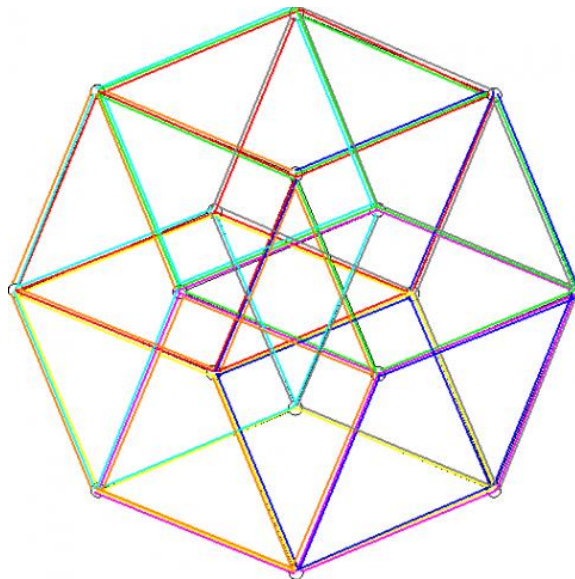


## Part 9 – The Shift from an Industrial to a Planetary Civilization— On Sarah Palin and the Technocratic Society

by William Irwin Thompson

*“We Irish think otherwise”* Bishop Berkeley



\* I am indebted to Karen at Oddity Journal for this wonderful image of the tesseract.  
See <http://odditycollector.livejournal.com/173945.html>

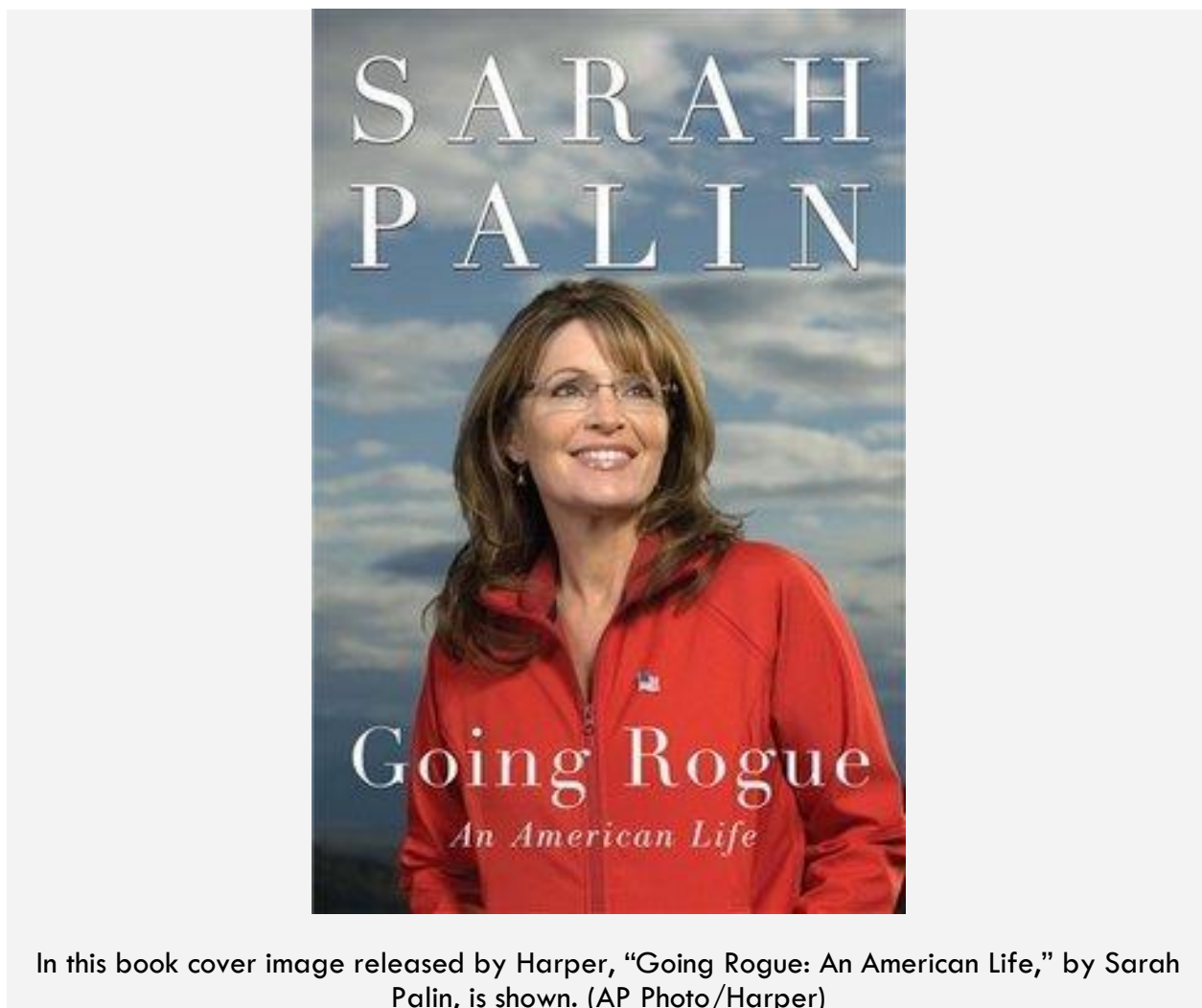
Tea parties, birthers, Glen Beck, Rush Limbaugh, and a multitude of fans for Sarah Palin. There is something going on here that beggars understanding. Book lines a mall-long for Palin, a woman who can't speak a syntactically ordered sentence much less write one? – this in spite of her degree in that new field marketed to drive-in universities called “Communications.” This we can't dismiss but have to sit up and take notice.

