Savagery in democracy’s empire

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ABSTRACT   The language of savagery is indigenous to US political culture as the trope that legitimises war and empire. This article traces its recurrence and development throughout US history, from America’s 18th century revolution to the post-World War II American century and from Cold War to the present open-ended war on terror—a continuing quest for empire under the sign of civilisation and democracy. The three main dimensions of the image of savagery and multiple sets of decivilising vehicles are identified as an initial step towards language critique.

The USA’s present war on terrorism is a variation on an old theme of defending civilisation against savagery. The image of the enemy as a savage is much older than the USA but is nevertheless intimately linked to the defence of democracy, among other aims and aspirations. The incomprehensible babble on the other side of the defensive walls surrounding democratic Athens was the threatening sound of the barbarian in ancient Greece. The Roman Empire, too, fought barbarians, those hordes of crude Germanic tribes who were enemies of culture and civilisation. Indeed, throughout the ages, the archetype of the barbarian enemy has served to legitimise war and empire—Athenian, Roman, British, Japanese, Soviet, American, and other such exercises in dominion and domination—whether in defence of democracy or, in the case of Nazi Germany, to justify the rule of the Third Reich and the extermination of Jews.1

After winning its independence from Great Britain and then taking a continent (or all of the northern part of the continent that it wanted) by decimating indigenous peoples and invading its neighbour to the south, America next set out to christianise and civilise the savages of the Philippines. The mission of an exceptional nation now reached beyond manifest destiny to encompass the rest of the world. The beginning of the American century was soon dramatically announced with an atomic bang over Hiroshima and then extended through four decades of bipolarising cold war. Today, American empire has become a unifying project in globalising the world economy and democratising all nations in order to secure a universal peace and thus the end of history.2

Pronouncing itself the world’s one essential nation, the post-Soviet era USA shortly thereafter declared war, again in the name of civilisation and
under the banner of fighting for a democratic peace. Monarchy, fascism and communism had been conquered, each in its turn, in order to make the world free of barbarous tyranny and thus safe for democracy. After the tragedy of 9/11, however, terrorism was proclaimed the new savagery threatening America’s empire of democracy. Civilisation would be rescued this time from an international conspiracy of militant Islamist extremists who wished to destroy freedom and instill the tyranny of theocracy. The discourse of savagery versus civilisation, deeply rooted in the American political lexicon, its culture and collective psyche, was easily pressed into service to rally the nation, quell dissent and effectively inoculate the public against any alternative perspective.3

America’s indigenous trope of savagery

Although the trope of savagery is not unique to American war rhetoric, it is indigenous to it and deeply ingrained in the political culture. The USA was born in a new world that European settlers had cleared tribe by tribe, nation after nation, of its native savages. British rule was overthrown in the colonies with a call to arms against English monsters that thirsted for American blood.4 The War of 1812, considered by many to be America’s second war of independence, was justified in Congress and to the nation by increasingly intense cries of British diabolism and decivilising metaphors of force that conveyed the image of a people being trampled, trodden and bullied by an enemy portrayed variously as beast of prey, common criminal, ruthless murderer, haughty pirate and crazed tyrant.5 Similarly, the expansionist war declared against Mexico in 1846 was portrayed by a partisan President Polk, with a disciplined majority party in Congress, as a reluctant act of national defence in response to an irrational and evil Mexican aggressor, a belligerent foe that was easily inflamed and as unstable as a violent storm.6 President McKinley’s justification of commercial imperialism five decades later, as the USA was about to enter the 20th century, was that America, by God’s grace, would ‘uplift and civilize and Christianize’ those who ‘were unfit for self-government’. These savages of the Philippines would be the beneficiaries of America’s ‘noble generosity’ and ‘Christian sympathy and charity’.7

The savagery of war itself, as well as the rationalisation of slaughter, was marked particularly in the modern age by the trope of the machine. War became ‘the mechanical human beast’, adding yet another metaphor to the heritage of ‘discursive support for military conflict’ and to the language of ‘common sense’ that legitimised its destructive reality. A ‘delirium of technology’ transformed the machine into a deranged and destructive monster. The national character of the evil enemy was contained in this image of mechanised madness, with expansionist Germany representing the perfectly oiled war machine, its individual citizens reduced to uniform mechanical cogs. The beast became a rampaging automaton, an anarchic machine, an abdication of individuality and human responsibility, an uncontrolled threat to democracy that transformed the savage lust of the masses into the modern menace of civilisation. Indeed, the ‘broad distinction
between “civilisation” and “barbarism” that was so central to the language of World War I rested heavily on the pejorative characterisation of Germany as a perversion of progress, a degeneracy of ‘over-rapid development’, a mechanical mentality that elevated atrocity to ‘a science and a technology’. The modern primitive had become a ‘murdering machine’, stripping its victims of their humanity, reducing them to raw material—its mechanical ethos making war into an inevitability, into ‘the Frankenstein’s monster of the twentieth century’. Thus Woodrow Wilson called for a war against Germany to make the world safe for democracy, with ‘civilization itself seeming to be in the balance’ because the menace of ‘autocratic governments backed by organized force’ had taken control ‘of the will of their people’.

