The U.S. War on Terror

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'America is at war,' reminded the President recently, when the latest plot against America was revealed. This state of war is codified in 'The National Security Strategy of the United States', issued from the White House, not to mention 'The National Defense Strategy of the United States', issued from the Pentagon.[1] George W. Bush is the self-styled war president and self-willed commander-in-chief. As those who have hitched themselves to his chariot have discovered ('Yo Blair'), what he says goes. 'I'm the commander, see, I don't need to explain – I do not need to explain why I say things. That's the interesting thing about being the president.'[2] In an era when wars are commonly supposed to be undeclared – when war itself is a word that dare not speak its name – the 'global war on terror' suffers if anything from a surfeit of declaration. The GWOT is among other things a war of words, and acronyms, a war of characterization and mischaracterization. Some of these words are new ('PUC'),[3] or combined in gruesome neologism ('extraordinary rendition'); some are shop-soiled ('values'); some are deliberately anodyne ('detainee'); some are hyperbolic, yet curiously reversible ('civilization', 'barbarian'); some are almost unpronounceable ('torture').

The National Security Strategy characterizes it as both a war of arms and a war of ideas.[4] That appears to be a serviceable enough distinction, as far as it goes, but it has the effect of underwriting a propensity to elevate the former and relegate the latter, at least when it comes to priorities for action and resource allocation. Ideas are conceded to be fundamental; but ideas need time to take hold (and think up). Time is with the

terrorist – more plots hatched, more martyrs enlisted. Waiting for the barbarians is not conducive to public safety. Convincing them of the error of their ways or their analysis – their woeful failure to appreciate the truly benign character of American power and purpose – that is a tall order, beyond even the mighty Secretary of Defense, a man whose musings have contributed so much to the corpus of Western thought, most notably his celebrated taxonomy of known knowns, known unknowns, and unknown unknowns (the ones we don't know we don't know).[5] Concerning the barbarians, the unknown unknown was just how little we knew about them – who they were, where they were, how they operated, what they believed. The known known, by contrast, was simplicity itself: barbarians are notoriously impervious to argument. There has been a tendency to typecast, to put it mildly. An academic acquaintance of the editor of the literary magazine Granta, a Middle East specialist, was asked by an intelligence agency in Washington if he would care to write a paper which would answer their question, 'Why Arabs Lie'.[6] 'You have to understand the Arab mind,' explained an infantry company commander in Iraq. 'The only thing they understand is force – force, pride, and saving face.'[7] Manifestly, they are not like us. The enemy is the other. The enemy in this particular war is irremediably other: fiendish and fanatical, almost bestial. Iraqis grasped this attitude of mind only too well. In the debris of Fallujah a teenager came up to the leader of a US Army patrol. Gesturing to a pile of rubbish that filled a space where a building had been, he asked in a loud voice: 'Why don't you Americans clean up the garbage?' Sighing, the patrol leader replied: 'Why don't you clean it up yourselves?' 'Oh, because we're not like you Americans,' said the boy theatrically. 'We are a savage and primitive people.'[8]

Savage and primitive people seem to have the knack of strategic surprise. The battle of arms must be joined now, therefore, before it is too late. The need for action – military action – is transparent and urgent, at once comprehensible and sellable; the need to do something, and to be seen to be doing something, is a powerful goad. It is in part a strategic imperative, if not a psychological need. More than that, it is a political requirement. A democracy cannot wage a seven-year war, said the organizer of victory General George C. Marshall, meaning that it cannot go on indefinitely, mobilized and immobilized, at war and at bay, bristling with arms and bereft of ideas. It must fight, and win, or it must find alternative modes of engagement. (So much for 'the long war', newspeak for the GWOT. Marshall's dictum applies. Given that the enemy is virtually indestructible, or perpetually renewable, the long war is almost certainly unwinnable in these terms, as Hezbollah even now serve to demonstrate.) Political mandates are crucially dependent upon successful military operations, or operations which can plausibly be represented as successful – remember 'mission accomplished' – however hollow the claim may appear in retrospect. Even mature democracies have a kind of pain threshold for the body politic. For the United States, the pain of 9/11 was surely hard to bear. The shock was intense. The sanctuary had been violated. A crime against humanity had been committed. America had been wounded. The great city had been scarred. The great nation had been humiliated. The threshold had been crossed. And yet, dimly perceived amid the smoking ruins, there were limits. 9/11 was an atrocity, not an existential threat. It counselled restraint; renunciation was out of the question. The war on terror is a war of choice and a war of necessity. At root, possibly, it is a war of the heart and the soul, a war of humiliation, more instinctual and less cerebral than the warriors might care to admit.

