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Touched by Fire: Readings in Time of War

We shared the incommunicable experience of war. We have felt, we still feel, the passion of life to its top. . . . In our youth, our hearts were touched by fire.

—Oliver Wendell Holmes Jr.

In the late summer of that year we lived in a house in a village that looked across the river and the plains to the mountains.” So begins the perfect first paragraph—at once ominous and luminous—of Ernest Hemingway’s *A Farewell to Arms*. The narrator, Frederick Henry, an American lieutenant in the Italian ambulance corps during the Great War, tries to fix his attention on redeeming details in nature. “In the bed of the river there were pebbles and boulders, dry and white in the sun, and the water was clear and swiftly moving and blue in the channels.” However, though he looked out on the world with what Malcolm Cowley called a “*spectatorial* attitude,” trying to detach himself from involvement, Lieutenant Henry could not avoid seeing ominous details of war as he watched weary Italian troops march off to battle.¹

Troops went by the house and down the road and the dust they raised powdered the leaves of the trees. The trunks of the trees too were dusty and the leaves fell early that year and we saw the troops marching along the road and the dust rising and leaves, stirred by the breeze, falling and the soldiers marching and afterward the road bare and white except for the leaves.²

Lieutenant Henry had to endure a trial by fire—he was wounded in battle—before he could make his “separate peace.”

In the late summer of 1990, continuing through a tense autumn and an alarming early winter, Americans watched the gathering of armed forces in the Middle East with increasing concern and public debate. Building toward a troop strength of half a million, American forces, including National Guard units, flew off to bases in Saudi Arabia and to ships in the Persian Gulf. After Iraq’s sudden invasion of Kuwait in August, President George Bush prepared for war if Iraqi forces were not removed. He was “running out of patience” with Saddam Hussein, the Iraqi leader, who, Bush said, is “worse than Hitler.”³ So, through a figure of speech, did President Bush raise the stakes and pursue a policy of intimidation—“brinkmanship” it was called

when practiced by John Foster Dulles in the Eisenhower administration—against a personalized, demonized enemy, Saddam Hussein.

In confirmation of Bush's willingness to sacrifice American lives in war, Americans learned that the Pentagon had ordered 45,000 body bags for possible use in the Middle East.⁴ (It was estimated, by *The Nation*, that war could result in 5,000 dead and 15,000 wounded in the first ten days of fighting, then 10,000 dead and 35,000 wounded in a victorious ninety-day battle, or 30,000 dead in twenty days, along with 100,000 civilian casualties.)⁵ The United States steered through the United Nations Security Council a resolution approving military action if Iraqi forces were not removed from Kuwait by January 15, 1991. All the elements were in place for a dramatic, bloody engagement—a war, unlike our forays into Grenada or Panama, with no script. The end of the Cold War had, it seemed, made a regional hot war more likely.

Thus the 1990 holiday season had all the ominous ease of summer 1939, or the eerie days of the Cuban missile crisis in October 1962. Testifying before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee on December 5, Secretary of State James Baker stated the administration's position: "A very dangerous dictator—armed to the teeth—is threatening a critical region at a defining moment in history." And Baker threatened Hussein, saying that U.S. forces, if deployed, would be used "suddenly, massively and decisively."⁶ (This war, if fought, would not be prolonged, as was the war in Vietnam, the administration seemed to say, though it said nothing about the cost, either in money or in lives.) On Christmas Eve 1990, Secretary of Defense Dick Cheney, in Saudi Arabia, announced that the U.S. military is prepared to counter threatened Iraqi chemical attacks with "overwhelming and devastating force," and warned troops in the Persian Gulf to be on alert for attack over the holidays. On the home front the national mood was low. Pollster Louis Harris said, "We're in a real funk. There's a great cloud over the American people this Christmas."⁷

During the fall of 1990, domestic opposition to the potential war had grown as quickly as American troop strength. For example, testifying before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee in early December, Zbigniew Brzezinski, former national security adviser under President Jimmy Carter, took issue with the Bush policy of buildup and name-calling. "To speak of Saddam Hussein as a Hitler is to trivialize Hitler and to elevate Saddam," suggested Brzezinski.⁸

However, arguing in support of Bush's policies, Alexander M. Haig Jr., former adviser to President Richard Nixon and secretary of state under President Ronald Reagan, accepted Bush's Hitler analogy and extended the parallel to include Munich, when "appeasement" only encouraged Hitler and made World War II inevitable. Vietnam, argued Haig, provides another

instructive analogical lesson for our policies in the Middle East: we should, this time, use force “decisively.”⁹ By year’s end President Bush repeatedly reaffirmed Haig’s argument for decisive force and continued to make rash threats. Thus a war of words, aggression by analogy—we would not be timid against a tyrant, as England had been in Munich, nor would we “restrain” our forces as we had in Vietnam!—occupied the attention of Americans as the days of 1990 dwindled down.

As Christmas 1990 approached, storm clouds gathered, far across the sea and in Washington. Lieutenant General Calvin A. H. Waller, the deputy commander of American forces in the gulf, said that American troops would *not* be ready to fight Iraq by January 15.¹⁰ The Bush administration, apparently at odds with itself as well as with critics in Congress, went into spin control to qualify Waller’s claim. Pentagon officials said U.S. war planes *would* be ready to strike Baghdad by mid-January, and President Bush told a group of congressmen that Saddam Hussein must be made to realize that “he’s going to get his ass kicked.”¹¹ President Bush was talking tough and carrying a big stick.

George Bush invoked Theodore Roosevelt as a model for his presidency. In the Cabinet Room, Bush removed the portrait of Calvin Coolidge, hung by Ronald Reagan, and replaced it with a picture of Roosevelt. In the Oval Office, he displayed two sculptures of the Rough Rider. It was Teddy Roosevelt, of course, who formulated the aphorism “Speak softly and carry a big stick.” Sidney Blumenthal noted that “Bush has picked up the stick, but he has spoken shrilly—and incoherently. . . . If he is swept away in a messianic crusade to an unknown destiny, it will be because he failed to limit his objectives and commitments from the start.”¹²

It was Barbara Bush, during the fall of 1990, who took a kinder, gentler line—reshaping the down-and-dirty, I’m-no-wimp image of George Bush, which still lingered from the scurrilous 1988 presidential campaign—by composing a book from the “dictated” memoirs of her springer spaniel, Millie. *Millie’s Book*, which topped Ronald Reagan’s memoirs on bestseller lists by year’s end, is a curious and defiantly silly book.

