U.S. Presidents, War, and Dictatorship in Gore Vidal's Historical Novels

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Abstract :

This paper tries to find out whether Gore Vidal (1925-2012) reflected his passionate opposition and vehement criticism of American politics and of U.S. military intervention in Vietnam, Iraq and other countries in two works of his series of historical novels also known as the « Narratives of Empire », namely *Lincoln* (1984) and *Empire* (1987). It brings to test the idea that the historical novel is a sub-genre that can be used as a means of political dissent just as it may serve as a vehicle to glorify nationalism.

To do that, this article analyses the representation of American presidents, which, although very topical in these days of popular opposition to President Biden and the even more vehement one to President Trump before him, has not been sufficiently dealt with in critical studies. It inquires about the presidential « inherent powers » in wartime and whether they can be abused to encroach on the dearly-held, much-celebrated American individual liberties. Moreover, given that a gap has always existed between the image and the reality of the president, the present paper tries to answer the following questions: Did Vidal confirm the image of the president or did he rather reveal the reality? Did he distinguish the presidents from the presidency, the office from its occupants? Did he treat them all in the same way, or did he allow for their tremendous differences? Who is the best president in American history according to Vidal and why?

Keywords: Gore Vidal, *Lincoln*, *Empire*, U. S. President, representation, war, dictatorship.

ملخص:

نحاول في هذه الدراسة اكتشاف مدى توظيف غور فيدال (1920–2012) لمعارضته الشديدة وانتقاده المحموم للسياسات الأمريكية وتدخّلها العسكري في فيتنام والعراق ودول أخرى في اثنتان من رواياته التاريخية المسماة "سرديات الإمبراطورية"، تحديداً: لينكولن (1984) و إمبراطورية (1987). كما نستقصي إمكانية استخدام الرواية التاريخية كجنس أدبي في الانتقاد السياسي تماماً كما تُستخدم كوسيلة لتمجيد الوطنية.

لتحقيق هذا الهدف، نباشر دراسة التمثيل الأدبي للرئيس الأمريكي وهي دراسة لم تجد الكثير من الاهتمام في الأعمال النقدية رغم أنّها تصبّ في صميم الراهن الذي يتميّز بالمعارضة الشعبية للرئيس بايدن والرئيس ترامب قبله. كما نحاول البحث عن السلطات الكامنة للرئيس أثناء الحروب وإمكانية سوء استغلالها حتّى تتقاطع مع الحرّيات الفردية التي يقدّسها الأمريكيون ويبالغون في الاحتفاء بها. إضافة إلى ذلك، وعلى ضوء المسافة الشاسعة بين صورة الرئيس في الأذهان وحقيقته الفعلية، نحاول في هذه الدراسة الإجابة عن التساؤلات التالية: هل رسّخ غور فيدال صورة الرئيس أم بيّن حقيقته؟ هل فرّق بين الرئيس والرئاسة، بين المنصب وشاغليه؟ هل تعامل مع الرؤساء بنفس الطريقة أم أخذ بعين الاعتبار اختلافاتهم الكبيرة؟ من هو أعظم رئيس أمريكي في نظر فيدال ولمَ؟

1. *Introduction*

The definitions and descriptions of the intellectual by many philosophers and thinkers like Julien Benda, Antonio Gramsci, Jean-Paul Sartre, Michel Foucault, Russell Jacobi and Edward Said clearly demonstrate his involvement in politics in different ways. The literary intellectual is not exempt; he mostly means the poet, the dramatist and the writer of fiction, but the literary critic is definitely concerned too,

and is in fact more associated with politics and political opposition than the writer. There are indeed outstanding examples of writers who were deeply involved in particular political crises like Emile Zola in the (in)famous Dreyfus affair (1894-1906) and, more recently, Sartre in the Algerian question. As Edward Said succinctly explained, the writer at the dawn of the twenty-first century "has taken on more and more of the intellectual's adversarial attributes in such activities as speaking the truth to power, being a witness to persecution and suffering, and applying a dissenting voice in conflicts with authority" (127). Norman Mailer, Ralph Ellison, Henry Miller and many postwar American novelists belong to this category of politically-driven writers, yet Gore Vidal (1925 – 2012**)** holds a particular place amongst them due to the peculiar attention he pays to politics in most of his fictional oeuvre. He was as much a political activist as he was a writer; he ran for political office on two occasions and singled himself out as a major political critic in the manner of Edmund Wilson. Not only did he preside over the People's Party (from 1970 to 1972) and many organizations, and write pamphlets and essays against American expansionism, the power complex, and the George W. Bush administration; he even modeled many of his novels and plays on actual political conflicts and crises.

