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THEY SAID IT

[Rep. John] Murtha's invocation of this event [Clinton's retreat from Somalia] as an example for future US foreign policy decision-making demonstrates a lack of perspective that is so completely absurd that it defies logic. It is so shockingly wrong that if you didn't know who was saying such a thing you would have to conclude the man was joking. And therefore any American leader who would say such a thing, by definition is himself a joke.

--Military blogger Mathew Heidt (a.k.a "Froggy"), a naval reservist and 14-year Navy Seal corpsman, writing at BlackFive.net, June 19, 2006.

In this Issue

It's the Context, Stupid.

The Age Of... ?

IT'S THE CONTEXT, STUPID.

It comes as no surprise that there is a deep and impassioned difference of opinion among Americans over the war in Iraq. Given the left's hatred of President Bush, the politicization of all aspects of life and public discourse, and the various and sundry "legacies" of Vietnam, it was utterly predictable that some significant portion of the public would immediately and unthinkingly oppose the war and would argue stridently that its causes and justifications were not what the President and his supporters claimed they were. At the same time, it was equally predictable that another significant portion of the public would support the war unquestioningly, trusting the man who held the nation together after 9/11 and believing deeply in the need to alter the conduct of business-as-usual in the Middle East in general and Iraq in particular.

What is a little surprising to us is the way in which this disagreement has, in recent months, gone well beyond ordinary squabbling over the subjective aspects of the war's inception and justification and begun to impinge upon what might otherwise be considered the unassailable, objective elements of the conflict.

Using the exact same information, one side is firmly convinced that the United States is losing the war, indeed, that it has already lost the war and that every occurrence in Iraq must therefore be viewed through this prism of failure. The other side is equally convinced that American and coalition forces are winning and that the enemy is everywhere in retreat. This later group recognizes that things may occasionally get bloody, but they argue that that is simply the nature of war, and in any case, that most of the blood is being spilled by the other side, which is slowly but surely losing the ability and the will to resist the new order in Iraq.

We are, of course, not the only ones to have noted this disconnect. One of the best and most comprehensive discussions of this phenomenon appears in the current issue of *Commentary*, and was written by the veteran Middle East journalist Amir Taheri. His piece, “The Real Iraq” begins thusly:

Spending time in the United States after a tour of Iraq can be a disorienting experience these days. Within hours of arriving here, as I can attest from a recent visit, one is confronted with an image of Iraq that is unrecognizable. It is created in several overlapping ways: through television footage showing the charred remains of vehicles used in suicide attacks, surrounded by wailing women in black and grim-looking men carrying coffins; by armchair strategists and political gurus predicting further doom or pontificating about how the war should have been fought in the first place; by authors of instant-history books making their rounds to dissect the various “fundamental mistakes” committed by the Bush administration; and by reporters, cocooned in hotels in Baghdad, explaining the “carnage” and “chaos” in the streets as signs of the country’s “impending” or “undeclared” civil war. Add to all this the day’s alleged scandal or revelation—an ousted CIA operative, a reportedly doctored intelligence report, a leaked pessimistic assessment—and it is no wonder the American public registers disillusion with Iraq and everyone who embroiled the U.S. in its troubles . . .

For someone like myself who has spent considerable time in Iraq—a country I first visited in 1968—current reality there is, nevertheless, very different from this conventional wisdom, and so are the prospects for Iraq’s future.

Now, it would be easy enough to blame this situation exclusively on partisanship, or as Taheri terms it, the “increasing bitterness of American politics.”

And certainly there are those on the opposite side of the political aisle from President Bush who do, indeed, see only darkness in Iraq because that is what their political predilections stipulate that they see. Moreover, a fair number of these individuals are members of the media who feign impartiality, all the while doing their very best to paint Iraq as a failure, whether out of a sense of nostalgia for Vietnam (ala Seymour Hersh) or blind partisan rage.

But there are a couple of problems with assigning the blame for the general disconnect to partisanship alone. For starters, it seems unlikely to us that all of those who report gloomily from Iraq are actually hoping that the war is lost. Most are, we’re sure, earnest in their beliefs about the progress of the war, and no more than a handful are intentionally skewing their coverage and analysis to effect an American defeat. Hersh and his ilk do, indeed, exist, but until it is proved otherwise, we’ll believe that they are the exception rather than the rule.

