

# “The Axis of Evil,” Operation Infinite War, and Bush’s Attacks on Democracy

Douglas Kellner

University of California, Los Angeles

In his televised State of the Union Address on January 29, George W. Bush promised an epoch of Terror War, expanding the Bush doctrine to not only go after terrorists and those who harbor terrorist groups but to include those countries making weapons of mass destruction. Claiming that Iraq, Iran, and North Korea constituted “an axis of evil, arming to threaten the peace of the world,” Bush put the “world’s most dangerous regimes” on notice that he was planning to escalate the war on terror. Rattling the saber and making it clear that he was perfectly ready to wag the dog if Enron or domestic scandals and economic failures threatened his popularity, Bush put “rogue states” and terrorists everywhere on notice that he was prepared to go to war indefinitely against an array of targets in an epoch of Enduring Terror War.

As was becoming his norm, Bush’s team was able to orchestrate an impressive media event with celebrities such as Hamid Karzai, interim president of Afghanistan, in the audience next to Laura Bush, along with members of U.S. military families, New York firemen, and other icons of September 11. Moreover, Bush was learning to read his teleprompter speeches with proper emphasis and pronunciation but was not able to rid himself of his tale-tell smirk, weird darting eye gestures, and increasing arrogance and self-satisfaction. He also took the occasion to announce new dangers to the United States via plans found in Afghanistan to blow up U.S. nuclear installations, public monuments, and other targets.

In fact, these documents had been found weeks before and had already been discussed in the media, so Bush was simply using the threats to legitimate his

---

**Author’s Note:** This text is extracted from my study, *September 11, Terror War, and the New Barbarism*, a work-in-progress that will be regularly updated and available on my home page, <http://www.gseis.ucla.edu/faculty/kellner/kellner.html>. It continues the work done in my books, *The Persian Gulf TV War* (Westview, 1992) and *Grand Theft 2000* (Rowman and Littlefield, 2001). It is an experiment in writing contemporary history as it evolves, circulating a first-draft condensed from various media sources. As more material comes out, I plan to keep up with new information and various interpretations of the emerging Terror War and New Barbarism to help produce an eventual book on the topic, one that documents the conjunction of Bush’s theft of Election 2000, the September 11 terror attacks, and the consequent Bush administration responses and their global ramifications. Thanks to Norm Denzin for inviting me to submit this selection to *Cultural Studies ↔ Critical Methodologies* and to sending me ideas to address in dissecting Bush’s State of the Nation Address.

Cultural Studies ↔ Critical Methodologies, Volume 2 Number 3, 2002 343-347  
© 2002 Sage Publications

own militarist agenda and to deflect attention from his own failings at economic policy and the involvement of himself and others in his administration in the Enron scandals. Certainly, terrorism remains a threat to the United States, but to exaggerate the dangers, to escalate the war, and to engage in excessive rhetoric are arguably not the way to deal with the problem. In a round of TV interviews that preceded Bush's address, one of his advisers, Karen Hughes, claimed that Americans face dangers from up to 100,000 terrorists trained in Afghanistan and deployed worldwide. Eyes bulging and lower lip tremulous, the utterly mendacious Hughes, who has made a career of lying for Bush, made it clear that Terror War would be a major focus of Bush administration policy. Terrorist experts were dumbfounded at the spinmistress' far-fetched fantasizing, with Stanley Bedlington, a former CIA terrorism analyst, insisting that "Al Qaeda has never had that kind of strength." Bedlington continued, "I just came back from a luncheon with about 15 specialists. If I dropped that like a rock into a stagnant pool, there would be roars of laughter" (Woodward, 2002).

Likewise, Bush's rhetoric of "evil" was becoming tiresome and worrisome to many. He used the term *evil* at least five times in his State of the Union Address and included countries such as Iran in this litany, which was itself undergoing complex domestic changes. Furthermore, what Bush did not talk about in the State of the Union speech was also significant. He did not mention Osama Bin Laden and the Al Qaeda and Taliban leadership that he had failed to apprehend. Bush did not refer to the stunning deficits that his fiscal mismanagement had produced, glossing over the reversal in 1 year from the largest surplus in U.S. history to a stunning \$100 billion plus deficit (with estimates rising by the week).<sup>1</sup> Bush claimed that the "state of the union had never been so good," but in fact during Bush's presidency, the nation suffered one of the greatest 1-year reversals and declines in U.S. history. The U.S. economy was suffering massive unemployment, the Enron scandal was harming investor confidence and pointing to glaring problems that Bushonomics had helped produce, while the national deficit was skyrocketing.

Moreover, in his State of the Union Address, George W. Bush out-vooded Ronald Reagan in his calls for wildly increased military spending, a jump in home security spending, large tax cuts for the wealthy, and a 9% increase in basic government programs. Bush was willing to finance this budget with a more than \$100 billion deficit for 2002 and an \$80 billion budget deficit for 2003. One tries to imagine the uproar this would create if the Democrats had urged such irresponsible deficit funding of the government. It was startlingly clear that the Bush administration was returning to the giant deficit spending that had seen the Reagan years double the national debt, whereas Bush I in his failed 4 years of economic mismanagement doubled the national debt once again. Every responsible economist believed that it was necessary to keep the deficit and national debt under control to ensure U.S. economic stability, but

once again the Bush administration embarked on a rash and dangerous economic policy that could end in catastrophe for the U.S. and global economy.