The very militarisation of America led next, under this technological shadow of war, into a second world conflagration. Franklin Roosevelt, as Michael Sherry observes, ‘did not merely perceive the importance of technology in modern warfare, he seized on it as fitting the nation’s strengths and he deepened the American impulse to achieve global power through technological supremacy’. Such was his ‘ideological construction’ of national security. Europe’s war-mad barbarians were the product of a technological determinism that assaulted ‘the foundations of civilization’ and required the USA to adopt ‘strategies of annihilation as the measure of its own security against the danger of new technologies and ideologies. Thus FDR called on America, as the world’s arsenal of democracy, to lead a crusade against the evil Axis of fascist power, a diabolical enemy that feigned peaceful intentions even as it ravaged the world in the most shocking, brutal, and criminal acts of treachery. The Japanese aggression at Pearl Harbor on Sunday, 7 December 1941 was a cause for indignation, an affront to a God-fearing nation, and it provided an exigency for defending civilisation by vanquishing rampant evil. Roosevelt’s war rhetoric condensed belligerency to its pure form for a technological age and enemy.

War itself became, even for Americans who prided themselves on their individualism, a ‘mindless, anonymous’ expression of ‘machine-age dehumanization and cosmic purposelessness’. The bombing of cities was portrayed ‘as a process of surgical destruction administered by cool-headed Americans’. This was an image of war rendered benign and a sense of power inflated into a technological arrogance that culminated in the atomic extermination of Japanese treachery and savagery. The mindset of Hiroshima among the US public was ‘a collective form of psychic numbing’ that carried forward into a regime of cold-war nuclearism. The atomic bomb, President Truman announced in triumph, was repayment for Pearl Harbor many fold, ‘a new and revolutionary increase in destruction’, a ‘harnessing of the basic power of the universe’, which Americans were rightly ‘grateful to Providence’ that decent people possessed, and with which they had righteously vanquished an evil enemy.

The World War II American image of the enemy, although technologised into a numbing abstraction, retained its more visceral vehicles as well, including the raw emotions of racism captured in visions of atrocity. The Japanese were portrayed as subhuman, as apes and vermin, a primitive,
childish and mentally deficient threat to civilisation that required extermination by a nation of reluctant warriors. FDR merged the concrete with the abstract image of a barbaric enemy, blaming the ‘mechanized might’ of the Axis powers for their ‘brutality’ and condemning their ‘order of concentration camps’ as a ‘savage and brutal’ force ‘seeking to subjugate the world’. America’s ‘unscrupulous’ enemies were condemned as ‘crafty’ gangsters and powerful ‘bandits’ harbouring the morals of a predator, a lowly beast of prey.

Savagery and America’s cold war culture of fear

The rhetorical texture of the savage enemy evolved in its time without losing touch with its history. Decades of cold war, punctuated by hot encounters with communism in Vietnam and elsewhere, constituted a culture of fear premised on a multidimensional image of the enemy’s sheer savagery. Truman conjured a powerful cold war spell by representing the Soviet savage in terms of fire, flood and red fever to convey the threatening image of a communist epidemic and impending disaster for the free world. A compelling metaphor of disease framed the inception, and infused the presentation and reception of the Truman doctrine speech at this formative moment, constituting a heroic expression of democratic America questing after total security by eradicating the communist infestation.

Next in the line of presidential succession, Dwight Eisenhower cultivated an image of himself as the aspiring peacemaker, even as he affirmed Truman’s vision of national vulnerability by totalising the communist threat. The world’s captive nations, Eisenhower insisted, had been ‘terrorized into a uniform, submissive mass’. This ‘Red cancer’ must ‘feed on new conquests—or wither’. America could never rest until ‘the tidal mud of aggressive Communism receded’. Civilisation was imperilled by savagery—portrayed as primal, primitive, barbaric, monstrous, diseased and brutal—with its insatiable lust for conquest. A voice of perpetual peril, speaking calmly and reassuringly behind a mask of peace, coaxed the nation down a path of nuclear deterrence, based on an insane logic of mutual assured destruction, and in search of a false security. Elites as well as the public had become invested emotionally and intellectually in a visceral image of the enemy that provoked deeply repressed nuclear nightmares. ‘Just as empire did not look imperial to most Americans’, Sherry observes, ‘the militarized state did not look militaristic’.

