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September 11, 2001, 10:00 a.m. Tower 2 of New York's World Trade Center collapses. With this "blood-dimmed tide" now flowing, "what rough beast, its hour come round at last, slouches toward Bethlehem to be born?"

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Night Falls

9/11 and the Afghan War



Our story of America at war in the 21st century begins, as it must, on September 11, 2001. We'll meet the horror of that day head-on, stepping back into the ghastly hours that unleashed the fury of war.

We'll see that, just after the tragedy, there was a moment of debate, but quite quickly this "multilogue" was replaced by an insistent monologue: One voice, one message soon dominated the media conversation that would decide America's future. Its four-part message was classic Manichaeism:

1. *Our enemies are deranged and evil. Hatred and war are the only possible responses to them.* This mask of the bad guy was affixed to the faces, not just of the al-Qaeda perpetrators of 9/11 but also to our erstwhile partners, the Taliban, and eventually to anyone who challenged the U.S. writ. Our world was on its way to becoming a very "Mean World" indeed.
2. *President Bush and his White House team are the heroes of a struggle between good and evil and are to be revered.* We'll see that as it lionized

the president, the press abdicated its watchdog function, an act that would have far-reaching consequences.

3. *Those who disagree with the New Orthodoxy are to be condemned, derided, and marginalized.* Before the press was through with its branding of dissidents as traitors, the marketplace of ideas would have only one hegemonic idea left.
4. *See no evil; inconvenient facts are to be forgotten.* Another reverse content analysis will lift up the rug to see what was not there in the mainstream media's version of the Afghan war. Here we'll see that U.S. covert action was "the rib from which" the Taliban and, indeed, bin Laden himself were fashioned as U.S. proxies in Afghanistan's 1980s war with the Soviet Union (quotation from Roy 2001). But you wouldn't learn that from the mainstream press. Nor would you learn much about civilian casualties, which were inconsistent with the story of a good war and perhaps for that reason were deemed "not news." Apparently, such casualties were also on the list of "Dig here, *not there* [italics added]!" (Bagdikian 2004).

In this chapter, we'll also see the entertainment media, corporate first cousins of the news, enlist in the war effort to create a seamless unity of message about the justice of the battle for Afghanistan.

As the bombing begins, we'll see that even war can be made into infotainment. The battle is rendered as the dramatic story of a fierce and formidable enemy bested by the grit and know-how of American GIs and their marvelous machines.

Of course, the most infotaining stories have Hollywood endings, and as the conclusion to this war, the press gave us the happy tableaux of celebration and liberation from the oppressive Taliban.

But meanwhile, in the forgotten ghetto of untold stories, the end of the war left an Afghanistan that had suffered thousands of civilian casualties, six months of starvation, and a half million refugees—an Afghanistan that now faced provincial rule by brutal, opium-growing warlords, and the return of the Taliban. And all of this carnage, it would turn out, was only the beginning.

❖ "ALL CHANGED, CHANGED UTTERLY"

It was a crisp September morning, and there wasn't a cloud in the sky when, out of the blue, the first plane struck. As refugees from Tower 1 poured into the street and the crowd stared up at the fire spewing like

dragon's breath from the building's gaping wounds, a second plane hit Tower 2. Soon, up and down the avenues surrounding the towers, onlookers could hear the screams of people plunging from the inferno. One couple, witnesses said, held hands as they fell. "I guess they couldn't see any hope," said a man in the crowd.

Within minutes, a third plane tore into the western face of the Pentagon. Shortly afterward, tourists were stunned by the sight of workers fleeing the White House in terror.

Back in New York, a real estate broker working on the 86th floor of Tower 2 called his wife, she said, "several times until 10:00" then nothing.

He sounded calm, except for when he told me he loved me. He said, "I don't know if I'll make it." He sounded like he knew it would be one of the last times he would say he loved me.

At 10:00 a.m., as rescue workers continued to rush into the building and up its many flights of stairs, Tower 2 collapsed. At 10:29 a.m., Tower 1 dissolved.

Eleven minutes later, a fourth plane—and all its passengers and crew—fell to Earth in a Pennsylvania field.

All over the East Coast, overloaded phone circuits shut down; survivors dialed loved ones in vain. New York's television stations, their antennae fallen with Tower 1, went dark. The White House switchboard asked callers to wait for an operator then went dead. For the first time in aviation history, the whole country was grounded.

As the fallen Towers billowed up from the ground as black clouds—a million tons of dust, said the EPA—a kind of night fell over Lower Manhattan and, indeed, across the whole country.

Through this Stygian darkness and, through the thick slush of memos, computer disks, and—witnesses said—body parts, an exodus of survivors, covered in white ash and plaster dust, staggered like ghostly refugees from a war zone across the bridges to Brooklyn. "This is America," one of them said. "How can it happen in America?"

Indeed, how could it? But it did. And in those few minutes on that day, the most lethal on American soil since the Civil War, all was "changed, changed utterly." And now, with the "blood dimmed tide" loosed upon the nation, "what rough beast, its hour come round at last, slouches toward Bethlehem to be born?" (Yeats 1974, pp. 152, 158).

A Moment of Debate

In the media, in the days that followed, the dead were mourned. Heroes were praised. Shock, horror, dismay, fear, and anger were given vent. But as a nation, what was our response to be?

As is perhaps inevitable and proper in a democratic society, opinions differed. Some writers were critical of the administration on grounds small or large. They wondered, for example, why the President spent much of 9/11 hunkered down in a bunker in Nebraska, at a moment when the nation needed its leaders, and there was no sign that the president had been a terrorist target (Apple 2001, p. A24).¹

More important, others wondered how such a massive failure of the nation's intelligence and security systems could have been allowed to happen (Elliott et al. 2001). Some called for us to wage war on the Afghan government that harbored bin Laden. Others argued that this attack was not an act of war—not an aggression by Afghanistan against the United States—but a monstrous crime that should be treated as such, with the al-Qaeda perpetrators rounded up and tried in an international court (Howard 2001).

These advocates for an international law resolution to the attack added that a war brought by the world's richest and most powerful nation against one of the world's poorest would further immiserate a starving and war-weary Afghan people. They worried, too, that such a war would only fan the flames of the Islamic world's animosity toward the United States, producing "a further cycle of terrorist attacks, American casualties and escalation" (Chalmers Johnson, in Bernstein 2001, p. A13). "If our goal is to reduce the number of people in the world who want to kill us," said author Barbara Kingsolver, "this is not the way to go about it" (Gates 2001, p. 2).

Nicholas Lemann, dean of Columbia's School of Journalism, wanted to know what the experts thought. He interviewed a group of the country's most respected foreign policy mavens—focusing on scholars from the "realist," as opposed to the liberal or leftist, school

¹On the morning of 9/11, Bush was attending a Sarasota, Florida, photo opportunity, reading to schoolchildren to promote his education initiative. Curiously, he remained in the classroom posing for cameras for a full 50 minutes after the first plane struck and long after the Federal Aviation Administration, White House, and Secret Service became aware that three commercial jetliners had been hijacked. From there, 30 minutes after the second attack, Bush was, in his own words, "trying to get out of harm's way." Air Force One then flew to an air force base in Louisiana, where Bush made brief remarks to the nation, then to an underground bunker at the U.S. Strategic Command (USSTRATCOM) in Offutt, Nebraska. Stung by suggestions, including some from Republican lawmakers and conservative commentators, that the president's movements that day did not show the strength needed from the nation's leader, the White House insisted they were reacting to "hard evidence" that Air Force One had been a target of the terrorists. After several media accounts challenged that assertion, White House spokesman Ari Fleischer refused further comment. Eventually, White House officials explained that, despite the earlier claims of "hard evidence," the fear for Bush's safety on 9/11 occurred because White House telephone operators "apparently misunderstood comments made by their security detail" (Alterman and Green 2004, pp. 225–230).

of thought. These scholars' assumption is that the United States should focus exclusively on its own interests. Lemann's interviews revealed a remarkably consistent and, in retrospect, insightful set of analyses. "Military power is not necessary to wiping out al Qaeda," said Stephen Walt of Harvard's Department of Government.

It's a crude instrument, and it almost always has effects you can't anticipate. . . . This is ultimately a battle for the hearts and minds of people around the world. When your village just got leveled by an American mistake, the conclusions you draw will be rather different from what we'd want them to be. (Lemann 2002)

Statistical evidence for this concern about the "hearts and minds" of Muslims "around the world" was not long in coming. A Gallup poll conducted in nine Muslim countries in February 2002 found that 77% of respondents deemed the U.S. war in Afghanistan "unjustifiable." Only 9% expressed support (Green 2002).

