

The Red Herring in Two-Party Politics and the Danger of Fascism

By Arnold August, November 2012

The danger of fascism in the U.S. is raised by only a few U.S. writers and academics. One such author is Naomi Wolf, in her book *The End of America: Letter of Warning to a Young Patriot*. Despite its limitations of being grounded in solutions based on the very source of the menace — the U.S. Founding Fathers and their traditions — her work constitutes an important wake-up call.¹ The U.S.-based scholarly journal *Socialism and Democracy* (2008) published a timely issue on U.S. fascism with close to a dozen U.S. contributors.

Among the most extensive works developed over many years is that of William I. Robinson, Professor of Sociology, Global Studies and Latin American Studies at the University of California in Santa Barbara. One of his latest pieces, co-authored with Mario Barrera of the same university, is entitled “Global Capitalism and Twenty-First Century Fascism: A US Case Study.”^{2; 3} Unfortunately, it is not possible to do justice to this and other works in this short online article. The focus of our attention remains the U.S. two-party system of democracy and how fascism can play out in this context. Most important is to avoid the danger of fascism by taking into account and recognizing the U.S.-centric influence. This burden consists of being blinded by illusions about the U.S. two-party, competitive electoral process. For example, in 2006–08, the period preceding and during the 2008 electoral campaign, hype was built up around Obama. His media consultant and image maker, David Axelrod, and Obama himself, driven by pure presidential political opportunism, consciously portrayed Obama as embodying “change.” In addition, playing the African-American card added to the appearance of “change” and “progress.” Chapter 2 of the book deals with this in detail. These circumstances combined to create the illusion that the two-party system does indeed offer choices. However, the events since 2008, as outlined in the same chapter, illustrate that Obama represents continuity in relation to previous administrations and similarity to his 2008 Republican opponents. Obama actually has been going on the *offence* in favour of elite interests in domestic and international affairs. A key ingredient in this aggressive approach is pacifying much of the African-American population, due to Obama’s co-opting ability. His activities can — perhaps — even lead to fascism. This pacification is based on the U.S.-centric prejudice that the two-party, competitive system is viable with Obama as an

alternative option. The tranquilizing effect on much of the African-American population can thus facilitate a possible tendency toward fascism.

In this sense, while not in any way asserting that fascism has been established in the U.S. or that it is likely, Robinson and Barrera raise a significant warning. Their understanding is “that fascism is not a simple, clearly demarcated phenomenon and also that a twenty-first century fascism ... need not and would not resemble twentieth century ‘classical’ fascism in many respects, despite certain parallels.”⁴ Regarding “fertile bases for projects of twenty-first century fascism,” the authors point to “a host of mechanisms of coercive exclusion,” including “mass incarceration and prison-industrial complexes” and “pervasive policing.”⁵ In this context, therefore, it may be instructive for the discussion to note that I detail this mass incarceration and its effects on democracy in Chapter 2 of the book, under the subheading “Founding Fathers’ Heritage and Voter Turnout.”

Robinson and Barrera point to the “ideological campaigns aimed at seduction and passivity through petty consumption and fantasy. All this provides fertile bases for projects of twenty-first century fascism.”⁶

Noam Chomsky’s groundbreaking, co-authored work on “manufacturing consent” in the U.S. through the media⁷ is more significant today than ever before. This is especially the case for those who are concerned about the rise of fascism through the role played by the media’s ideological campaign. The silent “consent” of the masses, if this comes about, replaces the all too familiar Nazi-type fascism that therefore “need not and would not resemble twentieth century ‘classical’ fascism in many respects, despite certain parallels,” as Robinson and Barrera astutely point out. They also write, the “role of political and ideological domination, through control over media and the flow of images and symbols, would make any such project [fascism] more sophisticated.”⁸ The authors register their agreement with the analysis made by Bertram Gross’ “Friendly Fascism: The New Face of Power in America.”⁹ I also agree with Gross (on this particular point), who

argues that such a state of affairs [fascism] can develop gradually and incrementally, without a dramatic takeover of power by an overtly authoritarian party, and that control can be exercised through more subtle and sophisticated means than in the classic cases. Indeed, he believed that the evolution of such a system of friendly fascism in the US

was fully compatible with retaining a two-party and ostensibly democratic system.¹⁰

