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The Culture of Death and Its Logic

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Monday, May 10, 2004

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Consider the Culture of Death and the death of culture that we have witnessed over the past half-century. In his book, *The End of the Twentieth Century*, Historian John Lukacs spoke of the twentieth century as being dominated by the two world wars and their massive fallout. Lukacs, a refugee from Eastern Europe, suggests that centuries should not be measured so much by the span of years, but by the events that shape the great patterns of history. He pointed to the two great events which framed the parameters of the twentieth century—the start of World War I in 1914 and the fall of the Iron Curtain in 1989.

This century began with wild hopes and a sense of inevitable progress. The liberal spirit of the age set the tone as the twentieth century dawned. Leaving behind a pre-industrial, pre-modern society, those who saw the dawn of the twentieth century were determined that this would be a century marked by the inevitable and strategic march of human progress.

And yet we know what happened. The century ended with a great sense of moral and cultural uncertainty. Left behind was the debris of failed utopianisms and brutal totalitarian regimes. In the words of C.S. Lewis, “Endings come with either a bang or a whimper.” This century seems to have ended with a bit of both.

The Marxist historian Eric Hobsbawm describes the twentieth century as “short”—brutally so. And much like Lukacs, he dates the century essentially from 1918 to 1989. How does he characterize this epoch? He described it as a short century of “mega-death.” More human beings were “killed or allowed to die by human decision than ever before in history.”

The great symbols of the twentieth century are not only the two World Wars, but also symbols such as the Nazi concentration camps, including Dachau and Buechenwald. The century is unrecognizable without the symbols of the atom bomb and the gas chambers and ovens and the killing fields of Cambodia. The brutal debris left behind from human social experimentation and utopian visions testifies to the failure of the experiments to push progress beyond human limits in the twentieth century. These symbols, in Hobsbawm’s words, represent a century built on “the deliberate reversal of civilization.”

There are many prophets whose words should be heard as the century comes to an end and as the last fifty years are seen in review. One of the most cogent of these prophets was the National Security Advisor to President Jimmy Carter, Zbigniew Brzezinski. In his work, *Out of Control*, Brzezinski identified the two “central existential struggles” that forged much of the twentieth century’s bloodletting as fascism and communism.

Brzezinski traces the death toll of Hitler’s Germany. The toll includes the murder of over five million Jews, 800,000 gypsies, two million Poles, and six million Soviet prisoners of war and non-combatants killed or starved to death. Two to

three million were killed in the Baltic states in the rest of Eastern Europe. All told, Brzezinski counts about seventeen million bodies left at Hitler's feet. But Hitler was outdone by Stalin and Mao. Stalin accounts for between twenty and twenty-five million deaths. Twenty-nine million died at the hands of Chinese communism, including those in China under Mao, forced by collectivization or outright extermination. Thus Brzezinski counts between sixty and sixty-five million deaths attributable to Communist regimes and their totalitarian visions.

When we look with some historical perspective at the last fifty years, we understand that it is indeed a culture of death to which we have come. The phrase, "the culture of death" has been in use for several years now by those who have perceived the crisis of the age. It has, perhaps, been popularized most effectively by Pope John Paul II in his encyclical *Evangelium Vitae*, A Gospel of Life. Therein, he observed, "The twentieth century will have been an era of massive attacks on life, an endless series of wars and a continual taking of innocent human life."

In the last half-century, we have seen nothing less than the perfection of death through modern warfare, the exercise of total war, the use of civilians as human shields and pawns, aerial bombardment of civilian communities, chemical warfare, the use of land mines against civilians, and the rise of nuclear weapons with the threat even of the neutron bomb—the first weapon in human history designed to kill human beings while leaving structures standing. We have seen, in this half-century, life denied and life annihilated. And the culture of death has not just come in the form of warfare, as brutal and costly as that has been.

Life has been denied and annihilated, not only on the plains of war, but also in the sanctity of the womb. In the United States, since the *Roe v. Wade* decision in 1973, between forty and forty-five million infants have been aborted in the womb. The culture of abortion has unleashed a warfare on the womb unprecedented in its destruction and also in its lack of conscience. There has been a cauterization of the American conscience so that the multitudes do not even understand this issue in moral terms. The unborn child is reduced to nothing more than a biomass of unwanted tissue in what is euphemistically described as the "product of conception."

The technologies of abortion are growing ever more sophisticated, and they are now so gruesome (and yet so effective) that abortions can now be reduced to the use of a sufficient dosage of birth control pills. Today we also face the abortion pill RU-486—the human pesticide—the taking of which kills the unborn human life with a silent and unseen perfection, unprecedented in human history. Clearly, we have lost all ability to maintain moral discourse. We use terms like "partial birth abortion," when that "process" is nothing less than the insertion of scissors into the cranial cavity of an unborn infant. The scissors are then opened and a suction tube inserted. The brains are extracted, and the skull is collapsed, and then the unwanted "bio-product" of conception is removed. We know what a transparent lie this is, and yet our moral discourse is so malformed that we cannot speak of such issues in rational terms.

The fact that the Partial Birth Abortion Ban Act of 2003 was signed into law by President George W. Bush offers some encouragement for those who have fought for so long on behalf of life, but the law is now under review in no less than three federal courts, and most observers expect the issue to arrive eventually at the U.S. Supreme Court—probably sooner than later. There is no room for complacency.

It was just a few years ago that a teenage couple in Delaware was charged with murdering their baby immediately after birth and casting it into a dumpster. Columnist George Will raised the issue of these two homicidal parents when he said, "Don't young people read newspapers? Don't they know that, thanks to President Clinton [who twice vetoed laws banning partial-birth abortion], they could have chosen to have a doctor suck their baby's brains out, and Delaware would not have chosen to charge them with murder?" He continues: "In Delaware, such punishment (the death penalty) is by lethal injection. Could Delaware choose to execute the two by inserting scissors into the bases of their skulls, opening the scissors, inserting suction tubes, and sucking out their brains? Of course not. The Constitution forbids choosing cruel and unusual punishments." But the lie does not end there.

For we learned shortly thereafter that Ron Fitzsimmons, Executive Director of the National Coalition of Abortion Providers, confessed to lying when he denied, publicly and privately to the Congress, that partial birth abortion was a widely used procedure that mostly transpired as an elected procedure. Fitzsimmons confessed that "in the vast majority of cases, the procedure is performed on a healthy mother with a healthy fetus that is 20 weeks or more along." He continued, "The abortion right folks know it, the anti-abortion folks know it, and so, probably, does everybody else."

Mr. Fitzsimmons spoke on behalf of the Culture of Death when he presented his testimony—and his lies. The Culture

of Death survives only on a fabric of untruths and false promises. A recovery for the Culture of Life will require that the truth win out—and that its witnesses speak with determined boldness.

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