Agonistic Politics and the 'War on Terror'

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AGONISTIC POLITICS AND THE 'WAR ON TERROR'

This paper marks the beginning of a new research project for me that explores the relation between being human and 'the political.' I begin my analysis from the theoretical standpoint of political agonism, which argues for the creative potential of conflict in human political relations and its importance in the very definition of the realm of politics. I then turn my attention to consideration of the structure of opposition that defines what US President George W. Bush designated as the conflict with the 'axis of evil,' and the 'war on terror' it inaugurated. Reviewing various important policy documents and actions of the US military and government during the past twenty-five years, I suggest that the present conflict is organized in terms that are different from the familiar clash of 'good' versus 'evil.' Although it might seem as though the goal that the 'war on terror' seeks is the destruction of enemies, I argue that the pursuit and execution of the war seeks and depends upon the disappearance of the enemy. The final part of my paper offers an example of this in a philosophical analysis of the mysterious death of a US army colonel.

'[…] this crusade, this war on terrorism, is going to take a while.'

George W. Bush, September 16, 2001.

For the past ten or so years much of my research has been devoted to the study of various concerns that emerge out of the philosophy of Friedrich Nietzsche. A special interest of mine has been how his views of power are limited and defined by his reflections on contest, conflict and struggle. I have been particularly interested in what might be called 'constitutional conflicts' – struggles or moments of opposition that play a role in defining us as the people we are, including our senses of ourselves as distinct individuals, as members of particular cultures, or as part of particular political entities. As I began to apply and extend this research in contemporary philosophy, I became a critic (in both the positive and negative sense) of what some call 'agonistic pluralism,' which we can think of both in terms of an analytic framework for understanding the nature of modern democratic political relations, opportunities and challenges, and as an actual form of political organization that its adherents advocate. My project in this paper involves roughly sketching some of the features of this form of thinking about politics and then applying it to reflections on a particular instance of conflict, namely the so-called 'war on terrorism' – as it is engaged by the United States. This is more than an exercise in academic gymnastics to see whether and how the theory we study can be stretched to apply to this situation or that. For as I discovered in doing my research, the theoretical resources that are my primary concern of study and critique are precisely those that have informed US military and foreign policy for more than twenty years, which I see as now resulting in major changes in domestic policies and social, political and legal relations. What I see is the very unraveling, not just of liberal democracy, but 'the political' as we know it.

In what follows, I shall say a few words about the relation between theories of being human and the political. I shall then briefly explain what agonistic politics is and why some people think it is a helpful way to look at political relations. A sketch of some ways of being

opposed will serve as the initial basis of my assessment of the structure of opposition of the so-called 'axis of evil,' which also refers to several important policy documents and actions of the US military and government during the past twenty-five years. I suggest this shows that although it might seem as though the end (or goal) that the 'war on terror' seeks is the *destruction* of its enemies, the pursuit and execution of the war turns on the *disappearance* of the enemy, more specifically the disappearance of any possible real threat to national sovereignty. Translated back into a military context, however, this is highly problematic, since it is difficult enough to fight a war against an unseen enemy and impossible to do so when the enemy has disappeared. The final part of my paper offers just one example of where I see evidence of such disappearance and its disastrous consequences – it is a *philosophical* analysis of the mysterious death of a US army colonel whose story unfolds at the nexus of the various phenomena I endeavor to describe.

Theories of Being Human and the Political

Political philosophers and theorists endeavor to supply frameworks for resolving or at least negotiating disagreements, differences and conflicts that inevitably characterize human social and political existence. Theories of human nature – what human beings are, what motivates them, and what ends they seek – are implicitly if not always explicitly at the heart of such accounts.[1] How one thinks about human nature affects what one thinks about the kinds of institutions and organizations that are required to make common life possible. A familiar example of the great differences that can be found in such initial assumptions is provided in the modern period in the divergent philosophies of Rousseau and Hobbes. Rousseau, who thought that human beings are basically good and agreeable toward others, viewed political institutions as something of a necessary evil, whose purpose should be to preserve the natural liberty of human beings to coordinate the co-pursuit of freedom among parties that will inevitably have different ideas as to how to pursue it. The purpose of government is just this – letting people pursue freedom for themselves and to interfere as little as possible. Our great varieties of contemporary liberal theory spring from these general ideas even if they do not acknowledge Rousseau as their source. The contrast position comes to us from Hobbes, who famously contends that human life is 'nasty, brutish, and short.' In brief, Hobbes thought human beings are naturally inclined toward aggression, which results in hostility so that political power is necessary to regulate and referee inevitable conflict. Many of the objections to liberal theory share this basic view of human existence. Contemporary agonistic politics tends to adopt Hobbes' perspective as the starting point. There are varieties of agonistic political theories, and shortly I shall sketch one dominant view from which most others spring.

