Chapter 21: Carter-Reagan-Bush: The Bipartisan Consensus

Halfway through the twentieth century, the historian Richard Hofstadter, in his book *The American Political Tradition*, examined our important national leaders, from Jefferson and Jackson to Herbert Hoover and the two Roosevelts—Republicans and Democrats, liberals and conservatives. Hofstadter concluded that "the range of vision embraced by the primary contestants in the major parties has always been bounded by the horizons of property and enterprise. . . . They have accepted the economic virtues of capitalist culture as necessary qualities of man. . . . That culture has been intensely nationalistic..."

Coming to the end of the century, observing its last twenty-five years, we have seen exactly that limited vision Hofstadter talked about—a capitalistic encouragement of enormous fortunes alongside desperate poverty, a nationalistic acceptance of war and preparations for war. Governmental power swung from Republicans to Democrats and back again, but neither party showed itself capable of going beyond that vision.

After the disastrous war in Vietnam came the scandals of Watergate. There was a deepening economic insecurity for much of the population, along with environmental deterioration, and a growing culture of violence and family disarray. Clearly, such fundamental problems could not be solved without bold changes in the social and economic structure. But no major party candidates proposed such changes. The "American political tradition" held fast.

In recognition of this, perhaps only vaguely conscious of this, voters stayed away from the polls in large numbers, or voted without enthusiasm. More and more they declared, if only by nonparticipation, their alienation from the political system. In 1960, 63 percent of those eligible to vote voted in the presidential election. By 1976, this figure had dropped to 53 percent. In a CBS News and *New York Times* survey, over half of the respondents said that public officials didn't care about people like them. A typical response came from a plumber: "The President of the United States isn't going to solve our problems. The problems are too big."

There was a troubling incongruity in the society. Electoral politics dominated the press and television screens, and the doings of presidents, members of Congress, Supreme Court justices, and other officials were treated as if they constituted the history of the country. Yet there was something artificial in all this, something pumped up, a straining to persuade a skeptical public that this was all, that they must rest their hopes for the future in Washington politicians, none of whom were inspiring because it seemed that behind the bombast, the rhetoric, the promises, their major concern was their own political power.

The distance between politics and the people was reflected clearly in the culture. In what was supposed to be the best of the media, uncontrolled by corporate interest—that is, in *public* television, the public was largely invisible. On the leading political forum on public television, the nightly "MacNeil-Lehrer Report," the public was uninvited, except as viewer of an endless parade of Congressmen, Senators, government bureaucrats, experts of various kinds.

On commercial radio, the usual narrow band of consensus, excluding fundamental criticism, was especially apparent. In the mid-1980s, with Ronald Reagan as President, the "fairness doctrine"
of the Federal Communications Commission, requiring air time for dissenting views, was eliminated. By the 1990s, "talk radio" had perhaps 20 million listeners, treated to daily tirades from right-wing talk-show "hosts," with left-wing guests uninvited.

A citizenry disillusioned with politics and with what pretended to be intelligent discussions of politics turned its attention (or had its attention turned) to entertainment, to gossip, to ten thousand schemes for self-help. Those at its margins became violent, finding scapegoats within one's group (as with poor-black on poor-black violence), or against other races, immigrants, demonized foreigners, welfare mothers, minor criminals (standing in for untouchable major criminals).

There were other citizens, those who tried to hold on to ideas and ideals still remembered from the sixties and early seventies, not just by recollecting but by acting. Indeed, all across the country there was a part of the public unmentioned in the media, ignored by political leaders—energetically active in thousands of local groups around the country. These organized groups were campaigning for environmental protection or women's rights or decent health care (including anguished concern about the horrors of AIDS) or housing for the homeless, or against military spending.

This activism was unlike that of the sixties, when the surge of protest against race segregation and war became an overwhelming national force. It struggled uphill, against callous political leaders, trying to reach fellow Americans most of whom saw little hope in either the politics of voting or the politics of protest.

The presidency of Jimmy Carter, covering the years 1977 to 1980, seemed an attempt by one part of the Establishment, that represented in the Democratic party, to recapture a disillusioned citizenry. But Carter, despite a few gestures toward black people and the poor, despite talk of "human rights" abroad, remained within the historic political boundaries of the American system, protecting corporate wealth and power, maintaining a huge military machine that drained the national wealth, allying the United States with right-wing tyrannies abroad.

Carter seemed to be the choice of that international group of powerful influence-wielders—the Trilateral Commission. Two founding members of the commission, according to the Far Eastern Economic Review—David Rockefeller and Zbigniew Brzezinski—thought Carter was the right person for the presidential election of 1976 given that "the Watergate-plagued Republican Party was a sure loser..."

Carter's job as President, from the point of view of the Establishment, was to halt the rushing disappointment of the American people with the government, with the economic system, with disastrous military ventures abroad. In his campaign, he tried to speak to the disillusioned and angry. His strongest appeal was to blacks, whose rebellion in the late sixties was the most frightening challenge to authority since the labor and unemployed upsurges in the thirties.

His appeal was "populist"—that is, he appealed to various elements of American society who saw themselves beleaguered by the powerful and wealthy. Although he himself was a millionaire peanut grower, he presented himself as an ordinary American farmer. Although he had been a
supporter of the Vietnam war until its end, he presented himself as a sympathizer with those who had been against the war, and he appealed to many of the young rebels of the sixties by his promise to cut the military budget.

In a much-publicized speech to lawyers, Carter spoke out against the use of the law to protect the rich. He appointed a black woman, Patricia Harris, as Secretary of Housing and Urban Development, and a black civil rights veteran, Andrew Young, as ambassador to the United Nations. He gave the job of heading the domestic youth service corps to a young former antiwar activist, Sam Brown.

His most crucial appointments, however, were in keeping with the Trilateral Commission report of Harvard political scientist Samuel Huntington, which said that, whatever groups voted for a president, once elected "what counts then is his ability to mobilize support from the leaders of key institutions." Brzezinski, a traditional cold war intellectual, became Carter's National Security Adviser. His Secretary of Defense, Harold Brown, had, during the Vietnam war, according to the Pentagon Papers, "envisaged the elimination of virtually all the constraints under which the bombing then operated." His Secretary of Energy, James Schlesinger, as Secretary of Defense under Nixon, was described by a member of the Washington press corps as showing "an almost missionary drive in seeking to reverse a downward trend in the defense budget." Schlesinger was also a strong proponent of nuclear energy.

His other cabinet appointees had strong corporate connections. A financial writer wrote, not long after Carter's election: "So far, Mr. Carter's actions, commentary, and particularly his Cabinet appointments, have been highly reassuring to the business community." Veteran Washington correspondent Tom Wicker wrote: "The available evidence is that Mr. Carter so far is opting for Wall Street's confidence."

Carter did initiate more sophisticated policies toward governments that oppressed their own people. He used United Nations Ambassador Andrew Young to build up good will for the United States among the black African nations, and urged that South Africa liberalize its policies toward blacks. A peaceful settlement in South Africa was necessary for strategic reasons; South Africa was used for radar tracking systems. Also, it had important U.S. corporate investments and was a critical source of needed raw materials (diamonds, especially). Therefore, what the United States needed was a stable government in South Africa; the continued oppression of blacks might create civil war.

The same approach was used in other countries—combining practical strategic needs with the advancement of civil rights. But because the chief motivation was practicality, not humanity, there was a tendency toward token changes—as in Chile's release of a few political prisoners. When Congressman Herman Badillo introduced in Congress a proposal that required the U.S. representatives to the World Bank and other international financial institutions to vote against loans to countries that systematically violated essential rights, by the use of torture or imprisonment without trial, Carter sent a personal letter to every Congressman urging the defeat of this amendment. It won a voice vote in the House, but lost in the Senate.
Under Carter, the United States continued to support, all over the world, regimes that engaged in imprisonment of dissenters, torture, and mass murder: in the Philippines, in Iran, in Nicaragua, and in Indonesia, where the inhabitants of East Timor were being annihilated in a campaign bordering on genocide.

The *New Republic* magazine, presumably on the liberal side of the Establishment, commented approvingly on the Carter policies: "... American foreign policy in the next four years will essentially extend the philosophies developed ... in the Nixon-Ford years. This is not at all a negative prospect.... There should be continuity. It is part of history...."

Carter had presented himself as a friend of the movement against the war, but when Nixon mined Haiphong harbor and resumed bombing of North Vietnam in the spring of 1973, Carter urged that "we give President Nixon our backing and support—whether or not we agree with specific decisions." Once elected, Carter declined to give aid to Vietnam for reconstruction, despite the fact that the land had been devastated by American bombing. Asked about this at a press conference, Carter replied that there was no special obligation on the United States to do this because "the destruction was mutual."

Considering that the United States had crossed half the globe with an enormous fleet of bombers and 2 million soldiers, and after eight years left a tiny nation with over a million dead and its land in ruins, this was an astounding statement.

One Establishment intention, perhaps, was that future generations see the war not as it appeared in the Defense Department's own *Pentagon Papers*—as a ruthless attack on civilian populations for strategic military and economic interests—but as an unfortunate error. Noam Chomsky, one of the leading antiwar intellectuals during the Vietnam period, looked in mid-1978 at how the history of the war was being presented in the major media and wrote that they were "destroying the historical record and supplanting it with a more comfortable story... reducing 'lessons' of the war to the socially neutral categories of error, ignorance, and cost."

The Carter administration clearly was trying to end the disillusionment of the American people after the Vietnam war by following foreign policies more palatable, less obviously aggressive. Hence, the emphasis on "human rights," the pressure on South Africa and Chile to liberalize their policies. But on close examination, these more liberal policies were designed to leave intact the power and influence of the American military and American business in the world.

