

Fear Springs Eternal: The Cold War, 9/11, and  
The Literature of Existential Fear

by

Julia Reed  
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## Preface

Midway through *Falling Man*, set amid the rubble of 9/11, Don DeLillo declares, “Everything now is measured by after” (138). The deadliest attack on U.S. soil prompted many to wonder whether America could ever be the same. A decade later, the irony of those expectations is clear. Not only has America changed little since the attacks, but post-9/11 novels like *Falling Man* themselves carry on an established tradition: the literature of existential fear. Fifty years before the terrorist attacks on 9/11, Americans had to learn to live with the existential threat of nuclear attack in the early years of the Cold War. Like the outbreak of global terror, the dawn of the atomic age forced citizens to imagine the unimaginable and come to terms with rational fears about irrational actions. In each case, the initial urgency of a seemingly unprecedented new era gave way to old habits and patterns. Even DeLillo’s own work on the subject cannot be “measured by after”: His novel *Mao II*, which warns that terrorists have used “midair explosions and crumpled buildings” to set “the new tragic narrative,” appeared ten years before 9/11 (157).

In modern life and literature, fear springs eternal. The treatment, use, and spread of fear in the Cold War culture of the 1950s provides an ideal lens through which to view fear in post-9/11 culture and fiction. In both eras, Americans had to consider how much they were willing to sacrifice to quell new fears, while their leaders chose whether to calm fears or stoke them. The culture of the two periods, half a century apart and confronted with different enemies, reflects an enduring struggle to make sense of new threats. The dangers of complacency collide with the dark side of vigilance. The fruits of liberty are weighed against the price of freedom.

A profound longing for normalcy trumps the sense that nothing can ever be the same. The need to move on interrupts the duty to remember. Vigilance, as Corey Robin contends in *Fear: The History of a Political Idea*, is a dangerous addiction: “We savor the experience of being afraid, as many writers did after 9/11, for only fear, we believe, can turn us from isolated men and women into a united people” (3).

A close study of 1950s Cold War novels and novels of 9/11 will show that the literature of existential fear follows set narrative conventions and expounds constant themes, no matter the enemy or era. First, fear challenges us to rediscover who we are. Nations rarely muster what Robin calls a “galvanizing fear,” yet fear often reminds us of the values we worry we may have squandered (13). Second, fear can underscore how complacency about our own weaknesses may pose greater danger than the other side’s strengths. An external threat can make it harder to neglect political and moral shortcomings we have put off dealing with at home. Third, fear may not unite us, but it reveals the ways we are divided. In times of crisis, countries can ill afford to ignore festering divisions that make individuals choose alienation over feeling part of a nation.

As Robin suggests, the politics of fear – and by extension the literature – return to the same conventions and themes because they address challenges inherent to liberal democracy. Individualistic societies that prize personal freedom and balance diverse interests doubt their capacity to contend with existential threats. By posing the threat of an imagined, existential enemy who seems to represent a completely different way of life, the literature of existential fear reminds us of the virtues of liberal democracy and the dangers of those willing to sacrifice freedoms in

freedom's defense. The conventions of this literature reflect a persistent story told again and again in times of crisis, when enduring doubts come to the fore. Existential enemies who do not play by our rules or respect our ideals always force us to wonder whether our own worship or neglect of those ideals will seal our doom. Yet then, just as surely, liberal democracy restores our faith in America by finding and expelling a scapegoat – demagogue, turncoat, extremist – who represents its greatest weakness and poses the greatest threat to its survival.

Written in the heat of the Cold War and the aftermath of 9/11, the literature of existential fear sets out not to soothe, ignite, or remake the nation, but rather to reckon with the nation's angst and trauma. The novels examined in these pages echo the words Oskar Schell recalls from his late father in *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close*: “Sometimes you have to put your fears in order” (Foer 87).

## Chapter One

### The Storm Beneath the Calm

In his first Inaugural Address in 1933, Franklin D. Roosevelt assured a nation weary of Depression, “The only thing we have to fear is fear itself” (Houck 3). History had greater fears in store. Just five weeks earlier, Adolf Hitler had been sworn in as Chancellor of Germany. A year later, Joseph Stalin began the Great Purge that would secure his hold on the Soviet Union for a generation, while Mao Zedong used the Long March to begin his long rise to power in China. By the end of the 1930s, Hitler plunged the world into another war that once again would stretch the boundaries of the unthinkable. The Holocaust left no limit to human evil. The invasion of Poland, the London Blitz, and the attack on Pearl Harbor shook great nations. With the atomic bombs dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki, humanity discovered the capacity to destroy itself.

Battling totalitarian regimes in World War II, America learned of the horrors concealed behind fascist walls – a dark world, as George Orwell wrote in 1946, of “secret-police forces, censorship of opinion, torture, and frame up trials” (Gleason 60). Though the war ended and democracy emerged victorious, images of concentration camps remained fresh in the minds of Americans and fears of totalitarianism only intensified as Soviet ambitions crystallized. As Abbott Gleason points out, “The totalitarian idea – that the Communists were the successors of the Nazis and closely connected to them – was the most powerful political idea of the late 1940s” (74). One tyrannical empire bent on world domination gave way to another. In his 1946 Iron Curtain speech, Winston Churchill warned Western nations that

Communist states could use “the fear of [nuclear weapons] . . . to enforce totalitarian systems upon the free and democratic world, with consequences appalling to the human imagination” (Gleason 69). When the Soviet Union developed its own atomic weapon in 1949, it became increasingly apparent that more than one nation could play the game. Americans had to confront two grim realities that had once seemed unthinkable: For the first time, another nation had the means to decimate the United States – and no matter what became of that military threat, we suddenly faced a prolonged Cold War to defend ourselves. If totalitarianism was the most powerful political idea of the time, paranoia was an understandable political side effect. The Soviets (and soon enough, the Chinese) really were out to get us, and we felt the same way toward them.

The Cold War transformed American foreign and national security policy, turning a nation that had long preferred to be left alone into the leading and most activist superpower. At the same time, the new era introduced an element far less common in the past: fear. At the dawn of the Cold War, American culture made little attempt to treat the threat of Communism in a balanced, measured way. As Stephen Whitfield points out, 12 anti-Communist films were produced in 1952 alone, with titles like *The Steel Fist* and *Red Snow* (133). Politicians and citizens alike saw red everywhere they looked, and J. Edgar Hoover’s FBI looked everywhere. Science fiction, horror, and disaster movies also thrived. According to M. Keith Booker, author of *From Box Office to Ballot Box*, the alien-invasion and disaster films of the 1950s “directly reflected anxieties associated with the Cold War” (87).

Perhaps because of the tumultuous decade that followed, the 1950s are sometimes remembered as “the quiet ’50s” (Kitch 11). The U.S. economy was booming and family incomes were rising along with it. The birth rate was high and the crime rate was low. Civil rights emerged as a national issue, only to be quashed by filibusters on the Senate floor. Other social issues like homosexuality and abortion were hardly raised at all. Biographer Stephen Ambrose describes President Dwight Eisenhower as “so calm . . . he inspired a trust that was as broad and deep as that of any President since George Washington” (449).

In his introduction to *Fear Itself*, however, Ira Katznelson identifies three defining sources of American paranoia in the postwar era: the existential threat of totalitarian Communism, the nagging complacency of our democracy, and the burning fuse of racial division (12-14). Three bestselling novels of the period bring these fears to life. Richard Condon’s 1959 thriller *The Manchurian Candidate* exploits and mocks the threat of Communist infiltration. In his 1959 Washington novel *Advise and Consent*, Allen Drury explores whether the American political system can rise to the challenge of the Cold War. Ralph Ellison’s 1952 novel *Invisible Man* reveals the explosiveness of race in America but questions whether our Cold War rivals can take advantage of anger at racial injustice. A closer examination of each of these iconic early Cold War novels shows fears just beneath the surface that belie the decade’s quiet calm.



*America's Worst Nightmare*

Americans had grown accustomed to war by the time the Cold War began. For much of the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the U.S. had been gearing up for, fighting, or recovering from war. What made the Cold War seem different to commentators at the time was the existential nature of the threat it seemed to pose at every level – to the nation, to humanity, and to the individual. If World War I was sometimes called “the war to end all wars” and World War II “the Good War,” the Cold War loomed as a war without end, unless to end badly. Perhaps even more unnerving than nuclear annihilation was the threat totalitarianism posed to the American way of life. Nations had been fighting each other for centuries; the totalitarian state, especially as it was conceived by mid-century political theorists, seemed designed to conquer not only territory but basic freedoms. For Americans, who valued individual liberty highly, totalitarian ideology appeared impossible to fathom and easy to fear. The Korean War confirmed their darkest imaginings. During World War II, as in previous wars, the U.S. had gone to extraordinary lengths and sacrificed civil liberties – especially in the creation of internment camps – to contain imagined security threats from within. The North Korean and Chinese Communists came up with a new way to unnerve the American populace by capturing U.S. prisoners of war and trying to turn them against us. As Gleason points out, “The experiences of American prisoners in North Korea and Chinese camps in particular were the first direct experience of ordinary Americans with the demonic world of totalitarianism” (94).

One particularly “demonic” technique would capture the popular imagination. “The free world began to hear strange reports from the Communist-operated prisoner of war camps in North Korea,” a journalist wrote in 1950. “Procommunist publications everywhere began to carry purported confessions and grotesquely worded statements said to have been signed by these soldiers in support of whatever propaganda appeal international communism was making at the moment” (Gleason 92). This mysterious phenomenon was attributed to the invasive techniques of Communist thought control dubbed “brainwashing” by Edward Hunter in his 1951 book *Brainwashing in Red China*. According to Gleason, “The whole ‘brainwashing episode’ . . . made a powerful impression on public opinion, suggesting to people in variously sophisticated ways that totalitarianism was at bottom the effort of a conspiratorial elite to achieve total control of the human individual” – or “enslavement of the helpless individual psyche” (92, 103).

Richard Condon’s 1959 novel *The Manchurian Candidate* builds an elaborate conspiracy around that paranoia. Condon exploits every possible American insecurity. His anti-hero, Sergeant Raymond Shaw, is a Medal of Honor winner and the stepson of a prominent United States senator. But Shaw won the medal for acts that never occurred, his stepfather is a buffoonish anti-Communist demagogue, and his mother is a Soviet agent plotting to take over the White House. Shaw himself is a Communist Party puppet, brainwashed in North Korea by Chinese mastermind Yen Lo, who turns him into a ruthless assassin. Condon writes of Shaw and his squadron, “Their brains had not merely been washed, they had been dry-cleaned” (55). Like totalitarianism, Shaw’s brainwashing cannot be reversed. He follows orders to

murder his true love. He kills key figures around the world without memory or remorse. “The conception of people acting against their own best interests should not startle us,” Yen Lo explains. “We see it occasionally in sleepwalking and in politics, every day” (Condon 41). Shaw becomes America’s worst nightmare: Fear appears not only in the uniform of the Soviet Red Army, but also in the blond, blue-eyed innocence of the boy hero next door. As his mother tells him, when she believes her plot will succeed, “We have won the power, and now that they have given it to us they can just begin to fear” (Condon 289).

If Shaw is a hero turned evil, the Manchurian candidate is his stepfather, Senator Johnny Iselin, a slapstick version of the most successful fearmonger of the 1950s, Senator Joseph McCarthy. Condon borrows some incidents directly from McCarthy’s exploits. Iselin’s loyalty investigation takes three million words of testimony: “Johnny had generated an extraordinary amount of fear, which he beamed directly into the eyes of all who came close to him” (Condon 132). Stephen Whitfield notes that two weeks after former State Department employee Alger Hiss was sentenced for spying, McCarthy “claimed to have in his hand a list of 205 Communists who were still working under [Secretary of State Dean] Acheson” (29). Senator Iselin holds a press conference to denounce “two hundred and seven persons who are known to the Secretary of Defense as being members of the Communist party and who, nevertheless, are still working” (Condon 125). To attract still more news attention, Mrs. Iselin instructs her husband to keep changing the number of Communists he accuses. Liberals and foreign leaders denounce “Iselinism,” but it earns him the vice-presidential nomination. Mrs. Iselin’s diabolical plan calls for

Shaw to assassinate the presidential nominee, lightly wound Iselin, and turn himself in as a Soviet assassin – with the expectation that the plan will propel Iselin to the White House on a wave of anti-Communist fervor.

As Louis Menand observes, this “true artifact of cold war culture” is about fear but equally about manipulation – a skill Communists and anti-Communists had in common (“Brainwashed”). Condon cannot help himself from indulging other anxieties, such as those prompted by incest and drug abuse. In a *New York Times* review, novelist Frederic Morton calls the book “a breathlessly up-to-date thriller, gimmicked to the gills, from judo to narcohypnosis” (“One Thing Led to Another”). Yet *The Manchurian Candidate*’s emergence as a bestseller suggests that Condon’s premise struck a nerve, perhaps precisely because Condon’s story of brainwashing, doping, and incestuous manipulation dramatized popular ideas of what totalitarianism must involve and popular fears that American culture might not be so different from totalitarian society after all. After a decade of the Cold War, Americans were more hypnotized than galvanized by a new set of fears – as bizarre as brainwashing, as unthinkable as nuclear war, and as existentially terrifying as totalitarianism. Condon managed to suggest both that such dangers were invading the U.S. from abroad and that they were springing up in the fertile soil of a decadent society that was ready to embrace the very evils it believed itself to be fighting against.

