

Narrative C

E. L. Doctorow

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In the seventeenth century, North America was conceived by Europeans as an escape from Europe, a New Found Land for religious separatism and the aggregation of unspoken-for wealth. It was in this era of colonial activity that the seeds of the American narrative had to have been planted. England, France, Spain, and Holland all had staked a claim, but after a hundred and fifty or so years of farming and trading and warring, somehow the English communities along the East Coast prevailed – they prevailed over the French and the Dutch, over the wilderness, over the sometimes hostile native populations, and rather late in the game, they prevailed over the English monarchy. And so the breath of Self-Determination was slapped into our country at its birth.

However we think of ourselves as a nation – call it our narrative, call it our identity myth – it is a sustaining thing insofar as it does not square with some of the grim realities of our history. Children are repositories of one version of the classic narrative, as, for example, it was invested in me and my grade school classmates in the 1930s. During our school assemblies, everything we believed about our country seemed to emanate from the American flag up on the stage. We pledged our allegiance to it.

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We looked at its field of colors, and spoke the words of the colors, red white and blue, and that's what we carried with us as our feeling, as something as free and as bright and agile as we were afterward in our games. We all knew the difference between what was fair and what was unfair, and the colors of the flag and the words for the colors meant what was fair. The assumption we made from those colors was of a real, unwavering order of justice for everyone, whether they were big or little, rich or poor. The expectation we had from those colors was of the beneficent intent of an elected American government, standing in service to all its citizens and working to ensure their well-being.

This was the naive, somewhat leftist version of the American narrative appropriately tuned to the time of the Great Depression. Our teachers, knowing how shaky things were, intoned, as in prayer, that America was exceptional. We were a little too young to take in the Constitution and the Bill of Rights, and so the colors, and the words of the colors red white and blue, are what stood in our minds for the resolved democratic presence of a nation of people who had come from all over the world to be free. They could go to whatever church they pleased. They could speak out without being punished for it. They could vote. If they were old, they could have a government pension. We knew all that. And so we carried the image of our flag and the words for the colors of our flag outside in the sun and clean air of our playgrounds.

Something like this lovely narrative may be held in the minds of schoolchildren today. Many foreigners who continue to come here from all over the world harbor a version along the same lines. The difficulty of emigrating – of escaping from despotism, from a theocracy, from an overwhelmingly corrupt class society, or from irremediable poverty – is a measure

of the fiercely held, chaste American narrative in the mind of the newly arrived immigrant. Survival may be difficult, nativist resistance to his presence may be oppressive, but if he is prepared to struggle, to live a menial life, his children will go to college. America is the diaspora of choice, a country in which the freedom to succeed or fail transfers one's fate to one's character, something not possible in the brutal, degraded class society of the abandoned country.

In this shared idealism of the child's instilled faith and the immigrant's ground-kissing gratitude, the United States of America is forever the New Found Land.

Call this version Narrative A.

There is a related narrative that, if as idealistic, is not naive. In this version, the flag, and the words of the colors red white and blue, stand for a justifiable American hegemony. It says we are a superpower with a military capacity second to none and an economy that, whatever its ups and downs, is the envy of the world. The generative sources of our historically unprecedented national wealth are a free market philosophy, technological creativity, and the limited liability corporation. Underlying all is the inarguable Social Darwinist distinction that must be made between the haves and the have-nots. There is no help for that. We are, after all, part of the natural world in which the fittest prevail. Nevertheless, everyone has the right to worship as he pleases, to write what he pleases and say what he pleases, as long as his speech does not libel, slander, or incite criminal activity. We enjoy a degree of free imaginative expression that few cultures in the world can tolerate. But the colors red white and blue and the words for the colors mean this is a country free to do business. There are those who do not appreciate the genius of commerce unhampered by government

*E. L.
Doctorow*

Narrative C controls. There are always those who want to fix what does not need fixing. These elements include people in government and labor organizations. It will not do to forget we are a democratic Republic in periodic danger of becoming a socialist state.

Call this Narrative B.

