GEORGE SOROS

The Bubble of American Supremacy

CORRECTING THE MISUSE OF AMERICAN POWER

The Bubble of American Supremacy

CHAPTER 2

The War on Terror

Terrorists pose an enormous threat to our national and personal security, and we must protect ourselves and our country from them. The suicide bombers of September 11 found us unprepared, and many of the measures we have taken since then are necessary and appropriate. Indeed, it can be argued that not enough has been done to prevent future attacks. But there is something fundamentally wrong with the Bush administration's war on terror. The war being waged has little to do with ending terrorism or enhancing homeland security; on the contrary, it uses terror as a pretext for waging war.

It is said that in the seventy-two hours following the terrorist attack, the Bush administration became engaged

in an intense debate on how to respond to it. Eventually, the war terminology prevailed.*

War is a false and misleading metaphor in the context of combating terrorism. Treating the attacks of September 11 as crimes against humanity would have been more appropriate. Crimes require police work, not military action. To protect against terrorism, you need precautionary measures, awareness, and intelligence gathering—all of which ultimately depend on the support of the populations among which the terrorists operate. Imagine for a moment that September 11 had been treated as a crime. We would have pursued Bin Laden in Afghanistan, but we would not have invaded Iraq. Nor would we have our military struggling to perform police work in full combat gear and getting killed in the process.

Declaring war on terrorism suited the purposes of the Bush administration better because it invoked our military might. But it is the wrong way to deal with terrorism.[†] Military action requires an identifiable target, preferably a state. As a result, the war on terrorism has been directed

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*Bob Woodward, *Bush at War* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2002), 42.

[†]"[T]o use, or rather to misuse, the term 'war' is not simply a matter of legality or pedantic semantics. It has deeper and more dangerous consequences. To declare that one is at war is immediately to create a war psychosis that may be totally counterproductive for the objective being sought. It arouses an immediate expectation, and demand, for spectacular military action against some easily identifiable adversary, preferably a hostile state—action leading to decisive results" (Michael Howard, "What's in a Name? How to Fight Terrorism," *Foreign Affairs* 81, no. 1 [January/February 2002], p. 9).

primarily against states harboring terrorists. Yet terrorists are nonstate actors by definition, even if in many cases they are sponsored by a state. By turning the hunt for terrorists into a war, we are bound to create some innocent victims. The more innocent victims there are, the greater the resentment and the better the chances that some victims will turn perpetrators.

Victims Turning Perpetrators

Victims turning perpetrators is a well-known syndrome both in individuals and in groups.* Repressive rulers often exhibit a similar pattern. Both Mahathir bin Muhammad of Malaysia and Robert Mugabe of Zimbabwe appeal to the memory of colonial repression while engaging in repressive acts of varying severity.

Perhaps the most poignant and difficult case is Israel. Jews were the victims of the holocaust, which can itself be ascribed, in part, to a process of victims turning perpetrators: Hitler rose to power by capitalizing on a wave of resentment caused by an onerous peace treaty and runaway

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*The idea was first popularized by Erich Fromm, *The Anatomy of Human Destructiveness* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1973). Criminologist Lonnie H. Athens, in *The Creation of Dangerous Violent Criminals* (New York: Routledge, 1989), later collected case studies of some of the most violent criminals in U.S. jails and found a recurrent pattern: An abused youth chooses a perpetrator as his role model and starts imitating him; when he finds that he can get away with it, he carries the violence to extremes.

inflation. He appealed to the German people's sense of being victimized. Whether the Germans' sense of victimization was imaginary or not, there can be no doubt that the Jews were victims in the literal sense. In the holocaust, many Jews went to their death helplessly and naively obeying orders, something I witnessed personally as a thirteen-year-old in Budapest.*

After the war, Jews resorted to terrorism against the British in Palestine in order to secure a homeland in Israel. Subsequently, after being attacked by Arab nations, Israel occupied additional territory and expelled many of the inhabitants. Eventually, the Arab victims also turned perpetrators, and Israel started suffering terrorist attacks. Israel made a habit of retaliating vigorously, enlarging the circle of Arab victims. Yitzhak Rabin made a valiant attempt to reverse the vicious cycle with the Oslo Accords of 1993, and he came very close to succeeding, so close that a Jewish extremist found it necessary to murder him in 1995. Subsequent attempts at reaching a settlement were rebuffed by Yasir Arafat, who thrived on conflict and recognized that a democratic Palestinian state at peace with Israel would likely mean the end of his days as leader.