Gore Vidal's series of historical novels is quite revealing in this respect. Unlike the pioneering Walter Scott who cherished the romantic idea that historical novels were a means of raising national pride and engraving the national memory with historical events, Vidal crafts « novelized histories »[†] about political crises in order to comment on, criticise and parody the American status quo. To the difference of Orwell and Huxley however, Vidal states in many forewords to his novels that he keeps as close as possible to true history, if the latter is not an oxymoron altogether[‡]. His is an original blend of the historical and the political novel, and in it parallels with present time America are easily discerned.

This paper analyses two of Vidal's novels, namely *Lincoln* (1984) and *Empire* (1987)**,** and argues that the representation of U.S. presidents in them, of their relations with Congress, and of their attitudes to war and democracy, is a way of criticizing the contemporary American political scene and the imperial, dictatorial tendencies of post-war American presidents; given that presidents had originally but little to do in the political life as the American Republic had been conceived as a legislative one. In

[†] In the title page of his novel, *1876* , the publisher celebrates Gabriel Garcia Marquez's praise of « Gore Vidal's magnificent series of historical novels or novelized histories ».

[‡] Vidal claims in *1876* that no history is credible, that one cannot know history, and that fiction is truer if not in the details, at least in its portrayal of human nature. Shakespeare's plays are thus great even though the history in them is not true.

reaction to the English royal prerogatives during the colonial times and the havoc the English monarch George III wreathed on the colonies, the Founding Fathers invested more powers and responsibilities in Congress and thus established "a congressional republic, not an executive one" (Brinkley and Dyer 175). Certainly, the president is given full liability as regards foreign affairs, and is held accountable as to the state of the army, yet it is Congress that is celebrated and prized by the Constitution in all other important domestic respects (Brinkley and Davis 174).

Few critical studies have been concerned with the representation of American presidents in American fiction. It is partly due to the fact that, Abraham Lincoln aside, American presidents are seldom portrayed in literature, not even in historical novels. Gore Vidal is quite an anomaly in this respect. In his play, *The Best Man* (1960), Vidal dramatised the presidential race in election year. Besides, he devoted one of his seven « Chronicles of Empire » to Abraham Lincoln (1809 – 1865), and also gave enough space to other presidents in the six remaining ones—e.g. George Washington and Thomas Jefferson in *Burr*, Ulysses Grant in *1876*, Woodrow Wilson and Warren Harding in *Hollywood*, Franklin Roosevelt in *Washington D.C.* and in *The Golden Age* (ordered according to the chronology of their subject matter). Vidal was himself a close friend of the Kennedys and an insider of both Washington and the White House. Moreover, he stated that most writers in the 1960s played with the idea of running for the highest executive office. Very few literary writers are thus in a better position to speak about American presidents than Vidal.

The present presidential system of government being part of the much proclaimed political exceptionalism of the United States, an exploration of the image of the president in fiction is quite rewarding, especially in these Joseph Biden years that follow the much contested Trump administration. In the public eye, presidents are much more influential and iconic than the second Article of the Constitution stipulates:

Almost all presidents—whatever they have or have not achieved—have occupied positions of enormous symbolic and cultural importance in American life. They have become the secular icons of the republic—emblems of nationhood and embodiments of the values that Americans have claimed to cherish… Almost everything a president does, in the end, seems to much of the nation to be larger than life (Brinkley and Davis x-xi).

