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The Decline and Fall of Truth in Bush's America

"INDISPENSABLE." —DAVID GREENBERG, *THE WASHINGTON POST*

TWO

"DEAD OR ALIVE"

SHARK ATTACKS had been one of the more entertaining diversions of the summer of 2001. When cable news got bored with Gary and Chandra, there was always some sighting of teeth somewhere, replete with *Jaws* footage and the accompanying John Williams thump-thump-thump horror music, even though, in reality, the rate of shark attacks had been routine that year, and sharks were a statistically minuscule cause of mortality at any time. (There had been at most two U.S. shark deaths in any year since 1990.) But by the afternoon of 9/11, the great shark scare of 2001 was officially consigned to the dustbin of history when *People* scrapped its shark cover to make way for the thousands dead. Al Qaeda's attack on America was a genuine apocalypse, not a soap opera that could be turned into a 24/7 cable news miniseries or tabloid fare. It was one tragedy that could not be safely guided to that satisfying denouement that had been in vogue ever since the 1999 shootings at Columbine High School in Colorado: "closure."

Signs of a new realism abounded, at least at first. On television we were told hourly that we had lost the untroubled freedom of movement that Amer-

icans consider a birthright. It was self-evident that our illusion of impregnability had been smashed, too. Confronted with catastrophic news and the need for reliable information about it, TV viewers of 9/11 largely deserted the cable news networks for the Big Three, as embodied by the supposedly obsolescent Tom Brokaw, Peter Jennings, and Dan Rather. Americans wanted the authority of the anchors, and the anchors upheld their part of the bargain, sticking to pre–Drudge Report, pre-cable journalistic standards and offering reportage rather than blather and rumor. They didn't make any of the errors that had pumped up the hysteria of the O.J. and Monica mediathons–and that on 9/11 could have spread wholesale panic across a jittery nation instead of the usual prurient fun. The anchors, however anachronistic their declining evening newscasts, knew they had to do their part to steady a country that still gathered at the tube, not the computer screen, during a crisis like this.

In 9/11's immediate aftermath, it even seemed possible that words such as *survivor* and *fear factor* would be reunited with their original meanings. Of late they had been held captive by television's so-called reality programs, which had turned *Survivor* and *Fear Factor* into brands standing for fantasy entertainment in which nothing really fearful ever happened and every imperiled contestant was certain to survive.

A decade of dreaming was coming to an end. The dream had been simple–that Americans could have it all without having to pay any price, and that national suffering of almost any kind could be domesticated into an experience of virtual terror akin to a theme park ride or a Hollywood blockbuster. Even before 9/11, the mass escapism that defined the 1990s had started to collapse with the puncturing of the stock bubble and the economic aftershocks. Now terrorists had achieved the literal annihilation of the most commanding twin edifices of American capitalism.

Overnight, World War II fetishism was almost ludicrously obsolete. The lavish promotion of HBO's new series *Band of Brothers* during the days before 9/11 rang hollow in the days after. The HBO posters had to share Manhattan's signage with the ubiquitous faces smiling out expectantly from the new quilt of mass death, the vast patchwork of fliers headlined MISSING. "There was a time when the world asked ordinary men to do extraordinary things" went the *Band of Brothers* ad copy, which took pains to remind us that the miniseries was "based on the true story." As of 9/11, the prospect that civilians might have to

make an extraordinary effort for the national good was no longer an arcane fantasy as far-fetched as the knights of the round table.

Most important, 9/11 might just shock the don't-worry-be-happy presidency of George W. Bush into growing up. Perhaps he might tell us that it was not possible to have big tax cuts (for some of us, anyway) along with spending increases for better schools and defense–all without having to dip into the Social Security stash. Maybe we would even be told that it was impossible to lick an energy crisis or navigate the politics of the Middle East while continuing to burn gas as if there were no tomorrow. Perhaps the president would ask for a new generation to sacrifice, as he, his vice president, and the boomer elite running both political parties by and large had not done during Vietnam.

Perhaps irony was dead. Perhaps there was a New Normal. Perhaps 9/11 was the day that changed everything.

Then again, perhaps not.

AT HEART Americans are eternal innocents, and 9/11 did not change that. The question ricocheting throughout the media past the point of absurdity–"Why do they hate us?"–was a sincere one. Few Americans had a clue about who "they" were, let alone why they hated us. Radical Islam was as mysterious to most as quantum physics. In the summer of 2001, there had been far more news coverage of domestic sharks, Condit included, than of the foreign threat of Al Qaeda. Now that the worst had happened, the country wanted desperately to rally around a leader–any leader. We needed someone to root for. We needed someone to take charge. We needed someone to protect us. We needed someone to strike back. The president, hardly visible in the first forty-eight hours after the attacks, left a vacuum in that role, and into the vacuum stepped the unlikely figure of Rudolph Giuliani. New York's mayor was said to be of a type that doesn't play nationally–ethnic, authoritarian, a liberal Republican way to the left of his party's base on culture-war issues such as abortion and gay civil rights. But he was immediately embraced by one and all. His televised omnipresence amid the ruins of Lower Manhattan was seen as fearlessness.

