

NORMAN MAILER AND
JOSEPH ELLIS: UNSETTLING
DIALOGUES ON DEMOCRACY

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Nothing but integrity in private and justice in public bodies can preserve a republic. If calamities are necessary to teach us wisdom and virtue, I wish God would rain down shows of them upon us.

—Benjamin Rush to John Adams, January 17, 1778

DURING THE FINAL FOUR YEARS OF HIS LIFE NORMAN MAILER (1923–2007) wanted to clarify his ideas regarding two of his central concerns as a writer and public intellectual. To do so he opened three dialogues. His book *On God: An Uncommon Conversation* (2007) was a conversation with his archivist and authorized biographer J. Michael Lennon on Mailer’s metaphysical and philosophical speculations as they had evolved since the 1950s. He also published two other nonfiction books, both on American politics and democracy—*Why Are We at War?* (2003) and *The Big Empty* (2006). The books on democracy opened a final dialogue with his compatriots, including the younger generations. In the former, Mailer was in conversation with his friend Dotson Rader in Part I, speaking with members of The Commonwealth Club in San Francisco in Part II, and in conversation with *The American Conservative* magazine about “Why I am a left conservative” in Part III. In the case of *The Big Empty*, he engaged in a dialogue particularly with the generation then coming into full adulthood because the book is composed of conversations between Mailer and his youngest child, John Buffalo Mailer, who was just turning thirty when the book was published.

“Because the younger generations are more attuned to learning from film, television, and the Internet,” John writes in his introduction to *The Big Empty*, “our understanding of the past is more easily manipulated by the increasingly sophisticated political and media marketing techniques used by those who hold power today. This is why it is so important that we have these conversations with the older generations” (x).

The political books offer Mailer’s thoughts on democracy in the twenty-first century based on a lifetime of writing about American democracy and participating in it. In articles and books he had been covering Presidential primaries and conventions since the early 1960s. He ran for mayor of New York City on the Democratic ticket in 1969, once campaigning vociferously beneath the statue of George Washington at Federal Hall on Wall Street and Nassau, where Washington took his oath of office. (Mailer had hoped that a Left-Right city coalition might “make a dent in the entrenched power . . . of the corporate center”). He was one of the earliest activists against the Vietnam war. And as a member of the “Greatest Generation” who fought as an infantryman in the Philippines during World War II, one can say that he also fought for democracy against the juggernaut of global fascism. It is striking how Mailer returns in these late nonfiction books to many of the questions the founding fathers and mothers faced in the eighteenth century. To Mailer having the *dialogue* itself was the necessary thing, as it was to the Founders as well.

By 2018 we American citizens (left, right, and center) had come to believe that our democracy was in crisis, that we might be living, once again, in “times that try men’s souls.” Into our arguments over the nature and fate of our democracy, renowned historian Joseph Ellis inserted his new book examining the original debates among the Founders and extended their dialogue to us as well, *American Dialogue: The Founders and Us*. Ellis’s book served as a crash course in the processes, compromises, hopes, failings, and fears of the Founders. Through a technique of alternating chapter sections between *then* and *now*, Ellis reestablishes the relevance of the founding dialogues for our own time.

Mailer in his two books was performing a similar service for his fellow citizens, though he was not as explicit in that purpose as Ellis is. But it is remarkable how much similar territory all three books cover as they awaken us to our democratic fundamentals in the opening decades of the new century. For both Mailer and Ellis, reopening our dialogue on democracy is the

key to reclaiming a vital democracy. (It is perhaps fortuitous for our democracy that the National Archives recently created a digitized version of the more extensive founding dialogues—even beyond the debates that ended in the Declaration and the Constitution, beyond the better-known correspondence between Jefferson and Adams, and beyond the Federalist Papers—among six major founding correspondents in “The Founders Online” project, available at <https://Founders.archives.gov>).

Three topics both Mailer and Ellis consider (as did the Founders) are among the most significant—our fragile democracy, our economic inequality, and our foreign policy. These three political concerns are, of course, mutually interactive.

The fragility of democracy (especially as it is susceptible to fascistic temptations) is a sort of undercurrent through much of Mailer’s work, starting with *The Naked and the Dead* (1948) and ending with *The Castle in the Forest* (2006), but for our purposes I want to look at Mailer’s straightforward reflections as he approached the end of his life. In 2003, Mailer argued that compulsive, self-serving patriotism was odious. “When you have a great country it’s your duty to be critical of it so it can become even greater.” He believed, however, that we were becoming more arrogant and vainer, both “culturally and emotionally.”

