

RENEWING THE AMERICAN EXPERIMENT

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Something must happen so as to touch the hearts and souls of men that they will come together, not because the law says it, but because it is natural and right.

— Martin Luther King, *Stride Toward Freedom*, 1958

Summary

America was born as an experiment dedicated to creating a modern democratic nation devoted to the democratic ideals of liberty, justice, and opportunity for all. That experiment remains an unfinished project now placed in peril by a small and determined group of elitists who are intent on rolling back more than 200 years of hard won progress toward the realization of these ideals in America and beyond. Their success in gaining the support even of those who bear the disastrous consequences of their program rests in part on their ability to control the national political dialogue by controlling the stories by which we answer three basic questions: How will we prosper? What will make us secure? And how will we find meaning? These are increasingly serious questions for a great many Americans.

The stories that have come to be accepted as conventional wisdom narrow both the question and the related political debate. “How will we prosper?” is reduced to “What will you do to promote economic growth?” “What will make us secure?” is reduced to “What will you do to protect us from evil people?” “And how will we find meaning?” is reduced to “Will your policies please my jealous and wrathful God?” Progressive politicians thus find themselves unwittingly reduced to a debate framed by the worldview of a small group of extremists who believe in a system of elite rule and pose an increasingly serious threat to the American Experiment in democratic self-governance by ordinary people.

This challenge to America’s founding ideals can be countered only by stories that offer better and more inspiring answers to these questions. Progressives face a twofold challenge. We must find new stories that answer the larger questions and learn to communicate them in ways that enlarge and redefine the terms of the debate.

The United States of America was founded as a bold experiment designed to demonstrate the possibility of creating a society governed by ordinary citizens that gives full expression to the ideals of liberty, justice, and opportunity for all. In its time it was a truly audacious idea. When the founders boldly declared that all men are created equal and that governments derive their justice powers from the consent of the governed, the evidence of 5,000 years of rule by hereditary emperors, kings, and feudal lords suggested such an idea might even be contrary to human nature.

The Long Road to Freedom

Given their historical context it should not be surprising that the lives and actions of the founders themselves were in many ways deeply conflicted. The land they declared free had been expropriated by force and treachery from the Native Americans whose own democratic traditions and institutions were a source of their inspiration. Furthermore, the founders were all white males and nearly all owned slaves. There is much to suggest that when they spoke of free and equal men they had in mind white male property owners much like themselves. Their bold framing of the American story, however, gave latitude for those who followed to expand on a powerful idea that ultimately has spread throughout the world and transformed our beliefs about human possibility.

The American Experiment was launched in 1776 with a Declaration of Independence from the English crown. The U.S. Constitution was framed in 1787 and ratified in 1789. The all important Bill of Rights was added in 1791. In 1865 the Thirteenth Amendment of U.S. Constitution abolished slavery. In 1868 the Fourteenth Amendment declared all persons born or naturalized in the United States and subject to its jurisdiction to be citizens and thereby entitled to the equal protection of the law. In 1870, the Fifteenth Amendment declared that no citizen could be denied the right to vote on account of race, color, or previous condition of servitude. In 1920 the Nineteenth Amendment added a prohibition against denying the right to vote on the basis of sex — finally recognizing women as full persons entitled to the rights of citizenship under the law.

Constitutions and their amendments are but words on paper. The words become actualized in new cultures and institutions only through the work of millions of people over centuries of time. Growth of the U.S. labor movement in the mid-1800s to mid-1900s prepared the way to reduce extremes of inequality and transform the United States into a predominantly middle class nation in the 1940s, 50s, and 60s. Successes of the civil rights and peace movements in the mid-1900s, and of the women's and environmental

movements in the late 1900s produced profound cultural and institutional advances that at each step brought the United States closer to realizing the vision of human possibility for which people the world over have come to admire our nation. Given the backdrop of 5,000 years of imperial history, it adds up to quite an accomplishment for a

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period of little more than 200 years.

Yet to this day the United States remains a deeply divided nation in which liberty, justice, opportunity, and political voice continue to depend in disturbing measure on the class, race, and gender to which an individual chances to be born. Given our history and the barriers of deep institutional and cultural change, we should not be surprised or dismayed to find that the American Experiment remains an unfinished project.

