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Democracy Matters.

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DEMOCRACY MATTERS ARE FRIGHTENING IN OUR TIME

We have frequently printed the word Democracy, yet I cannot too often repeat that it is a word the real gist of which still sleeps, quite unawakened, notwithstanding the resonance and the many angry tempests out of which its syllables have come, from pen or tongue. It is a great word, whose history, I suppose, remains unwritten, because that history has yet to be enacted.

—WALT WHITMAN, *Democratic Vistas* (1871)

To be an Afro-American, or an American black, is to be in the situation, intolerably exaggerated, of all those who have ever found themselves part of a civilization which they could in no wise honorably defend—which they were compelled, indeed, endlessly to attack and condemn—and who yet spoke out of the most passionate love, hoping to make the kingdom new, to make it honorable and worthy of life.

—JAMES BALDWIN, *No Name in the Street* (1972)

A decade ago I wrote *Race Matters* in order to spark a candid public conversation about America's most explosive issue and most difficult dilemma: the ways in which the vicious legacy of white supremacy contributes to the arrested development of

American democracy. This book—the sequel to *Race Matters*—will look unflinchingly at the waning of democratic energies and practices in our present age of the American empire. There is a deeply troubling deterioration of democratic powers in America today. The rise of an ugly imperialism has been aided by an unholy alliance of the plutocratic elites and the Christian Right, and also by a massive disaffection of so many voters who see too little difference between two corrupted parties, with blacks being taken for granted by the Democrats, and with the deep disaffection of youth. The energy of the youth support for the Howard Dean campaign and avid participation in the recent antiglobalization protests are promising signs, however, of the potential to engage them.

As I've traveled across this country giving speeches and attending gatherings for the past thirty years, I've always been impressed by the intelligence, imagination, creativity, and humor of the American people, then found myself wondering how we end up with such mediocre and milquetoast leaders in public office. It's as if the best and brightest citizens boycott elected public office, while the most ambitious go into the private sector. In a capitalist society that is where the wealth, influence, and status are. But we've always been a capitalist society, and we've had some quality leaders in the past. Why the steep decline? As with sitcoms on television, the standards have dropped so low, we cannot separate a joke from an insult. When Bush smiles after his carefully scripted press conferences of little substance, we do not know whether he is laughing at us or getting back at us as we laugh at him—as the press meanwhile hurries to concoct a story out of his clichés and shibboleths.

In our market-driven empire, elite salesmanship to the demos has taken the place of genuine democratic leadership. The majority of voting-age citizens do not vote. They are not stupid (though shortsighted). They know that political leadership is confined to two parties that are both parasitic on corporate money and interests. To choose one or the other is a little like black people choosing between the left-wing and right-wing versions of the Dred Scott decision. There is a difference but not much—though every difference does matter.

Yet a narrow rant against the new imperialism or emerging plutocracy is not enough. Instead we must dip deep into often-untapped wells of our democratic tradition to fight the imperialist strain and plutocratic impulse in American life. We must not allow our elected officials—many beholden to unaccountable corporate elites—to bastardize and pulverize the precious word *democracy* as they fail to respect and act on genuine democratic ideals.

The problems plaguing our democracy are not only ones of disaffection and disillusionment. The greatest threats come in the form of the rise of three dominating, antidemocratic dogmas. These three dogmas, promoted by the most powerful forces in our world, are rendering American democracy vacuous. The first dogma of free-market fundamentalism posits the unregulated and unfettered market as idol and fetish. This glorification of the market has led to a callous corporate-dominated political economy in which business leaders (their wealth and power) are to be worshipped—even despite the recent scandals—and the most powerful corporations are delegated magical powers of salvation rather than relegated to democratic scrutiny concerning both the ethics of their

business practices and their treatment of workers. This largely unexamined and unquestioned dogma that supports the policies of both Democrats and Republicans in the United States—and those of most political parties in other parts of the world—is a major threat to the quality of democratic life and the well-being of most peoples across the globe. It yields an obscene level of wealth inequality, along with its corollary of intensified class hostility and hatred. It also redefines the terms of what we should be striving for in life, glamorizing materialistic gain, narcissistic pleasure, and the pursuit of narrow individualistic preoccupations—especially for young people here and abroad.