Political Agonism

'Agon' is the Greek word for contest. In the Greek context, it would be applied to struggles as well as competitions. The English word 'agony' is derived from this root. Modern conceptions of *agon* are greatly influenced by the historian Jacob Burckhardt, who (along with others) considered the significance of competition for the ancient Greeks in terms of how much of Greek public and cultural life revolved around or was organized specifically in terms of contests.[2] When applied to a modern political context, 'agon' tends to refer to the contests for political power and competing interests that define politics. Theorists of political agonism study and analyze the structures of opposition that characterize various forms of political relations, particularly those that are conceived as definitive of democracy, and some advocate

particular forms of robust contention among political participants as the route to achieving democracy more fully.[3]

Contemporary agonistic politics has both progressive and conservative adherents. It is worth briefly noting their differences. Radical democratic political theorists, some of whom affirm 'agonistic pluralism,' look to conflict for mechanisms and procedures for incorporating and accounting for difference and diversity in political contention.[4] Conservative agonistic political theorists emphasize conflict as the way in which we identify what is common and distinctive (what is really truly 'ours') in political associations. Concerns about sovereignty as essential to the very existence of the state are important to conservative agonistic political theorists, and they consider the capability and the right of a political entity to define the terms of its existence and contend with others as definitive of the political. While agonistic pluralists focus on engagement with opposition and difference as enhancing domestic relations and a route to resisting stubborn nationalism and parochialism, conservatives seek a theoretical framework that involves defining and strengthening national identity and the identification and defense of national interests in an international environment.

Agonistic pluralists think that agonistic politics positively addresses certain persistent problems facing all democracies, particularly those of late western modernity. Modern democracies are essentially organized around a commitment (in a variety of ways, of course) to the ideals of liberty (or freedom) and equality, and these serve as the basis for the legitimacy of popular sovereignty. But we might ask why these values should be held in such great esteem, or, to put it as Nietzsche might, *what is the value of these values, what is the source of these values*? Arguably, much of modern philosophy and many cultural and political conflicts that have defined the modern period have been about precisely this question: what is the ground or origin of our values? And, if the modernist project has in some sense been about how humans ground values themselves, then how can this happen?[5] What we are to do when these values compete; which trumps which, when, and why? Unless we can appeal to a divine order or conclusively reveal some natural law, then we must acknowledge that part of the activity of politics involves and to some extent *just is* arguing about these very foundations. In other words, contending democratic ideals is part of the way we achieve our political agency; such contention at least partially defines political participation.[6]

The Classical appropriation of the *agon* focuses on the significance of action in the public realm as the chief way in which a person realizes and exercises his or her political character. The *agon* provides an institutional framework that secures, defines and regulates legitimate engagement of and among fellow citizens.[7] 'Postmodern' or 'late modern' appropriations of the *agon* are found in radical democratic political theories, which tend to emphasize the performative possibilities that are available in an agonistic arena, and how those possibilities facilitate and provide an outlet for resistance to hegemonic and exclusionary political forces.[8] In other words, a polity with commitments to the significance of the *agon* allows for marginalized voices to find expression and to be recognized as legitimate contestants. The vision of the public good is not fixed in such an organization: it is contingent and always open to new possibilities.

Those who advocate agonistic pluralism think this is both *effective* and *healthy* for a political entity. It is effective because as it recognizes legitimate contention, it provides pathways and channels for such opposition to occur, and it provides clear mechanisms for reaching decisions. It is healthy because this potentially results in the perpetual revitalization of the political entity's fundamental commitments. Thus, agonistic pluralists oppose consensus strategies that minimize and mute opposition, and they were especially critical of political

strategies that were dominant in the US and the UK in the 1990s to forge 'middle way' coalitions, or 'triangulations' because such undermine full consent by limiting access for those who hold minority views. By increasing rather than minimizing *opportunities for* political conflict, agonistic pluralists believe, the body politic is able genuinely to confront and respond to significant differences and to channel contention to political outlets, thereby *potentially* minimizing violence and building a stronger community.[9]

It cannot be emphasized strongly enough that there is *no guarantee* that such positive outcomes will occur, but in this respect agonistic pluralism is no worse off that any of its rivals. The commitment to broadening opportunities for legitimate conflict has obvious dangers. And efforts to circumscribe the range of legitimate actions and modes of expression of dissent and opposition potentially curtail the nature of the views that can be expressed. This terribly difficult tension has been at the crux of my critique of agonistic pluralism (Acampora, 2003). There are no easy answers or solutions. But since this problem of determining just how far the range of acceptable forms of contention can be *expanded* is not my main concern in this paper, I shall simply acknowledge it and move on. My concern here is not so much about the precise contours or limitations of agonistic political interaction but rather its *disappearance* altogether.

Ways of Being Opposed

I now want to turn attention to consideration of some of the ways in which it is possible to be opposed (setting aside for the moment limitations and qualifications of all forms of political contention that are the primary concerns of agonistic pluralists), just so we can get a rough sense of the different ways in which one can be an enemy and the difference that makes for what one ought to do in the face of opposition.[10]

Nietzsche famously distinguishes some general ways of being opposed in his *On the Genealogy of Morality*, and I find this a helpful starting point:
1. There is the good/bad spectrum: in this evaluative scheme those who are considered 'good' regard those who are unlike them as different, 'bad.' (Necessarily, I am leaving a good deal out of Nietzsche's story, which is not my own.)
2. There is also a good/evil spectrum: in this evaluative scheme, those who are 'good' are categorically opposed to those who are 'evil.'