In this respect, Condon’s novel tapped into a central feature of Cold War discourse, the anxiety about whether a liberal democracy could summon the resources to fight an existential enemy. While demagogues like Joseph McCarthy railed against threats from within, Cold War liberals like Arthur Schlesinger worried whether

America had the resolve to prevail. According to Corey Robin, Schlesinger hoped to turn those doubts to good use: “By confronting an external enemy, the Soviet Union, Americans could thereby transform their existential anxiety into focused, galvanizing fear” (13). Yet in the same way that over time, America’s aggressive response to 9/11 would lead to second thoughts that the reaction had gone too far, McCarthy’s indiscriminate fear mongering eventually backfired. “As the fear of conspiracy ebbed, the intolerance of heresy weakened too,” Whitfield writes. “Without such anxieties to define the national purpose or darken the national prospect, the culture of the Cold War could no longer be sustained” (203).

Condon does his best to have it both ways. On the one hand, the novel plays to Americans’ darkest fears of conspiracy, treason, and Communist trickery. At the same time, it makes the American political system look petty, overwrought, and foolish and American culture more broadly appear soft and conformist. In his study of Cold War movies, Michael Paul Rogin calls the screen version of *The Manchurian Candidate* “the most sophisticated film of the cold war” because “far from mocking the mentality it displays, it aims to reawaken a lethargic nation to the Communist menace” (252). Yet as Whitfield notes, Condon makes clear that those who sound the alarms about that menace pose one of their own: “While Communism is fiendish and still dangerous, the far right is hypocritical and foolish” (213). Johnny Iselin, the drunken McCarthyite, represents as grave a threat to democracy as Raymond Shaw, the assassin the Communists brainwash to remove the last obstacle in Iselin’s path to the White House.

Condon captures these contradictions in the character who thwarts the Communist conspiracy, Colonel Bennett Marco. The fate of the Cold War depends on Marco and Shaw, and while both men do their job, neither looks like a hero for it. Marco uncovers and eventually outwits what Whitfield calls “the diabolical cunning of the Eastern bloc,” but his own methods are more cutthroat than angelic (212). If Shaw is an unwitting pawn in an evil plot, Marco is a witting and ruthless plotter in response. The two men show that despite their ideological differences, the U.S. and its enemies agree that in their quest to destroy each other the ends justify the means.

In most respects, Marco and Shaw are opposites. Shaw is the son of privilege and stepson of a senator; Marco comes from a long line of Army men, and is the descendant of Aztecs and Eskimos. Shaw is a romantic writer and dreamer; Marco is a voracious reader and doer. Shaw needs brainwashing to overcome his social inhibitions around women; Marco brings home so many women he insists that “everyone wear shoes as a precaution against athlete’s foot” (Condon 110). Shaw takes the knowledge of his brainwashing in stride; Marco studies every detail of every dream for clues, an intelligence officer spying on his own past.

Like Shaw, Marco is a victim of Communist treachery. Yen Lo dupes him into recommending Shaw for the Medal of Honor, which Marco says he has been raised to revere: “A Medal of Honor man is the best man any soldier can think of because he has achieved the most of what every soldier was meant to do” (Condon 205). Once he learns the truth, Marco devotes himself to avenging what the Communists have done, no matter what that may mean for his best friend. After pummeling Communist conspirator Chunjin he feels “filled to his hairline with

adrenalin because he had at last been permitted to take those nightmares and one of the people in them into the fingers of his hands to beat and to torture them until he found out why they had happened and where they had happened and how they could be made to stop” (Condon 174). When Senator Iselin tries to silence him with a promotion, Marco vows to make him pay: “If he has to be killed, and I can’t kill him, I’ll have someone kill him for me” (Condon 206). For a soldier on a patriotic mission, he worries more still about his ambitions, observing how a general’s tragic suicide had been a boon for his own career. “Because he was human to extreme dimension, Marco secretly felt he had done pretty well,” Condon writes. “Colonel Marco puzzled his past nightmares and decided they could make him a full general yet” (216). Marco is as obsessive and unconstrained as Yen Lo. He operates with “maximum police efficiency” (Condon 235). He interrogates Shaw in a voice that attacks “like a starving rodent which gnaws at flaws behind the doors, mad to get through to an unknown trove of crazing scent on the other side” (Condon 232). Marco borrows the enemy’s tactics to brainwash his best friend – and when he orders Shaw to assassinate Iselin, it becomes harder to tell Marco and the enemy apart.

These central contradictions in Marco’s character – between patriotism and ambition, ideals and tactics, friend and country, defense and aggression – mirror the inherent tensions in America’s performance during the Cold War. While speaking out against totalitarianism around the globe, the U.S. quashed dissent and abrogated civil liberties at home. Condon makes the most of this inconsistency, aware that as one critic notes “his novel’s potboiler plotting and scare tactics exploited the very tendencies it lampooned” (Szalay 366). Americans could live in mortal fear of

Communist brainwashing and simultaneously subject themselves to endless commercial and nationalistic manipulation in the form of mass advertising and political demagoguery, without noticing the irony. As Marco jokes to Shaw, “You must have gotten a better brainwashing than I did” (Condon 185).

Shaw and Marco are the crucial doubles in Condon’s narrative. They represent two alternative accounts of what could happen to the model of liberal citizenship under the threat of totalitarian manipulation, and more broadly, two models of liberal citizenship in a mass bureaucratic society. Either Americans would become passive and infantilized puppets, Condon implies, or they would embrace an aggressive militarism and sacrifice the liberties they were ostensibly committed to defending. Michael Szalay calls Marco “the organization man cum James Bond – globetrotting, learned, lethal, and loving” (372). In the Cold War, as in World War II, organization men were called upon to be heroes – or criminals. Even then, as Louis Menand points out in his 2003 *New Yorker* essay on totalitarianism, it was not always clear which was which: “Do the loyal henchmen obey the dictator out of fear or out of conviction?” (“The Devil’s Disciples”) Like the country he serves, Marco is the toughest guy on the block, and not afraid to prove it.

This narrative convention recurs throughout the literature of existential fear. The implication of Condon’s narrative is that the greatest danger lies not in our enemies but in ourselves, and that such risks are inherent to the personal freedoms permitted by a liberal society. For Condon, the most serious threat America faced a decade into the Cold War came not from Communism but from the culture the 1950s had helped produce. Alongside a page-turning plot about Communist brainwashing,



*The Manchurian Candidate* hints at dark conspiracies of America's own making: the abuse of power by politicians, the hypnotic indoctrination of commercialism, the willing surrender of individualism to organizations and bureaucracy. To some degree these themes reflect the cynicism of an author who had spent more than 20 years as a Hollywood publicist, manipulating the American people on behalf of an inherently manipulative industry. Yet in many respects, Condon echoes doubts that many of his contemporaries shared. In the same way that recent novels like Amy Waldman's *The Submission* explore individual freedoms America may have sacrificed in the decade since 9/11, Condon uses *The Manchurian Candidate* to ask which liberties the political and social currents of the 1950s may have washed away. In both cases, as throughout the literature of fear, an allegedly existential threat is used to dramatize the concern that liberal democracy may not be sustainable in the modern world – and the value of liberal democracy is rediscovered in the process.

Condon's novel both tells this story, and like many other works of the late 1950s and early 1960s, hints that everything could go wrong because of the fragility and decadence of American institutions and American culture. From his harsh portrayal of McCarthyite politicians to his own observations about abuse of power, Condon suggests that in its zeal to defeat totalitarianism around the globe, the U.S. risks falling into totalitarian habits of its own. "It's the villains that make good literature, because they're the only ones in the story who know what they want," Condon would later write (Gussow). He pins America's troubles on a host of villains: politicians, business, bureaucracy, Americans themselves, and the culture those forces together have wrought. Condon was far from alone in ridiculing the

same national paranoia he was exploiting. Five years after *The Manchurian Candidate*, Joseph Heller vilified American bureaucracy in *Catch-22*. Corey Robin quotes Heller's rationale: "The anti-war and anti-government feelings in the book belong to . . . the Korean War [and] the Cold War of the fifties. A general disintegration of belief took place then" (214). *The Manchurian Candidate* captures that same "disintegration of belief." Condon seems reluctant to believe in anything. He relishes the irony of a nation demanding greater and greater loyalty to beliefs it does less and less to honor. Mrs. Iselin recruits 2.3 million citizens to join an organization she calls "the Loyal American Underground," dedicated to her husband's "cause of fanatic good government, cleansed of the stain of communism" (Condon 155). What frightens Condon is not just the conspiracy but Americans' ingrained eagerness to take part. "We are taught what we are taught," he writes in his 1978 autobiography, *And Then We Moved to Rossenarra or the Art of Emigrating*. "What we are taught and made to experience (whether vicariously or directly) is our conditioning" (267). In some ways, the American people's "conditioning" is as debilitating as Raymond Shaw's. "People were frightened during the 1950s," notes Corey Robin. "They looked . . . like Hobbesian man – reasonable, purposive, and careful never to take a step in the wrong direction. Fear didn't destroy Cold War America: it tamed it" (49). For Condon, the Cold War is America's Queen of Diamonds: Americans will do as they're told, the only question is who's telling them.

The most immediate targets of Condon's satire are politicians and the political system. "Every book I've ever written has been about the abuse of power," Condon

once observed. “I’d like people to know how deeply their politicians are wronging them” (Gussow). *The Manchurian Candidate* paints a melodramatic picture of such abuse. Mrs. Iselin, an incestuous drug addict and murderous traitor, has “one of the best political minds in the country” (Condon 105). Shaw tries to escape the family stain by becoming a newspaperman. When he pulls strings to get Marco a promotion, he worries that “Political Influence” will be stamped all over his friend’s personnel file (Condon 193). He keeps his engagement to the woman he loves a secret because “his mother would use it at once to political advantage” and “his mother’s political advantages were profitless, even detrimental, to anyone concerned” (Condon 269). If, as a *New York Times* reviewer once wrote, Condon was unsurpassed in “the fiction of information,” much of the information he provided came at politicians’ expense (Hamill). Right before the Iselins’ assassination, he dedicates an entire chapter to explaining the foolishness of political platforms and party conventions. Shaw’s one genuinely heroic act is to gun down his politician parents.

But as much as he satirizes the political world, Condon sees a less absurd and therefore more dangerous threat to American society from the world of consumer capitalism. When Mrs. Iselin chides her husband for his insincerity, he tells her, “What the hell, hon, this is a business with me” (Condon 155-56). In Condon’s opinion, there is no honor among salesmen. Describing the passengers on Marco’s train trip to New York, Condon counts an abortionist and an astrologer as businessmen, then editorializes that “no matter how much they would like the world to think so, the planet is not populated entirely by businessmen no matter how banal the quality of conversation everywhere has become” (163). Amid the growing

prosperity of the 1950s, crass commercialism posed its own existential threat. Television subjected American consumers to advertising on an unprecedented scale. While Condon's novel and ensuing movie took full advantage of rising consumerism, he was nevertheless alarmed by its hypnotic powers. Condon would later call the novel an "all-American brainwashing" about commerce as much as Communism (*And Then We Moved* 267). Michael Szalay suggests that Condon saw the Cold War "as a spur to invent and live up to a national mission beyond commercialism," but also points out the author's "complicity with consumerism" (370, 381). Condon regards consumption, like politics, as another form of indoctrination, with Americans its willing victims. Yen Lo "conditioned the men to enjoy all the Coca-Cola they could drink, which was, in actuality, Chinese Army issue tea" (32). Condon finds it easy to confuse America's greatest export with her greatest enemy.

By 1959, a decade of Cold War had left Condon and others with the bitter aftertaste of conformity. The banality of totalitarianism, of course, was its impact on self-determination. In Orwell's words, "We live in an age in which the autonomous individual is ceasing to exist" (Gleason 59). Like Orwell, and like many Cold War liberals, Condon feared the threat to autonomy from organizations and bureaucracy here at home as much, if not more, than the threat of subversion from abroad. Here again, Condon did not act alone. As Garry Wills explains in *The Kennedy Imprisonment*, bureaucracy became a foremost concern for President Kennedy when he took office. Wills writes that Kennedy "assembled a hit-and-run team to cut through enemy resistance" posed by "the many dullards of the bureaucracy" – only to see his best and brightest Cold Warriors commit greater blunders than the bureaucrats

ever imagined (169). Condon unleashes Marco to mount a similar insurgence, assembling his own army of several hundred FBI agents, intelligence officers, and policemen – who repeatedly lose track of Shaw anyway. From politics and bureaucracy to commercialism and the Cold War, Condon sees the 1950s as an assault on individualism, with Americans all too happy to surrender to the greater enemy within.

### *Red Alert*

As the decade drew to a close, even Americans without a trace of Condon's cynicism had to deal with doubt and anxiety about the possible directions of the Cold War. In October 1957, the Soviet Union beat the U.S. into space by launching the Sputnik satellite. Two months later, the first U.S. launch attempt failed badly when the Vanguard TV3 satellite exploded immediately after liftoff. Trailing the Soviets in the space race prompted intensified concerns that American democracy, character, or ingenuity somehow might fail to measure up to the challenge.

