

Yankees and Cowboys: A Perspective on the Dallas- Watergate Decade

The assassination of John Kennedy and the downfall of Richard Nixon have both been viewed as isolated moral disasters for American democracy: Kennedy's murder as a demonstration of our continuing national inability or unwillingness to cope with violence; Nixon's downfall as a demonstration of the failure of our democratic institutions to overcome the abuses of secret intelligence and electronic surveillance at the seat of national power.

But these two events represent neither isolated disasters nor a generalized failure of American institutions but something almost beyond the ability of ordinary people even to see, much less control. The two events — Dallas and Watergate — are actually concrete links in a chain of related

and ominous events passing through the entire decade in which they occurred and beyond. And this chain of events itself represents only the violent eruptions of a deeper struggle of rival power elites identified here as Yankees and Cowboys.¹

This book proposes to show that Dallas and Watergate are intrinsically linked conspiracies in a hidden drama of coup and counter-coup which represents the life of an inner oligarchic power sphere, and "invisible government," capable of any act in the pursuit of its objectives, that sets itself above the law and beyond the moral rule: a clandestine American state, perhaps an embryonic police state.

We see the expressions and symptoms of clandestine America in a dozen places now — the FBI's COINTELPRO scheme, the CIA's Operation Chaos, the Pentagon's Operation Garden Plot, the large-scale and generally successful attempts to destroy legitimate and essential dissent in which all the intelligence agencies participated, a campaign whose full scope and fury are still not revealed. We see it in the ruthlessness and indifference to world, as well as national, opinion with which the CIA contracted its skills out to ITT to destroy democracy's last little chance in Chile.

We see it as well, as this book argues, in the crime and cover-up of Dealey Plaza, the crime and cover-up of Watergate.

How could the clandestine state have stricken us so profoundly? How could we — as we might have fancied, "of all people" — have given way with so little resistance, in fact with so little evident understanding of what was happening? What accounts for the way the various organs of state force — defense and security alike — became so divided against each other? CIA-Intelligence against CIA-Operations, the CIA, the Pentagon, the FBI, and the presidency at one time or another against each other — what is this internal conflict all about? Why should the country's premier political coalition, formed after Reconstruction and reformed by Franklin Roosevelt, have begun to destabilize so badly in the 1960s and 1970s?

The intensification of clandestine, illicit methods against racial and antiwar dissent as a “threat” to the (secret) state precisely coincided with the intensified use of such methods in conflicts for power and hegemony taking place within the secret state, against a background of declining consensus.

The Dallas-to-Watergate outburst is fundamentally attributable to the breakdown taking place within the incumbent national coalition, the coalition of the Greater Northeastern powers with the Greater Southwestern powers, the post-Civil War, post-Reconstruction coalition, the coalition of the New Deal, of Yankees and Cowboys.

This is the theme, at bottom, of the entire narration to follow. The agony of the Yankees and the Cowboys, the “cause” of their divergence in the later Cold War period, is that there was finally too much tension between the detentist strategy of the Yankees in the Atlantic and the militarist strategy of the Cowboys in the Pacific. To maintain the two lines was, in effect, to maintain two separate and opposed realities at once, two separate and contradictory domains of world-historical truth. In Europe and the industrial world, the evident truth was that we could live with communism. In Asia and the Third World, the evident truth was that we could not, that we had to fight and win wars against it or else face terrible consequences at home.

As long as the spheres of detente and violence could be kept apart in American policy and consciousness, as long as the Atlantic and Pacific could remain two separate planes of reality wheeling within each other on opposite assumptions and never colliding, then American foreign policy could wear a look of reasonable integration. But when it became clear that the United States could not win its way militarily in the Third World without risking a nuclear challenge in the North Atlantic, the makings of a dissolving consensus were at hand.

