

What's Going on in the USA? Rise of an Imperial Triumvirate

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Introduction: Searching for Prophetic Spirit Today

It is almost too much. For any of us seeking to read the signs of the times - whether we be theologians of culture, proclaimers of the gospel who wish to engage our times intelligently, or people of faith and conscience anywhere - for all of us, our task is not easy. The discerning lens we would apply to our times to find "the signs" seems to shatter in our hands as bright flashpoints of crises, now here, now there, defy focus and vision, leaving us not so much a meaningful set of indicators but usually some dreary list of crises. In Summer of 2006, that list of crises would surely include the national ignominy of war and occupation in Iraq, the untold levels of suffering borne by Iraqis daily as a result of that war and the mix of U.S. fear, nationalism and lies that produced it,¹ the draconian rationalization of torture by U.S. leaders today, the struggle for immigrant rights, the regimes of impoverishment and racism that are more problematic in the USA than in any other developed country, the yearning for full inclusion in society's benefits by our GLBT brothers and sisters, the struggle for real peace with justice for Palestinians and Israelis, the attempts to subvert democratic leadership and governments in Latin America and the Caribbean, - and, do we remember them (?), the 2-million-plus-and-still-growing population of women and men in the U.S. prison industrial complex.

I confess, it is always hard to know where to start, but start, we must. Persevere, we must. If nothing else, the exemplary Christian witness of John Witherspoon for which this Society is named, calls us to continue seeing and responding to the demands of justice and love that we are graced to fulfill by the Spirit of Christian faith. Even if Witherspoon's example sometimes fails us - as it does, alas, on the questions of slavery and racism in particular - I trust the cloud of witnesses gathered here today include a mighty remembrance of other exemplars whose spirits we might invoke: Dolores Huerta and Cesar Chavez, Fanny Lou Hamer and Martin Luther King, Jr., Mohatma Gandhi, Malcolm X, Harriet Tubman and Frederick Douglass, Archbishop Oscar Romero, Rigoberta Menchú, Yuri Kochiyama, Leonard Peltier and Mumia Abu-Jamal, Lydia Maria Child and John Brown, Walt Whitman and Ralph Waldo Emerson, and especially the host of other unnamed, "everyday people" who waged democratic struggle of peoples for justice and peace in this country. Taken together, these make up something like what historians have called "the motley crew" that has built up the real freedoms we have in this country or elsewhere. Whether persons of Christian faith, of some other religious faith or of no faith, they were enlivened by the prophetic Spirit that kept them at work for justice and freedom. God's work among them is a gift of grace for us today. May we be borne up by that Spirit in them as we seek discernment and courage for these times.

The prophetic Spirit of global peoples' struggle for justice meets Reformed Christians most dramatically in the *Semper Reformanda* ("always to be reformed") work of the World Alliance of Reformed Churches, especially in the language of two documents emerging from its General Council meetings of 2004 in Accra, Ghana. The first of these is the document, "Covenanting for Justice in the Economy and the Earth," which lifts up prophetic lament and a prophetic call for

¹ Two of the many books documenting the lies made and accepted within the post-9/11 nationalist milieu in the U.S. are these: Scott Ritter, *Iraq Confidential* (New York: Nation Press, 2005), and Seymour M. Hersh, *Chain of Command: The Road from 9/1 to Abu Ghraib* (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 2004).

renewal because of the way globalization agendas based in the wealthy Northern nations drive the structural impoverishment of so many poor nations. This dominant kind of globalization is what many throughout the poorer countries call “the Washington Consensus” or “Neoliberalism.” The second document, called “Letter from Accra” renders prophetic critique not only against this Neoliberal globalization but against the imperial politics of the powerful nations that deploy military power to defend the global North’s political and economic privilege. Taken together, these two documents are some of the most important examples of prophetic witness to come before the global church in modernity or postmodernity. Reformed churches everywhere should be proud of the prophetic courage, clarity and gospel conviction breaking forth from these documents. I urge their prayerful and critical scrutiny by all, especially by the churches of the USA. If we are a people loyal to the whole of the Creator’s loving embrace, we cannot be content to ignore the plight of those beyond our nation, those outside the privileged economies of the North.

Today, though, I want to remind us that the politics of Neoliberal globalization and of imperial war and occupation abroad, so lamented by the *Semper Reformanda* documents of the World Alliance meetings of Accra, serve us no better at home. In the long run they will lead to our ruin here, as they already are ruinous to all the poor throughout this land, but especially ruinous to communities of color in the U.S. Imperial adventuring abroad leads to neglect of people at home and the enshrining of new domestic domination by elites here. Just one example of this is evident in the 2005 neglect and devastation of the Gulf Coast and of New Orleans, while an overstretched military sank its personnel and equipment into an ever deepening morass in Iraq, pouring in now nearly \$300 billion (equivalent to the cost of providing 2 ½ million public housing units, and healthcare for 173,000 children).² This neglect of the people amid military adventuring in Iraq is just one example of a host of others that might be given to evidence the emaciation of the USA in the wake of our leaders imperial hubris (This is documented in persuasive detail by sociologist Emmanuel Todd’s book, *After Empire: The Breakdown of the American Order*.³)

My question for today, then, is this: how is it that we are letting the body politic at home atrophy while permitting our leaders to flex unilateral and imperial muscle abroad over others? Resisting empire and globalization, as the Accra documents urge us to do, means also looking at our *national* scene, to study the sickness of structure in which we all are enmeshed.