When America began, it was the first time in the history of civilization that a nation dared to make an enormous bet founded on this daring notion—that there is more good than bad in people. . . . Now we have to keep reminding ourselves that just because we’ve been a democracy, it doesn’t guarantee we’re going to continue to be one. Democracy is existential. . . . It changes all the time. That’s one reason I detest promiscuous patriotism. You don’t take democracy for granted. It is always in peril. (*Why Are We at War?*, 15–16)

He saw our promiscuous flag-waving as one way of taking democracy for granted. “You take a monarchy for granted, or a fascist state. You have to” (17). Compulsive flag-waving is no better than “compulsive adoration of our leaders,” which adoration Mailer calls “poison” for democracies (85). Likewise, if you love your country indiscriminately, “critical distinctions begin to go. And democracy depends on those distinctions” (108). You can be pa-

triotic, you can love your country, you can put your life at risk defending it, and you can still be critical of it. It is precisely because democracy is “beautiful” and “noble” that it is always endangered, always “perishable.” “I think the natural government for most people, given the uglier depths of human nature, is fascism. . . . Democracy is a state of grace attained only by those countries that have a host of individuals not only ready to enjoy freedom but to undergo the heavy labor of maintaining it” (70–71). One of the greatest threats to our democracy is the “mega-corporation,” ever doing its “best to appropriate our thwarted dreams with their elephantiaistical conceits” (75). This threat is a reference to what Mailer has been identifying since the mid-sixties as “corporate totalitarianism.”

The fragility theme is also central to Mailer’s dialogues with his son John in *The Big Empty*. Again, fascism is a palpable danger, but if it does come to America it will not be comparable to what happened in Germany during the 1930s, as much to Mailer’s annoyance people keep suggesting. It will, instead, approach slowly, won’t be called fascism, won’t have party men in uniform. And we will allow it to develop here ourselves, whether we are Left or Right, if we keep acting stupidly (100–101). We seem too ready not to investigate the difficult questions but search for quick answers, and patriotism “gobbled up, sentimentalized, and thereby abased is one of the most powerful single forces to proliferate stupidity” (98). We have already made the shift from a country in love with “freedom and creativity (in constant altercation with those other Americans who want rule and order) into a country that’s now much more interested in power” (123). He sees ominous signs in the collaborations of church (fundamentalism), state, and corporation. Capitalism per se is not the problem. Small businesses can be creative, useful, and don’t seek vast power. It is the marriage of the state with corporate capitalism or finance capitalism that poses the threat (211–212). And corporations and their greed in turn are handmaidens to empire.

It was John Adams, perhaps America’s first “left-conservative,” (followed by Thoreau and, closer to Mailer’s generation, Edward Abbey and Christopher Hitchens, for example) who was most attuned among the Founders, as Joseph Ellis points out, to the fragility of the democracy they were struggling to create. “In every society known to man,” Adams wrote in *A Defence of the Constitutions of the United States* in 1787, “an aristocracy has risen up in the course of time, consisting of a few rich and honorable families who have united with each other against both the people and the first magis-

trate.” As he would write that same year to Thomas Jefferson, who had a sunnier, European Enlightenment view of human nature, “You are afraid of the one, I, of the few” (Ellis, 87). It was not a monarchy citizens of the new republic should fear most; it was oligarchy.

Ellis points out that Adams questioned certain beliefs of the French Enlightenment—belief in the preternatural wisdom of the people; the assumption that human beings are inherently rational creatures, the assumption that America was immune to class distinctions so common in Europe. No less a patriot than Jefferson, Adams nonetheless wanted as much as possible a healthy skepticism built into the constitution that would spark the vigilance of future generations as they adapted to maintain the best ideals of a living document. No threats were greater than the ruthless amassing of fortunes and the human passion for adulation or fame. In his 2018 book *Rush*, Stephen Fried juxtaposes correspondence among John and Abigail Adams and Benjamin Rush between 1790 and 1801 that demonstrates their sense that a “system of influence bordering on corruption,” as Rush put it, was *already* creeping into their new republic (327, 411).

Adams seems to have retained a residual fondness for the Platonic/ Socratic Guardians of the state, whose philosophically *disinterested* leadership is only for the good of the state and its citizenry. But upon reflection, Adams must have come to suspect that such higher polity was nowhere, never was, and never would be. For without attainable recourse to Platonic Aristos (with their “better and more complete education” and “minds that are awake” and who would never *seek* political office), Adams’ default became republican democracy. Democracy with protections against the excesses of the citizenry itself as well as their political leaders: three branches of government, a bi-cameral and representational Congress, a free press, etc. On the other hand, Adams’ fears better reflect Plato’s more realistic fears, as expressed in his Socratic dialogues: the treacheries of either tyranny (authoritarian rule above or in defiance of the law by one man’s brutal self-interest) or oligarchy (see American democracy, circa 2020).

