



March 2007 TRENDEVENTS

Ghawar Is Dead! By CommonDreams.org, March 7, 2007 —**The Wide-Spread Use of Advanced Extraction Techniques are Killing the Mother of All Oil Fields...** by Matthew S. Miller

"How could we drink up the sea? Who gave us the sponge to wipe away the entire horizon? What were we doing when we unchained this earth from its sun?" — Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, 1882

"My father rode a camel. I drive a car. My son flies a plane. His son will ride a camel." — *Anonymous Saudi Sheik*, 1982

"Ghawar, Ghawar she gave and gave; They sucked her dry like mankind's slave; The Sheiks told us that big oil lie; And all those people had to die." — *Lyrical History*, 2082

I've watched in shock and awe in recent days, shaking my head and wringing my hands. Yet another unremarkable narrative of celebrity intrigue entered the echo chamber of the mainstream media system and its 24/7-positive-feedback-amplification-loop to emerge as biggest news event — no, the earth-shaking cultural event of the year. This time it is...Anna Nicole is dead... Her mournful supplicants conduct vigils in her memory and quietly reflect upon her iconic life, wishing her soul Godspeed. Meanwhile, we are left to ponder the paternity of her unfortunate offspring and the symbolic meaning of her celebrity status for posterity. All the while we wait with bated breath as Wikipedia straightens out the facts of her untimely demise.

Hers was the quintessentially American tale of the technological metamorphosis of East Texas trailer trash into the bearer of the trophy titties for an oil tycoon. Her bare breasts in the pages of Playboy reaffirmed the greatness of our country! She pulled herself up by her bra straps and made her way in the world. We imagine that the indelible image of her "candle in the wind" life will never be extinguished because she really lived the collective dream. Sometimes it's funny how fake-life makes contact with real-life.

It was also announced recently, without the same media feeding frenzy, that another queen of mass-culture is dead, too. Few of us even know her name. Rather than being the personification of the contemporary zeitgeist, she is one of the cornerstones of what Marx called global capitalism's base. She was an integral part of the concrete material conditions that make our peculiar form of social organization possible. Her name is Ghawar, and she is the mother-of-all oil fields. She was once a veritable sea of light sweet crude 174 miles long and 12 miles wide under the sands of the eastern province of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (KSA), and now she is dead.

Ghawar is by far the largest conventional oil field ever discovered. Since first tapped in 1948, Ghawar has produced some 60 billion barrels of oil and accounted for 60-65% of Saudi production from 1948-2005. While actual field-by-field production numbers remain a Saudi State secret, Ghawar is estimated to produce more than five million barrels per day or 6.5% of the planet's daily production total of 84 million barrels.

Ghawar's obituary has already been written, but the Saudis have thus far prevented the appropriate authorities from entering the house to inspect the body. We have only secondhand reports of her demise. Of these accounts, the most notable is investment banker Matthew Simmons' book "Twilight in the Desert: The Coming Saudi Oil Shock and the World Economy." Simmons assembles a picture of declining Saudi production from publicly available technical reports written by Saudi-Aramco's own reservoir engineers in recent decades. His portrayal of the situation is dire indeed. He claims that, "When Saudi Arabia peaks (enters the unavoidable state of permanent production decline), the world, categorically, has peaked." It looks like the 2006 numbers confirm Simmons' 2005 prophecy.

The writers at the Oil Drum, a data-driven oil analysis website, after assessing the production data from several independent reporting agencies, claim that Saudi production is down a whopping 8% in 2006 from 2005 numbers. The decline would have been closer to 14% without the addition of the Haradh III mega-project. They assert that Saudi Arabia has now officially peaked and that the pace of production decline there is likely to accelerate. Remember, Ghawar accounts for 60% of Saudi production.

As we munch on takeout Subway sandwiches, a plate glass window is the only thing separating us from the adjacent lab, which contains a glowing caldera of "plasma" three times as hot as

the surface of the sun. Every few minutes there's a horrific clanking noise — grinding followed by a thunderous "voomp, like the sound a gas barbecue makes when it first ignites... "Is it supposed to do that?" I ask Longo nervously. "Yup," he says. "That's normal."