There is cause for serious alarm, however, at the emergence of a powerful ruling faction whose efforts to roll back the gains of 200 years place the Experiment itself at grave risk. Our country has been taken over by forces not of our choosing for ends contrary to America's defining values. Our freedoms are being rolled back. Misguided economic policies are destroying the middle class, rending the social fabric, devastating the environment, and mortgaging our children's future. An arrogant go-it-alone foreign policy strains the friendship of former allies, undermines essential international cooperation, and deepens resentments that are swelling the ranks of terrorist organizations.

Especially alarming is the surprising level of political support enjoyed by an administration committed to extremist economic and security policies so sharply at odds with our nation's founding ideals — even among those most adversely affected. I have been asking the same questions many other Americans have been asking: What has gone wrong? And what can be done to put America back on a positive track? These are my reflections.

Neo-Royalist Rebellion

Resistance to the goals of the American Experiment is not new. There has been resistance at every step, beginning with the royalists who during the American Revolution remained loyal to the English king and the institutions of hereditary elite rule. It found continued expression after the American Revolution in efforts to establish a government modeled on monarchy and a hereditary house of lords, the defense of slavery and denial of worker rights, promotion of genocide against native Americans to clear the way for Westward expansion, and denial of the right to vote to women and those without property.

To this day the most dramatic, but unnoted, political division in the United States is between those committed to advancing the American Experiment and those committed to rolling it back. It is a division that transcends the conventional political labels of conservative and liberal, because a commitment to advancing the American Experiment is shared by the vast majority of all Americans — conservatives and liberals alike.

Nor is the division necessarily based on class. Being a member of an elite does not necessarily make one an elitist. Many persons of wealth and power share a passionate commitment to the American ideal.

The American Experiment was founded by men of wealth and power and many people of wealth and power in our own day are strongly committed to it. Elitists, by contrast, are people of any class who believe a system or society should be ruled or dominated by an elite.

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The present authoritarian threat to the American Experiment has been orchestrated by a small group of elitists at the extreme fringe of the political spectrum. Their power comes not from their numbers, which are modest, but from their ability to control the stories that shape the political debate.

Their assault began to take shape in the 1960's when members of America's corporate elite became alarmed by the threat to corporate interests posed by increasing economic competition from the newly industrializing countries of Asia, a spreading cultural rejection of consumerism, and the growing role of government in regulating the economy, redistributing income, and delivering public services. In response they set about to gain control of the national agenda.

Along the way extremist elements within the ranks of the corporate, political, and religious establishment began building the alliances and crafting the stories of a political movement aimed at rolling back the gains of the American Experiment and restoring the rights and power of hereditary wealth. They gave particular priority to creating and funding think tanks devoted to advancing an elitist agenda. They worked to reinforce the elitist bias of the federal judiciary by reframing law school curricula and holding seminars on neoliberal economics for judges in posh resorts. The Reagan administration (1981-1989) brought the economic, military, and foreign policy elements of their agenda together in what came to be known as the Reagan Revolution.

Elitist Economics

The elitist economic agenda features market deregulation, a rollback of social and environmental protections, the opening of economic borders to the free flow of goods and money, privatization of public services and assets, tax reductions for the wealthy, weakening of anti-trust enforcement, an assault on the rights of union members, and the dismantling of social safety nets. These were all elements of the policy agenda the Reagan Revolution advanced relentlessly at home and abroad.

The global financial crisis created by the international debts built up by Third World countries during the OPEC created oil crisis of the late 1970s provided an opening for the IMF and World Bank, under the direction of the U.S. Treasury Department of the Republican Reagan administration, to impose on these countries a standard package of neoliberal policy prescriptions called structural adjustment. These prescriptions greatly expanded the power and privilege of global corporations and financial institutions and held governments accountable for protecting the assets and interests of foreign investors — even over the interests of their own people. The underlying neo-liberal ideology came to be known as the “Washington consensus.”

The Republican Bush I administration (1989–1993) turned increasingly to international trade agreements as their favored vehicle for circumventing democratic institutions and processes to advance implementation of the Washington consensus agenda in all countries, including the industrial democracies of the North. Demonstrating that the elitist agenda is not exclusive to the Republican Party, the Democratic Clinton/Gore administration (1993-2001), with the backing of the Democratic Leadership Council [a leadership group of the neo-royalist wing of the Democratic Party], picked up in a seamless transition from where the Bush I administration left off — completing the North

American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) in 1994 and creating the World Trade Organization in 1995.

