

Peace and Conflict Monitor

ANALYSIS

Politics of the Absurd: Sarah Palin and the mindset for war

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You mean you were SERIOUS about that, judge?

In the film, “My Cousin Vinny,” the protagonist, a neophyte lawyer from Brooklyn, cannot believe that wardrobe decorum –to look “lawyerly,” as the judge puts it-- can be relevant to the murder trial of two innocent college students. Much the same attitude (this can't be serious!) has recently engulfed half of the U.S. citizenry in laughter. Here was a vice-presidential candidate—the Governor of the state of Alaska-- who didn't know what a vice president does, who couldn't list the newspapers she reads on a daily basis, who answered with the flip “Oh, I'll try to find you some, and I'll bring them to ya,” when asked for examples of McCain's opposition to deregulation, and who mumbled incoherently when asked to name supreme court decisions she didn't agree with other than *Roe v. Wade*.

Sarah Palin herself shrugged it off—with a smile and a wink. (After all, she wasn't interested in talking about *those* things.) One of the churches near her home town in Alaska sought supernatural aid by initiating 40 days of prayer and fasting (English 2008), while her staff swooped down to protect her from the “liberal media.” The night after the Republican convention, one of Palin's senior advisors confided to a *New York Times* reporter--over late-night beers at the Hilton--that no, they never did get around to talking to her about international issue. Senator Joe Lieberman called her lack of knowledge an asset: it helps her “relate to regular people....This isn't an IQ test” (Stein

2008). Palin has retained power in the Republican Party, at least so far—although a few high-profile leaders bailed out and fled to the Democrats.¹

While most rank and file Republicans still consider Palin a triumph, most other U.S. citizens have viewed her as the triumph of the absurd. As the interviews exposed her ignorance of international affairs, she touched the funny bone of jaded journalists, inspired hitherto quiescent You Tube producers, and propelled composers to their synthesizers and samplers. The result: new heights of satirical creativity—thus providing a stressed-out public with much-needed therapeutic mirth, a complement to the grassroots political activism that was just as suddenly sweeping the country. For those of us who want a peaceful world, who have no overwhelming yearning for empire or rapture, who decry the military-industrial complex, it was exhilarating to see the American public suddenly energized through an outpouring of grassroots social commentary reminiscent of the 1960s-1970s.

In this past election, voters in Colorado defeated a ruling that would have defined a fertilized egg, not yet implanted in a woman, as a person. Three states passed injunctions against same-sex marriage (California, Arizona and Florida). In Arkansas, unmarried couples—straight or gay--cannot now adopt or even provide foster care for the children who are languishing in their overburdened state-run facilities. While some anti-abortion proposals were defeated, there seems little doubt that governmental social engineering is still alive and well in the United States. On the other hand, I will argue that the election results delivered at least a temporary defeat to Sarah Palin, a type of military motherhood figure that ably complements the warrior image of John McCain. There is little doubt that many, if not most, voters considered the election to be a

referendum on the unpopular war, and understood that Palin, in her unquestioning acceptance of the superiority of her own (family, state, country, religion), represented in cartoon fashion what I call the “clanmom” role in a militaristic family structure.

Contrary to the voters’ expressed desire, the country’s economy remains precariously balanced on permanent military involvement, while a “three trillion dollar war” (Steele & Goldberg 2008) has wrought economic disaster on the country. Absurd? Despite the voters’ emphatic message, the imperial folk and the egg-personhood folk have not gone away; indeed, some of the former are planning to move to Washington in January, having been invited into the new administration. Absurd?

On January 31, in his last debate with Hillary Clinton, Obama, offered leadership in changing the “mindset for war”:

I don't want to just end the war, but I want to end the mindset that got us into war in the first place.

Ten months later, in his victory speech, Obama gave a more muted version of this hope:

This victory alone is not the change we seek. It is only the chance for us to make that change. And that cannot happen if we go back to the way things were.

Indeed it was a call for help as he realized the limitations imposed upon the presidency. There is an urgency right now to answer his call, a window of opportunity, before too many of those imperial folk unpack their bags.

More than a year before his election success, Obama had characterized the mindset for war. In his last debate with Hillary Clinton on September 12, 2007, Obama told Iowa supporters:

Conventional thinking in Washington lined up for wartoo many politicians feared looking weak and failed to ask hard questionsOur only opportunity to stop the war was lost.

Obama's *mindset*, I would argue, is composed of what I like to call *subliminal truths*, a term for the subliminal assumptions we have internalized since infancy, concepts that can contradict rational conclusions we have drawn from actual experience and information. One of the sub-truths forming the mindset for war is purification, something I have written about elsewhere (Hopkins 2008). Obama, in explaining why congressional representatives were so quick to obey gung-ho warrior leaders, was pointing (in the above quote) to another, equally important, component of the war mindset, one that the psychologist Stefan Ducat has termed *anxious masculinity* or *the wimp factor*, "now an issue that dogs most men who run for public office" (Ducat 2004). Obama called it "the fear of looking weak" And this fear of looking weak has led to the death (in Iraq alone) of an estimated 89, 243-97, 423 civilian deaths (according to Iraq Body Count)ⁱⁱ and at least 4,202 members of the U.S. military forces (AP) in an unprovoked attack upon a small and defenseless nation.

In a very real sense, a mindset is a story line. The relationship between reality and mystery has always been a challenge for mortals to understand. We all tend to—perhaps need to—live within narratives, but these may or may not work for us. When they work, they are something like Harold in the children's story who uses his purple crayon to draw a staircase when he needs to climb one. Even children (perhaps especially children) have no trouble in disentangling the reality from the mystery in this little tale—and getting the message. To use a dreadful word (because it has been so misused), it is an authentic communication. Problems arise when the messages are inauthentic (sorry again!). That is when we accept and

incorporate in our own lives stories that have nothing to do with our own experience but have been appropriated without deliberation.