Approaching the National Scene of the Imperium

I will speak of that national scene today as marked by the rise of an imperial triumvirate. The Christian Right is one of the forces among three now at work in our country, effecting their devastating consequences. The Christian Right is not necessarily the most significant force. Certainly, it is not *the* independent variable that explains the state of things in U.S. politics. But we do have to take with great seriousness the Christian Right (not to be confused with *all* conservative Christians), for its power is on the rise.

Not to long ago, for example, Karl Rove phoned James Dobson of the Christian Right group, “Focus on the Family,” assuring him that President George W. Bush’s Supreme Court nominee, Harriet Miers, according to Dobson’s own account of Rove’s assurances, is an “Evangelical Christian” and “from a very conservative church, which is almost universally pro-life.” Later, Dobson soon followed Bush in retracting support for Miers, agreeing that the Alito nomination was a much stronger one.

Pat Robertson called for the assassination of a democratically elected Venezuelan President. The Federal Emergency Management Agency placed Robertson’s “Operation Blessing” high on its list of sanctioned outlets for cash donations to aid Katrina hurricane victims. Christian theocrats like

² See the comparisons at “The War in Iraq Costs,” National Priorities Project, at <http://costofwar.com/index-public-housing.html>, Access date: 10 June, 2006.

³ Emmanuel Todd, *After Empire: The Breakdown of the American Order* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002).

Robert Upton of the Apostolic Congress gain access to White House discussions about U.S. policy toward Israel. Christians organize “Justice Sundays” to craft their own moral agenda for the public square. Theocracy (national rule by God), even Christocracy, are in the plans of many.⁴

I will return to this interest in Christocracy and Theocracy later, but here let me remind you of the argument that I hope to leave with you today: *while the Christian Right is rising to new strength across the U.S. social landscape, it is doing so through its alliances with other forces, i.e. with, first, a military planning elite (the neoconservatives) and, second, key sectors of corporate America. This constitutes an “imperial triumvirate.”* The imperial power being exercised in our midst is not, in this case, one of three men (*virorum*) as in periods of Roman empire, but one of a tridimensional ruling power (*trium-*) of cultural-political-economic forces. To understand the complex workings of this imperial triumvirate, it is necessary to begin with a reading of the 9/11 event.

The 9/11 Mythic Moment

Politics and public opinion are still feeling the impact of the attacks on New York City and Washington, D.C., on September 11, 2001. Invocations of 9/11 are still used to stoke citizen fear and uncritical patriotism, even while George W. Bush’s approval ratings plummet. Political leaders and media outlets still capitalize on the fear, and state surveillance powers grow in the name of national security and love of country. This is not simply because a cabal of political leaders is in power, manipulating the citizenry. No, these leaders, with the media’s frequent help, exploit certain historical tendencies long at work in the U.S., which have been amplified by 9/11. 9/11 was experienced as not only a dramatic “historical moment” (with events and complex dynamics we still have not fully uncovered), but also as what I call a “mythic moment.”⁵ 9/11 ruptured many U.S. citizens’ sense of mythic grandeur, a secure collective feeling that they occupied a veritable sanctuary between two oceans, a place of security (and indeed, it had been for many). As the myth went, though, this land between two oceans was also a garden for the cultivation of freedom, freedom that the rest of the world wants and awaits. This land of freedom - and this is part of the mythology of U.S. “civil religion” - is seen as a sacred gift and vocation.

In the 1980s, Ronald Reagan revived this mythology in many of his speeches in favor of Star Wars technology, the Strategic Defense Initiative (SDI). He argued that America’s sacred land of freedom needed protection from attacks from the skies. Reagan, the “great communicator,” deftly grafted this fear of missile attacks onto discourse from the Puritan founders, especially from John Winthrop’s image of America as “a city on a hill,” or, in Reagan’s terms, a “shining city.”⁶ Sensibilities like these had powered many U.S. citizens’ visions of manifest destiny, animating U.S. expansion and imperial vision.

The weapons used on the morning of September 11, 2001, hijacked commercial airliners, were not the nuclear missiles of Reagan’s nightmare. Still, the attacks from the skies on 9/11 exploded with an impact that was momentous for Americans because of the way Reagan and so many before him had spun the myth of a protected and divinely sanctioned America. The sense of a protected, Edenic nation was further shaken for those steeped in the myth because the targets of the attack were the most visible public symbols of the nation’s military and economic strength – the Pentagon and World Trade Center. The Strength of the U.S. is buttressed within the world order – militarily, economically, and politically – by planners and organizations identified with those sites. When the towers came down in a repeatedly televised global spectacle of disintegration, the myth of U.S. invulnerability and of its divinely blessed national vocation were publicly and dramatically ruptured.

⁴ Rabbi James Rudin, *The Baptizing of America* (New York: Thunder’s Mouth Press, 2006), 11-9.

⁵ Mark Lewis Taylor, *Religion, Politics and the Christian Right: Post-9/11 Powers and American Empire* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2005), 35-46.

⁶ Frances Fitzgerald, *Way Out There in the Blue: Reagan, Star Wars and the end of the cold War* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2000), 23-5.