More to the point, the lines that separate the two sides in this disconnect/debate do not mirror perfectly the nation’s partisan divisions. Indeed, a great many of those who would otherwise agree with the President, or who did at one time agree with him about the war, have nonetheless seen the evidence from Iraq and declared defeat, even while the President himself argues that victory looms. Consider the following, which was written a full week *after* the death of Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, by Harlan Ullman, a military affairs analyst, Vietnam veteran, and occasional columnist for *The Washington Times*, the Capital’s overtly *conservative* newspaper. To wit:

Without both [truth and candor], and without the courage to admit what we do not know or fail to understand about Iraq, no matter how much money the United States pours into that fractured state, long-term peace and stability will not be obtainable. Indeed, even if we can find the “right” strategy, assuming one exists, it could be too late.

First, let us try to put ourselves in the places of the 26 million Iraqis. If the violence and chaos in Iraq were transposed to the United States, here is what Americans would be facing. In the belt that includes more than one-third of our population — stretching from Boston to New York and Philadelphia, encompassing Washington, Atlanta and Chicago and then meandering through St. Louis and Denver to Los Angeles and San Francisco — each week about 3,000 Americans would die violently in the insurgency. That's the same number who perished on September 11. That makes about 12,000-15,000 dead Americans a month or 150,000 a year killed in the violence . . . The violence would extend to all members of the community, including merchants and business people on whose products many depend for their livelihoods and sustenance . . .

I am not prepared to predict failure yet. However, we are close.

But if partisanship is not to blame for this kind of thing, what is?

It seems to us that there are at least two entirely separate answers to this question, depending on the people involved. The first explanation is that the tragedies and horrors of war are so shocking that they prompt many people simply to close their minds to any argument that stops short of getting out of Iraq and stopping the bloodshed immediately. We both know people who, upon seeing the pictures of the wounded and the families of the dead mourning their loved ones, refuse to listen to any proposal that does not involve America's immediate withdrawal from Iraq.

The other, more complicated explanation, which applies to an entirely different population group, has to do with the fact that Vietnam and Watergate changed the nature of both politics and journalism in

this country, perverting the motivations for many of those who participate in both endeavors and turning what were once professions premised on public service into pursuits of individual glory.

Michael Barone summed up this phenomenon rather nicely last week in a piece for *The Wall Street Journal*. And while his description is of journalists alone, we think it applies (with some modifications, of course) to the politicians who share these journalists' ideological preferences. Barone wrote:

America's newsrooms are populated largely by liberals who regard the Vietnam and Watergate stories as the great achievements of their profession. The peak of their ambition is to achieve the fame and wealth of great reporters like David Halberstam and Bob Woodward.

The net effect of this is that there is a race among these people to come up with the next big twist or spin or develop the next great unified theory of everything that will elevate them above their coworkers and competitors and earn them fame, money, and power. They therefore tend to overemphasize those aspects of the debate that they think are their purview, believing or hoping that they have a story or an insight that no one else has ever had. This self-absorption almost by definition precludes them from looking at the larger picture or from placing individual events in a greater context.

In both cases, what we are talking about here is a shocking lack of perspective. Both the insistence that any cost is too great to bear and the pretension that one may possess insight that others lack have caused people to deny even the idea of a just and honorable victory and to presume that what little they know about the war is all they need to know. These individuals are very much like the blind men in the Indian/Buddhist parable of the elephant, each of whom feels a part of the animal (e.g. leg, trunk, tail) and extrapolates an entire beast from his experience alone. They lack perspective.

Take, for example, the analysis by Harlan Ullman cited above. Mr. Ullman writes about how awful and intolerable it would be if what is going on in Iraq were going on this country. And about this, there can be no question. Such a state of affairs, were it to exist in the United States, would indeed be intolerable. But he then uses that conclusion, in and of itself, to suggest that the war is lost (or at least on its way to being so), which is absurd, to put it mildly.

Ullman's comparison is unfair; so unfair, in fact, that it has to be seen as borderline dishonest, or more likely in his case, the result of a blinding desire to say something important and beyond the mundane. But for a comparison to be valid or useful, it must compare things that are, well, comparable. And not only are the United States and Iraq not comparable, but no one – outside of Ullman – has ever suggested that they are.

Ullman might come to a different and less desperate conclusion about the progress in Iraq if he compared apples to apples; if, for example, he asked how many civilians have been killed in other, similar wars of liberation. How many German civilians were killed when the Allies liberated their country from the Nazis? How many civilians have died in other insurgencies in the Islamic world, say in the 30-year-long civil war in Sudan? These comparisons too might be less than perfect, but certainly they come closer to the mark than a comparison between Iraq and the United States.