The Elite Prosperity Story: The elite economic agenda is supported by a simple and effective story that offers the elitists' formula for creating prosperity. According to this story:

The wealth of a society is measured by the market value of its economic output. Growth in economic output combined with increasing productivity expands the pie of wealth for all and is the foundation of prosperity and human progress. Economic growth and productivity increases depend in turn on increasing investment. Since the poor have no discretionary income available to invest, for a society to progress it must have a wealthy class. The greater the returns to the investments of the wealthy class, the faster the economic growth, and the faster the lives of all improve. Inequality is thus essential to economic progress; economic policy choices are best made on the basis of maximizing the rate of return to the money of wealthy investors.

The private sector is the engine of wealth creation and the free market rewards private investors in direct proportion to their contribution to increasing the total wealth of the society. Government, by contrast, consumes wealth and undermines the natural and beneficial incentives of the marketplace by regulating economic activity and taxing away the returns to the most productive investors and entrepreneurs in order to fund inefficient and ineffective public programs and services that kill the incentive to work and invest.

Poverty, for example, is the result of government-administered welfare programs for the poor that destroy their incentive to find employment and become productive members of the society. If there is a lack of jobs that pay a living wage it is because government regulation of the market and taxes on the investor class reduce their incentive to invest. Free the private sector from the dead regulatory hand of government. Eliminate taxes on the investor class. Eliminate the disincentive of public welfare programs. And transfer public assets and services to efficient private managers through privatization.

This will free the market to put people to work, eliminate poverty, get money in people's pockets to buy the goods and services of their choice from private providers, create the wealth necessary to protect the environment, and provide people with better services at a cheaper price. Even though the rich may get richer, everyone gains.

Reality: The story has a compelling coherence and logic until subjected to critical examination. It assumes for example that that wealth and prosperity are defined solely by the goods and services available for pur-

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chase. It takes no account of many of the essentials of healthy and prosperous communities, such as clean air and water, trust, job security, safe neighborhoods, well maintained streets, loving homes, and much else beyond the means of markets to produce. In the words of WalMart it promises “Everyday low prices” for the things it offers for sale, encouraging us to define ourselves solely as consumers of those goods the market offers and to overlook the destruction of communities, families, and individual lives that are real costs of low WalMart prices. The workers whose living wage jobs have been destroyed by a WalMart economy are left with no choice other than to seek the lowest price. As a society, however, we can well afford to pay a bit more for our market goods to provide workers a living wage, leave our children a healthy planet, and preserve the

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local independent farms and businesses that are the backbone of healthy communities and a vibrant democracy.

Furthermore, many of the things that economists count as contributions to economic growth actually devalue the quality of our lives and ultimately result in high hidden costs, which ironically are then counted as though they were positive contributions. For example, sales of tobacco, guns, and video games to children,

the fees of divorce lawyers, costs of security guards and devices, weapons sales, and payments for the treatment of cancers caused by environmental pollution, tobacco, and food contaminated with pesticide residues. Costs counted as growth have become so great that many countries are experiencing a decline in real well-being even as what economists measure as economic growth continues to rise.

Productivity is a measure of increased output per work hour. If the gains from such increases are equitably shared by investors and workers and translated into increased pay and leisure, productivity increases are good for all. Productivity gains in the face of an ever growing workweek and large scale unemployment are, however, quite another matter. Unfortunately, most productivity gains of the past twenty years have been translated into job layoffs, unemployment, and stagnant or declining wages to increase profit for major shareholders — thus harming workers and contributing to ever growing inequality.

The claim that unregulated markets allocate wealth in direct relation to individual contribution neglects the obvious reality that many fortunes began with a large inheritance or were acquired in all or part through fraud and deception, monopoly power, corporate welfare, preferential tax breaks, usury, financial speculation, market manipulation, and/or exploitation of workers and the environment.

Markets require rules impartially administered by government to assure honest dealing, limit monopoly power, place the costs of pollution on the polluter, secure the health and safety of workers, maintain a living wage, and in general counter the unregulated market’s bias for financial values over life values, short-term benefits over long-term costs, inequality over equality, rich people over poor people, and the interests of in-

dividuals over the interests of society. As confirmed in daily reports of financial fraud and abuse, an unregulated market is an invitation to criminal exploitation.

