

THE ROLE OF THE DEMOCRATIC PARTY IN THE AMERICAN POLITICAL SYSTEM

In many ways both symbolic and actual, the heart of American politics is manifested in the nation's quadrennial presidential elections. It is at these times that Americans are most directly and vociferously invited to "choose" the direction the country should take. Constitutionally, of course, elections are the institutional means by which political control is formally transferred. And, needless to say, election campaigns are gargantuan media extravaganzas. Thus, presidential elections garner the citizenry's attention, focus, expectations, and hopes like no other societal event.

Elections are indeed supremely important political phenomena. But they are important for a reason other than the officially recognized one. While we are supposed to believe that it is critical which candidates win, in reality it matters relatively little who the citizens vote for--*so long as they participate in the process*. "As the late New York Senator and Democratic Party 'wise man' Daniel Patrick Moynihan said, perhaps admitting more than he intended: 'It doesn't so much matter who wins. The important thing is the legitimacy of the system.'"¹

The legitimacy of the system. This is key. As long as Americans play along, the status quo will remain basically undisturbed. This is why activists must start to focus on disrupting Americans' illusions concerning the electoral process in general and the Democratic Party in particular. We must *not* play along, and we must encourage the people not to play along. It is only by first recognizing that periodic elections are the device by which our rulers keep us in check that we will be able to proceed to envision and then install a true democracy in the United States.

Many leftists believe that true progressive politics lies in "movement-building," and that elections, therefore, are an irrelevant sideshow. The first part of this proposition is debatable (see the Appendix); the second is erroneous. While the efficacy of elections as a means of advancing fundamental change is indeed nugatory, elections--as the functional embodiment of the representative system--are the keystone of our rulers' constitutional hold on us. Any radical alteration in the power structure will require removing the current electoral farce entirely; it cannot be left in place. We must therefore begin to attack it head-on. There is no avoiding this course of action if we are to move from where we are now--oligarchy--to where we desperately need to be--democracy.

With the election of the Democrat Barack Obama after eight years of the Republican George W. Bush, and then the inevitable and massive disappointment of Obama's presidency, there can be no more opportune time for the Left to train its sights on the political system as a whole and to expose it for what it is: a stupendous fraud but an extremely effective one. The phenomenon of Barack Obama is spectacular confirmation that the Democrats are, from the working/middle-class point of view, as useless, and, from the ruling-class point of view, as useful, as the Republicans. The current generation of Americans, those of us who lived through the Tweetledum/Tweetledee administrations of Johnson, Nixon, Ford, Carter, Reagan, Bush I, Clinton, Bush II, and now Obama, can be under no illusions about the worth of the American political system. Unless we wish to deceive ourselves perpetually, there is no reason for us to tolerate its existence one minute longer.

¹Lance Selfa, *The Democrats: A Critical History* (2008), 38.

Reproduced below are excerpts from a number of books that critically examine the American electoral system as well as the nature and track record of the Democratic Party: Paul Street, *Barack Obama and the Future of American Politics* (2009); Paul Street, *The Empire's New Clothes: Barack Obama in the Real World of Power* (2010); Lance Selfa, *The Democrats: A Critical History* (2008); Chris Hedges, *The World As It Is: Dispatches on the Myth of Human Progress* (2010); Alexander Cockburn and Jeffrey St. Clair, *Dime's Worth of Difference: Beyond the Lesser of Two Evils* (2004); and Michael Parenti, *The Face of Imperialism* (2011).

These excellent studies make it clear that we progressives will not succeed in furthering our society-transforming agenda by relying on establishment institutions. In particular, it is vital that we disabuse ourselves of any romantic notions concerning our presidents, and instead examine their tenures in the cold and unforgiving light of day.

(A certain amount of repetition is inevitable in the compilation; in any event, many points bear repeating and re-reading.)

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The Electoral System

[E]very four years millions of Americans invest their hopes in an electoral process that does not deserve their trust. These citizens qua voters hope that a savior or at least a more effective manager can be installed in the White House--someone who will raise wages, roll back war and militarism, provide universal and adequate health care, rebuild the nation's infrastructure, produce high-paying jobs, fix the environmental crisis, reduce inequality, guarantee economic security, and generally make daily life more livable. But these dreams are regularly drowned in the icy waters of historical and political "reality." In the actuality of American politics and policy, the officially "electable" candidates are vetted in advance by what Laurence Shoup calls "the hidden primary of the ruling class." By prior establishment selection, all of the "viable" presidential contenders are closely tied to corporate and military-imperial power in numerous and interrelated ways. They run safely within the narrow ideological and policy parameters set by those who rule behind the scenes to make sure that the rich and privileged continue to be the leading beneficiaries of the American system. In presidential as in other elections, U.S. "democracy" is at best a "guided" one; at worst it is a corrupt farce, amounting to manipulation, with the larger population the [target] of propaganda in a controlled and trivialized electoral

process. "It is an illusion," Laurence Shoup [correctly] claims . . . "that real change can ever come from electing a different ruling class-sponsored candidate." . . .

[The dark] truth is that American democracy has always been significantly constrained and compromised by the privileged and the propertied and power elite. . . .

Throughout the [last] century . . . and into the present one, Howard Zinn noted, "We have seen exactly the same limited vision [from our top politicians] . . . a capitalist encouragement of enormous fortunes alongside desperate poverty, a nationalistic acceptance of war and preparation for war. Government power swung from Republicans to Democrats and back again, but neither party showed itself capable of going beyond that vision." . . .

Zinn's observations remain strikingly relevant to [the] Barack Obama presidency. . . . Obama's careful, business-friendly handling of the economy (strong on bailouts for giant financial institutions and weak on support for the growing mass of unemployed and poor), the weakening of his "health reform" to a corporation-serving shadow of its original progressive promise, the passage of a record-setting Pentagon budget, and the related significant escalation of U.S. military violence in Afghanistan, Pakistan, Yemen, and Somalia are just some of the many indications . . . of how deeply beholden Obama is to existing dominant domestic and global hierarchies and doctrines.²

Candidates cannot generally succeed in the highly expensive winner-take-all U.S. electoral process without backing from the stupendous concentrations of private power in America, sources of funding that work to "take the risk out of democracy" by funding campaigns and controlling "public" (corporate) communications and culture in ways that set dangerously narrow and business-friendly parameters of acceptable debate. This harsh reality touched every presidential candidacy in 2007-2008 . . . making excessively left (Kucinich), populist (even Edwards), and anti-imperial (Mike Gravel and Ron Paul) contenders inherently unviable.³

The process of selecting elected officials in the United States is largely controlled by those who have the money to fund expensive campaigns. "In this country, with a highly developed and profitable corporate community," Edward Herman noted . . . "money comes disproportionately from Wall Street and a broad array of business interests." Those with large private resources to invest in candidates . . . generally do so with more than mere enthusiasm for elections in mind. Their supposed interest in funding the "democratic process" cloaks their darker and largely successful agenda of undermining democracy and turning it to their own ends both immediate and systemic. Such is the harsh reality of what Herman sardonically labeled "market democracy," where the masters of the capitalist economy produce election and related policy outcomes meant to further their own wealth and power.⁴

Whatever his actual value orientation at the end of the day, Obama's relentless cutting of moral and ideological corners and his tacking to the corporate, imperial, nationalistic, and racially conciliatory center makes sense given the massive barriers to running a feasibly victorious populist, social-democratic, and peace-oriented campaign for the presidency. Those obstacles include, first and foremost, the hidden wealth and media primaries discussed [earlier]. One simply cannot mount a serious run for the presidency without the approval of wealthy election

² Street, *Empire's New Clothes*, vii-viii.

³ Street, *Barack Obama*, 11.

⁴ Street, *Barack Obama*, 65.

investors from within the top 1 percent of citizens who own more than half the nation's financial wealth and account for more than three-fourths of the significant campaign contributions. People from within that opulent and highly class-conscious category of Americans are quite notoriously and logically hostile to left progressive ideals and movements, which threaten their disproportionate wealth and power.

A candidate also has no chance for the White House if he or she does not gain approval from the powerful people who own and manage national and global corporate media. Besides driving the costs of campaigns so high that backing from the rich and powerful is required for viability, corporate media enjoys practically godlike powers when it comes to shaping the public profile and mass perception of candidates. Dominant media has[,] and exercises[,] the capacity to narrowly restrict the boundaries of acceptable political debate and at the same time to focus public attention away from issues that matter to citizens and toward "spectator"-oriented subjects like candidate "character," "likeability," and "the horse race." Candidates seen by the reigning private communications authorities as too far beyond dominant elite doctrine on empire, inequality, and business rule are efficiently relegated to the media's dunce corners and recycling bins. . . .

Serious presidential candidates are expected to audition with such august imperial policy-formation bodies as the Council on Foreign Relations (CFR) and to include trusted members of the foreign policy and military-industrial-academic complex on their teams of advisers. These foreign-policy power elites warn party, business, funding, and media authorities of any candidate's lack of safety (ideological, practical, or otherwise) for the imperial project. There is little chance of ultimate success for a candidate who questions the inherent underlying nobility of U.S. global dominance and/or the need to back American hegemony with a stupendous military budget and a fierce readiness to use military force with or (if necessary) without the approval of "the international community."⁵

The Two-Party Duopoly

US rulers are committed to maintaining "overwhelming unilateral global military dominance." While claiming to be motivated by a dedication to human rights and democracy, US rulers have armed, trained, and financed some of the most notorious right-wing autocracies in history.

The overall aim is to promote a global order dedicated to private ownership of the world's financial and industrial wealth, expropriation of its natural resources, and advantageous control of its consumer and labor markets. This is a world where the gap between the wealthy few and the many poor grows ever greater, where the masses are experiencing a drastic decline in living standards. The goal is a world composed *totally* of exploitative, repressive, free market countries like Indonesia, Nigeria, and Haiti.⁶

The titanic expenditures needed to maintain military supremacy leave little money for environmental initiatives. . . . In the aftermath of America's worst environmental disaster (the BP oil spill in the Gulf of Mexico) President Obama did not reverse his endorsement of deepwater

⁵ Street, *Barack Obama*, 189.

⁶ Parenti, 119.

drilling and nuclear power. In his first two years in office, he did next to nothing about the climate crisis.⁷

The US empire presides over the global unraveling of nature without so much as a plan of action. The US empire has more important things to do: pursue corporate profit opportunities and capital accumulation, and vanquish those who try to oppose or deviate from this course. To the extent the empire deals at all with the climate crisis, it is only to figure out new ways of making a profit off it.⁸

[F]or most of the twentieth century, top Democratic and Republican politicians, leaders, and officials maintained general agreement on the essential leading decisions of U.S. foreign policy. . . . American imperial Cold War policy was a richly bipartisan affair from Truman through Eisenhower, Kennedy, Johnson, Nixon, Ford, Carter, Reagan, and George H. W. Bush. During the long Cold War era (1945-1991), Republicans and Democrats . . . were in fundamental agreement . . . when it came to critical foreign policy and "national security" matters: the massive long-term post-World War II escalation of U.S. military spending; the construction of a "permanent U.S. war economy"; nuclear arms development; regular imperial U.S. interventions in a large number of states and regions across the planet (including both direct military action and more covert involvement) . . . one-sided support (after 1967) of Israel in its oppression of the Palestinian people and its struggle with surrounding Arab states; the construction of a world economic order calculated and crafted to ensure American global economic hegemony; direct massive U.S. military assaults on Korea and Vietnam; the construction of a global "empire of bases" (Chalmers Johnson's term) that involved setting up hundreds of U.S. military installations scattered across most nations in the world; the sponsorship of pro-U.S. dictatorships and dedicated opposition to popular revolutionary and independent nationalist movements and forces across the "Third World"; the determination that the proper role for "Third World" nations to play in the global economic system was as inferior and impoverished complements to the wealthy, U.S.-led industrial core states, including those of North America (excluding Mexico), Western Europe, and Japan; the false designation of states and movements rejecting that role as "Anti-American" partners and agents in supposed Marxist Soviet and Chinese plans for world "communist" domination; and the toleration for Third World "democracy" and independence only insofar as those principles could be reasonably seen to be operating for and within the broader project of U.S. imperial management.

Democrats and Republicans recurrently tussled over certain tactical questions involved in the enactment of this broader imperial agenda. . . .

But these were primarily disputes over tactics, not doctrine, structure, and worldview. There was no basic argument between the parties over the broader and supposedly noble and progressive role and necessity of American Empire and militarism. There was no serious questioning of the morality of the United States' core and underlying globalism and militarism or its deadly opposition to independence and popular self-determination abroad. Thus, Nixon's mass-murderous bombing of Cambodia went unmentioned in the Articles of Impeachment drawn up by congressional Democrats against Nixon, who was forced out of office for the comparatively minor offense of burgling a Democratic Party campaign office. And, as Howard Zinn noted in regard to the Iran-Contra incident,

⁷ Parenti, 131.

⁸ Parenti, 132.

Once the scandal was out in the open, neither Congressional investigating committees nor the press nor the trial of Colonel Oliver North, who oversaw the contra aid operation, got to the critical questions: What is U.S. foreign policy all about? How are a president and his staff permitted to support a terrorist group in Central America to overthrow a government that, whatever its faults, is welcomed by its own people as a great improvement over the terrible governments the U.S. has supported there for years? . . . The limits of Democratic party criticism of the affair were revealed by a leading Democrat, Senator Sam Nunn of Georgia, who, as the investigation was getting under way, said: "We must, all of us, help the President restore his credibility in foreign affairs."⁹

During its many imperial actions, U.S. policymakers of both parties--liberals and conservatives alike--have regularly described U.S. objectives in terms of the advance of "democracy." But the operative U.S. definition of "democracy" is rather different from the dictionary meaning. The United States recognizes only a curious sort of overseas democracy--the kind that supports interrelated U.S. global economic and military-strategic objectives. U.S.-acknowledged "democracies" provide U.S. transnational capital with a favorable investment climate. They accept neoliberal prescriptions that forbid poor states from undertaking commonsense economic-nationalist measures required for them to develop rapidly and independently on the model of the richer states. They agree to serve as neocolonial military vassals of Uncle Sam.¹⁰

[D]espite their (at times) populist rhetoric and support for social reform legislation, the Democrats are at core an elite party concerned with sharing the responsibility of ruling the United States with the GOP. The differences that separate the Democrats and Republicans are minor in comparison to the fundamental commitments that unite them. To be sure, if there weren't differences between the two parties, there would be no justification for a two-party system. But for corporate America, which generally supports the Republicans more fervently than the Democrats, the two-party system plays an essential role. If one party falls out of favor with the voters, there's always the other one--with predictable politics--waiting in the wings. Even as the New Deal rearranged mainstream American politics, a well-known radical social commentator, Ferdinand Lundberg, stressed that the underlying nature of U.S. politics hadn't changed: "The United States can be looked upon as having, in effect, a single party: the Property Party. This party can be looked upon as having two subdivisions: The Republican Party, hostile to accommodating adjustments (hence dubbed "Conservative") and the Democratic Party, of recent decades favoring such adjustments (hence dubbed "Liberal")."¹¹

[T]he two-party system would not work the way it is supposed to if the two parties were identical. There must be at least some differences between the parties to give voters a stake in choosing which of the two will be in power after each election. [Thus, the Democratic Party is "pro-choice" and more open to labor, blacks, gays, environmental groups, etc.] . . .

⁹ Street, *Barack Obama*, 124-6.

¹⁰ Street, *Barack Obama*, 130.

¹¹ Selfa, 13.

[Such differences are] enough to allow the Democrats to present themselves as a lesser evil to the Republicans.¹²

Minimal political differences between the two main parties and the fact that leading liberal organizations are tied to the Democratic Party form the basis of the politics of "lesser evilism"--of voting for the lesser of two evils. . . . [M]ost voters are left to decide their vote on Election Day according to which choice they dislike least. . . .

Leading liberals operate in this environment and have come to accept its limitations. "We support what's possible," they'll say, "not what's desirable." After Clinton endorsed the 1996 bill repealing Aid to Families with Dependent Children . . . *Nation* columnist Katha Pollitt denounced her fellow liberals for holding their fire against Clinton because they feared what the Republicans would do:

[T]hese liberal groups are caught up in mainstream electoral politics, which in practice means clinging to Clinton and the Democratic Party. . . . Meanwhile, they preach the gospel of the lesser of two evils, that ever-downward spiral that has brought us to this pass and that will doubtless end with liberals in hell organizing votes for Satan because Beelzebub would be even worse.

Democrats know that, no matter how much liberals complain, they will accept the Democrats as the lesser evil on each Election Day. Indeed, the stability of the two-party system rests on this.

The Democrats agree with the Republicans on all fundamental issues, even if they disagree on specific policies. If Democrats argue that social programs should not be cut as deeply as the Republicans desire, they agree that such programs must be cut to demonstrate "fiscal responsibility." If Democrats campaign for slightly less regressive tax programs, they and the Republicans agree that tax breaks for the rich will stimulate investment. Both want to preserve a "good business climate." In times of economic expansion, this means confining social welfare expenditures and programs within business-defined limits. In times of economic contraction, this means cutting back on social spending and attacking working-class living standards. If they disagree on a particular use of military power, they are no less committed than the Republicans to extending U.S. influence around the world. In the meantime, the severe crises facing millions of Americans, including lack of affordable health care and declining living standards, remain unaddressed. For the bosses the arrangement is ideal: two capitalist parties help to uphold their rule, with one masquerading as the friend of labor and the poor. But for workers, every election presents a choice between two options, neither of them desirable.¹³

Even if we knew nothing about the mainstream candidates running for president in 2008, [the evidence from] the history of U.S. imperialism is . . . that the main thrust and direction of U.S. foreign policy won't change after Bush leaves the White House. A Democratic administration arriving in 2009 may reflect ruling-class desires for a "kinder, gentler" imperialism. But it would be dedicated to imperialism just the same. . . . [I]t's understandable

¹² Selfa, 34, 37.