Building on this point, Ullman claims that the situation in Iraq is intolerable. Okay. Compared to what? The Saddamite regime? How many Iraqi civilians died every day, every week, every month when Saddam ruled? How many more would have died when Saddam eventually passed the reins to his even more twisted and sadistic sons? Or how about the Islamists, formerly under the direction of Abu Musab al-Zarqawi? How many civilians would die if we conceded failure and left the country, leaving the head-hackers in charge? How many would die in the civil war that would almost certainly ensue? If the situation in Iraq is intolerable now, what would it be like then?

Finally, there is the question of civilian deaths relative to the entire population. Over 1,000 Israeli civilians have been killed by Palestinian terror attacks in the last six years. That number extrapolated to the population of the United States would be roughly 50,000, not quite as high as the rate of civilian deaths in Iraq, but close, and significant nonetheless. If the level of civilian casualties in Iraq denotes failure, as Ullman suggests, does that mean that Israel is failing as well? Should the Israelis simply give up and leave, abandoning Israel proper once the settlements in the West Bank have been dismantled? Or is the rate of Israeli suffering not as important as the Iraqi suffering and thus unworthy of similarly extreme defeatist reaction?

Now Ullman, of course, is not the only critic of the President's Middle East policy and is hardly the only one suggesting that we admit defeat and get our troops out of Iraq. Indeed, the entire Democratic establishment, from John Kerry to John Murtha to would-be Speaker of the House Nancy Pelosi – everyone in the party, it seems, except Senators Joseph Lieberman and Hillary Clinton – has come to the conclusion that both the troops and the country would be better off and safer if we simply left Iraq as we left Vietnam three decades ago.

In fact, this outcry has become so ubiquitous among Democrats competing with each other to be the most vociferous in opposition to the war that we wonder if perhaps a third explanation for their behavior is not beginning to evidence itself, namely a strange type of mass hysteria that, like the previous two explanations, clouds one's sense of perspective and precludes one's ability to place events in context or to give any consideration to history.

As John Fund notes in his column this morning, Congressman Murtha, who has emerged as the leader of the "surrender now" faction of his party, recently lamented the fact that President Bush can't be convinced "to change direction" in Iraq. "In Beirut, President Reagan changed direction," Murtha noted, and "In Somalia, President Clinton changed direction."

Pardon us for asking, but has this guy lost mind? Is he serious? Does he even read the newspapers? If he did, he would certainly know that Somalia, the nation in which Bill Clinton so bravely “changed direction” and from which he had our troops hightail it as quickly as possible, is considered by most analysts to be the “New Afghanistan,” a lawless, government-less state that has become a magnet for Islamic radicals and which has recently come under some semblance of control by Islamists who resemble the Taliban in no small measure. Today, Somalia is potentially a far greater security risk to American soldiers, to the American people, and to the world than it ever was before or during the brief American intervention there in the 1990s.

The same, incidentally, can be said about Lebanon, where, Murtha noted, President Reagan “changed direction.” In the two decades since the withdrawal of American troops from Lebanon, that nation has devolved into an anti-Israel and anti-American terrorist client state, housing not only the Syrian intelligence apparatus, but serving as the base of operations for the Iranian-funded Shiite armies of Hezbollah, who were responsible for, among other things, the attack on American servicemen at the Khobar Towers in Saudi Arabia.

Of course, anyone with any perspective or sense of context (or sense at all) would know that Somalia and Lebanon are hardly alone and that *all* of the world’s hotspots of unrest, Islamist unrest in particular, are countries in which America once had pressing interests but which she abandoned for fear that things might get too sticky. From Iran to Afghanistan to Iraq, the United States has been there before, but left or quit before the enemy was defeated out of fear that staying would only make things worse. Could anyone with an even rudimentary knowledge of modern history not know about these precedents and therefore not grasp what the outcome would be if the coalition left Iraq now? Yes, the troops would almost certainly be safer if they left now, but only for the time being. When they returned, as they almost certainly would, they would be in much greater danger, as anyone with any perspective could tell you.

One final aspect of the war and its coverage provides further evidence that some sort of collective hysteria has gripped the war’s critics of late, seemingly preventing them from applying even a modicum of common sense, good judgment, patriotism, or respect for the men and women who are fighting in Iraq. We are speaking, of course, about the alleged misbehavior of American soldiers on the battlefield.

