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Media, Democracy, Hegemony



This chapter argues that the press is full of promise and fraught with peril: It can be an instrument of democracy, or of hegemony. We'll apply this maxim to the subject of American foreign policy by examining the dominant, press-preferred story of American foreign policy and offering an untold story about America's role in the world.

We begin by asking, How important is a free press to democracy? It's so important, we'll discover, that democracy is simply not possible without a free press, which is why the Founding Fathers and the Supreme Court have given the press a privileged place in our Constitution.

Next we'll ask, What do a people who mean to be their own governors need from the press? Again, the Founders, their Constitution, and its interpreter, the Supreme Court, will help us with the answer: For democracy to work, the press must be a "watchdog of the people" and a "marketplace of ideas."

But what happens when the media's power, "the power to tell a society's stories," falls into the hands of "a shrinking group of global conglomerates with nothing to tell but a great deal to sell" (George Gerbner, in Jhally 1997). This question will lead us to the theory of "cultural hegemony." The word *hegemony* can be briefly defined as "domination."

In this case, it is the domination of a people's culture—ways of thinking, believing, and behaving—by those who own the culture's "idea factories," such as the mass media. Our look at hegemony theory will focus on the thoughts of one of its pioneers, Antonio Gramsci.

We'll see that some of Gramsci's observations fit our media to a T. Once it is complete, he said, hegemony is institutionalized, built into the rules and routines of a society's institutions. In the case of the media, the rule that's rigged the game is the commercial imperative—the rule that says the main business of the media is business. This chapter begins the argument that the rule's long-established hold on the media has grown even stronger in recent years, as conglomerate corporations have taken ever-larger pieces of the ownership pie.

Next, we'll turn to the hegemonic message itself. What is the dominant story of American foreign policy told to us by our mass media? And is there evidence of this story's influence over our thinking? As we'll see, the hegemonic story is a tale of America's benevolence in the world and of an American "right to lead," by military force if necessary, that follows from this benevolence. We'll see that the "Bush Doctrine" of preemptive war was presented by the White House and accepted by the press as a logical and necessary extension of this hegemonic story of American foreign policy.

Finally, we'll do a "reverse content analysis," asking what stories are *not there* in press coverage of foreign policy. Here we'll discover the relatively untold story of American economic imperialism. We'll hear this story not because it is the one true account of American foreign policy. There are other accounts, and they too are tenable. Rather, we'll hear this story because, despite the press's professed devotion to telling "both sides" of the story, this is the side not told. In our "marketplace of ideas," this is the shelf that is empty.

In this story, we'll learn

- Why the corporate sector is sometimes called our "fourth branch of government";
- Why President Eisenhower warned us of a "disastrous rise of misplaced power" involving the "military-industrial complex";
- How the United States builds and maintains its empire, by means that Henry Kissinger said are "not missionary work"—and how this dark history, in particular of U.S. support for brutal repressions and regimes, has been met in the American press by an eerie silence;
- How American policy in the Persian Gulf has produced considerable suffering and massive "blowback" against the United States,

prompting even more violent interventions—and how the press has spun this story into one of American beneficence and heroism;

- How our Manichaeian media see the world in black and white, good and evil, creating a “mean world syndrome” that teaches us fear and hatred—and how useful that fear is to press and politicians alike;
- Why we should be less terrified of terrorism than we are—and how the fear of terrorism has been stoked beyond reason in pursuit of ratings and votes;
- Finally, how the “globalization” now facilitated by U.S. foreign policy has been a boon to wealthy Americans and a bane to many American workers.

With this chapter as prologue—the press and democracy, hegemony, a dominant story and an untold one about America’s role in the world—we will be ready to begin our case study of how the press has covered America at war in the 21st century.

❖ DEMOCRACY AND THE PRESS

How important is a free press to democracy? To Thomas Jefferson and James Madison, the answer was simple: no free press, no free country—no democracy.¹ “A popular government without popular information or the means of acquiring it,” said Madison, “is but a prologue to a farce or a tragedy or perhaps both. Knowledge will forever govern ignorance, and a people who mean to be their own governors must arm themselves with the power knowledge gives” (Madison 1822).

In case we were wondering where that “popular information” will come from, Jefferson chimes in. Liberty is not safe, he says, “without information.” But “where the press is free, and every man able to read, all is safe” (1816).

What the Founders understood was that, in the modern world of printing press and nation-state, each of us lives in “two worlds” (Bagdikian 2004, p. xii). One is the world in which personal experience and face-to-face interactions help us form our beliefs and attitudes, just as they have done throughout human history.

And then there is another very important world that is beyond the horizon of our own eyes and ears. Journalist Walter Lippmann, writing

¹Strictly speaking, the terms *democracy* and *freedom* are anachronistic here, because they were not in favor among the Founders. They preferred the terms *republic* and *liberty*. Madison explains why in *The Federalist Papers*, #10 (Hacker 1964, pp. 16–24).

in the wake of World War I, asks us to consider “Miss Sherwin of Gopher Prairie” as she grapples with this “other world.” She is aware that a war is raging in France and tries to conceive it. “She has never been to France, and certainly she has never been along what is now the battlefield” (1922, p. 12).

Despite this formidable handicap, Ms. Sherwin is asked to make important decisions about the war in France. As one of Madison’s “people who would be their own governors,” Ms. Sherwin is asked to consider whether it is a just war, whether the United States should enter the war or not, and then to cast a vote, pass a petition, demonstrate, or write a letter to a congressman. But given her handicap—these events and debates are not happening in her ambit—how can she consider such life and death questions? How can she make such fateful decisions?

The answer to this crucial question is, of course, a free press that can serve as Ms. Sherwin’s other-world eyes and ears, open to all the far-flung events and debates she cannot personally see or hear. And now we see why, for Madison and Jefferson, modern democracy is not possible without a free press. Because without it, Ms. Sherwin—and we are all Ms. Sherwin—is blind and deaf to the world she is asked to help govern.

What Does Ms. Sherwin Need From the Press?

The first crucial role the press is asked to play for democracy is that of watchdog of the people, guarding against the tendency of those in power to take more than their share of social wealth and influence.

Thomas Jefferson began his earlier-cited tribute to a free press with these words: “The functionaries of every government have propensities to command at will the liberty and property of their constituents” (1816). And it is in response to this concern that Jefferson offers up a free press, to act as a kind of people’s watchdog, alerting us when there are powerful prowlers afoot.

This tendency of the powerful to overreach themselves is especially likely to emerge in one particular situation, adds Madison, and his observation implies the need for an especially alert watchdog in that situation—the moment of war.

Of all the true enemies of liberty, war is, perhaps, the most to be dreaded, because it comprises and develops the germ of every other. War is the parent of armies; from these proceed debts and taxes, and debts and taxes are the known instruments for bringing the many under the domination of the few. In war, too, the discretionary power

of the executive is extended . . . and all the means of seducing the minds, are added to those of subduing the force, of the people. The same malignant aspect . . . may be traced in the inequality of fortunes, and the opportunities of fraud, growing out of a state of war, and in the degeneracy of manners and of morals, engendered in both. No nation can preserve its freedom in the midst of continual warfare. . . .

War is, in fact, the true nurse of executive aggrandizement. In war, a physical force is to be created, and it is the executive . . . patronage under which they are to be enjoyed. It is in war, finally, that laurels are to be gathered; and it is the executive brow they are to encircle. The strongest passions, and the most dangerous weaknesses of the human breast, ambition, avarice, vanity, the honorable or venial love of fame, are all in conspiracy against the desire and duty of peace. (1793)

The press's watchdog role is, in fact, so important to popular sovereignty that it was, in a real sense, written into the U.S. Constitution. Supreme Court Justice Potter Stewart explains that the First Amendment's free-press clause was intended to allow the "organized expert scrutiny of government" by the press, and "to create a fourth institution outside the government as an additional check on the three official branches" (1975, p. 634).

The Supreme Court has also endorsed this "watchdog" view of the First Amendment's free-press clause, in the landmark case of *New York Times v. Sullivan*. As it granted the press wide latitude to bark at public figures, the Court said that "public men are, as it were, public property," and that "discussion cannot be denied and the right, as well as the duty, of criticism must not be stifled." Laws that restrict this freedom, indeed, this "duty," of the press "reflect the obsolete doctrine that the governed must not criticize their governors."

In addition to people's watchdog, there is also a second vital role that democracy asks the press to perform: that of "marketplace of ideas"—a teeming bazaar of competing perspectives that Americans can weigh and balance, in order to come to their own conclusions. Once again, in granting the press wide latitude to do its job, the Supreme Court's *Sullivan* decision declared that the "marketplace of ideas" role was also important enough to warrant constitutional protection. The First Amendment, said the Court, "was fashioned to assure unfettered interchange of ideas for the bringing about of political and social changes desired by the people." Quoting Judge Learned Hand's ringing defense of democracy, the Court said, "The First Amendment proposes that right conclusions are more likely to be gathered out of a multitude of

tongues than through any kind of authoritative selection. To many, this is, and always will be, folly; but we have staked upon it our all."

How important is a free press to democracy? It is simple: no free press—no watchdog of the people, no marketplace of ideas—no free country. Together, these two press roles stand as the necessary underpinnings of any successful democracy. They are the standard we shall set for the press as we assess its performance in the coverage of recent wars.

