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—Andrew Bacevich

THE AMERICAN WAY OF WAR

How Bush's Wars Became Obama's



Tom Engelhardt

A TomDispatch book



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Praise for *The American Way of War*

“They may have Blackwater/Xe, Halliburton, aircraft carrier battle groups, deadly drones by the score, and the world’s largest military budget, but we have Tom Engelhardt—and a more powerful truth-seeking missile has seldom been invented. Longtime fans like me will be happy to see some of his most memorable pieces reprinted here, although woven together in a way that makes them still stronger; for anyone not yet familiar with his work, this is your chance to meet one of the most forceful analysts alive of our country’s dangerous, costly addiction to all things military.”

—Adam Hochschild, author of *Bury the Chains* and *King Leopold’s Ghost*

“Tom Engelhardt is the I. F. Stone of the post-9/11 age—seeing what others miss, calling attention to contradictions that others willfully ignore, insisting that Americans examine in full precisely those things that make us most uncomfortable.”

—Andrew J. Bacevich, author of *Washington Rules: America’s Path to Permanent War*

“Tom Engelhardt is among our most trenchant critics of American perpetual war. Like I. F. Stone in the 1960s, he has an uncanny ability to ferret out and see clearly the ugly truths hidden in government reports and statistics. No cynic, he always measures the sordid reality against a bright vision of a America that lives up to its highest ideals.”

—Juan R. Cole, Professor of History at the University of Michigan

“There are a lot of ways to describe Tom Engelhardt’s astonishing service to this country’s conscience and imagination: you could portray him as our generation’s Orwell, standing aside from all conventional framings to see afresh our dilemmas and blind spots, as the diligent little boy sending regular dispatches on the nakedness of the emperor and his empire, as a bodhisattva dedicated to saving all beings through compassion and awareness, but analogies don’t really describe the mix of clear and sometimes hilarious writing, deep insight, superb information, empathy, and outrage that has been the core of Tom’s TomDispatches for almost a decade, or the extraordinary contribution they’ve made to the American dialogue. Check out this bundle of some of the best from that time span.”

—Rebecca Solnit, author of *Hope in the Dark* and *A Paradise Built in Hell*

The American Way of War

How Bush's Wars Became Obama's

TOM ENGELHARDT



Haymarket Books
Chicago, Illinois

For Chalmers Johnson, the most astute observer of the American way of war I know. He broke the ground and made the difference.

INTRODUCTION

Is America Hooked on War?

“War is peace” was one of the memorable slogans on the facade of the Ministry of Truth, or Minitru in “Newspeak,” the language invented by George Orwell in 1948 for his dystopian novel *1984*. Some sixty years later, a quarter century after Orwell’s imagined future bit the dust, the phrase is, in a number of ways, eerily applicable to the United States.

On September 10, 2009, for instance, a *New York Times* front-page story by Eric Schmitt and David E. Sanger was headlined “Obama Is Facing Doubts in Party on Afghanistan, Troop Buildup at Issue.” It offered a modern version of journalistic Newspeak.

“Doubts,” of course, imply dissent, and in fact just the week before there had been a major break in Washington’s ranks, though not among Democrats. The conservative columnist George Will wrote a piece offering blunt advice to the Obama administration, summed up in its headline: “Time to Get Out of Afghanistan.” In our age of political and audience fragmentation and polarization, think of this as the Afghan version of Vietnam’s Walter Cronkite moment.

The *Times* report on those Democratic doubts, on the other hand, represented a more typical Washington moment. Ignored, for instance, was Wisconsin senator Russ Feingold’s call for the president to develop an Afghan withdrawal timetable. The focus of the piece was instead a planned speech by Michigan senator Carl Levin, chairman of the Armed Services Committee. He was, Schmitt and Sanger reported, hoping to push back against well-placed leaks (in the *Times*, among other places) indicating that war commander General Stanley McChrystal was urging the president to commit fifteen thousand to forty-five thousand more American troops to the Afghan War.

Here, according to the two reporters, was the gist of Levin’s message about what everyone agreed was a “deteriorating” U.S. position: “[H]e was against sending more American combat troops to Afghanistan until the United States speeded up the training and equipping of more Afghan security forces.”

Think of this as the line in the sand within the Democratic Party. Both positions could be summed up with the same word: More.

The essence of this “debate” came down to: More of them versus more of us (and keep in mind that more of “them”—an expanded training program for the Afghan National Army—actually meant more of “us” in the form of extra trainers and advisers). In other words, however contentious the disputes in Washington, however dimly the public viewed the war, however much the president’s war coalition might threaten to crack open, the only choices were between more and more.

In such a situation, no alternatives are likely to get a real hearing. Few alternative policy proposals even exist because alternatives that don’t fit with “more” have ceased to be part of Washington’s war culture. No serious thought, effort, or investment goes into them. Clearly referring to Will’s column

one of the unnamed “senior officials” who swarm through our major newspapers made the administration’s position clear, saying sardonically, according to the *Washington Post*, “I don’t anticipate that the briefing books for the [administration] principals on these debates over the next weeks and months will be filled with submissions from opinion columnists.... I do anticipate they will be filled with vigorous discussion...of how successful we’ve been to date.”

State of War

Because the United States does not look like a militarized country, it’s hard for Americans to grasp that Washington is a war capital, that the United States is a war state, that it garrisons much of the planet, and that the norm for us is to be at war somewhere (usually, in fact, many places) at any moment. Similarly, we’ve become used to the idea that, when various forms of force (or threats of force) don’t work, our response, as in Afghanistan, is to recalibrate and apply some alternate version of the same under a new or rebranded name—the hot one now being “counterinsurgency,” or COIN— in a marginally different manner. When it comes to war, as well as preparations for war, more is now generally the order of the day.

