**Journal of American Studies of Turkey**
35-36 (2012): 29-38

# Gore Vidal, the American Empire, and the Cultural Vocabulary of the Post-Civil War South

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For the historian of ideas seeking the origin of Gore Vidal's critique of the United States of America, that since World War II the American government has engaged in unjustified violence against people abroad while abridging civil liberties at home, William Pfaff provides a clue. In an essay published in *The New York Review of Books* in 2012, Pfaff examines "the decisive events shaping the condition of individual lives and providing the cultural vocabulary of an era" in several countries. For the United States, he argues, the decisive event is World War II, "although," he adds, "at the time that World War II began for America, in 1941, the era ended would probably have been identified as post-Civil War, at least in the South" (51). If the historian were to accept Pfaff's argument, it becomes possible to see Vidal's critique of post-World War II America as rooted in the "cultural vocabulary" of the post-Civil War pre-World War II South.

To understand the difference between the cultural vocabulary of post-World War II America and that of the post-Civil War pre-World War II South, it is useful to turn to the work of historian C. Vann Woodward. In essays written in the 1950's and collected in *The Burden of Southern History (1960)*, Woodward argued that certain national myths were gaining influence in post-World War II America. The first he called "the legend of American success" (18). Americans saw their history as a success story. The United States had never lost a war and had emerged from its victory in World War II seemingly militarily invincible. America was also affluent. While the war had left much of Europe and Asia in ruins, the American homeland had been untouched, and the American economy was booming. The second national myth Woodward called "the legend of American innocence" (19). Americans saw World War II as a victory over evil and saw themselves as good and their country as the embodiment of virtue – the defender of freedom and democracy in the world and the liberator of

enslaved peoples. Just as the United States had defeated one totalitarian menace in the form of Adolf Hitler, America was standing up to a new totalitarian menace in the form of the Soviet Union.

Woodward drew attention to the "risk and danger involved, both to America and to the world, in pursuing national policies" based on the "illusions" of American innocence and invincibility (214):

> We are exasperated by the ironic incongruities of our position. Having more power than ever before, America ironically enjoys less security than in the days of her weakness. Convinced of her virtue, she finds that even her allies accuse her of domestic vices invented by her enemies. The liberated prove ungrateful for their liberation, the reconstructed for their reconstruction, and the late colonial peoples vent their resentment upon our nation – the most innocent, we believe, of the imperial powers. Driven by these provocations and frustrations, there is the danger that America may be tempted to exert all the terrible power she possesses to compel history to conform to her illusions. The extreme, but by no means the only expression, would be the so-called preventive war (192-93).

Woodward believed that Southerners might help America to avoid the pitfalls of basing its foreign policy on myths of success and innocence. Southerners, he argued, could not fully partake in these national myths because Southerners had a different history from that of other Americans. Southerners alone had suffered military defeat, a bitter defeat in the American Civil War. Nor did Southerners have a history of affluence. The Civil War destroyed two-thirds of the wealth of the South, and as a result, Southerners suffered through generations of poverty. Southern experience also ran contrary to the legend of American innocence – Southerners had experience with guilt and evil, slavery and racial injustice. The Civil War remained central to the lives of Southerners long after the war ended. Southerners passed down the memory of their collective experience of defeat, poverty, guilt, and evil from generation to generation. Southern

author Katherine Anne Porter expressed that folk memory when she wrote in the early twentieth century, "I am a grandchild of a lost War, and I have blood-knowledge of what life can be in a defeated country on the bare bones of privation" (qtd. *Burden* 33).

The unique history of Southerners, Woodward believed, made them less likely to think victory in war inevitable and might allow Southerners to caution other Americans against deciding to take the country to war without first taking into account the possibility of defeat. The Southern experience with guilt and evil, he believed, might allow Southerners to point out to other Americans that no one is truly innocent, that all human beings are mixtures of good and evil, and that even actions intended to be noble can have evil consequences.

