Culture, US Imperialism, and Globalization

John Carlos Rowe

The return of what was once termed *gunboat diplomacy* in the first decade of the twenty-first century as part of the "new global order" endorsed repeatedly and abstractly by George H. W. and now George W. Bush's regimes could not have occurred without the prior work of culture. In what follows, I make a simple, important point: US cultural production, the work of what Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno termed "the culture industry," conditioned American citizens to accept the undisguised militarism and jingoistic nationalism now driving US foreign policy (Horkheimer and Adorno 122). In its inevitably globalized forms, the US culture industry continues to produce the deep divisions between local resistance and subaltern imitation so characteristic of colonial conflicts from the age of traditional imperialism to the neo-imperialisms of our postindustrial era. And the culture industry today does its work in ways that encompass a wide range of nominally different political positions, so that in many respects Left, liberal, and conservative cultural works often achieve complementary, rather than contested, ends. In this respect, little has changed since Horkheimer and Adorno argued in 1944, "Even the aesthetic activities of political opposites are one in their enthusiastic obedience to the rhythm of the iron system" (Horkheimer and Adorno 120).

As the US military raced toward Baghdad, there was considerable criticism of the "embedded reporters" allowed to report the war under the special conditions imposed by the Pentagon and Department of Defense. Most of the criticism assumed that such reporting was biased or censored. When a *Newsweek* photographer was caught doctoring on his laptop a photograph of an encounter between Iraqi civilians and US military personnel, his firing seemed to vindicate the news magazine of prejudice. Antiwar activists circulated two photographs of Iraqi demonstrators tearing down a monumental statue of Saddam Hussein in Firdos Square, Baghdad: The first was a familiar photograph in the news of demonstrators beating on the sculpture's foundation and then, with the help of an Abrams tank,

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toppling the hieratic image of the defeated dictator. In the second photograph, not displayed in the popular press or evening news, the camera provides a wide-angle view of the scene at the square, where access roads have been blocked by the US military and the “populist” demolition of the statue has been theatrically staged by US forces. In a third photograph circulated on the Internet, the same Iraqis actively involved in attacking the Baghdad statue are shown “one day earlier” in Basra, where they are preparing to board US military aircraft for transport to Baghdad—identified in this photograph as members of the “Iraqi Free Forces.”[1]

Such exposures of US military propaganda during the war have continued in news coverage of the putative “rebuilding” of the political and economic infrastructure in Iraq. The current debate regarding who was actually responsible for the disinformation regarding “weapons of mass destruction” used as the principal justification for the invasion of Iraq is the most obvious example of public concern regarding the federal government’s veracity. For such propaganda to be successful, there must be a willing audience, already prepared for certain cultural semantics adaptable to new political circumstances and yet with sufficient “regional” relevance as to make possible the very widespread confusion between Hussein and Osama bin Laden, between a secular Iraqi state tyranny and an Islamic fundamentalist guerilla organization. How was it possible that such a preposterous war could be permitted by Congress and by the US population? The answer is not simply that the Bush administration ignored the numerous international protests of the preparations for war and its eventual conduct. Nor is the answer simply that when the war began, the Bush administration controlled the news and staged symbolic events to fool the public, although there is plenty of evidence to support these claims. The cultural preparations for a “just war” and for the US as global “policeman” did not occur overnight; they are our cultural legacy from the Vietnam War and integral parts of our emergence as a neo-imperial nation since 1945. Central to this legacy is the conception of the US as a discrete nation that nonetheless has a global identity and mission. Although traditional imperialism works by way of expansion from a national center, US imperialism since Vietnam has worked steadily to “import” the world and to render global differences aspects of the US nation—in short, to internalize and “hypernationalize” transnational issues.

It is commonplace, of course, to criticize the US as one of the several First World nations to employ cultural media to market its products around the world. Neocolonialism generally connotes some complicity between a “multinational corporation covertly supported by an imperialist power,” to borrow Chalmers Johnson’s definition, and thus implies some entanglement of economic, political, and military

motives (Johnson 30). The globalization of consumer capitalism and the commodities of First World economies (often manufactured elsewhere) are identified as specific targets by political movements as different as Slow Food in France, Earth First!, and al-Qae'da. Although the arcades and other defined shopping areas were developed in nineteenth-century Europe—Paris, Milan, Berlin, and other metropoles—the shopping mall is an American spin-off. With its emphasis on the city-within-a-city, the linkage of entertainment and consumption, the faux cosmopolitanism of its "international" and regionally specific shops (Cartier, Montblanc, Neiman Marcus, Saks Fifth Avenue, Texas Souvenirs), and its ubiquitous, often international food courts, the American shopping mall was developed in the 1960s and refined over the past 40 years. Such megamalls as Minneapolis's Mall of America, Houston's Galleria, and southern California's South Coast Plaza have redefined the public sphere as the site of consumption and commodification of both products and consumers.

Whether directly exported by US business interests or developed by multinational corporations to look like its US prototypes, the international mall is often traceable back to US funding, design, and marketing sources or models. A PBS *Frontline* report, "In Search of Al Qaeda," which aired on November 21, 2002, includes footage of a shopping mall in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia, which is physically indistinguishable from European and American malls and includes many of the same stores. Of course, the reporter calls attention to the presence of the Mu'tawah, or religious police, who stroll through this mall looking for unveiled women or illicit liaisons between unmarried men and women. "In Search of Al Qaeda" is a fine attempt by *Frontline* to explain the animosity felt by many different groups in the Arab world toward the US. The mall in Riyadh represents quite clearly one common source of resentment: the rapid Americanization of Saudi Arabia and the tacit demand that everyday Muslim practices be adapted to the demands of the global market. From one perspective, the Mu'tawah operate comfortably within this typical mall, with its long, open corridors and the insistent appeal of its transnational commodities. In another view, the religious police seem already defeated by the cultural rhetoric of the mall, which encourages romance and consumption in the same freewheeling space. As Anne Friedberg has argued, the mall links consumer and psychic desires in ways that depend crucially on "the fluid subjectivity of the spectator-shopper" (120).

