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Mobilizing Fear: US Politics Before and After 9

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MOBILIZING FEAR: U.S. POLITICS BEFORE AND AFTER 9/11¹

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The chief costs of terrorism derive not from the damage inflicted by the terrorists, but what those attacked do to themselves and others in response. That is, the harm of terrorism mostly arises from the fear and from the often hasty, ill-considered, and overwrought reaction (or overreaction) it characteristically, and often calculatedly, inspires in its victims.

John Mueller (Mueller, 2006: 29)

In 2007 my mother, who for more than twenty years has been concerned that I am cut off in Britain from what is going on in the United States, forwarded a letter to me that has been widely circulated on the Internet. Purportedly written by a Ms. Pam Foster to a family member in Iraq but (no doubt unknown to my mother) composed in 2005 by a former speechwriter for Republican Party candidates, it countered allegations of abuse of prisoners held in Camp X-Ray at Guantanamo Bay with the refrain, 'I don't care!'. After all, the letter continued:

Are we fighting a war on terror or aren't we? Was it or was it not started by Islamic people who brought it to our shores on September 11, 2001?

Were people from all over the world, mostly Americans, not brutally murdered that day, in downtown Manhattan, across the Potomac from our nation's capitol and in a field in Pennsylvania?

Did nearly three thousand men, women and children die a horrible, burning or crushing death that day, or didn't they? ²

With its dismissal of 'I don't care' to incidents from the desecration of the Koran, the 'roughing up' and even shooting in the head of terrorist suspects, and the treatment of 'naked Iraqi prisoners'—'no more than a college-hazing incident' (Patton, 2008)—the letter might seem to be founded on hatred. However, I doubt that the author, and

¹ My thanks to The Leverhulme Trust for financial support of research for this essay.

² The letter originally appeared on the website www.gopusa.com on 6 June 2005 and can be seen in its entirety at <http://www.americandaily.com/article/8987>. The version from 'Ms Foster' omitted the first three paragraphs, converting it from specific responses to *Newsweek's* expose of the desecration of prisoners' Korans at Camp X-Ray into a general reaction to accusations of misbehavior by the U.S. military.



I am certain that my mother, would agree. Instead, the letter's invocation of Americans decapitated by kidnappers, U.S. soldiers slain by insurgents, and innocents jailed for possession of the Bible converts the author's position into one of defense rather than aggression, based upon rather than animosity. Indeed, it is through that adoption of a defensive position that the authors convert anger into an 'I do care' position to disseminate their views.

Whether or not my mother, or the author of the letter, recognized it, their thoughts fit into a discourse with a longer historical resonance. Moreover, although I have no evidence that either has ever worked with the U.S. Government, the sentiments and the manner in which they are expressed tap into a mobilizing of emotion by the State. This is a mobilization designed to serve political interests, objectives, and strategies at home and abroad, all the time positioning those interests in the defensive language of national security rather than the offensive language of conquest and control. Put bluntly, it is the hypothesis of this essay that the projections of both 'radical Muslims', aided and abetted by the 'media', and the Americans—blown up, beheaded, or simply overworked—who suffer at their hands are constructions of a far-from-benign 'culture of fear'.

There have been a series of valuable considerations of politics and the 'culture of fear' in the last decade. Barry Glassner brought term to prominence in the United States with his book and then his appearance in Michael Moore's *Bowling for Columbine* (Glassner, 2000). Frank Furedi developed and dissected the concept, concluding that 'the absence of real choice is the message that is implicit in the many anxieties stimulated by society's obsession with risk', with governments 'treat[ing] their citizens as vulnerable subjects who tend not to know what is in their best of interest' (Furedi, 2002: 169; Furedi, 2007: 142). David Altheide has examined the construction and projection of 'terrorism' as part of a 'politics of fear' (Altheide, 2006).

