

The Bushes' new world disorder

By James Carroll

“It must be considered that there is nothing more difficult to carry out, nor more doubtful of success, nor more dangerous to handle, than to initiate a new order of things.” This warning is from Niccolo Machiavelli, yet it has never had sharper resonance.

More than a decade ago, after Saddam Hussein's invasion of Kuwait, President George H. W. Bush explicitly sought to initiate, as he put it to Congress, a “new world order.” He made that momentous declaration on Sept. 11, 1990. Eleven years later, the suddenly mystical date of 9/11 motivated his son to finish what the father began. A year ago this week, Bush the younger launched a war against the man who tried to kill his dad, initiating the opposite of order.

The situation hardly needs rehearsing. In Iraq, many thousands are dead, including 564 Americans. Civil war threatens. Afghanistan, meanwhile, is choked by drug-running warlords. Islamic jihadists have been empowered. The nuclear profiteering of Pakistan has been exposed but not necessarily stopped. Al Qaeda's elusiveness has reinforced its mythic malevolence. The Atlantic Alliance is in ruins. The United States has never been more isolated. A pattern of deception has destroyed its credibility abroad and at home. Disorder spreads from Washington to Israel to Haiti to Spain. Whether the concern is subduing resistance fighters far away or making Americans feel safer, the Pentagon's unprecedented military dominance, the costs of which stifle the US economy, is shown to be essentially impotent.

In America, the new order of things is defined mainly by the sour taste of moral hangover, how the emotional intensity of the 9/11 trauma—anguished but pure—dissolved into a feeling of being trapped in a cage of our own making. As the carnage in Madrid makes clear, the threats in the world are real and dangerous to handle, but one US initiative after another has escalated rather than diffused such threats. Instead of replacing chaos with new order, our nation's responses inflict new wounds that increase the chaos. We strike at those whom we perceive as aiming to do us harm but without actually defending ourselves. And most unsettling of all, in our attempt to get the bad people to stop threatening us, we have begun to imitate them.

The most important revelation of the Iraq war has been of the Bush administration's blatant contempt for fact. Whether defined as “lying” or not, the clear manipulation of intelligence ahead of last year's invasion has been completely exposed. The phrase “weapons of mass destruction” has been transformed. Where once it evoked the grave danger of a repeat of the 9/11 trauma, now it evokes an apparently calculated American fear. The government laid out explicit evidence defining a threat that required the launching of preventive war, and the US media trumpeted that evidence without hesitation. The result, since there were no weapons of mass destruction, as the government and a pliant press had ample reason to know, was an institutionalized deceit maintained to this day. At the United Nations, the United States misled the world. In speech after speech, President Bush misled Congress and the nation. And note that the word “misled” means both to have falsified and to have failed in leadership. To mislead, as the tautological George Bush might put it, is to mislead.

The repetition of falsehoods tied to the war on terrorism and the war against Iraq has eroded the American capacity, if not to tell the difference between what is true and what is a lie, then to think the difference matters much. The administration distorted fact ahead of the invasion, when the American people could not refute what had not happened yet. And the administration distorts fact now, when the American people do not remember clearly what we were told a year ago. That Bush retains the confidence

of a sizable proportion of the electorate suggests that Americans don't particularly worry anymore about truth as a guiding principle of their government.

In that lies the irony. The Bush dynasty has in fact initiated a new order of things. The United States of America has become its own opposite, a nation of triumphant freedom that claims the right to restrain the freedom of others; a nation of a structured balance of power that destroys the balance of power abroad; a nation of creative enterprise that exports a smothering banality; and above all, a nation of forcefully direct expression that disrespects the truth. Whatever happens from this week forward in Iraq, the main outcome of the war for the United States is clear. We have defeated ourselves.