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### Superstition and farce: the survival of the Inquisition in American political culture

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Consider C. Wright Mills, probably the first American scholar to bother tracking the elites in the US and to theorise about decision-making outside the formal legitimising rituals of elections etc. His 1956 book the *Power Elite* – published ten years before Carroll Quigley's *Triumph and Hope* – was entirely marginalised.<sup>1</sup> His argument was that there is actually a complex institutional structure for class formation in the US; and this is still the fundamental taboo in **Contents** political and social science. Dwight Eisenhower would allude to this in his farewell address as the 'military-industrial complex'. However Mills's concept was far broader. The competing theories and the ones essentially maintained even on the left in the US are those of Popper, Bell and Schlesinger.<sup>2</sup> It is part of the way the US Left supports the idea that it is not like Britain, not a class society, that prevents it from challenging the official mythology of how the state works. Ironically the US Left has spent almost a century trying to prove that Marx's analysis does not apply to either the economy or politics.

There is another queer point in US political culture and that is its quasi-religious foundation. The US is not a political entity but a global institution with a destiny like the Roman Catholic

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<sup>1</sup> Carroll Quigley, *Tragedy and Hope*, 1966

<sup>2</sup> Karl Popper, *The Open Society and its Enemies*, 1945, Daniel Bell, *The End of Ideology*, 1960, Arthur Schlesinger, *The Cycles of American History*, 1986.

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Church. Just as most liberation theologians could not abandon the Catholic Church, the US Left cannot abandon the central theological foundation of the USA – an idea that it is socio-political salvation compared to Europe. When people write that conspiracy theories distract from greater political movement, this has the same cognitive and rhetorical function as the insistence even among radical clergy on the legitimacy of the priesthood, the mass, and the elected Papacy for the guidance of world Catholicism.

### Producing the cadre

It is somehow fitting that the three main elite institutions for producing the cadre (Harvard, Georgetown, and Johns Hopkins) are Anglo-American, Roman Catholic and Prussian in character. Harvard creates the clubmen; Georgetown trains the American 'Jesuit' (*exercito*) military and foreign policy types; and Johns-Hopkins trains the quantitative, administrative, and medical bureaucrats for the US government (USG) social management agencies. I am sure one could compare these to the various Catholic religious orders: Johns-Hopkins and Georgetown train the US equivalent of Dominicans and Jesuits and Harvard is something like a pontifical university training those who are on an episcopal or cardinal track. Chicago has a kind of Franciscan orientation which may explain why it has produced/harboured both radicals and fascists.

Another problem could be called the 'ontological proof for American democracy'. Rather than argue and organise around a concept like popular will and the state as an outgrowth of it, meaning that it is the objectification of the dynamic by which popular will reconstitutes itself that gives a particular form to the polity, and then to ask questions about how the popular will emerges and finds expression – in my view a very practical and pragmatic way of deriving organised action from shared cognitive processes – there is a constant attempt to show that

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the dogmatic constitution of the US is a given and citizens are derivative of this definitive historical act in the process of perfection. To admit and pay serious attention to elite and class formation would contradict this principle. It would mean that there are in fact competing 'wills' which do not necessarily meet, or which do not even derive from the same first principles. If that were the case, then almost all mainstream left and liberal discourse in the US would collapse.

Bruce Cumings wrote a long history of the origins of the Korean War<sup>3</sup> in which he said clearly that there is no way to answer the question 'Who started it?' In a way this is just as irrelevant as 'Who killed JFK?' However, what makes Cumings' book remarkable is that he not only does not reject out of hand the idea that tight coincidence within a penumbra of strong political action may warrant useful conclusions about the manner and nature of decisions taken by people in power; he is careful to make the distinction between what can be documented and what can be concluded from a confluence of documentary and non-documentary evidence. His second volume – which he himself says is largely ignored by politics and scholarship – traces the various levels of US Asia-Pacific imperial policy and how it was interpreted and implemented by the main actors. What is most striking is that he shows how much effort was made by people like Dean Acheson to shape US domestic discourse and distract from actions the US had been taking in Korea. Then he shows that the reports of e.g. the North Koreans in most cases identified the actions of the USG in Korea correctly, while these were being successfully concealed by the USG from almost everyone in the US. Even today, although there is much hand-wringing about Vietnam, Korea is still a secret in the US. Moreover nearly everyone accepts the official US version of events. You will look very hard to find anyone on the left or centre who discusses the role of the US military government in Korea in suppressing Korean popular

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<sup>3</sup> Bruce Cumings, *The Origins of the Korean War* (two volumes) 1981, 1990.

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government. The current Korean government was a relative successful example of what the USG then tried to do in Vietnam and Nicaragua. As a result of this kind of ignorance and the success of the USG in concealing its Asia-Pacific policy (one which essentially goes back to the Russo-Japanese War), the most idiotic alliances can be found in the US supporting the bullying of North Korea today.

### Phoenix

Doug Valentine<sup>4</sup> wrote a nice little book on the Phoenix program. In it he shows that a substantial success of the program was to mislead most people in the US about government policy and the nature of pacification. This very intense multi-agency programme, spearheaded by the CIA, produced a generation of professional assassins and colonial mandarins who have held power for the past 30-odd years: just to mention a couple, Negroponte and Holbrooke.<sup>5</sup> Yet when the US describes its Central Asia policy and above all its war strategy and tactics, even the appointment of a Special Ops general does not raise an eyebrow.<sup>6</sup> No one asks why the Panama invasion,

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4 Douglas Valentine, *The Phoenix Program*, 1990.