In the wake of the attack, we also asked ourselves, "Why?" The Bush administration argued that attacks by Muslims on the United States were motivated by "evil." "They can't stand the thought of a free society. They hate freedom," said Bush. "They love terror. They love to try to create fear and chaos" (Associated Press [AP] 2003).

Others contended that Bush's explanation was simplistic—that it ignored the grievous suffering that U.S. policies had, in fact, imposed on Islamic people. They pointed, for example, to U.S.-led sanctions against Iraq, imposed after the 1991 Gulf War, which denied not just weapons to the Iraqi regime but food, water, sanitation, and medicine to the Iraqi people, causing the deaths of an estimated 500,000 Iraqi children.² While these writers were at pains to point out that such grievances did not justify attacks on American civilians, they maintained that we ignore U.S. misconduct at our peril. "Let's by all means grieve together," wrote novelist Susan Sontag, "but let's not be stupid together" (2001, p. 32).

Not surprisingly, this complex debate helped produce a complex public opinion. At this early stage, 15% of Americans thought the United States should declare war on Afghanistan. Sixty-one percent were "not sure" whom to declare war against (Elliott et al. 2001, p. 5).

²This number is somewhat controversial, due to the difficulty of assigning numbers to the various causes of Iraq's very high childhood mortality rate during the sanctions regime. What does seem clear is that a very large number of Iraqi children died as a result of the sanctions and that the United States was the prime mover behind those sanctions (Gordon 2002; Welch 2002). For an unblinking report on other grievances the Islamic world may justifiably harbor against U.S. foreign policy, see Pintak (2006, chap. 1).

❖ FROM MULTILOGUE TO MONOLOGUE

But quite quickly, this multilogue among many voices faded from the mass media, leaving only monologue; one voice, one message, soon dominated the conversation that would decide America's future. The tenets of the new orthodoxy were as follows:

1. Our enemies are deranged and evil. Hatred and war are the only possible responses to them.

The media delivered this Manichaean message first, by quoting President Bush often and at length on the subject. A study of 15 major speeches by the president during this period found that the "themes of evil, security and peril were present in at least one of every ten presidential paragraphs, and often much more" (Pintak 2006, p. 91). Here is a sample of the presidential language that permeated the media in the fall of 2001:

The great purpose of our great land . . . is to rid this world of evil and terror. . . . The evil ones have roused a mighty nation, a mighty land. And I am determined that we will prevail. . . . [In this] war between good and evil [our nation] was targeted because we're the brightest beacon for freedom and opportunity in the world. . . . These are people [who] hate freedom. . . . [Together] with all those who want peace and security in the world [America will now] go forward to defend freedom and all that is good and just in our world. (Pintak 2006, pp. 89–91)³

But the press was not content just to quote the president and his spokesmen on the subject of evil. The news would also echo and amplify the president's Manichaean views. A special 9/11 issue of the nation's leading newsmagazine set the tone for the new orthodoxy in an editorial entitled "The Case for Rage and Retribution":

What's needed is a unified, unifying . . . purple American Fury—a ruthless indignation that doesn't leak away. . . . Let America explore the rich reciprocal possibilities of the fatwa . . . America needs to relearn why human nature has equipped us all with a weapon . . . called hatred. The worst times . . . separate the civilized of the world from the uncivilized. This is the moment of clarity. Let the civilized

³This language, argued Bruce Lincoln (2003), Caroline E. Haskell Professor of the History of Religions in the Divinity School at the University of Chicago, was an "eerie echo" of bin Laden's words: "Both men constructed a Manichaean struggle, where Sons of Light confront Sons of Darkness, and all must enlist against one side or another, without possibility of neutrality, hesitation or middle ground" (p. 20).

toughen up, and let the uncivilized take their chances in the game they started. (Morrow 2001)

The editor in chief of *U.S. News & World Report* added another note to this hymn of hatred, a note that would become common in the months ahead: Not only are our attackers' motives not rational, but they are despicably petty—they are jealous of us:

The extreme fundamentalists who carried out these attacks . . . are trapped in a medieval mindset. . . . These fanatics resent our cornucopia. They resent our moral values. . . . There is no deal we can ever make with such people. None. (Zuckerman 2001, p. 76)

A good deal of the coverage during this period seemed designed to emphasize the otherness, the alienness of Muslims who opposed the U.S. writ. Again and again, their beliefs and behaviors are presented as irrational and incomprehensible to civilized people. A *Chicago Tribune* editorialist specifically dismissed the motive suggested by Taliban and al-Qaeda spokesmen ("a result of the U.S. government's wrong policies"). Instead, he declared, "The bin Ladens of the world hate us simply because we are Americans." This is "a form of odium as intense as it is irrational," he said, and we find ourselves "under a Kafkaesque indictment for unspecified crimes" (Grossman 1998). A *San Francisco Chronicle* article laid out the weird beliefs that explain "Why Suicide Terrorists Embrace the Unthinkable," including a faith that "he will get permission to send to heaven 70 members of his family" and that "the martyr will find 72 virgins waiting for him in heaven" (Asimov 2001). A *New York Times* account of a protest against the United States in Kabul described a "frenzied . . . mob" beset by "passions that spiraled out of control. . . ." While "a group of turbaned black-clad Taliban men" pulled the seal of the United States from a former embassy, the crowd "danced ecstatically and shouted 'Long Live Osama' and 'Death to America'" (9/27/01). Subsequent demonstrations around the Islamic world were described in a second *New York Times* piece as "feverish protests" and "fevered chants." This article concludes that "the world these militants want to create" is based on such "hollow" grievances as the taking of the Palestinian homeland and the punitive sanctions imposed on the Iraqis after 1991 (Crossette 2001a, p. B4).

Many of these references to "frenzied . . . out of control" Arabs were classic examples of what one writer calls "raiding the Orientalist cupboard . . . picking up old prejudices" (Ahmed 1992, p. 186). Jack Shaheen's classic study of the media's biases against Islam identifies

two of the recurring media prejudices as basic: seeing Muslims as “barbaric and uncultivated” and “reveling in acts of terrorism” (1984, p. 4). As a result, Arabs have been “dehumanized,” leading Americans “to think in ‘us versus them’ dichotomies,” according to Muslim scholar Edward Said (1997, p. 109).

Likewise, the notion that Muslims “hate our values” is a false and pernicious stereotype. The U.S. official who knew bin Laden best, the CIA officer who headed the bin Laden task force in the 1990s, explains why bin Laden’s words (though not necessarily, as we shall see, his deeds) had resonance in the Muslim world:

Bin Laden’s genius has been to focus the Muslim world on specific U.S. policies. He’s not, as the Ayatollah did, ranting about women who wear knee-length dresses. He’s not against Budweiser or democracy. The shibboleth that he opposes our freedoms is completely false, and it leads us into a situation where we will never perceive the threat. (Scheuer 2004)

A 2004 survey of attitudes in six Arab countries confirmed that “there appears to be no empirical evidence to support the claim that Arabs have a negative view of the United States because ‘they hate American values’” (Pintak 2004). Likewise, a 2002 survey of public opinion in eight Muslim countries found that, while there was overwhelming resentment of U.S. policies among the respondents, substantial majorities had a favorable view of American freedom and democracy and even of U.S. television and movies (Zogby 2002). “Those who hate America love its freedoms,” said a columnist for Pakistan’s *Nation* magazine. “They hate America because America’s hypocritical policies deny them those freedoms” (Pintak 2006, p. 105).

Lawrence Pintak, a decorated journalist who has spent most of his career living in Muslim countries, argues persuasively that the Islamic world reacted to 9/11 in two main ways:

1. First, with a huge outpouring of outrage and sympathy for the loss of innocent life: “brutal,” “insane,” “inhumane,” “cowardly,” “crimes against humanity whose ugliness and barbarism exceed all imagination,” “un-Islamic and immoral.” These are just a few of the reactions Pintak cites from Muslim editorialists and political leaders around the world (2006, p. 77).
2. And secondly, “Arab and Muslim leaders and the region’s media” implored the United States to use the tragedy as an “opportunity for Americans to reassess their relationship with the Muslim world” (p. 84).

This suggestion was seconded by the National Commission on Terrorism, which sensibly admonished, "An astute American foreign policy must take into account the reasons people turn to terror, and, where appropriate and feasible, address them" (Bremer 2000, p. 2).

Unfortunately, in the climate of rage and fear created after 9/11, any news story exploring the "reasons people turn to terror" was attacked "as if somehow we were not explaining a reality but justifying the 9/11 attacks," according to *Los Angeles Times* editor Simon Li. "And . . . that sort of superpatriotism does cause us to hesitate" ("Report on International News Coverage in America" 2003).

