

Inverted Totalitarianism: A New Way of Understanding How the U.S. Is Controlled

Review of Democracy Incorporated by Sheldon S. Wolin

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It is not news that the United States is in great trouble. The pre-emptive war it launched against Iraq more than five years ago was and is a mistake of monumental proportions — one that most Americans still fail to acknowledge. Instead they are arguing about whether we should push on to “victory” when even our own generals tell us that a military victory is today inconceivable. Our economy has been hollowed out by excessive military spending over many decades while our competitors have devoted themselves to investments in lucrative new industries that serve civilian needs. Our political system of checks and balances has been virtually destroyed by rampant cronyism and corruption in Washington, D.C., and by a two-term president who goes around crowing “I am the decider,” a concept fundamentally hostile to our constitutional system. We have allowed our elections, the one nonnegotiable institution in a democracy, to be debased and hijacked — as was the 2000 presidential election in Florida — with scarcely any protest from the public or the self-proclaimed press guardians of the “Fourth Estate.” We now engage in torture of defenseless prisoners although it defames and demoralizes our armed forces and intelligence agencies.

The problem is that there are too many things going wrong at the same time for anyone to have a broad understanding of the disaster that has overcome us and what, if anything, can be done to return our country to constitutional government and at least a degree of democracy. By now, there are hundreds of books on particular aspects of our situation — the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, the bloated and unsupervised “defense” budgets, the imperial presidency and its contempt for our civil liberties, the widespread privatization of traditional governmental functions, and a political system in which no leader dares even to utter the words imperialism and militarism in public.

There are, however, a few attempts at more complex analyses of how we arrived at this sorry state. They include Naomi Klein, *The Shock Doctrine: The Rise of Disaster Capitalism*, on how “private” economic power now is almost coequal with legitimate political power; John W. Dean, *Broken Government: How Republican Rule Destroyed the Legislative, Executive, and Judicial Branches*, on the perversion of our main defenses against dictatorship and tyranny; Arianna Huffington, *Right Is Wrong: How the Lunatic Fringe Hijacked America, Shredded the Constitution, and Made Us All Less Safe*, on the manipulation of fear in our political life and the primary role played by the media; and Naomi Wolf, *The End of America: Letter of Warning to a Young Patriot*, on *Ten Steps to Fascism* and where we currently stand on this staircase. My own book, *Nemesis: The Last*

Days of the American Republic, on militarism as an inescapable accompaniment of imperialism, also belongs to this genre.

We now have a new, comprehensive diagnosis of our failings as a democratic polity by one of our most seasoned and respected political philosophers. For well over two generations, Sheldon Wolin taught the history of political philosophy from Plato to the present to Berkeley and Princeton graduate students (including me; I took his seminars at Berkeley in the late 1950s, thus influencing my approach to political science ever since). He is the author of the prize-winning classic *Politics and Vision* (1960; expanded edition, 2006) and *Tocqueville Between Two Worlds* (2001), among many other works.

His new book, *Democracy Incorporated: Managed Democracy and the Specter of Inverted Totalitarianism*, is a devastating critique of the contemporary government of the United States — including what has happened to it in recent years and what must be done if it is not to disappear into history along with its classic totalitarian predecessors: Fascist Italy, Nazi Germany and Bolshevik Russia. The hour is very late and the possibility that the American people might pay attention to what is wrong and take the difficult steps to avoid a national Gtterdmmerung are remote, but Wolin's is the best analysis of why the presidential election of 2008 probably will not do anything to mitigate our fate. This book demonstrates why political science, properly practiced, is the master social science.

Wolin's work is fully accessible. Understanding his argument does not depend on possessing any specialized knowledge, but it would still be wise to read him in short bursts and think about what he is saying before moving on. His analysis of the contemporary American crisis relies on a historical perspective going back to the original constitutional agreement of 1789 and includes particular attention to the advanced levels of social democracy attained during the New Deal and the contemporary mythology that the U.S., beginning during World War II, wields unprecedented world power.