The rupture, however, prompted massive resurgence of patriotism. This can be understood as not just intense love of country amid national crisis, but as a massive drive to restore an Eden-like sense of invulnerability. It does not matter whether the earlier invulnerability had been an illusion or that it cannot now be recaptured. The loss is nonetheless felt and expressed in many efforts of citizens to restore their sense of invulnerability. This felt loss accounts, in part, for the intense fear in U.S. citizens. The fear is not only of terrorists who might soon be planting bombs in U.S. neighborhoods and cities. No, the more pervasive fear, I suggest, is a more deeply registered apprehensiveness resulting from the fact that the terrorist attack removed the sense of protection under the sacred canopy of U.S. national greatness. A restorationist drive to recapture that myth of greatness, mingled with the fear of future attacks, is what governments can exploit, promising citizens a restoration of security, persuading them that government needs ever more powers of surveillance.

It is this restorationist drive, powered by fear and patriotic love of the homeland (note the name of the newly-created, Department of "Homeland Security"), which has been exploited by various powers after 9/11. The Christian Right is one of these powers, and they are joined by military planning and corporate elites. I stress that these powers are not new visitors to the American cultural landscape. They were etched deeply into U.S. cultural life long before 9/11, however resurgent they may be now. Let us look more closely at these post-9/11 powers, beginning with the Christian Right.

The Christian Right

It is important now to sharpen up this notion of "the Christian Right." I use the phrase "the Christian Right" to refer to a group of Christians who feature three major traits. First, the Christian Right is a *politically proactive* group of Christians. Their religious life not only carries political meanings, but to a significant degree integrates those meanings into an overtly political agenda. Of course, other religious communities can and do share this feature. This feature alone, then, is not sufficient to define the Christian Right, but it is a necessary starting point, especially since the Christian Right may be the most politically proactive at the national level, among all religious groups in the U.S. As Esther Kaplan documents in her book, *With God on Their Side*, the Christian Right mobilizes its agenda through "an ornate and stable infrastructure of hundreds of national and local membership organizations," with budgets often exceeding the \$100 million level, and radio and TV industries reaching millions of people.⁷ There exist whole networks of thousands of Christian churches and parachurch groups, strengthened by generously endowed think tanks and political action committees that cultivate links to Israeli nationalist groups in the U.S. seeking to shape national policy on Middle Eastern hotspots.⁸

Second, the Christian Right is marked by what I call an *explicit theocratic intention*. Regarding the political agenda it organizes, the Christian Right believes that it has a duty to enforce its religious-political vision. It does not just "have an agenda," as almost all religious and other groups do; it also has an intention to enforce it, to "rule." Hence, the commitment to "theocracy," rule by god.

There are hard and soft modes of this theocratic intention. Both are explicit in the sense of intending some notion of religious values as necessary for structuring political rule. The harder version, though, is found in the likes of Robert Upton of the Apostolic Congress who explicitly embraces the goal of theocracy, and in others who organize Christian colleges and institutions named "Regent," as with Pat Robertson's Regent College. These intend to implement God-based, Christ-ruled governance in America, and are expressive of "Dominionist" and "Reconstructionist" political agendas that long have been on the U.S. cultural scene.⁹ A softer version of the theocratic intention, limits the intention to vaguer talk of rooting political life in "God's principles," "biblical

⁷ Esther Kaplan, *With God on Their Side: How Christian Fundamentalists Trampled Science, Policy and Democracy in the George W. Bush's White House* (New York: The New Press, 2004), 72.

⁸ Kaplan, *With God on Their Side*, 123-24.

⁹ On these two traditions, see Sara Diamond, *Roads to Dominion: Right-Wing Movements and Political Power in the United States* (New York and London: Guilford, 1995).

principles,” or “biblical foundations.” They are not quite so explicit about an intention to rule, but they organize and vote out of a conscious sense that these religious principles are important guides for political life. The softer theocrats thus often support the harder ones. Whether hard or soft, though, the theocratic intention takes aim at almost all spheres of human life, from individual morality, to organizing family life, to society’s sexual practice, social customs, and especially national policy.

This third mark of the Christian Right is a *piety of militarist nationalism*. The Christian Right fuses religious devotion with reverence for the U.S. nation-state and often to its expansionist designs. Much of this nationalist fervor is driven by a kind of apocalyptic mindset, evident in the Christian Right’s militarized fantasies of divinely-willed world destruction.¹⁰ Christian Right videos, like *Faith in the White House: George W. Bush*, show Christian Right leaders like Richard Land of the Southern Baptist Convention, and others, embracing the vocation of U.S. “manifest destiny.” This is grafted onto a sacred reverence for the “founding fathers” and key U.S. Presidents, usually presented as exemplars of Christian piety. The Christian Right, then, often grants a sacral aura to unquestioning loyalty amid the aggressive nationalism of the Bush regime today. While many U.S. evangelicals would not identify with the Christian Right, the Christian Right does benefit from the years of intentional work that evangelicals as a whole have done in allying their interests with the U.S. military.¹¹

These three features give the Christian Right prominence in governance well beyond its numerical strength in the population. The Christian Right should not be confused with all “conservative Christians,” nor with terms like “evangelicals.” The category of white evangelicals, according to a University of Michigan Study of 2000, constitutes only 23.1 percent of the U.S. population. Of this number, historian and contemporary analyst Anatol Lieven suggests only 7-12 percent of the U.S. population actually support the Christian Right’s agenda.¹² That 7-12 percent, however, is between 19 and 32 million people, more than enough to constitute 40 percent of Bush’s presidential popular vote. But even that percentage is not enough to put a nominee into presidential office and keep his agenda alive. Other powers are at work. We do best not to point only to the Christian Right to explain the political times in early 21st-century USA. The Christian Right is not an independent variable. So, what are the other powers? We can explore these by noting the links of the Christian Right to the neoconservatives and to corporate power. Let us consider each in turn and so begin to trace out the imperial triumvirate.