I think they can be applied effectively to the reconsideration of policymaking, specifically the making of U.S. foreign policy, in both historical and contemporary cases. Although the 'culture of fear' was not specifically invoked, the concept underlay Richard Freeland's provocative 1971 study of the Truman Administration (Freeland, 1971). It is engrained in Herman and Chomsky's 'manufacturing consent' (which in turn builds upon Lippmann and Bernays) as well as Qualter's 'opinion control' in democracies (Herman and Chomsky, 1988; Bernays, 1955; Lippmann, 1922; Qualter, 1985). Building upon this scholarship, I would suggest two general hypotheses:

1. Scholarly study of U.S. foreign policy in the Cold War has been so focused on objective explanations of strategy, geopolitics, and, most important, 'national security' that it has ignored the subjective construction and projection of that policy. Provocatively stated, the Soviet Union served not so much as an actual nightmare than as a constructed nightmare to justify the projection of American power around the world.
2. Contemporary U.S. foreign policy, like the political strategy of the 1950s, does not respond to fear with plans for 'security'; rather, it has sought to channel and even stoke fear to bolster implementation of a predetermined policy. Specifically and provocatively stated, the Bush administration did not stage the tragedy of 11 September 2001, but within hours of the event it began to consider how to use a War on Terror to implement plans for regime change in Iraq.

Sixty years before my mother took advantage of the Internet to send her message, when the foes of America were not radical Islamists but Communists, President Harry Truman hosted a meeting with Congressional representatives. The Truman administration, having been told by Britain that London could no longer provide aid to Greece or Turkey, faced a challenge: how could it persuade the American public and Congress to send hundreds of millions of dollars to those two Mediterranean countries? The advice to the Democratic president from Arthur Vandenberg, the Republican leader in the Senate, was blunt: make a speech to 'scare the hell' out of the American people (Jones, 1955). Two weeks later, the president went before a joint session of Congress and issued what would become known as the Truman Doctrine: 'I believe that it must be the policy of the United States to support free peoples who are resisting attempted subjugation by armed minorities or by outside pressures' (Truman, 1947).

Truman's initiative was that of an 'official' executive political network, using the method of formal communication to justify policy rather than a private individual taking advantage of technological shift and acceleration to disseminate an urgent political message. Ironically, however, the role of the Executive would be eclipsed in favor of a representation based on catalytic individuals whipping up a public fervor that overtook Government policy.

On 9 February 1950 a then little-known senator from Wisconsin named Joseph McCarthy addressed a Republican women's club in Wheeling, West Virginia, and declared that he had a list of 205 Communists who worked in the State Department (McCarthy, 1950). The number on the list fluctuated wildly, but McCarthy's persistent message of infiltration and subversion encouraged a climate of fear and domestic repression. Thus, in the narrative set out not only by contemporary observers but by historians, the US Government merely followed—willingly or unwillingly—a path laid by the Senator.

The problem with this storyline is that it inverts cause and effect. By the time McCarthy made his Wheeling speech, the U.S. government was already well advanced in its projection mobilization of the threat within and without. Nine days after Truman set out his doctrine, the government issued an executive order requiring that any federal employee not only pass a security vetting but also sign a loyalty oath ('Executive Order 9835', 1947). Truman issued other high-profile declarations about dangerous groups within American society, notably a speech on St. Patrick's Day in 1948 in which he asserted the following: 'I do not want and I will not accept the political support of Henry Wallace and his Communists. If joining them or permitting them to join me is the price of victory, I recommend defeat' (Truman, 1948).

The domestic mobilization of fear was connected to the government's foreign policy through its guidelines on 'U.S. Objectives with Respect to the USSR to Counter Soviet Threats to U.S. Security', first adopted in November 1948 (NSC 20/4, 1948). In its most famous incarnation, NSC 68 of April 1950, the policy sanctioned not only development of the hydrogen bomb but also substantial increases in conventional forces, economic and military aid to 'friendly' governments, information programs, and covert operations. All of this depended upon congressional authorization of expenditure, however, and that in turn rested upon an intensive campaign to persuade the American public: 'The whole success of the proposed program hangs ultimately on recognition



by this Government, the American people, and all free peoples, that the cold war is in fact a real war in which the survival of the free world is at stake' (NSC 68, 1950).