First off, we have to recognize that Sarah Palin is popular because she is not smart and articulate. The women interviewed in the lines of enthusiasts waiting for her to sign their books sound like a sorority of communications majors. Sarah quits her job as governor, abandons all pretence at responsibility and competence, and they love her all the more for it. She has left the corridors of power and entered their world: the world of morning television, of *Oprah* and *The View*, a world of celebrities who are famous for nothing but shallow opinions they shout at one another all at once. Because we have no Royals in this country—

another group also without abilities and famous for being famous—we have to protect the void of the day with the bubble wrap of many little bumps of inflated nothing.

When TV reporters interview children and ask them the question, “What do you want to be when you grow up? (Notice, the verb here is “be” and not “do.”) The children and teenagers most often say, “I am going to be somebody!”—meaning that they are going to be a celebrity. They will be famous in the ways they know: a movie, TV, or pop star, sports celebrity, or politician. In this new world, little girls do not wish to grow up to be Madame Curie and boys do not wish to be Einstein or William Faulkner. They just want to be famous. And reality TV and *American Idol* are there to enhance and serve this vast market of aspirants.

So Sarah is now famous for selling more books on her first day of publishing than anyone else in non-fiction history, and the fact that she has no proven competence in governing or writing only adds to her appeal. She is the media’s apotheosis of the ordinary, and because she is slimmer and prettier than those standing in line means that she can also appeal to the Weight Watchers market as Princess Fergie once tried to do and failed because she was too foreign for America.



In this book cover image released by Harper, “Going Rogue: An American Life,” by Sarah Palin, is shown. (AP Photo/Harper)

But there is a deeper secret lurking here, one that is common to the market appeal of Glen Beck and Rush Limbaugh—their fans are not just stupid but afraid. What are the stupid afraid of?

The smart, dummy!

Yet what they are afraid of is not all that stupid and smacks more of C. S. Lewis's Christian humanist critique of social science in *That Hideous Strength* or Jacques Ellul's analysis of *The Technological Society* than of old Senator Joe McCarthy or the John Birch Society of my high school days.

Let me get up close and personal now to share with you as a seventy-one year old white male, just what the smart people have done to me in my life. When I was in the third grade, I used to like to get up at five to watch the eastern horizon of L.A. light up from the open-air atom bomb explosions in southern Nevada. The smart people in that pre-emptive strike at dawn were doing all sorts of clever and secret things we were not supposed to know about. I also used to love to twinkle my toes in the X-ray machines the smart people had decided to put in all the Thom McCann shoe stores. Now teenagers have cell phones to show how technology is way cool. When I got cancer at eleven, the smart people gave me X-ray therapy treatments, which doctors now tell me ruined my teeth and made my cancer more virulent with higher malignancy levels and increased metastases. Just think what all our gabby teenagers can look forward to.

