

The Corporate State and the Subversion of Democracy

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Chris Hedges gave this keynote address on Wednesday, May 28, in Furman University's Younts Conference Center.

When it was announced in May that President Bush would deliver the commencement address, 222 students and faculty signed and posted on the school's Web site a statement titled "We Object." The statement cites the war in Iraq and the administration's "obstructing progress on reducing greenhouse gases while favoring billions in tax breaks and subsidies to oil companies that are earning record profits."

"We are ashamed of the actions of this administration. The war in Iraq has cost the lives of over 4,000 brave and honorable U.S. military personnel," the statement read.

"Because we love this country and the ideals it stands for, we accept our civic responsibility to speak out against these actions that violate American values."

I used to live in a country called America. It was not a perfect country, God knows, especially if you were African-American or Native American or of Japanese descent in World War II or poor or gay or a woman or an immigrant, but it was a country I loved and honored.

This country gave me hope that it could be better. It paid its workers wages that were envied around the world. It made sure these workers, thanks to labor unions and champions of the working class in the Democratic Party and the press, had health benefits and pensions. It offered good public education. It honored basic democratic values and held in regard the rule of law, including international law, and respect for human rights. It had social programs from Head Start to welfare to Social Security to take care of the weakest among us, the mentally ill, the elderly and the destitute. It had a system of government that, however flawed, was dedicated to protecting the interests of its citizens. It offered the possibility of democratic change. It had a media that was diverse and endowed with the integrity to give a voice to all segments of society, including those beyond our borders, to impart to us unpleasant truths, to challenge the powerful, to explain ourselves to ourselves.

I am not blind to the imperfections of this America, or the failures to always meet these ideals at home and abroad. I spent 20 years of my life in Latin America, Africa, the Middle East and the Balkans as a foreign correspondent reporting in countries where crimes and injustices were committed in our name, whether during the Contra war in Nicaragua or the brutalization of the Palestinians by Israeli occupation forces. But there was much that was good and decent and honorable in our country. And there was hope.

The country I live in today uses the same words to describe itself, the same patriotic symbols and iconography, the same national myths, but only the shell remains. America, the country of my birth, the country that formed and shaped me, the country of my father, my father's father, and his father's father, stretching back to the generations of my family that were here for the country's founding, is so diminished as to be nearly unrecognizable. I do not know if this America will return, even as I pray and work and strive for its return. The "consent of the governed" has become an empty phrase.

Our textbooks on political science are obsolete. Our state, our nation, has been hijacked by oligarchs, corporations and a narrow, selfish political elite, a small and privileged group which governs on behalf of moneyed interests. We are undergoing, as John Ralston Saul wrote, “a coup d’état in slow motion.” We are being impoverished—legally, economically, spiritually and politically. And unless we soon reverse this tide, unless we wrest the state away from corporate hands, we will be sucked into the dark and turbulent world of globalization where there are only masters and serfs, where the American dream will be no more than that—a dream, where those who work hard for a living can no longer earn a decent wage to sustain themselves or their families, whether in sweat shops in China or the decaying rust belt of Ohio, where democratic dissent is condemned as treason and ruthlessly silenced.

I single out no party. The Democratic Party has been as guilty as the Republicans. It was Bill Clinton who led the Democratic Party to the corporate watering trough. Clinton argued that the party had to ditch labor unions, no longer a source of votes or power, as a political ally. Workers, he insisted, would vote Democratic anyway. They had no choice. It was better, he argued, to take corporate money. By the 1990s, the Democratic Party, under Clinton’s leadership, had virtual fundraising parity with the Republicans. Today the Democrats get more. In political terms, it was a success. In moral terms, it was a betrayal.

The North American Free Trade Agreement was sold to the country by the Clinton White House as an opportunity to raise the incomes and prosperity of the citizens of the United States, Canada and Mexico. NAFTA would also, we were told, staunch Mexican immigration into the United States.

“There will be less illegal immigration because more Mexicans will be able to support their children by staying home,” President Clinton said in the spring of 1993 as he was lobbying for the bill.