As has been endlessly reported in the press, American Marines have been accused of killing civilians last November in Haditha, an insurgent stronghold. And critics of the war have seized upon this incident – which has not yet been proven and which is still under investigation by at least two military commissions – as evidence that the mission in Iraq is flawed and that American troops are simply incapable of withstanding the pressures of a counter-insurgency. The troops, the argument goes, have been “reprimativized” in combat by an immoral war strategy that promotes immoral and primeval behavior.

Let us stipulate, like everyone else who addresses this subject, that if the Marines did, in fact, do that which they have been accused of doing, then they committed a war crime and should be punished accordingly. But even if they did kill civilians “in cold blood,” as Jack Murtha has declared but which is far from established fact, that doesn’t mean that they bear sole moral responsibility for deaths of those civilians.

Like all Islamist terrorosts, the “insurgents” fighting American and British soldiers in Iraq are, at best, indifferent to human life. They use innocent men, women, and children as shields; they attack from within civilian population centers for the express purpose of using the civilians to their advantage; they hope either to exploit the Americans’ righteous restraint to act with impunity or to provoke a reprisal in which civilians are killed and for which Americans can be credibly blamed.

Rarely if ever is it mentioned that American troops in this war have shown remarkable restraint and have, in fact, put their own lives at risk time and time again to ensure that civilians are kept from harm. Rarely if ever is it mentioned that no army in the history of the

world has ever done so much to minimize “collateral damage” and to fight such a civilian-sensitive counter-insurgency.

Even more rarely is it mentioned that the intentional sacrifice of innocent non-combatants is part of the terrorists’ plans to manipulate the media itself. As the analysts at StrategyPage.com noted last week, among the documents seized from the safe house where Zarqawi was killed were some that “stressed the need to manipulate Moslem and Western media,” which “was to be done by starting rumors of American atrocities and feeding the media plausible supporting material.” That strategy works equally well, of course, if not better, if instead of having to start rumors, the terrorists can point to actual “atrocities” which they themselves orchestrated, as appears to have been the case in Haditha.

We are not arguing here that the intentional targeting of non-combatants should be excused or that war crimes should be ignored. What we are arguing is that even though such crimes may occasionally be committed, they are committed only very rarely and, moreover, the moral responsibility for a civilian death does not rest exclusively with he who pulled the trigger but lies as well with he who placed the civilian in the bullet’s path in the first place. In short, the reporting of stories about potential war crimes committed by American soldiers is indeed necessary, but reporting such stories with a bit of perspective and a little context would go a long way toward dispelling the misimpression held by so many of this nation’s elites that these crimes are indicative of the failure and moral corruption of the mission in Iraq. If anything, the inclusion of such context would make explicit the justification of the mission and the absolute necessity that it succeed.

Columnist Mark Steyn noted yesterday that “last week, [John Kerry] voted to lose Iraq even though we’re winning it.” Kerry doesn’t know we’re winning, of course, since he sees everything through the prism of his own self-absorption, both with regard to his “heroic” role in ending the Vietnam War and his delusion that he lost the 2004 presidential race by being insufficiently defeatist.

The problem is that Kerry’s myopia is hardly unique and, indeed, tends to be characteristic of all those who see defeat as imminent. Whether the visual impairment is caused by naivety, self-absorption, or mass hysteria, the effects are the same: critics are simply unable to see the bigger picture, to see the proverbial forest for the trees. We can’t help but conclude, therefore, that whatever the cause, they are disconnected not just from that part of the country that sees victory drawing closer, but from reality as well.

THE AGE OF . . . ?

Years and years ago when I was a young man and dinosaurs roamed the earth, the Book-of-the-Month club offered a free 11-volume set entitled *The Story of Civilization* by Will and Ariel Durant as an inducement to join the club and agree to buy four books in the first year of membership. I joined and received my free books with the same enthusiasm that I had demonstrated years earlier upon the arrival in the mail of a genuine Sergeant Preston of the Yukon ring with a compass on top and a secret compartment within. I lost the ring somewhere along the way, but I still have the books and I still value them, probably the more so because they are widely regarded today as “middle-brow” histories, which is another way of saying that they are eminently readable and easily understood by dummies like me.

I got to thinking about these books last week while ruminating on the world today, which is an exercise I go through once a week as part of the process of trying to decide what to write about in the upcoming newsletter. Specifically, I thought about the Durants’ use of the phrase “The Age Of . . .” to describe several of the periods into which they divided their ambitious work, these being *The Age of Faith*, *The Age of Reason Begins*, *The Age of Louis XIV*, *The Age of Voltaire*, and *The Age of Napoleon*. What, thought I, will some future historian decide to call the age in which we live today?