The “subtle and sophisticated means” currently being used result in a situation where it is *so* politically *incorrect* to criticize Obama from a progressive perspective. The political and ideological pressure represents another testimony to the danger of “manufacturing consent.” The virtual prohibition to oppose Obama by the “left” or by “liberals” feeds into the U.S.-centric mindset of the two-party system. This political process of U.S. democracy is portrayed as being immutable and forever embedded in the political scene. It attempts to block any serious alternative to it, and maintains people in the straightjacket of the “lesser of two evils” syndrome, blocking an independent path. This is why the Occupy Wall Street movement is important to analyze (see the subheading “The Occupy Movement: Breaking Out of U.S.-Centrism?” in Chapter 2 of the book).

By examining some examples that nullify the differences between the two parties in the U.S. multi-party, competitive system, one can more clearly see how it would be quite possible for fascism to take hold today. However, it would be in a different manner than its twentieth century predecessor, as Robinson and Barrera contend.

In the course of the 2011–12 U.S. presidential campaign between the Democrats and the Republicans, the latter are sometimes highlighted as a potential source of fascism, alongside marginal fascist and neo-fascist groups. In this way, Obama’s first term is painted in a relatively positive light.

One of the conditions for fascism is the chosen-people concept as a cornerstone of “American Exceptionalism.” The latter refers to the claim that the U.S. was born and developed as an exceptional nation with a mission for the world. In Chapter 2 of the book, I deal with Pilgrims and their evangelical “City Upon a Hill,” the “guiding light,” the “beacon” for the world. The Founding Fathers and U.S. presidents since then follow this precept. During election periods, as in 2011–12, both sides (Republicans/Tea Party and Democrats) define themselves in relation to their loyalty to this issue. Some Republicans claim that Obama is not a real patriot because he does not express allegiance to “American Exceptionalism.” However, this is not the case. On innumerable occasions and in different ways, Obama has vaunted, and still does, the superiority of the U.S., especially its democracy and inherent example for the world. The terms, however, are somewhat modified to give credence to the “new face” as a facade for the

same policy. In Obama's 2011 State of the Union address, he said that what is at stake is "whether we sustain the leadership that has made America not just a place on a map, but *the light to the world*"¹¹ (emphasis added). Obama has been pledging himself to Pilgrim exceptionalism right from the beginning of his mandate. In his 2008 election night victory speech, he said to the world that he was assuring "all those who have wondered if America's *beacon* still burns as bright"¹² (emphasis added). In his November 2012 speech on the occasion of his second election victory, he developed the same theme using different words. However, to introduce his second mandate, he showed even more confidence and arrogance in putting forward the U.S. as the "beacon of the world," further emphasizing its military might (see the section entitled "The November 2012 Elections and Obama" in Chapter 2 of my book). Even as a candidate for the Democratic presidential nomination in 2007, he wrote in the influential *Foreign Affairs* journal about the need to "renew American leadership in the world," tying this directly to refining and building up the U.S. military. He pledged to "show the world that America remains true to its founding values."¹³

It would be a laughing matter — were it not so tragic for the U.S. and the world — that a self-avowed African-American would lower himself to show fidelity to the "City Upon a Hill" sermon. It is symbolic of racism, the superiority complex, condescendence toward other peoples, slavery, genocide of the Indigenous peoples and unmerciful expansion into the west and beyond in the south.

In my view, the U.S. *is* indeed "exceptional." The U.S. is the only country that has emerged at the time of its very birth (with the Declaration of Independence) as an expansionist, slaveholding colony. In that period, it was still breaking its umbilical cord with the colonial mother country, England. From there, the Thirteen Colonies developed toward expansionism in the west and in the south, to colonialism, neo-colonialism and imperialism.

