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“Make My Day!”: Spectacle as Amnesia in Imperial Politics

I

THE THIEF HIDES the purloined letter, in Edgar Allan Poe's story, by placing it in plain sight. His theft is overlooked because no attempt is made to conceal it. The crimes of the postmodern American empire, I want to suggest, are concealed in the same way. Covert operations actually function as spectacle. So let us begin like Poe's Inspector Dupin, and attend to the evidence before our eyes.¹

The last president of the United States was a Hollywood actor. His vice president, the man who succeeded him, was the director of the Central Intelligence Agency. To understand how the career paths of these two men, rather than discrediting either them or the political system in which they had risen to the top, uniquely prepared them for the presidency is to name the two political peculiarities of the postmodern American empire: on the one hand the domination of public politics by the spectacle and on the other the spread of covert operations and a secret foreign policy. “Going public,” Samuel Kernell's phrase for the shift from institutionalized, pluralist bargaining among stable, elite coalitions to appeals to the mass public, coexists with going private, the spread of hidden, unaccountable decision making within the executive branch. How are we to think about the relationship between the two?²

It may seem that spectacle and secrecy support each other by a division of labor, one being public and the other private, one selling or disguising the foreign policy made by the other. The Iran/Contra exposure broke down that division, on this view, by revealing a secret foreign policy that not only violated public law against aiding the Contras but also contradicted public denunciations of the Ayatollah Khomeini and of bargaining with terrorists. The privatization of American foreign policy that characterized Iran/Contra signified, in this interpretation, the takeover of policy by private, unaccountable arms merchants and state terrorists by means of private, secret operations. Although the executive junta owed its power to officials in high public positions, the argument continues, it was not a public body.

Such an interpretation, which divides public image from secret operations, ignores secrecy's role beyond covert operational borders, producing signals for elite and mass audiences. To begin with, the "neat idea[s]" that produced *Iran/Contra* (to recall Oliver North's apt phrase) were acted out as a film scenario in the heads of the junta, who, along with the right-wing ideologues let in on parts of the story, formed the audience for their own movie. ("Ollie was a patriot," remarked former Reagan press spokesman Larry Speakes. "But I sometimes felt he thought he was playing some kind of role, that he was watching a movie on the screen with himself the star in it.")³ And just as *Iran/Contra* was acted out as a spectacle within the junta, other covert operations have been intended to function as spectacle for relevant audiences—enemies and allies abroad, mass public and opinion makers at home. Political spectacle in the postmodern empire, in other words, is itself a form of power and not simply window dressing that diverts attention from the secret substance of American foreign policy.

To introduce the entanglement between the two apparent opposites, spectacle and secrecy, let us consider their conjunction in the *modus vivendi* of the two presidential figures, the Ronald Reagan of spectacle and the George Bush of covert operations. "Plausible deniability," as the phrase used to exculpate Reagan inadvertently admitted, points to a president whose operations in front of the camera were meant to render plausible the denial that he also operated behind it. That has been true since Hollywood, when President Reagan of the Screen Actors Guild engaged in two covert actions: first, he informed on his coworkers to the FBI and helped organize the anti-Communist blacklist whose existence he denied; second, he negotiated the exemption for Music Corporation of America that allowed it alone among talent agencies to produce movies and television shows and simultaneously to represent actors. The former covert action launched Reagan's political career. The latter, putting him in front of the camera on the GE Television Theater, moved him from movies to TV; helped him perfect the intimate, living-room image that would be crucial to his political success; and gave him the capital and capital-producing friendships that would underwrite his political career.⁴

These examples, which reverse the usual image of Reagan as mere entertainer, make covert action into the source of his power. Reagan's domination of American politics has come, however, not from his compartmentalized mastery of either covert action or spectacle but from his confusion of the two. Just as it facilitated his rise from Hollywood acting to Washington power, that confusion also protected the president from the worst consequences of the *Iran/Contra* exposure. When Reagan took responsibility for *Iran/Contra* with the words "It happened on my watch," he placed himself on the permeable border between public display and covert operation. "My watch" identified him as commander-in-chief, standing on the bridge as he did in the role of submarine commander in his last Hollywood movie, *Hellcats of the Navy*. Just as the script of that movie

freed the fictional commander from responsibility for the loss of his ship, so “It happened on my watch” allows the real president to evade responsibility by assuming it. The line first separates the visible commander-in-chief from the guilty parties in charge of operations down in what one former presidential chief-of-staff has called the “engine room.” Second, the line identifies the president not simply as the object at whom we look but as one of the watchers as well. “My watch” makes the president just another ordinary American spectator, as much or as little responsible as the rest of us—there and not there at the same time—as in the head and upper body shot of Reagan at the 1984 Republican convention. At once on camera and part of the television audience, the president lounged in shirt sleeves and watched his wife (a tiny image much smaller than he) raise her arms and, saying “Win one for the Gipper,” turn toward the giant image of presidential head and torso lounging and watching his wife—an infinite regression that drew the convention and television audience into the picture, identifying that audience as one of and as subject to the one of itself it was watching. Reagan’s managers planned every detail of that scene, including the special podium built without a single edge or straight line—“Curves everywhere,” as its creator described it, “brown, beige, nothing jarring. . . . The eye comes to rest there. Earth tones and rounded shapes are peaceful.” “The podium was a giant womb,” comments Garry Wills, “into which the country would retreat along with Reagan.”⁵

The Reagan spectacle points, then, neither to the insignificance nor to the autonomy of the sign but rather to its role in producing power. By the same token, the former CIA director was no more a powerful invisible presence before he became chief of state than the former actor was a powerless visible one. That is not because, as Robert Dole charged, Bush is the perennial good-boy marionette who doesn’t pull his own strings. Bush has had, after all, a substantial relationship to the CIA. He was, first, the former director who brought in Team B to politicize intelligence judgments, to exaggerate the extent of the Soviet military and political threat to the United States, and thereby to lay the groundwork for the massive military buildup and expanded covert operations that together define the Reagan Doctrine in foreign policy. And, second, his national security adviser, Donald Gregg, was (according to Congressional testimony) linked through CIA agent Felix Rodriguez to the illegal Contra supply operation, including the ill-fated Eugene Hassenfuss and probably to Contra drug running as well. Moreover, Bush has falsely denied his substantial involvement in trading arms for hostages. Bush’s claims of ignorance and privileged communication, like Reagan’s assumption of responsibility, evidence plausible deniability rather than the absence of either president or vice president from the scene of the crime.⁶

Bush, like Reagan, calls into question the distinction between mass spectacle and covert power. He does so in two ways. First, Bush’s evasions exemplify the public use of the claim of secrecy, in the name of national security, that allows

men like Bush, John Poindexter, and Oliver North to avoid political responsibility. And, second, Bush reminds us of the set of beliefs of the men (and women like Jeane Kirkpatrick) who carry out and defend covert operations. Whether or not Bush is a figurehead, he stands for fantasies about our enemies that—I have cited Reagan and the Reagan Doctrine, Bush and Team B to suggest—operate not in the first place in popular culture but at the most secret levels of decision making. These fantasies, reinforced by being shared among the covert operators, constitute the spectacle they produce for one another.

In a recent review, Ian Baruma agrees that Ronald Reagan's jokes, *Rambo*, and Jerry Falwell "tell us something about popular culture in America, but it would be simplistic to say that they directly account for United States foreign policy—even though the link might exist somewhere in the president's own mind."⁷ In dismissing the organizing principle of the president's mind, however, Baruma is making a big mistake. For if the link exists not only in Reagan's mass mind—the public spectacle—but in the minds of those who think up and implement our foreign policy, then to separate fantasy from policy works simply to preserve a realm of public discourse for reasonable men like Baruma to speak to power.