An album of snapshots of Millie, a spotted and furtive-looking beast, in various poses—reclining on chairs or floors throughout the White House, romping on the South Lawn with the “Prez,” posing for family portraits with her pups and schmoozing with the rich and famous: snuggling with television personality Diane Sawyer, ignoring evangelist Billy Graham, tolerating a pat from Vice President Dan Quayle, and reclining on a sofa between “Bar” and comedian Dan Aykroyd, who appears to be recoiling from a bad smell. Millie shows a surprising interest in White House

furnishings, renovations, and her mistress's wardrobe; she snootily sniffs around many high-status visitors to the White House. Perhaps, if pet owners are said to grow to resemble their pets, Millie is imitating Bush family "values." Proceeds from *Millie's Book* go to the Barbara Bush Foundation for Family Literacy, though it is difficult to see how this book will advance that cause.

Somehow, Millie's preposterous yappings about the Prez and Bar neither amused nor distracted this reader. However, Millie does expand our base of cultural literacy by calling attention several times to George Bush's fascination with Abraham Lincoln as a wartime president. In the state dining room hangs a copy of George Healy's portrait of Lincoln discussing the war and prospects for peace with Generals Ulysses S. Grant and William Tecumseh Sherman and Admiral David Dixon Porter, aboard the *River Queen*, on the James River near Richmond, close to the end of the Civil War.¹³ In the president's upstairs office, Millie notes, hangs the original of Henley's painting *The Peacemaker*. "The Prez and I admire the painting and are inspired when we look at it." However, it is difficult to imagine why a springer spaniel would be inspired by a portrait of four middle-aged men sitting and talking. Clearly Millie has incorporated George Bush's enthusiasm here; the dog, speaking through her mistress, has become her master's voice! The president "is so inspired by [the painting] that when he addressed the forty-fourth session of the United Nations General Assembly, he said,

There's a painting that hangs on the wall of my office in the White House and it pictures President Abraham Lincoln and his Generals meeting at the end of a war that remains the bloodiest in the history of my country. Outside, at the moment, a battle rages—in this picture. And yet what we see in the distance is a rainbow—a symbol of hope, of a passing of the storm. That painting is called THE PEACEMAKERS. For me, it is a constant reminder that our struggle—the struggle for peace—is a struggle blessed by hope.¹⁴

Indeed, George Bush seems obsessed by this painting, referring to it repeatedly. After his inauguration, Bush, standing before the picture, confided to a friend that he wondered "how he might be tested, whether he too might be one of the handful of Presidents destined to change the course of history."¹⁵ (Perhaps that is why, late in 1990, George Bush kept speaking of "a new world order.") A year after his inauguration, George Bush gave Diane Sawyer and the television viewers of *Prime Time Live* a tour of the White House.

Standing before the Henley painting, Sawyer asked the president if he

agreed with Lincoln that the presidency was a “splendid misery.” “Well,” the president replied, “I haven’t been tested by fire. Abraham Lincoln had a goal of holding the union, keep[ing] brother from killing brother. I mean, it was tough.”¹⁶ By December 1990, many feared that George Bush was closing down his options and seeking just such a test by fire, as a wartime president, in the Middle East; then he, too, could call the presidency a splendid misery.

Darkest of all Decembers
Ever my life has known,
Sitting here by the embers
Stunned, helpless, alone.¹⁷

So wrote Mary Chestnut, in her extraordinary diary of Civil War days, as she brooded upon General Sherman’s capture of Savannah in December 1864. Chestnut’s eloquent reflection on the devastations of war were read by actress Julie Harris, against a background of stark images and plaintive melodies, in *The Civil War*, an eleven-hour documentary produced by a team led by Ken Burns, which appeared on the Public Broadcasting System in early autumn and was repeated just before Christmas. Thus, while Americans warily contemplated war in the Middle East over issues that were not well articulated, they looked back in renewed wonder at the principled, passionate slaughter in the American Civil War. Images of dead young men, many of them barefoot children by the end of the war, stacked in mounds, piled in ditches, strewn across fields—Manassas, Bull Run, Shiloh, Sharpsburg, Chancellorsville, Chickamauga, the Wilderness, Gettysburg; the names constitute an American elegy—impinged on one after viewing this marvelous documentary, after reading this vividly illustrated and memorable book.

Ken Burns’s *Civil War* is notable for its incorporation of eloquent reflections, memories of those who were “touched by fire” in deeds and words. Ordinary soldiers on both sides, politicians and civilians, bore witness and rose to the rhetorical occasion. For example, Joshua Lawrence Chamberlain, a rhetoric teacher at Bowdoin, who led the 20th Maine at Little Round Top during the battle at Gettysburg, never lost his eye for apt detail.

The edge of the conflict swayed to and fro, with wild whirlpools and eddies. At times I saw around me more of the enemy than of my own men; gaps opening, swallowing, closing again; squads of stalwart men who had cut their way through us, disappearing as if translated. All around, a strange, mingled roar.¹⁸

William Tecumseh Sherman’s forecast, made early in the war—“I think

this is to be a long war—very long—much longer than any politician thinks”—served in 1990 as a caution to those who predicted a quick and decisive engagement against Iraq.¹⁹ At a time when President Bush was praising American troops as “heroes” in his Christmas message, it was good to be reminded, by General Sherman, that war is not only hell, but also can be an obscene joke on the warriors: “Military history is to die in battle and have your name spelled wrong in the newspapers.”²⁰

In this documentary and accompanying text, the familiar, resonant words of Abraham Lincoln, Frederick Douglass, and Walt Whitman called us back to that era of exalted sacrifice. Most memorable, however, were the words of Sullivan Ballou, a little-known major of the 2nd Rhode Island, who wrote to his wife from Camp Clark, Washington, on July 14, 1861. Shown against the background of photographs of unnamed, indeed unknown, couples who posed before these young men went off to war, many of them to their death, Sullivan Ballou’s words stirred thousands of viewers and readers. He was, he told his “dear Sarah,” ready to die for his country, but his letter leaves a record of his living love.