While Obama withdrew from Iraq by the end of December 2011, this was already a *fait accompli* under Bush. The latter was advised by the Iraqi government that the U.S. troops would not be protected by immunity after December 31, 2011. Remarking on the December 2011 withdrawal, Obama no longer referred to the Iraq war as a "dumb" Bush war. This previous Obama "dumb war" October 2, 2002, statement was in the first place never a principled opposition to the war, as explained in Chapter 2 of the book. In December 2011, the pre-2008 supposed antagonism between Obama and Bush on the Iraq war was converted into a consensus between the Democrats and Republicans. The war was rather described by Obama in the following laudatory terms: "our nation

has been at war in Iraq.” Obama painted the nine-year war as a virtual “mission accomplished” (referring to a banner titled “Mission Accomplished” that was displayed on the aircraft carrier during a televised address by President George Bush on May 1, 2003, regarding the end of major combat operations in Iraq). Obama said, “One of the most extraordinary chapters in the history of the American military will come to an end ... we’re leaving behind a sovereign, stable and self-reliant Iraq, with a representative government that was elected by its people”¹⁴ (emphasis added). Bush’s “mission accomplished” evaluation was made explicit by Obama in a March 2012 special White House dinner in honour of the armed forces who had served in Iraq. In his speech, he quoted a soldier leaving Iraq and then Obama himself affirmed this: “‘We completed the mission.’ [quoting the soldier and then Obama reaffirmed] We completed the mission. We did our jobs.” In the same speech, Obama also used one of the main code phrases to assure the ruling circles that he is as apt a warrior as anyone else on the political scene. He said that 2012 is the 50th anniversary of the Vietnam War but “our veterans didn’t always receive the respect and the thanks that they so richly deserved — and that’s a mistake that we must never repeat.” His closing words can be seen as a warning to the world for future U.S. military adventures: “America’s greatest days are still to come — and they are great because of you.”¹⁵ The question is: if Vietnam, Iraq and others are considered positive examples, what will the “greatest days still to come” look like? To give one an idea, Obama administration officials and his military commanders are reportedly planning a troop buildup in the Gulf area, including eyeing Iran as a target.¹⁶

The illusion that Obama was an “anti-war candidate” in the 2008 elections, against the backdrop of the facade of the two-party, competitive, democratic system, was largely based on his supposed stand against the war in Iraq. However, as I write in my book in examining Obama’s writings and speeches, his qualification of the war as a “dumb war” was an unprincipled position, leaving the question open as to what is a “smart war.” His position on Iraq was put forward as part of his “pure presidential political opportunism” combined with the attempt (largely successful) to co-opt the anti-Iraq war sentiment among the “liberals” and other activists. (For an elaboration on these concepts of political opportunism and co-optation, see Chapter 2 of the book.) In a December 2011 joint press conference with Iraq’s prime minister, a journalist asked if Obama still “think[s] of this as ‘a dumb war.’” Obama did not directly answer the question, rather saying, “I think history will judge the original decision to go into Iraq.” He concluded by

asserting, “What we have now achieved is an Iraq that is self-governing.”¹⁷

Obama made his 2012 announcement on new defence strategy and spending. It aimed to provide the impression of cutbacks in defence allocations in the midst of the economic crisis. Therefore, this was supposed to feed the illusion that the two-party system is capable of responding to the concerns of the people. However, Obama’s first sentence was:

The United States of America is the greatest force for freedom and security that the world has ever known. And in no small measure, that’s because we’ve built the best-trained, best-led, best-equipped military in history — and as Commander-in-Chief, I’m going to keep it that way....

[He later said] Over the next 10 years, the growth in the defense budget will slow, but the fact of the matter is this: *It will still grow*, because we have global responsibilities that demand our leadership.¹⁸ (emphasis added)

As the analyst and retired colonel Douglas Macgregor wrote, “It’s no secret what’s required in 2012 and beyond: an efficient and effective organization of military power for the optimum utilization of increasingly constrained resources.”¹⁹ The title of the January 3, 2012, Obama-crafted U.S. defence plan tells it all: “Sustaining U.S. Global Leadership: Priorities for 21st Century Defense.”²⁰

Perhaps the greatest danger facing the people of the U.S. — and the entire world — is nuclear war as part of the U.S. quest for world domination. Thus we see the importance of the task facing the two-party democracy system in the 2008 elections in order to have people believe there were actually competing and opposing long-term views on nuclear weapons.