Free-market fundamentalism—just as dangerous as the religious fundamentalisms of our day—trivializes the concern for public interest. The overwhelming power and influence of plutocrats and oligarchs in the economy put fear and insecurity in the hearts of anxiety-ridden workers and render money-driven, poll-obsessed elected officials deferential to corporate goals of profit, often at the cost of the common good. This illicit marriage of corporate and political elites—so blatant and flagrant in our time—not only undermines the trust of informed citizens in those who rule over them. It also promotes the pervasive sleepwalking of the populace, who see that the false prophets are handsomely rewarded with money, status, and access to more power. This profit-driven vision is sucking the democratic life out of American society.

In short, the dangerous dogma of free-market fundamentalism turns our attention away from schools to prisons, from workers' conditions to profit margins, from health clinics to high-tech facial surgeries, from civic associations to pornographic Internet

sites, and from children's care to strip clubs. The fundamentalism of the market puts a premium on the activities of buying and selling, consuming and taking, promoting and advertising, and devalues community, compassionate charity, and improvement of the general quality of life. How ironic that in America we've moved so quickly from Martin Luther King Jr.'s "Let Freedom Ring!" to "Bling! Bling!"—as if freedom were reducible to simply having material toys, as dictated by free-market fundamentalism.

The second prevailing dogma of our time is aggressive militarism, of which the new policy of preemptive strike against potential enemies is but an extension. This new doctrine of U.S. foreign policy goes far beyond our former doctrine of preventive war. It green-lights political elites to sacrifice U.S. soldiers—who are disproportionately working class and youth of color—in adventurous crusades. This dogma posits military might as salvific in a world in which he who has the most and biggest weapons is the most moral and masculine, hence worthy of policing others. In practice, this dogma takes the form of unilateral intervention, colonial invasion, and armed occupation abroad. It has fueled a foreign policy that shuns multilateral cooperation of nations and undermines international structures of deliberation. Fashioned out of the cowboy mythology of the American frontier fantasy, the dogma of aggressive militarism is a lone-ranger strategy that employs "spare-no-enemies" tactics. It guarantees a perennial resorting to the immoral and base manner of settling conflict, namely, the perpetration of the very sick and cowardly terrorism it claims to contain and eliminate. On the domestic front, this dogma expands police power, augments the prison-industrial complex, and legit-

imates unchecked male power (and violence) at home and in the workplace. It views crime as a monstrous enemy to crush (targeting poor people) rather than as an ugly behavior to change (by addressing the conditions that often encourage such behavior).

As with the bully on the block, one's own interests and aims define what is moral and one's own anxieties and insecurities dictate what is masculine. Yet the use of naked force to resolve conflict often backfires. The arrogant hubris that usually accompanies this use of force tends to lead toward instability—and even destruction—in the regions where we have sought to impose our will. Violence is readily deployed by those who cloak themselves in innocence—those unwilling to examine themselves and uninterested in counting the number of innocent victims they kill. Note the Bush administration's callous disregard for both the U.S. soldiers and innocent Iraqis killed in our recent adventurous invasion. The barbaric abuse of prisoners at Abu Ghraib is a flagrant example.

The third prevailing dogma in this historic moment is escalating authoritarianism. This dogma is rooted in our understandable paranoia toward potential terrorists, our traditional fear of too many liberties, and our deep distrust of one another. The Patriot Act is but the peak of an iceberg that has widened the scope of the repression of our hard-earned rights and hard-fought liberties. The Supreme Court has helped lead the way with its support of the Patriot Act. There are, however, determined democrats on the Court who are deeply concerned, as expressed in a recent speech of Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg: "On important issues," she said, "like the balance between liberty and security, if the public doesn't care, then the security side is going to outweigh the other." The

cowardly terrorist attacks of 9/11 have been cannon fodder for the tightening of surveillance. The loosening of legal protection and slow closing of meaningful access to the oversight of governmental activities—measures deemed necessary in the myopic view of many—are justified by the notion that safety trumps liberty and security dictates the perimeters of freedom.