Despite his 74 years, Longo bears an unnerving resemblance to the longtime cover boy of *Mad Magazine*, Alfred E. Neuman, who shrugs off nuclear Armageddon with the glib catchphrase, "What, me worry?" Both share red hair, a smattering of freckles, and a toothy grin. When such a man tells me I'm perfectly safe from a 30,000 degrees F. arc of man-made lightning heating a vat of plasma that his employees are "controlling" in the next room —well, I'm not completely reassured.

To put me at ease, Longo calls in David Lynch, who manages the demonstration facility. "There's no flame or fire inside. It's just electricity," Lynch assures me of the multimillion-dollar system that took Longo almost two decades to design and build. Then the two usher me into the lab, where the gleaming 15-foot-tall machine they've named the Plasma Converter stands in the center of the room. The entire thing takes up about as much space as a two-car garage, surprisingly compact for a machine that can consume nearly any type of waste — from dirty diapers to chemical weapons — by annihilating toxic materials in a process as old as the universe itself. Called plasma gasification, it works a little like the big bang, only backward (you get nothing from something). Inside a sealed vessel made of stainless steel and filled with a stable gas — either pure nitrogen or, as in this case, ordinary air — a 650-volt current passing between two electrodes rips electrons from the air, converting the gas into plasma. Current flows continuously through this newly formed plasma, creating a field of extremely intense energy very much like lightning. The radiant energy of the plasma arc is so powerful, it disintegrates trash into its constituent elements by tearing apart molecular bonds. The system is capable of breaking down pretty much anything except nuclear waste, the isotopes of which are indestructible. The only by-products are an obsidian-like glass used as a raw material for numerous applications, including bathroom tiles and high-strength asphalt, and a synthesis gas, or "syngas" — a mixture of primarily hydrogen and carbon monoxide that can be converted into a variety of marketable fuels, including ethanol, natural gas, and hydrogen.

Perhaps the most amazing part of the process is that it's self-sustaining. Just like your toaster, Startech's Plasma Converter draws its power from the electrical grid to get started. The initial voltage is about equal to the zap from a police stun gun; but once the cycle is under way, the 2,200 degrees F. syngas is fed into a cooling system, generating steam that drives turbines to produce electricity. About two-thirds of the power is siphoned off to run the converter; the rest can be used on-site for heating or electricity, or sold back to the utility grid. "Even a blackout would not stop the operation of the facility," Longo says.

It all sounds far too good to be true, but the technology works. Over the past decade, half a dozen companies have been developing plasma technology to turn garbage into energy. "The best renewable energy is the one we complain about the most: municipal solid waste," says Louis Circeo, the director of plasma research at the Georgia Institute of Technology. "It will prove cheaper to take garbage to a plasma plant than it is to dump it on a landfill." A Startech machine that costs roughly \$250 million could handle 2,000 tons of waste daily, approximately what a city of a million people amasses in that time span. Large municipalities typically haul their trash to landfills, where the operator charges a "tipping fee" to dump the waste. The national average is \$35 a ton, although the cost can be more than twice that in the Northeast — where land is scarce, tipping fees are higher — and the tipping fee a city pays doesn't include the price of trucking the garbage often hundreds of miles to a landfill or the cost of capturing leaky methane — a green-house gas — from the decomposing waste. In a city with an average tipping fee, a \$250-million converter could pay for itself in about 10 years, and that's without factoring in the money made from selling the excess electricity and syngas. After that break-even point, it's pure profit... *Someday very soon, cities might actually make money from garbage.*

Talking Trash

It was a rainy morning when I pulled up to Startech R&D to see Longo waiting for me in the parking lot. Wearing a bright yellow oxford shirt, a striped tie, and blue pinstriped pants, he dashed across the blacktop to greet me as I stepped from my rental car. A street-smart Brooklyn native, Longo was an only child raised by parents who worked long hours at a local factory that made baseballs and footballs. He volunteered to fight in Korea as a paratrooper after a friend was killed in action. He's fond of antiquated slang like "attaboy" and "shills" (as in "those shills stole my patents"), and is old school enough to have only recently abandoned the

protractors, pencils, and drafting tables that he used to design his original Plasma Converter in favor of computers.