Such a study might do well to uncover the importance of the president in a given administration, his conflicts with the congress and other branches of government, as

well as his personal demeanour and conduct. Given that there has always been a gap (sometimes enormous, sometimes relatively narrow) between the image and reality of the president and his office, did Vidal confirm the image of the president or did he rather reveal the reality? Manifesting varied degrees of influence and prestige, did Vidal distinguish the presidents from the presidency, the office from its occupants? Did he treat them all in the same way, or did he allow for their tremendous differences? Vidal believes in the vital role media plays in modern politics, at the expense of party machines which are in decline. It is indeed an age of media-mediated politics. Does Vidal's rendering of the influence press and journalism (there was no radio and TV at the time of Lincoln) had on mid-nineteenth century politics in general, and on the image of presidents show it was any lesser than the media's today?

Asked in the year 2000 to restage his successful *The Best Man* Vidal claimed that it was no longer the same country that it had been in the early years of the republic or even four decades earlier, that politicians and media needed to awake to the fact that the president today –regardless of his public image—had lost most of his significance to the "great financial powers and corporate interests" which were struggling, with considerable success, to influence legislation and drive it in the direction of lesser and lesser taxes (Gardner 2). Does this mean that all presidents before that date are rendered as quite significant and overpowering in his fiction? Who is the best president in American history according to Vidal and why? These are some of the questions that outline this paper. *Lincoln* and *Empire* are here selected because in them we have a better focus on particular presidents, unlike *The Golden Age* which may be considered as a belated version of *Washington D. C.*, and *Burr* which revolves much more around the unique personality of the vice president and his intrigues than on President Thomas Jefferson himself. As to *1876*, there is much more concern with the presidential election campaigns than with either presidential candidate, namely Tilden and Hayes.

2. *President Lincoln and Internal Conflict*

2.*1 Lincoln's "Inherent Powers" and Dictatorial Fantasies*

No other president, not even George Washington, has a whole book devoted to him by Vidal, which is clear indication as to Vidal's preference. Striving to be accurate in his rendering of major historical events and figures, Vidal models his Lincoln on the same strong, very tall, awkward man of the biographies. Indeed, as he admits in his afterword to the novel, " [a]ll of the principal characters really existed, and they said and did pretty much what [he has] them saying and doing". As a literary character, however, Lincoln remains

mysterious and distant. Vidal opts for the « distancing » third person point of view and thus, whatever Lincoln really has in mind is oftentimes beyond the reader, or at best a matter of deduction and of guesswork. In her article on this novel, Oates compares Lincoln to another character, i.e. Aaron Burr in Vidal's eponymous novel, and stipulates that « [s]ince it is the author's strategy to keep Lincoln mysterious and secretive, we are never privy to his thoughts, as we were to Aaron Burr's; but, by degrees, we come to know him well through the eyes of his witnesses" (1). Approached properly, this mystery may be saluted as a literary achievement because it makes Lincoln look quite like a real person who lives amongst us. Its merits and literary advantages apart, the first person point of view may reduce the ability of the reader to judge for himself, thus obtaining his insights through the ego filters of the hero which may distort, silence, redeem and accommodate disturbing facts. The mysterious president does reveal himself in the novel, but only indirectly; and Vidal did very well to allow us to judge Lincoln based on his actions, thus approaching him like we do real people around us. Vidal therefore, partly because of the narrative techniques employed, is much in keeping with the modern taste for 'showing' rather than 'telling' the reader[§]. The latter finds out for himself the attributes of this mystified persona of American history.

In physical appearance and attire, Vidal drew a correct, historically verifiable portrait: a non-photogenic, haggard, gloomy man who, in Eric Foner's view, would make a poor image of president in this age of TV and public relations industry. The controversy however has been about Lincoln's *moral* characteristics. Many politicians and historians then and now blame and castigate Lincoln as tyrannical and dictator (Supreme Court Justice Roger Taney, Democratic Party observers, border state critics, Southern politicians and secessionists, for instance); and Vidal alludes to this denigration in his novel, making even his Secretary of State, William Henry Seward (1801-1872), lament the presence of a despotic streak in Lincoln who managed very well to dissimulate it under a veneer of false humility and populist behaviour**:**

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. He had been able to make himself absolute dictator without ever letting anyone suspect that he was anything more than a joking, timid

[§] Wayne Booth extensively explains the difference between the two narrative styles in his seminal *The Rhetoric of Fiction* (London: Penguin Books, 1991).

backwoods lawyer, given to fits of humility in the presence of all the strutting military and political peacocks that flocked about him (370).