So instead of stories that opened Americans' minds to Muslim opinion, the news was filled with stories that closed minds, fostered ignorance, and stoked the fires of fear and hatred. Perhaps the single most damaging decision made by television news during this period was to air, incessantly, footage of a group of Palestinians dancing, cheering, and passing out chocolates in celebration of the 9/11 attacks. Given the frequency of the airings and the inflammatory nature of such an outrageous celebration, this was bound to be, "for many Americans," their enduring image of the Muslim world's attitude toward 9/11 (Pintak 2006, p. 78).

Unfortunately, that impression was terribly wrong; it was, in fact, the opposite of the truth. A Gallup poll conducted in December 2001 found that only 5% of those surveyed in seven predominantly Muslim countries believed the 9/11 attacks were "morally justified" (Morin and Deane 2002). Yet 54% of Americans surveyed believed that "all or most people in the Muslim world admire Osama bin Laden" (CNN 5/4/02).

Why wouldn't they, when no cameras "caught the spontaneous sorrow, despair, tears, and heartache of the vast majority of the Palestinian people," said Reverend Sandra Olewine, Jerusalem liaison for the United Methodist Church. "My phone rang and rang," she added, "as Palestinians from around the West Bank called to offer their horror and their condolences" (Olewine 2001, p. 16). And so, steeped in ignorance and primed by fear, Americans marched in lockstep with their president and press, toward the inexorable conclusion.

War Is So the Answer

And what, according to the news, is the appropriate foreign policy response to enemies who are deranged and evil? In the nation's leading newspapers, the *New York Times* and the *Washington Post*, a total of 46 op-ed pieces discussed responses to 9/11 in the three weeks after the

attacks. Forty-four of those urged a military response while two sought nonmilitary solutions (Rendall 2001). On television, the move from shock to fury to war was quick and decisive. On September 12, CNN's logo for 9/11 coverage was "America Under Attack." Two days later, it was "America at War" followed the next week by "America's New War." These declarations of war were well in front of the U.S. government, which did not begin the bombing of Afghanistan until October 7.

Over the next few months, TV network commentators approved of George W. Bush's military answers to 9/11 almost 80% of the time (*Human Events* 2001). This is not surprising, given the "experts" TV chose to lead their discussions. One survey showed that conservative, or right-leaning think tanks, outnumbered progressive, or left-leaning, ones by more than 3.5 to 1 in post-9/11/2001 (Dolny 2002). Another survey found that in the week after 9/11, "alternative perspectives" from activist or advocacy groups were represented only 2% of the time on network news—and even this 2% consisted entirely of advocates for firefighters, airline pilots, and Arab Americans, with the latter "simply urging tolerance and explaining that most Arab Americans do not support terrorism" (Ackerman 2001).

During this period, network television reporters and anchors would refer to Afghan soldiers as "rats," "terror goons," "psycho Arabs," "terrorist thugs," "diabolical," and "henchmen" (Hart and Naureckas 2002). Fox News' chief war correspondent said, among other things, "[If I find bin Laden] I'll kick his head in, then bring it home and bronze it." And

We want to be there when they bring Osama bin Laden to justice. . . . I've got a New York City fire department hat I want to put on—on the body of his—you know, the head of his corpse. It's deeply personal on the one hand. On the other hand, it is my professional calling. (Rutenberg 2001)

2. President Bush and his White House team are the heroes of a struggle between good and evil, and are to be revered.

The media might, at this moment, have adopted Mark Twain's definition of patriotism: It means, he said, "loving your country all the time, and loving your government when it deserves it." But they didn't. Instead, George W. Bush in particular, as head of state, was unconditionally lionized by the media as few presidents have ever been.

"War Has Made Bush a First-Rate Commander in Chief," pronounced *Hearst Newspapers* (11/25/01). "Global Spotlight Falls on Bush, and He Shines," trumpeted the *Los Angeles Times* (10/23/01). "Surer Voice, Wider Vision," proclaimed the *New York Times* article, redolent

with praise: “forceful . . . plain speaking . . . eloquence . . . engaged and activist . . . full throated . . . strode into the . . . House . . . as one of the most popular presidents in modern history . . . sustained applause . . . the tableau was that of a celebration of a war hero” (1/30/02). “George W. Bush has found his mission and his moment,” effused *U.S. News & World Report* (10/1/01). “A President Finds His Voice,” exulted *Time* (9/24/01). *Newsweek* declared, “Succeeding When It Matters Most: George Bush has always risen to the occasion . . . [now he has] inspired the nation, rallied the allies, and impressed even his critics . . . calm and commanding in private, warm and dignified in public . . . ‘Our George:’ the designated dragon slayer, a boyish knight in a helmet of graying hair” (9/24/01; 9/27/01).

These characterizations—of a president we’ve since come to see as mortal after all—might seem amusing in retrospect. But they helped set the stage for the uncritical acceptance, by press and public alike, of President Bush’s message as he led the nation down the path to dubious battle.

This aura of greatness attached to Bush was, in fact, large enough to include the entire “Bush Team.” “It’s hard to imagine a more tested lot than the group that gathers with Bush . . . to make decisions in the new, worldwide campaign against terrorism,” said *Newsweek* (9/27/01). *Vanity Fair* added a

reverent spread . . . which lionized the presidential team with solemn head shots and TV wrestlers’ nicknames—Cheney was “The Rock,” Ashcroft was “The Heat,” while ranking [Bush] with Demosthenes: “It’s been a while since presidential rhetoric could raise the hairs on your arm”

whispered the awestruck author (Miller 2002).

One measure of the Bush team’s preeminence in the media was the team’s sheer ubiquity; according to one study, CNN carried 157 live events featuring administration officials during this period, while elected Democratic officials were featured seven times.

Perhaps Dan Rather summed up the attitude of the news media generally when he said, “George Bush is the president. He makes the decisions, and you know . . . wherever he wants me to line up, just tell me where, and he’ll make the call” (Hart and Ackerman 2001, p. 6).

The valorizing of George W. Bush is doubly remarkable when we contrast it with the press’s view of Bush prior to 9/11. Back then, only 38% of Bush’s evaluations on network news were favorable—nowhere near the 77% positive evaluations of his post-9/11 role as Terror Buster (*Human Events* 2001). Until 9/11, Bush was the accidental president

who hadn't won the popular vote, the president of the deer in the headlights misspeech, of the budget-busting tax cuts for the rich, of the "screw you foreign policy," the "slash and burn environmental policy." What a difference a day makes (Miller 2002).

3. Those who disagree with the New Orthodoxy are to be condemned, derided, and marginalized.

The process of purging dissenters began almost immediately. Columnists who had criticized Bush's 9/11 hopscotch around the country were summarily fired (Hart and Ackerman 2001).

Veteran progressive radio host and frequent Bush critic Peter Werbe was dropped by radio station KOMY-AM in Santa Cruz, California. The station's owners explained that "partisanship is out. We cannot afford the luxury of political divisiveness." Meanwhile, the station continued to air six hours a day of right-wing talk show host Michael Savage. Apparently, his accusations that peace marchers were committing "treason" were not divisive (Hart and Ackerman 2001, p. 6).

When asked whether their coverage had included any antiwar voices, TV networks came up short. A CBS spokesman pointed to a segment on *The Early Show* in which a reporter interviewed former 1960s war protestors who turned hawkish after 9/11. MSNBC's president said his network had trouble finding "anyone credible" opposed to the war. But this claim was disputed by the seemingly credible Phil Donahue, who argued that "opportunities were few" for antiwar voices to be heard on TV: "You cannot say that people willing to speak up are not in existence," he said. "There is just not a lot of enthusiasm for this in the programs" (Stanley 2001, p. B4).

In the post-9/11 climate, any deviation from the new orthodoxy, no matter how minor, was swiftly and surely condemned. Speaking to a class of Columbia University students, ABC News President David Westin was asked whether the Pentagon was a legitimate target for America's enemies. "As a journalist," he said, "I feel strongly that's something I should not be taking a position on." But after his comment was attacked on Fox News' *Special Report*, in the *New York Post*, the Drudge Report, and on Rush Limbaugh's radio show, Westin recanted. With Limbaugh's hour-long attack on him still in progress, Westin e-mailed this abject retraction: "I was wrong. Under any interpretation the attack on the Pentagon was criminal and entirely without justification" (Alterman 2003, p. 203).

Comedian and then-ABC talk show host Bill Maher made the fatal mistake of agreeing with his conservative guest, who had warned against stereotyping the terrorists as cowards, because "people willing

to die for their cause are not cowards." Maher added, "We have been the cowards, lobbing cruise missiles from 2,000 miles away. That's cowardly" (9/24/01). For this comment, Maher was publicly reprimanded by White House Press Secretary Ari Fleischer, who denounced Maher personally and also issued a more general warning: "The reminder is to all Americans to watch what they say and that this is not a time for remarks like that" (*New York Times* 9/30/01). Maher's program was quickly dropped by 19 ABC affiliates and two major sponsors. Shortly thereafter, the network cancelled Maher's program, the ironically titled *Politically Incorrect*.

