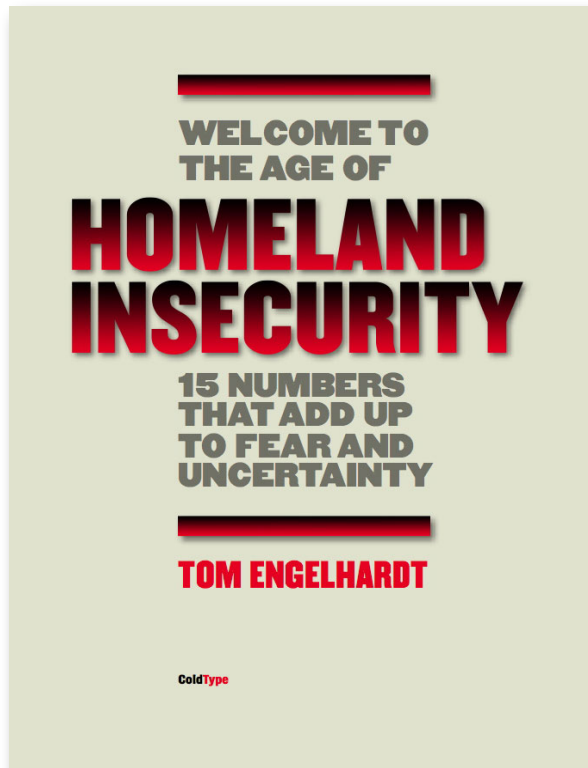

**WELCOME TO
THE AGE OF**

**HOMELAND
INSECURITY**

**15 NUMBERS
THAT ADD UP
TO FEAR AND
UNCERTAINTY**

TOM ENGELHARDT

ColdType



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Once upon a time, I studied the Chinese martial art of Tai Chi – until, that is, I realized I would never locate my “chi.” At that point, I threw in the towel and took up Western exercise. Still, the principle behind Tai Chi stayed with me – that you could multiply the force of an act by giving way before the force of others; that a smaller person could use the strength of a bigger one against him.

Now, jump to September 11, 2001 and its aftermath – and you know the Tai Chi version of history from there. Think of it as a grim cosmic joke – that the 9/11 attacks, as apocalyptic as they looked, were anything but. The true disasters followed and the wounds were largely self-inflicted, as the most militarily powerful nation on the planet used its own force to disable itself.

Before that fateful day, the Bush administration had considered terrorism, Osama bin Laden, and al-Qaeda subjects for suckers and wusses. What they were intent on was pouring money into developing an elaborate boondoggle of a missile defense system against future nuclear attacks by rogue states. Those Cold War high frontiersmen (and women) couldn't get enough of the idea of missiling up. That, after all, was where the money and the fun seemed to be. Nuclear was where the big boys – the nation states – played. “Bin Laden determined to strike in U.S....,” the CIA told the President that August. Yawn.

After 9/11, of course, George W. Bush and his top advisors almost instantly launched their crusade against Islam and then their various wars, all under the rubric of the Global War on Terror. (As Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld pungently put the matter that September,

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"We have a choice – either to change the way we live, which is unacceptable, or to change the way that they live; and we chose the latter.") By then, they were already heading out to "drain the swamp" of evil doers, 60 countries worth of them, if necessary. Meanwhile, they moved quickly to fight the last battle at home, the one just over, by squandering vast sums on an American Maginot Line of security. The porous new Department of Homeland Security, the NSA, the FBI, and other acronymic agencies were to lock down, surveill, and listen in on America. All this to prevent "the next 9/11."

In the process, they would treat bin Laden's scattered al-Qaeda network as if it were the Nazi or Soviet war machine (even comically dubbing his followers "Islamofascists"). In the blinking of an eye, and in the rubble of two enormous buildings in downtown Manhattan, bin Laden and his cronies had morphed from nobodies into supermen, a veritable Legion of Doom. (There was a curious parallel to this transformation in World War II. Before Pearl Harbor, American experts had considered the Japanese – as historian John Dower so vividly documented in his book *War Without Mercy* – bucktoothed, near-sighted military incompetents whose war planes were barely capable of flight. On December 8, 1941, they suddenly became a race of invincible supermen without, in the American imagination, ever passing through a human incarnation.)

