

HOBBS AND/OR NORTH:
THE RHETORIC OF AMERICAN
NATIONAL SECURITY

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*Mantegna, Eric Fischl
Mary Boone Gallery*

Thus Satan, talking to his nearest mate,
With head uplift above the wave and eyes
That sparkling blazed; his other parts besides
Prone on the flood, extended long and large,
Lay floating may a rood, in bulk as huge
As whom the fables name of monstrous size,
Titanian or Earth-born, that warred on Jove,
Briareos or Typhon, whom the den
By ancient Tarsus held, or that sea-beast
Leviathan, which God of all his works
Created hugest that swim the ocean-stream.
Him, haply slumbering on the Norway foam,
The pilot of some small night-foundered skiff
Deeming some island, oft, as seamen tell,
With fixed anchor in his scaly rind,
Moors by his side under the lee, while night
Invests the sea, and wished morn delays.

— Milton, *Paradise Lost*, I

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1

Paradise Lost, completed little more than a decade after the publication of Thomas Hobbes's *Leviathan* (1651), reasserts the sea-beast's sinful deceptiveness. For Hobbes, the dissolution of the metaphysical underpinnings of rule by divine right occasioned the construction of an "Artificiall Man . . . of greater stature and strength than the Naturall . . ." ¹

Although the breakup of the *ancien régime* appeared to cast man out of his Christian, eschatological "paradise" and into a world bereft of sure moorings, man might build a landing of his own, if only he rid himself of the scholastic fantasies that kept him ignorant of his powers as a God-like *artificer*. *Leviathan* performs this task in part by ironically inverting the story of Genesis: Eden, in Hobbes's optic, is the harsh and unruly state of nature, of which to be cast out is a blessing; and "that sea — beast/Leviathan," classic symbol of Satan, becomes man's true and only Savior. In Milton's epic, the shifting, unreliable leviathan is mistaken for "some island" — literally *land*, or a *ground* — to which a sailor adrift might anchor himself, escaping the turbulent winds and the dangers of the night. Man's attempt to anchor himself in the ground — in matter, that is, rather than spirit — binds him intimately, Milton suggests, to Satan's revolt against God, and so in reality to a perpetual *de* — anchoring, a permanent *méconnaissance* of the profane for the sacred. Hobbes aims to show that the Satanic revolt was well — considered, for what man left behind when dismissed from paradise was nothing other than God's "natural" world ("Nature . . . the Art whereby God hath made and governes the World" (81)), in which, as Hobbes tells us, man's life was in fact solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short. The state — man's artificially created ground — is the truly limitless power, greater, potentially, than God's nature.

The leviathan-state cannot *simply* replace the anchor of God, however, because Hobbes's attempt to *invent* a new anchor and a new ground relies upon the privileging of capacities that are adrift owing to qualities inherent in the ground-creating, world — interpreting being, Hobbes's "natural" individual. With the same gesture that liberates man's creativity, Hobbes takes it back by insisting on total obedience to his self-created state, reinvesting in the notion of sin and the baleful consequences of revolt — not against God, now, but against the state. Despite their chronological order, *Leviathan* might profitably be read as a Satanic backward masking of *Paradise Lost* — a kind of black mass in which the punishment for disobedience is being cast out of the paradise of a well-ordered society and into God's stateless, indeed hellish, "Nature." With the grounding of the only possible paradise in the deceptive sea-beast of human art, the ground is no longer a ground. Like Milton's Satan, man with his artificial leviathan has been driven into the deep, into Nietzsche's "darkly chopping sea" of uncertainty.² Sea changes in this groundless ground are to be expected; the covenants out of which human societies are made will respond to the

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constant seductions of man's own nature, or what Hobbes calls his "passions." Obedience to state authority emerges as both absolutely necessary and absolutely impossible to guarantee: the artificer that makes the leviathan can always undo it. Hobbes's solution to this politico-metaphysical problem is an elaborate and delicately balanced network of disciplines, constraints, and controls as the condition of man's "freedom" and "power."

Hobbesian man, then, is like the "doublet empirico-transcendental" of Michel Foucault's *Les mots et les choses*: absolutely sovereign and utterly disciplined. An analogous "undecidability" is central, I shall suggest, to the vocabulary of "containment," which has dominated American discussion of foreign affairs since World War Two. Although said to be a Lockean society devoted to maximizing individual freedom, American public and quasi-public figures have promulgated a discourse that tacitly specifies the conditions under which the United States must put aside its Lockean commitments. Ronald Reagan, Oliver L. North and his cabal, and anonymous Pentagon planners have built a discursive bridge leading back behind Locke to Hobbes. They have disclosed — in a Heideggerian sense — an America in which Lockean categories of thought and action are indiscernible, but, as we shall see, they have not fixed the groundless ground that haunts Hobbes's project. Instead, they have pushed to the limit the American anxiety over our schizophrenic coupling of radical freedom with subjection to nature, or what North calls our "dangerous world." For what must strike anyone who followed the debates surrounding the Iran-contra affair was their enigmatic incoherency. Watching Congress's passionate defense of the public's right to know, coupled with careful avoidance of any leads suggesting improper actions by the Central Intelligence Agency, it was difficult not to conclude that most members of the committees investigating the Iran-contra affair sensed that their world no longer reflected, and could not reflect, the theory of constitutionally limited representative democracy they all-too-hesitantly invoked. It was as if the rhetoric of democracy itself had been placed *sous rature*: the committee members could not *not* speak of democracy, but neither could they fully convince themselves of the contemporary relevance of democratic principles. What haunts America now is a political identity crisis: Are we a Lockean or an Hobbesian society?

