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9/11, Culture War, and the Pitfalls of History

A Presentation by Prof. David A. Horowitz Before the Humanists of Greater Portland, Sept. 11, 2022

9/11, the most traumatic single event of U. S. history, still continues to shape the national psyche but offers useful insights into the law of unintended consequences, the role fear plays in public life, and the pangs of modernity.

The Lessons of Tragedy, a recent work by national security analysts Hal Brands and Charles Edel, suggests that policymakers learn more from mistakes than past triumphs. In a post-revisionist account of the early Cold War, the authors explain how American leaders of that period sought to discourage a repeat of the nationalist and authoritarian military regimes held responsible for Pearl Harbor and the devastation of World War II. Fearing that the spread of Soviet communism represented such a threat, they cooperated with Western allies by replacing isolationist policies with a program of liberal internationalism. This entailed efforts to enhance human rights, the rule of law, democratic governance, and collective defense through the United Nations Charter and NATO. They also acted to stabilize capitalist economies through free trade, stable currencies, the International Monetary Fund, the World Bank, and the Marshall Plan.

These internationalist policies barely survived the Communist takeovers of Czechoslovakia and China and Soviet testing of an atomic bomb. In response, conservative nationalists and anti-communists at home led by Wisconsin Republican senator Joe McCarthy mounted voracious attacks on President Harry Truman for losing the Cold War. Once Soviet ally North Korea invaded the South, Truman agreed to a United Nations police force to repel the aggressors back to the 38th Parallel. Under political pressure and unable to resist the temptation to liquidate a communist regime, however, the president permitted General Douglas MacArthur to invade the North. This precipitated Chinese intervention and a deadly stalemate that accounted for 80% of America's 40,000 casualties in Korea.

Vietnam presented the next major battleground. Although President Dwight Eisenhower balked at sending ground troops to assist France in putting down the communist insurgency in South Vietnam, Democratic president John Kennedy dispatched Special Forces advisers to the conflict. After Kennedy's assassination, Lyndon Johnson followed Cold War strategy by escalating the commitment. By 1968, 500,000 U. S. troops were fighting an evasive ground and air war against Vietnamese guerrillas and their supporters in Hanoi.

At home, conservative populists Ronald Reagan, George Wallace, and Richard Nixon blamed the stalemate in Vietnam and the disorder linked to black liberation struggles and antiwar activism on liberal cosmopolitans in Washington. Failing to ensure the Great Power settlement promised in his 1968 presidential campaign, Nixon delayed signing a Vietnam peace treaty for five years, leading to America's worst social disarray since the Civil War. Unable to disengage from the war without offending his political base, the White House demonized antiwar protesters. This ultimately spread to the series of illegal "Watergate" measures against political centrists, an exercise of "power unfettered by law," as one historian puts it, that ended with the first chief executive's resignation in U. S. history.

By the time film clips showed Vietnamese dependents clinging to helicopter rudders as U. S. officials evacuated Saigon during the presidency of Gerald Ford in 1975, over 55,000 Americans in uniform had lost their lives in the struggle. President Jimmy Carter hoped to substitute diplomacy and humanitarian aid for military strength. When Iranian students captured 66 hostages from the U. S. embassy in Tehran and the revolutionary Islamist regime held them for over a year, however, Carter struggled to respond. Taking advantage of the Soviet invasion of its client state Afghanistan and an energy and inflation crisis at home,

Ronald Reagan won the 1980 election by promising to win the Cold War and return to the moral and military virtues associated with World War II.

Yet foreign entanglements blindsided Reagan as well. Not aware that anti-Soviet rebels in Afghanistan opposed all forms of Western modernity, not just communism, Reagan used the CIA to arm the Islamic insurgency. When the president dispatched the Marines to act as a peacekeeping force during the Lebanese civil war between Orthodox Christians and Muslim, a Lebanese militia affiliated with Iran bombed the U. S. embassy and a Marine base in Beirut, killing over 500 Americans. With terrorist kidnappings of U. S. citizens continuing, including the torture and murder of the CIA Station Chief in Lebanon, Reagan tacitly approved an illegal arms-for-hostages deal with Iran, leading to congressional hearings and even talk of impeachment.