Although during the 2008 presidential campaign Obama spoke about a “world without nuclear weapons,” “his first term will go down in history, however, as containing one of the single largest spending increases on nuclear weapons ever.” He committed the U.S. to a multi-hundred-billion reinvestment in nuclear weapons over a period exceeding the next three decades. His nuclear spending outdid both the first and second presidents Bush, and thus was able to succeed where George W. Bush failed. Obama saved the nuclear weapons program, “reinvigorating it with legitimacy, and outflanking anyone who would dare to elevate a debate over military vs. social investments.”²¹

One cannot say that Obama broke his promise on nuclear weapons any more than he did on the issue of the war in Iraq. To pay homage to a “world without nuclear weapons” is as pie in the sky and vague as the Iraq conflict being qualified as a “dumb war.” A “world without nuclear weapons” or an imprecise “dumb Iraq war” are always secondary. These are mere words. They are conjured up to be modified or tweaked. These slight alterations allow Obama to fulfill his key strategic pledge to the Pilgrims’ worldview of the U.S. as the chosen people acting as the beacon for the world to export its “democracy” by force or subversion. The chosen people are now fighting for world domination, as during the Bush presidency, under the banner of the war on terror with U.S.-style democracy promotion as one of the pretexts to replace terror.

In the midst of the 2012 controversy over the possible Israeli attack on Iran’s nuclear installations, Obama said that his option “includes a military component.... I think that the Israeli government recognizes that, as president of the United States, I don’t bluff.” He added the pretext that Iran is aiming for nuclear weapons and running the risk of them “falling into the hands of terrorist organizations.”²²

The unconditional U.S. support of Israel operates, in the words of Obama, “whether it’s a Democratic or Republican administration.” Furthermore, the differences with Israel “are tactical and not strategic.”²³

Pointing to the Republicans or fascist fringe groups as the vehicles for fascism serves as a red herring to allow the more credible Obama to use the two-party system of the U.S.-type of democracy to bring it about. A “red herring” in etymological terms is

this fallacy [that] comes from the sport of fox hunting in which a dried, smoked herring, which is red in color, is dragged across the trail of the fox to throw the hounds off the scent. Thus, a “red herring” argument is one which distracts the audience from the issue in question through the introduction of some irrelevancy.²⁴

“The irrelevancy,” or the “red herring,” might very well turn out to be the Republicans. Whether consciously or not, this is the way the establishment “throws the hounds off the scent,” the “scent” being Obama.

U.S. attorney and author Glenn Greenwald wrote a perceptive article on the September 11, 2011, American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) 36-page detailed report. The latter dealt with the serious erosion of civil liberties. It focused not only on the Bush era continuity carried out by Obama, but his actual *escalation* on both domestic and international issues. Greenwald wrote that the ACLU report no longer receives attention from progressives as was the case during the Bush era. “And, as usual, anyone urging that attention be paid to these facts [the ACLU Report] will be met with demands that *eyes be diverted instead* to how scary Rick Perry is [and other Republican candidates such as Romney as they come and go], and then this will all blissfully fade away in a cloud of partisan electioneering”²⁵ (emphasis added). We can see that the red herring is the Republicans to which “eyes should be diverted,” thus allowing full freedom for Obama to carry out the program. For further information, I recommend reading the full ACLU report.²⁶

On the international scale, there are well-known examples indicating that Obama is capable of “quietly” bringing the U.S. into fascism, using the two-party system, twenty-first-century style, rather than Hitlerism’s open fascism of the previous century. U.S. fascism in this century cannot at all resemble that of its predecessor.

The U.S. uses World War II as a political tool to carry out its wars of aggression and support of Israel. Bush’s statements after September 11, 2001, repeatedly made reference to the U.S. opposition to fascism in World War II, and the U.S. was likened to the victims of the Holocaust.²⁷ Obama does the same thing. From his first writings to his presidential campaign and thereafter, he has often used the imagery of the U.S. being a champion against fascism in World War II. In order to make the point more appealing, he often employs personal stories to amplify the image. For example, in the 2012 State of the Union address, he mentioned once again the role of his grandparents as being part of the “nation that had triumphed over a depression and fascism.”²⁸ Furthermore, like all U.S. presidents before him since World War II, he associates himself and the U.S. with opposition to the Holocaust and fascism in World War II. Regarding a possible Israeli attack against Iran, Obama said in an interview published on March 2, 2012, that the Israeli leadership “has a profound responsibility to protect the Israeli people in a hostile neighborhood, and I am certain that the history of the Holocaust and of anti-Semitism ... weighs on him when he thinks about these questions.”²⁹ Two days later, on March 4, 2012, at the Washington Conference sponsored by the American Israel Public Affairs Committee (AIPAC, a pro-

Israel lobby group), Obama said that the United States and Israel share

a belief that freedom is a right that is given to all of God's children. An experience that shows us that democracy is the one and only form of government that can truly respond to the aspirations of citizens.

