TABLOID ABSURDITY: ALLEGORIES OF A CONTEMPORARY AMERICAN POLITICAL CRISIS

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Waiting to buy our groceries in the supermarket checkout line, occasionally we'll glance at the rack of tabloids and wonder, who could possibly read these flagrant fabrications? Nevertheless, tabloids may be worth a closer look. In *Men In Black*, Tommy Lee Jones, Agent K, and Will Smith, Agent J, scour the tabloids for reports of extra-terrestrial activity, viewing these absurdities as "the best investigative journalism on the planet" (*Men In Black*). The American government and society in the film see supermarket tabloids as the purest form of unencumbered truth, where the most absurd conspiracies are blatant fact and the skeptics are merely in denial. This comic portrayal of a society with radically different values of journalistic validity hints at a presence of truth in tabloid journalism that is often brusquely dismissed. Though we are all aware of the lies and inventions presented in such tabloids as The *Weekly World News*, perhaps it is possible to uncover an element of truthful social commentary beneath the surface of their flagrant fabrications. By looking at the tabloids' commentary on American politics and power, we can discern an allegory for current American values and concerns: one that provides a unique forum for contemporary societal frustrations.

Since its birth as a refuge to individuals driven from their homelands by religious persecution, America has been a nation rich with symbolism of new beginnings and allegoric representations of important historic events. Defining allegory as the expression of truths or generalizations about human existence by means of symbolic fictional figures and actions, one can begin to recognize many such representations throughout American History. The way Americans interpret their own social, political, and economic condition through cultural allegory has evolved and developed from the idealism of colonial America to the cynicism of the modern era.

Deborah L. Madson's *Allegory in America* provides a fluid explanation of American allegory as it has evolved from colonialism to the postmodernist era, while also chronicling the transformation of American ideals and values. In the early stages of colonial settlement, Americans created allegories to represent the trials and hardship with which they were repeatedly assailed. Stemming from the idea of religion as the basis of the migration from Europe to the New World, the allegories adopted were generally biblical (Madsen 2). In particular, colonists related their experience to that of the "redeemed people [led by Moses] out of bondage in Egypt into the freedom of the Promised Land" (2). The colonists viewed their mission to develop "a citie [sic] upon a hill" as a religious calling to set an example for other nations of redemption and second chances (2). Thus, just as Moses led the persecuted Jews from Egypt, America

became the new 'Promised Land,' one of intense religious loyalty and opportunity. The biblical allegory allowed colonists to explain the trials and challenges such as famine, Indian attack, and disease that they were experiencing. Colonists could justify their suffering as symbolic of God's concern for their spiritual welfare, "a means of warning them of the dangers of complacency" (2). Consequently, the biblical allegory served to sanction colonial actions by reassuring colonists of the righteousness of their choices.

Inversely, the same allegory could be used as a rebellion against these very rationalizations. While the persecuted Jews were escaping unjust treatment from the Egyptians, the colonists were instilling similar abuses on the natives of the new land. Here, the reading of the allegory serves as a critique of the colonists for the hypocrisy of manipulating such an allegory to justify their own oppressive actions. The influence of the Exodus story on New World America, Madsen suggests, represents the tendency of allegories to propagate during times of cultural crisis as a means of encouraging continued strength. Yet, the many facets and elements of each allegorical tale lend it a flexibility, allowing it to represent not only the orthodox vision, in this case of America as the land of opportunity, but also "a voice to those who dissent from this vision, who use allegory only to reject what it has come to stand for" (Madsen 5). Therefore, we see both the origination of allegorical tradition in American society as well as its propensity to create a paradox, a means of questioning its own values.

A cultural crisis of today, from which an allegory might stem, lies in the lack of political stability stemming from conflicting opinions concerning presidential legitimacy and capability. Going into the Presidential Election of 2000, the country was starkly divided between support for the Democratic candidate, Al Gore, and the Republican candidate, George W. Bush. In fact, the election was so closely divided that President Bush was set into office without the backing of the popular vote, which made for one of the "messiest postelection [periods] in American history" (Cook 652). An ABC News/ Washington Post Survey of 1,050 adults taken in late February, 2001, showed Bush's popularity, 55% approval, to be the "lowest job-approval rating of any newly elected President in the past 50 years" (Cook 652). Throughout Bush's presidency, the country has seen a continuous seesaw of rising and falling support for the President's actions.

