



“Just Out Looking for a Fight”: American Affect and the Invasion of Iraq

Gearóid Ó Tuathail (Gerard Toal)

Government and International Affairs, Virginia Tech, Alexandria,
VA 22314, USA; toalg@vt.edu

It brought tears to the eyes of Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld, a man not known for sensitivity. The trigger was not pain for the estimated 10,000 Iraqi fighters and 2,000 civilians killed in the recent war he commanded. Rather, a red-eyed Secretary Rumsfeld removed his glasses and wiped tears from his eyes as country-and-western singer Darryl Worley (2003) crooned “Have You Forgotten?” to Pentagon personnel at a concert a week after the fall of Baghdad (Kozaryn 2003). Worley wrote the song after entertaining American troops in Afghanistan and the Middle East in late 2002. The song begins:

I hear people saying we don't need this war
I say there's some things worth fighting for
What about our freedom and this piece of ground?
We didn't get to keep 'em by backing down
They say we don't realize the mess we're getting in
Before you start preaching
Let me ask you this my friend

And then the first chorus begins:

Have you forgotten how it felt that day,
To see your homeland under fire,
And her people blown away?

Worley's song was at the top of the country charts at that moment.¹ Speaking before Rumsfeld, Joint Chiefs chair General Myers and other Pentagon notables, Worley explained that he wanted to “bring some honor and respect” to the American troops fighting for freedom across the globe. “Now, it's been called a pro-war song. If that means that I support my president and the conflict that we just took care of over there, then I guess that's what it is if that's what it has to be. But it's a whole lot more to me. It's a pro-America song. It's a pro-military

song.” The crowd cheered and hollered while Secretary Rumsfeld welled up (Kozaryn 2003).

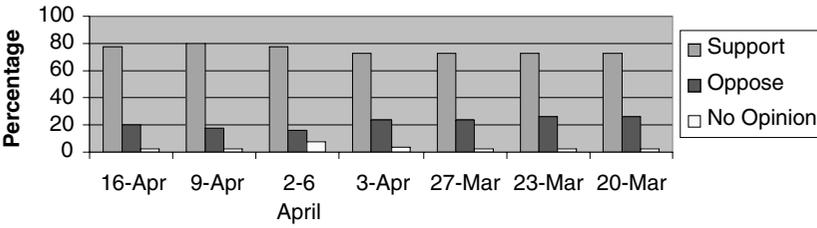
The world’s most powerful military is today led by a cabal of restless nationalists immersed in an anti-intellectual culture of affect and aggressive militarism. Although the secular Iraqi regime of Saddam Hussein had no connection to the 9/11 attacks, was condemned by Osama bin Laden, and was deterred from using weapons of mass destruction, it was the object of a “pre-emptive war” made possible by their channeling of the public affect unleashed by 9/11. In the geopolitical window of opportunity generated by September 11, 2001, the Bush administration interpreted the attacks in a sweeping, simplistic, and politically opportunistic manner, and after a brief war against Afghanistan, turned its “war against terrorism” into a campaign against the regime of Saddam Hussein. This regime has been overthrown, but the “war on terror” continues, and promises to shape future geopolitics and the next important campaign—the re-election of George W Bush in 2004.

The manipulation of public outrage at the terrorist attacks of September 11 to support an illegal invasion of Saddam Hussein’s Iraq has not been easy. After beginning with an extraordinary degree of international sympathy and support—a product of the “pain projection” capacity of American television networks—the Bush administration’s response to 9/11 managed to alienate much of the international public. The “war against Iraq as a war against terrorism” had dubious policy coherence, questionable national-security rationale, and thin support on the United Nations (UN) Security Council. The geopolitical discourse of the Bush administration, the veracity of its claims, and the legitimacy of its actions were widely questioned and challenged. Millions of people across the world protested the imminent war with Iraq in the early months of 2003. Yet, despite the hard—and unsuccessful—sell internationally, domestic public-opinion polls indicated that the war against Iraq attracted support from the majority of the American public (see Table 1). Worley’s song provides a clue to explaining this disjuncture between prevailing international sentiment and majority American opinion: “Some say this country’s just out looking for a fight/After 9/11, man, I’d have to say that’s right.”

