

TOM ENGELHARDT



**MAKING THE
WORLD UNSAFE
FOR DEMOCRACY**

COLDTYPE

Boy President in a Failed World?

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On Thursday morning, with the London bombings monopolizing the TV set, I watched our President take that long, outdoor, photo-op walk from the G-8 summit meeting to the microphones to make a statement to reporters. Exploding subways, a blistered bus, the dead, wounded, dazed, and distraught just then staggering through our on-screen morning, and there he was. He had his normal, slightly bowlegged walk, his arms held just out from his side in a fashion that brings the otherwise unusable word “akimbo” to mind. It’s a walk — the walk to the podium at the White House press conference, to the presidential helicopter, to the Rose Garden microphone — that is now his well-practiced signature move. For some people, a tone of voice or a facial expression can tell you everything you need to know; that’s how the President’s walk acts for him. And *nothing* puts spine in that walk the way the war on terror does. Each horror is like a shot of adrenalin.

As he approached the microphones on Thursday, while ambulances and police cars rushed through the streets of London, everything about him radiated a single word: resolve. It was a

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word that came to mind even before he used it making his brief statement, and then turned, no less resolutely, to walk away just as the word “Iraq” came out of the mouth of some reporter as part of an unfinished question. This was definitely our War (on Terror) President back in the saddle.

He said nothing to surprise. He offered “heartfelt condolences to the people of London, people who lost lives”; he spoke of defending Americans against heightened dangers (“I have been in contact with our Homeland Security folks. I instructed them to be in touch with local and state officials about the facts of what took place here and in London, and to be extra vigilant, as our folks start heading to work.”); he extolled the strength of resolve of the other G-8 leaders by comparing it to his own (“I was most impressed by the resolve of all the leaders in the room. Their resolve is as strong as my resolve.”); and he presented for the umpteenth time his Manichaeian vision of a world of good and evil in which he and his administration are unhesitatingly the representatives of all goodness. (“[T]he contrast couldn’t be clearer between the intentions and the hearts of those of us who care deeply about human rights and human liberty, and those who kill — those who have got such evil in their heart that they will take the lives of innocent folks.”)

There’s something so confoundingly dream-like about all this, so fantastic, even absurd, especially set against the background of the murder of random people taking public transportation in one of the globe’s great cities. As reality grows ever darker, our President never ventures far from his scripted version of a fictional world that is nowhere to be seen. Let’s keep in mind that this was the same President who, only the day before in Denmark, had launched a vigorous, completely ludicrous defense of his Guantánamo prison complex. Just two weeks earlier, his Vice President had pointed out — as if he were making one of those Caribbean tourist ads — that the prisoners there were lucky to be

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housed and fed so admirably in the balmy “tropics.” Now, the President was practically proffering tickets to those tropics for Europeans who wanted to check the situation out for themselves. (“[T]he prisoners are well-treated in Guantánamo. There’s total transparency. The International Red Cross can inspect any time, any day. And you’re welcome to go. The press, of course, is welcome to go down to Guantánamo... There’s very few prison systems around the world that have seen such scrutiny as this one. And for those of you here on the continent of Europe who have doubt, I’d suggest buying an airplane ticket and going down and look — take a look for yourself.”)

It was certainly a unique vacation package he was offering. As it happens, Jane Mayer of the *New Yorker* magazine took one of those tickets and, even getting a military dog-and-pony show at the prison, was struck by “the utter lack of due process” in the one trial-like proceeding she saw. (“It looked like a court hearing, but there were no lawyers.”) The place — despite having its own Starbucks for the Americans — struck her as a giant dystopian experiment in mind manipulation.

A number of FBI agents took these tickets a while ago and sent back harrowing tales of mistreatment and torture (“The documents showed that FBI agents were particularly upset with what they saw as physical and mental abuse of the detainees, including the sticking of lighted cigarettes in their ears, choking, beatings, temperature changes, hooding, the use of dogs and other forms of harassment.”); or simply consider what the elder President Bush’s White House physician, a former doctor in the Army Medical Corps, had to say recently on this Bush administration’s treatment of prisoners:

“Today, however, it seems as though our government and the military have slipped into Joseph Conrad’s ‘Heart of Darkness.’ The widespread reports of torture and ill-treatment — fre-

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quently based on military and government documents — defy the claim that this abusive behavior is limited to a few noncommissioned officers at Abu Ghraib or isolated incidents at Guantanamo Bay. When it comes to torture, the military's traditional leadership and discipline have been severely compromised up and down the chain of command. Why? I fear it is because the military has bowed to errant civilian leadership."