Where was George Bush? The country saw the pictures of him that morning at Emma E. Booker Elementary School in Sarasota, where he was once again posing with schoolchildren to advertise his compassion. He visibly flinched

when his chief of staff, Andrew Card, interrupted his reading of "The Pet Goat" to second graders to whisper into his ear that a second plane had crashed into the South Tower. Some twenty minutes later, at 9:30, the president stood in front of a READ TO SUCCEED banner and appeared on television, declaring that "terrorism against our nation will not stand." What exactly happened in the eleven hours that followed was destined to remain a mystery.

When the president next popped up, it was midday, in a taped appearance from an air force base in Louisiana; in some of the networks' initial airings, the video and audio were disconcertingly subpar. Bush promised that America would "hunt down and punish those responsible for these cowardly acts," but he was the one who seemed on the run, like a panicked fugitive trying to elude authorities. Once more disappearing from view, he skedaddled by a roundabout route to another military base, in Omaha, where, the nation was informed, he led a National Security Council meeting by videophone from a bunker. He didn't resurface publicly again until 8:30 that night, when he materialized in the Oval Office to address the nation with pretty words composed by the same glib Hallmark-style poets who fashioned his alliterative campaign locutions. "These acts shattered steel, but they cannot dent the steel of American resolve," he said, sounding every bit as fake as Rudy sounded real.

During the course of the speech, he said, "Immediately following the first attack, I implemented our government's emergency response plans." But Bush's behavior that morning at the Florida school, in which he seemed in no rush to end his visit, belied his claim, which proved false.[1] He remained at the school altogether nearly an hour after the bulletins of the first jet hitting the World Trade Center. Months after 9/11, Bush would directly contradict his assertion that he had instantly implemented emergency plans after the first attack, telling interviewers that he had initially thought, as many Americans did, that the crash into the first tower was "pilot error," not an attack at all.[2]

September 11 was the first time since the British set fire to the White House in 1814 that a president abandoned the capital for security reasons. "Frankly, President Bush made an initial mistake," Boston University historian Robert Dallek told *USA Today*. "The president's place is back in Washington."[3] On the day the quote ran, September 12, Karl Rove took time out from his other pressing duties to call Dallek, whom he'd never met, to tell him that Bush did not return home right away because of threats to the White House and Air Force One.[4] But the White House did not provide any information to substantiate this claim, and, as Eric Alterman would later ask in *The Nation:* "If you think Air Force One is to be attacked, why go up in Air Force One?"[5]

Still, the administration had its 9/11 story and was sticking to it–with Rove making the same unsubstantiated claim to *The New Yorker* and Dick Cheney doing likewise with Tim Russert on *Meet the Press*. CBS News and the Associated Press would soon report that there had been no such threat. No matter. History would record the White House's account, whatever the facts. In Woodward's *Bush at War,* a year later, the scenario of an Air Force One threat surfaced again, once more on the authority of Cheney. In 2003, the scenario became a full-fledged Hollywood screenplay, for the first docudrama about 9/11. Many of the subsequent 9/11 movies would focus on the heroism of the passengers on Flight 93, who revolted against the hijackers and precipitated the plane's crash in Pennsylvania before it reached its Washington target. But not the first out of the box, Showtime's *DC 9/11: Time of Crisis*. It concentrated on the heroism of George W. Bush on Air Force One. The star was Timothy Bottoms–the same actor who less than two years earlier had been playing a cartoon version of the president in the short-lived Comedy Central satire *That's My Bush!* The new screen Bush was an unironic action-movie superhero.

There were no laughs in *DC 9/11,* or at least no intentional ones. Instead, the president could be found overruling his Secret Service detail and ordering his plane back to Washington on the fateful day when many Americans found him harder to find than Waldo. "If some tinhorn terrorist wants me, tell him to come and get me!" the on-screen Bush says. "I'll be at home, waiting for the bastard!" Lest the audience miss the point, he is also given lines like "The American people want to know where their damn president is!" and "People can't have an AWOL president!" Meanwhile, the rest of the White House team was portrayed as the very model of efficiency and derring-do, a tack also taken by Woodward's *Bush at War.* Even a nonentity like the transportation secretary, Norman Mineta (played by the actor best known as Sulu on *Star Trek*), came across so decisively he might be mistaken for Patton.

Unsurprisingly, *DC 9/11* was produced by Lionel Chetwynd, long known as the go-to conservative in B-list Hollywood. Somewhat more surprising was the ease with which official Washington and bona fide journalists were enlisted for this fictionalized effort. *The Washington Post* reported in a feature on the

making of the film that Chetwynd had access to top White House officials, Bush included, and also to "a group of conservative Washington pundits, including Fred Barnes, Charles Krauthammer and Morton Kondracke," who vetted the script.[6] In their non-Hollywood day jobs, these same pundits covered the administration for Fox News, *The Weekly Standard,* and, in Krauthammer's case, as a *Post* columnist. It was not disclosed if they were paid for their participation in what was unmistakably a propaganda effort on behalf of a sitting administration.