There are some things to notice about these two different scales. While the first regards its opposition as having an *inferior* constitution of some sort, the second sees moral *defect* in the opponent. The 'bad' are largely to be avoided, dismissed or possibly pitied on scale 1. On scale 2, the 'evil' are a threat to the good's very existence and must be eliminated (either through conversion or defeat). I am not suggesting at this point that either of these views is necessarily inherently superior: while the danger of the second view should be obvious (it provides a justificatory basis for annihilating one's opposition), the threats of the first should also be recognized (it can be used for discounting the humanity of the opponent, for abusing opposition, or engaging in inhumane treatment).

In a political context, we can see that an axis of good and evil allows no room for negotiation, no possibility for compromise, no hope for progress toward a reconciliation. There is also little room for any 'real' engagement with an evil enemy. By that I mean that in designating oneself as good and one's opposition as evil, one endeavors to defeat the enemy without having to make the case for the merits of one's own position and without necessarily having to offer

any evidence that would serve to ground one's claim to superiority. The language of 'evil' in political discourse seeks elimination of opposition rather than legitimation. A so-called 'axis of evil' indicates the impossibility of any possible limit to the forces that would call themselves good – everything is permitted. It knows only operations of 'Infinite Justice' (the first name of the military actions that eventuated in the wars in Afghanistan) in which 'Freedom' is purportedly the highest ideal (the code name is now 'Operation Enduring Freedom'). It asserts that nothing can legitimately make a claim on it; it will refuse to recognize any claims to limiting it. And with that, we have the demolition of any possible basis for community or meaningful, significant relations to others.

The Structure of Opposition of 'The Axis of Evil'

When US President George W. Bush delivered his speech on the 'war on terrorism' following the September 11, 2001, attacks in New York City and Washington, DC, he associated terrorism with will to power, stating :

> We are not deceived by their pretenses to piety. We have seen their kind before. They are the heirs of all the murderous ideologies of the 20th century. By sacrificing human life to serve their radical visions – by abandoning every value except the will to power – they follow in the path of fascism, and Nazism, and totalitarianism. And they will follow that path all the way, to where it ends: in history's unmarked grave of discarded lies. (Bush, 2001).[11]

Here, 'will to power' is used as a term for desiring power and valuing it above everything else, including human life. To emphasize how bad the unnamed enemy must be, Bush's speechwriter alludes to historical admirers of Nietzsche, including Hitler. This speech is recognized by many as a defining moment in the US initiation of its 'war on terror,' which it engaged globally and coerced others into joining. It was the US call to battle that was supposed to identify the enemy and distinguish it/them as evil. I wish to consider the nature of this opposition in light of my remarks above. What kind of opposition informs the basis of the war on terror – who are the competing parties, and what is the end and the ideal that it embodies?

To pursue answers to these questions, I considered a variety of texts. The first is widely recognized (by both supporters and detractors) as the blueprint for Bush foreign policy and the exercise of his powers as 'commander in chief.' Written prior to September 2001, and even prior to the inauguration of George W. Bush, on the eve of the election, a group organized under the name of The Project for the New American Century (also known as PNAC) published a report titled 'Rebuilding America's defenses: strategy, forces and resources for a new century.' Its roots are in a 1992 document titled 'Defense policy guidance,' issued by Dick Cheney, who was then secretary of defense, and authored by Paul Wolfowitz, who was then the Pentagon's under-secretary for policy. Major players in the Bush II administration, the organization of the war efforts, eventual leaders in Afghanistan, and eventual military and government leaders who rose to national and international prominence only after September 2001, are either signatories to the report or founding members of PNAC.[12] These include Cheney, Wolfowitz (former deputy secretary of defense under Rumsfeld (2001–2005) and then president of the World Bank), and 'Scooter' Libby (former chief of staff to the vice-president of the United States, Dick Cheney, and assistant to the vice-president for national security affairs, who resigned following indictment for perjury and obstruction of justice in 2005).

The report emphasizes the changing nature of the United States' definition of itself as combatant and the struggles in which it is involved. Its foremost concern is stated on the first page: 'At present the United States faces no global rival. America's grand strategy should aim to preserve and extend this advantageous position as far into the future as possible' (PNAC, 2000, p. i). What is a superpower without a worthy opponent supposed to do? The psychology of this phenomenon has been observed often. Ordinarily it is assumed that a lonely superpower will seek out another 'worthy enemy' – the idea is that the existence of superpowers, their very sense of themselves *as a superpower* is relational, that they define themselves in terms of their superiority to their opponents. Lacking rivals, lonely superpowers are thought to go out and seek new opponents when rivals disappear. But Cheney and Wolfowitz, first at the Pentagon and the department of defense, then later through PNAC, and yet later in the Bush II administration, had another idea.

