

**The Sad, Forgotten Tale of Smedly Butler:
How American Do I Feel?**

Looking back on it, I might have given Al Capone a few hints. The best he could do was operate his racket in three districts. I operated on three continents.¹

It is a common superstition of American presidents that the first one hundred days in office are crucial to the overall quality of the entire stay, and while the honeymoon of newly elected President Obama is not quite over, the most significant hundred days goes almost forgotten. These are the first hundred days of Franklin Roosevelt, and the ensuing attempted coup of the United States Government.

The year is 1934. The place is Washington. Roosevelt is confronted with the Great Depression, now in full swing. Nearly one out of every two people is unemployed, and both the banking and stock system that threw fuel on the fire of the Roaring Twenties tears itself apart at the seams. Investments are lost. Retirement funds are sucked dry, sometimes in a matter of months. Inflation pushes the price of bread so high, getting a decent meal for dinner becomes the new culture of the super-rich. Each day grows darker than the last for the working class of America, and so deep is this darkness, the word communism is whispered among the intellectuals, tucked away in the smoky corners of cafes.

Roosevelt proposes a radical shift in wealth to solve the problem: to stop spending money at the top rung of society and letting it drip down, and instead spend at the bottom and let it rise up through the ranks. Obviously, some people have a problem with this, namely the rich New England bankers who continue their traditions of yacht sailing, water polo, and Yale educations to this day. So feverish is the fear of losing their government subsidies and right to wealth, the bankers begin to doubt the commitment of the new president to their ways. A coup is organized, though not the kind of coup a modern audience expects, with students hurling Molotovs and men in rags packing Kalashnikov rifles

¹ Butler, Smedly. "War is a Racket." Feral House. 1936, 2003. p. 21-46.

and towering dreams. This is a coup of men in suits who smoke Cuban cigars, and care for nothing more than, as John Huston says in the end of *Chinatown*, “the future.”

The bankers, who have studied the government of Benito Mussolini in fascist Italy, decide that America needs to become a fascist nation, though not run by a fanatic like Hitler or a dreamer like Mussolini, but run by corporations, such as Chase Bank, US Steel, and Standard Oil. And they have just the man for the job.

Smedley Butler is a man of little consequence, a Marine since eighteen, a career fighter, and one of the few people to receive the Medal of Honor twice, and live to tell about it. Butler is popular with the troops, as he identifies with the humble origins of the US soldier, and commands intense respect among his men. Butler is approached about the coup, and asked to furnish fifty-thousand fighting men to threaten Roosevelt from power. Butler, being a good American, immediately turns this information over to the FBI, who arrests the almost thirty members of the coup, and defuses a potential second civil war.

The conspirators were never punished, never even prosecuted, and barely stood trial for more than a week. Butler's testimony and the FBI's evidence was deemed inconsequential, and while the coup never took place, men who otherwise would have stood trial for treason walked free, back to their mansions and yachts.

Or did it take place? Did the conspirators ultimately succeed, lying in their graves in the deepest satisfaction, knowing they have indeed won the future?

I was born in this country, and without question it is my home. The long country road that goes passed my mother's house, where my wallet fell out when my friends and I stole roadsigns one night, and were subsequently found out by a neighbor, is as integral to my being as my first name. There is something magical about living in a place where I do not risk a death sentence every time I get on a train, and my sister is not ostracized for being disabled and my mother is not burned at an alter for getting a divorce. This is the land where my Jewish ancestors found refuge after The Holocaust, and

raised me to believe that I was, as my grandmother said, “Whatever religion I needed to be.”

I readily equate American culture to consumerism, and I do not consume. I do not watch television or buy online, and when I do spend money I try to support local business. I do not eat fast food or wear clothing store logos, and if geography did not prevent me, I would gladly sell my car. But all of these things, from reality TV to NASCAR replacing baseball as the national past time (if you go by sales figures and fan attendance) are America's culture, but not *my* culture.

The true tragedy is that a man like Smedly Butler, who stood up and served his country when it meant throwing away a chance at leading America into a new age of corporate fascism, is not a household name. A man who literally saved the entire nation at one of its most critical turning points is nothing more than a talking point in fancy coffee shops where liberals and college students have deep, intellectual discussions, and then pay five dollars for a crappy Starbuck's branded latte. Smedly Butler embodies the true ideals of those shadowy figures invoked in pointless presidential speeches that do not understand them: the founding fathers. The fanatic devotion to the common man, and the idea that it is not only the right of one to question those above him, but his *duty*, are characteristics that underlay all legal and governmental processes in this country. While every American family in the now mythical fifties, the great age of conformity, had a picture of Jesus above the kitchen archway, the man who actually helped give them that nice suburban home remained unknown, furious and silent.

The late folk singer Phil Ochs often spoke of a place called “The Real America” in his rhetorical songs. That real place is my America: a land that distinguishes itself because of how it treats the common man. Instead, the “real” America is one where more students know the McDonalds Big Mac song better than the national anthem, and where so many young workers are so convinced labor unions are evil, they sacrifice their own health care in the name of upholding “real American values.” And while I am proud of my home’s history and the things it has accomplished, the grim reality precludes any sense of pride or nationalism. I am an American, but this is neither the America that I know, nor the America I want.