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Liberalism at Bay,
Conservatism at Play:
Fear in the Contemporary Imagination

While I was fearing it, it came,
But came with less of fear,
Because that fearing it so long
Had almost made it dear.
—Emily Dickinson

AMONG THE GREAT COMMONPLACES OF MODERN POLITICAL THOUGHT is the opposition between freedom and fear. From Montesquieu to the Frankfurt School, from Franklin Roosevelt to Burmese opposition leader Aung San Suu Kyi, fear has been viewed as the enemy of independent selfhood and political decency and has been opposed in the name of liberty, liberal values, the Enlightenment, or civilization itself (Montesquieu, 1988; Kant, 1991 [1970]: 54-55; Sidgwick, 1891: 41; Inaugural Addresses of the Presidents of the United States, 1961: 235; Horkheimer and Adorno, 1986: 3; Neumann, 1957; Shklar, 1989: 29; Kyi, 1991: 180-85). At the same time, many political theorists have suggested that fear may well be a necessary condition of selfhood and a free society. For theorists like Locke and Burke, fear is something to be cherished, not because it alerts us to real danger or propels us to take necessary action against it, but because fear is supposed to arouse a
heightened state of experience. It quickens our perceptions as no other emotion can, forcing us to see and to act in the world in new and more interesting ways, with greater moral discrimination and a more acute consciousness of our surroundings and ourselves. According to Locke, fear is “an uneasiness of the mind” and “the chief, if not only spur to human industry and action is uneasiness.” Though we might think that men and women act on behalf of desire, Locke insisted that “a little burning felt”—like fear—“pushes us more powerfully than great pleasures in prospect draw or allure.” Burke had equally low regard for pleasure. It induces a grotesque implosion of self, a “soft tranquility” approximating an advanced state of decay if not death itself.

The head reposes something on one side; the eyelids are more closed than usual, and the eyes roll gently with an inclination to the object, the mouth is a little opened, and the breath drawn slowly, with now and then a low sigh; the whole body is composed, and the hands fall idly to the sides. All this is accompanied with an inward sense of melting and languor . . . relaxing the solids of the whole system.

But when we imagine the prospect of “pain and terror,” Burke added, we experience a “delightful horror,” the “strongest of all passions.” Without fear, we are passive; with it, we are roused to “the strongest emotion which the mind is capable of feeling” (Locke, 1959, II.20.6,10; II.21.34: 304-5, 334; Burke, 1990: 32, 36, 123, 135-36).

At the political level, modern theorists have argued that fear is a spur to civic vitality and moral renewal, perhaps even a source of public freedom. Writing in the wake of the French Revolution, Tocqueville bemoaned the lethargy of modern democracy. With its free-wheeling antimonianism and social mobility, democratic society “inevitably enervates the soul, and relaxing the springs of the will, prepares a people for bondage. Then not only will they let their freedom be taken from them, but often they actually hand it over themselves” (Tocqueville,
Lacking confidence in the traditional truths of God and king, Tocqueville believed that democracies might find a renewed confidence in the experience of fear, which could activate and ground a commitment to public freedom. "Fear," he wrote in a note to himself, "must be put to work on behalf of liberty," or, as he put it in *Democracy in America*, "Let us, then, look forward to the future with that salutary fear which makes men keep watch and ward for freedom, and not with that flabby, idle terror which makes men's hearts sink and enervates them" (cited in Lamberti, 1989: 229; Tocqueville, 1969: 702). Armed with fear, democracy would be fortified against not only external and domestic enemies but also the inner tendency, the native desire, to dissolve into the soupy indifference of which Burke spoke. Surveying the moral wasteland created by Europe's second Thirty Years War, Hannah Arendt concluded that Auschwitz and the gulag had shredded the nineteenth-century assumptions of Right and Left; the verities of the past were no longer useful, the axioms of universal progress inoperable. All that remained was the fear these horrors had generated, but in that fear lay the instrument of a new moral and political consensus:

The fear of concentration camps and the resulting insight into the nature of total domination might serve to invalidate all obsolete political differentiations from right to left and to introduce beside and above them the politically most important yardstick for judging events in our time, namely: whether they serve totalitarian domination or not (Arendt, 1973 [1951]: 442).1

Such ideas do not belong exclusively to the rarified province of the philosopher; they permeate the work of popular writers and influential journalists. At the height of the Cold War, Arthur Schlesinger wrote *The Vital Center*, ostensibly a liberal call to arms against the Soviet Union and American communism, but really a diagnosis, similar to Tocqueville's, of democratic despair. "Western man in the middle of the twentieth century," wrote Schlesinger, "is tense, uncertain, adrift.
We look upon our epoch as a time of troubles, an age of anxiety. The
grounds of our civilization, of our certitude, are breaking up under our
feet, and familiar ideas and institutions vanish as we reach for them,
like shadows in the failing dusk.” Lacking religion or traditional author-
ity, Americans were forced to make decisions without any ground from
which to choose. What to do? Turn the conflict between the Soviet
Union and the United States into a proving ground of self and society.
By confronting an external enemy, Americans could transform their
existential uncertainty into focused, galvanizing fear. Let us “strike
at the dilemma of history,” urged Schlesinger, referring to modern
despair, “in terms of the problem” between the United States and the
Soviet Union. “The fact that the contest between the USA and the USSR
is not the source of the contemporary crisis does not . . . alter the fact
that the crisis must be met in terms of this contest” (Schlesinger, 1988
[1949]: 1-7, 51-53, 244).

In this article, I would like to make two arguments about how
modern intellectuals have thought about fear. First, though many
modern theorists have opposed political fear in the name of liberty,
reason, or other Enlightenment values, many of them have embraced
fear, often in spite of themselves, as a source of political vitality. Whether
condemning Jacobin terror, Soviet despotism, ethnic cleansing, or
September 11, they have seen opportunities for renewal—personal
and political, moral and spiritual—in the fear of these evils. Not for the
victims, but for us, who look upon these evils from without. Second,
at the same time that these theorists have seen opportunity in the fear
of political dangers, they have insisted on viewing those dangers as
not political, as having little to do with the issues and controversies
that ordinarily animate political discussion and action. The objects of
fear are not thought to be the product of laws, institutions, ideas, or
even power; instead, they are viewed as eruptions from prepolitical or
nonpolitical space. “Fear needs no definition,” writes Raymond Aron.
“It is a primal, and so to speak, subpolitical emotion” (Aron, 1968: 20-
21). As a subpolitical emotion, fear is supposed to belong to the spheres
of psychology or culture. And while psychology and culture need not be
opposed to politics, they often are in the accounts of those who write about fear.