¹³ Selfa, 38.

that millions who opposed the 2003 war in Iraq would want to get rid of the Republicans in 2008. But trading one imperialist politician for another is no step toward peace or justice.¹⁴

Each election day seems to confront Americans with a Hobson's choice of one pro-business party that pretends to represent the interests of working people (the Democrats) and another pro-business party that doesn't even bother to pretend (the Republicans). Facing the uninspiring choice in the 1996 presidential elections between Democrat Bill Clinton and Republican Bob Dole, *New York Times* columnist Russell Baker--hardly a radical--complained, "[W]e can only conclude that a 'New Democrat' is just another Gingrich Republican, except of course for lacking the Republicans' philosophical consistency. . . . Except that [Clinton] makes a nicer speech than Dole, what difference is there between them?" . . .

Both the Democrats and the Republicans have worked hard to protect their corporate duopoly, which allows these two pro-business parties to share power between them. America's elites can thus rest assured that whichever party wins a given election their interests will dictate government policy.¹⁵

Nothing in President Bush's extraordinarily vague doctrine, promulgated on September 19, 2002, of fighting "preemptive" wars, unilaterally if necessary, was a fundamentally new departure. Since the 1890s, regardless of whether the Republicans or Democrats were in office, the U.S. has intervened in countless ways--sending in the Marines, installing and bolstering friendly tyrants--in the western hemisphere to determine the political destinies of innumerable southern nations. The Democratic administration that established the United Nations explicitly regarded the hemisphere as the U.S. sphere of influence, and at the same time created the IMF and World Bank to police the world economy.

Indeed, it was the Democratic Party that created most of the pillars of postwar American foreign policy, from the Truman Doctrine in 1947 and NATO through the institutionalization of the arms race and the core illusion that weapons and firepower are a solution to many of the world's political problems. So the Democrats share, in the name of a truly "bipartisan" consensus, equal responsibility for both the character and dilemmas of America's foreign strategy today. . . .

In foreign and military affairs, both the Clinton and Bush administrations have suffered from the same procurement fetish, believing that expensive weapons are superior to realistic political strategies. The same illusions produced the Vietnam War--and disaster. Elegant strategies promising technological routes to victory have been with us since the late 1940s, but they are essentially public relations exercises intended to encourage more orders for arms manufacturers [and] justifications for bigger [military] budgets. . . . During the Clinton years the Pentagon continued to concoct grandiose strategies, demanding--and getting--new weapons to implement them. . . . [T]he consensus between the two parties on the Pentagon's budgets has flourished since 1945. In January 2000 Clinton added \$115 billion to the Pentagon's five-year plan, far more than the Republicans were calling for. When Clinton left office the Pentagon had over a half trillion dollars in the major weapons procurement pipeline, not counting the ballistic missile defense systems, a pure boondoggle that cost over \$71 billion by 1999.¹⁶

¹⁴ Selfa, 157.

¹⁵ Selfa, 177.

¹⁶ Gabriel Kolko, in Cockburn and St. Clair, 265-7.

Although the foreign and military policy goals of the Democrats and Republicans since 1947 have been essentially consensual, both in terms of objectives and the varied means--from covert to overt warfare--of attaining them, there have been significant differences in the way they were expressed. . . . [S]tyle can be important and . . . the Bush administration's falsehoods, rudeness, and peremptory demands have [been counterproductive]. . . . The Democrats . . . will perpetuate the same adventurism and opportunism that began generations ago and that Bush has merely built upon, the same dependence on military means to solve political crises, the same interference with every corner of the globe as if America has a divinely ordained mission to muck around with all the world's problems. The Democrats' greater finesse in justifying these policies is therefore more dangerous because they will be made to seem more credible.¹⁷

The Democratic Party

Democrats were more than simply acquiescent to the U.S. militarism and imperialism of the long Cold War. . . . Americans who insist on strongly identifying the "liberal" Democratic Party with peace, antimilitarism, and anti-imperialism in the last and current century have to ignore a massive record of imperial arrogance and criminality to which Democratic policymakers have richly contributed. [Two pages of examples follow.]¹⁸

The "corporate Democrats" (of which Obama is the new leader and epitome) are better able to deceptively pose as a progressive alternative to business class and imperial rule than the Republicans when they are out of office than when they are in power. Democrats are more effectively exposed as ultimately inadequate tribunes of the ordinary working people they claim to represent when they hold power and then quite naturally fail to deliver on popular hopes and dreams they've ridden and raised on the road to office. They are less able to hide their essential identity as the other business and Empire party (what former Richard Nixon strategist Kevin Phillips once aptly termed "history's second most enthusiastic capitalist party") when they sit atop the political system.¹⁹

[T]he renewed and more confident Democratic Party of 2008 is the latest incarnation of an institution that appeals to "the people" while looking out for the interests of corporations. . . .

Democratic "betrayals" are not primarily the result of unscrupulous politicians or office holders who "sell out"--although there are plenty of each of those in the Democratic Party. Rather they are the inevitable outcome of a political institution that socialists have long described as a capitalist party that only pretends to be a friend of working people.²⁰

[T]he party that claims to be a "party of the people" has acted against the people time and again.

. . .

¹⁷ Gabriel Kolko, in Cockburn and St. Clair, 271.

¹⁸ Street, *Barack Obama*, 127.

¹⁹ Street, *Empire's New Clothes*, ix.

²⁰ Selfa, 8-9.

These Democratic Party actions are perfectly understandable . . . if one . . . sees the Democrats not as representative of "voters" or "the people," but as one of the leading institutions that sustains the U.S. political system on behalf of the ruling capitalist class. . . .

[G]overnments [i.e. particular officials] can change while the state, the crucial determinant of the "long-term large-scale policies of a political system," remains intact. . . . As long as the regime's political parties remain committed to maintaining [a capitalist] state, big business can abide by changes in government. . . .

[I]t is easy to see that the Democrats are concerned with the staffing of the government but not with altering the state. The Democratic Party, like the Republican Party, plays the role of helping big business to articulate its priorities through government while maintaining the power and stability of the political status quo. . . . [This explains] why so often the "party of the people" carries out the wishes of big business or the military-industrial complex instead.²¹

[I]n the 1990s, Democratic Party leaders under Bill Clinton reoriented the institution to the emerging sectors of the "New Economy" [vs. the Old Economy of agribusiness and energy] so that [it] . . . "emerged as the clear choice of many of the new Internet and telecommunications rich headed to the top of the *Forbes* 400." . . .

What does corporate America expect from its investment? In total, the 2004 presidential election cost somewhere approaching \$4 billion. While this seems like a staggering sum . . . it is equivalent to the size of an average "mid-cap" company. When Microsoft tycoon Bill Gates is worth more than \$50 billion and a company like Google is valued . . . at nearly \$200 billion, the cost of buying the Oval Office appears to be a bargain. What is most notable is how much a relatively small investment in politicians will bring in returns for their "investors." . . .

Consider [Clinton's] Telecommunications Act of 1996. . . . The bill . . . took down barriers of ownership and transmission rights of content among major media, radio, phone, and Internet companies. Although the industry promised a new era of competition that would lead to lower prices and greater choice for consumers, the exact opposite developed. The Telecommunications Act unleashed a bacchanal of media mergers and industry consolidation. In the decade following the act's passage, cable TV rates jumped by almost 50 percent and local phone charges increased by 20 percent. Under the Telecommunications Act, the government gave to broadcasters *for free* digital TV licenses that were at the time valued at \$70 billion. . . . All this for a total industry investment in the Democratic Party of about \$309 million. At the head of the gravy train was Clinton, who bounced back from the 1994 loss of Congress to the GOP to win easy reelection in 1996. [Thomas] Ferguson observed:

[T]he best-kept secret of the 1996 election is that, more than any other single bloc, it was the telecommunications sector that rescued Bill Clinton. In my sample of large firms, this staggeringly profitable sector . . . stands out in its support for Clinton: Forty-six percent of the firms in my sample contributed to the president's re-election campaign.²²

Elections are an expensive business. Anyone hoping to mount a successful campaign needs millions of dollars. In the 2006 congressional election, when the Democrats overturned a twelve-year-old Republican majority, the average House winner spent almost \$1.3 million for his/her seat. The average Senate winner spent \$8.8 million. . . . The expense of electioneering

²¹ Selfa, 16-18.

²² Selfa, 23-6.

means that both major parties look to wealthy individuals and to corporations for their funding. In fact the major parties often decide to back particular candidates based on their ability to raise money. . . .

Perhaps nothing better exemplified the [big-money fundraising] spirit of the Clinton-Gore years than the May 24, 2000, Democratic fundraiser held in Washington, D.C.'s MCI Center. Pulling in a record \$26.5 million in one evening, the Democrats paid tribute to their fundraiser-in-chief, outgoing President Bill Clinton. But unlike the blue-blooded Republicans, who dined extravagantly at their 2000 fundraiser, the Democrats ate barbecue served on paper plates. In keeping with this fake populism, organizers encouraged all who attended to wear blue jeans.

The MCI Center spectacle typified the administration it honored. Like the Clinton-Gore administration, the Democratic Party itself hid its pro-corporate agenda behind a fog of populist rhetoric. Like the administration, it beat the Republicans at their own game. . . .

Why would prominent capitalists and wealthy individuals give money to a party that is traditionally thought of as the "party of the people"? Certainly there are rich, liberal individuals who, for reasons of personal conviction or background, support Democrats over Republicans [e.g. George Soros, Warren Buffet]. . . . Yet there are limits to what the likes of Soros and Buffet will support. As sociologist G. William Domhoff, writing about the "limousine liberals" of the early 1970s, put it, they "want a little touching up of the socioeconomic system around the ragged edges, but they don't want anybody tampering with sacred corporate institutions."

While [the large contributions of rich businessmen] grab headlines, they are not the crucial measuring stick for corporate control of the Democratic Party. Perhaps it's obvious that [such] donations . . . are proof that corporate America has nothing to fear from the Democratic Party. But the more central evidence of the Democrats' fealty to corporate America can be seen in the day-to-day accounting of the party's financial lifeblood. Although labor unions send about 90 percent of their political contributions to Democratic candidates, labor union [and liberal group] money is not decisive in Democratic fundraising. . . . [The vast majority comes] from business sectors. . . . Former Senator Russell Long (D-LA), the longtime chairman of the Senate Finance Committee, was not far from the mark when he said: "It would be my guess that about 95 percent of campaign funds at the congressional level are derived from businessmen." . . .

Thus, any money or campaigning support the AFL-CIO or other unions deliver to the Democrats is offered among all the other sources of money and support, predominantly corporate, that the party's candidates receive. It is little wonder that Democratic officials have time and again ignored union demands.

Business funding for the Democratic Party assures that it, like the Republican Party, will remain a loyal corporate representative in government. . . . [T]he system of organized bribery that finances American political parties ensures that no one who might challenge [the] status quo becomes a serious contender. "Any candidate that expects to show up on the PAC lists is well aware of the need to tailor, if not eliminate, any populist leanings," a Democratic congressional aide told investigative journalists Alexander Cockburn and Ken Silverstein. "It is not a formula that opens the door to any but establishment candidates." . . .

[S]incere liberals among elected Democrats--people like Representatives Dennis Kucinich of Ohio or Barbara Lee of California--are exceptions that prove the rule. . . . [T]hese two representatives receive most of their funds from labor unions and from committed individuals. Although they have long tenures in Congress . . . they would not even be in the running for leadership roles in Congress.²³

²³ Selfa, 27-30.

The Democratic Party [in the late 1930s] had provided the vehicle through which the labor movement was incorporated into national policy making. But labor had joined as a junior partner to the business interests that still controlled the Democrats. . . .

The New Deal did not save the economy from the Great Depression, but the Second World War did. Between 1940 and 1945, the U.S. government spent more money than it had in the previous 150 years combined. A flood of government contracts lined the pockets of big business while wartime wage-and-price controls and the CIO's "no strike pledge" held down workers' incomes. Two-thirds of the more than \$175 billion the U.S. government spent between June 1940 and September 1944 went to only one hundred companies and more than \$50 billion of this went to just ten companies. Historian George Lipsitz explained, "The nation's largest businesses clearly reaped the greatest benefits from one of the largest welfare projects in history--wartime industrial expansion." The U.S. economy nearly doubled in size in the war years, with most of the benefits accruing to those "who already had the greatest share of the nation's wealth."²⁴

At the [post-Cold War] high-water mark of what became known as the "liberal-labor" alliance in the Democratic Party . . . the Democratic Party, representing the liberal wing of the U.S. capitalist class, had no . . . intention [of implementing profound reform]. Democratic administrations erected most of what in the U.S. passes for a welfare state--Social Security, Medicare, Head Start, and federal aid to cities. But the Democratic Party remained a self-consciously capitalist party throughout, responding to the needs of business rather than to the desires of its "constituents," from labor unions to reform groups. As one astute observer remarked, this factor explains why the Democratic Party

left ordinary Americans alternately confused, perplexed, alarmed, or disgusted, as they tried to puzzle out why the party did so little to help unionize the South, protect the victims of McCarthyism, promote civil rights for blacks, women, or Hispanics, or in the late 1970s, combat America's great "right turn" against the New Deal itself. To such people, it always remained a mystery why the Democrats so often betrayed the ideals of the New Deal. Little did they realize that, in fact, the party was only living up to them.²⁵

Writing in 1972, radical scholar G. William Domhoff eloquently outlined the role the Democratic Party plays in accommodating the oppressed and exploited to the mainstream political system:

Despite the social and economic hardships suffered by hundreds of millions of Americans over the past one hundred years, the power elite have been able to contain demands for a steady job, fair wages, good pensions, and effective health care within very modest limits. . . . One of the most important factors in maintaining those limits has been the Democratic Party. The party dominates the left alternative in this country, and the sophisticated rich want to keep it that way. Democrats . . . are the branch of the Property Party that to some

²⁴ Selfa, 52, 53.

²⁵ Selfa, 59.

extent *accommodates* labor, blacks, and liberals, but at the same time hinders genuine economic solutions to age-old problems.²⁶

The 1967 urban rebellions and the prospects of more militant activity prodded the Democratic Party machines, particularly in Northern urban centers, to make concessions to Black sentiment. . . . The election of Black politicians would not change the conditions of Black people's lives in their jurisdictions, yet "Black people were supposed to get the impression that progress was being made, that they were finally being let in the front door. . . . The intention is to create an impression of real movement while actual movement is too limited to be significant."

The Democratic strategy of co-optation succeeded. Not only did Black electoralism serve its purpose for the predominantly white ruling class--that of demobilizing the Black movement--but it coincided with the interests of Black middle-class politicians and their Black business backers. Between 1964 and 1986, the number of Black elected U.S. officials grew from 103 to 6,424. But at the same time, conditions for the mass of the Black population--workers and the poor--grew increasingly desperate. In fact by the 1980s, a range of indices suggested that living conditions, job opportunities, and poverty levels for Black America were worse than they were before the civil rights movement. Often, Black electoral victories proved hollow. Assuming the reins of cities and counties facing fiscal crisis, Black Democratic politicians were able to deliver little more than austerity to their Black working-class constituents.²⁷

The Democratic Party . . . is one of the main conduits through which various "out" groups in U.S. society have been integrated into the mainstream political process. This has had the effect of blunting and co-opting [these] social movements. . . . As leading Populists, labor activists, civil rights activists, and others have learned the hard way over the years, the Democratic Party doesn't simply seek to represent these groups. It seeks to corral them and to ensure that they don't strike out on an independent political path.²⁸

One undeniable truth is that Democratic presidents led the United States into every major war in the twentieth century. The First World War (Wilson), the Second World War (Roosevelt), the Korean War (Truman), and the Vietnam War (Kennedy [actually Johnson-ed.]) were "Democratic" wars. . . .

The reason behind these facts is simple: The Democrats are as committed as the Republicans to upholding the United States's right to police the world. Truman's "Doctrine," announced in 1947, asserted the U.S. government's intention to intervene anywhere to uphold U.S. interests in the name of fighting "communism." In 1960 Kennedy campaigned on a foreign policy platform more conservative than Nixon's, chiding the Eisenhower administration for falling behind the Soviet Union in its development and deployment of missiles, satellites, and nuclear weapons. This "missile gap" was later discovered to be nonexistent. In 1984 Walter Mondale called for a quarantine of Nicaragua, a position farther to the right than Reagan's support for the *contras*, the mercenary force fighting to overthrow the democratically elected Sandinista government. And in the wake of the September 11, 2001, attacks, Democrats and Republicans competed to show who was tougher in the "war on terror." . . .

²⁶ Selfa, 88.

²⁷ Selfa, 115.

²⁸ Selfa, 123.

