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American Intellectuals and the Concept of Totalitarianism 1960–2009

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I hereby declare that this thesis has not been and will not be, submitted in whole or in part to another University for the award of any other degree.

Signature: .................................................... Sophie Joscelyne
This thesis engages with one of the most influential and misused concepts in American intellectual life, ‘totalitarianism’. As a malleable and powerfully evocative concept, totalitarianism has been frequently mobilised in the service of wide-ranging political ends, shaping and policing the boundaries of political discourse in the United States for nearly a century. While a relatively large body of scholarship exists pertaining to anti-totalitarianism as a rationale for the Cold War, this thesis provides a new perspective by focusing on the lasting effects of totalitarianism as a concept in the second half of the twentieth century and after the millennium. I consider: 1960s uses of ‘totalitarianism’ as a justification strategy for the radical politics of the New Left; the role of totalitarianism in the neoconservative reaction against radicalism in the 1970s and 80s; and the re-emergence of totalitarianism discourse after the end of the Cold War, employed as a rationale for supporting the ‘war on terror’. I argue that during these years the fundamental connection between totalitarianism and the state – in both meanings of the state as an externally sovereign entity and the state as internal government – was contested and challenged. In the 1960s, radical intellectuals turned totalitarianism inwards to criticise trends in American politics and society and, in doing so, experimented with ‘soft’ or ‘cultural’ readings of totalitarianism which de-emphasised the centrality of state control. While in the 1960s non-terroristic formulations of totalitarianism were advanced, the 1980s witnessed the re-centring of terror and violence at the heart of totalitarianism. In this decade, understandings of the ‘terrorist’ and the ‘totalitarian’ became fused. This period also saw a crucial shift from state ‘terror’ to international ‘terrorism’. The implications of the purported link between totalitarianism and terrorism were revealed in the post-2001 ‘war on terror’ which saw the concept of totalitarianism mobilised in support of a war against complex networks of decentralised and stateless terrorist organisations, representing the detachment of totalitarianism from its traditional association with the nation-state.
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Introduction

‘At its June 1965 convention SDS [Students for a Democratic Society] removed the word totalitarian from its description of the form of government it opposed, a final break with the liberal tradition. But the New Left didn’t quite abandon the concept of totalitarianism. Instead, it inverted it.’


‘The 1968-era student movements arose more or less the same way in at least several countries around the world; and from country to country they fell the same way.

Almost everywhere the movements began by promising to construct a new kind of democratic or libertarian socialism. And almost everywhere ... the democratic and libertarian aspects dropped away, in part or in whole, by the end of the sixties or the early seventies, and the protests and merry carnivals degenerated into guerrilla mayhem and Dostoyevskian persecutions, and the spectre of left-wing dictatorship arose, and instead of freedom there was havoc.’


In the public debate over the 2003 Iraq War, Peter Beinart, editor of *The New Republic*, and Paul Berman, author of the best-selling *Terror and Liberalism* (2003), were both leading proponents of the pro-war ‘liberal hawk’ position in the United States. Berman, in particular, was branded a ‘philosopher king’ of the liberal hawks by one of his critics.¹ Both these intellectuals invoked specific historical narratives of twentieth-century American politics to buttress their support for the war – narratives in which the concept of totalitarianism played a pivotal role. Their interpretation of US left-liberal politics since 1960 ran as follows: the New Left generation, rebelling against the immorality of American capitalism and imperialism, reconfigured the dominant doctrine of Cold War anti-totalitarianism by directing critical attention away from America’s external enemies and instead focusing the lens of anti-totalitarianism inwards onto American society. In so doing, Beinart and Berman argued, the New Left forfeited a clear-eyed view of the relative merits of American democracy, lost sight of the dangers of political radicalism,

and, in some cases, adopted terrorist tactics and became fellow travellers of totalitarian
Communist movements. Then, starting in the 1980s, this generation of former radicals,
recognising the folly of their earlier views, came to reverse their assessment of the
inherent immorality of American foreign policy and to identify a progressive role for the
US in the world. This re-assessment was prompted, in part, by the perceived emergence
of a new totalitarian threat after the end of the Cold War – in the form of Arab nationalism
and Islamic fundamentalism. These developments necessarily entailed a reconsideration
of the relationship between US democracy and totalitarianism, and the New Left
generation gradually came to embrace anti-totalitarianism in its ‘true’ form, defined as
the antithesis of American liberal society. Beinart and Berman’s narrative thus
culminated in the liberal interventionist position in 2003 and support of the Iraq War as
an anti-totalitarian endeavour.²

In this thesis I examine the same history relayed by these intellectuals, though I
see the generational trajectory they identify in a different, less celebratory, light.
Totalitarianism is one of the most influential and misused concepts in American
intellectual life. As a malleable and powerfully evocative concept, it has been mobilised
frequently in the service of wide-ranging political ends, shaping and policing the
boundaries of political discourse in the United States for nearly a century.

The contemporary and retrospective significance of 1960s radical attitudes
towards totalitarianism, though central to the consciousness of pro-war liberals in the
early 2000s, has been largely ignored by historians. Indeed, most studies of the influence
of totalitarianism in the United States have focused on its role as a concept which

² Beinart came to repudiate his support of the war after the disastrous aftermath of the invasion became
clear. In 2006 he wrote that he had been ‘wrong on the facts’ and ‘wrong on the theory’ which had
convinced him to support the war. However, he continued to believe in the anti-totalitarian rationale
behind the broader ‘war on terror’. Peter Beinart, The Good Fight: Why Liberals – and Only Liberals –
Can Win the War on Terror and Make America Great Again (New York: Harper Perennial, 2008), xiii.
underpinned the West’s twentieth-century ideological struggle with the Soviet Union, and far less attention has been paid to its counter-hegemonic uses during the Cold War, or its continued influence after the close of this conflict in 1991. The current literature on totalitarianism is limited by its focus on the influence of the concept in the early and middle decades of the twentieth century. Notable scholarly contributions which focus on the 1930–1950 period have analysed ‘totalitarianism’ in American public culture; its role in shaping the ideals of post-war liberalism; and how black Americans co-opted ‘official’ anti-totalitarianism to subvert the geo-politics of the Cold War. ³ The lasting impact of totalitarianism as a way of understanding American politics in the second half of the twentieth century and its re-emergence after the millennium demand further attention. This thesis thus considers the life of a concept after its heyday.

The most extensive study of totalitarianism as a concept remains Abbott Gleason’s Totalitarianism: The Inner History of the Cold War (1995). ⁴ Gleason covers the debate about totalitarianism in Europe and the United States from its first use in the 1920s as a description of Fascist Italy – through its application to Nazi Germany during World War II and transference to the Soviet Union in the post-war period – to the end of the Cold War. Since 1991, intellectuals and public commentators have continued to engage with totalitarianism as a means of analysing domestic and international events. A new history is thus essential to understand how the concept of totalitarianism outlasted


the fall of the Soviet Union, and the implications of its continued use in American politics. Moreover, my approach sheds new light on the totalitarianism debate after mid-century. I treat the 1980s, when neoconservative theories of totalitarianism came to the fore, not as the twilight years of this concept but rather as an all-important bridge between 1960s radical reconstructions of totalitarianism and its post-Cold War revival. This illuminates new dimensions of the discourse, revealing, for example, how neoconservatives formed a link between totalitarianism and terrorism.

Liberal intellectuals claimed anti-totalitarianism as a liberal tradition in the early 2000s, and some scholars have reinforced this perception by identifying genuine ‘moments’ of anti-totalitarianism as specific to the liberal-left.5 My study encompasses radical re-imaginings of totalitarianism as well as conservative versions. Without attention to these perspectives, a comprehensive view of totalitarianism’s significance in American political discourse remains incomplete. Gleason’s extensive study dedicates just a few lines to alternative readings of totalitarianism among radicals in the 1960s.6 Existing scholarship focuses on the important role of émigré intellectuals in shaping totalitarianism discourse in the United States.7 My approach advances existing knowledge by highlighting the Americanisation of the concept of totalitarianism after 1950. By shifting the temporal boundaries of enquiry, I have unearthed a distinctly American anti-totalitarian tradition which challenges widely held assumptions about the centrality of state control to understandings of totalitarian rule. In the conclusion, I investigate the continued importance of this tradition in contemporary US political discourse. My central argument is that conceptions of totalitarianism in the second half

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of the twentieth century have become detached from their conventional association with
the state. Attention to the 1960s reveals a trend towards American models of
totalitarianism which de-emphasised the coercive role of the state. In addition, in the
1980s, and again in the early 2000s, intellectuals fused together understandings of
totalitarianism and ‘international terrorism’ which represented the uncoupling of
totalitarianism from the nation-state.

Theories of totalitarianism were most influential in the 1950s, following the
publication of paradigmatic studies such as George Orwell’s *Nineteen Eighty-Four*
(1949), Hannah Arendt’s *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (1951), Carl J. Friedrich’s edited
collection *Totalitarianism* (1954) and his co-authored *Totalitarian Dictatorship and
Autocracy* (1956) with Zbigniew K. Brzezinski. The work that had most influence over
popular conceptions of totalitarianism in America was Orwell’s dystopian vision of a
society in which all aspects of life are controlled by the state and no personal freedom,
even of private thought, exists.8 Arendt’s eclectic study, which positioned ideology and
terror as the essence of totalitarian government, was hugely influential in intellectual
circles.9 A more empirical approach was taken by Friedrich and Brzezinski, who
advanced a six-point definition which in the mid-1950s became the most authoritative
treatment of totalitarianism.10 Influenced by these works, Americans conceived
totalitarian government as a form of terroristic rule which did not stop at external coercion
but aimed to reach inside citizens’ minds and psychologically preclude the possibility of
resistance. The perceived existential threat of totalitarianism emanated primarily from
Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union – states which were intent on expansion and

8 Alpers, *Dictators, Democracy*, 286.
9 Ibid., 292.
10 Gleason, Totalitarianism, 125.
motivated by totalitarian ideologies fundamentally at odds with democratic American values.

Current academic understandings of the historical meaning of totalitarianism remain focused on this image of the all-invasive state. For Gleason, the core meaning of totalitarianism was ‘the idea of a radically intrusive state’ which attempts not just to control ‘citizens from the outside … but also attempt[s] to reach into the most intimate regions of their lives’ and make them ‘constitutionally incapable of challenging the rule of the state’.11 Political scientist David Ciepley similarly asserts that ‘totalitarianism stands for state control of both body and mind’.12 However, scholarly understandings require updating to recognise a multiplicity of perceived totalitarianisms – including non-statist, non-terroristic ‘soft’ forms as well as stateless terrorist versions.13 Analysing these alternative definitions is crucial to comprehending the way in which intellectuals have invoked totalitarianism since 1960 in the domestic and international arena. Examining the application of totalitarianism to domestic politics in the 1960s reveals the potentialities and limitations of anti-totalitarianism as an internal critique of American society. In the international sphere, intellectual engagement with totalitarianism in the post-Cold War era shows how this concept has been adapted to a new context in which state sovereignty is in question and nation-states are no longer the sole significant actors on the world stage.

In the 1960s radical intellectuals and activists challenged widely held beliefs in the centrality of coercive state control to totalitarian rule and shifted focus from America’s external enemies to an internal totalitarian menace lurking within US society.

11 Gleason, Totalitarianism, 10.
12 Ciepley, Liberalism in the Shadow, 2. Emphasis in original.
13 I use ‘non-statist’ to refer to definitions of totalitarian focused on cultural – rather than political/governmental – forms of societal control and ‘stateless’ to mean totalitarian movements not connected to a nation-state.
Author and social critic Norman Mailer identified a form of cultural totalitarianism existing in America. In doing so, he transferred attention from the state to the structures of corporate capitalism and the mass media and focused on psychological manipulation rather than violence as the means of control. Mailer’s development of the idea of cultural totalitarianism to criticise the pervasive climate of stultifying conformity built on pre-existing associations – including the biological framing of totalitarianism as a type of disease which could cross national borders, the link to the theory of mass society, and emphasis on the internal psychological dimension of totalitarian control. Mailer’s work was both an influence on, and symptomatic of, a broader trend towards the study of American totalitarianism which was at its highpoint in 1968.

Sixties radicals also applied totalitarianism as an internal critique of American racism. Black Panther activist Eldridge Cleaver was influenced by Mailer’s writing, though his activism in the late 1960s and early 1970s also connected to a tradition of African American thought which mobilised totalitarianism to point to similarities between the racial politics of Nazi Germany and US slavery and Jim Crow in the American South. However, the application of totalitarianism to American racism was not straightforward because conventional understandings of this concept excised race. Most theorists of totalitarianism viewed it as an unprecedented phenomenon and emphasised the mid-twentieth century as a radical break in history, an approach which threatened to erase other and earlier forms of racial oppression. Cleaver therefore co-opted specific elements of the broader totalitarianism discourse and diagnosed the United States as a fascist state which employed totalitarian methods to control its African American citizens. His analysis corresponded with his international strategy of seeking alliances with Communist governments, including Cuba and North Korea, and his embrace of

14 Rasberry, Race and the Totalitarian Century, 65.
revolutionary violence and guerrilla warfare. The use of such tactics and alliances by some factions of the New Left was seen later by neoconservative and neoliberal intellectuals as evidence of its totalitarian potential.

In the 1980s neoconservative intellectuals reaffirmed the connection between totalitarianism and the state. Foreign-policy intellectual Jeane Kirkpatrick saw the extension of government control into all areas of life as the essence of totalitarianism. Kirkpatrick’s anti-totalitarian politics, influenced by her fundamental rejection of 1960s radicalism, were anti-revolutionary, anti-utopian, and inherently conservative. Though totalitarianism theory shaped her response to domestic politics, Kirkpatrick was primarily a foreign-policy expert who saw the greatest danger to the United States to be the expansion of international Communism. She dismissed the New Left argument that the United States exhibited totalitarian tendencies and projected anti-totalitarianism back onto America’s external enemies. Her tenure as UN ambassador under President Ronald Reagan witnessed the rejection of détente, heightened tensions with the Soviet Union and totalitarianism theory applied to US foreign policy in Latin America. Given that anti-totalitarianism and anti-communism were closely linked during the Cold War, and near synonymous in Kirkpatrick’s thought, the collapse of the Soviet Union seemed likely to signal the end of the relevance of anti-totalitarianism as an organising principle for foreign policy. However, in the early 2000s, totalitarianism was once again mobilised by both pro-war liberals and the ‘neo-cons’ of the George W. Bush administration to identify new external enemies in the ‘war on terror’.

While in the 1960s non-terroristic formulations of totalitarianism were advanced, the 1980s witnessed the re-centring of terror and violence at the heart of totalitarianism. In this decade, understandings of the ‘terrorist’ and the ‘totalitarian’ became fused. This period also saw a crucial shift from state ‘terror’ to international ‘terrorism’. The
implications of the purported link between terrorism and totalitarianism became clear in the ‘war on terror’ when liberal hawk intellectuals, including journalist Christopher Hitchens and political critic Paul Berman, mobilised the tradition of anti-totalitarianism in support of President Bush and applied the label ‘totalitarian’ to both Saddam Hussein’s statist regime in Iraq and the decentralised, stateless organisation Al-Qaeda. The new connection between totalitarianism and stateless terrorist groups established in the ‘war on terror’ – arising from the conceptual slippage between terrorism and state terror – represented the detachment of totalitarianism from its traditional association with the nation-state. The identification of totalitarianism with terrorism is the most significant development in understandings of totalitarianism since the Cold War.

Paul Berman’s support of the ‘war on terror’ rested on this connection. He characterised two vastly different phenomena, ‘Arab nationalism’ and ‘Islamic fundamentalism’, as ‘two branches of a single impulse, which was Muslim totalitarianism’ on the basis that they were driven by the same terroristic anti-liberal impulse which can be traced back through twentieth-century totalitarian movements to the Jacobin terror. Berman has been accused of ‘deliberately promot[ing] and justify[ing] the most dangerous aspect of the Bush Administration’s approach to the war on terrorism: the lumping together of radically different elements in the Muslim world into one homogeneous enemy camp.’ The importance of anti-totalitarianism for Berman was that it linked the ‘war on terror’ to the Cold War ideological struggle. This argument was reinforced by two historical narratives in his work: the migration of the totalitarian impulse to the Muslim world and the intellectual trajectory of the ‘1968 generation’ away from anti-interventionism towards a post-Cold War form of liberal anti-totalitarianism. Berman’s insistence on continuity with the twentieth century served to obscure the

15 Lieven, “Liberal Hawk Down.”
watershed significance of the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001 and their role in reorienting his attitude towards the unrestrained use of American power to protect US security interests.

British-American journalist Christopher Hitchens, too, emphasised continuity between his pre- and post-9/11 opinions. Hitchens sought to make the importance of 9/11 disappear in his work. He positioned his support of the 2003 Iraq war as an extension of the liberal support for humanitarian intervention which arose in the 1990s following the end of the Cold War. If, on the one hand, conceptions of totalitarianism have become linked with terrorism, on the other, the political tradition of anti-totalitarianism has come to be perceived as synonymous with the doctrine of humanitarian intervention. Liberal hawks were widely perceived to have supported the 2003 Iraq War as both a humanitarian ‘war of liberation’ and an anti-totalitarian counter-terrorist war. The marriage of these moral and strategic arguments was manifest in Hitchens’ pro-war arguments. However, his conflation of anti-totalitarianism and humanitarianism is challenged by the international norm of the ‘Responsibility to Protect’ which asserts that ‘coping with human protection claims in other states … must not be confused with … responding to terrorist attacks in one’s own state’. The mobilisation of anti-totalitarianism as a moral argument, when combined with the political argument which connects totalitarianism and terror, has only served to muddle this distinction. The new links between totalitarianism and terrorism, and anti-totalitarianism and humanitarianism, are key to answering the question addressed in chapters four and five: How did totalitarianism, ‘the great mobilizing and unifying concept of the Cold War’, survive the collapse of the Soviet Union?

17 Gleason, Totalitarianism, 3.
Chapter Outline and a Note on Methodology

This thesis is structured around individual studies of five key figures, capturing a diverse range of vantage points in American society. These five intellectuals, Norman Mailer, Eldridge Cleaver, Jeane Kirkpatrick, Christopher Hitchens, and Paul Berman, embody specific intellectual trends, from 1960s radicalism through the conservative backlash in the 1980s to liberal imperialism at the turn of the twenty-first century. They are, to a certain degree, representative of the debates of their eras while also bringing their own specific perspectives. The choice of these intellectuals reflects attention to gender and racial diversity, as well as the varied forms of intellectual contribution in American public life including those of foreign policy intellectuals, activists, cultural critics, journalists, and writers.

Chapter one focuses on Mailer who, as a novelist and social critic sympathetic to the radical student movements of the 1960s, drew attention to the cultural aspects of totalitarian control and applied his analysis to American society, thus subverting the Cold War bipolar divide between Soviet totalitarianism and US liberal democracy. I argue that Mailer’s importance lies in his idiosyncratic approach to totalitarianism which Americanised a discourse which had been largely dominated by émigré intellectuals. Chapter two considers Cleaver’s activist engagement with totalitarianism as a leading member of the Black Panther Party. It situates Cleaver within an established tradition of African American engagement with totalitarianism and explores the potentialities and limitations of the use of this concept as a critique of American racism. Cleaver’s work is distinguished by the fact that he was less interested in theoretical discussions than the ways in which totalitarianism could be mobilised as a concept which illuminated the lived experience of African Americans. Chapter three analyses Kirkpatrick’s contributions as a foreign policy expert and ambassador to the United Nations. I consider how she
attempted to reinstate the authority of dominant 1950s theorists of totalitarianism, projected totalitarianism back out into the international arena, and wove contemporary discussions about human rights and international terrorism into her totalitarianism theory. In chapter four, I examine Hitchens’ engagement with totalitarianism theory as a journalist and foreign correspondent and engage critically with his conflation of humanitarian and anti-totalitarian rationales for supporting the ‘war on terror’. Hitchens’ work also reveals the importance of religion to twenty-first century understandings of totalitarianism. The final chapter explores Berman’s approach to the concept of totalitarianism as a political critic and a chronicler of the ‘1968 generation’. Berman adopts a rhetorical style which relies on historical narration, and his work connects his contemporary context back through four decades to the starting point of this thesis. Though he and Peter Beinart adopt a similar stylistic approach, I focus on Berman’s work because of the attention he accords a second historical narrative – the development of the concept of ‘terror’ which was fundamental to the meaning of totalitarianism in the early twenty-first century.

This thesis offers a contextualist history which recovers the development of totalitarianism as a concept after 1960. I have not attempted to describe what totalitarianism is (or is not) but instead to analyse what it has meant and how it has been used. I have analysed the concept of totalitarianism not in order to arrive at a final definition but to understand the dynamics of anti-totalitarianism as a political argument and consider how it illuminates political debates from 1960 to the present day. In essence, I have sought to answer the same questions addressed by Gleason in his own study of totalitarianism:

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In order to see what the term means, one must examine the context in which it is defined. Who uses it? Against whom? When someone is called totalitarian, what is the meaning of the disagreement, and what are the stakes?\textsuperscript{19}

The analysis that follows shifts from domestic society to foreign policy, revealing how totalitarianism retains a hold on American political discourse. It tracks the dynamics of totalitarianism as it has been recycled and turned inwards to critique American culture and politics before being projected back out to identify America’s external enemies in the Cold War era and after.

\textsuperscript{19} Gleason, \textit{Totalitarianism}, 10.
Chapter 1: ‘Trapped in the totalitarian tissues of American society’:

Norman Mailer and Cultural Totalitarianism in the 1960s

In his 1963 collection of political essays, *The Presidential Papers*, Norman Mailer wrote that there once had been ‘a time when simple totalitarianism could be found attached to Fascism, and perhaps to Bolshevism.’ This totalitarianism ‘seemed synonymous with dictatorship’: ‘Oppression was inflicted upon a nation through its leaders … A tension was still visible between the government as the oppressor and the people as the oppressed.’ Mailer’s assessment of US society in the 1960s led him to conclude that this ‘simpler’ time had passed. A new, insidious, form of totalitarianism had ‘slipped into America’, into the ‘psyche’ of American citizens, without altering the existing political structure or visibly oppressing Americans.¹

The description of 1960s America as a totalitarian society cuts across most conventional understandings of the meaning of the term ‘totalitarian’. While ‘totalitarianism’ has always been, and remains, a protean concept, it is associated with certain core characteristics. Totalitarianism has an inseparable connection to the ideological conflict of the Cold War. The term became shorthand for the argument that Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union shared an essential nature and should be categorised together as equal threats to American democracy and indeed liberal democracy everywhere. In addition to its enlistment as a fighting term in the Cold War, the meaning of totalitarianism centred on fears of coercive state control extending to all areas of life. Totalitarianism was the nexus in a web of connections to fears of economic collectivism, ideology, surveillance, propaganda, the use of terror, concentration camps – all centring on the issue of state control.

In his work in the 1960s, Mailer developed a theory of cultural totalitarianism which deemphasised the coercive role of the state and instead found the root of totalitarianism in the cultural conformity that permeated American society. In doing so, he transferred his attention from the Soviet Union to the United States as the main focus of his theory of totalitarianism. This shift in emphasis from the statist or political totalitarianism of Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union to a more loosely defined cultural totalitarianism reflected Mailer’s preoccupation with internal psychological manipulation rather than external political coercion. Moreover, Mailer’s concentration on the United States was symptomatic of a broader intellectual trend towards the study of non-statist forms of totalitarianism which has yet to receive adequate scholarly attention. Mailer was a crucial figure in this context, as he was instrumental in shifting the meaning and focus of totalitarianism in the 1960s. Encroaching totalitarianism in America was Mailer’s main preoccupation during this period, and we fail to gain a full picture of his significance without analysing the meaning of this concept in his work. The 1960s have been generally overlooked by scholars of totalitarianism. This chapter extends the history of totalitarianism beyond the bounds of the well-researched early Cold War period and examines the counterhegemonic use of totalitarianism as a justification strategy for radical politics.

The flexibility of totalitarianism as a concept, its ambiguity and amorphousness, were important features contributing to its influence after the 1950s. Totalitarianism had

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2 Though Mailer did not use the term ‘cultural’ to describe the totalitarianism he identified, I use this term to identify his distinctive version of this concept, which was focused on the cultural conformity which permeated American society. I do so to differentiate his use of the concept from the prevailing assumption that totalitarianism was a political or statist phenomenon. Other scholars have similarly referred to Mailer’s ‘cultural’ totalitarianism but have not considered in detail how his version was related to dominant understandings of the concept. See Maggie McKinley, Understanding Norman Mailer (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 2017), 27; Cyrus Ernesto Zirakzadeh, “Political Prophecy in Contemporary American Literature: The Left-Conservative Vision of Norman Mailer,” Review of Politics 69, no.4 (2007): 631–32.
been a highly fluid concept since its first widespread usage in the 1930s. The proliferation of theories of totalitarianism in the immediate aftermath of World War II and in the 1950s, including the significant influence of the work of German émigrés in the United States, did little to resolve debates surrounding its correct application. Rather than providing a definitive description of the historical phenomenon of totalitarianism, these theories opened new avenues and broadened the scope of the debate. The instability of the concept and its protean nature facilitated its appropriation by radical intellectuals in the 1960s.

In the two decades following the end of World War II the American Left underwent a period of transition, and Mailer occupied a strategic position at the locus of this shift. He can be viewed as a hinge figure in American intellectual life – he had connections to both the Old Left and the New, to the establishment, the Beat Generation and the counterculture. He was both a member of the intellectual elite and a popular celebrity. While numerous studies of Mailer mention his interest in totalitarianism, scholars have yet to connect his work to the longer history of this concept, despite its importance to his social criticism.³

To understand Mailer’s intervention in the debate, it is essential to grasp how his work connected to dominant understandings of totalitarianism and how structural ambiguities in this concept allowed for alternative readings. The first half of this chapter explores the inherent flexibility of the concept and highlights aspects of the totalitarianism discourse that facilitated its appropriation by radical political actors. Prevailing theories of totalitarianism – particularly around the height of their influence in the 1950s –

emphasised the centrality of the state. While totalitarianism was fundamentally connected to the Nazi and Soviet regimes, the way in which it was also understood as a type of disease or insidious infection facilitated a broader definition which transcended national boundaries. Equally important was the association of totalitarianism with invasive state control. The perceived ability of totalitarian societies to control thought and behaviour was a defining characteristic. By the late 1960s, these prior theories of totalitarianism were in decline, and increasingly challenged by a trend towards US-focused models which de-emphasised the coercive role of the state. The emerging theories kept the emphasis on the psychological aspects of control while shifting the location of the causes.

The second half of the chapter examines Mailer’s development of the idea of cultural totalitarianism, which built on the ambiguity and rhetorical power of dominant understandings of totalitarianism to support his radical critique of American society. In doing so, Mailer helped open a discursive space in which alternative readings of totalitarianism were possible in the 1960s.

Totalitarianism and the State

Mailer’s counterhegemonic appropriation of totalitarianism necessitated shifts in conventional understandings of the term because, from the 1930s to the 1950s, most Americans perceived totalitarianism as an external threat. As Gleason has noted, ‘the idea of totalitarianism had been the special point of view of those who believed in the necessity of what became the Cold War’. The influence of the concept of totalitarianism was most overt when considering its effects on US foreign policy. Guiding decision-making during the years of the Cold War was the vision of Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union as new kinds of ‘insatiably aggressive and invasive state[s]’ which posed an ‘unparalleled threat’

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4 Gleason, *Totalitarianism*, 129.
to the American and European democracies. The concept of totalitarianism provided a binary framework of understanding in which the co-existence of totalitarian and ‘free’ states in the world was impossible and ‘the leaders of the free world would have to struggle (until victory was won) or perish.’\textsuperscript{5} The spectre of totalitarianism abroad also acted as a warning to the United States to avoid the path trodden by European nations, even leading, as David Ciepley has argued, ‘to a redefinition of the very “meaning” of America’ resulting in a ‘rupture in the American liberal tradition.’\textsuperscript{6} According to Ciepley, fears of totalitarianism pushed American intellectual discourse in a libertarian direction in both cultural and economic terms, as liberalism was reframed as the polar opposite of totalitarianism, which represented ‘\textit{state control of both body and mind}’.\textsuperscript{7}

Both Gleason and Ciepley emphasise the importance of the state in definitions of totalitarianism, in both meanings of the state as an externally sovereign entity and the state as internal government. Ideas of totalitarianism when connected to the Nazi and Soviet states represented an external threat to the United States. As Benjamin Alpers has argued in his study of the classic era of totalitarianism, in the late 1930s the focus on the ‘totalitarian state’ was joined by new understandings of totalitarianism. From this point onwards totalitarianism referred to both an all-powerful state and a system of belief. The definition of totalitarianism as a style of thinking was more general and flexible and reflected popular fears of ‘isms’ and ideology. In this context, American politicians, the press, and the popular media sometimes presented totalitarianism as an ‘active force in the world’ – an independent actor with a life of its own.\textsuperscript{8} This tendency increased in the Cold War climate, bolstered by a broader culture of heightened fears of disease and
infection which characterised Cold War discourse. Totalitarianism was frequently constructed as a type of disease which could infect individuals and nations and spread throughout the world. As Geoffrey S. Smith has observed, medical language was prevalent in the political culture of the Cold War, where the ‘spectre of “red Fascism” or “brown Bolshevism”’, whether defined as plague or epidemic, as virus or bacteria’ threatened the ““Free World” in ways more sinister than armies or advanced weaponry’. 9

Such language contributed to Americans’ widely held perception of totalitarianism, particularly in its Communist form, as insidious and deceptive. The work of Waldemar Gurian, a German Catholic émigré whose ideas, according to Udi Greenberg, helped to form the ideological foundations of the Cold War, exemplified the prevalent view of the insidious nature of totalitarianism. Gurian was recognised as a leading scholar of totalitarianism and he emphasised its deceptive, insidious, and transformative qualities. His work captured and perpetuated fears that totalitarianism had the ability to creep unnoticed into the tissues of democratic society and to ‘consume [it] from within’. 10 Yet, the nature of the threat, even though it was complex, remained external to the United States. As Alpers comments, ‘[t]hough totalitarianism could take hold in the United States, the virus had to be transplanted from without.’ 11 Public intellectual and former radical Max Eastman captured this sentiment in 1940, when he wrote ‘[t]he enemy of democracy and civilization is not any country, but the totalitarian state of mind. And that state of mind is most successfully introduced into the United States by the adherents of and fellow travelers of Stalin.’ 12 Even in this amorphous formulation, Eastman found totalitarianism to have external origins.

10 Greenberg, Weimar Century, 159.
11 Alpers, Dictators, Democracy, 144.
12 Quoted in ibid., 144.
Totalitarianism thus reflected fears of the military and ideological threat that emanated from Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union but also a more general and universal threat that could permeate national borders. Mark Greif has found that fears of totalitarianism’s ability to transform human nature occupied a central position in the minds of American intellectuals and writers in the middle decades of the twentieth century. Greif argues that intellectuals ‘converged on a perception of danger’ during these years, centred on the fear that the very nature of ‘man’ was under attack. The attack on ‘man’ ‘largely occurred at gunpoint, of Nazi, Soviet, or fascist arms, though intellectuals took the threat to be much more general.’

The idea of the state as the carrier of totalitarianism – which remained a crucial aspect of its definition – thus existed in tension with fears of totalitarianism as a universal threat to human nature, as a disease, or an independent force in the world. Disease metaphors and the perception of totalitarianism as an autonomous actor were central to Mailer’s development of an American version of totalitarianism in the 1960s.

**Totalitarianism and State Control**

From the 1930s to the 1950s, American intellectuals established a fundamental connection between totalitarianism and the idea of state control. However, it is vital to note that understandings of state control centred not just on external coercion but also on the ability of the state to control behaviour through internal, psychological means. As Gleason has suggested, ‘totalitarianism’ invoked a ‘radically intrusive state’ which could reach into citizens’ private thoughts and make them ‘constitutionally incapable’ of

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challenging the state. The internalised aspects of control became a central part of Mailer’s theory of American totalitarianism which de-emphasised the role of the state.

An analysis of the ‘conceptual foundations’ of totalitarianism, presented by political scientist Benjamin R. Barber in 1967, illuminates the nature and status of dominant understandings of totalitarianism, as well as the prevalence of alternative US-focused constructions by the late 1960s. Barber’s essay surveyed the wide-ranging existing literature and highlighted the major fault lines and ambiguities inherent in the discourse on totalitarianism. He argued that differences of opinion centred on whether totalitarianism should be examined primarily as a political or socio-economic entity, whether totalitarianism was a matter of ‘degree’ or ‘kind’, whether totalitarianism was a uniquely modern phenomenon or whether it had existed in past forms, and whether it was ‘logically antithetical’ – or in some forms compatible with – democracy. Barber’s findings reflected the fracturing status of dominant understandings of totalitarianism by the 1960s. For Barber, ‘the major conclusion to be drawn from … [the] discrepancies in usage and ambiguities in definition that surround the term is that totalitarianism is to modern political science what reason was to Luther: a conceptual harlot of uncertain parentage, belonging to no one but at the service of all.’

Despite his emphasis on the near hopeless ambiguity of theories of totalitarianism and his wish that they would decline, Barber attempted in his essay to uncover the root meaning of totalitarianism. In doing so, he highlighted the prevalence of alternative constructions of totalitarianism and unravelled their connection to dominant understandings. He found that ‘almost all definitions … share[d] a concern… [with] the

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14 Gleason, Totalitarianism, 10.
16 Ibid., 19.
relationship between the public domain (the state) and the private realm’. In the broadest terms, all theories were concerned with what Barber identified as ‘totalism’ – ‘an all-encompassing social and political holism that rejects boundaries and, hence, the fragmented public and private spheres that boundaries define’. However, the focus on ‘statist’ totalism inherent in most theories of totalitarianism obscured other forms of totalism which were achieved ‘by means other than repressive statism’. Barber identified a noncoercive form of totalism – which he termed ‘involuntary totalism’ – in which ‘public power, without increasing its scope or jeopardizing its legitimacy, seeps by default into a somnolent private sector under conditions of unconscious conformity that obviate the need for – indeed exclude the possibility of – coercion.’ This totalism was evolutionary and involuntary in the sense of being unintentional – not revolutionary and deliberate like statist totalitarianism. To be free in such a society ‘[would] necessarily entail resistance to internal psychological restraints and subliminal manipulation’. In this understanding:

the Soviet Union approximates the statist pattern in which revolutionary coercion is used to extend the public sphere into areas previously considered private, while the United States conforms more to a seepage model in which the increasing irrelevance of formal constitutional boundaries coupled with a gradual and largely unperceived evaporation of the distinction between private and public have led to a blending of the two realms favorable to thought and behavior control of a far more subtle kind. The individual personality is submerged in both cases, but in a framework of repressive coercion on the one hand, and in one of consensus, conformity, and legitimacy on the other.

In his study of totalitarianism as a concept in the late 1960s Barber thus found it appropriate to give extensive attention to ideas of totalitarianism that did not centre on coercive state control – formulations in which the United States might be considered as

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17 Ibid., 24.
18 Ibid., 27.
19 Ibid., 29.
20 Ibid., 30.
equally totalitarian as the Soviet Union. In more recent histories of this concept this highly significant part of the debate over totalitarianism has been lost.

The proliferation of alternative theories of totalitarianism coincided with, and indeed was enabled by, the declining status of dominant understandings of totalitarianism. Two of the three discussions of totalitarianism contained in the same volume concluded with the hope that ‘the totalitarian construct [would] be overtaken … by creeping desuetude’ and the assertion that ‘it does not serve the cause of comparative political analysis or of political understanding to cling to the concept of totalitarianism.’\(^{21}\) The legitimacy of the totalitarian conceptual model was declining in the social sciences in the 1960s, as well as in public debate.\(^{22}\) Liberalisation in the Soviet Union following the death of Stalin in 1953 also challenged the notion of the fixed nature of totalitarian societies. At home, opposition to the Vietnam War raised broader questions about Cold War policy and ideology.\(^{23}\) In this climate US-focused constructions of totalitarianism flourished – although they never reached the status of the hegemonic theories of totalitarianism of the 1950s. In 1967 students at the University of Pennsylvania could take a course entitled ‘The United States as a Totalitarian Society’.\(^{24}\) Even Carl J. Friedrich, co-author of the paradigmatic study *Totalitarian Dictatorship and Autocracy* (1956), noted in 1969 that ‘totalitarian trends … are not absent in constitutional democracies such as the United States.’\(^{25}\)

Norman Mailer was an important influence over the shift towards alternative readings of totalitarianism focused on the United States. He contributed towards

\(^{21}\) Ibid., 39 and Curtis, “Retreat from Totalitarianism,” in *Totalitarianism in Perspective*, 116.
\(^{23}\) Ibid., 130.
fracturing the dominant discourse by widely – even indiscriminately – using the concept of totalitarianism outside of its Cold War conceptual framework. In doing so, he helped open a discursive space in which alternative constructions of totalitarian were possible. Mailer focused on the cultural, non-statist form of totalitarianism existing in America, rather than the political, statist version associated with Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union. This use of totalitarianism separated him from the Old Left and marked him as an influence over a new generation of radicals. His significance was captured in a statement made by Irving Howe, a public intellectual and social critic associated with the New York intellectual circle, in 1968. Howe lamented the prevalence among New Leftists of what he regarded as the irresponsible ‘notion that we live in a society that can be described as “liberal fascism”’. For inspiring such talk, Howe continued, ‘men like Norman Mailer must bear a heavy responsibility, insofar as they have recklessly employed the term “totalitarian” as a descriptive for present-day American society.’

As we will see in chapter two Mailer’s influence was apparent in the work of Eldridge Cleaver, who later became a leading member of the Black Panther Party. Mailer briefly corresponded with Cleaver in 1966 while the latter was in prison and sent him a copy of his latest work. In his bestselling memoir *Soul on Ice* (1968) Cleaver wrote that he became ‘a student of Norman Mailer’s *The White Negro*, which seemed to me both prophetic and penetrating’. Cleaver adopted Mailer’s view of the United States as totalitarian to reinforce his criticisms of American society.

The decline in status of dominant theories of totalitarianism goes some way towards explaining the rise of alternative theories in the 1960s. However, this begs the question: why did American intellectuals, like Mailer, not abandon the concept of

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totalitarianism altogether? An answer can be found in aspects of the discourse on totalitarianism from the previous decades that made it particularly appropriate for use as a critique of American society. The connection between theories of mass society and totalitarianism, the image of European totalitarianism as a warning to the United States, and the focus on the psychological effects of terror in totalitarian societies were all aspects of the debate which facilitated the argument that totalitarianism had taken root in the United States.

One major point of crossover between dominant and US-focused constructions of totalitarianism was the theory of ‘mass society’ which Daniel Bell, in *The End of Ideology* (1960), identified as ‘probably the most influential social theory in the Western world today’ aside from Marxism.\(^{28}\) Much like their use of the concept of totalitarianism, intellectuals freely employed the theory of mass society but its exact meaning remained ambiguous; attempts to apply it analytically were hampered by its ‘slippery’ nature.\(^{29}\)

From the 1930s, theorists of diverse political stripes, including members of the Frankfurt School on the left as well as cultural conservatives on the right, had offered differing and at times contradictory formulations of mass society. Broadly speaking, these theories were united by the concern that, in the modern era, people had been brought into closer contact and were more interdependent, but ‘[d]espite this greater interdependence … individuals ha[d] grown more estranged from one another’.\(^{30}\) Versions of this theory were advanced by Hannah Arendt, C. Wright Mills, Herbert Marcuse, and Paul Goodman. Dwight Macdonald, associated with the New York intellectual circle and a close friend of Norman Mailer, focused his magazine, *politics*, on a rejection of ‘all the forces of

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\(^{29}\) Ibid., 22.

\(^{30}\) Ibid., 21.
modern life that were contributing to the process of dehumanization, alienation, “thingification”.

In particular, Macdonald was troubled by the effects of modern warfare, which reduced soldiers to cogs ‘in one hell of a big machine’, and modern mass culture, which he saw as exerting a form of control over the mind.

Theories of mass society and dominant understandings of totalitarianism were closely related but crucially separate. For most theorists, mass society was a stepping stone on the road to totalitarianism, or else a prerequisite for its full emergence. In The Power Elite (1956), C. Wright Mills wrote that the United States had ‘moved a considerable distance along the road to the mass society. At the end of that road there [was] totalitarianism, as in Nazi Germany or in Communist Russia’, but America was ‘not yet at that end.’

Many agreed that the United States was or could become a mass society, and this made it dangerously susceptible to totalitarian influence. Bell observed that ‘in the light of Communist successes, the argument has been advanced that the mass society … is particularly vulnerable to Communist penetration’. At the same time, however, the general conviction followed Hannah Arendt’s argument in The Origins of Totalitarianism (1951) that America had a natural resistance to totalitarianism, and had ‘escaped the extreme effects of having become a mass society’. Crucially, though, the theory of mass society established a way of thinking that identified similar problems in the West and the East which cut across the Cold War bipolar division between

34 Bell, End of Ideology, 31.
totalitarianism and democracy. Mailer built on the connection between mass society and totalitarianism to make his case for the existence of totalitarianism in the United States.

The image of totalitarianism abroad had acted as a warning of what might happen in America should it fail to deal with the same problems which had plagued European societies since the 1930s. During that decade, understandings of the rise of European totalitarianism centred on the role of economic hardship and the psychological effects of modernity, exacerbated by the impact of the mass media.\(^{36}\) While widespread economic hardship was an issue linked to the years of the Great Depression, similar fears centring on psychology and concerning US susceptibility to totalitarianism existed in the 1950s and early 1960s. These were manifested in a compulsion to develop systematic tests and experiments that would gauge and quantify the possibility of totalitarianism taking hold in America, with the hope of finding the means of resistance. Theodor W. Adorno’s *The Authoritarian Personality* (1950), which took on the ‘task of diagnosing potential fascism’ in the United States by exploring ways to identify ‘potentially fascistic individuals’, was an example of this type of research.\(^{37}\) In a similar vein, Eric Hoffer’s *The True Believer* (1951) sought a psychological explanation for the phenomenon of mass movements by seeking to trace the ‘genesis’ and outline the ‘nature’ of the fanatical ‘true believers’ who made up their ranks.\(^{38}\) The drive to understand the psychological root of totalitarian movements was no less present in the 1960s, when the widely reported 1961 trial of Adolf Eichmann captured the attention of Americans. In the same year, Stanley Milgram’s experiments at Yale University on the subject of obedience to authority sought to answer the question of how so many ‘ordinary’ people could have been complicit in

\(^{36}\) Alpers, *Dictators, Democracy*, 94–128.


the monstrous crimes of the Holocaust. Many studies that warned of the potential for totalitarianism in the United States looked for its causes not in the expansion of state control, but in the psychology of individuals.\(^39\)

Psychology was key to understanding both the causes and the effects of totalitarianism. One of the most influential early analyses of totalitarianism in its most extreme form – the concentration camp – was Bruno Bettelheim’s ‘Individual and Mass Behavior in Extreme Situations’ (1942).\(^40\) Bettelheim was interested not in the use of terror itself but its psychological impact – the ‘process of disintegration’ of autonomous personality which produced a childlike and submissive prisoner.\(^41\) This focus on psychology could be translated into a very different context – one which eliminated the physical elements of terror altogether. The influence of Bettelheim’s work was evident in feminist scholar Betty Friedan’s comparison of American suburban homes to ‘comfortable concentration camps’, on the basis of their alleged infantilising and dehumanising effects on women, in her 1963 book *The Feminine Mystique*.\(^42\) Kirsten Fermaglich positions this analogy in the context of a wider trend ‘in the late 1950s and early to mid-1960s … when some American Jewish thinkers … emphasized the evils of Nazi concentration camps … as a means of expressing prevalent intellectual concerns with bureaucracy, alienation, and conformity and criticizing American society from a liberal perspective.’\(^43\) The emphasis on psychology in Bettelheim’s work facilitated a comparison of the ‘psychological and physical destruction’ of the concentration camp

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\(^{39}\) For more on the intersection of psychoanalysis and totalitarianism see Matt ffytche and Daniel Pick, eds., *Psychoanalysis in the Age of Totalitarianism* (London: Routledge, 2016).

\(^{40}\) Although now widely discredited, Bettelheim’s work was highly influential around mid-century.


\(^{43}\) Ibid., 207.
with the ‘psychological devastation’ of the suburban home.\(^{44}\) Attention to the internal psychological causes and effects of totalitarianism, over the external violent coercions of the state, was central to Mailer’s application of this concept to an American context in the 1960s.

One of the most significant absences in US-focused theories of totalitarianism was the idea of terror. For Arendt, in her seminal *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (1951), terror was the ‘essence of totalitarian domination’.\(^ {45}\) Studies of American totalitarianism rejected the centrality of terror in favour of an emphasis on non-coercive psychological manipulation. One of the most significant examples of this type of theory was Herbert Marcuse’s 1964 *One-Dimensional Man*. A German émigré associated with the Frankfurt School, Marcuse’s work in the 1960s was a significant influence on the American New Left. He argued that totalitarianism was ‘not only a *terroristic political* coordination of society, but also a *non-terroristic* economic-technical coordination which operates through manipulation of needs by vested interests’, which then ‘preclude[d] the emergence of an effective opposition against the whole.’\(^ {46}\) *One-Dimensional Man* can be viewed as a ‘convergence’ model of totalitarianism – theories which argued that all modern industrial societies were becoming alike and equally oppressive.\(^ {47}\) This idea was not new to the 1960s. James Burnham’s *The Managerial Revolution* (1941) which predicted the rise of a new ruling class of ‘managers’ around the world, although not strictly a theory of totalitarianism, can be considered in this vein. Like Mailer, Marcuse rejected dominant theories of totalitarianism that focused on external threats and used the idea of totalitarianism to argue against the Cold War. For Marcuse, the genuine causes of

\(^{44}\) Ibid., 206. My emphasis.


\(^{47}\) Barber, “Conceptual Foundations,” 12.
the threat to humanity inherent in ‘contemporary industrial society’ remained ‘unidentified, unexposed, unattacked by the public because they recede[d] before the all too obvious threat from without – to the West from the East, to the East from the West.’

Émigré intellectuals, such as Marcuse and Arendt, as well as Bettelheim, Adorno, Friedrich, and Gurian, profoundly shaped the discourse on totalitarianism in the United States. However, the prominence of émigrés in the debate over totalitarianism is all the more reason to study Mailer’s central contribution to the Americanisation of a concept which had always maintained a ‘whiff of foreignness’. Mailer built on the structural ambiguities of dominant theories of totalitarianism, its association with contagion, its links to mass society, previous warnings of the potentiality for totalitarianism in America, and the focus on psychological understandings of the nature of control, to develop a theory of cultural totalitarianism that was distinctively American. Regarding himself first and foremost as an American writer and cultural critic, Mailer moved beyond a comparative approach and shifted the primary focus of interest and study to the United States.

**Norman Mailer, Conformism, and Totalitarianism in the 1950s**

As Benjamin R. Barber’s 1967 survey of totalitarianism revealed, counterhegemonic conceptions of this concept which de-emphasised the role of state control were a fixture of the discourse by the mid to late 1960s. Mailer, however, had been incorporating an analysis of US society as totalitarian into his work as far back as the late 1940s. His contribution to the discourse on totalitarianism is thus vital to understanding how the

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48 Marcuse, *One-Dimensional Man*, xxxix.
49 Alpers, *Dictators, Democracy*, 144.
50 Another early proponent of the idea that America had become totalitarian was Dwight Macdonald. See Christopher Lasch, *The New Radicalism in America, 1889–1963: The Intellectual as a Social Type* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1966), 324.
concept was reconfigured and, as a result, became open to appropriation by other radical political actors. Mailer focused on a type of totalitarianism already existing in American society in the form of cultural conformity, which sharply distinguished his from earlier uses of this concept, even those which warned of the potential for totalitarianism spreading to America. As literary critic Diana Trilling commented in 1962, ‘[e]ven before the height of McCarthyism, as far back as his first novels, Mailer had arrived at th[e] conviction that fascism is not merely a potential in America as in any modern capitalism but, what is quite another order of political hypothesis, that it is the most coherent and dominant force in American society.’

Totalitarianism was a crucial concern for Mailer from the time he rose to fame with the success of his first novel *The Naked and the Dead* (1948) and continued to shape his thoughts throughout his writing career. His engagement with the concept was at a peak in the 1960s, a period which saw his departure from a focus on writing novels to a foray into political essays. From the beginning of his career as a writer and public intellectual, Mailer’s political views did not conform to the dominant Cold War anti-communist consensus. In the late 1940s, he leaned towards a revolutionary anti-Stalinist position guided by his friend and mentor Jean Malaquais, a Marxist writer and philosopher. Malaquais’ influence was evident in Mailer’s statement at the 1949 ‘Cultural and Scientific Conference for World Peace’ held at the Waldorf Hotel in New York. Here, Mailer argued that ‘both Russia and America [were] moving radically towards state capitalism … and that … there [was] no future in fighting for one side or the other.’ The critique of state capitalism was a position held by some factions of the anti-Stalinist left,

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and Mailer’s emphasis on the growing similarities between the United States and the Soviet Union was also in line with the ‘convergence theories’ identified above. Although Mailer’s position went against the grain of the dominant Cold War discourse, his views at the conference won him support among American left-wing intellectuals like Dwight Macdonald, Mary McCarthy and Irving Howe.⁵³

State capitalism and the similar forms of oppressive bureaucracy in the United States and Soviet Union were also central concerns in Mailer’s second published novel *Barbary Shore* (1951).⁵⁴ Here he engaged with dominant understandings of totalitarianism to make a counterhegemonic comparison between the opposing sides in the Cold War. *Barbary Shore* investigated the overreaching of the state in America: ‘herald[ing] the emergence of an American version of the police state’. It ends with ‘an image of internal state terror which compares with the practices of Stalin’s secret police.’⁵⁵ The novel sought to unsettle Americans’ confidence in their culture and values. For Norman Podhoretz, Mailer’s point in *Barbary Shore* was ‘precisely that our society is not what it seems to be. It seems to be prosperous, vigorous, sure of itself, and purposeful, whereas in fact it is apathetic, confused, inept, empty, and in the grip of invisible forces that it neither recognises nor controls.’⁵⁶ During the 1950s, at the height of the anti-communist hysteria in the United States, totalitarianism was a crucial element of the explanatory narrative of the Cold War which put a premium on conformity and repressed criticisms of the status quo, justified by the necessity of protecting American democracy from totalitarian subversion.⁵⁷ Mailer challenged the accepted connection

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⁵³ Ibid., 117.
⁵⁵ Ibid., 87, 91.
⁵⁷ While I maintain that the imperatives of the Cold War and the threat of totalitarianism put a premium on conformity, I do not intend to suggest that no dissent was possible during these years. See Jennifer A.
between the threat of totalitarianism and the necessity of conformity in America, arguing that suppressing criticism of America in the name of preserving US dominance in the Cold War could lead to the very situation it sought to avoid – the introduction of totalitarianism in America. His increasing interest in cultural conformity reflected the beginning of his reformulation of a theory of totalitarianism to fit an American context.

