

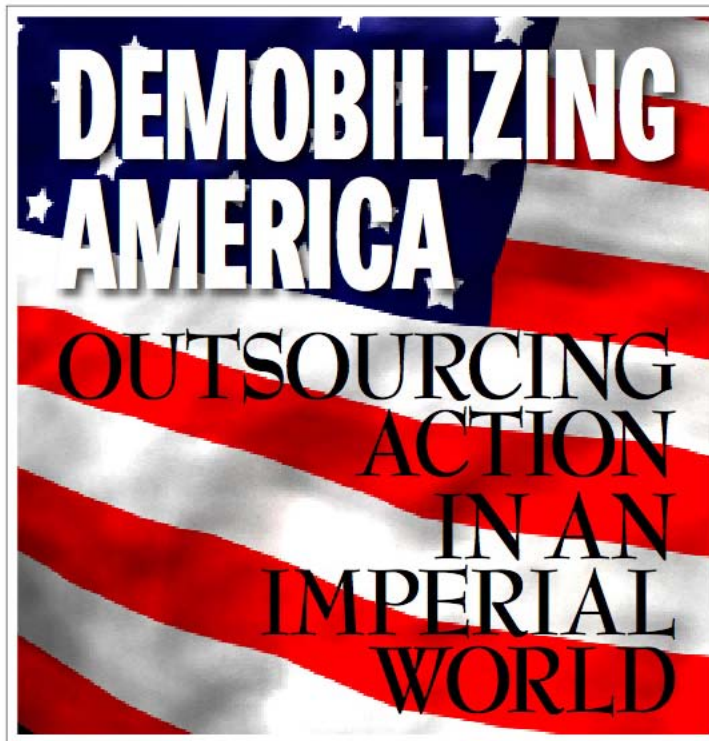
The background of the cover is a stylized American flag with a blue field of white stars in the upper left and red and white stripes below. The text is overlaid on this background.

DEMOBILIZING AMERICA

OUTSOURCING ACTION IN AN IMPERIAL WORLD

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XCUSE me if, at 62, and well into my second era of protest against yet another distant, disastrous, and disabling American war, I express a little confusion. Was it actually like this in Rome while the legions were off fighting on the German frontiers? Was this the way it felt in London while the imperial forces conducted their frontier wars in Afghanistan, or Paris when the Foreign Legion was holding down North Africa? Was this how it felt in Washington when Douglas MacArthur's father was suppressing the Filipinos and General Jacob Smith was turning the island of Samar into a "howling wilderness"? Is this the way it usually feels in the heartlands of great empires until the barbarians actually do come knocking at the gates?

I went marching against the President's Iraqi war of choice in my hometown on March 25. I found myself in an older crowd, many visibly from the Vietnam era. It was relatively quiet, small-scale, and lacking in energy; all in all – for me at least – a modestly dispiriting experience, given the crisis at hand and the disillusioned state of public opinion here in the U.S.

I came home wondering whether some Bush-era version of the old Roman formula had indeed been working. Had bread and circuses become croissants and iPods, or Bud and *American Idol*, or Sony PlayStation 3 and 24? I couldn't help puzzling over the gap between public opinion on the President's war and public action, or between the conclusions opinion polls tell us so many Americans have reached and those generally reached in Washington as well as in the mainstream media.

I know I'm not alone in wondering about such things, so here's my provisional exploration of some of what's puzzled me most. I don't claim to have the answers, only perhaps some of the questions. Think of this, then, as a guided tour of a few of the trees on our landscape – with the hope that you'll be able to spot the forest.

An imperial frame of mind

For four years now, journalists have reported on Iraq; editorial pages have editorialized; and pundits – that special breed of Ciceros – have opined; while the retired generals who fought our last frontier wars have trooped onto FOX, MSNBC, and CNN to analyze this one; and experts and political figures of every expectable sort have appeared again and again on the *Charlie Rose Show*, *Meet the Press*, and their ilk, without our general fund of wisdom seeming to improve appreciably.

The same people who once thought Bush's war was a great idea, or a good idea, or at least an okay idea, or something we should all support no matter what, are still at it. Now, some of them claim the war was a lousy idea but, following Colin Powell's Pottery Barn rule, are convinced that, since we "broke" Iraq, it's "ours" anyway. Some, like the Washington Post editorial page's editors, still think the invasion was a good idea, just somehow poorly – the word you always see is "incompetently" – carried out, making the mess the Iraqis are in still ours.