This wasn’t always the case. The early Republic that the most hawkish conservatives love to cite was a land whose leaders looked with suspicion on the very idea of a standing army. They would have viewed our hundreds of global garrisons, our vast network of spies, agents, Special Forces teams, surveillance operatives, interrogators, rent-a-guns, and mercenary corporations—as well as our staggering Pentagon budget and the constant future-war gaming and planning that accompanies it—with genuine horror.

The question is: What kind of country do we actually live in when the so-called U.S. Intelligence Community lists seventeen intelligence services ranging from Air Force Intelligence, the Central Intelligence Agency, and the Defense Intelligence Agency to the National Reconnaissance Office and the National Security Agency? What could “intelligence” mean once spread over seventeen sizeable bureaucratic, often competing outfits with a cumulative 2009 budget estimated at more than \$50 billion (a startling percentage of which is controlled by the Pentagon)? What exactly is so intelligent about all that? And why does no one think it even mildly strange or in any way out of the ordinary?

What does it mean when the most military-obsessed administration in our history, which, year after year, submitted ever more bloated Pentagon budgets to Congress, is succeeded by one headed by a president who ran, at least partially, on an antiwar platform, and who then submitted an even larger Pentagon budget? What does this tell you about Washington and about the viability of nonmilitarized alternatives to the path George W. Bush took? What does it mean when the new administration, surveying nearly eight years and two wars’ worth of disasters, decides to expand the U.S. Armed Forces rather than shrink the U.S. global mission?

What kind of a world do we inhabit when, at a time of mass unemployment, the American taxpayer is financing the building of a three-story, exceedingly permanent-looking \$17 million troop barracks at Bagram Air Base in Afghanistan? This, in turn, is part of a taxpayer-funded \$220 million upgrade of the base that includes new “water treatment plants, headquarters buildings, fuel farms, and power-generating plants.” And what about the U.S. air base built at Balad, north of Baghdad, that has fifteen bus routes, two fire stations, two water treatment plants, two sewage treatment plants, two power plants, a water bottling plant, and the requisite set of fast-food outlets, PXes, and so on, as well as a

traffic levels sometimes compared to those at Chicago's O'Hare International?

What kind of world are we living in when a plan to withdraw most U.S. troops from Iraq involves the removal of more than 1.5 million pieces of equipment? Or in which the possibility of withdrawal leads the Pentagon to issue nearly billion-dollar contracts (new ones!) to increase the number of private security contractors in that country?

What do you make of a world in which the U.S. military has robot assassins in the skies over its war zones, 24/7, and the "pilots" who control them from thousands of miles away are ready on a moment's notice to launch missiles—"Hellfire" missiles at that—into Pashtun peasant villages in the wild, mountainous borderlands of Pakistan and Afghanistan? What does it mean when American pilots can be at war "in" Afghanistan, 9 to 5, by remote control, while their bodies remain at a base outside Las Vegas, and then they can head home past a sign that warns them to drive carefully because this is "the most dangerous part of your day"?

What does it mean when, for our security and future safety, the Pentagon funds the wildest ideas imaginable for developing high-tech weapons systems, many of which sound as if they came straight out of the pages of sci-fi novels? Take, for example, Boeing's advanced coordinated system of handheld drones, robots, sensors, and other battlefield surveillance equipment slated for seven army brigades within the next two years at a cost of \$2 billion and for the full army by 2025; or the Next Generation Bomber, an advanced "platform" slated for 2018; or a truly futuristic bomber, "a suborbital semi-spacecraft able to move at hypersonic speed along the edge of the atmosphere," slated for 2035? What does it mean about our world when those people in our government peering deepest into the blue-skies future are planning ways to send armed "platforms" up into those skies and kill more than a quarter century from now?

And do you ever wonder about this: If such weaponry is being endlessly developed for our safety and security, and that of our children and grandchildren, why is it that one of our most successful businesses involves the sale of the same weaponry to other countries? Few Americans are comfortable thinking about this, which may explain why global-arms-trade pieces don't tend to make it onto the front pages of our newspapers. In September 2009, the *Times* Pentagon correspondent Thom Shanker, for instance, wrote a rare piece on the subject, but it appeared inside the paper on a quiet Labor Day. "Despite Slump, U.S. Role as Top Arms Supplier Grows" was the headline. Perhaps Shanker, too, felt uncomfortable with his subject, because he included the following generic description: "In the highly competitive global arms market, nations vie for both profit and political influence through weapons sales, in particular to developing nations." The figures he cited from a congressional study of the "highly competitive" market told a different story: The United States, with \$37.8 billion in arms sales (up \$12.4 billion from 2007), controlled 68.4 percent of the global arms market in 2008. Highly competitively speaking, Italy came "a distant second" with \$3.7 billion. In sales to "developing nations," the United States inked \$29.6 billion in weapons agreements or 70.1 percent of the market. Russia was a vanishingly distant second at \$3.3 billion, or 7.8 percent of the market. In other words, with 70 percent of the market, the United States actually has what, in any other field, would qualify as a monopoly position—in this case, in things that go boom in the night. With the American arms industry in a ditch, it seems that this (along with Hollywood films that go boom in the night) is what we now do best, as befits a war, if not warrior, state. Is that an American accomplishment you're comfortable with?

Consider this: War is now the American way, even if peace is what most Americans experience

while their proxies fight in distant lands. Any serious alternative to war, which means our “security is increasingly inconceivable. In Orwellian terms then, war is indeed peace in the United States—and peace is war.