The renegotiation of the Panama Canal treaty with the tiny Central American republic of Panama was an example. The canal saved American companies $1.5 billion a year in delivery costs, and the United States collected $150 million a year in tolls, out of which it paid the Panama government $2.3 million dollars, while maintaining fourteen military bases in the area.

Back in 1903 the United States had engineered a revolution against Colombia, set up the new tiny republic of Panama in Central America, and dictated a treaty giving the United States military bases, control of the Panama Canal, and sovereignty "in perpetuity." The Carter administration in 1977, responding to anti-American protests in Panama, decided to renegotiate
the treaty. The *New York Times* was candid about the Canal: "We stole it, and removed the incriminating evidence from our history books."

By 1977 the canal had lost military importance. It could not accommodate large tankers or aircraft carriers. That, plus the anti-American riots in Panama, led the Carter administration, over conservative opposition, to negotiate a new treaty which called for a gradual removal of U.S. bases (which could easily be relocated elsewhere in the area). The canal's legal ownership would be turned over to Panama after a period. The treaty also contained vague language which could be the basis for American military intervention under certain conditions.

Whatever Carter's sophistication in foreign policy, certain fundamentals operated in the late sixties and the seventies. American corporations were active all over the world on a scale never seen before. There were, by the early seventies, about three hundred U.S. corporations, including the seven largest banks, which earned 40 percent of their net profits outside the United States. They were called "multinationals," but actually 98 percent of their top executives were Americans. As a group, they now constituted the third-largest economy in the world, next to the United States and the Soviet Union.

The relationship of these global corporations with the poorer countries had long been an exploiting one, it was clear from U.S. Department of Commerce figures. Whereas U.S. corporations in Europe between 1950 and 1965 invested $8.1 billion and made $5.5 billion in profits, in Latin America they invested $3.8 billion and made $11.2 billion in profits, and in Africa they invested $5.2 billion and made $14.3 billion in profits.

It was the classical imperial situation, where the places with natural wealth became victims of more powerful nations whose power came from that seized wealth. American corporations depended on the poorer countries for 100 percent of their diamonds, coffee, platinum, mercury, natural rubber, and cobalt. They got 98 percent of their manganese from abroad, 90 percent of their chrome and aluminum. And 20 to 40 percent of certain imports (platinum, mercury, cobalt, chrome, manganese) came from Africa.

Another fundamental of foreign policy, whether Democrats or Republicans were in the White House, was the training of foreign military officers. The Army had a "School of the Americas" in the Canal Zone, from which thousands of military leaders in Latin America had graduated. Six of the graduates, for instance, were in the Chilean military junta that overthrew the democratically elected Allende government in 1973. The American commandant of the school told a reporter: "We keep in touch with our graduates and they keep in touch with us."

And yet the United States cultivated a reputation for being generous with its riches. Indeed, it had frequently given aid to disaster victims. This aid, however, often depended on political loyalty. In one six-year drought in West Africa, 100,000 Africans died of starvation. A report by the Carnegie Endowment said the Agency for International Development (AID) of the United States had been inefficient and neglectful in giving aid to nomads in the Sahel area of West Africa, an area covering six countries. The response of AID was that those countries had "no close historical, economic, or political ties to the United States."
In early 1975 the press carried a dispatch from Washington: "Secretary of State Henry A. Kissinger has formally initiated a policy of selecting for cutbacks in American aid those nations that have sided against the U.S. in votes in the United Nations. In some cases the cutbacks involve food and humanitarian relief."

Most aid was openly military, and by 1975, the United States exported $9.5 billion in arms. The Carter administration promised to end the sale of arms to repressive regimes, but when it took office the bulk of the sales continued.

And the military continued to take a huge share of the national budget. When Carter was running for election, he told the Democratic Platform Committee: "Without endangering the defense of our nation or commitments to our allies, we can reduce present defense expenditures by about 5 to 7 billion dollars annually." But his first budget proposed not a decrease but an increase of $10 billion for the military. Indeed, he proposed that the U.S. spend a thousand billion dollars (a trillion dollars) in the next five years on its military forces. And the administration had just announced that the Department of Agriculture would save $25 million a year by no longer giving free second helpings of milk to 1.4 million needy schoolchildren who got free meals in school.

If Carter's job was to restore faith in the system, here was his greatest failure—solving the economic problems of the people. The price of food and the necessities of life continued to rise faster than wages were rising. Unemployment remained officially at 6 or 8 percent; unofficially, the rates were higher. For certain key groups in the population—young people, and especially young black people—the unemployment rate was 20 or 30 percent.

It soon became clear that blacks in the United States, the group most in support of Carter for President, were bitterly disappointed with his policies. He opposed federal aid to poor people who needed abortions, and when it was pointed out to him that this was unfair, because rich women could get abortions with ease, he replied: "Well, as you know, there are many things in life that are not fair, that wealthy people can afford and poor people cannot."

Carter's "populism" was not visible in his administration's relationship to the oil and gas interests. It was part of Carter's "energy plan" to end price regulation of natural gas for the consumer. The largest producer of natural gas was Exxon Corporation, and the largest blocs of private stock in Exxon were owned by the Rockefeller family.

Early in Carter's administration, the Federal Energy Administration found that Gulf Oil Corporation had overstated by $79.1 million its costs for crude oil obtained from foreign affiliates. It then passed on these false costs to consumers. In the summer of 1978 the administration announced that "a compromise" had been made with Gulf Oil in which Gulf agreed to pay back $42.2 million. Gulf informed its stockholders that "the payments will not affect earnings since adequate provision was made in prior years."

The lawyer for the Energy Department who worked out the compromise with Gulf said it had been done to avoid a lengthy and costly lawsuit. Would the lawsuit have cost the $36.9 million dropped in the compromise? Would the government have considered letting off a bank robber without a jail term in return for half the loot? The settlement was a perfect example of what
Carter had told a meeting of lawyers during his presidential campaign—that the law was on the side of the rich.

The fundamental facts of maldistribution of wealth in America were clearly not going to be affected by Carter's policies, any more than by previous administrations, whether conservative or liberal. According to Andrew Zimbalist, an American economist writing in *Le Monde Diplomatique* in 1977, the top 10 percent of the American population had an income thirty times that of the bottom tenth; the top 1 percent of the nation owned 33 percent of the wealth. The richest 5 percent owned 83 percent of the personally owned corporate stock. The one hundred largest corporations (despite the graduated income tax that misled people into thinking the very rich paid at least 50 percent in taxes) paid an average of 26.9 percent in taxes, and the leading oil companies paid 5.8 percent in taxes (Internal Revenue Service figures for 1974). Indeed, 244 individuals who earned over $200,000 paid no taxes.

In 1979, as Carter weakly proposed benefits for the poor, and Congress strongly turned them down, a black woman, Marian Wright Edelman, director of the Children's Defense Fund in Washington, pointed to some facts. One of every seven American children (10 million altogether) had no known regular source of primary health care. One of every three children under seventeen (18 million altogether) had never seen a dentist. In an article on the *New York Times* op-ed page, she wrote:

The Senate Budget Committee recently . . . knocked off $88 million from a modest $288 million Administration request to improve the program that screens and treats children's health problems. At the same time the Senate found $725 million to bail out Litton Industries and to hand to the Navy at least two destroyers ordered by the Shah of Iran.

Carter approved tax "reforms" which benefited mainly the corporations. Economist Robert Lekachman, writing in *The Nation*, noted the sharp increase in corporate profits (44 percent) in the last quarter of 1978 over the previous year's last quarter. He wrote: "Perhaps the President's most outrageous act occurred last November when he signed into law an $18 billion tax reduction, the bulk of whose benefits accrue to affluent individuals and corporations."

In 1979, while the poor were taking cuts, the salary of the chairman of Exxon Oil was being raised to $830,000 a year and that of the chairman of Mobil Oil to over a million dollars a year. That year, while Exxon's net income rose 56 percent to more than $4 billion, three thousand small independent gasoline stations went out of business.

Carter made some efforts to hold onto social programs, but this was undermined by his very large military budgets. Presumably, this was to guard against the Soviet Union, but when the Soviet Union invaded Afghanistan in 1979, Carter could take only symbolic actions, like reinstituting the draft, or calling for a boycott of the 1980 Moscow Olympics.

On the other hand, American weaponry was used to support dictatorial regimes battling left-wing rebels abroad. A report by the Carter administration to Congress in 1977 was blunt, saying that "a number of countries with deplorable records of human rights observance are also countries where we have important security and foreign policy interests."
Thus, Carter asked Congress in the spring of 1980 for $5.7 million in credits for the military junta fighting off a peasant rebellion in El Salvador. In the Philippines, after the 1978 National Assembly elections, President Ferdinand Marcos imprisoned ten of the twenty-one losing opposition candidates; many prisoners were tortured, many civilians were killed. Still, Carter urged Congress to give Marcos $300 million in military aid for the next five years.

In Nicaragua, the United States had helped maintain the Somoza dictatorship for decades. Misreading the basic weakness of that regime, and the popularity of the revolution against it, the Carter administration continued its support for Somoza until close to the regime's fall in 1979.

In Iran, toward the end of 1978, the long years of resentment against the Shah's dictatorship culminated in mass demonstrations. On September 8, 1978, hundreds of demonstrators were massacred by the Shah's troops. The next day, according to a UPI dispatch from Teheran, Carter affirmed his support for the Shah:

Troops opened fire on demonstrators against the Shah for the third straight day yesterday and President Jimmy Carter telephoned the royal palace to express support for Shah Mohammad Reza Pahleavi, who faced the worst crisis of his 37-year reign. Nine members of parliament walked out on a speech by Iran's new premier, shouting that his hands were "stained with blood" in the crackdown on conservative Moslems and other protesters.

