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Home to Roost: A Bicentennial Address

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The crises of the Republic, of this form of government and its institutions of liberty, could be detected for decades, ever since what appears to us today as a minicrisis was triggered by Joe McCarthy. A number of occurrences followed which testified to an increasing disarray in the very foundations of our political life. One consequence of the McCarthy episode was the destruction of a reliable and devoted civil service, something relatively new in this country, probably the most important achievement of the long Roosevelt administration. It was in the aftermath of this period that the "ugly American" appeared on the scene of foreign relations; he was then hardly noticeable in our domestic life, except in a growing inability to correct errors and repair damages.

Immediately thereafter a few thoughtful spectators began to have doubts whether our form of government would be able to withstand the onslaught of this century's inimical forces and survive the year 2000—the first to utter such doubts publicly, if I remember rightly, was John Kennedy. But the general mood of the country remained cheerful and no one was prepared, not even after Watergate, for the recent cataclysm of events, tumbling over one another, whose sweeping force leaves everybody, spectators who try to reflect on it and actors who try to slow it down, equally numbed and paralyzed.

No doubt, the cataclysm of events that numbs us is due to a large extent to a strange, but in history by no means unknown, coincidence of occurrences, each of which has a different meaning and a different cause. Our defeat in Vietnam—by no means a "peace with honor" but on the contrary an outright humiliating defeat, with the helter-skelter evacuation by helicopter and its unforgettable scenes of a war of all against all, certainly the worst possible of the administration's four options to which we added gratuitously our last public relations stunt, the baby airlift, the "rescue" of the only part of the South Vietnamese people who were entirely safe—the defeat by itself could hardly have resulted in so great a shock: it was a certainty for years, expected by many since the Têet offensive.

That "Vietnamization" would not work should have surprised nobody; it was a public relations slogan to excuse the evacuation of American troops who, ridden by drugs, corruption, desertions, and plain rebellion, could no longer be left there. What came as a surprise was the way Thieu himself, without even consulting his protectors in Washington, managed to accelerate the disintegration of his government to such an extent that the victors were unable to fight and conquer; what they found, when they could make contact with an enemy who fled more rapidly than they could persecute him, was not an army in retreat but a rout of a mob of soldiers and civilians on a rampage of gigantic proportions.

The point is that this defeat in Southeast Asia occurred almost simultaneously with the ruin of the foreign policy of the United States—the disaster in Cyprus and possible loss of two former allies, Turkey and Greece, the coup in Portugal and its uncertain consequences, the debacle in the Middle East, the rise to prominence of the Arab states. It coincided in addition with our manifold domestic troubles: inflation, devaluation of currency, the plight of our cities, the climbing rate of unemployment and of crime. Add to this the aftermath of Watergate, which I think is by no means behind us, trouble with NATO, the near bankruptcy of Italy and England, the conflict with India, and the uncertainties of détente, especially in view of the proliferation of nuclear arms, and compare it for a moment with our position at the end of the Second World War, and you will agree that among the many unprecedented events of this century the swift decline in power of the United States should be given due consideration.

We may very well stand at one of those decisive turning points of history which separate whole eras from each other. For contemporaries entangled, as we are, in the inexorable demands of daily life, the dividing lines between eras may be hardly visible when they are crossed; only after people have stumbled over them do the lines grow into walls which irretrievably shut up the past.

At such moments in history when the writing on the wall becomes too frightening, most people flee to the reassurance of day-to-day life with its unchanging, pressing demands. And this temptation today is all the stronger since any long-range view of history is not very encouraging either: the American institutions of liberty, founded two hundred years ago, have survived longer than any comparable glorious historical period. These highlights of man's historical record have rightfully become the paradigmatic models of our tradition of political thought; but we should not forget that, chronologically speaking, they were always exceptions. As such they survive splendidly in thought to illuminate the thinking and doing of men in darker times. No one knows the future, and all we can say with certainty at this rather solemn moment is: no matter how it will end, these two hundred years of liberty, with all its ups and downs, have earned their "due meed of glory" (Herodotus).