The public Reagan/Bush relation to secret operations also introduces a third form of power, the power of amnesia. The secret, retroactive finding that President Reagan forgot he signed, like the incessant "I don't recall"s of John Poindexter and Edwin Meese, may seem merely to disconnect high public officials from secret, illegal activities. Amnesia of this sort slides into claims of privileged communication on the one hand—Bush cannot tell us what, as vice president, he advised the president about arms and hostages—and ignorance on the other—Bush denies he knew Noriega was trafficking in drugs although that was commonplace information in the CIA when he was in charge of it—"not a smoking gun," one former NSC staffer has remarked, "but rather a twenty-one-gun barrage of evidence." Amnesia here severs the link between what goes on behind the scenes and what in front of the camera, as when Reagan forgets the movie origins of the lines he delivers as his own, or is just as surprised as the rest of us to learn that he never spoke to Mikhail Gorbachev the words that Larry Speakes attributed to him.⁸ If we disbelieve those claims of forgetting, we see them as protecting secret complicity. If we believe them, the reality principle disappears. Let us not dismiss the latter hypothesis too quickly, for I am going to suggest that memory loss is not confined to the president and his men, and that it sustains not only the covert actions hidden from public view but also the imperial spectacles that we have all seen. Covert actions derive from the imperatives of spectacle, not secrecy. They owe their invisibility not to secrecy but to political amnesia. What is displayed and forgotten in imperial spectacle is the historical content of American political demonology.

II

If spectacle and secrecy define the political peculiarities of the post-modern American empire, racial and political demonology define the peculiarities of the historic American empire. Countersubversion and racism, I will argue, provide the content for the covert, specular form. But this content is hidden by the form that seems to reveal it. Racism and countersubversion, like the actor and the CIA director, are concealed from contemporary eyes by being in plain sight. I am calling this forgetting of what one continues to see political amnesia, in order to yoke together the arguments of Russell Jacoby's *Social Amnesia* with those of Fredric Jameson's *The Political Unconscious*.⁹ In this motivated forgetting, that which is insistently represented becomes, by being normalized to invisibility, absent and disappeared. Instead of distinguishing circuses for the mass mind from secret, elite maneuvers, as if the former merely covered over the forces that drive the latter, we need to see how the links between going public and going private are strengthened by amnesia. Consider two illustrations from a source I have been trying to legitimate, the movies that matter to Ronald Reagan. Instead of reporting only my own interpretations of these motion pictures, as if the films were self-enclosed texts, let me practice some informal reception analysis.

"Go ahead. Make my day!" President Reagan invited Congress, promising to veto a threatened tax increase. Reagan was quoting Clint Eastwood as Dirty Harry, of course. But it turned out to be hard to remember in which of the four Dirty Harry movies the lines appeared and in what context Eastwood delivered them. Like many others, I first thought the lines came from the original movie, *Dirty Harry* (1971), in the scene where Eastwood holds a gun on a killer and dares him to draw, neither the killer nor the audience knowing whether there is a bullet left in Eastwood's gun. But although that scene opens and closes the movie (the first time the killer fails to call Eastwood's bluff, the second time he is blown away), Eastwood says "Make my day!" neither time. He speaks that line in *Sudden Impact* (1983) to a hoodlum holding his gun to a female hostage's head. In the scene that closes the movie the hoodlum is a rapist; in the scene that opens the movie he is black. Eastwood is daring a black man to murder a woman, in other words, so that Dirty Harry can kill the black. No question this time about whether his gun is empty and Eastwood at risk. The lives he proves his toughness by endangering are female and black, not his own.

When the president says "Make my day!" he is aspiring to Eastwood's power, but the audience is in a more complicated position. Theories of the male gaze notwithstanding, viewers are passive spectators closer to the helpless, female hostage position than to Eastwood's. This is not only because of their passivity in theater or living room but because of their larger, political helplessness as well. "Make my day!" blames that impotence on the criminal threat to women. By rein-

scribing race and gender difference and identifying with the rescuer, Clint Eastwood, the film offers viewers imaginary access to power.

The audience's relationship to this particular scene, however, is more complicated yet. Eastwood made *Sudden Impact* during the Reagan presidency, as the racial and sexual antagonisms of the 1980s put women and blacks into the picture at their own expense. The president who quoted Eastwood's line had made women and blacks his targets, notably through the tax cuts that eviscerated their welfare-state benefits and that he was defending when he said "Make my day!" But my claim here is not only that women and blacks were present in the presidential unconscious but also that they were absent from the memories of those who had seen the picture. Whenever I spoke on Reagan and the movies after seeing *Sudden Impact*, to student and nonstudent audiences, in my own classes and in public lectures, I asked whether anyone remembered the context of the famous words. Everyone recognized the line, for it has become a cultural cliché. But those who thought they had seen the movie floundered on the scene. Some wrongly placed the words in the episode, between men alone, of the first movie. Others got the movie and general setting right, but forgot key characters. As my sample reached the thousands, only one person remembered either the black man or the woman. That exception was himself a black man; he forgot the woman. Amnesia allows Eastwood and Reagan to have their race and gender conflict and digest it too. The white hero is remembered; the context that produced him is buried so that it can continue to support *Standing Tall* (the title of yet another Reagan-quoted movie) in the world. In the American myth we remember, men alone risk their lives in equal combat. In the one we forget, white men show how tough they are by resubordinating and sacrificing their race and gender others. The white man dares Moamar Qaddafi to blow up a café (maybe he did and maybe he didn't) so that he can drop bombs on men, women, and children of color. "Go ahead. Make my day!"

My first example of political amnesia concerns race and gender; my second is about countersubversion. In his 1940 movie *Murder in the Air*, Ronald Reagan plays an undercover member of the Secret Service (forerunner of the wartime OSS and the postwar CIA). The secret agent, Brass Bancroft, penetrates a Nazi/Communist plot to steal the plans for a secret, defensive superweapon that bears an uncanny (and, I have argued, not accidental) resemblance to Star Wars. I introduced my book "*Ronald Reagan, the Movie*" with that film. But I told the story of sabotage, subversives, House Un-American Activities Committee investigation, and secret weapon as if I were describing history and not a movie. In the fall of 1987, after "*Ronald Reagan, the Movie*" appeared, I visited a college freshman English class that was studying political writing and had read the Reagan essay. One student asked whether I had wanted readers to believe I was telling a true story, and since that was indeed my intention I asked other members of the class whether it had worked. An Asian-American responded that he had been taken

in at first but realized the tale was fiction and not fact when I brought in the House Un-American Activities Committee. Relying on intelligence and common sense to compensate for historical ignorance, this student assumed that HUAC could only be made up; how could he know that it was also American history? It was a history, moreover, that operated with particular force, if not against the parents or grandparents of this student then against other Asian-Americans who were, from the point of view of the makers of that history, indistinguishable from them.

These responses to *Sudden Impact* and *Murder in the Air* point to two amnesias whose forgettings are hardly identical. One is personal, the other social, since ignorance of American history is not the same as forgetting what one has actually seen. Millions of Americans familiar with "Make my day!" never have seen the movie, moreover. They may know the line from television trailers that do not show the actual scene, or from computer "toy" programs in which a digitalized voice speaks the words. As "Make my day!" enters the common culture its roots disappear, and HUAC and *Sudden Impact* come to resemble each other as instances not of individual forgetting but of historical memory loss. At the same time film, by functioning in Reaganite politics to confuse the historical with the imaginary, also preserves an objective memory of scenes that have now entered history. *Sudden Impact* allows us to hold to account the culture that voices the movie's most famous words.

