

An Ever-Upward Spiral?: Democracy and Imperialism in Gore Vidal's
Narratives of Empire

Master's Thesis

North American Studies

Leiden University

John Mulry

S2238217

20 January 2020

Supervisor: Dr. E.F. van de Bilt

Second Reader: Prof.dr. G.P. Scott-Smith

Introduction

Gore Vidal is one of the most significant cultural figures to emerge from the United States in the twentieth century. Focusing on his literary output, Jay Parini remarks that “[h]is vast, almost Trollopian, productivity spans five decades and includes over twenty novels, collections of essays on literature and politics, a volume of short stories, successful Broadway plays, television plays, film scripts, even three mystery novels written under the pseudonym Edgar Box” (“The Writer and His Critics” 1). Of this vast corpus, Parini believes that the *Narratives of Empire*, a series of novels concerned with the inner workings of the American political system, “may well be seen as Vidal’s main achievement by future historians of literature” (“The Writer and His Critics” 20).

That Vidal’s most enduring novels are political in nature is no surprise given his personal biography. Born into a wealthy family in 1925, he was raised primarily by his grandfather, Thomas Pryor Gore, a populist senator from Oklahoma. His grandfather was the single biggest influence on his life, shaping his intellectual and political interests; through him, he became acquainted with writers such as Mark Twain and Henry Adams, and gained the inside knowledge of the political system that would later distinguish his novels. Vidal’s parents had political connections, too: his father served as director of the Bureau of Air Commerce under Franklin D. Roosevelt, while his mother was related to the Kennedy family through her second marriage.

Vidal was politically active throughout his life. He ran for office twice, the first time as a Democratic candidate in the 29th Congressional District of New York in 1960, the second challenging Jerry Brown in the Senate primary in California in 1982. On both occasions he performed admirably, but was ultimately unsuccessful. He remained a sought-after political commentator, famously engaging in heated television debates with William F.

Buckley and Norman Mailer. Post-9/11, he attracted a new audience with his scathing attacks on the War on Terror and what he referred to as “the Cheney-Bush junta” (*Point to Point Navigation* 172).

In this thesis, I will examine the themes of democracy and imperialism in Vidal’s Narratives of Empire series. I will focus specifically on the novels *Lincoln, 1876*, and *Empire*, as these cover a distinct period in which, according to Vidal, the United States’ imperial ambitions continued to increase while its democratic institutions entered into a period of decline: as John Hay expresses it in *Empire*, “[f]rom Lincoln to Roosevelt had not been, exactly, an ever-upward spiral” (482). My research questions will be as follows: What explanations does Vidal provide in these novels for the rise of American imperialism in this period? How does he connect this rise with the decline of American democracy?

The reason for undertaking this research is that Vidal remains an underappreciated figure in analyses of America’s ‘imperial’ past. This is a mistake: despite his conscious rejection of academic conventions, he still offers an essential alternative voice on this issue. The same might be said more generally for fiction writing, which despite - or perhaps because of - its artistic license has the capacity to challenge established historical narratives in a way traditional academic approaches cannot.

Methodologically, I will offer a close reading of the novels under consideration and attempt to place them in the context of both the life and works of Gore Vidal and the historical period in which they are set. In order to achieve this, I will use a number of other primary sources: these include Vidal’s memoirs, various of his essays, and the documentary film *Gore Vidal: The United States of Amnesia*, which features both original and archive interviews with Vidal. The secondary source material that I will use consists of a number of biographies and works of literary criticism by Vidal scholars, such as Jay Parini and Heather Neilson. Other works will be historical studies dealing with the United States in the late

nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, particularly those concerned with the relationship between imperial expansion and democracy. A third scholarly context will be made up by the wider genre of historical fiction and its place in these discussions: the issue of why Vidal decided to express his political convictions in works of fiction is of central importance in the discussion of his views.

Parini has noted that “[o]ne of the curiosities in surveying the critical scene around Vidal is his relation to academe, which has been troubled from the outset” (“The Writer and His Critics” 2). He suggests a number of explanations for this, ranging from Vidal’s rejection of modernism to the ‘tone’ of his prose (3-6), although it is also clear from essays such as “Lincoln, *Lincoln*, and the Priests of Academe” that Vidal put little personal effort into making himself likeable. This is not to say that Vidal has no admirers within academia, however. Donald E. Pease, for instance, describes him as “the most prolific and arguably the most talented writer of his generation” (247). Harold Bloom believes that “his narrative achievement is vastly underestimated by American academic criticism” (228). Parini himself praises Vidal’s output as “one of the largest and most intellectually and artistically substantial of any American writer in our time” while also hailing him as “sui generis - an American original” (“The Writer and His Critics” 29-30).

Of the limited academic literature on Vidal, the most comprehensive is by Parini. His *Empire of Self*, intentionally published after Vidal’s death in 2012 so as not to draw his subject’s ire, is part biography, part personal memoir, and part literary criticism. In it, he proposes to “look at the angel and the monster alike, offering a candid portrait of a gifted, difficult, influential man who remained in the foreground of his times” (5). Parini’s strength is his inside knowledge, being a close friend of Vidal’s since meeting him in Italy in the mid-80s. As such, he is able to offer a highly personalised perspective on his subject that other

biographers can simply never achieve. This closeness also raises questions - just how impartial can he be about his friend? - but to his credit he does not shy away from the less savoury aspects of Vidal's life, nor the narcissism, paranoia and jealousy that at times defined him. As a Professor of English, Parini is also able to offer a balanced critique of Vidal's literary output, thereby providing an invaluable overview of his works that can be utilised by Vidal scholar and casual reader alike.

In *Empire of Self*, Parini refers to power as a central theme in Vidal's works: "Power compelled his attention, and he studied its dynamics with a cool eye" (216). This is the focus of the other major study of Vidal since his death, *Political Animal* by Heather Neilson. In it, Neilson dissects a number of his major novels in order to show just how he represented power in his writing. She identifies a number of themes in Vidal's work, the most prevalent being the idea of politics as a dramatic art form. Intrinsic to this is the influence of Shakespeare, with Neilson contending that there are three themes running throughout Vidal's writing that borrow from Shakespearean drama, namely "the nature of 'report' and reputation; the notion of 'true' and 'false' fathers and sons; and the legitimacy (or otherwise) of authority" (26). Despite some problems inherent to Neilson's approach - particularly her definition of 'power' - *Political Animal* is an engaging, well-developed piece of research. It has been especially useful to the composition of this paper, given the overlap in subject matter.

Another significant study is *Gore Vidal* by Fred Kaplan, originally published in 1999. This is an officially sanctioned biography, with "letters and oral interviews provid[ing] the evidentiary backbone of the narrative" (797). Unlike Parini, who as a friend of Vidal's enjoyed a similar level of access, Kaplan is not constrained by existing personal attachments. He is, however, hampered by the fact that his subject, difficult at the best of times, was still alive when the work was being composed (Parini turned down the opportunity to write it for

this very reason). Vidal himself was not impressed with the results, writing in *Point to Point Navigation* that, “I’ve not read his book other than an occasional passage just enough for me to realize how accurate the review of his book in *The Times Literary Supplement* was: ‘On Misreading Gore Vidal’” (109). Parini, however, believes this very reaction reflects positively on the author, noting that the work “has a candidness that annoyed Gore but spoke well for Kaplan” (*Empire of Self* 354).

A more novel approach is that taken by the Australian academic Dennis Altman, who in *Gore Vidal’s America* considers the author and his works through the prism of the gay rights movement. Altman cites Vidal as a key influence on his previous work, remarking that “[m]y first book, *Homosexual: Oppression and Liberation*, and several subsequent books drew on Vidal’s writings, as was true of most of the writings of my generation of gay activists” (176). Altman believes the significance of his study to also lie in the fact that it “is a reading of Vidal by a non-American, who therefore reads his work with somewhat different preconceptions and assumptions” (176-7).

Other academics refer to Vidal only in passing. Walter Russell Mead cites him as an example of his ‘Jeffersonian’ school of American foreign policy, which “has typically seen the preservation of American democracy in a dangerous world as the most pressing and vital interest of the American people.” Mead also writes that these ‘Jeffersonians’ (an awkward term that he himself admits to being somewhat anachronistic) have “consistently looked for the least costly and dangerous method of defending American independence while counseling against attempts to impose American values on other countries” (88). Both of these definitions fit Vidal well, and are especially pertinent to his *Narratives of Empire*.

More critical is Niall Ferguson, a writer whose ideological convictions are diametrically opposed to Vidal’s. Ferguson shares with Vidal the unfashionable belief that the United States is an imperial power, but disagrees with him as to the desirability of this

empire. In *Colossus*, he suggests an explanation for Vidal's aversion to it: "In the eyes of Gore Vidal, the tragedy of the Roman Republic is repeating itself as farce, with the 'national-security state' relentlessly encroaching on the prerogatives of the patrician elite to which Vidal himself belongs" (4). From Ferguson's perspective, Vidal's attacks on American foreign policy are borne of selfish motives.

Narratives of Empire

Before embarking on a discussion of the specific novels, it is worth considering Vidal's Narratives of Empire more generally. Pease describes these works as "a comprehensive fictional history of the United States that includes an important revisionist understanding of the relationship between American history and its literature" (247-8). He believes that Vidal's exile from academia served as a "precondition" for embarking on this endeavour, arguing that he "affiliates exclusion from the academic establishment with a freedom from its limitations." Rather than treating history and literature as separate fields, as is traditional, "Vidal reshapes the materials of the past into structures of discourse and arrangements of social practices more inclusive and instructive than either academic discipline" (248). This allows him to rescue historical figures such as Abraham Lincoln, Mark Twain and Henry Adams from established narratives and have them interact within an entirely new context. Parini believes that it is this underlying approach that makes these disparate novels a series: "while one must sometimes strain to find much narrative connection between, say, *Burr* and *Hollywood*, all the novels have in fact the unifying theme of Vidal's approach to certain revisionist aspects of American political history" ("The Writer and His Critics" 27).

Pease notes Vidal's ties to the counterculture and New Historicist movements. He points out that the first novel in the series, *Washington, D.C.* was published in 1967, when "the controversy surrounding the Vietnam War resulted in widespread recognition of the difference between actual historical events and the official versions the nation told itself about them." This prompted a number of "revisionist accounts of American history [that] challenged the relationship between historical fact and the literary imagination," of which "Vidal's ongoing project was but one example" (249). Following the demise of the counterculture movement, these ideas were repackaged by the New Historicists. They, like Vidal, believed in the relevance of literature to historical studies, although unlike him they carried out their work within the bounds of academia. Pease argues that Vidal occupies a central role in this movement, observing that he "has been practising the New Historicism since 1967" and that "[h]is fictional histories constitute a research archive for this emergent field as well as a broad public for its political concerns" (277).

In writing these novels, Vidal strived for historical accuracy: "I order boxes full of books from American booksellers. I may buy two or three hundred books for each novel. I read the books here, in Ravello, taking notes. After I've written the novel, I always get a professional historian to check the novels to see that I've not made any great gaffs" ("An Interview with Gore Vidal" 286). This attention to detail is picked up on by Joyce Carol Oates, who in her review of *Lincoln* opines that the work is contentious more from a literary standpoint than a historical one. "Now comes Mr. Vidal's *Lincoln*," she writes, "with its necessary but somewhat misleading subtitle 'A Novel,' certain to be a controversial work among literary critics, if not among historians (surely the history cannot be faulted, as it comes with the imprimatur of one of our most eminent Lincoln scholars, David Herbert Donald of Harvard)."