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*During that time, I was working for the Jewish Council in Budapest as a runner and I was instructed to deliver notices to Jewish lawyers to report at the Rabbinical Seminary with food and clothing the next day. When I showed the notices to my father, who was also a lawyer, he told me to warn the recipients that they were going to be deported. I informed one of the recipients, who replied, "They can't do that to me. I've always been a law-abiding citizen."

The situation deteriorated until suicide bombings became commonplace. Perpetrators are now in charge on both sides. The current Israeli prime minister, Ariel Sharon, has been held responsible for the massacre of Palestinians that took place in the Shatila and Sabra refugee camps in Lebanon in 1982. The Palestinians and Israel are locked in a vicious circle of escalating violence.

The policy of retaliation is not without its own logic. Terrorists need an organization and a source of outside support. If you can strike at the source, sometimes you can destroy the organization. Israel, with its excellent intelligence and total dedication to self-defense, was very successful in fending off terrorism for many years and executed many brilliant counterstrikes. Yet terrorism has not been eradicated. It reappeared whenever more peaceful methods of protest failed to produce positive results. In the Second Intifada, in Jenin, it took nearly six months, during which time some fifty inhabitants were killed, before the first suicide bomber emerged from that town. Subsequently, Jenin became a major source of suicide bombers. Jenin was then subjected to a siege in which fourteen Israeli soldiers and an unknown number of inhabitants were killed.*

*A planned UN investigation was aborted when the Israeli government stated its opposition to the composition and mission of the fact-finding team appointed by the UN secretary-general. The team was prevented from carrying out any on-the-ground investigation (meeting only in Geneva) and was disbanded on May 3, 2002, when it became clear that Israel's objections could not be dealt with. A report on events in Jenin and other Palestinian areas was nevertheless prepared.

The Bubble of American Supremacy

Under the Bush administration, the United States has also become a victim-turned-perpetrator, although the American public would be loath to recognize it. On September 11, America was the victim of a heinous crime and the whole world expressed spontaneous and genuine sympathy. Since then, the war on terrorism has claimed more innocent civilians in Afghanistan and Iraq than have the attacks on the World Trade Center.* That comparison is rarely made at home: American lives are valued differently than the lives of foreigners, but the distinction is less obvious to people abroad.

Anti-American Sentiment

Indeed, since the United States has pursued the war on terror, world public opinion has turned sharply against us. The swing has been impressive. On September 12, 2001, a special meeting of the North Atlantic Council invoked Article 5 of the NATO Treaty for the first time in the alliance's history, calling on all member states to treat the

United Nations General Assembly, "Report of the Secretary-General prepared pursuant to General Assembly resolution ES-10/10," July 30, 2002. Available at: http://ods-dds-ny.un.org/doc/UNDOC/GEN/N02/499/57/IMG/N0249957.pdf? OpenElement

*For Iraq, the civilian casualties tabulated by Iraqi Body Count place total civilian deaths at between 7,377 and 9,180 (http://www.iraqbodycount.net). Similar tabulations of civilian deaths in Afghanistan stand at about 3,500 (http://pubpages.unh.edu/%7Emwherold/).

terrorist attack on the United States as an attack upon their own soil. On September 13, 2001, *Le Monde*'s lead headline declared, "*Nous sommes tous américains*" ("We are all Americans") in a robust display of solidarity. The United Nations promptly endorsed punitive U.S. action against al Qaeda in Afghanistan.

A little more than a year later, the United States could not secure a UN resolution to authorize the invasion of Iraq, and in 2003, when we would have welcomed international involvement, we faced strong resistance. Surveys conducted in November 2002 revealed that fully one-third of all Britons viewed George Bush as a greater threat to world peace than Saddam Hussein, and attitudes have not improved since then.* A Pew Research Center poll released in March 2003 found that the percentage of the British population holding "favorable views" of the United States had declined drastically (from 75 percent to 48 percent) relative to levels measured in mid-2003.†

A large majority throughout the world opposed the war in Iraq. One and a half million Europeans took to the streets in mid-February 2003 to express opposition to the Iraqi war. In the meantime, Gerhard Schroeder secured reelection in Germany in September 2002 by refusing to

*Patrick Wintour and Ewen MacAskill, "One in Three Say Bush Is Biggest Threat," *Guardian*, November 14, 2002.