Oates takes for granted Seward's opinion as expressed in the words above as well as similar ones by Lincoln's enemies, and therefore she doesn't hesitate to qualify Lincoln as usurper, listing his undemocratic acts.

It can be proven, Oates observes, that Lincoln actually took advantage of the "inherent powers" to establish a dictatorship that censored the press, suspended the habeas corpus and threatened to imprison Democrats who were campaigning in the border-states against the Republicans as the 1864 election approached. Furthermore, adopting the view of yet another of his detractors—namely, Stephen Douglas (1813-1861)—Oates claims that Lincoln had the proclivity and was prepared for this undemocratic conduct even before the commencement of the war. Hence, he did not do more than fore-grounding a dictatorial streak inherent in his character. Oates further suggests that Vidal is of the same opinion on Lincoln as Stephen Douglas who, with the jealousy but also the clairvoyance of a defeated rival, reminds Lincoln somewhere in the middle of the novel, of the alleged declaration he had made when much younger that laid bare his early dictatorial fantasies which could not be satisfied now by the mere office-holding that results from democratic election: "You said that the founders of the republic had got all the glory that there was and that those who come after can never be anything except mere holders of office, and that this was not enough to satisfy 'the family of the lion, or the tribe of the eagle". Douglas, just like Vidal, was aware of Lincoln's inherent, insatiable ambition for greatness at any price, be it that of "emancipating slaves", or "enslaving free men" (Oates 1). Douglas is indubitably right about Lincoln's quest for greatness (what politician does not, for that matter?), but that quest was not allowed to go out of hand or turn into an urge for dictatorial powers. Little evidence in the book corroborates Oates's claim that either Seward or Douglas is Vidal's mouthpiece. True, Vidal amply shows, first, the extent to which Lincoln favoured General Grant's and General Sherman's genocidal war tactics against the Confederates to McLellan's inaction and his attempts to save civilian and military lives; and second, how the president suppressed the « habeas corpus » alongside other liberties, invested in and abused the vague wartime « inherent powers » of the presidency, detaining political opponents, rigging elections, etc. However, this does not necessarily imply that Vidal portrays him as a dictator.

An inquiry into the nature of Lincoln's attitude towards individual liberties and journalism might well answer the question whether he was dictatorial or not. Lincoln knew very well that, unless he compromised some peacetime democratic liberties, he had an awfully slim chance to preserve the Union and

defeat the secessionists who fought on their own land and had excellent experimented commanders like General Robert Lee (1807-1870). He resorted for instance to the arrest of about two thousand civilians without trial. Suspending the writ of habeas corpus that had always protected individuals and citizens from the abusive conduct of their government**,** was thus but another draconian measure to accomplish a formidable task. In his article on Lincoln, Jean H. Baker reproduces the president's righteous rationalizing that appeased his troubled conscience and led him out of the acute dilemma: "Would he not have broken his oath of presidential office, asked the president, had he allowed the scrupulous observance of one law to stand in the way of preserving all the others and thereby permitted the government to go to pieces" (Brinkley and Dyer 178)? Vidal had to deal in a pressing moment with a difficult choice, either preserve the habeas corpus or save the Union and its constitution as a whole. He opted for the second option at last.

As to the charges of newspaper censorship and the illegal imprisonment of editors leveled against him by Oates in the quote above, Lincoln actually imprisoned (albeit for three days only) the managers of *New York World* in 1864 after shutting down the said paper, and thus proved definitely guilty, but for different reasons than Oates would like us to believe. Lincoln is shown to fear the influential editor of *The New York Times*, Horace Greely (1811-1872), and to try to manipulate him. He wrote letters to him explaining war tactics and the political status quo, hoping to win him over to his side. It was a precautious war measure. No war in history is free of such measures as to limit freedom of opinion and of speech, democracy or no democracy. Freedom of speech can easily be used by the enemy as a cover for fraudulent propaganda, or, unwittingly, by naive editors to compromise and jeopardize the war effort:

Infringing on First Amendment privileges, he closed down newspapers not because they criticized him – for Lincoln remained remarkably thick-skinned to personal abuse – but rather because they repeatedly opposed the war effort, discouraged volunteering, and published grossly misleading information that undermined popular support for the war (179).

