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Power and Performance:
The War on Terror between the Sacred
and the Profane

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The War on Terror between the Sacred and the Profane*

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LECTURE

by

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Power and Performance: The War on Terror between the Sacred and the Profane

Social action is performative. Individual and collective action communicates meaning, consciously or not, to an audience who must ‘read’ that behavior in turn. This approach grounds social action in meaning, but not in meaning alone (Alexander et al, 2006). Meaning is attributed to actions by audiences against the background of previously existing collective representations, which are structured by the division between the sacred and the profane. Such meaning attribution provides what Austin (1957) called the locutionary dimension of performativity. But actors must propitiate the gods of illocution and perlocution as well.

The September 11th Strike as Performance

If we want to understand 9/11, we must begin with background representations. For more than a millennium, Christians and Muslims have engaged in extravagant misunderstandings of one another. The reasons for this tragic history of conflict cannot concern us here. It is recorded in and projected by thousands of stories, written tracts, and, in modern times, by television and film. It is the cultural reality, the set of signifiers—the stereotyped constructions that constitute social imaginaries—that underlies what millions in the West and the East think they ‘observe’ today. Actual

occurrences in the conflict between East and West become events insofar as they are typified (Mast 2006). Contingent events become the signifieds of these background signifiers. Specifications and refractions of barely changing structures, they form the speech acts of the social languages that mark out the politics of the sacred and profane.

Against these background representations Osama Bin Laden's exercise of violent power on September 11th was seen as lucid and compelling to many on the 'Eastern' side. It was seen as reparation, experienced as revenge, perhaps even promised liberation. But if Bin Laden's attack made sense—if it achieved a semantic location—this did not mean that his performance would necessarily achieve success in pragmatic terms.

Radical Islamicist groups, especially those trained in the anti-Soviet insurgency in Afghanistan, all had access to these same background representations. What made Bin-Ladin different was his ability to make this occidental literature walk and talk. To understand what it means to achieve not only locutionary but illocutionary and perlocutionary force, the other elements of social performance must be brought into play.¹

Script: Bin-Laden and his lieutenants actually wrote out detailed plans for the September 11th attack, including preparations and training, directions of movement and time, entrances and exists.

Actors: To prepare for the performance, BIN-LADEN assembled, with painstaking effort, a cast of less than 20 actors, supported by a big background crew. They were superbly trained and carried out difficult parts. Rehearsals took place in *Al Qaeda* training camps.

Means of symbolic production: This is perhaps BIN-LADEN's most creative and significant innovation in terms of the cultural pragmatic requirements for performance. The large passenger airplanes were not only cruelly effective in the instrumental sense but powerfully expressive weapons in the dramaturgical sense, and they were cheap and relatively easy to obtain. The Twin Towers against which these new weapons were aimed performed as equally evocative symbols. The metonymic juxtaposition of planes and towers created a global stage for the performance of political murder, capturing the world's media attention.

Social Power: It has often been said that Bin-Laden did not have access to significant social power, which is what defines warfare of an asymmetrical kind. But he did, in fact, have considerable physical and financial leverage. He controlled spaces, influence, and governmental power, first in Sudan and then later in Afghanistan and Pakistan. This access to social power was critical in allowing the terrorist performance to be launched, providing not only arenas for rehearsal but financial and ideological networks, allowing theologically and pragmatically legitimate promises of salvation to be made to martyrs and families.

Mise-en-Scene: Bin-Laden and his staff's directorial effectiveness could not be faulted. They thought through thoroughly the technical requisites of putting the elements of performance 'into the scene.'

1 For this notion, and for the other technical concepts about performativity which are introduced in the following, see Alexander 2006.

Audience: Even with all these elements in place, Bin Laden's performance on September 11th was not assured success. There remained the audience to contend with, the final performative component whose relative independence cannot be denied. In considering the audience, we confront an issue that is critical to considering the performance of power in complex, socially and culturally fragmented societies.

For the sake of simplification, and this is, indeed, grossly to simplify, let us say there were two audiences, the 'home' or Arab audience and the 'away' or Western one. With the first audience, the performance of terror was virtually a complete success. As Bin Laden remarked in a later videotape, 'the Brothers who heard the news were overjoyed by it.' Was the Western, layered from New York outward (Rauer, 2006), convinced by the terrorist actors and their script? This would suggest that on September 11th Bin Laden exercised power in a successful way.