Madison, the first author of the constitution as the founders were moving away from a Confederacy toward a Nation, also saw that only a federal government might have the strength and courage to restrain economic elites, as well as inadequately informed but passionate majorities, from controlling power for their own purposes. George Washington agreed, sovereignty needed to shift from state to federal level. Jefferson acknowledged that only

federal sovereignty might suffice, but he insisted that the Bill of Rights and the framing of the constitution assured what government could *not* do by way of restricting basic freedoms. In fact, history would demonstrate that the final documents have led to a dialectical exchange on many fronts between the two levels of government, but as Ellis points out, the Founders believed they were creating a living Constitution, adaptable (with difficulty) over time, not an inflexible, dead document (141–142, 154–159).¹

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Economic inequality, then, the Founders saw as one of the chief dangers to our democracy. Both Mailer and Ellis develop this theme at considerable length. Mailer in *Why Are We at War?* focuses on the conflict between our egalitarian ideals and the corporate takeover of America.

Nobody ever said . . . that a democracy should be a place where the richest people . . . earn a thousand times more than the poorest. . . . The people who feel this lack of balance probably make up two thirds of the country, but they don't want to think about it. They can't do a damn thing about it. We don't run our country. Corporate power is running this country now. . . . If we have a depression or fall into desperate economic times, I don't know what's going to hold the country together. There's too much anger here, too much ruptured vanity, too much shock, too much identity crisis. And worst of all too much patriotism. (104–105)

If Mailer were right, we dodged an asteroid when we climbed out of the 2008–9 Wall Street meltdown, but he foresaw some of the angry forces behind the 2016 election.

The Big Empty takes this theme further. Mailer sounds the note early in this book, reminding us that democracy is the greatest of all experiments, and as such must improve or get worse. Capitalism may be stronger than socialism due to capitalism's creativity, but the "foreseeable price" is that "greed becomes paramount." For all its potential creativity, capitalism also tends to dumb down the populace, making us less civilized, less cultivated (10–11). Mailer echoes here a theme in a lifetime of work by historians

Charles and Mary Beard: the history of America is the history of the struggle between capitalism and democracy. Mailer describes this struggle as a war between liberals and conservatives. And the left is losing because they are only beginning to figure out that “they can’t beat the right with intelligent argument. They need punch phrases that get to the heart of the average American.” The right would like nothing more than to see protests and anarchy in the streets as self-justification for the right to advance its causes (7, 16–17).

Mailer argues that true conservatives, as opposed to “Flag Conservatives,” feel in accord with the left concerning the corporate stifling of our lives economically, aesthetically, culturally, and spiritually. Corporations *are* The Big Empty, but they have “massive complacency about their own corporate virtues,” and our politicians have become their handmaidens and bodyguards (53–54). The struggle against the corporation is profound, and it would take at least fifty years to prevail in such a revolution, Mailer says. We will first have to release ourselves from the economic, political, and spiritual brainwashing that is far superior and more subtle than that of the crude old Soviets. He then quotes Hermann Goering on the ease with which leaders can manipulate a population toward any policy—all you have to do is convince the people they are under attack, that the pacifists and naysayers are unpatriotic, and the people will follow, in Goering’s words, “whether it is a democracy, or a fascist government, or a parliament, or a communist dictatorship” (60).

The capitalism of small businesses, however, may be a resource in the battle against corporate power, Mailer suggests. The men and women running small businesses are always taking their chances, leading an existential life, gambling with their wit, energy, and ideas for what will work in the marketplace. The small business owner “may be a sonofabitch, but at least he is out there in the middle of life” (55–57). Small business owners are not corporate executives ensconced in a political protection racket, coddled in their shimmering Xanadus. At one point in the dialogue, Mailer’s son John asks whether corporate CEOs and their peers can really be untouched by the economic and environmental crises they enable. After all, they too have children and grandchildren. Mailer responds, “You’re not old enough yet to know how various and creative are the self-exculpations in the mentality of the prosperous. They find more ways of forgiving what they’re doing than you can take account of” (109). During those last four years of his life Mailer

did of course go beyond *Why Are We at War?* and *The Big Empty* to further express his concerns publicly. One example, a sort of companion piece, is a long essay appearing in *Playboy* magazine's 50th anniversary issue, where Mailer presented a series of "Immodest Proposals" expanding the ideas presented in his two final political books, a sort of definitive statement on economic inequity.

