Intellectual dissent and the war on terror

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SOMEWHERE along the line the idea took hold that, to be an intellectual, you had to be against it, whatever "it" was. The intellectual is a negator and a dissenter. It wasn’t always so. In the World War II era, American intellectuals signed on for the war effort, and our foreign policy enjoyed bipartisan support. Liberal, conservative, moderate, even radical intellectuals found common ground in the struggle against fascism, without fear of betraying the lofty stance of dissent. Unfortunately, the same cannot be said of the fight against Stalinism. Many on the left were reluctant to face the truth about the Soviet Union, with its mass slaughters and gulags. This form of left-wing denial has resurfaced in the wake of the terror attacks of September 11.

The proximate cause for this denial, however, is to be found in the tumult of the 1960s. The Vietnam era opened up a fissure that still transfixes us and freezes our thinking. The Cold War consensus of the 1950s broke up. Former allies split bitterly. The radical young saved their most vehement ire for those they called “the establishment”—and the establishment was liberal. We entered an era of political vituperation and political paranoia. The assault against the liberal “establishment” is an important backdrop to the simmering discontents of the intellectual class in America. It also helps to account for the time warp in which so much anti-war protest seems stuck, both during the 1991 Persian Gulf War and the current war against terrorism. The anti-war rhetoric of the Vietnam era has been dusted off and sent marching yet again, often in a manner that displays a radical disconnection between the slogans and chants and current realities.

This essay is adapted from the author’s forthcoming book Just War Against Terror: American Power and Responsibility in a Violent World (Basic Books, 2003).
The 1960s backdrop

For those of us who entered young adulthood in the 1960s, to be an intellectual was to be in opposition. To be an academic was to be on the left, or at the very least, a liberal. It was unfashionable to argue, as some of us did, that while the Vietnam War was unjust and should be brought to a halt as quickly as possible, communism posed a real threat. The historical record was clear: Communist regimes destroyed freedom and slaughtered millions of their own people. That was an empirical reality. Many denied that reality, and facts themselves came to be distorted or ignored. This was in part a natural reaction to the Watergate crisis, which lent credence to the cynical view that no one ever told the truth in public life. But it was also the result of the concurrent rise of a form of radical subjectivism, in which how one feels about something triumphed over serious thinking about reality.

The worst of the 1960s mindset—cynical and subjectivist—was left largely intact even as the Cold War came to a peaceful conclusion. To the consternation of many academics and intellectuals, one key architect of the Soviet Union’s collapse was a conservative American president, Ronald Reagan, while the other was Pope John Paul II. Yet Ronald Reagan was treated with contempt in intellectual circles, and Pope John Paul II was all but ignored. I recall very well colleagues telling me that Reagan’s election would mean no less than nuclear war. Dire predictions proliferated, and people murmured darkly of moving to Canada or somewhere else where movie stars don’t get elected president. I hadn’t voted for Reagan, but this sort of political posturing struck me as preposterous and self-important.

What actually happened, of course, was a nuclear détente as Reagan and his Soviet counterpart, Michael Gorbachev, developed an extraordinary working relationship. World events weren’t moving the way left-wing ideology dictated. For scholars and intellectuals, that should have prompted a bit of rethinking, as mounting evidence put pressure on existing categories of thought and political judgment. But, in the case of American intellectuals, it didn’t appear to work that way. One wag’s bitter depiction of the intellectual classes as “the herd of independent minds” seemed only too apt.

Why this brief run through recent history? Because, over time, automatic oppositionism hardens into identities. That is
the only way I can make sense of the vituperation that so often accompanies attacks from those who consider themselves radicals, as well as others both inside and outside the academy, against those with whom they disagree. The people who ridiculed Western observers who condemned what was taking place behind the Iron Curtain, calling it CIA propaganda, now deride—or their successors do—attempts to take the measure of the threat terrorism poses to America and to all those who fall under indictment by Islamic fundamentalists, including moderate Muslims. Many intellectuals believe that those of their number who support the U.S. war effort are betraying their calling. The late Christopher Lasch dubbed this sort of automatic negativism “pseudo-radicalism.” It fails to make critical distinctions and fails to take the measure of what is at stake now—not a quarter of a century ago.