The first edition of *The Burden of Southern History* came out in 1960. By the time the second edition appeared in 1968, the Vietnam War had called into question Woodward's thesis. In the new edition of his book Woodward addressed the issue. America had entered the war confident in victory, believing it "unthinkable" that the United States could be defeated in "a war with rag-tag guerillas of a small and heretofore unheard-of undeveloped country of Southeast Asia" (219). American officials justified their policy in Vietnam by referring to the legend of American innocence: Americans were fighting to defend the freedom and self-determination of the South Vietnamese. The problem with Woodward's thesis was that the main architects of this war were Southerners – President Lyndon Johnson from Texas and Secretary of State Dean Rusk from Georgia. "And yet from these quarters," Woodward wrote,

> came few challenges and little appreciable restraint to the pursuit of national myths of invincibility and innocence. Rather there came a renewed allegiance and sustained dedication. So far as the war and pursuit of victory were concerned, the people of the South seemed to be as uncompromising as those of any part of the country and more so than many. (230)

The Vietnam War undermined notions of American success and innocence. Not only did America suffer military defeat, but reports of atrocities committed by American troops – the torture and assassination

of suspected Viet Cong, the massacre of civilians, the burning of villages – challenged the idea of American goodness. Yet these national myths outlasted America's Vietnam experience. President Ronald Reagan reassured Americans that the Vietnam War had been a noble cause, and both he and his successor George H.W. Bush worked to revive the idea of American military invincibility. As Woodward wrote in 1993:

> History did not end with Vietnam. In the succeeding two decades American leaders did work to restore the myth. In addition to blustering interventions in tiny Central American and Caribbean republics, came victory in the Gulf War and the claim of national victory in the Cold War. Of the former, President George Bush declared, "By God, we've kicked the Vietnam syndrome once and for all."(260)

Woodward had to admit that "no part of the country manifested more enthusiasm for the flag-waving of the 1980's and early 1990's than the South" (260).

In the end, Woodward came to doubt his own thesis. Except for "a few Southern writers," including William Faulkner and Robert Penn Warren, who "bore evidence of their heritage," Southerners did not appear to have reacted to their experience of defeat, poverty, and evil as Woodward thought they might. He even quoted one of his critics, historian Richard H. King, who said of Woodward's thesis that "as history, it makes little or no sense" (Woodward, *Thinking Back* 117).

King was wrong. Before World War II there had been Southerners, in addition to the few writers to whom Woodward referred, who reacted to the unique Southern historical experience exactly as Woodward thought Southerners might, and among them, as Gore Vidal's memoir *Palimpsest* makes clear, was Vidal's maternal grandfather, Thomas Pryor Gore. Born in Mississippi in 1870, son of a Confederate veteran, Gore became active in Democratic Party politics in 1896 and harbored the ambition to become a United States Senator, but in Mississippi entrenched incumbents occupied both Senate seats. Gore immigrated to Texas, then to Indian Territory, which he helped organize into the state of Oklahoma, and in 1907 became a United States Senator for the new state. Senator Gore opposed American

entry into World War I, and it was his Southern heritage of defeat and poverty that led him to do so, as Vidal explained: "For someone brought up in the wreckage of the Civil War, any foreign war seemed like perfect folly" (*Palimpsest* 61). Woodward suggested that because Southerners have had a different historical experience from that of other Americans, Southerners may see American history from a different perspective, may view cherished national myths with some degree of detachment, and may regard idealistic American political rhetoric with a degree of skeptical realism. Senator Gore displayed that kind of skeptical realism. Vidal recorded, for example, his grandfather's reaction to Abraham Lincoln's Gettysburg Address (1863):

> "Was there ever a fraud greater than this government of, by, and for the people?" He threw back his head, the voice rose: "*What* people, *which* people? When he made that speech, almost half the American people had said the government of the North was not of, by, or for *them*. So then Lincoln, after making a bloody war against the South, has the effrontery to say that this precious principle, which he would not extend to the Southern people, was the one for which the war had been fought" (*Palimpsest* 56).