These two arguments are peculiar to modern political thought because modern theorists have been repeatedly beset by crises of confidence about the legitimate foundations of thought and action, the grounds for creating and defending a just society. When theorists cannot identify rational, universal, and defensible grounds for positive political moralities, they look to fear as a substitute, albeit negative, foundation. What makes fear so appealing at these moments is precisely that it is assumed to be a universally abhorrent experience, a source of adverse agreement requiring no controversial philosophical arguments to establish its evil. But to qualify as a negative foundation, fear must assume a transpolitical status. It must not partake of contested values or institutions; if it did, it would be implicated in the very morals and politics these writers hope to justify, and therefore could not serve as a foundation. For that reason, theorists are often impelled to situate the sources of fear outside the realm of morality and politics, in the psyche or in a murky cultural primitivism.

Though these two arguments apply to a variety of modern theorists—Montesquieu, Tocqueville, Arendt, and, to a lesser degree, Hobbes—I speak here only of a small group of contemporary intellectuals: liberals like Judith Shklar, Richard Rorty, and Michael Ignatieff at one end of the spectrum, and conservatives like Samuel Huntington, Robert Kaplan, and David Brooks at the other. These writers have written about fear in the context of the end of the Cold War, the defeat of the left-liberal activism of the 1960s, and the triumph of the free market. This combination of victories and defeat, I argue, has prompted a mood of despair, not unlike that diagnosed by Tocqueville in the wake of the French Revolution, casting doubt upon the foundations of political morality. To counter this mood, contemporary writers have turned to fear as a substitute foundation, and thereby depoliticized the objects of fear, whether those objects are the ethnic cleansing of the 1990s or the Islamic terrorism now threatening the West. The function of this move to fear is twofold: Domestically, it revives the flagging spirits of
a generation that has seen the great crusades of the Cold War come to an end; internationally, it allows liberals and conservatives to rally behind an activist liberalism that neither party thinks it possible to defend at home. Inspired by readings of Montesquieu, recalling the delight Tocqueville took in Europe's imperial adventures (Tocqueville, 1985: 141-42, 150-51; 2001; Jardin, 1988: 309-14, 348-49), writers seize on tyrannies in far-off lands as an outlet for their frustrated energies. Aiming the artillery of insurgency, which was once directed at domestic inequity, at foreign ills, they hope that Enlightenment values will find a welcome reception abroad—precisely because they no longer find political traction at home.

REMAINS OF THE DAY
After every great battle comes a great despair. Particularly if the war is civil and insurgent, whether it is waged with words or arms, both sides feel desolate. Among the vanquished, comrades accuse comrades of treachery or cowardice, soldiers denounce generals for marching them toward folly, and everyone is soon seized by what Tocqueville described as the "contempt" broken revolutionaries "acquire for the very convictions and passions which moved them" in the first place. Forced to abandon the cause for which they gave up so much, failed rebels "turn against themselves and consider their hopes as having been childish—their enthusiasm and above all, their devotion, absurd." Unlike the losers, whose defeat is a permanent reminder of their struggle's unrequited sacrifice, the victors suffer from short memories. Forgetting the hardship of battle, the abbreviated sleep and racing heart, they mourn the lost noise of struggle. We felt more alive in the jaws of death, they cry, than we do now, in the lap of comfort. "Let me have a war" one of Aufidius' servants notes in Coriolanus. "It exceeds peace as far as day does night; it's spritely, waking, audible, and full of vent. Peace is a very apoplexy, lethargy; mulled, deaf, sleepy, insensible; a getter of more bastard children than war's a destroyer of men" (Tocqueville, 1862: 262-63; Coriolanus, IV.v.236-40; also see Hegel, 1967 [1952], § 324: 210; Emerson, 1990: 143-44). Though the winners
complain of victory's deceleration, the real source of their disquiet is its disenchantment. Victory forces victors to see that the good for which they fought, like all goods, is tarnished and soiled, that every promised land looks better from afar than up close. Perhaps that is why God never allows Moses off Mount Nebo; had he entered Canaan, he might have seen the waiting disappointment. Thus do victor and vanquished converge upon the same realization: the battle we fought was for naught, nothing in the real world compares to the dream awakened by our effort to change it.

In the last third of the twentieth century, both Left and Right suffered victory and defeat. The Left helped stop the Vietnam War—the only popular movement, with the exception of the Russian Revolution, ever to prompt a government to quit the battlefield. It ended 100 years of Jim Crow, shattered glass ceilings for women, and introduced gays and lesbians to the world. But it was also defeated at the polls and routed in the streets. Today, equality no longer propels political argument; freedom, that other sometime watchword of the Left, is the private property of the Right. Triumphant or trounced, the Left has responded to these experiences with a mix of sadness and agitation. As early as 1968, a sober Julian Bond caught a whiff of victory's despair in the split within the civil rights movement over that year's presidential campaign. While Bond and his Georgia comrades campaigned for Hubert Humphrey and a compromised Democratic Party, militants in the North could not reconcile the meagerness of this stance with the movement's spilled blood. "We are called 'shills' and 'prostitutes' by our Northern brothers and sisters," wrote Bond, "which is an indication, I believe, that now that the sit-in demonstrations and Freedom Rides have paled, and voter registration efforts lost their excitement, that there isn't much interest up yonder in us folks down here." In the antiwar movement, the despair was more palpable, if flakier. In 1971, with the engines of radical advance at full throttle, Jerry Rubin announced his readiness to jump off the train: it was getting too close to the station. "Peace has become respectable," he complained after the May Day mobilization against the Vietnam War—an early warning of

Thirty years later, it is the sour smell of defeat that makes leftists snort. With much of the world renouncing everything they once fought for, ex-Leftists, repentant Leftists, and liberals subject themselves and former comrades to an anxious scrutiny. The Left, they complain, allowed its extremists, or divisive splits over gender and identity, to alienate the rest of America. Forgetting that loss is usually the fate of all rebels from below, these critics imagine a Left less histrionic, more moderate and inclusive, able to do what had never been done before: change the world without provoking a howling backlash. A Left more appetizing and decent, they argue, might have eliminated white supremacy, stopped the war, launched a participatory social democracy—and somehow avoided the political exile ultimately visited upon it. Unable to reconcile themselves to their loss, critics are now seized by the contempt and embarrassment Tocqueville detected in an earlier generation of defeat. One writer cringes over the “androidal” complexion of sixties sectarians, with their “short haircuts” and “flabby muscles,” their “flat tones” of Marxism so “oddly remote from American English.” Another renounces his one-time fascination with “the Dostoevskian moral absolutism of the Weather Underground.” Others wince at the Left’s lack of patriotic fervor and national identification, the hostility to all things American (Berman, 1996: 84-85; Rosenbaum, 2002: 1; also see Rorty, 1998; Kazin, 2002: 41-44; Alterman, 2001: 10; Gitlin, 2002: A23).