It is precisely because people are aware of the fearful distance that separates us from our extraordinary beginnings and the extraordinary qualities of the founders themselves that so many embark upon a search for the roots, the "deeper causes" of what happened. It is in the nature of roots and "deeper causes" that they are hidden by the appearances in broad daylight of the phenomena which they are supposed to have caused. There exists a plethora of *theories* about the "deeper" cause for the outbreak of the First or Second World War based not on the melancholy wisdom of hindsight but on the speculations, grown into convictions, about the nature and fate of capitalism or socialism, of the industrial or postindustrial age, the role of science and technology, and so on. But such theories are even more severely limited by the implied demands of the audience to which they are addressed. They must be *plausible*, that is, they must contain statements that most reasonable men at the particular time can accept; they cannot require an acceptance of the unbelievable.

I think that most people who have watched the frantic, panic-stricken end of the Vietnam war thought that what they saw on their television screens was "unbelievable," as indeed it was. It is this aspect of reality, which cannot be anticipated by either hope or fear, that we celebrate when Fortuna smiles and that we curse when misfortune strikes. All speculation about deeper causes returns from the shock of reality to what seems plausible and can be explained by what reasonable men think is possible. Those who challenge these plausibilities, the bearers of bad tidings, who insist on "telling it as it is," have never been welcomed and often not been tolerated at all. If it is in the nature of appearances to hide "deeper" causes, it is in the nature of speculation about such hidden causes to hide and to make us forget the stark, naked brutality of facts, of things as they are.

This natural human tendency has grown to gigantic proportions during the last decade when our whole political scene was ruled by the habits and prescriptions of what is euphemistically called public relations, that is, by the "wisdom" of Madison Avenue. It is the wisdom of the functionaries of a consumer society who advertise its goods to a public, the larger part of which spends much more time in consuming its wares than it takes to produce them. Madison Avenue's function is to help to distribute the merchandise, and its interest is focused less and less on the needs of the consumer and more and more on the need of the merchandise to be consumed in larger and larger quantities. If abundance and superabundance were the original goals of Marx's dream of a classless society, then we live the reality of the socialist and communist dream, except that this dream has been realized beyond our wildest fantasies through the advancement of technology, whose provisionally last stage is automation: the noble dream has changed into something closely resembling a nightmare.

Those who wish to speculate about the "deeper" cause underlying the factual change of an early producer society into a consumer society that could keep going only by changing into a huge waste economy would do well to turn to Lewis Mumford's recent reflections in *The New Yorker*. For it is indeed only too true that the "premise underlying this whole age," its capitalist as well as its socialist development, has been "the doctrine of Progress." "Progress," Mumford says, "was a tractor that laid its own roadbed and left no permanent imprint of its own tracks, nor did it move toward an imaginable and humanly desirable destination. '*The going is the goal*,' " but not because there was an inherent beauty or meaningfulness in the "going." Rather, to stop going, to stop wasting, to stop consuming more and more, quicker and quicker, to say at any given moment, enough is enough, would spell immediate doom.

This "progress," accompanied by the incessant noise of the advertisement agencies, went on at the expense of the world we live in, and of the objects themselves, with their built-in obsolescence, which we no longer use but abuse, misuse, and throw away. The recent sudden awakening to the threats to our environment is the first ray of hope in this development, although nobody, as far as I can see, has yet found a means to stop this runaway economy without causing a really major breakdown.

Much more decisive, however, than these social and economic consequences is the fact that Madison Avenue tactics under the name of public relations have been permitted to invade our political life. The Pentagon Papers not only presented in detail "the picture of the world's greatest superpower killing or seriously injuring a thousand noncombatants a week, while trying to pound a tiny backward nation into submission on an issue whose merits are hotly disputed"—a picture which in Robert McNamara's carefully measured words was certainly "not a pretty one." They also proved beyond doubt and in tedious repetition that this enterprise was exclusively guided by the needs of a superpower to create for itself an *image* which would *convince* the world that it was indeed "the mightiest power on earth."

