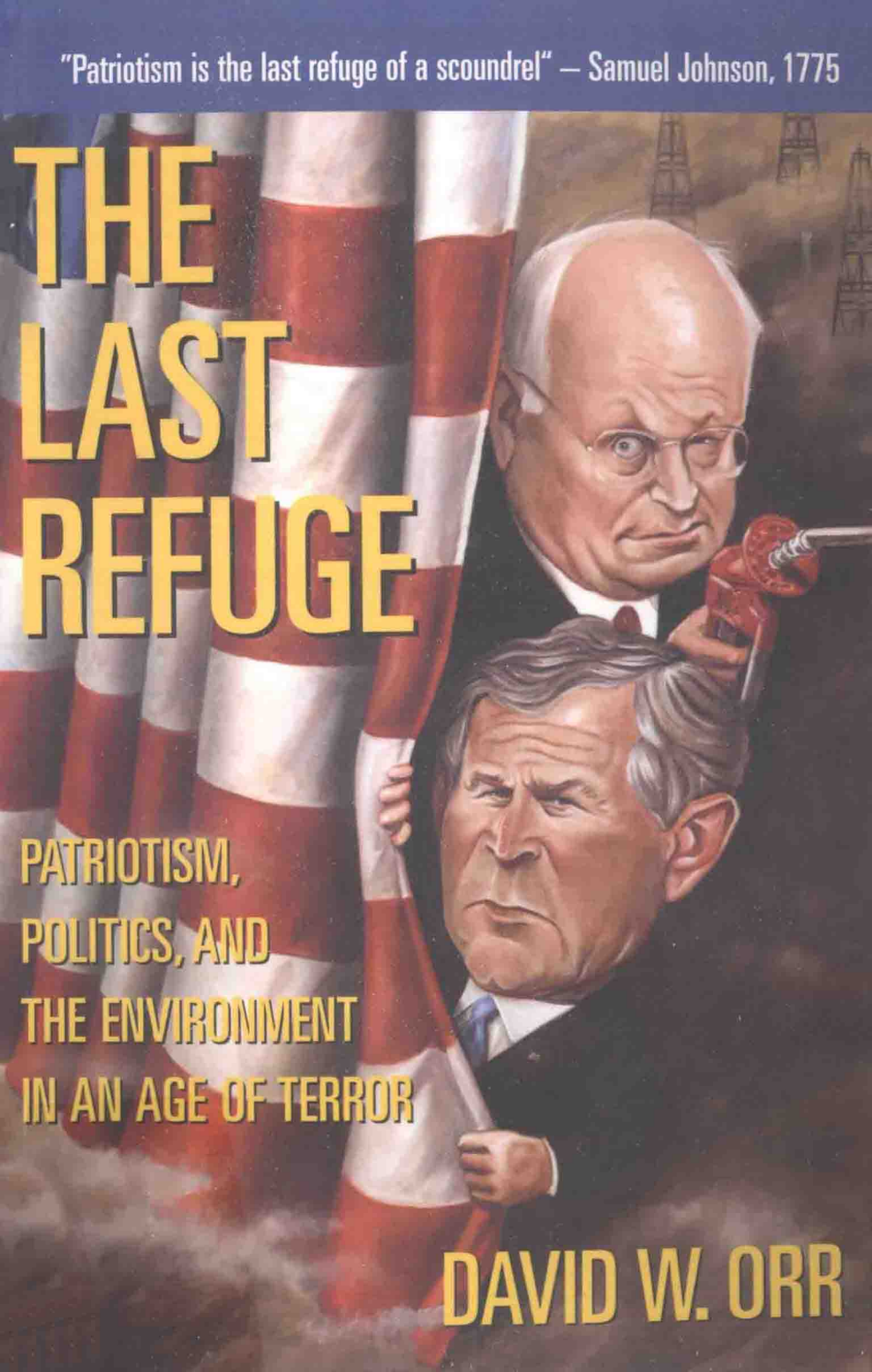


"Patriotism is the last refuge of a scoundrel" — Samuel Johnson, 1775

THE LAST REFUGE



PATRIOTISM,
POLITICS, AND
THE ENVIRONMENT
IN AN AGE OF TERROR

DAVID W. ORR

David W. Orr

The Last Refuge

Patriotism
Politics, and
the Environment
in an Age of Terror

 **ISLANDPRESS**
Washington • Covelo • London

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First Island Press cloth edition, March 2004

First Island Press paperback edition, August 2005

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ISLAND PRESS is a trademark of The Center for Resource Economics.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication data.

