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Bush at War

by James Bovard

Bob Woodward, the famed Watergate investigator and now a senior editor at the *Washington Post*, was granted unprecedented access to George W. Bush and to some of the top players in his administration in the wake of September 11. The result is a new book — *Bush at War* — which chronicles in an uncritical manner the thoughts and words of the inner sanctum of the Bush administration after the terrorist strike.

Most of the book — like most political speeches — is blather. But there are some comments by Bush and others that provide insight into how the Bush administration sees the world — and itself. And as Bush lurches into another war in the Middle East, the comments and thoughts from the September 11 period are more relevant than ever.

It is especially interesting to see the early debate within the administration on the issue of Iraq.

At a White House meeting on September 12, 2001, Vice President Cheney urged, “To the extent we define our task broadly, including those who support terrorism, then we get at states. And it’s easier to find them than it is to find bin Laden.”

That is the “round up the usual suspects” mentality brought to the war on terrorism.

Bush replied, “Start with bin Laden, which Americans expect. And then if we succeed, we’ve struck a huge blow and can move forward.... We don’t want to define [the threat] too broadly for the average man to understand.”

The book highlights how Deputy Secretary of Defense Paul Wolfowitz was obsessively pushing to attack Iraq even before September 11. At a Pentagon press briefing a few days after September 11, Wolfowitz announced, “It’s not just simply a matter of capturing people and holding them accountable, but removing the sanctuaries, removing the support systems, ending states who sponsor terrorism. It will be a campaign, not a single action.”

Wolfowitz’s “ending states” promise sparked critical comment around the world. When asked about the Wolfowitz statement, Secretary of State Colin Powell replied, “Ending terrorism is where I would like to leave it, and let Mr. Wolfowitz speak for himself.”

At a subsequent meeting of top administration officials, Wolfowitz again pushed to attack Iraq. Woodward summarized the arguments he made to the inner sanctum:

“Attacking Afghanistan would be uncertain. He worried about 100,000 American troops bogged down in mountain fighting in Afghanistan six months from then. In contrast, Iraq was a brittle, oppressive regime that might break easily. It was doable. He estimated that there was a 10 to 50% chance Saddam was involved in the September 11 terrorist attacks. The US would have to go after Saddam at some time if the war on terrorism was to be taken seriously.”

Thus, a hypothetical 10 percent chance that Saddam was linked to the September 11 hijackers was sufficient to invade and capture all of Iraq.

At a White House meeting shortly thereafter, Bush suddenly announced, “I believe Iraq was involved, but I’m not going to strike them now. I don’t have the evidence at this point.” But, as the subsequent history of Bush’s presidency has shown, he never allows lack of evidence to block the path of righteousness.

After the administration committed itself to invading Afghanistan, the Pentagon sent over a two-star general to present a slide show to Bush on options to bring down the Taliban. As Woodward notes, “One slide about potential operations in Afghanistan was labeled ‘Thinking Outside the Box — Poisoning Food Supply.’ The National Security Council staff in charge of putting on the show for Bush ‘almost gagged’ and reminded National Security Council advisor Connie Rice that ‘the US doesn’t know how to do this, and we’re not allowed. It would be a chemical or biological attack, clearly banned by treaties the US had signed.’”

Woodward notes, “Rice took the slide to Rumsfeld. ‘This slide is not going to be shown to the President of the United States,’ she said. A poison attack was exactly what they feared from bin Laden. How was it conceivable that someone could imagine adopting bin Laden’s tactics and presenting the idea to the President?”

The pious response by all involved is almost amusing. Obviously, at the highest levels of the Pentagon, the thought of poisoning a nation’s food supply was fair game. But it was a serious breach of propriety to formally present the idea to the president.

Administration officials seemed to enjoy pushing the hot buttons of the American people. In war-council discussions over what to include in Bush’s September 20, 2001, speech to Congress and the American people, Defense Secretary Rumsfeld suggested mentioning that weapons of mass destruction could be used against America by the terrorists. He favored mentioning this threat because “it’s an energizer for the American people.”