The Power of Affect: 9/11 as “Somatic Marker”

William Connolly (2002) draws attention to the power and significance of affect in understanding the multilayered nature of human thinking and, by extension, political behavior such as waging wars. Drawing upon contemporary research in neurophysiology, Connolly (2002) notes how human thought is, not merely representational, but “enactive,” meaning it is made possible by a level constituted through biophysical encounters and negotiation with the world. This process of encounter

Table 1: US Public Opinion on Iraq War



Source: ABC News/*Washington Post* poll, 16 April 2003, of 504 adults nationwide, with a margin of error of $\pm 4.5\%$ (PollingReport.com 2003c).

mixes the cultural into the corporal to create a “somatic marker,” what Connolly (2002:35) defines as “a culturally mobilized, corporeal disposition through which affect-imbued, preliminary orientations to perceptions and judgment scale down the material factored into cost-benefit analyses, principled judgments, and reflective experiments.” Put differently, a somatic marker is an organizing and categorizing capacity that sets the ground for higher-order “deliberative thinking.” Operating below the threshold of reflection and structured by affect-saturated memory and “gut feelings,” it simplifies and speeds the process of calculative reasoning so that every decision is relatively instantaneous, rather than a rational-choice marathon. Neither wholly cultural nor biophysical but the mixing of the latter into the former, somatic markers are intersubjective structures of affect and memory. Connolly (2002:35) writes:

When European Jews went through the Holocaust, for instance, the trauma left effects on several layers of collective experience. The term *Holocaust* became a way to draw up those memories, both virtually in the course of action and in explicit recollection. The term both calls up complex memories on the higher, linguistic register and taps into the visceral dimension of the trauma, an intense set of feelings that gather in the gut, the muscles, and the pallor of the skin. When people with such intense collective memories face new circumstances that trigger them, a set of dispositions to perception, feeling, interpretation, and action are called into play. Media such as TV and film, as they mix music, background sounds, words and visual images together, are particularly adept at invoking such dispositions, and also at working upon them.

In contemporary America, “9/11” has become an obsessive collective experience of trauma and loss, its pain projected to the world by American media networks as it happened and repetitively looped into the public mind in the weeks and months afterwards. Partially captured on video camera, the terrorist attacks that day spawned a blitzkrieg of

multimedia cultural productions: dramatic visual footage, poignant still photography, eyewitness experiences, spectacles of catastrophe, “portraits of grief,” and endless television programs, newspapers articles, movies, documentaries, theatrical plays and, of course, songs and music. Millions of Americans experienced the events of 9/11 in a visceral way and processed them in a personalized mix of the cultural and the corporal. Seventy-four percent of Americans polled the night of the attacks viewed the events of 9/11 as “a turning point that will fundamentally change things forever.”² All across the United States, millions felt a deep need to display an American flag in their community, on their houses, their cars, and their clothes, and at their places of work. Bridges and buildings were festooned with flags and handmade banners with messages such as “God Bless America,” “United We Stand” and “Still Standing Tall.” All of the main highway bridges in the Washington, DC metro area, for example, had handmade banners and flags affixed to them for months following the attacks. Over time, these banners faded, but the desire for public patriotic display remains intense. Convenience stores offer adhesive American flags, hand-sized flags, and flag lapels at their checkout counters. Key stores offer “patriotic” keys in the colors of the American flag, while the state of Virginia now offers customized automobile and motorcycle number plates depicting an American flag with the legend “9-11-01” above it, enframed within a Pentagon shape. On the right are the initials FT, and at the base the meaning is spelt out: “Fight Terrorism.”

Not everyone, of course, participates in this mass patriotic performance. Adhesive flags, patriotic keys, and “Fight Terrorism” license plates are more likely to be found on relatively affluent sports-utility vehicles in the Washington suburbs than in the marginalized quadrants of the District of Columbia, where African-Americans and immigrant Latinos predominate. Nevertheless, the affective tsunami unleashed by the terrorist attacks of 2001 is a broad and deep one that has set down a powerful somatic marker for most Americans. “9/11” is its shorthand, a phrase that has instant meaning for millions of Americans but more estranged resonance overseas. The calendar digits memorialize a moment in time that has become an affect-imbued memory bank for the media and political class in the United States and, consequently, for the media-incited nation. 9/11 is the somatic pivot of geopolitics in contemporary America, a memory that necessitates and justifies a radical “down-scaling” of the world into infantile categories and identities: “good” versus “evil,” “civilization” and “freedom” versus a cartoon world of “evildoers,” “terrorists,” and storybook characters described in presidential speeches as “the dictator” and “the tyrant.” The somatic marker is a domain of resentment and desire, the desire to avenge the symbolic castrating of America’s power and profile on September 11, the desire to affirm that America “still stands tall,” the