By blue Ontario's shore,
As I mused of these warlike days and of peace return'd, and
    The dead that return no more,
A Phantom gigantic superb, with stern visage accosted me,
Chant me the poem, it said*, that comes from the soul of America,*
    Chant me the carol of victory,
And strike up the marches of Libertad, marches more powerful yet,
And sing me before you go the song of the throes of democracy.
(Democracy, the destin'd conqueror, yet treacherous lip-smiles
    everywhere,
And death and infidelity at every step.)[9]

Elements of it may have been premeditated, on the wilder shores of neocon wish fulfilment or the millenary fantasy of the Project for the New American Century, but it was not preordained. The 'warfare model' prevailed against conceivable alternatives. 'There was a consensus that we had to move from retribution and punishment to pre-emption and prevention,' recalled one White House lawyer, of the mood after 9/11. 'Only a warfare model allows that approach.'[10] And so it became the GWOT and not the GLOT. War-war is better than law-law, according to the Bush Administration. The other, that elusive prey, was defined as an enemy combatant rather than a criminal defendant. The appointed destination for the terrorist suspect was not the court but the camp. Hence Amnesty's 'gulag of our times' – a misrepresentation, perhaps, but a public relations disaster (in the idiom of the Deputy Assistant Secretary of State for Public Diplomacy), and a gift to the enemy.[11] The netherworld of dark prisons and black sites is uncomfortably

reminiscent of Kafka's penal colony, where the guiding principle is devastatingly simple: Guilt is never to be doubted.[12]

In the camp, Hannah Arendt once remarked, everything is possible. In the camp, bare life begins.[13] Human beings dwindle to the status of dogs. At Abu Ghraib the cringing detainee on a leash held by the grinning Lynndie England was known to the night shift as Gus. Gus and his companions, Taxi Driver, Gilligan, the Iranian, Shitboy, and nameless others, were made to perform 'dog tricks' to improve discipline and demonstrate worth; heap, naked, in 'dog piles', ostensibly to maintain control; and do 'doggy dances' for general entertainment, while military dog handlers competed to see who could make them defecate or urinate on themselves.[14] It is but a short step from typecasting to degrading.

Such practices have been presented as some sort of aberration. It would be more accurate to speak of normalization. Abusing detainees was all part of a day's work, filmed by the perpetrators themselves, posing happy-snappy for the camera. The results became screen savers on their personal computers. An official investigation by Major General Antonio Taguba found that 'numerous incidents of sadistic, blatant, and wanton criminal abuses were inflicted on several detainees'.[15] Seymour Hersh believes that Taguba (a Filipino-American) was offended by what he saw. It is now known that the 'extremely graphic photographic evidence' to which he refers in his report far exceeds the sample disclosed in 2004 – dogs, hoods, electrodes and all – amounting to well over one thousand images and nearly one hundred video files of suspected ill-treatment.[16] Courageously, Taguba went further. 'This systemic and illegal abuse was intentionally perpetrated', he averred,

confronting the weasel arguments offered by tame apologists: that the abuse was confined to rogue elements ('a few bad apples'), that it was not so heinous a crime ('"Animal House" on the night shift'), and that the purpose was not to cause harm but to extract information (the lawyerly exculpation of 'specific intent'). The Taguba Report will have none of this.

Information, of course, is vital. It is the very lifeblood of any counter-terrorist activity. The prosecution of this war has been stymied from the outset by a chronic lack of information, or intelligence, and a further lack of the expertise required to make sense of what has been unearthed. A generation ago Daniel Ellsberg wrote: 'There has never been an official of Deputy Assistant Secretary rank or higher (including myself) who could have passed in office a mid-term exam in modern Vietnamese history.'[17] Could his successors have done any better in Iraqi history, or culture, or customs? When the reporter George Packer visited that temporary proconsul Paul Bremer in his Baghdad lair, deep in the fastness of the Green Zone, he found the bookshelves almost empty. 'Rudolph Giulliani's Leadership stood on one shelf, and a book about the management of financial crises on another, near a box of raisin bran.'[18] Paul Bremer had barely two weeks to prepare himself to run Iraq. He was a walking example of unknown unknowns in action. He was not alone. Crude notions about Arab fear of dogs and Muslim sense of shame seem to mark the limits of cultural understanding. The war on terror is a war of mutual incomprehension, a war of tribes, with something of the primitive about it. As the captors strip the captives of their dignity, insult their mothers, and profane their religious books, the captives mock the captors in terms the latter cannot begin to understand – women with men's haircuts, men without beards. 'In the American army I could not see a real man,' said an Afghan returned to his

homeland, no longer an enemy combatant, after three years in Guantánamo. 'And they talk rudely about homosexuals, which is very shameful to us.'[19]

