

THE WORLD CAN'T WAIT DRIVE OUT THE BUSH REGIME!

PRESIDENT JONAH: A DIG LED BY

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WHILE CONTEMPLATING the ill-starred presidency of G.W. Bush, I looked about for some sort of divine analogy. As usual, when in need of enlightenment, I fell upon the Holy Bible, authorized King James version of 1611; turning by chance to the Book of Jonah, I read that Jonah, who, like Bush, chats with God, had suffered a falling out with the Almighty and thus became a jinx dogged by luck so bad that a cruise liner, thanks to his presence aboard, was about to sink in a storm at sea. Once the crew had determined that Jonah, a passenger, was the jinx, they threw him overboard and—Lo!—the storm abated. The three days and nights he subsequently spent in the belly of a nauseous whale must have seemed like a serious jinx to the digestion-challenged whale who extruded him much as the decent opinion of mankind has done to Bush.

Originally, God wanted Jonah to give hell to Nineveh, whose people, God noted disdainfully, “cannot discern between their right hand and their left hand,” so like the people of Baghdad who cannot fathom what democracy has to do with their destruction by the Cheney-Bush cabal. But the analogy becomes eerily precise when it comes to the hurricanes in the Gulf of Mexico at a time when a president is not only incompetent but plainly jinxed by whatever faith he cringes before. Witness the ongoing screw-up of prescription drugs. Who knows what other disasters are in store for us thanks to the curse he is under? As the sailors fed the original Jonah to a whale, thus lifting the storm that was about to drown them, perhaps we the people can

persuade President Jonah to retire to his other Eden in Crawford, Texas, taking his jinx with him. We deserve a rest. Plainly, so does he. Look at Nixon’s radiant features after his resignation! One can see former President Jonah in his sumptuous library happily catering to faith-based fans with animated scriptures rooted in “The Simpsons.”

Not since the glory days of Watergate and Nixon’s Luciferian fall has there been so much written about the dogged deceits and creative criminalities of our rulers. We have also come to a point in this dark age where there is not only no hero in view but no alternative road unblocked. We are trapped terribly in a now that few foresaw and even fewer can define despite a swarm of books and pamphlets like the vast cloud of locusts which dined on China in that ’30s movie “The Good Earth.”

I have read many of these descriptions of our fallen estate, looking for one that best describes in plain English how we got to this now and where we appear to be headed once our good Earth has been consumed and only Rapture is left to whisk aloft the Faithful. Meanwhile, the rest of us can learn quite a lot from “Dark Ages America: The Final Phase of Empire” by Morris Berman, a professor of sociology at the Catholic University of America in Washington, D.C.

I must confess that I have a proprietary interest in anyone who refers to the United States as an empire since I am credited with first putting forward this heretical view in the early ’70s. In fact, so disgusted with me was a book reviewer at Time magazine that as proof

of my madness he wrote: "He actually refers to the United States as an empire!" It should be noted that at about the same time Henry Luce, proprietor of Time, was booming on and on about "The American Century." What a difference a word makes!

Berman sets his scene briskly in recent history. "We were already in our twilight phase when Ronald Reagan, with all the insight of an ostrich, declared it to be 'morning in America'; twenty-odd years later, under the 'boy emperor' George W. Bush (as Chalmers Johnson refers to him), we have entered the Dark Ages in earnest, pursuing a short-sighted path that can only accelerate our decline. For what we are now seeing are the obvious characteristics of the West after the fall of Rome: the triumph of religion over reason; the atrophy of education and critical thinking; the integration of religion, the state, and the apparatus of torture—a troika that was for Voltaire the central horror of the pre-Enlightenment world; and the political and economic marginalization of our culture.... The British historian Charles Freeman published an extended discussion of the transition that took place during the late Roman empire, the title of which could serve as a capsule summary of our current president: "The Closing of the Western Mind." Mr. Bush, God knows, is no Augustine; but Freeman points to the latter as the epitome of a more general process that was underway in the fourth century: namely, 'the gradual subjection of reason to faith and authority.' This is what we are seeing today, and it is a process that no society can undergo and still remain free. Yet it is a process of which administration officials, along with much of the American population, are aggressively proud." In fact, close observers of this odd presidency note that Bush, like his evangelical base, believes he is on a mission from God and that faith trumps empirical evidence. Berman quotes a senior White House adviser who disdains what he calls the "reality-based" community, to which Berman sensibly responds: "If a nation is unable to perceive reality correctly, and persists in

operating on the basis of faith-based delusions, its ability to hold its own in the world is pretty much foreclosed."