Three days after 9/11, Bush at last made his way to the smoking ruins of the Twin Towers. In the view of most, he found his voice the moment he picked up a bullhorn and promised the rescue workers at the site in blunt language that the terrorists would soon hear from America. The gesture seemed spontaneous in a way that Bush's controlled public appearances rarely were. He started to resemble the leader the nation was yearning for.

What wasn't clear was where he would lead the country. He wanted "evildoers" brought to justice. Invoking the parlance of a Steve McQueen TV Western of his adolescence, he wanted to hunt down and nab Osama bin Laden "dead or alive." But while polls showed that Americans overwhelmingly supported the idea of going to war, they didn't indicate whether Americans understood that idea. Who would fight and where? Would any kind of sacrifice be required?

On September 20, Bush addressed a joint session of Congress, in a speech that forsook his previous pulp-fiction bravado for substance. He started to make a case for what a war on terrorists might mean. He drew essential distinctions between "Islamic extremism" and Islam, between the Taliban and "Afghanistan's people," between a TV-ready war of "instant retaliation and isolated strikes" and "a lengthy campaign" whose clandestine operations might be "secret even in success."

BUT ALREADY the audience was drifting away. In the country beyond the stunned attack sites of New York and Washington, the old normal was quickly reasserting itself. So was the old culture. By late September, CNN's ratings had dropped 70 percent from their postattack peak. The prohibition on humor was ceremonially lifted when Giuliani participated in a gag that opened the September 29 edition of *Saturday Night Live.* Flanked by police officers and firemen, the show's producer, Lorne Michaels, asked the mayor, "Can we be funny?" With perfect timing and a Buster Keaton–esque poker face, Giuliani responded, "Why start now?" He brought down the house. The late-night talk shows, which had at first been shocked into playing host to pundits and Middle East experts, brought back their regular guests and opening monologues. It was safe for Jay Leno to deliver a joke linking Osama bin Laden to Anna Nicole Smith.

The time had come for the great commercial engine of the country to rev up again. Interspersed among television's dire reports of Wall Street bloodletting and widespread layoffs in 9/11-affected industries were immaculately produced black-and-white commercials in which corporations asserted their solidarity with the American spirit. In soulless emulation of the countless Americans who had raised a flag after the attacks, TV news stars also started marketing their patriotism: they kept sprouting more and more elaborate lapel effusions, some of them large enough to dwarf that of the country's commander in chief. At ABC News, where the thorny spirit of Peter Jennings prevailed, the lapel pins were soon forbidden. But when the news director at KOMU, an NBC affiliate run by faculty and students at the University of Missouri, announced a similar prohibition on journalistic grounds, a state legislator threatened to have lawmakers scrutinize the school's future budget requests. (The Missouri House voted to cut the station's budget by five hundred thousand dollars in April 2002.)[7] At the network level, NBC was particularly obsessive in its flag-waving. It outfitted its promotional peacock logo in stars and stripes and then affixed it with abandon to virtually every frame of its primetime schedule, assuring that even a doomed sitcom starring the celebrity chef Emeril Lagasse would be patriotically correct during its brief unhappy life. Rarely had there been such a persuasive argument for a constitutional amendment banning flag desecration.

A vocal but powerless antiwar left notwithstanding, nearly all Americans, liberals included, wanted to go after those who had perpetrated the 9/11 attacks. And in keeping with the president's September 20 speech warning against ill-planned "instant retaliation," much of the country was patient while the administration got its act together. During the 1990s boom, the citizenry had become addicted to instant gratification–and to a post–Gulf War military pol-

icy predicated on the slam-dunk idea of a silver bullet fired safely (and often indiscriminately) from on high, as if in a video game. Now it was willing to let the president take his time and choose his means of battle. Bush's poll numbers were in the stratosphere. Ryan Clark, a nineteen-year-old firefighter in Lewiston, Idaho, summed up the mood to a *New York Times*/CBS News pollster: "I would like to see quick justice, but if you jump the gun and attack the wrong person, it's not going to accomplish anything."[8]

If anyone was restless for action, it was Bush's own right flank. *National Review*'s Web edition disseminated a call from the professional provocateur Ann Coulter to invade the hijackers' countries, "kill their leaders and convert them to Christianity."[9] On the same day as the president's measured speech before Congress, a saber-rattling "open letter" signed by William Bennett, Richard Perle, Gary Bauer, and editors of *The New Republic* and *The Weekly Standard* threatened to brand the president a wimp–guilty of "surrender in the war on international terrorism"–should he buck their demand to make "a determined effort" to oust Saddam Hussein "even if evidence does not link Iraq directly to the attack."[10] These signatories and others on the right were so busy accusing Colin Powell of appeasement, because of his known reluctance to wage a new war against Saddam, that they failed to acknowledge that the Democratic leaders, Tom Daschle and Richard Gephardt, as well as Gore, were proving fiercely loyal to the administration.