Of course, many of those who once praised the war have revised their opinions and judgments somewhat (and were usually exorbitantly praised for doing so). Still, just about all of them, not to speak of just about everyone in Washington who hasn't gone numb or mum, seems to agree on one thing. As the Washington Post put it in its fourth-anniversary-of-the-war lead editorial, "It's tempting to say that if it was wrong to go in, it must be wrong to stay in. But how Iraq evolves will fundamentally shape the region and deeply affect U.S. security. Walking away is likely to make a bad situation worse."

Under the many conflicts between George W. Bush and most of his opponents in the Democratic and Republican parties lies an area of agreement seldom challenged in the mainstream political or media world (or, when challenged, given remarkably little attention). On the deepest points, major politicians and the most influential parts of the media are actually in remarkable accord. In fact, you could say that, in the world of our media gatekeepers, there's just another version of the sort of accord that existed before the invasion of Iraq.

That country, it is said, is crucial to "American interests" – "vital national security interests in Iraq" was the way, for instance, Hillary Clinton put the matter recently. There is also agreement (as there was about such things in the Vietnam era) that if we were to leave Iraq totally or "precipitously," American credibility would take a terrible hit, that the terrorists would be "celebrating." It is similarly agreed that, while all sorts of partial withdrawals from Iraq

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might sooner or later be possible, actually withdrawing from the country is hard to imagine, even if staying seems hardly less so. This is why, as in the recently passed House legislation, withdrawal of all American forces has been replaced by the withdrawal of all, or most, American "combat troops" (or "combat brigades"), a technical term that actually accounts for less than half of American forces in Iraq.

The two categories are now so conveniently blurred that it would be pardonable if few Americans grasped the difference any more than did Charles Gibson, anchor of ABC's *World News Tonight*. On the news two days before the march, he claimed the House had voted to get "all U.S. forces" out when his own White House correspondent used the correct phrase, "combat forces."

Americans lived through endless similar non-withdrawal (or partial withdrawal) "withdrawal" plans back in the Vietnam years. Now, it seems, we must do so again. At that time, a crucial argument against full-scale withdrawal was the "bloodbath" sure to follow. It was common knowledge in Washington then that any American withdrawal would result in an unimaginable version of the bloodbath already long underway in that country. That it didn't, of course, hasn't stopped the Vietnam playbook from being pulled out again. Now, we have the "Iraqi bloodbath" to contend with.

It's not just that those "vital national security interests" would be endangered by a withdrawal from Iraq. On one predominant "fact," just about everyone who matters in Washington agrees. We cannot leave Iraq because only we protect the Iraqis from themselves; only we have any hope of "stabilizing" the country. Even the Pentagon has finally acknowledged that a brutal civil war is underway in areas of Iraq; nonetheless, if we were to up and depart, it is agreed, a near genocidal-level bloodletting would certainly be in the cards. We are, in other words, the only force standing between the Iraqis and the "gates of hell." Yes, we may have loosed all this on them in the first place; yes, our tactics in the field may only clear the way for greater bloodshed; yet our "presence" remains their sole remaining hope. This is considered a reality of our world, a clear, if understandable, limit on American policy-making, whether Republican or Democratic.

That this common Washingtonian wisdom is but a prediction about a future yet to be made is seldom noted; that it is being offered by people who often, however unconsciously, have a stake in its coming true is not commented upon either; that, for many of them, such a bloodbath might justify much that has gone wrong, conveniently highlighting the "depravity" of the Iraqis we tried to help, isn't a subject for discussion; that most of these seers have

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had uncommonly poor records when it comes to predicting any developments in Iraq over the last four-plus years is seldom brought up either.

There is also, of course, something grimly self-fulfilling about this particular prophesy. If a single conclusion can be drawn about the U.S. presence in Iraq, it's this: The longer we have been there, the worse it's gotten. We've now reached the point where, with Americans "protecting" Iraqis from themselves, nearly one in five of them have nonetheless either fled their country, been forced into internal exile, or died in the mayhem. If you were projecting into the future, it would be far more logical to assume that, with us present, this situation would only worsen. (Of course, by now, both predictions might prove accurate.)

