

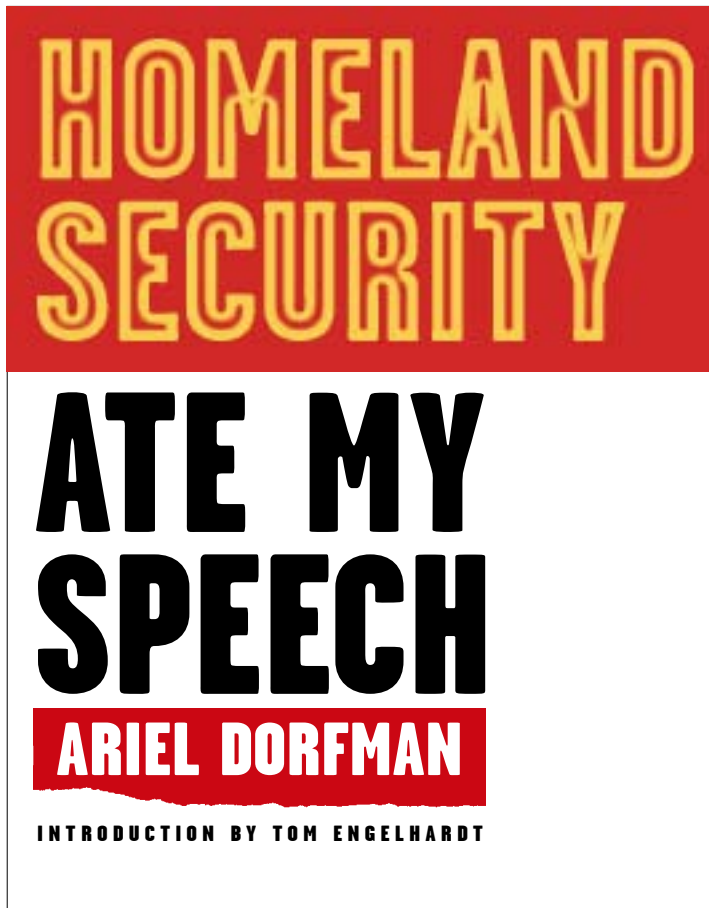
**HOMELAND
SECURITY**

**ATE MY
SPEECH**

ARIEL DORFMAN

GoldType

INTRODUCTION BY TOM ENGELHARDT



Ariel Dorfman has written extensively about the relationship between the two September 11ths, particularly in his book of provocations, **Other Septembers, Many Americas** (Seven Stories). He is also the author, most recently, of **Desert Memories: Journeys Through the Chilean North** (National Geographic) and a novel, **Burning City** (Random House), written with his youngest son, Joaquin. His website is: www.adorfman.duke.edu.

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INTRODUCTION

TOM ENGELHARDT

In April 2005, I posted a dispatch at tomdispatch.com, in which I claimed that “a senior official in one of our intelligence agencies” had slipped me an unpublished manuscript by “the President.” I added that I believed it genuine and had done my best to vet it. My source, I mentioned, had told me that the book might have had illustrations by either Paul Wolfowitz or Donald Rumsfeld (though no illustrations arrived with it). The title of the manuscript, I swore, was *George’s Amazing Alphabet Book of the Contemporary World*, or *Al-Qaedas All Around* and, though it was missing two letters of the alphabet, K and R, it had stirring contemporary entries for children such as:

“W as in Waterboarding. Wally waterboarded Ahmed (see A). Kids, it’s not surfboarding, but almost! There’s the board and the water and the person on the board, and it’s the main sport of the Central Intelligence Agency (see G), and the great thing is – you can do it twenty-four hours a day. You never have to wait for the surf to be up.”

With this satire, I hoped to catch something of George’s grim world. I assumed that what I had written, including “George’s” book, was far too ridiculous on every level for anyone to take seriously and so never put a humor warning on it. How wrong I was became clear as soon as the first e-letters from readers arrived at the Tomdispatch mailbox, filled with

shock that the President had written such things, or insisting I had been gulled, that this was obviously a product not of the President but of the CIA. Certifiably sane but puzzled friends got in touch to ask whether the “manuscript” was real or my fantasy. In this way, I learned a painfully useful lesson, one Ariel Dorfman, author of *Other Septembers, Many Americas*, absorbed recently – as he recounts here. The lesson is simple enough: The Bush administration’s actions since 9/11 have outstripped anyone’s ability to parody them; or, put another way, nothing in our world now is too absurd, too far-fetched to seem plausible. This, of course, is why one of the more popular news programs of recent years is Jon Stewart’s Daily Show where the silliest parodies often come closer to our reality than anything you might see on the network prime-time news.

