

Bush and bin Laden's Binary Manicheanism: The Fusing of Horizons

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In the current ongoing Terror War, both George W. Bush and Osama bin Laden deploy certain similar figures of speech, fusing their metaphysical and political discourses while reserving the demonology. In his speech to Congress on September 20, 2001 declaring his war against terrorism, Bush described the conflict as a war between freedom and fear. The coming Terror War was, he explained, a conflict between “those governed by fear” who “want to destroy our wealth and freedoms,” and those on the side of freedom. Bush insisted that “you’re either with us, or you’re with the terrorists,” and laid down a series of non-negotiable demands to the Taliban while Congress wildly applauded. Bush’s popularity soared with a country craving blood-revenge and the head of Osama bin Laden. Moreover, proclaiming what his administration and commentators would describe as “the Bush doctrine,” Bush also asserted that his administration held accountable those nations who supported terrorism — a position that could nurture and legitimate military interventions for years to come.

What was not noted was that the dominant rightwing and Bush Administration discourses, like those of bin Laden and radical Islamists, are fundamentally Manichean, positing a binary opposition between Good and Evil, Us and Them, civilization and barbarism. It is assumed by both sides that “we” are the good, and the “Other” is wicked, an assertion that Bush made in his incessant assurance that the “evil-doers” of the “evil deeds” will be punished, and that the “Evil One” will be brought to justice, implicitly equating bin Laden with Satan himself.

Such hyperbolic rhetoric is a salient example of Bushspeak that communicates through codes to specific audiences, in this case domestic Christian rightwing groups that are Bush’s preferred subjects of his discourse. But demonizing terms for bin Laden both elevate his status in the Arab world as a superhero who stands up to the West, and angers those who feel such discourse is insulting. Moreover, the trouble with the discourse of “evil” is that it is totalizing and absolutistic, allowing no ambiguities or contradictions. It assumes a binary logic where “we” are the forces of goodness and “they” are the forces of darkness. The discourse of evil is also cosmological and apocalyptic, evoking a cataclysmic war with cosmic stakes. On this perspective, Evil cannot be just attacked and eliminated one piece at a time, through incremental steps, but it must be totally defeated, eradicated from the earth if Good is to reign. This discourse of evil raises the stakes and violence of conflict and nurtures more apocalyptic and catastrophic politics, fuelling future cycles of hatred, violence, and wars.

The very term “evil” is highly archaic and has a mystifying, supernatural quality that exaggerates the power of the perpetrator so designated. Deploying the discourse of evil also makes bin Laden and Al Qaeda much more irrational than they in fact are and makes it harder to understand and to defeat them. In fact, the bin Laden group has a very specific agenda and priorities: to promote Islamic Jihad against the West and in particular to overthrow the current rulers of Saudi Arabia and to create an Islamic Republic there, as has been produced, in different variants in Iran and in the Afghanistan Taliban regime. The U.S. is perceived as the modernizing and secular force in the West, the major support of Israel and Saudi Arabia and thus logically the

major enemy of a Jihadist. The bin Laden network is not just a group of fanatic terrorists but a well-financed and organized network including many mosques, madrassas and religious schools, and organizations throughout the world. It has its financial institutions, its business fronts, its charity and religious institutions, and tacit and operative supporters. To defeat the bin Laden network thus requires not just the destruction of the Taliban and Al Qaeda group in Afghanistan but an entire global network that will require a multilateral coalition and activity across the legal, judicial, political, military, ideological, and pedagogical fronts.

Personalizing the problem as bin Laden and demonizing him as evil thus deflects attention from the global network of Jihadism and the many dimensions of struggle. It exaggerates the importance of military action as a violent and retaliatory tool of the destruction of evil and decenters the importance of dialogue, understanding, coalition-building, and using the instruments of global finance, law, and politics to isolate and overcome the forces of global terrorism.