That the 1930s child's (A) and the Social Darwinist's (B) are the Left's and the Right's versions of the American narrative is borne out by the nature of our political life, which oscillates between expansive periods of social inclusion and contracting periods of social triage. So the versions are competitive. (We may go further and acknowledge them as the flags carried by our contemporary Democratic and Republican parties.) But despite their differences, they are bound together by their belief in American exceptionalism. They have similarly benign views of our historic territorial expansion, either as a kind of liberation theology or as manifest destiny, and they are equally steadfast in their allegiance to the flag and to the Republic for which it stands, as delineated in the articles of the Constitution and its amendments.

Finally, the crucial differences between leftist and rightist versions of the American narrative come to be argued in their claims of constitutional authority. The Constitution is our sacred text. Like all sacred texts, it is subject to commentary, to interpretation, and to statutory application. Its operative verb, *shall*, speaks to the endless future (“*The Congress shall have Power To lay and collect Taxes . . .*”), and so its articles and amendments, while laying down the structure of the nation-state, provide also the means to deal with unimagined circumstances. Historically, the Constitution may have been marred by readings of this or that judiciary, and the difference between its proscriptions and the actual conduct of citizens who have claimed to live according to them may have

left the edges of the parchment seared, but the document is still intact, having apparently withstood all abuses but one: when it was invoked to endorse slavery, and a war had to be fought to redact it.

The Constitution is our flag written out in the penmanship of the Founding Fathers. It is the text that, given our roiling history, we do not perfectly embody. It is what we hold to as our identity despite the harsh realities of our national conduct over 235 years. It is the repository of our ideals, shimmering in ambiguity but holding in its articles all the arguments we muster in our seemingly endless leftist/rightist readings. Finally, we live in it, it is our house of many mansions. If anyone on the Left or Right were to pull it down we would have a narrative only nominally American. But that would take some doing, and it would come not from the efforts, legal or illegal, of some marginal political party; it would come from the top, which is how houses are usually pulled down.

Here, in this regard, I offer a view of the last ten years or so of our political life.

George W. Bush was installed as president in the year 2000, when the Supreme Court countermanded the Florida Supreme Court's ruling that a statewide recount be conducted, the election in Florida having shown a difference of only a few hundred votes between Mr. Bush and Vice President Al Gore. There were good reasons, including the fact that Mr. Gore won the national vote count, that Republican courthouse rallies at the time verged on thuggery, that the Florida secretary of state, a Republican, refused to grant extensions to counties that had asked for more time to recount, that the votes of three counties where many African Americans lived were never counted at all – good reasons to feel that, as in some banana republic, the legitimacy of a sitting president

was in doubt, and that some damage had been done to the Constitution.

From the moment this president chose to invade Iraq, claiming speciously that it had nuclear weapons of mass destruction, he appeared relentless in his violations of Article VI of the Constitution (“*the Constitution, and all Laws of the United States which shall be made in Pursuance thereof; and all Treaties made, or which shall be made, under the authority of the United States, shall be the supreme law of the Land*”). The UN Security Council voted to reject the U.S. decision to invade Iraq pending further efforts to gain inspection of the alleged WMD caches, and though the United States is a signatory of the UN Charter, this president went ahead with his invasion. He would subsequently refuse, with sophistic reasoning supplied by his lawyers, to honor this country’s observance of the Geneva Convention regarding the treatment of prisoners of war. He would violate the Treaty Against Torture and the Eighth Amendment of the Constitution, which prohibits the infliction of cruel or unusual punishment, calling the torture he had ordered only “enhanced interrogation.” Other profound constitutional matters, such as the writ of habeas corpus, the unreasonable search and seizures amendment (IV), had to be reassessed by the courts or bypassed by congressional legislation, all under the pressure of this president’s deconstructive policies.