The actual consequence of the deregulation of markets and trade advocated by the elitists is to give free reign to transnational corporations to abuse their growing monopoly power to manage trade and markets to their exclusive financial advantage. Economic decision rules centered on maximizing financial returns to wealthy investors virtually assure that economic benefits flow to the already well off — the more money you have the more you get. Contrary to the elitist claim that inequality is a social benefit, history reveals that extremes of inequality have serious detrimental consequences.

Since “free” markets — unregulated markets — respond only to money, the more unequal the distribution of financial power, the more the economy directs its attention to providing goods and services to the wealthiest members of society and neglects even the most basic needs of nature and of those who lack financial means. Unequal economic power translates into unequal political power, giving the super rich an increasingly free hand in rewriting the rules of society in their own favor. The choices of the rich increase as the choices of the rest are diminished and the needs of the weakest and most vulnerable among us, including children and the elderly, are ignored. The super rich enjoy multiple luxury vacation homes and private jet airplanes. The poor endure an increasingly difficult struggle for survival. And environmental collapse accelerates.

As the devastation spreads, institutional legitimacy erodes and the anger and desperation of the disaffected create a growing security threat for all. With time, even the rich will find their choices increasingly constrained by social and environmental breakdown.

Elitist Security Doctrine

Elitist security doctrine has two major elements: the use of the state’s police powers to maintain order, protect private property, and limit dissent; and the wielding of its military powers to secure our borders and our access to the world’s resources and markets. The influence of this elitist doctrine is revealed in two key statistics.

Domestically, more than two million people are now held in prison in the United States — the highest per capita rate of incarceration of any nation in the world, with the possible exception of Russia. A young African-American male faces a greater prospect of going to prison than to college.

Internationally, the U.S. military budget request for 2003 was \$396 billion compared to requests for education and health respectively of \$52 billion and \$49 billion. The United States spends six times as much for military as the next biggest spender, Russia. It spends thirty seven times as much as the *combined* spending of the seven “rogue” states (Cuba, Iran, Iraq, Libya, North Korea, Sudan and Syria), the countries most commonly named as potential threats to U.S. interests.

The installation of a new U.S. administration in January 2001 handed control of U.S. security policy to a cadre of extremist neoconservative civilians with a strong commitment to strengthening the police powers of the federal government and to imposing a *Pax Americana* on the world through the unilateral and pre-emptive use of overwhelming military force. This latter doctrine had been spelled out over preceding years in a number

of publications, including papers of the Project for a New American Century (PNAC) www.newamericancentury.org. Several members of the new administration had been founders and principals of PNAC, including Vice President Richard Cheney, Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld, Deputy Secretary of Defense Paul Wolfowitz, and former Defense Advisory Board Chair Richard Perle. Rarely in American history has a group of power holders been so explicit and public in articulating a policy goal of imposing U.S. imperial rule on the world. They came to power in January 2001 intent on making their vision the defining reality of U.S. foreign policy.

This group had noted in one of their planning documents that they would need a Pearl Harbor to unify the nation behind their program. It came in the form of the terrorist attack of September 11, 2001.

The neo-royalists seized on the September 11 tragedy as their moment of opportunity to move ahead both their economic and military agendas. Their administration declared a perpetual war against terrorism, launched the invasion and occupation of Afghanistan, passed new tax cuts for the very rich, funded new corporate subsidies, pushed the Patriot Act through the U.S. Congress to expand domestic police powers, announced it would henceforth be U.S. policy to launch pre-emptive, unilateral military strikes against any country considered a potential threat to the United States, and invaded Iraq in disregard of overwhelming international opposition and the lack of credible evidence of any real threat.

The Elite Security Story: The open pursuit of U.S. global imperial rule required a strong supporting security story. The story we now hear endlessly told and retold by the Bush II administration melds together both secular and biblical themes.

The world is a dangerous place in which the forces of good are in perpetual confrontation with the forces of evil. It is the right and responsibility of the righteous to impose order to protect freedom and keep the world safe from unruly elements.

