ To reinforce the concept of mobility that underlies this system, Socrates declares that a silver child is occasionally born to a gold parent and a gold child is sometimes born to a bronze parent and so forth. Considering this thread of mobility, the assessment of the “metal” in one’s soul, or one’s natural gifting is a vital component of classical education. It is essential to the proper functioning of the city that those with the gifts and talents to rule do so, and that those with born to serve as auxiliaries and artisans perform those functions that apply their related qualities.⁸

So – my readers and only friends – the noble lie is designed to provide humans reasonable grounds for resisting their powerful selfish desires in the name of the common good as a city driven by selfishness will not endure. In order to avoid, or at least delay, this inevitable self-destruction, the noble lie creates institutions that assist humans in mastering their desires so that those who possess a deep eros for the truth will govern the city beyond their appetites for power and possessions. A just city can only subsist when these “golden” individuals rule in such a way that permits and encourages its citizens to live excellent and virtuous lives marked by wisdom, justice, temperance, and courage.

Modern Version: The Clever Lie

While Socrates takes up Hesiod’s noble lie as a shield that guards against the fragmenting effects of human selfishness, the exiled third son of an attorney Niccolo Machiavelli makes clever use of myths to mask the self-interested motives of the powerful. While the classics and the moderns both stipulated man’s deeply entrenched egoism, they disagreed on how to treat it in political community. Machiavelli’s *The Prince* (1513) represents the great ideological shift away from the classical and rather “utopian” vision of the State toward a more modern, “practical” regime not informed by the same flights of fancy as its antecedent. Machiavelli – a disinclined witness to the

abuses of power by the Florentine ruling class and the Roman Catholic Church – wrote with regard to a “radical departure” from the classical notion of government and championed a more pragmatic approach to statecraft:

But since my intention is to write something useful for anyone who understands it, it seemed more suitable to me to search after the effectual truth of the matter rather than its imagined one. And many writers have imagined for themselves republics and principalities that have never been seen nor known to exist in reality;⁹

With a banner signaling the search after an “effectual” truth of the state rather than an “imagined” one, Machiavelli births a highly gravitational modern political philosophy that pulls everything down from the fanciful and merely “imagined” classical republic to the “real” modern state where the *telos* (τέλος), or end is the selfish preservation of the rulers’ power through institutions, rather than its institutionalized resistance. In this bravely myopic new world, the classical virtue of *arête* has little to do with the selection of rulers; for, as Machiavelli argues, ruin is often greedily heaped upon those who would attempt to live a virtuous life. Like a child growing up with a lying politician for a father and a sex-crazed nun for a mother, Machiavelli witnessed the undeniable gap between how one lives and how one ought to live, and he reasoned that anyone who abandons what is done for what should be done learns his ruin rather than his preservation. As a result, he surmised that it was necessary for a prince who wished to maintain his position to learn how not to be good, and to either use or not use this knowledge according to necessity.¹⁰

It was this acute examination of human hypocrisy that launched a philosophical revolution and deposed the classical endeavor to preserve a city centered on virtue and replaced it with a modern nation-state spawned from the political necessity to protect the ascendancy of the Prince. Not only has Machiavelli created the concept of *realpolitik* (political realism / practical politics) by altering the purpose of political necessity, but he has also created a new anthropology and given conceived the modern politician who dances to atonal sounds of modern ethics. If, in the name of real world political pragmatism, we have thrown out the classical ruler who governs for the common good, then what has replaced him? Who is this modern prince and how does he maintain order in the absence of a social tradition that, at least in theory, defers to the common good at the expense of self? Machiavelli gives this new prince a physical form as he cites several real life examples, foremost of which is the ruthless commander of the papal armies – Cesare Borgia (1474-1507).¹¹ As the incarnation of this new prince, Borgia employed any means necessary to sustain the most practical of all political ends – self-preservation.¹² If this is the modern political *telos*, then what are the means to this end? Machiavelli, in short, endorses such means as the protection of a praiseworthy appearance and the use of fear, which should both be wrapped within the protective shroud of the “clever lie.”