Today, Longo is meeting with investors from U.S. Energy, a trio of veteran waste disposal executives who recently formed a partnership to build the first plasma-gasification plant on Long Island, New York. They own a transfer station (where garbage goes for sorting en route to landfills) and are in the process of buying six Startech converters to handle 3,000 tons of construction debris a day trucked from sites around the state. "It's mostly old tile, wood, nails, glass, metal, and wire all mixed together," one of the project's partners, Troy Caruso, tells me. For the demonstration, Longo prepares a sampling of typical garbage — bottles of leftover prescription drugs, bits of fiberglass insulation, a half empty can of Slim-Fast. A conveyor belt feeds the trash into an auger, which shreds and crushes it into pea-size morsels (that explains the deafening grinding sound) before stuffing it into the plasma-reactor chamber. The room is warm and humid, and a dull hum emanates from the machinery.

Caruso and his partners, Paul Marazzo and Michael Nuzzi, are silent at first. They've seen the demo before. But as more trash vanishes into the converter, they become increasingly animated, spouting off facts and figures about how the machine will revolutionize their business. "This technology eliminates the landfill, which is 80 percent of our costs," Nuzzi says. "And we can use it to generate fuel at the back end," adds Marazzo, who then asks Lynch if the converter can handle chunks of concrete (answer: yes). "The bottom line is that nobody wants a landfill in their backyard," Nuzzi tells me. New York City is already paying an astronomical \$90 a ton to get rid of its trash. According to Startech, a few 2,000-ton-per-day plasma-gasification plants could do it for \$36. Sell the syngas and surplus electricity... you'd actually net \$15 a ton... "Gasification is not just environmentally friendly," Nuzzi says. "It's a good business decision."

The converter we're watching vaporize Slim-Fast is a mini version of Startech's technology, capable of consuming five tons a day of solid waste, or about what 2,200 Americans toss in the trash every 24 hours. Fueled with garbage from the local dump, the converter is fired up whenever Longo pitches visiting clients. Longo has been talking with the National Science Foundation about installing a system at McMurdo Station in Antarctica. The Vietnamese government is considering buying one to get rid of stockpiles of Agent Orange that the U.S. military left behind after the war. Investors from China, Poland, Japan, Romania, Italy, Russia, Brazil, Venezuela, the U.K., Mexico, and Canada have all entered contract negotiations with Startech after making the pilgrimage to Bristol to see Longo's dog-and-pony show.

Startech isn't the only company using plasma to turn waste into a source of clean energy. A handful of start-ups — Geoplasma, Recovered Energy, PyroGenesis, EnviroArc, and Plasco Energy, among others — have entered the market in the past decade, but Longo, who has worked in the garbage business for four decades, is perhaps the industry's most passionate founding father. "What's so devilishly wonderful about plasma gasification is that it's completely circular," he says. "It takes everything back to its fundamental components in a way that's beautiful." Although all plasma gasification systems recapture syngas to turn into fuel, Startech's "Starcell" system seems to be ahead of the pack in its ability to economically convert the substance into eco-friendly and competitively-priced fuels. "A lot of other gasification technologies require multiple steps. This is a one-step process," says Patrick Davis of the U.S. Department of Energy's Office of Hydrogen Production and Delivery, which has awarded Longo's company almost \$1 million in research grants. "You put the waste in the reactor and you get out the syngas. That's it."

The Garbage Man

After his tour of duty in Korea, Longo put himself through night school at the Brooklyn Polytechnic Institute. In 1959, engineering degree in hand, he got a job at American Machine & Foundry (AMF) — the same company that today runs the world's largest chain of bowling alleys — designing hardened silos for nuclear inter-continental ballistic missiles, such as Titan and Minuteman. "There was never a time I can remember when I didn't want to be an engineer," he says.

For years, Longo tried to convince his bosses at AMF to go into the garbage business (as manager of new product development, he was charged with investigating growth areas). "I knew a lot about the industry, how backward it was," he says. The costs to collect and transport waste were climbing. He was sure there had to be a better way... In 1967, Longo quit his job at AMF to start his own business, called International Dynetics. The name might not be familiar, but its product should: Longo designed and built the world's first industrial-size trash compactors. "If you live in a high-rise or apartment building and dump your trash down a chute," he says, "it's probably going into one of our compactors."

When Longo started his company, it was still easier and cheaper to just haul the loose trash to the dump, but gas prices climbed, inflation increased, and soon business boomed. In a few years, there were thousands of International Dynetics compactors operating around the world. The machines could crush the equivalent of five 30-gallon cans crammed with trash into a cube that was about the size of a small TV. "Our purpose was to condense it so it would be easier and cost less to bring to a landfill," he says.