Perhaps the time has come for Americans to stop worrying about the welfare of the rich. For the last two decades, the assumption has grown more powerful each year that unless the very well-to-do are encouraged to become wealthier, our economy will falter. Well, we have allowed them to get wealthier and wealthier and then even wealthier, and the economy is faltering. Apparently, the economic lust of the 1990s has unbalanced the springs. Might it not be unnatural, even a little peculiar, to concern ourselves so much about the needs of the rich. . . . They know how to make money. They do not need incentives. Making money is not only their gift but their vital need. That is their vision of spiritual reward. Not only is their measure of self attached directly to the volume of their gains, but the majority of them know how to stay rich. They are highly qualified to take care of themselves in any society, be it socialist, fascist, banana republic, or chaotic. Whether they live in a corporate economy relatively free of government or with a larger government presence, they will prosper. They can withstand an American safety net. And they may even sleep better.²

Ellis takes up the topic of enormous economic inequality chiefly in his "then" chapter on John Adams and the subsequent "now" chapter entitled "Our Gilded Age." Adams was one Founder who saw inequality as embedded in American society. Unlike Jefferson who thought an agrarian, decentralized polity was America's future, Adams was both more prescient and more skeptical about human nature. (If Jefferson provided our democratic ideals; Adams tempered our ideals by pushing our noses closer to harsh historical realities). Adams agreed with Locke that political power derives from the people, but he was less reverential than Jefferson about popular sovereignty—despotism could arise from many sources, popular, oligarchic, or

monarchial. Our passions control us more than our reason; they insinuate themselves into our conscience and our understanding (71, 75-79). Adams, so to speak, takes Mailer's formulation a step further: we are all capable of dangerous self-exculpations. But to Adams, essentially, it was the "relentless pressure toward oligarchy," as Ellis puts it, that "needed constant attention from all branches of government." That, to Adams, was "the central problem of political science" (85, 88).

A Yankee Federalist who had participated in the debate over Hamilton's proposal for a national bank, Adams saw the serpent in Jefferson's American Eden of the 1780s as finance capitalism, a capitalism Adams viewed as establishing an emerging "commercial republic." Adams looked upon banks as "engines of inequality" and bankers as reapers of immoral profits, as "an Aristocracy as fatal as the Feudal barons." Banks, Adams believed, ought to be public institutions within each state yet under the control of Congress. Our Left-Conservative Founder was anticipating our Federal Reserve Board and New Deal banking regulations, as Ellis puts it, by arguing that the "invisible hand of the marketplace required the visible hand of government to regulate its inevitable excesses" (90-91). Financial aristocracies, like all aristocracies, would use their power to control political institutions for their own agendas, resulting in political oligarchy. Adams anticipated Thorstein Veblen by locating the financial driver of human vanity as the desire to be seen as exceptional, the *emotional* imperative to display wealth as indicator of elite status, "because riches attract the attention, consideration, and congratulation of mankind" (94-97). If one agrees with Adams (and Veblen), might one reasonably ask whether three million years of primate evolution has culminated in human admiration of Alpha-hierarchical status through displays of wealth? Isn't display of wealth one engine of contemporary celebrity?

Ellis's "then" chapter on "Our Gilded Age" is one of his most convincing, cogently presented, and data-driven. Ellis makes fine comparisons and distinctions between our time and the first Gilded Age (to use Mark Twain's 1873 terminology). Not only in light of the evidence Ellis marshals, but in light of the testimony of our own senses, a reader would have to perform ingenious mental contortions of self-exculpation to come to believe we have not created a second Gilded Age through the very forces that Adams foresaw and that Mailer uncovers in his dialogues with fellow citizens. Let me add that the most convincing book that I have come across uncovering the his-

