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The Technological Decline of Consensus: How New Forms of Politicized Culture Impacted American Politics

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The Technological Decline of Consensus: How New Forms of Politicized Culture Impacted American Politics.

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Sous la Direction de Monsieur Jean-Daniel Collomb

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Contents

Introduction:	5
I - The Idol and the Villain: The Debate over Ronald Reagan's Legacy ...	24
I – A/ Ronaldus Magnus: The lionization of a president.....	24
I – B/ Ronald Wilson Reagan – 666: Evil in the White House and Social Plights in America.....	38
I – C/ Historical Remembrance in New Media	49
II- Domestic Warfare: How Disagreement Became Antagonism	55
II – A/ Liberal Enemies: The Transformation of Dissenters into Enemies from Clinton's Crimes to Bush's Holy War	55
II – B/ Hip-hop and Foreign Policy: Presidential Terrorists and Conservative War Hawks	69
II – C/ Manichean Media: How New Culture Reinforces Ideological Conviction	79
III – The Climax: Politicized Culture and the Obama Presidency	89
III – A/ Consensus is Worthless: How Barack Obama was stonewalled in Conservative Entertainment.....	89
III – B/ Support and Disillusion: Hip-hop and Obama's presidency	102
III – C/ The Obama and Post-Obama era: The End of the Political Daily Routine	111
CONC: INVENTORY OF EFFECTS	122

Table of Illustrations

Figure 1: Illustration of the Apocalyptic Presidency of Barack Obama..... 97

Figure 2: Rates of Polarization and Presidential Approval 1953-2015. ... 119

Introduction:

In the course of its existence, the American political system has been the stage of different forms of engagement. All forms of commitment had to take into account a linchpin of American politics: bipartisan feuds are desirable but should not hamstring the governmental apparatus. In short, no matter how prominent ideological beliefs were, they were always baffled by the reality of political moderation and the structural limitations imposed by the American political system. In this study, I posit the 2000s and 2010s were marked by a downfall of moderation in culture which in turn, ushered in a political crisis. That political crisis is defined by an onslaught on bipartisan consensus. Shutdowns, gridlocks, lack of cooperation as well as verbal demonization and attack politics have permeated American politics since Obama's election in 2008. Although the phenomenon is milder in non-elite circles, I argue that the nosediving appreciation for moderation plays a pivotal role in American public and political life. Consensus and collaboration have become dirty words in American politics because technological changes that started in the late 1980s sanctioned a polarization game which is currently reaching its pinnacle. The outcome is quite simple: the American political landscape is no longer cleft between two parties. It is now divided on the basis of irreconcilable worldviews. Disagreements borne out of that chasm have been voiced through jibes, jeers and flaks targeted at those who hold opposite standpoints.

Political moderation requires the two parties to consent to meet halfway on some issues in order to enact policies. According to the *Concise Oxford Dictionary of Politics*, consensus might be seen as entailing “the end of ideology” and can theoretically lead to “the replacement of conflict about basic values and goals by harmony about the ends to be attained.”¹ It presupposes that at times, parties will be willing to take some distance from ideological tenets. As Richard Hofstadter was prone to point out in his study of the paranoid style in politics, consensus has always played a fundamental role in American politics. More than a practice, it is the art of professional politicians.² Some observers like political scientist Geoffrey Kabaservice argue that the

¹ McLean, Iain, and Alistair McMillan. *The Concise Oxford Dictionary of Politics*. 3rd ed. New York: Oxford University Press, 2009. 111. Print.

² Hofstadter, Richard. *The Paranoid Style in American Politics, and other Essays*. New York: Knopf, 1966. 107. Print.

recent drift away from moderation is for the worse: “If moderation remains long absent from one party, let alone both, the consequences are likely to be dire.”³ My study consists in interpreting this visible comedown of consensus politics as an offshoot of the plummeting value of moderation in American culture. An important prong of my argument in this study is that this development was inevitable. Technological advances and an ever wider range of cultural options embittered public discourse and foreshadowed that rhetorical moderation or political consensus would become unfashionable. A perusal of politicized forms of culture helps elucidate these recent developments in American politics.

It has long been surmised that political mass media “are not the major determinants of an individual’s vote decisions.”⁴ Recent statistics buttress that theory but it is a big mistake to dismiss aggressive political culture as toothless.

First of all, political life cannot be reduced to electoral contests. The current atmosphere in Washington is a microcosm of a growing disconnection between different groups of American people (whether along racial, generational, or class lines).

Secondly, even though the direct impact of political culture on individual voters is allegedly limited, communication scholars such as Guy Lachapelle explain that mass-mediated political discussion impacts on popular behaviors in two vicarious ways. On the one hand, the types of culture I will deal with influence a group of politically engaged individuals “who follow the action of government closely and who communicate the information.”⁵ Right now in the United States, the number of people fitting this category can be assessed at “around 10 percent of the electorate who voted in general elections [in 2008].”⁶ These politically-savvy individuals hold clear-cut views and try to spread their political beliefs. On the receiving end of both mass and interpersonal political communication, other individuals who are politically disinvested or uninterested, have a crucial role to play when election season is around the corner. The influence of occasional exposure to political talk coming from mass media and

³ Kabaservice, Geoffrey. *Rule and Ruin: The Downfall of Moderation and the Destruction of the Republican Party, from Eisenhower to the Tea Party*. United States: Oxford University Press, 2012. 401. Print.

⁴ Katz, Elihu, Paul F Lazarsfeld, and Elmo Roper. *Personal Influence: The Part Played by People in the Flow of Mass Communications*. 2nd ed. New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Publishers, 2005. 31. Print.

⁵ Lachapelle, Guy. “Political Communication and Personal Influence: Do the Media Make a Difference?” in Wolfsfeld, Gadi, and Philippe J. Maarek, eds. *Political Communication in a New ERA: A Cross-National Perspective*. London: Routledge, 2002. 84. Print.

⁶ Alter, Jonathan. *The Promise: President Obama*. London: Simon & Schuster, 2010. 279. Print.

politically interested relatives has always been tricky to appraise. In addition, the cultural forms I study involve artists and commentators who in their rhetoric, straddle the line between mass and interpersonal communication by aspiring to a privileged relation with their audience.

Besides, more than the impact on potential electors, the phenomena I intend to describe in this study are illustrations of the clout exerted by media in altering political discourse and negotiations. Indeed, restraint in cultural discourse is a prerequisite for political temperance. As soon as the fabric of public discourse evolves, it reverberates upon the nature of political discourse. The spread of embittered, simplistic and conflictual forms of discourse has been increasingly echoed in professional politics. In one of his farewell addresses, President Barack Obama – who, as we shall see in the third part, has been targeted by intense forms of attack politics during his presidency - encapsulated the looming issue with public and media discourse in the United States:

Our children are watching what we do. If we lie about each other, they learn it's OK to lie. If we make up facts and ignore science, then they just think it's just their opinion that matters. If they see us insulting each other like school kids, then they think, 'I guess that's how people are supposed to behave.' The way we respect or don't [respect] each other as citizens will determine whether or not the hard, frustrating but absolutely necessary work of self-governing continues.⁷

Even though his own administration was sometimes guilty of the excesses he denounces in his speech, – disinterest in or irrelevance of factual truth, downfall of urbane discussions, personal attacks and libel – his emphasis on civility in public discourse sheds light on drastic transformations in American culture. By tugging at his audience's heartstrings with his reference to children, Obama accurately diagnosed the predicament facing the nation and its forms of communication. The last media-savvy generations got introduced to a world of black and white hues, in which respect for dissenting opinions is no longer required. Nonetheless, although Obama issued a cogent warning call, he failed to reckon with the fact that those changes are not only due to the attitudes of a growing number of elected officials. These changes are consequences of a process which started long ago. The fabric of modern public discourse as well as the

⁷ Obama, Barack in Doevere, Edward-Isaac. "Obama's journey of nostalgia and regret". POLITICO, 10 Feb. 2016. Web. Mar. 24 2016.

rules of new culture emerging since the 1980s encourage this sour brand of adversarial politics.

In this regard, conservative media scientist Brian C. Anderson considers the latest developments in political communication since the late 1980s as signaling the demise of political correctness. In particular, he praises the repeal of the Fairness Doctrine⁸ which brought down requirements of ‘balanced’ broadcasting and opened new horizons on TV and the radio. Curiously, Anderson equates that decision to the collapse of political correctness in American media.⁹ Rescinding the Fairness Clause played a laudable role in widening the scope of opinions in media. With the rise of new media and the coming of age of new consumers, shock value became increasingly privileged in the course of the 1990s and 2000s and most cultural forms were affected by this evolution. ‘Serious’ talk in new media outlets was no exception to those developments. New ways to envision media and cultural discourse in a no-holds-barred fashion seeped onto American screens and airwaves. Thereafter, such evolutions affected how American citizens receive their national politics and the news of the day. These developments are exemplified on TV through FOX News, over the radio with shows hosted by Limbaugh, Beck, and Hannity among others, and in rap songs. However, as the label “political correctness” indicates, expectations of a measured and polite discourse in politics rely on a form of correctness. The downfall of political correctness may well be suitable for the cultural world but is it desirable in politics?

In their transition to modern mass media, political and cultural communication, have become so uncompromising that partisanship looks akin to “politics-as-warfare.”¹⁰ The crux of the arguments about policies no longer lies in what could be done but rather in agreeing on the significance of the problems at hand. Sean Hannity, anchorman for Fox News, encapsulates the nature of the new divide in very accurate words: “There is a great philosophical divide that splits this nation in half – a divide born of diametrically opposite worldviews, which are engaged in an ongoing power struggle over the

⁸ The Fairness Doctrine was a piece of legislation which used to require radio stations and TV channels to cover relevant news pieces (including local news) and provide equal airtime to different opinions on an issue.

⁹ Anderson, Brian C. *“South Park” Conservatives: The Revolt against Liberal Media Bias*. Washington, D.C.: Regnery Publishing, Inc., An Eagle Publishing Company, 2005. 34-36. Print.

¹⁰ Kabaservice, Geoffrey. *Rule and Ruin: The Downfall of Moderation and the Destruction of the Republican Party, from Eisenhower to the Tea Party*, 387.

direction of this nation.”¹¹ The divide is perpetuated by cohesive and isolated ways to see the whole world in cultural spheres. As a result, politics as envisioned in new media is a terrain for conflict, not debate, consensus or middle grounds. I believe that in light of recent events, the downfall of political correctness spread to professional politics and that it is not something which should be celebrated.

Indeed, from the mid-1980s to nowadays, conservatives have brought up the idea of an America corrupted by counterculture. In their words, the course needed to be reversed and only a full rewind could put America back on the right track. Many conservative pundits doggedly warned about an America on the brink of collapse because of forces seeking to recant principles such as free enterprise. When the Fairness Doctrine was repealed, Conservative talk-radio shows which warned about those threats blossomed all over the country. Talk-radio thrived not only because of the new kinds of ideology it brought to the forefront but also, and perhaps more significantly, because it blazed a trail by legitimizing the irreverent tack adopted by Limbaugh and other hosts towards Washington politics.

In parallel, another worldview took shape with the rise of a groundbreaking cultural form: hip-hop. Its influence on whole new generations cannot be understated. Contrary to early predictions, the genre was not a fad and became the best-selling genre in the country in the 1990s.¹² The worldview that some rappers offered was one in which institutions were looked upon with wariness. In many cases, it included depictions of a warped system where corruption prevailed. The tone adopted was laden with undertones of dissent and nihilism. Ironically, while becoming a symbol of “all-American popular culture,” hip-hop sustained a paradoxical image as a “marginalist, oppositional culture.”¹³ This tension between commercial ambitions and political edginess makes hip-hop culture best able to spread politically dissenting opinions to mass audiences because: “rap is the packaging and marketing of social discontent by some of the most skilled ad agencies and largest record producers in the world.”¹⁴ Throughout this memoir, I explore hip-hop as a politically committed culture favoring

¹¹ Hannity, Sean. *Conservative Victory: Defeating Obama's Radical Agenda*. New York: William Morrow Paperbacks, 15 Apr. 2010. 1. Print.

¹² McFarland, Pancho. *Chicano Rap: Gender and Violence in the Postindustrial Barrio*. United States: University of Texas Press, 2008. 104. Print.

¹³ Gosa, Travis L., and Erik Nielson, eds. *The Hip-hop & Obama Reader*. United Kingdom: Oxford University Press, 2015. 2. Print.

¹⁴ Lusane, Clarence. “Rap, Race and Politics.” *Race & Class* 35.1 (1993): 41–56. Web.

a worldview in which the government is met with contempt for its role in the plight of poor urban constituencies in America. Thus, I analyze musical messages as a form of political literature and I subscribe to the idea that their spread represents “one of the most efficient ways to win large and formerly disinterested audiences round certain causes.”¹⁵ The kind of worldviews exhibited in hip-hop songs has been somehow averted by the mainstream music industry but its impact remains relevant to get a handle on one of the worldviews contesting the conservative one.

In the end, the visions provided in these two cultural forms are so unsparing in their depictions of ‘enemies’ that their impressive success and influence undermine the rationale for debate. In short, while conservative punditry argued that America has been hijacked, politicized rappers contend that the whole system is corrupted.

It may be asserted that the association between conservative politics and radical hip-hop is flawed or at least imbalanced because hip-hop is judged exclusively in terms of entertainment value. I dismiss this very argument because I believe that conservative media dabbled in entertainment at least as much as hip-hop acted as an information source for a lot of fans. In addition, upon closer examination, the similarities between the two genres are glaring:

- The two genres are flagrantly exclusive in terms of audience groups. Conservative hosts and rap artists seldom pander to new kinds of audience. They seek instead to please the ones that are already converted to their cause. In Jamieson and Cappella’s words, these forms of opinionated culture are “preaching to the choir.”¹⁶ For instance, although Fox News Channel counts a small liberal and moderate audience, these viewers are often information addicts or look to confront ideas they don’t share. In this respect, they emulate quite well the ways in which political discourse has been evolving.
- Both politically committed rap songs and conservative talk-shows put reinterpretations of the past at the heart of their ideology. History books published by Beck, Limbaugh, O’Reilly and other less prominent figures of

¹⁵ Traini, Christophe. *La Musique en Colère*. France: Paris: SciencesPo Les Presses. 2008. 55. Print. « La diffusion des chansons constitue l’un des moyens les plus efficaces dès lors qu’il s’agit de rallier à la cause défendue de larges publics initialement indifférents. »

¹⁶ Jamieson, Kathleen Hall, and Joseph N Cappella. *Echo Chamber: Rush Limbaugh and the Conservative Media Establishment*. United Kingdom: Oxford University Press, 2010. 81. Print.

conservative entertainment have flourished in recent years.¹⁷ Conversely, history and hip-hop which used to look incompatible began to dovetail in some politically committed tracks. Increasingly, artists promote alternate visions of history out of touch with official narratives that they confront.

- Violent rhetoric has been a core trait of those two forms of rhetorical performances. Polemical rhetoric and simulacra of violence feature in hip-hop and in conservative talk particularly when it comes to talk about opponents. That tendency has been dubbed “eliminationism.” David Neiwert who authored a book about the rise of eliminationism defines it as follows:

A politics and a culture that shuns dialogue and the democratic exchange in favor of the pursuit of outright elimination of the opposing side, either through suppression, exile, and ejection, or extermination (...) It always depicts its opposition as beyond the pale, the embodiment of evil itself, unfit for participation in their vision of society, and thus worthy of elimination.¹⁸

Books authored by new media figureheads such as Ann Coulter’s *Demonic: How the Liberal Mob is Endangering America*¹⁹, Sean Hannity’s *Deliver Us From Evil: Defeating Terrorism, Despotism, and Liberalism*²⁰, song titles such as East Coast Avengers’ “Kill Bill O’Reilly” [2008]²¹ or denunciations of Rush Limbaugh and Glenn Beck as racists in Lupe Fiasco’s “Words I Never Said” [2011]²² exemplify the growing number of portrayals of the opposition as anathema. These entertainers parlay on shock value and constantly try to outbid their rivals through polemical statements in order to get under the spotlight.

¹⁷ Beck published volumes such as *Dreamers and Deceivers: True Stories of the Heroes and Villains who Made America* in which he focuses on the history of important individuals in American history. Rush Limbaugh has his own bestselling historical fiction series titled *Rush Revere* which is meant for kids and recounts in a laudatory manner the feats of important figures of America’s history. Bill O’Reilly also has a series of his own with the *Killing* books in which he reassesses important events such as the assassination of Kennedy, the tenure of Ronald Reagan, or the death of General Patton. Others such as Ann Coulter, Dinesh D’Souza, Sean Hannity include their own versions of American history to explain that the country has been steered away from its righteous course.

¹⁸ Neiwert, David. *The Eliminationists: How Hate Talk Radicalized the American Right*. United Kingdom: Polipoint Press, 2009. 11. Print.

¹⁹ Coulter, Ann. *Demonic: How the Liberal Mob Is Endangering America*. United States: Three Rivers Press, 2011. Print.

²⁰ Hannity, Sean. *Deliver Us from Evil: Defeating Terrorism, Despotism, and Liberalism*. New York: Simon & Schuster, 2004. Print.

²¹ East Coast Avengers, et al. “Kill bill O’Reilly.” *Prison Planet*. 2008. Audio Recording.

²² Lupe Fiasco, and Skylar Grey. “Words I never said.” *Lasers*. 1st & 15th; Atlantic Records, 2011. Audio Recording.

- No matter how revolting their statements might sound, hip-hop artists and talk-show hosts resort to or hide behind the excuses of creativity, metaphors, humor, and other artistic devices to explain the tone and content of their statements.
- Both hip-hop and political talk elicit expectations of profitability. By extension, they lead to the involvement of their leading figures in the world of show-business. Marketability plays a fundamental role in their careers.
- They fit a tradition of cultural activism and are often associated with past movements which have marked recent American history (namely the Civil Rights Movement and the Reagan (counter)revolution). The cardinal role played by Civil Rights struggles in shaping hip-hop's politicization is the most significant demonstration of that connection to history.
- Talk-show hosts and conscious rap artists take pride in their independent-minded approach to events and cast denigrating looks at their mainstream counterparts. They claim to speak the truth that rivals willingly jettison to rake in maximal proceeds.
- Finally, the two kinds of culture I tackle view politics with extreme wariness. When hip-hop artists or conservative media mouthpieces are opposed to a governmental decision, they tend to epitomize a tradition that Samuel P. Huntington identifies as one of the "central themes of American political thought:" "opposition to power, and suspicion of government as the most dangerous embodiment of power."²³ In these cultural outlets, opposing a governmental decision is easily transformed into opposing the whole political apparatus as corrupt and its elected officials as delusional. Portrayals of institutionalized enemies who corrode the country from the inside have gained traction as the forms of culture I tackle gained momentum in the last two decades.

This list could be extended even further but the elements aforementioned will find resonance in the course of this study.

²³ Huntington, Samuel P. *American Politics: The Promise of Disharmony*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press. 1992. 347. Print.

Undertaking such a comparative analysis is also relevant because it accounts for the increasing tension and distance between two contestants in America's more and more abrasive culture wars.²⁴ People on the right have considered their ideology as embattled and beleaguered by liberal monopoly. For instance, Roger Ailes, the famous head of Fox News Channel took on the role of a fighter from the day of FNC's launch: "Although Ailes never served in the military, he recognized that his new job would put him on the front lines of a culture war (...) He was an exponent of revolutionary ideas – "I consider myself a freedom fighter," he once declared."²⁵ In other words, Ailes, Limbaugh, and other right-wing pundits construed their role as a fight against an oppressive system. Those words could equally apply to the hip-hop culture which developed in parallel to the right-wing media revolution.

Nonetheless, one difference between the two forms is fundamental in the structure of my study. I believe that right-wing media, no matter how extreme it turned at times, has always remained influential in Republican politics, either by promoting the ideas of the party or by coercing the GOP to adapt. Conversely, the radicalism spread by hip-hop artists has long remained on the edges in spite of sparse involvement in Democratic electoral efforts. Understanding hip-hop as a "certain literature of the left" is part of my approach.²⁶ Here, I interpret the word "left" in the European sense and view it as differing from center-left Democratic policies. As a result, the lyrical content I explore diverges from the guidelines followed by Democrats at the turn of the 21st century in sectors as diverse as economics, judicial policies, or foreign affairs. Except in the run-up to Obama's election, hip-hop worldviews (as leftist worldviews) were remote from Democratic politics. As Todd Gitlin argues, the "Left" which "had no conviction that commonality was possible" has been an occasional purveyor of ideas for the Democratic Party since the drastic political realignment in the aftermath of the 1960s.²⁷ In the course of my analysis of hip-hop as an example of new politicized culture, I focus on hip-hop as a form of radical leftist prose even though I sometimes include examples

²⁴ In this study, I use the term "culture war" as a synonym of conflict between liberal and conservative ideology on a set of wedge moral issues (abortion, LGBT rights, political correctness...) which used to remain relatively out of daily discussions in Washington of other types of problems (such as healthcare, foreign affairs, discretionary spending...)

²⁵ Sherman, Gabriel. *The Loudest Voice in the Room: How the Brilliant, Bombastic Roger Ailes Built Fox News-- and Divided a Country*. New York: Random House Publishing Group. 2014. 201. Print.

²⁶ Griffith, Dai. "The High Analysis of Low Culture" *Music Analysis*. 18/3. 402. 1999. Web.

²⁷ Gitlin, Todd. *The Twilight of Common Dreams: Why America Is Wracked by Culture Wars*. New York: Metropolitan Books, 1995. 82. Print.

which are more aligned with mainstream Democratic goals. To summarize, while conservative entertainment transformed into an important power broker in mainstream politics and supported grassroots mobilization through the Tea Party, the influence of hip-hop has been more piecemeal and difficult to locate in electoral politics.

I decided to organize the study of these cultural and political phenomena in three chronological sections which each outline features of the transformation of media culture I wish to highlight.

I begin my exploration with the Reagan era and look at how it has been reshaped with historical distance. Indeed, the analyses made of the Reagan era in political and popular culture show that the Republican president made a lasting impression in the minds of a generation introduced to mass culture. On one edge of the political scope, Reagan secured a spot among American idols. The praise he received on the right-side of the spectrum made his alleged political tenets look like a form of civil religion. The treatment of his legacy in conservative media outlets provides a fascinating example of the distortion of memory in contemporary media. On another hand, the treatment of his legacy in popular culture and especially in some hip-hop songs is akin to a vilification process. To put it in a nutshell,

perhaps no figure so divides the American people like Ronald Reagan. Rap and Hip-hop culture has for decades cited the Reagan era as a decisive and dangerous turning point in modern American history, while conservative Republicans hail the late president as a sort of savior whose radical conservatism restored the country to strength.²⁸

Reinterpretations of the Reagan era exemplify how polarized visions of history have come to influence new generations and how these find an echo in modern politics. Looking at how Reagan has been recast after his presidency not only sheds light on two different visions of recent history. It informs the diverging American dreams of two major influences in modern-day America. Since I devote this first part to examples of belated historical revisionism, the sources I draw from to account either for the glorification or the vilification of Reagan appeared after 2000.

²⁸ Inc, Genius Media Group. *Rap vs. Ronald Reagan*. Genius, 17 May 2013. Web. 24 Mar. 2016. <http://genius.com/posts/775-Rap-vs-ronald-reagan>

In a second part, I look at the ways in which actual warfare can be transformed into internal conflict in the country. I am particularly interested in how indictments of dissent (on the conservative side) and denunciations of governmental policies (in hip-hop culture) have been issued with ominous statements. I continued to delve into the same fonts and dug up the most drastic criticisms and attacks made in conservative media and hip-hop about the war in Iraq. Portrayals of G.W. Bush in conservative media soon began to resemble the idolizing tendencies I highlighted about Reagan. The War in Iraq exacerbated the excoriation of internal dissent on the conservative side. Adversely, it also continued the denunciation of political corruption in the songs of hip-hop artists. For many left-wingers, Bush came to epitomize corruption and heedless decision making. For many right-wingers, opposition to war became equated with treason.

Finally, this exploration will segue into antagonistic political discourse in the era of Barack Obama's tenure. From the run-up of the 2008 presidential contest to the closure of the Obama era, the last 10 years have seen venomous rhetoric step up to a new level. Conservative pundits ratcheted up their attacks on liberals after Obama's election, calling the president a radical, a socialist, or even a criminal.²⁹ The backlash they spearheaded against a reality they contributed to distort provides a perfect complement of the symptoms I highlight in my first two parts. Their immoderate inveighing against the president pressured Republican elected officials to turn a deaf ear to appeals for bipartisan collaboration. The metastasizing crisis of moderation I detail in this study set the stage for the 2016 presidential campaign. In the words of *New York Times* columnist David Brooks, America is currently going through a bout of anti-politics since Donald Trump

is the culmination of the trends we have been seeing for the last 30 years: the desire for outsiders; the bashing style of rhetoric that makes conversation impossible; the decline of coherent political parties; the

²⁹ Conservative publications teems with examples. See Sean Hannity's *Conservative Victory* for a depiction of Obama the radical, David Limbaugh's *Crimes against Liberty* for the trial of the criminal president or Michael Savage's *Trickle Down Tyranny* for more information on Obama's full-fledged brand of socialism.

declining importance of policy; the tendency to fight cultural battles and identity wars through political means.³⁰

All these facets are in tune with my findings and throughout this study, I give clarifications about their origins. My contribution throughout this study and particularly in the third part is to analyze Brooks' observations as driven by cultural changes rather than popular demand or changes in professional politics. Indeed, it is not a coincidence that Brooks assesses the phenomenon to be 30 years old precisely when the cultural era I describe started between two and three decades ago.

Before getting into more details and exploring revisionisms of Ronald Reagan's legacy, it is pivotal to introduce the sources I privileged and why I did so.

Studying the phenomenon of right-wing media requires an exploration of recent historical developments in political communication. According to Brian C. Anderson, until the late 1980s, the "old media regime" favored liberal opinions and framed the news in ways that made liberalism look appealing. He contends that news had been leaning left for decades and that a whole apparatus of liberal control ensured that conservatism was getting negative - or inexistent - coverage.³¹ In this respect, Kavanaugh and Blumler offer a framework for the history of political communication which helps locate the shift depicted by Anderson. Maarek and Wolfseld illuminate that framework with their contention that political communication is a permanent power struggle between audiences, politicians and media.³² Against that backdrop, the history of political communication in culture can be divided into three phases: a "first age" in which politicians had full control over their communication on major networks and focused on ideology; a "second age" dominated by an increasing range of media in which "the focus shifted to passing on messages through the mass media and increased the demand for communication professionals;" and a "third" one in which the media have been divested of some of their power by audiences and politicians because using formerly dominant media outlets is no longer necessary for communication. That third age is marked by "media abundance" and increased "professionalization of political

³⁰ Brooks, David. "The Governing Cancer of Our Time." *The Opinion Pages* 26 Feb. 2016. Web. 2 May 2016. <http://www.nytimes.com/2016/02/26/opinion/the-governing-cancer-of-our-time.html>

³¹ Anderson, Brian C. "South Park" Conservatives: The Revolt against Liberal Media Bias. 15-16.

³² Wolfsfeld, Gadi, and Philippe J. Maarek. eds. *Political Communication in a New ERA: A Cross-National Perspective*. London: Routledge, 2002. 2. Print.

communication.”³³ My study applies that framework more generally to culture and focuses on the transition from the second to the third media age which led to the rising success of dire visions of politics.

Liberal control, although much exaggerated by Anderson, is not a figment of his imagination. Before the late 1980s, it was virtually impossible to get something similar to modern-day opinionated conservatism on TV and radio airwaves – in large part because political neutrality was the standard for big networks. That state of affairs began to waver under the pressure of talk-radio and especially Rush Limbaugh’s show. The host’s unapologetic brand of talk began airing in 1988 in New York and soon achieved nationwide spread. His approach to political talk paved the way for two reasons. First in terms of ideology, Limbaugh was overtly to the right of the political spectrum. Second, he made no bones about his beliefs and chose verbal attacks as a hallmark of his style. Nonetheless, I believe that studying 28 years of *The Rush Limbaugh Show* as an isolated phenomenon – although it would certainly be fascinating – misses the bigger picture. It is not only the boisterous host who revolutionized American public discourse. It is the gradual emulation of his unsparing style elsewhere in American culture which deserves particular attention. The unapologetic style of talk adopted by Limbaugh first resurged elsewhere on radio airwaves before expanding to a host of other media outlets such as cable TV, internet blogs, books, opinionated press columns, and websites. The birth of political talk-radio in the 1980s and 1990s would be more accurately portrayed as a second birth. Indeed, antique forms of talk-radio had already featured on America’s airwaves. The most memorable example was Father Coughlin’s populist radio show in the 1930s which gathered an impressive number of listeners. However, the US did not have a genuine tradition of talk-radio until the boom of the 1990s. By 1995, although it had been decried as a nonstarter from birth, political talk-radio already occupied more than 10% of airtime on American radio stations.³⁴ By 2006, the format in which talk radio is included (news/talk) had become the main format on American airwaves.³⁵ Talk-radio provided a blueprint to make politics a

³³ Blumler, J.G. and D. Kavanaugh. “The Third Age of Political Communication: Influences and Features.” *Political Communication*, n° 31. 1999. 741-761. Print.

³⁴ Kay, Jack; Ziegelmüller, George W. and Kevin M. Minch. “From Coughlin to Contemporary Talk Radio: Fallacies & Propaganda in American Populist Radio.” *Journal of Radio Studies*. 5.1. (1998) 12. Web. 6 Feb 2016.

³⁵ Pew Project for Excellence in Journalism’s Study, “The State of the News Media, 2007 Talk Radio.” *The State of the News Media 2007: An Annual Report on American Journalism*. 2007.
<http://www.stateofthemedias.org/2007/radio-intro/talk-radio/>

marketable product: recounting daily politicking as a saga of epic proportions. The genre's defining characteristics include popular participation and opinionated – overwhelmingly conservative - hosts. Participation takes the form of callers reacting to the host's talking points. Its direct attacks and simplified language made politics and especially political anger more accessible to common listeners: "Talk radio is populism in its purest form, because it uses direct feedback, calls from listeners, to shape political sentiments, the listeners want anything but well-thought-out programs. They want noise, and the most successful noise now comes from the right."³⁶ Berry and Sobieraj even go further by depicting that noise industry as offering a brand new form of political responses based on "outrage."³⁷ Finally, it is important to remark that talk radio hosts scarcely attempt to convince audience members of the validity of new standpoints. They frame issues in order to emphasize the salience of agreeable beliefs and ingrain the feeling that these widely held values are in danger.³⁸

The rollout of Fox News Channel in 1996 accelerated the trend. Ascribed with the mission of bringing more balance and objectivity in news reporting, Fox developed its own brand of opinionated and inflammatory rhetoric.³⁹ It broadened the "echo chamber"⁴⁰ of right-wing media and swelled the payroll of right-wing outlets with loudmouths such as Sean Hannity, Bill O'Reilly or more recently Sarah Palin, and Glenn Beck. Often depicted as an isolated channel providing a haven for right-wing ideology, Fox contributed to shift the fabric of public discourse by furthering the message that liberals are beyond the pale and bent on stripping America from its inherent greatness. Finally, the most riveting development in the evolution of American public discourse toward more straightforwardness is the transition of its new features to political discourse. The 2016 Republican primary is in my opinion, the culmination of cultural and political attacks with its heap of factual inaccuracy and schoolyard attacks. As Gabriel Sherman asserts, "Through Fox, Ailes helped polarize the American electorate, drawing sharp, with-us-or-against-us lines, demonizing foes, preaching

³⁶ Mattusek, M. "Tuning in Hate." *World Press Review*. No. 42. 1995. 26-27. Web. 20 Feb 2016.

³⁷ Berry, Jeffrey M., and Sarah Sobieraj. *The Outrage Industry: Political Opinion Media and the New Incivility*. United States: Oxford University Press, 2014. 5. Print.

³⁸ Barker, David C. *Rushed to Judgment: Talk Radio, Persuasion, and American Political Behavior*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2002. 7. Print.

³⁹ In addition to the slogan "Fair and Balanced," see the declarations made by Ailes at the time in Sherman, Gabriel. *The Loudest Voice in the Room: How the Brilliant, Bombastic Roger Ailes Built Fox News-- and Divided a Country*. 212.

⁴⁰ Jamieson, Kathleen Hall, and Joseph N Cappella. *Echo Chamber: Rush Limbaugh and the Conservative Media Establishment*. 75-76.

against compromise.”⁴¹ The relevance of that depiction has never been as strong as it currently is. The triumph of attack politics and more generally of aggressive public discourse relaxed the rules set for the culture wars.

After more than three decades of existence, it is not exaggerated to argue that these programs helped redefine the Republican Right and bridge the gap between constituencies and elites. In the process, they also tilted the party further to the right and transformed disappointment toward the system into a legitimate political movement. The popularity of countless conservative political talk shows at the national or local level dwarfs the scarce examples of liberal political shows such as *The Ed Schultz Show*, *The Young Turks* or Keith Olbermann’s TV shows. In addition, liberal responses to Limbaugh, Fox, Dobbs, Hannity and others came belatedly and did not meet a similar kind of success. In this regard, I don’t concur with Berry and Sobieraj’s contention that liberals and conservatives have vested the same interest in the “outrage industry.”⁴² In my opinion, responses to conservative opinionated shows on the left have emerged later and outrage did not become a major form of cultural response for liberals until very recently. Moreover, the leverage of these liberal responses on decisions taken by the Democratic Party is minimal.