Lincoln's alleged "despotic" streak had thus nothing to do with his infringement of free press, which turns out to be one inevitable war measure.

2.2 *Lincoln and Congress*

In stark contrast to Oates, Jean Baker announces in his eponymous article that Lincoln never contemplated dictatorial authority, but rather held the legislative in high esteem: "By nature the sixteenth president was a moderate who believed that Congress, not the president, held primacy in directing the nation's affairs" (Brinkley and Dyer173). In line with the policies of the Whig party, a member of which he had been until the late 1850s, Lincoln wrote in 1861 to condemn "a very free use of any … means, by the Executive, to control the legislation of the country. As a rule I think it is better that Congress should originate as well as perfect its measures without bias"[**]. As a Whig congressman, he was known to have attacked President James Polk's use of war powers to involve the United States in a conflict with Mexico in 1846. Was this merely an opponent's polemics, given that the opposition's statements, as George Orwell so well explains[††], are so often irresponsible and exaggerated? Did power and war eventually change Lincoln's principles?

Indeed, critical observers do not lose sight of the unprecedented political sins Lincoln committed against Congress (and other institutions) during the war. For one thing, he involved the Union in civil war, increased the size of the army, and carried out a blockade of Southern ports without any declaration of war by Congress[‡‡]. Moreover, he acted unilaterally, usurping the prerogatives of both Congress and the courts from the start of the war till July, 04th 1861. These actions however, were more due to the fact that Congress was not in session from the time of Fort Sumter until July, rather than to any malefic intention to usurp the legislative and judicial powers out of dictatorial aspirations. Yet, even after Congress was held, Lincoln bypassed it in some of his endeavors. For instance he laid his hands on the treasury to support the war effort even before Congress mandated him[§§]. In fact Lincoln took full advantage of his newly embraced conviction that he alone, not the members of Congress or judges, was nationally elected.

[**] Quoted in Brinkley and Dyer, p. 179.

[††] « The ruling power is always faced with the question, 'In such and such circumstances, what would you *do*?', whereas the opposition is not obliged to take responsibility or make any real decisions » (Orwell 131).

[‡‡] Actually, very few American wars ever since were sanctioned by the legislative.

[§§] "He instructed the Treasury Department to pay two secret agents two million dollars to buy military supplies before the requisition system was regularized, i.e. he violated the provision that expenditures could be made only when carrying out specific congressional appropriations" (Brinkley and Dyer,179).

These derivations from Democracy, however, are quite normal in time of extreme crisis or war[***]. The executive by nature responds faster than the legislative, and many political philosophers (like John Locke) considered such prompt executive decisions quite valid. It is thus unfair to judge Lincoln's measures during a critical period of national alarm by peacetime standards. More to his credit, President Lincoln sought retroactive sanction for his acts when Congress was back in the political life, claiming that his actions, strictly legal or not, had been undertaken in the name of urgent necessity, and managed to obtain it within a month when his actions were belatedly endorsed. On the whole, Lincoln, who had the good sense of not initiating any legislation, had a quite easy relationship with a Congress, dominated by his party, regardless of the seemingly disrespectful conduct mentioned above.

To sum up, Vidal indubitably deviated from the wide-spread, inaccurate, and romantic image of Lincoln as a backward, rail-splitting western young man becoming a righteous lawyer so intent on emancipating the blacks, even at the risk of civil war. Lincoln appears instead less ideal than many biographers wanted us to believe, including the poet Carl Sandburg (1878-1967) in his multi-volume book that won him the Pulitzer Prize in 1940. He stands ridiculous at times, but authoritative and seemingly dictatorial oftentimes. He is not a noble, ingenuous politician who stands by the ideals of freedom and integrity but rather a smart, cunning and vicious one hankering after fame and greatness. A superb manipulator of the levers of a complicated political machine, outwitting all opponents with presidential ambitions like Stephen Douglas, George McClellan, William Seward and Salmon Chase, and making some of them look ridiculous or even treacherous.