Mailer’s response to a 1952 *Partisan Review* symposium on ‘Our Country and Our Culture’ reflected his negative reaction to the trend towards conformity and the uncritical celebration of American democracy. The *Partisan Review* editors wrote that this was a period in which ‘many writers and intellectuals … [felt] closer to their country and its culture’ due to the recognition that American democracy had ‘an intrinsic and positive value’ and needed to be ‘defended against Russian totalitarianism.’ 58 Mailer resolutely refused to accept this intellectual trend. His disagreement with the editors concerned, in part, the meaning of totalitarianism and the implications this had for the relationship of intellectuals to American culture. In response to the editors’ opening statement, Mailer countered that he was ‘in almost total disagreement with the assumptions of [the] symposium.’ 59 While he accepted that many writers had come to champion the ‘American Century’, he argued that this had stunted their ability to produce material of any worth. Intellectuals who found themselves ‘in the American grain’ failed to discuss what Mailer identified as the real crisis: that the needs of modern ‘total war and the total war economy predicate[d] a total regimentation of thought’, ‘that the prosperity of America depend[ed] upon the production of the means of destruction, and it [was] not only the Soviet Union which [was] driven toward war as an answer to insoluble

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59 Norman Mailer, contribution to “Our Country and Our Culture,” 298.
problems. Mailer thus rejected the argument that Soviet totalitarianism represented the greatest threat to American democracy and pointed to similar problems in both systems.

By the early 1950s Mailer’s position constituted a rejection of the official anti-totalitarianism of the Cold War establishment. Instead, he highlighted similarities on both sides of the Cold War divide. He also displayed an interest in metaphors of disease that permeated Cold War discourse. In the *Partisan Review* symposium, he wrote that it was a period of ‘health manifestos. Everywhere the American writer is being dunned to become healthy, to grow up, to accept the American reality, to integrate himself, to eschew disease’. These metaphors pervaded his own work in the 1950s, and captured the insidious nature of the problems he sought to expose. In the *Village Voice*, Mailer wrote of ‘the hopeless conformity which plagues us’ and the ‘anti-human plague of our time’.

Another major source of interest for Mailer was psychology – or more specifically the Freudian theory of psychoanalysis – evident in his unpublished ‘Lipton’s Journal’. Written while he was struggling to publish his third novel *The Deer Park* in the winter and spring of 1954–1955, the ‘Lipton’s Journal’ documented Mailer’s experimentation with marijuana and attempts to psychoanalyse himself. In addition to his personal thoughts and observations, major themes in the journal include a critique of psychoanalysis, particularly the theories of Sigmund Freud, an extended discussion of the relationship between society and the individual, and the importance of sexual liberation and revolution. Written at speed in a stream-of-consciousness style, the journal reveals the problems that were at the forefront of Mailer’s mind in the mid-1950s. The influence

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60 Ibid., 300.
61 Ibid., 299.
of the theory of mass society is readily apparent in the journal entries, particularly in Mailer’s negative attitude towards the mass media. He mused that ‘[a]dvertising and television and radio and newspaper and movies, but especially advertising are society’s war upon each individual. It is the place where advertising reaches deep into each man’s soul and converts a piece of it to society’.  

Mailer further experimented with putting together his interest in mass society and Freud in *Advertisements for Myself*, a collection of essays and fiction published in 1959. By rewriting a section from Freud’s *The Interpretation of Dreams*, Mailer sought to apply Freud’s theories to society rather than the individual – so Freud’s ‘psychological technique which makes it possible to interpret dreams’ became Mailer’s ‘psychological technique which makes it possible to interpret the unconscious undercurrents of society’. His experimentation with psychoanalysis reflected his growing dissatisfaction with the ability of Marxist theories to solve the problems of modern society – particularly the effects of consumer culture and the manipulations of the mass media. In ‘From Surplus Value to the Mass-Media’, which he saw as one of the most important short essays in *Advertisements*, Mailer explored the limitations of Marxism and argued that the future of radicalism ‘[could] come only from a new revolutionary vision of society’. The new theory would not ‘explore nearly so far into that jungle of political economy which Marx charted … but rather will engage with the empty words, dead themes, and sentimental voids of [the] mass-media’. Mailer’s critiques of Marxism paralleled the limitations he found in dominant theories of totalitarianism, which focused on political and economic (physical), rather than psychological, domination. The foremost problem

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63 Norman Mailer, “Lipton’s Journal,” entry for December 17, 1954, container 1014.1–3, Norman Mailer Papers, Harry Ransom Center, University of Texas at Austin.
65 Ibid., 375.
in Mailer’s mind was the ‘psychic’ manipulations of the mass media which, in America, outweighed the issue of the ‘forcibl[e]’ subjection of the working class.66

**Totalitarianism in ‘The White Negro’**

Mailer’s ideas on totalitarianism were developed in his landmark 1957 essay ‘The White Negro’. Here, Mailer articulated his theory that hipsterism represented the best chance of escaping the post-war ‘years of conformity and depression’.67 Mailer defined the ‘hipster’ as an ‘American existentialist’: one who was ‘divorce[d] … from society’ and ‘without roots’. Hipsters embraced the ‘rebellious imperatives of the self’ and ‘existe[d] in the present’.68 Hipsterism was Mailer’s answer to the limitations of Marxism – a theory that dealt with the psychological dislocations of society and responded to the problems of what he came to identify as cultural totalitarianism. In ‘The White Negro’, Mailer built on earlier theories which saw totalitarianism as a universal phenomenon which had escaped the boundaries of the state – and developed the view of totalitarianism as a collective phenomenon, or as a condition of the twentieth century, which had implications for the whole of humanity. This essay, which gained widespread attention and influence, represented a crucial pivot in Mailer’s theory of a distinctively American form of totalitarianism. It also cemented Mailer’s status as an intermediary between the intellectual establishment, known as the ‘Family’, and the less conventional Beat Generation.69 Finally, it positioned Mailer as an influence on the rising radicalism of the New Left.70

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66 Ibid., 374.
68 Ibid., 283.
70 Ibid., 221.
Although the essay has been widely discussed, the relationship between the ‘hipster’ and Mailer’s view of American totalitarianism requires further consideration.\(^{71}\) In the opening lines Mailer merged the implications of ‘the concentration camps and the atom bomb’, a link which in itself subverted the putative moral divide between totalitarian and democratic states. The universal psychological consequences of the crimes of World War II were emphasised in Mailer’s assertion that ‘we will never be able to determine the psychic havoc of the concentration camps and the atom bomb upon the unconscious mind of almost everyone alive in these years.’\(^{72}\) The often-quoted opening paragraphs of the essay reinforce the idea of collective guilt and are revealing of Mailer’s engagement with the concept of totalitarianism:

The Second World War presented a mirror to the human condition which blinded anyone who looked into it. For if tens of millions were killed in concentration camps out of the inexorable agonies and contractions of super-states founded upon the always insoluble contradictions of injustice, one was then obliged also to see that no matter how crippled and perverted an image of man was the society he had created, it was nonetheless his creation, his collective creation (at least his collective creation from the past) and if society was so murderous, then who could ignore the most hideous of questions about his own nature?

Worse. One could hardly maintain the courage to be individual, to speak with one’s own voice, for the years in which one could complacently accept oneself as part of an elite by being a radical were forever gone. A man knew that when he dissented, he gave a note upon his life which could be called in any year of overt crisis. No wonder then that these have been the years of conformity and


depression. A stench of fear has come out of every pore of American life, and we suffer from a collective failure of nerve.⁷³

These paragraphs are crucial as, here, Mailer moved subtly from the concentration camps of Nazi Germany to post-war America, linking and implicitly equating the features of totalitarianism in its dominant understanding with the conformity of American society. In viewing totalitarianism as a universal phenomenon, Mailer suggested that the psychological effects of the concentration camps extended across national borders, that the very fact of the existence of concentration camps in Europe was enough to ensure conformity in America. Mailer continued that it was ‘on this bleak scene that a phenomenon has appeared: the American existentialist – the hipster, the man who knows that … our collective condition is to live with instant death by atomic war, relatively quick death by the State as l’univers concentrationnaire, or with a slow death by conformity with every creative and rebellious instinct stifled.’⁷⁴ Mailer thus conjured up parallels between the effects of the concentration camps and the effects of conformity in America – going beyond an analysis of the similarity in terms of psychological control to argue that each resulted in death. Although this analogy seems overblown, intentionally provocative and insulting, it was in keeping with the work of several other Jewish intellectuals, including Stanley M. Elkins, Betty Friedan, Stanley Milgram, and Robert Jay Lifton, who in the late 1950s and early 1960s used imagery from the concentration camps to illuminate problems in American society and culture.⁷⁵ It also revealed Mailer’s determination to emphasise that the worst effects of totalitarianism could be felt without state coercion or violence.

⁷³ Ibid., 282–3.
⁷⁴ Ibid., 283.
The link between conformity and the identification of American society as totalitarian was made explicit as Mailer outlined his thesis, that ‘[o]ne is Hip or one is Square … one is a rebel … or else a Square cell, trapped in the totalitarian tissues of American society, doomed willy-nilly to conform if one is to succeed.’ The hipster was both a product of the ‘bleak scene’ of the post-war world and an answer to it. Mailer indirectly acknowledged that there were differences between the forms of totalitarianism in Nazi Germany and in post-war America, although, as he did in later works, he contended that ‘partial’ totalitarianism in America might have had a more damaging effect on the psyche of citizens. The implications of Mailer’s emphasis on the psychological effects, over the physical violence, of totalitarian regimes was evident in his argument that ‘[a] totalitarian society makes enormous demands on the courage of men, and a partially totalitarian society makes even greater demands for the general anxiety is greater.’ Mailer’s reference to ‘partial totalitarianism’ suggests that, in the late 1950s, he was still working with dominant theories of totalitarianism in mind and recognised that America was missing certain crucial elements.

The limits of Mailer’s focus on cultural conformity were revealed in his treatment of race and totalitarianism in ‘The White Negro’. Though not an activist, Mailer was generally supportive of the civil rights and Black Power movements. Race was also a recurring theme in his work – ‘The White Negro’ and two sympathetic articles on Black Power from the late 1960s stand out as his most direct comments on racial justice. However, Mailer’s emphasis on the psychological effects of the traumatic events of World War II and the climate of conformity in post-war America led him to minimise the

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77 Ibid., 284.
reality of state-sponsored violence and political oppression experienced by African Americans. Mailer’s shift away from defining totalitarianism as a political, statist, coercive phenomenon towards a focus on the psychological manipulations of American culture – a shift which crystallised in his later work – was already apparent in ‘The White Negro’.

Mailer’s arguments connect to the dialogue between domestic race relations and Cold War politics – a subject which has been surveyed in the rich literature on African American internationalism in the twentieth century. Mary L. Dudziak has shown how the Cold War climate could both advance and constrain civil rights reform. On the one hand, civil rights discourse was limited by the constricting framework of Cold War anti-communism, which took precedence. At the same time, however, domestic racial discrimination had the potential to weaken the position of the United States in its global contest with the Soviet Union, by tarnishing the image of American democracy. This, in turn, spurred limited federal action in the 1950s to protect civil rights at home.

Significantly, the concept of totalitarianism could be manipulated to point out the hypocrisy of claims concerning the superiority of American democracy. As Leerom Medovoi has suggested, ‘how could the United States claim to defend human freedom against its totalitarian enemies abroad while it waged a totalitarian race war at home every

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time it terrorized its own black (and other minority) populations?”

David Ciepley has shown how comparisons between the racial policies of Nazi Germany and the American South encouraged the US Supreme Court to make the elimination of Southern totalitarianism a priority by the late 1930s. Historian Thomas Borstelmann has also made a connection between the ‘political totalitarianism’ of the Soviet Union and the ‘racial totalitarianism’ of the American South during the Cold War. Mailer, however, did not use the concept of totalitarianism to make direct criticisms of racism in American society.

Instead, Mailer identified black culture, ‘the source of Hip’, as an antidote to cultural totalitarianism in the United States. For Mailer, the exclusion of African Americans from the ‘securities’ available to ‘the average white’, and their daily experience of violence and danger, imbued black Americans with ‘a potential superiority’ – a resistance to the conformity which plagued society. On this basis, he suggested that it was white America that suffered most from the effects of totalitarianism, while black Americans were spared the worst effects. Significantly, then, Mailer did not identify American racism as a form of totalitarian domination. This reasoning followed from his preoccupation with cultural conformity, rather than political coercion and violence, as the form totalitarianism had taken in America. Conversely, violence was presented as a means of liberation from such conformity – as the ‘catharsis which prepares growth’. Mailer premised this argument on a distinction between ‘individual acts of violence’,

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82 Ciepley, *Liberalism in the Shadow*, 244.
85 Ibid., 285, 300.
which could be constructive, and the ‘collective violence of the state’. ³⁶ For Mailer, totalitarian ‘state’ violence did not exist in the United States – it was an ‘ugly consequence of the past’. ³⁷ Mailer’s hope was that greater equality for African Americans, and the emergence of ‘hip’ in American culture, would put an end to the time of mass conformity. As Jean Malaquais commented, Mailer ‘bestow[ed]’ upon African Americans ‘a Messianic mission’ to rescue (white) America from cultural totalitarianism.³⁸

As much as Mailer shared with other intellectuals the view that totalitarianism had implications for all of humanity, his definition tended to address the afflictions he saw affecting his own white, middle-class milieu. Mailer’s characterisation of African Americans also perpetuated racist stereotypes of black masculinity, famously criticised by James Baldwin in his 1961 essay ‘The Black Boy Looks at the White Boy’. The limitations of cultural totalitarianism were captured best by Mailer himself, in a comment made in a different context to the Japanese translator of his work Eiichi Yamanishi: ‘I was thinking of the generation which I think is most interested in my work, some of the younger American’s [sic] of my own class. To a Negro activist, my ideas would seem a luxury’.³⁹ Dominant understandings of totalitarianism, with their emphasis on political oppression and violence, were more applicable than Mailer’s focus on conformity and the mass media to structural racism in American society.

³⁶ Ibid., 299. For more on the role of violence in Mailer’s work see Maggie McKinley, Masculinity and the Paradox of Violence in American Fiction, 1950-75 (New York: Bloomsbury, 2015), 67–90.
³⁷ Mailer, “The White Negro,” 299. He also warned that it was possible that totalitarian state violence would emerge in America. Without the “catharsis” of individual violence the injustice of American society could become “turned into the cold murderous liquidations of the totalitarian state”. Ibid., 301.
³⁹ Mailer, interviewed by Eiichi Yamanishi, undated c.1967, container 577.2, Mailer Papers. Mailer was responding to a question about an answer he gave in “An Impolite Interview” with Paul Krassner published in The Realist in December 1962.
Defining Totalitarianism in *The Presidential Papers*

One of Mailer’s foremost concerns in the opening years of the 1960s was cultural totalitarianism. Mailer’s understanding of this concept, and its relationship to its statist Nazi and Soviet forms, had remained relatively fluid in the 1950s. His early views conformed to comparative and convergence models which suggested the potential for totalitarianism in America without fundamentally reconfiguring the definition of totalitarianism to fit this context. With his shift from fiction to political essays, however, cultural totalitarianism became a more defined presence in Mailer’s work. This was evident in Mailer’s contributions to *Commentary* and *Esquire* in the early 1960s, including his widely read report on John F. Kennedy and the 1960 Democratic Convention, which were collected and published in 1963 as *The Presidential Papers*. This volume consisted of Mailer’s most sustained effort to provide a definition of the new form of totalitarianism he identified.

Mailer explicitly built on the structural ambiguities inherent in dominant theories of totalitarianism. He suggested that the indefinable and amorphous nature of totalitarianism was its essential and defining characteristic. It was ‘a shapeless form, an obdurate emptiness, an annihilation of possibilities’. Totalitarianism had ‘haunted the twentieth century, haunted the efforts of intellectuals to define it, of politicians to withstand it, and of rebels to find a field of war where it could be given battle’. 90 Equally, the idea of totalitarianism as a type of contagion reinforced Mailer’s argument that totalitarianism was the collective condition of the twentieth century to which the Western world was as susceptible as the East. Mailer charts the evolution of totalitarianism in the following paragraph:

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That first huge wave of totalitarianism was like a tide which moved in two directions at once. It broke upon the incompatible military force of Russia and of America. But it was an ocean of plague. It contaminated all that it touched. If Russia had been racing into totalitarianism before the war, it was pervasively totalitarian after the war, in the last half-mad years of Stalin’s court. And America was altered from a nation of venture, exploitation, bigotry, initiative, strife, social justice and social injustice, into a vast central swamp of tasteless toneless authority … The creative mind gave way to the authoritative [sic] mind.  

In this reading, World War II, a cataclysmic event, had spread the disease of totalitarianism and led to its introduction to America. Despite the specificities of America’s cultural totalitarianism then, it was nonetheless a manifestation of the same affliction. Framing totalitarianism in this way masked a potential weakness in Mailer’s theory – the question of causation. Building on earlier conceptions of totalitarianism as a force in itself, capable of spreading independently, Mailer evaded a detailed exposition of the factors that had led to totalitarianism in America. A similar ambiguity marked Barber’s assessment of ‘involuntary [or unintentional] totalism’ which, he suggested, seeped ‘by default’ into society. Dominant theories of totalitarianism were also ambiguous on this subject – despite the plethora of attempted answers a consensus had, and has, not been reached. Most significantly, Arendt’s argument in The Origins of Totalitarianism remained fundamentally ambiguous about the precise nature of causation. As historian Richard H. King suggests, Arendt’s ‘purpose was to analyse the component parts of totalitarianism without arriving at any grand, overarching conclusions about causal priority’. The relationship between these parts, covered in the three sections of the book, ‘Antisemitism’, ‘Imperialism’, and ‘Totalitarianism’, was left open to interpretation. Cultural conformity was at the heart of Mailer’s diagnosis of American totalitarianism – though it is unclear whether he viewed this as primarily as cause or symptom.

91 Ibid., 199.
Mailer relied on disease metaphors not just to explain how totalitarianism had reached America, but also to give substance to his definition of what it was in its American form. He argued that ‘[t]otalitarianism ha[d] come to America with no concentration camps and no need for them, no political parties and no desire for new parties, no, totalitarianism ha[d] slipped into the body cells and psyche of each of us.’

This was Mailer’s crucial distinction, explaining how conformity in American society related to forms of oppression in Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union. He suggested that totalitarianism had ‘appeared first in Nazi Germany as a political juggernaut, and in the Soviet Union as a psychotization of ideology’ but ‘totalitarianism ha[d] slipped into America with no specific political face.’ Comparing Mailer’s description with one of the most authoritative hegemonic definitions of totalitarianism – offered by Carl J. Friedrich and Zbigniew Brzezinski in *Totalitarian Dictatorship and Autocracy* (1956) – helps to reveal how far Mailer had shifted the discourse. For Friedrich and Brzezinski, there were six ‘basic features’ of totalitarian dictatorships: ‘an ideology, a single party typically led by one man, a terroristic police, a communications monopoly [in the hands of the party], a weapons monopoly [in the same hands], and a centrally directed economy.’ Mailer rejected the significance of the first and second features, disassociating totalitarianism from political parties and arguing that totalitarianism was ‘better understood if it is regarded as a plague rather than examined as a style of ideology’, which fundamentally altered the overall meaning. The nature of control he identified was not ‘centrally directed’ from the state or party, operating externally on citizens, but existed internally, in the minds of Americans. Mailer also used metaphors of disease to

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94 Ibid., 200.
suggest that totalitarianism was more insidious, and therefore worse, in the United States. The shift from external and statist to internal and psychological forms of oppression was crucial – hence his distinction between the ‘simple’ totalitarianism attached to Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union and the insidious cultural totalitarianism in America.

The theory of mass society was used to similar effect. In particular, Mailer’s fear of the effect of mass media and his distaste for new technologies were subjects to which he frequently returned in his writing. Relatedly, criticism of corporate capitalism – a refrain common by the 1950s – was likewise a theme in Mailer’s work. He identified the power of corporations in American society as another manifestation of the nation’s totalitarian tendencies. Historian Kevin M. Schultz has shown how corporate capitalism was a crucial target in Mailer’s broader attack on the mid-century liberal establishment, and an enemy he had in common with friend and political sparring partner, William F. Buckley, Jr. Mailer wrote that the ‘twentieth century may yet be seen as that era when civilized man and underprivileged man were melted together into mass man, the iron and steel of the nineteenth century giving way to electronic circuits which communicated their messages into men, the unmistakable tendency of the new century seeming to be the creation of men as interchangeable as commodities’. This paralleled many other theories of mass society. Yet, he continued, ‘[n]owhere, as in America … was this fall from individual man to mass man felt so acutely, for America was at once the first and most prolific creator of mass communications, and the most rootless of countries.’ The concept of ‘rootlessness’ seems to have been lifted from *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, yet Mailer’s argument is in conflict with Arendt’s assertion that the United States could resist the worst effects of mass society and avoid turning totalitarian. Mailer thus used

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and adapted the idea of mass society to support his argument that a new form of cultural totalitarianism already existed in America.

**Cultural Totalitarianism and the Cold War**

While much of Mailer’s criticism in the 1950s and 1960s was directed at the effects of the Cold War at home, he did also comment directly on the foreign policy of the Kennedy and Johnson administrations. When projected into the international area, the analytical power of Mailer’s theory of cultural totalitarianism was limited. The excesses of Mailer’s equation of the effects of statist and cultural totalitarianism were revealed when they came into contact with the practical implications of the Cold War, as he was forced to admit the differences between the United States and the Soviet Union. In 1960 Mailer penned an ‘Open Letter to Fidel Castro’, not published until the following year, in which he urged the Cuban leader not to align himself with the Soviet Union. Mailer wrote that the difference between ‘my country’, and the ‘other country’ is that ‘my country … allow[s] me to speak my mind in a way I never could in the other country.’

Thus, Cuba could not be ‘[left] alone with Russia, lost to what we can offer.’ Despite Mailer’s assertion that US citizens were subject to cultural totalitarianism, when engaging with the realities of Cold War diplomacy he was forced to admit this crucial difference between the United States and the Soviet Union.

Mailer found the concept of cultural totalitarianism most useful when he turned his attention to the domestic effects of fighting the Cold War. It was this consideration which informed most of his arguments about foreign policy. In *The Presidential Papers* Mailer cautioned against the view of Communism as an ‘absolute evil’, because to ‘insist communism [was] a simple phenomenon [would] only brutalize the minds of the

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99 Ibid., 87.
100 Ibid., 92.
American people.’\textsuperscript{101} The practice of fighting the Cold War threatened ‘[a]rt, free inquiry and the liberty to speak’ in America, the very elements which were the ‘only cure against the plague’ of totalitarianism that threatened society. Thus, the crucial question for Mailer was ‘[d]o we become totalitarian or do we end the cold war?’\textsuperscript{102} The escalation of the Vietnam War increased Mailer’s certainty of the reality of this dilemma. In 1964 he wrote to Eiichi Yamanishi to emphasise that ‘the thing I feel the most is that America, engaged in world-wide adventures for which she has no tradition and no natural aptitude, will become rotted through and through as she is three-quarters rotted already by a totalitarian spirit which, if it ever succeeded here, could win the complete and final destruction of the earth.’\textsuperscript{103} He also developed a corollary to this argument, which suggested that the Soviet Union would destroy itself if left to its own devices. This was articulated most clearly in Mailer’s contribution to a \textit{Partisan Review} symposium ‘On Vietnam’. He argued that Stalin had caused Communist ideology to become ossified to the point where it could not ‘change remotely so fast as reality and so [had to] be insulated from reality by war. War [was] the health of Communist ideology whereas peace and the abrupt strifeless acquisition of backward countries [was] a nightmare to ideology.’\textsuperscript{104} In Mailer’s view, Communism left to spread unchecked would soon destroy itself.

Mailer also intervened directly in foreign policy discussions through his nonfiction novel, \textit{The Armies of the Night}, a highly influential account of the October 1967 March on the Pentagon to protest the Vietnam War which helped turn public opinion

\textsuperscript{101} Ibid., 186.
\textsuperscript{102} Ibid., 188.
\textsuperscript{103} Norman Mailer to Eiichi Yamanishi, November 24, 1964, container 553.6, Mailer Papers.
against the conflict.\footnote{Lennon, \textit{Norman Mailer}, 387.} Jerry Rubin, co-organiser of the March and a founding member of the ‘Youth International Party’, stated that ‘\textit{The Armies of the Night} became the bible of the Movement’.\footnote{Quoted in Peter Manso, \textit{Mailer: His Life and Times} (New York: Washington Square Press, 1985), 461.} In \textit{Armies}, Mailer again used disease metaphors to convey his vision of American totalitarianism. After describing his own arrest during the march following his deliberate crossing of a police line, Mailer recounted a conversation with the federal marshal guarding him who believed that ‘the evil was without, America was threatened by a foreign disease’. In contrast, the marshal ‘was threatened to the core of his sanity by any one of the first fifty of Mailer’s ideas which would insist that the evil was within’\footnote{Norman Mailer, \textit{The Armies of the Night: History as a Novel, the Novel as History} (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1968), 145.}. This scene captures the difference between dominant understandings of totalitarianism as an external enemy and Mailer’s contention that totalitarianism existed internally, within America’s borders and in the minds of Americans. Mailer’s opposition to the Vietnam War intersected with his views on totalitarianism. US policy in Vietnam became a symptom of the American disease, a manifestation of America’s totalitarian tendencies.\footnote{Mailer made a similar argument by analogy in his 1967 novel \textit{Why Are We in Vietnam}? (New York: Random House, 2017), which addressed through metaphor the political and cultural problems in America responsible for US presence in Vietnam.} Thus, Mailer found that ‘the war in Vietnam offered … the grim pleasure of confirming his ideas’ about American totalitarianism, as ‘[t]he disease he had written about existed now in open air’.\footnote{Mailer, \textit{Armies of the Night}, 188.}

Mailer’s views were a direct inversion of the US government’s Cold War policy which sought to protect American democracy from totalitarianism through intervention across the globe. In each case, the underlying motivation was the same: to protect America, and by extension the entire world, from totalitarian domination. In Mailer’s view, it was the United States that was now the chief incubator of the totalitarian disease
and the continuation of the Cold War would cause America to succumb and spread this
disease abroad. Mailer’s views were formed and articulated with little consideration of
the consequences for the populations of countries subject to US intervention (also
suggested by Mailer’s dismissive reference to ‘backward countries’) but rather focused
on the potential dangers to America.

An ‘American’ Totalitarianism?

In 1967–68, when counterhegemonic theories of totalitarianism were at their peak, Mailer
could justifiably claim to have been ‘going on for years’ about America’s ‘oncoming
totalitarianism’. He built on widespread fears of totalitarianism as a universal threat
that transcended national boundaries, its association with contagion, its connection with
the theory of mass society, and popular interest in the psychological dimensions of
control. In doing so, Mailer crucially shifted the definition of totalitarianism from a
political, statist, coercive phenomenon to a version that highlighted psychological
manipulation and cultural conformity. Mailer was not alone in identifying a non-statist
form of totalitarianism existing in America, though he had advanced this analysis earlier
than many other intellectuals. As such, he should be credited as a source of influence over
new models of American totalitarianism – as Eldridge Cleaver’s adoption of Mailer’s
ideas illustrates – though his sway over the ideas of the New Left was perhaps not as

110 Ibid., 188.
distinctive as that of Herbert Marcuse’s theory of totalitarianism in *One-Dimensional Man*.

Mailer’s significance lies not just in his relationship to this broader trend but also in his idiosyncrasy. He stretched the concept of totalitarianism further than any other writer or intellectual. Many critics felt that Mailer’s frequent use of totalitarianism was outrageous and provocative, or entirely irresponsible. In a typical criticism, Christopher Lasch wrote that Mailer had ‘steadily enlarged [the meaning of totalitarianism] – as he ha[d] enlarged so many things, the length of his sentences, the heat of his indignation, the scope of his literary ambitions – until it includes everything he finds in the slightest degree distasteful’. Occasionally, Mailer’s use of totalitarianism did threaten to degenerate into an epithet directed at anything he disliked. At times, he used the term totalitarian so indiscriminately that it retained little meaning, as in the following quote from a literary symposium in 1960: ‘I am terrified of a creeping totalitarianism of thought, which weakens, adulterates, vitiates… [a] dictatorship of a vast monotony and boredom …. You can’t turn off the Muzak. Your architecture is dreadful. Television is horrible. Smog … In fact, anything is totalitarian that makes us empty and depressed.’ As Irving Howe commented in the same year, ‘Mailer [was] in danger of being carried away by the fertility and brilliance of his own metaphors.’ Yet, this determined overuse had political purpose. It likely contributed to the fracturing of dominant understandings of totalitarianism by the 1960s, opening a new discursive space in which alternative constructions of totalitarianism flourished.

A core of inherent rebellion was contained in Mailer’s counterhegemonic use of totalitarianism at a time when this concept was the ideological backbone of the American cause in the Cold War. While some critics remained unconvinced by Mailer’s indiscriminate use of the term, for example a British reviewer who observed that “‘Totalitarianism’ [was] a blanket-word that Mailer use[d] … to cover everything he hates’, Mailer’s description of the totalitarian plague inflecting America resonated with others.  

For Richard Kluger, writing for the *New York Herald Tribune* in 1963, ‘[w]hat Norman Mailer [was] doing, and doing more prolifically and more provocatively and occasionally more preposterously than any other literary figure we have, [was] to tell what life is like now in America.’ He was a ‘volcanic despoiler of the stifling orthodoxy that America … [represented] to him’.

Mailer’s ultimate contribution to the discourse on totalitarianism can be seen in his Americanisation of the concept for a US audience. Midge Decter echoed the sentiment of Kluger’s review in her own, stating: ‘Mailer’s daring has to do with something not, I think, sufficiently taken into account about him, and for which *The Presidential Papers* brings massive evidence. And that is how American he is. By “American” I do not mean anything literary-metaphysical. I mean quite simply that he owns America. He unquestioningly and unambiguously belongs here … no one is currently telling us more about the United States of America.’

Mailer felt a ‘deep love’ for ‘the promise and the dream’ of America even while presenting criticisms of US society in the 1960s. His interpretation of totalitarianism facilitated the coexistence of this love with his radical attack on many areas of American life. Despite his Americanisation of totalitarianism, the term would always keep its

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116 Midge Decter, quoted in McKinley, *Understanding Norman Mailer*, 34.
association with foreign contagion. The idea of totalitarianism as a disease enabled Mailer to formulate a fundamental critique of American society but at the same time to locate the origins of the infection outside of the American state. If totalitarianism had taken root in America, and America had proved to be fertile ground for its growth, it could still be conceived as a foreign infection from which the United States could return to full health.

The lingering foreignness of totalitarianism is suggestive of the way in which this concept never completely lost its connection to dominant understandings associated with the Cold War. By the 1970s, Mailer presented his fixation on totalitarianism in a less novel form, one which emphasised the role of the state and secret police. At a party for his fiftieth birthday in 1973 Mailer announced to his 500 guests that he was forming ‘The Fifth Estate’, a ‘democratic secret police to keep tabs on Washington’s secret police’, as it was time to ‘face up to the possibility that the country may be sliding toward totalitarianism’. Mailer’s biographer characterised this announcement, and the party itself, as an ‘embarrassing failure’ as his guests soon lost interest and were quick to ridicule Mailer’s speech. Nevertheless, Mailer ramped up his efforts to inform the American public about totalitarianism in the early 1970s. The revelations of the Watergate scandal encouraged Mailer’s renewed focus on the state and drove him to translate his birthday announcement into a new organisation which became ‘The Organizing Committee for a Fifth Estate’. The organisation’s newsletter, Counter-Spy, mobilised imagery associated with the dystopian novel Nineteen Eighty-Four and proclaimed that George Orwell’s vision was becoming a reality in America, again suggesting Mailer’s return to more hegemonic constructions of totalitarianism. Mailer’s

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119 Lennon, Norman Mailer, 461.
The 1960s constituted a distinct moment in which radical and alternative readings of totalitarianism were possible. By the 1980s, the concept of totalitarianism had been mostly reclaimed by neoconservatives such as Jeane Kirkpatrick and would underpin the early years of Reagan’s foreign policy. However, the 1960s had fractured the status of dominant Cold War theories of totalitarianism with lasting effects. The centrality of state control to conceptions of totalitarianism was challenged by a new focus on cultural conformity. The attachment of totalitarianism to foes external to the United States was undermined by the idea that totalitarianism had taken root within America. Totalitarianism remained a flexible concept which would later be used by different and opposing political actors for vastly disparate purposes. Echoes of Mailer’s identification of a form of non-coercive cultural totalitarianism in American society could be found in the work of Noam Chomsky the 1980s, and in the early 2000s work of political scientist Sheldon Wolin. Indeed, in the current political moment public commentators are once again turning totalitarianism inwards to analyse trends in domestic US politics. In his immediate context, Mailer’s Americanisation of totalitarianism inspired contemporary political actors to take the concept in a more activist direction. In the late 1960s and 1970s Black Panther leader Eldridge Cleaver built on Mailer’s work to explore the crucial intersection between ideas of race, colonialism, and totalitarianism.

Chapter 2: ‘The stifling, murderous, totalitarian white world’: Race and Totalitarianism in the work of Eldridge Cleaver

The rise of European totalitarian movements in the twentieth century and the centuries-long history of colonialism, slavery, and racial oppression in the United States constitute two distinct historical narratives which have, at times, coexisted uneasily. The emphasis that nearly all theorists of totalitarianism have placed on the middle decades of the twentieth century as representing a radical break in history which witnessed unprecedented levels of violence and brutality has been seen by postcolonial scholars to minimise or even erase earlier forms of oppression associated with colonialism and slavery.¹ In addition, the Cold War Manichean framework of viewing the world as divided between the poles of democracy and totalitarianism, freedom and slavery, or West and East, encouraged an uncritical view of the United States as uniquely and solely good, innocent of any and all of the crimes associated with the totalitarian Nazi or Soviet enemy. As one commentator has starkly put it, the antithetical comparison of totalitarianism and democracy ‘relies on a liberal-progressive version of history in which democracy’s entwinement with colonialism and the slave trade is downplayed, rationalized, or consigned to the dustbin of democratic history. Politically, this mode exonerates putatively democratic regimes from the infringements and repressive tendencies normally attributed to their illiberal counterparts.’²

Despite the fact that ‘conventional formulations of totalitarianism’ may ‘excise race’, the decades after World War II reveal a rich history of African American engagement with the concept of totalitarianism which was frequently mobilised to point

² Rasberry, Race and the Totalitarian Century, 66.
out the hypocrisy of the US government which claimed to fight oppression abroad while propping up a system of inequality at home.  

However, though there is extensive scholarship on the subject of race and the Cold War, totalitarianism remains peripheral in much of this literature. The dialogue between African American history on the one hand and the conceptual history of totalitarianism on the other therefore remains relatively limited. In this regard, the work of historian Vaughn Rasberry represents a crucial exception – his study *Race and the Totalitarian Century* centres race at the heart of the study of totalitarianism. This chapter builds on Rasberry’s study of race in the classic era of totalitarianism by extending historical analysis to the 1960s and 1970s.

Perhaps uniquely among radical black activist-intellectuals, Eldridge Cleaver was influenced by Norman Mailer’s theory of cultural totalitarianism. In his highly influential *Soul on Ice* (1968), Cleaver used and adapted Mailer’s theory as a lens to analyse the dynamics of racism in American society. In the following years, during his time with the Black Panther Party, Cleaver shifted focus and continued in the tradition of other African American activists who mobilised statist conceptions of totalitarianism, often centring on the image of Nazi Germany, to invoke parallels with the United States which cut across the Cold War divide between democracy and totalitarianism. Cleaver’s engagement with anti-colonial theory, reflecting the influence of, among others, Frantz Fanon, represented another dimension to his work which facilitates analysis of the intersection of discourses on colonialism and totalitarianism. Finally, in addition to his position as a leader of the Black Panther Party, Cleaver was also an influential figure in the broader New Left –

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3 Ibid., 65.
illustrated by his nomination as presidential candidate in 1968 on the ticket of the Peace and Freedom Party – and his work reveals how the concept of totalitarianism could be mobilised as a means of creating solidarity between black and white activists.

Cleaver is a crucial figure because his writing from the late 1960s and 1970s illuminates how totalitarianism was used to challenge the dominant Cold War consensus and to advocate racial equality in the United States. However, as important as examining the potentialities for alternative readings of totalitarianism is an exploration of the limits of this concept as a critique of racism and colonialism. As the previous chapter has shown, in the 1960s the American discourse on totalitarianism was frequently turned inwards. Yet, constructions of American cultural totalitarianism which focused on conformity and noncoercive forms of control and de-emphasised the role of the state were ill-suited to describe the reality of state-sponsored structural racism in America.

In his early work, Cleaver experimented with adapting Mailer’s theory of cultural totalitarianism by foregrounding racism as a central cause of America’s totalitarian tendencies. After his release from prison, Cleaver’s focus shifted and he engaged with a different conversation about the relevance of the concept of totalitarianism to American society, one which brought attention to the parallels between Nazi racial ideology and American racism. African American intellectuals and activists participated in the trend towards US-focused models of totalitarianism, though they drew more heavily on the dominant discourse of state-led oppression, and highlighted specific elements of the discourse, notably the idea of the totalitarian state as a police state which found its ultimate expression in the concentration camp. Eldridge Cleaver and others in the Black Panther Party suggested that federal and state-level government and police used
totalitarian tactics to oppress African American citizens. This idea was prevalent in the 1960s and 1970s, and it has also found expression in more recent scholarship.\(^6\)

This first part of this chapter considers Cleaver’s 1968 *Soul on Ice* as a response to Mailer’s arguments about cultural totalitarianism advanced in the ‘The White Negro’ and his nonfiction writing from the 1960s. The second part situates Cleaver in the context of African American intellectuals’ responses to totalitarianism as a concept from the 1930s to the 1950s. The focus shifts from Cleaver’s engagement with cultural totalitarianism – specifically influenced by Mailer – to his participation in the discourse on political/statist totalitarianism and its significance to an analysis of race relations in the United States. In this way Cleaver extended the tradition of activists who projected their arguments directly into the Cold War discursive arena and who called out the hypocrisies of the US government which claimed to be the defender of freedom abroad while oppressing African American citizens at home. The chapter then considers how Cleaver and other Black Panther Party members employed the concept of ‘fascism’ to apply to US society in the pages of the *Black Panther* newspaper, and how this usage connected to the broader discourse on totalitarianism, before analysing Cleaver’s attempts to connect his analysis of American totalitarianism and fascism to an international anti-colonial framework while in exile in Cuba and Algeria. Finally, it highlights Cleaver’s engagement with totalitarianism during the late 1970s, when he returned to the United States, abandoned his revolutionary socialist views, and ultimately embraced conservatism.

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\(^6\) See, for example, Borstelmann, *Cold War and the Color Line* and Rasberry, *Race and the Totalitarian Century*. Both authors comment on the relevance of conceptions of totalitarianism to the Jim Crow South.
Soul on Ice and Cultural Totalitarianism

The height of Cleaver’s fame and influence as an intellectual and activist followed the publication of Soul on Ice in 1968, written while he was incarcerated in 1965–1966. He had spent the majority of the previous ten years in prison for a conviction of attempted rape and assault. While in prison, Cleaver converted to the Nation of Islam, following Malcolm X after the organisation split in 1964. He was particularly influenced by the latter’s black internationalism, and he also read the revolutionary works of Fanon, Lenin, Mao Zedong, Fidel Castro and Che Guevara. Soul on Ice was a reflection of these influences in that it attempted to ‘graft Marxist critiques of capitalism and imperialism onto the framework of black internationalism’. An unlikely, and unexamined, addition to these core influences was the work of Norman Mailer. Cleaver’s early engagement with the concept of totalitarianism owed much to Mailer – the two intellectuals had corresponded in 1966 and Cleaver received from the author a copy of Mailer’s latest work Cannibals and Christians while in prison. Cleaver acknowledged Mailer’s influence on his work – in contrast to the reaction of other African American intellectuals, most notably James Baldwin, Cleaver stated that he found Mailer’s ‘The White Negro’ ‘both prophetic and penetrating’ in its analysis of race relations in the United States. Cleaver embraced Mailer’s analysis of the United States as a mass society afflicted by a cultural form of totalitarianism, but he also adapted this view to centre racial oppression as the crucial cause of totalitarianism in America.

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7 Other significant influences on Cleaver’s thought included Robert F. Williams and Leroi Jones. For a summary of these influences see Kathleen Rout, Eldridge Cleaver (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1991), 49–53.
8 Sean L. Malloy, “Uptight in Babylon: Eldridge Cleaver’s Cold War,” Diplomatic History 37, no.3 (June 2013): 544.
9 Cleaver, Soul on Ice, 98.
According to Cleaver’s biographer, Kathleen Rout, *Soul on Ice* was ‘regarded as the “Red Book” of the second American revolution’, as it captured the worldview of young black and white radicals.\(^{10}\) It was named Book of the Year by the *New York Times* and sold over a million copies, making Cleaver an overnight celebrity. While Mailer’s influence is evident throughout *Soul on Ice*, an unpublished essay titled ‘Unlocking *The Time of Her Time*’ – undated but included with other *Soul on Ice* materials in Cleaver’s archive – is perhaps most indicative of the relationship between the arguments of the two writers. ‘The Time of Her Time’ is a short story by Mailer, first published in *Advertisements for Myself* (1959). Following Mailer, Cleaver argued that the United States was on the brink of descending into totalitarianism. He wrote that ‘the Fascist Radical Right Wing forces in the nation … [were] relentlessly building their totalitarian machine which, if allowed to go on unchecked by insight or understanding, [would] certainly take over … [and] plunge [sic] this crippled nation and the world into a mortal night of Assyrian madness and carnage’. However, what Cleaver saw as the cause of this totalitarianism differed subtly from Mailer’s focus on the stultifying conformity of American society. Instead, Cleaver argued that it was the ‘Myth of White Supremacy/Black Inferiority’ which was at the root of America’s problems. America’s refusal to reject this myth meant that the country was:

> trapped in the stagnation of an equivalent tension between spiritual life and death. The creative energies and impulses of the people have become stifled and perverted because the Truth of our time is diametrically opposed to America’s official version of the world … Thus, the efforts of American artists – save a few – who are trying to create within the terms of the dead myth and Official lie, come more and more to manifest a weird form of cultural necrophilia … in painting, sculpture, letters, music, the theater, T.V.. Movies – everything they touch turns to a corpse.

\(^{10}\) Rout, *Eldridge Cleaver*, 40
This analysis of the state of American culture owed much to Mailer, although Cleaver attributes the cause of this stagnation to racial oppression, rather than Cold War conformity. As the previous chapter suggests, Mailer was ambiguous as to whether he regarded cultural conformity as a symptom or a cause of America’s totalitarianism. His vagueness facilitated Cleaver’s adaption of his argument to position race more centrally in the diagnosis of cultural totalitarianism. While Mailer did argue that the liberation of African Americans could help rid the United States of totalitarian tendencies, he certainly did not argue that the cause of America’s totalitarianism was its racial inequality. This fact did not deter Cleaver from remarking that the ‘genius of Norman Mailer is that he has not only truly turned away from the death and lies of the past, he has attempted to show the way out of the stalemate and trap of the present’; Mailer ‘said No to the corpse of a dead way of life. He said No to the Central Myth of White Supremacy/Black Inferiority’.

Cleaver was also interested in Mailer’s views on sexuality in America, to which he added his own interpretation. Cleaver regarded ‘The Time of Her Time’ as ‘a truely [sic] brilliant, consumately [sic] artistic revelation’ of the sexual psychoses of American society, which were ‘an underlying malignancy eating like an impatient cancer growth at the very core of this nation.’ America’s ‘sexual syndrome’, like its totalitarian tendencies, was caused ‘by 400 years of lies’ on which rested the myth of white supremacy. Cleaver argued that race and gender relations, ‘the relationship between the Four Pillars of American civilization: the black man, the white man, the black woman, and the white woman’ were at the root of ‘the central drama of our time, from the Montgomery Bus Boycott, the Sit-Ins and Freedom Rides, through the School Integration Riots, the
Birmingham Riots, to the Valedictorian riots of the Summer of 1964’.\footnote{For a critical analysis of how Cleaver’s sexism contributed to the patriarchal culture of the Black Power movement see Michele Wallace, \textit{Black Macho and the Myth of the Superwoman} (London: Verso, 1999 [1978]). For more on the Black Panther Party and gender see Robyn C. Spencer, \textit{The Revolution Has Come: Black Power, Gender, and the Black Panther Party in Oakland} (Durham: Duke University Press, 2016).} The primary division in society was between white and black men, and the division of the ‘white man’s masculinity … based on the power of the Mind’ and ‘the black man’s masculinity … based on the Brute Power of the Body.’ Cleaver argued that racial segregation and inequality had resulted in the ‘division and the separation of Mind from Body.’\footnote{Eldridge Cleaver, “Unlocking \textit{The Time of Her Time},” unpublished manuscript, undated, carton 1, folder 15, Eldridge Cleaver Papers, Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley.} These quotations from Cleaver’s unpublished manuscript are important because they reveal his in-depth engagement with Mailer’s work and its influence over the rest of \textit{Soul on Ice}.

Cleaver’s analysis of American sexuality was central to part four of \textit{Soul on Ice}, ‘White Woman, Black Man’. In the third chapter of this section, ‘Convalescence’, Cleaver suggested that the integration of African Americans into society, starting with the US Supreme Court’s 1954 \textit{Brown v. Board} decision, represented an attempt to ‘graft the nation’s Mind back onto its Body’.\footnote{Cleaver, \textit{Soul on Ice}, 192.} In making this argument, he implied that integration was as vital for white Americans as it was for black Americans. Significantly, Cleaver identified the problems of mass society as the context in which the reunification of mind and body was so essential.\footnote{As observed in the previous chapter, critiques of mass society took many forms. In this case, I refer to the theory of ‘Mass as the mechanized society’, which viewed technology as dehumanizing and expressed the fear that society operated like a machine, in which man had become a cog. See Bell, \textit{End of Ideology}, 22–5.} He wrote that,

In the increasingly mechanized world – a cold, bodiless world of wheels, smooth plastic surfaces, tubes, pushbuttons, transistors, computers, jet propulsion, rockets to the moon, atomic energy – man’s need for affirmation of his biology has become that much more intense. He feels need for a clear definition of where his body ends and the machine begins, where man ends and the \textit{extensions} of man begin.
These problems were universal, ‘transcend[ing] national or racial boundaries.’ However, Cleaver suggested that black Americans were in the position to save white America from the nightmare of the mechanised, depersonalised society. Against this backdrop, Cleaver argued, black Americans ‘personifying the Body and therefore in closer communion with their biological roots than other Americans, provide the saving link, the bridge between man’s biology and man’s machines.’ Cleaver thus took from Mailer the argument that black culture could cure America’s totalitarian tendencies and presented African American liberation as a way of mitigating the damaging effects of mass society.

Mailer’s influence was further evident in the fact that, for Cleaver, the diagnosis of cultural totalitarianism and mass society had an explicitly cultural remedy. In causing the ‘convalescence’ of the United States, the role of black culture, especially music and dance, was particularly significant. He wrote that, at the end of the 1950s, the Twist ‘burst upon the scene like a nuclear explosion, sending its fallout of rhythm into the Minds and Bodies of the people … The Twist was a guided missile, launched from the ghetto into the very heart of suburbia … The Twist was a form of therapy for a convalescing nation.’ Following Mailer, and explicitly acknowledging his intellectual debt to him, Cleaver presented these shifts in American society in terms of health and disease, writing that what was ‘condemned as a sign of degeneracy and moral decay was actually a sign of health, a sign of hope for full recovery. As Norman Mailer prophesied: “the Negro’s equality would tear a profound shift into the psychology, the sexuality, and the moral imagination of every white alive.”’ Commenting on the significance of countercultural movements in the United States, Cleaver wrote that ‘the long hair, the new dances, their love for Negro music, their use of marijuana, their mystical attitude towards sex’ were

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16 Ibid., 197.
17 Ibid., 200.
the ‘tools of … rebellion’ of ‘the white rebels’. The rebels had ‘turned these tools against
the totalitarian fabric of society – and they mean[t] to change it.’\(^{18}\) In *Soul on Ice*, Cleaver
thus shared with Mailer an emphasis on the role of culture, and particularly attitudes
towards sex, in breaking through the totalitarian confines of American society.