Even the President's surge plan, a version of the old Vietnam-era "oil spot strategy," is but an attempt to extend the control of the American military and the dependent, largely Shiite Iraqi government from the citadel-microstate of the fortified Green Zone inside the Iraqi capital to most of Baghdad. It is aimed at turning our "Iraq," at best, into a full-scale city-state, while driving much of the internecine killing to the outskirts of the capital or surrounding provinces. How such a plan could possibly "stabilize" the situation there in any long-term way remains beyond serious explanation.

But perhaps this sort of deep agreement on the "realities" of our world should not surprise us. After all, we're talking about a literal "conspiracy" here – in the original Latin sense of the word: to con-spire once essentially meant to breathe the same air. Indeed, our politicians and top media figures do breathe the same air and, in a way that wasn't true decades ago, cohabit in the same rarified class atmosphere.

Not surprisingly, then, they often agree on the basics, holding in common, above all else, an essentially imperial mindset. In this way, they are genuine representatives of what was – before a ragtag minority insurgency fought the U.S. military to a stand-still – hailed as the planet's "last superpower," its only "hyperpower," its "global sheriff," the ultimate inheritor of Western civilization, not to speak of the mantles of the Roman and British empires, and so on. This imperial mindset can, at its most kindly, be expressed in this way: In any situation where American "interests" are at stake, the United States can only be imagined as part of the solution, not part of the problem. In the present Iraqi situation, such thinking also represents an imaginative failure, your essential deck-of-the-Titanic strain of thinking.

So call all this the fog of imperial war and, if you want to see it in action, just turn on your TV and check out David Brooks, or Tom Friedman, or Richard Perle, or George Packer, or various of the New York Times or Washington Post reporters who regularly double as pundits, or retired General Jack Keane, or Senator Joe Biden, or countless others nattering on about

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our prospects in Iraq. Sometimes it seems as if all the major figures on our television landscape were simply in some hypnotic state, claustrophobically recycling the same stale air.

Oddly enough, as far as I can see, the only disqualification for being a pundit or expert in our TV world, when it comes to the President's Afghan and Iraq wars (or his prospective Iranian one), is having been right in the first place, having imagined from the start something of what actually did occur – as, for instance, was the case with Nation columnist Jonathan Schell and Boston Globe columnist James Carroll, or, for that matter, any of the millions of protestors who took to the streets in early 2003.

The protesting public: erased from the story

Among the missing-in-action of these last years are all those Americans who went out into the streets before the invasion of Iraq began, part of the largest global antiwar demonstrations ever mounted. Even a fine piece like Frank Rich's "The Ides of March 2003," his recent return to the countdown to war, leaves out that mass of people – a distinct minority in the U.S., but already part of a global majority.

They carried a plethora of handmade signs, including "No blood for oil," "Contain Saddam – and Bush," "Uproot Shrub," "Oil for Brains, We Don't Buy It, Liberate Florida," "The Bush administration is a material breach," "Pre-emptive war is terrorism," "W is not healthy for Iraqis and other living things," "Use our Might to Persuade, not Invade," "Give Peace a Chance, Give Inspections a Chance," "How did USA's oil get under Iraq's sand," "Peace is Patriotic," and thousands more. In their essential grasp of the situation, they were on target and they marched directly into the postwar period in vast numbers before seemingly disappearing from the scene and then being wiped from history.

It wasn't, as people now often claim, that almost everyone was gulled and manipulated into supporting this war by the Bush administration, that no one could have had any sense of what a disaster was in the making. Millions of Americans had a strong sense of what might be coming down the pike and many of them actively tried to stop it from happening. I certainly did and I found myself repeatedly in crowds of staggering size.

Women traced out pleas for peace naked on beaches, while in the Antarctic well bundled bodies formed similar peace signs in the snow. And almost everywhere on the planet hundreds of thousands, millions, marched. After the invasion was launched and we had broken Iraq like a Pottery Barn vase, Americans in startling numbers went to the effort of officially apologizing in photos at the Sorry Everyone website.

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The demonstrations of that moment were impressive enough that my hometown paper, the New York Times, which loves to cover large demonstrations as if they were of no significance, had a fine front-page piece by Patrick Tyler claiming that we might be seeing the planet's other superpower out on the streets.