American Newspeak

Newspeak, as Orwell imagined it, was an ever more constricted form of English that would, soon or later, make “all other modes of thought impossible.” “It was intended,” he wrote in an appendix to his novel, “that when Newspeak had been adopted once and for all and Oldspeak forgotten, a heretical thought...should be literally unthinkable.”

When it comes to war (and peace), we live in a world of American Newspeak in which alternatives to a state of war are not only ever more unacceptable, but ever harder to imagine. If war is now a permanent situation, it has also been sundered from a set of words that once accompanied it. It lacks, for instance, “victory.” After all, when was the last time the United States actually won a war (unless you include our “victories” over small countries incapable of defending themselves, like the tiny Caribbean island of Grenada in 1983 or powerless Panama in 1989)? The smashing “victory” over Saddam Hussein in the First Gulf War only led to a stop-and-start conflict now almost two decades old that has proved a catastrophe.

Keep heading backward through the Vietnam and Korean Wars, and the U.S. military was last truly victorious in 1945. But achieving victory no longer seems to matter. War American-style is now conceptually unending, as are preparations for it. When George W. Bush proclaimed a Global War on Terror (aka World War IV), conceived as a “generational struggle” like the cold war, he caught a certain American reality. In a sense, the ongoing war system can’t absorb victory. Any such endpoint might indeed prove to be a kind of defeat.

No longer has war anything to do with the taking of territory either, or even with direct conquest. War is increasingly a state of being, not a process with a beginning, an end, and an actual geography.

Similarly drained of its traditional meaning has been the word “security”—though it has moved from a state of being (secure) to an eternal, immensely profitable process whose endpoint is unachievable. If we ever decided we were either secure enough, or more willing to live without the unreachable idea of total security, the American way of war and the national security state would lose much of their meaning. In other words, in our world, security is insecurity.

As for “peace”—war’s companion and theoretical opposite—it, too, has been emptied of meaning and all but discredited. Appropriately enough, diplomacy, the part of government that classically would have been associated with peace, or at least with the pursuit of the goals of war by other means, has been dwarfed by, subordinated to, or even subsumed by the Pentagon. In recent years, the U.S. military, with its vast funds, has taken over, or encroached upon, a range of activities that once would have been left to an underfunded State Department, especially humanitarian aid operations, foreign aid, and what’s now called nation-building.

Diplomacy itself has been militarized and, like our country, is now hidden behind massive fortifications, and has been placed under *Lord of the Flies*-style guard. The State Department embassies are now bunkers and military-style headquarters for the prosecution of war policies. Diplomats, when enough of them can be found, are now sent out into the provinces in war zones to

“civilian” things.

And peace itself? Simply put, there’s no money in it. Of the nearly trillion dollars the United States invests in war and war-related activities, nothing goes to peace. No money, no effort, no thought. The very idea that there might be peaceful alternatives to endless war is so discredited that it’s left to utopians, bleeding hearts, and feathered doves. As in Orwell’s *Newspeak*, while “peace” remains with us, it’s largely been shorn of its possibilities. No longer the opposite of war, it’s just a rhetorical flourish embedded, like one of our reporters, in *Warspeak*.

What a world might be like in which we began not just to withdraw our troops from one war to fight another, but to seriously scale down the American global mission, close those hundreds of bases—of 2010, there were almost four hundred of them, macro to micro, in Afghanistan alone—and bring our military home is beyond imagining. To discuss such obviously absurd possibilities makes you an apostate to America’s true religion and addiction, which is force. However much it might seem that most of us are peaceably watching our TV sets or computer screens or iPhones, we Americans are always—always—marching as to war. We may not all bother to attend the church of our new religion, but we all tithe. We all partake. In this sense, we live peaceably in a state of war.

Shock and Awe: How We Got Hit

The World Before September 11

September 2001. The “usually disengaged” president, as columnist Maureen Dowd labeled him, had just returned from a prolonged, brush-cutting Crawford vacation to much criticism and a nation in trouble. One Republican congressman complained that “it was hard for Mr. Bush to get his message out if the White House lectern had a ‘Gone Fishing’ sign on it.”

Democrats were on the attack. Journalistic coverage seemed to grow ever bolder. George W. Bush’s poll figures were dropping. A dozen prominent Republicans, fearful of a president out of touch with the national mood, gathered for a private dinner with Karl Rove to “offer an unvarnished critique of Bush’s style and strategy.” Next year’s congressional elections suddenly seemed up for grabs. The president’s aides were desperately scrambling to reposition him as a more “commanding” figure while, according to the polls, a majority of Americans felt the country was headed in the wrong direction. At the Pentagon, Donald Rumsfeld had “cratered”; in the Middle East “violence was rising

An editorial in the *New York Times* caught the moment this way in its opening sentence: “A simple truth of human existence is that it is vastly easier to amplify fear than it is to assuage it.” Now, there was a post-9/11 truth—except that the editorial was headlined “The Statistical Shark” and its next sentence wasn’t about planes smashing into buildings or the way the Bush administration had since wielded the fear card, but another hot-button issue entirely. It went: “Consider the shark attacks that have occurred in Florida, Virginia and North Carolina this summer.”

This was, in fact, September 6, 2001, the waning days of a man-bites-dog summer in which headlines had been dominated by the deaths of David Peltier, a 10-year-old boy in Florida, and Sergiy Zaloukaev, a 28-year-old in North Carolina, in fatal shark attacks. Just the day before, in fact, the *Times* had carried a piece by William J. Broad reassuring readers that scientists did not believe the world was facing a shark “rampage.” “If anything,” Broad concluded, “the recent global trend in shark attacks is down.”