Of course, that's just reality and means nothing to our President, who assures the world that he's the defender of "human rights" against the forces of evil. Guantánamo is but the tip of the offshore archipelago of injustice sponsored with enthusiasm by him, his top officials, his lawyers, et al. In fact, the "human rights and human liberties" President and his men have created such an ungodly mess at home and in the world that trying to tackle any of his tightly held fantasies point by point is a nearly impossible task, the equivalent of cleaning out the Augean stables. But put that aside for a moment. Whatever he may be — and it's worth saying this exactly at such a moment — George Bush is simply not the representative of good. While holding up the banner of democracy, he and his men, experts in vote suppression and gerrymandering on their home turf, have created an ever less democratic, more intolerant, more police-ridden, more liberties-impaired America. That's simply their record on the ground. But after a while, as you watch the carnage from London to Baghdad, you say these things — or write them — and then you just throw up your hands in despair. Why write more?

"The War on Terror Goes On"

Now, we know, of course, that George's people read the opinion polls and check their focus groups and that, amid his increasingly poor polling figures (including a recent Zogby poll, hardly covered

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in the mainstream press, that showed 42% of Americans willing to consider his possible impeachment for lying about going to war with Iraq), he hangs onto one thing: the war on terror. It's his. Americans still believe, though in smaller numbers than before, that he's handling it well. Before the attacks of September 11, 2001, before he proclaimed his war on terror — though that period now seems almost beyond memory — his presidency looked dead in the water. After a brief, embarrassing moment of fear and flight on Air Force One that long ago day, he clambered aboard the September 11th jet and flew it for all he was worth. That day made the man and his advisors undoubtedly believe that, in the end, it is likely to make or break his presidency.

Before the war in Iraq, and again before the recent election, he, his handlers, and his top officials played the war-on-terror card domestically with impressive effectiveness. All of this is well known. So why wouldn't they return to it as the early months of his second term begin to look much like those in-the-doldrums early months of his first one? As London demonstrated all too painfully — as his policies in Iraq and elsewhere help to ensure — we now live in a Kamikaze world. After all, as he always says with a strange pride, he made Iraq into “the central theater in the war on terror.” Remember, whatever else Iraq was, before the invasion it was a country that had never experienced a suicide car bombing (though Baghdad was evidently car-bombed by the CIA in the 1990s via the Iraqi National Accord, the exile organization of the future prime minister of occupied Iraq, Iyad Allawi) or sent a suicide car bomber anywhere else on Earth; and don't forget our now seemingly endless and bloody occupation of unreconstructed Afghanistan, and so many grim policies elsewhere, most of which impact heavily on the largely Arab oil heartlands of the planet. All of this has so far been, speaking purely practically, as London may demonstrate once again, useful to the President domestically, even if his policies are

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helping produce it, even if those of us who live in the large cities of the world are never again likely to get on a subway or a bus without suppressing that second or two of doubt about what might happen next.

In *Superpower Syndrome*, an insightful paperback published in 2003, psychiatrist Robert Jay Lifton wrote of how, in the wake of the 9/11 attacks, the Bush administration “responded apocalyptically to an apocalyptic challenge”; of how, facing Islamist fanaticism, it offered its own version of a fundamentalist “world war without end”; of how it perversely partnered up with al-Qaeda in a strange global dance of animosity. Once again, the London bombs may bolster Bush’s waning support domestically, just as his acts globally reinforce the evidently growing support for various al-Qaeda linked or identified groups. All of this activity — from those color-coded alerts at electorally appropriate moments to the President’s speeches — can seem quite cynical and manipulative, and yet there was a moment, a line, in the President’s statement in Scotland which spoke of something quite different. Near the end, he said, quite simply, “The war on terror goes on.” It was one of those moments filled with resolve, but with something else as well.

“The war on terror goes on...” You might imagine that such a sentence, especially at that moment, would have been the most mournful, the saddest of statements. But in the President’s mouth it had none of that quality. Though far more subdued, what it hinted at was one of the President’s most childish comments, now almost forgotten. Back in July, 2003, when the Iraq War that should have ended was just turning into an insurgency that wouldn’t end, he taunted the Iraqi insurgents, saying, “Anybody who wants to harm American troops will be found and brought to justice... There are some who feel like the conditions are such that they can attack us there. My answer is, bring ‘em on.”

