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Mythic Incantations of American Empire

Mityczne zaklęcia amerykańskiego imperium

Abstract

American empire is sustained by the mythic incantations of rhetorical rituals constituting an attitude of war. The discourse of empire consists of dead metaphors that lend a sense of necessity and inevitability to war by depicting it as rhythmical, timeless, migratory, clean, and heroic. It is a persistent but declining discourse. Its totalizing worldview resists critique, leaving it politically moribund and exposed to transformation by tricksters.

Imperium amerykańskie opiera się na mitycznych zaklęciach i retorycznych rytuałach kreujących obraz wojny. Dyskurs imperium składa się z martwych metafor, które nadają poczucie konieczności i nieuchronności wojny, przedstawiając ją jako rzeczywistość rytmiczną, ponadczasową, nomadyczną, szlachetną i heroiczną. Światopogląd wyrażany w tak natarczywym dyskursie jest odporny na wszelką krytykę, czyniąc go politycznie martwym i narażając na mistyfikacje.

Key words

war, empire, myth, metaphor, trickster

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Mythic Incantations of American Empire

The geography of empire's dead metaphors is a petrified landscape in which dreams of greatness come to rest in a soldier's grave. Its capital city is a wasteland of illusions that do not fade. The young and the old walk the streets without clear purpose or star. Guided by the logic of realism, a crowd of living corpses greets the passage of a knight's skeleton, encased in armor, riding a chestnut warhorse. Citizens cheer even after losing all their children to the business of war. A bishop with staff and miter bows his head in adoration of old gods, the prophet is slain in the monk's cold cell. Ancient, venerable buildings are covered with thorns and brambles. As the prophet warned, they have become a court for owls and a residence for dragons.

Such is the moribund discourse of empire, viewed from a mythic standpoint. It is a discourse that encompasses the static vision of a death struggle between civilization and savagery sustained by the mythic incantations of rhetorical rituals that naturalize and rigidify an attitude of war. Like any orthodoxy, empire overreaches when closed off to critique. The ruling order is rendered insensible, unresponsive, and ultimately vulnerable to the dynamic forces of pluralism and self-determination. Empire's rhetorical inertia, we suggest, prefigures a nonconforming corrective.

1. Imperial Orthodoxy

Empire is a woolly concept for a multifarious condition of political, economic, cultural, and military hegemony. It designates a preponderance of power, a degree of influence and authority comprising a state of domination expressed as a hierarchy of relations. It represents itself in reified images as the natural order of things. Its reigning symbols are figures of speech made so routine and conventional by everyday use that they sound flat, appear literal, turn rigid, and lose their symbolic resonance. Empire, by this reckoning, is the rule of politically enervated imagery,

a regime of gestures no longer vital or flexible enough to adapt to a dynamic world, an order maintained by violence.

In view of the world militarization that both preceded and followed World War II, George Orwell (1972, 433) warned that a debased language produced a “reduced state of consciousness,” which was “favorable to political conformity.” Three years before the publication of *1984*, he wrote: “Orthodoxy, of whatever color, seems to demand a lifeless, imitative style.”

Friedrich Nietzsche (1999, 84-85) captured the essence of metaphors-reduced-to-reified-concepts when he defined truth as “a movable host of metaphors, metonymies, and anthropomorphisms: in short, a sum of human relations which have been poetically and rhetorically intensified, transferred, and embellished, and which, after long usage, seem to a people to be fixed, canonical, and binding.” So-called truths, he observed, “are metaphors that have become worn out and have been drained of sensuous force.” Concepts, and the logics they entail, are the “*residue of a metaphor*.”