Published just three months after *The Manchurian Candidate*, Allen Drury's *Advise and Consent* captures the political mood of a worried nation worn down by a long decade of Cold War. In the novel, when the Soviets make scientific breakthroughs, the U.S. must grapple with the unaccustomed fear of falling behind. The never-ending threat of nuclear annihilation forces Americans to weigh the risks of confrontation and appeasement. Above all, Drury's characters express nagging doubts about whether the country can shake off the complacency that stands in the way of restoring past greatness. In the face of an external threat, the literature of fear

turns inward. The novel suggests that at a fateful moment in history, the shortcomings of its politics and politicians and the complacency of its people make America its own worst enemy.

Thanks to its pitch-perfect portrayal of the clash of interests that makes the United States Senate tick, *Advise and Consent* endures as the great American political novel. In their insecurities and vices, as well as their constant struggle to balance principle and ambition, the politicians Drury brings to life could come from any era. The title of the novel harkens back to the Founders, who placed the advice-and-consent clause in Article Two of the Constitution to force the executive and legislative branches to work together. Drury highlights inherent tensions in our institutions of government, from the games congressional leaders play to corral their caucuses to the mix of flattery and intimidation presidents employ to bend legislators to their will. While his characters are timeless political archetypes, Drury tries to sum up the anxious mood of the era, declaring it “a time of worry and confusion and uncertainty,” “a time of uneasiness,” and “a time of nip and tuck” (33). Americans and their representatives in Washington may not know what to make of the Soviet threat, but can sense what the U.S. has lost. “In his lifetime he had seen America rise and rise and rise, some sort of golden legend to her own people,” Senate Majority Leader Bob Munson thinks to himself. “Then, in the sudden burst of Soviet science in the later fifties, the golden legend crumbled” (Drury 32). He sees the moment as a time of “sudden fear” that makes citizens stare into “the dark abyss . . . in the small hours of the night’s cold terror,” wondering what to do if the U.S. cannot catch up (Drury 32).

To some degree, Drury sets this tone to explain the stakes of the nomination of Robert Leffingwell as Secretary of State. As Munson suggests, “The fate of the Republic, in this instance, did indeed in large measure depend on what the Senate did” (Drury 34). One newspaper headline declares, “REDS SAY MESSAGE MAY DECIDE FATE OF WORLD” (Drury 606). At the same time, the novel conveys the toll the arms race and the space race have already taken. Senators agree that “the game of leapfrog played for so long by the United States and the Soviet Union” has reached “a turning point in time that most of them knew, instinctively, had always been destined to come” (Drury 609). In March 1961, two years after it was published, Drury would explain that he intended the book to express his “thoughts on foreign policy in the period of crisis through which the United States was passing vis-a-vis the Soviet Union, and, of course, is still passing” (667). JFK launched his failed Bay of Pigs invasion of Cuba a month later. The President in *Advise and Consent* seems to be on red alert as well. “The evil machine that has pounded for almost half a century against the fabric of a reasonably secure and decent society in the world has never been more active everywhere,” he laments, telling himself “it will be a miracle” if he can survive the burden of dealing with the Soviets much longer (Drury 475). Drury’s “evil machine” foreshadows Ronald Reagan’s “evil empire” and George W. Bush’s “axis of evil,” blurring the line between fictional presidents and presidential fictions.

Despite the threat from abroad, Drury suggests that Americans may have just as much to fear from the dismal state of their political system here at home. Like Richard Condon in *The Manchurian Candidate*, he warns that whenever politicians

behave badly in times of fear and crisis, the U.S. risks sinking to the Soviet Union's level. When Senator Brigham Anderson tells the President that Leffingwell "lied to the whole world" about his Communist history, the President replies that arrogance, stubbornness, and deceit may be "just exactly what we need in dealing with the Russians" (Drury 400, 402). The President menacingly declares that his devotion to country is so deep, "I have allowed nothing – *nothing* – to stand in the way of my concept of how best to do it" (Drury 407-08). After defying the President, Anderson learns just how far the man will go. "This isn't Russia, you know," the young senator tries to reassure a colleague, after he finds himself the victim of a smear campaign over past indiscretions. "I'm not going to be shot" (Drury 394). But the President's ruthless character assault does Stalin one better, prompting Anderson to shoot himself. Even the Soviet ambassador sees the resemblance: "It was the sort of equation a representative of Communism could understand, for in one form or another it happened in his country all the time" (Drury 525). In *The Manchurian Candidate*, demagogues from the right spark fear. In *Advise and Consent*, it comes from demagogues on the left. Condon mocks anti-Communists like Senator Johnny Iselin for trying to scare Americans about Communist infiltration of the State Department. Drury takes the concerns of right-wing anti-Communist seriously and warns what could happen if a Communist sympathizer ran the State Department. His favorite target is Wyoming Senator Fred Van Ackerman, who will do anything in the name of appeasement. Drury's version of the fellow-traveling liberal plays to American fears of war, telling a roaring crowd, "As for me, I had rather crawl on my knees to Moscow than die under an atom bomb!" (456) Much as he loathes such



panderers, however, Drury faults the entire political system for what he views as the nation's weak posture in the Cold War. Drury indicts "all the vultures who preyed off . . . [America] in business, in labor, in politics, and press and international affairs" (507). He later expressed his regret that his publisher rejected his original subtitle, *A Novel of the Western World*, explaining that "only in the Western world could a parliamentary struggle such as this occur; the book has much to say of the ills of the Western world" (672).

In short, despite the fact Drury is as avowedly conservative as Condon is liberal, both fear that fatal weakness is built into the political culture of liberal democracy. Senator Munson blames America's troubles not least on Americans themselves, "who somehow didn't give quite enough of a damn about their country in spite of all their self-congratulatory airs about how patriotic they were" (Drury 32). Senator Orrin Knox sympathizes with his longtime rival, the President, about "a frightening apathy that seemed to run through the entire structure of American life" and made it difficult "to lead to safety a country that sometimes appeared not to care whether it got there or not" (Drury 506-07). Perhaps wishing that the era was in fact still more a time of fear, Knox describes his contemporary moment as "the Age of the Shrug," in which the comforts of consumerism have numbed Americans to the "dry rot" of their culture and produced "an almost hopeless complacency and compliance with all the things that devious people wanted to do" (Drury 507). He and the President wonder what it will take to awaken the country from its slumber. When the U.S.S.R. beats the U.S. to the moon, Knox asks, "What *is* the matter with us, anyway?" (Drury 579)

Like *The Manchurian Candidate*, *Advise and Consent* speaks to powerful political attitudes that were prominent in the last years of the 1950s. The Soviet threat had frightened and wearied Americans – and perhaps worse, Soviet success in the space race had deeply wounded our pride. Indeed, Drury’s 1959 novel sets forth much the same critique that would fuel Senator John Kennedy’s 1960 presidential bid a year later. JFK’s slogan was “Let’s get America moving again.” In his floor speech responding to the Soviets, Drury’s Senator Knox implores “a very great nation, which has a job to do” with the same message: “Let’s get on with it!” (612) Like Condon and Kennedy, Drury’s advice to America is not to become too contented. Equally important, the novel glorifies the United States Senate as an arena where heroic statesmanship still somehow endures amid the pettiness and complacency of liberal society, while neglecting the fact that at the time the Senate was the last bastion of Southern resistance against the movement for civil rights. For Drury, as for Condon, the politics of fear allows the narrative both to rise above the weakness of liberal society and to tolerate the repression of civil liberties and civil rights.

As *The Manchurian Candidate* and *Advise and Consent* both demonstrate, a Cold War novel set in Washington in the 1950s cannot avoid the legacy of Washington’s most infamous 1950s Cold Warrior, Senator Joseph McCarthy. Richard Condon turns Senator Iselin into a caricature of McCarthy who makes a name for himself by destroying the reputations of others. Allen Drury creates Senator Van Ackerman, who is soft on Communism but, as a scheming demagogue, is even tougher than McCarthy on his colleagues. Ironically, by conjuring up Communist conspiracies to infiltrate the U.S. government, both novels legitimize McCarthy’s

gravest accusations. In separate ways, however, Condon and Drury go to great lengths to discredit McCarthyite tactics. Condon highlights the cynicism of those tactics: Iselin knows his charges against the State Department are false, but craves public attention. Drury focuses on an even darker peril – the unchecked villainy of the true believer. As he sets out to blackmail his fellow Senator Brigham Anderson of Utah, Van Ackerman showboats for the cameras and does the bidding of a stubborn, cynical president. What makes Van Ackerman so dangerous is his unflinching zeal to do whatever it takes for the cause he believes in, even if he has to destroy a colleague's life in the professed pursuit of peace.

Senator Anderson's suicide in response to the threat of gay baiting underscores two tragic side effects of the politics of fear in the 1950s. First, the incident is based on a real tragedy, the 1954 suicide of Senator Lester Hunt, a Democrat from Wyoming. Hunt was an outspoken opponent of McCarthyism; according to the Senate Historical Office, he publicly called McCarthy "an opportunist," "a liar," and a "drunk" ("Senator Lester Hunt's Decision"). After his son was arrested on a morals charge, Republican leaders warned Hunt that if he ran for re-election they would make the young man's homosexuality an issue. The Senate historian calls it "one of the foulest attempts at blackmail in modern political history" ("Senator Lester Hunt's Decision"). Hunt initially rebuffed the threat, then changed his mind and withdrew from the race. A few days later, he brought a .22 rifle into his Senate office and (as Drury's Anderson will do) shot himself. In Hunt's obituary in *The New York Times*, a Republican senator insisted that Hunt was not the unnamed Democratic senator McCarthy had accused of "just plain wrong doing" in a

television interview (“Hunt Takes Life”). Drury alters the story dramatically. His villain, Van Ackerman, is not a Republican anti-Communist, but a left-leaning demagogue from Wyoming, and in Drury’s narrative he threatens to out a senator’s distant past rather than a senator’s son. But perhaps still more fundamentally, Drury changes the historical record to imagine the Cold War as an occasion for national solidarity and elite leadership in which partisan differences and personal interests are finally set aside. After Anderson’s suicide, an otherwise divided Senate unites to shame and censure Van Ackerman and an otherwise heartless press corps never reports the accusations against Anderson.

In this manner, Drury’s novel alludes to the repressive underside of the politics of fear, while also imagining that the politics of fear could somehow provide a means of transcending that repression. Anderson’s suicide alludes to the surveillance, manipulation, and paranoia that accompanied the growth of the national security apparatus amid the Cold War. In *The Lavender Scare*, David K. Johnson quotes a memorandum from Harry Truman’s advisors warning him that “the country is more concerned about the charges of homosexuals in the Government than about Communists” (2). Johnson says the Republican Party’s 1952 campaign slogan “Let’s Clean House” and Dwight Eisenhower’s charges of “wickedness in government” were aimed at ridding the bureaucracy of “communism, corruption, and sexual perversion” (121). In April 1953 Eisenhower signed an executive order making “immoral, or disgraceful conduct” and “sexual perversion” national security grounds for prohibiting federal employment (“Executive Order 10450”). Drury manages to disavow sexual repression through some clever plot design that both aligns

homosexuality and Communism and suggests, at the same time, that personal desire and political ideology are profoundly different. Drury creates two candidates with histories that they wish to keep hidden. Secretary of State Robert Leffingwell and Senator Brigham Anderson both conceal a secret that could destroy their political careers. Leffingwell lies to Congress to cover up his Communist past; Anderson decides to use that lie to block Leffingwell's nomination while covering up a politically embarrassing past of his own. Anderson becomes a hero in Drury's depiction for insisting that Leffingwell's background should disqualify him from serving as Secretary of State. The President and Van Ackerman, by contrast, come across as cowards for using Anderson's sexual secret against him. In part, this narrative strategy implies that it was liberal Democrats, not conservative Republicans, who used fear and demagoguery to defeat their rivals during the Cold War. It further suggests that while domestic repression may have accompanied the grand geopolitical struggle of the Cold War, that repression was not necessary or significant. In Drury's narrative existential fear triumphs over and obscures the small personal fears that were in fact a major feature of political life during the Cold War.

Drury's true hero in *Advise and Consent* is the United States Senate, even though the 1950s now look like a dark chapter in that institution's past as well. "*Advise and Consent* is besotted with the Senate," Mark Feeney writes in *Nixon at the Movies*, noting that Drury dedicates the novel to the Senate with gratitude for the "example, existence and eccentricities" of its members (114). In the 1950s those "eccentricities" began with Joseph McCarthy and ended with a Southern stranglehold on civil rights legislation. A longtime congressional reporter, Drury seems to share

the legislative branch's dim view of the executive. The President refuses to consult with Congress and nominates men who cannot be trusted. When the Soviets land on the moon, it takes Senator Orrin Knox's speech on the Senate floor to inspire the nation in response, not the President's address from the Oval Office. The government gets going again only when the President dies and his more compliant successor nominates Senator Knox as Secretary of State. In 1962 Drury explained that one reason for writing the novel was to show "that [government] had great strengths and great weaknesses, and that although the weaknesses sometimes seemed to predominate the strengths usually won out" (667). Others were not so quick to list the Senate on the strength side of the ledger. In identifying totalitarian Communism, democratic complacency, and race relations as the three defining American fears of the era, Ira Katznelson places much of the blame for the last two on the Senate. With good reason, Katznelson claims, leaders feared that "democracies could not compete successfully with the dictatorships" because polarized "legislative politics" made it slow and difficult "to solve the big problems of the day" (12). He holds the Senate responsible for refusing to solve the biggest problem of all, civil rights: "The racial structure of the South generated the era's third pervasive fear, a source of worry for both its defenders and its adversaries" (Katznelson 14). While Drury devotes three of the novel's four sections to senators from the Midwest and West, only South Carolina Senator Seab Cooley's Book Two reflects the power of the real Senate, which rested with entrenched members from the South. Drury may be right that for the United States the 1950s were the Age of the Shrug and the Shoddy, but for the United States Senate they were the Age of the South and the Stall.