Commodities are neither passive nor politically innocent; they are perpetually active in the specific kinds of desires they produce in consumers and work by means of the social psychologies of commodity fetishism analyzed by Karl Marx in *Capital* (125–77) and reification elaborated by Georg Lukács in *History and Class*

Consciousness (91–92). Specific consumer desires can also be traced back to hierarchies of specific kinds of capitalist labor. In modern, industrial economies, stores displaying high fashion and leisure-class products, such as designer clothing for women and luxury products for successful men, were central. The traditional display windows with their mannequins of elegantly dressed and sexually alluring women belong to the era of the large department stores and while still a part of the postmodern mall are challenged by stores displaying the most elaborate array of computerized bodily extensions and miniaturizations, laborsaving devices, and high-tech tools promising greater access to the primary source of wealth and power: the control and manipulation of information and its assorted hermeneutic and representational protocols. In the crush of the crowds defining the public space of the mall, the consumer is promised some individuality apart from just what forces him/her through the doors of his/her local Circuit City. Such identity depends, of course, on its promise of communication, but not so much *with* other people, especially those who may be different from this consumer, but *apart* from others in the notable privacy of postmodern life. The new laptops and Palm Pilots (PDAs) are prized for allowing us to negotiate the crowd as we travel through it, but then for saving from this mob our informational work, which can be stored, sifted, and processed in the privacy of our own homes. Of course, the peculiar desire for representational power and authority fetishized in computer hardware and software is rapidly displacing the public sphere created by the late-modern desire for more traditional commodities, such as fashion and luxury items. The mall is morphing into the Internet, an imaginary space so rapidly commercialized as to terrify even the most recalcitrant critic and sometime defender of consumer capitalism.

In spite of the admirable efforts of intellectuals to find emancipatory possibilities in the new technologies—alternatives to traditional social forms and practices certainly do exist today—the speed with which the Internet has been commercialized and hierarchized is symptomatic of the huge inequities dividing corporations that can afford access, individuals who merely use the technology (and are thereby used by it), and the majority of the world's population left entirely out of the new communicative practices. In *What's the Matter with the Internet?* Mark Poster recognizes most of these problems while stressing the "underdetermined" character of new digital technologies and thus their availability for new transnational politics: "The Internet affords an opportunity for a contribution to a new politics [and] . . . may play a significant role in diminishing the hierarchies prevalent in modern society and in clearing a path for new directions of cultural practice" (20). In *Ambient Television*, Anna McCarthy acknowledges the ideological consequences of television's

portability and publicity in achieving a culture of surveillance such as Foucault predicted, but she also imagines critical alternatives and interventions capable of disrupting and in some cases even transforming unidirectional television (226–51). Such alternatives, however, are pushed increasingly to the margins of the Internet and television. Most television scholars agree that the "post-network era" has reconfigured the industry only by allowing more corporate giants to share the wealth of television programming. Niche television and target audiences have led to a wider variety of television only within certain limits of the liberal-to-conservative political spectrum. Radical television, such as Dee Dee Halleck's Paper Tiger Television, goes virtually unwatched, is financially marginal, and is supported primarily by extramural grants. The networks long ago succeeded in defeating public access cable as a populist alternative to one-way television, and the short-term future of interactive television, especially when integrated with computers and the Internet, is likely to be little more than an extension of the enormously profitable video game market.

We yearn for each new electronic device, but the vast majority are finally useless to most consumers either because they do not know how to use them or have no use for them in the first place. What lures consumers to new digital technologies is the general promise of social communication, ironically just the ideal offered by Marx and Engels in *The German Ideology*, but it is a false promise that substitutes complex programming and upgrades for socially meaningful communication (47). Designed to serve business and commercial needs, predicated on the increasing privatization of the public sphere, whereby the illusion of sociability is simulated in the radical alienation and paradoxical exclusivity of the home office, commuter vehicle, or commercial airline's reserved seat, such devices produce specific desires structured by their ideological motivations. The imperial imaginary thrives upon these desires, which once initiated are difficult to reverse or purge. Cultural apologists for the Americanization of the globe, like Francis Fukuyama, imagine that such homogenization will take us to that "end of history" fantastically dreamt by Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel and other protomoderns, because such conditions will produce a political consensus (Fukuyama 211). Fukuyama is certainly right that one-way globalization is likely to result in an international consensus, even if it is one we can hardly condone, which we know will be not only excruciatingly tedious but finally "inhuman," and will require periods of incredible, unpredictable violence.

Such criticism of what may generally be termed a "postmodern economy" focused on information, communications, and entertainment products, including their integrated research and development

components, may seem strangely anachronistic when applied to the contemporary global situation. Today, we confront the revival of traditional imperialism as the US towers over all other human communities and exerts its unchallenged power in the most flagrantly militaristic manner. Not since the British Empire ruled the world by force and fear in the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries has there been such undisguised rule by military power. While recognizing important differences between contemporary US global rule in the twenty-first century and that of the British in the nineteenth century, Johnson traces a historical genealogy from British to US imperial policies, especially in such critical regions as the Middle East and Southeast Asia (138–39, 217–18). In Somalia and most of Africa, Kosovo, Serbia, Cuba, Nicaragua, Panama, Salvador, Colombia, the Philippines, North and South Korea, Afghanistan, Israel and Palestine, Saudi Arabia and the Gulf states, Iraq, and Iran, the US works by open military action or threats. Such situations hardly appear to have much to do with the postmodern economics analyzed by theorists of postindustrial or late capitalist practices, such as Ernest Mandel, Fredric Jameson, and David Harvey.