Then, in 1972, Longo read a paper in a science journal about fusion reactors. "The authors speculated that plasma might be used to destroy waste to the elemental level someday in the future," he recalls. "That was like a spear in the heart, because we had just got our patents out for our trash compactors, and these guys were already saying there's a prettier girl coming to town," he says. "It would make obsolete everything we were doing. I resisted looking at the technology for 10 years, but by 1984, it became obvious that plasma could do some serious work."

By then, the principal component of today's plasma gasification systems, the plasma torch, had become widespread in the metal fabrication industry, where it is used as a cutting knife for slicing through slabs of steel. Most engineers at the time were focused on ways to improve plasma torches for manipulating metals, but Longo had trash on the brain — whole landfills of trash. He was intent on developing a system that used plasma to convert waste into energy on a large scale. So he jumped ship again. In 1988, Longo sold International Dynetics and founded Startech.

Plasma to the People

"People kept asking me, 'If this is so good, Longo, then why isn't everyone already using one?' " he says, referring to himself in the third person, a device he relies on frequently to emphasize his point. "We had the technical capability, but we didn't have a product yet. Just because we could do the trick didn't mean it was worth doing." Trucking garbage to dumps and landfills was still cheap. Environmental concerns weren't on the public radar the way they are today, and landfills and incinerators weren't yet widely seen as public menaces. "We outsourced the parts to build our first converter," Longo says. "Manufacturers were told we were working with plasma; some of them thought it had something to do with blood and AIDS."

Longo describes the development curve as "relentless." He teamed up with another engineer who had experience in the waste industry and an interest in plasma technology. "We didn't have computers. We did everything on drafting boards — but I was aggressive, and the more we did, the more it compelled us to continue." It took almost a decade of R&D until they had a working prototype.

"I felt like St. Peter bringing the message out," Longo says of his first sales calls. In 1997, the U.S. Army became Startech's inaugural customer, buying a converter to dispose of chemical weapons at the Aberdeen Proving Ground in Maryland. A second reactor went to Japan for processing polychlorinated biphenyls, or PCBs, an industrial coolant and lubricant banned in the U.S since 1977 ("really nasty stuff," Longo says).

Longo realized early on that what would make plasma gasification marketable was a machine that could handle anything. Some of the most noxious chemicals, he knew from his decades in the garbage industry, are found in the most mundane places like household solid waste. Startech has an edge over some of its competitors because its converter doesn't have to be reconfigured for different materials, which means operators don't have to presort waste, a costly and time-consuming process. To achieve this adaptability, Startech converters crank the plasma arc up to an extremely high operating temperature: 30,000 degrees F. Getting that temperature just right was one of Longo's key developmental challenges. "You can't rely on the customer to tell you what they put in," Longo says. "Sometimes they don't know, sometimes they lie, and sometimes they've thrown in live shotgun shells from a hunting trip. That's why it's imperative that the Plasma Converter can take in anything."

A video camera mounted near the top of the converter at the Bristol plant gives me a glimpse of the plasma arc doing its dirty work. At a computer station near the converter, Lynch taps a few commands into a keyboard, and a loud hiss fills the room, the sound of steam being released from behind a pressurized valve. "You can use that steam to heat your facility and neighboring buildings," he says proudly. Next to him is an LCD monitor with a live video feed from inside the reactor. A vivid magenta glow fills the screen as I watch the plasma torch vaporize a bucket of cell phones and soda cans. A hopper at the top of the vessel dumps another load into the plasma reactor, and seconds later, it vanishes too. "The idea," Lynch says, "is that regardless of what you put

in the front end, what comes out will be clean and ready to use for whatever you want." I've watched him operate the converter for nearly an hour, and I'm still stunned to see no smoke, no flames, no ash, no pollution of any kind — all that's left is syngas, the fuel source, and the molten obsidian-like material.