Oates was somewhat naive in this assessment. Contrary to her expectations, Vidal's unconventional approach provoked a backlash from historians, with Lincoln scholars seemingly the most aggrieved (see "Lincoln and the Priests of Academe"). Pease highlights the example of C. Vann Woodward, who "used *Lincoln* to illustrate the distinction between a historical fiction and a fictional history." Woodward believed Vidal's fictional history to be the more dangerous because, in his own words, "it is here that fabrication and fact, fiction and non-fiction, are most likely to be mixed and confused" (273). Vidal remained unrepentant, arguing that in his novels, "[t]he history is plainly history. The fiction fiction." He also claimed ulterior motives for the attacks made against him, remarking that "I am not well disposed toward the National Security State that pays for academe's icon-dusters," and further bemoaning "the surrender of academe to the imperial paymaster" ("Lincoln and the Priests of Academe" 700).

It is notable, however, that figures from beyond the confines of academia have made a similar point regarding Vidal's work. These include his one-time protegee Christopher Hitchens, who argues in *United States of Amnesia* that "the problem [with Vidal] is whether you're open or not to a certain version of the conspiracy theory of history" (0:48:52-49:00). He expands on this in an article written for *Vanity Fair*, alleging "that [Vidal] suspected Franklin Roosevelt of playing a dark hand in bringing on Pearl Harbor and still nurtured an admiration in his breast for the dashing Charles Lindbergh, leader of the American isolationist right in the 1930s."

Whatever its shortcomings, Vidal uses the freedom inherent in his approach to deconstruct the mythologies that have been built up around famous historical figures. In his study of presidential power, Thomas S. Langston describes how "the American people have decided to be governed by a veritable priest-king, the most atavistic of executives" (1). Vidal seemingly agrees, seeking in his own work to attack "[t]hat peculiarly American religion,

President-worship” (“President and Mrs. U. S. Grant” 709). In so doing, he looks to undermine the wider national myths constructed around the figure of the president.

The most notable of these myths is that of American anti-imperialism. Neilson notes efforts by academics such as Neil Smith and Niall Ferguson to reintroduce the term ‘empire’ to discourses on American foreign policy, remarking that, “[w]hile Gore Vidal represented historical events predominantly through the genres of historical fiction and the essay, he shared Smith’s and Ferguson’s premise that, in order to comprehend the role of the American empire in our own time, both Americans and those of us within the reach of its influence need to know something of its evolution” (147). Neilson also highlights the influence of William Appleman Williams and other revisionist historians on the novel’s composition: like them, “Vidal rejects the notion that the United States’s acquisition of Hawaii, Guam, the Philippines and Puerto Rico was...‘unpremeditated’” (148). Ultimately, Vidal takes a position strikingly similar to Walter Lafeber, who like Williams is a historian of the Wisconsin School:

First, the United States did not set out on an expansionist path in the 1890’s in a sudden, spur-of-the-moment fashion. The overseas empire that Americans controlled in 1900 was not a break in their history, but a natural culmination. Second, Americans neither acquired this empire during a temporary absence of mind nor had the empire forced upon them. I have discovered very little passivity in the systematic, expansive ideas of Seward, Evarts, Frelinghuysen, Harrison, Blaine, Cleveland, Gresham, Olney, and McKinley and the views of the American business community in the 1890’s. (*xxxi-xxxii*)

In explaining the roots of the modern United States, Vidal's novels also serve as a critique of contemporary American politics: *1876*, published to coincide with the country's bicentennial in 1976, mirrors the squalor of the Nixon Administration, while *Lincoln* and *Empire* articulate Vidal's concerns about the interventionist policies of Ronald Reagan. This is inextricably linked to Vidal's "firm conviction that America is a country run *by* the rich and *for* the rich, that America's pretence of being a great 'democracy' is a sham, and that we as a nation have caused a good deal of pain, misery, and danger in the world by continuing the practice of imperialism begun by our forefathers, such as Teddy Roosevelt" ("The Writer and His Critics" 7).

Whether Vidal convincingly makes the case for this interpretation of American history is debatable. Critics include Delbanco, who in his review of *Empire* writes that "the novel is badly truncated. A serious inquiry into the roots of American imperialism must begin at least with the Mexican War, if not with the Louisiana Purchase and the post-colonial westward expansion," none of which are dealt with in any depth by Vidal. Eder, meanwhile, identifies a structural weakness to the entire Narratives of Empire series, noting that "Vidal makes the point that the spirit of American expansion was in conflict with the authentic qualities of the American character and has tended to extinguish them. The fact that his books on earlier portions of our history found precious few such qualities rather weakens the point."

Another issue to consider is Vidal's use of fiction to express his viewpoint. One explanation for this is that it allows him to reach Pease's "broad public." As Delbanco points out, Vidal is "one of the few authors who bridge the gap between upper- and middle-brow readers" and, as such, his novels offered him an opportunity to expound his ideas to people who might not otherwise be aware of them. Vidal certainly regards these novels as an opportunity to educate a wide audience, remarking that "history is so badly taught in the

schools, which means that there's a hunger for information of a certain kind. Americans want to find out about their past" ("An Interview with Gore Vidal" 282).

The use of the novel may also represent Vidal's attempt to place himself in the tradition of political fiction writing. Assessing the genre of historical fiction - to which the *Narratives of Empire* at least superficially belong - Williams asserts that it should contribute "to the solution of the supreme social problems of the vast, world-wide, social crisis of today" (363), while Vidal expressed his own belief that the "[n]ovelist ought to explore the issue the issue of class and write for society at large" ("An Interview with Gore Vidal" 283). As will be shown, novels such as *1876* and *Empire* draw heavily on Vidal's literary idols Twain and Adams, whose own works featured explicitly political themes.

Vidal's choice of medium might ultimately be interpreted as an alternative means to power. Neilson suggests the idea of a "split" between writer and politician in the person of Vidal, observing that he constantly shifted between being reporter and participant in the political process (15). Parini agrees, remarking in *Empire of Self* that Vidal "converted the same will to power that had pushed him to run for political office in New York and California into a drive to seize control of the national narrative in his writing" (297). Parini goes on to remark that while "he would never know what it meant to hold the levers of real political power in his hands...he could write the history of his country as he saw it, mastering and owning the story, and this was power of a kind" (301).

This desire for power is a reflection of Vidal's self-imposed outsider status. Parini cites the example of *Burr*, whose titular character, a perennial outsider, acts as "the ideal stand-in" for Vidal (*Empire of Self* 217). Eder agrees, arguing that the character of Burr "is Vidal. The voice of the failed adventurer, debunking the vain and pompous Washington, the piously deviant Jefferson, the self-protective John Marshall and the whole uplift of our constitutional tradition...is the writer's." Within the novels under consideration in this paper,

Charles Schermerhorn Schuyler and William Randolph Hearst represent the most obvious examples of this character type.

Given his privileged background and political connections, however, it might reasonably be argued that this exclusion from the centre of power exists only in Vidal's head, and that he bore little relation to those sections of society that have experienced actual disfranchisement. Delbanco, for one, believes Vidal to be no friend of the common man, writing that while he targeted the American establishment, "[h]is contempt for them matches his longer-established disdain for the common people whom they manipulate, but who did not sustain his energy of invention." Indeed, Delbanco goes so far as to suggest that "Vidal is not just outraged at the distance between ideals and reality; he is skeptical of the idea of democracy itself," which is an important nuance when considering the misanthropic viewpoints expressed in his novels by characters such as Twain and Adams. Vidal's approach also casts doubt on his self-proclaimed commitment to class issues, a point made by Julian Moynahan in his review of *1876*: "By Vidal's method no question can be asked about real people, real suffering, real change, real history - only the trivializing, gossipy question about celebrities."

Lincoln

Lincoln covers the Civil War period, beginning with the entry of the president-elect into Washington in 1861 and ending with his death four years later. Parini believes this work to be "in many ways...Vidal's least Vidalian novel," in large part because of the unusual centrality of the title character. Indeed, Parini goes so far as to suggest that "Vidal, by placing Lincoln at the centre of his novel, has in effect reversed the traditional method [of historical fiction], creating what may well become a new genre" ("The Writer and His Critics" 24-5).

Vidal's Lincoln is supported by an "almost Dickensian roster of fabulistic caricatures" (Bloom 226), the most memorable being Secretary of State William H. Seward and Secretary of the Treasury Salmon P. Chase. However, although these characters make their own important contributions to Vidal's historical narrative, there is little doubt that Lincoln remains the "Central Man" (Bloom 223).

In *Empire of Self*, Parini remarks that "[a]mong the great men of American politics and history, only Aaron Burr and Lincoln attracted Gore's complete admiration" (278). This is surprising, not least given Neilson's assertion that "Vidal openly identified himself as a Southern writer" (4). Neilson goes on to explain the discrepancy, remarking that "Vidal clearly admired Lincoln as a master tactician," but that, "as the descendant of a Confederate soldier, he made it clear that he regarded Lincoln's response to the secession of the Southern states as 'a very great evil'" (115-6). Bloom makes a similar point in regard to Vidal's aversion to the 'national security state,' remarking that "Vidal does not celebrate Lincoln's destruction of civil liberties, but shows a certain admiration for the skill with which the President subverts the Constitution he is sworn to defend" (228).

Lincoln is, in large part, an attempt to demythologize the sixteenth president. Parini observes that while "Lincoln commands Gore's respect...Gore punctures the myth repeatedly" (*Empire of Self* 281). Bloom suggests a specific example of this: "Vidal demystifies Lincoln to the rather frightening degree of suggesting that he had transferred unknowingly a venereal infection, contracted in his youth, and supposedly cured, to his wife, Mary Todd, and through her to his sons" (225). Neilson agrees, remarking that, "[i]n *Lincoln*, as in *Burr*, Vidal is still in his 'correctionist' mode, attempting to recover and to communicate the realities which the accretion of legend has obscured." There is a caveat to this, however: "Paradoxically...he is also intimating that the only Lincoln available for interpretation is the Lincoln that has already been reconstructed by previous interpretations"

(116-7). According to Neilson, this is because the novel's narration relies on the thoughts of supporting characters, rather than probing into the mind of Lincoln himself. As Vidal himself puts it, "I tell the story from about five different viewpoints - though I never pretend to get inside Lincoln's head, as such" ("An Interview with Gore Vidal" 284).

In *United States of Amnesia*, Vidal comments that Lincoln is "one of those figures that everybody knows who he is, so they think they know who he is. And they don't, they just know a name, they just know an idea." In Vidal's opinion, "he created the United States as we know it, he created the nation state as we know it" (0:47:46-48:01). If Lincoln is responsible for the modern American nation state, however, he is also to blame for that nation state's faults. In "Last Note on Lincoln," Vidal argues that "[i]n a sense, we have had three republics," the first lasting from 1776 to 1789, the second going up to the end of the Civil War. "In due course," Vidal goes on, "Lincoln's third republic was transformed (inevitably?) into the national security state where we have been locked up for forty years" (707).

Pease argues that Vidal does not blame Lincoln personally for this development, noting that the final words of the novel "thoroughly separate Lincoln's death from the nation-state founded upon his martyrdom." Indeed, "Vidal found in Lincoln's assassination evidence that Lincoln (as well as his assassin) wished for the death of a tyrant, and characterized the need for the political mythology about Lincoln's assassination as the nation's justification for imperialism and racism" (272). This development has contemporary ramifications: as Bloom notes, "[w]ith the likely, impending reelection of Ronald Reagan (1984), the nation confirms what might be the final crisis of Lincoln's presidential creation. If our system is, as Vidal contends, Lincoln's invention, then the American age of Lincoln finally approaches its apocalypse" (225). *Lincoln* therefore constitutes a prime example of Vidal using fiction to articulate "political concerns" (Pease 277), and must therefore be considered as part of his efforts to exert influence through non-traditional channels.

In this chapter, I will argue that Vidal uses *Lincoln* to propose a number of explanations for his revisionist historical narrative. Chief amongst these is the president himself, who in his execution of the war effort unwittingly creates the conditions necessary for both democratic decline and imperial expansion. I will also demonstrate how, through the character of Seward, Vidal makes an explicit connection between an assault on the Constitution and a lust for overseas territories, and show how the inclusion of figures such as Winfield Scott and Horace Greeley establishes the vital role played in these developments by the military and press, respectively.