Imperial nations are prone to literalizing metaphors into truths. Vico’s *New Science*, contra Descartes, understood the cycle of cultural innovation and decline as a process of insight followed by development leading to decay. Metaphor, in Vico’s model, is the linguistic vehicle of *ingenium*, the human faculty for seeing similarities among differences. As a creative act of knowledge, an exercise of imagination, it produces fresh insights. As a rhetorical act, it finds and draws on images that function as *topoi* to invent arguments and build logics into socio-cultural constructs that resist critique and demand conformity in the name of truth. Society rigidifies and crumbles as it loses touch with its mythic origins. It fails to recognize that its concepts were founded on dynamic metaphors, themselves myths in miniature, visions that evoke narratives.

Understanding society as a cyclical process of symbolic action brings into focus the relationship of rhetoric and reality to myth and ritual. Kenneth Burke provocatively explains how rhetoric cycles through the victimage ritual to sustain hierarchies by sacrificing scapegoats. The governing order is ritually redeemed “by blaming all its many troubles on the other.” Hence, the imperial “Cult of the Kill” (Burke 1970, 5, 236). In the 19th century, José Martí warned that no empire is innocent of what Burke (1969, 265) called the “exaltation” of sacrificial human offerings:

[Among American Indians] there are sacrifices of beautiful young maidens made to invisible gods in Heaven just as in Greece, where often there were so many sacrifices that there was no need to build altars for new ceremonies, because the pile of ashes of the last burn was so high that the priests could lay their sacrificial victims on them; there were human sacrifices like the one by Abraham the Hebrew, who tied Isaac over the wood pile to kill him with his own hands because he thought he heard voices from Heaven which ordered him to plunge his knife into

his son, so that his blood would satiate his god; there were public sacrifices in the Plaza Mayor in Spain, in front of bishops and kings, when the Inquisition burned men alive, with pomp and circumstance, while the Madrid ladies observed the burning from their balconies. Ignorance and superstition turn human beings into barbarians in all nations. And about the Indians more than is just has been said about these things by the victorious Spaniards, who exaggerated and invented the defects of the defeated race, so that their own cruelty would appear just and convenient to the world. (Martí 1995, 116. Trans Oscar Giner)

Mark Twain (1992, 479) once lamented that a handful of Missouri lynchers had “given us a character and labeled us with a name,” making the U.S. known globally as the “United States of Lyncherdom.”

2. Empire’s Resistance to Critique

Comic correctives, in Kenneth Burke’s (1984, 166-75; 1969, 19-23) sense of the term, are required to deflect the tragic trajectory of victimage, to bridge the human divide, and to reduce the imperial impulse to dominate and kill. Empire is devoid of a comic perspective. Acknowledging and retrieving dead metaphors would be destabilizing. Instead, the cultural and political legitimacy of American empire rests precariously on a lifeless image of democracy. It exists in a state of symbolic denial. All that remains of democracy in the imperial image is an empty gesture, a simulacrum, a trace of collective self-governance.

In 1922, H.L. Mencken (2010, 303-304, 333) asked himself the question “Why am I still here?” after American artists and intellectuals had departed—and called others to depart—U.S. shores for “fairer lands” in Europe. Mencken’s essay, “On Being an American,” stands as an engaging critique of American exceptionalism:

Here, more than anywhere else that I know of or have heard of, the daily panorama of human existence, of private and communal folly—the unending procession of governmental extortions and chicaneries, of commercial brigandages and throat-slittings, of theological buffooneries, of aesthetic ribaldries, of legal swindles and harlotries, of miscellaneous rogueries, villainies, imbecilities, grotesqueries, and extravagances—is so inordinately gross and preposterous, so perfectly brought up to the highest conceivable amperage, so steadily enriched with an almost fabulous daring and originality, that only the man who was born with a petrified diaphragm can fail to laugh himself to sleep every night, and to awake every morning with all the eager, unflagging expectation of a Sunday-school superintendent touring the Paris peep shows.