At the same time, Reagan's agreement with reform Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev limiting the deployment of nuclear missiles in Europe destroyed the threat of Western encirclement, bringing the collapse of the Soviet empire and the end of the Cold War in 1991. President George H. W. Bush benefitted from the thaw in international tensions to proclaim a "New World Order" in which the rule of law and recognition of national borders would supplant the dictate of the jungle. Bush and Secretary of State James Baker orchestrated the participation of a half-million American troops in an UN-sanctioned, twenty-seven-nation coalition including Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, and Syria, to reverse the invasion of neighboring Kuwait by Iraqi dictator Saddam Hussein. Intent on avoiding another Vietnam, the military adopted a doctrine of overwhelming force with a clear exit strategy. Beyond that, 84% of war costs were born by the Saudis, Kuwaitis, and oil consumers Japan and Germany. In deference to Arab allies and fearing civilian casualties, Bush called off a march on Baghdad and accepted UN resolutions for monitoring Iraq's nuclear, biological, and chemical weapons;

Instead of war, President Bill Clinton authorized missile attacks to enforce an American-British "no-fly" zone in Iraq and supported a UN "oil for food" program. Yet he attracted conservative criticism after forces loyal to a local warlord murdered eighteen U. S. soldiers deployed in a UN mission to deliver food relief during the Somalian civil war. The bombing of U. S. embassies in Kenya and Tanzania blamed on Al Qaeda, an Islamist terrorist network headed by Saudi Arabia's Osama bin Laden, and an unanswered Al Qaeda attack on an American battleship off the coast of Yemen that killed seventeen American sailors, further damaged the administration.

Bogged down by a domestic policy gridlock and declining public faith in government after 1994, Clinton faced a Special Prosecutor's investigation into financial dealings during his Arkansas governorship. The inquiry went nowhere but led to Clinton's impeachment by the Republican House in connection with a sexual affair with a White House intern. The Senate fell far short of a conviction but Republican George W. Bush, a born-again Christian evangelical, benefited from the moral ambiguity of Clinton's personal behavior. Following a controversial 5-4 Supreme Court decision to halt a Florida recount over ballot irregularities in 2000, Bush squeezed out a narrow Electoral College victory despite losing the national popular vote.

The new vice president, Dick Cheney, was among the "Vulcans" in the national security bureaucracy intent on reversing Clinton's cuts in defense spending. In a replay of the bipolar Cold War, National Security Adviser Condoleezza Rice focused on updating missile defense systems, failing to appreciate the threat posed by rogue and stateless global terror groups such as Al Qaeda. During the summer of 2001 the administration ignored reports from Counter-Terrorism adviser Richard Clarke that bin Laden was preparing "an attack" on the U. S. An FBI agent's warning that an Arab national in Minnesota was learning to navigate airplanes with no interest in landing got lost in the traffic. Later analyses pointed to a lack of coordination between the CIA and FBI in "connecting the dots."

On Sept. 11th, nineteen Islamic extremists affiliated with Al Qaeda, fifteen of them Saudis, used box cutters to take over four airliners, forcing two into the twin towers of New York's World Trade Center and one into the Pentagon. A fourth plane headed for the Capitol crashed into a western Pennsylvania field with no survivors after the passengers stormed the cockpit to divert it from targeting the nation's symbol of democracy. Nearly 3000 people died in the most lethal attack on U. S. territory in its history.

U. S. intelligence had little understanding of a brand of terrorism rooted in a fundamentalist 18th century Muslim sect hostile to the Enlightenment. Al Qaeda emerged after Islamic guerrillas received subsidies from the Reagan administration to oust the Soviet Union from Afghanistan. The movement played upon Arab grievances over civilian casualties from Persian Gulf War bombing, the presence of American troops in Saudi Arabia, and U. S. support for Israel against the Palestinians. Yet Al Qaeda's main strength rested on calls for purity, personal duty, and solidarity in contrast to the perceived decadence of global consumerism. Recruiting educated young migrants to the West in cyberspace sanctuaries, it sought to unite the world's 1.36b Muslim in a jihad against "non-believer" nation-states through assaults on civilian life. 9/11 was its prime recruiting poster.