Other conservatives wanted to make domestic political hay out of 9/11 while the ashes at Ground Zero were still hot. On Pat Robertson's daily television show, *The 700 Club*, Jerry Falwell said, "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.'" Robertson concurred, adding that "the problem is we have adopted that agenda at the highest levels of our government."[11]

These views, though disowned by some other conservative evangelical Christian leaders, were not out of step with the evangelicals' reading of the Bible; it was their deeply held belief that God would withdraw protection from nations that didn't honor His word. In its own pandering to this constituency, *The Wall Street Journal*'s editorial page suggested just eight days after 9/11 that

the president use his high poll ratings to push conservative judicial nominees of the Robertson-Falwell stripe through the Senate.[12]

That America's own homegrown admixture of fundamentalism and political paranoia could be Taliban-esque at its extremes was a point fundamentalist fellow travelers such as the Republican hierarchy, the Bush administration, and its press claque at Fox News and the *Journal* largely chose to ignore, if they noticed it at all. The philosophical similarities were not superficial. Sayyid Qutb, the Egyptian intellectual (1906–1966) whose writings were instrumental in formulating the radical, fundamentalist Islamism championed by Al Qaeda, had lived in the United States from 1948 to 1950, when he studied American education on a scholarship at what was then known as the Colorado State College of Education. His ruminations on his time in the town of Greeley were very much in the spirit of the Robertson-Falwell post-9/11 condemnation of American wantonness. Qutb condemned the open sexuality of "the American girl" and decried even a church-sponsored teenage dance for its atmosphere of "desire" as teenagers gyrated "to the tunes of the gramophone."[13]

But as powerful as Bush's own fundamentalist base could be, he put a distance between himself and the homegrown ayatollahs after 9/11 as he had not done in his Bob Jones excursion during the 2000 campaign. Almost immediately, the White House released a statement rejecting the Robertson-Falwell take on 9/11. Falwell had no choice but to beat a hasty and humiliating retreat, trying to eradicate evidence seen by the world on videotape by lamely accusing "news reports" of taking his words "out of their context." Similarly, Bush quickly disowned his early and inflammatory call for a "crusade" against terrorists and was almost slavishly PC in paying public respect to American Muslims. He ignored the *Journal*'s demand that he force right-wing judicial nominations through the Senate.

The White House jumped on its very few liberal critics at least as hard as it did on Falwell and Robertson. Dissent, it made plain, was a synonym for disloyalty. The first administration target was, of all people, a stand-up comic, Bill Maher, the host of the ABC late-night show *Politically Incorrect*. Maher had not directly criticized the government but had made the politically incorrect observation that the hijackers, who committed suicide while committing mass murder, were not cowardly compared with an America that thought it could strike back by launching cruise missiles at targets thousands of miles away. Ari Fleischer,

the White House press secretary, denounced Maher, issuing a general warning that in times like these "people need to watch what they say, watch what they do." An uproar ensued, and perhaps more intriguing than Fleischer's statement itself was the revelation that his veiled threat was mysteriously missing from the official transcript the White House later posted of his briefing. A Fleischer deputy explained that this strange elision had been an innocent mistake—"a transcription error." But it remained uncorrected for days.[14] *Politically Incorrect* was soon canceled by ABC.

The White House expected obedience not merely from entertainers but from the press—and mostly it got it. The post-9/11 presidential address to Congress was all it took for Washington to uncork a Hollywood fairy tale, or perhaps a Shakespearean one, in which the immature leader of September 10 was transformed overnight into a giant by a single scripted speech. (Cheney played Falstaff to Bush's Prince Hal.) The awestruck tone was set by David Broder of *The Washington Post,* the so-called dean of the capital press corps and the pacesetter for the city's conventional wisdom. His column was titled "Echoes of Lincoln."[15]

Press adulation was not all the White House wanted; it also wanted control. When the United States made its first strikes in Afghanistan in October, there were no pictures available—except from Aljazeera, the Arab network based in Qatar, whose live shots of nighttime antiaircraft fire around Kabul were conveyed on the American cable-news networks. It was also Aljazeera that, on the very first day of U.S. military action, broadcast a video in which Osama bin Laden threatened further terrorism. Bin Laden was preceded on-screen by his deputy, Ayman al-Zawahiri, who asked, "American people, can you ask yourselves why there is so much hate against America?"

To counteract this propaganda, America fashioned some of its own, even as it experimented with restricting information by canceling a routine daily Pentagon press briefing. The Defense Department's footage to networks included a hokey shot of the launch of a Tomahawk missile set against the backdrop of the American flag. Pilots from the first Afghanistan missions were made available to a pool of reporters. All their news from the front was good news. There were few means for verifying it. Once the bombing of Afghanistan began, press access to U.S. troops was restricted for months, so that Americans learned about even the war's red-letter events, like the fall of Mazar-i-Sharif,

only secondhand. At first no American reporter or anchor questioned the spoon-fed government handouts, though a Canadian Broadcasting Corporation reporter, speaking on his own network, was allowed a skeptical observation: "We've heard the Americans describe their missions before as a well-oiled machine and it turned out not to be the case."[16]

