

PETER SWIRSKI

# AMERICAN POLITICAL FICTIONS

War on Errorism in Contemporary American  
Literature, Culture, and Politics

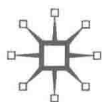


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Peter Swirski

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AMERICAN POLITICAL FICTIONS  
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# **American Political Fictions**

The most important thing for us is to find Osama bin Laden. It's our number-one priority, and we will not rest until we find him.

—George W. Bush, September 13, 2001

I don't know where he is. I have no idea, and I really don't care. It's not that important. It's not our priority.

—George W. Bush, March 13, 2002

Dedicated to friends and colleagues  
in the English Department at UMSL

# List of Figures

0.1	Ride 'em Cowboy!	7
0.2	The Government's Idea of Probity	12
1.1	Constitutional Mythomatics	30
1.2	War is Business	43
2.1	If Jesus Were GOP . . .	56
2.2	Rightwingers and Leftwingers Going Nowhere	67
3.1	Mr. Bush . . . Tear Down This Wall!	90
3.2	Dnal-sdrawkcab	95
4.1	My Turf	112
4.2	Human Evolution	132
5.1	Speak Softly and Carry a Big Shovel	147
5.2	Money Talks, Bullshit Walks	153

# Contents

List of Figures	xi
Introduction: Artists and Con-Artists	1
1 A Picture Is Worth a Hundred Thousand Words: Joseph Heller, <i>Picture This</i>	19
2 No Child Left Behind: Tim LaHaye and Jerry B. Jenkins, <i>Left Behind: A Novel of the Earth's Last Days</i>	49
3 A Planet for the Taking: Alistair Beaton, <i>A Planet for the President</i>	79
4 (R)hyming (A)merican (P)oetry: Various Artists	107
5 The Left Wing: Aaron Sorkin, Lawrence O'Donnell, Jr., Eli Attie, et al., <i>The West Wing</i>	137
Notes	167
Bibliography	175
Index	199



## Introduction

# Artists and Con-Artists

### A Quantum of American History

I was not lying. I said things that later on seemed to be untrue.

*Richard Milhous Nixon*

**I**n the last year of the nineteenth century, the commissioner of the United States Patent and Trademark Office penned a memorandum to President McKinley advising him to close the office. His rationale? Everything that could possibly be invented has already been invented. Imagine that: a top-level federal bureaucrat composes an effective suicide note in which he recommends sacking himself and his underlings in the name of reducing redundancy and trimming the budget.

The story was so good that for decades it made the rounds in the media, first by word of mouth, then mouse, with everybody milking it for maximum effect. In May 1987 Ronald Reagan's speechwriters even worked it into an address that the president—a lifelong apostle of small government, except when it came to matters of defense—gave to graduating students in a local high school in Chattanooga, Tennessee. Once the story had received a thumbs-up from the Office of the President of the United States, it picked up even more momentum, gaining in stature every time it was trotted out as a quantum of American history by amateurs and *The Economist* alike.<sup>1</sup>

Except it was nothing of the sort. The public officer who was alleged to have so ill-counseled McKinley was Charles Holland Duell, head of the Patent Office from 1898 to 1901, before he moved to private legal practice and then to the federal bench. The problem is that there is not one shred of evidence that Charles Holland Duell has ever written anything resembling the memorable memo. In spite of a century of endorsements going all the way up to the Oval Office, the story has zero basis in historical fact. It is apocryphal. It is made up. It is, in short, a great piece of American fiction.<sup>2</sup>

Organized politics is, of course, not the only wellspring of enduring political fiction. At a far remove from the White House and the Patent and Trademark Office lies a different kind of political make-believe: American literature that, instead of practicing art for art's sake, practices grassroots democracy. Judging by the number of critical encomiums, to this day the quintessential example of this variety of political fiction is the muckraking classic of American letters, Upton Sinclair's *The Jungle* (1904).<sup>3</sup> Written by an American and published in the United States, it plots a theme that has lost nothing of its socioeconomic resonance: the plight of immigrant slave-wage earners in the turn-of-the-century slaughterhouses of Chicago.