Cleaver’s engagement with Mailer is further illustrated by a comparison between
the following two passages, taken from Mailer’s *Cannibals and Christians* and *Soul on
Ice*. In *Cannibals* Mailer wrote of the ‘pit and plague’ of the bedding of civilization ‘on
which two centuries of imperialism, high finance, moral hypocrisy and horror have lain.
The skulls of black men and the bowels of the yellow race are in that bed … with the
ashes of the concentrations camps … moonshots fly like flares across black dreams, and
the Beatles – demons or saints? – give shape to a haircut which looks from the rear like
nothing so much as an atomic cloud.’\(^{19}\) Here Mailer presented again his argument that
Western culture had been contaminated by the horrors of the previous centuries. Echoing
Mailer in *Soul on Ice*, Cleaver wrote:

> A young white today cannot help but recoil from the base deeds of his people. On
every side, on every continent, he sees racial arrogance, savage brutality toward
the conquered and subjugated people, genocide; he sees the human cargo of the
slave trade; he sees the systematic extermination of American Indians; he sees the
civilized nations of Europe fighting in imperial depravity over the lands of other
people – and over possession of the very people themselves. There seems no end
to the ghastly deeds of which his people are guilty. *GUILTY*. The slaughter of the
Jews by the Germans, the dropping of atomic bombs on the Japanese people –
these deeds weigh heavily upon the prostrate souls and tumultuous consciences
of the white youth.\(^{20}\)

Cleaver followed Mailer in listing the same series of events, although he was much clearer
about who was to blame and who were the victims. This resonates with the responses of
other African American intellectuals to totalitarianism, such as James Baldwin, who also

\(^{18}\) Ibid., 75.
\(^{20}\) Cleaver, *Soul on Ice*, 82.
identified totalitarian tendencies in American society. While for Mailer, writing from the perspective of a white male, totalitarianism implied collective guilt, for Baldwin, if black Americans were ‘not legitimate heirs to the cultural achievements of western civilization, then neither [were] they responsible for its onslaught of betrayals and disfigurements.’ Cleaver was also much more direct in his indictment of ‘the stifling, murderous, totalitarian white world’. His engagement with totalitarianism was a direct response to Mailer, yet he shifted the focus of cultural totalitarianism to foreground racism as a crucial cause of America’s cultural maladies. While, for Mailer, a sense of collective responsibility for the atrocities associated with World War II, including the Holocaust and the atomic bomb, was crucial to his arguments about the spreading totalitarian contamination of the post-war period, Cleaver positions himself, and other non-white Americans, as exempt from this guilt.

If Cleaver accused white Americans of guilt by association with the perpetrators of totalitarianism, he also emphasised that they were potential victims if the totalitarian menace should continue to spread. He used the concept of totalitarianism as a warning to the perpetrators and enablers of oppression and exploitation, by mobilising popular fears of totalitarianism as a universally oppressive system. He argued that the ‘world capitalist system ha[d] come to a decisive fork in the road’: The choice to the (political) left led to ‘the liberation of all peoples’, and to the right, ‘worldwide genocide, including the extermination of America’s Negroes.’ Those who would ‘try to stand against the will of the overwhelming majority of the human race [had to] be willing to forgo the last traces of their own liberty and see their governments turned into totalitarian regimes tolerating no dissent’. He emphasised that the ‘rage of the American power structure’ against

22 Cleaver, Soul on Ice, 106. My emphasis.
protestors of the Vietnam War was ‘only a mild taste of the hemlock the people will be forced to swallow’ should the United States continue down the road of oppression.²³

Cleaver’s meaning was expressed more directly in a 1968 interview for Playboy with Nat Hentoff. Here, he argued that government repression ‘creates an endless chain of suspicion; everyone in dissent, black or white, becomes suspect. And if the government intensifies the suppression of dissent, it cannot help but eventually become totalitarian. It creates and implements its own domino theory to the point where there won’t even be lip service paid any more to individual civil liberties for black or white.’²⁴ He thus used totalitarianism as a concept which spoke directly to the fears of white Americans, and invoked understandings of totalitarianism as a universal system that would affect all citizens. Cleaver’s invocation of the ‘domino theory’ suggests how he repurposed elements of the dominant Cold War discourse and redirected fears about the contaminating nature of international Communism towards domestic racism. His arguments also recall the theory of the ‘boomerang’ effect of imperialism, articulated by Aimé Césaire in Discourse on Colonialism (1955) and Hannah Arendt in The Origins of Totalitarianism (1951), which suggested ‘how barbarism ultimately returns (or “boomerangs”) upon the colonizer’.²⁵

In Soul on Ice Cleaver’s use of the concept of totalitarianism remained closer to Mailer’s version of cultural totalitarianism than to dominant theories of political or statist totalitarianism. Cleaver mobilised the idea of cultural totalitarianism as well as the theory of mass society to explore the negative effects of American society on all Americans, rather than the specific harm done to black Americans by racial discrimination. This is

²³ Ibid., 119. My emphasis.
not to say that Cleaver’s main focus was not on the impact of America’s racism on black citizens, but rather to highlight the dynamics of his engagement with totalitarianism and the role it played in speaking to white Americans. Additionally, it was clear that Cleaver viewed the oppression of African Americans as the root cause of America’s problems, a view that was not shared by Mailer.

African American Intellectuals, Fascism, and Totalitarianism

After his release from prison and during his time as a member of the Black Panther Party in Oakland, California, Cleaver’s engagement with the concept of totalitarianism shifted away from the influence of Mailer’s cultural totalitarianism and increasingly focused on the image of Nazism and fascism. In this context, state terror was central to the meaning of totalitarianism, and the Holocaust and the Nazi concentration camps were crucial references. As the previous chapter argues, Mailer engaged with specific elements of the totalitarianism discourse, including its associations with cultural conformity, disease, psychological control, and mass society, in order to apply this concept to the United States. Cleaver’s shift towards foregrounding Nazi Germany as central to the meaning of totalitarianism saw him engaging with a different conversation about the relevance of totalitarianism to American society. During World War II and the early Cold War, African American activists and intellectuals had used the concept of totalitarianism to reveal the hypocrisy of the image of the United States as a defender of freedom and democracy by drawing parallels between the Nazi totalitarian enemy and domestic race relations.26 Civil rights activists frequently made comparisons between the racial policies

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26 This comparison has been buttressed in recent years by scholarship which reveals that the Nazis drew on American race law for inspiration for some of their own legislation in the early 1930s. See James Q. Whitman, Hitler’s American Model: The United States and the Making of Nazi Race Law (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2017).
of Nazi Germany and the American South in the 1950s, and similar parallels had been
drawn by liberal Supreme Court justices since the 1930s to condemn Southern racism.27

However, the invocation of totalitarianism to apply to American racism was not
without tension. In particular, attempts by activists to appropriate and mobilise anti-
totalitarianism as a rhetorical weapon in the fight against racism in the United States were
hampered by the emphasis almost all theorists of this phenomenon placed on the unique
and unprecedented nature of European totalitarianism. Many African Americans did not
initially share the analysis of totalitarianism as a ‘radically new’ and unprecedented
phenomenon. Instead, such analysis was considered ‘ahistorical and racist’ by the black
press, which criticized the ‘discovery’ of the ‘senseless brutality’ of the twentieth century,
and made comparisons between fascism and colonialism and the slave trade.28 This view
was linked to the specific interpretation of World War II shared by many black
intellectuals, journalists, and activists who developed a universalist conception of
democracy which encompassed a challenge to the fundamental problems of colonialism,
imperialism, and racism, in contrast with the more limited goals of European antifascism.

This interpretation changed in the Cold War atmosphere as some activists began
to ‘[equate] racism with Nazism in order to legitimize their struggle.’ Penny M. Von
Eschen has argued that ‘[t]hroughout World War II, black Americans had portrayed
Nazism as one consequence of imperialism and one manifestation of racism, seeing
antifascism as a critical component of democratic politics but not to the exclusion of
anticolonialism. Now Nazism became the standard of evil, and antiracist struggles
appealed to similarities between racism and Nazism for their legitimacy.’ The comparison
of racism and Nazism was rhetorically powerful, but also potentially problematic. As Von

27 King, Race, Culture, 166, Ciepley, Liberalism in the Shadow, 244.
28 Von Eschen, Race Against Empire, 41.
Eschen suggests, it ‘took the case against racism out of its American context and out of the context of colonialism as well. And in positing Nazism and racism as unique, ahistorical evils, it took racism out of the context of history.’

The tension between interpretations of totalitarianism which connect it to imperialism and racism, and those which emphasise its radically new, unique, and unprecedented nature was encapsulated in one of the most significant analyses of totalitarianism, Hannah Arendt’s *The Origins of Totalitarianism*. Arendt argued unambiguously that totalitarianism represented a fundamental break in Western civilization. She also, however, focused one of the three sections of *Origins* on imperialism, which could be read to imply an inherent connection between colonial and totalitarian forms of oppression. Thus, the degree to which she should be read as arguing for ‘strong causality’ between European imperialism and the emergence of totalitarianism, or ‘a foreshadowing … without strong causal links’, is left open to interpretation. For Michael Rothberg, Arendt set herself ‘a paradoxical task’, as she both sought to reveal the ‘unprecedented nature’ of Nazism, ‘while simultaneously seeking the antecedent elements that help explain its possibility’. The connection between imperialism and totalitarianism was ultimately left ambiguous in *Origins*. Another, more critical, interpretation of Arendt’s work has been put forward by William Pietz who has identified the use of colonialist discourse and Orientalist stereotypes in the work of major totalitarianism theorists, including Arendt. For Pietz, ‘Arendt’s particular contribution was to argue that totalitarianism was, in fact, the historical product of

29 Ibid., 153. My emphasis.
30 King, *Race, Culture*. For a more detailed study of Arendt’s work in an American context see also: King, *Arendt and America*.
colonialism, an argument she developed in order to locate the true side of arbitrary social
terror, and of racism as well, outside Europe, in “tribal” Africa.’

Moreover, as Patricia Owens has noted, Arendt’s emphasis on the unprecedented
nature of totalitarianism set her apart from postcolonial scholars ‘who vehemently reject
– as racist – the notion that Nazi crimes were different.’ Owens highlights W.E.B. Du
Bois’ famous comment that ‘there was no Nazi atrocity – concentration camps, wholesale
maiming and murder, defilement of women or ghastly blasphemy of childhood – which
the Christian civilization of Europe had not long been practicing against colored folk in
all parts of the world in the name of and for the defense of a Superior Race born to rule
the world’. The ambiguous place of imperialism in Arendt’s work and the potentially
racist implications of emphasising the uniqueness of totalitarian violence above any other
form of oppression are indicative of the tensions between totalitarianism theory and
theories of racism and colonialism. These tensions are further revealed through analysis
of the work of Eldridge Cleaver.

In addition to the specific relevance of the Nazi racial project to American racism,
other aspects of the totalitarianism discourse were also drawn on by activists during the
1940s and 1950s. The comparison between totalitarian regimes and the putatively
democratic United States was extended into the Cold War arena with the transfer of the
archetypical example of totalitarianism from Nazi Germany to the Soviet Union. In the
1950s, references to totalitarianism entered the mainstream of civil rights discourse.
Following the conflict over school integration in Little Rock in 1957, civil rights leaders

34 Quoted in Ibid., 409. Owens situates Arendt’s arguments about the unprecedented nature of
totalitarianism in the context of what she views as Arendt’s racism which permeated much of her thought
and influenced her negative reaction to the rise of Black Power and the idea of solidarity with the ‘Third
Martin Luther King, Jr., Roy Wilkins, A. Philip Randolph, and Lester B. Granger presented a joint statement to President Eisenhower stating that:

It is no secret that the foreign relations program of our nation has been hampered and damaged by the discriminatory treatment accorded citizens within the United States, solely on the basis of their race and color. In our world-wide struggle to strengthen the free world against the spread of totalitarianism, we are sabotaged by the totalitarian practices forced upon millions of our Negro citizens.35

This statement specifically emphasised the significance of the Little Rock crisis beyond the issue of racism – suggesting that southern resistance to civil rights reform had ‘assumed a significance beyond the question of racial justice, important as that is. The welfare of the whole country is involved.’ The authors asserted that the refusal to comply with federally directed desegregation threatened the rule of law and basic constitutional freedoms.36

The invocation of totalitarianism as a framework to criticise racism and its detrimental effect on democracy in the United States is a practice that has been continued by contemporary scholars. For example, historian Thomas Borstelmann introduces the concept of ‘racial totalitarianism’ – as opposed to the ‘political totalitarianism’ of the Soviet Union – to make a comparison between the situation in the American South and Soviet Russia during the early Cold War. For Borstelmann, a ‘short list of common features’ of the USSR and the US South include:

- the language of justice and the reality of inequality before the law; involuntary labor (peonage and prison labor in the South); kangaroo courts and summary executions; arbitrary imprisonment; the denial of human rights through the use of inhumane prison conditions and even torture; and the state’s use of spies and terror to intimidate potential dissidents, including occasional ‘disappearances.’ Above

35 Quoted in Dudziak, *Cold War Civil Rights*, 139–40. The full text of this statement is available online at [https://kinginstitute.stanford.edu/king-papers/documents/statement-president-united-states](https://kinginstitute.stanford.edu/king-papers/documents/statement-president-united-states)
all, the role of the government … was that of a crucial supporter and perpetrator of such practices.\textsuperscript{37}

While Borstelmann recognises that the histories and specific contexts of the Soviet Union and the American South were very different, he maintains that ‘the parallels between political totalitarianism and racial totalitarianism could occasionally be striking.’\textsuperscript{38} Many of his comparisons rest on the question of the subjective nature of ‘truth’ in totalitarian regimes, the arbitrary nature of punishment, and ‘the absence of the rule of law’.\textsuperscript{39} Both political and racial totalitarianism ‘seemed to serve an ideological “higher truth” in its legal system rather than pursuing questions of actual innocence or guilt … Truth [in the American South], as in the Soviet Union, was often established long before anyone walked into the courtroom.’\textsuperscript{40} Making a similar argument, Rasberry highlights the theme of the ‘debasement of truth’, identified under conditions of slavery and Jim Crow in Frederick Douglass’s \textit{Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass} (1845) and Richard Wright’s \textit{Black Boy} respectively, as ‘evidence of a totalitarian impulse at the heart of U.S. racial democracy’.\textsuperscript{41}

The significance of totalitarianism to understanding race relations in the United States was further illuminated by the publication of Stanley Elkins’ \textit{Slavery: A Problem in American Institutional and Intellectual Life} in 1959. In this book Elkins, a Jewish academic, developed an analogy between American slavery and the Nazi concentration camps, based on the analysis of both as examples of ‘closed’ systems. Elkins’ work thus ‘powerfully reinforced the view that the totalitarianisms of the twentieth century and slavery in the United States in the preceding century shared certain crucial

\textsuperscript{37} Borstelmann, \textit{Cold War and the Color Line}, 4.
\textsuperscript{38} Ibid., 4.
\textsuperscript{39} Ibid., 56.
\textsuperscript{40} Ibid., 4–5.
\textsuperscript{41} Rasberry, \textit{Race and the Totalitarian Century}, 90, 79.
characteristics.\(^{42}\) Significantly, however, his comparison did not centre on the similarity of the racist ideology that underpinned both systems. In fact, he ‘purposefully deemphasized the specific racial elements of both systems to demonstrate the universal ability of absolute power to decimate individual personality.’\(^{43}\) Elkins’ thesis was heavily influenced by the work of Bruno Bettelheim and his study of the infantilising and dehumanising effects of the concentration camp on inmates. Fermaglich positions \textit{Slavery} in the broader context of ‘prevalent intellectual concerns with bureaucracy, alienation, and conformity’ in American society – the same concerns, in other words, which animated Mailer in the 1950s and 1960s. Though Elkins’ analogy between the concentration camp system and slavery became contentious by the end of the 1960s, his arguments, which connected to a broader conversation about mass society, conformity, and totalitarianism, remained important to the intellectual context inherited by Cleaver.\(^{44}\)

In particular, Elkins’ emphasis on the psychological elements of oppression were significant. Like other interpretations of totalitarianism in the 1950s and 1960s, ‘Elkins’s text [was] saturated with the post-1945 preoccupation with the relationship between the individual and society’ as well as exemplifying the ‘extraordinary appeal of psychoanalysis itself as a master theory for understanding the individual/society relationship in the postwar years.’\(^{45}\) Rasberry highlights the significance of Elkins’ use of psychoanalytic methods, and notes that what Elkins took from Bettelheim was the view that ‘[t]otalitarianism … had the power not only to enforce obedience but also to change personality.’\(^{46}\) Elkins’ \textit{Slavery} shows how prevailing fears of alienation, mass society,

\(^{42}\) King, \textit{Race, Culture}, 164.
\(^{43}\) Fermaglich, \textit{American Dreams}, 28.
\(^{44}\) The changes to the political and intellectual climate, relating to conceptions of racial identity and Holocaust consciousness, which affected the reception of Elkins’ book are discussed in King, \textit{Race, Culture}, 165–9 and Fermaglich, \textit{American Dreams}, 9–23.
\(^{45}\) King, \textit{Race, Culture}, 152, 153.
and psychological forms of oppression crossed over into discussions of – to borrow Borstelmann’s phrase – ‘racial totalitarianism’ in the United States.

As the previous chapter demonstrates, attempts to understand the psychological aspects of totalitarianism were a crucial part of the discourse in the 1950s and 1960s. In addition to understanding the effects of totalitarianism on its victims, many intellectuals sought to uncover the psychology of its perpetrators. Hannah Arendt’s reporting on the trial of Adolf Eichmann and the subsequent publication of *Eichmann in Jerusalem* (1963) were important contributions to this discussion. The debate sparked by her suggestion that Eichmann was ‘not a “monster”’, or even exceptional, but a ‘diligent yet “banal” bureaucratic criminal’, shaped totalitarianism discourse in the 1960s.47 The Eichmann trial entered popular consciousness in America and shaped perceptions of totalitarianism as a dehumanised bureaucratic system in which faceless bureaucrats ‘doing their duty’ were mindlessly complicit in horrific crimes.

The above discussion provides the starting point to consider Cleaver’s engagement with the concept of totalitarianism in the late 1960s and 1970s. From the 1930s, black activists and intellectuals established a precedent for mobilising the concept of totalitarianism to highlight the imperfect nature of American democracy and drawing comparisons between the United States and the totalitarian enemy.

*Post-Prison Writings, Anticolonialism, and Anti-totalitarianism*

After his release from prison in December 1966, Cleaver joined the Black Panther Party as minister of information and editor of the *Black Panther* newspaper. During 1967 Cleaver’s involvement with the BPP ensured his actions were subject to scrutiny from the

Oakland police and he was under constant threat of his parole being revoked. The year 1968 was notable for a number of reasons. The BPP’s influence and Cleaver’s celebrity were on the rise and the party proclaimed 1968 ‘The Year of the Panther’. Cleaver spoke frequently on college campuses and ran for US president on the Peace and Freedom Party ticket, reflecting the highpoint of an alliance between the BPP and white radicals. However, as the BPP’s influence increased so did their conflict with the police. In April 1968 Cleaver was involved in a shoot-out with Oakland police which left a young BPP member, Bobby Hutton, dead, and caused Cleaver’s parole to be revoked, leading to his decision in November to leave the United States rather than return to prison. Nineteen sixty-eight was also the year of the assassination of Martin Luther King and Robert Kennedy. King’s death, and the riots that followed, were essential to the development of Cleaver’s thought. It was in this context of police harassment of the BPP and heightened racial tensions throughout the United States that Cleaver wrote the essays to be included in Post-Prison Writings and Speeches, published, after the start of his self-imposed exile, in 1969.

The most significant aspect of Cleaver’s writing during these years, in the pages of the Black Panther newspaper and in Post-Prison Writings, was his development of the theory of internal colonialism – the idea that African Americans constituted an internal colony in the United States. As Sean Malloy has noted, Cleaver was not the first to make this analysis. His contribution was to ‘popularize and foreground’ this idea by developing an ‘anti-colonial vernacular’ which ‘linked the daily problems faced by African Americans … to a global struggle against capitalism, imperialism, and white

48 Rout, Eldridge Cleaver, 62.
49 In the aftermath of King’s death, Cleaver wrote “Requiem for Nonviolence,” arguing, as the title suggests, that King’s assassination had closed the door on any last hopes for a nonviolent route to equality. Two days later, Cleaver was involved in the shoot-out with Oakland Police.
supremacy’. Cleaver’s application of this strategy also favoured cross-racial alliances with other radical groups in the United States, an approach which distanced the BPP from cultural nationalists. Anticolonialism appealed to activists who sought to subvert the East-West dynamics of the Cold War in favour of a North-South analysis which forged links between people of colour throughout the world. Anticolonialism thus challenged and destabilised the Cold War Manichean division of the world into ‘totalitarian’ and ‘free’ zones.

*Post-Prison Writings* could therefore be considered a rejection of the utility of the concept of totalitarianism to describe adequately either the domestic or international situation. However, references to totalitarianism are not entirely absent in the book. The introduction, written by journalist Robert Scheer, likened Cleaver’s treatment by the Californian authorities to the ‘violations of the rights of Soviet artists’ and condemned the ‘host of organizations’ including ‘PEN, the Congress of Cultural Freedom, International Rescue Committee and other “free world” crusaders normally charged with the protection of liberty against totalitarian regimes’ for seeming ‘constitutionally incapable of finding analogous problems in this country.’ For Scheer, the events of Cleaver’s life, if not his work, merited mention of the totalitarian tendencies of America.

In addition, *Post-Prison Writings* introduced a theme which would reoccur in Cleaver’s later statements from exile, namely the positioning of the United States as the successor to previous totalitarian regimes, specifically Nazi Germany. In an address at

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50 Versions of the internal colony thesis had been advanced by figures such as Harold Cruse, Malcolm X, Stokely Carmichael, Angela Davis and even Martin Luther King. Malloy, “Uptight in Babylon,” 541.

51 Ibid., 554–55.

52 Ibid., 541.

Stanford University in October 1968, reprinted in *Post-Prison Writings*, Cleaver stated that:

[Looking around today, we find ourselves in the pretty position of having to say that America the beautiful, unmasked as America the ugly, America the hideous, America the horrible, the torturer and the murderer of mankind, has become successor to Nazi Germany. America is, in fact, the number one obstacle to human progress on the face of the earth today. Not Russia, not China, but Babylon, right here in North America.](#)

Cleaver’s arguments thus echoed those of earlier activists who invoked a comparison with Nazi Germany to reveal the hypocrisy inherent in the façade of US democracy. His words also recall Martin Luther King’s 1967 anti-war speech ‘Beyond Vietnam’, in which he argued that the United States government was the ‘greatest purveyor of violence in the world today.’ Cleaver subverted the Cold War division between totalitarianism and US democracy – positing an alternative narrative which positioned the United States as the totalitarian heir of Nazi Germany.

In ‘An Open Letter to Ronald Reagan’, written following the April shoot-out with police, Cleaver told the right-wing governor of California that ‘[t]hose who fastened the handcuffs to my wrists, the shackles around my legs, the chain around my body, put me into a car, transported me to this place and turned me over to the keepers here, were mere functionaries, automatons, carrying out their “duties” in Adolf Eichmann’s spirit.’ This is one of many references to Eichmann to be found in Cleaver’s work and reflects his concern with the mindless complicity of many Americans with the oppressive tactics of their government. It is suggestive of the permeation of the discourse on totalitarianism into Cleaver’s thought. The relevance of Eichmann was a message that Cleaver was

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54 Cleaver, *Post-Prison Writings*, 127.
particularly keen to get across to white Americans. In the *Playboy* interview quoted
above, he commented: ‘I think a lot of whites are made racists against their essential
humanity and without their conscious knowledge … They would really be put on the spot
if a large-scale confrontation took place between black people as a whole and white
people as a whole. In that event, a lot of white people could not endure seeing themselves
as part of the totalitarian apparatus.’ Here was a call to white Americans to wake up to
the true nature of the US government and stop acting like mindless cogs in a machine.
Cleaver told his Stanford audience that ‘you’re part of the solution or you’re part of the
problem. There is no more middle ground, because the problem is rampant, the problem
is a problem of survival … You’re faced with that, as the people in Nazi Germany were
faced with it’. Cleaver’s references to Nazi Germany recall the widespread concerns
about mass society, mechanisation, and brainwashing mentioned in the previous chapter.
Cleaver stated that he did not believe that ‘the American people [were] evil and corrupt
as a whole …[but] that the American people ha[d] been brainwashed’. This fact could
also represent a source of optimism; as it was possible for Americans to be made aware
of reality and extricate themselves from the system of oppression.

These arguments connect to the discourse on the subjective nature of truth under
totalitarian regimes – and suggest how Cleaver sought to use his position as editor of the
*Black Panther* newspaper to counter what he saw as the corruption of truth by the
establishment. At a national press conference in Los Angeles in 1968, Cleaver stated that
the ‘problem is that there is a gulf between the people and facts. The facts are transmitted
to the people by the pig mass media, apologists and court jesters of the power structure.

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57 Ibid., 177.
58 Ibid., 134.
They have their function: to misinform and deceive the people’. Yet he maintained that he had ‘100% faith in the ability of human beings to reach correct conclusions if they’re given accurate information’. In this context, Cleaver highlighted the importance of the underground press, including, implicitly, the *Black Panther* newspaper, which could challenge the monopoly on truth held by the establishment. Cleaver’s insistence on his ‘100% faith’ in the people shows how he walked a line between the pessimism, urgency, and gravity implied by his frequent invocation of the imagery of Nazi Germany, the Gestapo, and the concentration camp while maintaining a message of optimism about the potentialities of subverting the totalitarian tendencies of America.

Cleaver’s references to Nazi Germany should be seen in the context of the atmosphere of fear and paranoia which pervaded the BPP and the wider African American community in the late 1960s. In 1967 author John A. Williams published *The Man Who Cried I Am*, a fictionalised account of the life of Richard Wright. This novel imagined the existence of an FBI-backed plan for a ‘final solution’ to racial unrest in the United States, called the ‘King Alfred Plan’. This plan was to be enacted in the event of ‘racial war’ and its goal was to ‘terminate, once and for all, the Minority threat to the whole of the American society’. Excerpts from the book detailing the plan, written as imitation classified government documents, were circulated without explanation that they were fictional, leading many to believe that the extermination of African Americans was a real possibility. While the King Alfred Plan was entirely fictional, the FBI’s COINTELPRO (counter-intelligence program) activities were not. The FBI’s surveillance, harassment, and disruption of the BPP is now well documented, and the Bureau is also considered to have been behind the assassination of high profile BPP members, including Fred

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Hampton, who was shot in his bed by Chicago police in 1969. In this context, it is not surprising that references to the ‘Gestapo police’ and concentration camps were frequent in Cleaver’s writing.

Cleaver’s analysis of America as Nazi-like, fascist, or totalitarian was inextricably linked to his political activism. More than any other intellectual considered in this thesis, Cleaver’s engagement with totalitarianism was inherently activist. His fundamental importance therefore lies not in his contribution to theory but in his invocation of anti-totalitarianism as a political strategy which drew attention to the daily experiences of African Americans. Cleaver’s work in the 1960s and 1970s is part of an activist tradition of antifascism which has run through American politics from the 1930s and remains vitally important in the present day. However, historian Robyn C. Spencer notes that ‘[b]lack history has been marginalized in [the] burgeoning contemporary discourse about fascism.’ As Spencer argues, the contribution of activists like Cleaver in the late 1960s was to shift the discussion of fascism away from Europe and instead demonstrate ‘the value of unearthing manifestations of fascism in the lived experiences of Black people in the US.’ In particular, she highlights the importance of Black Panther Party activists and their identification of fascism in America, culminating in their organisation of the United Front Against Fascism (UFAF) conference, which took place in Oakland in 1969.

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and brought together at least 4000 activists from more than 300 organisations across the New Left.\textsuperscript{63}

**Antifascism in the Black Panther newspaper**

Cleaver’s involvement with the Black Panther Party helped to shift his views away from the focus on cultural totalitarianism which reflected Mailer’s influence. The changes in his work reflected the transformation in his circumstances. Rather than engaging with American society through reading the works of others while confined in his prison cell, Cleaver shifted his frame of reference to the daily realities of living freely as a black activist in California. Malloy suggests that ‘the BPP changed Cleaver – leading him to focus much of his creative energy on practical grassroots organizing’, but ‘the new Minister of Information also put his own stamp on the party.’ Malloy has shown how Cleaver’s influence internationalised the party. From 1967–1968, in his writing and speeches, and in his role as editor of the *Black Panther*, Cleaver worked to forge connections between the BPP and revolutionary movements and governments in the Third World.\textsuperscript{64} More relevant to the concerns of this chapter is the fact that, during the years that Cleaver was a member, the BPP developed an analysis of the United States government as a fascist regime.

This argument was not directly attributable to Cleaver’s influence, as it emerged most prominently in 1969 after he had left the United States for Cuba and his influence over the party and the *Black Panther* newspaper had lessened. However, Cleaver did adopt this view along with other party leaders and American fascism continued to inform


\textsuperscript{64} Malloy, “Uptight in Babylon,” 550.
his writing and speeches during his time with the International Section of the BPP, discussed below. The arguments put forward by the BPP in the pages of the *Black Panther* newspaper during the late 1960s and early 1970s crossed over with Cleaver’s views and for a time, between 1969 and 1971, were virtually indistinguishable. However, important differences – centring on the incompatibility between Cleaver’s increasing radicalism while in exile, and the turn to survival tactics advocated by the BPP leadership in the United States – later developed. The use of ideas of fascism, totalitarianism, and mass society by black activists on the other side of the BPP’s leadership divide, including its leader, Huey P. Newton, and George Jackson, an influential member of the San Quentin branch of the party, reveal the prevalence of these ideas in the BPP more broadly.

In addition to the anti-colonial analysis which featured prominently in the *Black Panther* newspaper, editors and contributors frequently referred to America as ‘fascist’. While the use of the term fascist was not identical to the use of totalitarian, it does suggest another dimension to the influences shaping the BPP. If identifying African Americans as an internal colony in the United States revealed the influence of anti-colonial theory, identifying American politics and society as fascist reflects the influence of an alternative frame of reference – the history of World War II and totalitarianism. This other frame of reference for the BPP has received minimal attention from historians.65

The BPP’s use of the term fascism, rather than totalitarianism, can be explained by their radical leftist politics. As Rasberry has suggested, those on the far left, like the BPP, ‘recoil from the conflation of Nazism (or fascism) and Stalinism (or communism), largely on the grounds that these ideologies are fundamentally opposed: the former conceived as an ultranationalist, racial project’ and the latter ‘imagined (if not realized)

as a universal, radically egalitarian project.\(^{66}\) In addition, whatever the BPP’s views on Soviet Communism, the fundamental link between fascism and racism made this a more obvious tool for criticising racial inequality, violence, and oppression in the United States than the more abstract label ‘totalitarian’. In identifying US society with fascism, however, the BPP did draw on the broader discourse surrounding totalitarianism. It did this in two main ways: firstly, BPP leaders focused on the totalitarian tactics which characterised fascism in both its Nazi and, they argued, US forms. The BPP thus selected specific elements of the totalitarianism discourse which were relevant to their arguments and used them to prove the hypocrisy of US claims to democracy, equality, and freedom by highlighting comparisons between totalitarian and putatively democratic regimes. Secondly, the BPP also engaged with broader associations between totalitarianism and mass society – particularly the discourses on mechanisation and the psychological manipulations of the mass media.

The use of the term fascist to describe the United States also served as a bridge between the BPP and other New Left groups. In their extensive study of the history and politics of the BPP, Joshua Bloom and Waldo Martin suggest that, as the party increased in influence, BPP leaders used the term fascism as part of a strategy to broaden appeal and widen the message of the party. They suggest that, ‘[b]y the summer of 1969, the Black Panthers recognized that the broader New Left was turning toward their party for leadership.’ They ‘seized [this] opportunity’ by calling for a ‘Revolutionary Conference for a United Front Against Fascism’ in the May 31, 1969, issue of the *Black Panther*, which ran with the headline ‘Fascism in America’ and featured photos of nonblack New Leftists.\(^{67}\) That the use of fascism has been seen as an appeal for solidarity on the part of


\(^{67}\) Bloom and Martin, *Black Against Empire*, 300.
the BPP suggests that there was more to this term than its connotations of extreme racism. Fascism, like totalitarianism, clearly implied a more universal threat which had equal implications for white Americans.

The idea that fascism existed in America was returned to frequently in the pages of the *Black Panther* from 1969 onwards. It was used to interpret the death of Black Panther member Fred Hampton who was killed in December 1969 in a raid on his apartment by FBI agents and Chicago police. The *Black Panther* announced that Hampton had ‘stood up in the midst of the fascist gestapo forces and declared, “I am a revolutionary”’ and that he had been ‘murdered by fascist pigs’.68 Later, in 1971, another article in the newspaper reiterated that the ‘assassinations of Fred [Hampton] and Mark [Clark, also killed in the same raid] were reminiscent of the Hitler SS executions, befitting the vicious nature of Amerikan Fascists’. The black community was shocked by news of the murders, ‘but not surprised that such a thing could happen in the land of “democracy”’.69 The continued incarceration of BPP Chairman Bobby Seale in 1970 was also referred to in these terms. The *Black Panther* ran an article in March 1970 attributed to the International Section of the BPP, at that time led by Cleaver, which argued that the ‘fascists have already decided in advance to murder Chairman Bobby Seale in the electric chair’ .70 These headlines show how the term fascist was used to highlight the totalitarian tactics of the US government and police. In this way, the BPP sought to reveal the presence of features typically associated with totalitarian states, including arbitrary imprisonment, show trials, political murder, brutal police practices, and generally the absence of the rule of law, in the supposedly democratic United States.

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69 *Black Panther* 7, no.4, 18 September 1971, 5.
The analysis of the United States as a fascist state received more sustained attention from George Jackson in his book *Soledad Brother* (1970) and his contributions to the *Black Panther* newspaper. It was clear that his conception of fascism was one informed by the shift towards US-focused models of totalitarianism in the 1960s which maintained that totalitarian forms of control could exist in a formally democratic system. In the March 13, 1971 edition of the *Black Panther*, Jackson wrote that fascism ‘reduce[d] consensus political machinery, complex, massive and also state-controlled to totalitarianism.’ Thus, he argued, it was clear that ‘the type of regime, or number of fascist parties, or formalization of political activity within the fascist state had little meaning at all’. Jackson also wrote fascism back into the history of America – attributing the development of ‘Amerikan Fascism’ in the twentieth century to the ‘overt racism that has always permeated Amerikan society, its ultra-nationalism, and its historically violent drive always to expand to the next frontier.’ Like others who highlighted the totalitarian tactics of fascist America, Jackson identified his own incarceration as part of a ‘concentration camp technique’ enacted on the ‘Black man in America’ by the ‘fascist enemy’. In *Soledad Brother*, Jackson compared US prisons to the Nazi concentration camps Dachau and Buchenwald and emphasised the profound psychological effects of serving prison time – which created either ‘broken’ or revolutionary men. The use of the concentration camp analogy, and emphasis on the psychological effects of living in a

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73 Ibid., 60.

closed system, recalled the earlier work of Stanley Elkins, showing that despite the controversy over *Slavery* in the late 1960s, this analogy still held currency. The development of Jackson’s thought reflected the direct influence of BPP leaders, including Cleaver, as well as the work of Angela Davis.\(^{75}\)

Like Jackson, Davis focused on the prison system and warned of the potentiality of fascism taking hold in the United States. She wrote that ‘[f]ascism is a process, its growth and development are cancerous in nature. While today, the threat of fascism may be primarily restricted to the use of the law-enforcement-judicial-penal apparatus to arrest the overt and latent revolutionary trends among nationally oppressed people, tomorrow it may attack the working class en masse and eventually even moderate democrats’.\(^{76}\)

Davis’ views were influenced by the philosopher Herbert Marcuse who taught her during her postgraduate study at the University of California, San Diego, in 1968. Writing on the subject of Marcuse’s legacies in 2005 Davis noted his engagement with antifascism, suggesting that his opposition to German fascism meant ‘he was able and willing to identify fascist tendencies in the United States.’\(^{77}\)

Jackson’s understanding of fascism was also strikingly influenced and informed by the discourse on mass society. He wrote that the aim of fascism was to ‘create a mass society’ in which a ‘feeling of community’ was impossible and participation in ‘massive electoral politics’ was ‘meaningless’. This society was further characterised by:

- a cornucopia of mass-produced goods that have little significance in the real quality of social life; and mass spectacular leisure sports that break down to little more than a controlled riot where strangers meet, shout each other down and often trample one another to death on the way home; and ultra-nationalistic, ritualistic events on days to

\(^{75}\) Jackson wrote that the ‘leadership of the black prison population now definitely identifies with Huey, Bobby, Angela, Eldridge, and antifascism’, ibid., 51.

\(^{76}\) Angela Davis, quoted in Rodríguez, “Radical Lineages,” 133.

glorify the idiots who died at war for the ruling class, or other days to deify those who sent them out to die.

This dystopian society articulated by Jackson was very much in the style of Norman Mailer and in line with his views on cultural totalitarianism. Jackson found further that ‘corporate capitalism’ was a crucial feature of American fascism: he suggested that ‘the dream of monopoly and cooperation among the ruling class elements is the core of the fascist arrangement.’ The solution to these problems, for Jackson, lay in Huey Newton’s theory of ‘intercommunalism’.

Newton had been released from prison in 1970 and in January 1971 he articulated the new party strategy of ‘intercommunalism’ in the Black Panther. Newton argued that the BPP needed to shift from revolutionary to survival tactics due to the fact that ‘the people are threatened with genocide because racism and fascism is rampant.’ A revolution was impossible while ‘the total destruction of the people’ was threatened, and until a ‘total transformation’ was achievable, the people needed to ‘exist’, and to exist, they needed to ‘survive’. Newton presented his intercommunalism strategy as an adaption of Marxism under conditions of mass society. He argued that it was essential for ‘the people … to control the institutions of their community’ and then to ‘unite as one community’ in order to transform the world. The problem was the objective conditions of mass society, the fact that the world was interconnected, but that the power existed in the wrong hands. Newton’s was, in some ways, a more optimistic reading of the possibilities of revolution under conditions of mass society stemming from a faith in ‘the

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79 Ibid., 60.
81 Newton, “Let Us Hold High,” 50.
82 Ibid., 55.
people’ which was absent in the discourse from the 1930s to the 1950s among predominately white intellectuals. This was captured in his earlier pronouncement that ‘[t]he will of the people is greater than the man’s technology’, a phrase that was often repeated in the *Black Panther*. Newton’s strategy of intercommunalism fits into a broader trend in 1960s society identified by historian Howard Brick, who has read Black Power, as well as other 1960s countercultural movements, as a ‘reassertion of community’ in response to the conditions of mass society.

Ultimately, Newton’s diagnosis of American fascism was used to justify the turn to survival tactics and community programmes in the 1970s. Under extensive police pressure in the 1970s, perceived by the BPP as constituting a threat akin to genocide and extermination, Newton put revolution on hold indefinitely.

**Anti-totalitarianism in Exile**

Cleaver’s arguments about the totalitarian nature of the American government based on comparisons with Nazi Germany continued after he left the United States for Cuba in late 1968. After spending five months on the island, Cleaver travelled to Algeria in May 1969 where he established the International Section of the BPP. Here, Cleaver took on the role of ‘ambassador’ of the American revolution, attempting to form alliances with America’s Cold War adversaries, including North Vietnam, China, and North Korea. In February 1971, growing tensions between Cleaver and Huey P. Newton led to a split between the International Section and the BPP in America, and the expulsion of Cleaver from the Party. The split stemmed from the divergence between Cleaver’s militant radicalism and

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85 Malloy, “Uptight in Babylon,” 539. Malloy considers the achievements and weaknesses of Cleaver’s International Section, arguing that by ‘casting in [his] lot with America’s Cold War adversaries’ Cleaver was still ‘vulnerable to unexpected shifts in the Cold War environment’, ultimately contributing to the demise of the International Section. Ibid., 571.
emphasis on guerrilla warfare which was increasingly at odds with the BPP’s shift towards ‘survival programs’, including free breakfasts for children, and community engagement. The interference of COINTELPRO, including the forging of letters between Newton and Cleaver, greatly exacerbated the tensions leading to the split. The International Section lasted until 1972, and Cleaver left Algiers for Paris at the beginning of 1973. By the time he re-entered the United States in 1975, Cleaver had revised much of his earlier radicalism and come to view the American political system as ‘the freest and most democratic in the world.’

Cleaver’s attempt to subvert the geopolitics of the Cold War by seeking alliances with America’s adversaries led him to reverse the lines of division between the free and oppressed worlds. During the years from 1969 to 1971 his politics shifted from a position of ‘nonalignment … in favour of a more direct engagement with the Cold War in Asia.’

This new strategy was most apparent in Cleaver’s engagement with the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea (DPRK). In 1969 Cleaver represented the International Section at ‘The International Conference on Tasks of Journalists of the Whole World in Their Fight Against U.S. Imperialist Aggression’ held in Pyongyang. In his address to the conference Cleaver stated that:

> In the 20th Century, a large portion of humanity has liberated itself from oppression and struck out on the new road of socialist construction that leads to communism … Starting with the great October Revolution … a revolutionary tidal wave has been sweeping around the world … [as] in such places as the Democratic Peoples’ Republic of Korea, the People’s Republic of China, the eastern European socialist countries, the Republic of Cuba … However, the surviving portions of the anachronistic capitalist system have not crawled into the

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87 Malloy, Out of Oakland, 151.
88 Malloy suggests that though, today, North Korea may seem a surprising choice of ally for the BPP, in the 1960s ‘this pairing made a good deal of sense for both parties.’ Significantly, the DPRK was an important diplomatic force in the ‘Third World’ and it was staunchly hostile to the United States, while also retaining its independence from the USSR and China during the Sino-Soviet split. Ibid., 152–3.
grave … they have done everything they could to bind up their wounds and limp
into the future, blood-stained, dripping with human gore.\(^8^9\)

This statement thus positioned Cleaver on the opposite side of the Cold War bipolar
divide. In a direct contradiction of the Cold War justification of defending freedom
throughout the world, Cleaver argued that ‘[b]ehind the façade of lending assistance to
democratic governments against the aggression and threat of “The Communist Menace”,
the U.S. imperialist aggressors [were] in fact, spreading death and destruction all over the
world, creating, arming, financing, and propping up the most brutal, fascistic, anti-
democratic dictatorships the world has ever seen.’ Cleaver’s views went beyond those of
earlier activists – who used the Cold War to point out the hypocrisy of US claims to be
the defender of freedom abroad while oppressing minority populations at home – to
position himself directly on the side of America’s Cold War enemies. He defended this
position from a socialist, anti-imperialist perspective but also invoked the memory of the
fight against fascism and the Axis powers in World War II. ‘One of the greatest dangers
faced by the world’, Cleaver argued, was ‘that many people are not able to recognise
fascism when they see it unless it wears Hitler’s swastika or Mussolini’s bald head. We
feel that this is a grievous mistake that must be vigorously combatted, because fascism is
the type of reptile that always takes on a local coloring. The American flag and the
American eagle are the true symbols of fascism, and they should elicit from the people
the same outraged repugnance elicited by the swastika of Nazi Germany and the flag of
the rising sun of the Japanese imperialists.’ \(^9^0\)

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\(^8^9\) Eldridge Cleaver, Address: “Solidarity of the Peoples Until Victory or Death!, International Conference on Tasks of Journalists of the Whole World in Their Fight Against U.S. Imperialist Aggression,” 22 September 1969, carton 4, folder 5, Cleaver Papers. Cleaver’s views on Japan were in contrast to those of earlier black internationalists who supported imperialist Japan as an ally against white supremacy. For more context on the history of African American engagement with Japan see Marc S. Gallicchio, The African American Encounter with Japan and China: Black Internationalism in Asia, 1895-1945 (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2000).

\(^9^0\) Cleaver, “Solidarity of the Peoples.”
Cleaver’s arguments thus represented a blend of anti-colonialism and anti-fascism. Though he did use anti-colonialism to analyse the domestic situation of African Americans (as an ‘internal colony’), these two frameworks could be seen to correspond to the international and domestic contexts. This was implied by Cleaver in a 1972 speech which called for an end to ‘imperialist aggression abroad’ and ‘fascist repression at home’. This dual approach echoed the ‘Double V’ campaign used by activists during World War II to call for victory over fascism abroad and an end to racism at home. As in the *Black Panther* newspaper, the term fascist was used by Cleaver to describe the US government’s treatment of African American radicals and the type of tactics used to maintain control. In the same speech, Cleaver asserted that the ‘repressive police agencies of the United States denounced the Black Panther Party as the Number One enemy of the regime’ and ‘[when] he took office in 1969, Richard Nixon unleashed these forces of repression against the Black Panther Party … coordinated [sic] from a special operations center in the Pentagon, and carried out with the tactics pioneered by Hitler in Nazi Germany.’ These tactics included ‘police terror and judicial persecution’, ‘political frame-ups’, ‘kidnap and secret murder’, and ‘naked assassination’. By mobilising this comparison with Nazi Germany, Cleaver was engaging with the broader discourse on political/statist totalitarianism and its associations with violent methods of oppression and state terror.

While the Black Panther Party leadership at home was turning towards survival programmes, Cleaver’s analysis of the United States as a fascist society from exile was coupled with his growing advocacy of revolutionary violence and guerrilla tactics. From Algiers, Cleaver voiced his support in the *Black Panther* for the Weather Underground’s

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92 Ibid., 3.
bombing campaign in America. This line of argument led later intellectuals to assess the New Left as a movement with totalitarian sympathies. As we will see, in the 1980s Jeane Kirkpatrick implicated the entire New Left in a totalitarian worldview based on her view that it aimed to impose revolution by force. In the 2000s, liberal intellectual Paul Berman wrote that the identification of Nazism hidden in the democratic disguise of Western society led factions of the New Left to accept the ‘terrorist logic’ that only a bomb would ‘blow a hole in the Western web of total oppression.’ Thus, for Berman, the New Left having ‘set out to fight Nazism … ended up, in a modern left-wing disguise, Nazi-like’. Though neither of these intellectuals identified Cleaver specifically, his politics in the early 1970s would certainly fall under their condemnation.

Return from Exile

The Watergate scandal in the early 1970s provided fresh evidence of the totalitarian tendencies of the US government. However, Cleaver’s response to Watergate was more revealing of the problems inherent in the concept of totalitarianism, its tendency to erase or minimise forms of oppression other than those related to its specific history, than its usefulness as a concept to describe the history of racial oppression in the United States. In 1974 Cleaver wrote an article for the French newspaper *Le Monde Diplomatique* in which he argued:

There is not a single charge leveled against Nixon and his cronies that has not been common practice in America for a long time. The illegal, unconstitutional use of the machinery of government, including clandestine burglaries, theft, and electronic surveillance [*sic*], is nothing new in America. The only thing new is that Nixon dared to use these totalitarian police state tactics against the loyal opposition, the Democratic Party, and against other members of the various power cliques of the establishment itself.

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95 Ibid., 61.
As long as it was only the pariahs of the Left, black people and their organizations, Labor Unions, and other progressive forces who were the manifest victims of totalitarian tactics at the hands of the state, the same people who screamed loudest for Nixon’s scalp were perfectly satisfied. Indeed, the Democratic Party has been in the forefront of violating the Civil Liberties of the American people. And the Mass Media is largely responsible for poisoning the minds of the American people with a steady diet of vicious, racist, and undemocratic propaganda. Cleaver’s bitterness towards a system that only recognised the totalitarian violation of civil liberties when those in power were affected was clear. His comments here recall the argument made by Du Bois nearly thirty years earlier that there was nothing new about totalitarianism that oppressed minorities had not already experienced.

By 1974, however, Cleaver’s exhaustion with life in exile was taking its toll. A 1977 *New York Times* article on his return to America noted that ‘[u]nable to speak foreign languages, Cleaver, according to his own statements, found himself cut off from the societies where he lived in exile’. According to his biographer, Cleaver ‘returned [to America] because he simply could not stand exile anymore.’ His time in Cuba had been marred by his experience of the racism still permeating society after the revolution, and he was deeply disillusioned by the failure of his attempts to establish a permanent International Section in Algeria. Four years after his article for *Le Monde Diplomatique* Cleaver had dramatically revised his views on America’s un-democratic tendencies. Looking back on his embrace of American values in *Soul on Fire* (1978), Cleaver wrote:

> In every Communist country I visited … I would silently compare that reality with my memories of home. Quietly, America started winning … [In America] there were some principles, civilized procedures, due process … In those other Communist countries … [they] forget about due process of law and the concept

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96 Eldridge Cleaver, “Halleluja Babylon!,” for *Le Monde Diplomatique*, undated c.1974, carton 2, folder 1, page 2, Cleaver Papers. This quotation is from the typed draft of the English version of article found in Cleaver’s archive. The published article is in French.


of innocent until proved guilty … Yes, I was a critic of the unsolved racial problems that infected America; but … I realized how special was our democratic form of government … I was homesick and homeless.\textsuperscript{100} The extracts from Cleaver’s notes which did not make it into the published essay on Watergate are indicative of the shifts in his beliefs towards accommodation with the American system, and how these changes were squared with his views on totalitarianism. Cleaver wrote that Nixon had attempted ‘like Hitler, to elevate his regime above the institutions of his society. The difference [was] that Hitler succeeded and Nixon failed.’ He reasoned that it was ‘quite possible that the beneficial consequences of Nixon’s failure to consolidate a totalitarian regime will be in inverse proportion to the negative consequences for the world of Hitler’s success.’\textsuperscript{101} Ultimately, he had ‘come to the conclusion that the best hope of the world, in terms of structured freedom, still lies in the potential contained in the American Dream. Nixon was usurping this dream with the nightmare of his astronaught [sic] society. But Nixon got busted, and so we have that rarest of all gifts, another chance.’\textsuperscript{102}

By 1986, Cleaver’s had come to accept a version of totalitarianism theory which was similar to dominant understandings from the 1950s. In this form, totalitarianism was used to describe enemies external to the United States and to emphasise a fundamental difference between American democracy and totalitarian forms of state control. In an interview, in response to the question ‘[w]hen you were living in exile in Cuba and Algeria, what was it that started to make you rethink your view of them and their government?’ Cleaver replied with the following analysis:

I had a great burning desire to help enlarge human freedom and no desire at all to increase human misery or totalitarianism, so I stood up in America to fight against what I saw as the evils of our system. Then to go to a country like Cuba or Algeria

\textsuperscript{100} Cleaver, \textit{Soul on Fire}, 124–5.
\textsuperscript{101} Eldridge Cleaver, typed essay fragment, “‘The Nixon Question’ and Other Writings on Nixon”, undated, carton 2, folder 11, page 2, Cleaver Papers.
\textsuperscript{102} Ibid., 7.
or the Soviet Union and see the nature of control that those state apparatuses had over the people – it was shocking to me. I didn’t want to believe it, because it meant that the politics that I was espousing was wrong and was leading toward a very bad situation. So, I tried to figure out what was wrong.