When I was in L.A. high, my smart teachers said I was un-American and a subversive communist when I quoted Emerson and Thoreau in class that "To be great is to be misunderstood." and "Whoso would be a man, must be a non-conformist." The vice-principal called up the parents of my best-friend and girl-friend and warned them that I was an intellectual communist trouble-maker and that they should forbid their children to have anything to do with me. It worked on my best friend's Dad who, with highball in hand, screamed at me on his front lawn that I was a pinko-commie queer (note his surprising gift for alliteration) and was not to come to their house ever again. I think he thought I was queer because I did not play on the basketball team with his son but worked in a grocery store after school for 28 hours a week. With my earnings in pocket, I would talk my friend into going to Pickwick bookstore at Hollywood and Vine with me where we would buy subversive books like *Moby Dick*, the *Bhagavad Gita*, and the *Tao Te Ching*. My girl friend's parents, being good Jewish liberals, did not cast me out on the basis of the Vice-Principal's McCarthyism, but they certainly did not feel comfortable with my adolescent readings and rantings—from Ayn Rand's *Fountainhead* to James Joyce's *Portrait*.

When I was at Pomona College, I was forced—along with all the other students—to strip and be photographed naked for some all-important social science research. It wasn't the nudity that troubled me but being deprived of free will and being treated as an object of research. We were also forced to take the Minnesota Multi-phase Personality Test. And when I asked the Professor of psychology at the end of the test why questions such as 'Have you ever had a mystical experience' were clustered with 'Do you wash doorknobs before you touch them?' or 'Do you stare at your feces before you flush the toilet?', he did not answer my question but asked me with a condescending smirk, "And have you ever had a mystical experience?" If I

were a film director, it would be great fun to portray him, as he was a mean-spirited, nasty little man who seemed more in need of psychological help than work as a professor.

When I was working forty hours a week as a grocery checker to be able to afford to finish my college education, a professor of English from Yale complained that society had created Cal Poly for people like me and that I shouldn't be allowed at an elite school like Pomona. He did not tell his colleagues that the real reason for his cultured distaste was that I had dared to challenge him in his class on nineteenth century English literature by pointing out that he was teaching Coleridge and Wordsworth in an extremely narrow manner, and that their trip to Germany in 1799 and Coleridge's encounter with the Jena circle had to be factored into a study of *The Prelude*. Wordsworth's *Prelude* and Hegel's *Phenomenology of Mind*, I asserted in class, were both coeval expressions of a new analysis of the evolution of consciousness. The professor was embarrassed, not just because I was a smart-ass, but because he had not read Hegel since philosophy was not his field. He never changed his mind, even when I graduated with Honors and won a Woodrow Wilson Fellowship to Cornell.

After my studies at Cornell, I moved to Cambridge and was shocked to encounter at MIT and Harvard, decidedly simple-minded one track experts with new social systems they wished to inflict on the world in the forms of behaviorism, cognitivism, and Freudian psychoanalytical theories about the true meaning of literature as a code of signs and not a multiply leveled narrative of complexity. At that time, the best and the brightest were also giving us the war in Viet Nam, including the spraying of Agent Orange on the forests, and the social science modernization of Vietnamese culture, while here at home the smart people were administering electroshock treatments to psychiatric patients with absolutely no idea of what they were doing to the brain. "Shock and Awe" has not disappeared and Skinner's behaviorism has now evolved into the Churchlands' eliminativism. The smart people never learn, they just learn how to pass mechanized tests and get degrees from one another.

So as former Irish working class kid from parochial schools in central Los Angeles, I understand what the followers of Sarah Palin, Rush Limbaugh, and Glen Beck are afraid of with these shape-shifters of socialized government and Federal medical programs. They are afraid of becoming not citizens but subjects of the empire of social science research. They are afraid of the smart people who will measure their IQs and engineer their genes under the guise of fertility treatments, and indoctrinate their children with liberalism and multiculturalism in the public schools. They are afraid of the kind of medical experimentation inflicted on black people by smart white people in Tuskegee, Alabama in the nineteen-thirties and forties.<sup>[1]</sup> Sarah Palin's vision of "death squads" is rationally absurd, since it is now the Medical Insurance companies that are the true death squads that cancel people's benefits when their illnesses threaten their profit margins, but Palin's rhetorical trope is also a nightmare that expresses the deep and real state of fear of her constituents. Underneath, Limbaugh, Beck, Bachmann, and Palin and their followings know they are dumb and cannot defend themselves from Big Science backed up by the Big State.