In “First Note on Abraham Lincoln,” Vidal writes that “Honest Abe the rail-splitter was the creation of what must have been the earliest all-out PR campaign for a politician” (665-6). This PR campaign is discussed early in the novel by Seward and Republican congressman Elihu Washburne:

Seward frowned. “I don’t know. I’m not used to prairie statesmen, if you’ll forgive me, Mr. Washburne.”

“Forgiven. After all, you and I are used to each other. But Abe isn’t really Western, you know. In fact, he isn’t really like other people.”

“In what way? I thought he was very much your typical Western politician, man of the people, a splitter of rails, that kind of thing.”

Washburne laughed. “That was all made up for the campaign.”

“You mean Honest Abe the Rail-Splitter is a fraud?”

“Yes and no. I’m sure he split a rail or two in his youth, but he’s always been a politician and a lawyer. The honest part is true, of course. But all the rest was just to get out the vote at home.” (13)

Part of Lincoln’s talent is an ability to disseminate a carefully cultivated public image, based at least in part on his physical appearance. This involves the utilization of modern technology: according to Hay, “[h]e was...the first politician to understand the importance and the influence of photography; no photographer was ever sent away unsatisfied” (37), while in a later passage Seward observes that, “[t]hanks to the telegraph and the modernization of the daguerreotype, Lincoln’s managers had been able to impress an indelible image on the country’s consciousness” (257). The concern for his public appearance is demonstrated by a passage in which Vidal describes the discrepancy between Lincoln’s hair in public and in private: “For all the talk of *Old Abe*, most people who met Lincoln were startled to find that, at fifty-two, he had not a gray hair in his black shock, which was, for the moment, contained by the barber’s art and Mary Todd’s firm brushwork.” Once out of sight of the public, however, “the long fingers would start to stray through the haystack and, in no time at all, three cowlicks in opposition would make his hair look like an Indian warbonnet.” (70-1). It is as if Lincoln is taking off a mask or a costume once his performance is concluded.

Another conscious calculation on Lincoln’s part is his decision to grow a beard. This was done “in order to soften his somewhat harsh features; and to make himself, at least in appearance, the nation’s true Father Abraham” (37). Even the growing of the beard is mythologized, allegedly being “the result of a letter from a little girl who liked whiskers.” The reality is, of course, completely different; it was in fact a group of influential Republicans who encouraged him to grow it, as they “thought that a beard might give him

dignity, something they had found dangerously wanting in the quaint western teller of funny and not-so-funny stories.” The beard, then, was not Lincoln’s decision alone, but was rather part of a wider party strategy. This undermines somewhat the image of the lone political genius. It does, however, show a level of political calculation and even cynicism on the part of Lincoln. The manipulation of the president’s image is ultimately so effective that, “[e]ven William Seward had difficulty separating the practical if evasive and timorous politician [as he sees him] from the national icon that Lincoln and his friends had so carefully constructed before and during the convention at Chicago: Honest Abe, the Rail-Splitter, born in a manger - or, rather, log cabin...” (257). The reference to Lincoln’s friends again suggests the influence of the wider Republican Party. Meanwhile, the sarcastic reference to the manger reflects Seward’s - and Vidal’s - aversion to the Jesus-like image that has been created.

Lincoln’s public persona performs the dual function of winning votes and lulling his rivals into a false sense of security. Seward, as well as dismissing the president as an “evasive and timorous politician,” also labels him an “inexperienced outlander” (26) and a “Western Jesuit” (29), amongst other epithets. Chase is no less haughty when he opines that Lincoln “was nothing more than a run-of-the-mill politician of the western sort. He would have made a splendid governor of Illinois; and no more” (114). But Chase also senses greater depths to Lincoln’s character, finding him, “at bottom, an unexpectedly hard man, who would never weep for anyone - or anything, saving perhaps power withheld” (267). This is the image of Lincoln that Vidal attempts to build over the course of the narrative.

In an early passage, for instance, we learn about a speech that Lincoln gave at the Cooper Institute in New York in early 1860. This speech enhanced his public profile and eventually led to him winning the Republican nomination and the presidency. He was apparently only in the area visiting his son Robert at college. ““So if it hadn’t been for you, Bob,’ Lincoln liked to say, ‘being up there at Exeter, I’d never have been nominated or

elected.” John Hay does not believe this version of events, as, “[f]rom the beginning of his close association with Lincoln - less than a year but it seemed like a lifetime - he had been delightedly conscious of the Tycoon’s endless cunning.” It was with “characteristic forethought” that Lincoln had sent Robert to Exeter, “with no other apparent end than ordinary paternal care.” There is an irony in this last line being juxtaposed with the image of Lincoln as “the nation’s true Father Abraham” (37), in that he is willing to manipulate his own son in order to project a paternal image.

In another example, we learn how Lincoln “destroyed” the Democratic Party during his run for the Senate in 1858. As with the Cooper Institute speech, this was done with the ultimate goal of the 1860 presidential election in mind; Lincoln himself admits as much, telling Frank Blair, “[t]he taste was in my mouth, I suppose.” In asking a question about the expansion of slavery, Blair alleges that Lincoln set a “trap” - a word suggestive of hunting - for his opponent Stephen Douglas. This “trap” lost him the Senate seat but allowed him to beat Douglas in the presidential election two years later. “Do you think I plan so far ahead?” asks Lincoln at the end of the conversation. “Yes, sir, I do,” responds Blair. This again underlines the essence of Lincoln’s political talent: Blair describes him as “the subtlest man I have ever come across in politics” (110-11) The story is also an indication of the unyielding manner in which Lincoln acts towards his opponents. It is as if he is a hunter and Douglas is his prey.

Yet Chase’s characterization of Lincoln as a man interested only in power is perhaps unfair. As president, Lincoln demonstrates a singular devotion to the cause of preserving the Union. Hay, for instance, recalls Lincoln’s inaugural oath, and “the high voice that positively shouted the word ‘defend’” (110). Lincoln himself claims this to be his priority when discussing an upcoming speech with Seward:

“I can’t cut the part about the oath that I have sworn to uphold the Constitution. That is what gives me - and the Union - our legitimacy in the eyes of heaven.”

“I did not think of you as a religious man, Mr. Lincoln.”

“I am not, in any usual sense. But I believe in fate - and necessity. I believe in this Union. That is *my* fate, I suppose. And my necessity.” (50)

The reference to necessity is interesting. As Parini points out, Vidal’s Lincoln “will do whatever he needs to do, never losing sight of his larger purpose, to maintain the Union” (*Empire of Self* 281). Although identifying the Constitution as the cornerstone of these efforts, the pursuit of the wider goal occasionally necessitates its subversion. Vidal alludes to this in the following passage:

“Nicolay, where’s the Constitution?”

“I don’t know, sir. I think they keep it down at the Capitol, somewhere. I’ll ask...”

“No, I meant where’s a copy of it?”

“I don’t know.” Nicolay looked at Hay, who shook his head. Lincoln turned, comically, to Bates. “Tell no one that there’s not a copy of the Constitution in the President’s House.”

“People have already guessed that.” Bates was dour. (203)

The fact that there is no copy of the Constitution at the White House suggests that Lincoln does not feel especially bound by it. Bates’s subsequent quip serves as an acknowledgment that this leaves Lincoln vulnerable to charges of tyranny.

This constitutional flexibility manifests itself in an arbitrary approach towards the other branches of government. Schlesinger describes this period as one in which Lincoln “ignored one law and constitutional provision after another...even with Congress in session, [he] continued to exercise wide powers independently of Congress” (58). Vidal is keen to emphasize this point. His Lincoln describes his position in relation to Congress in these terms: “This is not England, where the sovereign may not set foot in the House of Commons. I can wander in and out of the Capitol as I please” (342). This image is intended literally, but it also serves as a neat metaphor for the traditional separation of powers being eroded. In another passage, Lincoln explains to Seward how he would like to build a railroad from Lexington to Knoxville, only to be told that Congress will not let him. “Then we must find a way to persuade them,” he responds. “Or just do it ourselves” (274). In this case we see that he is willing to bypass Congress entirely if it obstructs his plans.

The president encounters similar difficulties with the judiciary. At one stage he is reprimanded by Chief Justice Roger Taney for refusing to comply with an order: “He now reminds you that you are under oath - sworn to him at your inaugural - to uphold the Constitution, and that you must see to it that the laws, and the Chief Justice, are obeyed.” Lincoln extricates himself from the difficulty by drawing a distinction between his duty to the country and his duty to the Supreme Court: “I think we should, first, persuade Mr. Taney that thought might’ve *looked* like I was swearing an oath to him because he happened to be holding the Bible that morning, I was really swearing an oath to the whole country to defend the whole Constitution.” After an appeal by Blair to invoke his “inherent powers,” Lincoln proposes that “[w]e’ll handle Mr. Taney by not mentioning him.” As with Congress, he is willing to ignore the Supreme Court. Interestingly, as part of his plan to bypass Taney, Lincoln signals his intention to “make my case to Congress once they get back in July” (202-3). This demonstrates that he is willing to make use of Congress when it suits his purposes.

Schlesinger writes of the historical Lincoln that, “[i]n such undertakings, [he] had the enthusiastic collaboration of his Secretary of State, William H. Seward” (58). The same is true in the novel, Vidal describing how “[w]ith the President’s hearty concurrence Seward had been allowed to take over the delicate business of censoring the press as well as the even more delicate task of determining, upon the advice of various military commanders, who ought not to be at large.” These powers are granted to him in the name of winning the war, but, “[a]s a lawyer and as an office-holder, sworn to uphold the Constitution and its Bill of Rights, not to mention those inviolable protections of both persons and property so firmly spelled out in Magna Charta and in the whole subsequent accretion of the common law, Seward found that he quite enjoyed tearing up, one by one, those ancient liberties in the Union’s name” (301). A later reference to the arrest of newspaper editors being “Seward’s peculiar delight” (543) serves to underscore this point.

The mania for arresting subversive elements eventually extends to the government of the United States - in Seward’s head, at least:

As Seward rocked slowly back and forth in the hammock, he thought, longingly, of sending a detachment of troops to surround the Capitol while Congress was in session. There would be a mass arrest. He himself would speak to the assembled members of the two houses - would they be chained to one another? He left that detail for a later daydream. But, for the present, he was seated in the Speaker’s chair, and smoking a cigar as the terrified members of Congress stood before him, guns trained on them from soldiers in the gallery. Naturally, he would address them pleasantly; he might even make a joke or two. Then he would explain how no state could support, in time of war, the luxury of such a large, unwieldy and often dangerously unpatriotic band of men. Therefore, it was with true sorrow that he was dissolving the legislative

branch of the government. Most of the members would be allowed to return home. Unfortunately, there were a number who would be obliged to stand trial for treasonable activities. Senator Wade would, of course, be given every opportunity to defend himself before a military court. But should he and the other Jacobins be found guilty, they would, of course, be hanged - in front of the Capitol. Seward was debating whether or not the gallows should be placed at the east or the west end of the Capitol, when the servant announced, "Mr. Chase is here to see you, sir." (366)

This passage is noteworthy for a couple of reasons. One is the fact that Seward envisages an alliance between himself and the military as part of his imaginary coup. Another is that Seward seeks the total destruction of the legislative branch of government. For all of his ambition and tendency towards executive overreach, even Lincoln never went this far. How seriously we should take this passage is difficult to say; after all, it represents no more than an idle daydream. Coupled with his actions in office, however, it marks Seward out as an extremely dangerous figure.

