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September 11, Spectacles of Terror, and Media Manipulation: A Critique of Jihadist and Bush Media Politics

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The September 11 terror attacks on the World Trade Center in New York and Pentagon in Washington, D.C., were shocking global media events that dominated public attention and provoked reams of discourse, reflection, and writing. These media spectacles were intended to terrorize the U.S., to attack symbolic targets, and to unfold a terror spectacle of Jihad against the West, as well as to undermine the U.S. and global economy. The World Trade Center is an apt symbol of global capitalism in the heart of the New York financial district, while the Pentagon stands as a symbol and center of U.S. military power. In this study, I suggest how terrorists have used spectacles of terror to promote their agenda in a media-saturated era and how two Bush administrations have also deployed terror spectacle to promote their geo-political ends.¹

Terror Spectacle

Terrorists have long constructed media spectacles of terror to promote their causes, attack their adversaries, and gain worldwide publicity and attention. There had been many major terror spectacles before, both in the U.S. and elsewhere. Hijacking of airplanes had been a standard terrorist activity, but the ante was significantly upped in 1970 when the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine, hijacked three Western jetliners. The group forced the planes to land in the Jordanian desert, and then blew up the planes in an incident known as “Black September” which was then used as a basis of a Hollywood film. In 1972, Palestinian gunmen from the same movement stunned the world when they took Israeli athletes hostage at the Munich Olympic Games, producing another media spectacle, which eventually became the subject of an Academy Award winning documentary film.

In 1975, an OPEC (Organization for Petroleum Exporting Countries) meeting was disrupted in Vienna, Austria, when a terrorist group led by the notorious Carlos the Jackal killed three people and wounded several others in a chaotic shootout. Americans were targeted in a 1983 bombing in Beirut, Lebanon, in which 243 U.S. servicemen were killed in a truck bombing, orchestrated by a Shi'ite Muslim suicide bomber, that led the U.S. to withdraw its troops from Lebanon. U.S. tourists were victims in 1985 of Palestinians who seized the cruise ship *Achille Lauro*, when they killed Leon Klinghoffer, 69, a crippled American Jew, and threw his body and wheelchair overboard.

In 1993, the World Trade Center was bombed by Islamist terrorists linked to Osama bin Laden, providing a preview of the more spectacular September 11 aggression. An Americanborn terrorist, Timothy McVeigh, bombed the Alfred P. Murrah Federal Building in Oklahoma City, killing 168 and wounding more than 500. Al Qaeda had assaulted U.S. embassies in Africa in 1998 and a U.S. destroyer harbored in Yemen in 2000. Consequently, terror spectacle is a crucial part of the deadly game of terrorism and al Qaeda had systematically used the spectacle of terror to promote its agenda. But the 9/11 terror spectacle was the most extravagant strike on U.S. targets in its history and the first foreign attack on its territory since the war of 1812.

In a global media world, extravagant terror spectacles have been orchestrated in part to gain worldwide attention, dramatize the issues of the terrorist groups involved, and achieve specific political objectives. Previous al Qaeda strikes against the U.S. hit a range of targets to try to demonstrate that the U.S. was weak and vulnerable to terrorism. The earlier 1993 World Trade Center bombing, the embassy assaults in Kenya and Tanzania in 1998, and the attack on the *U.S.S. Cole* in 2000 combined surprise with detailed planning and coordination in well-orchestrated, high-concept terror spectacle.

Terrorism thus works in part through spectacle, using dramatic images and montage to catch attention, hoping thereby to catalyze unanticipated events that will spread further terror through domestic populations. The September 11 terror spectacle looked like a disaster film, leading Hollywood director Robert Altman to chide his industry for producing extravaganzas of terror that could be used as models for attacking the country. Was *Independence Day* (1996) the template for the disaster in which Los Angeles and New York were attacked by aliens and the White House was destroyed? The collapse of

the WTC indeed had resonances of *The Towering Inferno* (1975) that depicted a high-rise building catching on fire, burning and collapsing, or even *Earthquake* (1975) that depicted the collapse of entire urban environments.