[T]he image of sharp polarization between the parties [on foreign policy is] particularly curious since this is the one main policy area in which the idea of "bipartisanship" extends the farthest. One of the oldest clichés in American politics holds that "politics stops at the water's edge"--i.e., that partisan disputes aren't supposed to interfere with the conduct of American foreign policy. On the biggest, guiding questions of American foreign policy, this is certainly the case. During the Cold War, for instance, no mainstream candidate ever ran a campaign challenging the United States's anticommunist "containment" policy against the USSR. . . .

But within these wider agreements on goals and aims there is room for disagreement on the particulars. This is especially true during election season, when candidates and parties accentuate even miniscule differences in order to appeal to their respective voting bases. As foreign policy analyst Andrew Bacevich explained, "Through tacit agreement, the two major parties approach the contest for the presidency less as an opportunity for assessing U.S. policies abroad than for striking poses--a hallowed and inviolable bit of political kabuki."²⁹

[W]hen it comes to foreign policy, there is much more continuity between the administrations of both political parties than there is difference between them. As Bacevich noted, most disagreements between Democratic and Republican administrations emerge on the margins of the main questions of U.S. foreign policy. . . . Democratic administrations were the architects of the Cold War "national security state" and the policy of "containment" toward the USSR. FDR and his administration set up the International Monetary Fund, the World Bank, and the United Nations--ongoing tools of American imperialism. After Truman ordered atomic bombs dropped on Japan, he went on to create the National Security Council, the CIA, and the Defense Department. The Truman Doctrine authorized U.S. troops to intervene anywhere to "defend free enterprise" against "communism." The mythmakers laud Kennedy for creating the Peace Corps, while ignoring that he also created the Green Berets.³⁰

[Woodrow] Wilson ordered military interventions in more countries and stationed troops for longer periods than either Roosevelt or Roosevelt's Republican successor, William Howard Taft. In particular, Wilson turned the Caribbean Sea into a virtual American lake. In the years before U.S. intervention in the First World War, Wilson dispatched the marines to Mexico, Haiti, the Dominican Republic, Cuba, Panama, Honduras, and Guatemala. In 1914 U.S. troops landed in Port au Prince, Haiti, on a mission to collect from Haitian customshouses a debt owed to National City Bank. When the Haitians rose up against this attack on their sovereignty, the United States launched a full-scale occupation that lasted until 1934. When the United States finally withdrew from Haiti, it left behind a U.S.-trained military whose successors continued to terrorize the Haitian population for the rest of the century.

Wilson's actions in Haiti and the rest of the Americas followed logically from his understanding of the role U.S. foreign policy should play in the twentieth century. Writing as a Princeton political scientist more than a decade before he was elected president, he concluded that the "flag followed commerce":

Since trade ignores national boundaries and the manufacturer insists on having the world as a market, the flag of his nation must follow him, and the doors of the nations which are closed against him must be battered down. Concessions obtained by financiers must be

²⁹ Selfa, 126-7.

³⁰ Selfa, 129.

safeguarded by ministers of state, even if the sovereignty of unwilling nations be outraged in the process. Colonies must be obtained or planted, in order that no useful corner of the world may be overlooked or left unused.

Despite his nakedly imperialist point of view, Wilson is remembered as a great humanitarian who pioneered the notion that U.S. foreign policy should serve loftier goals, promoting democracy and defending the self-determination of small nations.³¹

Assuming the Democrats sweep the 2008 elections . . . whatever [they] plan will be tailored to shore up the system and to short-circuit ordinary people's demands. The "party of the people" will pursue policies that may produce some minimal reforms for workers and the oppressed, but only as a by-product of its historic role: to save the capitalist system from its own excesses in order to preserve the political status quo.

Although both major parties in the United States have undergone major changes over the years of their existence, the Democratic Party is the ultimate chameleon in the two-party system. The party that spawned the Confederate States of America was by 2008 ready to nominate an African American as its presidential candidate. For most of the last century it has served a particular role in the two-party system. It is the party that encourages the loyalty of oppressed and exploited groups in U.S. society--Blacks, union members, women, immigrants--only to contain and blunt aspirations for a more fundamental reordering of capitalist priorities.

In times of great social crisis, such as that which confronted the Roosevelt administration in 1933, the Democrats can shift "left" to appeal to mass discontent with the system. Democratic politicians have introduced reforms, such as Social Security and unemployment insurance, which both stabilized the system and convinced millions to tie their hopes for a better future on continuously reelecting Democrats. Yet as an institution the Democratic Party has routinely used its control over government resources . . . for policies that are both pro-business and pro-imperialist. . . .

Despite reforms that some Democrat administrations have enacted, the essential character of the Democrats as a big business party hasn't changed. [The Democratic Party is] an institution that corporate money funds and sustains--and increasingly so. Its bedrock loyalty to big business explains its history as a party that has championed intervention and "free trade" abroad, while limiting the reforms it promotes within the U.S. capitalist consensus. The fact that the Democratic Party remains a party of American business explains why the American "welfare state" is so anemic. . . . The conservative Republican dominance of U.S. politics over the last generation only obscures how from the 1930s through the 1960s the Democrats were the dominant party of U.S. capitalism. The Democrats are the party of Social Security and the Voting Rights Act. But . . . the Democrats are equally the party of the World Bank, the CIA, and the Vietnam War.³²

Many people who agree [that the Democrats are not really for the people] may still decide to vote for a Democrat--if only to prevent a conservative Republican from wreaking further damage on the tattered social welfare state and on civil liberties. . . . [M]any voters will cast a vote for the lesser evil. . . . But is voting for the lesser of two evils really a [prudent] strategy? . . . Consider

³¹ Selfa, 130.

³² Selfa, 190-91.

Democrat Lyndon Johnson's election as a "peace candidate" in 1964. Once elected, Johnson escalated the war in Vietnam beyond anyone's worst nightmares.

In reviewing the left's support for the lesser-evil election of Johnson, socialist Hal Draper recalled . . . when the German Social Democrats encouraged a vote for . . . conservative Field Marshal von Hindenburg against Hitler and the Nazis in 1932:

So the Lesser Evil, Hindenburg, won; and Hitler was defeated. Whereupon President Hindenburg appointed Hitler to the chancellorship, and the Nazis started taking over. . . . [T]he people voted for the Lesser Evil and got both [the greater and lesser evil]. . . . This is exactly why 1932 is the classic case of the Lesser Evil, because even when the stakes were this high, even then voting for the Lesser Evil meant historic disaster.

Draper's historical example is dramatic, but it illustrates the importance of analyzing the Democrats and Republicans in the way that twentieth-century muckraker Ferdinand Lundberg described them: as two wings of the same "property" party.³³

The [members of the] wealthiest one percent of the population--industrialists, bankers, media barons . . . own the major corporations and the media. Through their control over the state, they defend their privileges and power. No less an authority than Democratic President Woodrow Wilson explained it this way:

Suppose you go Washington and try to get at your government. You will always find that while you are politely listened to, the men really consulted are the men who have the big stake--the big bankers, the big manufacturers, and the big masters of commerce. . . . The masters of the government of the United States are the combined capitalists and manufacturers of the United States.

Ordinary working-class Americans, by contrast, have no say over their working conditions, whether they will be "downsized" out of jobs, or whether their wages and benefits will be cut.

Working people do not elect the top judges, the generals, the police, or the bureaucrats who run Washington--all of whom are appointed, not elected. And working people have no means to control the candidates they elect once they have taken office.³⁴

Lyndon Johnson

[President Lyndon B.] Johnson's opponent [in 1964] was reactionary Republican Senator Barry Goldwater. . . . Johnson campaigned as the "peace candidate" against "extremist" Goldwater. . . . Johnson signaled his [real] intentions when in late 1963 he told a meeting of the Joint Chiefs of Staff: "Just get me elected and then you can have your war."

³³ Selfa, 194.

³⁴ Selfa, 197.

The threat of a Goldwater victory frightened SDS [Students for a Democratic Society]. . . . Many SDS activists flocked to Johnson's campaign, registering voters and getting out the vote on Election Day. Johnson won in a landslide, taking 61 percent of the popular vote. . . .

Most of big business [had] found Goldwater too "extreme" for its tastes. Sixty percent of members of the Business Council, an extremely influential Washington advisory group composed of chief executives of the largest and most important U.S. companies, backed Johnson. And LBJ won the lion's share of corporate contributions to the presidential candidates.

Within months of his inauguration Johnson showed his cards. . . . In March 1965 he asked Congress for a massive escalation of the Vietnam War effort. By the decade's end, more than 550,000 troops would be sent to fight in Vietnam. More than fifty-eight thousand Americans and 2 million Vietnamese would die in the Vietnam War. As the war effort impinged on the government's ability to spend on the "War on Poverty," even the promise of liberal reform at home was undercut. A leading radical explained the lessons of the 1964 election:

In 1964 . . . [many people] convinced themselves that Lyndon Johnson was the lesser evil as against Goldwater. . . . Many of them have realized that the spiked shoe was on the other foot; and they lacerate themselves with the thought that the man they voted for "actually carried out Goldwater's policy." . . . Who was really the Lesser Evil in 1964? The point is that it is the question which is the disaster, not the answer. In setups in which the choice is between one capitalist politician and another, the defeat comes in accepting the limitation to this choice.³⁵

Jimmy Carter

[Jimmy Carter] may have been a millionaire peanut grower, but he put himself forward as an ordinary, plain-speaking farmer moved by simple decency to give ordinary Americans a new sense of hope and change.

Making a special appeal to those who saw themselves as besieged by the rich and powerful, Carter . . . denounced the use of law to serve and protect the wealthy few. Carter promised to eliminate flagrant tax loopholes for corporations and the rich and proposed to raise the tax on capital gains and reduce rates on individuals. He also promised to introduce major health-care reform providing coverage for millions of uninsured Americans. His personal campaign mission was to restore hope in Washington and America by shrinking the distance between the American people and American politics, and the promise to roll back the power of special corporate interests was a key part of that promise.

Once he attained power, however, Carter "remained," in Howard Zinn's words, "within the historic political boundaries of the American system, protecting corporate wealth and power, [and] maintaining a huge military machine that drained the national wealth." He appointed a strong militarist and nuclear-power advocate as secretary of energy and made numerous other cabinet appointments calculated to win approval from the upper reaches of the "business community." His 1977 tax reform did little to help working-class and poor people, and the tax bill that Congress passed and Carter signed the following year "was perhaps the most regressive

³⁵ Selfa, 179-80.

measure since the 1920s," according to noted liberal author and journalist William Greider. Renowned economist Robert Lekachman said the bulk of the 1978 tax measure's "benefits accrue[d] to the affluent individuals and corporations." Carter's energy bill benefited oil companies more than consumers, and the health-reform measures he pledged never materialized.

Reflecting his declared neoliberal desire to reduce the size of government and lessen its control over the "free market," Carter supported business-backed legislation that concentrated corporate control and deepened economic insecurity for consumers and workers by deregulating airlines, trucking, natural gas, and banks. He made no effort to expand or renew the antipoverty and social welfare initiatives of his Democratic predecessor, Lyndon B. Johnson, or to strengthen the American labor movement through aggressive enforcement of the National Labor Relations Act. Under Carter, federal funds that might have gone to inner-city schools and health and social services were diverted instead to an expanded military budget.³⁶

Responding to business complaints that social programs had become unaffordable, Carter reversed the long period of increases in spending on domestic programs. Leaders of major African-American civil rights groups, meeting under the auspices of the Urban League in August 1977, denounced Carter for having "betrayed" them by practicing "callous neglect" toward African Americans. Carter also supported and signed into law the Hyde Amendment, the 1976 measure barring the use of Medicaid funds for the performance of abortions. Its passage, one of the first major victories of the anti-abortion movement following the 1973 Supreme Court legalization of abortion, put the procedure out of reach of poor women who could not otherwise afford it. When President Carter was confronted with this inequity, he remarked: "[T]here are many things in life that are not fair, that wealthy people can afford and poor people can't." It wasn't the federal government's place to make "opportunities exactly equal, particularly when there is a moral factor involved."

Carter's 1978 tax plan anticipated what later became known as Reagonomics by cutting capital gains taxes for the wealthy while boosting Social Security taxes on workers. It was the first time since the 1930s that Congress--a Democratic majority Congress at that--had passed an unambiguously regressive tax plan. . . .

In light of Carter's post-presidential image as Nobel [peace prize] laureate and international peace envoy, it is worth recalling that Carter . . . created the Rapid Deployment Force for intervention in the Middle East.³⁷

Carter reinstated the military draft in 1979, requiring all males of draft age to register. But Carter's care and feeding of the U.S. war machine went far beyond bringing back the draft, whose abolition represented a victory of the movement against the Vietnam War. Carter increased the U.S. military budget at a rate of 4 percent above inflation annually. In fact he launched the Pentagon buildup that Ronald Reagan would take to then-unprecedented heights. Toward that end in 1980 Carter signed Presidential Directive 59, establishing plans for fighting a "limited" nuclear war, including a first-strike policy.

"Human rights" played a big role in Carter's rhetoric about U.S. foreign policy but not its practice. As historian Howard Zinn summarized: "Under Carter, the United States continued to support, all over the world, regimes that engaged in imprisonment of dissenters, torture, and

³⁶ Street, *Barack Obama*, 4.

³⁷ Selfa, 68.

mass murder: in the Philippines, in Iran, in Nicaragua, and in Indonesia, where the inhabitants of East Timor were being annihilated in a campaign bordering on genocide."

The biggest gap between word and deed came in Washington's unconditional support for the shah of Iran, Mohammad Reza Pahlavi, the brutal dictator who acted as a U.S. strongman in the Gulf. In 1977, during a state visit to Iran, Carter toasted the shah as an "enlightened monarch who enjoys his people's total confidence." Less than two years later the Iranian people overthrew the shah. Another Carter favorite was Romanian dictator Nicolai Ceausescu, who won praise and Western aid for abiding by Carter's boycott of the 1980 Moscow Olympics. In 1989, Ceausescu and his hideous regime met the same fate that the shah's did.

To many, Carter's greatest achievement for "peace" was brokering the 1978 Camp David Accord that resulted in Egypt's recognition of Israel. In fact the United States designed the Camp David Accord to bolster Israel by removing Egypt as a military challenger. Israeli hawks openly admit that the peace treaty with Egypt allowed Israel to concentrate its forces for its 1978 and 1982 wars in Lebanon. No thought of justice for the Palestinians entered into Carter's considerations. One year after Camp David, Carter fired UN Ambassador Andrew Young for meeting with a member of the Palestine Liberation Organization.

The 1979 Russian invasion of Afghanistan marked a turning point for Carter's shift to a Cold War confrontation with the USSR. Years later, National Security Adviser Zbigniew Brzezinski admitted [that] the Carter administration had armed Afghan insurgents to provoke a Soviet invasion. In other words, the New Cold War whipped up in 1979-80 was based on a lie from someone who made a campaign pledge to a Watergate-weary electorate that "I will never lie to you." In his 1980 State of the Union address, Carter asserted openly what all U.S. administrations since the 1940s had believed: "An attempt by any outside force to gain control of the Persian Gulf region will be regarded as an assault on the vital interests of the United States of America, and any such assault will be repelled by any means necessary, including military force."

The United States didn't seriously believe the Soviet Union was using Afghanistan as a staging area for a thrust into the Persian Gulf. The "Soviet threat" justified a new policy of direct U.S. intervention in the Persian Gulf after the 1979 Iranian Revolution had eliminated the main U.S. ally in the region. To enforce this "Carter Doctrine," the United States created the Rapid Deployment Force, later renamed the U.S. Central Command (CENTCOM). CENTCOM oversaw U.S. efforts to "pre-position" tons of U.S. military hardware and thousands of troops in friendly states around the Gulf. This deployment in the Gulf gave the United States the power to respond immediately to any crisis that threatened its access to oil and to "hold" the situation until a more substantial U.S. force could be assembled for war. Operation Desert Storm, the U.S.-led war in Iraq in 1991, represented the culmination of the Carter Doctrine and CENTCOM's mission. . . .

[Carter thus] helped [to] rekindle the Cold War and to lay the groundwork for future U.S. wars in the Middle East.³⁸

Bill Clinton

³⁸ Selfa, 143-5.

The 1992 Clinton campaign's rhetoric contained a "strong streak of populism," starting with a speech that excoriated the 1980s as "a gilded age of greed." Clinton claimed he would restore hope in America by "putting people first" over and above the big corporate interests and privileged few. Contrasting his plebian origins and passionate concern for ordinary working families with the perceived plutocratic indifference of the arch-aristocratic George H. W. Bush, Clinton promised to strengthen unions, fight poverty, introduce universal health care, and reject the regressive, corporate-globalizationist North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA). Clinton was going to usher in a new era of national "unity" that would restore the connection between the American people and U.S. politics by elevating shared goals of democracy and equality above partisan divisions, economic privilege, and special-interest control.

Once in office, however, Clinton "put Wall Street in charge of national economic strategy." His actions . . . reflected not his egalitarian promises but rather his leading role in the rise of the Democratic Leadership Council (DLC). Formed by business-oriented party elites to increase the party's distance from labor, environmentalism, blacks, and civil rights, the DLC's mission was to steer the Democratic Party closer to the corporate, imperial, southern, suburban, and racially accommodationist center. Its goal was to advance postpartisan corporate convergence between Democratic and Republican agendas at the elite level and to impose economically and racially regressive policies underneath the cloak of "progressive" strategy and a "pragmatic," "get-things-done" realism.

