Confessions of a
Hawkish Hack

The Media and the War on Terror

"groundbreaking"
Philip Bobbitt

"a powerful argument"
Timothy Garton Ash

Matthew d'Ancona

policy
exchange

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The nature of terror has changed beyond recognition since Philip Geddes died in an IRA explosion in 1983. That change, and the response of the media class to it, is the theme of this unapologetically personal essay.

I joined *The Times* in 1991, and I have had the very great fortune since then to work for national newspapers and now *The Spectator*. I regard what I do as a great privilege – and emphatically as a trade. Journalists, in the end, *are* hacks, not policymakers or savers of souls.

Yes, they have an important role to play in any polity, in preserving free speech, in feeding democratic discourse, in scrutinising power and the political process. But that role must always be kept in perspective. Analysis of the media is most useful when it opens other doors, when it reveals broader truths about the dissemination and digestion of information in our society.

What is a neo-con?

I would describe myself as a "hawkish" hack. I prefer hawkish to "neo-conservative", a term that has been pummelled into meaning-

lessness by overuse and endlessly pejorative application. I was, and am, hawkish in the sense that I have reached the grim conclusion that diplomacy does not work in confrontations if military force is removed from the table as an option. That does not mean it is always the right option. But – in our dealings with Iran, with North Korea, with Hezbollah – it cannot be ruled out.

It should be said, in passing, that, these days, a hawk is what P.G. Wodehouse would have called "a rare bird indeed." Sightings are uncommon.

But it is intellectually lazy to assume that such a position makes a person a neo-conservative. The fact is that there are relatively few true "neo-cons". As is clear from Irving Kristol's book *Neo-Conservatism: the Autobiography of an Idea*, it arose among disillusioned Democrats in the US but, Kristol writes, "it never really was a movement…since no organizational efforts were made or even thought of. It would more fairly be described as a current of thought, represented by not more than a few dozen people who were rather more articulate and familiar with the nature of foreign affairs generally and of Communist intentions generally."[1]

Kristol, his wife Gertrude Himmelfarb, Norman Podhoretz, Robert Bork and a handful of others clustered around journals such as *The Public Interest* and organisations such as the American Enterprise Institute. Their interests were the cultural revolution of the 1960s, supply-side economics and the battle against communism.

The Kristols' son, William, has updated this intellectual enterprise in the pages of *The Weekly Standard* and, most notably, the Project for the New American Century, a foreign policy organisation best known for its petition to President Clinton in 1998 calling for the removal of Saddam Hussein.

Certainly, this group is influential in Washington and the American Enterprise Institute, in particular, continues to have formidable links with the Bush administration. In foreign policy, they tend towards the idealism of Woodrow Wilson or Theodore Roosevelt. Unlike Wilson they have limited faith in multilateral institutions and emphasise the need for "coalitions of the willing" in acts of intervention.

But as the American economist and political commentator, Irwin Stelzer, observes in the introduction to the indispensable collection of essays he edited in 2004, *Neoconservatism*, there is no "small cabal of intellectuals" or cerebral masonry seeking to take over the world. Rather there is a neo-conservative sensibility or persuasion which is much more intellectually diverse than has been acknowledged and is certainly anything but secretive in its deliberations. The neo-cons' motto in foreign policy, as Stelzer puts it, is "diplomacy if possible, force if necessary." They see the spread of democracy not only as a good in itself, but as the ultimate guarantor of global security.[2]

But to describe all who supported the military interventions in Afghanistan and Iraq as neo-cons is to confuse two different groups. Kristol Jr and his fellow petitioners were calling for action long before 9/11 – an atrocity which in their eyes vindicated their analysis in full.

To be a hawk – or hawkish – is not precisely the same thing as being a neo-conservative. Mine was a journalistic response to 9/11 rather than a sense that a set of core principles had been validated. Quite the opposite: it seemed that there was no adequate existing frame of reference, or none that I was familiar with, to comprehend what had happened. Nonetheless, as a political commentator, I was required to try to draw a series of conclusions about what that awful day signified, and what it might mean for the geopolitical landscape.

My initial reaction, in common with, I suppose, almost everyone, was one of speechlessness. Not only the speechlessness of shock, but the recognition that existing language and intellectual categories would not quite do. Whatever else one thought of the attacks, this was clearly not business as usual.

As it happened, I had lunch that day with the Czech ambassador of the time, Pavel Seifter, a wonderful dissident intellectual of the Velvet Revolution who had earned his money as a window cleaner during the dark years of the Cold War. He took me to a small Italian bistro in Notting Hill, the kind of restaurant that does not have a radio or a television. He talked of his experiences, the end of communism, his friend Vaclav Havel and the future of the Czech Republic. In retrospect, it was a conversation that formed a book-end. Even as we polished off our salad and pasta, history, in Joe Klein's apt phrase, was "resuming its contentious dance".

Klein uses those words in his verdict on Bill Clinton and what he calls "the smug, shallow serenity of his time."[3] That is a stern but acute judgement. The 1990s had indeed been what Auden called in *September 1, 1939* a "low dishonest decade". On 9/11 we had been caught napping, and we knew it. This was, as has so often been said, a wake-up call. Did that day change the world? Yes, of course. But it also revealed that the world had already changed. What to do about that change quickly became, has remained and will long be a matter of the deepest controversy.

Four propositions

I came fairly quickly to believe a number of propositions, none of them exceptional, but worth mentioning if only for reasons of transparency.

My first proposition was that what had happened was indisputably an act of war.

It quickly became absolutely essential for one group in the debate that followed to describe 9/11 as a *crime*, however heinous. For many who opposed the subsequent military action, it was important to argue that the response of the coalition was innately disproportionate, and that the use of the word "war" was Orwellian: simply a means of justifying a sudden grab of power by the repressive State. To categorise 9/11 reassuringly as the work of a criminal conspiracy also signalled linguistically that the act could be comprehended within existing categories, and the threat contained by pre-existing strategies.

But it seemed to me that the co-ordinated transformation of planes into guided missiles and a successful strike on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon was much more than a crime. It was an act of warfare, albeit a new asymmetric form of warfare in which the enemy would not always have a return address for acts of retaliation, and would not necessarily be willing to negotiate in any meaningful way.

