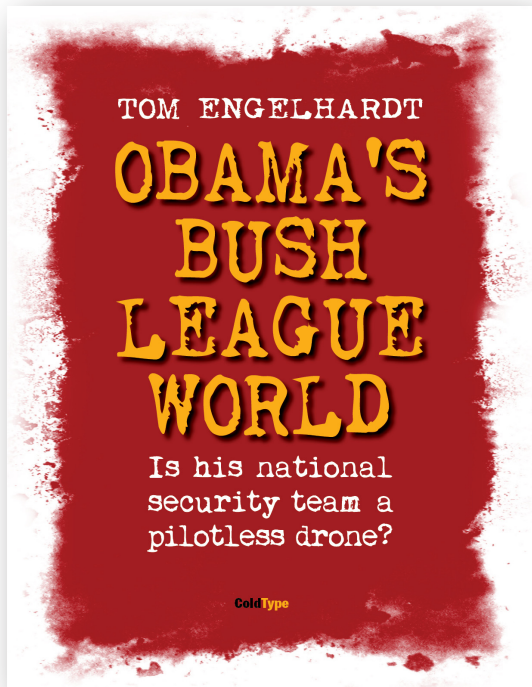


TOM ENGELHARDT

OBAMA'S BUSH LEAGUE WORLD

Is his national
security team a
pilotless drone?

ColdType



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OBAMA'S BUSH LEAGUE WORLD

George W. who? I mean, the guy is so over. He turned the big six-five the other day and it was barely a footnote in the news. And Dick Cheney, tick-tick-tick. Condoleezza Rice? She's already onto her next memoir, and yet it's as if she's been wiped from history, too? As for Donald Rumsfeld, he published his memoir in February and it hit the best-seller lists, but a few months later, where is he?

And can anyone be surprised? They were wrong about Afghanistan. They were wrong about Iraq. They were wrong about Saddam Hussein's weapons of mass destruction. They were wrong about what the military was capable of doing. The country imploded economically while they were at the helm. Geopolitically speaking, they headed the car of state for the nearest

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cliff. In fact, when it comes to pure wrongness, what weren't they wrong about?

Americans do seem to have turned the page on Bush and his cronies. (President Obama called it looking forward, not backward.) Still, glance over your shoulder and, if you're being honest, you'll have to admit that one thing didn't happen: *they* didn't turn the page on us.

They may have disappeared from our lives, but the post-9/11 world they had such a mad hand in creating hasn't. It's not just the Department of Homeland Security or that un-American word “homeland,” both of which are undoubtedly embedded in our lives forever; or the Patriot Act, now as American as apple pie; or Guantanamo which, despite a presidential promise, may never close; or all the wild, overblown fears of terrorism and the new security world that goes with them, neither of which shows the slightest sign of abating;

or the National Security Agency's surveillance and spying on Americans which, as far as we can tell, is ongoing. No, there are scores of Bush policies and positions that will clearly be with us until hell freezes over. Among them all, consider the Obama administration's updated version of that signature Bush invention, the Global War on Terror.

Yes, Obama's national security officials threw that term to the dogs back in 2009, and now pursue a no-name global strategy that's meant not to remind you of the Bush era. Recently, the White House released an unclassified summary of its 2011 "National Strategy for Counterterrorism," a 19-page document in prose only a giant bureaucracy with a desire to be impenetrable could produce. (Don't bother to read it. I read it for you.) If it makes a feeble attempt to put a little rhetorical space between Obama-style counterterrorism and what the Bush administration was doing, it still manages to send one overwhelming message: George W. Bush, Dick Cheney, et al., are still striding amongst us, carrying big sticks and with that same crazed look in their eyes.

The Global War on Terror (or GWOT in acronym-crazed Washington) was the bastard spawn of the disorientation and soaring hubris of the days after the 9/11 attacks, which set afire the delusional geopolitical dreams of Bush, Cheney, their top national security officials, and their neocon supporters. And here's the saddest thing: the Bush administration's most extreme ideas when it comes to GWOT are now the humdrum norm of Obama administration policies — and hardly anyone thinks it's worth a comment.

A History Lesson from Hell

It's easy to forget just how quickly GWOT was upon us or how strange it really was.



In their fever dreams, they thought that this was their moment and the apocalyptic winds of history were at their backs

On the night of September 11, 2001, addressing the nation, President Bush first spoke of winning "the war against terrorism." Nine days later, in an address to a joint session of Congress, the phrase "war on terror" was already being expanded. "Our war on terror," Bush said, "begins with al-Qaeda, but it does not end there. It will not end until every terrorist group of global reach has been found, stopped, and defeated."

In those early days, there were already clues aplenty as to which way the wind was gusting in Washington. Top administration officials immediately made it plain that a single yardstick was to measure planetary behavior from then on: Were you "with us or against us"? From the Gulf of Guinea to Central Asia, that question would reveal everything worth knowing, and terror would be its measure.