On 20 April 1950 President Truman, addressing the American Society of Newspaper Editors, launched the Campaign of Truth: 'We must pool our efforts with those of the other free peoples in a sustained, intensified program to promote the cause of freedom against the propaganda of slavery. We must make ourselves heard round the world in a great campaign of truth' (Truman, 1950). Truman may have emphasized the 'positive' dimension of the American way of life but, in the Manichaeian construction of the Cold War, that political culture could only exist in tandem with the projection of the Soviet menace:

Unwillingly our free society finds itself mortally challenged by the Soviet system. No other value system is so wholly irreconcilable with ours, so implacable in its purpose to destroy ours, so capable of turning to its own uses the most dangerous and divisive trends in our own society, no other so skillfully and powerfully evokes the elements of irrationality in human nature everywhere, and no other has the support of a great and growing center of military power. (NSC 68, 1950)

Thus two months later, the incursion of North Korean troops across the 38th parallel marked a global showdown with Stalinist and Maoist Communism rather than a post-colonial civil war. And two years later, with that war turned into stalemate, the anti-Communist mobilization would rebound upon the Truman administration when presidential candidate Dwight Eisenhower accused the Democrats of 'the negative, futile, and immoral policy of "containment"' ('Republican Party Platform', 1952).

It could be contended that, for all its damaging virulence, the climate of fear had receded by 1954. In an extensive national survey conducted by Samuel Stouffer that year, less than one percent of Americans listed Communism as their primary concern. In contrast, more than eighty percent cited 'personal and family problems', forty-three percent focusing on business or financial issues (Stouffer, 1954).

That, however, is too simple a reading. If the Communist menace was far from the explicit priority for most in the United States and if its most 'extreme' proponents such as McCarthy had fallen from grace, the threat could always be invoked. Thus, when the Cold War moved beyond the European theater to 'peripheries' such as Asia and Latin America, Chinese and Cuban evils circulated from White House press conferences to Hollywood films to weekly television series.³ The specter of Communism would not be vanquished by military victory or by recognition of its 'realities' but by the collapse of political culture—at home and abroad—over Vietnam. Fear had not been met by a positive projection of 'freedom' but by tensions and even contradictions in the representation of that freedom, embodied in the famous (perhaps apocryphal) remark of an American officer in the aftermath of the Tet Offensive: 'It became necessary to destroy this village in order to save it' ('Beginning of the End', 1971).

It would be foolish beyond simplicity to attribute fear solely to the machinations of Government official. Individual and community insecurity, be it fear of the known over what has occurred or fear of the unknown over what might happen, be it fear of the natural disaster or the man-made one, has a history long before 1945. The salient

³ See, for example, J.F. MacDonald (1985) *Television and the Red Menace*. New York: Praeger.

point is not that the U.S. Government manufactured fear. Rather, having just emerged from a period of global fear amidst war, genocide, and turmoil, it could mobilize fear, using and contributing to the new structure of the 'national security state' and channeling anxieties in a public confrontation with Moscow.

What relevance does this historical background have when, for some, our dilemmas and challenges began on 11 September 2001? At one level, I would respond that the simplistic assertion that a society conditioned in part by the fear of the 'other', a fear re-stoked by Ronald Reagan's declaration in 1982 of the American confrontation with an 'evil empire', did not put that fear to rest just because the Berlin Wall fell and the Soviet Union collapsed. To the contrary, other villains had emerged before and during those supposedly climactic events—Iran's 'mullahs', Nicaragua's Sandinistas, Libya's crazed Colonel Qaddafi in the mid-1980s, Panama's Manuel Noriega in 1989; and in 1990 Iraq's Saddam Hussein (complete with photographically altered Hitleresque moustache).⁴

More importantly, these worries were not just a context for political activity; they were stoked and used by the American executive pursuing its foreign policy agenda. To be sure, this was not a process that was always consistent—another lengthy essay would be needed to explain how the Reagan administration was trying to sell aircraft parts and missiles to the same ayatollahs that they were publicly denouncing⁵—but it was ever-present. Furthermore in 1992, in an unprecedented effort, White House officials tried to link that mobilization to a new strategy seeking a 'preponderance of power' throughout the world. In a document innocuously called the Defense Planning Guidance, Assistant Secretary of Defense Paul Wolfowitz⁶ proposed that