Clinton's policies and appointments stayed true to his DLC credentials. They also reflected his captivity to powerful corporate and Wall Street interests that key corporate Clinton advisers--including former Goldman Sachs CEO and Clinton Treasury Secretary Robert Rubin--famously instructed him not to buck. After attaining office on the basis of the Democratic Party's standard egalitarian vows, the president "from Hope" quickly defied mainstream public support for socially democratic policies by conducting the public business in regressive accord with the . . . imperatives of empire and inequality.

Clinton's domestic agenda was first announced as a gigantic jobs-creation program coupled with a determined effort to guarantee health care for all. But, as Howard Zinn has noted, Clinton quickly betrayed these declared campaign priorities by concentrating on reduction of the deficit, which had drastically increased under Reagan and George Bush the First. This emphasis "meant that there would be no bold programs of expenditures for universal health care, education, child care, housing, the environment, the arts, or job creation," wrote Zinn. Clinton's "small gestures" toward social democracy did "not come close to what was needed in a nation where one-fourth of the children lived in poverty; where homeless people lived on the streets in every major city; where women could not look for work for lack of child care; where the air [and] the water were deteriorating dangerously."

More than being merely inadequate to the needs of America's millions of truly disadvantaged citizens, the Clinton administration with the help of a Newt Gingrich-led Congress actually attacked the disproportionately nonwhite poor in numerous interrelated ways. Clinton signed a punitive neoliberal "welfare-reform" bill that ended the federal government's guarantee of financial help to impoverished families with dependent children. By forcing poor families getting federal cash-assistance (mainly nonwhite, single-parent units) to find employment without establishing concomitant government programs to create or directly provide livable-wage jobs, Clinton flooded the nation's low- and poverty-wage and no-benefits job market with hundreds of thousands of defenseless new proletarians. . . .

Meanwhile, Clinton increased economic insecurity in poor and working-class American communities by signing the investor-rights NAFTA bill without requiring that it contain significant labor and environmental protections for American workers and consumers. NAFTA destroyed tens of thousands of American industrial jobs by tearing down long-established regulatory barriers to the movement of corporate capital and commodities across the U.S.-Mexican border.

Clinton claimed that "the era of big government" was over. He was more than content, however, to sustain funding for the regressive, repressive, and militaristic "right hand of the state." His concern with balanced budgets did not extend to the prison- and military-industrial complexes. As Zinn noted, Clinton's federal government "continued to spend at least \$250 billion a year to maintain the military machine" and thereby feed the coffers of the rich and powerful "defense" corporations that had long come to rely on the Pentagon system to feed investors' bottom lines. It was only the left hand of the state, the part that serves the poor and nonaffluent majority, that Clinton targeted in his quest for deficit reduction. . . .

Clinton ended his presidency without making any serious effort to meaningfully deliver on his initial health-insurance promises. He also failed to advance any meaningful initiative to protect the rights of beleaguered workers or to increase the woefully inadequate minimum wage.

...
 The Clinton campaign and presidency were excellent case studies in the plutocratic dance of populism and elitism that constitutes Hitchens's "essence of American politics." As George Bush the First was showing himself to be hopelessly out of touch with popular concerns, Clinton pitched his White House bid around Jeffersonian promises to the working majority and then proceeded to construct a richly Hamiltonian, corporate-neoliberal administration that tended to serve the rich and powerful and punish the poor. That performance was richly consistent with the Reagan presidency, which demonstrated a special capacity for selling militantly regressive, corporate-plutocratic policy as the politics of the "little guy."³⁹

President Bill Clinton acted upon his proclaimed desire to uphold "the essential continuity in American foreign policy" by maintaining traditional imperial double standards in U.S. global relations. Like American presidents of both parties before and since, he rewarded authoritarian regimes perceived to support U.S. economic and strategic interests while punishing those perceived to threaten U.S. interests. He embraced "humanitarian causes" perceived to work against states and regimes he opposed (for example, in Yugoslavia and Cuba) and ignored or opposed those that worked against states and regimes that the United States supported . . . including Saudi Arabia, Suharto's Indonesia before 1999 . . . the "Marxist" forced labor state of China, Boris Yeltsin's Russia, and the U.S.-created dictatorship of Haiti.

Clinton took the lead in opposing international action to stop the greatest human rights crime of the 1990s, the genocide in Rwanda. He continued large-scale arms sales and financial and political support to repressive states like Indonesia and the arch-reactionary, quasi-feudal state of Saudi Arabia. He spoke repeatedly against Iraq's alleged development of "weapons of mass destruction," but said nothing about the well-known nuclear weapons arsenal possessed by Israel, whose illegal and oppressive occupation of Palestine he supported in strict accord with U.S. foreign policy over prior decades. He violated his proclaimed "free trade" principles by maintaining a destructive trade embargo on Cuba and imposing restrictive, deadly economic sanctions on Iraq, even while he assisted the dictatorial Chinese state's entrance into the world

³⁹ Street, *Barack Obama*, 5-7.

trading and investment system, with negative consequences for American workers and economic security.

Also consistent with long-standing imperial practice, Clinton betrayed his 1992 campaign promises to deliver a significant post-Cold War "peace dividend" (the significant transfer of public resources from military to socially useful purposes) by "continu[ing] to spend at least \$250 billion a year to maintain the military machine." He "accept[ed] the Republican claim that the nation must be ready to fight 'two regional wars' simultaneously, despite the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1989," wrote Zinn. "At the time," Zinn noted, "[George H. W.] Bush's Secretary of Defense, Dick Cheney, had said, 'The threats have become so remote, so remote that they are difficult to discern.'" General Colin Powell spoke similarly . . . "I'm running out of demons. . . . I'm down to Castro and Kim Il Sung."⁴⁰

U.S. business [in the 1970s and 80s] used the revitalized Republican Party as its primary vehicle. But big business also found organized support among the Democrats. One month after Carter lost to Reagan [in 1980], the Democratic National Committee appointed Los Angeles corporate lawyer Charles Manatt to regroup the party. . . . He established the Democratic Business Council (DBC), an advisory group of leading CEOs, to develop a pro-business alternative to "Reaganism." These pro-business forces aimed to align the Democrats' official positions more closely with business's political agenda. "[Manatt's] program was perfectly straightforward. Like most other business Democrats, Manatt wanted to strengthen the party's ties with the business community, rather than those with Blacks, community organizations, or the poor. To that end, he and his allies deliberately sought out millionaires and other wealthy figures to run as candidates."

In 1985, Manatt's successor, DNC chair Paul Kirk, saluted the DBC, calling it the "backbone of the Democratic Party's finances and its intellectual resources." But for some politicians and business Democrats, the DNC wasn't moving the party to the right fast enough. These politicians--including then-Arkansas governor Bill Clinton [and] then-Senator Al Gore . . . launched the Democratic Leadership Council (DLC) to promote more conservative Democratic candidates and policies. Major corporations like RJ Reynolds Tobacco, Atlantic Richfield (oil), Georgia Pacific (wood and building products), Martin Marietta (military), and Prudential Bache (financial and insurance) bankrolled the DLC and its conservative policies, now dubbed "centrist."⁴¹

[M]edia critic Norman Solomon was more correct than he knew when he wrote in 1994 that "If Bill Clinton did not exist it would have been necessary to invent someone like him. In a manner of speaking, he was invented: by his longtime backers in the Democratic Leadership Council. . . . They boosted Clinton in tandem with the news media that pronounced him the front-runner before a single vote was cast in the 1992 primaries." Like many Democrats before him, Clinton made rhetorical nods to demands for "change" and reform. But he had no intention of carrying out any reforms that would alter the distribution of political power established by the corporate class since the mid-1970s. . . .

As noted [previously], the two-party system holds a built-in advantage for big business. If one corporate party can't be sold to voters (as the Republicans clearly couldn't in 1992), there's always the other corporate party waiting in the wings. After twelve years of Republican rule,

⁴⁰ Street, *Barack Obama*, 131.

⁴¹ Selfa, 70.

many liberals and Democratic interest groups were willing to accept anything from a new Democratic president. Into Bush's vacuum . . . stepped Clinton, the most business-friendly Democratic president since Grover Cleveland.

Clinton won the 1992 election, calling for change from Reagan-Bush's "twelve years of trickle-down economics." Yet in his first couple of years as president, he pushed harder for passage of the corporate-backed North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) than he did for any of the campaign promises that helped him win the election. The health care system overhaul that was supposed to be his signature achievement collapsed in 1994. Public disappointment ran so high that the 1994 election delivered control over Congress--a Democratic bastion for the previous sixty years--into the hands of conservative Republicans.

Within a year, Clinton figured out a modus operandi to deal with the Republican Congress and to recapture public support in the polls. Clinton adopted most of the GOP program, including its retrograde "welfare reform." At the same time, he staged high-profile battles with the Republicans to show that they were "going too far." This strategy, known as "triangulation," revived Clinton's presidency. In 1996 Clinton signed the Republican-sponsored Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Act, dismantling the hallmark welfare legislation enshrined in the New Deal. Bill Clinton won a second term in 1996--the first Democratic president to be reelected since Franklin Roosevelt in 1936.

But after regaining the initiative, Clinton immediately embraced "bipartisanship," signing off on a 1997 budget agreement slashing billions from important programs like Medicare and Medicaid. . . .

Clintonism may have appeared as nothing more than a series of poll-driven maneuvers intended to keep Clinton one step ahead of his political foes. But from the start the Clinton-Gore administration pursued a well thought-out and deeply conservative political project. This "New Democrat" agenda emerged in the 1980s as the program of a faction of conservative Democrats determined to break the Democratic Party's identification with organized labor, civil rights, and other traditionally liberal causes. Embodied in the corporate-funded DLC, this faction succeeded in capturing the party machinery in 1992. It placed two of its chief leaders--Clinton and Gore--at the top of the Democratic ticket.⁴²

Conservative David Frum, writing in the *Weekly Standard*, captured the essence of Clintonism better than many liberals could:

Since 1994, Clinton has offered the Democratic Party a devilish bargain: Accept and defend policies you hate (welfare reform, the Defense of Marriage Act), condone and excuse crimes (perjury, campaign finance abuses) and I'll deliver you the executive branch of government. . . . He has assuaged the Left by continually proposing bold new programs--the expansion of Medicare to 55-year-olds, a national day-care program, the reversal of welfare reform . . . And he has placated the Right by dropping every one of these programs as soon as he proposed it. Clinton makes speeches, Rubin and Greenspan make policy, the Left gets words, the Right gets deeds. . . .

Clinton's 1993 budget plan enshrined "deficit reduction" as the administration's chief domestic aim. . . . Abandoning his campaign proposals for "investments" in education and job training, Clinton's "deficit reduction plan" won support on Wall Street. . . .

⁴² Selfa, 72-3.

The other major piece of economic legislation passed in 1993--ratification of NAFTA in October--added another fundamental plank to the Clinton-Gore economic program. Clinton and Gore went all out to win NAFTA, shunting aside protests from labor and environmentalists. If the 1993 budget plan enshrined "deficit reduction" as a domestic economic strategy, NAFTA established "free trade" as the holy writ of the Clinton-Gore foreign economic strategy. No modern administration was as aggressive in pushing deals for American business around the globe, as demonstrated by subsequent free-trade initiatives such as the 1994 ratification of the World Trade Organization (WTO) and the 2000 approval of "permanent normal trade relations" with China.

The administration's pro-business policies went much further than simple "deficit reduction." . . . [T]he administration . . . actively encouraged deregulation and monopolization in the military (by encouraging outsourcing and defense industry consolidation through successive Pentagon budgets), telecommunications (the Telecommunication Act of 1996), and finance (Financial Services Modernization Act of 1999). . . .

And despite the pro-environment rhetoric emanating regularly from the Clinton White House, big business had little to fear in the area of environmental regulation. "We just don't have unlimited resources to enforce all these measures and that can create a backlash [from corporations]," said Environmental Protection Agency administrator Carol Browner. "So we need to be realistic." For the Clinton-Gore administration, "being realistic" required sacrificing environmental protection at the first hint of any corporate objection. After fierce industry lobbying, the administration preserved sweetheart deals allowing the mining industry to pillage federal lands and the timber industry to clear-cut old-growth forests. . . . The Clinton administration signed the 1997 Kyoto Agreement, a worldwide treaty aimed to limit global warming. But it never attempted to win treaty ratification in the U.S. Senate.

By the time the GOP swept Congress in the 1994 elections, Clinton had already adopted "Republican-lite" economic policies. In the early 1990s, with the economy pulling out of recession, Clinton argued for "shared sacrifice" and budget austerity to "get our economic house in order." . . . Clinton's conversion to the balanced-budget religion ruled out any major government initiative to expand access to education, health care, or Social Security during his tenure.

Even with the budget running at a surplus, Clinton and Gore continued to tout the need for austerity. Gore ruled out deficit spending to stimulate the economy even in the face of a future recession. Instead, Gore said, a recession "should be viewed as an opportunity to [downsize government further] before any other options are considered." Nobel-prize winning economist Robert Solow responded that Gore "should wash his mouth out with soap" for echoing Republican President Herbert Hoover's approach to the Great Depression. From Wall Street's point of view, Clinton's eight years in office were viewed as a smashing success. . . . Between 1992 and 1997, corporate profits grew by an average of 15 percent annually. . . .

Yet all that glittered in the "miracle economy" wasn't gold. Of the 22.5 million jobs the administration took credit for creating between 1993 and 2001, roughly half paid less than \$7 an hour. . . . Americans worked six weeks longer per year than they did in the 1970s. Even with the tax increases in Clinton's 1993 budget plan, the wealthy paid a substantially lower percentage of their income in taxes than they did in 1977.

Meanwhile, 31 million Americans remained poor according to the government's own statistics. This growing gap between rich and poor was no accident. It followed directly from the Clinton-Gore economic program. Whenever Clinton faced a choice between economic

policies favoring Wall Street or those that might help Main Street, "in almost every instance, [Clinton] took the route favored by Wall Street, business executives and conventional economists, not the ones that ordinary people might have favored."⁴³

Clinton arrived in office promising to enact a system of universal health care. But seeking a "New Democrat" solution that preserved the central role of the biggest insurance companies in managing the health care system, he handcuffed himself from the start. . . . With every attack on health care reform Clinton retreated. In the end, health care reform wasn't so much defeated as it was compromised away, piece by piece, until there was nothing left. . . .

[W]hen the administration completed the 1997 Balanced Budget Agreement (BBA) with the congressional Republican leadership, it endorsed the GOP's long-term goal of gutting spending on "entitlements" like Medicare and Medicaid. . . . These austerity measures accounted for the first-ever annual decline in Medicare spending in 1999. Between 1997 and 1998, the number of sick and elderly receiving Medicare-financed home health care services fell an astounding 45 percent, with six hundred thousand fewer people receiving care. Under the BBA, Clinton literally abandoned millions of poor, sick, elderly, and disabled Americans.⁴⁴

While Clinton and Gore presided over a retreat of government responsibility to meet human needs, the administration continuously expanded the government's policing of every aspect of life [through the 1994 Crime Control Act]. . . . This \$33 billion monstrosity expanded the use of the federal death penalty to sixty crimes, appropriated \$10 billion for a vast expansion of prison building, and offered money to localities to hire one hundred thousand additional police officers. . . . On Clinton's watch, the U.S. prison population grew from about 1.3 million to nearly 2 million and the number of executions jumped to ninety-eight in 1999, its highest level in four decades.

With Clinton's full support, a spate of bills supposedly directed at fighting terrorism took away ordinary people's civil rights, years before George W. Bush took office. The 1996 "antiterrorism" legislation allowed the U.S. government to prosecute Americans for raising money for any organization the government labeled as "terrorist"--setting the stage for the USA PATRIOT Act, passed shortly after the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks. During the Clinton era, hundreds of legal immigrants who had lived in the United States since childhood were arrested and deported because immigration officials found that they had been convicted of petty crimes, often decades earlier. These immigrants were arrested, charged, and convicted on the grounds of secret testimony that the defendants' lawyers could not challenge, presaging the barbaric treatment of thousands of Arabs and Muslims rounded up as "suspected terrorists" after 9/11.⁴⁵

In 1993 the Clinton administration inherited a favorable [international] position for the United States. . . . Two years after the disappearance of its chief military rival, the Soviet Union, the United States stood unchallenged as the world's lone superpower. . . . The time was ripe for a "peace dividend," a major cut in military spending that would free up resources for spending on health care, education, and other social needs that had taken a backseat during the Cold War. Instead Clinton took the opposite course. Clinton's plan for the post-Cold War military adopted

⁴³ Selfa, 74-7.

⁴⁴ Selfa, 78-9.

⁴⁵ Selfa, 81.

most of the outgoing Bush administration's assumptions. It preserved a Cold War-sized military after the Cold War was over. . . . In 1998 Clinton announced a six-year boost to the military budget of \$112 billion, including a go-ahead to the Pentagon's biggest boondoggle, a "national missile defense" system. Ironically, the \$112 billion figure corresponded almost exactly to a 1996 General Accounting Office estimate of the cost to make decrepit U.S. public school buildings functional for the nation's schoolchildren. . . .

Reagan-era Pentagon official Lawrence Korb . . . noted that military budgets under Clinton and Gore were larger than President H. W. Bush had planned, had he won the 1992 election. The budget for training, readiness, and maintenance was actually 40 percent higher per person in uniform than it was under Bush. . . .

