

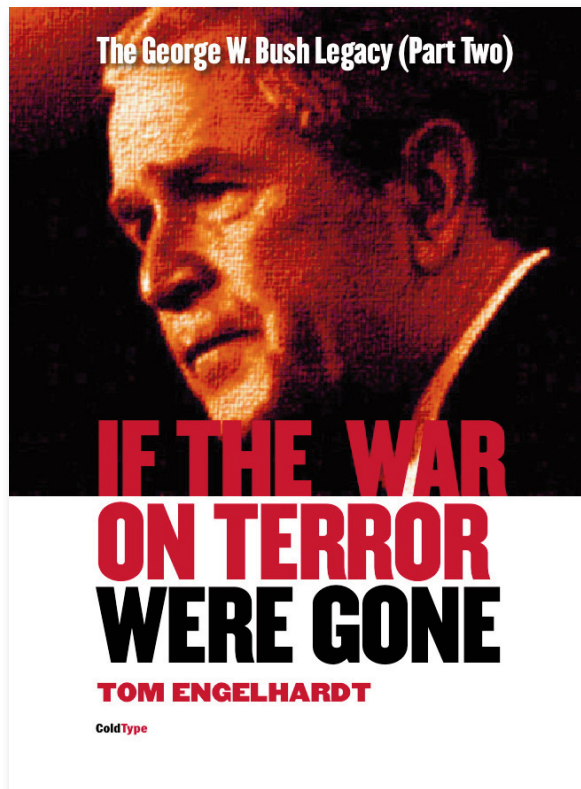


The George W. Bush Legacy (Part Two)

**IF THE WAR
ON TERROR
WERE GONE**

TOM ENGELHARDT

ColdType



Tom Engelhardt, who runs the Nation Institute's Tomdispatch.com, is the co-founder of the American Empire Project. His book, *The End of Victory Culture* (University of Massachusetts Press), has been thoroughly updated in a newly issued edition that deals with victory culture's crash-and-burn sequel in Iraq.

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IF THE WAR ON TERROR WERE GONE

Consider the debate among four Democratic presidential candidates on ABC News recently. In the previous week, the price of a barrel of oil briefly touched \$100, unemployment hit 5%, the stock market had the worst three-day start since the Great Depression, and the word "recession" was in the headlines and in the air. So when ABC debate moderator Charlie Gibson announced that the first fifteen-minute segment would be taken up with "what is generally agreed to be... the greatest threat to the United States today," what did you expect?

As it happened, he was referring to "nuclear terrorism," specifically "a nuclear attack on an American city" by al-Qaeda (as well as how the future president would "retaliate"). In other words, Gibson launched his version of a national debate by focusing on a fictional, futuristic scenario, at this point far-fetched, in which a Pakistani loose nuke would fall into the hands of al-Qaeda, be transported to the United States, perhaps picked up by well-trained al-Qaeda minions off the docks of Newark, and set off in the Big Apple. In this, though, he was surely channeling Rudy Giuliani, he managed to catch the essence of what may be George W. Bush's major legacy to this country.

On September 11, 2001, in his first post-attack address to the nation, George W. Bush was already using the phrase, "the war on terror." On September 13th, Deputy Secretary of Defense Paul Wolfowitz announced that the administration was planning to do a lot more than just take out those who had attacked the United States. It was going to go about "removing the sanctuaries, removing the support systems, ending states who sponsor terrorism." We were, Bush told Americans that day, in a state of "war"; in fact, we were already in "the first war of the twenty-first century."

That same day, R.W. Apple, Jr. of the *New York Times* reported that senior officials had

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"cast aside diplomatic niceties" and that "the Bush administration today gave the nations of the world a stark choice: stand with us against terrorism... or face the certain prospect of death and destruction." Stand with us against terrorism (or else) – that would be the measure by which everything was assessed in the years to come. That very day, Secretary of State Colin Powell suggested that the U.S. would "rip [the bin Laden] network up" and "when we're through with that network, we will continue with a global assault on terrorism."

A global assault on terrorism. How quickly the President's Global War on Terror was on the scene. And no nation was to be immune. On September 14th, the news was leaked that "a senior State Department official" had met with "15 Arab representatives" and delivered a stiff "with us or against us" message: Join "an international coalition against terrorism" or pay the price. There would be no safe havens. The choice – as Deputy Secretary of State Richard Armitage would reportedly inform Pakistan's intelligence director after the 9/11 attacks – was simple: Join the fight against al-Qaeda or "be prepared to be bombed. Be prepared to go back to the Stone Age." The price of a barrel of crude oil was, then, still under \$20.