torical chain of oligarchs, their ideological enablers, and their financial and institutional mechanisms that led from John Calhoun through Nobel economist James McGill Buchanan to the Koch brothers et al. is Nancy MacLean's 2018 *Democracy in Chains: The Deep History of The Radical Right's Stealth Plan for America* (made all the more credible by Professor MacLean's eighty pages of densely packed notes and bibliography to document her historical findings). Ellis in his "now" section of "Our Gilded Age" makes it clear that "the last thing the thirty-nine signers of the Constitution wanted was for the Supreme Court to become supreme. . . . that status belonged to Congress," a *representative* body. But the "originalists" have fallen prey to fully financed campaigns and institutions to wrest control of government through judicial activism masked by verbal contortions as "originalism." Indeed, Ellis reminds us, on the contrary, "The seminal source for a 'Living Constitution' is none other than Jefferson himself" (154–155). Ellis's analysis of how the Supreme Court has abetted the emergence of our second Gilded Age and distorted true original intent on a number of crucial issues is worthy of any reader's close attention. (Mailer had predicted in *The Big Empty* that if Kerry lost to Bush, it would make little difference in restraining corporate hegemony, but Kerry's loss might nonetheless prove on many issues that the real "price we'll pay with the Supreme Court will prove too large," 83–84). Ellis might not convince those in ideological mind-lock, but those who come to him with a hint of open mind will at the very least be given pause. And if Ellis were to be widely read and discussed, his analysis might have the potential to alter how we perceive our behavior in the voting booth when regularly reconstituting our *representative* bodies in Congress.

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The third central topic Mailer addresses is American foreign policy. Those entangling alliances and imperial impulses that the Founders also debated. Mailer sees the imperial impulses as taking several forms: cultural invasions with commercial roots, military invasions, and political invasions, the latter instigated by the corporatization of international politics and emboldened by Christian fundamentalism. None of the three types are mutually exclusive, and they all arise from similar hubris. But as expected in a book entitled *Why Are We at War?* the military aspects of the latter two impulses toward imperialism get the sharper focus.

Our cultural invasions, first, “have this tendency to take over large parts of the economies of other countries,” Mailer writes. “Often we are the next thing to cultural barbarians. We don’t always pay attention to what we are trampling.” But what intensifies the anger against us is “how often we are successful in these commercial invasions” (24). His first example is his own experience of McDonald’s in Moscow and how Russian students were excited and proud when Mailer told them their Micky Ds were better than our own. But older Russians were upset by Moscow’s McDonald’s because we had a role in bankrupting the old Soviet Union, communism had betrayed them, and they felt culturally invaded by “our money-grubbing notions of food.” Still, it is our cultural invasion of Islam that is now (in 2003) more significant to us. Muslims feel endangered by our modern technology and corporate capitalism. Our culture, our Western values, seem to them to be eroding theirs. Although Mailer understands that fundamentalism and human nature can distort Islam as much as it distorts Christianity, he believes that we nonetheless blundered in without understanding that many Muslims feel devoted to and directly related to God. “Their Islamic culture is the most meaningful experience of their lives, and their culture is being infiltrated” (25–27).

In Part II of *Why Are We at War?*, which repeats the book’s title, Mailer tries to understand the “logic” of post-9/11 military invasions during the Bush administration’s first term. How we ended up going from Afghanistan to Iraq as the principal enemy. It is a complicated tale, as Mailer describes it, but the most conspicuous element is a lack of evidence for the originally announced purpose for invasion—Weapons of Mass Destruction. Mailer reminds us that while the world was reacting in horror of the Bush agenda for war, a *Time* magazine poll (European edition) revealed people’s feelings across Europe. Which country poses the greatest danger to the world in 2003? Of the 318,000 European votes cast, the U.S.A. came in first, at 84%. North Korea came at 7%, Iraq at 8% (35–43). When our “evidence” for war was revealed to be fraudulent, both Democrats and Republicans by a majority started to believe we could bring democracy to Iraq by invasion. An ancillary benefit might be the expansion of our Christian values into the region, even if our own acts for decades smacked less of Christ’s teachings than of piling up earthly wealth. The old isolationist conservatives weren’t with Bush, but the new conservatives, flag conservatives, and fundamentalists looked to our striving for world empire as the solution to our own moral dis-

solutions at home, Mailer argues. We had become, after all, a full-fledged empire, a planetary policeman, a hyperpower whose military expenditures were about to equal those of the next fifteen most powerful states combined. I am giving the mere outlines of Mailer's investigation of the topic, but any reader is welcome to examine it in detail for him or herself to assess its credibility (see 35–75).