The PNAC manifesto criticizes the Clinton administration for squandering the 'peace dividend' following the end of the Cold War, acting, 'Like a boxer between championship bouts, [who thinks he can] afford to relax and live the good life, certain that there would be time to shape up for the next big challenge' (PNAC, 2000, p. 2). Alternatively, they argue, the US should aggressively pursue global peace defined on American terms ('Pax Americana'): 'to preserve an international security environment conducive to American interests and ideals' (PNAC, 2000, p. 2). Whereas previously the US sought to *limit* and *deter the expansion* of political rivals (e.g. the former Soviet Union), it should now pursue a different global relationship: 'to secure and expand the "zones of democratic peace;" to deter the rise of a new great-power competitor; defend key regions of Europe, East Asia and the Middle East; and to preserve American preeminence through the coming transformation of war made possible by new technologies' (PNAC, 2000, pp. 2–3). In other words, the defining conflict of American international relations is cast as a shift from engaging and containing opponents to *ensuring there cannot possibly be any opponents*.

The PNAC strategy for the prevention of such opposition includes domination of terms of engagement through the expansion of what the US determines as the appropriate 'ideals' and forms of political association and expansion of its form of democracy. This includes, according to the PNAC blueprint, 'control [of] the new "international commons" of space and "cyberspace"' (PNAC, 2000, p. v). 'As the world's sole superpower [it is] the final guarantor of security, democratic freedoms and individual political rights' (PNAC, 2000, p. 4).

The political context of the 'war on terror' – authorizing it, funding it, drumming up or coercing the support of allies for it, etc. – draws on a logic of opposition that is familiar in the context of the wars of the twentieth century, a form of moralized opposition identified earlier in terms of good and evil. But it is unclear to me whether, given the quest identified above, the grand moral battle is what is being sought in the 'war on terror.' The hypermoralization evident in the rhetoric of the war – as conveyed in the 2001 'axis of evil' speech – suggests that it is, indeed, a clear and extreme variety of it. It appears to divide the world not in terms of worthy and unworthy opponents but rather in terms of friends (those who are 'with us,' that is those who will do our bidding and nothing less) and *evil* enemies who must be destroyed, extinguished. The axis of evaluation, the aim of the conflict in terms of the destruction of the opponent, and the mode of action within the contest – namely, violence – are clearly the terms of moralized conflict associated with the good/evil axis.

But the objectives articulated and the rationale for action lurking in the PNAC document – in combination with domestic developments (e.g. passage and renewal of the US Patriot Act, which arguably seeks out an 'enemy' within; suspension of the Constitutionally-defined

relation of governmental powers through the use of 'emergency powers' and 'executive signing statements')[13] and international policies and military actions (e.g. development and application of the so-called 'Bush Doctrine,' which already appears in the 1992 defense department report mentioned above) – lead me to hesitate before the conclusion that this is just another instance of that same dynamic. I wish to pursue what I see as the logic or dynamic of this form of opposition, which is essentially a project to ensure there can *be* no opposition.[14] And these are very different logics of opposition – one seeks to destroy its opposition; the other seeks to destroy *all* opposition, to put an end to opposition itself. And these yield different ways of acting –the one pursues actions against a specific target; the other must keep its field of battle open and the definition of its opponent *necessarily vague and shifting* because it seeks the elimination of all possible opponents.[15] I think there is evidence of the latter both in the rhetorical presentation of the war, as evident in public statements by government and military officials, and in the military actions, which have dire consequences for the physical safety and well-being of people around the world, since the realm of conflict is truly worldwide but most especially throughout the Middle East, Asia and Africa. If viable forms of political contest and conflict are essential to the very foundation of the realm of political association, as the agonistic political theorists of all stripes argue, then the end of political contestation, which I claim the 'war on terror' seeks, is also the end of the political itself (and thus the end of the possibility of resolving differences, perhaps *humanely*, through political means and institutions).[16] That the 'war on terror' is truly a 'mission impossible' is suggested in the story of a warrior who found it impossible to exist as such, indeed, impossible to exist *at all*, in such conditions. His experience illustrates what Carl Schmitt decries as 'sinister or crazy' (Schmitt, 1996, p. 48) in war; this one in particular.[17] The peculiar nature of the conflict as I have identified it above, its vague and indeterminate borders and its unclear and imprecise formulation of its objectives includes a campaign to distort the appearance of the enemy, to render it elusive and at the same time omnipresent. This has the effect of significantly undermining trust, which is vital not only for the maintenance of war and the continual commitment to its objectives but also to human society more generally.

A Warrior's Story

On June 5, 2005, Colonel Ted Westhusing was found dead with a gunshot wound to the head in his quarters at Camp Dublin in Baghdad. Ted was my classmate in graduate school. He spoke Italian and Russian, read classical Greek. He wrote his dissertation on the concept of excellence, *arête*, particularly in the context of studying virtue in a military context. He had three children and was an academy professor at West Point. At the time of his death, he was the highest-ranking officer to die in Iraq. Ted volunteered to go to Iraq, and he was one month shy of completing his tour and returning home when he allegedly killed himself. In the pictures of him in Iraq that are posted on the Internet, he is pale, somewhat thin. But in my memory he is young, handsome and brown.