The Promise and the Peril of Mass Media

The pen, it is said, is mightier than the average sword. Indeed, the mass media's pen is no ordinary weapon, but a two-edged sword. It has the power to enable democracy. But wielded another way, it can also erode democracy, helping it to degenerate, as Aristotle feared it would, into oligarchy—rule by the few—or into plutocracy—rule by the wealthy.

Few have understood both the promise and the peril of modern media as well as media effects researcher George Gerbner. Gerbner begins his discussion of the media's power by observing that "the basic difference between human beings and other animals is that we live in a world created by the stories we tell" (in Jhally 1997). By "stories," Gerbner means more than a few fictional narratives. These stories are our ur-stories—the underlying beliefs and values that guide our thinking about what is and what ought to be, beliefs and values "woven together into an invisible web called culture." Indeed, Gerbner defines culture as "the stories and messages that govern our way of life and our behavior." The power to tell these stories is the power to control the culture, says Gerbner, quoting Scottish statesman Andrew Fletcher: "If one person were able to write the ballads of a country, he would not need to care who makes the laws."

And here is Gerbner's concern about that power. "For hundreds of thousands of years," he says, "a culture's stories were told face to face." Then, suddenly, with the invention of the printing press, there began "the industrialization of story telling, the ability to stamp out large quantities of stories." And an even more sudden shock was to come, in the early years of the 20th century, with the simultaneous advent of mass production and the advertising industry needed to sell all those mass-produced goods, together with the electronic revolution. A mere century later,

For the first time in human history, a child today is born into an environment in which the television is on more than seven hours a

day, a home in which most of the stories, most of the time, to most of the children, are told no longer by the parent, by the school, or the church, but instead by a shrinking group of global conglomerates that really have nothing to tell, but a lot to sell. (Gerbner, in Jhally 1997)

Now Gerbner has brought us up to the moment, where we meet our next question: How will democracy fare when private corporations own most of a culture's storytelling apparatus? When in fact, "five corporations dominate one of the two worlds in which every modern person is destined to live" (Bagdikian 2004, p. 10).

❖ THE THEORY OF CULTURAL HEGEMONY

For an answer, we turn to a thinker whose life's work focused on that question, the Italian political theorist Antonio Gramsci.

As a Marxist, Gramsci's idea of popular sovereignty was that sooner or later working-class men and women would see the injustice of life under capitalism and band together to change that life. Indeed, Karl Marx had sometimes seemed to suggest that such a people's revolution was inevitable—a matter of history taking its course (Marx 1988).

But already in 1927, as Gramsci began his great work, *The Prison Notebooks*, the rooftop of history had fallen in upon the notion of "inevitability." Himself imprisoned by Mussolini, the fascist dictator who had just consolidated his power in Italy, Gramsci surveyed a Western world where socialism seemed everywhere in retreat. Already, in 1927, it was clear that there would be no "of course" about history. And so, amid the rubble of the Marxian prediction, Gramsci wondered why.

The basis for what sometimes seems like cavalier optimism in Marx was his assumption that our culture—ways of thinking, believing, and behaving—is determined by our material circumstances.² Thus for a while, a property-owning class would be able to command the compliance of working-class people, browbeating them with the coercive powers of government and the undeniable demands of making a living. Eventually, though, the tensions of working-class life—of losing control of the fruits of one's labor, of how one worked, for what—would draw the working class to consciousness of its plight, to

²In fairness, though determinism is certainly on display in some of Marx's writings, the whole body of his work is more balanced. This economism/inevitabilism becomes categorical only later, in some of Marx's disciples (Abercrombie, Turner, and Hill 1980, p. 9).

resistance and revolt. And, argued many Marxists in the 1920s, wasn't the proof in the historical pudding? Hadn't Marx's scenario just been acted out in Russia?

But as Gramsci looked around him, he saw a Western world very different from Lenin's Russia. In Russia, a state that had lived by the sword, died by it—force was undone by force. But here, in the West, nations were stronger than coercion alone could make them; here, they also rested on the consent of the governed. To achieve that consent, the capitalist ruling class had to do more than deploy the police. It had to build and hold the barricades of "civil society,"³—all those places where political ideas and instincts are made and remade. All those places, Gerbner would say, where our stories are made: the schools, the political parties, the churches, the interest groups. Oh yes, and one more—perhaps the strongest barricade of all in our time—the mass media.

The flag to be captured on this battleground of civil society is what Gramsci called the "common sense"—the usually uncritical, often unconscious way in which most people perceive the world (Gramsci 1971, p. 419). This "common sense" is what Gerbner referred to as our "stories about how things are, how they work, and what to do about them" (Jhally 1997). Gramsci adds that these basic stories are so ingrained in us that we take their truth for granted. He called the conquest of these heart habits *egemonia*—hegemony.

Hegemony. Domination. It is an old sin, older than the ancient Greeks who first used the term *hegemony*. But Gramsci's understanding of it was new. The Greeks had used the term to describe the military domination of one city-state by another. In Gramsci, hegemony was not just military, but cultural, a conquering of a people's hearts and minds.

The great genius of Gramsci's account of this struggle is that it is full of healthy respect for all the combatants, which is not true of some accounts of "false consciousness" that ascribe only self-interest to the dominant and stupidity to the dominated. In Gramsci, to be sure, the common sense does protect ruling class power and privilege. But the propertied class has only succeeded in capturing the common

³Of course, Marx himself planted the seedling of this idea, which would grow to challenge both economic determinism and inevitabilism. The most famous passage is from the *German Ideology*: "The class which has the means of material production at its disposal, has control at the same time over the means of mental production, so that the ideas of those who lack the means of mental production are subject to it" (Marx and Engels 1964, p. 61).

sense by wrapping its ideology around a core of “good sense”—a set of genuinely worthy ideals.⁴

For example, one might argue that the ideal of freedom, which figures so prominently in the American common sense, ought to, because that word represents a deep human need. But somehow, propertied-class ideology has conquered that word and wrapped it in a particular meaning (freedom to do as I please with my property, free enterprise, free markets). That meaning, of course, tends to exclude other meanings more favorable to working- and lower-class people (freedom from poverty, freedom of a people to choose its civic destiny—even if the choice is to abrogate property).

Herbert Marcuse put the point this way: In our society, “speech moves in synonyms and tautologies” (1964, p. 88). Words that should begin debates, end them. Words whose meanings should be argued over are instead invariably defined by the status quo, where the “haves” have and the ruling class rules. The “free press” is our press, never mind that it is bound wrist and ankles by commercial imperatives (as Chapter 6 will argue), while news editors in other countries have no commercial overseers, leaving our press behind that of 30 other countries in the “Second World Press Freedom Ranking” (Reporters Without Borders 2003). “Success” is commercial success. “The American way” is the capitalists’ way. “The good life” is their life. Good words, words whose only limits should be limitless imagination, are, for the moment, bound to the service of one idea, one class.

But other meanings remain in them, latent, like the strength of Samson, awaiting their moment for a “counterhegemony” when the “good sense” emerges to challenge the “common sense” that usually keeps it under wraps. When this happens, says Gramsci, a society’s idea factories will try to “incorporate” the counterhegemony: to lasso it, tame it, and rewrap it in the embrace of the dominant ideology

⁴Is there “good sense” in the dominant ideology? As is often the case, Gramsci is ambiguous here. Clearly good sense involves a philosophical, critical mindset, as opposed to an unreflective one (Gramsci 1971, p. 419). But the conclusions such a mind will come to are not defined in the passages defining “good sense.” Abercrombie et al. take the good sense to be only that part of the common sense that opposes the dominant ideology (1980, pp. 14–15). But Gramsci described his own argument as one that began by trying to find, in his bourgeois adversaries, that which “should be incorporated . . . in his own construction” (1971, p. 344). And in the passage that most compels a finding of good sense in the dominant ideology, he allows that his own Marxism “presupposes all this cultural past: Renaissance and Reformation, German philosophy and the French Revolution, Calvinism and English classical economics, secular liberalism. . . . The philosophy of praxis is the crowning point of this entire movement of intellectual and moral reformation” (p. 344).

(1971, pp. 395–398). For example, when the Women’s Movement emerged to challenge, among other things, fundamental features of capitalism, capitalism moved to “incorporate” or “co-opt” feminism—creating countless advertisements that simultaneously celebrated women’s empowerment and offered consumer products as the pathway to women’s liberation: “You’re tough, you’re smart, you’re driven. You’ve become the person you were meant to be. You’ve come into your own. . . . In colors for your eyes, lips, cheeks and nails, by Charles of the Ritz” (Barthel 1988, pp. 124–125).

Gramsci’s heirs have also added a dose of respect and empathy to the understanding of another form of hegemony. In this form, the media’s job is not to indoctrinate people into capitalism but to anesthetize them to its injuries. To carry them away from a world full of poverty, rapacity, and indignity, to a realm of undiluted pleasure—a world where laughter and sex and excitement are always available at the touch of a button; where the good guys, the ones like us, always win in the end and find true love; and where the endings are always happy. In our time, even the news media, as we shall see, have been asked to provide this kind of escape into “infotainment.”