I argue in Part Two of this book that the power-elite collision one sensed at Dallas on November 22, 1963, was real. It was no chance collision of a lone political maniac with a lone political star. It was a collision anchored in the larger social dialectic that propels the life of the national ruling elites. The conspiracy to kill JFK and the much larger conspiracy to keep official silence embodied this collision and had their being in this, the opposition of Yankee and Cowboy.

The lines of division became clear early in 1968 with the rapid crystallizing of a whole new front of opposition to the war, that of the “corporate liberals.” Formerly, the established liberalism of the sort we associate with Xerox and Harvard had been inclined to defend the U.S. position in Vietnam as a part of its long-standing general commitment to anticomunism. The Yankee lights had made the usual arrangements to provide world banking services to a Free South Vietnam and take the oil from its waters, and it was always clear that there would be no serious objection from the Yankees as a whole if the Vietnam War turned out to be winnable. 1 But now in 1967-68 a new line of criticism of Johnson and his war policy opened up.

The war’s costs had exploded out of all proportion to the original objective, one now heard. No vital American interests were being attacked or defended in Vietnam, after all. Europe was appalled at us. Our European alliances were suffering. Our young people were strenuously alienated. Our economy was hurting. Other problems were lying neglected. We needed to wrap

up the bleeding stump and move to a better position. General James Gavin, for example, one of President Kennedy's chief military advisers, developed these and related ideas about the war in various public forums during that period.

But the strategy that was continued by Nixon in 1969 in the aftermath of the Martin Luther King and Robert Kennedy assassinations and Nixon's resultant reelection, was, of course, escalation — the secret air war, the invasion of the “sanctuaries” in Cambodia and Laos, the Christmas bombings, etc. But for a moment in 1968, Johnson had suddenly and strangely abdicated, stopped the bombing, and opened the Paris peace talks, and Robert Kennedy had assembled an electoral coalition reaching from Mayor Daley to the liberal peaceniks, if not Tom Hayden, a New-Politics-style coalition that appeared easily capable of beating Nixon, taking office, and stopping the war with a thump.

So whereas there had formerly appeared to be essential agreement at the top of the American power structure on the Vietnam question, now we had two “ruling-class” voices to account for, one demanding more military effort and insisting upon the necessity of the original objective, the other tiring of the frustrations and costs of the attempt, unwilling to sacrifice resources at a yet higher magnitude, and wanting to be free to worry about other things — oil, gold, the Mideast, Europe, the economy, and so on.

It was directly clear that there was a regional component to this difference. Of course there are major points that do not fit the Yankee/ Cowboy curve. The West Coast Bank of America, for example, spoke throughout the period of maximum unrest over the war with an essentially liberal voice. And Fulbright is from Arkansas. But on balance, the souls most fervently desirous of decisive military measures to prevent a Communist takeover tended to argue from a Frontierist, China-Lobby kind of position, and the souls most calmly able to accept losses and pull back tended to argue from an Atlanticist, Council on Foreign Relations, NATO-haunted kind of position.

The Yankee/ Cowboy split thus suggested itself as a not- too-simplistic way to indicate in swift, available terms the existence of a rich and complex rivalry, the general cultural disposition of its chief contending principals, and the jointly historical and mythic character of their struggle, commingling John Wayne fantasies with real bloodshed, real genocide.

The profile of these types is best suggested in the persons and relationship of corporate-banker/monopolist David Rockefeller and tycoon entrepreneur Howard Hughes. An inquiry into their long rivalry is the first step in our exposition of Watergate in Part Three. But the spirit of Yankeeness is given off by many things besides the Chase Manhattan and of Cowboyness by many things besides the Hughes empire. Yankeeness is the Ivy League and Cowboyness is the NFL. Yankee is the exclusive clubs of Manhattan, Boston, and Georgetown. Cowboy is the exclusive clubs of Dallas and New Orleans, Orange County East and West. Yankee is the Council on Foreign Relations, the secret Round Table, Eleanor Roosevelt, Bundles for Britain, and at a certain point, the Dulles brothers and the doctrine of massive retaliation. Cowboy is Johnson, Connally, Howard Hunt and the Bay of Pigs team. Yankee is Kennedy, Cowboy is Nixon.