Meanwhile the market-driven media—fueled by our vast ideological polarization and abetted by profit-hungry monopolies—have severely narrowed our political "dialogue." The major problem is not the vociferous shouting from one camp to the other; rather it is that many have given up even being heard. We are losing the very value of dialogue—especially respectful communication—in the name of the sheer force of naked power. This is the classic triumph of authoritarianism over the kind of questioning, compassion, and hope requisite for any democratic experiment.

We have witnessed similar developments in our schools and universities—increasing monitoring of viewpoints, disrespecting of those with whom one disagrees, and foreclosing of the common ground upon which we can listen and learn. The major culprit here is not "political correctness," a term coined by those who tend to trivialize the scars of others and minimize the suffering of victims while highlighting their own wounds. Rather the challenge is mustering the courage to scrutinize *all* forms of dogmatic policing of dialogue and to shatter *all* authoritarian strategies of silencing voices. We must respect the scars and wounds of each one of us—even if we are sometimes wrong (or right!).

Democracy matters are frightening in our time precisely because the three dominant dogmas of free-market fundamental-

ism, aggressive militarism, and escalating authoritarianism are snuffing out the democratic impulses that are so vital for the deepening and spread of democracy in the world. In short, we are experiencing the sad American imperial devouring of American democracy. This historic devouring in our time constitutes an unprecedented gangsterization of America—an unbridled grasp at power, wealth, and status. And when the most powerful forces in a society—and an empire—promote a suffocation of democratic energies, the very future of genuine democracy is jeopardized.

How ironic that 9/11—a vicious attack on innocent civilians by gangsters—becomes the historic occasion for the full-scale gangsterization of America. Do we now live in a postdemocratic age in which the very “democratic” rhetoric of an imperial America hides the waning of a democratic America? Are there enough democratic energies here and abroad to fight for and win back our democracy given the undeniable power of the three dominant dogmas that fuel imperial America? Or will the American empire go the way of the Leviathans of the past—the Roman, Ottoman, Soviet, and British empires? Can any empire resist the temptation to become drunk with the wine of world power or become intoxicated with the hubris and greed of imperial possibilities? Has not every major empire pursued quixotic dreams of global domination—of shaping the world in its image and for its interest—that resulted in internal decay and doom? Can we committed democrats avert this world-historical pattern and possible fate?

Our fundamental test may lie in our continuing response to 9/11. With the last remnants of the repressive Soviet empire (North Korea and Cuba) proud yet weak, the postimperial European Union

in search of an identity and unity, the Asian powers steady but hesitant, and African and Latin American regimes still grappling with postcolonial European and U.S. economic domination, the American empire struts across the globe like a behemoth. We have built up uncontested military might, undeniable cultural power, and transnational corporate and financial hegemony—yet with a huge trade deficit, budget deficit, and intensifying class, racial, religious, and ideological warfare at home. During the cold war, these internal conflicts were often contained by focusing on a common external foe—Communism. Then, for a brief decade, Americans turned on one another in “the culture wars.” The well-financed right wing convinced many fellow citizens that the Left—from progressive professors to neoliberal Clintonites, multicultural artists to mainstream feminists, gay and lesbian activists to ecological preservationists—was leading America over the abyss. After 9/11, unity seemed possible—but only if it fit the mold of a narrow patriotism and a revenge-driven lust for a war on terrorism. And as the old-style imperialism of the new hawks in the Bush administration made manifest—through subtle manipulation and outright mendacity—the newly aggressive American empire would not only police the world in light of its interests but also impose its imperial vision and policy—by hook or by crook—on a sleepwalking U.S. citizenry.