Again, in theories of “false consciousness,” working people’s willingness to “buy” this cornucopia offered by the media is viewed derisively—a selling of the birthright of resistance for a bowl of potage. But this denies the obvious truth: the truth of how hard resistance to injustice is, of how good, really good, the confections of the media’s ministering myths can be. “‘False consciousness’ always contains its truth,” Todd Gitlin says, “the truth of wish, the truth of illusion that is embraced with a quiet passion made possible, even necessary, by actual frustration and subordination” (Gitlin 1987, p. 258).

For Gramsci, in other words, the capture of the common sense is not a matter of the strong hypodermically injecting their version of the truth into the weak. Human give-and-take does not work that way. Instead, the common sense is “negotiated by unequal forces in a complex process through which the subordination and resistance of the workers are created and recreated” (Simon 1982, p. 64).

Gramsci summarizes his position and hints at its implications in one of the most-quoted passages of *The Prison Notebooks*:

In the East, the State was everything, civil society was primordial and gelatinous; in the West . . . when the State trembled a sturdy structure of civil society was at once revealed. The State was only an outer ditch, behind which there was a powerful system of fortresses and earthworks. (1971, p. 238)

In our time, this system of fortresses and earthworks is to be found in places like Hollywood, Madison Avenue, and the Manhattan headquarters of CBS, NBC, ABC, Fox News, *Time*, and *Newsweek*.

Hegemony and the Media

In case the hegemony thesis has begun to sound like a conspiracy theory, let me quickly add that it is not. Media magnates and managers do not huddle behind closed doors plotting to benight the masses. Today, hegemony is more complex than that. Today, as Gramsci predicted, hegemony is also more complete than that. Hegemony is now so complete that it is built into the very foundation of the mass media—into the imperatives, the norms, and the routines of the business—so that perpetrating hegemony is not deliberately benighting the masses. It is merely doing one's job. In our time, hegemony has become banal.

This was not always the case. In the beginning, these media were not a bundle of unquestioned assumptions, but of unanswered questions. Who would own these new possibilities? What was their function? Who would decide what they would say? By what criteria? The possibilities were endless. Titanic struggles over these issues ensued. And in one medium after another, capitalists emerged victorious (McChesney 1999). Certainly, their crucial victory was to make the capitalist purpose the media's purpose—that is, to define the media as a commercial enterprise.

With that commercial definition came these commercial imperatives:

1. **Maximize profit.** To do that,
2. **Maximize audience size.** To do that,
- 3a. **Do not bore the audience.** Entertain it. Avoid the arcana of social issues.

Instead, hit their pleasure buttons: sex, violence, laughter, and so on. Even the news can be enlisted in this project.

- 3b. **Do not offend your audience.** Do not challenge their common sense.

Reaffirm it. Indeed, decades of research have concluded that this is the most profound effect the mass media have on our culture: “reinforcing a particular way of seeing the world by telling the same stories over and over” (Gerbner, in Jhally 1994). In other words, to make the media commercial was not only to put ultimate power over them in the hands

of capitalists; it was also to render their content either apolitical or reaffirmative of the common sense. This was a common sense the business community would be at pains not only to reflect, but to shape, especially in its formative years and in crisis times (Exoo 1994). Eventually, reaffirming the common sense meant reaffirming the “free enterprise” system and its corollaries.

Apolitical and pro-establishment. An opiate and an ideology in one syringe. What more could a hegemonic class ask for?

Media Hegemony in the 21st Century: A Turn of the Screw

Recently, the profit motive has tightened its grip on the media business even further. This happened as the media completed a transition foreseen by Thorstein Veblen at the turn of the last century. He called it the transition from “industry” to “business” (1904, chap. 3).

The founders of the media “industries” were intimately involved in the production of their newspapers, movies, or television programs. They wanted, of course, to make money. But as makers of products, they also indulged themselves in the pride of craftsmen.

Long-time White House correspondent Helen Thomas describes the pioneering CEOs of television this way: “Robert Sarnoff [of NBC] and William Paley [of CBS] had a great respect for news, and they helped democracy. They allowed their networks to be neutral and successful but didn’t expect them to be big moneymakers. I think there’s a different corporate view now in terms of the bottom line” (Borjesson 2005, p. 132). Under Paley, “CBS was the gold standard of American radio and television news,” adds Ben Bagdikian. “It had the best documentary unit and the best news staff” (2004, p. 45).

But after this generation of founders has passed from the scene, after the industry proves its profitability, says Veblen, it is “acquired” by a purer form of capitalism—a form more interested in profit than in product, more interested in “selling the people” than in “telling the people” (Rubin 1981, chap. 3).

The transition Veblen describes has gone into overdrive in our time, the time of the takeover. Harvard’s Rakesh Khurana has documented the change: In 1950, nearly 90% of corporate ownership was in the hands of the families and friends of the founders. By 2000, 60% of corporate equities belonged to “institutional investors” (Meyer 2004, p. 13). This era began in the 1970s, when American corporations were confronted with increased foreign competition. In response, they might have redoubled their efforts to make their own products better. But they chose an easier way: speculative investment instead of productive investment.

One form of this speculation is the takeover. Under this strategy, a company is acquired. Some divisions are sold to other speculators. Others are shut down, taking advantage of U.S. tax laws allowing companies to profit from the boarding up of productive enterprises and the creation of unemployment. Still other divisions are retained by the acquiring conglomerate and run, in the new corporate argot, “leaner and meaner.”

By the 1980s, 12,200 companies, worth almost a half billion dollars, were bought and sold in a three-year period. “The merger-acquisition takeover business amounted to nearly a fifth of the 1986 market value of all traded stocks” (Harrison and Bluestone 1988, chap. 3). Ours had become a “casino” economy (Harrison and Bluestone, 1988, chap. 3). Since then, U.S. corporations have spent \$20 trillion on mergers and acquisitions that are often “get rich quick” devices for senior executives and large stockholders, but they have spent only \$2 trillion on the research and development that help companies compete and retain their employees (J. Brock 2005).

Among the favorite targets of the acquisition business have been the highly profitable mass media. But here, there was a slight wrinkle. Since the early days of radio, federal law has restricted the ownership of mass media, on the grounds that a diversity of owners would help produce the “multitude of tongues” required of our marketplace of ideas. But these restrictions stood in the way of some of the most powerful corporations in the world as they moved to acquire some of the world’s most profitable media assets. Deferring, as we shall see in Chapter 6, to that corporate political power, the federal government obligingly removed most of these restrictions. For example, the Telecommunications Act of 1996 was a “Magna Charta” for multinational media corporations, unleashing a tidal wave of media mergers and acquisitions (McChesney 2004, p. 50).

The result is that since Paley’s time CBS has been bought and sold by three different conglomerate corporations. Today, Sarnoff’s NBC is the property of the General Electric Corporation—which also owns Universal movie and television studios, TV and radio stations in every major market, Universal Studios’ theme parks, cable stations such as CNBC, MSNBC, USA Network, Bravo, and Telemundo, along with divisions that provide nuclear energy, military aircraft engines, plastics, financial services, oil and gas treatment plants, and, oh yes, lightbulbs.

Inevitably, these corporate acquisitions have concentrated the ownership of the mass media in fewer and fewer hands. “In 1983, there were fifty dominant media corporations. Today there are five. . . . [These]

five global-dimension firms,⁵ operating with many of the characteristics of a cartel, own most of the newspapers, magazines, book publishers, motion picture studios, and radio and television stations in the United States" (Bagdikian 2004, pp. 3, 16). To paraphrase Andrew Fletcher, "If one person were able to write the ballads of a country," these multinational corporations would be that person.

The CEOs of these sprawling empires have not usually apprenticed in the craft of media production. Their backgrounds are in law, finance, or other nonmedia businesses. They are not mainly interested in craftsmanship, quality, or product. They are mainly interested in profit, profit, profit. "I don't aspire to that Paleyesque role," a recent CBS CEO says flatly. "This is a business" (Baum 2003, p. 35).

These CEOs are not preoccupied with profit because they are narrow, greedy people. They are single-minded because they have to be, at this stage of advanced capitalism. For a variety of reasons, investors and stockholders have recently become an ever more fickle crowd.⁶ They demand not just profits, but large profits—larger than last year's, larger than the other available opportunities. They do not suffer laggards gladly. Companies that don't produce are abandoned and raided. Today's climate is not one in which to worry about product at the expense of profit. Today, more than ever, profit is the king over television, the movies, and even the news. More than ever, the king's decrees are absolute law. More than ever, the resulting media fare is a toothless politics, a mindless entertainment.

❖ AMERICA'S PLACE IN THE WORLD: THE HEGEMONIC STORY

Because this book's focus is on media coverage of American foreign policy, let's ask, What are our culture's dominant beliefs about America's role in the world? Which "stories" about American foreign policy have currency in our media and in our minds?

"There are two fundamental presuppositions—actually articles of faith—that guide U.S. foreign policy," say media researchers John

⁵Bagdikian's list includes Time Warner, the News Corporation, Viacom, German-based Bertelsmann, and The Walt Disney Company. McChesney would add GE and Sony to this list of "top-tier" media firms (2004, p. 182). McChesney also lists a "second-tier" of 20 media conglomerates that "tend to be major players in a single area or two related areas" (p. 103). Examples are the Gannett newspaper chain and radio powerhouse Clear Channel.

