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The Unveiling of the National Security State

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All things change, including our time-honored system of government. We have entered into a new era, marked by the existence of an omnipresent state, controlled by the very few, bound by no law but its own. Welcome to the New World Order.



*A new American order is in place.
Better get used to it. Or else.*

Five centuries ago, Niccolo Machiavelli explained how to undertake a revolution from above without most people even noticing. In his *Discourses on Livy*, he wrote that one "must at least retain the semblance of the old forms; so that it may seem to the people that there has been no change in the institutions, even though in fact they are entirely different from the old ones."

That is, keep the old government structures, even while you make profound changes to the actual system, because the appearances are all that most people will notice.

So today, instead of seeing the corpse of a republic in which we live, we see merely the dead man's clothing. Those clothes look the same as ever, albeit increasingly worn. We have had a quiet revolution that has not eliminated our Congressional representatives – it's simply made them largely irrelevant.

It's been a long journey to our current state of affairs. Not surprisingly, wars have been a major catalyst. Most wars fought by the United States have added power to the executive branch, while whittling power away from the legislature. This includes wars fought for high-minded purposes such as the Civil War and World War Two, mindless bloodbaths like World War One, and the dozens of undeclared wars over the past half-century.

I would select World War Two – and its immediate aftermath – as the real turning point when the American Dream went awry. This is ironic, since it was at that moment when America first sat atop the world at the pinnacle of power.

And therein lies the problem. For this was when the American republic began its transformation into a

national security state. Or, to put it another way, into an Empire.

Harry Truman has received a free ride from historians who glorify the all-powerful American State, but it he deserves a large share of the blame for the existence of our current behemoth – perhaps a future article will explore this more fully.

But enough of the past. This is, after all, post-9/11 America, in which we are collectively driving our vehicle down a dangerous mountain path, only to discover suddenly that we're not doing the driving.

We no longer govern ourselves. There is no "government of the people, by the people, and for the people," in any meaningful sense – in any sense beyond what it might have meant to a citizen of the U.S.S.R. in the bad old days of the Soviet Union.

As Machiavelli saw in his own time (and as he essentially foretold regarding our own), the dramatic changes to our political institutions have occurred without the people really noticing.

Consider the extraordinary – "nonstop" would be a better word – number of U.S. military actions around the world these days. But when did Congress last issue a declaration of war?

Consider the all-but open purchase of Presidents, members of Congress, and anyone else of significance by those with financial means. Yet another set of nails in the coffin of the American Republic.

Consider the internationalization of real power in this world, and the lack of institutional means to examine or regulate such power. Our global situation is akin to medieval feudalism, or more simply gangsterism. The military power of the United States is the primary tool for enforcement and self-enrichment by those with means. Best of all, you don't have to be an American citizen to influence policies of the U.S. military. Just ask any influential Saudi Arabian, Israeli, or Chinese leader. Or various leaders from the world of organized crime.

Consider the ramming through of the Patriot Act a bare month after 9/11/01, when it was obvious that not a single member of Congress read it thoroughly. With such a massively expanded federal ability to spy into your personal life, you might as well bid farewell to the Fourth Amendment – at least if you're doing anything interesting in the opinion of certain and mysterious bureaucrats.

Consider the conviction held by America's Founding Fathers that a functioning democracy requires an informed citizenry. Otherwise, they argued, the experiment in "government by the people" would be doomed to failure, and would inevitably transform into oligarchy. Compare that to our situation today, when ordinary people cannot gain important information from governing bodies, when the Freedom of Information Act is increasingly unfriendly, and when people are pacified 24/7 by a non-stop all-encompassing entertainment-driven culture that dominates one's waking moments. The Romans called that bread and circuses. It describes our situation well enough today.

In the same vein, consider also the promulgation of lies by America's political leadership that served as the pretext for the current war (e.g. the false link between Iraq and Al Quaida, the falseness of claims regarding Iraqi weapons of mass destruction), and the willingness of America's so-called Watchdog Media to jump uncritically on board, beating the war drum. And when recognition is made that the information was indeed false, it comes too late to prevent the pointless deaths of thousands of soldiers and civilians.

Consider the horrified reaction to the savagery of Nazi and Japanese atrocities during the Second World War. To the infamous German defense -- "we were only following orders" -- the world responded (rightly) that there are certain human values that must never be transgressed, and that torture is never an acceptable human value. Fast forward to the atrocities committed by American soldiers at Abu Ghraib prison. And the defense offered by (what some like to refer to as) America's finest: that they did no wrong, since they were only following orders. Just ask American soldier, Lyndie England. That's what she told the world.

Consider the ominous, burgeoning discussion on developing protocols in the event that the upcoming Presidential election needs to be "delayed" due to a possible terrorist attack. Delay the election? Even during America's Civil War, the election of 1864 occurred right on schedule. We've come a long way,

indeed.

What has happened by degrees over the past fifty years is that our traditional political structure and culture have eroded and degraded into something that prior generations of Americans would have found shocking and unrecognizable. Indeed, they would have found our current state of affairs to be positively un-American.

Machiavelli certainly had it right, but an addendum is necessary. After the true and deep structures of power have been sufficiently transformed, the outward appearance must eventually catch up. As the old song says, something's gotta give, and the outward trappings will need to be revised to reflect the new order.

Thus we see, in the wake of 9/11, that the veil of the New State is being lifted. It is a State that has become so expansive and powerful, it is no longer possible to hide it with the fig leaf of the old, honorable ideology of republican virtue. Consider our era the "coming out party" of the National Security State.

The millions of bumper stickers that proudly proclaim "God Bless America" would be better expressed with a slight change:

"May God have mercy on the United States of America."