America's Founding Fathers understood this truth, just as Israel's founding generation did.³⁰

It does not take too much effort to connect the dots between "God's children," "America's Founding Fathers" and "Israel's founding generation," all having the mission of bringing "democracy" to the world. Everyone in the AIPAC conference room knew that Obama's code words were referring to the common "chosen people" concept of the Thirteen Colonies Pilgrims/Founding Fathers as well as those of the Israeli Zionists.

Obama also said in that same speech, "My administration's commitment to Israel's security has been unprecedented. Our military and intelligence cooperation has never been closer.... *Despite a tough budget environment, our security assistance has increased every single year*" (emphasis added). He continued, "We will do what it takes to preserve Israel's qualitative military edge — because Israel must always have the ability to defend itself, by itself, against any threat.... Now our assistance is expanding Israel's defensive capabilities."³¹ This statement reinforces the view provided above that the mention of "troop withdrawals" and "reduction in defense spending" is just an illusion hiding the true picture.

Regarding Iran, Obama said in the same remarks, "Now is the time to heed the timeless advice from Teddy Roosevelt: Speak softly; carry a big stick."³² U.S. President Theodore Roosevelt (Republican) was the architect of the corollary to the Monroe Doctrine. The Corollary is known as "Speak softly and carry a big stick; you will go far." The Manifest Destiny, Monroe Doctrine and its Corollary are part of one overall system of expansion and imperialism. For example, President Theodore Roosevelt's "big stick" led the 1898 intervention in Cuba to steal its victory against Spain and appropriate the neighbouring island for the U.S. For further information, see the subheading "Foreign Policy Toward Its Neighbours and Democracy Promotion" in Chapter 2 of the book. I refer the readers to the Monroe Doctrine and President Theodore Roosevelt's corollary to it, as well as about his successor, President

Taft: “Therefore, even President Taft’s pretext for extension throughout Latin America and the Caribbean, in his own words, ‘by virtue of our *superiority of race*,’ was an outgrowth of the previous doctrines”³³ (emphasis added). Obama does not manifest any shame in linking himself to the openly racist views on which U.S.-based U.S.-centrism relies. The bottom line is the risk of fascist aggression under the pretext of Iran’s nuclear program while ensuring funds and support from the Israeli lobby in the 2012 elections. These are the types of lobbies participating in U.S.-style elections and democracy, while the participation of the people is virtually non-existent.

After Obama’s speech, Netanyahu issued a statement expressing appreciation for Obama’s position that all options are on the table to prevent Iran from developing a nuclear weapon. Netanyahu also said, regarding Obama’s latest points on Iran–Israel, ““Perhaps most important of all, I appreciated the fact that he said that Israel must be able to defend itself, by itself, against any threat.””³⁴

There is the danger that the U.S. may move toward fascism under the guise of anti-fascism. Israel, for its part, is the “anti-fascist” country par excellence, given its history, to the extent that anyone who connects Israel with fascism is labelled as being anti-Semitic or a Holocaust denier. It is no accident that the U.S. and Israel are the closest of all allies. Aside from common geo-political and economic aims and advantages, the U.S. relies on Israel for an added ideological advantage. This consists in identifying itself totally with Israel in order to camouflage the danger of the U.S. itself becoming fascist.