It was a form of warfare, too, in which symbolism would be the key. The most visible shrine to capitalism in the world's richest and most powerful nation had been razed to the ground, and its military nerve centre struck like a coconut in a shy. Men armed only with blades and prayers had executed the biggest attack on America since Pearl Harbour, and the first on the US mainland since the war of 1812. It was the bloodiest day on American soil since the civil war Battle of Antietam in September 1862 in which 2,108 Union soldiers and 1,512 Confederates were slaughtered. 9/11 was a huge military event, however rudimentary the methods used.

My second proposition was that the Islamist ideology driving the attacks, though not homogeneous, was now a global phenomenon, capable of considerable regional variation, but not as disaggregated as many would go on to claim.

9/11, Madrid, Bali, 7/7: these were not isolated atrocities carried out by psychopathic mavericks. They were linked by a bloody thread.

The contentions of this global movement are anti-colonial, of course, and aimed at the great Satan, America, and its allies. But 9/11 was much more than a reflex response by the powerless to the foreign policy of the mighty. It would be neat and easy to blame it all on a series of decisions taken in the White House by Bush, Clinton and their predecessors. But September 11 reflected a poisonous cultural phenomenon, too, a worldwide rising up, primarily of young Muslim men, against the trajectory of world history: against sexual liberation, against consumerism, against the soft power of the West, against what Fukuyama so wrongly called the "end of history".

Indeed, it was in the year that the Berlin Wall fell that Britain had its first taste of what was to come. To understand how we got here cast your mind back long before September 2001 to 14 February 1989, the day that Ayatollah Khomeini proclaimed a fatwa on Salman Rushdie over *The Satanic Verses*. That was the first true warning of the clash of civilisations that was going on not between people but within them, and of the capacity of battles over ideas and thought to cross borders and bring death, or its threat, in their wake. Tragically, the road led from book-burning in 1989 to the London bombings in 2005.

To blame this all on what is euphemistically called "foreign policy" underestimates the scale and nature of the threat. It is true, of

course, that militant Muslims have cited the invasion of Iraq or the action against Hezbollah as justification for their murderous actions – just as they cite the Balfour Declaration of 1917, the end of the Caliphate in 1924, and the declaration of Israel's independence in 1948. All these, and more recent events, can be described as "recruiting sergeants" for militant Islam. But none of them is what lawyers would call the *causa causans* – the original cause of 21st century Islamic terrorism.

At its heart is a terrible mutation of a great world religion: a ferocious system of ideas that seeks theocracy at any price, regards mass murder as divinely ordained and wills not only the destruction of Israel but the overthrow of modern Western society. As V.S. Naipaul warned before 9/11, in some parts of the world, "religion has been turned by some into a kind of nihilism" by people who "are enraged at the world and wish to pull it down".[4] By definition, those who adhere to such ideas cannot be appeased.

In this sense, the battle, as Benjamin Barber puts it, is between Jihad and McWorld, between fundamentalist belief and unstoppable capitalism.[5] But this phenomenon cannot be dismissed as anti-modern. Far from it: what gives it its global glue is the capacity of modern media, especially the internet and DVDs, to duplicate the message of radical madrassas anywhere in the world.

As John Gray has argued so brilliantly, Al Qaeda is in this sense anything but a medieval phenomenon.[6] It has colonised and exploited all the most sophisticated forms of the modern media age and turned them to its advantage. It understands what Philip Bobbitt has called the "unique vulnerabilities of globalised, networked market states."[7] Although its roots are ancestral, contemporary Islamism is as much a product of 21st century as the ipod or

Google. It seeks to turn modernity against itself. This is the age of e-terrorism.

Al Qaeda, it is true, is both a loose-knit international hierarchy and a "franchise" with national affiliates: it plots globally and kills locally. But it is also, above all else, a software, a murderous way of thinking which you can, quite literally, download to a laptop. Who needs to go to a terrorist training camp when you have broadband?

My third proposition was that any post-9/11 foreign policy would have to take account of the limits of the old realpolitik and assess what to do about rogue states, global terror groups and weapons of mass destruction.

More particularly, what to do when these threats became entangled, as rogue states harboured terrorist groups, developed weapons of mass destruction (WMD) and opened up an arms bazaar of the sort we now know A.Q. Khan did with Pakistani nuclear technology.

The risk of such entanglement did not *ipso facto* provide the justification for military action. But I could not see how the old trio of containment, deterrence and non-proliferation treaties would last us long into the new millennium. In late 2001, it was not yet clear that this would mean a pre-emptive war on Iraq. But it *was* clear, even then, that new forms of warfare were probable, and that the straightforward removal of the Taliban with international support was only a fiery dress rehearsal for much more complex and divisive acts upon the global stage.

My fourth proposition was that the conflict was so new in character, and the terrain so uncharted, that terrible errors would be made, no

matter how good the intentions. The compass which the West clasped in its hand was new and untested.

Even in the first days after the war, you could see the post-Second World War supranational structures creaking badly under the new pressures: the UN, Nato and Europe. None of these bodies was created to deal with this sort of challenge, in which a grieving and enraged hyperpower sought to destroy a new configuration of enemies.

As Alan Dershowitz explains in his recent book, *Preemption*, the doctrine of pre-emptive intervention properly unveiled by Bush at West Point in June 2002 is so utterly different to the retaliatory campaigns to which our culture is habituated that it was always going to create problems, diplomatic, military and political.[8] Pre-emption, after all, is not only a concept without a true jurisprudence. It is also one that is innately difficult to proselytise. By definition, it requires politicians to go out on a limb, to face a blizzard of popular scepticism.

The first Gulf War was a new kind of conflict in that the technology deployed by the West was of a sophistication never before seen. But the grounds for war in that case – the invasion of one nation state, Kuwait, by another – were reassuringly familiar and immediately recognised by the world. Not so the war on terror. It also seemed probable that, in this new kind of war, in which regime change would play a central role, that victory would precede quagmire rather the other way round. The rogue regime would be deposed easily enough by the overwhelming force of the US military. But then things would get tricky as they decided what to do after the statues had been toppled. So, from an early point in the post-9/11

conflict, it was clear that terrible mistakes would be made. And the greatest test, it seemed, was what happened next: how we dealt with those mistakes, the speed with which we owned up to them, the lessons we learned and how we proceeded thereafter.