2

Hobbes's "natural" subject of knowledge and power poses a curious (though for the postmodern sensibility, familiar) dilemma: it can ground itself only in what it creates out of its own resources, yet the world that it thereby discloses, if it is to be compelling, must appear to it as the discovery of a privileged natural object, sign, or kind. To be sure, Hobbes's attempt at epistemological recovery cannot simply be assimilated to "Platonism." For Hobbes, whose model of inquiry derives from Euclidean geometry rather than Platonic dialectic, "*truth* consisteth in the right

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ordering of names" (105) and not in the direct mirroring of an uninterpreted reality. The very idea of an uninterpreted reality is, for Hobbes, a legacy of the "Vain Philosophy, and Fabulous Traditions" that he attacks in Chapter 46 of *Leviathan*. "Vain Philosophy" teaches that from a statement such as "Man is a living body" we must infer the existence of three ontologically distinct essences: man, living body, and being itself. In fact, terms such as "*Entity, Essence, Essentiall, Essentiality*" are "no Names of Things; but Signes, by which wee make known, that wee conceive the Consequence of one name or Attribute to another" (691). Nonetheless, Hobbes is very far from putting all discourse on the same level: the doctrine of separated essences, for example, involves taking literally what are in fact only "empty names," as opposed to Hobbes's nominalism which attends scrupulously to the *nature* of language. Making good the Hobbesian critique of separated essences depends upon constituting a subject of knowledge who can "remember what every name he uses stands for," and who can "place it accordingly" (105); it depends, that is, upon fixed definitions and unambiguous distinctions purged of figural language. In constructing his rigorously unambiguous and logically consistent system, however, Hobbes relies upon the suppressed figural dimension of terms that are crucial to his discussion of man and society. Attention to Hobbes's rhetoric — in particular, the tropes with which he appears to mobilize the authority of nature to compel obedience to discourse — reveals the shifting ground of Hobbesian politico-linguistic authority.

As a subject of scientific knowledge that transcends that of the "Schoolemen," Hobbes's natural man needs a long memory to support his "Knowledge of Consequences." Nevertheless, as a subject capable of abandoning the state of nature and entering into political covenants, such a subject must be able to reinterpret political meanings effortlessly. The subject whose memory of nature is long demands a correspondingly short *political* memory. How can these epistemological figures be combined in one subject? Hobbes reconciles the two by founding knowledge on what he calls "fancy," a word that can refer both to an accurate mental representation of an external object, and an invention, caprice, delusion, or fictional image. As an *ambiguous* sign, "fancy" performs essential functions in Hobbes's science of politics, despite the latter's alleged dependence upon words "purged from ambiguity." To avert the impotence of "Insignificant Speech," the subject must avoid the "Absurdity" of words severed from their "*Definitions*" — the dark vocabulary of scholastic fantasy that, for Hobbes, has affinities to immaturity and madness. This is no mere epistemological problem, for it is the regulation of the passions by thought, as refined, ideally, into a *method*, that enables individuals to perceive their long-term interest in security and therefore sacrifice the unlimited exercise of natural rights to the stability of a social contract.

Consider first Hobbes's evocation of the mechanics of "Sense," which in turn explain the origin of "Thoughts." Thoughts, he writes, are "every

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one a Representation or Apparence." A representation designates an "Object, ... a body without us." The relation of thought to its object, then, initially appears as the classical epistemological puzzle concerning the possibility of knowledge of the external world. Hobbes proposes, of course, a mechanical solution: the movement of objects in space produces a corresponding movement in the senses. The "cause of Sense," Hobbes tells us,

is the Externall Body, or Object, which presseth the organ proper to each Sense . . . which pressure, by the mediation of Nerves, and other strings, and membranes of the body, continued inwards to the Brain, and Heart, causeth there a resistance, or counter-pressure, or endeavour of the heart, to deliver itself: which endeavour because *Outward*, seemeth to be some matter without. And this *seeming*, or *fancy*, is that which men call *Sense* (85).

Although this theory shows the method by which the subject can have thoughts of the "body without," it cannot account for the possibility of *reflection* upon objects that are not immediately present to the senses. If representations are caused by "pressure" on the sense organs from the "body without," how is memory possible? How can the object be present in the imagination when it is not exerting pressure on the senses?

Hobbes's answer is that the "counter-pressure," or the movement of the sensory organ, reverberates for some time after the original pressure of the object has ceased, though not indefinitely; the reverberation gradually "decays." Since the movement of the sensory organ outlasts the movement of the object, without, however, outlasting it indefinitely, a kind of thought not under the immediate sway of desire becomes possible, namely deliberation. The mechanism of "decay" ensures that the subject may entertain, in the imagination, a "fancy" or "relique" of the object's impact, thus establishing the possibility of knowledge of the connections between past events and, therefore, of instrumental action oriented towards the future.³ This foundation has been secured, however, at the cost of constituting the knowledge of events as "fancy." The mental representation of a thing, a fancy, can also be an invention or caprice, and as such tends to blur the distinctions between the names that Hobbes strives to keep carefully "placed." The depiction of knowledge of the past as the remains of an originally fully present (but now decaying) "fancy" necessarily renders knowledge opaque, vague, and ambiguous.