Seward's goal is not the preservation of the Union, it is the establishment of an American empire. Early in the narrative he hopes to steer Lincoln away from war with the South entirely, and instead "begin the creation of the new North American - South American and West Indian, too; why not? - empire that Seward felt would more than compensate them for the loss of the slave states" (26). When this fails, he repeatedly suggests overseas expansion as a tactic for ending the conflict. The rationale behind this is inconsistent. At times, it is about placating the South. According to Charles Sumner, for instance, "Mr. Seward dreams of some sort of war between us and all of Europe to distract our attention from the matter of slavery. He spoke to me in the most alarming way of Spain's influence in South America and of France's in Mexico." Sumner goes on to add: "He thinks we should

invoke the Monroe Doctrine and drive them out of the Western hemisphere, *with* the support of the Southern states, who would then, presumably, extend slavery over the entire southern half of our hemisphere” (93). When talking to Chase later in the novel, Seward again invokes the phantoms of the Old World: “Wouldn’t you rather go to war against Spain, and acquire Cuba? Against the French, and acquire Mexico?” In this case, however, he suggests that this would help them to *defeat* the Confederacy, because it would mean that they had “outflanked the cotton states.” This is, however, entirely incompatible with the vision he previously outlined to Sumner.

Whatever his motives, “Seward’s vision was simple: he wanted the entire western hemisphere to belong to the United States.” He can thus be considered an early advocate for the American imperial project. At times he vents his frustration at Lincoln’s lack of ambition in this direction, bemoaning that while he “dreamed, splendidly and practically, of empire, the railroad lawyer in the White House wanted only to bring back into the Union a half-dozen or so rebellious mosquito-states.” We see his aristocratic haughtiness shining through as he dismisses the Gulf states as “so many irrelevant parcels of third-rate territory that would promptly revert to the Union once Mexico had come to accept American rule, much as Cisalpine Gaul had come to accept that of Rome” (173). The South is therefore only important to Seward as part of the wider establishment of a new Roman Empire.

Seward frequently attempts to draw Chase into his intrigues in the belief that he shares these imperialist convictions. There is some credence to this. At one point Chase objects to a scheme to repatriate freed slaves, “[e]xcept, perhaps, as a means of our obtaining a foothold in Central America” (394). He is also tempted by Seward’s logic that conquering Cuba and Mexico would enable the Union to win the war, believing that “[t]he two famed birds that it was always his dream with one stone to kill might, at last, be snared” (117). Yet, while “[t]here were times when Seward felt that Chase shared his imperial vision...those

times were few.” Ultimately, according to Seward, “Chase was a man in thrall to a single cause - the abolition of slavery” (173). This is perhaps unfair; the “two famed birds” in the previous quote appears to be a reference to the preservation of the Union as well as the abolitionist cause. However, it is true that Chase only appears interested in imperialism insofar as it helps to achieve these goals.

Chase and Seward do resemble each other in their courting of the military. “Chase’s wooing of generals was one of the scandals of the city,” we learn at one point. “Whenever a general looked as if he might indeed be the leader the war required, Chase would draw close to him and befriend him” (423). This is a political calculation, done so that “the winning general would stand at Chase’s side in the election of 1864” (424). Seward, meanwhile, regards Winfield Scott “as his own handiwork” (27). Scott is an example of a military figure being groomed by a politician for publicity purposes. His relationship with Seward will be echoed by Theodore Roosevelt and George Dewey in *Empire*. Given that he ran, unsuccessfully, in the presidential election of 1852, he also represents a prime example of the crossover of the political and military spheres; this is what Vidal is suggesting when he depicts Scott’s “voice of military command taking on a politician’s tone” (27).

Vidal makes a point of associating the military generals in the novel with imperialism. Scott, upon meeting Lincoln for the first time, stands “before a painting of himself as the hero of the War of 1812. As Lincoln entered the room, the general waddled forward; they shook hands beneath a portrait of Scott conquering Mexico in 1847.” Scott also sits in “a throne that had been designed for a very fat man to get in and out of with relative ease” (27). This girth gains greater significance in the later novels, when Vidal draws a connection between weight and imperial ambition. McClellan, meanwhile, is referred to by various of the characters in the novel as the “Young Napoleon.” This comparison even extends to his mannerisms; at one point Vidal describes how “he thrust his hand inside his tunic like Napoleon.” There is a

sense that this is somewhat sarcastic, however, as in the same passage we also learn that “in the face of an actual hero of the republic’s wars [Scott], McClellan withdrew his hand from his tunic” (265). Whatever the true scale of the danger, the other characters are wary of him. This is because “a number of McClellan’s closest aides often spoke of the necessity of a military solution to the political problem at Washington.” This involves “wild talk of sending Congress home; locking up the President and Cabinet; then, under McClellan, peace would be made with the South” (411). In other words, McClellan has authoritarian pretensions.

Certain newspapermen also wield a considerable amount of influence. Seward, for instance, alleges that Lincoln is scared of Horace Greeley and James Gordon Bennett, editors of the *Tribune* and *Herald*, respectively: “The President’s afraid of him. Bennett, too. I can’t think why” (258). It is later remarked, however, that “Seward could never believe that Lincoln was as indifferent to newspapers - other than Messrs. Greeley and Bennett - as he claimed” (273). This suggests a more general sensitivity to the press coverage he receives. At the very least, Greeley appears to hold an outsized importance for the president: “so extensive was his published private advice to Lincoln that one entire pigeonhole of the presidential desk was devoted to Greeley.” This is because “half a million people read the weekly edition of the *Tribune*, particularly in the midwest” (212). It is probably not a coincidence that Lincoln hailed from the midwest and depended on the support of voters in this region.

Greeley’s influence may also be due to his role in getting Lincoln elected. In the account of the Cooper Institute speech, we learn that “[t]he liberal editor of the New York *Evening Post*, William Cullen Bryant, chaired the meeting, while the city’s most powerful editor, Horace Greeley, sat in the audience. The next day Lincoln was known to the entire nation.” The juxtaposition of these sentences is deliberate on Vidal’s part, suggesting that Lincoln owed his political success to the support of the press. This, however, oversimplifies the dynamic; as with later presidents, there is a question as to who is really in control. In the

same passage Hay goes on to observe: “There was nothing that Lincoln ever left to chance if he could help it. He was a master of guiding public opinion either directly through a set speech to a living audience or, indirectly, through an uncanny sense of how to use the press to his own ends” (37). It is, therefore, a mutually beneficial relationship.

Greeley’s influence is also evident in the execution of the war. Lincoln, for instance, bemoans the fact that “[t]hanks to General Horace Greeley, ‘Forward to Richmond’ is now on every lip, up North. At least, it is daily on *his* lips, and everyone, they say, reads the *Tribune*” (211). General Irvin McDowell makes a similar point when he remarks that Lincoln is sensitive to “[a]ll that ‘Onward to Richmond’ noise of Horace Greeley...I’d like to send *him* on to Richmond. That man is always wrong” (231). These passages highlight both the importance of the press in shaping public opinion and the manner in which politicians are forced to respond. It is a theme that will become even more important in Vidal’s later novels.

The broader point of concern for Vidal is the increasing overlap between the political and media spheres. Greeley’s true motives are revealed at near the end of the novel, when Lincoln hints that he might be made Postmaster General: “Greeley, who lusted for public office, had taken the bait; and his editorials now oozed honey” (638). Similarly, Lincoln decides that “[f]or Mr. Bennett’s editorial support, he can be minister to France or wherever he would like to go” (639). These newspaper proprietors are abusing their sway over public opinion in an attempt to win power and prestige for themselves. Other newspapermen seek to undermine democracy more directly; Thurlow Weed, for instance, is briefly revealed to be conspiring with Seward with the intention of overthrowing Lincoln. These sinister trends will eventually reach a climax, half a century later, in the character of William Randolph Hearst.

Bloom observes that “Vidal’s opening irony, never stated but effectively implied, is that the South beheld the true Lincoln long before Lincoln’s own cabinet had begun to regard

the will and power of the political genius who so evasively manipulated them” (223-4). By novel’s end, even the most blinkered of his rivals realise that they have been outmanoeuvred. Seward’s moment of epiphany is captured in the following passage:

Seward felt an involuntary shudder in his limbs. He was also ravished by the irony of the moment. For nearly three years, a thousand voices, including his own, had called for a Cromwell, a dictator, a despot; and in all that time, no one had suspected that there had been, from the beginning, a single-minded dictator in the White House, a Lord Protector of the Union by whose will alone the war had been prosecuted. For the first time, Seward understood the nature of Lincoln’s political genius. He had been able to make himself absolute dictator without ever letting anyone suspect that he was anything more than a joking, timid backwoods lawyer, given to fits of humility in the presence of all the strutting military and political peacocks that flocked about him.

(505)

Lincoln never sought to make himself “a dictator, a despot,” but became one by necessity, in order to preserve the Union. In this sense, he is not the ogre of the South’s imagination. For Vidal, Lincoln’s danger lies in his role in the establishment of the modern United States; as Bloom remarks, “[t]he South feared an American Cromwell, and in Vidal’s vision, the South actually helped produce an American Bismarck” (224). The ramifications of this development are left to later novels, beginning with *1876*.

1876

Unlike *Lincoln* and *Empire*, *1876* is told from a first person perspective. In it, we see the United States through the eyes of Charles Schermerhorn Schuyler, an American who has spent the majority in life of his life in Europe. It is tempting to draw parallels between Schuyler and Vidal, who spent much of his own life in Italy; indeed, Vidal himself once remarked, “I liked being the voice of Charlie...I knew him well” (*Empire of Self* 236). Schuyler - who, like Vidal, considers himself to be exiled from the traditional centres of power - returns to the United States during the final year of Ulysses S. Grant’s presidency, and serves as a witness to the corruption that has overrun the country. During the election campaign, he takes the side of the Democratic candidate Samuel Tilden over the Republican Rutherford B. Hayes. However, Tilden is denied victory by the machinations of the sitting president, Congress, and the press.

Neilson notes that “[d]uring the writing of *1876*, Vidal described the novel as a reworking of, or variation upon, *The Gilded Age* written by Mark Twain and Charles Dudley Warner,” a work that “combined an attack on postwar American politics with a romantic subplot” (130). Although Vidal initially downplayed the political aspects of his own novel, Neilson believes that it represents his “contribution to the celebrations of the bicentennial of the Declaration of Independence,” and argues that in its “fictional commemoration of the centennial year - haunted by the Civil War, the assassination of Lincoln, and the corruption of the Grant administration - the novel implicitly evokes comparison with the United States in 1976, when memories of American involvement in Viet Nam, the assassination of John F. Kennedy and the Watergate scandal still had the force of recency” (131-2). The concern with these specific issues makes sense given Vidal’s ties to the counterculture and New Historicist

movements, and gives weight to the suggestion that Vidal saw fiction writing primarily as a means of examining political and social issues.

The novel is also an opportunity for Vidal to further explore his interpretation of American history. In “President and Mrs. U. S. Grant,” he writes that “[b]etween Lincoln and Grant the original American republic of states united in free association was jettisoned. From the many states they forged one union, a centralized nation-state devoted to the acquisition of wealth and territory by any means” (721). Although, like Lincoln, originally opposed to the war with Mexico and the subsequent annexation of Texas, Grant is by the time of this novel seeking new territories overseas. This is not due to a belief in imperialism itself, but is rather an offshoot of the president’s greed, and his belief that he had been insufficiently rewarded for his efforts in the Civil War: “Since an ungrateful nation had neglected to give him a Blenheim palace, Grant felt perfectly justified in consorting with such crooks as Jim Fisk and Jay Gould, and profiting from their crimes.” One of the more outlandish of these crimes was “Babcock’s deal to buy and annex to the United States the unhappy island of Santo Domingo, the Treasury’s money to be divvied up between Babcock and the Dominican president (and, perhaps, Grant, too)” (“President and Mrs. U. S. Grant” 721). In the novel, Vidal has Schuyler confront Grant over this episode, thereby exposing his hypocrisy, but this might also be read as Vidal personally confronting the established historical narratives and, in the process, exerting power.