Almost a century later, one might conclude that the glaring flaws of the nation’s political system are not a particular idiosyncrasy, but rather a central element of North American culture. “Here in the very citadel of democracy,” Mencken writes, “we found and cherish a clown *dynasty!*”

Mencken’s (2010, 303-304, 333) characterization is the product of the vision of a trickster prophet. Like Babylon, the Republic has “glorified herself,” and her

citizens—plagued by the worms of belief in a manifest destiny—have become biblical scribes and Pharisees: “whited sepulchres,” beautiful outside, but “within full of dead men’s bones, and of all uncleanness” (*Holy Bible* 1984, Revelation 18:7; Matthew 23:27). In the entrails of empire, overrun by the weight of dead metaphors, trickster’s howl is not heard and trickster’s humor is ignored. Prophets are killed, scourged or crucified only when they threaten empires.

Imperial rule is lethal, but it is also rhetorically moribund. A worn regime of exclusion, surveillance, and coercion displaces the spirited politics of inclusion and contestation. Canonical images operate in the war state just below the threshold of critical reflection. They goad the public to defend the citadel of democracy and to smite projected demons. The act of demonizing adversaries denatures peace-making and naturalizes warfare. Depicting war as rhythmical, timeless, migratory, clean, and heroic lends it a sense of necessity and inevitability. A vast landscape of habituated imagery diminishes political life, reduces political discourse to mythic incantations of war propaganda, and renders polity robotic like drone warfare.

The Roman Empire has served as a constant model for the imperial aspirations of a young U.S. nation, complete with restrained but unresolved tensions between the quest for greatness and a call for justice. The story of Spartacus, “founded on that passage of Roman history where the slaves—Gallic, Spanish, Thracian and African—rose against their masters, and formed themselves into a military organization,” proved meaningful to the American cultural imaginary in the 19th century. The first American-born tragedian Edwin Forrest (1806-1872) won national renown in the role of Spartacus in Robert Montgomery Bird’s (1806-1854) *The Gladiator*. Walt Whitman (1952, 544-45) witnessed a performance of the play in 1846: “From footlights to lobby doors—from floor to dome—were packed crowds of people last night at the Park Theatre, New York, to see Mr. Forrest in *The Gladiator*.” Whitman admired Forrest’s delivery of the speech of Spartacus “in which he attributes the grandeur and the wealth of Rome, to her devastation of other countries.” In chains, Spartacus speaks when he sees the palaces of Rome for the first time:

If Romans had not been fiends, Rome had never been great! Whence came this greatness, but from the miseries of subjugated nations? How many myriads of happy people ... were slain like beasts of the field, that Rome might fatten upon their blood, and become great?...There is not a palace upon these hills that cost not the lives of a thousand innocent men; there is no deed of greatness ye can boast, but it was achieved upon the ruin of a nation; there is no joy you can feel, but its ingredients are blood and tears. (Bird 1997, 179-80)

In 1960, just before the John F. Kennedy administration assumed power heralding a “New Frontier,” Stanley Kubrick’s film *Spartacus* premiered in Hollywood. The screenplay was written by Dalton Trumbo, based on the novel by Howard Fast

(1960). Both writers had been imprisoned and blacklisted in Hollywood during the national persecution of film artists and producers with past communist associations. In the film (produced by Kirk Douglas' Bryna Productions), the Roman patrician Crassus (Laurence Olivier) shows his young slave Antoninus (Tony Curtis) a panoramic view of Rome from his villa. Roman cohorts march in the distance *en route* to quell Spartacus' slave rebellion. Crassus describes the fabled city in the distance, and the empire for which it stands:

The might, the majesty, the terror of Rome....There is the power that bestrides the known world, like a colossus. No nation can withstand Rome. No man can withstand her....You must serve her. You must abase yourself before her. You must grovel at her feet. You must love her.

The American Legion sent a letter to "17,000 local posts" warning them to NOT SEE *Spartacus*. One influential columnist wrote: "The story was sold ... from a book written by a Commie and the screen script was written by a Commie, so don't go see it." But JFK—with a more perceptive understanding of mythic evocations—"sneaked out of the White House in the middle of a snowstorm one night, to go see *Spartacus* at the Warner Theater" (Douglas 1988, 294, 305).

