

# MORE GOOD, LESS EVIL: CONTESTING THE MYTHOS OF NATIONAL INSECURITY IN THE 2008 PRESIDENTIAL PRIMARIES

ROBERT L. IVIE AND OSCAR GINER

*The rhetoric of national security in both the Democratic Party and Republican Party presidential primaries functioned very much as an archetypically dark ritual of insecurity. The principal exception was the discourse of candidate Barack Obama, who spoke in a prophetic voice to invoke the myth of American exceptionalism as a foundation of hope and change and to express national mission in more democratic and practical terms. Speaking in a democratic idiom, he turned the mythos of mission from a story of moral conquest into a practical vision of working collaboratively on the global scene to promote peace by augmenting social justice.*

American national security, considered from a rhetorical perspective, defaults to a discourse of national *insecurity*—to a political ritual of affirming national identity by articulating fear and loathing of a demonized enemy. It invokes a hyperbolic discourse of exaggerated danger, not unlike war propaganda, which Nicholas Jackson O’Shaughnessy astutely defines as “a fantasy of enmity, where we seek self-definition through constructing our antithesis.”<sup>1</sup> Rhetoric, myth, and symbolism—and thus metaphor, narrative, and ritual—are endemic to the articulation of self-defining and affirming fear, especially in today’s hypersymbolic state of governing imagery, which positions both the general public and political elites within its cultural circumference.<sup>2</sup>

As David Campbell has observed, securing the nation’s identity is tantamount to identifying danger: “just as the source of danger has never been fixed, neither has the identity that it was said to threaten.”<sup>3</sup> Thus, the texts of U.S. foreign policy discourse comprise an American jeremiad and reflect a struggle to

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*Robert L. Ivie is Professor of Rhetoric and Public Culture, Department of Communication and Culture at Indiana University in Bloomington. Oscar Giner is Professor of Performance and Directing, School of Theatre and Film at Arizona State University in Tempe.*

fix a tenuous national identity by articulating danger in terms of “alien, subversive, dirty, or sick” forces that allegedly threaten the body politic from within and without. These dehumanizing vehicles contribute in turn to a demonizing drama of good versus evil. A recurring jeremiad of national insecurity and corresponding politics of fear, complete with apocalyptic overtones, routinely transform ordinary risk into perceived danger as a cultural condition of achieving a reassuring sense of community.<sup>4</sup>

The rhetoric of national security in the 2008 presidential primaries functioned very much and for the most part in this ironic vein as a ritual of insecurity. It worked to articulate national identity in terms of the ongoing war on terror—to align the evil specter of savagery against freedom and democracy—thus defining America as a moral agent by constructing its antithesis in a fantasy of fear and enmity. Republican Party candidates, with the principal exception of libertarian Ron Paul, competed with one another for best performance of the Bush administration’s terrorizing script of infinite global struggle.

The Democratic Party contest turned the 9/11 script itself into a drama of continuity and change. As the chief protagonist of change, Barack Obama spoke in a prophetic voice that invoked anew foundational myths of a national calling. He would adjust the nation’s perilous rightward lean by balancing fear with hope and supplanting blind hatred with a vision of U.S. leadership by good deed and positive example. As his primary Democratic antagonist, Hillary Clinton cautioned against falling prey to empty optimism. She would bank the nation’s security instead on her claim to foreign-policy experience.<sup>5</sup> Clinton mocked Obama’s inspirational rhetoric, calling it naive and depicting him as a deceptive dreamer. I could “wave a magic wand,” Clinton scoffed, and say that “the sky will open,” with light shining and “celestial choirs ... singing,” so that “everyone will know we should do the right thing and the world will be perfect.”<sup>6</sup> She occupied the contrasting position of the legitimate realist opposed to the romantic pretender to presidential power.

Thus, the national security question of the primaries came down to whether America dared to abandon the politics of fear on which its very identity depended. Would the ritualized story of danger continue to define America, or would it be reworked into a less angry vision of U.S. leadership on the world stage? This basic question of national purpose necessarily invoked primal myths that, as Richard Hughes observes, can bind a nation together either by inspiring faith or by miring it in self-delusion and cynicism. After 9/11, the myth of a people chosen to spread freedom throughout the world had turned violently into expressions of moral outrage and professions of absolute innocence. “America is exceptional,” Hughes writes, “because God chose America and its people for a special mission in the world.” This American creed is the

nation's sacred covenant, its sense of responsibility and duty, but also its legacy of presumed privilege and righteous indignation.<sup>7</sup>

The plasticity of the myth, not its timeless influence on American political culture, was at issue. Would it remain a terrorizing story, or might it spur renewed optimism? Could the leading role of an endangered superpower be made to evoke more good and conjure less evil on the world stage? Certainly, the prosaic script of Republican continuity called for the stern projection of a tough national persona over any lyrical expression of hope or unrealistic vision of change.