With his rejection of the classical political paradigm that emphasizes a regime based on transcendent ideals, Machiavelli is left with only the material world and the arbitrary will of the prince. As a consequence, the shrewd prince must imprint his will upon matter in order to shape it into a mold that matches the contour of egocentric desire. In order to do this, he must make clever use of a modern ethics based not on the discovery and cultivation of moral excellence (*arête*), but rather on the preservation of those things that will garner praise and diminish blame in order to attain a life that is powerful, honored, secure, and happy.¹³ Desperate to attain these qualities, the modern politician carries an ethics that can only envision a virtue such as honesty in terms of its political utility:

...one sees from the experience of our times that the princes who have accomplished great deeds are those who have cared little for keeping their promises and who have known how to manipulate the minds of men by shrewdness; and in the end they have surpassed those who laid their foundations upon honesty. ¹⁴

While the state is preserved through the clever lie and its manipulation of appearances – since it impossible to maintain appearances at all times – it is also maintained through the clever use of fear. Although the prince cannot force the demos to love him when he has been exposed, he can make the masses fear him, which renders fear the more practical solution to any revolutionary hazard. To this end, Machiavelli cites the Carthaginian general Hannibal who commanded great loyalty from his soldiers who (supposedly) never dissented. Such loyalty, according to Machiavelli: "...never could have arisen from anything other than his inhuman cruelty, which, along with his many other abilities, made him always respected..." ¹⁵ This prince, this new man is one who skillfully wields the clever lie of appearances and the shrewd use of fear to shape the masses to a will that sees the safeguarding of political power as the only practical telos.

The Noble American Union

Accurately observing the great disparity between how one lives and how one ought to live, Machiavelli calls forth the modern nation-state fabricated by political, religious, economic, educational, and aesthetic institutions that disguise the selfish motives of the rulers. Hopefully, peering back toward the classical vision of the city and modern state illuminates, if only dimly, their American descendent and its own brand of political myth-making and its unique forms of social control.

In order to free themselves from the rule of the King George III (referred to as the "Prince" in the founding document), it was required that a collection of diverse colonies form a united state, which was, in part, created by the noble lie of inclusion seen in the opening salvo: "When in the Course of human events it becomes necessary for one people to dissolve the political bands which have connected them with another..." ¹⁶ Here, the "one people" referred to in the *Declaration of Independence* (1776) offers the first stage of the classically conceived noble lie of inclusion that could fashion a regime with a predisposition toward the maintenance of liberty. Later in the *Declaration*, the force of this myth is engendered by including "Enemies in War, in Peace Friends" language that creates good citizens who would act on this mentality. In Book II of the *Republic*, Socrates compares the demeanor of these individuals to that of noble dogs when he states: "You know, of course, that by nature the disposition of noble dogs is to be as gentle as can be with their familiars and people they know and the opposite with those they don't know." ¹⁷ It is these loyal and united guardian-citizens (or "citizen-soldiers" in modern parlance) who possess the power to "throw off" the despotic tyrant, and it is from these individuals that the new American rulers will emerge. According to Socrates, the new rulers will surface from the guardian, or military class, and it is quite interesting to note that the first American president was a kind of mythological war hero who could "never tell a lie." It is precisely this kind of seemingly virtuous ruler, or "new Guard," who could best represent a newly formed people and provide for "their future security." ¹⁸

While the founders effectively used the inclusion aspect of the noble lie to defeat their British oppressors, this political mechanism also sowed the seed that grew into the American Civil War. The necessity of declaring British citizens – like their government and the rest of mankind – "Enemies in War, in Peace Friends" is paradoxically both a cause

for the Revolution's success and also grounds for the Union's subsequent, though temporary failure roughly a century later. The new American State was uniquely comprised of thirteen "free" states (generally divided into North and South) that would, after a successful revolution, predictably adopt the same policy to maintain their own autonomy before the federal system had yet to fully integrate into the American political and social framework. As it happened, the Southern and Northern states would both assume an internal "Enemies in War, in Peace Friends" posture, which resulted roughly in 200,000 combat deaths. Historically contextualized, just as Romulus slew Remus over who enjoyed the favor of god, so too the American republic was reborn in fratricide.

Championing states' rights and citing Thomas Jefferson's *Kentucky and Virginia Resolutions* (1798), seven Southern cotton states seceded from the classically mythologized union and formed the Confederate States of America (1861). With an insurmountable superiority in population and manufacturing production, the North was eventually victorious over the weaker South. While the South represented, among other things, the plague of racial slavery, it also possessed a lucrative economic engine that the North could simply not afford to lose. With roughly half of the country still raw from the defeat, Lincoln's "Gettysburg Address" (1863) effectively wove the inclusion lie back into an American social fabric that had been rent by civil war. Lincoln's *Address* endeavored to mend the tear of war by utilizing the inclusive aspect of the noble lie and unite the "one people" and reshape a: "...government of the people, by the people, for the people."¹⁹ While the noble lie was used in the *Declaration* to fuse the demos together to shed an external power, it was employed again by Lincoln for political preservation after the attempted internal revolution of a people it once helped to unify.

The Clever American State

In the case of both the *Declaration* and the "Gettysburg Address," the need for a fundamentally similar myth, or the noble lie of inclusion, appears compulsory in order to establish a republic with institutions that preserve justice and guard against the deteriorating effects of selfishness. However, while the beginning is always a very delicate time, the crimson mushroom cloud of human corruption blooms just beyond the horizon as the nobility of the founding revolution inevitably decays into tyranny.