It is difficult to see something that is everywhere. War was becoming just that, a perpetual and pervasive condition of US political culture, a habit of thought embedded in a manner of speaking, the cultural motif of an embattled nation. This militarised world-view extended to declaring metaphorical wars on poverty, drugs, disease and crime, engaging in ‘trade wars’ with foreign competitors, and fighting ‘culture wars’ with one another. The agonising task of Americanising a lingering French colonial war in Vietnam drove the discourse of savagery ever more deeply into the national psyche in order to rationalise world hegemony as a defence of civilisation.
America would expel the barbarian from the garden of democracy to cultivate perpetual peace.

By this reckoning the savage in democracy’s empire was marked with the sign of irrationality, represented as coercive, and configured for aggression. Each of these discursive dimensions was a contrasting feature in an overall image of American civility that featured a quintessentially rational, freedom-loving and reluctant defender of the peace. Thus, the rhetorical *topoi* of savagery against civilisation reduced to naturalised and interconnected articulations of force versus freedom, irrationality opposed to rationality, and aggression contrasted to defence. Americans were reluctant warriors defending the South Vietnamese people from communist aggression against the free world, insisting only on the right of choice and free elections rather than a government imposed by force. The USA fought for tolerance and diversity; the enemy insisted on ideological conformity and refused to negotiate. American military actions were sanitised in a language of protective reaction, pacification, incursion, defoliation; the enemy assassinated, kidnapped, strangled, ravaged and terrorised its innocent victims. The USA would settle disputes by law and reason in order to build an enlightened world order; the enemy was cunning but rash and driven by hate to perpetrate chaos. The enemy’s aggression was deliberate, wilful and unprovoked; America’s response was defensive, involuntary, and reluctant but necessary.19

After the debacle of Vietnam drove the USA into a temporary state of malaise, from which it quickly recovered following the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, Ronald Reagan ascended to the presidential helm to reinvigorate the discourse of savagery versus civilisation by calling upon Americans to defeat communism’s ‘evil empire’. The standard three-dimensional image of the barbarian was readily expressed by Reagan deploying a reified cluster of decivilising terms. These vehicles, too, had become the conventional idiom of an increasingly militarised culture of fear. They ranged from terms of natural menace, such as fire, flood, disease, tides and storms, to the language of dangerous animals and predators, such as snakes and wolves, and progressed to figures of primitives and brutes, mindless machines, criminals, lunatics, ideologues and fanatics, culminating in references to the satanic and profane enemies of God. Each effaced the Other, constituting a decivilised enemy by caricature, together conveying an image of savagery by indirectness and figuration. Thus Reagan’s Soviets were portrayed vividly in the language of light and shadow as a dark force, a grey monument to repression, a gale of intimidation, and as an untamed adversary preying upon its neighbours, barbarously assaulting the human spirit, clubbing its victims into submission, bullying the world to submit to its unhappy fate, employing the machines of war to commit murderous crimes against humanity, cheating, lying, driven by psychotic fears and unbounded ambitions, immune to practical reason, and even denying the existence of God in the fanatical machinations of a menacing evil. This was the totalitarian onslaught against civilised ideas and the defenders of liberty of which Reagan spoke with such urgency in an idiom that expressed the common sense of a nation.20
The figurative quality of these tropes and their centrality to the recurrent narrative of war, necessitated each time by yet another savage Other, went unremarked and unrecognised for the most part. They were the thoroughly literalised compositional elements of a long-told and often-repeated tale of American exceptionalism and mission. They were the plain-spoken and matter-of-fact words of a no-nonsense Harry Truman embedded in a language of rationality and a voice of reason handed down from the early republic. They were facts made certain and obvious within a narrow framework of interpretation. Moreover, they were reified in their sheer opposition to everything that made sense about freedom, liberty and democracy—the very terms of identity adopted by a peace-loving people to legitimise their warlike habits. Freedom, in the American political lexicon, was feminised and fragile, a risky experiment in a dangerous world, and always vulnerable to the rape of the barbarian if left unprotected.

