

The Horror! The Horror!  
The paranoid style of the American left.  
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The fascists are coming! Or rather, they're already here, installed in the White House, planning like mad to subvert the Constitution and extend their reign in perpetuity, having first suppressed and eviscerated all opposition and put all of their critics in jail. Thus goes the rant of America's increasingly unhinged left. *If only*, sigh many Bush partisans, wondering when this administration will get out of the fetal position and show some fighting spirit. To them, as to most reasonable observers, the White House shows the chronic fatigue of a two-term presidency reaching its final year. Nonetheless, paranoia about what Bush and Co. are up to preys on the minds of many progressives, who have progressed, in this case at least, beyond reason.

*It Can Happen Here*, says Joe Conason, in his book of the same name, and in fact it already has started: George W. Bush and his coterie are the very picture of the pious and scheming homegrown *fascisti* that Sinclair Lewis described in his 1935 novel *It Can't Happen Here*. Similarities abound. In Lewis's novel, "Buzz Windrip" (Bush), an illiterate dweeb with sleazy charm and low animal cunning, backed by Lee Sarason (Karl Rove), a smooth and duplicitous political mastermind, becomes president, cooks up a fake war to extend his own power, cows Congress, corrupts the courts, bankrupts the country, and all but destroys the free press. The core of his power is a sinister nexus of theocrats joined at the hip to corporate interests, and you can tell how evil they are by their proclaimed love of country, and their incessant talk about God. In their endeavors, they are backed by the Hearst newspaper empire (Fox News), the only one left after all other outlets have been shut down.

Fox News looms large in the liberal panic about creeping fascism--an immense smoke machine pumping poison gas into the atmosphere 24/7, against which there is neither escape nor defense. This theory of the pervasive malevolent power of Fox rests on a quip by anchor Brit Hume that the network played a decisive role in the 2002 midterms, which Conason seems to take seriously, and the scholarly output of two obscure professors arguing that Fox swung the presidential elections of 2000 and 2004 as well. "Citing what they call 'The Fox Effect,'" Conason informs us, "professors Stefano Della Vigna of the University of California at Berkeley and Ethan Kaplan of the University of Stockholm found that the network convinced 2 to 8 percent of its non-Republican viewing audience to 'shift its voting behavior toward

the Republican party." If they say so. But there is no corresponding mention of the NBC-ABC-CBS-*Time-Newsweek-New York Times* "effect," and what its impact on voters might be.

At the same time that Conason is looking back to a fictional past in America, Naomi Wolf--last heard from in 2000 advising Al Gore to dress in earth tones--is looking back to a real past in Europe, and seeing troubling parallels. In 4,600 overwrought words, she explained to the readers of the *Guardian* that there are ten steps to "Fascist America" and Bush is taking them all. He has whipped up a menace (the war on terror); created "a prison system outside the rule of law" (Guantánamo, to which public dissidents, including "clergy and journalists" will be sent "soon enough"); developed "a thug caste . . . groups of scary young men out to terrorize citizens" (young Republican staffers who supposedly "menaced poll workers" during the 2000 recount in Florida); set up an "internal surveillance system" (NSA scanning for phone calls to and from terrorists). An airtight case, this, and leading to just one conclusion: "Beneath our very noses, George Bush and his administration are using time-tested tactics to close down an open society. It is time for us to be willing to think the unthinkable . . . that it can happen here."

Well, this explains many things. It explains why poor Cindy Sheehan is now sitting in prison; why Bush critics like CIA retiree Valerie Plame have been ostracized by the corporate media and are wasting away in anonymity; why no critic of Bush can get a hearing, why no book complaining about him can ever get published, and why our multiplexes are filled with one pro-Bush propaganda movie after another, glorifying the Iraq war and rallying the nation behind its leader.

Meanwhile, back on planet Earth, Cindy Sheehan is running for Congress; Valerie Plame is rich and famous; the young Republican "thugs" made all of one appearance seven years ago--chanting "Let us in!" when Miami-Dade County vote counters planned to move to a small inner room with no observers present; and press censorship is now so far-reaching that you can't even expose a legal, effective, and top-secret plan to trace terrorists without getting a Pulitzer Prize. "What if the publisher of a major U.S. newspaper were charged with treason or espionage?" Wolf asks breathlessly. "What if he or she got 10 years in jail?" Well, journalists have been harassed, pressed for their sources, and threatened with prison, but not by George W. Bush and his people. Back in the real world, only one prominent journalist has been jailed by the federal government in recent memory, and that was Judith Miller, imprisoned for 80-plus days for contempt by prosecutor Patrick Fitzgerald, the great hero of the anti-Bush forces for having indicted Vice President Cheney's chief of staff.