The novelty of the September 11 terror acts resulted from the combination of airplane hijacking and the use of airplanes to crash into buildings and disrupt and wound urban and economic life. The targets were partly symbolic, representing global capital and American military power, and partly material, intending to disrupt the airline industry, the businesses centered in downtown New York, and perhaps the global economy itself through potentially dramatic downturns of the world's largest stock market and primary financial center. Indeed, as a response to the drama of the terror spectacle, an unparalleled shutdown occurred in New York, Washington, and other major cities throughout the U.S., with government and businesses closing up for the day and the airline system canceling all flights. Wall Street and the stock market were shut down for days, baseball and entertainment events were postponed, Disneyland and Walt Disney World were closed, McDonald's locked up its regional offices, and most major U.S. cities became eerily quiet.

Post-9/11 Media Spectacle

The 9/11 terror spectacle unfolded in a city that is one of the most media-saturated in the world, and that played out as a deadly drama live on television. The images of the planes hitting the towers and their collapse were played repeatedly. The spectacle conveyed the message that the U.S. was vulnerable to terror attack, that terrorists could create great harm, and that anyone at anytime could be subject to a violent terror attack, even in "Fortress America." The suffering, fear, and death that many people endure on a daily basis in violent and insecure situations in other parts of the world was brought home to U.S. citizens. The terror attacks thus had material effects, attempting to harm the U.S. and global economy, and psychic effects, traumatizing a nation with fear. The spectacle of terror was broadcast throughout the global village, with the whole world watching the assault on the U.S. and New York's attempts to cope with the attacks.²

The live television broadcasting brought a "you are there" drama to the September 11 spectacle. The images of the planes striking the World Trade

Center, the buildings bursting into flames, individuals jumping out of the window in a desperate attempt to survive the inferno, and the collapse of the towers and subsequent chaos provided unforgettable images, much like the footage of the Kennedy assassination, photographs of Vietnam, the 1986 explosion of the space shuttle *Challenger*, or the death of Princess Diana and young JFK Jr. in the 1990s.

The September 11 terror attacks in New York were claimed to be “the most documented event in history” in the May 2002 HBO film, *In Memoriam*, which itself provided a collage of images assembled from professional news crews, documentary filmmakers, and amateur videographers and photographers who in some cases risked their lives to document the event. As with other major media spectacles, the September 11 terror spectacle took over TV programming for the next three days without commercial break as the major television networks focused on the attack and its aftermath.³

There followed a media spectacle of the highest order. For several days, U.S. television suspended broadcasting of advertising and TV entertainment and focused solely on the momentous events of September 11. In the following analysis, I want to suggest how the images and discourses of the U.S. television networks framed the terrorist attacks to whip up war hysteria, while failing to provide a coherent account of what happened, why it happened, and what would count as responsible responses. In an analysis of the dominant discourses, frames, and representations that informed the media and public debate in the days following the September 11 terrorist attacks, I will show how the mainstream media in the United States privileged the “clash of civilizations” model, established a binary dualism between Islamic terrorism and civilization, and largely circulated war fever and retaliatory feelings and discourses that called for and supported a form of military intervention. I argue that such one-dimensional militarism could arguably make the current crisis worse, rather than providing solutions to the problem of global terrorism. Thus, while the media in a democracy should critically debate urgent questions facing the nation, in the terror crisis the mainstream U.S. corporate media, especially television, promoted war fever and military solutions to the problem of global terrorism.