Of specific importance in domestic policy is the use of the race card to mesmerize and paralyze African-Americans. Many African-American scholars and activists are not at all shying away from this issue. This “Black Agenda Report” article illustrates the danger of the Obama race card:

A recent poll of African American public opinion adds to the evidence that the very presence of a Black man in the White House has created lasting distortions in Black people’s collective ability to gauge their own relative position in society. To put it bluntly, something has gone very wrong with Black perceptions of reality, since the ascent of President Obama.³⁵

As reported by Chika Oduah in *The Griot*, “Rutgers University political science professor Alvin Tillery says the symbolic value of an African-American president for black Americans is ‘tremendously high.’ ‘For better or for worse, Obama is regarded as a symbolic institution that must be honoured,’ [says Tillery].”³⁶

When there is a massive participation of African-Americans in a rebellion against the oligarchy, as was the case in the 1960s, everything is possible for real change. However, without their substantial involvement, no movement against the status quo, or even less so against the threat of fascism, is possible. Thus, it is important to consider the significance of what Robinson and Barrera indicate concerning the “ideological campaigns aimed at seduction and passivity through petty consumption and fantasy.” Robinson and Barrera do not necessarily have in mind the impact of the Obama media-hype on African-Americans. However, the astute observation by these two scholars remains a point to keep in mind from my perspective when exploring twenty-first-century fascism. The situation of African-Americans, as described above, fleshes out what Chomsky wrote regarding “manufacturing consent,” unfortunately applicable to the current situation of many African-Americans, with Obama in the White House.

Thus the question emerges, why all the fuss about the Republicans and the Tea Party, or the “right wing,” as the potential source of fascism, when it may be already sitting in the White House in the form of Obama? Whether intentionally or not, the “red herring” commotion is part of the U.S. two-party, competitive system as the democracy model. I do *not* believe that the “red herring” phenomenon is consciously worked out behind doors as a conspiracy. The U.S. oligarchy relies rather on the free market based on private property as applied to the political process. In the 2008 and 2012 elections in order to make their choice, the “military–industrial complex” depended on Obama’s pure presidential political opportunism. This was combined with his talent and personal situation as an African-American, thus placing him in a privileged position to co-opt. As pointed out in Chapter 2 of the book, it was the “invisible hand” of the free-market economy applied to the political system that allowed Obama to begin his rise to power. However, as Samir Amin points out, to guarantee the proper working of the free market, this “implies that the visible fist ... must complete the work of the invisible hand of the market.”³⁷ In the case of Obama, the “visible fist” to help the “invisible hand” consisted of the efforts of his Chicago adviser, David Axelrod, to market the willing Obama. The “visible fist” was later extended to the media that, on behalf of the oligarchy, endorsed Obama in 2008, as detailed in Chapter 2 of the book. This carried on for the 2012 elections. In 2012, Mitt Romney, the

Republican candidate, based on his pure presidential political opportunism, made his pitch to those sections in the elite who may potentially support the candidacy. Their ability to co-opt in order to preserve the system is on display for inspection by the ruling elite. Obama's individual drive for power and his potential for co-opting are also examined. At one point, it became evident for the ruling circles who should be appointed as the next president. At one juncture in the campaign, the "visible fist" helped the "invisible hand." If the U.S. ruling circles have no other way to further their interests domestically and internationally, this could lead to fascism. Obama is best fit to carry this through, if he is not stopped at the U.S. grass-roots level as well as in other areas of the planet.

If one were to be consistent about twenty-first-century fascism not being the same as its counterpart in the previous century, then one would have to abandon the stereotypes that come with the old concept. Fascism, if it comes about in the U.S., which is far from certain, will not necessarily be symbolized by a white, moustached, openly racist individual like Hitler. It may be Obama. This supposition may surprise some. However, the goal here is to contribute to awareness on this issue, given the potentially disastrous consequences for the people of the U.S. and around the world.

Obama has written much, and made innumerable speeches, against the fascism of World War II. However, Huey Long, a U.S. populist politician (born in 1893 and assassinated in 1935), is quoted by former New Orleans District Attorney Jim Garrison as follows: "Fascism will come to America in the name of anti-fascism." Garrison goes on to warn: "I'm afraid, based on my own experience, that fascism will come to America in the name of national security."³⁸

¹ Wolf, Naomi. 2007. *The End of America: Letter of Warning to a Young Patriot: A Citizen's Call to Action*. White River Junction, VT: Chelsea Green Publishing Company.

² I am indebted to both these authors for their work. However, the conclusions and analysis are mine and do not necessarily reflect the opinions of Robinson and Barrera.

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- ⁶ Ibid.
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