That is not to damn all speakers of the line, however. "Make my day!" declares an aggression that leads back in American culture to racial and sexual inequality, even if many have used the phrase without knowing its filmic source or historical meaning. (The same would apply, for an earlier generation, to Theodore Roosevelt's injunction to speak softly and carry a big stick.) No one wants to be accused of knowing and forgetting the origin of "Make my day!" But instead of exculpating the innocently ignorant and sending those who have forgotten their guilty knowledge to hell, the concept of political amnesia points to a cultural structure of motivated disavowal. That structure will vary in implicating individuals (from those who want others to forget; to those who forgot; to those who, with varying degrees of wilfulness, never allowed themselves to know) and events (readers of earlier drafts of this essay have been more willing to acknowledge race and amnesia in Bush's use of Willie Horton, with which I will conclude, than in Reagan's invocation of Clint Eastwood).

It is not necessary to agree about who and what fit within the structure of political amnesia to understand how it works. Since amnesia means motivated forgetting, it implies a cultural impulse both to have the experience and not to retain it in memory. Political amnesia signifies not simply memory loss but a dissociation between sensation and ego that operates to preserve both. Amnesia signals forbidden pleasure or memory joined to pain. It permits repetition of pleasures that, if consciously sustained in memory over time, would have to be called into question. From this perspective, the political spectacle opens a door

the viewer wants to close so that it can be opened again. There is, first, the forbidden pleasure in the sensations themselves, a sensory overstimulation that in political spectacle is more typically violent than sexual (or sexual by being violent). Amnesia disconnects from their objects and severs from memory those intensified, detailed shots of destruction, wholesaled on populations and retailed on body parts. There is, second, the historical truth exposed by the mythic effort to cannibalize it—that the white male sacrificed women and people of color, for example, in the name of his own courage. Historical amnesia allows race and countersubversion to continue to configure American politics by disconnecting current practices from their historical roots. Political amnesia works, however, not simply through burying history but also through representing the return of the repressed. An easily forgettable series of surface entertainments—movies, television series, political shows—revolve before the eye. The scopic pleasure in their primal, illegitimate scenes produces infantile amnesia once the images themselves threaten to enter the lasting, symbolic realm.¹⁰ The recovery of historical memory exposes these processes.

Spectacle is the cultural form for amnesiac representation, for specular displays are superficial and sensately intensified, short lived and repeatable. Spectacle and amnesia may seem at odds, to be sure: *amnesia*, a term from depth-historical analysis, points backward, to the nineteenth century's concern with the past. *Spectacle*, by contrast, names the spatial pleasures of contemporary visual entertainment. But this opposition, underlined in modernist and postmodernist analysis, is what enables spectacle to do its work.

Spectacles, in the Marxist modernist view, shift attention from workers as producers to spectators as consumers of mass culture. Spectacles colonize everyday life, in this view, and thereby turn domestic citizens into imperial subjects. Spectacle goes private by organizing mass consumption and leisure; it attaches ordinary, intimate existence to public displays of the private lives of political and other entertainers. Spectacles, in the postmodern view, define the historical rupture between industrial and postindustrial society—the one based on durable goods production, the other on information and service exchange. With the dissolution of individual subjects and differentiated, autonomous spheres, not only does the connection between an object and its use become arbitrary, in this view, but skilled attention to display also deflects notice from the object to its hyperreal, reproducible representation. The society of the spectacle provides illusory unification and meaning, Guy Debord argues, distracting attention from producers and from classes in conflict. Simulacric games have entirely replaced the real, in Jean Baudrillard's formulation, and offer not even a counterfeit representation of anything outside themselves.¹¹

Spectacle is about forgetting, for the Marxist modernist, since it makes the tie to production invisible. The historicizing concept of amnesia suggests that the forgotten link in political spectacle is the visible tie to the past. Spectacle contrasts

to narrative, for the postmodernist, as fragmented and interchangeable individuals, products, and body parts replace the subject-centered story. Political spectacles display centrifugal threats—threats to the subject and threats to the state—to contain as well as to enjoy them. Instead of dissolving the subject into structures or discourses, the concept of amnesia points to an identity that persists over time and that preserves a false center by burying the actual past.

American imperial spectacles display and forget four enabling myths that the culture can no longer unproblematically embrace. The first is the historical organization of American politics around racial domination. Once openly announced, American political racialism must now give unacknowledged satisfactions. The second is redemption through violence, intensified in the mass technologies of entertainment and war. The third is the belief in individual agency, the need to forget both the web of social ties that enmesh us all and the wish for an individual power so disjunctive with everyday existence. And the fourth is identification with the state, to which is transferred the freedom to act without being held to account that in part compensates for individual helplessness but in part reflects state weakness as well.

Covert spectacles, the Reagan Era's main contribution to American imperial representation, display state-supported American heroes in violent, racial combat. Covert spectacles—movies like *Rambo* (which begins, "A covert action is being geared up in the Far East") and political schemes like aid to the Nicaraguan "freedom fighters"¹²—preserve the fiction of a center. It is not just that America occupies that center, but that international politics comprises a coherent narrative where secret agents—the word *agent* has a double meaning—are at once connected to a directing power and also able to act heroically on their own. In a world of impersonal forces, massive suffering, and individual helplessness, the covert spectacle provides the illusion, through violence, of personal control. The visual character of the story, moreover, encourages immediate audience identification, elevating a visionary ideal above chaotic, ordinary, daily existence.¹³

Political spectacles incorporate fragmentary surface pleasures—the crotch shot in *Rambo*, for example, where the camera pulls back to reveal that it was showing not female private parts but the crease inside the hero's elbow, now safely tucked between biceps and forearm; or the explosions of violence in *First Blood, Part I* and *Part II*—into a larger whole. Resuscitating the center rather than disintegrating it, political spectacle provides the pleasure of meaning-giving order. In so doing, political spectacle heals the rift between present and past. Mass advertising has marketed reassurance about historical connectedness since its origins in the 1920s.¹⁴ The covert operator, bringing the past into the present, offers that reassurance as well. Entering racially alien ground, he regresses to primitivism in order to destroy the subversive and appropriate his power.

Two American histories support the covert spectacle, the history of racial demonology and the emergence of a specular foreign policy. I want briefly to

outline those histories, suggesting at greater length how World War II provides the missing link between them. World War II, by joining demonology to the covert spectacle, configured both the first Cold War and its revival under Reagan. Finally, since amnesia itself must be historicized, I will conclude with the connection established in the 1960s between racial demonology and imperial spectacle. For the display and forgetting of that link produced both the Reagan Doctrine in foreign policy and the Bush presidential campaign.

III

As with the career paths of the current president and his predecessor, so with our historical origins, the obvious is rendered invisible by being taken for granted. The United States is a settler society. America began in European imperialism against people of color. The American empire started at home; what was foreign was made domestic by expansion across the continent and by the subjugation, dispossession, and extermination of Indian tribes. Other settler societies—South Africa, now Israel—came to depend on the labor of indigenous populations. The American colonies, after experimenting with Indian workers, enslaved Africans instead. The United States was built on the land and with the labor of peoples of color.

Academic divisions between domestic and international politics separate the American empire from its domestic, imperial base. With the end of the continental frontier, the racial basis of American expansion carried forward into the Philippines, the Caribbean, Latin America, and eventually the Asian mainland, with full consciousness (since forgotten) of the continuity between the triumph of civilization over savagery at home and the white man's burden abroad. (Rudyard Kipling urged America to take up the white man's burden in the Philippines, connecting that war to European imperialism as well.) The distinction between European powers that held colonies and the United States, which generally did not, wrongly locates the imperial age in the late nineteenth century instead of three centuries earlier, at the dawn of the modern age. Imperial expansion to extend the area of freedom (in Andrew Jackson's words) was integral to American politics from the beginning. The linkage of expansion to freedom instead of to the acquisition of colonies prepared the United States to see itself as the legitimate defender of freedom in the postcolonial Third World.

