

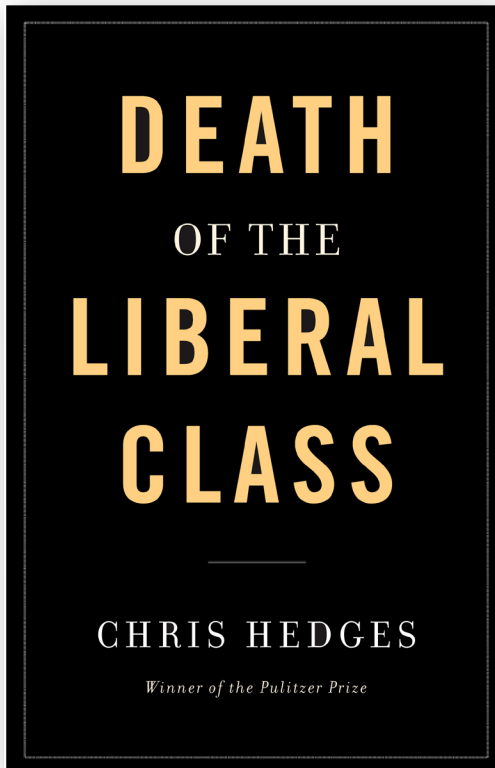
CHRIS HEDGES

**PERMANENT
WAR**

AN EXCERPT FROM THE BOOK

**DEATH OF THE
LIBERAL CLASS**





Chris Hedges, a Pulitzer Prize-winner, is the former Middle East Bureau Chief of *The New York Times*, and a Senior Fellow at The Nation Institute. He is the author of several books, including *War is a Force That Gives Us Meaning*, *Losing Moses on the Freeway: The 10 Commandments in America*, *I Don't Believe in Atheists*, and *American Fascists: The Christian Right and the War on America*. He lives in Princeton, New Jersey.

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PERMANENT WAR

An excerpt from
DEATH OF THE LIBERAL CLASS
by Chris Hedges

One of the most pathetic aspects of human history is that every civilization expresses itself most pretentiously, compounds its partial and universal values most convincingly, and claims immortality for its finite existence at the very moment when the decay which leads to death has already begun.

– Reinhold Niebuhr, *Beyond Tragedy*

Since the end of World War I, the United States has devoted staggering resources and money to battling real and imagined enemies. It turned the engines of the state over to a massive war and security apparatus. These battles, which have created an Orwellian state illusion of permanent war, neutered all opposition to corporate power and the tepid reforms of the liberal class. The liberal class, fearful of being branded as soft or unpatriotic in

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A state of war demands greater secrecy, constant vigilance and suspicion. It generates distrust and fear, especially in culture and art, often reducing it to silence or nationalist cant

the Cold War, willingly joined the state's campaign to crush popular and radical movements in the name of national security. Permanent war is the most effective mechanism used by the power elite to stifle reform and muzzle dissent. A state of war demands greater secrecy, constant vigilance and suspicion. It generates distrust and fear, especially in culture and art, often reducing it to silence or nationalist cant. It degrades and corrupts education and the media. It wrecks the economy. It nullifies public opinion. And it forces liberal institutions to sacrifice their beliefs for a holy crusade, a kind of surrogate religion, whether it is against the Hun, the Bolshevik, the fascist, the communist, or the Islamic terrorist. The liberal class in a state of permanent war is rendered impotent.

Dwight Macdonald warned of the ideology of permanent war in his 1946 es-

say *The Root Is Man*. He despaired of an effective counterweight to the power of the corporate state as long as a state of permanent war continued to exist. The liberal class, like the Marxist cadre from which Macdonald had defected in favor of anarchism, had, he wrote, mistakenly placed its hopes for human progress in the state. This was a huge error. The state, once the repository of hope for the liberal class and many progressives, devoured its children in America as well as in the Soviet Union. And the magic elixir, the potent opiate that rendered a population passive and willing to be stripped of power, was a state of permanent war.

The political uses of the ideology of perpetual war eluded the theorists behind the nineteenth- and early twentieth-century reform and social movements, including Karl Marx. The reformists limited their focus to internal class struggle and, as Macdonald noted, never worked out “an adequate theory of the political significance of war.” Until that gap is filled, Macdonald warned, “modern socialism will continue to have a somewhat academic flavor.”

The collapse of liberalism, whether in imperial Russia, the Austro-Hungarian Empire, Weimar Germany, the former Yugoslavia, or the United States, was intimately tied to the rise of a culture of permanent war. Within such a culture, exploitation and violence, even against citizens, are justified to protect the nation. The chant for war comes in a variety of slogans, languages, and ideologies. It can manifest itself in fascist salutes, communist show trials, campaigns of ethnic cleansing, or Christian crusades. It is all the same. It is a crude, terrifying state repression by the power elite and the mediocrities in the liberal class who serve them, in the name of national security.



The imposition of fear ensures that the corporations that wrecked the country cannot be challenged

It was a decline into permanent war, not Islam, that killed the liberal, democratic movements in the Arab world, movements that held great promise in the early part of the twentieth century in countries such as Egypt, Syria, Lebanon, and Iran. The same prolonged state of permanent war killed the liberal classes in Israel and the United States. Permanent war, which reduces all to speaking in the simplified language of nationalism, is a disease. It strips citizens of rights. It reduces all communication to patriotic cant. It empowers those who profit from the state in the name of war. And it corrodes and diminishes democratic debate and institutions.

“War,” Randolph Bourne remarked, “is the health of the state.”