Given this historical backdrop, Wolin introduces three new concepts to help analyze what we have lost as a nation. His master idea is "inverted totalitarianism," which is reinforced by two subordinate notions that accompany and promote it — "managed democracy" and "Superpower," the latter always capitalized and used without a direct article. Until the reader gets used to this particular literary tic, the term Superpower can be confusing. The author uses it as if it were an independent agent, comparable to Superman or Spiderman, and one that is inherently incompatible with constitutional government and democracy.

Wolin writes, "Our thesis is this: it is possible for a form of totalitarianism, different from the classical one, to evolve from a putatively 'strong democracy' instead of a 'failed' one." His understanding of democracy is classical but also populist, anti-elitist and only slightly represented in the Constitution of the United States. "Democracy," he writes, "is about the conditions that make it possible for ordinary people to better their lives by becoming political beings and by making power responsive to their hopes and needs." It depends on the existence of a demos — "a politically engaged and empowered citizenry, one that voted, deliberated, and occupied all branches of public office." Wolin argues that to the extent the United States on occasion came close to genuine democracy, it was because its citizens struggled against and momentarily defeated the elitism that was written into the Constitution.

"No working man or ordinary farmer or shopkeeper," Wolin points out, "helped to write the Constitution." He argues, "The American political system was not born a democracy, but

born with a bias against democracy. It was constructed by those who were either skeptical about democracy or hostile to it. Democratic advance proved to be slow, uphill, forever incomplete. The republic existed for three-quarters of a century before formal slavery was ended; another hundred years before black Americans were assured of their voting rights. Only in the twentieth century were women guaranteed the vote and trade unions the right to bargain collectively. In none of these instances has victory been complete: women still lack full equality, racism persists, and the destruction of the remnants of trade unions remains a goal of corporate strategies. Far from being innate, democracy in America has gone against the grain, against the very forms by which the political and economic power of the country has been and continues to be ordered.” Wolin can easily control his enthusiasm for James Madison, the primary author of the Constitution, and he sees the New Deal as perhaps the only period of American history in which rule by a true demos prevailed.

To reduce a complex argument to its bare bones, since the Depression, the twin forces of managed democracy and Superpower have opened the way for something new under the sun: “inverted totalitarianism,” a form every bit as totalistic as the classical version but one based on internalized co-optation, the appearance of freedom, political disengagement rather than mass mobilization, and relying more on “private media” than on public agencies to disseminate propaganda that reinforces the official version of events. It is inverted because it does not require the use of coercion, police power and a messianic ideology as in the Nazi, Fascist and Stalinist versions (although note that the United States has the highest percentage of its citizens in prison — 751 per 100,000 people — of any nation on Earth). According to Wolin, inverted totalitarianism has “emerged imperceptibly, unpremeditatedly, and in seeming unbroken continuity with the nation’s political traditions.”

The genius of our inverted totalitarian system “lies in wielding total power without appearing to, without establishing concentration camps, or enforcing ideological uniformity, or forcibly suppressing dissident elements so long as they remain ineffectual. A demotion in the status and stature of the ‘sovereign people’ to patient subjects is symptomatic of systemic change, from democracy as a method of ‘popularizing’ power to democracy as a brand name for a product marketable at home and marketable abroad. The new system, inverted totalitarianism, is one that professes the opposite of what, in fact, it is. The United States has become the showcase of how democracy can be managed without appearing to be suppressed.”

Among the factors that have promoted inverted totalitarianism are the practice and psychology of advertising and the rule of “market forces” in many other contexts than markets, continuous technological advances that encourage elaborate fantasies (computer games, virtual avatars, space travel), the penetration of mass media communication and propaganda into every household in the country, and the total co-optation of the universities. Among the commonplace fables of our society are hero worship and tales of individual prowess, eternal youthfulness, beauty through surgery, action measured in nanoseconds, and a dream-laden culture of ever-expanding control and possibility, whose adepts are prone to fantasies because the vast majority have imagination but little scientific knowledge. Masters of this world are masters of images and their manipulation. Wolin reminds us that the image of Adolf Hitler flying to Nuremberg in 1934 that opens Leni Riefenstahl’s classic film “Triumph of the Will” was repeated on May 1, 2003, with President George Bush’s apparent landing of a Navy warplane on the flight deck of the USS Abraham Lincoln to proclaim “Mission Accomplished” in Iraq.