When, in October 2001, Congress passed the Patriot Act, and an Office of Homeland Security (which, in 2002, became a "department") was established, it was welcome to the era of homeland insecurity. From then on, every major building, landmark, amusement park, petting zoo, flea market, popcorn stand, and toll booth anywhere in the country would be touted as a potential target for terrorists and in need of protection. Every police department from Arkansas to Ohio would be in desperate need of anti-terror funding. And why not, when the terrorists loomed so monstrously large, were so apocalyptically capable, and wanted so very badly to destroy our way of life. No wonder that, in the 2006 National Asset Database, compiled by the Department of Homeland Security, the state of Indiana, "with 8,591 potential terrorist targets, had 50 percent more listed sites than New York (5,687) and more than twice as many as California (3,212), ranking the state the most target-rich place in the nation."

In the administration's imagination (and the American one), they were now capable of anything. From their camps in the backlands of Afghanistan (or was it the suburbs of Hamburg?), as well as in the murky global underworld of the arms black market, al-Qaeda's minions were toiling feverishly to lay their hands on the most fiendish of plagues and pestilences – smallpox, botulism, anthrax, you name it. They were preparing to fill suitcases with nuclear weapons for deposit in downtown Manhattan. They were gathering nuclear refuse for dirty bombs. Nothing was too mad or destructive for them. Every faint but strange odor – the sweet smell of maple syrup floating across a city – was a potential bio-attack. And

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everywhere, even in rural areas, politicians were strapping on their armor and preparing to run imminent-danger, anti-terror campaigns, while urging their constituents to run for cover. Meanwhile, that former Sodom of the New World, New York City, had somehow been transformed into an I-heart-NY T-shirt-and-cap combo.

So, thank you, Osama bin Laden for expediting the Department of Homeland Security, glutting an already bloated Pentagon with even more money, ensuring that all those "expeditionary forces" would sally forth to cause havoc and not find victory in two hopeless wars, enabling the establishment of a vast offshore prison network (and the torture techniques to go with it), and creating a whole new global "security" industry to "thwart terrorists" that was, by 2006, generating \$60 billion a year in business and whose domestic wing was devoted to locking down America.

When the history of this era is finally written, based on the Tai Chi Principle, Osama bin Laden and his scattering of followers may be credited for goading the fundamentalist leaders of the United States into using the power in their grasp so – not to put a fine point on it – stupidly and profligately as to send the planet's "sole superpower" into decline. Above all, bin Laden and his crew of fanatics will have ensured one thing: that the real security problems of our age were ignored in Washington until far too late in favor of mad dreams and dark phantoms. In this lies a bleak but epic tale of folly worthy of a great American novelist (wherever she is).

In the meantime, consider the following little list – 15 numbers that offer an indication of just what the Tai Chi Principle meant in action these last years; just where American energies did and did not flow; and, in the end, just how much less safe we are now than we were in January 2001, when George W. Bush entered the Oval Office:

536,000,000,000: the number of dollars the Pentagon is requesting for the 2009 military budget. This represents an increase of almost 70% over the Pentagon's 2001 budget of \$316 billion – and that's without factoring in "supplementary" requests to fund the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, as well as the President's Global War on Terror. Add in those soaring sums and military spending has more than doubled in the Bush era. According to the Center on Budget and Policy Priorities, since 2001, funding for "defense and related programs... has jumped at an annual average rate of 8%... – four times faster than the average rate of growth for Social Security, Medicare, and Medicaid (2%), and 27 times faster than the average rate for growth for domestic discretionary programs (0.3%)."

1,390,000: the number of subprime foreclosures over the next two years, as estimated by Credit Suisse analysts. They also predict that, by the end of 2012, 12.7% of all residential bor-

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rowers may be out of their homes as part of a housing crisis that caught the Bush administration totally off-guard.

1,000,000: the number of "missions" or "sorties" the U.S. Air Force proudly claims to have flown in the Global War on Terror since 9/11, more than one-third of them (about 353,000) in what it still likes to call Operation Iraqi Freedom. This is a good measure of where American energies (and oil purchases) have gone these last years.

509,000: the number of names found in 2007 on a "terrorist watch list" compiled by the FBI. No longer, in George Bush's America, is a 10 Most Wanted list adequate. According to ABC News, "U.S. lawmakers and their spouses have been detained because their names were on the watch list" and Saddam Hussein was on the list even when in U.S. custody. By February 2008, according to the American Civil Liberties Union, the names on the same FBI list had ballooned to 900,000.

300,000: the number of American troops who now suffer from major depression or post-traumatic stress, according to a recent RAND study. This represents almost one out of every five soldiers who served in Iraq or Afghanistan. Even more – approximately 320,000 -- "report possible brain injuries from explosions or other head wounds." This, RAND reports, represents a barely dealt with "major health crisis." The depression and PTSD alone will, the study reported, "cost the nation as much as \$6.2 billion in the two years following deployment."