This becomes clearer if we consider that for Hobbes, the mechanism of decay is not only the dwindling of sensory motions set off by the pressure of an object, but rather the interference of *other* objects, nearer in time, which obscure, muffle, and cover over the previous movement. If fancies did not decay and could not be pushed aside by the pressure of other objects, the subject would, after all, be confined to a perpetual present — or past. Ironically, the mechanism that makes possible the *growth* of knowledge is a continuous layering process that might equally well be

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said to yield a *loss* of knowledge, as the apprehension of the "body without" is complicated by a continually revised mass of experience that has the status of an ambiguous fancy, caprice, or invention. Such a view of experience is crucial, of course, to Hobbes's vision of an unconditioned invention of the political order: the subject of political action must be free of past contingencies and traditional values, viewing the accumulation of knowledge as raw material for creative manipulation. At the same time, however, knowledge of the connections between past events is essential to a scientific subject who abandons scholastic fantasy in favor of exact knowledge of causal relations. "Fancy" is a term whose dual meanings are equally necessary to Hobbes's derivation of sovereign power.

The contradictory character of "decay" appears again in Hobbes's discussion of how rational speech wards off the error threatened by the unavoidable layering of fancy in knowledge. In Hobbes's genesis of the natural individual, a crucial property of speech is its capacity to offset the unreliability and insubstantiality of ambiguous sensory phenomena. The signs of language, Hobbes says, attenuate or "delay" the decay of signs long enough to enable these "reliques" of external motion to perform as the objects of an intelligible discourse of deliberation and explanation. Decay cannot and must not be eliminated, but thanks to rightly ordered speech it can be postponed long enough for the accumulation of "Knowledge of Consequences," or memory. This stable language of consequences, in turn, provides the foundation in the natural individual for those effects of power specific to Hobbes's "Artificial Man": for without this faculty of knowledge, as Hobbes puts it, "there had been amongst men, neither Common-wealth, nor Society, nor Contract, nor Peace, no more than amongst Lyons, Bears, and Wolves" (100). If, however, the delay afforded by linguistic signs is the mechanism that lends stability to a self-invalidating sensory apparatus, Hobbesian language itself raises, albeit in a different form, the very difficulties bound up in the ambiguities of fancy. For Hobbes, the horizon of clear and distinct ideas is populated by dream-like visions, absurdity, giddiness, and finally madness. Speech, which enables memory and the knowledge of consequences, is in itself no guarantee of reason. Hobbes's vivid examples of intellectual error are governed by the figure of a subject who has lost control over speech, trapped in a meaningless show of vain images that are incapable of reaching the real world. The discourse of the "Schoole-men" aptly symbolizes this mad speech in which words are juggled for purely ornamental effect. Far from having mastered language to escape the uncertainty of fancy, the subject of dogmatic fantasy is literally dissolved into the signs of language themselves, a plaything of discourse rather than an agent who orders the world by "settling on . . . definitions." So radically impotent a subject, absorbed not in the strict calculation of consequences but by the contemplation of a display of representations, is in no respect the stuff of the "Artificiall Man."

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The emergence of a Hobbesian subject of power is linked to the invention of a language "purged from ambiguity," but how does one move from the aesthetic play of signs to a discourse of empirical causes and effects, when the very condition of thought and representation is the permanent possibility of decay, layering, and substitution? Hobbes deals with the ambiguities that arise here by referring them to other domains, via the textual strategies that Jacques Derrida has isolated under the rubric of "supplementation."⁴

We have noted how the gradual decay of sensory motion establishes both the possibility of thought and the layering over of its object. Hobbes insists that "There is no conception in a man's mind, which hath not first, totally, or by parts, been begotten upon the organs of Sense" (94). Mental representations are derived from the pressure of bodies upon the senses, as we have seen, but since the latter persist as "reliques" and "fancies," representations can be linked together by the mind in a virtually unlimited variety of combinations. An event can be mentally attached to any other event, therefore becoming imaginatively tied together; and, as Hobbes notes, they can as easily be untied, dissolved, and recombined. If this vertiginous option is extended, it "comes to pass in time," Hobbes says, "that in the imagining of anything, there is no certainty what we shall imagine next."⁵ The terror of unregulated thought is articulated through images of variance and eccentricity: persons friendless and alone, wills empty of desire, disharmonious, and caught in the "wild ranging of the mind." This "uncertainty about what we shall imagine next," Hobbes says, is delirium. Sanity, of course, consists in experiencing ourselves as enduring subjects acting in time. Since, on Hobbes's account, it is in the nature of human beings as speakers that delirium remains a constant possibility — that thought might become "*unguided, without Designe, and inconstant*" — some principle is required to establish how the subject avoids falling prey to the anarchic play of imagination. Speech, whose resources were introduced to correct the ambiguities of sense, is now itself felt to require similar treatment.

"Passion," "desire, and designe" are the figures that Hobbes now introduces to discipline the paralyzing chaos of memory, imagination, and fancy unleashed by a disorderly language. Desire accomplishes this task by positing some aim for the subject, lending direction to the associative spontaneity of thought by organizing it according to a teleological movement towards the real world of consequences. "Thoughts," when ordered by desires, become organized as "Scouts, and Spies, to range abroad, and find the way to the things desired." Not only does desire supply direction and coherency to the imagination, it also increases the sense of substantiality attached to its representations: "The impression made by such things as wee desire," in Hobbes's pithy phrase, "is strong and permanent" (95). Desire and speech reinforce one another, prolonging the life of a given impression despite the constant intrusion of fresh experience. Yet in a sense,

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Hobbes is exploiting still another meaning of the metaphor with which he began his genealogy of the natural individual: "fancy" can mean not only a mental representation, but also something desired by an individual. In appealing to passion to regulate the chaos of sense and thought, Hobbes is relying upon the multiple significations of his original metaphor.