But I stress my purpose is not to name a concrete group of conspirators and assassins, though I do not doubt that the conspiracies I speak of are actual. My aim rather is to call attention to the persistence of Civil War splits in the current situation and to the historical ideological substance of the positions at play.

It must be often the case, as it was with me and the Yankee/ Cowboy idea, that one's fresh insight turns out to be already well mapped and settled. I first proposed the Yankee/ Cowboy references in early 1968 but wrote nothing of any account on the theme until a series of articles about Watergate for the Boston Phoenix in 1973 and 1974. A reader of one of those pieces informed me of the similarity of my views with those of Professor Carroll Quigley, a historian at Georgetown.

Quigley is the author of a huge book about the contemporary world, *Tragedy and Hope*, to which I will return in chapter two. I begin my debt to Quigley here by borrowing the following observation from his summary. Noting that since 1950 a "revolutionary change" has been occurring in American politics, Quigley says this transformation involves "a disintegration of the middle class and a corresponding increase in significance by the petty bourgeoisie at the same time that the economic influence of the older Wall Street financial groups has been weakening and been challenged by new wealth springing up outside the eastern cities, notably in the Southwest and Far West." He continues:

"These new sources of wealth have been based very largely on government action and government spending but have, none the less, adopted a petty-bourgeois outlook rather than the semiaristocratic outlook that pervades the Eastern Establishment. This new wealth, based on petroleum, natural gas, ruthless exploitation of national resources, the aviation industry, military bases in the South and West, and finally on space with all its attendant activities, has centered in Texas and southern California. Its existence, for the first time, made it possible for the petty-bourgeois outlook to make itself felt in the political nomination process instead of in the unrewarding effort to influence politics by voting for a Republican candidate nominated under Eastern Establishment influence. By the 1964 election, the major political issue in the country was the financial struggle behind the scenes between the old wealth, civilized and cultured in its foundations, and the new wealth, virile and uninformed, arising from the flowing profits of government-dependent corporations in the Southwest and West."

The whole point of introducing the Cowboy/ Yankee language, of course, is to bring precisely that old-money/ new money, Atlanticist-Frontierist tension into focus in the plane of current events.

The main idea of looking at things this way is to see that a sectional rivalry, derived from the patterns of the Civil War, still operates in American politics, indeed that at the altitude of national power elites, it may be the most sensitive and inflamed division of all, more concentrated than race and class and more basic than two-party system attachments and ideologies. The argument of this book is that the emerging clash of Yankee and Cowboy wills beneath the visible stream of events is the dominant fact of real U.S. political life since 1960. The dissolution of the Yankee/ Cowboy consensus of World War II and the Cold War until 1960 is behind the Dallas of Kennedy and the Watergate of Nixon.

Let us go a step further with these types, Cowboy and Yankee, and sketch a first outline of the differing worlds they see.

The Yankee mind, of global scope, is at home in the great world, used to regarding it as a whole thing integrated in the far-flung activities of Western exploration, conquest, and commerce. The Yankee believes that the basis of a good world order is the health of America's alliances across the North Atlantic, the relations with the Western Democracies from which our tradition mainly flows. He believes the United States continues the culture of Europe and relates to the Atlantic as to a lake whose other shore must be secured as a matter of domestic priority. Europe is the key world theater, and it is self-evident to the Yankee mind that the fate of the United States is inevitably linked up with Europe's in a career of white cultural destiny transcending national boundaries: that a community of a unified world civilization exists, that there is such a thing as "the West," "One World."

The Cowboy mind has no room for the assumption that American and European culture are continuous. The Cowboy is moved instead by the discontinuity of the New World from the Old and substitutes for the Yankee's Atlantic-oriented culture a new system of culture (Big Sky , Giant) oriented to an expanding wilderness Frontier and based on an advanced Pacific strategy.