But NAFTA, which took effect in 1994, had the curious effect of reversing every one of Clinton’s rosy predictions. Once the Mexican government lifted price supports on corn and beans for Mexican farmers, they had to compete against the huge agribusinesses in the United States. The Mexican farmers were swiftly bankrupted. At least 2 million Mexican farmers have been driven off their land since 1994. And guess where many of them went? This desperate flight of poor Mexicans into the United States is now being exacerbated by large-scale factory closures along the border as manufacturers pack up and leave Mexico for the cut-rate embrace of China’s totalitarian capitalism. But we were assured that goods would be cheaper. Workers would be wealthier. Everyone would be happier. I am not sure how these contradictory things were supposed to happen, but in a sound-bite society, reality no longer matters. NAFTA was great if you were a corporation. It was a disaster if you were a worker.

Clinton’s welfare reform bill, which was signed on Aug. 22, 1996, obliterated the nation’s social safety net. It threw 6 million people, many of them single mothers, off the welfare rolls within three years. It dumped them onto the streets without child care, rent subsidies and continued Medicaid coverage. Families were plunged into crisis, struggling to survive on multiple jobs that paid \$6 or \$7 an hour, or less than \$15,000 a year. But these were the lucky ones. In some states, half of those dropped from the welfare rolls could not find work. Clinton slashed Medicare by \$115 billion over a five-year period and cut \$25 billion in Medicaid funding. The booming and overcrowded prison system handled the influx of the poor, as well as our abandoned mentally ill. And today we stand in shame with 2.3 million of our citizens behind bars, most for nonviolent drug offenses. More than one in 100 adults in the United States is incarcerated and one in nine black men ages 20 to 34 is behind bars. The United States, with less than 5 per cent of the global population, has almost 25 percent of the world’s prisoners.

The growing desperation across the United States is unleashing not simply a recession—we have been in a recession for some time now—but the possibility of a depression unlike anything we have seen since the 1930s. This desperation has provided a pool of broken people willing to work for low wages and without unions or benefits. This is good news if you are a corporation. It is very bad news if you work for a living. For the bottom 90 percent of Americans, annual income has been on a slow, steady decline for three decades. The majority's income peaked at \$ 33,000 in 1973. By 2005, according to New York Times reporter David Cay Johnston in his book "Free Lunch," it had fallen to a bit more than \$29,000, this despite three decades of economic expansion.

And where did that money go? Ask ExxonMobil, the biggest U.S. oil and gas company, which made a \$10.9-billion profit in the first quarter of this year, leaving us to pay close to \$4 a gallon to fill up our cars. Or better yet, ask Exxon Mobil Corp Chief Executive Rex Tillerson, whose compensation rose nearly 18 percent to \$21.7 million in 2007, when the oil company pulled in the largest profit ever for a U.S. company. His take-home pay package included \$1.75 million in salary, a \$3.36-million bonus, and \$16.1 million of stock and option awards, according to a company filing with the U.S. Securities and Exchange Commission. He also received nearly \$430,000 of other compensation, including \$229,331 for personal security and \$41,122 for use of the company aircraft. In addition to his pay package, Tillerson, 56, received more than \$7.6 million from exercising options and stock awards during the year. Exxon Mobil earned \$40.61 billion in 2007, up 3 percent from the previous year. But Tillerson's 2007 pay was not even the highest mark for the U.S. oil and gas industry. Occidental Petroleum Corp. CEO Ray Irani made \$33.6 million and Anadarko Petroleum Corp. chief James Hackett took in \$26.7 million over the same period.

For each dollar earned in 2005, the top 10 percent got 48.5 cents. That was the top 10th's greatest share of the income pie, Johnston writes, since 1929, just before the Roaring '20s collapsed in the Great Depression. And within the top 10 percent, those who made more than \$100,000, nearly all the gains went to the top 10th of 1 percent, people like Tillerson, or Irani or Hackett, who made at least \$1.7 million that year. And until we have real election reform, until we make it possible to run for national office without candidates kissing the rings of Tillersons, Iranis and Hacketts to get hundreds of millions of dollars, this rape of America will continue.