Lest this agony over victory and defeat be dismissed as a peculiar indulgence of the Left, consider some of the recent melancholy on the Right. Having fought for more than a half-century to eliminate communism and the welfare state, today’s conservatives can claim a large and credible success. The free market is the lingua franca of our time. The Berlin Wall is no more. Religion is once again fashionable. But for the fathers of modern conservatism—and their sons—the end of the Cold War has been an unhappy time. Irving Kristol complains that the collapse of communism “deprived us”—conservatives—“of an enemy.”
And “in politics,” he says, “being deprived of an enemy is a very serious matter. You tend to get relaxed and dispirited. Turn inward.” Having won universal recognition of the free market, conservatives now realize that capitalist societies are not all they are cracked up to be. Markets do not launch fleets of daring entrepreneurs; instead, they foster a desire for comfort and ease, discouraging the élan and panache that were supposed to flourish after the end of communism and the welfare state. “The trouble with the emphasis in conservatism on the market,” observes a jaded William F. Buckley, “is that it becomes rather boring. You hear it once, you master the idea. The notion of devoting your life to it is horrifying if only because it’s so repetitious. It’s like sex” (Robin, 2001: 32-33).

Some conservatives even find themselves pining for the old days of ideological war. They miss the Left, for the Left, writes Francis Fukuyama, aroused supermen like “Lenin or Trotsky, striving for something . . . purer and higher,” and provoked soldiers of vision and courage to battle against them. Its defeat has left the world with no “large causes for which to fight” and men content to “satisfy their needs through economic activity.” Perhaps another progressive revolt would resurrect these titans of the past, for the Left’s “struggle against injustice is what calls forth what is highest in man.” Such a revolt might also summon another Sakharov or Solzhenitsyn, whose refusal to compromise made them “the most free and therefore the most human of beings.” But when men like Solzhenitsyn succeed, “as they eventually must,” and when the leftist regimes against which they contend fall, as they eventually do, “struggle and work in the old sense” will fade, as will “the possibility of their again being as free and as human as in their revolutionary struggle.” And then there will only be “dishwashers and VCRs and private automobiles,” the very promised land conservatives have spent the better part of a half-century trying to enter (Fukuyama, 2002b [1992]: 304-5, 311-12).

Considering how much energy conservatives and liberals alike devoted to fighting and winning the Cold War, its unexpected, victorious end should have been the occasion of much celebration. And
for a brief time it was. But no sooner had the United States declared victory than a tense mood set in among political and cultural leaders. Government officials began to worry that the United States no longer possessed a clear international charge or definition of national security. A preponderance of power and vanished enemy had rendered America's military strength an ambiguous resource, its strategic mission a black hole of uncertainty: What were we to do with all this power? Against whom was it to be leveraged? (Kagan and Kagan, 2000: 294; Rice, 2000: 45) Where these worries were concrete, the anguish of cultural elites was more amorphous. The Cold War, many intellectuals now claimed, was a reassuring time. The Soviet Union helped organize the ambiguities of a complex world into a simple battle between the United States and an identifiable enemy, leaving Americans with a coherent sense of self. Without communism, we no longer knew who we were, what we were about. Insecurity and self-doubt were the inevitable result. As a character in Don DeLillo's *Underworld* declares of the Cold War, "It's the one constant thing. It's honest, it's dependable. Because when the tension and rivalry come to an end, that's when your worst nightmares begin" (DeLillo, 1997: 170; also see Friedman, 1999: 10-11; Edmunson, 1997: 66; Huntington, 1996: 125-30; Gitlin, 1995: 2-3, 61-66).

It was into this gap—the absent foundation, the vanished cause—opened by the end of the sixties and the Cold War, and the triumph of the free market, that a small group of intellectuals, brandishing fear as a *causus causans* of liberal politics, stepped. Disavowing all utopias, skeptical of grand claims about the good life, but sensitive to the charge that liberalism was an insufficiently fighting, and grounded, faith, these theorists hoped to restore liberalism to its original animating purposes: the defense of freedom, the rule of law, toleration, and limited state power. Justifying these values as the hard-earned wisdom of experience, they insisted that liberalism arose from no positive vision of social transformation, no philosophically derived notion of the individual or freedom or justice. It was instead the sad, dystopian knowledge of the twentieth century—the unhappy recognition that state tyranny and the cruelty of fanatics were all one needed to know in order to
defend liberal arrangements, at home and abroad. Liberal politics was best understood as "a recipe for survival" rather than "a project for the perfectibility of mankind," a "liberalism of fear" rather than a liberalism of rights or equality (Shklar, 1984: 4; 1989).

THE LIBERALISM—AND CONSERVATISM—OF FEAR

The original, and most forceful, exponent of this liberalism of fear was Harvard political theorist Judith Shklar. A Jewish refugee from Nazi Europe, Shklar had little patience for talk of vanished causes, spent militarism, and the like. The plaints and pleas of the last quarter of the twentieth century reminded her of nothing so much as the soured romanticism and political fervor that consumed Europe during the first half (Shklar, 1989: 21, 27, 32, 36). But for all her impatience with the dreamy qualities of contemporary discussion, Shklar was hardly immune to the challenges confronting other writers in the wake of the Cold War, the sixties, and the triumph of the free market. For she also believed that contemporary liberalism lacked moral confidence and political momentum, that it required a new foundation. In fear, she found the foundation she needed. "What liberalism requires," she wrote, "is the possibility of making the evil of cruelty and fear the basic norm of its political practices and prescriptions" (Shklar, 1989: 30). As a category of political discussion, fear possessed a distinct utility: it answered those who criticized liberalism for lacking sufficient moral justification, a rationally grounded vision of the good life. It did so not by providing a vision of the good life, but by enlightening liberalism's critics about the perils of looking for that life in politics. Resting politics on the negative foundation of fear deflated our aspirations—not to goodness per se, but to achieving goodness through, and looking for it in politics. Witnessing the fears unleashed throughout the twentieth century in the name of the working class or a higher race, the sober observer would realize that whenever utopian aspirations entered the public sphere, fear inevitably followed. This was, Shklar insisted, no philosophical claim; it was the incontrovertible conclusion to the evidence of history.
Shklar was hardly the first to point out the relationship between fear and idealism—it was Robespierre, after all, who pronounced terror and virtue the French Revolution's twin children—but she derived from this knowledge a larger conclusion about the kind of foundation liberalism required. Too many philosophers, Shklar suggested, had searched for political foundations by looking beyond the factual and the actual to the moral and the principled. Instead of immersing themselves in history or politics, they asked what reason required or goodness entailed, and then sought to instantiate their conclusions in the political realm. From that manner of proceeding, she argued, all sorts of political mischief followed. Would it not make more sense, she asked, to begin with the instruments of politics, particularly violence, by which ideals had so often been pursued? Rather than peering up to the city of God, why not walk among the strewn bodies and mangled limbs of Europe's killing fields? By doing so, she argued, "one closes off any appeal to any order other than that of actuality." The liberalism of fear, she concluded, entailed "a ramble through a moral minefield, not a march toward a destination" (Shklar, 1984: 6, 9).