Looked at more closely, Bush's State of the Union Address could be read as a cunning use of Terror War to push through his indefensible domestic programs such as the Star Wars missile program, his tax break and giveaway for the rich, and his social service programs that would advance a conservative agenda (i.e., people and charities would solve social problems and not government). The "evil axis" countries could be used to legitimate producing the Star Wars missile defense system that critics had claimed had not been proven workable. Although on one hand the very notion of an axis of evil suggests Bush administration geopolitical confusion and misunderstanding, on the other, it opens the way to any military intervention whatever. And by calling attention to countries that produce weapons of mass destruction, it legitimates a missile defense system that will at least allegedly protect the United States against nuclear missile attack.

Most incredible, Bush was using the Enron collapse to push his tax giveaway program and discredited pension plan. Although Bush did not mention the unmentionable name of Enron in his speech, the day after the State of the Union Bush called for pension reform in the light of the Enron collapse using the national tragedy to push his social security stock scam, telling workers that with improved investment advice and some protection, they would be better off with retirement plans in which they could choose to invest their own savings! As if the Enron scandal had not revealed the uncertainty of investment and dangers in the stock market!

The emphasis on care, compassion, sacrifice, national service, and community voluntarism in the State of the Union gave Bush credence as a compassionate conservative, as opposed to a hard-right ideologue and shameless manipulator of crisis and tragedy for his own political ends. But the emphasis on patriotism, national unity, and moral community functions to identify his party and policies with patriotism but also to identify anyone who criticized his foreign or domestic policies as "unpatriotic." Lynne Cheney, wife of U.S. Vice President Dick Cheney and a longtime cultural warrior against the Left, has been circulating texts documenting unpatriotic statements by university professors. Since September 11, Ms. Cheney had been leading an assault against dissidents to Bush administration policy on the grounds that they are not patriotic and supporting the president in a time of war and danger (Defense of Civilization Fund, 2001).<sup>2</sup> Stressing national unity and patriotism was thus providing a cover for suppressing dissent and difference and thus threatening to undermine U.S. democracy, revealing the dangerous antidemocracy sentiments of the Bush-Cheney gang.

Moreover, appropriating the language of "moral community" for a conservative "homeland defense" against terrorism and "an axis of evil" redefines

community in conservative terms as those who identify with U.S. government policy. It also subordinates discourses of social justice, civil rights, and democracy to pulling together in the name of national unity, a move that can easily be used to suppress dissent and progressive agendas. Thus, the Bush administration is using the September 11 terrorist attacks and issues of national security to push through a right-wing agenda that is a clear and present danger to U.S. democracy as well as world peace.

## Notes

1. Budget analysts noted that although it was claimed on page 396 of Bush's budget that the 2002 deficit would be \$106 billion, on page 417 it is admitted that "the amount of government debt outstanding at the end of this year will rise by fully \$367 billion to a new world record of \$6.1 trillion" (Oliphant, 2002). When Senator Fritz Hollings confronted Bush administration budget director Mitch Daniels with this discrepancy, Daniels admitted that "we hid it but you found it." According to Oliphant (2002), the Bush administration plans to help cover the gargantuan deficit by raiding social security and Medicare.

2. Lynne Cheney and her right-wing allies had long dreamed of crushing radical voices of dissent in the university and had long waged a cultural war against their academic enemies. The conservative jihad was launched during the Reagan era when Ms. Cheney was head of the National Endowment for the Humanities, which she governed like a Taliban, rooting out all politically incorrect policies and personnel and going after progressives in the academic world. There were some speculations that the U.S. Left/Right culture wars were suspended in favor of national unity against terrorism, but obviously Cheney and her Taliban were not going to miss a chance to go after their long-time adversaries.

## References

- Defense of Civilization Fund. (2001, November). *Defending civilization: How our universities are failing America and what can be done about it?* Available from [www.goacta.org](http://www.goacta.org)
- Oliphant, T. (2002, February 12). *The Boston Globe*. Available from [www.bostonglobe.com](http://www.bostonglobe.com)
- Woodward, C. (2002, January 29). *Bush sketches dark portrait of the threat from terrorists* (Associated Press).

**Douglas Kellner** is George Kneller Chair in the Philosophy of Education at the University of California, Los Angeles, and is author of many books on social theory, politics, history, and culture, including *Camera Politica: The Politics and Ideology of Contemporary Hollywood Film* (with Michael Ryan); *Critical Theory, Marxism, and Modernity*; *Jean Baudrillard: From Marxism to Postmodernism and Beyond*; and *Postmodern Theory: Critical Interrogations* (with Steven Best).

He has just published a book on the 2000 presidential election, *Grand Theft 2000: Media Spectacle and the Theft of an Election*, and *The Postmodern Adventure. Science, Technology, and Cultural Studies at the Third Millennium* (with Steve Best). Forthcoming books include *Media Spectacle and September 11, Terror War, and the New Barbarism*.