Catching the Litter Bug

Low transportation costs, cheap land, weak environmental regulations — these factors help explain why it took plasma until now to catch on as an economically sensible strategy to dispose of waste. "The steep increase in energy prices over the past two years is what has made this technology viable," says Hilburn Hillestad, president of Geoplasma. His company, which touts the slogan "waste destruction at the speed of lightning with energy to share," is negotiating a deal with St. Lucie County, Florida, to erect a \$425-million plasma gasification system near a local landfill. The plant in St. Lucie County will be large enough to devour all 2,000 tons of daily trash generated by the county and polish off an additional 1,000 tons a day from the old landfill. Of course, the technology, still unproven on a large scale, has its skeptics. "That obsidian-like slag contains toxic heavy metals and breaks down when exposed to water," claims Brad Van Guilder, a scientist at the Ecology Center in Ann Arbor, Michigan, which advocates for clean air and water. "Dump it in a landfill, and it could one day contaminate local groundwater." Others wonder about the cleanliness of the syngas. "In the cool-down phases, the components in the syngas could re-form into toxins," warns Monica Wilson, the international coordinator for the Global Alliance for Incinerator Alternatives, in Berkeley, California. None of this seems to worry St. Lucie County's solid waste director, Leo Cordeiro. "We'll get all our garbage to disappear, and our landfill will be gone in 20 years," he tells me. The best part: Geoplasma is footing the entire bill. "We'll generate 160 megawatts a day from the garbage," Hillestad says, "but we'll consume only 40 megawatts to run the plant. We'll sell the net energy to the local power grid." Sales from excess electricity might allow Geoplasma to break even in 20 years.

In New York, Carmen Cogna, an attorney with the city council's infrastructure division, is evaluating how plasma gasification could help offset some of the city's exorbitant waste costs. "All the landfills around New York have closed, incinerators are banned, and we are trucking our trash to Virginia and Pennsylvania," he explains. "That is costing the city \$400 million a year. We could put seven or eight of these converters in the city, and that would be enough." The syngas from the converters, Cogna says, could be tapped for hydrogen gas to power buses or police cars, but the decision making bureaucracy can be slow, and it is hamstrung by the politically well-connected waste-disposal industry. "Many landfill operators are used to getting a million dollars a month out of debris," says U.S. Energy's Paul Marazzo. "They don't want a converter to happen, because they'll lose their revenue."

Meanwhile, Victor Sziky, the president of Sicmar International, an investment firm based in Panama, is working with the Panamanian government to set up at least 10 Startech systems there. "The garbage problem here is exploding in conjunction with growth," says Sziky, who lives in Panama City. "We have obsolete incinerators and landfills that are polluting groundwater and drinking water. We've had outbreaks of cholera and hepatitis A and B directly attributed to the waste in landfills. There are a lot of people in a small country, and there's no infrastructure to deal with it." The project will be capable of destroying 200 tons of trash a day at each location, enough to handle all the garbage for the municipalities involved — and, says Sziky, to produce up to 40 percent of their electrical demand.

Panama's syngas will probably be converted to hydrogen and sold to industrial suppliers. The current market for hydrogen is at least \$50 billion worldwide, a figure that is expected to grow by 5 to 10 percent annually, according to the National Hydrogen Association, an industry and research consortium. Analysts at Fuji-Keizai USA, a market-research firm for emerging technologies, predict that the domestic market will hit \$1.6 billion by 2010, up from \$800 million in 2005. The Department of Energy's Patrick Davis says that when the long-awaited hydrogen-powered vehicles finally arrive, the demand for hydrogen will soar, but he also notes that to have an effect on global warming, it's critical that hydrogen come from clean sources.

That's one more idea that's old news to Longo, who, as usual, is 10 steps ahead of the game, already embedded in a future where fossil fuels are artifacts of a bygone era. For the past several years, he has been developing the Starcell, a filtration mechanism that slaps onto the back end of his converter and quickly refines syngas into hydrogen. As he says, "We are the disruptive technology." Longo has been working in garbage for 40 years, making his fortune by literally scraping the bottom of the barrel. Which is, it turns out, the perfect vantage point for finding new ways to turn what to most of us is just garbage into arguably the most valuable thing in the world: clean energy.

SCIENTISTS OFFERED CASH TO DISPUTE CLIMATE STUDY, by Ian Sample, Science Correspondent — *The Guardian*, February 2, 2007 [<http://www.guardian.co.uk/frontpage/story/0,,2004399,00.html>]

Scientists and economists have been offered \$10,000 each by a lobby group funded by one of the world's largest oil companies to undermine a major climate change report due to be published today... Letters sent by the American Enterprise Institute (AEI), an ExxonMobil-funded think tank with close links to the Bush administration, offered the payments for articles that emphasize the shortcomings of a report from the UN's Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC). *Travel expenses and additional payments were also offered.*

The UN report was written by international experts and is widely regarded as the most comprehensive review yet of climate change science. It will underpin international negotiations on new emissions targets to succeed the Kyoto agreement, the first phase of which expires in 2012. World governments were given a draft last year and invited to comment.