Desire allows for the creation of a kind of subjective ontology, singling out and investing with special significance a particular class of impression. More importantly, it is what provokes the subject to make connections between the desired object and the performances required to attain it, as well as to collect in memory and recall all the effects associated with such objects. At this point, the term "power" acquires some concreteness, for it is by proceeding backwards in the chain of means towards some desired end that one arrives at a "beginning within our own power" (96) and can construct a practical syllogism relevant to the subject's actual situation. With this concept, Hobbes links thought and power by constituting thought as a tool for attaining the end desired by a concrete, situated subject, as opposed to fancies divorced from practice.

Yet Hobbes's vocabulary of desire, no less than that of sense and speech, generates multiple meanings whose effects must be taken into account. As a regulator of errant signs, the figure of desire we have just isolated plays a positive role in Hobbes's project, bringing order to the "wild ranging" of the mind and constituting a necessary step in the genealogy of a subject of power. Nevertheless, *Leviathan* offers a different picture of desire, emerging as Hobbes looks more closely at the nature of the passions and which again engenders ambiguities it was designed to foreclose. Passion too, it seems, contains its own principles of disharmony and excess, so that the same disability — the failure to master a discourse of causes and effects — and the same problem — how can this excess be limited or regulated? — emerge again. The discipline of instrumental thinking can be upset by what Hobbes calls "the more or lesse Desire of Power," marking passion too with an inconstancy that once again culminates in madness:

For as to have no Desire, is to be Dead: so to have weak Passions, is Dulnesse; and to have Passions indifferently for every thing, GIDDINESSE, and *Distraction*; and to have stronger, and more vehement Passions for any thing, than is normally seen in others, is that which men call MADNESSE (139).

Hobbes comes full circle by linking to madness the "Insignificant Speech" of the "Schoole-men," who "speak such words, as put together, have in them no signification at all" (146). The category of passion, whose unity, it was hoped, would temper the Hobbesian mind's "wild ranging," emerges as an ambiguous new source of error.

To the dangerous entanglement of desire and language, Hobbes envisages a radical solution: replace the common vocabulary with one "purged from ambiguity" that allows the deduction of complex passions from simpler,

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self-evident elements, as demanded by Hobbes's conception of scientific method. With passion disciplined by an unambiguous language — that is, with an impersonal *method* — the subject can hope to ward off the aesthetic pull of fanciful representations, invent a true discourse of causes, and enjoy the effects of power. The hazards of this project reach their zenith, of course, in Hobbes's vision of a body politic. An association of acquisitive individuals requires a sovereign power that can never quite be guaranteed, because the fabrication of the "Artificiall Man" relies upon an "Inconstancy" that persists in haunting it. What is striking about the state of nature is less the fear engendered by the unrestrained exercise of natural rights than the relative absence of *logos*. Life is not only "solitary, poore, nasty, brutish, and short," but also it is unintelligible: "In such condition, there is . . . no Knowledge of the face of the Earth; no account of Time; no Arts; no Letters; no Society" (186). The absence of speech disciplined by *logos* means that individuals in the state of nature are "dissociate(d)" from one another, so that their actions are "governed" only by the anti-logic of the passions. The individual delirium that Hobbes forecasts when passion overcomes thought re-emerges at the level of collective life as the "war of each against all." The state of nature is a state of generalized "madnesse."⁶

To overcome this pandemic madness, an undivided sovereign power must coordinate the anarchic play of desire-cum-delirium. Even though covenants without the sword are meaningless, this is to be accomplished not only by force of arms, but by supplying the *logos* that the state of nature lacks: the sovereign power discharges its duties by pronouncing *laws* to regulate and regiment the passionate pursuit of individual interests. The sovereign power, as "Judge of what is Commodious, or Incommodious to the Common-wealth," must, as Hobbes puts it, promulgate "*good Lawes*"⁷ (327), i.e., regulations that ensure commodious living. While subjects, then, have a duty of "simple obedience," the sovereign's duties are more subtle and demanding. The Hobbesian sovereign must *teach* obedience, and learn the arts that Foucault studies under the name of "discipline."

While the sovereign's injunctions aim to endow society with certainty and predictability, the capacity of the sovereign power to do so depends in turn on its "constancy." The figure of the sovereign, however, opens the door to the same problem of *inconstancy* that we saw in the delirium of passions and the chaos of the state of nature. If the sovereign power takes the form of an assembly, it will be threatened, Hobbes fears, by disagreement among those who comprise it (accordingly, Hobbes advises against democracy and aristocracy). Even when vested in an individual, inconstancy may spring from human nature, i.e., from the passions: the sovereign power might fail to perform its duties owing to excessive timidity or arrogance. The sovereign is, after all, a "*mortal god*,"⁸ "compound-ed of the power of all *men*" (227), and thus fully subject to the dialectic

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of desire and language we have already adopted. Here again, the invention of an impersonal discourse is necessary to correct for this excess of desire, in this case the knowledge of how to govern and be governed: educating subjects to adhere to the prevailing form of government, to dismiss competing claims of authority, to obey established authority, to memorize the duties of citizenship, to respect parental authority, to nurture the habits of compliance, and to adjust their "designes and intentions" to the law. Knowledge of how to rule is an all-embracing pedagogy of obedience in which "thought" is removed from the world of airy abstraction and concretized as a mechanism of political control.

The system of concepts organized by the sovereign's laws are subject, however, to a chaos of their own. The sovereign, as we have noted, performs its duties "by a generall Providence, ... and in the making, and executing of good Lawes. . . ," but laws may be misunderstood. The need to interpret the sovereign's commands is another source of inconstancy, threatening the commonwealth. Neither brevity nor verbosity are of any use:

The written Laws, if they be short, are easily mis-interpreted, from the divers significations of a word, or two: if long, they be more obscure by the divers significations of many words (322).