As an act of terror, the attack was designed to convince citizens that their government was unable to protect them. Bush responded by emphasizing that the enemy was terrorism, not an ideology, religion, or nationality. Bonding with firefighters and first-responders, the president vowed to direct every resource to the disruption of the global terror network. When several hate attacks on American Muslims marred the early mood of national unity, Bush visited a mosque to denounce these reprisals.

The president's first official response, nevertheless, was the Patriot Act. The law permitted the government to retain foreign nationals on visa violations or minor charges and to monitor telephone and library records as well as email contacts, including those with U. S. citizens. This led to the deportation of thousands of targets suspected of ties to terrorist organizations. Although critics objected to the law's seeming violation of civil liberties, the administration defended it as a necessary defense against further attacks, depicted as the first task of any government. Anxious to ensure safety, Democrats pushed for the creation of an Office of Homeland Security, a preventative agency that would coordinate intelligence on domestic threats, create a terror alert system, and manage airport security.

Although NATO invoked the only collective security alert in its history, Bush viewed 9/11 as a military matter for the United States alone. He noted that the Islamist Taliban government that succeeded the Soviets had welcomed bin Laden's base camps into the country and were still protecting them. With help from Afghan warlords and Pakistani troops, the campaign to overthrow the regime proceeded with bombing and counter-insurgency efforts by the CIA, Special Forces teams, and the Marines.

The Taliban fell within weeks. In the process, 600 of its fighters were detained as stateless "enemy combatants" at the U. S. naval base at Guantanamo, Cuba. Their incarceration came under the authority of dubious White House legal memos that sanctioned murder, torture, or indefinite detention for defendants tried in U. S. military courts not subject to Geneva Convention protections for prisoners of war. By now, bin Laden was hiding in the mountains between Afghanistan and Pakistan, possibly aided by military forces from both nations. At this point, Vice President Cheney and the Defense Department Vulcans renewed an interest in Iraq.

Invoking "American Exceptionalism," neo-conservative hawks in the Republican party viewed the break-up of the Soviet Empire as the result of U. S. armed prowess and moral will. The erosion of military and executive power under Clinton, they believed, pointed to the loss of America's role as a Great Power and guarantor of world order. They argued that the potential spread of weapons of mass destruction made this even more dangerous, requiring unilateral preemptive military strikes if necessary.

Accordingly, President Bush's 2002 State of the Union message described the "rogue nations" of North Korea, Iran, and Iraq as an "Axis of Evil" capable of delivering chemical, biological, or nuclear weapons

to terrorist groups. Bush later warned that “if we wait for threats to fully materialize, we will have waited too long.” In June the administration demanded that Saddam Hussein account for or destroy his WMDs. When Dick Cheney insisted that the Iraqi leader had a role in 9/11, over 70% of Americans agreed. Historian David Potter has suggested in another context that people don’t mind being lied to if it makes them feel safer. Whatever the case, the administration charged that Saddam was hiding WMDs that could be turned over to terrorist groups. “We cannot wait for the final proof – the smoking gun – that could come in the form of a mushroom cloud,” Bush warned.

As the Midterm elections approached in 2002, Bush political consultant Karl Rove pressed the president to marginalize the Democrats by asking for congressional authority to protect the national interest with military action if diplomacy with Iraq failed. The resolution passed the Senate by a substantial margin with support from potential presidential candidates Hillary Clinton, Joe Biden, John Kerry, and those who accepted the argument that the threat of force would give diplomats a stronger hand in dealing with Saddam. Their position was strengthened by UN Resolution 1441, which declared Iraq in material breach of its obligation to cooperate with weapons inspectors, who had left the country in frustration in 1998. The UN warned that Iraq faced “serious consequences” for noncompliance.