It goes without saying that each of these propositions is hugely controversial and contestable. Still for the sake of clarity and without apology, they are what I believed then and believe now.

Honesty about mistakes

Days after the attacks I sent a message to an acquaintance who serves as one of President Bush's advisers, expressing simple condolences. He replied, ruefully, that the world was behind America for the moment, but would not be for long. The coalition, he believed, would fragment as quickly as it had been assembled. At the time, *Le Monde* declared in an editorial that "We are all Americans". Jacques Chirac was promising that "France will be in the front line in the combat against international terrorist networks, shoulder to shoulder with America, its ally forever." But how long, my Republican acquaintance mused, would "forever" last?

Five years on, his words resonate deeply. The Madrid bomb broke the Spanish governing party. Iraq broke Tony Blair and, as the American mid-term elections showed, has exacted a terrible price from the Republican Party. The UN's authority has suffered, as has the Atlantic alliance. Governments considering the humanitarian crisis in Darfur fret that anything that remotely resembled a Western military intervention would encourage jihadis to export the insurgency that did its terrible work in Iraq to Sudan.

It is important not to neglect the positives: the thwarting of terror plots, the destruction of the Taliban, the removal of Saddam, the uncovering of the Khan network, the opening up of Libya, the birth of fledgling democracies in Iraq and Afghanistan.

But those who believe this war must be fought should be the first to face up to its failures. It is clear that the decision by the White House to ignore Colin Powell's advice on reconstruction was a strategic catastrophe. It is clear that the American and British Governments should never have encouraged the idea that the proof of the war's legitimacy would be the discovery of WMD in the sands of Iraq. It is clear that senior politicians should have resigned over Abu Ghraib. Equally, the disbanding of the structures of order and security in Iraq was an appalling error of judgment.

In September, I interviewed Senator John McCain, a potential presidential candidate, in Washington for *The Spectator*.[9] On that very day, he, Senator Lindsey Graham of South Carolina, and Senator John Warner of Virginia were negotiating a deal with the White House which would see legislation on the detention and interrogation of suspects amended to ensure that the Geneva Conventions were respected more explicitly. Having spent five and a half years as a prisoner of war in Hanoi, McCain speaks with huge moral authority on such matters.

His analysis struck as me as entirely correct. It was imperative after Abu Ghraib and Guantanamo, he said, that "we do everything we can to regain the moral high ground. Part of that is not treating people as they treat us. If we did that, then there is moral equivalency between the two."

It is hard to think of a greater failure of public diplomacy in modern times than the presentation of this war. Indeed, the problem

with the so-called "neo-cons" – Cheney, Rumsfeld *et al* – is that they are not "neo" at all. They have used old Cold War language to describe an utterly modern conflict. This war may well, for a start, be longer than the great struggle of the second half of the last century.

It is certainly more complex: the triple, interlocked threat of weapons of mass destruction, global terrorist groups and rogue states is much more difficult to explain than the monolithic danger which was represented by the Soviet bloc and its ideology.

And, to be prosecuted successfully, the war on terror will require durable public faith in politicians and the intelligence services that inform them: the very trust which has taken such a terrible beating before, during and after the Iraqi conflict.

The anti-war lobby has the slick movies of Michael Moore, brilliantly-crafted popcorn politics, militancy for the multiplexes. We hawks, by contrast, have the sickening images of Iraqi prisoners piled into a pyramid.

I write this because the stakes are vertiginously high, particular at this moment in the conflict. Self-delusion is a luxury we cannot afford as a society. This is not an election campaign, or an edition of *Question Time*. It is a long war, with all that that implies.

The 'domestication' of the war

Having provided this brief *tour d'horizon*, let us return to the specific question of the media and the war. What one can say with absolute certainty is that nobody is happy.

Historically, most argument about the media and warfare has raged over two related issues: bias and access. Ernest Hemingway, in *Men at War*, described the realities of war reporting with brutal

clarity: "The last war," he wrote, "during the years of 1915, 1916, 1917 was the most colossal, murderous, mismanaged butchery that has ever taken place on earth. Any writer who said otherwise lied. So the writers either wrote propaganda, shut up, or fought."[10] But that has not prevented every conflict of modern times spawning huge rows about impartiality.

Alastair Campbell's long feud with the BBC after 9/11, over its reporting of the Afghan operation as well as Iraq, is now the stuff of legend. "If that is BBC journalism," he said in June 2003, "then God help us". "Et tu, Aunty?" he seemed to be saying.

Equally, David Blunkett reveals in his diaries that in March 2003 he despaired of the way in which the media was covering the invasion of Iraq:

> Our media are reporting it in a way that was never the case in the First or Second World Wars. If it had been, we would have given up, as there would have been no chance of victory. Just imagine how they would have reported Dunkirk. The reports in the press would have demoralised the whole country rather than mobilising it. It is just remarkable to see it happening and then to realise that we have to fight a war and win through.[11]

At the opposite end of the spectrum, Noam Chomsky, in his book *9-11*, writes:

> There is probably strong majority sentiment against lashing out blindly and killing plenty of innocent people. But it is entirely typical for the major media, and the intellectual classes generally, to line up in support of power at a time of crisis and try to mobilize the popu-

lation for the same cause. That was true, with almost hysterical intensity, at the time of the bombing of Serbia. The Gulf War was not at all unusual. And the pattern goes far back in history.[12]

In his book *Embedded: Weapons of Mass Deception*, published in 2003, Danny Schechter, a relentless media blogger, attacks the "docility of the media" and blames "structural changes within the media itself", particularly the acceleration of corporate consolidation.[13] Where Campbell believed that the media had been captured by the liberal-Left, Schechter argues just the opposite. Where Chomsky sees craven complicity, Blunkett sees something not far off treason. For every columnist fulminating against BBC treachery, there is another, especially in America, complaining of "media enlistment", "information warriors" and "perception managers".