On the domestic side, the United States is beset with threats to physical security and the moral order by people whose families lacked the moral fiber to provide their children with the discipline and religious instruction required to hold their sinful impulses in proper check. Schools must provide the missing moral education and law enforcement officials must instill order and discipline with zero tolerance for rule breaking — and stern punishments, including the death sentence for serious crimes and life sentences for repeat offenders. To be safe we must devote whatever resources are necessary to assure adequate police manpower and prison capacity to protect the law abiding majority from harm. We must further give law enforcement officials the authority to apprehend and punish the guilty with severe sentences that set an example and get criminal elements off the street. Strict law enforcement has increased prison populations and decreased the crime rate. Incarceration works.

In the international arena, war is the natural state of humankind. Peace and order prevail only when imposed by military force. Evil is presently manifested in the world by terrorists who hate us for our freedom and are supported by rogue states ruled by cruel tyrants. For good to prevail, the righteous must be willing to bear arms to impose peace and order on the world through superior military force. America is a righteous nation with great military power under direct terrorist threat. It is our responsibility to use this power to vanquish the evil rulers who harbor and support terrorist organizations and replace them with democratic regimes that share our values.

As with the economic story, the elitists' national security story has a superficial logic and coherence that plays to the fear and insecurity of a nation rudely awakened to its vulnerability to terrorism by the tragic events of September 11, 2001.

Reality: No foreign nation currently presents a military threat to the United States. The major threats to our domestic security come from terrorism, financial instability, environmental stress, and the inequality and social breakdown that fuel both crime and terrorism. All are threats that elitist economic and security policies accelerate. Conventional military power is not only useless in addressing these threats; its application further worsens the conditions that cause them. In nearly every respect military policies supported by the elitist security story are increasing terrorism in the world and making Americans and others less safe.

The claim that the terrorists who most threaten us hate us for our freedoms and must be countered by unilateral military assaults against what we perceive to be rogue states is more than disingenuous. Terrorists hate us not for the freedom bestowed on our people by democratic institutions, but rather for our frequent use of the freedom our economic and military power gives us to arbitrarily oppress and humiliate other nations and peoples. The arbitrary and unilateral use of our military power to which the elitist security story leads adds fuel to terrorist anger, swells the ranks of terrorist organizations with new recruits, undermines the international cooperation needed to actually deal with the terrorist threat, and makes us less secure.

Terrorism is a form of guerilla warfare not unlike what the United States faced in Vietnam, in which conventional military weapons, troops, and tactics are largely counterproductive because they have no capability to distinguish the enemy combatant and his supporters from innocent civilians. Bombs, missiles, mortars, and artillery — even those labeled

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“smart” — are blunt instruments that inevitably kill large numbers of noncombatants and thus build popular support for resistance efforts among those who bear the consequences. A counter-terrorism strategy based on launching unilateral, pre-emptive wars against

weak nation states is especially unsound, because it weakens the moral authority of the invader, undermines the systems of international cooperation needed to identify and bring actual terrorists to justice, and swells the ranks of terrorist organizations with eager recruits filled with rage.

As elitist economic and military policies increasingly divide the world between rulers and ruled, haves and have-nots, victors and vanquished — each individual becomes pitted in a life-and-death competition with every other for the few positions in the social order that afford full dignity, security, and well-being. The resulting fear and insecurity efficiently serve the cause of tyrants who promise protection and order in return for obedience, who appeal to patriotism and national unity in time of war to secure their own political position, and who reap outsized profits from their investments in defense and energy corporations.

Reducing international relationships to the moral certainty of a final battle of good against evil ignores the moral ambiguities of a complex and interdependent world — including the actions of previous U.S. administrations that with equal moral certainty once praised and supported the very same tyrants now identified as evil enemies — including Osama bin Laden, Al-Qaeda, the Taliban, and Saddam Hussein. Moral certainty is a fickle master.

With regard to keeping us safe from more ordinary criminals, every society has its criminal elements and there are among them habitual criminals who seem to be so lacking in the capacity for conscience as to be beyond redemption. There is little alternative to locking the latter away for the good of society through diligent due process. Such persons are, however, few in number and are randomly distributed through the population without regard to class, race, education, or religion.

There is an important difference between using the criminal justice system to protect society from criminal elements and using it to protect elite power and privilege from the rage of the disaffected.