On December 13, 1978, Nicholas Gage reported for the *New York Times*:

The staff of the United States Embassy here has been bolstered by dozens of specialists flown in to back an effort to help the Shah against a growing challenge to his rule according to embassy sources... The new arrivals, according to the embassy sources, include a number of Central Intelligence Agency specialists on Iran, in addition to diplomats and military personnel.

In early 1979, as the crisis in Iran was intensifying, the former chief analyst on Iran for the CIA told *New York Times* reporter Seymour Hersh that "he and his colleagues knew of the tortures of Iranian dissenters by Savaki, the Iranian secret police set up during the late 1950s by the Shah with help from the CIA." Furthermore, he told Hersh that a senior CIA official was involved in instructing officials in Savaki on torture techniques.

It was a popular, massive revolution, and the Shah fled. The Carter administration later accepted him into the country, presumably for medical treatment, and the anti-American feelings of the revolutionaries reached a high point. On November 4, 1979, the U.S. embassy in Teheran was taken over by student militants who, demanding that the Shah be returned to Iran for punishment, held fifty-two embassy employees hostage.

For the next fourteen months, with the hostages still held in the embassy compound, that issue took the forefront of foreign news in the United States and aroused powerful nationalist feelings. When Carter ordered the Immigration and Naturalization Service to start deportation proceedings against Iranian students who lacked valid visas, the *New York Times* gave cautious but clear approval. Politicians and the press played into a general hysteria. An Iranian-American girl who
was slated to give a high school commencement address was removed from the program. The bumper sticker "Bomb Iran" appeared on autos all over the country.

It was a rare journalist bold enough to point out, as Alan Richman of the Boston Globe did when the fifty-two hostages were released alive and apparently well, that there was a certain lack of proportion in American reactions to this and other violations of human rights: "There were 52 of them, a number easy to comprehend. It wasn't like 15,000 innocent people permanently disappearing in Argentina.... They [the American hostages] spoke our language. There were 3000 people summarily shot in Guatemala last year who did not."

The hostages were still in captivity when Jimmy Carter faced Ronald Reagan in the election of 1980. That fact, and the economic distress felt by many, were largely responsible for Carter's defeat.

Reagan's victory, followed eight years later by the election of George Bush, meant that another part of the Establishment, lacking even the faint liberalism of the Carter presidency, would be in charge. The policies would be more crass—cutting benefits to poor people, lowering taxes for the wealthy, increasing the military budget, filling the federal court system with conservative judges, actively working to destroy revolutionary movements in the Caribbean.

The dozen years of the Reagan-Bush presidency transformed the federal judiciary, never more than moderately liberal, into a predominantly conservative institution. By the fall of 1991, Reagan and Bush had filled more than half of the 837 federal judgeships, and appointed enough right-wing justices to transform the Supreme Court.

In the seventies, with liberal justices William Brennan and Thurgood Marshall in the lead, the Court had declared death penalties unconstitutional, had supported (in Roe v. Wade) the right of women to choose abortions, and had interpreted the civil rights law as permitting special attention to blacks and women to make up for past discrimination (affirmative action).

William Rehnquist, first named to the Supreme Court by Richard Nixon, was made Chief Justice by Ronald Reagan. In the Reagan-Bush years, the Rehnquist Court made a series of decisions that weakened Roe v. Wade, brought back the death penalty, reduced the rights of detainees against police powers, prevented doctors in federally supported family planning clinics from giving women information on abortions, and said that poor people could be forced to pay for public education (education was not "a fundamental right").

Justices William Brennan and Thurgood Marshall were the last of the Court's liberals. Old and ill, though reluctant to give up the fight, they retired. The final act to create a conservative Supreme Court was President Bush's nomination to replace Marshall. He chose a black conservative, Clarence Thomas. Despite dramatic testimony from a former colleague, a young black law professor named Anita Hill, that Thomas had sexually harassed her, Thomas was approved by the Senate and now the Supreme Court moved even more decisively to the right.

With conservative federal judges, with pro-business appointments to the National Labor Relations Board, judicial decisions and board findings weakened a labor movement already
troubled by a decline in manufacturing. Workers who went out on strike found themselves with no legal protection. One of the first acts of the Reagan administration was to dismiss from their jobs, en masse, striking air traffic controllers. It was a warning to future strikers, and a sign of the weakness of a labor movement which in the thirties and forties had been a powerful force.

Corporate America became the greatest beneficiary of the Reagan-Bush years. In the sixties and seventies an important environmental movement had grown in the nation, horrified at the poisoning of the air, the seas and rivers, and the deaths of thousands each year as a result of work conditions. After a mine explosion in West Virginia killed seventy-eight miners in November 1968 there had been angry protest in the mine district, and Congress passed the Coal Mine Health and Safety Act of 1969. Nixon's Secretary of Labor spoke of "a new national passion, passion for environmental improvement."

The following year, yielding to strong demands from the labor movement and consumer groups, but also seeing it as an opportunity to win the support of working-class voters, President Nixon had signed the Occupational Safety and Health Act of 1970. This was an important piece of legislation, establishing a universal right to a safe and healthy workplace, and creating an enforcement machinery. Reflecting on this years later, Herbert Stein, who had been the chairman of Nixon's Council of Economic Advisers, lamented that "the juggernaut of environmental regulation proved not to be controllable by the Nixon administration."

While President Jimmy Carter came into office praising the OSHA program, he was also eager to please the business community. The woman he appointed to head OSHA, Eula Bingham, fought for strong enforcement of the act, and was occasionally successful. But as the American economy showed signs of trouble, with oil prices, inflation, and unemployment rising, Carter seemed more and more concerned about the difficulties the act created for business. He became an advocate of removing regulations on corporations and giving them more leeway, even if this was hurtful to labor and to consumers. Environmental regulation became more and more a victim of "cost-benefit" analysis, in which regulations protecting the health and safety of the public became secondary to how costly this would be for business.

Under Reagan and Bush this concern for "the economy," which was a short-hand term for corporate profit, dominated any concern for workers or consumers. President Reagan proposed to replace tough enforcement of environmental laws by a "voluntary" approach, leaving it to businesses to decide for themselves what they would do. He appointed as head of OSHA a businessman who was hostile to OSHA's aims. One of his first acts was to order the destruction of 100,000 government booklets pointing out the dangers of cotton dust to textile workers.

Political scientist William Grover (*The President as Prisoner*), evaluating environmental policy under Carter and Reagan as part of his penetrating "structural critique" of both presidents, concluded:

OSHA appears caught in a cycle of liberal presidents—who want to retain some health and safely regulatory programs, but who also need economic growth for political survival—and conservative presidents, who focus almost exclusively on the growth side of the equation. Such a
cycle will always tend to subordinate the need for safe and healthful workplaces to ... ensuring that commitment to OSHA will only be as strong as the priorities of business will allow.

George Bush presented himself as the "environmental president," and pointed with pride to his signing of the Clean Air Act of 1990. But two years after that act was passed, it was seriously weakened by a new rule of the Environmental Protection Agency that allowed manufacturers to increase by 245 tons a year hazardous pollutants in the atmosphere.

Furthermore, little money was allocated for enforcement. Contaminated drinking water had caused over 100,000 illnesses between 1971 and 1985, according to an EPA report. But in Bush's first year in office, while the EPA received 80,000 complaints of contaminated drinking water, only one in a hundred was investigated. And in 1991 and 1992, according to a private environmental group, the National Resources Defense Council, there were some 250,000 violations of the Safe Water Drinking Act (which had been passed during the Nixon administration).

Shortly after Bush took office, a government scientist prepared testimony for a Congressional committee on the dangerous effects of industrial uses of coal and other fossil fuels in contributing to "global warming," a depletion of the earth's protective ozone layer. The White House changed the testimony, over the scientist's objections, to minimize the danger (Boston Globe, October 29, 1990). Again, business worries about regulation seemed to override the safety of the public.

The ecological crisis in the world had become so obviously serious that Pope John Paul II felt the need to rebuke the wealthy classes of the industrialized nations for creating that crisis: "Today, the dramatic threat of ecological breakdown is teaching us the extent to which greed and selfishness, both individual and collective, are contrary to the order of creation."

At international conferences to deal with the perils of global warming, the European Community and Japan proposed specific levels and timetables for carbon dioxide emissions, in which the United States was the leading culprit. But, as the New York Times reported in the summer of 1991, "the Bush Administration fears that ... it would hurt the nation's economy in the short term for no demonstrable long-term climatic benefit." Scientific opinion was quite clear on the long-term benefit, but this was not as important as "the economy"-that is, the needs of corporations.

Evidence became stronger by the late eighties that renewable energy sources (water, wind, sunlight) could produce more usable energy than nuclear plants, which were dangerous and expensive, and produced radioactive wastes that could not be safely disposed of. Yet the Reagan and Bush administrations made deep cuts (under Reagan, a 90 percent cut) in research into renewable energy possibilities.