My hope is that, by using a folkloric perspective—by examining the tales told by and about Sarah Palin and John McCain (stock figures in this drama)--we can begin to find ways to promote the hope that Obama has inspired—and the satirical energy that Sarah Palin engendered. It is essential that we don't allow ourselves to fall back into the lethargy that made Chris Hedges write six years ago: “The question is whether America now courts death. We no longer seem chastened by war as we were in the years after the Vietnam War” (Hedges 2002: 160). Let's begin at the beginning.

I SARAH PALIN THE CLANMOM: HER STORY

Sarah Palin is the Clarence Thomas for feminists...a breath of fresh air.

--Rick Santorum castigating women for not supporting Palin

Culture War and the emergence of Sarah Palin--

During the last 35 years or so, U.S. citizens have witnessed the gradually-increasing power of an alignment of reactionary secular and religious forces bent on reversing the progressive trends of the 1960s-1970s counterculture. The movement was sparked (among others) by two “fathers,” Irving Kristol, “godfather of neoconservatism” (fellow of the American Enterprise Institute)—who called liberalism “a rot and decadence germinating within American society” (Kristol 1984) and Paul Weyrich, “father of conservatism” (co-founder of the Heritage foundation), who recently repeated his contempt for voting rights.ⁱⁱⁱ Nearly two decades ago, James Davison Hunter published *Culture Wars: the Struggle to Define America*) in which he predicted that the family

would become “the decisive battleground”—centering on the question of “*what constitutes a family in the first place*” (Hunter 1991: 176-177; emphasis in original).

Openly hostile to all egalitarian mechanisms, the disparate conservative groups that made up the Republican alliance agreed to focus on the only issue with which they were in complete agreement: the establishment of a single legitimate family type--heterosexual, two-parent, and patriarchal--both through legislation and through the resurrection of social stigma. ^{iv}It is the kind of social control necessary to complement an hierarchical military social structure. Authoritarian domestic policies and the imperial state are two sides of the same coin.

At first, Sarah Palin seemed to be a Godsend, quite literally, to the Republican Party, most of whose evangelical base, unhappy with the nomination of John McCain, had been threatening to stay home or worse (vote Democratic). Palin is a conservative evangelical Christian, hunter of animals, a life-long member of the N.R.A., anti-choice, anti-abortion even in the case of rape or incest, pro-abstinence-only education, pro-teaching creationism, anti-environmental constraints, and pro-drilling anywhere. Televangelist Pat Robertson declared, “I am astounded at her abilities”(WCVB TV-Boston). Paleo-conservative Patrick Buchanan wrote: “Palin has become, overnight, the most priceless political asset the movement has” (Buchanan 2008). Senator John Ensign (R-Nevada) sang, “A sea-change in the mood, in everything. It is nothing but positive....I cannot even describe to you what this has done to our prospects of winning the White House” (Mascaro 2008). James Dobson, leading figure in the Dominionist movement (Hedges 2005), returned with enthusiasm: “I have not been so excited about any candidate since Ronald Reagan” (Munro 2008). And finally, the libertarian pseudo-

sociologist Charles Murray was in love with Palin: “Truly and deeply in love” (*TrackBack* 2008). The coalition was back—for a time.

Absurd changes of heart--

On September 1, Sarah and Todd Palin issued the family’s official statement on their daughter’s pregnancy: “Bristol and the young man she will marry are going to realize very quickly the difficulties of raising a child, which is why they will have the love and support of our entire family.” To almost everyone’s astonishment, Palin’s base of support only solidified when the Governor of Alaska—announced that her 17-year-old, unmarried daughter Bristol was 5 months pregnant. At one time, the above-quoted Ensign had lobbied his legislators to “bring back stigma” for out-of-wedlock sex.

Reminded of his former views, a reporter at the Republican Convention asked him:

“...should that child [Bristol] be given a stigma?” Ensign replied in the negative: “The difference is....that the Alaska governor’s teen daughter plans to marry the father”

(Compare Henry 1997 with Mascaro 2008) Despite the young man’s disinterest in having offspring-- as noted on his personal website (now unavailable), the Palin family and their supporters have stoutly maintained that their announcement of the impending liaison was not a “shot-gun marriage.”

The point is important because during the 1990s, humiliation was successfully used—and hammered into legislation (most especially through the welfare “reform” bill)—to win public support for recognizing only one kind of family, the heterosexual, two-parent, patriarchal structure favored by right-wing social engineers. Insistent demands to “bring back stigma” involved reviving the concept of illegitimacy for out-of-

wedlock sex and retrieving the threat of the “shot-gun marriage.” Former Pennsylvania Senator Rick Santorum’s views of sex outside of marriage used to be so extreme that he didn’t believe rape victims should be permitted to use either the “morning after” pill or RU 486. However, in this case, he called the Bristol story “a net positive”; after all, he said, “Social conservatives are not puritanical. They are not people who think people don’t sin (Hamilton 2005; Horowitz 2008). President of the Family Research Council Gary Bauer, who used to think that increasing rates of “illegitimacy,” indicated that a society was “headed for the rocks of decline,” found the story “endearing” (Horowitz 2008).