In their recent study of media bias and of the consumption attitudes of audiences, Grossmann and Hopkins argue that two other elements are crucial to understand why there is no unified countermovement to the conservative push in new media. First of all, the perception that mainstream media are unreliable is a uniquely conservative one. The widespread distrust toward mainstream media (or “drive-by media” as Limbaugh calls them) is typical of Republican constituencies⁴³ but is also a staple in radical left circles. Audiences who trust mainstream media find no rationale in the development of doctrinaire news content. Secondly, Grossmann and Hopkins remind that Republicans are driven by “an ideological commitment” to conservatism while Democrats are a “coalition of social groups.”⁴⁴ As a consequence, political issues on the left have been tackled in various forms: talk shows, popular culture, satire.... The

⁴¹ Sherman, Gabriel. *The Loudest Voice in the Room: How the Brilliant, Bombastic Roger Ailes Built Fox News-- and Divided a Country*. xii

⁴² Berry, Jeffrey M., and Sarah Sobieraj. *The Outrage Industry: Political Opinion Media and the New Incivility*. Chapter 2.

⁴³ Public Policy Polling survey in Matthews, Dylan. 2 *political scientists have found a key reason Republicans and democrats see politics so differently*. Vox, 1 Apr. 2016. Web. 7 May 2016.

<http://www.vox.com/2016/4/1/11340882/republicans-democrats-media-fox>

⁴⁴ Ibid. Matthews, Dylan.

most popular form of political talk on the liberal side comes from comedy shows in which satirical attacks dominate airtime. Yet, the relative weakness and diversity of responses in the media encouraged me to look elsewhere for a leftist counterweight to conservative political talk. Selecting hip-hop tenders the advantage and downside of considering culture in more diverse manifestations than simply TV and radio.

While Rush Limbaugh was ranting over the airwaves for the first times of his long career, another rebellious cultural movement which was also born in New York started its conquest of America: hip-hop. Similarly armed with microphones but adopting different styles, groups such as Sugarhill Gang and artists such as Grandmaster Flash designed their own ways to become famous and speak out about their experiences and ideas. Exploring these two movements as arising simultaneously provides much needed insight into the intensification of culture wars in America.

Remarkably, hip-hop also negotiated its way between entertainment and serious messages: “Throughout its career hip-hop has produced its share of unusual moments, walking the fine line between the theater of the absurd and the genuinely profound.”⁴⁵ My take is that in many instances, hip-hop artists have been “genuinely profound” and that they consistently provided alternate worldviews that contradicted those promoted not only in conservative media but in mainstream American thought. In the course of the 1990s, with the triumph of gangsta rap, hip-hop’s political undertones got increasingly downplayed but it should not be overlooked that “while rap is often associated with “gangsta life” in the mainstream press, the origins of rap and hip-hop culture are not rooted in outlaw ideology.”⁴⁶ In other words, at its birth, hip-hop artists assigned a socio-political role to the genre. Nonetheless, the impressive success of reenactments of violence and drug consumption have contributed to belittle that important aspect of the genre. From the turn of the 1990s, less politicized forms of rap became pathways to success. To this day, expectations of profitability still dictate the outlook of most of what is being released.

⁴⁵ Watkins, Craig S. *Hip-hop Matters: Politics, Pop Culture, and the Struggle for the Soul of a Movement*. 3rd ed. Boston: Beacon Press, 2006. 1. Print.

⁴⁶ Alexander, Michelle M. *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness*. 2nd ed. Jackson, TN: Distributed by Perseus Distribution, 2010. 174. Print.

The political feature of hip-hop has been studied by various academics who often end up underwhelmed by hip-hop's devotion to mainstream expectations.⁴⁷ Surprisingly, however, I found few authors who devoted careful attention to lyrics and messages. These tasks have now been undertaken by fans or artists themselves who posted their take on hip-hop lyrics on internet websites. When it comes to understand audiences of hip-hop and look at their exposure to social and political issues, I believe that overlooking politicized lyrics is wrongheaded. That dearth of in-depth interest in the substance of hip-hop has contributed to promote the image of a commodified and toothless genre. Not only are committed artists representative of the mindset of a share of urban poor generations (especially black youth), the spread of their views has an impact on listeners who don't hail from these communities. Indeed, hip-hop is consumed on a daily basis by whites, suburbanites, and/or affluent audiences. Taking a look at the impact of mainstream hip-hop is a much needed initiative but it fails to take into account non-commodified expressions of poor urban culture because most of those come from independent labels. By repeatedly sketching a worldview that decries politics as corrupt and adverse to the individual interests of a whole generation of listeners, hip-hop has contributed to popularize a form of wariness toward and perhaps hatred for the American political system. It also nurtures forms of activism such as Black Lives Matter which find little resonance in the platforms of both American parties and push for the insertion of their concerns in the political debate. In short, hip-hop can certainly not change the world but it is a reflection of developing views on the left side of the political spectrum that Democrats are more and more compelled to heed.

Still, it is important to bear in mind that media outlets exaggerate messages and that what I primarily describe in this study is not a set of grassroots phenomena. In other words, it is not because Rush Limbaugh and others consider liberals to be a scourge of American society that most listeners will take it as a clarion call to attack liberals. On the same note, it is not because hip-hop messages often recount that whole communities are swindled by the system that hip-hop fans will act against mainstream society institutions. In this regard, I am not interested in the ways in which right-wing punditry and hip-hop artistry might have encouraged isolated cases of extreme action.⁴⁸ Studies

⁴⁷ See for instance Heaggans, Raphael. "New Slaves." in Gosa, Travis L., and Erik Nielson, eds. *The Hip-hop & Obama Reader*. United Kingdom: Oxford University Press, 2015. 186-205. Print.

⁴⁸ See for example Timothy McVeigh's case whose conspiratorial worldviews might have been influenced by Limbaugh (in Neiwert, David. *The Eliminationists: How Hate Talk Radicalized the American*

have shown little correlation between adhesion and action. Neil Postman argues that the nature of instant-based media deters consumers from direct action: “Most of our daily news is inert, consisting of information that gives us something to talk about but cannot lead to any meaningful action.”⁴⁹ Not only is that true for news but it also holds for culture as a whole. Distance from culture has become characteristic of our modes of consumption. It is precisely that gap between the content of culture and the interest waged in it that is most fascinating.

New media have also limited our direct connection to the culture we consume and involvement in the messages it conveys. Therefore, I believe it is wrongheaded to limit popular culture study to their direct and conspicuous impact. For instance, musicologists and social scientists who studied hip-hop and the generations influenced by the genre often conclude that hip-hop’s political undertones don’t matter because activism within hip-hop fans has remained discrete. Hip-hop scholars like Jeff Chang even have scathing words for a generation which fails to grasp the political potential of its main form of culture: “Not enough people are taking advantage of using hip-hop as a way to deal with serious issues, as a way to try to change things before tragedy strikes.”⁵⁰ Furthermore, scholars who condescend to study hip-hop culture for its political significance often limit their outlook to racial concerns instead of seeing the importance of hip-hop’s commitment beyond racial barriers. In the course of this study, I opted to eschew as often as possible the conflation of hip-hop with black culture and consider the effect of hip-hop’s politics with a broader scope than the purely racial one.

It is undeniable that hip-hop does not prime socio-political outreach. Nonetheless, it has been at least a soundtrack for mobilization behind diversified events including Barack Obama’s election, War in Iraq protests, and more recently Black Lives Matter. More than its impact on activism, hip-hop has played a proselytizing role and egged on listeners to develop political awareness. As a result, even though the extent of activism in a given community is a good yardstick to assess political commitment, it

Right. United Kingdom: Polipoint Press, 2009. Print) or more recently, the influence of Glenn Beck on Richard Poplawski as documented in Bunch, Will. *The Backlash: Right-Wing Radicals, High-Def Hucksters, and Paranoid Politics in the Age of Obama*. United States: HarperCollins Publishers, 2010. Print. Chapter 10

⁴⁹ Postman, Neil, and Andrew Postman. *Amusing Ourselves to Death Public Discourse in the Age of Show Business*. 20th ed. New York, N.Y., U.S.A.: Penguin Books, 2005 [1985]. 68. Print.

⁵⁰ Chang, Jeff. *Can’t Stop Won’t Stop: A History of the Hip-Hop Generation*, New York, NY: St. Martin’s Press. 2005. iv. Print.

should not be the only criterion, especially for wired generations in which political awareness and involvement can take more discrete forms. I strongly concur with Parker and Barreto's observation that "people's inability to free themselves of the constraints prohibiting activism does not render their attitudes or behavior irrelevant."⁵¹

To summarize, rhetoric matters not so much because it has been emulated in most Americans' approach to politics but because it substantially altered modern politics as a practice. The first example I will tackle exemplifies historical revisionism in new culture. The focal point is one of the most debated presidential legacies in recent political history: the Reagan era.

⁵¹ Parker, Christopher S., and Barreto, Matt A. *Change They Can't Believe in: The Tea Party and Reactionary Politics in America*. United States: Princeton University Press, 2013. 17. Print.

I - The Idol and the Villain: The Debate over Ronald Reagan's Legacy

I – A/ Ronaldus Magnus: The lionization of a president

From the end of Reagan's presidency to the first election of Barack Obama, conservatives tried to latch on to what would benefit their electoral ambitions: the illusion of a glorious conservative tradition. The problem was that ideological conservatism and its much-vaunted finery has never been in power. Even Reagan, who by many bellwethers had been a successful president, did not govern by abiding to a set of fixed conservative principles. In Geoffrey Kabaservice's words, Reaganites were aware that: "burying conservative proposals such as privatizing Medicare, restricting abortion, and abolishing the departments of Energy and Education"⁵² was necessary to win the 1980 and 1984 elections. Despite that stubborn reality, right-wing media personalities launched a campaign to cast the Reagan era as the halcyon days of conservatism and Reagan himself as a committed ideologue.

The rise of talk-radio, then followed by Fox News Channel, and other related conservative outlets encouraged that trend. These media which came to be seen as leading a "revolt against liberal media bias"⁵³ spearheaded the urge for revisionism of the Reagan era. Indeed, the formats of these shows were particularly adapted for rushed, unverified historical lessons. In some respects, the kind of history these media outlets made possible can be labeled 'emotional history.' Conservatives, who were searching for ways to promote a role model, found devoted spokesmen first with talk radio and then with FOX News Channel. Rush Limbaugh recognized in his tribute to Reagan that he would not "have had the life" he has "were it not for Reagan" and that

⁵² Kabaservice, Geoffrey. *Rule and Ruin: The Downfall of Moderation and the Destruction of the Republican Party, from Eisenhower to the Tea Party*. 368.

⁵³ Anderson, Brian C. *"South Park" Conservatives: The Revolt against Liberal Media Bias*. Washington, D.C.: Regnery Publishing, Inc., An Eagle Publishing Company, 25 Apr. 2005.

his show “is conservatism and the Reagan legacy.”⁵⁴ Rupert Murdoch, the Australian media mogul who launched Fox News was also an admirer of Republican politics and especially of Reagan.

Reagan was used as a basis to build upon for various reasons but the chief cause of his success as a conservative lodestar lies in his own mastery of public relations. He was the first successful “conservative” president in a media-savvy era. The Great Communicator, as he was nicknamed, had succeeded in responding to a generation of unsettling activism followed by the “malaise” era of the Carter presidency. He did not accomplish such a daunting task simply by the force of his decisions. The legacy from the Reagan presidency is more visual, audible, and dramatic than political. The Gipper left soundbites and lasting impressions which turned out to be bullion for conservative media outlets emerging after he left the White House. Political scientist Sean Wilentz goes as far as declaring that under Reagan’s influence, conservatives “learned how to seize and keep control of the terms of public debate.”⁵⁵ More than an assertion about politics, Wilentz’s remark can be expanded to the world of political communication.

The disasters he was faced with as a president (Iran-Contra, rampant inequality...) seemed to wither away when right-wing media talked about his tenure. Unlike Nixon or G.H.W. Bush, his name was almost never slighted, especially after he was diagnosed with Alzheimer’s disease. To summarize, Reagan was the perfect guinea pig for such a historical and media experiment because he had left plenty of readymade pieces that TV channels and radio hosts could easily use to craft a stainless legacy. Reagan and his public relations advisors had a gift of creating memorable quotes which remained general enough to be used in variegated situations.

In addition, Reagan became a model because he contributed to the modern heyday of his party. In hindsight, a lot of pundits marketed his success as a result of ideological convictions. Reagan managed to channel the different fringes of the GOP and cajoled moderates as well as hardcore conservatives into supporting his presidential bids. Overall, pundits have ignored the conciliatory achievements of Reagan because it was not consonant with their brand of ideological conservatism. Glenn Beck provides a

⁵⁴ Premiere Radio Networks, and All Rights Reserved. *Rush Limbaugh’s tribute to Ronald Reagan*. Rush Limbaugh, 7 June 2004. Web. 7 May 2016.

http://www.rushlimbaugh.com/daily/2004/06/07/rush_limbaugh_s_tribute_to_ronald_reagan

⁵⁵ Wilentz, Sean. *The Age of Reagan: A History, 1974-2008*. New York, NY: HarperCollins Publishers, 5 May 2009. 8. Print.

perfect example in one of his various analyses of Reagan's path to victory on his radio show: "He remained solid, and if anything, solidified himself outside of Washington and the establishment. The establishment hated his guts. They hated him. (...) Reagan stood on his principles, won the presidency and the establishment flocked to him."⁵⁶

When they did mention Reagan's electoral outreach, pundits tended to consider that Reagan converted people to his conservatism rather than adapted it to please new supporters. It is clear that Reagan the candidate successfully brought together fringes of the right that did not have the same priorities. Even if his bid was the first in history to rally as much support from evangelicals: "Christian right-wing activism reached its pinnacle with Ronald Reagan's election in 1980 and his reelection in 1984,"⁵⁷ Reagan did not alienate moderate Republicans. Of course, Reagan was a conservative - perhaps the most successful American politician ever to sport that label - but he was a politician before being an ideologue. More accurately, he knew quite well how to balance "his unusual combination of ideological fervor and moderating political pragmatism."⁵⁸ He knew that harboring hopes of being successful in politics required putting forth a fixed set of principles.

Nonetheless, he also showed during his presidency that governing often required sidelining ideological faithfulness: "Throughout his presidency, Reagan would demonstrate his almost unique ability to stir the blood of the faithful while also mollifying moderates and framing conservatism in a way that made it appealing to a majority of Americans."⁵⁹ This is where the myth departs from the historical record. In truth, the type of conservatism applied by Ronald Reagan during his presidency was at odds with the one promoted during his electoral campaigns (from his involvement in the Goldwater campaign to his 1984 reelection bid). It was also disconnected from the narratives peddled decades after his retirement.

⁵⁶ Beck, Glenn. "A page from the playbook: How Ronald Reagan renewed the GOP." 12 Nov. 2015. Web. 7 May 2016. <http://www.glennbeck.com/2015/11/12/a-page-from-the-playbook-how-ronald-reagan-renewed-the-gop/>

⁵⁷ Ben Barka, Mokhtar. *La droite chrétienne américaine: les évangéliques à la Maison-Blanche*. France. Toulouse: Privat, 2006. 63. Print. « L'activisme de la droite chrétienne a atteint son apogée avec l'élection de Ronald Reagan en 1980 et sa réélection en 1984. »

⁵⁸ Collins, Robert M. *Transforming America: Politics and Culture During the Reagan Years*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2007. 53. Print.

⁵⁹ Kabaservice, Geoffrey. *The Downfall of Moderation and the Destruction of the Republican Party, from Eisenhower to the Tea Party*. 364

The Reagan that right-wing pundits created was a hard-nosed conservative who ought to be remembered for his flamboyant campaign promises rather than for the pragmatism he evinced when pressed by presidential reality. He epitomized “conservatism” although he did not apply all the principles that such a label has come to imply. It is true that he abided by some tenets of the kernel of conservatism when he cracked down on crime or in some of his economic decisions. Yet, the balance of these policies has not been as positive as some pretended and Reagan failed to implement the whole conservative agenda. In retrospect, conservative writers often argue that his intentions were thwarted by an unwilling Congress. Conversely, historians and liberal intellectuals ascribe Reagan’s moderation to his own awareness that transforming some conservative wedge issues into legislation would have had a negative impact on his popularity. The truth is probably halfway between those discrepant interpretations but it is certain that Reagan neither defined conservatism nor held true to all of the precepts he is said to have defended. Overall, in spite of his eight years in power, Reagan’s mark in the historical record favors the “set of principles” he set forth in his rhetoric rather than the “methods of governance” he adopted when in power.⁶⁰

Taking advantage of the popularity of a president to assert the righteousness of a certain kind of politics is not a rare political move. All aspiring statesmen look for the blessing of and claim to be inspired by seminal historical characters (Lincoln, Kennedy, Reagan...). Yet, the myth-making surrounding Reagan is unique for three reasons. Firstly, Reagan was the first living president to receive such myth-like treatment.⁶¹ Secondly, he was the first president whose legacy consisted of speeches, televised appearances and soundbites rather than testimonies, statistics, and printed material. Lastly, the ones who tried to reclaim his legacy were not only conservative politicians. The list of wannabe heirs is very long and includes most presidential candidates from both parties, Congressmen, radio hosts, TV anchors. According to Will Bunch, it has now become a commonplace strategy to embed Reagan’s name in a run for office without actually sticking to the historical record.⁶² It is now time to take a closer look at some of the substance that Reagan’s self-proclaimed legatees manipulated.

⁶⁰ Greenwald, Glenn. *A Tragic Legacy: How a Good Vs. Evil Mentality Destroyed the Bush Presidency*. New York: Crown Publishing Group, 2007. 40. Print.

⁶¹ Bunch, Will. *Tear down This Myth: How the Reagan Legacy Has Distorted Our Politics and Haunts Our Future*. United States: Simon & Schuster Adult Publishing Group, 2009. 150. Print.

⁶² Ibid. Bunch, Will. 28

In matters of foreign policy, Reagan is now remembered for the “Tear Down this Wall” admonition to Gorbachev. His strayed attitude in the wake of the Iran-Contra scandal or his willingness to engage in a puzzling conflict such as the operation in Granada are seldom the focus of attention. His foreign policy strategy has been repeatedly extolled. Sean Hannity, anchor of *Hannity* on Fox News, talk-radio host, and author of *Conservative Victory* proclaims in a chapter devoted to justify his endorsement of Reagan conservatism that: “when conservatives defend the principle of peace through strength, they needn’t resort to mere academic theories. The record of history is all they need.”⁶³ That record includes giving Reagan props for singlehandedly weakening the U.S.S.R. and putting an end to an everlasting showdown. Rush Limbaugh is particularly adamant in depicting Reagan as playing the lead role in ending the Cold War. Rush Limbaugh’s use of Reagan’s Berlin speech for example suggests direct historical correlation between the speech and the collapse of the Berlin Wall: “Ronald Reagan set the stage for the end of the Cold War. Ronald Reagan defeated Soviet communism without firing a shot.”⁶⁴ In his tribute to the 40th president, Limbaugh boasted about his privileged relationship to Margaret Thatcher who often “commanded” him to hammer home the fact that Reagan won the Cold War into whoever would listen to him.⁶⁵ In academic circles, Reagan’s responsibility in ending the Cold War has been the object of a lot of debate. Of course, Reagan’s role should not be overlooked but the simplified vision that Reagan brought the U.S.S.R. down is part of the mythical repackaging. Even if Hannity, Limbaugh and others are willing to grant him the achievement of winning the Cold War through his “peace through strength” approach, it should be noted that he did not engage in any conflict with the U.S.S.R. and considered diplomacy a major prong of his strategy. He also fierily opposed civilian casualties and direct intervention because he was aware of the potential nuclear fallout that open warfare could bring about.⁶⁶ However, the disconnect between Reagan’s lifetime beliefs and those he was ascribed after he retired from public life allowed right-wing conservatives to conjure Reagan to sanction G.W. Bush’s interventions in

⁶³ Hannity, Sean. *Conservative Victory: Defeating Obama’s Radical Agenda*. New York: William Morrow Paperbacks, 15 Apr. 2010. 143. Print.

⁶⁴ Premiere Radio Networks. *Why is Ronald Reagan a hero?* Rush Limbaugh, 4 Feb. 2011. Web. 7 May 2016. http://www.rushlimbaugh.com/daily/2011/02/04/why_is_ronald_reagan_a_hero2

⁶⁵ Premiere Radio Networks. *Rush Limbaugh’s tribute to Ronald Reagan*. Rush Limbaugh, 7 June 2004. Web. 7 May 2016. http://www.rushlimbaugh.com/daily/2004/06/07/rush_limbaugh_s_tribute_to_ronald_reagan

⁶⁶ Bunch, Will. *Tear down This Myth: How the Reagan Legacy Has Distorted Our Politics and Haunts Our Future*. 71

Afghanistan and Iraq: "I really believe that if Reagan had been able he would have put his hand on Bush's shoulder and say to him, "Stay the course, George." I really believe that."⁶⁷ Once more, the importance of Reagan's posthumous endorsements of current decisions pervades the GOP's recent history.

In terms of domestic policies, Reagan the candidate might have approached the ideal definition of a conservative politician with his bent on a set of sacred moral values, his intractable response to crime and his rebuttal of a governmental-based "liberal great society" to establish an individual-based "creative society."⁶⁸ Reagan the president was rather different. Despite his embrace of a line of hardcore conservatism in his campaigns, the aspects that propelled Reagan to the forefront and made his popularity were related to pragmatism and symbolism rather than ideology. The rise of an overly confident leader after the lackluster years of Carter who had simple cures to America's predicaments was timely. In the words of Todd Gitlin, "Reagan *was* the nation that its voting majority wished to exist."⁶⁹ The nation was not as motivated by a drift towards conservatism as it was enthralled by the rise of a colorful personality.

For instance, Reagan did not keep the promises his dalliance with evangelism could have foreshadowed: "The alliance between the Republican Party and Christian fundamentalists such as Jerry Falwell and Pat Robertson was indeed a major achievement for Reagan and his team, but it was purely a political victory, not a successful policy drive."⁷⁰ His sentiments on abortion were not transformed into law and his Supreme Court appointments turned out to further thwart the pro-life cause. However, his discursive emphasis on the family structure and the example he set through his own gave raw material to myth-makers who wanted to assert that he opposed droves of liberals who were hostile to the concept of family.

As we shall see in the second sub-part, Reagan's hands-off approach to race and class struggles bears the brunt of liberal criticism. His distant involvement in social politics has often been decried as a turning point in the making of a more unequal

⁶⁷ Premiere Radio Networks, and All Rights Reserved. *Rush Limbaugh's tribute to Ronald Reagan*. Rush Limbaugh, 7 June 2004. Web. 7 May 2016.

http://www.rushlimbaugh.com/daily/2004/06/07/rush_limbaugh_s_tribute_to_ronald_reagan

⁶⁸ Collins, Robert M. *Transforming America: Politics and Culture During the Reagan Years*. 39

⁶⁹ Gitlin, Todd. *The Twilight of Common Dreams: Why America Is Wracked by Culture Wars*. New York: Metropolitan Books, 1995. 76. Print.

⁷⁰ Bunch, Will. *Tear down This Myth: How the Reagan Legacy Has Distorted Our Politics and Haunts Our Future*. 114

American society. Conversely, for those who defended a mythical Ronald Reagan, those strategies validated a belief in a depleted governmental role and in a society that regulated itself through the market. Conservative infotainers often used Reagan's policies as evidence that "Reagan conservatism succeeded where Franklin Roosevelt's liberalism failed."⁷¹ In that view, those who were left out of the economic growth of the era were the ones to blame for failing to profit from the economic opportunities of the 1980s. In the conservative narrative, Reagan's attitude was the right answer to a program that they loathed: Lyndon Johnson's War on Poverty. Indeed, the modern narrative promoted by some conservative loudmouths panned Johnson's War on Poverty. Conservative pundits considered that program to be a starting point for decades of governmental intervention in social issues which used to be and should still be overcome through individual efforts. In David Horowitz and Richard Poe's words, the conservative doctrine would eventually prevail because "Americans remember the social and economic destruction wrought by 40 years of Great Society entitlements."⁷²

Another prong of the myth consisted in casting Reagan as a besieged president who challenged the establishment and more particularly, the ill-intentioned mainstream media, as shown in those claims by Hannity and Limbaugh: "The media never liked Reagan or his policies in the first place;"⁷³ "Ronaldus Magnus did not have a media. There was no conservative media. He had ABC, CBS, NBC, the New York Times, Washington Post, TIME, Newsweek, you name it. National Review was the only media publication that was at all oriented towards supporting Ronaldus Magnus."⁷⁴ In the process, the Gipper became a maverick candidate who faced the ire of a united set of outlets forming the "adversary culture."⁷⁵ The opprobrium against Reagan seems to hold still according to Glenn Beck. In a recent lamentation about the destruction of heroes undertaken by "the progressive movement", Beck warned that progressives

⁷¹ Jamieson, Kathleen Hall, and Joseph N Cappella. *Echo Chamber: Rush Limbaugh and the Conservative Media Establishment*. United Kingdom: Oxford University Press, 2010. xii. Print.

⁷² Horowitz, David, and Richard Poe. *The Shadow Party: How George Soros, Hillary Clinton, and Sixties Radicals Seized Control of the Democratic Party*. United States: Nelson Current, 2006. 219. Print.

⁷³ Hannity, Sean. *Conservative Victory: Defeating Obama's Radical Agenda*. New York: William Morrow Paperbacks, 15 Apr. 2010. 146. Print.

⁷⁴ Premiere Radio Networks. *The loser must compromise*. Rush Limbaugh, 5 Nov. 2010. Web. 24 Mar. 2016. http://www.rushlimbaugh.com/daily/2010/11/05/the_loser_must_compromise

⁷⁵ Trilling, Lionel. *Beyond Culture: Essays on Literature and Learning*. New York, NY: Viking Press, 1965. ix. Print.

intended to “[get] rid of our heroes” and included Reagan in his list.⁷⁶ Paradoxically, Reagan has often received praise for his charisma, eloquence and mastery of television as a medium. The truth is that despite the possible bias some mainstream media executives had against the Republican candidate, their outlets were essential in his victory especially in the Reagan-Carter debates. Political scholar Eric Alterman even goes further and characterizes the treatment ascribed to Reagan by the mainstream media as “gentle.”⁷⁷ They also played a fundamental role in furthering Reagan’s ‘Morning in America’ given the expert showmanship of the president. Even inside his own party, Reagan is now recast as having epitomized anti-establishment mindsets. He is praised for forcing a reluctant GOP into victory through ideological strength.

It is in all those discrepancies between actual historical record and fond conservative recollections that the chief success of new media lies. Memories of the Reagan era began to feature on talk-radio airwaves on Rush Limbaugh’s show, where Reagan became Ronaldus Magnus. The promotion of a ‘we never had it so good’ feeling has been achieved through simplistic claims such as: “Many people credit President Ronald Reagan with ending the Cold War and creating millions of jobs in the 1980s”⁷⁸ and entreaties to “learn from President Reagan on his 103rd birthday.”⁷⁹ In the words of former Fox anchor Jon DuPre who was asked to cover the anniversary of Ronald Reagan’s birth: “Ronald Reagan’s birthday was for Fox News Channel viewers something akin to a holy day.”⁸⁰ Such efforts to praise Reagan have become commonplace efforts deployed by modern-day conservatives seeking to shore up electoral efforts and highlight a solid conservative legacy. More often than not, Reagan and his brand of conservatism played the counterweight role to evil-minded opponents from moderate Republicans such as John McCain in 2000 whose willingness to

⁷⁶ Beck, Glenn. *The most powerful man in America today*. Glenn Beck, 23 Mar. 2016. Web. 19 Jan. 2016. <http://www.glennbeck.com/2016/03/23/the-most-powerful-man-in-america-today/>

⁷⁷ Alterman, Eric. *When Presidents Lie: A History of Official Deception and Its Consequences*. New York: Viking. 276. 2004.

⁷⁸ FOX News Insider. “VIDEO: College Students Have No Clue Who Ronald Reagan Is.” *Fox News* 24 Apr. 2015. Web. 08 Feb. 2016. <http://insider.foxnews.com/2015/04/24/video-college-students-have-no-clue-who-ronald-reagan>

⁷⁹ FOX News Insider. “Remembering Reagan: Former President Would Have Been 103 Today.” *Fox News* 6 Feb. 2014. Web. 8 Feb. 2016. <http://insider.foxnews.com/2014/02/06/remembering-reagan-former-president-would-have-been-103-today>

⁸⁰ Brave New Films. “Outfoxed • Rupert Murdoch’s War on Journalism • FULL DOCUMENTARY FILM Exposes Fox News.” *YouTube*. YouTube, 22 Dec. 2014. Web. 8 Feb. 2016. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=P74oHhU5MDk>

compromise was deemed outrageous;⁸¹ to Democrats increasingly portrayed as natural evildoers (as we shall see in the last two parts of this study).

Yet, there is more at stake than the simple reclaiming of Reagan's legacy. New media outlets allowed Hannity, Limbaugh, and others to claim that America had veered away from the right path by disavowing conservative principles. The depiction of "the right path" as a conservative path⁸² makes the well-being of the country a matter of ideological partisanship. The strength of his values brought prosperity back to the country. As Limbaugh states it bluntly in his tribute to the 40th president, those who were skeptical of Reagan's ideas "were wrong. He was right. Our lives today are a testament to how Ronald Reagan was right."⁸³

In the course of the myth-making process, some conservatives managed to establish "Reagan's" conservatism as a new standard for Republican politics:

The Reagan era may have spawned debt as far as the eye can see, but it also gave rise to a cadre of right-wing activists who were mastering new tricks in an age of new media, establishing beachheads in a rising format called talk radio and eventually on cable TV news.⁸⁴

That motley group of Reagan myth-makers, led by public relations specialists, and assisted by right-wing politicians and media luminaries, managed to cast a distorted version of Reagan's politics as the solution to Republican ills. Already in the 2008 Republican primary, the name of Ronald Reagan loomed over candidates who were eager to embrace his legacy.⁸⁵ Today, although some historians argue that the "age of Reagan" is over, Reagan's name hovers in the air and the obsession with his legacy

⁸¹ See for instance Limbaugh referring to "the guy who worked with Democrats" in Premiere Radio Networks. *Unconscionable: McCain staffers attempting to destroy Sarah Palin*. Rush Limbaugh, 6 Nov. 2008. Web. 20 Feb. 2016.

http://www.rushlimbaugh.com/daily/2008/11/06/unconscionable_mccain_staffers_attempting_to_destroy_sarah_palin

⁸² Scarborough, Joe. *The Right Path: From Ike to Reagan, How Republicans Once Mastered Politics-- and Can Again*. United States: Random House, 13 Nov. 2013. Print.

⁸³ Premiere Radio Networks. *Rush Limbaugh's tribute to Ronald Reagan*. Rush Limbaugh, 7 June 2004. Web. 7 May 2016.

http://www.rushlimbaugh.com/daily/2004/06/07/rush_limbaugh_s_tribute_to_ronald_reagan

⁸⁴ Bunch, Will. *Tear down This Myth: How the Reagan Legacy Has Distorted Our Politics and Haunts Our Future*. 124

⁸⁵ Ibid. Bunch, Will. 5

shapes much of current political discussions on the right.⁸⁶ For instance, in the article in which Limbaugh discusses his support of 2016 Republican candidate Ted Cruz, the reasons he provides speak volumes about Reagan's glorification: "Ted Cruz is the closest living thing to Ronald Reagan we're ever gonna have in our lifetimes. I don't know what more I can say about Ted Cruz."⁸⁷ After the results of Super Tuesday, Limbaugh went even further and proclaimed that "He is the ideal conservative candidate. He is the modern incarnation of Ronaldus Magnus."⁸⁸ In other words, Cruz looks like Reagan in terms of ideological proposals. In the world of conservative media, the meaning of resembling Reagan is twofold: First, it means that candidates who embrace his legacy will find the solution to most ills and second, at an inner-party level, coming back to Reagan's roots is still seen as the path to Republican victory. Cruz's successful embrace of 'Reagan conservatism' in turn brought him the endorsement of Beck and Limbaugh among others. Donald Trump also played the Reagan card with his co-option of Reagan's "Make America Great Again" slogan even though his association with the Gipper was more contested. As a response, candidate Marco Rubio warned on Fox News that a first-rate con artist is on the verge of taking over the party of Lincoln and Reagan.⁸⁹ The struggle for the symbolic endorsement of the late president rages on even for candidates said to emanate from outside the GOP establishment. In the words of Ronald Reagan Jr., Republicans "trot him out (...) like a fetish object" when election season comes.⁹⁰ In essence, the level of Reaganism shown by a candidate determines whether or not he is fit to represent the GOP as it is envisioned by Limbaugh and others. According to several right-wing pundits, solving pressing issues in America would simply take a return to Reagan conservatism. History in talk-radio and on outlets such

⁸⁶ Wilentz, Sean. *The Age of Reagan: A History, 1974-2008*. New York, NY: HarperCollins Publishers, 5 May 2009. Print., Introduction

⁸⁷ Premiere Radio Networks. *The mister big of the vast right-wing conspiracy explains what's going on: Perfection is not an option, folks*. Rush Limbaugh, 16 Feb. 2016. Web. 16 Feb. 2016.
http://www.rushlimbaugh.com/daily/2016/02/16/the_mister_big_of_the_vast_right_wing_conspiracy_explains_what_s_going_on_perfection_is_not_an_option_folks

⁸⁸ Limbaugh, Rush. "A lot of Conservatives are Really Puzzled why Ted Cruz isn't doing better (...)" Facebook. 02 Mar. 2016. Web. 04 Mar. 2016.
<https://www.facebook.com/RushLimbaugh/posts/1288190897863235>

⁸⁹ Rubio, Marco on *Fox News Sunday*. "I believe a first-rate con artist is on the verge of taking over the party of Lincoln and Reagan." Facebook. Feb. 29. Web. 04 Mar. 2016.
<https://www.facebook.com/FoxNews/videos/10154092935141336/>

⁹⁰ Reagan Jr. Ronald. in Maher, Bill. "Real Time with Bill Maher." Sep. 29. 2015. Embedded video in Leuchtenburg, William. *Behind the Ronald Reagan myth: "No one had ever entered the white house so grossly ill informed."* Salon. Dec, 28th, 2015. Web. 08 Mar. 2016.
http://www.salon.com/2015/12/28/behind_the_ronald_reagan_myth_no_one_had_ever_entered_the_white_house_so_grossly_ill_informed/?utm_source=facebook&utm_medium=socialflow

as FOX News Channel takes the shape of a struggle to hold true to eternally victorious values.