You know, the communists teach you that the dictatorship is a transient phase – that once capitalism is eliminated, then the state will wither away and you will have freedom. Well, when you look at those governments up close and see how they treat their own people, you can’t believe in that. … it made me realize that a new form, a worse form, of totalitarianism was creeping into the world and that it was necessary to sound an alarm against it, stand up and protest it – without sugar-coating anything that’s wrong over here.

That’s been the mistake made by a lot of people in assessing what I have said. I have never intended to say that we can rest on our laurels or we can stay right where we are. But I wanted to point out that we had better be careful where we jump when we jump out of the frying pan.103

Cleaver ultimately ended up following the path well trodden by twentieth-century intellectuals, leading to the celebration of the relative merits of American democracy via the embrace of anti-totalitarianism. Caution should be employed, however, before fitting Cleaver into the mould of other formerly revolutionary intellectuals who became conservative during the Cold War principally due to their virulent anti-totalitarianism. Cleaver’s demoralising experience in exile, and his overwhelming desire to return home, had more to do with the change in his views than the influence of anti-totalitarian theory. On the other hand, his embrace of President Reagan in the 1980s places him within a broader trend of rising conservatism during that decade, and a corresponding resurgence in conservative anti-totalitarian theory, discussed in the next chapter.

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Chapter 3: Jeane Kirkpatrick and the ‘Totalitarian Temptation’:

Neoconservative Anti-Totalitarianism in the 1980s

In contrast to the theories of radical and activist intellectuals in the 1960s, including Norman Mailer and Eldridge Cleaver, neoconservative intellectual Jeane Kirkpatrick celebrated the work of the dominant 1950s theorists of totalitarianism – notably Carl J. Friedrich – and attempted to reinstate their arguments as the guiding principles of US foreign policy during the Reagan era. She was deeply opposed to the revolutionary upheavals of the previous period and, incorporating her criticism of the 1960s into her conception of totalitarianism, formulated a theory which was fundamentally conservative and anti-revolutionary. Kirkpatrick interlaced American exceptionalism with totalitarianism theory more closely than had ever been the case before. In doing so, she incorporated the emerging discourse of human rights into her theory of totalitarianism and advanced a version of human rights that was tightly linked to the pursuit of the American national interest and inherently compatible with the fight against Soviet totalitarianism.

This chapter sets out, firstly, Kirkpatrick’s definition of totalitarianism and situates it in relation to dominant 1950s theories of totalitarianism. Kirkpatrick is best known for her distinction between ‘authoritarian’ and ‘totalitarian’ regimes which shaped the early years of Reagan’s foreign policy, though scholars contest the originality of this contribution. Comparing Kirkpatrick’s arguments to the work of earlier theorists reveals how she built on the existing discourse and applied it to her contemporary context, subtly altering the meaning of the authoritarian-totalitarian distinction and bringing new significance to the argument that totalitarianism was a historically unique phenomenon. Secondly, this chapter argues that Kirkpatrick’s theory of totalitarianism was a reaction
to cultural changes in the United States in the 1960s and examines her view of the New Left as a potentially totalitarian phenomenon. Kirkpatrick believed confidence in American democracy had been damaged by two threats: the impact of the 1960s cultural revolution at home and the advance of Soviet influence and power abroad. These trends, which Kirkpatrick saw as well-advanced by the 1980s, had resulted in the ‘semantic infiltration’ of political discourse and the ‘moral disarmament’ of the United States. In response, Kirkpatrick argued that it was essential that the inherent morality of American founding principles – and by extension the ‘virtue’ of American power – was reaffirmed. This helps to explain why Kirkpatrick’s theory of totalitarianism frequently seemed to reflect a one-dimensional view of the world and countenanced no criticism of the United States. Kirkpatrick was a leading opponent of the Carter administration’s human rights policy and participated in the reformulation of human rights discourse under Reagan into a profoundly instrumentalist doctrine which flowed naturally from the pursuit of the national interest. In Kirkpatrick’s view, human rights policy and anti-totalitarianism were fundamentally compatible, if not one and the same. Thirdly, this chapter positions Kirkpatrick within the broader shifts of US foreign policy from the 1980s to the 2000s. The neoconservatives of the 1980s differed in crucial respects from the ‘neo-cons’ of the George W. Bush era. Significantly, Kirkpatrick was a realist and her emphasis on caution and restraint in US foreign affairs was distinct from the hubristic approach of the later neo-cons. Equally importantly, these years saw the transfer of US hostilities from Communist totalitarianism to ‘Muslim totalitarianism’ and terrorism after the Cold War.

Kirkpatrick’s contribution to the discourse on totalitarianism in the 1980s revealed her attempts to reckon with the influence of the 1960s cultural revolution on American politics. She sought to reinstate the authority of the theorists of the 1950s in opposition to the ‘self-denigration’ she saw inherent in 1960s attitudes towards
totalitarianism. The end of the Cold War in 1991 ensured that Kirkpatrick’s reinvigoration of hegemonic totalitarianism theory was not destined to be long-lived. Reagan had already moved away from the ‘Kirkpatrick Doctrine’ by the second term of his presidency as the changes in the Soviet Union under Mikhail Gorbachev became clear. However, Kirkpatrick left a lasting mark on totalitarianism theory. She had countered the influence of the 1960s and reoriented this concept along more conservative lines. Most significantly, Kirkpatrick’s work in shaping a theory of totalitarianism which was fundamentally compatible with the emerging field of human rights found echoes in the debate over the role of strategic concerns in humanitarian intervention in the 1990s. Her emphasis on the dual elements of the ‘strategic’ and the ‘moral’ in US foreign policy would resurface in strikingly similar terms in the arguments of liberal hawks after 2001.

Kirkpatrick’s Early Anti-Totalitarianism and Democratic Politics

Born in 1926, Kirkpatrick grew up in Duncan, Oklahoma (moving to Illinois in 1938) during the years of the Great Depression. This background helped shape her intellectual formation. According to Sylvia Bashevkin, Kirkpatrick carried ‘a rugged frontier outlook that stressed the importance of individual, family, and community, [and] became a public intellectual and decision-maker who consistently elevated national prowess above international pressures, and personal agency above collectivist conformity or group-think.’¹ Throughout her life, Kirkpatrick maintained a lasting belief in the fundamental greatness and goodness of the United States. In her own words, a ‘deep opposition’ to ‘attacks on the integrity of [US] government and culture’ remained with her, forming one

strand of her worldview – a second influential strand was a lifelong interest in, and commitment to opposing, totalitarianism in all its forms.2

In 1948, Kirkpatrick began an MA at Columbia, where she was taught by Franz Neumann, a German-Jewish revisionist Marxist and political scientist, who exerted considerable influence over her early intellectual development. Neumann, author of the paradigmatic study *Behemoth: The Structure and Practice of National Socialism* (1942), was an expert on Nazi Germany who introduced Kirkpatrick to other theorists of totalitarianism, including Hannah Arendt and Herbert Marcuse. Neumann gave her access to his files on the inner workings of Nazi rule – which, she later suggested, ‘changed [her] forever’ by giving her a sense of ‘the human capacity for evil.’3 Supervised by Neumann, she completed an MA dissertation on Oswald Mosley and the British Union of Fascists. Kirkpatrick’s early adoption of classic theories of totalitarianism, informed by the experience of European émigrés, pushed her away from the appeal of political radicalism. In the run-up to the 1948 election she attended a rally for presidential candidate Henry Wallace at which ‘Pete Seeger played the banjo, and then the candidate was introduced by Norman Mailer … Wallace … issued a dire warning about the fascist nature of the FBI’. Kirkpatrick was ‘put off not only by these exaggerations but by the fact that most of his entourage were obviously Communists; and Communists, she had already decided, “were always defending the indefensible.”’ Kirkpatrick’s biographer, Peter Collier, suggests that she ‘regarded voting for Harry Truman as a key moment in her life. In the memoir she tried to write 40 years later she said of the episode: “I am retrospectively proud of myself for having resisted, at 21, the temptation of radical politics.”’4

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3 Kirkpatrick, quoted in ibid., 25, 24.
4 Ibid., 22.
She had further exposure to material relating to totalitarian states while working for Evron Kirkpatrick (later her husband) who headed the Office of Intelligence Research, an intelligence agency which was part of the State Department. Her job involved editing a collection of papers detailing life in the pre-war Soviet Union, including evidence of purges and show trials, government-engineered famine, and plans for the Gulag system. These papers, according to Kirkpatrick, ‘revealed a hell purposefully created by government’. 5 Her views on the nature of totalitarianism were further consolidated during a research job at George Washington University in 1954, working on interviews with Chinese Communist soldiers who had been taken prisoner during the Korean War. These interviews ‘described the methodical effort to break down individuals and create politically compliant automata from that human debris.’ 6 This project was one of a number of similar studies of Chinese and Korean prisoners of war which played an important role in the construction of the Cold War enemy in the 1950s. 7

From the 1950s to the late 1960s Kirkpatrick’s views were informed by the dual influences of Democratic party politics and virulent anti-communism. In many ways, her intellectual trajectory from staunch Democrat to Reaganite by the 1980s was typical of many neoconservatives. 8 Up until the 1970s, Kirkpatrick was a committed and active member of the Democratic Party and she considered loyalty to the Democrats a part of her identity. 9 This allegiance was challenged by the upheavals of the 1960s and

5 Kirkpatrick, quoted ibid., 37–8.
6 Ibid., 50.
9 Collier, Political Woman, xii, 72.
Kirkpatrick’s perception of the influence of revolutionary politics on the party. She was closely involved in Hubert Humphrey’s 1968 presential campaign, and his defeat was a key moment in her disillusionment with the Democrats. Her decision to vote for Richard Nixon in 1972 stemmed from her rejection of the influence of George McGovern on the Democratic Party and marked the first time she voted for a Republican. Anti-communism was deeply embedded in her intellectual milieu. Leading anti-communist intellectuals James Burnham and Sidney Hook were frequent guests at her home.

Kirkpatrick’s allegiances were reflected in her membership of the Coalition for a Democratic Majority (CDM) and the Committee on the Present Danger (CPD). Both these organisations played a formative role in shaping the neoconservative worldview. The CDM, formed in 1972, provided a home for centrist Democrats who were disillusioned with the direction of the party in the early 1970s, and the CPD, formed in 1976, rallied intellectuals and policymakers who viewed US foreign policy towards the Soviet Union as inadequate and weak. Commentary magazine, where Kirkpatrick published her 1979 ‘Dictatorships and Double Standards’, was also a hub for neoconservative intellectuals. This article launched her career as a public intellectual and led to her position as an influential member of Reagan’s cabinet and ambassador to the UN. ‘Dictatorships and Double Standards’ quickly became one of the most widely read pieces in Commentary. The relevance of its central argument about the threat of totalitarian regimes was ‘seemingly certified when the Soviets invaded Afghanistan while it was still on the newsstands.’ In the month following its publication Reagan wrote to Kirkpatrick to say that the article had had a ‘great impact’ on him. He had ‘found [himself]

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10 Ibid., 71.
11 Ibid., 84.
12 Ibid., 59.
13 For more on the CDM and the CPD see Vaisse, Neoconservatism, 149–79.
14 Collier, Political Woman, 104–5.
reexamining a number of the premises and views which [had] governed [his] own thinking in recent years.\textsuperscript{15}

Kirkpatrick was one of the most – if not the most – influential figures in shaping Reagan’s foreign policy in his first term. Despite this, as Bashevkin has noted, she has been left out of several important studies of Reagan’s time in office.\textsuperscript{16} In part, these absences reflect the gender bias of the Reagan administration. Kirkpatrick’s colleagues were inclined to belittle her contribution and such discrimination can have knock-on effects on scholarship. In his recent extensive intellectual history of American diplomacy in the twentieth century, David Milne explained the absence of any chapter focused on a woman by attributing this imbalance to ‘the gender discrimination present in foreign policy-making, academia, and journalism throughout the twentieth century’.\textsuperscript{17} However, these biases provide all the more reason to study the vital contributions of women in foreign policy, and to redress the perception that international diplomacy is a masculine pursuit.

A second explanation for the relative paucity of scholarship on Kirkpatrick is the fact that the end of the Cold War disproved her arguments about the immutability of Soviet totalitarianism. Her recommendations contradicted Reagan’s second-term policy of softening US relations with the Soviet Union after the direction of Mikhail Gorbachev’s reforms seemed certain – and she was therefore on the ‘wrong side of history’. However, Kirkpatrick was far from alone in making mistaken predictions about the permanence of the Cold War conflict. Her contribution to foreign policy discourse is

\textsuperscript{15} Quoted in ibid., 105.
vitally relevant on its own terms – particularly as a means of understanding the totalitarianism discourse in the 1980s – and doubly so given the revival of the concept of totalitarianism in the ‘war on terror’.

Kirkpatrick is best known for articulating a distinction between right-wing ‘authoritarian’ and left-wing ‘totalitarian’ regimes. This distinction exerted considerable influence over the foreign policy of the first Reagan administration, during which time Kirkpatrick served as UN ambassador, as well as holding a cabinet level position and a seat on the National Security Council. Reflecting Kirkpatrick’s influence from 1981 to 1984, US foreign policy featured accommodation with ‘authoritarian’ right-wing regimes friendly to the US and an escalation of Cold War tensions with the ‘totalitarian’ Soviet Union. Kirkpatrick’s ideas shaped US foreign policy in Latin America – notably the Reagan administration’s funding of the right-wing Nicaraguan Contras and support for the government of El Salvador which was threatened by a leftist insurgency.¹⁸

This much is commonly accepted – though there is much to unpack within the seemingly straightforward ‘Kirkpatrick Doctrine’. The focus on how Kirkpatrick’s theory justified US support of authoritarian governments has obscured other aspects of her argument, including ‘her view that democracy [was] the result of a process of political evolution’, her criticism of modernisation theory, and the link between her views on domestic and foreign policy.¹⁹ Though Kirkpatrick is known for making a distinction between authoritarianism and totalitarianism, in ‘Dictatorships and Double Standards’

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Kirkpatrick used the term ‘authoritarian’ only once, preferring instead to distinguish between ‘traditional’ and ‘revolutionary’ ‘autocracies’ (a term she used twenty-five times). Perhaps because of this, there is confusion among scholars about the originality of Kirkpatrick’s authoritarian-totalitarian distinction, though most agree that her contribution was to renew a commonplace of 1950s discourse. The following section firstly highlights the significance of Kirkpatrick’s rejection of modernisation theory and suggests how this stance connected to her broader anti-revolutionary views; next, it unpicks the specifics of Kirkpatrick’s terminology and contextualises her work with reference to dominant 1950s theories of totalitarianism; finally, it analyses the degree of continuity and originality in her own theory of totalitarianism.

‘Dictatorships and Double Standards’: Modernisation, Revolution, and Tradition

In ‘Dictatorships and Double Standards’ Kirkpatrick criticised the Carter administration’s foreign policy for what was – in her view – its comprehensive failure to defend American interests and prevent the advance of global Soviet influence. She highlighted the examples of US policy towards Iran and Nicaragua as typifying the disastrous nature of Carter’s approach. Nineteen seventy-nine, the year of publication of Kirkpatrick’s article, witnessed revolutions in both Iran and Nicaragua. In Iran, the regime of the Shah, supported by the United States, was overthrown and replaced with an Islamic Republic, headed by the Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini. In Nicaragua, the Somoza dictatorship was ousted by the socialist Sandinista National Liberation Front. In these two countries, the Carter administration had, according to Kirkpatrick, ‘actively collaborated in the replacement of moderate autocrats friendly to American interests with less friendly autocrats of extremist persuasion.’²⁰ For her, the reason for Carter’s failure was his

reliance on two commonly held, but fundamentally mistaken, ideas – the ‘belief that it is possible to democratize governments, anytime, anywhere, under any circumstance’ and the ‘doctrine of modernization’. From the late 1950s through the 1960s, modernisation theory had been the prevailing framework in the social sciences for understanding development in the post-colonial world. It predicted a ‘singular path’ of economic, political, and social progress for all developing nations. As Nicolas Guilhot suggests, Kirkpatrick’s critique of this theory constituted a ‘direct attack on the intellectual and political creeds of the liberal foreign policy establishment’.

Her argument that building democracy was a slow and uncertain process aimed to challenge the assumption underpinning modernisation theory that progress and a ‘happy ending’ was the inevitable result of supporting change in developing nations. She argued that not all change, and certainly not revolution, was compatible with US interests. Instead, an abstract ‘commitment to change’ frequently ‘end[ed] up by aligning [the US] tacitly with Soviet clients’. The inadequacies of modernisation theory were compounded, for Kirkpatrick, by the Carter administration’s mistaken preference for revolutionary over traditional autocratic regimes. She argued that Carter, like other liberals, had been fooled by the misleading rhetoric of revolutionaries and ‘“duped” time after time into supporting “liberators” who turn out to be totalitarians’. She acknowledged that traditional autocracies – regimes run by unelected leaders, characterised by inequality, and kept in place by force – were ‘in general and in their very nature, deeply offensive to modern American sensibilities’. By contrast, ‘the rhetoric of

21 Ibid., 30, 35.
23 Guilhot, Democracy Makers, 155.
25 Ibid., 45.
progressive revolutionaries sound[ed] much better to [Americans]'. Beyond the level of rhetoric, however, Kirkpatrick advanced her own view of the differences between traditional and revolutionary autocrats. She argued that there were,

*systemic* differences … that have a predictable effect on their degree of repressiveness. Generally speaking, traditional autocrats tolerate social inequities, brutality, and poverty while revolutionary autocracies create them.

Traditional autocrats leave in place existing allocations of wealth, power, status, and other resources which in most traditional societies favor an affluent few and maintain masses in poverty. But they worship traditional gods and observe traditional taboos. They do not disturb the habitual rhythms of work and leisure, habitual places of residence, habitual patterns of family and personal relations. Because the miseries of traditional life are familiar, they are bearable to ordinary people … Such societies create no refugees.

Precisely the opposite is true of revolutionary Communist regimes. They create refugees by the million because they claim jurisdiction over the whole life of the society and make demands for change that so violate internalized values and habits that inhabitants flee in the remarkable expectation that their attitudes, values, and goals will ‘fit’ better in a foreign country than in their native land. Kirkpatrick was heavily criticised for her highly dubious assertion that traditional autocracies ‘create no refugees’. As historian Abbott Gleason has noted, ‘examples to the contrary abound’. Intellectuals Michael Walzer and Noam Chomsky both presented convincing criticisms of this argument at the time. Kirkpatrick, however, maintained that ‘traditional authoritarian governments are less repressive than revolutionary autocracies, that they are more susceptible of liberalization, and that they are more compatible with U.S. interests.’ It was on this basis that Kirkpatrick advocated implementing a policy which sought to ‘encourage th[e] process of liberalization and democratization’ in traditional autocracies – though even here she advocated extreme...
caution, emphasising that reforms must be ‘gradual’, and never attempted if the incumbent government was under attack from domestic rivals. On the other hand, no such hope for democratisation existed for revolutionary insurgencies which ‘if victorious … [were] unlikely to lead to anything but totalitarian tyranny.’

The United States should therefore seek to prevent, at all costs, these insurgencies from coming to power.

Kirkpatrick’s deeply rooted opposition to radical social change in other countries fits into the broader tradition of US attitudes towards revolution since the late eighteenth century. Historian Michael H. Hunt has identified a ‘persistent pattern [among Americans] of disillusionment with foreign revolutions’. Americans consistently judged revolutions against the high standard they instinctively associated with their own liberation struggle and therefore assumed that any legitimate revolution should be orderly, respectable, and moderate, and should enshrine constitutional protections which safeguarded human and property rights. Kirkpatrick conformed exactly to this tradition. She argued that US independence had been born of a ‘conservative revolution’ which involved ‘no sharp break with the past’. This revolution was to be celebrated and, crucially, sharply differentiated from the ‘twentieth century’s conception of revolution’ which was associated with a ‘radical transformation’ of politics, society, and culture. Throughout Kirkpatrick’s thought can be found her rejection of revolution counterposed to her embrace of tradition and stability. These principles were fundamentally linked to her theory of totalitarianism and informed her view of the domestic US and international context.

31 Ibid., 51.
34 Ibid., 215.
Authoritarianism, Autocracy, and Totalitarianism Theories of the 1950s

Though Kirkpatrick referred to ‘traditional autocracies’ rather than authoritarian regimes in ‘Dictatorships and Double Standards’, the term ‘authoritarian’ was used frequently in the broader intellectual and political discourse. Gleason highlights Henry Kissinger’s use of this term in 1977, and John Ehrman notes that Nathan Glazer used the totalitarian-authoritarian distinction in 1976. Kirkpatrick’s ‘Dictatorships and Double Standards’ should thus be positioned within this wider debate. Her contribution was to provide a theoretical basis for existing assumptions. As Ehrman has commented, ‘Dictatorships and Double Standards’ ‘was a milestone in neoconservative thinking’ as ‘it turned the neoconservatives’ gut feelings into theory’. It seems, therefore, that the attribution of the authoritarian-totalitarian distinction to Kirkpatrick resulted from the prevalence of this term in the broader discourse and became a shorthand means of referring to the arguments she advanced in ‘Dictatorships and Double Standards’. Kirkpatrick herself later referred repeatedly to authoritarianism in a *Commentary* magazine symposium in November 1981. It is essential, however, to highlight the specifics of her terminology in order to understand the connection between Kirkpatrick’s argument and earlier theories of totalitarianism, and to gain a full understanding of her meaning.

For a number of scholars, the Kirkpatrick Doctrine contributed little of original value to US foreign policy. David F. Schmitz has argued that Kirkpatrick ‘resurrect[ed] the distinction between authoritarian and totalitarian regimes’ and that ‘there was little that was new in Kirkpatrick’s analysis or Reagan’s policy, [though] it was rare to have

36 Ehrman, *Neoconservatism*, 121.
37 See Kirkpatrick’s contribution to “Human Rights and American Foreign Policy”.
such bold public statements of the ideas and assumptions behind American policy’. 38 For Schmitz, Reagan’s adoption of Kirkpatrick’s theory represented a return to an earlier tradition of ‘supporting authoritarian regimes as the best means to preserve American interests’, and Kirkpatrick’s contribution was merely to articulate this approach more overtly. Schmitz argues that successive administrations had pursued this strategy since the 1920s, with this policy only being disrupted by the upheavals of the Vietnam era. However, Kirkpatrick’s influence in reshaping policy, or at least policy discourse, is underplayed by Schmitz, given the significant shift away from the détente and human rights policies pursued by Carter.

Other scholars have suggested that Kirkpatrick ‘borrowed’ or ‘renewed’ an earlier distinction. For Ehrman, the originator of the authoritarian-totalitarian distinction was Hannah Arendt, while for Gleason the sources were Carl Friedrich and Zbigniew Brzezinski. 39 Ehrman does not provide a reference for his assertion, while Gleason points to a relatively obscure comment of Friedrich’s, made during a panel discussion at the 1953 conference on totalitarianism held by the American Academy of Arts and Sciences. Here, Friedrich stated that,

Totalitarianism is precisely the opposite of authoritarianism, for it involves the elimination of all stable authority … every society must be ‘authoritarian’ in some degree, every society must contain ‘authoritarian’ personalities, every society must exact obedience to authority. But totalitarian societies attempt to shatter all traditional types of authority and to replace them with a new kind of social control. In a very real sense, in a totalitarian society true authority is altogether destroyed.

Though Friedrich was clear on the important difference between totalitarianism and authoritarianism, this distinction was not central to his broader theory of totalitarianism. Rather, he was responding specifically to the tendency of psychologists to use ‘the term

38 Schmitz, The United States and Right-Wing Dictatorships, 8. See also Schmitz, Thank God They’re on Our Side: The United States and Right-Wing Dictatorships, 1921–1965 (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2009).
“authoritarian” for the kind of personality inclined towards totalitarianism’, which he viewed as a ‘serious error’.  

While the distinction between totalitarianism and authoritarianism was not central to Friedrich’s theory, a separate argument about the differences between totalitarianism and other forms of autocracy was vital – as is suggested by the title of Friedrich and Brzezinski’s collaborative volume, Totalitarianism Dictatorship and Autocracy (1961). However, their argument here was again different from Kirkpatrick’s later views. Friedrich and Brzezinski emphasised that ‘totalitarian dictatorship is historically unique and sui generis’. The six points characteristic of totalitarianism, outlined by Friedrich, aimed to ‘sharply differentiate contemporary totalitarian dictatorships from past autocratic regimes’ – the examples given were Roman emperors, absolute monarchs, ‘oriental despots’, the ‘tyrants of Greece and Italy’, and the ‘Medicis in Florence’. Thus their argument was about the newness of totalitarianism and their object was to differentiate totalitarian regimes from all forms of autocratic rule – the tyrannies, despotisms, and absolutisms – that had existed in the past. As the previous chapter observes, many theorists in the 1950s agreed that totalitarianism represented a radical break from the past; Arendt’s insistence was similarly on the radical newness of this phenomenon. She emphasised totalitarianism’s essential difference from ‘other forms of political oppression known to us such as despotism, tyranny and dictatorship’, forms of government which ‘Western thought has known and recognized since the times of ancient philosophy.’ Totalitarianism, then, was conceived as a specifically modern type of autocracy.

41 Friedrich and Brzezinski, Totalitarian Dictatorship, 5.
42 Ibid., 11. My emphasis.
43 Arendt, Origins, 460–61.
Clarification of the arguments of earlier theorists is essential to understanding Kirkpatrick’s contribution to the totalitarianism debate in the 1980s. It is clear that, more than renewing a pre-existing distinction, she built on the widely accepted argument that totalitarianism was a new and unprecedented phenomenon – ‘historically unique’ – and applied this reasoning to her contemporary context. Thus, like Friedrich, Kirkpatrick distinguished totalitarianism from other forms of autocracy – but focused on contemporary forms of right-wing autocracy, mainly in Latin America, rather than autocratic regimes of the past. Political theorist Michael Walzer, writing in 1983, made this point implicitly when he noted that the ‘argument that totalitarianism represents a radical break even within the long history of unfreedom has recently been revived by a group of conservative intellectuals.’ While Walzer agreed that they were right to ‘stress the importance of the argument’, he suggested that ‘the distinction they go on to draw between totalitarian and “authoritarian” regimes plays a part in their work that the theorists of the fifties never intended.’

While 1950s theorists broadly distinguished totalitarianism from any other form of political oppression, Kirkpatrick was specifically differentiating between right-wing ‘traditional’ and left-wing ‘revolutionary’ forms of autocracy. As she was applying the argument that totalitarianism was historically unique to the present, it no longer made sense to refer to autocracies ‘of the past’ but rather to a ‘traditional’ form of autocracy that still existed in the present. This was not her only reason for emphasising the ‘traditional’ nature of the regimes she defended. Her acceptance of ‘traditional’ and rejection of ‘revolutionary’ autocracy provides a clue to the nature of her broader theory.

of totalitarianism. This theory was anti-revolutionary and anti-utopian, and therefore inherently conservative.

Throughout the twentieth century, adoption of an anti-totalitarian worldview had had a tempering effect on revolutionary politics, frequently leading intellectuals to a position of first acceptance, then celebration of US democracy and discouraging criticism of the status quo. This political trajectory was common among the group known as the New York Intellectuals who moved from a position of revolutionary anti-Stalinism to Cold War anti-communism between the 1930s and 1950s.\textsuperscript{45} The embrace of totalitarianism theory by prominent intellectuals associated with this group, including Sidney Hook and Max Eastman, was instrumental in shaping their intellectual journey. More recently, philosopher Slavoj Žižek has argued that ‘[t]hroughout its entire career, “totalitarianism” was an ideological notion that sustained the complex operation of “taming free radicals”’.\textsuperscript{46} However, not all earlier theories of totalitarianism were inherently anti-revolutionary, as Kirkpatrick’s was.\textsuperscript{47} Part of the neoconservatives’ shift towards conservatism was their ‘discover[y of] the virtues of traditional authority’.\textsuperscript{48} The significance of ‘Dictatorships and Double Standards’ was that it ‘revealed how conservative the neoconservatives’ view of foreign policy had become … they had become openly distrustful of any attempts to improve the world. Instead they were happy to settle for just preserving it.’\textsuperscript{49}

\textsuperscript{45} For an authoritative study of this group see Alan Wald, \textit{The New York Intellectuals: The Rise and Decline of the Anti-Stalinist Left from the 1930s to the 1980s} (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1987).
\textsuperscript{46} Slavoj Žižek, \textit{Did Somebody Say Totalitarianism?: Five Interventions in the (Mis)use of a Notion} (London: Verso, 2001), 3.
\textsuperscript{47} A significant example of an (economically) conservative theory of totalitarianism was Friedrich Hayek’s 1944 \textit{The Road to Serfdom}.
\textsuperscript{48} Ehrman, \textit{Neoconservatism}, 122.
\textsuperscript{49} Ibid., 121.
Innovation in Kirkpatrick’s Theory of Totalitarianism

Kirkpatrick’s theory of totalitarianism was fundamentally informed by the theorists of the 1950s, though she developed her own distinct emphasis – one that centred on the extension of government control to all areas of society. It was this definition that she used to differentiate between totalitarianism and traditional autocracy. She advanced this argument as early as 1963, in the introduction to a volume dedicated to the study of ‘worldwide communist tactics’. Kirkpatrick had been invited to co-edit this volume, titled The Strategy of Deception, by New Leader editor Sol Levitas. When Levitas died suddenly mid-way through the project, Kirkpatrick was left in charge of the book.

She used the introduction to argue that traditional nondemocratic elites sought to maintain ‘the traditional social structure and culture’ which ‘requires less repression than … the effort radically to alter it’, and they typically ‘utilize coercion only to protect their own power’.50 Thus, for ‘the traditional autocrat the political sphere … is quite narrowly defined.’ By contrast, totalitarian ‘Communist elites are more repressive than traditional dictatorships because they aim at revolutionizing society, culture, and personality. Therefore, they perceive the totality of social structure and culture as involved in the political struggle.’ The ‘important consequence of treating society and culture as parts of the political sphere is that it multiplies many times the number of potential points of conflict between citizens and political authority. It greatly increases the issues in which the authority and coercive power of the state are involved’.51 This, for Kirkpatrick, was the essence of totalitarianism: ‘Extension of [government] regulation and coercion into all spheres of society is the meaning of totalitarianism. Since regulation in social and

51 Ibid., xx.
cultural affairs is uniquely difficult to enforce, it requires more police, more surveillance, more terror. This is the reason that totalitarian regimes are uniquely repressive.52

In addition to her focus on the expansion of state control, a second distinctive feature of Kirkpatrick’s theory of totalitarianism was her near-exclusive focus on Communism, which remained characteristic of her later work. While many earlier theorists had sought to show that ‘fascist and communist totalitarian dictatorships [were] basically alike’, Kirkpatrick was solely interested in revealing what made Communist movements totalitarian.53 Though, at root, almost all theories of totalitarianism – Kirkpatrick’s included – rested on the assumption that Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union shared certain essential characteristics, during the Cold War the study of totalitarianism shifted to focus on the Soviet Union. As Abbott Gleason suggests, the ‘development of the idea of totalitarianism by the American scholarly community was intimately connected to the development of Soviet studies or Russian studies after 1945.’54 In the 1960s, the use of the totalitarian model to study the Soviet Union fell increasingly out of favour, principally as a result of the broader challenge to Cold War Manichean ways of thinking advanced by the New Left.55

The rejection of the Soviet totalitarian model was also closely linked to the policy of détente followed by the Nixon administration after 1969. Deescalating relations between the two Cold War powers required the United States to view the Soviet Union as a state capable of change and compromise, rather than an evil and monolithic entity with which there could be no fruitful engagement. As with other neoconservatives, Kirkpatrick’s continued embrace of totalitarianism theory in the 1970s and 1980s was

52 Ibid., xxi.
53 Friedrich and Brzezinski, Totalitarian Dictatorship, 5.
54 Gleason, Totalitarianism, 121.
55 See ibid., 128–37, for a summary of the changes in the United States which led to a rejection of the totalitarian model.
connected to her rejection of détente. The political motivations of Kirkpatrick’s focus on
the totalitarian nature of Communism were clear – she was part of the broader
neoconservative movement which vehemently denounced détente and sought to reorient
US foreign policy towards a renewed confrontation with the Soviet Union.
Totalitarianism theory was the natural ally of this movement. In addition, Kirkpatrick’s
anti-totalitarianism was focused not only on the Soviet Union but on Communist
movements worldwide, particularly those in Latin America. This remained true
throughout her career. Her biographer notes that ‘from the time she arrived at the UN
until she left, the central front in her cold war remained Latin America’.\textsuperscript{56}

Kirkpatrick’s interest in Latin America can be traced back to her doctoral research
in the 1960s. Shortly after she edited \textit{The Strategy of Deception}, Kirkpatrick began her
PhD at Columbia University on the Peronist movement in Argentina. She turned this
research into a book, published as \textit{Leader and Vanguard in Mass Society} in 1971. Thus,
in addition to her interest in Communism, Kirkpatrick simultaneously developed her
academic interests in traditional and semi-traditional forms of autocracy, ‘[p]olitical
systems that [were] neither democratic nor totalitarian’.\textsuperscript{57} To her, Latin America was ‘for
the student of nondemocratic regimes … an especially fruitful scene for research’.\textsuperscript{58} She
analysed the Argentinian political system as having a ‘mix of traditional and modern
democratic and autocratic elements’, arguing that it was a ‘traditional Latin system under
conditions of mass society’ and that Peronism was a ‘Caesarist movement in a
technologically advanced society’.\textsuperscript{59} Crucially, though the masses in Argentina did
participate in and had ‘limited but real power’ to influence political decisions, this did not

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\begin{thebibliography}{1}
\bibitem{56} Collier, \textit{Political Woman}, 149.
\bibitem{57} Jeane Kirkpatrick, \textit{Leader and Vanguard in Mass Society: A Study of Peronist Argentina} (Cambridge,
\bibitem{58} Ibid., xix.
\bibitem{59} Ibid., 1, 3.
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‘necessarily imply, entail, or lead to democratic politics’. This limited form of mass participation in politics was neither democratic nor totalitarian, and therefore required a different analytical category.

Kirkpatrick’s analysis of totalitarian Communist and traditional autocratic regimes in the 1960s, and her preference for the latter, provided the basis for her argument in ‘Dictatorships and Double Standards’ a decade later. Her study of Argentina also reveals how she used the work of 1950s theorists to distinguish traditional autocratic movements in Latin America from totalitarianism. She employed a slightly modified version of Friedrich’s six-point definition of totalitarianism to analyse the political system in Argentina, arguing that it was ‘clear that [Peron’s Argentina] lacked most of the distinguishing characteristics of totalitarian systems’. The influence of Friedrich was no less apparent in Kirkpatrick’s 1982 book Dictatorships and Double Standards: Rationalism and Reason in Politics in which she provided her most extensive definition of totalitarianism. Here, she quoted Friedrich’s six points in full and noted that her own definition ‘differs only in emphasis’. She found the authoritative work of 1940s and 1950s theorists of totalitarianism to remain the ‘best guide to this extraordinary phenomenon.’ However, it was clear that she had also maintained her own specific focus on the expansion of the state. Ultimately, for Kirkpatrick, the value of totalitarianism as an analytic concept was that it ‘demystifies modern tyranny’ because it ‘opens the way to comparing all governments on the extent to which government attempts to control the lives of citizens.’

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60 Ibid., 3, 2.
61 Ibid., 40.
63 Ibid., 98.
64 Ibid., 97.
She noted that previous influential theorists of totalitarianism had offered explanations for totalitarian regimes by emphasising various characteristics – they had analysed, for example, the use of modern technology, terror, ideology, the institutional mechanisms of total power. However, what united these theorists, for Kirkpatrick, was that they all saw totalitarian regimes as ‘sharing the drive to establish comprehensive political control over the lives of individuals, obliterating in both theory and practice the distinction between public and private, between objective and subjective, claiming for the state the whole life of the whole people.’ As in her 1963 essay, Kirkpatrick remained focused on the expansion of the state as the essence of totalitarianism. For her, totalitarianism as a category focuses not on the number of rulers, nor on how they came to power, but on the operational goals of a regime. A totalitarian regime is distinguished by its rulers’ determination to transform society, culture, and personality through the use of coercive state power … The distinguishing characteristic of totalitarian goals is that they dramatically extend the scope of governmental activity. Since governments commit their power wherever they act, goals which expand the scope of government activity also expand the scope of coercion in a society.

Therefore, for Kirkpatrick, the use of terror, modern technology, or ideology (or any other specific of totalitarian government) was not the defining feature of totalitarianism. Terror, the factor that Arendt had regarded as the ‘essence of totalitarian domination’ was, in Kirkpatrick’s theory, simply the inevitable result of expanding the scope of government.

Kirkpatrick’s focus on the expansion of government as the true meaning of totalitarianism found its logical counterpart in Reagan’s domestic policy, which aimed to decrease the scale of government regulation in the United States. In his 1981 inaugural address, Reagan denounced the ‘intervention and intrusion in our lives that result from unnecessary and excessive growth of government’ which was directly responsible for the

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65 Ibid., 98.
66 Ibid., 99.
67 Arendt, Origins, 464.
‘present troubles’ of the American people. In his famous turn of phrase, Reagan emphasised that ‘government is not the solution to our problem; government is the problem’.  

68 His focus was primarily on reducing economic regulation – in this respect, Friedrich Hayek’s 1944 *The Road to Serfdom* was an important influence on Reagan’s political formation.  

69 This book argued that any attempt at centralised control of the economy would lead inevitably to totalitarianism. While Kirkpatrick’s theory of totalitarianism did not directly shape Reagan’s domestic policy, it was the context which explains the favourable reception of her ideas in the Reagan administration.

**Totalitarianism, Utopianism, and the New Left**

Thus far this chapter has explored the connection between Kirkpatrick’s definition of totalitarianism and the work of 1950s theorists. Equally important, however, was the influence of the 1960s and counterhegemonic theories of totalitarianism which negatively shaped her theory as much as those of the 1950s influenced it positively. In this regard, her views on totalitarianism were shaped as much by shifts in US domestic politics as by the international context. Kirkpatrick rejected both the influence of the New Left and the ‘cultural revolution’ on US politics, which she viewed as detrimental to liberal democracy, as well as New Left formulations of totalitarianism which had resulted in the ‘semantic infiltration and moral disarmament’ of domestic and international political discourse.

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Kirkpatrick’s writing in the 1970s on domestic political issues ‘continued to be shaped by what she had learned about totalitarianism and modern dictators’ attempts to change political systems by force. Her writings from this period show a growing distrust of attempts to manipulate political development through reform instead of allowing systems to evolve slowly on their own.’

This applied particularly to reforms to the nominating process of the Democratic party – which, reflecting the influence of the New Left, aimed to democratise the nominating process and increase representation of minority groups. It was these reforms, in place for the 1972 and 1976 presidential elections, which had resulted in the nomination of George McGovern and Jimmy Carter, nominees Kirkpatrick viewed as alienated from the majority of Democratic voters. The result of these reforms, she argued, was to take power away from the traditional base of the party and hand it to ‘public relations firms, professional campaign consultants, and candidate organizations’ who did not act in the interests of the party but rather for anyone who hired them.

These political professionals were part of a ‘new class’ of ‘intellectuals and semi-intellectuals’ whose growing influence Kirkpatrick viewed as having a harmful effect on American political life. Kirkpatrick’s writing on the ‘new class’ contributed to an already flourishing discourse on this subject. Gleason observes that arguments about the ‘new class’ had been ‘repeatedly formulated by leftists over the past 150 years, most of them “former”’, and these ideas were echoed by American conservatives in the 1970s and 1980s. Previous iterations could be found in the work of Waclaw Machajski,
Mikhail Bakunin, James Burnham, Milovan Djilas, and Harold Laswell – Kirkpatrick credited the influence of the latter three in her work. Among Kirkpatrick’s contemporaries, Irving Kristol, Robert Nisbet, and Norman Podhoretz were all neoconservative intellectuals writing about the new class. For Kirkpatrick, the ‘most important characteristic’ of the new class was ‘a marked tendency to rationalistic, moralistic, and reformist approaches to politics.’ These were features she associated with the ‘totalitarian temptation’ – the ‘political temptation’ of the new class to believe that ‘its members’ intelligence and exemplary motives equip them to reorder the institutions, the lives, and even the characters of almost everyone’. This ‘linkage of zealous reformism with totalitarianism’ was crucial because it once again revealed the fundamentally conservative implications of her theory. In effect, Kirkpatrick equated the preservation of freedom with the preservation of the status quo.

Even more dangerous than the reformism of the new class, for Kirkpatrick, was the ‘utopianism’ she associated with the New Left. Through her arguments about the close link between utopianism and totalitarianism, Kirkpatrick implicated the entire New Left in a totalitarian worldview. For Kirkpatrick, ‘[t]otalitarianism is utopianism come to power’. This argument reflected the influence of Israeli historian Jacob Talmon, whose 1952 book *The Origins of Totalitarian Democracy* argued that the roots of totalitarianism could be found in the Enlightenment. Though not all utopianism was totalitarian, it became so when ‘political power’ was used as ‘the principal instrument for achieving’ its goals; totalitarianism was thus ‘rooted in the variety of utopian political philosophy which

79 Ibid., 203.
seeks moral reform ends through political means. Totalitarians use power to remake men.’

By emphasising the utopian nature of totalitarianism, Kirkpatrick sought to create a link between such disparate thinkers as Adolf Hitler, Karl Marx, Frantz Fanon, and Herbert Marcuse. Her reasoning was that ‘[t]otalitarian politics begins with a critique of the morality of existing persons and institutions and promises to reform them … The totalitarian claim to power, then, rests on two pillars: distinctive goals and a distinctive critique of existing society’. A ‘radical critique’ was of ‘central importance to the ideological foundations of totalitarian movements’.

Kirkpatrick argued that the Marxist version of the radical critique was only the best known, and that ‘versions of the radical critique have appeared in the writings of [R. D.] Laing, Marcuse, Fanon, and certain of the Women’s Liberation spokespersons’. It was also ‘less widely understood that in Mein Kampf Adolf Hitler also provided a classic version of the radical critique.’

The implications of Kirkpatrick’s argument were clear – that political radicals represented a serious totalitarian threat to American democracy. To reinforce the link between the New Left and totalitarianism, Kirkpatrick theorised that totalitarian ideology was a type of ‘counterculture’. She argued that, for all totalitarians, ‘culture is ideology.’ By this, she meant that totalitarians viewed the existing culture as ‘the corrupt ideology of the existent society’. This politicised all aspects of culture and society, including ‘art, literature, dress, values, habitual ways of conceiving, valuing, relating, and behaving’. Totalitarians sought to translate their ideology into culture – therefore the ‘revolutionary’s ideology is … a counterculture’ and the ‘revolutionary task is to transform the new redemptive ideology from the counterculture to culture’.

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83 Kirkpatrick, “Reflections on Totalitarianism,” 103.
84 Ibid., 105.
85 Ibid., 106.
86 Ibid., 109. Emphasis in original.
‘revolutionary’ and ‘totalitarian’ interchangeably – once again highlighting the inherent conservatism of her approach. From here, she connected her argument about counterculture to her assertion that the essence of totalitarianism was the unique expansion of government regulation, then inevitably coercion, to all areas of society. She suggested that,

When totalitarian ideology is conceived as a counterculture, several aspects of totalitarian politics are illuminated. First the comprehensive character of totalitarian ideology is clarified; while ideology often concerns only politics – narrowly conceived – culture includes the entire symbolic environment … When culture is viewed as ideology, as by Hitler, Marx, Fanon, or Marcuse, conceptions of reality, value, and purpose become objects of political action, and securing acceptance of new conceptions of reality, value, and purpose becomes the object of political revolution. That is why control of the symbolic environment has such high priority for totalitarian governments …

Because culture is internalized by almost all the members of any society, commitment to the use of force to effect cultural change leads to quite literally saturating a society with coercion.\textsuperscript{87}

Kirkpatrick’s argument implied that there was a potential totalitarian within anyone who suggested fundamentally altering the status quo. Her rejection of ‘radical critiques’ of American society would have extended to those offered by Norman Mailer and Eldridge Cleaver, who both proposed the need for a revolution in the politics and culture of the United States, as well as the consciousness of Americans. Kirkpatrick did not respond specifically to their work, though her opinion of Mailer’s argument that a non-statist form of totalitarianism existed in American society was made clear in her brief comments on Benjamin R. Barber’s 1967 survey of the conceptual foundations of totalitarianism. As chapter one of this thesis highlights, Barber’s essay accorded detailed attention to non-statist and non-coercive forms of totalitarianism, revealing the prevalence of these theories in the late 1960s. Kirkpatrick refused to take the question of non-statist

\textsuperscript{87} Ibid., 110–11.
totalitarianism seriously. She wrote that Barber’s suggestion that there was no significant
difference between the coercive power of government and other forms of control in
society ‘lacked persuasiveness’. She argued that other forms of social or cultural control
paled in comparison to the coercive power of the state which was always the most
comprehensive and potentially severe, as it could threaten imprisonment or loss of life.88

Kirkpatrick’s focus on government regulation as the root of totalitarianism was in
direct contradiction to Mailer’s identification of unregulated corporate capitalism as a
source of the totalitarian impulse in American society. Following naturally from her
assessment of the evils of extensive government regulation, and the inherent connection
to totalitarianism, Kirkpatrick embraced classical liberalism and the free market.89 In this
respect, her engagement with the concept of totalitarianism was far from unprecedented.
Historian David Ciepley has shown how representations of totalitarianism in the 1930s
and 1940s which centred on the dangers of a centrally directed economy caused US
economic policy and thought to shift in a libertarian direction. In particular, Friedrich
Hayek’s highly influential *The Road to Serfdom* had a decisive impact on economic
policy and discourse.90

Kirkpatrick’s determination to implicate the New Left, and indeed any and all
who made ‘radical critiques’ of contemporary society, in a totalitarian worldview
revealed a weak point in her theory. As has been demonstrated, Kirkpatrick’s definition
of totalitarianism centred on its distinctive goals, which involved the expansion of the
political sphere to include all aspects of society and culture. For her, all other aspects of

88 Ibid., 100.
89 For the intersection of Kirkpatrick’s views on capitalism, liberalism, and government regulation see
Kirkpatrick, “The Reagan Phenomenon and the Liberal Tradition,” in *The Reagan Phenomenon and
Other Speeches on Foreign Policy* (Washington, DC: American Enterprise Institute for Public Policy
Research, 1983), 3–16, and “Regulation, Liberty, and Equality”, in *Dictatorships and Double Standards*,
204–14.
totalitarianism were secondary, including the question of how totalitarianism functioned in practice and the methods through which its goals were achieved. The role of state coercion and terror, in particular, had an ambiguous position in her theory. Though she suggested that the ‘totalitarian’s methods’ – the ‘determination … to use state power to achieve …. goals’ – ‘[were] as distinctive as [these] goals’– this assertion was clearly much more applicable to institutionalised forms of totalitarianism in Nazi Germany and Soviet Russia than to the totalitarian potential she saw inherent in the revolutionary ideology of independent intellectuals like Fanon and Marcuse.\footnote{Kirkpatrick, “Reflections on Totalitarianism”, 118.} Kirkpatrick avoided addressing the problem that neither Fanon nor Marcuse had, nor sought, control of a state machine, by instead focusing on the question of violence more broadly. By conflating the unparalleled fascist state violence of Hitler with the left-wing revolutionary violence sanctioned by Lenin and the psychologically liberating anti-colonial violence defended by Fanon, she claimed that both ‘Hitler and Lenin were explicit about the need for violence’ and that ‘[n]either praises violence for its effect on the wielders in the manner of … Fanon’, though, even then, this argument could not be stretched to include Marcuse.\footnote{Ibid., 119.} There was evidently a gap between Kirkpatrick’s arguments about totalitarian goals – through which she implicated the New Left – and totalitarianism in practice, which only applied to totalitarian movements that had gained state power, notably in Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union.

Furthermore, her theory rested on the assumption that attempts to change culture would \textit{inevitably} result in political coercion. This, as Kirkpatrick noted, introduced a further complication as ‘if a chief task of the totalitarian is to translate ideology into culture, then one would expect the role of coercion in the cultural sphere to decline with
time’ as ‘new norms are internalized’. Therefore, if successful in its goals of transforming ‘society, culture, and personality’, totalitarianism would no longer involve the use of terror or coercion – instead relying on ‘the mix of habit, loyalty, and fear characteristic of political institutions generally’. This represented something of a paradox in Kirkpatrick’s theory as she seemed to imply that, having achieved its goals, a totalitarian regime would no longer maintain any distinctive features of totalitarianism.

Kirkpatrick did not fully resolve this issue. She highlighted that others had argued that ‘totalitarian ideologies are in their nature incapable of taking root and becoming operative cultures’, that they were ‘inherently unstable … [and] incompatible with bureaucratic routine or legal order’ because they demanded ‘the perpetual movement of permanent revolution’. However, Kirkpatrick remained equivocal, arguing that though current and previous totalitarian movements had thus far failed in their attempts to fully transform human consciousness and force the internalisation of new cultural values, there was some possibility that they would succeed in future and, more importantly, no sign that they would stop trying. On the evidence, Kirkpatrick suggested that it was most likely that totalitarian attempts to transform society, culture, and personality were doomed to failure, as all totalitarian ideologies and ideologues ‘underestimate the power of habit’ and ‘the difficulties of achieving social and cultural character change’. The ‘odds [were] against the totalitarians’ as their goals required that ‘ordinary people renounce the ways of thinking and being that have characterized people known to human history and achieve habitual levels of dedication associated till now with heroes and saints.’ Ultimately, Kirkpatrick found that ‘[e]xisting evidence suggests that … conformity to totalitarian

93 Ibid., 114–5.
94 Ibid., 115.
95 Ibid., 114, Clement Moore quoted in ibid., 114.
96 Ibid., 120.
97 Ibid., 121.
behaviour models is easier to secure than conversion ... and the “new” rulers bear a remarkable and discouraging resemblance to the old tyrants’.