But, O Sarah! if the dead can come back to this earth and flit unseen around those they loved, I shall always be near you; in the gladdest days and in the darkest nights . . . *always, always*, and if there be a soft breeze upon your cheek, it shall be my breath, as the cool air fans your throbbing temple, it shall be my spirit passing by. Sarah do not mourn me dead; think I am gone and wait for me, for we shall meet again.²¹

Sullivan Ballou was killed soon after, in the first battle of Bull Run.

Ken Burns and his team deserve the praise they received for *The Civil War*, documentary and book, because they went far in restoring a noble but horrific past to Americans. We are moved again by the extraordinary courage, eloquence, and generosity of spirit of those like Joshua Lawrence Chamberlain, by then a major general, who accepted the surrender of the Army of Northern Virginia on April 11, 1865, and spoke of the defeated Confederates with moving reverence.

On they come, with the old swinging route step and swaying battle flags. . . . On our part not a sound of trumpet more, nor roll of drum; nor a cheer, nor word, nor whisper or vain-glorying, nor motion of man . . . but an awed stillness rather, and breath holding, as if it were the passing of the dead.²²

But we are also appalled by the carnage, the devastation, which

Americans inflicted upon each other. So many dead. “Terrible it had been, terrible in its magnitude and its persistence, terrible in its ferocity, and its sickening cost in human life,” wrote C. Vann Woodward.²³ Each side believed, fervently, that it had God on its side, so each side struck the other with righteous wrath, reflected in Julia Ward Howe’s “Battle Hymn of the Republic.” At Gettysburg alone, 51,000 men were lost, approaching the total of all the Americans killed in the Vietnam undeclared war.

When Americans, in late 1990, heard President Bush assert that military engagement in the Middle East would not be restrained, as it had been in Vietnam, they could not help but recall the extraordinary blood sacrifice of the Civil War. Sullivan Ballou knew exactly what he was fighting for, even as he realized all he would lose in never again seeing Sarah and his sons. “I know how strongly American Civilization now leans on the triumph of the Government, and how great a debt we owe to those who went before us through the blood and suffering of the Revolution. And I am willing—perfectly willing—to lay down all my joys in this life, to help maintain this Government, and to pay that debt.”²⁴

Does “American Civilization,” we wondered, now depend upon the destruction of Saddam Hussein? Does the survival of “this Government” depend upon the vindication of George Bush’s foreign policy? For what high cause were we “perfectly willing” to have American young men and women kill and be killed in the Middle East?

Many Americans thought the Bush administration was not giving peace a chance through quiet (“back channel”) diplomacy. By late November, in Cambridge, Massachusetts, signs were being carried which said, “Hell, no! We won’t go! We won’t die for Texaco!” In early January, in Amherst, Massachusetts, young women and men stood out in the bitter cold holding up signs for passing motorists: “Light a Candle for Peace in the Gulf.” In Washington, peace lobbyists pleaded with their congressional representatives, who promised to debate the issue before January 15. The Civil War, begun as a conflict between advocates for state’s rights and believers in the Union, in the end was fought over slavery. That is, Americans battled over just what kind of people they were and what their country would become. But what, many Americans wondered at year’s end, would a war in the Middle East be *for*? What would become of us if we allowed such carnage?

George and Barbara Bush watched *The Civil War* at Camp David. A *People* magazine interviewer asked the president to recall the death of Sullivan Ballou at Bull Run and to speak about possible casualties in the Middle East. Bush said forces against Iraq would “be backed up in every way possible,” as they were not in Vietnam. He reflected that he had been in battle in World War II, so he had a privileged perspective. “I read these

letters and I identify with the plea to bring the kids home safely. And yet I know that sometimes, to get peace, you've got to make the tough call."²⁵ Teddy Roosevelt, Bush's hero, was "tough." We recall that Bush said, "I mean it was tough," when he reflected on Lincoln's splendid misery during the Civil War. Sometimes you have to kick some ass in the cause of peace, our only president seemed to say, in eerie echo of Lyndon Johnson's macho hyperbole during the Vietnam War. In President Bush's favorite picture, a battle rages, but a rainbow marks the sky, "a symbol of hope, of a passing of the storm." So stood the world according to George Bush—a dangerous, dramatic, symbol-ridden landscape, above which looms a wise and lonely leader. Americans watched him with a spectatorial attitude—stunned, helpless, alone.²⁶ "In the late summer of that year we lived in a house in a village that looked across the river and the plains to the mountains."

George Bush's belligerent performance as president during the Middle East crisis made me, much to my surprise, a bit nostalgic for the passivity of Ronald Reagan, a president who talked a tough game but, with the circumscribed exception of the Grenada invasion and the Libya bombing, let it go at that. We all remember Ronald Reagan—the president who forgot to remember! (The former president made *Esquire's* list of "Dubious Achievements of 1990" for his forgetful testimony during the trial of John Poindexter—"I just don't recall such a meeting, and certainly not by the day it occurred." Reagan even forgot the name of the chairman of his former Joint Chiefs of Staff, General John Vessey.)²⁷ Well, Ronald Reagan appeared before us once again to say that he *remembers* a thing or two, in his massive snore, *An American Life*, an undramatic monologue of more than seven hundred pages of memories, rationalizations, fantasies, half-truths, diary entries, public documents, and occasional flashes of unintended revelation.²⁸ The Gipper was back!