Vidal believes and shows Lincoln to be greater than George Washington who created the Union because he achieved the far harder task of saving it, or rather creating a different (better?) one. As Stephen Harris asserts " Lincoln presides with mute authority over the competitive claims of Hearst and Roosevelt to sovereignty over history, Vidal clearly see[s] Lincoln as the dominant figure in American history" (Harris 110). He appears convincing, more plausible, more human, thick-skinned, and ready to learn from his mistakes. Like most successful statesmen, he is open-minded and far from opinionated, on the subject of slavery as well as that of war. George Carret asserts that Vidal makes the president in his novel look « at once more complex, mysterious and enigmatic, more implacably courageous and, finally, more tragic

[***] Consider for instance the recent closing in several European democracies of all types of media that support Russian involvement in Ukraine like *Russia Today*, and *Sputnik* news channels.

than the conventional public images, the marble man of the memorial. He is honored in his book » (qtd in *Lincoln* 2)

The revisionist attitude towards a great president whose figure basks in admiration and pride on the five-dollar bill does not in the least erode or tarnish his importance and significance, nor does it mean to parody and mock him with a distorted portrait. As he makes it clear in his memoir, Vidal would "either create –out of air—a parallel Duluthian universe or …recreate, from agreed-upon facts, a figure like Abraham Lincoln" whose portrait, Oates believes, is reasoned, judicious, and convincing" (*Palimpsest* 99).

3. McKinley, Roosevelt and International Expansion

3.1 McKinley and the Spanish-American War

A good exercise as to the degree of appreciation Vidal held for Lincoln is to contrast the latter's literary image (as revealed above) with those of Presidents William McKinley (1897-1901) and Theodore Roosevelt (1901-1909) whose administrations are also portrayed from a revisionist point of view in *Empire*. Theirs are definitely less developed representations as neither had the ample space of a whole book, however. The parallels between the fates of Lincoln and Kennedy have recurrently been drawn, yet only few discussed those between Lincoln's and McKinley's lives like Vidal did. The latter offers the reader two distinctive appreciations of McKinley in *Empire.* On the one hand, McKinley was a politically cunning but genuinely good man; on the other, he was a mere puppet of Senator Mark Hanna of Ohio (1837-1904) and other moneyed interests. Greater credence is ultimately given to the former interpretation, however (Neilson 82).

McKinley is sometimes convincingly likened to Lincoln in terms of goodness of heart and political efficiency. In their personal lives, both were more fatherly attached to a young official (John Hay and his son Del Hay respectively) than to their own respective sons. However, they could not be more far off from each other as regards foreign policy and attitude towards colonial expansion. Lincoln is not shown to have entertained any desire to expand the territories of the US to Mexico or Canada as did his Secretary of State, William Seward, for instance. His foreign policy is typically isolationist. Americans had to wait for the end of the century to see expansionist officials like McKinley in the White House. He, along with Secretary John Hay, is portrayed in *Empire* as the spearhead of American imperialism. There is little doubt about Vidal's position, himself an isolationist and a revisionist, as to America's involvement in WWII, Vietnam and Iraq, and about his preference of Lincoln to McKinley, and to all imperialist presidents for that matter.

Immensely aided by Hearst and the dishonest journalism of his time which blew, without tangible, irrefutable evidence, the mysterious sinking of the *Maine* (1898) out of proportions, McKinley involved the nation in war against Spain and made sure to invade Cuba, Hawaii, Guam and the Philippines. With remarkable intelligence and inspiring resolution, McKinley, alongside his admirals and generals proceeded, like the major conquerors of the world, to install the foundations of an ever expanding empire, notwithstanding its seemingly naive demeanor and parochial nature. Vidal shows his character Caroline, protagonist and à la Hearst journalist, to be surprised by the swift analysis and shrewd capacities of McKinley's mind.

McKinley barely knew of Caesar and Alexander; yet 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…There was, thought Caroline, a lot to be learned about acting from McKinley (*Empire* 206).

McKinley is thus portrayed in the novel as responsible for and pioneer in paving the way towards imperialist expansion.