Ironically, this vision and policy is, in some ways, continuous with those of earlier administrations that rarely questioned the dogmas of free-market fundamentalism (look at the disaster of Clinton’s NAFTA on Canada and Mexico), aggressive militarism (abusive police power in poor communities of color at home), and

escalating authoritarianism (targeted crime fighting and mandatory sentencing for incarceration). But the coarse and unabashed imperial devouring of democracy of the Bush administration is a low point in America's rocky history of sustaining its still evolving experiment in democracy. And now instead of Communism as our external foe we have Islamic terrorism. In addition, the prevailing conservative culture has made the Left—progressives and liberals—internal enemies. They are considered out of step with the drumbeat of patriots, who defer to the imperial aims, free-market policies, cultural conservative views, and personal pieties of the Bush administration. To put it bluntly, we have reached a rare fork in the road of American history.

Democracy matters require that we keep track of the intimate link between domestic issues and foreign policies. Like the empires of old—especially the Roman and British ones—what we do abroad affects what we can do here and what we do here shapes what we can do abroad. Probably the most difficult challenge facing our democracy, in the near term at any rate, is that of the centrality of Middle East politics for the American empire. If we are to stabilize the world and enrich democracy in the world, we must confront the anti-Semitic hostility of oil-rich autocratic Arab regimes to Israel's very existence, as well as Israelis' occupation and subjugation of Palestinian lands and people. We must act more decisively to stop both the barbaric Palestinian suicide bombers' murdering of innocent Israeli civilians and the inhumane Israeli military attacks on unarmed Palestinian refugees. These explosive issues test the capacity of all Americans to engage in a respectful

and candid dialogue; indeed, they may be pivotal in determining the destiny of American democracy.

How does one honestly criticize the close relationship between American imperial elites and Israeli political officials without falling into ugly anti-Semitic traps? How does one sympathize with the always-fragile existence of a hated people, like the Jews, anywhere in the world while also acknowledging that Israel is a military giant in the Middle East, and that American Jews constitute an organized, powerful force in the American empire to buttress this military might? How does one highlight the inexcusable conditions and treatment of Palestinians under Israeli occupation while also acknowledging the aims of some Palestinian groups to push Israel into the sea? Can a Jewish state become a full-fledged secular and democratic state without the annihilation of its Jewish citizens? Will the American empire abandon the Jewish state when its economic interests are in direct conflict with such support? Whom are Jews to trust? Whom are Palestinians to trust? Will myopic leadership on both sides preclude any just peace? Will anti-Semitic hatred and anti-Arab bigotry squelch any democratic alternative?

Wrestling with these heart-wrenching queries requires all the critical intelligence and genuine compassion we can muster, yet to remain satisfied with the status quo may well lead to disaster. It is impossible to talk about democracy matters on a global scale without engaging these questions. And given the increasing threats of terrorist attacks on America and others abroad, we must grapple with them for our own security and sense of justice.

This does not mean that we should turn away from the wretched

of the earth in Africa facing both the unprecedented AIDS epidemic and the betrayals of authoritarian leaders; or suffering Latin Americans still under the aegis of transnational corporations and deferential elected officials; or struggling Asians trying to find or preserve a niche in the new world order. To focus on the Middle East is not to single out any regime for special treatment or targeted demonization. Rather it is to acknowledge that Islamic fundamentalist gangsters do pose a threat to the United States and the world and that they gain their potency from U.S. foreign policy in the Middle East. An American imperial response to this real threat may pose an even greater threat to the United States and the world. And the American democratic experiment cannot flourish alongside such an American imperial response. This is why the response of the Bush administration to 9/11 wreaks havoc here and abroad—more wealth inequality, less resources for jobs, education, health care, and the arts, and increasing distrust and hatred even from former allies.