Perhaps it will turn out, as the hero of John Updike's *Roger's Version* suggests, "that we all existed inside Reagan's placid, uncluttered head as inside a giant bubble, and those of us who survived would look back upon this present America [the 1980s] as a paradise."²⁹ Which, of course, is another way of saying that the Reagan era marked a high point in American self-assurance, self-delusion, and conspicuous consumption.

By the end of the 1980s this was becoming evident to another Updike character, Harry Angstrom in *Rabbit at Rest*. Young Harry ("Rabbit") began his self-centered, circuitous quest for American salvation through sex in *Rabbit, Run* (1960), at the end of the Eisenhower administration. At the end of the Reagan era, Harry is rich, overweight, suffering heart attacks, living in overdeveloped Florida—a representative American. "Everything falling apart, airplanes, bridges, eight years under Reagan of nobody minding the

store, making money out of nothing, running up debt, trusting in God.”³⁰ However, we will not forget the Reagan years—eight years of relatively peaceful self-indulgence.

In his selective reconstruction—only four lines are devoted to his marriage with Jane Wyman—Ronald Reagan, aided by Robert Lindsey, recomposes his already well-known “American life” into a romantic idyll and a redemptive parable. He sees his childhood in Dixon, Illinois, along the Rock River, through a blur of nostalgia. “As I look back on those days in Dixon, I think my life as sweet and idyllic as it could be, as close as I could imagine for a young boy to the world created by Mark Twain in *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer*.”³¹ Not, we note, *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, though that novel better describes Reagan’s youth, for Reagan, like Huck, had a drunken Pap, suffered from family poverty and an uprooted home life.

Well, as he likes to say, this charming, handsome, nearsighted young man—Garry Wills compares him to Mr. Magoo—came a long way from Dixon, Illinois.³² Drum major, football guard, lifeguard, student at Eureka College, a period he recreates with characteristic, self-serving charm. “I’d like to be able to recall that my burning desire to go to college was planted first and foremost in a drive to get an education. But at seventeen, I think I was probably more motivated by love for a pretty girl and a love of football.”³³ Ah, well, boys will be boys. Still, “Dutch” Reagan found time to lead a student strike against faculty cuts, and he starred in college dramatic productions, revealing a lifelong penchant for public issues and self-dramatization.

These traits came in handy when he worked as a broadcaster for WOC in Davenport, where, for his audition, he reconstructed a narrative of a football game in which he had played at Eureka, inventing details, heightening the drama—“Long blue shadows are settling over the field and a chill wind is blowing in through the end of the stadium.” Though he had missed a key block in his team’s winning touchdown drive, in his radio recreation “a right guard named *Reagan* leveled a block on the linebacker so furiously that I could have killed him.”³⁴ (Note Reagan’s detachment from his own actions, even early in his career: “Reagan” is a story line told by “I.”) In *An American Life*, narrated by the hero of that life, Ronald Reagan never fumbles the ball, always scores the winning touchdown, then wins the biggest game of all, against the “Evil Empire,” but he also shows himself to be a good sport throughout.

At Warner Brothers he became “the Errol Flynn of the B pictures” until, in *Knute Rockne—All American*, he got the part of George Gipp, a young man who begs his team to “win one for the Gipper,” though he would then be dead. “I don’t know where I’ll be but I’ll know about it and I’ll be

happy.”³⁵ Fittingly, Reagan’s other notable leading role, in *King’s Row*, found him again in bed, playing the part of a young rake who, his legs amputated, wakes and shouts to his wife, “Randy, where is the rest of me?”³⁶ Garry Wills, in *Reagan’s America: Innocence at Home*, argues that this scene proves that Reagan was “not an actor of depth and intensity,” as Reagan remembers himself to have been.³⁷ But surely Reagan’s screen skills no longer matter. More important in this reading of Reagan is the telling fact that, in his two most memorable moments on screen, he was passive, dying, or debilitated, fantasizing a future victory for his team or begging for the return of what had been taken from him.

(Frances FitzGerald read *An American Life* as Reagan’s *refutation* of charges by former aides Michael Deaver and Donald Regan that he had been disengaged from the process of his own administration.)³⁸ However, Reagan—genial, dutiful, incurious—cannot help but confirm the impression of Peggy Noonan, his loyal speech writer, who compared him with “a gigantic heroic balloon floating in the Macy’s Thanksgiving Day parade, right up there between Superman and Big Bird.”³⁹ *Where’s the Rest of Me?* (1965), written with the help of Richard G. Hubler, became, of course, the revealing title of Ronald Reagan’s first autobiography.

Perhaps beneath the macho mask of this actor-politician who, before a radio broadcast, joked about bombing Moscow in fifteen minutes, lay the soul of a passive man, a man who took directions well in both fields, acting and politics—in both roles he learned his lines, showed up on time, and hit his marks—a man who was better at narrating (and fabricating) the game than he was at playing in it. For all of Reagan’s arms buildup, he showed more interest in reviewing his troops than in deploying them. “Reagan never describes himself as taking an initiative,” FitzGerald accurately notes. For FitzGerald, Reagan was a solipsist who concocted a self-aggrandizing myth of his life, a man who had no “interest in the rest of us on this planet.”⁴⁰ However, Ronald Reagan *did* have a vision of himself as a healer, a man who soothed a troubled nation, as FDR had done in his fireside chats, and Ronald Reagan *did* come to see himself as a man of peace.

During World War II, Reagan, too nearsighted for combat, served as an army officer assigned to the making of training films at the Hal Roach studio. There he saw “the horrors of Nazism” in captured films.⁴¹ Most of what Ronald Reagan saw throughout his life was refracted through films or through the screen community in Hollywood. Communism, for instance, was something that threatened the movie business, so, as president of the Screen Actors Guild and an undercover agent for the FBI, he led the postwar fight against the farfetched possibility of a communist takeover of the film industry. Reagan recalls all this in hyperbolic, militaristic imagery—his “hand-to-hand combat” with the then still Evil Empire.