The answer depends, of course, on one's estimation of what it was that Bin Laden and *Al Qaeda* consciously or unconsciously wanted to perform. Minimally, they wished to communicate power and danger; maximally, they hoped to overwhelm and degrade American collective identity. By creating subjective weakness and disintegration, the attacks would force submission, the term within which Bin Laden has continued to couch his demands to the West today. Certainly Bin-Laden wanted the American audience to experience his terrorist action as power and danger, but he hoped also to teach Americans about the integrity and purity of Arab land and the transcendence and righteousness of Islamic faith.

The September 11th attacks succeeded in their minimal ambition, but not in their maximal one.

From Trauma to Triumph: Resignifying the Terror As Civil and Military *Communitas*

911 was indeed experienced as a vast trauma. This trauma lingered and affected Americans for long afterward. It marked a palpably new sense of America as a vulnerable nation, as a potential victim. It would not be an exaggeration to say that, in the weeks and months after 911, 'fear stalked the land.' Yet, far from undermining American collective identity, this fear and danger actually enraged and energized it, to such an extent that it triggered a series of counter-performances that would themselves eventually trigger counter-performances in turn.

From the perspective of terrorist actors and their director/leaders, the inner life of the enemy is somehow connected to its physical manifestations. It is believed, or half-believed, that, if terrorism destroys the material structures of the enemy society and the biological bodies of enemy persons, it will, by virtue of such destruction, destroy the inner life of the collectivity and its individual members. This working proposition, however, overlooks the spiritual core of every society's collective life. That, on the evening of the attacks, President George W. Bush spoke to this spiritual core, and associated himself with it, goes far to explaining his own purification in its aftermath, as indicated, for example, in the extraordinary spike in his poll ratings. 'Those acts of mass murder were intended to frighten our nation into chaos and retreat,' the President

declared, 'but they have failed.' The reason for this failure? 'Our country is strong. Terrorist acts can shake the foundation of our biggest buildings, but they cannot touch the foundation of America.'

The President at that moment was right. From the smoldering ashes of destruction there emerged an American counter-performance of strength not weakness, of triumph not trauma (Giesen 2006). This revivification of what Victor Turner might have called 'civil *communitas*' pointed, not to the destruction, but to the vitality of America as a democratic, civil nation.

For the American audience, then, the terror of 911 actually had a counter-signifying effect. The explosions pushed the things and people it touched and destroyed – the material referents of signs – from the profane to the sacred side of American cultural life. The Twin Towers had been signified as ugly and mercantile, globs of materialism marring the Statue of Liberty. In the bathetic afterglow of 911, they were symbolized as things of great energy, beauty, and democracy. The economic elite working inside the Towers had been the object of disdain and aspersion—think Michael Douglas, the academy award winning arch-villain of the movie *Wall Street*. Post-911, this elite was spoken of in hallowed tones, sanctified by its association with the heroic ethnic working class of firemen and policemen. 'New York City' too was neatly shifted in its frame, from polluted outcast to the purified-by-fire center of American democratic life.

The movement from trauma to triumph, however, was not only civil in its transforming power; it was also militaristic. It revivified not only civil community but the 'community of warriors,' the ancient band of brothers, the nation in its primordial and primitive, not modern and democratic guise. This ritual revivification had nothing to do with civility or inclusion and everything to do with the ethic of manly struggle. The roots of this ethic lay outside Christian civilization, emerging from within the republican-warrior cultures of Greece and Roman cultures, whose archetypes have continued to energize, and deplete, Western civilizations today (Carroll, 2001; Gibson, 1994).

The U.S. is not only a democratic but a warrior nation. It was founded, and twice refounded, not only by Puritan covenant, Bill of Rights, and Reconstruction-era amendments, but by Indians wars, a long military struggle against Britain, and a much bloodier civil war. In the 150 years since, the American Republic has been engaged in more or less continuous war on behalf of itself and others. In this republican-warrior nation, we find the language of friend and enemy, not in the civil and Madison but in the Schmittian sense.