The Theocon/Neocon Alliance as Romanticism

Consider the relationship in the triumvirate between the Christian Right and the neoconservative Pentagon planners. We might call this the Theocon/Neocon alliance, understanding “Theocons” not as theological conservatives, a larger group, but as “theocratic conservatives,” displaying the traits of the Christian Right noted above. Theocons’ alliance with the Neocons is possible because they both share commitments to “American exceptionalism.” They each tap into a long-running current of U.S. American romanticism, the belief in the country’s unique vocation to defend and carry freedom forward globally, often expanding and crossing national frontiers to do so. The romance centers on Winthrop’s “city set on a hill,” Reagan’s “shining city.”

Since 9/11, the Neocons’ exceptionalism has not embraced a category as overtly religious as “manifest destiny,” but they have its rough secular analogue in notions of “American greatness”

¹⁰ See the fine discussion of this apocalyptic mindset in Richard K. Fenn, *Dreams of Glory: The Sources of Apocalyptic Terror* (Hampshire, UK, and Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2006).

¹¹ Anne C. Loveland, *American Evangelicals and the U.S. Military, 1942-1993* (Baton Rouge and London: Louisiana State University, 1996).

¹² Anatol Lieven, *America Right or Wrong: An Anatomy of American Nationalism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), 140-1.

and “American power.”¹³ Never mind that the Christian Right, celebrates more the God-fearing presidents, while the Neocons, prefer the heroics of a swashbuckling, charge-ahead guy like Teddy Roosevelt; they both drink from the well of political romanticism, pursuing visions of the nation’s exceptional grandeur. In that shared romanticist milieu, both God-fearers and swashbucklers often mingle. Both are united in a project of revolutionary romanticism, an aggressive program for remaking the U.S. in keeping with a collective triumphalist aspiration. Moreover, throughout U.S. history, the greatness and expansion of the nation was most often forged in contestation with “racialized” others, with usually white champions of the nation having to prove themselves on some frontier of engagement with them. This racialized aspiration for greatness has extended, in numerous mutations, from the period of early North American settlers to the most recent depictions of U.S. soldiers in Iraq as cavalry for U.S. frontier stockades.¹⁴ These romanticists of “America,” Theocons and Neocons together, provide the political scaffolding on which the media often elaborates – further developing citizen fear and uncritical patriotism.

I use the word romanticism, to characterize the alliance between the Christian Right and the Neocons, because naming their shared interests as such enables us to go deeper, beneath the play of U.S. public and global policies to discern the political anthropology and even a political ontology that are operative in this post-9/11 context. When exploiting post-9/11 fear and drives to restore mythic security, the Christian Right and Neoconservatives are not just growing strong through refurbished notions of manifest destiny and American greatness. Tracing those notions *is* important, but both of them are ways to exploit, toward distorted and destructive ends, some deep anthropological and ontological needs of a nation’s residents. As romanticist moves, I am suggesting that the Theocon/Neocon alliance lives off of citizens’ need for narrative structures that provide sense of belonging to a culture, land and nation. Myths of a people and of their origins are often what provide this narrative structure of belonging. As Richard Slotkin has suggested, “The history of humanity gives us no reason to suppose that we will ever cease to mythologize and mystify the origin and history of our societies.”¹⁵

It is important to understand how deep-running are the powers that are being tapped by the Christian Right and Neoconservatives. The kinds of romanticist forces at work today in the U.S. have in other contexts generated dangerous chauvinistic nationalisms, leading to fascism, more ruthless racism, militarism and war.¹⁶ In the U.S. political romanticism’s mythology has been especially driven by racialized imaging of others as enemy (Native Americans, African-Americans, Mexicans, Chinese and Filipinos, swarthy Mediterraneans and more) with whom Americans were to do battle along its many frontiers.¹⁷ Many countries have learned the hard way that it is important to temper devotion to romanticist myths of a nation, or to formulate them and reformulate them in ways that respect other nation’s narratives. The challenge we face in the U.S., amid the recent resurgence of romanticism in the Theocon/Neocon alliance, is to construct an alternative romanticism, or, at least an alternative narrative structure, that might satisfy U.S.

¹³ Gary Dorrien, *Imperial Designs: Neoconservatism and the New Pax Americana* (New York and London: Routledge, 2004), 15, 17.

