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We Are the Patriots

by GORE VIDAL

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I belong to a minority that is now one of the smallest in the country and, with every day, grows smaller. I am a veteran of World War II. And I can recall thinking, when I got out of the Army in 1946, Well, that's that. We won. And those who come after us will never need do this again. Then came the two mad wars of imperial vanity--Korea and Vietnam. They were bitter for us, not to mention for the so-called enemy. Next we were enrolled in a perpetual war against what seemed to be the enemy-of-the-month club. This war kept major revenues going to military procurement and secret police, while withholding money from us, the taxpayers, with our petty concerns for life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness.

But no matter how corrupt our system became over the last century--and I lived through three-quarters of it--we still held on to the Constitution and, above all, to the Bill of Rights. No matter how bad things got, I never once believed that I would see a great part of the nation--of we the people, unconsulted and unrepresented in a matter of war and peace--demonstrating in such numbers against an arbitrary and secret government, preparing and conducting wars for us, or at least for an army recruited from the unemployed to fight in. Sensibly, they now leave much of the fighting to the uneducated, to the excluded.

During Vietnam Bush fled to the Texas Air National Guard. Cheney, when asked why he avoided service in Vietnam, replied, "I had other priorities." Well, so did 12 million of us sixty years ago. Priorities that 290,000 were never able to fulfill.

So who's to blame? Us? Them? Well, we can safely blame certain oil and gas hustlers who have effectively hijacked the government from presidency to Congress to, most ominously, the judiciary.

How did they do it? Curiously, the means have always been there. It took the higher greed and other interests to make this coup d'état work.

It was Benjamin Franklin, of all people, who saw our future most clearly back in 1787, when, as a delegate to the Constitutional Convention at Philadelphia, he read for the first time the proposed Constitution. He was old; he was dying; he was not well enough to speak but he had prepared a text that a friend read. It is so dark a statement that most school history books omit his key words.

Franklin urged the convention to accept the Constitution despite what he took to be its great faults, because it might, he said, provide good government in the short term. "There is no form of government but what may be a blessing to the people if well administered, and I believe farther that this is likely to be well administered for a course of years, and can only end in Despotism, as other forms have done before it, when the people shall become so corrupted as to need despotic Government, being incapable of any other." Think of Enron, Merrill Lynch, etc., of chads and butterfly ballots, of Scalia's son arguing before his unrecused father at the Supreme Court while unrecused Thomas sits silently by, his wife already at work for the approaching Bush Administration. Think, finally, of the electoral college, a piece of dubious, antidemocratic machinery that Franklin doubtless saw as a source of deepest corruption and subsequent mischief for the Republic, as happened not only in 1876 but in 2000.

Franklin's prophecy came true in December 2000, when the Supreme Court bulldozed its way through the Constitution in order to select as its President the loser in the election of that year. Despotism is now securely in the saddle. The old Republic is a shadow of itself, and we now stand in the glare of a nuclear world empire with a government that sees as its true enemy "we the people," *deprived* of our electoral franchise. War is the usual aim of despots, and serial warfare is what we are going to get unless--with help from well-wishers in new old Europe and from ourselves, awake at last--we can persuade this peculiar Administration that they are acting entirely on their vicious own, and against all *our* history.

The other night on CNN I brought the admirable Aaron Brown to a full stop, not, this time, with Franklin but with John Quincy Adams, who said in 1821, on the subject of our fighting to liberate Greece from Turkey, the United States "goes not abroad, in search of monsters to destroy." If the United States took up all foreign affairs, "she might become the dictatress of the world. She would no longer be the ruler of her own spirit," her own soul.

Should we be allowed in 2004 to hold a presidential election here in the homeland, I suspect we shall realize that the only regime change that need concern our regained spirit--or soul--is in Washington.

President Adams is long since dead. And we have now been in the empire business since 1898: We had promised to give the Filipinos their independence from Spain. Then we changed our mind, killing some 200,000 of them in the process of Americanizing them.

A few years ago there was a significant exchange between then-General Colin Powell and then-statesperson Madeleine Albright. Like so many civilians, she was eager to use our troops against our

enemies: What's the point of having all this military and not using it? He said, They are not toy soldiers. But in the interest of fighting Communism for so long, we did spend trillions of dollars, until we are now in danger of sinking beneath the weight of so much weaponry.