†The Pew Research Center for the People and the Press, "America's Image Further Erodes, Europeans Want Weaker Ties," March 18, 2003, 1, available at http://people-press.org/reports/pdf/175.pdf.

cooperate with the United States on Iraq. In a similar fashion, South Koreans elected an underdog candidate to the presidency because he was considered the least friendly to the United States. Surveys show that more South Koreans regard the United States as a greater danger to their security than North Korea. After the Coalition victory, most Iraqis were happy to be rid of Saddam, but that does not mean they welcome American occupation.

A reverse transformation has taken place in American public opinion. Immediately after September 11, America passed through a period of questioning and heart-searching. Newspaper op-eds and articles in both the popular press and academic journals sought to shed light on the sources of global anti-Americanism. Two years later, the mood has hardened and the U.S. public responds negatively to the hostility emanating from abroad. If the world increasingly regards the United States as a rogue superpower, many Americans seem to be holding fast to a self-image in which they are the victims. French President Jacques Chirac's threat to veto a UN Security Council resolution approving military action against Iraq gave rise to a spontaneous boycott of French goods among American consumers. The canteen of Congress has renamed French fries "freedom fries." Donald Rumsfeld's berating of "old Europe" has found a sympathetic audience. Even as the American public turns against President Bush, it continues to blame the French.

DELIBERATE DECEPTION

Usually when victims turn perpetrators, they are unaware of what they are doing. That is the case with the American public today. Most people believe that terrorism poses a threat to our personal and national existence and that in waging war on terrorism we are acting in self-defense. The idea that we may have been transformed from victims to perpetrators must be rather shocking to most of us.

By contrast, the advocates of American supremacy within the Bush administration knew what they were doing when they advised President Bush to declare war on terrorism. This drive can be most clearly demonstrated in the case of the Iraqi invasion. As mentioned earlier, many of the key players in the Project for the New American Century argued for invading Iraq as early as 1998 in an open letter to President Clinton. After September 11, 2001, they claimed that Saddam Hussein was in possession of weapons of mass destruction and had links with al Qaeda. They were prepared to argue the case even if it involved deception and outright lies.

Clearly, there must have been other reasons for invading Iraq; otherwise, the neocon ideologues would not have advocated it as early as 1998. Those reasons remained unspoken. The invasion of Iraq had to be fitted into the context of the war on terrorism because that is what President Bush claimed a mandate to fight. The campaign of misinformation was led by President Bush

personally, although he may also have been deceived by the people around him; one statement does not exclude the other. The debate on Iraq was entirely stilted. The possibility that the United States was motivated by considerations such as ensuring the flow of oil supplies could not even be mentioned, because it would have been regarded as unpatriotic or worse.

The war on terrorism as pursued by the Bush administration cannot be won, because it is based on false pretenses. The war on terrorism is more likely to bring about a permanent state of war. Terrorists are invisible; therefore, they will never disappear. They will continue to provide a convenient pretext for the pursuit of American supremacy by military means. That pursuit, in turn, will continue to generate resistance, setting up a vicious circle of escalating violence.

In this respect, there is a parallel between the war on terrorism and the war on drugs: The remedy is inappropriate to the disease. In the case of drugs, we are confronted by a public health problem, not a problem of crime. The public health problem cannot be properly addressed if we treat drug addicts as criminals. In the case of terrorists we *are* dealing with a crime. We need detective work, good intelligence, and cooperation from the public, not military action. In both cases, waging war is a false metaphor that can be used to justify repressive measures.*

*When I decided to extend the operations of my Open Society Foundation to the United States, I chose drug policy as one of the first fields of engagement. I

Reexamining the Terrorist Threat

Terrorism is not new. It was an important factor in nineteenth-century Russia, and it had a great influence in shaping the character of the czarist regime, enhancing the importance of the secret police and justifying authoritarian rule. More recently, several European countries—Italy, Germany, Spain, Greece, and the United Kingdom—have had to contend with terrorist gangs. It took each of them a decade or more to root them out, but they did not live in thrall of terrorism during all that time.