Moreover, in answer to the question of whether ‘it is possible that a totalitarian state can be stable and enduring’, Kirkpatrick asserted that ‘it is clear, as Carl Friedrich pointed out, that “totalitarian dictatorship, like all other political phenomena, is a relative rather than an absolute category.”’98 This was a quite a remarkable admission for a theorist known for her rigid and uncompromising stance on the fundamentally unique and historically unchanging nature of totalitarian regimes. Friedrich’s comment quoted here was a revision of his earlier views on the correct use of the concept of totalitarianism.

While in his authoritative 1956 work Totalitarian Dictatorship and Autocracy he emphasised that the features of totalitarianism together formed a ‘syndrome’ and should ‘not be considered in isolation or be made the focal point of comparison’, in a later 1969 essay on ‘The Evolving Theory and Practice of Totalitarian Regimes’ he wrote that ‘the most important change’ to the concept ‘is the realization that totalitarian dictatorship … is a relative rather than absolute category’ and that ‘it is quite meaningful to speak of totalitarian features in terms of more and less, and that it is meaningful also to speak of totalitarian trends.’99

This evolution of totalitarianism theory took place in the context of the fracturing of consensus on the meaning and utility of the concept in the 1960s, following the decline of dominant 1950s theories of totalitarianism discussed in chapter one. In the 1980s, the enduring relevance of totalitarianism was no less contested, despite the neoconservative reinvigoration of this concept, led, in no small part, by Kirkpatrick. Her admissions concerning the slim chances of success for totalitarian goals, as well as her ambiguity on

98 Ibid., 124.
the ‘stability and endurance’ of totalitarian regimes, gave some ground to critics of the concept, notably Michael Walzer.

For Walzer, the shift in historical circumstances from the 1950s to the 1980s required a critical re-examination of the theory of totalitarianism. As he noted, the context in 1983 ‘looked rather different … from the way it did in 1949 and years immediately following. What struck Orwell, Arendt, [Jacob] Talmon, [Czeslaw] Milosz, and the others was the sheer success of totalitarian politics.’ On the other hand, in 1983, examples of what Walzer termed ‘failed totalitarianism’ abounded. Observing the international situation, he noted the same problem that Kirkpatrick had run into – that ‘[t]otalitarianism as an ideal type cannot be realized in fact, or it cannot endure.’ Most significantly, he argued that the levels of ‘messianism’ required to keep totalitarianism alive had proved impossible to export by force, or even to maintain in a previously totalitarian regime after the death of the leader embodying the cult of personality. Thus, he argued, the ‘governments of eastern Europe … all look like authoritarian regimes, dressed up … in the ideology of totalitarianism’ and ‘the leaders of Russia today are very much like old-fashioned oligarchs’. Walzer’s arguments may have been influenced by the work of dissident intellectuals and the theoretical developments taking place in totalitarianism theory in Eastern Europe. In particular, in a 1978 essay playwright Václav Havel used the term ‘post-totalitarian’ to describe the reality in Czechoslovakia – though, unlike Walzer, Havel maintained that this was still a revised form of totalitarianism.

Walzer, in deliberate opposition to the arguments of Kirkpatrick and other neoconservatives, reached the conclusion that totalitarianism should be considered a

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101 Ibid., 116.
102 Ibid., 113, 114.
103 Gleason, Totalitarianism, 184.
variation of traditional authoritarianism, particularly in its failed state, but even fully-fledged it was just ‘the name we give to the most frightening form of authoritarian rule’, a ‘form continuous with other forms’.  

Given the collapse of the Soviet Union eight years after he was writing, Walzer’s suggestion that totalitarianism might ‘not be capable of routinization but only of decay’ and his analysis of the USSR as ‘a dictatorship resting on popular apathy, the hollow shell of a totalitarian regime’, was prescient.  

Indeed, a similar argument about the inherent inability of totalitarianism to achieve and sustain total domination was revived by Christopher Hitchens after the end of the Cold War to proclaim the demise of totalitarianism as a concept.

For Kirkpatrick, though, writing in the early 1980s, the concept of totalitarianism retained its significance as she believed that totalitarian rulers ‘have not abandoned their efforts to stay in power and to exercise comprehensive control over society, culture, and personality’. It was these efforts that ‘distinguish them from other autocrats and from democrats.’

As we have seen, Kirkpatrick used the concept of totalitarianism to implicate, via a connection with utopianism, the New Left in a totalitarian worldview. In addition, she also viewed New Left and 1960s theories of totalitarianism as having had a damaging effect on political discourse in the United States. For Kirkpatrick,

The cultural revolution that had swept through American cities, campuses, and news rooms, challenging basic beliefs and transforming institutional practices, had as its principal target the morality of the American experience and the legitimacy of American national interests. It was, after all, a period when the leading columnist of a distinguished newspaper wrote: ‘The United States is the most dangerous and destructive power in the world.’ It was a time when the president of a leading university asserted: ‘In twenty-six years since waging a world war against the forces of tyranny, fascism, and genocide in Europe we have become a nation more tyrannical, more fascistic, and more capable of genocide.

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105 Ibid., 115.
106 See chapter four of this thesis.
107 Kirkpatrick, “Reflections on Totalitarianism,” 125.
than was ever conceived or thought possible two decades ago. We conquered Hitler but we have come to embrace Hitlerism." Kirkpatrick viewed the late 1960s and 1970s as a dark period in which faith in American democracy was undermined by the upheavals of the Vietnam era. She suggested that the optimism, prosperity, and confidence of the post-war years was ‘finally destroyed by the protracted and bitterly disillusioning conflict in Vietnam and by a sequence of political, economic, and cultural shocks that polarized our society and shattered the confidence of our ruling elites.’ For Kirkpatrick, the demoralising effect of the war at home was more important than the debate about the necessity of the war abroad. Her biographer suggests that her ‘views about the anti-war movement were always much stronger than her views about the war itself.’ For Kirkpatrick, the lessons of Vietnam supported her broader critique of modernisation theory. Though she felt the war was morally justified, she also argued that it was strategically unwise and had resulted from an overly expansive view of what it was possible for the United States to achieve in the world.

Human Rights and the United Nations

In February 1981 Kirkpatrick began her post as UN ambassador. The focus of her work shifted from analysing the theory of totalitarianism and criticising Carter’s foreign policy from the outside, in her role as a public intellectual, to engaging with the practical implications of countering Soviet influence and shaping Reagan’s foreign policy from inside his administration. One of her primary goals at the UN was to reassert the validity of the totalitarian paradigm as a framework for understanding international affairs. She

108 Kirkpatrick, “Human Rights and American Foreign Policy.”
110 Collier, Political Woman, 63.
111 Once it was committed, however, she felt that the US had a duty to see the war through – and she viewed withdrawal as ‘the most shameful display of irresponsibility and inhumanity in our history’, arguing that ‘Vietnam taught us is that where American power withdraws, something very terrible happens under certain kinds of circumstances’. Kirkpatrick, quoted in Collier, 63, Kirkpatrick, Legitimacy and Force: State Papers and Current Perspectives, vol. 1: Political and Moral Dimensions (London: Routledge, [1988] 2017), 45, ProQuest Ebook Central.
repeatedly sought to present the Cold War conflict in black and white terms, dismissing any comparison between the actions of the United States and the Soviet Union, and emphasising the fundamental distinction between totalitarianism and democracy. The Soviet war in Afghanistan was a ‘daily focus’ for Kirkpatrick at the UN.\textsuperscript{112} In a speech to the General Assembly in 1981, she described the Soviet invasion as ‘a momentous event that altered … the course of world politics … [shaking] the very foundations of world order.’ \textquoteleft More than any other single event in recent years\textquoteright{} the invasion revealed \textquoteleft{}the danger that the policies of the Soviet Union now pose to global stability and world peace\textquoteright{}.\textsuperscript{113} She also dedicated much of her energy towards opposing Communist movements in Latin America, specifically the Sandinistas in Nicaragua and Marxist Farabundo Martí National Liberation Front (FMLN) in El Salvador. Another of Kirkpatrick\textquotesingle{}s major aims to was counter the anti-Israel basis she perceived among UN member states.\textsuperscript{114}

The cracks in the consensus on the superiority of American values wrought by the debate over Vietnam and the rise of the New Left were matched on an international scale by what Kirkpatrick identified as the \textquoteleft{}extension of Soviet influence over language\textquoteright{} resulting in \textquoteleft{}Western acceptance of [Soviet] definitions of our fundamental concepts and values\textquoteright{} which infiltrated international debate and manifested itself \textquoteleft{}in such political arenas as the United Nations\textquoteright{}.\textsuperscript{115} For Kirkpatrick, \textquoteright{}[t]wo decades of mistaken theories, disinformation, and self-denigration in the West, matched by conviction, dogma, and denial on the Soviet side had wreaked confusion, self-doubt, and demoralization in the U.S. and the West.\textquoteright{}\textsuperscript{116} The \textquoteleft{}expansion of Soviet influence in the intellectual domain\textquoteright{} was

\textsuperscript{112} Collier, \textit{Political Woman}, 143.
\textsuperscript{113} Kirkpatrick, \textquoteright{}Human Rights in Afghanistan,	extquoteright{} \textit{The Reagan Phenomenon}, 70.
\textsuperscript{114} Collier, \textit{Political Woman}, 129–32.
\textsuperscript{116} Ibid., 8.
paralleled by an increase in Soviet power more broadly – notably in ‘military build-up’ and ‘Soviet imperial expansion’.

It was this situation that Reagan, according to Kirkpatrick, inherited from Carter in 1981. In her formulation, the success of Reagan’s foreign policy rested on its ability to ‘redress the correlation of forces, stop Soviet expansion, clarify the nature of the contest and its stakes, and to do these simultaneously’.

For Kirkpatrick, based at the UN and confronted with what she viewed as widespread anti-American sentiment among other representatives, countering the ‘semantic infiltration’ of international political discourse and ‘moral disarmament’ of the United States was of utmost importance. She viewed the UN as dominated by the power blocs of the ‘Third World’ nations and the Soviet Union and its allies which resulted in the isolation of Israel and the United States. She argued that Western nations were disinclined to oppose their former colonies which ‘left the new nations of the Third World and the Soviet bloc free to impose their understandings on the work of the United Nations.’ The UN was thus a forum in which ‘Newspeak’, of the type identified by George Orwell in 1984, proliferated, where international law was ‘twisted again and again to deprive the actions of the United States of legitimacy and to provide a cloak of legitimacy to all Soviet actions.’ A clear example of how Reagan attempted to insert moral clarity back into the Cold War struggle was his well-known ‘Evil Empire’ speech, which described the Soviet Union as the ‘focus of evil in the modern world’.

117 Ibid., 5, 6.
118 Ibid., 9.
119 Ibid., 12.
120 For an overview of the dynamics of the UN see Mark Mazower, Governing the World: The History of an Idea (London: Allen Lane, 2012).
121 Kirkpatrick, Legitimacy and Force, 18.
122 Ibid., 13.
speechwriter, Terry Dolan, responsible for the phrase ‘evil empire’ later described it as a ‘semantic infiltration’ in kind.\(^{124}\)

Kirkpatrick’s description of how the United States should counter Soviet imperial expansion also reflected the significance of semantics in the Cold War conflict. She wrote approvingly that the ‘President’s response to imperial growth of the USSR has been to clearly affirm American solidarity with peoples struggling to prevent their incorporation into the Soviet empire or to regain their freedom. He has insisted on their right to national independence and self-determination.’\(^{125}\) Reagan’s strategy, as identified by Kirkpatrick, was thus to appropriate and mobilise the language of anti-colonialism and self-determination as a rhetorical weapon in the Cold War conflict with the Soviet Union. She presented anti-colonialism as fundamentally compatible with the framework of anti-totalitarianism, in which the United States represented the unambiguous force of good in contrast to the ‘evil’ totalitarian empire. Though the Soviet Union did indeed qualify as an empire, Kirkpatrick’s flat refusal to countenance any analogous criticisms of US actions when they were raised by the Soviet bloc or ‘non-aligned’ nations at the UN suggested that this commitment to self-determination was disingenuous, or, at best, selective.

Kirkpatrick, however, was determined to dispel the ‘myth’ of ‘moral equivalence’ – the idea that there was any comparison between the actions of the United States and the Soviet Union. She argued that there was ‘no more misleading concept abroad today than this concept of superpower rivalry and the concept of superpower equivalence’. For her, there was no ‘symmetry’ between the goals of the United States and the Soviet Union: the ‘fact is … that we [the United States] do not seek to dominate the world. We do not

\(^{124}\) Quoted in Gleason, *Totalitarianism*, 197.

seek colonies. We do, in fact, seek to foster a world of independent nations.’ The Soviet Union was the only power which sought ‘to undermine and subvert the independence of nations’, therefore, ‘there is no question of superpower rivalry, and there isn’t even a question of a contest between the United States and that imperialistic power. There is a contest between the imperialistic power and all other countries who desire to preserve their independence.’ Kirkpatrick’s determination to counter the anti-American bias she perceived at the UN and in domestic US political discourse during the Carter administration helps to explain a glaring lacuna in her work – the absence of any acknowledgement that the United States was anything but perfect in all its foreign and domestic policies.

Kirkpatrick’s rejection of any suggestion of moral equivalency between the United States and the Soviet Union reflected her determination to reassert a bipolar vision of the world fundamentally divided between the antithetical spheres of Soviet totalitarianism and American democracy. She dismissed criticisms of the United States which cut across this simplistic reading of the world, including its domestic racism and imperialist tendencies in foreign policy.

For Kirkpatrick, it was enough to say that the ‘United States is not in fact a racist, colonial power, it does not practice genocide, it does not threaten world peace with expansionist activities. In the last decade especially we have practiced remarkable forbearance everywhere … We have also moved further, faster, in eliminating domestic racism than any multiracial society in the world or in history.’ This rosy view of US domestic and foreign policy was justified, for Kirkpatrick, because it was necessary to counter the ‘self-denigration’ in domestic discourse under Carter and the ‘anti-

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Americanism’ of international politics. It was also vital that American self-confidence was restored, and the morality of US founding principles re-affirmed, due to the all-important connection between the self-image of the United States and its image in the world and the pursuit of its foreign policy. Under Carter, ‘with the U.S. defined as an essentially immoral society, pursuit of U.S. power was perceived as immoral and pursuit of morality as indifferent to U.S. power. Morality … required transforming our deeply flawed society, not enhancing its power.’ On the other hand, ‘[a]s long as the United States was perceived as a virtuous society, policies which enhanced its power were also seen as virtuous.’ This ‘traditional conception’, in which ‘[m]orality and American power were indissolubly linked’, had been lost under Carter.128 For Kirkpatrick, then, ‘[t]he restoration of the conviction that American power is necessary for the survival of liberal democracy in the modern world is the most important development in U.S. foreign policy in the past decade. It is the event which marks the end of the Vietnam era, when certainty about the link between American power and the survival of liberal democratic societies was lost.’129

To understand the significance of Kirkpatrick’s emphasis on the inherent morality of US foreign policy, it is essential to place her arguments in the context of the rise of human rights discourse in the United States and internationally in the 1970s and 1980s. Historian Samuel Moyn suggests that global concern over human rights emerged quite suddenly in the 1970s, with the years leading up to 1977, the ‘breakthrough year’, witnessing an ‘explosion of human rights activism’.130 Moyn attributes the turn to human rights during these years to ‘the collapse of prior utopias and the search for refuge

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128 Kirkpatrick, “Human Rights and American Foreign Policy.”
elsewhere’ which led to the ‘transfiguration [of other utopias] into a human rights agenda’. He charts the emergence of human rights from various sources – including the work of NGOs, notably Amnesty International, and the reception and influence of Soviet, and later Eastern European, dissidents in the West – before the institutionalisation of human rights during Carter’s presidency. Moyn emphasises the novelty of human rights in the 1970s, arguing that this type of international human rights movement, focused primarily on protecting individuals from the state, had ‘never existed before’.

An alternative narrative of the rise of human rights is put forward by social scientist Nicolas Guilhot, who traces the continuity in ideas and intellectuals from the anti-Stalinist left in the 1940s to the Reagan era, suggesting that ‘the endorsement of liberal democracy by the anti-Stalinist left represents the real social and political basis of the struggle for democracy and human rights.’ Guilhot characterises the politics of the anti-Stalinist left as an ‘international crusade for democracy and against totalitarianism’ which re-emerged in modified form in the human rights agenda of the Reagan administration.

These narratives raise important questions about the place of human rights in US history, and, more significantly for this study, the relationship between human rights and the Cold War fight against Soviet totalitarianism. If human rights was a neoconservative project, associated with the intellectuals who transitioned from the Old Left to Reagan’s administration, then it was bound inherently to the neoconservative campaign against the Soviet Union. On the other hand, if human rights emerged in the 1970s in the moment of Cold War détente, then it was likely separate – if not entirely – from the imperatives of

131 Ibid., 122.
132 Ibid., 1.
133 Guilhot, Democracy Makers, 48.
134 Ibid., 51.
fighting the Cold War struggle. Indeed, Carter’s pivotal speech at Notre Dame University in 1977 set out his human rights-based foreign policy in opposition to ‘that inordinate fear of communism’ which had characterised the policy of containment in the previous administrations.\(^{135}\) Locating human rights in US history is complicated by the contestation of the meaning of this term in the 1970s and 1980s – human rights were in fact both a product of détente and also subsumed into the neoconservative rejection of détente. Kirkpatrick’s engagement with the human rights policies of the Carter administration and reformulation of her own version of human rights illustrates the rapidly changing significance of human rights in US foreign policy during the late 1970s and early 1980s. The case of Soviet dissidents, and the neoconservative adoption of their cause, also illuminate the connections between Cold War anti-totalitarianism and human rights.

Kirkpatrick was a leading critic of the Carter administration’s human rights policy, though she was at pains to point out that she was not opposed to human rights per se, only to the Carter conception. She argued that Carter’s policy was hopelessly utopian and universalistic in theory, and hypocritical and counterproductive in practice. Kirkpatrick saw in Carter’s human rights policy both the influence of the ‘cultural revolution’ in the United States and a ‘determinist, quasi-Marxist theory of historical development’. These utopian theories imbued Carter’s policy with an expansive conception of human rights – rather than being limited to the ‘judicial protections associated with the rule of law and the political freedoms associated with democracy’ and the American tradition, the ‘Carter doctrine of human rights … favored equality over

liberty, and economic over political rights; socialism over capitalism, and Communist dictatorship over traditional military regimes.136

Kirkpatrick argued that Carter’s human rights policy was contaminated by the same totalitarian temptation she found in ‘modern liberalism’ more broadly, in which the ‘distinction between state and society’ had been erased. Thus, Carter’s assumption that ‘governments can create good societies, affluent economies, just distributions of wealth, abundant opportunity, and all the other prerequisites of the good life creates the demand that they should do so’. This ‘indifference to the distinction between state and society … renders the new liberals [like Carter] insensitive to the pitfalls and consequences of extending the jurisdiction and the coercive power of government over all institutions and aspects of life in society.’ It was, Kirkpatrick emphasised, ‘precisely this extension of government’s plans and power over society, culture, and personality that makes life in totalitarian societies unbearable to so many’. This argument thus represented the application of Kirkpatrick’s theory of totalitarianism to human rights policy. It also linked back to her distinction between traditional ‘authoritarian’ and revolutionary ‘totalitarian’ forms of autocracy. It was the Carter administration’s lack of attention to the dangers of expanding the scope of government into all areas of society that led it to ‘prefer’ totalitarian to authoritarian regimes.137

Although she believed that the Carter administration’s approach to human rights was fundamentally misguided, Kirkpatrick maintained that ‘not only should human rights play a central role in U.S. foreign policy, no U.S. foreign policy can possibly succeed that does not accord them a central role.’ She put forward a different conception of human rights – one which had at its centre the inherent morality of US identity and policies. She

136 Kirkpatrick, “Human Rights and American Foreign Policy.”
137 Ibid.
argued that the ‘nature of politics and the character of the United States alike guarantee’ that human rights would be accorded a central role in foreign policy. It was for this reason that the restoration of confidence in the American tradition and belief in the virtue of American power and influence was so important. Kirkpatrick’s formulation of human rights was inherently linked to American national interests. She argued that ‘there is no conflict between a concern for human rights and the American national interest as traditionally conceived.’ This was because ‘[o]ur national interest flows from our identity, and our identity features a commitment to the rights of persons.’ In practice, this meant that ‘human-rights policies should be … scrutinized not only for their effect on other societies but also for their effect on the total strategic position of the United States and its democratic allies – not because power is taking precedence over morality, but because the power of the U.S. and its allies is a necessary condition for the national independence, self-determination, self-government, and freedom of other nations.’ Crucially, because Kirkpatrick believed the national interests of the United States were concerned primarily with countering the influence of Soviet totalitarianism, she implied a natural affinity between anti-totalitarianism and human rights policy. Thus, she and other neoconservative intellectuals understood human rights to mean ‘anticommunism by another name’.

Kirkpatrick’s criticisms of Carter’s human rights policy and elucidation of her own conception of human rights revealed the shifts in the meaning of human rights from the Carter to the Reagan presidencies. Kirkpatrick’s arguments were part of a broader neoconservative political strategy of ‘successfully capturing ... and ... contesting the virtual monopoly of liberals over human rights issues.’ Neoconservatives thus ‘sought

138 Ibid. My emphasis.
139 Ibid.
both to deprive their adversaries of a critical weapon, and to capitalize on human rights as an instrument of legitimation for their own foreign policy.’

Both Moyn and Guilhot identify a shift from the liberal conception of human rights to neoconservative ideas of ‘democracy promotion’ in the 1980s, though the significance of this shift was obscured by the rapidity of the neoconservatives’ co-opting of this issue, which resulted in an ‘almost immediate redefinition of human rights’. In addition, the efforts of intellectuals, like Kirkpatrick, to ‘root [human rights] in American tradition’ obscured ‘how much novelty there really was’ in the emergence of human rights as a dominant force in the 1970s. The transformation initiated by the ascendancy of neoconservatism is succinctly outlined by human rights scholar Julie Mertus, who states that the ‘Reagan administration reoriented the human rights agenda by interlacing American exceptionalism throughout. The very definition of human rights was altered to focus narrowly on the civil and political rights most familiar in the American system. Decisions to engage another country in human rights discussions were based even more squarely on larger American interests.’

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141 Guilhot, *Democracy Makers*, 70.
142 Moyn, *Last Utopia*, 218. The shift to ‘democracy promotion’ occurred during Reagan’s second term after Kirkpatrick had left the administration, see Kathryn Sikkink, *Mixed Signals: U.S. Human Rights Policy and Latin America* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2004), 148–80. The interventionism associated with democracy promotion was in contrast to Kirkpatrick’s emphasis on caution and limiting the extent of US intervention in the affairs of foreign nations, unless vital US interests were at stake.

Mertus notes further that the ‘United States refused to apply international human rights standards to its own behaviour … Domestic practices in violation of human rights in the United States included measures of discrimination against racial minorities, such as cutting back equal opportunities in education and fair housing, and the enormous discrepancies in the incarcerations of the nation’s blacks (versus whites), which were magnified after the onset of Reagan’s drug war.’ Mertus, *Bait and Switch*, 33. These factors are in stark contrast to Kirkpatrick’s conception of human rights which was premised on the inherently morality of the US system and which countenanced no criticism of domestic racism.
Though much of the substance of human rights was transformed between the Carter and Reagan administrations, important strands of continuity remained. In particular, the centrality of Soviet dissident intellectuals to the newly emerging field of human rights grounded this discourse in the Cold War fight against totalitarianism. Moyn identifies dissidence as the ‘first self-styled “human rights movement” in world history’. The cause of Soviet dissidence was championed by neoconservative intellectuals and politicians, most notably Senator Henry ‘Scoop’ Jackson, as part of the broader anti-Soviet campaign, but Carter also took steps to recognise and support dissidents while viewing his actions as compatible with the policy of détente. Whereas Kirkpatrick saw the influence of the ‘cultural revolution’ in Carter’s human rights policy, Moyn suggests that human rights ‘was as much the beneficiary of collapse of the “countercultural” explosion as a set of idealistic causes as it was part of that outburst.’ Moreover, he observes that certain forms of human rights were ‘deeply conservative’ from the beginning, resulting not from the search for ‘new utopia but rather [emerging as] a response to a god that failed’.

The neoconservatives constructed a fundamental link between the national interest of combating Soviet totalitarianism and the moral imperative of advancing the cause of human rights. Whether one regards this connection as new or, as Guilhot suggests, it had its origins in the early Cold War anti-totalitarianism of the anti-Stalinist left (finding its parallel in their ‘international crusade for democracy and against

145 Moyn, *Last Utopia*, 139.
146 Justin Vaisse writes that ‘it would be impossible to overstate the role of Scoop Jackson and his work on behalf of Soviet Jews, which brought the human rights issue to front and center’ of public debate. Vaisse, *Neoconservatism*, 142.
147 Moyn, *Last Utopia*, 133.
totalitarianism’), it is nonetheless significant that Kirkpatrick was acknowledged for her role in forging this link by her contemporaries. Sociologist Robert Nisbet heralded Kirkpatrick for her ‘extraordinary ability to fuse, to give creative union to, the moral on the one hand and the strategic on the other’. Similarly, historian Richard Pipes, an expert on the Soviet Union, responded to a talk given by Kirkpatrick in 1985 on the ‘Reagan Doctrine’ by emphasising that Reagan was ‘the first President to affirm a direct link between the destinies of free peoples everywhere and our own’.

Reagan thus made the link between the strategic and the moral, between the interests of others and the interests of the United States, that was so central to Kirkpatrick’s work, an integral part of his foreign policy. This represented the fulfilment of Kirkpatrick’s dictum in ‘Dictatorships and Double Standards’ that ‘[l]iberal idealism need not be identical with masochism, and need not be incompatible with the defense of freedom and the national interest.’ In reality, it meant that the role of human rights in foreign policy had been subsumed into and subjugated by the imperatives of pursuing the national interest.

As neoconservative understandings of the national interest centred on the fight against Soviet totalitarianism, Kirkpatrick and other neoconservatives presented human rights and anti-totalitarianism as one and the same. Though human rights survived in the Reagan era and continued to occupy a central position in the formation of foreign policy, it did so in a profoundly altered form. Twenty years later, strikingly similar arguments

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149 Robert Nisbet, forward to The Reagan Phenomenon, xii.
152 For example, Julie Mertus highlights that the implementation of Kirkpatrick’s policy recommendation of pursuing friendly relations with traditional autocratic regimes actually corresponded with an increase of human rights violations in these countries. Mertus notes that ‘during the Reagan administration, large amounts of U.S. aid … given to rightist dictators … was associated with a deterioration in human rights observance.’ Mertus, Bait and Switch, 32.
153 See Sikkink, Mixed Signals, 148–80, for analysis of the shift from human rights to ‘democracy promotion’ in the Reagan years. The forces at work reshaping human rights were also larger than the
about the inherent compatibility of strategic and moral foreign policy aims, of fighting totalitarianism while protecting human rights, played a crucial role in the arguments of the liberal hawks who supported the ‘war on terror’ after 2001. Like Reagan, Paul Berman linked together the destinies of US citizens with those of foreign nations, arguing that ‘liberty for them means safety for ourselves’. Similarly, like Kirkpatrick, Christopher Hitchens was recognised by his contemporaries for his eloquent fusion of strategic and moral concerns, the dualism in his work of ‘considerations of principle and considerations of prudence’.155

‘Third Age’ Neoconservatism and Islamic Terrorism

In the intervening years before the start of the ‘war on terror’, however, vast changes to the global and domestic context meant that US foreign policy was operating under dramatically altered circumstances. The end of the Cold War and the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991 brought an end to the organising principle of anti-communism that had guided foreign policy for the previous 40 years. Moreover, the power and influence of the United States increased significantly – the post-Cold War years witnessed a ‘unipolar’ moment’ in which America was the sole superpower and able to act unilaterally in world affairs.
A clear illustration of the transformation of US foreign policy can be seen in the shift from ‘second’ to ‘third age’ neoconservatism – in Justin Vaisse’s helpful categorisation. Second age neoconservatives, like Kirkpatrick, were identified by their domestic opposition to the ‘New Politics’ of the Democratic Party and rejection of détente in foreign affairs. Although these neoconservatives were deeply opposed to isolationism and viewed an active role in the world for the United States as essential, they were also characterised by their caution in foreign affairs – at least relative to the ‘overconfidence’ of the post-2000 neoconservatives. Vaisse identifies a crucial distinction between the ‘defense’ and ‘active promotion of democracy’ which characterised the second and third age neoconservatives respectively. As he notes, “defense” is indeed the operative word.

In this respect, the 2003 war in Iraq blurred the lines, because it was widely asserted that neoconservatives sought to export democracy by force of arms … The move from the defense to the active promotion of democracy reflected the fact that America’s relative power in the world had increased considerably between the time of Nixon and Carter (and the second-age neoconservatives) and that of George W. Bush (and the third-age neoconservatives).

The emphasis many second-age neoconservatives placed on defence and caution was epitomised by Kirkpatrick. Her argument in ‘Dictatorships and Double Standards’ had been primarily a warning against the dangers of indiscriminate US attempts to export democracy. She suggested that the strength of the Reagan Doctrine lay in not just its adherence to moral principles and pursuit of the national interest, but also in its limits. For her, the Reagan Doctrine ‘affirms American principles and interests … but also the limits of [American] resources. It seeks to marry idealism and prudence, to accept limits

156 Vaisse, Neoconservatism, 12.
157 Ibid., 138.
on our solidarity and resources without renouncing the universal moral claims of men seeking freedom.’.\footnote{Kirkpatrick, \textit{The Reagan Doctrine}, 14.} This, she maintained, ‘sharply distinguished’ Reagan’s foreign policy ‘from the “containment” or “rollback” approaches’ as ‘under … Reagan, the U.S. is prepared to help others protect or restore their freedom and independence but not to assume responsibility for the task.’\footnote{Ibid., 11.} Ultimately, she argued that ‘[f]acing the limits of our resources and our interests means giving up the illusion that we can solve all the world’s problems, cure all the world’s ills. It means forswearing the illusion that we are strong enough or wise enough or good enough to do so.’\footnote{Kirkpatrick, \textit{Legitimacy and Force}, 325.} This last statement suggests that the importance of not overreaching the extent of American power, for Kirkpatrick, outweighed her belief in the innate goodness of the United States and its actions in the world. Kirkpatrick’s approach was thus distinct from the belief of third-age neoconservatives and the Bush administration that American power should be used ‘to shape a world safer for all’.\footnote{Vaisse, \textit{Neoconservatism}, 12.}

Kirkpatrick’s commitment to limiting the scope of intervention in the 1980s clearly did not preclude the necessity of protecting of US interests where they were threatened by Soviet advances. The ingrained anti-communism of Kirkpatrick and her contemporaries kept them wedded to American involvement in the affairs of other nations. As Ehrman comments, ‘[t]heir anti-Communist struggle … required a continually activist posture, both in domestic politics as well as in their preferences for American foreign policy.’\footnote{Ehrman, \textit{Neoconservatism}, 191.} While Vaisse’s study of neoconservatism seeks to analyse the connection between the historical roots of neoconservatism and the 2003 Iraq War, Ehrman’s book, published in 1995, provides a lens for looking at neoconservatism in the
1980s unclouded by the events of the twenty-first century. Ehrman’s prediction that the ‘end of the external Communist threat [would] encourage [neoconservatives] to favour a more relaxed set of policies’, as global events would no longer be ‘magnified by superpower competition’, provides a reminder that the shift to the expansive and overconfident policies associated with post-2000s neoconservatism was by no means preordained.  

Kirkpatrick greeted the end of the Cold War with the hope that United States could return to being a ‘normal nation’ in ‘normal times’. She maintained her fundamental view that though it was important to ‘encourage democratic institutions wherever possible,’ ‘it [was] not within the United States’ power to democratize the world’. The realist streak in Kirkpatrick’s approach to foreign policy meant that she did not share with ‘third-age’ neo-cons the belief in using US power to remake the world and establish democracy around the globe.

The significant increase in American global power after the Cold War provides one compelling reason for the changes in US foreign policy from the 1980s to the 2000s. A further, vitally important, reason was the emergence of a new ‘existential’ threat to American security and values – emanating this time from ‘political Islam’ or ‘Islamism’. While Ehrman’s predictions about the declining role of neoconservatism in foreign affairs were proved mistaken, another of his observations was more prescient. He noted that a generational shift was already underway – identifying, among others, Daniel Pipes, son of historian Richard Pipes, who, as ‘a respected Middle East specialist’, was ‘heir’ to the neoconservative legacy. Daniel Pipes was indeed one of the earliest commentators to

163 Ibid., 191–2.
164 Kirkpatrick, quoted in Collier, Political Woman, 185.
165 Ibid., 184.
166 Ehrman, Neoconservatism, 192.
link Islamism with previous totalitarian movements, thereby facilitating the later transference of hostilities from the Cold War fight against Soviet totalitarianism to the ‘war on terror’. Pipes also emphasised the same connection between totalitarianism and utopianism as Kirkpatrick to make his case that ‘fundamentalist Islam is a radical Utopian movement closer in spirit to other such movements (communism, fascism) than to traditional religion.’

Though Kirkpatrick was less instrumental in linking Islamism with fascism and Communism, she did participate in forging the connection between totalitarianism and terrorism which became central to the arguments of the liberal hawks in support of the ‘war on terror’. In 1984 Kirkpatrick spoke at the Second International Conference on Terrorism in Washington, which aimed to educate and organise the West for the ‘battle’ against international terrorism. Kirkpatrick mobilised her definition of totalitarianism as the political invasion of the private sphere to condemn terrorism, arguing that the ‘affinities between terrorism and totalitarianism [were] multiple. Both politicize society. The totalitarian makes society, culture, and even personality the objects of his plans and actions; the terrorist sees the whole of society as the object of his violence and his war.’

Though this trend was absent in Kirkpatrick’s talk, the ‘overall effect of [the Second International Conference on Terrorism] was to make clear that … experts were convinced of the existence of a particular Islamic tendency toward terror’. Kirkpatrick herself, however, remained focused on the actions of the Soviet Union and its supporters, arguing that ‘the most powerful totalitarian state of our time is also the principal supporter and

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sponsor of international terrorism.¹⁷⁰ It was left to others to make the connection between totalitarianism, terrorism, and Islamism which provided the foundations for the arguments of the liberal hawks in the ‘war on terror’.

Chapter 4: ‘Defending Islamofascism’: Christopher Hitchens, Anti-
Totalitarianism and Humanitarian Intervention

Writing in 1990, at the end of the Cold War conflict, British-American journalist
Christopher Hitchens proclaimed the ‘demise of “totalitarianism”’ as a useful term.1 The
revolutions that had swept across Eastern Europe in 1989, he argued, had ‘negated every
single one of the assumptions upon which the “totalitarian” hypothesis rested.’2 Thirteen
years later, Hitchens emerged as a leading supporter of the 2003 Iraq War on the basis
that the fight against ‘Islamofascism’ in the ‘war on terror’ represented the latest front in
the long twentieth-century battle against totalitarianism. This chapter explores how the
concept of totalitarianism survived the collapse of the Soviet Union – an event which
seemed to signal the end of its relevance in international politics.

With the end of the Cold War, theories of humanitarian intervention and liberal
imperialism both gained currency in US intellectual discourse. Humanitarian
intervention, in particular, emerged as a leading foreign policy concern in the 1990s in
the United States and internationally following the collapse of the bipolar conceptual
framework of Soviet totalitarianism versus American democracy.3 Though
humanitarianism offered an alternative justification for an interventionist foreign policy
in the 1990s, scholars and public commentators have come to view humanitarian and anti-
totalitarian rationales for war as compatible, and even synonymous, in the discourse on
the ‘war on terror’. This perceived compatibility has been essential to the survival of the

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1 Christopher Hitchens, “How Neo-Conservatives Perish,” reprinted in Hitchens, For the Sake of
2 Ibid., 186. Emphasis in original.
3 See Thomas G. Weiss, Humanitarian Intervention (Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 2016); Nicholas J.
Simms and D. J. B. Trim, eds., Humanitarian Intervention: A History (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge
concept of totalitarianism in the post-Cold War era. Anti-totalitarianism was also used to facilitate arguments in support of liberal imperialism – as advocates of ‘benign’ empire deemed that the necessity of combating a totalitarian enemy took precedence over avoiding the evils of American imperialism.

Another vital development was the newly perceived threat of ‘Islamism’ which captured the attention of US journalists, intellectuals, and policymakers after the 1979 Iranian Revolution. In media coverage of the Revolution, Islamism was presented as an ideological threat to American values similar to that represented by totalitarian Communism. Discussion of ‘terrorism’ dominated public discourse in the decade after the 1979–1981 Iran hostage crisis, when neoconservative intellectuals merged new understandings of the threat of international terrorism with pre-existing ideas of totalitarianism. After the devastating terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon on September 11, 2001, fears of Islamist ideology and terrorism increased immeasurably, and politicians and public intellectuals re-affirmed the connection with the totalitarian movements of the twentieth century. The discourse on Islamism and terrorism in the 1980s provided the foundations for the survival of the concept of totalitarianism in the post-Cold War era. The attacks of September 11 confirmed, for many, the paradigm’s continued relevance in the twenty-first century.

The connection to Islamism was crucial for Hitchens’ use of the concept of totalitarianism after 9/11. The attacks transformed totalitarianism in Hitchens’ thought from an outdated theory to a vitally relevant concept. While others who have identified Islamism as a form of totalitarian ideology have been careful to maintain a distinction between Islam, the religion, and Islamism, the political movement, Hitchens proposed a fundamental connection between totalitarianism and all forms of religion. His work is
therefore the perfect lens through which to consider the transformation in understandings of totalitarianism from the ‘secular’ to the ‘theocratic’.

Hitchens’ broader target in his 1990 article was neoconservatism, which, he argued, had been discredited and ‘robbed of its theoretical undergirding’ by the collapse of totalitarianism as a viable framework for understanding the world. Hitchens linked the totalitarian paradigm firmly to neoconservative ideology, and specifically Jeane Kirkpatrick’s arguments in ‘Dictatorships and Double Standards’. The events of 1989, he argued, had undermined the foundations of Kirkpatrick’s view of the immutable nature of totalitarian regimes. They had prompted her to advocate a path of ‘quiet diplomacy’ towards the Soviet Union, previously unthinkable according to her own doctrine.

Kirkpatrick held on to her views about the intractable nature of Soviet totalitarianism until the end of 1988, when increasing signs of independence in Soviet bloc countries prompted her to seriously consider the possibility that Gorbachev was abandoning ‘the efforts at total control, the distinguishing characteristic of the totalitarian state’. She remained sceptical of Gorbachev’s reforms throughout 1989, until the fall of the Berlin Wall, when she was forced to admit that the ‘dramatic events of recent days confirm beyond reasonable doubt that Mikhail Gorbachev and his collaborators in Eastern Europe have abandoned the totalitarian project.’ The collapse of the Soviet Union thus represented the end of the relevance of Kirkpatrick’s version of anti-totalitarianism, focused as it was on the threat of international Communism. Indeed, the close of the Cold War ushered in, for Kirkpatrick, a period in which the United States could take a step back from its global role holding back the tide of Communist

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domination. However, it was not long before a new generation of intellectuals, Hitchens among them, took up the mantle of anti-totalitarianism, now focused on the twin threats of Arab nationalism and Islamist ideology, in order to justify a seemingly limitless war against ‘terror’.

From his vantage point at the end of the Cold War, Hitchens reflected on the history of the term ‘totalitarian’ in the United States. Identifying James Burnham, a former Trotskyist-turned-conservative intellectual, as both ‘the intellectual founder of the neoconservative movement and the original proselytizer, in America, of the theory of “totalitarianism”’, Hitchens traced a line from Burnham’s work in the 1940s to the neoconservative deployment of totalitarianism in the 1980s. The common thread was the explicit, in Burnham’s case, or implicit, among later neoconservatives, argument in support of American empire. The fight against totalitarianism during the Cold War had been used as a cover for imperialism, as ‘by attributing the global design to the “totalitarian” foe … Cold War propagandists were able to remain indirect and even defensive about a plan of their own.’\(^7\) The ‘all-enclosing world-view’ of neoconservative anti-totalitarianism further emphasised the distinctiveness of totalitarian regimes as ‘marked by a terrifying acquiescence, if not complicity, among their subjects. There was no such thing as a private life in the “totalitarian” universe’. Hitchens accused neoconservatives of being privately envious of such ‘ruthlessness’ which, they argued, gave the “totalitarians” a definite advantage in the global contest’ between the United States and the Soviet Union.\(^8\)

While the features of totalitarianism Hitchens emphasised – an inherently expansionist foreign policy coupled with invasive internal control – were broadly

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\(^7\) Hitchens, “How Neo-Conservatives Perish,” 185.
\(^8\) Ibid., 185.
accepted across the political spectrum during the Cold War, he identified anti-totalitarianism in the 1980s specifically with neoconservatism. Indeed, the form of totalitarianism theory to which Hitchens was responding, with its emphasis on the invasion of the private sphere, was precisely the one popularised by neoconservatives such as Kirkpatrick, and it was neoconservative anti-totalitarianism that Hitchens regarded as thoroughly debunked by the end of the Cold War. The Soviet Union was evidently not intent on expansion, and thus neoconservatives had ‘lost the prime justification for American power and American empire.’ The fact that the peoples of Eastern Europe, in the former Soviet bloc countries, were ‘cheerful, orderly, well-informed, happily familiar with all the values and procedures of democracy, anti-militarist, conscious of history’ disproved the idea that no individual thought was possible ‘under a “totalitarian” system, where obedience and thought control were the norms’.  

At the beginning of the 1990s, Hitchens thus thoroughly rejected the usefulness of the concept of totalitarianism in its neoconservative iteration. Though his consistent admiration for George Orwell indicated a subscription to an older tradition of left-wing anti-totalitarianism before 9/11, references to totalitarianism are muted in Hitchens’ writing from this earlier period. His position at the start of the 1990s conformed to Abbott Gleason’s prediction that the end of Cold War would deprive arguments about totalitarianism of their urgency and ‘unhook them from the deepest political passions of the age’.  

Hitchens’ dismissive attitude towards totalitarianism as a concept changed decisively after the terrorist attacks of September 11. He became an outspoken proponent of the idea that ‘Islamofascism’ represented a revived totalitarian threat to Western

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9 Ibid., 186.
10 Gleason, Totalitarianism, 209.
security and values, comparable to the threat represented by Nazism during World War II and Soviet Communism during the Cold War. Hitchens’ views caused him publicly to break his association with the Left and support the policies of George W. Bush in the ‘war on terror’. In his 2003 book *A Long Short War: The Postponed Liberation of Iraq*, Hitchens outlined the development of his views since the end of the Cold War. He wrote that while he ‘had welcomed the uplifting pro-democracy movement of 1989’, which seemed to prove that ‘the old illusion of one-party rule, or one-man rule … had been as historically condemned as any theory or practice possibly could be’, he now felt his optimism had been ‘naïve’. The rise of Slobodan Milošević, Saddam Hussein, Kim Jong-II, and the Taliban in Afghanistan signified for Hitchens ‘a new mutation of the totalitarian idea’. He now affirmed the arguments he had ridiculed in 1990 – arguing that in such regimes ‘the citizen is the property of the state’, and that ‘totalitarian regimes are innately and inherently aggressive and unstable’.¹¹ His earlier attack on anti-totalitarianism as a cover for empire was also reversed. Hitchens’ use of the concept necessitated changes in its meaning, evident in the range of regimes that now fell under this term – in addition to the above, Hitchens also described the Islamic Republic of Iran and the terrorist organisation Al-Qaeda as totalitarian. The list included both religious and secular regimes, and movements with and without state backing.

Hitchens’ engagement with totalitarianism theory took two main forms: First, he argued that the totalitarian *state* had re-emerged as a feature of the post-Cold War world; secondly, he identified the continued existence of totalitarian *ideology* in the form of ‘Islamofascism’. Totalitarianism theory in these two forms can be traced back to the late 1930s, when the focus on the ‘totalitarian state’ was joined by new understandings of

totalitarianism as an ideology or system of belief. These two meanings facilitated a connection between the totalitarian state of Iraq under Saddam Hussein’s rule and the totalitarian ideology of the terrorist organisation Al-Qaida. The most important function of totalitarianism in the discourse on the ‘war on terror’ was as a vital linking concept. Most overtly, totalitarianism connected the ‘war on terror’ to the ‘Good Fights’ of World War II and the Cold War. As Tony Judt wrote in the London Review of Books in 2006, pro-war liberals connected their views to ‘their grandparents’ war against Fascism and their Cold War liberal parents’ stance against international Communism’. In this sense, totalitarianism was used as a political epithet to simplify and reduce ‘the new confrontation … like its 20th-century predecessor, to a familiar juxtaposition … Democracy v. Totalitarianism, Freedom v. Fascism, Them v. Us.’

However, to write off totalitarianism as an epithet is to fail to get to grips with the significance of this concept in the ‘war on terror’ and the other functions it performed. This chapter considers in turn the other vital links which facilitated Hitchens’ embrace of the politics of anti-totalitarianism, adapted for a new era. I examine the two main pillars which supported Hitchens’ anti-totalitarian worldview: the idea of Iraq as a totalitarian state, and Al-Qaida as motivated by a totalitarian ideology. The first half of this chapter

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12 Alpers, Dictators, Democracy, 129–56.
13 Historian Anson Rabinbach has made a similar argument that the primary function of the term totalitarian is a ‘semantic bridge’. He writes that ‘the word … has served to bridge changing political affiliations at several crucial historical moments (in the 1930s, 1950s and 1970s) by suspending the ambiguities and political reservations that might otherwise inhibit the creation of new political constellations and alliances’. My own focus differs from Rabinbach’s attention to how totalitarianism has bridged shifting political orientations. While, with Rabinbach, I argue that the term provided a powerful semantic bridge between the anti-totalitarianism of the 1930s–1950s and the anti-totalitarian position taken by the liberal hawks in the early 2000s, I am more interested in the content of 2000s liberal anti-totalitarianism, and the connecting strands which made up this worldview. Anson Rabinbach, “Public Intellectuals and Totalitarianism: A Century’s Debate,” in Intellectuals and Their Publics: Perspectives from the Social Sciences, ed. Christian Fleck, Andreas Hess, and E. Stina Lyon (Farnham, UK: Ashgate, 2009), 121.
explores how Hitchens used arguments about state totalitarianism to support the perception of the Iraq War as a humanitarian intervention. The second half considers how the perception of Islamism as a totalitarian ideology justified the war as a necessity to protect American security. Another vital connection facilitated by the concept of totalitarianism, then, was the link between humanitarian and strategic arguments for righteous war. Anti-totalitarianism implied a reciprocity of interest between protecting human rights in Afghanistan and Iraq and protecting the United States from terrorism. Hitchens also expanded the definition of totalitarianism to connect secular and religious regimes and ideologies. In order to make this link, he developed the argument that all totalitarianism was essentially religious in nature, and all religion was essentially totalitarian. Before proceeding with this analysis, this chapter first sets out some crucial context, including Hitchens’ intellectual background, the significance of the totalitarianism debate in Eastern Europe in the 1980s, the continuation of theories of American totalitarianism after the 1960s, and the emergence of the discourse on humanitarian intervention in the 1990s.

Christopher Hitchens differed from the other intellectuals in this thesis in his dual nationality. Born in Portsmouth, England, in 1949, he moved to the United States in 1981, becoming a US citizen in 2007. His background helped shape Hitchens’ views on totalitarianism, as well as his broader political outlook. Owing to his role as a journalist, and frequently as a foreign correspondent, Hitchens accorded close attention to international politics, and developments in his thought were frequently directly linked to global events. The influence of the British socialist writer George Orwell was ever-present in his work, and events in Europe, as well as the ideas of European intellectuals, had a larger significance in Hitchens’ early thought than in that of the US-born intellectuals considered in this thesis. As a student at Oxford during the 1960s, Hitchens
acquired a theoretical grounding in revolutionary socialist politics, in particular as a result of his reading of the work of Leon Trotsky and Rosa Luxemburg. He joined the International Socialists and adopted the view that the Soviet Union was best characterised as a ‘state capitalist’ system.\textsuperscript{15}

Later, Hitchens assimilated into his American intellectual context. In his attitude towards the United States, he identified with the ‘pulse of patriotic sympathy’ evident in Norman Mailer’s reporting on the 1968 Democratic convention in Chicago.\textsuperscript{16} In 1968 Mailer was still warning of the totalitarian plague he saw menacing American society. In this instance he expressed concern about the threat of ‘totalitarian phalanxes of law and order’ called in to deal with the disruption at the convention.\textsuperscript{17} Despite his deep criticisms of American society, Mailer maintained a love for ‘the promise and the dream’ of America, and Hitchens compared Mailer’s ‘thwarted patriotism’ favourably with the anti-Americanism of more radical protestors.\textsuperscript{18} Hitchens declared himself ‘immune to the sort of propaganda that emphasized “Uncle Sam” or “the Yanqui,” let alone the sort that burned the American flag’. This immunity stemmed from Hitchens’ ‘[e]xperience with Communists and fellow travelers in Cuba’ – an experience he had in common with Eldridge Cleaver, and which ultimately contributed towards the latter’s acceptance of the relative merits of American democracy by the 1980s.\textsuperscript{19} Hitchens spent time in Cuba in 1968, and Cleaver arrived in the country to begin his self-imposed exile at the end of that year.

\textsuperscript{16} Ibid., 211.
\textsuperscript{18} Schultz, \textit{Buckley and Mailer}, 4, Hitchens, \textit{Hitch-22}, 211.
\textsuperscript{19} Hitchens, \textit{Hitch-22}, 211.
Already sceptical of Cuban socialism, Hitchens was further disillusioned by Fidel Castro’s support of the Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia, which occurred while Hitchens was in Cuba. He described the ‘three most important episodes’ from the 1970s as ‘the stirrings of revolution in Portugal and in Poland, and the experience of counter-revolution in Argentina’.  

Disagreement with the International Socialists over the 1974 revolution in Portugal led Hitchens to break from this group. While still describing himself as a socialist until the end of the 1990s, Hitchens wrote that ‘Portugal had broken the mainspring [of his socialist politics] … because it had caused me to understand that I thought democracy and pluralism were good things in themselves, and ends in themselves at that, rather than means to another end.’  