On the day of the terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center and Pentagon, the networks brought out an array of national security state intellectuals, usually ranging from the right to the far right, to explain the horrific events of September 11. The Fox Network presented former UN Ambassador and

Reagan administration apologist Jeane Kirkpatrick, who rolled out a simplified version of Huntington's clash of civilizations, arguing that we were at war with Islam and should defend the West. Kirkpatrick was the most discredited intellectual of her generation, legitimating Reagan administration alliances with unsavory fascists and terrorists as necessary to beat Soviet totalitarianism. Her 1980s propaganda line was premised on a distinction between fascism and communist totalitarianism which argued that alliances with authoritarian or right-wing terrorist organizations or states were defensible since these regimes were open to reform efforts or historically undermined themselves and disappeared. Soviet totalitarianism, by contrast, should be resolutely opposed since a communist regime had never collapsed or been overthrown and communism was an intractable and dangerous foe, which must be fought to the death with any means necessary. Of course, the Soviet Union collapsed in the early 1990s, along with its empire, and although Kirkpatrick was totally discredited, she was awarded a professorship at Georgetown University and allowed to continue to circulate her misguided views.

On the afternoon of September 11, Ariel Sharon, prime minister of Israel, himself implicated in war crimes in Sabra and Shatilla in Lebanon in 1982, came on television to convey his regret, condolences, and assurance of Israel's support in the war on terror. Sharon called for a coalition against terrorist networks, which would contrast the civilized world with terrorism, representing the Good vs. Evil, "humanity" vs. "the blood-thirsty," "the free world" against "the forces of darkness," who are trying to destroy "freedom" and our "way of life."

Curiously, the Bush Administration would take up the same tropes with Bush attacking the "evil" of the terrorists, using the word five times in his first statement on the September 11 terror assaults, and repeatedly portraying the conflict as a war between good and evil in which the U.S. was going to "eradicate evil from the world," "smoke out and pursue . . . evil doers, those barbaric people." The insensitive semantics of the Bush Administration also used cowboy metaphors, calling for bin Laden "dead or alive," and described the campaign as a "crusade," until he was advised that this term carried offensive historical baggage of earlier wars of Christians and Muslims. And the Pentagon at first named the war against terror "Operation Infinite Justice," until they were advised that only God could dispense "infinite justice," and that Americans and others might be troubled about a war expanding to infinity.

Disturbingly, in mentioning the goals of the war, Bush never mentioned “democracy,” and the new name for the campaign became “Operation Enduring Freedom.” The Bush Administration mantra became: the war against terrorism is being fought for “freedom.” But we know from the history of political theory and history itself that freedom must be paired with equality, or concepts like justice, rights, or democracy, to provide adequate political theory and legitimation for political action. It is precisely the contempt for democracy and self-autonomy that has characterized U.S. foreign policy in the Middle East for the past decades, which is a prime reason why groups and individuals in the area passionately hate the United States.

In his speech to Congress on September 20 declaring his war against terrorism, Bush described the conflict as a war between freedom and fear, between “those governed by fear” who “want to destroy our wealth and freedoms,” and those on the side of freedom. Yet “freedom” for Bush has usually signaled the capacity to say and do anything he wanted to, in a lifetime of providing deregulation of the economy, favors to his corporate supporters, and participation himself in dubious political and economic activities. The “Bush doctrine” in foreign policy has signified freedom for the U.S. to wage preemptive strikes anywhere it wishes at any time, and the unilateralist Bush administration foreign policy has signified freedom from major global treaties ranging from Kyoto to every conceivable international effort to regulate arms and military activity (see Kellner 2001 and 2003).

And while Bush ascribed “fear” to its symbolic other and enemy, as Michael Moore’s film *Bowling for Columbine* demonstrates, the corporate media has been exploiting fear for decades in their excessive presentation of murder and violence and dramatization of a wide range of threats from foreign enemies and within everyday life. Clearly, the media whipped up hysteria in its post-9/11 coverage of anthrax attacks and frequent reports of terrorist threats, and since September 11 the Bush administration has arguably used fear tactics to advance its political agenda, including tax breaks for the rich, curtailment of social programs, military build-up, and the most draconian assaults on U.S. rights and freedoms in the contemporary era.