As much as Shklar might not have cared to admit it, the advantage of putting fear first was distinctly epistemological. Shklar believed that fear possessed an easy intelligibility, which made for quick and universal agreement about principles. Fear required no philosophy, no leap of reason, to establish its evil; everyone knew what it was and that it was bad. "The fear of fear does not require any further justification, because it is irreducible." Cruelty, fear's most common weapon, "repels instantly and easily because it is 'ugly.'" Fear prompted an indisputable argument on behalf of any politics that might prevent it. "Because the fear of systematic cruelty is so universal, moral claims based on its prohibition have an immediate appeal and can gain recognition without much argument." Unlike goodness or rights, which provoked endless disagreement, fear settled arguments. The liberalism of fear, she wrote, "does not, to be sure, offer a summum bonum toward which all political agents should strive, but it certainly does begin with a summum malum, which all of us know and would avoid.
if only we could." All of us knew it—that was the key. And from that knowledge, morality and politics followed. "The liberalism of fear, which makes cruelty the first vice, quite rightly recognizes that fear reduces us to mere reactive units of sensation and that this does impose a public ethos on us" (Shklar, 1984: 5, 9, 237; 1989: 29, 30; also see Scarry, 1985: 13-14).

While Shklar wrote out of a genuine concern for the victims of fear, her theory served a more domestic purpose: it responded to the widespread sense that liberalism was a tottering faith, that in the wake of the sixties and the twilight of the Cold War, its ideals no longer compelled. For many intellectuals, the crisis of contemporary liberalism was a crisis of knowledge, of uncertainty about positive programs and principles. Fear and the practices associated with it—cruelty, suffering, pain—provided certainty, resolved doubt. Intellectuals writing in Shklar's wake often invoked the simple clarity of these negative experiences—as opposed to the elusive obscurity of positive principles—as the reason for adopting them as a foundational premise. Among the arguments cited by Israeli political theorist Avishai Margalit for resting politics upon the evils of humiliation was that it is easier to identify humiliating than respectful behavior, just as it is easier to identify illness than health. Health and honor are both concepts involving defense. We defend our honor and protect our health. Disease and humiliation are concepts involving attack. It is easier to identify attack situations than defense situations, since the former are based on a clear contrast between the attacker and the attacked, while the latter can exist even without an identifiable attacker (Margalit, 1996: 5).

Richard Rorty likewise argued that negative experiences like cruelty and fear made it possible to affirm liberal principles without resorting to an architectonic philosophy. Solidarity with the victims of cruelty, he wrote, was "to be achieved not by inquiry"—the traditional route of
liberals like Rawls or Dworkin—"but by imagination, the imaginative ability to see strange people as fellow sufferers." The liberal need no longer worry about the grounds of her ideals once she realized that she was "more afraid of being cruel than of anything else." All she needed to recognize was that "traditional differences (of tribe, religion, race, customs, and the like)" were "unimportant when compared with similarities with respect to pain and humiliation." She could forego the unanswerable philosophical question, "Do you believe and desire what we believe and desire," and ask instead, "Are you suffering?" (Rorty, 1989:192, 198) Or, as Michael Ignatieff put it:

In the twentieth century, the idea of human universality rests less on hope than on fear, less on optimism about the human capacity for good than on dread of human capacity for evil, less on a vision of man as maker of his history than of man the wolf toward his own kind. The way stations on the road to this internationalism were Armenia, Verdun, the Russian front, Auschwitz, Hiroshima, Vietnam, Cambodia, Lebanon, Rwanda, and Bosnia (Ignatieff, 1997:18-19).

Despite Shklar's impatience with the self-indulgence of contemporary argument, many seized upon her liberalism of fear precisely because it responded to their own quest for political assurance. Fear was an evil scourge, but it stiffened the spine. It established knowledge where there was doubt. The liberalism of fear, in short, spoke as much to the cultural uncertainty of Western intellectuals as it did to the genuine horrors of international politics. The accounts of fear intellectuals read throughout the nineties—in the Balkans or Rwanda—were not simple tales of far-off lands. They were very much tales about the West, the witnesses to the fear. Slaughterhouse, David Rieff's acclaimed account of Bosnian ethnic cleansing, was subtitled "the Failure of the West." Reviewing Slaughterhouse in The New Republic, veteran journalist Anthony Lewis called it "an epitaph for Bosnia, or for us" (Rieff, 1996 [1995]; Lewis, 1995; though see Rieff's second thoughts in A Bed
For the Night: Humanitarianism in Crisis, 2002). Samantha Power, author of an award-winning account of the lackluster American response to genocides throughout the twentieth century, confessed to *The New York Times* that she was “a child of Bosnia” who “came of age” in the Balkans (Bohlen, 2003: E1). As if to underscore the point, two of the most prominent accounts of ethnic cleansing in the nineties—Philip Gourevitch’s *We Wish to Inform You that Tomorrow We Will Be Killed with Our Families* and Michael Ignatieff’s *The Warrior’s Honor*—made their authors the central characters of their tales. Where Cold War accounts of Nazi or Stalinist atrocities often kept their author off stage and featured austere, impersonal narratives—one thinks of Solzhenitsyn’s *Gulag Archipelago* or Arendt’s *Origins of Totalitarianism*, the first by a victim of Stalin, the second by a refugee from Hitler—literary treatments of fear after the Cold War pushed their author to center stage, reminding readers that the chief protagonist in these tales was not the victim, but the teller, standing in for the rest of us.

Few writers made these connections between fear and personal renewal more palpable than Gourevitch, author of a harrowing report on the 1994 Rwandan genocide. For Gourevitch, Rwanda was a classroom of the Western self, the place where someone like him—or us—could acquire greater clarity about his beliefs and the veracity of his own experience. At the outset of *We Wish to Inform You*, Gourevitch confessed that his real topic was not the Rwandan genocide but moral epistemology. “This is a book about how people imagine themselves and one another,” he explained, “a book about how we imagine our world.” Though genocide might seem a peculiar occasion to raise such rarified questions of the imagination, Gourevitch believed it was appropriate. Genocide forced one to confront “the peculiar necessity of imagining what is, in fact, real.” Staring at a pile of bones, Gourevitch “wondered whether I could really see what I was seeing while I saw it.” Unlike the average person who saw a tree, and took it for granted that she was seeing a tree, the witness to genocide had to do more than look in order to see; looking was insufficient, for what one saw was too horrible to be believed. To truly see genocide, one had to acknowledge that, yes,
human beings had done—and could do—these things to each other. Sight, in other words, required ethical comprehension, a leap of the moral imagination. That melding of morality and vision, Gourevitch explained, "is what fascinates me most in existence" and is what drew him to Rwanda (Gourevitch, 1998: 6-7, 19).

As difficult as it was to see genocide, once one saw it, one enjoyed a far greater confidence about the truth of one’s perceptions, and came away with a more bracing sense of reality. The sight of mass death solidified Gourevitch’s sense of his own experience, applying a clarifying shock of reality that he would never, could never, lose. Nor would he wish to: “These dead Rwandans will be with me forever, I expect. That was why I had felt compelled to come to Nyarubuye: to be stuck with them—not with their experience, but with the experience of looking at them.” The benefit of sight, in other words, redounded to the seer, not to the seen. He was the audience; they, the objects of revivifying display. “The dead at Nyarubuye were, I’m afraid, beautiful. There was no getting around it. The skeleton is a beautiful thing.” Traveling on a dangerous road in the Rwandan countryside, surrounded by death and destruction, Gourevitch simply felt alive, more alive perhaps than at any point in his life: “I was glad to be out there, on an impassable road in an often impossible-seeming country, hearing and smelling—and feeling my skin tighten against—the sort of dank, drifting midnight that every Rwandan must know and I had never experienced so unprotectedly” (Gourevitch, 1998: 16, 19, 33).