Top Gun theater--

Palin’s acceptance speech was written by staff writer, Matthew Scully, before he, or anyone else on McCain’s staff, knew who the vice-presidential nominee would be. His original assumption that the candidate would be male, he said, forced re-writing from scratch, but he refused to elaborate. We can assume that the attacks on Obama probably needed no rewriting, and we notice the absence of Palin’s more radical religious beliefs. (or her hunting prowess; Scully is a vegetarian and an animal rights activist). At any rate, Palin demonstrated an uncanny ability to bond with thousands of delegates in the hall, virtually none of whom had ever heard of her before. Her speech was punctuated with cries of “Sarah!--Sarah!” from an audience that had been pumped up by earlier speakers. In retrospect, it was a rather chilling foreshadowing of demagoguery to come when her words were to incite swarms of infatuated followers to shout violent and racist epithets against Obama (“Traitor! --“Kill him!”). At the end of her acceptance speech, when her

whole family, including husband, future son-in-law and four of her five children joined her on the stage, a gleeful John McCain jumped up to hug her and photographers snapped the tableau that would circulate around the world. Then McCain grabbed the microphone, shouting: Don't you think we have made the right choice for the next vice president? And what a beautiful family!" (CNN)

The crowd's roar of approval was not just for the beauty of the family tableau. The Palin family portrait established the credentials for this vice-presidential nominee: She began her family introduction by describing her oldest son, a soldier about to be deployed to Iraq, a circumstance that not only attested to her patriotism and respect for the military but also to appropriate training of a male offspring; the youngest son's very existence was proof of her commitment to "life" principles (She had knowingly brought this Down-syndrome baby into the world.); and the presence of her obviously pregnant daughter attested both to her "pro-life" principles and to her redemptive method of dealing with a child fallen from grace. In humiliating Bristol before the entire world, wasn't she following the following the prescriptions of right-wing pundits who have been demanding "bring back stigma!" lo these many years? And the marriage to come was quite in accord with the spirit of Bush's "marriage initiative" which also treats marriage as the solution to sin.

The rank and file of her public were solidly behind her. They gave one of two reasons: either they focused on her decision to choose life and welcomed the upcoming marriage as a purifying agent; or, secondly, they said they related to her as a normal, a person just like them with problems just like theirs (as Senator Lieberman predicted

although in a different context; see above). Clearly, Palin had qualifications that suited her constituency, although perhaps not exactly the credentials most people have in mind when they talk about vetting a candidate. She is the quintessential role model for the female part of what members of the religious right choose to call “the traditional family” that espouses “family values,” or simply “values.” The term has been used *ad nauseam*, but the public well understands that its meaning is restricted to certain specifics and has nothing to do with ameliorating poverty or promoting peace.

The clanmom--

Palin’s stage-managed propulsion into the political arena at the Republican convention reminded me of George W. Bush’s Top Gun landing on the USS Abraham Lincoln. To adapt the words of Stephan Ducat to the feminine situation, “Rarely in the history of political stagecraft has there been a more coherent spectacle, by which I mean a unity of *clanmom* form with *clanmom* content. she became for a while the principal iconic figure for resurrected American woman” (Ducat 22).^y

I have had to resort to a neologism to express a feminine type that is, nonetheless, familiar: *clanmom*. There simply is no equivalent to the original word *phallic* with its host of both biological and metaphorical connotations; indeed “clanmom” contains within it the phallic principle because this kind of mom provides coach-like support to both male and female children *and her husband*. She is not a feminist, rejecting the concept of gender equivalency; on the contrary, she is a firm advocate of dichotomous gender roles—which she transmits to her children. She tends to disparage intellectual discourse as a waste of time. As a conservative maintainer of family morals, she usually is active

in a religious institution. She wields actual power through maintaining the social calendar, performing as a stylish and gracious hostess for her husband's business associates, and frequently controls the check book. Like a football coach, she commonly directs from outside the playing field but can choose to appear on the playing field if she so wishes. The term "clanmom" suggests the "blood" loyalty that can inspire fierce hatred of others, a one-sided, irrational allegiance to the clan that can lead to a competition far deadlier than team sports; thus the image is integrally related to family feuds, belief in retribution--and acceptance, even promotion, of warfare. The extreme focus on her family can lead to racism.

Sarah Palin exhibits a remarkable number of the foregoing characteristics. The author Susan J. Douglas calls it "Feminism Without Feminism" and, with a nod to Palin, "Pit Bull Feminism" (Douglas 2008).

The clanmom is not the only feminine ideal with a time-honored pedigree. ^{vi}However, there is no doubt that the family structure is the most convenient "building block" upon which to construct an hierarchical warrior state.

It was an idealized form of the clanmom image that captivated two sets of right-wing movers and shakers when they met, and were entertained by, Governor Sarah Palin of Alaska during the summer of 2007. According to a fascinating account in the *New Yorker*, two separate luxury cruises offering tourists lectures by prominent writers stopped in Juneau, Alaska: the first from Rupert Murdoch's *The Weekly Standard* and the latter from the William Buckley-founded *National Review*. Upon his return, Fred Barnes, Executive Editor of *The Weekly Standard* published the first major national article specifically promoting Palin, "The Most Popular Governor," but the other powerful

journalists used hyperbole, too: *striking, pretty, a combination of Annie Oakley and Joan of Arc, former beauty queen, a honey, a heartthrob*. This last came from the computer strokes of Bill Kristol, The *Weekly Standard's* Washington-based editor. Back in June, this neo-conservative pundit had declared: “I don’t know if I can make it through the next three months without her on the ticket” (Mayer 2008). Clearly, the Christian right was also involved, and when Rick Santorum, on Fox News announced his selection of Palin from a short list, it was June 22, three months before September—at the same time Kristol couldn’t stand waiting for her to be chosen.

Unfortunately for at least some of these Washington insiders, they underestimated the clanmom. Perhaps they should have been aware of an example from nearly a thousand years ago that could have served as a warning.

Absolutes that cannot be questioned--

The clanmom is found in the 13th century Icelandic *Njals Saga* or *Burnt Njals Saga* (*Brennu-Njáls Saga*). It describes the beginning of a cycle of violence that leads to the self-immolation of the good Njáls, his wife and sons; the tragedy had been initiated by Hilkigunna when she demanded blood vengeance for her murdered husband. The distraught official arbiter, Flosi, unable to persuade her to accept peaceful retribution, is described as “blood-red in the face and sometimes ashy pale as withered grass and sometimes blue as death,” but he cannot go against the power of the woman he describes as “the greatest hell-hag” who wishes “...that we should take that course which should be the worst for all of us” He tells her: “It is well thou should weep for a good husband....But women’s counsel is ever cruel” (*Njáls Saga*: Chapter LXVIII).