In several cases, writers deemed too close to the boundaries of political heresy were pushed over the line by shameless media distortions of their words. Author Barbara Kingsolver, winner of a National Humanities Medal, made the mistake of pointing out that patriotism had been used to justify death threats against an antiwar congresswoman and the murder of a Sikh man. She asked, rhetorically, whether the perpetrators thought the American flag stood for intimidation and violence. Taken out of its actual context and placed in a false one, her question was used to imply that Kingsolver thought the answer was "yes." (For the record, she believes the flag is "an emblem of peace, generosity, courage, and kindness.") Kingsolver then watched, "amazed, as some ultraconservative journalists ignited an attack on my patriotism with a stunning prevarication that blazed like a grass fire through the Internet and countless newspapers, including the *Wall Street Journal*" (Kingsolver 2002).

A few months later, the media's patriotism police were busy planting evidence again—this time on the National Education Association (NEA), a teacher's union. *The Washington Times'* Ellen Sorokin began the frame-up with a story charging that the NEA's Web site was about to offer lesson plans that would "take a decidedly blame-America approach" to 9/11. She quoted the site as advising teachers to avoid "suggesting that any group was responsible" for the attacks (Somerby 2002, p. 3).

An actual visit to the NEA's site revealed that the source of the quotation was an obscure link to an essay by the National Association of School Psychologists (NASP). (Sorokin did not mention that the site also sported much more prominent links to speeches by George W. Bush.) The psychologists' message was quite clear: "Explain that all Arab-Americans are not guilty by association or racial membership." In an act of startling intellectual dishonesty, Sorokin turned this perfectly unobjectionable suggestion into perfidy: the claim that the NEA was telling teachers not to blame al-Qaeda for the crimes of 9/11.

Despite the fact that Sorokin's hatchet job was immediately exposed by alternative press writer Robert Kuttner (2002) as a "completely trumped-up hoax," it continued to pong through the media pinball machine: "The liberal hold on our education system amounts to a kind of moral disarmament," wailed Mona Charen. The NEA is "a national menace," announced *Washington Post* columnist George Will (8/5/02). "The folly of the NEA is staggering," declared Jon Leo (*U.S. News & World Report* 9/9/02). Sorokin herself wrote two follow-up articles, both featured on page one by the *Washington Times* (8/20/02; 8/24/02). "Each promoted the absurd idea that the NEA was a shill for Al Qaeda" (Somerby 2002, p. 3). Lillian Helman once called an earlier moment of such fear and falsity, the McCarthy era, a "scoundrel time." Were we now, in the wake of 9/11, entering another?

Even after a year had passed, the pro-war, pro-Bush climate had not cooled, and dissenters were scorched. When in September 2002, Al Gore dared to deliver a "calm and soberly delivered" speech echoing the concerns raised by several four-star generals about the direction of the war on terror, he was met with an "astonishing explosion of invective" from the media. Fox News contributor Charles Krauthammer called the speech "a disgrace—a series of cheap shots strung together without logic or coherence." And Michael Kelly, not mincing words in the *Washington Post*, called the speech "dishonest, cheap, low, hollow . . . wretched . . . vile . . . contemptible . . . a lie . . . a disgrace . . . equal parts mendacity, viciousness, and smarm" (Alterman 2003, p. 210).

Right to Assemble?

But perhaps the media's sharpest invective was reserved for those Americans who took to the streets to protest the bombing of Afghanistan. The editor of the *New Republic* demanded that demonstrators explain themselves: "This nation is now at war. And in such an environment, domestic political dissent is immoral without a prior statement of national solidarity, a choosing of sides" (9/24/01).

A *Los Angeles Times* guest columnist warned demonstrators that blood would be on their hands, just as it was on the hands of earlier antiwar demonstrators:

The blood of hundreds of thousands of Vietnamese and tens of thousands of Americans is on the hands of the anti-war activists who prolonged the struggle and gave victory to the Communists. . . . This country was too tolerant toward the treason of its enemies within. (Hart 2001, p. 18)

A *Washington Times* columnist took this last point a step further and made a suggestion about how to deal with the protestors' "treason": "Why are we sending aircraft carriers halfway around the world to look for enemies, when our nation's worst enemies—Communists proclaiming an anti-American jihad—will be right there in front of the Washington Monument on Saturday" (Hart 2001, p. 18).

This threatening tone was common in attacks on the protestors, as when *Newsweek* warned protestors, "Blame America at Your Peril": "A sizable chunk of what passes for the left is already knee-deep in ignorant and dangerous appeasement of the terrorism of Sept. 11. . . . Peace won't be with you, brother. It's kill or be killed" (Alter 2001).

Even news reports about the protests could not conceal the media's contempt for them. After thousands gathered in Washington, D.C., on September 29 to call for a nonmilitary response to terrorism, the *New York Times* covered the event in a 10-sentence story that vastly underreported the size of the crowd and, in a gross distortion of the protestors' message, was headlined "Protestors in Washington Urge Peace with Terrorists."⁴

4. See no evil; inconvenient facts are to be forgotten.

"The greatest triumphs of propaganda have been accomplished, not by doing something, but by refraining from doing," Aldous Huxley once wrote. "Great is truth, but still greater . . . is silence about truth." In Afghanistan, the silences were sometimes deafening.

When Freedom Fighters Go Bad

The basic tenets of the New Orthodoxy were simple: United States good, Taliban bad. Unfortunately, this catechism would require a vow of silence about a very inconvenient truth: The United States had helped create the Taliban and, indeed, al-Qaeda, all with the dutiful support of the U.S. press.

After a Soviet-backed government came into power in Afghanistan in 1978, U.S. officials decided to back its opponents, hoping to "lure the Soviets into a Vietnamese quagmire." "It was July 3, 1979, that President Carter signed the first directive for secret aid to the opponents of the pro-Soviet regime in Kabul. And that very day, I wrote a note to the President in which I explained to him that this aid was going to induce a Soviet military intervention," said Carter's National Security Advisor, Zbigniew Brzezinski (*Extra!* 2001, p. 1).

⁴The *New York Times* reported that "a few hundred protestors," etc., were on hand. The official police estimate was 7,000; organizers estimated 25,000 (Hart 2001).

After the Soviets took the bait, invading Afghanistan in 1979, the United States mounted “the largest covert operation in the history of the CIA.” From 1979 to 1992, the United States funneled at least \$3 billion to the factions fighting the Russians (Parenti 2001).

And who were these U.S.-backed “Mujahadeen,” as they called themselves, or “freedom-fighters,” as the U.S. press liked to call them? “In general, the most radically Islamic groups always received the bulk of the funding” (Parenti 2001). Among the beneficiaries was Mohammed Omar, who would later be known as the leader of the Taliban. Other senior members of the Taliban also fought with the Mujahadeen. Many of the Taliban members who were too young to fight the Soviets were trained in Mujahadeen-controlled refugee camps in Pakistan.

Worse yet, the appalling human rights record of the Taliban—so rightly condemned by the media after 2001—was there in the Taliban’s incubator, the Mujahadeen, as the press looked on in silence. Fully one third of U.S. aid, for example, went to a group headed by Gulbuddin Hekmatyar, who directed his compatriots to throw acid in the faces of unveiled women (Gibbs 2002, p. 13; Parenti 2001). By 1985, the Mujahadeen had prohibited aid agencies from bringing women doctors to rebel-controlled areas—“this in a society where no male doctors are allowed to examine female patients” (London’s *Guardian*, in Gibbs 2002, p. 14).

To reinforce the ranks of the Mujahadeen, the U.S. CIA also facilitated the influx into Afghanistan of some 35,000 fervent young Muslim men from 40 Islamic countries between 1982 and 1992. Tens of thousands more, inspired by the Mujahadeen, came to study in radical Islamic madrasas in Pakistan. “Eventually, more than 100,000 foreign Muslim radicals were directly influenced by the Afghan jihad” (Rashid 1999). One of the first of these imported fighters, “recruited by the CIA,” was a wealthy young Saudi Arabian named Osama bin Laden. One of bin Laden’s duties was to maintain identity and contact information about the international recruits. “From this little black book would emerge Al Qaeda” (Parenti 2001).

To help fund their rebellion, the Mujahadeen also expanded Afghanistan’s opium-growing sector from a local and regional business into a major supplier for the world’s heroin trade (Gibbs 2002, p. 14). Between 1982 and 1983, opium production near the Afghan–Pakistan border doubled. By the end of the decade, production had reached 800 tons and accounted for 50% of European and North American heroin sales (Prashad 2001).