[The administration's] first objective is to prevent the re-emergence of a new rival. This is a dominant consideration underlying the new regional defense strategy and requires that we endeavor to prevent any hostile power from dominating a region whose resources would, under consolidated control, be sufficient to generate global power. These regions include Western Europe, East Asia, the territory of the former Soviet Union, and Southwest Asia. ('Defense Planning Guidance', 1992)

Pursuit of the strategy was deferred because of the defeat of the first President Bush by Bill Clinton, but it continued to color American political discourse. Former Government officials such as Wolfowitz, Dick Cheney, Donald Rumsfeld, Zalmay Khalilzad, and Elliot Abrams (many of whom would later re-emerge in the current Bush administration) pressed their case for an American quest for 'preponderance of power' in think tanks and Government commissions.⁷ In one notable case, the Commission to Assess the Ballistic Missile Threat to the United States, chaired by Rumsfeld, dismissed intel-

⁴The *New Republic's* cover of 3 September 1990 put the altered image of Saddam above the giant caption 'Führer in the Gulf'.

⁵In the 'Iran-contra' episode, exposed in 1986, the Reagan Administration tried to fund the efforts of the Nicaraguan contras to overthrow the Sandinista Government through revenues from the sale of arms to the Iranian Government, then fighting a protracted war against Iraq.

⁶The document was written by Wolfowitz's aide Zalmay Khalilzad, who would become George W. Bush's Ambassador to Afghanistan after the fall of the Taliban, Ambassador to Iraq after the toppling of Saddam Hussein, and Ambassador to the United Nations.

⁷For one now well-known example, see the documents of the Project for a New American Century at <http://www.newamericancentury.org>.



ligence from agencies like the CIA to declare that Iran, Iraq, and North Korea would pose missile threats within the next five to ten years ('Rumsfeld Commission, 1998'). Perhaps more important, the Clinton administration contributed to the ongoing projection of those threats with their identification of 'rogue states'. Consider, for example, the words of National Security Advisor Anthony Lake in 1994:

Our policy must face the reality of recalcitrant and outlaw states that not only choose to remain outside the family but also assault its basic values. There are few 'backlash' states: Cuba, North Korea, Iran, Iraq and Libya. For now they lack the resources of a superpower, which would enable them to seriously threaten the democratic order being created around them. Nevertheless, their behavior is often aggressive and defiant. The ties between them are growing as they seek to thwart or quarantine themselves from a global trend to which they seem incapable of adapting. (Lake, 1994)

None of this is to suggest that 9/11 was a mere incident in a chain of events dating back to the start of the Cold War (I hasten to add that I am not arguing that 9/11 was 'manufactured' to implement a plan for American dominance.) That tragedy, however, was not the *ab initio* foundation for a new U.S. foreign policy or for a new construction of 'fear' in American culture. Rather, it acted upon—indeed, served as a catalyst for—both government planning and the context in which that planning was projected and developed.

On 31 January 2001, less than two weeks after the inauguration of George W. Bush, the president's National Security Council met for the first time. The lead item on the agenda was 'Regime Change in Iraq'. Secretary of Defense Rumsfeld asked his colleagues to 'imagine what the region would look like without Saddam and with a regime that is aligned with U.S. interests. It would change everything in the region and beyond. It would demonstrate what U.S. policy is all about' (Suskind, 2004). In effect, Iraq was going to be a demonstration case both of American power and the U.S. quest for preponderance in the Middle East and beyond.

That quest was frustrated, in the short term, by other foreign policy issues and crises, such as the recurrence of violence in the Israeli-Palestinian dispute and the downing of an American reconnaissance plane by China in April 2001. The deferral of the quest did not mean, however, that the 'threat' had dissipated. Saddam continued to be held up as a menace to regional stability, and U.S. warplanes periodically bombed Iraqi anti-aircraft positions. Other challenges to American 'security' were ever-present, and indeed, in the aftermath of the incident with the U.S. spy plane, there was the prospect of a showdown with the Chinese.