One of the more intriguing characters encountered by Schuyler in the course of the narrative is Twain himself. Vidal was an admirer and, perhaps inevitably, claimed a personal connection, describing him in *Palimpsest* as his grandfather’s “friend and fellow Chautauqua speaker” (47). However, he was also critical of Twain for his unwillingness to express unpopular beliefs, writing in one essay that “[s]ince Mark Twain was not about to lose his audience, he told dumb jokes in public while writing, in private, all sorts of earth-shattering

notions” (“Thomas Love Peacock” 151), and in another bemoaning “his habitual silence on any issue where he might, even for an instant, lose the love of the folks” (“William Dean Howells” 194). As with other historical figures, Vidal uses the medium of the novel to ‘free’ Twain from these fears, and have him candidly express an opinion on the state of American democracy.

In this chapter, I will demonstrate how in *1876* Vidal attempts to both explain and connect the themes of democratic decline and imperial expansion within the broader context of nineteenth century American corruption. I will show how, once again, a number of actors are implicated in these developments. These include the president, whose corrupt practices literally result in the attempted acquisition of an overseas territory; Members of Congress, most notably James G. Blaine, whose readiness to accept bribes risks undermining the entire democratic system; and the press who, building on the foundations laid in *Lincoln*, seek to overturn the outcome of a democratic election while more broadly distracting the public from the true problems of society.

Upon returning to America, Schuyler notes that “everything appears new, even the sun, which this morning looked like a fresh-minted double eagle as it began its climb over the island” (28). This immediately suggests the worship of money in American society. Schuyler also notices a physical change in the American people:

My fellow passengers were mostly men, mostly bearded, mostly potbellied like the stove. In fact, saving the desperate poor, everyone in New York is overweight: it seems to be the style. Yet when I was young...the American was lean, lanky, often a bit stooped with leathery skin - and, of course, beardless. Some new race has

obviously replaced the Yankees: a plump, voluptuous people, expanding gorgeously beneath their golden sun. (29)

The phrase “expanding gorgeously” carries a double meaning, referring to both American waistlines and American imperial ambitions. This interpretation is strengthened by Schuyler’s subsequent assertion that “Americans seem always to be on the move these days” (287). The beardlessness of the new American, meanwhile, is intended to suggest a parallel between the United States and the Roman Empire, a connection that will be made explicit in *Empire*.

Neilson notes Robert Kierney’s observation that “in 1876, Vidal inverted Henry James’s novelistic formula of portraying corrupt Europe through innocent American eyes, by representing a corrupt United States from the perspective of a still-more-corrupt Europe” (140). This is not entirely accurate. At one point, for instance, Vidal has Schuyler remark that, “our wicked old Paris has never come up with a thief on the scale of Boss Tweed” (37). This would suggest that, from Schuyler’s perspective at least, it is the United States that is the more corrupt. Neilson herself is more nuanced in her analysis, noting that, “what Charlie discovers is that American corruption is no less endemic than that of Europe and, moreover, has a tawdriness all its own” (141). She justifies her position by quoting, in part, the following passage:

Why is it that I so much admire the Bonapartes but detest these money-grubbers? Scale, I suppose. The Bonapartes wanted glory. These folk just want money for its own sake. Only lately have they begun, nervously, to spend money in what they take to be a splendid manner by accumulating works of art, by building mansions. I

wonder if one of them will prove to be a new Augustus: finding New York brownstone, he will leave it marble. (99-100)

Schuyler's account is peppered with these kinds of references to American vulgarity. In another passage, he remarks that "Americans care desperately for titles, for any sign of distinction," adding that "since the War Between the States, I have not met a single American of a certain age who does not insist upon being addressed as Colonel or Commodore" (23).

This obsession with wealth and titles is an essential element of Vidal's historical narrative, because it masks the corruption that drives American success. The "Commodore" referred to by Schuyler is the railroad magnate Cornelius Vanderbilt, whom he meets at one point in the narrative. Visiting Vanderbilt's private railway car, Schuyler describes it as "a monument to a lifetime of triumphant rascality." But Schuyler also acknowledges that "it must be said in the old villain's favour that before he managed through theft, violence, and fraud to put together his railroad empire, a passenger from New York City to Chicago was obliged to change trains seventeen times during the course of the journey" (287). Ultimately, America benefits from Vanderbilt's unscrupulousness. William Sanford similarly boasts that "we cut a few corners when we set out to build our railroads like I did or like my father did when he made jeans for the Westerners and those encaustic tiles for the Easterners, regular old villain he was!" Sanford, like so many other Americans of his era, "saw nothing wrong in villainy if more miles of track were laid, jeans stitched, tiles encausticized" (79).

Sanford applies the same logic to politics. "Who gives a goddamn if a bunch of congressmen take money for services rendered?" he asks at one point. "That's the way you get things done down here" (81). He repeats this sentiment in a later passage: "how else can you run a country where half the people don't speak English and everybody's in a scramble to get his share of the pie?" (127). The connection between universal suffrage and corruption

is echoed by Twain as part of his brief cameo. Schuyler initially expresses a low opinion of him, and links him to the policies of the Grant Administration:

My dislike for Twain is inevitable. The professional vulgarian wandering amongst the ruins and splendours of Europe, making his jokes, displaying his contempt for civilization, in order to reassure the people back home that in their ignorance, bigotry and meanness they are like gods and if they ever should (Heaven forbid) look about them and notice the hideousness of their cities and towns and the meagerness of their lives, why, there's good old Mark to tell them that they are the best people that ever lived in the best country in the world, so let's go out and buy his book! I will say one thing for him: he is read almost entirely by people who ordinarily read no books at all. This helps us all. As everyone knows, the President's favourite (only?) book in all the world is *The Innocents Abroad*. (94-5)

However, Neilson observes that while Schuyler initially views Twain with scepticism, “[t]he rage which [he] reveals at the folly and corruption around him causes Charlie to revise his opinion” (131). This change of heart is prompted by the following rant:

“Look at those congressmen you've been writing about! Every last one a thief. You know their motto, don't you? Addition and division and silence, They are all crooks - and why? Because of universal suffrage. Wicked, ungodly universal suffrage!

“Now you watch me real close because I am about to foam at the mouth! I always do at this point. How, I ask, can you have any kind of a country where every idiot male of twenty-one or more can vote? And how, I ask you, can anyone with half

a mind want to make equal what God has made unequal? I tell you to do that is a wrong and a shame.” (342)

Here we see the ‘real’ Twain, let loose from traditional academic interpretations and his own fear of being unpopular. Schuyler now “comes to perceive Clemens/Twain as a paradoxical figure of self-hatred, perpetually performing to an audience that he despises” (Neilson 131). Twain’s monologue is also interesting because it raises the suggestion that the people themselves are contributing to the decline of democracy. It is grist for critics such as Ferguson and Delbanco, who believe that Vidal cared little for the lower classes.

Twain and Sanford’s remarks also serve to highlight the influence of wealth in the American political system. This influence is becoming increasingly pernicious, with Schuyler’s daughter Emma remarking that “[i]t would seem...that the government here is simply the giving and taking of money” (181). The Republican Party come in for particular scorn. The newspaper proprietor Jamie Bennett, for instance, bemoans “those high-minded Republicans...willing to accept all sorts of thievery at Washington just because of the hallowed memory of Honest Ape” (45). John Bigelow, a former Republican now working for Tilden’s campaign, similarly complains that “*that* Republican party did its work, and died. We abolished slavery. We preserved the Union. Now a corrupt machine continues to use our name” (50). Schuyler himself observes that “the noble new party that freed the slaves and preserved the Union is the very same party that is now in cahoots with the crooked railroad tycoons and with the Wall Street cornerers of this-and-that” (75). Like Bigelow, he supports Tilden for president.

At the heart of the current malaise is the incumbent president. “Most of us here have a fair idea that Grant has been involved in a good many shady deals,” declares Charles Nordhoff, a journalist friend of Schuyler’s. Emma further observes that Grant affects

ignorance “[w]hile knowing everything - like the Emperor” (184), thereby suggesting a connection between his corruption and his conception of power. This link is strengthened in a later conversation between the president and Schuyler:

“For me the use of power was simply a trust, given me to maintain the Union at any cost.”

“And using that power, you achieved the end you wanted.”

“Well, when a war stops there is a halt, but I don’t know that it’s an end. The fight goes on in other ways, doesn’t it, General?” (237)

It is at this point in the novel that graft and imperialism collide, with Grant being implicated in a corrupt scheme to annex Santo Domingo. After exposing the president’s hypocrisy, Schuyler declares him to be “like the first Bonaparte, entirely immoral or amoral, but unlike the Emperor, burdened with the Puritan’s sense of sin and retribution” (238). This marks Grant’s imperialism as being distinctly American in form.

Yet while criticising Grant, Schuyler also questions the extent of his influence. “As far as I can tell, our presidents have almost no function, except perhaps in wartime” he remarks at one point (127), recalling Lincoln’s exercise of executive power in his capacity as commander-in-chief. However, this novel is set only a decade after the attempted impeachment of Andrew Johnson, something that Schuyler explicitly refers to when he observes of the current president: “He is not as powerful as Congress. Or the courts. He can be impeached easily enough. Look what they did to President Johnson, who had committed no crime of any sort” (184). Schuyler believes Congress is now the true source of power - and corruption - in the republic: “I admit that our presidents have very little to do. The Congress governs - and does most of the stealing” (143).

James G. Blaine is perhaps the worst offender within Congress, with Schuyler calling him “an absolute scoundrel.” This prompts Emma to comment: “So was Napoleon - the First *and* the Third. Anyway, the world is made for scoundrels, isn’t it? Certainly they always manage to do with it as they please” (262). In comparing Blaine to Napoleon, Vidal is suggesting that he poses a threat to democracy. However, as Neilson points out, the depiction of Blaine is also “an intriguing instance in which Vidal – through his narrator Charles Schuyler – appears to celebrate the fine art of lying in politics or, at least, to enjoy more than to condemn the skill of the liar as consummate professional.” She explains this seeming contradiction by describing Blaine as “a safe villain, imprisoned in the past,” and notes that “had he ever achieved his aspiration to become President of the United States, there may well have been more of Vidal’s ‘puritan’ view brought to bear upon his depiction” (138).

Another distinctive feature of American society in this period is the press, a number of whom greet Schuyler upon his arrival in the country:

Thin man from the New York *Herald*. Indolent youth from the New York *Graphic*.

Sombre dwarf from *The New York Times*. The *Sun*, *Mail*, *World*, *Evening Post*,

Tribune were also present but not immediately identified. Also half a dozen youths

from the weeklies, the monthlies, the bi-weeklies, the bi-monthlies...oh, New York,

the United States is the Valhalla of journalism - if Valhalla is the right word.

Certainly, there are more prosperous newspapers and periodicals in the United States than in all of Europe put together. (7)

This passage draws attention to the scale of the popular press in the United States in general and New York in particular, while the comparison with Europe is intended to serve as a further distinction between the Old World and the New. However, Schuyler’s scepticism -

questioning whether “Valhalla is the right word” - also reflects the dubious role played by the press in the country’s political corruption.

The *New York Times* comes in for particular criticism from certain characters in the novel, which is perhaps not surprisingly given that Vidal describes it elsewhere as “the Typhoid Mary of American journalism” (“Lincoln and the Priests of Academe” 684). Bigelow, for instance, describes how the Republicans are “aided and abetted by *The New York Times*” (50), while Bennett complains that “[t]here is no crime their editors would not commit to help the Republican Party” (334). These ‘crimes’ reach a peak during the 1876 election, when the paper prints “ambiguous news reports declaring that Oregon and Florida had chosen Hayes” (359). These reports appear to be decisive in swinging the election away from Tilden. As the Democrat August Belmont laments, “[f]or a month the country has thought of Tilden as the next president. But now they begin to doubt. They read the *Times*...” (379).