U.S. military spending, which consumes half of all discretionary spending, has had a profound social and political cost. Bridges and levees collapse. Schools decay. Domestic manufacturing declines. Trillions in debt threaten the viability of the currency and the economy. The poor, the mentally ill, the sick, and the unemployed are abandoned. Human suffering is the price for victory, which is never finally defined or attainable.

The corporations that profit from permanent war need us to be afraid. Fear stops us from objecting to government spending on a bloated military. Fear means we will not ask unpleasant questions of those in power. Fear permits the government to operate in secret. Fear means we are willing to give up our rights and liberties for promises of security. The imposition of fear ensures that the corporations that wrecked the country cannot be challenged. Fear keeps us penned in like livestock.

Dick Cheney and George W. Bush may be palpably evil while Obama is merely

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weak, but to those who seek to keep us in a state of permanent war, such distinctions do not matter. They get what they want. The liberal class, like Dostoyevsky's Underground Man, can no longer influence a society in a state of permanent war and retreats into its sheltered enclaves, where its members can continue to worship themselves. The corridors of liberal institutions are filled with Underground men and women. They decry the social chaos for which they bear responsibility, but do nothing. They nurse an internal bitterness and mounting distaste for the wider society. And, because of their self-righteousness, elitism, and hypocrisy, they are despised.

The institutional church, when it does speak, mutters pious non-statements. It seeks to protect its vision of itself as a moral voice and yet avoids genuine confrontations with the power elite. It speaks in a language filled with moral platitudes. We can hear such language in a letter written March 25, 2003, by Archbishop Edwin F. O'Brien, head of the Archdiocese for the Military Services, telling his priests that Catholic soldiers could morally fight in the second Iraq war: "Given the complexity of factors involved, many of which understandably remain confidential, it is altogether appropriate for members of our armed forces to presume the integrity of our leadership and its judgments, and therefore to carry out their military duties in good conscience." The U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops told believers that Iraqi president Saddam Hussein was a menace, and that reasonable people could disagree about the necessity of using force to overthrow him. It assured those who supported the war that God would not object. B'nai B'rith supported a congressional resolution to authorize the 2003 attack on Iraq. The Union of Ameri-



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can Hebrew Congregations, which represents Reform Judaism, agreed it would back unilateral action, as long as Congress approved and the president sought support from other nations. In a typical bromide, the National Council of Churches, which represents thirty-six different faith groups, urged President George W. Bush to "do all possible" to avoid war with Iraq and to stop "demonizing adversaries or enemies" with good-versus-evil rhetoric, but, like the other liberal religious institutions, did not condemn the war.

A Gallup Poll in 2006 found that "the more frequently an American attends church, the less likely he or she is to say the war was a mistake." Given that Jesus was a pacifist, and given that all of us who graduated from seminary rigorously studied just war doctrine, a doctrine flagrantly violated by the invasion of Iraq, this is startling.

The attraction of the right wing, and the war-makers, is that they appear to have the courage of their convictions. When someone like Sarah Palin posts a map with crosshairs centering on Democratic districts, when she favors a slogan such as "Don't Retreat, Instead – RELOAD!," there are desperate people listening who are cleaning their weapons. When Christian fascists stand in the pulpits of megachurches and denounce Obama as the Antichrist, there are believers who listen. When during a 2010 House debate on the pending health-care bill, Republican lawmaker Randy Neugebauer shouts, "Baby killer!" at Michigan Democrat Bart Stupak, violent extremists nod their heads, seeing the mission of saving the unborn as a sacred duty. These zealots have little left to lose. We made sure of that. And the violence they inflict is an expression of the economic and institutional violence they endure.

These movements are not yet full-blown fascist movements. They do not openly call for the extermination of ethnic or religious groups. They do not openly advocate violence. But, as I was told by Fritz Stern, a scholar of fascism and a refugee from Nazi Germany, “In Germany there was a yearning for fascism before fascism was invented.” This is the yearning that we now see, and it is dangerous. Stern, who sees similarities between the deterioration of the U.S. political system and the fall of Weimar Germany, warned against “a historic process in which resentment against a disenchanted secular world found deliverance in the ecstatic escape of unreason.” Societies that do not reincorporate the unemployed and the poor into the economy, giving them jobs and relief from crippling debt, become subject to the hysterical mass quest for ecstatic deliverance in unreason. The nascent racism and violence leaping up around the edges of U.S. society could become a full-blown conflagration. Attempts by the liberal class to create a more civil society, to respect difference, will be rejected by a betrayed populace along with the liberal class itself.

“One thing that is very likely to happen is that the gains made in the past forty years by black and brown Americans, and by homosexuals, will be wiped out,” the philosopher Richard Rorty warned in his book *Achieving Our Country*:

Jocular contempt for women will come back into fashion. The words “nigger” and “kike” will once again be heard in the workplace. All the sadism that the academic Left has tried to make unacceptable to its students will come flooding back. All the resentment which badly educated Americans feel about having their manners dictated to them by college graduates will find an outlet.



Attempts by the liberal class to create a more civil society, to respect difference, will be rejected by a betrayed populace along with the liberal class itself

The hatred for radical Islam will transform itself into a hatred for Muslims. The hatred for undocumented workers in states such as Arizona will become a hatred for Mexicans and Central Americans. The hatred for those not defined as American patriots by a largely white mass movement will become a hatred for African Americans. The hatred for liberals will morph into a hatred for all democratic institutions, from universities and government agencies to cultural institutions and the media. In their continued impotence and cowardice, members of the liberal class will see themselves, and the values they support, swept aside.