Tens of thousands of antiwar protesters were soon marching in the streets of Europe and North America, including 10,000 in Portland. Rather than engaging the public on whether armed force would make the world safer, however, demonstrators seemed more inclined to venting moral outrage and opposition to *any* war that involved the United States. This may have clouded the message when there were concrete arguments for opposing the war.

In a twist to the story, Saddam invited the inspectors back and cooperated with on-site monitoring but avoided documentation on the status of his weapons program. Bush seized upon this ambivalence in the 2003 State of the Union when he cited reports already discredited by the CIA that Iraq had attempted to buy uranium and aluminum tubes from Niger to be used in nuclear weapons production. Secretary of State Colin Powell then delivered a UN speech that charged Iraq with a cover-up by storing WMDs in portable labs. Powell asked for a deadline for Iraqi disarmament. Yet Security Council permanent members France, China, and Russia and allies like Germany wanted more time for inspections and were skeptical of a preemptive war.

The impasse prompted Bush to lead a “Coalition of the Willing” – a deployment of 300,000 troops by Britain and the U. S. to usher in “regime change” and “disarm Iraq and free its people.” Like Bill Clinton, Bush sought to restructure the Middle East by encouraging democratic and market-oriented societies as a replacement for ideological dictatorships hostile to western values that might be seeking WMDs. Yet by following a military path, the administration faced the law of unintended consequences and the danger of overplaying its hand. In May, the president’s appearance in a flak jacket on a U. S. battleship under a “Mission Accomplished” banner hid fatal flaws in the operation that would cost the lives of nearly 5000 U. S. military personnel and leave 40,000 wounded.

The consequences of the Iraq occupation included looting and disorder following the disbanding of the country’s armed forces and Ba’ath Party, the resulting exodus of 4m refugees, U. S. reliance on untrained contractors and multiple deployments of National Guardsmen to compensate for an inadequate military force, the torture and humiliation of Iraqi prisoners in response to an emerging insurgency, and the appearance of a postwar terror group, ISIL, drawn from Saddam loyalists, Iraqi nationalists, and sectarian militias.

By September 2005, a few weeks after the Bush administration mishandled the response to Category 5 Hurricane Katrina on the Gulf Coast, 100,000 antiwar protesters marched in Washington. Two-thirds of a poll of Americans now expressed the view that the Iraq War had not been necessary. Former Counter-Terrorism Adviser Richard Clarke’s conclusions were more startling:

- CIA analysts failed to recognize the significance of WMD data and engaged in “group-think” about unproven allegations by “cherry-picking” intelligence, disregarding negative assessments, or engaging in duplicitous manipulation of information.
- the Bush administration's own weapons inspector subsequently reported that Saddam had *hidden* the fact that the UN had destroyed his WMD stockpiles in 1991 for fear that public disclosure would leave him open to attacks by the U. S. or Iran.
- the invasion of Iraq played into the hands of *Al Qaeda*, which based its appeal on a warning that the U. S. was out to occupy Muslim nations, a prediction validated by evidence of American torture and the failure to find WMDs.
- dismantling the Sunni regime and installing a revenge-minded Shi'ite government furthered sectarian conflict and allowed Iraq to become an Iranian client state

Saddam Hussein was tracked down by the American military and executed by the Shi'ite government in 2006. The U. S. combat mission in Iraq ended five years later, although a complete withdrawal did not occur until 2021. A U. S. Navy Special Forces team killed Bin Laden in Pakistan in 2012. Just weeks ago, an American drone in Afghanistan took out his successor, Ayman Al-Zawahiri. Yet the Taliban had resumed power in Afghanistan, complicating a chaotic departure from Kabul that brought back memories of Saigon in 1975. Altogether, the two post-9/11 wars killed 7000 American troops and wounded 52,000. Another 30,000 veterans have died from suicide in the years since 2003. Much of the public has lost faith in “endless wars.”