Having yet to bring bin Laden to justice either dead or alive, the White House tried another countermove: the president and other administration officials simply stopped mentioning the chief evildoer by name in all public statements. This lasted for all of three days in October, after which the White House slapped bin Laden with that most American form of capital punishment—kicking him off network television. Condoleezza Rice, the national security adviser, held a conference call with the top American network and cable news executives to ask that they no longer broadcast unedited bin Laden rants. She was worried that coded messages would reach Qaeda cells in the United States and incite Muslims to attack Americans in countries where the international incarnations of CNN and NBC were available. But what Rice mainly accomplished was inadvertently to send three not too successfully coded messages of her own: (1) that the administration entertained at least a passing fantasy that Al Qaeda, despite its access both to the Internet and to the Arabic superstation Aljazeera (then with 35 million viewers worldwide, 150,000 by dish and cable in the United States), could be disrupted by having its video kept off the likes of Fox; (2) that the administration's ambitions to manage the news knew no bounds; and (3) that the White House, like the rest of America, had been spooked by bin Laden and Zawahiri's almost instant rebuttal to President Bush as the war in Afghanistan began. Undaunted, the White House asked the same self-censorship of newspapers, requesting that they not publish transcripts of bin Laden's proclamations, for fear they might, in Ari Fleischer's words, find their way "into the hands of people who can read it and see something in it."

The same strictures applied abroad: Richard Boucher, a State Department spokesman, publicly chastised Voice of America for defying the department's request that it not broadcast a rare interview it had obtained with the Taliban leader, mullah Mohammad Omar. Though the mission of Voice of America is in part to demonstrate the value of a free press to societies that don't have one, State was more interested in dumbed-down propaganda with minimal journal-

istic content. To serve as undersecretary for public diplomacy, it recruited Charlotte Beers, a former chairwoman of the Madison Avenue giants Ogilvy & Mather and J. Walter Thompson, whose career triumphs included campaigns for Uncle Ben's rice and Head & Shoulders shampoo. In her government job, Beers eventually created a "Shared Values" campaign–slick videos featuring American Muslims talking about how wonderful their life in the United States was. The warm multicultural tableaux were reminiscent of testimonial commercials for new household cleaning products–or of the Bush presidential campaign's spots for No Child Left Behind. Many Arab nations refused to show the spots, complaining that they didn't address the most serious problem for America among Muslims–its policies in the Middle East.

Behind the scenes, even more ambitious efforts to manipulate public opinion both at home and abroad were quietly being set in motion. At the Pentagon, a covert Office of Strategic Influence (OSI), with a staff of fifteen, was established to plant helpful "news," some of it phony, with foreign media. The office was headed by Brigadier General Simon Worden of the air force, who reported to Douglas Feith, the undersecretary of defense for policy. Some of the operation's multimillion-dollar budget was going to outside contractors such as the Rendon Group, an international consulting firm in Washington whose clients had included the Central Intelligence Agency, the Kuwaiti royals, and the Iraqi National Congress, the anti-Hussein exile group headed by Ahmad Chalabi.[17]

The existence of the OSI became public just a few months later–in February 2002, when it was reported by *The New York Times*.[18] The *Times* learned that one military unit assigned to carry out the office's programs was the army's Psychological Operations command. In the ensuing debate, some of it taking place within the Pentagon, critics wondered if an American attempt to psych out foreign media with fake press releases and e-mails might backfire and antagonize U.S. allies. A week after the *Times* report on the office ran, Bush distanced himself from the OSI, and a day after that Rumsfeld said it was being "closed down," not so much as a matter of principle but because its clandestine work had been "damaged" by the revelation of its existence. Reports that its activities had merely been rerouted to other parts of the Pentagon bureaucracy persisted after its demise.

More blatant was the administration's plan to turn the war in Afghanistan

into a reality TV series. It gave the green light to Jerry Bruckheimer, the producer of the reality hit *The Amazing Race* and the movie blockbusters *Top Gun, Black Hawk Down,* and *Pearl Harbor,* to pursue an ABC prime-time series about the "compelling personal stories of the U.S. military men and women who bear the burden of the fighting."[19] Torie Clarke, the Defense Department PR chief, and Rear Admiral Craig Quigley, the chief flack with Central Command, promised Bruckheimer and his colleagues access to the troops, technical advice, and the use of aircraft carriers in exchange for the Pentagon's retention of the right to review all footage (exclusively for catching any security breaches, they said). This proximity to the war was a privilege generally denied to the news media. Just before the series was announced, one *Washington Post* reporter in Afghanistan wrote of having been held at gunpoint by American soldiers when he tried to get to the scene of a missile strike on suspected Qaeda fighters; he was told he would be shot if he pursued the story further.[20] The Pentagon tried to discredit the reporter's account, but the *Post* correspondent, Doug Struck, stood firm, saying that the Pentagon version of what went on (that he was being curtailed only for his own safety) was "an amazing lie" that "shows the extremes the military is going to to keep this war secret, to keep reporters from finding out what's going on."[21]

Understandably, given such restrictions on reporters, ABC's news division complained to its parent company, Disney, that it was unfair for an outside entertainment producer like Bruckheimer to be permitted to create a documentary about the war while actual correspondents were being shut out. But Disney stiffed its own journalists, much to the delight of the military. "There's a lot of other ways to convey information to the American people than through news organizations," Admiral Quigley said in defending his end run around the press. Bruckheimer had far more clout with this Pentagon than Peter Jennings, though not so much that he could save *Profiles from the Front Line* from almost instant oblivion in the Nielsen ratings when it finally aired a year later on the eve of another war, in February 2003. By then, the war in Afghanistan, forgotten though not gone, was yesterday's news.