### THE REPUBLICAN SCRIPT

Rudy Giuliani, playing the part of America's mayor and presidential aspirant, expressed his bona fides on the terror war with characteristic zeal. As a Republican Party frontrunner early in the long runup to the primaries, he emulated President Bush's "bring 'em on" rhetoric by vowing to launch a war on Iran if that Islamic republic should ever get nuclear weapons. In the Fox News Republican debate of October 21, 2007, for instance, he insisted that "going to war with Iran" would be less dangerous than allowing the emergence of "a nuclear-armed Iran." Just as the earlier revolutionary Iranians gave up their American hostages when "they saw something different in Ronald Reagan's eyes than in Jimmy Carter's eyes," a President Giuliani would deal with the present world from a position of military strength and with a clear determination to take action against America's Islamic enemies.<sup>8</sup> In an earlier June debate, he and Duncan Hunter agreed that the "preemptive" use of tactical nuclear weapons would be appropriate to knock out Iranian centrifuges.<sup>9</sup>

On October 25, candidate Giuliani further allowed that whether or not waterboarding constituted torture depended on how it was done, under what circumstances, and who was doing it. At worst, it fell into a gray area, but most importantly it was one of the coercive interrogation techniques that he believed appropriate for Americans to use to prevent a potential attack. Other leading Republican presidential candidates concurred in the use of aggressive interrogation techniques, with only John McCain rebuking Giuliani's endorsement of waterboarding. Mitt Romney refused, in a direct clash with McCain during the GOP debate of November 28, to rule out waterboarding as an instrument of interrogation.<sup>10</sup> Not to be bested on the get-tough rhetoric of his Republican opponents, even as he stuck to his principled position against the use of torture, McCain affirmed on May 3 that, in his view, the acquisition of nuclear weapons would be the "trip wire" for a U.S. attack on Iran.

This rhetorical bravado on the issues of a nuclear Iran and the use of torture was indicative of the Republican attitude toward the terrorist threat as a

matter to be addressed firmly in unilateral rather than multilateral terms.<sup>11</sup> It was code for endorsing the Bush administration's aggressive national security policy without too often invoking the name of the unpopular president himself. Tom Tancredo, arguing in the August 5 Republican debate that "we are in a war with radical Islam" but hampered by overly restrictive "rules of engagement," reaffirmed his earlier position that the United States should "threaten to bomb Mecca and Medina" to "deter an attack by Islamic terrorists using nuclear weapons." Although Tommy Thompson disagreed with Tancredo on tactical grounds, saying that "bombing religious artifacts and religious holy sites would do nothing but unify 1 billion Muslims against us," Thompson concurred that "we've got to strengthen our military and we've got to recognize in this world right now we are fighting a holy war. It's a jihad. And until we recognize that and stand up to be Americans and for America, we're going to continue to lose."<sup>12</sup> Romney seemed to concur on May 15 (and thereafter) when he stressed that the United States was fighting a global war against "radical jihadists ... [who] want to bring down the West, in particular us." The United States faced a ubiquitous enemy that was plotting all over the world, Romney insisted, including "inside our own country, to come here and kill us. And the worst thing to do in face of that is to show them weakness."<sup>13</sup>

Strengthening the military to deter and defend against the nation's radical enemies entailed pushing ahead unilaterally with a ballistic missile defense system, regardless of Russia's or anyone else's objections.<sup>14</sup> This was the kind of Republican "optimism," Giuliani affirmed at the beginning of the debate on May 3, that would get us "back to Ronald Reagan's morning in America" and thus would restore the "shining city on the hill." America "should never retreat in the face of terrorism." In terms of Iraq proper, McCain added that "we must win in Iraq. If we withdraw, there will be chaos; there will be genocide; and they will follow us home."<sup>15</sup> The problem with the Iraq War was that it had been mishandled, not that it was outside the national interest.<sup>16</sup> The war on terrorism considered more broadly, in Sam Brownback's view, required a policy "to engage those that'll work with us, contain and confront those that won't, and convey that to the Muslim world. . . . We cannot be weak on this whatsoever." Brownback's presidency would promote "a very strong, aggressive foreign policy." For McCain, this meant tracking down and bringing to justice Osama bin Laden by following him all the way "to the gates of hell."<sup>17</sup> For Giuliani it also meant making clear to Russian President Putin "that America can speak softly and carry a big stick. . . . The answer is a very, very strong military that no other country on earth would ever consider challenging."<sup>18</sup>

Ron Paul staked out the position on foreign affairs that made the mainstream Republican contenders look more alike than different. He stood for a foreign policy of "non-intervention," arguing that "if the goal of government is to be the policeman of the world, you lose liberty." He claimed moreover that

“when we overdo our military aggressiveness, it actually weakens our national defense.” As a moral principle and conservative cause, he insisted, “defending liberty” required “minimizing the scope of government.” He would be “very, very cautious about warrantless searches” and “would never abuse habeas corpus.” Paul’s symbolic function as a contrastive feature to the Republicans’ prevailing worldview became apparent when the debate moderator replied, “I’m sorry, we have to go on. We have to go on.”<sup>19</sup> So much for Paul’s subsequent warning about “blowback”—specifically that “if we think we can do what we want around the world and not incite hatred, then we have a problem,” after which yet another moderator said he wanted to “change the subject.”<sup>20</sup>

Whereas Paul contended in a June debate that the most pressing moral issue in America was the administration’s policy of preemptive war, even preemptive nuclear war (which he later called Bush’s “war-mongering foreign policy”), Giuliani allowed that American ideals were transcendent because they “came from God.”<sup>21</sup> After noting that no Democratic Party nominee had yet referred to “Islamic terrorism” in their debates, Giuliani insisted on August 5 that the “reality is that you do not achieve peace through weakness and appeasement.”<sup>22</sup> Late in November, while referencing Hitler’s unimpeded rise to power, McCain simply dismissed Paul as an “isolationist,” while Duncan Hunter insisted that the image of America in the Muslim world needed no repair:

... to the critics of America I would say this. When you were faced with disease and starvation, the Americans brought food and medicine. When you had earthquakes and tsunamis and floods, the Americans came and helped you. And when you were threatened from outside, the Americans left the safety of their own homes to come and defend you.<sup>23</sup>

Ultimately, Ron Paul and the alternative position he staked out on national security could be dismissed as naive by all serious Republicans because, as Tom Tancredo put the matter:

I wish that we lived in the world that Ron is describing—I wish that we lived in a world where we did not have to worry. By simply removing our forces, we would be safe. Unfortunately, Ron, honest to God, I don’t believe that that is the case. We are living in a world where we are threatened. It is radical Islam. It is—the ideology, the political and religious ideology of radical Islam [that] is a threat to America, and it would be a threat to America if we never had a single person serving anywhere outside this country.<sup>24</sup>

The reality-defining mythos of the times was one of national insecurity. America was defined in opposition to its designated enemy by this unyielding Republican

rhetoric. The “first obligation” and “transcendent challenge,” as McCain put the matter in the December 12, 2007, and January 5, 2008, debates, was to “make America safe” from “this great evil of radical Islamic extremism,” which is why McCain endorsed the Bush doctrine of “preemptive attack” and why Giuliani, on January 5, said his first and most important commitment was to keep “this country on the offense in the Islamic terrorist war against us.”<sup>25</sup>

Mike Huckabee, however, sensed the potential political problem of such a negative approach to national security. Barack Obama had touched “the core of something Americans want,” Huckabee warned, and Republicans had better be careful “because if we don’t give people something to be for and only something to be against, we’re going to lose that next election.”<sup>26</sup> Yet, even as Romney bowed out of the race in early February to clear the way for a McCain victory, he insisted that a Democratic win in the presidential election would be tantamount to “surrender to terror.”<sup>27</sup>

### THE DEMOCRATIC ALTERNATIVE

Was Huckabee right? Did the Democrats—Barack Obama in particular—offer voters a positive alternative to the Republicans’ archetypically dark depiction of national insecurity? Could national identity be expressed in an image other than its antithesis and short of enacting the ritual of redemptive violence? Was there a possibility of transforming or even transcending the politics of fear that had gripped the nation since 9/11? And if there was cause for change and hope, what was its mythic foundation and rhetorical inspiration?

Indeed, the theme of change was central to the defining narrative of the Democratic primaries, including the account of national security, but the tension between the top two candidates reflected the difficulty of adjusting deeply ingrained attitudes. Both Hillary Clinton and Barack Obama disputed Rudolph Giuliani’s suggestion that electing a Democratic president would increase the chance of suffering another 9/11 terrorist attack against the United States and that the country would be safer under the leadership of a Republican president. A Democrat in office would “wave the white flag,” Giuliani alleged, but Clinton and Obama allowed that America had moved beyond this old rhetorical canard. America was ready to reject the politics of fear, Obama insisted, and the country was ready for a change from Republican rhetoric that feeds on the fear of terrorism, Clinton added.<sup>28</sup> On this Obama and Clinton agreed, but otherwise they diverged, at least in some measure, over what each meant by changing the prevailing Republican script.

For Obama, change meant not only ending the Iraq War but ending “the mindset that got us there in the first place.”<sup>29</sup> In Clinton’s case, the theme of change was qualified by a compensatory gesture to continuity to suggest her

advantage over an allegedly inexperienced rival. Whereas Obama delivered an inspiring message of hope, Clinton assumed the traditional mantle of reason—rhetorically opposing words to action—and emphasized that she had experience sufficient to achieve change.<sup>30</sup> In this vein, she stood for what she called “coercive diplomacy.”<sup>31</sup> “The fact is,” she stressed in the Democratic debate of January 15, 2008, “that we face a very dangerous adversary ... a relentless enemy. ... We have real enemies ... and we’d better be ready to meet them on day one.”<sup>32</sup> Her difference with the current administration in this regard was that Bush did not believe in diplomacy, whereas she believed in “serious diplomacy” over “cowboy diplomacy,” in “very vigorous diplomacy,” in “aggressive diplomacy” with “sticks and carrots,” in “patient, careful diplomacy ... that really gets people to stay with it over time” and that aims “to make friends and allies and [to stop] the alienation of the rest of the world.” She was opposed to “a rush to war,” but her list of sticks included a strategy of “deterrence” that would threaten “heavy retaliation,” not just economic sanctions, against countries harboring stateless terrorists.<sup>33</sup> Accordingly, Clinton argued that she would be “better positioned” than Obama “to take on John McCain or any Republican when it comes to issues about protecting and defending our country and promoting our interest in the world.”<sup>34</sup> The implication seemed to be that she would debate Republicans on their own dark terms, with her differences being a matter of emphasis and degree.