In June 1992 more than a hundred countries participated in the Earth Summit environmental conference in Brazil. Statistics showed that the armed forces of the world were responsible for two-thirds of the gases that depleted the ozone layer. But when it was suggested that the Earth Summit consider the effects of the military on environmental degradation, the United States delegation objected and the suggestion was defeated.
Indeed, the preservation of a huge military establishment and the retention of profit levels of oil corporations appeared to be twin objectives of the Reagan-Bush administrations. Shortly after Ronald Reagan took office, twenty-three oil industry executives contributed $270,000 to redecorate the White House living quarters. According to the Associated Press:

The solicitation drive . . . came four weeks after the President decontrolled oil prices, a decision worth $2 billion to the oil industry . . . Jack Hodges of Oklahoma City, owner of Core Oil and Gas Company, said: "The top man of this country ought to live in one of the top places. Mr. Reagan has helped the energy business."

While he built up the military (allocations of over a trillion dollars in his first four years in office), Reagan tried to pay for this with cuts in benefits for the poor. There would be $140 billion of cuts in social programs through 1984 and an increase of $181 billion for "defense" in the same period. He also proposed tax cuts of $190 billion (most of this going to the wealthy).

Despite the tax cuts and the military appropriations, Reagan insisted he would still balance the budget because the tax cuts would so stimulate the economy as to generate new revenue. Nobel Prize-winning economist Wassily Leontief remarked dryly: "This is not likely to happen. In fact, I personally guarantee that it will not happen."

Indeed, Department of Commerce figures showed that periods of lowered corporate taxes (1973-1975, 1979-1982) did not at all show higher capital investment, but a steep drop. The sharpest rise of capital investment (1975-1979) took place when corporate taxes were slightly higher than they had been the preceding five years.

The human consequences of Reagan's budget cuts went deep. For instance, Social Security disability benefits were terminated for 350,000 people. A man injured in an oil field accident was forced to go back to work, the federal government overruling both the company doctor and a state supervisor who testified that he was too disabled to work. The man died, and federal officials said, "We have a P.R. problem." A war hero of Vietnam, Roy Benavidez, who had been presented with the Congressional Medal of Honor by Reagan, was told by Social Security officials that the shrapnel pieces in his heart, arms, and leg did not prevent him from working. Appearing before a Congressional committee, he denounced Reagan.

Unemployment grew in the Reagan years. In the year 1982, 30 million people were unemployed all or part of the year. One result was that over 16 million Americans lost medical insurance, which was often tied to holding a job. In Michigan, where the unemployment rate was the highest in the country, the infant death rate began to rise in 1981.

New requirements eliminated free school lunches for more than one million poor children, who depended on the meal for as much as half of their daily nutrition. Millions of children entered the ranks of the officially declared "poor" and soon a quarter of the nation's children—twelve million—were living in poverty. In parts of Detroit, one-third of the children were dying before their first birthday, and the New York Times commented: "Given what's happening to the hungry in America, this Administration has cause only for shame."
Welfare became an object of attack: aid to single mothers with children through the AFDC (Aid to Families with Dependent Children) program, food stamps, health care for the poor through Medicaid. For most people on welfare (the benefits differed from state to state) this meant $500 to $700 a month in aid, leaving them well below the poverty level of about $900 a month. Black children were four times as likely as white children to grow up on welfare.

Early in the Reagan administration, responding to the argument that government aid was not needed, that private enterprise would take care of poverty, a mother wrote to her local newspaper:

I am on Aid to Families with Dependent Children, and both my children are in school. ... I have graduated from college with distinction, 128th in a class of over 1000, with a B.A. in English and sociology. I have experience in library work, child care, social work and counseling.

I have been to the CETA office. They have nothing for me.... I also go every week to the library to scour the newspaper Help Wanted ads. I have kept a copy of every cover letter that I have sent out with my resume; the stack is inches thick. I have applied for jobs paying as little as $8000 a year. I work part-time in a library for $3.50 an hour, welfare reduces my allotment to compensate. . .

It appears we have employment offices that can't employ, governments that can't govern and an economic system that can't produce jobs for people ready to work. . .

Last week I sold my bed to pay for the insurance on my car, which, in the absence of mass transportation, I need to go job hunting. I sleep on a piece of rubber foam somebody gave me.

So this is the great American dream my parents came to this country for: Work hard, get a good education, follow the rules, and you will be rich. I don't want to be rich. I just want to be able to feed my children and live with some semblance of dignity. . ." 

Democrats often joined Republicans in denouncing welfare programs. Presumably, this was done to gain political support from a middle-class public that believed they were paying taxes to support teenage mothers and people they thought too lazy to work. Much of the public did not know, and were not informed by either political leaders or the media, that welfare took a tiny part of the taxes, and military spending took a huge chunk of it. Yet, the public's attitude on welfare was different from that of the two major parties. It seemed that the constant attacks on welfare by politicians, reported endlessly in the press and on television, did not succeed in eradicating a fundamental generosity felt by most Americans.

A New York Times/CBS News poll conducted in early 1992 showed that public opinion on welfare changed depending on how the question was worded. If the word "welfare" was used, 44 percent of those questioned said too much was being spent on welfare (while 50 percent said either that the right amount was being spent, or that too little was being spent. But when the question was about "assistance to the poor," only 13 percent thought too much was being spent, and 64 percent thought too little was being spent.
This suggested that both parties were trying to manufacture an anti-human-needs mood by constant derogatory use of the word "welfare," and then to claim they were acting in response to public opinion. The Democrats as well as the Republicans had strong connections to wealthy corporations. Kevin Phillips, a Republican analyst of national politics, wrote in 1990 that the Democratic Party was "history's second-most enthusiastic capitalist party."

Phillips pointed out that the greatest beneficiaries of government policy during the Republican presidencies of Ronald Reagan and George Bush were the superrich: "It was the truly wealthy, more than anyone else, who flourished under Reagan... The 1980s were the triumph of upper America... the political ascendency of the rich, and a glorification of capitalism, free markets, and finance."

When government policy enriched the already rich, it was not called welfare. This was not as obvious as the monthly checks to the poor; it most often took the form of generous changes in the tax system.

In *America: Who Really Pays The Taxes?*, two investigative reporters with the *Philadelphia Inquirer*, Donald Barlett and James Steele, traced the path by which tax rates for the very rich got lower and lower. It was not the Republicans but the Democrats—the Kennedy-Johnson administrations—who, under the guise of "tax reform," first lowered the World War II-era rate of 91 percent on incomes over $400,000 a year to 70 percent. During the Carter Administration (though over his objections) Democrats and Republicans in Congress joined to give even more tax breaks to the rich.

The Reagan administration, with the help of Democrats in Congress, lowered the tax rate on the very rich to 50 percent and in 1986 a coalition of Republicans and Democrats sponsored another "tax reform" hill that lowered the top rate to 28 percent. Barlett and Steele noted that a schoolteacher, a factory worker, and a billionaire could all pay 28 percent. The idea of a "progressive" income in which the rich paid at higher rates than everyone else was now almost dead.

As a result of all the tax bills from 1978 to 1990, the net worth of the "Forbes 400," chosen as the richest in the country by *Forbes Magazine* (advertising itself as "capitalist tool"), was tripled. About $70 billion a year was lost in government revenue, so that in those thirteen years the wealthiest 1 percent of the country gained a trillion dollars.


For those who blame Republicans for what has happened and believe that equitable taxation will be restored if only the Democrats can win back the White House, there is this disquieting fact: The turning point on tax politics, when the monied elites first began to win big, occurred in 1978 with the Democratic party fully in power and well before Ronald Reagan came to Washington, Democratic majorities have supported this great shift in tax burden every step of the way.
Not only did the income tax become less progressive during the last decades of the century, but the Social Security tax became more regressive. That is, more and more was deducted from the salary checks of the poor and middle classes, but when salaries reached $42,000 no more was deducted. By the early 1990s, a middle-income family earning $37,800 a year paid 7.65 percent of its income in Social Security taxes. A family earning ten times as much, $378,000 paid 1.46 percent of its income in Social Security taxes.

The result of these higher payroll taxes was that three-fourths of all wage earners paid more each year through the Social Security tax than through the income tax. Embarrassingly for the Democratic party, which was supposed to be the party of the working class, those higher payroll taxes had been put in motion under the administration of Jimmy Carter.

In a two-party system, if both parties ignore public opinion, there is no place voters can turn. And in the matter of taxation, it has been clear that American citizens have wanted taxes that are truly progressive. William Greider informs us that shortly after World War II, when rates on the very rich were up to 90 percent, a Gallup poll showed that 85 percent of the public thought the federal tax code was "fair." But by 1984, when all those tax "reforms" had been put into effect by Democrats and Republicans, a public opinion survey by the Internal Revenue Service found that 80 percent of those polled agreed with the statement: "The present tax system benefits the rich and is unfair to the ordinary working man and woman."

By the end of the Reagan years, the gap between rich and poor in the United States had grown dramatically. Where in 1980, the chief executive officers (CEOs) of corporations made forty times as much in salary as the average factory worker, by 1989 they were making ninety-three times as much. In the dozen years from 1977 to 1989, the before-tax income of the richest 1 percent rose 77 percent; meanwhile, for the poorest two-fifths of the population, there was no gain at all, indeed a small decline.

And because of favorable changes for the rich in the tax structure, the richest 1 percent, in the decade ending in 1990, saw their after-tax income increase 87 percent. In the same period, the after-tax income of the lower four-fifths of the population either went down 5 percent (at the poorest level) or went up no more than 8.6 percent.

While everybody at the lower levels was doing worse, there were especially heavy losses for blacks, Hispanics, women, and the young. The general impoverishment of the lowest-income groups that took place in the Reagan-Bush years hit black families hardest, with their lack of resources to start with and with racial discrimination facing them in jobs. The victories of the civil rights movement had opened up spaces for some African-Americans, but left others far behind.