*One, and Yet Many*

Alongside the existential threat of nuclear annihilation and the episodic threat of complacency, the Cold War literature of fear confronted what it often deemed the most insidious threat from within, alienation. In *Invisible Man*, Ralph Ellison cast the problem of American racial injustice as fundamentally a problem of alienation – the alienation of white Americans from the interracial origins of their culture and the compulsory alienation of African-Americans from the society their labor had made.

As Ira Katznelson argues, one of America’s greatest fears in the first decade of the Cold War was the explosive issue of race (14). While World War II had appeared to unite Americans across racial lines to fight a common, racist enemy, African-American soldiers returned with heightened expectations to a nation whose structures of racial domination were nearly unchanged. As Richard Purcell points out in *Race, Ralph Ellison, and American Cold War Intellectual Culture*, African-American soldiers in World War II were acutely aware of the irony of the U.S. “waging war against nations whose ideology was founded on state-sponsored racism” (18). Ellison himself makes a similar point in a 1981 introduction to *Invisible Man*, referring to the years leading up to the Civil Rights movement as a time defined by “an archetypical American dilemma: How could you treat a Negro as equal in war and then deny him equality during times of peace?” (xiii) Indeed, Ellison first imagined his work-in-progress as a means to dramatize this dilemma. His novel would be the story of an African-American pilot who becomes the highest-ranking captive in a German prisoner-of-war camp, putting him at odds with the traditional racial hierarchy on both sides of the War. The book that ultimately became *Invisible*

*Man* suggested that African-Americans had always faced this war-within-a-war of having to fight their country just to gain the right to fight for their country. “Eighty-five years ago they were told they were free . . . . And they believed it,” the narrator’s grandfather tells him in *Invisible Man*. “Our life is a war” (Ellison 15).

America’s racial hypocrisy was not lost on the Soviet Union, either. Along with class, racial injustice had long been a Communist rallying cry in the U.S. Prominent African-American thinkers like Wright and Ellison were drawn to the Communist Party in the 1930s. In the Cold War battle for hearts and minds around the globe, the lack of racial progress posed a serious problem for the U.S. throughout the developing world. The high stakes for America abroad, the growing impatience for action on civil rights at home, and Ralph Ellison’s own disillusionment with Communism as another hollow white promise combined to give *Invisible Man* a crucial role in Cold War culture.

From the outset, *Invisible Man* reveals just how unjust the plight of African-Americans remained in 1952, four score and seven years after the war that ended slavery. The earnest, ambitious young narrator has to endure scorn and humiliation every step of his journey. Dr. Bledsoe, his college hero, dooms the narrator’s prospects by sending cruel letters of introduction to white patrons of the school urging them to “Keep This Nigger-Boy Running” (Ellison 32). When he tries to work at a paint factory, union members beat him for being a scab and supervisors ensure he fails. “White folks seemed always to expect you to know those things which they’d done everything they could think of to prevent you from knowing,” the narrator observes (Ellison 315). He leads a protest to try to stop an elderly Harlem



couple's eviction, and mourns a friend shot by police for "resisting reality" (Ellison 457). The journey is loosely autobiographical: Ellison studied for three years at Tuskegee Institute, the historically black college founded by Booker T. Washington, then moved north to Harlem, where he joined the Communist Party. In *Wrestling with the Left*, Barbara Foley calls Ellison "a committed writer of proletarian fiction in his apprentice years" (4). She notes that in addition to writing three dozen left-leaning articles and stories in the 1930s and early 1940s, he wrote his mother a letter in 1937 expressing hope that the U.S. would turn to Soviet-style socialism. The narrator exhibits that same initial enthusiasm when he joins the Brotherhood. Reflecting on his success in stirring a crowd, he thinks, "For the first time, lying there in the dark, I could glimpse the possibility of being more than a member of a race" (Ellison 354).

Before long, however, the narrator comes to a different conclusion. Like Richard Wright's *Black Boy*, published in 1945, *Invisible Man* portrays Communism as another false promise at African-Americans' expense. In a 1965 interview, Ellison observed:

[Communists] fostered the myth that Communism was 20<sup>th</sup>-century Americanism, but to be a 20<sup>th</sup>-century American meant, in their thinking, that you had to be more Russian than American and less Negro than either. That's how they lost the Negroes. Communists recognized no plurality of interests and were really responding to the necessities of Soviet foreign policy. (*Collected Essays* 748)

Ellison was heavily influenced by other leading Cold War liberals, including the critic Lionel Trilling, who soured on the left and became strongly anti-Communist in the years after World War II. According to Richard Purcell, “Ellison’s connections to this ‘vital center’ allowed him to meet with a level of public success very few African-American intellectuals enjoyed during the Cold War” (19). Many other post-war novels and memoirs reflected a similar disaffection, from *1984* and *Darkness at Noon* to *Black Boy* and *The God That Failed*. Yet, for the narrator in *Invisible Man*, casting aside Communism is a relief, not a disappointment. In “Ralph Ellison, Race, and American Culture,” Morris Dickstein calls it “the thrill of a man reclaiming his own life” (61). The narrator decides the Brotherhood is just the last in a series of swindles, “the same old trick with new variations” (Ellison 560). “Everyone seemed to have some plan for me, and beneath that some more secret plan,” he says. “Everywhere I’ve turned somebody has wanted to sacrifice me for my good – only *they* were the ones who benefited” (Ellison 194, 505). He is exhilarated to achieve the true freedom of existing on his own terms: “It was better to live out one’s own absurdity than to die for that of others” (Ellison 559).

Ellison did not initially intend *Invisible Man* to become a pawn in the ideological struggle of the Cold War. In the 1981 introduction he stresses his desire to make it “the dramatic study in comparative humanity which I felt any worthwhile novel should be” rather than “another novel of racial protest” (xviii). Even so, his vivid portrait of America’s race problem and his rejection of Communism as the answer carried considerable ideological weight. In Barbara Foley’s view, “Ellison’s novel has functioned over the years as Exhibit A for the case that Communism is

antithetical to the interests of Americans in general and African-Americans in particular” (1). Morris Dickstein agrees: “Summing up every ideology roiling the turbulent waters of black life, Ellison wrote a great ideological novel, perhaps the single best novel of the whole postwar era” (63). *Invisible Man* reinforces Ellison’s observation, in an essay on Richard Wright’s struggles with Communism, that “in the end, the direction of negro destiny must depend upon negroes themselves, regardless of their alliances with other groups” (Foley 59). “Life is to be lived, not controlled; and humanity is won by continuing to play in face of certain defeat,” the narrator concludes. “Our fate is to become one, and yet many” (Ellison 576). No matter how much this nation has done to make him feel invisible, Ellison offers a vision of racial progress that ultimately chooses to defend American liberalism rather than dissent from it.

### *A Case of Hysteria*

Like *Advise and Consent* and *The Manchurian Candidate*, *Invisible Man* dramatizes concerns about the profound failures of liberal democracy, while ultimately defending it. Like those other novels, as well, Ellison links the rediscovery of liberalism to the politics of fear. In particular, like Condon’s and Drury’s, Ellison’s novel turns on public hysteria and on efforts to manipulate it. Each novel portrays an irresponsible but wildly successful demagogue with the power to strike fear in the masses. In each novel, vast crowds come across as easily frightened and quite frightening in their own right. All three novels wrestle with a central dilemma

of the early Cold War years, which would reemerge in the aftermath of 9/11: how to address the twin dangers of complacency and panic.

All these novels pit one-dimensional demagogues willing to exploit crowds for their own purposes against introspective leaders with a more nuanced approach. *The Manchurian Candidate* sets its protagonist Shaw, a war hero who never stops questioning himself, against Senator Iselin, a McCarthyesque puppet dictator who shamelessly panders to every crowd. Condon brands Senator Iselin “one of the greatest demagogues in American history” and an international embarrassment (154). “Iselinism stood for anything and everything that was dirty, backward, ignorant, repressive, offensive, anti-progressive, or rotten,” he explains, comparing the senator to the worst dictators on earth (Condon 154). The Communist conspiracy to take over the country depends upon Iselin’s ability to instill panic after the assassination of his running mate. When Shaw shares the plot with Marco he predicts the act will rally “a nation of television viewers into hysteria” (Condon 306). In *Advise and Consent*, “one little demagogue,” Senator Van Ackerman, goes up against an entire Senate that unites in opposition to him (Drury 531). Van Ackerman is willing to say or do anything to advance himself and his cause, “the Committee on Making Further Offers for a Russian Truce (COMFORT)” (Drury 23). His peers see through his reckless self-promotion, warning one another of the threat he poses. “[Van Ackerman] means trouble, Bob; I’ve seen his kind come to the Senate before,” Senator Seab Cooley warns Senator Bob Munson. “Destroy him, Bob, while you still can” (Drury 257-58). Once they realize his demagoguery has no limits, Senators move quickly to do just that.

The most authentic demagogue in these three novels is *Invisible Man*'s Ras the Exhorter, the Harlem leader who tries to radicalize the more thoughtful narrator. A skilled and incendiary orator, Ras is patterned after Black Nationalist leader Marcus Garvey (Rice 44). Like Garvey he believes African-Americans will never achieve equality in the U.S. and therefore calls for acts of radical rebellion to avenge the injustice of black subordination. Dubbing himself "Ras the DESTROYER!" he calls for "the destruction of everything white in Harlem" (Ellison 485). He preaches to the masses, urging militant acts of resistance to regain what has been taken from them: "It took a billion gallons of black blood to make you. Recognize you'self inside and you wan the kings among men!" (Ellison 373) Stanley Crouch describes the separatist drift Ras represents: "Ellison knew a long time ago what the dangers were. All the dangers are in *Invisible Man*. The dangers of demagoguery. The dangers of trying to hold up a rational position in a country that can become hysterical about race, from either side" (399). Just as Condon and Drury warn of demagogues exploiting the fear of Communism or nuclear war, Ellison shows the damage that firebrands can do in the name of race. He pairs Ras with the Brotherhood, a subtler, more manipulative brand of demagoguery. In the Brotherhood, Ellison imagines a conspiratorial enemy much like the ones Condon and Drury present. He portrays both Ras and the Brotherhood as undemocratic, illiberal, and above all, un-American. During the riot, Ras speaks in a West Indian patois that Harlem residents cannot understand. Brother Jack of the Brotherhood lapses into an "unknown tongue, the language of the future" that he learned somewhere else (476).

While confronting the evils of demagoguery, these authors also wonder what to make of the mentality of the masses. Written amid the backlash against McCarthyism, both *The Manchurian Candidate* and *Advise and Consent* warn readers to fear the crowd nearly as much as the enemy. The narrator of *Invisible Man* has greater sympathy for the crowds he speaks to in Harlem. In contrast to *The Manchurian Candidate* and *Advise and Consent*, his audiences have not been brainwashed into excessive fear; they have deep, legitimate grievances, and are looking for leaders who will do something about them. Searching for the right tone, he vacillates between humble “nonresistance” and “rabble rousing” (Ellison 25, 371). He encounters a number of unruly mobs over the course of his journey. First he gets expelled from college after a roadhouse crowd unsettles the white trustee, Mr. Norton, who faints from what a “pock-marked man” aptly calls “a case of hysteria” (Ellison 62). Later the narrator is forced into the ring to box for others’ entertainment. In Harlem his own mob becomes his enemy when a deadly race riot breaks out. “It was not suicide, but murder,” he concludes. “The committee had planned it. And I had helped, had been a tool” (Ellison 553). Deeming himself an accessory to murder triggered by mob hysteria, the narrator decides to renounce radicalism. “[I] recognized them at last as those whom I had failed,” he says in his final moments, lamenting that he leads them only in “the stripping away of [his] illusionment” (Ellison 559). In his most eloquent moments, the narrator no longer sees a mob: “As I took one last look I saw not a crowd but the set faces of individual men and women” (459). In his address at Tod Clifton’s funeral, he tries not to excite

the crowd and tells them to go home. "Here you have only the same old story," he says. "You're heard it all. Why wait for more?" (455-56)

In the epilogue, Ellison resolves the problems he has framed in the narrative. If the narrator starts out seeing the people of Harlem as an angry mob trapped in a nation consumed by a crazed race war, in the epilogue he transforms that view and begins to see the American public as capable of appreciating diversity and fated to "become one, and yet many." Like Condon and Drury, in short, Ellison uses a narrative of fear as an occasion for rediscovering the seemingly threatened values of liberal democracy. His narrative operates in much the way that Corey Robin sees in de Tocqueville: Fear "must be put to work on behalf of liberty" (9).