Such is life here in Fascist America. Of course, some think that the coup took place some time back, in the form of two, three, even four stolen elections over the span of six years. In 2000, they agree, the election was -stolen by the Supreme Court, after Governor Jeb Bush and other Republicans in Florida had systematically disenfranchised liberal voters through misleading ballots, illegal purges, faulty machines, and long lines. After 2002, most had moved on to a different fixation: the touch-screen electronic voting machines that they thought had been secretly programmed to tip key elections to conservatives. "There is strong evidence that Kerry won the popular vote [in the 2004 election]," Robert F. Kennedy Jr. told the

*Progressive* before the 2006 midterms. "There were easily three million votes that were shifted. . . . There were 80,000 Democratic voters in twelve western Ohio rural counties who cast a vote for Kerry and had their votes shifted. . . . In six other counties there were tens of thousands of Kerry voters who had their votes shifted to Bush."

Exit polls and predictions were taken as proof that the vote count was tampered with. "On Wall Street, and in betting parlors nationwide, Kerry was the gamblers' pick," wrote Mark Crispin Miller, a professor of media studies at New York University. "There was the unprecedented gap between the exit polls and the official tally. . . . No one would discuss the soundest explanation of the mystery, clearly posed by Steve Freeman, a professor at the University of Pennsylvania: the exit polls were accurate, and the official numbers fraudulent. . . . Votes for Bush were invented, Democratic votes were prevented or discarded, or converted into still more votes for Bush." Miller is not a figure of the academic fringe; he has written frequently over the years--albeit not on his voting-machine theories--for such publications as the *New York Times*, *Slate*, and the *New Republic*.

In a long article in *Rolling Stone* in 2006, Robert F. Kennedy Jr. implied that the surprise 2002 wins in Georgia of Saxby Chambliss and gubernatorial candidate Sonny Perdue were due to the installation of touch-screen machines in the state that spring and summer, and especially to a visit in July 2002 by a president of the voting machine company, who oversaw the planting in many machines of what was described as a mystery software update, or patch. "It was an unauthorized patch, and they were trying to keep it secret," a former employee had told Kennedy. "There could be a hidden program on a memory card that adjusts everything to the preferred election results," the employee added. "Your program says, 'I want my candidate to stay ahead by three or four percent or whatever.' Those programs can include a built-in delete that erases itself after it's done." When election experts denied this was possible, the conspiracy theorists attacked them; and when the press refused to report on their theories, they complained it was in on the plot. Democrats who refused to complain were denounced as collaborators in the conservatives' fascist plot. As Mark Crispin Miller told Bob Cesca of the *Huffington Post*, the press and the Democrats were in a state of denial, unable to accept or to deal with reality. They refused to acknowledge that "the United States is clearly not a democratic country, or that the Bush administration are dangerous extremists, intent on building a one-party theocratic state."

Students of election procedures readily acknowledge that touch-screen machines have their problems, that it would be nice to have a paper-trail back-up. But all voting systems have their technical drawbacks, all have lost votes, all have had breakdowns and failures. Investigations undertaken by the Democratic National Committee and the state's leading papers--the Cleveland *Plain Dealer*, the Cincinnati *Enquirer*, and the Columbus *Dispatch*--found Kennedy's conspiracy-mongering baseless, noting that elections in Ohio (as most everywhere) are run on a bipartisan basis, that the voting machines in inner-city precincts were put there by Democrats, that the purges of voter rolls undertaken by Republican secretary of state Kenneth Blackwell were mandated by law to weed out nonvoters, and that Ohio's rate for counting provisional ballots was the third highest in the United States.