At the end of the eighties, at least a third of African-American families fell below the official poverty level, and black unemployment seemed fixed at two and a half times that of whites, with young blacks out of work at the rate of 30 to 40 percent. The life expectancy of blacks remained at least ten years lower than that of whites. In Detroit, Washington, and Baltimore, the mortality rate for black babies was higher than in Jamaica or Costa Rica.
Along with poverty came broken homes, family violence, street crime, drugs. In Washington, D.C., with a concentrated population of black poor within walking distance of the marbled buildings of the national government, 42 percent of young black men between the ages of eighteen and thirty-five were either in jail, or out on probation or parole. The crime rate among blacks, instead of being seen as a crying demand for the elimination of poverty, was used by politicians to call for the building of more prisons.

The 1954 Supreme Court decision in *Brown v. Board of Education* had begun the process of desegregating schools. But poverty kept black children in ghettos and many schools around the country remained segregated by race and class. Supreme Court decisions in the seventies determined that there need be no equalization of funds for poor school districts and rich school districts (*San Antonio Independent School District v. Rodriguez*) and that the busing of children need not take place between wealthy suburbs and inner cities (*Milliken v. Bradley*).

To admirers of free enterprise and laissez-faire, those people were poor who did not work and produce, and so had themselves to blame for their poverty. They ignored the fact that women taking care of children on their own were working very hard indeed. They did not ask why babies who were not old enough to show their work skills should be penalized—to the point of death—for growing up in a poor family.

Ironically, it was Republican Kevin Phillips who, analyzing the Reagan years, wrote: "Less and less wealth was going to people who produced something ... disproportionate rewards to society's economic, legal and cultural manipulators—from lawyers to financial advisers."

In the mid-eighties, a major scandal began to emerge in Washington. The deregulation of the savings and loan banks begun in the Carter administration had continued under Reagan, leading to risky investments which drained the assets of the banks, leaving them owing billions of dollars to depositors, which the government had insured.

As the years went by and the problem was kept behind a screen, it was going to take more and more money to pay depositors and bail out these banks. The figure began to reach $200 billion. During the 1988 presidential campaign, the Democratic candidate Michael Dukakis was restrained from pointing the finger at the Republican administration because the Democrats in Congress were heavily involved in bringing about and then covering up the situation. So the voters were kept in the dark.

The enormous drain of money from the treasury for defense had once been declared by President Eisenhower to be a "theft" from human needs. But it was accepted by both parties, as Democrats competed with Republicans to show the electorate how "tough" they were.

Jimmy Carter as president had proposed a $10 billion increase in the military budget, an enactment of exactly what Eisenhower had described. All of the huge military budgets of the post-World War II period, from Truman to Reagan and Bush, were approved overwhelmingly by both Democrats and Republicans.
The spending of trillions of dollars to build up nuclear and nonnuclear forces was justified by fears that the Soviet Union, also building up its military forces, would invade Western Europe. But George Kennan, the former ambassador to the Soviet Union and one of the theoreticians of the cold war, said this fear had no basis in reality. And Harry Rositzke, who worked for the CIA for twenty-five years and was at one time CIA director of espionage operations against the Soviet Union, wrote in the 1980s: "In all of my years in government and since I have never seen an intelligence estimate that shows how it would be profitable to Soviet interests to invade Western Europe or to attack the United States."

However, the creation of such a fear in the public mind was useful in arguing for the building of frightful and superfluous weapons. For instance, the *Trident* submarine, which was capable of firing hundreds of nuclear warheads, cost $1.5 billion. It was totally useless except in a nuclear war, in which case it would only add several hundred warheads to the tens of thousands already available. That $1.5 billion was enough to finance a five-year program of child immunization around the world against deadly diseases, and prevent five million deaths (Ruth Sivard, *World Military and Social Expenditures 1981-1988*).

In the mid-1980s, an analyst with the Rand Corporation, which did research for the Defense Department, told an interviewer in an unusually candid statement, that the enormous number of weapons was unnecessary from a military point of view, but were useful to convey a certain *image* at home and abroad:

If you had a strong president, a strong secretary of defense they could temporarily go to Congress and say, "We're only going to build what we need... And if the Russians build twice as many, tough." But it would be unstable politically... And it is therefore better for our own domestic stability as well as international perceptions to insist that we remain good competitors even though the objective significance of the competition is ... dubious.

In 1984, the CIA admitted that it had exaggerated Soviet military expenditures, that since 1975 it had claimed Soviet military spending was growing by 4 to 5 percent each year when the actual figure was 2 percent. Thus, by misinformation, even deception, the result was to inflate military expenditures.

One of the favorite military programs of the Reagan administration was the Star Wars program, in which billions were spent, supposedly to build a shield in space to stop enemy nuclear missiles in midair. But the first three tests of the technology failed. A fourth test was undertaken, with government funding for the program at stake. There was another failure, but Reagan's Secretary of Defense, Caspar Weinberger, approved the faking of results to show that the test had succeeded.

When the Soviet Union began to disintegrate in 1989, and there was no longer the familiar "Soviet threat," the military budget was reduced somewhat, but still remained huge, with support from both Democrats and Republicans. In 1992, the head of the House Armed Services Committee, Les Aspin, a Democrat, proposed, in view of the new international situation, that the military budget be cut by 2%, from $281 billion to $275 billion.
That same year, as Democrats and Republicans both supported minor cuts in the military budget, a public opinion survey done for the National Press Club showed that 59 percent of American voters wanted a 50 percent cut in defense spending over the next five years.

It seemed that both parties had failed in persuading the citizenry that the military budget should continue at its high level. But they continued to ignore the public they were supposed to represent. In the summer of 1992, Congressional Democrats and Republicans joined to vote against a transfer of funds from the military budget to human needs, and voted to spend $120 billion to "defend" Europe, which everyone acknowledged was no longer in danger—if it ever had been—from Soviet attack.

Democrats and Republicans had long been joined in a "bipartisan foreign policy," but in the Reagan-Bush years the United States government showed a special aggressiveness in the use of military force abroad. This was done either directly in invasions, or through both overt and covert support of right-wing tyrannies that cooperated with the United States.

Reagan came into office just after a revolution had taken place in Nicaragua, in which a popular Sandinista movement (named after the 1920s revolutionary hero Augusto Sandino) overthrew the corrupt Somoza dynasty (long supported by the United States). The Sandinistas, a coalition of Marxists, left-wing priests, and assorted nationalists, set about to give more land to the peasants and to spread education and health care among the poor.

The Reagan administration, seeing in this a "Communist" threat, but even more important, a challenge to the long U.S. control over governments in Central America, began immediately to work to overthrow the Sandinista government. It waged a secret war by having the CIA organize a counterrevolutionary force (the "contras"), many of whose leaders were former leaders of the hated National Guard under Somoza.

The contras seemed to have no popular support inside Nicaragua and so were based next door in Honduras, a very poor country dominated by the United States. From Honduras they moved across the border, raiding farms and villages, killing men, women and children, committing atrocities. A former colonel with the contras, Edgar Chamorro, testified before the World Court:

We were told that the only way to defeat the Sandinistas was to use the tactics the agency [the CIA] attributed to Communist insurgencies elsewhere: kill, kidnap, rob, and torture. . . . Many civilians were killed in cold blood. Many others were tortured, mutilated, raped, robbed, or otherwise abused. . . . When I agreed to join ... I had hoped that it would be an organization of Nicaraguans.... [It] turned out to be an instrument of the U.S. government. . . .

There was a reason for the secrecy of the U.S. actions in Nicaragua; public opinion surveys showed that the American public was opposed to military involvement there. In 1984, the CIA, using Latin American agents to conceal its involvement, put mines in the harbors of Nicaragua to blow up ships. When information leaked out, Secretary of Defense Weinberger told ABC news: "The United States is not mining the harbors of Nicaragua."
Later that year Congress, responding perhaps to public opinion and the memory of Vietnam, made it illegal for the United States to support "directly or indirectly, military or paramilitary operations in Nicaragua." The Reagan administration decided to ignore this law and to find ways to fund the contras secretly, looking for "third-party support." Reagan himself solicited funds from Saudi Arabia, at least $32 million. The friendly dictatorship in Guatemala was used to get arms surreptitiously to the contras. Israel, dependent on U.S. aid and always dependable for support, was also used.

In 1986, a story appearing in a Beirut magazine created a sensation: that weapons had been sold by the United States to Iran (supposedly an enemy), that in return Iran had promised to release hostages being held by extremist Moslems in Lebanon, and that profits from the sale were being given to the contras to buy arms.

When asked about this at a press conference in November 1986, President Reagan told four lies: that the shipment to Iran consisted of a few token antitank missiles (in fact, 2,000), that the United States didn't condone shipments by third parties, that weapons had not been traded for hostages, and that the purpose of the operation was to promote a dialogue with Iranian moderates, in reality, the purpose was a double one: to free hostages and get credit for that, and to help the contras.

The previous month, when a transport plane that had carried arms to the contras was downed by Nicaraguan gunfire and the American pilot captured, the lies had multiplied. Assistant Secretary of State Elliot Abrams lied. Secretary of State Shultz lied ("no connection with the U.S. government at all"). Evidence mounted that the captured pilot was working for the CIA.

The whole Iran-contra affair became a perfect example of the double line of defense of the American Establishment. The first defense is to deny the truth. If exposed, the second defense is to investigate, but not too much; the press will publicize, but they will not get to the heart of the matter.

Once the scandal was out in the open, neither the Congressional investigating committees nor the press nor the trial of Colonel Oliver North, who oversaw the contra aid operation, got to the critical questions: What is U.S. foreign policy all about? How are the president and his staff permitted to support a terrorist group in Central America to overthrow a government that, whatever its faults, is welcomed by its own people as a great improvement over the terrible governments the U.S. has supported there for years? What does the scandal tell us about democracy, about freedom of expression, about an open society?