THE AFGHANISTAN WAR was branded "America's New War" by CNN, and Americans were on board. Polls showed that 94 percent of Americans sup-

ported the war, with even a presumed bastion of leftism like the Harvard student body proving pro-war by more than two to one. The very few who had anything critical to say on the subject were greeted with such a disproportionate avalanche of invective that you would hardly guess that Susan Sontag, Bill Maher, and Noam Chomsky were a writer, a late-night comic, and a linguistics professor—Americans with less clout and a smaller following than a substitute weatherman on the *Today* show. The similarly overheated rage from the angry right about pacifists on and off college campuses suggested that there was a large and serious antiwar movement afoot to rival that of the Vietnam sixties. There wasn't, not even remotely.

You had to wonder if those in and around the administration who protested the minuscule protests against the war were protesting too much. They sometimes sounded as if they had something to cover up. And maybe they did. Giving a first progress report on the war at a press conference in the early going, Bush found solid advances on every single front, without a single setback, not even a minor one, of any kind.

But there were already glitches too visible to ignore in the sweeping war on terror. The first sign was the anthrax scare. It had begun on October 4, when news broke that a Florida man had contracted pulmonary anthrax, which Tommy Thompson, the secretary of health and human services, instantly dismissed as "an isolated case" that was "not contagious" and was most likely environmental in origin. "We do know that he drank water out of a stream when he was traveling to North Carolina last week," the secretary said during a White House briefing. The victim died the following day, but it wasn't for another week, as anthrax proliferated at the Boca Raton offices of American Media, a tabloid publisher, on its way north to congressional offices on Capitol Hill and high-powered media towers in New York, that it dawned on the White House that the crisis had nothing to do with streams in North Carolina. Once it belatedly realized that, in essence, another terrorist attack was under way, the administration's first impulse was not to secure as much Cipro as speedily as possible to protect Americans, but to protect the right of pharmaceutical companies to profiteer by refusing to break Bayer AG's patent and authorize other drug companies to produce generic versions of the drug.[22] Even as Washington fell into panic after anthrax turned up in the office of the Democratic leader

Tom Daschle, Bush said little about it, delegating the problem to ineffectual Cabinet members like Thompson and the attorney general, John Ashcroft.

The rank incompetence of these two Cabinet secretaries, at most thinly disguised by a veneer of supercilious officiousness, was farcical. They were Keystone Kops in the costumes of bureaucrats, ready at any time to slip on a banana peel. Thompson came across as a chamber of commerce glad-hander who didn't know his pants were on fire, and Ashcroft often shook as if he'd just seen not only great Caesar's ghost but perhaps John Mitchell's as well. In his disregard for the law, Ashcroft often did seem determined to emulate the Watergate-era attorney general, though on a grander scale. It wasn't enough for Congress to enhance his antiterrorist legal arsenal legitimately by passing the USA Patriot Act before most of those on the Hill had taken the time or the trouble to read it; the attorney general changed other rules without consulting senators or congressmen of either party at all. He abridged by decree the Freedom of Information Act, an essential check on government misbehavior during peace and war alike, and discreetly slipped into the Federal Register a new directive allowing eavesdropping on conversations between some lawyers and clients.[23] If the administration was really proud of grabbing "emergency" powers at wartime, why was it doing so in the dead of night? Ashcroft refused repeated requests to explain himself before congressional committees. At one House briefing where he did show up, he told congressmen they could call an 800 number if they had any questions about what his department was up to.[24]

What was known was far from encouraging. Eight former FBI officials, including a former director, William Webster, went on the record to criticize Ashcroft's post-9/11 blanket arrests—not because they violated civil liberties but because they violated law-enforcement common sense. By nabbing possible terrorists prematurely, the government may have lost the ability to track them as they implicated the rest of their cells. Of the nine hundred known suspects rounded up since 9/11, none had been criminally charged in the World Trade Center attack. Another Ashcroft brainstorm—an attempt to interview five thousand Middle Eastern men around the United States—was widely ridiculed by FBI veterans, too. (Not one of them would ever be convicted of a terrorist offense.)[25] Kenneth Walton, who established the Bureau's first Joint Terrorism Task Force in New York, said, "It's the Perry Mason school of law enforcement,

where you get them in there and they confess. . . . It is ridiculous."[26] Most of the invited interviewees were not turning up anyway, and those who did needed only reply by rote to yes or no questions from a four-page script.