Democratic pollster Mark Blumenthal, at his Mystery Pollster blog, unraveled the myth of the exit polls that Kennedy described as "exquisitely accurate." To the contrary, he reported, they were error-prone, unreliable, and had a record in the past four presidential elections of tipping heavily to the Democrats' side: in 1988, they exaggerated the Democrats' vote by 2.2 points; in 1992 by 5.0 points, by 2.2 points again four years later, and in 2000 by 1.8. In 2004, the spread was 6.5 points, barely higher than it was in 1992, the difference being that the candidate projected as being the winner then was the one who in the end won. Blumenthal noted that "Senior election officials from the Carter Center have repeatedly advised against the use of exit polls in election monitoring in Central American countries, calling them 'risky,' 'unreliable,' and 'misleading'" and that an election project funded by the U.N. and the U.S. Agency for International Development had concluded, "The majority of exit polls carried out in European countries over the past years have been failures. . . . One might think there is no reason why voters in stable democracies should conceal or lie about how they have voted . . . but they do." Joe Andrews, a chairman of the Democratic National Committee in the late 1990s, has repeatedly noted that touch-screen machines really help Democrats, by making voting easier for their constituent groups, including disabled and elderly voters.

Nonetheless, in the months leading up to the 2006 midterms, rumors that the election was about to be stolen attained fever pitch. Rosie O'Donnell accused the Diebold company, the leading manufacturer of voting machines, of cheating. HBO showcased *Hacking Democracy*, an ominous documentary warning that free elections were a thing of the past. Then came the election itself--and the Democrats won. They won 30 House seats, and took back the House; they won six Senate seats, and took back the Senate; out of six very close calls in the Senate, they won five.

How could any self-respecting Fascist have allowed this to happen? The answer seemed to be that the Republicans had cheated, but incompetently: They cut the Democrats' true totals almost in half, which wasn't enough. "The Democrats may well have picked up over 50 House seats (as opposed to 29) and one or more [additional] Senate seats," Mark Crispin Miller explained, insisting that the proof lay in the exit polls, which said one thing on Election Day and another on the day after. Republicans had put the fix in early, before the effect of late-breaking stories like the Mark Foley scandal had kicked in. "As the e-voting machinery was now often closely monitored . . . the party's gremlins would have fixed the codes as early as they could so as to hide their actions. . . . Thus did they lock themselves into a lead that, while it may well have seemed sufficient . . . was finally not enough to do the trick." Q.E.D. For weeks and months before the 2006 midterms, Miller had warned that if they lost, Republicans would raise fraud charges hoping to overturn the results, "much as they did after the rape of Florida in 2000." When instead they conceded quickly and graciously, Miller took this as even more proof of their infamy. "It is far likelier that [they] folded to protect themselves, as any real investigation of the civic crime wave in 2006 would probably land them, or their minions, in the slammer."

Ask those who see plots what they think they are fighting, and it will not be

anything small. They see themselves locked in an end-of-times struggle, defending the full range of Enlightenment values against a rogue clique made up of backward fanatics, bent upon snuffing them out. And who are these dangerous extremists? For a deep cultural explanation, let us turn to the prolific author and Washington think-tanker Michael Lind, whose neglected 2004 classic, *Made in Texas: George W. Bush and the Southern Takeover of American Politics*, uncovered the Texan conspiracy to bring back the Confederacy, complete with slave labor. The president, you see, was "born in New Haven, Connecticut, but reared in the reactionary culture of Anglo-Southern West Texas," and as a result is heir not to the parties of Lincoln or of either Roosevelt, but to the segregationists of the Jim Crow and the Ku Klux Klan eras, and longing to turn the clock back to their day.

Lind has nothing to say about Diebold or touch screens, but he does agree that the 2000 election was stolen, making the startling claim that Al Gore's razor-thin popular vote margin of roughly 537,000 (out of 100 million votes cast) was the equivalent of Lyndon Johnson's 1964 rout of Barry Goldwater, when he won by a popular vote margin of about 16 million, while carrying all but six states. "The votes for Al Gore and Ralph Nader combined created the largest popular-vote landslide for the center-left since 1964," Lind tells us. It "was as though Lyndon Johnson had trounced Barry Goldwater--who had nonetheless gone on to win the presidency, as result of the archaic electoral college." In fact, the combined Gore-Nader edge over Bush in the 2000 election (about three million votes) was no more a "landslide" than Bush's 2004 win over John Kerry. And the thin edge of four votes in the Electoral College accurately reflected the tie in the country, as Johnson's 1964 edge of almost 400 reflected the size and the breadth of his sweep. (For that matter, if one really wants to play this game, how about the 14-million-vote Bush-Perot wipeout of the usurper Bill Clinton in 1992?)