From that day to this, from the edge of the \$20 barrel of oil to the edge of the \$100 one, the Global War on Terror would be the organizing principle for the Bush administration as it shook off "the constraints," "took off the gloves," loosed the CIA, and sent the U.S. military into action; as it went, in short, for the Stone Age jugular. The phrase, Global War on Terror, while never quite catching on with the public, would become so familiar in the corridors of Washington that it would soon morph into one of the least elegant acronyms around – GWOT – sometimes known among neocons as "World War IV," or by military men and administration officials – after Iraq devolved from fantasy blitzkrieg into disaster – as "the Long War."

In the administration's eyes, the GWOT was to be the key to the magic kingdom, the lever with which the planet could be pried open for American dominion. It gave us an interest everywhere. After all, as Pentagon spokesperson Victoria Clarke would say in January 2002 (and this was a typical comment of that moment): "The estimates are anywhere from 50 or 60 to 70 countries that have al Qaeda cells in them. The scope extends far beyond Afghanistan." Administration officials, in other words, were already talking about a significant portion of existing states as potential targets. This was not surprising, since the GWOT was meant to create planetary free-fire zones. These al-Qaeda targets or breeding grounds, after all, had to be emptied. We were, as Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld and other top officials were saying almost immediately after 9/11, going to "drain" the global "swamp" of terrorists. And any countries that got in the way had better watch out.

With us or against us, that was the sum of it, and terror was its measure. If any connection could be made – even, as in the case of Saddam Hussein and al-Qaeda, a thoroughly bogus one – it immediately offered a compelling home-front explanation for possible inter-

vention. The safety and security of Americans was, after all, at stake in every single place where those terrorist mosquitoes might be breeding. If you had the oil lands of the planet on your mind (as was true with Dick Cheney's infamous Energy Task Force), then the threat of terrorism – especially nuclear terrorism – was a safe bet. If you wanted to fortify your position in new oil lands, then the ticket was to have the Pentagon move in – as in Africa – to help weak, possibly even failing, states prepare themselves against the forces of terror.

For us or against us in the GWOT, that was the way all things were to be judged, no matter the place or the complexities of the local situation – in Pakistan no less than the Gulf of Guinea or Central Asia. And that was to be true at home as well. There, too, you were for us or against us. Those few who opposed the Patriot Act, for instance, were obviously not patriots. The minority who claimed that you couldn't be at "war" with "terror," that what was needed in response to 9/11 was firm, ramped up police action were simply laughed out of the room. In the kindest light, they were wusses; in the worst light, essentially traitors. They lacked not only American red-bloodedness, but a willingness to blood others and be bloody-minded. End of story. In the wake of those endlessly replayed, apocalyptic-looking scenes of huge towers crumbling and near-mushroom-clouds of ash billowing upwards, a chill of end-time fear swept through the nation. War, whatever name you gave it, was quickly accepted as the obvious, commensurate answer to what had happened. In a nation in the grips of the politics of fear, it seemed reasonable enough that a restoration of "security" – American security – should be the be-all and end-all globally. Everything, then, was to be calibrated against the successes of the GWOT.

Domestically, a distinctly un-American word, "homeland," entered our everyday world, was married to "security," and then "department," and suddenly you had a second defense department, whose goal was simply to make the American people "safe." Alone on the planet, Americans would now be allowed a "safe haven" of which no one could rob us.

From Seattle to Tampa, Toledo to Dallas, fear of terrorism became a ruling passion – as well as a pure money-maker for the mini-homeland-industrial complex that grew up around the new Department of Homeland Security. A thriving industry of private security firms, surveillance outfits, and terror consultants was suddenly among us. With its help, the United States would be locked-down in an unprecedented way – and to do that, we would also have to lock down the planet by any means necessary. We would fight "them" everywhere else, as the President would say again and again, so as not to fight them here.