desire to appear “powerful,” “resolute,” and “dominant” amidst swirling questions of legitimacy (from Florida in 2000 to the Security Council in 2003), economic weakness (from the dot.com crash to corporate scandals and rising unemployment), and risk society (from airline safety to anthrax and nuclear proliferation). The Bush administration’s political processing of 9/11 has deepened the disposition of many Americans to view certain regions, peoples, and faiths as hostile. With presidential help, it has generated interpretations of those resistant to American pre-eminence in the world as either “terrorists” and “tyrants” or those, such as the French government in the Security Council, who indirectly give them “aid and comfort.” For many in the political class and beyond, 9/11 is a somatic marker that overpowers deliberative discourse and rational discussion. “French fries” become “freedom fries.” Affect-imbued down-scaling and imperial desire fuel impatience with debate and dissent. “Enough is enough.” What is required is action, not words.

Affect and the Jacksonian Geopolitical Tradition

This affect-fueled desire for revenge and muscular reassertionism in the wake of 9/11 is not a new phenomenon in American political life. During the Iranian hostage crisis of 1979–1980, similar desires and a comparable down-scaling of geopolitical reasoning swept America. A Texas band called Vince Vance and the Valiants gave voice to popular sentiments with its song “Bomb Iran,” recorded to the tune of the Beach Boys’ “Barbara Ann.” Presidential candidate Ronald Reagan mobilized and channeled popular resentments to take the White House in 1980. Popular chauvinism, Manichean geopolitics, and imperial fantasies of military strength and renewal were the order of the day.

American geopolitical culture is best conceptualized as triangulated between universalism (America as the world), regionalism (America as an exceptional sphere) and ignorance (a lack of knowledge about the rest of the world). Reagan’s close electoral victory in 1980 and the unprecedented “election” of George W Bush twenty years later owed much to the mobilization of a particularly powerful tradition in American geopolitical culture, which Walter Russell Mead (2001) delimits as “Jacksonian.” Mead identifies four different geopolitical traditions—Hamiltonian, Wilsonian, Jeffersonian, and Jacksonian—and argues that the practices of American foreign policy contain elements of each. Reagan and Bush, in their rhetoric and policies, articulate elements of all four traditions, but they draw their base political support from a Jacksonian tradition of popular aggressive nationalism. For Jacksonians, America is idealized as a “folk community with a strong sense of common values and common destiny” (Mead 2001: 226). Traced by some to the values and traditions of the Scotch-Irish

in the American South, the Christian morality and gun-owning culture of Jacksonianism is found throughout the United States. "Like country music, another product of Jacksonian culture, Jacksonian politics and folk feeling have become a basic element in American consciousness that can be found from one end of the country to the other" (Mead 2001:227). Jacksonian values include self-reliance, individualism, and personal dignity. Military service is held to be a sacred duty. There is a strong distinction between those inside the "homeland" and those considered "outsiders." Insiders are entitled to respect and honor, while outsiders are not entitled to any rights until they demonstrate themselves as having the same moral character as insiders.

Affect, not intellect, is central to the Jacksonian tradition, conditioned as it is by weekly affective preaching. For Mead, Jacksonianism is an amorphous set of feelings and dispositions. It is, he (2001:226) notes, "neither an ideology or a self-conscious movement with a clear historical direction or political table of organization." Rather "Jacksonian political philosophy is often an instinct rather than an ideology, a culturally shaped outlook that the individual may not have worked out intellectually, a set of beliefs and emotions rather than a set of ideas" (Mead 2001:244). Jacksonianism celebrates experience over "learning," "community" over "elites," and corporal feeling over intellectual capability. Its vision of community emerges from and depends upon a "popular culture of equality and honor," rather than flowing out of "abstract principles or written documents" (Mead 2001:236).