Therefore, I suppose it was inevitable that, sooner or later, a new generation would get the bright idea, Why not stop fooling around with diplomacy and treaties and coalitions and just use our military power to give orders to the rest of the world? A year or two ago, a pair of neoconservatives put forward this exact notion. I responded--in print--that if we did so, we would have perpetual war for perpetual peace. Which is not good for business. Then the Cheney-Bush junta seized power. Although primarily interested in oil reserves, they liked the idea of playing soldiers too.

Last September Congress received from the Administration a document called the National Security Strategy of the United States. As the historian Joseph Stromberg observed, "It must be read to be believed." The doctrine preaches the desirability of the United States becoming--to use Adams's words--dictatress of the world. It also assumes that the President and his lieutenants are morally entitled to govern the planet. It declares that our "best defense is a good offense." The doctrine of pre-emption is next declared: "As a matter of common sense and self-defense, America will act against such emerging threats *before* they are fully formed." (Emphasis added.) Doubtless, General Ashcroft is now in Utah arresting every Mormon male before he can kidnap eight young girls for potential wives.

Article 1, Section 8 of the Constitution says that only Congress can declare war. But Congress surrendered that great power to the President in 1950 and has never taken it back.

As former Senator Alan Simpson said so cheerily on TV the other evening, "The Commander in Chief of the military will decide what the cause is. It won't be the American people." So in great matters we are not guided by law but by faith in the President, whose powerful Christian beliefs preach that "faith is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen."

In response to things not seen, the USA Patriot Act was rushed through Congress and signed forty-five days after 9/11. We are expected to believe that its carefully crafted 342 pages were written in that short time. Actually, it reads like a continuation of Clinton's post-Oklahoma City antiterrorist act. The Patriot Act makes it possible for government agents to break into anyone's home when they are away, conduct a search and keep the citizen indefinitely from finding out that a warrant was issued. They can oblige librarians to tell them what books anyone has withdrawn. If the librarian refuses, he or she can be criminally charged. They can also collect your credit reports and other sensitive information without judicial approval or the citizen's consent.

Finally, all this unconstitutional activity need not have the slightest connection with terrorism. Early in February, the Justice Department leaked Patriot Act II, known as the Domestic Security Enhancement Act, dated January 9, 2003. A Congress that did not properly debate the first act will doubtless be steamrolled by this lawless expansion.

Some provisions: If an American citizen has been accused of supporting an organization labeled as terrorist by the government, he can be deprived of his citizenship even if he had no idea the organization had a link to terrorists. Provision in Act II is also made for more searches and wiretaps without warrant as well as secret arrests (Section 201). In case a citizen tries to fight back in order to retain the citizenship he or she was born with, those federal agents who conduct illegal surveillance with the blessing of high Administration officials are immune from legal action. A native-born American deprived of citizenship would, presumably, be deported, just as, today, a foreign-born person can be deported. Also, according to a recent ruling of a federal court, this new power of the Attorney General is not susceptible to judicial review. Since the American who has had his citizenship taken away cannot, of course, get a passport, the thoughtful devisers of Domestic Security Enhancement authorize the Attorney General to deport him "to any country or region regardless of whether the country or region has a government." Difficult cases with no possible place to go can be held indefinitely.

Where under Patriot Act I only foreigners were denied due process of law as well as subject to arbitrary deportation, Patriot Act II now includes American citizens in the same category, thus eliminating in one great erasure the Bill of Rights.

Our greatest historian, Charles Beard, wrote in 1939:

The destiny of Europe and Asia has not been committed, under God, to the keeping of the United States; and only conceit, dreams of grandeur, vain imaginings, lust for power, or a desire to escape from our domestic perils and obligations could possibly make us suppose that Providence has appointed us his chosen people for the pacification of the earth.

Those Americans who refuse to plunge blindly into the maelstrom of European and Asiatic politics are not defeatist or neurotic. They are giving evidence of sanity, not cowardice, of adult thinking as distinguished from infantilism. *They* intend to preserve and defend the Republic. America is not to be Rome or Britain. It is to be America.