¹⁴ On frontier language regarding Iraq, Thomas Donnelly and Vance Serchuk, “Toward a Global Cavalry: Overseas Rebased and Defense Transformation,” National Security Outlook, *AEI Online*, July 1, 2003. For the history of the racialized frontier, see the set of three volumes by Richard Slotkin, *Regeneration Through Violence: The Mythology of the American Frontier, 1600-1860* (1973), *The Fatal Environment: The Myth of the Frontier in the Age of Industrialization, 1800-1890* (1987), and *Gunfighter Nation: The Myth of the Frontier in 20th-Century America* (1992), Norman, Oklahoma: University of Oklahoma Press.

¹⁵ Slotkin, *Gunfighter Nation*, 654.

¹⁶ On the threat of these developments in contemporary U.S.A., see Kevin Phillips, *American Theocracy: The Peril and Politics of Radical Religion, Oil, and Borrowed Money in the 21st Century* (New York: Viking, 2006), and Chris Hedges, *American Fascism: The Rise of the Christian Right* (New York: Free Press, 2006).

¹⁷ See extensive index references under “racism,” in Slotkin, *Gunfighter Nation*, 842, Cf. index references, “race” and “racialist theory,” in Richard Slotkin, *The Fatal Environment: The Myth of the Frontier in the Age of Industrialization, 1800-1890* (Normon, OK: University of Oklahoma Press, 1985), 632.

citizens' anthropological and ontological hunger for "belonging being". Such an alternative narrative might help resist the destructive impact of the present romanticizing powers that inspire people to accommodate totalitarian structures at home and imperial adventures abroad.

Christian Right/Corporate Power Alliance as Liberalism

Consider next the Christian Right's link to corporate power. Corporate powers may be more comfortable with the Neocons than with the Christian Right, because the Neocons' deployment of the U.S. military system keeps them in continual interaction with the corporate structure and big businesses that drive the military industrial complex. Moreover, the Theocons, especially with their strong romanticist nationalisms, can seem to many corporate agents like eccentric cultural conservatives, lagging behind the transnational and cosmopolitan dynamism that corporate powers claim to prefer.

Nevertheless, corporate players know that the Christian Right regularly delivers a large number of compliant consumers, whose mix of piety and politics rarely allows analysis or critique of the corporate sector's inordinate control over national wealth and monetary policy. Especially after 9/11, with the spectacular display of the World Trade Center taking a direct hit, the economic system in the U.S. also shuddered, as airline industries, hotel and other sectors were hit hard. Uncertainty in the U.S. political and economic domain does not help financial investor classes feel secure.

In such a context, corporate powers found two of many ways to capitalize on the 9/11 moment.

First, they prevailed upon those in the U.S. Congress who are especially supportive of corporate interests, to rush through massive tax breaks for major corporations. Second, explosion of nationalism made market exploitation of a whole host of commercial Americana a lucrative business in itself, selling old and new forms of national memorabilia, pasting flags on familiar products to give them greater marketability. Moreover, beyond these two particular ways of capitalizing on the post-9/11 moment, the intensified “war on terrorism” economy has created new wealth for the large number of corporate contractors in the U.S. who provide military equipment and services.¹⁸ An active military given a noble nationalist purpose is often a financial boon for corporate power. In short, Christian nationalism might sit awkwardly alongside cosmopolitan corporate transnationalism, but militarist nationalism under pressure can be good for business – especially in a time of threatening economic disorder. Corporate power can easily help to power an unchecked chauvinistic nationalism.

It is important to stress that when speaking of “corporate power” here I do not mean any person working for corporations or any one company or corporation. I mean the key groups among corporate classes, who are heavily invested in preserving what is often called a neoclassical or neoliberal global economic order.¹⁹ Corporate power here names the economic and political structures of “globalization” that serve the interests of leading groups in the G-7 countries, regularly operating to the detriment of poorer nations, and often widening gaps between rich and poor within the richer nations. This group has an interest, in the U.S., in maintaining a domestic economic order in which the top one percent of the population captures 70 percent of all earnings growth.²⁰ That economic distortion is well served by corporate alliance with sustained nationalist fervor.

This has happened before. U.S. businessmen sought war with Spain in 1898, for example, in part to defend economic interests and advances amid the pressure of labor disenchantment, growing populist movements, and surplus capital. They thus accommodated themselves to the jingoist patriotism and resurgent American romanticism of that period.²¹ As another example, economic managers in 1930s Germany helped deliver power to the National Socialists, the revolutionary romanticists of that time, in part because holders of wealth trembled in the face of the genuine social reorganization that was needed and being called for by powerful protest movements and a system in crisis.²² This does not mean that the compromise with war and nationalism is *only* worked by the corporate classes; quite to the contrary, populist nationalism spreading throughout all sectors of social strata also play crucial roles, often carrying the romanticist nationalism that corporate power exploits.

Today, the Christian Right’s “Council on National Policy” is one example of an organization maintained to coordinate Christian ties between Theocoons and many leading CEOs of the neoliberal economic order (<http://www.policycounsel.org/18856/28356.html> Access date: June 9, 2006). We might term these the CEOcons (CEO conservatives, seeking to preserve and defend the present transnational economic order). The Bush regime today is a perfect host structure for both Theocon and CEOcon interests. This presidential regime combines a corporately-connected, Bush family dynasty in the highest echelons of political power, with ideologies of theocratic

¹⁸ Carl Boggs, *Imperial Delusions: American Militarism and Endless War* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2005), 29-31.