America's counter-performance to terror, in other words, was not only about the reconstruction of civil community, with an emphasis on solidarity, autonomy, and equality. It was also about reconstructing the technical and organizational capacity to project military power, and the moral capacity to sustain hierarchy, discipline, command, and control. If we examine the front page of the liberal *New York Times* on the morning after the attack, September 12th, it is this militarizing frame of aggression and defense that we see widely displayed:

"All the News That's Fit to Print"

The New York Times

Late Edition
New York: Today, sunny, a few after-noon clouds. High 77. Tonight, slightly more humid. Low 63. Tomorrow, sun then clouds. High 81. Yesterday, high 81, low 63. Weather map, Page C18

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NEW YORK, WEDNESDAY, SEPTEMBER 12, 2001
75 CENTS

U.S. ATTACKED

HIJACKED JETS DESTROY TWIN TOWERS AND HIT PENTAGON IN DAY OF TERROR

A CREEPING HORROR
Buildings Burn and Fall as Onlookers Search for Elusive Safety
By N. R. KLEINFELDER



President Vows to Exact Punishment for 'Evil'
By SERGE SCHMEMMANN
Hijackers slammed jetliners into each of New York's World Trade Center towers yesterday, toppling both in a hellish storm of ash, glass, smoke and leaping victims, while a third jetliner crashed into the Pentagon in Virginia. There was no official count, but President Bush said thousands had perished, and in the immediate aftermath the calamity was already being ranked the worst and most audacious

In his front page story entitled 'Awaiting the Aftershocks,' the legendary *Times* reporter R.W. Apple, who first distinguished himself for critical reporting on the Vietnam war, wrote that the 'astonishingly well-coordinated attacks on the World Trade Center' had 'plunged the nation into a war-like struggle against an enemy that will be hard to identify with certainty and hard to punish with precision.' On its back page, *The Time's* lone conservative, William Safire, entitled his column 'New Day of Infamy,' metaphorically associating the attacks with President Franklin Roosevelt's iconic characterization of the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor almost sixty years before.

Defining the attacks of 9/11 in terms of war was the result neither of cabal nor neoconservative ideology. It was rooted, rather, in the political culture of the republican nation. Just so, the counter-signifying process concerned not only civil *communitas* but military reconstruction. It triggered the movement from attacked to attacker, from victim to victor, from civilian to soldier.

The invasion of Afghanistan and destruction of the Taliban were the *mise-en-scene*, the putting into the scene, of both triumphant scripts. This military performance made both metaphoric and metonymic sense. It entered physically and symbolically into the heart of darkness that had endangered the American nation. It challenged the symbolic and physically profane. The skillful military invasion and scattering of the Taliban was meaningfully compelling and pragmatically effective.

From Triumph to Trauma: Military Counter-Performances as Success and Failure

In dramaturgical terms, the Afghan invasion, launched only weeks after the terrorist attacks, fused the separate elements of this American counter-performance into an apparently seamless whole. It was viewed, by American and Western audiences more broadly, as possessing authenticity and verisimilitude. Constituting a solidarizing quasi-

ritual, it linked the democrat and warrior, the *communitas* of civil and military life. This successful performance created an enormously satisfying, if short lived, triumph, which seemed to 'correct' the trauma of 911.

The Iraq war that followed can be viewed, in performative terms, as a sequel, or even 'triquial.' Who were the directors of this new performance? Certainly the American President, his staff, his military chiefs, and cabinet ministers. But perhaps they were more the producers, the political sources that facilitated its production. The real directors were less visible, a secretive and determined group of neoconservative strategists and ideologues. These neoconservatives were at once deeply idealistic about the possibilities of democratic reconstruction globally, and specifically in the Middle East, and deeply cynical about democratic process at home. They were hard-eyed realists who saw themselves through rose-colored glasses as republican warriors, and their opponents, both inside and outside the U.S., as dangerous and corrupted enemies.

For most of the decade preceding the second Bush presidency, these 'Vulcans,' as they called themselves, had been itching to invade Iraq and overthrow Saddam. Now, with the great success of the first and second acts of the (counter-performance) 'From Trauma to Triumph,' these determined ideologues seized their opportunity. To the American people, they presented the Iraq invasion as the drama's Third Act. An 'iteration' of the earlier smash hit performances, it constituted a telos, a narrative denouement that would bring down the curtain to standing ovations. The revival of America's civil and military *communitas* would be fully achieved. The arc of counter-signification would be complete.

After social performances end, they constitute collective memories, providing representations that background subsequent performance in turn. This was certainly the case for the Afghan invasion, which was fought, metaphorically and metonymically, with the martyrdoms and triumphs of the up-from-ashes aftermath of 911 firmly in mind. The residues of the Afghan success, in turn, left glowing nuggets of collective memory for the would-be Iraqi revival that followed. One big question remained, however. Even if the background representations for this third Act were readily available, would the other elements of performance fall into place?