As a graduate student, Ted was clearly different from the rest of us. We would sit around eating and drinking too much, admittedly lazy, complaining about how difficult our lives were, given how little the faculty took notice of us – all quite typical activities for graduate students. No one else was married; none of us had children. We were so free of responsibility and so oblivious to that fact. Ted, by contrast, was the most disciplined person I had ever encountered. He was concerned that graduate life – that *excessive* reading, thinking, and writing (setting aside the drinking and eating parts) – would detract from his training. I would often pass him as I was foolishly driving the 1.5-mile route from my apartment to campus. He would be running – fast – with a large, laden pack on his back.

In Iraq, Ted worked for the Multi-National Security Transition Command Iraq, reporting to then Lieutenant General David Petraeus and Major General Joseph Fil. Petraeus was subsequently promoted to a four-star general and was confirmed by the Senate in 2007 as the commanding general for all US troops in Iraq and the multi-national forces in Iraq; most recently he assumed the post of commander of CENTCOM, responsible for the command of all operations in the Middle East.[18] Fil subsequently became the commanding general for the multi-national division in Baghdad and the 1st Cavalry; he was later promoted to the rank of lieutenant general and now serves as commander of the 8th US Army, headquartered in Korea.[19] Ted was tasked with overseeing counter-terrorism and insurgency training for the Iraqi police troops. He had to supervise and work closely with US-hired contractors, and eventually he came to believe there was widespread corruption and human rights abuse in their practices, and that his superiors – presumably Petraeus and Fil – knew it.[20]

Ted published four articles in the *Journal of Military Ethics* (one posthumously). In professional academic philosophy, his work would be classified as applied ethics. Arguably, much of what passes for philosophy in this vein is largely calculation of or rumination about various imagined practical possibilities, with various philosophical theories supplying the formulas for calculating and justifying imagined outcomes. Ted's work is different. He does not simply seek to justify a specific outcome. Instead, he is primarily interested in the heart of ethics, in fundamental principles of moral goodness and the value of human life – ideas he draws from ancient classical sources as well as religious philosophy – and he allows those to supply guidance for specific problems. Moreover, he uses his analyses of the problems themselves to reflect back upon and add depth to the broader questions of virtue and justice that are his primary interest.

So, for example, in writing about targeting strategy, Ted begins by emphasizing that the 'offices of the soldier, sailor, airman, or marine […] arise from the creation of conventional social offices' to protect the citizenry. But 'our status as human beings […] is ontologically prior to any social position one may occupy [and this] generates moral principles to which we claim we ought to adhere' (Westhusing, 2002, p. 130). Ted argues that 'if the office of soldier arises from the moral obligation to protect innocents, it is contradictory for the soldier to intentionally harm innocents in order to protect some other innocents' (2002, p. 131). In his analysis of the rules of engagement (ROE), Ted attempts to challenge a common argument in Just War Theory that the justice of war (*Jus ad Bellum*) is logically distinct from justice in war (*Jus in Bello*). He underscores what he calls the 'ethical divide that [in 2002 when he published the article] exist[ed] between the coalition's war effort which disdains the intentional targeting of innocents, and the terrorists, who do not hesitate to slaughter directly thousands of innocents' (2002, pp. 133–4). To maintain this distinction between ourselves from our enemies, Ted claims, the 'war on terror requires for its success that we separate ourselves ethically from those whom we fight' (2002, p. 134). The rules of engagement he proposes would do just that.

Ted emphasizes similar concerns in his other articles, arguing that 'peace and counter terrorism operations require an explicit acknowledgement of both the commanders' moral responsibility for force protection and the military members' moral justification to defend themselves fully' (2003, p. 1). He wrote an extended analysis of military honor ('A beguiling military virtue: honor'), which draws on the philosophy of Hume (2003). Ted's concern is to examine real-life examples, mindful of their relation to 'common life.' His conception of honor and excellence in the context of military life, in the context of being 'an artful warrior' (as he once described Tommy Franks, the army general responsible for Central Command at the time of the invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq), is not something that individuals strike

out on their own to achieve. In his article 'Equality within military organizations' (2006), Ted emphasizes the importance of trust and cooperation in hierarchical fighting units and how these are essential for 'an atmosphere of excellence for the whole.' A dominant theme in his work is moral consistency, particularly in the peculiar contexts that I have sketched here – cases in which the military mission is supposed to be one of 'peace-keeping' and in which the enemy is not clearly defined (or, at least not easily identifiable).

I have not described Ted's philosophical writings to lionize him or squarely set him on the side of moral goodness or purity. I am not even suggesting that there is such a thing as a just war. Rather, I am trying to sketch the basis of Ted's philosophical beliefs and how these informed his life, not only his moral sensibility (which was quite strong in some respects), but also his basic understanding of the exceptional circumstance of war, its limitations and attendant responsibilities.