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“Bring ‘em on.” As then, so in Scotland, you could feel the way George Bush had absorbed his own Global War on Terror into his political and personal bloodstream. It was indeed, to use Boston Globe columnist James Carroll’s word for it, his personal crusade. In that context, each terror attack is, for him, strangely like a shot of adrenaline (as it is, piety aside and for quite different reasons, for the TV news channels which ride such attacks for all they’re worth). Each attack somehow bucks him up, sets him walking more resolutely. I have no doubt that, serially, they give meaning to his life. This, after all, was the man who, according to the Washington Post’s Bob Woodward, kept in his Oval Office desk drawer “his own personal scorecard for the war” in the form of photographs with brief biographies and personality sketches of those judged to be the world’s most dangerous terrorists, each ready to be crossed out by the President as his forces took them down. This is the Osama Bin Laden (or now Zarqawi) “dead or alive” President.

Playing at War

More than anything else, as I watched him that morning in Gleneagles, Scotland, I was filled with a sense of sadness that we had reached such a perilous moment with such a man, or really — for here is my deepest suspicion — such a man-child in power. Yes, he genuinely believes in his war on terror, even as he and his advisors use it to his own advantage. And yes, he’s good at being, or rather enacting with all his being, the role of the War on Terror President. And yet there’s something so painfully childlike in the spectacle of him. Here, after all, is a 59 year-old who loves to appear in front of massed troops, saying gloriously encouraging and pugnacious things while being hoo-ah-ed — and almost invariably he makes such appearances dressed in some custom-made military

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jacket with “commander in chief” specially stitched across his heart, just as he landed on the deck of the USS Abraham Lincoln back in May 2003 in a Navy pilot’s outfit. Who could imagine Abe himself, that most civilian of wartime presidents, or Franklin D. Roosevelt, or Dwight D. Eisenhower, a real general, wearing such G.I. Joe-style play outfits?

Let’s face it. George Bush likes dress-up. What a video game is to a teenager, the Presidency seems to be to this man. It’s a free pass to the movies with him playing that brave warrior part. All in all, I’m afraid to say, it must be fun. When he so cavalierly said, “Bring ‘em on,” he was surely simply carried away by the spirit of the game. What it wasn’t, of course, was the statement of a mature human being, an adult.

I don’t usually say such things, but there’s something unbelievably stunted about all this. He and his top officials seem almost completely divorced from any sense of the actual consequences of their various acts and decisions. They live in some kind of dream world offshore of reality, which would perhaps not be so disturbing if they didn’t also control the levers of power in what, not so long ago, was regularly referred to as the “lone” or “last superpower” or the globe’s only “hyperpower.” (Even in their own terms, it’s a sign of their failed stewardship that almost no one uses such phrases any more or, say, Pax Americana, another commonplace of 2002 and 2003.)

It may be that nations deserve the leaders they get and perhaps it’s no mistake that George Bush ended up as our leader — twice no less — in a period that otherwise seemed to cry out for having your basic set of grown-ups in power, or that his Secretary of Defense likes to play stand-up comic at his news conferences, or that his first Attorney General just loved to sing songs of his own creation to his staff, or that none of them can get it through their heads that

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it's not just the terrorists who, in our world, have been taking "the lives of the innocent."

I keep thinking: Who let these children out in the world on their own? Obviously the American people, in some state of global denial, did. It's strange, but I can't get out of my mind an image that Bush administration officials, from the President on down, were using regularly back in 2003-2004. They often quite publicly compared the Iraqis to a child taking his first wobbly bike ride (assumedly on a democratic path) under the administration's tutelage. There was Washington, the kindly adult, stooped over, helping balance that ungainly kid, or trying to decide whether this was the moment to take off those training wheels and let the child take an initial spin on his own, chancing of course a spill.

In May of 2004, for instance, the President, according to a CBS News report, "sought to rally Republican lawmakers around his Iraq plan..., saying Iraqis are ready to 'take the training wheels off' by assuming some political power." Secretary of Defense Rumsfeld spoke similarly in March of that year: "Getting Iraq straightened out, he said, was like teaching a kid to ride a bike: 'They're learning, and you're running down the street holding on to the back of the seat. You know that if you take your hand off they could fall, so you take a finger off and then two fingers, and pretty soon you're just barely touching it. You can't know when you're running down the street how many steps you're going to have to take. We can't know that, but we're off to a good start.'" And from Undersecretary of Defense Paul Wolfowitz to L. Paul Bremer, head of the Coalition Provisional Authority in Baghdad, others chimed in similarly.

Of course, all of this was a lie of an image and not just because it was classically patronizing and colonial. After all, if you wanted to extend the image, you would have to say that the American parent helping that sweet child learn how to bike was also plundering the

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child's future college fund, looting his future patrimony, and turning his life into a swirl of deadly chaos. Take off those wheels and let him wobble around that first corner and he was likely to be knocked off his bike by an RPG round and find himself in a hospital without supplies run by doctors who were either being assassinated or fleeing the country.