Out of the much-publicized "contragate" scandal came no powerful critique of secrecy in government or of the erosion of democracy by actions taken in secret by a small group of men safe from the scrutiny of public opinion. The media, in a country priding itself on its level of education and information, kept the public informed only on the most superficial level.

The limits of Democratic party criticism of the affair were revealed by a leading Democrat, Senator Sam Nunn of Georgia, who, as the investigation was getting under way, said: "We must, all of us, help the President restore his credibility in foreign affairs."
A few Democrats were critical, which was deplored by a Harvard professor, James Q. Wilson, who was a member of Reagan's Foreign Intelligence Advisory Board. Wilson looked back nostalgically to a "bipartisan consensus" (the equivalent of the one-party system in a totalitarian state). He worried most about "a lack of resolve to act like a great power."

It became clear that President Reagan and Vice-President Bush were involved in what became known as the Iran-contra affair. But their underlings scrupulously kept them out of it, illustrating the familiar government device of "plausible denial," in which the top official, shielded by subordinates, can plausibly deny involvement. Although Congressman Henry Gonzalez of Texas introduced a resolution for the impeachment of Reagan, it was quickly suppressed in Congress.

Neither Reagan nor Bush were indicted. Rather, the Congressional committee put the lesser culprits on the witness stand and several of them were indicted. One (Robert McFarlane, a former National Security Adviser to Reagan) tried to commit suicide. Another, Colonel Oliver North, stood trial for lying to Congress, was found guilty, but was not sentenced to prison. Reagan retired in peace and Bush became the next president of the United States.

In an ironic twist, an obscure citizen of the tiny town of Odon, Indiana, became a tangential actor in the Iran-contra controversy. This was a young man named Bill Breeden, a former minister who lived in a tepee in the woods with his wife and two children, teaching the children at home. Breeden's home town of Odon was also the home town of Admiral John Poindexter, McFarlane's successor as Reagan's National Security Adviser, who was heavily involved in the illegal activities of the Iran-contra affair.

One day Bill Breeden noticed that the town, to show its pride in its "home boy," had renamed one of its streets "John Poindexter Street." Breeden, a pacifist and critic of U.S. foreign policy, indignant at what he thought was a celebration of immoral behavior in government, stole the sign. He announced that he was holding it for "ransom"—$30 million, the amount of money that had been given to Iran for transfer to the contras.

He was apprehended, put on trial, and spent a few days in jail. As it turned out, Bill Breeden was the only person to be imprisoned as a result of the Iran-contra affair.

The Iran-contra affair was only one of the many instances in which the government of the United States violated its own laws in pursuit of some desired goal in foreign policy.

Toward the end of the Vietnam war, in 1973, Congress, seeking to limit the presidential power that had been used so ruthlessly in Indochina, passed the War Powers Act, which said:

"The President, in every possible instance, shall consult with Congress before introducing United States Armed Forces into hostilities or into situations where imminent involvement in hostilities is clearly indicated by the circumstances."

Almost immediately, President Gerald Ford violated the act when he ordered the invasion of a Cambodian island and the bombing of a Cambodian town in retaliation for the temporary
detention of American merchant seamen on the ship Mayaguez. He did not consult Congress before he gave the attack orders.

In the fall of 1982, President Reagan sent American marines into a dangerous situation in Lebanon, where a civil war was raging, again ignoring the requirements of the War Powers Act. The following year, over two hundred of those marines were killed when a bomb was exploded in their barracks by terrorists.

Shortly after that, in October 1983 (with some analysts concluding this was done to take attention away from the Lebanon disaster), Reagan sent U.S. forces to invade the tiny Caribbean island of Grenada. Again, Congress was notified, but not consulted. The reasons given to the American people for this invasion (officially called Operation Urgent Fury) were that a recent coup that had taken place in Grenada put American citizens (students at a medical school on the island) in danger; and that the United States had received an urgent request from the Organization of Eastern Caribbean States to intervene.

An unusually pointed article in the New York Times on October 29, 1983, by correspondent Bernard Gwertzman demolished those reasons:

The formal request that the U.S. and other friendly countries provide military help was made by the Organization of Eastern Caribbean States last Sunday at the request of the United States, which wanted to show proof that it had been requested to act under terms of that group's treaty. The wording of the formal request, however, was drafted in Washington and conveyed to the Caribbean leaders by special American emissaries.

Both Cuba and Grenada, when they saw that American ships were heading for Grenada, sent urgent messages promising that American students were safe and urging that an invasion not occur... There is no indication that the Administration made a determined effort to evacuate the Americans peacefully.... Officials have acknowledged that there was no inclination to try to negotiate with the Grenadian authorities. ... "We got there just in time," the President said.... A major point in the dispute is whether in fact the Americans on the island were in such danger as to warrant an invasion. No official has produced firm evidence that the Americans were being mistreated or that they would not be able to leave if they wanted.

The real reason for the invasion, one high American official told Gwertzman, was that the United States should show (determined to overcome the sense of defeat in Vietnam) that it was a truly powerful nation: "What good are maneuvers and shows of force, if you never use it?"

The connection between U.S. military intervention and the promotion of capitalist enterprise had always been especially crass in the Caribbean. As for Grenada, an article in the Wall Street Journal eight years after the military invasion (October 29, 1991) spoke of "an invasion of banks" and noted that St. George's, the capital of Grenada, with 7500 people, had 118 offshore banks, one for every 64 residents. "St. George's has become the Casablanca of the Caribbean, a fast-growing haven for money laundering, tax evasion and assorted financial fraud... ."
After a study of various U.S. military interventions, political scientist Stephen Shalom (*Imperial Alibis*) concluded that people in the invaded countries died "not to save U.S. nationals, who would have been far safer without U.S. intervention, but so that Washington might make clear that it ruled the Caribbean and that it was prepared to engage in a paroxysm of violence to enforce its will." He continued:

There have been some cases where American citizens were truly in danger: for example, the four churchwomen who were killed by government-sponsored death squads in El Salvador in 1980. But there was no U.S. intervention there, no Marine landings, no protective bombing raids. Instead Washington backed the death squad regime with military and economic aid, military training, intelligence sharing, and diplomatic support.

The historic role of the United States in El Salvador, where 2 percent of the population owned 60 percent of the land, was to make sure governments were in power there that would support U.S. business interests, no matter how this impoverished the great majority of people. Popular rebellions that would threaten these business arrangements were to be opposed. When a popular uprising in 1932 threatened the military government, the United States sent a cruiser and two destroyers to stand by while the government massacred thirty thousand Salvadorans.

The administration of Jimmy Carter did nothing to reverse this history. It wanted reform in Latin America, but not revolution that would threaten U.S. corporate interests. In 1980, Richard Cooper, a State Department expert on economic affairs, told Congress that a more equitable distribution of wealth was desirable. "However, we also have an enormous stake in the continuing smooth functioning in the economic system. ... Major changes in the system can ... have important implications for our own welfare."

In February 1980 El Salvador Catholic Archbishop Oscar Romero sent a personal letter to President Carter, asking him to stop military aid to El Salvador. Not long before that, the National Guard and National Police had opened fire on a crowd of protesters in front of the Metropolitan Cathedral and killed twenty-four people. But the Carter administration continued the aid. The following month Archbishop Romero was assassinated.

There was mounting evidence that the assassination had been ordered by Roberto D'Aubuisson, a leader of the right wing. But D'Aubuisson had the protection of Nicolas Carranza, a deputy minister of defense, who at the time was receiving $90,000 a year from the CIA. And Elliot Abrams, ironically Assistant Secretary of State for Human Rights, declared that D'Aubuisson "was not involved in murder."

When Reagan became President, military aid to the El Salvador government rose steeply. From 1946 to 1979, total military aid to El Salvador was $16.7 million. In Reagan's first year in office, the figure rose to $82 million.

Congress was sufficiently embarrassed by the killings in El Salvador to require that before any more aid was given the President must certify that progress in human rights was taking place. Reagan did not take this seriously. On January 28, 1982, there were reports of a government massacre of peasants in several villages. The following day, Reagan certified that the Salvadoran
government was making progress in human rights. Three days after certification, soldiers stormed the homes of poor people in San Salvador, dragged out twenty people, and killed them.

When, at the end of 1983, Congress passed a law to continue the requirement of certification, Reagan vetoed it.

The press was especially timid and obsequious during the Reagan years, as Mark Hertsgaard documents in his book *On Bended Knee*. When journalist Raymond Bonner continued to report on the atrocities in El Salvador, and on the U.S. role, the *New York Times* removed him from his assignment. Back in 1981 Bonner had reported on the massacre of hundreds of civilians in the town of El Mozote, by a battalion of soldiers trained by the United States. The Reagan administration scoffed at the account, but in 1992, a team of forensic anthropologists began unearthing skeletons from the site of the massacre, most of them children; the following year a UN commission confirmed the story of the massacre at El Mozote.

The Reagan administration, which did not appear at all offended by military juntas governing in Latin America (Guatemala, El Salvador, Chile) if they were "friendly" to the United States, became very upset when a tyranny was hostile, as was the government of Muammar Khadafi in Libya. In 1986, when unknown terrorists bombed a discotheque in West Berlin, killing a U.S. serviceman, the White House immediately decided to retaliate. Khadafi was probably responsible for various acts of terrorism over the years, but there was no real evidence that in this case he was to blame.