While targeting the *Times* in particular, Schuyler is contemptuous of the press in general, viewing it as a chief factor in the decline of American democracy. “All in all, I do not think that democracy, as practised in these states, is a success,” he writes at one point. “While Tilden grimly, laboriously presents to the people his plans to reform what is, probably, the most corrupt society in the Western world, the press is busy with idiotic irrelevancies about Tilden’s alleged drunkenness, syphilis, closeness to Tweed - all set to music in a pretty song called “Sly Sam, the Railroad Thief” (334). This trivialization of politics contributes to democratic decline because it distracts the public from the true issues of the day, which in this case is government corruption. It is somewhat ironic, too, given Moynahan’s criticism of Vidal’s own work as “trivializing” and “gossipy.”

Perhaps no character contributes to the trivialization of political discourse more than Bennett. Neilson argues that Vidal’s depiction of this character “foreshadows his fuller

treatment of Hearst in *Empire*” (134). There are certainly shades of Hearst in Bennett’s campaign to find the lost explorer David Livingstone, which, again, is intended to serve as a distraction: “this entirely boring saga filled miles of newsprint for what seemed a decade, ensuring the *Herald* its American pre-eminence, despite my own unremittingly dull reports on such trivia as Bismarck, Garibaldi, and Napoleon III” (44). In his excursions into Africa, Bennett also anticipates Hearst’s role in the establishment of the American empire.

Empire

In *Empire*, Vidal considers the aftermath of the Spanish-American War, and in particular the acquisition by the United States of new overseas territories. Parini notes that its writing “coincided with Gore’s growing realization that the United States under Reagan had become an aggressive force in Central America and elsewhere, bolstered by the right-wing president’s unwavering faith in the capitalist system coupled with his fear of the Soviet Union” (*Empire of Self* 298). It must be read, at least in part, as an attempt to explain the historical roots of this development, based on Vidal’s revisionist understanding of the past. As has been shown in previous chapters, Vidal rejected the idea that the United States became an imperial power by accident. With specific regard to this period in history, he writes that “our modern empire was carefully thought out by four men,” whom he identifies as Alfred Thayer Mahan, Brooks Adams, Theodore Roosevelt, and Henry Cabot Lodge (“The Day the American Empire Ran Out of Gas” 1009).

In keeping with previous novels, *Empire* is an exercise in demythologization. The primary target here is Roosevelt, a figure who Poirier describes as already having “a large element of the ridiculous in him” (231), but who Vidal elevates to new levels of absurdity: as Eder notes, the “flashing eyeglasses and ferocious smiles simply repeat the caricatures of the

time, but there is something extra in Vidal's depiction of Roosevelt marching pointlessly around a room." In an essay written in 1981, Vidal considers the contemporary relevance of Roosevelt, predicting that "[n]ow that war is once more thinkable among the thoughtless, Theodore Roosevelt should enjoy a revival. Certainly, the New Right will find his jingoism appealing, though his trust-busting will give less pleasure to the Honorable Society of the Invisible Hand" ("American Sissy" 736). This appropriation of Roosevelt by the neoconservative movement does much to explain Vidal's eagerness to deconstruct his historical legacy.

Much of the novel centres on the rivalry between Roosevelt and the newspaper proprietor William Randolph Hearst, the pioneer of 'yellow' journalism. Parini describes these characters as two "titans of history who deployed their energies over separate but converging political and media fiefdoms" (*Empire of Self* 299), with this convergence representing a particular area of concern for Vidal. However, while holding Hearst in contempt, Altman notes that Vidal resembles Hearst in the sense that he "has spent much of his life in Washington, New York, and Hollywood, the three centres of American power" (2). Parini similarly argues that the character speaks to Vidal's desire for power: "If Hearst, as a bloated press lord who creates 'fictions' that become reality, is a caricature, the cartoon serves Gore's wish to gain control of the American narrative, as an author, in ways he could never do as a politician" (*Empire of Self* 301).

Like Twain in *1876*, *Empire* features two of Vidal's literary idols in Henry Adams and Henry James. Neilson believes that in writing *Empire*, Vidal consciously "placed himself in the tradition of Adams and James," and notes that in the novel he "pays tribute to them in various ways" (150). Adams is someone who Vidal has repeatedly expressed admiration for, writing in "Four Generations of the Adams Family" that, "I cannot remember a time when I was not fascinated by Henry Adams" (661), while in *Palimpsest* expressing his desire to be

buried “midway between Jimmie Trimble [his first love] and Henry Adams - midway between heart and mind” (418-9). Neilson highlights the influence of Adams on Vidal’s other novels, noting that he had previously “used *Democracy* as a model for *Washington, D.C. and 1876*” (157). Indeed, *Democracy* is referred to directly in *Empire*, with the fictional Caroline Sanford describing how its “heroine, a Mrs, Lightfoot Lee, settles in Washington in order to understand power in a democracy, and is duly appalled.” We also learn that “Caroline had delighted in the book, almost as much as she did in its author” (157).

Vidal’s James, meanwhile, is described by Poirier as “a figure of benign, alert majesty who will prove more than a match for the effusive conversational aggressions of President Roosevelt,” while also noting that James’s “relaxed, receptive skeptical style” serves as a kind of model for Vidal’s attacks on figures such as Roosevelt (232). Both he and Adams function as critical voices within the novel, reflecting Vidal’s own skepticism on issues such as imperial expansion. Indeed, as Eder points out, the “crabby, gloomy Adams” might simply be interpreted as a vehicle for Vidal’s viewpoint.

In this final chapter, I will argue that the drive towards American imperial expansion that took place in this period is explained by Vidal as being the result of a number of factors. The most important of these is the precedent set by Lincoln during the Civil War, with his mythical memory now being woven into a broader narrative of imperial ‘destiny.’ I will argue that, as in *Lincoln*, Vidal depicts the country’s course as being dictated in large part by the personality of the president, in this case the cynical nature of McKinley and the pomposity of Roosevelt. I will also highlight the contribution of other actors, all of whom have been introduced in previous novels: these include the Congress, military, and press. Further to this, I will demonstrate that the press constitute the most important of these elements, with Vidal depicting the media sphere, represented in the character of Hearst, as fatefully encroaching on the prerogatives of the political sphere. Finally, in reference to my

second research question, I will show how Vidal depicts democratic decline as being the *consequence* of imperial expansion, with historical figures such as Hay and Adams drawing an explicit connection between the two.

In his review of the novel, Delbanco writes that “*Empire* is interesting only to the extent that it is a book shadowed by its extraordinary predecessor, *Lincoln*.” While perhaps harsh regarding the novel’s literary merits, he is correct in identifying the ongoing legacy of the Civil War era in Vidal’s narrative. Reminders of the conflict are everywhere, from Hay gazing at “the familiar green hills of Virginia, enemy country during the four years that he had been President Lincoln’s secretary” (72), to an unidentified old man recalling “Governor Seward, with that big nose of his and those baggy pants, going back and forth across the road here, with this big cigar all the time” (76). Vidal also places images of Lincoln in a number of scenes. A pointed example of this is the description of Hay’s office: “Had he wanted to turn round in his chair, he could have stared into Lincoln’s bronze face, surprisingly life-like for a life-mask” (116-7). Vidal does not appear to share Hay’s opinion of this life-mask, remarking in “Last Note on Lincoln” that, “[w]hen the sculptor Saint-Gaudens first saw it, he thought it was a *death* mask, so worn and remote is the face.” He himself experienced a similar reaction to seeing it, commenting that “[w]ith eyes shut, [Lincoln] looks to be a small man, in rehearsal for his death” (702). Taking this into account, the mask might be seen to serve as a reminder of Lincoln’s martyrdom. From Hay’s perspective, however, it also creates the illusion that the former president is still alive.

The mask also represents what Vidal considers to be a tension between myth and reality. In one passage, he describes how “Hay tried to visualize the Ancient, but could only summon up the dead life-mask in his study. Lincoln had been erased by too much - or too little? - thought upon the subject” (228). The idea that Hay has spent too little time

contemplating Lincoln might be considered contradictory, given that he has spent much of the period between *Lincoln* and *Empire* writing a biography of his former boss. However, “[d]uring the years that he and Nicolay were writing their enormous history of the President, Hay was amazed to find that he had lost all firsthand memory of Lincoln. The million words they had written had had the effect of erasing Hay’s own memory. Nowadays, when asked about the President, he could only remember what they had written, so dully he knew, of that odd astounding man” (117). In this instance, the act of writing history has replaced the real Lincoln with a mythologized version in Hay’s mind only. However, according to Vidal, the same might also be said for the wider national consciousness.

The Lincoln myth is now being woven into a broader narrative of American imperial ‘destiny,’ something that Henry Adams alludes to when he declares McKinley to be “[o]ur first man of destiny since Mr. Lincoln” (16). However, in another passage Vidal describes Roosevelt giving “a long speech on the tides of history while a portrait of Abraham Lincoln looked wearily away” (437), which strongly suggests that the real Lincoln would not have approved of the ‘destiny’ being fulfilled in his name. John Nicolay, another of Lincoln’s former secretaries, also asserts that “Mr. Lincoln would never have wanted us to be anyone’s master” (335). Since Nicolay is one of the few characters in the novel to have known the real rather than the mythological Lincoln, he must be treated as a credible source.

In spite of its invocation of the past, the adoption of an explicitly imperialist foreign policy signifies an entirely new phase in the development of the American historical narrative. In one passage, Hay observes that, “as Lincoln had been the first bearded president, McKinley was now the first clean-shaven one in a generation. Why...had he thought of that?” (80). As Schuyler had marvelled at the girth of the new American in 1876, now Hay associates a change in fashion with a change in the national character. Hay returns to the theme later in the novel: “What did beards imply? he wondered. The early Roman emperors,

like the early presidents, were clean-shaven; then decadence - and beards; then Christianity and the clean-shaven Constantine” (121). Once again Vidal is suggesting a parallel between the trajectory of the United States and that of the Roman Empire.

Vidal is also keen to emphasize the peculiarly American nature of this new empire. A prime example of this is the encounter between McKinley and Caroline. Caroline, “whose own criterion for intelligence was both conventional and European,” views this quality as, “simply, to what degree a mind had been civilized.” As such, she is unprepared upon meeting the president for “a mind that, innocent of civilization, was still capable of swift analysis and shrewd action.” To Caroline, McKinley is not an emperor in the traditional sense of the word; indeed, he “barely knew of Caesar and Alexander.” Yet in spite of this, “he had conquered almost as much of the earth as either, without once stirring from the ugly national house with its all-important telegraph-machine and no less potent telephone” (239). In *Lincoln*, Vidal drew a connection between the president’s political success and his utilization of technology; in *Empire*, technology is a key component in the furtherance of the American imperial project. Meanwhile, the reference to the “ugly” White House is another example of American culture being unfavourably viewed by Vidal in comparison to that of the Old World.

McKinley may not be Caesar or Alexander, but he and other imperialists do resemble historical despots. The image of Napoleon, previously used in association with McClellan, is employed frequently. In one example, McKinley is given a “Napoleonic chin” (331). In another, Hay recalls Adams’s characterization of Roosevelt as “the Dutch-American Napoleon,” while also wondering “[h]ow else is an empire to begin?” (434) This question suggests that empires, or at least the means by which they are won, are by nature undemocratic. These associations are not limited to Republican politicians, with even the populist Democrat William Jennings Bryan being placed in “a golden throne, covered with

Napoleonic bees” (395). This represents a rather cutting assessment of the Great Commoner’s true intentions.

Comparisons with the Catholic Church are also abundant. Lodge, for example describes how Bryan “holds court in the Marble Room back of the Senate. They come in, one by one, to get their instructions. He’s like the pope” (123). The Senators themselves are compared by Adams to “cardinals in Renaissance Rome” (157). McKinley, meanwhile, is frequently likened to a religious or spiritual figure: Hay wonders whether he is to be “a religious leader, as well as imperial consolidator” (121), while Caroline marvels at his “papal charm,” imagines him speaking “Church Latin” (219), and thinks of the way in which he shakes hands with his guests as the “laying on of hands” (239). Other comparisons are less benign. At one point, for instance, Hay refers to McKinley’s “secret Borgia smile” (229), thereby suggesting something sinister and underhand.