By 2006, Mailer's dialogues with his son John in *The Big Empty* now had the benefit of some hindsight on how our adventures in the Middle East were turning out. Our "unholy urge to purvey democracy to all countries of the world was not working out." Nor was our empire-building, because "global capitalism does not speak of a free market but of a controlled globe." In the post-Cold War world of the 1990s, the political—and economic and military—"exceptionalists" felt the "need for America to become a Roman power in contrast to other nations who will serve as our hard-working Greeks. . . ." (41, 150). To a large extent George W. Bush was their man. (See esp. pages 71–77 for an extended analysis of Bush and his administration for some of the root causes of our twenty-first-century adventures in imperialism). George W. Bush had something to prove, in relation to his father, in relation to his own vacuous military service, in relation to his corporate and fundamentalist enablers. In one of several moments in both books of what we can now see as prescience, Mailer asks, "How clear will it be in the awareness of Middle America that Kerry was a combat hero and Bush was a National Guard flight suit? It will be interesting to see how the Republicans will look to tarnish Kerry's war record" (47). Mailer hoped that our failures to expand Pax Americana into the Middle East and elsewhere during and since the Cold War might make for a chastened view of our "exceptional" status and powers, might dampen our willingness to expend blood and treasure for the foreseeable future. Certainly, one element of the rise of Left and Right populism is populism's isolationist tendencies that could be bearing Mailer's hopes out, but as yet we are still enmeshed in (if struggling to end) decades of our miscalculations in the Middle East.

In his "Abroad" section of Chapter 4, Ellis considers the founding roots of our Americans' isolationist preferences. Preferences that should temper our opposing compulsion toward global empire-building. I would summarize it this way: Between them, George Washington and John Adams developed a theory of isolationism abroad and imperial expansionism at home. Adams wanted "commercial relations with all foreign nations but diplomatic

relations with none,” as Ellis puts it. Adams feared involvement with the convulsions and controversies of Europe, and Washington, agreeing, wanted the new republic to focus on expansion into the western frontier. Both wanted to avoid entanglements—and especially wars—abroad. Maintaining neutrality during the war between Great Britain and France in 1793 was the first example, despite our agreements with France in the Franco-American Treaty of 1778, a treaty resulting from France’s crucial help during our own revolution (192–193).

But how can democracy function as an imperial power? It can’t on a global level; expansion westward, however, would enhance the building of our own nation. That was Washington’s conclusion. The western domain and its natural resources were to be the economically depleted new nation’s post-revolution prize and the source of its independence. The prize also would provide a spacious welcome to European refugees escaping war, poverty, and the oppressions of monarchy. Immigration was desirable. Immigrants in the western territories would become citizens. Such would be Jefferson’s argument also for the Louisiana Purchase—a way to extend his agrarian ideals. Jefferson would be asked to chair the committee preparing a temporary government for the western territories, “where neither slavery nor hereditary titles would be permitted” (175–181).

Of course, human fallibility being what it is, political problems arose early and late: The conflicts over whether slavery could be expanded westward; the moral debates over “conquest theory” in the taking of Native American lands; the lurking dangers of European powers who had certain claims to the west. Washington and General Henry Knox struggled to maximize Native American rights. The Treaty of New York (1790) with the Creeks seemed to be a model moral and political breakthrough. (Ellis points out that Abigail Adams, who had been made an honorary Creek and given the name Mamma, looked over the treaty proceedings from the gallery of Federal Hall). But politics being politics, the terms broke down almost immediately when the Georgia legislature defied federal jurisdiction and allowed settlers to pour over the sanctioned border (185–191). And the coming generations of the nineteenth century would violate Native American rights more horrifically than the founding generation.

Ellis boldly takes on the contradictions of American freedom and slavery and of Native American conquest. These are complicated issues, and I recommend that readers turn to Ellis to understand the nuances and political

complexities, the conflicting human follies and nobilities at play. For our purposes, we might say that the horrors perpetrated by subsequent generations in the conquest of western territories over the next century were inexcusable, even if given the troubling history of human nature we might find them unsurprising. There were those Founders who fought for greater rights for slaves and native peoples; there were those who fought against them. There were those who were living contradictions of both positions.

But it is hard for us in the twenty-first century to remember that our nation's Founders (flawed human beings like ourselves) were emerging in their corner of the Western Enlightenment from a five-thousand-year *global history* of normalized warfare, conquest, captivity, enslavement, torture, and slaughter of innocents practiced across many racial, ethnic, tribal, and geopolitical lines. Founders such as the active abolitionist Dr. Benjamin Rush were of course exceptional but not alone in 1780s and 90s America.³ That the Founders as an assembly were able to do only so little in their moment to solve such an historical train of abuses of what we now call human rights—that their best instincts were crushed by the politics and compromise of their worst—we can hold against them. That they began the political processes and the debates that would expand human rights for future generations perhaps we can conditionally credit them. Some progress has been made, but it's not as if the generations that followed the Founders right into our own in the twenty-first century have resolved what feel like eternal problems of racism and greed. Let alone the problems of looming economic and environmental crises we are leaving for the generations who follow us. Nonetheless, we should learn from the Founders' skepticisms, built into their debates and founding documents, that global imperialism, the sort of American empire-building begun in the nineteenth century and accelerating since the Second World War, would place our own homeland security and sovereignty in danger.