In fact, a poll taken just prior to the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, found President Bush's approval rating had dipped to a low 51%, only to sky rocket after the attacks to an impressive 90%, before sinking once again to 57% by early March of the following year (Cook 2507). Earlier this year, Richard Benedetto, a journalist for *USA Today*, found the President's "score for honesty and trustworthiness [to be] at the lowest point of his presidency" (Benedetto A7). Explanations for Bush's rising and falling popularity inevitably stem from an immense polarity within the country, "the country remains evenly split, 50-50, between the two major parties" (Cook 2507). A country so divided lends itself to allegorization, though not in such a conventional form as those of colonial times.

Rather, the specific allegory adopted during each moment of cultural crisis appears to reflect the popular culture and societal values of the given period. Just as the colonists of the New World created a biblical allegory to the richness of their religious piety, we might expect to find our contemporary allegory veiled under the cover of American consumerism and materialism. In his commentary on the declining value of pure education in the university culture, Mark Edmundson notes that "university culture like American culture writ large is . . . ever more devoted to consumption and entertainment" (2). Even politics has become a matter of entertainment, as one might see in such politically oriented talk shows as *Politically Incorrect with Bill Maher* and *The Daily Show with Jon Stewart*. With immense efforts to draw voter attention and interest through entertaining and catchy campaigns, we have become "a country learning about one party's potential nominees in a way that suggests it might be easier to learn about their platform had they taken out ads in *Daily Variety*" (Goodman D1). Tim Goodman, a journalist for *The San Francisco Chronicle*, comments that the upcoming election is so entertainment-oriented that it appears to be "ignoring the real information and concentrating on poll results and personal high jinks" (D1). American society today depends on entertainment in all areas of knowledge acquisition, from university education to information about political campaigns. In this age of entertainment, it is no wonder that we might begin to discover our allegories of American political ideology in something as common and consumer based as a supermarket tabloid.

Supermarket tabloids overflow with entertainment, appearing to focus much more on amusing their readers than on passing on any important information. William Randolph Hearst, one of the pioneers of tabloid journalism, espoused a journalistic philosophy of "90% entertainment, 10% information—and the information without boring you" (Sloan 25). Yet, considering the absent need for intellectualism in such reporting, tabloid journalists are not nearly as self-effacing and uneducated as one might expect. In order to improve the quality of their product in the early 1970s, tabloid publishers began to draw in the most esteemed journalists from respectable newspapers ranging from the *Los Angeles Times* to the *Fort Worth Press*. They accomplished this by promising a "fat pay raise" (14) which resulted in the *Enquirer* salaries being "the highest paid by any paper or magazine in the country" (14). Thus, with such well-regarded minds concocting stories, these tabloids should not be dismissed so quickly as being entirely without merit. One might wonder, with such respectable writers, whether tabloids have a more formative effect on their audience than we might previously have assumed.

The majority of tabloid readers are between the ages of twenty and forty-nine, the voting public, creating a very effective audience for political commentary ("Trends in Newspaper Readership"). While expecting all of these readers to recognize the political commentary concealed in the tales woven by tabloid journalists, the reactions of readers to these stories certainly vary. The flexibility of tabloid journalism lies in its ability to be read in one of two ways: as serious, though fantastical, journalism, or as

ridiculously absurd comedy. Those who choose to read tabloids in the former manner take its stories at face value, rarely questioning the truth of the news as reported. Those who employ the latter method might use tabloids as a lens to ridicule modern society. This dual function lends tabloid journalism the ability to create an effective modern allegory. Tabloids possess a subversive nature, a painstakingly hidden truth which, when discovered, can open the eyes of the reader to the hypocrisies of their own society.