3. Transgressive Tricksters

Living in the post-9/11 war state is a stupefying experience akin to the "psychic numbing" of Cold War nuclearism and the prospect of mutual assured destruction (Lifton and Mitchell 1995, 337-40). War delineates the arc of U.S. history (Anderson and Cayton 2005) and permeates the whole of American culture (Sherry 1995; Kelly Denton-Barhaug 2011). Militarism is as unexceptional and unremarkable as the air one breathes. It is an everyday occurrence and a totalizing worldview fully integrated with the nation's favorite modes of entertainment (Stahl 2010). Even the primal myth of American exceptionalism, with its notions of national innocence and superiority, is reified in public discourse. The religious image of redemptive warfare by a righteous people on an errand to vanquish evil and to spread the blessings of liberty is a taken-for-granted premise of secular society (Hughes 2003).

On posters during a presidential trip in 2002, on car bumper stickers, on signs raised by protesters in Washington during the second inaugural, the harsh, mocking laughter of trickster was heard ridiculing George W. Bush: "Send the twins to Iraq!" The call was for the president to send his 20-year old daughters to serve in his war. It pointed out the hypocrisy of North American ruling classes, and conjured the political lessons contained in the classic tale of the Greek armies that mustered at Aulis for the Trojan War.

Send the twins to Iraq because the Achaeans have gathered at Aulis and profaned

the countryside, killing a hare “bursting with young unborn,” and Artemis “the undefiled” has bound the fleet with crosswinds until Iphigeneia is slaughtered by her own father. In spite of its seeming barbarity, the command of the virgin goddess of nature and wild things was a metaphor for a wise policy that imposed trauma in order to arrest war. Before the Greeks sailed to Ilion, the allied host was forced to prove its conviction that the war was worthy and necessary (Aeschylus 1953, lines 119, 133).

An exchange between King Agamemnon and Queen Clytemnestra in Euripides’ *Iphigeneia at Aulis* reveals the political conflict that could be solved only through Iphigeneia’s execution. The Queen, protecting her daughter, argues:

Let Menelaos
to whom it matters most, after all, cut his own
daughter’s throat.

Agamemnon, affirming the political necessity of Greek nation-states, replies:

Being Greeks,
we must not be subject to barbarians,
we must not let them carry off our wives.

Proof of his conviction will be the sacrifice of his firstborn daughter, for Artemis demands a human tax before the war is fought (Euripides 1978, lines 1611-13, 1710-12).

There is no guarantee that trickster’s twists and turns will yield a comic corrective, for war making as an expression of personal and national identity is easy compared to peace-building. Ivie (2007, 1) has noted that the “rhetorical presumption of war’s necessity makes the violence regrettable but [seemingly] sane, rational, right, proper, and easier than bearing the heavy burden of dissenting from war”—that “placing one’s self or loved ones in harm’s way seems less difficult and more reassuring than questioning the necessity, legitimacy, or sanity of war in any given case.” This is the tyranny of war culture, but trickster’s opportunity turns up most readily when the warmonger is extracted a cost, or made to pay a personal price for his war.

In Euripides’ (1973) *Iphigeneia in Tauris*, the daughter of Agamemnon is spirited away by Artemis at the moment of death and taken to the land of the Taurians. Embittered at the grave injustices committed against her, Iphigeneia becomes the priestess who dedicates human victims at the sacrificial shrine of Artemis. Only when it comes to sacrificing her brother Orestes does she acknowledge her complicity in the human sacrifices of the Taurians. Only when the sacrificial knife threatens our own do we feel dissonance, and recognize our own shadow projections

for what they are. The emotional distress produced by trauma, especially when the trauma is brought home to those in positions of power, conjures trickster as compensation, in an attempt to restore harmony and balance to the universe. The resolution of Iphigeneia's tension through a tricksterish recognition of her victim as her own brother—a comic corrective to the tragic plot—allows her to reject the sacrificial knife, and escape to Argos with Orestes, with the blessings of Athena.

