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9/11 and the manipulation of the USA

Traveling from New York City in late September 2001, on a pre-scheduled book tour, author Joan Didion spoke with audiences in several cities on the West Coast. In the wake of 9/11, she later wrote, "these people to whom I was listening – in San Francisco and Los Angeles and Portland and Seattle – were making connections I had not yet in my numbed condition thought to make: connections between [the American] political process and what had happened on September 11, connections between our political life and the shape our reaction would take and was in fact already taking. These people recognized that even then, within days after the planes hit, there was a good deal of opportunistic ground being seized under cover of the clearly urgent need for increased security. These people recognized even then, with flames still visible in lower Manhattan, that the words 'bipartisanship' and 'national unity' had come to mean acquiescence to the administration's preexisting agenda..."

A lot of media coverage was glorifying people who died and/or showed courage on September 11, 2001. "In fact," Didion contended, "it was in the reflexive repetition of the word 'hero' that we began to hear what would become in the year that followed an entrenched preference for ignoring the meaning of the event in favor of an impenetrably flattening celebration of its victims, and a troublingly belligerent idealization of historical ignorance."

To observe the political manipulation of 9/11 after the towers collapsed was to witness a multidimensional power grab exercised largely via mass media. By the end of 2002, Didion concisely and incisively described what occurred: "We had seen, most importantly, the insistent use of September 11 to justify the reconception of America's correct role in the world as one of initiating and waging virtually perpetual war." Instead of, even in theory, being a war to end all wars, the new war for America would be a war to end peace.

Like many of his colleagues in the upper reaches of the Bush administration, Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld went out of his way to stress that this war – with no single nation to defeat and no finite enemy to vanquish – would be open-ended. On September 27, 2001, a New York Times op-ed piece under Rumsfeld's byline emphasized the theme:

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"Some believe the first casualty of any war is the truth. But in this war, the first victory must be to tell the truth. And the truth is, this will be a war like none other our nation has faced."

Written two weeks after 9/11, the short Rumsfeld essay was an indicative clarion call. And, from the outset, the trumpet was sounding inside a tent pitched large enough to accommodate any number of configurations: "This war will not be waged by a grand alliance united for the single purpose of defeating an axis of hostile powers. Instead, it will involve floating coalitions of countries, which may change and evolve."

Purporting to be no-nonsense, the message from the Pentagon's civilian head was expansive to the point of limitlessness: "Forget about 'exit strategies'; we're looking at a sustained engagement that carries no deadlines." If the concepts of deadlines and exit strategies were suddenly obsolete, so too was the idea that disfavored historical contexts should or could matter a heck of a lot.

At once, the proclaimed war on terrorism was to be unending, and impervious to information or analysis that might encourage critical scrutiny. As soon as the basic premises of the ongoing war were accepted, the irrelevance of any inconvenient part of the historical record was a given.

And so, when Rumsfeld's essay in the New York Times told a still-shocked nation in late September 2001 that it was embarking on "a war against terrorism's attack on our way of life" – an attack coming from foes "committed to denying free people the opportunity to live as they choose" – some questions were off limits. Such as: Perhaps the attack was more against our foreign policy than against our domestic "way of life" or our opportunity to live as we choose? (Scandinavian countries, for instance, were not notably different in the extent or character of their freedoms compared to the United States, yet those nations did not seem to be in much danger of an Al Qaeda attack.) Explorations along that line were out of bounds.

"By accepting the facile cliché that the battle under way against terrorism is a battle against evil, by easily branding those who fight us as the barbarians, we, like them, refuse to acknowledge our own culpability," journalist Chris Hedges has observed. "We ignore real injustices that have led many of those arrayed against us to their rage and despair."

Numerous reporters seemed content to provide stenographic services for official U.S. sources under the guise of journalism. During a September 17, 2001, appearance on David Letterman's show, the CBS news anchor Dan Rather laid it on the line. "George Bush is the president," Rather said, "he makes the decisions." Speaking as "one American," the newsman added: "Wherever he wants me to line up, just tell me where. And

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he'll make the call."

Cokie Roberts, well known as a reporter-pundit for NPR and ABC, appearing on the Letterman show a few weeks later, gushed: "I am, I will just confess to you, a total sucker for the guys who stand up with all the ribbons on and stuff, and they say it's true and I'm ready to believe it. We had General Shelton on the show the last day he was chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff and I couldn't lift that jacket with all the ribbons and medals. And so when they say stuff, I tend to believe it."

Long after September 11, 2001, most U.S. reporting seemed to be locked into a zone that excluded unauthorized ironies. It simply accepted that the U.S. government could keep making war on "terror" by using high-tech weapons that inevitably terrorized large numbers of people. According to routine news accounts, just about any measures deemed appropriate by Washington fit snugly under the rubric of an ongoing war that might never end in any of our lifetimes.

A year after 9/11, Nicholas Lemann wrote in the *New Yorker*, the "war on terror" was a phrase that "has entered the language so fully, and framed the way people think about how the United States is reacting to the September 11 attacks so completely, that the idea that declaring and waging war on terror was not the sole, inevitable, logical consequence of the attacks just isn't in circulation." In late November 2002, a retired U.S. Army general, William Odom, told C-SPAN viewers: "Terrorism is not an enemy. It cannot be defeated. It's a tactic. It's about as sensible to say we declare war on night attacks and expect we're going to win that war. We're not going to win the war on terrorism. And it does whip up fear. Acts of terror have never brought down liberal democracies. Acts of parliament have closed a few."

Variations on a simple dualism – we're good and people who don't like us are bad – had never been far from mainstream American politics. But 9/11 concentrated such proclivities with great intensity and narrowed the range of publicly acceptable questioning. "Inquiry into the nature of the enemy we faced, in other words, was to be interpreted as sympathy for that enemy," Didion wrote. "The final allowable word on those who attacked us was to be that they were 'evildoers,' or 'wrongdoers,' peculiar constructions which served to suggest that those who used them were transmitting messages from some ultimate authority." On the say-so of those in charge of the government, we were encouraged to believe that their worldviews defined the appropriate limits of discourse.

Four years after 9/11, those limits are less narrow than they were. But mass media and politicians still facilitate the destructive policies of the Bush administration. From Baghdad to New Orleans to cities and towns that will never make headlines in the national press, the dominant corporate priorities have made a killing. Those priorities hold sway

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not only for the Iraq war but also for the entire "war on terrorism."

While military spending zooms upward, a downward slide continues for education, health care, housing, environmental protection, emergency preparedness and a wide array of other essentials. Across the United States, communities are suffering grim consequences. "Now it should be incandescently clear that no one who has any concern for the integrity and life of America today can ignore the present war," Martin Luther King Jr. said in 1967. The same statement is profoundly true in 2005.

Norman Solomon is a syndicated columnist and author.

This article is excerpted from his new book

"War Made Easy: How Presidents and Pundits Keep Spinning Us to Death."

For information, go to: www.WarMadeEasy.com