Most crime, however, is not so much a consequence of inherent personality defects, as of deep social dysfunction — including the dysfunctions created by the economic injustice advanced by elitist economic policies. Putting minor offenders in prison with little or no attention to rehabilitation

does nothing to correct these dysfunctions or to prepare those imprisoned for productive and law abiding lives on their release. It does disrupt potentially moderating influences of family and community ties. Furthermore, many of our prisons serve as schools for crime — turning out graduates who on their release return to the street with new anger, skills, and criminal contacts. Present high rates of incarceration are a recipe for soaring future crime rates.

There is an important difference between using the criminal justice system to protect society from criminal elements and using it to protect elite power and privilege from the rage of the disaffected. When petty nonviolent criminals and minor drug offenders are given long prison sentences and crimes of much greater consequence committed by political and corporate power holders go unpunished, it is evident that the domestic security agenda is more about securing privilege than securing public safety.

If public safety and well-being were truly the security goal of the elitists, they would give high priority to eliminating the deeper social and economic causes of criminality, rehabilitating those guilty of crimes and restoring them to useful roles in society, and prosecuting those engaged in the criminal abuse of high level economic and political power. Shifting even a fraction of our immense military budget to this work would go far toward creating a more secure world for our children.

Elitist Morality

The ease with which a small group of elitists has established a political lock on a nation that prides itself on its democratic ideals reveals a disturbing truth: the United States is not a democracy, but a plutocracy — a country ruled by wealthy elites — now a deeply corrupted plutocracy of the far right. *The stability of any political system depends on a story that provides its moral legitimacy.* This is especially true for a political system based on an unjust concentration of power and privilege.

Elitists draw on two stories to support their claim to the moral superiority of elitist regimes. One is a sacred story based on an elitist interpretation of biblical scripture; the other is a secular story based on an elitist interpretation of evolution.

The Elitist Sacred Morality Story: We humans have long looked to stories of the sacred for meaning and moral guidance. By their nature sacred stories are a matter of faith rather than logic. A version of the sacred story favored by elitists who profess the Christian faith goes something like this.

Nothing happens in Creation except by the will of God who created the world in six days, gave his creation to man in return for strict obedience to his will, and in his infinite righteous judgment favors the obedient with wealth and power. Great wealth and power are thus a mark of the pure and righteous; poverty and suffering are a mark of impurity and disobedience. It is therefore both the due and the responsibility of those God has identified as the righteous to pass judgment on others and to make and enforce the rules that others must follow in the market place, politics, and relations among nations.

The Elitist Secular Morality Story: For secularists more inclined to look to science for insights into the moral order, the elitists turn to the story line of social Darwinism.

In nature progress comes through a competitive struggle in which the fit triumph, the unfit perish, and the species grows stronger. As with other species, so is it true for humans. The victors prove their worth by virtue of their victory and have every right to claim the rewards that are their due without guilt or concern for those who perish in the struggle.

It is important to recognize that these morality stories are more than statements of values. Although morally flawed, they presume to offer answers to deeper questions of meaning and purpose useful in making sense of what often seems an arbitrary and hostile world.

Reality: The elitists' sacred story dishonors the life and teaching of the prophet Jesus, a man who chose a life of poverty, taught that the poor enjoy God's special blessing, and urged compassion for all people. Similarly, the ideology of Social Darwinism contradicts the substantial biological evidence that life is a fundamentally cooperative enterprise in which the species that survive over the long term are those that find their place of service to the whole.

These unfortunate elitist morality stories mask the deeper reality that much of the arbitrary violence we humans experience in our daily lives is neither the work of a righteous God, nor of some law of nature. It is of our own creation — in large measure a self-fulfilling prophecy of our own stories.

The Power of Stories

Each of the elitists' stories embodies a theory of how things work that speaks to deep emotional needs and converges on a clear bottom line. The wealth creation story embodies a theory of how prosperity is achieved and promises to deliver it in return for our support of the elitist political agenda. The security story similarly embodies the elitist theory of what we must do to feel secure and defines a path to physical safety. The sacred morality story embodies a theory of sacred purpose and defines a path to eternal salvation. The secular morality story defines a theory of the purification of the species and legitimates the unrestrained exercise of power in a might makes right world. They are partly statements of values. Even more, however, they are statements of how things work that legitimate the perverse values of the narrowest of special interests.

A story that embodies a flawed theory can be challenged successfully only by a more compelling story.