What we’re fighting for

In February 2002, a group of 60 academics and intellectuals, myself among them, issued a statement, “What We’re Fighting For: A Letter from America,” that outlined what we believe is at stake in the war against terrorism. The origins of the 20-page document lay in our displeasure with the anti-war rhetoric that was emanating from the universities and many intellectual journals. We feared that our academic counterparts in Europe and elsewhere might think that the American intellectual class was, once again, a font of opposition to U.S. policy and, once again, blamed their country for the harm that had come to it. In our view, it was cruel to suggest, as some in academia did, that the United States somehow brought September 11 on itself. The terrorist attacks went beyond the bounds of any reasonable definition of politics, diplomacy, or even war. These considerations animated those of us who began to draft and circulate our statement. Signatories of “What We’re Fighting For” ranged from the left to the right, with plenty of representatives from the center. Michael Walzer, James Q. Wilson, Mary Ann Glendon, Francis Fukuyama, David Blankenhorn, Robert Putnam, Theda Skocpol, Samuel Huntington, George Weigel, Daniel Yankelovich, and James Davison Hunter, among others, signed on.

The letter asserted five fundamental truths that “pertain to all people without distinction”: (1) all human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights; (2) the basic subject of society is the human person, and the legitimate role of govern-
ment is to protect and help to foster the conditions for human flourishing; (3) human beings naturally desire to seek the truth about life's purposes and ultimate ends; (4) freedom of conscience and religious freedom are inviolable rights of the human person; (5) killing in the name of God is contrary to faith in God and is the greatest betrayal of the universality of religious faith.

We associated these five principles with "American values," because we believe America is premised on some version of these truths—not that our country is the sole bearer of them. We lamented our society's shortcomings and failure to live up to its highest ideals on many occasions. We defended the U.S. government's response to September 11 on just-war terms, and reaffirmed just-war restraints on how the war should be pursued. Finally, we called for brotherhood with Muslims, arguing that what unites us is greater than what divides us, and pledged ourselves to stay on guard against jingoism and extremism in our efforts at self-defense.

We hoped that the statement would accomplish two things. First, it was written to demonstrate to our counterparts in other countries that American intellectuals and academics were not uniformly in opposition to the war effort. We sought thereby to begin a dialogue with intellectuals in other countries who were ambivalent about, or disagreed with, the American effort. Second, we hoped to offer a conceptual framework within which to critically assess America's response. As it happened, the statement was almost completely ignored by the mainstream American media. Those in the media who did comment rose up with one voice and denounced the statement as pro-war propaganda.

An explicit response took the form of a three-page document called "Letter from United States Citizens to Friends in Europe," described as "written by a number of U.S. intellectuals in critical response to 'What We're Fighting For.'" Signatories included Stanley Aronowitz, Helen Caldicott, Claudia Koonz, Michael Parenti, Gore Vidal, and Howard Zinn. Several of these individuals have independently issued denunciations of the United States and the war effort.

The "Letter from United States Citizens" shares with reactions from other American intellectuals four basic characteristics, one or more of which is usually present in ideological attacks against America's war on terror. The first characteristic is distortion or omission of the facts. The second is the resort to false or simplistic historical reasoning. The third is the
avoidance of the complexities inherent in war and politics, and the fourth is an attack on American motivations and aims. Here I will concentrate on the first two of these characteristics, drawing from the "Letter" as well as other critiques of America's war on terror.

**Ignoring or distorting the facts**

It is difficult to make a case that facts are being distorted if many of one's intellectual opponents deny the very existence of facts or objectivity. Prevalent in our intellectual circles is the view that all of us, more or less, make things up as we go along—we "whip up a story to make ourselves look good," as Richard Rorty once put it. So playing fast and loose with hard realities is not at all uncommon. "Letter from United States Citizens" bills itself as an attempt to set the record straight, but by the third paragraph the fact-shunning hyperbole has already crept in. Describing the war effort in Afghanistan, the statement claims that the "material destruction envisaged" by the U.S. military is "immeasurable." The human damage is also tagged "immeasurable," to which is added the authors' concern for "the moral desperation and hatred that are certain to be felt by millions of people who can only watch helplessly as their world is devastated" by the United States (emphasis in the original).

Immeasurable? Millions? Do the authors and signatories even know the size of the population of Afghanistan? Were they aware of the ongoing assessments made by the U.S. military as well as international observers of the material damage? How would they square their dire picture of "millions" of Afghans growing in hatred toward the United States with scenes of celebration in the streets of Kabul when the Taliban were overthrown—or the people dancing at weddings, women going to school and teaching, crowded movie houses, the small shops and enterprises springing up? One of my favorite headlines during the war was: "Taliban pinned down, dancing in Kabul." One must, of course, note the tragic effects of American bombing errors in order to make an honest assessment. But it is remarkable how little anti-Americanism has developed in Afghanistan, even despite the inevitable losses due to bombing mistakes.