Of course, Palin is not Hilkgunna, and there are differences. We are not told by the saga author whether Hilkgunna was “a babe,” given to outrageous spending sprees or winking flirtatiously while presenting her case. However, Hilkgunna is depicted as both a gracious hostess and goader of her menfolk— tough enough to toss her late husband’s still-blood-soaked coat over the startled Fossi’s shoulders to prove her point. More importantly, in both cases, decision-making is not dependent upon weighing pros and cons, but on absolutes that cannot be discussed or questioned but are handed down from previous generations.

Blurring the separation of church and state—

*I think that God's will needs to be done in unifying people and companies.
And pray about that. ...*

--Palin to graduates of the Missionary program at Wasilla Assembly of God.

During her lifetime, Sarah Palin has worshipped in 4 churches under pastors who teach Bible inerrancy. Since becoming governor in 2006, she has been attending the Juneau Christian Center in the capital of Alaska. It is affiliated with the Assembly of God, the largest Pentecostal denomination in the world, and it offers an emotional type of spiritual experience characterized by speaking in tongues and laying on of hands. For over 25 years, Palin attended the Wasilla Assembly of God, the church where she was baptized, and she remains in touch with her home church. Earlier this year she was honored at the opening night banquet of the 2008 Alaska District Council of the Assemblies of God of Alaska; and, according to their official newsletter, Superintendent Ted Boarsman (her former Pastor at Wasilla) and Pastor Mike Rose (her present pastor at Juneau) “laid hands on the Governor and led the Council in prayer.”

Thus it seems fair to ask: To what extent has Palin's immersion in an extreme religious environment affected her official performance? In 2001, Pat Robertson's resignation as President of the Christian Coalition was explained by Gary Bauer, President of *American Values*: "I think Robertson stepped down because the position had already been filled. [Bush] is that leader right now." Like Bush, Palin believes in destiny and sees herself endowed with a mission from a supreme being (Duffy 2002). In the following excerpt from her speech to June graduates of a missionary program at her old church, the Wasilla Assembly of God, she is hinting at the news she cannot yet divulge, what she considers to be her destiny:

And I want to tell the Masters' Commission students that you'd be amazed, the umbrella of this church here where God is going to send you from this church – Believe me, I know what I'm saying, where God has sent me from under the umbrella of the church....

During her graduation address, Palin clearly blurred the church-state distinction by asking the graduates to work with her on a gas line project for Alaska:

We're very, very rich. But our most important natural resource is our people. I'm thinking what I need to do is strike a deal with you guys. I can do my part by doing things like working really, really hard to get a natural gas line-- about a thirty billion dollar project that will create a lot of jobs.

I think that God's will needs to be done in unifying people and companies. And pray about that. ... But really all that stuff won't do any good if the people's heart isn't right with God. And that's going to be your job.

The Republican party's shameful record on the environment, writes Chip Ward, the author of *Canaries on the Rim*, can only be partly explained as practical expediency. "In the final analysis," he continues, "the only explanation that fits the nightmare of the last eight years is this: It has been on a holy war against nature...and the nomination of Sarah

Palin has been essentially an insurance policy taken out on its continuation.” (Ward 2008).

Palin is on record as favoring the teaching of creationism in the public schools; it is not a sideline issue, Ward point out, because it involves “...a disparaging attitude toward science, belief in mankind’s domination over the natural world, and a willingness to impose its religious doctrine on other.” Palin wants to drill for oil in the fragile Arctic National Wildlife Refuge; she recently sued the Interior Department to keep the polar bear from being listed as a threatened species under the Endangered Species Act; and she is an active promoter of Alaska’s aerial hunting program, amongst other similar positions. Palin’s views on environmental destruction and are in line with the rapture theories of her pastors who believe war and environmental devastation are good omens, sign of an approaching “rapture “ of true believers while everyone else is “left behind” (Ward 2008). Since warfare is felicitous sign, so it is not surprise to find Palin describing the war in Iraq as “God’s plan”:

But my oldest, my son Trak; he's a soldier in the United States army now. He's an infantryman,.... Pray for our military. He's going to be deployed in September to Iraq. Pray for our military men and women who are striving to do what is right also for this country that our leaders—our national leaders—are sending them out on a task that is from God. That's what we have to be sure we're praying for: that there is a plan and that plan is God's plan. So bless them in your prayers

In her acceptance speech at the Republican convention, Palin earned kudos for bringing into the world a Down syndrome baby and, especially for assuring the families of special needs children that “if we are elected, you will have a friend and advocate in the White House. “ It has been pointed out, however, that Alaska has a birth defect rate twice the national average and that, as Governor, Palin has “pursued environmental

policies that seem perfectly crafted to swell the ranks of special needs kids” (Kaplan and Snell 2008).

Eight years ago, under the leadership of Mayor Palin, the Wasilla City Council voted to have Wasilla declared a “City of Character.” Today Wasilla is one of about 200 cities nationwide, as well as a number in 27 other countries, to have committed itself, at least nominally, to follow the precepts of the International Association of Character Cities (IACC), an ostensibly secular organization that is, however, modeled on the evangelical teachings of the Institute in Basic Life Principles (IBLP) (Posner 2008).

Finally, it is noteworthy that since Palin assumed the governorship in late 2006, she and her family have charged the state more than \$13,000 in taxpayer funds to attend religious events, including meetings with Christian pastors—and including the missionary graduation ceremony mentioned above (Burke 2008).