The liberal class refused to resist the devolution of the U.S. democratic system into what Sheldon Wolin calls a system of inverted totalitarianism. Inverted totalitarianism, Wolin writes, represents “the political coming of age of corporate power and the political demobilization of the citizenry.” Inverted totalitarianism differs from classical forms of totalitarianism, which revolve around a demagogue or charismatic leader. It finds its expression in the anonymity of the corporate state. The corporate forces behind inverted totalitarianism do not, as classical totalitarian movements do, replace decaying structures with new, revolutionary structures. They do not import new symbols and iconography. They do not offer a radical alternative. Corporate power purports, in inverted totalitarianism, to honor electoral politics, freedom, and the Constitution. But these corporate forces so corrupt and manipulate power as to make democracy impossible.

Inverted totalitarianism is not conceptualized as an ideology or objectified in public policy. It is furthered by “power-holders and citizens who often seem

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unaware of the deeper consequences of their actions or inactions,” Wolin writes. But it is as dangerous as classical forms of totalitarianism. In a system of inverted totalitarianism, it is not necessary to rewrite the Constitution, as fascist and communist regimes would. It is enough to exploit legitimate power by means of judicial and legislative interpretation. This exploitation ensures that the courts, populated by justices selected and ratified by members of the corporate culture, rule that huge corporate campaign contributions are protected speech under the First Amendment. It ensures that heavily financed and organized lobbying by large corporations is interpreted as an application of the people’s right to petition the government. Corporations are treated by the state as persons, as the increasingly conservative U.S. Supreme Court has more and more frequently ruled, except in those cases where the “persons” agree to a “settlement.” Those within corporations who commit crimes can avoid going to prison by paying large sums of money to the government without “admitting any wrongdoing,” according to this twisted judicial reasoning. There is a word for this: corruption.

Corporations have thirty-five thousand lobbyists in Washington and thousands more in state capitals that dole out corporate money to shape and write legislation. They use their political action committees to solicit employees and shareholders for donations to fund pliable candidates. The financial sector, for example, spent more than \$5 billion on political campaigns, influence peddling, and lobbying during the past decade, which resulted in sweeping deregulation, the gouging of consumers, our global financial meltdown, and the subsequent looting of the U.S. Treasury. The Pharmaceutical Research and Manu-



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facturers of America spent \$26 million in 2009, and drug companies such as Pfizer, Amgen, and Eli Lilly kicked in tens of millions more to buy off the two parties. The so-called health-care reform bill will force citizens to buy a predatory and defective product, while taxpayers provide health-related corporations with hundreds of billions of dollars in subsidies. The oil and gas industry, the coal industry, defense contractors, and telecommunications companies have thwarted the drive for sustainable energy and orchestrated the steady erosion of regulatory control and civil liberties. Politicians do corporate bidding and give lip service to burning political and economic issues. The liberal class is used as a prop to keep the fiction of the democratic state alive. The Constitution, Wolin writes, is “conscripted to serve as power’s apprentice rather than its conscience.”

There is no national institution left that can accurately be described as democratic. Citizens, rather than authentically participating in power, are have only virtual opinions, in what Charlotte Twight calls “participatory fascism.” They are reduced to expressing themselves on issues that are meaningless, voting on *American Idol* or in polls conducted by the power elite. The citizens of Rome, stripped of political power, are allowed to vote to spare or kill a gladiator in the arena, a similar form of hollow public choice.

“Inverted totalitarianism reverses things,” Wolin writes:

It is politics all of the time but a politics largely untempered by the political. Party squabbles are occasionally on public display, and there is a frantic and continuous politics among factions of the party, interest groups, competing corporate powers, and rival media concerns. And there is, of course, the culmi-

nating moment of national elections when the attention of the nation is required to make a choice of personalities rather than a choice between alternatives. What is absent is the political, the commitment to finding where the common good lies amidst the welter of well-financed, highly organized, single-minded interests rabidly seeking governmental favors and overwhelming the practices of representative government and public administration by a sea of cash.

Hollywood, the news industry, and television – all corporate-controlled – have become instruments of inverted totalitarianism, as I illustrated in my book *Empire of Illusion*. They saturate the airwaves with manufactured controversy, whether it is the Tiger Woods sex scandal or the dispute between NBC late-night talk-show hosts Jay Leno and Conan O'Brien or the extramarital affair of John Edwards. We confuse knowledge with our potted responses to these non-events. And the draconian internal control employed by the U.S. Department of Homeland Security, the military, and the police, coupled with the censorship, witting or unwitting, practiced by the corporate media, does for inverted totalitarianism what thugs and bonfires of prohibited books did in previous totalitarian regimes.

Liberals, socialists, trade unionists, independent journalists, and intellectuals, many of whom were once important voices in our society, have been banished or muzzled by corporate control throughout academia, culture, the media, and government. “It seems a replay of historical experience that the bias displayed by today’s media should be aimed consistently at the shredded remains of liberalism,” Wolin writes:

Recall that an element common to most



The uniformity of opinion molded by the media is reinforced through the skillfully orchestrated mass emotions of nationalism and patriotism, which paint all dissidents as “soft” or “unpatriotic

twentieth-century totalitarianism, whether Fascist or Stalinist, was hostility toward the left. In the United States, the left is assumed to consist solely of liberals, occasionally of “the left wing of the Democratic Party,” never of democrats.