Reagan was determined to make a point. Planes were sent over the capital city of Tripoli with specific instructions to aim at Khadafi’s house. The bombs fell on a crowded city; perhaps a hundred people were killed, it was estimated by foreign diplomats in Tripoli. Khadafi was not injured, but an adopted daughter of his was killed.

Professor Stephen Shalom, analyzing this incident, writes (*Imperial Alibis*): "If terrorism is defined as politically motivated violence perpetrated against non-combatant targets, then one of the most serious incidents of international terrorism of the year was precisely this U.S. raid on Libya."

Early in the presidency of George Bush, there came the most dramatic developments on the international scene since the end of World War II. In the year 1989, with a dynamic new leader, Mikhail Gorbachev, at the head of the Soviet Union, the long suppressed dissatisfaction with "dictatorships of the proletariat" which had turned out to be dictatorships over the proletariat erupted all through the Soviet bloc.

There were mass demonstrations in the Soviet Union and in the countries of Eastern Europe which had been long dominated by the Soviet Union. East Germany agreed to unite with West Germany, and the wall separating East Berlin from West Berlin, long a symbol of the tight control of its citizens by East Germany, was dismantled in the presence of wildly exultant citizens of both Germanies. In Czechoslovakia, a new non-Communist government came into being, headed by a playwright and former imprisoned dissident named Vaclav Havel. In Poland,
Bulgaria, Hungary, a new leadership emerged, promising freedom and democracy. And remarkably, all this took place without civil war, in response to overwhelming popular demand.

In the United States, the Republican party claimed that the hard-line policies of Reagan and the increase in military expenditures had brought down the Soviet Union. But the change had begun much earlier, after the death of Stalin in 1953, and especially with the leadership of Nikita Khrushchev. A remarkably open discussion had been initiated.

But the continued hard line of the United States became an obstacle to further liberalization, according to former ambassador to the Soviet Union George Kennan, who wrote that "the general effect of cold war extremism was to delay rather than hasten the great change that overtook the Soviet Union by the end of the 1980s." While the press and politicians in the United States exulted over the collapse of the Soviet Union, Kennan pointed out that, not only did American policies delay this collapse, but these cold war policies were carried on at a frightful cost to the American people:

We paid with forty years of enormous and otherwise unnecessary military expenditures. We paid through the cultivation of nuclear weaponry to the point where the vast and useless nuclear arsenal had become (and remains today) a danger to the very environment of the planet. . . .

The sudden collapse of the Soviet Union left the political leadership of the United States unprepared. Military interventions had been undertaken in Korea and Vietnam with enormous loss of life, also in Cuba and the Dominican Republic, and huge amounts of military aid had been given all over the world—in Europe, Africa, Latin America, the Middle East, Asia—on the supposition that this was necessary to deal with a Communist menace emanating from the Soviet Union. Several trillion dollars had been taken from American citizens in the form of taxes to maintain a huge nuclear and nonnuclear arsenal and military bases all over the world—all primarily justified by the "Soviet threat."

Here then was an opportunity for the United States to reconstruct its foreign policy, and to free hundreds of billions of dollars a year from the budget to be used for constructive, healthy projects.

But this did not happen. Along with the exultation "We have won the cold war" came a kind of panic: "What can we do to maintain our military establishment?"

It became clearer now, although it had been suspected, that United States foreign policy was not simply based on the existence of the Soviet Union, but was motivated by fear of revolution in various parts of the world. The radical social critic Noam Chomsky had long maintained that "the appeal to security was largely fraudulent, the Cold War framework having been employed as a device to justify the suppression of independent nationalism—whether in Europe, Japan, or the Third World" (World Orders Old and New).

The fear of "independent nationalism" was that this would jeopardize powerful American economic interests. Revolutions in Nicaragua or Cuba or El Salvador or Chile were threats to United Fruit, Anaconda Copper, International Telephone and Telegraph, and others. Thus,
foreign interventions presented to the public as "in the national interest" were really undertaken for special interests, for which the American people were asked to sacrifice their sons and their tax dollars.

The CIA now had to prove it was still needed. The *New York Times* (February 4, 1992) declared that "in a world where the postwar enemy has ceased to exist, the C.I.A. and its handful of sister agencies, with their billion-dollar satellites and mountains of classified documents, must somehow remain relevant in the minds of Americans."

The military budget remained huge. The cold war budget of $300 billion was reduced by 7 percent to $280 billion. The Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, Colin Powell, said: "I want to scare the hell out of the rest of the world. I don't say that in a bellicose way."

As if to prove that the gigantic military establishment was still necessary, the Bush administration, in its four-year term, launched two wars: a "small" one against Panama and a massive one against Iraq.

Coming into office in 1989, George Bush was embarrassed by the new defiant posture of Panama's dictator, General Manuel Noriega. Noriega's regime was corrupt, brutal, authoritarian, but President Reagan and Vice-President Bush had overlooked this because Noriega was useful to the United States. He cooperated with the CIA in many ways, such as offering Panama as a base for contra operations against the Sandinista government of Nicaragua and meeting with Colonel Oliver North to discuss sabotage targets in Nicaragua. When he was director of the CIA in 1976-1977, Bush had protected Noriega.

But by 1987 Noriega's usefulness was over, his activities in the drug trade were in the open, and he became a convenient target for an administration which wanted to prove that the United States, apparently unable to destroy the Castro regime or the Sandinistas or the revolutionary movement in El Salvador, was still a power in the Caribbean.

Claiming that it wanted to bring Noriega to trial as a drug trafficker (he had been indicted in Florida on that charge) and also that it needed to protect U.S. citizens (a military man and his wife had been threatened by Panamanian soldiers), the United States invaded Panama in December 1989, with 26,000 troops.

It was a quick victory. Noriega was captured and brought to Florida to stand trial (where he was subsequently found guilty and sent to prison). But in the invasion, neighborhoods in Panama City were bombarded and hundreds, perhaps thousands of civilians were killed. It was estimated that 14,000 were homeless. Writer Mark Hertsgaard noted that even if the official Pentagon figure of several hundred civilian casualties was correct, this meant that in Panama the U.S. had killed as many people as did the Chinese government in its notorious attack on student demonstrators at Tiananmen Square in Beijing six months earlier. A new president friendly to the United States was installed in Panama, but poverty and unemployment remained, and in 1992 the *New York Times* reported that the invasion and removal of Noriega "failed to stanch the flow of illicit narcotics through Panama."
The United States, however, succeeded in one of its aims, to reestablish its strong influence over Panama. The Times reported: "The President [of Panama] and his key aides and the American Ambassador, Deane Hinton, have breakfast together once a week in a meeting that many Panamanians view as the place where important decisions are taken."

Liberal Democrats (John Kerry and Ted Kennedy of Massachusetts, and many others) declared their support of the military action. The Democrats were being true to their historic role as supporters of military intervention, anxious to show that foreign policy was bipartisan. They seemed determined to show they were as tough (or as ruthless) as the Republicans.

But the Panama operation was on too small a scale to accomplish what both the Reagan and Bush administrations badly wanted: to overcome the American public's abhorrence, since Vietnam, of foreign military interventions.

Two years later, the Gulf War against Iraq presented such an opportunity. Iraq, under the brutal dictatorship of Saddam Hussein, had taken over its small but oil-rich neighbor, Kuwait, in August 1990.

George Bush needed something at this point to boost his popularity among American voters. The Washington Post (October 16, 1990) had a front-page story headline: "Poll Shows Plunge in Public Confidence: Bush's Rating Plummets." The Post reported (October 28): "Some observers in his own party worry that the president will be forced to initiate combat to prevent further erosion of his support at home."

On October 30, a secret decision was made for war against Iraq. The United Nations had responded to the invasion of Kuwait by establishing sanctions against Iraq. Witness after witness testified before Congressional committees in the fall of 1990 that the sanctions were having an effect and should continue. Secret CIA testimony to the Senate affirmed that Iraq's imports and exports had been reduced by more than 90 percent because of the sanctions.

But after the November elections brought gains for the Democrats in Congress, Bush doubled American military forces in the Gulf, to 500,000, creating what was now clearly an offensive force rather than a defensive one. According to Elizabeth Drew, a writer for the New Yorker, Bush's aide John Sununu "was telling people that a short successful war would be pure political gold for the President and would guarantee his re-election."

Historian Jon Wiener, analyzing the domestic context of the war decision shortly afterward, wrote that "Bush abandoned sanctions and chose war because his time frame was a political one set by the approaching 1992 presidential elections."

That and the long-time U.S. wish to have a decisive voice in the control of Middle East oil resources were the crucial elements in the decision to go to war against Iraq. Shortly after the war, as representatives of the thirteen oil-producing nations were about to gather in Geneva, the business correspondent of the New York Times wrote: "By virtue of its military victory the United States is likely to have more influence in the Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries than any industrial nation has ever exercised."
But those motives were not presented to the American public. It was told that the United States wanted to liberate Kuwait from Iraqi control. The major media dwelled on this as a reason for war, without noting that other countries had been invaded without the United States showing such concern (East Timor by Indonesia, Iran by Iraq, Lebanon by Israel, Mozambique by South Africa; to say nothing of countries invaded by the United States itself—Grenada, Panama).

The justification for war that seemed most compelling was that Iraq was on its way to building a nuclear bomb, but the evidence for this was very weak. Before the crisis over Kuwait, Western intelligence sources had estimated it would take Iraq three to ten years to build a nuclear weapon. Even if Iraq could build a bomb in a year or two, which was the most pessimistic estimate, it had no delivery system to send it anywhere. Besides, Israel already had nuclear weapons. And the United States had perhaps 30,000 of them. The Bush administration was trying hard to develop a paranoia in the nation about an Iraqi bomb which did not yet exist.