While the Democrats have been very bad, George W. Bush has been even worse. Let's set aside Iraq—the worst foreign policy blunder in American history. George Bush has also done more to dismantle our Constitution, ignore or revoke our statutes and reverse regulations that protected American citizens from corporate abuse than any other president in recent American history. The president, as the Boston Globe reported, has claimed the authority, through "signing statements," to disobey more than 750 laws enacted since he took office, asserting that he has the power to set aside any statute passed by Congress when it conflicts with his interpretation of the Constitution.

Among the laws Bush said he can ignore are military rules and regulations, affirmative-action provisions, requirements that Congress be told about immigration services problems, "whistle-blower" protections for nuclear regulatory officials, and safeguards against political interference in federally funded research. The Constitution is clear in assigning to Congress the power to write the laws and to the president a duty "to take care that the laws be faithfully executed." George Bush, however, has repeatedly declared that he does not need to "execute" a law he believes is unconstitutional.

The Bush administration has gutted environmental, food and product safety, and workplace safety standards along with their enforcement. And this is why coal mines collapse, the housing bubble has blown up in our face and we are sold lead-contaminated toys imported from China. Bush has done more than any president to hand our government directly over to corporations, which now get 40

percent of federal discretionary spending. Over 800,000 jobs once handled by government employees have been outsourced to corporations, a move that has not only further empowered our shadow corporate government but helped destroy federal workforce unions. Everything from federal prisons, the management of regulatory and scientific reviews, the processing or denial of Freedom of Information requests, interrogating prisoners and running the world's largest mercenary army in Iraq has become corporate. And these corporations, in a perverse arrangement, make their money off of the American citizen.

Halliburton in 2003 was given a no-bid and non-compete \$7-billion contract to repair Iraq's oil fields, as well as the power to oversee and control Iraq's entire oil production. This has now become \$130 billion in contract awards to Halliburton. And flush with taxpayer dollars, what has Haliburton done? It has made sure only 36 of its 143 subsidiaries are incorporated in the United States and 107 subsidiaries (or 75 percent) are incorporated in 30 different countries. Halliburton is able through this arrangement to lower its tax liability on foreign income by establishing a "controlled foreign corporation" and subsidiaries inside low-tax, or no-tax, countries known as a "tax havens." They take our money. They squander it. And our corporate government not only funds them but protects them. Halliburton—and Halliburton is just one example—is the engine of our new, rogue corporate state, serviced by people like George Bush and Dick Cheney, once the company's CEO.

The disparity between our oligarchy and the working class has created a new global serfdom. Credit Suisse analysts estimates that the number of subprime foreclosures in the United States over the next two years will total 1,390,000 and that by the end of 2012, 12.7 percent of all residential borrowers in the United States will be forced out of their homes. The corporate state, which as an idea is an abstraction to many Americans, is very real when the pieces are carefully put together and linked to a system of corporate power that has made this poverty, the denial of our constitutional rights and a state of permanent war inevitable.

The assault on the American working class—an assault that has devastated members of my own family— is nearly complete. The U.S. economy has 3.2 million fewer jobs today than it did when George Bush took office, including 2.5 million fewer manufacturing jobs. In the past three years, nearly one in five U.S. workers was laid off. Among workers laid off from full-time work, roughly one-fourth were earning less than \$40,000 annually. A total of 15 million U.S. workers are unemployed, underemployed or too discouraged to job hunt, according to the Labor Department. There are whole sections of the United States which now resemble the developing world. There has been a Weimarization of the American working class. And the assault on the middle class is now under way. Anything that can be put on software—from finance to architecture to engineering—can and is being outsourced to workers in countries such as India or China who accept a fraction of the pay and work without benefits. And both the Republican and Democratic parties, beholden to corporations for money and power, allow this to happen.