The uniformity of opinion molded by the media is reinforced through the skillfully orchestrated mass emotions of nationalism and patriotism, which paint all dissidents as “soft” or “unpatriotic.” The “patriotic” citizen, plagued by fear of job losses and possible terrorist attacks, unfailingly supports widespread surveillance and the militarized state. There is no questioning of the \$1 trillion spent each year on defense. Military and intelligence agencies are held above government, as if somehow they are not part of the government. The most powerful instruments of state control effectively have no public oversight. We, as imperial citizens, are taught to be contemptuous of government bureaucracy, yet we stand like sheep before Homeland Security agents in airports and are mute when Congress permits our private correspondence and conversations to be monitored and archived. We endure more state control than at any time in U.S. history.

And yet the civic, patriotic, and political language we use to describe ourselves remains unchanged. We pay fealty to the same national symbols and iconography. We find our collective identity in the same national myths. We continue to deify the founding fathers. But the America we celebrate is an illusion. It does not exist.

The liberal class has aided and abetted this decline. Liberals, who claim to support the working class, vote for candidates who glibly defend NAFTA and increased globalization. Liberals, who claim to want an end to the wars in Iraq and Af-

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ghanistan, continue to back a party that funds and expands these wars. Liberals, who say they are the champions of basic civil liberties, do not challenge politicians who take these liberties from them.

Obama lies as cravenly, if not as crudely, as George W. Bush. He promised that the transfer of \$12.8 trillion in taxpayer money to Wall Street would open up credit and lending to the average consumer following the financial crisis. It did not. The Federal Deposit Insurance Corporation (FDIC) admitted that banks have reduced lending at the sharpest rate since 1942. As a senator, Obama promised he would filibuster amendments to the Foreign Intelligence Surveillance Act (FISA), which retroactively made legal the wiretapping and monitoring of millions of American citizens without warrant; instead, he supported passage of that legislation. He told us he would withdraw American troops from Iraq, close the Guantánamo Bay detention camp, end torture, restore civil liberties such as habeas corpus, pass a health-care bill with a robust public option, and create new jobs. Some troops have been withdrawn, slowly and piecemeal, from Iraq, but other than this too-little-too-late process, almost none of his promises has been kept.

He shoved a health-care bill down our throats that will mean ever-rising co-pays, deductibles, and premiums and leave most of the seriously ill bankrupt and unable to afford medical care. Obama, after promising meaningful environmental reform, did nothing to halt the collapse of the 2009 Copenhagen Climate Conference, a decision that ended perhaps our final chance to save the planet from the catastrophic effects of climate change. He empowers Israel's brutal apartheid regime. He has expanded the war in Afghanistan and Pakistan, where hundreds



Liberals, unlike the right wing, are emotionally disabled. They appear not to feel. They do not recognize the legitimate anger of those who have been dispossessed

of civilians, including entire families, have been slaughtered by sophisticated weaponry such as drones and the AGM-144 Hellfire missile, which sucks the air out of its victims' lungs. He is delivering war and death to Yemen, Somalia, and, perhaps soon, he will bring it to Iran. Obama is part of the political stagecraft that trades in perceptions of power rather than real power.

The illegal wars and occupations, the largest transference of wealth upward in U.S. history, the deregulation that resulted in the environmental disaster in the Gulf of Mexico, and the egregious assault on civil liberties – begun under George W. Bush – raise only a flicker of protest from the liberal class. Liberals, unlike the right wing, are emotionally disabled. They appear not to feel. They do not recognize the legitimate anger of those who have been dispossessed. They retreat instead into the dead talk of policy and analysis. The Tea Party protesters, the myopic supporters of Sarah Palin, the veterans signing up for Oath Keepers, and myriad groups of armed patriots have brought into their ranks legions of dispossessed workers, angry libertarians, John Birchers, and many others who, until now, were never politically active.

The three-thousand-word suicide note left by Joe Stack, who flew his Piper Dakota into an Internal Revenue Service office in Austin, Texas, on February 18, 2010, murdering an IRS worker and injuring thirteen others, two seriously, expressed the frustration of tens of millions of workers over the treachery of global corporations and a liberal class that abandoned them.

Stack, in his note, remembered that when he was an eighteen- or nineteen-year-old student living in Harrisburg, Pennsylvania, he occupied an apartment

next to an elderly widow. The woman had been married to a steel worker, who, Stack wrote, “had worked all his life in the steel mills of central Pennsylvania with promises from big business and the union that, for his thirty years of service, he would have a pension and medical care to look forward to in his retirement.” But the worker got nothing “because the incompetent mill management and corrupt union (not to mention the government) raided their pension funds and stole their retirement.” The widow survived on Social Security.

“In retrospect, the situation was laughable because here I was living on peanut butter and bread (or Ritz crackers when I could afford to splurge) for months at a time,” he wrote:

When I got to know this poor figure and heard her story I felt worse for her plight than for my own (I, after all, thought I had everything in front of me). I was genuinely appalled at one point, as we exchanged stories and commiserated with each other over our situations, when she in her grandmotherly fashion tried to convince me that I would be “healthier” eating cat food (like her) rather than trying to get all my substance from peanut butter and bread. I couldn’t quite go there, but the impression was made. I decided that I didn’t trust big business to take care of me, and that I would take responsibility for my own future and myself.

Stack’s life, like Ernest Logan Bell’s, soon made clear that the corporate government served its own interests at the expense of the citizen. And the liberal class and its institutions, including labor unions, the media, and the Democratic Party, would not defend them.