¹⁹ For a fine summary of the politics and economic values of this group, see Rebecca Todd Peters, *In Search of the Good Life: The Ethics of Globalization* (New York: Continuum, 2004), 41-69.

²⁰ Kevin Phillips, *Wealth and Democracy: A Political History of the American Rich* (New York: Broadway Books, 2002), xiii.

²¹ Norman Etherington, *Theories of Imperialism: War, Conquest and Capital* (London: Croom Helm, 1984), 7-24.

²² Detlev J. K. Peukert, *Weimar Republic: The Crisis of Classical Modernity* (New York: Viking, 2004), 222-30.

conservatives. The Christian Right's Council on National Policy is just one way of nurturing this alliance. The Bush regime's effectiveness in hosting both theocratic and economic conservatives is dramatized by the enormous funds that have gone from Wall Street world of CEOcons to the administration most favored by Theocons. *The Washington Post* has documented Wall Street's unprecedented level of giving to Republicans in the 2004 presidential campaign.²³

The Theocon alliance with corporate culture, as with its alliance to neoconservatives, is again not just the work of an evil, ruling minority. The synergy playing between faith and consumption in the Theocon/CEOcon alliance also taps into deep-running cultural currents. The structures of economic gain, especially when baptized by faith, attain their public cogency because of a powerful anthropology and ontology that they exploit. Corporate power clothes itself in promises of improvement for people. It exploits and distorts peoples' need for growth in wealth, to experience progress and improvement. People are oriented to living in expectation of some betterment in life – either as to wealth, opportunity, knowledge acquisition, educational and vocational advancement. This can lead to consumerist greed or lust for power, but this expectation, short of those distortions, is also a part of aspiring human being. This dynamic, future- oriented drive to grow toward the new means that humans are steeped in what I call “expectant being,” in addition to the “belonging being” that births mythologies and romanticisms of the past.

This expectation is the heart of liberalism. It pervaded the “American enlightenment” culminating in the Constitution of the founding fathers. Speaking about the heart of the founders' interests, the young Abraham Lincoln gave voice to the core liberal aspiration when he intoned, “We proposed to give *all* a chance; and we expected the weak to grow stronger, the ignorant, wiser; and all better, and happier together.”²⁴ Corporate power gains public support for itself by presenting its system of economic life as implementing this liberal aspiration. It may seem strange to say, but when the Christian Right allies itself to corporate power it is also wedded to a kind of liberalism, the liberalism that claims to champion liberty and progress, but largely through an uncritical support of the corporate market. (For example, Christian Right megachurch pastor Rod Parsley has a website that links his online “Breakthrough Covenant” ministry with advertising for a book, *Eat, Drink and Be Healthy*, as well as for major corporate credit cards.²⁵)

The tragedy and moral failure of expectant being in the U.S., even in the most sophisticated of liberal ideologies, is that the liberalism announced has in practice almost always been “contractual,” and this in two related senses. First, it is a liberal vision carrying hidden contracts, ones which often limit freedoms and access to improvement, accommodating patterns of discrimination that damage most severely peoples of color, women, and others at structural disadvantage. Thus philosopher Charles Mills has written of liberalism's “racial contract” and political theorist Carol Pateman of its “sexual contract,” noting how peoples of color and women, respectively, have been routinely neglected or disenfranchised by liberal orders.²⁶ Corporate cultures of technology business have not become the leveling forces against racism and sexism that exuberant advocates have often claimed. Some opportunities have been made, but they have been parceled out along the traditional lines of race and gender. Here, hidden contracts function to limit the liberal promise. Liberalism is contractual, though, in a second sense, i.e. as a contracting, or shrinking, of the sphere of those who might realize liberalism's benefits. Liberal or neoliberal economic orders display this notion of the contractual, when they shrink the economic sphere of liberal largesse so that it meets most the needs of a very few, the one percent, who work atop the U.S. economic order.

²³ Thomas B. Desalt and Jonathan Weisman, “Wall Street Firms Funnel Millions to Bush,” *The Washington Post*, 24 May, 2004, A04.

²⁴ From *The Collected Works of Abraham Lincoln*, eds. Roy B. Bashler, as cited in Richard Cowardine, *Lincoln: A Life of Purpose and Power* (New York: Alfred Knopf, 2006) 26.

²⁵ <http://www.breakthrough.net/>

²⁶ Charles Mills, *The Racial Contract* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1997), and Carol Pateman, *The Sexual Contract* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1988).

In fact, there is a danger today, that the Christian Right in the triumvirate with neoliberal corporate power, and in alliance with the neocons, is doing more than reinforce a limited, contractual liberalism. The triumvirate is also helping to create an anti-liberal modernism, a greater decay of any liberal proclivities in U.S. civic nationalism, driving it back toward the brasher modernity that accommodated diverse and complex structures of domination. Anti-liberal modernism preserves liberalism's claim to develop, expand and drive toward the new, but usually only as the technological creativity by which elites create an ever more efficient apparatus of social control. There is modern "progress" in terms of technology and bureaucracy, but these are distinguished neither by being shared nor by seeking a wider dissemination of goods among U.S. or global residents.