But here problems begin to mount. To begin with, *The Jungle* is far from a typical work of fiction, having been underwritten by Sinclair's seven-week fact-finding mission to the abattoirs of Armour, Swift, and Morris as an investigative reporter for the socialist magazine *The Appeal to Reason*. So fundamental, in fact, was this documentary aesthetic to his conception of art that he made it the cornerstone of his 1903 manifesto "My Cause." Three years later, agonizing over the cuts he had inflicted on *The Jungle*, he even rued that his error lay in thinking that it is fiction that makes life, not the other way round.

Worse still, even though Sinclair's classic is typecast as a political novel, in truth it has precious little to say about politics. This is especially so in the self-censored book version canonized around the world in more than eight hundred editions. Taking the knife to almost all references to socialism and the Socialist Party of America to make *The Jungle* palatable to a commercial press, Sinclair transformed a working-class novel into an exposé of the horrors of the meat-packing industry, testified by his lament that he aimed for the country's heart and by mistake hit it in the stomach.<sup>4</sup>

But if equating "political" with "socially engaged" is contentious from the start, so is equating American political fiction with literature composed by Americans and published in the United States. Alistair Beaton's *A Planet for the President* (2004) is a mother of all satires on the gunboat presidency of George W. Bush and America's fixation with manifest destiny and world hegemony. Between partisan flak and demotic vernacular dished out with the flamboyance of Mark Twain in one of his hang-'em-high moods, this White House burlesque is as American as they come. Yet it was penned by a Scotsman and published outside the United States.

Historically speaking, Beaton is, of course, in some choice company. There is nothing new about American literature being written outside the country or, for that matter, by non-Americans. James Fenimore Cooper's *The Prairie*, Ernest Hemingway's *The Sun Also Rises*, and Francis Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby*, to name only three timeless classics, were all written in Paris. Conversely, a towering monument of American

letters entitled *De la démocratie en Amérique* was composed by a nineteenth-century French tourist and future deputy in the French Assembly, Alexis de Tocqueville.

When it comes to equating literary fiction with novelistic prose, the mismatch is, if anything, even more pronounced. Rap, the quintessentially American genre of poetic and musical expression, is by its very nature countercultural, oppositional, and—with a regularity that is far from accidental—political. Yet, no matter how much *eliterary* conservatives might close their ears to the greatest explosion of black poetry since the Harlem Renaissance, no one could confuse rap lyrics with narrative prose. For that matter, not even the most successful political fiction in the history of American artertainment falls under the heading of literary prose, having ruled the airwaves with a synergy of image, spoken word, and music.<sup>5</sup>

*The West Wing* liberally steeped itself in contemporary partisan politics, from the chicken-suits episode (“Freedonia”), borrowed from an Arkansas governor’s 1992 election trail, down to the federal government shutdowns during his 1995 standoff against Gingrich-led House. Week after week, its high-octane fusion of political soapbox and soap opera cast its spell on umpteen million viewers during a seven-year, Emmy-studded run.

With Aaron Sorkin, the creative mastermind, deploying a cadre of researchers, writers, and consultants—including Clinton’s former press secretary Dee Dee Myers, Gore’s speechwriter Eli Attie, Carter’s pollster and policy adviser Patrick Caddell, Democratic senatorial aide Lawrence O’Donnell—and, for a spell, Reagan and Bush I’s press secretary Marlin Fitzwater and speechwriter Peggy Noonan, Reagan’s chief of staff Kenneth Duberstein, Republican pollster Frank Luntz, and chief economic adviser to both Clintons Gene Sperling—this was one political fiction that did its homework.

Truth being stranger than fiction, in addition to making television history, *The West Wing* even made political history by handing a blueprint to Britain’s Conservative Party for their vaunted 2006 rebellion-by-stealth against Tony Blair. On “A Good Day,” from the show’s penultimate season, Democratic lawmakers pretend to clear out from Capitol Hill to hoodwink the Republican Speaker into calling the vote on stem cell research under the impression that it is in the bag. “That’s where the idea came from,” revealed the ringleader of the British MPs who copycatted this stealth tactics. “It was directly inspired by *The West Wing*.”<sup>6</sup>

As in the United Kingdom, so in the United States. New York Democratic representative Carolyn Maloney also adopted a real-life political stratagem from the series, although this time from the inaugural season. In “Enemies,” President Bartlet falls back on his executive powers from the 1906 Antiquities Act to proclaim an environmentally sensitive region

in Montana a national monument, and as such out of bounds for mining. Maloney's 2000 plea to Clinton to evoke the Antiquities Act to preserve Governor's Island (just south of Manhattan) by declaring two of its forts national monuments had been, as she cheerfully admitted, borrowed lock, stock, and both barrels from *The West Wing*.