Is it naive, given the dangers to the nation from international terrorism, to demand strict observance of the supreme laws of the land? Hasn’t the sacred text been treated carelessly before this? Abuses occurred in the presidencies of Richard Nixon (who resigned after facing impeachment for obstruction of justice and abuse of power) and Ronald Reagan (who was not impeached or forced to resign for his administration’s secret sale of arms to Iran and diversion of the proceeds to fund

an insurgent war against Nicaragua in violation of the Intelligence Authorization Act, the Arms Export Control Act, and the Neutrality Act). But it is that nascent culture of presidential autonomy created in the forty or so years before the election of 2000 (“If the president does it, it’s not illegal,” said Richard Nixon) that floated Bush to his level of lawlessness – from his predecessors’ indifference to his irreverence, from their disrespect to his heedlessness, from their blasphemy to his subversion. He had taken an oath to preserve, protect, and defend the Constitution of the United States. His actions altogether would, as a clear moral imperative, call for criminal prosecution. The fact that a successor administration under a Democratic president has refused to bring a case against Mr. Bush and his advisers is a pragmatic but tragically wrong political decision. President Obama indicated a desire not to dwell on the past but to move the country forward. If he felt, on consideration, that everything else in the way of government business might grind to a halt were a legal case to be mounted, it is something the Republican Party has managed to achieve anyway, even in the face of Obama’s bipartisan comity. Incalculable damage is done to our sacred text when such unconstitutional precedents are put in place and left standing. If the American narrative derives from our covenant with the Constitution, to break that covenant is to redact our way to another narrative. Two years into the Obama presidency, the damage is showing up in the streets as an antigovernment Tea Party populism, a vindictive party-above-country politics of the Right in Congress itself, and with a sense overall of some malign antinomian spirit abroad on the land.

Republicans in Texas backed George Bush’s runs for governor of Texas, and for president, not because of his sterling char-

E. L.
Doctorow

Narrative C acter or his intelligence but because he had a name and had grown up drenched in the values of the oil business. Having come late to religion and sobriety, he was, for many, a true American, one who would blur the division of church and state, champion deregulation, and govern on behalf of the people who had put him in office.

He had been for years something of a lout, by all accounts silver spooned as the eldest son of a political family, exempt all his life from the usual consequences of bad behavior, proudly anti-intellectual as a college student, and all his life contrarian as a matter of principle, so that holding the country's highest office, with deadly stupidity behind the guile, he made policy leaving the American middle class reeling, the wealthy relieved of their share of taxes, the Treasury burdened with enormous debt, the environment trashed, many thousands dead from his elective war, and, with apparent reasonableness after 9/11, the rights of a free American citizenry severely compromised, their phone calls and email data-mined, their business, medical, and public library records sequestered, and, in disregard of constitutional safeguards, secret warrantless searches made of their homes and businesses.

Mr. Bush also left us with a Supreme Court seeded with arch-conservatives of his own and his father's predilection that would go on, in *Citizens United v. Federal Election Commission*, to affirm the First Amendment right of free speech of corporations, declaring them equivalent to human beings, thus bringing into the American narrative something like the fervid life of a golem.

How valid is the Court's ruling that corporations are ontologically equivalent to human beings, perhaps even a new branch of human life distinguished only by its limited liability? A modern corporation is composed of officers, trustees, lawyers,

workers, and shareholders. They all are humans of human dimension, but however good and fine they are as people, they are indentured to the corporate creature to whom – for one reason or another – they have given their loyalty and, in some cases, their lives. The corporation's demands require their submission if, as workers, they are not to lose their jobs, or as shareholders they are not to lose their investment, or as executives they are not to lose their year-end bonuses and their reputations in the business magazines. Whatever seeming humanity is the corporation's, it is of an authoritarian character. And so I look at what the Court has given the First Amendment right of free speech:

If it is a corporation that sells cigarettes proven to cause lung cancer, it will continue to sell cigarettes.

If it is an oil company amassing enormous profits, it will continue to expect government subsidies.

If it is a credit card corporation, it will find a way to charge increasingly usurious interest rates.

If it is a health insurance corporation, it will insure a person until she becomes seriously ill.

If it is a pharmaceutical corporation, it will create a medicine for which it will invent a disease or condition the medicine can treat.

If it is a coal mining company, it will strip-mine a mountain, destroying the surrounding ecology and leaving the land desolate to the people who live there.

If it is a multinational corporation, it will park offshore profits in foreign tax havens to avoid paying U.S. taxes.

If it is a Wall Street bank responsible for the subprime mortgage scandal, it will reward its executives with bonuses consisting of taxpayer bailout money.