What's going on in the USA? In sum, at the highest levels of national governance (with repercussions throughout all levels of the body politic), three cultural-political-economic forces – theocratic conservatives, neoconservatives, and corporate conservatives (Theocons, Neocons and CEOcons) – have brought their somewhat divergent agendas together in a tridimensional governing regime, what I have termed an imperial triumvirate of cultural-political-economic forces. The power of this triumvirate resides in the ways it has tapped into the long-existing U.S. currents of American romanticism and liberalism. Amid the fear and restorationist patriotism of the post-9/11 milieu, Theocons with the Neocon war-planning elite have exploited the romanticism and exceptionalism of U.S. mythology, harnessing people's human need for belonging, co-opting and distorting it for imperial adventuring abroad and disciplining at home. At the same time, Theocons with the CEOcon corporate elite exploit the liberalism of U.S. civic history, harnessing people's human orientation to expectation (for progress, prosperity, improvement), co-opting and distorting this to foster, again, a public sanctioning of U.S. imperial ventures abroad and structuring at home. In the past, social movements, civil rights organizing, international agreements, and a variety of constitutional amendments and legislation, had placed some brakes on the the most sinister tendencies in these U.S. currents. With 9/11, however, the public has been less attentive to those tendencies; in fact, they have often been ready to define their modes of belonging and expectation in modes that support leaders ready to exploit them for their own power. So, where might we go from here?

Dissolving the Triumvirate

Many programs, involving courageous leaps and daily small steps will be necessary to counter the strength of the imperial triumvirate. As U.S. policies of war in Iraq, Iran, and elsewhere become more destructive, as the Republican regime rationalizes greater levels of torture for racialized others, as it unbridles militarism and totalitarian control, as it increasingly neglects its own residents' social well-being, more drastic course corrections will become necessary – such as removing national leaders, presidential impeachment, or abolition of long-standing intelligence agencies. Whether minor or major in nature, we can assess these steps in terms of how they contribute to five larger aims that loom today as increasingly urgent mandates. The first three of these mandates concern links in the triumvirate's alliance; the final two direct us back to what might renew the best of our democratic visions.

1. We need to at least slow the growing alliance between the Christian Right and the Neocon military planners. This means doing everything possible to disrupt the ethos that links Christian piety with U.S. militarism. Fortunately, there are dissenting Christians who do not support the American exceptionalist agendas of the militant Christian Right. There are also dissenting military personnel who depart from the Neocon agenda of pursuing the "American greatness" of unrivaled military supremacy. Christian and military dissenters need to work together to expose ever more clearly the public danger posed by the Christian Right/Neocon alliance. One of the reasons that Cindy Sheehan's anti-war protest outside Bush's Crawford ranch and on national tour – partly in memory of her son killed in Iraq – made such an impression is that her movement displayed U.S. military and Pentagon critics of the Iraq war cooperating U.S. Christians who offered up their own protests, prayers, and even Eucharistic ceremonies. More efforts of that sort might help to break the Christian Right/Neocon tendency to fuse Christian and military fervor.

2. We can also work to weaken the links forged between the Christian Right and corporate power. Again, there already exist dissenters who object to this linkage from both sides.

There are Christians who do not understand their public witness to be primarily an implementation of the agenda of corporate power. These are Christians who view the spirit of Christ to be alive primarily in the agency of the activist poor, with whom others, including some of the wealthy, can enter into supportive relation. Christian voices like those of Ron Sider and Jim Wallis who speak from the evangelical left, together with Jewish voices like Michael Lerner, present religious practices that challenge the exploitative ways of corporate powers. Christians who critically engage Marxist and other critics of the economic order are also important. All of those voices are essential for weakening the Theocon/CEOcon alliance in the imperial triumvirate.

In the corporate culture itself there are also dissenters whose cosmopolitan, religious, or secular self-understandings lead them to object to the CEOcon/Theocon alliance. They often view the agenda of the Christian Right as a violation of global human values and, in a more self-interested manner, see it as blocking corporate growth.²⁷ Both Christian and corporate dissenters to the link between Christian Right and corporate power need to expose the dangers of this alliance for the whole body politic and the way those dangers erode the positive impulses of religious faith and corporate practice that aid the peoples of the world.

3. Lest we think that resisting the triumvirate means only focusing on the Christian Right, we must take aim also at the ways other forces that help to cement the problematic alliance between Neocons and corporate powers. The Neocon/CEOcon link is not facilitated only by the Theocons' links to both. The Neocon/corporate alliance also has its own dynamics of fusion, linking drives for imperial grandeur with drives to accumulate wealth. A whole nation's people can become complicit in imperial drives and economic lust, but usually the architects and beneficiaries of that fusion are, as Michael Doyle argues in his book *Empires*, a "dominant domestic coalition" of elites who sit atop an increasingly neglected and restless multitude.²⁸

That multitude, with its many organizations, movements, and leaders, must resist the Neocon/CEOcon link as the elitist alliance it is, driving a permanent war economy that betrays the U.S. body politic even while it claims to build it up. The recent failure of U.S. governance to deal with its own peoples' needs in New Orleans and Mississippi in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina, while pursuing imperial adventures abroad in Iraq and elsewhere, is just one example of how citizens get neglected at home when architects of imperial adventure and economic aggrandizement privilege their own plans.