In Poland in 1976, Hitchens met Adam Michnik, later another leading supporter of the ‘war on terror’ on anti-totalitarian grounds, whom he credited with uttering the ‘life-altering’ statement that ‘[t]he real struggle for us is for the citizen to cease to be the property of the state’. For Hitchens, this represented the ‘the principle of consistent anti-totalitarianism’ and had ‘enormous’ implications for his political positions.  

Hitchens visited Buenos Aires in 1977 to interview the Argentine dictator Jorge Rafael Videla. His experience of the military dictatorship contributed to his support of Britain in the 1982 Falklands War – and further alienation from the British Labour Party. These developments preceded Hitchens’ American writings. At the time of his emigration to the United States, he had abandoned his early socialist views and become disillusioned with the optimistic spirit of 1968. His thought was also grounded in a European anti-Stalinist perspective – which contained the roots of his anti-totalitarianism.

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20 Ibid., 181.
21 Ibid., 186.
22 Ibid., 192. Emphasis in original.
The Totalitarianism Debate in Eastern Europe

The discourse on totalitarianism in Eastern Europe in the 1970s and 1980s deeply influenced Hitchens’ thought. In addition to Adam Michnik, the work of Polish émigré poet Czesław Miłosz, author of *The Captive Mind* (1953), made a lasting impression on Hitchens and helped shape his later arguments that totalitarianism was an essentially religious phenomenon. *The Captive Mind* aimed to ‘make West Europeans and Americans understand Communism as a political religion’ and had an enormous influence on Western understandings of totalitarianism.23 Hitchens’ engagement with anti-totalitarian activism in Eastern Europe also represented a significant point of crossover with neoconservative anti-totalitarianism. As the previous chapter shows, Soviet and Eastern European dissident movements were significant in shaping neoconservative conceptions of totalitarianism in the 1980s. While the academic use of totalitarianism as an appropriate model for comprehending the Soviet Union declined in the United States after the 1960s (notwithstanding the continued embrace of the concept by neoconservatives like Kirkpatrick), this model conversely took off in Eastern Europe after 1968 as a means of analysing and opposing the Communist governments of the Soviet satellite states.24

Eastern European engagement with the totalitarianism paradigm was generally more activist than the academic approach taken by Western European and American intellectuals.25 In Eastern Europe, merely identifying Communism as totalitarian placed intellectuals in opposition to their governments, so there was ‘little space for nonactivist politics’.26 Intellectuals thus focused on how totalitarianism could be opposed, and in

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26 Ibid., 167.
doing so they developed a definition of totalitarianism which had interesting parallels with the debate in the United States. Polish and Czechoslovak dissident intellectuals, including Leszek Kołakowski, Jacek Kuroń, Adam Michnik, and Václav Havel advocated a strategy of opposing totalitarianism by expanding ‘civil society’. This meant encouraging social and cultural public activity in the nongovernmental sphere. The expansion of autonomous social and cultural spheres would then exert pressure on the totalitarian political sphere. The invocation of the ‘language of civil society was a purposive and deliberate attempt to make a critical linkage with the tradition of Western political thought’, including the work of Hannah Arendt. This strategy could also be considered a counterpart to Kirkpatrick’s emphasis on the defining feature of totalitarianism as the attempt to expand the political sphere to include all aspects of society and culture – though she clearly took a more pessimistic view of the potentialities of reforming totalitarian states from within. According to Kirkpatrick, totalitarians would never abandon their attempt to expand the political sphere and control all of society and culture.

The flourishing of dissident movements in the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe also influenced discussion in the United States on the end of totalitarianism. While Kirkpatrick remained a proponent of the totalitarian model until the very end of the Cold War, for others the very existence of dissidence was clear evidence of the changes that had taken place since the Stalinist era. By the 1980s, a growing number of Western intellectuals identified the Soviet regime as closer to authoritarianism than...

totalitarianism. New categories, including Michael Walzer’s ‘failed totalitarianism’, and ‘post-totalitarianism’, introduced by Václav Havel, were coined to analyse the new reality. Hitchens similarly cited the existence of free-thinking Eastern Europeans as evidence of the failure of the totalitarian project and the uselessness of totalitarianism as an analytical concept.

In the debate over the 2003 Iraq War, however, the experience of Communist rule in Poland took on a different significance for some former dissidents, including Adam Michnik. Michnik presented his support for the invasion of Iraq as a natural progression from his earlier opposition to Communism, writing:

I remember my nation’s experience with totalitarian dictatorship. This is why I was able to draw the right conclusions from Sept. 11, 2001. Just as the murder of Giacomo Matteotti revealed the nature of Italian fascism and Mussolini’s regime; just as the great Moscow trials showed the world the essence of the Stalinist system; just as ‘Kristallnacht’ exposed the hidden truth of Hitler’s Nazism, watching the collapsing World Trade Center towers made me realize that the world was facing a new totalitarian challenge.

It was to this reasoning that Hitchens referred when he commended Michnik’s position of ‘consistent anti-totalitarianism’. In making these comparisons, Michnik collapsed the distinction between acts of internal domestic repression and violence and the external threat of international terrorism. Like Hitchens, in identifying 9/11 as the reason for his support of the Iraq War, Michnik conflated the statist and secular regime of Saddam Hussein with the theocratic, stateless movement Al-Qaeda, writing that the ideology behind the terror attacks represented a ‘crusade against the democratic world. Saddam Hussein takes part in this just as Hitler and Stalin did before him’.

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30 Gleason, Totalitarianism, 180.
31 Adam Michnik, “In Support of President Bush: We, the Traitors,” World Press Review 50, no.6 (June 2003), https://worldpress.org/Europe/1086.cfm.
Theories of American Totalitarianism after the 1960s

In addition to rejecting neoconservative conceptions of totalitarianism, Hitchens also disregarded the theory, a product of the 1960s, that a form of non-statist or ‘cultural’ totalitarianism existed in the United States. Reflecting on his views in the 1960s in his 2010 memoir, Hitchens stated that he had found Herbert Marcuse’s argument that ‘liberalism was just another mask for tyranny’ an example of ‘moral silliness’.

The idea of American totalitarianism did not disappear with the 1960s, though it did reach its apex in that decade. In the 1980s – in opposition to neoconservative conceptions of totalitarianism presented as the polar opposite of US freedom and democracy – linguist and public intellectual Noam Chomsky highlighted the limits of freedom in the putatively democratic United States by invoking a comparison with statist conceptions of totalitarianism. In *Necessary Illusions: Thought Control in Democratic Societies* (1989), he wrote that,

> In the democratic system ... necessary illusions cannot be imposed by force. Rather, they must be instilled in the public mind by more subtle means. A totalitarian state can be satisfied with lesser degrees of allegiance to required truths. It is sufficient that people obey; what they think is a secondary concern. But in a democratic political order, there is always the danger that independent thought might be translated into political action, so it is important to eliminate the threat at its root.

The ‘system of propaganda’ in the United States ensured that these necessary illusions were enforced, constraining debate within ‘proper bounds’ and setting limits on ‘thinkable thought while reinforcing the belief that freedom reigns’.

Though Chomsky held back from explicitly identifying the United States as a totalitarian society, he echoed the earlier arguments of 1960s radical intellectuals, including Norman Mailer, when suggesting that intellectual conformity was actually a worse form of control as it was

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more insidious and harder to identify. Reviewing another book by Chomsky published around the same time, *The Culture of Terrorism* (1988), Hitchens was unconvinced by Chomsky’s suggestion that there was ‘an almost “totalitarian” system of thought control in the USA’. Hitchens found this analogy ‘suggestive’ but insufficient, arguing that the ‘mass communications industry’ was better regarded as ‘an area of contestation’ than total conformity.34

More recently, in direct opposition to Hitchens’ theory of totalitarianism which focused on enemies external to the United States, political theorist Sheldon S. Wolin presented another theory of internal American totalitarianism. In *Democracy Incorporated: Managed Democracy and the Specter of Inverted Totalitarianism* (2008), Wolin developed the argument that the contemporary United States, under President George W. Bush, represented a new form of totalitarian regime. He identified this totalitarianism as ‘inverted’ to differentiate it from the ‘classic totalitarianism’ of Nazi Germany, Stalinist Russia, and Fascist Italy. Wolin echoed many of the arguments of earlier radical intellectuals who developed the idea of American totalitarianism in the 1960s, including de-emphasising the role of the state and of terror. For Wolin, ‘inverted totalitarianism is only in part a state-centered phenomenon. Primarily it represents the political coming of age of corporate power and the political demobilization of the citizenry.’ In addition, he identified the American form of totalitarianism as unconscious, unintentional, and unrecognised. Like Mailer’s 1963 description of totalitarianism ‘slipping into America’ with no ‘specific political face’ or ideology and without visibly altering the existing power structure, Wolin wrote that:

Unlike the classic forms of totalitarianism, which openly boasted of their intentions to force their societies into a preconceived totality, inverted totalitarianism is not expressly conceptualized as an ideology or objectified in

34 Hitchens, “The ‘We’ Fallacy,” reprinted in *For the Sake of Argument*, 280.
public policy. Typically it is furthered by power-holders and citizens who often seem unaware of the deeper consequences of their actions or inactions.\textsuperscript{35} Like Hitchens, many other liberal hawks explicitly rejected the argument that the United States had ever exhibited totalitarian tendencies. As Adam Michnik bluntly put it: ‘One cannot perceive totalitarian threats in George W. Bush’s policies and at the same time defend Saddam Hussein. There are limits to absurdity, which should not be exceeded recklessly.’\textsuperscript{36} Liberal intellectuals Paul Berman and Peter Beinart both presented the rejection of the idea of American totalitarianism as an important milestone in the political development of the left. In similar works published in the early 2000s, Berman and Beinart told a story of anti-totalitarianism, a noble tradition, perverted into an anti-American doctrine in the 1960s. Like Hitchens, these liberals laid claim to an older tradition of anti-totalitarianism which had its origins in the early Cold War. The specifics of their engagement with the contested tradition of anti-totalitarianism are discussed in the next chapter.

**Liberal Hawks and Humanitarian Intervention**

The embrace of anti-totalitarianism by prominent liberal intellectuals in the debate on the ‘war on terror’ is widely acknowledged by scholars but remains critically unexamined. Moreover, this revival of anti-totalitarianism is complicated by the fact that liberal hawks were equally widely believed to have supported the ‘war on terror’ on liberal humanitarian grounds – an extension of the liberal support for intervention which arose in the 1990s following the end of the Cold War. The liberal hawk position on the Iraq War was articulated in humanitarian terms, as is evident from the 2005 collection *Humanitarian Arguments for War in Iraq* compiled by sociologist Thomas Cushman and including contributions from both Hitchens and Berman. Cushman introduced this

\textsuperscript{35} Wolin, *Democracy Incorporated*, xviii. My emphasis.

\textsuperscript{36} Michnik, “In Support of President Bush.”
volume as consisting of essays from those who supported the war on ‘liberal-
humanitarian grounds’, defined as ‘[c]oming to the rescue and aid of a people who had
been subjected to decades of brutality and crimes against humanity … [which is] entirely
consistent with … the fundamental humanitarian principle of rescue.’  37 At the same time,
however, he maintained that the ‘ideological tradition uniting many authors in this
volume might be described as “antitotalitarianism”’.  38 The liberal hawks saw the invasion
of Iraq as both part of ‘a great antitotalitarian struggle’ and ‘a war of liberation, or a
humanitarian war’.  39 Thus, for the liberal hawks themselves, as for scholars who have
studied them, the concepts of humanitarianism and anti-totalitarianism were compatible,
or even synonymous. These widely held assumptions about the compatibility or
equivalence of humanitarian and anti-totalitarian arguments for war contributed to the
survival of totalitarianism as a concept in the post-Cold War era.

However, in the literature on the rise of humanitarian intervention in the 1990s,
totalitarianism does not feature as a significant concept.  40 Instead, it was the end of the
Cold War and the collapse of the polarised conceptual framework of Soviet
totalitarianism versus American democracy which provided a space for the debate over
humanitarian intervention to emerge. Following the end of the Cold War, ‘hopes were
widespread that power politics would increasingly be replaced in international relations

37 Thomas Cushman, ed., A Matter of Principle: Humanitarian Arguments for War in Iraq (Berkeley:
38 Ibid., 6.
39 Maria Ryan, “Bush’s ‘Useful Idiots’: 9/11, the Liberal Hawks and the Cooption of the ‘War on
40 To cite a few examples, totalitarianism is either not mentioned, or mentioned only fleetingly, in
Thomas G. Weiss, Humanitarian Intervention; Nicholas J. Wheeler, Saving Strangers; Simms and Trim,
Humanitarian Intervention; J. L. Holzgrefe and Robert O. Keohane eds, Humanitarian Intervention:
Ethical, Legal and Political Dilemmas (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003); Jennifer M.
Welsh ed., Humanitarian Intervention and International Relations (Oxford: Oxford University Press,
2004); Simon Chesterman, Just War Or Just Peace?: Humanitarian Intervention and International Law
(Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002); Norrie MacQueen, Humanitarian Intervention and the United
by moral and ethical considerations.'

Despite the limited successes of humanitarian intervention in the former Yugoslavia, the failure of intervention in Somalia, and non-intervention in the Rwandan genocide, by ‘the early 2000s an “emerging norm” of intervention to protect human rights was widely recognised.’ This norm remained ‘highly contested’ – notably, the crucial question of the role that strategic interests should play in humanitarian intervention remained unresolved. Historians who have studied the career of humanitarian intervention have suggested that strategic and humanitarian concerns are by necessity sometimes indivisible. For Matthew Jamison, interventions ‘both past and present have shown that humanitarian and strategic concerns are not only hard to disentangle, but may in fact sometimes be indistinguishable’.

By contrast, the introduction of the principle of the ‘Responsibility to Protect’, or ‘R2P’, based on a 2001 report by the International Commission on Intervention and State Sovereignty (ICISS) and adopted by all UN member states in 2005, placed an emphasis on the concept of ‘right intention’. The report asserted that the ‘primary purpose of the intervention, whatever other motives intervening states may have, must be to halt or avert human suffering.’ The development of R2P attempted to consolidate the shift towards humanitarian intervention as the new norm governing international relations between states and to resolve continuing problems and inconsistencies. R2P reflected a change in understandings of state sovereignty from one centred on absolute rights to one contingent on responsibility. It stated that ‘[w]here a population is suffering serious harm, as a result of internal war, insurgency, repression or state failure, and the state in question is unwilling or unable to halt or avert it, the principle of non-intervention yields to the

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42 Ibid., 365.
44 “The Responsibility to Protect,” xii. My emphasis.
international responsibility to protect. In shifting the terms of debate from rights to responsibility, the report aimed to encourage ‘evaluation of the issues from the point of view of those seeking or needing support, rather than those who may be considering intervention.’

Furthermore, the report emphasised the separateness of humanitarian concerns and the goal of combatting international terrorism. Compiled before 9/11, the R2P report aimed to provide ‘precise guidance for states faced with human protection claims in other states’ and was not intended to ‘guide the policy of states when faced with attack on their own nationals, or the nationals of other states residing within their borders.’ Significantly, the authors emphasised that:

The two situations in our judgement are fundamentally different. The framework the Commission … has developed to address the first case (coping with human protection claims in other states) must not be confused with the framework necessary to deal with the second (responding to terrorist attacks in one’s own state).

While acknowledging that the debate over the presence of national and strategic interests in humanitarian interventions is far from resolved, it is clear that the principle of R2P presents a challenge to the conflation of humanitarianism and anti-totalitarianism. The report’s emphasis on the need to separate humanitarianism and counterterrorism is a distinction that is elided and obscured by the fusion of the concepts of totalitarianism and terrorism on one hand, and anti-totalitarianism and humanitarianism on the other. In other words, if counterterrorism and humanitarianism should be thought of separately, and the concepts of terrorism and totalitarianism have become merged in contemporary discourse, then anti-totalitarianism and humanitarianism equally should be separated. The question of the ‘evaluation of the issues’ either ‘from the point of view of those seeking

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45 Ibid., xi.
46 Ibid., 17.
47 Ibid., viii. My emphasis.
or needing support’ or from ‘those who may be considering intervention’ raised by the R2P report is one that is instructive in separating the three concepts. Both anti-totalitarianism and counter-terrorism are primarily concerned with the security or interests of the country considering intervention (in this case the US), while humanitarianism (ideally) is based on a consideration of the issues from the perspective of the population requiring assistance – though this consideration is still undertaken by the intervening state. It is with these distinction in mind that the analysis of Hitchens’ work in this chapter proceeds.

The end of the Cold War prompted a conversation about the potential for humanitarian intervention on a global scale, but this debate held particular significance for the generation of former radicals who had maintained a staunch anti-interventionism since the Vietnam War. One such New Left veteran, Todd Gitlin, commented that the impact of Vietnam was such that for many on the American left, a ‘near-automatic No to military force’ was ‘a staple of conviction, even “identity,” for three decades.’ The end of the Cold War, however, and the collapse of the anti-communist organising principle of American foreign policy, opened a space for a reconsideration of this position. Foreign policy no longer had to be thought of ‘as all of a piece, the product of original imperialist sin’, and equally the ‘price of nonintervention was rising steeply in the eyes of many.’

Thus, for many former ‘60s activists, the 1990s issued in a shift away from anti-interventionism towards support for humanitarian intervention. The debate over NATO intervention in Bosnia in the early 1990s was a turning point. Prominent left-wing and

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liberal intellectuals who revised their anti-interventionism during these years included Todd Gitlin, David Rieff, Michael Walzer, Michael Ignatieff, and Paul Berman.\(^{49}\)

**Hitchens’ Humanitarianism**

Hitchens too was part of this generation of anti-interventionists who repudiated their absolute opposition to the use of military force in the 1990s to become proponents of armed intervention for humanitarian purposes. For Hitchens, the Bosnian War prompted the ‘realization that American power could and should be used for the defense of pluralism and as a punishment for fascism’.\(^{50}\) Humanitarian concerns occupied a prominent position in his support for intervention in Iraq in 2003, and his longstanding sympathy for the plight of the Kurdish people in Iraq predated his arguments for war. However, the question of whether strategic motivations can or should play a role in humanitarian interventions is highly relevant to an analysis of Hitchens’ work.

In contrast to the conclusions of the R2P report, Hitchens’ humanitarian arguments in support of the 2003 Iraq War were inextricably linked to US strategic interests and security concerns, including combatting the threat of international terrorism. Simon Cottee and Thomas Cushman, editors of a collected volume of his writing on the ‘war on terror’, have suggested that, for Hitchens, leaving the Baathist regime in power was both ‘morally and politically inconceivable: morally, because of the exceptionally brutal and murderous nature of the Baathist regime, and politically, because of the regime’s uniquely pathological and dangerous character’.\(^{51}\) Thus, they suggested, ‘Hitchens’s case for intervention in Iraq can … be said to rest on considerations of

\(^{49}\) Though Ignatieff and Berman went on to support the 2003 Iraq War, Gitlin, Rieff, and Walzer all opposed the war, reflecting the contested nature of what constitutes a humanitarian intervention.

\(^{50}\) Hitchens, “An Interview with Christopher Hitchens, Part II: Anti-Fascism, Reactionary Conservatism, and the Post–September 11 World,” reprinted in Cottee and Cushman, *Christopher Hitchens*, 203.

\(^{51}\) Cottee and Cushman, *Christopher Hitchens*, 16.
principle and considerations of prudence’. Hitchens’ arguments were premised on this marriage of the humanitarian and the strategic, or the ‘moral’ and the ‘political’, the ‘principled’ and the ‘prudent’.

The same combination of interests was evident in other writings by Hitchens, particularly his ‘Case for Regime Change’ in Iraq, which rested on three central arguments: (1) that regime change would neutralise the risk of Saddam Hussein acquiring weapons of mass destruction (WMD); (2) that Saddam Hussein was a ‘leading sponsor and advocate of Islamist violence’; (3) that intervention would alleviate the suffering of the Iraqi and Kurdish peoples. Only the last of these was strictly a humanitarian concern. Presenting the strategic/humanitarian connection still another way, Hitchens divided his case for intervention into arguments based on the view of ‘Iraq as a “rogue” state and … the danger of Iraq’s becoming a “failed” state’. As a rogue state which had failed to comply with UN resolutions relating to WMD, Iraq was a danger to the security of other nations. By threatening to become a failed state, a state which could not provide for or protect its population, it was a danger to its own citizens. Hitchens used the language of humanitarian intervention, arguing that state failure ‘may involve actual or attempted genocide, which nations signatory to the Genocide Convention are sworn to prevent and to punish’ and that only intervention could avoid a result like ‘Somalia or Rwanda on a far vaster scale’. Hitchens’ humanitarian argument for war – when made with reference to the principles of international law – was therefore a pre-emptive one.

To strengthen his case, Hitchens tied his humanitarian arguments to US security and strategic interests – arguing that there was a ‘reciprocity between the ‘rogue state’

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52 Ibid., 18.
54 Ibid., 30.
55 Ibid., 31.
danger and the ‘failed state’ danger.’ Thus, for Hitchens, ‘[o]ne way to reflect on all this … [was] to separate what we must do for others from what we are entitled to do for ourselves’. The situation in 2003 represented an ‘unusually favorable conjunction of circumstances’ because ‘there was excellent reason to think that the inhabitants of a rogue state would see the removal of a foul tyrant as a deliverance.’ Hitchens put this another way in his 2003 book *A Long Short War: The Postponed Liberation of Iraq*, arguing that he supported the war in the hope ‘that the next Iraqi regime [would] be better and safer, not just from our point of view but from the points of view of the Iraqi and Kurdish peoples.’ For Hitchens, humanitarian and strategic motivations for war were not just compatible, but two sides of the same coin. The concept of totalitarianism provided Hitchens with a framework which encapsulated this reciprocity of interest – Iraq, as a totalitarian state, was a danger to its people, while simultaneously, as a sponsor of totalitarian ideology (Islamism) Iraq was a threat to the West.

**Anti-Totalitarian and Humanitarian Arguments for War: Are they the Same?**

Hitchens’ assessment of the nature of the Baathist regime was influenced by the work of Iraqi-British academic Kanan Makiya, particularly his 1989 *Republic of Fear: The Politics of Modern Iraq*. Born in Baghdad, Makiya left Iraq to attend the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. In 1981, he began writing *Republic of Fear*, which detailed the atrocities of the Iraqi regime and became a bestseller after Iraq invaded Kuwait in 1990.

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36 Ibid., 31.
37 Ibid., 36.
In exile in the 1990s, Makiya was a leading critic of Saddam Hussein and became a highly influential supporter of the 2003 invasion. In *Republic of Fear*, which has been described as a ‘classic [text] on the nature of totalitarianism’, Makiya applied Hannah Arendt’s analysis of totalitarianism to Saddam Hussein’s rule in Iraq.\(^59\) For Cushman and Cottee, ‘Hitchens’s pro-war position [was] indistinguishable from that of … Makiya’, who supported the war on the basis of ‘the exceptional nature of Baathi totalitarianism in Iraq’ and the ‘extraordinary moral responsibility’ incumbent on the United States to ‘finish that which it … left unfinished’ after failing to remove Saddam Hussein from power in the first Gulf War.\(^60\) Hitchens and Makiya shared the view of Saddam Hussein’s rule in Iraq as totalitarian and advocated humanitarian intervention on this basis. The definition they adopted was the one popularised by theorists such as Arendt in the 1950s which emphasised the centrality of invasive and violent state control. For Hitchens, it was George Orwell’s definition that remained most relevant as,

> The attention paid to the three states of Iran, Iraq and North Korea, as a consequence of President Bush’s speech on the ‘axis of evil’, has reminded us that the absolute state … is a real presence in our own lives as well. Many reporters in Saddam’s Baghdad were compelled to use the imagery of Nineteen Eighty-Four … [and] on my own visit to North Korea I had no choice but to speculate that the Kim Il Sung state … might actually have employed the novel as a blueprint in designing its system of total surveillance and regimentation, and endless, hermetic misery.\(^61\)

By emphasising a definition of totalitarianism as an ‘absolute state’ in which citizens are the property of the state and no private life exists, Hitchens justified intervention in the interests of liberating the Iraqi population from totalitarian rule. However, his reference to Bush’s ‘axis of evil’ speech was telling, as it revealed how, in Hitchens’ work, the humanitarian interest of liberating a population under totalitarian rule was consistently

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\(^{60}\) Cottee and Cushman, *Christopher Hitchens*, 18; Makiya, quoted in ibid., 19.

and inextricably bound to the threat that totalitarian states represented to the United States. In this speech, Bush’s primary focus was on how to ‘prevent regimes [specifically Iran, Iraq, and North Korea] that sponsor terror from threatening America or our friends and allies with weapons of mass destruction.’

Although, after his visit to the country in 2000, Hitchens variously described North Korea as a totalitarian state, a ‘famine state’, a ‘slave state’, and a ‘garrison state’, held in place by ‘indescribable degree of surveillance and indoctrination’, he did not advocate military intervention. This reinforces the argument that his support for the war in Iraq was based on his assessment of the immediacy of the threat this state represented to the United States, which – because of its perceived (but non-existent) connection to Islamist violence – was greater than that of North Korea. Ultimately, US security concerns, rather than humanitarian concerns, tipped the balance in favour of intervention. In the context of R2P, Hitchens’ case for intervention in Iraq was made not with the interests ‘of those seeking or needing support’ foremost in mind, but rather built on his insistence on the coincidence and harmony of humanitarian and strategic concerns – of the compatibility of the interests of Iraqi citizens and the interests of the United States. It could be argued therefore, that Hitchens’ case for war was not strictly humanitarian, though it could be considered anti-totalitarian. Before accepting this categorisation, however, it is essential to emphasise the transformation of the meaning of totalitarianism in the post-Cold War era, particularly the new connection with terrorism.

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Hitchens’ arguments for war were consistent with those offered by the Bush administration. Bush justified intervention in Afghanistan and Iraq by contending that ‘[u]nder the rule of the Taliban and al Qaeda, Afghanistan was a totalitarian nightmare – a land where women were imprisoned in their homes, men were beaten for missing prayer meetings … Religious police roamed the streets, beating and detaining civilians for perceived offenses.’\(^\text{64}\) Like Hitchens, Bush also emphasised the dual nature of the threat of totalitarianism – to the citizens inside the state, and as an external threat to America, continuing, ‘[a]nd Afghanistan was turned into a launching pad for horrific attacks against America and other parts of the civilized world’. Equally, he argued that, in Iraq, ‘the regime’s repression [was] all pervasive’, ‘[t]ens of thousands of political opponents and ordinary citizens ha[d] been subjected to arbitrary arrest and imprisonment, summary execution, and torture … and all of these horrors concealed from the world by the apparatus of a totalitarian state.’\(^\text{65}\)

Hitchens’ insistence on the compatibility of humanitarian and strategic arguments for war highlights similarities not only with the ‘neocons’ of the Bush administration but also with the earlier generation of neoconservatives of the Reagan era. As the previous chapter outlines, the link between strategic and moral concerns was central to Jeane Kirkpatrick’s articulation of US foreign policy aims in the 1980s. Though the human rights debate of the 1970s and 1980s and the humanitarianism discourse of the 1990s and 2000s were separate and distinct, the linking of moral and strategic arguments under the umbrella of anti-totalitarianism in both cases was strikingly similar. The discourse on totalitarianism emerging from Soviet and Eastern European dissident circles provides a


connecting link between Kirkpatrick and Hitchens. Dissidence was styled, by dissident intellectuals themselves and neoconservative supporters alike, as both an ‘anti-totalitarian’ and a ‘human rights’ movement – thus cementing the connection between these rationales. Updating a similar argument for 2003, Adam Michnik responded to concerns that ‘Bush policies … [would] lead to the suppression of humanitarian principles in international relations’ with the assertion that ‘we believe that what leads to the destruction of humanitarian principles is rather the tolerance of totalitarian regimes’. 66

Hitchens, however, positioned his arguments within an older tradition of anti-totalitarianism which stretched back to the 1930s. He could thus claim continuity with the ‘Good Fights’ of the Second World War and the Cold War and with his political hero, Orwell, without accepting ideological proximity to a generation of neoconservatives he once derided. While some scholars and public commentators have seen strategic and humanitarian arguments as inherently embedded in the anti-totalitarian worldview from its conception, the neoconservative link was forged in the context of the human rights ‘boom’ of the 1970s and, similarly, the liberal hawks linked their arguments to the emerging discourse on humanitarian intervention in the 1990s. 67 The role of human rights, and later humanitarian concerns, were indisputably of much larger importance during these two periods of debate than had been the case before détente. The connection with first human rights and later humanitarianism grounded anti-totalitarianism within contemporaneously significant and politically powerful discourses – giving totalitarianism a new relevance and thus contributing to the staying power of this concept in the post-Cold War world.

66 Michnik, “In Support of President Bush.”
67 This argument has been made by social scientist Nicolas Guilhot in The Democracy Makers, see chapter three of this thesis, as well as political commentator Peter Beinart in The Good Fight.
In addition to his claim to a consistent anti-totalitarian worldview, Hitchens also argued that there was a shorter-term continuity between his position before and after 9/11. As the title of his book *A Long Short War: The Postponed Liberation of Iraq* suggests, Hitchens maintained that 9/11 was not the most significant reason for his support of the invasion of Iraq. He argued that ‘the case for regime change in Iraq was complete on its own terms, and widely understood as such, before the atrocities of September 11, 2001 … for the most part, the addition of the supposedly “new” emergency strengthened the case for an urgent revisiting of the longer-term one’.

Equally, in his memoir Hitchens presented his intellectual trajectory as a seamless transition from the first Gulf War to the 2003 war in Iraq. In fact, Hitchens had opposed the first Gulf War on the basis of his assessment of US foreign policy in the region since the 1970s, which he characterised as a policy of ‘Mutually Assured Destabilization’. He suggested ‘George [H. W.] Bush [may] someday understand that a president cannot confect a principled call to war – ‘hostages’, ‘Hitler’, ‘ruthless dictator’, ‘naked aggression’ – when matters of principle have never been the issue for him or his type.’ In 2003, the history of US foreign policy in the Persian Gulf was apparently of less importance, and Hitchens was happy to buy a similar confection of principled reasons for war from the second President Bush.

Hitchens thus retrospectively minimised the significance of 9/11 to the development of his political views. However, his identification of Iraq as totalitarian formed only one strand in his broader anti-totalitarian worldview. The Iraq War was ‘a critical front in a much wider struggle against a vicious and totalitarian ideology.’ If Hitchens’ support for armed humanitarian intervention and concern for the plight of the

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70 Ibid., 101.
Iraqi and Kurdish peoples had its origins before 9/11, his views on both imperialism and terrorism were transformed. After September 11, Hitchens adopted a new view of the world in which American values, the Western liberal tradition, and ‘civilization’ itself were under existential threat from the forces of ‘reactionary Islam’. Though he claimed continuity between his pre- and post-9/11 arguments, his politics had changed dramatically.

Totalitarianism and ‘Benign’ Imperialism

One of the most important markers of this change was Hitchens’ attitude towards imperialism, which switched from a longstanding anti-imperialism to acceptance of a ‘benign’ form of American empire. While in the 1990s Hitchens had condemned neoconservative totalitarianism theory as cover for empire, he came to revise his views. His newfound support for American empire was part of a broader trend towards liberal imperialism after 9/11 when the United States saw a ‘renaissance of interest in the word “empire” and in resuscitating its reputation as a benign form of global governance’.  

Jeanne Morefield argues that liberal imperialists justified empire through the ‘politics of deflection’ – by ‘drawing critical attention away from the liberal empire’s illiberalism by insisting upon its fundamental character’. Using the same strategy, the Bush administration was able to ‘[brush] aside the troubling discrepancy between what American foreign policy leaders tell the world their state represents and the American state’s acts of military, economic, and political aggression’ by emphasising America’s liberal identity. For Bush, there was no need to choose between ‘American ideals and

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73 Ibid., 2.
American interest’ because ‘America, by decision and destiny, promotes political freedom—and gains the most when democracy advances’.  

Hitchens’ arguments, too, rested on the assumption that any intervention on the part of the United States would inherently be an act of ‘liberation’. He also argued that imperialism was necessary to protect human rights and democracy, because ‘the plain fact [was] that when the rest of the world wants anything done in a hurry, it applies to American power’. Without the United States taking the lead, humanitarian intervention would be impossible and, he argued, ‘Bosnia-Herzegovina and Kosovo would now be a howling wilderness, Kuwait would be the nineteenth province of a Greater Iraq, and Afghanistan might still be under Taliban rule’. The liberal character of the United States ensured that ‘[a] condition of the new imperialism will be the specific promise that while troops will come, they will not stay too long … the aim is to enable local populations to govern themselves.’ Hitchens’ position on empire mirrored that of Michael Ignatieff, one of the foremost proponents of liberal imperialism. In his 2003 *Empire Lite*, Ignatieff argued that America was an ‘imperial power for a post-imperial age’, an ‘empire lite’ which sought ‘to reconcile imperial power and local self-determination through the medium of an exit strategy’.

Hitchens, Ignatieff, and other liberal hawks presented acceptance of American empire as unavoidable if meaningful action to protect human rights was to be taken. For Ignatieff, as for Hitchens, the ‘case for empire is that it has become, in a place like Iraq, the last hope for democracy and stability’. Liberal imperialism was a doctrine which

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74 Bush, quoted in Ibid., 2.
76 Ibid., 32–3.
77 Michael Ignatieff, “Empire Lite,” *Prospect*, 20 February 2003, [https://www.prospectmagazine.co.uk/magazine/empirelite](https://www.prospectmagazine.co.uk/magazine/empirelite). For a critical take on how liberal imperialism theory provided the ‘intellectual underpinnings’ of the War on Terror, see Tony Smith, *A Pact with the*
embraced the connection between humanitarian and strategic concerns already present in Hitchens’ work. Like Jeane Kirkpatrick, who had argued in the 1980s that US commitment to human rights flowed naturally from the pursuit of the national interest, liberal imperialists presented humanitarianism as an integral part of American foreign policy. They, like Kirkpatrick, and like George W. Bush, embraced the conveniently reassuring belief that human rights gained most when US interests were advanced. In addition, they argued that the presence of strategic interests was a precondition for humanitarian intervention. Proponents of this ‘benign’ form of empire argued that the sustained commitment required to make humanitarian interventions a success could only be achieved where strategic, or liberal imperial, interests were also present.

The transformation of Hitchens’ views on imperialism was also connected to the growing importance of totalitarianism in his work. As the spectre of totalitarianism came to dominate his thought, the evils of empire receded. In 2011, he observed that in the case of conflict between the causes of anti-imperialism and anti-totalitarianism, he ‘increasingly resolved it on the anti-totalitarian side’. He thus presented anti-totalitarianism and anti-imperialism as potentially incompatible traditions. In this respect, he was again in the company of other liberal hawks. Peter Beinart also coupled his embrace of the liberal anti-totalitarian tradition of the early Cold War with a rejection of the politics of the ‘anti-imperialist Left’. Beinart suggested that the liberal hawks perceived, correctly, that the perpetrators of 9/11 were ‘the latest in an antiliberal, anti-American lineage that stretched through Milosevic back to the totalitarians of World War II and the cold war.’ On the other hand, ‘for the anti-imperialists, Bin Laden was not part

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of an anti-American tradition; he was part of a distinctly *American* tradition, a tradition of imperial chickens coming home to roost.\textsuperscript{79} Beinart thus presented anti-totalitarianism and anti-imperialism as competing traditions in American political life. He argued that anti-imperialists only ever saw America itself as the enemy, and thus were guilty of ignoring the true external totalitarian enemies. He connected the anti-imperialist argument against the ‘war on terror’ to those who had criticised America’s imperialist and totalitarian tendencies in the Vietnam era.

Political radicals had, since the 1960s, presented anti-totalitarianism and anti-imperialism as compatible. They viewed the United States as the chief perpetrator of both evils. In the 2000s Sheldon Wolin, author of *Democracy Incorporated*, invoked this tradition when he identified America’s imperialism as a symptom of the ‘inverted totalitarianism’ of US society. He argued that Bush’s presidency and the ‘war on terror’ had ‘redefined national identity, overshadowing “republic” and “democracy.”’ The “‘United States,” hitherto a name that denoted the lower half of a continent, now signified a global empire.’ This empire ‘define[d] the scope of its dominion by postulating an enemy – terrorism – that had no obvious limits, neither temporal nor spatial, nor a single fixed form’.\textsuperscript{80}

**Terrorism, Islamism, and Totalitarianism**

As Wolin suggested, American perceptions of a new existential enemy, in the form of international terrorism, had profound implications for US foreign policy. Wolin’s observations about the spatial limits of terrorism, or the lack thereof, connect to the transformation of the concept of totalitarianism in the post-Cold War era; the fusion of theories on totalitarianism and terrorism in the debate on the ‘war on terror’ released

\textsuperscript{79} Beinart, *The Good Fight*, 170.
\textsuperscript{80} Wolin, *Democracy Incorporated*, xi.
totalitarianism from its primary connection to the nation-state. The origins of this discourse can be found in the 1980s when the Iran hostage crisis introduced Americans to the idea that the United States was a ‘nation imperiled by terrorism’. Theories of terrorism in the 1980s retained a connection to the state, as was evident from Jeane Kirkpatrick’s frequent references to the Soviet Union as the ‘principal supporter and sponsor of international terrorism’ at the UN. Similarly, discussions of Iran also centred on the problem of ‘state sponsored’ terrorism. In the ‘war on terror’, understandings of terrorism lost their state-centric focus, and in contemporary discourse, terrorism is commonly understood to be something done by non-state agents.

In 1986, Hitchens noted and condemned the new popularity of the term ‘terrorism’ and the plethora of attempts to analyse and define it. Surveying the definitions offered by the literature on terrorism (including Terrorism: How the West Can Win, the conference publication of the Second International Conference on Terrorism) Hitchens concluded the word had ‘no meaning and no definition’, yet it had ‘become the political and media buzzword of the eighties’. For Hitchens, in 1986, ‘terrorist’ was a ‘brainless propaganda word’, a ‘convenience word’ and a ‘junk word’. It ‘disguise[d] reality and impoverishe[d] language … [It was] the perfect instrument for the cheapening of public opinion and for the intimidation of dissent’ and it had a ‘hypnotic effect on public debate’. ‘Terrorist’, for Hitchens, was worse than meaningless as a word that was used to ‘obliterate distinctions’ and manipulate public opinion.

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81 McAlister, Epic Encounters, 199.
84 Ibid., 377, 379.
85 Ibid., 377, 382.
86 Ibid., 379.
Hitchens’ support for a ‘war on terror’ therefore indicated a radical departure from his earlier views on terrorism. In a 2002 article on the subject, while acknowledging that problems of definition still existed, he abandoned his earlier argument that terrorism was nothing but a propaganda word. For Hitchens, September 11 heralded the emergence of a world in which terrorism was no longer meaningless, but an ‘an important word of condemnation’.

Having ridiculed the act of defining terrorism in the 1980s, he now advanced his own definition which centred on irrationality and extreme violence. In his view, terrorism, was ‘the tactic of demanding the impossible, and demanding it at gunpoint’, and he emphasised that ‘[e]nfolded in any definition of “terrorism,” … there should be a clear finding of fundamental irrationality.’ For Hitchens, any organisation or state previously identified as terrorist paled in comparison to Al-Qaida which ‘[met] and exceed[ed] … [the] criteria’ of irrational and extreme violence. He also belatedly accepted the link between terrorism and totalitarianism that had been established by neoconservatives in the 1980s, referring to Al-Qaida as ‘theocratic totalitarians’.

In Hitchens’ post-2001 work, as in the discourse on the ‘war on terror’ more broadly, the threat represented by international terrorism was closely connected to conceptions of ‘Islamism’ which had also emerged as a leading foreign policy concern in the 1980s. The Iranian Revolution brought the concept of Islamic ‘fundamentalism’ into the mainstream of US political discourse. ‘Fundamentalist’ Islam was assumed to be ‘[v]iolent, irrational, unappeasable, totally uncompromising’, threatening to the world and particularly to the United States. It also connected Islam to the Cold War totalitarian enemy. Edward Said found that in media coverage of the Iranian Revolution,

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87 Hitchens, “Terrorism: Notes Toward a Definition,” reprinted in A Long Short War, 24.
88 Ibid., 23, 25. Hitchens’ emphasis on irrational violence was mirrored in Paul Berman’s definition of terrorism. See chapter five of this thesis for discussion of how this relates to the connection between totalitarianism and terrorism.
89 Ibid., 25.
90 Ibid., 26.
‘fundamentalism equal[ed] Islam equal[ed] everything-we-must-now-fight-against, as
we did with communism during the Cold War’.91 Said’s observations capture the nature
of the discussion of Islam at the 1984 Second International Conference on Terrorism,
attended by Kirkpatrick, which implied that there was a particular Islamic tendency
toward terror.92 Furthermore, conference speakers connected this newly perceived threat
with pre-existing ideas of totalitarianism, arguing that there was ‘a natural affinity
between the terrorist and the totalitarian’ because both politicised ‘all of society’ and
recognised ‘no exemptions from politics’.93

By the second half of the 1990s, the term ‘Islamism’ was increasingly favoured
over ‘fundamentalism’. This shift reinforced connections with Cold War ideology.
Islamism was added ‘to the list of dangerous twentieth century “isms” that had defied the
liberal West and gone down to defeat.’ Martin Kramer suggests that the ‘entry of
Islamism into common English … made it easier to categorize [Islamist movements] as
threats of the first order. As fundamentalists, these Muslims might have claimed some
affinity to Christian and Jewish fundamentalists, who were generally tolerated. As the
Muslim equivalent of fascists or bolshevists, they were clearly marked as the enemies of
democracy and freedom.’94

For Hitchens, too, developments in Iran held particular significance. In the 1980s,
the publication of Salman Rushdie’s *The Satanic Verses* (1988) and the subsequent fatwa
issued by Ayatollah Khomeini, the Supreme Leader of Iran, calling for Rushdie’s
assassination, drew Hitchens’ attention to the Islamic revolution. Writing with hindsight

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91 Edward W. Said, *Covering Islam: How the Media and the Experts Determine How We See the Rest of
94 Martin Kramer, “Coming to Terms: Fundamentalists or Islamists?,” *Middle East Quarterly* 10, no. 2
(2003), [https://www.meforum.org/541/coming-to-terms-fundamentalists-or-islamists](https://www.meforum.org/541/coming-to-terms-fundamentalists-or-islamists).
in 2010, Hitchens argued that Rushdie’s experience ‘was a prefiguration of the world in which we all, to a greater or lesser extent, live now … a world in which a fanatical religion, which makes absolutist claims … and promises to supply – even to be – a total solution to all problems’. He identified Rushdie as ‘the lineal descendant of all those who have had to confront the totalitarian idea physically as well as morally’. In making this argument, Hitchens was reading his post-9/11 position back into his earlier views. He had defended Rushdie in 1989 without reference to totalitarianism and rejected the legitimacy of totalitarianism theory a year later. Yet his recollection of this episode highlights a significant development in Hitchens’ understanding of totalitarianism. By connecting totalitarianism with religion, and particularly with Islam, Hitchens elevated totalitarianism from an outdated theory with little immediate relevance to a vital concept which defined his worldview.

Totalitarianism and Women’s Oppression

Public perceptions of Iran since the 1980s also connected religion and totalitarianism, and Islam in particular, to women’s oppression. After 2001, Hitchens made use of this connection to reinforce his arguments about the humanitarian potential of the ‘war on terror’. These themes were explored in Margaret Atwood’s 1985 novel, The Handmaid’s Tale, which imagined the transformation of the United States into a religious totalitarian state called the Republic of Gilead. The Handmaid’s Tale placed the oppression of women at the centre of totalitarianism. This dystopian novel followed in the tradition of earlier anti-totalitarian literature; Atwood was influenced by Orwell’s Nineteen Eighty-Four, and The Handmaid’s Tale reinforced earlier constructions of totalitarianism as characterised by invasive state control of all aspects of life enforced by omnipresent

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95 Hitchens, Hitch-22, 277. Emphasis in original.
surveillance and violence. Like activists in the 1960s, Atwood used the concept of totalitarianism to expose dangerous trends in US politics and society, describing the novel as ‘a response to “it can’t happen here”’ – the idea that totalitarianism was an impossibility in America. In the 1980s, a Communist takeover of America no longer appeared sufficiently realistic or threatening to provide the premise for Atwood’s dystopia. Instead, she looked for the origins of totalitarianism in home-grown American traditions. She suggested that, in the United States, a totalitarian transformation would occur through ‘something like the way the religious right is doing things. And the ultimate result of that process would be the union of church and state’. While the rise of the religious right provided one source of inspiration, the image of Iran was also present in the novel. At the end of The Handmaid’s Tale, a fictional academic conference taking place in the future makes a telling reference to a paper comparing the ‘Monotheocracies’ of the Islamic Republic of Iran and the Republic of Gilead.

Similar themes, of totalitarianism, religion, and women’s oppression are present in Reading Lolita in Tehran (2003), Iranian writer Azar Nafisi’s memoir of life in Iran after the revolution. Like commentators on Islamism in the 1980s, Nafisi connected the Islamic Revolution to revolutionary Marxism, suggesting that ‘they had a great deal in common, in that they were both ideological and totalitarian.’ Although Nafisi was careful to maintain a clear distinction between Islam and the political ideology of the Islamic Revolution, arguing that the latter ‘did more damage to Islam by using it as an

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instrument of oppression than any alien ever could have done’, her memoir was read as reinforcing perceptions of Iran, and of Islam, as ‘everything-we-must-now-fight-against’. As one reader has suggested, ‘[i]nvoking Soviet totalitarianism to describe Islamism could exert a powerful effect on many American readers, suggesting an imperative to confront an ideologically opposed enemy that is armed (or soon to be) and extremely dangerous.’ Nafisi’s novel has thus been criticised by some reviewers for justifying a neoconservative foreign policy agenda.

Both Hitchens and Paul Berman had high praise for Reading Lolita and, after 9/11, they both made use of the connection between religious totalitarianism and the oppression of women established in Nafisi’s work to justify their support for war. Thus, in addition to reinforcing negative perceptions of Islam, in the context of the ‘war on terror’, Nafisi’s novel was seen to potentially feed into imperialist ‘fantasies of rescue’ which positioned Europeans and Americans ‘as having the responsibility to “save” the women of the Muslim world from their own culture.’ Indeed, both Hitchens and fellow liberal hawk Peter Beinart used the same emotive phrasing regarding the effects of Islamist ideology on women to justify their support of the ‘war on terror’. Hitchens wrote that ‘[t]he people who destroyed the World Trade Center … are fighting for the right to throw acid in the faces of unveiled women in Kabul and Karachi’. Similarly, Beinart wrote that ‘jihadist terrorism’ is a movement which ‘flings acid at unveiled women’. Their use of this specific imagery is arguably comparable to the use of the figure of a veiled woman to

102 McAlister, Epic Encounters, 282.
103 Hitchens, “The Pursuit of Happiness is at an End,” reprinted in Cottee and Cushman, Christopher Hitchens, 43.
104 Beinart, The Good Fight, xii.
symbolise the oppression of women under Islam which was widespread in Western media in the run-up to the invasion of Afghanistan and was used to justify the war.105

Like the Bush administration, Hitchens and Beinart ‘used women’s rights language’ to argue that ‘the war was necessary not only to retaliate for 9/11 but also because the Taliban deserved to be deposed from power due to their history of misrule, and particularly their record on women's issues.’106 The concept of totalitarianism linked these disparate rationales together into one, apparently coherent, argument. For the Bush administration, as for the liberal hawks, war was justified on the dual basis that Afghanistan, as a totalitarian state, oppressed its own (female) population, and because it supported a totalitarian ideology which menaced the security of the United States through international terrorism.

‘Defending “Islamofascism”’

The marriage of the concepts of terrorism, Islamism, and totalitarianism found expression in Hitchens’ use of the political epithet ‘Islamofascism’. In a 2007 article defending this term, Hitchens elaborated on the link he saw between Al-Qaida and past totalitarian movements. In his view, ‘jihadist ideology’ had much in common with twentieth-century fascism. Specifically, he argued that

Both movements are based on a cult of murderous violence that exalts death and destruction and despises the life of the mind … Both are hostile to modernity (except when it comes to the pursuit of weapons), and both are bitterly nostalgic for past empires and lost glories. Both are obsessed with real and imagined “humiliations” and thirsty for revenge. Both are chronically infected with the toxin of anti-Jewish paranoia … Both are inclined to leader worship and to the exclusive stress on the power of one great book. Both have a strong commitment to sexual repression – especially to the repression of any sexual “deviance” – and to its counterparts the subordination of the female and contempt for the feminine.