The ugly events of 9/11 should have been an opportunity for national self-scrutiny. In the wake of the shock and horror of those attacks, many asked the question, why do they hate us? But the country failed to engage in a serious, sustained, deeply probing examination of the possible answers to that question. Instead, the leaders of the Bush administration encouraged us to adopt the simplistic and aggressive “with us or against us” stance and we ran roughshod over our allies, turning a deaf ear to any criticisms of the course of action the Bush leadership had determined to take. We have been unwilling—both at this critical juncture and throughout our history—to turn a sufficiently critical eye on our own behavior

in the world. We have often behaved in an overbearing, imperial, hypocritical manner as we have attained more and more power as a hegemon.

Our hypocritical, bullying behavior in regard to so many of the regions of the world is surely not the only reason for the 9/11 attacks—and it certainly doesn’t justify those horribly callous, violent terrorist acts—but we have failed to even consider deeply as a culture the role our imperialist behavior has played in the contempt we have inspired in so much of the world. The Bush administration’s abuses of power both at home and in unilaterally invading Iraq and waging a campaign of lies have now provoked an intense scrutiny, and this scrutiny needs to dig deeper than throwing angry barbs at the Bush administration’s policies. We’ve got to reconnect with the energies of a deep democratic tradition in America and reignite them.

If we are to grapple critically with the three antidemocratic dogmas that are raising their ugly heads at this crucial juncture, we will need a more realistic understanding of the crushing ways in which they have operated in the country throughout our history. The first step for any critique of a dogma is to lay bare the history of that dogma—to disclose its contingent origins and ignoble beginnings and to show that the critique of that dogma in history has its own tradition and history. America has a long tradition of excoriating, painful, and powerful critiques of the arrested development of our democracy—critiques of the ravages of our imperial expansionist genocide of the Native Americans; of the crushing of the lives of workers by the callous machinery of capitalist excesses; of the wholesale subjugation of women, gays, and lesbians; and

most especially and centrally of the deeply antidemocratic and dehumanizing hypocrisies of white supremacy. This is why the lens of race becomes indispensable in our attempt to understand, preserve, and expand America's democratic experiment.

The brutal atrocities of white supremacy in the American past and present speak volumes about the harsh limits of our democracy over against our professed democratic ideals. Race is the crucial intersecting point where democratic energies clash with American imperial realities in the very making of the grand American experiment of democracy. The voices and viewpoints of reviled and disempowered Amerindians, Asians, Mexicans, Africans, and immigrant Europeans reveal and remind us of the profoundly racist roots of the first American empire—the old America of expansionist Manifest Destiny. How ironic that this New World outpost of the British empire, which rested upon Amerindian lands and was greatly aided by predominantly African enslaved laborers, would institute a grand anti-imperial revolution and embark on a rich democratic experiment?

The contingent origins of American democracy and the ignoble beginnings of imperial America go hand in hand. This dynamic and complex intertwining of racial subjugation and democratic flourishing, of imperial resistance (against the British) and imperial expansion (against Amerindians)—driven primarily by market forces, to satisfy expanding populations and greedy profiteers—sets the stage for the uneven development of the best and worst of American history. We must learn how to keep track of both opposing tendencies if we are to maintain our democratic energy.

Like any other human endeavor, American democracy and im-

perial America are shot through with multilayered incongruities, contradictions, and imperfect forms of resistance against ugly structures of domination. Race is not a lens to justify sentimental stories of pure heroes of color and impure white villains or melodramatic tales of innocent victims of color and demonic white victimizers. In fact, by shattering such Manichaeic (good versus evil/us versus them) views that Americans often tell about themselves, we refuse to simply flip the script and tell new lies about ourselves.

The fight for democracy has ever been one against the oppressive and racist corruptions of empire. To focus solely on electoral politics as the site of democratic life is myopic. Such a focus fails to appreciate the crucial role of the underlying moral commitments and visions and fortifications of the soul that empower and inspire a democratic way of living in the world. These fortifications also fuel deep democratic movements both within the American empire and across the world in global democratic efforts.