4. Empire's Continuous War on Evil

The basic logic of U.S. war culture is premised unreflectively on an illusory specter of chaos. To regress into chaos is to reenter a dark, formless, and meaningless void. Chaos symbolizes disorder, a condition of disorientation, a negation of life. Evildoers, appeasement, dominoes, and containment are metaphors taken literally in the context of U.S. foreign affairs. They convey the fear of a cataclysmic event, a collapse of civilization, which prods the nation to preserve a tenuous world order. In columnist Charles Krauthammer's (*Washington Post*, March 27, 2014) opinion, "The alternative to U.S. leadership is either global chaos or dominance by the likes of China, Russia and Iran." Likewise, intones the U.S. Department of State (2015), terrorism is the scourge of world order, a menace that can be removed only by prolonged warfare:

Terrorist networks currently pose the greatest national security threat to the United States . . . [Al-Qaida] aims to overthrow the existing world order and replace it with a reactionary, authoritarian, transnational entity. This threat will be sustained over a protracted period (decades not years) and will require a global response.

This logic makes a perfect enemy of the Islamic State. The barbarity of the designated enemy affirms America's heroic role as enlightened defender of civilization. The American president considers what kind and how much of a military engagement the U.S. should undertake against the "cancer" of the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria. High-ranking officials in his administration (the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, the Secretary of Defense, and the Secretary of State) characterize the Islamic State as a "barbaric" and "apocalyptic" terrorist organization that must be "contained," "defeated," and "destroyed" because it poses an "imminent threat." This enemy is "beyond anything we've seen," the Defense Secretary insists, "so we must prepare for everything" (Spencer Ackerman, *Guardian*, August 22, 2014).

Richard Cohen (*Washington Post*, August 25, 2014), a political commentator who supported the George W. Bush administration's decision to invade Iraq, insists that the U.S. is "once again up against the question of evil." The Islamic State

is “pure evil.” It “murders with abandon. It seems to love death the way the fascists once did.” This reincarnation of the Nazis, Cohen asserts, is “beyond explication.” It would be “futile and tasteless” to lay the blame on the U.S., colonialists of old, Zionists of today, or the rich and powerful. No one can understand a Hitler. Any attempt to explain the inexplicable amounts to a justification of “evil returned, evil that can be understood only as beyond understanding.” The “category of evil remains useful” because “it assigns agency where it belongs.” Evil simply “needs to be eliminated.”

This reification of evil proscribes any attempt to understand the causes, motives, and reasons behind the violence and thereby exonerates the U.S. for past, present, and future actions in the Middle East. It stuns a people’s mental faculties, blinds them to the complexity of the situation, and commits the nation to a narrow mindset of eradication as the only viable option, while exposing would-be critics to the charge of condoning atrocity.

Imperial warfare is continuous and self-perpetuating. It possesses a certain rhythm, an ebb and flow of featured enemies, as it shifts from venue to venue. With the emergence of the Islamic State, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi is declared the world’s most powerful, violent, and anti-American jihadist, Osama bin Laden’s true heir. Middle Eastern chaos and extremism are deemed resurgent (Patrick Cockburn, *The Independent*, June 11, 2014; David Ignatius *Washington Post*, June 10, 2014). The rhythm of enemy making ritualistically renews war, keeping the public synchronized with the war state and resigned to the global war of terrorism.