Given these associations, it is not surprising that McKinley and Roosevelt are both fond of utilizing executive power. McKinley, for instance, neglects to consult Congress when deciding what to do with the Philippines: “You annexed them?” asks an astonished Hay. “With God’s assurance that I must. And of course,” he adds, perhaps ironically, “some assistance from Admiral Dewey and Colonel Roosevelt.” This unilateral decision is reminiscent of Lincoln’s use of executive power, while his claim that “it is God’s plan now, and we are his humble instruments” (129) recalls Lincoln’s own, disingenuous, protestations of innocence. Roosevelt himself expresses disdain for Congress in conversation with Dewey: ““But doesn’t your legislature tell you what you should do?”” he is asked. ““No, it doesn’t.’ The teeth snapped now like rifle shots. ‘I tell *them* what to do’” (202).

In spite of this, the Senate, led by Cabot Lodge, appears to wield considerably more influence than it did in *Lincoln*. Indeed, Hay suggests that it is the major driver of imperialism, observing that “the problem with Henry Cabot Lodge...was his serene

conviction that he alone knew what the United States ought to do in foreign affairs, and from his high Republican Senate seat he drove the administration, like some reluctant ox, toward the annexation of, if possible, the entire world” (118). In a later passage we see this in action, when Caroline prints “a story concerning the Virgin Islands, which Hay thought that the United States might be obliged to buy from Denmark for the five million dollars made available by the Senate, courtesy of Senator Lodge” (184). Other characters express pessimism regarding the Senate’s role in the future direction of the country, including Henry Adams. Quoting Aaron Burr’s farewell speech, he remarks, “If the Constitution is to perish, its dying agonies will be seen on this floor.” When Caroline questions whether the Constitution will indeed perish, Adams remarks that “[a]ll things do” (166).

Another driving force behind the imperial project is the American military. Again, Vidal emphasizes the closeness of this sphere with the political. In one passage, Hay observes that “every American war had bred at least one president. Who, Hay wondered, would the splendid little war - oh, fatuous phrase - bring forth?” (121). McKinley and Roosevelt’s respective nicknames, ‘the Major’ and ‘the Colonel,’ are a reflection of the close relationship between the two spheres. Indeed, Roosevelt is a prime example of someone who uses his military experience to enhance his political profile. At one point, he talks about his election as governor of New York, and admits that he won “on a hurrah, after Cuba” (263). He continues to use his military exploits as a propaganda tool when seeking the vice-presidential nomination, swapping his bowler hat for “his famous Rough Rider’s sombrero” on the way to the convention (265), and then approaching the stage, “Rough Rider hat held high” (273). Roosevelt’s hat serves a similar purpose to Lincoln’s beard in that it is the centrepiece of a carefully cultivated public image that will, with luck, enable its owner to win power: as McKinley wryly observes after Roosevelt secures the nomination, “it was the hat that did it”

(275). In Roosevelt's case, the public image he seeks to project is explicitly associated with both the military and the wider imperial project.

Not surprisingly, Roosevelt promotes a belligerent foreign policy as president. This is done with a view to further electoral success. In one passage, for instance, we hear how, "[a]lready in a state of hysteria over the coming election, Theodore had quite lost his mind. He raged to Hay and to Taft: war, war, war!" (480). In another, it is described how, "[a]s a war leader, at the head of his legions in Manchuria, he would be, he thought, another Lincoln and so, overwhelmingly, elected" (412). Roosevelt's invocation of the former president represents another example of the Lincoln myth being woven into the new imperial narrative.

Admiral Dewey, the 'Hero of Manila,' offers another example of this trend. As with Winfield Scott in *Lincoln*, he is associated with imperial imagery: the monument dedicated to his victory, for instance, is a "huge version of Rome's arch of Septimus Severus," while he is also described as a "latter-day Nelson" (196). He is also, like Scott, used as a kind of propaganda tool by politicians: Hay considers him to be "a McKinley-made hero" (202), while also observing that Roosevelt had, "from the beginning, taken full credit for Dewey's career and famous victory" (203). The irony is that Dewey, unwittingly, has a better understanding of the role of the president than either of them, at least as Vidal sees it. "I don't...suppose it's very difficult, being president," he says at one point. "I mean, it's just like the Navy. They give you your orders and you carry them out." When asked by Elihu Root who gives these orders, he replies, "Oh, Congress" (200). In another passage, it is remarked that, "[a]fter a bit of thought, the Admiral had declared his readiness to be president, an easy sort of job, he declared, where you simply did what Congress told you to do" (258). Unlike either McKinley or Roosevelt, Dewey respects the separation of powers intended by the Constitution.

The final, and arguably most important, element in the expansion of the American imperial project is the press. The central character in this development is Hearst, who Vidal casts as Greeley's successor; his offices are symbolically placed on "the second the third floors of the Tribune Building, that monument to the honest founder of all that was best - if hectoring - in modern journalism, Horace Greeley" (66). Blaise believes Hearst to be someone who "makes things happen" (105). Caroline similarly describes him as "one of those rare creatures who make...the weather" (108). It is certainly true that, through his newspapers, he holds significant sway over government policy. Blaise, for instance, describes the war as "Hearst's victory over Spain," and speculates that "[w]ithout Hearst's relentlessly specious attacks on Spain, the American government would never have gone to war" (55). Hearst himself adorns his paper with the headline "*Journal's War Won!*" and boasts that "McKinley and Hanna weren't ever going to fight. So we got the war going" (109). All of this is reminiscent of the effect Greeley's 'Onward to Richmond' rhetoric had on Lincoln during the Civil War.

Much of what Hearst prints in his newspapers is either untrue or exaggerated. For instance, he convinces the American public that Spain was responsible for blowing up the *Maine* even though "those who knew something of the matter were reasonably certain that the Spanish had nothing to do with the explosion" (55). The effect of such reporting is significant according to Del Hay, who tells Caroline: "I agree newspapers are not always true, but if...foolish men think they are true - then it *does* matter to everyone because that is how governments are run, in response to the news" (29).

Ultimately, Hearst's power lies in his ability to *create* news. At one point Blaise observes that, "Hearst alone had discovered a truth so obvious that Blaise, a fascinated newcomer to the American world, was amazed that no one else had grasped it: if there is no exciting news to report, create some" (61). In another passage, Caroline watches on as

“Hearst put a number of strips of text and squares of illustration on the floor and then got down on his hands and knees and, like a child happy with a puzzle, began to create - no other word for it - the next day’s news” (109). Taking this idea more literally, certain characters report rumours that Hearst himself blew up the *Maine* in order to provoke the war with Spain. “You said you thought Mr. Hearst and Blaise probably sank it together,” Caroline says to Adams at one point. “Oh, dear,” he replies. “But at least I tell the truth in my delirium” (10). Although taken no further than idle speculation, Hitchens would no doubt recognise this as Vidal, through Adams, indulging his fondness for conspiracy theories.

For Caroline, “[a]lthough money was the source of power in this rude place...what she had seen and heard of Hearst that night had convinced her that the ultimate power is not to preside in a white house or open a parliament while seated on a throne but to reinvent the world for everyone by giving them the dream you wanted them to dream” (115). As with other periods in American history, these dreams centre on the acquisition of land and money: “There was still wealth to be had for the lucky; as for the rest, they could daydream, their imaginations fed by the *Journal*” (194). However, given that the United States is now a continental power, this land must be sought further afield: “Although the frontier had ended with the invention of California, the newly acquired Caribbean Sea and Pacific Ocean were now American lakes, filled with rich islands and opportunities, and the far-away look could once more be detected in the noble Buckwheat’s eyes” (195). In other words, Hearst holds an indirect interest in imperialism; overseas expansion encourages ambition, which in turn helps him to sell newspapers.

Initially, it appears as if this is Hearst’s primary motivation. Blaise comments at one point that “the real war...was against not Spain, but the *World*” (60), referring to the rival *New York World*, owned by Joseph Pulitzer. Blaise also remarks that the *Journal*’s coverage of the war “was devoted to the expansion of the *Journal*’s circulation and, incidentally, the

American empire” (63). However, as the narrative progresses, it becomes increasingly clear that Hearst is interested in more than just selling newspapers. “Votes?” Blaise asks him at one point. “I thought you wanted readers.” “Well, I want both,” replies Hearst (154).

At times, it appears that Hearst embodies the American empire, his eyes “more like an eagle’s than a man’s - the palest blue irises rimmed black pupils that seemed to be forever acquiring whatever he looked at, the brain within a *camera obscura* in which, given time, he would have the whole world’s image fixed and filed” (58). He is constantly surrounded by imperial trappings, too; arriving at his office, for instance, Blaise is “respectfully greeted by a chasseur in a splendid, for no reason, Magyar officer’s uniform” (57). In his office, Hearst sits “at an Empire table, all gold eagles and honey-bees.” Above it hangs “a portrait of Napoleon, one of his heroes; the others were all equally *heroic* heroes, world conquerers” (61). These heroes are made explicit in a later scene he lies on a couch, “[a] bust of Alexander the Great at his head; one of Julius Caesar at his feet” (152). The news-wire in his office, meanwhile, is set up between busts of Alexander the Great and - why? - Tiberius” (550). This reference to the second Roman emperor may be intended to suggest the abuse of power.

Hearst represents “a new Caesarian element upon the scene: the wealthy maker of public opinion who, having made common cause with the masses, might yet otherthrow the few” (465). These ‘few’ are personified by Roosevelt, “the Jovian sovereign...conducting himself like a king, destined by birth to high estate” (391). Each believes the other to be under his control, with Hearst claiming of Roosevelt that “we invented him” (60), and Roosevelt, in turn, complacently referring to “a press so easily manipulated and its gullible readers” (263). Two of the more intriguing images used by Vidal in the novel are that of Hearst as “a small boy about to play pirate” (65), and Roosevelt as a “tightly wound-up child’s toy, dominating all the other toys in the power’s playroom” (355). Although these

images of Hearst as child and Roosevelt as toy are never juxtaposed directly, when considered together they suggest that Roosevelt is Hearst's plaything.

Poirier notes that "Roosevelt and Hearst are, by the end of the novel, the leading contenders for control of the new 'empire'" (236). However, in the final confrontation at the White House, Hearst seemingly asserts his power by sitting at the head of the Cabinet table and forcing the shorter Roosevelt to look up at him when shaking hands. Although Roosevelt attempts to respond in kind, Hearst continues to question the power of the president, alleging that the country is run by wealthy trusts and that "it makes no difference at all who sits in that chair of yours." (563). Hearst holds true power, because while Roosevelt is "just an officeholder", Hearst will "go on and on, describing the world we live in, which then becomes what I say it is" (563-4). This passage might be read as Vidal asserting his own right to 'create' history, while at the same time questioning the legitimacy of established historical narratives. In the words of Hearst: "It's my story, isn't it? This country. The author's always safe. It's his characters who'd better watch out" (566).

A number of characters question the wisdom of the imperialism promoted by McKinley, Roosevelt, Hearst, and others. Henry James, for instance, asks "[h]ow can we, who cannot honestly govern ourselves, take up the task of governing others?" (42). He also warns that while "the acquisition of an empire civilized the English...what civilized them might very well demoralize us even further" (43). Others voice concern about imperialism's compatibility with American values: "Although Hay did not in the least disapprove of the coming American hegemony," for instance, "he felt that the Administration ought never to associate itself with such un-American concepts as Empire" (485).