Perhaps it was inevitable that Gourevitch would look among African skeletons for a clarifying mirror of himself. For as Shklar discovered when she embarked upon her ramble in a moral minefield, there was a deep vein of narcissism running throughout the liberalism of fear. For all their talk of victims, Shklar pointed out, liberals often “protect [themselves] against utter despondency” by seizing upon victims as answers to their own concerns. For the liberal, the victim was an argument, “a way of... finding an ethos that... leads neither to zeal nor to cruelty.” The liberal of fear thus impressed the victim into
a service the latter did not choose. "Forced to serve the onlookers," the victim was "used untruthfully, as a means to nourish our self-esteem and to control our own fears" (Shklar, 1984: 17).

TO MAKE FEAR A NEGATIVE FOUNDATION OF LIBERAL POLITICS, IT WAS essential that fear participate in none of the morals or politics men and women valued. Mix fear with any virtue, connect it to any cherished institution, and it lost that conspicuous intelligibility and apartness that made it a desirable foundation in the first place. The "popularity" of organizations like Amnesty International, Ignatieff noted, "owes much to the fact that it is an antipolitics, rejecting all the arguments that political ideologists devise to justify harm done to human beings. It is also an antipolitics in its refusal to differentiate among victims" (Ignatieff, 1997: 22). Again, Shklar's account proved useful. Shklar focused upon exclusively physical forms of fear, the violence committed by tyrants against defenseless victims. Physical fear, she argued, did not partake of the morals and politics that inspired ordinary political actors. Though at times she talked about "moral cruelty"—the "deliberate and persistent humiliation" of other persons (Shklar, 1984: 37)—Shklar wrote mostly about the fear profiled by Montesquieu in The Spirit of the Laws. Montesquieu understood fear, according to Shklar, as a "physiological reaction" to violence or the threat of violence. "This is where our physical and moral impulses meet and struggle, and where the former triumph." Fear did not allow for purposive action; it was too "tyrannical a passion," too "involuntary and far too imperious to be controlled." "There is something uniquely physical about a fear-ridden despotism that separates it from every other form of government in Montesquieu's gallery of regimes" (Shklar, 1987: 84). The fear Shklar was interested in required only an acknowledgement of victims as "sentient beings, whatever else we may be" (Shklar, 1989: 32). Only by being reduced to physical beings could the victims of fear be deemed worthy of support and fear worthy of condemnation. In the words of Ignatieff, "We are all Shakespeare's 'thing itself': unaccom-
modated man, the poor, bare forked animal. It is 'the thing itself' that has become the subject—and the rationale—for the modern universal human rights culture'' (Ignatieff, 1997: 5).

In explaining the causes of fear, Shklar further separated it from morals and politics. Shklar claimed that fear was aroused by cruelty, which she defined as “the willful inflicting of physical pain on a weaker being in order to cause anguish and fear” (Shklar, 1984: 8). Philosophers might dismiss this argument as circular—fear was aroused by cruelty, and cruelty was the use of physical pain to arouse fear—but circularity was critical to Shklar’s account. For it suggested, like nothing else, the close-knit world to which fear and cruelty exclusively belonged. Fear was enclosed in a self-sustaining sphere, borrowing from nothing outside its own circle. Fear had nothing to do with the requirements of political rule. Tyrants often relied upon fear, Shklar’s claimed, because of their “princely fear, not only of foreign enemies, but... for the ruler’s own prestige.” Princely fear was irrational, a dishonorable cowardice or derangement of psyche, rather than a reasonable reflection upon necessities of state. None of the actions the tyrant took in response to his fear, Shklar noted, qualified as “rational responses to any necessities.” He used fear against victims, like defenseless women and children, from whom he had nothing to fear (Shklar, 1984: 23-25, 30-31).

Occasionally, Shklar did attempt to provide a thicker political description of fear, pointing to the connections between fear, inequality, and the state’s monopoly of power. Fear, she noted, was often inspired by its wielder’s belief in the inferiority of his victims (Shklar, 1984: 26-29). The “difference,” she claimed, between “the weak and the powerful” often “invites” the “abuse of power and intimidation.” The infliction of cruelty was “not an occasional personal inclination” but a systemic application of violence “made possible by differences in public power.” Such inequalities were “built into the system of coercion upon which all governments have to rely to fulfill their essential functions.” Cruelty and fear entailed the “deliberate infliction of physical, and secondarily emotional, pain upon a weaker person or group by stronger
ones in order to achieve some end, tangible or intangible, of the latter” (Shklar, 1989: 27, 29). Cruelty and fear, she suggested, did not lie at the extremity of the human experience but were directly implicated in the distribution of political and economic power.

But even as she opened the door to politics, Shklar closed it. For Shklar held inequality to be significant because it increased the “social distance” between victim and victimizer. Inequality separated the victim, emotionally and cognitively, from her tormentor, making it possible for the latter to act upon an internal impulse toward cruelty, which always and already inspired him. Inequality made the victim strange and alien to the victimizer, enabling him to implement his prepolitical, personal desires. Inequality did not inspire the powerful to use fear to protect his superior position. Instead, it facilitated his use of fear. “The court,” she wrote of cruel monarchies, “creates around the despot a vacuum that separates him from his subjects, and this is the prerequisite for the maximum both of inequality and of potential and actual cruelty” (Shklar, 1984: 28-29). Inequality “expose[d] people to oppressive practices” (Shklar, 1989: 28). It did not inspire those practices. Fear came first, in other words, before inequality; it was made possible, but not activated, by inequality.

Though Shklar insisted that fear was not to be understood as the product of a sadistic mind or a personal derangement, she could not escape a certain psychological reductiveness. Fear for Shklar, like despotism for Montesquieu, was a universal solvent, a psychic impulse that found an outlet in the concentration of state power and accumulated inequality. Fear was, as she put it in a revealing phrase, the “underlying psychological and moral medium that makes vice all but unavoidable” (Shklar, 1984: 242). It was its own instigator of political evil, serving no purpose except the creation of a cowed and victimized population. Because it was a universal medium, the only remedy was to construct dams and dikes throughout the body politic, which would check its coursing movement. Thus did Shklar, like Montesquieu and Tocqueville before her, use the language of fear to justify the rule of

SHKLAR WROTE HER MOST BRACING PIECES ON FEAR DURING THE MID-TO LATE 1980s, just as the Cold War was coming to an end. Fresh in her mind were Hitler and Stalin, those "agents of the modern state" who, with "unique resources of physical might and persuasion at their disposal," acted so often with such "deadly effect" (Shklar, 1989: 21). But for those who sought to make fear a negative foundation in the wake of the Cold War, Shklar's focus on concentrated state power posed a problem. Her successors witnessed the breakdown of modern states in the Balkans, Rwanda, and elsewhere, which unleashed waves of ethnic cleansing. Here the problem of fear was not the unbounded states that Shklar had warned of but "failed states." Failed states liberated men and women from all restraint, giving rise, it was argued, to a more arbitrary and vicious violence and a more virulent fear (Ignatieff, 1997: 6). What seemed to prompt this genocidal savagery, moreover, was an obsession with the purity of collective identities, the unity—ethnic, religious, or national—of a particular group. Unlike the utopianism that inspired the hot and cold wars of the twentieth century, this new breed of conflict was fueled by considerations more ethereal and symbolic, which seemed less amenable to traditional political calculations.