Here is a description I offered of an enormous demonstration in New York City four days after the shock-and-awe invasion was launched:

"Twenty to thirty minutes after the group I was with ended our march at Washington Square and dispersed, I called my son – thanks to the glories of the cell phone – and he told me he was stuck at the end of the march over 30 blocks north of us. And we hadn't even been near the front of the march. That's a lot of people and there were sizeable crowds of onlookers, cheering from the street side as well as people waving or offering V signs from windows all along the way. It was a remarkably upbeat experience. We were all, perhaps, stunned by the evidence of our existence. Many, many young people. Wonderful signs. Drums and music. Roaring waves of cheers at the end. I think we felt something like shock and awe – of the genuine kind – that we had not gone away, that we were not likely to go away."

And then, in a sense, we were gone. And yet, in another sense, we never left the scene.

At the time the invasion was launched, polls showed over 70% of Americans in support of the President's war (or in a state of terror about terror, should we not stop Saddam Hussein from nuking us). Now, here we are, four years later, and the pundits who were telling us that we should indeed do it are still familiar fixtures on our TVs, while the faces of the pundits who didn't, and of the Americans, in their millions, who arrived at similar conclusions and tried to stop possibly the maddest, most improvident war in our history, have been erased from memory.

And yet, to offer a little hope to those who believe that the mainstream media holds the idling brains of hundreds of millions of Americans helplessly in its thrall, that we are all merely the manipulated, let's consider something curious indeed: The general point of view of the minority represented in those giant prewar demonstrations took deep hold as time passed and has now been embraced by a striking majority.

Back in December 2006, when James Baker's Iraq Study Group released its report – and was hailed in the press for finding genuine "common ground" on Iraq – I argued that the American people, without much help from politicians or the media, "had formed their own

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Iraq Study Group and arrived at sanity well ahead of the elite and all the 'wise men' in Washington."

The Bush administration, of course, rejected the findings of the Iraq Study Group, while the Democrats, by and large, accepted them. But no one turned out to be particularly interested in the "Iraq Study Group" formed by ordinary Americans whose "findings" were expressed in that least active of all forms: the opinion poll (and later, the midterm election). Nonetheless, the numbers in those polls represent a modest miracle, if you think about it.

According to a poll released that December by the reliable Program on International Policy Attitudes (PIPA), 58% of Americans wanted a withdrawal of all U.S. troops from Iraq on a timeline – 18% within six months, 25% within a year, 15% within two years; 68% of Americans wanted us completely out of that country with no permanent bases left behind, including a majority of Republicans – despite the fact, that you could search the American press, most of the time, in vain for any indication that the Bush administration had built a series of vast military bases, big enough to have multiple bus routes and capable of housing 20,000 or more American troops and contractors. In addition, according to PIPA, by the end of 2006, 60% of Americans had reached the conclusion that the U.S. military presence was "provoking more conflict than it is preventing"; while only 35% still thought it a "stabilizing force" in Iraq.

Too bad we don't have similar polls for politicians, opinion-makers, and media gatekeepers. They would surely bear little relation to PIPA's findings.

In 2007, if anything, such polling figures have only grown more emphatic. A recent Newsweek poll, for instance, offered the following figures: 69% of Americans disapprove of the President's "handling" of the Iraqi situation; 61% think the U.S. is losing ground in Iraq; 64% oppose the President's "surge" plan; 59% favor Congressional legislation requiring the withdrawal of all U.S. forces by the fall of 2008.

In the most recent CNN poll, 61% of Americans feel the decision to launch the invasion of Iraq was "not worth it"; 54% think the U.S. will not win there; 58% believe we should either withdraw "now" or "in a year"; in the most recent USA Today/Gallup poll, 58% favor total withdrawal from Iraq either immediately or within 12 months. So it goes in poll after poll, while the President's approval ratings continue their slow slide into the low 30s.

Let's remember, by the way, that, unlike mainstream Democratic "withdrawal" plans, the American public is talking about actually leaving Iraq, as in that old, straightforward slogan of the Vietnam era: Out now! In other words, there is a hardly noted but growing gap – call

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it, in Vietnam-era-speak, a "credibility gap" – between the Washington consensus and what the American people believe should be done when it comes to Iraq.

Add in one more odd fact here: It's possible that American public opinion is now actually closer in its conclusions to its Iraqi equivalent than to the Washington consensus. A number of recent polls, in which Iraqis expressed grim feelings about what has happened to their country, have been released and, like the American polls, they seem to reflect a belief that American forces are anything but "stabilizing" and an urge simply to have the Americans out. A PIPA September 2006 poll found "that seven in ten Iraqis want U.S.-led forces to commit to withdraw within a year."