In fact, story after story from the Age of Bush reads like fiction of an especially improbable sort. Take the recent account by James Moore, author of *Bush’s Brain*, a less than positive book about Karl Rove, that was put up at the Huffington Post website. He describes how, a year ago, he arrived at an airport, found himself on the government’s no-fly list (“All I can tell you is that there is something in your background that in some way is similar to someone they are looking for...”), and has been unable to get off it ever since, though he continues to fly with some added inconvenience. (“I have been on the No Fly Watch List for a year. I will never be told the official reason. No one ever is. You cannot sue to get the information. Nothing I have done has moved me any closer to getting off the list.”) No fiction, in other words, could be stranger than the truths of our moment.

Tom Engelhardt

HOMELAND SECURITY ATE MY SPEECH

BY ARIEL DORFMAN

On December 27, 2005, at 11:31 in the morning to be precise, agents of the Homeland Security Department detained me at Miami International Airport and proceeded to impound a speech I was supposed to deliver in Washington, D.C. to a plenary session of the Modern Language Association of America.

Well, not quite.

It is true that this is what I told some two thousand university professors of language and literature who had gathered at a forum on the “role of the intellectual in the twenty-first century” in the Washington Hilton. I explained to them that the actions of the Department of Homeland Security had made it impossible for me to convey the words I had originally written and that instead I would narrate the strange, drawn-out conversation I had held with those two intimidating men in a windowless room at the airport as they discussed my speech on how exactly to think ourselves out of the catastrophe of our era.

The loss of that speech was, of course, a gigantic literary fabrication. All through my talk, I provided innumerable clues that this was indeed a tongue-in-cheek attempt to embody the contradictions of being an intellectual in our present time of turmoil. I wanted to use this “method” to obliquely lay out my ideas without launching into the sort of preachy manifesto I dislike. I made references to Borges and Nabokov, those literary

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masters of deception and apocryphal manuscripts. I speculated that the agents were part of a special (and hitherto secret) division of Homeland Security dedicated to weeding out alien scholars with dangerous academic leanings.

I gave one of these agents a tall and gangly physique as well as Trotsky-like glasses and wondered whether he was not exquisitely versed in post-modern theory and subaltern studies. I detailed his derisory comments regarding my central thesis that American intellectuals could learn from the Chilean struggle against dictatorship in their attempt to confront the erosion of freedom in the United States – that it was necessary to examine the lessons of that other September 11th, the day in 1973 when Chilean President Salvador Allende was overthrown. I pushed my description to absurd levels, making those men grill me about possible Chilean sleeper cells bent on revenge against the CIA for its role in that military coup against Chile's democracy.

The whole literary exercise, in fact, was meant to be a gentle way of poking fun at the bloated self-importance of intellectuals, a way of scoffing at my own challenge to my colleagues to go beyond the thousands who admire Susan Sontag and reach out instead to the sixty-five million Americans who have devoured the Left Behind series of apocalyptic best-sellers. Yeah, sure. Grandiose plans for critical thought and seditious discourse and I couldn't even convince these two agents with my arguments.

Indeed, in my fraudulent version of events, I made my listeners keenly aware of my limitations. "You know what I think, Professor?" I had the beefier, the more vulgar, of the two bogus agents say just before they let me go, the one who hadn't seemed even remotely interested in a syllable I uttered until that second. "I think you guys at the MLA take yourselves too seriously, way too seriously. You want people to understand what the hell you're talking about? How about trying a little humor for a change?"

And I had done my best to listen to my own character. My answer to him was this attempt to be funny at the MLA forum, this small story.

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It should have been obvious that it was a story. A funny story. No audience could miss that, right?

Well, not quite.

I discovered all too soon that some members of the audience had taken me seriously, way too seriously. As soon as I descended from the podium, I was stopped by several professors, none of whom I had met before. One was puzzled that those agents had not Googled me and so grasped that I was a completely harmless sort. Another wanted to know if they had also taken my computer away.

In the hours that ensued, I discovered that they were not the only ones to deem my tall tale trustworthy. People I did not know approached me in the corridors of the Hilton to express their indignation and to ask whether I had been roughed up. One of them suggested that a petition be circulated protesting this infringement of academic freedom.

At first, I was astonished. It was joke! And this was a literary convention, for Keats sake! We earned our daily bread by parsing double meanings, lionizing irony, amusing ourselves with aesthetic chicanery.