Blindsided by crises at home and abroad, from the energy shortages, economic depression, and Iranian hostage takeover of the Carter years to continuing terrorism against U. S. allies and overseas interests in the 1980s to the Financial Meltdown of the early 20th century, Americans have become accustomed to seeing their fate shaped from conspiracies by hidden enemies. **9/11 reaffirmed the nation's vulnerability to unanticipated events and a pattern of fearful responses. It was easy to turn the suspicion of foreign actors aroused by the attacks toward a wariness of hidden cultural elites at home.**

These divisions played a key role in the 2016 presidential election between Democrat Hillary Clinton and Republican Donald Trump.

The former real estate tycoon and TV personality cultivated a following with evocations of national pride, hints of racial exclusivity, and denunciation of cosmopolitan “elites.” At the same time, his supporters coalesced around a mix of economic issues. They included rural Americans and working people in manufacturing and extractive industries who had lost confidence in the globalism of governing elites. Stung by deindustrialization and outsourcing, these voters relished Trump's attacks on international trade deals and liberal immigration policies. Their views overlapped with small business and corporate Republicans looking for tax reductions and less government regulation. Some 60% of the candidate's white voters without college degrees fell in the top half of national income.

Russian operatives supporting Donald Trump exploited these grievances by spreading disinformation and creating fictitious identities on online sites. These sought to demonize centrists like Clinton as incapable of responding to the country's problems. The strategy seemed to work when Green Party candidate Jill Stein amassed more votes than Trump's slight margin over Clinton in battle-grounds Wisconsin, Michigan, and Pennsylvania. When connected to a depressed African American turnout, the difference was more than enough to hand the Republicans their second Electoral College win since 2000 despite losing the national popular vote.

As Yale political scientist Timothy Snyder has explained, Trump embodied authoritarian tropes by depicting history as the struggle of powerful groups to dominate lesser peoples, making democratic governance irrelevant. Since raw emotions were preferable to reason and empirical fact in bonding followers, truth could be shared exclusively between the Leader and the “real people.” Institutions, laws, the courts, the press, and “rigged” elections were corrupt barriers between a charismatic icon and the folk. The meaning of politics did not come in reform or any set of policies benefitting the base but in expressions of emotional outrage toward perceived enemies. The logic of “strategic relativism” allowed followers to assume an aura of winning because opponents are seen as losing. It may not even matter whether supporters accept the literal truth of outrageous verbal attacks but simply enjoy hearing someone articulate them.

Cultural issues have played a huge role among “Make America Great Again” voters. This included Christian evangelicals and other social conservatives seeking Supreme Court appointments to reassert traditional morality over abortion, religious freedom, and sexual decorum. Like other Trump supporters, they viewed themselves as under siege by a cosmopolitan establishment of urbane, college-educated “woke” elites who attacked their values and did not have their interests at heart. MAGA followers particularly objected to the idea that identity politics was legitimate for everyone but the generic European Americans or whites that multiculturalists disparage as racist. Setting the foundation for the attack on Critical Race Theory, they disdained “virtue-signaling know-it-alls” who blamed the country’s problems on generic categories such as “whiteness” or “masculinity.”

Once elected, Trump revived the nationalism of the pre-Pearl Harbor “America First” movement. Catering to his base, who rejected anything associated with Barack Obama or previous presidents, he mocked the effectiveness of democratic governments and paid homage to overseas authoritarians such as Vladimir Putin at the expense of traditional allies. Accordingly, Trump questioned the survival of NATO and cut off U. S. participation in global trade, disarmament, and environmental treaties. Referring to “my generals” and “my cabinet,” he personalized government and eroded the independence of the State, Justice, and Interior departments as well as the Environmental Protection Agency, the Pentagon, the FBI, and intelligence community. Surviving two House impeachments for abuse of power and obstruction of justice, he claimed that any criticism of him was really an attack on his supporters.

Beyond denying climate change, Trump dismissed the World Health Organization’s alerts about COVID, the worst global pandemic in a hundred years. The president went from rejecting public health warnings as a scam to blaming the spread of the virus on the Chinese. Throughout the episode, he bonded with the base’s distrust of the scientific and academic community by mocking the utility of vaccines, mass testing, and masking, even to the point of endorsing quack remedies. COVID ultimately contributed to the death of a million Americans. Ensuing controversies over lock-downs, social distancing, and school closings, and the anxiety, depression, and sense of loss induced by extended periods of isolation, seemed to validate the president’s view of “American Carnage.”