⁶Among the reasons are U.S. tax laws and the computerization of the financial sector, which has made capital "hypermobile" (Harrison and Bluestone 1988, p. 58).

Nichols and Robert McChesney. “[These beliefs] are almost never questioned in major U.S. news media” (2005, p. 45).

The first article of faith is that “the United States is a benevolent force in the world” and that its role in global politics has been to make the world “a more just and democratic place” (Nichols and McChesney 2005, p. 45).

In keeping with the press’s belief in this precept, those moments when the United States is clearly *not* a benevolent force—the Iran Contra or Abu Ghraib scandal, for example—are framed by the press as deviations from the norm wrought by a few maverick miscreants—deviations that will soon be curbed, proving once again that our political system works. Reporting and editorials in the wake of these scandals were unabashed odes to the American way, to, as the *New York Times* put it, “the structure unshaken, the genius of American democracy renescent” (Exoo 1994, p. 61).

The other “article of faith” that goes largely unquestioned by the press is a corollary of the first: It is “that the United States, and the United States alone, has a 007 like right to invade any country it wishes” (Nichols and McChesney 2005, p. 47). The United States also reserves the right to “deputize an ally” to join an invasion, “but otherwise other nations are not permitted to join in the invasion business” (Nichols and McChesney 2005, p. 47).

This second basic tenet about America’s proper role in the world became, in fact, the centerpiece of the Bush administration’s foreign policy. In announcing the Bush Doctrine of “preemptive war,” the president began with the first “article of faith,” declaring that the “American flag stands not only for our power, but for freedom . . . We fight, as we always fight, for a just peace—a peace that favors human liberty” (Bush 2002a).

But he warned, in an age of

terrorists and tyrants . . . if we wait for threats to fully materialize, it will be too late . . . the war on terror will not be won on the defensive. We must take the battle to the enemy. In the world we have entered, the only path to safety is the path of action. And this nation will act. Our military must be ready to strike at a moment’s notice in any dark corner of the world. . . . All nations that decide for aggression and terror will pay a price. . . . While the United States will constantly enlist the support of the international community, we will not hesitate to act alone, if necessary, to exercise our right of self defense preemptively against such terrorists. (Bush 2002b)

America’s role as champion of freedom, now threatened, implies an American right to invade, unilaterally and preemptively, the president asserted.

Recent work by Friel and Falk (2004) has demonstrated the media's acceptance of this belief in an American right to invade. Although the UN Charter prohibits the invasion of one country by another unless it is under armed attack, the U.S. press has been selective in its attention to such violations of international law—vigorously prosecuting the violations of unfriendly countries, but steadfastly ignoring blatant violations by the United States and its allies.

The press's acceptance of this story of American beneficence will also be on display in subsequent chapters. As we'll see, when there is debate about American foreign policy in the press, it tends to be about means, not ends. Because it is assumed that the United States is generally a force for good, serving well the people of America and the world, debate is limited to the question of *how*, not *whether*, to extend American power and influence around the world. As Iraq descended into a Hobbesian war of all against all, the news might have taken the opportunity to raise fundamental questions about *why* the United States invaded and *whether* it should have. But such questions would have disturbed the hegemonic assumption about America's benignity. Instead, letting the hegemonic assumption stand, press criticism focused on the question of *how*, not *why*, the war was fought, as we'll see in Chapter 5.

Not surprisingly, this message of the rightness of American might, regularly reinforced by American politicians and press alike, has left its tracings on the public mind. More than a year after the occupation of Iraq had begun, 77% of Americans still supported the Bush Doctrine of preemptive war—invading a country not actively hostile but considered threatening to U.S. interests.

The same survey respondents also asserted that “following moral principles” should be the most important value in American foreign policy (72%) and rejected the notion that “there is anything that the United States did wrong in its dealings with other countries that might have motivated the 9/11 terrorist attacks” (51%) (“Public Support for War Resilient” 2004).

This story, of American benevolence and an American right to lead around the world, with military force if necessary, is our story and we're sticking to it. It is a story that has been told over and over again and is now standard equipment in the American common sense.

❖ ANOTHER STORY: AMERICAN EMPIRE

Then there is another story of American foreign policy. This one is not so often told, perhaps because it is not as flattering to us as the first story. In this story, American foreign policy is not especially benevolent,

nor is it interested above all in freedom and democracy. This is the story of American imperialism.

We'll hear this story, at some length, not because it is the only plausible story of American foreign policy; there are others, also plausible. Rather, we'll hear it as an exercise in what media research pioneer Warren Breed called "reverse content analysis" of the news—chronicling what's not there. Breed and Herbert Gans, in separate studies, found that stories like this one of American Empire, stories of social class and political power, and their uneasy truce with democracy, are a conspicuous lacuna in the news (Breed 1958; Gans 1979, p. 23). Making a similar point, Ben Bagdikian tells us that the press operates under a powerful imperative to "dig here, not there." This story of American imperialism is high on the list of "not there" (Bagdikian 2004, pp. 91–102).

Our "Fourth Branch" of Government

The story begins with a simple but crucial observation about the source of our material well-being, the American economy, made by Charles Lindblom in his classic book, *Politics and Markets* (1977). To an extent not matched in other developed democracies, Lindblom points out, ours is largely a privately owned and managed economy. This, in turn, means that most of the crucial decisions affecting the economy's performance will be made not by public officials, but by business executives.

And because ownership of American business is now, after many years of corporate acquisitions and mergers, quite concentrated, most of these crucial decisions will be made by relatively few, very large corporations. Today, eight companies control half the more than \$100 billion oil refining business; just four command 90% of the \$150 billion auto market; the four largest textile firms take 82% of a \$20 billion market; and so on (Katznelson, Kesselman, and Draper 2002, p. 41). It is big business's decisions—whether to invest, what to invest in, what prices will be charged and wages paid—that will determine "jobs, prices, production, growth, the standard of living, and the economic security of everyone" (Lindblom 1977, p. 175). Thus, as Lindblom points out, "In the eyes of government officials, businessmen . . . appear as functionaries performing functions that government officials regard as indispensable" (p. 175).

In particular, it is U.S. presidents who find themselves, like it or not, in partnership with the business community. That is because research has shown that Americans take inflation, unemployment, and other "economic indicators" very seriously. And when these indicators tell of economic trouble, Americans do the most rational thing they can: They blame the president. Presidents who want to be reelected, or seen

as successful by the history books, need to do something. But what? After all, presidents don't make most of the decisions that directly determine the health of the economy. So instead, presidents have done the next best thing: They *maintain business confidence*—that is, confidence that government will foster an environment in which business will flourish (Lindblom 1982, p. 327).

Former presidential adviser James Carville acknowledged this primordial power of big business, paying tribute to the stock and bond markets, where the business community registers its “thumbs-up” or “thumbs-down” on government policy: “The damned bond market. Who knew it was so powerful? If it gets nervous, everybody has to calm it down. If I’m ever reincarnated, I want to come back as the bond market. Then everybody will be afraid of me and have to do what I say” (*New York Times* 9/15/96).

The need to maintain business confidence was never more dramatically illustrated than in 2008, when a gigantic housing and financial bubble burst. Wall Street, together with unscrupulous mortgage lenders, blew the bubble, which, for a while, gave investment bankers a license to print money. But sooner or later, Wall Street and its regulators should have realized the “money” they were printing would be seen for what it was: counterfeit, worthless. At that point, the nation’s investment banks, lousy with these toxic assets, would be insolvent.

Treasury Secretary Henry Paulson thought the big banks should pay for their own perfidy and announced that the government would not bail out Lehman Brothers, one of the most aggressive players in the game of get rich quick and let the future be damned. But even before Paulson finished speaking, all hell broke loose: Banks stopped lending, credit markets froze, the stock market crashed. Government had failed to maintain business confidence, and business registered its unhappiness. Within 48 hours, Federal Reserve Chairman Ben Bernanke would tell Paulson, “We need to bail out Wall Street.” The two finance czars, both true believers in minimal government intrusion into free markets, then went to Congress with a blunt message: Unless you act now to supply Wall Street with nearly a trillion dollars, our economy will be “gone by Monday.” Needless to say, Congress did act, preserving the privilege and positions of those who had caused the problem and handing the bill for Wall Street’s greed to innocent taxpayers (Kirk 2009). Such is the power of big business in American politics.

In addition to its primordial power over the economy we all depend on, business has other political power tools. Big business, along with the wealthy Americans who profit from big business, control so much of the one asset every politician needs above all: money.

Mark Hanna, who is said to have run the first modern money and media campaign in 1896, put the point this way: "There are two things that are important in politics. The first is money, and I can't remember the second" (*New York Times* 4/1/01).

In recent years, money has climbed from *important* to *crucial* in the needs hierarchy of candidates, as campaigns rely ever more heavily on the expensive arts of political consultants and paid media. Between 1972 and 2000, spending on political ads increased by over 600% in constant, inflation-adjusted dollars. Over the past decade, the rate of increase in TV political ad spending has been 40% to 50% *every four years* (McChesney 2004, p. 127). In 1974, the average successful challenger for a seat in the House of Representatives spent an average of \$100,000. By 2002, that figure was \$1.5 million (both figures in constant, inflation-adjusted dollars; Pierson and Hacker 2005, p. 113).