THE ELEPHANT AND THE GWOT

If the Global War on Terror initially seemed to be the royal road to the Bush administration's cherished dream of a global Pax Americana and a local Pax Republicana, it was, it turned

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out, also a trap. As manipulatively as they might use their global war to stoke domestic fears and create rationales for what they wanted to do anyway, like so many ruling groups they also came to believe in their own formulations. The GWOT would, in fact, be a Presidential monomania. According to journalist Ron Suskind in his book *The One Percent Doctrine*, "The President himself designed a chart: the faces of the top al Qaeda leaders with short bios stared out. As a kill or capture was confirmed, he drew an 'X' over the face." According to *Washington Post* reporter Bob Woodward, the President kept that "personal scorecard for the war" in a handy desk drawer in the Oval Office for the next hot piece of good news on terror.

In the universe of the GWOT and homeland security, everything would be obsessively U.S.-centric. In fact, the administration's "war" brings to mind an old joke in which various nationalities are asked to write essays on "the elephant." The Frenchman, for instance, writes on *L'Éléphant et L'Amour*. In an updated version of the joke, the American would, of course, write on "The Elephant and the Global War on Terror". The media picked up this obsession. On some days you can still see this reflected clearly in news accounts – as in this typical first paragraph from a news piece in the January 2 *Wall Street Journal* on the aftermath of fraudulent presidential elections in Kenya.

"Kenya's marred presidential vote and the violence that has spiraled from it are threatening an island of stability in the otherwise volatile horn of Africa and endangering U.S. counterterrorism efforts in the region."

Or, to return for a moment to Charlie Gibson's loose-nuke terrorism scenario in that Democratic debate: It was a given that neither Gibson, nor any of the Democratic presidential hopefuls on stage would mention the single country for which such a scenario might have an element of realism – Pakistan's neighbor, India. But that's just par for the course, since other countries, other peoples, except as they relate to the American War on Terror, have neither purpose, nor reality. Without the GWOT, without the (narrowly defined) issue of American "insecurity," they all qualify as just "the elephant." And yet, as an obsession, as war policy as well as domestic policy, banking everything on the GWOT has proved about as foolish, as self-defeating, as – let's say it – mad, as anyone could possibly have imagined.

To put this Bush legacy and its significance in perspective, here's my own fantasy scenario for you to debate:

Imagine that, by some unknown process, the GWOT succeeds. Instantly. Al-Qaeda and other like-minded terrorist and wannabe terrorist groups are simply wiped off the face of the Earth. They cease to exist. Tomorrow. No al-Qaeda in Mesopotamia. No original al-Qaeda

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(with its local admixtures) in the Pakistani tribal areas or Afghanistan. No al-Qaeda-style car bombers lurking in London. No more hijacked vehicles heading for American buildings or U.S. Navy vessels. No more trains blowing up in Madrid railway stations. No more al-Qaeda-labeled suicide car bombs going off in Algiers, or Istanbul, or anywhere else. The end. *Finis.*

This would mean, of course, that the American obsession of these last years, the Global War on Terror would be ended, too. There would then be no reason for the world to be with us or against us, no need for a Department of Homeland Security, or draconian laws, or major surveillance programs, and so on.

Now, we still have a few minutes left in this segment of our "debate," so let's just keep imagining. Take a glance around the world – theoretically made "secure" and "safe" for Americans – and ask yourself this: If the Global War on Terror were over, what would be left? What would we be rid of? What would be changed? Would oil be, say, \$60 a barrel, or even \$20 a barrel? Would Russia return to being an impoverished nearly Third World country, as it was before 2001, rather than a rising energy superpower? Would the Iraq War be over? Would the Arctic Sea re-ice? Would Afghans welcome our occupation with open arms and accept our permanent bases and jails on their territory? Would all those dollars in Chinese and Middle Eastern hands return to the U.S. treasury? Would Latin America once again be the "backyard" of the United States? Would we suddenly be hailed around the world for our "victory" and feared once again as the "sole superpower," the planetary "hyperpower"? Would we no longer be in, or near, recession? Would hundreds of thousands of manufacturing jobs begin flowing back into the country? Would the housing market bounce back? Would unemployment drop?