To trace a line from Columbus to, say, Elliott Abrams hardly proves the racial motivations of America's Third World interventions—Iran in the 1950s, Zaire in the 1960s, Vietnam in the 1960s and 1970s, Nicaragua and El Salvador today, to name some prominent examples. Race enters in three ways, however. First, most subjects of American intervention are peoples of color, and the racial history of the United States makes it easier to dehumanize and do away with them. Second,

American political culture came into being by defining itself in racist terms. And third, categories that originated in racial opposition were also imposed on political opponents, creating an American political demonology.

To illustrate these three points, I borrow an example from Jonathan Kwitny's *Endless Enemies*.¹⁵ Walter Cronkite opened the CBS evening news on 19 May 1978 with these words: "Good evening. The worst fears in the rebel invasion of Zaire's Shaba province reportedly have been realized. Rebels being routed from the mining town of Kolwezi are reported to have killed a number of Europeans." Easy to pass right over that remarkable "worst fears," which, as Kwitny says, makes it better to kill blacks than whites. Colored deaths, my first point, do not count the way white ones do. That is because the history of imperialism and slavery has encoded a nightmare of racial massacre so that it speaks even through Walter Cronkite. That nightmare of red and black murdering white inverts actual history, in which massacres (certainly in the big, world-historic picture and in most individual cases as well) were usually the other way around. There was, as Kwitny shows, neither a rebel invasion of Zaire nor a massacre of whites. Far more blacks were killed than whites in the fighting that did occur, and "the worst massacre of Europeans in modern African history" was a historically produced figment of the imagination of the *Washington Post*. It never happened.

Imaginary racial massacres make peoples of color not simply disposable but indispensable as well, for—and this is my second point—the fantasy of savage violence defines the imperial imagination. Racial inversions, in which victims metamorphose into killers, may seem at most to justify Euro-American interventions in the Third World, not to cause them. Surely the color of the minerals in Zaire, not the people, provoked the covert American intervention of the early 1960s that was responsible for killing Patrice Lumumba and making Joseph Mobutu the dictator of the postcolonial state. If Vietnamese oil won't do the work of Zairian copper, then geopolitical conflict will. Or the domino effect? Or anti-Communism? Or unconsummated male bonding? Why *were* we in Vietnam? As the procession of explanations moves farther and farther from solid, mineral ground, it moves closer to race. Not race as a natural category of difference (and even minerals acquire value from culture and not nature) but as a cultural field, inseparable from the economic and political forces it has helped to constitute.

Racial conflict, as Richard Slotkin, Richard Drinnon, and I among many others have argued, created a distinctive American political culture. It linked freedom to expansion in nature rather than to social solidarity, to violent conquest of the racial other rather than to peaceful coexistence. The covert operator, "consuming an act of racial revenge or rescue," is the mythic hero of American expansion.¹⁶ The rescue of the helpless female hostage from peoples of color established sexual as well as racial difference—against the threats of racial uprising, female independence, and the feminization of helpless white men, *Sudden Impact* transports the frontier myth into the city as well. "Make my day!"

The impact of the racial history of the United States transcends race—my third point—contaminating our political culture as a whole. The conflict in the New World between protestant bourgeois white men and peoples of color not only produced a racial demonology but underlies the broader countersubversive tradition in American politics. Racial and political demonology are often explicitly linked, as in the hostility to aliens in *Murder in the Air*, and as among the government officials and media spokespeople who fantasized a racial massacre in Zaire. Zaire illustrates the interconnection between race and countersubversion because Cuban troops in Angola were held responsible for a conflict with which they had nothing to do. Balunda who had fled to Angola after the defeat of their effort to create an independent state (which put them on the “Right” in the Cold War procrustean bed during the 1960s) were in 1978 trying to return home (which put them on the “Left”).¹⁷

“The crisis of ethnocentricity in the beginning of the sixteenth century (and for a long time afterward),” to borrow Carlo Ginzburg’s phrase, came about when Europeans discovered other places and peoples that did not revolve around them. But Europeans in the New World used this Copernican revolution in politics to make themselves the center again.¹⁸ The claims of the Reagan Doctrine to roots in American history should thus not be lightly dismissed. The distinctiveness of Reagan’s foreign policy lies elsewhere, not in its demonological vision per se but in the character of its Cold War revival. For the Cold War, by centering countersubversion in the national security state, marked a break with the past. That shift, in turn, had its origins in World War II, both structurally at the beginning of the Cold War and in the career patterns and mentality of those who revived the Cold War under Reagan. World War II, moreover, is the distinctive historical moment when the United States seems innocent of the charges of racial and political demonology. The birth of the national security state from out of “the good war” (as Studs Terkel has labeled it) produced the Cold War’s specular foreign policy.¹⁹

IV

Beginning with the Cold War’s origins in World War II, demonology has been used to dramatize and justify the covert spectacle. But if racial demonology organized American politics before the war, and if the war has organized our politics since, then the grip of the good war has importantly to do with how it seemed at once to justify demonology and to free American politics from the stigma of race.

World War II justified demonology because in that war we confronted a truly demonic foe. It is easy enough to show how the presence of Nazism distorted postwar politics; how the concept of totalitarianism promoted a binary division

between the extremes of Right and Left on the one hand and the Free World on the other; how the resulting distinction between authoritarianism and totalitarianism, well before Jeane Kirkpatrick resuscitated it,²⁰ was an empty placeholder faithful neither to the actual domestic qualities of the regimes it contrasted nor to their ambitions abroad but rather to their relationship to the United States; and how anti-Communism justified both coups against democratic regimes—Guatemala, Iran, Chile—to protect them from totalitarianism and the embrace of merely authoritarian regimes that (with our help) use death squads and massive bombing against their own populations. A thought experiment might be able to reproduce all these effects in the absence of World War II. In real historical time, however, World War II offered an objective correlative for the countersubversion that preceded and succeeded it by providing a genuinely demonic enemy bent on world conquest.

In so doing, in addition, the good war shifted the stigma of racialism from the United States to its enemies, Germany and Japan. Jim Crow continued at home, of course, notably in the armed forces. American participation in the war had nothing to do with saving European Jewry, moreover, and was, as David Wyman has shown, actively hostile to efforts to do so.²¹ That was hardly the dominant postwar perception, however, and since racial murder was the centerpiece of Nazism and at worst a sideshow for America, the good war seemed to bring to an end the racial underpinnings of American demonology. Racialism had spread from peoples of color to Southern and Eastern Europeans during the alien and Red scares of the industrializing United States; before 1930 American history was more dominated than was Germany by racism. But the New Deal and World War II could be seen as reversing the racist direction of American politics and as beginning to bring American racism to an end.

That is its effect on Ian Baruma, whom I quoted earlier and to whom I now want to return. John Dower's recent book, *War Without Mercy: Race and Power in the Pacific War*, shows the brutalizing, murderous impact of racial hysteria on American and Japanese policy. Baruma disagrees; he believes that "Dower overstates . . . the moral equivalence of both sides"; that what racism emerged against the Japanese "was more the result of war . . . than the cause of it"; that the propaganda required by a mass war should not be confused with the causes of the war; and that the easy, postwar resumption of friendship with Japan shows the superficiality of negative racial stereotypes during the war. One has to distinguish, Baruma writes, the Nazi war against the Jews and the American conflict with Japan. "Jews were killed because they were Jews. Japanese got killed because they were part of a nation bent on military conquest." My quarrel is not with the distinction between Nazi genocide and American racism, but with using that distinction to obliterate the racial character of America's war with Japan and—Baruma's explicit project—the character of subsequent American foreign policy.²²

To take first the war against Japan: surely Baruma would at least acknowledge

the racist basis for the internment of Japanese-Americans during the war. However, he suggests instead that the differing attitudes toward Germans and Japanese were based on “logical reasons that Dower does not take into account. Japanese-Americans, being relatively recent immigrants, still lived in highly visible, culturally distinct communities,” explains Baruma. “‘Good’ Germans were acknowledged simply because there were more of them,” that is, refugees from Nazi terror.²³