The war on terror has been advertised as a new kind of war against a new kind of enemy – a new kind of evil, as the President said in September 2001 – though he is also keen to stake a claim to 'the great tradition of American foreign policy', citing predecessors as diverse as Harry Truman and Ronald Reagan.[20] In fact, the salient features of the GWOT as waged are depressingly familiar. The military campaigns in Afghanistan and Iraq, where shock and awe soon gave way to battles of attrition, where the campaigning has to be done over and over again every year, where rubblization outpaces reconstruction; and their corollaries, the sweep, the round-up, the arbitrary detentions, the creative forms of interrogation: such methods are certainly traditional, not to say old-fashioned. Reliance on them has caused the United States no end of trouble. The source of that trouble is not the under-trained and overwhelmed reservists of the 320th Military Police Battalion at Abu Ghraib – ordinary men indeed – but the strongholds of certainty, inviolability and 'inherent power' at the heart of the Administration: the Office of the Vice-President, the Office of the Secretary of Defense and the Office of Legal Counsel. The occupants of these offices have done their level best to give the President free rein in the conduct of this war, at home and abroad. In so doing they have shown a fine contempt for international law, including the fusty old Geneva Conventions and basic instruments such as the Convention Against Torture; and in memorandum after memorandum they have sought to circumvent it. Embedded in the National Defense Strategy is a revealing example of the mindset. A list of 'our vulnerabilities' includes the following item: 'Our strength as a nation state will continue to be challenged by those who

employ a strategy of the weak using international fora, judicial processes, and terrorism.'[21]

There is also the question of the Constitution. Electorally, it may be that the issues have not yet detonated; but they are explosive enough. At home, warrantless wiretapping and monitoring of banking transactions; illegal military tribunals; contentious use of Presidential 'signing statements'.[22] Abroad, rendition and torture. Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., who defined The Imperial Presidency (1973) in the Nixon era, has said of the Bush Administration's legal defence of torture: 'No position taken has done more damage to the American reputation in the world – ever.'[23] If the warfare model is underpinned by what might be called a with-us-or-against-us model, the evidence of the Pew Global Attitudes Project is that the world is against. Moreover the trend is adverse. The Dutch cosmopolitan Rem Koolhaas observes acutely that 'the attraction of America is quickly getting less all around the world, which allows each of us to define our identities a little more strongly'.[24] We are all Americans now, declared Le Monde in the wake of 9/11. No longer.

In one sense, those who believe that the antics at Abu Ghraib have been over-played have a point. Abu Ghraib is a metonym for the moral failings of this factitious war, but it by no means exhausts them. Nearly 100 detainees have died in the hands of US officials in the global war on terror. According to the military's own classification, thirty-four of these cases are suspected or confirmed homicides; Human Rights First has identified a further eleven in which the facts suggest death as a result of physical abuse or harsh detention conditions. Eight people in US custody have been tortured to death. The steepest sentence given to anyone involved in a torture-related death is five

months in jail. Only twelve detainee deaths have resulted in punishment of any kind for any US official.[25] To echo Arthur Schlesinger, no action has more severely compromised the United States in its prosecution of the war on terror than its inaction when faced with irrefutable evidence of American wrongdoing (evidence gathered by its own internal inquiries): the conspicuous failure to trace responsibility to its source and hold commanders and policy-makers to account.

The leitmotif of the original National Security Strategy of 2002 was 'the non-negotiable demands of human dignity'. In 2005 US military personnel in Iraq were issued with cue cards, 'talking points', such as: 'We are a values-based, people-focused team that strives to uphold the dignity and respect of all.'[26] The war on terror has always aspired to be more than a war – a cause, a crusade, though that particular word was quickly banished from the vocabulary. Causes and crusades are projects with a moral purpose, perhaps even a mission. Snatches of that theme are audible in the President's obiter dicta. It is thumpingly present in the speeches of his cheerleader-in-chief, Tony Blair, whose hyper-articulate apologetics fairly pulsate with values-talk and a rhetorical emphasis on good and evil, darkness and light, especially when addressing American audiences.[27]

In other words, the war on terror bids to be a good war. They are few and far between. It is doubtless no accident that the template is the Second World War. The President and his confederates often invoke Winston Churchill as an example of a politician who was punished in the polls but rewarded by history for rejecting appeasement. In one of the more implausible characterizations or identifications of his career, Bush has said that Churchill 'knew what he believed, and he really kind of went after it in a

way that seemed like a Texan to me'.[28] The war on terror may or may not be a war for civilization, but it is inescapably a war for posterity. For George Bush, as for Tony Blair, the posterity project is in deep trouble, caught on the pincers of the wrong war in the wrong place at the wrong time. The Iraq War has become the cynosure of the war on terror. It foreshadows a choice any President half-conscious of history must be desperate to avoid: debacle or quagmire.