And where is this mother's milk for candidates to come from? Just as Willie Sutton robbed banks because "that's where they keep the money," candidates go mainly to business and those made wealthy by it for contributions. In recent years, for example, business PACs have contributed about twice as much to congressional candidates as labor unions, the second largest contributors (Katznelson et al. 2002, p. 154). In the 2002 election cycle, a very wealthy one tenth of 1% of Americans provided 83% of all itemized campaign contributions (McChesney 2004, p. 131). In 2000, 95% of major individual contributors (giving \$1,000 or more) to campaigns had incomes of \$100,000 or more (Pierson and Hacker 2005, p. 114). These are the same Americans, roughly 10% of the population, who own most (78%) of U.S. corporate stocks (Wolff 2001, p. 15).

This story of America abroad continues, then, with this question: What might be the foreign policy interests of this business community, so politically powerful that it is sometimes dubbed our "fourth branch of government"?

American Empire: Act I

In the fresh wake of World War II, as European economies lay shattered, American business was in a unique position to expand into new markets in the Third World and to profit from its resources, its consumers, and its low-wage workers.

There was just one problem. According to historian David Callahan, this global expansion "was seen as requiring an international economic order that could only be guaranteed if the United States took over the position of a declining Britain" as the world's leading military power, to act as security guard for U.S. corporate interests worldwide (1994, p. 30). Fortunately for multinational corporations, President

Harry Truman was ready to maintain business's confidence that the United States would do all it could to facilitate this global expansion.

Only one thing seemed to present itself as a threat to the vision of a U.S.-led capitalist world order: another emerging world power and avowed enemy of capitalism, the USSR. But as it turned out, the Soviet Union would not be much of an impediment. According to Soviet expert Adam Ulam, "The moment of [World War II] victory was to find the Soviet Union enfeebled and devastated on a scale unprecedented in the past by countries *defeated* in a major war" (1971, p. 11).

Exhausted and beleaguered by repeated invasions, the postwar Soviets had only a limited, if fiercely determined, foreign policy objective: to create a buffer zone under its control in Eastern Europe. There were no resources for fomenting a global rebellion against capitalism, and there was no attempt to (Gaddis 1972, p. 355).

And yet American politicians warned frantically of just such a Soviet scheme to spread communism across the world. Why? Perhaps Senator Arthur Vandenburg's advice to President Truman provides a clue: "The only way to get Americans to accept the United States' new role as world leader was to 'scare the hell out of the country'" (Katznelson et al. 2002, p. 305).

Truman's response to this situation was the "Truman Doctrine," which would define American foreign policy for the next half century: The United States would intervene in other countries' affairs, militarily if necessary, "to support free peoples who are resisting subjugation . . . by outside pressures" (Truman 1947). This sounds noble enough, but as historian Stephen Ambrose has pointed out, since the terms *free peoples* and *anti-Communist* were thought to be synonymous, the policy justified American intervention on behalf of any corporate-friendly dictator and against any popular movement, if the dictator merely claimed he was battling communism (Ambrose 1980, p. 305).

The Military-Industrial Complex

There followed a U.S. military buildup of a scale unprecedented in human history. Today, war production is the biggest industry in the United States. Over 4.5 million Americans are employed in the business of war. The U.S. Department of Defense (DoD) is the single largest consumer in the world. Total U.S. military spending now exceeds \$800 billion per year—more than the next 12 highest-spending nations put together, and accounting for almost half the military spending world wide (Parenti 2008, p. 78).

Much of that spending goes to the huge corporations that are the DoD's top contractors. Among the country's 25 largest corporations, in

fact, all but 5 are among the top 100 firms receiving DoD contracts. What's more, these firms are especially fond of their military contracts, which are often awarded without competitive bidding, involve no risk or competition, and pay for cost overruns that gallop into the billions (Johnson 2004, p. 309; Parenti 2008, pp. 79–81). These contractors, now doing business in all 50 states and employing millions of Americans, are another gale-force wind of lobbying power in the sails of more and more military spending.

Almost no other nation has even a single military base outside its borders. The United States maintains over 700, in over 70 countries all over the globe, along with a “military presence” in 153 of the UN’s 189 member countries (Johnson 2004, pp. 167, 288; Nichols and McChesney 2005, p. 46). The U.S. Navy patrols every ocean, with a fleet larger than all the other navies of the world combined. American war planes “enjoy uncontested supremacy in the skies, and the United States has the best-trained, best equipped army in the world” (Katznelson et al., 2002, p. 317).

But perhaps the most important fact about the U.S. military is not its size, but its purpose. According to *New Republic* editor Gregg Easterbrook, the American armed forces are the only military in the world “whose primary mission is not defense. Practically the entire military is an expeditionary force, designed not to guard borders—a duty that ties down most units of other militaries, including China’s—but to ‘project power’ elsewhere in the world” (2000, p. 24).

In his famous “Farewell Address” as president, former general Dwight Eisenhower warned the nation of the power of this “military-industrial complex”:

The conjunction of an immense Military Establishment and large arms industry is new in the American experience. . . . In the councils of government we must guard against the acquisition of unwarranted influence . . . by the military-industrial complex. The potential for the disastrous rise of misplaced power exists and will persist. (1961)

Empire Building: “Not Missionary Work”

Once again, this immense American firepower has been justified by U.S. officials, whose words are faithfully transcribed by the press as a defense of freedom and human rights against the specter of Soviet empire building. But a walk through the history of how the military has actually been used since World War II tells a very different story.

In a dispiriting parade of overt and covert U.S. excursions into other countries, it is clear that what is being defended are the raw materials, markets, and investments abroad of U.S.-based corporations. In case after case, it is painfully clear that human rights and democracy are not

the point. Time and again, the United States has opposed peaceful and democratic social change in the Third World when it seemed to threaten U.S. corporate interests. Repeatedly, the United States has installed or propped up the most barbaric dictators, friendly to American corporations, but not above the use of torture, "disappearances," executions, and assassinations to crush their critics. When asked why his administration had first, as a favor to the Shah of Iran, encouraged rebellion among Iraq's Kurds and then, when that rebellion had outlived its usefulness, allowed them to be slaughtered while, via telegram, they literally begged him for help, Henry Kissinger replied, "Covert action should not be confused with missionary work" (Blum 1995, pp. 242-244).

In this way the United States imposed its will on Iran, Guatemala, Chile, the Congo, Brazil, East Timor, Greece, El Salvador, Bolivia, Nicaragua, Myanmar . . . this list could go on (Blum 2000). It is this dark history, in particular, of support for unconscionable repressions and regimes, about which the American press has maintained an eerie silence. "At the time of these events," says Ben Bagdikian, who edited the *Washington Post* at the height of the Cold War, "the accounts read by most Americans were the propagandistic reports issued by Washington, giving ordinary readers and viewers the impression that these moves . . . were either spontaneous or beneficent actions by the United States to oppose communism, further social justice or prevent threats to the security of the United States" (2004, p. 97).

Professor of journalism Lawrence Pintak, who has lived in Muslim countries during most of his long career, blames this press bias for the tragic disconnection he observed after 9/11: "The question that arose like a collective moan from the U.S. body politic after 9/11, 'Why do they hate us?' was mirrored by an equally bewildered, 'Why can't they see?'" from the Muslim world (2006, p. 15). After reviewing the particular injuries American foreign policy has inflicted on Muslim countries, Pintak answers the question about why Americans can't see: "In much of the mainstream U.S. media, there was only the most cursory effort to understand the motivations of those who had carried out the attacks or even the perspectives of the world's 1 billion plus Muslims." Instead, reporters were ordered to "tie facts to a pro-U.S. perspective." In other words, to frame the story in a way that cropped out the history of U.S. perfidy in the Middle East (Pintak 2006, pp. 40-41). "Dig here, not there" (Bagdikian 2004, pp. 91-102).

American Empire: Act II, "Globalization"

In the early 1990s, our question about the goals of American foreign policy was subjected to a fascinating natural experiment, when, quite

suddenly, the Soviet Union imploded. Now that the reason given for our military escalation, the Russian Bear, was no more, would the United States melt swords into plowshares, redeploy some of the enormous resources devoted to the military, and use them for education or health care or tax cuts? Would there not be a massive “peace dividend”?

There would not. In a new National Security Strategy unveiled in 1990, the George H. W. Bush White House argued that the United States would continue to need a huge interventionist capability to deal with “threats to American interests” in the Third World. In particular, the Strategy foresaw a need to “reinforce our units forward deployed” in the Middle East, because of “the free world’s reliance on energy supplies from this pivotal region” (Chomsky 1992, pp. 29–30).

So it was that, even in the post-Soviet 1990s, “Defense spending averaged . . . almost exactly the Cold War norm” (Johnson 2004, p. 56). Today’s military budgets, adjusted for inflation, “exceed the average amount spent by the Pentagon during the Cold War,” even when we exclude the special appropriations that pay for ongoing wars in Afghanistan and Iraq. In today’s federal budgets, military spending continues to exceed all other discretionary spending combined (Hellman 2006).

