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The Truth, the News, and the Presumptive Narrative¹

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I first heard about the 9/11 terrorist attacks while listening to Italian radio, in a rented car, on the highway between Mantua and Milan. For the next ten days, I followed the story, from a borrowed Paris apartment, mainly in the British press and in French radio and television.

In Europe, 9/11 was an international event. The terrorist attacks on the U.S. directly related to a global whole rooted in history. There was a strong sense, both in the media and on the streets of Paris, that the United States had suddenly been brought into a world that most human beings had already been living in. “This has already happened to us,” people told me. “We had these terrible bombs in the subway. We have had these conflicts for a long time.”

When I returned to the United States towards the end of September, however, the stories I had heard in Europe all vanished. In this stunned nation, the rest of the world just did not exist. There was only the wounded United States and its great enemy, the embodiment of evil, Osama bin Laden. The story was a titanic struggle between the forces of light and darkness.

As time passed, the narrative began to change. It grew into the story line I will call, later in this paper, “America Is Destined by God to be Number One.” This is a narrative that emerges at times of great national stress, tragedy, or confusion--- Pearl Harbor or the assassination of President Kennedy, or the resignation of Richard Nixon. This story holds that America has a special relationship with Divine Providence, and that, when threatened, martyrs, heroes, and leaders naturally emerge. The citizens join together in common cause, the system works, and the nation always emerges stronger than before.

As 2001 came to a close, this narrative had taken hold of the American media so seamlessly that I began to wonder what had happened to all the alternative texts I had seen in Europe.

This is not to say that what the American media presents is false or some sort of propaganda. Quite the contrary--- I would argue that, despite some recent well-publicized lapses, the American news media have never been more professional or more preoccupied--- even obsessed--- with factual accuracy². Instead, in 2001 and at other times, the media have been less ruled by facts but by what I call “presumptive narratives” that give them form.

In many of the most bitterly controversial news stories of recent years--- the Iraq War is a prime example--- the disagreement is not about the facts, which are generally agreed, but about the presumptive narratives that gives them shape. In some cases, the presumptive narratives are so strong and persistent, the facts become almost irrelevant.

As I explored these presumptive narratives, I realized that they were relatively few in number and that most of them went back to the origins of American journalism in the early 19th-century. Many have strong Biblical overtones, not that the media has by any means been

taken over by the religious right. The presumptive narratives I am sure are mostly unconsciously used by editors are reporters. They are the collective unconscious of institutions that go back to a time when Biblical narratives were the common parlance of most Americans.

The list of presumptive narratives I have come up with are these:

Signs and Wonders
Massacre of the Innocents
Caesar's Evil Ways
Belshazar's Feast
Ananias Exposed
Everyman Overcomes Every Obstacle (or, the Sinner Redeemed)
Tribulations of the High and Mighty
Things Are Much Worse Than You Thought
There You Go Again
Titanic Battle of Two Bitterly Opposed Forces
All's Well That Ends Well

and the aforementioned:

America Was Destined by God to be Number One.

Each of these dozen presumptive narratives has its own history, uses in the media, and cultural implications.⁵ I won't have time here to discuss each in detail. But let me make a few observations.

First of all, the vast majority of news stories fall into the "Signs and Wonders" category. Strictly speaking, Signs and Wonders are not presumptive narratives at all. Instead they are unusual or bizarre or shocking events that might *become* a presumptive narrative. One teenaged suicide--- even a number of them--- is a Sign and Wonder. But a long series, with elements in common, in a single geographic area or generally across the nation, can become a presumptive narrative--- a "Massacre of the Innocents" narrative or a "Things Are Much Worse Than You Thought."

Presumptive narratives only come to the fore in news stories that last for a period of time or through several "news cycles," however you define them. They grow in strength in stories that hold attention for weeks or months, and are partly a way for the news media to give long, repetitive cycles of news facts structure, meaning, and human interest.

Another noteworthy feature of the presumptive narratives is that, although they often hybridize or transmogrify into each other, they are neither symmetrical nor reversible. Thus there is no "Things Are Much Better Than You Thought" to match "Things Are Much Worse Than You Thought." Optimistic moments remain just Signs and Wonders until, in the end, they become "All's Well That Ends Well."