"Honor and respect" are two core Jacksonian values that are "enactive," rather than representational. In evoking the organic folk community under attack in "Have You Forgotten," Worley understands his performances as enacting "honor and respect." The international dimensions of the attack—that it was an attack on a "World Trade" Center, on a global symbol in a global city that took the lives of people from 86 different nations—are ignored. The event is thoroughly Americanized, its pain the monopoly of the insider homeland community (even though this "country" homeland community often delimits its own virtue in opposition to the "corruption" of cities like New York and Washington). Outsiders do not understand because they were not attacked, or so goes the reasoning. The attackers were cowards bereft of honor, the rescuers heroes deserving celebration and remembrance. Writing well before the attacks, Mead (2001:246) notes: "Jacksonians believe there is an honor code in international life ... and those who live by the code will be treated under it. But those who violate the code, who commit terrorist acts against innocent civilians in peacetime, for example, forfeit its protection and deserve no more consideration than rats." The terrorist attacks demonstrated contempt for America and its military might. Mead (2001:231–232) writes, "Jacksonian

honor must be acknowledged by the outside world. One is entitled to, and demands, the appropriate respect: recognition of rights and just claims, acknowledgment of one's personal dignity. Many people in the United States will still fight, sometimes with weapons, when they feel that they have not been treated with the proper respect."

Within this quick-draw, personal-to-the-geopolitical culture, America was defiled and disrespected by the 9/11 attacks. In the affect-fueled culture of Jacksonianism, this disrespect requires immediate redress. Response should not be restrained by intellectual qualifications, qualms or limits. Problems are often complex, but in the Jacksonian world solutions are simple and direct. There, the binary logic of religious morality provides a virtuous compass for navigating world affairs, as do fantasies of colonial frontier governmentality. There is "true evil" in the world, people "who hate the United States of America." Osama bin Laden is "wanted, dead or alive." "Good people" need to "stand up and be counted." The "civilized world" needs to hunt down "outlaws," to "smoke them out" from their hiding places. The "rule of law" must triumph over the "law of the jungle." Again writing well before the Iraq war, Mead (2001:246) summarizes this deeply imperial Jacksonian disposition thus: "The United States must be vigilant, strongly armed. Our diplomacy must be cunning, forceful, and no more scrupulous than any other country's. At times we must fight preventative wars. There is absolutely nothing wrong with subverting foreign governments or assassinating foreign leaders whose bad intentions are clear." Such Jacksonian sentiments, of course, rationalize international aggression and imperialist violence as necessary, moral, and even civilizing. The White House's favorite Orientalist, Bernard Lewis, among others, provided regional verification for the application of such reasoning toward Iraq, telling the White House in December 2001 that "[N]othing matters more than resolute will and force" in that part of the world (Lemann 2002).

George W Bush: Enactive Jacksonian Affect

The presidency of Ronald Reagan articulated and expressed many of the elements of the Jacksonian tradition. George W Bush's presidency similarly articulates these elements, though in a different manner (Keller 2002). Whereas Reagan was a "great communicator" who could mobilize and articulate the inchoate reservoir of Jacksonian feelings and instincts with eloquence and skill, Bush has his struggles with language and higher-order conceptualization. Yet Bush is effective, first, because his discourse and policies are products of careful political research on "value structures"—which, for most, are somatic, rather than deliberative—and second, because he has mastered the art of delivering a speech scripted to elicit and mobilize affect. Bush's intellectual shortcomings also give him authenticity with some. The frat-boy smirk

has been replaced by a more presidential smile (though it sometimes slips). With the corporal self-confidence of an athlete, the swagger of privileged Texas masculinity (dressed in cowboy fantasies), and the self-righteousness of a mind unburdened by intellectualism, George W Bush enacts contemporary Jacksonian affect.