Savagery in an age of terror and American empire

Thus the discourse of savagery informed but transcended the long era of cold war and the eventual demise of the USSR, further draining the nation’s political imagination of any alternative to militarising its domestic culture and foreign relations, and thereby constituting a people forever in search of new enemies and more wars to fight. The line between metaphorical and real war, Sherry maintains, had been blurred beyond recognition. War had become the master trope of all things domestic and foreign and all issues economic and social. Everyone and everything was potentially an enemy. Saddam Hussein offered an irresistible temptation, not once but twice, in a simulated return engagement with evil under the symbolic shadow of Hitler and Stalin. But it was the sheer savagery of terrorism that put the USA back on its steady rhetorical course of defending civilisation with all its surplus military might. Whether or not there was a demonstrable connection between Saddam and the terror of 9/11, there would be an open-ended ‘war’ of terror on the axis of evil, a different kind of war that acknowledged no political or territorial bounds within or between states. Freedom would be sacrificed in the cause of defending it against its foreign and domestic enemies wherever they may lurk.

Savagery, then, depicted the post-cold war era as a perpetual condition of ubiquitous violence, a Hobbesian state of nature and vicious warfare on civilians that would seem to indicate the fall of civilisation or signal the arrival of a modern leviathan of imperial peace. Rhetorical conditions seemed ripe for realising Kant’s vision of perpetual peace among a world federation of republican states, now called liberal democracies (or just democracies in shorthand). This so-called ‘democratic peace’ was a peace that would be achieved through the agency, in Kant’s words, of ‘a powerful and enlightened people’ who had formed a republic that could serve as ‘a focal point for a federal association among other nations that will join it in order to guarantee a state of peace among nations that is in accord with the idea of the right of nations, and through several associations of this sort such a federation can extend further and further’. This vision of peace was akin
to a biblical prophecy of world salvation by virtue of an American ascendancy; a chosen people would lead the world towards the final realisation of an empire of democracy where savagery was forever vanquished.27

Terrorism as the legitimising sign of American empire—the reigning symbol of savagery opposed to a civilising empire of democratic peace—grew out of a long tradition of war discourse deeply embedded in the nation’s political culture. The pivotal articulation of danger in the American experience, as David Campbell notes, was always the decivilising representation of the enemy as ‘alien, subversive, dirty, or sick’.28 Even as the cancer of communism was being eradicated, Ronald Reagan began to address the rising threat of terrorism. He talked tough about terrorists being able to run but not hide, while he negotiated a secret arms-for-hostages deal with Iran, a regime his government denounced for supporting international terrorism. That should have been warning enough, but ‘combating terrorism’, Jeffrey Simon observes, ‘would now be a top priority for the United States’. Like fighting the evil of the communist empire, combating terrorism was portrayed by Reagan in strict black-and-white terms and as a matter of war.29

George W Bush, the rhetorical and ideological son of Reagan, filled in the blanks after 9/11, drawing on the time-honoured language of savagery to justify his so-called war on international terrorism. It was a unique war in some ways, he said, but in other ways a continuation of the great clashes of the 20th century between tyranny and liberty. Democratic America, victimised again by a ‘ruthless surprise attack’, was committed to the ‘forward march of freedom’ against ‘murderous ideologies’ and in defence of world peace. The terrorist enemy ‘chose death over life’, ‘spreading fear and anarchy’ consistent with the ‘swagger and demented logic of the fanatic’. The war on terror was ‘civilization’s fight’. Were it lost to Muslim terrorists, ‘thugs’, ‘assassins’, and ‘despots’, books would be ‘burned’, women would be ‘whipped’, and children would be ‘schooled in hatred, murder, and suicide’; ‘darkness’ would be imposed by these ‘evil’ men all across the oil-rich Middle East. The only true path to peace, progress and prosperity, by the logic of this thoroughly conventionalised discourse of savagery, was the military path to freedom, justice and democracy.30 No other credible option seemed imaginable.