The maverick story

She's a little more savvy to the ways of Washington than she's lets on
 ---Steve Ellis, *Vice-President: Taxpayers for Common Sense*

A good part of Sarah Palin’s attraction to her supporters had to do, not with issues or even her family, but with the earnestness with which she put forth an image of understanding their problems from her own experience. It convinced them she had the courage to defy the establishment in Washington. During Charlie Gibson’s interview on September 11, 2008, Gibson quizzes her on her experience with international diplomacy:

GIBSON: *I'm talking about somebody who's head of state, who can negotiate for that country. Ever met one?*

PALIN: *I have not.... But, Charlie, again, we've got to remember what the desire is in this nation at this time. It is for no more politics as usual and somebody's big, fat resume maybe that shows decades and decades in that Washington establishment, where, yes, they've had opportunities to meet heads of state ...*

In point of fact, Sarah Palin *had* met a head of state last October; as confirmed by her press secretary, a meeting took place between Palin and the President of Iceland, Ólafur Ragnar Grímsson, in Anchorage. It is hard to believe that Sarah Palin simply forgot this meeting. Perhaps it didn't fit in with the storyline she had been weaving about being squeaky-clean, an outsider to the Good Ol' Boys. If so, it would not be the only instance of obscuring or denying inconvenient truths. We know that the lobbying firm hired by the supposedly out-of-the-Beltway Palin, as Mayor of Wasilla, has ties to the notorious Jack Abramoff (McGann 2008;Kilkenny 2008). Despite the debunking of her claim, Palin continues to repeat her mythical rejection of the bridge that led to nowhere (actually, two such bridges); despite her claims to have rejected the embattled Senator Ted Stevens, records show that she directed one of his organizations from 2003-2005, and in fact the embattled senator had much to do with jump-starting her career (Mosk 2008; Kilkenny 2008).^{vii} The point I am making, of course, has nothing to do with guilt by association. I am simply trying to demonstrate that, politically, Sarah Palin is not naïve or ingenuous.

Just as the strutting George Bush on the aircraft carrier was pure theater (he was not a pilot, let alone an heroic one, and no mission had been accomplished). the picture Sarah Palin continues to paint of herself--as a reformer from outside the Beltway, (as a fiscal conservative, a fighter against "earmarks")--does not accord with the facts. During her six years as Mayor of Wasilla, she increased government expenditures by over 33%

and increased city taxes by 38%; while she reduced property taxes for landowners, she increased a regressive sales tax that included food. Far from being a “maverick,” a naive outsider to the beltway boys, Palin, as Mayor of Wasilla, employed a lobbying firm to secure almost \$27 million in federal earmarks for a town of 6,700 residents. As pointed out by [Steve Ellis](#), vice president of Taxpayers for Common Sense. "She certainly wasn't shy about putting the old-boy network to use to bring home millions of dollars....She's a little more savvy to the ways of Washington than she's lets on" (Kane 2008; Kilkenny 2008).

Inside, outside the family--

Palin’s officially expressed support of her pregnant daughter Bristol does not extend to young women outside the family. Earlier this year, the Governor of Alaska used her veto power to cut funding from a proposed budget for state programs that aid pregnant and parenting teen women. She also slashed funding to Alaska's Family Services. Palin’s police department used to bill rape victims for their own forensic exams; news reports **show** that the state of Alaska had to step in and pass legislation making it illegal to charge a rape victim for evidence collection. Since the victim is offered a morning-after pill as part of the rape-kit procedure, then-Rep. Eric Croft believes the opposition may have come “from a hardcore pro-life position...that it’s a government-funded abortion” (McGann 2008; also see Sood 2008 for the effect Alaska’s anti-abortion policies have had on Native women). In 2007, Gov. Palin proposed the transfer of \$1.5 million for social service block grants to the state faith-based office ([Anchorage Daily News](#), March 12, 2007). Oil-rich Alaska, one of the wealthiest states in the union, is one of only ten states that does not have universal pre-K education; in

reference to this lack Palin explained, "Constitutionally, we are mandated to provide public education and, traditionally, we are talking K-12" (Newman 2008).

II JOHN McCAIN THE WARRIOR: HIS STORY

I know how to win wars!

--John McCain, at a town hall in Albuquerque

John McCain, as a prisoner of war in Vietnam, endured torture. It was an experience that made him dislike the practice--until he found his position politically inexpedient. A number of Republican evangelicals, who had become spiritual advocates of torture at least since Mel Gibson's *The Passion of the Christ*, found him too wimpy for their taste. Even after he changed his mind—and demonstrated his courage by telling a New Hampshire audience that it was “fine with me” if the U.S. had to stay in Iraq for a hundred years-- many still felt they couldn't trust him to be tough enough. He was shocked, however, when Russia invaded Georgia, seemingly unaware that there had been a provocation: the invasion of Ossetia, Russian territory, by Georgia; the U.S. unprovoked invasion of Iraq, of course, did not enter his mind. But this was all party line obfuscation, most especially his remark that:

In the 21st century, nations don't invade other nations.

But aside from political maneuvering, there was another, far greater, problem with John McCain. Here's a man running for president of the United States who happily admitted he knew nothing about economics and had no interest in acquiring computer skills. On the day the news broke about the collapse of Merrill Lynch and Lehman Brothers (Sept. 15), McCain was quoted on ABC: “the fundamentals of our economy are strong,” During an interview on a Spanish-language radio station, McCain repeatedly

didn't recognize the name of the Prime Minister of Spain, Jose Luis Zapatero, apparently thinking he was the head of a country in Latin America (*National Journal Hot Line*, Sept. 19). On ABC's *Good Morning America* (July 21), McCain indicated that he believed Iraq and Pakistan share a border. According to CNN (July 16), he referred to Czechoslovakia two days running as if it were still a country, a status it hasn't had since 1993. On *Straight Talk Express* (July 1), McCain asked: "How can we bring pressure on the government of Somalia?" only to be corrected by his aide Mark Salter: "Sudan." "Sudan," McCain repeated. McCain (speaking to reporters in Amman, the Jordanian capital) undermined his claim as an expert in foreign affairs when he repeated a mistaken claim that Iran was training al-Qaeda fighters (Frick 2008). Of course, Iran and al Qaeda represent opposing sides in the Iraq civil war; Shiites make up 90% of the population of Iran while al Qaeda is a Sunni Moslem group.-This time, it was Senator Joseph Lieberman who whispered in his ear--a highly publicized incident caught on camera. A few moments later, McCain told the reporters, "I'm sorry. The Iranians are training extremists, not al-Qaeda" (Barr and Shear 2008). That did not prevent him, however, from continuing to repeat the incorrect information, e.g. on Hugh Hewitt's right-wing radio show (March 17) and to a Congressional hearing the following month, according to the London *Telegraph's* Washington correspondent (Spillius 2008).