Now I knew from firsthand experience how Communists used lies, deceits, violence, or any other tactic that suited them to advance the cause of Soviet expansionism. I knew from the experience of hand-to-hand combat that America faced no more insidious or evil threat than that of Communism.⁴²

But Ronald Reagan fought his battles with words and images—his smile and shoeshine. His principles derive less from analysis of public policies than from personal pique. Finding himself in the 94 percent tax bracket, Reagan was outraged. As a result, he turned against his former faith in government as a source of solution to society's problems and developed a credo that has served him well, personally and politically: "There probably isn't any undertaking on earth short of assuming the national security that can't be handled more efficiently by the forces of private enterprise than by the federal government." Postwar government expansion led the nation "along the path to a silent form of socialism."⁴³ Such views, of course, were a hit with fat-cat businessmen, who found him jobs (General Electric, MCA), underwrote his campaigns for governor and president, granted him loans, and bought him houses. It is hard to see from his own narrative where Ronald Reagan—who poses as a loner, a Marlboro man on horseback—has ever been his own man.

Indeed, Ronald Reagan affirms no free will; rather, he insists he is an agent of God. In Dixon, Illinois, in 1932, "Dutch" Reagan did not get the job he wanted, manager of the sporting goods section at Montgomery Ward, a job that would have kept him home. "I was raised to believe that God has a plan for everyone and that seemingly random twists of fate are all a part of His plan."⁴⁴ God apparently had bigger and better things in mind for Ronald Reagan than Montgomery Ward. Hooray for Hollywood! There, he and Nancy Davis were married in 1952. "If ever God gave me evidence that He had a plan for me, it was the night He brought Nancy into my life."⁴⁵ (Was his first marriage *not* part of God's plan? Is God's plan evident only in artful reconstruction of one's life story?) After a bullet, from the gun of John Hinckley Jr., stopped an inch from his heart, Reagan decided, "I owe my life to God and will try to serve Him in every way I can."⁴⁶ (What is the point of gun control if God has your name on a bullet? Furthermore, why protect the environment if the world, as he believes, will soon be coming to an end?)

Though Ronald Reagan is seldom given to self-analysis or self-doubt, he does grant that the death of those Marines he sent, against the advice of his own military command, as "peace-keepers" in Lebanon, "was the source of my greatest regret and my greatest sorrow as president."⁴⁷ (On October 23, 1983, 241 Marines, within their Lebanon compound, were killed by a car bomb. Even here, Reagan's forces were passive, vulnerable, sleeping.) It is,

of course, impossible to know what Ronald Reagan would have done had he been president when Saddam Hussein invaded Kuwait. However, *An American Life* provides enough evidence of his caution, calculation, passivity, and self-assurance to suggest that Ronald Reagan might not have placed half a million forces in harm's way, and he might not have painted himself into a corner—by refusing to negotiate and by setting an arbitrary deadline for Iraqi troop withdrawal from Kuwait—with no seeming options but attack.

As *An American Life* concludes, Ronald Reagan prepares to leave the White House. On his last morning there, in January 1989, his security adviser, Colin Powell, gave the departing president his final security briefing: “Mr. President, the world is quiet today.”⁴⁸ At the end of 1990, Colin Powell, who had become Bush's chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, was preparing American forces to attack Iraq! The world seemed poised, as it had been for Matthew Arnold (“Dover Beach”) in 1851, “on a darkling plain / Swept with confused alarms of struggle and flight, / Where ignorant armies clash by night.”

Arnold blamed the withdrawing Sea of Faith for the world's alarms. However, Garry Wills, in *Under God*, contests the proposition that faith in God has indeed diminished. *Under God*—more a collection of essays with a central concern than a coherent book—grew out of Wills's coverage of the 1988 presidential campaign, reports that included three cover stories for *Time*, a brilliant *Frontline* piece (“The Choice”) for public television, and other essays. This is a book on the rich history and the living presence of Christian fundamentalism—the subtext of American politics and culture. This is also a book on how the media and the intellectual establishment try to deny its presence. “The electorate wants a president who observes his (or, eventually, her) religion.”

Evangelicals, shows Wills, compose the largest number of American Christians—40 percent of Americans report they have been, as they say, “born again.” “The *mainstream* of American religion has always been evangelical.” A new millennium, with its doomsday associations, points up “a central theme in our history—the apocalyptic spirit that drove American settlers to grapple with the devil's instrument in the wilderness.”⁴⁹ Our manifest destiny has been to clear the land of infidels so that we might build an American city upon a hill. “Religion has been at the center of our major political crises, which are always moral crises—the supporting and opposing of wars, of slavery, of corporate power, of civil rights, of sexual codes, of ‘the West,’ of American separatism and claims to empire.”⁵⁰ Wills's book was, of course, written before the current Middle East crisis, which has revived evangelical rhetoric about a final battle between good and evil. But

Wills makes us understand why Americans tend to personalize and demonize their enemies. Who, after all, would negotiate with Satan or “Hitler”?

In retrospect, in Wills’s view, that is what the scurrilous 1988 presidential election had been all about—not about policies and certainly not about “competence,” but about damnation and redemption. Though two ordained ministers, Jesse Jackson and Pat Robertson, campaigned for the presidency, they became political centrists, while that most centered of politicians, George Bush, went outside mainstream political discourse to win votes through appeal to America’s deepest fears and its shallowest sentiments. Bush had learned from Nixon, whom Bush had defended during Watergate, to be a Washington “player” at any cost. “Under Nixon, he was schooled in realpolitik in foreign policy and cynicism in domestic politics. What he had not learned was ‘the vision thing.’”⁵¹

Thus George Bush, though speaking from his own high place of power in the national government, could express the fear that patriotism was under attack, the flag was being desecrated, the godless ACLU was gaining power, and criminals were being sheltered in the home of the brave. The people were being led astray. It was time to recall them, revive the ancient spirit of the country, silence the voice of the tempters. The most centrist figure of the 1988 campaign was licensed to become the most hysterical in his rhetoric. As denouncers of guilt, the professional preachers were pushed aside by that orator born again at the last minute, George Jeremiah Bush. But for this his managers had to supply him with a preacher’s devil. The name of the new devil was [Willie] Horton.⁵²