It was just past Labor Day. Congress was barely back in session. Heywood Hale Broun, the sportswriter, would die at eighty-three that relatively quiet week, while Mexican president Vicente Fox swept triumphantly into Washington, and a new book, featured on *Newsweek*’s cover, would carry the title, *The Accidental President*. The Sunday *New York Times* Arts & Leisure section was promoting “the new season” in entertainment, while that night a highly publicized ten-part miniseries was premiering on HBO—*Band of Brothers*, a Tom Hanks and Steven Spielberg production that followed a platoon of “greatest generation” soldiers deep into Germany. If World War II nostalgia was on the tube, war elsewhere in the American world was also largely on screen. On September 7, *Tim*

journalist Thom Shanker reported on a classified war game, a computer-generated simulation played out by “the nation’s senior commanders” which determined that the U.S. military could “decisively defeat one potential adversary, North Korea, while repelling an attack from Iraq”—even if “terrorists [attacked] New York City with chemical weapons.”

All in all, that week before September 11 was a modestly uneventful one. An afternoon spent revisiting the version of it in the *New York Times*, via a library microfiche machine, making my way through that paper, day by day, section by section, plunged me into a nearly forgotten world in which the Democrats still controlled the Senate by a single vote and key Republican senators—it was Texas Phil Gramm’s turn to announce his retirement that week—were going down like bowling pins. (Jesse Helms and Strom Thurmond had preceded Gramm, “adding a new element of uncertainty to the 2000 race.”) The president had been met by exceedingly gloomy economic news as the unemployment rate jumped that Saturday to 4.9 percent—another 100,000 jobs lost—a full point above election day, ten months earlier; and Wall Street responded with a sell-off that dropped the Dow Jones to 9,600. Republicans were “panicked,” the administration adrift, and we wouldn’t see the likes of it again for four years.

Eerie Resonances

A number of post-9/11 subjects were in the paper that week: Torture was in the headlines—leading off the culture page that Saturday (“Torture Charge Pits Professor vs. Professor”) in a memory piece date-lined Santiago, on Augusto Pinochet’s brutal military rule in Chile. (The anniversary of his bloody coup, September 11, 1973, was approaching.)

Then, too, an American citizen had been imprisoned without charges for eighteen months—but he was electrical engineer Fuming Fong and China was holding him.

Anthrax made the op-ed page—but only because Russian scientists had developed a new type that could “overcome the standard Russian and American vaccines.”

Terrorism in the United States was in the news—an Oklahoma prosecutor was seeking the death penalty for Terry L. Nichols in the Oklahoma City Murrah Federal Building bombing.

“Violence in the Middle East” was on the front page—but in that week, it had only one meaning: the endless Israeli/Palestinian conflict. (The first Israeli-Arab suicide bomber had just struck.)

The Taliban could be found on the front page on September 7 (and inside on subsequent days)—but only because the mullahs were trying to extradite eight foreign aid workers for preaching Christianity. The bemused articles (“Another Strange Kabul Problem: Finding a Lawyer”) were of the weird-foreigner variety.

Military recruitment was a topic of interest then as now—the army, after switching ad agencies and slogans (“Army of One” for “Be All You Can Be”) had just conducted an “elaborate event” at the Pentagon, swearing into service its 75,800th recruit of the year, nineteen-year-old Rodrigo Vasquez Ibarra of Karnes City, Texas, in order to highlight meeting its recruitment goals a month ahead of schedule in the “most successful recruiting year since at least 1997.”

Howard Dean made the inside pages of the paper that week—the little-known Vermont governor (tagged with “fiscal conservatism/social liberalism”) announced that he would not seek reelection

his fifth two-year term. There was “speculation” that he might even “run for the Democratic nomination for President.”

Missing in Action

And then there were—in terms of what we’ve been used to ever since—the missing, or almost missing issues. Saddam Hussein didn’t make it into the paper that week. Kim Jong-il was nowhere in sight. Osama bin Laden barely slipped into print—twice deep into articles—as “the accused terrorist being hosted by the strange Taliban government. The Axis of Evil, of course, did not exist, nor did the Global War on Terror, and the potential enemy of the week, pushed by Donald Rumsfeld (himself on the defensive over the military budget and arguments with his generals), was “the rising China threat

Iran was scarcely a blip on the news radar screen; Syria rated not a mention. Also missing were just about any of the names we came to consider second nature to the post-9/11 news. No “Scooter” Libby. No Valerie Plame. No Paul Wolfowitz, John Bolton, or Douglas Feith. In fact, not a neocon made it into the pages of the paper over those seven days, and Judy Miller, the neocons’ future dream reporter who would soon enough storm the front page of the *Times* and take it for her own, had two pieces that week: a September 5 article on page 5 about a former Arms Control and Disarmament Agency general counsel challenging the administration’s “assertion that the global treaty banning biological weapons permits nations to test such arms for defensive purposes”; and, two days later, a tiny Israel piece tucked away at the bottom of page 15 on “the alleged [online] support for terrorism” by Islamic groups and charities.

The vice president, silently at the president’s side at a “hastily arranged” and awkward “appearance” on the White House grounds after the unemployment figures broke, was otherwise nowhere to be seen, though the *Times* speculated on its editorial page (“The Bush Merry-Go-Round” that he was “losing influence.” (“Mr. Cheney’s heart problems and his ardent embrace of the coal, oil, and gas industries seem to have hobbled him.”)