3.2 Theodore Roosevelt and Imperialism

Vidal follows the progress of Theodore Roosevelt from a navy officer to a very popular president of the United States after the assassination of McKinley. Indeed, he occupies more space in the novel than McKinley and enjoys a superior presence. The popularity of 'Teddy' which made him the only president to secure two presidential terms since Ulysses Grant does not obfuscate Vidal's view and his revisionist perspective. This emblem of courage and energy which inspired a generation of politicians and presidents is ridiculed and caricatured in *Empire*. Diametrically opposed to Lincoln who cared little for his image amongst his contemporaries in general and political opponents in particular, Roosevelt is shown to create a mystery of bravery and a halo of adventure about him. In *Empire* and two essays accompanying it, namely "Theodore Roosevelt : An American Sissy" and "The Day the American Empire Ran out of Gas", Vidal analyses Roosevelt's character only to find him miserably lacking in that essential quality which is essential in the realm of politics, i.e. moral courage. Obsession with physical courage is in fact a sign of immaturity in a politician, and Roosevelt, regardless of his characteristic bravado and distinguishing domineering attitude in politics, was deprived of real courage which could have

come in handy to help uproot the corruption that inflicted the republic under his administration (Neilson 83).

Besides his war-mongering and domineering conduct, Roosevelt is physically represented in a exaggerated caricatured way. Contemplating Roosevelt, it is not just Hay who "marvelled at the way neck became head without any widening at all', but so does the reader (400). Unlike Lincoln whose tendency to crack bawdy jokes and to mimic black accents is silenced in *Lincoln*, Roosevelt's many idiosyncrasies including his teeth-clacking habit and restless movements are allowed to recur like caricature in *Empire* so as to puncture the mystery and demystify the persona. In this, Vidal was true to his pet acerbic, denigrating technique of scrutinizing the physical characteristics of prominent figures he does not cherish in an exposing "close-up" that deflates their artificial aura (Neilson 83). John Hay tolerated his president's weaknesses because he appreciated the—to him—far superior qualities singling him out as "the best the country had to offer". That was not Vidal's impression of "Teddy" however, all the less in comparison with Lincoln.

Indeed, Vidal questions Roosevelt's integrity and alludes, for instance, to his illegal request of money from Standard Oil to finance his 1904 election campaign: "What…were the President's relations with Standard Oil? Obviously, there was something that he didn't want known; and it probably had to do with the gathering of money for the 1904 election" (*Empire* 481). Similar accusations could not be truthfully levelled against Lincoln in Vidal's former novel, unless they were connected with the First Lady, i.e. Mary Todd's debts and prodigal spending which were carried out unbeknownst to him.

Roosevelt has even less appeal to Vidal as he is, like McKinley before him, a committed expansionist. Some historians claim that McKinley's war on Spain and his attachment of foreign territories were mainly the work of Roosevelt and like-minded entourage.

[The Spanish-American War] was initiated by an administration… led by a president widely believed by contemporaries to be easily influenced, if not controlled, by a powerful group of aggressive foreign policy unilateralists committed to extending the power of the United States on the world stage, and controlling access to external vital raw materials while espousing free trade doctrines…. McKinley was surrounded by powerful allies and friends—Theodore Roosevelt, Captain Alfred Thayer Mahan and Senator Henry Cabot Lodge among them—advocating a 'large policy' of imperial expansion… (Hagan and Bickerton 84).

As a 'revisionist' historian, Vidal argues that American engagement in overseas imperialism was not 'abrupt and unpremeditated' as Louis Hall and many mainstream historians have it. Roosevelt deliberately wanted to follow the example of Britain and believed that colonies help hold power at sea. In this, he was under the influence of some of the leading architects of American empire like US naval officer and historian Alfred Taylor Mahan (author of *The Influence of Sea Power on History, 1660-1783*) and Brooks Adams—two of the four men by whom, Vidal argues, 'our modern empire was carefully thought out', the other two being Roosevelt himself and Henry Cabot Lodge. The protagonist of *Empire*, Caroline Sanford, is clearly disgusted with the war Roosevelt offered to the Americans: 'Why drive poor weak old Spain out of the Caribbean and the pacific? Why take on far-off colonies? Why boast so much (25)? Along with John Hay, Caroline is arguably Vidal's mouthpiece and those rhetorical questions might well be his own.