But there is an important relationship between the emergence of US military power, along with the complementary threats of inequitable and repressive policies toward peoples (especially but not exclusively non-US citizens) at home and abroad, and the capitalization of "cultural exports" ranging from Hollywood entertainment and television programming to digital technologies and their protocols for communication and work. John Gallagher and Ronald Robinson's theory of "free-trade imperialism" is now half a century old and was formulated long before the postmodern economy came to dominate global relations by restructuring other forms of economic production and trade (especially devastating for the "industrialized" developing nations, now cast in the shadow of new, privileged forms of capitalization) (1–25). The thesis of free-trade imperialism still explains a good deal about how traditional imperial military power should emerge with such prominence and frequency as a "foreign policy" at the very moment when globalization seems the nearly inevitable consequence of US economic triumphalism. Contemporary critics of US foreign policy like Johnson have also recognized that "free trade" is often used as a rationalization for the conduct of multinational corporations and for the US government's development of "client states," like Israel and, until recently, South Korea (Johnson 31).

Gallagher and Robinson refute traditional theories that imperialism—their principal example was British imperialism in Africa—proceeded historically from military conquest to consolidation of colonial rule only to be legitimated and transformed slowly through

economic development. Gallagher and Robinson argue that "free-trade" policies generally *preceded* historically the militarization of colonies and that such military force was required only by the failure to negotiate trade agreements between metropolitan and colonial centers. Military force is thus held in reserve, not out of humane considerations but primarily for reasons of practicality and economy, while the imperial power promotes trade agreements—either for raw materials or finished products—with the appearance of favorable and equitable terms to colonizer and colonized. It is only when this illusion of "free trade" is shattered that military force is required to reimpose imperial "order"; then the appearance of free trade can be resumed, under whose guise what in fact usually occurs is demonstrably inequitable exploitation of natural or human resources of the colony. As Gallagher and Robinson write, "The usual summing up of the policy of the free trade empire as 'trade, not rule' should read 'trade with informal control if possible; trade with rule when necessary'" (qtd. in Rowe, *Literary Culture* 132).

Is this not the situation we are witnessing today in the Gulf and in other strategic locations around the world? At present, the relationship between the US and the People's Republic of China can be described accurately as one operating according to the logic of "free-trade imperialism" as China's economy booms in large part thanks to the exploited labor required to manufacture products for the US export market.[2] One of the assumptions of Fukuyama's approach to globalization is that the "end of history" will bring an end of warfare and national struggle, that the "global village" and world peace are inextricably linked. From this perspective, whatever the cost of globalization in the mediocrity and uniformity of personal lives is more than compensated by the security achieved. In view of the everyday fear experienced by the majority of humankind, the enormous gains achieved by US global hegemony are well worth the sacrifices. In his neoliberal defense of the US exercising power around the world in its own "defense," Robert Kagan reaches a similar conclusion, albeit one that involves his condemnation of both the European Union and the United Nations—the closest competitors for US global hegemony at the present moment (Kagan 157–58).

Late capitalism thrives on fear, even employing fear as a principal marketing strategy. In the depressed US economy of the past few years, one of the rare bright spots has been the booming market for self-defense goods, especially high-tech gadgets, in response to 9/11 and the assorted xenophobic anxieties, such as the mailing of anthrax, it prompted. In his documentary *Bowling for Columbine* (2002), Michael Moore attributes violence in the US primarily to a culture of fear propagated by the news media and federal government. If we accept the general outlines of his argument, then the

globalization of US cultural capital will involve the exportation of precisely this culture of fear, a phenomenon we are witnessing as complementary with the increase in US military actions as the Bush administration takes seriously its role as global policeman of the new world order. I want to propose then a dialectical relationship between cultural or free-trade imperialism and military imperialism that is mediated by way of a culture of fear that helps market late-capitalist products and encourages, rather than diminishes, military conflicts in the place of international diplomacy.

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The history of this dialectic is understandably as long as that of modernity itself, especially if we trace modernity back to the voyages of exploration and conquest of the late fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries. Modernization begins not so much with the technologies used to achieve such conquests—no new technology was, in fact, invented just for the voyages of exploration—but with the imagining of other worlds and peoples. It is commonplace to speak of how easily the early explorers substituted one people for another, as Christopher Columbus mistook Caribs and Arawaks for "Indians" of the Far East (and the name continues to this day, albeit often contested by Native Americans and First Peoples). But there is a shorter history that tells us a good deal about this dialectic, especially in its present deployment in world politics, and that history begins with the military failure of the US in Vietnam in the early 1970s. Beginning in that moment, US culture attempted to explain and rationalize the war in a wide range of media and from virtually every possible political perspective. Sorting out these diverse outlooks on the Vietnam War remains crucial work for cultural and political critics, but the general impression this cultural work offers is that of the renarrativization of a military and colonial failure into a foundation for subsequent military ventures in the Caribbean, Central America, the Persian Gulf, Africa, and the warring republics of the former Yugoslavia.