Let us begin with the problems of scripting, which must assemble and foreground codes and narratives, either proscriptively or retroactively, from background representations. To create a hermeneutically script effective is never easy to do. To persuasively and not only physically fight Saddam – to be allowed and encouraged to start a second Iraq war—a new action-specific script would have to be created, one that could mediate between triumphant background representations and the pragmatics of the here and now. After establishing a coherent interface between realistic exigencies and background symbolic structure, this scripted coding and narrative would have to fold into, or at least seem to complement, the requirements for successful performance that remained. It would have to help generate authentic acting. It would have to adapt to, and help generate access to and control over, the means of symbolic production. It would have to be open to, as well as defend against, the resources of hovering social powers. It would have to complement the flow of *mise-en-scene*, the unfolding of the invasion and its aftermath on the ground. Last but not least, it would have to calibrate a fit between message and audiences.

Good scripts must be agonistic, coding actors into the binaries of good and evil and narrating a plot that has beguiling beginnings, ambiguous middles, and cathartic ends. Most good scripts also strive for clarity and concision. These hermeneutical requirements point to the first problem that scripting the Iraq invasion encountered on the ground. It was easy to describe Saddam as evil but not to give this evility sufficient weight. Without writing the protagonists as a seriously evil, the script's invasion could not be read as fateful, as adumbrating an imminent and decisive triumph. Only a crusade could sustain a narrative of blood sacrifice in war.

The script writers of the Iraq war faced an immense hermeneutic challenge, and this explains their two most important lies. One way to thicken Saddam's evility was to connect him to the earlier trauma that had justified the immediately preceding war. Despite the Presidential advisors' fervent hopes and queries, however, it was not credible to assert that Saddam actually had helped plan, or even to support, the September 11th attack.

The connection between Saddam and 911 would have to be metonymically and metaphorically made. If Saddam could be linked to terrorism, by giving stipends to the families of suicide bombers and or even harboring terrorists on his own national soil, a rhetorical if not empirical association to 911 could be constructed. He had, in fact, given money to suicide bombers; allowed a small terrorist group inside his national boundaries; engaged in state terrorism; committed gross human rights violations, ethnic cleansing, and mass murder. Each of these issues was placed on the table by the scripters of 'Iraq.' Through such metonymic relationships it might be possible to build a metaphorical bridge to 911. This would make it easier to draw powerful moral sustenance from the binary representations of the originating trauma. If the evility of the Iraq antagonist was deepened, the invasion could be narrated in a salvatory way.

Even these imaginative constructions, however, did not meet the symbolic requirements of the day. Americans were well misled, a majority believing the fictive linkages to be undeniable fact. The serial relationship between Saddam's actions in Iraq and 911 at home, however, was too extended. The danger remained too far from home. The victims of Saddam's terrorist efforts were of little interest to most Western audiences. Such narrowness of empathic imagination suggests moral failure; it also had significant sociological effect. For Western audiences, Saddam was evil, but he did not seem seriously or world-historically evil, a threat to the moral and physical existence of life in the West.

The serial relation would have to become fused. To be truly evil, Saddam needed to be linked to a world-historical crime. This semiotic demand led to the assertion that Saddam possessed, had used, and would use again weapons of mass destruction, the famously eponymous 'WMD's', capitalized and acronymized, that were scripted lavishly and spoken in hushed tones. If such weapons did exist, and about that there was said to be certainty, and if we lived in an age of global transportation and transmission, which was undeniable, then it was only a matter of time before these weapons of horror would strike at Americans, and, before that, at Israelis and possibly Europeans too. To write WMD's into the script was to evoke the previous century's most apocalyptic events. Chemical weapons had terrorized tens of thousands of soldiers during World War I, and nuclear weapons had killed hundreds of thousands at the end of World War II. WMD's and their possible victims also recalled another 'mass,' the mass murder of the Jews that became

the Holocaust, the terrifying symbol of evil that continually threatened to darken modernity's good name.

It was for these reasons of symbolic logic that WMD's become central to the Iraqi invasion script. But if this script now worked aesthetically, could it be made to walk and talk, to work pragmatically as well? Could the script be put into practice, such that it would produce performances with which audiences could identify and stand up and applaud? To create such dramaturgical fusion, audiences must be convinced that performances have verisimilitude, that they are authentic and true.

It was just this necessity that led to the play within the play. The WMD-centered script was to be pre-tested, in an out-of-town performance. The actor was American Secretary of State Colin Powell. The stage was the emergency meeting of the U.N. Security Council. The time was early February, 2003.