Political scientists are prone to point to the conservative media establishment for having dictated in the post-G.W. Bush era that ‘Reagan conservatism’ was the preferable Republican strategy. Pushing in that direction at a turning point of the GOP’s history was a choice which further stratified the Republican Party as dissenting from conservatism became equivalent with being a RINO (Republican In Name Only).

Believing in the currency of ‘Reagan’s principles’ requires an approach that arrantly denies that changing times call for changing solutions. That strategy involves applying a faith in the timelessness of constitutional law which is shared by many in the right-wing movement. Jill Lepore, who focuses on the role of the Founding Fathers in the rise of the Tea Party, defines the concept of originalism or historical fundamentalism which equally applies to recent history in the case I analyze:

Historical fundamentalism is marked by the belief that a particular and quite narrowly defined past – “the founding” – is ageless and sacred and to be worshipped; that certain historical texts – “the founding documents” – are to be read in the same spirit with which religious fundamentalists read, for instance, the Ten Commandments; that the Founding Fathers were divinely inspired.⁹¹

Historical fundamentalism or originalism is not a new development of conservative politics. Neither is it a rare feature in conservative media shows.⁹² Yet, recently, originalism has been extended to more than constitutional law. Loud voices on TV and airwaves claim that Reagan’s unalloyed political success justifies belief in some principles presumably shared by the Gipper. In turn, that approach vindicates beliefs in the immutability of some of their own principles and a worldview which is not open for discussion. In some cases, Limbaugh, Beck and other right-wing personalities even use Reagan to express his “views” on current political issues. Among other examples, titles

⁹¹ Lepore, Jill. *The Whites of Their Eyes: The Tea Party’s Revolution and the Battle over American History*. United States: Princeton University Press, 2010. 16. Print.

⁹² See for example the utter fascination of Glenn Beck for George Washington’s relevance in current politics in Beck, Glenn. *The most powerful man in America today*. Glenn Beck, 23 Mar. 2016. Web. 19 Jan. 2016. <http://www.glennbeck.com/2016/03/23/the-most-powerful-man-in-america-today/>

such as “Ronaldus Magnus Responds to Haley,”⁹³ “What did Ronald Reagan say about small business in 1983 that has even greater significance today?”⁹⁴ or “1975 Warning from Reagan ‘Could Have Been Said Last Night’”⁹⁵ bring him back to life to voice the quiddity of the purest form of conservatism. Such a practice strikingly reminds us of the co-optation of the Founding Fathers and how their sayings are often extolled for their timelessness. In the ramblings of an increasing number of right-wing analysts, Reagan became a sort of new Founding Father who put forth a recycled set of sacred American ideals. Indeed, under the sway of right-wing pundits, the idea that successful policies in the past can be applied to the present without much retrofit has gained credence. In order to answer to the discombobulating changes of modernity, right-wing pundits refer to the eighties. More accurately, they use a version of the past in which glorious deeds correct blunders and difficult episodes. For instance, Hannity, when responding to those who argue in favor of some alterations in conservatism, declares that:

They mistakenly believe that the time has passed for traditional Reagan conservatism and that we need to adapt the movement to meet the changing times. (...) I believe this position is wrongheaded, cynically pragmatic, and ultimately destructive to our first principles and the timeless ends of American constitutional governance.⁹⁶

This position is symptomatic not only of a willingness to preserve ideas of the past but also of a tendency to depict the present as dangerous because of the hijacking of America by adversarial forces. I will further explore that tendency which is typical of new media outlets in the second and third parts of this study.

Politically speaking, adhering to Reagan conservatism also presupposes that the “silent majority” of the Reagan revolution has gone back to sleep and simply awaits a wake-up call. According to George H. Nash, the faith in a slumbering majority waiting

⁹³ Premiere Radio Networks. *Ronaldus Magnus responds to Haley*. Rush Limbaugh, 13 Jan. 2016. Web. 15 Jan. 2016. http://www.rushlimbaugh.com/daily/2016/01/13/ronaldus_magnus_responds_to_haley

⁹⁴ Draxx. *WATCH: What did Ronald Reagan say about small business in 1983 that has even greater significance today?* Glenn Beck, 30 Oct. 2013. Web. 15 Jan. 2016. <http://www.glennbeck.com/2013/10/30/watch-what-did-ronald-reagan-say-about-small-business-in-1983-that-has-even-greater-significance-today/>

⁹⁵ FOX News Insider. “Hannity: 1975 Warning from Reagan ‘could have been said last night.’” *Fox News* 18 Dec. 2013. Web. 15 Jan. 2016. <http://insider.foxnews.com/2013/12/18/hannity-looks-back-1975-warnings-reagan-tonight-show-johnny-carson>

⁹⁶ Hannity, Sean. *Conservative Victory: Defeating Obama’s Radical Agenda*. New York: William Morrow Paperbacks, 15 Apr. 2010. 151. Print.

for an awakening is not new at all: “In the late 1960s and early 1970s, however, this older rhetoric, while not dead, was supplanted by an optimistic new theme: conservatives were no longer pariahs but the voice of the “silent majority” of the American people.”⁹⁷ Upholding that belief owes much to the belief that conservatism is stronger in numbers than liberalism in America. The problem is that ideological statistics don’t seem to translate into electoral stranglehold. Believing in Reagan’s cogency almost forty years later presupposes that Republicans lay voters long for the comeback of the same conservatism they elected in the early 1980s. It implies that demographic changes would not invalidate the strategy adopted by Reagan in 1980 and 1984 if it were to be dug up nowadays. By extension, hankering after that silent majority validates a reluctance to pander to new electors such as members of minority groups who might show interest in an alternative to the Democratic Party. It also posits that some moral tenets are eternal and that a good conservative does not renege on some principles no matter what the cost might be.

Finding the Reagan promoted by talk-radio, Fox News and other outlets was a boon for conservative right-wingers who sought a new pulse after salvaging their control over the executive branch for four more years before Clinton’s rise. Carving a new Reagan allowed conservatives to seize control of the Republican Party and brush aside proponents of alternative solutions for the GOP (Republican moderates, evangelists...) while remaining attractive to these alternative fringes of the Right in times of elections. By making the character a spokesman for pure conservatism, modern conservatives shy away from his moderate record. They disregard the ambivalence inherent to political ideologies which “can be understood as a set of principles, or, independently, as the collection of policies and methods of governance that its adherents, *in practice*, undertake when in power.”⁹⁸ They dismiss his gift for consensus which is consonant with his image as a unifier. By insisting on the record of Reagan the candidate, Reagan the ideologue, and Reagan the hero, conservative pundits fail to see Reagan the statesman and craft a die-hard ideology out of a moderate record.

More importantly, the creation of the Reagan myth is typical of a refusal to dig into political substance. The historical record is not a collection of soundbites and

⁹⁷ Nash, George H. *The Conservative Intellectual Movement in America, Since 1945*. New York: Basic Books, 2008 [1976]. 350. Print.

⁹⁸ Greenwald, Glenn. *A Tragic Legacy: How a Good Vs. Evil Mentality Destroyed the Bush Presidency*. 40

selected facts. However, the time allotted to the historical record on TV and on the radio is particularly conducive to cast the past in simple, Manichean terms. Having a president who salvaged the country from Jimmy Carter through the force of his character and convictions puts conservatives on the good side of history. Reagan himself understood this quite well during his lifetime when he used striking rhetoric such as the “Evil Empire” coinage. That soundbite would deeply shape the black and white worldview spread on FOX News and in talk-radio. Yet, FOX and friends were not the only ones to mention evil to describe enemies at home and abroad. Neither were they the only ones to paint Reagan as a character of dramatic proportions.

I – B/ Ronald Wilson Reagan – 666: Evil in the White House and Social Plights in America

It would be an exaggeration to argue that hip-hop artists have taken an explicit interest in history in most of their songs. The overwhelming majority of rappers have not shown any interest in political commentary, even less about the past. After all, they are lured and/or constrained by expectations of entertainment and profitability. However, for a substantial minority of rappers, attempts to market their music did not make them abjure their political commitment. As a result, historical revisionism has been part and parcel of different forms of musical commitment. Whether commitment takes the form of isolated lyrics, soundbites in speeches and interviews, full-length songs, whole albums, or entire careers, the number of rappers who commented on political issues is not negligible. For those who did so, the Reagan era was considered a watershed in the history of poor urban America. Immediate reactions to Reagan in music have first emerged from the American punk-rock scene and from rap groups such as Public Enemy. Indeed, the Reagan era with its crackdown on drug crime and its dismantling of war on poverty initiatives served as “an incubator for hip-hop to emerge and flourish.”⁹⁹ However, the most fascinating aspect of the connection between the Reagan era and a form of culture which would soon invade the mainstream is that it has endured for three decades. Therefore, I am not interested in immediate responses to his presidency and I focus rather on late responses to the legacy left by the former governor of California (released since 2000). From the vantage point of the new millennium, hip-hop artists increasingly pointed to the Reagan era as a crunch-time for American urban poor communities.

The most relevant example of historical revisionism in recent hip-hop came from Atlanta rapper Killer Mike. The emcee, who recently became an activist and campaigns with Bernie Sanders, walks us through a genuine history lesson in his song “Reagan” [2012].¹⁰⁰ The two main criticisms associated with the Reagan era are laid out in this song: Reagan started a destructive war on drugs while members of his administration helped to spread cocaine in American inner cities in the aftermath of Iran-Contra (“Just

⁹⁹ Love, David A. “Hip-Hop and Politics Have a Long History Behind the Mic.” *theGrio*, 15 June 2010. Web. 12 Mar. 2016. <http://thegrio.com/2010/06/15/hip-hop-and-politics-have-a-long-history-behind-the-mic/>

¹⁰⁰ Killer Mike. “Reagan.” *R.A.P. Music*. Williams Street Records, 2012. Audio Recording.

like Oliver North introduced us to cocaine / In the eighties when them bricks came on military planes”). The former aspect has been an important prong of the praise given to the former president in conservative circles while the latter is either considered a taboo subject or regarded as an action of Reagan’s administration for which he was caught aback.

It is startling to see that even when historical revisionism about Reagan serves to lambast his balance, the use of Reagan’s soundbites is still a feature. Indeed, the song starts with an extract from Reagan’s speech about the Iran-Contra affair. In that speech, he asseverates that his administration did not negotiate the liberation of American hostages in Iran:

Our government has a firm policy not to capitulate to terrorist demands. That no-concessions policy remains in force. In spite of the wild, and speculated, and false stories of the arms for hostages and alleged ransom payments, we did not, repeat, did not trade weapons or anything else for hostages.

At the end of the first verse, Killer Mike and producer El-P once again use an excerpt from Reagan’s speech, this time to expose his mendacity: “A few months ago, I told the American people I did not trade arms for hostages. My heart and my best intentions still tell me that’s true but the facts and the evidence tell me it is not.” In exposing one of the weak points of Reagan’s tenures, Killer Mike lays the groundwork for the portrayal of life after the Reagan era and the denunciation of the War on Drugs. Both stylistically and historically, the exposure of Reagan’s Iran-Contra lies and the unraveling of his crime policies lead to a new era. That era is described in the second verse of Killer Mike’s song through a testimony about what Reagan’s policies “changed forever” in poor urban areas. The rapper has often referred to the impact drugs had on his family and personal life.¹⁰¹ However, “Reagan” complements the picture with a direct indictment of the conservative idol as the culprit for the War on Drugs. The depiction of the War on Drugs provided by Killer Mike details a cycle of police abuse that an increase in discretion and independence of police departments allowed: “What they really did was let the police terrorize whoever.” The correlation between the racial

¹⁰¹ See for example his verse on Rick Ross, Gunplay, Killer Mike, and Stalley. “Black and White (Remix).” RAP US. YouTube. *YouTube*, 6 Sep 2014. Web. 14 Apr 2016.
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nnnh4QBRr0U>

bias in the enforcement of the provisions of the War on Drugs and the growing leeway given to police officers is at the heart of the denunciation of Ronald Reagan's legacy.

The crackdown on drug crimes has also been widely denounced for two other reasons. First, drug crimes were not a major problem before the Reagan administration decided to wage a war on them. Drug consumption was considered a societal problem and a medical ailment more than a crime. The shift enacted under Nixon and intensified under Reagan toward a proactive war on drugs led scholars such as Michelle Alexander to point at: "the odd coincidence that an illegal drug crisis suddenly appeared in the black community after – not before a drug war had been declared."¹⁰² In rap music, the "odd coincidence" was often explained as being a result of the Reagan administration's decision to directly supply drugs in inner city neighborhoods. In that narrative, references to Ronald Reagan, Oliver North and the Iran-Contra affair are keystones.

Second, the issue of mass incarceration – especially among minority communities – started in no small part because of the War on Drugs. The three successive Republican tenures of Reagan and Bush Sr. witnessed a gigantic growth in numbers of inmates: "The 1994 prison population, including county jails, represented a 212 percent increase since 1980."¹⁰³ In other words, the kind of policies started by the 40th president aimed at papering over the cracks rather than looking for solutions to solve the issues at hand in poor communities.

In hip-hop culture, Reagan's neglect of urban communities has been repeatedly criticized. For example, politically committed rapper Brother Ali refers to Reagan's presidency and its negative impact by naming one of his albums "Mourning in America and Dreaming in Color" [2012]. Thereby, he takes aim at Reagan's 1984 campaign tagline "Morning in America." The rapper who belongs to the same generation as Killer Mike testifies about the long-lasting impact of the 1980s on inner city residential areas. In the eponymous song "Mourning in America,"¹⁰⁴ the artist drills down into the hopelessness of growing up in urban America after the Ronald Reagan era and mentions the threat of incarceration, the failure of schools, and the inaccessibility of upward

¹⁰² Alexander, Michelle M. *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness*. 2nd ed. Jackson, TN: Distributed by Perseus Distribution, 2010. 6. Print.

¹⁰³ Watkins, Craig S. *Hip-hop Matters: Politics, Pop Culture, and the Struggle for the Soul of a Movement*. 3rd ed. Boston: Beacon Press, 2006. 169. Print.

¹⁰⁴ Brother Ali. "Mourning in America." *Mourning In America And Dreaming In Color*. Rhymesayers Entertainment, 2012. Audio Recording.

mobility in the United States. However, it should be noticed that he ends the song on a hopeful note, saying that he is not satisfied with America as it is (and will keep on denouncing it) but that he hasn't lost hope in what the country ought to be and could become.

Criticism towards Ronald Reagan also filtrated in the lyrics of best-selling artists such as Jay-Z and Kanye West. In his single "Blue Magic" [2007], Jay-Z reiterates the indictment of Reagan's administration for the spread of crack cocaine: "Blame Reagan for making me into a monster. Blame Oliver North and Iran Contra. I ran contraband that they sponsored."¹⁰⁵ Once more, Ronald Reagan occupies a privileged position in the list of culprits for the spread of drugs in American neighborhoods and accordingly, for the dim prospects of a whole generation of Americans.

Those artists alongside other ones like Wale, Common, Scarface, and countless others were direct eye witnesses of Ronald Reagan's deeds. On a personal basis, they had firsthand experience of the changes brought about by the War on Drugs and as a result, they are able to draw upon their own experiences to comment on the situation. Some of them have directly involved themselves in politics as Common and Jay-Z's proximity to Barack Obama exemplify. Yet, as they point out in some of their songs, the consequences of the social and economic policies of Ronald Reagan expanded well beyond his presidency and they are not the only ones to denounce the plight of the urban poor.

A younger generation of artists has also testified about the origins and consequences of the drug problem in urban communities. Kendrick Lamar, who was born in 1987 and did not experience Reagan's presidency firsthand leads a group of rappers who were born during or just after Ronald Reagan declared his War on Drugs. In his album "Section 80" [2011], the emcee, who grew up in Compton, an area ravaged by drug trade and gang rivalries, documents the ways in which Reagan's social policies affected the kind of community in which he grew up. Kendrick Lamar, who witnessed the effects of the War on Drugs, provides a metaphorical condemnation of Reagan's policies in his song "Ronald Reagan Era" [2011]: "1987, the children of Ronald Reagan raked the leaves off your front porch with a machine blowtorch."¹⁰⁶ Whether "the children of Ronald Reagan" line hints at Reagan's neoconservative heirs or the laws he

¹⁰⁵ JAY Z. "Blue magic." *American Gangster (Explicit Version)*. Roc-A-Fella Records, 2007. Audio Recording

¹⁰⁶ Kendrick Lamar. "Ronald Reagan Era." *Section.80*. Top Dawg Entertainment, 2011. Audio Recording.

enacted, the impact they had on urban neighborhoods was dire. Throughout “Section 80,” Kendrick Lamar refers to Reagan as a fatherly figure who begot bastard children he deprived of alimony.

Therefore, they were bereft of means to cope with the challenges posed by America’s social structure.¹⁰⁷ In his view, the 40th president of the United States helped ingrain a destructive mindset in poor urban communities through relentless assaults on urban youth and governmental disinvestment. On his 2015 album “To Pimp a Butterfly”, Kendrick Lamar goes a step further by describing the consequences of the drift taken during the Reagan era. In “The Blacker the Berry” [2015], he parrots the discourse that some young blacks from his generation and the next one heard from society: “I mean it’s evident that I’m irrelevant to society. That’s what you’re telling me. Penitentiary would only hire me.”¹⁰⁸ The rapper fuels a tendency to link mass incarceration with the War on Drugs initiated under Reagan. Comments on mass incarceration increased in recent years as a bunch of artists pointed to the spread of drugs to account for the “New Jim Crow” affecting Blacks and Latinos in urban communities. For example, self-appointed revolutionary rapper Immortal Technique argues in “Civil War” [2011] that “the ghetto is like a prison with invisible bars;” thus shedding light on the impossibility of upward mobility for young inner city residents and the likelihood that they will spend time behind bars. On the same song, Killer Mike points out that “The government profits from prison population.”¹⁰⁹ In another one, Killer Mike denounces mass incarceration as “a plot and a plan for paper that punish the poorest kids.”¹¹⁰ Chicago emcee Lupe Fiasco expands on the role played by the tactics endorsed under Reagan and continued during the presidencies which followed. Following a trend which establishes a parallel between the War on Drugs and slavery as systems of control, Lupe Fiasco denounces federal and state policies which seek to punish crime and hide criminals from sight instead of tackling the root causes of criminal behavior. In that framework, prison becomes a solution to conceal social ills in addition to being a castigation of crime. In “Prisoner 1 & 2” [2015], the artist speaks as

¹⁰⁷ Kendrick Lamar. “Chapter Six.” *Section.80*. Top Dawg Entertainment, 2011. Audio Recording.

¹⁰⁸ Kendrick Lamar. “The blacker the berry.” *To Pimp A Butterfly*. Top Dawg Entertainment; Aftermath Entertainment; Interscope Records, 2015. Audio Recording.

¹⁰⁹ Immortal Technique, Killer Mike, Brother Ali, and Chuck D. “Civil War.” *The Martyr*. Viper Records, 2011. Audio Recording.

¹¹⁰ Glasses Malone, Killer Mike and Kendrick Lamar. “Thuggin’ (Remix).” GlassesMaloneVEVO. Aug 4 2015. Web. Feb. 19. 2016. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=i9XrBxcRUwE>

a prison warden constantly watchful of what inmates could do. Asserting that these criminals are lost for society, the persona argues that these prisoners should be sentenced for life “you should get strike two, you should get like life.”¹¹¹ With those words, the rapper echoes the direction taken by crime legislation in the last 30 years, namely that convicts should get long sentences for specific crimes (especially drug crimes) and be deprived of a second chance after their first misstep. His lyrics also resonate with a penchant to accuse Reagan of setting up a system to warehouse expendable constituencies. According to activist Angela Davis, “The massive prison-building project that began in the 1980s created the means of concentrating and managing what the capitalist system had implicitly declared to be a human surplus.”¹¹²

Immortal Technique brings the indictment of the American government for its role in the intense criminalization of drug crimes. According to the lyrics of his song “Bin Laden” [2005], in which, as we shall see in the second part of this study, he interprets 9/11 as an inside job, Immortal Technique harks back to corporate and governmental involvement in the spread of cocaine in America’s urban centers: “Corporate military banking off the War on Terror / They controlling the ghetto with the fear of attack / Tryna distract the fact that they engineering the crack.”¹¹³ His standpoint is even more detailed in the song “Peruvian Cocaine” [2003]¹¹⁴ in which he depicts the drug trade in the form of a “tragicomedy” with various actors (workers in a South American cocaine field, corrupted local politician, CIA agent in cahoots with the trade, small-scale drug retailer in America...). In this song, he claims that institutions are involved in supplying the same drugs they pledged to eradicate in America through the planks of the War on Drugs. A fictional interview taken from the movie *Scarface* precedes the song and includes the contention that the U.S. government favored the spread of crack cocaine in America while simultaneously clamping down on drug

¹¹¹ Lupe Fiasco, and Ayesha Jaco. “Prisoner 1 & 2 (feat. Ayesha Jaco).” *Tetsuo & Youth*. Atlantic Records, 2015. Audio Recording.

¹¹² Davis, Angela Y. *Are Prisons Obsolete?* New York, NY: Seven Stories Press, U.S., 2003. 91. Print.

¹¹³ Immortal Technique, Mos Def, and DJ Green Lantern. “Bin Laden.” Single. Viper Records; Babygrande Records, 2005. Audio Recording.

¹¹⁴ Immortal Technique, et al. “Peruvian cocaine.” *Revolutionary Vol. 2*. Viper Records, 2003. Audio Recording.

consumption. Thus, he echoes theories widespread in hip-hop's historical revisionism that "the real father of crack was Ronald Reagan."¹¹⁵

Nonetheless, although the theory of a governmentally assisted cocaine spread throughout inner city communities has gained sway over the last decades – particularly in hip-hop songs - factual evidence of CIA involvement and of Reagan's awareness of the situation has remained too thin "to prove a conspiracy."¹¹⁶ The involvement of members of the Reagan administration, whether known to the president himself or not, might not have been as pivotal as various rappers have portrayed it given that the drug trade was already shooting up in Central America and progressively infiltrated the American market.¹¹⁷ Still, the narrative of a president playing deaf to the spread of crack cocaine in urban poor communities chimed with the narrative about social abandonment under Reagan.

Another colorful character in the crack cocaine plot depicted by several rappers was Rick Ross, a middleman allegedly used by the CIA to facilitate the supply of Nicaraguan cocaine in American cities. Once again, Rick Ross the drug trafficker has been a recurrent reference in hip-hop culture and even became the stage name of one of the most famous artists in the industry.¹¹⁸

In recent years, the War on Drugs has been denounced even more loudly as a growing share of social scientists joined rappers to point to the institutionalization of a bias against blacks through specific pieces of legislation. Theories about the War on Drugs have bolstered claims about the hostility of a whole system. Cultural references such as the ones offered by Killer Mike, Immortal Technique, Kendrick Lamar and others have echoed findings of academic studies about systemic racial and social discrimination. These artists brought the findings to a broader public without delving into details. As a result, their portrayals often took simplified forms and favoured scorn for America and its leading institutions. That scornful attitude included a wariness

¹¹⁵ Daveyd, mr. "Here's what we should teach our kids today on Ronald Reagan Day - hip-hop and politics." *2011 Daily News*. Hip-Hop and Politics, 6 Feb. 2011. Web. 31 Mar 2016.
<http://hiphopandpolitics.com/?s=ronald+reagan>

¹¹⁶ Marcy, William L. *The Politics of Cocaine: How U.S. Foreign Policy Has Created a Thriving Drug Industry in Central and South America*. United States: Zephyr Press, 2010. 115. Print.

¹¹⁷ Ibid. Marcy, William L. Chapter 4

¹¹⁸ This even led to a trial as documented in Selby, Jenn. "Rapper Rick Ross wins \$10 Million Court Battle against Former Drug Kingpin to Keep his Name." *Independent*. 02 Jan 2014. Web. 31 May 2016.
<http://www.independent.co.uk/news/people/news/rapper-rick-ross-wins-10-million-court-battle-against-former-drug-kingpin-to-keep-his-name-9034861.html>

towards the Democratic Party which, despite its occasional appeals to black voters, has not been aware of the pressing concerns depicted by the rappers mentioned above.

Another reason for criticism against Reagan came from his economic policies, which frequently receive the praise of right-wing pundits. In the words of social commentator and musicologist Bakari Kitwana, the Reagan era also marked the onset of economic failure in soon-to-be-neglected communities:

At home, as the new economy marched forward, supportive politicians and economists insisted that what was good for American-based global corporations was good for the national economy and for American workers. Corporate profit, they argued, would trickle down to all workers. But the trickle-down never came. Instead hundreds of thousands of jobs were lost in the 1980s.¹¹⁹

Unemployment rates, health hazards statistics, and studies about income in urban poor communities reinforce the feeling that Reagan pushed the envelope for the abandonment of these communities.¹²⁰

The phenomenon of demonization of those who crafted legislation such as the War on Drugs or advocated in favor of economic laissez-faire reflects a widespread distrust towards the government and the official history of the country. This is made obvious by the last words of Killer Mike in “Reagan” that he ends with the conspiratorial theory according to which Reagan is the Devil because of the number of letters in his names (“Ronald Wilson Reagan / 666”). Such a far-fetched theory plays into the entertainment value of the song but theories likening famous politicians to evil have flourished in recent years; thus showing that what is perceived to be at stake in the game of politics has increased.

Still, it is pivotal to clarify that Kendrick Lamar and Killer Mike among other rappers own up to their responsibility in the state of affairs. They acknowledge that they share guilt in furthering systemic discrimination against poor urban communities. As spokesmen for young blacks and urban poor residents, they are not helpless victims in a discriminatory system. Indeed, the latter devotes the first verse of “Reagan” to

¹¹⁹ Kitwana, Bakari. *The Hip-hop Generation: Young Blacks and the Crisis in African American Culture*. New York: Basic Civitas Books, 1 Sept. 2002. 34. Print.

¹²⁰ See Lipsitz, George. *The Possessive Investment in Whiteness: How White People Profit from Identity Politics*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press, U.S., 1998. 24-46. Print.

denounce the nefarious role played by rappers banking on the glorification of crime. He also shoots down the rags-to-riches version of the American dream

“So it seems our people starve from lack of understanding cause

All we seem to give them is some balling and some dancing

And some talking bout our cars and imaginary mansions

We should be indicted for bullshit we inciting...”¹²¹

The younger emcee from Compton also confesses complicity in the predicament of his home community. In “The Blacker the Berry,” he declares from the start that he is “the biggest hypocrite of 2015”¹²². In a final climax, he reveals that in his youth, he was involved in the death of another black man and that denouncing the death of Trayvon Martin reveals his double standards.¹²³ Thus, he implies that his proximity to gangs and participation in street crime made him unfit to criticize the downward spiral favoured by an adverse environment. Yet, it is noticeable that unlike the beliefs promoted by right-wing pundits, the portrayals drawn by rappers imply that institutional structures played a key role in the plight of young blacks and other poor urban residents.

These features, which breed distrust in ‘the system’ in an already jaded generation of Americans, nurture a form of discourse in which the either-with-us-or-against-us worldview dear to conservative pundits reappears. In the hip-hop generations’ worldview, the predicaments that plague inner-city communities, and particularly black youth are all interrelated and date back to Reagan’s decisions. The War on Drugs, which was initiated by the idol of modern conservatism is often equated by many people in hip-hop generations with a decision to wage a war on a bracket of the American people. Contentions that the drug problem was largely amped up by media coverage and aggravated by the sudden spread of crack cocaine - for which Reagan’s administration is labeled guilty - are common. That vision and its conspiratorial undertones have been congruent with pleas denouncing the government’s role in urban plight. It has informed some forms of nihilism as well as a wariness for politics and disenfranchisement through abstention.

¹²¹ Killer Mike. “Reagan.” *R.A.P. Music*. Williams Street Records, 2012. Audio Recording.

¹²² Killer Mike. “Reagan.” *R.A.P. Music*. Williams Street Records, 2012. Audio Recording.

¹²³ Kendrick Lamar. “The Blacker the Berry.” *To Pimp A Butterfly*. Top Dawg Entertainment; Aftermath Entertainment; Interscope Records, 2015. Audio Recording.

Beyond Reagan and recent political history, the hip-hop worldview described in those pages is also marked by an acute distrust for positive versions of American history as a whole. By recognizing that America is not immune from flaws, they give a wide berth to the originalist vision of history propounded in right-wing media. Their skepticism stems from the fact that the history of the communities they come from (blacks, Latinos, and poor whites) gets glossed over in most historical studies. As James W. Loewen states: “African Americans want to see positive images of “themselves” in American history.”¹²⁴ Hence, the shortfall of positive images in what African Americans (as well as other non-whites and poor whites to a lesser extent) get from history teaching breeds scorn for institutional America. More, efforts to debunk history as it is retold inform standpoints that equate official historical narratives with the nation’s infatuation with itself. Therefore, they echo James Baldwin’s reluctance to take American history as a tool to shape identity: “What passes for identity in America is a series of myths about one’s heroic ancestors.”¹²⁵ Spoken word poet Propaganda corroborates that view and aims at blind historical glorification in his song “Precious Puritans” [2012].¹²⁶ Through an exploration of history from the point of view of victims, Propaganda points out that puritans took part in the slave trade and that the glorification of what they brought to America slights non-white sensitivities. Although the emphasis is laid on religion, the artist’s diatribe about historical adulation pays lip service to the mindset of a generation that finds neither resonance nor comfort in American history. Among other instances, veteran Chicago rapper Lupe Fiasco devotes his song “Unforgivable Youth” [2012]¹²⁷ to relate the United States’ plundering of Native American lands and the slave trade that followed. Those elements which are often belittled in history textbooks and classrooms are important components of worldviews that baffle patriotic versions of history. The prominence of America’s past aggravations against minority groups prevents some artists to promote patriotism. For instance, references to impossible pledges of allegiance such as Lupe Fiasco’s opening words in the song “Strange Fruition” [2012]: “I can’t pledge allegiance to your flag

¹²⁴ Loewen, James W. *Lies My Teacher Told Me: Everything Your American History Textbook Got Wrong*. New York: Simon & Schuster Adult Publishing Group, 16 Oct. 2007. 44. Print.

¹²⁵ Baldwin, James. “A Talk to Teachers,” *Saturday Review*, December 21st 1963, reprinted in ed. by Simonson, Rick and Walker, Scott, *Multi-Cultural Literacy*, St. Paul, MN: Graywolf Press, 1988.

¹²⁶ Propaganda, and Kevin Olusola. “Precious Puritans.” *Excellent*. Beautiful Eulogy, 2012. Audio Recording.

¹²⁷ Lupe Fiasco, and Jason Evigan. “Unforgivable Youth.” *Food and Liquor II: The Great American Rap Album Pt. 1*. 1st & 15th Records; Atlantic Records. 2011. Audio Recording.

because I can find no reconciliation with your past” serve to repudiate what American pride has become.¹²⁸ The impossibility of reconciliation with “your” patriotism is symptomatic of a share of the country which does not perceive America’s foreign policy decisions under the same light as some other Americans do.

To summarize, for members of a whole generation, the Reagan era became a cataclysmic period of history that doomed their communities for several decades. The main critiques issued by hip-hop artistry over the years have centered on the following issues: “racial profiling, environmental justice, electoral politics, youth issues, parenting, globalization” which have been described as “many heads to the same monster.”¹²⁹ Most of these issues have been traced back to the Reagan era and the two-term Republican president has come to be identified as the monster who wreaked havoc on urban communities nowadays. A central tenet of rap’s revisionist narrative is that Reagan instigated a war on drugs which ravaged inner city centers and targeted blacks and Latinos. He also pursued an economic agenda which primed individual initiative and thus made starting from the bottom a difficult endeavor.