And for very good reason. After all, the Cold War may have been ending in the early 1990s, but U.S. corporate “globalization” was just coming into full bloom. Global financial flows increased from several billion dollars a day in the 1970s to about \$2 trillion a day at the end of the 1990s. U.S. exports increased from a value of \$272 billion in 1980 to about \$1 trillion by the late 1990s. Imports rose from \$290 billion to \$1.2 trillion during that period. In 1979, U.S.-owned assets abroad were worth \$786 billion. By 1999, the foreign assets of U.S. corporations were worth \$6 trillion (Scholl 2000; Wade 1996).

Once again, the vast majority of this business is being conducted by gargantuan companies—the multinational corporations (MNCs) that now control more than a third of the world’s privately owned productive assets (Wade 1996). Once again, the global profit seeking of these MNCs relies heavily on their partnership with the U.S. government, as Bill Clinton’s under secretary of commerce explains:

We had a mission. [Ron] Brown [secretary of commerce] called it “commercial diplomacy”—the intersection of foreign policy, government power, and business deals. We used Washington’s official muscle to help firms crack overseas markets. The culture was electric. We set up an economic “War Room” and built a “trading floor” that tracked the world’s largest commercial projects. (Garten 1997, p. 16)

More than ever, the *sine qua non* of all this world commerce would be a global climate made safe for U.S. capitalism to do business. That kind of security could be ensured only by an undiminished U.S. military. As we shall see, no one made the case for continued military supremacy more ardently than the White House team that would lead the United States into a war-wracked 21st century.

American Empire: The Particular Case of the Persian Gulf

As the United States and its corporations surveyed their global opportunities after World War II, one region of particular interest was the Middle East, with its vast oil reserves. A classic study of the history of oil makes clear that this is no ordinary commodity for nation-states. This is the commodity on which their very survival depends:

The First World War made all Western governments painfully aware of the importance of oil for survival . . . as the war extended—fought with planes, cars and tanks—and the oil tankers were critical for supplies. “We must have oil!” said [Allied Commander Marshal] Foch, “or we shall lose the war.” “The allies,” said Lord Curzon, “floated to victory on a wave of oil,” as the Germans ran short. . . . After the war, there was a new rush of consumption . . . and the right to travel cheaply, to have cheap electricity and cheap heating became regarded as part of American democracy, and the whole landscape was transformed by the product. . . .” Oil,” said Georges Clemenceau, “is as necessary as blood.” (Sampson 1975, pp. 59–60)

More recent actions by U.S. presidents clearly demonstrate that oil and the Middle East are continuing priorities of American foreign policy. The “Carter Doctrine” puts the matter plainly: “Any attempt by any outside force to gain control of the Gulf Region will be regarded as an assault on the vital interests of the United States of America, and will be repelled by any means necessary, including military force” (Carter 1980).

In his turn, Ronald Reagan put muscle behind Carter’s mouth, creating the U.S. Central Command (CENTCOM)—the first regional command created in 35 years—to police the broader Middle East, from Sudan to Kyrgyzstan.

Today, says U.S. foreign policy scholar Chalmers Johnson, “attempting to control as many sources of petroleum as possible” is one of the five post–Cold War missions that require maintaining a worldwide network of military bases (2004, pp. 151–152).

For their part, U.S. oil companies in the post–World War II period, like Tammany Hall philosopher George Washington Plunkitt, not only

“‘seen’ their opportunities” in the Middle East, but with the essential help of the U.S. government, they also “took ‘em” (Riordan 1905, pp. 3–6). In 1940, British companies controlled 72% of Middle East oil reserves; the United States, 10%; and several other countries divided the remainder. By 1967, Britain controlled 29%; the United States, 59%; and other countries, what little was left (Magdoff 1969, p. 43). How did the United States alter the balance of oil power so quickly and decisively?

Iran: Conquest and Blowback

In Iran, for example, where the only oil company was British after World War II, the CIA successfully conspired to overthrow the elected Prime Minister Mohammed Mossadegh, in 1953. Mossadegh was “neither pro-Soviet nor pro-communist; his nationalism was single minded” (Rubin 1980, p. 59). In fact, he had played a major role in driving the Soviets out of northern Iran after World War II (Prestowitz 2003, p. 184). But he had spearheaded a movement to nationalize Iran’s oil fields, and this, the United States and Britain agreed, was unacceptable. Once he was out of the way, power was consolidated in the hands of Muhammed Reza Shah Pahlevi, who was “prepared to cooperate with the United States” (Sick 1985, p. 7).

Not long afterward, the Shah concluded an agreement, midwived by the American government, with eight multinational oil companies, five of them based in the United States, to develop Iranian oil. There was also a clandestine “participant’s agreement,” kept secret from the American people, to restrict the flow of Iranian oil and thus maintain the fixing of the world price (Sampson 1975, pp. 128–132).

To help the Shah support the United States’ interest in allowing U.S. corporations to do business in the Middle East, Washington also immediately agreed to sell him \$80 billion (in today’s dollars) of American weaponry (Prestowitz 2003, p. 185).

Also to help secure his power, the Shah maintained a CIA-trained secret police, SAVAK, a force notorious for its savagery: torture “equal to the worst ever devised,” the murder of an estimated 10,000 Iranians, long-term imprisonment without trial, the ubiquitous monitoring of innocents—including dissident Iranian students studying in the United States, where its agents seemed to operate openly—these were the stock in trade of SAVAK’s reign of terror (Rubin 1980, pp. 177–178).

Not surprisingly, the Shah’s brutality, together with the carnival of corruption that marked his government, made him immensely unpopular. Finally, in 1979, a broadly popular revolution—supported by students, intellectuals, religious leaders, and industrial workers—overthrew the Shah and captured the embassy and staff of

the “Great Satan” Americans who had supported him (Afary and Anderson 2007).

By promising a complete “break with Western imperialism—cultural and political,” the Fundamentalist Islamic cleric Ayatollah Khomeini took power. He established the repressive theocracy that continues to govern Iran⁷ (Afary and Anderson 2007).

This history was a classic instance of “blowback”—the intelligence term for the tendency of American empire building to produce hostile reactions that imperil U.S. goals. The term is a synonym for the biblical adage that “as you sow, so shall you reap.” Now Iran and its formidable, U.S.-provided arsenal were in the hands of an avowed archenemy of the United States.

Iraq: Ally, Enemy, Tool, Archenemy

This, of course, did not mean that the United States was willing to surrender its hegemony in the region. What it was willing to do was get into bed with Saddam Hussein, despite knowing full well that the Iraqi dictator was a ruthless thug.

Prior to the U.S. alliance with Hussein, the CIA had actually brought his dreaded Ba’ath Party to power in a violent coup in 1963 and then helped the Ba’athists to push out their coalition partners in 1968, leaving a Ba’ath regime “unquestionably midwived by the United States” (Johnson 2004, p. 223). Once Saddam Hussein emerged as the Ba’athist leader in 1979, it was not long before his penchant for mass murder became evident. In the summer of 1980, for example, Hussein “detained” 5,000 Kurdish-Iraqi dissidents, who were never seen again, and may well have been victims of poison gas and chemical weapons experiments (Fisk 2002, p. 15).

Nevertheless, when Hussein launched an attack on Iran’s oil fields later that year, he qualified himself to be the United States’ designated hitter in the region. Then-President Reagan ordered the Pentagon and CIA to provide Hussein with military intelligence and weapons. By November 1983, Hussein was using chemical weapons against the Iranians “almost daily,” and the United States knew it (Prestowitz 2003, p. 188).

But that knowledge did not deter Reagan from dispatching special envoy Donald Rumsfeld to Baghdad to resume diplomatic relations with Iraq, in December 1983. Subsequently, the United States provided

⁷In 1997, a very hopeful liberalization movement resulted in the election of pro-reform President Mohammad Khatami. Unfortunately, when George W. Bush designated Iran a member of the “axis of evil” and warned of possible military action in 2002, hardliners used the occasion to quash the reformers and elect arch-conservative Mahmoud Ahmadinejad as president (Afary and Anderson 2007).

Hussein with “a veritable witch’s brew” of chemical and biological agents (Blum 2000, p. 121) along with computer parts for ballistic missiles, technology for biochemical weapons research, and the Bell helicopters used to spray deadly toxins on Iraqi Kurds in March 1988, killing an estimated 5,000 of them in the village of Halabja. Throughout this mayhem, the United States remained Hussein’s staunch ally. When asked about the gassing of the Kurds, Assistant Secretary of State Richard Murphy replied, “The U.S.-Iraqi relationship is important to our long-term political and economic objectives” (Blum 2000, p. 121; Prestowitz 2003, p. 189).

This partnership might well have persisted indefinitely if it weren’t for Hussein’s own imperial ambitions in the Mideast, together with one of the most colossal miscommunications in the history of diplomacy.

From Ally to Enemy

Iraq had long laid claim to territory inside its oil-rich neighbor, Kuwait. “Before moving [against Kuwait,] however, [Hussein] first tried to determine how the United States would react. On July 25, 1990, he met with U.S. Ambassador April Glaspie, who assured him that President Bush ‘wanted better and deeper relations, and that we have no opinion on the Arab-Arab conflict like your border dispute with Kuwait’” (Prestowitz 2003, p. 189).

On August 2, Iraqi troops stormed into Kuwait. Although the United States had overlooked or condoned other, similar invasions, this one, upending a crucial, oil-rich ally and the stability of a crucial, oil-rich region, was unacceptable (Exoo 1994, p. 6).