Take a look at our government departments. Who runs the Defense Department? The Department of Interior? The Department of Agriculture? The Food and Drug Administration? Who runs the Department of Labor? Corporations. And in an election year where we are numbed by absurdities we hear nothing about this subordinating of the American people to corporate power. The political debates, which have become popularity contests, are ridiculous and empty. They do not confront the real and advanced destruction of our democracy. They do not confront the takeover of our electoral processes.

We have watched over the past few decades the rise of a powerful web of interlocking corporate entities, a network of arrangements within subsectors, industries or other partial jurisdictions to diminish and often abolish outside control and oversight. These corporations have neutralized

national, state and judicial authority. They dominate, for example, a bloated and wasteful defense industry which has become sacrosanct and beyond the reach of politicians, most of whom are left defending military projects in their districts, no matter how redundant, because they provide jobs. This has permitted a military-industrial complex, which contributes lavishly to political campaigns, to spread across the country with virtual impunity. Defense-related spending for fiscal 2008 will exceed \$1 trillion for the first time in history.

The U.S. has become the largest single seller of arms and munitions on the planet. The defense budget for fiscal 2008 is the largest since the Second World War even as we have more than \$400 billion in annual deficits. More than half of federal discretionary spending goes to defense. This will not end when Bush leaves office. And so we build Cold War relics like \$ 3.4-billion submarines and stealth fighters to evade radar systems the Soviets never built and spend \$ 8.9 billion on ICBM missile defense that will be useless in stopping a shipping container concealing a dirty bomb. The defense industry is able to monopolize the best scientific and research talent and squander the nation's resources and investment capital.

These defense industries produce nothing that is useful for society or the national trade account. Melman, like President Eisenhower, saw the defense industry as viral, something that, as it grew, destroyed a healthy economy. And so we produce sophisticated fighter jets while Boeing is unable to finish its new commercial plane on schedule, and our automotive industry tanks. We sink money into research and development of weapons systems and starve technologies to fight against global warming and renewable energy. Universities are awash in defense-related cash and grants, and struggle to find money for environmental studies. This massive military spending, aided by this \$3-trillion war, is hollowing us out from the inside. Our bridges and levees collapse, our schools decay and our safety net is taken away.

The corporate state, begun under Ronald Reagan and pushed forward by every president since, has destroyed the public and private institutions that protected workers and safeguarded citizens. Only 7.8 per cent of workers in the private sector are unionized. This is about the same percentage as in the early 1900s. There are 50 million Americans in real poverty and tens of millions of Americans in a category called "near poverty." Our health care system is broken. Eighteen thousand people die in this country, according to the Institute of Medicine, every year because they can't afford health care. That is six times the number of people who died in the 9/11 attacks, and these unnecessary deaths continue year after year. But we do not hear these stories of pain and dislocation. We are diverted by bread and circus. News reports do little more than report on trivia and celebrity gossip. The FCC, in an example of how far our standards have fallen, defines shows like Fox's celebrity gossip program "TMZ" and the Christian Broadcast Network's "700 Club" as "bona fide newscasts." The economist Charlotte Twight calls this vast corporate system of spectacle and democratic collapse "participatory fascism."

How did we get here? How did this happen? In a word, deregulation—the systematic dismantling of the managed capitalism that was the hallmark of the American democratic state. Our political decline came about because of deregulation, the repeal of antitrust laws, and the radical transformation from a manufacturing economy to a capital economy. This understanding led Franklin Delano Roosevelt on April 29, 1938, to send a message to Congress titled "Recommendations to the Congress to Curb Monopolies and the Concentration of Economic Power." In it, he wrote:

"The first truth is that the liberty of democracy is not safe if the people tolerate the growth of power to a point where it becomes stronger than the democratic state itself. That, in its essence, is Fascism—ownership of Government by an individual, by a group, or by any other controlling private

power. The second truth is that the liberty of a democracy is not safe if its business system does not provide employment and produce and distribute goods in such a way to sustain an acceptable standard of living.”

The rise of the corporate state has grave political consequences, as we saw in Italy and Germany in the early part of the 20th century. Antitrust laws not only regulate and control the marketplace, they serve as bulwarks to protect democracy. And now that they are gone, now that we have a state that is run by and on behalf of corporations, we must expect inevitable and perhaps terrifying political consequences.