To explain this new development, writers did not abandon Shklar's depoliticized account of fear. They merely supplemented it with a psychocultural analysis of anxiety. The fear wrought from ethnic warfare and conflicts over identity, Samuel Huntington argued, was a response to the disruptions of modernity. As Westernizing elites attempted to export the rule of law, toleration, pluralism, free markets, free trade, and secularism to undeveloped parts of the world, men and women there were uprooted from traditional ways of life. Stripped of nurturing institutions like the patriarchal family or village, shorn of the beliefs that organized their universe, the victims of this imposed
modernity reacted with the same anxiety described by Tocqueville in *Democracy in America*. They grew nervous about their place in the universe, felt confused and uncertain about who they were. As globalization assaulted traditional identities, making men and women more alike, they grew even more anxious. Homogeneity meant the loss of their specific identity; assimilation spelled existential death. In response to the anxieties of anomie and assimilation, men and women gravitated to rigid and authoritarian cultural forms. They cleaved to their traditions and beliefs, particularly religion, and feared whatever they perceived to be the "other"—the West, an opposing ethnicity, a different religion. Opting for repressive modes of identity—Serbian nationalism, Islamic fundamentalism—the uprooted of modernity inflicted savage cruelty and fear upon these others, hoping to ward off whatever threatened their identity (Huntington, 1996: 67, 76, 97-98, 101, 116, 125; also see Kaplan, 2000: 26-27, 35; Barber, 1996: 155-168, 205-16; Gray, 1997: 35-38, 57-60).

Though the liberals of fear rejected Huntington's claim of a "clash of civilizations," many of them were more indebted to his account than they realized. Michael Ignatieff, for example, opened his account of the Balkan wars of the nineties on a note of ostensible opposition to Huntington. "Theorists like Samuel Huntington," Ignatieff wrote, "would lead me to believe that there is a fault line running through the back gardens of Mirkovci [a village in eastern Croatia], with the Croats in the bunker representing the civilization of the Catholic Roman West and the Serbs nearby representing Byzantium, Orthodoxy, and the Cyrillic East." But, Ignatieff went on,

here in Mirkovci, I don't see civilizational fault lines, geological templates that have split apart. These metaphors take for granted what needs to be explained: how neighbors once ignorant of the very idea that they belong to opposed civilizations begin to think—and hate—in these terms, how they vilify and demonize people they once called friends;
how, in short, the seeds of mutual paranoia are sown, grain by grain, on the soil of common life (Ignatieff, 1997: 36).

Claiming that identities did not grow out of ancient hatreds but were recent creations, Ignatieff argued that the collapse of the Yugoslavian state made individuals uncertain about their prospects for survival and encouraged them to seek the promised protection of leaders like Slobodan Milosevic. Ignatieff stressed the political entrepreneurialism of Milosevic, who saw ethnic identity and hatred as a lever for exercising power and diverting attention from the growing economic crisis in the Balkans. Ignatieff also acknowledged that power and privilege in the Balkans had long been distributed along ethnic lines, which helped explain the mutual distrust and dislike among the peoples of the former Yugoslavia. "Communities of fear," wrote Ignatieff, "are created out of communities of interest." and ethnic fear was the result (Ignatieff, 1997: 38-45, 50, 53-54).

But beneath or beside Ignatieff's political account of ethnic revanchism stood a far less political account, closely paralleling Huntington's—and Shklar's—approach. An early clue to Ignatieff's assumptions came in his invocation of the Biblical story of Cain and Abel. Although Cain was a farmer and Abel a sheepherder, these brothers were essentially the same—that is, until God, for no apparent reason, chose Abel as the object of his blessing. Enraged at this arbitrary elevation, Cain killed Abel. For Ignatieff—and Gourevitch—the story of Cain and Abel symbolized the sheer meaninglessness of conflict between peoples whose differences were so small (Ignatieff, 1997: 46-48; Gourevitch, 1998: 47). Ignatieff's and Gourevitch's invocation of Cain and Abel was emblematic of their depoliticized, anti-historical approach to ethnic conflict. After all, they could have chosen other stories of fratricidal conflict from Genesis, where the source of hatred between brothers is neither arbitrary nor otherworldly. In the case of Jacob and Esau, for instance, or of Joseph and his 11 brothers, it is a father's—rather than God's—decision to favor one son over
another that impels the hatred of the second for the first and the decision of the second to eliminate the first. In these stories, hatred and conflict arise from what the Declaration of Independence called "a long train of abuses," and seem neither so mysterious nor theologically hallowed as they do in the Cain and Abel parable. At stake in these stories was neither the sameness nor difference of brothers but the inequality between them. Inspired by these other passages, Ignatieff and Gourevitch might have adopted a more historically sensitive analysis of the Rwandan or Balkan conflicts, identifying the sources of violence and fear in the accumulation of inequities over time, and in the desire for vengeance such accumulations generate. But Ignatieff and Gourevitch were not interested in history and politics. Gourevitch conducted a brisk 15-page tour—in a 350-page book—through 100 years of European colonialism, leading him to conclude that the Rwandan genocide was fueled by an "idea" that "may be criminal and objectively very stupid." Ignatieff was even less impressed by history and politics, dispensing with them in fewer than 10 pages (Gourevitch, 1998: 17, 47-62; Ignatieff, 1997: 38-45, 50, 53).

Having established the mythic resonance and political emptiness of genocidal warfare, Ignatieff resorted, like Huntington, to an equal mix of psychology and speculation about the perils of modernity to explain the Balkan wars. Invoking Freud's theory of the "narcissism of minor differences," Ignatieff asked why small differences between peoples are so often "accompanied by such large amounts of anxiety?" "Why is it that minor difference should be strange and therefore threatening?" Ignatieff never answered his own question, perhaps because he assumed the question answered itself. Instead, he merely asserted, as if it were a truism, that the convergence of identities aroused anxiety, forcing the threatened individual to distinguish himself, with great ferocity, from whatever or whomever he imagined as the other. As if "narcissistic anxiety" were a natural response to this cultural convergence, as if ethnic cleansing were a natural response to narcissistic anxiety. Despite his qualification that he was not invoking
narcissistic anxiety as an “explanatory theory” but “only as a phrase, with a certain heuristic usefulness,” Ignatieff did use the theory of narcissistic anxiety as an explanatory account. Like Huntington, he argued that as “globalism . . . brings us closer together, makes us all neighbors, destroys the old boundaries of identity marked out by national or regional consumption styles, we react by clinging to the margins of difference that remain.” It was the “uprootings of modernity,” he claimed, that aroused anxiety. Modernity unleashed an underlying psychic mechanism, which prompted the turn to ethnic violence. Ignatieff acknowledged that differences were often attached to status and power, but he concluded that it was the psychological threat that modernity posed to the self—the psychic insecurity, the dissolving of boundaries, the loss of self—that truly made it such a source of mischief (Ignatieff, 1997: 48-61).

