

## American Apocalypse

by Robert Jay Lifton

The apocalyptic imagination has spawned a new kind of violence at the beginning of the twenty-first century. We can, in fact, speak of a worldwide epidemic of violence aimed at massive destruction in the service of various visions of purification and renewal. In particular, we are experiencing what could be called an apocalyptic face-off between Islamist forces, overtly visionary in their willingness to kill and die for their religion, and American forces claiming to be restrained and reasonable but no less visionary in their projection of a cleansing warmaking and military power. Both sides are energized by visions of intense idealism; both see themselves as embarked on a mission of combating evil in order to redeem and renew the world; and both are ready to release untold levels of violence to achieve that purpose.

The war on Iraq—a country with longstanding aspirations toward weapons of mass destruction but with no evident stockpiles of them and no apparent connection to the assaults of September 11—was a manifestation of that American visionary projection.

The religious fanaticism of Osama bin Laden and other Islamist zealots has, by now, a certain familiarity to us as to others elsewhere, for their violent demands for spiritual purification are aimed as much at fellow Muslims as at American “infidels.” Their fierce attacks on the defilement that they believe they see everywhere in contemporary life resemble those of past movements and sects from all parts of the world; such sects, with end-of-the-world prophecies and programmatic violence in the service of bringing those prophecies about, flourished in Europe from the eleventh through the sixteenth centuries. Similar sects like the fanatical Japanese cult Aum Shinrikyo, which released sarin gas into the Tokyo subways in 1995, have existed, even proliferated, in our own time.

The American apocalyptic entity is less familiar to us. Even if its urges to power and domination seem historically recognizable, it nonetheless represents a new constellation of forces bound up with what I’ve come to think of as “superpower syndrome.” By that term I mean a national mindset—put forward strongly by a tight-knit leadership group—that takes on a sense of omnipotence, of unique standing in the world that grants it the right to hold sway over all other nations. The American superpower status derives from our emergence from World War II as uniquely powerful in every respect, still more so as the only superpower from the end of the cold war in the early 1990s.

More than mere domination, the American superpower now seeks to control history. Such cosmic ambition is accompanied by an equally vast sense of entitlement—of special dispensation to pursue its aims. That entitlement stems partly from historic claims to special democratic virtue, but has much to do with an embrace of technological power translated into military terms. That is, a superpower—the world’s only superpower—is entitled to dominate and control precisely because it is a superpower.

The murderous events of 9/11 hardened that sense of entitlement as nothing else could have. Superpower syndrome did not require 9/11, but the attacks on the twin towers and the Pentagon rendered us an aggrieved superpower, a giant violated and made vulnerable, which no superpower can permit.

Indeed, at the core of superpower syndrome lies a powerful fear of vulnerability. A superpower’s victimization brings on both a sense of humiliation and an angry determination to restore, or even extend, the boundaries of a superpower-dominated world. Integral to superpower syndrome are its menacing nuclear stockpiles and their world-destroying capacity.

In important ways, the “war on terrorism” has represented an impulse to undo violently precisely the humiliation of 9/11. To be sure, the acts of that day had a warlike

aspect. They were certainly committed by men convinced that they were at war with us. In post-Nuremberg terms they could undoubtedly be considered a “crime against humanity.” Some kind of force used against their perpetrators was inevitable and appropriate. The humiliation caused, together with American world ambitions, however, precluded dealing with the attacks as what they were—terrorism by a small group of determined zealots, not war. A more focused, restrained, internationalized response to Al Qaeda could have been far more effective without being a stimulus to expanded terrorism.

Unfortunately, our response was inseparable from our superpower status and the syndrome that goes with it. Any nation attacked in that way would have felt itself humiliated. But for the United States, with our national sense of being overwhelmingly powerful and unchallengeable, to have its major institutions violently penetrated created an intolerable breakdown of superpower invulnerability that was never supposed to happen, a contradiction that fed our humiliation.

We know from history that collective humiliation can be a goad to various kinds of aggressive behavior—as has been true of bin Laden and Al Qaeda. It was also true of the Nazis. Nazi doctors told me of indelible scenes, which they either witnessed as young children or were told about by their fathers, of German soldiers returning home defeated after World War I. These beaten men, many of them wounded, engendered feelings of pathos, loss and embarrassment, all amid national misery and threatened revolution. Such scenes, associated with strong feelings of humiliation, were seized upon by the Nazis to the point where one could say that Hitler rose to power on the promise of avenging them.

