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## **Book Review** **by Brigid O'Neil**

*Terrorism and Tyranny: Trampling Freedom, Justice, and Peace to Rid the War of Evil*  
by James Bovard (Palgrave Macmillan, 2003); 448 pages; \$26.95.

If the Constitution could be imagined as a sort of master tailor for the people, fashioning a government that represents their general shape with each electoral try-on, the Bush administration would be bursting at the seams. In an age of sound-byte news, political lethargy, and celebrated cheaters, it gets harder to distinguish the deceit in stories, from the *New York Times* to *People* magazine — and even harder to find an American not desensitized to it all. In short, you're unlikely to find serious analysis on Washington's fumbled road to the war on terror in most media outlets. As a result, the electorate have a greater understanding of the latest Beniffer scandal than they do of the current administration's policies.

Thankfully, we can count on assiduous journalists such as James Bovard, Washington watchdog extraordinaire, to compile an accessible and thoroughly researched look at the war on terror and its ill effects on everything from national security to individual liberty.

Put simply, Bovard's latest book, *Terrorism and Tyranny: Trampling Freedom, Justice, and Peace to Rid the War of Evil*, paints a disturbing portrait of an administration that handles terrorism with knee-jerk rejoinders and photo-op victories, while maintaining little regard for constitutional protections or national security.

It's a wide scope and controversial thesis for any book to cover, but Bovard's penchant for detailed analysis and fair-minded reporting has created one of the best critiques of post-9/11 policies yet. Starting with the shocking failure of intelligence prior to 9/11, Bovard writes in rapid-fire prose on the administration's abysmal failure to keep America safe and free, with enough passion and bite to make even the most desensitized reader red in the face.

Bovard's chronicle begins with a dissection of similar power grabs and war advocacy in American history. For example, the Reagan administration's assertion of a war against terrorism fared no better in the 20th century than Bush's does today. In Nicaragua, Reagan's financial

support of anti-communist groups failed miserably to secure American safety, while decimating the country it was intended to help.

Also, as told in countless history books, U.S. military and monetary backing aided guerillas in a systematic slaughter of thousands of innocent civilians in Africa and Latin America. Additionally, U.S. intervention in Lebanon to help arm and train the anti-Muslim army triggered devastating attacks on the American embassy and U.S. marine barracks.

This history of deadly missteps and policy gaffes caused former Pentagon counterterrorism chief Neal Koch to describe Reagan's record on terrorism as "marked variously by indifference, indecision, vacillation, venality and incompetence." Ominously, these lessons would go unheeded, contributing to a second "war against terror" in 2001 that was just as vague and grandiose in scope.

On the domestic front, Bovard argues, the fall of the twin towers and subsequent terrorist scares gave the Bush administration a no-limit credit for any presidential powers it could dream up, including civilian surveillance and detention.

Less than two months after the terrorist attacks in September 2001, the Justice Department capitalized on a frightened citizenry and formidable lead in the polls to push through an unprecedented presidential power-grab in the form of the USA PATRIOT Act (many provisions of which were routinely denied in the Senate before 9/11).

The PATRIOT Act was neither finished by the bureaucracy nor read by Congress before it was signed into law in late October 2001. As Bovard tells it, this legislative blank check for presidential authority was secured in part by implicit threats from administration officials of political destruction for any dissenters. These aggressive tactics paved the way for unparalleled gains in executive powers, at a great cost to civil liberties and judicial oversight alike.

In stark contrast to recent Justice Department accusations of "hysterical" criticism directed at the PATRIOT Act, Bovard lays out a clear case against the act's directives, using both its real and implied powers as the most damning evidence of all. In essence, some of the worst provisions of the act lie in its naive delegation of carte blanche powers to both executive branch and law-enforcement officials.

With relaxed evidentiary standards and the elimination of probable cause from everything, from FBI warrants to search and seizures, the PATRIOT Act bears a frightening resemblance to the J. Edgar Hoover days of old. As Bovard argues, the act recklessly "treats every citizen like a suspected terrorist and every federal agent like a proven angel." Anyone who has taken Political Science 101 will recognize this shortsightedness as productive of one of the great dangers — the accrual of power in the hands of a few.

## **Abuse of power**

Any concentration of police and judicial powers creates a minefield for abuse. This, at least, was the Republicans' argument when the Clinton administration launched a series of mass deportations and secret courts following the Oklahoma City bombing. Now, after a party turnover, it's become the hallmark of Democratic opposition leaders who are particularly incensed over the bungled war on Iraq.

Writing about the truths, half-truths, and all-too-often falsehoods surrounding "Operation Iraqi Freedom" could easily fill tomes of material. In *Terrorism and Tyranny*, however, this material takes up barely a chapter. It might be a cursory handling of one of the most crucial issues in the war on terror, but it also contains some of the best deconstruction of Iraq propaganda yet.

From the yellowcake scandal to deception about the link between Saddam and al-Qaeda, there's plenty of ground to cover in this chapter. Bovard also illuminates some important ties between the quagmire in Iraq and the problems that underlie the greater war on terror. In effect, he argues, these excursions from the truth are necessary to maintain public support for a seemingly endless war with an ever-expanding list of enemies.

Yet propaganda isn't the only catalyst — so too is an increase in police powers to suppress dissent and to control those groups (typically ethnically based) who pose the newest "threat" to American security. It's a horrible abuse of America's founding principles of freedom and tolerance, made all the more repugnant when such principles are used to name the very wars that threaten their survival.

In offering his own ideas for the future of America, Bovard presents an astute Jeffersonian ideal. On the domestic front, he argues, we need to restore our commitment to the Bill of Rights and repeal some of the worst provisions of the PATRIOT Act. Instead of making scapegoats out of immigrants and librarians, federal enforcement officials need to concentrate their resources on actual dangers to public safety. Applying these same pragmatic principles to the international scene, Bovard calls on the administration to "formally renounce their hegemony doctrine" in favor of a foreign policy stripped of all imperial engagements and hazardous entanglements. In practice, this involves finishing off al-Qaeda and ending the war before the United States becomes yet another spent (United) Kingdom. Such imperial ambitions are an anathema to any free society, particularly one founded on limited government and individual liberty. Thankfully, we still have a few dissidents like Bovard around who are courageous enough to risk censure with their words and antagonism with their speech.

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