What appeared in the mid- to late 1970s to be a series of critical interpretations of US involvement in Vietnam—such films as *Coming Home* (1978), *The Deer Hunter* (1979), and *Apocalypse Now* (1980)—were later replaced by films and television programs that appropriated the liberal rhetoric of these predecessors but incorporated it into compensatory narratives intent on imaginatively fighting the war again and winning. Sylvester Stallone's "Rambo" character is the locus classicus of just such heroic conventions. John Rambo fights the Vietnamese, the Russians, and other foreign enemies in the Rambo films, but he also combats *Americans* in ways that clearly anticipate the contemporary "nationalization" of global issues in US mass media. The opening scene of the first film, Ted Kotcheff's *Rambo: First Blood* (1982), establishes John Rambo's motivation for fighting the local police department and eventually the National

Guard called in to hunt him down. As the opening credits roll, John Rambo walks down a charming Northwest dirt road to a modest house on the edge of a lake. The African-American woman, who is hanging her wash on a clothesline and who centers a sublime prospect of natural beauty, is the mother of Rambo's best friend in Vietnam, Delmar Berry. In the opening dialogue of the film, Rambo learns from Delmar's mother that his friend has died of cancer, a victim of the Agent Orange sprayed as a defoliant in Vietnam. I have elsewhere interpreted how Rambo consequently appropriates the civil rights, antiwar, and countercultural movements of the late 1960s and early 1970s to legitimate the militarism he represents in *Rambo: First Blood* (*New American Studies* 180–86).

In the second film, George P. Cosmatos's *Rambo: First Blood Part II* (1985), Rambo's rage is directed at the CIA's reliance on high technology rather than human agency. In the concluding scene of the film, John Rambo fires the large automatic weapons he has used on his mission into Vietnam to destroy the computer command center of the CIA in Thailand, and then he releases a primal scream to accompany this ritualized destruction of the new automated warfare he clearly condemns as inhuman. Ironically, the Emersonian self-reliance and natural identity of John Rambo in both films are set in explicit contrast with the automated militarism employed by the Department of Defense and Pentagon in the first and second Gulf wars, which for many people were culturally justified by the revival of militaristic values exemplified by the character of John Rambo. There is a direct line from the fictional John Rambo to Brigadier General Vincent Brooks, "the six-foot-plus, Hollywood-handsome African American spokesman for Central Command" during the second Gulf war, who at Camp as-Sayliyah's state-of-the-art "$1.5 million, made-for-TV 'Coalition Media Center,' . . . gave hundreds of journalists his daily edited presentations" (Johnson 249).

Never very precisely defined as a culture, geopolitical region, history, or people, *Vietnam* became a flexible term, so that the war refought in cultural fantasy could take place at home in such films as Louis Malle's *Alamo Bay* (1985) and Walter Hill's *Southern Comfort* (1981), or in other global hot spots, such as Grenada in Clint Eastwood's *Heartbreak Ridge* (1986) or Central America in Mark Lester's *Commando* (1985) or Afghanistan in Peter MacDonald's *Rambo III* (1988), where John Rambo fights valiantly with the Afghani *mujahideen* against the Soviets. Of course, the anticolonial resistance movement in Afghanistan, supported by CIA advisors and US funds and weapons, would in the mid-1990s align itself with the Taliban (Students of Islam), which in turn would host Osama bin Laden and al-Qae'da (Johnson 177). Screening *Rambo III* today in the US is a bizarre experience, as the viewer watches John Rambo

learning and even participating in folk rituals, such as horse racing, of Afghani "freedom fighters" who by 2001 would be our unequivocal enemies in that now nearly forgotten US colonial enterprise in the oil-rich regions southeast of the Caspian Sea, including Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan, and Afghanistan.

Contemporary with these films and fiction television programs such as *China Beach* and *Miami Vice* or documentary series such as HBO's *Soldiers in Hiding* were military "tie-ins," which traded official sites as movie sets and insider information about military procedures for films that promoted military heroism and honor, such as *An Officer and a Gentleman* (1982), *Top Gun* (1986), and the many spin-offs, which have by now helped establish a cinematic and televisual genre (see, for example, the popular *JAG* [*Judge Advocate General*]). What came to be termed *the Vietnam-Effect* extended its aura to draw parasitically upon other wars, so that the recent revival of World War II as a topic in films, television docudramas, and print narratives (fiction, biography, and oral histories) had as much to do with the large-scale revision of the Vietnam War (and US imperialism in Southeast Asia) as it did with such nominal historical markers as the 50th anniversary of D-Day or memorials for the end of World War II. Billed as "antiwar films," often because of their graphic and thus alienating violence, films like Steven Spielberg's *Saving Private Ryan* (1998), Terrence Malick's *The Thin Red Line* (1998), and John Woo's *Windtalkers* (2002) helped remilitarize the US not only because they drew on the conventions of World War II heroism and military success but also because each in its own way borrowed liberal, often explicitly pacifist, sentiments for its purposes. Thus the lieutenant (Tom Hanks) leading the soldiers assigned to rescue Private Ryan is a schoolteacher unwilling to risk human lives unnecessarily and obliged merely to do the unpleasant but necessary job of civilian soldier. Officers in *The Thin Red Line* disobey orders from above when those orders put their troops at unreasonable risk, and the Navajo "windtalkers" in Woo's film challenge the racism of their fellow soldiers. All end up fighting, however, thereby linking a "just war" thesis with liberal and antiwar sentiments. My point that combat films with radically different political perspectives often contribute equally to promilitary sentiments is confirmed by Anthony Swofford in his recent memoir of the Gulf War, *Jarhead*. Describing US soldiers' fascination with antiwar films about the Vietnam War, Swofford concludes: "But actually Vietnam War films are all pro-war, no matter what the supposed message, what Kubrick or Coppola or Stone intended .... The magic brutality of the films celebrates the terrible and despicable beauty of their fighting skills. Fight, rape, war, pillage, burn. Filmic images of death and carnage are pornography for the military man" (210).