5 John Negroponte (Foreign Service) and Richard Holbrooke (USAID) both began their 'foreign service' careers as members of the CIA-run, multi-agency Rural Pacification Program in Vietnam. The main participants were the USAID and the CIA although various units of the MACV were involved throughout the US war against the Vietnamese.

6 As of this writing the current commander of US forces in Afghanistan General Stanley McChrystal has spent the better part of his career commanding US special operations units.

There would appear to be even dynastic succession in US special operations and imperial rule. E.g. Douglas MacArthur and his father were both military governors of the Philippines and as such responsible for US counter-insurgency operations there. The William McCaffrey, father of Bill Clinton's 'drug czar', Barry McCaffrey, was an important figure in US counter-insurgency operations in Korea and Vietnam. Much is made of a supposed meritocratic and elected elite in the US – as a contrast to the European dynastic systems. However, a geneology of US military-bureaucratic power would reveal not only old school ties but hundreds of legacies.

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the Afghan invasion and some less well-known operations were all implemented by Phoenix/Rural Pacification alumni. One well-known CIA critic wrote recently how surprised he had been that Colin Powell was either easily deceived or willing to deceive in his capacity as national security advisor. This same person said to me he was unaware of the role Powell played in attempts to cover up My Lai.<sup>7</sup> Amidst the recent excited debate about the CIA's actions over the past eight years, one could be forgiven for thinking that Philip Agee had never lived and that the Church and Pike Committees had never met. Even Mr Panetta, who is commonly depicted as a new broom at Langley, has been part of the so-called intelligence community for more than thirty years.

'Witches' and 'miracles'

There is a very strong cognitive – I would say religious and dogmatic – construct shared throughout almost the entire US political spectrum (perhaps excluding the elites who often betray what appear to be a completely different set of paradigms) which excludes conspiracy, except in two forms. These are 'witches' and 'miracles'. The foundation of this construct can be found in sexual prudery and policing both of which are taught and enforced at a very early age.

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*Footnote 6 continued*

Election circuses and self-promotion by exclusive universities and corporations obscure the existence of close-knit family networks and rivalries at the highest level of political power. Thus Americans are reassured that their country is 'too big' to be ruled by small groups of conspirators. The ideology of plurality and the big 'melting pot' together with abject worship of corporations distorts the discussion of how decisions are actually made and who makes them. America's melting pot myth denies the possibility of dynastic power, while the worship of corporations prevents its citizens from seriously examining personal power and its ruthless exercise, let alone demanding accountability.

<sup>7</sup> Then a US Army major, Colin Powell was assistant chief of staff to the Americal Division (23rd Infantry), charged with responding to the first complaints that the My Lai massacre occurred. It has been strongly suggested that his role was to soften the impact of the report.

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Sexual prudery, the result of non-existent education and fanatical policing of personal behaviour, conditions the way Americans respond to all other areas of social control: secretively, irrationally, and maliciously, without the least sense of irony and only rare critical distance. This is also the root of the obsession with so-called 'political correctness'. Despite volumes which would otherwise be considered evidence – e.g. police, court, legislative, and scholarly reports – Americans will frequently insist that they cannot believe or, that it would be impossible for them to entertain, the possibility that these facts would be true; or even if they are, that they could point to different conclusions than those they learned as a child, the fundamental belief in *America* as such.

Within this framework there are the two above exceptions, either 'witches' are involved (these can be anything from 'communists' to 'secret cabalistic government'). In this case the facts and fantasy are mixed to justify the accusation and condemnation of any number of 'enemies' whose goal is to ruin the pure American society.

The other exception is very much like the 'miracle' in Catholicism. Miracles in Catholic doctrine are divine interventions. They are often ascribed to people and it is this ascription which is a central requirement for canonisation as a saint. Of course the Catholic Church, like any corporation, now has a very complex and seemingly rationalised system for accrediting miracles and recognising saints as their agents. Yet miracles – since they are by definition not human but divine in origin – can occur without the Church and frequently did. The miraculous events often reinforced precisely those currents of paganism or apostasy that the Roman Church was struggling to destroy. Miracles often catalysed insurrections. In Mexico, the Virgin of Guadeloupe was considered to be a miraculous power on the side of the Mexican peasantry and preceded the communist icons as a banner for revolution. The sainthood

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commissions of the Church had the task of integrating these 'miracles' and authorising limited veneration when belief in them could not be suppressed.

No doubt commissions and some limited disclosures by the military and scientific bureaucracy serve the same function in the US. Whatever UFOs might be, it is certainly absurd to discount them entirely. The assassination of the Kennedys (unlike the murders of black Americans such as King, Evers, Malcolm X *et al*) created a special category of sainthood. At the popular level the investigations are far more like exercises in veneration than concern with the implications of these murders for the religious belief in the USA and its corporate-political hierarchy. When concessions are made to those who argue for the existence and significance of UFOs, then it is in large part to satisfy the spiritual needs of a sect which is perceived as an annoyance. The sect's members are satisfied by being included through revelations. In return the sect continues its marginal and for serious investigators highly distracting 'research'. Attention is diverted from the covert activities of the military-scientific complex that despite the best efforts at secrecy still generates public emissions.

These are not necessarily mapped strategies of manipulation. Rather the institutions are shaped by the doctrine and ideology that retains the US as a belief system – not a rational system of government or social management by consent of the governed.

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