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'Image, Rhetoric and Nationhood':

Framing September 11:
Cultural Diplomacy and the Image of America

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Washington's Dangerous Framework

11 September

It was common for those of a certain age after 1963 to remark that: Like everyone of my generation, I remember exactly where I was and what I was doing the day John F. Kennedy was shot. I guess we could say the same about 11 September 2001. 'Flashbulb' memories, for all their inaccuracies will be created or 're-membered' as various frameworks and contexts descend on the 'memories'[1]. Once the revisionists got to work on Kennedy, Christopher Hitchens, despite his recent excursions (challenged by one notable Professor in Birmingham), once penned a memorable line: 'Like every one else of my generation, I can remember exactly where I was standing and what I was doing on the day that President John Fitzgerald Kennedy nearly killed me.'[2] It took nearly three decades for Hitchens to pen this line, and at least a decade before the Kennedy revisionists began to have an impact (on academia, if not the general public). The revisions were a necessary antidote. If the revisionists do not get to work on 11 September and the US led response, the cycle of violence is bound to continue. The very limited framework to explain the atrocities of that day neither enhance US security nor serve any long-term interests.

On September 11, I was in the Ford Library, University of Michigan. Such is the interest in Ford, I was the only one there, so the archivists took me in to watch the TV in one of the offices. Soon after a call came through from DC, all federal buildings were to be closed. They apologised that I would not be able to get on with White House Central Files and indicated I should return the next day. Which I did. That afternoon, I spent in *O'Neill's,* Ann Arbour. Incidentally, I was examining the documents relating to the 1975 *Mayaguez* incident, and the 1976 'Korean Tree Incident'. What struck me was the considerable overlap in White House staff and the similarity of the message they gave Ford after the US defeat in Vietnam and the message they gave Bush after September 11: there was a need to demonstrate US resolve and determination. Their credibility was at stake.

The Flag and the Framework

After such an atrocity, after such an act of terrorism, after that 'crime against humanity', I guess I should not have been as surprised to see the presence of the Stars and Stripes augmented, manifold. But I was.

It was not just that people reached for these symbols, these icon's of community, of imagined community, in the face of external attack; there seemed to be more to it. There seemed to be a

strain, and certainly there was talk in the bars that evening, of the need for mobilisation, of the need to strike someone or something.

The images of the flag were omnipresent. As a symbol of community, a community of grief and condolence, it is understood. But, as a rallying point for response and counterattack, it was more worrisome. A nationalistic framework would preclude a thorough examination of US foreign policy, past, present and future.

Vendors gave away miniatures of Old Glory, to those who bought a bandanna in New York, the flag was soon draped over a section of the Pentagon, bodies on stretchers were sometimes covered with it, it framed the ticker-tape news on major networks, and perhaps most famously, it took centre stage in the fireman's recreation of the (re-enacted) Iowa Jima photograph on Ground Zero, and so forth. As the *Economist* pointed out, 'The whole country is aflutter with flags. They fly at half-mast from federal buildings. They fly from every other house and car you pass as you walk down the street. Huge flags decorate sports stadiums, tiny ones dangle from baby carriages. Wal-Mart and K-Mart have sold more than half a million flags in the past week.'[3] The flag, was obviously something many demanded, the workshops in China could not keep pace with demand at one point. They provided the symbol for community. But, perhaps the rush to the patriotic response also limited the latitude of questions asked. I heard little about the causes or roots of the terrorist actions, or at least little that was plausible. Perhaps it would have been distasteful in the early days, but the framework has not widened that much later on. And that will not serve US interests or security in the long run.

The 'Enemy' & The Opinion Polls

Bush gave us few clues about the positive direction of his foreign policy prior to September 11. Perhaps there wasn't one, beyond the unilateralism, that September 11 allowed to accelerate (an end to the ABM, Kyoto, and ICC…). Bush said little about foreign policy in his inaugural. He warned 'the enemies of liberty' that Washington would 'meet aggression and bad faith with resolve and strength.' It seemed to be a familiar refrain: earlier, during the campaign, he admitted not knowing who the enemy was. But he explained: 'When I was coming up, with what was a dangerous world, we knew exactly who they were. It was us versus them, and it was clear who the them were. Today we're not so sure who the they are, but we know they're there.'[4] It was not until this week, a year and half a month after September 11 that we get a concerted description of US National Security Policy. It is a triumphant document celebrating US ideas and aspirations and differs little from ideas expressed early in the 1990s. Plus, of course, the necessary post-9/11 additions on terrorism.[5] The events of 11 September gave the Bush administration a purpose.