September 11, of course, was more than an abstract threat. It was a far too real, unprecedented illustration of how terrorism could be waged on the U.S. mainland. Even more daunting, it was an act carried out not by an identifiable enemy state but by a trans-national organization with no clear center that could be attacked in response. So, on one level, the threat was met with the imagery of a 'War on Terror': the posters of Osama bin Laden—'Wanted Dead or Alive'—and photographs of his acolytes, the institution of a color-coded measure of the level of danger, the declarations that these enemies 'follow in the path of fascism, Nazism and totalitarianism'. At another, however, the challenge had to be made tangible by giving the United States someone or

something to attack—in this case, the Taliban regime of Afghanistan that was allegedly giving shelter to bin Laden.⁸

But September 11 was far more than a manifestation of how ‘fear’ would be met by an ongoing battle for ‘security’. What it offered to the Bush administration, tragically, was the opportunity to re-frame that battle in the service of its long-term foreign policy goals. National Security Advisor Condoleezza Rice asked her staff, ‘How do we capitalize on these opportunities [presented by 9/11]?’ (cited in Lemann, 2002). Secretary of Defense Rumsfeld offered the answer in instructions to his staff: ‘Best info fast. Judge whether good enough hit S.H. [Saddam Hussein] at same time. Not only UBL [Osama bin Laden]. Go massive. Sweep it all up. Things related and not.’⁹ While Bush and his advisors deferred an immediate attack on Iraq, which some in the administration supported, notably Undersecretary of Defense Paul Wolfowitz, the president made it clear that ‘if we could prove that we could be successful in [the Afghanistan] theater, then the rest of the task would be easier’ (cited in Woodward, 2002: 84).

This is not to deny that the upsurge in fear, accompanied by grief, anger, and displays of patriotism, was not heartfelt. The government, however, did not stand aside from those emotions. To the contrary, the mobilization of those emotions could defer if not resolve, tensions and contradictions raised by the implementation of long-standing Government plans. Fear, rather than evidence, could offer the foundation for the Bush Administration to move from Kabul to other targets.

Consider, for example, the ‘Campaign for Freedom’ of the Advertising Council—the non-profit service organization through which ad agencies produce government campaigns. In one television spot, a young man attempts to check out a book from a local library. His request is not only met by hostility by the librarian; as he turns, with some trepidation, from the counter, he is met by two dark-suited gentlemen who escort him from the building. Those who saw the commercial, run through the autumn and winter of 2001/2, may have been unaware of the irony that at that time the FBI was demanding that librarians hand over lists of readers who had checked out books on subjects such as Islam (or that more than 1,000 people in the United States had been detained without charge after 9/11).¹⁰

Consider, in the ‘foreign policy’ complement to this domestic projection, the mistaken but persistent linkage of Saddam Hussein with Al Qa’eda and 9/11 by a major-

⁸ I deliberately use the modifier ‘allegedly’ for, on 20 September 2001 and again on 13 October 2001, the Taliban offered to negotiate the handover of Osama bin Laden for trial in an Islamic court. See John Burns (2001) ‘Afghans Coaxing Bin Laden, but U.S. Rejects Bid’, *New York Times*. 21 September. [http://query.nytimes.com/gst/fullpage.html?res=9400E5DC1E3BF932A1575AC0A9679C8B63&scp=2&sq=+bin+laden&st=nyt](http://query.nytimes.com/gst/fullpage.html?res=9400E5DC1E3BF932A1575AC0A9679C8B63&scp=2&sq=+bin+laden&st=nyt;); (2001) ‘Bush Rejects Taliban Offer to Hand Bin Laden Over’, *The Guardian*. 13 October. <http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2001/oct/14/Afghanistan.terrorism5>.

⁹ (2002) ‘Plans for Attack Began on 9/11’, *CBS News*. 4 September. <http://www.cbsnews.com/stories/2002/09/04/september11/main520830.shtml>.

