

Tearing Down the Bush Wall: Disassembling George's Global War on Terror

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Informed Comment - Juan Cole - Bush articulated his War on Terror yet again on Thursday. But I think the American public has heard all this over and over again and it is increasingly just not convinced. It is time for another installment of the ever-popular "Arguing with Bush" series.

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Arguing with Bush and the GWOT

by Juan Cole

Informed Comment

Friday, October 07, 2005

Bush, predictably, began with September 11:

"Recently our country observed the fourth anniversary of a great evil, and looked back on a great turning point in our history. We still remember a proud city covered in smoke and ashes, a fire across the Potomac, and passengers who spent their final moments on Earth fighting the enemy. We still remember the men who rejoiced in every death, and Americans in uniform rising to duty. And we remember the calling that came to us on that day, and continues to this hour: We will confront this mortal danger to all humanity. We will not tire, or rest, until the war on terror is won."

September 11 was a horrible moment that traumatized all Americans and killed nearly 3,000 persons. I myself had two cousins in the Pentagon that day. But it had nothing, repeat, nothing whatsoever to do with Iraq.

Bush then mentions some of the other terrorist attacks (most of them after September 11 and therefore theoretically preventable if Bush had put real resources into fighting al-Qaeda instead of running off to tangle with Baathists in Iraq.) He says,

"Some call this evil Islamic radicalism; others, militant Jihadism; still others, Islamo-fascism.

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Whatever it's called, this ideology is very different from the religion of Islam. This form of radicalism exploits Islam to serve a violent, political vision: the establishment, by terrorism and subversion and insurgency, of a totalitarian empire that denies all political and religious freedom. These extremists distort the idea of jihad into a call for terrorist murder against Christians and Jews and Hindus -- and also against Muslims from other traditions, who they regard as heretics. Many militants are part of global, borderless terrorist organizations like al Qaeda, which spreads propaganda, and provides financing and technical assistance to local extremists, and conducts dramatic and brutal operations like September the 11th. Other militants are found in regional groups, often associated with al Qaeda -- paramilitary insurgencies and separatist movements in places like Somalia, and the Philippines, and Pakistan, and Chechnya, and Kashmir, and Algeria. Still others spring up in local cells, inspired by Islamic radicalism, but not centrally directed. Islamic radicalism is more like a loose network with many branches than an army under a single command. Yet these operatives, fighting on scattered battlefields, share a similar ideology and vision for our world."

All this is true as far as it goes, but it completely lacks any context or nuance.

The Abu Sayyaf group in the Philippines is just a small mafia gang of 90 persons that lives on extortion. It could no more overthrow the Philippines government than David Koreish could have taken over Texas. I don't actually think that terrorist analyst Marc Sageman found many, if any, persons engaged in international terrorism from Kashmir. There has been a lot of political violence in Kashmir, but there are two sides to it, and heavy-handed Indian military tactics have killed a lot of Kashmiris. The UN had decreed that a referendum would be held in Kashmir on its future, which India has ever since 1948 refused to allow. Likewise, Chechnya is a rugged area of clannish Muslims that the Russians conquered in the 19th century, and where they committed a sort of 19th century genocide in the course of "pacifying" it. Chechen demands for more autonomy after the fall of the Soviet Union were greeted by Yeltsin with enormous brutality, and Putin has not been wiser. Chechnya and Kashmir are sites of local struggles for more autonomy in a post-colonial context, and just reeling their names off as sites of an "ideology" of "hatred" does not tell us anything useful.

The list Bush gave is highly deceptive.