In the wars of the 20th century, the principal issue for the media was access, or rather the growing reluctance of governments to allow journalists to report freely. In his history of war reporting, *The First Casualty*, Phillip Knightley argues that the liberty enjoyed by reporters in Vietnam was an aberration and that the Falklands provided the true model of information control – a model crystallised in the pool system employed in the first Gulf War. According to Knightley: "The rules turned out to be fairly simple: control access to the fighting; exclude neutral correspondents; censor your own; and muster support, both on the field and at home, in the name of patriotism, labelling any dissidents as traitors...objectivity could come back into fashion when the shooting was over."

Embedding was an enormous controversial issue in the first Gulf War, and has remained so in the second Iraq conflict. There was a deeply depressing front-page story in *The Times* recently which

reported that the Government had withdrawn co-operation from ITV News in war-zones for reasons which seemed distinctly flimsy.

The embedding system is certainly not working. To take the US example: at one point in September there were only nine reporters embedded with 150,000 American troops in Iraq, compared to 770 during the invasion.

That said, much of the coverage of the war has been remarkable, both as a technological and a human achievement. The acts of bravery by individual journalists are humbling, and sometimes troubling: the coroner in the death of the ITN reporter Terry Lloyd recently found that he was killed unlawfully by American soldiers near Basra in March 2003. Depending on the judgment of the Director of Public Prosecutions, it may yet lead to a mirror image of the NatWest Three furore – in this case with British prosecutors arguing for extradition on the basis of the Geneva Conventions Act 1957, against the US authorities which take the view that their troops acted lawfully.

The arguments about bias and access are real, and will continue. Rightly so. But, these are not the most compelling media issues raised by the war on terror. The variety of opinion and reporting put forward since 9/11 has been dazzling. In this country we have five national quality daily newspapers, a proliferation of radio and TV channels, the best public broadcaster in the world, and more blogs and websites than would have seemed possible only a year ago. In such a context, I think it is literally meaningless to pronounce the coverage of the war as good or bad. Which coverage do you mean?

What is more interesting is what that coverage has to tell us about how we are confronting, or not confronting, this historic challenge as a society.

What has gone wrong is that we have domesticated a story that is, by definition, truly global. We have looked through the wrong end of the telescope and refracted a worldwide phenomenon through the prism of day-to-day politics.

The cross-roads was undoubtedly the Hutton Inquiry and the tragic events that led to this remarkable investigation into the governing style of the Blair years. The final report was a bland and unsatisfactory document, but the records of the hearings remain the most indispensable source yet on this period in political history.

What the inquiry revealed, in essence, was the absolute folly of the Iraq dossiers. According to Bob Woodward's book, *Bush at War*, Donald Rumsfeld strongly opposed Blair's wish for a similar propaganda document in the run-up to the Afghan invasion. On this occasion, Rumsfeld was right. Such documents, because they are so speculative, are rarely persuasive. But they jeopardise trust by their very equivocations, uncertainties and manipulations.

In the case of Iraq, they were also a massive distraction from the only possible argument for pre-emptive attack that ever had the remotest chance of commanding international support: namely, that Saddam was in material breach of 12 years' worth of UN resolutions, and 1441 in particular. That resolution – emphatically, definitely and unambiguously – did not require the discovery of WMD for a breach. The onus was explicitly upon Iraq "to comply with its disarmament obligations" and to explain what happened to the arms unaccounted for when the inspectors were expelled in 1998. But the dossiers confused the issue completely. In the eyes of the public, they made the test of the just war the discovery of a "smoking gun" rather than Saddam's observable behaviour.

The dossiers also, we now know, conflated intelligence with spin. And the two are not only different. They are polar opposites.

Intelligence is composed of the hedged, necessarily imperfect estimates provided by analysts working with agents operating under the most stressful circumstances imaginable. It is a currency of probabilities and uncertainties, the language of "maybe" expressed in the subjunctive.

Spin is precisely the opposite. It is how modern power expresses certainty – even when it is privately very uncertain – and tries to infect others with the same certainty. It is the manipulation of data and argument to shore up power. Spin is not the same as lying. Nor is it economy with the truth. It is a way of treating information hyper-politically. The spin doctor asks: what is the headline I want in the *Evening Standard* when I release this document? And then works backwards from that. Spin is insatiable and indiscriminatory, too. It scavenges, consumes, processes, and repackages whatever it can find: rumour, hard fact, intelligence, anything. Its sole purpose is to feed the 24/7 media beast, and to maintain the illusion of impregnable confidence.

In the David Kelly affair, the attempt to conflate the two unravelled with tragic consequences. A man lost his life. Others lost their jobs. The integrity of the BBC and the Government respectively was called into question. Although the Hutton Report was technically the "clean win" that Alastair Campbell had craved, it did not feel either clean or much of a win.

It also transformed the way in which the Iraq conflict was seen, and by extension the war on terror. It made the war symbolic in a parochial rather than a geopolitical sense. The word "Iraq" became political shorthand, a catch-all category like "spin" or "sleaze". It

became, in practice, a dark metaphor for all that the voters dislike about Mr Blair's conduct at home, an exotic symptom of a malignant disease. The dossier row sealed the perception of Blair as a man fatally distracted from his domestic programme by foreign adventurism. It seemed to vindicate the electorate's suspicion that you could not believe a word he said.

Hutton changed fundamentally the way in which the polity generally and the media specifically filtered information about the war. The question was no longer: how does this military action fit into the big picture? It was: how quickly is this war going to cost Blair his job? How fast will this crazed alliance with Bush lead to his downfall?

For those in the Westminster village, the soap opera was intriguing. Who, for instance, had known that the famous 45 minutes claim in the September dossier referred only to battlefield weaponry, rather than to strategic missiles? And when? Did Blair know before he made his speech to the Commons on March 18, 2003, as Robin Cook claimed? Or not, as the Prime Minister himself insisted?

This was not a trivial question by any means. But nor was it the most important question at the time. Just when we should have been using the wide-angle lens, the media was peering through the Westminster microscope at the squabbling ants.

In the midst of all this, some important questions went not only unanswered but unasked.