The AEI has received more than \$1.6m from ExxonMobil and more than 20 of its staff have worked as consultants to the Bush administration. Lee Raymond, a former head of ExxonMobil, is the vice-chairman of AEI's board of trustees... The letters, sent to scientists in Britain, the U.S. and elsewhere, attack the UN's panel as "resistant to reasonable criticism and dissent and prone to summary conclusions that are poorly supported by the analytical work" and ask for essays that "thoughtfully explore the limitations of climate model outputs." Climate scientists described the move yesterday as an attempt to cast doubt over the "overwhelming scientific evidence" on global warming. "It's a desperate attempt by an organisation who wants to distort science for their own political aims," said David Viner of the Climatic Research Unit at the University of East Anglia.

"The IPCC process is probably the most thorough and open review undertaken in any discipline. This undermines the confidence of the public in the scientific community and the ability of governments to take on sound scientific advice," he said... The letters were sent by Kenneth Green, a visiting scholar at AEI, who confirmed that the organisation had approached scientists, economists, and policy analysts to write articles for an independent review that would highlight the strengths and weaknesses of the IPCC report... "Right now, the whole debate is polarised," he said. "One group says that anyone with any doubts whatsoever are deniers and the other group is saying that anyone who wants to take action is alarmist. We don't think that approach has a lot of utility for intelligent policy."... One American scientist turned down the offer, citing fears that the report could easily be misused for political gain. "You wouldn't know if some of the other authors might say nothing's going to happen, that we should ignore it, or that it's not our fault," said Steve Schroeder, a professor at Texas A&M university.

The contents of the IPCC report have been an open secret since the Bush administration posted its draft copy on the Internet in April. It says there is a 90% chance that human activity is warming the planet, and that global average temperatures will rise by another 1.5 to 5.8 degrees C. this century, depending on emissions... Lord Rees of Ludlow, the president of the Royal Society, Britain's most prestigious scientific institute, said: "The IPCC is the world's leading authority on climate change, and its latest report will provide a comprehensive picture of the latest scientific understanding on the issue. It is expected to stress, more convincingly than ever before, that our planet is already warming due to human actions, and that 'business as usual' would lead to unacceptable risks, underscoring the urgent need for concerted international action to reduce the worst impacts of climate change; however, yet again, there will be a vocal minority with their own agendas who will try to suggest otherwise."

Ben Stewart of Greenpeace said: "The AEI is more than just a think tank — it functions as the Bush administration's intellectual Cosa Nostra. They are White House surrogates in the last throes of their campaign of climate change denial. They lost on the science; they lost on the moral case for action. All they've got left is a suitcase full of cash."... On Monday, another Exxon-funded organisation based in Canada will launch a review in London which casts doubt on the IPCC report. Among its authors are Tad Murty, a former scientist who believes human activity makes no contribution to global warming. Confirmed VIPs attending include Nigel Lawson and David Bellamy, who believes there is no link between burning fossil fuels and global warming.

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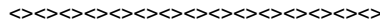
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It Can Happen Here... By Joe Conason, February 23, 2007 — [Salon.com]

In light of the series of laws passed in Congress and precedents set by the Bush administration, people have good reason to doubt the future of democracy and the rule of law in America... The following is excerpted from Joe Conason's new book, "It Can Happen Here: Authoritarian Peril in the Age of Bush," (Thomas Dunne Books, 2007)... Can it happen here? Is it happening here already? That depends, as a recent president might have said, on what the meaning of "it" is... To Sinclair Lewis, who sardonically titled his 1935 dystopian novel, "It Can't Happen Here," "it" plainly meant an American version of the totalitarian dictatorships that had seized power in Germany and Italy. Married at the time to the pioneering reporter Dorothy Thompson, who had been expelled from Berlin by the Nazis a year earlier and quickly became one of America's most outspoken critics of fascism, Lewis was acutely aware of the domestic and foreign threats to American freedom. So often did he and Thompson discuss the crisis in Europe and the implications of Europe's fate for the Great Depression-wracked United States that, according to his biographer, Mark Schorer, Lewis referred to the entire topic somewhat contemptuously as "it."