The good news in that regard is that there is a deep public reverence for—a love of—democracy in America and a deep democratic tradition. This love of democracy has been most powerfully expressed and pushed forward by our great public intellectuals and artists. Our democratic tradition has built on the profound democratic impulse that stretches all the way back to the Greeks, and this book will, in part, explore the rich insights and expressions of that deep democratic tradition, from the radical iconoclasm of Socrates, to the tragically schizophrenic visions of the American Founding Fathers, to the exuberant and brilliant indictments laid down by hip-hop.

Three crucial traditions fuel deep democratic energies. The first is the Greek creation of the Socratic commitment to questioning—questioning of ourselves, of authority, of dogma, of parochialism, and of fundamentalism. Vital also is the Jewish invention of the prophetic commitment to justice—for all peoples—formulated in the Hebrew scriptures and echoed in the foundational teachings of Christianity and Islam. And indispensable in addition is the mighty shield and inner strength provided by the tragicomic commitment to hope. The tragicomic is the ability to laugh and retain a sense of life's joy—to preserve hope even while staring in the face of hate and hypocrisy—as against falling into the nihilism of paralyzing despair. This tragicomic hope is expressed in America most profoundly in the wrenchingly honest yet compassionate voices of the black freedom struggle; most poignantly in the painful eloquence of the blues; and most exuberantly in the improvisational virtuosity of jazz.

In the face of elite manipulations and lies, we must draw on the Socratic. The Socratic commitment to questioning requires a relentless self-examination and critique of institutions of authority, motivated by an endless quest for intellectual integrity and moral consistency. It is manifest in a fearless speech—*parrhesia*—that unsettles, unnerves, and unhouses people from their uncritical sleepwalking. As Socrates says in Plato's *Apology*, "Plain speech [*parrhesia*] is the cause of my unpopularity" (24a). His courageous opposition to the seductive yet nihilistic sophists of his day—Greek teachers who employed clever but fallacious arguments—exposed the specious reasoning that legitimated their quest for power and might. His historic effort to unleash painful wisdom seeking—his

midwifery of ideas and visions—was predicated on the capacity of all people (such as the brilliant slave boy Meno in the famous dialogue of that name) to engage in a critique of and resistance to the corruptions of mind, soul, and society. We desperately need the deep democratic energy of this Socratic questioning in these times of rampant sophistry on the part of our political elites and their media pundits.

In the face of callous indifference to the suffering wrought by our imperialism, we must draw on the prophetic. The Jewish invention of the prophetic commitment to justice—also central to both Christianity and Islam—is one of the great moral moments in human history. This was the commitment to justice of an oppressed people. It set in motion a prophetic tradition based on the belief that God had imparted this love of justice because God is first and foremost a lover of justice. The Judaic prophetic commitment to justice is therefore predicated on the divine love of justice. Israel—a hated and enslaved people in the most powerful empire of its day (that of Egypt's pharaohs)—is chosen by God because of God's love of justice. And the admonition against inhumane injustice is central to the message of the prophetic: "He who oppresses a poor man insults his maker / He who is kind to the needy honors him" (Proverbs 14:31). Prophetic witness consists of human acts of justice and kindness that attend to the unjust sources of human hurt and misery. Prophetic witness calls attention to the causes of unjustified suffering and unnecessary social misery. It highlights personal and institutional evil, including especially the evil of being indifferent to personal and institutional evil.