In his September 20 talk to Congress, Bush also drew a line between those who supported terrorism and those who were ready to fight it. Stating that “you’re either with us or against us,” Bush declared war on any states

supporting terrorism and laid down a series of non-negotiable demands to the Taliban who ruled Afghanistan, while Congress wildly applauded. Bush's popularity soared with a country craving blood-revenge and the head of Osama bin Laden. Moreover, Bush also asserted that his administration held accountable those nations who supported terrorism—a position that could nurture and legitimate military interventions for years to come.

Interestingly, Bush Administration discourses, like those of bin Laden and radical Islamists, are fundamentally Manichean, positing a binary opposition between Good and Evil, Us and Them, civilization and barbarism. Bush's Manichean dualism replicates as well the Friend/Enemy opposition of Carl Schmidt upon which Nazi politics were based. Osama bin Laden and al Qaeda provided the face of an enemy to replace the "evil Empire" of Soviet Communism which was the face of the Other in the Cold War. The terrorist Other, however, does not reside in a specific country with particular military targets and forces, but is part of an invisible empire supported by a multiplicity of groups and states. This amorphous terrorist Enemy, then, allows the crusader for Good to attack any country or group that is supporting terrorism, thus promoting a foundation for a new doctrine of preemptive strikes and perennial war.

The discourse of Good and Evil can be appropriated by disparate and opposing groups and generates a highly dichotomous opposition, outside the discourses of democratic communication and consensus, and provoking violent and military responses. It is assumed by both sides that "we" are the good, and the "Other" is wicked, an assertion that Bush made in his incessant assurance that the "evil-doers" of the "evil deeds" will be punished, and that the "Evil One," will be brought to justice, implicitly equating bin Laden with Satan.

Such hyperbolic rhetoric is a salient example of Bushspeak that communicates through codes to specific audiences, in this case domestic Christian right-wing groups that are the preferred subjects of his discourse. But demonizing terms for bin Laden both elevate his status in the Arab world as a superhero who stands up to the West, and angers those who feel such discourse is insulting. Moreover, the trouble with the discourse of "evil" is that it is totalizing and absolutist, allowing no ambiguities or contradictions. The discourse of evil is also cosmological and apocalyptic, evoking a cataclysmic war with cosmic stakes. On this perspective, Evil cannot simply be attacked one piece at a time through incremental steps, but it must be

totally defeated, eradicated from the earth if Good is to reign. This discourse of evil raises the stakes and violence of conflict and nurtures more apocalyptic and catastrophic politics, fuelling future cycles of hatred, violence, and wars.

Furthermore, the Bushspeak dualisms between fear and freedom, barbarism and civilization, and the like can hardly be sustained in empirical and theoretical analysis of the contemporary moment. In fact, there is much fear and poverty in “our” world and wealth, and freedom and security in the Arab and Islamic worlds—at least for privileged élites. No doubt, freedom, fear, and wealth are distributed in both worlds, so to polarize these categories and to make them the legitimating principles of war is highly irresponsible. And associating oneself with “good,” while making one’s enemy “evil,” is another exercise in binary reductionism and projection of all traits of aggression and wickedness onto the “Other” while constituting oneself as good and pure.

It is, of course, theocratic Islamic fundamentalists who themselves engage in a similar simplistic binary discourse which they use to legitimate acts of terrorism. For certain Manichean Islamic fundamentalists, the U.S. is evil, the source of all the world’s problems and deserves destruction. Such one-dimensional thought does not distinguish between U.S. policies, people, or institutions, while advocating a jihad, or holy war, against the American evil. The terrorist crimes of September 11 appeared to be part of this jihad and the monstrousness of the actions of killing innocent civilians shows the horrific consequences of totally dehumanizing an “enemy” deemed so evil that even innocent members of the group in question deserve to be exterminated.