The preceding are just a few examples of the misinformation McCain has been disseminating on the campaign trail; left out are his many contradictory statements on Middle East policy, and I have also omitted obvious slips of the tongue (e.g., FEC for SEC), as well as the most widely publicized gaffe of all, his supposed forgetfulness concerning how many houses he owns; to me, that seems likely to have been a cover-up,

the truth not likely to sit well with the mythical Joe Six-Pack. Most media outlets treat his gaffes (when they mention them at all) as memory slips and worry about them (those that concern themselves at all) as possible signs of senility. Astonishing is the fact that virtually none of the commentators consider the possibility that what they may demonstrate is a dangerous lack of basic knowledge.

“Just a heartbeat away from the presidency!” was the cry that made even (otherwise) wise Americans tremble. Did they really think that the man who had just made a trip to Iraq and still didn’t understand the political situation there could protect them? Any more than the woman who just got her first passport a month or so ago?

III OBEDIENCE TO AUTHORITY

We know something about Sarah Palin’s formative influences. As noted above, she attended the Wasilly Assembly of God, for more than a quarter century, from the time she was ten years old. The church has a credo based on obedience to authority so rigid that the church’s pastor, Ed Kalnins, a firm believer in the approaching end times, asserts that criticism of President Bush for his handling of Katrina is sinful:

I hate criticism towards the President, because it's like criticisms towards the pastor — it's almost like, it's not going to get you anywhere, you know, except for hell.

On John Kerry, in 2004:

I'm not going to tell you who to vote for, but if you vote for this particular person, I question your salvation. I'm sorry" (Both quotes from Huffington Post’s Kalnins tape archives).

A description of military training was written in 1933 by the remarkable Major General Smedley Butler who became--after retiring from the Marine Corps (with two Congressional Medals of Honor for combat heroism)-- a dedicated peace activist:

I suspected I was just part of a racket at the time. Now I am sure of it. Like all the members of the military profession, I never had a thought of my own until I left the service. My mental faculties remained in suspended animation while I obeyed the orders of higher-ups. This is typical with everyone in the military service (Butler 1933).

Anyone perusing the two lists— Palin’s and McCain’s-- of inconsistent statements, contradictions and lapses in factual knowledge must see a remarkable similarity. In addition, both show little regard for the truth, something they have not hesitated to mold to the convenience of the moment; in both cases, there is little chagrin upon being caught in a patent contradiction; and, finally, both are quite willing to knowingly repeat falsehoods. It seems likely that Stanley Milgram, the psychologist who did the classic investigation into obedience to authority, has provided the answer; he discovered that: “The essence of obedience consists is the fact that a person comes to view himself as the instrument for carrying out another person’s wishes, and he therefore no longer regards himself as responsible for his actions” (Milgram 1974/2004: xviii). Is this not a perfect description of the goal both of military training and of the clanmom role? In both cases, an other-directed personality has been trained. There can be no place for individual inquiry or criticism; one follows a storyline laid down by others.

Blinking—

Who would have thought that blinking—or rather *not* doing it—would open the door to celebrity—and perhaps, even more impressive, notoriety? However, when you find an organic recipe for “Sarah ‘you can’t blink’ Palin Cupcakes” posted on the website

of The Haphazard Gourmet Girls (not to speak of attention from the likes of Jay Leno and Jon Stewart), you may not like so much what they say, but you must know you've made it. Of course, non-blinking has also favorably impressed your supporters. Country singer Hank Williams, for example, sang a new adaptation of his one-time hit *Family Tradition* in your honor; to quote the refrain:

*...John and Sarah tell you what they think—
And they're not gonna blink—*

--although he may not understand all your non-blinking principles; he may not have it quite right (at least from the Alaskan bear's point of view), judging from the following lines of the song:

*...Like a mama bear in Idaho
She'll protect your family's condition
If you mess with her cubs, she's gonna take off the gloves—
That's an American female tradition....*

Now that the blinking parodies have a life of their own, it's time to go back to the original; here's the appropriate excerpt from Palin's Charlie Gibson interview on September 11:

GIBSON: *Governor, let me start by asking you a question that I asked John McCain about you, and it is really the central question. Can you look the country in the eye and say, "I have the experience and I have the ability to be not just vice president, but perhaps president of the United States of America?"*

PALIN: *I do, Charlie, and on January 20, when John McCain and I are sworn in, if we are so privileged to be elected to serve this country, I will be ready. I'm ready.*

GIBSON: *And you didn't say to yourself, "Am I experienced enough? Am I ready? Do I know enough about international affairs? Do I -- will I feel comfortable enough on the national stage to do this?"*

PALIN: *I didn't hesitate, no.*

GIBSON: *Didn't that take some hubris?*

PALIN: *I answered him, yes, because I have the confidence in that readiness and knowing that you can't blink, you have to be wired in a way of being so committed to the mission, the mission that we're on, reform of this country and victory in the war, you can't blink. So I didn't blink then even when asked to run as his running mate.*

Palin's words have inspired so much hilarity that it is difficult to remember that it was a serious conviction expressed by a real candidate for high office in the United States. At the time, a *New York Times* editor was reminded of an: "ill-prepared and unblinkingly obstinate president. One who didn't pause to think before he started a disastrous war of choice in Iraq...who obstinately cut taxes and undercut all efforts at regulation, unleashing today's profound economic crisis" (Editorial: Sept, 13; p.A 18).