Criticized by intellectuals for a variety of reasons—direct efforts to relegitimate US military force, part of a general return to "masculine" values in reaction to the women's rights movement, more complex efforts to co-opt and thus defuse the sort of antiwar dissent that did contribute significantly to ending the Vietnam War—mass media rarely addressed these questions directly. Populist media and documentary filmmakers, including the surprisingly popular Moore and less visible producers of "alternative" television, such as Paper Tiger Television's Halleck, rarely addressed the subtlety with which the mass media employed the rhetoric of its political opponents. In Moore's *Roger and Me* (1989), the CEO of General Motors is a classic capitalist hypocrite and thief; in *Bowling for Columbine* (2002), the president of the National Rifle Association is the senile, foolish, and contradictory Charlton Heston. Only demystify!

There are important exceptions, of course, such as Barry Levinson's *Wag the Dog* (1997) and David O. Russell's *Three Kings* (1999), both of which criticized the nationalist propaganda and media control that allowed the George H. W. Bush administration to wage the Persian Gulf War with little public scrutiny and the illusion of an "international coalition" of allied forces. *Wag the Dog* is based on the premise that a "war" we are waging against Albania is entirely fabricated by a Washington spin doctor (Conrad Brean, played by Robert De Niro) with the help of a Hollywood producer (Stanley Motss, played by Dustin Hoffman) to distract public attention from a sexual harassment charge against the incumbent president two weeks from his reelection. The film brilliantly satirizes the increasing control the US federal government has exercised over news reporting of its foreign military ventures. In many respects, *Wag the Dog* seems merely to elaborate in Hollywood film satire the claims made by Jean Baudrillard in his deliberately iconoclastic *La guerre du Golfe n'a pas eu lieu* (1991).[3]

In a very different fashion, *Three Kings* attempts to peel away the mask of patriotic dedication in the Gulf War by exposing the US soldiers' greed for Kuwaiti gold looted by the invading Iraqi army as a metaphor for US self-interest in controlling the oil-rich Gulf. The pacifist and populist sentiments of *Three Kings* are noteworthy, especially in a period when Hollywood films were targeted increasingly at 12- to 17-year-old moviegoers, who pay the most dollars per person of any age group in the US. The grisly scene of an M-16 bullet penetrating human intestines in slow motion and producing the green bile that will slowly and painfully kill the victim is far more effective than the slow-motion melodrama of US troops dying on the beaches of Normandy during the D-Day invasion in *Saving Private Ryan*.

Nevertheless, both *Wag the Dog* and *Three Kings* rely on a narrative of Americanization that plays a significant role in the general

public's understanding of globalization and anticipates how post-9/11 film and television would rely on similar processes of nationalizing international problems to channel "the nation back to normalcy—or at least to the normal flows of television and consumer culture," as Lynn Spigel puts it (Spigel 239). *Wag the Dog* does this cultural work in an obvious manner by locating all of the film's action in the US; the imprisoned soldier (Denis Leary), who is chosen to simulate an actual US soldier "downed" by hostile gunfire in Albania and miraculously "rescued," has to be picked up by the media team from his maximum-security military prison in Texas. The liberal politics of *Wag the Dog* make what I have termed *hypernationalization* an explicit theme in the film, so that we are expected to understand immediately the irony of the Hollywood producer Motss and the Washington insider Brean inventing an international crisis to cover a domestic sexual scandal. The film satirizes Americans' chronic ignorance of world events, thanks to news structured around entertainment and commercialism, but it also reinforces the assumption that the US is the center of the world and that even a "fictional" war can have meaning and value, as long as it is waged by the US. Carefully structured news stories about the second Gulf war seem to have followed the example of *Wag the Dog*, despite its satiric and countercultural intentions. The "saving" of Jessica Lynch, the US soldier wounded and captured by Iraqi troops during the US-British invasion, follows just such a narrative of Americanization, from her heroic rescue by US Special Forces through her medical treatment and debriefing at a US military base near Frankfurt to her triumphant return to her hometown in Palestine, West Virginia. Rather than *Wag the Dog*'s satire overwhelming and thus neutralizing the Jessica Lynch story on the evening news, Jessica Lynch's narrative, now made into a television biopic, has undone the irony of Barry Levinson's film, especially its "rescued soldier" device.

More conventionally, *Three Kings* challenges self-interested US militarism and foreign policy in the Gulf by condemning the command structure of the US military and countering it with the populist pacifism and humanitarianism of the "three kings," who finally live up to their biblical titles by guiding dissident Iraqis and their families to their "promised land" across the border in Iran. The familiar imperial narrative of US paternalism, of the white man's burden, plays itself out once again in terms almost identical to those criticized so thoroughly in nineteenth-century imperial narratives. The dissident Iraqis who save Archie Gates (George Clooney), Troy Barlow (Mark Wahlberg), Chief Elgin (Ice Cube), and Conrad Vig (Spike Jonze) from attack by the Republic Guard turn out to be primarily intent on "get[ting] rid of Saddam," in order to "live life and do business," as their leader Amir Abdullah (Cliff Curtis) says.