So when Hussein proved intransigent, he quickly went from the friend with whom the United States wanted “deeper relations,” to, in the elder President Bush’s words, Adolf Hitler.

By the following January, it was U.S. troops who “Desert Stormed” into Iraq. Total Iraqi casualties, many of them civilian, were estimated in the hundreds of thousands (Harbrecht 2003).

Then, when the newly dubbed “Butcher of Baghdad” was expelled from Kuwait and his army routed, American forces withdrew—though not without adding an armoire full of new jewels to the crown of American empire. These included the first major foreign military installation ever sited in Saudi Arabia—the huge Prince Sultan air force and surveillance base; the relocation of the Navy’s 5th Fleet, with its 4,200 personnel, to Bahrain; the \$1.4 million Al-Udeid air base and Camp As Sayliyah in Qatar, the latter being “the largest locale of pre-positioned war material in the world” (Johnson 2004, p. 249). This military necklace draped around the Persian Gulf also added new bases in

Kuwait, Oman, the United Arab Emirates, and Djibouti (Johnson 2004, p. 242). Together, these new installations are a giant U.S. military footprint, planted firmly in the heart of the world's energy supply.

The "Stability" of Tyranny

The American withdrawal from Iraq left Hussein free to crush the Kurdish and Shiite rebellions that President Bush had explicitly encouraged the Iraqi people to undertake. The Butcher of Baghdad was back in business, and soon, an estimated 2 million Kurds were refugees (Cowell 1991). White House officials explained the seeming contradiction this way: "Whatever the sins of the Iraqi leader, he offered the West . . . a better hope for stability than did those who have suffered under his repression" (Cowell 1991, p. 1).

Likewise, after all the talk of ending "brutality and lawlessness," the pro-democracy and human rights groups in Kuwait had reason to hope for help from the American government. They would have reason to be disappointed. As Kuwait rounded up thousands of its imported workers suspected of supporting Saddam, and tortured, beat, and sometimes murdered them, President Bush said there was "little he could do" (Rosenthal 1991, p. D1) to urge democratic reform on the ruling Emir (Whitley 1991, p. 19). This, after crushing the invader who had crushed the Emir.

White House officials further explained that while they would not encourage democratic reforms that might "destabilize" Kuwait's oligarchy, they would exercise another kind of influence. "By virtue of the military victory, the United States is likely to have more influence" on the Emirates and Princes now under American protection "than any industrial nation has ever exercised." They explained "how they might use their new franchise" for the benefit of American business, at a cost to the American consumer: "If crude oil prices plunged, Washington might lean on Saudi Arabia to push prices back up high enough to allow American energy companies to make profits" (Uchitelle 1991, p. D1).

Once again, the "stability" in which American corporations could conduct business as usual had proven to be the paramount value of U.S. foreign policy. Just as it had in overthrowing Mossadegh, installing the Shah, supporting Saddam, then attacking and finally tolerating him, the "stability" of American corporate hegemony had trumped all other values.

This is where, for now, our story of American ventures in the Persian Gulf ends and begins again in Chapter 3, when a foreign policy team calling themselves the Vulcans will begin the next episode in the tragic history of America and this battle-scarred land.

❖ OUR MANICHAEAN MEDIA

Again, the point of telling this story—the story of an American foreign policy designed to make the world safe for capitalism—is not to argue that it is the only plausible story of America abroad. The point is rather to tell a well-documented story the press seems phobically averse to.

For example, to another observer, it might seem that the first Gulf War was a morally ambiguous situation: a situation in which a nation went to war against a nation it had just supported, causing hundreds of thousands of deaths, on behalf of another regime with a poor human rights record, over an invasion like many others it had tolerated or condoned, and refusing in the aftermath to urge democracy or human rights on the defeated/rescued regimes.

But not to the American press. To the American media, the 1991 Gulf War was, unambiguously, “a just message on behalf of honorable goals,” a message sent to “messianic tyrants and madmen.” A war fought by the “majesty and utter menace” of the American military, “a star-spangled display of threatening force,” unleashing “the full fury of modern warfare” in assaults both “spectacular and terrifying.” The war was “a moral victory,” which defeated “not just the Iraqi army, but also any . . . self doubt, fear of power, divisiveness and uncertainty about America’s purpose in the world” (Exoo 1994, pp. 4–17).

But this is not surprising. Indeed, a fundamental tendency of American mass media is to view the world in “Manichaeian” terms. Just as the medieval followers of Manes conceived of the world as a struggle between light and darkness, good and evil, so, in their own way, do our mass media.

In the media’s Manichaeian world, conflict arises when bad guys make mischief and have to be dealt with by good guys. Conflict could, of course, be seen in other ways. It could be seen as a result of social inequality, or injustice, or ignorance. But the mass media tend to see conflict in black and white, good and evil.

In the film and TV business’s most valuable genre, “action-adventure,” bad guys are not bad as a function of social forces or of human weakness common to us all. No, say these modern melodramas, the bad, to paraphrase Fitzgerald, are different from you and me. They are bad for the sheer hell of it; they are evil incarnate.

These villains being the subhuman psychotics that they are, violence is a necessity. Nonviolence is a non-option. Having watched *Shane* and John Wayne, *Dirty Harry*, *Eliot Ness*, *Batman*, *Darkman*, *Spider-Man*, *Dick Tracy*, multiple semesters of *The Terminator*, *Lethal Weapon*, and *Die Hard*, we have learned their relentless lesson: the imperative of violence, so succinctly formulated by Stallone’s *Cobra*: “You’re a disease. I’m the cure.”

George Gerbner's 30-year study of television has found that one of TV's main effects is the creation of a "Mean World Syndrome." The average viewer, Gerbner notes, is exposed to six to eight acts of violence per hour on prime-time TV—some by villains making problems, some by heroes solving them. Not surprisingly, heavy viewers see the world as more dangerous than it actually is: They feel "more insecure, more threatened, more dependent on people who claim they'll protect you. You'll even approve repression, in the country or in the world, if that is presented to you as a way of enhancing your security" (Gerbner, in Jhally 1994).

These viewers are ripe, says Gerbner, for political exploitation. Previously, we've seen that a goal of American foreign policy is, at least sometimes, protecting U.S. corporate interests, even at the expense of democracy and human rights. Ordinarily, such a policy would be a hard sell. But it becomes easier when politicians, with the cooperation of the press, can put the breastplate of righteousness on themselves and the mask of the bad guy on those foreign leaders who don't cooperate: the "Evil Empire," the "little dictator in designer sunglasses," the "Mad Dog of the Middle East," the "drug-dealing dictator." Such appeals to our Manichaeic beliefs have justified recent interventions in Nicaragua, Libya, Panama, Grenada, and the Persian Gulf.

The Utility of Fear

Polls showed that the number of Americans suffering from "Mean World Syndrome" increased markedly after 9/11 (*Newsweek* 8/6/05). To some extent, of course, these fears are warranted: The 9/11 assaults brought home a terrorism threat that had not previously been much on Americans' minds.

But is it also possible that Americans' fears were stoked beyond reason, by politicians and media who understood Gerbner's dictum that fearful people are "exploitable" people—who understood that, like sex, fear sells? (Jhally 1994).

A-level Republican strategist Frank Luntz certainly understood the possibilities of 9/11. His 2004 memo to Republican candidates advised that "no speech about homeland security or Iraq should begin without a reference to 9/11," and every such speech should pound home the theme that "9/11 changed everything" (Lustick 2006, p. 104).

Luntz's strategy was applied with a vengeance by the George W. Bush White House. In a typical rendering of its message of threat, a 2002 presidential statement said:

The threat of terrorism is an inescapable reality of life in the 21st century. It is a permanent condition to which America and the entire

world must adjust. The need for homeland security . . . is tied to the underlying vulnerability of American society and the fact that we can never be sure when or where the next terrorist conspiracy against us will emerge. The events of September 11 were a harsh wake-up call to all citizens, revealing to us the danger we face. Not since World War II have our American values and our way of life been so threatened. The country is now at war, and securing the homeland is a national priority. (Bush 2002b)

Between 2002 and 2006, the president's five State of the Union addresses mentioned education 11 times, unemployment 3 times, and terrorism 122 times.

"Terrorism," said the president's director of national intelligence, "is the preeminent threat to our citizens. The War on Terror is our first priority and driving concern" (Negroponte 2006).

For its part, the mass media also understood the potential of fear. Just as it could sell a candidate, so could it sell movies and newspapers. "The relationship between the War on Terror and the news media," says international relations scholar Ian Lustick, "is particularly robust. It is probably not too strong to say that the lifeblood of the War on Terror is the attention of the media to scary questions about disasters that terrorists could visit upon us." The media "revel in headlines that maintain the image of a constant state of semi-emergency. For the national media, it is as if, for a local news outlet, a gigantic blizzard or hurricane were permanently identified as 'possibly about to strike our city'" (2006, pp. 90–91).

With headlines like that, there is no need to add, "Stay tuned." Viewers will. In the two years following 9/11, MSNBC, CNN, and FOX News all enjoyed soaring viewership and revenues (Journalism.org 2005). Between the news' horror stories—and the ones ladled out by the entertainment divisions of the same companies, who also understood that fear sells—it became difficult for Americans to avoid "repeated depictions of their country as living beneath a sword of Damocles" (Lustick 2006, p. 26).