Washington's "Farewell Address," as Ellis points out, is the key document here. The Jay Treaty (1796) had negotiated the removal of British troops (who were inciting Indian wars) from the frontier and paying off America's debts to Britain. But the political imbroglio that accompanied the treaty's passage shook Washington deeply. He now saw the enormous, baleful potential for demagoguery in domestic politics, especially over foreign policy, that could threaten the new republic. "The great rule of conduct for us in regard to foreign relations," Washington said in farewell, "is in extending our

commercial relations, to have them with as little political connection as possible . . . 'Tis our policy to steer clear of permanent Alliances with any portion of the foreign world" (199–201). Of course, that was then; this is now. But might one be forgiven for making the case that twenty-first-century "originalists" and "conservatives" are the last people who should be thumping our founding documents in support of conducting pre-emptive wars or invasions to transplant democracy or extend American empire abroad?

It is our global empire-building since the Cold War that Ellis examines in the final portion of his book, entitled, "At Peace with War," the "now" to the 18th-century "then." Like Mailer, Ellis views with jaundiced eye America's hegemonic role, the assumption that we can now create, in President George H. W. Bush's phrase in 1991 after the fall of the Soviet Union and the defeat of Saddam Hussein, "a new world order" that would remake the world in our image. The consequence has been an improvisational foreign policy rather than a comprehensive foreign strategy. That improvisational quality of the policy made us easier prey, so to speak, for demagogues. And after September 11, 2001, we found a new Evil Empire (to use Ronald Reagan's old 1983 formulation) to rationalize the expansion of defense and security budgets, executive powers, and foreign invasion. An all-voluntary military made it easier to sustain a "fully militarized foreign policy" (208–212, 215).⁴

Ellis points out that the founding generation left a legacy of American exceptionalism that means the opposite of what that term has come to mean. Jefferson believed, idealistically, that our unique democratic principles would be destined to be spread *by living example* throughout the world. In the next generation John Quincy Adams agreed we could become a role model, but he was clear in a Fourth of July speech that we shouldn't import our ideals and institutions by force: "America goes not abroad in search of monsters to destroy." On the contrary, the Founders looked to Tacitus on the Roman Empire and to Britain's colonial policies as examples of the cyclical demise of empires—chiefly by the over-extension of economic and military resources into vast foreign holdings. Ellis summarizes:

These voices from the past . . . constitute a chorus in sounding three clear notes. First, the United States has committed the predictable mistakes of a novice superpower most rooted in overconfidence bordering on arrogance; second, wars have become routinized because foreign policy has become militarized

at the same time as the middle class has been immunized from military service; and third, the creedal conviction that American values are transplantable to all regions of the world is highly suspect and likely to draw the United States into nation-building projects beyond its will or capacity to complete. (215–16)

Is it possible that thinking American citizens would have found a living dialogue between Mailer and Ellis on the publication of Ellis's book in 2018 of great interest? Mailer's death in 2007 closed that possibility of a final dialogue between a member of "the Greatest Generation" and an historian who came of age in the 1960s, one generation later. Both men have devoted much of their lives to writing about democracy in America. And as we had seemed to arrive at a state of national political crisis by 2018 when Ellis published his book, the dialogue between the two writers might have helped stimulate a hard look at where we've allowed ourselves to be at this moment in our national destiny. We'll have to settle, instead, for the charged political season of the 2020 presidential campaign. Maybe Mailer's and Ellis's published dialogues could have some small effect on the debate, but would anyone put money on it?

Is not a serious, unfrenzied citizens' dialogue on our democracy, nonetheless, the important thing in our historical moment? We would first have to struggle to put aside our ideological litmus tests and our political correctness on the left *and* the right. Mailer suggested this idea when he told his son John: "Political correctness is not a satisfying activity when you get down to it. People may just get tired of mouthing it all the time. It's a boring way to live and a shaky method for shoring up one's psyche" (*Big Easy*, 162). We would have to try to suspend whatever cherished dogmas or delusions we've allowed to close our minds while we ensconced ourselves in comforting ideological enclaves. We would have to give up our cartoons of Enlightenment founding figures as either nothing but bourgeois oppressors creating new forms of subjugation, or as nothing but divinely-inspired Paragons of Reason who created inflexible documents that are not intended to help us adapt to prodigious changes over centuries and epochs. We would have to get back to documented factual analysis and to the best science available. We would have to ask a lot more of ourselves than we have for a long time.

