

ROUGH DRAFT

America as a Strong Nation with a Weak State--additional perspectives from Naomi Klein

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You may know that for the past several years I have been writing and talking about the phenomena of the US as a "Strong Nation and Weak State". I used that phrase to capture the fact that, since the days of Reagan, Americans have been taught to hate the state and love the private sector; to believe that "free market capitalism" should be allowed to do everything, and the state be withered away to nothing.

This withering has been accomplished in part by ideological badmouthing of many kinds (most notably Newt Gingrich's 1994 "Contract with America", and by millions of rightwing think-tank pieces and countless speeches by Republicans and libertarians, including Alan Greenspan). But far more than that, the withering of the state has been accomplished by purposely indebting the state--by cutting taxes and engaging in massive deficit spending, while downsizing the personnel of all agencies except military and paramilitary agencies which have ballooned, and most of all by engaging in killing or intimidating activities in the Middle East and elsewhere

As a consequence, the state has neither the money, nor the personnel, nor the will to perform traditional social services of any kind, such as repair of infrastructure, seeing that planes fly on time, guaranteeing citizens access to clean air, pure water, safe drugs, and untainted food, and all the rest.

That is the "weak state" part of my concern. It is all well-known and widely commented on by others. I am saying nothing new here, except perhaps to add my voice to those who point out that the hollowing out of the state is viewed by many not as a regrettable situation to be corrected but rather a highly laudable goal to be pushed even farther until the state can do absolutely nothing.

What has been less observed is the other half of my focus: strong nation. Especially since Bush was declared president by the US Supreme Court in 2000--and well before the events of 9/11/01--Americans have been expected to be unquestionably loyal and patriotic--to salute the flag, to worship the Constitution as an unquestioned Holy Writ, to know that God loves America and hates all others, and that their sons and daughters should be willing and eager to go fight for the nation whenever told to do so.

Bush and company have been very successful in getting Americans to love and sacrifice for their nation even though their state can do nothing good for them.

My question then has been, how much longer will the public be blindly loyal to the symbols of a nation whose state does nothing for them?

Recently, Naomi Klein has vastly improved our understanding of the disappearing of the state, and of the creation of a heavily-militarized corporate "shadow state" that serves the rich and those of the middle class with the means to pay for its services, while the poor are being left to fend for themselves.

While she does not directly address my concern (or any of the issues involving nationalistic sentiments), she at least explains clearly why there has so far been no demand for a return to a functioning state while disaster follows disaster: the rich (and the middle class wannabees) are quite happy to see the state continue to fail, as long as the forces of "disaster capitalism" take care of them, as they have so far.

Below are excerpts from "Disaster Capitalism," by Naomi Klein, *Harpers*, October 2007, itself adapted from her book *Shock Doctrine* (Metropolitan Books, 2007):

Like most people, I saw the divide between Baghdad's Green and Red zones as a simple by-product of war. This is what happens when the richest country in the world sets up camp in one of the poorest. But now, after years spent visiting other disaster zones, from post-tsunami Sri Lanka to post-Katrina New Orleans, I've come to think of these Green Zone/Red Zone worlds as something else: fast-forward versions of what "free market" forces are doing to our societies even in the absence of war. In Iraq the phones, pipes and roads have been destroyed by weapons and trade embargoes. In many other parts of the world, including the United States, they have been demolished by ideology, the war on "big government", the religion of tax cuts, and the fetish for privatization. When that crumbling infrastructure is blasted with increasingly intense weather, the effects can be as devastating as war. (48)

Politicians have been free to cut taxes and rail against big government even as their constituents drove on, studied in, and drank from the huge public works projects of the 1930s-1940s. But after a few decades, that trick stops working. The American Society of Civil Engineers has warned that the US has fallen so far behind in maintaining its public infrastructure--roads, bridges, schools, dams--that it would take more than a trillion and a half dollars over five years to bring it back up to standard. (48)

After each new disaster, it's tempting to imagine that the loss of life and productivity will finally serve as a wake-up call, provoking the political class to launch some kind of a "new New Deal". In fact, the opposite is taking place: disasters have become the preferred moments for advancing a vision of a ruthlessly divided world, one in which the very idea of a public sphere has no place at all.

Call it disaster capitalism.

