

## SHOCK AND AWE: RE-INVIGORATING THE MYTH OF AMERICAN INNOCENCE

The three generally unacknowledged subtexts of our public life in the 21<sup>st</sup> century are the permanent war economy, voter apathy and race. Those who profit from these conditions, with the cooperation of religion and media, have historically convinced Americans to ignore them. But don't all large, centralized states do this? It is the extent to which we *participate in our own exploitation* that makes America unique.

Democracy requires participation, but countless Americans have withdrawn from the *polis*. Since 1968 we have voted less and less often, to barely fifty percent, *the lowest voter turnout in the industrialized world*. Except for brief periods of wartime cohesion, the long-term trend since the sixties has been toward disengagement. Sociologist Robert Bellah argues that "talk radio," for example, "mobilizes private opinion, not public opinion, and trades on anxiety, anger and distrust, all of which are deadly to civic culture." Almost the only public groups that grew in recent decades have been support groups, which are "oriented primarily to the needs of the individual."

Several factors led to this situation, including the exclusion of diverse opinion by the two-party electoral system, the perception that the Democrats have abandoned their traditional working-class base and the general nastiness of the process itself.

There is indeed extreme polarization, but not between Republicans and Democrats. It is between voters and non-voters, those who have given up on (or in the case of some 5.3 million African-Americans, denied the right to vote because of felony disenfranchisement) the process. Fully 43% of those who are not likely to cast ballots are Hispanic, African-American or other racial and ethnic minorities. Youth understand that society has little need for them except as consumers, and the poor are indifferent to minor differences between the political parties.

Decline in participation is welcome news to the rich; but it also means that fewer people accept the basic assumptions of the myth of American innocence any more. **Hence the continual need to re-invigorate the myth of innocence. This has occurred, since long before 9-11, in three major ways:**

**1 – On the positive side,** media and politicians collude to present messages of denial. Characteristic themes include, "doom-and-gloomers" overrate our problems, global warming is a lie, unemployment is down, racism is history, the Iraqis welcomed us, and the system is working. An essential part of this message is idealized images of the nuclear family and small-town, traditional values.

The media's speed and frivolity charms everyone. It conveys American values primarily through two film and TV styles. In one – westerns and other action films – the redemption hero intercedes to save the community from evil. Since 1990, when Islam replaced communism as the "external Other," a new generation has grown up seeing literally dozens of movies depicting this threat, with a series of (white) American heroes (temporarily) eliminating the threat with Biblical ferocity. *Zero Dark Thirty* and *American Sniper* are merely the latest and most honored of this genre. The other style is the ubiquitous Disney-style cartoons and children's programming, in which, writes Todd Gitlin, "...characters are incarnations of an innocence that can never be dispelled." And both films and TV continue to ignore demographics by portraying most positive TV characters as white.

TV news offers a parallel experience. Reassuringly calm, unemotional, authoritative newscasters place even bad news in the wider context of progress: *It's all good*. Michael Ventura, however, measures how deeply "...people know that 'it' is not all right...by how much money they are willing to pay to be ceaselessly told it is."

**2 – The negative side** (playing out simultaneously with the positive side) involves constant, low-level threats: AIDS, crime, teen pregnancy, satanic cults, child molesters, epidemics, terrorists and traveler's advisories. Long before 9/11, local television (from which 50% of Americans receive all their news) gave high coverage to crime: "If it bleeds it leads." What about network news? Between 1990 and 1998, while the murder rate declined by 20%, murder stories on network newscasts increased by 600% (*not counting O.J. Simpson stories*).

Indeed, the combative, confrontational style of many news programs leaves viewers with the sense that style (the process, in psychological terms) dominates content, that conflict is the primary reality regardless of the issues being debated. Meanwhile, the subtext or hidden message of spectator sports is that (with the rare exception of tie games) conflict always results in resolution, regardless of who wins.

But the dominant message is that our public life is constantly qualified by the threat of violence. Forty percent of newspaper coverage of children concerns violence (55% on local newscasts). As a result, three out of four parents fear that strangers will kidnap their children. Thus, in the midst of massive denial about global warming and the real sources of terrorism, Americans fret about issues that TV chooses to present. Everyone can avoid discussing gun control when newspapers editorialize, "It's Not Guns, It's Killer Kids." The most common source of fear is the disturbed individual, the bad seed, rather than systematic inequities and corruption. Thus, obsession with individualism links happy denial with a constant, low-level background of fear. Periodically, actual – or contrived – episodes of terror evoke the old frontier paranoia, and, as Ben Franklin lamented, we quickly exchange our freedoms for a dubious sense of security.