Vidal had grown up in the 1920s and 1930s in his grandfather's household in Washington, D.C. (Vidal's maternal grandmother was also Southern, a member of the Kay family, slaveholders from South Carolina who had moved to Texas after the Civil War), and in conversations around the family dinner table, Vidal had absorbed the cultural vocabulary of the post-Civil War South. "I am literally," he wrote, "a grandchild of the American Civil War, and I belonged to the losing side" (qtd. Morgan 26). That meant for Vidal that in the case of foreign wars he became, like his grandfather, a noninterventionist. It also meant that Vidal learned to regard American political rhetoric with the same skeptical realism as his grandfather, which Vidal described as "the ability to detect the false notes in the arias that our shepherds lull their sheep with" (*Palimpsest* 56).

The Second World War proved to be a turning point for Southerners, as the case of Alvin C. York from Tennessee illustrates. York, America's greatest military hero of World War I, in a speech in San Francisco in

1939, spoke out against American military intervention in the growing political crisis in Europe. He drew on his Southern heritage in warning Americans about the risks involved in war. Historian Michael E. Birdwell has summarized the speech:

> Tennessee had suffered the ravages of war firsthand during the Civil War, he [York] reminded his listeners, and had been slow to recover, lagging behind the rest of the country for decades. Therefore, Tennessee "is a state that believes in the George Washington Doctrine, 'stay out of foreign entanglements.'" (100)

By 1941, however, York had begun to advocate American intervention in Europe after becoming involved with Warner Bros. film studio, which was making a movie based on his life. Jack and Harry Warner, the heads of the studio, supported American intervention in Europe and from the mid-1930's to the early 1940's produced a number of films, among them *Black Legion* (1936) and *Confessions of a Nazi Spy* (1939), warning Americans of the dangers to freedom and democracy posed by Nazi spies and fascist groups within the United States. Warner Bros. pioneered the portrayal of Hitler as evil incarnate, a portrayal that became a staple of the post-World War II cultural vocabulary in America. Harry Warner convinced York of Hitler's malevolence and of the necessity for the United States to fight to defend freedom and democracy, converting York from the post-Civil War Southern way of viewing the world to a view characterized by ideas essential to the cultural vocabulary of post-World War II America.

Alvin York's conversion from a post-Civil War view of the world to a view shaped by World War II perhaps represents what happened to many Southerners, which would account for why Woodward found that in the post-World War II period, Southerners were not reacting to their unique historical experience as he expected they might. Gore Vidal, however, did not undergo such a conversion. World War II notwithstanding, for him the Civil War remained the decisive event in American history. Asked in 1960 why he had written a play set in the Civil War, he responded that "the Civil War was – and is – to the United States what the Trojan War was to the Greeks, the great single tragic event that continues to give resonance to our Republic" (*Imperial America* 57). Vidal's intellectual grounding in the

Southern experience of defeat, poverty, guilt, and evil gave him immunity to the national myths of invincibility and innocence and made it possible for him to regard post-World War II American history with detachment.

As Vidal saw it (in views expressed in works published late in his writing career – *The Last Empire* (2001), *Perpetual War for Perpetual Peace* (2002), and *Imperial America* (2005), the United States emerged from World War II in possession of a worldwide empire – a modern empire in which America did not annex other nations outright but dominated them through the economy, military alliances such as NATO (which, Vidal argued, turned the nations of western Europe into American client states), and covert activities of the Central Intelligence Agency. The United States justified its world dominance by turning to the legend of American innocence, arguing that America was defending freedom, democracy, and peace in the world. Instead of demobilizing after World War II, the United States remained on a wartime footing, engaging in what Vidal termed "perpetual war for perpetual peace" (*Perpetual War* 150). Vidal was merciless in exposing the fallacies in the American legends of innocence and success, calling attention, for example, to the defeat in Vietnam and characterizing "our crazed adventure" there as "imperial, instead of yet another proof of our irrepressible, invincible altruism, ever eager to bring light to those who dwell in darkness" (*Imperial America* 5). After Vietnam, Vidal wrote, "we were enrolled in a perpetual war against what seemed to be the enemy-of-the-month club" (*Imperial America* 161). Of that "enemy-of-the-month club," he said:

> If it's not Noriega, it's Bishop in Grenada; Qaddafi, whose eyeliner is very ominous; Saddam, just like Hitler. When they get into their bunkers they always find a copy of *Mein Kampf*, a portrait of Hitler, women's underdrawers – which they wear – a couple of dead Boy Scouts and three mistresses, because they do both terrible things (qtd. Solomon 40).