The rhythm of imperial warfare is as constant as the ocean tides. The symbol of the sea, as Michael Osborn (1977) has explained, is archetypal. It sets off a primal emotional response. It can convey a sense of inevitability, peril, adventure, and redemption. At the turn of the 20th century, U.S. Senator Albert Beveridge imagined the ocean as an avenue of U.S. imperialism that rendered the world contiguous. In a speech at the Naval War College, Theodore Roosevelt (1897) recalled the “glorious triumphs at sea” of the War of 1812. Before “everyman of really far-sighted patriotism,” he argued for the “possession of a sufficient” armed navy fleet:

Those who wish to see this country at peace with foreign nations will be wise if they place reliance upon a first-class fleet of first-class battleships rather than on any arbitration treaty which the wit of man can devise.... Peace is a goddess only when she comes with sword girt on thigh. The ship of state can be steered safely only when it is possible to bring her against any foe with “her leashed thunders gathering for the leap.”

The continuous ebb and flow of the global war on terrorism is a naturalizing balm. It gives imperial warfare a comprehensible form. The tide of war rises and falls rhythmically with the pull of the moon. One day, the news is military success

against the Islamic State (Jim Michaels, *USA Today*, December 4, 2014). The enemy's advance has been halted; plans are afoot to retake the lost territories. High tide. The next day, the news is military setback: "The main al-Qaeda affiliate in Syria is extending its control over a swath of territory that was until recently held by the collapsing moderate opposition, jeopardizing U.S. plans to form a new rebel force to fight extremists" (Liz Sly, *Washington Post*, December 5, 2014). Low tide.

Dead metaphors impart to imperial warfare a sense of timelessness. The mythos of timelessness goes unnoticed as it makes war an ongoing, continual, unending struggle against relentless evil, an eternal cycle of attack-defense-victory-attack, a millennial contest with the devil that transforms chronic conflicts into a transcendent, forever war.

Speaking at the National Defense University, President Obama (2013) allowed that America was at a "crossroads" where it must define its effort "not as a boundless 'global war on terror,' but rather as a series of persistent, targeted efforts to dismantle specific networks of violent extremists." The language of "a series" represents war as persistent. Continuity intersects with change at a point of transition. Invisible Hecate, goddess of the crossroads, mythically inhabits this ghostly place where dark deeds congress with her beauty and purity, her timeless presence suggesting the uncertainty that flows from the coincidence of good and evil. The symbol and image of Hecate is undetectable in a presidential speech the through-line of which begins with the acknowledgment that Americans are deeply ambivalent about the war. So was Macbeth after hearing the triple prophecy of the witches upon Hecate's heath. The cautionary words of Banquo fall on deaf ears:

Oftentimes, to win us to our harm
The instruments of darkness tell us truths,
Win us with honest trifles, to betray's
In deepest consequence. (Shakespeare 1993, 1.4.134-137)

The present war, like every war, intoned Obama (2013), must "come to an end"; yet, "our systematic effort to dismantle terrorist organizations must continue" because "our nation is still threatened by terrorists." America's fight enters "a new phase." The U.S. cannot remain on a "perpetual wartime footing," but it must "continue to fight terrorism." Success on all fronts requires a "long-term strategy" and "sustained engagement." War persists and will continue, like the line of Banquo's heirs, "to th' crack of doom" (Shakespeare 1993, 4.2.127).

5. Migratory-Pristine-Heroic-Routine War

War is forever, and it migrates. It moves from one place to another in search

of enemies to engage. Obama's (2013) speech was about defending the homeland by pursuing terrorists in distant lands. The long war against terrorism began with 9/11, sending Americans first to Afghanistan and Iraq, then the battleground shifted to Yemen, Somalia, and North Africa. The continuing hunt for al Qaeda affiliates takes U.S. military forces to "distant and unforgiving places . . . remote tribal regions . . . caves and walled compounds . . . empty deserts and rugged mountains." These are the faraway places that constitute the "imminent threat" to "our cities at home and our facilities abroad." History advises America to pursue terrorist leaders and organizations relentlessly. The President's image of place does not imply everywhere war so much as migratory war, something that travels, that is mobile and peripatetic, that perpetually moves from one battlefield to the next. The U.S. follows the threat wherever the enemy appears.