Though the sharks in the world’s oceans that week were feeding on something other than humans, there were still “sharks” around. Allison Mitchell began a Sunday lead *Week in Review* piece (“Facing Off: Which Way to Win Control of Congress?”) this way: “Talk about shark season. Congress came back into session last week and the Democrats were circling, sensing blood in the political waters. Little wonder. This was, after all, a non-majoritarian president who had, as *Times* writers didn’t hesitate to remind people, just squeaked through with a helping hand from the Supreme Court. After managing to get one massive tax cut by Congress, he began to drift like a lost lifeboat at sea, while his advisers fretted over polls “showing that many people still view Mr. Bush not as decisive but tentative and perhaps overly scripted.” He was, as a front-page piece by Richard L. Berke and David Sanger put it on September 9, “essentially out of economic ammunition.”

The nature of politics in Washington that week could be caught in lines like: “Democrats go on the attack” and “Democrats intensified their attacks against Mr. Bush.” Less than a year into a Bush presidency, columnist Tom Friedman was already offering the faltering leader heartfelt advice on how not to lose the next election. Be “Clinton-minus,” not “Reagan-squared” was the formula he offered. As the Mitchell piece made clear, this was a presidency under siege, as well as a Republican Party—“everyone” in Washington agreed—“in peril.” In the sort of action not to be seen again for years,

Senate committee actually cut money from the defense budget that week, an act Shanker of the *Times* termed “another stark challenge” from committee chairman Carl Levin of Michigan. The political failure of the president’s father was evidently on Washington minds as well, and so the paper in that number of pieces linked father and son. The father’s bid for reelection had, after all, gone down in flames in the nation’s previous recession, or, as the headline of one story put it, “Like Father, Bush Caught in a Politically Perilous Budget Squeeze.”

A few aspects of our post-9/11 political world were quite recognizable even then. That week, the Bush administration was easing up on Big Tobacco (“Justice Official Denies Pressure to Settle Tobacco Suit”) and Big Computer (“U.S. Abandoning Its Effort to Break Apart Microsoft”), while preparing to bail from the Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty. And as the administration pushed for legislation to open the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge, a “hobbled” Dick Cheney was already stonewalling about what had occurred when his Energy Task Force of Big Oil met earlier in 2001.

The two days before 9/11 were so quiet that you could practically hear a news pin drop. In the *Times* of September 11—in that moment before the Internet took full possession of us, a day’s lag between events and the news was a print norm—the major story (“Key Leaders Talk of Possible Deals to Revive Economy, Bush Is Under Pressure”) indicated that “some Republicans” were anxiously bringing up 1982 when President Reagan “told the nation to ‘stay the course’ in a recession” and the party dropped numerous House seats in the midterm elections.

At the bottom of the front page was a plane hijacking story, though it was thirty years old (“Trace on Internet, Teacher Is Charged in ’71 Jet Hijacking”). Across the rest of the page-bottom on that fine morning were “In a Nation of Early Risers, Morning TV Is a Hot Market” and “School Dress Code vs. a Sea of Bare Flesh.”

For intimations of what was to come, you would have had to move inside. On page 3, Douglas Frantz reported, “Suicide Bomb Kills 2 Police Officers in Istanbul,” a bombing for which no one took credit and which was automatically attributed to “a leftist terrorist group” (something that would not happen again soon). On the next page, you could find Barry Bearak and James Risen’s piece “Report Disagree on Fate of Anti-Taliban Rebel Chief” about the assassination of Ahmed Shah Massoud, an anti-Taliban warlord, by two Arabs posing as journalists (which we now know was connected to the September 11 plot). In its penultimate paragraph was this: “If the would-be assassins were indeed Arabs...the fact would lend credibility to those who contend that foreigners, including Osama bin Laden, are playing an ever bigger decision-making role among the Taliban.”

Peering further into the future, on page 8, under World Briefs, was a throwaway paragraph on the low-level air war even then being conducted against Saddam Hussein’s Iraq: “Iraq said eight civilians were killed and three wounded when Western planes attacked farms 100 miles southeast of Baghdad. The Pentagon said American and British warplanes attacked three surface-to-air missile sites in the so-called no-fly zone.” Another article, “Iran: Denial on Nuclear Weapons,” began: “The government rejected charges by the United States that it was seeking nuclear weapons.”

And then, of course, there was nothing to do but oh-so-slowly turn the microfiche dial and, after a pitch-black break between days, stumble into those mile-high headlines—“U.S. Attacked, Hijacked Jets Destroy Twin Towers and Hit Pentagon in Day of Terror”—and, despite yourself, experience with a kind of gasp the sky in your brain filling with falling bodies.

Here, by the way, is how that September 6 *Times* shark editorial ended. If it doesn’t give you a little

chill for what we've lost, I don't know what will: "Life is full of things that carry more risk than swimming in the ocean. Most of them are inevitably the byproducts of daily life, like falling televisions and car accidents, because daily life is where we spend most of our time. It may lack the visceral fears aroused by the unlikely threat of a shark attack, but it is also far more lethal."

Only five days after that was written, almost three thousand New Yorkers, some adopted from countries around the globe, would face a danger far more shocking—and, until that moment, far less imaginable to most of us—than any shark attack. Things would indeed fall from the sky—and from history so many Americans knew nothing about—and visceral fears would be aroused that would drive us, like the Pearl Harbor-style headlines that greeted the audacious act not of a major power but of nineteen fanatics in four planes prepared to die, into a future even more unimaginable.

Put another way, an afternoon spent in the lost world of September 5-10, 2001, reminds us that the savage attacks of the following day would, in fact, buy a faltering, confused, and weak administration as well as a dazed and disengaged president, a new life, a "calling" as he would put it, and almost four years to do its damndest. It would be 2004 before the president's polling figures settled back to the levels of that long-lost September 10. It would be the summer of 2005—and the administration's disastrous handling of hurricanes Katrina and Iraq—before the president would again be criticized for his "gone fishing" summer vacation; before the Democrats would again begin to attack; before newspapers would again be relatively uncowed; before the Republicans would again gather in their private (and then public) places and begin to complain; before Congress would again be up for grabs. Four long years to make it back to September 10, 2001, in an American world now filled to the brim with horrors, a United States that was no longer a "country," but a "homeland" and a Homeland Security State.

