

Opinion

Levees made of lies: Rage, grief, and the chimera of the American Dream

By Phil Rockstroh

Online Journal Contributing Writer

September 15, 2005—An entire American city has become an uninhabitable mire of fetid water, sodden ruins, and toxic sludge. Moreover, the destruction will not end there: the financial, political, and psychological spill-off, incurred by the deluge, will cause our nation to sink further into a morass of debt, denial, and despair.

How did it come to this? How did we come to buy this worthless plot of swampland known as George Bush's America?

Perhaps, at this point, a brief history lesson, for a nation whose populace possesses the collective capacity for long-term memory of a Louisiana gnat on a hot afternoon in high summer, might prove helpful. Let's begin with the watershed year of 1968.

After it became increasingly obvious that the Vietnam War was neither a moral nor a winnable cause and, concurrently, on the racially riven domestic front, when a sense of hopeless rage among inner city African Americans, engendered by centuries of racism and its attendant disparities of wealth and equality, lit the spark of urban riots—Richard Nixon, by promising he had a "secret plan" to end the war in Southeast Asia and vowing he would restore "law and order" to the nation's streets, was able to slither into the White House. Yet, within a few years time, it was revealed that Nixon's plan (to be more accurate, scheme) would prolong the war for years, causing hundreds of thousand of unnecessary casualties, and, in general, would screw over all concerned. As for his law and order policy, it consisted of a covert plan to take crime off of the streets and place it back within the corridors of official power where it belongs.

But an unwashed, unruly mob of sticklers for constitutional process got lucky, that round, and they brought Nixon down. And, for our anti-American sins of self-doubt, we received Jimmy Carter, who delivered cardigan-draped bromides of thrift and Sunday school sermons of self-restraint and personal sacrifice . . . and that sort of thing drove people to cocaine and disco.

Moreover, the high cost and banality of (not to mention brain-damage incurred by) those activities left the nation susceptible to the platitudinous, confidence man assurances of power and prosperity, without sacrifice, promised by Ronald Reagan. All the while, through the 1980s, George W. Bush hid himself among mountains of the afore-mentioned disco marching powder and Arnold Schwarzenegger brandished fists full of anabolic steroids, creating for himself a body that is a precise metaphor for his adopted land—a nation that worships the appearance of strength, but whose interior life is as stunted as that of a narcissistic bodybuilder, a preening twit for whom the larger world serves no greater purpose than for the adoration of his over-sized, oil-lacquered muscles.

More and more, the American mind began to suffer from steroid-induced psychosis. Worse, our self-absorption was only surpassed by our paranoia: The proxy armies of the Evil Empire awaited the command from their Kremlin masters to attack and enslave us; homosexuals plotted to destroy the American family, thereby leaving aimless children adrift and easy prey for conversion by skulking sodomites; civil liberty advocates employed legalistic weasel words to hamstring the police and thwart the

legal system, giving criminals carte blanche to roam the streets and commit crimes with impunity, while their Welfare Queen mothers cushioned their posh asses on the leather seats of Cadillacs and cruised city streets trading Food Stamps for crack cocaine. Then matters grew far, far worse.

In the early 1990s, came a threat to everything we hold sacred in Christendom: Bill Clinton. Although, godly souls need not have worried—he turned out to be simply a Sybaritic salesman of global neo-liberal economic colonialism. Furthermore, Bill Clinton did Ronald Reagan one better: he bitch-slapped those Welfare Queens so hard their taxpayer-subsidized gold teeth rattled. Across the land, good Christians paused to listen to the satisfying thwap.

George W. Bush has shown us an even more blessed path to salvation: He has revealed to us how we can ascend to heaven—by climbing the stacked corpses of the poor. In the meantime, he will carry out Christ's admonition to give succor to the truly deserving—to the members of the true welfare state—all those needy Haliburton contractors in Iraq.

While domestically, with the intention of protecting us from rising rivers of reality, Bushco., a division of Cheney Inc., a subsidiary of JesusCorps and NeoConico have tirelessly labored to keep us safe from the possibility of ever being so much as touched by a droplet of truth. Therefore, they have constructed for us a shoddy levee system of lies . . . Beneath which, we, inhabiting ad hoc, flimsy structures, live below sea level of self-awareness, all the while, choosing to call this misnomer made manifest—life.

Meanwhile, like the waters of the Mississippi River flooding into Lake Pontchartrain, the waters around us have begun to rise towards the tipping point.

And thus far, we Americans have risen to meet the challenge of these perilous times—by dozing off before our televisions. With crumbs of Doritos stippled in the folds of our double chins and upon our sagging chest, the garish glow of our sets flickers over our sleep-slackened faces, while the programming fare proclaims that "reality" is now comprised of the stuff of contrived competitions between corporately-neutered, would-be pop stars and of Weather Channel remotes, in which, legions of blow-dried, sub-cretinous blathering heads are dispatched to hurricane-battered coastal regions to be blown about on camera for the amusement of viewers afflicted with a voyeuristic fetish for "live" disaster footage. And it was big fun, until the appearance of floating corpses put a damper on everyone's festive mood.

Inasmuch as the reality of our waking life now includes crushing debt, runaway inflation, due to diminishing oil supplies, global environmental upheaval brought on by global warming (including increasingly destructive cataclysms, such as Hurricane Katrina), and the enmity of the people of the world beyond our shores, in response to our bullying militarism and economic imperialism—we would have to be a nation of narcoleptics, in the first place, to have ever believed in the existence of this chimera called the "American Dream." For it's not a dream: it amounts to complicity in multiple acts of criminal negligence.