The ultimate aim of this terribly destructive war, which Johnson let loose in 1965, was neither power nor profit, nor even anything so real as influence in Asia to serve particular tangible interests for the sake of which prestige, an appropriate image, was needed and purposefully used. For the ultimate aim, all "options" were but short-term interchangeable means, until finally, when all signs pointed to defeat, this whole outfit strained its remarkable intellectual resources on finding ways and means to avoid *admitting* defeat and to keep the *images* of the "mightiest power on earth" intact.

Image making as global policy is indeed something new in the huge arsenal of human follies recorded in history, but lying as such is neither new nor necessarily foolish in politics. Lies have always been regarded as justifiable in emergencies, lies that concerned specific secrets, especially

in military matters, which had to be shielded against the enemy. But this was not lying on principle; it was the jealously guarded prerogative of a small number of men to meet extraordinary circumstances. Image making, the seemingly harmless lying of Madison Avenue, was permitted to proliferate throughout the ranks of all governmental services, military and civilian—the phony body counts of the "search-and-destroy" missions, the doctored after-damage reports of the air force, the constant progress reports to Washington, as in the case of Ambassador Martin up to the very moment when he boarded the helicopter to be evacuated. These lies concealed no secrets from friend or enemy; nor were they intended to. They were meant to manipulate Congress and to persuade the people of the United States.

Lying as a way of life is also no novelty in politics, at least not in our century. It was quite successful in countries under totalitarian rule, where the lying was guided not by an image but by an ideology. Its success as we all know was overwhelming but depended on terror, not on hidden persuasion, and its result is far from encouraging: quite apart from all other considerations, to a large extent this lying on principle is the reason that Soviet Russia is still a kind of underdeveloped and underpopulated country.

The decisive aspect of this lying on principle is that it can work only through terror, that is, through the invasion of sheer criminality into the political processes. This is what happened in Germany and Russia on a gigantic scale during the Thirties and Forties, when the governments of these two great powers were in the hands of mass murderers. When the end came, with the defeat and suicide of Hitler and the sudden death of Stalin, a political kind of image making was introduced in both countries to cover up the unbelievable record of the past, though in very different ways. The Adenauer regime in Germany felt it had to cover up the fact that Hitler had not only been helped by some "war criminals" but supported by a majority of the German people, and Khrushchev in his famous speech on the Twentieth Party Congress pretended that it had all been the consequence of the unfortunate "personality cult." In both instances, this lying was what we today would call a coverup, and it was felt to be necessary to enable the people to return from a monstrous past that had left countless criminals in the country and to recover some kind of normalcy.

As far as Germany was concerned, the strategy was highly successful and the country actually recovered quickly. In Russia the change was not back to anything we would call normalcy but a return to despotism. Still, it was a change from total domination, with its millions of entirely innocent victims, to a tyrannical regime which persecutes mainly its opposition, something that is not an aberration in Russian history. Today the most serious consequence of the terrible disasters of the Thirties and Forties in Europe is that this form of criminality, with its bloodbaths, has

remained the conscious or unconscious standard by which we measure what is permitted or prohibited in politics. Public opinion is dangerously inclined to condone not crime in the streets but all political transgressions short of murder.

Watergate signified the intrusion of criminality into the political processes of this country, but, compared to what already happened in this terrible century, its manifestations—blatant lying, a number of third-rate burglaries, the excessive lying to cover up the burglaries, the harassment of citizens through the Internal Revenue Service, the attempt to organize a secret service exclusively at the command of the executive—were so mild that it was always difficult to take them altogether seriously. This was especially true for spectators and commentators from abroad because none of them came from countries where a written constitution is actually the basic law of the land, as it has been here for two hundred years. So certain transgressions which in this country are actually criminal are not felt in other countries to be crimes.