In *Perpetual War for Perpetual Peace* Vidal documented over two hundred military operations that the United States had engaged in since World War II, and, he wrote, in these "wars against Communism, terrorism, drugs, or sometimes nothing much, between Pearl Harbor and Tuesday,

September 11, 2001, we tended to strike the first blow. But then we're the good guys, right? Right" (40).

In explaining why Al Qaeda had attacked the United States on 11 September 2001, President George W. Bush fell back on the myth of American innocence. "We are good," he declared. "They are evil." He continued: "They hate our freedoms, our freedom of religion, our freedom of speech, our freedom to vote and assemble and disagree with each other" (qtd. *Perpetual War* 4-5). Vidal offered an alternative explanation:

> Once we meditate upon the unremitting violence of the United States against the rest of the world, while relying upon pretexts that, for sheer flimsiness, might have given Hitler pause when justifying some of his baroque lies, one begins to understand why Osama struck at us from abroad in the name of one billion Muslims whom we have encouraged, through our own preemptive acts of war as well as relentless demonization of them through media, to regard us in – how shall I put it? – less than amiable light (*Perpetual War* 45).

After the 9/11 attacks, Vidal charged, the United States had engaged in "wars of aggression" in which "we wrecked Afghanistan and Iraq, two countries that had done us no harm" (*Imperial America* 11, viii). He concluded:

> Although we regularly stigmatize other societies as rogue states, we ourselves have been the largest rogue state of all. We honor no treaties. We spurn international courts. We strike unilaterally whenever we choose. We give orders to the United Nations but do not pay our dues. We complain of terrorism, yet our empire is now the greatest terrorist of all. We bomb, invade, subvert other states (*Perpetual War* 158-59).

The Southern folk memory of the Civil War made Vidal alert to the threat war posed to the American republic. Vidal argued that Lincoln had used "military necessity" to justify making himself dictator of the

United States – to justify raising troops and making civil war, suspending habeas corpus, and closing newspapers, all in violation of the Constitution (*Perpetual War* 66). Since World War II, Vidal contended, American presidents behaved as Lincoln did. Presidents routinely sent troops into combat without obtaining – despite the Constitution's requirement that they should – a declaration of war from Congress. By asserting that America was in a state of war against drugs or terrorism, presidents maintained their power and used executive orders, some of which were secret, to create new law by presidential decree. The state of perpetual war, Vidal argued, had shredded the Bill of Rights. Though the Fourth Amendment bans unreasonable searches and seizures, Vidal contended that police routinely perjured themselves in court to justify warrantless entries into peoples' homes, especially in cases involving the war on drugs. By the early twenty-first century law enforcement agents were intercepting two million private phone calls a year. The Patriot Act, passed by Congress in the wake of the 9/11 attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon, allowed government agents to secretly enter a citizen's home and conduct a search without the citizen ever being informed. The law also allowed government agents to collect sensitive information about citizens, including credit reports, without court approval. As Vidal wrote, "The awesome physical damage Osama and company did to us on Dark Tuesday is as nothing compared to the knockout blow to our vanishing liberties" (*Perpetual War* 18-19).

C. Vann Woodward came to believe that after World War II the Southern heritage of defeat, poverty, guilt, and evil had become a "largely untapped source of wisdom" (*Thinking Back* 137). Gore Vidal tapped that source and drew wisdom from it, wisdom he exhibited when, in *Perpetual War for Perpetual Peace*, he wrote, "War is the no-win all-lose option" (18).

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