Imperial war is also technologically clean. Drones—unmanned aerial vehicles—are a signature weapon of clean, precisely targeted, warfare. In the insect world, drones are fast flying male bees with big eyes but no stinger. In the military world, drones are equipped with advanced optics and armed with Hellfire missiles. They are named Predator and Reaper and used to smite evil terrorists. The mythical undertone of these slayer drones with their Gorgon Stare is underappreciated for its power to legitimize automated warfare. The lethal Reaper drone insinuates the Grim Reaper, death's personification in the figure of the hooded skeleton carrying a scythe to sever body from soul. Just as the biblical Angel of Death, the Reaper drone serves implicitly as imperial America's destroying angel.

Clean war is the work of the gods. Its contrast with dirty war is ritually purifying, even if the perpetrators are the empire's own warriors. The Oscar-nominated documentary, *Dirty Wars* (2013), is illustrative. The war crimes of Commander-in-Chief Barack Obama and his Joint Special Operations Command (JSOC) are uncovered and exposed for public condemnation. The film, featuring the investigative journalism of Jeremy Scahill, unfolds in the style of a conspiracy thriller. JSOC is a "shadowy outfit" with a growing "hit list" and a presidential order to kill. These special forces are "assassins" killing innocent civilians in the night, "war masters" fighting a war of terror, which extends from home invasions to torture and murder. They make America look like a terror state, until they kill Osama bin Laden to earn official recognition and public acclaim.

Condemning dirty wars indirectly affirms wars that conform to the rules. Rule-governed war is just war. War itself is obliquely redeemed by the negative examples of rogue soldiers (and the war crimes of enemies). Purifying rituals put the nation in touch with the divine. They serve as an unacknowledged mythic "control system" for glorifying militarism (Campbell 2002, xxiii).

America's pristine-migratory-perpetual warfare is heroic, the pride of patriots.

Soldiers fighting evil terrorists are empire's equivalent to the biblical David slaying Goliath. In Abrahamic mythology, God enabled His people to destroy evil giants and to occupy their land. The chosen people ousted outsized pagans from the Promised Land. Not timid Saul, but brave David, "a man of valor, a warrior," led the army that secured Israel and Judah (*Holy Bible* 1977, 1 Samuel 16:18). Virtue and courage overcome the bluster of evil. The faithful underdog is victorious over those who have "defied the armies of the living God" (*Holy Bible* 1977, 1 Samuel 17: 36). Imperialism is transformed from aggressor to defender.

The mythic underdog is expected to lose. He is the good guy, not the imperialist with the biggest military budget and the most sophisticated weapons. The expected winner is the foreign giant, the personification of evil savagery. Justice prevails when the little guy surprisingly beats the big guy. Walter Pincus' (*Washington Post*, September 29, 2014) story of the "Islamic State's Bloody Message Machine" is a case in point. The Islamic State, he reports, is a barbaric enemy, but it has developed a 21st century global media platform that gives it superpowers. Its propaganda spews forth in social media, pamphlets, magazines, billboards, t-shirts, and baseball caps. The message machine includes professionally staged videos of beheadings and a captive British journalist criticizing the U.S. bombing campaign. Video games are used to recruit more jihadists. "The Islamic State PR team has a big advantage when it comes to the propaganda war" in a region of the world that is "hospitable to anti-West and particularly anti-U.S. messaging." These slick barbarians get away with calling the U.S. president a "mule of the Jews." Americans "will pay the price," they taunt, for meddling with Islam. The U.S. has been outmaneuvered on foreign terrain. It must rely on unreliable Iraqis and Syrians to win not only the ground war but also the propaganda war.