Not surprisingly, this increase in Afghan production was related to a sudden surge in U.S. heroin consumption. A congressional investigation

reported that overdose deaths in the United States increased by 93% between 1979 and 1983 (Robison 1985). During this period, the CIA sought to block investigations into the “Afghan connection” (Gibbs 2002).

This dark profile of the Afghan guerillas—the intolerance, the extremism, the torture, the executions for violations of religious rules, the massacres, and the drug trafficking—was well known to American reporters, but somehow did not, for the most part, become part of their reports.

Instead,

there was near unanimous agreement that the guerillas were . . . “fighting the good fight,” [that] a “heroic struggle [was being] waged by the Afghan freedom fighters,” [that] “The Afghan guerillas have earned the admiration of the American people for their courageous struggle,” [that] “the rebels deserve unstinting American political support and . . . military hardware,” [and that] “The fight for freedom in Afghanistan is an awesome spectacle and deserves generous tribute.” [Furthermore], “Heroes come in many shapes and sizes. . . the civil rights leaders who led American blacks to equality . . . [and] the Afghan freedom fighters.” (from *New Republic*, *Wall Street Journal*, *Los Angeles Times*, *Washington Post*, and *Christian Science Monitor*, quoted in Gibbs 2002, p. 15)

Perhaps surprisingly, this U.S. government and press support for Islamic extremism in Afghanistan did not end with the Soviet occupation. By 1992, the USSR was history and so was Kabul’s Communist government. “With no external enemy, the Mujahadeen coalition soon tore itself, and the cities of Afghanistan, to pieces” (Parenti 2001). It was from this melee that the Taliban emerged victorious in 1996. Immediately, their Mujahadeen-trained Mullah announced that adulterers would be stoned, drinkers hung, women veiled, and that “education would cease to be available to women.” Nonetheless, “Washington extended a warm hand towards Mullah Omar and the Taliban,” hoping to seal a deal for the Unocal Corporation to build a \$4.5 billion oil pipeline through Afghanistan (*Extra!* 2001, p. 3; Parenti 2001).

In May 2001, the Bush administration again extended a warm hand, this one delivering a \$43 million check to the Taliban. The grant, said Secretary of State Colin Powell, was intended to support “those farmers who have felt the impact of the ban on poppy cultivation, a decision by the Taliban that we welcome” (Crossette 2001b, p. A7).

In other words, the opium trade expanded by Afghan Muslim extremists with the complicity of the United States was now being contracted by the Muslim extremists, with a \$43 million incentive from the United States. Without hinting at the history or the irony of the situation,

the *New York Times* extolled the virtues of this new U.S.–Taliban war on drugs. The Taliban, said the *New York Times*, urged the ban “in very religious terms, citing Islamic prohibitions against drugs, and that made it hard to defy” (Crossette 2001b, p. A7).

A few months later, when the Taliban suddenly became evil personified, the earlier encomiums to their U.S.-backed origins as “freedom fighters” and their more recent status as U.S.-supported devout drug busters, became inconvenient. And so, they were mostly forgotten. In their stead, the media paraded the Taliban’s history of thuggery and drug dealing, with scant mention of U.S. support for it all. If George Orwell had been alive, he might have said “I told you so”:

To tell deliberate lies while genuinely believing in them, to forget any part that has become inconvenient, and then, when it becomes necessary again, to draw it back from oblivion for just so long as it is needed . . . all this is indispensably necessary. (Orwell 1992, p. 214)

See No Evil: Civilian Casualties Are “Not News”

By the media’s lights, this was a good war. But in a good war, what becomes of bad facts such as the civilian casualties that will inevitably occur? In one sense, those bad facts were simply ignored. While human rights groups and the European press tried to measure the cost of the war in innocent lives, the U.S. networks offered almost no estimates of the number of civilians killed, except to assure us in general terms that there were few (Coen 2002b, p. 6).

Consider the contrast in coverage of the bombing of Kandahar. France’s leading wire service, *Agence France Presse*, saw it this way: “Two months of relentless bombardment have reduced the city of Kandahar to a shattered ghost town,” bereft of water, electricity, and food, “housing only the famished who were too poor to leave. . . . [Refugees from Kandahar] spoke of horrendous civilian casualties as wave after wave of American bombers” targeted their city (12/6/01).

The Washington Post’s version, on the other hand, was headlined “Civilian Deaths Not Evident in Kandahar”:

The campaign in Kandahar was conducted mostly from the air, with US warplanes conducting more than two months of strikes against the city and its environs. Despite repeated reports of civilian casualties . . . a trip around the city indicated that, for the most part, the bombs hit their targets and there were relatively few civilian injuries. . . . “We were scared because of the explosions, but they didn’t hit us in the end,” said a resident. (12/12/01)

This was more than just a matter of perception. The U.S. press said quite explicitly that, for them, civilian deaths were (a) unimportant, (b) the necessary price to be paid for the lives of the 9/11 victims, or (c) a propaganda tool of the Taliban. So while the British *Independent* reported

After viewing the pulverized homes of Karam, what was apparent was that dozens, and perhaps as many as 200, civilians had been killed by American bombing. From all over the countryside, there came stories of villages crushed by American bombs; an entire hamlet destroyed by B-52's at Kili Sarnad, 50 dead near Tora Bora, eight civilians killed in cars bombed by U.S. jets on the road to Kandahar, another 46 in Lashkargah, 12 more in Bibi Mahru. (12/4/01)

Thomas Friedman of the *New York Times* fumed:

Think of all the nonsense written in the . . . European media about the concern for "civilian casualties." It turns out that many of those Afghan "civilians" were praying for another dose of B-52's to liberate them from the Taliban, casualties or not. (11/23/01)

Brit Hume, of Fox News, also wondered whether civilian casualties were important news: "The question I have is civilian casualties are, historically, by definition, a part of war, really. Should they be as big news as they've been?" Fox commentator and *U.S. News & World Report* columnist Michael Barone answered Hume's question: "I think the real problem here is that this is poor news judgment on the part of some of these news organizations. Civilian casualties are not . . . news. The fact is that they accompany wars" (11/5/01). This is a somewhat curious logic. The fact is that almost all aspects of the Afghan war—battles, enemy casualties, U.S. casualties, strategies, victories—"accompany wars." Are they also "not news"?

CNN's chairman, Walter Isaacson, instructed reporters that they were not "to focus too much on the casualties or hardship⁵ in Afghanistan." Furthermore, any mention of civilian casualties, CNN's head of Standards & Practices said, should also include this rationale for those deaths:

We must also keep in mind, after seeing reports like this . . . that the Taliban regime continues to harbor terrorists who are connected to the

⁵This is probably a reference to increases in malnutrition. The UN and other relief agencies argued that while U.S. bombing interrupted famine relief efforts, starvation would rise sharply.

Sept. 11 attacks that claimed thousands of innocent lives in the United States. Even though it may start sounding rote, it is important that we make this point each time. (*Washington Post* 10/31/01)

CBS reporter Jim Martin cast his own aspersion on casualty stories by arguing that “the Taliban’s chief weapon seems to be pictures they say are innocent civilians killed or injured by the bombing” (10/23/01). In another story that touched on the issue of civilian casualties, Martin reminded viewers that “according to the Pentagon, the Taliban is likely to try anything to win the propaganda war” (11/24/01). NBC’s Jim Miklaszewski joined the chorus of reporters equating civilian casualties with Taliban propaganda, ruing the fact that the United States is “on the defensive today” because “the Taliban took foreign journalists on a guided tour of the village of Karam, where they claim U.S. bombs killed 200 civilians” (10/15/01).

Because their focus was on America’s battle “to protect its image as a compassionate nation” (NBC 11/4/01) against the Taliban “propaganda machine” (CBS 10/24/01), these stories did not try to determine whether, or how many, civilians had actually been killed or wounded.

❖ THE ENTERTAINMENT MEDIA ENLIST

The monolithic message of a righteous U.S. war against the evil Taliban was not confined to the news media. The non-news media also enlisted in the PR campaign, creating a seamless unity of message about the justice of the “war on terror.”

Advertisers were among the first to get into the game. Their ads seemed designed to be inoffensive to antiwar consumers while implicitly endorsing the use of force. In one full page ad, placed in the *New York Times* just 10 days after the attack, the Statue of Liberty, looking angry and determined, strides off her pedestal, rolling up her robe sleeves. Clearly, Lady Liberty is opening up a can of whup-ass. The text says simply, “We will roll up our sleeves. We will move forward together. We will overcome. We will never forget. A message from G.E.” Another full page ad, filled by an American flag, quoted a few words from JFK—words that echoed George W. Bush’s own warning:

Let every nation know, whether it wishes us well or ill, that we shall pay any price, bear any burden, meet any hardship, support any friend, oppose any foe to ensure the survival and the sources of liberty—from the 130,000 men and women of Lockheed.