The film criticizes consumer capitalism and its globalization but advocates on the other hand the value of small businesses. When Troy Barlow is captured and tortured by Republic Guards, he is made to drink crude oil poured into his mouth propped open with a CD case. The consumer goods stolen from Kuwait and heaped in poorly guarded Iraqi bunkers exemplify the meretriciousness of multinational globalization; tape and CD players in their unopened boxes, tangled skeins of jewelry, heaps of cell phones, and other consumer "junk" are visually effective, but the political dissidents these three kings will eventually save are committed to modest but meaningful businesses, such as hairstyling. Following a nearly schematic narrative of "education," the three remaining kings (Conrad Vig dies and is prepared for a Muslim burial) use the gold they have stolen from the Iraqis (who have stolen it from the Kuwaitis) to "buy" safe passage for the political dissidents into the relative safety of Iran. The film's final scene in which the border crossing is enacted, replete with sentimental waves and sympathetic looks between the dissidents and the enlightened US soldiers, is difficult to watch today as the Bush administration clamors to expand its invasion and occupation of Iraq to include Iran.

The sympathy these US soldiers establish with the Iraqi dissidents is certainly intended by Russell to counter the Orientalist demonization of Arab peoples that has been so common in US mass culture since the nineteenth century, that intensified as part of the buildup for the first Gulf war, and that approached near cultural hysteria in the months following the attacks on 9/11.[4] Yet the Iraqi dissidents are represented in what seem to be deliberately ambiguous regional, ethnic, and religious terms. The mercenary US soldiers enter southern Iraq in quest of the stolen Kuwaiti gold, so the political dissidents they encounter in the aftermath of the first Gulf war would most likely be Shi'ite dissidents, similar to those who appealed to George H. W. Bush for military assistance and staged an unsuccessful rebellion against Hussein in the weeks following the conclusion of that war. Yet there is considerable cinematic evidence to suggest that the Iraqi dissidents are Kurds. Hairdressing, for example, is a traditionally respected profession among the Kurds, so that one dissident's plan to return to that profession hints at Kurdish affiliations, displaced of course from the main Kurdish population centers in northern Iraq to the film's setting in southern Iraq. Hussein's government did forcibly "resettle" Kurds in the south (including many who were murdered and buried in mass graves there) during the Anfal, the genocidal "ethnic cleansing" the Iraqi dictator conducted prior to the first Gulf war.[5]

The deliberate confusion of different dissident groups in Iraq seems intended not only to achieve cinematic economy but also to

make these dissidents more accessible to the four US soldiers. These soldiers represented in the film offer a sample of US multiculturalism: Chief Elgin is a devout Christian African American, Conrad Vig is an uneducated Southern white racist, Archie Gates is a white career soldier taking early retirement, and Troy Barlow is a model WASP. To be sure, the representativeness of this group is very narrow, but their respective sympathies with the Iraqi dissidents perform a narrative of cultural hybridity that unmistakably argues for greater understanding of other peoples as an alternative to unilateral globalization and to US militarism. Chief Elgin appears to abandon Christianity for Islam, and he dons the traditional Arab male *kaffieyeh* (head covering) to announce his conversion. Conrad Vig learns about Islamic burial practices, overcomes his racism toward Chief Elgin by way of their shared interest in Islam, and is eventually prepared for an Islamic burial of his own. In fact, when the dissidents cross the border into Iran, they are carrying his body with them for a proper burial on the other side. The protagonists learn to sympathize with and understand not historically and regionally specific groups of Iraqis but generalized "Arab" and "Muslim" types. In this way, the four Americans act out liberal multiculturalism, which is often criticized for what Lisa Lowe terms its contribution to the "ideological representation of the liberal imperialist state" (420). Thus the cinematic experience of viewing in 2004 the concluding scene of Iraqi dissidents crossing the border into the relative freedom of Iran is not a prophecy from 1999 of how the Bush administration would turn to military power again in 2003 because it failed to follow the humane and politically liberal advice of *Three Kings*. Instead, the liberal ideology, itself deeply invested in US nationalism, helped produce the circumstances that would make the Bush administration's invasion of Iraq a military and colonial reality and that would make covert or military efforts at "regime change" in Iran the "logical next step" of this foreign policy.

What has been particularly noteworthy in US mass media since the terrorist attacks of September 11 and during the invasion of Iraq has been a new twist on these old themes, but a turn that is compatible with them and readable as part of a history stretching from the Vietnam era to the present in the gradual, ineluctable control of the news and entertainment media by the US government. Fiction and nonfiction television has understandably paid great attention to the related events of 9/11 and the justification of US military intervention in Iraq. Spigel describes in some detail how "traditional forms of entertainment" reinvented "their place in U.S. life and culture" after 9/11, initially by reducing the number of violent films released and replacing them on television with "family fare" (235). Spigel goes on to argue that very quickly after this period of self-censorship,

Hollywood and television turned instead to familiar historical narratives to stabilize the myths of national cohesion and reaffirm a teleological narrative about the American experience (240–41). Spigel's fine study confirms my own sense that Hollywood and television quickly recycled old mythic narratives about America, rather than drawing the opposite conclusion: that the terrorist attacks of 9/11 indicate that Americans need to know far more about the world they are so intent upon "globalizing." As if in direct response to this promise of greater attention to the other peoples of the world, the media began to incorporate "terrorism" into the US and strip it of its international threat. Like President Bush's continuing efforts to link Iraq directly with al-Qae'da, the nationalizing of terror helped defuse its transnational, inchoate, and thus truly terrifying power. The containment of terror on contemporary US television follows the logic of the cultural imperialism I have been tracing thus far, but now with the claim that the best weapons against such "terror" are those of traditional US democracy: the fairness of the law and the populism of an American people that transcends party politics.