Why does Baruma normalize Japanese internment? The good war has wiped out of his historical memory the exclusion of Japanese from America and the racially based residential segregation of those who were here. It has made him forget that the Italians, more recent immigrants than the Japanese, were not rounded up, deprived of their liberty and property without due process of law, and placed in concentration camps. Baruma suppresses not only the racially based exclusion of thousands of good Germans, Jews, from the United States but also the presence of many bad Germans, the thousands of organized and active supporters of Nazism in the German-American Bund who were not rounded up and jailed. He has forgotten that, underneath the fantasies about Japanese aliens, about the disloyalty not only of Japanese born in Japan but of those born in the United States as well, there simply were no bad Japanese. He fails to cite the racist justifications for Japanese internment by high United States and West Coast state officials who could cite no evidence at all of Japanese disloyalty or of any danger to American security. Baruma neglects one of Dower’s most telling findings, that although cartoons and propaganda against Germany during the war depicted Hitler and Nazism rather than the Germans as the enemy, the demon in the Pacific war was the depersonalized “Jap.” Thus a July 1942 *Washington Post* cartoon captioned “Mimic” shows Hitler destroying the towns of Lidice and Lezaky in the foreground, while in the background a gorilla labelled “Jap” tramples Cebu. Cartoon Japanese are apes and rodents; American leaders (sounding like cartoon figures but wielding real power) call for their extermination. “The Japs will be worried about all the time until they are wiped off the face of the map,” warned Lt. Gen. John Dewitt, who headed the Western Defense Command and interned the Japanese-Americans. Marines wore “Rodent Exterminator” on their helmets, and a *Leatherneck* cartoon in March 1945 showed a Japanese “lice epidemic.” “To the Marine Corps,” reads the caption, “was assigned the gigantic task of extermination.” That cartoon appeared the same month that the firebombing of Tokyo killed on a single night 80,000 to 100,000 Japanese—fewer than would soon die on a single night in Hiroshima, more than Nagasaki.²⁴

Dresden and Hamburg were firebombed before Tokyo, to be sure; World War I’s depersonalized, mass killing preceded them all. But instead of citing indiscriminate mass slaughter to minimize the significance of racism, one might better remember the racially imperialist prehistory of World War I, a war produced not

only from imperialist rivalries in Lenin's sense but also from the brutalizations of colored peoples, Slavs, Jews, and others viewed as racially inferior.²⁵

The Tokyo firebombing, defended as an effort to break the Japanese fighting will, was aimed at no material, military targets. It was psychological warfare, a spectacle to terrorize, demoralize, and destroy the civilian, Japanese mass public. And that firebombing produced another spectacular during the Cold War. In the Hollywood, anti-Communist parable *Them!*, the Japanese rodents reappeared as giant ants, mutations from a desert atomic explosion. In history the atom bomb destroyed those labeled rodents; in fantasy it created them in order to destroy them again. At the climax of *Them!*, the ants are traced to their breeding ground, with its strong "brood odor," in the storm drains under Los Angeles. They are obliterated in a holocaust of fire. What looks like futuristic science fiction is actually, in the service of anti-Communism, a record of the firebombing of the past. Gordon Douglas, who had also directed *I Was a Communist for the FBI*, was putting on screen the injunction in *Leatherneck* that, "before a complete cure may be effected, the origins of the Plague, the breeding grounds in the Tokyo area, must be completely annihilated." Failing to accept responsibility for the hundreds of thousands of Japanese deaths by firebombs and atomic destruction, Hollywood made nuclear explosions reproduce the rodents who, now become Communists, had to be wiped out all over again.²⁶

The firebombing of Tokyo also produced movies of another sort. Unlike *Them!*, which was made for a mass audience, these were part of a covert operation, "one of the better-kept secrets of the war, ranking up with the atomic bomb project." "Everyone who has ever seen a picture based on World War II" will, according to their narrator, recognize the briefing in which he supplied the voice-over. To prepare real pilots to bomb Tokyo, Hollywood special effects men built a complete miniature of the city for simulated bombing runs. They "intercut their movies of the model with real scenes taken from flights over Tokyo," thereby creating a series of movies that taught pilots about the real thing. Each movie concluded when the narrator said, "Bombs away." The narrator who has been describing his role in World War II is Capt. Ronald Reagan. After I read this account in his autobiography and then wrote about it, I stressed how, to make himself a participant in the war while he was actually stationed in Hollywood, Reagan had broken down the distinction between filmed war and real war, simulated bombing runs and real bombs: "As a result, none of the explosives in his account, from the bombs he narrates to the atomic bomb, fall on real targets."²⁷ But I was still being taken in, for Reagan is not simply pretending to have participated in a war but is also distancing himself from the real bombs his movie instructions helped drop. The actual people at risk were the inhabitants of Tokyo; as Reagan tells the story, he becomes the secret agent close to danger. Turning his covert operation into spectacle, Reagan has made invisible the real, obliterated

Japanese. The white man, in no danger himself, cinematically participates in killing men, women, and children of color. "Make my day!"

When the Japanese government mercilessly bombed the civilian population of China in 1938, the United States Senate denounced "this crime against humanity . . . reminiscent of the cruelties perpetrated by primitive and barbarous nations upon inoffensive peoples."²⁸ The rhetoric of this condemnation blamed modern total war on American Indians. It helped prepare the United States, in the name of fighting savages, to imitate them, or rather, *Them!*—not historical Indians, but the monsters recreated in the imperial mind.

V

World War II laid the structural foundations in politics for the modern American empire. First, the good war established the military industrial state as the basis for both domestic welfare and foreign policy. Second, it made surveillance and covert operations, at home and abroad, an integral part of the state. Third, it drew the political parties together behind an interventionist, bipartisan foreign policy directed by Democrats during the major wars (World War II, Korea, and Vietnam), and by the former Democrat, Ronald Reagan, in the 1980s. Fourth, the good war's popularity linked the mass public to the structures of power. Mass enthusiasm for the national security state could not be mobilized for subsequent hot wars and was actually threatened by them. Nevertheless, only for a few years during and after the American defeat in Vietnam were the fundamental assumptions about America's role in the world established during World War II ever challenged by significant sectors within American politics. Finally, World War II celebrated the undercover struggle of good against evil, and thereby prepared the way for the covert spectacle.

World War II slid easily into the Cold War, as Communism replaced Nazism and one Asian enemy, China, took the place of another, Japan (so that the Japanese demons of World War II movies could be recycled within the decade as Hollywood North Koreans and Chinese).²⁹ But the Cold War was fought mainly with symbols and surrogates. It organized politics around ideology and conspiracy (Communists in government at home, secret interventions abroad) just as ideology was supposed to be coming to an end. It may be, as Fred Block argues, that the state recognized its need to play a foreign, economic role as the alternative to domestic social reconstruction, and recast economic challenges as Cold War and military ones to mobilize popular support. In any case, Richard Barnet suggests, the permanent mobilization of the American population—to sustain high taxes, foreign aid, interventionist state policies, and ongoing international alliances—marks a fundamental break with the peacetime past. The worry in the now famous National Security Council memorandum no. 68 as the Cold War

began—that America would be crippled by internal weakness at the moment of its greatest strength—reflected the state’s new economic and security role and the fear that the population would not support it. Genuinely covert actions were one response to fears of popular flaccidity; the politics of spectacle as political mobilization was the other.³⁰

The spread both of covert operations and of foreign policy as spectacle responded to the tensions among economy, state, organs of public opinion, and instruments of nuclear war that emerged in the shift from World War II to the Cold War and that were accentuated at the end of the first Cold War period with the American defeat in Vietnam. Postwar worries about the weakness of the American state nonetheless presumed an American hegemony that more recent economic and political developments have called into question. A multinational-dominated internationalized economy that resists state control sets the stage for defensive, American nationalism. The sources for that nationalism lie in state structures that lack the power either to control the economy or to mobilize the populace and so turn to covert action and the spectacle; in the political economy of the military-industrial complex; in a nuclear-dominated military strategy, where weapons function as symbols of intentions in war games rather than as evidence of war-fighting capabilities; and in the permeation of public and private space by the fiction-making visual media.³¹

Public anti-Communist mobilization operated alongside genuinely covert operations in the early Cold War years, the one to engage masses, the other to serve the interests of elites. That separation broke down with John Kennedy, however, for whom the theory and practice of foreign interventions served less to preserve imperial interests than to demonstrate the firmness of American will. Vietnam functioned as the most important theater of destruction, from Kennedy’s Green Beret adventurism through Nixon’s expansion of the war to test our resolve to meet a future “real crisis.”³² But Vietnam failed as symbolic foreign policy, not just because the United States lost the war but also because American suffering and turmoil could not immediately be dissolved into spectacle.