This was the point of Obama’s rhetorical departure from Clinton’s rendering of his campaign theme of change. In Des Moines, Iowa, on December 27, Obama put the matter this way: His was a “new kind of politics” for “a defining moment in our history.” It was about change based on hope, “not blind optimism.” It was about “shed[ding] our fears and our doubts and our cynicism.” It was about never fearing to negotiate with our enemies. “We can’t afford the same politics of fear,” he insisted, “that tells Democrats that the only way to look tough on national security is to talk, act, and vote like George Bush Republicans.” His difference with Senator Clinton about the meaning of change was over a commitment to hope that transcended politics as usual. “The real gamble in this election,” Obama professed with reference to Clinton, “is playing the same Washington game with the same Washington players and expecting a different result. ... [Y]ou can’t at once argue that you’re the master of a broken system in Washington and offer yourself as the person to change it. You can’t fall in line behind the conventional thinking on issues as profound as war and offer yourself as the leader who is prepared to chart a new and better course for America.”<sup>35</sup>

Obama attempted to bolster his signature theme of change and hope as an alternative to failed conventional thinking by invoking the spirit of America’s democratic calling. He spoke of the nation’s historic mission in democratic

overtone to insinuate an alternative, yet recognizable, perspective on the problem of terrorism. His prophetic call to adjust the national attitude was not issued in a radical voice, nor did it sound either ethereal or timorous. Instead, it exuded confidence that democracy could sustain the nation by building stronger partnerships rather than by withdrawing from the world or trying to dominate it. His vision of sustainable democracy would engage the problem of evil without succumbing to the tyranny of terror. This was an unusually egalitarian ethos of positive participation and constructive leadership, which he expressed on behalf of a new foreign policy. It was the rhetorical engine of his vision for fundamentally changing the mindset of fear.

Obama's democratically inflected discourse featured themes of transparency and of uniting rather than dividing a common humanity—of cooperating, partnering, discussing, and negotiating. He would “create transparency in our government” and “enlist [the American people] in taking back their government.” Things get done, he argued, by “bridging differences” rather than by “stand[ing] above the rest of the world.”<sup>36</sup> Thus, he would “meet not just with our friends, but with our enemies” rather than resort to Republican “fearmongering” and “groupthink.” He would “turn the page on the imperial presidency that treats national security as a partisan issue” and would institute instead a “National Declassification Center,” an annual “State of the World” address, and regular “fireside webcasts,” all out of respect for “the necessity of openness in a democratic society.” And he would abandon the use of torture and other violations of civil liberties.<sup>37</sup>

The mythic mandate for Obama's democratic vision was most conspicuously the enduring figure of an exceptional America that leads the troubled world toward a secure and just future. In his address to the Chicago Council on Global Affairs, Obama spoke unflinchingly of America as “the last, best hope of Earth.” The United States, he affirmed, would “lead the world in battling immediate evils and promoting the ultimate good.” It would lead “by deed and example,” serving as “a beacon of freedom and justice for the world.”<sup>38</sup>

While agreeing that “America's larger purpose in the world is to promote the spread of freedom,” Obama cautioned that liberating “all who live in the shadow of tyranny and despair” must be done “not in the spirit of a patron, but the spirit of a partner—a partner that is mindful of its own imperfections” while “recognizing the inherent equality and worth of all people.” Just as the world cannot meet the threats it faces without relying on U.S. leadership, at least by Obama's reckoning, neither can the United States “meet the threats of this century alone.” Achieving “sustainable democracy” in “a new era of global cooperation” involves far more than “deposing a dictator or setting up a ballot box.” It also requires reducing poverty, promoting education and health care, and developing “a strong legislature, an independent judiciary, the rule of law,



a vibrant civil society, a free press, and an honest police force.” This, he allowed, is an “agenda for hope” that can “defeat the terrorists’ message of hate.”<sup>39</sup>

Obama’s agenda of hope required the United States itself to behave democratically to promote sustainable democracy elsewhere and thereby “reduce terrorism around the world.”<sup>40</sup> Rather than letting terrorism define America, the country might author its own story through the agency of his presidency. In coming together to make that story a reality, he declared, “we’ll do more than win a war—we’ll live up to that calling to make America, and the world, safer, freer, and more hopeful than we found it.”<sup>41</sup> This was his mythic sense of mission and leadership “grounded in the understanding that the world shares a common security and a common humanity.” He would renew “America’s great promise and historic purpose in the world” by “export[ing] opportunity” and “behav[ing] in ways that reflect the decency and aspirations of the American people.”<sup>42</sup>

In giving a democratic inflection to the myth of American mission, Obama promoted the exercise of soft power to enhance global security, which was also his link to the conventional wisdom of the foreign-policy establishment. Joseph Nye, the Harvard professor closely associated with the notion of America’s exceptional capacity for world influence through the attraction of its ideals, identified Obama as the candidate most capable of projecting soft power. Obama, who majored in international relations at Columbia University, would promote democracy with an emphasis on dialogue, transparency, and cooperation, and with a commitment to multilateral institutions, including the United Nations. From a perspective that embraced complexity and aimed to improve America’s image in the world, Obama argued that the Islamic world would be amenable to America’s soft power if it were applied with a pragmatic concern for “the aspirations of the people in those countries.” This made him a standard bearer of mainstream Democratic Party foreign-policy specialists. Even his temperament—as manifested in a calm demeanor and unhurried, thoughtful manner of speaking—exuded confidence in soft power as a preferred instrument for reforming a violent world.<sup>43</sup> As president, he would “make diplomacy a top priority.”<sup>44</sup>

This was the choice, the attitude adjustment on matters of national security, that candidate Obama offered voters in the Democratic Party caucuses and primaries. It set him apart rhetorically from Republican Party presidential candidates and from Hillary Clinton in the Democratic Party. It represented what he called a fundamental change, a shift in the prevailing mindset that would renew the promise of American mission and global leadership. The myths invoked by his gesture to change was as culturally resonant and recognizable as his proposed departure from a politics of fear was potentially threatening. Did the country dare to shift its priority even marginally from fighting evil

to trusting in its soft power? Was the democratic inflection of Obama's vision for renewing American leadership reassuring, or was it an additional cause for skepticism and alarm?