Berman does a brief tour of the American horizon, revealing a cultural death valley. In secondary schools where evolution can still be taught too many teachers are afraid to bring up the subject to their so often un-evolved students. "Add to this the pervasive hostility toward science on the part of the current administration (e.g. stem-cell research) and we get a clear picture of the Enlightenment being steadily rolled back. Religion is used to explain terror attacks as part of a cosmic conflict between Good and Evil rather than in terms of political processes.... Manichaeism rules across the United States. According to a poll taken by Time magazine fifty-nine percent of Americans believe that John's apocalyptic prophecies in the Book of Revelation will be fulfilled, and nearly all of these believe that the faithful will be taken up into heaven in the 'Rapture.'

"Finally, we shouldn't be surprised at the antipathy toward democracy displayed by the Bush administration.... As already noted, fundamentalism and democracy are completely antithetical. The opposite of the Enlightenment, of course, is tribalism, groupthink; and more and more, this is the direction in which the United States is going.... Anthony Lewis who worked as a columnist for the New York Times for thirty-two years, observes that what has happened in the wake of 9/11 is not just the threatening of the rights of a few detainees, but the undermining of the very foundation of democracy. Detention without trial, denial of access to attorneys, years of interrogation in isolation—these are now standard American practice, and most Americans don't care. Nor did they care about the revelation in July 2004 (reported in Newsweek), that for several months the White House and the Department of Justice had been discussing the feasibility of canceling the upcoming presidential election in the event of a possible terrorist attack." I suspect that the technologically inclined prevailed against that extreme measure on the ground that the newly

installed electronic ballot machines could be so calibrated that Bush would win handily no matter what (read Rep. Conyers' report (.pdf file) on the rigging of Ohio's vote).

Meanwhile, the indoctrination of the people merrily continues. "In a 'State of the First Amendment Survey' conducted by the University of Connecticut in 2003, 34 percent of Americans polled said the First Amendment 'goes too far'; 46 percent said there was too much freedom of the press; 28 percent felt that newspapers should not be able to publish articles without prior approval of the government; 31 percent wanted public protest of a war to be outlawed during that war; and 50 percent thought the government should have the right to infringe on the religious freedom of 'certain religious groups' in the name of the war on terror."

It is usual in sad reports like Professor Berman's to stop abruptly the litany of what has gone wrong and then declare, hand on heart, that once the people have been informed of what is happening, the truth will set them free and a quarter-billion candles will be lit and the darkness will flee in the presence of so much spontaneous light. But Berman is much too serious for the easy platitude. Instead he tells us that those who might have struck at least a match can no longer do so because shared information about our situation is meager to nonexistent. Would better schools help? Of course, but, according to that joyous bearer of ill tidings, the New York Times, many school districts are now making sobriety tests a regular feature of the school day: apparently opium derivatives are the opiate of our stoned youth. Meanwhile, millions of adult Americans, presumably undrugged, have no idea who our enemies were in World War II. Many college graduates don't know the difference between an argument and an assertion (did their teachers also fail to solve this knotty question?). A travel agent in Arizona is often asked whether or not it is cheaper to take the train rather than fly to Hawaii. Only 12% of Americans own a passport. At the time of the 2004 presidential election 42% of voters believed that Saddam

Hussein was involved in 9/11. One high school boy, when asked who won the Civil War, replied wearily, "I don't know and I don't care," echoing a busy neocon who confessed proudly: "The American Civil War is as remote to me as the War of the Roses."