The full-fledged absorption of American foreign policy by symbolic gesture, therefore, awaited the Reagan presidency. The men whose consciousness was formed by World War II revived the American empire after Vietnam—Paul Nitze and the other members of the Committee on the Present Danger, who prepared the ideological ground for the Reagan administration; William Casey, who moved from the wartime OSS to direct first Reagan’s presidential campaign and then the CIA (and, as he shifted from electoral spectacle to secrecy, to subordinate intelligence collection to covert activities); and Reagan himself, who made training and morale movies during the war and who met the crisis in his personal and professional life after it by leading the fight against Hollywood Communism.³³ The Reagan Doctrine—inspired by the ideological adventurer Jack Wheeler, known as the “Indiana Jones of the right”³⁴—recuperated in political

theater what had been lost in imperial substance. A foreign policy run from the expanded, hidden, militarized National Security Council aimed, by reversing Vietnam (“Do we get to win this time?” Rambo wants to know), to reenact the good war as a movie.

The covert spectacle thus reflects the persistence of dreams about American dominance in the face of the erosion of the material and ideological sources for American preeminence in the world. The budgetary and political demands that the American government inflicts on its people in the name of military and national security contribute, to be sure, to trade and budget deficits and economic decay. But at the same time the decline in a solidly based American preeminence has generated efforts at symbolic recovery that center around military and national security. This combat with the Soviet Union takes two forms: a visible military buildup in weapons that cannot be used, and low-intensity (as they are called) military interventions in the Third World. Together these demonstrate American resolution without substantial risks at home. Foreign policy is conducted by theatrical events—Grenada invasion, Libyan bombing, Persian Gulf flagging, Honduran “show of force”—staged for public consumption. These interventions may well succeed, but their significance lies less in stopping the local spread of “Communism” than in convincing elite and mass publics that America has the power to have its way. Substituting symbols for substance, these staged events constitute the politics of postmodernism, so long as one remembers that symbols produced for consumption at home and abroad have all too much substance for the victims of those symbols, the participant-observers on the ground in the Third World.³⁵

Individual covert operations may serve specific corporate or national-security-clique interests, and the operations themselves are often (like Iran/Contra) hidden from domestic subjects who might hold them to political account. But even where the particular operation is supposed to remain secret, the government wants it known it has the power, secretly, to intervene. The payoff for many covert operations is their intended demonstration effect. The covert spectacle is a form of therapeutic politics. By focusing attention on itself, it aims to control not simply political power but knowledge.

Most obviously, the specular relation to political life has implications for democratic governance. Spectators gain vicarious participation in a narrative that, in the name of national security, justifies their exclusion from information and decision making. Covert operations as spectacle pacify domestic as well as foreign audiences, for they transform the political relation between rulers and citizens from accountability to entertainment. Vicarious participation, moreover, is also granted to the rulers themselves, for those who sponsor and promote covert action almost never place themselves at risk. Vicarious participation in the spectacle of the covert heals in fantasy and preserves in fact the separation of those

who plan from those who kill and are killed, the separation that Richard Barnett has called bureaucratic homicide.³⁶

Secrecy is a technique not just for vicarious inclusion and political exclusion, however, but also for defining the real. Covert actions, obscured by disinformation, require the state to lie. When John Poindexter denied that the Libyan bombing aimed to kill Qaddafi, and defended the spread of disinformation about alleged Libyan terrorism as a strategy to keep the Libyan leader off balance, he also had a domestic purpose. He was orchestrating an entertainment that, in winning popular applause, would underline for the mass audience the need for secret planning, accountable to no one and to no standard of truth outside itself. Poindexter wanted a mass public that stopped asking what was true and what false because it knew which side it was on. The term for the psychology at which Poindexter aimed is *identification with the aggressor*. Destabilizing orienting cues from any source, the state was to become the single anchor in the midst of the shifting realities it displayed. And that would increase trust in government, for the less one experiences alternatives to power, the more one needs to see it as benign.

Aggression is thus not opposed to intimacy but rather a technique for producing it—much as, conversely, intimacy in the American president normalizes the violence he authorizes. The benign version of spectacle plays on our ontological insecurity by offering trust in the sources of information. That answers the question James Lardner recently asked in his review of *Broadcast News*: “Why are the networks’ anchormen so much more vivid to us than the stories they present?”³⁷ Presidential intimacy, as in the “giant womb” Garry Wills described at the 1984 Republican convention, or Bush’s call for a “kinder, gentler nation” four years later, offers us the security of trusting the head of state as much as we trusted Walter Cronkite.

The form promoted by political infantilization is reliance on central power; its content is reassurance that we can continue to live in the (fantasized) past. Aspirations to appropriate basic trust may well fall short, into mass cynicism and withdrawal. But they do succeed in investing the imaginary with as much truth effect as the real—or rather, I have been arguing, the other way around. Where political spectacles compel attention and are not turned off, they acquire the power of fiction. For why should the mass audience be able to tell the difference between TV series and movies and the political spectacles that also appear on the screen, so long as the reality principle never reaches, directly and forcefully, into their lives (as it did, for example, in the 1930s depression or the 1960s draft)? The spectacle aims either to keep the reality principle entirely at bay (Star Wars as invisible shield) or to seize control of the interpretations placed on its intrusions (Star Wars shifts the terms of political debate from aggressive American preparations to win a nuclear war to the pros and cons of nuclear defense).

The covert spectacle thus breaks down the distinction between politics and theater (or rather, movies)—from the one side in police, spy, adventure, and science-fiction thrillers (including old movies starring Ronald Reagan) where the audience is privy to the hidden world of counterinsurgency warfare, and from the other side in Reagan's invocation of lines from such movies and reenactments of their plots—in his praise to Oliver North on the day he fired him that the events that had made North a “national hero” would “make a great movie.”³⁸

This movie reenactment of history, whether directed from Hollywood or from Washington, puts few Americans at risk. Instead of actually refighting the Second World War, it enlists Third World peoples as surrogates. The covert spectacle is thereby grounded in the history of American expansion, not eastward against established European powers but westward and southward against vulnerable racial others. But the 1960s, by recovering imperial history in civil rights struggle and Vietnam, challenged the racial constitution of American national identity. The Reagan doctrine had to forget, therefore, the moment in which American history was remembered.