Regardless of how these questions were answered by the electorate, insofar as matters of national insecurity figured into their choice of one candidate over another, Obama's rhetorical achievement was to articulate a plausible vision of positive change within the constraints of a political culture that ordinarily feeds on fear of demonized enemies. His vision was plausible largely because it revived a foundational myth of the nation's special calling, which he rhetorically inclined toward a constructive rather than cynical or self-righteous appropriation by shading it democratic. His position was nuanced at the boundary of mainstream politics, subject to criticism from political opponents and pundits for being too inspirational and insufficiently realistic but still well enough within the boundary of plausibility to gain political prominence.

Whereas Ron Paul's campaign put the standard Republican script in clear relief by contrasting it with his libertarian isolationism, Dennis Kucinich's progressive politics marked the boundary on the left that Obama's rhetoric of change never crossed. When Obama called for changing the nation's mindset of fear, he meant adjusting its attitude toward war and peace. Kucinich called instead for reversing the prevailing attitude that "peace comes through strength" by changing it to one of "strength through peace." When Kucinich—like Obama—said the United States should lead, not bully the world, he meant—unlike Obama—that America's approach to national security should be "anti-militarist." When Kucinich criticized the Bush administration's policy of preventative warfare, he meant war must be reduced to "the last desperate measure of self-defense" rather than serve as a "standard instrument of policy." Kucinich would "make war archaic through creating a paradigm shift in our culture." He would "change the basic metaphor of our society from one of war to one of peace" and would establish a Department of Peace as an expression of America's "capacity to evolve as a people" and as a confirmation of "the universal spirit in our lives." This is how he would have the United States "reject the current administration's policies of fear, suspicion, and preemptive war" to "once again become a beacon of hope for the world." Evoking the myth of national mission in this way propelled Kucinich's vision beyond the limits of the mainstream imagination and into an unexplored rhetorical stratosphere of "mak[ing] nonviolence an organizing principle at home and abroad," of "tap[ping] the infinite capabilities of humanity to transform consciousness and conditions" of violence, and ultimately of "mov[ing] from wars to end all wars to peace to end all wars."<sup>45</sup>

Relative to the true audacity of Kucinich's progressive vision, which outstripped the mind's eye of a public plagued by terror talk, Obama's "audacity

of hope” was at least conceivable precisely because it did not break free of the use of military force as an instrument of foreign policy. “There will be times,” Obama wrote, “when we must again play the role of the world’s reluctant sheriff. This will not change—nor should it.” America’s military challenge, he observed, will require “putting boots on the ground in the ungoverned or hostile regions where terrorists thrive,” “hunting down terrorists” in Pakistan, and engaging in “preemptive strikes” against al Qaeda.<sup>46</sup> Rather than transcending evil in the spirit of Kucinich’s cultural paradigm shift from the reigning metaphor of war to a bold new faith in nonviolence and peace, candidate Obama promised a shift of the mindset of fear that got the United States into the Iraq War. He would rely substantially more on diplomacy and less on military force than the present administration—more on convincing rather than bullying—but insisted that he would draw on “the full range of American power,” including its military might, because “the single most important job of any President is to protect the American people.”<sup>47</sup> He would even “consider using military force in circumstances beyond self-defense in order to provide for the common security that underpins global stability—to support friends, participate in stability and reconstruction operations, or confront mass atrocities.” For Obama, telling “the next great American story” in sufficiently familiar terms meant renewing faith in “an America that battles immediate evils, promotes an ultimate good, and leads the world once more.”<sup>48</sup>

Thus, a question to ask is whether Obama’s rhetoric of hope crossed the threshold of significant difference even as it stayed within the boundaries of mainstream thinking about a wicked world of hurt. Did it alter the ratio of good to evil enough to constitute what he himself called “a clean break against Bush and Cheney”?<sup>49</sup> What were its implications for adjusting a national identity so heavily dependent on a fantasy of enmity and for reorienting an American creed that had become so negatively inclined toward fear, cynicism, and self-righteousness? If not transcendent, how was his discourse, which achieved so much prominence in the presidential primaries, transformative?

### MISSION IN A DEMOCRATIC IDIOM

Positioned somewhere between a conventional expression of national insecurity and a radical critique of war culture, Obama’s rhetorical embrace of the democratic idiom aligned American identity with diversity.<sup>50</sup> It was a new vision of diversity embedded in the old mythos of mission—a “vision that draws from the past but is not bound by outdated thinking.”<sup>51</sup> His egalitarianism sanctioned rather than censured difference, calling on the nation to communicate and cooperate in a complicated world. His campaign discourse exuded pluralism, eschewed the arrogance of rigid ideology, and abandoned

the conceit of enforcing a narrow code of international conduct. Rather than reiterate talk of sinister deviance and evil savagery, he spoke instead of responding to America's calling in a new spirit of confidence, intelligence, tolerance, and caring for a global humanity—of cooperating, helping, and partnering by talking, discussing, engaging, negotiating, bridging differences, and seeking to understand the causes of terrorism. He spoke of “deepen[ing] our knowledge of the circumstances and beliefs that underpin extremism.”<sup>52</sup> Rather than relying on preventative warfare, he would promote sustained diplomacy and sustainable democracy as the nation's first line of defense. Unlike other presidential candidates, Obama would signal the dawn of a new era of American diplomacy and global cooperation by “talk[ing] to all nations, friend and foe,” not fearing that by doing so he would “lose a propaganda battle with a petty tyrant.”<sup>53</sup> In egalitarian overtones, he insisted that the problem “is if we think that meeting with the president is a privilege that has to be earned,” which is a particularly troublesome way of thinking because it “reinforces the sense that we stand above the rest of the world.” The next president must be willing instead “to take that extra step” to renew American leadership and fix the Bush administration's damage to foreign relations.<sup>54</sup>