9/11 in a Movie-Made World

We knew it was coming. Not, as conspiracy theorists imagine, just a few top officials among us, but all of us—and not for weeks or months, but for more than half a century before September 11, 2001.

That's why, for all the shock, it was, in a sense, so familiar. Americans were already imagining versions of September 11 soon after the dropping of the first atomic bomb on Hiroshima on August 6, 1945. That event set the American imagination boiling. Within weeks of the destruction of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, as scholar Paul Boyer has shown, all the familiar signs of nuclear fear were already in place: newspapers were drawing concentric circles of atomic destruction outward from fantasized Ground Zeroes in American cities, and magazines were offering visions of our country as a vaporized wasteland, while imagining millions of Americans dead.

And then, suddenly, one clear morning it seemed to arrive—by air, complete with images of the destruction of the mightiest monuments to our power, and (just as previously experienced) as a live onscreen spectacle. At one point that day, it could be viewed on more than thirty channels, including some never previously involved with breaking news, and most of the country was watching.

Only relatively small numbers of New Yorkers actually experienced 9/11 firsthand: those at the tip of Manhattan or close enough to watch the two planes smash into the World Trade Center towers, t

watch (as some schoolchildren did) people leaping or falling from the upper floors of those buildings to be enveloped in the vast cloud of smoke and ash, in the tens of thousands of pulverized computers and copying machines, the asbestos and flesh and bone, the shredded remains of millions of sheets of paper, of financial and office life as we know it. For most Americans, even those like me who were living in Manhattan, 9/11 arrived on the television screen. This is why what leapt to mind—an image that had instantaneously filled our papers and TV reporting—was previous screen life, the movies.

In the immediate aftermath of the attacks, the news was peppered with comments about, though not about, and references to films. Reporters, as Caryn James wrote in the *New York Times* that first day, “compared the events to Hollywood action movies”; as did op-ed writers (“The scenes exceeded the worst of Hollywood’s disaster movies”); columnists (“On TV, two national landmarks...look like the aftermath in the film *Independence Day*”); and eyewitnesses (“It was like one of them *Godzilla* movies”; “And then I saw an explosion straight out of *The Towering Inferno*”). Meanwhile, in a irony of the moment, Hollywood scrambled to excise from upcoming big- and small-screen line-ups anything that might bring to mind thoughts of 9/11, including, in the case of Fox, promotion for the premiere episode of *24*, in which “a terrorist blows up an airplane.”

In our guts, we had always known it was coming. Like any errant offspring, Little Boy and Fat Man, those two atomic packages with which we had paid *them* back for Pearl Harbor, were destined to return home someday. No wonder the single, omnipresent historical reference in the media in the wake of the attacks was Pearl Harbor or, as screaming headlines had it, INFAMY, or A NEW DAY OF INFAMY. We had just experienced “the Pearl Harbor of the 21st Century,” or, as R. James Woolsey, former CIA director (and neocon), said in the *Washington Post* that first day, “It is clear now, as it was on December 7, 1941, that the United States is at war.... The question is: with whom?”

The Day After

No wonder what came instantly to mind was a nuclear event. No wonder, according to a *New York Times* piece, Tom Brokaw, then chairing NBC’s nonstop news coverage, “may have captured it best when he looked at videotape of people on a street, everything and everyone so covered with ash...[and he said] it looked ‘like a nuclear winter in lower Manhattan.’” No wonder the *Tennessean* and the *Topical Capital-Journal* both used the headline “The Day After,” lifted from a famous 1983 TV movie about nuclear Armageddon.

No wonder the area where the two towers fell was quickly dubbed “Ground Zero,” a term previously reserved for the spot where an atomic explosion had occurred. On September 12, for example, the *Los Angeles Times* published a full-page series of illustrations of the attacks on the towers headline “Ground Zero.” By week’s end, it had become the only name for “the collapse site,” as in a September 18 *New York Times* headline, “Many Come to Bear Witness at Ground Zero.”

No wonder the events seemed so strangely familiar. We had been living with the possible return of our most powerful weaponry via TV and the movies, novels and our own dream-life, in the past, the future, and even—thanks to a John F. Kennedy TV appearance on October 22, 1962, during the Cuban missile crisis to tell us that our world might end tomorrow—in something like the almost-present.

So many streams of popular culture had fed into this. So many “previews” had been offered. Everywhere in those decades, you could see yourself or your compatriots or the enemy

“Hiroshimated” (as *Variety* termed it back in 1947). Even when Arnold Schwarzenegger was kissing Jamie Lee Curtis in *True Lies* as an atomic explosion went off somewhere in the Florida Keys, or a playground filled with American kids wasn’t being atomically blistered in *Terminator 2: Judgment Day*, even when it wasn’t literally nuclear, that apocalyptic sense of destruction lingered. The train, bus, blimp, explosively armed, headed for us in our unknowing innocence; as the towering inferno, airport, city, White House was blasted away, as we were offered Pompeii-scapes of futuristic destruction in what would, post-9/11, come to be known as “the homeland.”

Sometimes it came from outer space armed with strange city-blasting rays; other times irradiated monsters rose from the depths to stomp our cities (in the 1998 remake of *Godzilla*—New York City, no less). After Darth Vader used his Death Star to pulverize a whole planet in *Star Wars*, planets were regularly nuclearized in Saturday-morning TV cartoons. In our imaginations, post-1945, we were always at planetary Ground Zero.