Ashcroft's Justice Department seemed to be squandering time and resources on wild-goose chases that pumped up arrest numbers without making any progress on tracking down terrorists, including those who had so effectively peppered scattered high-profile sites with anthrax. A month after the first anthrax case, the FBI still hadn't located all the American labs that legally handled anthrax, let alone any suspects in the anthrax attacks.[27]

But Ashcroft had been zealous and then some about warning of other terrorism attacks while the anthrax threat was proceeding under his nose. The first alert of a probable new attack was issued two weeks after 9/11. On the first-month anniversary of 9/11, the attorney general and the FBI warned again that new attacks by terrorists either in America or overseas might happen in the "next several days." Bush endorsed this alert, but neither he nor anyone else in the government explained how serious the threat was or what form it might take or where it might happen. The president told Americans "to go about their lives, to fly on airplanes, to travel, to go to work" regardless. On October 29, there was yet another grave alert from Ashcroft, who said that there were terrorist attacks planned against the United States in the next week, though the intelligence did "not contain specific information as to the type of attack or specific targets."

When no attacks occurred, Ashcroft was eager to pat himself on the back for combating them. On November 8, he announced that "the home front has witnessed the opening battle in the war against terrorism, and America has emerged victorious." His evidence for this victory was that "two periods of extremely high threat have passed" without anything happening–though both these periods of high threat were entirely on his say-so. But his boss knew that America needed a pep talk from a leader who inspired more confidence than his attorney general, who seemed to regard battling terrorism as a part-time job. (He was simultaneously freelancing another initiative, the prosecution of doctors assisting the suicides of the terminally ill in Oregon.) So, on the same night that Ashcroft declared victory in the war against terrorism in the capital, the president gave a prime-time speech in Atlanta, calling for the creation of a volunteer civil-defense service and a larger National Guard presence at airports.

Bush stood before a backdrop emblazoned with the slogan UNITED WE STAND and with pictures of America's new heroes, police officers and rescue workers. His speech ended with the exhortation "Let's roll!"–then thought to be the final words of Todd Beamer, a passenger who helped lead the revolt against the 9/11 hijackers on Flight 93.

Eventually the 9/11 Commission would discover that the actual words spoken (not necessarily Beamer's) were "roll it"–perhaps referring to an airplane service cart that the passengers hoped they might use to smash their way into the cockpit. But the number of Americans who heard Bush appropriate "Let's roll!" as an applause line was diminished anyway; only one of the four networks, the one with ratings in the toilet (ABC), interrupted regular programming for his speech. The other three reverted instead to the old normal: *Family Guy, Friends,* and *Survivor 3.* Later that night, CBS at last aired an episode of its CIA drama *The Agency,* which had twice been postponed that fall for fear it would upset the audience. In the can well before 9/11, it predicted an anthrax attack on Washington well before anyone in the government had awakened to that possibility.

BY THEN the Taliban government of Afghanistan had collapsed–a cause for thanksgiving as Thanksgiving approached. Though some skeptical journalists had seen some early signs of a Vietnam-like quagmire, the American public had remained united and resolute. A *Los Angeles Times* poll found that even Democrats supported Bush by a four-to-one margin, as if bitter memories of the Florida recount and its aftermath had been eviscerated. Yet for a country incessantly declaring itself to be at war, the country often didn't seem to be at war. Asked if the American people had to make any sacrifices to defeat terrorism, the only one the president could come up with was longer lines at the airport. His most frequent peroration to the home front was to take more vacations, a cause he believed in so fervently that he lent his image to a TV ad sponsored by the Travel Industry Association of America.[28] As long as we took time off to spend more money, all would be well. No higher calling was necessary.

It was a lost opportunity. After 9/11, the many Americans not in uniform came together, eager to be part of a national mobilization even if they weren't

about to enlist themselves. But because there was a vacuum of leadership in defining what form that patriotism might take, the initial national impulse started to diminish. The farther away Americans were from 9/11, both in time and geography, the faster it faded. Or became a brand, ready to do its American duty and move product. Ground Zero soon had its own viewing stand, with vendors selling souvenirs and long lines like those for Space Mountain at Disneyland. When TV correspondents came down to sample the bustling scene, visitors waved and smiled at the camera just as they did uptown at the *Today* show. For the Christmas season, Barnes & Noble offered competing coffee-table books handsomely packaging the carnage of just months before. On Gary Condit's Web site, a snapshot of the congressman's own visit to Ground Zero was posted to help sell his (doomed) reelection campaign. "Portraits of Grief," a popular daily feature in which *The New York Times* profiled the dead of 9/11, was retired at the New Year. In almost a gesture of nostalgia, *Time* magazine picked not George W. Bush or Osama bin Laden as its Person of the Year but Rudy Giuliani, already moving out of the spotlight along with the day that won him American hearts.

The new patriotism boosting America's waning new war often proved to be little more than vicarious patriotism reminiscent of the pre-9/11 fetishism of the greatest generation. While Americans applauded the selfless men and women in uniform, whether at Ground Zero or in battle, we could rest assured that the all-volunteer army would take care of everything. We didn't have to do our part, whatever that part was. There was no incentive to reduce the nation's dependence on the oil from the country that had nurtured most of the hijackers, Saudi Arabia, no interest in Washington in revisiting a $1.35 trillion, ten-year tax cut to find the serious money needed to underwrite a long-term war effort. Supporting the war by plastering flags on a gas-guzzling foreign car, Bill Maher observed, was "literally the least you can do." And we leapt at that option.