Media pundits, intellectuals, think-tank spokespersons, politicians, and religious figures aligned with the elitist agenda endlessly retell these factually flawed and morally bankrupt stories as if speaking from an identical sheet of talking points. A concentration of media ownership in the hands of proponents of the elitist agenda amplifies these voices far

out of proportion to their presence in the population.

So long as the U.S. public is primarily exposed to these elitist stories, they become the defining stories of political discourse — framing the only theories against which voters of any political persuasion are able to evaluate the policy proposals of the various candidates. So, for example, if they are not supporting tax cuts for the rich to increase investment, productivity, and growth they are easily dismissed by the proponents of elitism as naïve, marginal, and outside the mainstream. Neo-royalists have thus gained control of the public discourse and built popular support for their position even among those most harmed.

It is not enough merely to point out the flawed and ethically challenged assumptions of an established story. In science a flawed theory will survive disconfirming data until challenged by a new theory more consistent with the data. Similarly in society a

story that embodies a flawed theory can be challenged successfully only by a more compelling story.

Those of us committed to causes that advance the American Experiment focus much of our energy on critiquing and resisting the elitist stories, resisting elitist agendas, and alleviating the damage to the groups of greatest interest to us. From time to time some of us may join together in common cause in ever shifting tactical alliances — most often to resist a particular elitist initiative. Furthermore, although justice, peace, and a healthy environment are scarcely special interests, our fragmented and piecemeal articulation of our many causes makes it all too easy for the neo-royalists to portray us as a divided collection of special interests lacking a coherent and pragmatic alternative to their more comprehensive agenda. Little, if any, of our energy is devoted to articulating stories that communicate positive, holistic theories of prosperity, security, and meaning.

We thus concede the initiative, the national story, and political power to the modern bearers of the royalist torch. To renew the American Experiment we must create spaces in which those who believe in America's founding ideals can engage the search for shared stories that advance a bold vision and a practical, experience based theory of human possibility — of an America and a world that works for all — of the world that can be.

What Americans Want

Polling data make clear that the vast majority of the U.S. electorate wants peace, fairness, a healthy environment, opportunity, freedom, democracy, and security for all — a world centered on people, not profits; on spiritual, not financial, values; and on international cooperation, not domination. These are not distinctively liberal or conservative values; they are the universally shared values on which the United States was founded.

It is instructive to recall that to get within a half million votes of his opponent George W. Bush — one of the most dedicated neo-royalists ever to gain control of the administrative branch of the U.S. government — had to present himself to the electorate as a *compassionate* conservative who would work for ordinary people, be fiscally responsible, leave no child behind, protect the environment, and pursue a peaceful, cooperative, and non-belligerent foreign policy respectful of the rights and interests of others. He promised — in effect — to advance the American Experiment and to honor the best and truest of conservative values. We can presume that most of those who voted for him did so because they took him at his word.

Given the broad U.S. consensus on core values we might expect to find strong support for programs that actually advance these values in a straightforward way. The fact we do not may be explained by the fragmented and partial nature of the many, often conflicting, stories of groups promoting such programs. Contrasting what our stories communicate with the promises of the elitists' stories tells us a good deal about the nature of the problem.

The neo-royalists offer a prosperity story that promises ever-growing material prosperity for all and spells out a clear plan in which, by their telling, everyone wins. By contrast, the progressive agenda can easily be construed as a call to tax those who are productive to provide welfare for those too lazy to get a job, take jobs from white males

to give them to women and people of color, and reduce production and consumption to save exotic species most people have never seen and wouldn't recognize if they did. No matter how truthful our claim that elitist policies actually destroy wealth and take from the poor to give to the rich, the elitist story will carry the day until we are able to counter it consistently and convincingly with a coherent prosperity story that communicates a compelling theory of what we must do to create an economy that provides opportunity for every person to contribute to the common good as a productive and responsible citizen.

The elitists offer a security story that promises to impose peace and order on a demonstrably unruly world populated by dangerous criminals, political extremists, and religious fanatics intent on violence and other evil deeds. By contrast, the progressive international security story centers on unilateral disarmament and the rejection of war as an instrument of policy. Our domestic security story calls for greater attention to protecting the rights of the accused, constraining the police, making life better for those serving time, reducing sentences, and closing prisons. It seems we have little to offer by way of comfort to those who fear for the lives of themselves, their families, and their children. It should be no surprise that the elitist security story carries the day.