But even we who are citizens, and who as citizens have been in opposition to the administration at least since 1965, have our difficulties in this respect after the selective publication of the Nixon tapes. Reading them, we feel that we overestimated Nixon as well as the Nixon administration—though we certainly did not overestimate the disastrous results of our Asian adventure. Nixon's actions misled us because we suspected that we were confronted with a calculated assault on the basic law of the land, with an attempt to abolish the Constitution and the institutions of liberty. In retrospect it looks as though there existed no such grand schemes but "only" the firm resolve to do away with any law, constitutional or not, that stood in the way of shifting designs inspired by greed and vindictiveness rather than by the drive for total power or any coherent political program. In other words, it is as though a bunch of con men, rather untalented mafiosi, had succeeded in appropriating to themselves the government "of the mightiest power on earth."

However we account for the erosion of American power, the antics of the Nixon administration, with its conviction that dirty tricks are all you need to be successful in any enterprise, are not among its major causes. Although it is not very consoling, it is still the case that Nixon's crimes were a far cry from that sort of criminality with which we once were inclined to compare it. Still, there are a few parallels which, I think, may rightfully claim our attention.

There is first the very uncomfortable fact that there were large numbers of men around Nixon who did not belong to the inner circle of his cronies and were not hand-picked by him, but who nevertheless stuck with him, some to the bitter end, even though they knew enough about the "horror stories" in the White House to preclude their mere manipulation. It is true that he himself never trusted them. But how could *they* trust this man who had proved throughout a long and not

very honorable public career that he could not be trusted? The same uncomfortable question could of course, and with more justification, be asked about the men who surrounded and helped Hitler and Stalin.

Men with genuinely criminal instincts are not frequently found among politicians and statesmen, for the simple reason that their particular business, the business in the public realm, demands publicity, and criminals as a rule have no desire to go public. The trouble, I think, is less that power corrupts than that the *aura* of power, its glamorous trappings, more than power itself, attracts; for all those men we have known in this century to have abused power to a blatantly criminal extent were corrupt long before they attained power. What Nixon's helpers needed to become accomplices in criminal activities was some assurance that they would be above the law. We don't know anything solid about these matters; but all speculations about an inherent tension between power and character suffer from a tendency to equate indiscriminately born criminals with those who only rush to help once it has become clear to them that public opinion or "executive privilege" will protect them from being punished.

As far as the criminals themselves are concerned, the chief common weakness in their characters seems to be the rather naïve assumption that all people are actually like them, that their flawed characters are part of the human condition stripped of hypocrisy and conventional cliches. Nixon's greatest mistake—aside from not burning the tapes in time—was to have misjudged the incorruptibility of the courts and the press.

The cascade of events during the last month almost succeeded for a moment in tearing to shreds the tissue of lies of the Nixon administration and the web of the image makers that had preceded it. Events brought out the undisguised facts in their brutal force, tumbling out into a heap of rubble; for a moment, it looked as though all the chickens had come home to roost together. But for people who for so long had lived in the euphoric mood of "Nothing succeeds like success," the logical sequence of "Nothing fails like failure" was not easy to accept; and thus it was perhaps only natural that the first reaction of the Ford administration was to try a new image that could at least attenuate the failure, attenuate the admission of defeat.

Under the assumption that "the greatest power on earth" lacked the inner strength to live with defeat, and under the pretext that the country was threatened by a new isolationism, for which there were no signs, the administration embarked upon a policy of recriminations against Congress, and we were offered, as were so many other countries before us, the stab-in-the-back legend, generally invented by generals who have lost a war and most cogently argued in our case by General William Westmoreland and General Maxwell Taylor.

President Ford himself has offered a broader view than these generals; he warned us that to look backward could only lead to mutual recriminations—forgetting for the moment that he had refused to give unconditional amnesty, the time-honored means to heal the wounds of a divided nation. He told us to do what he had not done, namely, to forget the past and to open cheerfully a new chapter of history. Compared to the sophisticated ways in which for many years unpleasant facts were swept under the rug of imagery, this is a startling return to the oldest method mankind has used to get rid of unpleasant realities—Oblivion. No doubt, if it were successful, it would work better than all the images that tried to substitute for reality. Let us forget Vietnam, let us forget Watergate, let us forget the coverup and the coverup of the coverup enforced by the premature presidential pardon for the chief actor in this affair, who even today refuses to admit any wrongdoing; *not amnesty but amnesia will heal all our wounds*.