4. *CONCLUSION*

It could be argued with regard to the instances above that Vidal's representation of U.S. presidents does not always reproduce the wide spread myths; it is rather based on 'true' historical accounts in order to uncover the reality. Neither Lincoln nor McKinley or Roosevelt in Vidal's novels is what the average American reader who is indoctrinated by the official historical narratives and corporate media, expects. However, Vidal's 'revisionist' representation of presidents is not mainly an attempt to distinguish history from myth (like when he gave a more accurate version of Lincoln's 'Gettysburg Address'). The 'didactic heresy' that the formalists and the aesthetes of modernism and post-modernism had warned writers of fiction against is clearly at play in Vidal who aims rather at commenting on and criticising contemporary politics and the foreign policy in especial. Parallels could easily be drawn by alert readers with the *status quo*. One telling example is the portrayal of the Spanish-American war; a war that Hagan and Bickerton claim to be closer and so similar to U.S. involvement in Vietnam and Iraq. Although Vidal had Reagan in mind when he wrote *Empire*, Hagan and Bickerton assert that successors in the White House like George H. W. Bush did not prove any wiser[†††].

[†††] « The Spanish-American War, as it is better known, more than any other fought by the United States, resembles the present war in Iraq. Like the Iraq war, it was begun ostensibly to

Accordingly, the presidents in Vidal's 'Chronicles of Empire' are meant to compare, favourably or otherwise, with those recently and presently in power.

Dennis Altman was awake to the parallels Vidal drew between the events of his novels and the current state of affairs; he claims that bitter "debate between the characters in *Empire* over the annexation of the Philippines can be seen as prefiguring divisions over interventions in Vietnam and Iraq a century later' (49). Vidal therefore gives the impression that all wars are ugly, and that brutal strategies and undemocratic actions are *sine qua non* if one does not consider losing them. Lincoln emerges from the namesake novel as a realistic practical leader who was driven to a war he never wished (though he wasn't a pacifist either) and who accomplished his difficult mission with distinction. He. War, not Lincoln, should be held accountable for the atrocities that befell Americans, all Americans, victorious and defeated, supporters and opponents. War, Vidal regrets, corrupts the American character, empowers the executive branch beyond the curbing authority of the representative institutions, obstructs freedom of expression, affects journalism and jeopardizes individual liberties, among other things.

Vidal aspires to uncover the hideous aftermath of Reagan's (and presidents before him) adventures in Central America, Afghanistan, etc. If Lincoln was driven into a war he did not want and fought a secession that started before his inauguration, present-day presidents wittingly intervened in foreign countries and brought war upon peace-loving peoples. Unlike that of Lincoln, their wars are inexcusable by any means, except greed, expansion and the desire for hegemony. Wars always benefited segments of the American economy and fostered a savage version of Capitalism that concentrated wealth in the hands of

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achieve regime change, to bring democracy to a people suffering under a cruelly repressive regime. It was initiated by an administration loudly proclaiming the moral righteousness of its cause, led by a president widely believed by contemporaries to be easily influenced, if not controlled, by a powerful group of aggressive foreign policy unilateralists committed to extending the power of the United States on the world stage, and controlling access to external vital raw materials while espousing free trade doctrines. In 1898 President William McKinley, like President George W. Bush in 2002, portrayed himself as deeply religious, acting in accordance with the will of the Almighty. […] In both wars, the conventional military phase was over quickly, the victorious outcome never in doubt. And in both the consequences for the United States, mostly unanticipated, were far reaching, domestically and externally. Within a short time in both wars, the United States found itself enmeshed in a brutal war against insurgents determined to expel American forces from their land. The hoped-for market gains were not immediately forthcoming; rather than strengthening the United States economically and strategically, both wars had the opposite effect » (Hagan and Bickerton 84-5).

the elite 1%, the financial-military complex. Hence, Vidal spares no effort and uses all possible means (novels and essays in particular) to denounce hawkish presidents who bring about war and thus deteriorate the wellbeing of the poor in terms of health care and education, bloat the defence budget (already higher than those of the rest of the world combined), compromise free press and free expression, tarnish the image of the country in the world, and empower the executive branch.

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