If it is an energy company with coal-fired furnaces that cause acid rain to fall over the eastern states, it will refuse to invest in equipment that would end acid rainfall over the eastern states.

If it is an ocean fishing corporation, it will use industrial technology to net a kind of fish to extinction, and then go on to another fishery and do the same with another kind of fish.

If it is an oil company, it will deny the existence of global warming in the interest of maintaining the demand for oil.

If it is a life insurance company, it will administer the death benefits given to families who have lost sons and daughters in the war, paying them 1 percent interest on their money while collecting 5 percent interest on it in their own corporate investment accounts.

If it is any corporation, no matter what its business, it will fight attempts to regulate its practices.

As inarguable as these statements are, they should not be read as a moral bill of particulars. Such huge corporations as these operate in accordance with their reason for being. It makes no more sense to condemn them for what they are than to condemn a tiger for running down a fawn for dinner. A corporation is formed to produce wealth. While the people who work for it can take pride in their work, perhaps designing and producing something that sends them home at the end of a workday feeling that they have accomplished something, the corporation itself is indifferent to the product or the means by which its wealth is produced. It will grow bigger and bigger through mergers – that is the corporate proclivity – and, as it does, the different things by which it produces wealth will have less and less relation to one another. A food corporation will produce jet engines, and a soap and toothpaste corporation will sell auto in-

urance. A corporation will advertise itself as having a human face, as being in business to serve the public, and it will display its workers, usually of many races, smiling and doing their jobs. Yet these same workers will be let go if the corporation is not meeting its projected profits, or they will be deemed superfluous when the corporation merges with another corporation. It's nothing personal, and it never is: the corporation either makes the profit per stockholder share that it needs to keep attracting investors, or it doesn't.

But if we accept corporations on their own terms, we cannot at the same time grant them human rights. They simply lack the range of feelings or values that define what it is to be human. Humans can act against their own interests, they can feel sympathy for others, they can be merciful. Corporations cannot act except in their own interest, they do not know compassion and will not act mercifully unless there is some public relations advantage to it. Corporations do not live and die, they continue to exist in one form or another apart from the life and death of their members. Corporate executives will support candidates who best serve the corporate interests, and it will not matter that they themselves or their shareholders may feel differently. There will be an overriding logic to the corporate choice that alone is indication that a powerful business entity whom human beings work in service to is not itself a human being deserving of First Amendment rights.

Corporations may be great tromping golems of clay striding the earth, or they may be robotic creatures programmed to smile and say hi, but they are not us. We humans work for these corporations, we pull the levers and sit at the computers, but we are controlled by the unyielding logic of the corporate ethos and we do things as functionaries that we would not do in our personal lives. The corporation diffuses

E. L.
Doctorow

Narrative C responsibility, supplies rationales. The liability is limited and the rewards are great.

How is anything made different by the Supreme Court's ruling that corporations have the First Amendment right of free speech and can put up all the money they care to on behalf of their chosen candidates right up to the day of election? Doesn't the ruling confer on labor unions the same rights? And, after all, corporate lobbies have been a fixture in Washington ever since politics as an amateur calling gave way to the professionals. A politician's backers are repaid with a sensitivity to their interests. This is hardly news. It is the recurrent truth of Washington, so rhythmically repetitive as to be its heartbeat.

But the corporate sector is already so dominant in its influence as to make of this decision a release of errant energy through the corridors of Washington. The commentators and politicians who see this as a triumph of First Amendment thinking are, like the Court, supposing corporate animacy to be a kind of human life. There is such a failure of analysis in that, it is so obviously fallacious that, granting the intellectual capacity and learning of the justices who voted with the majority, their decision may reflect a point of view that is simply ideological. That they affirm the First Amendment on behalf of big business has its ironies. They overturned elements of two major campaign finance reform laws with this decision. How can anyone honestly believe it will promote democracy? Corporations are insular, their members will put forth the corporate interests regardless of the manifest needs of the country or the planet. In fact, they will do more than that, they will conflate their interests with the public good.