Every time a new crisis hits--even when the crisis itself is the direct by-product of free-market ideology--the fear and disorientation that follow are harnessed for radical social and economic re-engineering. Each new shock is midwife to a new course of economic shock therapy. The end result is the same kind of unapologetic partition between the included and the excluded, the protected and the damned, that is on display in Baghdad. (49)

Not so long ago, disasters were periods of social leveling, rare moments when atomized communities put divisions aside and pulled together. Today they are moments when we are hurled farther apart, when we lurch into a radically segregated future where some of us will fall off the map and others ascend to a parallel privatized state, one equipped with well-paved highways and skyways, safe bridges, boutique charter schools, fast-lane airport terminals and deluxe subways. (50)

*The military-industrial complex that Dwight D. Eisenhower warned against in 1961 has expanded and morphed into what is best understood as a **disaster-capitalism complex**, in which all conflict- and disaster-related functions (waging war, securing borders, spying on citizens, rebuilding cities, treating traumatized soldiers) can be performed by corporations at a profit. And this complex is not satisfied merely to feed off the state, the way traditional military contractors do; it aims, ultimately, to replace core functions of government with its own profitable enterprises, as it did in Baghdad's Green Zone. (50)*

Since [Hurricane Katrina], privatized disaster response has become one of the hottest industries in the South. [A] slew of new corporations entered the market, promising safety and security should the (50) next Big One hit. (51)

Much of the parallel disaster economy has been built with taxpayers' money. ... (51)

The reach of the disaster industry extends far beyond policing. When the contractor infrastructure built up during the Bush years is looked at as a whole, what we see is a fully articulated state-within-a state that is as muscular and capable as the actual state is frail and feeble. This corporate shadow-state has been built almost exclusively with public resources.... Yet the vast infrastructure is all privately owned and controlled. The citizens who funded it have absolutely no claim to this parallel economy or its resources. (51)

The actual state, meanwhile, has lost the ability to perform its core functions without the help of contractors. (52)

Under George W. Bush, the state still has all the trappings of a government--impressive buildings, presidential press briefings, policy battles--but it no more does the actual work of government than the employees at Nike's Beaverton, Oregon, campus stitch running shoes. (52)

The companies at the heart of the disaster-capitalism complex increasingly regard both the state and non-profits as competitors; from the corporate perspective, whenever governments or charities fulfill their traditional roles, they are denying contractors work that could be performed at a profit. (52)

Much of this new aggressiveness flows from suspicion that the golden era of bottomless federal contracts might not last much longer. The US government is barreling toward an economic crisis, thanks in no small part to the deficit spending that has bankrolled the privatized disaster economy. Sooner rather than later, the contracts are likely to dip significantly. (52)

The next phase of the disaster-capitalism complex is all too clear: with emergencies on the rise, government no longer able to foot the bill, and citizens stranded by their hollow state, the parallel corporate state will rent back its disaster infrastructure to whomever can afford it, at whatever price the market (52) will bear. (54)

Perhaps part of the reason so many of our elites, both political and corporate, are so sanguine about climate change is that they are confident they will be able to buy their way out of the worst of it. (54)

This may also partially explain why so many Bush supporters are Christian end-times. It's not just that they need to believe there is an escape hatch from the world they are creating. It's also that the Rapture is a parable for what they are building down here on Earth--a system that invites destruction and disaster, then swoops in with private helicopters and airlifts them and their friends to divine safety. (54)

Another potential growth area identified by the disaster-capitalism complex is municipal government: the contracting out of police and fire departments to private security companies. (54)

The contracting business predicts that these new markets will expand dramatically over the next decade. (54)

Another glimpse of a disaster-apartheid future can be found in a wealthy Republican suburb outside Atlanta. Its residents decided that they were tired of watching their property taxes subsidize schools and police in the country's low-income African-American neighborhoods. They voted to incorporate their own city, Sandy Springs, which could spend most of its taxes on services for its 100,000 citizens and minimize the revenue that would be redistributed throughout Fulton County. The only difficulty was that Sandy Springs had no government structure and needed to build them from scratch--everything from tax collection to zoning to parks and recreation. In September 2005...the residents of Sandy Springs were approached by the construction and consulting giant CH2MHill

with a unique pitch: Let us do it for you. For the starting price of \$27 million per year, the contractor pledged to build a complete city from the ground up. A few months later, Sandy Springs became the first "contract city." Only four people worked directly for the new municipality--everyone else was a contractor. (54)

Within a year, contract-city mania was tearing through Atlanta's wealthy suburbs. (54)

Soon a campaign began for the new corporate cities to join together to form their own county. (55)

In these wealthy Atlanta suburbs, the long crusade to strip-mine the state is nearing completion. (56)

Today, global instability does not just benefit a small group of arms dealers; it generates huge profits for the high-tech-homeland-security sector, for heavy construction, for private health-care companies, for the oil and gas sectors--and of course for defense contractors. (56)