For the values-based, the erosion of moral authority is a particular hardship. It is perhaps a pardonable exaggeration to say that the US war on terror is a struggle of good guys against bad, right against wrong, or it is nothing. The goodness, however, has been spoiled. The non-negotiable demands of human dignity have been found to be negotiable after all. The Administration's efforts to reconcile the excusable and the inexcusable in the conduct of the war have failed, as they were bound to fail. Antonio Taguba was not merely offended by what he saw of Abu Ghraib: he was shamed. So is the United States. So are we all. As Walt Whitman knew, the damage is indivisible.

> Whoever degrades another degrades me,
> And whatever is done or said returns at last to me.[29]

Shame is enduring. In the Muslim world the story of the shame will be told, Scheherazade-like, for years to come. In the United States and its satrapies awareness will sink in, slowly, painfully, like dripping water on the Western conscience. Has the alliance of values yet taken the measure of the consequences of its actions?

This article is based on a presentation to the Woodrow Wilson Center European Alumni Association, at a conference on 'Europe and the Muslim World' in Istanbul in October 2006.

[1] George W. Bush's introduction to the National Security Strategy of the United States of America (2006), at www.whitehouse.gov. Cf. National Defense Strategy of the United States of America (2005), p. 1, at www.defenselink.mil.
[2] Bob Woodward, Bush at War (New York: Pocket, 2003), pp. 145-46. 'Yo Blair' was the President's greeting during an informal exchange with the British Prime Minister between sessions at the G8 Summit in July 2006, caught on an open microphone. The exchange is printed and deconstructed in the Guardian, 18 July 2006.
[3] 'Person Under Control', an expression originating in Afghanistan to replace Prisoner of War (POW), after the President decided that the Geneva Conventions or at any rate POW status did not apply there; subsequently carried over to Iraq. Pronounced puck, as in 'fuck a PUC' (administer a beating). An inquiry conducted by Human Rights Watch, based on the first-hand testimony of serving soldiers, found that the PUCs held at Forward Operating Base Mercury, near Fallujah, were 'fucked' routinely, by anyone who pleased, over an eight-month period from September 2003 to April 2004. See 'Leadership Failure: Firsthand Accounts of Torture of Iraqi Detainees by the US Army's 82nd Airborne Division', September 2005, at www.hrw.org; excerpted in 'Torture in Iraq', New York Review of Books, 3 November 2005.
[4] Explicitly so in the original version of 2002 ('we will also wage a war of ideas …'); latterly 'a battle of arms and a battle of ideas'.
[5] 'The Unknown', in Hart Seely (ed.), Pieces of Intelligence (London: Simon & Schuster, 2003), p. 2.
[6] Ian Jack, 'Introduction', Granta 84 (2003), p. 7.
[7] Eliot Weiberger, 'What I heard about Iraq', London Review of Books, 3 February 2005, quoting Captain Todd Brown, 4th Infantry Division. The account of a pseudonymous army interrogator in Afghanistan reaches a similar conclusion: Chris Mackey with Greg Miller, The Interrogator's War (London: Murray, 2004), p. 477. An unusually frank assessment by a senior British officer serving with the coalition forces in Baghdad found that the US Army's 'cultural insensitivity, almost certainly inadvertent, amounted to institutional racism'. Brigadier Nigel Alwyn-Foster, 'Changing the Army for Counterinsurgency Operations', Military Review 6 (2005), p. 3. The Director of the School of Advanced Military Studies, who told the Washington Post that the Brigadier was 'an insufferable British snob', said his remark had been made in the heat of the moment. The Army Chief of Staff ordered a copy of Alwyn-Foster's critique to be sent to every general in the US Army. The National Security Strategy claims that the approach has been refined over time, and perhaps in this respect it has. See George Packer, 'The Lesson of Tal Afar', New Yorker, 10 April 2006.
[8] Rory Stewart, 'Degrees of Not Knowing', London Review of Books, 31 March 2005, quoting from Jon Lee Anderson, The Fall of Baghdad (Boston: Little, Brown, 2005).
[9] Walt Whitman, 'By Blue Ontario's Shore', in Leaves of Grass [1891-92] (Oxford: World's Classics, 1998), p. 264.
[10] Bradford Berenson, quoted in Jane Mayer, 'The Hidden Power', New Yorker, 3 July 2006.
[11] After dozens of attempted suicides at Guantánamo over the years, the first to succeed (in 2006) were described by the commander of the camp as 'an act of asymmetrical warfare waged against us', and by the Deputy Assistant Secretary of State for Public Diplomacy as 'a good PR move'. New York Times, 11 June 2006; Guardian, 12 June 2006.
[12] The gulag analogy was made by Irene Khan, Secretary General of Amnesty International, in a speech at the Foreign Press Association introducing a damning report on the United States, 'Guantánamo and Beyond: The Continuing Pursuit of Unchecked Executive Power' (2005). Cf. Franz Kafka, trans. Willa & Edwin Muir, 'In the Penal Settlement' [1919], in Metamorphosis and Other Stories (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1961), p. 175.
[13] 'Bare life' is Agamben's expression for the fathomless existence of the detainee. See Giorgio Agamben, trans. Kevin Athill, State of Exception (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2005).
[14] See Alex Danchev, 'Human Rights and Human Intelligence', in Steve Tsang (ed.) Intelligence and Human Rights in the Era of Global Terrorism (New York: Praeger, forthcoming).
[15] 'AR-15-6 Investigation of the 800th Military Police Brigade' [Taguba Report], March 2004, in Karen J. Greenberg & Joshua Dratel (eds), The Torture Papers (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005), p. 416.
[16] Conversation with Seymour Hersh, 20 October 2005. Hersh was instrumental in the Taguba Report being made public – like most of the others on this subject, it was intended to be an internal inquiry – and the first to underline its severity. See Chain of Command (London: Penguin, 2005), pp. 22 ff. 'The