GM warned, "The American Dream: We refuse to let anyone take it away." Chevrolet announced its intention to "keep America rolling," in an homage to Flight 93 hero Todd Beamer, whose last words, heard on a cell phone before a struggle with hijackers, were, "Are you guys ready? Let's roll."

While Madison Avenue led the way, Hollywood was not far behind. In November, President Bush's chief campaign operative Karl Rove flew to Los Angeles to meet with more than 40 Hollywood executives, asking them to "make films showing the heroism of American armed forces" (Stephen 2002). He promised producers making "patriotic" films the equipment, personnel, and full cooperation of the U.S. military. Fox Studios quickly took up the challenge, rushing *Behind Enemy Lines*, a "rock and roll driven celebration of the American can-do spirit," into theaters. Other studios followed quickly with such titles as *We Were Soldiers*, *Black Hawk Down*, and *Hart's War* (Ansen 2001).

Before the year was out, CBS had begun taping *AFP: American Fighter Pilot*, a "Top Gun-like reality series" following the lives of American pilots from training to their exploits in the "U.S. anti-terrorist war," according to the networks (AP 12/12/01). A&E, "the arts and entertainment network," quickly produced flattering biographies of 9/11 good guys George W. Bush, Tony Blair, and Rudy Giuliani.

Time Warner's Showtime network followed with *DC 9/11: Time of Crisis*, a reverent tribute to George W. Bush's leadership in the days following the tragedy. In it, Bush (played by actor Timothy Bottoms) is seen heroically resolving to return to the White House on 9/11, despite warnings of a threat against it; a "composed but tough-talking" Bush refuses "to cede to his staff decisions on key passages of an oval office speech"; a charismatic and inspirational Bush rallies rescue workers—and the nation—through a bullhorn at Ground Zero; and so on. "Yes, it is a flattering portrait of the President," declared the film's writer-producer, Lionel Chetwynd, who is also a Bush supporter, campaign-donor, and Bush appointee to the President's Committee on the Arts and Humanities.

[Chetwynd] does not deny [that the film is,] as one observer put it, a shot across the bow of Democrats seeking to replace Bush. That characterization initially bothered him, but no longer. "Let him (Bush) and his administration's handling of those nine days be the standard by which we judge our leaders because they rose to the occasion." (CNN.com 9/7/03)

Or at least, that was the message broadcast by Showtime via Chetwynd's movie.

Meanwhile pop radio's addition to the national conversation was actually a subtraction. The Clear Channel Corporation, owner of over 1,200 radio stations, including over 60% of all rock stations in 2001, compiled a list of "questionable" songs after 9/11—songs that were to be "steered clear of" by its stations. This long list included Bruce Springsteen's "War," John Lennon's "Imagine," and Cat Stevens' "Peace Train," as well as tunes by System of a Down, and "all songs" by Rage Against the Machine, a band that made no secret of its left-wing, antiestablishment politics (Morello 2001).

Also during this period, live-action video games popped up "all over the internet that let you punch, shoot, and basically torture in every way imaginable the bearded likeness" of bin Laden. Some sites allowed "wrathful gamers to enlist images of 'good guys'" such as George W. Bush, Dick Cheney, or Colin Powell to administer the beat-down. One game had players shooting bin Laden as he hid in a mosque. Its bloody conclusion, in which bin Laden's head explodes, had been seen over 300,000 times within three weeks of 9/11. Even in the popular and previously pacific game *The Sims*, thousands of players were starving or poisoning the bin Laden character to death—"or worse"—while also enjoying "good guy" characters such as Bush, Tony Blair, and Arnold Schwarzenegger (Cox News Service 10/6/01).

When its turn came, the nation's ultimate media extravaganza, the Super Bowl, also did its part for the pro-war effort. During pregame festivities, Barry Manilow and other performers sang his composition "Let Freedom Ring," while a field of cheerleaders pranced about in Statue of Liberty costumes and children in military fatigues ringed around a "Liberty Bell." Once the game began, statistics were presented "by a frequently repeated little series of automated logos starting with what appeared to be a U.S. soldier pressing a button" (Stephen 2002). This game's advertising also waxed patriotic. Budweiser, for example, aired a commercial during the game that featured the Clydesdales traveling to Ground Zero, where they bowed in tribute to the fallen. This Bud's for you, 9/11 victims.

And so, in ways sometimes subtle and sometimes not, the entertainment media joined the news media in producing a Phil Spector-like "wall of sound" in favor of war. And this was not politically unimportant in an era when 79% of Americans under 30 "sometimes or regularly" get their political information from the entertainment media (Williams and Delli Carpini 2002, p. B14).

❖ THE BOMBING BEGINS

On October 7, less than a month after the hijackers' attack, the rush to war became war. President Bush's announcement that the bombing of Afghanistan had begun was met in the press with unequivocal enthusiasm:

George W. Bush had promised the war on terrorism would be a war like no other, and on Sunday, he delivered. Striking a blow for the hearts and minds of Muslims at the same time he struck Afghanistan, the president fired the opening salvos of Operation Enduring Freedom at midday. (*Newsweek* 10/7/01)

"The American people, despite their grief and anger, have been patient as they waited for action. Now that it has begun, they will support whatever efforts it takes to carry out this mission properly" (*New York Times* 10/8/01).

Immediately and unanimously the five major TV news networks dubbed their coverage of the war "America Strikes Back" or "America Fights Back"—thus giving linguistic victory to the pro-war position by ending the argument, before it began, about whether attacking the cities, roads, bridges, sanitation and water treatment facilities, food storage units, and so on that sustained the impoverished people of Afghanistan was, in fact, "fighting back" against those who had attacked us.

Right Makes Might

Once again, the media left no doubt that this was not merely a just war but, indeed, a war of good against evil:

If the prior campaign in Araby had been a war of choice, this one is a war of necessity. A brutal band of merciless men, bereft of all scruples and as convinced of their righteousness as Nazi leaders were six decades ago, brought the war to our shores. There are no half truths in this kind of war. It is order versus malignance. (*U.S. News & World Report* 10/12/01)

Often the evil we were up against was personified in the form of Taliban leader Mullah Mohammed Omar or, of course, Osama bin Laden. Like many a good Hollywood villain, Omar was marked, we were told, by his physical repulsiveness as well as by his supposedly

characteristic Middle Eastern lunacy: “Mullah Omar Mohammed, the Taliban’s one-eyed leader, is, we are often told, insane. A twitching, convulsing Cyclops in a turban, this lunatic clergyman is, apparently, a standout kook even in a region known for its delusional and psychotic despots” (Struttaford 2001).

At the same time, hatred of bin Laden was stoked, not in the name of justice but in the name of a more volatile and dangerous satisfaction—revenge:

It must be one of the most repulsive home movies ever made. Osama bin Laden chuckles contentedly over slaughtering his own men along with several thousand Americans. . . . In the hearts of wary Americans, bin Laden’s smirking and gloating, at once cruel and feral, inspired an overwhelming desire for revenge. They may get it soon enough. (*Newsweek* 12/24/01)

“Powerful Beyond Comprehension”

The press couched the story of combat in Afghanistan in dramatic terms: a fierce and formidable enemy would be beaten by the wonders of American technology, and by the resourceful courage of American GIs and their cohorts, the Northern Alliance.

Intuitively, it might seem that the ragtag “army” of impoverished Afghanistan would not prove much of an obstacle to the armies of the world’s only superpower. But that was not the picture provided in the American media. Instead, the press warned of the “brutal terrain and brutal fighters” that had sent first the British and then the Soviets into ignominious retreat.

Afghanistan is a land of fierce tribal fighters, rugged terrain and no obvious targets. (Knight Ridder 9/29/01)

They are the ultimate fighters in their own terrain . . . a super tough breed of warriors . . . their basic military skills honed by the intertribal feuding and a ruthless culture of vendetta. (Underhill 2001)

For centuries it has been known as the place where great powers go to die. The terrain was a nightmare for Soviet and British troops, who were ambushed from the hills, massacred in the passes, cornered on the steep, treeless mountainsides. (Hirsh and Barry 2001)

Fortunately, the U.S. military was up to the daunting challenge, boasting technological marvels undreamed of by the Soviets, much less the medieval-minded Taliban:

Over the last seven weeks in Afghanistan, the US military has shown the world . . . the new American way of war, one built around weapons operating at extremely long ranges, hitting targets with unprecedented precision, and relying as never before on gigabytes of targeting information gathered on the ground, in the air, and from space. (*Washington Post Weekly Edition* 12/10/01)

This dazzling technology, said the press, struck fear in the hearts of our once-fearsome foes:

To many Taliban, the Americans must have seemed like creatures from another planet: out there somewhere, in the sky or across the horizon, powerful beyond comprehension. . . . The Taliban are the first victims of a revolution in military affairs . . . which results largely from astounding leaps in information technology, [and] will eventually be as important as the introduction of gun powder. (Barry 2001)

The specs of this arsenal were rendered in gee-whiz detail in the news, like some super-video gamers' powers:

Super Stallion helicopters . . . refueled in midair . . . zigzagged like rabbits to confuse the enemy . . . Super Cobra attack helicopters scanned the perimeter. "We surprised the hell out of the enemy." A Predator "painted" a house, and an F/A-18 from a carrier then dropped a thousand-pound laser-guided bomb (Barry 2001).