BY PAINTING FEAR AS AN ERUPTION FROM THE PSYCHE AND CULTURE, Huntington and Ignatieff, and writers like Robert Kaplan, fulfilled the imperative that made fear such an ideal political foundation in the first place. Fear, in their hands, remained an intrusion into politics. It did not emerge from the requirements of politics or from the conflicts that politics so often generate; it stood outside of politics. In the words of Kaplan, “there is less and less ‘politics’ today in Liberia, Sierra Leone, Somalia, Sri Lanka, the Balkans, and the Caucasus, among other places” (Kaplan, 2000: 47). These writers were also quick to point out that the Western military interventions designed to end ethnic cleansing might also have a domestic benefit: restoring the flagging spirits of the West. According to Ignatieff:

When policy [in the Balkans or other troubled spots of the world] was driven by moral motives, it was often driven by narcissism. We intervened not only to save others, but to save ourselves, or rather an image of ourselves as defenders of universal decencies. We wanted to show that the West
“meant” something. This imaginary West, this narcissistic image of ourselves, we believed was incarnated in the myth of a multiethnic, multiconfessional Bosnia (Ignatieff, 1997: 95).

For Ignatieff, this moral exhilaration and domestic renewal were closely linked to the revival of a liberal activism discredited since the 1960s. The military incursions in Bosnia, he noted, were “a theater of displacement, in which political energies that might otherwise have been expended in defending multiethnic society at home were directed instead at defending mythic multiculturalism far away. Bosnia became the latest ‘bel espoir’ of a generation that had tried ecology, socialism, and civil rights only to watch all these lose their romantic momentum” (Ignatieff, 1997: 95). Resigned to a complete rollback of domestic liberalism, liberal activists hoped to do elsewhere what they could not do at home.

Where Ignatieff and his liberal colleagues imagined the battle against ethnic cleansing as an occasion of progressive renewal, Kaplan and his counterparts saw it as an opportunity for conservative renewal. A new generation of imperial warriors, they believed, might deliver the West from its cultural mediocrity and easy living. More pagan than bourgeois, more intuitive than rational, these warriors would be no Colin Powell’s—no strict professionals, equally comfortable in the bureaucracy of the Pentagon and the corridors of the United Nations. They would recall instead “something old and traditional.” Special Forces in the third world, Kaplan argued, were

recreating colonial expeditionary forces with men who are chameleons, modeled after the spy, linguist, and master of disguise Sir Richard Francis Burton. “Ambiguity,” “subjective” and “intuitive” thinking, and decisions made when only 20 percent of the evidence is in are encouraged: by the time more information is available, it will be too late to act (Kaplan, 2000: 108).
These romantic impresarios of war would find their diplomatic counterparts in men like Henry Kissinger and Richard Nixon, who practiced statecraft the old-fashioned way. Kissinger, Kaplan wrote, treated foreign policy as if it were “lovemaking”—inventive and creative, “intensely human” rather than drably rule-bound, sensitive to the peculiar genius of each individual and the particularity of each situation (Kaplan, 2000: 143). Illegally bombing Cambodia, continuing the Vietnam War long after it was necessary, Kissinger and Nixon displayed an aristocratic contempt for the mass, demonstrating that it was still possible in a disenchanted universe to show true character.

Now, isn’t that exactly what we want—or at least how we say we want—our leaders to act? Isn’t what angers so many people about President Bill Clinton and other current politicians the fact that they make policy according to the result of public-opinion polls rather than to their own conviction (Kaplan, 2000: 147)?

In a decade that had seen “an increasingly shallow form of mediocrity,” Kaplan concluded, we should savor the “unflinching firmness” of a Kissinger or Nixon, their willingness to “go to cruel extremes” (Kaplan, 2000: 154).

What the new wars of ethnic purity—and the corresponding duty of imperial involvement—promised for the Left as well as the Right was nothing less than a regeneration of the West. For liberals, fear offered a posture of militant, crusading purpose, an opportunity to impose the Enlightenment abroad precisely because it could not be defended at home. For conservatives, it was a chance to restore martial valor and aristocratic heroism jeopardized by the free market and the end of the Cold War. Whatever the source of their new fervor, Left and Right were now united in a worldwide revolutionary project to bring America to the rest of the world. This was not the first time that Western intellectuals had looked to fear abroad for answers to their own domestic despair. It would not be the last.
A WAR ON TERROR?

Immediately following the terrorist attacks of 9/11, journalists and writers seized upon the day’s events as a comment on the cultural miasma and decadent materialism of the United States. David Brooks noted that even the most casual observers of the pre-9/11 domestic scene, including Al Qaeda, “could have concluded that America was not an entirely serious country.” The United States had just emerged from a decade in which we “renovated our kitchens, refurbished our home entertainment systems, invested in patio furniture, Jacuzzis and gas grills.” Maureen Dowd wrote that 9/11 had exposed the “narcissistic us-me culture” of the nineties, when baby boomers hoped “to overcome flab with diet and exercise, wrinkles with collagen and Botox, sagging skin with surgery, impotence with Viagra, mood swings with anti-depressants, myopia with laser surgery, decay with human growth hormone, disease with stem cell research and bioengineering.” Francis Fukuyama complained that the decade’s “peace and prosperity encourage[d] preoccupation with one’s own petty affairs” and “self-indulgent behavior.” Making the connection between America’s limp character and the terrorist attack explicit, Brooks concluded, “You can imagine how it [the United States] must have looked to the Islamic extremists leading the hard life in Afghan terrorist camps.” Such speculations were not peculiar to media commentators. Even Bush administration officials like Lewis Libby—and later Bush himself, as well as Republican leader Tom Delay—claimed that an ethos of lethargy, embodied in Bill Clinton’s foreign policy, had made “it easier for someone like Osama bin Laden to rise up and say credibly, ‘The Americans don’t have the stomach to defend themselves. They won’t take casualties to defend their interests. They are morally weak’” (Brooks, 2001a; Dowd, 2001: A19; “Francis Fukuyama Says,” 2001: 1; Libby cited in Lemann, 2002: 48; Bush and Delay cited in “In Bush’s Words,” 2003; Gresh, 2003).