Outsourcing protest

And yet the translation of all this sentiment, of these conclusions, into visible action, despite inspirational moments, has generally been less than overwhelming. Yes, in the years since the invasion, there have been a few enormous marches; and yes, there are groups that protest regularly, even heroically; and yes, in cities and towns across the country, protesters have gone out weekly with their signs, sometimes to freezing mid-winter street corners, simply to make a point. Nonetheless, given the extremity of the Bush administration and its acts, it's hard not to wonder why, most of the time, the levels of mobilization have been so relatively weak.

Those of us who can use the tumultuous mobilizations of the Vietnam era as a point of comparison – there was even a group called The Mobe then – are certainly aware that this time around nothing comparable has happened. It's crossed my mind that there might even be a silver lining in the disappearance of those large, boisterous prewar crowds, in the fact that, generally speaking, the country seems, in protest terms, strangely demobilized.

In the Vietnam era, though few realize this, antiwar sentiment was strongest at the bottom, in the blue-collar world. As Vietnam scholar Chris Appy has pointed out, for instance, a Gallup poll in January 1971 "showed that the less formal education you had, the more likely you were to want the military out of [Vietnam]: 80% of Americans with grade school educations were in favor of a U.S. withdrawal from Vietnam; 75% of high school graduates agreed; only among college graduates did the figure drop to 60%."

What largely neutralized the full development of antiwar sentiment among the majority of Americans in that era was, I believe, the strength of anti-antiwar-movement sentiment, the

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visceral reaction of many working-class Americans against the crowds of protestors, against the look of that far wilder moment (and a media that invariably focused its cameras and attention on the wildest-looking of the demonstrators, especially those carrying the flags of the enemy and chanting, "Ho, Ho, Ho Chi Minh, NLF is going to win"). That visceral dislike for antiwar sentiment, as expressed in the streets, was strongest at the bottom. In other words, in those years, angry feelings about the disastrous war in Vietnam were offset by angry feelings about the most visible of those demonstrating against it.

Interesting enough, according to John Mueller of Ohio State University, an expert on the subject, the loss of support the Bush administration has experienced for its Iraqi adventure has followed the same arc as in the Vietnam era (and the Korean War era as well); but, in the Iraqi case, support has eroded far more "precipitously," based on far fewer American casualties and, Mueller wrote back in late 2005, "there is little the Bush administration can do to reverse this decline."

On this he proved correct. If anything, the decline in support seems only to have intensified in recent months, leaping well ahead of equivalent figures for the Vietnam era. Only four years into the Iraqi catastrophe, polling figures match or exceed those for 1970 (perhaps seven years into the Vietnam conflict, depending on how you count) on questions like whether you favor the complete withdrawal of American forces. In 1970, for instance, 56% of Americans thought going into Vietnam had been a mistake, already way below figures for Iraq. In the latest ABC News/Washington Post poll, for example, a record 64% of Americans say the war was "not worth fighting."

Given that, why were antiwar Americans so mobilized in the Vietnam era and why are they so relatively demobilized now? (And don't think, by the way, that the Vietnam-era mobilization in the streets, with all its wildness and excesses, made no difference. Seymour Hersh, for example, points out in *The Price of Power: Kissinger in the Nixon White House* that President Nixon was considering a major escalation of the war in 1969 when vast crowds of demonstrators descended on the capital. "Those Americans who marched in Washington on October 15 to protest the war," Hersh wrote, "had no idea of their impact; they were protesting the policies already adopted by the Nixon administration and not those under consideration. Nixon came out of the crisis convinced that the protesters had forced him to back down [from his secret plans to escalate the war]. The protesters thought the Moratorium had been largely a failure.")

The reason most often cited for the Vietnam-era mobilization is the draft. After all, we still

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had a citizen army then. Usually, the draft explanation is linked only to fear – the fear, in particular, that middle-class kids had of going to Vietnam; and fear was certainly a factor that drove some young men into the streets. But it wasn't, to my mind, the predominant one. The draft had a more important effect. It reminded young men (and also young women, who couldn't be drafted) and their friends, relatives, and parents that the killing going on in Vietnam wasn't just some distant event, that it touched and affected them. The draft made the war, and anger about it, real in a mobilizing way as nothing has done today.