¹⁰ The ‘Campaign for Freedom’ no longer survives on the Advertising Council’s website (www.adcouncil.org), although a related campaign, ‘I am an American’, can be found at <http://www.adcouncil.org/default.aspx?id=61>. A good summary of the Campaign for Freedom, including the contradictions of the ‘Library’ spot, is in Peter Norman (2002) ‘The Ad Council’s Campaign for Freedom’, *Flak Magazine*. 9 July. <http://www.flakmag.com/tv/freedom.html>. On the detentions after 11 September, see Andrew Gumbel (2001) ‘U.S. Detaining Foreign Nationals Without Charge and Legal Advice’, *The Independent*. 12 November. <http://news.independent.co.uk/world/americas/article143675.ece>.



ity of the American public and the encouragement of that linkage by government statements, including those by President Bush.¹¹ It is also worth noticing related 'public diplomacy' efforts: as Vice President Cheney was proposing to Tony Blair in March 2002 that planning move from Afghanistan towards an invasion of Iraq, Lynne Cheney, his wife, was opening at the Museum of London an exhibit of twenty-eight photographs of 9/11's 'Ground Zero' by Joel Meyerowitz. To heighten the message, the photographs were displayed in the room next to the permanent exhibit on the Blitz of World War II.¹²

We are now entering in the seventh year of the war in Iraq. It can easily be argued that, far from fulfilling the global blueprint set out by the Bush administration with the president standing on U.S. warships declaring, 'Mission Accomplished' (Bumiller, 2003), the venture has clearly marked the downfall of the quest for a 'preponderance of power'. Perhaps more provocatively, it could be contended that there has been an assimilation of 'fear' similar to that of the mid-1950s, a duality holding together the menace of the 'other' with the immediately relevant challenges of family, finance, and well-being. The threat level continuously scrolls at 'Elevated: Orange' on Fox's news ticker, hundreds of detainees remain in Camp X-Ray and other prisons around the world, Osama bin Laden sits (probably in the northwest frontier of Pakistan) beyond the reach of American forces, and Saddam's execution fades before everyday terror, political turmoil, and civil war in Iraq. These issues, however, are no longer quite as prominent in American discourse, be it Page 1 of the *New York Times* or (more cogently) *The Huntsville (Alabama) Times*. If you can forgive a personal assertion for this point, my mother may send me e-mails such as the one that I used to open this essay, but her concerns—and those of my father, my sisters, and other relatives in the United States—are usually closer to the bank balance than they are to the purported 'clash of civilizations'.

Still, as in the Cold War, fear may be re-mobilized against new enemies or old enemies restored. It remains to be seen whether the current denunciations of Iran will lead to military action or whether we have reached a 'tipping point' where the images cannot be translated into another campaign. It remains to be seen whether another theater of conflict—for example, Israel/Palestine or Israel/Lebanon—becomes a stage for wider intervention, whether there is a re-configuration of the old tensions with Russia or China, or whether another unexpected 'terrorist' atrocity turns the international kaleidoscope once more. For, unlike the Cold War, there is no symbolic marker—no fall of the Wall, no end to an enemy system such as Communism—that can offer

¹¹ Consider, for example, Bush's speech of 1 May 2003: 'The battle of Iraq is one victory in a war on terror that began on September the 11th, 2001' [transcript at <http://edition.cnn.com/2003/US/05/01/bush.transcript>]. Two years after 9-11, almost 70 percent of Americans still believed that 'Saddam Hussein was personally involved in the Sept. 11 attacks' [Associated Press, 2003, quoted in '69% of Americans Believe Saddam Linked to 9/11: Poll', *Arab News*, 7 September. <http://www.arabnews.com/?page=4§ion=0&article=31530&d=7&m=9&y=2003>].

¹² The photographs are exhibited at 'After September 11: Images from Ground Zero', <http://www.museumoflondon.org.uk/archive/exhibits/sept11/index.htm>. A report on the opening of the exhibition at the Museum of London is at <http://london.usembassy.gov/sept11/myrwtz.html>. See also Liam Kennedy (2003) 'Remembering September 11: Photography as Cultural Diplomacy', *International Affairs*: 315–326.

long-term absolution of the fear that has been cultivated in past generations and, in particular, in the first years of this century.

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