Like his father discovered in Panama, there is nothing like a foreign crisis to boost opinion poll ratings; (At least that much Bush Sr. and Saddam Hussein have in common, they both invaded a sovereign country, and dubiously both claimed to have been invited to do so). After September 11, Bush's approval ratings shot from an implausibly high 51% immediately to 86%, and further up to 90%, around which it hovered when the bombs started to drop on Afghanistan. [6] Though predictably as the war dragged on, widened to focus on Iraq, not to mention the condition of the domestic economy and the corporate scandals, they dipped somewhat.

Clearly, however, September 11 helped the Bush Administration to frame its purpose and the direction of its foreign policy. The specific war on terrorism is augmented by a strong sense of American exceptionalism and US unilateralism. As LeFeber writes, 'In the post-September 11 world, exceptionalism, combined with the immensity of American power, hinted at the dangers of being a nation so strong that others could not check it, and so self-righteous that it could not check itself. Moreover, the horrors of September 11 did not naturally produce restraints or limits

on the uses of that power.'[7] And certainly some conservatives (in the relative sense of the administration), pushed from the days after the atrocity to expand the problem, to take on Saddam Hussein, if not other regimes. (More recently Henry Kissinger has referred to the process of 'regime change' as a revolution in US foreign policy. Forgetting, well let's just take a few: Guatemala 1954, Iran 1953, Cuba 1961, Chile 1973, and Nicaragua 1981-90…). The country was initially prepared for a long and patient campaign, as well as the prospects of imminent war. Bush was urged to concentrate on Afghanistan by four of the five White House principals; allies threatened to defect from the coalition if the war was widened. But little else was in the mind of the Bush Administration. Rumsfeld referred to Eisenhower early on: "If a problem cannot be solved, enlarge it." [8] Soon enough the results in Afghanistan were devastating, liberating and frustrating. And soon Iraq was brought back into focus (though after the bombings in Bali there maybe a temporary reconsideration of priorities).

Nationhood, Narratives and Ideology

Certain benevolent narratives and rhetoric had an important role in galvanising domestic support. Just as Bush had no idea who the 'them' were, he had no idea why the 'them' were so angry. An ingenious strategy, well perhaps a reflexive response was to immediately situate the terrorist action within the benign framework of US history, and to rid the problem of any grey matter, to present to US response in Manichaean terms. To draw on a couple of centuries of US diplomacy from the Monroe Doctrine, through the Truman Doctrine, to the 'Clash of Civilizations', by framing the response in terms of us v. them. To 'orientalise' them. But also to draw on the Manichaean tradition of fundamental Christianity, and frame the US response in terms of good versus evil. The characteristics and 'pasts' of both parties needed some mythology. From Emile Durkheim, through Maurice Halbwachs, myths have been considered indispensable as 'integrative' and stabilising forces. They are vital to social organisation; they insure solidarity and social cohesion.[9]

The traditional American image of the United States and US foreign policy is built around a series of myths. They relate to stories about liberty, democracy, self-determination, individualism and opportunity. It is not that all of these attributes are missing, but the public rhetoric is particularly exclusive of other interpretations and facets of US history. Michael Hunt, (building on Clifford Geertz) suggests that US ideology must be understood as an '...integrated and coherent systems of symbols, values, and beliefs' arising from 'socially established structures of meaning'. 'The United States' and US foreign policy are mediated by the various ideological constructs, inspired and sustained by culture / society. The constructed collective memories ultimately secure the sense of historical place, in a bewildering present, and serve as a basis for moral action 'intended to shape a better future.' Hunt argues that these ideological constructs are as much a part of the thinking of policy makers as the general population. The narratives that emerge from their public rhetoric become one of the primary devices used to represent the past in US political culture. These narratives provide the essential context and framework to understand the US response.[11]

Rhetoric and the Two Nationalisms

What George Bush did, like many presidents before him, was to combine two sets of nationalism in his rhetoric. In the mid-1950s, Louis Hartz identified two sets of American nationalism that often clashed with each other. Some identified US nationalism with the territory, the country, the flag, the state, and others with the narratives of America, the ideologies, the content of the traditional benign rhetoric.[12] After September 11, there seemed to be no separating the two. The

state had been attacked and Bush was quick to explain events within the context of an attack on freedom.