On inverted totalitarianism's "self-pacifying" university campuses compared with the usual intellectual turmoil surrounding independent centers of learning, Wolin writes, "Through a combination of governmental contracts, corporate and foundation funds, joint projects involving university and corporate researchers, and wealthy individual donors, universities (especially so-called research universities), intellectuals, scholars, and researchers have been seamlessly integrated into the system. No books burned, no refugee Einsteins. For the first time in the history of American higher education top professors are made wealthy by the system, commanding salaries and perks that a budding CEO might envy."

The main social sectors promoting and reinforcing this modern Shangri-La are corporate power, which is in charge of managed democracy, and the military-industrial complex, which is in charge of Superpower. The main objectives of managed democracy are to increase the profits of large corporations, dismantle the institutions of social democracy (Social Security, unions, welfare, public health services, public housing and so forth), and roll back the social and political ideals of the New Deal. Its primary tool is privatization. Managed democracy aims at the "selective abdication of governmental responsibility for the well-being of the citizenry" under cover of improving "efficiency" and cost-cutting.

Wolin argues, "The privatization of public services and functions manifests the steady evolution of corporate power into a political form, into an integral, even dominant partner with the state. It marks the transformation of American politics and its political culture from a system in which democratic practices and values were, if not defining, at least major contributing elements, to one where the remaining democratic elements of the state and its populist programs are being systematically dismantled." This campaign has largely succeeded. "Democracy represented a challenge to the status quo, today it has become adjusted to the status quo."

One other subordinate task of managed democracy is to keep the citizenry preoccupied with peripheral and/or private conditions of human life so that they fail to focus on the widespread corruption and betrayal of the public trust. In Wolin's words, "The point about disputes on such topics as the value of sexual abstinence, the role of religious charities in state-funded activities, the question of gay marriage, and the like, is that they are not framed to be resolved. Their political function is to divide the citizenry while obscuring class differences and diverting the voters' attention from the social and economic concerns of the general populace." Prominent examples of the elite use of such incidents to divide and inflame the public are the Terri Schiavo case of 2005, in which a brain-dead woman was kept artificially alive, and the 2008 case of women and children living in a polygamous commune in Texas who were allegedly sexually mistreated.

Another elite tactic of managed democracy is to bore the electorate to such an extent that it gradually fails to pay any attention to politics. Wolin perceives, "One method of assuring control is to make electioneering continuous, year-round, saturated with party propaganda, punctuated with the wisdom of kept pundits, bringing a result boring rather than energizing, the kind of civic lassitude on which managed democracy thrives." The classic example is certainly the nominating contests of the two main American political parties during 2007 and 2008, but the dynastic "competition" between the Bush and Clinton families from 1988 to 2008 is equally relevant. It should be noted that between a half and two-thirds of qualified voters have recently failed to vote, thus making the management of the active electorate far easier. Wolin comments, "Every apathetic citizen is a silent enlistee in the cause of inverted totalitarianism." It remains to be seen whether an Obama candidacy can reawaken these apathetic voters, but I suspect that Wolin would predict a barrage of

corporate media character assassination that would end this possibility.

Managed democracy is a powerful solvent for any vestiges of democracy left in the American political system, but its powers are weak in comparison with those of Superpower. Superpower is the sponsor, defender and manager of American imperialism and militarism, aspects of American government that have always been dominated by elites, enveloped in executive-branch secrecy, and allegedly beyond the ken of ordinary citizens to understand or oversee. Superpower is preoccupied with weapons of mass destruction, clandestine manipulation of foreign policy (sometimes domestic policy, too), military operations, and the fantastic sums of money demanded from the public by the military-industrial complex. (The U.S. military spends more than all other militaries on Earth combined. The official U.S. defense budget for fiscal year 2008 is \$623 billion; the next closest national military budget is China's at \$65 billion, according to the Central Intelligence Agency.)