All this led to “a politics of contentless fervor.”⁵³ However, the themes and techniques of the didactic and deftly directed Bush campaign were pure Nixon. Bush beat Robert Dole, who publicly accused Bush of lying about his record, for the Nixon succession and adhered to his mentor’s vision and formula for success: accusations of domestic deceit and warnings of foreign threats. “The Cold War was Nixon’s reason for being. He needed the long twilight struggle, both to wage it and to continue it.”⁵⁴ During the campaign, George Bush wrapped Americans in the flag, protecting them from alien and perverse elements embodied by the ACLU—not just a good government organization but, in the eyes of Christian believers and patriots, the group that defended pornographers and tried to remove God from the schools, as Wills notes—and Willie Horton, the black criminal who was released from prison by liberals so he could rape and assault decent white Americans. Bush’s Democratic opponent, Michael Dukakis, a dithering yet rigid man—liberal, rational, secular, cold—“never knew what hit him in the 1988

campaign.”⁵⁵

Wills brilliantly sets the 1988 presidential campaign in the wider context of American religiosity. We are, indeed, “a Christian nation,” with vast implications for good and evil. The Puritan settlers were narrow ideologues. “To allow no dissent from the truth was exactly the reason they had come,” wrote Perry Miller in *Errand into the Wilderness*.⁵⁶ Their righteous wrath against infidels has not been lost. Ronald Reagan, trained by the Disciples of Christ, used biblical language about the end time, drawn from Revelations, as in his designation of the USSR as the Evil Empire.⁵⁷ Then, of course, he reversed himself, becoming a man of peace. But, we wonder, can America so quickly give up its Manichaeic vision of struggle between forces of light and dark? After the Evil Empire, what?

Sidney Blumenthal’s *Pledging Allegiance: The Last Campaign of the Cold War*, the most astute assessment of the 1988 presidential campaign and its implications, concerns itself less with religion and more with traditional political matters. (Wills, for example, is far more sympathetic to the Reverend Jesse Jackson, that peripatetic preacher with a flamboyant style, than is Blumenthal. Blumenthal sees Jackson as a self-promoting con man, forcing an identification with Martin Luther King through “a symbolism of christology,” trying to take the martyr’s place, while Wills praises Jackson.⁵⁸ “Jackson, driven back to the margin of politics, was only legitimate as the voice of the dispossessed,” wrote Willis. For all that, Blumenthal’s concerns were large—nothing less than the fate of the Wills.⁵⁹ For all that, Blumenthal’s concerns were large—nothing less than the fate of the republic—as he made clear by citing Henry James, from *The American Scene*, in his epigraph: “I see what you are not making, oh, what you are so vividly not.”

For Sidney Blumenthal the 1988 campaign was insular, trivial, an insult to the national intelligence, a cynical avoidance of world political issues—a “not making” of vast implications.

The period from 1985 to 1990—from Gorbachev’s assumption of power through Bush’s—marked the Cold War’s waning. The 1988 presidential campaign, the political centerpiece of this anxious, confused time, was a stunning exercise in the absence of leadership—a failure to come to terms with the new realities of the world as it was and as it was becoming. Pledging allegiance to the shibboleths of the past became the measure of patriotism and prudence. The campaign itself was lived in the last age, as if the Cold War were raging and Stalin alive.⁶⁰

Blumenthal's book appeared in the fall of 1990, while U.S. troop forces were building in the Middle East. With the disappearance of Ronald Reagan's Evil Empire, and its Commie leaders as the personified enemy, it seemed that George Bush, having invaded Panama and deposed its leader, Manuel Noriega, in December of 1989, had designated Saddam Hussein and Iraq to serve as the newly personified enemy. This justified the Nixonian perpetuation of the Cold War, with the USSR now an ally, but the battle relocated to the Middle East. Though Blumenthal's book does not deal directly with these matters, he provides valuable insight into the process that resulted in the election of George Bush, the man in the Bush administration who most seemed to *want* a war against Iraq at year's end.

After the Iran–Contra scandal, according to Blumenthal, Ronald Reagan “presided over a posthumous presidency.” Then “Gorbachev emerged as Reagan's ultimate handler.” The leader of the USSR needed the American “president, and he needed to provide a script the president could follow.” As a result of Gorbachev's diplomacy, Reagan had “a bravura last act.” Therefore “the indirect effect of Reagan's remaking was the making of the Bush candidacy.”⁶¹

Ronald Reagan changed his mind about the threat of Russian communism. He had called the Soviet Union “the very heart of darkness,” but by 1988 he walked arm in arm with Mikhail Gorbachev in Red Square. “I was talking about another era,” he blithely said.⁶² But George Bush was not convinced. For all his determination to change his positions to best serve his chances to attain the presidency—“His agenda was to get the job,” writes Blumenthal—George Bush declared, after the Moscow summit, that the Cold War was *not* over.⁶³ (In Dan Quayle, a Christian fundamentalist and a self-declared Cold Warrior, Bush chose a vice president to his right.) As a result, “George Bush ran the last campaign of the Cold War.”⁶⁴ Michael Dukakis, who climbed into a tank in his silliest moment during the campaign, was equally committed to maintaining eternal “vigilance”; that is, he was committed to the Kennedy vision of a “long twilight struggle” against an enemy that neither candidate seemed to notice had surrendered.

George Bush won the 1988 election through a successful manipulation of wartime imagery, foreign and domestic.

In 1984, Ronald Reagan's advertising depicted America as a mythical small town where no one was unfriendly or had a reason for discontent: “It's morning in America.” In Bush's [television] ad [“The Dukakis Furlough Program”], if it was morning, it was a cold, grim dawn. The threat in his ad was not just the escaping criminals; it was the concrete walls, the tall towers, the guards, the guns. This is where the voters would be sentenced to live if Dukakis were elected.