For the first time since 1812, mainland America had been struck. The rhetoric of war, rather than criminality, soon took over. The state was at war. And so according to Bush, the terrorists were at war with the American ideas. On 14 September, Bush informed the National Cathedral, the nation and indeed the world: '… our responsibility to history is already clear: to answer these attacks and to rid the world of evil. War has been waged against us by stealth and deceit and murder. This nation is peaceful, but fierce when stirred to anger. This conflict was begun on the timing and terms of others. It will end in a way, and at an hour, of our choosing.' And 'In every generation, the world has produced enemies of human freedom. They have attacked America, because we are freedom's home and defender. And the commitment of our fathers is now the calling of our time.'[13]

A week later, to the joint session of Congress, on 20 September he stated: 'My fellow citizens, for the last nine days, the entire world has seen for itself the state of our Union-and it is strong.' (applause). 'Tonight we are a country awakened to danger and called to defend freedom. Our grief has turned to anger, and anger to resolution. Whether we bring our enemies to justice, or bring justice to our enemies, justice will be done.' (applause). … 'On September 11th, enemies of freedom committed an act of war against our country.' … 'Americans are asking, why do they hate us? They hate what we see right here in this chamber-a democratically elected government. Their leaders are self-appointed. They hate our freedoms-our freedom of religion, our freedom of speech, our freedom to vote and assemble and disagree with each other.' …. 'Every nation, in every region, now has a decision to make. Either you are with us, or you are with the terrorists. (Applause). … 'This is not, however, just America's fight. And what is at stake is not just America's freedom. This is the world's fight. This is civilization's fight. This is the fight of all who believe in progress and pluralism, tolerance and freedom.' [14] Of course it was much more than that, but some uncomfortable fundamental lessons could not be admitted. The Manichaean formula masked the US support for all the authoritarian regimes that it supported in pursuit of regional stability and access to its resources.

The American Image and the Image of America

From the limited and exclusive rhetoric it was a short jump to the 2002 State of the Union in which Bush identified the 'Axis of Evil': Iraq, Iran and North Korea, and the wars into which George Bush may lead the Americans and perhaps us as well. The Manichaean image proposed by Bush made life simple. Like the infamous *New Yorker* cartoon of its own city, there was little to know or understand beyond the Hudson River. It was easier to avoid the hard questions. It was simpler to avoid the hard lessons. It was easier to undercut European attempts at constructive engagement and diplomacy with Iran and North Korea, for the sake of a rhetorical flourish and the creation of a mythical 'axis' that grouped the 'other' as though they had not spent years of war with each other. 'Nations themselves are narrations.' This was perhaps never more important in constructing the 'imagined community'. To that end it was important for Bush to reduce the character of the United States and that of its enemies to basic labels that are no more useful to analyse and understand the problems, but are essential to cohere and motivate society, especially after Vietnam. As Renan put it: 'Getting its history wrong is part of being a nation.'[15]

It was not necessarily or exclusively US values, its lifestyle, its freedom and so forth that brought such enmity. It was more an updated version of the fact that Americans were 'over paid and over here'. It had something to do with the resources upon which the American lifestyle was built, namely cheap oil, it had something to do with the US presence in Saudi Arabia, (and by implicit

implication elsewhere), it had something to do with Israel and Palestine. It had something to do with US 'freedom' being seen as support for authoritarian regimes throughout the Middle East and elsewhere for the last fifty years and longer.[16] These are awkward issues and in no way are advanced to justify the attacks of 11 September, but it would be folly not to more fundamentally re-examine the structures of US foreign policy, along with the structures of global wealth, poverty and distribution.[17]

A 'United States' as a 'city on a hill', would probably not have experienced 11 September.

On 11 September 2002, a *Guardian* editorial concluded that lessons remained unlearned. The wider questions hardly asked. It concluded: 'Like Bin Laden's al-Qaida, George Bush has much (privately) to celebrate this day. A weak, second-rate president with no mandate and less nous has since September 11 gained unprecedented levels of voter support. Only an increasingly self-induced sense of an American state of siege, characterised opportunistically by the Republican right as a state of war, could have produced such a result. Only Mr Bush's progressively higher-handed, unilateral and exaggerated responses to September 11 could have made of Bin Laden, and now Saddam Hussein, such potent and (to some) heroic bogeymen. Perhaps only Mr Bush could have squandered the almost universal goodwill offered the US a year ago.' [18] A sentiment that was echoed by Al Gore on 23 September 2002.