Perhaps this image, now retired by the administration, came back to me as the President spoke because, only the day before, on a wet and slippery Scottish road, riding his own special sports bike, George had crashed into a policeman guarding him, scraping his hands and arms, and sending that policeman briefly to the hospital.

Now, anyone can fall off a bike, but I had to wonder who had taken those training wheels off the Bush administration bike — al-Qaeda by its 9/11 attacks, would assumedly be the answer — and let its officials careen off on their first wild rides, all of which have left them skidding off the road and someone else in the hospital. I wondered what the inhabitants of Baghdad, the capital of our failed state of Iraq, might have been thinking about the President's statement on the London bombings or all the media attention that was given over to them. After all, 7 to 8 car bombings a week now take place in Baghdad alone — and this figure is held up proudly by the American military as an accomplishment of the moment (being down from 14 to 21 before a recent offensive in that city). And yet in our press there are never stories about how Baghdadis keep stiff upper lips or carry on with life amid the carnage, though somehow they evidently do.

If you'll excuse another image, it was as if our child leaders had taken off, ridden directly into someone else's neighborhood, seen a wasp's nest, promptly stomped on it, and then stood around praising themselves and waiting to be stung. If you judge a war by its

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results, then our president's war on terror has led only to ever more terror and ever more war. Just the other day, the Bush administration did some new figuring and reported that terrorist incidents globally in 2004 had increased five-fold over the previous figures it had released to the public. For that year, the National Counterterrorism Center now counts up 3,192 attacks worldwide, with 28,433 people killed, wounded, or kidnapped — and Iraq led the list by a mile even though attacks on the U.S. military were not counted in the tally.

In the meantime, as Dilip Hiro points out, bombing attacks — Bali, Turkey, Madrid, London — are moving ever closer to the heartland of our particular world, of George Bush's imperium. Once upon a time it was a trope of American presidents to claim that we were fighting there, wherever there might be — in the case of Lyndon Johnson Vietnam, in the case of Ronald Reagan Central America — so that we might not fight on the beaches of San Diego or in the fields of Texas. When a president said such a thing, it sounded fierce and threatening — and it was inconceivable. Armed Nicaraguans were never going to punch through Texas, nor were Vietnamese guerrillas going to slip ashore in Southern California, nor Panamanians in Atlanta; nor Grenadians in Key West; nor, for that matter, Iraqis of the First Gulf War era in Boston.

George Bush now uses the same punch lines as those former presidents, just as he did recently in his national television address to the nation on Iraq. But for the first time, they have an actual meaning. They have perhaps even more meaning over “there.” Riverbend, the eloquent, young Baghdad Blogger, recently put the matter this way from the perspective of a resident of the Iraqi capital:

“Bush said: ‘Iraq is the latest battlefield in this war. ... The commander in charge of coalition operations in Iraq, who is

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also senior commander at this base, General John Vines, put it well the other day. He said, “We either deal with terrorism and this extremism abroad, or we deal with it when it comes to us.”

“He speaks of ‘abroad’ as if it is a vague desert-land filled with heavily-bearded men and possibly camels. ‘Abroad’ in his speech seems to indicate a land of inferior people — less deserving of peace, prosperity and even life. Don’t Americans know that this vast wasteland of terror and terrorists otherwise known as ‘Abroad’ was home to the first civilizations and is home now to some of the most sophisticated, educated people in the region? Don’t Americans realize that ‘abroad’ is a country full of people — men, women and children who are dying hourly? ‘Abroad’ is home for millions of us. It’s the place we were raised and the place we hope to raise our children — your field of war and terror.”

Failed-State World

“The war on terror goes on...” What a thing to say. We are now in a destabilizing world, and it will undoubtedly only get worse as George Bush’s “war” to stop terror goes on and on and on. The Bush administration will never cease to lend a hand — no matter what it thinks it’s doing — to those evil ones who will take innocent lives without a blink. It is ever ready to destabilize the oil heartlands of our planet, what not so long ago was regularly called “the arc of instability” (before any of our pundits really knew what instability was all about). The two countries the Bush administration has occupied are both dismally failed states effectively ruled by no one. One is now proudly held up by the President as the central theater in the war on terror, the other is the prime narco-state on the planet. And it’s clear that only the revealed weakness of a military giant that turned out to be incapable of imposing its will

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on two of the weaker states on Earth has prevented further radical acts of “decapitation,” armed “regime change,” and thoroughgoing destabilization.