By multiplying the senses of a text, interpretation creates more problems than it resolves:

For Commentaries are commonly more subject to cavill, than the Text; and therefore need other Commentaries; and so there will be no end of such Interpretation (326).

Misunderstanding the sovereign can be mitigated, for Hobbes, only by insisting on the "literal" sense of the law: "that, which the Legislator intended, should by the letter of the Law be signified." Disputes over the scope and meaning of laws, of course, are to be settled by the sovereign power alone. More than brute force, however, lies behind the sovereign's authority over the meaning of its words. It is not simply the sheer power of sovereign intention that adjudicates disputes over interpretation, but his "perfect understanding of the finall causes, for which the Law was made" (322). The sovereign's intention, obscured by the "divers significations" of his words, can be saved, once more, only by a political science "purged from ambiguity" and embodying a "perfect understanding." The problem of interpreting the commonwealth's laws, then, is referred to sovereign intention as the content of the law, while the problem of interpreting sovereign intention is referred to the "laws" of a new political science. The mainspring of the civil order remains as fragile as the ever-threatened line between passion and delirium — no more, finally, than a "*Fiat*," as Hobbes puts it in the Introduction to *Leviathan*.

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Leviathan attempts to establish an unambiguous political vocabulary on the basis of figures whose multiple meanings necessarily thwart any such project. At each stage, the hoped-for "constancy" — political, psychological, metaphysical — appears compromised by the resources of the figures in which Hobbes chooses to state it, and must be guaranteed by supplementary measures. Political action is concentrated as much as possible into the sovereign's law-making duties; law-making, to circumnavigate the passions, must attain the status of a science; and finally, the imperative of guaranteeing a "felicitous" sphere of individual action necessitates a comprehensive education for obedience. This route, however, merely returns us to the passions, and to Hobbes's recognition that the artificiality of covenants among self-sufficient individuals requires that these be enforced by the sword, by a power able to "keep them in awe."

That the indispensable unity of the sovereign rests on a delicate weave, easily unraveled, helps to explain Hobbes's hostile reaction to the suggestion that the sovereign be subject to the law. This idea is "repugnant," he says, because it would lead to an infinite chain of equivocation, "continually without end, to the Confusion, and Dissolution of the Commonwealth" (367). This properly Hobbesian repugnance towards executive power being subject to law is now voiced with increasing shrillness in what is commonly supposed to be the most authentically Lockean political culture, the United States.

3

America was promises . . .

Archibald MacLeish

The conundrums following Hobbes's demand that individuals make an almost *unconditional* grant of authority to the state appear less problematical for Locke, for whom the people's power is held conditionally, on trust. Hobbes's unholy coupling of human power with the despotic state, we like to think, is simply an expression of bourgeois pessimism that more reasonable thinkers, upon whom we rely for our political identity, saw through. But Lockean liberalism encounters its own problems of undecidability. At the center of both Hobbesian and Lockean accounts of politics, of course, is the contract, the *promise* — the individual's promise not to use his unlimited natural right to invade others as long as all other individuals make the similar promise. Accordingly, the great fear of contractarian experience is that one or more of the parties to the contract might make a *lying promise*, a circumstance that pushes hermeneutics close to the center of politics: now, political life demands ways of discerning sincerity, and liberalism demands a political semiotic that can tabulate the reliable signs of the sincere promise.

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Precisely this riddle of promising and keeping promises, in fact, was encountered early in the history of semiotics by Umberto Eco, who defined the field as "a theory of the lie."⁹ Semiotics, which treats "sign-functions" abstracted away from their referential dimension, is the study of whatever can be used to *depart* from the real. Eco's paradoxical definition of a discipline devoted to telling the truth about lies captures the character of modern political theory as Hobbes sees it. For Hobbes, sheer human artifice could fashion a simulacrum of the "natural" ruler, but the cooperation upon which this art depended relied in turn on promises that were likely to be overwhelmed by the passions. Since promises are so thin, ontologically speaking, the necessary partner of consent is state coercion, which at its roots is that which moors us to the deceptive sea-beast, Leviathan, the only ground for which we may hope. This dialectic of consent and coercion was analyzed by Nietzsche in his early draft "On Truth and Lies in a Nonmoral Sense," where he emphasizes the conformity implied by the notion of a social contract.¹⁰ Individuals "by themselves," Nietzsche writes, will in the ordinary course of events rely on subterfuge, camouflage, and the lie for survival. Through "boredom and necessity," however, they might contract to live according to certain rules, i.e., promises. The essence of the social contract is to tell the truth, but also to define truth as the conformity to the conventions of the group, to "lie according to fixed conventions." Later, in *On the Genealogy of Morals* and elsewhere, Nietzsche detailed the forms of discipline required to produce a creature — the modern, guilt-ridden individual — with a memory capable of keeping promises. Like Hobbes, Nietzsche emphasizes the paradox of the promiser: the language of commitment, stability, and trust most lends itself to deception and ruses. Contractarian societies, therefore, encourage ambivalence towards the promise, alternately grounding it in a dangerously unmanageable human will and in a nature that can overcome the hazards of the former. The founding document of the American polity, Jefferson's *Declaration of Independence*, conforms to this pattern: it celebrates the capacity of individuals acting with others to alter, invent, and establish new forms of political association, but it is careful to ground these capacities in "the Laws of Nature" and "Nature's God," consistent with a theory of the individual's natural right to be against and control nature.¹¹