Social performances are historically, not only geographically layered. Secretary Powell's appearance was recognized as an iteration, both by his production team and its incipient critics, of an earlier iconic moment during another national crisis. Adlai Stevenson, John Kennedy's American ambassador to the United Nations and a hero of the democratic left, had turned in a bravado performance at an emergency meeting of the UN Security Council during the Cuban missile crisis, nearly four decades before.

President Bush and his aides had chosen Secretary of State Colin Powell because he, too, was popular with the liberal left, despite his Republican affiliation. He was reputed to be honest and bold, and he was thought to be politically independent. Alone among the President's men, Powell's performative utterances would not immediately be framed in a partisan way. The American and global audience would likely hear him out. Looking relaxed and sure of himself, and making ample help of visual aids, Secretary Powell seized the podium and dramatically put the administration's big lies into the global civil sphere. When it was over, he felt that he had given 'the performance of his life'. Many segments of his audience, particularly the American, seemed to agree. Polling support bumped up sharply.

The success of this global performance was not preordained. Its fusion had to be achieved; it was not ascribed. That it was successful transformed the performance from dress-rehearsal into prologue. What quickly followed, the dramatic opening scene of the Iraqi invasion, was characterized in terms of the sublime—'shock and awe.'

While success came easily, it was too immaculate. For in the days immediately leading up to the invasion, and in those that quickly followed it, the dramaturgical justifications for blood sacrifice ran into trouble.

As I have earlier suggested, effective scripting depends on agonism. The tension between sacred and profane must be sustained, so that the zig-zag reversals that make plots interesting can lead to cathartic resolution. This agonism was undermined, however, by two events on the ground, contingent and unscripted happenings that threatened the hegemonic script. The first was Saddam's agreement to cooperate with, rather than to confront, the new Security Council resolutions, allowing weapons inspectors relatively free access to look around. They traveled through Iraq investigating putative weapons

sites. Of course, the meaning and motivation for Saddam's accession were ambiguous, and the effectiveness of the inspection process far from transparent, but taken together they manifestly weakened the cut of the antagonist's evilty, and threatened to undermine the tense agonism being constructed by the war script.

Eventually, these inspectors, headed by a grave and stolid Swedish diplomat, asked the UN for more time, in order to be rational and fair. By opposing this request, the US and UK, and their Allies in the developing war Coalition, publicly and dramatically broke with the democratic procedural process of the Security Council. This cast a bad light, and even possibly a polluting shadow, on those who would be the war's moral protagonists, foreshadowing their own potential for evilty in turn.

These unscripted, symbolically realigning events led to the break-up of the Western democratic alliance. The American-led military party adopted a go-it-alone attitude, a self-described 'coalition of the willing' that, despite its civil sounding label, also connoted gangs or posses. This split in the Western alliance made it even more difficult to frame the resort to violence in a consensual and democratic way. It increased the distance between the civil and military narratives that swirled around the initial days of the Iraqi war.

From the invasion's earliest moments, then, there developed, among significant American and Western audiences, a counter-coding and counter-narration opposing the script projected by the governments of America and its allies. In this emerging counterscript, it would be the American President Bush who was inscribed as a symbol of arbitrary authority and violence, not Saddam. It would be Bush who projected a dangerous and polluting aura, whose honesty and sincerity were doubted, whose motives were projected as irrational, and whose actions generated fear.

Coalition military and civilian leaders had predicted that the performance of 'Iraqi Freedom' would not only be successful in instrumental terms—routing the Iraq army—but theatrically as well. Audiences of Iraq citizens would welcome the soldiers as liberators, with flowers in their hands, and the subsequent installation of democracy would justify America's warrior myth in civil terms.

This did not occur. After the dispersal of Saddam and his army, conspicuous groups of Iraqis began publicly looting their national treasures, not only destroying their own patrimony but carrying away vital icons marking the very beginnings of civilization. Because American soldiers looked the other way, refusing to block this profanation, the civil side of the democratic-warrior balance was cast destabilized. More doubt was cast on the master narrative of liberation that was to legitimate the military founding of civil society in the Middle East.

Soon the narrative of military triumph itself was subject to challenge. Coalition control became undermined by a growing insurgency, countering both the pragmatic effectiveness and the moral integrity of the American counter-performance against terror. The multiplicity of social power poses immense challenges to performative success. In the aftermath of the invasion, American forces failed to monopolize the means of violence. The invading army was too small, the established Iraqi armed forces were disbanded, and the most experienced members of the nation's administrative apparatus were purged in the campaign against the Baathist party. American was creating its own

counter-powers, an underground leadership, administrative staff, and armed insurgency that further undermined not only the effectiveness of its military force but its chances for sympathetic framing and interpretation by Iraqi audiences.