A good example of this irreversibility is the cycles of the U.S. economy. While the economy is reasonably stable, most economic news stories are Signs and Wonders. The stock market

is up some days, down others. Some parts of the nation thrive while others decline. Employment numbers look bright or not so bright. Riches might be in the cards, or ruin.

However, with a string of bad news, especially the onset of an official recession, the economy tilts into “Things Are Much Worse Than You Think.” At this point, most economic stories are grim and disturbing--- bankrupt companies, closed factories, lay offs, unemployment lines, falling real estate values, and other dismal news. Once the story line has tilted, the presumptive narrative *remains* “Things Are Much Worse Than You Think,” regardless of periodic ups and downs, until the economy is deemed good again, at which point the presumptive narrative becomes “All’s Well That Ends Well.”

Ironically, there is rarely a strong sense of cycle in this cycle of economic news narratives. The “natural” economy is always, by implication, the upside of the cycle. Thus the economy is either in a natural or unnatural state and the nuances of income distribution, geographic differences, stock market swings, budget deficits, and the like stay in the background. Also typically missing from the dichotomy is the sense that, for some people, the economy is *always* bad.

There are enormous political implications to this narrative cycle, of course. Elections results often fall on whether the prevailing economic narrative is positive or negative. Even the reversal of a recession into economic growth is no guarantee of a positive economic narrative.

Since the 19th-century, one of the most popular presumptive narratives has been the one I call “Ananias Exposed.” Here there is a strong parallel, if not a direct source, for this narrative in the New Testament, in the story of Ananias, related in the 5th chapter of the Acts of the Apostles:

Neither was there any among them that lacked: for as many as were possessors of lands or houses sold them, and brought the prices of the things that were sold, And laid them down at the apostle’s feet: and distribution was made unto every man according as he had need...

But a certain man named Ananias, with Sapphira his wife, sold a possession, And kept back part of the price, his wife also being privy to it, and brought a certain part, and laid it at the apostles’ feet.

But Peter said, Ananias, why hath Satan filled thine heart to lie to the Holy Ghost, and to keep back part of the price of the land?

Whiles it remained, was it not thine own? And after it was sold, was it not in thine own power? Why hast thou conceived this thing in thine heart? Thou hast not lied unto men, but unto God.

And Ananias hearing these words fell down, and gave up the ghost: and great fear came on all them that heard these things.

And the young men arose, wound him up, and carried him out, and buried him.

(Acts 4:33-35; 5:1-6)

The key to this story as a presumptive narrative is Ananias' concealed nature. While *appearing* to be righteous and selfless, he is, in fact, neither. And the sudden revelation of his duplicity utterly destroys him.

Most domestic murders barely rate a "Signs and Wonders" in the local news. But when a handsome and apparently adoring husband is accused of murdering his young, pregnant wife, the story becomes a national "Ananias Exposed" and runs for months.

"Ananias Exposed" is, of course, a favorite narrative of the political arena. Every politician is a potential Ananias, presenting himself or herself as a paragon of public virtue. Much of the excitement in any political season is the thought that, behind closed doors, every politician or government official might be a liar, or an embezzler, or a philanderer, or a closet homosexual, or an enemy agent, or a faker of military honors. Each major political party has a stake in creating as many "Ananias Exposed" narratives on the opposite side as possible. And the news media is almost always an eager participant in the process.

Most years, and every election year, there is at least one national "Ananias Exposed" political narrative. The fact that the potential outcomes are limited does not make the story less compelling. Will Ananias confess? Will he express enough remorse? Will the people forgive him his sins? Or will he be utterly destroyed and buried by the "young men" of politics?

It is largely the national political aspects that make such narratives significant. Only when politicians take up a family end-of-life conflict does it become "Titanic Battle of Two Bitterly Opposed Forces."⁴

I mentioned above that the presumptive narratives of today have strong roots in the American 19th-century. They are also strongly sectarian. Just as 19th-century Methodists and Shakers and Mormons and Unitarians drew different conclusions from the same biblical texts, so the development of presumptive narratives from raw facts is strongly influenced by pre-existing worldviews.