Highly nuanced and grossly underpaid philosopher Leo Strauss identifies political philosophy with the end of political action, which he defines as either "preservation or change."²⁰ While the end of political action with regard to the American founding was revolutionary change and preservation in the case of the Union after the American Civil War, what is the end of modern American political action? Since empires cannot advocate (internal) revolution, modern American political philosophy is most likely guided by the action of preservation, which begs the question: what does the American empire desire to preserve?

A state perched atop a pedestal of unbridled consumerism has undoubtedly moved beyond any shadow of a comparison with Socrates' founding city of "utmost necessity," which boasts citizens who do not produce nor consume "beyond their means."²¹ Rather, the modern American state more closely resembles a kind of Socratic "feverish" city marked by individuals who have become well-to-do slaves chained to their bottomless appetites. When, inevitably, the noble lie of inclusion fails, the appetitive division of the soul is unleashed and cannot be subdued apart from the blood sacrifice on the altar of revolution, which begins the cycle (κύκλος) of regimes anew.²² This most inevitable of situations is explicitly announced when the grab for power is internalized and the demos consumes at the expense of others as individuals are conditioned to seek self-esteem by coveting the property of their neighbors. Empire, or the feverish soul writ large, has by definition moved beyond utmost necessity and is concerned with preserving the feverishness (signified by acquiring the land and treasure of others) upon

which it is built. Predicting these citizens of empire, Socrates declares that they must be gorged with a great “bulky mass of things,” which includes everything from the frivolous gyrations of actors, feminine adornment, beauticians, great animal herds for slaughter, and doctors to prescribe drugs to those who now adhere to a more gluttonous way of life.²³ Now that the leviathan of American self-interest has been let loose, and if that leviathan must be preserved, the great modern American political question becomes: how can the state sustain itself in the face of the fragmenting effects of a feverish empire?

Although certainly defective human beings like the rest of us, the American founders employed the inclusion myth in an effort to create institutions that nurtured an industrious, yet contemplative and classically virtuous life. However, roughly since the end of WWII and the dawn of mass American consumption, Americans no longer taught to band together for a common good that nurtures the republican freedom for all individuals to live a life of moral excellence. Rather, Americans are now conditioned to band together to preserve a “democratic freedom,” which is ubiquitously understood as the liberty to indulge our appetites beyond the constraint of the common good. As a consequence, this modern freedom is not achieved through self-sacrifice, but rather through self-indulgence, which is a veiled form of imprisonment. From the rulers to the artisans, we have become a society of slaves driven by the masters of our corporate sponsored appetites, and we are only united in our quest to achieve a modern, materialistic American Dream – the clever lie.

According to Machiavellian contention, myths only carry value when they are used to protect and veil the interests of the prince. While Machiavelli generally believed the prince to be a single individual, democracy tends to transform the individual into the masses as the mob, in effect, becomes the prince. The regime is not run by naturally gifted rulers who possess no real appetite for power, but rather by egocentric professional politicians who are elected via enormously influential economic institutions and the masses who support them through their unrestrained consumption. Paradoxically, it was the United States' military success in WWII (in addition to the virtual annihilation of most of the industrialized world) that marked both the beginning and ending of the American Empire. It was WWII that birthed, among other things, the vast military-industrial complex (that Eisenhower warned against) and the transformation in American foreign policy from a more classical, pseudo-isolationist approach to a more modern, neo-conservative, and interventionist ethos.

For the classical political philosophers, the regime employs the noble lie to create institutions that foster a domestic policy that attempts to stave off the state-fragmenting effects of human selfishness. Moreover, the purpose and function of foreign policy is limited to the necessity of self-preservation of a just and good regime.²⁴ Thus, the temporary suspension of more isolationist classical foreign policy is required only when it serves the ideals of its virtuous domestic policy.²⁵ In the *Republic*, Socrates argues that such grabs must not overstep the “boundary of necessity” in order to maintain the good regime based on virtue.²⁶ However, an underappreciated pragmatist, Socrates notes that when a city becomes feverish, an inevitable desire for more land and resources will arise to meet the ever-expanding appetites of its citizens.²⁷ It is the feverish city's lust for more that is often the source of war, which also illuminates the noble lie's ability to cover the harsh injustice of seizing the land and resources of others. Case in point, the fact that U.S. citizens see themselves as “Americans” belies the fact that this land was taken from those “native” a patch of earth south of cold and north of hot. Passed down through the generations, the myth that we are all “one people” born from the same patch of earth becomes so engrained in our collective psyche that Americans generally accept Woody Guthrie's hymn that this “land is my land,” rather than a place unlawfully acquired from others. In spite of this inherent injustice, classical philosophy generally argues that the

fundamental rightness or wrongness of political action or policy depended on the rightness or wrongness of the political regime which it supports. So, while the noble lie can effectively cover this founding injustice, it is also intended to preserve a regime founded on more noble classical virtues.²⁸