Since the 1987–88 television season, NBC's *Law and Order*, now the main title for three separate television programs, has worked out fictional solutions to much publicized cases in criminal law in the US.[6] Starring Sam Waterston as the lead prosecutor of the district attorney's office in New York, the program makes moral claims specific to the medium of television and thereby distinguishes itself from the continuing spate of police and crime shows, which rely primarily on the urban public's anxieties about living in an increasingly dangerous America and world. The program is structured in two parts: in the first half hour, police detectives investigate a crime, arrest a suspect, and present their case to the district attorney's office; in the second half hour, chief prosecutor Jack McCoy (Sam Waterston) and his attractive assistant DA, Serena (Elisabeth Rohm), bring the case to trial and judgment. Although the detective and legal work do not always coincide, the errors in the process seem to confirm the overall checks and balances built into the police-judicial system, as it is referred to in the voice-over prologue to the program.

Here I want to digress for a moment to anticipate my larger argument. I disagree with Moore's repeated claim in *Bowling for Columbine* that it is primarily the news media, rather than entertainment television and film, that have shaped the atmosphere of fear in the US resulting in more than 11,000 gun deaths per year. Citing how other societies, like Canada and Japan, where gun deaths are less than 1,000 per year, still generate large audiences for violent films, television programs, and video games, Moore contends that in such societies even adolescent viewers can suspend their disbelief in fiction programs and understand the difference between fantasy and

reality. But in the US, there is a long tradition of confusing fiction and reality in the mass media, primarily for the purposes of maximizing the commercial advantages of each mode. We hardly need the examples of recent reality television to remind us that television thrives on what Baudrillard long ago defined as the "hyperreal," a phenomenon seemingly explained best by the way television gives us the illusion of heightened knowledge and authority over an otherwise baffling real. *Law and Order* certainly has this effect on its viewers, which may account for its huge success on network television, which has been otherwise challenged significantly by cable channels, such as Lifetime and Oxygen, targeting specific market shares and trying to break up network hegemony in the so-called post-network era.

I have argued elsewhere that the socially conscious television of the early 1970s, such as Norman Lear pioneered in *All in the Family*, was transformed in the 1980s into much more conventional "moral problem solving" within the existing legal and social boundaries of US democracy (*New American Studies* 170–71). *All in the Family* argued that racial and ethnic bigotry could not be overcome entirely by the law but required changes in personal values. *Sanford and Son* joined that argument to claim that class and racial antipathies were inextricably bound together in psychological habits difficult but still possible to change. But *Law and Order* imagines that equality under the law, despite notable aberrations in US legal history, is our best defense against injustices tied to class, race, ethnicity, gender, or sexuality. The cultural shift is clearly from television committed to political and social reform to television concerned with defending existing institutions, as indeed the title of the program—a slogan of conservative Republican campaigns for the past 35 years—suggests.

The episode of *Law and Order* I want to analyze focuses on the murder of a popular professor of anthropology, Louise Murdoch, who is also the head of a community advocacy center for Muslim women, and the eventual arrest and trial of a young American male, Greg Landen, who has converted to Islam. Of course, on 2 October 2002, the date this episode was first broadcast, the most infamous American convert to Islam was John Walker Lindh, the so-called American Taliban, who had left his upper-middle-class home in Marin, California, to study Arabic and thus the Qur'an in Yemen and Pakistan and then to join the Taliban in Afghanistan. Two days after this episode aired, Lindh was sentenced to a 20-year prison term in a plea bargain that reduced the charges against him to "one count of providing services to the Taliban and one count of carrying explosives during a felony" ("I Made a Mistake"). In his sentencing hearing, Lindh was tearful and apologetic, denying he had any intention

of taking up arms against the US, and his divorced parents stood by him throughout his arrest and trial.

Lindh is certainly the historical model on which the character of Greg Landen in *Law and Order* is based, but very important changes are made in his character and history. First, the young man in *Law and Order* despises his parents, the legal system, and America in general, so that, as he takes over his own legal defense for purposes of political propaganda, his courtroom tirades remind the viewer of news accounts of Zacarias Moussaoui, the accused “20th” hijacker in the 9/11 attacks, who also insisted on serving as his own legal counsel and used the courtroom as a bully pulpit. Testifying in his own defense, Landen makes some very reasonable connections between al-Qae’da’s possible motivations and the historical motivations of oppressed minorities in the US to resist domination: “Since 1990, [the US] has occupied our holy lands.... America doesn’t respect any culture but its own.... America is a country that was born out of the mass murder of Native Americans and built on the backs of Africans. If the Native Americans could have defended themselves by flying planes into buildings, don’t you think they would have? If the slaves could have freed themselves by becoming martyrs, don’t you think they would have? And it wouldn’t have been terrorism; it would have been self-defense.” In Muslim male dress and beard, Greg Landen is exoticized and Orientalized, even though his testimony echoes reasonable arguments made by many intellectuals in response to 9/11. In addition to his physical appearance, Landen is also alienated by his father, who is shown in the courtroom shaking his head from side to side and mouthing the unheard word, “no,” as his son testifies.