By inflicting deadly violence and rousing intense fear, the 9/11 terrorists, according to these commentators, promised to deliver the
United States from its tedium and selfishness, its individualism and despair. For Brooks, “the fear that is so prevalent in the country” was “a cleanser, washing away a lot of the self-indulgence of the past decade.” Revivifying fear, Brooks argued, would now supersede crippling anxiety, replacing a disabling emotion with a bracing passion. “We have traded the anxieties of affluence for the real fears of war” (Brooks, 2001a; Brooks, 2001b).

Now upscalers who once spent hours agonizing over which Moen faucet head would go with their copper farmhouse-kitchen sink are suddenly worried about whether the water coming out of pipes has been poisoned. People who longed for Prada bags at Bloomingdale’s are suddenly spooked by unattended bags at the airport. America, the sweet land of liberty, is getting a crash course in fear (Brooks, 2001a).

With its shocking spectacle of death and consequent fear, 9/11 offered a dead or dying culture the chance to live again. After that day in September, Andrew Sullivan noted in the New York Times Magazine, America was “more mobilized, more conscious and therefore more alive.” In the same pages, George Packer remarked upon “the alertness, grief, resolve, even love” awakened by 9/11. He quoted a survivor of the attack on the World Trade Center, who said, “I like this state. I’ve never been more cognizant in my life,” to which Packer added, “I’ve lived through this state” too, “and I like it.” In fact, Packer noted, “what I dread now is a return to the normality we’re all supposed to seek” (Sullivan, 2001; Packer, 2001: 15-16).

In analyzing what drove the 19 hijackers, writers portrayed the angry young men of Islam as the anxious residue of an advancing modernity. Cobbling together an account similar to that of Huntington and Ignatieff, intellectuals insisted that politics had nothing to do with the events of 9/11. The men who seized the planes, their leaders and wealthy patrons, and the recruits who threatened to join them, were
not interested in politics in any sense of the word. They were motivated by the torment of their inner psyches, brought about by the cultural shock of modernity. "Their grievance," explained Thomas Friedman, "is rooted in psychology, not politics," and they "blame America for the failure of their societies to master modernity" (Friedman, 2002: A 21; Friedman, 2001: A 27). Political Islamists did not hate the United States because of its policies—a history of interventions in Muslim countries like Iran, Saudi Arabia, and Indonesia, unstinting support for Israel, or sponsorship of repressive regimes throughout the Middle East. They hated the United States for what it was. And what the United States was, according to these writers, was the emblem of modernity: liberal, tolerant, democratic, secular. In the words of one reporter, the terrorists acted "solely out of . . . hatred for the values cherished in the West as freedom, tolerance, prosperity, religious pluralism and universal suffrage, but abhorred by religious fundamentalists (and not only Muslim fundamentalists) as licentiousness, corruption, greed and apostasy." Given this existential hatred, it made no sense to talk of changing any specific American policy in the Middle East. As Friedman noted, "Their terrorism is not aimed at reversing any specific U.S. policy," and, added another reporter, "changes in Western policy, though not to be ruled out completely, would not necessarily resolve the disputes" between the political Islamists and the West (Schmemann, 2001: 1; Friedman, 2001: A 27; Crossette, 2001: B4).

Why were the terrorists and political Islamists so hateful toward modernity? Because it made them anxious. What made them anxious? The loss of premodernity, the ruined solidarity of dead or dying traditions, the unscripted free-for-all of individualism. The Islamists were not threatened directly by the United States, but the United States was a convenient scapegoat for their own anxieties. "Trapped between the traditional world in which they born," wrote one editorialist, "and the confusing world of modernity in which they inescapably live, they seek a single cause for their confusion, their resentments, their frustrated ambitions and their problems of cultural identity." One reporter noted,
“Freedom itself can be considered deeply disturbing, even threatening, in many of the world’s poorer societies that are anchored to the old pillars of faith, tradition and submission.” And “this anxiety,” he concluded, “has found a ready focus in American rock music.” This anxiety was also present, argued Fouad Ajami, in Mohamed Atta, the Egyptian-born ringleader of the 9/11 attacks. “The modern world unsettled Atta,” Ajami claimed. Growing up in “a drab, austere society that had suddenly been plunged into a more competitive, glamorized world in the 1970s and 1980s,” Atta had been “placed perilously close to modernity.” From this collision between the modern and the traditional “there emerged an anxious, belligerent piety.” The absolute truths of Islamic fundamentalism were a source of comfort, a way of creating meaning in a meaningless world. Like Arendt’s totalitarian, Atta “needed the faith” of radical Islam “as consolation” (Steel, 2001: A27; Burns, 2001: A4; Ajami, 2001: 19).

These twin doctrines—that fear could be a source of domestic renewal, and that terrorism was inspired by an anxiety over modernity—complemented each other well. America needed an antidote to its own cultural despair, which the fear of terrorism supplied. But for that fear not to cripple, it required an answering war. By insisting that Islamic fundamentalism arose from existential anxiety about modernity, writers ensured that, intellectually speaking, no political or diplomatic response would be envisioned to it. For modernity was an irreversible process, and anxiety its inevitable result. The best way to subdue modernity’s discontent, especially its murderous veins, was to kill it. A permanent war against terror would convert domestic anxiety into bracing fear; remake liberalism, which had seen such hard times since the 1960s, as a fighting faith; restore to a fraying society its sense of collective and individual purpose; and unite conservatives and liberals behind a worldwide crusade for the Enlightenment.

At one end of the political spectrum, the former Trotskyist but still radical Christopher Hitchens called out in defense of the war on terrorism: “Americanization is the most revolutionary force in the world. There’s almost no country where adopting the Americans wouldn’t
be the most radical thing they could do. I've always been a Paine-ite.”
“After the dust settles, the only revolution left standing is the American
one” (Packer, 2002: 107). And from the other end of the spectrum came
the answering reply:

The political agenda of American conservatives is no less revolutionary. From the beginning, Americans regarded
their values and institutions as embodying universal aspirations that would one day have a significance far beyond the
shores of the United States. The Great Seal on the back of the
dollar bill bears the inscription *novus ordo seclorum*—“new
order of the ages”—that expresses a very unconservative
sentiment with potentially revolutionary consequences.
In this view, democracy, constitutional government and
the individual rights on which they rest are good not just
for North Americans by virtue of their peculiar habits and
traditions, but for all people around the world. Hence the
United States in its foreign policy has been anything but a
status quo power (Fukuyama, 2002).

“The radicalism of the American revolution,” Francis Fukuyama would
conclude, “is still present, expressed today in U.S. promotion of a global
economy and in a muscular foreign policy that seeks to shape the world
in an American image” (Fukuyama, 2002). With the Soviet Union no
longer around, with terror revived as the foundation of politics, intel-
lectuals who once shuddered at the violent utopianism of the Bolshevik
Revolution were now prepared to take up, and prosecute with arms
more lethal, what Thomas Paine once called the “cause of all mankind”

**NOTES**

1. Elsewhere, Arendt wrote, “No-one can give us a logical demonstration
that we all have human rights, but the camps and the bomb between
them show us what can happen if we do not agree to share the earth with others" (cited in Canavon, 1992: 199).

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