If "it" denotes the American style police state as imagined and satirized by Lewis, complete with concentration camps, martial law, and mass executions of strikers and other dissidents, then "it" hasn't happened here and isn't likely to happen anytime soon... For contemporary Americans, however, "it" could signify our own more gradual and insidious turn toward authoritarian rule. That is why Lewis's darkly funny but grim fable of an authoritarian coup achieved through a democratic election still resonates today — along with all the eerie parallels between what he imagined then and what we live with now.

For the first time since the resignation of Richard M. Nixon more than three decades ago, Americans have had reason to doubt the future of democracy and the rule of law in our own country. Today we live in a state of tension between the enjoyment of traditional freedoms, including the protections afforded to speech and person

by the Bill of Rights, and the disturbing realization that those freedoms have been undermined and may be abrogated at any moment... Such foreboding, which would have been dismissed as paranoia not so long ago,

has been intensified by the unfolding crisis of political legitimacy in the capital. George W. Bush has repeatedly asserted and exercised authority that he does not possess under the Constitution he swore to uphold. He has announced that he intends to continue exercising power according to his claim of a mandate that erases the separation and balancing of power among the branches of government, frees him from any real obligation to obey laws passed by Congress, and permits him to ignore any provisions of the Bill of Rights that may prove inconvenient.

Whether his fellow Americans understand exactly what Bush is doing or not, his six years in office have created intense public anxiety. Much of that anxiety can be attributed to fear of terrorism — which Bush has exacerbated to suit his own purposes — as well as to increasing concern that the world is threatened by global warming, pandemic diseases, economic insecurity, nuclear proliferation, and other perils with which this presidency cannot begin to cope. As the midterm election showed, more and more Americans realize that something has gone far wrong at the highest levels of government and politics — that Washington's one-party regime had created a daily spectacle of stunning incompetence and dishonesty. Pollsters have found large majorities of voters worrying that the country is on the wrong track. At this writing, two of every three voters give that answer, and they are not just anxious but furious. Almost half are willing to endorse the censure of the president.

Suspicion and alienation extend beyond the usual disgruntled Democrats to independents and even a significant minority of Republicans. A surprisingly large segment of the electorate is willing to contemplate the possibility of impeaching the president, unappetizing though that prospect should be to anyone who can recall the destructive impeachment of Bush's predecessor... The reasons for popular disenchantment with the Republican regime are well known — from the misbegotten, horrifically mismanaged war in Iraq to the heartless mishandling of the Hurricane Katrina disaster. In both instances, growing anger over the damage done to the national interest and the loss of life and treasure has been exacerbated by evidence of bad faith, by lies, cronyism, and corruption.

Everyone knows — although not everyone necessarily wishes to acknowledge — that the Bush administration misled the American people about the true purposes and likely costs of invading Iraq. It invented a mortal threat to the nation in order to justify illegal aggression. It has repeatedly sought, from the beginning, to exploit the state of war for partisan advantage and presidential image management. It has wasted billions of dollars, and probably tens of billions, on Pentagon contractors with patronage connections to the Republican Party... Everyone knows, too, that the administration dissembled about the events leading up to the destruction of New Orleans. Its negligence and obliviousness in the wake of the storm were shocking, as was its attempt to conceal its errors. It has yet to explain why a person with few discernible qualifications, other than his status as a crony and business associate of his predecessor, was directing the Federal Emergency Management Agency. By elevating ethically dubious, inexperienced, and ineffectual management, the administration compromised a critical agency that had functioned brilliantly during the Clinton administration.

To date, however, we do not know the full dimensions of the scandals behind Iraq and Katrina, because the Republican leaders of the Senate and the House of Representatives abdicated the traditional congressional duties of oversight and investigation. It is due to their dereliction that neither the president nor any of his associates have seemed even mildly chastened in the wake of catastrophe. With a single party monopolizing power yet evading responsibility, there was nobody with the constitutional power to hold the White House accountable... Bolstered by political impunity, especially in a time of war, perhaps any group of politicians would be tempted to abuse power, but this party and these politicians, unchecked by normal democratic constraints, proved to be particularly dangerous. The name for what is wrong with them — the threat embedded within the Bush administration, the Republican congressional leadership, and the current leaders of the Republican Party — is authoritarianism... The most obvious symptoms can be observed in the regime's style, which features an almost casual contempt for democratic and lawful norms; an expanding appetite for executive control at the expense of constitutional balances; a reckless impulse to corrupt national institutions with partisan ideology; and an ugly tendency to smear dissent as disloyalty. The most troubling effects are matters of substance, including the suspension of traditional legal rights for certain citizens; the imposition of secrecy and the inhibition of the free flow of information; the extension of domestic spying without legal sanction or warrant; the promotion of torture and other barbaric practices, in defiance of American and international law; and the collusion of government and party with corporate interests and religious fundamentalists.