Dystopian Serendipity

Increasingly, from Hamburg to Saudi Arabia to Afghanistan, others were also watching our spectaculars, our catastrophes, our previews; and so, as Hollywood historian Neal Gabler would write in the *New York Times* only days after 9/11, they were ready to deliver what we had long dreamed of with the kind of timing—insuring, for instance, that the second plane arrived “at a decent interval after the first, so that the cameras could be in place—and in a visual language American viewers would understand.

But here’s the catch: What came, when it came, on September 11, 2001, wasn’t what we thought came. There was no Ground Zero, because there was nothing faintly atomic about the attacks. It wasn’t the apocalypse at all. Except in its success, it hardly differed from the 1993 attack on the World Trade Center, the one that almost toppled one tower with a rented Ryder van and a homemade bomb.

What “changed everything,” as the phrase would soon go, was a bit of dystopian serendipity for al-Qaeda: Nineteen men of much conviction and middling skills, armed with exceedingly low-tech weaponry and two hijacked jets, managed to create an apocalyptic look that, in another context, would have made the special-effects masters of George Lucas’s Industrial Light & Magic proud. And from that—and the Bush administration’s reaction to it—everything else would follow.

The tiny band of fanatics who planned September 11 essentially lucked out. If the testimony, under CIA interrogation techniques, of al-Qaeda’s master planner Khalid Shaikh Mohammed is to be believed, what happened stunned even him. (“According to the [CIA] summary, he said he ‘had no idea that the damage of the first attack would be as catastrophic as it was.’”) Those two mighty towers came crumbling down in that vast, roiling, near-mushroom cloud of white smoke before the cameras in the fashion of the ultimate Hollywood action film (imagery multiplied in its traumatizing power by thousands of replays over a record-setting more than ninety straight hours of TV coverage). And that imagery fit perfectly the secret expectations of Americans—just as it fit the needs of both al-Qaeda and the Bush administration.

That’s undoubtedly why other parts of the story of that moment faded from sight. For example, take American Flight 77, which plowed into the Pentagon. That destructive but non-apocalyptic-looking

attack didn't satisfy the same built-in expectations. Though the term "ground zero Washington" initially floated through the media ether, it never stuck. Similarly, the unsolved anthrax murders-by-mail of almost the same moment, which caused a collective shudder of horror, are now forgotten. (According to a LexisNexis search, between October 4 and December 4, 2001, 260 stories appeared in the *New York Times* and 246 in the *Washington Post* with "anthrax" in the headline. That's the new equivalent of a high-pitched scream of horror.) Those envelopes, spilling highly refined anthrax powder and containing letters dated "9/11/01" with lines like "Death to America, Death to Israel, Allah Is Great," represented the only use of a weapon of mass destruction (WMD) in this period, yet they were slowly eradicated from our collective (and media) memory once it became clearer that the perpetrator or perpetrators were probably homegrown, possibly out of the very cold war U.S. weapons labs that produced so many WMD in the first place.

The 36-Hour War

Indulge me, then, for a moment on an otherwise grim subject. I've always been a fan of what-if history and science fiction, which led me to take my own modest time machine—the IRT subway—back to September 11, 2001, via the New York Public Library, a building that—in the realm where sci-fi and what-if history meld—suffered its own monstrous "damage," its own 9/11, only months after the A-bombing of Hiroshima.

In November 1945, *Life* magazine published "The 36-Hour War," an overheated what-if tale in which an unnamed enemy in "equatorial Africa" launched a surprise atomic missile attack on the United States, resulting in ten million deaths. A dramatic illustration accompanying the piece showed the library's two pockmarked stone lions still standing, guarding a ground-zero scene of almost total destruction, while heavily shielded technicians tested "the rubble of the shattered city for radioactivity."

I passed those same majestic lions, still standing (as was the library), entered the microfiche room and began reading the *New York Times* starting with the September 12, 2001, issue. Immediately I was plunged into an apocalypse: "gates of hell," "the unthinkable," "nightmare world of Hieronymus Bosch," "hellish storm of ash, glass, smoke, and leaping victims," "clamorous inferno," "an ash shell of itself, all but a Pompeii." But one of the most common words in the *Times* and elsewhere was "vulnerable" (or as a *Times* piece put it, "nowhere was safe"). The front page of the *Chicago Tribune* caught this mood in a headline, "Feeling of Invincibility Suddenly Shattered," and a lead sentence: "On Tuesday, America the invincible became America the vulnerable." We had faced "the kamikaze of the 21st century"—a Pearl Harborish phrase that would gain traction—and we had lost.

A what-if thought came to mind as I slowly rolled that grainy microfiche; as I passed the photo of a man, in midair, falling headfirst from a World Trade Center tower; as I read this observation from a Pearl Harbor survivor interviewed by the *Tribune*: "Things will never be the same again in this country"; as I reeled section by section, day by day toward our distinctly changed present; as I read all those words that boiled up like a linguistic storm around the photos of those white clouds; as I considered all the op-eds and columns filled with instant opinions that poured into the pages of our papers before there was time to think; as I noted, buried in their pages, a raft of words and phrases—"preempt," "a new Department of Pre-emption [at the Pentagon]," "homeland defenses," "homeland security agency"—readying themselves to be noticed.

Among them all, the word that surfaced fastest on the heels of that “new Day of Infamy,” and deadliest effect, was “war.” Senator John McCain, among many others, labeled the attacks “an act of war” on the spot, just as Republican senator Richard Shelby insisted that “this is total war,” just as *Washington Post* columnist Charles Krauthammer started his first editorial that first day, “This is not a crime. This is war.”