Bush seemed determined to go to war. There had been several chances to negotiate an Iraqi withdrawal from Kuwait right after the invasion, including an Iraqi proposal reported on August 29 by Newsday correspondent Knut Royce. But there was no response from the United States. When Secretary of State James Baker went to Geneva to meet with Iraqi foreign minister Tariq Aziz, the instruction from Bush was "no negotiations."

Despite months of exhortation from Washington about the dangers of Saddam Hussein, surveys showed that less than half of the public favored military action.

In January 1991, Bush, apparently feeling the need for support, asked Congress to give him the authority to make war. This was not a declaration of war, as called for by the Constitution; but since Korea and Vietnam, that provision of the Constitution seemed dead, and even the "strict constructionists" on the Supreme Court who prided themselves on taking the words of the Constitution literally and seriously would not intervene.

The debate in Congress was lively. (At one point, a Senate speech was interrupted by protesters in the balcony shouting "No blood for oil!" The protesters were hustled out by guards.) It is likely that Bush was sure of having enough votes, or he would have launched the invasion without Congressional approval; after all, the precedent for ignoring Congress and the Constitution had been set in Korea, Vietnam, Grenada, and Panama.

The Senate voted for military action by only a few votes. The House supported the resolution by a larger majority. However, once Bush ordered the attack on Iraq, both houses, with just a few dissents, Democrats as well as Republicans, voted to "support the war and support the troops."

It was in mid-January 1991, after Saddam Hussein defied an ultimatum to leave Kuwait, that the U.S. launched its air war against Iraq. It was given the name Desert Storm. The government and the media had conjured up a picture of a formidable military power, but Iraq was far from that. The U.S. Air Force had total control of the air, and could bomb at will.

Not only that, U.S. officials had virtual total control of the airwaves. The American public was overwhelmed with television photos of "smart bombs" and confident statements that laser bombs
were being guided with perfect precision to military targets. The major networks presented all of these claims without question or criticism.

This confidence in "smart bombs" sparing civilians may have contributed to a shift in public opinion, from being equally divided on going to war, to perhaps 85 percent support for the invasion. Perhaps more important in winning over public support was that once American military were engaged, it seemed to many people who had previously opposed military action that to criticize it now meant betraying the troops who were there. All over the nation yellow ribbons were displayed as a symbol of support for the forces in Iraq.

In fact, the public was being deceived about how "smart" the bombs being dropped on Iraqi towns were. After talking with former intelligence and Air Force officers, a correspondent for the Boston Globe reported that perhaps 40 percent of the laser-guided bombs dropped in Operation Desert Storm missed their targets.

John Lehman, Secretary of the Navy under President Reagan, estimated there had been thousands of civilian casualties. The Pentagon officially had no figure on this. A senior Pentagon official told the *Globe*, "To tell you the truth, we're not really focusing on this question."

A Reuters dispatch from Iraq described the destruction of a seventy-three-room hotel in a town south of Baghdad, and quoted an Egyptian witness: "They hit the hotel, full of families, and then they came back to hit it again." Reuters reported that the air raids on Iraq first used laser-guided bombs, but within a few weeks turned to B-52s, which carried conventional bombs, meaning more indiscriminate bombing.

American reporters were kept from seeing the war close-up, and their dispatches were subject to censorship. Apparently recalling how press reports of civilian casualties had affected public opinion during the Vietnam war, the U.S. government was taking no chances this time.


The bombing has involved... dozens of high-flying B-52 bombers equipped with huge, unguided munitions. But the Pentagon has not allowed interviews with B-52 pilots, shown videotapes of their actions or answered any questions about the operations of an aircraft that is the most deadly and least accurate in the armada of more than 2000 U.S. and allied planes in the Persian Gulf region... .

In mid-February, U.S. planes dropped bombs on an air raid shelter in Baghdad at four in the morning, killing 400 to 500 people. An Associated Press reporter who was one of few allowed to go to the site said: "Most of the recovered bodies were charred and mutilated beyond recognition. Some clearly were children." The Pentagon claimed it was a military target, but the AP reporter on the scene said: "No evidence of any military presence could be seen inside the wreckage." Other reporters who inspected the site agreed.
After the war, fifteen Washington news bureau chiefs complained in a joint statement that the Pentagon exercised "virtual total control ... over the American press" during the Gulf War.

But while it was happening, leading television news commentators behaved as if they were working for the United States government. For instance, CBS correspondent Dan Rather, perhaps the most widely seen of the TV newsmen, reported from Saudi Arabia on a film showing a laser bomb (this one dropped by British aircraft in support of the American war) hitting a marketplace and killing civilians. Rather's only comment was: "We can be sure that Saddam Hussein will make propaganda of these casualties."

When the Soviet government tried to negotiate an end to the war, bringing Iraq out of Kuwait before the ground war could get under way, top CBS correspondent Lesley Stahl asked another reporter: "Isn't this the nightmare scenario? Aren't the Soviets trying to stop us?" (Ed Siegel, TV reporter for the Boston Globe, February 23, 1991).

The final stage of the war, barely six weeks after it had begun, was a ground assault which, like the air war, encountered virtually no resistance. With victory certain and the Iraqi army in full flight, U.S. planes kept bombing the retreating soldiers who clogged the highway out of Kuwait City. A reporter called the scene "a blazing hell ... a gruesome testament. ... To the east and west across the sand lay the bodies of those fleeing."

A Yale professor of military history, Michael Howard, writing in the New York Times (January 28, 1991), quoted the military strategist Clausewitz approvingly: "The fact that a bloody slaughter is a horrifying act must make us take war more seriously, but not provide an excuse for gradually blunting our swords in the name of humanity." Howard went on to say: "In this conflict of wills, the bottom line remains a readiness to kill and be killed. . . ."

The human consequences of the war became shockingly clear after its end, when it was revealed that the bombings of Iraq had caused starvation, disease, and the deaths of tens of thousands of children. A U.N. team visiting Iraq immediately after the war reported that "the recent conflict has wrought near-apocalyptic results upon the infrastructure.... Most means of modern life support have been destroyed or rendered tenuous...."

A Harvard medical team reporting in May said that child mortality had risen steeply, and that 55,000 more children died in the first four months of the year (the war lasted from January 15 to February 28) than in a comparable period the year before.

The director of a pediatric hospital in Baghdad told a New York Times reporter that on the first night of the bombing campaign the electricity was knocked out: "Mothers grabbed their children out of incubators, took intravenous tubes out of their arms. Others were removed from oxygen tents and they ran to the basement, where there was no heat. I lost more than 40 prematures in the first 12 hours of the bombing."

Although in the course of the war Saddam Hussein had been depicted by U.S. officials and the press as another Hitler, the war ended short of a march into Baghdad, leaving Hussein in power. It seemed that the United States had wanted to weaken him, but not to eliminate him, in order to
keep him as a balance against Iran. In the years before the Gulf War, the United States had sold arms to both Iran and Iraq, at different times favoring one or the other as part of the traditional "balance of power" strategy.

Therefore, as the war ended, the United States did not support Iraqi dissidents who wanted to overthrow the regime of Saddam Hussein. A New York Times dispatch from Washington, datelined March 26, 1991, reported: "President Bush has decided to let President Saddam Hussein put down rebellions in his country without American intervention rather than risk the splintering of Iraq, according to official statements and private briefings today."

This left the Kurdish minority, which was rebelling against Saddam Hussein, helpless. And anti-Hussein elements among the Iraqi majority were also left hanging. The Washington Post reported (May 3, 1991): "Major defections from the Iraqi military were in the offing in March at the height of the Kurdish rebellion, but never materialized because the officers concluded the U.S. would not back the uprising...."

The man who had been Jimmy Carter's National Security Adviser, Zbigniew Brzezinski, a month after the end of the Gulf War, gave a cold assessment of the pluses and minuses of the event. "The benefits are undeniably impressive. First, a blatant act of aggression was rebuffed and punished.... Second, U.S military power is henceforth likely to be taken more seriously.... Third, the Middle East and Persian Gulf region is now clearly an American sphere of preponderance."

Brzezinski, however, was concerned about "some negative consequences." One of them was that "the very intensity of the air assault on Iraq gives rise to concern that the conduct of the war may come to be seen as evidence that Americans view Arab lives as worthless... And that raises the moral question of the proportionality of response."

His point about Arab lives being seen as "worthless" was underlined by the feet that the war provoked an ugly wave of anti-Arab racism in the United States, with Arab-Americans insulted or beaten or threatened with death. There were bumper stickers that said "I don't brake for Iraqis." An Arab-American businessman was beaten in Toledo, Ohio.

Brzezinski's measured assessment of the Gulf War could be taken as close to representing the view of the Democratic Party. It went along with the Bush administration. It was pleased with the results. It had some misgivings about civilian casualties. But it did not constitute an opposition.

President George Bush was satisfied. As the war ended, he declared on a radio broadcast: "The specter of Vietnam has been buried forever in the desert sands of the Arabian peninsula."

The Establishment press very much agreed. The two leading news magazines, Time and Newsweek, had special editions hailing the victory in the war, noting there had been only a few hundred American casualties, without any mention of Iraqi casualties. A New York Times editorial (March 30, 1991) said: "America's victory in the Persian Gulf war ... provided special vindication for the U.S. Army, which brilliantly exploited its firepower and mobility and in the process erased memories of its grievous difficulties in Vietnam."
A black poet in Berkeley, California, June Jordan, had a different view: "I suggest to you it's a hit the same way that crack is, and it doesn't last long."