106 McAlister, Epic Encounters, 282.
Both despise art and literature as symptoms of degeneracy and decadence; both burn books and destroy museums and treasures.\footnote{Hitchens, “Defending Islamofascism,” \textit{Slate}, 22 October 2007, \url{https://slate.com/news-and-politics/2007/10/defending-the-term-islamofascism.html}.} Hitchins’ insistence on similarities clearly flattened the much more significant differences between Islamist terrorist organisations and past totalitarian movements. In the words of one commentator, ‘[o]ne has to rigorously empty the political-scientifically established term “fascism” of content if one wants to make out superficial similarities’.\footnote{Moshe Zuckermann, “Islamofascism. Remarks on a Current Ideologeme,” \textit{Die Welt des Islams} 52, no.3/4 (2012): 354.} Hitchins’ comparison required taking fascism out of its historical and national contexts as well as ignoring ‘the simple fact that Islamic fundamentalism is theocratically driven, whereas fascism tended to be and act non- and also decidedly anti-religiously’.\footnote{Ibid., 355. On historical and national contexts see also Joachim Scholtyseck, “Fascism–National Socialism–Arab ‘Fascism’: Terminologies, Definitions and Distinctions,” \textit{Die Welt des Islams} 52, no.3/4 (2012): 242–89.} In addition, as far as fascism is associated with totalitarian state control, it refers to a highly centralised and bureaucratic system which was far removed from the decentralised and stateless Islamist organisations to which Hitchins was referring.\footnote{Though the later rise of Islamic State complicates this argument, this organisation also remained far from the centralised and bureaucratic nature of earlier totalitarian state-based movements. On the organisational structure of ISIS see Ahmed Hashim, \textit{The Caliphate at War: The Ideological, Organisational and Military Innovations of Islamic State} (London: Hurst & Company, 2018).} Hitchins’ mention of ‘the subordination of the female’ was indicative of the more recent association between totalitarianism and female oppression. Though a consideration of the gender politics of fascist movements is beyond the scope of this thesis, women’s oppression was certainly not considered to be a defining feature of totalitarianism by any of the major theorists in the 1950s.\footnote{For an assessment of gender politics in Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union see David L. Hoffmann and Annette F. Timm, “Utopian Biopolitics: Reproductive Policies, Gender Roles, and Sexuality in Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union,” in \textit{Beyond Totalitarianism: Stalinism and Nazism Compared}, ed. Michael Geyer and Sheila Fitzpatrick (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 87–130.}

The link between Al-Qaida and fascism was vital for Hitchins as it formed another pillar in his broader argument for the relevance of the concept of totalitarianism.
in the post-9/11 world, in addition to the identification of Saddam Hussein’s rule in Iraq as totalitarian. Together, these formed two sides of the same argument for the necessity of the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq. Totalitarianism was a vital linking concept which smoothed the disparate elements of Hitchens’ arguments in support of the ‘war on terror’ into an apparently coherent whole. Commenting on the relationship between Al-Qaida and Saddam Hussein’s Baathist regime in Iraq, Hitchens wrote that his ‘analogy for the Baathist/al-Qaida collusion [was] that of a Hitler-Stalin pact: a cynical agreement on common interests and common enemies by ostensible and actual rivals. The analogy would break down a bit in point of relative scale: Saddam used to have a state machine, and the jihadists (at least after the fall of Kabul) did not. But that doesn’t affect the argument very much.’\textsuperscript{112} Totalitarianism thus enabled Hitchens to conflate the state-based, secular regime in Iraq with the theocratic, stateless organisation Al-Qaida.

By invoking the comparison with twentieth-century totalitarian movements Hitchens was less interested in the specifics than in conveying that ‘Islamofascism’ represented a ‘[threat] to civilization and civilized values’ comparable to that of fascism and Nazism during World War II. By ‘civilization’, Hitchens meant the West, and specifically the values of the Western liberal tradition, which he identified as secularism, free inquiry, and female emancipation. It was this civilisational clash, and the existential threat to Western values, that Hitchens wanted to invoke when he first used the phrase ‘fascism with an Islamic face’ in 2001. He argued that ‘[w]hat [the perpetrators of 9/11] abominate about “the West,” … is not what Western liberals don’t like and can’t defend about their own system, but what they do like about it and must defend: its emancipated women, its scientific inquiry, its separation of religion from the state.’\textsuperscript{113} It was on this


\textsuperscript{113} Hitchens, “Against Rationalization,” reprinted in Cottee and Cushman, \textit{Christopher Hitchens}, 46.
point that the divide between Hitchens and the anti-war left was deepest, and where Hitchens fell in line with the Bush administration’s analysis of 9/11. For Hitchens, any response to 9/11 which referred to Western foreign policy as a cause, motivation, or even as context for the attacks – like those offered by Susan Sontag, Gore Vidal and Noam Chomsky, among others – was an attempt to impose a ‘moral equivalence’ between liberal democracy and ‘theocratic fascism’, or an attempt to ‘change the subject’ away from the existential threat represented by ‘Islamofascism’.\textsuperscript{114}

Hitchens’ emphasis on American secularism explained how he rationalised his opposition to all forms of religion with his embrace of the values of the United States, despite the fact that religious faith is deeply embedded in American society. He emphasised the secular identity of the United States, arguing that America was ‘ultimately founded upon an idea. The idea … that on this continent there might arise the world’s first successful multinational and secular democracy.’\textsuperscript{115} This reasoning did at times force him into seemingly contradictory arguments, as when he suggested that America ‘is actually the world’s only truly secular state as well as in some ways the world’s most religious one’\textsuperscript{116}. Similarly, he argued that ‘George Bush may subjectively be a Christian, but he – and the US armed forces – have objectively done more for secularism than the whole of the American agnostic community combined and doubled. The demolition of the Taliban, the huge damage inflicted on the Al Qaeda network, and the confrontation with theocratic saboteurs in Iraq represent huge advances for the non-fundamentalist forces in many countries.’\textsuperscript{117} Hitchens’ arguments were in some ways similar to Kirkpatrick’s earlier employment of the bipolar framework of anti-totalitarianism which

\begin{footnotesize}
\textsuperscript{114} Cottee and Cushman, \textit{Christopher Hitchens}, 13.
\textsuperscript{115} Hitchens, “American Society Can Outlast or Absorb Practically Anything,” reprinted in ibid., 39.
\textsuperscript{116} Hitchens, “Saving Islam from bin Laden,” reprinted in ibid., 61.
\textsuperscript{117} Hitchens, “Bush’s Secularist Triumph,” reprinted in ibid., 82.
\end{footnotesize}
involved ignoring elements of US society which did not fit with antithetical definitions of totalitarianism and democracy.

Like Hitchens, President Bush offered an explanation for the attacks that avoided mentioning any specific grievance against Western foreign policy. In his address to Congress on 20 September 2001 Bush asserted – in words very similar to Hitchens’ – that what ‘they’ (the attackers) hated about the United States was ‘democratically elected government’: ‘[t]hey hate our freedoms – our freedom of religion, our freedom of speech, our freedom to vote and assemble and disagree with each other.’

Hitchens’ pro-war position echoed that of the Bush administration in other ways. Most significantly, Bush also invoked the historical memory of totalitarianism to support his ‘war on terror’, arguing that ‘the terrorists’ were ‘the heirs of all the murderous ideologies of the 20th century’ following ‘in the path of fascism, and Nazism, and totalitarianism.’ This comparison conveyed the need for war, but also optimism about its outcome. The lesson of the twentieth century was that totalitarianism would inevitably be defeated – and those responsible for 9/11 would ‘follow that path all the way, to where it ends: in history’s unmarked grave of discarded lies’. Hitchens, too, used totalitarianism to make this argument. He suggested that one ‘point of comparison … [was] encouraging. Both … totalitarian systems of thought [fascism and terrorism] evidently suffer from a death wish … Thus, while [the United States had] a duty to oppose and destroy these and any similar totalitarian movements, [it could] also be fairly sure that they [would] play an unconscious part in arranging for their own destruction’. The use of this triumphalist Cold War narrative to predict an easy victory in the ‘war on terror’ reflected the hubristic

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119 Ibid., 68-69.
120 Ibid., 69.
121 Hitchens, “Defending Islamofascism.”
optimism that was one of the most commonly criticised features of the Bush administration’s approach to war.

Totalitarianism and Religion

Twentieth-century totalitarianism’s secular nature initially presented a problem to Hitchens’ theory that 9/11 represented the emergence of a new totalitarian threat. In the first few days after September 11, Hitchens observed that ‘[d]uring the cold war, it was often said that the United States faced an unsleeping foe that was ‘godless.’ … The holy warriors, as these seem to be, are an entirely different proposition’. By 2007, however, Hitchens had solved this discrepancy by arguing that twentieth-century totalitarianism was never really ‘godless’. In his 2007 book, *God is Not Great*, Hitchens argued that totalitarianism had always been inherently tied to religion.

Totalitarianism theory has shared a complex historical relationship with religion. While anti-totalitarianism has been claimed as a secular tradition, the earliest theorists of totalitarianism were, as intellectual historians have shown, Catholic intellectuals, and the concept was ‘[o]riginally a theological notion’. However, although Catholic intellectuals denounced totalitarianism as a secular menace which sought to eradicate religion, this did not preclude the view of totalitarianism as a type of religion, albeit a political or secular one. In fact, this analogy was common. Udi Greenberg has found that in the work of Waldemar Gurian, one of the most significant early Catholic theorists of totalitarianism, Communism became ‘not only the church’s enemy but also its dark mirror image.’ The idea of totalitarianism as a ‘secular’ or ‘political religion’ is, therefore, not

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new. There is still considerable distance, however, between an analysis of the totalitarian movements of the twentieth century as secular religions, and the argument that religious movements themselves can be totalitarian.

However, for Hitchens, the ‘very root and source of the totalitarian impulse’ – the ‘object of perfecting the species’ – was ‘in essence a religious one’. Additionally, he argued, ‘[f]or most of human history, the idea of the total or absolute state was intimately bound up with religion’. The fact that totalitarianism had long been opposed as a secular religion was now evidence, for Hitchens, that totalitarianism and religion had a shared nature. For good measure, he reiterated the same argument himself, reminding his reader that Communism ‘did not so much negate religion … as seek to replace it.’

Hitchens employed these arguments to form two interrelated conclusions: (1) That all religion was totalitarian, because religion ‘even at its meekest has to admit that what it is proposing is a “total” solution, in which faith must be to some extent blind, and in which all aspects of the private and public life must be submitted to a permanent higher supervision’; (2) That all totalitarianism was a form of religion, as ‘[t]otalitarian systems, whatever outward form they may take, are fundamentalist and, as we would now say, “faith-based.”’ In order to make these arguments, Hitchens accepted the utility of the neoconservative definition of totalitarianism which he had vehemently denounced in 1990, arguing that totalitarianism was ‘a useful term, because it separate[d] ‘ordinary’ forms of despotism – those which merely exact obedience from their subjects – from absolutist systems which demand that citizens become wholly subjects and surrender their private lives and personalities entirely to the state, or to the supreme leader.’

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126 Ibid., 246. Emphasis in original.
127 Ibid., 249, 250.
128 Ibid., 230.
Hitchens’ references to Islam in relation to totalitarianism in *God is Not Great* were conspicuously minimal – this book represented an attempt to present a reasoned case against all religion, which was separate from his political arguments in support of the ‘war on terror’. Thus, while Hitchens’ use of ‘Islamofascism’ certainly qualified as a political epithet – as a shorthand means of drawing a historical parallel between the ‘war on terror’ and the ideological conflicts of the mid-twentieth century – *God is Not Great* represented an attempt to give the connection between totalitarianism and religion a more robust theoretical grounding. However, Hitchens’ political motivations were clear, and his reasoning connecting totalitarianism with religion does not hold up to scrutiny. For example, as evidence of the totalitarian nature of religion, Hitchens described the ‘connection between the Christian churches and fascism, and the capitulation of the churches to National Socialism’. He did not mention that religion has also been a source of resistance to totalitarian political domination, as was the case with the earliest Catholic theorists of totalitarianism. Catholicism also played a significant role in rallying opposition to totalitarianism in Eastern Europe, particularly in Poland where the Church played an important role as an independent institution in resisting both Nazi and Soviet rule.

Hitchens was far from alone in his attempt to provide legitimacy for the concept of ‘Islamofascism’. In this respect, some scholars have been perhaps too quick to declare the end of the academic study of totalitarianism, as the connection between Islamism and

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129 Though much of his opposition to religion was ostensibly directed towards Christianity, Hitchens has also suggested that Islam is more ‘sinister and dangerous’ than other religions, as, in addition to claiming to be an ‘absolute, unchallengeable, eternal authority’ it claims to be the last and final religion, leaving no further need for inquiry. Hitchens quoted in *The Four Horsemen: The Conversation That Sparked an Atheist Revolution*, ed. Hitchens, Richard Dawkins, Sam Harris, D.C. Dennett (New York: Random House, 2019).
130 Hitchens, *God is Not Great*, 242.
past totalitarian movements has also gained a foothold in scholarly research. Historian James Chappel has suggested that ‘[w]hile academic historians have largely abandoned it as a viable research protocol, [totalitarianism] lives on in political and cultural discourse; it is the epithet used by those who wish to connect current geopolitical struggles with the Cold War and the Second World War.’132 The exchange of ideas between public discourse and academic scholarship is examined in the next chapter.

In 1990 Christopher Hitchens described neoconservative totalitarianism theory as an ‘all-enclosing world-view’. After September 11, 2001 this became an apt description of anti-totalitarianism in his own thought – totalitarianism enveloped all aspects of his analysis of the ‘war or terror’ and closed off alternative interpretations. Though Hitchens claimed continuity between his pre- and post-9/11 views, arguing that he had been ‘consistently against the totalitarian’, the reality was much more complex. Understandings of totalitarianism underwent a fundamental transformation in the post-Cold War era. Since the 1980s, totalitarianism has become linked to religion, Islamism, humanitarian intervention, and terrorism. September 11 cemented, in the minds of leading public intellectuals, a pre-existing link between Islamism and totalitarianism. In the discourse on the ‘war on terror’, liberal hawks presented anti-totalitarian and humanitarian arguments for war as interchangeable, a conflation which has largely remained unchallenged by scholars. Most importantly, for these liberals, the terror attacks heralded the emergence of a world in which the security and values of the United States were once more under existential threat from a totalitarian foe. The transformation of Hitchens’ views on the threat of terrorism and – perhaps most revealingly – on the relative benefits of American empire suggest that, while he was able to claim to have been

opposed to ‘totalitarianism’ both before and after 9/11, this word had fundamentally
different implications after 2001.
Chapter 5: ‘Terror and Liberalism’: Paul Berman and Totalitarianism in the Twenty-First Century

As a leading proponent of liberal anti-totalitarianism in the twenty-first century, Paul Berman offers one of the most sustained defences of this theory. Berman’s support of the ‘war on terror’ was premised on the idea that it should be viewed as ‘a war of an old kind’, ‘the last war of the twentieth century’, against the new totalitarian enemy of radical Arab nationalism and Islamic fundamentalism. His main argument was that these two movements were the ‘heirs of the twentieth-century totalitarians’ and that the wars of the twentieth century, fought by the West to defend liberal civilisation against its totalitarian enemies, should provide the blueprint for action in the ‘war on terror’.

Berman is an influential liberal intellectual in the United States – he has held a position on the editorial board of Dissent magazine and was a contributing editor of the New Republic. He holds the position of ‘critic-at-large’ for Tablet magazine, a daily online magazine of Jewish news, ideas, and culture. Berman is known as a leading ‘liberal hawk’ – an advocate of armed intervention by the United States on liberal humanitarian grounds, a critic of the left from a ‘left liberal’ perspective, and a chronicler of the political journey of the ‘1968 generation’. Most importantly, he is a significant theorist of totalitarianism in the twenty-first century.1 His work is thus a crucial resource for

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analysing the significance and implications of the continued interest in the concept of totalitarianism after the end of the Cold War.

Born in 1949, Berman studied American History at Columbia University, receiving his BA in 1971 and MA in 1974. While at Columbia, he participated in the student protests in 1968 and was a member of Students for a Democratic Society (SDS). His involvement with the student uprisings, and more importantly, the evolution of his views on the New Left since the 1960s, have informed his work to a significant degree. Berman’s chosen mode of argument is through the telling of historical narratives – two of his books relate the history of the 1968 generation, and another two discuss the history of Islamist movements in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. Berman’s association with the *New Republic* is indicative of his position in American intellectual life. As Jeane Kirkpatrick’s publication of ‘Dictatorships and Double Standards’ in *Commentary* magazine reflected her position in the emerging neoconservative movement in the 1970s, the *New Republic* was a site of crossover for neoliberal and neoconservative intellectuals and ideas in the 2000s.²

Historian of neoconservatism Justin Vaisse has commented on the similarity of liberal hawk, or ‘neoliberal’, and neoconservative approaches to foreign policy. He raises the question of whether neoconservatism and neoliberalism may even be the same thing and notes that, at the least, the ‘convergences are striking’.³ Indeed, Berman shared many core principles with neoconservative intellectuals of the George W. Bush era, notably their ‘ideological interpretation of the new international situation’, the conviction that ‘Americans, by seeking their own security, brought peace and order to the rest of the

² Vaisse, *Neoconservatism*, 254.
₃ Ibid., 254.
world’, and the belief in ‘using American power to promote democratic peace, especially in the Middle East’, which also defined the Bush doctrine.⁴

These convergences link to important developments in neoliberal foreign policy thinking in the 1990s which ‘emerged in relative harmony with neoconservative thinking’.⁵ Tony Smith has argued that liberals provided the ‘intellectual underpinnings’ of the Bush doctrine in the form of the theories of ‘democratic peace’, ‘democratic transition’, and legal theory of the ‘right’ and then ‘duty’ to intervene.⁶ Democratic peace theory rested on the assumption that ‘democracies do not go to war with one another’, and thus ‘argued that the world would benefit incalculably from the spread of democracy’. Transition theory, which ‘argued that rapid democratization was possible’ represented a reversal of Jeane Kirkpatrick’s assertion, crucial to her approach to foreign policy, that promoting democracy is a slow and difficult process. The ‘duty to intervene’ underpinned the ‘Responsibility to Protect’ and constituted a fundamental transformation in the meaning of state sovereignty.⁷ These developments, in addition to the post-Cold War increase of American power which facilitated the country’s ability to act unilaterally in world affairs, are the context for US foreign policy at the turn of the twentieth century.

For Berman, however, it would appear that the world situation, including both the existence of a totalitarian enemy, and the response it should elicit, had changed little since the Cold War era. In Terror and Liberalism (2003) Berman positioned himself in opposition to theorists who viewed the end of the Cold War as a turning point in history. He rejected the conclusions of influential texts from the 1990s, including both the ‘Clash of Civilizations’ and ‘End of History’ theories. For Berman, Samuel P. Huntingdon’s

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⁴ Ibid., 253, 234, 244.
⁶ Smith, A Pact with the Devil.
argument that civilisational conflict would take over from ideologically driven warfare was unconvincing. The ‘war on terror’ was ‘an event in the twentieth-century mode. It was the clash of ideologies.’

Though Berman did not dispute Francis Fukuyama’s contention that ‘liberal democracy was destined to prevail and to dominate the world’, he argued that this ‘transcendent victory … will come about, if it ever comes about, in some other age.’ For Berman, it was crucial to emphasise that the existential threat to liberal society was not over. On the contrary, liberalism must continue to defend its very survival against totalitarian onslaught. Berman argued that ‘nothing from the twentieth century has come to an end, nothing at all, save the numerals at the top of the calendar’ and that the ‘revolt against liberalism that got underway after 1914 has never run out of energy, and the impulse for murder and suicide continues to rocket around the globe’.

This view led Berman to call for a post-9/11 foreign policy directly modelled on the Cold War and its ideological battle against totalitarianism. He wrote: ‘The genuine solution to these attacks can come about in only one way, which is by following the same course we pursued against the Fascist Axis and the Stalinists … The solution, in short, lies in effecting enormous changes in large parts of the political culture of the Arab and Islamic world – the sort of transformation that can be achieved, if at all, only after many years or even decades of struggle, and not through any single decisive strike.’ Therefore, in addition to military raids, economic pressure and covert action, the most significant dimension of the conflict was the ‘war of ideas – the liberal ideal against the ideal of a blocklike, unchanging society; the idea of freedom against the idea of absolute truth; the idea of diversity against the idea of purity; the idea of change and novelty against the idea

9 Ibid., 160.
10 Ibid., 160, 159.
11 Berman, “Terror and Liberalism.”
of total stability; the idea of rational lucidity against the instinct of superstitious hatred.’\(^{12}\)

It was in this regard that the ‘war between liberalism and Islamism’, perceived as a clash of ideologies, ‘mirrored perfectly … the earlier wars between liberalism and other forms of totalitarianism.’\(^{13}\)

Berman’s insistence on continuity with the Cold War struggle concealed a number of crucial changes to the meaning of totalitarianism that this chapter will reveal. Most significant was the connection between totalitarianism and terrorism, traceable back to neoconservative thought in the 1980s, which Berman reinforced in his work. In the 2000s, this connection meant that totalitarianism no longer necessarily implied a movement with state backing. In addition, to reinforce his identification of Islamic fundamentalism as a new totalitarian enemy, Berman participated in a shift from secular to theocratic understandings of totalitarianism. Finally, the newly established link between humanitarian and anti-totalitarian arguments for war, discussed in the previous chapter, was crucial to Berman’s view of the ‘war on terror’ as a ‘liberal war of liberation’\(^ {14}\).

Berman identified an apparently coherent programme of ‘Muslim totalitarianism’ across the Middle East. He mobilised totalitarianism to link a vast range of disparate regimes and organisations, including the Baathist movements in Syria and Iraq, the regime in Iran after the Revolution, the Taliban in Afghanistan, the Muslim Brotherhood, and Al Qaeda, thus imbuing these movements with a superficial ideological consistency. In this respect, his approach ironically echoed the tendency of Cold War intellectuals and policymakers to refuse to distinguish between disparate nationalistic Communist regimes and instead to view them as part of a unified global conspiracy centrally directed from Moscow. Though Berman acknowledged that the movements he identified ‘varied hugely

\(^{12}\) Ibid.

\(^{13}\) Berman, *Terror and Liberalism*, 183.

\(^{14}\) Ibid., 191.
and have even gone to war with one another', he maintained that the ‘Baathi and the
Islamists were two branches of a single impulse, which was Muslim totalitarianism – the
Muslim variation on the European idea.' Berman thus denied the importance of the
difference between nationalism, secularism, and theocracy, as well as that between statist
regimes and decentralised stateless organisations. Eliding the historical evolution of Arab
nationalism and Islamism in the context of European imperialism in the Middle East,
Berman presented Middle Eastern relations with the West as primarily an ideological
clash and argued that Arab nationalism and Islamism rose solely in opposition to Western
values, rather than Western imperialism.16

The concept of ‘terror’ was vital to Berman’s argument regarding continuity with
the Cold War and coherence across the Middle East. ‘Terror’ is, if possible, an even more
ill-defined, ambiguous, and flexible concept than totalitarianism. The idea of terror
conflated Cold War conceptions of the ‘state terror’ used by totalitarian governments to
control their citizens with modern understandings of ‘terrorism’ – the violent tactics used
by non-state entities against enemy governments. Thus if, as the previous chapter
outlines, anti-totalitarianism has become linked with humanitarianism, understandings of
totalitarianism in the ‘war on terror’ have simultaneously become connected with the
concept of ‘terrorism’. The crucial linking of ideas of totalitarianism and terrorism
represented the detachment of totalitarianism from its traditional association with nation-
states. That the concept of totalitarianism was used by Berman to apply to both
authoritarian regimes in the Middle East and non-state terroristic groups constituted a
significant shift away from the way in which totalitarianism had previously been

15 Berman, “‘Terror and Liberalism’”; Berman, Terror and Liberalism, 60.
16 For a history of Arab nationalism and Islamism see Fawaz A. Gerges, Making the Arab World: Nasser,
Qutb, and the Clash That Shaped the Middle East (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2018). For a
summary of the history and lasting effects of European imperialism in the Middle East see Roger Hardy,
The Poisoned Well: Empire and Its Legacy in the Middle East (London: Hurst, 2016).
understood. Berman’s merging of the meaning of totalitarianism and terrorism was based in large part on a negative definition – he viewed both as defined by anti-liberalism. In addition, he argued that the violent and irrational natures of totalitarianism and terrorism were further evidence of their shared identity.

The connection between totalitarian states and terrorist organisations was underpinned, for Berman, by their association with extreme violence. Berman yoked Arab nationalist and Islamist movements together, and to previous totalitarian regimes, by emphasising that they each constituted ‘an irrationalist cult of death and murder’.\textsuperscript{17} To do this, he merged the histories of totalitarianism and terrorism, building on the work of French intellectuals who traced the origins of totalitarianism back to the French Revolution and the Jacobin terror. Berman’s emphasis on the ‘irrationalism’ of terrorist and totalitarian violence connected to shifts in the meaning of totalitarianism in the twenty-first century, specifically its association with religious fanaticism. Like Christopher Hitchens, Berman attributed a religious or cult-like character to all totalitarian movements, past and present. Like Hitchens, too, much of Berman’s work serves to reinforce the connection between Islamism and past totalitarian movements implied by the use of the political epithet ‘Islamofascism’. Berman’s engagement with the work of academic historians reveals that the assumptions behind the use of this term have moved beyond political and cultural discourse to gain a foothold in academia.

The following discussion is divided into analyses of two central themes in Berman’s work: first, his excavation of the liberal tradition of anti-totalitarianism, and secondly, his understanding of the history and definition of totalitarian movements. In \textit{A Tale of Two Utopias} (1996) and \textit{Power and the Idealists} (2005) Berman chronicles the

\textsuperscript{17} Berman, \textit{Terror and Liberalism}, 40.
shift of the ‘1968 generation’, which includes himself, away from anti-interventionism –
premised on left-wing opposition to capitalism and imperialism – towards support for
armed humanitarian intervention and a post-Cold War form of liberal anti-totalitarianism.
uncover the shared anti-liberal nature and history of totalitarian and terrorist movements,
and to furnish evidence of a link between mid-century radical left- and right-wing
movements in the West and current radicalism in the Middle East. These arguments are
used to support his identification of Islamism and Arab nationalism as new forms of
totalitarianism.

**The 1968 Generation and the Anti-Totalitarian Tradition**

A short *New York Times* article from 1991, supporting intervention against Saddam
Hussein’s Iraq in the first Gulf War, introduces these themes in Berman’s work. The Gulf
War was a key event, not just in Berman’s intellectual trajectory, but in the emerging
discourse on humanitarian intervention. Coming at the end of the Cold War, Saddam
Hussein’s invasion of Kuwait marked the first dent in American progressives’
commitment to non-intervention in the 1990s, causing divisions on the US left about how
to respond. For Berman, the question of intervention hinged not just on humanitarianism
but on the question of totalitarianism.

To justify his support for intervention, Berman invoked the similarity between
Saddam Hussein’s Iraq and fascism in the 1930s. The Iraqi regime with its ‘totalitarian
controls’ and the ‘stampede across the desert by hundreds of thousands of refugees
bearing tales of horror about the invasion of Kuwait’ had ‘the glinty look of a dynamic,
expanding Fascism, 1930’s-style’. In the face of this revived threat, the post-Vietnam era
anti-interventionism of Berman’s generation was no longer appropriate. He argued that,
instead of the lessons of the Vietnam War – the ideas that ‘the far away enemy … would
pose no threat to us’ and ‘that America is itself a trouble-making country and can wreak nothing but harm’ – the most important legacy was instead that of World War II: ‘an anti-Fascist war to preserve civilization from governments that were not only evil but vigorously on the march’. For Berman, the immediate post-Cold War landscape resembled that of 1938, not 1968. The Baath government in Iraq seemed to him ‘not just evil, like many another government, but … vigorously on the march in ways that Vietnamese Communism never was’.18 This article provides an early example of Berman’s use of the concept of totalitarianism to support intervention, demonstrating both his invocation of the anti-totalitarian tradition, through direct reference to interwar fascism and World War II, and his identification of a new form of totalitarianism in the Middle East.

As the previous chapter outlines, humanitarian intervention emerged as a leading foreign policy consideration following the end of the Cold War which removed the imperative of combatting Soviet totalitarianism for liberal and conservative US foreign policy intellectuals. The rise of humanitarian intervention held particular significance for the ‘1968 generation’ of former radicals who had opposed all US military ventures since the Vietnam War. From the early 1990s, many of these staunch anti-imperialists were coming to embrace armed intervention for avowedly humanitarian purposes. In the context of Iraq’s invasion of Kuwait and the subsequent humanitarian crises in Bosnia and Kosovo, they found the principle of non-intervention harder to defend.19

Berman’s own version of the journey of the 1968 generation is an interesting counterpoint to this widely accepted narrative. In his account, the concept of totalitarianism features heavily as a mobilising influence on what he sees as a generational

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19 Gitlin, “End of the Absolute No.”
trajectory from radical New Leftism in the 1960s to liberal anti-totalitarianism in the 1990s. The narrative Berman relates dovetails with the history of anti-totalitarianism told in this thesis, beginning with the New Left’s co-option of the anti-totalitarian critique to criticise trends in American politics and society in the 1960s. Though Berman writes from a transnational perspective, covering developments in the United States, France, and West Germany, the contours of the totalitarianism debate he highlights are familiar. In *Power and the Idealists* (2005), he offered the following analysis of post-war developments in West Germany:

Everyone knows what was the Nazism of the nineteen-thirties and forties. But what was the New Left of the nineteen-sixties and seventies, in its motives, instincts, goals, and spirit? … The New Left was a young people’s movement motivated by fear … a fear that Western civilization comprised a system of manipulation designed to mislead its own people and everyone else – an iron cage cleverly designed to resemble the open air of freedom. … It was a fear, in sum, that in World War II, fascism, and more specifically Nazism, had not been defeated after all – a fear that Nazism, by mutating, had continued to thrive into the nineteen-fifties and sixties and onward, always in new disguises. … What was New Leftism, then? It was – it pictured itself as – Nazism’s opposite and nemesis: the enemy of the real Nazism, the Nazism that had survived Nazism, the Nazism that was built into the foundations of Western life.²⁰

Though Berman was writing about the West German New Left in general, and the Red Army Faction in particular, his overall thesis aimed to connect international New Left movements in a shared trajectory. While the history of post-war Germany – and the issue of the continued presence of former Nazis in public life to which the West German New Left was responding – was unique, Berman’s analysis of the trajectory of New Leftism also applied to the US context.²¹ Berman argued that the fear of mutated Nazism led the

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West German New Left to accept the ‘terrorist logic’ that only a bomb would ‘blow a hole in the Western web of total oppression.’ This logic ‘drew on Marcusian social criticism: the criticism that saw no hope at all in Western society’ (and which was also highly influential in the US).\(^{22}\)

However, the entrance of the Palestinian armed struggle onto the world stage in the 1970s caused the New Left to rethink its relationship with revolutionary violence.\(^{23}\) Berman identifies ‘two very shocking developments’ – the Black September terrorist actions at the Munich Olympics in 1972 and the plane hijacking and hostage taking at Entebbe airport in 1976 – which had a deep impact on European radicals.\(^{24}\) He argues that when ‘theoretical sympathy for the Palestinian cause brought the European New Left into contact with actual Palestinian guerrillas’, they ‘turned away in horror’ – not just at the ‘strategy of Palestinian terror, but also at their own intentions of launching similar campaigns at home.’\(^{25}\) These shocks were compounded when New Left hopes for a ‘new utopian society’ in Communist Indochina were instead confronted with genocide in Cambodia in the late 1970s. Following these developments, a ‘new and unpredicted truth became clear’ that ‘huge portions of the New Left’, through their sympathy for ‘Palestinian guerrillas’ and ‘Cambodian Communists’, had ended up supporting ‘anti-Semitism and genocide’. For Berman, it thus ‘became obvious that the New Left in its more radical or revolutionary version was not, as everyone had imagined, an anti-Nazi movement. On the contrary.’ The New Left had ‘set out to fight Nazism in its sundry modern democratic disguises, only to have ended up, in a modern left-wing disguise,

\(^{22}\) Berman, *Power and the Idealists*, 49.


\(^{24}\) Berman, *Power and the Idealists*, 53.

\(^{25}\) Ibid., 55, 57.
Nazi-like’.

Berman identifies a similar journey which took place among activists in the United States who ‘began by promising to construct a new kind of democratic or libertarian socialism’ and ended up ‘celebrating totalitarian leaders’ and ‘champions of totalitarian violence’.

The Palestinian armed struggle connects Berman’s arguments to developments in neoconservative thinking about totalitarianism and terrorism in the 1980s. The 1976 hostage rescue mission at Entebbe airport resulted in the death of one Israel Defense Forces officer, Jonathan Netanyahu, brother of the current Israeli prime minister, Benjamin Netanyahu. This incident led to the creation of the Jonathan Institute, a private research foundation, which organised the Second International Conference on Terrorism in Washington in 1984, where Jeane Kirkpatrick spoke on the subject of the ‘affinities’ between ‘the totalitarian’ and ‘the terrorist’. The ‘global offensive’ of the Palestinian Liberation Organisation (PLO) which got underway in the Middle East in 1967 and emerged onto the world stage in 1974 was crucial to the development of discourses on international terrorism.

Paul Thomas Chamberlin notes that ‘the contest between the PLO and the United States was one of a series of events that marked the beginning of … the age of globalization … Palestinian fighters employed a new set of transnational guerrilla tactics, which indicated the increasing power of nonstate actors in the international system and introduced the concept of “international terrorism” into the modern lexicon.’

Also vital was the consolidation of the close relationship between Israel and United States in the 1960s, which underpinned combined efforts by these nations to

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26 Ibid., 61.
29 Ibid., 7.
counter the PLO’s global insurgency.\textsuperscript{30} In the context of this ‘special relationship’, the Second International Conference represented a collaborative effort to combat international terrorism. The Jonathan Institute had organised a previous conference, held in Jerusalem in 1979. In the intervening years, the Iran hostage crisis heightened fears of terrorism in the United States, and the moving of the second conference to Washington symbolised that ‘now the United States, rather than Israel, would be acknowledged as the leader in the struggle against terrorism.’\textsuperscript{31}

In addition to this important international context, Berman’s perception of the European and American New Left as fellow travellers of totalitarianism resonates with other arguments made by Kirkpatrick, and more broadly with the conservative turn of 1970s and 1980s US politics. Berman’s work highlights how conceptions of totalitarianism were shaped in important ways by the rise of international New Left movements and the rejection of political radicalism which followed their highpoint in 1968.\textsuperscript{32} In West Germany, the debate over totalitarianism became ‘entirely politicized’ by the division between the New Left and the liberal establishment. For the younger generation of political activists and radical historians, the concept of totalitarianism was to be rejected as ‘excessively political’; it held ‘dubious scholarly value’ and had an ‘utterly polarizing nature’.\textsuperscript{33} For liberal scholars, on the other hand, typified by political scientist and totalitarianism theorist Karl-Dietrich Bracher, the concept was central to understanding the Nazi past and the Communist regime in East Germany. Moreover, in a

\begin{flushleft}
\textsuperscript{30} Ibid., 32.
\textsuperscript{31} McAlister, \textit{Epic Encounters}, 217.
\textsuperscript{33} Gleason, \textit{Totalitarianism}, 162.
\end{flushleft}
1978 article entitled ‘Terrorism and Totalitarianism’ Bracher attacked the West German Left for its tendency towards ‘totalitarian modes of thinking’.  

The importance of 1968 to the totalitarianism debate was perhaps most marked in France. Accordingly, it was to this context that Berman’s narrative next turned. Unlike in most other western countries, Communism in France remained an influential political and intellectual force until the late 1970s. Correspondingly, the concept of totalitarianism, founded as it was in the fundamental connection between Communism and Nazism, did not take root in France until this decade. Scholars have thus referred to the 1970s as France’s ‘anti-totalitarian moment’, when the concept was embraced by politicians, intellectuals, and scholars and institutionalised in French political and intellectual life.

Kevin Duong has shown how totalitarianism underwent a ‘conceptual mutation’ during this decade, as intellectuals shifted focus from the bureaucratic nature of totalitarianism to locating its origins in democracy. This shift occurred following the events of May 1968, a period of civil unrest involving general strikes, demonstrations, and occupations of factories and universities, which dramatised the dangers of radical democracy. The ‘reference point of totalitarianism [thus] shifted from the Soviet Union to the French Communist Party and the soixante-huitards’. French anti-totalitarian thinkers rewrote the relationship between democracy and totalitarianism. While in the 1950s intellectuals positioned these systems as polar opposites, in the 1970s they redefined totalitarianism as a ‘specifically democratic pathology’, resulting from

34 Ibid., 163.
‘excessive democratic voluntarism.’ The ‘defining example’ of totalitarianism, understood in this revised form to reveal the dangers of excessive democracy, was the Jacobin terror, with Stalinism confined to ‘a subsequent case of compulsive repetition.’ The connection between the Jacobin terror as a radical expression of democracy and totalitarianism was crucial to Berman’s arguments concerning the shared nature of totalitarianism and terrorism, discussed below.

As the accusation of terrorism applied only to the most extreme factions of the New Left, the argument that implicated the entire New Left in a totalitarian worldview – the argument made by Kirkpatrick in the US context, as well as by intellectuals in both France and West Germany – is perhaps better understood as a part of a broader shift away from left-wing politics and the rejection of political radicalism taking place after 1968. In other words, the interpretation of the New Left as totalitarian owes more to the increasingly conservative political climate in which it was made than to an objective assessment of this movement. Dominant 1950s understandings of totalitarianism centring on the role of the state clearly did not apply to the New Left. However, the increasing slippage between ideas of terror, terrorism and totalitarianism to be found in these negative assessments of the New Left points to an important development in the 1970s reconfiguration of the concept of totalitarianism.

Berman connected his reading of the French intellectual context to his transnational narrative of anti-totalitarianism. He argued that following the development of totalitarian tendencies within the (West German) New Left which had intended to fight totalitarianism in Western society, many activists went through a shared ‘process of disillusionment’, experiencing ‘shock at Palestinian terror doubled by the shock at

Cambodia, the shock at the New Left’s plans for its own terror campaign, the remorse, the self-reproach, the moral confusion’. For Berman, this process was embodied by André Glucksmann, a French intellectual associated with the New Philosophers – a group of French intellectuals who broke with Marxism and embraced the concept of totalitarianism in the 1970s. According to Berman, Glucksmann’s first step ‘was to give up on his old-fashioned anti-capitalism and anti-imperialism … in favor of what he began to call antitotalitarianism – though by antitotalitarianism he meant something broad, an opposition to extreme oppression of every kind, whatever its shape or cause.’ His second step was a ‘new ardor for humanitarian action’, and his third step to support this humanitarianism with military action. The new position of the ’68 generation, typified by the New Philosophers, was thus ‘antitotalitarianism, humanitarian action, forceful means’.

Berman tracked what he argued were parallel developments in West Germany – personified by Joschka Fischer and his evolution from left-wing militant to leading figure in the German Greens – and among the dissidents of the Eastern bloc, embodied by Adam Michnik. Berman thus described the revolutionary fervour of 1968 as ‘a young people’s rehearsal, preparatory to adult events that only came later’. For him, ‘the authentic political revolution of our era was [1989], not [1968]; liberal and democratic, not radical leftist in the ’68 style.’ Connecting the national contexts of the Soviet bloc countries, West Germany, France, and the United States, Berman’s narrative posited, at each turn, the influence of totalitarianism theory on the former radicals of the New Left generation. He charts how the New Left organised to oppose the totalitarianism it saw in the

37 Berman, Power and the Idealists, 66.
38 Ibid., 67.
39 Ibid., 70.
40 Ibid., 87.
41 Berman, A Tale of Two Utopias, 16.
putatively democratic western governments – but, he argues, in doing so it went too far and adopted totalitarian or terroristic tactics itself. The embrace of anti-totalitarianism in what is, for Berman, its true form – one which celebrates liberal democracy and the United States as the defender of global freedom – by former political radicals across Europe and the United States was thus a vital corrective to the earlier flawed politics and totalitarian tendencies of the New Left.

Saddam Hussain’s invasion of Kuwait was another turning point for the New Left generation in its shift towards anti-totalitarianism as it recalled the ‘good fight’ against fascism in World War II. According to Berman, ‘aspects of Saddam’s regime … the slaughter of hundreds of thousands of Kurds in northern Iraq, a danger of further atrocities to come, Saddam’s threat to incarcerate the Israelis’ were ‘[q]uestions of genocide: a twentieth-century predicament.’ The newfound anti-totalitarianism of the ’68 generation was consolidated when the ‘big moment of left-wing evolution came … when the ethnic massacres got underway in the Balkans. Then, at last, the old, profound question of Nazism and what to do about it rumbled up from the depths’. Berman’s narrative of the development of liberal interventionism uses the same markers as many histories of humanitarianism in the 1990s, yet in his version anti-totalitarianism, not humanitarianism, is the driving force.

Berman’s emphasis on the importance of anti-totalitarianism was shared by fellow liberal intellectual, Peter Beinart. In *The Good Fight* (2006), a book which celebrates the Cold War liberal anti-totalitarian tradition, Beinart presented a narrative of political developments in the twentieth century similar in many ways to Berman’s. Beinart too

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43 Ibid., 82.
44 In addition to Iraq, Bosnia, and Kosovo, non-intervention in Rwanda and failed intervention in Somalia provide the key case studies in histories of humanitarian intervention. See, for example, part three of Wheeler, *Saving Strangers*, and “The Responsibility to Protect,” 1.
highlighted how Cold War anti-totalitarianism was ‘inverted’ by the New Left in the 1960s. In his words, the New Left, like Cold War liberals, ‘saw a clear divide between totalitarianism and freedom’, though they flipped the analysis, ‘calling America the totalitarian state and leftist rebels the forces of freedom.’ For Beinart, in making this argument, the New Left ‘denied America’s moral potential and, in the process, forfeited its own.’

Beinart highlights Berman’s own role in the correction of this mistaken view. The rejection of the influence of the New Left got underway, according to Beinart, among a small group of Democrats, led by Congressman Dave McCurdy from Oklahoma and including Senators Sam Nunn and Al Gore, who began, in the debate over intervention in Latin America in the 1980s, to reject the prevailing leftist analysis of US foreign policy which was ‘defined more by fear of imperialism than fear of totalitarianism’. Instead, these Democrats began to accept US intervention as the price of protecting democracy, and moved towards ‘a liberal antitotalitarianism for the post-Vietnam world, which prized human rights without taking refuge in morally pure isolationism’. Beinart singles out Berman’s contribution – in the form of an article the latter wrote for Mother Jones magazine criticising the Sandinista regime in Nicaragua. The then editor of Mother Jones, filmmaker Michael Moore, attempted to prevent the publication of the article because, according to Beinart, he believed it would support the foreign policy of the Reagan administration. For Beinart, Moore represented the morally flawed anti-imperialist politics of the left, while Berman symbolised the revival of the noble tradition of liberal anti-totalitarianism. Berman once again played a central role in Beinart’s narrative in the

45 Beinart, The Good Fight, 50.
46 Ibid., 33.
47 Ibid., 69.
48 Ibid., 73.
1990s. Beinart wrote that ‘Paul Berman … spoke for an entire category of liberals’ in his statement that: “‘We who used to be the party of anti-intervention (because we were anti-imperialists) … should now become, in the case of various dictators and genocidal situations, the party of intervention (because we are democrats).’” For Beinart, this ‘wasn’t exactly liberal antitotalitarianism, since America’s Balkan foes didn’t merit the name. But the spirit was similar and the change was real.’

An analysis of Berman’s work on the ‘1968 generation’ calls into question widely held assumptions about the humanitarian motivations of the liberal hawks for their support of the ‘war on terror’. Berman’s narrative of the trajectory of this generation and the embrace of interventionism is one that places primary emphasis on the influence of fears of totalitarianism, rather than humanitarian concerns. While these impulses are not necessarily opposites, they imply differing perspectives. As the previous chapter sets out, anti-totalitarianism privileges US security and interests, while humanitarianism foregrounds the plight of a population requiring assistance. In addition, anti-totalitarianism assumes that what is at stake is a clash of ideologies, rather than a violation of the principles of international law. For Berman, the history of the anti-totalitarianism of the 1968 generation is more important to explaining liberal support for the 2003 Iraq War than the narrative of humanitarian intervention in the 1990s.

Fundamentally, as the rest of this chapter makes clear, it was the connection between totalitarianism and terrorism that was at the heart of Berman’s anti-totalitarianism, and this connection which is much more important to making sense of liberal support for the ‘war on terror’. The linking of totalitarianism and terrorism also belies the unchallenged assumption that anti-totalitarianism is synonymous, or even

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49 Ibid., 83–4.
compatible, with the definition of humanitarian intervention. While it is perhaps a matter of opinion whether counter-terrorist and humanitarian impulses in foreign policy had to be pursued simultaneously, it is certainly true that these motives are distinct, as the framework of the ‘Responsibility to Protect’, set out in the previous chapter, makes clear. The use of the concept of totalitarianism has only served to muddle these distinctions.

**Terror and Liberalism**

Thus far, this chapter has focused on Paul Berman’s analysis of the tradition of anti-totalitarianism, and its importance to the ‘1968 generation’, before the September 11 terrorist attacks and the launch of the ‘war on terror’. The second half of the chapter considers Berman’s argument that Islamist terrorism and Baathism constituted a new form of Muslim totalitarianism and examines how this argument has shaped the development of the concept of totalitarianism in the twenty-first century. Totalitarianism and terror suddenly became much more vital to Berman’s political views after 9/11. In *Terror and Liberalism*, he identified a fundamental link between totalitarianism and terrorism which cemented, for him, the continued relevance of this concept in the twenty-first century. Berman’s invocation of the anti-totalitarian tradition was a claim to continuity with the Cold War struggle. An important question is thus how far Berman’s usage of totalitarianism represented a continuation or a break from Cold War understandings of totalitarianism.

To assess Berman’s claim that the ‘war on terror’ was simply a new battle in the long twentieth-century war against totalitarianism, it is necessary to analyse how his understanding of totalitarianism compared to its earlier incarnations. The dominant Cold War meaning of totalitarianism, widely accepted by the public, politicians and the intellectual establishment during its heyday in the 1950s, centred on the state: totalitarianism described ‘a new kind of insatiably aggressive and invasive state’, based
on the typology of Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union, which represented an unparalleled existential threat to the Western democracies.\textsuperscript{50} It further aimed to capture the internal processes, including the use of violence and terror, through which the state could dominate and control the lives of citizens. Though public and intellectual discussion focused both on the totalitarian state and on totalitarianism as an ideology which transcended state borders, these more amorphous conceptions of totalitarian ideology retained an inherent connection to the state.\textsuperscript{51} Berman’s suggestion that terrorist groups without state backing could constitute a totalitarian threat was therefore a deviation from the Cold War conception of totalitarianism.

Perhaps it is truest to say that the sum of the continuities between Cold War and post-Cold War formulations of totalitarianism amount to a concept defined in negative terms – as the antithesis of America and American freedom. Enzo Traverso, in assessing the utility of the concept of totalitarianism, has observed ‘the only way to gather fascism and communism into a single category’ is through a ‘purely negative definition: totalitarianism as antiliberalism’.\textsuperscript{52} This conclusion can be extended to Berman’s view of totalitarianism; he did indeed describe totalitarianism as primarily a ‘revolt against liberalism’, writing that ‘[t]otalitarian movements always, but always, rise up in rebellion against the liberal values of the West. That is their purpose.’\textsuperscript{53} In essence, what Berman was borrowing from the Cold War was the tendency to define totalitarianism and liberalism (meaning freedom) in opposition to each other.

Berman’s engagement with totalitarianism was, moreover, overtly political – his invocation of totalitarianism was directly tied to his support of the ‘war on terror’. This

\textsuperscript{50} Gleason, \textit{Totalitarianism}, 3.
\textsuperscript{51} Alpers, \textit{Dictators, Democracy}, 129–56.
\textsuperscript{52} Enzo Traverso, “Totalitarianism Between History and Theory,” \textit{History and Theory} 56, no. 4 (2017): 110.
\textsuperscript{53} Berman, \textit{Terror and Liberalism}, 99.
type of engagement is clearly not a new development; totalitarianism has always been deployed in political arguments. During the Cold War, policymakers and intellectuals used the concept of totalitarianism to ‘[channel] the anti-Nazi energy of the wartime period into the postwar struggle with the Soviet Union’.54 Berman too, mobilised the concept to attempt to transfer the ideological clarity of the Cold War struggle to the ‘war on terror’, and to invoke a reassuring comparison with the ‘Good Fight’ of World War II. It remains crucial, however, to take seriously the conceptual transformations Berman and others engineered beneath the surface use of totalitarianism as a political epithet.

Berman’s understanding of totalitarianism in Terror and Liberalism was influenced by his engagement with the divisive debate on totalitarianism in post-war France and particularly his reading of Albert Camus’ The Rebel (1951). In the 1950s and 1960s the French intellectual context was dominated by Jean-Paul Sartre who was sympathetic to the French Communist Party and the Soviet Union. He was bitterly opposed by anti-communist anti-totalitarian intellectuals, including Camus and Raymond Aron, whose influence only came to the fore after 1968. The Rebel was an anti-communist polemic which resulted in a public split between Camus and Sartre, after the latter published a denunciation of the book in the leading journal Les Temps modernes in 1952.

Like Berman, Jeane Kirkpatrick had also been influenced by Camus. She engaged directly with the French debate when she visited Paris in 1953, where she attended talks by both Sartre and Camus. Kirkpatrick read the as yet untranslated L’Homme révolté in the original French, and ‘declared herself an unambiguous partisan of Camus’.55 According to her biographer, the Camus-Sartre split helped crystallise her view of the totalitarian nature of the Soviet Union.56 Crucially, in The Rebel, Camus put forward the

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54 Gleason, Totalitarianism, 3.
55 Collier, Political Woman, 45.
56 Ibid., 42.
same argument made by Jacob Talmon in *The Origins of Totalitarian Democracy* that linked Soviet totalitarianism with the French Revolution and the Jacobin terror. Talmon’s work influenced Kirkpatrick’s focus on revolution and ideology as the essence of totalitarianism. The question of the nature of the French Revolution, and most importantly its relation to later totalitarian movements, was clearly of vital concern to French intellectuals, though this issue had remained largely peripheral in the American debate. However, Berman’s engagement with the French debate, through his use of Camus’ work, was central to his post-9/11 theory of totalitarianism.

In *The Rebel*, Camus depicted the Jacobins as ‘prototalitarians’ and explored ‘how eighteenth-century rebellion turned into twentieth-century totalitarianism.’ He aimed to show how ‘the extreme individualism of some forms of revolt led, by way of the Marquis de Sade and Nietzsche, to Fascist totalitarianism’. His central argument explored how the thought of Jean-Jacques Rousseau underpinned the later Soviet terror.\(^57\) In Berman’s formulation, Camus had identified ‘a modern impulse to rebel’ that had emerged from the ‘French Revolution and the nineteenth century and had very quickly, in the name of an ideal, mutated into a cult of death.’\(^58\) In the twentieth century this ‘cult of death and irrationality … took hold of entire mass movements’ and these movements ‘devoted themselves to a single, all-consuming obsession, which was a hatred of liberal civilization.’\(^59\) Berman’s next move was to extend the arc of totalitarianism established in the French debate, from the Jacobins to the Stalinists, by connecting it to Arab nationalism and Islamist terrorist organisations.