Also on that day, 11 September 2002, before a more dignified reading of the names by former Mayor Rudolf Guilliani, in a further bizarre attempt to align 11 September with other 'heroic' struggles, parts of the Declaration of Independence were (earlier) read out and Governor Pataki read the Gettysberg Address that Lincoln had orated in 1863. Perhaps, just as the chevron that is the Vietnam Memorial situates itself by pointing to the Lincoln Memorial and the Washington Monument on the Mall, perhaps Pataki's words intended a similar act of location at Ground Zero, to invoke the idea of heroic struggle or suffering for benevolent ideas. But these orations too, were excluding other interpretative possibilities. Gary Wills, author of *Lincoln at Gettysburg: The Words That Remade America,* explained of the event in 1863: 'Everyone in that vast throng of thousands was having his or her intellectual pocket picked. The crowd departed with a new thing in its ideological luggage, that new constitution Lincoln had substituted for the one they brought with them. They walked off, from those curving graves on the hillside, under a changed sky, into a different America. Lincoln had revolutionised the Revolution, giving people a new past to live with that would change their future indefinitely'.[19]

On 20 September 2001, Bush explained: 'Great harm has been done to us. We have suffered great loss. And in our grief and anger we have found our mission and our moment. Freedom and fear are at war. The advance of human freedom-the great achievement of our time, and the great hope of every time-now depends on us. Our nation-this generation-will lift a dark threat of violence from our people and our future. We will rally the world to this cause by our efforts, by our courage. We will not tire, we will not falter, and we will not fail.' … 'We'll go back to our lives and routines, and that is good. Even grief recedes with time and grace. But our resolve must not pass. Each of us will remember what happened that day, and to whom it happened. We'll remember the moment the news came-where we were and what we were doing. …'

It may still be premature in terms of 11 September, but in terms of the Bush Administration's response to the terrorist acts, it is about time the Hitchens line was rehashed. Some images, but especially the rhetoric, provide a simple and abstracted framework that will not serve US security though it may well serve some interests.

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[1]Ian Parker, 'Dept. of Memory: Where Were You, Really?' *The New Yorker* (8 October 2001).

[2]Christopher Hitchens, 'Kennedy Lies,' in his, *Prepared for the Worst: Selected Essays & Minority Reports* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1989), 252.

[3]*The Economist* 22 September 2001.

[4]Frances Fitzgerald, 'George Bush and the World,' *The New York Review of Books* (26 September 2002), 84.

[5]David Ryan, *US Foreign Policy in World History* (London: Routledge, 2000), p. 190.

[6]Mark Gillespie, Poll analysis: 'Most Americans Still Rallying Behind Bush and War on Terrorism' The Gallup Organization, www.gallup.com, accessed 14 January 2002.

[7]Walter LaFeber, 'The Bush Doctrine,' *Diplomatic History*, vol. 26, no. 4 (Fall 2002), 558.

[8]Eric Schmitt and Thom Shanker, 'Administration Considers Broader, More Powerful Options for Potential Retaliation,' *The New York Times*, 13 September 2001.

[9]Lewis A. Coser , 'Introduction' to Halbwachs, *On Collective Memory*, pp. 1-3; Peter Novik, *That Noble Dream: The Objectivity Question and the American Historical Profession* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), pp. 4-5.

[10]Michael H. Hunt, *Ideology and US Foreign Policy,* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1987), p. 12.

[11]For more on the working of narratives, framework and context see Alun Munslow, *Deconstructing History* (London: Routledge, 1997), pp. 174-5.

[12]Louis Hartz, *The Liberal Tradition in America*, (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1955), p. 289.

[13]President George Bush, Remarks at National Day of Prayer and Remembrance, The National Cathedral, The White House, www.whitehouse.gov/news/releases/2001/09/20010914-21.html, 14 September 2001.

[14]President George Bush, Address to a Joint Session of Congress and the American People, 20 September 2001, the white House, www.whitehouse.gov/news/releases/2001/09/20010920-8.html. Accessed 17 October 2001.

[15]The term is Benedict Anderson's. Alex Callinicos, *Theories and Narratives: Reflections on the Philosophy of History* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1995), p. 45; Alun Munslow, *Deconstructing History* (London: Routledge, 1997), pp. 9-11; Renan cited by Eric Hobsbawm, *Nations and Nationalism Since 1780: Programme, Myth, Reality* (Cambridge: Canto, 1990), p. 12. See also Peter Novik, *That Noble Dream: The "Objectivity Question" and the American Historical Profession* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988).

[16]Danner elaborates: 'In the gulf, as in other places and at other times, America stands not for freedom but for stability. Its interest is in the unfettered flow of oil from the gulf to the industrialized world. Now, as in 1991, American policy makers will struggle to achieve this interest within the bounds of the forbearance of the American public.' Mark Danner, 'The Battlefield in the American Mind,' *New York Times* (16 October 2001).

[17] For more see, Ted Honderich, *After the Terror* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2002).

[18]Editorial, *The Guardian* (London), 11 September 2002.

[19]Gary Wills, *Lincoln at Gettysburg: The Words That Remade America,* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1992), p. 20, 38;