The suggestion that the news media of that reforming era should be "fair and balanced" would have been considered absurd in 19th-century America. Newspapers and periodicals were crusaders and partisans for specific parties and moral causes⁵.

Horace Greeley's *New York Tribune*, to give just one especially famous example, was all about moral reform. Called the "political Bible" of the north, the *Tribune's* most celebrated cause was the abolition of slavery. But Greeley also opposed liquor, tobacco, prostitution, and capital punishment and supported public education, economic progress, and the elevation of the masses through government efforts. These battles filled the presumptive narratives of his newspaper.

Greeley's partisan political efforts--- he worked for one political party, helped found two others, and ran for president himself in 1872--- seemed a natural part of his newspaper work and, indeed, of all newspapers of the time.

Up to the late 1940s, this old idea of media still prevailed in the United States. Even small cities supported several dailies, often in more than one language, each expressing a distinct political view or social attitude. In those days, you were what you read.

In the autobiographical first chapter of his novel, *Sophie's Choice*, William Styron recalls the twilight of that period in a conversation with his employer about his lunchtime reading matter.

“I cannot dictate your newspaper-reading habits, nor do I want to,” he said, “but it is not wise for a McGraw-Hill employee to be seen with a copy of the New York *Post*...”

“What should I be reading then?”... At the time I was not so much politically innocent as a political neuter, a *castrato*, and I read the *Post* not for its liberal editorials or for Max Lerner’s columns--- all of which bored me--- but for its breezy, big-city journalistic style and its alluring reports on the *haut monde*...

“The *Herald Tribune* might be more appropriate,” he said in his Tennessee drawl so strangely devoid of warmth. “Or the *News*, even.”

“But they’re published in the morning.”

“Then you might try the *World-Telegram*. Or the *Journal-American*. Sensationalism is preferable to radicalism.”⁶

In the 1950s, the rise of television and the decline of newspapers and other print media changed this landscape. In New York and other American cities, newspaper after newspaper folded. Meanwhile, legal restrictions on broadcast media introduced the idea of “fairness” and “balance” when using the airways. The three major television networks adopted a stance, in their reporting, that seemed politically neutered by 19th-century standards.

Somewhat anachronistically, however, national television networks stuck with the old presumptive narrative structures of 19th-century newspapers. And to a certain extent, the national broadcast media kept a progressive, reforming agenda not unlike those of Greeley’s day⁷.

As local media shrank in significance, and newspapers and specialized periodicals began to disappear, critics of the mainstream national press began to complain of “bias,” a lack of “balance,” and “spin.” These are notions that editors of Styron’s day and before would have considered laughable. After all, to an abolitionist like Greeley, there was no other side, no fair treatment, no positive spin, for slavery.

With the recent re-diversification of the media thanks to cable news networks and the Internet, new, even stranger, notions have entered the arena. News outlets not only claim to be factually accurate, they proclaim their “spin” to be balance rather than bias. These new battles between the Fox News Channel and CNN and the New York Times are not really

over facts or balance, but over moral narratives--- over which presumptive narratives should prevail.

With the media saturation and fragmentation implied by multiple 24-hour news outlets, only news stories with the strongest, most sustained presumptive narratives manage to penetrate public consciousness. At the same time, the old presumptive narratives, which served the 19th-century quite well, seem inadequate to the 21st.

In the newly competitive world of news, media outlets must cater to the viewers' narrative preferences, which tend to favor such entertainment-laced or morally engaged stories as the Terri Schiavo case or the Michael Jackson trial.

In some ways, the presumptive narratives now get in the way of the facts. In the build up to the Iraq War, the American media did not actually report that Iraq had weapons of mass destruction. It reported that the Bush Administration said there were weapons of mass destruction. In the interest of fairness and balance, however, they also reported that others--- notably current and former weapons inspectors like Scott Ritter--- doubted the existence of those weapons.

The presumptive narrative of the war, however, had already moved into "Belshazar's Feast," that is, the war was a foregone conclusion and the existence of weapons of mass destruction was irrelevant. As the war unfolded, the presumptive narrative made a transition into "Titanic Battle of Two Bitterly Opposed Enemies" and finally into "All's Well That Ends Well."