On the other hand, Reagan received praise on the right side of the political spectrum for having put America right back on track. Although observers like blogger “Walter Crunkite” think that the glorification of Reagan has taken hold: “We’ve been so overwhelmed by the story of Reagan’s unassailable greatness that the conservative narrative largely prevails,”¹³⁰ the importance of the vilification process of the former president should not be underestimated. These dissonant yet loud legacies partly inform the two irreconcilable stances on social politics in the United States and inform the development of history wars in new cultural spaces. While a substantial share of the American people sees the Reagan era as one of the most glorious in history, numerous others argue that it kick-started a new phase of decline of their communities. They also set the framework for the absence of debate between two sides perceived as extreme by each other. As these two sub-parts foreshadowed, the process I described above owed much to the role played by new media. In the third sub-part, I will focus on the technical

¹²⁸ Lupe Fiasco. “Strange Fruition.” *Food and Liquor II: The Great American Rap Album Pt. 1*. 1st & 15th Records; Atlantic Records. 2011 Audio Recording

¹²⁹ Kitwana, Bakari. *The Hip-hop Generation: Young Blacks and the Crisis in African American Culture*. 149

¹³⁰ Inc, Genius Media Group. *Rap vs. Ronald Reagan*. Genius, 17 May 2013. Web. 24 Mar. 2016.
<http://genius.com/posts/775-Rap-vs-ronald-reagan>

specificities which make emotional approaches to history the norm in new media outlets.

I – C/ Historical Remembrance in New Media

The coexistence and popularity of the opposed views I detailed above reveals an environment in which conflict is marketable, especially when it comes to historical revisionism. Instant-based media and history have never been compatible. History, as such, is not an entertaining product fit for television or music. Thoroughgoing history programs on television, a “present-centered medium” according to Neil Postman,¹³¹ are relegated to obscure cable channels or public networks. In a world revolving primarily around “image, instancy, and therapy,” the weight of history considerably shrinks.¹³² The rare attempts to make it into a palatable product transform it into authoritative truth rather than a set of contested theories. The tendency to spread a single historical truth increases in new media outlets. Such an obsession is puzzling, especially when the study of recent history is at hand. Indeed, as James W. Loewen signals, recent events are more contested than old history and should not be recounted with authoritative value.¹³³

Although it has occasionally made inroads in the world of radio, history seems incompatible with new media for other reasons than the problem of clear-cut narratives. It faces other hurdles in visual and audible media: it does not work well with images and needs to be put in context. While the former disqualifies it for TV, the latter considerably alters the kind of history featuring on the radio and in music.

Moreover, the historical record does not always brim with images that could be used as primary sources. In other cases, historical sources require additional commentary to be put in context. Thus, in media which peddle history as a means of entertainment and “identification” for the audience (as opposed to “history as interpretation”¹³⁴), the scarcity of raw emotional material complicates the task of

¹³¹ Postman, Neil, and Andrew Postman. *Amusing Ourselves to Death Public Discourse in the Age of Show Business*. 20th ed. New York, N.Y., U.S.A.: Penguin Books, 2005 [1985]. 126. Print.

¹³² Ibid. Postman, Neil. 140

¹³³ Loewen, James W. *Lies My Teacher Told Me: Everything Your American History Textbook Got Wrong*. New York: Simon & Schuster Adult Publishing Group, 2007. 259-279. Print.

¹³⁴ Morris-Suzuki, Tessa. *The Past Within Us: Media, Memory, History*. United Kingdom: Verso Books, 2004. 224. Print.

making history attractive. Finally, in some cases, it needs to be transformed into fiction and thus by definition, stripped of part of its truth value.

The fictionalization of history is precisely what happened to the Reagan era with the image of holy Reagan carved out of conservative stone and the evil-mindedness of the 40th president depicted in rap songs. Outside of the academic world, the legacy of Reagan is painted in shades of black and white because that oppositional framework is adapted to the ways culture is consumed in America at the turn of the 21st century. New culture contributes to narrowing down the breadth of the past. The proliferation of different sources which become increasingly accessible leads to a greater selectivity when it comes to ferreting out primary sources. Thus, sources are extracted from a heap made readily available by new technology. How supportive they are of a preconceived opinion is an important criterion in the selection process. The construction of Reagan as a die-hard ideologue who waxed and waned with his ideas owes much to the selection of sources made by Limbaugh, Hannity, and others. The obliteration of his tax raises from both his records as governor of California and president of the United States is only one of the sundry examples of cultural amnesia.

For modern conservatives, it seems unconscionable that Americans would want to veer away from principles vindicated by the historical record. This can be explained by the fact that conservative infotainers speak to an audience dominated by old, white, and rather affluent viewers who saw the Reagan era as a boon. In Fox News' world for instance, it seems impossible to construe why new generations ignore the Reagan era so much. In a regular sequence of *The Bill O'Reilly Show*, an interviewer named Jesse Watters conducts street interviews to confront the views of American millennials depicted as addicted to entitlements and deluded by promises of governmental help. In one of these sequences, Watters holds a picture of Reagan and seems scandalized that interviewees fail to identify the man on the picture.¹³⁵ This is another attempt to convey the impression that America has forgotten its glorious recent past and that if the Reagan legacy had not been distorted, Americans would naturally rally behind the Reaganite worldview and style of governance.

¹³⁵ Kaufman, Scott Eric. *Fox news tasks Jesse Watters to roam the streets of NYC and find people unfamiliar with white popular culture — again*. Salon, 19 Apr. 2016. Web. 02 May 2016. http://www.salon.com/2016/04/19/fox_news_hires_jesse_watters_to_roam_the_streets_of_nyc_and_find_people_unfamiliar_with_white_popular_culture_again/

In this respect, the discussion of “historiographies of oblivion” provided by Morris-Suzuki offers interesting insights on the phenomenon. Although she focuses on the tactics to which massacre deniers resort, the two-pronged strategy she exposes has some relevance here. According to her, revisionists “shift the arena of discussion away from the overall meaning, causes and effects of the historical event, towards a more narrow matter of definitions; and second, they subject a small number of selected pieces of evidence to sustained critical scrutiny.”¹³⁶ In the case of Reagan’s image in right-wing outlets, the enhancement of his economic and tax policies over the dismal record of his social policies served to depict him as a savior especially in light of the simultaneous portrayal of the Carter presidency as hell-on-earth. In other words, Reagan myth-makers primed issues such as the Cold War and privileged laudatory sources to depict a hero rather than a president. Through the creation of a president who triumphed over enemies who beleaguered him throughout his presidency, conservatives kept a movement alive. Bolstered by the support of people who held fond memories of the 40th president, conservatives attempted to convert younger generations to a modern movement associated with a president who was no longer around. Thus, the ways in which history was shunned by new media allowed conservative pundits to be the main media voices to take an interest in events that had happened in the 1980s. In so doing, they insisted that lessons could be drawn from a past they reshaped. Indeed, the Reagan era belonged to the recent past at a time when interest in all forms of memory was shrinking. Thus, it was up for grabs for any group interested in using it. The second group that showed up to comment on Reagan’s legacy dramatically opposed right-wing media pundits. That struggle in which it became tough to agree on the actions of a president speaks volumes about the erosion of historical common ground between atomized groups of Americans.

Another facet of history in new media is that the emphasis on the role of individuals has increased. The two groups I have analyzed abide by a similar set of principles. Glenn Beck’s foreword to *Dreamers and Deceivers* reveals important features of the conception of history I describe in those pages. In his words, “history isn’t really about events – those are just labels we give to things. It’s the people who really matter.”¹³⁷ The creation of heroes who face larger-than-life predicaments and

¹³⁶ Morris-Suzuki, Tessa. *The Past Within Us: Media, Memory, History*. 22-23

¹³⁷ Beck, Glenn. *Dreamers and Deceivers: True and Untold Stories of the Heroes and Villains Who Made America*. United States: Threshold Editions, 2014. xi. Print.

intractable opponents reflects the transformation of politics. It is easier to sell politics as entertainment when it has enormous stakes and when its lead characters have enormous power. The daily routine of Washington D.C.'s negotiations and consensus pales in comparison with the repackaged version outlined above. Indeed, recent political history has been revamped with lead characters who achieve results against all odds and villains who wield limitless powers. In those versions, heroes like Ronald Reagan coped with multitudinous enemies bent on using their power to thwart the common good: the mainstream media, the Russians, the Democrats, the radicals, the skeptics, the establishment, you name it. James W. Loewen, in his analysis of history textbooks which can be applied to new culture in general, observes that: "textbooks leave out the warts, the problems, the unfortunate character traits, and the mistaken ideas"¹³⁸ of the portrayals of historical figures pegged as good. Adversely, the phenomenon of vilification observed above identifies the historical figure as a celluloid villain. In my opinion, it is precisely those versions of history which suit the current era and its dominant forms of culture. Shortened historical narratives that TV, radio, music, and the Internet spread entail the simplification of issues. History is now narrated as the result of the intersection of decisions taken by individuals who indulge in good or evil deeds. The salience of individuals in the historical record aggrandizes the power of individuals and belittles the importance of structures. Glossing over the role of corporations, administrations, grassroots movements, lobby groups and structural factors accounting for economic, political, and social events increases individual merits and accountability. It also makes the president of the United States a major actor in tilting the whole world towards good or evil, as we shall see in the next two parts. A diet of information from new cultural forms inevitably leads to navigate between adulation and loathing of historical characters.

These tactics, when applied to individuals like Ronald Reagan, amount to creating fictional characters who were either exempt from or fraught with flaws. Reagan monopolizes the admiration of pundits who emerged out of a generation who was favored by Reagan's decisions. They represent a piecemeal version of history in which the Reagan era represented heaven on earth. Conversely, artists who hail from communities harmed by Reagan's social measures depict him from their perspective. As

¹³⁸ Loewen, James W. *Lies My Teacher Told Me: Everything Your American History Textbook Got Wrong*. 29.

a consequence, the overall picture of the Reagan era can be found neither in popular culture nor in infotainment media. What they provide are emotional cues about a flamboyant movie-like character. On the one hand, comforting redoubts from an ever more distant past are very useful to mobilize people in the present. Glorified visions of a blissful past are more likely to spur political involvement than realistic promises grounded in current concerns. On the other hand, demonized versions of a past era supply reasons to be wary of mainstream institutions and/or to look for other ways to have an impact on politics. In both cases, the relevance of Reagan is more current than ever and the struggle to rewrite his legacy influences attitudes in the present. In light of his importance in conservative media, the former president still looms large in modern politics. He, and to a lesser degree, his administration, have been set as starting points for worldviews which collide in the present era. Such a scenario unraveled in large part because of the diversification and spread of history in non-academic spaces. The transition of history to media such as TV, radio, or the Internet marked a general evolution from the domination of media which “seem readily adaptable to the tasks of interpretation and analysis” to new ones “given to tasks of evoking identification with the experiences of the past.”¹³⁹ In other words, the gradual demise of print-based forms of culture, their intertextuality, depth, and ease for contextualization expedited the transformation of history. Indeed, in “the age of show-business,”¹⁴⁰ history has turned into an exact science defined by single historical truths and compelling narratives of struggles between incommensurate forces. In this respect, new perceptions of history remind the conspiratorial mindset described by Richard Hofstadter at the time of Barry Goldwater’s 1964 presidential bid. In his words, the paranoid mind thinks that: “history is a conspiracy, set in motion by demonic forces of almost transcendent power, and what is felt to be needed to defeat it is not the usual methods of political give-and-take, but an all-out crusade.”¹⁴¹ By making Reagan a central protagonist of history who bears direct responsibility for all the events (and non-events) happening during his tenure, hip-hop artists and right-wing media pundits peddle a paranoid style in which single individuals possess the power to change history on their own. These individuals should be stopped at all costs in those versions of history.

¹³⁹ Morris-Suzuki, Tessa. *The Past Within Us: Media, Memory, History*. 23

¹⁴⁰ Postman, Neil. *Amusing Ourselves to Death Public Discourse in the Age of Show Business*.

¹⁴¹ Hofstadter, Richard. *The Paranoid Style in American Politics, and other Essays*. New York: Knopf, 1966. 29. Print.

In a nutshell, the triumph of instant-based media accounts for the increasingly warped versions of history held by many Americans. In the last thirty years, under the impetus of new media outlets, history has become something that is meted out to be approved rather than explored to be debated. As I have shown in this first part, the reinterpretation of history has contributed to entrenching uncompromising ideological visions in the present. The use of an American president as raw material to carve out a perfect role model or reviled arch-villain informs broader attitudes towards the country in general.

Alarming statements about the decline of history have been common in recent years among historiographers. Although warning about people's alienation from the past¹⁴² might be an overreaction, it is hardly deniable that variegated and diffuse versions of the past in new media have done a disservice to new generations' historical awareness. The new approaches to history I have described in this first part play an important role in allowing isolated groups to co-opt the past to push for current ideologies.

In the second part, I am going to turn to another facet that defined cultural and political discourse in the 21st century. In so doing, I will focus on something which had not happened since America's unison against communism: dissent from a point of view is now construed as either blithe disbelief in the best cases or genuine enmity in the worst ones. The proclivity to create enemies, not only in the historical record, but among the American polity spiraled under the Bush era as Manicheism prevailed in the governmental narrative but also in new forms of culture.

¹⁴² As for example in Plumb, J. H., Simon Schama, and Niall Ferguson. *The Death of the Past*. 2nd ed. N.p.: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004. Print.

II- Domestic Warfare: How Disagreement Became Antagonism

II – A/ Liberal Enemies: The Transformation of Dissenters into Enemies from Clinton’s Crimes to Bush’s Holy War

The Reagan revolution lauded by right-wing pundits was not only refurbished as a genuine era of greatness in the country. It was also painted as a counter-revolution because decisions taken and attitudes formed in the sixties were called into question or rescinded. In this narrative, those who had been left out of the morning in America offered by Reagan owed their misfortune to defecting cultural values that the 1960s had instilled in them. According to political scientist George Lipsitz:

Reagan and his allies mobilized a crossclass coalition around the premise that the declines in life chances and opportunities in the United States, the stagnation of real wages, the decline of basic services and infrastructure resources, and the increasing social disintegration stemmed not from the policies of big corporations and their neo-liberal and neo-conservative allies in government, but from the harm done to the nation by the civil rights, antiwar, feminists, and gays liberation movements of the 1960s and 1970s.¹⁴³

Some of the former president’s allies assisted by new ones have maintained this contention to this day. They pretend that sixties radicals and their heirs are still bent on

¹⁴³ Lipsitz, George. *The Possessive Investment in Whiteness: How White People Profit from Identity Politics*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press, U.S., 1998. 72. Print.

foisting their dystopian vision on other Americans. Indeed, the condemnation of the uprisings of the 1960s and the promotion of individual respectability to achieve success are part and parcel of the message hammered by Hannity, Limbaugh and company. More, according to them, the fact that America veered off course in the 1960s was not mere happenstance. The theory they offer is that radicals hijacked America from the course it should have followed. Not only were these hijackers armed with bad intentions, they suffered from inherent moral flaws.

In moral terms, Fox, Limbaugh and other right-wing commentators started promoting the view that liberals' moral values were rotten. Limning a liberal enemy with corrupted personal values allowed to draw a link between 60s radicals and turn of the 21st century Democrats. In doing so, they also catered to the Christian Right that the 1980s and 1990s had reactivated politically. During his mandate, Bill Clinton supplied much fuel to that view with the Lewinsky affair. Investigations into the scandalous personal and professional parts of Bill Clinton's lifestyle became daily features in right-wing outlets for which "the scandal was a media bonanza."¹⁴⁴ According to Sherman, the emphasis on moral values in right-wing media was spurred by the firestorm following the scandals to which Clinton was linked artificially or factually. Interestingly, the variety of accusations proffered against the 42nd president was impressive. Years after the first presidential campaign genuinely based on attack politics created by Roger Ailes – Fox's future executive producer – for G.H.W. Bush in 1988, the Clinton era marked the next step in the demonization of the enemy. It was through scandal, conflict, and attacks that politics found a way to make an inroad in new media, especially TV. Neutrality and information-based discussions were now at loggerheads with instant-based media because these principles couldn't adapt to the pace imposed in new technology. Fox News transformed into an "anti-Clinton news network" and experienced an impressive and unexpected growth by relaying theories about Clinton's countless extramarital affairs, his un-American intentions, or association with radicals from the 1960s.¹⁴⁵ The criticism they deployed has some common features with the sharpened one they would dig out for the Obama era. Quickly, Fox and other growing networks became strongholds to revitalize the culture

¹⁴⁴ Sherman, Gabriel. *The Loudest Voice in the Room: How the Brilliant, Bombastic Roger Ailes Built Fox News-- and Divided a Country*. New York: Random House Publishing Group, 2014. 225. Print.

¹⁴⁵ Neiwert, David. *The Eliminationists: How Hate Talk Radicalized the American Right*. United Kingdom: Polipoint Press, 2009. 40. Print.

war and denounced a passel of “contemptible influences: Bill Clinton’s libido, the media, environmentalists, gay activists...”¹⁴⁶

Those features had two major consequences. Firstly, at the political level, ideology was more valued than concrete plans in attack politics. That tendency was epitomized by the rise of Newt Gingrich who used conservative outlets as well as public channel C-SPAN to indulge in vitriolic onslaughts against political rivals. According to George Packer, Newt Gingrich inspired a new brand of politicians who began to regard bipartisanship in oppositional terms rather than consensual ones: “Whether he ever truly believed his own rhetoric, the generation he brought to power fervently did. He gave them mustard gas and they used it on every conceivable enemy, including him.”¹⁴⁷ Gingrich’s vision of politics first affected Congress when his coalition of Republicans took over the institution to oppose Clinton’s executive branch. The author of the “Contract with America” based his moves in Congress upon the premise that bipartisan cooperation was less profitable than ideological staunchness:

Gingrich’s proposition, and maybe accurately, was that as long as...our party cooperate[s] with Democrats and get[s] 20 or 30 percent of what we want and they get to say they solved the problem and had a bipartisan bill, there’s no incentive for the American people to change leadership.¹⁴⁸

Yet, his impact was not limited to political wheeling and dealing. He also knew how to mesmerize audiences and frame debates in ways that favored his vision without getting into political details. Such a proclivity for outrage and simple rephrasing has earned him a privileged spot on Fox News up today. These qualities would also prove valuable for aspiring politicians reaching to the masses through new media.

Secondly, the rise of talk-radio, Fox News Channel, and a good number of conservative websites were omens of a new twist in conservative discourse. It was no longer necessary to argue that a decision was misguided. More and more political disagreements got equated with inherent discrepancies as to what America represents and how it should evolve. Conflict no longer revolved around episodic decisions

¹⁴⁶ Sherman, Gabriel. *The Loudest Voice in the Room: How the Brilliant, Bombastic Roger Ailes Built Fox News-- and Divided a Country*. 225

¹⁴⁷ Packer, George. *The Unwinding: An Inner History of the New America*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2013. 24. Print.

¹⁴⁸ Seitz-Wald, Alex. *How newt Gingrich crippled congress*. The Nation, 29 June 2015. Web. 12 Feb. 2016. <http://www.thenation.com/article/how-newt-gingrich-crippled-congress/>

because conservative hosts proclaimed that most problems facing the country stemmed from the creed of ill-intentioned liberals. Liberalism morphed into a plague to wipe out. It became a fact that liberals couldn't be brought back to reason. In Rush Limbaugh's words, "liberalism is a scourge. It destroys the human spirit. It destroys prosperity. It assigns sameness to everybody. And wherever I find it, I oppose it."¹⁴⁹ Accordingly, if they ignored the right way on purpose, something was wrong either with their wits or even worse, with their intentions toward the country. They became enemies from within afflicted with moral flaws who devoted their lives to undermine America's progress. Under Clinton, in spite of their occasional bitterness, attacks on liberals were only in their early stages and their consequences on public discourse remained limited. The Bush presidency marked a new step in the influence of conservative talk on public and political discourse. At no point in history was public discourse as dualistic as during the Iraq War.

In the aftermath of 9/11, the context was particularly ripe for the spread of dual visions of the world. The obsession with demonic forces favored wary mindsets in which enemies were hearkening in the shadows both abroad and at home. George W. Bush himself harked back to a rhetoric in which evil was a characteristic of some countries and individuals. America's "most prominent moralist"¹⁵⁰ hammered that the War on Terror was defined by the omnipresence of enemies who were infected with the virus of evil. By making such remarks to a citizenry that 9/11 had bound together, the 43rd president prompted Americans to share a Manichean worldview and look for pervasive enemies.¹⁵¹ The success of maneuvers by the Bush administration to garner support for the war stemmed from the redefinition of governmental decisions as righteous and patriotic. The administration benefitted from what Victor Argothy calls a "consensus crisis" in which 9/11 led to "great efforts on the part of authorities and the impacted population take place to minimize social distinctions and promote a common orientation for action."¹⁵² Until the War in Iraq, Bush's decisions, especially in foreign affairs, faced little opposition. In other words, the early stages of G.W. Bush's tenure

¹⁴⁹ Limbaugh, Rush. "The Playboy Interview: Rush Limbaugh," *Playboy*, December, 1993. Print.

¹⁵⁰ Singer, Peter. *The President of Good and Evil: The Convenient Ethics of George W. Bush*. New York: E P Dutton & Co, 2004. 1. Print.

¹⁵¹ Greenwald, Glenn. *A Tragic Legacy: How a Good Vs. Evil Mentality Destroyed the Bush Presidency*. New York: Crown Publishing Group (NY), 2007. xi. Print.

¹⁵² Argothy, Victor. "Framing Volunteerism in a Consensus Crisis: Mass Media Coverage of Volunteers in the 9/11 Response." Disaster Research Center. University of Delaware. 2. 2003. Web. 14 Jan 2016.

were the last time in American history when bipartisan conflict caved in to the severity of the issues of its time. The actual conflict in Iraq reactivated bipartisanism and even ratcheted it up to a new level.

Indeed, although war operations in Afghanistan were virtually unopposed, the War in Iraq was not univocally supported by the American people. The support it garnered in the early stages of the conflict was high partly as a result of news media approval of the war. In this respect, Gadi Wolfsfeld provides an interesting framework in which she argues that the level of popular consensus for an issue dictates the approach of news media. In the early stages of the War in Iraq, when victory was thought to be swiftly accessible and the reasons for war had not yet been undermined, news media were overwhelmingly supportive of the war effort. Support for the war effort did not come only from media identified as right-wing. For instance, CNN, often lambasted as a “drive-by” or mauled for belonging to the mainstream media, adhered wholeheartedly to the governmental narrative.¹⁵³ The influence of government over news institutions stood to the surface after the War in Iraq began. News media were in a position in which they can be “considered merely one more tool in the allies’ arsenal” and did not “feel [any] obligation to present opposing views because such attitudes [were] considered marginal and inconsequential.”¹⁵⁴ Coverage of the war was also strongly influenced by governmental guidelines. For instance, military contributors on Fox News’ payroll got the drill from the government on what they should and should not say.¹⁵⁵

Nonetheless, as the war unraveled and rationales for it began to crumble, the level of consensus decreased. As a consequence, war protests became increasingly newsworthy and national news outlets started to heed dissenting voices. As a result, some media conservatives who remained supportive of the war effort targeted war protesters and played a major role in bringing the conflict to the home front. They applied a dualistic view to cover the war in Iraq and categorized protesters as internal enemies. Sean Hannity encapsulates the points of view circulating in conservative entertainment with the following words: “We weren’t just fighting the war on terror; we

¹⁵³ See Jaramillo, Deborah L. *Ugly War, Pretty Package: How CNN and Fox News Made the Invasion of Iraq High Concept*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2009. Print.

¹⁵⁴ Wolfsfeld, Gadi, and Philippe J. Maarek, eds. *Political Communication in a New ERA: A Cross-National Perspective*. London: Routledge, 2002. 145-146. Print.

¹⁵⁵ Jaramillo, Deborah L. *Ugly War, Pretty Package: How CNN and Fox News Made the Invasion of Iraq High Concept*. 201.

were fighting an internal enemy – the left, which was doing everything it could to undermine our war effort.”¹⁵⁶

Opinionated right-wing media were perfectly at ease with dualism because that vision was the one they had been propounding for years. Dismissing anti-war protests as not representative of America allowed right-wing personalities to seize the blanket of patriotism. It also contributed to establish a divide between people who act in the best interests of the country and others who willingly jeopardize America’s well-being for base personal gains. In order to better understand the conservative outlook on war and war protests, a brief exploration of the martial record of the United States is necessary.

When it comes to war, conservative media spokesmen such as Sean Hannity share a firm belief in the overbearing military power of the United States. They use that argument as a basic premise in all conflicts. It follows that they express disbelief at unsuccessful war operations. Recently, in a segment of his Fox show, Sean Hannity discussed America’s martial history with former Secretary of State Donald Rumsfeld in those terms: “Go back to Vietnam. We could have won Vietnam but it became politicized. Iraq became politicized.”¹⁵⁷ Sean Hannity is not an isolated mouthpiece for that vision. Ann Coulter concurs with that interpretation of the Vietnam debacle in her book *Treason*: “It was becoming clearer and clearer that we could have won that war, too.”¹⁵⁸ Rush Limbaugh equally ascribes the defeat in Vietnam to an internal sabotage orchestrated by unpatriotic mainstream media: “They lied about Vietnam, too. We were winning there.”¹⁵⁹ Taken altogether, they promote a form of historical revisionism in which the United States is always supposed to win handily because of its exceptionalism. They also make specific wars such as Vietnam in the 1960s and Iraq at the turn of the millennium synonymous with America’s nature and success. These wars require the whole dedication of the citizenry because they put “the nation’s security *and*

¹⁵⁶ Hannity, Sean. *Conservative Victory: Defeating Obama’s Radical Agenda*. New York: William Morrow Paperbacks, 2010. 176. Print.

¹⁵⁷ Hannity, Sean. “Interview with Donald Rumsfeld: “This Administration has not Fashioned a Logical Winning Strategy.”” Facebook. Jan 26 2016. Web. Feb 22 2016.
<https://www.facebook.com/SeanHannity/videos/10156571241275389/>

¹⁵⁸ Coulter, Ann. *Treason: Liberal Treachery from the Cold War to the War on Terrorism*. New York: Random House USA, 2003. 134. Print.

¹⁵⁹ Premiere Radio Networks. *Manufactured news product*. Rush Limbaugh, 27 Sept. 2005. Web. 19 Jan. 2016. http://www.rushlimbaugh.com/daily/2005/09/27/manufactured_news_product

honor” at stake. Any opposition to war becomes “tantamount to heresy.”¹⁶⁰ Targeting the politicization of conflicts is Hannity’s way of recasting internal dissent as one of the chief reasons for America’s failures far from home. Interpreting internal dissent as one of the major causes of war routs, conservative loudmouths posit that wars abroad against weaker countries cannot be lost when it comes to firepower. They can only be lost on the home front. Hence, it becomes tricky to make sense of conflicts in which the United States does not romp to victory. The credibility of that point of view has increased over the years and fueled a kind of foreign politics in which dissent undermines America and in which the list of enemies of the country swells with the names of liberals on the home front. Conservative thinkers David Horowitz and Richard Poe make the blunt assertion that: “In every military encounter with American forces, the Communists suffered defeat. Their victory was only possible because the American radicals won.”¹⁶¹ On the same note, Ann Coulter goes a step further by declaring that “Whenever the nation is under attack, from within or without, liberals side with the enemy. This is their essence.”¹⁶² Those arguments extend far beyond the Cold War and leave little doubt about the victory of the United States in a war against a far weaker enemy than the USSR: Iraq. Whether during or after the bulk of the operations in Iraq, conservative infotainers hark back to domestic dissent to make sense of the Iraqi quagmire. Any criticism of the war, no matter the grounds on which it relied, was a display of unpatriotic behavior. By recognizing at the time of the conflict that war was the one and only acceptable solution to the situation in Iraq, right-wing pundits did not deem it necessary to double-check the causes of the war.

Therefore, they also spread the contention that those who offered alternate solutions were weak-kneed or even worse, ready to surrender America to its enemies. For instance, on the 2004 campaign trail, John Kerry failed the patriotic litmus test because of his ties with France, a UN member which vetoed the resolution to go to Iraq. His connection to Chirac’s country was played up to peg him as a coward because he was critical of the Iraq war and offered alternate solutions such as increasing the

¹⁶⁰ Gitlin, Todd. *The Twilight of Common Dreams: Why America Is Wracked by Culture Wars*. New York: Metropolitan Books, 1995. 68. Print.

¹⁶¹ Horowitz, David, and Richard Poe. *The Shadow Party: How George Soros, Hillary Clinton, and Sixties Radicals Seized Control of the Democratic Party*. United States: Nelson Current, 2006. xiv-xv. Print.

¹⁶² Coulter, Ann. *Treason: Liberal Treachery from the Cold War to the War on Terrorism*. 1

cooperation between intelligence services around the world.¹⁶³ Yet, the most compelling illustrations of that internalization of enemies come with examples of how anti-war protesters were treated in right-wing media at the time of the conflict.

As the war proved more difficult than expected and voices began to rise against it, right-wing media stuck to the script that the Bush administration had set. If terrorism was evil in its purest form, questioning the involvement in Iraq amounted to undermine a commonsensical commitment. However, in right-wing circles, more was at stake than victory in Iraq. It was also a question of defeating the radicals on the home front who jeopardized the role of the American troops through their opposition to the conflict. In right-wing outlets, the lack of distinction – and even outright connection – between opposition to war and support for terrorism was troubling. In the words of Graham Spencer, various news media outlets including Fox News promoted “the removal of any distinction between terrorism and those who might be seen to be sympathetic to terrorism (as encapsulated in speeches by Bush which espoused a “with us or against us” ethos).”¹⁶⁴ Indictments of internal dissent followed this logic and became commonplace in the early stages of the war. Although George W. Bush seldom commented on the situation at home, his Manichean view of the world contributed to polarizing the American people no more than two years after its post-9/11 unity. The right-wing noise machine was fundamental in creating a home front for the War in Iraq in which dissenters and protesters were in cahoots with evil.

Not only were hosts wholly supportive of the war effort, they were waging their own war on those who weren't. On Fox News, host Bill O'Reilly issued a warning to dissenters: “Americans and, indeed, our allies who actively work against our military once the war is under way will be considered enemies of the state by me. Just fair warning to you, Barbra Streisand, and others who see the world as you do.”¹⁶⁵ His point of view bolsters the claim that supporting war is inherently patriotic and that standing against it is a mark of hatred for America. Guests featured on the channel in the early stages of the conflict concurred with O'Reilly and went even further by depicting anti-

¹⁶³ See Harsin. Jayson. “Diffusing the Rumor Bomb “John Kerry Is French” (i.e., Haughty, Foppish, Elitist, Socialist, Cowardly, and Gay)” in Givan, Rebecca Kolins, Sarah A. Soule, and Kenneth M. Roberts, eds. *The Diffusion of Social Movements: Actors, Mechanisms, and Political Effects*. United Kingdom: Cambridge University Press, 2010. 20. Print.

¹⁶⁴ Spencer, Graham. *The Media and Peace: From Vietnam to the “War on Terror.”* United States: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005. 154. Print.

¹⁶⁵ O'Reilly, Bill. *The O'Reilly Factor*. Fox News Channel. TV. Feb. 26, 2003

war protests as ideologically anti-American or part of a conspiracy to bring the country down. Conspiracy theories starring antagonistic forces from inside America have been a staple feature of right-wing rhetoric. The frequent depictions of all forms of opposition as contrived serve to rationalize disagreements and reinforce ideological convictions on various issues. Seeing anti-war protesting as part of “a synchronized movement to stage protests”¹⁶⁶ or as a movement co-opted by “anti-American international groups”¹⁶⁷ ostracizes war protesters and marshals patriotic support against Americans who sell out to un-American causes.

These observations are even more compelling when a comparison with the written press is drawn. Major hosts and commentators in new media often confronted protests aggressively. To do so, they disseminated the idea that protests were damaging the American cause in Iraq. Such a strong indictment was absent from the written press. In his essay about the press coverage given to anti-war movements, Ronald Bishop signals that some of the coverage was negative because of various reasons going from lack of organization and absence of unity to patriotic ambivalence or even remorse.¹⁶⁸ Yet, no matter how negative the coverage might have been in the press, it never went as far as positing that protesters were intentionally harming America. It was more of an argued denunciation than an emotional one.

The ubiquitous condemnations of internal dissent in right-wing new media marked the beginning of a trend towards polarization which took center stage in the years that followed. Since the beginning of the war in Iraq, the vision of enemies poisoning America from the inside has not been limited to the paradigm of the internal enemy in times of war. When it comes to racial, social, and moral issues, liberals bear the brunt of criticism for the aggravation of problems and sometimes the fabrication of an opposition. Some thinkers on the right-wing of the spectrum contend that radicals seized control of the Democratic Party and that their intentions for America are destructive. A whole framework in which Democrats are cold-hearted schemers indulging in the vilest kind of actions to remain in power has been promoted in conservative culture. David Horowitz, academic figurehead of the new brand of

¹⁶⁶ Thompson, Fred. Fox News Channel. Mar 24 2003. in Jaramillo, Deborah L. *Ugly War, Pretty Package: How CNN and Fox News Made the Invasion of Iraq High Concept*. 137.

¹⁶⁷ Smith, Shepard. Fox News Channel. Mar 20 2003. in *ibid.* Jaramillo, Deborah L. 137.