With both Al Qaeda and the Nazis, humiliation could, through manipulation but also powerful self-conviction, be transformed into exaggerated expressions of violence. That psychological transformation of weakness and shame into a collective sense of pride and life-power, as well as power over others, can release enormous amounts of aggressive energy. Such dangerous potential has been present from the beginning in the American “war” on terrorism.

## Infinite War

War itself is an absolute, its violence unpredictable and always containing apocalyptic possibilities. In this case, by militarizing the problem of terrorism, our leaders have dangerously obfuscated its political, social and historical dimensions. Terrorism has instead been raised to the absolute level of war itself. And although American leaders speak of this as being a “different kind of war,” there is a drumbeat of ordinary war rhetoric and a clarion call to total victory and to the crushing defeat of our terrorist enemies. When President Bush declared that “this conflict was begun on the timing and terms of others [but] will end in a way, and at an hour, of our choosing,” he was misleading both in suggesting a clear beginning in Al Qaeda’s acts and a decisive end in the “battle” against terrorism. In that same speech, given at a memorial service just three days after 9/11 at the National Cathedral in Washington, he also asserted, “Our responsibility to history is already clear: to answer these attacks and rid the world of evil.” *Washington Post* reporter Bob Woodward, not a man given to irony, commented that “the president was casting his mission and that of the country in the grand vision of God’s master plan.”

At no time did Bush see his task as mounting a coordinated international operation against terrorism, for which he could have enlisted most of the governments of the world. Rather, upon hearing of the second plane crashing into the second tower, he remembers thinking: “They had declared war on us, and I made up my mind at that moment that we were going to war.” Upon hearing of the plane crashing into the Pentagon, he told Vice President Cheney, “We’re at war.” Woodward thus calls his account of the President’s first hundred days following 9/11 *Bush at War*. Bush would later recall, “I had to show

the American people the resolve of a commander in chief that was going to do whatever it took to win.” With world leaders, he felt he had to “look them in the eye and say, ‘You’re either with us or you’re against us.’” Long before the invasion of Iraq—indeed, even before the invasion of Afghanistan—Bush had come to identify himself, and be identified by others, as a “wartime president.”

Warmaking can quickly become associated with “war fever,” the mobilization of public excitement to the point of a collective experience of transcendence. War then becomes heroic, even mythic, a task that must be carried out for the defense of one’s nation, to sustain its special historical destiny and the immortality of its people. In this case, the growth of war fever came in several stages: its beginnings, with Bush’s personal declaration of war immediately after September 11; a modest increase, with the successful invasion of Afghanistan; and a wave of ultrapatriotic excesses—triumphalism and labeling of critics as disloyal or treasonous—at the time of the invasion of Iraq. War fever tends always to be sporadic and subject to disillusionment. Its underside is death anxiety, in this case related less to combat than to fears of new terrorist attacks at home or against Americans abroad—and later to growing casualties in occupied Iraq.

The scope of George Bush’s war was suggested within days of 9/11 when the director of the CIA made a presentation to the President and his inner circle, called “Worldwide Attack Matrix,” that described active or planned operations of various kinds in eighty countries, or what Woodward calls “a secret global war on terror.” Early on, the President had the view that “this war will be fought on many fronts” and that “we’re going to rout out terror wherever it may exist.” Although envisaged long before 9/11, the invasion of Iraq could be seen as a direct continuation of this unlimited war; all the more so because of the prevailing tone among the President and his advisers, who were described as eager “to emerge from the sea of words and pull the trigger.”

The war on terrorism is apocalyptic, then, exactly because it is militarized and yet amorphous, without limits of time or place, and has no clear end. It therefore enters the realm of the infinite. Implied in its approach is that every last terrorist everywhere on the earth is to be hunted down until there are no more terrorists anywhere to threaten us, and in that way the world will be rid of evil. Bush keeps what Woodward calls “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 if killed or captured. The scorecard is always available in a desk drawer in the Oval Office.

## War and Reality

The amorphousness of the war on terrorism is such that a country like Iraq—with a murderous dictator who had surely engaged in acts of terrorism in the past—could, on that basis, be treated as if it had major responsibility for 9/11. There was no evidence at all that it did. But by means of false accusations, emphasis on the evil things Saddam Hussein had done (for instance, the use of poison gas on his Kurdish minority) and the belligerent atmosphere of the overall war on terrorism, the Administration succeeded in convincing more than half of all Americans that Saddam was a major player in 9/11.