Orr, David W., 1944-

The last refuge : patriotism, politics, and the environment in an age of terror / David W. Orr.

p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 1-59726-032-0 (pbk. : alk. paper)

1. Political culture—United States. 2. Social values—United States.
3. Sustainable development—United States. 4. United States—
Politics and government—2001- I. Title.

JK1764.O77 2005

302.6'0973'090511—dc22

2005014648

British Cataloguing-in-Publication data available.

Design by Teresa Bonner

Text font: Miller Roman by Matthew Carter/The Font Bureau Inc.

Printed on recycled, acid-free paper ♻️

Manufactured in the United States of America

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

About Island Press

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Support for Island Press is provided by the Agua Fund, The Geraldine R. Dodge Foundation, Doris Duke Charitable Foundation, Ford Foundation, The George Gund Foundation, The William and Flora Hewlett Foundation, Kendeda Sustainability Fund of the Tides Foundation, The Henry Luce Foundation, The John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation, The Andrew W. Mellon Foundation, The Curtis and Edith Munson Foundation, The New-Land Foundation, The New York Community Trust, Oak Foundation, The Overbrook Foundation, The David and Lucile Packard Foundation, The Winslow Foundation, and other generous donors.

The opinions expressed in this book are those of the author(s) and do not necessarily reflect the views of these foundations.

The Last Refuge

To Vaclav Havel, Nelson Mandela, and Paul Wellstone
Pioneers of twenty-first-century politics

Patriotism is the last refuge of a scoundrel.

—Samuel Johnson

Necessity is the plea for every infringement of human freedom: it is the argument of tyrants; it is the creed of slaves.

—William Pitt

Genuine politics—politics worthy of the name—is simply a matter of serving those around us: serving the community, and serving those who will come after us. Its deepest roots are moral because it is a responsibility expressed through action, to and for the whole. . . .

—Vaclav Havel

Acknowledgments

Many of the chapters here first appeared in the journal *Conservation Biology* and owe a great deal to the thoughtful editorial comments and support of the editor, Gary Meffe. "The Education of Power" originated in part from collaboration with Hunter Lovins and a group organized in part by Ray Anderson that aimed to improve environmental policies of the current administration. Their willingness to reprint sections of our report is gratefully acknowledged. I acknowledge, too, permission to reprint previously published material from *Conservation Biology* and the University of Kentucky Press with appreciation. Finally, I appreciate the encouragement and editorial skill of Todd Baldwin at Island Press, without which this would have been a more tedious enterprise for author and reader alike.

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Introduction to the 2005 Edition

I'll begin at the end of this short book and say that I want to take you to what Thomas Berry calls “the Great Work”—a call to national renewal that crosses the divisions between red and blue America.¹ In fact, I don't believe that we are nearly as divided between liberal and conservative as is often said. The great majority of us are a bit of both depending on the particular issue, and we change our minds over time as our perspectives change and we mature and grow wiser. At our best Americans are a pragmatic people, not ideologues. American history, our national shortcomings notwithstanding, is a noble chapter in the human story and I do not believe that it is nearly ended.

The United States was born in the revolutionary idea that all of us stand equally before the law—still a revolutionary idea. We came to believe that government ought to be of the people, by the people, and for the people—democratic, open, and accountable. In revolution we forged a country that became a nation through the tragedy of a civil war. We built continental prosperity, fought and beat the forces of tyranny in the twentieth century, and put men on the moon. But now virtually everyone across the spectrum of political opinions

and religious persuasions agrees that we are in serious trouble. Some attribute this to the threat of terrorism and the hostility of Islamic fundamentalists. Some believe that the crisis is that of a decadent culture that needs spiritual renewal and more discipline. Some believe that we are in crisis because we are living far beyond our ecological and economic means. Less philosophically, most Americans experience one crisis or another in the daily effort to support a family and raise decent children in difficult economic circumstances and in confusing times. But most agree that something has gone seriously wrong in America.

The Great Work that Thomas Berry describes is not a political agenda, although it will eventually require solutions forged in the political arena. It begins, rather, with the call of duty and necessity that is thrust on societies by circumstance and fate at particularly perilous times in history. No generation ever chooses its great work. The young Americans that rose to the challenge of the Revolution or those called to battle in the Civil War did not choose those trials, yet they responded to them with courage and fortitude. Against the challenges of history, whatever they might be, the generation on trial is measured by its discernment, foresight, fairness, ingenuity, and magnanimity in its particular hour. Ours will be similarly judged.