On the night of September 11, the president himself, addressing the nation, already spoke of winning “the war against terrorism.” By day two, he was using the phrase “acts of war”; by day three “the first war of the twenty-first century” (while the *Times* reported “a drumbeat for war” on television); by week’s end, “the long war”; and the following week, in an address to a joint session of Congress, while announcing the creation of a cabinet-level Office of Homeland Security, he wielded “war” twelve times. (“Our war on terror begins with Al Qaeda, but it does not end there.”)

What If?

What if the two hijacked planes, American Flight 11 and United Flight 175, had plunged into those north and south towers at 8:46 and 9:03, killing all aboard, causing extensive damage and significant death tolls, but neither tower had come down? What if, as a *Tribune* columnist called it, photogenic “scenes of apocalypse” had not been produced? What if, despite two gaping holes and the smoke and flames pouring out of the towers, the imagery had been closer to that of 1993? What if there had been no giant cloud of destruction capable of bringing to mind the look of “the day after,” no images of crumbling towers worthy of *Independence Day*?

We would surely have had blazing headlines, but would they have commonly had “war” or “infamy” in them, as if we had been attacked by another state? Would the last superpower have gone from “invincible” to “vulnerable” in a split second? Would our newspapers instantly have been writing “before” and “after” editorials, or insisting that this moment was the ultimate “test” of George W. Bush’s until-then languishing presidency? Would we instantaneously have been considering taking what CIA director George Tenet would soon call “the shackles” off our intelligence agencies and the military? Would we have been reconsidering, as Florida’s Democratic senator Bob Graham suggested that first day, rescinding the congressional ban on the assassination of foreign officials and heads of state? Would a *Washington Post* journalist have been trying within hours to name the kind of “war” we were in? (He provisionally labeled it “the Gray War.”) Would *New York Times* columnist Tom Friedman on the third day have had us deep into “World War III”? Would the *Times* have been headlining and quoting Deputy Defense Secretary Paul Wolfowitz on its front page on September 11, insisting that “it’s not simply a matter of capturing people and holding them accountable, but removing the sanctuaries, removing the support systems, ending states who sponsor terrorism.” (The *Times* editorial writers certainly noticed that ominous “s” on “states” and wrote the next day: “but we trust [Wolfowitz] does not have in mind invading Iraq, Iran, Syria and Sudan as well as Afghanistan.”)

Would state-to-state “war” and “acts of terror” have been so quickly conjoined in the media as “war on terror” and would that phrase have made it, in just over a week, into a major presidential address? Could the *Los Angeles Daily News* have produced the following four-day series of screaming headlines, beating even the president to the punch: “Terror”/ “Horror!”/“This Is War”/“War on Terror”?

If it all hadn't seemed so familiar, wouldn't we have noticed what was actually new in the attacks September 11? Wouldn't more people have been as puzzled as the reporter who asked White House press secretary Ari Fleischer, "You don't declare war against an individual, surely"? Wouldn't Congress have balked at passing, three days later, an almost totally open-ended resolution granting the president the right to use force not against one nation (Afghanistan) but against "nations," plural and unnamed?

And how well would the Bush administration's fear-inspired nuclear agenda have worked, if those buildings hadn't come down? Would Saddam Hussein's supposed nuclear program and stores of WMD have had the same impact? Would the endless linking of the Iraqi dictator, al-Qaeda, and 9/11 have penetrated so deeply that, in 2006, half of all Americans, according to a Harris poll, still believed Saddam had WMD when the U.S. invasion began, and 85 percent of American troops stationed in Iraq, according to a Zogby poll, believed the U.S. mission there was mainly "to retaliate for Saddam's role in the 9-11 attacks"?

Without that apocalyptic 9/11 imagery, would those fantasy Iraqi mushroom clouds pictured by administration officials rising over American cities, or those fantasy Iraqi unmanned aerial vehicles capable of spraying our East Coast with chemical or biological weapons, or Saddam Hussein's supposed search for African yellowcake (or even, today, the Iranian "bomb" that won't exist for perhaps another decade, if at all) have so dominated American consciousness?

Would Osama bin Laden and Ayman al-Zawahiri be sitting in jail cells or be on trial by now? Would so many things have happened differently?

The Opportunity of a Lifetime

What if the attacks on September 11, 2001, had not been seen as a new Pearl Harbor? Only three months earlier, after all, Disney's *Pearl Harbor* (the "sanitized" version, as *Times* columnist Frank Rich labeled it), a blockbuster made with extensive Pentagon help, had performed disappointingly at the multiplexes. As an event, it seemed irrelevant to American audiences until 9/11, when that ancient history—and the ancient retribution that went with it—wiped from the American brain the actual history of recent decades, including our massive covert anti-Soviet war in Afghanistan, out of which Osama bin Laden emerged.

Here's the greatest irony: From that time of triumph in 1945, Americans had always secretly suspected that they were not "invincible" but exceedingly vulnerable, something both pop culture and the deepest fears of the cold war era only reinforced. Confirmation of that fact arrived with such immediacy on September 11 largely because it was already a gut truth. The ambulance chasers of the Bush administration, who spotted such opportunity in the attacks, were perhaps the last Americans who hadn't absorbed this reality. As that New Day of Infamy scenario played out, the horrific but actual scale of the damage inflicted in New York and Washington (and to the U.S. economy) would essentially recede. The attack had been relatively small, limited in its means and massive only in its daring and luck—abetted by the fact that the Bush administration was looking for nothing like such an attack, despite that CIA briefing given to Bush on a lazy August day in Crawford ("Bin Laden Determined to Strike in US") and so many other clues.

Only the week before 9/11, the Bush administration had been in the doldrums with a "detached

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