Prophetic Judaic figures appeal to us as individuals to join in

transforming the world as communities. They shun individual conversion that precludes collective insurgency. They speak to all peoples and nations to be just and righteous. Amos prophesied not only to Israel but also to Damascus, Gaza, Tyre, Edom, and Moab—he spoke in the name of a God who decides the destiny of all nations (Amos 9:7). Isaiah's domain was addressed to "all you inhabitants of the world, you who dwell on the earth" (Isaiah 18:3; see also 33:13, 34:1). Jeremiah's calling was that of "a prophet to the nations" (Jeremiah 1:5), including Israel, Ammon, Sidon, and the other peoples. Hundreds of years before the universalism of Stoic sages (like Zeno, Cleanthes, and Chrysippus), Judaic prophets raised the banner of internationalism in the name of divine compassion and divine love of justice. There is nothing tribalistic or nationalistic about prophetic witness. Xenophobic prejudices and imperialistic practices are unequivocally condemned. Prophetic witness has no room for such petty and pernicious inflictions.

Prophetic Judaic figures also target the sole reliance on the force of power. Aggressive militarism is false security—a mere diversion from attending to the necessary domestic policies of compassion that can "heal your wound" (Hosea 5:13). Escalating authoritarianism is a species of injustice that tightens the rope around one's own neck ("for not by force shall man prevail"; 1 Samuel 2:9). The deadly charge of idolatry, which is the preeminent weapon in the prophetic arsenal against injustice, whether that idolatry is the worship of power or money, sits at the center of prophetic resistance to imperial nations. The golden calf of wealth, along with the blood-soaked flag that envelops it, is the true idol of empires, past and present.

This prophetic commitment to justice is foundational in both Christianity and Islam. The gospel of love taught by Jesus and the message of mercy of Muhammad both build on the Jewish invention of the prophetic love of justice. This profound tradition should inform and embolden the struggle against the callous indifference of the plutocratic elites of the American empire about the sufferings of our own poor and oppressed peoples. It should also help to illuminate the effects of our imperialism on the poor and oppressed peoples around the world. Prophetic witness was a driving force in Martin Luther King Jr.'s vision for the civil rights movement, and lay behind the solidarity of Jews and blacks in the enactment of that movement, and it should inform and embolden us in revitalizing our democratic fires.

In the face of cynical and disillusioned acquiescence to the status quo, we must draw on the tragicomic. Tragicomic hope is a profound attitude toward life reflected in the work of artistic geniuses as diverse as Lucian in the Roman empire, Cervantes in the Spanish empire, and Chekhov in the Russian empire. Within the American empire it has been most powerfully expressed in the black invention of the blues in the face of white supremacist powers. As Ralph Ellison wrote in "Richard Wright's Blues," "The blues is an impulse to keep the painful details and episodes of a brutal experience alive in one's aching consciousness, to finger its jagged grain, and to transcend it, not by the consolation of philosophy but by squeezing from it a near-tragic, near-comic lyricism." This powerful blues sensibility—a black interpretation of tragicomic hope open to people of all colors—expresses righteous indignation with a smile and deep inner pain without bitterness or revenge. One

finds it in the works of Mark Twain, Tennessee Williams, Eudora Welty, and Thomas Pynchon as well as Bessie Smith, Ma Rainey, Robert Johnson, and Leroy Carr.

There are a number of white lovers of the blues who have a tragicomic sensibility, but for too many in white America the blues remains a kind of exotic source of amusement, a kind of primitivistic occasion for entertainment only. The blues is not simply a music to titillate; it is a hard-fought way of life, and as such it should unsettle and unnerve whites about the legacy of white supremacy. The blues is relevant today because when we look down through the corridors of time, the black American interpretation of tragicomic hope in the face of dehumanizing hate and oppression will be seen as the only kind of hope that has any kind of maturity in a world of overwhelming barbarity and bestiality. That barbarity is found not just in the form of terrorism but in the form of the emptiness of our lives—in terms of the wasted human potential that we see around the world. In this sense, the blues is a great democratic contribution of black people to world history.