Between the considerable experience and ability of tabloid journalists and the unknowingly susceptible audience, one can imagine that these journalists might be tempted to slip some political commentary into their stories. In fact, tabloid journalists of the 1970s, became "the first among their profession since World War II—at least in this country—to take a questioning, aggressive, often adversarial approach to government and other major forces that control our society" (Sloan 15). Thus, thirty years ago, tabloid staff set a precedent of intelligent political commentary that appears to remain, though painstakingly hidden, even in the most sensationalized and unrealistic tabloids of today.

The search for political commentary in The *Weekly World News*, yields a fruitful article, "2-Headed Man for President—And Vice President," which appears to be merely a comical fabrication, yet, with further scrutiny, serves as an allegory of current American political division. The article discusses the background and political platform of a fictional two-headed character, Peter Paul Prentice (one head being Peter, the other Paul), running for the presidency and vice presidency as an independent. By setting up the candidate as an independent, the journalist, Annie Van Horne, creates a foundation for a critical commentary on both democratic and republican ideals.

The article presents a valid political platform with qualities typical of the two prominently conflicting parties, the Republicans and the Democrats. Van Horne describes such espoused policies as balancing the budget and increasing military spending which, according to analysts, are typical of the Republican Party (Fineman 38). She also describes what many call characteristically Democratic policies, such as Medicare drug benefits to senior citizens and legalization of purchasing pharmaceuticals overseas (Alter 22). We see further symbolism of the conflict between Republicans and Democrats in Prentice's place of birth: Sarasota, Florida, one of the many counties in Florida which experienced a re-count after the confused elections of 2000. Thus, Van Horne sets the candidate up as an embodiment of both parties, thereby allowing us to see his two-headedness as a symbol of the conflict between the Right and the Left.

Yet, Peter Paul Prentice is not only referred to as "two-headed," he is also termed "two-faced" (Van Horne 6), indicating an element of hypocrisy among any single candidate or political party. This idea of hypocrisy serves as a common means of ammunition against one's opponent. In the current 2004 election, Republicans attack John Kerry for his hypocritical acceptance of campaign contributions from companies

which he had previously condemned for their practice of sending their operations overseas to avoid U.S. taxes (*Human Events* 6).

Similarly, in the elections of 2000, Bush was criticized for his hypocrisy when he promised to change the accusatory tone of modern presidential campaigns and then went on to cast "aspersions of Gore's mistakes and exaggerations" (Safire B11). The *Weekly World News*' Van Horne not only critiques the current political system through a disguised reference to hypocrisy, she also bluntly assails the vanity of the current president, professing that Peter Paul Prentice would expand education with the money that President Bush would have used for "pork barrel programs" such as "adding [his] bust to Mount Rushmore" (Van Horne 6). Thus, through the use of fantastical characters and a fictional scenario, the *Weekly World News* creates an allegory which serves as a critique of the dishonesty, self-interest, and duality of the current political system.

In another edition of the *Weekly World News*, correspondent Miguel Figueroa writes "Oil Discovered in Cuba–U.S. Troops Poised to Liberate Island Nation," an article which subtly critiques the faults of the current presidency and the conservative ideology. The article discusses a fictional discovery of oil off the cost of Cuba, a discovery that, Figueroa purports, will lead America to invade Cuba and overthrow Fidel Castro. The supposed oil in Cuba mirrors the situation that Bush faced in Iraq, thus serving as an allegory of the Iraq War. By touching on the motivations for which Bush was accused of going to war with Iraq, the article mocks American self-centeredness.

Figueroa comments on the idea of oil as motivation when he remarks, "it's the access to millions of gallons of 'black gold' that really excites the White House" (11), as well as on the perception that successful grandiose action will ensure re-election—"this time the vote in Florida won't be close, trust me" (11). Figueroa bluntly discusses the Bush's hypothetical motivation for invading Cuba as he explains that Americans have located the oil but now need to "[overthrow] Fidel so we can go get it" (11). The directness of such an assertion reflects a common critique, espoused by George Soros, of America's self-serving motivation for war with Iraq.