4. We need to reinvigorate the revolutionary American tradition that generated the U.S. democratic experiment and strengthened both citizen freedoms and structures of justice. That tradition has consisted of what historians Peter Linebaugh and Marcus Rediker have referred to as "a motley crew" of activists and ordinary people resisting unjust structures (not to be mistaken, or course, for the Motley Crue of heavy metal fame!). Leading up to the formation of U.S. government in 1776-1789, decades of earlier organizing were fueled by revolts against slavery, by indigenous nations' attempts to resist, negotiate with, and contain white settlers, by sailors' protest against impressments into imperial navies, as well as the struggles of by laborers, women and youth in a variety of resistance efforts.²⁹ This motley crew of everyday people has a long, persistent, if unknown history reaching to the Renaissance and English Revolution, with roots on all the continents where people struggle against the ignominies of oppression and dream a common life together for all creation. And the motley crew still thrives. For a better sense of the

²⁷ David Batstone, *Saving the Corporate Soul, and (Who Knows?) Maybe Your Own: Eight Principles for Preserving Wealth and Well-Being for You and Your Company Without Selling Out* (New York: Jossey-Bass, 2003).

²⁸ (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1986).

²⁹ On the motley crew, see Peter Linebaugh and Marcus Rediker, *The Many-Headed Hyrda: Sailors, Slaves, Commoners and the Hidden History of the Revolutionary Atlantic* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2000), 236-40, and Taylor, *Religion, Politics and the Christian Right*, 112-20.

spirit and character of this venerable tradition, listen to this elaboration on the “motley crew” in American history by historians Linebaugh and Rediker:

We should explain the significance of the term. In the habits of royal authority in Renaissance England, the “motley” was a multicolored garment, often a cap, worn by a jester who was permitted by the king to make jokes, even to tell the truth to power. As an insignium, the motley brought carnivalesque expectations of disorder and subversion, a little letting-off of steam. By extension, *motley* could also refer to a colorful assemblage, such as a crowd of people whose tattered demalio dress made it interesting. A motley crowd might very likely be one in rags, or a “*lumpen*”-proletariat (from the German word for “rags”). Although we write about and emphasize the inter-racial character of the motley crew, we wish that readers would keep these other meanings – the subversion of power and the poverty in appearance – in mind.³⁰

Instead of the nationalist and militarist romantic fantasies of our day that have come to define U.S. citizens’ sense of belonging, we need a whole new kind of romance, a clear-eyed and sober reverence for our belonging to this “motley crew,” the diverse multitude of peoples who continually experiment with new modes of governance, seeking those that serve us best. A deeper kind of national belonging roots itself in this diverse multitude that holds every government accountable to a teeming, sometimes clamorous, multitude of peoples.³¹ Here is the founding force of American Revolution, behind, before, and often beyond the plans of those who are called “founding fathers.”

5. The revolutionary tradition mentioned above must come to expression today in a more radical liberalism, one that has yet to be crafted in U.S. democratic life. If liberalism in the U.S. has long been, and remains today, a “contractual” liberalism – liberalism functioning in obeisance to hidden and not-so-hidden racial, sexual, and economic exclusionary contracts – then, it is long past time to break that liberalism free and return it to the many it has often excluded. Moreover, if liberalism itself is now being set aside wholesale – as do some of the new brutal technocrats of modern empire do today – then it is a matter of the utmost urgency that a stronger, more radical liberalism, be forged as a levee against any new flood of modern barbarity.

Such a radical liberalism will require honoring and foregrounding leaders of long-repressed groups who are at work today: those speaking for communities of color that still suffer racism, for women whose structural disadvantage remains (especially when compounded with economic hardship and racial discrimination), for the sick, elderly and disabled, for the 2.1 million incarcerated, for the rural and urban poor who continually get locked out of programs that could better their lives, or who are enticed onto the ever-new killing fields of the American empire. These groups have their leaders, their own organizations. It is time to build the U.S. future around their needs and visions for the whole body politic.³²

Increasingly, though, if we want a radical liberalism consistent with our deeper and more worthy revolutionary tradition, we will have to construct forms of governance around such leaders of today’s excluded and repressed peoples. Through acts of imagination and organization, let us begin to see them as *our* representatives, experimenting with new ways to give them leadership for forging a new political future for civil society.. Let us hold plebiscites, for example, on the issues and visions they set before us, and attend to these plebiscites with a civic virtue that excels what we give now to electoral processes in a system that so often fails us now. Let us practice a shadow government, just as many held shadow conventions to challenge the major political party

³⁰ Peter Linebaugh and Marcus Rediker, *The Many-Headed Hydra: Sailors, Slaves, Commoners, and the Hidden History of the Revolutionary Atlantic* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2000), 27-28.

³¹ On the “multitude,” see Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, *Multitude: War and Democracy in the Age of Empire*, (New York: Penguin, 2004), 189-219.

³² Taylor, *Religion, Politics and the Christian Right*, 129-41.

nominating conventions in 2000. This may all seem only a play of shadows. But such citizen performances also rehearse us in new patterns of civic virtue so necessary for new government to spring forth.

There will be no easy replacement of the governmental regime we have today, but something like this radical liberalism, re-energizing American revolutionary traditions, is necessary for staving off the imperial triumvirate consolidating itself anew today, thriving as it does on the old militarist romanticisms and on resilient, exclusive liberalisms. The hour is late, but it is still not too late to challenge the imperial triumvirate, to plant seeds for regime change in the U.S.