It is especially significant that the elitists ultimately ground both their economic and security stories in a story of the sacred. From the beginning of time we humans have looked to sacred stories for meaning, moral guidance, and understanding of creation's deep mysteries. Except for the civil rights movements, progressive movements have generally been self-consciously secular — carefully avoiding discussion of the sacred. We are left by default with a dehumanizing scientific story devoid of meaning or inspiration, of a world in which only the material is real, life is an accidental outcome of complexity, and consciousness is an illusion.

Yet I am struck by the fact that nearly every progressive leader of my acquaintance acts from a deep sense of spiritual connection. If we are to renew the American Experiment, perhaps it is appropriate to acknowledge and renew its spiritual foundations.

We must integrate the practical and the visionary in stories that express our vision of the human possible and provide real answers to serious questions.

Although the neo-royalist stories and policies consistently produce results the opposite of what they promise, we need to recognize that their stories address real and legitimate questions of considerable importance to our daily lives and sense of well-being. How do we create prosperity? What

must we do to feel safe? Where do we turn for moral guidance? How do we live a meaningful life?

Stories of the Human Possible

If we are to renew the American Experiment we must enrich the mix of stories that define our lives and politics. It is not about finding a single story, which would be inconsistent with the Experiment's democratic ideal. Our goal is to liberate the human spirit, not to confine it to a new ideological box.

We must be mindful, however, that renewing the national story is key to renewing the national commitment to the American Experiment. We must integrate the practical

and the visionary in stories that express our vision of the human possible and provide real answers to serious questions.

We need prosperity stories that spell out a practical path to creating wealth and jobs for all within a framework of economic justice and environmental sustainability. We need security stories that address the reality of criminal elements, rogue states, and the need for a sense of safety within a framework of commitment to civil liberties for all and cooperation among the world's peoples and nations. And we need sacred stories that address our need for meaning, moral guidance, and understanding of the infinite within a framework of mutual responsibility to one another and the living Earth. All must be stories that invite the imagination to soar in its search for an ever-expanding vision of the possible.

The demeaning and morally challenged stories of the neo-royalists achieved simple clarity only over time through the contributions of many people. So too, our stories will be collective creations that will take on clarity only through time and a broadly inclusive consensus-building process. It begins not with answers, but with questions around which we might engage in a dialogue of discovery — questions such as these:

Prosperity:

- What is true prosperity and how do I believe it is created?
- What would real prosperity mean for me, my family, my community, my nation, and the world?
- What do I believe to be appropriate measures of economic performance?
- What do I believe to be the causes of poverty and the path to their elimination?
- What must we do to prosper?

Security:

- What are the major security threats facing the United States?
- How might we best deal with these threats, including the threat of terrorism?
- What is the necessary and appropriate role for the military in maintaining national and international security?
- How is necessary and appropriate public order and security best achieved?
- Is there a way to identify, apprehend, and confine dangerous criminals and terrorists without compromising civil liberties?
- What role do we see for the U.S. government in advancing the development of democratic institutions in other countries?

The Sacred:

- What do I believe to be the source and meaning of creation?
- What does it mean to be human?
- What is the human nature?
- What is my source of moral guidance?
- What is the human place in creation's continued unfolding?
- What responsibility do I have to other people, species, and the earth?

It will not be easy to break the elitists' established monopoly on our national stories. Those who join in accepting the challenge should bear in mind, however, that those whose goal is truly to advance the well being of all people and the Earth have a natural advantage over the neo-royalists. We can speak truth as we have no need to hide our true intent. The disastrous consequences of the policies to which the neo-royalists' stories lend support become more evident by the day. And stories that demean and diminish the human spirit cannot compete with the stories of creative human possibility it is ours to tell.

The United States faces a defining moment of challenge and opportunity. The goal of creating a world that works for all is integral to the American Experiment. The United States is a natural social laboratory for advancing its realization. Nearly all the world's many traditions come together within our borders by virtue of our rich racial, cultural, and religious diversity. And we have a long history of social and technological creativity and innovation.

The time has come to renew the American Experiment. This is our opportunity to join with all the world's people and nations in a cooperative effort to realize the ideals of liberty, justice and opportunity for all people everywhere. This work calls us to a national dialogue in search of valid and uplifting answers to crucial questions in stories with the power to redefine our national political discourse and lead us to a new sense of national purpose.

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