¹⁶⁸ Bishop, Ronald. in Nikolaev, Alexander G, and Ernest A Hakanen. *Leading to the 2003 Iraq War: The Global Media Debate*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006. 41-63. Print.

aggressive conservatism I depict in these pages, contends alongside co-author Richard Poe that the Democratic Party has been co-opted by people who harbor “a fundamental hostility to American institutions – even to the idea of America’s sovereignty as a nation.”¹⁶⁹ As a result of such depictions, enemies of America are not only located at home. They are institutionalized. Such contentions make political decisions a matter of patriotism rather than an issue of convictions. In addition, believing that some core beliefs will benefit or even save the country implies that those who do not share those beliefs are necessarily ignorant or worse, conspiring to target what makes the country great.

An offshoot of that theory states that grassroots mobilization is driven from the top and utterly denies agency to popular movements. In this paradigm, mobilization is often part of a plot devised by officials brokering for power who convey the impression that a particular issue is pressing when it is not the case. Those radical tactics, supposedly taken word for word from Saul D. Alinsky’s *Rules for Radicals: A Pragmatic Primer for Realistic Radicals*¹⁷⁰ would have been followed by liberals since the 1960s and used to create “the illusion of a widespread clamor for change from the grassroots.”¹⁷¹ According to Rush Limbaugh, all protests organized by leftists, including the one against the War in Iraq, play a major part in a multifaceted delusion involving media bias, hidden political agendas and staged grassroots mobilization: “The protesters are the malcontent leftists who make it their job. They go out and they secure rent-a-mobs and they try to create chaos and tumult and this is what the media is doing, and the Democrats, they don’t want you happy.”¹⁷²

Those who lurk in the shadows of that conspiracy are revolutionaries whose power is beyond imagination. They follow the tenets set by a deceased radical activist whose influence on radicals is more pervasive than ever according to right-wing commentators. The figure of Alinsky is frequently mentioned by conservatives as the guide of modern radicals poised to undermine America’s greatness. Websites such as Limbaugh’s or Beck’s index multiple entries when one looks up the words “Alinsky” or

¹⁶⁹ Horowitz, David and Richard Poe. *The Shadow Party: How George Soros, Hillary Clinton, and Sixties Radicals Seized Control of the Democratic Party*. xiii

¹⁷⁰ Alinsky, Saul David D. *Rules for Radicals: A Practical Primer for Realistic Radicals*. New York: Random House USA, 1972. Print

¹⁷¹ Horowitz, David and Richard Poe. *The Shadow Party: How George Soros, Hillary Clinton, and Sixties Radicals Seized Control of the Democratic Party*. x

¹⁷² Premiere Radio Networks. *Why democrat tactics work*. Rush Limbaugh, 3 Apr. 2007. Web. 19 Jan. 2016. http://www.rushlimbaugh.com/daily/2007/04/03/why_democrat_tactics_work

“Alinskyites.” In a recent website post, Beck posthumously dubbed Alinsky “the most powerful man in America today” and indicted his theories for the collapse of values in American politics.¹⁷³ In the eyes of conservative ‘infotainers,’ the crux of Alinsky’s dangerousness lies in his advocacy for the subversion of the system through insidious tactics rather than clear claims to revolution. One of the driving principles defended by Alinsky is that “all effective actions require the passport of morality” but that morality and ideological consistency should not be prime concerns of the political activist.¹⁷⁴ His dismissal of ideological steadiness is particularly at variance with the prevalence of ideology in conservative talk. In addition, his relinquishment of political ethics in the name of success has been critical in making his alleged disciples crooked characters. That group, which includes the current president of the United States, as well as the Clinton couple among other politicians, is depicted as trying to effect change within the traditional system by lying, cheating, and deceiving a majority of benighted American people. Before Obama’s rise however, the theory that Saul Alinsky’s precepts played a pivotal role in America involved other characters with preternatural capacities for disruption of the status quo. Among those other protagonists, a shadowy character of paramount importance in these theories about the left-wing’s subversive mindset is billionaire George Soros. In short, Horowitz and Poe describe him as intent on fighting against America’s exceptionalism in the world.¹⁷⁵ As a mysterious billionaire who has a Hungarian-American dual citizenship, Soros perfectly fits the mold of “the puppet master”¹⁷⁶ manipulating American politicians and brainwashing American audiences from his hideaway in the shadows. He is often described as bent on international progress and as a result, he gets bashed for anti-Americanism. Horowitz and Poe warn against Soros’ influence on American politics and depict the billionaire as a subversive force which has the wherewithal to bring about changes in American politics as he pleases.¹⁷⁷ Glenn Beck buttressed their warning calls with a 2-hour program in which he soliloquized about Soros’ control apparatus. Using his traditional blackboard to scaremonger about the shadow government luring to control America, Beck indicts

¹⁷³ Beck, Glenn. *The most powerful man in America today*. Glenn Beck, 23 Mar. 2016. Web. 19 Jan. 2016. <http://www.glennbeck.com/2016/03/23/the-most-powerful-man-in-america-today/>

¹⁷⁴ Alinsky, Saul. *Rules for Radicals: A Practical Primer for Realistic Radicals*. 44

¹⁷⁵ Horowitz, David and Richard Poe. *The Shadow Party: How George Soros, Hillary Clinton, and Sixties Radicals Seized Control of the Democratic Party*. 67-68

¹⁷⁶ Alarmified. “George Soros, Puppet Master.” Glenn Beck. YouTube. Feb 20 2012. Web. Mar 04 2016.

¹⁷⁷ Horowitz, David and Richard Poe. *The Shadow Party: How George Soros, Hillary Clinton, and Sixties Radicals Seized Control of the Democratic Party*. 135-136

radicals willing to transform the country. Claiming that the “truth is right out in the open,” Beck encourages his viewers to conduct extra research knowing quite well that a substantial share of the audience is unlikely to do so. The war on terror is central to Beck’s denunciation of Soros. He resorts to a quote from the billionaire advocating non-military answers to terrorism and marks a dramatic pause right after reading the quotation to insist on how dangerous such a point of view is. Thus, he illustrates how most conservatives perceive non-military options as connivance in the spread of terrorism. Through these ominous warnings, conservative infotainers transform that enigmatic figure into more than a contributor to the Democratic Party. In their framework, he actually co-opted the party to prime new priorities which eventually harm America.

These two protagonists, among others, are at the top of a conspiracy which is sometimes defined in conservative talk, as the great liberal, radical and/or progressive delusion. The combination of a dead ideologue and billionaire dedicated to the triumph of revolutionary ideals is frequently conjured as a driving force in America’s political life. Their inordinate influence echoes the depiction of enemies made in Hofstadter’s seminal study *The Paranoid Style in American Politics*. Both Soros and Alinsky are “sinister, ubiquitous, powerful, cruel, sensual, luxury-loving” and fit a “distinctly personal” version of history in which their manipulation of masses “deflects the normal course of history in an evil way.”¹⁷⁸ Limbaugh, Hannity, and Beck often give airtime to plot hypotheses involving Soros, Alinsky and the most famous Democrats of the last decades.¹⁷⁹ The obsession with progressives seeking to “obtain income equality just like Marxists” by acting from “within the system” enlightens viewers about why war protesters contribute to an insidious revolution.¹⁸⁰ Against that backdrop, opposition to the Iraq War was not only un-American; it looked like a prelude to a revolutionary overhaul of America’s values.

Another twist has been added by conservative mouthpieces in efforts to comprehend grassroots protests such as anti-Iraq demonstrations. Ann Coulter, who has

¹⁷⁸ Hofstadter, Richard. *The Paranoid Style in American Politics, and other Essays*. 32

¹⁷⁹ See for instance the platform given to the theory of one of Limbaugh’s caller about Obama and his ties to the Russian KGB in Premiere Radio Networks. “The Limbaugh theorem explains it all.” Rush Limbaugh, 7 Nov. 2014. Web. 20 Apr 2016.

¹⁸⁰ Beck, Glenn. “Communism part IV: American radicals.” Glenn Beck, 31 Mar. 2016. Web. 31 May 2016. http://www.glennbeck.com/2016/03/31/communism-part-iv-american-radicals/?utm_source=glennbeck&utm_medium=contentcopy_link

made a career in vituperative books and televised rants against the American left (and against various American minority groups) is even more critical of protesters. In her broadside against the Democrat “mob,” Coulter laments the role of “irrational masses” in furthering the Democratic agenda through mobilization.¹⁸¹ Likewise, political commentator Michelle Malkin believes that liberals are indoctrinated and brainwashed to become “junior lobbyists and Democratic voters” from their birthday.¹⁸² Once again, these theories serve to rationalize the reality of protests as a liberal-driven stagecraft in which protesters are manipulated. This time however, protesters don’t have the intellectual capacities to see beyond the fallacies of those who organize them. Not only are they manipulated but they don’t have the strength to oppose or even realize their own co-option. In this respect, it is startling that suspended belief in the genuine nature of grassroots mobilization has not affected the Tea Party, endorsed in the Conservative movement as an authentic awakening of the silent majority.

For loudmouths like Limbaugh, Hannity, or Beck and people such as Ann Coulter, Dinesh D’Souza, or David Horowitz, who complement the media movement I have documented this far through books, movies, and interviews, the coronation of Manicheism in American politics through George Bush’s presidency was a bonanza. In a world plagued with “a conflict between good and evil,” where you’re “either with or against” America,¹⁸³ conservative pundits have been given free rein to develop a conspiratorial vision of enemies hearkening in the shadows. In such a context, events result from the struggle between pro and anti-American forces. On the domestic soil, it entails an equation between disagreement and opposition to the country. Guilt by association or more accurately, subversion by association has become a cornerstone of political talk. Iraq was only a starting point. It boosted discourses in which the slightest mark of disapproval with presidential decisions could imply a willingness to harm the country. At the heart of the widening chasm described above lies a conflict between accepting America as it is (and thus cheering for decisions such as waging war even if they might seem ungrounded at first) and longing for America as it could or even should

¹⁸¹ Coulter, Ann. *Demonic: How the Liberal Mob Is Endangering America*. United States: Three Rivers Press, 2011. Print. 12

¹⁸² Newsmax. “Michelle Malkin: Liberals Have ‘brainwashed’ American Kids.” *Newsmax-Tv* 1 June 2015. Web. 17 Mar. 2016. <http://www.newsmax.com/Newsmax-Tv/Michelle-Malkin-liberals-brainwashed-republicans/2015/06/01/id/648104/>

¹⁸³ Bush, George W. “State of the Union Address.” January 30, 2002. Web. <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/americas/1790537.stm>

be (and thus being vocal in protesting decisions even after they are taken). Conservative talkers perceive that accepting America as it is and especially the decisions of its commander-in-chief once they are enacted is the definition of patriotism whereas war protesters remain critical of the government even in times of conflict. Depending on the scale of the crisis at hand, the appeal of 'blind' patriotism will wax and wane but these two groups have coexisted in most American conflicts. It was based upon that cleavage that Iraq protesters were adjudicated as betrayers by those who consider patriotic nods to be the only adequate attitude once America wages war. More importantly, these demonstrators were portrayed as part of a manipulated mass which at times, denied that reality stood in the way of their worldview.

In light of those reactions, it can be said that conspiratorial undertones, which used to be the hallmark of extreme ideologists, have made dents into more mainstream venues under the aegis of the personalities I describe in this study. However, it is undeniable that there was a demand for this kind of reactions. In other words, the resurgence of attack politics and the uptick in conspiratorial analyses rose because the success met by Limbaugh, Beck, Fox News and others was even more impressive when their explanations of events featured identifiable culprits. Expanding on the proclivity shown by Beck for conspiracy theories, Will Bunch provides an enthralling explanation in which he mentions implicitly what is expected from an entertainer such as Glenn Beck: "Real problems and real solutions would have been a buzz-kill (...) [Beck] spoke directly to fears of an apocalypse and to nationalistic pride."¹⁸⁴ The issues evoked by Bunch are bullion for political entertainers who can frame issues in emotional terms. Moreover, in their compelling exposes, conservative infotainers can depict all issues as resulting from the forsaking of old values; namely departures from constitutional law, the general dereliction of good old patriotism, or the coming of age of a generation oblivious to the lessons taught by history.

The growing traction of the visions mentioned above foreshadows the rhetoric developed under Obama's tenure. The growing consensus among conservatives that some influential liberals are hell-bent on attacking America's inherent greatness further polarizes the country. In addition, it allows conservative talkers to bemoan a departure from the past and the divisiveness of the present. Moreover, the intentions of those

¹⁸⁴ Bunch, Will. *The Backlash: Right-Wing Radicals, High-Def Hucksters, and Paranoid Politics in the Age of Obama*. United States: HarperCollins Publishers, 2010. 62. Print.

liberals are not the result of mistakes but the fruits of deliberate plots to put America down. Nonetheless, conspiracy theories and more generally, distrust for the actions of elected officials, have not been patented by right-wing media. Hip-hop music has proven very inclined to explain historical and political events through conspiratorial innuendos and theories.

II – B/ Hip-hop and Foreign Policy: Presidential Terrorists and Conservative War Hawks

As I warned in the first part of this study, the visions I dwell on in my exploration of hip-hop discourse are not representative of the worldview of an identifiable group of people. As in the case of my study of conservative entertainment, the actual leverage of these forms of culture has rarely been assessed - even less in the case of hip-hop. It is beyond my means to parse the impact of the worldviews I detail here. Hip-hop has such a protean fan base whose members react with more or less interest to political content that it is hard to gauge the impact of the forms I describe. What I attempt to show in this part is that hip-hop, a modern form of culture, has been more conducive to extreme views and conspiratorial undertones than major forms of culture in past eras. For example, I don't presume that a majority of hip-hop fans believe that 9/11 was an inside job. Still, in shedding light on the views that have been spread in a prominent form of American culture, I continue to demonstrate how American cultural and political elites privileged visions of conflict rather than the preservation of common grounds.

When it comes to foreign policy, one of the main lessons taught by a cursory look at the war in Iraq is that some Americans hold a vision of foreign affairs in which

inward-looking visions prevail whereas others consider issues in light of the global context. Applied to 9/11, that divide compartmentalizes opinions on war in two main categories. Some Americans abide by the view that the country was attacked on 9/11 for ungrounded religious and ideological resentment whereas others adopt what I call an ‘internationalist perspective.’ That perspective avoids prioritizing American interests over global well-being and looks at the fallout of events from a remote vantage point instead of a patriotic outpost. In the case of the Iraq War, it led its adherents to point to past American military operations as causes for widespread contempt and hatred towards the US. It also heightens the importance of foreign casualties and the fate of non-American citizens when issues such as war, immigration, or free trade are the topic of conversation. In the previous sub-part, I have detailed how the influence of patriotism brought public voices to excoriate those who doubted the rightness of war. A counter-reaction was also noticeable especially in American youth culture. I devote the following pages to an assessment of how influential hip-hop artists viewed the war. I look at the extent to which an ‘internationalist perspective’ prevailed over blunt patriotism and led artists to lambast American foreign policies – and especially the war in Iraq. Hip-hop artists were among the staunchest defenders of the ‘internationalist perspective.’ Young people influenced by hip-hop culture vocally protested George W. Bush and the operations he led in Iraq. This resulted from two different causes: an antagonism towards the president himself and the judgment of foreign policy by international standards.

First, from the start of his presidential career, George W. Bush has been the target of strong criticism in musical culture. Hip-hop records might not be as riddled with references as other genres such as rock music but the president was alternately depicted as a political conman, racist, and/or warmonger in rap texts. His Republican label made him naturally unlikable in the eyes of denizens of poor urban neighborhoods because as I highlighted in the first part, they perceive the abandonment of social policies under Republican rule as one of the reasons for the plight of their deteriorating communities. These “captured constituenc[ies] of the Democratic Party”¹⁸⁵ could expect little from a president who did not owe them his election and did not make social issues a priority. In addition, the blur surrounding his election in 2000 further blotted his

¹⁸⁵ Harris, Fredrick C. *The Price of the Ticket: Barack Obama and Rise and Decline of Black Politics*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2012. Print. 177

copybook. Bush made little effort to reach out to constituencies which overwhelmingly voted against him. The disinterest was reciprocal. Musicologist Aisha Staggers argues that “hip-hop [had] taken a sabbatical” from political commentary in the aftermath of 9/11.¹⁸⁶ Once again, examinations of the hip-hop commercial canon support her claim (except for Eminem’s widely acclaimed “Mosh”). Nonetheless, can it be expected from a popular musical current that it addresses politics most of the time? Such a decision would be unmarketable. In addition, hip-hop fans, as the American people in general, are mildly interested in politics. In other words, it seems logical in light of business expectations that the number of artists devoting themselves to edutainment through music has shrunk. Yet, I found examples of politicized hip-hop about Bush, 9/11, and Iraq which supplement songs about Reagan and disseminate a very specific political awareness in youth communities influenced by the hip-hop genre. My sample of songs about Bush show that hatred and scorn superseded disinterest when artists tackled the figure of G.W. Bush. Moreover, they demonstrate that hip-hop can be wielded as a tool for enfranchisement and/or political activism.

In the independent hip-hop scene, George W. Bush’s 2000 election has been tackled by artists with a negative point of view. For instance, the imbroglio following the Gore-Bush presidential election has been the object of white Seattle emcee Macklemore’s “Bush Song” [2005] early in his career.¹⁸⁷ In this satirical track, Macklemore is particularly critical of Bush’s bigotry and denounces his shenanigans to win the 2000 election. Impersonating the president, Macklemore starts out with homophobic and racist rants before laying out in the second verse the strategies deployed by Bush and his allies to steal the election. The song culminates with the hook in which Macklemore/Bush upturns the Manichaeian view deployed by the president and sings that he’s “evil” before asserting that he doesn’t care about the collapsing American economy and got into a war for profit.

Quite similar to Macklemore’s song with a darker outlook, Louis Logic’s “The Ugly Truth” [2003] is another all-out condemnation of the president.¹⁸⁸ The emcee starts straight away embodying a xenophobic, homophobic, and anti-Semitic persona

¹⁸⁶ Stagger, Aisha. “Casualties of War,” in Flota, Brian. *The Politics of Post-9/11 Music: Sound, Trauma, and the Music Industry in the Time of Terror*. Ed. Joseph P. Fisher. United Kingdom: Ashgate Publishing, 2011. Print. 108

¹⁸⁷ Macklemore. “Bush Song.” *The Language of my World*. Macklemore LLC, 2005. Audio Recording.

¹⁸⁸ Louis Logic. “The Ugly Truth.” *Sin-A-Matic*. Solid Records; Demigodz Records, 2003. Audio Recording

whose identity remains mysterious until the end of the song. In the verses, the rapper slurs people who stand out of the norm because of their race, ethnicity or sexuality. This diatribe seems directly taken from the most extreme expressions of right-wing fringe groups. His impersonation of a mysterious extremist climaxes at the end of the song with a skit in which we hear applauses and praise for Governor Bush after a speech. Associating Bush with strong anti-minority sentiments has been a recurrent tendency in hip-hop culture. The feeling that his election would mark another chapter in a process of disinvestment in poor communities influenced representations of his presidency in rap songs.

Another episode of the Bush presidency added grist to the mill of critical artists. Hurricane Katrina and the means deployed to fight it in 2005 further besmirched Bush's record. The slow response to a natural hazard of unprecedented proportions on the domestic soil revealed dysfunctions in the governmental apparatus. For the hip-hop community though, it was interpreted as a sign that the government, and particularly its neoconservative heads, were not interested in the fate of a specific part of the population. A famous soundbite illustrating the wariness shown by hip-hop elites for the governmental apparatus was Kanye West's: "George Bush doesn't care about black people" which stigmatized the president for his handling of Katrina.¹⁸⁹ Once again, despite the fact that the sequence is more remembered for its awkwardness than its substance, Kanye West undeniably heralded a widespread feeling at the time that governmental abandon had reached its paroxysm under a Republican tenure.

As in the part about hip-hop and Reagan, exaggeration is a trademark of the artists I deal with and to that extent, politicized hip-hop is congruent with opinionated infotainment. Both treat presidents as tremendously powerful and therefore praiseworthy of or accountable for everything that happens under their tenure. The portrayal of George Bush as aloof from most of the American people mirrored the demonization of war protesters in conservative circles. Bush was painted as hateful towards minority groups and unfit for the office he held. Yet, it was his mishandling of the Iraq War which bore the brunt of hip-hop criticism.

¹⁸⁹ Shockroc1. "Bush Doesn't Care about Black People." YouTube. *YouTube*, 16 Apr 2006. Web. 14 May 2016. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zIUzLpO1kxI>

Depicted as the quintessential critique emanating from hip-hop culture during the Bush presidency, Eminem's "Mosh" [2004]¹⁹⁰ lays particular emphasis on Bush's role as commander-in-chief.¹⁹¹ As in Killer Mike's "Reagan" [2012],¹⁹² the song demonizes a president who, according to Eminem's lyrics, waged a war for the defense of specific corporate interests. In the name of freedom of speech, the emcee feels that it is his duty to speak his mind about Bush's foreign policy and lead a movement to oppose the decisions of the president. "Mosh" is not only a way to lash out at the age of Bush, it is an attempt to activate a disenfranchised generation. Eminem uses his aura to issue a powerful statement against the president. Seeking to lead a multiracial coalition to avoid further jeopardizing the future of next American generations, Eminem channels his ire at the president while supporting American troops. In so doing, he confounds claims that opposing war means being disloyal to the soldiers involved on the ground. In addition, he overturns the Manichean view promoted by the president and calls on American citizens to speak out against the evil they enabled. Inveighing against the "weapon of mass destruction," the "monster," and the "coward" that America "empowered," Eminem bemoans what he perceives to be bogus motives for war. With this reference to America's presidential "WMD," the Detroit rapper reminds his listeners that Bush wrings destruction not only on American soldiers but also on local civilians for a war relying on tenuous grounds. That line of thought is capital in the 'internationalist perspective' that rappers often adopt. Indeed, Talib Kweli's admonition on "The Proud" [2002]¹⁹³ that "America killed the innocent too," Blueprint's comments on the importance of foreign deaths in the song "Perspective" [2014]¹⁹⁴ or Immortal Technique's observation in "Leaving the Past" [2003]¹⁹⁵ that "soldiers emptying their clips at little kids and their moms are just like a desperate motherfucker strapped to a bomb" are examples of how foreign casualties matter as much as fallen American soldiers. The Manichean underpinnings used by the administration to frame the war are brought down with the indictment of President Bush for war crimes and the emphasis on the relevance of foreign lives.

¹⁹⁰ Eminem. "Mosh." *Encore*. Aftermath Entertainment, 2004. Audio Recording.

¹⁹¹ Gosa, Travis L., and Erik Nielson, eds. *The Hip-hop & Obama Reader*. United Kingdom: Oxford University Press, 2015. 49. Print.

¹⁹² Killer Mike. "Reagan." *R.A.P. Music*. Williams Street Recordings, 2012. Audio Recording.

¹⁹³ Talib Kweli. "The Proud." *Quality*. Rawkus Records, 2002. Audio Recording.

¹⁹⁴ Blueprint. "Perspective." *Respect the Architect*. Weighless Recordings. 2014. Audio Recording.

¹⁹⁵ Immortal Technique. "Leaving the Past." *Revolutionary Vol. 2*. Viper Records. 2003. Audio Recording.

“Mosh” reveals another feature common to some of the rappers I mentioned to this point; namely the belief that they put themselves at risk by speaking out against the government. Whereas Eminem warns his listeners about a looming threat: “If I get sniped tonight, you’ll know why; ‘cause I told you to fight,”¹⁹⁶ Killer Mike is equally chary of undercover governmental retaliation in “Reagan” [2012] when he rhymes: “If I say anymore, they might be at my door.”¹⁹⁷ Oftentimes in hip-hop, artists pretend that hindrances stand in the way of truth, especially in the mainstream canon seen as a path to sell out the authenticity of the genre. Rapper B.o.B. confesses that he swings between commercial and ‘true’ content in the song “Paper Route” [2013]. In that song, he also warns that by tackling politics he produces “the kind of talk that will probably piss off [his] publicist” and make ‘the government come after [him] in public.’ Aware that his ‘true’ songs are not for the radio, the Atlanta emcee echoes the feeling that truth is inconvenient and should be eschewed to maintain hopes of a successful career in the mainstream.¹⁹⁸ In general, a substantial share of hip-hop artists are surprisingly clear-sighted when it comes to the wishy-washy lyrical content of mainstream hip-hop. However, they feel helpless to change a tastelessness they deem treacherous to the genre’s roots. Lupe Fiasco’s “State Run Radio” [2011] hinges round the premise that record labels bank on the same recipe every time they choose to promote an artist. In so doing, they avoid politics as much as they can because they have a vested interest in preserving the status quo.¹⁹⁹ Numerous artists have spoken out against the music industry which maintains a state of mind “real far from hip-hop”²⁰⁰ through regulating practices that hamper artistic creativity. Part of the limitations involve political commitment which has been labeled undesirable in hip-hop.

In this regard, claims to ‘being true’ are an important part of politicized forms of culture and often amount to oppose the mainstream. Hip-hop emcees pretending to speak the truth are casting doubts on popular sources of information in the exact same way as conservative pundits do on a daily basis. For instance, Bill O’Reilly’s promise of a “no spin zone” in his Fox News show implies that other information channels spin the

¹⁹⁶ Eminem. “Mosh.” *Encore*. Aftermath Entertainment. 2004. Audio Recording.

¹⁹⁷ Killer Mike. “Reagan” *R.A.P. Music*. Williams Street Recordings. 2012. Audio Recording.

¹⁹⁸ B.o.B. “Paper Route.” *Underground Luxury*. Rebel Rock; Grand Hustle; Atlantic Records. 2013. Audio Recording.

¹⁹⁹ Lupe Fiasco and Matt Mahaffey. “State Run Radio.” *Lasers*. Atlantic Records. 2011. Audio Recording.

²⁰⁰ Jadakiss, Styles P, Common, and Nas. “Why? (Remix).” *Kiss of Death*. Ruff Ryders; Interscope. 2004, Audio Recording.

raw information in a certain way to avoid inconvenient truths. Limbaugh's references to "drive-by" media or remarks such as Hannity's: "Why people believe *The New York Times* at this point is beyond imagination but there are some people that still believe it," are other examples of arrant distrust for mainstream sources of information.²⁰¹ Allegations that truth is withheld from the public and ought to be sought in secret locations are typical of new forms of culture. Perceptions that information is twisted in traditional media reinforce consumers in their decisions to stay in their 'comfort zones' to be informed. In addition, they are essential to nurture the paranoid mind. A succinct overview of hip-hop songs about 9/11 and American foreign policy provides concrete examples of paranoid undertones in hip-hop worldviews.

Hip-hop's birth in derelict parts of America also contributed to promote a jaundiced vision of domestic issues in the country. Likewise, its representativeness of minority groups informs a vision of foreign affairs which clashes with the patriotic tone promoted by conservative pundits. Oftentimes, blatant distrust toward governmental claims and decisions emerges as a predominant feature of hip-hop artists' political commentary on foreign matters. Reactions to 9/11 provide an illustration of hip-hop's international outlook on events which have been viewed from a patriotic perspective in most spheres of American public life. Fraught with underlying suggestions that the government is treacherous, politicized hip-hop songs have also been replete with conspiratorial explanations for some events. 9/11 is a perfect example of the international relativism adopted by hip-hop. This 'internationalist perspective' and the full-fledged patriotism observed in right-wing outlets are at loggerheads.

Hip-hop became a conduit for visions of 9/11 as an event with historical root causes as opposed to an event borne out of the hatred of an evil mastermind. An overwhelming majority of artists were shocked by 9/11 and tracks supporting family victims and calling for solidarity were myriad. Nonetheless, criticism about blind patriotism and governmental decisions taken in the aftermath of 9/11 was central for committed hip-hop artists. To simplify, hip-hop, and more particularly independent artists, have adopted two different stances when they mention 9/11. On one hand, some artists put the event in perspective and shun the explanation given by Bush to account

²⁰¹ Hannity, Sean. *Listen: Sean Hannity fires back after New York times blatantly Smears him | the Sean Hannity show*. The Sean Hannity Show, 2016. Web. 31 May 2016.
<http://www.hannity.com/articles/hanpr-election-493995/listen-sean-hannity-fires-back-after-14437318/>

for 9/11: “They hate our freedoms – our freedom of religion, our freedom of speech, our freedom to vote and assemble and disagree with each other.”²⁰² Yet, that point of view does not go as far as suggesting that 9/11 was an inside job. On another hand, the number of hip-hop artists who saw something fishy in the official narrative for 9/11 is non negligible and bespeaks a penchant for scrutinizing widely accepted versions of the event. Some artists went as far as questioning the responsibility of the American government in the event. They did so either by mentioning America’s ties with terrorist groups in a recent past or by suggesting that the Bush administration was directly involved in the events.

The first category of artists who oppose war without denying commonplace explanations for 9/11 includes artists such as Eminem, Sage Francis or Talib Kweli. These artists predicate their disagreement with war policies upon the idea that violence in the name of their country is not always right. In their view, the justifications for the War in Iraq were too flimsy to withstand even the most cursory examinations.

In the song “Makeshift Patriot” [2001], rapper Sage Francis mauls Americans for sporting their colors without paying attention to the decisions taken in the name of patriotism. Characterized as a heartfelt reflection on the consequences of the attacks, “Makeshift Patriot” goads listeners to be careful of the decisions taken in the name of national security. In the course of the song, Sage Francis echoes a common dread in leftist circles by claiming that: “freedom will be defended at the cost of civil liberties” and that 9/11 will be used to vindicate measures such as racial profiling, ubiquitous surveillance, and attitudes such as religious or patriotic bigotry. Undermining the calls for unity at all costs issued in most American media, Sage Francis interprets 9/11 as a dramatic event but also as an event with deep historical causes. Reiterating calls to investigate Bin Laden’s ties with America in the 1990s, the rapper seeks to avoid a narrative in which America has been struck by evil forces coming from nowhere. Calls to investigate America’s ties in the 1980s to groups that would go on to become terrorist groups have been reiterated in other musical reactions to 9/11 and have breathed life into theories connecting Bin Laden with the American government.

Artists who publicly undermine the explanations given for 9/11 tend to accuse the Bush administration for having doctored reasons to go to war. For instance,

²⁰² Bush, George W., “Address to Joint Session of Congress,” September, 20, 2001. Web. 3 Mar 2016.
<http://www.americanrhetoric.com/speeches/gwbush911jointsessionspeech.htm>

Immortal Technique, one of the most outspoken 9/11 conspiracy theorists in hip-hop culture suggests that Donald Rumsfeld and the Bush administration used 9/11 as a pretext for a war in Iraq. In the song “Bin Laden” [2005] which features Mos Def - another emcee who expressed doubts about 9/11 - Immortal Technique dwells on several topics including the reasons for his disbelief in the Iraq narrative. Immortal Technique makes it clear in the first lines of the song that he believes “Bush knocked down the towers.” But notwithstanding these provoking lyrics which are not representative of hip-hop fans as a whole, this song teems with references which help us to make sense of part of hip-hop’s global politics. In that song and more generally throughout his career, Immortal Technique has been one of the rappers who voiced his loathing for corporate America. His take is that terrorism is an issue manufactured more or less directly by an American government in cahoots with corporate honchos to avert eyes away from real domestic problems and keep the citizenry subdued by fear. There, he echoes Sage Francis’ line that governments “use civilians against civilians and charge the Trojan horses into our buildings.”²⁰³ Basing his theories on the premise that American presidential administrations bankrolled abhorring terrorist organizations – including Al Qaeda - under Reagan and G.H.W. Bush: “They gave Al Qaeda 6 million dollars in 1989 to 1992,”²⁰⁴ Immortal Technique claims to connect the dots between past support and current events.

Another interesting part comes when the rapper evokes the resistance faced by American soldiers in Iraq. In his view, rebels who retaliate after an invasion don’t fight to preserve a regime but they follow basic instincts to fight for their survival. Through the establishment of a comparison in which he weighs in on what would happen if an American neighborhood were to be invaded, the Peruvian native explains that fighters don’t defend their government but stand in the way of anyone harming them and their relatives. Thus, the war in Iraq is rephrased as a war on civilians instead of a war against evil. In doing so, rappers divide war casualties not by their countries of origins but according to their social extraction. As a result, they reframe the struggle as pitting the “New World Order” against ordinary people.

Immortal Technique zooms in on 9/11 more specifically in another song titled “Cause of Death” [2003]. Resorting to a common trope of 9/11 conspiracy theorists, the

²⁰³ Sage Francis. “Makeshift patriot.” *Sick Of Waging War*. Strange Famous, 2001. Audio Recording.