But politics also imitates art in more disquieting ways. Just ask comedian Reggie Brown about his experience straight from Frank Capra's *Meet John Doe*. In 2011 Brown was asked to do his shtick as an Obama impersonator at the annual Republican Leadership Conference. Proving himself an equal opportunity offender, he opened with a joke that, with mixed-race parents, the president ought to celebrate only half of the Black History Month, before going after the bigwigs in the GOP: Mitt Romney, Newt Gingrich, and Tim Pawlenty. But he appears to have crossed the line when he segued into a gag about Tea Party stalwart Michele Bachmann. It was at that moment that Reggie Brown met John Doe, as the power to his mic was cut while he was ushered from the stage to swelling music.

Satire or misfire? Anti-constitutional suppression of free speech or merely questionable taste in jokes? You be the judge.

### America's Finest News Source

The world is rapidly getting "Ahmadinejadized," if I'm allowed to make a joke.

*Mahmoud Ahmadinejad*

The central premise behind *American Political Fictions* is that approaching popular political art as an elementary expression of American democracy offers a valuable vantage point for a critical look at America's erroneous conceptions of itself. Traceable to the ubiquitous culture of spin, questions about the level of citizens' participation—or indeed, lack thereof—in the political process are really questions about the degree to which political apathy is rooted in and reflected by the culture in which we all participate.

My historical timeframe is roughly that of the last generation. A little over thirty years ago, a charismatic Republican president promised Americans hope and deliverance from the ravages of "an economic affliction of great proportions."<sup>7</sup> These days the promises of hope and deliverance are spouted by a charismatic Democrat. Other than that, nothing appears to have changed, right down to the ravages of an economic affliction of great proportions. This is why my inquiries into American political fictions and the political structures they describe are not only literary but also *critical*, in the sense of skeptical inquiries into the political fictions prevailing in contemporary public discourse.

Only a year after *The Closing of the American Mind*, a book that argued that higher education has failed democracy, the leading satirist of his generation set out to educate the American public about democracy by means of a “faction” that broke almost all fundamental rules of narration. Eerily, even as *Picture This* (1988) grafted events going back to Thucydides onto the military and social agenda under Reagan, Joseph Heller’s novel-as-history reads nowadays as if it had been written under Bush II. A tragic constant or a quirk of history?

My two-pronged answer to this question occupies chapter 1, “A Picture Is Worth a Hundred Thousand Words.” An anatomy of Heller’s canons of storytelling helps me shed light on the ways in which he splices historical fact with satirical fiction to deliver his most searching sermon and his darkest comedy. And a review of the canons of experiential historiography allows me to assemble a picture of Greek, Dutch, and American varieties of democratic imperialism—a two-and-a-half-thousand-year global theater starring War and Money.

In chapter 2, “No Child Left Behind,” I come to grips with the recent publishing sensation from two fundamentalist Christian ministers-turned-writers, Tim LaHaye and Jerry B. Jenkins. Their Bible-spouting sixteen-book cycle *Left Behind* (1995–2007) has by now sold an estimated eighty million copies, crossing over from the evangelical margins to the book-seller’s mainstream. Cementing its commercial success, it has been adapted into movies, radio series, graphic novels, music CDs, a board game, and a video game, not to mention spawning spinoffs of its own.

Man is by nature a political animal, aphorized Aristotle more than four hundred years before Christ, and *Left Behind* brings this animal to narrative life for that segment of America that sees Reagan as Messiah and Obama as Antichrist. Ranging from the first to the last novel in the series, my discussion maps their fuzzy logic and *theologic* onto the rise of apocalyptic imagery in American public life. On a broader front, it traces the connection between Bible-inspired nonfiction and the politics of American education from the textbook wars of the 1970s to the No Child Left Behind Act and the recent Texas Textbook Massacre.