But that afternoon, in a follow-up workshop, a graduate student queried me about my experience, confessing that my story had filled her with fear. If someone like me could be apprehended in that way, what might not happen to her? What might not be happening at that very moment to so many unprivileged, invisible others who were entering the United States right now? How do we rebel against that sort of repression, she asked, if the very act of speaking out could endanger our family, our loved ones?

It was then, as I watched that small gathering of intellectuals nod in agreement, that it finally dawned on me how deeply the fictional account of my persecution by Homeland Security had resonated with unbridled fantasies that seethed inside the heads of so many men and women at that convention – and unquestionably elsewhere in the country. I doubted that any of the people I had talked to was in immediate danger of being sent to Guantanamo or dispatched to a country where they would be tortured. As

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one of my fictitious guards had pointed out to me when I tried to persuade him that the United States was on the verge of becoming a police state, I was totally free to say anything I wanted at the MLA, to expostulate even the most outrageous falsehoods. Nobody was going to arrest me – or my audience, for that matter – for voicing a dissident opinion.

And yet there could be no denying the paranoia my story had tapped into. If arguably rational academics believed me, it was because in some profound recess of their psyches they had already imagined such a possible world, had already inflicted that nightmare scenario upon themselves in the shadows of their own dread. Perhaps that's why, no matter how much I assured everyone I met that my tribulations had been a hoax, rumors of my ordeal continued to spread at an alarming rate. A former student told me she was writing a letter to the Washington Post to complain about my mistreatment. E-mails began to arrive, commiserating with my plight.

Everybody seemed absolutely ready to credit my absurd story as perfectly real, as not, in fact, at all absurd. When I lamented the naiveté of such a sophisticated audience to friends at the MLA, when I declared my amazement at the reaction I had gotten, the answer was unanimous: I was the naïve one.

Amazed? Why should I be amazed? Of course, people had found my version of events – to use an Aristotelian category – a paragon of verisimilitude. Isn't art, according to my master Picasso, a lie that always tells the truth? To those friends, my fraudulent story was terrifyingly plausible, all-too-unfortunately representative of a country where citizens and non-citizens can indeed be kept forever and a day in custody without charges, where illegal wiretapping is rampant, where that obscene word "rendition" (or the even more perverse "extraordinary rendition") has crawled into our everyday vocabulary, where the Vice President insists that certain suspects may have to be tortured in order to defeat terrorism, where the President lies and invades another country under sham pretences and is not impeached, where polls indicate that a majority of Americans are willing to give up their civil liberties in order to be "secure." Had I not proclaimed in

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my own essays that anything can happen in the United States, that anything can happen anywhere if ordinary citizens are afraid enough to accept the slow destruction of democracy, to justify the worst crimes against humanity if they feel their lives are imperiled? And wasn't I as responsible as my gullible audience? Wasn't I also laboring under the anxiety that this could truly befall me? Wasn't my story, my telling of it, filled with an underlying panic? Wasn't that what had made it so credible?

Undoubtedly, its credibility was also due to the unfortunate fact that the room I had described, that windowless room in an airport where I had not been detained, where I had not been interrogated, does in fact exist. How can we know what is being perpetrated at this very moment in such impenetrable chambers? How can we be sure that my speech, or any other speech for that matter, is not being scrutinized by some federal agency, transcribed for spying eyes? How can we even find out who is being interrogated at this airport, that terminal, in that other windowless room, right now? How can we be sure that we are not next?

The sad truth about my story is that it comes straight out of the trepidation and terror of September 11th, 2001. Before that date I would not have concocted my chronicle in this manner, not here anyway. I would not have thought about making it up because, quite simply, most Americans would not have understood what I was talking about, because nobody would have found it even slightly realistic.

The sadder truth is that I can invent an epilogue to my story.

Let us suppose that the United States suffers another terrorist attack of even more devastating consequences than the last one, an assault where maybe, who knows, thousands, tens of thousands, hundreds of thousands of men, women, and children die. That day, who can say that there will not be a knock at my door and, when I open it, two men there, one of them tall and gangly with Trotsky-like glasses; the other shorter, beefier, and vulgar?

I can see them right now, right now in my head.

I can see them ask if I remember having spread lies about them, about

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their efforts to fight the war against terrorism.

And then I can hear them, those two men, demand that I accompany them, just for a few hours, they'll say, just for some routine questioning.

And I am left to wonder if this new ending to my story is really so unbelievable, if it is, after all, so absolutely, totally, impossibly unbelievable?



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