“Why is it that a handful of thugs and plunderers can commit unthinkable



American workers are not the only workers who have been betrayed by the new global economy. Nor are they alone in their anger

atrocities (and in the case of the GM executives, for scores of years) and when it’s time for their gravy train to crash under the weight of their gluttony and overwhelming stupidity, the force of the full federal government has no difficulty coming to their aid within days if not hours?” Stack wrote:

Yet at the same time, the joke we call the American medical system, including the drug and insurance companies, are murdering tens of thousands of people a year and stealing from the corpses and victims they cripple, and this country’s leaders don’t see this as important as bailing out a few of their vile, rich cronies. Yet, the political “representatives” (thieves, liars, and self-serving scumbags is far more accurate) have endless time to sit around for year after year and debate the state of the “terrible health care problem.” It’s clear they see no crisis as long as the dead people don’t get in the way of their corporate profits rolling in.

And justice? You’ve got to be kidding!

“How can any rational individual explain that white elephant conundrum in the middle of our tax system and, indeed, our entire legal system?” the note went on:

Here we have a system that is, by far, too complicated for the brightest of the master scholars to understand. Yet, it mercilessly “holds accountable” its victims, claiming that they’re responsible for fully complying with laws not even the experts understand. The law “requires” a signature on the bottom of a tax filing; yet no one can say truthfully that they understand what they are signing; if that’s not “duress” th[e]n what is. If this is not the measure of a totalitarian regime, nothing is.”

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This letter is a coherent and lucid expression of views and concerns, many of them legitimate, shared by millions of sane, struggling citizens. All of them feel betrayed, as they should, by both the government and the liberal class.

American workers are not the only workers who have been betrayed by the new global economy. Nor are they alone in their anger, as illustrated by strikes and protests in countries such as Greece and China. Sociologist Ching Kwan Lee's study of Chinese labor, *Against the Law: Labor Protests in China's Rustbelt and Sunbelt*, shows that workers in these regions of China experience bitterness and a sense of betrayal very similar to those expressed by Stack.

Lee writes about workers in the north-east province of Liaoning, which, like the rust belt in states such as Ohio, has been abandoned by the Chinese government for the southeast. Liaoning has "declined into a wasteland of bankruptcy and a hotbed of working-class protest by its many unemployed workers and pensioners. Unpaid pensions and wages, defaults on medical subsidies, and inadequate collective consumption are the main grievances triggering labor unrest in Liaoning."

In the southern province of Guangdong, China's export-oriented industry is booming. The province in 2000 accounted for forty-two percent of all China's exports, 90 percent of which came from eight cities in the Pearl River Delta. The area attracts many of China's eighty to one hundred million migrant workers. But here Lee found "satanic mills" that run "at such a nerve-racking pace that workers' physical limits and bodily strength are put to the test on a daily basis." Workers can put in fourteen- to sixteen-hour days with no rest day during the month until payday. In these factories it is "normal" to work



Workers can put in fourteen- to sixteen-hour days with no rest day during the month until payday. In these factories it is "normal" to work four hundred hours or more a month, especially for those in the garment industry

four hundred hours or more a month, especially for those in the garment industry. Working conditions are in open defiance of official labor laws, which mandate a forty-hour work week and a maximum of thirty-six hours of overtime per month as well as a day off each week. But labor laws are rarely enforced in China. Most workers, Lee found, endure unpaid wages, illegal deductions, and substandard wage rates. They are often physically abused at work and do not receive compensation if they are injured on the job. Every year a dozen or more workers die from overwork in the city of Shenzhen alone. In Lee's words, the working conditions "go beyond the Marxist notions of exploitation and alienation." A survey published in 2003 by the official China News Agency, cited in Lee's book, found that three in four migrant workers have trouble collecting their pay. Each year scores of workers threaten to commit suicide, Lee writes, by jumping off high-rises or setting themselves on fire over unpaid wages. "If getting paid for one's labor is a fundamental feature of capitalist employment relations, strictly speaking many Chinese workers are not yet laborers," Lee writes.

Workers in China, according to Lee, feel deeply betrayed by a state that espoused Maoist collectivism rather than liberal democratic principles. But the sense of betrayal, and the expressions of rage and bitterness, by workers in China and the United States are very similar. Workers in China have been used and discarded, in much the same way as workers in other global industrial centers, from Michigan to India to Vietnam to South Korea. There are, Lee estimates, some thirty million "excess workers" in China who are effectively but not officially unemployed. Lee found that many of the workers "broke down in tears in the course of our

conversation, while others could barely contain their indignation and anger.” She noted that “a sense of being victimized by injustice was widely shared in the local communities.” Lee sees a looming crisis in China that will mirror the crisis in the United States and in other parts of the world where corporations have been permitted to ruthlessly exploit workers and move to new locations once wages begin to rise or workers become organized. The fury Joe Stack expressed against corporate abuse of the working class is a fury that, Lee warns, is reverberating around the globe in a multiplicity of tongues.

India, along with China and other emergent economies, has experienced the same desperation. An estimated 182,936 Indian farmers committed suicide between 1997 and 2007. Nearly two-thirds of these suicides occurred in five of India’s twenty-eight states. Those who took their lives, the Indian journalist Palagummi Sainath has written, were primarily farmers who fell deeply in debt. Debt in Indian peasant households doubled in the first decade of India’s neoliberal “economic reforms,” from twenty-six percent of farm households to 48.6 percent, Sainath found. The farmers who killed themselves largely grew cash crops for export, such as cotton, coffee, sugarcane, groundnut, pepper, and vanilla. The switch from subsistence farming to cash crops, pushed on farmers by corporations, eventually led to higher cultivation costs, higher loans, and unsustainable debts, leaving farmers at the mercy of global commodity markets. Seed prices, controlled by corporate seed companies such as Monsanto, skyrocketed. And farmers, finally, could not cope. Many simply walked away from their land.