The Yankee monopolists who first broke faith with the goal of military victory in Vietnam did so in view of what they saw as the high probability of failure and the certain ambiguity of success. The Cowboy entrepreneurs who fought hardest to keep that faith alive did so out of conviction of the necessity of success. Said the multicorporate-liberal Yankee (about 1968): "The United States cannot wage a winning nonnuclear land campaign in Asia. It will destroy its much more essential relations in Europe if in spite of all wisdom its leadership continues to siphon off precious national blood and treasure to win this war. It is necessary to stand down." Said the Cowboy: "Only the strong are free."

The distinction between the East Coast monopolist and the Western tycoon entrepreneur is the main class-economic distinction set out by the Yankee/ Cowboy perspective. It arises because one naturally looks for a class-economic basis for this apparent conflict at the summit of American power. That is because one must assume that parties without a class- economic base could not endure struggle at that height. It is then only necessary to recall that antiwar feeling struck the Eastern Establishment next after it struck the students, the teachers, and the clergy — struck the large bank-connected firms tied into the trans-Atlantic business grid. During the same period, industrial segments around the construction industry, the military-industrial complex, agribusiness, the Southern Boom of the sixties and seventies, and independent Texas/ Southwest oil interests — i.e., the forces Quigley calls "new wealth" — never suffered a moment of war-weariness. They supported the Texan Johnson and the Southern Californian Nixon as far as they would go toward a final military solution .

Why should this difference have arisen? After a century of Northeastern leadership, and one-quarter century of Cold War unity, why should the national ruling coalition of the old and new owning classes, Yankee and Cowboy, have begun pulling apart? But then we have to go back: What was the basis of their unity to begin with?

William Appleman Williams deals with a variation of this question when he argues that the basis for the long-term general (or “pluralist”) coalition of the forces of capitalism (or “plutocracy”) with the forces of democracy in American politics is the constant companionship of the expanding wilderness frontier. Williams thus stands the Turner Frontier on its head, correcting it. I add that another and cognate effect of the frontier in American economic development was to preserve the entrepreneurial option long after the arrival of the vast monopoly structures which tend to consume entrepreneurs. In the states whose political-economic histories Marx studied, for example, the frontier was never the factor that it was in America, except as America itself was Europe’s Wild West. The rugged-individualist self-made rich man, the autonomous man of power, the wildcatter, began to drop out of sight, to lose presence as individual, type, and class, with the rise of the current-day computer-centered monopoly-corporate formations. The tycoon-entrepreneur is of course disappearing as a type in America too, at least as a political force in national life. The Hughes empire, at last, has been corporatized. Old man Hunt is dead. His sons are bringing Harvard Business School rational bureaucracy to the operation. But that only makes it all the more curious that political power continued to emanate from the type and the person, the image and the reality, the ghost perhaps, of a creature like Hughes as late as the second victorious presidential campaign of Nixon. Why should the Cowboy tycoon have persisted so long as a political force, competent to struggle against the biggest banking cartels for control of the levers of national power?

As others have argued, the Frontier was a reprieve for democracy. We may note here that it was also a reprieve for capitalism as well, whose internal conflicts were constantly being financed off an endless-seeming input of vast stretches of natural riches, having no origin in capitalist production. All that was needed was for the settlers to accept the genocidal elimination of the native population and a great deal became possible — the purple mountains, the fruited plains. And generation after generation of American whites were able to accept that program. The Indian wars won the West. The railroads and highways were laid. The country was resettled by a new race, a new nation.