The most vivid recent expression of liberal anxiety over the promise is the discourse of Ronald Reagan. Indeed, for Reagan our enemies are those who cannot keep their promises. Referring to the leaders of the Soviet Union, Reagan claims that "they reserved these rights to break a promise, to change their ways, to be dishonest, and so forth if it furthered the cause of socialism. . . . (P)romises are like pie crusts, made to be broken."¹² Accordingly, Reagan's objections to the Sandinista government in Nicaragua center not on the government's human rights violations, but on the claim that the Sandinistas *broke a promise*: they, Reagan alleges, "literally made

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a contract" with the Organization of American States for support in return for "true democracy."¹³ In such statements, the emphasis is less on the absence of true democracy in Nicaragua than on the alleged fact that the Sandinistas broke a promise — that is, that they violated a principle that is central to legitimate government as we understand it. At the same time, the state over which this Lockean liberal presides relies overwhelmingly on what one of his operatives calls "great deceit":

I think it is very important for the American people to understand that this is a dangerous world; that we live at risk and that this nation is at risk in a dangerous world. And that they ought not to be led to believe ... that this nation cannot or should not conduct covert operations. By their very nature covert operations or special operations are a lie. There is great deceit, deception practiced in the conduct of covert operations. They are at essence a lie.¹⁴

For Lt. Col. Oliver North, it is imperative that Americans understand that this nation can and should engage in "great deceit," even though such action violates the principles of legitimate government embodied in the U.S. constitution. The "dangerous world" in which we live demands that we resort to "covert actions" or "special operations" that "are at essence a lie." The covert action, however, has the epistemological and moral status of a noble lie, forced upon the liberal democracies by the difficult choice between "lives and lies" and by the fact that those, such as North, who possess an esoteric knowledge of the nature of the threat to American freedom, are hampered by an unwieldy bureaucracy, a misinformed Congress, and an apathetic public.¹⁵

Still, North's testimony, taken by itself, leaves unclear the basis upon which the representative of a polity dedicated to open contracts and serious promises can instead devote himself to "great . . . deception." A complete answer to this question would require a study of the rhetoric of the great documents of containment, such as George Kennan's "Mr. X" essay, National Security Council Memorandum #68, Henry Kissinger's *Nuclear Weapons and Foreign Policy*, and the Pentagon Papers. Some insights, however, can be gained from a close reading of one of those hundreds of ignored government planning documents: "Prospects for Containment of Nicaragua's Communist Government," dated May 1986 and issued by the U.S. Department of Defense. Read not as a prosaic planning study but as political allegory, the Defense Department document bridges the gap between Locke and Hobbes, showing *why* the character of our "dangerous world" is such that our principles of legitimacy no longer apply. It provides the theory that North did not explicitly pronounce, but upon which he acted.

"Containment" refers broadly to the postwar commitment of the United States to prevent the spread of Communism.¹⁶ In the debate, however, over how to accomplish this goal, two camps quickly emerged. The docu-

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ment's title refers to the debate between proponents of "rollback" and a less extreme variant that became known simply as "containment." In this sense, containment envisaged a political deal in which the Soviet Union and the United States enjoyed tacitly recognized spheres of influence, and it assumed that both parties were capable of honoring treaties, i.e., making contracts and keeping promises. Proponents of rollback understood the Soviet Union as incapable of such behavior — in Reagan's terms, it reserves the right to lie, cheat, and steal in pursuit of Communist expansion. In addition, rollback, by its nature, involves military conflict because an adversary that does not recognize the sanctity of contracts cannot be a party to a political solution. In arguing that the prospects for merely *containing* Nicaragua's communist government are bleak, the study is an implicit call for a military solution: rollback.

The document begins by noting differences of opinion in Congress over U.S. policy towards the Sandinista regime, differences that came to the fore after Reagan's lurid speech in March of 1986 about Nicaragua as a "safe haven" for terrorists from around the world caused some to call for political compromise rather than military conflict:

The President's request to Congress on aid to the Nicaraguan Democratic Resistance has led to an extensive debate in Congress. There is a difference of views as to how effective an agreement would be in providing the needed security for Central America.

The document begins, in other words, by stressing the liberal, democratic context of U.S. policymaking: the "difference of views"; but it subsequently emphasizes that despite differences over policy, all parties to the debate agree that the Sandinistas are a threat to be combated, and that while some in Congress "maintain that a greater effort should be made to secure a political agreement which would serve to contain Communism in Nicaragua," "Many . . . recall the failure of previous treaties and agreements with the Communists." "Prospects for Containment," then, will jog the short political memories of those who forget that treaties with "the Communists" are mere scraps of paper.

This is accomplished in a section misleadingly entitled "Historical Perspective." The title is misleading not because the accounts historically inaccurate (they are, in fact, grotesquely oversimplified), but because the study purports to deal with U.S. policy towards Nicaragua, but not a word is devoted to relations between these two countries. Rather, "Historical Perspective" means reviewing situations in which the United States entered into political agreements with "the Communists," who, in the vernacular of the document, are a kind of Jungian archetype that everywhere and always remains the same. (I can recall childhood memories of TV news broadcasts about the "Viet Cong," which I dimly imagined must be an ethnic group different from the Vietnamese we were defending.) Since "the Communists" are always the same, it follows that the behavior of any one Com-

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munist entity is entirely predictable. If the further assumption that the Sandinistas are Communists is also made, no further inquiry is necessary into the historical peculiarities of U.S.-Nicaragua relations: Sandinista policy is determined by their being part of "the Communists," and not as Nicaraguans.