Remember when neocons authors were writing about a world of “failed states,” that jungle out there just beyond our civilization? Where are they now that we need them? The bombings in London signal that, in such a failed-state world, failure — and the carnage that goes with it — only spreads like so many ripples in a pond into which someone is catapulting boulders. Nor will our leaders hesitate to destabilize our own country, turning it from the ultimate hyperpower into the ultimate failed state in a failed world.

There is a similar piece, I have no doubt, to be written about the maniacs — and yes, they have their strategies and their reasons and their grievances, including George Bush’s Iraq War — who are willing to climb into a car in Iraq, or take an underground ride in London with a backpack filled with explosives, or smash a plane into a tall building, or blow up a synagogue, or... They believe no less than our President in their fictional version of reality and are no less eager to impose it on the rest of us. They too, given half a chance, would create their own failed states in a failed-state world.

It is perhaps an insult to children to compare the Bush administration to them, but I’m at a loss for images. I’m a deeply civil person. If I had my choice, like so many people in this world of ours, I would simply wash my hands of their apocalypses and ours. Unfortunately, that’s not possible. Theirs, at least, are someone else’s responsibility, but George and his malign fictional worlds are, it seems, mine.

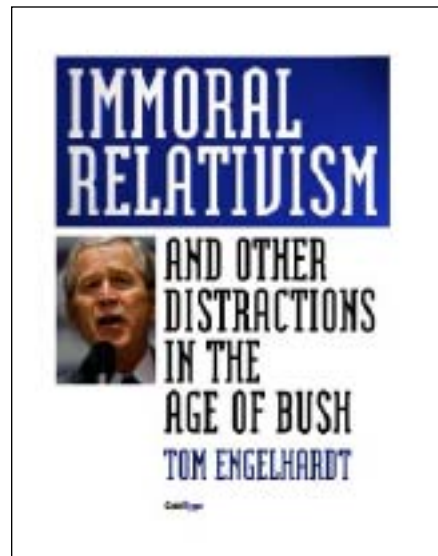
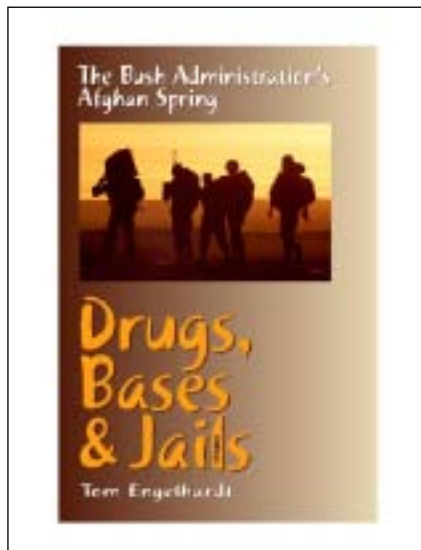
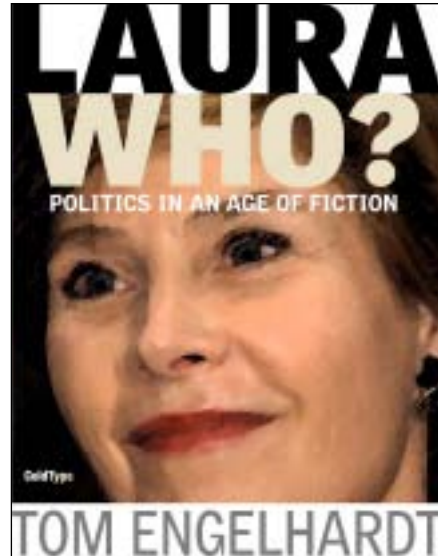
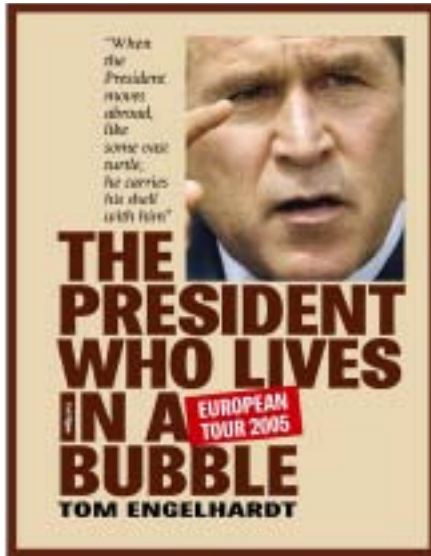
The sad thing is that the truth is relatively simple. What people using terror in the fashion of London are quite capable of doing is killing and maiming randomly and in large numbers — and perhaps in the process revealing to us both how fragile and how strong our

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world actually is. What they are completely incapable of doing, no matter what George Bush says, is taking our liberties and freedoms away. They can't take anything away. Only we can do that.

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