The city, or state is the soul of man writ large and as the feverish city expands in search of resources to satisfy its desires, it is those same desires that are the source of its internal decay. For the city itself has become unjust, no longer in pursuit of moral excellence, but rather in pursuit of material possessions put to use through hedonistic pleasure. The end of modern American political action is no longer the classical pursuit of the virtuous regime, but rather the pursuit of "empire gain" as no-thing transcends the material realm.²⁹ This modification in political ambition is mirrored by the historical shifts in American foreign policy. In a speech delivered on July 4, 1821, John Quincy Adams (one of the chief architects of early American foreign policy) invoked the "wise and learned philosophers of the elder world" and declared that America:

...goes not abroad in search of monsters to destroy. She is the well-wisher to the freedom and independence of all. She is the champion and vindicator only of her own. [...] She well knows that by once enlisting under other banners than her own, were they even the banners of foreign independence, she would involve herself beyond the power of extrication, in all the wars of interest and intrigue, of individual avarice, envy, and ambition, which assume the colors and usurp the standard of freedom. The fundamental maxims of her policy would insensibly change from liberty to force.... She might become the dictatress of the world. She would be no longer the ruler of her own spirit.... America's glory is not dominion, but liberty. Her march is the march of the mind. She has a spear and a shield: but the motto upon her shield is, Freedom, Independence, Peace. This has been her Declaration: this has been, as far as her necessary intercourse with the rest of mankind would permit, her practice.³⁰

Taking his cue from classical thinkers, Adams clearly understood the dangers of becoming embroiled in foreign affairs "beyond the power of extrication," which would cause the United States to assume the role of a "dictatress" known more by her use of force than by her flame of liberty. Adams appeals to the peaceful pursuit of the higher ideals and warns against interventionist foreign policy, even in the event of a foreign struggle for independence.

In the *Federalist Paper #43*, James Madison appealed to the transcendent law of nature and of nature's God, which declared that the: "...safety and happiness of society are the objects at which all political institutions aim and to which all such institutions must be sacrificed." It is this appeal to *natural law* (*jus naturale*) – ground of the social contract – which obligates a nation's government to respect the "rights of humanity" and secure the lives, liberties, and estates of its own citizens who gain these civil rights in return for subjecting themselves to political authority. What is more, governments are not naturally authorized to sacrifice their own citizens for the sake of other nations' citizens.³¹

In contrast to this more classically conservative foreign policy, a new power has arisen in the realm of American political philosophy – neoconservatism. According to Brooklyn son and AEI emeritus Irving Kristol – generally known as a kind of "godfather" to this movement – one of the three basic pillars of neoconservatism is a foreign policy that centers on the idea that the U.S. is generally obliged to defend a democratic nation under attack from non-democratic forces, external or internal.³² It is this brand of interventionist foreign policy that underlies U.S. support for states such as Israel. It is possible, however, that this seemingly noble ambition covers more feverishly imperialistic, empire-building motives that are rather closely aligned with the political principles of a

more modern liberalism that masks the grab for land and treasure. Kristol's ideas in this arena are in the ideological lineage of Theodore Roosevelt who generally rejected the traditionally conservative principles of the American founders who argued for a more limited foreign policy. In "Expansion and Peace" (1899), Roosevelt wrote that the best policy is a frank imperialism all over the world and: "...every expansion of a great civilized power means a victory for law, order, and righteousness."³³

It is this type of liberal, interventionist foreign policy that modern neocon thinkers have adopted and named "benevolent hegemonism." To this point, neo-conservatism argues that the founding principles imply that America has a moral responsibility to make the world more democratic. Such a position, I argue, has the effect of making the world safer for the interests of the democratic prince, or a regime driven by powerful economic entities and the appetitive masses that fuel them. Viewed in this light, benevolent hegemonism manifests as a kind of Machiavellian clever lie that cloaks the intrinsic fiscal interests of the American empire. In other words, such neocon foreign policy concepts as "freedom" and "democracy" are revealed as clever lies when viewed in opposition to the necessary grab for land and treasure that the U.S. must now undertake to support its massive consumption habit. Eric Foner, the DeWitt Clinton Professor of History at Columbia University, articulated this concept nicely:

George W. Bush's second inaugural address cynically invoked noble ideals for ignoble ends. In the course of twenty minutes, Bush used the words "free," "freedom" and "liberty" no fewer than forty-nine times. Freedom lies at the heart of American political culture, and as groups from abolitionists to modern-day conservatives have realized, it gives legitimacy to political goals of all kinds. The historic rallying cry of the dispossessed, freedom can also be what the philosopher Nikolas Rose calls a "formula of power."³⁴