Clinton and Gore dispatched troops around the world far more frequently than any other modern administration. . . . Clinton, the one-time anti-Vietnam War protester, continued Bush's 1992 invasion of Somalia, invaded Haiti in 1994, bombed Serbia in 1995 and 1999, Sudan and Afghanistan in 1997, and Iraq almost continuously throughout his administration. To force North Korea into negotiations, Clinton threatened a 1994 war that could have provoked a nuclear conflict. In 1995 the United States aided its Croatian ally in the ethnic cleansing of more than 170,000 Serbs. And it remained the main enforcer of genocidal sanctions on Iraq that killed more than a million Iraqis throughout the 1990s . . . In another case where the administration aided the violation of the human rights of millions, the administration won congressional approval for \$1.3 billion in aid to the Colombian military in 2000.

The administration's support for sanctions in Iraq and for the death squads in Colombia belied all talk about establishing a foreign policy based on human rights. But this had been clear from the start. After denouncing the Bush administration for ordering the forcible repatriation of Haitians fleeing persecution from their country, Clinton did an about-face. Bush's policy became Clinton's policy. Blasting Bush for "coddling dictators" in China, in 1994 Clinton removed any human rights considerations from U.S.-China trade. Clinton supported the Suharto dictatorship in Indonesia to the bitter end in 1998. And his administration in 1997 lifted the ban on weapons sales to Latin American governments, including present and future military regimes. Given this record, it should come as no surprise that Clinton's "humanitarian" war against Yugoslavia in 1999 produced a catastrophe for ordinary Serbians and Kosovar Albanians alike. . . .

Clinton--and especially his administration's interventions in the Balkans--played a key role in helping to rehabilitate American imperialism *ideologically*. Down the line, the people who led the war over Kosovo represented the liberal or social democratic parties of their countries. The traditional right-wing "warmongers" like Bush, Reagan, Thatcher, and Kohl were in retirement--with Clinton, Britain's Tony Blair, Germany's Gerhard Schroeder, and France's Lionel Jospin filling their shoes. For them, leading NATO's war represented a collective final step from the left side of the political spectrum to the "center" of capitalist politics. They had built their careers on playing to the aspirations of ordinary people while working hard to convince big business that they would be respectable custodians of the status quo. Blair and Clinton showed their willingness to cut social welfare programs. The Kosovo war gave them the opportunity to show the military establishment that they could win a major war and, at the same time, to sell it as a humanitarian gesture. . . .

[In terms of far-reaching military aggression] George W. Bush . . . ran at full speed down a trail that Clinton had blazed for him.⁴⁶

⁴⁶ Selfa, 145-8.

To truly understand [the Democrats' acquiescence to Bush's militarist] foreign policy after September 11, it was essential to pay attention to the players' records more than their election campaign rhetoric. From this point of view, a different understanding of the differences between Democrats and Republicans emerged. The Bush Doctrine indeed represented a departure in U.S. foreign policy. But it didn't represent the sharp and radical break with the past that liberal Democrats imagined. If anything, the more aggressive U.S. imperial policy under Bush represented an amplification of trends in U.S. policy that the Clinton administration had set in motion.

Many Democratic supporters willingly forgot this because the Clinton-Gore administration labeled its militarist policies as "humanitarian" efforts, while the post-9/11 Bush administration made no such claim. Contrasting the fear and loathing Bush inspired in Europe with the "mourning for Clinton" in European public opinion, Perry Anderson commented in 2002,

Where the rhetoric of the Clinton regime spoke of the cause of international justice and the construction of a democratic peace, the Bush administration has hoisted the banner of the war on terrorism. These are not incompatible motifs, but the order of emphasis assigned to each has altered. The result is a sharp contrast in atmospherics. The war on terrorism orchestrated by Cheney and Rumsfeld is a far more strident, if also brittle, rallying cry than the cloying pieties of the Clinton-Albright years. The immediate political yield of each has also differed. The new and sharper line from Washington has gone down badly in Europe, where human-rights discourse was and is especially prized. Here the earlier line was clearly superior as a hegemonic idiom.

As Anderson noted, the Clinton administration was diplomatically adept at cloaking its agenda of American domination in idealistic claptrap about the "international community." But it also spoke incessantly of the United States as the world's "indispensable nation." Its rhetoric may not have been as "unilateralist" as Bush's, but its actions [including sidestepping the United Nations in the Balkans] set many of the precedents that Bush ended up flaunting. . . .

Although George W. Bush would never credit his predecessor, his administration took full advantage of policies Clinton had enacted years earlier. Rumsfeld would not have been in the position to play "New Europe" against "Old Europe" had Clinton not pushed through NATO expansion in 1996 or pursued an aggressive policy in the Balkans. . . .

The Clinton administration also pursued policies that presaged the world-dominating strategy of the Bush Doctrine. The watchword of the 1997 *Quadrennial Defense Review (QDR)*, the main statement of an administration's military policies, was "shaping the international security environment in ways that promote and protect U.S. national interests." In other words, using the military in "forward-leaning" ways to alter the political and economic configuration of the world to conform to U.S. interests. The *QDR* asserted that "preventing the emergence of a hostile regional coalition or hegemon" was a chief U.S. national security goal. And the Clinton administration did not shrink from even more expansive definitions of U.S. goals. The Pentagon under Clinton sponsored Joint Vision 2020, a task force promoting the idea that the United States should strive for "full-spectrum dominance" of all possible theaters of war, from the oceans to space. Clinton authorized the key weapon in this plan for global domination, the national missile defense system, a long-time goal of neoconservatives. . . .

[Regarding] the continuity of Clinton and Bush policies . . . [Andrew Bacevich] explains:

Throughout the Clinton era, U.S. military forces marched hither and yon, intervening in a wider variety of places, for a wider variety of purposes than at any time in our history. More often than not, once the troops arrived, they stayed. As a result, by the time Clinton left office in 2001, the defining fact of international politics--albeit one vigorously denied by the outgoing administration--had become not openness and not globalization but the emergence of Pax Americana. . . . The Bush administration's grand [national security] strategy reeks of hubris. . . . In the end [however], we have little real choice--as the similarities between this new strategy and the Clinton strategy . . . attest. In truth, whatever their party affiliation or [purported] ideological disposition, members of the so-called foreign policy elite cannot conceive of an alternative to "global leadership"--the preferred euphemism for global empire.⁴⁷

As JoAnn Wypijewsky succinctly puts it, "By a brisk accounting of 1993 to 2000 [i.e. Clinton's tenure], the black stripe of [Jesse Jackson's Rainbow Coalition] got the Crime Bill, women got 'welfare reform,' labor got NAFTA, gays and lesbians got the Defense of Marriage Act. Even with a Democratic Congress in the early years, the peace crowd got no cuts in the military; unions got no help on the right to organize. . . . the single-payer crowd got worse than nothing. Between Clinton's inaugural and the day he left office, 700,000 more persons were incarcerated, mostly minorities; today one in eight black men is barred from voting because of prison, probation or parole."

It was just before his re-election campaign, in 1996, that Bill Clinton took for his own the Republican proposal for "welfare reform," even worse than his original proposal for "reform" in 1992. . . . Liberals were aghast but did nothing. There was no insurgency, no rocking of the boat, no "divisive" challenge on that or anything else. The Democratic Party, from DLC governors to liberal public-interest groups[,] mustered around their leader and marched into the late Nineties arm in arm along the path sign-posted toward the greatest orgy of corporate theft in the history of the planet, deregulation of banking and food safety, rates of logging six times those achieved in the subsequent Bush years, a war on Yugoslavia, a vast expansion of the death penalty, re-affirmation of racist drug laws, the foundations of the Patriot Act.

Through the Clinton years the Democratic Party remained "united" in fealty to corporate corruption and right-wing class viciousness.⁴⁸

In the Clinton years, union membership as a percentage of the work force dropped, as well it might, because he did nothing to try to change laws or to intervene in disputes.

Clinton presided over passage of NAFTA, insulting labor further with the farce of side agreements on labor rights that would never be enforced. End result: half the companies involved in organizing drives in the US intimidate workers by saying that a union vote will force the company to leave town; 30 percent of them fire the union activists (about 20,000 workers a year); only one in seven organizing drives has a chance of going to a vote, and of those that do result in a yes vote for the union, less than one in five has any success in getting a contract.

So while many saw the rapid decline in union membership as just a melancholy index of the passing of the old economy, making way for a cornucopia of New Economy jobs that would be high-paying affairs with plenty of stock options for workers, the reality is otherwise. Most

⁴⁷ Selfa, 149-51.

⁴⁸ Alexander Cockburn, in Cockburn and St. Clair, 8.

New Economy jobs are in fact low-tech, low-skill, low-paying jobs with no future. . . . The Democrats have produced no laws, indeed have campaigned against laws[,] that would make [high unionization] attainable. . . .

One useful way of estimating how little separates the Democratic and Republican parties, and particularly their presidential nominees, is to tot up the issues on which there is tacit agreement either as a matter of principle or with an expedient nod-and-wink that these are not matters suitable to be discussed in any public forum, beyond *pro forma* sloganeering: the role of the Federal Reserve, trade policy, economic redistribution, the role and budget of the CIA and other intelligence agencies, nuclear disarmament, allocation of military procurement, reduction of the military budget, the roles and policies of the World Bank, International Monetary Fund and kindred multilateral agencies, crime, punishment and the prison explosion, the war on drugs, corporate welfare, energy policy, forest policy, the destruction of small farmers and ranchers, Israel, the corruption of the political system.⁴⁹

By the end of April 1993, Clinton had sold out the Haitian refugees; handed Africa policy to a Bush appointee, Herman Cohen, thus giving Jonas Savimbi the green light in Angola to butcher thousands; put Israel's lobbyists in charge of Mideast policy; bolstered the arms industry with a budget . . . higher in constant dollars than average spending in the Cold War . . . increased secret intelligence spending; maintained full DEA [Drug Enforcement Agency] funding; put Wall Street in charge of national economic strategy; sold out on grazing and mineral rights on public lands; pushed NAFTA forward; plunged into the "managed care" disaster offered by him and Hillary Rodham Clinton as "health reform."

By the end of May 1993, as any kind of progressive challenge to business-as-usual, the Clinton presidency had failed, even by the measure of its own timid promises. The recruitment of the old Nixon/Reagan/Bush hand David Gergen as the president's new public relations man signaled the surrender.⁵⁰

"The general requirement of product differentiation in an electoral market," the economist Robert Pollin writes . . . "entails that at the margin any Democratic president will offer more social concessions than a Republican of the same cohort. But we should be careful not to make too much of such differences in the public stance of these two figures, as against the outcomes that prevail during their terms of office." . . .

Through the Clinton era, as through those of Reagan and both Bushes, the bargaining power of capital to cow workers, to make them toil harder for less real money, has increased inexorably.

When the bubble tide ebbed at the end of eight years of the Democrat Clinton, what did workers have by way of a permanent legacy? Clinton, Pollin bleakly concludes, "accomplished almost nothing in the way of labor laws or the broader policy environment to improve the bargaining situation for workers. . . . Moreover, conditions under Clinton worsened among those officially counted as poor."

In the overall economy the reserve army of the unemployed is swelling, just as reservists are increasingly manning US forces, as against the permanently employed forces of former times. . . .

⁴⁹ Alexander Cockburn, in Cockburn and St. Clair, 10.

⁵⁰ Alexander Cockburn, in Cockburn and St. Clair, 12.

The Clinton years did nothing to alter the rules of the neoliberal game that began in the Reagan/Thatcher era with the push to boost after-tax corporate profits, shift bargaining power to business, erode social protections for workers, make the rich richer, the middle tier at best stand still and the poor get poorer. . . .

Pollin is unambiguous: "It was under Clinton that the distribution of wealth in the US became more skewed than it had at any time in the previous forty years. Inside the US under Clinton the ratio of wages for the average worker to the pay of the average CEO rose from 113 to 1 in 1991 to 449 to 1. Considering the difference between the richest and poorest 10 percent . . . inequality grew by 19 percent; by 77 percent, if you take the richest and poorest one percent."

The basic picture? "Under the full eight years of Clinton's presidency, even with the bubble ratcheting up both business investment and consumption by the rich, average real wages remained at a level 10 percent below that of the Nixon-Ford peak period, even though productivity in the economy was 50 percent higher." . . . We had a bubble boom, pushed along by consumer spending by the rich. . . .

Pollin shows that [most] of Clinton's fiscal turnaround [from deficit to surplus] can be accounted for by slashes in government spending. . . . Pollin then asks the question. Suppose there really had been a peace dividend after the cold war was won? We could have had a few less weapons systems, 100,000 new teachers, 560,000 more scholarships, 1,400 new high schools and still had a budget surplus of \$220 billion.

Wall Street applauded the surpluses and the ordinary folk paid the costs of all those slashes in the budget: fewer teachers, a dirtier environment, [etc.].⁵¹

The high-water mark in the Clinton administration's attack on the Bill of Rights came in 1996 with the Counter-Terrorism and Effective Death Penalty Act, which among other horrors allowed the INS to deport immigrants without due process, and denied prisoners the right to [habeas corpus] appeal[s]. . . . "When historians write the story of civil liberties in the twentieth century," said Ira Glasser, head of the ACLU, "they will say that the Clinton administration adopted an agenda that has everything to do with weakening civil rights and nothing to do with combating terrorism."⁵²

The rise of the Jackboot State has marched in lockstep with the insane and ineffective War on Drugs. This has been an entirely bipartisan affair. Its consequences are etched into the fabric of our lives. Just think of drug testing, now a virtually mandatory condition of employment, even though it's an outrageous violation of personal sovereignty, as well as being thoroughly unreliable. In an era in which America has been led by three self-confessed pot smokers--Clinton, Gore and Bush--the number of people held for drug crimes in federal prisons has increased by 64 percent.

No-knock raids are becoming more common as federal, state and local politicians and law enforcement agencies decide that the war on drugs justif[ies] dumping the Fourth Amendment. Even in states where search warrants require a knock on the door before entry, police routinely flout the requirement.⁵³

⁵¹ Alexander Cockburn, in Cockburn and St. Clair, 23-25.

⁵² Alexander Cockburn and Jeffrey St. Clair, in Cockburn and St. Clair, 57.

⁵³ Alexander Cockburn and Jeffrey St. Clair, in Cockburn and St. Clair, 59.

No other president in United States history has managed to get so much black support for giving so little. But what makes Clinton's race act so successful is that black America never asked him to do much to begin with. In the 1980s, Clinton was the first white candidate for governor to reach out to Arkansas's black voters, to eat on their porches, pray in their churches, invite them into the governor's office. For 12 years before Clinton, Ronald Reagan and George Bush insulted and ignored black people. Consequently, when Clinton wooed African Americans, most were just happy someone was finally paying attention. . . .

[Some] point to the record number of African Americans in the Clinton cabinet and the picture of racial diversity it projected. . . . A black man, Vernon Jordan, was his best friend. A black woman, Betty Currie, was his personal secretary. It's debatable whether the blacks around Clinton had any real power, but real or not, his mostly symbolic gestures were much more than black people had ever seen from a white person in power. And those gestures carried Clinton a long way.

The joke that refuses to go away has Clinton as America's first black president--a sentiment enthusiastically affirmed by black celebrities, elites and quasi-intellectuals. . . .

The notion of Clinton as a great friend of the black community or defender of civil rights is . . . crazy. . . . [H]is policies and attitude on due process, equal protection and equal treatment, or civil rights (rights guaranteed to all), were horrible. A couple of examples of his racial hypocrisy come to mind. One was his initiative requiring citizens, mostly black, in public housing to surrender their Fourth Amendment or privacy rights. Another was the "one strike and you're out" policy under which public housing residents convicted of a crime, along with anyone else who lives with them, are evicted without consideration of their due process rights. . . .

[Given his opportunistic early career with regard to racial politics], the fact that Clinton left behind a larger--mostly black--prison population than when he took office should come as no surprise. Black incarceration rates during the Clinton years surpassed Ronald Reagan's eight years. The incarceration rates for blacks increased from around 3,000 per 100,000 to 3,620 per 100,000 people during his administration. That he did nothing about mandatory minimum sentences was no surprise. That he did nothing to change the sentencing disparity between crack and powder cocaine that disproportionately affects African Americans was no surprise. That he successfully stumped for "three strikes and you're out" in the crime bill, for restrictions on the right of habeas corpus and expansion of the federal death penalty was no surprise. When he came into office one in four black men were in the toils of the criminal justice system in some way; when he left it was one in three. . . .

Shortly after leaving office, Clinton published a piece, "Erasing America's Color Lines," in the *New York Times*. . . . He outlined a path that would allow the Bush administration to reduce systemic racism. The list included a ban on racial profiling, an examination of mandatory minimum sentencing and a presidential commission on voter reform.

But Clinton's suggestions were another bit of hypocrisy given that he refused to implement them while he had the chance. And his knowledge that George Bush would never take any of his suggestions made the whole exercise just another piece of grotesque symbolism, typical of his relationship with the black community. The commentary was a perfect postscript to Clinton's marriage with black America, a relationship that is characterized by the James Brown song, "Talking Loud and Saying Nothing."⁵⁴

⁵⁴ Kevin Alexander Gray, in Cockburn and St. Clair, 96-100.