One of the discoveries of totalitarian governments was the method of digging giant holes in which to bury unwelcome facts and events, a gigantic enterprise which could be achieved only by killing millions of people who had been the actors in or the witnesses of the past. For the past was condemned to be forgotten as though it never had been. To be sure, nobody for a moment wants to follow the merciless logic of these past rulers, especially since, as we now know, they did not succeed.

In our case, not terror but persuasion enforced by pressure and the manipulation of public opinion is supposed to succeed where terror failed. Public opinion at first did not show itself to be very amenable to such attempts of the Executive; the first response to what happened was a rapidly increasing stream of articles and books about "Vietnam" and "Watergate," many of which were eager not so much to tell us the facts as to find out and teach us the lessons we are supposed to learn from our recent past, quoting again and again the old adage that "those who do not learn the lessons of history are condemned to repeat it."

Well, if History—as distinct from the historians who derive the most heterogenous lessons from their interpretations of history—has any lessons to teach us, this Pythian oracle seems to me more cryptic and obscure than the notoriously unreliable prophecies of the Delphic Apollo. I rather believe with Faulkner, "The past is never dead, it is not even past," and this for the simple reason that the world we live in at any moment *is* the world of the past; it consists of the monuments and the relics of what has been done by men for better or worse; its facts are always what has become (as the Latin origin of the word: *fieri—factum est* suggests). In other words, it is quite true that the past *haunts* us; it is the past's function to haunt us who are present and wish to live in the world as it really is, that is, has *become* what it is now.

I said before that in the cataclysm of recent events it was as if "all the chickens had come home to roost," and I used this common saying because it indicates the boomerang effect, the unexpected and ruinous backfiring of evil deeds on the doer, of which imperialist politicians of former generations were so afraid. Indeed anticipating this effect actually restrained them decisively from whatever they were doing in faraway lands to strange and foreign people. Let us count not our blessings but in quick and certainly not exhaustive form mention some of the most obvious ruinous effects for which it would be wise to blame no scapegoats, foreign or domestic, but only ourselves. Let us start with the economy, whose sudden turn from boom to depression nobody predicted, and which the latest events in New York City have so sadly and ominously dramatized.

Let me first say the obvious: inflation and currency devaluation are inevitable after lost wars, and only our unwillingness to admit a disastrous defeat leads and misleads us into a futile search for "deeper causes." Only victory, together with the acquisition of new territories and reparations in a peace settlement, can make up the entirely unproductive expenses of war. In the case of the war which we have lost, this would be impossible anyhow, since we did not intend to expand, and even offered (though apparently never intended to pay) North Vietnam 2.5 billion dollars for the reconstruction of the country. For those eager to "learn" from History, there is the trite lesson that even extravagantly rich people can go bankrupt. But there is, of course, more to the sudden crisis that has overcome us.

The Great Depression of the Thirties, which spread from the United States to all of Europe, was in no country brought under control and followed by a normal recovery—the New Deal in America was no less impotent in this respect than the notoriously ineffective *Notverordnungen*, the emergency measures of the dying Weimar Republic. The Depression was ended only by sudden and politically necessitated changes to a war economy, first in Germany where Hitler had liquidated the Depression and its unemployment by 1936 and then with the outbreak of the war in the United States. This tremendously important fact was noticeable to everybody, but it was immediately covered up by many complicated economic theories, so that public opinion remained unconcerned. Seymour Melman is, as far as I know, the only writer of any consequence to make this point repeatedly (see *American Capitalism in Decline*) and his work remains entirely outside the mainstream of economic theory. But while this basic fact, very frightening in itself, was overlooked in nearly all public debates, it resulted almost immediately in the more or less shared conviction that manufacturing "companies are in business not to produce goods but to provide jobs."

This maxim may have its origin in the Pentagon, but it certainly has meanwhile spread all over the country. It is true that the war economy as the savior from unemployment and depression some twenty years ago was followed by the large-scale use of various inventions which we sum up under the label of automation and which should have meant a brutal loss of jobs. But the debate over automation and employment quickly disappeared for the simple reason that "featherbedding" and similar practices—partly but only partly enforced by the great power of the unions—have obscured and at least partly taken care of the problem. Today it is almost universally accepted that we must above all make cars to keep jobs, not to move people about.