Take the whereabouts of Saddam's arsenal of weapons. In the 1990s, under duress, Saddam produced an inventory of his WMD. Amongst those items which are still unaccounted for are: 3.9 tons of VX gas, 8,500 litres of anthrax, 550 artillery shells containing

mustard gas, and 25 missile warheads bearing germ agents. When they did not turn up in Iraq there was considerable jubilation that Blair had been proved wrong. But what, exactly, happened to this deadly arsenal? Remember, this was the *Iraqi* inventory, not the West's. And much of it is still missing, as even Hans Blix noted with alarm. But how often is its whereabouts discussed, or the issue even raised?

Precisely when our horizons should have been broadest, the British polity turned in on itself, and transformed the Iraq war from a geopolitical event into a means of fighting domestic political battles by other means. Who knew what? Who said what to whom? Was Gordon on side? These questions – often obscurely semantic or even downright Jesuitical – are all subsets of a much bigger issue, aptly described by Alastair Campbell in his diary as "this huge stuff about trust". In February 2003, when Britain's airports were put on high alert, the instinctive reaction of many people was not to panic but to ask what sneaky propaganda stunt the Government was trying to pull this time. If it is hard to persuade people that you mean what you say about A-levels or transport, what chance was there for a concept as novel, alien and unsettling as pre-emption?

By early 2004, the war had become not an existential crisis, but a metaphor for the character failings of a single politician. So often, the convulsions over Iraq have been a proxy for something else much more parochial.

The low point was the moment in March 2005 when the Tory whips, having forced the Government to insert an automatic expiry date into its Prevention of Terrorism Bill – the so-called "sunset clause" – brayed that they were off to uncork the champagne. To celebrate what? Who was their real enemy – Bin Laden, or Blair?

Within less than five years, the global consciousness spawned by 9/11 had dwindled to Punch and Judy politics on the green benches. What started as a worldwide alert became, in Britain, at least something not much better than a Whitehall farce.

This parochialism is a result of the instinctive recoil of the political and media class from the *terra incognita* of the war on terror. None of us, hawkish or dovish, truly knows where this struggle is heading, and it is dishonest to pretend otherwise. Rumsfeld was right to warn of the difference between the "known unknowns" and the "unknown unknowns" – the things we have not even guessed we do not know about. It is no surprise that we retreat into the comfort zone of political knockabout.

How reassuring it is to reduce the whole geopolitical challenge to questions such as: how quickly will Blair go? But how rude an awakening it will be when we have to confront the fact that Islamism will long survive Blair and indeed Bush. Whom will we blame then?

This, needless to say, is precisely what the terrorists want. The purpose of modern terrorism is not only to cause bloodshed but also to spray psychological shrapnel across the societies it attacks and seeks to subvert, to disfigure normality, to desecrate the routine. This is the Cold Sweat War: the enemy's weapons range from outright terror to the most irrational suspicion. Imagine the feelings of New Yorkers earlier this year when they heard that a plane had crashed into an apartment block on the Upper East Side. I remember all too well hearing that a bomb had been planted on the number 26 bus on July 21 last year, a fortnight after 7/7. As it happens, the number 26 goes past my house and is the bus on which my five-year-old son goes to school. Just saying those words has an effect on me today.

This is a war in which the enemy seeks, more than in any other, to get inside our heads as much as to mutilate our bodies.

Above all, the terrorist seeks to divide. After the initial horror of an attack, and its tendency to unite its target society, the strategic objective is to force democracies, in their rage and panic, to make mistakes, to falter and to resort to internal squabbling. Action is supplanted by introspection.

At its worst, this tendency to introspection becomes almost wilful. We do not just identify errors, apologise for them and learn from them. We strip away the context and, occasionally, let proper self-scrutiny slip into indulgent self-loathing. It is right that we face unflinchingly the horrors of Abu Ghraib and the terrible cost of the botched reconstruction of Iraq; but let us not forget the countless thousands tortured and murdered under Saddam whose images do not crowd our TV screens and whose names and faces are so easily forgotten. It is right that the appalling tragedy of the shooting of Jean Charles de Menezes remains a matter of the highest concern. But how many now recall the death of Detective Constable Stephen Oake who was killed in an anti-terrorist raid in Manchester three years ago? We should ask why the dreadful bungled raid of Forest Gate in June took place. But we should not lose sight of the successful police actions and intelligence work that prevented mid-Atlantic carnage in August. There is a thin line between essential self-scrutiny and the psychological evasion of self-hatred.

When history is moving at this speed, it is hard for the media to keep up. Take the war in southern Lebanon in July and August. The BBC was widely criticised for being anti-Israeli. Hezbollah's cunning in the conflict was to nurture the impression in the West that it was somehow a romantic *maquis*, a rag-tag force of noble freedom

fighters and pimpernels defending the people of Lebanon against murderous colonialists. It was almost completely absent from our screens, always nimbly one step ahead of the cameras.

Never mind that, in the memorable phrase of Amos Oz, Hezbollah was using the Lebanese people as "human sandbags" – what Jan Egeland, the UN's humanitarian affairs chief, called "cowardly blending". What we saw on our screens was image after image of Israeli tanks and image after image of Lebanese casualties. No wonder the charge that the Israeli assault was "disproportionate" was made with such impunity.

Hezbollah itself and its Katyusha missiles were the phantoms of the conflict. And, like generals fighting the last war, much of the global media was still, effectively, reporting the Palestinian intifada – as if Israel were facing little more than a street uprising of youths armed with bricks and bottles. The reality, of course, was very different: a Katyusha aimed at Israeli civilians does a lot more damage than a Molotov cocktail thrown at a tank.

The media was not anti-Israeli in any conspiratorial sense. But it failed in its responsibility to capture the true geopolitical nature of this conflict. Because Hezbollah maintained such a low profile until the war had ended, there was little sense that it was running a full-blown state within a state, armed with state-of-the-art weaponry, or that what we were witnessing in northern Israel and southern Lebanon was the first battle in a new war waged by theocratic Iran – vigorously pursuing its nuclear ambitions and supporting Islamist terror around the world – for unchallenged hegemony in this afflicted region. Hezbollah is but one pawn in this great struggle, and Israel only the front line.