As the *New York Times* reported on September 14th, Bush's top officials had "cast aside diplomatic niceties" and were giving Arab countries and "the nations of the world a stark choice: stand with us against terrorism or face the certain prospect of death and destruction." According to Pakistani dictator Pervez Musharraf, Deputy Secretary of State Richard Armitage took that message directly to his country's intelligence director: either ally with Washington in the fight against al-Qaeda, or prepare to be bombed "back to the Stone Age," as Armitage reportedly put it.

Global War on Terror? They weren't exaggerating. These were people shocked by what had happened to iconic buildings in "the homeland" and overawed by what they imagined to be the all-conquering power of the US military. In their fever dreams, they thought that this was their moment and the apocalyptic winds of history were at their backs. And they weren't hiding where they wanted it to blow them either. That was why they tried to come up with names

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to replace GWOT – World War IV (the third was the Cold War) and the Long War being two of them – that would be even blunter about their desire to plunge us into a situation from which none of us would emerge in our lifetimes. But to the extent anything stuck, GWOT did.

And if everything is in a name, then the significance of that one wasn't hard to grasp. Bush's national security folks focused on an area that they termed "the arc of instability." It stretched from North Africa to the Chinese border, conveniently sweeping through the major oil lands of the planet. They would later dub it "The Greater Middle East." In that vast region, they were ready to declare hunting season open and they would be the ones to hand out the hunting licenses.

Within weeks of 9/11, top administration officials like Deputy Secretary of Defense Paul Wolfowitz were speaking of this vast region as a global "swamp," an earthly miasma that they were going to "drain" of terrorists. As the US military had declared whole areas of enemy-controlled rural Vietnam "free fire zones" in the 1960s, so they were going to turn much of the planet into such a zone, a region where no national boundary, no claim of sovereignty would stop them from taking out whomever (or whatever government) they cared to.

Within days of 9/11, administration officials let it be known that, in their war, they were preparing to target terrorist groups in at least 60 countries. And if they were that blunt in public, in private they were exuberantly extreme. Top officials spoke with gusto about "taking off the gloves" or "the shackles" (the ones, as they saw it, that Congress had placed on the executive branch and the intelligence community in the wake of the Vietnam War and the Watergate affair).

As journalist Ron Suskind reported



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in his book *The One Percent Doctrine*, in a "Presidential Finding" on September 17, 2011, only six days after the World Trade Center towers went down, Bush granted the CIA an unprecedented license to wage war globally. By then, the CIA had presented him with a plan whose name was worthy of a sci-fi film: the "Worldwide Attack Matrix." According to Suskind, it already "detailed operations [to come] against terrorists in 80 countries."

In other words, with less than 200 countries on the planet, the president had declared open season on nearly half of them. Of course, the Pentagon wasn't about to be left out while the CIA was given the run of the globe. Soon enough, Secretary of Defense Rumsfeld began building up an enormous CIA-style secret army of elite special operations forces within the military. By the end of the Bush years, these had reportedly been deployed in – don't be surprised – 60 countries. In the Obama era, that number expanded to 75 – mighty close to the 80 in the Worldwide Attack Matrix.

And one more thing, there was a new weapon in the world, the perfect weapon to make mincemeat of all boundaries and a mockery of national sovereignty and international law (with little obvious danger to us): the pilotless drone. Surveillance drones already in existence were quickly armed with missiles and bombs and, in November 2002, one of these was sent out on the first CIA robot assassination mission – to Yemen, where six al-Qaeda suspects in a vehicle were obliterated without a by-your-leave to anyone.

CT to the Horizon

That CIA strike launched the drone wars, which are now a perfectly humdrum part of our American world of war. Only recently, the Obama administration leaked news that it was intensifying its military-run war

against al-Qaeda in Yemen by bringing the CIA into the action. The Agency is now to build a base for its drone air wing somewhere in the Middle East to hunt Yemeni terrorists (and assumedly those elsewhere in the region as well). Yemen functionally has no government to cooperate with, but in pure Bushian fashion, who cares?

Similarly, as June ended, unnamed American officials leaked the news that, for the first time, a US military drone had conducted a strike against al-Shabab militants in Somalia, with the implication that this was a “war” that would also be intensifying. At about the same time, curious reports emerged from Pakistan, where the CIA has been conducting an escalating drone war since 2004 (strikes viewed “negatively” by 97% of Pakistanis, according to a recent Pew poll). Top Pakistani officials were threatening to shut down the Agency’s drone operations at Shamsi air base in Baluchistan. Shamsi is the biggest of the three borrowed Pakistani bases from which the CIA secretly launches its drones. The Obama administration responded bluntly. White House counterterrorism chief John O. Brennan insisted that, whatever happened, the US would continue to “deliver precise and overwhelming force against al-Qaida” in the Pakistani tribal areas.