Tone-deaf American political authorities failed to find ways to bridge the yawning problems of sectarian majority rule. As it became increasingly clear that the Shiite Muslims exercised effective cultural control, the connections between American occupying forces and both Iraqi and American domestic audiences became ever more attenuated, or de-fused. The global audiences were fragmented as well. The early pro- and anti-America splits within Western audiences deepened throughout the post-invasion period. Events seemed to confirm the initially skeptical counter-narratives of influential intellectuals and political elites in such nations as Germany, France, Italy, and Spain. These and other critical 'reviews' of the unfolding military intervention constructed barriers between European publics and Coalition actions that were difficult to breach. These barriers did not prevent the Coalition from waging war; they undermined its symbolic power for legitimate war-making.

The resulting instability and chaos, and the resurgence of anti-American feelings, effected an extraordinary rhetoric transformation in the critical scripting of war. The American army gradually but unmistakably shifted from 'liberator' to 'occupier,' from the democratic to the anti-democratic side. This new labeling was deployed as much by American reporters as by others. This symbolic transformation crystallized and exacerbated the shifting fortune's of America's symbolic justification for war.

As the WMD's failed to appear in the days, then weeks and months after the invasion, the anti-democratic construction of American action became more deeply entrenched, for the language of deceit and political manipulation became harder to avoid. The revelations of systematic torture at Abu Ghraib, publicity about secret CIA kidnappings and renditions, the Supreme Court's ringing declaration that holding enemy aliens without trial and representation was illegal, the exposure of NSA domestic spying without prior warrant—these revelations further denied America's status of democratic protagonist.

While the signifiers of the discourse of American civil society remained powerful, its ability to successfully represent this discourse in the social signifieds of the war project had failed. The stage of 'Operation Iraqi Freedom' was being evacuated. The Americans in Iraq were increasingly constructed as colonial oppressors who would have to exit stage right if Iraqis were, in fact, ever to become free. Yet the Iraqis themselves seemed less and less likely to be constructed as having the capacity for freedom, as sectarian militia and death squads took murderous aim, not only at Americans but at one another.

Conclusion

While the war's military outcome has not yet been settled, in performative terms it is clearly in shambles. A good part of the reason for this failure belongs to the difficulty of formulating an effective script, one that could mediate between the background traumas and triumphs and the actual exigencies of geopolitical realities. It must also be attributed to the difficulties of making the script walk and talk on the ground, to the unexpected actions of Iraqi citizens and insurgents, the incompetent and undemocratic actions of

American officials in Iraq and at home, the plurality of social powers, and the fragmentation of audiences in the U.S. and abroad.

In the arc that stretches from the restorative *communitas* of 911 to the bitter military, political, and ideological polarization of today, we observe not only the defeat of a great nation's military project but its demoralization. In performative terms, we see symbolic inversion and evacuation, a drama whose unfolding was blocked, and whose meaning seems at once elusive and dangerously incomplete.

As the American war party has been pushed from the sacred to the profane, the very symbolic identity of the enemy has wobbled and become diffuse. The figure of Saddam has shifted from vainglorious and threatening dictator, to hermit-trickster hiding in the hole, to dazed and unkempt prisoner, and then to raving defendant, before finally coming to rest as the first hectoring, then hectored, then seemingly dignified victim of a botched if still morally justified execution. In the course of this signifying process, the iconic 'Saddam' as evil slipped away, and a more comic and ridiculous figure appeared.

The good and evil positions as originally plotted have disappeared, but the soon to be empty stage will not quickly become the setting for an imminent triumph. For Western critics, at least, no sacred and compelling narrative has emerged from the insurgent side. Forty years ago, in an earlier military debacle, the apparently humanistic and compelling narratives of socialism and national liberation made America's enemies—Ho Chi Min, the Viet Cong, and the National Liberation Front—seem attractive to significant audiences and elite critics both at home and abroad. Today, by contrast, there is little enthusiasm, even among the war's fiercest opponents, for the sectarian ideologies, political leaders and organization, much less the military tactics that of America's enemies in Iraq.

Yet, without a sacred place to stand, it is difficult to represent evil. If America has been murderous and invasive without good reason or just cause, how can we condemn those who have opposed the invasion? Some critics have called the Iraqi war a tragedy, others a stupid and unforgivable mistake. It is now beyond good and evil. Neither sacred nor profane, it has become mundane.

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