## Chapter Two

### After the Fall

“There is America, full of fear from its north to its south, from its west to its east,” Osama bin Laden declared in a televised statement shortly after the 9/11 attacks (“Text: Bin Laden’s Statement”). For Americans struggling to make sense of the attacks, fear was not the only emotion. “Evil, despicable acts of terror,” President Bush told the nation the night of 9/11, “have filled us with disbelief, terrible sadness and a quiet, unyielding anger” (“Text of Bush’s Address”). Much of the early literature of 9/11 reflects those immediate reactions. Art Spiegelman’s 2003 graphic novel, *In the Shadow of No Towers*, captures the enduring sense of shock. “I saw stunned pigeons sitting listlessly on the pavement in lower Manhattan for days after the explosions on 9/11,” he writes. “It’s almost two years later, and most New Yorkers seem to have picked up the rhythms of daily life . . . but right under the surface, we’re all still just a bunch of stunned pigeons” (Spiegelman 9). Spiegelman jokes that “before 9/11 my traumas were all more or less self-inflicted,” but adds that after the attacks he found himself, as the son of Holocaust survivors, “reeling on that fault line where World History and Personal History collide” (1).

Spiegelman was but one of many writers who took the 9/11 attacks as a moment that marked the collision of world and personal history. Like Spiegelman, best known for *Maus: A Survivor’s Tale*, Jonathan Safran Foer launched his career with a novel – *Everything Is Illuminated* – based on the experience of an ancestor who survived the Holocaust. His second novel, *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close*, explores the aftermath of 9/11 through the eyes of Oskar Schell, an extremely



odd and incredibly precocious nine-year-old whose father dies in the World Trade Center collapse. While Oskar has plenty of anxieties, from loneliness and death to tall buildings and turbans, what frightens him most is how to go on without the father he has lost. For Foer, Oskar's quest to channel his grief, comprehend what has happened, and put his fears in order illuminates the profound private toll of a vast national tragedy. He suggests, much as his Cold War predecessors did, that the experience of existential fear can be an occasion to rediscover what we value most.

### *Heavy Boots*

As the title of his novel suggests, Foer tries to portray the impact of 9/11 not from a sweeping historical or geopolitical perspective, but through the “incredibly close” lens of its impact on a young boy. “What Oskar does is personalize 9/11 as his own private tragedy,” Arin Keeble writes in *The 9/11 Novel*. “The significance of 9/11 is reduced to the fact that Oskar has lost his father” (62). Although he is a curious, inventive child, Oskar spends much of the novel working through his grief. “I miss Dad,” he tells his grandmother by walkie-talkie. “I miss him a lot. . . . All the time” (Foer 71). He lashes out at his mother for not being with him on 9/11, and lets her know that if he had a choice, he would have chosen her to die instead. Oskar resists her pleas to move on. “I wanted to tell her she shouldn't be playing Scrabble yet,” he explains (Foer 35). “I'm sad,” he laments, “about everything” (Foer 42). When he dons a skull costume to play Yorick in the school production of *Hamlet*, Oskar has his own to-be-or-not-to-be existential crisis. “I wondered, for the first time

in my life, if life was worth all the work it took to live,” he says. “What *exactly* made it worth it? What’s so horrible about being dead forever?” (Foer 145)

Oskar is well-acquainted with his grief; he nicknames it “heavy boots,” a phrase he repeats eighteen times. After his mother sends him to a child psychologist, he notes, “I didn’t understand why I needed help, because it seemed to me that you *should* wear heavy boots when your dad dies, and if you *aren’t* wearing heavy boots, *then* you need help” (Foer 200). Recognizing that he is not the only one to grieve, he imagines a special drain under every pillow in New York: “Whenever people cried themselves to sleep, the tears would all go to the same place, and in the morning the weatherman could report if the water level of the Reservoir of Tears had gone up or down, and you could know if New York was in heavy boots” (Foer 38). He wishes his mother would spend less time laughing and more time adding to the reservoir, although later he admits that “*maybe it’s true that you can use up all of your tears*” (Foer 290). Several prominent critics seem to think Foer has done exactly that. John Updike calls Foer “a naturally noisy writer” and wishes for “a little more silence, a few fewer messages” (“Mixed Messages”). Michiko Kakutani considers the novel “contrived and improvisatory, schematic and haphazard . . . mannered and irritating” (“A Boy’s Epic Quest”). According to Walter Kirn, Foer misses the moral import of 9/11 by choosing “to take on the most explosive subject available while . . . venturing no sentiment more hazardous than that history is sad and brutal and wouldn’t it be nicer if it weren’t” (“Extremely Loud”).

For all his tears, however, Oskar does not withdraw from the world in sorrow. Instead, he channels his grief into an elaborate quest to solve the mystery of a key his

father has left behind with a note marked “Black.” His heavy boots were made for walking: At the tender age of nine, Oskar ventures all over New York City to track down scores of people to whom that key might belong. He considers the quest a test of love for his father. On one expedition he gets heavy boots when he is reminded “of the lock I still hadn’t found, and how until I found it, I didn’t love Dad enough” (Foer 251). He presses onward. “At the end of my search I wanted to be able to say: I don’t know how I could have tried harder,” he admits (Foer 160). When his quest ends, he tells his mother just that: “I tried incredibly hard. I don’t know how I could have tried harder” (Foer 323).

The quest is quixotic, with little purpose other than prolonging a connection to his father. Even Oskar has his doubts. “I’ve been searching for more than six months, and I don’t know a single thing that I didn’t know six months ago,” he tells the renter in his grandmother’s apartment, who turns out to be his grandfather. “I miss my dad more now than when I started, even though the whole *point* was to *stop* missing him” (Foer 255). Some critics go so far as to compare Oskar’s heavy boots in Manhattan with George W. Bush’s decision to put boots on the ground in Iraq. “As Foer’s novel suggests, it is not clear that there are any good options when it comes to unknown unknowns,” writes Mitchell Huehls, alluding to Bush Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld’s famous phrase. “Oskar and the Bush administration can either act in real-time with compromised knowledge, or they can stabilize their knowledge but risk acting too late” (46). Huehls makes too much of the Iraq analogy – as opponents of that war might have put it, no one died when Oskar cried – but Arin Keeble may be right to note the post-9/11 impulse to do something: “Oskar’s

compulsion to act, to embark on his quest, also allegorically reflects ideas of America's need to act" (59).

At the same time, Oskar's quest echoes a deeper longing in the literature of existential fear after 9/11: to rediscover who we are, remember what we have lost, and renew our determination to live up to that example. Foer suggests that this hunger to comprehend the unthinkable is a tragedy of modern war, not confined to 9/11. In a title-page acknowledgment, he signals his interest in the anguish of survival: "The author found inspiration in the testimony of numerous Hiroshima, Nagasaki, and Dresden survivors, but especially that of Kinue Tomoyasu, a version of which Oskar plays to his class" (Foer n.p.). Oskar reads Tomoyasu's account of watching her daughter die from radiation exposure within hours of the Hiroshima bombing. "That is what death is like. It doesn't matter what uniforms the soldiers are wearing," she says. "I thought if everyone could see what I saw, we would never have war anymore" (Foer 189). Oskar's grandfather was so traumatized by the Dresden bombings in World War II that he lost the ability to speak, fled his pregnant wife, and never knew his son, Oskar's father. The grandfather comes to New York after watching on television as the World Trade Center towers fell. "I was in Dresden's train station when I lost everything for the second time," he says (Foer 272). Oskar helps a grandfather bury a lifetime of letters inspired by Dresden in the coffin of a father who perished on 9/11. As Kristiaan Versluys points out, "The novel brings a significant part of the twentieth century within the purview of September 11" (80). Foer reminds those who think 9/11 changed everything that the modern world has seen horror before.

Oskar, however, has not. As he sets out to share his story with all 472 people named Black in the New York phone book, he seems to be looking for more than a lock to fit his key. Above all, he wants to understand why and how his father died, and how to go on without him. Long before 9/11, Oskar asks questions even his father cannot answer, like “Why does the universe exist at all?” (Foer 13) Now he seeks answers to more pointed ones, such as “Why didn’t he say goodbye?” and “Why didn’t he say ‘I love you’?” (Foer 207) Acquaintances Oskar makes on his quest offer up their own doubts and answers. The mysterious key belongs to William Black, who tells Oskar that he has been searching for Oskar’s father, too: “Wherever I was, I was trying to find him: uptown, downtown, on the train” (Foer 299). Although Oskar’s quest cannot fill the “hole in the middle of me that every happy thing fell into,” he discovers he is not the only one searching (Foer 71).

Perhaps just as important, Oskar finally comes to terms with his fears, which is no small task for a traumatized young boy with a wild imagination. While he has seen the worst – “my dad died the most horrible death that anyone ever could invent” – he invents new horrors anyway (Foer 201). He has trouble sleeping, showering, crossing suspension bridges, and taking public transportation. He worries about elevator cables snapping and planes running into buildings. He imagines “frozen planes, which could be safe from heat-seeking missiles” and skyscrapers underground or with “open holes in their middles for planes to fly through” (Foer 259). He is haunted by his failure to answer the phone when his father called to say goodbye on 9/11. At the same time, he wants to live up to his father’s challenge: “Dad used to say that sometimes you have to put your fears in order” (Foer 87). Eventually, Oskar

finds a way to do that with the fear that plagues him most of all. He often pictures the circumstances of his father's death and wonders what he would do in his place: "Would I jump or would I burn?" (Foer 244) Like Art Spiegelman and Don DeLillo, Foer refers repeatedly to the photograph of a man falling from the World Trade Center. As Laura Frost observes, the image captures the incomprehensible, Everyman horror of the attacks: "The recurrence of 9/11's falling bodies emblemizes the lingering uncertainty about the meaning of 9/11 and a resistance to assimilating all the events of that day" (185). "I need to know how he died," Oskar pleads, "so I can stop inventing how he died" (Foer 256). Eventually he finds some peace by inventing an ending he can live with. When he flips backward through pictures of the falling body, Oskar discovers, "It looked like the man was floating up through the sky" (Foer 325). He imagines reversing all the events of that fateful day and ending up back at the bedtime story his father told him the night before. The novel concludes with Oskar's words, "We would have been safe" (Foer 326). In effect, having dramatized the fear that 9/11 created, Foer imagines that Oskar and the world he represents can return to innocence.

### *Childish Things*

In a publisher's interview accompanying its release, Foer admits that *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close* did not start out as a book about 9/11. He explains that over the course of "39 distinct drafts," a plot about a museum and a long-forgotten European writer evolved into the story of "a precocious young boy in a damaged city" ("Conversation with Foer"). For many critics, that choice of a child

narrator too young to comprehend the broader import of the attacks precludes any credible examination of 9/11. Laura Miller says Oskar “gives Foer access to extravagant emotions and quirky imaginings that would seem cloying or self-indulgent in a grown-up, but at the cost of allowing the central trauma its due” (“Terror Comes to Tiny Town”). Even from the mouths of babes, bursts of exuberance and experimentalism risk ruffling too many flags. “It may just be too early to get cute in writing about September 11,” Miller writes in a 2006 review. “On the other hand, there’s never a good time to get as cute as *Extremely Loud & Incredibly Close* gets” (“Terror Comes to Tiny Town”). A 2012 review by film critic Ann Hornaday suggests that even a decade after the attacks still feels too soon: “There’s a fine line between precocious and insufferable, and it’s a line continually crossed by ‘Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close’” (“A Director’s Misguided Odyssey”). The movie version of “The Manchurian Candidate” earned Angela Lansbury a Golden Globe for best supporting actress. “Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close,” by contrast, ranks as the worst-reviewed Best Picture nominee since “Anne of the Thousand Days” in 1969 (*Rotten Tomatoes*). In book and movie alike, what Michiko Kakutani calls Oskar’s “exasperating precocity” exhausts the reservoir of critical patience faster than the boy can fill the Reservoir of Tears (“A Boy’s Epic Quest”).

Foer knows terrorism is not child’s play, so why risk a child narrator? First, as Miller points out, children are not held to the same standard, which gives Foer room to experiment. A grown-up would be less likely than Oskar to blurt out harsh truths, such as telling his mother he wished she had died and lashing out at her with a

graphic description of his father's death: "He had cells, and now they're on rooftops, and in the river, and in the lungs of millions of people around New York, who breathe him every time they speak!" (Foer 169) In *The Road*, a post-apocalyptic allegory written after 9/11, Cormac McCarthy uses a boy to press his father with innocent, revealing questions. "If we were going to die would you tell me?" he asks, and later, "If you're on the lookout all the time does that mean that you're scared all the time?" (McCarthy 94, 151) Oskar is also quick to volunteer his anxieties, no matter how random or personal – "mustaches, smoke, knots" – as well as his confusion: "I said, 'I understand,' even though I didn't understand" (Foer 36, 286). Too young to reason, he can express anxiety without the appearance of prejudice, acknowledging that he panics around "Arab people on the subway (even though I'm not racist), Arab people in restaurants and coffee shops and other public places . . . [and] turbans" (Foer 36). Adult characters in *Terrorist*, *The Submission*, and other 9/11 novels require entire chapters to navigate similar issues. Oskar has quirky habits and a lively imagination. He thinks in cartoons, picturing "skyscrapers for dead people that were built down . . . underneath the skyscrapers for living people that are built up" and an "elevator falling, a trampoline at the bottom, us shooting back up, the roof opening like a cereal box, us flying toward parts of the universe that not even Stephen Hawking was sure about" (Foer 3, 244). Foer assembles the novel like Oskar's scrapbook of *Stuff that Happened to Me*, interspersing chapters with photos, illustrations, letters, and song lyrics. These entertaining, childish diversions – sending bulletproof drumsticks to Ringo Starr, communicating with his grandmother by walkie-talkie – sharpen the pathos of his grief.