This “vision” of renewing American leadership, in the spirit of partner and exemplar rather than patron and patriarch, would “refocus” attention on the broader Middle East, recognizing the Iraq War to be a strategic blunder badly executed and a diversion from the fight against global terrorism. It would involve enhancing the U.S. military and using it wisely, even unilaterally, to protect the nation from attack or imminent threat, but also cooperatively to underpin global security. It would entail “work[ing] with other nations” to keep terrorists from acquiring a nuclear weapon, “negotiat[ing] a verifiable global ban on the production of new nuclear weapons material,” and engaging in “sustained, direct, and aggressive diplomacy” to “develop a strong international coalition to prevent Iran from acquiring nuclear weapons and eliminate North Korea's nuclear weapons program.” It would recognize that terrorism operates globally but make Pakistan and Afghanistan the focal point of the fight against al Qaeda, using troops “wisely and judiciously” while engaging in “sustained diplomacy to isolate the Taliban” and encouraging “dialogue” between Pakistan and Afghanistan and between Pakistan and India to resolve their disputes and thereby reduce Pakistan's perceived need to cooperate with the Taliban. It would reinforce the position of moderates in Islam who “believe in a future of peace, tolerance, development, and democratization” by exporting opportunity in the form of “access to education and health care, trade and investment.” All of this and more would be done in the spirit of building and rebuilding “alliances, partnerships, and institutions necessary to confront common threats and enhance common security.” Expressed in the language

of “effective collaboration” and “invigorated alliances and partnerships,” this vision of renewed American leadership to build a “better, freer world” would require the United States to “behave in ways that reflect the decency and aspirations of the American people.” American security and American morality compelled a renewal of American leadership that “recognizes the inherent equality and worth of all people.” The nation must remain true to its “founding values” by looking out for the “common good” with “wisdom and some measure of humility.” This was a restorative vision that said, in Obama’s words, “We can be this America again.”<sup>55</sup>

As a restorative vision of mission, Obama’s egalitarian discourse accessed what Cornel West has termed “the deep democratic tradition in America.” It operated in the “prophetic tradition” of a language that gives “rise to visions of justice and deeds of compassion.” It tapped into the public’s traditional “reverence” for democracy in ways that are remarkably similar to West’s account of “tragicomic hope” for overcoming the “political nihilism” of a sentimental, evangelical, and paternalistic delusion of American domination of the world.<sup>56</sup> In contrast, West labeled Senator Hillary Clinton (along with President Bill Clinton) a “paternalistic nihilist” who neither speaks with full candor while espousing populist rhetoric nor challenges the system of global domination, but instead defers to pollsters, lobbyists, and corporate interests to reinforce a conservative drift “heralded by Republicans.”<sup>57</sup> She carried “baggage” that was “neoliberal” and politically “spent,” and was “going to run out of gas.” Such neoliberalism was “opportunistic,” in West’s view, because it “looked good on the surface, but it had very little substance” for poor and working people. Obama’s position was more progressive, enough so that West identified himself as a “critical supporter” of Obama’s candidacy in the principled fight for democratic ideals and against imperialism and inequality. Even as West would “pressure” Obama “to be more bold” and “courageous” in “highlighting issues of the poor, issues of working people, the legacies of white supremacy that are still very, very real”—to speak more as a “statesman” against “imperial invasion” and “injustice in our society”—he understood that Obama was also a politician who had to address “a larger constituency.” In short, West perceived Obama-the-politician as a leader “in process” with the potential of becoming a great democratic statesman for progressive causes.<sup>58</sup>

West would push Obama beyond restoring political vision to focusing intensely on progressive “subject matters” and “causes.”<sup>59</sup> He would turn a presidential campaign into a social movement, presumably to confront the “legacy of race and empire” that lay beneath the nation’s “self-deceptive innocence” and the conceit of being an exceptional people chosen by God to lead the world.<sup>60</sup> Social justice and global security required political boldness and “democratic maturation.”<sup>61</sup> As West wrote, “To talk about race and empire in

America is to talk about how one musters the courage to think, care, and fight for democracy matters in the face of a monumental eclipse of hope, an unprecedented collapse of meaning, and a flagrant disregard for the viewpoints and aspirations of others.<sup>62</sup> Democracy, in West's view, is a "movement" and a "cultural way of being" that "question[s] prevailing dogmas" by creating "new attitudes, new vocabularies, new outlooks, and new visions" for "an energized public to make elites responsible."<sup>63</sup>

Despite the extra intensity of West's democratic movement rhetoric over Obama's democratically inflected campaign rhetoric, both would redirect the nation's special sense of mission toward similar aims and policies. West, for instance, wrote of "a confident yet humble democratic experiment" in strengthening international law and multinational institutions, promoting "wealth-sharing and wealth-producing activities" between rich and poor nations, and investing heavily in health care, education, employment, and environmental preservation.<sup>64</sup> Obama campaigned on a platform that encompassed each of these themes. The difference marked a rhetorical borderline between politically discrete and socially frank critiques of problematic formations of race and empire. The tactical issue was how far to take the critique in the context of the presidential primaries and whether that was far enough to effect a strategic and potentially positive change in a national identity anxiously dependent on demonizing outsiders.

