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## THE EMPIRE VERSUS LITTLE AMERICA

by Bill Kauffman

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Former Arkansas Sen. William Fulbright said in 1967, “The price of empire is America’s soul, and that price is too high.”

War, expansion, the maintenance of a large standing army: these corrupt a country, as poets from James Russell Lowell to Wendell Berry have tried to tell us. The Vietnam or Iraq War may level villages across the sea but back home, in our villages, they unleash an insidious poison, too. They make our places less liveable. From the pit of the Cold War Edmund Wilson, the Sage of Boonville, New York, lamented that “our country has become today a huge blundering power unit controlled more and more by bureaucracies whose rule is making it more and more difficult to carry on the tradition of American individualism.”

In Boonville as in Emporia as in Sauk Centre, the little places that give America soul were ravaged and denuded by the machine of perpetual war.

War effaces and perverts the very bases of healthy community life. It elevates impermanence and rootlessness to virtues. It forcibly uproots people; it distorts natural economic patterns, causing artificial regional booms and busts — witness the histories of Detroit and Kentucky; it spreads venereal disease, if not democracy; it separates husbands from wives and parents from children; it leads to a spike in the divorce rate among service personnel and it nationalizes their children in

what the Pentagon, with its usual tone-deafness to Orwellian rings, calls “the Total Army Family.” Welcome to the Brave New World.

A militaristic state is a centripetal machine that sucks all power to the center. Smaller bodies, grass-roots democratic institutions, are devitalized, wiped out. All political decisions of consequence are made at a level impossibly remote from real life. People we don’t know — people who have no desire or even means to know us — make life or death decisions about us.

America is the sum of a thousand and one little, individuated places, each with its own history and accent and stories. A politician who understands this will act in ways that protect and preserve these real places. He will ask the question that never gets injected into national debates over the wisdom of America’s constant wars — namely, What are the domestic costs? Loving his block, he will not wish to bomb Iraq. Loyal to a neighborhood, he will not send its young men and women across the sea to kill and die for causes wholly unrelated to local life.

It’s been a long time since a Republican or Democratic presidential nominee acknowledged the primacy of home over the empire. Today we have these rootless politicians babbling on about “the homeland” — a creepy totalitarian phrase that, pre-Bush, was never applied to our country and which we should ridicule at every opportunity before it is permanently implanted in our national vocabulary. As the manufacture of political opinions and the directing of the political parties has become centralized in imperial Washington, the old skepticism of a powerful central state and respect for out-of-the-way places, the provinces, has seemingly vanished.

But it is in these places — and they are urban as well as rural — that a healthy anti-war movement can grow. I say “healthy” because it is more than just “anti” something; it is based in love. This sentiment has suffused anti-expansion and anti-war movements throughout our history. It was captured in G.K. Chesterton’s wonderful novel *The Napoleon of Notting Hill*, when he said that “the supreme psychological fact about patriotism [is] that the patriot never under any circumstances boasts of the largeness of his country, but always, and of necessity, boasts of the smallness of it.”

### **The real homeland**

This was the kind of patriotism that animated the Anti-Imperialist League, which in opposing U.S. conquest of the Philippines spoke for a Little America, a land of creeks, not oceans; shops, not factories; modesty and sly humor, not bluster and brass. The Anti-Imperialists thought that, say, Indianans had enough to occupy them in Indiana — they had rich-enough lives in the Hoosier state — that they did not need to send their young men across the sea to kill foreigners and plant the American flag atop a mound of Filipino corpses.

George W. Bush, McCain, Hillary Clinton, Obama — the rootless class that runs this government — what do they love, other than the wielding of power? They stand on nothing. They have no ground under their feet. They have tanks and bombs but they have no soul.

They view Little America as a source of cannon fodder and tax dollars, though they are occasionally frustrated by our “isolationism” — that is, our reluctance to kill or be killed by

foreigners. This is benighted. So we are hectored to take our eyes off those things nighest and focus them on Baghdad, Hanoi, Teheran, who knows what's next. A warfare state centralizes and vulgarizes culture; it despises the local, exalts the national, focuses on the remote. So cherishing, protecting, little and local things becomes a subversive act. Love, finally, is the most potent enemy of the empire.

And the love which sustains this Little America is reasserting itself. At farm markets. In community-supported agriculture. Home-schooling. The reflorescence of regional literature. Something is happening and Mr. Jones — or Mr. Obama, or Mr. Romney — doesn't know what it is. Wendell Berry calls this new decentralism a “redemptive” movement, though he acknowledges that “in terms of standing and influence [it] is hardly a side at all. It doesn't have a significant political presence. It is virtually unrepresented in our state and federal governments. Most of its concerns are not on the agenda of either major party.”

But it's out there. And a mind-our-own-business, stay-out-of-foreign-wars, love-what-is-nighest-unto-you ethos is part of this emerging decentralist spirit. The Little America is waking up. And it is fertile territory in which to plant the flag of peace.