Lind's case against Bush as a white supremacist and oppressive reactionary is as follows: (1) His ranch house in Crawford and his father's presidential library in nearby College Station are located in the historic Texan lynching "belt"; (2) the town of Waco, 18 miles from Crawford, is home to the Texas Rangers' Hall of Fame, whose members "many Mexican-Texans and Mexicans . . . consider to be racist thugs and murderers"; (3) "Six Confederate generals were Waco residents, and the CSA raised seventeen companies from Waco, and surrounding towns like Crawford"; (4) in the 1870s, a prominent Texas politician named Richard Coke imposed strict Jim Crow laws as governor and, as a congressman, voted against the Force Bill, a federal measure to extend the vote to ex-slaves; (5) in 1916, a horrendous race crime was committed in Waco; (6) in the 1920s, Waco was a noted Ku Klux Klan stronghold; (7) in the 1930s, a man named J. Evetts Haley, "one typical example of the political culture that produced the two Bushes," belonged to a group of Democrats who opposed Franklin D. Roosevelt. In 1956, Haley ran for governor on a segregationist platform. And in 1964 he opposed the Civil Rights Act and wrote "a conspiracy-theory tract" that attacked LBJ for his "statement 'that man's best hope lies in the realm of reason.'"

Against this indictment of Bush (and his father), Lind has kind things to say of a few other Texans, among them Lyndon B. Johnson (who appears here as a gentle and modest transplanted Midwesterner) and the notorious moonbat H. Ross Perot.

Johnson, too, is a creature of the land he grew up on, in his case the Hill Country, a small chunk of Eden inside the Hell that is Texas, "an island of intellect." As Lind puts it, "Bush is a product of the Deep South traditions of the cotton plantation country . . . while Lyndon Johnson grew up in a region shaped by German-American Unionism, liberalism, and anti-slavery sentiment," in which the "German Texans did not despise leisure or learning. Their beer gardens rang with the melodies of their singing-clubs," and they replaced the other Texans' favorite pastime of lynching with reading and writing and song. If this sounds unlike the LBJ of history--rather more like his antithesis, Eugene McCarthy--rest assured that it gets even better. Another hero of reason is H. Ross Perot. "To Perot, the high-tech populist, the Bushes were upper-class parasites enriching themselves through the exploitation of riches that should have benefited all Texans. . . . Perot hated the Bushes and the Bakers in the way that Juan Perón, another modernizing tribune of the masses . . . once hated the Anglophile oligarchs of the Buenos Aires Jockey Club." This explains everything: LBJ as a scholarly German-American, Juan Perón as a model reformer, and George Bush the elder as a would-be Confederate general. If you buy Perot (and Perón) as democratic reformers, you will surely buy George W. Bush as an arch-segregationist, trying to bring back the Glorious Cause.

One who does buy it is Albert Gore Jr., the vice president turned ecology prophet, who has written a book, *The Assault on Reason*, which is in essence an assault on Bush. The most prominent figure to buy into the assertion that modern conservatism is a force more sinister than any before seen in this country, Gore has spent much of the last four years railing away at the president for his "incuriosity about new information," his "refusal to even consider complexity," his scorn for all kinds of dissenting opinions, his use of emotion to rouse fear in people, and his "disdain for facts." The problem for Gore is that increasing numbers of people--including a few from the Temple of Science--are saying much the same things about him. Climate change has emerged as a crusading faith in itself, with a high fervor quotient and no room for questions, proving that in order to be a religious fanatic, you don't need a religion per se. As Michael Barone notes, Gore has stolen the tropes of religion: "We Americans have sinned, and we will be punished. . . . We have been selfish . . . we must do penance by sacrificing some of our comforts (though not the gigantic houses and private jet travel of Al Gore or John Edwards)." Earlier this year the Gaia Napa Valley Hotel (where else?) replaced its stores of Gideon Bibles with copies of *An Inconvenient Truth*, by Al Gore.

How true is this truth Gore is spreading? Gore claims that there is a consensus, which just isn't true. "There is unanimity that the planet has warmed by about 1 degree over the last century. Just about everyone agrees that the growth of greenhouse gas emissions from fossil fuels cannot continue forever," says Steve Hayward, of the American Enterprise Institute. "That's where the agreement ends." This hasn't stopped Gore and his fans from comparing his critics to Hitler or to Holocaust deniers, a strange simile as denying something that is known to have happened is different by the standards of any rational person from wondering whether something may occur in the future.