The answer to all of the above, of course, is resoundingly and repeatedly "no." Essential power relations in the world turn out to have next to nothing to do with the war on terror (which may someday be seen as the last great ideological gasp of American globalism). In this sense, terrorism, no matter how frightening, is an ephemeral phenomenon. The fact is, non-state groups wielding terror as their weapon of choice can cause terrible pain, harm, and localized mayhem, but they simply don't take down societies like ours. The IRA did not take down England despite years of devastating terror bombings in central London; nor did al-Qaeda take down Spain, even with a devastating bombing of trains entering a Madrid railway station. And neither the British, nor the Spanish acted as though that might happen.

The Global War on Terror's greatest achievement – for American rulers and ruled alike – may simply have been to block out the world as it was, to block out, that is, reality. When it came to al-Qaeda's ability to cause death in the United States, any American faced more danger simply getting into a car and hitting an American highway, taking up smoking, or possibly even (these days) going to an American suburban high school.

A NATION OF COWARDS?

Most of the things that needed to be done to make us safer after 9/11 undoubtedly could have been done without much fuss, without a new, more bureaucratic, less efficient Department of Homeland Security, without a new, larger U.S. Intelligence Community, without pumping ever more money into the Pentagon, and certainly without invading and occupying Iraq. Most societies which have dealt with terror – often far worse campaigns than we have experienced, despite the look of 9/11 – have faced the dangers involved without becoming obsessional over their safety and security, without locking down their countries, and then attempting to do the same with the planet, as the Bush administration did. In the process, we may have turned ourselves into the functional equivalent of a nation of cowards, ready to sacrifice so much of value on the altar of the God of “security.”

Think of it: nineteen fanatics with hijacked planes, backed and funded by a relatively small movement based in one of the most impoverished places on the planet, did all this; or, put more accurately, faced with the look of the apocalypse and the dominating urges of the Bush administration, we did what al-Qaeda’s crew never could have done. Blinding ourselves via the President’s GWOT, we released American hubris and fear upon the world, in the process making almost every situation we touched progressively worse for this country.

The fact is that those who run empires can sometimes turn the right levers in societies far away. Historically, they have sometimes been quite capable of seeing the world and actual power relations as they are, clearly enough to conquer, occupy, and pacify other countries. Sometimes, they were quite capable of dividing and ruling local peoples for long periods, or hiring native troops to do their dirty work. But here’s the dirty miracle of the Bush administration: Thinking GWOT all the way, its every move seemed to do more damage than the last – not just to the world, but to the fabric of the country they were officially protecting.

Among their many GWOT-ish achievements, top administration officials demarcated an area extending from the western border of China through the territories of the former Central Asian SSRs of the Soviet Union and deep into the Middle East, down through the Horn of Africa and across North Africa (all of this more or less coinciding with the oil heartlands of the planet), and dubbed it “the arc of instability.” Then, from Somalia to Pakistan, they managed to set it aflame, transforming their own empty turn of phrase into a reality on the ground, even as the price of crude oil soared.

Opinion polls indicate that, in this electoral season, terrorism is no longer at, or even near, the top of the American agenda of worries. Right now, it tends to fall far down lists of “the most important issue to face this country” (though significantly higher among Republicans than Democrats or independents). Nonetheless, don’t for a second think that the subject isn’t lodged deep in national consciousness. When asked recently by the pollsters of

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CNN/Opinion Research Corporation: "How worried are you that you or someone in your family will become a victim of terrorism," a striking 39% of Americans were either "very worried" or "somewhat worried"; another 33% registered as "not too worried." These figures might seem reasonable in New York City, but nationally? As the Democratic debate Saturday indicated, the politics of security and fear have been deeply implanted in our midst, as well as in media and political consciousness. Even candidates who proclaim themselves against "the politics of fear" (and many don't) are repeatedly forced to take care of fear's rhetorical business.

Imagining how a new president and a new administration might begin to make their way out of this mindset, out of a preoccupation guaranteed to solve no problems and exacerbate many, is almost as hard as imagining a world without al-Qaeda. After all, this particular obsession has been built into our institutions, from Guantanamo to the Department of Homeland Security. It's had the time to sink its roots into fertile soil; it now has its own industries, lobbying groups, profit centers. Unbuilding it will be a formidable task indeed. Here, then – a year early – is a Bush legacy that no new president is likely to reverse soon.

Ask yourself honestly: Can you imagine a future America without a Department of Homeland Security? Can you imagine a new administration ending the global lockdown that has become synonymous with Americanism?

The Bush administration will go, but the job it's done on us won't. That is the sad truth of our presidential campaign moment.



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