In 2004, at the height of one of the lowest spells in US history, Alistair Beaton published his most political novel in a journalistic and novelistic career defined by politics. Touted by *The Independent* as Britain’s greatest living satirist, this former reporter and speechwriter for the future British prime minister poured a lifetime of partisan savoir faire into *A Planet for the President* (2004), a critically acclaimed satire about a White House plot to end all plots.

In chapter 3, “A Planet for the Taking,” I dissect its nobrow poetics and shoot-from-the-hip politics in a comparative study of the Bush II and

Obama administrations. Fortified by a series of personal interviews with the author, I also interrogate the premises of topical satire in light of its historical mission to roast public figures over bonfires of their vanities. Beaton's political and environmental commitments come together in an end-of-the-world humoresque and a *catharsis* with few parallels in contemporary American literature.

In chapter 4, "(R)hyming (A)merican (P)oetry," I direct the spotlight on rap as a quintessentially American cultural formation and a quintessential form of countercultural expression. Bringing poetics and politics together allows me to document both the artistic ambitions of prophets in the 'hood and, as importantly, the commercial seductiveness of profits in the 'hood, together with the resulting tug-of-war over their politics and identity.

Bestselling or selling out? The question illuminates at once rap's lust for stardom and its commitment to political engagement on all fronts, domestic and foreign. With hip-hop turning forty and middle-aged, with the genre dominated by the tastes of white suburban consumers, and with lyricists still fighting for mainstream recognition of their political and artistic credentials, I take a closer look at why rhyme continues to pay so much and in the name of what values.

Finally, *The West Wing*. In chapter 5, "The Left Wing," I identify the correlative to this epic drama in the groundbreaking televised debate between its two presidential candidates. Recorded live during the show's final 2006 season, it fused reality and scripted TV in an open put-down of real-life electoral debates. Highlighting the democratic role of political art, I highlight the principles of democracy as political power delegated to the public, of the referendum as the basic tool of democracy, and of public education (including public edutainment) as the key to exercising that tool and that power.

My arguments are grounded in my conviction that personal and collective well-being presupposes a genuine people's democracy, not the republican excuse for one enshrined in the United States. To flesh out this point, I triangulate three varieties of democratic theory and praxis. They are exemplified by the initiative system as practiced for roughly a century and a half in Switzerland, for a century in California, and for a little over two years in the European Union in the form of its vaunted CSI: the European Citizens' Initiative.

Throughout I illustrate many of the above points with political cartoons—still another variety of American political fiction—insofar as they graphically illustrate my belief that the matters at hand are often too serious to be tackled without humor. Jokes are a serious business in politics. In the nineteenth century, Thomas Nast proved it once and for all by whipping up public sentiment and public prosecutors against Democratic Party's charismatic Tammany "Boss" Tweed. Drawing and quartering the body politic for our collective edutainment, cartoons remind us that politics and political caricatures both demand a willing suspension of disbelief.<sup>8</sup>



**Figure 0.1 Ride 'em Cowboy!** "... Thomas Nast proved it once and for all by whipping up public sentiment and public prosecutors against Democratic Party's charismatic Tammany "Boss" Tweed..."

Credit: Florida Center for Instructional Technology

As if to illustrate the point, in September 2012 satirical magazine *The Onion* stepped right on the line between political fact and fiction. Mock-advertising itself as "America's Finest News Source," *The Onion* excels in posting very funny and very fictive opinion polls. On this occasion, it reported a juicy item: "Rural White Americans [read: rednecks] Prefer the Iron-fisted President of Iran Mahmoud Ahmadinejad to Barack Obama." Taking this political fiction for a fact, the Iranian state media widely reported on the poll among sideswipes at Uncle Sam (soon followed by the North Koreans, who fell for the magazine's "sexiest man alive" piece on Kim Jong-Un).

But, as in the case of Reggie Brown, there is a darker side to all this satirical fun and games. Of late Cartoonists Rights International has issued a public warning that visual satirists are increasingly becoming targets

of escalating harassment and even prison terms dispensed by the growing league of humorless politicians. The fact that the worst of these abuses take place outside the United States is small comfort. In the wake of the Snowden affair, no one believes that it can't happen here, whatever "it" might be.