Foreign military operations literally force democracy to change its nature: "In order to cope with the imperial contingencies of foreign war and occupation," according to Wolin, "democracy will alter its character, not only by assuming new behaviors abroad (e.g., ruthlessness, indifference to suffering, disregard of local norms, the inequalities in ruling a subject population) but also by operating on revised, power-expansive assumptions at home. It will, more often than not, try to manipulate the public rather than engage its members in deliberation. It will demand greater powers and broader discretion in their use ('state secrets'), a tighter control over society's resources, more summary methods of justice, and less patience for legalities, opposition, and clamor for socioeconomic reforms."

Imperialism and democracy are, in Wolin's terms, literally incompatible, and the ever greater resources devoted to imperialism mean that democracy will inevitably wither and die. He writes, "Imperial politics represents the conquest of domestic politics and the latter's conversion into a crucial element of inverted totalitarianism. It makes no sense to ask how the democratic citizen could 'participate' substantively in imperial politics; hence it is not surprising that the subject of empire is taboo in electoral debates. No major politician or party has so much as publicly remarked on the existence of an American empire."

From the time of the United States' founding, its citizens have had a long history of being complicit in the country's imperial ventures, including its transcontinental expansion at the expense of native Americans, Mexicans and Spanish imperialists. Theodore Roosevelt often commented that Americans were deeply opposed to imperialism because of their successful escape from the British empire but that "expansionism" was in their blood. Over the years, American political analysis has carefully tried to separate the military from imperialism, even though militarism is imperialism's inescapable accompaniment. The military creates the empire in the first place and is indispensable to its defense, policing and expansion. Wolin observes, "That the patriotic citizen unswervingly supports the military and its huge budgets means that conservatives have succeeded in persuading the public that the military is distinct from the government. Thus the most substantial element of state power is removed from public debate."

It has taken a long time, but under George W. Bush's administration the United States has finally achieved an official ideology of imperial expansion comparable to those of Nazi and Soviet totalitarianisms. In accordance with the National Security Strategy of the United States (allegedly drafted by Condoleezza Rice and proclaimed on Sept. 9, 2002), the United States is now committed to what it calls "preemptive war." Wolin explains: "Preemptive war entails the projection of power abroad, usually against a far weaker country, comparable

say, to the Nazi invasion of Belgium and Holland in 1940. It declares that the United States is justified in striking at another country because of a perceived threat that U.S. power will be weakened, severely damaged, unless it reacts to eliminate the danger before it materializes. Preemptive war is Lebensraum [Hitler's claim that his imperialism was justified by Germany's need for "living room"] for the age of terrorism." This was, of course, the official excuse for the American aggression against Iraq that began in 2003.

Many analysts, myself included, would conclude that Wolin has made a close to airtight case that the American republic's days are numbered, but Wolin himself does not agree. Toward the end of his study he produces a wish list of things that should be done to ward off the disaster of inverted totalitarianism: "rolling back the empire, rolling back the practices of managed democracy; returning to the idea and practices of international cooperation rather than the dogmas of globalization and preemptive strikes; restoring and strengthening environmental protections; reinvigorating populist politics; undoing the damage to our system of individual rights; restoring the institutions of an independent judiciary, separation of powers, and checks and balances; reinstating the integrity of the independent regulatory agencies and of scientific advisory processes; reviving representative systems responsive to popular needs for health care, education, guaranteed pensions, and an honorable minimum wage; restoring governmental regulatory authority over the economy; and rolling back the distortions of a tax code that toadies to the wealthy and corporate power."

Unfortunately, this is more a guide to what has gone wrong than a statement of how to fix it, particularly since Wolin believes that our political system is "shot through with corruption and awash in contributions primarily from wealthy and corporate donors." It is extremely unlikely that our party apparatus will work to bring the military-industrial complex and the 16 secret intelligence agencies under democratic control. Nonetheless, once the United States has followed the classical totalitarianisms into the dustbin of history, Wolin's analysis will stand as one of the best discourses on where we went wrong.

Chalmers Johnson's latest book is Nemesis: The Last Days of the American Republic (Metropolitan Books, 2008), now available in a Holt Paperback. It is the third volume of his Blowback Trilogy.

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