Rumsfeld became the darling of the press corps in part because of his light-hearted, bantering manner at Pentagon press conferences. Woodward related one of his witticisms from an October 2001 press briefing: “‘We are not running out of targets, Afghanistan is,’ Rumsfeld joked a few days into the bombing campaign.” But this was a bombing campaign that killed hundreds of innocent Afghans and repeatedly bombed UN food warehouses and other nonmilitary targets. But

that was irrelevant for most of the Washington Pentagon press corps as long as Rumsfeld provided such good copy.

When bombing mistakes finally made newspaper headlines, Secretary of State Powell criticized Pentagon inaccuracy at a war-council meeting. Bush jumped in: “We also need to highlight the fact that the Taliban are killing people and conducting their own terror operations, so get a little bit more balance here about what the situation is.”

A few good press releases — or better media spin — was all that was necessary to make irrelevant the innocent Afghans killed by the U.S. military.

Similarly, as the Taliban regime collapsed, Bush told his war council, “We need to manage the publicity here. We need to emphasize the cowardly atrocities that Taliban performed as they left the city.” The Taliban were apparently fleeing the scene so fast that they did not have time for a ritual slaughter of the innocents. But George Bush wanted his atrocity stories, come hell or high water.

His close-mindedness and pettiness loom larger as the book goes along. In the epilogue, Woodward notes,

“When it came to fighting terrorism, the president also wanted world leaders to equate their national interests with American interests. Some would go along with him when their interests and goals coincided roughly with his, but go their own way when they did not. Bush didn’t like that when it happened and at times he took it personally.”

It is almost comical to recognize that Bush believed that September 11 somehow gave him the right to demand submission and conformity from every other government on Earth. And yet that is the impetus of U.S. foreign policy.

Bush administration officials relished the adulation the president received after September 11. Bush went to New York City to throw out the first ball of Game 3 of the 2001 World Series and the crowd went wild. Woodward notes, “Watching from owner George Steinbrenner’s box, Karl Rove thought, ‘It’s like being at a Nazi rally.’” Rove later told Woodward how the war on terrorism would be judged by the public: “Everything will be measured by results. The victor is always right. History ascribes to the victor qualities that may or may not actually have been there. And similarly to the defeated.”

American bloodlust shines through in many places in the book — not least with Bush’s obsessive “scorecards” in which he marked off the names of dead al-Qaeda leaders. And when CIA counterterrorism chief Cofer Black visited Moscow shortly after September 11 to work out arrangements with the Russians for whacking Afghanistan, and a Russian official warned him that, if the United States went into Afghanistan, “You’re really going to get the hell kicked out of you,” Black replied, “We’re going to kill them. We’re going to put their heads on sticks. We’re going to rock their world.”

Woodward tells of a religious prayer meeting on February 5, 2002, attended by 25 men —

including three different Special Forces units and CIA paramilitary teams. After a prayer and the invocation of September 11, the attendees pledged, “We will export death and violence to the four corners of the earth in defense of our great nation.”

The lust to dominate the world shines through both in Bush and others in his administration. And yet Rumsfeld, in a speech at the Pentagon on the one-month anniversary of September 11, condemned the terrorists:

“The will to power, the urge to dominion over others ... makes the terrorist a believer not in the theology of God, but the theology of self and in the whispered words of temptation: ‘ye shall be as gods.’ In targeting this place, then, and those who worked here, the attackers, the evildoers correctly sensed that the opposite of all they were, and stood for, resided here.”

This is at the same time the Pentagon was masterminding the bombing of Afghanistan and threatening to attack several other nations. Yet because Bush, Rumsfeld, and other chief honchos believed in God, their powerlust is a supreme virtue.

*James Bovard is author of *Lost Rights (1994)* and the forthcoming *Terrorism and Tyranny: How Bush's Crusade is Sabotaging Peace, Justice, and Freedom (St. Martin's Press)* and serves as policy advisor for *The Future of Freedom Foundation*.*

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