We have been since the end of World War II a national military state. Guardians

of a Cold War arsenal of nuclear weapons, we have fought two wars in Asia, one of which, Vietnam, was never sufficiently justified. We have had simultaneous wars in two Mideast countries, and we are occupied fending off an international terrorist movement. We have found ourselves the sponsors of torture and imprisonment without trial of presumed terrorists. We learned well after the fact that we ourselves were subject to secret illegal surveillance by our government, all of these measures claimed as wartime expedients and promoted with a propaganda of fear. We are severely alienated by gross economic inequalities, the ever-with-us malefactors of great wealth thriving at the expense of the middle class. Fourteen million of us are out of work. Almost two-and-a-half million are locked down in our prisons. It has been quietly accepted that though a former president and some members of his cabinet committed crimes against the Constitution, they are above the law. Elected know-nothings prance about in Washington ready to tear down any program that looks like it might help people. Our once glorious system of free public education is in disarray. And our Supreme Court, perhaps anticipating an unreliable democratic future for the country, has turned to the business community for leadership, granting it the power to change the composition of the Congress.

All this seems to me a process of national deformation.

It may be difficult to imagine a time when the producers of our refrigerators and washing machines, our cars and planes, computers, and high-definition TVs, the big-box marketers of our food and baby clothes and outdoor grills, the owners of our oil refineries and the producers of our pesticides and engineered food crops, the proprietors of our steel forges, chemical factories, media companies, and nuclear energy plants, the oper-

ators of our banks, and manufacturers of our arms, all of them so insistently the suppliers of the good and essential things in life, could somehow, by the relentless-ness of their corporate energies, reconstitute us as a nation.

How would that work? Tocqueville proposed that tyranny might arrive here stealthily, as a kind of catatonia coming over a sheep-like population. Let us say that in our time it could arrive by degrees with the acquiescence of a propagandized population: the massive exercise of corporate First Amendment rights having methodically put in place a sitting House and Senate composed of old pols who, over the years, have been the most corporate-compliant, plus freshly groomed, suited, and coiffed professional lobbyists, and Congress comes into session as a shining example of a one-party democracy. Antitrust laws, so indifferently applied for so long, are revoked. The impersonal exactions of a ruling corporate culture begin to determine social policy. Federal regulatory agencies overseeing business and labor practices are disbanded. Unions are abolished. There is a steady progression of corporate mergers as the game players converge to compete or collude. A Darwinian principle of natural selection eventuates in megacorporations with the economic heft and working populations of fiefdoms. Collectively, they cannot be distinguished from the government. Yet with the degradation of the middle class – working people unable to buy what they are producing – the economy begins a downward spiral. Street demonstrations pop up in several cities. With the populace finally awakening, Selective Service is reinstated. The corporate CEO who has assumed the presidency relies on Homeland Security surveillance technology developed during the war on terrorism – GPS handhelds, facial recognition software, behavioral biometrics, body heat

recognition devices, unmanned aerial vehicles with the capacity to peer through windows from a great distance, and data banks of credit card and cell phone accounts and Internet social networks – to keep the citizenry under close watch.

I suppose this is a vision of what could be called corporate fascism. It seems in many ways to approximate the Chinese model of State Capitalism, though the Chinese prefer to describe what they have as “a market economy with Chinese characteristics.” Perhaps we will have a market economy with American characteristics and a Constitution still seemingly inviolate – as is the written Chinese constitution in defense of which Communist Party secretaries throw into jail anyone who asks them to live up to it.

But apart from any speculation of ours, nobody at this moment can consider the state of our nation without foreboding. The inanity of much of our political discourse is evidence of a national intellect ill equipped to respond to global emergencies. By every measure the planet is showing severe signs of stress. Yet the facts of dire climatic change are promoted as fantasy, or as a conspiracy of leftist scientists. To the extent that the megacorporations subscribe to this view, their characteristic self-interest is maladaptive. Eventually, there may have to be wars for water, for tillable land, for livable climates. The mournful facts seem to be clouding up as if some black spiritual weather is coming. A darkness. So one way or another the idea of a free citizenry of the red white and blue, along with what we think of as our exceptionalist democracy, may no longer be sustainable. If that is so, we will have written a new American narrative, though, after all, I don’t think anyone can know just how it will read.

Call it Narrative C.

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Doctorow*