Abu Ghraib Files' on Salon.com incorporate new documentary evidence from the US Army's Criminal Investigation Command (CID) investigations in 2004-05, including a further selection of images.
[17] Daniel Ellsberg, Papers on the War (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1972), p. 28.
[18] George Packer, The Assassins' Gate (London: Faber, 2006), p. 189. Cf. L. Paul Bremer with Malcolm McConnell, My Year in Iraq (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2006).
[19] Abdul Rahim Muslim Dost, a poet, who has written an account of his incarceration, The Broken Chains (forthcoming). Guardian, 3 April 2006. Moazzam Begg's account of a similar experience, Enemy Combatant (London: Free Press, 2006), is very wise on mutual incomprehension. Begg's case is one of those discussed in Alex Danchev, 'Accomplicity: Britain, Torture and Terror', British Journal of Politics and International Relations 8 (2006), forthcoming.
[20] 'The path we have chosen is consistent with the great tradition of American foreign policy. Like the policies of Harry Truman and Ronald Reagan, our approach is idealistic about our national goals, and realistic about the means to achieve them.' Introduction to National Security Strategy (2006).
[21] National Defense Strategy, p. 5.
[22] Signing statements have traditionally served a ceremonial function, extolling the virtues of the legislation so signed. President Bush has used them rather to distance himself from the legislation and, it seems, as a hedge against full compliance. In respect of the ban on torture, for example, passed in 2005 against the determined opposition of the Vice-President, the President wrote that the executive would 'construe' the legislation 'in a manner consistent' with the powers of the presidency 'and the constitutional limitations' on the judiciary. This is all of piece with an earlier evasion: that 'as a matter of policy' detainees are treated humanely and, 'to the extent appropriate and consistent with military necessity, in a manner consistent with the principles of the Third Geneva Convention of 1949'. The Third Geneva Convention flatly prohibits 'any form of coercion' of POWs in interrogation – the most protective standard of treatment in international law. See the American Bar Association Task Force Report on Presidential Signing Statements and the Separation of Powers (2006), at www.abanet.org.
[23] Quoted in Mayer, 'Hidden Power'.
[24] Tim Adams, 'Metropolis Now', Observer, 25 June 2006.
[25] Human Rights First, 'Command's Responsibility: Detainee Deaths in US Custody in Iraq and Afghanistan' (2006), at www.humanrightsfirst.org.
[26] Eliot Weinberger, 'What I heard about Iraq in 2005', London Review of Books, 5 January 2006.
[27] E.g. speech at Georgetown University, 26 May 2006, and to the Los Angeles World Affairs Council, 1 August 2006, at www.number10.gov.uk. See Alex Danchev, '"I'm with you." Tony Blair and the Obligations of Alliance: Anglo-American Relations in Historical Perspective', in Lloyd Gardner & Marilyn Young (eds), Iraq and the Vietnam Syndrome (New York: New Press, forthcoming).
[28] Jon Meacham, 'D-Day's Real Lessons', Newsweek, 31 May 2004.
[29] 'Song of Myself', in Leaves of Grass, p. 48.