Many commentators on U.S. television offered similarly one-sided and Manichean accounts of the cause of the September 11 events, blaming their favorite opponents in the current U.S. political spectrum as the source of the terror assaults. For fundamentalist Christian ideologue Jerry Falwell, and with the verbal agreement of Christian Broadcast Network President Pat Robertson, the culpability for this “horror beyond words” fell on liberals, feminists, gays and the ACLU. Jerry Falwell said, and Pat Robertson agreed, that “the abortionists have got to bear some burden for this because God will not be mocked. And when we destroy forty million little innocent babies, we make God mad. I really believe that the pagans, and the abortionists, and the feminists, and the gays and the lesbians who are actively trying to make that an alternative lifestyle, the ACLU, People for the American Way—all of them who have tried to secularize America—I point the finger in their face and say, ‘You helped this happen.’ ” In fact, this argument is similar to a

right-wing Islamic claim that the U.S. is fundamentally corrupt and evil and thus deserves God's wrath, an argument made by Falwell critics that forced the fundamentalist fanatic to apologize.

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

On the issue of "what to do," right-wing columnist Ann Coulter declaimed: "We know who the homicidal maniacs are. They are the ones cheering and dancing right now. We should invade their countries, kill their leaders and convert them to Christianity."⁴ While Bush was declaring a "crusade" against terrorism and the Pentagon was organizing "Operation Infinite Justice," Bush Administration Deputy Defense Secretary Paul Wolfowitz said the administration's retaliation would be "sustained and broad and effective" and that the United States "will use all our resources. It's not just simply a matter of capturing people and holding them accountable, but removing the sanctuaries, removing the support systems, ending states who sponsor terrorism."

Such all-out war hysteria was the order of the day, and throughout September 11 and its aftermath, ideological war-horses like William Bennett came out and urged that the U.S. declare war on Iraq, Iran, Syria, Libya, and whoever else harbored terrorists. On the Canadian Broadcasting Network, former Reagan administration Deputy Secretary of Defense and military commentator Frank Gaffney suggested that the U.S. needed to go after the sponsors of these states as well, such as China and Russia, to the astonishment and derision of the Canadian audience. And right-wing talk radio and the Internet buzzed with talk of dropping nuclear bombs on Afghanistan, exterminating all Muslims, and whatever other fantasies popped into people's unhinged heads.

Hence, broadcast television allowed dangerous and arguably deranged zealots to vent and circulate the most aggressive, fanatic, and downright lunatic

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

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

There is no question concerning the depth of emotion and horror with which the nation experienced this serious assault on U.S. territory by its enemies. The constant invocation of analogies to “Pearl Harbor” inevitably elicited a need to strike back and prepare for war. The attack on the World Trade Center evoked images of assault on the very body of the country, while the attack on the Pentagon represented an assault on the country’s defense system, showing the vulnerability, previously unperceived, of the U.S. to external attack and terror.

For some years, an increasing amount of “expert consultants” were hired by the television corporations to explain complex events to the public. The military consultants hired by the networks had close connections to the Pentagon and usually would express the Pentagon’s point of view and spin of the day, making them more propaganda conduits for the military than independent analysts. Commentators and Congressmen, like John McCain (R-Ariz.), Henry Kissinger, James Baker, Jeane Kirkpatrick, and other long-time advocates of the military-industrial complex, described the attacks as an “act of war” immediately on September 11 and the days following. For hawkish pundits, the terror attacks required an immediate military response and dramatic expansion of the U.S. military. Many of these hawks were former government officials, like Kissinger and Baker, who were currently tied into the defense industries, guaranteeing that their punditry would be paid for by large profits of the defense industries that they were part of.