In *The Bubble of American Supremacy*, Soros discusses Bush's possible reasons for initiating war on Iraq and focuses on America's limited resources of oil saying, "to lift the [oil] embargo with Saddam Hussein still in power might have made him too dangerous; therefore he had to be removed from power" (53). To emphasize this idea of American self-interest, Figueroa makes allusion to a past attempt to overthrow Castro in the Bay of Pigs Invasion. That "ill-fated attack" (11) was only "half-hearted" says Figueroa, but in the current attack, he counters, we're going to "kick butt and take over" (11). Figueroa creates an implied link between the half-heartedness of the previous attempt and its ultimate failure. He elaborates that the attack will be "nothing like" that of 1961, implying not only dissimilar effects but also different incentives. While the Bay of Pigs Invasion was spurred by a hatred of communism, the current

attack is motivated by personal gain, lower gas prices, and "a big political payoff" (11) for the President. In this way, Figueroa broaches the topic of American Supremacy, the concern that America considers only its own interests. Out of these subtleties and allusions as well as blatant exaggerations, Figueroa fashions an allegorical critique of American political action, a fictional story with real implications.

Yet, not only the content of Figueroa's article serves as an allegory of the War in Iraq, but also the style in which he creates his argument. By quoting only the President himself and "unnamed" White House officials, Figueora approaches the article through the perspective of the party now in power, the conservatives. In a way, this perspective allows him to more effectively critique the conservative ideology. Endowing himself with the power to exaggerate the conservative opinions, he creates a subversive parody of the current government.

In his argument in favor of invading Cuba, Figueroa mimics the rhetorical techniques employed by George W. Bush during his rationalization of initiating war in Iraq. In a speech Bush made to the National Press Conference on March 6, 2003, the President attempted to kindle American patriotism by tying his desire to commence war in Iraq to the memory of the terrorist attacks of *September 11th*. Despite the fact that the government found "no proven ties" (Soros 41) between Saddam Hussein and the Al Qaeda terrorists, Bush continually made comments setting the two parties as parallel threats. In one blunt attempt to draw an analogy between the terrorist threat from Iraq and Al Qaeda, Bush avowed that "the attacks of September 11th, 2001 showed what the enemies of America did with four airplanes. We will not wait to see what terrorists or terrorist states could do with weapons of mass destruction" (Bush).

In the same manner, Figueroa juxtaposes references to Saddam Hussein in the plans to overthrow Fidel Castro saying, "Cuban dictator Fidel Castro could soon be out of power and in jail—just like Saddam Hussein" (11). Figueroa creates an exaggerated parallelism even more evidently contrived then that of the President in order to cast a light of enmity on Castro, just as Bush had cast that same light on Hussein. The lack of subtlety in Figueroa's juxtapositions appears to serve as a direct parody of Bush's rationalization of war. The style in which Figueroa composes his article creates a further allegory in itself of the manipulated rhetoric used by President Bush to gather support for a war with Iraq.

Through the creation of fictional scenarios and the use of occasionally fictional, often real political figures, the *Weekly World News* engineers a series of political allegories that mirror both the divisive nature of our political system and the failures and inconsistencies of American political action. These allegories offer readers not only a sensationalized and fantasized version of modern American current events, but also a glimpse of the uncertainty and concern that many Americans feel when they learn of these proceedings. The fantastical imagery and symbolism of far-fetched supermarket tabloids provide stories of American politics and power that few other forms of media are at liberty to tell. By taking such a subversive approach, disguising

political critique as entertainment, tabloid journalists catch their readers unaware. They force even the unwilling reader to recognize some level of hypocrisy whether only in the allegory or itself, or in the current events which it represents. These supermarket tabloids provide a forum to disagree with current political policies without doing so directly. They create an allegory which, when read literally, merely weaves a tale similar to the unfolding of events in our contemporary society. Yet, when recognized for their hypocrisy, these tales open up a world for the critiquing; they create a forum for discreetly recognizing the flaws of one's government without betraying one's own political inclinations.

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