Tomahawk cruise missiles, launched from submarines hundreds of miles away, evade radar by skimming low. . . . satellite guidance enables missiles to slam 1,000-pound warheads into a target with pinpoint accuracy . . . Preludes . . . Gnats . . . Global Hawks . . . JDAMS—a guidance kit attached to a 2,000-pound gravity bomb converts it into a satellite-guided smart bomb. (Newman, Mazzetti, and Whitelaw 2001)

The Right Stuff

Another common theme, in this story of good battling evil, celebrated the bravery, patriotism, and resourcefulness of the American warrior. On the first day of bombing, said Fox News reporter Brett Baier,

Some of those pilots . . . described those bombing runs. . . . They talked about the pride, the adrenaline and the precision of this first night of strikes. . . . They did say they took some anti-aircraft fire, but they were trained to deal with it. (10/7/01)

Another dramatic report came from a *Newsweek* reporter “on the ground with the Special Forces who turned the tide—and just lost one of their own”:

They were a tight-knit group, each man trusting the others with his life. Yet it wasn't until the chopper faded from view and the vastness of the landscape came into focus that they realized how far they were from home, and how alone: 90 miles behind enemy lines, in the heart of Taliban territory. . . . The mission ahead sounded almost impossible . . . storm a key Taliban stronghold, Mazar-e Sharif. . . . After wresting control from the enemy . . . restor[ing] order and help[ing] local leaders begin rebuilding . . . in the harrowing, heroic days that followed, they did just that. (Lorch 2002)

This penumbra of virtue and courage also covered the U.S. allies in Afghanistan, the Northern Alliance. One Fox News reporter described them this way:

And these are great fighters by the way. . . . They don't have sleeping bags or uniforms, but they got courage, and they've been fighting these bad guys for years all on their own without any help from the rest of the world. Now they are truly the enemy of our enemy, so they're our friends. (12/6/01)

Few of these reports mentioned our allies' human rights record, which was awful. General Rashid Dostum's forces had a long record of raping, killing, and looting, for example, in Mazar-e-Sharif, which Dostum controlled from 1992 to 1997. Now he was retaking the city in the “harrowing, heroic” Special Forces mission just referred to.

In fact, the widely respected Revolutionary Association of the Women of Afghanistan (RAWA), referring to actions documented by Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch, called life under the Northern Alliance's previous rule “a living hell.” “From 1992 to 1996,” their statement read, “these forces waged a brutal war against women using rape, torture, abduction, and forced marriage as their weapons. Many women committed suicide as their only escape” (Ireland 2001).

RAWA's heroic struggle against the Taliban was often justly praised in the press, but their concerns about the Northern Alliance were not often mentioned. Indeed, when RAWA spokeswoman Saha Saba reported that “people are very worried” about the Northern Alliance, she was quickly “corrected” by CNN host Zain Vergee: “You have harshly criticized the Northern Alliance, but I just want to make a

distinction here. Within the Northern Alliance there is a liberal wing. . . . Today it's the liberal wing that's running the show" (4/20/01). This must have come as a surprise to Ms. Saba, who knew that at that moment, the Northern Alliance forces of Berhannudin Rabbani were entering Kabul. It was Rabbani who had just banned women from schools in Afghanistan, and it was Rabbani's military commander, Ahmad Shah Maasoud, who had ordered mass rape in Kabul in 1995, according to human rights groups (Flanders 2002, pp. 10–12).

❖ **HAPPY DAYS ARE HERE AGAIN: BURKAS OFF, MUSIC ON!**

The media story of the war's aftermath was a story of liberation and joy at the rout of the oppressive Taliban.

Residents of Mazar-e Sharif were rejoicing at the retreat of the Taliban military. . . . "There is music, there is dancing—these all had been banned under the Taliban," said . . . a spokesman for General Rashid Dostum, one of three Northern alliance generals to spearhead the takeover. "Men are shaving their beards. Women are burning their burkhas. All of these things are happening." (*Newsweek* 11/12/01)

And, according to the news, the U.S. victory meant more than just freedom from burkas; it meant freedom from hunger and disease. "A Win Over Famine Too," exalted the *Los Angeles Times* (1/6/02). "Massive Food Delivery Averts Afghan Famine," said the *Washington Post's* front page story (12/31/01). "New Year's Good Message is that Famine Averted," chimed in the *Houston Chronicle* (1/7/02). These stories arrived just in time to bolster George W. Bush's State of the Union Address, which opened by declaring that America "had saved a people from starvation."

Unfortunately, this jubilant story of liberation from repression and starvation had several drawbacks. First, it was the U.S. attack on Afghanistan that had created the threat of widespread famine in the first place. "It's not like there was a famine and we averted it," said Roger Normand, who led a UN-sponsored humanitarian assessment of postwar Afghanistan. "Had we not bombed there never would have been a famine in the first place. . . . There's no question that the military campaign disrupted the food supply networks" (Ackerman 2002, p. 8).

Second, it was not clear that the postwar effort had, in fact, averted famine. Because the war had disrupted supply networks and

unleashed roving bands of rival warlords' gangs, especially in the hinterlands, "there's much more looting and problems with food supply than there were under the Taliban," said Normand. Indeed, not until months after Bush and the media proclaimed victory over hunger were relief agencies able to return to isolated Afghan villages. In April 2002, for example, aid workers reached villages in western Afghanistan that had not received food aid since September 2001, before the U.S. bombing began. They found children "on the verge of dying from hunger." Arriving in the province of Ghor in March 2002, doctors with Action Against Hunger found 40 people had died of malnutrition in one small district. Doctors Without Borders reported a doubling of the mortality rate in Faryah province. And in Zareh, another group reported that half the children under 5 were malnourished. These reports, not in keeping with the story of the good war, "attracted little attention" from the U.S. press (Ackerman 2002, p. 8).

Promises, Promises

As the war "ended," President Bush promised that we would soon see "an Afghanistan that is prosperous, democratic, self-governing . . . respectful of human rights." But at this writing, years after the dancing in the streets, with the American-backed government still in place, Afghanistan remains desperately poor. Life expectancy is 42; yearly per capita income is \$700; and literacy is under 40% (Price 2005). Afghanistan's new, U.S.-backed government is ranked as the third most corrupt out of 30 countries surveyed by Freedom House, a Washington-based research group (Stockman 2005a). In 2005, a UN report ranked Afghanistan 173rd out of 178 countries in quality of life (Price 2005).

And all this would be much worse if not for the mainstay of the Afghan economy: opium production, which doubled between 2003 and 2004, to a level 36 times higher than in the last year of the Taliban's rule (National Public Radio [NPR] 8/23/05). Today, opium in Afghanistan is estimated to be a \$2.8 billion a year industry, comprising more than 60% of the country's GDP and 50% of the U.S. heroin problem (Prashad 2001; Price 2005).

Nor is it clear that Afghanistan has progressed in the area of human security and rights. After George W. Bush declared victory in Afghanistan and redirected U.S. attention toward Iraq, the United States decided not to provide a peace-keeping force. Instead, a small 5,000-troop International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) mobilized to support the new U.S.-backed government of Hamid Karzai.

ISAF's writ, and therefore the government's, did not extend much beyond the country's capital, Kabul. Meanwhile, in the countryside, former Mujahadeen warlords were back in business. Although the national "Loya Jirga," or grand tribal council, had harshly criticized these warlords, Washington dubbed them "regional leaders," "giving them a legitimacy that Afghans themselves are unwilling to bestow" (Rashid 2002).

Under these circumstances,

it is not surprising that very few women have discarded the burhka . . . because they fear for their safety. Recent reports of gang rapes by armed Afghan factions echo the indiscriminate sexual violence of the four-year civil war of 1992–96. . . . Human Rights Watch now reports a "wave of killing, rape and widespread ethnic persecution. . . . We have found case after case of gang-raping of women, and even children," says [Human Rights Watch] senior researcher Peter Bouckaert.