And we might have to acknowledge the Founders' courage in rebelling against the colonial system of capitalist empire. Their families, their for-

tunes, and their very lives were on the line. The Declaration of Independence is arguably the most treasonous document in the history of the British empire. Had the revolution failed, the Founders would have been lucky to be shot or hanged. As an example against future armed revolutionaries, they might have suffered the agonizing demise for “high treason” that John Thelwall, friend of Wordsworth and Coleridge, and other British radicals faced in the 1790s merely for “seditious” writings and speeches arguing for parliamentary and constitutional reform: they were to be taken to a place of execution to be hanged, cut down alive, their “privy parts” removed, disemboweled, and their bodies quartered. Their body parts could then be displayed or disposed of in any way at the King’s pleasure. Thelwall ultimately was acquitted by jury, but it is worth recalling in this context that during Thelwall’s trial the prosecution held up Thomas Paine’s writings (especially *The Rights of Man*) as the epitome of treasonous intent. And we might recall as well that both Founder Richard Stockton and General Hugh Mercer, seen as traitorous revolutionaries, were tortured on the battlefield without trial immediately upon being captured. Mailer said in *The Big Empty* that “courage is transcendence . . . we are obliged to go beyond ourselves, to transcend ourselves, if we wish to rise so high as courage itself.” When son John then asks Mailer if courage is a virtue, Mailer responds, “Absolutely a virtue—Make it *the* virtue” (144–145). If we are able to recognize the Founders’ courage, it might be a little easier for us to suppress our smug condescension toward them for their shortcomings and failures (for their imperfect humanity) and perhaps a little easier to learn from what wisdom they possessed in their time.

Mailer’s words in his two books have been conversational and informal. Ellis’s have been more measured, formal, and deeply sourced, if still styled for a general audience. But both men agree that there seems to be a conversation, an evidence-based dialogue, that we Americans have been avoiding, perhaps at our peril. And during any forthcoming American dialogue our raising of difficult, discomfiting questions would be more important to us at this point than answers, certainly more important than easy answers. As Founder Benjamin Rush put it, “Serious men ought not to flinch from dangerous questions” (*Rush*, 425). Might it still be possible for us to start at least by doing the hard work of framing essential questions? At the end of *The Big Empty*, Mailer puts it this way: “Let us be ready to argue it both ways. No authorities exist who have certain knowledge. . . . Often I believe we are here

to leave the world with better questions than the ones with which we came in. . . .” (218). These words valuing questions above answers—and valuing further questions to allow for improving our provisional answers—remind me of what Mailer wrote regarding his own anxieties in 1971 (during another period of national crisis) near the end of *Of A Fire on the Moon*.

If brooding over unanswered questions was the root of the mad . . . and sanity was the settling of dilemmas, then with how many questions could one live? He would answer that it was better to live with too many than with too few. Rave on, he would. He would rave on (458).

NOTES

1. Ellis’s chapter on “Immaculate Misconceptions” is a masterpiece of historical reasoning that demonstrates the corruptions that have impinged on the Supreme Court by special interests who use the mis-named “originalist” justices for their own purposes and against ideas embodied in the Framers’ founding documents and dialogues, see 151-170. See also Noah Feldman’s *The Three Lives of James Madison* (2017) for another look at Madison’s view, through a process of philosophical struggles of his own and with his peers, of a “living constitution” balancing federal sovereignty with certain rights of the states.
2. Norman Mailer, “Immodest Proposals,” *Playboy* (January 2004), 90–94, 198, 266, 268, 270, 272.
3. See Stephen Fried, *Rush: Revolution, Madness & the Visionary Doctor Who Became a Founding Father* (NY: Crown, 2018). Benjamin Franklin and John Dickinson, for example, joined with Rush in their early abolitionism. Rush not only fought for the emancipation of slaves, but for the formal education of African Americans, women, and immigrants; he was also instrumental with Jefferson in passage of Article VI of the Constitution furthering religious freedom in the new democracy. Rush also wrote the first book in America on mental illness and addiction, against the horrific incarceration and treatment of the mentally ill common at the time.
4. Andrew Bacevich, a former career military officer and professor emeritus at Boston University, has also written extensively about our militarization of foreign policy. See for example, *American Empire: The Realities and Consequences of U. S. Diplomacy* (Cambridge: Harvard, 2002) and in *Washington Rules: America’s Path to Permanent War* (NY: Henry Holt, 2010). Benjamin Rush perhaps foretold such skewed militarism in a democracy when in 1793 he wrote a satirical piece advocating a Peace-Office as counterpoise to the Department of War, recommending demilitarization and even gun control (see *Rush*, 343).

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