This is, of course, a futile pursuit since it is unlikely that anyone living at any given period can accurately grasp that period's place in the grand sweep of history. Moreover, it is a highly subjective exercise, if for no other reason than the simple fact that for every period in history there is an endless catalogue of perfectly appropriate appellations. Nevertheless, it is an entertaining task and potentially useful.

So, with all of that in mind, I thought I would speculate a little this week about the nature of the "age" in which we find ourselves in these the opening days of the 21st century. The goal is not to find the exact word that completes the phrase, "The Age Of . . ." Nor is it to try to lay out a detailed blueprint for the future based on my ruminations. It is simply to use this device as a means of gaining a little better understanding of the grand events that "alter and illuminate our times," as Walter Cronkite used to put it, and possibly to garner some limited insights into what the future might hold.

For starters, I will note that it would be easy to dismiss this project entirely by asserting that the present age is no age at all, but a period of transition from the age of the Cold War to an age that has yet to take shape. In support of this argument, one could note that we ourselves have still not adopted a widely accepted designation for the time in which we live, other than to use the decidedly un-descriptive phrase "post Cold War period." But this would be a mistake, in that future historians are likely to view this period not as an interregnum but as that very important time in the opening act of the drama of the 21st century when many of the key players introduced themselves and the plot line began to take shape. For example, the days immediately preceding World War I were largely uneventful, but most historians today view them as an integral part of that tumultuous and violent "age of the two world wars."

I will begin with the observation that every age is marked by some event or group of related events that set the stage for the end of one period and the beginning of another. The French Revolution and the assassination of the Archduke Ferdinand are examples

of this. Some observers would surely assert that the fall of the Berlin Wall is the event that will be seen by future historians as marking the beginning of the age in which we live. I disagree. My response to this assertion would be to quote one of Mel Brooks' great lines from his "2000 year-old man" comedy routines with Carl Reiner. Brooks asserts that the greatest invention of all time was Saran Wrap ("It clings, you can see through it, and you can take your lunch to work in it."). Reiner asks, "What about fire?" To which Brooks responds, "That was good."

Well, the fall of the Berlin Wall was good. But in my opinion, it pales in significance to Al Gore's invention of the Internet. That was not just good, it was great, fabulous, amazing. It altered the world in so many ways that no person living today can begin to grasp the vast scope of the changes that it portends for mankind.

Of course, this does not mean that we are living in the "Age of the Internet," anymore than the years immediately following Guttenberg's marvelous invention are collectively known as the "Age of the Printing Press." Rather than define the age, Guttenberg's great work prompted actions and reactions that set the stage for the various ages that followed. Among other things, as MSN's *Encarta* notes, the printing press "made the Reformation possible by putting a Bible in the hands of anybody who wanted one. The Church lost its lock on truth, and the sovereign individual soon emerged as the key unit of Western society." The trick here then is to identify the actions and reactions that the Internet is producing at the present and try to group these within the context of an "age."

When considering this task, it is worth noting that there are, for our purposes at least, two distinct models for defining an age. One is to name an age after an individual who, through the sheer strength of personality, intellect, or physical assertion, puts his or her stamp on an entire period of history, as did, according to the Durants, Napoleon, Voltaire, and Louis Quatorze. The other is to name an age after a series of related events, such as the Reformation

or the Renaissance. Of course, these “ages” were also populated with assertive individuals who defined and directed the action, although it might be said in these cases that the key players took advantage of the opportunities and circumstances that the age placed before them rather than actually creating these circumstances.

It is highly probable, for example, that the Reformation would have happened with or without Luther or Calvin or any one of the other larger-than-life individuals whose names are intimately associated with this period. On the other hand, it is doubtful that a bloody war would have destroyed all of Europe in the wake of the French Revolution had Napoleon not galloped onto the scene.

For what it’s worth, this distinction is reflective of the difference between Hegel’s view, that history is providentially determined and driven exclusively by “world historical” men, and Spencer’s belief that while a particular individual might be the proximate cause of any decisive event, no single person could be said to have caused the social conditions that set the stage for the event itself.

With all of this in mind, I would guess that the age in which we live is not likely to be named for a specific individual. I could be wrong about this, of course. Somewhere in the world today there could be a nascent Napoleon or a Voltaire or even a “Sun King” who will seize the day, as the saying goes, and rather than simply act a part in the unfolding drama will dominate the world stage, force the action into compliance with his or her will, and shape the outcome in a manner that would have been unthinkable without his or her participation. But I doubt it. My guess is that this will happen in the “age” that follows the present one (but that’s another story).