²⁰⁴ Immortal Technique. “Cause of Death” *Revolutionary Vol. 2*. Viper Records, 2003. Audio Recording

rapper calls into question official narratives because of the way the towers foundered which according to him, revealed that the towers were “full of explosives.”²⁰⁵ Likewise, Lupe Fiasco is equally careful with official explanations because seeing 9/11 as an inside job would chime with the “bunch of other cover-ups” for which the American government is well-known. Detailing his point of view in “Words I Never Said” [2011], the Chicago native considers that ramping up the war on terror was an overreaction designed by the Bush government to preserve the interests of the military-industrial complex: “I really think the war on terror is a bunch of bullshit. Just a poor excuse for you to use up all your bullets” This leads him to wonder: “9/11 Building seven Did they really pull it?”²⁰⁶ Another final example is Jadakiss’s “Why did Bush knock down the tower?” line on the song “Why?” [2004]. His explanations for the inclusion of that line reverberate with the idea that the truth is different from the narrative offered by media. Depicting 9/11 as “something that was planned” to preserve big business interests, Jadakiss promotes the idea of a bigger picture concealed from sight and warns against official versions of events. Those theories about governmental plots are consonant with hip-hop’s tradition of laying the blame on the American government for many problems befalling the nation.²⁰⁷ Posing as heralds of truth, these three artists and many others take part in a fight against ignorance and insist that only a citizenry informed by alternative means will prevail against adverse forces.

Those points of view are instructive to the extent that the frameworks they create to make sense of politics involve inimical governmental entities. The presidential administrations tackled in the songs I mentioned are depicted as having forsaken sound foreign policies to focus on financially fruitful ones. Reactions to the Bush presidency epitomize a trend to portraying powerful forces as misleading. The rappers I mentioned in this part often consider it their duty to bring down and warn against official narratives. In this regard, rappers have a proclivity to distrust anyone other than themselves. That tendency is as pronounced as the one shared by conservative infotainers. Hence, these two forms taken together reveal that American culture portrays politics as a feud between good and evil forces with high stakes. As we shall see in the

²⁰⁵ Immortal Technique. “Cause of Death” *Revolutionary Vol. 2*. Viper Records, 2003. Audio Recording

²⁰⁶ Lupe Fiasco, and Skylar Grey. “Words I Never Said.” *Lasers*. 1st & 15th; Atlantic Records, 2011. Audio Recording.

²⁰⁷ Jadakiss, and Anthony Hamilton. “Why?” *Kiss of Death*. Ruff Ryders; Interscope. 2004, Audio Recording.

third sub-part, the popularity of these views owes much to the technical peculiarities brought by the advent of new media and its 'comfort' and 'confrontation' zones.

II – C/ Manichean Media: How New Culture Reinforces Ideological Conviction

In this second part, I have shown that diverging visions when it comes to foreign policy popularized discourses in which enemies have infiltrated America itself - whether at the grassroots level according to conservative media voices or in Washington D.C. in the eyes of some hip-hop artists.

Consequently, the credibility gained by depictions of an internal enemy in culture also mean that conspiratorial explanations, which used to be constrained to extreme ideologies, are gaining ground in American culture. Since 9/11, culture has played a role in issuing and promoting theories about insidious forces which harm American interests. They transformed a long-standing American tradition of conspiracy theories by positing that enemies have relocated from beyond to within American borders. These “malign forces (...) operating from the top down” are fundamental in developing worldviews that new culture allows to thrive.²⁰⁸

²⁰⁸ Lemann, Nicholas. “Paranoid Style.” *The New Yorker*, 16 Oct. 2006. Web. 6 Feb. 2016.
<http://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2006/10/16/paranoid-style>

More importantly, in the first decade of the 21st century, redefinitions of patriotism and history in ambivalent binaries set the stage for the disappearance of common ground. In short, voters who got their politics from movements such as hip-hop were encouraged to feel that all the problems facing the country originated from Bush's decisions. At the same time, another bracket of the American electorate listened to voices portraying a country suffocating under the chokehold of its internal opposition. The growth of a market in which information can be found in skewed outlets encourages partisans to ensconce themselves in the views they hold, no matter how much they can be baffled by common sense and facts. Such a trend is unnerving. It coerces audiences into a choice between taking sides in the culture war or shy away from the hyper-partisan style that it sanctions.

Although political scientist Morris P. Fiorina confounds ominous warnings against political polarization by showing that partisanship hasn't evolved in electoral contests over the last decades, the impact of the kinds of discourse I describe in this study should not be reduced to the number of moderates beguiled by extreme discourses.²⁰⁹ That consequence has remained limited to this day and is difficult to appraise. The share of self-identified independent voters has remained roughly similar over the past three elections. As Parker and Barreto signal in their study of the Tea Party, deterrents to political action or even to mere interest in politics are numerous.²¹⁰ In any case, moderates who have little interest in politics are not the primary targets of the cultural forms I analyze. The influence of political and cultural 'realities' depicting opponents as beyond the pale is more relevant for two different targets: professional politicians and audiences that are already strongly politicized. The transformation of politics into an endless conflict between virtuous and flawed forces pressures politicians from both parties to ratchet up their warlike attitudes against those who disagree with them. On another note, strongly politicized audiences are encouraged to view dissenters as enemies when they tune in to cultural forms presenting politics as an endless conflict between worldviews rather than a debate between points of view. In turn, these politically savvy viewers will try to pass on this feeling of urgency and the idea that the gap between liberals and conservatives is absolutely impossible to bridge to remotely

²⁰⁹ Fiorina, Morris P. "America's Missing Moderates: Hiding in Plain Sight." *The American Interest*. 8.4 (2013) Web. 22 Feb 2016.

²¹⁰ Parker, Christopher S., and Barreto, Matt A. *Change They Can't Believe in: The Tea Party and Reactionary Politics in America*. United States: Princeton University Press, 2013. 17. Print.

interested relatives. Therefore, Manicheism pushes moderates toward making a choice with no middle-of-the-road options (or to give up on politics). Despite its limited reverberations in voting patterns, the no-holds-barred attitude of cultural and political elites has not been toothless in America as a whole.

In this regard, a look at interpretations of events before, during, and after the War in Iraq is enlightening. The cultural forms I tackled bespeak two different needs: rationalizing the revolting actions of the opposition and asserting the truthfulness of the arguments held.

Onslaughts on “irrational” activists, deniers, or anti-American protesters proved that some conservative elites were willing to peg dissenters as delusional, or inimical. On the same note, viewing Bush as the head of a vast plot to loot coveted resources in Iraq, some artists revealed alleged conspiracies which helped make sense of Bush’s presidential behavior. Designating opponents through direct and indirect references to evil was a new fundamental in political talk and politicized culture. Those two attitudes, coming from different sources, demonstrate the unwillingness of staunch believers to confront their realities to balanced reviews of events. Infotainment and culture outlets don’t open up debate. They have become arenas for the clash of different viewpoints relying on inner convictions rather than evidence. They legitimize rationales to silence contrasting voices criticized as deluded. More, the necessity to face the value of an argument made in supportive media outlets is less pressing than ever before. The ways in which arguments adapt to their source platform defines the relevance of the assertions made. The impression of validity of arguments in the current media sphere is more convincing than ever. Although scholars like Henry Jenkins and John Fiske were optimistic that the increasing number of media and cultural sources would help interested people to find ideological counterweights to their ideas, it seems that the exponential growth of information providers (whether in culture or media) has led to a different reality. Indeed, extended access to ideologically identifiable forms guided consumers in their exposure to foreseeable points of view.²¹¹ I believe that this part of my study evidences that two types of zones have been created with the rise of new media: ‘comfort zones’ and ‘confrontation zones.’

²¹¹ Jenkins, Henry. *Convergence Culture: Where Old and New Media Collide*. New York, NY: New York University Press, 2006. Print.
 Fiske, John, and John Hartley. *Reading Television*. 2nd ed. London: Routledge, 2014. Print.

The first label points to outlets in which the viewer, listener, or web user is served a worldview which reassures convictions he or she holds. In *Convergence Culture*, Jenkins reminds us that the new media age gives access to most kinds of opinions on demand. More than mere opinions though, media tailor to their users a range of mindsets to choose from; whether in front of their screens or in their broad cultural consumption.²¹² News went from being both a good and a service to just a good. The level of satisfaction of audiences with both the content and the form is now the most fundamental aspect to consider. Thus, it implies that consumers will settle for the most appealing and ideologically comforting product rather than the most useful ones. With the broadening range of options on TV and in culture, political products now have to compete not only against a wide array of entertainment products but also against other political shows which use news as a basis to depict the capital as the most violent battlefield in America. Sixteen years into the 21st century, it seems reasonable to conclude that a growing share of Americans interested in news and politics have chosen to adapt to new options and use their access to culture primarily to support views they held before. In the words of Maarek and Wolfseld, “as technology moves forward, citizens are better able to choose the kinds of information that they do and do not want to receive.”²¹³ Thus, they can skirt around discrepant opinions. In my opinion, ‘comfort zones’ help audiences process information in ways that are unlikely to undermine ideological coherence. Sometimes, when the news of the day allows it, they help people find support for ideas they had already formed. At other times, customers make sure that the information they confront won’t call into question their ideas. The cultural products that offered such an option looked way more entertaining than formerly centralized media outlets. Television, for instance, has entered a third television age or “post-network era” defined by “the expansion of choice in channel and content options.”²¹⁴ Thus, the medium gave the upper hand to the consumer in choosing what he or she wants to hear. In the words of former host Ted Koppel, the channels emerging during that third age took politics from “being objective and dull to being subjective and entertaining.” One of the outcomes is that substance no longer predominates.²¹⁵ Given

²¹² Ibid. Jenkins, Henry. 206-239.

²¹³ Wolfseld, Gadi, and Philippe J. Maarek, eds. *Political Communication in a New ERA: A Cross-National Perspective*. London: Routledge, 2002. 3. Print.

²¹⁴ Lotz, Amanda D. *The Television Will Be Revolutionized*. New York: New York University Press, 2007. 7. Print.

²¹⁵ Koppel, Ted. *The O'Reilly Factor*. Fox News Channel. 2 Mar 2016. Television.

the choice between getting coverage of the same news from neutral sources or entertaining and ideologically driven ones, it seems in light of Fox's success for instance, that a share of the audience went for the latter. In such circumstances, it becomes natural to play deaf to inconvenient facts.

Conversely, 'confrontation zones' are areas in which viewers confront information retold in ways that are most unpleasant to them. One could infer therefore that audiences are still interested in hearing contrasting arguments. However, in those cases, confrontation is seldom the result of a genuine willingness to take opposite arguments seriously. The ways in which information is presented are so unpleasant that they easily become grotesque. For instance, for audiences accustomed to a steady diet of conservative media, turning on different sources of information, especially mainstream media, will bring to mind myriad warnings issued by conservative entertainers about the dishonesty of mainstream media; even though several academic studies have invalidated the outcries against media bias.²¹⁶ Indeed, as made obvious by Rush Limbaugh, conservative entertainers picture themselves as embroiled in an adversarial struggle against the bulk of the American media. As the last torchbearers of truth in a vitiated media landscape, conservative infotainers have piled up evidence telling listeners that liberals control most media and distort the truth to extol ideas unbearable to conservatives who are the only ones willing to face reality. As one of multitudinous illustrations, Hannity deplores the fact that no evidence "seeps through the closed psyche of the impervious left" and its complicit media.²¹⁷ In Jamieson and Cappella's view, one result of the permanent critique of other sources of information is that "both Fox and Limbaugh insulate their audiences from persuasion by Democrats by offering opinion and evidence that make Democratic views seem alien and unpalatable."²¹⁸ Similar displays of wariness for most sources of information feature in politicized hip-hop where calls to shun mainstream media have been repeated. For instance, Immortal Technique's depiction of American media as a "4th branch" of the government which is

²¹⁶ See for example: Dave D'Alessio and Mike Allen. "Media Bias in Presidential Elections: A Meta-Analysis," *Journal of Communication* 50 (2000): 133–56 and Mark D. Watts et al., "Elite Cues and Media Bias in Presidential Campaigns: Explaining Public Perceptions of a Liberal Press," *Communication Research* 26 (1999): 144–75.

²¹⁷ Hannity, Sean. *Conservative Victory: Defeating Obama's Radical Agenda*. New York: William Morrow Paperbacks, 2010. 93. Print.

²¹⁸ Jamieson, Kathleen Hall, and Joseph N Cappella. *Echo Chamber: Rush Limbaugh and the Conservative Media Establishment*. United Kingdom: Oxford University Press, 2010. xiii. Print.

“controlling your brain” or R.A. the Rugged Man’s calls to reject mendacious “mob-minded media” incite listeners to consider news sources as unreliable.²¹⁹

Pleas to question every single piece of information provided by mainstream media in conservative sources and in hip-hop culture play a pivotal role in nurturing conspiracy theories for two reasons. First, viewing other sources of information as misleading conditions audiences to trust fewer sources and adopt a given point of view. Secondly, portraying most media sources as delusive may ultimately lead to the complete removal of common grounds. Hence, the desire to entertain oneself by listening to the loony voices of the other side is a driving force accounting for example for self-identified liberals listening to Rush Limbaugh. Fox host Bill O’Reilly summarizes that paradox – albeit in apolitical terms - in his introduction to *Who’s Looking out for you?*

There’s a certain profile that O’Reilly watchers, listeners, and readers fit most of the time. Sure, there are drive-by viewers who watch *The O’Reilly Factor* as they would a gruesome accident, fascinated but repelled at the same time. And there are snobs who tune in just to shake their heads over the boorishness of it all.²²⁰

Such an approach serves to bolster beliefs that there is another side which holds deluded views and ought to be maligned. The nagging presence of provoking comments (sometimes labeled as “trolls”) on comment threads whether on channel websites, blogs, and comment sections on music websites buttresses my claim that confrontation zones are an important part of the modern media landscape. Yet, it is not even necessary to scroll down to the comment section to see the disdain expressed by proponents of an ideology for those who defend another. Mere titles adduce sufficient evidence to support that claim.

On the whole, the fixed ideological leanings voiced and the criticism hurled at other sources in a growing share of American culture strip confrontation zones of their potential for spurring debate. In an opinionated environment in which cultural forms constantly warn against the corruption of the rest of American culture, it becomes difficult to open democratic dialogue.

²¹⁹ Immortal Technique. “The 4th Branch.” *Revolutionary Vol. 2*. Viper Records, 2003. Audio Recording. and R.A. The Rugged Man. “Media Midgets.” *Legends Never Die*. Nature Sounds, 2013. Audio Recording.

²²⁰ O’Reilly, Bill. *Who’s Looking out for You?* New York: Crown Publishing Group, 2003. 1-2. Print.

Furthermore, the growing influence of dualism in cultural and media narratives reflects the entrenchment of political elites. Although neither hip-hop culture can be identified as liberal America nor conservative talk be equated with conservative America, the visions upon which I expanded in the two previous sub-parts reveal that a battle for ‘truth’ is ongoing. In the last decade and a half, spreading truth has become a key concern for major forms of American culture. Historians Curthoys and Docker observe in *Is History Fiction?* that: “When truth becomes an issue of political debate and social confrontation, it becomes subject to the power of certain groups and forces in society.”²²¹ That quotation is extremely relevant to the American case as chief forms of culture shed doubts on every single piece of information doled out to them.

In this respect, Nancy Gibbs’ depiction of polarization under Bush summarizes my findings. In a 2004 article for *TIME* magazine, Gibbs pointed out that “red Truth looks at Bush and sees a savior; Blue Truth sees a zealot who must be stopped. In both worlds there are no accidents, only conspiracies, and facts have value only to the extent that they support the Truth.”²²² It seems reasonable to extend the scope of her remarks beyond 2004 and argue that the impact of George Bush’s Manicheism was long-lasting. Before the Bush era, dualistic worldviews used to be constrained to fringe groups such as the John Birch Society, the Oathkeepers and were also characteristic of evangelical outlooks on the world. Watertight arguments revolving around good and evil were deemed to be flimsy justifications for political decisions. However, the tenure of a born-again Christian president in 2000 who embraced an evangelical vision of the world made the Manichean approach a more acceptable prism to get a handle on intricate issues.

To sum things up, the ascent of dualism helped create two versions of ‘truth’ at loggerheads. Those contending realities owe their persistence to the proliferation of ‘evidence’ in media spheres which can virtually justify the most farfetched theories. As a consequence of the triumph of dualism, the relation between ‘reds’ and ‘blues’ has become more adversarial than ever because cultural transmitters harp on about the unconscionable characteristics of those who don’t share their opinion. Labels such as liberals, progressives, conservatives, Republicans are negatively connoted and deter

²²¹ Curthoys, Ann, and John Docker. *Is History Fiction?* 2nd ed. Sydney: University of New South Wales Press, 2010. 222. Print.

²²² Gibbs, Nancy. “Blue Truth, Red Truth,” *Time*, September 27, 2004, 24-34. Print.

those who use it from elaborating on the specific wrongdoings of their enemies. Overall, the Bush presidency witnessed the popularization in culture of derogatory views of liberals as conspiring traitors and conservatives as racist dunces. The association between liberals and evil or between conservatives and evil has hunkered down in some American minds because of how often it has been established. These developments set the stage for an obsession with demonizing and idolizing politicians. The electoral downfall of moderates since 2008 is a testament to the impact of unadulterated views.²²³

Notwithstanding the overt bias of her theory about the liberal mob, Ann Coulter offers precious guidance to these phenomena of political idolatry and demonization in America. Grounding her remarks in Le Bon's theoretical framework of mob behavior, she observes that: "infatuation[s] for an individual" pegged as good or evil delineate modern political thinking.²²⁴ Those judgments imply that no matter the decisions taken by those politicians, ideological prejudices and personal skepticism will remain too resilient to be ignored. Yet, in the course of the relentless attacks she hurls at liberals, she fails to recognize that the phenomenon she describes is not limited to a blurry conflation of liberals. Worse, she misinterprets that trend by making it a grassroots movement through the metaphor of the 'mob.' The proliferation of idols owes more to the sheen of image-based politics than the mob's clamors. The depiction of politicians as heroes and villains did not originate from the American people. The American public was peddled images of larger than life politicians. TV, radio, and more generally instant-based media relied upon that cinematographic technique to revitalize politics as a marketable commodity.

It might be too soon to adjudicate that the age of debate is over but it is clear that the developments brought by new forms of culture and the political atmosphere since Bush's election have entrenched elites to a new level. That polarization is not unprecedented in American history. The problem with that new manifestation of partisan bickering is that it colors the framework through which a lot of Americans

²²³ The McCain-Palin ticket was an alliance between a historically moderate Republican and a fledgling governor who was more distinguished for her outrageous soundbites than for policy proposals. The Romney-Ryan was theoretically more moderate but both soured their anti-Obama rhetoric under the pressure of the Tea Party and conservative media pundits. The Obama-Biden was not especially radical in terms of policy proposals (although its proposals to stimulate the economy in the face of crisis were unprecedented in American history) but having a relatively young, minority president symbolized a radical drift away from previous tickets.

²²⁴ Coulter, Ann. *Demonic: How the Liberal Mob Is Endangering America*. United States: Three Rivers Press, 2011. 17. Print.

process information. The identifiable ideology of some contemporary media outlets favors selected exposure to information and politics. Such a context stimulates the viewers' eagerness to find comfort or conflict in the outlet they choose.

The early stages of the Iraq War were the last moments in history when most media supported a cause in near unison. The gradual collapse of the governmental narrative left outlets facing a quandary: either they could stick to the script or acknowledge some missteps in their coverage of the war. Outlets which remained firm in their patriotic commitment reasserted and further developed an aggressive style toward enemies of the nation. That style hasn't left them since then.

Another consequence of those evolutions is that conspiracy theories are now well adapted to the market of new media for three reasons. First, these narratives are attuned with political tendencies to limn political opposition as genuine subversion. Conspiratorial undercurrents are often conjured to make sense of changes depicted as noxious for one's social group. Parker and Barreto observe that perceived threats to social statuses favor conspiratorial explanations and that people who feel under assault "tend to see things that aren't there (...) as a means of coping with perceived powerlessness."²²⁵ In this respect, regarding protesters as playing into schemes to strip America of its greatness is a natural reflex to make sense of behaviors deemed mindless and unpatriotic. Second, theories about mythical plots fit narrative patterns which have been vetted in the world of cinema. Therefore, their entertainment value is tried-and-true. Dualistic patterns are now a safe bet in infotainment because "conflict is intrinsically more interesting than consensus."²²⁶ The stories they tell are marketable and unmistakably endear audiences to the fate of "tedious personages of workaday politics (...) reborn as heroes and villains with triumphs and reverses."²²⁷ Finally, conspiracy plots in some right-wing and left-wing circles can hardly be thwarted by counterarguments because the media baffling the gist of the conspiracy theories are depicted as part and parcel of the conspiracies denounced. Selective exposure to opinionated new media created "a milieu in which counterevidence is considered further

²²⁵ Parker, Christopher S., and Matt A. Barreto. *Change They Can't Believe in: The Tea Party and Reactionary Politics in America*. 97-98. Print.

²²⁶ Sherman, Gabriel. *The Loudest Voice in the Room: How the Brilliant, Bombastic Roger Ailes Built Fox News-- and Divided a Country*. New York: Random House Publishing Group, 2014. xiv-xv. Print.

²²⁷ Ibid. Sherman, Gabriel. xiv-xv

proof of a conspiracy.”²²⁸ To put it in a nutshell, a type of “fundamentalism” in which one’s values override facts when one is faced with new information has gained ground thanks to the ideological comfort provided by modern ways to access information.²²⁹

To summarize, outlets wagered that Manicheism in times of war would be the easiest way to provide compelling entertainment to their audiences. In other words, they aligned with what the Bush administration told the American people not only because of media conglomeration and fears of a backlash. I believe that they also did so because they knew that “glorious crusades to crush Evil with violence will always be more intuitively exciting and emotionally satisfying than less flamboyant means for defeating it.”²³⁰ Where the Bush administration needed Manicheism to sell the war to the American people in simple terms, cultural actors abided by that maxim because cultural forms bank more on conflict than on debate. Accordingly, they needed Manicheism to impose their virulent style. But Manicheism soon permeated domestic politics beyond the Iraq framework. The conflict which unraveled on the domestic cultural terrain revealed marketable cultural products which have thrived since then.

The increasing share of artists and commentators who followed the Manichean playbook have set an example in which conflict reigns supreme. Audiences now have the choice to use culture to reinforce opinions by listening to friendly points of view of deriding identifiably opposed ones. Decades ago, in the early stages of mass communication, Hofstadter observed that “mass communication allowed to keep the mass-individual in a state of near permanent political involvement.”²³¹ The latest evolutions in media landscape added a twist to his remarks because the success of opinionated culture might very well be keeping consumers in a state of permanent political allegiance instead of critical involvement. In effect, the ideological conglomeration of like-minded media outlets (on various technological supports) forms “protective media space[s]” which provide a framework to confound antagonistic

²²⁸ Neiwert, David. *The Eliminationists: How Hate Talk Radicalized the American Right*. United Kingdom: Polipoint Press, 2009. 54. Print.

²²⁹ Sullivan, Andrew. *The Conservative Soul: Fundamentalism, Freedom, and the Future of the Right*. United States: HarperCollins Publishers, 2007. Print.

²³⁰ Greenwald, Glenn. *A Tragic Legacy: How a Good Vs. Evil Mentality Destroyed the Bush Presidency*. New York: Crown Publishing Group (NY), 2007. 135. Print.

²³¹ Hofstadter, Richard. *The Paranoid Style in American Politics, and other Essays*. New York: Knopf, 1966. 117. Print.

ideas.²³² In light of all these evolutions, it seems timely to wonder how much time moderates can resist the bipolarization template set by cultural and political elites, especially in view of the latest developments during the Obama era.

III – The Climax: Politicized Culture and the Obama Presidency

III – A/ The Noxious President: How Barack Obama was Stonewalled in Conservative Entertainment.

The kinds of discourse that new media helped develop in recent decades climaxed with the arrival of a character as riveting as Ronald Reagan: President Barack Obama. The difference with Reagan was that reactions to Obama's election and presidency were not belated. Contrary to Reagan's, Obama's treatment in popular culture is not historical fictionalization. It is an ongoing dispute between contending visions of reality.

It is not an overstatement to claim that Obama's election in 2008 bamboozled the American right. The ways in which the new president was covered in the media

²³² Jamieson, Kathleen Hall, and Joseph N Cappella. *Echo Chamber: Rush Limbaugh and the Conservative Media Establishment*. xiii.

induced right-wing sympathizers to embrace and actively engage in combat politics. For years, media pundits have been brewing anger at a government no longer solely because of its decisions but rather because of its outlook and ideological color. Obama's presidency has been an era marked by a more venomous public discussion. Never before in history had a president been so vehemently criticized. More accurately, a president had never seen such levels of criticism resonate as loudly as Obama during his terms. Reflecting on his years in power, Obama made the following comment: "Democracy grinds to a halt without a willingness to compromise, or when even basic facts are contested, or when we listen only to those who agree with us."²³³ The shortfall of accepted facts about Obama's policies²³⁴ coupled to the further growth of 'comfort' and 'confrontation' zones dominate the cultural landscape eight years after Obama moved into the White House.

Two important factors distinguish Obama's presidency from earlier eras. First, aggressive political discourse concretely impacted the democratic process when for instance, Washington's trench war temporarily hamstrung government. Second, the elitist phenomenon I described in my first two parts played a part in the resurgence of popular movements such as the Tea Party, Occupy Wall Street and Black Lives Matter which look for solutions to their complaints elsewhere than within the established political structure. To put it simply, Obama's election to the presidency created a rationale in which elite and grassroots politics became similar to media politics: jaded about the prospects of collaboration and more enticed by the promises of ideology.

In the words of the president himself, appeals to renege on consensus politics have been issued at both the political and the cultural levels:

The Republican political elites and many of the information outlets, social media, news outlets, talk radio, television stations, have been feeding the Republican base for the last seven years a notion that everything I do is to

²³³ Obama, Barack. "Remarks of president Barack Obama – state of the union address as delivered." whitehouse.gov, 1 Mar. 2016. Web. 15 May 2016. <https://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2016/01/12/remarks-president-barack-obama-%E2%80%93-prepared-delivery-state-union-address>

²³⁴ Obama himself lamented that paucity of accepted facts in a recent interview with Ellen DeGeneres by mentioning the example of budget: "Since I came into office, we reduced the deficit by two-thirds. But if you ask the average person, they're sure that spending has shot up, and the reason is because there are a bunch of folks who say that we're wildly overspending." In Gass, Nick, and Nolan D McCaskill. *Obama: Washington is depressing*. POLITICO, 12 Feb. 2016. Web. 12 May 2016. <http://www.politico.com/story/2016/02/obama-on-ellen-degeneres-219195>

be opposed, that cooperation or compromise somehow is a betrayal, that maximalist absolutist positions on issues are politically advantageous, that there is a “them” out there and an “us.”²³⁵

Grounded in the premise that a majority of Republican sympathizers yearned for vocal and complete opposition to Obama, the denunciation of the president became searing in right-wing political talk. Two factors favoured that noticeable shift: the adaptability of oppositional politics to new media and the acceptance among some grassroots constituencies (especially within the Tea Party) of the claim that Obama’s actions were not in America’s best interests and that he, himself, was somehow un-American.

Contrary to some of the previous sub-parts of this study, my quest for primary sources has been very simple. The abundance of negative theories about the new President of the United States beggars belief. It seems that media outlets such as Fox News, Breitbart and glitterati such as Glenn Beck or Mark Levin embraced a more conspiratorial outlook in the wake of Barack Hussein Obama’s victory. They pinned down the market opportunities such a move toward outrage and conspiracies would tender to their infotainment. After eight years spent railing against the excesses of the Democratic opposition and pontificating on the fruits of Reaganism, they could now put a face on an enemy against whom they could rally. A bemusing evolution brought by Beck, Jones, Limbaugh on TV or on the radio; by Drudge Report, Breitbart, countless blogs on the Internet and some Tea Party members on the ground was that attacks on the president could be targeted at his personal identity instead of his political decisions. As I have shown earlier, individual attacks were already a feature of the political game in Washington but the Obama era made it fair game to use attack politics for nearly every imaginable purpose. The fact that personal charges started to spill all over American culture was a key instalment in America’s political history. It confirms the success of the emotion-based styles developed in new media and diminishes the interest of more informational and objective forms of news as observed in dialogic politics.

²³⁵ Obama, Barack. in Taylor, Colin. “Obama to Republicans: I didn’t create trump, your bigotry towards me did.” *Occupy Democrats*, 10 Mar. 2016. Web. 2 Apr 2016.
<http://occupydemocrats.com/home/post/2016/03/10/obama-to-republicans-i-didnt-create-trump-your-bigotry-towards-me-did>

The three main sources I used in the course of this study; namely Glenn Beck, Sean Hannity, and Rush Limbaugh have been unanimous in their depictions of Obama as a shady individual. Excerpts in which they shed doubt on Obama's true intentions and national allegiance suggest that the United States is not faced with a president who errs in his decisions but with a leader who intentionally founders the American ship. For instance, in a recent intervention on air, Limbaugh censured Obama for seeking to drag America down:

I was trying to convince everybody back in 2008, "Do not elect this guy. This guy does not have respect for this nation. This guy thinks this nation is ill-conceived, immoral, unjust, from the days of its founding. He thinks that we have created most of the problems of the world. We are not the solution, that we are the primary problem."²³⁶

Once again, claims that Obama's internationalist worldview might not prime America's interests are worth consideration for their content but Limbaugh's tirade is more striking to the extent that it is a formal indictment of a POTUS in office for harboring anti-American views. Website glennbeck.com does not pale in comparison to Limbaugh's assaults on the president. A simple research with the keyword 'Obama' retrieves results such as "Obama continues to destroy the country,"²³⁷ an interview with Rudy Giuliani titled "Giuliani doubles down: Yep, Obama isn't a fan of America"²³⁸ or a 2014 entry asserting that Obama declared himself a dictator.²³⁹ Switching to a research about 'Obama' on hannity.com feels like a simple change of interface. Titles such as "Emperor Obama,"²⁴⁰ or "Emperor Obama's decree"²⁴¹ suggest that the

²³⁶ Networks, Premiere Radio. *Barack Obama sees the United States military as a force for evil, not good*. Rush Limbaugh, 4 Apr. 2016. Web. 22 Apr 2016.

http://www.rushlimbaugh.com/daily/2016/04/04/barack_obama_sees_the_united_states_military_as_a_force_for_evil_not_good

²³⁷ Beck, Glenn. *July 15, 2015 – Obama continues to destroy the country*. Glenn Beck, 15 July 2015. Web. 31 May 2016. <http://www.glennbeck.com/content/show/2015-07-15/>

²³⁸ Beck, Glenn. *Giuliani doubles down: Yep, Obama isn't a fan of America*. Glenn Beck, 20 Feb. 2015. Web. 20 Apr 2016. <http://www.glennbeck.com/2015/02/20/giuliani-doubles-down-yep-obama-isnt-a-fan-of-america/>

²³⁹ Beck, Glenn. *The ultimate flip flop: Tonight Obama declares himself a dictator in his own words*. Glenn Beck, 20 Nov. 2014. Web. 20 Apr 2016. <http://www.glennbeck.com/2014/11/20/the-ultimate-flip-flop-tonight-obama-declares-himself-a-dictator-in-his-own-words/>

²⁴⁰ Hannity, Sean. *Emperor Obama | the Sean Hannity show*. The Sean Hannity Show, Nov 20 2014. Web. 31 May 2016. <http://www.hannity.com/articles/immigration-487258/emperor-obama-12992761/>

²⁴¹ Hannity, Sean. *Emperor Obama's decree | the Sean Hannity show*. The Sean Hannity Show, Nov 21 2014. Web. 20 Apr 2016. <http://www.hannity.com/articles/immigration-487258/emperor-obamas-decree-12996422/>

president is poised to toss off the principles of American democracy whereas others such as “Obama takes a shot at American Christians”²⁴² reinforce the prevailing narrative that Obama has an ax to grind in attacking values that conservatives conflate with Americanism.

As a result, the Obama administration started to take exception to these attacks and White House strategists attempted to react with a boycott of Fox News and an attack on Rush Limbaugh.²⁴³ Interestingly, Obama himself was among the first presidents to look obsessed over the civility of public discourse. Yet, his fight against venomous rhetoric is virtually a struggle against media evolution in which he is disempowered. Now that “every loudmouth with a talk show or hatemonger with a laptop could mainline venom into the system,” Obama’s struggle for civil public discourse seemed a lost cause.²⁴⁴ Because of his emphasis on substance and serious discourse when it had become unfashionable, the president was an easy prey for demonization. His inability to offer counter-narratives and engage in “myth-busting” as well as the self-reinforcing echo chamber of conservative infotainment disarmed Obama in front of aggressive challenges.²⁴⁵ The profile drawn by vocal critics of Obama was ominous and gained traction as the administration failed to engage in debunking the theories trotted in the media.

Of course, each of the three pundits I mention above privilege slightly different agendas. For instance, Beck has a knack for moral and religious issues whereas Limbaugh is keener on economic conservatism. Nonetheless, when focusing on Barack Obama as a politician, statements originating from the three commentators are similarly venomous. As it was the case with Iraq protesters, Beck, Hannity, and Limbaugh among others create complex theories about Obama’s treasonous instincts. The ‘Limbaugh Theorem’ for instance, perpetuates the idea that Obama has a vested interest in hurting the country over which he presides:

²⁴² Hannity, Sean. *Obama takes A shot at American Christians, Ted Cruz Fires back | the Sean Hannity show | the Sean Hannity show*. The Sean Hannity Show, Oct 14 2015. Web. 20 Apr 2016. <http://www.hannity.com/onair/the-sean-hannity-show-55176/obama-takes-a-shot-at-american-14033424/>

²⁴³ Alter, Jonathan. *The Promise: President Obama*. London: Simon & Schuster. 2010. 267-290. Print.