“There’s much excited talk these days about a great global shift of power, with



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speculation about whether, or when, China might displace the U.S. as the dominant global power, along with India, which, if it happened, would mean that the global system would be returning to something like what it was before the European conquests,” said Noam Chomsky, speaking at the Left Forum at Pace University in New York:

And indeed their recent GDP growth has been spectacular. But there’s a lot more to say about it. So if you take a look at the U.N. human development index, basic measure of the health of the society, it turns out that India retains its place near the bottom. It’s now 134th, slightly above Cambodia, below Laos and Tajikistan. Actually, it’s dropped since the reforms began. China ranks ninety-second, a bit above Jordan, below the Dominican Republic and Iran. By comparison, Cuba, which has been under harsh U.S. attack for fifty years, is ranked fifty-second. It’s the highest in Central America and the Caribbean, barely below the richest societies in South America. India and China also suffer from extremely high inequality, so well over a billion of their inhabitants fall far lower in the scale. Furthermore, an accurate accounting would go beyond conventional measures to include serious costs that China and India can’t ignore for long: ecological, resource depletion, many others.

Front-page speculations about a global shift of power “disregard a crucial factor that’s familiar to all of us: nations divorced from the internal distribution of power are not the real actors in international affairs,” Chomsky said:

That truism was brought to public attention by that incorrigible radical Adam Smith, who recognized that the principal architects of power in England were the owners of the

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society – in his day, the merchants and manufacturers – and they made sure that policy would attend scrupulously to their interests, however grievous the impact on the people of England and, of course, much worse, the victims of what he called “the savage injustice of the Europeans” abroad. British crimes in India were the main concern of an old-fashioned conservative with moral values.

Chomsky said that there is indeed a global shift on power, “though not the one that occupies center stage”:

It’s a shift from the global work force to transnational capital, and it’s been sharply escalating during the neoliberal years. The cost is substantial, including the Joe Stacks of the U.S., starving peasants in India, and millions of protesting workers in China, where the labor share in income is declining even more rapidly than in most of the world.

Chomsky is one of the few intellectuals who challenges the structure and inequity of corporate capitalism and our state of permanent war. Perhaps America’s greatest intellectual, Chomsky is deeply reviled by the liberal class. His massive body of work, which includes nearly one hundred books, has for decades deflated and exposed the lies of the power elite, the myths they perpetrate, and the complicity of the liberal class. Chomsky has done this despite being largely blacklisted by the commercial media and turned into a pariah by the academy. He combines moral autonomy with rigorous scholarship, a remarkable grasp of detail, and a searing intellect. He curtly dismisses our two-party system as a mirage orchestrated by the corporate state, excoriates the liberal class for being toadies, and describes the drivel of the commercial media as a form of “brainwashing.” And as our nation’s most prescient critic of un-



Chomsky is deeply reviled by the liberal class. His massive body of work, which includes nearly one hundred books, has for decades deflated and exposed the lies of the power elite, the myths they perpetrate, and the complicity of the liberal class

regulated capitalism, globalization, and the poison of empire, he enters his eighty-first year warning us that we have little time left to save our anemic democracy and our ecosystem.

“It is very similar to late Weimar Germany,” Chomsky said when I spoke with him. “The parallels are striking. There was also tremendous disillusionment with the parliamentary system. The most striking fact about Weimar was not that the Nazis managed to destroy the Social Democrats and the Communists but that the traditional parties, the Conservative and Liberal Parties, were hated and disappeared. It left a vacuum which the Nazis very cleverly and intelligently managed to take over.

“The United States is extremely lucky that no honest, charismatic figure has arisen,” Chomsky went on:

Every charismatic figure is such an obvious crook that he destroys himself, like [Joseph] McCarthy or [Richard] Nixon or the evangelist preachers. If somebody comes along who is charismatic and honest, this country is in real trouble because of the frustration, disillusionment, the justified anger, and the absence of any coherent response. What are people supposed to think if someone says, “I have got an answer, we have an enemy”? There it was the Jews. Here it will be the illegal immigrants and the blacks. We will be told that white males are a persecuted minority. We will be told we have to defend ourselves and the honor of the nation. Military force will be exalted. People will be beaten up. This could become an overwhelming force. And if it happens it will be more dangerous than Germany. The United States is the world power. Germany was powerful but had more powerful antagonists. I don’t think all this is very far away. If the polls are accurate it is not the Republicans but the right-wing Republicans,

the crazed Republicans, who will sweep the [November 2010] election.

“I have never seen anything like this in my lifetime,” Chomsky added.

I am old enough to remember the 1930s. My whole family was unemployed. There were far more desperate conditions than today. But it was hopeful. People had hope. The CIO [Congress of Industrial Organizations] was organizing. No one wants to say it anymore, but the Communist Party was the spearhead for labor and civil-rights organizing. Even things like giving my unemployed seamstress aunt a week in the country. It was a life. There is nothing like that now. The mood of the country is frightening. The level of anger, frustration, and hatred of institutions is not organized in a constructive way. It is going off into self-destructive fantasies.