The young man’s target in *Law and Order* is not the capitalist authority symbolized by the World Trade Towers in New York City or the military authority of the Pentagon, but a woman professor of anthropology, who has devoted her life to liberal social change and exemplifies that work in her diversification of the American university. Equating global terrorist attacks, such as al-Qae’da’s on the US (or Israel, France, or Indonesia), with “domestic terrorism” within the US, such as Timothy McVeigh’s bombing of the Murragh Building in Oklahoma City, is a common response not only in the US but in Islamic societies. But this episode of *Law and Order* constructs the plot in such a way as to swerve widely from such a conclusion. Instead, we learn that the young man believed his girlfriend, who worked at the professor’s Center for Muslim Women, was being drawn away from her responsibilities as a submissive Islamic woman by her feminist work with the professor. In a jealous but also religiously motivated rage, he smote his enemy.

Cautious to protect itself against charges of insensitivity to Islamic Americans, *Law and Order* carefully disengages the young man from "true" Islam. In much the same fashion, al-Qae'da has been distinguished in the popular US news from "true" Islam: by condemning the "fundamentalist" irrationality of both, rather than making any substantive claims about the role of women in Islamic societies. In a decisive consultation between the prosecutors and a woman psychologist whom the prosecution will call as an "expert witness," the psychologist concludes that Landen's primary motivation for murder was his sexual insecurity, reinforced by his difficult relationship with his parents and his desperate need to maintain absolute control over his girlfriend. I need hardly comment on how such a conclusion reduces to triviality all of the important ethical questions raised by this episode. To be sure, *Law and Order* does not argue that this young man represents all American Muslims, but it reinforces virtually every convention the West has used to distinguish its "civilization" from Islamic "barbarism" since Romantic Idealist philosophers, like Hegel.

Talal Asad has argued in *Genealogies of Religion* that the "West" begins with the "project of modernization (Westernization)" that is inherently colonial and "defines itself, in opposition to all non-Western cultures, by its modern historicity. Despite the disjunctions of modernity (its break with tradition), 'the West' therefore includes within itself its past as an organic continuity: from 'the Greeks and Romans' and 'the Hebrews and Early Christians,' through 'Latin Christendom,' 'the Renaissance,' and 'the Reformation,' to the 'universal civilization' of modern Europeans" (18). Western imperialism, then, is a story that is told in countless different ways, media, and genres, but with surprisingly few variations when looked at in this light, which allows "otherness" to be internalized and rationalized, historicized, and civilized.

It perhaps should not surprise or even shock us that popular American television contributes to this narrative teleology in such transparently reductive ways. For a young American, like Lindh or the fictional character in this *Law and Order* episode, Islam is merely acting out childish rebellion, a confirmation of the "undeveloped" features of those "backward cultures," which like Hegel's Africa are "without history." In a similar fashion, conservative politicians and the general public accepted antiwar activism in the Vietnam War era as college hijinks, adolescent rebellion, a rejection of their fathers' America. What these historical moments—the Vietnam War and the current inchoate "war on terrorism"—have in common is a desperate desire to reaffirm national values by repressing utterly the history and reality of supposed enemies in Southeast Asia and the Islamic world. Today few, including such stubborn old hawks as

General William Westmoreland, would disagree that the Vietnam War marked a historic moment in which the US needed to change its foreign and domestic policies, its ties between government and corporation, its neglect of public opinion, and the changing political economies affecting these historical crises. If we are to learn the lesson of the Vietnam era, then we must learn to recognize, rather than repress, the complex, intertwined histories of Islam, its influence on the development of US and other Western societies, and our dependence on the economic means the US has provided to "modernize" and thus "Westernize," often at its own peril, the world. Before we can even begin to learn this lesson, however, we will have to read critically that other narrative of Western historicity Asad has so cogently interpreted as dependent on a constant "assumption": "To make history, the agent must create the future, remake herself, and help others to do so, where the criteria of successful remaking are seen to be universal. Old universes must be subverted and a new universe created. To that extent, history can be made only on the back of a universal teleology. Actions seeking to maintain the 'local' status quo, or to follow local models of social life, do not qualify as history making. From the Cargo Cults of Melanesia to the Islamic Revolution in Iran, they merely attempt (hopelessly) 'to resist the future' or 'to turn back the clock of history'" (Asad 19). It is time for us to think differently about how history is and has been made, to count the local as well as the global, and to develop new institutions, not simply interpretive methods, to negotiate the inevitable conflicts of such histories. Without such critical knowledge, there is likely to be unending terror from all sides in a new era of global warfare only one stage of which is being enacted in the US occupation of Iraq.

Notes

1. See the Web site http://www.informationclearinghouse.info/article2842.htm.

2. Today China is the source of the greatest imbalance of trade in US trade relations globally.

3. The English translation by Paul Patton, *The Gulf War Did Not Take Place*, was published in 1995.

4. One of my points in this essay and in *Literary Culture and U.S. Imperialism* is that when we view US imperialism in its full historical scope, rather than as a recent "neo-imperialism" dating either from World War II or from the Spanish-American War, we see such features as US Orientalism as relatively unchanged, except for the specific peoples employed. From the Barbary Pirates of nineteenth-century Tripoli to the Philippine revolutionaries led by Aguinaldo in the Philippine-American War

(1898–1902) who resisted US annexation to the Viet Cong and North Vietnamese Army regulars and more recently to the Libyans, Palestinians, Iraqis, Iranians, and transnational al-Qae'da-style revolutionaries, diverse groups around the globe have been consistently Orientalized by the US. For an interesting discussion of US Orientalism in these contexts, see Klein 1–19.

5. I am indebted to Thomas LeClair of the University of Cincinnati for this interpretation of the Kurdish elements in the dissident group represented in *Three Kings*.

6. The other two programs are *Law and Order: SVU (Special Victims Unit)* and *Law and Order: CI (Criminal Intent)*.

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