After some widespread speculation about whether Ted's death might be murder, the army determined it a suicide. An army psychologist, evaluating the case ex post facto, concluded that Ted's sense of his mission and the role of the contractors was 'surprisingly limited. He could not shift his mind-set from the military notion of completing a mission irrespective of cost, nor could he change his belief that doing the right thing because it was the right thing to do should be the sole motivator for businesses' (Bryce, 2007).[21] The psychologist obviously had not read Ted's published philosophical writings, for he quite explicitly would deny that a military mission should *ever* be completed 'irrespective of cost.' Robert Bryce, who combed through nearly 200 pages of documents on the case, which he obtained through the Freedom of Information Act, writing for *The Texas Observer*, claims of Ted's story that, 'It shows how one man's life, and the fervent beliefs that defined it, were crushed by the corruption and deceit that he saw around him' (Bryce, 2007). I am dissatisfied with this conclusion as well.

There is something dangerous in letting the cause of Ted's death be summed up as his stridently standing by unrealistic and unreasonable moral ideals. On the one hand, it makes him appear remarkably naïve – even the staunchest defenders of the war will grant that the protection of US economic interests and those of its allies plays a role in the political decisions that initiated the war and that govern its on-going execution (we did, after all take great care to protect oil wells when we embarked on 'shock and awe missions') – and on the other hand, the judgment that Ted opted out of life because he was unable to stomach or be compromised by the corruption that he found in Iraq makes him appear rather callous, shirking his responsibility to his family. He was a husband, a father of three young children. By all accounts he was a devoted and loving family man. Why could he not return home to them? He only had to make it for one more month. Deep down, was he really so selfish? In the months prior to his suicide, he had told his wife Michelle that he would be leaving the military upon his return. Much of Ted's life was organized around serving as a role model. Was it that he could not stand failure in this regard? Was it that he could not bear the judgment of his peers and students?

After reading Ted's published academic articles, reports by his family and colleagues, and his suicide note, I cannot be satisfied with any conclusion offered thus far. Surely, there are multiple factors that contributed to the decision that he reached on that day in June 2005, and I do not presume to be able to disentangle them or to claim that I have discovered the root cause of it all – for all I know something went horribly wrong with his serotonin uptake and there is nothing more to it than that. But, I do not think that Ted simply died for his principles. Or, to put it perhaps more precisely, *what it would mean* for him to have died for his principles is more complicated than might appear (or than what we are comfortable having

it appear). It is not just that he was a good man destroyed by a very bad (perhaps 'evil') war. Ted no longer fit what the world of war had become. He was 'born to be a warrior,' as he described himself in his dissertation, and he had lost the very conditions for his existence. He had no other way to navigate the world that he confronted – it had become, as Schmitt described the disappearance of the enemy, 'dizzying,' 'crazy.'

A postscript to Ted's suicide note reads: 'Life needs trust. Trust is no more for me here in Iraq.' Both the army psychologist and Bryce underscore the fact that Ted felt dishonored by interaction and involvement with the contractors he believed to be corrupt. This view is supported by reports of conversations he had with his commanding officers and others in his own command, and a line in his suicide note that reads, 'I am sullied no more.' Certainly his sense of dishonor must have been great, particularly considering the personal importance of his ethical views. But the lack of trust he experienced was clearly immense, as indicated in what are truly his last words. Trust, in Ted's mind, was essential for the warrior. A warrior needs to be able to trust in the legitimacy of his mission. He needs to be able to trust his comrades and fellow soldiers that they would risk their own lives to protect his, just as he agrees to do the same. He needs to be able to trust his commanding officers, that they will execute the mission mindful of the responsibilities for justice in war and that they will protect and not unnecessarily jeopardize the lives of those in their command.

All of this seems to have been missing from Ted's experience in Iraq. It was not just that he found the situation dishonorable. The absence of the structures that would have provided this trust meant that he was not even sure whose side he was on, what it was that he was fighting for, or even who it was he was there to protect. One day his trainees could be reporting for duty to protect their fellow citizens, the next day they could be driving a car bomb into a crowded market. Any child on the street is potentially carrying explosives.[22] The mission itself seemed to shift constantly, always eluding his grasp even though he bore great responsibility for it; the entire mission was ill-defined.

And the priorities of this conflict are somehow different (not just because of the business interests). Ted was part of a mission fighting an enemy who is virtually unseen – an enemy literally *disappeared*, and yet it can be virtually everyone, anywhere. 'Dizzying' seems to put it mildly. Because of this altered logic of opposition, Ted lacked a compass, some understanding of what he could expect and what he was supposed to do. I think it is possible that he caught a glimpse of this. I think it is possible that he could see what others could not. And what he saw was not just the interests of business in the work of the contractors. What Ted potentially recognized undermined the conditions of his existence, and this sheds somewhat different light on the last line of the main text of his suicide note: 'You are not what you think you are and I know it' (Bryce, 2007).