In defense of a benevolent hegemony foreign policy widely used by the Bush II administration (though not limited to this regime), fear appears is a tactic megaphoned to the American demos at the very beginning of neoconservatism by Kristol who wondered if the U.S. *should* go abroad in search of monsters to destroy. Kristol and other neocon thinkers have argued that the alternative is to leave monsters on the loose, ravaging and pillaging like Vikings invading the still darkened inhabitants of northern Europe. If indeed there are monsters abroad, I argue that the U.S. must critically examine its own role in both creating and continuing to feed them, which are topics that have been efficiently removed from American academic and political discourse. Sadly, one must travel beyond the "patriotic" arm of homeland security to engage in such matters. In order to maintain the myth that America is the "freest country on earth," the fear of these "monsters" is essential to the regime if it is to convince Americans to accept, almost without dissent, the systematic dismantling of their private liberties in the name of public safety.³⁵ The founding conservative sect generally argued that there always will be monsters abroad; however, it is not the obligation of one state to solve the problems of another. The classical thinkers understood that such endeavors would merely offer fragmenting distractions from the highest purpose of a political regime, which is to order foreign and domestic policy around the promotion of a noble and virtuous life for its own citizens.

A Requiem for a Dream

The term "American Dream" first appeared in a historical text by James Truslow Adams titled *The Epic of America* (1931):

If, as I have said, the things already listed were all we had to contribute, America would have made no distinctive and unique gift to mankind. But there has been also the *American dream*, that dream of a land in which life should be better and richer and fuller for every man, with opportunity for each according to his ability or achievement.³⁶

In J.T. Adams early vision of the American Dream, he articulates a somewhat anti-democratic view that not every human being is automatically entitled to the American Dream simply because they are an American; rather, the "opportunity" to a achieve a richer and fuller life is provided in measure with one's ability. Adam's position presupposes a reward system based on the law of nature, which accords varying levels of particular abilities to each individual. This "natural" stance resonates with Hesiod's Myth of the Metals, which creates a mobile class system that makes room for one's natural talents. As Adams wrote in a pre WWII environment, I argue that his version of a "richer" and "fuller" life was not necessarily one marked by material gain, but rather a life made more complete by the refining presence of moral, spiritual, and intellectual virtues.

Restating an earlier argument, WWII was the high water mark of a more classical American regime generally dedicated to fostering a society with institutions that attempted to guard against the destructive effects of human selfishness. However, with the dawn of the military-industrial complex and the American empire, the U.S. was transmuted into an exceedingly affluent society with an economy that has become desperately dependent on massive and conspicuous consumption. As a result, the Adams' American Dream has also been transformed from one that sought virtuous ends and respected the common good, to one that functions as a clever lie to keep the masses engaged in perpetual labor designed to keep the empire's economic engine functioning. In general, Americans have shockingly little regard for the common good because they are preoccupied in a life's pursuit to achieve the modern telos: security and happiness. This self-serving ethos is best captured by a modern ethics signified by the catchphrase: "Hey, it's only business," which is often uttered just after trampling on the interests of a fellow citizen.

The modern ethics are not only signified in speech, but they literally "fleshed-out" in the demos governed by a regime that serves at the behest of politically authoritative economic institutions. To draw this plainly, it is no mere coincidence that there is an "epidemic" of both American obesity and promiscuity and the fact that consumerist capitalism greatly benefits from unleashing the appetitive soul – the table and the bed. Instead of only producing and consuming according to the minimalist designs of necessity, it has become quite "patriotic" to eat more, drink more, drive more, and own more while thinking less about what the deleterious effects of such behavior. In addition to the physical effects, there is also an intellectual consequence of the modern telos. Specifically, the United States has now produced multiple generations of increasingly undereducated citizens who can barely conceive on anything beyond the systematic conditioning they have received through both advertising and a failed education system.