The scale of the revenues at stake is certainly enough to fuel an economic boom. (57)

Terrorist attacks, which used to send the stock market spiraling downward, now receive a similarly upbeat market reception. 57

An economic system that requires constant growth while bucking almost all serious attempts at environmental regulation generates a steady stream of disasters all on its own, whether military, ecological or financial. (57)

The disaster-capitalism complex does not deliberately scheme to create the cataclysms on which it feeds (though Iraq may be a notable exception) but there is plenty of evidence that its component industries work very hard indeed to make sure that current disastrous trends continue unchallenged. (57)

The creeping expansion of the disaster-capitalism complex into the media may prove to be a new kind of corporate synergy.... It certainly makes sound business sense. The more panicked our societies become, convinced that there are terrorists lurking in every mosque, the higher the new ratings soar, the more biometric IDs and liquid-explosive-detection devices the complex sells, the more high-tech fences it builds. (57)

If the dream of the open, borderless "small planet" was the ticket to profits during the Clinton years, the nightmare of the menacing, fortified Western continents, under siege from jihadists and illegal immigrants, plays the same role in the new millennium. (58)

From my perspective, Klein paints a very realistic present and an all too plausible future--one which most certainly is not my preferred future.

I can easily see that Hawaii is slipping (or has slipped) into this mold as well. Recent events regarding the Superferry and dire predictions about the future of the neighbor islands if we won't accept it--seem to illustrate this. And if a major natural, economic, or political disaster were to hit us suddenly, I suspect our local Blackwater representatives would be only too pleased to leap to our rescue.

But this future is not inevitable. I believe that those of us who are concerned about "disaster management" and "governing the end of the world as we know it" in Hawaii, should reflect soberly about what Klein says, and think carefully and creatively about how we can envision and move towards a future based on more communal, equitable, and peaceful values.

But there is more. Klein did not address the paradox I see of the US trying to be a Strong Nation with a Weak State. I just don't believe that contradiction can be sustained much longer. In some ways, Disaster Capitalism might seem like a preferred future to the chaos that might result from the collapse of both the American nation and the American state.

Growing discontent and disillusionment with "America" is apparent everywhere. It is no long only the bleeding heart liberals who are "ashamed" of what America has become. Many, if not most, of the people who initially supported Bush--even some people who signed the 1997 "manifesto" of the New American Century--feel we have gone too far--or that the policy was wrong from the start after all.

In the same issue of *Harper's* in which the Klein piece appeared, Garret Keizer, a senior editor of the magazine, wrote a stirring opening essay calling for a general strike on Election Day 2008 (9-12). He forcefully advocated that we all should say "Hell no, we won't go to the polls, or to work", given the fact that, in spite of a clear electoral mandate, ruling politicians of all kinds refuse to end the invasion of Iraq and the tax-cutting, downsizing policies that are leading to the rise of disaster capitalism. Americans should withdraw their allegiance to and participation (as feeble and indirect as it is allowed to be) in the apparatus of the nation until politicians respond to what a vast majority of the citizens clearly want, he argues

"It is one thing to endure abuses and to carry on in spite of them. It is quite another thing to carry on to the point of abetting the abuse. We need to move the discussion of our nation's health to the emergency room. We need to tell the doctors of the body politic that the treatment isn't working--and that until it changes radically for the better, neither are we." (10).

While I am reasonably certain no general strike will happen, just the call for it is a startling act of rebellion for a national magazine--though calls for far more drastic and violent acts of "disloyalty" are of course heard daily from both right and left.

So far, the upper and middle classes have not appeared to be worried about the collapse of the state--disaster capitalism will save them. But if both the state and the nation collapse, where will the wealth of the currently wealthy and middle class come from? Their wealth is not based on property or production as wealth was in the old days. Rather, our economy is based entirely on debt instruments piled on top of debt instruments piled on top of debt instruments. The wealth of wealthy Americans is entirely based on clever fantasy. The American--and more and more of the global--economy is a gigantic Ponzi scheme which assumes that some "sovereign" entity can and will ultimately guarantee "full faith and credit" (or full faith IN credit, as I prefer to phrase it) in the system. If there is no legitimate sovereign to come to the rescue, then what? Local and/or corporate "money" might fill the void, but even that, at least in its present form, assumes some external, superior, and legitimate authority.

Communal self-reliance and -sufficiency based on true equity and fairness may be more and more appealing as both the nation and the state wither away. But if we don't act now to begin to move towards a fairer community in Hawaii, it may be too late to do much when the need becomes painfully apparent and the disaster capitalists move in.