Along the way, Foer seems determined to remind us that if we look hard enough, we will see we have not lost all we value most. Oskar loses his father, but not his innocence nor his childhood. By the end of his quest, Oskar is more trusting and childlike than before he begins. If the attacks made Americans nostalgic for the days before 9/11, Foer goes even further, sending Oskar out into a calm, safe, welcoming New York City not seen since at least the 1950s. While the rest of the nation retreated behind air marshals, border guards, hidden cameras, and concrete fortifications, nine-year-old Oskar wanders alone through the very metropolis the terrorists attacked. His mother gives him a cell phone and takes him to the police station to be fingerprinted – “which was great,” exclaims Oskar, sounding like a child more interested in the Hardy Boys than the Patriot Act (Foer 52). Walter Kirn writes that on 9/11, “Eloise and Stuart Little died, too” – but Oskar retraces their steps and brings their New York back to life (“Extremely Loud”). Like Stuart Little, who descends down a drain to retrieve a ring and races sail boats in Central Park, Oskar often thinks about New York City’s drains and visits Central Park to dig for treasure. Eloise has a tricycle, Stuart Little a tiny car; Oskar hails taxis. When he does not have enough money to pay the fare, the driver still takes him. With his old-fashioned interests – Frank Sinatra; the Beatles; dressing only in white, like Pat Boone or a milkman – the past suits Oskar well.

Ironically, in that respect 9/11 *has* changed everything: everyone welcomes Oskar and wants to help him. Despite the attacks, no one is paranoid or puts bars on their doors. Even the 1950s seem more anxious by comparison. If New Yorkers in *The Manchurian Candidate* and *Invisible Man* worry about the enemy within,

wherever Oskar goes he finds the friend and neighbor within. Later Oskar learns that his mother has watched out for him the whole time, but that discovery only deepens the nostalgia. His quest to make sense of his father's death turns out to be another scavenger hunt, this time arranged by his mother, who is a far cry from Mrs. Iselin. Just as Oskar reverses his flip-book of photos to bring his father back to life, Foer rolls out a series of nostalgic portraits to revive a New York that makes it seem as though 9/11 never happened. By the end, Oskar's New York is more like the one his father left him: a bedtime story of boroughs that disappeared long ago.

The innocence of a child narrator serves Foer's ambiguous political purposes as well. The novel virtually ignores the war on terror and America's response to 9/11. Art Spiegelman attacks the politics of fear on every page of *In the Shadow of No Towers*, lamenting that he "hadn't anticipated that the hijackings of Sept 11 would themselves be hijacked by the Bush cabal that reduced it all to a war recruitment poster" (8). Foer, on the other hand, lives up to Kirn's charge of "showing no passion, giving no offense, adopting no point of view" ("Extremely Loud"). For all his despair over his father's death, Oskar's attitude toward the terrorists is remarkably restrained – more like young Stuart Little (who in the movie version mourns the accidental death of his real parents, but adapts happily to new ones) than young Bruce Wayne (the comic-book hero who spends his life avenging his parents' murder). He bares his feelings only once, and even then in an inconceivably fair-minded way. Atop the Empire State Building, he pictures a plane coming at him and imagines looking into the eyes of terrorist pilot: "I hate you, my eyes would tell him. I hate you, his eyes would tell me" (Foer 244).

Foer hints that he wishes America would have responded with similar generosity after 9/11. His history lessons blame the U.S., not its enemies. Oskar's grandparents barely survived the deadly Allied bombing of Dresden in the final months of World War II. At school, Oskar recounts the traumatic death of a Japanese girl killed when the U.S. bombed Hiroshima. Foer sometimes manages to single out the U.S. for criticism even more than Spiegelman, who denounces Allied and Axis forces alike for "the twin towers of Auschwitz and Hiroshima" (8). In the publisher's interview, Foer expresses hope that the aftermath of 9/11 will galvanize readers to see not al-Qaeda or Islamic fundamentalism but an abstracted vision of war itself as the real enemy. He claims that Rwanda and Bosnia left his generation – which came of age after the Cold War was over – with the impression that American force could be used for good, but that the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan suggest the U.S. bears its share of blame for a violent world. "It's been a painfully disillusioning few years for my generation, not only because we've had to face malevolent wars, but because we've had to face our own foolishness," he says. "It's only now that we're able to digest the lessons and use them. Toward what end? Toward the end of preventing war" ("Conversation with Foer"). As if "preventing war" were not idealistic enough, Foer extends his definition of war far beyond terrorist attacks or the field of battle: "There are so many other wars – big and small – that receive less, if any, attention. There are wars within our country, between increasingly polarized ideologies, and within our households: intimate wars, wars within families, between lovers. Breakfast table wars." ("Conversation with Foer"). By that measure, struggle of any kind will always seem too loud and close.

In effect, much like his Cold War predecessors, Foer makes use of a situation of seeming existential peril to imagine a world that can move beyond conflict. The politics of fear enable him to see political violence as ultimately marginal to global harmony. “It’s not a horrible world,” A.R. Black, Oskar’s 103-year-old neighbor, tells him. “But it’s filled with a lot of horrible people!” (Foer 156) Many of them turn up in the neighbor’s “biographical index,” a card catalogue that contains thousands of one-word biographies (Foer 156). Black shows Oskar the card for the terrorist who killed his father: “MOHAMMED ATTA: WAR” (Foer 159). The boy wishes the index contained a card for his father instead. “My dad deserves to be in here!” he tells Black. “My dad was good. Mohammed Atta was evil” (Foer 159). Setting aside Black’s quirks and Oskar’s reaction, the exchange is most telling about terrorism. Four years into the war on terror, all Foer has to say about the leader of the 9/11 attacks is “WAR” and “evil.” In effect, just as Oskar’s quest envisions a naïve and innocent metropolis, his discussions with Black cast the 9/11 terrorists as essentially foreign to that world.

In this way, Foer utilizes a narrative of fear to portray 9/11 not as a moment of political violence but as an example of cultural conflict that renders the U.S. as an implicitly innocent victim of existential peril. Walter Benn Michaels explains that logic in *The Shape of the Signifier*: “The enemy now must be understood as a kind of criminal, as someone who represents a threat not to a political system or a nation but to the law” itself (171). Seen this way, Michaels writes, the terrorist’s only politics are “identity politics,” which forces us to turn from “the differences between what people think (ideology) and the differences between what people own (class)” to “the

differences between what people are (identity)” (24). In a world “divided into those who follow the law and those who break it,” he says, terrorists are outlaws (172).

This is precisely how Foer’s Oskar understands the world. In a novel bursting with curiosity, the boy shows no interest in the motivations behind the attacks, only in the evil the terrorists have done. Samuel Huntington, in his seminal vision of cultural conflict, had predicted that “the clash of civilizations will be the battle lines of the future” (22). Oskar’s quest is a kind of reconnaissance mission on how one civilization not only has weathered the first battle but has discovered a new sense of identity in the experience. From Oskar’s vantage point, at least, the culture is rebounding stronger than ever. He meets his grandfather for the first time; his grandparents are reunited after more than half a century; he makes new friends with ease in every borough. Although Oskar sometimes worries about recurring violence – asking, for example, about the ferry being “hit with a shoulder-fired missile” – his thoughts rarely venture beyond New York (Foer 240). By constantly drawing parallels to the Dresden and Hiroshima bombings that brought World War II to a close in Germany and Japan, *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close* often seems as much the story of a war that is ending as one that has just begun. Indeed, Foer’s attitude echoes Holden Caulfield in *Catcher in the Rye*. “If there’s another war, they better just take me out and stick me in front of a firing squad,” Holden declares. “I’m sort of glad they’ve got the atomic bomb invented. If there’s ever another war, I’m going to sit right the hell on top of it” (Salinger 182-83).

Like Holden Caulfield, in other words, Foer sees in his Oskar a naïve victim of trauma who in his journey beyond suffering also imagines that conflict and

injustice can be purged from the world and war left in the past. Ironically, as Foer's similarity to J.D. Salinger and E.B. White suggests, the strategy makes his vision of terrorist violence closely resemble Cold War narratives about trauma and political violence. "Whatever the reality of the threat to Americans at home throughout the cold war, Americans expected and prepared for physical attack within the United States throughout the 1950s in ways that were no longer as plausible in the decades after," Sally Bachner writes in *The Prestige of Violence*. "Cultural discourse about violence throughout this period conceives of cold war violence as something that happens elsewhere" (10). So, too, does Oskar succeed in making violence something that ultimately belongs elsewhere.

### *The Old Normal*

In Don DeLillo's *Falling Man*, Keith Neudecker and his once-estranged wife Lianne Glenn watch a videotape of planes flying into the twin towers of the World Trade Center where he worked. The first collision "looks like an accident" because "the camera sort of shows surprise," they tell each other, but agree that the other collision is different. "By the time the second plane appears," Keith says, "We're a little older and wiser" (DeLillo 135). The rest of the novel – and indeed much of 9/11 literature – suggests otherwise. Far from changing everything for Keith and Lianne, the tragedy prompts them to return to the "extended grimness called their marriage" they had abandoned in the months before 9/11 (DeLillo 7). In *Falling Man*, the "New Normal" – to borrow a favorite cliché after 9/11 – amounts to craving the Old Normal. Parents try to calm their children's fears by preventing them from watching

television and letting them think the twin towers are still standing. *Falling Man*, whose death-defying performance art provides the novel both its title and archetypal symbol, dies of natural causes from a pre-existing condition. DeLillo seems to suggest that the more everything changes, the more everything stays the same. Keith is half right: seeing those two planes hit the World Trade Center made us older, but little wiser. As President George W. Bush unwittingly put it, while referring to Iraq in a 2002 speech on teaching American history, “Fool me once, shame on – shame on you. Fool me – you can’t get fooled again” (“Remarks by the President”).

Like *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close*, the story of a boy who has lost his father, *Falling Man* makes fear a sidebar to more pervasive themes of nostalgia, trauma, and grief. Keith sleepwalks through the novel like one of Art Spiegelman’s “stunned pigeons” (9). His story begins in a daze: “It was not a street anymore but a world, a time and space of falling ash and near night. . . . Otherworldly things in the morning pall. He wore a suit and carried a briefcase” (DeLillo 3). The pall takes its toll. “Days fade, nights drag on, check-and-raise, wake-and-sleep,” DeLillo writes. “He wondered if he was becoming a self-operating mechanism, like a humanoid robot” (226). Keith struggles to make sense of his surroundings, asking “what has happened to the meaning of things, to tree, street, stone, wind, simple words lost in the falling ash” (DeLillo 103). Like a sleeper puzzled by his own dream, Keith surprises himself by moving back in with his estranged wife and starting a fling with Florence Givens, another survivor. Confused and contradictory as they seem, his actions betray a common longing to recapture the past, through the comfort of an old relationship or the common bond of a fellow survivor. The novel ultimately rewinds

to the attack itself. In shock, Keith watches an office mate die at his desk, follows others down hundreds of stairs, and ends up clutching a briefcase that belongs to someone else. The briefcase symbolizes business as usual, the baggage and ballast of everyday routine. “The story in the end,” Florence tells Keith, is “what we carry” (DeLillo 91).

For Keith and Lianne, that turns out to be a heavy load. At first she does not know what to make of Keith’s sudden return, and welcomes him back mostly out of sympathy for his ordeal. But Lianne, too, hungers for normalcy and “the way they were before the planes appeared that day, silver crossing blue” (DeLillo 236). In her memory of that September morning, the clear sky itself “was different,” as though even clouds on the horizon were an unimaginable prospect before the terrorists attacked (DeLillo 135). Lianne knows better, reminding Keith of their real routine: “The everyday friction. The every-word, every-breath schedule we were on before we split” (DeLillo 75). But like him, she desperately wants to believe things have changed. “Is it possible you and I are done with conflict?” she asks. “We can live without it. Am I right?” (DeLillo 75). Marriage counseling “practically killed us,” Keith points out, not long before they watch footage of the terrorist attack that practically killed him. “We’re ready to sink into our little lives” (DeLillo 75). Characters in *Falling Man* find themselves sinking in place, drawn to the past and repelled by the future. Lianne thinks back to how her father shot himself to avoid slipping deeper into dementia. Survivors face a similar dilemma, afraid to forget and afraid to remember. “Still Life,” the title of *The New Yorker* excerpt of the novel,



captures the irony. Frozen in time, the characters still live, but barely – as DeLillo hints by using the Italian term for still-life paintings: “*Natura morta*” (12).

Viewing a national tragedy through the eyes of one messed-up couple has earned *Falling Man* a dose of the kind of criticism received by *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close*. “Are we really meant to think of domestic discord,” asks Pankaj Mishra, “as a metaphor for post-9/11 America?” (Keeble 12) Richard Gray complains that in *Falling Man* and other early novels after 9/11, “the crisis is in every sense of the word domesticated” (30). No matter how hard they try to pretend otherwise, Keith and Lianne understand that the New Normal is part of the routine, the same lie we always tell ourselves on our way back to the Old Normal.