“I listen to talk radio,” Chomsky said. “I don’t want to hear Rush Limbaugh. I want to hear the people calling in. They are like Joe Stack. ‘What is happening to me? I have done all the right things. I am a God-fearing Christian. I work hard for my family. I have a gun. I believe in the values of the country, and my life is collapsing.’”

In works such as *On Power and Ideology* and *Manufacturing Consent*, Chomsky has, more than any other American intellectual, charted the downward spiral of the American political and economic system. He reminds us that genuine intellectual inquiry is always subversive. It challenges cultural and political assumptions. It critiques structures. It is relentlessly self-critical. It implodes the self-indulgent myths and stereotypes we use to aggrandize ourselves and ignore our complicity in acts of violence and oppression. And genuine inquiry al-



Chomsky reserves his fiercest venom for members of the liberal class who serve as a smoke screen for the cruelty of unchecked capitalism and imperial war

ways makes the powerful, as well as their liberal apologists, deeply uncomfortable.

Chomsky reserves his fiercest venom for members of the liberal class who serve as a smoke screen for the cruelty of unchecked capitalism and imperial war. He has consistently exposed their moral and intellectual posturing as a fraud. And this is why Chomsky is hated, and perhaps feared, more among liberals than among the right wing he also excoriates. When Christopher Hitchens decided to become a windup doll for the Bush administration after 9/11, one of the first things he did was write a vicious article attacking Chomsky. Hitchens, unlike most of the right-wing elites he served, knew which intellectual in America mattered.

“I don’t bother writing about Fox News,” Chomsky said:

It is too easy. What I talk about are the liberal intellectuals, the ones who portray themselves and perceive themselves as challenging power, as courageous, as standing up for truth and justice. They are basically the guardians of the faith. They set the limits. They tell us how far we can go. They say, ‘Look how courageous I am.’ But do not go one millimeter beyond that. At least for the educated sectors, they are the most dangerous in supporting power.

Because he steps outside of the clichéd demarcations of intellectual left and right, equally eschewing all ideologies, Chomsky has been crucial to American discourse for decades, from his work on the Vietnam War to his criticisms of the Obama administration. He stubbornly maintains his position as an iconoclast, one who distrusts power in any form. And he is one of the few voices that speak to the reality of war, the disastrous effects of imperial power, and the fact that, rath-

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er than promoting virtue or waging war based on good intentions, the permanent war economy is consuming and destroying innocent lives at home and abroad.

“Most intellectuals have a self-understanding of themselves as the conscience of humanity,” said the Middle East scholar Norman Finkelstein, a former student of Chomsky’s:

They revel in and admire someone like Václav Havel. Chomsky is contemptuous of Havel. Chomsky embraces the Julien Benda view of the world. There are two sets of principles. They are the principles of power and privilege and the principles of truth and justice. If you pursue truth and justice, it will always mean a diminution of power and privilege. If you pursue power and privilege it will always be at the expense of truth and justice. Benda says that the credo of any true intellectual has to be, as Christ said, My kingdom is not of this world. Chomsky exposes the pretenses of those who claim to be the bearers of truth and justice. He shows that in fact these intellectuals are the bearers of power and privilege and all the evil that attends it.

“I try to encourage people to think for themselves, to question standard assumptions,” Chomsky said when asked about his goals:

Don’t take assumptions for granted. Begin by taking a skeptical attitude toward anything that is conventional wisdom. Make it justify itself. It usually can’t. Be willing to ask questions about what is taken for granted. Try to think things through for yourself. There is plenty of information. You have got to learn how to judge, evaluate, and compare it with other things. You have to take some things on trust or you can’t survive. But if there is something significant and important, don’t take it on trust. As soon as you read anything



In moral terms, in other words, the intent of the military intervention was good. It was correct to oppose communist aggression by the Vietnamese

that is anonymous, you should immediately distrust it. If you read in the newspapers that Iran is defying the international community, ask, “Who is the international community?” India is opposed to sanctions. China is opposed to sanctions. Brazil is opposed to sanctions. The Non-Aligned Movement is vigorously opposed to sanctions and has been for years. Who is the international community? It is Washington and anyone who happens to agree with it. You can figure that out, but you have to do work. It is the same on issue after issue.

Chomsky’s courage to speak on behalf of those whose suffering is minimized or ignored in mass culture, such as the Palestinians, is an example for anyone searching for models of the moral life. Perhaps even more than his scholarship, his example of moral independence sustains all those who defy the cant of the crowd, and that of the liberal class, to speak the truth.

The role of the liberal class in defending the purportedly good intentions of the power elite was on public display in 1985, when *Foreign Affairs* published a tenth-anniversary retrospective on the Vietnam War. The liberals in the magazine, writers such as David Fromkin and James Chace, argued that the military intervention in Vietnam was predicated on the view that the United States has a duty to look beyond its purely national interests, and that, pursuant to its global responsibilities, the United States must serve the interests of mankind. In moral terms, in other words, the intent of the military intervention was good. It was correct to oppose communist aggression by the Vietnamese. But the war, these liberals argued, was ultimately wrong because it was impractical, because our side was likely to lose. The liberal class cri-

tiqued the war on practical but not moral grounds. They were countered by the militarists who argued that with more resolve the North Vietnamese could have been defeated on the battlefield. The virtues of the nation, even in an act of war, are sacrosanct. The liberal class cannot question these virtues and remain within the circles of the power elite.