What worries many Americans even more is that the authoritarians can excuse their excesses as the necessary response to an enemy that every American knows to be real. For the past five years, the Republican leadership has argued that the attacks of September 11, 2001 - and the continuing threat from jihadist groups such as al Qaeda — demand permanent changes in American government, society, and foreign policy. Are those changes essential to preserve our survival — or merely useful for unscrupulous politicians who still hope to achieve permanent domination by their own narrowly ideological party? Not only liberals and leftists, but centrists, libertarians, and conservatives, of every party and no party, have come to distrust the answers given by those in power.

The most salient dissent to be heard in recent years, and especially since Bush's reelection in 2004, has been voiced not by the liberals and moderates who never trusted the Republican leadership, but by conservatives who once did... Former Republican congressman Bob Barr of Georgia, who served as one of the managers of the impeachment of Bill Clinton in the House of Representatives, has joined the American Civil Liberties Union he once detested. In the measures taken by the Bush administration and approved by his former colleagues, Barr sees the potential for "a totalitarian type regime."... Paul Craig Roberts, a longtime contributor to *The Wall Street Journal* and a former Treasury official under Reagan, perceives the "main components of a police state" in the Bush administration's declaration of plenary powers to deny fundamental rights to suspected terrorists.

Bruce Fein, who served as associate attorney general in the Reagan Justice Department, believes that the Bush White House is "a clear and present danger to the rule of law," and that the president "cannot be trusted to conduct the war against global terrorism with a decent respect for civil liberties and checks against executive abuses." Syndicated columnist George Will accuses the administration of pursuing a "monarchical doctrine" in its assertion of extraordinary war powers... In the 2006 midterm election, disenchanted conservatives joined with liberals and centrists to deliver a stinging rebuke to the regime by overturning Republican domination in both houses of Congress. For the first time since 1994, Democrats control the Senate and the House of Representatives, but the Democratic majority in the upper chamber is as narrow as possible, depending on the whims of Joseph Lieberman of Connecticut, a Republican-leaning Democrat elected on an Independent ballot line, who has supported the White House on the occupation of Iraq, abuse of prisoners of war, domestic spying, the suspension of habeas corpus, military tribunals, far-right judicial nominations, and other critical constitutional issues — nor is Lieberman alone among the Senate Democrats in supine acquiescence to the abuses of the White House.

Even if the Democrats had won a stronger majority in the Senate, it would be naive to expect that a single election victory could mend the damage inflicted on America's constitutional fabric during the past six years. While the Bush administration has enjoyed an extraordinary immunity from Congressional oversight until now, the deepest implication of its actions and statements is that neither legislators nor courts can thwart the will of the unitary executive. When Congress challenges that presidential claim, as inevitably it will, then what seems almost certain to follow is not "bipartisanship" but confrontation. The election of 2006 was not an end but another beginning.

The question that we face in the era of terror alerts, religious fundamentalism, and endless warfare is whether we are still the brave nation preserved and rebuilt by the generation of Sinclair Lewis or whether our courage and our luck have finally run out. America is not yet on the verge of fascism, but democracy is again in danger. The striking resemblance between Buzz Windrip [the demagogic villain of Lewis's novel] and George W. Bush and the similarity of the political forces behind them is more than a literary curiosity. It is a warning on yellowed pages from those to whom we owe everything.



A QUOTE BY HOWARD SCOTT: In the passing of the old and the instituting of the new, human conflict will become the bitterest in history. Science is hated and feared by ecclesiastical institutionalism, by corporate enterprise, and political parties. The fear and hatred that will be directed by these against science and its technological application will be far greater than those the Inquisition hurled against all the accumulated heresies. Only science and its technological application to the means whereby we live can produce for mankind the control of our social destiny here on this earth

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