Indeed, for Bush and his fellow believers, the inability to see matters otherwise was an article of faith. The sign of the barbarian marked the presence of sheer evil. The president’s messianic call to arms was a secular sermon delivered in a Biblical cadence. America’s holy mission now, as in the beginning, was to make the world right in the eyes of the Christian God. One of Bush’s generals, William Boykin, described by the administration as a good soldier, declared that the USA was fighting Satan in Iraq, that the Christian God was real, and that the Muslim god was an idol. Americans affirmed that they voted for a president whom they knew to be a Christian man. Just as the USA’s morals and ideals were endowed by the Creator, the Almighty’s gift of liberty was meant for His chosen people to spread throughout the world to all of humanity. The USA was the ‘greatest force for good in history’. Such was the evangelical arrogance of a reborn president’s
Christian humility, uttered in the name of an exceptional people whom he represented to the Lord and sent on their holy mission, strong in their faith, undistracted by doubt, and wielding a mighty sword of destruction. Democracy worked in mysterious ways. The world was either with democratic America or with the dark forces of savagery. Civilisation’s Christian soldiers were crusading against the terror of evil, fighting for the greater glory of God, and seeking their own salvation. Thus, a material empire was made holy by casting out the Devil himself.31

This is a discourse that rendered criticism almost unsayable within the empire of democracy. It emptied democracy of its meaning as a political practice and reduced it to a rationalisation for world domination. Democracy was little more than an open-ended justification of coercion on a global scale, a warrant for forcing the world to become free on US terms, and a moral imperative to kill those who refused to obey. Dissent was undemocratic, in this sense, and disloyal. As Attorney General John Ashcroft, a militant Christian fundamentalist, observed before the US Senate Judiciary Committee, critics of the administration’s war on terrorism provided ammunition to the country’s enemies. Those who tried to scare a peace-loving people with phantoms of lost liberty were deploying the tactics of terrorism by using America’s freedoms as a weapon against itself.32 Soldiers, not journalists, poets, or protesters, provide and preserve freedom at home and abroad, proclaimed Democratic Senator Zell Miller before the Republican National Convention as it prepared to nominate George W Bush for a second presidential term. It was time again for patriotic Americans to line up and march behind this straight-shooting, God-fearing leader with a spine of tempered steel.33

Silencing the voice of democratic dissent in the name of its own sacred cause stifled public deliberation, even in Congress among the people’s elected representatives, and thus blunted the country’s collective critical faculties. A people reduced by the dichotomous language of good versus evil to a form of patriotism that is reflexive rather than reflective could not debate the character of terror without sounding supportive of terrorists, could not distinguish between explaining terrorism and siding with terrorists, could not acknowledge even a strategic difference between international and nationalist terrorists, could not contemplate variations within the discourse of Islamism, and could not recognise the terror of their own indiscriminate war on terrorism.34 Even the gruesome visual evidence of American soldiers torturing prisoners in Abu Ghraib and elsewhere could be dismissed by Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld because it was not as bad as terrorists ‘chopping someone’s head off on television’.35 The USA simply could not see that much of the terror in democracy’s troubled empire was largely of its own making.

Critiquing images of savagery

The very idiom of democratic persuasion was once again corrupted and co-opted by the coercive language of savagery, leaving discouraged observers to
ponder whether there remained any alternative to reciprocal acts of righteous terror. Does an empire of democracy differ from any other kind of empire? Are there resources within the discourse of democracy for addressing the threatening Other in terms other than savagery? Is it possible to articulate more constructive relations among adversaries than that of sheer antagonism? Can rivals within and between political boundaries enunciate working points of identification from different positions of interest and identity? Can an overly narrow perspective be stretched to accommodate the diversity of a now compressed globe?

These questions of language critique must be addressed thoroughly within the particular context of US political culture, but ultimately they entail coming to terms with dissent as the key to enriching democratic practice and with rhetoric as the trick of articulating dissent. Rhetoric is to dissent as dissent is to democracy. Language makes claims upon us, as James Dawes observes, and ‘conceptions of language are a factor in the invention, obfuscation, or realization of particular social practices’ from which we ‘cannot opt out’. Language is not ideologically neutral, but it is subject to rhetorical critique from within. Otherwise language rigidifies and devolves into violence, spawning self-sustaining rituals of vilification and victimisation. Michel de Certeau recognised that marginalisation is no longer just the condition of minorities but instead has become the norm for nearly everyone and, accordingly, that the practice of everyday life now requires a quotidian operation of tactics for turning the tables on elites. Rhetoric, he notes, offers models of such tactics, which amount to discursive operations for reappropriating cultural capital. By extension, Ronald Bleiker envisions dissent itself as an ongoing quotidian practice of language critique, something more manageable on an everyday basis, an operation more protean and less heroic than single-handedly overthrowing the forces of injustice. The everyday rhetorical trickster makes democratic joints a bit more flexible and keeps alive the possibility of resisting overdrawn images of another’s savagery. Here is where we might begin to search in the hope of finding democracy’s lost voice.

Notes


3 I discuss these points in RL Ivie, *Democracy and America’s War on Terror*, Tuscaloosa, AL: University of Alabama Press, 2005.