²⁴⁴ Ibid. Alter, Jonathan. 287

²⁴⁵ Grunwald, Michael. *How Obama lost control of the narrative: The inside story*. POLITICO Magazine, 26 May 2016. Web. 27 May 2016. <http://www.politico.com/magazine/story/2016/04/narrative-message-media-president-barack-obama-administration-communications-213830>

For perhaps the first time in the history of the United States, it is in the political interest of a president to inflict maximum pain on the American people (...). There must be suffering by the American people. There must be. That's how Obama benefits.²⁴⁶

Hence, the theorem is the latest development of the paranoid style sketched out by Nicholas Lemann because the individual topping the conspiratorial hierarchy is the president himself.²⁴⁷

As serious academic works point out, Obama's response to the financial crisis might be unsettling because of the gigantic sums of money shelled out by the federal government. Indeed, the Obama administration favored interventionist solutions to solve the crisis facing the nation. Some academics such as Arthur C. Brooks sifted through recent political issues and provided interesting remarks about how the Obama era might be undermining the sacrosanct nature of free enterprise through economic intervention and extended social welfare.²⁴⁸ However, it is even more unsettling to consider the credit ascribed to contentions which, in other eras, would have sounded farcical because of the ways they are expressed. Formulated in isolation, theories about Obama's otherness, socialism or anti-Americanism might have remained unnoticed. Nevertheless, the current interrelation between right-wing pundits provides potential justifications which can be bandied around to validate the most farfetched hypotheses about the president. David Neiwert, who penned his study on eliminationism around the time of Obama's first election, warned about conservatives who depicted the opposition as evil and "straddle[d] the boundaries of various sectors of America's right-wing."²⁴⁹ Far from operating in the isolation depicted by Brian C. Anderson when he mentions the old media landscape, the presence of conservative arguments in culture takes multiple forms: talk radio, cable TV, YouTube Channels, blogs, websites, movies, books... In this respect, Rush Limbaugh's brother David authored an indictment of Barack Obama

²⁴⁶ Premiere Radio Networks. *Understanding the Limbaugh theorem: Obama Inflicts pain for political gain*. Rush Limbaugh, 5 Mar. 2013. Web. 1 June 2016.
http://www.rushlimbaugh.com/daily/2013/03/05/understanding_the_limbaugh_theorem_obama_inflicts_pain_for_political_gain

²⁴⁷ Lemann, Nicholas. "Paranoid Style." *The New Yorker*, 16 Oct. 2006. Web. 6 Feb. 2016.
<http://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2006/10/16/paranoid-style>

²⁴⁸ Brooks, Arthur C. *The Battle: How the Fight Between Free Enterprise and Big Government Will Shape America's Future*. United States: Basic Books, 2010. 65-68. Print.

²⁴⁹ Neiwert, David. *The Eliminationists: How Hate Talk Radicalized the American Right*. United Kingdom: Polipoint Press, 2009. 52. Print.

in which a mere look at chapter titles encompasses the scope of attacks hurled at the president in the conservative media sphere. In the course of the book, Obama is alternately called a “narcissist,” a “liar,” a “bully,” a “dictator” (a feat for which he gets honored with two chapters), and “anti-American.”²⁵⁰ His willingness to bankrupt the country is also mentioned and the whole mixture gives the image of a president with dubious intentions toward the country.

Charges leveled at Obama in conservative media revolve around three major themes: first, his religious and personal upbringing, second, his racial vision of America and third, his ‘radical’ relatives and ideas. These three facets echo the main complaints of Tea Partiers about the president. Tea Partiers were most fervid to follow in the footsteps of Donald Trump in asking for Obama’s birth certificate. They were also prone to wonder about Obama’s religious identification and believe rumors about his association with Islam. Besides, Tea Partiers, although they often defended themselves against charges of racism, were receptive to storylines in which Obama prioritized America’s minorities at the expense of its white majority. Finally, a third type of attack revolving around Obama’s disdain for key socio-economic mainstays of America correlates well with a trend that analysts of Tea Party sympathizers have highlighted: seeing political spending for social change as subversion of what America used to be and should revert to.²⁵¹ Overall, even though the impact of conservative commentators on rates of Tea Party sympathy is difficult to quantify, pieces of evidence pile up when we look at the similarities between media diatribes and popular movement. In addition, Skocpol and Williamson have found a parallel between watching Fox News Channel and supporting Tea Party ideas about Obama’s presidency.²⁵²

The substance of conservative diatribes is not the only weapon wielded to instill doubt about the goals of the president. Obviously, since they represent the opposition to the president’s party and ideological guidelines, conservative pundits begrudge the president for the content of most of his decisions. But they ground their opposition in more than sheer political substance. Devices to meld political opposition with distrust towards the individual are diverse and more or less covert. On this note, Fredrick C.

²⁵⁰ Limbaugh, David. *Crimes Against Liberty: An Indictment of President Barack Obama*. United States: Regnery Publishing, Inc., An Eagle Publishing Company, 2010. Print.

²⁵¹ Parker, Christopher S., and Matt A. Barreto. *Change They Can’t Believe in: The Tea Party and Reactionary Politics in America*. United States: Princeton University Press, 2013. 243. Print.

²⁵² Skocpol, Theda, and Vanessa Williamson. *The Tea Party and the Remaking of Republican Conservatism*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2012. Print.

Harris raises an acute point about how Obama is treated with leniency by his apologists but it paradoxically applies to how Obama is berated by his critics: “Unfortunately, when it comes to the Obama presidency and black America, the symbolic and the substantive are assumed to be one.”²⁵³

A lot of symbols have been used to decry Obama’s dangerousness. For instance, in the course of this study, I was dumbstruck with the recurrent use of Obama’s middle name in some conservative outlets. Rush Limbaugh’s allusions to “Barack Hussein,” or “Barack Hussein O.” are not haphazard. The association between Obama’s middle name and the last name of one of the evil characters buried in the American consciousness: Saddam Hussein, seems trivial but forms part of the symbolism deployed to depict Obama as alien and dangerous. By the same token, references to Obama’s crimes on liberties and freedom are reminiscent of the last freedom assaulter the U.S. faced: Osama Bin Laden. The dualistic historical record indicates that the last individual to imperil the American way of life was the mastermind behind 9-11. In George W. Bush’s words as well as in the conservative consciousness, his attacks were primarily aimed at American liberties.²⁵⁴ As David Limbaugh exemplifies, arguing that Obama is a direct threat to American liberties is both a political attack and a symbolic reference to an evil constantly threatening in the country. Visual props are also part of the apparatus deployed on the right to malign the president and make him as an insidious menace. It is once again a Limbaugh brother who seems more creative in that domain. Parodies of movies featuring pictures of a deranged Obama are an original part of Rush’s website. I provided an example below in which Obama’s presidency is compared to an apocalypse, a sequester, and Armageddon. The use of pictures of a president who looks demented and embodies evil in high-concept movies provides graphic fuel to the numerous theories about his intent to subvert the country.

²⁵³ Harris, Fredrick C. *The Price of the Ticket: Barack Obama and Rise and Decline of Black Politics*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2012. 187. Print.

²⁵⁴ See Bush, George W., “Address to Joint Session of Congress,” September, 20, 2001. Web. 3 Mar 2016. <http://www.americanrhetoric.com/speeches/gwbush911jointsessionspeech.htm>



Figure 1: Illustration of the Apocalyptic Presidency of Barack Obama from Networks, Premiere Radio. *Amazing how things never change.* Rush Limbaugh, 8 Mar. 2013. Web. 25 Apr 2016.²⁵⁵

As a result, more than ever before, the conservative echo chamber reaches popular circles. Fiscal responsibility is at heart one of the major concerns of Tea Partiers and a wedge issue for media personalities aspiring to attract those audiences. As a result, the significance of costly decisions such as health care reform has been hyperbolized in some media spheres as an intentional sacrifice of America's core spirit of limited government. Mentions of the costs outweighed mentions of the potential benefits in conservative talk. The law was mainly depicted as a boondoggle or a means to stand in the way of individual liberties. Health care was perfectly adapted for misinformation since the law "was a complex morass of plans, preferences, fears, data, and studies." As a result, it provided a lot of elbow room "for misinformation, exemplified by the Palin "death panels.""²⁵⁶ Other tactics to censure the current administration consist in depicting reform attempts as tokenism or pork-barrel politics to create the illusion of action.

Visceral reactions to the president also rely on the importance of Obama's identity. These reactions partly hinge on the fact that Obama represents a different outlook than the one traditionally represented by American presidents. Yet, the shady biographical details that right-wing outlets prioritized in their early coverage of the president – including Obama's ties with reverend Jeremiah Wright, Obama's 'team of radicals,' Obama's self-appointed authoritarian czars, Obama's links to exotic countries such as Indonesia and Kenya (or even Hawaii in some fringe circles) – often reeked of race-baiting. In their view, Obama does not like the country as it is because he has been

²⁵⁵ Networks, Premiere Radio. *Amazing how things never change.* Rush Limbaugh, 8 Mar. 2013. Web. 25 Apr 2016. http://www.rushlimbaugh.com/daily/2013/03/08/amazing_how_things_never_change

²⁵⁶ Herbst, Susan. *Rude Democracy: Civility and Incivility in American Politics.* United States: Temple University Press, 2010. 95. Print.

critical of the country he inherited when he became president. For instance, a segment aired on Hannity after Rudy Giuliani issued doubts about Obama's patriotism ("I do not believe that the president loves America"), shows Hannity and two of his guests trot out the list of Obama's radical friends. Additionally, they compare his criticism of the country to Reagan's unfaltering praise for America as it was. Notwithstanding the imbalance of that sequence (with three conservative commentators for only one progressive), the mere willingness to address the president's love for his country serves to further call into question his identity and raise doubts about his true allegiances.²⁵⁷ His actual and fictional ties to sixties radicals have been played up to depict Obama as standing for the institutionalization of revolution. In that context, the theory about mad Democrats hijacking the country becomes palatable. Moreover, when coupled with the inability of Republicans to curb that evolution and the mainstream media's complicity, criticism becomes akin to a paranoid feeling; namely, "distrust in everything that's institutionalized."²⁵⁸

Whereas Hannity and D'Souza were obsessed with Obama's 'radical' ties, entertainers such as Glenn Beck opted to present an endangered country caving in to the queries of undeserving citizens. In that framework, Obama stands for constituencies such as blacks, Latinos, LGBT, young millennials which don't jibe with a traditional vision of America. For viewers and listeners who got their news only from Beck's show or complemented it with like-minded sources, developing anguish toward Obama's impact on America seemed a natural upshot.²⁵⁹ Accordingly, the rise of the Tea Party was seen as pivotal to the preservation of the country they had known for decades. Members were not only opposing the government, they felt like they were salvaging the American way of life from the heirs of the 1960s radicals: "Together, the movement's followers truly believed that a conservative revolution had saved America from the godless, hedonistic, and socialist rule of 1960s hippies and fellow travelers."²⁶⁰

The cultural demonization I have shed light on leaves out efforts to sophisticate the criticism leveled at the president. The shift from labeling decisions as "dead wrong"

²⁵⁷ Dinesh D'Souza. "Hannity: D'Souza, Kevin Williamson Battle Juan Williams on Obama's Patriotism." *YouTube*. YouTube, 21 Feb. 2015. Web. 3 Mar. 2016.

²⁵⁸ Jamieson, Kathleen Hall. In Sanders, Sam. *#MemeOfTheWeek: "The media."* NPR.org, 31 Oct. 2015. Web. 25 May 2016. <http://www.npr.org/sections/itsallpolitics/2015/10/31/453220610/-memeoftheweek-the-media>

²⁵⁹ Bunch, Will. *The Backlash: Right-Wing Radicals, High-Def Hucksters, and Paranoid Politics in the Age of Obama*. United States: HarperCollins Publishers, 2010. 58. Print.

²⁶⁰ Ibid. Bunch, Will. 19

for the nation to the denunciation of politicians guided by “evil” motives shaped up under the aegis of entertainers; not academics. Attacking a president as the Devil’s henchmen encouraged those who supported these theories to take matters into their own hands through the creation of the Tea Party.

I will now zero in on another development that the Obama era witnesses: the wide dissemination of simplified narratives in grassroots activism. Theories stating that Obama jeopardizes America’s greatness have not only been an elite phenomenon. Conclusions that vociferous media talk has limited consequences have been somewhat invalidated by the vocal discontent voiced by Tea Partiers since Obama’s first election. For instance, skeptical observers argue that the conditions for “growing mass polarization through increasingly partisan media [are] thus met only for a minority of Americans, albeit an influential minority.”²⁶¹ The electoral successes and prominent status achieved by Tea Party sympathizers belie these minimizing assessments. The Tea Party movement arose in the aftermath of Obama’s first election for a mixture of reasons mentioned earlier on: socio-economic interventionism, fear of subversion, racial concerns, and disconnect with American values as additional reasons for Tea Party mobilization. Additionally, Obama himself proved problematic for Tea Partiers.²⁶² All those reasons for mobilization, whether official or covert, have also been implicitly or explicitly trotted out in partisan conservative shows. I believe given the unruly record of conservative new media over the last two decades, that it is misleading to aver that media outlets glommed on to the Tea Party movement for profit. The heyday of talk radio, blogs, Fox News, and all the other outlets I mentioned earlier antedates the rise of the Tea Party and set the stage for a large-scale popular upheaval nurtured by distrust in government. Resilient unrest only needed a match to kindle into an actual movement. The election of a black president whom they were told was a socialist handed them a lighter. Fox News and conservative infotainers provided a structure to turn up the volume for Tea Party mobilization. It remains unclear to which extent Tea Party activism fed off conservative media – although studies have established a non-

²⁶¹ Prior, Markus. “Media and Political Polarization.” *The Annual Review of Political Science*. Vol. 16: 101-127. 2013. 106. Web. 16 Feb 2016.

²⁶² Parker, Christopher S. and Matt Barreto. *Change They Can’t Believe in: The Tea Party and Reactionary Politics in America*. 190-216

negligible correlation between the two—²⁶³ but the consistency of the content between grassroots principles and shows such as Beck's and Palin's short-lived appearances on Fox is undeniable. Through Fox News, talk radio and his website, Beck's theories about FEMA camps²⁶⁴ and similes between Obama and Hitler²⁶⁵ were allowed to spread to a level former conspiracy theorists could only have dreamt of. The rise of the Tea Party encouraged entertainers to continue treading that path. Yet, seeds to call Obama's intentions into question were sowed before the grassroots movement. According to Will Bunch, Tea Party anxiety precisely resulted from media diatribes: "[Tea Partiers] are expressing something that isn't hate but something deeper, anxiety and anger over the things they have heard coming from their television, and a sense that something must be done."²⁶⁶ It has often been misstated that Tea Partiers caught the attention of media outlets such as Fox News but the relationship between grassroots movement and media attention was more of a give-and-take than a traditional newsworthy mobilization. The coverage granted to Tea Parties at the time of their inception was critical in winning the movement new supporters.

To summarize, the types of criticism hurled at the president in conservative infotainment and later at Tea Party rallies encompass various kinds of rhetorical tools. Jamieson and Cappella listed four in their thoroughgoing study of the conservative media phenomenon: "extreme hypotheticals, ridicule, challenges to character, and association with strong negative emotion."²⁶⁷ The examples I provided confirm their findings. "Extreme hypotheticals" are typical of Beck's diatribes with for example his ramblings on Obama and FEMA camps. His frequent references to terrorist apocalypses, end-of-the-world situations involved Obama and he conveyed the feeling that doomsday was closer than ever because of the president. Beck had a vested interest in propagating fear: his show featured ads for survivalist paraphernalia. The products he advised to invest in (gold, food-emergency kits and other survivalist products) were

²⁶³ See Skopcol and Williamson, *The Tea Party and the Remaking of Republican Conservatism* and Parker, Christopher S. and Barreto, Matt A.; *Change They Can't Believe In: The Tea Party and Reactionary Politics in America*, 290

²⁶⁴ My Patriot Act. "Glenn Beck on FEMA Camps...Are They Real?" *YouTube*. YouTube, 28 Jan. 2014. Web. 3 Mar. 2016.

²⁶⁵ Molloy, Tim. "5 people Glenn Beck has compared to Nazis." *TheWrap*. TheWrap, 8 May 2013. Web. 3 Mar. 2016. <http://www.thewrap.com/5-things-glenn-beck-has-compared-nazis-or-holocaust-90026/>

²⁶⁶ Bunch, Will. *The Backlash: Right-Wing Radicals, High-Def Hucksters, and Paranoid Politics in the Age of Obama*. 82

²⁶⁷ Jamieson, Kathleen Hall and Joseph N. Cappella. *Echo Chamber: Rush Limbaugh and the Conservative Media Establishment*. 6

more appealing if the viewer or listener believed in the reality of the threat posed by Obama.²⁶⁸ The increased entertainment value and appeal of conspiracy theories in modern culture also encouraged the running of storylines in which the president was the root of all evils. Even the risk of having to backpedal on unverified and wacky theories did not surpass the prospects offered by an entertaining story. “Association with strong negative emotion” is perhaps the most prominent feature of the rhetorical treatment ascribed to Obama. The constant use of his middle name in the *Rush Limbaugh Show* is typical of guilt by association strategies. The use of Obama’s “ties” with Iran²⁶⁹ as well as posters in which Limbaugh stars him as a famous movie villain are designed to elicit the same kind of revulsion by association (whether with historical anti-heroes, enemy countries, or popular culture villains). Interestingly, association with negative emotion also centered upon an interpretation of Obama’s rise as the triumph of 1960s radicalism. “Challenges to character” was another key tactic in conservative infotainment. Indeed, although there was far less raw material to criticize Obama than Bill Clinton, Obama’s morals sometimes made it into conservative attacks. Other rhetorical tools have been used in conservative infotainment. One of these techniques consists in entailing that Obama does not represent traditional presidential values. To do so, commentators such as Sean Hannity refer to values shared by “some of us,” “many of us” without feeling the need to be more specific about to whom the “us” alludes to.²⁷⁰ Distancing the president from their audience seems to be a valuable strategy for conservative media mouthpieces who think that America has reached a crossroads and that political solutions won’t be sufficient to solve the issues at hand.

To give a rundown of the demonization process of the American president also leads us to delve into generational differences. Conservative entertainers, as their name indicates, attempt to promote a vision of society in which the past stands for a common core of forlorn American values that younger generations have forsaken out of ignorance. In such conditions, different opinions are the result of the general dumbing down of younger generations rather than the emergence of new legitimate ways to see

²⁶⁸ Bunch, Will. *The Backlash: Right-Wing Radicals, High-Def Hucksters, and Paranoid Politics in the Age of Obama*. 233-260

²⁶⁹ Premiere Radio Networks. “It’s inexplicable! The US senate delivers nuclear weapons to the terrorist state of Iran on the anniversary of 9/11.” Rush Limbaugh, 11 Sept. 2015. Web. 14 Apr 2016. http://www.rushlimbaugh.com/daily/2015/09/11/it_s_inexplicable_the_us_senate_delivers_nuclear_weapons_to_the_terrorist_state_of_iran_on_the_anniversary_of_9_11

²⁷⁰ Hannity, Sean. *Conservative Victory: Defeating Obama’s Radical Agenda*. 87

the world. As a consequence, different points of view ought not to be debated and should be blamed on ignorance.

From the beginning of this study, I have contended that the phenomena I describe have favored a transformation or an escape from mainstream politics. As I have shown in this subpart, the impact of Tea Party candidates in Congress and their high profile in national politics illustrate that mainstream politics are being frozen by politicians who jettison compromise. The next section is an example of how mainstream politicians can win back individuals who used to view traditional politics as corrupt and inefficient. The general endorsement received by Obama from hip-hop artistry is a testament that strong symbolism and personal identification might trump skepticism towards politics and tame wary voters.

III – B/ Support and Disillusion: Hip-hop and Obama's presidency.

An exploration of hip-hop culture throughout Obama's rise explains how a movement generally wary of mainstream politicians can become – at least temporarily - a powerful tool to marshal support around a mainstream candidate.

In the course of his presidential campaign, Obama avoided straightforward stances on racial politics as much as possible. That reluctance to deal with a pressing problem in his country only slightly affected the support he got from hip-hop artists and fans in general. Members of generations influenced by hip-hop, as exemplified by its artists, split into two factions in their appreciation of Obama the president. A majority viewed the rise of the first black president as an event of unprecedented resonance for American society and especially for the black community. Besides, a vocal minority which was either initially enthusiastic about or unmoved by the election of a black president soon lamented that the change promised by Obama in his rhetoric had gone AWOL during his presidency. That division reflected a more general approach adopted by Obama's black and minority voters.

In *The Price of the Ticket: Barack Obama and the Rise and Decline of Black Politics*, Fredrick C. Harris provides a framework to make sense of the quandary posed by Obama to the black minority in general and more particularly to politically committed hip-hop millennials: "Symbolically, the election of Obama as the first black president represents the apex of black politics. Substantively, however, Obama's ascendancy illustrates the continuing decline of black politics' inability to set a political agenda in national politics."²⁷¹

Beyond black politics, Obama represented the symbolical coronation of new strata of American voters who were definitely ready to embrace the symbol but had not yet defined the substance that would follow. The coexistence of symbolic change and substantial stagnation have been persistently discussed in hip-hop for roughly the last ten years (from the early days of the Democratic primary for 2008 to Obama's last days in the White House). In his song "Black President" [2008] rapper Nas best encapsulated the dilemma that would prevail for hip-hop artists and Obama voters throughout the 44th American presidency: "When he wins, will he really care still?"²⁷² It is true that there was a groundswell of support for the black candidate aspiring to the White House in 2008 but the support was never univocal and encomia about Obama focused on what he represented rather than what he decided to do. As a lot of hip-hop scholars noted lately, hip-hop artists from all horizons were infatuated with Obama's candidacies although a

²⁷¹ Harris, Fredrick C. *The Price of the Ticket: Barack Obama and Rise and Decline of Black Politics*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2012. 173. Print.

²⁷² Nas, and DJ Green Lantern. "Black President." *Untitled*. Island Records, 2008. Audio Recording.

lot of them were more enthused in 2008 than in 2012. Still, Obama's election marked the dawn of a new era during which some of the features I mentioned above – wariness for politics, conspiratorial undertones, and virulence toward major political figures – were considerably blunted.

Most of the contributors of *The Hip-hop and Obama Reader* volume - to which I am much indebted for this part - claim that support for Barack Obama in the early stages of his presidential career was more vocal than vigilance towards him. The president was not only a political figure, he represented the collapse of a narrow-minded worldview as well as the awakening of constituencies which used to look at politics with extreme distrust. The way he endeared himself to forms of culture which were restive toward politics made hip-hop artists and fans more supportive and involved in the ascent of the former community organizer from Chicago. Rapturous reactions about Obama's rise were commonplace and ended decades of limited interest in politics

Ironically the skepticism that was so prominent before, especially expressed within the hip-hop community, eventually dissipated (at least in the mainstream) and transformed into the more recent expressions of social optimism for the symbolic significance of Barack Obama and a fantastic moment of black exceptionalism.²⁷³

Enthusiasm revolved around two different themes: the fulfillment of civil rights dreams and the symbolism of black/'other' political power. Artists such as Common, Jay-Z or Nas who had been very critical of politics before Obama's ascent were among the first to jump on the bandwagon when he became a presidential candidate. Although he never prioritized specific promises about issues plaguing poor urban communities, what he stood for was enough for various artists to rally behind him. In short, artists emanating from the cultural form which represented most faithfully black and poor urban communities followed a more general trend. Pro-Obama constituencies seemed eager to rally behind his election without any guarantee that their key concerns would be addressed. As Harris details, black voters were most inclined to cave in to that trend and give Obama a "wink-and-nod" agreement which dwelt on overlooking his deeds in the name of what he symbolizes. The "wink-and-nod" strategy adopted by black voters during the Obama era consists in keeping a low-profile and reap the benefits brought by

²⁷³ Gosa, Travis L., and Erik Nielson, eds. *The Hip-hop & Obama Reader*. United Kingdom: Oxford University Press, 2015. 268. Print.

the president's existence rather than by his decisions.²⁷⁴ Hip-hop artists were also representative of that penchant. Full songs such as Nas' "Black President" [2008],²⁷⁵ Young Jeezy's "My President is Black" [2008] or shorter references all illustrate that propensity to praise the symbolism of the Obama presidency.

On one hand, these songs describe Obama's success as a momentous episode in the struggle for civil rights for minorities of all sorts. His resonance is of course more obvious for the black civil rights record. His election was viewed as a continuation of efforts undertaken decades before under the aegis of civil rights leaders such as Martin Luther King, Malcolm X, Fred Hampton, Jesse Jackson... The relation between civil rights generations and hip-hop generations has often been tense because veterans of civil rights struggles begrudge hip-hop for promoting a derogatory image of black areas and inner cities in general. Conversely, young fans of hip-hop, although grateful for the achievements brought by civil rights activists, argue that the chief concerns of their communities have shifted and that "unfinished business" such as mass incarceration, police brutality, or social disinvestment is still on the agenda.²⁷⁵ The momentum gathered by Obama's election had the ephemeral effect of bridging the gap between generations. Overall, supportive hip-hop artists promoted the idea that the president's election was in congruence with the demands of past civil rights leaders. The symbolism behind Obama's election and reelection overshadowed the wariness of other hip-hop artists who refused to celebrate Obama's victory as long as concrete improvements on key issues were not to be seen.

As one of the emcees who was most vocal in supporting Obama before and after his first election, Common played a role in raising Obama's presidential profile through early references to the Illinois senator. As early as 2004, in the remix of Jadakiss' "Why," Common asked: "Why don't we impeach him (Bush) and elect Obama?"²⁷⁶ The emcee who would go on to become one of the most visible rappers to stand with Obama during his presidency, became more committed as Obama's election bid gained momentum. His references to Obama overlapped with another facet of his political commitment throughout his career: his repeated tributes to civil rights leaders. Common

²⁷⁴ Harris, Fredrick C. *The Price of the Ticket: Barack Obama and Rise and Decline of Black Politics*. 139

²⁷⁵ Kitwana, Bakari. *The Hip-hop Generation: Young Blacks and the Crisis in African American Culture*. New York: Basic Civitas Books, 2002. 148. Print.

²⁷⁶ Jadakiss, Styles P, Common, and Nas. "Why? (Remix)." *Kiss of Death*. Ruff Ryders; Interscope. 2004, Audio Recording.

links Obama with Martin Luther King and exemplifies the pattern which consists in seeing Obama as an embodiment of MLK's dream. The outro to "Changes" [2009] includes a direct mention to Obama as a new torchbearer of the change charted by Luther King.²⁷⁷ With "The Believer" [2011], Common devotes a full song to the ongoing legacy of civil rights movements. The chorus sung by John Legend weaves civil rights figures, hip-hop artists and role models such as Obama together. Common and John Legend trumpet that current generations ought to emblazon these three different models and endorse them as black America's legacy. This song lingers on the common representation of Obama as an heir to Luther King and the divinely-inspired fight for civil rights with the lines: "I know that God watches. From one King's dream, he was able to Barack us."²⁷⁸ Furthermore, the whole song conveys the feeling that the flames of civil rights activism will now be fanned in mainstream politics with the election of a black president. Jay-Z echoes that connection between Obama and civil rights luminaries by claiming on the remix to "My President" [2008] that Obama upholds the fight initiated by famous civil rights leaders in the past: "Rosa Parks sat so Martin Luther King could walk. Martin Luther King walked so Obama could run. Obama's running so we all can fly."²⁷⁹ Interestingly, later during Obama's second tenure, Common further expanded on the topic of the civil rights movement's legacy with the song "Glory" [2014] featuring John Legend.²⁸⁰ The analogy between civil rights history and Obama's rise which had been so prominent in "Changes," or "The Believer" was absent from his Grammy-winning ode to civil rights activism. In light of the continuing good relationship between the emcee and the president, it can be inferred that although wholly supportive of Obama as a symbol, Common could not eulogize the substance of socio-political decisions enacted by the president. The scarcity of references to Obama's record on issues such as minority rights, immigrant status or judicial reform coupled to the description of Ferguson demonstrations as a new instalment in civil rights struggle proves that American race relations are still considered dysfunctional. That song is a testament that hip-hop culture may still

²⁷⁷ Common, and Muhsinah. "Changes." *Universal Mind Control*. G.O.O.D. Music; Geffen Records. 2008. Audio Recording.

²⁷⁸ Common, and John Legend. "The Believer." *The Dreamer / The Believer*. Warner Bros. Records. 2011. Audio Recording.

²⁷⁹ Young Jeezy, Nas, and JAY-Z. "My President (Remix)." *The Recession*. Corporate Thugz; Def Jam Records. 2008. Audio Recording.

²⁸⁰ Common, and John Legend. "Glory." *Selma (Original Soundtrack)*. Columbia Records. 2014. Audio Recording.

begrudge mainstream politics but has temporarily toned down its criticism toward the president for the sake of the symbolic change he brought.

More accurately, most of the critiques about racial relations during the Obama era do not gravitate around the president. The rise of movements such as Black Lives Matter continued that tendency to wage a pressing fight without slighting the first black American president. Black Lives Matter is a grassroots movement which arose after the death of 17-year-old Trayvon Martin in 2012 at the hands of George Zimmerman, a neighborhood vigilante who was cleared of all charges in that case. In the manifesto they posted onto their website to explain their movement, Black Lives Matter leaders explain that "Black Lives Matter affirms the lives of Black queer and trans folks, disabled folks, black-undocumented folks, folks with records, women and all Black lives along the gender spectrum."²⁸¹ Yet, the total absence of Obama from that denunciation of iniquitous treatments strikes as odd and is in coherence with songs inspired by the movement. Hip-hop songs such as Kendrick Lamar's "Alright" [2015]²⁸² or Scarface's "Mental Exorcism" [2015]²⁸³ have served as a soundtrack to Black Lives Matter protests. Most of the politicized songs in the last two years are resentful about the state of black America and social abandonment. On the whole, the Obama era was marked by the propensity shown by rappers to dissociate the president from the broader system and shy away from discussing his own track record (which can be depicted as moderately beneficial for poor urban communities). This is a disquieting observation when we bear in mind that complaints made about the past all revolved around the figure of the president; whether Bush or Reagan. As a result, supportive hip-hop acts are consonant with the idea that blacks are a "captured constituency of the Democratic Party"²⁸⁴ and suggest that their soaring involvement in politics will not bestow them anything more than the satisfaction of symbolical triumph. By encouraging audiences to view Obama's success as the second coming of the civil rights movement, most artists put on display their full admiration. Accordingly, they goaded their fans to celebrate the historical import of that election forever and did not encourage them to take advantage of Obama's presidency to communicate their complaints and suggestions directly to Washington.

²⁸¹ BlackLivesMatter. "About the Black Lives Matter Network." <http://blacklivesmatter.com/about/>

²⁸² Kendrick Lamar. "Alright." *To Pimp A Butterfly*. Top Dawg Entertainment; Aftermath Entertainment; Interscope Records, 2015. Audio Recording.

²⁸³ Scarface. "Mental Exorcism." *Deeply Rooted*. Facemob Music. 2015. Audio Recording.

²⁸⁴ Harris, Fredrick C. *The Price of the Ticket: Barack Obama and Rise and Decline of Black Politics*. 177.

A consequence of Obama's categorization as a black leader is that targeted actions on issues dear to black and urban poor communities should have been expected and even demanded. However, such lofty expectations ignore "the fact that he tactically did not endorse a black agenda" and shied away from discussing racial issues. Therefore, "Obama has been carelessly added to the pantheon of black leadership by value of his blackness, not because of his record of civil rights activist"²⁸⁵ The mere arrival of a black politician was deemed meaningful enough by many artists and fans to fill the vacuum left by late civil rights activists. Even in an era of uproar over the treatment ascribed to black communities, Obama got off the hook with his colorblind rhetoric.

Allusions to Obama were not all connected to old and/or current civil rights struggle. Artists were also awestruck by the political significance of the event. Some songs provide rare insights into substance-based expectations surrounding Obama's presidency. For instance, the remix to Young Jeezy's "My President is Black" [2008] features the following lines "No more war, no more Iraq. No more white lies, the president is black" which highlight that Jay-Z expects the president to depart from the aggressive and dishonest guidelines followed by his predecessors.²⁸⁶ That allusion epitomizes the shifting attitudes of the bulk of the hip-hop community from arrant suspicion towards politicians to complete faith in the former Illinois senator and the changes he harped on about. In general, the artists I mentioned up to this point have shown clear signs of political (re)activation themselves through statements and increasing political activism. Therefore, they parallel the effect of Obama's rise in 2008 within communities with historically low turnout. That development has been predicated upon a complete trust for the symbolic significance of Obama.

Although a majority of references to Obama lurch toward the typical penchant for idealization in new culture, two alternatives have made inroads in hip-hop culture. One of these was a form of 'critical satisfaction' shown by artists such as Nas who extolled their new president but expected concrete reforms from his administration. The other one was the 'demonization' trend so prominent in depictions of Bush and Reagan.

²⁸⁵ Gosa, Travis L. and Erik Nielson. *The Hip-hop & Obama Reader*. 110-113.

²⁸⁶ Young Jeezy, Nas, and JAY-Z. "My President (Remix)." *The Recession*. Corporate Thugz; Def Jam Records. 2008. Audio Recording.