Palin's insistence to Gibson of the importance of a non-blinking obedience to a mission "from God" brings to mind Umberto Eco's description of Ur-Fascism, one of the principal features of which he calls the cult of irrationalism:

Action being beautiful in itself, it must be taken before, or without, reflection. Thinking is a form of emasculation (Eco 2006:x).

Perhaps we can begin to understand why the (probably) non-religious, Leo Strauss-following neoconservatives and (probably) religious, Rushdoony-following Christian rightists have joined hands on the family issue—and Sarah Palin. John McCain is the ideal male complement to Palin's clanmom image. And they are similar in another way. While demonstrating an abysmal lack of fundamental knowledge and a lack of interest in weighing evidence, neither one is stupid in a certain way. Both have been able to successfully navigate the murky world of politics through deftly manipulating facts to conveniently malleable stories while, at the same time managing to remain

remarkably free of being tarred by the same brush as many of their colleagues. However, if you take away the screen of faith that shields one from view, or withdraw the screen of patriotic heroism that shields the other, you no longer see wizards, just little Ozes, each of whom represents only half of the attributes of a whole person—the warrior, in the one case, the clanmom in the other, both trained to limit thinking powers to a constant political manipulating of the shield.

IV ANXIOUS MASCULINITY

This victory alone is not the change we seek--

On this past election day, some 65 million people delivered a resounding *no* to the policies of the last eight years—three million of whom had each contributed small amounts of money to the Obama campaign. The world was watching and overjoyed at the outcome; like the U.S. voters, they assumed the election to be a referendum on the war. MP George Galloway speaking to the Houses of Parliament on the day after the U.S. election: “Obama became the front runner because he opposed the war on Iraq,” and called an historic day “...when tens of millions of Americans voted for a fundamental change of direction from the appalling Bush era” □ (www.eastlondonadvertiser.co.uk). But, as discussed at the beginning of this article, Obama issued a more modified—but significant assessment:

This victory alone is not the change we seek. It is only the chance for us to make that change. And that cannot happen if we go back to the way things were.

Again to review, he seemed to be calling for help in changing what he had once described as the “mindset” for war, something that was so natural to almost members of Congress who gave away their powers to think because they “feared looking weak.” Absurdly, they translated this fawning obedience from weakness to courage. And, like Sarah Palin, they acted without asking “hard questions.” They didn’t blink. Of course, it begs the question: To whom would they appear weak? Who would be offended by hard questions?

A sure sign of an authoritarian society is widespread deference. A democracy cannot continue to function when officials elected by the citizens to represent them act according to an inauthentic storyline created by “superiors.” Virtually all of the absurdities discussed in this article make perfectly good sense if you accept an unequal, imperial society in which, as a Bush aide famously said, “We make our own reality.” The anti-woman woman, the un-heroic hero, the establishment maverick, God-planned wars: They all make sense if you know your place.

A mindset for war is the ultimate tool for justifying social inequality of all kinds. In this final section let’s take a close look at the background of the war hero narrative with an eye to finding our place in it today.

Oh, war! War! The dream of patriots and heroes! A fraud, Bluntschli
(Sergius in Shaw's *Arms and the Man*)

George Bernard Shaw’s answer to Virgil made a point that was by no means new. During the course of history, accounts of war heroes have been peppered by occasional war-hero-scoffers—e.g. the 5th century B.C., Pinder’s oft-quoted lines: “War is sweet to those who have not tried it.” But the epoch that reached from Shaw’s play to our time is

unusual: there may never have been such an extended period during which interest in war heroes has diminished so dramatically, although unfortunately not true of war itself.

“Old soldiers never die, they just fade away.” Midway through the twentieth century, in 1951, General Douglas MacArthur quoted an old army ballad in his farewell address to the nation. The general didn’t know how prescient his words were to prove and not only for himself: Soldiers in general—young as well as old, both dead and alive—were to become more and more indistinct and indistinguishable during the era that was characterized by what one sociologist called “the retreat of patriarchy.” The law of the father was the big loser during “the period of the most rapid and radical global changes in the history of human gender and generational relations....Probably no other institution has been forced to retreat as much” (Therborn 2004: 73).

Are these two circumstances related? Let’s take a long-lens view of the U.S trend toward a less authoritarian society, beginning more than a century ago, before the retreat of patriarchy. There is probably no better gauge of societal change than a popular vehicle used to enculturate children: the nursery rhyme.

The Boy Patriot

*I want to be a Soldier!--
 A soldier!--
 A soldier!--
 I want to be a Soldier with a saber in my hand
 Or a little carbine rifle, or a musket on my shoulder,
 Or just a snare-drum snarling in the middle of the band.*

Above is the refrain from one of James Whitcomb Riley's rollicking lyrics that was designed to charm toddlers a century or so ago. Part of a collection called *The Book of Joyous Children*, the final stanza of the poem presents an image of a heroic death::

*So when our foes have had their fill,
Though I'm among the dying,
To see The Old Flag flying still,
I'll laugh to leave her flying!*
(Riley 1902)

The Jungian psychotherapist D. Stephenson Bond believes people live within myths that must change with the constant flux of societies, our lives seen as unfolding stories (Bond 1993: 2-3). But he warns that old myths often survive beyond their utility, and he gives a personal example: finding his grandfather teaching his six-year-old son to shoot with rifle, shotgun and handgun. Bond calls this a mythological problem and explains: "The myth is: The right to bear arms." Noting that, even in his grandfather's childhood, the gun had become a cultural artifact, he writes: "Seeing my son with a loaded handgun reminded me in no uncertain terms that the cultural artifacts of dysfunctional myths are dangerous things" (Bond 1993:46).

Some may argue that one or both of the above examples represented a meaningful aspect of enculturation for its time--always one of the primary functions of nursery lore. But the first example, especially, may be seen as a fair gauge of the transformation in public attitudes throughout the past century. While there are still some who believe in teaching young children to use guns, bouncing a four- or five-year-old on the knee to jolly verses about his potential patriotic death would probably not be tolerated by many today.