Beyond my hunches, there is concrete evidence that a disordered logic is operating in this military engagement, one that disrupts the definition of the roles, responsibilities and expectations necessary for defining a mission and executing it well. Evidence can be found in a document written after Ted's death by his commanding officer David Petraeus and a host of contributing editors.[23] Shortly after Ted's death, Petraeus was brought back to the US from the war for the purpose of overseeing training at the army's colleges and schools and revising the *Army Field Manual FM 3-24: Counterinsurgency* (AFM).[24] It was the first major revision to that document in more than twenty years. The primary purpose of the AFM is spelling out the rules of engagement, precisely what Ted thought provided the essential guidance and moral organization for the *jus in bello*, justice in war, and what prospectively made it possible to reconcile the different spheres of justice that Just War Theory tends to distinguish. Late in

2006, the *Boston Globe* ran a story on the new manual. They interviewed Petraeus and obtained a penultimate draft of the 240-page document (Sennott, 2006). Petraeus underscores the paradoxical nature of COIN (counter-insurgency warfare), and these 'paradoxes' are reflected in the drafts for the very first chapter, which includes headings such as: 'The More You Protect Your Force, the Less Secure You Are,' and 'Sometimes Doing Nothing Is the Best Reaction.' If these were simply ruminations on war by an experienced general, the presence of 'paradox' might not be especially noteworthy. However, the aim of the *Army Field Manual* is to provide *clear and specific direction* for the rules of engagement, the command structure, and the objectives of the mission. It is intended, quite literally, to put everyone on the same page, to make things as clear as possible, since life on the battlefield is obviously characterized by many distractions. That offering any clear guidance is impossible in this engagement is about the only thing clarified in the manual. I think these revisions to the *Army Field Manual* are somewhat astonishing in their context. What is being clarified? How is a soldier, a warrior, supposed to understand his mission and what he must do in order to do it well? Perhaps this is the nature of war generally, but there is clearly something remarkable in this public recognition of such.

Excellence needs to be manifest; it is not something one merely possesses. Ted embodied this quite literally. His readiness for war was a matter of spiritual, moral and physical expression. Sure, his running to school with all of those books had an efficient component to it – he could get to school and work out at the same time. But it was more than that. Ted was also displaying his excellence – not *showing off* but rather *showing that*. The first four or five times I passed him on the road toward school, I stopped to pick him up. He thanked me and waved me on. He was not showing off for me, but he was showing me – and the rest of the world – what it meant to be in top physical form. The backpack never seemed less full, always crammed to the point of straining at the seams.

As a wife and a mother, I found myself short of breath when I learned the news of Ted's death and learned that his suicide letter was not addressed to his family but rather to his commanding officers, specifically Fil and Petraeus, but also the commanding structure more generally. There is one short sentence that *refers* to his family, and another brief sentence that more directly addresses them. Even though I had not seen him since he left my *alma mater*, Emory University, with his MA degree in 1992 (he returned years later for his PhD), there is one thing about which I am certain: Ted had uncompromising loyalty. He would never, ever recklessly abandon his family. I could not imagine that anything could cause that loyalty to erode. It was not just that he did not *want to live* in the world he found, although there was plenty that had him worried; rather it was that he concluded that he simply could not exist *as warrior*, he had no chance of expressing the military excellence that guided his life and defined his being. What the world of war had become did not include Ted; he simply *could not exist* in this political reality.

This brings me back to the question that initiated this part of my discussion – who and what are the constituents of this political reality? Are we really living in a time in which we successfully define ourselves with a sense of mission in relation to our enemies? The rhetoric of the war on terror – what we are asked to endorse and to accept as justifiable in this exceptional circumstance – has the appearance of the logic of opposition that is familiar to us – a titanic clash of good and evil. But I cannot help but feel like there is something of a bait and switch happening here. Things are not as they appear – the sense of *that* is clear. Ted's story illustrates this, too. And the possibilities of sorting out those appearances, of distinguishing friends from enemies, seem quite remote, seemingly intentionally so. This situation is politically advantageous for those who appear to resent the fact that they depend

(at least to some extent) on our consent to exercise their will. They urge us to be vigilant – 'If you see something, say something,' New York City subway riders are told. If nothing appears, all the better.

[1]A good discussion of the relation between theories of human nature and political theory is found in Berlin, 1979.

[2]The *locus classicus* for Burckhardt's thesis is Burckhardt, 1998, *passim*, especially 'The Agonal Age.' There is a vast literature on the degree to which ancient Greeks organized themselves in terms of contests above and beyond the Olympic Games, extending to virtually all forms of social and political existence, including the emergence of democracy. Supporting evidence and elaboration can be found in sociology, anthropology, philology, philosophy and psychology. I survey this work in my forthcoming *Contesting Nietzsche*.

[3]This is Hatab's strategy for arguing that a *Nietzschean* defense of democracy is possible even though Nietzsche himself is no democrat (Hatab, 1995). Although I am sympathetic to attempts to apply Nietzsche's critique of democracy in order to make democracy more robust, I do not think one can articulate a genuinely *Nietzschean* democratic political theory. Nevertheless, I find Hatab's work admirable and discuss it in Acampora, 2003.