Chechnya and Kashmir are trouble spots, but they are crawling with Russian and Indian troops, respectively, and big powerful states have honed in on them like a laser. In the Philippines, you also have a Muslim separatist movement. But the most virulent terrorist organization is just a small handful of people. The Algerian military government won its costly struggle against political Islam during the past decade and more, in which perhaps 150,000 persons perished. The Islamists were roundly and decisively defeated. This victory requires the US to do what,

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now? As for Pakistan, it is ruled by an elite that has thrown in with the US repeatedly in the past few decades, and did so again after September 11. Pakistani police and military have worked with the FBI and CIA to capture over 600 al-Qaeda operatives, including big fish like Abu Zubayda and Khalid Shaykh Muhammad. This situation requires the US to do what, exactly?

"We know the vision of the radicals because they've openly stated it -- in videos, and audiotapes, and letters, and declarations, and websites. First, these extremists want to end American and Western influence in the broader Middle East, because we stand for democracy and peace, and stand in the way of their ambitions. Al Qaeda's leader, Osama bin Laden, has called on Muslims to dedicate, quote, their "resources, sons and money to driving the infidels out of their lands." Their tactic to meet this goal has been consistent for a quarter-century: They hit us, and expect us to run. They want us to repeat the sad history of Beirut in 1983, and Mogadishu in 1993 -- only this time on a larger scale, with greater consequences.

It is true that Bin Laden taunts the US about withdrawing from Lebanon and Somalia when hit in those places. But Bin Laden's childish taunts do not change the fact that the US was right to withdraw in both places.

No amount of Marines in Lebanon would have made a difference in 1983 (the Israelis made the big mistake of trying to stay in southern Lebanon, and just got themselves blown up and driven out). Bush senior was wrong to send US troops to Somalia in the first place; they had no defined military mission there. And, Bin Laden's taunts are slyer than Bush reads them, since they are designed to draw the US into a quagmire in the Muslim world where Muslim radicals can do to US troops what they had earlier done to Soviet ones in Afghanistan. The taunt is a trap. Bush is too thick to avoid the trap being laid for him.

"Second, the militant network wants to use the vacuum created by an American retreat to gain control of a country, a base from which to launch attacks and conduct their war against non-radical Muslim governments. Over the past few decades, radicals have specifically targeted Egypt, and Saudi Arabia, and Pakistan, and Jordan for potential takeover."

Yeah, except that at no point have the radical Muslim fundamentalists ever come anywhere near taking over any of those countries. It is like saying that the Weathermen dreamed of a

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revolution against the US government in the late 1960s. So what? Small fringe groups dream big dreams.

'They achieved their goal, for a time, in Afghanistan.'

Yes, because the United States sent them \$5 billion dollars and strong-armed the Saudis to match it, and undermined and overthrew the Socialist government in Afghanistan, which had made women's education and literacy among its prime policy goals and which tried to implement land reform, etc. It was a brutal regime, but less brutal than the Mujahidin or holy warriors bankrolled by Reagan and Bush senior, in whose terror training camps many "Arab Afghans" gained their expertise in bombings, cell formation, and other terror techniques. The Taliban were just second-generation Mujahidin.

'Now they've set their sights on Iraq. Bin Laden has stated: "The whole world is watching this war and the two adversaries. It's either victory and glory, or misery and humiliation." The terrorists regard Iraq as the central front in their war against humanity. And we must recognize Iraq as the central front in our war on terror.'

Bin Laden set his sights on Iraq in 1990, when he offered to gather the Mujahidin and Arab Afghans to get Saddam out of Kuwait and overthrow his godless atheist socialist government. King Fahd told him "no."

The only difference between then and now is that then the Baath regime was strong enough to stand against various Muslim fundamentalist challenges, and now Bush has thrown Iraq into chaos, of which the fundamentalists are taking advantage. Bush's overthrow of the Baath also discredited secular Arab nationalism, driving many Iraqi Sunnis into the arms of the radical Salafi Sunni revivalists. The difference is Bush's ineptitude, not any change in Bin Laden. If Bush was worried about al-Qaeda taking over Iraq, he should have left it alone and not destabilized it.