The rhetorical challenge of turning the mythos of mission from a story of moral conquest into a vision of egalitarian hope is complicated by the mixed nuance of democracy in American political culture. Stressed too strongly, especially in a context of global terrorism, it evokes distrust of mob rule and radical politics—of Jacobin violence and chaos writ large in Charles Dickens's "worst of times" tale of two cities.<sup>65</sup> The threatening image of the foreign demon is all too readily constructed by projecting a deeply ingrained fear of the distempered domestic demos.<sup>66</sup> Restoring an uneasy democratic tradition to reform a sanctimonious attitude of mission is a delicate cultural operation that requires a steady hand and a calm, reassuring voice. Speaking in urgent tones about dismantling a racist empire is more compelling as a confession of conscience than a politics of change. In a context of electoral politics, transforming a national identity sustained by demonizing rituals requires an alternative model that can be widely emulated. Obama's campaign embodied such a model. He premised hope on a democratic wish, and change on an egalitarian embrace, of social justice. He transformed threatening differences into an enriching diversity by stressing global cooperation over global domination. This was the mythic spirit that suffused Obama's rhetorical vision with positive energy in an otherwise morose field of presidential aspirants.

### TEMPERING TRAGIC GUILT

Myth was the engine of change that at least some progressive political strategists believed crucial to any hope of overcoming the reigning Republican worldview. As Sara Robinson observed, “The hard, cold fact is that words and logic will never get us down to the deep, pre-rational places where people’s foundational worldviews are shaped. If we want to create change at that foundational level, we need to engage them emotionally, in the pre-verbal places where images, poetry, myths, and ritual reside.” In Robinson’s estimation, Obama was “singularly good” at just that, that is, “[at] doing exactly what every great progressive icon of the past [from Thomas Jefferson to Franklin Roosevelt, John F. Kennedy, and Martin Luther King] did—and every modern progressive needs to learn to do—if we’re going to inspire the nation and get people to commit themselves, body and soul, to our worldview.” Even while writing as a campaign strategist, Robinson reverted to the language and perspective of a movement, specifically of countering the “conservative movement” and its model of reality based on ineffable feelings of “fear, hate, and xenophobia.”<sup>67</sup>

Obama, however, kept the mythic spirit of his rhetorical vision of change carefully calibrated to the constraints of a political campaign. When, for example, ABC and Fox news aired footage of the “hellfire sermons” of the Reverend Jeremiah Wright, the recently retired pastor of Obama’s Trinity United Church of Christ in south Chicago, the presidential candidate stuck to his message of unity rather than endorse a radical call to confront the domestic racism that drives America’s coercive relationship to the rest of the world.<sup>68</sup> Obama spoke of fundamental change in a way that suggested an adjustment of attitude and a shifting trend rather than a break with mainstream political culture. He separated himself from other leading candidates without displacing his candidacy from the center of the political contest. As one political analyst noted, a Hillary Clinton presidency appeared “more likely to embrace exaggerated and alarmist reports regarding national security threats, to ignore international law and the advice of allies, and to launch offensive wars” than an Obama administration that “would be more prone to examine the actual evidence of potential threats before acting, to work more closely with America’s allies to maintain peace and security, to respect the country’s international legal obligations, and to use military force only as a last resort.”<sup>69</sup> Obama would “scale back” and otherwise change the current “trend” toward militarism and interventionism that Hillary Clinton and John McCain would continue to embrace.<sup>70</sup>

Even at that, as Ira Chernus observed, voters generally wary of the Iraq War—but typically ill-informed about the candidates’ specific positions on foreign affairs—were still more inclined toward the “toughness” of a McCain than either Hillary Clinton’s “experience” or Barack Obama’s “vision” for protection

from terrorism. “They hear questions about ‘crisis,’ ‘protecting,’ and ‘toughness’ as questions about the candidates’ character: Who can I really trust? Who will stand firm when the going gets rough? Which one will take care of America in an emergency? Which one has guts?” The Republican mantra of “No Surrender” was itself a powerful mythic force in the campaign and a potentially winning character issue that the Democratic Party standard bearer would have to confront.<sup>71</sup>

Obama’s campaign in the Democratic Party primaries succeeded in giving voice to a discourse that tempered tragic guilt with a rhetorical gesture to practicality. Tragic guilt, embedded in the Republican script of terror wars and understood in the sense of Kenneth Burke’s dramatistic theory of symbolic action, is the symbolic force that drives rituals of victimization in the fantasy of enmity that is war propaganda.<sup>72</sup> Speaking in a mythic register calibrated to the rhetorical constraints of a political campaign, candidate Obama advanced a vision of democratic mission that emphasized the practicality of pursuing peacebuilding policies over assigning blame.

Rather than reversing the target of blame by shifting the projection of guilt from Islamic radicalism to American racism and imperialism—that is, instead of substituting a rite of mortification for the redemptive ritual of sacrificing a scapegoat (which are the two options of the victimage ritual that form the incunabula of American political culture<sup>73</sup>)—Obama’s campaign strategically altered the mythic formulation of the operative, guilt-inducing terms of disorder. Tragic guilt is rhetorically (or “logologically” in Burke’s theory of symbolic action) a function of hierarchical “sin”—the consequence of violating a heroic sense of order.<sup>74</sup> As Burke explains in poetic summary:

Here are the steps  
 In the Iron Law of History  
 That welds Order and Sacrifice:  
 Order leads to Guilt  
 (for who can keep commandments!)  
 Guilt needs Redemption  
 (for who would not be cleansed!)  
 Redemption needs Redeemer  
 (which is to say, a Victim!).  
 Order  
 Through Guilt  
 To Victimage  
 (hence: Cult of the Kill) . . .<sup>75</sup>

The intensity of the experience of hierarchical guilt (and the corresponding impulse to redemptive violence) can be altered in principle by strategically



realigning the operative terms of the violated sense of order, which involves contributing to a perspective-altering dialectical development by introducing a modifying or “adjectival” character to the idealized mix.<sup>76</sup> That was the kind of discursive work Obama’s campaign performed by inflecting the mythos of mission with an egalitarian appeal to the ideal of practicality.