Yet DeLillo’s critics may underplay the extent to which DeLillo not only domesticates political tragedy, but reveals and implicitly subverts the desire to turn fear into safety. As Corey Robin argues, the notion that everything has changed is the same lie our leaders always tell us as well. In the wake of a national tragedy, leaders have good reason to insist the world has been altered in ways that could not have been foreseen. The alternative would be admitting that they should have seen conflict coming and done something to prevent it, or more basically, that the United States is not a mere innocent victim of motiveless terror. DeLillo gives us reason to view the novel this way by introducing a debate between two otherwise minor characters, Nina and her lover Martin. Nina, Lianne’s hard-bitten and overprotective mother, reacts viscerally to the attacks: “I read newspapers. I put my head in the pages and get angry and crazy” (42). Martin, an art dealer from Europe, responds with a worldly, less American point of view: “There’s another approach, which is to study the

matter. Stand apart and think about the elements. . . . Do not let it tear you down. See it, measure it. . . . Let it teach you something” (42). Like Oskar, Nina believes that terror has changed everything and that terrorists despise America for its modernity and freedoms. She is a poster child for the politics of fear: Despite her cosmopolitan, well-educated background, she responds to an attack on her core values by abandoning tolerance and reason. Martin, by contrast, offers a more nuanced assessment of the terrorists’ motives. “These are matters of history. This is politics and economics,” he says. “They strike a blow to this country’s dominance. They achieve this, to show how a great power can be vulnerable. A power that interferes, occupies” (46-47). Perhaps in keeping with this point of view, DeLillo suggests that the politics of fear is a false promise that cannot deliver the renewed sense of purpose, harmony, and national consensus its advocates claim. Like the fleeting restoration of Lianne and Keith’s marriage, forced unity cannot last. DeLillo’s characters yearn to see a world transformed, to no avail. Nina, for example, pronounces early in *Falling Man*, “There is no next. This was next. Eight years ago they planted a bomb in one of the towers. Nobody said what’s next. This was next. The time to be afraid is when there’s no reason to be afraid. Too late now” (DeLillo 10). But, of course, such declarations of transformative and unjustified violence are a familiar reflex. Americans had felt the same horror many times before – after a German U-boat sank the *Lusitania*, after Japanese planes bombed Pearl Harbor, after the Soviets launched Sputnik, after Communist revolutionaries took over China, Cuba, and Vietnam, and after countless examples of conflict with Native Americans. Events pronounced unimaginable at the time seem obvious and inevitable in

retrospect. For leaders and citizens alike, being surprised relieves guilt and blame for not paying attention and provides the comforting illusion we will pay better attention next time.

In Robin's view, nations pay a heavy price for these familiar refrains of "never before," "never again," and "never forget." Instead of encouraging the kind of genuine soul-searching that might indeed lead to a world where everything changed, the rush to fear prompts a rush to war abroad and a rushed return to normalcy at home. "Times like these, the family is necessary. Don't you think? Be together, stay together?" Lianne tells Keith. "This is how we live through the things that scare us half to death" (DeLillo 214). The most poignant symbol of how much we savor being afraid and how little we do about it is DeLillo's title character. Falling Man is a performance artist who appears out of nowhere, shocks crowds with treacherous leaps, hangs upside down while observers text word of what they have seen, then repeats the stunt elsewhere. Just as Oskar is transfixed by the grainy photographic image of a falling victim in *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close*, Lianne can neither turn away from Falling Man nor figure out what makes him jump. DeLillo mocks a New School panel discussion on "Falling Man as Heartless Exhibitionist or Brave New Chronicler of the Age of Terror" (220). He is neither, just an endless loop of human footage reminding citizens to never forget. While his name evokes the Fall of Man, there is more to the story: Man may have fallen, but he is not getting anywhere. Every performance ends in arrested suicide and suspended animation. "We clung to each other as if we ourselves were falling," John Updike writes in *The New Yorker* days after 9/11 ("Tuesday, and After"). Where Updike hopes crisis will bring society

together, DeLillo uses *Falling Man* to show the politics of fear to be a losing battle. With every performance the artist asks people not to forget, but they do forget – and *Falling Man* himself dies long forgotten.

*The Violence You Watch*

David Janiak's performances as *Falling Man* turn out to be merely the warmup act for a far more harrowing reenactment of 9/11 in the novel's final chapter. The real performance artist is DeLillo himself, who saves the full power of the World Trade Center attacks for last. By dwelling primarily on life after 9/11 before addressing Keith's ordeal that September morning, DeLillo leaves readers in the same state of suspended animation as the characters: We know what happened to the towers; we want to know what happened to the people inside as they scrambled to survive and watched others die. Through the eyes of a terrorist, then a survivor, "In the Hudson Corridor" recounts that story in slow motion. As his plane speeds toward the tower, the terrorist Hammad tries to calm his own fears. "Forget the world," he reminds himself. "Fix your gaze. Carry your soul in your hand" (DeLillo 238). He spends his final, mundane moments watching a water bottle fall from a counter and roll back and forth across the airplane aisle. DeLillo implies, perhaps, that the politics of terror is the mirror image of the politics of fear: a false promise of unity and purpose. Even for zealots, distraction trumps destiny. Keith's nightmare begins in the same sentence that Hammad's life ends. Thrown into a wall, Keith falls to the floor and feels "the tower lurching" (DeLillo 240). Like Hammad, Keith cannot forget the world nor fix his gaze. The world he sees makes no sense; he "was losing

things as they happened” (DeLillo 240). As a matter of habit, he puts on his suit jacket, clinging to normalcy at the very moment it has gone out of fashion.

Keith’s state of shock becomes most apparent when he makes his way into his friend Rumsey’s office. For Keith, Rumsey represents the epitome of order – a man so obsessed with precision that he looks for women in sandals to count whether they have exactly ten toes. Now both office and occupant are in utter disarray. The ceiling has collapsed, furniture is overturned, and with his face pressed into his shoulder, Rumsey “didn’t look like Rumsey” (DeLillo 241). Keith speaks to him anyway, “talking quickly to get himself to think in like manner” (DeLillo 242). Instead, the destruction accelerates more quickly than his thinking: “Things began to fall, one thing and then another” (DeLillo 242). Whatever he may think of falling things, Keith cannot make sense of falling men. Like a camera shutter slowly closing, the images take a moment to register in his memory: “Something went past the window, then he saw it. First it went and was gone and then he saw it. . . . something sideways, going past the window, white shirt, hands up, falling before he saw it” (DeLillo 242). Nothing stabilizes long enough for Keith to fix his gaze. “He looked at Rumsey, who’d fallen away from him, upper body lax, face barely belonging. The whole business of being Rumsey was in shambles now,” DeLillo writes. “The man opened his eyes and died. This is when he wondered what was happening here” (243). From ceilings to shirts, he has watched everything around him falling. Only when his friend falls to pieces in his arms does Keith begin to realize his world is falling apart.

If Keith's eyes take a moment to register images he could not imagine, his mind needs longer to come to terms with what he has seen. *Falling Man*, Sally Bachner observes, "is about the violence you watch" (140). Flashbacks chase Keith down the staircase: "Things came back to him in hazy visions, like half an eye staring. These were moments he'd lost as they were happening and he had to stop walking in order to stop seeing them" (DeLillo 243). He stops to stare at nothing, only to picture himself in a massive, swaying tower. Further down the stairs, he recalls what he saw outside the window: "He confused it with Rumsey, the man falling sideways, arm out and up, like pointed up, like why am I here instead of there" (DeLillo 244). He grabs onto a briefcase handed down by a man who mistakenly thinks its owner "fell and left it" (DeLillo 244). Near the bottom of the building, Keith starts to piece together the horrors he left behind: "Rumsey was the one in the chair. He understood that now" (DeLillo 245). When he steps outside, however, the sky is still falling. The south tower collapses with a windblast that knocks him flat. As Keith watches people run, fall, and try to get up, he becomes lost once again. "He could not find himself in the things he saw and heard," DeLillo writes. "He watched [two men with a stretcher] move into the stunned distance. That's where everything was, all around him, falling away" (246). His world has fallen apart before his very eyes, and the worst is yet to drop. DeLillo concludes with his most haunting image: a shirt coming down from the sky, "arms waving like nothing in this life" (246). Keith's fleeting glimpse of a white shirt outside the window has turned into a ghostly apparition he cannot escape. Even more than the briefcase, the shirt represents business as usual. But unlike his earlier mental snapshot or the photograph for which

the novel is named, this vision is in full motion, not freeze frame. Like Rumsey, the shirt appears empty, desperate, out of place, and already dead.

Revealing what Keith saw on 9/11 sheds light not only on his behavior in the rest of the novel, but on the repercussions for an entire society that witnessed the attacks. From endlessly repeated video clips of falling towers to chilling photographs of those who jumped, everyone had to share the experience of watching others die. As Bachner points out, "*Falling Man* locates the violence of 9/11 not so much in maimed bodies or in destroyed buildings but in the collective acts of horrified spectatorship" (27). Lianne and Keith watch a videotape of the attack. Forbidden from seeing it on television, their son and his friends imagine what they could not see and search the horizon for Bill Lawton, their invented villain. Crowds of spectators join Lianne in watching Falling Man, "the single falling figure that trails a collective dread" (DeLillo 33). Americans have long been accustomed to violence on television, but never so widespread, instantaneous, or real. Repetition and reenactment make the traumatic memories indelible. "Headlong, free fall, she thought, and this picture burned a hole in her mind and heart," DeLillo writes of Lianne's reaction to the iconic Falling Man photograph (222). The performance artist's fall from the elevated train platform is equally searing. "There were no photographs of that fall. She was the photograph," she recalls. "That nameless body coming down, this was hers to record and absorb" (DeLillo 223). Lianne reads newspaper profiles of the victims. According to Arin Keeble, the "Portraits of Grief" series in *The New York Times* memorialized more than 1800 victims (162). As Amy Waldman observes in *The Submission*, "You couldn't call yourself an American if

you hadn't, in solidarity, watched your fellow Americans being pulverized, yet what kind of American did watching create? A traumatized victim? A charged-up avenger? A queasy voyeur?" (15) Half a century before, the narrator of *Invisible Man* experiences the same feeling in the riot scene. After seeing a young man shot, he says, "I realized suddenly that it might have been me," and later observes, "I was one with the mass" (537, 550). As Bachner notes, DeLillo's novel depicts this situation in a different way: "The trauma is located in the act of witnessing someone else's death rather than in being threatened with your own imminent harm" (140). Here again, DeLillo undermines the politics of fear. Updike imagines society clinging to one another "as if we were falling ourselves" – with a collective feeling that an attack on any of us is an attack on every one of us ("Tuesday, and After"). DeLillo's distinctive view of trauma, however, suggests just the opposite – that the experience of victims is nothing like the experience of witnesses. Rumsey's death leaves him forgotten, not a martyr. Far from solving his marital troubles, Keith's trauma draws him into an affair with Florence, his fellow survivor. A society of passive witnesses forgets about falling together and marches on, alone and untransformed.

That is why Keith's story takes DeLillo so long to unpack: As with Rumsey, the whole business of being is in shambles. When Lianne asks Keith why he came back, he tells her about the man who gave him a ride – a plumber who kept driving around because he could see only one tower, and "one tower made no sense" (DeLillo 21). Bachner contends that by showing how Keith and others keep trying to make sense of the attacks, DeLillo shows how literature "will, eventually, allow people to



heal” (27). DeLillo does not say which will leave a greater mark, the healing or the scar. “The writer begins in the towers, trying to imagine the moment, desperately,” he declares in a 2001 *Harpers* essay. “The Bush administration was feeling nostalgia for the cold war. This is over now. Many things are over. The narrative ends in the rubble” (Abel 1240, 1245). Six years later, the novel ends the same way – in rubble, ashes, and dust.

### *The Latchkey Terrorist*

Throughout the literature of existential fear, the hardest anxiety to quell is the most important one to overcome – fear of the enemy within, the “other” we neither know nor understand. In *The Submission*, New York erupts in acrimony and division when the jury for the city’s 9/11 memorial chooses a Muslim architect who designs an Islamic garden. The families of 9/11 victims feel betrayed, the Muslim-American community feels aggrieved and isolated, the tabloids stoke those divisions, and the politicians try to choose between solidarity and tolerance. The architect’s immigrant father wonders “whether this country still has a place for us,” but his son assures him, “Sometimes America has to be pushed – it has to be reminded of what it is” (Waldman 219).

When Ahmad Mulloy Ashmawy, the title character in John Updike’s *Terrorist*, heads into an underclass Muslim neighborhood to learn his suicide mission, he feels like “an outsider among outsiders” in “a nation that persists in thinking of itself as light-skinned, English-speaking, and Christian” (244). Ahmad’s world is defined by what is missing: no father, no friends, and no respect for his teachers, his

mother, or his country. Even among terrorists he does not fit in – he is gentle, not violent; an introvert, not a zealot; an awkward teenager, not a genocidal menace. Like Raymond Shaw, who is ordered to help “start and finish a holy war” (Condon 311) by shooting a president in *The Manchurian Candidate*, Ahmad receives the order to destroy a tunnel named for one: “Lincoln” (Updike 248). Yet Ahmad poses an entirely different threat than most real or imagined enemies-from-within of Cold War fiction. Sergeant Shaw is the Medal-of-Honor-winner next door, the orchestrated agent of an inside job. Ahmad represents the stranger across town, the enemy never in our sights because he is rarely in our midst. The extent of his alienation, Richard Gray observes, makes Ahmad “a familiar, iconic figure in American literature, with such notable predecessors as Richard Wright’s *Bigger* Thomas and Ralph Ellison’s *Invisible Man*” (248). Like Ellison’s *Invisible Man*, Ahmad does not need brainwashing to question his place in American society, nor much prodding to respond accordingly. By showing modern society from the perspective of an Islamic fundamentalist and terrorism through the eyes of a homegrown suicide bomber, Updike introduces Americans to an unlikely new fear: the latchkey terrorist.