Indeed, the Bush family, James Baker and other advocates of large-scale military retribution were connected with the Carlyle Fund, the largest investor in military industries in the world. Consequently, these advocates of war would profit immensely from sustained military activity, an embarrassment rarely mentioned on television or the mainstream press, but that was widely discussed in alternative media and the Internet.⁵

The network anchors also framed the event as a military attack, with Peter Jennings of ABC stating that “the response is going to have to be massive if it is to be effective.” NBC, owned by General Electric, the largest U.S. military corporation, as usual promoted military action, and its talk shows were populated by pundits who invariably urged immediate military retribution. To help generate and sustain widespread public desire for military intervention, the networks played show after show detailing the harm done to victims of the bombing, kept their cameras aimed at Ground Zero to document the damage and destruction and drama of discovery of dead bodies, and constructed report after report on the evil of bin Laden and the al Qaeda terrorists who had committed the atrocities.

To continue the sense of drama and urgency, and to ensure that viewers kept tuned into the story and their channels, the television cable news networks all added “Crawlers” to the bottom of their screens, endlessly repeating bulletins of the latest news highlighting the terrorist attack and its consequences. It was remarkable, in fact, how quickly the media corporations produced frames for the event, constructed it as it was going on, and provided innovative and striking visuals and graphics to capture viewer attention. Already on September 11, CNN constructed a four-tier graphic presentation with a capitalized and blazing BREAKING NEWS title on the top of their screen, followed by a graphic describing the ATTACK ON AMERICA, or whatever slogan was being used to construct the event. Next, a title described what was being currently portrayed in the visuals flashed across the screen, with the crawlers scrolling the headlines on the bottom. In a remarkable presentation of the talk of Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon on September 11, for instance, the visuals were split between Sharon’s picture in Tel Aviv, images of the World Trade Center bomb site, and the graphics summarizing Sharon’s talk and the headlines crawling along the bottom of the screen. While the Bush Administration obviously had no idea what was happening to the U.S. as Bush’s presidential plane frantically flew around the country and Vice-President Dick Cheney was carried off to the mountains to hide, the TV networks were fully in control with frames, discourses, and

explanations of the momentous events. It was a tremendous formal accomplishment for the high-tech flash visual production capabilities of the networks, although one could question the intelligence of the interpretations, or the military retribution being fervently espoused without contradiction.

Bush Administration Media Spectacle

War itself has become a media event in which subsequent U.S. administrations have used military spectacle to prop up their agendas. The Reagan administration repeatedly used military spectacle to deflect attention from its foreign policy and economic problems and two Bush Administrations and the Clinton Administration famously “wagged the dog,” using military spectacle to deflect attention from embarrassing domestic or foreign policy blunders, or in Clinton’s case, a sex scandal that threatened him with impeachment (Kellner 2003).

The Gulf War of 1990-1991 was the major media spectacle of its era, captivating global audiences, and seemed to save the first Bush Presidency before its ambiguous outcome and a declining economy defeated the Bush presidential campaign of 1992. In the summer of 1990, George Bush’s popularity was declining; he had promised “no new taxes” and then raised taxes, and it appeared that he would not be re-elected. Bush’s salvation seemed to appear in the figure of Saddam Hussein, whom Bush had supported during the Iran-Iraq war of 1980-1988, and who continued to provide loans and programs that enabled Hussein to build up his military during Bush’s presidency (Kellner 1992).

When Hussein invaded Kuwait in August 1990, Bush mobilized an international coalition to wage war to oust Iraq from its neighboring oil emirate. Bush refused serious diplomatic efforts to induce Iraq to leave and appeared to want a war to increase U.S. power in the region, to promote U.S. military power as the dominant global police force, to save his own failing political fortunes, and to exert more U.S. influence over oil supplies and policies (Kellner 1992). The televised drama of the Gulf War provide exciting media spectacles that engrossed a global audience and that seemed to ensure Bush’s re-election (he enjoyed 90 percent popularity at the end of the war).

