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## Norman Mailer: Gaining an Empire, Losing Democracy?

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Iraq is an excuse

LOS ANGELES There is a subtext to what the Bushites are doing as they prepare for war in Iraq. My hypothesis is that President George W. Bush and many conservatives have come to the conclusion that the only way they can save America and get it off its present downslope is to become a regime with a greater military presence and drive toward empire. My fear is that Americans might lose their democracy in the process.

By downslope I'm referring not only to the corporate scandals, the church scandals and the FBI scandals. The country has gone kind of crazy in the eyes of conservatives. Also, kids can't read anymore. Especially for conservatives, the culture has become too sexual.

Iraq is the excuse for moving in an imperial direction. War with Iraq, as they originally conceived it, would be a quick, dramatic step that would enable them to control the Near East as a powerful base - not least because of the oil there, as well as the water supplies from the Tigris and Euphrates rivers - to build a world empire.

The Bushites also expect to bring democracy to the region and believe that in itself will help to diminish terrorism. But I expect the opposite will happen: terrorists are not impressed by democracy. They loathe it. They are fundamentalists of the most basic kind. The more successful democracy is in the Near East - not likely in my view - the more terrorism it will generate.

The only outstanding obstacle to the drive toward empire in the Bushites' minds is China. Indeed, one of the great fears in the Bush administration about America's downslope is that the "stem studies" such as science, technology and engineering are all faring poorly in U.S. universities. The number of American doctorates is going down and down. But the number of Asians obtaining doctorates in those same stem studies are increasing at a great rate.

Looking 20 years ahead, the administration perceives that there will come a time when China will have technology superior to America's. When that time comes, America might well say to China that "we can work together," we will be as the Romans to you Greeks. You will be our extraordinary, well-cultivated slaves. But don't try to dominate us. That would be your disaster. This is the scenario that some of the brightest neoconservatives are thinking about. (I use Rome as a metaphor, because metaphors are usually much closer to the truth than facts).

What has happened, of course, is that the Bushites have run into much more opposition than they thought they would from other countries and among the home population. It may well end up that we won't have a war, but a new strategy to contain Iraq and wear Saddam down. If that occurs, Bush is in terrible trouble.

My guess though, is that, like it or not, want it or not, America is going to go to war because that is the only solution Bush and his people can see.

The dire prospect that opens, therefore, is that America is going to become a mega-banana republic where the army will have more and more importance in Americans' lives. It will be an ever greater and greater overlay on the American system. And before it is all over, democracy, noble and delicate as it is, may give way. My long experience with human nature - I'm 80 years old now - suggests that it is possible that fascism, not democracy, is the natural state.

Indeed, democracy is the special condition - a condition we will be called upon to defend in the coming years. That will be enormously difficult because the combination of the corporation, the military and the complete investiture of the flag with mass spectator sports has set up a pre-fascistic atmosphere in America already.

Norman Mailer's latest book is "The Spooky Art: Some Thoughts on Writing." This comment was adapted from remarks Feb. 22 to the Los Angeles Institute for the Humanities and distributed by Global Viewpoint/Tribune Media Services International.

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