It was a vision of America as a prison.⁶⁵

If the long shadow of John F. Kennedy haunted Michael S. Dukakis, then the not-so-invisible hand of Richard M. Nixon shaped George Bush. Nixon, his first mentor, not Reagan, Blumenthal convincingly argues, is Bush's true model. In response to Gorbachev's innovations, Bush's "status quo plus" policy was another means of sustaining the Nixon-Kissinger Cold War aims. Iraq would be Vietnam revisited, Saddam Hussein another Ho Chi Minh, but this time we would *win!*

In 1990, peace broke out all over Eastern Europe. The Berlin Wall came down, along with statues of Lenin and Stalin. Pundits declared democracy the winner and the long twilight struggle over. Americans were wondering what to do with the "peace dividend." We awaited a revelation. Then all changed, utterly. Saddam Hussein's invasion of Kuwait and George Bush's responses plunged the world into a new twilight struggle. Yeats's "The Second Coming" glossed the moment.

Somewhere in the sands of the desert
A shape with a lion body and the head of a man,
A gaze blank and pitiless as the sun,
Is moving its slow thighs, while all about it
Reel shadows of the indignant desert bird.
The darkness drops again; but now I know
That twenty centuries of stony sleep
Were vexed to nightmare by a rocking cradle,
And what rough beast, its hour come round at last,
Slouches towards Bethlehem to be born?⁶⁶

Horrific holiday contemplations for the last days of 1990! "What do you think is going to happen?" was the question most asked at Christmas parties in Washington. "No one needed to refine the question further," comments Elizabeth Drew, for "everyone understood that it meant: Would there be war in the Persian Gulf before long or might there be a peaceful resolution? Either possible answer—and no one knows which it is—causes some anxiety, because a number of people here fear a settlement about as much as others are alarmed by the prospect of war."⁶⁷ The New Year found the country apprehensive about its president and anxious about its future. In the words of R. W. Apple Jr., "George Bush begins the new year with his Presidency poised between success and failure. The country begins it with bated breath."⁶⁸

While we held our breaths, the films we saw at year's end offered no sanctuary from the questions of character, political purpose, and imminent war, which haunted so many with increasing intensity in the final days before January 15. In *The Godfather Part III*, Michael Corleone seeks redemption, removal from the evils of the Corleone family and its crime machine. He is granted an award by the papacy in return for a vast contribution. He moves all the family money into legitimate enterprises. But Michael Corleone cannot so easily separate himself from his past. Just when he thought he was out, as he puts it, "they pull me back." Soon he is again sunk in duplicity and murder, the family business. A gunman shoots down his own daughter, who dies in his arms. All hopes of redemption, of cleansing his family's dark deeds, mired in European history, and of becoming a legitimate American success story are dashed. In *The Russia House* an alcoholic British publisher, Barley Blair, gets caught up in the espionage of the final days of the Cold War. However, in the end, he curses both political houses, East and West, chooses to betray his country in order to rescue the woman he loves—"You are my only country," he tells her—and, as a result, redeems himself. Both films assume the worst about the institutions and governments that shape our lives. The higher he rises, notes Michael Corleone, the more corruption he finds, not just in business and politics, but even in the Vatican. "If there is to be hope, we must all betray our countries," said redeemed Barley Blair in John le Carré's novel, on which the film was based.⁶⁹

These films suggest that there is no hope and no salvation beyond one's self and those one loves. Again, Matthew Arnold's lines from "Dover Beach" came to mind, characterizing the way we lived at year's end.

Ah, love, let us be true
To one another! for the world . . .
Hath really neither joy, nor love, nor light,
Nor certitude, nor peace, nor help for pain.

With little more than a week remaining before the January 15 deadline and no sign of peace breaking out, the country finally was told why its young men and women might soon be dying in the Middle East! In an op-ed essay titled "Why" (no question mark), Richard Nixon explained that the upcoming conflict would *not* be about restoring democracy to Kuwait; it would *not* be about Saddam Hussein's tyranny and cruelty; it would *not* be about oil. "It will be a war about peace—not just peace in our time, but peace for our children and grandchildren in the years ahead."⁷⁰

On that paradoxical reasoning—based upon full assurance that Richard

Nixon and his protégé George Bush could predict the exact degree of danger that the future would hold for us if Iraq were not punished *now* for its aggression against Kuwait—America prepared for war. Desert Shield, the code name for the massive U.S. military operation in the Middle East, threatened to become and became Desert Sword. Damocles, we recall, was a member of the court of Dionysius the Elder, the tyrant of ancient Syracuse who suspended a sword over Damocles's head to illustrate the precariousness of rank and power.

In the early winter of this year, we watched and waited, with what Sullivan Ballou called “an awed stillness . . . and breath-holding, as if it were the passing of the dead.”

Notes

1. Malcolm Cowley, *Exile's Return: A Literary Odyssey of the Nineteen Twenties* (New York: Viking Press, 1959 (1934)), 38.
2. Ernest Hemingway, *A Farewell to Arms* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1962 (1929)), 3.
3. Cited in James Reston, “Too Early for Bush to Dial 911,” *New York Times*, November 13, 1990, A-31. Reston urged Bush to be patient, reminding him of President Eisenhower's 1955 caution, “Every war is going to astonish you. So that for a man to predict what he is going to use and how he is going to use it would, I think, exhibit his ignorance of war; that is what I believe. So I think you just have to wait, and that is the kind of prayerful decision that may someday face a President.”
4. Rowland Evans and Robert Novak, “Caucus Behind Rep. Joe Kennedy,” *Boston Sunday Herald*, December 9, 1990, 42.
5. Cited in Louise Kennedy, “Calculating the Chilling Costs of a Gulf War,” *Boston Globe*, December 8, 1990, 71. See similar estimates in George J. Church, “If War Begins,” *Time*, December 10, 1990, 29.
6. Cited in Elizabeth Drew, “Letter from Washington,” *New Yorker*, December 31, 1990, 88–89.
7. Colin Nickerson, “Cheney, Departing Gulf, Gives a Warning,” and Larry Tye, “Holiday Dispirit,” *Boston Globe*, December 24, 1990, 1.
8. Cited in R. W. Apple, “The Collapse of a Coalition,” *New York Times*, December 6, 1990, A-17.
9. Alexander M. Haig Jr. “Gulf Analogy: Munich or Vietnam?” *New York Times*, December 10, 1990.
10. Eric Schmitt, “Forces Not Ready for January War, U.S. General Says,” *New York Times*, December 20, 1990, A-1.
11. Colin Nickerson, “Gulf Tension Goes Higher as U.S. Says It Will Be Set to Strike from Air Jan. 15,” *Boston Globe*, December 21, 1990, 1, 22.
12. Sidney Blumenthal, “Bull Mouse,” *The New Republic*, January 7 and 14, 1991,