Obama would “change that script” of fighting terrorism on its own terms by having Americans see “the world beyond our borders” in “practical terms.” He argued that it was in the nation’s “strategic interest to act multilaterally rather than unilaterally,” that “nobody benefits more than we do from the observance of international ‘rules of the road,’” that “building coalitions forces us to listen to other points of view and therefore look before we leap,” that “collaborative work [limits] the terrorists’ capacity to inflict harm,” and that “a more prudent use of military force” must correspond to “promoting peace” by aligning “our policies to help reduce the spheres of insecurity, poverty, and violence around the world,” thus giving “more people a stake in the global order that has served us so well.” Obama disagreed that “the world’s poor will benefit by rejecting the ideals of free markets and liberal democracy.” He insisted instead that the system was “flawed” but subject to “change and improvement” by moving it “in the direction of greater equity, justice, and prosperity,” which he suggested would “serve both our interests and the interests of a struggling world.”<sup>77</sup>

The sheer practicality of working collaboratively on the global scene to promote peace by augmenting social justice—of partnering with other countries to increase the stake of underprivileged societies in maintaining world order—warranted a less heroic, less tragic, less guilt-inducing, less fearful, less militant, and more democratic definition of national identity and mission. Accordingly, liberal democracy was not something to abandon or, alternatively, to impose “with the barrel of a gun.” Americans instead should be “skeptical” of those who say “we can single-handedly liberate other people from tyranny” because democracy necessarily arises from “a local awakening” that can be promoted only by enhancing rather than impeding their “sense of material and personal security.”<sup>78</sup> Practically speaking, by Obama’s reckoning, Americans have a stake in cooperating with others to help the world’s poor secure a dignified and decent life of “food, shelter, electricity, basic health care, education for their children, and the ability to make their way through life without having to endure corruption, violence, or arbitrary power.”<sup>79</sup> Taken seriously, this pragmatic call for working cooperatively to address the underlying causes of “pressing global challenges,” for enhancing global security by “perfecting our own democracy and leading by example,” would reduce the hierarchic incentive for engaging in redemptive violence.<sup>80</sup>

In this version of what Benjamin Barber calls “preventative democracy,” which envisions a more participatory and democratically active public that as a nation

is less arrogant, more humble, less fearful, and increasingly inclined toward a posture of multilateral cooperation and an attitude of interdependence on the world stage, Obama the presidential candidate accessed a largely dormant but potentially potent cultural resource for diffusing, or at least attenuating, a virulent discourse of projecting evil and seeking redemptive violence.<sup>81</sup> His discourse retained a national sense of purpose and leadership redirected toward a more practical and egalitarian attitude of partnership and interdependency. It was a discourse that operated within the limits of mainstream politics to articulate a shift of perspective, a shift that lowered hierarchic guilt by recalibrating national expectations rather than exacerbating it by censuring white American imperialism. A less tragic sense of order mandated a reduced sense of guilt and thereby decreased the need for redemption via the cult of killing. This expression of national mission in more democratic and practical terms indicated, at least “logologically,” the possibility of aligning public culture with a more global and constructive perspective on matters of national security. It revealed the possibility of a founding myth reformed to relax the lethal grip of the Evil One on the conscience of a nation that might do more good in the world if it were burdened less by tragic guilt.

Harold Lasswell understood how readily Americans respond to war propaganda mired in “the cult of satanism.” It is a circular logic in which “the guilty is the satanic and the satanic is the guilty” and a moralizing code professing “vengeance is mine, saith the Lord, and the Lord is working through us to destroy the Devil.” A beleaguered nation is glorified and redeemed by “conquering the Evil One.”<sup>82</sup> So powerful is this victimage ritual of tragic guilt and redemptive violence that one can only wonder whether it is possible to imagine an alternative path to national security, even one less often taken, in an era defined by totalizing terror and limitless war on evil. At a minimum, Obama’s rhetorical maneuvering on this dark terrain gives reason to ask such a question and cause, if not for hope, at least to defer a final answer.

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74. Burke, "On Human Behavior," 281–283; Burke, *Rhetoric of Religion*, 1–5.

75. Burke, *Rhetoric of Religion*, 4–5.
76. Kenneth Burke, “The Four Master Tropes,” in *A Grammar of Motives* (1945; rpt., Berkeley: University of California Press, 1969), 511–13, 516.
77. Obama, *Audacity of Hope*, 308–11, 314–16.
78. Obama, *Audacity of Hope*, 315–17.
79. Obama, *Audacity of Hope*, 317.
80. Obama, *Audacity of Hope*, 321.
81. Benjamin R. Barber, *Fear’s Empire: War, Terrorism, and Democracy* (New York: W. W. Norton and Company, 2003), 145–54.
82. Harold D. Lasswell, *Propaganda Technique in World War I* (1927; rpt., Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1971), 77, 96.

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