We are assured daily by advertisers and/or politicians that we are the richest, most envied people on Earth and, apparently, that is why so many awful, ill-groomed people want to blow us up. We live in an impermeable bubble without the sort of information that people living in real countries have access to when it comes to their own reality. But we are not actually people in the eyes of the national ownership: we are simply unreliable consumers comprising an overworked, underpaid labor force not in the best of health: The World Health Organization rates our healthcare system (sic—or sick?) as 37th-best in the world, far behind even Saudi Arabia, role model for the Texans. Our infant mortality rate is satisfyingly high, precluding a First World educational system. Also, it has not gone unremarked even in our usually information-free media that despite the boost to the profits of such companies as Halliburton, Bush's wars of aggression against small countries of no danger to us have left us well and truly broke. Our annual trade deficit is a half-trillion dollars, which means that we don't produce much of anything the world wants except those wan reports on how popular our Entertainment is overseas. Unfortunately the foreign gross of "King Kong," the Edsel of that assembly line, is not yet known. It is rumored that Bollywood—the Indian film business—may soon surpass us! Berman writes, "We have lost our edge in science to Europe...The US economy is being kept afloat by huge foreign loans (\$4 billion a day during 2003). What do you think will happen when America's creditors decide to pull the plug, or when OPEC members begin selling oil in euros instead of dollars?...An International Monetary Fund report of 2004 concluded that the United States was 'careening toward insolvency.' " Meanwhile, China, our favorite big-time future enemy, is

the number one for worldwide foreign investments, with France, the bete noire of our apish neocons, in second place.

Well, we still have Kraft cheese and, of course, the death penalty.

Berman makes the case that the Bretton-Woods agreement of 1944 institutionalized a system geared toward full employment and the maintenance of a social safety net for society's less fortunate—the so-called welfare or interventionist state. It did this by establishing fixed but flexible exchange rates among world currencies, which were pegged to the U.S. dollar while the dollar, for its part, was pegged to gold. In a word, Bretton-Woods saved capitalism by making it more human. Nixon abandoned the agreement in 1971, which started, according to Berman, huge amounts of capital moving upward from the poor and the middle class to the rich and super-rich.

Mr. Berman spares us the happy ending, as, apparently, has history. When the admirable Tiberius (he has had an undeserved bad press), upon becoming emperor, received a message from the Senate in which the conscript fathers assured him that whatever legislation he wanted would be automatically passed by them, he sent back word that this was outrageous. "Suppose the emperor is ill or mad or incompetent?" He returned their message. They sent it again. His response: "How eager you are to be slaves." I often think of that wise emperor when I hear Republican members of Congress extolling the wisdom of Bush. Now that he has been caught illegally wiretapping fellow citizens he has taken to snarling about his powers as "a wartime president," and so, in his own mind, he is above each and every law of the land. Oddly, no one in Congress has pointed out that he may well be a lunatic dreaming that he is another Lincoln but whatever he is or is not he is no wartime president. There is no war with any other nation...yet. There is no state called terror, an abstract noun like liar. Certainly his illegal unilateral ravaging of Iraq may well seem like a real war for those on both sides unlucky enough to be killed or wounded, but

that does not make it a war any more than the appearance of having been elected twice to the presidency does not mean that in due course the people will demand an investigation of those two irregular processes. Although he has done a number of things that under the old republic might have got him impeached, our current system protects him: incumbency-for-life seats have made it possible for a Republican majority in the House not to do its duty and impeach him for his incompetence in handling, say, the natural disaster that befell Louisiana.

The founders thought two-year terms for members of the House was as much democracy as we'd ever need. Therefore, there was no great movement to have some sort of recall legislation in the event that a president wasn't up to his job and so had lost the people's confidence between elections. But in time, as Ecclesiastes would say, all things shall come to pass and so, in a kindly way, a majority of the citizens must persuade him that he will be happier back in Crawford pruning Bushes of the leafy sort while the troops not killed or maimed will settle for simply being alive and in one piece. We may be slaves but we are not unreasonable.

One way that a majority of citizens can help open the road back to Crawford is by heeding the call of a group called the World Can't Wait (see their website, worldcantwait.org). They believe that the agenda for 2006 must not be set by the Bush gang but by the people taking independent mass political action.

On Jan. 31, the night of Bush's next State of the Union address, they have called for people in large cities and small towns all across the country to join in noisy rallies to make the demand that "Bush Step Down" the message of the day. At 9 p.m. Eastern Standard Time, just as Bush starts to speak, people can make a joyful noise and figuratively drown out his address. Then on the following Saturday, Feb. 4, converge in front of the White House with the same message: Please step down and take your program with you.