51,000: the number of post-surge Iraqi prisoners held in American and Iraqi jails at the end of 2007. In that country, the U.S. now runs "perhaps the world's largest extrajudicial internment camp," Camp Bucca, whose holding capacity is, even now, being expanded from 20,000 to 30,000 prisoners. Then there's Camp Cropper, with at least 4,000 prisoners, including "hundreds of juveniles." Many of these prisoners were simply swept up in surge raids and have been held without charges or access to lawyers or courts ever since. Add in prisoners (in unknown numbers) in our sizeable network of prisons in Afghanistan, at Guantanamo, and in our various offshore and borrowed prisons; add in, as well, the widespread mistreatment of prisoners at American hands; and you have the machinery for the manufacture of vast numbers of angry potential enemies, some undoubtedly willing to commit almost any act of revenge. Though there is no way to tabulate the numbers, hundreds of thousands of prisoners have certainly cycled through the Bush administration's various prisons in these last seven years, many emerging embittered. (And don't forget their embittered

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families.) Think of all this as an enormous dystopian experiment in "social networking," the Facebook from Hell without the Internet.

5,700: the number of trailers in New Orleans – issued by the Federal Emergency Management Agency as temporary housing after Hurricane Katrina – still occupied by people who lost their homes in the storm almost three years ago. Such trailers have also been found to contain toxic levels of formaldehyde fumes. Katrina ("Brownie, you're doing a heck of a job") was but one of many security disasters for the Bush administration.

658: the number of suicide bombings worldwide last year, including 542 in Afghanistan and Iraq, "more than double the number in any of the past 25 years." Of all the suicide bombings in the past quarter century, more than 86% have occurred since 2001, according to U.S. government experts. At least one of those bombers – who died in a recent coordinated wave of suicide bombings in the Iraqi city of Mosul – was a Kuwaiti, Abdallah Salih al-Ajmi, who had spent years locked up in Guantanamo.

511: the number of applicants convicted of felony crimes, including burglary, grand larceny, and aggravated assault, who were accepted into the U.S. Army in 2007, more than double the 249 accepted in 2006. According to the New York Times, between 2006 and 2007, those enrolled with convictions for wrongful possession of drugs (not including marijuana) almost doubled, for burglaries almost tripled, for grand larceny/larceny more than doubled, for robbery more than tripled, for aggravated assault went up by 30%, and for "terroristic threats including bomb threats" doubled (from one to two). Feel more secure yet?

126: the number of dollars it took to buy a barrel of crude oil on the international market this week. Meanwhile, the average price of a gallon of regular gas at the pump in the U.S. hit \$3.72, while the price of gas jumped almost 20 cents in Michigan in a week, 36 cents in Utah in a month, and busted the \$4 ceiling in Westchester, New York, a rise of 65 cents in the last year. Just after the 9/11 attacks, a barrel of crude oil was still in the \$20 range; at the time of the invasion of Iraq in March 2003, it was at about \$30. In other words, since 9/11, a barrel of crude has risen more than \$100 without the Bush administration taking any serious steps to promote energy conservation, cut down on the U.S. oil "addiction," or develop alternative energy strategies (beyond a dubious program to produce more ethanol).

82: the percentage of Americans who think "things in this country... have gotten pretty seriously off on the wrong track," according to the most recent Washington Post-ABC News poll.

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This is the gloomiest Americans have been about the "direction" of the country in the last 15 years of such polling.

40: the percentage loss ("on a trade-weighted basis") in the value of the dollar since 2001. The dollar's share of total world foreign exchange reserves has also dropped from 73% to 64% in that same period. According to the Center for American Progress, "By early May 2008, a dollar bought 42.9% fewer euros, 35.7% fewer Canadian dollars, 37.7% fewer British pounds, and 17.3% fewer Japanese yen than in March 2001."

37: the number of countries that have experienced food protests or riots in recent months due to soaring food prices, a global crisis of insecurity that caught the Bush administration completely unprepared. In the last year, the price of wheat has risen by 130%, of rice by 74%, of soya by 87%, and of corn by 31%.

0: the number of terrorist attacks by al-Qaeda or similar groups inside the United States since September 11, 2001.

So consider "the homeland" secure. Mission accomplished.

And if you doubt that, here's one last figure, representative of the ultimate insecurity that, by conscious omission as well as commission, the Bush administration has left a harried future to deal with: That number is 387: Scientists at the Mauna Loa observatory in Hawaii just released new information on carbon dioxide – the major greenhouse gas – in the atmosphere, and it's at a record high of 387 parts per million, "up almost 40% since the industrial revolution and the highest for at least the last 650,000 years." Its rate of increase is on the rise as well. Behind all these figures lurks a potential world of insecurity with which this country has not yet come to grips.



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