The American people, for their part, took these fears to heart. At one point, 94% of Americans believed that "there are terrorists inside the United States planning attacks" (CBS 7/15/05). There were 82% who thought it "likely" or "very likely" that "Islamic extremists will carry out major terrorist attacks against U.S. cities, buildings or national landmarks in the near future" (*Newsweek* 8/6/05). In addition, 40% were "somewhat" or "very worried" that "someone in your family might become the victim of a terrorist attack" (CBS 7/15/05).

But we still haven't answered the question that began this section. Yes, politicians and media alike advised us to be afraid after 9/11, and Americans took their advice. But wasn't that fear justified—a rational

response to a very real threat? Or was the specter created—of a hyper-potent, omnipresent, evil enemy—amped up, hyped beyond reason in pursuit of ratings and votes?

Terror: A Reality Check

It is exactly this question that political scientist Ian Lustick seeks to answer in his exhaustive, meticulous survey of the first five years of the War on Terror. He begins by documenting the “enormous scale of resources devoted to the search for terrorists, the virtual nonexistence of restraint on the conduct of investigations and the gathering of evidence, and the disposition of authorities to err on the side of arresting the innocent so as to maximize the probability of discovering the guilty” (2006, p. 46).

Such conditions, he reasons, maximize the chances that we will know something about the magnitude of the threat. “The truth is that in the four and a half years since 9/11, the government has assiduously investigated virtually any Middle Easterner in the United States who could in any way have been suspected of being associated with terrorism” (p. 46).

And the results?

Of the 80,000 Arabs and Muslim foreign nationals who were required to register after September 11, the 8,000 called in for FBI interviews and more than 5,000 locked up in preventive detention, not one stands convicted of a terrorist crime today. In what has surely been the most aggressive campaign of ethnic profiling since World War II, the government’s record is 0 for 93,000. (Lustick 2006, pp. 44, 46)

In those few terrorism cases the government has actually pursued, “the record reveals a string of false arrests followed by de-escalated indictments, failed prosecutions, and sometimes what appear to be rather desperate attempts to trumpet some sort of accomplishment in the War on Terror” (Lustick 2006, p. 44).

Yes, Lustick concludes, “there is and will continue to be a terrorist threat.” But the “undisciplined, spiraling, hysterical War on Terror” our politicians and press have conjured

is itself more damaging and dangerous than the terrorist threats it is supposedly combating. . . . The effort to master the unlimited catastrophes we can imagine with the scarce resources we have will drain our economy, divert and distort our military, intelligence and law enforcement resources, undermine our faith in our institutions and fundamentally disturb our way of life. In this way, the terrorists who struck us so hard on September 11, 2001, can use our own defensive efforts to do us much greater harm than they could ever do themselves.” (pp. ix–x)

For our purposes, the inference to be drawn from this study is not that Lustick is right and the terror hawks are wrong about the size of the threat we face. The point is simply that Lustick's not unreasonable point of view is absent—curiously, conspicuously, completely absent from the news.

❖ AMERICANS AND AMERICAN EMPIRE

This book argues that the press's default option is to boost American foreign policy, even though that policy often seems to be serving U.S. corporate interests, at a high cost in Third World human suffering.

This press support would be more understandable if serving corporate interests abroad also served the interests of most Americans. But does it? Is what's good for GM good for America?

To answer that question, let's return to the moment when the economies wrecked by World War II—the European and Japanese—had not only recovered but were often beating American companies at their own game. Suddenly, in the 1960s and 1970s, this foreign competition produced a “crisis of profitability” for American business. To maintain profit levels, the corporate community realized it would need to take a bigger piece of what was now a smaller pie—including a piece of what had been American workers' slice. In a 1974 editorial, *Business Week* sounded the call to arms:

It will be a hard pill for many Americans to swallow—the idea of doing with less so that big business can have more. . . . Nothing that this nation, or any other nation, has done in modern economic history compares in difficulty with the selling job that now must be done to make people accept this new reality. (in Dreier 1987, p. 65)

To reduce labor costs, business massively “restructured.” Abandoning the American worker, corporations decided that the land of opportunity was, in fact, Sri Lanka, South Korea, Mexico, or Brazil—places where wage rates are a tenth or a fifth of the American average. In other cases, the land of opportunity was out of the realm of production altogether and in the realm of “paper entrepreneurialism,” where goods and services are bought and sold instead of made (Harrison and Bluestone 1988, p. 32).

Either way, American workplaces were padlocked. Often enough, their failure was not that they weren't profitable, but that they weren't *profitable enough* to suit corporations whose only interest was in profit maximization. For a period during the 1980s, nearly a million jobs were lost each year. Most of them were in the unionized, well-paid manufacturing sector (Harrison and Bluestone 1988, p. 37).

As another kind of profit-maximizing strategy, business began creating other kinds of American jobs. Most of them were in the low-paying, nonunionized service sector.

Even expressed statistically, the consequences of this “deindustrialization” have been startling. By the late 1980s, the proportion of “middle wage” American workers had dropped from nearly 90% to less than 50% of all year-round, full-time workers. At the same time, the proportion of “low-wage” workers increased from less than 20% to about 35% of the total (Harrison and Bluestone 1988, p. 127).

By the 1990s, “globalization” was in full stride, but it carried a two-edged sword: global opportunities for corporations and investors, global threats to American workers (Freeman 2007). Between 1977 and 1999, the income of America’s richest 1% increased by 100%, while that of the poorest fifth of Americans declined by 10% (Katznelson et al. 2002, p. 57; percentage changes represent constant dollars).

“Moreover, there appears to have been a sea change in economic patterns during the 90s. Periods of full employment usually empower labor to demand higher wages. Yet despite steady productivity growth and [what the Clinton White House enjoyed boasting of as] the longest economic expansion in history, with record levels of employment and an intense demand for labor—wages barely inched upward. Intensified global competition” has cowed workers: Ask for “too much,” and you may have nothing, as your factory relocates to the Third World (Katznelson et al. 2002, pp. 57–58).

As this two-edged sword of globalization hacks away, indices of inequality have gone, literally, off the charts: Graphs comparing nations’ inequality cannot contain the U.S. line; those showing U.S. inequality over time cannot hold the most recent lines. In 1980, the ratio of CEO to average worker pay in the United States was 42 to 1. By 1990, it was 107 to 1—a startling increase but nothing compared to the inequality yet to come. By the mid-2000s, the gap was 431 to 1 (Jackson 2006).

No other industrialized nation comes close to matching these U.S. inequalities. Our closest “competitors” in the inequality contest, historical oligarchies such as Argentina and Brazil, sport CEO to worker pay ratios of between 40 and 50 to 1. More developed democracies, including Western Europe, Japan, and Canada, have ratios of between 10 and 20 to 1. In the world’s second and third largest economies, Japan and Germany, the ratios are 11 and 13 to 1 (Katznelson et al. 2002, p. 47).

By 2006, Forbes 400 *millionaires* were a thing of the past. In that year, the magazine’s list of the richest Americans was “billionaires only.” Even in the anemic recovery of the mid-2000s, corporate profits burgeoned by 72% between 2003 and 2007, largely because “almost all

of the benefits from productivity improvements are flowing to the owners of capital rather than to the workers” (Sklar 2006). So it was that in 2006, the combined wealth of the Forbes 400 was \$1.25 trillion—about the same amount held by half the U.S. population, numbering 57 million households (Sklar 2006).

And while the rich got richer, the poor, with their minimum wage, service sector jobs, got poorer: By 2007, four years into an economic expansion, the percentage of Americans defined as poor was higher than at the bottom of the last recession (*New York Times* 4/17/07). At the same time, the percentage of Americans living in “severe poverty,” defined as half or less of the federally defined poverty level, reached a 32-year high, growing by 26% from 2000 to 2005, to include 16 million Americans. Once again, this trend showed “how hard it is for low-skilled workers to earn their way out of poverty” in the new, global job market (McClatchey 2/25/07).

Finally, these stark inequalities became a major contributor to the economic crisis of 2008. As the newly superrich maintained their portfolios of safe investments, but then had oodles of cash to spare, they used it to gamble and, for a long time, win on the superhigh return of risky subprime mortgage-based investments. When this gamble eventually came up snake eyes, everyone lost. But even as bailed out financial firms were again showering their executives with bonuses, many working and lower-class Americans were losing the basics: house, job, college fund, retirement income (Collins 2008).

❖ CONCLUSION

No, America is not El Dorado. The Lone Superpower is not the Lone Ranger, righting wrongs wherever it goes. Capitalist hegemony and its monotonous story have not made ours “the best of all possible worlds.” And yet, somehow, the alchemy of our mass media has made it seem so: It has made the land of inequality, the land of opportunity; the stench of belligerence, the bouquet of idealism; cupidity and rapacity, the American Way. This book is a case study in one such metamorphosis: the transformation of 21st-century American imperialism into the story of a benevolent America, trying its best to defend the world from tyrants and terrorists. If George Gerbner is correct, and we “live in a world created by the stories we tell,” then we need to get our stories right (Jhally 1997). And there is no more important story than this one—of America’s role in the world in our time.