In all these cases, though the facts of the war were reported, the narratives were misleading. It was only as Iraq slid slowly into "Things Are Much Worse Than You Think" did the facts about weapons of mass destruction emerge as a significant part of the narrative. Even then, the long-established presumptive narratives about the war obscured the facts that the media *was* reporting. Most people who voted for George Bush in November 2004 believed that Iraq *had* had weapons of mass destruction.

More significantly, there are no presumptive narratives to handle such critical issues as foreign criticism of American policy. (In Cold War days, these were just dismissed as "There You Go Again" directed at leftist regimes.)

Finally, with the fragmentation of the media and the polarization of American politics, no single presumptive narrative prevails in politically charged stories. The national economy is, for example, currently "All Well That Ends Well" for most Republicans, but "Things Are Much Worse Than You Think" for most Democrats.

At the same time, most *Americans* have no clear conception of such economic threats as the current account imbalance. There are no presumptive narratives for it until it reaches the stage of "Things Are Much Worse Than You Think." By then, once again, the facts may be buried by the story.

¹ Those familiar with currently fashionable critical theory will recognize French influence in this paper, especially the works of Roland Barthes, including his *Mythologies*. A closer source is, I think, Flaubert's "Dictionary of Received Ideas," which outlines the presumed narratives of his own time.

² Thanks to new communication technologies, of course, "the facts" are far easier to obtain than ever before, both for media outlets and their audiences. The current, 24-hour news cycle, pumped through almost limitless outlets, is impossible to imagine without satellites, cell phones, email, the internet, cable systems, computers, digitized video and photographic images, and all the other new hardware and software that keeps the system going. What has not kept pace, of course, is the ability to sort, absorb, analyze, and, finally, to remember all the new facts that are now available.

³ These narratives relate strictly to the American media. I have not looked for the narratives in the media of other nations, but my sense is that they are different, perhaps even dramatically different. For example, the British press always seems to exhibit a profound skepticism: "You really expect me to believe what you are telling me?" The French, on the other hand, root everything in history: "But, of course, we have seen all this before." One would expect, too, that non-Christian nations would have presumptive narratives based on the stories familiar from their own religious texts and traditions.

⁴ The Terri Schiavo case presented an irresistible narrative to national media--- an apparent news-cycle cliffhanger uniting life and death issues with national politics. Initially, following the lead of the Mrs. Schiavo's family, the Schindlers, the national media took up the story as a "Titanic Battle of Two Bitterly Opposed Forces" with elements of "Caesar's Evil Ways." An indifferent and unreasonable court system was contrasted against the Schindlers' Everyman struggle to save Mrs. Schiavo's life. In fact, the legal aspects of the case were cut-and-dried, established by decades of law and precedence, and, from a judicial point of view, not even especially interesting. Once the courts had established Mrs. Schiavo's wishes, the legal battle was finished, as indicated by the Schindlers almost endless failed appeals. As the days passed, the presumptive narrative of the Schiavo story began to fall apart. The Schiavo-Schindler conflict shrank back to a family dispute and the true "Titanic Conflict" became one between the three branches of government. News commentary, prodded by public opinion polls, edged towards a "There You Go Again" narrative directed at the cynical opportunism of politicians. Finally, as is often the case with stories whose presumed narratives become too confused and diffuse for news cycle updates, the story began to fade from the headlines--- well before its strands were fully sorted out.

⁵ It is actually the fading away of this 19th-century moral dimension to the news that most frustrates American consumers of the media. The idea of the neutral observer strikes many Americans as unacceptable morally at the same time as it is touted as a media virtue. When Americans talk about media bias and cynicism, they are talking about the media's refusal to take the right moral stands more than they are complaining about errors of fact. Somehow, it seems, the facts *should* be moral.

⁶ William Styron, *Sophie's Choice* (New York: Random House, 1979), p. 17-18.

⁷ Thus the Civil Rights Movement became “Everyman Overcomes Every Obstacle,” the Vietnam War became, after years as a side bar to the Cold War narrative “Titanic Struggle of Two Bitterly Opposed Forces,” one of the most serious cases of “Things Are Much Worse Than You Think.”