I spent two years traveling the country to write a book on the Christian right called “American Fascists: The Christian Right and the War on America.” In depressed former manufacturing towns from Ohio to Kentucky it was the same. There are tens of millions of Americans for whom the end of the world is no longer an abstraction. They have lost hope. Fear and instability has plunged the working class into personal and economic despair, and not surprisingly into the arms of the demagogues and charlatans of the radical Christian right who offer a belief in magic, miracles and the fiction of a utopian Christian nation. And unless we re-enfranchise these Americans back into the economy, unless we give them hope, our democracy is doomed.

As the pressure mounts, as this despair and desperation reaches into larger and larger segments of the American populace, the mechanisms of corporate and government control are being bolstered to prevent civil unrest and instability. It is not accidental that with the rise of the corporate state comes the rise of the security state. This is why the Bush White House has pushed through the Patriot Act (and its renewal), the suspension of habeas corpus, the practice of “extraordinary rendition,” the warrantless wiretapping on American citizens and the refusal to ensure free and fair elections with verifiable ballot-counting. It is part of a package. It comes together. It is not about terrorism or national security. It is about control. It is about their control of us.

Sen. Frank Church, as chairman of the Select Committee on Intelligence in 1975, investigated the government’s massive and highly secretive National Security Agency. He wrote:

“That capability at any time could be turned around on the American people and no American would have any privacy left, such is the capability to monitor everything: telephone conversations, telegrams, it doesn’t matter. There would be no place to hide. If this government ever became a tyranny, if a dictator ever took charge in this country, the technological capacity that the intelligence community has given the government could enable it to impose total tyranny, and there would be no way to fight back, because the most careful effort to combine together in resistance to the government, no matter how privately it was done, is within the reach of the government to know. Such is the capability of this technology. ... I don’t want to see this country ever go across the bridge. I know the capability that is there to make tyranny total in America, and we must see to it that this agency and all agencies that possess this technology operate within the law and under proper supervision, so that we never cross over that abyss. That is the abyss from which there is no return. ...”

When Sen. Church made this statement the NSA was not authorized to spy on American citizens. Today it is.

In a military brig in Charleston an American citizen, Ali Saleh Kahlah al-Marri, is being held in a black hole set up on American soil. He was stripped on June 23, 2003, by George Bush of his constitutional rights and declared an “enemy combatant.” He is being detained without charge, interrogated without a lawyer and held indefinitely. Lawyers for the Bush administration claim that

the president can send the military into any neighborhood, any town or suburb, capture a citizen and hold him or her in prison without charge. They base this claim on the Authorization for Use of Military Force, passed by Congress after 9/11, that gives President Bush the power to “use all necessary and appropriate force” against anyone involved in planning, aiding or carrying out the attacks. But Al-Mari was not captured in Afghanistan or Iraq. He was arrested in Peoria, Ill., in December 2001. And if the president can declare American citizens living inside the United States to be enemy combatants and order them stripped of constitutional rights, what does this mean for us? How long can we be held without charge? Without lawyers? Without access to the outside world? Maybe Al-Mari is, as the government claims, a terrorist. I don’t know. But I do know that if this becomes a precedent, if it is not overturned by the courts, habeas corpus, the most important bulwark of our democratic state, will be dead.