A defining moment in Bush's presidency was at the so-called Ground Zero site in Manhattan, when, before a crowd of firefighters and rescue workers chanting "USA! USA!", Bush placed his arm around a firefighter and took a bullhorn. He instinctively nationalized, Christianized, and Americanized the event, declaring "America today is on bended knee in prayer for the people whose lives were lost here ... as we mourn the loss of thousands of our citizens." Amidst cries from the crowd that he was not being heard, he ad-libbed the response, "I can hear you. The rest of the world hears you" (cheers and roars). Then, pointing his finger, he added: "And the people who knocked these buildings down will hear all of us soon." Overwhelming cheering and roaring greeted these remarks. Guttural gorilla yelps and spontaneous renewed chants of "USA! USA!" echoed around Bush as he hoisted and waived a miniature American flag, the Jacksonian everyman leader amidst the angry and aroused masculine nation.³ A member of the crowd yelled out "God bless America," and Bush ended by repeating this mantra in a gesture that reiterated the Christianizing and Americanizing claims over the meaning of the attacks.⁴ Two days later, Bush ad-libbed that the war was a "crusade" (Bush 2001).

What 9/11 enabled is the triumph of affect over intellect in American foreign policy. The US decision to go to war with Iraq was remarkable for the incoherence, inconsistency, and illegitimacy that dogged it. Bush and his cabinet authorized planning for the war on 17 September 2001, but the decision was a subsidiary part of a broader "war against terror" that had as its immediate priority the overthrow of the Taliban regime in Afghanistan (Kessler 2003). As is well documented, a cabal of neoconservatives within the administration successfully marginalized State Department objections to the war and convinced Vice President Dick Cheney and President Bush of its merits (Thomas 2003). Enactive affect, however—not intellectual rigor or persuasive force—enabled the policy to succeed. Bush embraced the role of "wartime leader" and developed a providential sense of duty and destiny. In Bob Woodward's *Bush At War* (2002), the president is portrayed as an active and proudly decisive leader barking out orders to his cabinet officials. Woodward (Woodward 2002, 99) describes Bush's position on Saddam Hussein's Iraq at the 17 September meeting:

As for Saddam Hussein, the president ended the debate. "I believe Iraq was involved, but I'm not going to strike them now. I don't have

the evidence at this point.” Bush said he wanted them to keep working on plans for military action in Iraq but indicated there would be plenty of time to do that. Everything else, though, had to be done soon. “Start now,” the president said. “It’s very important to move fast. This is the new way.”

The triumph of affect over intellect is marked by the desire to attack Iraq even though there is not convincing evidence for doing so. Intellectual deliberation and policy credibility take a back seat to “instinctive” convictions and prejudgments. Saddam Hussein is an “evildoer,” and in the down-scaled world of affect, this alone justifies “regime change.” Furthermore, everything has to be done quickly. There is an overwhelming desire to demonstrate action, to show the world that America is responding to the attacks that surprised it.

Even intellectuals in the Bush administration, such as Condoleezza Rice, justify this triumph of affect as a form of intellectual clarity. Interviewed about Bush’s reasoning, Rice noted: “Many people are much more comfortable with on-the-one-hand-on-the-other-hand explanations. But there are very often cases where there are not arguments on both sides. And I think President Bush has been pretty willing, when that is the case, to speak in black-and-white terms” (Keller 2002). Bush is not a Protestant preacher president, but the binary logic of religious discourse imposed upon a chaotic world appears to be a somatic comfort zone for him—one perhaps learnt from the experience of his own body’s struggle to defeat alcoholism (Keller 2003).

The “Bait and Switch”

In Woodward’s *Bush at War* (2002), he represents Secretary of State Colin Powell as a figure who argued against an immediate invasion of Iraq in response to 9/11 (the argument had been made forcefully by Assistant Secretary of Defense Paul Wolfowitz). He (2002:87) attributes to Powell the argument that America’s allies will “view it as bait-and-switch—it’s not what they signed up to do.” Powell feared that the Bush administration would be accused of promising a war against the terrorists responsible for 9/11 but delivering something completely different—namely, an invasion of the sovereign state of Iraq. His fears later proved well grounded, but the marketing campaign for the Iraq invasion was delayed, not defeated, by Powell’s argument. Indeed, Powell would play an instrumental role before the UN Security Council in the sales campaign.