Most of this bizarre mix of denial and fear mongering settles upon our traditional, black, internal Other. Despite easily available statistics to the contrary, when psychologists ask Americans to picture a criminal, 95% still picture a black man. Meanwhile, media images reinforce the official message of a "post-racial America." For example, countless TV crime shows offer a vision of racial sameness by portraying blacks and whites as "buddies," many of whom are policemen who team up to restore order in the *polis*. The (mixed) message is: *It's really dangerous out there, but together we've solved the racial issue*. As a result of all these feel-good images, writes Benjamin DeMott, "The nearer at hand the perfect place and good life can be made to seem, the more needless politics becomes."

The condition of simultaneous denial and distrust leads to paradoxical connections. Polls commonly reflect our belief that things were better in the old days; that things are going downhill, even when our *personal* outlook is rosy. We ignore rising gas prices, global warming and violence in the Mid-East for the freedom to drive. Freedom as mobility: as other aspects of the myth lose their hold on us, the ability to get away while still broadcasting our status becomes more attractive. Bellah suggests that the rich, unattached man is now the "roaming frontiersman" of the old myths, spending "more on his means of transportation than on his home." For many, driving an attractive car may be the last way to be in the polis at all – once we emerge from our gated communities.

Indeed, the gated community has become yet another potent symbol. Four centuries after defining themselves in contrast to the demonic forces of the wilderness, whites are once more circling the wagons. The Los Angeles area alone has over a million homes behind walls, and 40% of new California homes are in gated communities. Nationally, fifty million people live in them. A new image of madness at the gates: as we enclose ourselves in homogeneous, suburban ghettos, we simultaneously imprison more people than any nation in history and warehouse millions of others in nursing homes.

**3 – A third factor** that contributes to the re-vitalization of the myth of innocence is the mania produced by our technologically enhanced environment. In most large, indoor public spaces (stores, shopping malls and sports arenas) we endure unrelenting onslaughts of loud music, blinking lights and high-definition visual images. This is most certainly not accidental. Restaurants are designed with floors and walls that reflect sound and force patrons to shout just to be heard (thereby increasing the noise). In many places, especially those catering to adolescents, the atmosphere approaches that of gambling casinos, which are deliberately designed to create “altered states” of consciousness. The object is to heighten anxiety and encourage the sense that it can be reduced through consumerism. However, because the anxiety never fully dissipates, we continually acclimate to greater levels of it.

*This awkward combination of fear, denial and stimulation* has ruled our consciousness during the 65 years of television, which was born amid both the new consumerism and McCarthyism. Lucille Ball diverted us while Richard Nixon admitted, “People react to fear, not love.” As we have seen, however, the roots of this madness go back to the original confrontation of Puritans and Indians. Ever since, we have held the contradictory notions of chosen people and eternal vigilance. If we are attacked, the release of disillusioned energy drives us to violent extremes. Our lost innocence (*We have done so much good! Why do they hate us?*) justifies our willingness to support reactionary policies and violent fantasies.

For forty years Americans have flocked by the millions to countless disaster films. This genre works both sides of the fear/denial dichotomy by heightening fear of apocalyptic punishment and then cleanly resolving the threat through the intercession of selfless heroes. Bad dreams constantly interrupt our 400-year sleep of denial, and we awake exhausted.

Recall how, after 9/11, the government took this madness to its logical extreme with its color-coded alert system. Recall how we awakened daily to a degree of anxiety that shifted according to arbitrary “findings.” And yet, most (employed, white) people had the existential experience of nothing being particularly wrong in their personal lives. In psychology experiments, this “intermittent reinforcement” drives lab animals mad. And it drives people to release the tension by any means necessary.

The pathology of this condition is that the soul is subject to persistent messages that its emotional intelligence – its intuitive knowing of the sheer madness of modern life – is completely discounted. It is exactly the same wounding that children receive when adults tell them that they don’t really feel something – and this happens every day.

Few of us are able to resist the underlying lesson: My ways of evaluating reality are failures, and so am I. Since failure in America is always moral failure, then I am also bad – I am a sinner. This has contributed to a massive epidemic of depression, substance abuse and further apathy – or the need to identify a scapegoat and punish him.