### We're Not Stupid

It's still about the economy . . . and we're not stupid.

Mitt Romney

No book on American political fictions would be complete without a critical look at political oratory, whether in the form of stump pledges, campaign trail rhetoric, policy papers, partisan manifestos, congressional addresses, or occasionally even State of the Union grandiloquence. All rain on the electorate with the avowed aim of imparting the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth. Except that, with an unfunny monotony of a late-night sitcom, it is only a matter of time before another political whopper is dragged into the light.

No matter if it is the pledge to close Guantanamo within a year of moving into the Oval, the "slam dunk" case of nonexistent Iraqi WMDs, the false truth of "I did not have sexual relations with that woman," the covert sales of weapons to Iran to finance a war outlawed by Congress, the escalation of "police action" in Southeast Asia, the fabrication of the Gulf of Tonkin *casus belli*, the Bay of Pigs invasion of a sovereign nation, or the hand-over-the-heart protestations of "I am not a crook." You could fill a big children's book with the cock-and-bull stories spun by the highest office in the land.

It may be uncommon to approach White House communications as a literary genre characterized by core thematic (free market, democracy), stylistic (folksy, anti-intellectual), and rhetorical (religious, apocalyptic) conventions. But *American Political Fictions* is not a common book of criticism: big on exegesis, small on analysis. Quite the reverse. It puts political fiction under the microscope to better calibrate the nature of political spin, which relies on poetic license as much as novelists, lyricists, or scriptwriters do. At the same time, it spares no effort to set the record straight on Beltway fictions to better calibrate the nature and the accuracy of political art. In short, it scrutinizes the errors of omission and commission perpetrated by both classes of producers of American political fictions: artists and con-artists.

Intentionality is the key issue here. Writers spin their yarns to cast light on the world of politics; politicians spin theirs to keep what they do out



of the public eye. If political art and entertainment deserve to be taken seriously, it is to the extent that they are taken seriously by the Americans who buy them—and arguably buy into them—by the millions. This entails taking the measure of the ideological agenda and rhetorical spin of such arertainment in order to extricate fact from fiction. It also entails taking stock of fairy tales spun by politicians of all stars and stripes in order to throw critical light on the popular art that immerses itself in politics. In short, it entails war on error and disinformation in the spirit of *amicus Americae, sed magis amica veritas*.

A case in point: the fiction of market economy. Even as everyone knows that American politics is all about the economy, stupid, no one is willing to admit that everyone is equally stupid. Flashback to August 1993. Newt Gingrich, the Republican leader in the soon-to-be Republican House, positions himself as the exorcist of Clinton's tax-and-budget package. The tax increase, he thunders, "will kill jobs and lead to a recession, and the recession will force people off of work and onto unemployment and will actually increase the deficit."<sup>9</sup> Washington experts like Phil Gramm, chairman of the Senate Banking Committee and former economics professor, echo his apocalyptic scenario with their own prophecies of gloom and doom:

We are buying a one way ticket to recession. I want to predict here tonight that if we adopt this bill, the American economy is going to get weaker and not stronger, the deficit four years from today will be higher than it is today and not lower.

What happened was exactly the opposite. Powered by the budget, the economy racked up one hundred and fifteen months of expansion, the longest uninterrupted growth in the United States' history. Over two terms, Clinton's budgets tackled the deficit, whittled unemployment down to 4 percent, cranked out more than twenty-two million jobs—more than under Reagan and Bush I combined—and bred corporate wealth at a blistering pace (the dot-com bubble did not burst for good until 2001).

The truth is that the national economy is so enormous, so complex, and as a consequence so unpredictable that the so-called experts seldom know what they are talking about. That being the case, there is every reason to question the premises behind market economy, all the more so that Demublihan administrations make a mockery of it anyway. Every time the economic chips are down, laissez-faire gets exposed for what it is: a best-selling political fiction. Not to look too far, in 2006 the bosses of the Big Three carmakers went to the White House to lobby for protectionist hand-outs after failing to retool from gas-guzzling minivans and SUVs and falling behind Europeans and Asians in the hybrid and economy market. Late