Barack Obama

[A]n Obama White House . . . could reasonably be expected to walk in the conservative, capitalist, market/corporate-friendly, nationalistic, and imperialistic footsteps [described by political analysts of previous administrations]. . . . It could also be expected . . . ironically enough, to offer little substantive challenge to the stark racial disparities that continue to undermine America's claim to embody the ideals of democracy and equality.

The "Obama phenomenon" . . . is richly continuous with previous centrist Democratic presidencies and presidential campaigns as well as with the broader neoliberal drift of the Democratic Party over the past three and a half decades. Obama . . . has demonstrated neither the inclination nor the capacity to transcend the sharp restrictions imposed on Democratic presidential politicians past and present. Hardly unique to the current presidential election cycle, the relevant limiting factors include the business-dominated . . . U.S. elections system, the United States' formidable (to say the least) imperial and military commitments, the massive overconcentration of American wealth in the hands of the privileged few, and a highly commodified, trivialized, and narrow political and ideological culture that leads many conservative and centrist positions and candidates to strike many voters and commentators as "progressive," "liberal," and even "left wing."

Contrary to much progressive mythology and wishful thinking, [Obama] repeatedly demonstrat[es] eager willingness to embrace and advance dominant domestic and imperial hierarchies and doctrines. . . . [The Obama campaign, says Temple University urban studies professor Marc Lamont Hill,]

has perverted the concept of hope by wedding it to a dangerous politics of compromise, concession and cunning. Obama has clung to a rigid centrism that is incompatible with full-scale social change. In Obama's corporate-sponsored universe of meaning, hope is not the predicate for radical social change, but an empty slogan that allows for a slick repackaging of the status quo. . . . Unlike [Martin Luther] King . . . Obama does not aim to disrupt the fundamental structure of society. Rather than dismantling the triple threat of global racism, poverty, and militarism that King warned against, Obama has promoted a doctrine of compromise that is self-serving rather than strategic, milque toast rather than pragmatic."⁵⁵

As investigative journalist Ken Silverstein noted in a *Harper's* article in the fall of 2006, "If [Obama's famous keynote address to the 2004 Democratic National Convention] was his debut to the wider American public, he had already undergone an equally successful but much quieter audition with Democratic Party leaders and fund-raisers, without whose support he would surely never have been chosen for such a prominent role at the convention."

A corporate, financial, national and legal vetting of Obama, with an emphasis on the critical money-politics nexus of Washington, D.C., began in October 2003. That's "when [corporate boardmember] Vernon Jordan . . . placed calls to roughly twenty of his friends and invited them to a fund-raiser at his home," according to Silverstein. The fund-raiser "marked [Obama's] entry into a well-established Washington ritual--the gauntlet of fund-raising parties and meet-and-greets through which potential stars are vetted by fixers, donors, and lobbyists."

⁵⁵ Street, *Barack Obama*, x-xi.

Drawing on his undoubted charm, wit, intelligence, and--of no small significance at least at the level of the political elite--his Harvard credentials, Obama passed this preliminary trial of wealth and power with flying colors. At a series of social meetings and at least one conference with assorted big "players" from the financial, legal, and lobbyist sectors, Obama impressed key establishment figures like Gregory Craig (a longtime leading attorney and former special counsel to the White House), Mike Williams (the legislative director of the Bond Market Association), Tom Quinn (a partner at the leading corporate law firm Venable LLP, who was one of "the leading lobbyists in town" as well as a leading Democratic Party power broker), and Robert Harmala (another Venable partner and "also a big player in Democratic circles," according to Silverstein). . . . Williams was impressed by Obama's reassurances that he was a not "anti-business" and became "convinced . . . that the two could work together." "There's a reasonableness about him," Harmala told Silverstein. "I don't see him as being on the liberal fringe."

By Silverstein's account, "word about Obama spread through Washington's blue-chip law firms, lobby shops, and political offices," and this accelerated after his win in the March [2004] Democratic primary." Contributions from elite financial and legal circles and from lobbyists came into the Obama campaign's coffers at an accelerating pace. The good news for Washington and Wall Street insiders was that Obama's "star quality" would not be directed against concentrated wealth or against the elite segments of the business class--[he] was someone the rich and powerful felt they could work with. According to David Mendell,

Obama [made] the rounds with the Democrats' set of power brokers. . . . Obama . . . spent a couple of days and nights shaking hands, making small talk and delivering speeches to liberal groups, national union leaders, lobbyists, fund-raisers and well-heeled money donors. In setting after setting, Obama's Harvard Law [School] resume and his reasonable tone impressed the elite crowd.

"Reasonable tone" was code language with a useful translation for Obama's new elite business-class backers: friendly to capitalism and its opulent masters. Obama now cultivated the support of the privileged few by "advocat[ing] fiscal restraint," "calling for pay-as-you-go government," and "extol[ling] the merits of free trade and charter schools." By Mendell's account, he "moved beyond being an obscure good-government reformer to being a candidate more than palatable to the moneyed and political establishment."⁵⁶

The biracial and Hawaiian-born Obama's race and ethnocultural heritage and [exotic] name . . . added to his novelty dividend. These critical "identity" factors helped voters see him as "brand new," making it easier for him to advance some very traditional and conservative agendas and beliefs . . . under the guise of originality and progressivism. And this has enhanced his attractiveness to U.S. economic, political, and policy elites and power brokers, who have certainly sensed a need for the United States to seem to be dramatically changing the face of power in the wake of the profound damage that George W. Bush's shockingly regressive, oppressive, and inept presidency has done to American authority at home and abroad.⁵⁷

⁵⁶ Street, *Barack Obama*, xxii-xxiv.

⁵⁷ Street, *Barack Obama*, xxvi.

For the masters of the "hidden primary," Obama's outwardly pluralist and universal appeal has been a useful illusion. Also functional for these mostly unseen elites has been the tendency of the media [and all the major campaigns] to elevate the personal image and celebrity of the candidate over difficult and detailed matters of policy, power, and worldview. This has all provided welcome cover for the veiled allegiance to dominant hierarchies and doctrines of class, race, and empire that Obama and the other candidates exhibited.⁵⁸

Obama . . . follows in the corporate-triangulationist "third party" footsteps of similarly pseudo-progressive politicians like Bill Clinton, who made, in the words of the noted left scholar Edward S. Herman, "populist and peace-stressing promises and gestures that [were] betrayed instantly on the assumption of power." For all his claims to be a noble reformer "above the fray" of America's imperial plutocracy and ideological politics . . . Obama . . . is no special exception to--and is in many ways an epitome of--what Christopher Hitchens called (in his 1999 study of the Bill and Hillary Clinton phenomenon) "the essence of American politics." "This essence, when distilled," Hitchens explained, "consists of the manipulation of populism by elitism." Relying heavily on the candidates' repeated promises to restore "hope" to a populace disillusioned by corporate control, corruption, and inequality--a standard claim of nonincumbent Democratic presidential candidates--this dark essence of U.S. political culture goes back further than the corporate-neoliberal era in which Obama came of political age. It is arguably as old as the Republic itself, always torn by the rift between democratic promise and the authoritarian realities of concentrated wealth and power.⁵⁹

[O]ne weekend after announcing his presidential candidacy in Springfield, Illinois, in February 2007 . . . Obama attended an event that put [his] corporate connections on display. "Amid the whirlwind . . . of campaign speeches and events," *Chicago Tribune* reporters David Jackson and John McCormick noted . . . "his entourage arrived at the Hyatt Regency Chicago, where eager fans grazed sandwich and fruit platters and offered checks and credit card payments of up to \$2,300." The Chicago mayor's brother, former Clinton Commerce Secretary William Daley, was "one of the more prominent faces in a crowd of more than 700 who contributed an estimated \$1 million."

The "crowd" came largely from "global Chicago's" heavily corporate-connected legal and financial elite. It stood in interesting contrast to the senator's Springfield claim that he was running to take America back from "the special interests who've turned our government into a game only they can afford to [play]." In his candidacy announcement, Obama said, "They write the checks and you get stuck with the bills; they get the access while you get to write a letter; they think they own the government, but we're here to take it back. The time for that politics is over. It's time to turn the page."

Would an Obama presidency really "turn the page" away from big-money influence and melt the icy stranglehold that concentrated wealth has long had on U.S. politics and policy? . . . I suggest . . . that an Obama White House could be expected to tilt toward elite economic interests--its leading inhabitant's onetime populist rhetoric [notwithstanding].⁶⁰

⁵⁸ Street, *Barack Obama*, xxxii.

⁵⁹ Street, *Barack Obama*, xxxiii.

⁶⁰ Street, *Barack Obama*, 3.

How different, if at all, is "the Obama brand" from other recent candidacies? What could and should voters and citizens expect from an Obama White House when it comes to the interrelated questions of corporate power and economic justice? . . . I believe his administration would follow the trend of the past half-century of Democratic presidencies. The record . . . is less than inspiring from a progressive perspective. . . .

"Now" is "the time," Obama told 10,000 listeners in Iowa City in April 2007 . . . for Americans "to turn the page" on "old" and "cynical" money- and power-dominated "politics." "The people in this stadium," Obama told a Chicago Soldier Field crowd of union members in the summer of 2007, "need to know who we're going to fight for. The reason that I'm running for president is because of you, not because of folks who are writing big checks." . . . And in Greenville, South Carolina, he said, "Washington lobbyists haven't funded my campaign, they won't run my White House, and they will not drown out the voices of working Americans when I am president."

In e-mail messages sent in the summer of 2007, Obama told supporters that "candidates typically spend a week like this--right before the critical June 30 financial reporting deadline--on the phone, day and night, begging Washington lobbyists and special interest PACs to write huge checks. Not me. Our campaign has rejected the money-for-influence game." . . .

By the time he was employing populist language to denounce big-money influence, however, Obama had become a millionaire. . . . More importantly, he had raked in impressive campaign largesse from some very rich and powerful interests. His roster of top contributors included Goldman Sachs; Excelon Corporation (a leading midwestern utility and the world's leading nuclear power plant operator); the leading global financial firms JP Morgan Chase, UBS AG, Lehman Brothers, Morgan Stanley, Credit Suisse, and Citadel Investment Groups; leading corporate law and lobbying firms (Kirkland & Ellis and Skadden, Arps, Sidley Austin LLP); and some top Chicago investment firms (Henry Crown and Aerial Capital Management).

The pattern would continue across the primary season. Wall Street veteran Pam Martens examined "Obama's Money Cartel" in late February 2008, after the subprime mortgage lending crisis had burst across the national and international stage, with disastrous implications for millions of American homeowners and the overall U.S. economy. Martens found the same firms--many deeply implicated in the subprime crisis--atop Obama's contributor list, which provided him with more than \$100 million well before the end of the primary season:

Seven of the Obama campaign's top 14 donors consist of officers and employees of the same Wall Street firms charged time and again with looting the public and newly implicated in originating and/or bundling fraudulently made mortgages. These latest frauds have left thousands of children in some of our largest minority communities coming home from school to see eviction notices and foreclosure signs nailed to their front doors. . . . These seven Wall Street firms are (in order of money given): Goldman Sachs, UBS AG, Lehman Brothers, JP Morgan Chase, Citigroup, Morgan Stanley and Credit Suisse. There is also a large hedge fund, Citadel Investment Group, which is a major source of fee income to Wall Street. There are five large corporate law firms that are also registered lobbyists; and one is a corporate law firm that is no longer a registered lobbyist but does legal work for Wall Street. The cumulative total of these 14 contributors through February 1, 2008, was \$2,872,128, and we're still in the primary season.

There was no small deception in Obama's recurrent claim to depend on small donations from ordinary working people. "The Obama campaign prefers the emphasis to be on the army of small donors who are giving--and raising--money for Obama," *Chicago Sun Times* columnist Lynn Sweet noted in April of 2007. "In truth, though, there are two parallel narratives--and the other is that Obama is also heavily reliant on wealthy and well-connected Democrats." Sweet found that a network of more than one hundred wealthy Democratic "bundlers"--"people who solicit their [elite] networks for donations" . . . was "raising millions of dollars for his White House bid," often with "assistance from campaign fund-raising professionals." Each of Obama's 138 official "bundlers" had promised to raise at least \$50,000--a pledge on which most if not all of them delivered. His "bundlers" included Chicago billionaire Penny Pritzker (the Hyatt heiress and his national finance chairwoman), . . . Capri Capital CEO Quintin Primo, Ariel Capital executives John Rogers and Melody Hobson, Hollywood moguls David Geffen and Jeffrey Katzenberg, Broadway producer Margo Lion, and Bill Kennard, managing director of the legendary military-industrial Carlyle Group (strongly connected to the Bush family). . . .

Obama's reliance on big money and corporate funders was hardly new to his presidential campaign. According to the *New York Times*, nearly half of the more than \$5 million Obama raised for his 2004 Senate primary came from just 300 donors. . . .

Obama's U.S. Senate campaign received a large contribution [\$112,500] from the family of James S. Crown, whose investments include a major stake in the military contractor General Dynamics.⁶¹

Obama campaign imagery pretends that his financial backers have simply been drawn in by the humble and earnest idealism of a candidate who eschews reliance on the business elite. The noble Obama did not aggressively pursue them, or so his campaign would like voters to believe. In his 2006 campaign book, *The Audacity of Hope*, Obama portrayed the pursuit of big-money supporters as a distasteful chore that caused him to spend too much time away from the concerns of ordinary voters.

This may well have been a deceptive narrative. "Even as he cultivated an image as an unconventional candidate devoted to the people, not the establishment," *New York Times* reporters Christopher Drew and Mike McIntire noted in April 2007, Obama "systematically built a sophisticated, and in many ways quite conventional, money machine" during and after his race for the U.S. Senate. . . . "He developed a skill at cultivating donors, often with the same disarming directness he uses on the campaign trail. 'I met him on the first hole,' Steven S. Rogers, a former business owner who teaches at the Kellogg School of Management at Northwestern, recalled recently about a golf game in 2001. 'By the sixth hole, he said, "Steve, I want to run for the Senate." And by the ninth hole, he said he needed to clear up some debts.'" According to Ken Silverstein's account in 2006, Obama moved rapidly and artfully into the money-politics-policy-nexus in Washington, D.C.:

It is . . . startling to see how quickly Obama's senatorship has been woven into the web of institutionalized influence-trading that afflicts official Washington. He quickly established a political machine funded and run by a standard Beltway group of lobbyists, P.R. consultants, and hangers-on. For the staff post of policy director he hired Karen Kornbluh, a senior aide to Robert Rubin when the latter, as head of the Treasury Department under Bill Clinton, was

⁶¹ Street, *Barack Obama*, 12-15.

a chief advocate for NAFTA and other free-trade policies that decimated the nation's manufacturing sector. . . .

Whatever his initial purported inhibitions about seeking sponsorship from the financial aristocracy, Obama overcame reluctance to shake the "moneyed elite's" campaign cash tree during the first quarter of 2007. As Clinton's campaign chairman, Terry McAuliffe, told *Time* magazine in May 2007, Obama "works the phone like a dog. He probably did three to four times the number of [fund-raising] events [that Hillary] did." "No matter who I call," McAuliffe reported, "he as already called three or four times."⁶²

[F]or all its talk of a million contributors giving to him in "\$25 and \$50 increments," the Obama campaign could not claim to rely primarily on small donors, though Obama often seemed to suggest that it did on the campaign trail. An important study released by the Campaign Finance Institute in early February 2008 showed that . . . Obama received just 32 percent of his campaign funding from [donors giving \$200 or less]. . . . His top contributors through April 2007 included investment bankers Goldman Sachs (\$571,330 for the year 2007), UBS AG (\$364,806), Lehman Brothers (\$318,467), and JP Morgan Chase (\$362,207); utility (and nuclear) giant Exelon (\$236,211); media giants Time Warner (\$257,527) and Google (\$309,514). . . . Obama received a total of \$15.8 million from law firms, \$7.8 million from securities and investment firms, \$5 million from the health-care sector, \$4 million from real-estate firms, \$3.3 million from corporate media, \$3.4 million from business-service firms, \$2.9 million from computer and Internet firms, and \$1.6 million from commercial banks. He received just \$95,000 from American labor unions.⁶³

Also suggestive of the likelihood that an Obama presidency would tend toward the pro-business right on economic policy was the tepid centrism of the economic stimulus plan Obama rolled out in early 2008. All the leading Democratic candidates advanced "stimulus packages" [in response to the imminent recession]. . . . Edwards took the lead with a plan that included significant assistance to unemployed workers, aid to cash-strapped state and local governments, and public investment in alternative energy. Hillary Clinton followed with a similar but larger, equally detailed proposal. Both Edwards and Clinton made provisions for expanded stimulus measures if the crisis worsened.

Obama's proposal was far less detailed and tilted to the right. It emphasized across-the-board tax cuts over aid to the hardest hit workers and families or to local and state governments and offered little in the way of alternative energy proposals. . . . Team Obama seemed more concerned with tax cuts and deficit reduction than with poverty reduction, sounding vaguely Republican in responding to the difficulties faced by working families.

It was all very consistent with the centrist, business-friendly nature of Obama's economic policy team. By early 2008, Obama's top economic advisers were DLC chief economist [Austan] Goolsbee and Harvard's David Cutler and Jeffrey Liebman. The last two were also developers of "market solutions to social welfare issues." Employed at the University of Chicago--which the veteran progressive writer David Moberg rightly called "the Vatican of the free market fundamentalists"--Goolsbee once published a *New York Times* column touting the positive benefits of subprime lending. . . .