The ugly terrorist attacks on innocent civilians on 9/11 plunged the whole country into the blues. Never before have Americans of *all* classes, colors, regions, religions, genders, and sexual orientations felt unsafe, unprotected, subject to random violence, and hated. Yet to have been designated and treated as a nigger in America for over 350 years has been to feel unsafe, unprotected, subject to random violence, and hated. The high point of the black response to American terrorism (or niggerization) is found in the compassionate and courageous voice of Emmett Till's mother, who stepped up to the lectern at Pilgrim Baptist Church in Chicago in

1955 at the funeral of her fourteen-year-old son, after his murder by American terrorists, and said: "I don't have a minute to hate. I'll pursue justice for the rest of my life." And that is precisely what Mamie Till Mobley did until her death in 2003. Her commitment to justice had nothing to do with naïveté. When Mississippi officials tried to keep any images of Emmett's brutalized body out of the press—his head had swollen to five times its normal size—Mamie Till Mobley held an open-casket service for all the world to see. That is the essence of the blues: to stare painful truths in the face and persevere without cynicism or pessimism.

Much of the future of democracy in America and the world hangs on grasping and preserving the rich democratic tradition that produced the Douglasses, Kings, Coltranes, and Mobleys in the face of terrorist attacks and cowardly assaults. Since 9/11 we have experienced the niggerization of America, and as we struggle against the imperialistic arrogance of the us-versus-them, revenge-driven policies of the Bush administration, we as a blues nation must learn from a blues people how to keep alive our deep democratic energies in dark times rather than resort to the tempting and easier response of militarism and authoritarianism.

No democracy can flourish against the corruptions of plutocratic, imperial forces—or withstand the temptations of militarism in the face of terrorist hate—without a citizenry girded by these three moral pillars of Socratic questioning, prophetic witness, and tragicomic hope. The hawks and proselytizers of the Bush administration have professed themselves to be the guardians of American democracy, but there is a deep democratic tradition in this country that speaks powerfully against their nihilistic, antidemo-

cratic abuse of power and that can fortify genuine democrats today in the fight against imperialism. That democratic fervor is found in the beacon calls for imaginative self-creation in Ralph Waldo Emerson, in the dark warnings of imminent self-destruction in Herman Melville, in the impassioned odes to democratic possibility in Walt Whitman. It is found most urgently and poignantly in the prophetic and powerful voices of the long black freedom struggle—from the democratic eloquence of Frederick Douglass to the soaring civic sermons of Martin Luther King Jr., in the wrenching artistic honesty of James Baldwin and Toni Morrison, and in the expressive force and improvisatory genius of the blues/jazz tradition, all forged in the night side of America and defying the demeaning strictures of white supremacy. The greatest intellectual, moral, political, and spiritual resources in America that may renew the soul and preserve the future of American democracy reside in this multiracial, rich democratic heritage.

Let us not be deceived: the great dramatic battle of the twenty-first century is the dismantling of empire and the deepening of democracy. This is as much or more a colossal fight over visions and ideas as a catastrophic struggle over profits and missiles. Globalization is inescapable—the question is whether it will be a democratic globalization or a U.S.-led corporate globalization (with thin democratic rhetoric). This is why what we think, how we care, and the way we fight mean so much now in democracy matters. We live in a propitious yet perilous moment in which it has become fashionable to celebrate the benefits of imperial rule and acceptable to condone the decline of democratic governance. The pervasive climate of opinion and the prevailing culture of consumption

make it difficult for us to even imagine the revival of the deep democratizing energies of our past and conceive of making real progress in the fight against imperialism.

But we must remember that the basis of democratic leadership is ordinary citizens' desire to take their country back from the hands of corrupted plutocratic and imperial elites. This desire is predicated on an awakening among the populace from the seductive lies and comforting illusions that sedate them and a moral channeling of new political energy that constitutes a formidable threat to the status quo. This is what happened in the 1860s, 1890s, 1930s, and 1960s in American history. Just as it looked as if we were about to lose the American democratic experiment—in the face of civil war, imperial greed, economic depression, and racial upheaval—in each of these periods a democratic awakening and activist energy emerged to keep our democratic project afloat. We must work and hope for such an awakening once again.