It is especially offensive and hypocritical that George W. Bush deploys “evil” as his favorite word for terrorism as it implies that he himself is “good,” whereas scrutiny of his biography indicates that Junior is really a very, very bad guy. After years of frat boy ribaldry at Yale, Bush got his father to pull strings so he would not have to go to Vietnam and he got into the Texas National Guard Air Reserves. During his lost years in the 1970s, he reportedly went AWOL for a year from National Guard duty, was a heavy alcohol and drug abuser, and a nair-do-well failure who finally decided to put together an oil company when he was already well into his 30s. Investors reportedly included the bin Laden family and other unsavory types and his initial company Arbusto went bust and was taken over by Harken Energy, with family friends again jumping in to bail Junior out. Harken received a lucrative Barain oil contract in part as a result of Bush family connections, and the Harken stock went up. But as a member of the Board of Directors, Junior knew that declining profits figures for the previous quarter, about to be released, would depress the value of the stock, so George W. unloaded his stock, in what some see as an illegal insider trading dump. Moreover, young Bush failed to register his questionable sale with the SEC, although later a paper was produced indicating that he had eventually recorded the sale, some eight months after he dumped his stock (it helped that his father was President when Junior should have been investigated for his questionable business dealings).ⁱ

With the money made from his Harken disinvestiture, Junior invested in the Texas Rangers baseball team and was made General Manager when some other Texas good old boys put up the money. Using a public bond issue that he pushed upon voters to finance construction of a new Rangers stadium, the stock value of the baseball team went up. Once again, Bush sold out for a hefty profit and then ran as Governor of Texas, despite no political experience and a shaky business history. His two terms in office wrecked the state economy as it went from surplus to deficit thanks to a tax bill that gave favors to the wealthiest, sweetheart deals and deregulation bonanzas to his biggest campaign contributors, that helped make Texas the site of the most toxic environmental pollution and outrageous corporate skullduggery in the country. Bush provided questionable favors to a nursing home corporations that faced state investigation and strong support for the wheelin’ and dealin’ Enron Company, one of the biggest financial contributors to Bush’s campaigns and, as well shall see, a corporation that underwent the biggest collapse of any U.S. company in history, under highly questionable circumstances.

Promising to do for the U.S. and global economy and polity what he did for Texas, Bush had the gall to run for President, stealing the 2000 election with the help of the Bush family gang in Florida and family consigliere James Baker (Kellner 2001), as well as the treason of a gang of Supreme Court thugs, whom fabled prosecutor Vincent Bugliosi (2000) dubbed the “felonious five”. During his first 100 days in office, Bush gave his biggest corporate contributors unparalleled tax and regulatory breaks, which threatens to push through the most scandalous transfer of wealth from poor to rich since the Reagan-Bush regimes and to seriously weaken the U.S. and global economy. Bush also tried to push through a hardright social agenda. After the Democrats seized control of the domestic agenda in late May 2001, with the defection of Republican Senator Jim Jeffords, Bush’s hardright and utterly corrupt agenda seemed sidetracked. But the September 11 attacks strengthened his hand and enabled his cronies to carry through even more radical hardright assaults on civil liberties and the free and open society, as well as to attempt more federal theft through the mechanism of an economic “stimulus” package. Such stimulus, as proposed by the Bush administration, would constitute even greater corporate giveaways and tax breaks to the rich and his biggest contributors.ⁱⁱ

George W. Bush was thus hardly someone who could use the discourse of “evil” with impunity and all the denial in the world and bombing of Afghanistan cannot purge him of a lifetime of sleaze, corruption, and hypocrisy. Every time Bush or a member of the Bush administration uses the term “evil” one should put out their crap detector and challenge the speaker to defend what is good about George W. Bush’s entire life and political record and those of the domestic and foreign policies of the Bush administration.

Bush continued for months to insist that the bin Laden terrorists “fear” Western freedom and democracy, as if their hatred were motivated by rejection of positive Western values. No doubt some of the terrorists were motivated by anti-Western hatred of U.S. culture, but it was simply a Big Lie to claim that it was Western values and “our way of life” that were the target of the terror attack. Rather, Arab anger concerning the U.S. and the West was primarily a result of U.S. policies, such as excessive support for Israel and reactionary forces like the Saudi monarchy and U.S. interventions in the Middle East.