Here's a second difference of eras: The young in revolt in the 1960s, whether on campuses or in the military, even those who claimed they were out to change the "system" or bring down "the establishment," had grown up with a deeply embedded belief that this was a system that could be challenged, could be changed; that real democracy (or "participatory democracy" in the phrase of the moment) was actually possible; that each person could make a difference. We still retained – whether we knew it or not – a kind of faith in the American system and its ability to respond. We had hope.

Similarly – and this is a third point seldom mentioned today – the young in the streets, however frustrated by the moment, however unresponsive or even criminal they found their leaders, still believed that, at some level, they would be, and should be, listened to. And the fact is they were being listened to. When President Lyndon B. Johnson complained about "that horrible song" ("Hey, hey, LBJ, how many kids did you kill today?"), he was listening; when Richard Nixon went out of his awkward way to claim that he would be watching a Washington Redskins football game as demonstrators arrived in town, he was signaling that he knew they were coming.

Today, it crosses no young minds that the top officials in the White House might be listening. Many fewer young people, I suspect, have any remnant of that deep faith that our political system could be responsive to them or that anything they could do might change it. When they look to Washington, what they see is fraud, dysfunction, conspiracy, cronyism, cabal, influence-peddling, corruption, fear – in short, a system, a world, beyond response, possibly beyond repair, and utterly alien to their lives. In such a situation, despair or apathy tends to replace anger and hope.

The Iraq demobilization, then, is certainly part of a larger demobilization, a deeper belief that, as Bill Moyers made vividly clear in a recent speech, your vote doesn't matter; that democracy is a-functional; that none of this has anything to do with you, or your ballot, or your feet, or your sign, or your shout.

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Our world has changed radically since the Vietnam era. Today, an increasing part of what matters in public life (and work life) has been "privatized" and subcontracted out, or simply outsourced.

The U.S. military has essentially been subcontracted out to small-town and immigrant or green-card America – to, that is, the forgotten or ignored places in our land; as a result, for most people in draft-less America, the war is not part of our lives or that of our children. (The draft itself has been carefully kept off the table by the Bush administration, despite the desperation of a body-hungry, overstretched military.) In addition, war-fighting has been outsourced to private corporate contractors who deliver the mail and the fuel, do KP, wash the laundry, build the bases, and, in the case of tens of thousands of rent-a-cop mercenaries, do some of the guarding, fighting, and interrogating in Iraq and Afghanistan.

And yes, the political system has increasingly been subcontracted out, with malice aforethought, to thieves, looters, cronies, and absolute dopes. Little wonder that Americans, living through the Age of Enron, scanning the horizon from Iraq to New Orleans to Walter Reed Army Medical Center, and watching Halliburton head for Dubai, generally believe their system no longer works; that those high-school civics texts are a raging joke (that, in fact, fierce joking, à la Jon Stewart, is the only reasonable response to the extreme, roiling absurdity of this administration as well as our world); and that, if you took to the streets of the capital, no one in either party would be paying the slightest attention.

No wonder Americans have arrived at a series of striking conclusions on Iraq, but haven't done much about them.

In an interview with the President, Jim Lehrer recently inquired about why he hadn't asked the public (other than the military) to "sacrifice" more. Bush, who had urged Americans to show their post-9/11 mettle by heading for Disney World and intensifying their shopping behavior, fumbled around before replying this way:

"Well, you know, I think a lot of people are in this fight. I mean, they sacrifice peace of mind when they see the terrible images of violence on TV every night. I mean, we've got a fantastic economy here in the United States, but yet, when you think about the psychology of the country, it is somewhat down because of this war."

Perhaps the formula wasn't so much bread and circuses as terror and consumerism. (Stop al-Qaeda, use more gas.) Same idea, though. This was, after all, an administration intent on terrifying and demobilizing most Americans (while mobilizing the foot-soldiers of the politi-

cal right), all so that they could create a *Pax Americana* world and a *Pax Republican* "home-land."

It was a mad dream, now in ruins. In response – and this is just my own hunch – Americans performed their own acts of privatization, even as they came to reject this administration, its war, and the way it was gambling with all our lives. That's not so surprising. After all, we really do all breathe the same air, live in the same world. And so, while they were at it, many Americans may have subcontracted out their war protest to others, to the pros maybe (even if those pros were actually dedicated amateurs, some of whom really were sacrificing something in their place). That, I think, is the forest I see.



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