The public relations strategy for the invasion of Iraq required a certain set of (con)fusions of the specific and the general. First, rather than 9/11 being interpreted as a unique event requiring a specific law-and-order response targeted at the perpetrators, the attacks were

immediately subjected to a series of category inflations, scalar jumps, and hyperbolic extrapolations. The attacks were “an act of war”; consequently, America was now “at war” and George W Bush a “wartime president.” The very situation description “war” and its wide circulation had the political effect of constituting the terror attacks as existential threats, though they were clearly not. Further, the attacks were said to represent a new kind of war, one where the enemy is illusive and global—rather than a clearly defined conspiracy of violent Saudi dissidents. The perpetrators were part of a “shadowy transnational terror network” that reportedly operated in 60 different countries. Their deeds in New York and Washington were not simply attacks on geographic places, but a declaration of war on America, capitalism, Western civilization, and “freedom.”

Second, rather than define the enemy as a specific terrorist organization or network, the Bush administration chose to universalize its representation of the enemy. The threat was not Osama bin Laden or al-Qaeda, but “terrorists.” Terrorists were “evildoers,” the antithesis of the values and virtues of the United States. But terrorists alone were not the enemy; so also were those judged by the Bush administration to be aiding and abetting them. Bush (2003b) stumblingly articulated these crucial set of threat inflations and universalizations in a speech at O’Hare Airport on 27 September 2001:

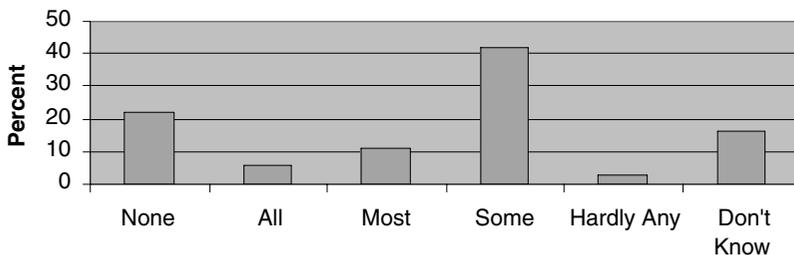
We’re ... a nation that is adjusting to a new type of war. This isn’t a conventional war that we’re waging. Ours is a campaign that will have to reflect the new enemy. There’s no longer islands to conquer or beachheads to storm. We face a brand of evil, the likes of which we haven’t seen in a long time in the world. These are people who strike and hide, people who know no borders, people who are—people who depend upon others. And make no mistake about it, the new war is not only against the evildoers, themselves; the new war is against those who harbor them and finance them and feed them.

These sets of understandings were promoted and labeled by the White House as the “Bush Doctrine,” formally launched in a speech to Congress a week earlier. The central passage in that speech consciously echoed the binary logic of the Truman Doctrine: “Every nation, in every region, now has a decision to make. Either you are with us, or you are with the terrorists” (Bush 2001). But whereas Truman cast his ideological war in quasiterritorial terms—the “slave” versus “the free world” became a metaphoric “East” versus “West”—the lack of a graspable territorial imagination remained a marketing challenge for the Bush administration until the “Axis of Evil” (Iraq, Iran, and North Korea) was coined for the State of the Union address of 2002. This conceptual (con)fusion of morality and state territoriality linked the visceral specificity of 9/11 to the territorial specificity of Iraq via the

universal categories of “terrorism,” “evil,” and “weapons of mass destruction.”

The campaign to sell a war against Iraq to the general public was “rolled out” on the first anniversary of September 11 with a Bush speech at Ellis Island, followed by a speech at the UN the next day.⁵ A central challenge for the White House was that every time the president or a senior official made the pitch for the war, they were addressing multiple audiences: the US political class, the US public, the international community’s political class, and international public opinion, not to mention Saddam Hussein’s regime itself. The Bush administration concentrated on its core audience—the US electorate—and skillfully managed to control the agenda of the 2002 congressional elections, bringing the Republicans to power in both chambers of Congress. Their efforts to convince the international community and international public opinion of the virtues of the invasion, however, were largely unsuccessful. Bush chose to go to war anyway. In speeches justifying the invasion, the memory of 9/11 is recurrent. The threat from “Saddam Hussein and his terrorist allies” must be met “now where it arises, before it can appear suddenly in our skies and cities” (Bush 2003c). Saddam Hussein’s “outlaw regime threatens the peace with weapons of mass murder. We will meet that threat now, with our Army, Air Force, Navy, Coast Guard and Marines, so that we do not have to meet it later with armies of fire fighters and police and doctors on the streets of our cities” (Bush 2003a). While the central premise of this rationale was unconvincing to most members of the international community and remains unproven, the linkage with vulnerability exposed on 9/11 worked for most Americans, with 59% surveyed in one poll indicating they believed Saddam Hussein had a degree of responsibility (all, most, or some) for the September 11 attacks (Table 2). Another poll indicated that 80% of Americans believed that Saddam Hussein would be

Table 2: Response to the question, “Do you think Saddam Hussein bears any responsibility for the September 11th attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon?”