And the river keeps rising around us.

Why do we Americans accept this pernicious and ultimately self-defeating arrangement? Because we're convinced that it bestows upon us everything we could possibly need and desire. All we need to know and experience is at our twitching, TV remote-happy fingertips. Ergo, we can flip from enactments of explicit porn on one channel, to explicit re-enactments of pornographic Christian prophecy on another; we can transmigrate from fake sin to phony salvation, in an instant . . . What else, in the whole of boundless creation, could we possibly want?

And, for our being provided with these comforts and accommodations, the only debt we owe is this: It is mandated that we make unceasing payments, using the scarce currency of the time we have been allotted in this finite world, to our munificent masters of the corporate class—and only for the duration of our mortal existence . . . It's a very simple arrangement: we give them the precious hours of our lives and they keep us sheltered from the unsettling storms that we seed, suppressing the knowledge of all the things we have forsaken by said transaction. In short, folks, it's the deal of a lifetime.

We have become a society of Willie Lomans (as he might have been written by Joseph Goebbels). In this Potemkin world, the public relations mountebanks of Bushco were convinced they could indefinitely hold back raging rivers of reality by means of media sound-bites, spin control, cooked intelligence, and strategic leaks to stenographic reporters . . . And because they had gotten away with it for so long, I suspect, they actually believed they could respond to the lethal winds and drowning tides of Hurricane Katrina by engaging in a Rovian whispering campaign against her fury. Somehow, it would seem, in their ineluctable arrogance, they went and mistook a level four hurricane for those walking wet farts known as the present day Democratic Party.

I'm as serious as a tsunami: I think such madness is in them—in direct proportion to the fecklessness of the leadership of our so-called opposition party.

And who is responsible for this miserable state of affairs?

We are: We the people of the United State. Our hubris, instilled by having lived our lives within the unreality of corporate dystopia, has deluded us into believing that we can indefinitely hold back the approaching shit storms spawned by our delusional sense of infinite entitlement—all of which have been financed by a pyramid scheme of (personal and national) debt. By the means of our emptiness, selfishness, and corruption, our "American way of life" is an unnatural disaster that has been waiting to happen.

But goddamn it to hell (or, at least, its earthly exurb Houston) why did it have to be New Orleans that was destroyed—N'awlins—one of the last outposts within this corporate simulacrum of a country where a human pulse and heart beat could be found—where the primordial songs of bone and heart and flesh and clouds and rivers had not been forced into the Clear Channel/Disney/Time-Warner Uberculture blandification machine?

Just let Haliburton try to build Branson, Missouri on the bayou. You see, in New Orleans, dead bodies will not remain buried underground. By the same token, we must not deep-six our grief and anger. In the name of the dead, we can't allow the truth to bulldozed, buried, and have shlock erected over their memories.

Although, to be of any use to them, first, we Americans must gaze down into the drowning pool that once was the Crescent City, where, superimposed upon the raw sewage, submerged debris, and bloated corpses—we will see our own face reflected. It is the face of empty entitlement, of exceptionalism, of state sanctified selfishness, of ceaseless ambition, and mindless appetite. What destroyed New Orleans is the toxic spill-off from our national psyche.

Frank O'Hara wrote: "In times of crisis we must all decide again and again whom we love."

Perhaps, to properly grieve the loss of New Orleans, we must allow ourselves to again be seduced by life—not by the soul-usurping machinations of the corporate UberCulture. Personally, like so many others who knew the city—beautiful, disloyal, capricious bitch she could be—I retain a lover's ardor for her. For the enveloping redolence of honey suckle and jasmine on the humid, evening air, as I, swigging a Turbo Dog, would hobbled up Esplanade. For the exquisite indifference of starlight above the Bywater and the manner in which those distance celestial bodies stood in stark contrast to the redemptive immediacy of the sweat-soaked bodies near me, as we would lie on our backs, on the sidewalk, watching stream rise from the roof of an old Camelback house, listening, as inside, Kermit Ruffin's band played an ode to Louis Armstrong's affection for reefer . . .

Living with the keening pain of loss evoked by such memories is the easier part of the grieving process . . . Now, through our rage and sadness, we must attempt to love, with the same ardor, the intricate manner that our lives and fates are interconnected, by way of mutual inter-dependance, with intimate strangers—which is the essential thing that we Americans seemed to have forgotten—and it is the reason our beloved city of New Orleans has been lost to us.

In a similar vein, we are dependent on air, water, and soil. Tragically, far too many of us have been tricked into believing we are dependent on the corporate power structure—and its proxy state, presently known as the three branches of the U.S. government. For far too long, we have deferred the hour when we faced the fact that this corrupt cabal cares nothing for us—and, accordingly, we owe them nothing.

In contrast, we owe the air, water, and soil—big time. For these things sustain us; they are the face of our beloved.

We should carry snapshots of New Orleans, before and after, in our wallets. And, in times of doubt, despair, and alienation, we should gaze at the photographs, in order that we never again forget: It was not divine wrath that brought on the flood; instead, the tragedy was caused by billions of interconnected acts (personal and collective; private and official) of carelessness, obliviousness, and indifference.

This is the choice our times have given us: continued complicity in sowing the toxic winds of corporatism or the passion-agitated air created by the ceaseless need to struggle against exploitation.

Our choice will not only determine our individual fates, but the fate of us all.

Phil Rockstroh, a self-described, auto-didactic, gasbag monologist, is a poet, lyricist and philosopher bard living in New York City. He may be contacted at: philangie2000@yahoo.com. Rockstroh is a contributing editor to [Cyrano's Journal Online](#).