VI

“The crisis in ideological confidence of the 70s, visible on all levels of American culture and variously enacted in Hollywood's ‘incoherent texts,’ has not been resolved,” writes Robin Wood in *Hollywood from Vietnam to Reagan*. “Instead it has been forgotten.” Wood is referring to the shocks administered to the dominant (white male) politics and culture by black protest, Vietnam, and the emergence of a mass-based feminism. Two 1967 Sidney Poitier movies, as Ed Guerrero has argued, represented Hollywood's last effort to incorporate race into liberalism. These twin celebrations of the black, middle-class professional, *Guess Who's Coming to Dinner* and *In the Heat of the Night*, together won seven Academy Awards. But Hollywood containment exploded the next year—in the Tet offensive, on the streets of America's inner cities, at the Chicago Democratic National Convention, and with the assassinations of Robert Kennedy and Martin Luther King, Jr. Wood analyzed the Hollywood movies that registered cultural breakdown without being able to resolve it. Ella Taylor has offered a comparable interpretation of the (more domesticated) space opened up on 1970s television, undercutting the traditional family and finding refuge in imagined workplace communities. The Carter presidency would lend itself to similar treatment.³⁹

The Reagan regime put America back together again by exploiting and disavowing the 1960s. On the one hand, Reagan capitalized on the sharpest electoral polarization in American history along race and gender lines. Beginning in 1968, a large majority of whites (overwhelming in every election but 1976) has opposed

the presidential choice of a large majority of peoples of color. Beginning in 1980 men have voted more strongly Republican for president than have women. No president since James Monroe has received as enormous a share of the white male vote as Reagan received in 1984—75 percent by my rough calculation, if Jewish voters are excluded—and the gap between men and women was as large or larger in the presidential vote four years later. On the other hand, since the 1960s subversive, colored, and female voices have called into question the racial and political demonology that often silenced such voices in the past.

The response to this double pressure, which undercuts the Reagan regime's claims to universality as they are being made, is regression. 1980s Hollywood has been dominated, writes Wood, by "children's films conceived and marketed largely for adults," an analysis that applies to Washington as well. Even if not technically science fiction (like *Star Wars*, the movie, and *Star Wars*, the weapon), 1980s films restore traditional race and gender divisions by abandoning pretensions to verisimilitude. "The audiences who wish to be constructed as children also wish to regard themselves as extremely sophisticated and 'modern,'" Wood explains, and they do so by admiring the skills with which they have been infantilized. Production is not hidden as the real source of power; it rather appears on the surface as one more display. Taking pleasure from production numbers, in film terminology, from the special effects of spin doctors, in the language of political campaigns, audiences enjoy at once the effects produced on them and the way those effects are produced. "We both know and don't know that we are watching special effects, technological fakery," Wood writes, suggesting that being in on the infantilizing tricks allows one to regress and enjoy them.⁴⁰

The self-aware quality of the mass spectacle, to which postmodernism points, should thus be read not as a sign of maturity but as an escape from troubling depths so that their residues can safely appear on the surface. As the mass public withdraws from political engagement to spectacles, lo and behold it watches self-ironizing—*Indiana Jones*—or self-pitying—*Rambo*—displays of racial demonology. Fredric Jameson once distinguished entrapping displays of nostalgia, which emphasize the beauty and accuracy of surface reproductions, from self-knowing forms of pastiche that create distance from the past.⁴¹ He wrote before the politics and the movies of the Reagan years used self-knowingness to allow us to return to the past (or go *Back to the Future* in another movie invoked by the president) without having time travel remind us of what we now know we must not do. When an imperial white male wins a white woman in violent combat with evil, dark tribes, as in the *Indiana Jones* movies, everyone knows that these surface cartoons are not meant to be taken seriously. So we don't have to feel implicated in their displays, can think they are sendups of 1930s serials rather than precipitates of current covert operations, and forget what we have seen. "Go ahead. Make my day!"

VII

George Bush might have borrowed his film criticism during the 1988 campaign from Robin Wood. "We have turned around the permissive philosophy of the 70s," Bush boasted, so that a society that once enjoyed movies like *Easy Rider* now prefers "Dirty Harry" films. "Clint Eastwood's answer to violent crime is 'Go ahead, make my day,'" Bush continued. "My opponent's answer is slightly different. His motto is, 'Go ahead, have a nice weekend.'" Bush was invoking, of course, the Massachusetts weekend furlough program under which Willie Horton, the black convicted murderer, had been allowed to leave prison. Horton, as the Bush campaign was making sure every American knew, had terrorized a white couple and raped the woman. The black criminal and white rapist whom Eastwood had dared to make his day had merged in the figure of Horton; Bush was casting Dukakis as the impotent liberal who could not protect his wife. The buddies who went seeking America, according to the advertising campaign for *Easy Rider*, and "couldn't find it anywhere" had in Bush's movie reviews turned into Dukakis and Horton.⁴²

Bush's campaign was not the first attempt to organize American politics around the specter of interracial rape. Repeated ads showing a revolving prison door, combined with the Horton victim's well-advertised campaign tour for Bush, reproduced *The Birth of a Nation*.⁴³ Attacking Dukakis as weak on defense as well as on violent crime, moreover, the Bush campaign linked imperial to domestic racial politics, for the Dukakis of Bush's television ads would make Americans vulnerable to aliens abroad and at home. Open racist appeals were now forbidden, however, and Bush (and his supporters in my presidency class) denied that Bush's version of "Make my day!" had anything to do with race. But the Republican candidate had succeeded in replacing Jesse Jackson with Willie Horton as the dominant black face in the campaign. For the first time, several of my students then remembered the racial and sexual context for "Make my day!"

That memory of the racial antagonism he promoted posed a problem for Bush, however, to which he offered a solution after his victory. The solution was amnesia. Along with two other movie phrases popularized by President Reagan—"Win one for the Gipper," from *Knute Rockne, All American*, and "the Evil Empire," from *Star Wars*—"Make my day!" will be included in the new edition of *Bartlett's Book of Famous Quotations*. If Bush has his way, however, the words will be severed from their meaning. "The American people," the new president reassured us after his election, "are wonderful when it comes to understanding when a campaign ends and the work of business begins." Bush wanted Americans to believe that his campaign spectacle would have nothing to do with his conduct of government. He was making his business that "great act of American amnesia," as political scientist James Barber called it on election night, by which our politics forgets the forces that drive it. The new president brushed off Barbara Walters's ques-

tions about the campaign on the eve of his inauguration. "That's history," said George Bush. "That doesn't mean anything any more."⁴⁴

Notes

An earlier version of this paper was presented in the series "The Peculiarities of the American Empire," sponsored by the History Department, Rutgers University, 29 April 1988. The title of the session for which this paper was written was "The Post-modern Empire." I am grateful for the responses of Richard Barnett, Fred Block, Victoria de Grazia, and Michael Schaffer, who share responsibility for the differences between the paper they heard and this one. I have also benefited from the comments of Ann Banfield, Kathleen Moran, H. Bradford Westerfield, and members of the *Representations* editorial board.

1. There are risks in adopting the Inspector Dupin position, as D. A. Miller has pointed out to me most forcefully. It will position me as the subject supposed to know, detecting crimes that others overlook. Given the direction of the argument, this will cast me as the double of my white, male target, not only antagonizing white men who do not see themselves defined by imperial American political culture but also speaking for women and people of color in the name of coming to their defense. Acknowledging this risk hardly disarms it. But being unable to envision criticism without a place to stand, the best response I can make to such suspicions is the argument of the essay itself.
2. Samuel Kernell, *Going Public: New Strategies of Presidential Leadership* (Washington, D.C., 1986). The depiction of imperial political culture on which I am about to embark identifies operating mentalities, powerful forces, and individuals in whom they reside. I am concentrating on extreme tendencies that came to a head during the Reagan years and, as the current legal indictments facing some of these individuals attest, however powerful in our history and politics and however sanitized in respectable accounts thereof, they have not always gotten their way. Nonetheless, the Bush regime represents the normalization of the politics of the Reagan era, not their reversal. Anti-Communism undergirded the Reaganite shift from domestic welfare to military spending, the expansion of secret government, and the conduct of foreign policy as spectacle. The advertised end of the cold war has reversed none of these developments, and, insofar as the drug war and the defense of traditional family values inherit the role of anti-Communism, that will intensify what I link here to going public and going private in foreign policy, the racist basis of American politics.
3. *San Francisco Chronicle*, 19 March 1987, 15.
4. The sources for this paragraph are Don Moldea, *Dark Victory* (New York, 1986); Garry Wills, *Innocents at Home* (New York, 1987); and Michael Rogin, "Ronald Reagan," *the Movie, and Other Episodes in Political Demonology* (Berkeley, 1987), 1–43.
5. On *Hellcats* and the 1984 Republican convention, see Rogin, "Reagan," *the Movie*, 40–42; Garry Wills, "More Than a Game," *New York Review of Books*, 28 April 1988, 3.
6. Robert Scheer, *With Enough Shovels: Reagan, Bush, and Nuclear War* (New York, 1982), 36–65; *Contra Watch* 4–5 (May–June 1987): 3; Christopher Hitchens, "Minority Report," *Nation*, 17 October 1988, 333–34.
7. Ian Baruma, "Us and Others," *New York Review of Books*, 14 August 1986, 24.