⁶² Street, *Barack Obama*, 16-17.

⁶³ Street, *Barack Obama*, 21.

Moberg added that the top economic advisers in an Obama White House would "likely be drawn from the Democratic establishment. Wall Street representatives, such as President Clinton's former Treasury Secretary Robert Rubin, are likely to have a big voice in an Obama administration. They will focus on balanced budgets, a strong dollar, low inflation, a light hand in financial regulation and restraint on spending that might spook traders." This would mean a corporate-neoliberal agenda.

According to AFL-CIO chief economist Ron Blackwell, such an approach would be unlikely to produce sustainable recovery in accord with progressive objectives. . . .

It was all very consistent with what Obama's former University of Chicago colleague Cass Sunstein called Obama's "minimalist" approach--a preference for "modest adjustments in institutions in search of his 'visionary' goals." It was in harmony also with the pronounced absence of any sweeping proposals to confront and overcome the steep disparities of U.S. wealth and power in Obama's *Audacity of Hope* and in his campaign presentations in early 2007. As Larissa MacFarquhar noted in a May 2007 Obama portrait entitled "The Conciliator," the solutions offered in Obama's book, speeches, and town-hall meetings were "small and local rather than deep-reaching and systemic." He preferred to pick and choose in eclectic fashion from whatever ideological tradition seemed convenient.

At the same time, Obama became practically notorious in mid-2007 for addressing deep social problems with no policy at all, preferring to substitute empty political platitudes and soothing bromides of hope and togetherness for concrete policy-action proposals. "When he talks about poverty," MacFarquhar noted, "he tends not to talk about gorging plutocrats and unjust tax breaks: he says that we are our brother's keeper, that caring for the poor is one of our traditions." Such refusal to advance larger reform--for example, a single-payer health-insurance program on the Canadian model--reflected what MacFarquhar found to be Obama's "deeply conservative" take on history, society, and politics:

In his view of history, in his respect for tradition, in his skepticism that the world can be changed any way but very, very slowly, Obama is deeply conservative. . . . He distrusts abstractions, generalizations, extrapolations, projections. It's not just that he thinks revolutions are unlikely: he values continuity and stability for their own sake, sometimes even more than he values change for the good. Take health care, for example. "If you're starting from scratch," he says, "then a single-payer system . . . would probably make sense. But we've got all these legacy systems in place, and managing the transition, as well as adjusting the culture to a different system, would be difficult to pull off. So we may need a system that's not so disruptive that people feel like suddenly what they've known for most of their lives is thrown by the wayside."⁶⁴

Between February 16 and February 29, 2008, according to [Pam] Martens, the CEOs of Goldman Sachs and UBS rewarded Obama for his accommodating positions on issues that mattered to their firms by raising \$200,000 each for his campaign. A managing director at Citigroup raised the same amount during that period. . . . Martens hypothesized . . . that Wall Street was bankrolling Obama so as to produce a president who could be expected to sweep the corruption [of defrauding homeowners and investors] under the rug, avoid prosecutions, and "get on with an unprecedented taxpayer bailout of Wall Street." "Who better to sell this agenda to the

⁶⁴ Street, *Barack Obama*, 34-6. One wonders what Obama's position on Jim Crow would have been!

millions of duped mortgage-holders and foreclosed homeowners in minority communities across America," she asked, "than our first, beloved, black president of hope and change?"⁶⁵

What about the claim that Obama is a closeted "true progressive" who has been playing the conservative game of U.S. politics in order to reach the White House, but who will spring populist values on America and the world as soon as he takes the oath of office? . . .

This seems highly unlikely for at least two reasons. First, very few people in key positions in the "radically centrist" Obama campaign seem remotely predisposed to follow such a path. Second, Obama's career prior to his emergence as a national celebrity and politician does not jibe particularly well with the "stealth progressive" hypothesis. During his seven years in the Illinois Senate between 1997 and 2004, Obama developed a strong reputation for being intensely ambitious politically, for working closely with Republicans, for engaging in "pragmatic" compromise, and for staying close to corporate money--the great hidden secret to success under the rules of American "market democracy." As *Chicago Tribune* reporters Rick Pearson and Ray Long noted, Obama, as state senator, was a regular at "The Committee Meeting"--a Wednesday night poker game attended by "about a dozen lawmakers and lobbyists." The game was held inside the Springfield, Illinois, headquarters of the Illinois Manufacturers Association, the state's leading business lobby. Obama also "studiously took up golf," the well-known game of choice for businessmen and lobbyists, reporting to his friend and former foundation executive Jean Rudd that "an awful lot happens on the golf course."

In Obama's eight years in the Illinois Senate, *Boston Globe* reporter Scott Helman found that . . . [he] "tapped financial services, real estate developers, health-care providers, and many other corporate interests [for money]." . . . His 2004 Senate campaign received \$128,000 from registered lobbyists and \$1.3 million from PACs, according to the Center for Responsive Politics.

These elite funding sources appear to have impacted his policy actions in the Illinois General Assembly. . . . Obama . . . played a key role in watering down an important state healthcare bill in accord with the interests of the kinds of lobbyists and special interests he tended to demonize during the presidential campaign. According to Helman, "lobbyists praised Obama for taking the insurance industry's concerns into consideration" in the process of moving the legislation from implementing universal health care to mandating little more than the establishment of a commission "charged only with studying how to expand healthcare access." Along the way, Obama fought "to give insurers a voice in how the task force developed its plan."

It was all very consistent with [Obama's lifelong] special penchant for career-advancing accommodation and pragmatic compromise with the "powers that be."⁶⁶

Those who cling to the notion of Obama as a [clandestine] "true progressive" . . . might want to consider an interesting description of the young phenomenon penned by the veteran black political scientist Adolph Reed, Jr., just as Obama's political career was beginning. By Reed's account, Obama came to the political game with an already advanced and highly cultivated bourgeois taste for incremental change, compromise, and accommodation with power. . . . [H]is finely honed centrism was a habit of thought that flowed naturally from his elite socialization in a corporate-neoliberal, post-Civil Rights era at privileged private institutions. It was Columbia, Harvard, and the metropolitan foundations on whose boards he sat and in whose circles he

⁶⁵ Street, *Barack Obama*, 39.

⁶⁶ Street, *Barack Obama*, 54.

moved while he worked as a Chicago lawyer (including the Woods Fund of Chicago and the Joyce Foundation) that had given shape to his position on the ideological spectrum. This is how Reed described the thirty-something Obama in early 1996, shortly after the latter won his first election to the Illinois legislature and more than eight years before the world beyond Springfield and the Chicago and Washington money-politics elite discovered the "Obama phenomenon":

In Chicago, for instance, we've gotten a foretaste of the new breed of foundation-hatched black communitarian voices: one of them, a smooth Harvard lawyer with impeccable credentials and vacuous-to-repressive neoliberal politics, has won a state senate seat on a base mainly in the liberal foundation and development worlds. His fundamentally bootstrap line was softened by a patina of the rhetoric of authentic community, talk about meeting in kitchens, small-scale solutions to social problems, and the predictable elevation of process over program--the point where identity politics converges with old-fashioned middle class reform favoring form over substance. I suspect that his ilk is the wave of the future in U.S. black politics here, as in Haiti and wherever the International Monetary Fund has sway.

The young Harvard lawyer and state legislator's ideological character aside, the more seasoned Obama, who is currently standing one election away from the presidency, thinks and functions well within the moral, ideological, and policy parameters set by the economic elite. As Alexander Cockburn noted in March 2008, "Wall Street has nothing to fear from Clinton or from Obama, who floats on vast contributions from Wall Street." Leading U.S. Marxist analyst Doug Henwood made a similar point in early April 2008, noting that possessors of "big capital would have no problem with an Obama presidency. They like him because they're socially liberal, up to a point, and probably eager for a little less war, and think he's the man to do their work. They're also confident he wouldn't undertake any renovations to the distribution of wealth."

In late April 2008, Obama's closeness to the corporate sector received special attention from . . . journalist and author Chris Hedges. . . . Hedges turned his critical eye to the supposed liberal progressivism of Obama. He noted that Obama's campaign message was "filled with repeated reassurances to the corporate elite" and that Obama's book *The Audacity of Hope* was a "reminder, bolstered by Obama's voting record[,] that corporations would have nothing to fear from an Obama presidency." According to Hedges,

The corporate state, which is carrying out a coup d'etat in slow motion, believes it will prosper in Obama's hands. If not, he would not be a viable candidate. . . . Obama is an articulate, intelligent, and attractive politician, but he is also a corporate figurehead. A vote for Obama is a vote for the corporate state. Under an Obama administration, the corporations would continue their ruthless drive to disempower the citizens, to protect an entrenched American oligarchy, and to subvert what is left of our faltering democracy.⁶⁷

The exorbitant expense of media advertisements and media consultants and image-makers drive the ever-escalating costs of campaigns to the point where candidates cannot stay viable without raising the enormous sums that wealthy contributors can best provide. A presidential campaign cannot succeed without raising tens of millions of dollars to pay for mass candidate marketing on a giant scale.

⁶⁷ Street, *Barack Obama*, 56-7.

The Obama campaign was hardly an exception. "The 2008 Obama presidential run," noted Bruce Dixon in February 2008, "may be the most slickly orchestrated marketing machine in history." According to the campaign's financial report to the Federal Election Commission, Obama had by then spent \$52 million on "media, strategy consultants, image-building, marketing research and telemarketing." . . .

In Dixon's judgment . . . the campaign's massive investment in selling the candidate was "not a good thing." "Marketing," Dixon noted, "is not even distantly related to democracy or civil empowerment. Marketing is about creating emotional, even irrational bonds between your product and your target audience."

One "target audience" appears to have "bonded" quite strongly: top mainstream media personnel. . . . Obama received [the most, discounting the far right's preoccupation with Hillary Clinton, and] by far the most favorable coverage of any presidential candidate in the first five months of the presidential primary campaign. . . .

Obama was off the charts in terms of the positive tone of the coverage he received. . . .

[By contrast] the substantively left-progressive congressman Dennis Kucinich was the focus of exactly 1 of the 1,742 presidential campaign stories [that a Pew Center study] uncovered during the first half of 2007.⁶⁸

[P]art of the explanation for [the election's emphasis on race and sex] was that [Obama's] own campaign had not staked out substantive policy and ideological positions all that different from those of his fellow centrist Hillary Clinton, a corporate insider and business-friendly Democrat who shared much the same core philosophical, moral, policy, and ideological space and big-money funding base. Neither on domestic nor . . . foreign policy did Obama represent any particularly graphic practical or philosophical alternative to Mrs. Clinton. . . .

When the interrelated "hidden primaries" of money, wealth, media, and empire filter out serious candidates with strong issue positions beyond the narrow corporate-imperial spectrum, and the candidates who remain are largely identical on matters of policy and ideology, what else are voters supposed to base their decisions on except matters of personal character, image, and identity?⁶⁹

Underlying the sense of demoralization and defeat that many progressives experience [with regard to the Democrats, Alolph] Reed observed, is a terrible misunderstanding about leading Democratic politicians: "the belief that they just don't know what we want and how important these things are to us." "They know," Reed rightly observed, but "*they just have different priorities.*"

Obama is no special exception to this harsh reality, which does not change . . . simply because he happens to be African American. The point is often missed on what has passed for the Left in the United States in 2007 and 2008. Many avowedly liberal and progressive voters--even highly sophisticated ones--have often and chronically made precisely the false conflation between self-interested politician and movement activist [like Martin Luther King] that Reed rightly disdains. . . .

If Reed is correct . . . then [linguist and political consultant] George Lakoff's widely discussed thesis on the Democratic Party's failures is largely beside the point. . . . Lakoff held the dubious belief that Democratic politicians and officials are left-leaning actors possessing at their

⁶⁸ Street, *Barack Obama*, 60-63.

⁶⁹ Street, *Barack Obama*, 71.

core egalitarian and socially democratic values, a conviction he has advanced with special emphasis in regard to what he calls the "deeply progressive" Obama. Many, if not most, of those candidates and officials [Obama being no special exception] have likely internalized the authoritarian values of corporation capitalism, socioeconomic inequality, U.S. nationalism, and imperial globalism.

The deeper point, however, is that it might not matter what sort of internal values they may or may not hold, since they are trying to succeed within a political culture and system that tends to militate against progressive commitments. Barack Obama, the nation's leading official "progressive" hope since 2004, could make all the populist-sounding primary-campaign noise he wished in Iowa about Maytag's terrible abandonment of working families in Galesburg [Illinois]. But his concern, real or feigned, for Galesburg's deindustrialized proletarians was not a high enough priority for him to significantly push his elite political investor, Maytag director Henry Crown, to do anything to avert the Galesburg shutdown. Securing his campaign-finance ties to the Crown family took precedence over serving Galesburg workers for the simple reason that one cannot run a viable presidential campaign ("progressive" or otherwise) without the sort of election investments that wealthy and powerful interests like the Crowns provide. Such are the rules of what progressive campaign-finance activists and researchers call "the American Wealth Primary." . . .

Obama could theoretically and privately share underlying "progressive," peace-oriented values on U.S. foreign policy and foreign relations, values that may have informed his early sympathetic approach (as a state senator) to the Palestinian cause and his 2002 speech against Bush and Cheney's war plans. But how much would it matter if he did? His priority of winning the highest office in the land (and the world) under the existing political order mandates building "credibility" with the foreign policy establishment, which does not confer presidential legitimacy on those who join Obama's former pastor Rev. Wright or Dennis Kucinich in questioning the underlying benevolence of U.S. foreign policy or the American quest for global dominance. The authoritarian comments Obama made to distance himself from Wright may have offended many left activists . . . but they made perfect sense from the perspective of what Obama is trying to accomplish: climbing to the top of the U.S. power structure.

This need to compromise ideals for the sake of the next election . . . almost certainly played a role in Dr. King's decision not to pursue being a politician, presidential or otherwise. Obama isn't a social justice movement leader or crusader. He's an extraordinarily ambitious politician trying to be a twenty-first-century JFK, not a twenty-first-century MLK.⁷⁰

[N]o one should doubt that [Obama] comes fully vetted by the U.S. foreign policy establishment. According to historian Laurence Shoup, Barack Obama's foreign policy advisors include thirteen current Council on Foreign Relations members and one former member. These include two former national security advisors, an air force chief of staff, an assistant secretary of defense, an assistant secretary of state, and a National Security Council director for Europe.⁷¹

Barack Obama is a brand. And Brand Obama is designed to make us feel good about our government while corporate overlords loot the Treasury, our elected officials continue to have their palms greased by armies of corporate lobbyists, our corporate media divert us with gossip and trivia, and our imperial wars expand in the Middle East. Brand Obama is about being happy

⁷⁰ Street, *Barack Obama*, 185-8.

⁷¹ Selfa, 8.

consumers. We are entertained. We feel hopeful. We like our president. We believe he is like us. But as is the case with all branded products spun out from the manipulative world of corporate advertising, we are being duped into doing and supporting a lot of things that are not in our interest.

What, for all our faith and hope, has Brand Obama given us? His administration has spent, lent or guaranteed \$12.8 trillion in taxpayer dollars to Wall Street and insolvent banks in a doomed effort to reinflate the bubble economy, a tactic that at best forestalls catastrophe and will leave us broke in a time of profound crisis. Brand Obama has allocated nearly \$1 trillion to defense-related spending and the continuation of our doomed imperial projects in Iraq, where military planners now estimate that seventy thousand troops will remain for the next fifteen to twenty years. Brand Obama has expanded the war in Afghanistan, including the use of drones sent on cross-border bombing runs into Pakistan that have doubled the number of civilians killed over the past three months. Brand Obama has refused to ease restrictions so workers can organize and will not consider single-payer, not-for-profit health care for all Americans. And Brand Obama will not prosecute the Bush administration for war crimes, including the use of torture, and has refused to dismantle Bush's secrecy laws or restore habeas corpus.

Brand Obama offers us an image that appears radically . . . new. It inoculates us from seeing that the old engines of corporate power and the vast military-industrial complex continue to plunder the country. . . . Brand Obama does not threaten the core of the corporate state any more than did Brand George W. Bush. The Bush brand collapsed. We became immune to its studied folksiness. We saw through its artifice. This is a common deflation in the world of advertising. So we have been given a new Obama brand with an exciting and faintly erotic appeal. Benetton and Calvin Klein were the precursors to Brand Obama, using ads to associate themselves with risqué art and progressive politics. It gave their products an edge. But the goal, as with all brands, was to make passive consumers mistake a brand for an experience. . . .

Obama, who has become a global celebrity, was molded easily into a brand. He had almost no experience other than two years in the Senate, lacked any moral core, and could be painted as all things to all people. His brief Senate voting record was a miserable surrender to corporate interests. He was happy to promote nuclear power as "green" energy. He voted to continue the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. He reauthorized the Patriot Act. He would not back a bill designed to cap predatory credit card interest rates. He opposed a bill that would have reformed the notorious General Mining Act of 1872 [which practically gives away valuable mining rights and land to corporations]. He refused to support the single-payer health care bill HR676. . . . He supported the death penalty. And he backed a class-action "reform" bill that was part of a large lobbying effort by financial firms. The law, known as the Class Action Fairness Act, would effectively shut down state courts as venues in which to hear most class-action lawsuits and deny redress in many of the courts where these cases have a chance of defying powerful corporate challenges. . . .