Energies of expansion consumed the continent in about two centuries, pushing on to Hawaii and Alaska. There is no way to calculate the impact of that constant territorial expansion on the development of American institutions. There is no way to imagine those institutions apart from the environment created by that expansion. It is a matter our standard national hagiography paints out of the picture, though we make much of the populist-saga aspect of the pioneering (never “conquering”) of the West. How can we congratulate our national performance for its general democracy and constitutionalism without taking into account the background of that constant expansion? We do not teach our children that we are democrats in order to expand forever and republicans on condition of an unfrozen western boundary with unclaimed wilderness. To the extent that the American miracle of pluralism exists at all, we still do not know how miraculous it would be in the absence of an expanding frontier, its constant companion till the time of the Chinese revolution.

The overwar in Asia has its internal American origin in the native reflex to maintain the Western Frontier on the old terms and to do so at all cost, since our whole way of life hinges on the Frontier. What the late-blooming Yankee liberal critics of the Vietnam war refused to hear and

recognize between the lines of the prowar arguments of the more philosophical Cowboy hawks was this essential point about the importance of Frontier expansion in American life from the beginning.

In the nature of things, the American Frontier continued to expand with the prosperity it financed. Now, in our generation, it has brought us to this particular moment of world confrontation across the Pacific, fully global in scale for both sides, fully modern in its technological expression for both sides — the old Westward-surging battle for space projected onto the stage of superpowers.

The success and then the successful defense from 1950 to 1975 of the Asian revolutionary nationalist campaigns against further Western dominance in Asia — China, Korea, Vietnam — means that all that is changed. What was once true about the space to the west of America is no longer true and will never be true again. There will never be a time again when the white adventurer may peer over his western horizon at an Asia helplessly plunged in social disorganization. In terms of their social power to operate as a unified people and in the assimilation of technology, the Chinese people are, since 1950, a self-modernizing people, not colonials any more. And instead of a Wild West, Americans now have a mature common boundary with other moderns like ourselves, not savages, not Redskins, not Reds, only modern people like ourselves in a single modern world. This is new for us, a new experience for Americans altogether.

Our national transformation from an unbounded to a bounded state will of course continue to stir the internal furies. No one interpretation of the event will be able to establish itself. No one will agree what the end of the Frontier means, what it will lead to, what one ought to do about it. But all will agree that it is upon us and past, whether it is called one thing or another. And now after Vietnam, as though it were not clear enough before, it is apparent beyond any possibility of doubt that whatever this force of Asian self-modernization is, whether it is evil or good or beyond good and evil, it is assuredly not a force that United States policy-makers can manhandle and manipulate and hold back through diplomatic chicanery and military force. Even if it were still advisable for the United States to stop “the march of Asian communism,” if that is what we are really talking about, it is not possible for the United States to do that. Look and see: China, Korea, Vietnam.

I have not written this book to say at the end, choose sides between Cowboy and Yankee for Civil War II. My less bloody belief is that ordinary people all over the map, Northeast by Southwest, have a deep, simple, and common need to oppose all these intrigues and intriguers, whatever terms one calls them by and however one understands their development. But this need of course must be recognized, and that is why I write: to offer an analysis of the situation of domestic politics from the standpoint of power-elite collisions taking place at the top, and then, at the end, to suggest that democracy’s first response must be to demand a realistic reconstruction of the assassination of President Kennedy. To comprehend his murder (as with the murder of Lincoln) is to comprehend a very basic event in the history of American government, as well as the crimes that came after it. The comprehension of these covert political actions is the absolute precondition of self-government, the first step toward the restoration of the legitimate state.

More broadly I write to say that we are the American generations for whom the frontier is the fact that there is no more frontier and who must somehow begin to decide how to deal with this.

What shall America do about the loss of its wilderness frontier? Can we form our nation anew, on new, non-expansionist terms without first having to see everything old swept violently away? The unarticulated tension around that question undermined the long-standing Yankee/ Cowboy coalition and introduced, with President Kennedy's assassination, the current period of violent and irregular movement at the top of the power hierarchy. It is the precipitous and at the same time unfocused character of this question of the closed, lost frontier that has created such a challenge, such a threat, to traditional American values and institutions, the threat of a cancerously spreading clandestine state within.