From title to setting, Updike’s novel signals a different perspective on the post-9/11 era. *Falling Man* has several title characters, some dead, others still falling. The title of *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close* reverberates with a young boy’s anguish. Both stories traverse the streets of New York and breathe the dust of 9/11. Although Updike spent his career writing for *The New Yorker*, where he recounted watching the attacks from a rooftop in Brooklyn, *Terrorist* takes place across the river

in New Jersey and treats 9/11 as a distant anniversary. As a 2006 review in *New York* points out, “Unlike every other novelist looking over his shoulder at 9/11 – an Ian McEwan, a Reynolds Price, a Jay McInerney, a Jonathan Safran Foer – Updike isn’t writing from the victim’s point of view” (Leonard). Foer gives a terrorist one brief cameo. For Updike, the whole point of *Terrorist* is to give its subject top billing. “I felt I could understand the animosity and hatred which an Islamic believer would have for our system. Nobody’s trying to see it from that point of view,” he told *The New York Times* in 2006. “They can’t ask for a more sympathetic and, in a way, more loving portrait of a terrorist” (“In *Terrorist*”). Sympathy, of course, is not the same as direct experience. As Richard Gray points out, Updike cannot hope to match the realism and indignation that Ralph Ellison brings to *Invisible Man*. Hiring a driver to show him the neighborhoods of Paterson, N.J., as Updike confessed in *The Times* to doing, is hardly the same as growing up there. “What is meant to sound different but authentic too often comes across as artificial, even stereotypical,” Gray writes. “This brave attempt to imagine the other never really fits together as a meaningful story” (34, 80). Yet if Updike fails to achieve a vivid portrait of the Muslim-American experience, he provides a detailed, sympathetic, and at times “loving” one. Ahmad is a polite, dutiful student who obeys his imam’s wishes not to go to college, to the frustration of his high school guidance counselor, Jack Levy. The young man becomes a truck driver and is recruited for a suicide mission in the Lincoln Tunnel. Ahmad acts more like a typical American teenager than a terrorist in training: He works at the “Stop-a-Sec” and keeps a messy room “except for the corner where he prays” (Updike 70, 118). He tells his co-worker Charlie how much

he “pitied” the 9/11 victims: “Especially those that jumped. How terrible, to be so trapped by crushing heat that jumping to certain death is better. Think of the dizziness, looking down before you jump” (Updike 187). In *Terrorist*, even the story of the archetypal 9/11 victim – Falling Man – is told from the prospective terrorist’s perspective. Levy has an affair with Ahmad’s Irish-American mother, but thwarts the young man’s plan thanks to a tip from his sister-in-law at the Department of Homeland Security. As soon as the would-be terrorist aborts his suicidal plot, he becomes – in Jack Levy’s words – “a victim, Ahmad – a fall guy” (Updike 309). Updike implicitly suggests that Ahmad can be redeemed and enter into the American compact because he, too, is actually a victim of the terrorists. Aside from nearly killing thousands by blowing up the Lincoln Tunnel, Ahmad seems to mean no harm. He eschews violence when he comes across a giant beetle. “Many a boy . . . would simply crush this irritating presence with his foot, but for Ahmad the option does not exist,” Updike writes. “He does not wish to contemplate any such organic horror . . . [and] manages, after a few tentative, squeamish attempts, to flip the tiny creature at his mercy over onto its legs” (253). The bug dies anyway.

That beetle reminds us that the terrorist in training is still just a kid. Like Oskar Schell, he knows how it feels to be a boy who has lost his father – and like Raymond Shaw and the narrator in *Invisible Man*, he is struggling to become a man without one. Shaw tells his Korean interpreter: “Senator Iselin is *not* my father. Repeat. He is *not* my father. If you learn nothing else on your visit to this country, memorize that fact” (Condon 164). When the narrator of *Invisible Man* prepares to leave campus to head north to New York City, a veteran tells him: “Be your own

father, young man. . . . Leave the Mr. Nortons alone” (Ellison 162). All these characters highlight the central concern that runs through the literature of existential fear – that liberal society is rootless, alienating, individualistic, and lacking in the authority that fathers can symbolize. Ahmad is but one of the lonely young men in this literature for whom existential crisis ultimately becomes a way to leave loneliness behind and discover his place in the American order.

Thus, Updike emphasizes that Ahmad’s susceptibility to terrorism results from his longing for parental and religious authority. Ahmad veers from bug lover to truck bomber in search of paternal affirmation. He turns to Islam hoping “he might find in this religion a trace of the handsome father” who abandoned him (Updike 99). The mosque “let him be born again” at age 11, giving Shaikh Rashid the chance to become his “surrogate father” (Updike 13, 99). “He’s always seemed so alone. He did this Allah thing all by himself, with no help from me,” Ahmad’s mother tells Jack. “I resented that he cared so much about a father who didn’t do squat for him. For us. But I guess a boy needs a father, and if he doesn’t have one he’ll invent one” (Updike 117). When he says goodbye to his mother for what he believes will be the last time, Ahmad admits, “All those years, there I was obsessing about my father, and *you* were the one taking care of me” (Updike 241). Even then he sees Allah as the father he never had: “[Ahmad] has always felt beside him, a brother, a father. . . . Now he, the fatherless, the brotherless, carries forward God’s inexorable will” (Updike 287).

But, in keeping with other novels that draw on the politics of fear, Updike ultimately saves Ahmad from his quest for self-destruction and transforms him from

terrorist outlaw to ordinary American boy. After following his father into Islam and allowing his shaikh and surrogate father to recruit him for a terrorist mission, Ahmad lets yet another father figure talk him out of it. Jack, a guidance counselor who gives teenagers paternalistic advice for a living, wears Ahmad down with guilt, understanding, and reverse psychology: “Go ahead, push your fucking button. Like the guy on an airplane on Nine-Eleven said to somebody on the cell phone, it’ll be quick” (Updike 304).

As in other stories in the literature of fear that first chronicle the failings of liberal democracy and then view those failings redeemed, Updike gives this story force by sympathizing with Ahmad’s critique of America as a haven of resentment, hypocrisy, and moral weakness. Ahmad has good reason to feel alienated in a country that treats him like an alien. His mother has to change their phone number after 9/11 because of anti-Muslim hate calls. Tylenol Jones, the school bully, calls him “Arab,” chides him for going to church “under false pretenses,” and says Muslims are “all faggots, man” (Updike 97-98). Many of Ahmad’s criticisms of American life ring true, but also echo Updike’s longstanding concerns about the spiritual emptiness of liberal society. “I look around me, and I see slaves – slaves to drugs, slaves to fads, slaves to TV,” he tells Joryleen (Updike 73). He bemoans “the false joy of shopping” and a President who asks citizens only “to buy – to spend money we cannot afford” (Updike 72). Mainstream figures express similar views. “We have too many rights and not enough duties,” the Homeland Security secretary complains (Updike 261). At the church service Ahmad attends, the preacher foments against crack, heroin, and illegitimacy.

In short, Updike's characters echo an attitude Corey Robin laments: the comforting post-9/11 doctrine that "terrorism was inspired by an anxiety over modernity" (159). "America is paved solid with fat and tar," Jack says. "The crazy Arabs are right – hedonism, nihilism, that's all we offer. Listen to the lyrics of these rock and rap stars" (Updike 27, 205). If the World Trade Center symbolized the ambition of American capitalism, the grim city of New Prospect, where the novel takes place, represents its shortcomings. When his wife worries about a heightened threat level of terrorist attack, Jack responds, "Bring 'em on. I was thinking, looking out the window, this whole neighborhood could do with a good bomb" (Updike 32). Updike mocks America's entire pretense of homeland defense. When the Secretary of Homeland Security questions the utility of raising threat levels, his deputy replies, "But I think people *do* like the sensation that steps are being taken" (Updike 257). The Secretary seems to be fighting the last war: "The enemy is obsessed with holy sites, and as convinced as the old Communist archenemies had been that capitalism has a headquarters, a head that may be cut off" (Updike 47). He asks, "Why do they hate us? What's to hate?" (Updike 48). The deputy quotes scripture and says, "They hate the light. . . . Like cockroaches. Like bats" (Updike 48). Even as Updike depicts the U.S. as a cruel, unjust, and aimless society, he ultimately gives us no reason to doubt these words. For in Updike's depiction terrorism is motivated by an unreasoning religious animus against modernity, and as in other works in the literature of fear, that existential threat eventually allows for a renewed appreciation of American freedoms.

Updike achieves this transition by bringing together his two most alienated characters – Ahmad and Jack – in a parental relationship that not only staves off violence but rescues both unhappy men from destruction and more broadly signals the inclusiveness and tolerance of American society. In the end, Ahmad proves relatively harmless, as terrorists go. “Jihad doesn’t have to mean war. . . . It can mean inner struggle,” he admits, “his voice shyly cracking”; his boss Chehab replies, “You are a good boy” (Updike 149). As the truck bomb inches toward its target, Jack agrees: “I’m betting you won’t set it off. You’re too good a kid” (Updike 296). After making the counselor sweat “little droplets of fear,” Ahmad comes to the same conclusion any other commuter might reach when traffic clears in the Lincoln Tunnel: “God does not want to destroy: it was He who made the world” (Updike 295, 306). With a little luck and random acts of counseling, Jack Levy earns his redemption. He gives Ahmad the chance to become an American by choosing citizenry over sect, nation over alienation. At the same time, he overcomes his own sense of discontent and alienation by rediscovering the value of his work as a public servant. Thanks to his accidental heroism, the country narrowly avoids an attack it plays no part in preventing by a loner who has never crossed its mind. As long as we live up to our ideal of inclusion, Updike seems to suggest, the ranks of the enemy within will dwindle, and we will have less to fear from latchkey terrorists and from ourselves. Just as in *The Manchurian Candidate* or *Advise and Consent*, the politics of fear enables a renewed appreciation of liberal democracy.



## Epilogue

In economic, demographic, and social terms, 21st-century America scarcely resembles the America of the 1950s. Today women are nearly twice as likely to join the work force as in 1950, and instead of rising three percent a year, incomes are flat (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics). The U.S. population has doubled in size and diversity (U.S. Census Bureau). While discrimination persists, same-sex marriage is now legal and racial segregation is not. The Cold War is over, Communism has been forgotten, and America has fought two wars in this century against enemies it did not see coming in the last one. Despite all those differences, however, the nature of fear in America has remained much the same. In response to vastly different threats half a century apart, the literature of existential fear follows the same narrative conventions and echoes the same themes. In the politics of fear, an existential threat to the viability of the American nation appears to be a call to action and a chance for spiritual and political redemption. *The Manchurian Candidate*, an inelegant thriller by a cynical screenwriter, and *Terrorist*, a thriller by one of the most elegant writers of his generation, end with the same twist, as unlikely heroes (brainwashed assassin Raymond Shaw and washed-up philanderer Jack Levy) rise to the occasion at the last moment to save the American way of life. Fear challenges us to rediscover who we are and what we most value. Orrin Knox in *Advise and Consent*, Keith Neudecker in *Falling Man*, and Oskar Schell's grandfather in *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close* reconsider causes they had abandoned when crises of fear show them how much is at stake. Fear is a constant reminder of our own shortcomings, not just our enemies' strengths. *Advise and Consent* celebrates a United States Senate that squandered the

1950s on Communist witch hunts and civil rights filibusters; *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close* imagines a New York City devastated by terrorists suddenly treating its children like Stuart Little. Yet both novels draw the same conclusion that America has as much to fear from complacency about its own weaknesses: the “dry rot” of “the shrug” and “the shoddy” for Drury (507); complicity in Hiroshima and Dresden for Foer. Fear highlights divisions and hard choices we might otherwise ignore. The narrator in *Invisible Man* chafes under racial prejudice but rejects Communism as an answer; Senator Brigham Anderson takes his own life rather than let the nation’s prejudice against homosexuality weaken his drive to protect the nation against Communism; Ahmad Ashmawy in *Terrorist* endures anti-Muslim prejudice in the wake of 9/11 but ultimately embraces citizenship over terror.

The ultimate irony of the literature of existential fear is its almost primal consistency: Confronted with threats we have never seen before, we respond the same way we have before. When the Cold War brought the new danger of mutually assured destruction, many Americans thought life would never be the same. The nation went on high alert, then returned to business as usual. When terrorists launched the deadliest attack on American soil, the nation mustered new defenses and Americans talked about a “New Normal” even as they embraced the Old Normal more than ever. Novels of the Cold War and 9/11 address fears never far below the surface. Corey Robin wonders, “What exactly, we must ask ourselves, is missing from our world that we should require spilled blood and incinerated flesh, and the fear such havoc and loss create, to feel alive?” (23) The novels discussed in this thesis suggest that nothing brings life into focus like the prospect of losing it. When

our way of life is threatened, we long for a renewed sense of identity, unity, and purpose – and turn to the literature of existential fear to find it.

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