Vidal certainly suggests a betrayal of the American Revolution when, describing the 'insurrection' in the Philippines, he imagines "Aguinaldo in the role of Washington and

McKinley in that of George III” (127). There is also a strong suggestion of historical betrayal when one journalist ironically declares that, “[t]he party of Lincoln...has freed from the yoke of Spanish bondage ten million Filipinos” (274). Less facetious comparisons with Lincoln are drawn following McKinley’s assassination: “Only three men had been murdered in office,” observes Hay. “It was curious, too, how essentially benign the three murdered men had been; it was not as if they had been tyrants, tempting the gods. Although, and Hay began to redefine ‘tyrant,’ many Filipinos and Spanish-Cubans did view McKinley as a tyrant” (349). Although Hay does not say it, the same word was used by the South to describe Lincoln during the Civil War.

Ultimately, the continuing deterioration of American democracy - a process with roots in the Civil War era - is the true cost of empire. In preparing for the 1904 election, Hay remarks that:

As usual, there was the problem of the people - those famous people that the Ancient had so mysteriously exalted that hot muggy day at Gettysburg; government of, by, and for the people? Had ever a great man said anything so entirely unrealistic, not to mention, literally, demagogic? The people played no part at all in the government of the United States in Lincoln’s time, and even less now in the days of Theodore Rex. Lincoln had tended to rule by decree, thanks to the all-purpose “military necessity” which gave legitimacy to his most arbitrary acts. Roosevelt pursued his own interests in his own surprisingly secretive way; he was for empire at any cost. The people, of course, were always *there*; they must be flattered from time to time; exhorted to do battle, or whatever the Augustus at Washington wanted them to do. The result was a constant tension between the people at large and a ruling class that believed, as did

Hay, in the necessity of concentrating wealth in the hands of the few while keeping the few as virtuous as possible, at least in appearance. (459-60)

Lincoln's disdain for democracy and democratic processes is now being replicated by Roosevelt, and others, in the pursuit of empire. Hay's reference to "Theodore Rex" is particularly instructive. As the novel progresses, Roosevelt and his family come to rule in an increasingly regal style. This includes the transformation of the Executive Mansion into something resembling a palace: "The East Room of the White House had been simplified to the point of brilliance, and the result was more royal than republican...Red silk ropes were everywhere, in order to control the public, which were allowed, at certain hours, to wander through their sovereign's palace" (501). These barriers represent both a literal and metaphorical barrier between the president and the people. They might be seen as a physical manifestation of the decline of American democracy.

For Adams, the rise of empire represents a death-knell not just for democracy, but for the whole ideal of the American republic:

"John, it is empire you want, and it is empire that you have got, and at such a small price, when you come to think of it."

"What price is that?" Hay could tell from the glitter in Adams's eye that the answer would be highly unpleasant.

"The American republic. You've finally got rid of it. For good. As a conservative Christian anarchist, I never much liked it." Adams raised high his teacup. "The republic is dead; long live the empire." (464)

There is little doubt that his bleak assessment of the republic chimes with Vidal's own. It is the author once again freeing one of his literary heroes from the traditional bounds in order to express an unpopular viewpoint, thereby allowing him to exercise power on his own terms.

The novel ends with yet another reference to Lincoln, the architect of this destruction: "Then Hearst was gone, leaving the President alone in the Cabinet room, with its great table, leather armchairs, and the full-length portrait of Abraham Lincoln, eyes fixed on some far distance beyond the viewer's range, a prospect unknown and unknowable to the mere observer, at sea in present time" (566). Parini argues that Vidal's "implication is, of course, that neither Roosevelt nor anyone after Lincoln could begin to fathom that depth of character or hope to emulate the grandeur, the balance, the humanity of the man who saved the Union" (*Empire of Self* 301). More broadly, it might also be read as a lament for twentieth century America.

Conclusion

In this thesis, I have considered the themes of democracy and imperialism in Gore Vidal's *Lincoln, 1876*, and *Empire*. My research questions were as follows: What explanations does Vidal provide in these novels for the rise of American imperialism in this period? And: How does he connect this rise with the decline of American democracy? While the explanations for the rise of imperialism vary slightly within each novel, a number of broad explanations can be identified, namely the conduct of the president, the prevalence of government corruption, the ambition of the military, and, increasingly as the series progresses, the pernicious influence of the media. As to the second question, while the relationship between imperialism and democracy is initially established through characters such as William Seward in *Lincoln*, it is not until *Empire* that Vidal states explicitly that the

decline of the latter is a *consequence* of the former, with the dawn of an American empire marking the death of the American republic.

In *Lincoln*, Vidal places an unusual degree of emphasis on his central character, aiming in the process to deconstruct the mythology surrounding him. Although remaining respectful - perhaps even deferential - Vidal holds Lincoln responsible for the establishment of the modern American nation state, which has promoted imperialist expansion whilst simultaneously dismantling democracy. Lincoln's willingness to subvert the Constitution is interpreted by Vidal as no more than a means to winning the war and preserving the Union, although some of the figures he surrounds himself with, most notably Seward, do appear to harbour more explicitly sinister motives in their destruction of civil liberties and lust for overseas territories. Instead, Lincoln's danger lies in the myths attached to him in the aftermath of his assassination, which will later be used to justify assaults on the ideals of the republic. In this novel, Vidal also establishes both the military and the press as key actors in these developments.

In *1876*, Vidal concerns himself with the rampant corruption that emerged in the United States following the Civil War, against which backdrop he both explains and connects the themes of imperialism and democracy. The narrative is told from the perspective of Charles Schermerhorn Schuyler who, like Vidal, is 'exiled' from the American political system. At the centre of the moral quagmire observed by Schuyler is President Grant, who despite his anti-imperialist convictions has now fallen so low as to annex an overseas territory for personal gain. Grant is by no means the sole offender according to Schuyler, with the Republican Congress and a partisan press also complicit. The disregard these disparate elements hold for Vidal's ideals reaches a peak in the presidential election of 1876, when they conspire to rig the result in favour of their chosen candidate. Ultimately, Vidal proposes

that the machinations of these actors fatally undermined American democracy while also creating the conditions necessary for future imperial expansion.

Empire, the last of the novels under consideration, marks the fulfillment of what Vidal considers to be America's historical trajectory. The legacy of Lincoln is emphasized more forcefully here than in *1876*, with his martyrdom being woven into a broader narrative of imperial destiny. Once again, Vidal's cast list is highly varied: presidents, senators, and members of the press represented alongside his fictional creations, with these elements variously compete and conspire for control of the new empire. This novel is marked in particular by the growing influence of the newspaper proprietor William Randolph Hearst, who resembles Vidal in his efforts to exert control of the political narrative through his largely fictional creations. Therefore, while viewed as a danger to the ideals of the republic, Hearst also speaks to Vidal's desire for power. Vidal concludes this period of his historical narrative by having his characters draw an explicit connection between the establishment of an American empire and the death of American democracy. In so doing, he proposes that the latter is the consequence of the former.

In this paper, I have limited myself to a particular period of Vidal's historical narrative. Further research may broaden this scope to include other novels in the *Narratives of Empire* series. It may also incorporate those novels not set in America at all, but which explore similar themes. Aside from Vidal's novels there is a wealth of material to consider, from plays and film scripts to newspaper articles and television interviews. As mentioned previously, the field of Gore Vidal studies is still in its infancy. Taken in conjunction with his vast body of work, this offers prospective scholars seemingly unlimited opportunities either to build on the existing literature or to embark on an entirely new research project.

Works Cited

Altman, Dennis. *Gore Vidal's America*. Polity, 2005.

Bloom, Harold. "The Central Man: On Gore Vidal's *Lincoln*." *Gore Vidal: Writer Against the Grain*, edited by Jay Parini, Columbia UP, 1992, pp. 221-29.

Delbanco, Andrew. "Gore Vidal's 'Empire' Was a Letdown of Epic Proportions." *The New Republic*, 21 Sep. 1987, <https://newrepublic.com/article/114964/andrew-delbanco-gore-vidals-empire>. Accessed 15 Jan. 2020.

Eder, Richard. "'Empire' by Gore Vidal." *Los Angeles Times*, 24 May 1987, <https://www.latimes.com/la-bk-gore-vidal-1987-05-24-story.html>. Accessed 15 Jan. 2020.

Ferguson, Niall. *Colossus: The Price of America's Empire*. New York, Penguin, 2004.

Gore Vidal: The United States of Amnesia. Directed by Nicholas Wrathall, IFC Films, 2013.

Hitchens, Christopher. "Vidal Loco." *Vanity Fair*, 8 Jan. 2010, <https://www.vanityfair.com/culture/2010/02/hitchens-201002>. Accessed 13 Nov. 2019.

Kaplan, Fred. *Gore Vidal*. Bloomsbury, 2000.

LaFeber, Walter. *The New Empire: An Interpretation of American Expansion, 1860-1898*.

Cornell UP, 1998.

Langston, Thomas S. *With Reverence and Contempt: How Americans Think About Their*

President. Johns Hopkins UP, 1997.

Mead, Walter Russell. *Special Providence: American Foreign Policy and How it Changed*

the World. New York, Routledge, 2002.

Moynahan, Julian. "A Centennial Novel for the Bicentennial." *The New York Times*, 7 Mar.

1976, <https://www.nytimes.com/1976/03/07/archives/a-centennial-novel-for-the-bicentennial-1876.html?searchResultPosition=8>. Accessed 18 Jan. 2020.

Neilson, Heather. *Political Animal: Gore Vidal on Power*. Monash UP, 2014.

Oates, Joyce Carol. "The Union Justified the Means." *The New York Times*, 3 June 1984,

<https://www.nytimes.com/1984/06/03/books/the-union-justified-the-means.html?pagewanted=all>. Accessed 15 Jan. 2020.

Parini, Jay. *Empire of Self: A Life of Gore Vidal*. Anchor, 2015.

---. "Gore Vidal: The Writer and His Critics." *Gore Vidal: Writer Against the Grain*, edited by Jay Parini, Columbia UP, 1992, pp. 1-30.

---. "An Interview with Gore Vidal." *Gore Vidal: Writer Against the Grain*, edited by Jay Parini, Columbia UP, 1992, pp. 278-90.

Pease, Donald E. "America and the Vidal Chronicles." *Gore Vidal: Writer Against the Grain*, edited by Jay Parini, Columbia UP, 1992, pp. 247-77.

Poirier, Richard. "Vidal's *Empire*." *Gore Vidal: Writer Against the Grain*, edited by Jay Parini, Columbia UP, 1992, pp. 230-38.

Schlesinger, Arthur M Jnr. *The Imperial Presidency*. Houghton Mifflin, 1973.

Vidal, Gore. *Lincoln: A Novel*. Abacus, 1994.

---. *1876: A Novel*. Abacus, 2000.

---. *Empire: A Novel*. Abacus, 2003.

---. *Palimpsest: A Memoir*. Abacus, 1996.

---. *Point to Point Navigation*. Abacus, 2007.

---. "Thomas Love Peacock: The Novel of Ideas." *United States: Essays 1952-1992*, Abacus, 2012, pp. 147-62.

---. "William Dean Howells." *United States: Essays 1952-1992*, Abacus, 2012, pp. 193-214.

- . "First Note on Abraham Lincoln." *United States: Essays 1952-1992*, Abacus, 2012, pp. 664-68.
- . "Lincoln, *Lincoln*, and the Priests of Academe." *United States: Essays 1952-1992*, Abacus, 2012, pp. 669-700.
- . "Last Note on Lincoln." *United States: Essays 1952-1992*, Abacus, 2012, pp. 701-07.
- . "President and Mrs. U. S. Grant." *United States: Essays 1952-1992*, Abacus, 2012, pp. 708-22.
- . "Theodore Roosevelt: An American Sissy." *United States: Essays 1952-1992*, Abacus, 2012, pp. 723-37.
- . "The Day the American Empire Ran Out of Gas." *United States: Essays 1952-1992*, Abacus, 2012, pp. 1007-16.

Williams, Michael. "Opportunities in Historical Fiction." *The Catholic Historical Review*, vol. 8, no. 3, 1922, pp. 360-71. *JSTOR*, www.jstor.org/stable/25011880. Accessed 19 Jan. 2020.