The document then contains discussions on violations of treaties with Communists entered into by the United States, which amount, of course, to Communists' breaking their promises, just as, according to Reagan, they affirm their right to do. In the case of Vietnam, for example, North Vietnam "began illegal subversive operations in South Vietnam immediately after signing the 1954 Geneva Accords," although "Communist military violations of the Geneva Agreement began to escalate sharply only in the late 1950's, when Hanoi started to infiltrate armed cadres and supplies into Vietnam." The same is true, according to the document, of "communist belligerents" in Korea, other Indochinese countries, and Cuba. True to form, the Nicaraguan Communists "literally made a contract," in Reagan's words, with the Organization of American States to establish "true democracy," only to violate it after assuming power. The Communists, then, are *boi barbaroi*, a group that cannot keep promises and hence is not fit to enter into the sort of contractual arrangements familiar to Lockean liberals.

Not only do Communists fail to keep promises, they actively, intentionally utilize the rhetoric of promising — likely persuasive for liberal polities — to pursue the expansion of Communist power. As Reagan has it, for Communists promises are made *in order to be broken*. Equally alien to liberal sensibilities is the fact that the Communists *plan* to break their promises: the Nicaraguans "never intended to honor the pledge" they made to the Organization of American States, and the Vietnamese and Korean Communists "were planning the infringements even as they were negotiating." The mere fact that the Communists *plan* is a mark of their difference from us. Strictly speaking, a liberal polity cannot plan; it only creates a framework of order within which individuals contract with one another and thus determine their fates. Planning in a liberal polity is possible only on an individual, not on a collective, basis. The Communists, with their Five Year Plans and historical inevitabilities, even plan to break promises.

The Communists, then, plan with no regard for past promises, and use promises only as a rhetorical device with which to manipulate liberal polities. The Sandinistas, therefore, can be expected to violate a Central American peace treaty. The questions then become: What would a Central American treaty call for, and what Sandinista violations are likely to occur? The key element of any such treaty, the Pentagon emphasizes, is the stipulation that the governments of the region refuse to allow foreign troops or military advisors on their soil, and refrain from supporting insurgencies in neighboring countries. This entails that Soviet and Cuban advisors leave Nicaragua, and that the United States discontinue its support for El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras. On the theory that the Communists

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plan to break promises, there can be only one reason for the Sandinistas to agree to such an arrangement: to induce the United States to withdraw from the region while they secretly pursue a military build-up that would enable them to become master of the region. As the Pentagon imagines it:

The Nicaraguan government would sign a Contadora agreement . . . the Nicaraguans would circumvent and violate the agreement in order to maintain or increase their military strength and to . . . support . . . Communist insurgencies throughout Central America. Nicaragua would seek to conceal its violations as long as possible. The U.S. and other Central American nations would fully abide by the agreement. . . .

Constrained by contractarian principles, the United States would abide by its promises while the Nicaraguans secretly break theirs, resulting ultimately in the Communist conquest of Central America. What, under the circumstances, can a liberal polity do? The United States could not simply announce its refusal to abide by a treaty supported by the governments of the region. Yet to abide by the agreement while the Communists secretly subvert it is to accept Communist rule over Central America, in the long run. Although the Pentagon stops short of drawing this consequence explicitly, the rhetorical context of the document encourages the conclusion that the United States must, like the Communists, secretly violate the agreement by supporting what it calls the "Democratic Resistance Forces" (the *contras*) covertly with the methods developed by North. Faced with an entity incapable of participating in contractarian life, the United States has no choice but to resort to "great deceit."

The rhetorical strategy that North adopted in his testimony to the Congressional committees investigating the Iran-*contra* affair was to present the great deceit as natural, realistic, and self-evidently justified. Although the U.S. Constitution grants the executive branch limited powers in foreign affairs, North speaks as if it were self-evident that the president is "in charge" of foreign policy. Congress need not be informed of government action in that area, according to North, because the president is accountable directly to "the people."¹⁷ North makes it clear that the great deceit is not limited to the Communist enemy, but includes all elements of the liberal polity (e.g., the press and Congress) that threaten the implementation of the covert policy: the deceit was staged in part, according to North, "to limit the political embarrassment."¹⁸ North asserts that to prevent political embarrassment, members of the executive branch can destroy official documents or fail to inform Congress of current policy ("deceit by omission"). All of this is, by definition, legal, because it is done at the behest of the "Commander-in-Chief," who, once again, acts in the interests of the nation as a whole and not in the parochial interests represented in Congress.

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The logic of containment, as expressed both in North's testimony and the Pentagon study, specifies the conditions under which the United States moves from Lockean commitments of limited, open government to an Hobbesian state of near-total authority and detailed administration of citizenship, for what were North's slide shows — and indeed his testimony — other than an exercise in “nurturing the habits of compliance”? Yet a nagging politico-epistemological question remains: If state policy must be secret, how can it be ratified by the people? Senator Mitchell raised this issue in the course of his questioning of North: “if, by definition, covert action is secret and (the president) doesn't tell them about it, there's no way the American people can know about it to be able to vote him out of office. . . .”¹⁹ Covert action emerges as a vulgar Platonism in which a system of hierarchical, Hobbesian state authority is masked for the multitude by a display of images staged for the purposes of ratifying the people's sense of living in a Lockean society of maximum individual freedom and government on trust. Thus, the inescapable duplicity of North's presentations, emphasizing Soviet designs on Central America while at the same time implying that the United States was doing no more for the “Democratic Resistance” than allowing them to die for their country. In public, North offered a rhetoric in which the citizen of a liberal polity might comfortably dwell, making arguments in favor of a particular policy; while privately carrying out a war his “intelligence” told him was necessary but towards which the public remained unsupportive.