We are fed lie after lie to mask the destruction the corporate state has wrought in our lives. The consumer price index, for example, used by the government to measure inflation, has become meaningless. To keep the official inflation figures low the government has been substituting basic products they once measured to check for inflation with ones that do not rise very much in price. This trick has kept the cost-of-living increases tied to the CPI artificially low. The disconnect between what we are told and what is actually true is worthy of the old East German state. The New York Times’ consumer reporter, W.P. Dunleavy, wrote that her groceries now cost \$587 a month, up from \$400 a year earlier. This is a 40 percent increase. California economist John Williams, who runs an organization called Shadow Statistics, contends that if Washington still used the CPI measurements applied back in the 1970s, inflation would be in the 10 percent range. The advantage to the corporations is huge. A false inflation rate, one far lower than the real rate, keeps equitable interest payments on bank accounts and certificates of deposit down. It masks the deterioration of the American economy. The Potemkin statistics allow corporations and the corporate state to walk away from obligations tied to real adjustments for inflation. These statistics mean that less is paid out in Social Security and pensions. It has reduced the interest on the multitrillion-dollar debt. Corporations never have to pay real cost-of-living increases to their employees. The term “unemployment” has also been steadily redefined. This has rendered official data on employment worthless. In real terms about 10 percent of the working population is unemployed, a figure that is, over the long run, unsustainable. The economy, despite the official statistics, is not growing. It is shrinking. And as the nation crumbles we are awash with the terrible simplicity of false statistics. We confuse our emotional responses, carefully manipulated by advertisers, pundits, spin doctors, television hosts, political consultants and focus groups, with knowledge. It is how we elect presidents and those we send to Congress, how we make decisions, even decisions to go to war. It is how we view the world. Four media giants—AOL-Time Warner, Viacom, Disney, and Rupert Murdoch’s NewsGroup—control nearly everything we read, see and hear. This growing disconnect with reality is the hallmark of a totalitarian state.

“Before they seize power and establish a world according to their doctrines,” Hannah Arendt wrote, “totalitarian movements conjure up a lying world of consistency which is more adequate to the needs of the human mind than reality itself; in which, through sheer imagination, uprooted masses can feel at home and are spared the never-ending shocks which real life and real experiences deal to human beings and their expectations. The force possessed by totalitarian propaganda—before the movements have the power to drop iron curtains to prevent anyone’s disturbing, by the slightest reality, the gruesome quiet of an entirely imaginary world—lies in its ability to shut the masses off from the real world.”

So what do we do? Voting is not enough. If voting was that effective, to quote the activist Philip Berrigan, it would be illegal. And voting in an age when elections are stolen by rigged ballot machines and a stacked Supreme Court willing to overturn all legal precedent to make George Bush

president, will not work. I am not saying do not vote. We should all vote. But that has to be the starting point if we want to reclaim America. We must lobby, organize and advocate for the dissolution of the World Trade Organization and NAFTA. The WTO and NAFTA have handcuffed workers, consumers and stymied our efforts to create clean environments. These agreements are beyond the control of our courts and have crippled our weakened regulatory agencies. The WTO forces our working class to compete with brutalized child and prison labor overseas, to be reduced to this level of slave labor or to go without meaningful work. We need to repeal the anti-worker Taft-Hartley law of 1947. The act obstructs the organization of unions. We need to transfer control of pension funds from management to workers. If these pension funds, worth trillions of dollars, were in the hands of workers the working class would own a third of the New York Stock Exchange.

The working class has every right to be, to steal a line from Obama, bitter with liberal elites. I am bitter. I have seen what the loss of manufacturing jobs and the death of the labor movement did to my relatives in the former mill towns in Maine. Their story is the story of tens of millions of Americans who can no longer find a job that supports a family and provides basic benefits. Human beings are not commodities. They are not goods. They grieve, and suffer and feel despair. They raise children and struggle to maintain communities. The growing class divide is not understood, despite the glibness of many in the media, by complicated sets of statistics or the absurd, utopian faith in unregulated globalization and complicated trade deals. It is understood in the eyes of a man or woman who is no longer making enough money to live with dignity and hope.