Source: *Los Angeles Times* public opinion poll, 2–3 April 2003, of 745 adults nationwide, with a margin of error of $\pm 4\%$ (PollingReport.com 2003b).

instrumental in helping Al Qaeda terrorists carry out future attacks against the United States if the US did not take military action.⁶

Most of the soldiers in the US military operated with a conviction about the linkage between 9/11 and the war they were fighting in Iraq.⁷ During the war, the PBS *NewsHour* ran an interview with two members of the US Air Force serving in the Middle East (Bearden 2003). The reporter asked them specifically about their motivations. Both identified the memory of the 9/11 attacks as “a big reason they’re willing to be here [sic]”:

AIRMAN SHANNON MURPHY: I’m stationed in Japan, and it was nighttime, and I watched it, and it puts a whole different sense into what you’re doing and how, you know, a person as small as you is part of something so big, and making a difference. It’s really quite amazing.

BEARDEN: How about you?

MAJOR “J.D.”: Absolutely. Sept. 11, I wound up flying what they call a noble eagle sortie now, combat air patrol over Atlanta for about six hours, and my only really regret is that I didn’t get a chance to bomb Afghanistan. I’m happy to be here.

BEARDEN: Do either of you make the connection between 9/11 and the Iraq conflict itself?

“J.D.”: I do.

BEARDEN: Why do you make the connection?

“J.D.”: Mostly because of the weapons of mass destruction potential. What was demonstrated on Sept. 11, what basically terrorists are capable of, if they were ever able to put their hands on a weapon like that, what happened on Sept. 11 would basically be multiplied potentially tenfold. So we’re here to eliminate that.

In a remarkable spectacle of triumphant affect that recalled the movies “Top Gun” and “Independence Day,” George W Bush flew a fighter jet onto the aircraft carrier *Abraham Lincoln* to declare the end of “major hostilities” in Iraq.⁸ Bush emerged from the cockpit in an Air Force aviator’s uniform and, surrounded by the overwhelmingly masculine nation of the carrier, wistfully recalled the memory of his days as a fighter pilot for the Texas National Guard (where he evaded the Vietnam war). Bush later changed attire into a presidential suit to give an “address to the nation” timed for prime time. The speech was full of punchy interactive sequences, with a series of paragraphs culminating in bold declarations designed to provoke affect and applause from his captive audience. In it, the Iraq invasion was represented as a logical part of “the war on terror that began on September 11, 2001—and still goes on.” US military interventions in Afghanistan and Iraq achieved their goals—ringingly declared—but battles were still being fought “from Pakistan to the Philippines to the Horn of Africa.”

Predictably, the somatic marker of 9/11 was evoked to justify the Iraqi invasion and this condition of permanent planetary warfare:

The liberation of Iraq is a crucial advance in the campaign against terror. We've removed an ally of al Qaeda, and cut off a source of terrorist funding. And this much is certain: No terrorist network will gain weapons of mass destruction from the Iraqi regime, because the regime is no more. [The declarative rising cadence of this sentence is greeted with emotive applause from the sailors and aviators.]

In these 19 months that changed the world, our actions have been focused and deliberate and proportionate to the offense. We have not forgotten the victims of September the 11th—the last phone calls, the cold murder of children, the searches in the rubble. With those attacks, the terrorists and their supporters declared war on the United States. And war is what they got. [This last line is delivered with controlled swagger and solicits visceral applause once again.] (Bush 2003d)