[4]See Mouffe, 1999; Laclau and Mouffe, 1985; Connolly, 1995, 2002, 2005; Brown, 1995, 2000.   Of course, there are others who write about agonistic politics or about political agonism in various contexts, including, for example, Seyla Benhabib.

[5]An elaborate account of this problem is found in Pippin, 1991.

[6]We can see these ideas reflected in rather different ways in the views of modern liberal theorists such as Mill, discourse ethics theorists such as Habermas, and modern classical theorists such as Arendt.

[7]For examples, see Arendt, 1958, 1978 and 1990.

[8]For examples, see Connolly, 1995, 2002 and 2005.

[9]But, there are problems with how even the self-described 'radical democratic political theorists' limit access to the *agon* as they are critical of the constraints on legitimate political participation that are entailed by the views of Rawls and Habermas, for example. In particular, how Connolly (1995 and 2002) and Mouffe (1999), for example, limit participation to those who affirm 'agonistic respect' means that many would be ineligible to contend in the public sphere. For my published critique of the agonistic pluralist project and more on what Nietzsche's philosophy contributes to this area, see Acampora, 2003.

[10]Important discussions of different ways of being an 'enemy' are found in Schmitt, 1996; Buck-Morss, 2002; Mouffe, 1999; and Connolly, 1995, 2002 and 2005.

[11]At the time it was accessed, the transcript posted on the website of the White House included the following at the end of the quoted material: '(Applause)'.

[12]http://www.newamericancentury.org/statementofprinciples.htm

[13]There are various analyses of the history of the use of presidential signing statements and Bush's in particular. For a general and broad analysis, see Agamben, 2004.

[14]Ultimately, as I expand on this project, I shall consider whether this is something distinctive about the 'war on terror' or whether this peculiar opposition to all possible opposition is also characteristic of war more generally; I suspect that it is not.

[15]The public lecture I gave whilst a fellow at the IAS included some elaboration of Schmitt's theory of the significance of 'the enemy' for sustaining the political. In the elaboration and extension of this project that I expect to do in the future, I shall include analysis of Schmitt's view that the friend/enemy relation is definitive of the political and the various ways in which this can be undermined. Schmitt argues that the good/evil opposition with which I am contrasting the dynamic of the 'war on terror' itself undermines the realm of politics (because it is essentially moral; for Schmitt what makes the political possible is a de-personalization of the 'enemy'). See Schmitt, 1985 and 1996.

[16]The grand argument here – that we are witnessing in the 'war on terror' not only remarkable violence and destruction of human life, but also the end of the realm of politics more generally – obviously requires more support than what this intentionally provocative short paper can provide. My time at the IAS has been spent initiating this very line of argument, which is an entirely new area of research for me. An important part of the larger argument (among many other pieces now missing) will be to show how war and the sort of relations among enemies in war are and are not related to the forms of political contest that are discussed and described by the agonistic political theorists mentioned above, that is, how such a dynamic is included in what I have described as 'agonistic politics.' A crucial piece of that account lies in Schmitt's views.

[17]While I think there is something quite distinctive and different about the 'war on terror' in terms of its objectives and thus its geographic domain and constituency, it might very well be that case that the 'sinister' and 'crazy' dimensions of this war are shared by all wars. This is one of the dimensions that will be pursued as I continue my research.

[18]Petraeus assumed his new post on October 31, 2008.

[19]http://www.defenselink.mil/transcripts/transcript.aspx?transcriptid=3891; http://www.army.mil/-images/2008/07/28/20025/   (both accessed on November 10, 2008).

[20]For coverage in the press, see: http://www.texasobserver.org/article.php?aid=2682.

[21]The documents that Bryce obtained in response to his filing on the basis of the Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) are now posted on Bryce's website: http://www.robertbryce.com/westhusing.

[22]The revision to the *Army Field Manual FM 3-24*, discussed below, reflects the disorienting notion that children are even more dangerous than women in the counter-terrorism conflict: 'Co-opting neutral or friendly women through targeted social and economic programs builds networks of enlightened self-interest that eventually undermine insurgents. Conversely, be cautious about allowing Soldiers and Marines to fraternize with local children. [...] Homesick troops want to drop their guard with kids. But insurgents are watching. [...] They may either harm the children as punishment or use them as agents. It requires discipline to keep the children at arm's length while maintaining the empathy needed to win local support.' Army, 2006, p. A-6.

[23]Extensive analysis of this document (and an account of its creation) is found in Anderson, 2008. My residence at the IAS in Durham was particularly fortuitous, since it led me to Anderson, faculty member in the Durham University Geography Department, and his fascinating work. I am most grateful to Anderson for sharing his work in progress with me.

[24]The manual is available for free download through the website of the 'Federation of American Scientists,' an entity established by scientists responsible for the Manhattan Project, which developed the first US atomic bombs (http://fas.org/about/index.html). It maintains archives of difficult to access documents and reports as part of its 'Government Secrecy Project' (http://www.fas.org/irp/doddir/army/fm3-24.pdf). The report proved to be so widely anticipated and so popular that it was published for sale in commercial outlets by the University of Chicago Press in 2007.

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