Hezbollah understood better how to manipulate global opinion. And for that reason, whatever one's audit of the military conflict,

they certainly won the media war. To repeat, the underlying problem was not something as simple as media bias, but the media's failure to learn the new language of a new conflict. It flounders like an English tourist abroad with a badly-written phrase-book.

Indeed, one of the oddities of the war has been the greater capacity of fiction and even popular television to wrestle with these huge issues.

Martin Amis noted recently that he had written about Mohammed Atta not long after John Updike had published his own book on the subject of Islamism, entitled simply *Terrorist*. Norman Mailer has written a stimulating short book, *Why are we at War?*[14] The Palestinian film-maker, Hany Abu-Assad last year produced a stunning exploration of the mind of a suicide bomber in *Paradise Now*. No less compelling was Paul Greengrass's *United 93*, which showed how ill-equipped operationally and intellectually we were – and are – to deal with this multi-faceted attack.

"We have a real world situation here," says one American officer on the ground, grappling with the terrible recognition that all the simulations and drills at the military's disposal are suddenly obsolete. Even pulp television drama like *Spooks* and *24* seems more at ease with the big dilemmas posed by the war than the mainstream factual media. And this is perhaps because the creative mind – in high art or commercial TV – is not required to provide solutions, merely to explore compelling issues.

No issue is more compelling than the war on terror. And yet it does not submit to pat answers, to slogans or to soundbites. "Stuff happens", "Not in My Name", "Mission Accomplished", "How Many Lives Per Gallon?": the glib lines of both sides grate when one considers the complex reality they seek to describe.

This has troubled the media. The daily, real-time news agenda depends upon a certain continuity of language, of categories, of methods, of understood positions. The war has demanded of us a new way of thinking and we have not yet risen to the challenge. Instead, we have mostly described the war at one remove: refracted through old prisms and with reference to old battles.

Accountability vs. the 'consumerisation' of policy

There is another, closely related problem which is the confusion of two entirely separate processes: accountability on the one hand, and the "consumerisation" of policy on the other.

Accountability is the heart of any healthy political process, from the emptying of wheely bins to the invasion of another country. Where does the buck stop? Whom do I blame? If we do not know that, we do not know anything.

For example, it is an entirely healthy response to the breakdown of trust, post-Iraq, that there should be a debate about the constitutional role of Parliament in the declaration of war. At present, that power falls within the royal prerogative, and it is clear that the boundaries of that power are going to be explored and quite possibly curtailed.

It is good that the Hutton and Butler inquiries forced the Government to examine its internal policymaking procedures and exposed the problems of "sofa" government and government by headline. One suspects that, partly as a consequence, Prime Minister Brown will run a very different kind of administration.

But this – the accountability debate – is not to be confused with what I call policy "consumerisation".

Let us start with the terrorists: Al Qaeda, as you may know, has its own media arm, Al Sahab, which churns out propaganda. The terrorists are astonishingly adept at this now. When Ayman al Zawahiri, bin Laden's second-in-command, wrote to Abu Musab al Zarqawi warning him not to broadcast videos of hostage decapitations, he declared: "I say to you that we are in a battle and that more than half of this battle is taking place in the battlefield of the media. And that we are in a media battle for the hearts and minds of our Umma."

Again, there is an unsettling sense that the Islamists are thinking more strategically than we are. I was told recently by a source who has had access to intercepted secret Hamas documents that they deal in time frames of 50 and 100 years, measuring their objectives in generations, not months or years.

Compare this, then, to the stop-go fickleness of the Western response. In the wake of an attack like 7/7 or a foiled atrocity such as the alleged August bomb plot, we hear much tough rhetoric, promises of action, and warnings that "the rules of the game have changed". Then the caravan of politics moves on, and another spree of "eye-catching initiatives" is announced.

That phrase, you will recall, was first used in the hideously embarrassing Blair memo leaked six years ago. That was a gruesome insight into the overwhelmingly tactical nature of much that modern Government does – its quest for what Bill Clinton's former pollster, Dick Morris, calls the "daily mandate". Small wonder that the polity suffers from attention deficit disorder. No Government has done more to glorify and trade in ephemera, or to nurture journalists' addiction to the new line, the new angle, the new new thing. Truly, we now live in Warhol's world: it is no longer just people who enjoy 15 minutes of fame, but Government initiatives, too.

But this tactical, hyperactive style of Government did not emerge in a vacuum. It is a symptom as well as a cause of a culture in which the spirit of consumerism is more prevalent than ever before. The postwar ethos of queuing and rationing is almost dead, its last institutional home being the NHS where the overwhelming support for the principle of equity which the health service enshrines still outweighs patients' grievances.

Niall Ferguson has written brilliantly of the "American attention deficit".[15] I would go further and contend that citizenship and consumerism are now merging to the point that they are almost coterminous. In our construction of narratives, we are used to the instant solutions of Hollywood, its distinctive grammar in which an answer is always found in 90 minutes. In our economic behaviour, we expect value for money, immediately. Nowadays, if you buy something and it does not work, you take it back to the shop. If a website fails to deliver goods quickly enough, you do not use it again. We are instinctively querulous rather than deferential. To borrow the distinction made famous by the American social scientist, Albert O. Hirschman, we are moving away from a culture of "voice and loyalty" to one of "exit": when something does not work, we do not stick around and complain.[16] We just dump it.

This is a very good way to force a business to provide a better service. It also has some application to public services, when parents and patients are genuinely empowered to express preference. But, when it comes to warfare and its conduct, consumerism is a bad paradigm to use.

In August of this year, *The Spectator* ran an intriguing survey of 1,700 people which suggested that more than 70 per cent believe we are in a world war against Islamic terrorists who threaten the West's

way of life.[17] And yet on Tuesday, *The Guardian* had a poll that showed that 61 per cent of voters want British troops out of Iraq by the end of the year.[18]

The two polls are not necessarily inconsistent, of course. They say much about the public's gut instincts on the big picture but also – unsurprisingly – their specific despair about Iraq. And they are important as guides to trends in popular opinion.