Stories like the one Walter Pincus tells tacitly convert the enemy into the giant and assign the U.S. the heroic underdog role, which helps to sustain an incessant war of terror by a nation that routinely celebrates military heroes. The hero, one of mythology's central motifs, affirms the national identity by associating it with the courageous warrior, crusader, and rescuer. It tells Americans they are a brave and honorable people, morally inspired, on a quest to overcome evil in the far reaches of the world. It is a primitive story based on a primordial image, an unprocessed attitude about violence and right behavior, Carl Jung (1976, 39, 42, 44) observed. The hero fights the forces of darkness. To slay the menacing dragon of evil is to redeem the vulnerable virtues of life (Jung 1969).

All of this and more is the naturalized symbol system that imparts automatic and undemocratic consent to imperial war. It makes war justification efficient. It takes the president only fifteen ceremonial minutes on primetime television to renew the nation's war commitment by announcing that America's new enemy in

the ongoing war on terrorism is the Islamic State (ISIL). This enemy is neither Islamic nor a state, he says, but instead a terrorist organization that kills innocent people.

The president's speech wastes no time (Obama 2014). He steps up to the White House lectern and begins without preliminaries or pause. He reiterates the standard rationale for war: the enemy is "evil"; "it has no vision other than the slaughter of all who stand in its way"; its "acts of barbarism" include killing children, raping and enslaving women, threatening a religious minority with genocide, and beheading two American journalists; the U.S. and its "broad coalition of partners" will meet this threat "with strength and resolve"; America's objective is to "hunt down," "degrade, and ultimately destroy" these terrorists "wherever they are; this is a "steady, relentless" fight for freedom and security and to defend the nation's values; "it will take time to eradicate a cancer like ISIL"; but Americans can be confident about the country's future; "American leadership is the one constant in an uncertain world"; "God bless our troops, and may God bless the United States of America." That said, the president turns and walks deliberately away from the lectern. No questions are asked. The president is exercising his authority. He welcomes Congressional support, but it is unnecessary.

If there had been a debate worthy of democracy, questions at issue would have included: Is there a military solution to this problem? What would a political solution to the crisis require? What are the alternatives to military force, including diplomacy and cutting off the flow of weapons and funds to ISIL? Is the retraining of the Iraqi military by the U.S. more likely to be successful than the failed initial training of the Iraqi military by the U.S.? Will today's military commitment eventually grow to include substantial numbers of U.S. combat troops, not just air strikes? How much money will the fight against ISIL require? Is U.S. military intervention counterproductive? Will it serve primarily to recruit more jihadists? What are the chances of the conflict spreading beyond Iraq and Syria? Is there an endpoint, a way out, a measure of victory in a war against ISIL? How enduring is public support for such a war?

Such questions are considered beyond the pale of public discourse in the war state. They are unreasonable, rude, unpatriotic, or simply naïve. War is fact. Information rules the modern world of empire. Objectivity is the standard of thought. Realists think in metrics. All they need is objective data. Facts reflect reality. The war on terror is about defeating an actual enemy. Terrorism is fact. Peacemaking is myth. Myth is primitive, wishful thinking that is neither mathematical nor objective. By this logic, those who dissent from the endless and boundless war on terror are automatically removed to the margins of rationality. Those who support the war, even fervently, are realists.

A kind of secular demonolatry gives to imperial warfare and its supporters the presumption of realism. Russian President Vladimir Putin, the Islamic State, Al-Qaeda, and other demons are the nation's preoccupation, the monsters and fiends sacrificed in war's ongoing victimage ritual. For those who literalize the Bible in a land that sees itself blessed by God, the obsession with salvation from evil spirits promotes conformity, authoritarianism, and an expectation of apocalypse. They are subconsciously massaged by metaphor, symbolism, imagery, and emotionalism, which short-circuits their capacity for critical thinking (Winnell and Tarico 2014). Yet, this kind of unacknowledged demonology is a mainline and secular, not just a fundamentalist and religious, phenomenon in the world of American exceptionalism.

If there is hope, it will come from across the frozen river. A loping savior must tread desert paths to bring among us the ancient medicine of chaos, and the comic salve of laughter. Old Man Coyote portends a democratic corrective to the stubborn but waning rule of American empire.

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