Obama's campaign won the vote of the hundreds of marketers, agency heads, and marketing-services vendors gathered at the Association of National Advertisers' annual conference in October. The Obama campaign was named *Advertising Age's* marketer of the year for 2008, edging out runners-up Apple and Zappos.com. Take it from the professionals: Brand Obama is a marketer's dream. President Obama does one thing and Brand Obama gets you to believe another. This is the essence of successful advertising. You buy or do what the advertiser wants because of how he or she can make you feel.⁷²

⁷² Hedges, 19-21, "Buying Brand Obama" (May 3, 2009).

Angus Macaulay, vice president of Rodale Marketing Solutions, told *Advertising Age* that Obama's campaign was "something we can all learn from as marketers." . . .

Six days after the election, *Advertising Age* heralded "Brand Obama" as a "case study in audacious marketing." The journal praised Obama's "messaging consistency" and "communications success," placing special emphasis on the Obama campaign's "boldness." . . .

At the same time Mr. Obama was building his brand with grand gestures," the journal added, "his campaign demonstrated an understanding of ground-level marketing strategies and tactics." . . .

Advertising Age was taken with the next president's success in wrapping the authoritarian American System in more outwardly democratic and progressive clothing. Expecting Obama to repair the damage done to that system and the U.S. public relations image by the brutal and clumsy excesses of the brazenly imperial Cheney-Bush gang, the trade journal hailed the president-elect for producing "An Instant Overhaul for Tainted Brand America." The journal quoted David Brain, CEO of the global public relations firm Edelman Europe, Middle East, and Africa, on how "the election and nomination process is the brand relaunch of the year. Brand USA. It's just fantastic." Nick Ragone, senior vice president of client development at the leading global advertising firm Omnicom Group's Ketchum . . . told *Advertising Age* that "we've put a new face on [America] and that face happens to be African-American." In Ragone's view, Obama's racial identity "takes a lot of the hubris and arrogance of the last eight years and starts to put it in the rearview mirror for us." In a similar Orwellian vein, Harvard Business School professor and former WWP Group (a global advertising firm) board member John Quelch . . . told the advertising trade journal that "the election result zero-bases the image of the United States worldwide. We have a clean slate with which to work." . . .

Advertising Age [and others] . . . might have said more, of course. They might have added that image, public relations, marketing, words, speeches, symbolism, and rhetoric are only skin deep. They might have added that the real change hoped for by tens of millions of Americans who voted for Obama . . . [was a] concrete increase in democracy and justice against the . . . policies and imperatives of empire, militarism, capitalism, and inequality. They might have noted the difference between an ethno-cultural identity change in a top political office and deep and meaningful social and material change in the real-life circumstances of ordinary people after the "brand overhaul." They might have mentioned the potential deadly illusion involved in the "rebranding"--the creation and encouragement of a childish and fantastic mass belief in democratic change that cloaks the persistence and even the deepening, under new, fake-progressive cover, of steep and oppressive social hierarchies and doctrines. They might have noted the fantastic, even childish nature of the notion that significant social and democratic change can come through the replacement of one set of corporate- and military-vetted officeholders with another such set.⁷³

Did they play Barack Obama's [Cairo] speech to the Muslim world in the prison corridors of Abu Ghraib, Bagram Airfield, Guantanamo, or the dozens of secret sites where we hold thousands of Muslims around the world? Did it echo off the walls of the crowded morgues filled with the mutilated bodies of the Muslim dead in Baghdad or Kabul? Was it broadcast from the tops of minarets in the villages and towns decimated by U.S. iron fragmentation bombs? Was it heard in

⁷³ Street, *Empire's New Clothes*, 2-5.

the squalid refugee camps of Gaza, where 1.5 million Palestinians live in the world's largest ghetto?

What do words of peace and cooperation mean from us when we torture--yes, we still torture . . . Muslims? What do these words mean when we sanction Israel's brutal air assaults on Lebanon and Gaza, assaults that demolished thousands of homes and left hundreds dead and injured? How does it look for Obama to call for democracy and human rights from Egypt, where we lavishly fund and support the despotic regime of Hosni Mubarak, one of the longest-reigning dictators in the Middle East?

We may thrill to Obama's rhetoric, but few of the 1.3 billion Muslims in the world are as deluded. They grasp that nothing so far has changed for Muslims in the Middle East under the Obama administration. The wars of occupation go on or have been expanded. Israel continues to flout international law, gobbling up more Palestinian land and carrying out egregious war crimes in Gaza. Calcified, repressive regimes in countries such as Egypt and Saudi Arabia are feted in Washington as allies. . . .

The expanding imperial projects and tightening screws of repression lurch forward under Obama. We are not trying to end terror or promote democracy. We are ensuring that our corporate state has a steady supply of cheap oil to which it is addicted. And the scarcer oil becomes, the more aggressive we become. This is the game playing out in the Muslim world.

The Bush White House openly tortured. The Obama White House tortures and pretends not to. Obama may have banned waterboarding, but as Luke Mitchell points out in the July 2009 edition of *Harper's* magazine, torture, including isolation, sleep and sensory deprivation, and force-feeding, continues to be used to break detainees. The president has promised to close Guantanamo, where only one percent of the prisoners held offshore by the United States are kept. And the Obama administration has sought to obscure the fate and condition of thousands of Muslims held in black holes around the globe. As Mitchell notes, the Obama White House "has sought to prevent detainees at Bagram prison in Afghanistan from gaining access to courts where they may reveal the circumstances of their imprisonment. It has sought to continue the practice of rendering prisoners to unknown and unknowable locations outside the United States, and sought to keep secret many . . . of the records regarding our treatment of those detainees."

Muslim rage is stoked because we station tens of thousands of American troops on Muslim soil, occupy two Muslim nations, make possible the illegal Israeli occupation of Palestine, support repressive Arab regimes, and torture thousands of Muslims in offshore penal colonies where prisoners are stripped of their rights. . . . The rage comes because we have constructed massive military bases, some the size of small cities, in Iraq, Afghanistan, Saudi Arabia, Turkey, and Kuwait, and established basing rights in the Gulf States of Bahrain, Qatar, Oman, and the United Arab Emirates. The rage comes because we have expanded our military empire into neighboring Uzbekistan, Pakistan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan. It comes because we station troops and special forces in Egypt, Algeria, and Yemen. And this vast network of bases and military outposts looks suspiciously permanent.

The Muslim world fears, correctly, that we intend to dominate Middle East oil supplies and any Caspian Sea oil infrastructure. And it is interested not in our protestations of good will but in the elemental right of justice and freedom from foreign occupation. . . .

Obama, whose embrace of American imperialism is as naive and destructive as that of George W. Bush, is the newest brand used to peddle the poison of permanent war. We may not see it. But those who bury the dead do.⁷⁴

⁷⁴ Hedges, 25-7, "Hold Your Applause" (June 8, 2009).

The American empire has not altered under Barack Obama. It kills as brutally and indiscriminately in Iraq, Afghanistan, and Pakistan as it did under George W. Bush. It steals from the U.S. Treasury to enrich the corporate elite as rapaciously. It will not give us universal health care, abolish the Bush secrecy laws, end torture or "extraordinary rendition," restore habeas corpus, or halt the warrantless wiretapping and monitoring of citizens. It will not push through significant environmental reform, regulate Wall Street, or end our relationship with private contractors that provide mercenary armies to fight our imperial wars and produce useless and costly weapons systems.

The sad reality is that all the well-meaning groups and individuals who challenge our permanent war economy and the doctrine of preemptive war, who care about sustainable energy, fight for civil liberties, and want corporate malfeasance to end, were once again suckered by the Democratic Party. They were had. It is not a new story. The Democrats have been doing this to us since Bill Clinton. It is the same old merry-go-round, only with Obama branding. And if we have not learned by now that the system is broken, that as citizens we do not matter to our political elite, or that we live in a corporate state where our welfare and our interests are irrelevant, we are in serious trouble. Our last hope is to step outside of the two-party system and build movements that defy the Democrats and Republicans. If we fail to do this, we will continue to undergo a slow-motion corporate coup d'etat that will end in feudalism.⁷⁵

The wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, when viewed from the receiving end, are state-sponsored acts of terrorism. These wars defy every ethical and legal code that seek[s] to determine when a nation can wage war, from Just War Theory to the statutes of international law largely put into place by the United States after World War II. These wars are criminal wars of aggression. They have left hundreds of thousands of people, who never took up arms against us, dead and seen millions driven from their homes. We have no right as a nation to debate the terms of these occupations. And an Afghan villager, burying members of his family's wedding party after an American air strike, understands in a way we often do not that terrorist attacks can also be unleashed from the arsenals of an imperial power.

Barack Obama's decision to increase troop levels in Afghanistan and leave behind tens of thousands of soldiers and Marines in Iraq . . . is a failure to rescue us from the status of a rogue nation. It codifies Bush's "war on terror." And the continuation of these wars will corrupt and degrade our nation just as the long and brutal occupation of Gaza and the West Bank has corrupted and degraded Israel. George W. Bush has handed Barack Obama a poisoned apple. Obama has bitten it.⁷⁶

Committed to the preservation of existing power relations, [the *New York Times'* ideological] orientation was suggested in a statement from the *Times* editorial board three weeks before Obama's inauguration. In a December 22, 2008, editorial . . . the *Times* explained that Obama had to walk a fine line in relation to the badly damaged domestic business order and recession he was inheriting from George W. Bush. The next president would need, the *Times* felt, to embrace a level of government intervention that was adequate to save the profits system while distancing himself from democratic pledges that might encourage the citizenry to resist. "As president," the *Times* lectured, "Mr. Obama will have to convey optimism without over-

⁷⁵ Hedges, 52, "Nader Was Right: Liberals Are Going Nowhere with Obama" (August 10, 2009).

⁷⁶ Hedges, 260, "Confronting the Terrorist Within" (December 1, 2008).

promising. He will have to inspire confidence, even in the absence of a dramatic turnaround--which is simply not on the cards." The editorial ended on an interesting note: "While Mr. Obama must continue to level with the American people--the economy is unlikely to turn up until 2010 at the earliest, and even then it will probably rebound slowly--his near-term moves will go a long way towards making the burdens yet to come more bearable." Translated, the *Times* felt it was Obama's job . . . to prevent the citizenry's anger and struggles (under a dramatically failing capitalism) from coalescing into popular rebellion. . . .

Interestingly, the *Times* had a different take on Obama's duties to the American Empire. The editors' emphasis on Obama's need to "realistically" downsize popular hopes in regard to domestic policy stood in curious contrast to the grandiose expectations the paper's opinion authorities held for Obama's obligation to repair and expand the power of America's military. In a November 16, 2008, editorial [the *Times* listed a number of hugely expensive measures it recommended Obama take to strengthen the military]. . . .

Taken together, these two postelection *Times* editorials were a striking example of what Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., during the middle and late 1960s, called America's "perverted priorities." The nation's leading newspaper called for cautious, conservative, and hope-chilling modesty when it came to addressing domestic pain and inequality. [Yet it] advocated expansion of Superpower's already gargantuan capacity to deliver death and destruction across [the] world. . . .

So far . . . the *Times* editorial board's hopes--not those of most the American[s] . . . who elected Obama and praised his ascendancy--have been met on the whole. The real-world Obama has advanced the twisted priorities of empire, war, inequality, and oppression even as Brand Obama has helped make the burdens imposed by the ruling class and its global empire seem "more bearable" to suffering masses at home and abroad.

Nevertheless, the afterglow of the brand relaunch has faded considerably in the wake of one popular betrayal after another. The president-elect's and then new president's once practically messianic sheen has dulled considerably, along with his approval numbers. He has been increasingly revealed to be yet another in a long line of calculating, corporate-captive politicians who might talk a good game on behalf of "We, the People," but who is really a servant and indeed an agent of existing authoritarian domestic and global power structures and ideologies.⁷⁷

In late April of 2009 the liberal political scientist Thomas B. Edsall noted on *Huffington Post* that Obama had earned the label "King of Corporate Welfare." "No matter what else he achieves or where he falls short," Edsall wrote, "Barack Obama can lay claim to the title of King of Corporate Subsidies. . . . Using any variety of measures, the Obama administration has broken all records in the distribution of tax dollars to American business, primarily banks, automobile manufacturers, and insurance companies. . . . The tidal wave of dollar bills has stunned folks on all sides of the political spectrum."⁷⁸

Obama is an incredibly Orwellian character. He can make people think that war is peace.⁷⁹

⁷⁷ Street, *Empire's New Clothes*, 6-8.

⁷⁸ Street, *Empire's New Clothes*, 45.

⁷⁹ Jeremy Scahill, in Street, *Empire's New Clothes*, 47.

Barack Obama's record as president has not jibed very well with Brand Obama's antiwar gloss, to say the least. The Iraq deception has continued into the Obama presidency. Obama won his epic primary battle with Hillary Clinton largely because he was able to convince much of the Democratic Party's liberal base to believe in the fairy tale that he was a strong and consistent opponent of George W. Bush['s] . . . archcriminal invasion of Iraq. But if we read the fine print on Obama's Iraq plan, however, we will see that he intends to sustain the occupation of that country into the indefinite future. He will keep at least 50,000 troops in Iraq well after the August 2010 combat troop withdrawal date he campaigned on. Many of the troops who stay will be in combat units redesignated as "advisory" brigades, a new classification that George Orwell would appreciate. As left activist, author, and journalist Anthony Arnove noted in March 2009, Obama's "withdrawal" plan "says nothing about the private contractors and mercenaries that are an essential part of the occupation and whose numbers may even be increased to cover functions previously provided by active-duty troops. . . . It will leave in place the world's largest foreign embassy, as well as the world's largest CIA foreign station, in Baghdad." The United States will maintain critical control over Iraqi skies and a significant naval and air presence "over the horizon."⁸⁰

What people . . . misunderstand about Barack Obama is that this is a man who is a brilliant supporter of empire--who has figured out a way to essentially trick a lot of people into believing they're supporting radical change, when in effect what they're doing is supporting a radical expansion of the U.S. empire. . . .

Obama is showing himself to be the master of misdirection--almost like a magician. He'll say a few things in his [Cairo] speech that sound like they're new, like a totally different U.S. approach, but then he'll also at the same time roll out a policy that is further than even Bush took things.⁸¹

Appendix

How many "movements" are we supposed to build and sustain?

An anti-war movement? Should we march against the Afghanistan War? Against the Iraq War? Against the Pakistan War? Against the Libya War? Against the Yemen War? Against the Somalia War? Again? And again? And again? And again? And again? And again? And what if we march and march and march and march and march . . . and it doesn't sway the Lords of War one bit?

Should we get arrested and thrown in jail (nowadays possibly for many years) for participating in civil disobedience in an anti-nuclear movement? An anti-coal movement? An anti-mountain top removal movement? An anti-offshore oil drilling movement? An anti-shale/tar sands mining movement? An anti-fracking movement?

⁸⁰ Street, *Empire's New Clothes*, 50.

⁸¹ Jeremy Scahill, in Street, *Empire's New Clothes*, 101; also in "Rebranding war and occupation," socialistworker.org, June 17, 2009.

An anti-toxic waste movement? An anti-acid rain movement? An anti-ocean dumping movement?

An anti-landmine movement? An anti-chemical/biological weapons movement?

An anti-colossal Pentagon budget movement? An anti-CIA intervention movement? An anti-torture movement? An anti-assassination movement?

An anti-civil rights destruction movement? An anti-domestic spying movement?

An anti-global warming movement? An anti-deforestation movement? An anti-whaling movement? An anti-rapacious fishing movement? An anti-habitat destruction movement? An anti-biofuel movement? An anti-global food price hike movement?

An anti-GMO movement? An anti-chemical pesticide movement? An anti-livestock hormone movement? An anti-factory farm movement?

An anti-monopoly movement? An anti-outsourcing movement? An anti-offshore tax haven movement? An anti-Wall Street criminality movement? An anti-tax cuts for billionaires movement? An anti-regressive tax movement? An anti-poverty movement?

An anti-union busting movement? An anti-privatization movement? An anti-charter schools movement?

And how about all the much needed "pro"-movements?!

A pro-food safety movement?

A pro-worker safety movement?

A pro-renewable energy movement?

A pro-single payer health care movement?

A pro-free college education movement?

A pro-public transportation movement?

Etc.

Etc.

Etc.

Etc.

Etc.

Etc.

The point is that although it is proper and beneficial that people fight for better societal policies, and that they be organized to do so as effectively as possible, agitating is not the same as governing and it never will be. Moreover, the issues of vital concern to the people are far too numerous for it to be practical to deal with them effectively through ad hoc, extra-governmental actions. The people, united, often *are* defeated. They are defeated because they do not hold the permanent and decisive reins of power in society; that is, they do not possess--they are not in control of--the settled, established, *governmental* tools necessary to take care of business efficiently. Attention to the institutions of government, specifically to their undemocratic nature in today's world, is thus not a mere academic exercise. It is not optional. It is the first concern of activists who wish not only to have people scream and shout, or even to have people scream and shout and occasionally be heard, but rather to *empower* the people radically by placing them at the helm of government. Governors have no need to shout. Their wish is the state's command.

The state is not to be trifled with. Either you control it or it will control you.