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'Third, the militants believe that controlling one country will rally the Muslim masses, enabling them to overthrow all moderate governments in the region, and establish a radical Islamic empire that spans from Spain to Indonesia. With greater economic and military and political power, the terrorists would be able to advance their stated agenda: to develop weapons of mass destruction, to destroy Israel, to intimidate Europe, to assault the American people, and to blackmail our government into isolation.'

Yes, al-Qaeda does want these things. But then the Christian Identity Movement in the United States wants to establish a massive fortified refuge for persecuted white people to escape oppression at the hands of what they in their looney tunes way consider the evil, minority-dominated Federal Government. That crackpot fringe groups have big plans and ideas is not surprising, and we only have to worry about them if it looks like they might actually succeed.

But who thinks this particular crackpot plan is in any way feasible? Look at America's friends in the Middle East-- Morocco, Algeria, Tunisia, Egypt, Jordan, the Palestinian Authority, Israel, Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Bahrain, Qatar, the UAE, Yemen, Oman, Pakistan, etc., etc. Which one of them is on the verge of being taken over by al-Qaeda? Why, al-Qaeda had to plan out 9/11 from Europe because it could not operate in the Middle East! An al-Qaeda meeting in Cairo would have had more Egyptian government spies in attendance than radical fundamentalists!

"Some might be tempted to dismiss these goals as fanatical or extreme. Well, they are fanatical and extreme -- and they should not be dismissed. Our enemy is utterly committed. As Zarqawi has vowed, "We will either achieve victory over the human race or we will pass to the eternal life." And the civilized world knows very well that other fanatics in history, from Hitler to Stalin to Pol Pot, consumed whole nations in war and genocide before leaving the stage of history. Evil men, obsessed with ambition and unburdened by conscience, must be taken very seriously -- and we must stop them before their crimes can multiply."

A wise leader has to be able to judge the moment, and to see things in proportion to their importance. Bin Laden is simply not a Hitler. There is no country in which he or his minions are about to become Chancellor. It is a joke to think that Zawahiri, who is not even respected by the Egypt-based al-Jihad al-Islami, has any chance of taking over Egypt! Al-Qaeda is not even an organization. It is a loose set of radical ideas that small fringe groups can take up at will. It is not German National Socialism. It is the contemporary Ku Klux Klan.

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"Defeating the militant network is difficult, because it thrives, like a parasite, on the suffering and frustration of others . . ."

Yeah, it thrives on the perception of injustice generated by Western imperial military occupation of Muslim countries. Your policies in Iraq, George, are a huge recruitment poster for al-Qaeda.

" The influence of Islamic radicalism is also magnified by helpers and enablers. They have been sheltered by authoritarian regimes, allies of convenience like Syria and Iran that share the goal of hurting America and moderate Muslim governments . . ."

This line is the most lunatic thing in Bush's speech. It is outrageous. It is the Big Lie. Syria has a secular Baath Arab nationalist government. The regime killed 10,000 Muslim activists at Hama in 1982. It tortured al-Qaeda members for the United States after September 11. Syria, a small country of only 18 million, has no ability to harm the United States and it most certainly is not in alliance with radical Muslim fundamentalists!

As for Iran, its brand of fundamentalism is Shiite. Al-Qaeda is made up of Sunnis and Wahhabis, who despise Shiites. Iran supports the new, Shiite-dominated government in Iraq. It supported the Jan. 30 elections. It supports the new constitution and the referendum. Iran hated the Taliban and very nearly went to war against them, backing the Northern Alliance instead. The Shiite Iranians hate the radical Salafis like Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, who has called for a war of extermination against the Shiites.

Bush's attempt to conflate the regimes he doesn't like with al-Qaeda makes nonsense of his whole vision.

It would be as though someone who disliked the United States and France should posit Southern Baptist American support for the Catholic Irish Republican Army because France is a US ally and is Catholic. To anyone who knows anything at all about the Middle East, Bush has made a mishmash of unrelated things and attempted to construct a bogeyman out of them.