Perhaps those who suffered under the Taliban have a clearer sense of what is at stake than do those who claim to be on their side. The Afghans' own reactions, including their
government's insistence that the United States must remain engaged in their country in order to stabilize and rebuild it, are ignored by the intellectual Left. We are never told what sort of effort America's critical intellectuals would have mounted to disrupt Al-Qaeda training camps and to dislodge the Taliban regime. Instead, America and her allies were lumped together with the Taliban and Al-Qaeda as brutal victimizers of the Afghan people.

**A mad rush to war?**

Intellectuals and academics also charged America with a "mad rush to war," and there was much consternation about George W. Bush, the reckless cowboy. What are the criteria for a "mad rush" in contrast to deliberate movement? "Mad rush" suggests that, on September 12, America had wildly begun laying about. But there was in fact no rush to war. By all the accepted standards of international law, and under the terms of the United Nations Charter, the attacks of September 11 were acts of war. The United States, as a sovereign state, had a fundamental right to defend itself.

Writing in 1625, the Dutch jurist Hugo Grotius, in his *Rights of War and Peace* (widely acknowledged to be the origin of what is now called "international law"), took it as given that states

have first and foremost the right to defend themselves. And, tangentially, just as a society of human beings has the right to punish a member who has committed a crime against another, so a nation or a group of nations has the right to punish a state or ruler that has injured another unjustly.

But the "Letter from United States Citizens" utterly confounds matters by claiming on behalf of "humanity as a whole" a "right to defend its own survival against the 'self defense' of an unchecked superpower." All "victims of U.S. military power" are enjoined in the letter to act in "solidarity" against the United States, including outraged American citizens. Because Osama bin Laden and others like him count as victims in this understanding, the implication is that only those who have a grievance against America—real or imagined—are fighting the good fight for, as the letter says, "whatever universal values we claim to cherish."

Take note of that "whatever": Universal values have become entirely subjective, and, not surprisingly, no universal values
are articulated. Do the signatories of this riposte disagree that all persons are created as moral equals and possess a dignity that does not originate with governments? Do they disagree that to slaughter others in a Holy War is despicable? The authors in fact make no pretense of reasoned argument, relying instead on rhetorical blast and demagoguery.

One can imagine, for example, a responsible critic of the war against terrorism reasonably claiming, as a point of departure for debate, that the United States, on prudential grounds, should not have committed itself to armed conflict. There are many other entirely appropriate ways to debate the matter. But to make a false claim about what happened is not one of these. If you don’t get the basic time-line right, or refuse to deal with widely available evidence, or honestly respond to the other side, your argument is going to collapse under the weight of its own distortions. And almost invariably, factual distortions—distortions of what is actually happening or has happened—go hand-in-hand with inflammatory rhetoric.

In her book *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, Hannah Arendt claimed that the first victim of totalitarian ideology is the truth. The basic distinction between truth and falsehood is obliterated; indeed, Arendt insisted, the ideal candidate for totalitarian rule is someone for whom truth and falsehood no longer exist as distinct categories. Arendt argued that politics is dependent on getting the facts right. Citing French Prime Minister Clemenceau on the origins of World War I, she noted that Clemenceau acknowledged that disputes about who, or what, led to the calamity would be long debated. “But I know one thing for certain,” he insisted: “that they will not say Belgium invaded Germany.”

So the number of civilian casualties, however unintentional, matters, as does the number of intentional civilian casualties. One cannot simply gloss over these distinctions. But this is just what many on the left do. For example, in the course of arguing that the United States is the foremost exporter of terror in the world, Mark Taylor of the Princeton Theological Seminary wrote that “primary here would be the large number of civilians in Afghanistan, whose deaths now exceed in number those lost at the New York World Trade Center.” Such sloppy reasoning has led Michael Walzer, himself a man of the Left, to characterize his erstwhile allies’ response to September 11 as “stupid, over-
wrought, grossly inaccurate." As he argued in his Dissent essay, "Can There Be a Decent Left?":

A few left academics have tried to figure out how many civilians actually died in Afghanistan, aiming at as high a figure as possible, on the assumption, apparently, that if the number is greater than the number of people killed in the attacks on the Twin Towers, the war is unjust.... But the claim that the numbers matter in just this way—that the 3,120th death determines the injustice of the war—is wrong. It denies one of the most basic and best understood moral distinctions: between premeditated murder and unintended killing. And the denial isn't accidental, as if the people making it just forgot about, or didn't know about, the everyday moral world. The denial is willful: unintended killing by Americans in Afghanistan counts as murder.

Such denials and distortions are the stock-in-trade of many on the academic left. For them, there is no separate activity called "getting the facts right." In good postmodern fashion, they simply interpret things in a way that will make their "side" look good. This is not the way political debate should proceed. Evaluation and interpretation must flow from the facts as best as they can be ascertained. This is why it is important to try to offer as full an account as one can of events. Interpretation is tied to a description of the situation. As an example, let's consider one "truism" that is not true at all, in order to see in more detail how this works.