The same scenario was played out in the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. David Remnick, the editor of the *New Yorker*, and Bill Keller, a columnist for the *New York Times* and later the paper's executive editor, along with Michael Ignatieff, the former director of the Carr Center for Human Rights Policy at Harvard and current head of the Liberal Party in Canada, joined Leon Wieseltier, along with academics such as Jean Bethke Elshtain of the University of Chicago Divinity School, Michael Walzer of the Institute for Advanced Study in Princeton, and Anne-Marie Slaughter at Princeton's Woodrow Wilson School of Public and International Affairs, to become self-described "reluctant hawks." The *New Republic's* Peter Beinart, joining the calls for war by the liberal class, wrote a book called *The Good Fight: Why Liberals – and Only Liberals – Can Win the War on Terror and Make America Great Again*.

At the start of the war, Slaughter, then dean of the Woodrow Wilson School and president of the American Society of International Law (as of this writing, she is now director of Policy Planning for the U.S. Department of State), wrote in *Foreign Affairs* that "the world cannot afford to look the other way when faced with the prospect, as in Iraq, of a brutal ruler acquiring nuclear weapons or other weapons of mass destruction":

Addressing this danger requires a different



Ignatieff, defending the invasion on National Public Radio's *Fresh Air* with Terry Gross in March 2003, laid out the classic arguments of the liberal class

strategy, one that maximizes the chances of early and effective collective action. In this regard, and in comparison to the changes that are taking place in the area of intervention for the purposes of humanitarian protection, the biggest problem with the Bush preemption strategy may be that it does not go far enough.

Ignatieff told the *Guardian* newspaper at the start of the war:

I still think that Bush is right when he says Iraq would be better off if Saddam were disarmed and, if necessary, replaced by force. . . . Ideology cannot help us here. In the weeks and years ahead, the choices are not about who we are or what company we should keep nor even about what we think America is or should be. They are about what risks are worth running, when our safety depends on the answer, and when the freedom of 25 million people hangs in the balance.

Ignatieff, defending the invasion on National Public Radio's *Fresh Air* with Terry Gross in March 2003, laid out the classic arguments of the liberal class. He insisted that war was a humanitarian action, that he supported the war with a heavy heart, but that there was no other option. This humanitarian and moral coloring to war, the insistence that the motives of the war-makers is virtuous, is the primary function of the liberal class, the reason the power elite tolerates its existence.

The liberal class played the same function during the war in Vietnam. War becomes a necessary evil. The rhetoric of the liberal class, however, mocks the brutal reality of war. Most liberals, including Ignatieff, have never been in combat. Their children rarely serve in the military. They neither know nor understand the destructive power of modern weaponry

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or the propensity on the part of armed combatants, whose fear and paranoia are raised to a fever pitch, to shoot any person, armed or unarmed, or obliterate whole villages in air strikes, if they feel threatened. Ignatieff's assertion at the time that "the only real chance that Iraq has to become a decent society is through American force of arms" is, when juxtaposed with the reality of industrial warfare, little different from the cruder propaganda disseminated by the Bush White House. 19 He and the liberal class joined the Bush administration in carrying out a project that under international law was illegal and resulted in the deaths of hundreds of thousands of Iraqis, far more than had ever been slaughtered by Saddam Hussein, and thousands more Afghani and Pakistani civilians. The wars in the Middle East have also driven several million Iraqis, Pakistanis, and Afghans into squalid displacement and refugee camps. War and violence, as instruments of virtue, are a contradiction in terms. But you can't fully grasp this unless you have been in combat, and combat is something the liberal class has been able to hand off to the working class since World War II.

The solitary voices of dissent that condemned the war at its inception were attacked as fiercely by the liberal class as by the right wing. When documentary filmmaker Michael Moore accepted the Oscar for his film *Bowling for Columbine* on March 23, 2003, he used the occasion to denounce the war, which had begun a few days earlier, as well as the legitimacy of the Bush presidency.

"We live in a fictitious time," Moore, dressed in an ill-fitting tuxedo, told an increasingly hostile audience:

We live in a time when we have fictitious election results that elect a fictitious president.



Liberals, in denouncing him, fulfilled their political role. They discredited Moore because he did not obey the rules

We live in a time where we have a man sending us to war for fictitious reasons, whether it is the fiction of duct tape or Orange Alerts. We are against this war, Mr. Bush. Shame on you, Mr. Bush! Shame on you!

Moore was booed and jeered. He told me he skipped the after-parties and spent the night alone in his hotel room, flipping through channels on which commentators, which included liberal pundits such as Al Franken and Keith Olbermann, unleashed vicious denunciations against him. Moore had crossed the parameters drawn by the power elite. Liberals, in denouncing him, fulfilled their political role. They discredited Moore because he did not obey the rules. And they did it with enthusiasm. Moore was portrayed as a "far-left" radical who needed to be escorted off the premises.

"American liberal intellectuals take special pride in their 'tough-mindedness,' in their success in casting aside the illusions and myths of the old left, for these same 'tough' new liberals reproduce some of that old left's worst characteristics," Tony Judt wrote in the *London Review of Books*:

They may see themselves as having migrated to the opposite shore; but they display precisely the same mixture of dogmatic faith and cultural provincialism, not to mention the exuberant enthusiasm for violent political transformation at other people's expense, that marked their fellow-traveling predecessors across the Cold War ideological divide. The value of such persons to ambitious, radical regimes is an old story. Indeed, intellectual camp followers of this kind were first identified by Lenin himself, who coined the term that still describes them best. Today, America's liberal armchair warriors are the "useful idiots" of the War on Terror. ◆

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