It fed off the belief that Obama, Bush, Reagan and other presidents are crooks who share corporate interests because they occupy the same position.

On the same “My President is Black” [2008] remix, Nas, another hip-hop veteran joins forces with his former rival Jay-Z and shows an example of ‘critical satisfaction’. Nas is less rapturous than Jay-Z about Obama’s election. Although he celebrates the moment for its historic significance, Nas advises Obama not to forget his upbringing and not to betray the voters who gave him the decisive edge over John McCain. Likewise, in “Black President,” [2008] another laudatory song about the 44th president, Nas reiterates his calls for Obama to tackle the issues pressing black communities by “keep[ing] it way real” and avoid becoming a “political snake.”²⁸⁷ Nonetheless, the balance between symbolical victory and political decisions was absent from most other songs.

When artists pay closer attention to the president’s deeds and decisions, the trends I signaled earlier about Bush and Reagan resurge unmistakably. His underwhelming record on racial issues morphed into the core of a hip-hop criticism emanating from older and/or independent rappers.

Two artists mentioned earlier were particularly leery of the ebullient reactions of the mainstream music industry for the president. In keeping with the treatment of Bush and Reagan I highlighted earlier, Killer Mike and Lupe Fiasco were particularly interested in what Obama had failed to change rather than what he represented. In “Words I Never Said,” Lupe Fiasco points to Obama’s inaction in some foreign conflicts as evidence that the president is not different from his predecessors.²⁸⁸ He followed up with an infamous statement about Obama as “the biggest terrorist in the United States of America” because Obama continued assenting to faraway wars in which civilians are killed. In Lupe Fiasco’s view, Obama’s foreign policy is in line with the neoconservative bellicose approach and is a form of “terrorism that actually causes the other forms of terrorism.”²⁸⁹ Similarly, Killer Mike classifies Obama as a president indebted to special corporate interests and unlikely to effect the actual change on which he campaigned. The portrayal of Obama as a president who is “just an employee of the

²⁸⁷ Nas, and DJ Green Lantern. “Black President.” *Untitled*. Island Records, 2008. Audio Recording.

²⁸⁸ Lupe Fiasco, and Skylar Grey. “Words I never said.” *Lasers*. 1st & 15th; Atlantic Records, 2011. Audio Recording.

²⁸⁹ TheFlexEffect. “Lupe Fiasco - Obama Is ‘the biggest terrorist.’” *YouTube*. YouTube, 9 June 2011. Web. 18 May 2016.

country's real masters" suggests that the corporate state continues to manipulate the president.²⁹⁰ Other veterans have been cautious not to infatuate themselves with Obama's promises and have sustained defining traditions of hip-hop's political commitment; namely "visible currents of leftist politics and black nationalism" to which the president could not cater.²⁹¹ These leftist currents can hardly fit the traditional political cadre because as made obvious here above and in the words of rapper Talib Kweli: "trust is gone from the neocons to Barack Obama."²⁹² The full rejection of solutions and individuals who act within the norms set by the political system suggest a crisis which would necessitate emergency solutions. However, the rise of Obama and the reactions in hip-hop culture imply that artists and fans can and should trust the established system when the symbolical promises seem beguiling.

In short, the Obama era marked a ceasefire in hip-hop's conflict with mainstream politics. Oftentimes, the symbolism of the Obama candidacies for hip-hop artists supplanted the absence of concrete measures to solve pressing issues such as mass incarceration or racialized poverty. Artists who excluded political substance from their songs offered a kind of support at odds with hip-hop's traditional wariness for American politics. Whether artists indulged in a radical critique of the system or in a faddish infatuation for Obama and his historical significance, hip-hop culture continued to be estranged from day-to-day political problems while keeping on crying out against the aversion of a whole system.

To sum up, Obama's portrayal in hip-hop circles has been ambivalent. The support he received was definitely a testament to the rising activism of millennials in politics. Obama activated members of a generation (often influenced by hip-hop) who generally failed to sustain their commitment and hold him accountable for his decisions. As Harris stresses, Obama was a readymade symbol and political symbolism - as opposed to substance - is more in keeping with mainstream/corporate goals. Obama as a hip-hop reference could be used without risk. A cursory look at the songs including shout-outs to Obama reveals that whenever mentions of the black president are positive, they do not revolve around any specific political benefit wrought by blacks during his tenure. Yet, both the symbolic idolization and the substantial demonization are in

²⁹⁰ Killer Mike. "Reagan." *R.A.P. Music*. Williams Street Records, 2012. Audio Recording.

²⁹¹ Gosa, Travis, and Erik Nielson. *The Hip-hop & Obama Reader*. 33

²⁹² R.A. The Rugged Man, and Talib Kweli. "Learn Truth." *Legends Never Die*. Nature Sounds. 2013. Audio Recording

keeping with the trends I have detailed earlier on about Reagan and G.W. Bush. Few balanced voices were to be heard in the studios. The choir of voices focusing exclusively on Obama as a mythical figure - even before he took his first step on the threshold of the White House - confirms various observations about forms of politicized popular culture. Firstly, optimistic stances painting Obama as the new civil rights messiah resemble the conservative glorification of the Reagan legacy. Furthermore, they sustain a tradition which consists in viewing all politics – and not only electoral bids – as a struggle between the will of powerful individuals devoted to the preservation or to the downfall of whole communities. Secondly, politics in popular culture are attractive because entertainers posit that they can bring tremendous change but in essence, popular culture also conveys the idea that meaningful discussions of issues are dull and pointless. As I have documented in the course of this study, American politics in the age of new media are more and more defined by the dualism typical of voices commenting on it.

As the United States enters the final stages of the Obama era, it is now time to see how political culture has shaped and continues to transform the apparatus in Washington.

III – C/ The Obama and Post-Obama era: The End of the Political Daily Routine.

Both as a cause and consequence of these bitter depictions of the opposition in culture, political victories are now more and more defined based on a “winner-takes-all” formula. This conception of politics as an arena where winners and losers are pitted against each other in an everlasting showdown entails that suffering electoral defeats no longer forces cooperation. The Obama presidency saw obstructionism become the preferable solution to frame disagreement. With a culture suggesting that the only acceptable political victories are total ones in which a set of fixed ideological beliefs is respected and the torchbearer of these beliefs gets cast as a hero, it becomes increasingly difficult to find common ground. In this respect, it is interesting to see that a warning issued by a media scientist in a 2006 book is now one of the hobby horses of the exiting president Obama. Indeed, in 2006, Henry Jenkins pointed out in *Convergence Culture* that “The current polarization also means that we are unable to find unifying principles or to act upon points of consensus.”²⁹³ Over the past eight years, Obama has primed the issue of collaboration and civility and has called on American citizens not to emulate the ludicrous spectacle shown in Washington. In one of his farewell addresses, Obama took these worries to a new level and reflected upon the cornerstones of new forms of culture: “Democracy grinds to a halt without a willingness to compromise, or when even basic facts are contested, or when we listen only to those who agree with us. Our public life withers when only the most extreme voices get all the attention.”²⁹⁴ These remarks were probably designed as a direct shot taken at conservative infotainers but they apply to an increasing share of American forms of culture. With these words, Obama delineates the contours of entertainment forms in which politics are predicated upon disagreements over truths instead of disputes over agendas. The president also hints at the obstructionism which hit his administration particularly after the Republican victory in the 2010 mid-term elections. Compellingly, he links it with the misinformation of public life actors. The diagnosis made by Obama is accurately capsulized by liberal commentator Jon Stewart who opened his televised debate with Bill O’Reilly with the following terms: “We face a

²⁹³ Jenkins, Henry. *Convergence Culture: Where Old and New Media Collide*. New York, NY: New York University Press, 2006. 236. Print.

²⁹⁴ Obama, Barack. “Remarks of president Barack Obama – state of the union address as delivered.” whitehouse.gov, 1 Mar. 2016. Web. 14 May 2016. <https://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2016/01/12/remarks-president-barack-obama-%E2%80%93-prepared-delivery-state-union-address>

deficiency in our problem-solving mechanism (...) [because] a good portion of this country has created an alternate universe.”²⁹⁵

Undoubtedly, there are concrete consequences of the advent of a culture parlaying upon bitter polarization to tackle politics. The shutdown and shutdown threats in Washington or the resistance to Obama’s nomination of a replacement for Supreme Court judge Antonin Scalia are bricks-and-mortar consequences of the rise of obstructionism as a responsible strategy. These responses to decisions of the Democratic administration were fleshed out in conservative media and welcomed by movements such as the Tea Party. For example, Rush Limbaugh was an advocate of obstructionism in the wake of the 2010 mid-term elections in which Democrats were beaten. Pressuring Republicans to adopt the only attitude possible to halt the Democrats’ ‘destructionist’ agenda, Limbaugh implied that it would be open season on Republicans who showed any willingness to compromise:

“I have said that there will be gridlock and that gridlock is good, especially now. Gridlock: When you have an administration hell-bent on destroying the nation's economy, there's nothing better in the world than stopping that. If gridlock is the way you do it, fine and dandy.”²⁹⁶

For receptive audiences, having Republican leaders adopting any other attitude than pure obstructionism would be judged a betrayal. Partly as a result, this uncompromising perception of politics became a driving force within the Republican Party at the time of the 2013 Washington shutdown. Under the aegis of Tea Party-backed senators such as 2016 presidential candidate Ted Cruz or current speaker of the House of Representatives Paul Ryan, a group of Republicans refused to ratify the 2014 budget unless the Obama administration agreed to some concessions (such as delaying the implementation of part of the healthcare reform or the establishment of a debt ceiling on the expenditures of the country). This refusal to respect due process led to the shutdown of some institutions in Washington for twelve days.

Looking back at those who were responsible for that notorious episode is edifying. The paralysis was brought about by Republicans who rose to prominence

²⁹⁵ by NickofTime. “O’Reilly Vs Stewart Debate.” *YouTube*. YouTube, 7 Oct. 2012. Web. 23 May 2016. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Pmr3XvaoVW4>

²⁹⁶ Premiere Radio Networks. *The loser must compromise*. Rush Limbaugh, 5 Nov. 2010. Web. 24 Mar. 2016. http://www.rushlimbaugh.com/daily/2010/11/05/the_loser_must_compromise

thanks to their hardline ideological attitude. Yet, as mentioned earlier, their rise did not come from out of the blue. They are in thrall to a minority of electors backed by a bevy of conservative media pundits who continuously make it clear that anything else than parliamentary filibuster would be seen as a letdown. This resulted in the rise of GOP conservatives in Congress who feel like they have been elected mainly to take Obama's agenda head on. Three years after the shutdown and although the blackmail attempt was not successful, a look at the profiles of GOP presidential candidates buttresses claims that hardliners have successfully raised their public profile. Their rise gives legitimacy to ideological obstructionism as a political strategy. Ted Cruz, for instance, argued that it was good to cause governmental deadlock because Washington officials had lost popular demands from sight: "unfortunately, the Washington establishment is failing to listen to the American people."²⁹⁷ This outsider rhetoric reveals that it has become profitable to include anti-establishment rants while knowing fairly well that abiding by that the bipartisan structure is the only way to climb the political ladder. Two years after the shutdown, House Republicans had essentially been overwhelmed by their hardline, anti-establishment branch. Indeed, Paul Ryan, who was on Mitt Romney's presidential ticket in 2012, took advantage of the unpopularity of speakers who sinned by listening too often to Democrats and became speaker of the House of Representatives. That vision of politics as a constant struggle in which compromise is betrayal was born in new forms of culture and has now made its way into Congress.

Although observers such as *LA Times* journalist Doyle McManus were quite pessimistic about the future of these political gambits, the array of presidential candidates wagering on oppositional tactics bears out the potential tendered by this move to raise individual profiles.²⁹⁸ The strategy is definitely at variance with the American political system but seems more attuned than ever with the redefinition of politics in popular culture.

The impact of the rise of Manicheism as a cultural frame and the success of obstructionism as a legitimate political strategy is twofold. First, it is a deterrent from political moderation. Second, it may also drive disinterested audiences away from even

²⁹⁷ Cruz, Ted. in Weisman, Jonathan, and Ashley Parker. "Republicans Back Down, Ending Crisis over Shutdown and Debt Limit." *New York Times*. 4 Aug. 2014. Web. 19 May 2016.

²⁹⁸ McManus, Doyle. *The hijacking of the House of Representatives*. latimes.com, 11 Oct. 2015. Web. 15 May 2016. <http://www.latimes.com/opinion/op-ed/la-oe-1011-mcmanus-gop-disarray-20151011-column.html>

ephemeral involvement in politics. *Salon* writer Amy Kittelstrom puts it best with her depiction of the Republican strategy: “by deploying the language of culture wars, left versus right and liberal versus conservative, Republican strategists have fed a polarization allegedly too extreme to tolerate constructive dialogue toward consensus.”²⁹⁹ In this regard, the 2016 election season bears witness to a pinnacle of apocalyptic language. It also represents the coronation of ideological absolutes as encapsulated by *Washington Post* columnist Robert J. Samuelson: “The curse of U.S. politics is that it’s become less about interests and more about ideologies— and ideologies breed moral absolutes, rigid agendas and strong emotions.”³⁰⁰ The prevalence of moral absolutes, rigid agendas and strong emotions in Ted Cruz, Marco Rubio, and Donald Trump’s campaigns bears the stamp of new forms of culture. It should be noticed however that moral absolutes are subsiding and that new absolutes are taking over. These are political absolutes such as immigration and fiscal responsibility which now top the list of divisive political issues.

A dive into new culture reinforces the feeling that ideological politics are triumphing in domains where consensus politics drove the latest efforts.³⁰¹ For the purposes of this study, I subscribed to social network notifications from Rush Limbaugh, Glenn Beck, Sean Hannity, Fox News, Michelle Malkin and others but also to outlets identified as politically left-leaning such as Salon, Comedy Central, Democracy Now, The Young Turks, Ed Schultz, Al Sharpton and many more. More than the antagonism shown in comment threads and even in the notifications themselves, that experiment confirmed my belief that a daily exposure to those news outlets could offer drastically different visions of the world. The links between interrelated networks and the criticism constantly hurled at different opinions – whether through catastrophism (mostly conservatives talking about liberals) or mockery (mostly liberals demeaning conservatives) – convey the feeling that political conflict in America can turn the world upside-down in a split-second.

²⁹⁹ Kittelstrom, Amy. *Ignorance, racism and rage: The GOP’s transformation to the party of stupid started long before Donald Trump*. *Salon*, 09 Apr 2016. Web. 15 May 2016. http://www.salon.com/2016/04/09/ignorance_racism_and_rage_the_gops_transformation_to_the_party_of_stupid_started_long_before_donald_trump/

³⁰⁰ Samuelson, Robert J. “The Shutdown Is a Triumph of Ideology.” *Washington Post* 6 Oct. 2013. Web. 16 May 2016. https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/robert-samuelson-the-shutdown-is-a-triumph-of-ideology/2013/10/06/1bc17054-2d4c-11e3-97a3-ff2758228523_story.html

³⁰¹ For instance, the 2013 “Gang of Eight” Immigration Bill is one instance of bipartisan collaboration which gathered 4 Democrats and 4 Republicans over an issue that now seems too contentious to reach settlements.

The processes of priming and framing of issues of the day offer dramatically different visions of American politics. In this regard, these news sources foster the gap between Democrats and Republicans when it comes to the kind of topics they choose to prime. The primaries for the 2016 presidential elections heighten the feeling that Democrats are becoming foreign to Republicans, and vice versa. According to *Washington Post* journalist Philip Rucker, this primary season represents “a political moment of pitched voter anxiety, [in which] candidates in both parties talk in dark, sometimes cataclysmic tones — but about different issues, as if they’re addressing two different countries.”³⁰² As a result of these discrepant visions, Americans who get their news from one side are encouraged to consider political opposition as people who ignore the most urgent problems and cannot be brought back to reason. In turn, committed grassroots constituencies egg on their representatives to oppose every proposal formulated by political enemies. This new tactic of refusing to make politics in the traditional sense has brought discussions of anti-politics back to the forefront. Believing that partisan collaboration should be limited to block or undo measures taken by the other party is an idea that arising politicians and new media have amped up. Both conservative infotainment and politicized hip-hop portray the political system as corrupted by its insiders. This oscillation between idealization of newcomers and demonization of the established system leaves no intermediate alternatives.

The current situation of entrenchment is alarming because no matter how the 2016 election wraps up, the new president will not face a traditional political opposition. Indeed, the election of Trump, Clinton or Sanders is depicted as an absolute disaster in opinionated cultural outlets. It follows that consensus will not be the priority of the winner. The 2016 election represents the grand finale after years of contentious climate in Washington. Candidates of opposing parties have never been judged as unacceptable by their opponents in the history of American elections. Democratic candidates Hillary Clinton and Bernie Sanders are depicted in conservative culture as coming from the same mold as Obama and prone to continue or even intensify a shift which for the last 8 years, has been branded a disastrous drift towards socialism. In the eyes of conservative entertainers, Hillary Clinton bears two major burdens. First, her last name which is

³⁰² Rucker, Philip. “Are Democrats and Republicans Talking about the Same Country?” *Washington Post* 18 Sept. 2015. Web. 15 May 2016. https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/are-democrats-and-republicans-talking-about-the-same-country/2015/09/18/7e6de048-5e32-11e5-b38e-06883aacba64_story.html

besmirched with scandals and disreputable hearsays, hints at an era which saw the growth of attack politics. Second, she serves in the administration that Limbaugh and others view as apocalyptic for America. The self-identified socialist Bernie Sanders weathers even more criticism for his promotion of an ideology with which America warred for decades. On another note, despite his unconventional profile, Republican frontrunner Donald Trump shares in a long tradition of vilification of the Republican candidate in liberal culture as racist, misogynist, intellectually limited and socially insensitive. It remains to be seen if and how Democrats would perpetuate the age of political blockage in the event of a Trump election. No matter who comes out as the winner, if culture proves once again to be a good harbinger of political reactions, the hail of attacks on presidential candidates foreshadows a golden age for obstructionist impulses.

In any case, that campaign represents the decline of professional politics and the coronation of a political game which favors soundbites, and simple images over the complexity of policies. Trump understands that language more than any other candidate. The billionaire frontrunner, as conservative entertainers, comedy hosts, and hip-hop artists among others, owes his mind-blowing popularity to the fact that he embodies the jaded approach to politics of the turn of the millennium. Among these features, outrageous statements, simplistic answers, conspiracy undertones and hackneyed theories about pernicious enemies contribute to the ascent of a new kind of politician. The tenor of his agenda to “make America great again” lies in two prongs: ‘win’ and undo most of Obama’s decisions. While the first aspect is new and blurry enough to appeal to different electors, the second one has been the pipe dream entertained by Republicans for the last decade.

Therefore, Trump is a testament that the hyper-ideological and polemical cultural mold prepares more adequately to electoral politics than years of experience in Washington’s congressional daily routine. In some respects, he is the perfect example of how political success can be achieved through permanent criticism toward politics itself. He mirrors a culture which values politics mostly for its entertaining penchant for conflict.

Historically, he represents the culmination of a tried-and-true strategy detailed earlier which consists in talking about ideological rights and wrongs instead of

considering practical policies. In his analysis of the Trump phenomenon, Paul Krugman draws a list of principles followed by the Trump candidacy which includes “bluster and belligerence as substitutes for analysis, disdain for any kind of measured response, dismissal of inconvenient facts reported by the “liberal media.”” However, as he promptly adds, that strategy “didn’t suddenly arrive on the Republican scene last summer.”³⁰³ Its rise was a long process which, as I have documented, was tested in politicized culture by conservative punditry. Nevertheless, Trump’s feat has been to successfully update the discussion by dropping outworn moral issues in favor of nationalistic impulses. In short, Trump’s strategy is not trailblazing. It is a readjustment of conservative political culture with slightly different substance priorities. He shares in a Republican tradition of using ideological rigor as the watchword when election season comes. On the other side of the spectrum, the ragtag alliance which provides electoral support to Democratic bids has also seen the rise of disappointed groups demanding that kind of permanent commitment to a set of core values. Politicized liberal culture pushes in that direction although audiences seem more diffuse and less receptive.

In sum, as a result of cultural criticism toward Washington politics, the likelihood of future bipartisan cooperation has depleted. These evolutions and most particularly the crippling of Congress leave few methods for the advancement of an agenda and solutions such as executive orders reinforce the feeling shared by supporters of the opposition that policies are rammed down their throats.

This tendency seems a logical explanation for the dismal rates of approval achieved by the last two presidents with voters from the other party. Indeed, as shown below in figure 2, G.W. Bush and Obama have reached the lowest average approval rates from supporters of the other party in the last sixty years. With record lows of 23% for Bush and 14% for Obama coupled to stable rates of approval from within their own party, these two presidents illustrate the growing polarization of the electorate. Those statistics which focus specifically on self-identified supporters of either party illustrate that the effect of Manichean, catastrophist, and ominous forms of culture contributes to embitter the relationships between politically committed Americans. For sure, ideological moderates and citizens who pay little attention to politics are unlikely to be affected by cultural references to political opponents as beyond the pale. The problem is

³⁰³ Krugman, Paul. “The Donald and the Decider.” *New York Times* 21 Dec. 2015. Web. 3 May 2016. <http://www.nytimes.com/2015/12/21/opinion/the-donald-and-the-decider.html>

that moderation is losing its appeal by the minute in a cultural environment magnifying the stakes and intensity of the culture war. Moderation has no platform in culture and few audible spokesmen in politics.

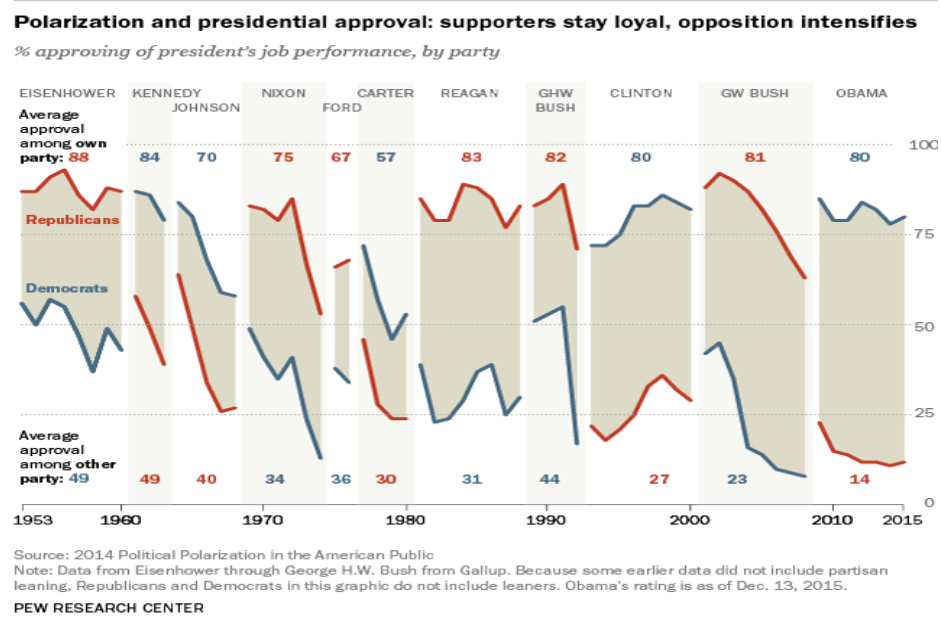


Figure 2: Rates of Polarization and Presidential Approval from Gao, George, and Samantha Smith. Presidential job approval ratings from Ike to Obama. Pew Research Center, 12 Jan. 2016. Web. 14 May 2016.³⁰⁴

On specific moral issues such as abortion, divorce, affirmative action, or more recently LGBT rights and on explicitly political ones such as immigration policy, fiscal responsibility, and policing, both Republicans and Democrats have come to “believe their cultural views are widely shared and a recipe for electoral victory.”³⁰⁵ Thus, they play deaf to arguments coming from the other side. Political debate becomes limited to a finite set of topics while others can no longer lead to constructive bipartisan agreements. In the words of Grossman and Hopkins, the issue at hand is that new media have been “producing a political conversation that is less a ‘great debate’ over principles and policies than an asymmetric dialogue between combatants who do not share each other’s rules or styles.”³⁰⁶ Indeed, more than simply expressing faith in the everlasting value of their dogma, cultural pundits such as conservative infotainers and politicized

³⁰⁴ Gao, George, and Samantha Smith. *Presidential job approval ratings from Ike to Obama*. Pew Research Center, 12 Jan. 2016. Web. 14 May 2016. <http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2016/01/12/presidential-job-approval-ratings-from-ike-to-obama/>

³⁰⁵ Ball, Molly. “Liberals Are Losing the Culture Wars.” *The Atlantic*. 4 Nov. 2015. Web. 15 May 2016. <http://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2015/11/liberals-are-losing-the-culture-war/414175/>

³⁰⁶ Matthews, Dylan. *2 political scientists have found a key reason Republicans and democrats see politics so differently*. *Vox*, 1 Apr. 2016. Web. 7 May 2016. <http://www.vox.com/2016/4/1/11340882/republicans-democrats-media-fox>

rappers have started aggressive campaigns against those who don't share their views. By maligning their nemeses as out of kilter with the bulk of today's America, liberals and conservatives consolidate an already existing like-minded support base. That phenomenon has been called "affective polarization" and is characterized by the fact that "regardless of where their views are moving, liberals increasingly dislike conservatives, and conservatives increasingly dislike liberals."³⁰⁷ In encouraging affective polarization, cultural pundits and elected statesmen jeopardize the chances of politicians to reach out to undecided constituencies. The increasing rate of political bystanders documented by the Pew Research Center is another result of forms of political culture which are unlikely to engage audiences naturally averse to politics.³⁰⁸

Paradoxically, the 2016 political election and its emphasis on colorful personalities rather than suitability to govern or its enhancement of values over policies reveal that culture wars over moral issues have less relevance than ever. The prominence of culture wars which are ideological by nature, makes politics unpractical. If one construes politics as involving bipartisan negotiation, then the current atmosphere can be labeled apolitical. In light of Trump's success, warnings that "apoliticalness, even anti-politicalness, will be very powerful elements in taking us towards a radically dictatorial direction" come back under the limelight.³⁰⁹ One main reason for the triumph of 'apolitical' forms of politics is that more and more people, including elected officials, feel that bipartisanship is no longer a satisfactory option to overcome key differences. To conclude, it seems that the winner of the culture wars is the concept of culture wars itself. The prominence of frozen ideological absolutes in new culture fundamentally overwhelms American politics.

The survival of cooperation is now predicated upon the extent to which politicians will resist popular and cultural pressure to base their whole political careers on ideological convictions. The rise of a Republican candidate like Donald Trump who grounds his campaign in anti-establishment rhetoric diminishes the likelihood of a respectful cooperation within Washington's bylaws. In parallel, the triumph of Clinton

³⁰⁷ Kurtzleben, Danielle. *Surprised about Donald Trump's popularity? You Shouldn't be*. NPR.org, 10 Dec. 2015. Web. 17 May 2016. <http://www.npr.org/2015/12/10/459207587/surprised-about-donald-trumps-popularity-you-shouldnt-be>

³⁰⁸ Gao, George. *1-in-10 Americans don't give a hoot about politics*. Pew Research Center, 7 July 2014. Web. 1 June 2016. <http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2014/07/07/1-in-10-americans-dont-give-a-hoot-about-politics/>

³⁰⁹ Wolin, Sheldon S. *Democracy Incorporated: Managed Democracy and the Specter of Inverted Totalitarianism*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008. Print.

or Sanders would also encourage Republicans to follow the oppositional model set by Gingrich in the 1990s and retaken by Cruz, Ryan, and others during Obama's second term. On the Democratic side, Sanders and Clinton's silence on the issue of bipartisan cooperation as well as Trump's preposterous reassurances that he will be able to reach out across the aisle³¹⁰ in spite of the scars left by eight years of political feud don't indicate that bipartisan cooperation will become fashionable again.

³¹⁰ See for example his interview with Jimmy Fallon. The Tonight Show Starring Jimmy Fallon. "Mock Job Interview for President with Donald Trump." YouTube. Jan 11 2016. Web. 4 May 2016.
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Xb7jWw5lft4>

Conclusion:

To conclude, since approximately the Vietnam War, political elites in the United States have constantly been aware of the ongoing culture wars. Nonetheless, they used it productively and ideological faithfulness remained at best an electoral strategy; not a creed for governance or opposition. In the overwhelming majority of cases, a tacit rule to ignore disagreements over a set of key values prevailed and prevented temporary conflicts from undoing common bonds of citizenship. This is not the case anymore. The steps taken to generalize culture wars and pretend that conservatives and liberals are incompatible convey the idea that concessions should be relinquished. This development stemmed from two different motives. First, the widened range of options in politicized culture boosted the marketability of opinionated content and therefore, favored the triumph of ideology over practical politics. Audiences interested in politics are more attracted by a content which features heroes and villains than by the daily routine on The Hill. Second, there are clear electoral advantages to criticizing Washington politicians who are willing to compromise. As *Politico* writer Michael Lind argues, anti-establishment rhetoric may signal a phase in which traditional politicians are still registering the political realignment brought by unconventional politicians such as Trump.³¹¹ Or as I would rather argue, it may foretell an overhaul of the political system in which defense of ideological precepts would become a sign of political nobility. In the words of some analysts, this would correspond to a new age of fascism.³¹² In either case, the latest developments show a political structure reshaped by the role ascribed to cultural pundits. The main symptoms afflicting politics are:

- a disgust for those who reach across the aisle,
- a focus on abstract ideologies or symbolism and the establishment of heroic stalwarts,
- the disappearance of respect for opposing views.

³¹¹ Lind, Michael. *This is what the future of American politics looks like*. POLITICO Magazine, 22 May 2016. Web. 1 June 2016. <http://www.politico.com/magazine/story/2016/05/2016-election-realignment-partisan-political-party-policy-democrats-republicans-politics-213909>

³¹² Baker, Peter. "Rise of Donald Trump Tracks Growing Debate over Global Fascism." *New York Times*. 29 May 2016. Web. 1 June 2016. <http://www.nytimes.com/2016/05/29/world/europe/rise-of-donald-trump-tracks-growing-debate-over-global-fascism.html>

All of these have been the essence of politicized entertainment and have transferred to the world of politics. How long will the country resist the sway of these aspects? Can politicians find a way to avoid a stalemate which seems likelier than ever? To do so, they will have to circumvent the ideological rigor encouraged by technology and dissociate the codes of politicized culture from the rules of electoral contests and congressional collaboration. The Obama presidency was marked only by episodic refusals to cooperate but the benefits of the gambit may incite future emulations. Hence, American politics are at a crossroads since the current system is unable to withstand modern bipartisan infighting. Can the influence of politicized culture on politics be curtailed?

In any case, changes won't come from the cultural forms I tackled in the course of this study. Whether the threats looming over Rush Limbaugh and Beck's shows materialize into the decline of the genre³¹³ or whether Kendrick Lamar and others manage or not to bring politics back to hip-hop's mainstream, the ways in which these commentators changed American politics have already transformed the current system. Increasing numbers of Americans choose to "receive information from sources whose primary objectives are to entertain and persuade."³¹⁴ The changes that such a trend entails have had strong repercussions on the ways politics are understood and practiced.

Envisioning politics as a conflict with heroes, villains, and fixed ideologies is now the magical formula for politicized entertainment. The fluster of unfiltered reactions unleashed by the 2016 campaign in hip-hop culture and conservative infotainment is a testament to the jarring health of political outrage.³¹⁵

As an ending note, I would like to emphasize that it is the duty of politicians to shield politics from the threats tendered by ideological purity. Unfortunately, condoning

³¹³ Gold, Hadas. *SiriusXM Suspends Glenn Beck over Trump Conversation*. POLITICO, 31 May 2016. Web. 1 June 2016.

Epstein, Ethan. *Is Rush Limbaugh's Business Model in Trouble?* POLITICO Magazine, 24 May 2016. Web. 1 June 2016.

³¹⁴ Barker, David C. *Rushed to Judgment: Talk Radio, Persuasion, and American Political Behavior*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2002. Print.

³¹⁵ See for instance the references to Trump in liberal comedy and talk shows as well as in songs by rappers Rick Ross, Mac Miller who stress how terrible the presidential candidate would be if in power. Paradoxically, Trump has been a staple reference in hip-hop for the last 25 years but he used to epitomize financial success instead of being depicted as a looming threat for the country. Finley, Taryn. "67 Times Rappers Name Dropped 'Donald Trump.'" *Huffington Post* 20 Aug. 2015. Web. 31 May 2016. http://www.huffingtonpost.com/entry/hip-hops-25-year-obsession-with-donald-trump_us_55d61727e4b055a6dab3524a

or even adopting such an approach also has alluring upsides. Ideology provides simple responses and does not require solutions to be practical. Therefore, a lot of politicians are lured by the advantages of ideological promises: simple language and readymade electoral cogency. It remains to be seen whether the daily operations in the capital are going to be completely transformed by the technological demise of consensus. In other words, is moderation still desirable at a time when the three actors of political communication – politicians, audiences, and media outlets – increasingly cover politics in the unshaded ways detailed in this study? Answering negatively implies that bipartisanship has petered out as recent cracks in the checks and balances system may indicate. In any case, the conspicuous inadequacies between the reality of politics and the fiction of politicized culture portend that American politics will continue to lurch toward the latter at the expense of the former.

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