**Who created bin Laden?**

It has been repeatedly claimed by intellectuals on the left that bin Laden and those at the core of Al-Qaeda are creatures of a flawed U.S. policy, and more broadly, that the "root causes" of September 11 are to be found in a long history of Western arrogance dating back to the Crusades. Neither of these charges stands up to scrutiny.

The first and more specific charge, which has frequently been heard in academic debates and discussions, is that the C.I.A. helped bin Laden build his first terrorist training camps. But as Peter L. Bergen, author of Holy War: Inside the Secret World of Osama bin Laden, has written: "This defies common sense. American officials did not venture into Afghanistan during the war against the Soviets for fear of handing the communists a propaganda victory if they were captured." In fact, the C.I.A. "had very limited dealings" with the Afghans, let alone the Afghan Arabs, Bergen writes, "and for good reason.... The
C.I.A. did not need the Afghan Arabs, and the Afghan Arabs did not need the C.I.A. So the notion that the Agency funded and trained the Afghan Arabs is, at best, misleading.

But of greater interest is the broader claim made over and over in academic circles—namely, that the medieval Crusades lie at the beginning of Western offenses, and are in some unspecified sense the "root cause" of September 11. Now, I have no interest in defending the Crusades. But it is important to offer an account of that era that acknowledges the dense complexity of historic events. Any simplistic treatment of the Crusades as Western imperialism fails that test.

It is in fact a real stretch to go all the way back to the eleventh century and from there try to build a bill of particulars against the West, as if Western perfidy began in the high Middle Ages and has continued unabated ever since. The Crusades were a complex series of events that began in response to four centuries of conquest by an energetic and expansionist Islam. Christians had been routed and expelled from Palestine, Syria, and Egypt. By the eighth century, Christian North Africa, the home of St. Augustine, was under Islamic influence and control. You would never know about this prehistory of the Crusades if you read and listened to contemporary reports. "Some reach back a millennium into Christian crusades into Arab homelands," notes the New York Times, without adding that the same were Arab homelands because the indigenous Christian population had been attacked, defeated, and displaced.

Islamic warriors nearly advanced into the heart of what became western Europe at the Battle of Poitiers in 732. In light of this, it is unsurprising that the Crusaders saw the reconquest of Jerusalem as an act of restoration. If there are grievances leftover from the Crusading era, the aggrieved would include all parties.

Consider a thought experiment. Imagine the reaction if Western intellectuals and political leaders justified military incursions into the Muslim world by reference to the Islamic conquests that lasted for centuries and then picked up again from the fourteenth to sixteenth centuries. Any Western politician or intellectual who pointed to Islam's attacks on western Europe, whether in the eighth or the seventeenth centuries, as a continuing grievance would be dismissed from the company of serious interlocutors very quickly. We would find this preposterous, inflammatory, and unacceptable. Why, then, should a historic narrative based on an ideologically charged,
partial reading of the record be taken seriously? Surely, it makes good sense to oppose such exculpatory strategies from any direction.

Real dissent

Columbia professor Edward Said displayed more characteristic errors of the Left in an essay in *Al-Ahram Weekly* attacking the “What We’re Fighting For” statement. Said had nothing to say about the terrorists’ fanatical religious motivations, instead saving his ire for those who analyzed and condemned radical Islam. He reported that he was “stunned when a European friend asked me what I thought of a declaration by 60 American intellectuals that was published in all the major French, German, Italian and other continental papers but which did not appear in the U.S. at all.” But there was no underhanded attempt on our part to suppress our statement in the United States. Rather, the American press didn’t find it noteworthy, as the signatories were *affirming* an effort rather than condemning it.

What most troubled Said was that the authors of “What We’re Fighting For” “align themselves so flagrantly with ... power.” Their position, he continued, “augurs a new and degraded era in the production of intellectual discourse.” Said warned about a return to the Cold War, when intellectuals worked for the C.I.A. and were “militantly unreflective and uncritical.” This “shameful episode” was now being repeated. Those who support the U.S. war effort, he charges, are collaborationists. What is remarkable about Said’s commentary is the unexamined belief that intellectuals must always be in the opposition, in dissent against the U.S. government.

It is apparent that at present, and for the foreseeable future, the real dissenters in American intellectual life are likely to be those who, at least in part, defend the foreign policy of the United States. This is perhaps to be expected. What is unfortunate is that the great bulk of America’s intellectual elite has chosen, in making its adversarial case, to disregard evident facts and to employ disingenuous and highly misleading arguments. This serves no cause well, least of all the calling of intellectual life.