While American academicians and philosophers have, with a few notable exceptions, been silent on this subject, American poets have been issued forth a more penetrating vision that sees further beyond the screen of the clever American Dream. Hunter S. Thompson's *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas - A Savage Journey to the Heart of the American Dream* acidly scrutinizes the unrest and cultural changes of the sixties as just another generation trying and failing to scale the summit of the American Dream, or a mirage of fleeting excess. In the novel, Thompson laments the high-water mark – that place where the wave of social change finally broke and rolled back – of a sixties

generation that ultimately failed because they relied more on their own consumption excesses of free love and drugs.³⁷

In American director David Fincher's *Fight Club* (1999), the central characters of Jack (Edward Norton) and Tyler (Brad Pitt) candidly express both the underlying philosophy of American consumption and its slavish consequences:

Jack: [...] I don't know, it's just when you buy furniture, you tell yourself that's it. That's the last sofa I'm gonna need. Whatever else happens, I've got that sofa problem handled. I had it all. I had a stereo that was very decent, a wardrobe that was getting very respectable. I was close to being complete. [...] Tyler: Why do guys like you and I know what a duvet is? Is this essential in the hunter-gatherer sense of the word? No. What are we then? Jack: We're, uh, you know, consumers. Tyler: Right, we're consumers. We are by-products of a lifestyle obsession. Murder, crime, poverty, these things don't concern me. What concerns me is celebrity magazines, television with 500 channels, some guy's name on my underwear. Rogaine, Viagra, Olestra. [...] The things you own, end up owning you.³⁸

The inevitable disillusionment with the clever lie is not only demonstrated in literature and film, but in the more harmonious arts as well. An exploration of American life, the lyrics of L.A.'s Rage Against the Machine's "Know Your Enemy" ends with: "Compromise, conformity, assimilation, submission, ignorance, hypocrisy, brutality, the elite... all of which are American dreams."³⁹

Finally, it is worth noting that none of these artists claim to be "Christians." And since the American ecclesiastical community often claims that the United States was founded as a "Christian nation," the gadfly in me wonders: where is the Christian voice of dissent? Has the regime effectively used tax-exemption to stifle the political dissidence of Christians who have a long and proud history of speaking truth to power? Where are the Timothy Dwights? The Elisha Williams? The Charles Chauncys? The John Wesleys? The Martin Luthers and the Martin Luther Kings? Is it possible that like much of the citizenry, the Church has become bloated, complacent and lulled to sleep by the siren's song of wealth, power, fame, and comfort? Like Orwell's ignorant proles, have Americans become a society passionate only about: "...rubbishy newspapers, containing almost nothing except sport, crime, and astrology, sensational five-cent novelettes, films oozing with sex, and sentimental songs..."⁴⁰ In defiance of the self-seeking modern regime, it is only a deep conviction of sustained self-sacrifice that can achieve the restoration of a more virtuous American Dream. Do we need a collective reminder of the most simplest of maxims: to love our neighbor as ourselves?⁴¹ Although delivered in 1774, Harvard educated minister Gad Hitchcock's sermon is just as applicable to a contemporary audience who must understand the adverse effects a more Machiavellian, modern regime can have on its citizens: "The vices of a ruler pervert the due exercise of his authority, to the disadvantage of the community."⁴²

I dare say, because it is both my spiritual and civic duty to do so, that the time has come for the sleepers to awaken, those great, swarming, disregarded masses who need only to "rise up and shake themselves like a horse shaking off flies" and vigorously contend for the true liberty to lead lives nobly lived.⁴³ Yet, if this is to be achieved, Americans must see themselves in opposition to a modern political other that has hidden itself behind the clever lie. If Americans truly believe that the tradition of liberty means all, then the telos American politics must be to reestablish a virtuous and just society where the tree of liberty may yet grow wild again. But as the writer penned in Anthony Burgess' *A Clockwork Orange* (1972), the common people will: "...sell liberty for a quieter life. That is why they must be prodded, prodded -"⁴⁴