After the war, in an exuberant rush of enthusiasm, Bush and his national security advisor Brent Scowcroft proclaimed a “New World Order” in which U.S. military power would be used to settle conflicts, solve problems, and assert the U.S. as the hegemonic force in the world. Such a dream was not (yet) to be, however, as the Gulf War peace negotiations allowed Saddam Hussein to stay in power and the U.S. failed to aid Shi’ite forces in the south and Kurds in the north of Iraq to overthrow Hussein. Images of the slaughter of Kurds and Shi’ites throughout the global media provided negative images that helped code the Gulf War as a failure, or extremely limited success, and that negative spectacle of failure combined with a poor economy helped defeat Bush in 1992.

At the time of the September 11 terror attacks, George W. Bush faced the same failing prospects that his father confronted in the summer of 1990. The economy was suffering one of the worst declines in U.S. history, and after ramming through a right-wing agenda on behalf of the corporations that had supported his 2000 election (Kellner 2001), Bush lost control of the political agenda when a Republican senator, James Jeffords, defected to the Democrats in May 2001. But the September 11 terror attacks provided an opportunity for Bush to re-seize political initiative and to boost his popularity.

The brief war against the Taliban and al Qaeda in Afghanistan from early October through December 2001 appeared to be a military victory for the U.S., as after a month of stalemate following relentless U.S. bombing, the Taliban collapsed in the north of the country, abandoned the capital, Kabul, and surrendered in its southern strongholds. Yet the Afghanistan Terror War, like George Bush’s Gulf War, was ambiguous in its outcome. Although the Taliban regime which hosted Osama bin Laden and al Qaeda collapsed under U.S. military pressure, the top leaders and many militants of al Qaeda and the Taliban escaped, and the country remains dangerous and chaotic.

While the Gulf War produced spectacles of precision-bombs and missiles destroying Iraqi targets and the brief spectacle of the flight of the Iraqis from Kuwait and the liberation of Kuwait City, the war in Afghanistan was more ambiguous and hidden in its unfolding and effects. Many of the images of Afghanistan that circulated through the global media were of civilian casualties caused by U.S. bombing and daily pictures of thousands of refugees raised questions concerning the U.S. strategy and intervention. Moreover,

just as the survival of Saddam Hussein ultimately coded the Gulf War as problematic, so do did the continued existence of Osama bin Laden and his top al Qaeda leadership point to limitations of Bush's leadership and policies.

Thus, by early 2002, Bush faced a situation similar to that of his father after the Gulf War. Despite victory against the Taliban, the limitations of the war and a failing economy provided a situation that threatened Bush's re-election. Thus George W. Bush needed a dramatic media spectacle that would guarantee his election, and once more Saddam Hussein provided a viable candidate. Consequently, in his January 20, 2002, State of the Union address, Bush made threatening remarks about an "axis of evil" confronting the U.S., including Iraq, Iran, and North Korea.

As 2002 unfolded, the Bush administration intensified its ideological war against Iraq, advanced its doctrine of preemptive strikes, and provided military build-up for what now looks like an inevitable war against Iraq. While the explicit war aims are to shut down Iraq's "weapons of mass destruction," and thus enforce UN resolutions which mandated that Iraq eliminate its offensive weapons, there are many hidden agendas in the Bush administration's offensive against Iraq. To be re-elected Bush obviously needs a major victory and symbolic triumph over terrorism and needs deflection from the failings of his regime both domestically and in the realm of foreign policy. Indeed, in the global arena, Bush appears to be the most hated U.S. president of modern times and anti-Americanism is on the rise throughout the world. Moreover, ideologues within the Bush Administration want to legitimate a policy of preemptive strikes and a successful attack on Iraq might normalize this policy. Some of the same militarist unilateralists in the Bush administration envisage U.S. world hegemony, George Bush's "New World Order," with the U.S. as the reigning military power and world's policeman. Increased control of the world's oil supplies is a tempting prize for the former oil executives who maintain key roles in the Bush Administration. And, finally, one might note the "Oedipus Tex" drama, where George W. Bush's desires to conclude his father's unfinished business and simultaneously defeat Evil to constitute himself as Good is driving him to war with the fervor of a religious Crusade.