As Spencer Ackerman of *Wired*’s Danger Room blog summed things up, “The harsh truth is that the Pakistanis can’t stop the drone war on their soil. But they can shift its launching points over the Afghan border. And the United States is already working on a backup plan for a long-term drone war, all without the Pakistanis’ help.” In other words, permission from a beleaguered local ally might be nice, but it isn’t a conceptual necessity. (And in any case, CIA flights from Shamsi still evidently continue uninterrupted.)

In other words, if Bush’s crew is long



We can’t be sure how many countries American drones, military or CIA, are patrolling, but in at least six of them they have launched strikes in recent years that have killed more “suspects” than ever died in the 9/11 attacks

gone, the world they willed us is alive and well. After all, there are reasonable odds that, on the day you read this piece, somewhere in the free-fire zone of the Greater Middle East, a drone “piloted” from an air base in the western United States or perhaps a secret “suburban facility” near Langley, Virginia, will act as judge, jury, and executioner somewhere in the “arc of instability.” It will take out a terrorist suspect or suspects, or a set of civilians mistaken for terrorists, or a “target” someone in Washington didn’t like, or that one of our allies-cum-intelligence-assets had it in for, or perhaps a mix of all of the above. We can’t be sure how many countries American drones, military or CIA, are patrolling, but in at least six of them – Afghanistan, Pakistan, Yemen, Somalia, Libya, and Iraq – they have launched strikes in recent years that have killed more “suspects” than ever died in the 9/11 attacks.

And there is more – possibly much more – to come. In late June, the Obama administration posted that unclassified summary of its 2011 National Strategy for Counterterrorism at the White House website. It’s a document that carefully avoids using the the term “war on terror,” even though counterterrorism advisor Brennan did admit that the document “tracked closely with the goals” of the Bush administration.

The document tries to argue that, when it comes to counterterrorism (or CT), the Obama administration has actually pulled back somewhat from the expansiveness of Bush-era GWOT thinking. We are now, it insists, only going after “al-Qaeda and its affiliates and adherents,” not every “terror group” on the planet. But here’s the curious thing: when you check out its “areas of focus,” other than “the Homeland” (always capitalized as if our country were the United States of Homeland), what you find is an expanded version of the Bush global

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target zone, including the Maghreb and Sahel (northern Africa), East Africa, the Arabian Peninsula, Iraq, South Asia, Central Asia, and – thrown in for good measure – Southeast Asia. In most of those areas, Bush-style hunting season is evidently still open.

If you consider deeds, not words, when it comes to drones the arc of instability is expanding; and based on the new counterterrorism document, the next place for our robotic assassins to cross borders in search of targets could be the Maghreb and Sahel. There, we're told, al-Qaeda in the Lands of the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM), with roots in Algeria, but operatives in northern Mali, among other places, potentially threatens "US citizens and interests in the region."

Here's how the document puts the matter in its classically bureaucratese version of English:

"[W]e must therefore pursue near-term efforts and at times more targeted approaches that directly counter AQIM and its enabling elements. We must work actively to contain, disrupt, degrade, and dismantle AQIM as logical steps on the path to defeating the group. As appropriate, the United States will use its CT tools, weighing the costs and benefits of its approach in the context of regional dynamics and perceptions and the actions and capabilities of its partners in the region..."

That may not sound so ominous, but best guess: the Global War on Terror is soon likely to be on the march across North Africa, heading south. And recent Obama national security appointments only emphasize how much the drone wars are on Washington's future agenda. After all, Leon Panetta, the man who, since 2009, ran the CIA's drone wars, has moved over to the Pentagon as secretary of defense; while



Count on drone-factory assembly lines to rev up as well, and the military's special operations forces to be in expansion mode

Bush's favorite general, David Petraeus, the war commander who loosed American air power (including drone power) in a massive way in Afghanistan, is moving on to the CIA.

On his first visit to South Asia as secretary of defense, Panetta made the claim that Washington was "within reach of strategically defeating al-Qaeda." Perhaps it won't surprise you that such news signals not a winding down, but a ratcheting up, of the Global War on Terror. Panetta, as Craig Whitlock of the *Washington Post* reported, "hinted of more to come, saying he would redouble efforts by the military and the spy agency to work together on counterterrorism missions outside the traditional war zones of Afghanistan and Iraq."

More to come, as two men switching their "civilian" and military roles partner up. Count on drone-factory assembly lines to rev up as well, and the military's special operations forces to be in expansion mode. And note that by the penultimate page of that CT strategy summary, the administration has left al-Qaeda behind and is muttering in bureau-speak about Hizballah and Hamas, Iran and Syria ("active sponsors of terrorism"), and even the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia.

On the Bush administration's watch, the US blew a gasket, American power went into decline, and the everyday security of everyday Americans took a major hit. Still, give them credit. They were successful on at least one count: they made sure that we'd never stop fighting their war on terror. In this sense, Obama and his top officials are a drone national security team, carrying out the dreams and fantasies of their predecessors, while Bush and his men (and woman) give lucrative speeches and write books, hundreds or thousands of miles away.

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