Containment depicts a “dangerous world” in which liberal principles are put “at risk” to the precise extent that liberal polities adhere to them. Containment — in both its moderate and extreme versions — sees the post-modern political condition as demanding private Hobbesian action coupled with public Lockean rhetoric. At the limit, containment even threatens to dissolve the difference between public and private upon which liberalism thrives. Many of North's associates, such as Richard V. Secord and Albert Hakim, were private individuals implementing state policy, which resorted to private funding and operatives because what it wanted to do was illegal. The implosion of the private into the public enabled all to claim a lack of responsibility: government officials could say that no appropriated funds were going to support the contras, even though the policy of support was worked out in the White House; while citizens, violating the law at the behest of the executive branch, could say they were doing so as patriots coming to the aid of their president. Perhaps North, Secord, Hakim, and even Reagan are neither private nor public figures, but an undecidable, postmodern amalgamation of these terms, figures capable of simulating the public and the private according to necessity. In a complementary way, containment gives us a new American state that is neither Lockean nor Hobbesian, but both in the sense that it is committed to staging itself in either mode according to the demands of state power. In the last analysis, the Iran-contra affair (like the affair of Gary Hart, which con-

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densed similar confusions over the difference between public and private) is but a symptom of an American identity crisis — a crisis, precisely, of identity: the repressed Hobbesian identity of freedom and control.

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Notes

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1. Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan*, ed. C.B. Macpherson (Harmondsworth, Middlesex, England: Penguin Books, 1985), p. 81. Further quotations from this text will be parenthetically referenced in the main body of the essay.
2. Friedrich Nietzsche, "On Truth and Lies in a Nonmoral Sense," in *Philosophy and Truth: Selections From Nietzsche's Notebooks of the Early 1870's*, trans. and ed. Daniel Breazale, (New Jersey: Humanities Press, 1979).
3. Hobbes's use of "relique" to refer to sensory experience may be innovative. The word normally refers to the physical objects of a saint, and more generally to the physical tokens of a past civilization, practice, or experience. According to the Oxford English Dictionary, however, its reference seems to have been restricted to external physical or material objects. By naming ideas and sensory experiences as "reliques" (traces, remnants, residue) of past motion, Hobbes extends the word's range and ironically harnesses its honorific connotations to his project. Just as a relic provides a link with venerated persons or practices, and is considered especially valuable owing to the connection it establishes between a physical, temporal entity and a spiritual one, the depiction of sense as a relic of actual movement provides a firm ontological foundation for the "seemings" of the imagination, allowing Hobbes to combine in one figure the laws of mechanics and the preservation of the sacred.
4. See Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology* trans. Gayatri Spivak, (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1976), p. 150ff.
5. Ibid. Hobbes notes that the course of apparently undisciplined "fancies" in the imagination is in fact determined by the *original* succession "made in the Sense."
6. It might be objected that this characterization overstates the absence of a *logos* in the state of nature, without which it is difficult to imagine how its inhabitants could ever contract to make over their rights to a sovereign power. On the other hand, the transition from the state of nature to political society has always presented problems for contractarians, who have generally taken the position that the idea of an original contract does not describe an historical event at all.
7. Emphasis added.
8. Thomas Hobbes, *English Works*, ed. Sir William Molesworth, (London: Bohn, 1839-1845), Vol. 6, p. 251. Emphasis added.
9. Umberto Eco, *A Theory of Semiotics*, (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1976), pp. 6-7.

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10. Nietzsche, Section 1. See also *On the Genealogy of Morals*, trans. Walter Kaufmann and R.J. Hollingdale, (New York: Vintage Books, 1967), Second Essay, Sections 5, 19, *et passim*.
11. "A Declaration by the Representatives of the United States of America, in General Congress Assembled," in *Thomas Jefferson: Writings*, (New York: The Library of America, 1984), p. 19.
12. Ronald Reagan, speech of January 20, 1983, quoted in *Reagan's Reign of Error*, ed. Mark Green and Gail MacColl, (New York: Pantheon Books, 1987), p. 41.
13. Ronald Reagan, speech of July, 1983, quoted in Roy Gutman, "America's Diplomatic Charade," *Foreign Policy*, Fall 1984. For a discussion of the substance of Reagan's claims, see the above essay and Noam Chomsky, "Nicaragua," *The Chomsky Reader*, ed. James Peck, (New York: Pantheon Books, 1987), p. 352.
14. Lt. Col. Oliver L. North, quoted in *Taking the Stand: The Testimony of Lt. Col. Oliver L. North*, (New York: Pocket Books, 1987), p. 12.
15. For documentation of North's views, see the section entitled "Reasons for the Deception" in the *Report of the Congressional Committees Investigating the Iran-Contra Affair*, (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1987), p. 150, *et passim*.
16. Primary documents relating to the containment and rollback doctrines can be found in *Containment*, ed. Thomas Etzold and John Lewis Gaddis, (New York: Columbia University Press, 1978).
17. On the significance, in this context, of the president's direct accountability to the people, see Sheldon S. Wolin, "Democracy and the Welfare State: The Political and Theoretical Connections Between *Staatsrason* and *Wohlfahrtstaatsrason*," *Political Theory*, Vol. 15, No. 4 (November 1987). Wolin argues that Locke's defense of "Prerogative," or "the power to act . . . for the Publick good, without the prescription of Law, and sometimes even against it," provides the means whereby Lockean political leaders can "inherit the same right of Reason of State to summon the full power of society, but now it is not for simple defense or domination but for the good of all" (p. 488). The result is that the overwhelming need to control disorder that is characteristic of the state of nature is imported into domestic society in the person of the executive. The bridge between Locke and Hobbes, in Wolin's reading, is provided by Locke himself.
18. *Taking the Stand*, p. 525.
19. *Ibid.*, pp. 674-680.