While the administration hadn't harnessed the post-9/11 outpouring of national unity to a war effort, it nonetheless wanted the country's war mood to remain at full throttle. As long as terror still lurked, the White House argued, legal superpowers would be required to vanquish the shadowy enemy. To the White House, the other two branches of government, the judicial and the legislative, were just too feckless and untrustworthy to do their part in the battle

between good and evil. And so, even as we were tracking down a heinous enemy, Osama bin Laden, who operated out of a cave, our government started moving our own legal system into a cave of sorts.

Bush issued an executive order to set up military tribunals in which neither the verdicts, evidence, nor punishments ever had to be revealed to the public. Ashcroft refused to identify detainees or explain why they were being held or even to provide an accurate count of the detainee population. The attorney general's stated motive for this secrecy was to prevent Al Qaeda from learning if any of its operatives might be locked up, as if the enemy were not cunning enough to figure out on its own which members might have been apprehended (if any). Ashcroft's legal argument was that existing law prevented him from giving out this information, but then his own deputy pointed out that the detainees had the right to publicize their names on their own, through their family or counsel. After much public criticism, Ashcroft relented and released some of the names he had so strenuously withheld. In keeping with his less-than-inspiring public image, he seemed to lack even the courage of his own wrong convictions.

Testifying before the Senate in December, Ashcroft grew defensive. He unveiled a new strategy to deflect critics of his high-handed legal actions—and by implication laid out a way to ward off critics of the administration in general. Those who challenged his policies, he declared, would "only aid terrorists" and "give ammunition to America's enemies." It was hard to know whom he was talking about. The only prominent traitors in sight were the usual civil-liberties watchdogs and a milquetoast legislator or two barely known beyond the Beltway or their own constituencies. Polls found the public squarely on the attorney general's side, and even the few pundits who dared knock him were ridiculed by their journalistic colleagues as hysterics so busy fussing about civil liberties that they had forgotten that "there's a war going on." But a line had been drawn: Americans who were not "with" the administration might just be "with" the terrorists. When Tom Daschle had opposed oil drilling in the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge that fall, an administration ally, the Family Research Council, ran ads in Daschle's home state of South Dakota likening him to Saddam Hussein.[29] The Republican leader Trent Lott would later codify this genre of attack: "How dare Senator Daschle criticize President Bush while we are fighting our war on terrorism?"[30] The new year would soon bring negative TV

and radio ads in which firefighters and flags were used as props and incumbent Senate Democrats were demonized as partisans who would "put their interests ahead of national interests."

THE THRUST of a war against terrorism going forward was becoming blurry, however, now that the Taliban had been routed. But shortly after the early-November fall of Kabul a new definition started to come hazily into view. Appearing in the White House Rose Garden for a brief post-Thanksgiving ceremony featuring two American aid workers who had been rescued in Afghanistan, Bush said that "Afghanistan is still just the beginning" of the war, and that if leaders in Iraq developed "weapons of mass destruction that will be used to terrorize nations, they will be held accountable." Hardly had the event ended than the press noted that the president's words were his first direct mention that Iraq might be a new battleground. Ari Fleischer quickly put out the fire. "It's nothing new," the White House press secretary said. "The president is focusing on Afghanistan."

Two weeks later Cheney picked up the subject of Iraq again, this time on *Meet the Press*, where he revised comments he had made to Tim Russert on the subject the first weekend after 9/11. Back then, Russert had asked the vice president about the 9/11 attacks: "Do we have any evidence linking Saddam Hussein or Iraqis to this operation?" The answer was a flat no. Now, on December 9, Cheney spoke of a new development "since you and I last talked, Tim." The vice president said that "it's been pretty well confirmed" that one of the 9/11 hijackers, Mohamed Atta, went to Prague and met "with a senior official of the Iraqi intelligence service in Czechoslovakia last April, several months before the attack."

Soon after Cheney asserted this 9/11-Iraq connection, *The New York Times* ran a front-page article by Judith Miller under the headline "SECRET SITES; Iraqi Tells of Renovations at Sites for Chemical and Nuclear Arms." The December 20, 2001, story began: "An Iraqi defector who described himself as a civil engineer said he personally worked on renovations of secret facilities for biological, chemical and nuclear weapons in underground wells, private villas and under the Saddam Hussein Hospital in Baghdad as recently as a year ago." The defector, Adnan Ihsan Saeed al-Haideri, spoke to Miller in an interview

arranged in Bangkok by the Iraqi National Congress, the Iraqi opposition group headed by Ahmad Chalabi and funded by the Rendon Group.[31]

Once the American invasion of Iraq began in 2003, other journalists, including Seymour Hersh of *The New Yorker*, would raise serious doubts about this defector's claims. But in truth the CIA had known that al-Haideri was suspect from the start—he had flunked a CIA lie-detector test three days before the Miller article appeared. Or so it would be reported by Jonathan S. Landay of Knight Ridder,[32] some two and a half years after Miller's front-page scoop gave such scary evidence of the threat posed by Saddam Hussein's weapons of mass destruction as Christmas approached in 2001.