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"and use terrorist propaganda to blame their own failures on the West and America, and on the Jews. These radicals depend on front operations, such as corrupted charities, which direct money to terrorist activity. They're strengthened by those who aggressively fund the spread of radical, intolerant versions of Islam in unstable parts of the world. The militants are aided, as well, by elements of the Arab news media that incite hatred and anti-Semitism, that feed conspiracy theories and speak of a so-called American "war on Islam" -- with seldom a word about American action to protect Muslims in Afghanistan, and Bosnia, Somalia, Kosovo, Kuwait, and Iraq."

This is all true. But the question is how to combat these pernicious ideas. It would be easier to knock down the antisemitism if the Israelis were not stealing Palestinian land in the West Bank or gradually taking over all of Jerusalem. It would be easier to highlight US humanitarian interventions that have benefited Muslims if the US government had ever bothered to offer a prize to an Arab author to write a book about this subject and publish it in Cairo (no such book exists and no avenue now exists for the US to encourage such publication projects.)

"Some have also argued that extremism has been strengthened by the actions of our coalition in Iraq, claiming that our presence in that country has somehow caused or triggered the rage of radicals. I would remind them that we were not in Iraq on September the 11th, 2001 -- and al Qaeda attacked us anyway. The hatred of the radicals existed before Iraq was an issue, and it will exist after Iraq is no longer an excuse. The government of Russia did not support Operation Iraqi Freedom, and yet the militants killed more than 180 Russian schoolchildren in Beslan" . . .

This argument is stupid. That Iraq is not the only grievance of the radical Muslim fundamentalists is obvious. The converse is not true, that Iraq does not matter. I agree with Bush that it is not useful to worry about the crackpot reasons for which al-Qaeda says it does things. But what we want to avoid doing is to spread around sympathy for al-Qaeda-like ideas.

The point about the US military occupation of Iraq is that it serves to convince Muslim publics that the al-Qaeda leaders were right to see the US as an imperialist, domineering power that wanted to take their lands, rape their women, humiliate their men, and steal their oil. We needed to avoid doing things that would help al-Qaeda recruit a new generation of trained activists. By going into Iraq in this way, the Bush administration has vindicated Bin Laden in the eyes of many Muslims.

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"Over the years these extremists have used a litany of excuses for violence -- the Israeli presence on the West Bank, or the U.S. military presence in Saudi Arabia, or the defeat of the Taliban, or the Crusades of a thousand years ago. In fact, we're not facing a set of grievances that can be soothed and addressed. We're facing a radical ideology with inalterable objectives: to enslave whole nations and intimidate the world. No act of ours invited the rage of the killers -- and no concession, bribe, or act of appeasement would change or limit their plans for murder."

This is true. But remember when you said you worried that this small band of fanatics might be like Hitler's Nazis circa 1926? What you want to do is prevent them from getting to 1933. How would you do that? You have to compete with them for a favorable public opinion with Muslim publics. There will always be fringe groups of fanatics. What we have to do is deny them constituencies. The creeping Israeli annexation of the West Bank and Jerusalem, and the US military occupation of Iraq, provide al-Qaeda with constituents they would not otherwise have. They therefore take us closer to 1933, not farther away from it.

"On the contrary: They target nations whose behavior they believe they can change through violence. Against such an enemy, there is only one effective response: We will never back down, never give in, and never accept anything less than complete victory."

This is stupid again. In any war, you have to back away from battles you aren't winning, otherwise you waste precious resources. It doesn't mean you back away from the war. In some instances, as with a US withdrawal from Iraq, al-Qaeda would be weakened far more by the removal of an irritant to Muslim public opinion than it would be strengthened by any perception of US weakness. Everybody saw what happened to the Taliban and Saddam's army. No one is in any doubt as to the military might of the US. The only question is whether the US is so unwise as to bleed itself into weakness by fighting long-term wars of occupation that it cannot win.