This isn't the only charge of denial of reason that critics have brought against Gore. A British expert on climate change complained to the BBC of "politicians . . .

confusing the language of fear, terror and disaster with the observable physical reality of climate change, actively ignoring the careful hedging which surrounds science's predictions," and said that "to state that climate change will be 'catastrophic' hides a cascade of value-laden assumptions." Even the *New York Times* reported that some scientists sympathetic to Gore were nonetheless "alarmed . . . at what they call his alarmism," not to mention his "exaggerated and erroneous" arguments, namely, his depiction of "a future in which temperatures soar, ice sheets melt, seas rise, hurricanes batter the coasts and people die en masse."

Even when he was a mere politician, rational discourse was hardly Gore's forte. As a candidate, he was known for the unexplained and radical U-turns he would make in long-standing positions, and for the savagery with which he attacked his opponents. In 2002, he ignored the candidates he was supposed to campaign for as he railed about his close loss in 2000, and urged voters to flock to the polls to punish Republicans and avenge his great wrong. In 2004, it had gotten no better. "In an angry, sweaty shout, sounding like the second coming of Huey Long, Gore drew an extended comparison between the post-Watergate election of 1976, the year of his first election to Congress, and the post-Iraq election of 2004," wrote Chris Suellentrop, describing how Gore relived not only his own loss in 2000 but also his father's long ago loss in the Senate, in a speech that was less a rational argument than a howl of unrelieved rage.

God sometimes seems to be toying with the Goracle, scheduling frigid weather and ice storms on the dates of his speeches about global warming, but his fans have an answer for that: all weather changes, if they are dire, come from global warming. Here are some other choice fancies that the Party of Reason believes:

- \* Global warning causes both hot and cold weather, just as elections are stolen when the Democrats lose them, but are stolen too when they win.
- \* A country in which dissent is a flourishing industry is on the brink of a great fascist crackdown, as you can tell by all the books written attacking the president, the plays put on that call him an idiot, and the movies that call for his death.
- \* When exit polls indicate a different result from the actual vote count, the polls are correct and the vote count is fraudulent, a fact covered up by journalists who are (a) Democrats by something close to a nine-to-one ratio; and (b) dying to uncover a huge government scandal, so that they too can be famous like Woodward and Bernstein, make millions of dollars, and be played in the movies by Hollywood stars.
- \* That the Presidents Bush, from Yale and a long line of Yankees, who made the careers of the first black secretaries of state ever named in this country, are secretly longing to bring back the South of 1859.
- \* And, that the Republican party, whose frontrunners are a once-divorced actor (just like Ronald Reagan), a Mormon from Massachusetts by way of Michigan, and a thrice-married Italian Catholic from the streets of Brooklyn, is a shrunken husk of a regional faction, punitive, narrow, and wholly obsessed with extreme social mores, relying on extralegal repression to perpetuate itself in power. To the more intense members of the reality faction, all of this makes perfect sense.

Ah, reason! How sweet it is, and to what lengths it can lead you, when you think that you have a monopoly on it. Political parties are coalitions of interests, fighting it out in a series of struggles, in which no side has a patent on wisdom and virtue, and no wins are ever complete. People who understand this maintain their own balance and bearings, but those who insist they are fighting for reason lose what remains of their own.

Over and over, they do what they claim their opponents are doing, want to do, or have done: make vast leaps of faith on almost no evidence, get carried away on large waves of emotion, build towering edifices on small collections of factoids, omit, deny, or denounce all contrary evidence, build fantastical schemes which they project on the enemy, put two and two together and get 384. People are entitled to say what they want, but it takes something other than reason to look at raging debates and discern in them fascistic oppression, to look at large Republican losses (wholly in line with a sixth-year election) and see massive fraud on the part of the losers, to look at today's South and see John Calhoun's, to draft both the Bushes (and the entire Republican party) into the Confederate Army, 150 years after the fact. Facts on the ground have no effect on their fantasies, which exist in a realm of their own.

Let's give the last words to Mark Crispin Miller, as he told the blog *Buzzflash* in February 2006: "That sort of warped perception comes from extreme paranoid projectivity: the tendency to rail at others for traits or longings that one hates and fears inside oneself. . . . We're dealing with a movement that is anti-rational. It's faith-based . . . it's a movement that believes what it believes, and it believes what it believes is right. . . . It believes what it wants to believe. If it hears contrary evidence, it comes up with evidence of its own. . . . This is not a movement that the rational can ever shame into surrendering by merely demonstrating its illogic to its followers. . . . Paranoia . . . is based on fear, and therefore on a kind of 'logic' that's impervious to evidence and quite incapable of learning from experience. . . . Paranoia is an atavism, deep within us all."

Right you are.

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