Concluding Comments

Obviously, multifaceted global events like the projected war against Iraq are highly complex and have a wealth of underlying factors. Thus it would be a mistake to suggest that one single factor like control of oil or domestic political goals were the key factor in either the Gulf War and or the current Iraq crisis. Complex historical events are overdetermined and require multi-causal analysis (Kellner 1992).

Yet in a highly saturated media environment, successful political projects require carefully planned and executed media spectacles. What I have been arguing here is that both the September 11 terror attacks and George Bush's Gulf War were prime examples of such spectacles, and that George W. Bush's proposed war against Iraq could be read in this light. Thus, both al Qaeda terrorists and two Bush administrations have used media spectacle to promote their agendas.

In the U.S. and much of the Western world, the corporate media have followed the Bush administration in demonizing bin Laden and terrorism while celebrating U.S. policy and military interventions. A critical cultural studies, however, should dissect dominant discourses, images, and spectacles of all contending sides, denoting manipulation, propaganda, and questionable policies. I have suggested that multilateralism is the appropriate global response to problems like terrorism and regimes like Iraq, and that global institutions and not unilateralism U.S. military intervention should deal with such problems.

In conclusion, I would like to argue that in a world when ever fewer media corporations control the broadcasting and print media that the Internet provides the best source of alternative information, a wealth of opinion and debate, and a variety of sites that might possible political discussion and organization (Kellner 2002). Although there is a frightening amount of misinformation and reactionary discourse on the Internet, there is the potential to become literate and informed on a variety of important topics. Indeed, the Internet has played a key role in nurturing the anti-globalization and global justice movements, and is playing an important role in facilitating development of a global anti-war movement.

Even more, the global peace movement that is constituting itself as a counter-spectacle to Islamic terrorism and Bush militarism signals a democratic alternative to war. The spectacle of millions demonstrating against an attack on Iraq in 2003, activists going to Iraq to serve as human shields against U.S.

and British bombing, and the daily protests throughout everyday life present opposition to war and struggles for peace and democracy.

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Notes

¹This study draws upon my books *The Persian Gulf TV War* (Kellner 1992); *Grand Theft 2000* (Kellner 2001) *Media Spectacle* (Kellner 2003); and *From 9/11 to Terror War: Dangers of the Bush Legacy* (Kellner, forthcoming).

²I attended a three-part symposium telecast live in the Beverly Hills Museum of Radio and Television which included media executives and broadcasters throughout the world who described how they processed the events of September 11. Representatives from Canada, European countries, China, and elsewhere described how they got footage to broadcast, how the story dominated their respective media sources, and how the story was truly global in reach. An archive is collecting video and commentary on September 11 broadcasting throughout the world.

³In this section I am indebted to students of my UCLA Cultural Studies seminar and to Richard Kahn who developed a website where the class posted material relating to the September 11 events and Afghan war; the following study draws on this material that can be found at:
<http://www.gseis.ucla.edu/faculty/kellner/ed270/index.html>.

⁴Shortly after this and other outbursts, the frothing Coulter was fired from *National Review* when she reacted violently to efforts to tone down her rhetoric by the editors, helping to provide her with martyr status for the U.S. Talibanites. Later, Coulter stated in a speech that American Taliban John Walker Lindh should be executed so that liberals and the left can get the message that they can be killed if they get out of line.

⁵ The Bush-Baker-Carlyle connection was documented in many English newspapers, the *New York Times*, and other sources, collected on <http://www.bushwatch.com> and Phil Agre's Red Rock Eater list collected at <http://dlis.gseis.ucla.edu/people/pagre/rre.html>. See also Melanie Warner, "The Big Guys Work for the Carlyle Group," *Fortune* (March 18, 2002).