Since September 2001, American foreign policy has been driven by the desire to avenge 9/11 and reassert the fantasy of a world where America is forever “the sole remaining superpower” and every century is “the American century.”⁹ Behind all the spurious policy justifications for the Iraq war is a Texas-inflected “Don’t mess with the US of A.” Wrapped up in this re-energized economy of affect, of course, is the entrenched economy of defense appropriations, with burgeoning new contracts in “homeland security,” military supplies, and “reconstruction.” But the Bush administration’s desire to perform military power in response to the exposure of 9/11 only fuels an affective economy of revenge. Bombing wars are quickly won but peace is not. Displays of violence offer an illusion of power. The Bush administration’s “will to imperial power” is a seductive fantasy of control in a world where the vulnerability of the United States and its interests to disruption, chaos, and the routine (mal)functioning of advanced modernity is a permanent condition. The United States’s demonstrations of hard power have undermined its resources of soft power and provoked a serious legitimacy crisis in the international community. Its assertion of raw military power is no more than a temporary cover of the vulnerabilities of advanced industrial states in a “world risk society.” Indeed, Bush’s policies have probably deepened the security problems facing the United States, with weapons of mass destruction scattered into transnational networks as a result of the war, and millions now actively hostile to its policies.

The Republican party is planning an affect-fueled political campaign in 2004, with Bush accepting its presidential nomination in New York City just days before the third anniversary of September 11. But, the United States is not the only place where the politics of affect loom large and desire for revenge and symbolic empowerment abound.

Across the globe, from Casablanca to Chechnya, Bali, Riyadh, and Tel Aviv, suicide bombers are blowing their bodies apart to become temporarily potent heroic martyrs, unleashing the affect within as deadly violence all around. Ending this cycle of desperate violence requires much more than enacting our own privileged cultural version of it.

Endnotes

¹ The tendency for country music to provide the soundtrack for America during wartime is satirized in the film “Wag the Dog,” in which Willie Nelson is recruited to provide the music for a fictional war of distraction. Patchett (2003) notes the role of the conglomerate Clear Channel Radio in supervising country music’s transition from an articulation of personal woe and vice to one of patriotic chauvinism. When a member of the successful country band the Dixie Chicks declared at a concert in London that “[W]e’re ashamed the president of the United States is from Texas,” they transgressed these masculinist chauvinist codes. The resultant controversy saw them be vilified by many yet also garner widespread publicity.

² Ipsos-Reid poll of 500 adults nationwide, 11 September 2001, with a margin of error of $\pm 4.4\%$ (Pollingreport.com 2001).

³ A discourse analysis does not capture the power of this event. See the video clip of the encounter, available on the White House Web site (“President Bush Salutes Heroes in New York” 2001).

⁴ “God Bless America” is, of course, the title of a song by Irving Berlin, first written to incite popular patriotism after the United States entered World War I. It was revived and gained its iconic status during World War II. As a desire and song, it became a leitmotif of the United States’s response to 9/11. The House of Representatives unanimously passed a resolution assuring public schools that it could display the phrase on school property. A congressman from Texas introduced a bill to designate it the country’s “national hymn” (Silk 2001). Banners with the phrase were common in the Washington area. One banner that appeared briefly with the message “God blesses all nations” challenged its divine sanctioning of only America. Critics note that the phrase is actually a prayer that violates a central principle of the United States—namely, the separation of church and state (Diemer 2001). Bush, like Clinton, uses it to end all formal presidential speeches.

⁵ White House Chief of Staff Andrew Card explained to the *New York Times* that “from a marketing point of view, you don’t introduce new products in August.” Political consultant Karl Rove added that “Everybody felt that was a moment Americans wanted to hear from him.” September 11 was a time to “seize the moment to make clear what lies ahead” (Bumiller 2002).

⁶ *Newsweek* public opinion poll of 1,004 adults nationwide, 13–14 March 2003, with a margin of error of $\pm 3\%$ (PollingReport.com 2003a). The figure was 83% in a similar survey conducted 6–7 February.

⁷ Some marines had an iconic 9/11 hero image—firefighters raising the American flag through the smoke at Ground Zero—tattooed onto their bodies (Davey 2003).

⁸ This event was brilliantly satirized by Maureen Dowd (Dowd 2003b). Dowd is one of the few reporters to analyze, engage, and critique the Bush presidency as an administration of affect. She writes that the Democrats “don’t know how to combat the Bushies’ visceral belief in action over explanation, juice over justification” (Dowd 2003a).

⁹ Neoconservatives have articulated their agenda as “The Project for the New American Century.” See Web site (<http://www.newamericancentury.org/>).

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