Donald Trump’s spread of the “Big Lie” over Joe Biden’s “stolen” presidential election in 2020 and the ensuing attack on the Capitol led by Trump’s right-wing militia allies has cemented his role as a cult leader with authoritarian tendencies. Perhaps 25% of the electorate now seeks to impose social morality codes on adversaries, deny the protection of the law for those they despise, and purge public education of ideas they find threatening. Following Trump, state Republican leaders have sought to abrogate the voting rights of those they refuse to see as “real Americans.” Several legislative bodies now intend to establish reviews of the 2024 presidential election for “fraud” if results do not meet their expectations. A delegation of professional historians recently warned President Biden that the nation is under siege by internal enemies who no longer believe in the survival of democracy.

Grounds for optimism, however, may rest with the estimated **40%** of the electorate in the political center, including many women and suburbanites. These may well be **transactional** voters willing to align with

anyone who does not directly threaten their values and interests. If so, they can provide a path to transforming American politics through coalition building. Theodore Roosevelt famously urged activists of the early 20th century to face life as it was, not as they thought it ought to be. Translated to today's world, when two-thirds of American adults lack a four-year college degree, the lesson is that boutique appeals to like-minded cosmopolitans face the danger of "political hobby-ism," a pastime Tufts electoral scholar Eitan Hersh dismisses as entertainment politics.

Coalitions, in contrast, allow participants to find common ground even when they disagree on some issues. It's important to frame goals within the sensibilities and interests of a broad band of the public. "Democracy requires compromises," President Obama told Howard University students in 2016, "even when you are 100 percent right." If you assume the mantle of moral purity, he warned, "you're not going to get what you want" and most likely retreat into cynicism and inaction. "I take better every time," the former president explained, "because you consolidate your gains and then you move on to the next fight from a stronger position."

Framing proposals that don't frighten or insult potential supporters is an important ingredient of successful politics. It's not what we **say** but what the listener **understands**. Barack Obama appreciated this when he acknowledged at the 2020 Democratic National Convention that "**Black Lives Matter – No More, No Less.**" Instead of preaching about the evils of the market economy, oppressive institutions, or racial hatred, references to a **well-regulated capitalism and pragmatic reforms that lift all of us up** may have far greater chances of support. Polling of working-class voters in the Midwest, for example, shows widespread backing for policies such as expanded Medicare, pre-K public schooling, a higher minimum wage, federal jobs programs, and taxes on the rich.

Political journalist E. J. Dionne has advanced such an agenda in *Code Red: How Progressives and Moderates Can Unite to Save our Country* (2020). Dionne advocates "visionary gradualism," a strategic approach to establishing common ground between social justice activists and centrists. The goal would be the restoration of democratic values and the transformative healing of social and economic wounds. To achieve this, however, Dionne warns that progressives must abandon unseemly moralism, understand the law of unintended consequences, and reject a belief in any single way forward.

Recent developments offer the prospect of coalitions to help erode the fear-based politics of an era defined by unanticipated assaults on American life. They include tentative steps toward gun safety reform. In another instance, Kansas voters defeated a state ballot initiative constitutionalizing bans on abortion by arguing that the measure was an example of government overreach violating conservative principles. Another sign has emerged in grass-roots efforts by parents to defeat purges of public-school curriculum threatening to deprive children of the educational tools required in a complex world. Still another has materialized in the Inflation Reduction Act's compromise package ensuring lower health and prescription drug costs and greater help in enabling homeowners and consumers to combat climate change.

These may be incremental steps in dealing with challenging problems. But with most of the Republican party deferring to a single figure whose loyalists seek to advance an extremist agenda most voters reject, the ultimate test of democracy and pursuit of the common good will undoubtedly be decided in forthcoming elections, still the voice of the people. It may still be possible to construct a broad-based politics that allows a majority of Americans to move beyond individual grievances and a sense of victimhood but time is running out.