In the meantime, it seems to me that the most important effect of the Internet on the current age will be to undermine the power and influence of political, cultural and intellectual leaders worldwide. This may seem to be counterintuitive, in that the

Internet is theoretically a perfect instrument for a “great” man or woman to attract a large international following. However, as with the printing press, the Internet is fundamentally a democratizing instrument, more likely, in my opinion, to atomize the world’s masses than to unite them behind a single powerful figure or movement.

Indeed, I think a key characteristic of the age in which we live will be a continuous weakening of the powers of all large and traditional institutions of authority in nations all over the world. As part of this process, power will naturally flow downward to a wide variety of individuals and groups, all intent on changing or undermining the existing order, either by force, by cultural persuasion, by political action, or by some combination of all three. These new players on the world stage will be important in their own right, but generally speaking not in the same league as those whom they are replacing.

This process will work differently from country to country and region to region, but it will, as I indicated earlier, result in an era of worldwide political instability and volatility.

In the United States, for example, it is becoming clear that the two political parties, the politicians loyal to them, and the establishment press are all rapidly losing large chunks of power and control of the governing process to Internet blogger community. This is a complicated phenomenon, but it basically comes down to providing the masses with greater access to the temple of political knowledge, the myriad delights of which were unknown to many of them prior to their acquisition of a computer and an Internet hookup, and which they now find much more rewarding and less intellectually challenging than their prior indulgences in such pursuits as the cooking and fishing channels on television.

Not only have the bloggers become an important new competitor in the political information business, but in doing so they have spawned a new species of angry, grass roots political action groups that aspire to discourage the political parties from compromising

on many important issues, which is the traditional manner in which democracies address complicated and controversial problems.

The eventual outcome of this Internet inspired atomization and polarization of the American political process is unknown, but it will most certainly cause a heightened degree of political and social instability. And I think that there is a good chance that over a period of time it will lead to demands for the elimination of the Electoral College, which is all that keeps the American two-party system from fragmenting into the kind of multi-party circus that exists in Europe.

And speaking of Europe, it seems likely that that benighted land will find the current era to be particularly hard on its traditional cultural, political, and social institutions, since they are largely in tatters already and are viewed by many Europeans as not worth saving anyway. Indeed the threat to the European establishment from the Internet-inspired enfranchisement of the masses comes not from the European canaille, who make Homer's lotus eaters look like high achievers, but from the Islamic immigrants in their midst, who are anxious to replace the existing and ancient institutions of Christendom with those of a quite different belief system.

And with this unhappy prognostication, it seems fitting now to bring up the probable impact of the Internet on those nations of the world that are currently attempting to maintain some form of totalitarian or autocratic regime. A list of candidates for this honor would include such important nations as Russia and China, as well as most of the countries in the Middle East and Africa, and many in Latin America.

During the Cold War, some wise wag suggested that the best way to defeat the U.S.S.R. would be to drop millions of Sears Catalogues behind the Iron Curtain.

This, they said, would inform the Russian people how meager their existence was when compared to the way people lived in what was then called the "free world." It was a good idea actually. Today the Internet performs that role, informing people all over the world, in words they can understand and trust, of the lies they are being told by their leaders. Moreover, this same Internet is providing them with the means to organize various forms of resistance and opposition to their oppressors.

In short, as a direct result of the Internet, Comrades Putin and Jiang, and the aspiring Führers of the Middle East, such as Mahmoud Ahmadinejad and Boy Assad, are having a much harder time creating and perpetrating the "social myths" that Max Eastman once described as "ideas not valid, but necessary to set the masses in motion." Time will tell whether they and others like them will be able to hold on to power under these circumstances, but there is little question that their authority and the authority of the governments they run and the institutions of these governments will be severely challenged in the years ahead as the Internet encourages the masses within their borders to aspire to greater political and cultural participation.

In sum then, the age in which we live is, I believe, likely to be a highly unsettled one, marked by the waning influence of existing political, social, and cultural institutions worldwide. This breakdown in the existing order will be accompanied by the emergence of all sorts of new institutions, closer to the people, cruder, and less stable. The era will witness revolutions, both noisy and silent, along with the emergence of dangerous and bloody reactionary movements, following in the footsteps of militant Islam. As with all "ages," the good will mix with the bad, for that is the nature of things and has been since the beginning of time.

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