"The murderous ideology of the Islamic radicals is the great challenge of our new century. Yet, in many ways, this fight resembles the struggle against communism in the last century. Like the ideology of communism, Islamic radicalism is elitist, led by a self-appointed vanguard that presumes to speak for the Muslim masses . . ."

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It is not important that al-Qaeda ideology is Leninist. What is important is that Lenin and his successors had a state, the Soviet Union, which was a superpower. Bin Laden is a fugitive. Al-Qaeda not only does not have a state, it doesn't have really good places to hide. It is ridiculous to attempt to scare the American people into thinking that there is this huge, Soviet-style challenge out there, when in fact "al-Qaeda" is a few hundred or at most a couple thousand local misfits and fanatics. The enemy is fishermen in Mombasa, Bedouin first-generation intellectuals in the Sinai, British school teachers meeting in a gym in Leeds, part-time seminarians in Indonesia. This asymmetrical enemy is not like Soviet communism. It is like the Baader Meinhoff gang and other small terrorist organizations.

"We didn't ask for this global struggle . . . "

You aren't waging a global struggle. You are spending a billion and a half dollars a week on a war of choice in Iraq. That, you asked for. You told interviewers way back when you were governor of Texas that you wanted to "take out" Saddam one day. You said in another speech that he tried to kill your Daddy. It seems to me that you have some sort of personal vendetta with Iraq. I doubt you even had ever heard of Usamah Bin Laden in 1998 when you were giving that interview about taking out Saddam. As for the struggle against al-Qaeda, I can't see that you are putting any significant resources into it. You neglected Afghanistan. It is back to producing heroin for a living, which may well turn into narco-terrorism. Although you claim to have stopped some al-Qaeda operations, you haven't in fact been able to stop al-Qaeda from hitting a whole string of targets, including London. You are just causing a lot of trouble in Iraq and playing into Bin Laden's hands there.

You say no country in the Middle East should be allowed to have "weapons of mass destruction." The only country that actually has weapons of mass destruction in the Middle East proper is Israel, which is the main thing driving other countries to try to get them. Why not call for a nuclear-free zone, promise Israel a US nuclear umbrella, and get Israel to destroy its? As it is, you just look like a hypocrite to people in the region, winking at Israel's bomb but going ballistic about the possibility of any other country getting nukes.

As for the rest of your speech, it is all made up as you go along, just like your whole administration. You are a fanatic about a few things like Iraq and "weapons of mass destruction" and Syria and Iran, but you don't actually seem to do much governing. When Katrina hit you were asleep at the switch. Your main accomplishment is to throw so much dust in the eyes of Americans that they let you push a million people into poverty last year, while reducing the

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taxes on the super rich by some enormous factor. Syria is a small weak country and I can't see that it has any power to do anything to the United States at all. The National Intelligence Estimate is that Iran is at least 10 years from having a nuclear weapon, assuming it is working on one, which is not proved (and you lied to us about Iraq being at work on one, so why should we pay any attention to you on this issue?)

Mr. Bush, I don't recognize the world you paint. I find your speech a form of sheer propaganda, having almost no relationship to reality. And I am very, very worried that you will allow to happen to the Oil Gulf what you allowed to happen to New Orleans. After watching you for five years I have become convinced that you don't have the slightest idea what you are doing in Iraq, that you are just reacting and playing it by ear. You can't do that, George. This Iraq thing is extremely complex. It needs serious, concerted thought by high-powered people, not just your cronies and yes-men and ideologues of various stripes (from Right to far-Right). You might just need the help of Iran and Syria to get Iraq right. Did you ever think of that? Iraq is the biggest policy failure in US history so far. You need to get a handle on it, the way you do on tax cuts for the billionaires (you've been very effective in making your rich friends richer). Otherwise all that extra treasure you've thrown to your tuxedoed "base" is going to go right down the tubes, drowned in a world of \$20 a gallon gasoline.

You can't "stay the course" because you don't have a course. Get one.

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