The Great Work of our generation is the task of negotiating the rapids of human history, or what biologist E. O. Wilson calls a "bottleneck." It is a "crisis of crises," an interlocking set of problems, each part of which must be solved to resolve the whole. The problems of our time are now global, including poverty and hunger, environmental deterioration and rapid climate change, loss of species and economic prosperity, and security and justice. Taken together the global challenges of the twenty-first century have no historical precedent, although we ought to learn what we can from the experience of other transitional times. In short, we will have to remake our role in the natural world to recalibrate human

intentions with the way the biophysical world works, a design problem. At a deeper level, the concern for our sustainability as a species represents a maturing of our kind to become “plain members and citizens” of an ecological community and trustees presiding midway between all that is past and all that is yet to come—a mystic chain of gratitude, obligation, charity, spirit, and hope.

The practical dimension of the Great Work ahead requires that we comprehend our problems as interlocking parts of a larger system and reverse a downward spiral of problems into an upward spiral of solutions. To do so, we must find leverage points in the system where relatively small changes have large positive results. This is not the same as finding a magic-bullet solution, but rather a creative rethinking of our situation. To illustrate, a rapid but coherent transition toward energy efficiency and renewable energy would:

- Reduce dependence on Middle Eastern oil,
- Lessen our military engagement in an unstable region,
- Encourage a homegrown renewable energy industry,
- Create millions of new jobs,
- Reduce oil spills and water and air pollution,
- Lower medical expenses and improve health,
- Remove the influence of fossil energy companies on U.S. politics,
- Contribute to stabilizing climate, thereby avoiding an avoidable catastrophe,
- Improve our reputation and standing in the community of nations,
- and so on . . .

Each of these collateral benefits of efficiency and renewable energy is well known and well documented. Nevertheless we are offered more nuclear power plants—which are potential targets for terrorists—more inefficient cars, more pollution, more coal mines, more oil wells, more risk, more oil wars, and ever greater environmental and economic costs.

Opinion polls show that the public is ready for the transition to a smarter energy policy, but nothing happens at the federal level. This and other examples that could be cited bring me back to the beginning. Before we get to the Great Work, we will have to put our house in order. The scope of our challenges will require collective, public choices that are first and foremost political. Something, indeed, has gone wrong in America and its causes lie in the way we are conducting the public business.

To candidly describe even a few of the present wrongs in U.S. politics, however, may sound shrill or even unpatriotic to some, especially during the “war on terrorism.” But if not now, when? The vice president tells us that that this thing could go on for fifty years. I won’t live that long, so I intend to speak my mind now. And democracy, as I understand it, begins with the right to say “wait just one cotton-pickin’ minute!” and get a decent hearing. What I see is a disturbing pattern emerging that has less to do with combating terrorism than with using the fear of terrorism disguised as super-patriotism to promote a hard-right agenda and destroy progressive government and all opposition.

The president, once thought to be a public servant, asserts his right to wage preemptive wars against any nation he deems a threat. Neither Congress nor a fearful public rises to challenge. He orders an attack on Iraq even though the best evidence available showed that it posed no real threat to the United States. The *Washington Post*, the *New York Times*, CNN, NBC, ABC, CBS, MSNBC, and right-wing radio all serve as cheerleaders for his war. His national security advisor, Condoleezza Rice, apparently knew that Iraq in all likelihood did not have weapons of mass destruction prior to the invasion. (If so, withholding that evidence from the president is an impeachable offense and possibly treasonous.² If she did communicate that information to the president, he should be similarly charged for knowingly taking the country to war under false pretenses.) Dominated by the right wing, both