ENDNOTES

- ¹ Lewis Carroll, *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* (New York: Aerie, 1992), 101.
- ² Hesiod, *Works and Days* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988), 40-41.
- ³ *The American Heritage College Dictionary*, 4th ed. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2002), 921. Myth: "A traditional story dealing with supernatural being, ancestors, or heroes that informs or shapes the worldview of a people, as by explaining aspects of the natural world or delineating the customs or ideals of society [Greek – mythos]."
- ⁴ Plato, *The Republic*, trans. by Alan Bloom (New York: Basic Books, 1968), 455. "Here, 'noble' is taken from the Greek word *gennaion*, which is 'nobly born,' or 'well bred.'"
- ⁵ Plato, *Republic* (1968), 93.
- ⁶ *New American Standard Bible* (Grand Rapids: The Zondervan Corporation, 1999), Genesis 3:24: So He drove the man out; and at the east of the garden of Eden He stationed the cherubim and the flaming sword which turned every direction to guard the way to the tree of life. 4:16-17: Then Cain went out from the presence of the LORD, and settled in the land of Nod, east of Eden. Cain had relations with his wife and she conceived, and gave birth to Enoch; and he built a city, and called the name of the city Enoch, after the name of his son.
- ⁷ Plato, *Republic* (1968), 94. "All of you in the city are certainly brothers," we shall say to them in telling the tale, "but the god, in fashioning those of you who are competent to rule, mixed gold in at their birth; this is why they are most honored; in auxiliaries, silver; and iron and bronze in the farmers and the other craftsmen."
- ⁸ Plato, *Republic* (1968), 367. In order to further ensure the belief in this myth, Socrates declares that everyone should be told that there is an oracle that society will be destroyed whenever anyone other than a golden soul rules.
- ⁹ Niccolo Machiavelli, *The Prince in The Portable Machiavelli*, trans. by Peter Bondanella and Mark Musa (New York: Viking Penguin Inc., 1979), 126-127.
- ¹⁰ Machiavelli, *Prince* (1979), 127-128. "...but since it is neither possible to have them [classical virtues] nor to observe them completely, because human nature does not permit it, a prince must be prudent enough to know how to escape the bad reputation of those vices that would lose the state for him, and must protect himself from those that will not lose it for him. [...] ...since taking everything into account, one will discover that something which appears to be a virtue, if pursued, will end in his destruction; while some other thing which seems to be a vice, if pursued, will result in his safety and his well-being.
- ¹¹ Peter Bondanella and Mark Musa, Introduction to *The Portable Machiavelli* (New York: Viking Penguin Inc., 1979), 11. "When Machiavelli first met him [Borgia] at Urbino, after he had captured the city without a struggle, Borgia delivered an ultimatum to Florence which gave the young Machiavelli a lesson in power politics he would never forget. [...] Machiavelli could not help admiring the man's boldness, resolution, and cunning." "Cesare Borgia," (text online) accessed on July 18 2007, <http://www.answers.com/topic/cesare-borgia>. "In June 1497 the body of Giovanni Borgia, its throat cut, was found in the Tiber River. Several parties might have been involved in the mysterious murder, but many historians hold Cesare responsible since the death was of political advantage to him. Cesare now saw the possibility of being dispensed from his clerical duties and of assuming his brother's secular titles, wealth, and position as military leader of the Borgias and the papacy."
- ¹² As a point of interest, although it is not proven, some historians believe that many classical likenesses of Jesus Christ were done in the image of Cesare Borgia.
- ¹³ Machiavelli, *Prince* (1979), 95.
- ¹⁴ Machiavelli, *Prince* (1979), 133.
- ¹⁵ Machiavelli, *Prince* (1979), 132. It should also be noted that Machiavelli does make an interesting case for the use of a "very few examples of cruelty" as more "compassionate than those who, out of excessive mercy, permit disorders to continue, from which arise murders and plundering."
- ¹⁶ *The Declaration of Independence* (1776). "A Prince, whose character is thus marked by every act which may define a Tyrant, is unfit to be the ruler of a free people."
- ¹⁷ Plato, *Republic* (1968), 53.

¹⁸ *Declaration* (1776). "Object evinces a design to reduce them under absolute Despotism, it is their right, it is their duty, to throw off such Government, and to provide new Guards for their future security."

¹⁹ Abraham Lincoln, "Gettysburg Address" (1863).

²⁰ Leo Strauss, *What Is Political Philosophy?* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1959), 10.

²¹ Plato, *Republic* (1968), 49.

²² The *kyklos* (κύκλος), or "cycle" is a term used by the classics to describe what they saw as the political cycle of governments in a society. "The *Kyklos*" as a concept is first seen in Plato's *Republic* – chapters VIII and IX. According to Polybius, who calls it the "anakyklosis," it rotates through the three basic forms of government, polity, aristocracy, and monarchy and the three degenerate forms of each of these governments democracy, oligarchy, and tyranny. While society's natural state is anarchy, the strongest figure emerges and establishes a monarchy. However, the monarch's descendants lack virtue, become despots, and the monarchy deteriorates into tyranny. Eventually, the tyrant is overthrown and an aristocracy is established. However, the aristocrats also lose their virtue and the state deteriorates into an oligarchy. Similarly, the oligarchs are overthrown by the demos who set up a democracy. However, democracy is quickly corrupted and degenerates into a tyranny of mob rule, which begins the cycle anew.

²³ Plato, *Republic* (1968), 50.

²⁴ Thomas G. West, "Leo Strauss and American Foreign Policy" (Claremont: The Claremont Institute, 2004) (text online) accessed 30 July 2007. http://www.claremont.org/publications/crb/id.1075/article_detail.asp. In the classical or Straussian approach, alliances are justified even with nations who oppress their own people. One's own survival, not the well-being of the peoples of other nations, is the standard. In order to defeat Hitler, America had to support Stalin, the most murderous tyrant in world history. To defeat Iraq, America arguably had to ally itself with despotic Saudi Arabia.