There was once a place for ordinary people in agricultural and industrial society, and a high school diploma could get you a job and a life. Now there is no place for them, because those sorts of jobs have been outsourced to Asia. Now everybody needs at least a community college Associate of Arts degree and some real skills beyond a Communications major for those who can't understand complex literature, speak in syntactical sentences, and think

outside the Tube. In Obama World, there is no place for these folks anymore, and ambitious Black, Hispanic, and Asian people are turning dumb white working class folks into the new minority. Now that authoritarian China has shown how to have free markets without a free people, it looks as if the experiment of American democracy is winding down, and so the white working poor fear becoming a new servant class again, not to rich white folk, but to rich and smart Blacks, Hispanics, and Asians. So they are scared, and they are mad that their America—Sarah’s “the real America”—has been taken from them.

Because we do not admit to having a working class in the U.S., we are socially constrained to call these people “the lower-middle class.” But whatever you call them, what the stupid are afraid of is not the smart ass but the smart class. They fear a new class of people who are going to rule them the way the Lairds ruled them in Scotland during the Highland Clearances, the landlords ruled them in Ireland during the Famine, or the factory owners ruled them in England and America during the industrial revolution. To paraphrase Pascal, the dumb have their reasons even if they cannot reason.

It is particularly tragic that the working poor should fear government because it was not the free market that created the railroads, public education, GI Bill, and the interstate highway system that got them out of tenements and into the suburban lower-middle class. The interstate highway system made the malls possible where now they line up for book-signings with Sarah, and it was Big Government’s intrusion into the private sector that created that system. Private enterprise would have built a jumble of competing quick buck toll roads with a pay booth every few miles.

It is Big Government that creates the infrastructure that allows a free market-system to emerge. The Internet was first the Defense Department’s DARPA, just as the Interstate Highway system was first funded and supported by the budget of the Defense Department. Whether it is a postal system in the eighteenth century, a railroad system in the nineteenth century, an aerospace industry in the twentieth, it is an infrastructure brought about by government. Left to its own devices, capitalism would create a world of a few billionaires and billions of serfs. The Republican Party’s primal story of freedom and free market economics is a complete fabrication. So it is an irony of the history of media and the masses and an expression of the sad truth from Randolph Hearst to Rupert Murdoch that whoever owns the media owns the minds of the people. Glen Beck and Rush Limbaugh can be hired for millions of dollars to teach the poor to hate liberals—the ones who eliminated slavery, child labor, and the disenfranchisement of women; they can be hired to convince poor kids to die in defense of the oil and defense industries, and to learn how to call the love of their oppressors the patriotic love of America. Remember that Sarah’s publishers, Harper Collins, and Glen Beck’s Fox News are both part of Rupert Murdoch’s empire.

Whoever convinced Sarah Palin to abandon Alaska before her term was up and go national immediately, is now probably bankrolling her campaign; you can be sure that he has an agenda to win back the hearts of the people that snarling Cheney and dithering Bush lost to Obama. But to be safe he, in concert with his cronies, will own both parties in any election, and can even teach Obama how to toe the line with policies that support Wall Street bond markets, medical insurance companies, and gas pipe lines in Central Asia.

When I proposed a tricameral legislature in past columns, I wanted merely one house out of three to be based on an electoral college of the faculties of the universities, because I knew from personal experience that those faculties are no better and wiser than the rest of the people, but that as invisible advisers and staffers to power, intellectuals were much more dangerous and corruptible. In an Assembly of their peers with open debate there is more hope for a balancing through diversity, from the ways of the stupid smart people like E. O. Wilson at Harvard to the “The Way of Ignorance” of good folks like Wendell Berry on his farm in rural Kentucky.[\[ii\]](#)

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[i] *James H. Jones, Bad Blood: The Tuskegee Syphilis Experiment* (New York: Free Press, 1993)

[ii] See Wendell Berry, *The Way of Ignorance and Other Essays* (Counterpoint Press: Berkeley, CA, 2005).