The danger, however, is that the political class and the media respond to these trends in the wrong way, as though they should be the drivers of strategy rather than reflections upon its presentational successes and failures. A foreign policy is not a retail product. A geopolitical strategy is not a consumer durable that you return in disgust immediately if it does not work straight away. This is the wrong model, a model in which there are only two options: instant gratification or instant rejection. The whole point of a strategy – perhaps its defining characteristic – is that you stick to it in spite of tactical setbacks. And this is an intrinsically difficult concept for which to argue at this point in Western history.

And yet, when it comes to the geopolitical landscape, it has never been more necessary. As General Sir Rupert Smith argues in his masterpiece, *The Utility of Force*, modern conflicts are not trials of strength but battles of will. They are fought, as he puts it, "amongst the people." As a result, he concludes, war in our time will tend to be "timeless" and open-ended, an ongoing activity of the state quite unlike the old industrial wars in which the whole of a society or state were subjugated to a single cause. Smith predicts long, grinding conflicts, in which the model is Cyprus, the Balkans or Northern Ireland rather than the Second World War or even the Falklands. The

risk of course is that modern societies lack the endurance for such commitment – particularly because, as Smith notes:

> We are conducting operations now as though we were on a stage, in an amphitheatre or Roman arena. There are two or more sets of players – both with a producer, the commander, each of whom has his own idea of the script…At the same time, they are being viewed by a partial and factional audience, comfortably seated, its attention focused on that part of the auditorium where it is noisiest, watching the events by peering down the drinking straws of their soft-drink packs – for that is the extent of the vision of a camera.[19]

In the case of this war, the strategies must, of course, be flexible and subject to review. But they must also contain at their core an immutable commitment and a clear trajectory. On Iraq: even the most furious opponent of the original invasion should be able to see that the question of withdrawal or non-withdrawal in 2006 or 2007 needs to be considered distinctly from the international furore of late 2002 and early 2003. My view is that to abandon post-Saddam Iraq now, or even soon, would unleash a regional catastrophe that would make the present conflict look like a mild skirmish; that it would send a signal to the jihadis that they can force Western flight by exporting insurgency to states in crisis around the world; and that it would be a moral outrage. What is certain is that James Baker, the former US Secretary of State, does not have the answers. There can be no better example of the politics of the goldfish, in which memory barely exists, that we are now turning to the arch-realist, the greatest advocate of containment, to resolve a crisis that has one of its many roots in his reluctance to act definitively against Saddam in

1991. His new prominence in the Iraq debate is being treated as a kind of retro chic rather than the sign of desperation it actually is: and anybody who thinks, like Mr Baker, that Syria and Iran will help stabilise Iraq is sorely deluded. In fact, his return to the fray suggests something even more worrying. The risk of a new isolationism in the US – reached by stages, of course – is suddenly clear and present.

In effect, the coalition's policy in Iraq is now being treated in the media as if it were a listed FTSE company whose shares were in freefall as the customers – that is, Western publics – turned their back on the product. The model is wrong because – sticking with the market metaphor – the customer in this case is not only the Western voter. At the risk of sounding portentous, most of the customers are as yet unborn. The decisions that we take and do not take now in this struggle will affect the world for generations.

The polls say pull out of Iraq now. What does the Iraqi girl looking forward to a modern education and the exercise of the vote say to that? It is hard to stay the course in Afghanistan, no doubt about it. But if we do not, what will the region look like in twenty years time? The greatest sin of the coalition leaders was to encourage the view that there was a quick fix in all of this, that Jeffersonian democracy would rise fully formed in Afghan villages and Iraqi towns. They nurtured consumerism and the expectations of the media grid when they should have been doing precisely the opposite. Returning to what John McCain told me recently: "In the United States we need to acknowledge that serious mistakes were made in the conduct of this conflict, and emphasise again and again how difficult this is. One of the biggest mistakes," McCain continued, "was to somehow make our citizenry believe that this was going to be a very easy kind of deal."

Of course it is precisely the opposite. The comparative ease with which we have toppled dictatorial regimes has masked the true complexity of everything else: the reconstruction of societies, the connections between what happens in Kandahar or Baghdad and what happens in Bethnal Green or West Yorkshire, and the hardest task of all, which is the readiness to undertake the long haul.

Self-evidently, we have to put "nation-building" at the heart of our forward thinking, and heed Paddy Ashdown's warning that we will need more soldiers in the 21st century, trained not only to fight war but to oversee its aftermath: a huge shift in global military culture. How can you expect the young US tank commander listening to thrash metal as he powers into Baghdad to suddenly become the arbitrator in sectarian strife?

We need to heed no less the warning of Philip Bobbitt that good law must be stockpiled like vaccine before horrors take place, lest bad law be rushed through in the wake of terrible bloodshed. He is surely right that one of the greatest tragedies of Iraq was, as he describes it, the steady removal of "the greatest source of our [the coalition's] power which was the rule of law." In this sense, Abu Ghraib and Guantanamo were battles, and battles that we lost. To be sure, I believe this is a war. But a war has laws, and prosecutions, and due process. While sympathetic to the Blair Government's calls for longer periods of detention without trial, what the war on terror badly needs now *is* more trials. It is not enough to close Guantanamo. If there are guilty men being held there, they should be tried in a fair manner. We need successful prosecutions of those who have plotted carnage around the world. Justice must be done and seen to be done. We

need to do more to dramatise the very values that the war seeks to defend.

And we need to stop expecting what some insist on calling the "Muslim street" to come round to a different way of thinking in some peculiar moment of epiphany. We must speed Turkey's accession into the EU, so that a Muslim nation can stand alongside the old countries of Christendom. We must make progress in the Middle East. We must not abandon Iraq, even though that is the easy thing to do. None of these objectives, indeed, are easy. But they are all essential.

As far as this country is concerned, I am probably the last person in Britain who believes there is some value in the word "multiculturalism" for the simple reason that it describes the world in which I live and have always lived. This is a world of porous borders, mingling identities, pluralism and change: personally, I love living in such a world. But it is also an increasingly complex world, one riven by anxiety and insecurity, perplexed by what the US political scientist, James Pinkerton, has called the "pulverising forces of modernity." [20]

The question is this: on what must we all agree – what, beyond the rule of law, must be included in what might be called the zone of conformity? A couple of years ago, I attended a meeting of a group called Dialogue with Islam in the East End. Naturally, given the timing, much of the discussion focused on 7/7, and its aftermath. Some extraordinary conspiracy theories were raised. The gulf between me as a white secular journalist and the radicalised Bengali Muslims in the audience was immense. But I left a cautious optimist. The discussion was impeccably courteous and of a high standard. That in itself is a cause for hope. There was no heckling, no disrup-

tion by far right groups. I wonder how many countries could have held such a meeting so soon after such a terrible atrocity.