²⁵ West, "Leo Strauss" (2004). The foreign policy of the classics is essentially selfish, because the main purpose of all good politics is "self-improvement," the advantage of one's own political community, not the common good of other political communities. The foreign policy of Strauss and the classics seeks neither *hegemony* over other nations nor *benevolence* toward other nations, unless, accidentally, one or the other is a means to survival.

²⁶ Plato, *Republic* (1968), 50.

²⁷ Plato, *Republic* (1968), 50-51.

²⁸ It is this paradox that we noted earlier as the inclusion myth in the *Declaration* anticipated the future internal discord of the Civil War as it undermined the internal political order between the states; it is a thorny thing indeed to foment a revolution while staving off future ones after the republic is established.

²⁹ Frederic Nietzsche, *The Gay Science* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1974), 120. Effectively both modern science and Nietzsche have declared that: "God is dead."

³⁰ John Quincy Adams, "Independence Day Speech of 1821" (Denver: The Future of Freedom Foundation, 2001) (text online) accessed 18 July 2007, <http://www.fff.org/comment/AdamsPolicy.asp>.

³¹ James Madison, "The Federalist Paper #43" (Ashland: Ashbrook Center, 1788) (text online) accessed 18 July 2007, <http://teachingamericanhistory.org/library/index.asp?document=822>.

³² "Irving Kristol Profile" (Silver City: International Relations Center, 2007) (text online) accessed 30 July 2007, <http://rightweb.irc-online.org/profile/1253>.

³³ Theodore Roosevelt, *The Strenuous Life* (Bedford: Applewood Books, 1991), chapter II.

³⁴ Eric Foner, "President Bush's Cynical Use of the Word 'Freedom'" (Virginia: George Mason University's History News Network, 2005) (text online) accessed 18 July 2007, <http://hnn.us/articles/9949.html>: "Almost from the moment the twin towers fell, Bush has wrapped himself in the language of freedom. 'They hate our freedom' became the all-purpose explanation for the attack itself and for subsequent worldwide disapproval of the Administration's Iraq policy. The National Security Strategy of 2002, which announced the doctrine of pre-emptive war, opened with the statement that freedom, as Americans understand it, is 'right and true for every person, in every society.' No variations and no exceptions. Bush's speechwriters have been reading American history. His address paraphrased some of the most celebrated orations in the nation's past, especially those delivered during wars, hot and cold. It echoed Lincoln's second inaugural, the messianic addresses of Woodrow Wilson during World War I, FDR's Four Freedoms speech, the

Truman Doctrine address to Congress, and Kennedy's inaugural. Like Ronald Reagan, who loved to quote Tom Paine, Bush is a master at appropriating for conservative ends language associated with his opponents."

³⁵ Dan Eggen and Robert O'Harrow Jr., "U.S. Steps Up Secret Surveillance (Washington: Washington Post, 2003) (text online) accessed 18 July 2007, <http://www.commondreams.org/headlines03/0324-02.htm>: "Since the Sept. 11, 2001, attacks, the Justice Department and FBI have dramatically increased the use of two little-known powers that allow authorities to tap telephones, seize bank and telephone records and obtain other information in counterterrorism investigations with no immediate court oversight, according to officials and newly disclosed documents. The FBI, for example, has issued scores of 'national security letters' that require businesses to turn over electronic records about finances, telephone calls, e-mail and other personal information, according to officials and documents. The letters, a type of administrative subpoena, may be issued independently by FBI field offices and are not subject to judicial review unless a case comes to court, officials said. Attorney General John D. Ashcroft has also personally signed more than 170 'emergency foreign intelligence warrants,' three times the number authorized in the preceding 23 years, according to recent congressional testimony.

³⁶ James Adams Truslow, *The Epic of America* (Boston: Little, Brown, and Company, 1931), 404.

³⁷ Hunter S. Thompson, *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas: A Savage Journey Into the Heart of the American Dream* 2nd edition (London: Vintage Books, 1998).

³⁸ David Fincher, dir. *Fight Club* (Beverly Hills: 20th Century Fox Home Entertainment, 2000), chapter 11.

³⁹ Rage Against the Machine, "Know Your Enemy" (Los Angeles: Sony Records, 1992).

⁴⁰ George Orwell, *1984* (New York: Penguin Group, 1977), 38.

⁴¹ John Allen, "An Oration Upon the Beauties of Liberty" in *Political Sermons of the American Founding Era*, volume I, Ellis Sandoz ed., (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, Inc., 1998), 305.

⁴² Gad Hitchcock, "An Election Sermon" in *American Political Writing during the Founding Era*, volume I, eds. Charles S. Hyneman and Donald S. Lutz (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, Inc., 1983), 287.

⁴³ George Orwell, *1984* (New York: Penguin Group, 1977), 61.

⁴⁴ Anthony Burgess, *A Clockwork Orange* (New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 1986), 161.