It was on the basis of the expansive and vague definition of totalitarianism as a ‘cult of death and irrationality’ that Berman staked most of his argument that Islamist

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\(^57\) Gleason, *Totalitarianism*, 153.
\(^59\) Ibid., 42.
terrorism, as well as Baathism, which he indiscriminately conflated, together represented a new version of twentieth-century totalitarianism. In particular, this definition provided the key to understanding a ‘crucial reality’, that ‘at a deep level, totalitarianism and terrorism [were] one and the same’. The root of both totalitarianism and terrorism was ‘an irrationalist cult of death and murder’. The conceptual shifts in the meaning of totalitarianism that Berman achieved through his reading of Camus’ work are impossible to fully understand without attention to the parallel transformation of the idea of ‘terrorism’ since the French Revolution.

The Shifting Definition of Terrorism

Berman’s identification of totalitarianism and terrorism should be put in the context of the shifts in the meaning of terrorism from its origins in the late eighteenth century. This term was first used to describe the Jacobin reign of terror in France in 1793 and 1794. This usage diverges significantly from contemporary understandings of terrorism. While the revolutionary French state was responsible for the ‘reign of terror’, terrorism today is widely understood to refer to actions undertaken by ‘nonstate or subnational entities’. During the nineteenth century the emergence of a range of anti-monarchist, anarchist, and nationalist movements active across various countries introduced terrorism in its contemporary anti-state meaning. However, the 1930s saw ‘the term [regain] its former connotations of abuse of power by government’ as it was mobilised to refer to the mass oppression of citizens in totalitarian regimes. Hannah Arendt’s assertion in The Origins of Totalitarianism that ‘terror is the essence of totalitarian governments’ typified this meaning. For Arendt, terror in totalitarian governments took the place of positive laws

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60 Ibid., 26.  
61 Ibid., 40.  
62 Hoffman, Inside Terrorism, 3.  
63 Ibid., 5.  
64 Ibid., 14.
which, in constitutional governments, define standards of right and wrong. As a result, ‘[g]uilt and innocence [became] senseless notions’.

In the second half of the twentieth century the definition of terror shifted once again to what we now understand as terrorism, meaning the violent methods employed by insurgent organisations against enemy governments – although victims are frequently civilians. After World War II, terrorism most frequently referred to acts of violence perpetrated by anti-colonialist movements in Asia, Africa, and the Middle East. This meaning expanded in the 1960s and 1970s ‘to include nationalist and ethnic separatist groups outside a colonial or neocolonial framework as well as radical, entirely ideologically motivated organizations.’ In the 1980s, international attention shifted to the rising threat of state-sponsored terrorism – it was this issue that occupied foreign policy intellectuals such as Jeane Kirkpatrick during the Reagan administration.

The debate over terrorism in the 1980s is worth pausing over – as this decade witnessed a crucial crossover between ideas of totalitarianism and terrorism. The ‘fusion’ of understandings of ‘the terrorist and the totalitarian’ was one of the major outcomes of the 1984 Second International Conference on Terrorism. A collection of statements from the conference, edited by Benjamin Netanyahu, and published as *Terrorism: How the West Can Win* in 1986, informed a wider audience that there was ‘a natural affinity between the terrorist and the totalitarian’. This affinity was based on the shared view of terrorists and totalitarians that ‘there are no exemptions from politics’: The terrorist, like the totalitarian, ‘politicizes all of society and recognizes no restraints.’

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Five conference participants, including Jeane Kirkpatrick, spoke on the subject of ‘Terrorism and Totalitarianism’. Senator Daniel Patrick Moynihan argued that in both totalitarianism and terrorism ‘[t]here is no law … Law is the highest expression of liberalism, establishing as it does the distinction between the individual and society, preserving the rights of the individual vis-à-vis the state.’ Moynihan thus linked together ‘law’ and ‘liberalism’ and defined totalitarianism and terrorism as the antithesis of both. The result of his argument was to reduce the definition of both totalitarianism and terrorism to the opposite of liberalism – liberalism in this case being defined as the protection of the rights of the individual. In the broader context of the conference, Moynihan’s argument fits into the overall emphasis on the threat that totalitarianism and terrorism represented to the innocent private citizen. It is also significant that the link between totalitarianism and terrorism was forged at the same time as the concept of terrorism became increasingly politicised – a word used to delegitimise and essentialise political opponents, rather than objectively analyse a phenomenon. In addition to constructing a link between totalitarianism and terrorism, a number of conference participants also identified Islam as a significant source of modern terrorism. Three conference participants addressed the subject of ‘Terrorism and the Islamic World.’ Introducing these papers, Netanyahu noted that ‘[t]otalitarianism is not the only wellspring of modern terrorism’. Due to the ‘resurgence of Islamic fundamentalism’, he asserted, ‘[t]errorism is … uniquely pervasive in the Middle East.’ Intellectuals in the 1980s thus laid the groundwork for the connection between totalitarianism, terrorism, and Islamism which became central to the liberal hawks’ case in support of the ‘war on terror’.

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70 Netanyahu, Terrorism, 61.
These conceptual developments thus forged another link connecting totalitarianism and terrorism, in addition to those arising from the French debate in the 1970s. When French intellectuals traced the origins of totalitarianism back to the Jacobin terror, the histories of totalitarianism and terrorism became entwined. During the 1970s and 1980s, attacks on the New Left as both terroristic and totalitarian, or totalitarian because of their use of terrorist tactics, reflected the merging of these concepts. The shared history and political arguments linking totalitarianism and terrorism were mobilised by Berman to justify his argument that the ‘war on terror’ should be supported as a new front in the long twentieth-century war against totalitarianism.

After the attacks of September 11, 2001, the meaning of terrorism was once again transformed. George W. Bush’s decision to announce a war on ‘terror’, as opposed to the more specific identifier terrorism, was intriguing given the shifting meanings of this concept. Bush’s choice of words linked the new fight more closely to the Cold War struggle against totalitarianism and its associations with ‘state terror’. As noted in the previous chapter, Bush also explicitly invoked a direct connection between Nazi and Soviet totalitarianism and the terrorists who had attacked the United States. Moreover, the redefinition of terrorism signalled by the announcement of the ‘war on terror’ also brought the concepts of totalitarianism and terrorism into closer alignment in other ways. In the words of one commentator, the ‘consequences of [Bush’s] semantic choice, whether deliberate or not, nonetheless proved as portentous as they were significant: heralding a virtually open-ended struggle against anyone and anything that arguably scared or threatened Americans.’

The definition of terrorism was expanded to ‘encompass both the dark forces that threaten ‘civilization’ and the fears they arouse.’

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71 Hoffman, Inside Terrorism, 19.
72 Geoffrey Nunberg, quoted in Ibid., 20.
In this respect, the definition of ‘terror’ echoed the earlier meaning of totalitarianism, defined as the enemy of ‘civilization’ and an existential threat to American values.

The Shared History of Terrorism and Totalitarianism

In *Terror and Liberalism*, Berman merged the histories of totalitarianism and terrorism to present a narrative of how irrationalism and violence came to triumph over rationality, progress, and liberalism. He sought to show how, from their starting point in the late eighteenth century, acts of terrorism became increasingly indiscriminate, as, in his words, the ‘fastidious yielded to the not fastidious’. 73 Despite this trend, the nineteenth century, though marked by smaller-scale acts of terrorism and imperial expansion, was broadly characterised, from the perspective of Europe and North America, by ‘visible progress’. The ‘secret behind … [this] progress’, according to Berman, was ‘the all-powerful, all-conquering principle’ of liberalism:

The recognition that all of life is not governed by a single all-knowing and all-powerful authority – by a divine force. It was the tolerant idea that every sphere of human activity – science, technology, politics, religion, and private life – should operate independently of the others, without trying to yoke everything together under a single guiding hand. It was a belief in the many, instead of the one. 74

This, ultimately, was a description of liberalism defined negatively, liberalism given shape by its antithetical relationship to totalitarianism. This fact becomes clearer when Berman’s definition of liberalism is set alongside his definition of totalitarianism. Totalitarianism was ‘the ideal of submission … the ideal of the one, instead of the many. The ideal of something godlike. The total state, the total doctrine, the total movement.’ 75

Berman squeezed the history of imperialist crimes into his wide-ranging account of violence since the eighteenth century, admitting that ‘even in the days when liberal

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73 Berman, *Terror and Liberalism*, 34.
74 Ibid., 37
75 Ibid., 46.
rationality and human progress seemed to be making their greatest strides, an irrationalist
cult of death and murder was springing up’ among European colonialists. It was only
in the twentieth century, however, that an act of terrorism in the nineteenth-century vein,
the assassination of Archduke Franz Ferdinand in Sarajevo, led to the undoing of ‘a
hundred years of rationality and progress.’ During World War I, the ‘tides of European
irrationality and mass murder, which had been surging up and down Africa, now went
pouring across the European continent itself.’ In this respect, Berman invoked something
similar to the ‘boomerang thesis’ articulated by Hannah Arendt in the Origins of
Totalitarianism to explain the relationship between imperialism and totalitarianism. The
rise of totalitarian states after the war represented the point when the ‘cult of death and
irrationality … took hold of entire mass movements’. After World War II, these
movements ‘went spilling outward from their original European home … to prosper in
the Arab and Muslim world.

Berman’s merging of the histories of totalitarianism and terrorism goes some way
to explaining how he came to identify Baathism and Islamism as separate versions of the
‘same impulse … Muslim totalitarianism’. He combined the conceptual histories of
totalitarianism and terrorism in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries and presented them
as a singular force rising up in revolt against liberalism. Ironically like Norman Mailer in
the 1960s, Berman built on perceptions of totalitarianism as a mobile concept, capable of
spreading from country to country, to explain how the totalitarian impulse moved
geographically from Europe to the Middle East. His reasoning, however, masked a
number of significant conceptual changes which transformed the meaning of

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76 Ibid., 40.
77 Ibid., 41.
78 Ibid., 42.
79 Ibid., 52. A similar thesis is advanced by Ian Buruma and Avishai Margalit in Occidentalism: A Short
80 Berman, Terror and Liberalism, 60.
totalitarianism – these centred on the roles of irrationality, the state, and religion in totalitarian movements.

**Violence and Irrationalism**

As has already been noted, Berman’s case for the similarity between the Cold War and the ‘war on terror’ largely rested on a concept defined in negative terms. Like Moynihan in the 1980s, Berman viewed totalitarianism and terrorism as the antithesis of liberalism. For participants in the Second International Conference on Terrorism, the function of violence in totalitarian governments and terrorist organisations was further evidence of their shared nature, as well as their fundamental opposition to liberalism. At the conference, Jeane Kirkpatrick argued that both terrorists and totalitarians ‘regard violence as an appropriate means to their political ends. Both use it as the instruments of first resort.’


83 Quoted in Ibid., 34.

The combination of violent means and political motivation is central to modern scholarly definitions of terrorism: Bruce Hoffman notes that ‘[t]errorism, in the most widely accepted contemporary usage of the term, is fundamentally and inherently political … Terrorism is thus violence – or, equally important, the threat of violence – used and directed in pursuit of, or in service of, a political aim.’

An extensive survey of over a hundred definitions of terrorism conducted by Alex Schmid in 1988 found that ‘violence’ or ‘force’ and ‘political’ were the most frequently used terms to define terrorism, with violence occurring in 83.5% of definitions and political in 65%. Berman too shared the emphasis on violence, though he supplanted the emphasis on politics with a focus on irrationalism.
Some important distinctions can be made, however, between totalitarian state and non-state terrorist violence. In totalitarian governments, violence is first used to establish control – once totalitarian rule is established, violence becomes arbitrary as ‘standards of right and wrong’ disappear and terror becomes an end in itself. Terrorist violence, by contrast, is indiscriminate in its choice of victims, but this violence has purpose – it is a means to an end.84 Berman masked these subtle differences – between arbitrary and indiscriminate violence – by emphasising the irrationality of violence in both these forms, captured in his argument that the root of both totalitarianism and terrorism was ‘an irrationalist cult of death and murder’.85 Berman’s focus on irrationalism was shared by Christopher Hitchens. Unlike Berman, Hitchens acknowledged a distinction between indiscriminate and irrational violence, though he argued that only the presence of the latter was sufficient to justify the use of the term terrorist. For Hitchens, terrorism was equivalent to ‘nihilism’, or ‘nothingism’. Terrorism amounted to ‘the application of fanatical violence and violent fanaticism, and of no other things.’86

Why both Berman and Hitchens emphasised irrationality as crucial to their definitions of terrorism is not immediately apparent, though two potential explanations can be ventured. First, while irrationality is not generally a term used to define terrorism, it is associated with twentieth-century totalitarianism.87 Historian Benjamin Alpers has found that totalitarianism ‘suggested irrationality.’ It implied a ‘tendency to totalize, to demand … an absolute, militant devotion … to silence or kill all who disagreed

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84 This view is shared by Benjamin R. Barber who writes ‘while Arendt understood violence as an end in itself and the totalitarian party as a form of institutionalized, administrative violence, Islamic terrorists treat violence only as a means to nonviolent ends’. Barber, “Hannah Arendt between Europe and America,” 274.
85 Berman, Terror and Liberalism, 40.
87 Irrationality was not one of the 22 frequently used terms to define terrorism in the 1988 study. See Hoffman, Inside Terrorism, 34.
…Totalitarianism was more a faith than a philosophy.’ Therefore, it is possible that Berman and Hitchens both emphasised irrationality as a key characteristic in order to link modern conceptions of terrorism to twentieth-century understandings of totalitarianism.

In the failure of anti-war intellectuals to recognise the totalitarian nature of Islamism and Baathism, Berman saw another continuity with the twentieth century. He argued that the irrationalism of totalitarian ‘apocalyptic and death-obsessed mass movements’ made them difficult for rational people to comprehend. The very idea of such a ‘pathological mass movement’ seemed ‘too far-fetched to be believable’. For Berman, a misplaced faith in rationalism was a characteristic response to totalitarian movements. It had afflicted groups from the French anti-war Socialists during World War II who collaborated with the Vichy government to figures like Noam Chomsky who sought a rational explanation for the terrorist attacks of 9/11. This is suggestive of the second potential reason that Berman and Hitchens emphasised irrationality. They both sought to deny the political motivations of terrorism and rejected any suggestion of a causative link between US foreign policy and the motivations of the perpetrators of 9/11. Like the Bush administration, Berman and Hitchens both shared the assumption, that it was American identity and values, not American actions, that had made the United States a target. In Berman’s words, ‘America’s crime, its real crime, is to be America herself. The crime is to exude the dynamism of an everchanging liberal culture.’

**Totalitarianism, Terrorism, and the Nation-State**

Underpinning the discussion of the shifting narratives of both totalitarianism and terrorism is the question of the role of the nation-state. It is particularly significant that

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88 Alpers, *Dictators, Democracy*, 144.
89 Berman, *Terror and Liberalism*, 121.
90 Berman, “Terror and Liberalism.”
western governments now ‘typically assume that terrorism is by definition done by non-
-state agents, and that a state can never be guilty of terrorism (although it can sponsor
terrorist organizations).’\textsuperscript{91} The connection between totalitarianism and fluid ideas of
‘terror’ in the twentieth century signifies the detachment of this concept from its
traditional association with the state. Of course, in addition to Islamist terrorist
organisations, Berman also saw Saddam Hussain’s Iraq as totalitarian. He argued that the
new totalitarianism ‘flourished in several, sometimes contradictory, versions. Islamism
the radical political movement … was one of those versions, and came in several
variations of its own. The Baath movement of Iraq and of Syria was another’.\textsuperscript{92} The fact
that Baathism was a secular, nationalist movement which controlled a state, while Al-
Qaeda (the Islamist group most relevant to Berman’s argument) was a multi-national
terrorist organisation without state backing was apparently unimportant. The conflation
of these disparate movements suggests that the nation-state was no longer central to the
meaning of totalitarianism. It equally raises the question of the place of religion in
understandings of totalitarian movements.

For political scientist Benjamin R. Barber, Berman’s use of totalitarianism to
apply to radical Islamist movements was fundamentally misguided – due principally to
the issues of the role of the state and of religion. Barber points out that ‘[r]adical Islam
today certainly practices terrorism, but it meets few of the criteria Hannah Arendt or later
social scientists set forth to mark totalitarianism. … Above all, whereas totalitarianism is
a centralized, statist phenomenon rooted in a perversion of politics, Islamic terrorists are
decentralized and stateless, aspiring to religious, not political, dominion and engaged in

\textsuperscript{91} Igor Primoratz, “Terrorism,” Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, Winter 2018 edition,
\textsuperscript{92} Berman, \textit{Terror and Liberalism}, xiii.
a perversion of religion rather than of the state.\textsuperscript{93} Though the later rise of Islamic State is a complicating factor, Barber’s assessment remains true in the context of the time of Berman’s writing.

As has been demonstrated, Berman’s merging of the histories of totalitarianism and terrorism was influenced by his reading of Camus’s \textit{The Rebel}. This, in addition to the crucial crossover between conceptions of totalitarianism and terrorism taking place in French and American debates in the 1970s and 1980s, provide some context for the semantic and conceptual shifts which have made his arguments possible. Berman himself, however, does not intend to make these conceptual transformations apparent. Instead, he has sought to obscure the significance of the detachment of the nation-state from understandings of totalitarianism by arguing that the state has never been central to this concept. According to Berman, although some totalitarian movements like ‘the Nazis in Germany and the Communists in Russia’ ‘succeeded in capturing a national state’, this was not a defining aspect of their nature, and these ‘antiliberal movements were never fully synonymous with national states.’\textsuperscript{94} In fact, ‘totalitarian movements have always been international, with and without state support’.\textsuperscript{95} In some ways, Berman’s assertion that totalitarianism has not always been uniquely connected to the state is true. From the 1930s, understandings of the totalitarian state were joined by more fluid conceptions of totalitarianism as an ideology which was not confined by national borders.\textsuperscript{96} However,

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\textsuperscript{93} Barber, “Hannah Arendt between Europe and America,” 272, 274. Barber also offers an interesting argument about the reason for the continued interest in totalitarianism. The use of the term totalitarian signified an attempt to make sense of the ‘radical evil’ of the September 11 terrorist attacks in the same way that Arendt’s work should be seen as an attempt to comprehend the Nazi Holocaust. He suggests that ‘[w]hat is left when the sober analytic comparisons showing the utter incommensurability of Nazi totalitarianism and Jihadic terrorism are done is the obsession with evil – the effort to comprehend the incomprehensible. Here we do find a certain affinity between those trying to comprehend the Holocaust and those wanting to make sense of 9/11.’ Ibid. 275.
\textsuperscript{94} Berman, “Terror and Liberalism.”
\textsuperscript{96} Alpers, \textit{Dictators, Democracy}, 129–56.
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Berman misrepresents this history by arguing that the meaning of totalitarianism was not primarily attached to the state during the twentieth century. Overall, the meaning of totalitarianism has swung away from its earlier crucial connection to the state.

Berman argued that the language of foreign policy after the Cold War, which focused on the UN and nation-states, as well as terms like ‘WMD, rogue states, regime change, nation-building, humanitarianism, and individual Bad Guys’ missed the all-important fact that ‘totalitarian visions live[d] on.’ This made clear his preference for the language of anti-totalitarianism, invocative of the twentieth-century clash of ideologies, over that of humanitarianism which, he argued, ‘cannot describe [totalitarian] movements and their doctrines and their fanaticism.’ Post-Cold War ‘foreign-policy-speak’ failed to recognise that ‘Sept. 11 did not come from a single Bad Guy – it was a product of the larger totalitarian wave, and the only proper response was to comprehend the size and depth of that larger wave, and find ways to begin rolling it back … To roll it back for our own sake, and everyone else’s sake, Muslims’ especially.’

Berman’s choice of language connected his arguments to the Cold War policy of ‘rollback’ – a more aggressive strategy of combatting Communist influence which lost out to the more influential policy of containment. The image of a ‘totalitarian wave’ was equally reminiscent of the language of anti-communist intellectuals in the 1930s and 1940s. In 1939, the manifesto of the anti-communist Committee for Cultural Freedom asserted that ‘[t]he tide of totalitarianism [was] rising throughout the world’. Berman was able to present his arguments as a continuation of earlier versions of totalitarianism theory, while eliding the significance of the detachment of totalitarianism from its association with the state. Like Berman, Norman Mailer had used the same phrasing.

97 Berman, “Stopping Muslim Totalitarianism.”
invoking a ‘wave of totalitarianism’, an ‘ocean of plague’ that ‘contaminated all that it touched’, to suggest how totalitarianism had moved geographically from the Soviet Union to the United States in the 1960s.

In addition to obscuring the move away from the centrality of the state to understandings of totalitarianism, Berman equally masked the fact that the importance of religious belief to Islamist movements was a significant departure from the secular nature of past totalitarian movements. To do this, Berman imbued all totalitarian movements, past and present, with a religious element. He argued that for all totalitarian movements there was an ‘ur-myth’ in which ‘[t]here was always a people of God, whose peaceful and wholesome life had been undermined’. The people of God were being polluted from within by the subversive dwellers of Babylon and attacked from without by Satanic forces. ‘Yet, no matter how putrid and oppressive was the present, the reign of God always beckoned in the future’ and ‘[t]he coming reign was always going to be pure – a society cleansed of its pollutants and abominations.’

By giving the racial and political ideologies of past totalitarian movements like Nazism and Stalinism a religious, or cult-like, dimension, Berman was able to hide the significance of the shift from secular to religious totalitarianism. He also used this argument to link the secularist Baath movement with Islamism. He wrote that ‘in the Baathi myth, there was a people of God. They happened to be the Arab nation’. In the same way, Berman argued, for Sayyid Qutb, the ‘single most influential writer in the Islamist tradition’, ‘there was a people of God. They happened to be the Muslims.’ The figure of a supreme leader, present in most traditional conceptions of totalitarianism, took on the position, for Berman, of ‘gods, every one of them. There was a god … in every

99 Berman, Terror and Liberalism, 47–49.
100 Ibid., 56.
101 Ibid., 99.
[totalitarian] movement and in every [totalitarian] country, someone deranged … all-powerful … someone who put no value on life, who could order mass executions for no reason at all. By presenting totalitarianism as a religious, even millenarian, phenomenon Berman thus built on early Cold War conceptions of the irrationalism of totalitarianism as ‘more a faith than a philosophy’.103

Islamism and Academia

The significance of the shift from secular to religious conceptions of totalitarianism has been covered in the previous chapter. However, one vitally important aspect of this shift remains to be considered. Some scholars have suggested that, though the term continues to be employed in cultural and political discourse, totalitarianism theory no longer holds sway in academic debate. That totalitarianism has been used as a political epithet is not to be disputed. However, the assertion that historians and political scientists no longer consider it a worthwhile object of study requires closer examination.

Although, since the 1980s, the ‘scholarly community remains, for the most part, in a posttheoretical and posttotalitarian mode’, ‘reflections on totalitarianism have been rekindled in recent years.’ An edited volume, Beyond Totalitarianism: Stalinism and Nazism Compared, published in 2009, is reflective of more recent historical engagement with totalitarianism. This can be categorised as a critical engagement which does not embrace or reject totalitarianism as an analytical category, but rather seeks to re-assess its usefulness. Beyond Totalitarianism is testament to the continued interest in totalitarianism not just as a historical concept but as a potentially viable research category. The editors highlight that attempts to move ‘beyond’ totalitarianism, as the title suggests,
remain hampered by the fact that ‘thought on totalitarianism always seems to intrude … because the concept is so deeply embedded in how historians grapple with and understand the [Nazi and Soviet] regimes.’

Other reasons for the revived scholarly interest in totalitarianism touch on many of the developments mentioned in this chapter. In particular, the embrace of the concept by French intellectuals in the 1970s played an important role. In addition, ‘the link between religious fundamentalism and terror’, renewed interest in political religion or religious politics, and attention to the ‘extreme violence of totalitarianism’ are reasons for continued perception of its relevance. In particular ‘the main push came from a popular- or populist-political response to the real and perceived threats to the security of the homeland, such that the debate is quite literally carried into the halls of academia.’

The type of scholarship that emerged from this nexus of interests and influences is exemplified by the academic journal Totalitarian Movements and Political Religions, founded in 2000 by two UK-based academics, Michael Burleigh and Robert Mallet. This journal illustrates that the post-2000 use of totalitarianism has a grounding in academia, though this scholarship has a clear connection to political debate. The editors aimed to reinvigorate the study of totalitarianism by broadening the parameters of research, encouraging contributors not to be ‘limited to assessments of the most obvious areas of enquiry (Germany, Italy, and the Soviet Union), but [to] contribute scholarship that illustrates the implications of such notions across chronological and geographical boundaries.’

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106 Ibid., 2.
107 Ibid., 10–11.
108 Ibid., 11–12.
109 The journal was renamed Politics, Religion & Ideology in 2011.
Much of the scholarship published in this journal rests on the implicit assumption that Islamism is correctly characterised as a totalitarian movement in the twentieth-century mould. Though the journal was founded before September 11, 2001, the attacks in New York and Washington were seen to increase the urgency of such scholarship. A special edition of the journal published in book form as *Fascism, Totalitarianism and Political Religion* asserted that ‘09/11 and its aftermath has [sic] demonstrated the urgent need for political scientists and historians to unravel the tangled conceptual and causal links that characterise the relationship of secular ideologies and organised religions to political fanaticism’. The journal frequently publishes scholarship which reaffirms the connection between Islamism and totalitarianism – one of the most popular articles is titled ‘Radical Islamism and Totalitarian Ideology: a Comparison of Sayyid Qutb’s Islamism with Marxism and National Socialism’, and other essays include ‘Islamism and Totalitarianism: Similarities and Differences’, ‘Islamism and Totalitarianism’, ‘The Rise of Islamism in the Light of European Totalitarianism’, and ‘The Totalitarianism of Jihadist Islamism and its Challenge to Europe and to Islam’.

If such scholarship made its way into academia prompted by public and political debate over Western security, it also returned to the public domain via the work of intellectuals such as Berman. The work of Bassam Tibi, who has published in *Totalitarian Movements and Political Religions*, as well as affirming the Islamism-totalitarianism connection in several of his own books, was used by Berman in his 2010 book *The Flight of the Intellectuals*. Tibi is a Syrian-born German political scientist, who studied under Max Horkheimer and the Frankfurt School. Berman also relied heavily on the research of Jeffrey Herf, an American historian of modern Europe, particularly his 2009 *Nazi

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Propaganda for the Arab World. Herf has also popularised the Islamism-totalitarianism connection himself by publicly supporting the ‘war on terror’ on the basis of this connection, publishing in The American Interest and Partisan Review as well as an edited volume of Humanitarian Arguments for War in Iraq.¹¹²

Berman’s argument in Terror and Liberalism rested mainly on his assessment of the superficial similarities between Arab nationalism, Islamism and past totalitarian movements. Evidence of a concrete connection between these movements was largely lacking. He admitted that the ‘degree [to which Europe’s fascist movements] … spread into the Muslim world’ was obscure. ‘This question’, he noted, ‘deposits us at once in a land of fog’.¹¹³ However, by 2010, he had found evidence for his claim, provided by Herf. Much of The Flight of the Intellectuals is concerned with reinforcing Berman’s arguments about the totalitarian nature of Islamist movements by furnishing evidence of the direct links between Nazism and Islamist movements in the 1930s and 1940s. Using Herf’s findings, Berman relates how the Palestinian nationalist leader Amin al-Husseini collaborated with the Nazis and disseminated anti-Semitic propaganda in the Middle East. Thus, according to Berman, Husseini was responsible for the ‘creating of something monstrous: an infernal blurring of Islam and Nazism’.¹¹⁴

However, other scholars have challenged Herf’s findings on the basis that he does not account for the local reception of Nazi propaganda. A critical article notes that ‘in contrast to what some recent studies on German propaganda to the Near East suggest, an analysis of contemporary local sources indicates that trust in this Islamic propaganda

¹¹³ Berman, Terror and Liberalism, 54.
including the radio broadcasting by Nazi Germany was generally low.’\textsuperscript{115} While, for Berman, Herf’s revelations about al-Husseini were all important, René Wildangel argues that while al-Husseini became ‘the prime symbol of “German-Islamic cooperation”’, his case was not typical and the propaganda he helped disseminate remained ineffectual.\textsuperscript{116}

The direct connection between Nazism and Islamism embodied by al-Husseini provided Berman with a concrete historical link that proved ‘that, when the word fascism is uttered in connection to the political heritage of … the modern Middle East, there is good reason why some people respond today with an agitated rush of memory, reaching back into the 1930s and ’40s. And good reason why some people fall into worried contemplation of our own age of indiscriminate massacres and mad ideas.’\textsuperscript{117} Berman may view this argument as straightforward, but it clearly has the same political implications as his earlier argument in \textit{Terror and Liberalism} – that current Islamist movements should be viewed as the heirs of the twentieth-century totalitarian movements. This link is made explicit by the fact that Berman concludes the Afterword to \textit{The Flight of the Intellectuals} by endorsing a manifesto titled ‘Together Against the New Totalitarianism’ published in the French newspaper \textit{Charlie Hebdo}. The manifesto begins ‘Having overcome fascism, Nazism and Stalinism, the world is faced by a new totalitarian global menace: Islamism.’\textsuperscript{118}

In his work Berman presents two distinct narratives. One is the political journey of the 1968 generation from leftist anti-imperialism to liberal anti-totalitarianism. The other is the combined history of the concepts of totalitarianism, terror, and terrorism. This

\textsuperscript{116} Ibid., 536.
\textsuperscript{117} Berman, \textit{Flight of the Intellectuals}, 112.
ranged widely from the Jacobin terror, through nineteenth-century terrorism, to the ‘state
terror’ of the twentieth-century totalitarian movements, and finally on to modern
understandings of terrorism associated with the ‘war on terror’. Both of these narratives
challenge widely held assumptions about the centrality of humanitarian concerns in
motivating liberal support for the ‘war on terror’. For Berman, it was anti-totalitarianism,
not humanitarianism, which caused a generation of anti-interventionists to embrace the
use of American military power.

Berman’s work reveals how the meaning of totalitarianism in the post-9/11 era
has become inescapably connected to understandings of terrorism. This is the most
significant development in the way totalitarianism has been understood since the end of
the Cold War. This connection not only helps to explain how totalitarianism has survived
the collapse of the Soviet Union, but it also shows how the meaning of totalitarianism has
shifted and expanded. It has dramatically altered the meaning of totalitarianism, detaching
this concept from its traditional association with the nation-state and linking it to a
seemingly limitless war. With the decoupling of totalitarianism from the state has come
the removal of the protections of state sovereignty which governed international relations
in the Cold War era. The emergence of humanitarian intervention as a ‘new norm’ has
further undermined the presumption of state sovereignty, as statehood is increasingly
recognised not as an absolute right but as contingent on the ‘responsibility to protect’.
Though the concept of totalitarianism is less pervasive in post-Cold War discourse, it
arguably gained in power relative to the decline in the protection of state borders and the
increase in the power of the United States in the 1990s. The concept of totalitarianism
was thus employed to justify a war which had, in the words of Sheldon Wolin, ‘no obvious limits, neither temporal nor spatial, nor a single fixed form’.

\[119\] Wolin, *Democracy Incorporated*, xi.
Conclusion

In a recent obituary for the concept of totalitarianism, historian Samuel Clowes Huneke, writing for the *Boston Review* in April 2020, countered popular claims about the totalitarian nature of Donald Trump’s presidency and asserted that ‘the idea of totalitarianism is a useless tool in assessing the decency of governance in any twenty-first-century state.’ For Huneke, it is essential that ‘we … acknowledge that the Manichean worldview implied in the term totalitarianism is an outdated relic of the Cold War.’ Such dismissals of the utility of the concept of totalitarianism are familiar. Historians, social scientists, and political commentators have been declaring totalitarianism a dead concept since at least the 1960s: Benjamin Barber, for example, in 1967; Michael Walzer in the 1980s; Christopher Hitchens at the end of the Cold War. However, totalitarianism clearly has a staying power in political discourse. As this thesis has shown, it has outlasted historical revisionism and détente, the end of the Cold War and the close of the twentieth century. It continues to inform how Americans think about their country and the rest of the world.

Huneke’s rejection of totalitarianism’s explanatory power relies on an incomplete assessment of the functions this concept performs. He notes that ‘the term totalitarian fulfills two quite different purposes’, the first taxonomic, used by twentieth-century scholars to categorise a certain type of state, the second ‘ideological and pejorative’, used by intellectuals and politicians to define America’s political enemies as ‘radically other, sealed off from the liberal, capitalist, democratic order that we take to be normal’. He finds the second use particularly problematic, arguing that the term totalitarianism performs ‘a sleight-of-hand by which to both condemn foreign regimes and deflect criticism of the regime at home.’ For Huneke:
By claiming that dictatorship and democracy are not simply opposed but categorically different, totalitarianism disables us from recognizing the democratic parts of dictatorial rule and the authoritarian aspects of democratic rule, and thus renders us less capable of effectively diagnosing problems in our own society.

Moreover, by thinking of totalitarianism as something that happens elsewhere, in illiberal, undemocratic places, we ignore the ways in which our government can and has behaved in authoritarian ways within our own country. Black Americans experienced conditions of dictatorial rule in the Jim Crow South and under slavery, to name but the most prominent examples. However, this view fails to take into account the fact that totalitarianism has consistently been employed in precisely this way – to illuminate the very anti-democratic tendencies in America which Huneke claims it ignores. During World War II African Americans re-appropriated anti-totalitarian rhetoric as a means of highlighting similarities between American racism and Nazi policies. This practice continued during the Cold War when totalitarianism was mobilised to expose the hypocrisy of American leaders’ claims to champion freedom and democracy in the world, while African Americans and other minority groups faced oppression and inequality at home. The use of totalitarianism as an internal critique of American society reached an apex in the 1960s when radical intellectuals redeployed this concept to subvert the conformism of Cold War culture. The description of Donald Trump as a totalitarian president, rather than representing an aberration in the use of this concept, actually continues a twentieth-century tradition of turning totalitarianism inwards to criticise trends in American politics.

It is true that ‘classic’ totalitarianism theory – used to identify a new type of state which emerged in the middle decades of the twentieth century based on the shared characteristics of Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union – has little relevance in contemporary discourse about the nature of the United States. The ‘classic’ totalitarian model has not been considered an innovative or useful means of interpreting world affairs.

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for at least half a century. The last remaining country closest to this model, North Korea, is now widely considered a ‘post’ or ‘failed’ totalitarian state.\(^2\) Totalitarianism, as described by its major interpreters in the 1940s and 1950s, including Arendt and Orwell, is widely considered an ideal type which was never fully realised. However, it is also clear that totalitarianism now has a much wider meaning than its mid-century conceptual innovators intended.

It is tempting to join in with the myriad of other voices that have called for an end to the concept of totalitarianism – to agree with those who argue that a concept so fractured by its contradictory political use can have little meaning and is hardly likely to retain any analytical power or serve to clarify the issue to which it is deployed. Yet this does not help to understand why totalitarianism retains a conceptual grip on American political discourse, or what this tells us about American politics. Rather than write off totalitarianism as a useless concept, then, the goal of enhancing our understanding US political culture is better served by examining how totalitarianism has been adapted to suit a twenty-first century American context. An alternative approach is to accept that, if the concept must continue to be employed, it is essential to recognise the changes in its meaning. By way of conclusion, I will suggest a new typology of totalitarianism based on political commentators’ current use of this concept which recognises how far its meaning has shifted since the mid-twentieth century.

Norman Mailer’s domestication of totalitarianism in the 1960s provides a starting point to consider how popular understandings of totalitarianism have changed. Though the specifics of Mailer’s analysis were rooted in Cold War culture and are less applicable today, his crucial intervention suggested that sources of totalitarian control could be

located away from the centralised state. Mailer’s understanding of how cultural totalitarianism operated finds echoes in contemporary discourse on the perceived totalitarianism of ‘cancel culture’ – though critics of this phenomenon are now broadly on the political right rather than the left.

In a speech at Mount Rushmore on 4 July 2020 President Donald Trump stated that the nation was under threat from a ‘cancel culture’ which was ‘driving people from their jobs, shaming dissenters, and demanding total submission from anyone who disagrees.’ He argued that this ‘is the very definition of totalitarianism, and it is completely alien to our culture and to our values and it has absolutely no place in the United States of America.’³ In very similar terms, political scientist Andrew A. Michta, writing in the Wall Street Journal, compared ‘cancel culture’ to totalitarianism in the Soviet bloc states, ‘where the accusation of being out of step with the party was enough to end one’s career and nullify one’s reputation.’⁴ Although they are on the opposite end of the political spectrum to 1960s radicals, these contemporary critics of ‘cancel culture’ continue a tradition of American anti-totalitarianism which locates the totalitarian impulse away from the state. As Rod Dreher, senior editor of the American Conservative, starkly warned: ‘If you think totalitarianism is only something that the state can impose, you’re wrong … Totalitarianism is coming. It will be softer than what existed in the Soviet bloc, but totalitarianism it certainly will be.’⁵

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⁴ Andrew A. Michta, “The Captive Mind and America's Resegregation; Idol smashing and cancel culture are part of a broad ideological project to dominate society,” Wall Street Journal (online), 31 July 2020, ProQuest.
These comments also draw attention to the tradition of conservative anti-totalitarianism highlighted in this thesis. Michta deployed Jeane Kirkpatrick’s famous distinction (uncredited though unmistakable) between authoritarian and totalitarian regimes to reinforce his identification of American totalitarianism. For Michta, following Kirkpatrick, “[a]uthoritarian regimes leave largely untouched the private civic sphere of human activity; totalitarians destroy traditional value systems and reorder the culture. That is why they are harder to overthrow.” Although Kirkpatrick primarily invoked the authoritarian-totalitarian distinction to identify external threats, in the form of international Communism, she also turned this analysis on the domestic New Left. Kirkpatrick described totalitarian ideology as a ‘counterculture’ because, she argued, totalitarians aimed to transform all aspects of culture and society. While moving away from Kirkpatrick’s focus on the role of government, Michta’s argument builds on her emphasis on the importance of culture, which has come to characterise radical and conservative understandings of totalitarianism alike. The shift away from statist conceptions of totalitarianism was further illustrated by the fact that Michta called upon the state to protect against cultural totalitarianism, arguing that the ‘U.S. is roiled by spasms of violence and intolerance today because government at all levels … has abdicated its duty to protect the public space.’

Trump’s inflammatory remarks, and Michta’s article, were intended to demonise antifa and ‘Black Lives Matter’ protestors, but fears of ‘cancel culture’ have also been expressed by more liberal political factions in the United States. A letter in Harper’s magazine, published three days after Trump’s speech and signed by over 150 prominent writers, artists, and academics, stated that the ‘forces of illiberalism are gaining strength throughout the world’. America was ‘paying the price in greater risk aversion among

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6 Michta, “The Captive Mind and America's Resegregation.”
writers, artists, and journalists who fear for their livelihoods if they depart from the consensus’. The letter thus expressed sentiments very similar to Mailer’s more dramatic assertion in ‘The White Negro’ (1957) that in his own ‘years of conformity’ a ‘man knew that when he dissented, he gave a note upon his life’ and, as a result, Americans were suffering from ‘a collective failure of nerve’.

The Harper’s letter argued that ‘[t]his stifling atmosphere’ in America ‘will ultimately harm the most vital causes of our time.’ Significantly, in keeping with previous descriptions of cultural totalitarianism, it warned that the ‘restriction of debate’ was equally damaging ‘whether by a repressive government or an intolerant society’. The letter did not use the term ‘totalitarian’ (though the reference to ‘illiberalism’ is telling), but there are striking similarities with Trump’s description of ‘cancel culture’ as the ‘very definition of totalitarianism’. It was signed by those who have previously warned of the threat of totalitarianism, including Paul Berman – as well as Margaret Atwood, Noam Chomsky, and Salman Rushdie. Although the signatories of the letter claimed to support current protests for racial and social justice, and identified Trump as a ‘powerful ally’ of the ‘forces of illiberalism’, it nonetheless seems that ‘cancel culture’ is an enemy shared across a broad spectrum of American politics, including American conservatives, the populist right, the liberal establishment, and the left. These recent discussions reveal that the idea of a totalitarian culture, in which the sources of control are not directed centrally from the state but are diffuse throughout society and operate primarily through psychological means (‘shaming dissenters’), remains an important part of the discourse on totalitarianism in America.

9 “A Letter on Justice.” My emphasis.
In addition, Mailer’s criticism of corporate capitalism in the 1960s points to another development in understandings of this concept. The role of corporate power was given greater attention in Sheldon Wolin’s theory of ‘inverted totalitarianism’ developed in the early 2000s. For Wolin, totalitarianism in America took the form of the ‘political coming-of-age of corporate power’. Indeed, Wolin’s definition of inverted totalitarianism was recently employed by another scholar to analyse the current political situation in the United States. For political scientist Sasha Breger Bush:

what Trump’s election has accomplished is an unmasking of the corporate state. Trump gives inverted totalitarianism a persona and a face, and perhaps marks the beginning of a transformation from inverted totalitarianism to totalitarianism proper. In spite of this, it makes no sense to me to call the system toward which we are heading … “fascism” or to make too close comparisons to the Nazis. Whatever totalitarian nightmare is on our horizon, it will be uniquely American. And it will bear a striking resemblance to the corporate oriented system we’ve been living in for decades.

As I argued in chapter one, theories of American totalitarianism do not just represent attempts to apply the classic model to American society but a new formulation entirely: a ‘uniquely American’ totalitarianism. As Wolin emphasised, inverted totalitarianism was ‘not derivative from “classic totalitarianism” of the types represented by Nazi Germany, Fascist Italy, or Stalinist Russia’ but totalitarianism in a new and different form.

The importance of corporate power to contemporary understandings of American totalitarianism suggests another way in which this concept has changed. If theorists originally conceived the centralised control of the economy by an all-invasive state to be a vital feature of totalitarianism, commentators now worry about the manipulation of government by powerful economic forces. In this regard, the close alliance between oligarchical business interests and the state symbolised by Trump’s presidency is, for

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10 Wolin, Democracy Incorporated, xxi.
some critics, a worrying feature of America’s totalitarianism. Reconfigurations of this concept which focus on an American context have, since the 1960s, necessarily sought to show how totalitarianism can flourish under a capitalist free market system. Mailer’s focus on the psychological manipulations of the mass media and advertising was one such explanation, as was Herbert Marcuse’s description of the ‘non-terroristic economic-technical coordination [of society] which operates through manipulation of needs by vested interests’.\(^{12}\) Relatedly, the importance that 1950s theorists of totalitarianism attributed to ideology is not shared by many current commentators. While Friedrich and Brzezinski identified an ‘official ideology … covering all vital aspects of man’s existence to which everyone living in that society is supposed to adhere’ as an essential feature of totalitarianism – no such official ideology exists in America today. If there can be said to be an informal ideology it is perhaps ‘neoliberalism’ – defined by its tenets of free market economics, deregulation, and reducing the state – but crucially this ideology is ill-defined and certainly unofficial. It is an ideology primarily identified by its critics – rather than one that is set as formal doctrine by the state. Totalitarianism and ideology do, however, remain linked the minds of some right-wing public commentators, who have viewed recent Black Lives Matter protests as a totalitarian attempt to impose the ideology of the ‘neo-Marxist left’.\(^{13}\)

The role of terror has also been minimised by those who identify domestic totalitarianism in the United States. As chapters four and five argued, understandings of ‘terror’, which have become conflated with ‘terrorism’, have been more commonly mobilised by political commentators in the realm of foreign policy to identify external enemies of the United States. Though Bush’s ‘war on terror’ rhetoric, and his concerted

\(^{12}\) Marcuse, *One-Dimensional Man*, 5.
\(^{13}\) Michta, “The Captive Mind and America's Resegregation.”
efforts to forge a connection between totalitarianism and terrorism, ended when he left the White House in 2009, there has been no clear close to the conflict and the ‘war on terror’ is widely seen as a ‘perpetual’ or endless war.\textsuperscript{14} With no clearly defined enemy and no temporal or geographic boundaries, as Bush stated in 2001, the war ‘will not end until every terrorist group of global reach has been found, stopped and defeated.’ There is no guarantee, therefore, that totalitarianism will not be remobilised in foreign policy discourse in the future. Commentators have found this term particularly useful, as Bush did in his 2002 ‘axis of evil’ speech, in making a convenient conceptual – if factually questionable – link between enemy states and stateless terrorist groups. It is certainly clear that control of a state is no longer required to warrant the label totalitarian.

In domestic terms, the question of terror in totalitarian societies throws the contrast between ‘classic’ totalitarianism theory and American models into relief. In March 2020, Russian-American journalist Masha Gessen, a leading critic of Trump and author of\textit{The Future is History: How Totalitarianism Reclaimed Russia}, invoked Arendt’s views on totalitarianism to analyse Trump’s presidency in the light of the COVID-19 pandemic. Gessen argued that Arendt had identified a ‘key precondition’ for totalitarianism that ‘[o]nly where great masses are superfluous or can be spared without disastrous results of depopulation is totalitarian rule, as distinguished from a totalitarian movement, at all possible’. Gessen then went on to explore the relevance of Arendt’s argument to contemporary America, explaining,

She was speaking about state terror … But a pandemic also exerts terror … Of course, COVID-19 is not being unleashed by the state under the cover of ideology … it’s not twentieth-century totalitarianism. But a population gripped by terror

\textsuperscript{14} A leading critic of the failure to end the war is historian Andrew Bacevich, see also Mark Danner, \textit{Spiral: Trapped in the Forever War} (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2016).
creates extraordinary opportunities for this President, who has been groping his way to autocratic rule. 

In addition to Gessen’s qualifying statements, there are other reasons why this analysis is not convincing. Arendt referred to ‘terror’ in the context of the extermination of millions at the hands of the Nazi state, and to compare this to the failure of leadership represented by the Trump administration’s lethally inept response to the COVID-19 pandemic is jarring. In the same article, Gessen goes on to describe the effects of the pandemic as pervasive societal ‘anxiety’, a more accurate description than ‘terror’ in an Arendtian sense.

Similar incongruous comparisons have resulted from other attempts to apply the ‘classic’ totalitarian model to contemporary society. A recent Guardian article made use of analogy between Facebook and North Korea, while another suggested that ‘the sophisticated data-mining techniques of Cambridge Analytica … would have made the Stasi, the Gestapo, or the NKVD green with envy.’ Fears of surveillance have been a part of the conversation about totalitarianism from at least the 1940s. Societal surveillance remains vital to understandings of totalitarianism, though the primary focus of concern in the United States has shifted from the state to ‘Big Tech’ companies, including Facebook, Apple, Amazon, and Google. The consistent importance of surveillance shows how some aspects of totalitarianism discourse have persisted, while others have dramatically changed. Another recently popular topic which draws on older aspects of totalitarian discourse is ‘post-truth’ – defined as a political culture in which objective facts are

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16 Carole Cadwalladr, “Facebook is out of control. If it were a country it would be North Korea,” Guardian, 5 July 2020, https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2020/jul/05/facebook-is-out-of-control-if-it-were-a-country-it-would-be-north-korea; Huneke, “An End to Totalitarianism.”
17 Rob Dreher also expresses concerns about the potential totalitarianism of ‘surveillance capitalism’ and corporate power, though from a right-wing perspective. See Dreher, “American Totalitarianism.”
secondary to opinion and emotion and ‘truth’ becomes irrelevant.\textsuperscript{18} Since Trump’s election, many commentators have sought to expose and analyse his continuous public lying as a political strategy. This contemporary discourse on the idea of ‘post-truth’ builds on Orwellian understandings of totalitarianism and ‘newspeak’.\textsuperscript{19}

Analysis of contemporary uses of totalitarianism in political discourse suggests that meanings of this concept in the twenty-first century have split off in two directions. Associations of ‘terror’ and ‘ideology’ – the essence of totalitarianism according to Arendt in the 1950s – constitute one branch. In the early 2000s, politicians and public commentators linked these features to international terrorism and to ‘Islamism’. Totalitarianism, constructed in this way, is an external threat to the United States, and operates through violent means. Trump’s stated intention to designate antifa a domestic terrorist organisation, as well as right-wing fears of ‘neo-Marxist ideology’, show that these associations also remain present in domestic discourse. More frequently, however, in domestic terms, commentators have invoked a second branch of meaning: totalitarianism is used to refer to cultural forms of psychological control and surveillance. Conceptions of ‘American’ totalitarianism, developed since the 1960s, now refer to a society characterised by: the suppression of dissent through cultural means, for example, through public shaming on social media leading to the threat of reprisals from private employers; an economy in which money and power are concentrated in the hands of large corporations which hold sway over the state; pervasive surveillance at the hands of private technology companies which have the power to influence political elections; a political culture in which truth is subjective – i.e. characterised by ‘post-truth’. Though some of these points are interrelated, the definition of totalitarianism clearly remains fractured.

\textsuperscript{18} Lee McIntyre, \textit{Post-Truth} (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2018), 5.
\textsuperscript{19} Ibid., 4.
The features listed include criticisms of American society from widely differing – both left and right-wing – perspectives.

The meaning of totalitarianism is further complicated by thriving discussions of ‘fascism’ in America – a related but separate conversation. Discussions of Trump’s fascist tendencies invoke statist models of totalitarianism – such accusations gained ground recently following Trump’s deployment of federal forces in Washington D.C, and Portland, Oregon to suppress protests. However, the term ‘fascist’ more often refers specifically to Trump’s right-wing populist appeal and is used to make direct comparisons to previous right-wing dictators. While, for some, Trump’s election may have lifted the lid and provided a human face for American totalitarianism, in a longer-term perspective what sustains totalitarianism in political discourse is the desire to expose. Those who invoke totalitarianism intend to reveal unintentional and unrecognised anti-democratic trends which are perceived to have no place in the United States. American totalitarianism has consistently been found to be creeping, hidden, and insidious. Driving discussion of totalitarianism remains the fear, as Mailer articulated in the 1950s, that America is ‘in the grip of invisible forces that it neither recognises nor controls.’

From the mid-century discourse dominated by émigré intellectuals, centred on notions of state control, and focused on external threats to the United States, this thesis reveals how domesticated totalitarianism has become in American intellectual life and recovers a distinctly ‘American’ anti-totalitarian tradition.

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