I do not believe that the challenges of a multi-faith, multi-ethnic society are intractable. The reward for success is too great and the cost of failure unthinkable. But let me add just one more thought in this context. I do not think this debate has been advanced an inch – not an inch – by the chorus of white middle aged politicians telling Muslim women it is inappropriate to wear the veil. All this achieves is to make such women the victim of two patriarchies, rather than one. It has been a hopelessly inept intervention in a debate of enormous subtlety. I do not see any political courage here: rather its complete absence. It is headline-grabbing noise which has damaged the dialogue it claims spuriously to advance.

Are we equal to this task? Or, to put it another way, are we capable of thinking durably in an age of disposable thought? In his book on Vietnam, *The Real War*, Jonathan Schell argues that "the puzzle of how the world's mightiest power was defeated by a tiny one" is no mystery when you consider the words of Truong Chinh, the Secretary General of the Vietnamese Communist Party as far back as 1947: "The war," he said, "must be prolonged, and we must have time. Time is on our side – time will be our best strategist."[21] More than a quarter century later, at the Paris peace conference, time did indeed deliver on this promise. Try to imagine a Western politician making such a statement – presenting the sheer length of the struggle ahead as a positive *advantage*, as our best chance of victory over our impatient, weak-willed foes. It is, of course, quite impossible. What Braudel called *la longue duree* is almost completely invisible in contemporary political discourse.

Yet rarely has it been more badly needed. Discussion of the environmental challenge, of population mobility, and of global terrorism is almost literally meaningless without such a perspective. What sort of response would Churchill get today if he offered only "blood, toil, tears and sweat." I am not sure his spin doctors would let him say it: the focus groups would probably have given the slogan the thumbs down.

This is a war of unknowable duration. It will not submit to timetables fixed in Whitehall or on Capitol Hill. Some seem to believe that it will recede once Blair and Bush leave office. In fact, the seriousness of what we face and the probable longevity of the conflict will only be generally recognised once these two heads of government are gone. For now, there is the spurious comfort that this is Bush and Blair's war. That comfort will be gone for good in January 2009 when Bush follows Blair into retirement, leaving the 44th President of the United States to decide what to do next at an early Camp David summit with – in all likelihood – Prime Minister Brown. Global Islamism is not a temporary protest movement, with a brief inventory of policy goals. It is a historic phenomenon. What will it take for us to accept that bleak reality?

I began this essay by describing myself as a hawk. But perhaps the fable of the tortoise and the hare is more appropriate. It is a time for those who are able to think hard, see far and endure setbacks. In an era where hysteria or euphoria are the default positions of our culture, this is what Americans call a "big ask". But it is the only "ask" that is worth making.

In previous wars, in previous conflicts, for those in my trade, the great issue has been the question of competing allegiance: to country, to truth, to the public, to the troops in the line of fire. That

has been the main question in the past. But I do not think it is the main question now.

The primary issue for those who look ahead to years of this great global struggle is not patriotism.

It is patience.

1   Irving Kristol, *Neo-Conservatism Selected Essays 1949-1995*, New York 1995, pp3-40

2   Ed. Irwin Stelzer, *Neoconservatism*, London 2004, pp3-26

3   Joe Klein, *The Natural: The Misunderstood Presidency of Bill Clinton*, New York, 2002, p217

4   See Matthew d'Ancona, "There are some people even Blair can't persuade", *The Sunday Telegraph*, 21 October 2001

5   Benjamin R Barber, *Jihad vs McWorld: How Globalism and Tribalism are Reshaping the World*, New York 1995

6   John Gray, *Al Qaeda and What it Means to be Modern*, London 2003

7   Interview, *The Spectator*, 20 May 2006

8   Alan. M. Dershowitz, *Preemption: A Knife that Cuts Both Ways*, New York 2006

9   Interview, *The Spectator*, 30 September 2006

10   Quoted, Philip Knightley, *The First Casualty,* London 1989, p79

11   David Blunkett, *The Blunkett Tapes: My Life in the Bear Pit*, London 2006, p469

12   Noam Chomsky, 9-11, p30

13   Danny Schecter, *Embedded: Weapons of Mass Deception*, Buffalo, New York 2003

14   Norman Mailer, *Why Are We At War?*, New York 2003

15   See, for example, Niall Ferguson, *Foreign Policy*, September/October 2006

16   Albert O. Hirschmann, *Exit, Voice and Loyalty: Response to Decline in Firms, Organisations and States,* Harvard 1970

17   *The Spectator*, 19 August 2006

18   *The Guardian,* 24 October 2006

19   Rupert Smith, *The Utility of Force: The Art of War in the Modern World*, London 2005, pp284-5 (2006 paperback edition)

20   James Pinkerton, "How Right must face the future", *The Times*, 13 March 1995

21   Jonathan Schell, *The Real War: The Classic Reporting on the Vietnam War*, New York 1988

Much of the discourse on the war on terror sacrifices historical perspective for an often partisan focus on the day-by-day flow of events. *Confessions of a Hawkish Hack: The Media and the War on Terror* is Matthew d'Ancona's critique of such short-termism. In it, he outlines his own interpretation of the attacks of 9/11 and the media's coverage of events since then. Above all, he urges the West to show greater patience and stamina in a conflict that is likely to last for decades and may never have a clear end point.

"Thus far our biggest deficit in waging war on terror has been a lack of ideas—the kind of reshaping ideas that Viner, Brodie, Schelling, and others developed to cope with the emergence of the nuclear threat during the Cold War. In this remarkable essay, Matthew d'Ancona undertakes precisely this groundbreaking effort, focusing on the fraught relationship between the media and the wars on terror. It is a triumph.**"**

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