Nazi Germany succeeded in defusing a strong feminist peace movement that came into fruition in 1928 so that, by 1933, steady infiltration of National Socialist members had thrown all feminists out of leadership positions. Called *Gleichshaltung* (the bringing—in--line) this rapid transformation was accomplished by appeals to religious

and patriotic duty.

However, it was apparently no simple task to persuade members of German feminist peace organizations that they had a duty to provide cannon fodder for the fatherland. A fascinating document has come down to us from 1932: Field notes kept by a Nazi party worker testify that it was no easy task to interest women in National Socialism because every woman, as she puts it, “has a bit of pacifist in her.” And some are Marxist, “today still tense, inflamed, embittered..” However, there is a way: “God be praised!” Women can be enlisted through calling on their allegiance to Christianity and country:

. One thing we can do: teach women to rear their children to love their homeland. So we cultivate the will to sacrifice in every German woman

In a grim echo of James Whitcomb Riley’s earlier predictive vision, the Nazi party worker then asserts::

... they will be ready, albeit with heavy hearts, to give that which is most dear to the Fatherland. (quoted in Millett 1969: 160f)

It is frightening to discover how rapidly this change in mindset took place, and it is even more frightening to learn from Adolf Hitler’s *Mein Kampf* that he deliberately set out to change a mindset against war he found amongst soldiers during the First World War. Hitler, wounded during a skirmish, recounted his disgust with fellow patients in the military hospital; he was the only true sufferer, he wrote, the rest were malingerers who simply wanted to escape the battle scene, and he stipulated military training for boys, women non-citizens until marriage (Hitler 1925/ 2001): 192, 441). The “bringing-in-line” was the sexual side of retrenchment to familia polarized gender roles: the male trained to wield death, the female to breed bodies.

However, in the United States, valuation of flags over male bodies, once common in the U.S. as in Germany, has never regained the respect it lost during the Vietnam era:

Hell, no. I won't go!

The rallying cry of male youth in the 1960s, complemented a nascent women's movement that has continued to grow, a powerful combination that has never lost its momentum. Today, war is still popular with some U.S. citizens, but dead soldiers are not; the young today have to be enticed into the military, not with dreams of glory, but pressured by financial urgency--and promises: *no, of course you'll never see a war*—or money—or a green card—or a get-out-of-jail free card. The Bush administration, instead of honoring gold-star mothers and their dead sons, ignored them by not publicizing casualty figures and passing up funerals, while focus groups try to figure out new ways to make soldiering sound like fun and recruiters are given more and more power to infiltrate the high schools. The draft, ironically, has become an anti-war issue, its very suggestion striking fear into the hearts of the total warrior folk group and their "shock and awe" message of invulnerability. The time was ripe for a courageous woman to make a stand for male liberation, against the disappearing male stereotype--and against the consequent demonization of strong women, especially strong moms. Cindy Sheehan's action in standing up for her son Casey, questioning the need for his death by demanding answers from the presidential authority figure himself, confronted the stigma of being a confident mother, thus challenging an historic piece of American folklore that, not unlike the Nazi example, has long used shame to stifle maternal affection, not to say common sense and critical thinking:

I've never heard of a woman protesting a war in front of a leader's home in my life. I've never heard of anything quite so outrageous.

Thus spoke the man known as "the house conservative of the New York Times," John J. Tierney, at a Heritage Foundation-sponsored event on August 30, 2005.

By anti-war actions that took aim at both masculine and feminine stereotypes, Sheehan has challenged the encroaching campaign against gender in the U.S.: The reaction to Sheehan was--shall we say?--hysterical. William Greene, the President of RightMarch.com -- an online right-wing rapid response alert service molded to combat the success of the left-wing MoveOn--uses Christian Response e-alerts to combat the Sheehan factor, and now a full page nationwide newspaper ad featuring side-by-side photos of Cindy Sheehan and President Bush headlined: *WHO [sic] DO YOU WANT AS YOUR COMMANDER IN CHIEF?* That is a good question. I don't have to blink over that one.

Let's use this window of opportunity between now and January, to answer Obama's call. The rapidity with which Hitler and his cronies managed to change a German mindset should give us pause for thought, for we may well be at the tipping point now: our society could go either way. To end with a little absurdity: *Writers (and cartoonists) unite; you have nothing to lose but your brains!* (But I am serious about that.)

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NOTES:

ⁱ Most notably, they include David Brooks, Christopher Buckley, and Colin Powell. The first post-election Rasmussen Poll (Nov. 7) reported that 91% Republicans viewed Sarah Palin favorably, only 8% unfavorably. Since then, a deep split within Republican leadership has been revealed.

ⁱⁱ Washington does not keep track of civilian casualties in Iraq. The IBC figures have been criticized as being far too low; however, it is the only recent estimate I have been able to find. A research team from the [Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health](#) in Baltimore, United States estimated in July 2006, that 654,965 Iraqis had died then as a consequence of the war. See Michel Thieren, "Iraq Deaths:How Many, Why It Matters." Available:http://www.opendemocracy.net/conflictiraq/iraq_deaths_4011.jsp

ⁱⁱⁱ Compare his 1980 address available on www.youtube.com with Weyrich 2008).

^{iv} This perspective involves the non-recognition of many existing families, the rejection of working toward providing greater economic and educational opportunities, the retraction of liberal attitudes toward sex, a desire to control the ethnic and racial makeup of the country, the rejection of a woman's right to control her own body, as well as the demonization of single moms and homosexuals.

^v I was interested to see that Frank Rich, in his insightful article on Palin in the *New York Times*, made this same analogy.

^{vi} There are at least three others types recognizable today: the peacemaker, the victim of family honor, and the ecofeminists' conception of the feminine principle.

^{vii} Stevens was found guilty in federal court on seven counts of corruption this past October; on Nov. 19, after all the absentee ballots had been counted, he found himself defeated after 40 years in the Senate.