houses of Congress remain agreeably supine. Rice is promoted to secretary of state with vigorous dissent from only a few Democrats. The evidence is reasonably clear that the president intended to invade Iraq long before the events of 9/11, but few in the press or television find that worthy of investigation.³ No good answers are given for the failure of the White House to respond to multiple high-level warnings of an impending attack on the United States in 2001. The White House first tries to stop the investigation into the events of 9/11, then to restrict its scope, and then with the investigation underway, to withhold crucial evidence. The commission charged with investigating the events of 9/11, wishing to preserve harmony, refuses to assign blame for White House incompetence or worse.⁴ The White House attorney argues in secret memorandums that the president is above the law, that the Geneva Convention is merely a quaint anachronism, and that torture is permissible for anyone suspected of terrorism. He is promoted to attorney general of the United States. The architects of the “shock and awe” war who demonstrated a lack of a foresight and a brazen incompetence that makes George Custer at Little Bighorn look really good are awarded the Medal of Freedom or are retained in office. No one is investigated, charged, or fired. Evidence that prisoners under military or CIA custody are often subjected to systematic humiliation, sexual degradation, physical abuse, and torture becomes irrefutable.⁵ An unknown number have been tortured to death. A few in the lower ranks are tried, but the muddy footprints go far up the chain of command leading toward the Oval Office where no investigation is permitted. Republican senators like James Inhofe, a specimen from an earlier period of evolution, and right-wing blowiator Rush Limbaugh dismiss the issue as comparable to fraternity-boy pranks and attack those bringing the evidence of lawlessness. The vice president’s company, Halliburton, is not required to go through the normal bidding procedures to win lucrative government contracts. Not even a whisper of dissent from

those who otherwise advertise themselves as men of good judgment and fiscal probity.

At home the chasm between political spin and actual policy grows wider by the day. The so-called Clear Skies Initiative is a smokescreen for dirty air and yet another giveaway to the coal and oil industries. The words “healthy forests” veil yet another robbery from the public lands.⁶ The administration of George W. Bush aims to dismantle the laws and regulations protecting the public health and environment, but by stealth and out of public sight.⁷ The silence of the media, in particular, is deafening, for it too has been mostly bought or cowed.⁸ Ethical standards in the U.S. Congress are rewritten to preclude serious investigation of systematic and widespread corruption by Tom Delay, the majority leader of the House. Evidence of voter fraud and manipulation of the vote in both the 2000 and 2004 elections continues to grow, but the mainstream media do not find that interesting.⁹ The outing of a CIA agent, a federal crime, leads to the prosecution of reporters unconnected to the story but not to the arrest of any White House official or of Robert Novak, who did publish the story. A right-wing male escort mysteriously acquires a White House press pass and surfaces at presidential press conferences to ask puffball questions at opportune moments. No one is held to account, no one explains, and few in the media find either travesty worthy of investigation.

The list of malfeasances, mendacity, and incompetence go on and on. But there is, as they say, method in the madness. Beneath the words, evasions, and invasions there is a plan, of sorts, to use fear of terrorism and a state of permanent crisis (part fabrication, part real, and part a predictable reaction to U.S. policies to combat terrorism) to take care of the “base” of extremely wealthy, to mollify right-wing evangelicals, to increase the national debt thereby forcing Congress to dismantle social and domestic programs, and to extend the reach of empire. The goal is not a smaller government but a larger one redirected toward control and manipulation, a totally

intimidated or wholly owned media, and a supine and vulnerable public. This is said to be “conservative,” but Newt Gingrich identified it correctly when he called the right-wing agenda “revolutionary.” It is a thoroughgoing reactionary coup aimed at remodeling the government to create an alliance between the military, intelligence agencies, corporations, a pliant media, and a one-party state.

Call it what you will, but something has gone dreadfully wrong in American politics. Many are becoming aware and are deeply concerned, but large numbers of Americans, otherwise well versed on the intimate lives of celebrities, seem befuddled at best and somnambulant at worst when it comes to politics. We are the most media-saturated but among the least informed people on Earth and this is no accident. We are ruled by a plutocracy, distracted by the entertainment industry, and are frequently misinformed by an increasingly concentrated news media that puts the pursuit of market share above telling the whole truth. Part symptom, part cause, we have state legislatures and a Congress with a lot of members who haven't read widely, thought deeply, or imagined much beyond their own pecuniary gain. The result is a leadership vacuum on the big issues of our time that is now filled with lobbyists for the rich and powerful who talk the language of populism while doing all in their power to undermine real democracy.

The Bush administration fights its war on terrorism in a way that will certainly increase enmity toward the United States and thereby increase the numbers of terrorists and deepen their sense of purpose. Diplomacy, nuance, subtlety, empathy for other cultures, and a knowledge of history are mocked. In his second inaugural address, George W. Bush announced a global crusade to spread freedom and democracy around the world, but democracy and the right to dissent and a free press at home are being systematically undermined. Its rhetoric notwithstanding, the present administration is proving to be the most reactionary, closed, and deceitful in our history, and that is saying a great deal.