8. *San Francisco Examiner*, 24 April 1988, A-6; *New York Times*, 30 April 1988, 11; Rogin, "Reagan," *the Movie*, 7–8; *San Francisco Chronicle*, 13 April 1988, 9; 14 April 1988, 20.
9. Russell Jacoby, *Social Amnesia* (Boston, 1975); and Fredric Jameson, *The Political Unconscious* (Ithaca, N.Y., 1981).
10. Thanks to Kathleen Moran for this argument, which is expanded in the following section.
11. Cf. T. J. Clark, *The Painting of Modern Life: Paris in the Art of Manet and His Followers* (Princeton, N.J., 1984), 9, 68–69; Guy Debord, *Society of the Spectacle* (1967; Detroit, 1983); Jean Baudrillard, *Simulations* (New York, 1983), and "The Ecstasy of Communication," in *The Anti-Aesthetic: Essays in Postmodern Culture*, ed. Hal Foster (Port Townsend, Wash., 1983), 126–34; Dana Polan, *Power and Paranoia: History, Narrative, and the American Cinema, 1940–1950* (New York, 1986), 293–98; Fredric Jameson, "Postmodernism; or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism," *New Left Review* 146 (July 1984), 58–69.
12. For linking *Rambo* to Iran/Contra, I am indebted to Ronald Reagan, and I have analyzed the connection between Iran/Contra and *First Blood, Part I* and *Part II*, in "Ronbo," *London Review of Books*, 13 October 1988, 7–9.
13. This formulation is indebted to Debord, *Society of the Spectacle*, and to Jacques Lacan, "The Mirror Stage as Formative of the Functions of the I as Revealed in Psychoanalytic Experience," *Ecrits*, trans. Alan Sheridan (New York, 1977), 1–7.
14. Roland Marchand, *Advertising the American Dream: Making Way for Modernity, 1920–1940* (Berkeley, 1985).
15. Jonathan Kwitny, *Endless Enemies* (New York, 1986), 11–14.
16. Richard Slotkin, *Regeneration Through Violence* (Middletown, Conn., 1973), and *The Fatal Environment* (New York, 1985); Richard Drinnon, *Facing West* (Minneapolis, 1980); Michael Rogin, *Fathers and Children: Andrew Jackson and the Subjugation of the American Indian* (New York, 1975), and "Reagan," *the Movie*. The quotation in the text is from Richard Slotkin, "The Continuity of Forms: Myth and Genre in Warner Brothers' *The Charge of the Light Brigade*," in this issue, pp. 1–23.
17. Kwitny, *Endless Enemies*, 13–15.
18. Carlo Ginsburg, *The Cheese and the Worms* (London, 1980), 78, 92. On the history of American demonology, see Rogin, "Political Repression in the United States," in "Reagan," *the Movie*, 44–80 and passim.
19. Studs Terkel, *The Good War* (New York, 1984).
20. Jeane Kirkpatrick, "Dictatorships and Double Standards," *Commentary* 68 (November 1979): 34–45.
21. David Wyman, *The Abandonment of the Jews* (New York, 1984).
22. See John Dower, *War Without Mercy: Race and Power in the Pacific War* (New York, 1986); and Baruma, "Us and Others," 23–25.
23. Baruma, "Us and Others," 24.
24. Dower, *War Without Mercy*, 34, 38–39, 78–92. See also Richard Drinnon, *Keeper of Concentration Camps: Dillon S. Myer and American Racism* (Berkeley, 1986); and Peter Irons, *Justice at War* (New York, 1983).
25. See Dower, *War Without Mercy*, 325; Baruma, "Us and Others," 25; Hannah Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (New York, 1951).
26. I analyzed *Them!* in "Kiss Me Deadly: Communism, Motherhood, and Cold War Movies," "Reagan," *the Movie*, 264–66, but did not make the connection to the Tokyo firebombing until reading *War Without Mercy*; see Dower, 174–75; and, on depictions

- of Asians in Hollywood from World War II to Vietnam, Tom Engelhardt, "Ambush at Kamikazi Pass," *Bulletin of Concerned Asian Scholars* 3 (Winter–Spring 1971): 64–84.
27. Rogin, "Reagan," *the Movie*, 24.
 28. Dower, *War Without Mercy*, 38–39.
 29. Engelhardt, "Ambush at Kamikazi Pass."
 30. Fred Block, "Empire and Domestic Reform" (Paper delivered at the conference on "The Peculiarities of the American Empire," Rutgers University, 29 April 1988); Richard Barnet, comments at the same conference; James Fallows, *National Defense* (New York, 1981), 162–63.
 31. Of the enormous literature on these subjects, I have found particularly helpful Jonathan Schell, *The Time of Illusion* (New York, 1975); and Fallows, *National Defense*.
 32. Cf. Garry Wills, *The Kennedy Imprisonment* (Boston, 1982); Bruce Miroff, *Pragmatic Illusions: The Presidential Politics of John F. Kennedy* (New York, 1976), 35–166; Schell, *Time of Illusion*, 90–95.
 33. See Scheer, *With Enough Shovels*; and Rogin, "Reagan," *the Movie*, 27–37.
 34. Ben Bradlee, *Guts and Glory: The Rise and Fall of Oliver North* (New York, 1988), 153–55.
 35. Richard J. Barnet, "Reflections (National Security)," *New Yorker*, 21 March 1988, 104–14; "Talk of the Town," *New Yorker*, 4 April 1988, 23.
 36. Richard J. Barnet, *The Roots of War* (New York, 1972).
 37. James Lardner, "Films," *Nation*, 28 January 1988, 94–98.
 38. *New York Times*, 30 November 1986, 12-Y.
 39. Robin Wood, *Hollywood from Vietnam to Reagan* (New York, 1986), 162; Edward Villaluz Guerrero, *The Ideology and Politics of Black Representation in U.S. Narrative Cinema* (Ph.D. diss., University of California, Berkeley, 1989), 68–79; Ella Taylor, *Prime-Time Families* (Berkeley, 1989).
 40. Wood, *Hollywood*, 163–66.
 41. Fredric Jameson, "The Shining," *Social Text* 4 (Fall 1981): 114.
 42. Maureen Dowd, "Bush Boasts of Turnaround from 'Easy Rider' Society," *New York Times*, 7 October 1988, A-11; Elizabeth Drew, "Letter from Washington," *New Yorker*, 31 October 1988, 94; Wood, *Hollywood*, 228.
 43. Cf. Michael Rogin, "'The Sword Became a Flashing Vision': D. W. Griffith's *Birth of a Nation*," in "Reagan," *the Movie*, 190–235. Having written on the political significance of *Birth*, I was suffering from amnesia, and the connection between *Birth* and Willie Horton was pointed out to me by Martin Sanchez-Jankowski.
 44. *New York Times*, 28 November 1988, B-4; *New Yorker*, 21 November 1988, 41; *International Herald Tribune*, 21 January 1989, 4.