Using hijacked planes for suicide attacks *is* something new, and so is the potential for the terrorists' use of weapons of mass destruction. There is clear evidence that al Qaeda was experimenting with chemical and biological weapons in Afghanistan, and we must take the threat seriously. Suicide bombers using hijacked airplanes took us unawares; we cannot let that happen with nuclear, biological, or chemical weapons. To come to terms with these threats will require serious attention, but we cannot let them dominate our existence.

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felt that drug policy was the area in which the United States was in the greatest danger of violating the principles of open society. I did not claim that I had all the right answers, but I was sure of one thing: The war on drugs was doing more harm than the drugs themselves—and on that point the evidence is clear. Drugs kill a few people, incapacitate many more, and give parents sleepless nights. On the other hand, the war on drugs has put millions behind bars, disrupted entire communities, particularly in the inner cities, and destabilized entire countries.

It is high time to reconsider the war on terrorism. By allowing terrorism to become our principal preoccupation, we are playing straight into the terrorists' hands: They—and not us—are setting our priorities. September 11 needs to be put into the proper perspective. The loss of three thousand innocent lives is an enormous human tragedy, but it does not endanger our existence as a nation. To elevate the threat posed by al Qaeda to the level represented by nuclear war is a wild exaggeration that can be sustained only by cultivating a link between terrorism and weapons of mass destruction.

The expression *weapons of mass destruction* is itself a misnomer: Nuclear, chemical, and biological weapons have little in common.* As of now, chemical and biological weapons do not approach nuclear weapons in destructive power, although they do hold the menace of the unknown. They are also more easily accessible. We know that al Qaeda was experimenting with chemical and biological weapons in Afghanistan and Saddam Hussein actually used poison gas against his own people in 1975.

But terrorist groups cannot marshal the same resources as state-sponsored weapons programs can, and there is no evidence of any link between al Qaeda and Saddam Hus-

*At the inquiry into the suicide of the British weapons expert David Kelly, a Ministry of Defense official, Brian Jones, said, "I think 'weapons of mass destruction' has become a convenient catch-all which in my opinion can at times confuse discussion of the subject" (Brian Jones, quoted in Warren Hoge, "Arms Dossier Troubled British Experts, Panel Is Told," *New York Times*, September 4, 2003).

sein. It is highly unlikely that Saddam's Iraq would have dared to supply terrorists with weapons of mass destruction because of the repercussions: It is easier to find Iraq than the terrorists. The occurrence of an anthrax attack immediately following September 11, with anthrax of a high quality that only the U.S. weapons program was capable of producing, remains a strange and still unexplained incident, but undoubtedly it contributed to the myth that links weapons of mass destruction with terrorism. The anthrax attack had few victims; a portable nuclear bomb would have many more.

Exaggerating these threats only makes them worse. Yet that is exactly what the Bush administration is doing. When John Ashcroft accused a scruffy dropout named José Padillo in a plot to release a radioactive "dirty bomb," the attorney general achieved the same result as a terrorist perpetuating such a scheme: He fostered fear. Fear can be a useful tool in the hands of a government intent on exploiting it: It unites people against a common enemy. Communism used to serve as the enemy; now terrorism can fill the role. The appeal to patriotism can also be used to silence the critics. We seem to have come a long way from the time when President Roosevelt reminded the nation that "the only thing we have to fear is fear itself."

The important thing to remember about terrorism is that it is a reflexive phenomenon: Its impact and development are precisely dependent on the actions and reactions of the victims. If the victims react by turning into perpetrators, terrorism triumphs in the sense of engendering a

vicious cycle of escalating violence. That is what the fanatically militant Islamists who perpetrated September 11 must have hoped to achieve.

A Different Vision for America

The most powerful country on earth cannot afford to be consumed by fear. To make the war on terrorism the centerpiece of our national strategy is an abdication of our responsibility as the leading nation in the world. The United States is the only country that can take the lead in addressing problems that require collective action: preserving peace, assuring economic progress, protecting the environment, and so on. Fighting terrorism and controlling weapons of mass destruction also fall into this category.

The United States cannot do whatever it wants, but nothing much can be done in the way of international cooperation without the leadership or at least active participation of our nation. The United States has a greater degree of discretion in deciding what shape the world should take than anybody else. Other countries have to respond to U.S. policy, but we can choose the policy to which others have to respond. This imposes a unique responsibility on the United States: Our nation must concern itself with the well-being of the world. We will be the greatest beneficiaries if we do so.