Not only has Bush made the discourse of “good” and “evil” impossible to use by honorable people, but the Bushspeak dualisms between fear and freedom, barbarism and civilization, and the like can hardly be sustained in empirical and theoretical analysis of the contemporary moment. In fact, there is much fear and poverty in “our” world, just as there is wealth, freedom, and security in the Arab and Islamic worlds — at least for privileged elites. No doubt, freedom, fear, and wealth are distributed in both worlds so to polarize these categories and to make them the legitimating principles of war is highly irresponsible. And associating oneself with “good,” while making one’s enemy “evil,” is another exercise in binary reductionism and projection of all traits of aggression and wickedness onto the “other” while constituting oneself as good and pure.

It is, of course, theocratic Islamic fundamentalists who themselves engage in similar simplistic binary discourse which they use to legitimate acts of terrorism. For certain Manichean Islamic fundamentalists, the U.S. is “evil,” the source of all the world’s problems and deserves to

be destroyed. Such one-dimensional thought does not distinguish between U.S. policies, people, or institutions, while advocating a Jihad, or holy war to eradicate the American infidel. The terrorist crimes of September 11 appeared to be part of this Jihad and the monstrosity of the actions of killing innocent civilians shows the horrific consequences of totally dehumanizing an "enemy" deemed so "evil" that even innocent members of the group in question deserve to be exterminated.

Many commentators on U.S. television offered similarly one-sided and Manichean accounts of the cause of the September 11 events, blaming their favorite opponents in the current U.S. political spectrum as the source of the terror assaults. For fundamentalist Christian ideologue Jerry Falwell, and with the verbal agreement of Christian Broadcast Network President Pat Robertson, the culpability for this "horror beyond words" fell on liberals, feminists, gays and the ACLU. Jerry Falwell said and Pat Robertson agreed: "The abortionists have got to bear some burden for this because God will not be mocked. And when we destroy 40 million little innocent babies, we make God mad. I really believe that the pagans, and the abortionists, and the feminists, and the gays and the lesbians who are actively trying to make that an alternative lifestyle, the ACLU, People for the American Way--all of them who have tried to secularize America--I point the finger in their face and say, 'You helped this happen.'" In fact, this argument is similar to a rightwing Islamic claim that the U.S. is fundamentally corrupt and evil and thus deserves God's wrath, an argument made against Falwell by his critics that forced the fundamentalist fanatic to apologize.ⁱⁱⁱ

For right-wingers, like Gary Aldrich the "President and Founder" of the Patrick Henry Center, it was the liberals who were at fault: "Excuse me if I absent myself from the national political group-hug that's going on. You see, I believe the Liberals are largely responsible for much of what happened Tuesday, and may God forgive them. These people exist in a world that lies beyond the normal standards of decency and civility." Other rightists, like Rush Limbaugh, argued incessantly that it was all Bill Clinton's fault, and Election-thief manager James Baker (see Kellner 2001) blamed the catastrophe on the 1976 Church report that put limits on the CIA.^{iv}

On the issue of "what to do," rightwing columnist Ann Coulter declaimed: "We know who the homicidal maniacs are. They are the ones cheering and dancing right now. We should invade their countries, kill their leaders and convert them to Christianity."^v While Bush was declaring a "crusade" against terrorism and the Pentagon was organizing "Operation Infinite Justice," Bush Administration Deputy Defense Secretary Paul Wolfowitz said the administration's retaliation would be "sustained and broad and effective" and that the United States "will use all our resources. It's not just simply a matter of capturing people and holding them accountable, but removing the sanctuaries, removing the support systems, ending states who sponsor terrorism."

Such all-out war hysteria was the order of the day, and throughout September 11 and its aftermath ideological war-horses like William Bennett came out and urged that the U.S. declare war on Iraq, Iran, Syria, Libya, and whoever else harbored terrorists. On the Canadian Broadcasting Network, former Reagan administration, Deputy Secretary of Defense and military commentator Frank Gaffney suggested that the U.S. needed to go after the sponsors of these states as well, such as China and Russia, to the astonishment and derision of the Canadian

audience.^{vi} And rightwing talk radio and the Internet buzzed with talk of dropping nuclear bombs on Afghanistan, exterminating all Moslems, and whatever other fantasy popped into their unhinged heads.