George Bush, who will be here on Saturday, has done more to shred, violate or absent the government from its obligations under domestic and international law. He has refused to sign the Kyoto Protocol, backed out of the Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty, tried to kill the International Criminal Court, walked out on negotiations on chemical and biological weapons, and defied the Geneva Convention and human rights law. He has set up offshore penal colonies where we deny detainees basic rights and openly engage in torture. He launched an illegal war in Iraq based on fabricated evidence we now know had been discredited even before it was made public. And if we as citizens do not hold him accountable for these crimes, if we allow the Democratic majority in Congress to get away with its refusal to begin the process of impeachment, which appears likely, we will be complicit in the codification of a new world order, one that will have terrifying consequences. For a world without treaties, statutes and laws is a world where any nation, from a rogue nuclear state to a great imperial power, will be able to invoke its domestic laws to annul its obligations to others. This new order will undo five decades of international cooperation—largely put in place by the United States—destroy our own constitutional rights and thrust us into a Hobbesian nightmare. We are one, maybe two, terrorist attacks away from a police state. Time is running out.

We must not allow international laws and treaties—ones that set minimum standards of behavior and provide a framework for competing social, political, economic and religious groups and interests to resolve differences—to be discarded. The exercise of power without law is tyranny. And the consequences of George Bush's violation of the law, his creation of legal black holes that can swallow American citizens along with those outside our borders, run in a direct line from the White House to Abu Ghraib, Guantanamo and military brigs in cities such as Charleston.

George Bush—we now know from the leaked Downing Street memo—fabricated a legal pretext for war. He decided to charge Saddam Hussein with the material breach of the resolution passed in the wake of the 1991 Gulf War. He had no evidence that Saddam Hussein was in breach of this resolution. And so he and his advisers manufactured reports of weapons of mass destruction and disseminated them to a frightened and manipulated press and public. In short, he lied. He lied to us and to the rest of the world. There are tens of thousands, perhaps a few hundred thousand people, who have been killed and maimed in a war that has no legal justification, a war waged in violation of international law, a war that under the post-Nuremberg laws is defined as “a criminal war of aggression.”

We have blundered into nations we know little about. We are caught between bitter rivalries and competing ethnic groups and leaders we do not understand. We are trying to transplant a modern system of politics invented in Europe characterized, among other things, by the division of earth into independent secular states based on national citizenship in a land where the belief in a secular civil government is an alien creed. Iraq was a cesspool for the British when they occupied it in 1917. It will be a cesspool for us as well. We can either begin an orderly withdrawal or watch the mission collapse.

A rule-based world matters. The creation of international bodies and laws, the sanctity of our constitutional rights, have allowed us to stand pre-eminent as a nation—one that seeks at its best to respect and defend the rule of law. If we demolish the fragile and delicate domestic and international order, if we permit George Bush to create a world where diplomacy, broad cooperation, democracy and law are worthless, if we allow these international and domestic legal safeguards to unravel, our moral and political authority will plummet. We will erode the possibility of cooperation between nation-states, including our closest allies. We will lose our country. And we will, in the end, see visited upon us the evils we visit on others. Read Antigone, when the king imposes his will without listening to those he rules or Thucydides' history. Read how Athens' expanding empire saw it become a tyrant abroad and then a tyrant at home. How the tyranny the Athenian leadership imposed on others it finally imposed on itself. This, Thucydides wrote, is what doomed Athenian democracy; Athens destroyed itself. For the primary instrument of tyranny and empire is war and war is a poison, a poison which at times we must ingest just as a cancer patient must ingest a poison to survive. But if we do not understand the poison of war—if we do not understand how deadly that poison is—it can kill us just as surely as the disease.

Hope, St. Augustine wrote, has two beautiful daughters. They are anger and courage. Anger at the way things are and the courage to see they do not remain the way they are. We stand at the verge of a massive economic dislocation, one forcing millions of families from their homes and into severe financial distress, one that threatens to rend the fabric of our society. We are waging a war that devours lives and capital, and that cannot ultimately be won. We are told we need to give up our rights to be safe, to be protected. In short, we are made afraid. We are told to hand over all that is best about our nation to those like George Bush and Dick Cheney who seek to destroy our nation. A state of fear only engenders cruelty; cruelty, fear, insanity, and then paralysis. In the center of Dante's circle the damned remained motionless. If we do not become angry, if we do not muster within us the courage, indeed the militancy, to challenge those in the Democratic and Republican parties who herd us towards the corporate state, we will have squandered our courage and our integrity when we need it most.

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