It is no secret that a large proportion of the billions of dollars demanded by the Pentagon for the armament industry are necessary not for "national security" but for keeping the economy from collapsing. At a time when war as a rational means of politics has become a kind of luxury justifiable only for small powers, arms trade and arms production have become the fastest growing business, and the United States is "easily the world's largest arms merchant." As Canada's Prime Minister Pierre Trudeau, when criticized recently for selling arms to the United States that were eventually used in Vietnam, sadly stated, it has all become a choice "between dirty hands and empty bellies."

Under these circumstances, it is entirely true that, as Melman states, "inefficiency [has been elevated] into a national purpose," and what has come home to roost in this particular case is the hectic and unfortunately highly successful policy of "solving" very real problems of economic development by clever gimmicks which are only successful enough to make problems temporarily disappear.

Perhaps it is a sign of a reawakening sense of reality that the economic crisis, highlighted by the possible bankruptcy of the country's largest city, is beginning to get the kind of attention formerly given to Watergate. But although two administrations tried to push Watergate into the background, it will not go away. What still persists, and still haunts us, is the astounding aftermath of Mr. Nixon's enforced resignation. Mr. Ford, an unelected president, appointed by Mr. Nixon himself because he was one of his strongest supporters in Congress, was greeted with wild enthusiasm. "In a few days, almost in a few hours, Gerald Ford dispelled the miasma that had hung so long over the White House; and the sun, so to speak, started shining in Washington again," said Arthur Schlesinger, certainly one of the last among the intellectuals one would have expected to nurture secret longings for the man on horseback.

That was indeed how a great many Americans instinctively reacted. Mr. Schlesinger may have changed his mind after Ford's premature pardon, but what then happened showed how well attuned he was to the mood of the country in his hasty evaluation. Mr. Nixon had to resign

because he was sure to be indicted for the coverup of Watergate; the normal reaction of those concerned with the "horror stories" in the White House would have been to ask precisely who actually instigated this affair which then had to be covered up. Instead of such a question being asked—as far as I know, only a lonely article by Mary McCarthy in *The New York Review of Books* pursued it seriously—those who had already been indicted and convicted for their roles in the coverup were overwhelmed with very high offers from publishers, the press and television, and the campuses to tell their story. No one doubts that all these stories will be self-serving, most of all the story Nixon himself plans to publish. These offers, I am sorry to say, are by no means politically motivated; they reflect the market and its demand for "positive images"—that is, its quest for more lies and fabrications, this time to justify or mitigate the coverup and to rehabilitate the criminals.

What comes home to roost now is this year-long education in imagery, which seems no less habit-forming than an addiction to drugs. Nothing I think was more telling about the presence of this addiction than the public reaction, on the streets as well as in Congress, to our "victory" in Cambodia, in the opinion of many "just what the doctor ordered" (Sulzberger) to heal the wounds of the Vietnam defeat. Indeed, " 'Twas a famous victory,' " as James Reston appropriately quoted in *The New York Times*; let us hope that this was finally the nadir of the erosion of power in this country, the nadir of self-confidence when victory over one of the tiniest and most helpless countries on earth could cheer the inhabitants of what only a few decades ago really was the "mightiest power on earth."

While we now slowly emerge from under the rubble of the events of the last few years, let us not forget these years of aberration lest we become wholly unworthy of the glorious beginnings two hundred years ago. When the facts come home to us, let us try at least to make them welcome. Let us try not to escape into utopias—images, theories, or sheer follies. For it was the greatness of this Republic to give due account, for the sake of freedom, to the best in men and to the worst.

Hannah Arendt

Hannah Arendt (1906–1975) was a German political theorist who, over the course of many books, explored themes such as violence, revolution, and evil. Her major works include *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, *The Human Condition*, and the controversial *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, in which she coined the phrase "the banality of evil."