My point is that broadcast television allowed dangerous and arguably deranged zealots to vent and circulate the most aggressive, fanatic, and downright lunatic views, creating a consensus around the need for immediate military action and all-out war. The television networks themselves featured logos such as “War on America,” “America’s New War,” and other inflammatory slogans that assumed that the U.S. was at war and that only a military response was appropriate. I saw few cooler heads on any of the major television networks that repeatedly beat the war drums day after day, without even the relief of commercials for three days straight, driving the country into hysteria and making it certain that there would be a military response and war.

Radio was even more frightening. Not surprisingly, talk radio oozed hatred and hysteria, calling for violence against Arabs and Muslims, demanding nuclear retaliation, and global war. As the days went by, even mainstream radio news became hyperdramatic, replete with music, patriotic gore, and wall-to-wall terror hysteria and war propaganda. National Public Radio, Pacifica, and some discussion programs attempted rational discussion and debate, but on the whole radio was all propaganda, all the time.

There is no question concerning the depth of emotion and horror with which the nation experienced the first serious assault on U.S. territory by its enemies. The constant invocation of analogies to “Pearl Harbor” inevitably elicited a need to strike back and prepare for war. The attack on the World Trade Center and New York City evoked images of assault on the very body of the country, while the attack on the Pentagon represented an assault on the country’s defense system, showing the vulnerability, previously unperceived, of the U.S. to external attack and terror. It is not surprisingly that the country should pull together in the face of such a horrific terrorist assault, but the media in a democracy should provide more clarification of the historical background of the event, intelligent discussion of rational and effective responses, and debate over what responses would be most appropriate and successful in dealing with the problem of global terrorism.

Notes

ⁱ This text is an abstract from Douglas Kellner, From September 11 to Terror War: The Dangers of the Bush Legacy. Lanham, Md.: Rowman and Littlefield, 2003. Sources on George W. Bush’s life and career include Hatfield 2000; Dubose and Ivins 2000; Begala 2000; and Kellner 2001.

ⁱⁱ For the astonishing story of the Bush gang election theft, see Kellner 2001 which also draws on sources grounding the thumbnail sketch of Bush’s life presented here (see note 24 above). All of these stories are well-documented in Web-sites like www.bushwatch.com, as well as a series of books that I draw upon in Kellner 2001, but the mainstream media prefer to neglect the more unsavory aspects of the life and times of George W. Bush, in favor of puff pieces on the rascal.

ⁱⁱⁱ Falwell was quoted from an interview on Pat Robertson's CBN Club, cited in Washington Post, Sept. 13, 2001. For a summary of the inflammatory remarks made by Jerry Falwell and Pat Robertson: "Verbal assaults . . . by Fundamentalist Christian leaders" (from www.Religioustolerance.org)

^{iv} In a October 5, 2001, Wall Street Journal editorial Rush Limbaugh wrote: "Mr. Clinton can be held culpable for not doing enough when he was commander in chief to combat the terrorists who wound up attacking the World Trade Center and Pentagon." Shortly thereafter, Limbaugh confessed that he was almost fully deaf and had been feigning dialogue on his radio show all year. On rightwing attempts to blame Clinton for the terrorist attacks, see **also** John F. Harris "Conservatives Sound Refrain: It's Clinton's Fault," The Washington Post, October 7, 2001: A15.

^v Shortly after this and other outbursts, the frothing Coulter was fired from National Review when she reacted violently to efforts to tone down her rhetoric by the editors, helping to provide her with martyr status for the U.S. Talibanites.

^{vi} Gaffney, Bennett, and other rightwingers who populate the Bush administration are old-time Cold Warriors who continued to see Russia, China, Cuba, and Communist countries as major threats to the U.S., downplaying the dangers of terrorist attacks. Jason Vest speculates that it is precisely the obsolete anti-Cold War mentality of so many in the Bush administration that accounts for their inability to see new and harder to grasp enemies, like terrorist networks. See "Why Warnings Fell on Deaf Ears: For the Bush administration the Cold War never ended—so Al Qaeda had to get in line behind more serious enemies" The American Prospect (June 17, 2002). Vest claims that the Gaffney group's Web-site claims that "22 of the center's advisory council members now occupy key national security positions in the Bush administration." Thus, does the Cold War continue to haunt the U.S. as those who share its mentality in the Bush administration fail to understand the challenges of a different world and historical era.