The war on terrorism, then, took amorphous impulses toward combating terror and used them as a pretext for realizing a prior mission aimed at American global hegemony. The attack on Iraq reflected the reach not only of the “war on terrorism” but of deceptions and manipulations of reality that have accompanied it. In this context, the word “war” came to combine metaphor (as in the “war on poverty” or “war on drugs”), conventional military combat, justification for “pre-emptive” attack and assertion of superpower domination.

Behind such planning and manipulation can lie dreams and fantasies hardly less apocalyptic or world-purifying than those of Al Qaeda’s leaders, or of Aum Shinrikyo’s guru.

For instance, former Director of Central Intelligence James Woolsey, a close associate of Donald Rumsfeld and Deputy Secretary of Defense Paul Wolfowitz in the Pentagon, spoke of the war against terrorism as a Fourth World War (the Third being the cold war between the United States and the Soviet Union). In addressing a group of college students, he declared, “This Fourth World War, I think, will last considerably longer than either World Wars I or II did for us. Hopefully not the full four-plus decades of the cold war.”

That kind of apocalyptic impulse in warmaking has hardly proved conducive to a shared international approach. Indeed, in its essence, it precludes genuine sharing. While Bush has frequently said that he prefers to have allies in taking on terrorism and terrorist states worldwide, he has also made it clear that he does not want other countries to have any policy-making power on this issue. In one revealing statement, he declared: “At some point, we may be the only ones left. That’s OK with me. We are America.” In such declarations, he has all but claimed that Americans are the globe’s anointed ones and that the sacred mission of purifying the earth is ours alone.

The amorphousness of the war on terrorism carries with it a paranoid edge, the suspicion that terrorists and their supporters are everywhere and must be “pre-emptively” attacked lest they emerge and attack us. Since such a war is limitless and infinite—extending from the farthest reaches of Indonesia or Afghanistan to Hamburg, Germany, or New York City, and from immediate combat to battles that continue into the unending future—it inevitably becomes associated with a degree of megalomania as well. As the world’s greatest military power replaces the complexities of the world with its own imagined stripped-down, us-versus-them version of it, our distorted national self becomes the world.

Despite the constant invocation by the Bush Administration of the theme of “security,” the war on terrorism has created the very opposite—a sense of fear and insecurity among Americans, which is then mobilized in support of further aggressive plans in the extension of the larger “war.” What results is a vicious circle that engenders what we seek to destroy: Our excessive response to Islamist attacks creates more terrorists and more terrorist attacks, which in turn leads to an escalation of the war on terrorism, and so on. The projected “victory” becomes a form of aggressive longing, of sustained illusion, of an unending “Fourth World War” and a mythic cleansing—of terrorists, of evil, of our own fear. The American military apocalyptic can then be said to partner and act in concert with the Islamist apocalyptic.

## **Off the Treadmill**

We can do better. America is capable of wiser, more measured approaches, more humane applications of our considerable power and influence in the world. These may not be as far away as they now seem, and can be brought closer by bringing our imaginations to bear on them. Change must be political, of course, but certain psychological contours seem necessary to it.

As a start, we do not have to partition the world into two contending apocalyptic forces. We are capable instead of reclaiming our moral compass, of finding further balance in our national behavior. So intensely have we embraced superpower syndrome that emerging from it is not an easy task. Yet in doing so we would relieve ourselves of a burden of our own creation—the burden of insistent illusion. For there is no greater weight than that which one takes on when pursuing total power.

We need to take a new and different lesson from Lord Acton’s nineteenth-century assertion: “Power tends to corrupt and absolute power corrupts absolutely.” Acton was not quite right. The corruption begins not with the acquisition of power but with the quest for and claim to absolute power. Ever susceptible to the seductive promise that twenty-first-century technology can achieve world control, the superpower (or would-

be superpower) can best resist that temptation by recognizing the corruption that follows upon its illusion.

To renounce the claim to total power would bring relief not only to everyone else but, soon enough, to the leaders and followers of the superpower itself. For to live out superpower syndrome is to place oneself on a treadmill that eventually has to break down. In its efforts to rule the world and to determine history, the superpower is, in fact, working against itself, subjecting itself to constant failure. It becomes a Sisyphus with bombs, able to set off explosions but unable to cope with its own burden, unable to roll its heavy stone to the top of the hill in Hades. Perhaps the crucial step in ridding ourselves of the syndrome is recognizing that history cannot be controlled, fluidly or otherwise.

Stepping off the superpower treadmill would also enable us to cease being a nation ruled by fear. Renouncing omnipotence would make our leaders themselves less fearful of weakness, and diminish their inclination to instill fear in their people as a means of enlisting them for illusory military efforts at world hegemony. Without the need for invulnerability, everyone would have much less to be afraid of.