- 11–12, 16. In *Pledging Allegiance*, Blumenthal calls attention to discontinuities in George Bush's character and rhetoric. Bush "seemed to be a man in piece," looking for "the vision thing. . . . 'Whatever' was his fill-in-the-blank answer to 'the vision thing.' . . . The lesions in his language reflected lesions in his thinking," 53.
13. As dictated to Barbara Bush, *Millie's Book* (New York: William Morrow, 1990), 87–88.
 14. *Ibid.*, 99–100.
 15. Dan Goodgame, "In the Gulf: Bold Vision," *Time*, January 7, 1991, 22.
 16. Cited in Jonathan Alter with Lucille Beachy, "The Civil War and Modern Memory," *Newsweek*, October 8, 1990, 64.
 17. Mary Chestnut, cited in Geoffrey C. Ward, with Ric Burns and Ken Burns, *The Civil War: An Illustrated History* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1990), 349.
 18. Cited in *ibid.*
 19. Cited in *ibid.*, 81.
 20. Cited in Alter with Beachy, "The Civil War and Modern Memory," 64.
 21. Cited in Ward, *Civil War*, 83.
 22. Cited in *ibid.*, 381.
 23. Cited in *ibid.*, 398.
 24. Cited in *ibid.*, 82.
 25. "Tough and Tender Talk," an interview with George and Barbara Bush, *People*, December 17, 1990, 50.
 26. *Time* caught the contradictions in George Bush by making two George Bushes *Time's* 1990 "Men of the Year:" George J. Church, "A Tale of Two Bushes," *Time*, January 7, 1991, 20.
 27. "Dubious Achievements of 1990," *Esquire*, January 1991, 84.
 28. Ronald Reagan, *An American Life* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1990).
 29. John Updike, *Roger's Version* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1986), 313.
 30. John Updike, *Rabbit at Rest* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1990), 9. However, like Updike, "Rabbit liked Reagan. He liked the foggy voice, the smile, the big shoulders, the way his head kept wagging during the long pauses, the way he floated above the facts, and the way he could change direction while saying he was going straight ahead, pulling out of Beirut, getting cozy with Gorby, running up the national debt. The strange thing was, except for the hopeless down-and-outers, the world became a better place under him. The Communists fell apart, except for Nicaragua, and even there he put them on the defensive. The guy had a magic touch. He was a dream man. Harry dares say, 'Under Reagan, you know, it was like anesthesia,'" 62.
 31. Reagan, *Life*, 29.
 32. "The cartoon character Mr. Magoo, blind and optimistic, loudly describes the happy things going on around him while the viewer sees him surrounded by perils, destruction, and violence. So while Reagan fondly describes this period as one continual sequence of virtuous acts, businesses were taking corruption in defense contracts to spectacular new heights, robbing the HUD treasury, and using government-backed savings and loan banks as their private kitties. Is Reagan incapable of seeing such things? That seems to be the case," Garry Wills, "Mr. Magoo Remembers," *New York Review of Books*, December 20, 1990, 3–4.
 33. Reagan, *Life*, 45.
 34. *Ibid.*, 65.
 35. *Ibid.*, 89, 92.

36. Ibid., 95.
37. Garry Wills, *Reagan's America: Innocence at Home* (New York: Doubleday, 1987), 177.
38. Frances FitzGerald, "Reagan's Book," *New Yorker*, December 24, 1990, 93.
39. Peggy Noonan, *What I Saw at the Revolution: A Political Life in the Reagan Era* (New York: Random House, 1990), 280.
40. FitzGerald, "Reagan's Book," 93, 99.
41. Reagan, *Life*, 99.
42. Ibid., 115.
43. Ibid., 120.
44. Ibid., 20.
45. Ibid., 123.
46. Ibid., 263.
47. Ibid., 466.
48. Ibid., 722.
49. Garry Wills, *Under God: Religion and American Politics* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1990), 17, 19, 20.
50. Ibid., 25.
51. Sidney Blumenthal, *Pledging Allegiance: The Last Campaign of the Cold War* (New York: HarperCollins, 1990), 67.
52. Wills, *God*, 69.
53. Ibid., 66.
54. Blumenthal, *Pledging*, 79.
55. Wills, *God*, 58. As Dukakis left the governorship of Massachusetts, he admitted that he had made serious mistakes in the presidential campaign of 1988. "Shame on me for not having much more effectively responded and dealt with what they were trying to do." Cited in Robin Toner, "Leaving Public Office, Dukakis Reflects, and Emerges Upbeat," *New York Times*, January 1, 1991.
56. Cited in Wills, *God*, 142.
57. Ibid., 144.
58. Blumenthal, *Pledging*, 183.
59. Wills, *God*, 233.
60. Blumenthal, *Pledging*, 5.
61. Ibid., 38–46.
62. Cited in *ibid.*, 248.
63. Cited in *ibid.*, 251.
64. Ibid., 262.
65. Ibid., 307.
66. William Butler Yeats, "The Second Coming," in Richard J. Fineran, ed., *W. B. Yeats: The Poems* (New York: Macmillan, 1983), 187.
67. Drew, "Letter from Washington," 87.
68. R. W. Apple Jr., "Presidency on the Brink of a Make or Break Year," *New York Times*, January 1, 1991, 10.
69. John le Carré, *The Russia House* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1989), 286.
70. Richard Nixon, "Why," *New York Times*, January 6, 1991, 18-E.