"We felt safe under the Taliban," said a UNICEF project officer. "We could sleep with our doors open at night, but no longer" (Goodwin 2002, p. 20).

Even such a seemingly joyous occasion as Afghanistan's first post-war parliamentary election was tainted by the power of these warlords. The media's headlines touted this election as a triumph for democracy: "War-Ravaged People Embrace Chance to Choose"; "Afghans Go to Polls in Historic Vote" (Stockman 2005b, p. A1; *Atlanta Journal-Constitution* 9/18/05).

But the reality was a triumph for intimidation. While many Afghans complained that the warlords responsible for decades of strife and carnage should not be able to run for election, run they did—roughshod over the democratic process. Topping the ballot in Nangarhar was a "24 carat warlord [Hazrat Ali] with alleged narcotics links and a dubious human rights record" (*Economist* 2005). In one Kabul neighborhood,

residents . . . cringe at the sight of posters of Abdul Sayyaf, the commander they say destroyed their homes and murdered their families [in the early 1990s]. Sayyaf's militia is tied to mass rapes and the disappearance of hundreds of people. (Stockman 2005b, p. A1)

These gangsters joined local strongmen "in many provinces . . . offering nothing but the promise of patronage or the threat of retribution" (*Economist* 2005).

On election day, “complaints [of fraud and intimidation] were heard in almost all regions of the country” (Wiseman 2005). In Mazar-e-Sharif, long since liberated by heroic U.S. Special Forces, “about 100 women” were seen arriving at polling stations, but returning without casting their votes when they saw warlords’ militia-men acting as polling station workers (*Financial Times* 9/18/05).

When the smoke cleared, “almost all” the militia leaders had won seats, including Sayyaf and Ali (*The Advertiser* 2005; *St. Petersburg Times* 2005). The win conferred “unprecedented legitimacy and political power” on mass murderers and rapists (Stockman 2005b, p. A1). “It’s not,” said Shukria Barakzai, a women’s rights activist, “good news for Afghanistan” (*The Advertiser* 2005).

❖ RETURN OF THE TALIBAN

As we shall see in Chapter 3, the Bush administration has envisioned a world dominated by its only superpower. To achieve that goal, the United States would need to be able to impose serial military punishments on rebellious nations and movements. This policy of “pre-emptive war” against nations said to be potentially threatening became known as the “Bush Doctrine” of foreign policy (Scheer, Scheer, and Chandry 2004, p. 23). This doctrine, in turn, meant two things:

1. In order to be ready for subsequent conflicts, the military could not be bogged down in a previous one, such as Afghanistan, for too long.
2. Casualties would have to be limited, so that the American people, whose support would be necessary to sustain serial warfare, would not suffer battle fatigue.

The first principle meant, as we’ve already seen, that the United States would drastically reduce its commitment in Afghanistan once the Taliban had fled from office. The second principle, limiting U.S. casualties, meant that the United States was willing to rely largely on Afghan warlords’ forces as its proxies on the ground, augmented by a few Special Forces troops calling in air support.

This strategy actually worked well until the war’s climactic battle. When Taliban and al-Qaeda forces retreated from the American-led onslaught, they holed up in a redoubt of cave-riddled mountains at a place called Tora Bora. Here, military analysts have since concluded,

was the United States' last and best chance to post a decisive victory and capture or kill the mastermind of 9/11 (Gellman and Ricks 2002).

As U.S. bombing over the area intensified and flushed al-Qaeda fighters from their caves, warlords (including Hazrat Ali) were assigned to mop up the region behind the bombing and guard the escape routes out of Tora Bora.

Unfortunately, the warlords proved reluctant to engage their "Muslim brothers" and eager to accept payment from them for safe passage to Pakistan. When the last of the caves had been taken, only 21 exhausted al-Qaeda soldiers of no rank or importance were left out of an estimated force of 2,000 (Smucker 2002).

Subsequent "after-action reviews" of Tora Bora, conducted by the Bush administration, concluded that the escapees did include bin Laden, as well as his chief deputy, Ayman al-Zawahiri. These reviews deemed the battle a "significant defeat for the U.S." (Gellman and Ricks 2002, p. A1). Press coverage at the time of the battle, however, saw it quite differently. Despite witnesses' accounts saying that bin Laden had escaped Tora Bora by November 30, and that his followers were gone by December 12 (Walker 2001, p. A25), most U.S. press accounts continued to suggest that the battle was a victory and that the "noose" was "tightening":

"Afghans Mop Up, Hunt bin Laden"; "It's Just a Matter of Time, Bush Vows" (*Atlanta Journal-Constitution* 12/18/01)

"Al-Qaeda Holdouts Trapped" (*Atlanta Journal-Constitution* 12/15/01)

"Heavy Fire Crippling al Qaeda" (*Boston Globe* 12/16/01)

"Taliban's Omar Reportedly Trapped" (*San Francisco Chronicle* 12/17/01)

"Afghan Fighters Declare Victory; Al Qaeda Force Is Routed Near Tora Bora" (*St. Louis Post Dispatch* 12/17/01)

"Mullah Omar 'Held'" (*New York Post* 12/8/01)

"Enemy Routed in Search for Leader" (*New York Daily News* 12/9/01)

"Al Qaeda Crumbling Under Massive Attack" (*New York Daily News* 12/12/01)

"Allied Forces Say They've Cornered Osama bin Laden" (*New York Times* 12/14/01)

These celebratory headlines lasted well into January and then, following the administration's lead, gradually dissolved into a story of the United States "shifting forces" away from the caves and toward "rebuilding" Afghanistan. Few of these stories acknowledged the magnitude of the failure at Tora Bora:

"US Blasts Suspected Al Qaeda Cave Hideouts" (*Daily News* 1/13/02)

"Bin Laden Hunt to Turn From Caves" (*Boston Globe* 1/9/02)

"New Leads in Manhunt as US Smashes Caves" (*New York Post* 1/15/02)

"US Shifts Focus, Troops from Tora Bora" (*Wall Street Journal* 1/9/02)

The escape at Tora Bora, together with the withdrawal of most of the U.S. forces from Afghanistan, probably meant that it was just a matter of time before Taliban forces would return—and not much time at that. Within a year, our old friend Gulbuddin Hekmatyar, the main beneficiary of CIA largesse in the 1980s, had "joined forces with al Qaeda and Taliban remnants to destabilize the Karzai regime" (Rashid 2002). Since then, the number of insurgent attacks has "steadily increased each year," as fresh troops, training, and funds—Muslim blowback against the U.S. war in Iraq—replenished the Taliban (Jones 2005, p. A19).

In just the first nine months of 2005, 1,200 Afghans and 82 U.S. soldiers—six times as many troops as were lost in the war itself—were killed by Taliban attacks (Baldauf and Khan 2005). In each year since 2003, the death toll for coalition soldiers has increased. In 2008, there were 3,276 improvised explosive device (IED) attacks, a 45% increase over 2007; and in just the first two months of 2009, IED attacks had already killed 36 foreign troops, triple the number for the same period in 2008. The untold stories of Afghanistan had returned to haunt us, as we shall see in Chapter 5.

❖ CONCLUSION

In the winter of 2001, a war was fought in Afghanistan. Or perhaps there were two wars. The first was the one we saw and heard about in our mass media. Then there was another war—one we didn't see or hear much of.

The first war was a fight for freedom and against “evil.” The other was a mistaken and cruel use of military force against a defenseless Afghanistan in retaliation for a crime—monstrous indeed—but committed by a small cabal of al-Qaeda men—none of whom were Afghans.

The media war was heroic—a thrilling show, a high stakes game—and took no toll. The other war was not an epic tale, or a fireworks display, or a game. It was pain and death and displacement on a massive scale: thousands of civilian casualties, six months of starvation, a half million refugees (Conetta 2002). The media’s war ended as a great victory, with the promise, as the president put it, of “an Afghanistan that is prosperous, democratic, self governing . . . respectful of human rights.” But the other war handed a new lease on power to Afghanistan’s brutal warlords, sowed the seeds of a resurgent al-Qaeda, roiled up a tsunami of worldwide Muslim anti-Americanism, boosted a heroin trade more murderous to Americans than terrorists could ever be, and left a forgotten Afghanistan immersed in poverty and violence.

The conclusion to be drawn from this is not that the other war was the real war and the media’s was spurious, but that both wars happened. The facts of the unreported war occurred. Its critics spoke. Its inferences were drawn. And yet, this other war was curiously, almost completely absent from the mass media.

Then again, perhaps this absence was not so curious. Perhaps, in fact, it was neither an aberration nor an accident. Perhaps it was just business as usual—a possibility that suggested itself anew as the next chapter of American history began to unfold in Iraq.