"The Axis of Evil," Operation Infinite War, and Bush’s Attacks on Democracy

Douglas Kellner
University of California, Los Angeles

In his televised State of the Union Address on January 29, George W. Bush promised an epoch of Terror War, expanding the Bush doctrine to not only go after terrorists and those who harbor terrorist groups but to include those countries making weapons of mass destruction. Claiming that Iraq, Iran, and North Korea constituted “an axis of evil, arming to threaten the peace of the world,” Bush put the “world’s most dangerous regimes” on notice that he was planning to escalate the war on terror. Rattling the saber and making it clear that he was perfectly ready to wag the dog if Enron or domestic scandals and economic failures threatened his popularity, Bush put “rogue states” and terrorists everywhere on notice that he was prepared to go to war indefinitely against an array of targets in an epoch of Enduring Terror War.

As was becoming his norm, Bush’s team was able to orchestrate an impressive media event with celebrities such as Hamid Karzai, interim president of Afghanistan, in the audience next to Laura Bush, along with members of U.S. military families, New York firemen, and other icons of September 11. Moreover, Bush was learning to read his teleprompter speeches with proper emphasis and pronunciation but was not able to rid himself of his tale-tell smirk, weird darting eye gestures, and increasing arrogance and self-satisfaction. He also took the occasion to announce new dangers to the United States via plans found in Afghanistan to blow up U.S. nuclear installations, public monuments, and other targets.

In fact, these documents had been found weeks before and had already been discussed in the media, so Bush was simply using the threats to legitimate his...
own militarist agenda and to deflect attention from his own failings at eco-
nomic policy and the involvement of himself and others in his administration
in the Enron scandals. Certainly, terrorism remains a threat to the United
States, but to exaggerate the dangers, to escalate the war, and to engage in exces-
sive rhetoric are arguably not the way to deal with the problem. In a round of
TV interviews that preceded Bush’s address, one of his advisers, Karen Hughes,
claimed that Americans face dangers from up to 100,000 terrorists trained in
Afghanistan and deployed worldwide. Eyes bulging and lower lip tremulous,
the utterly mendacious Hughes, who has made a career of lying for Bush, made
it clear that Terror War would be a major focus of Bush administration policy.
Terrorist experts were dumbfounded at the spinmistress’ far-fetched fantasiz-
ing, with Stanley Bedlington, a former CIA terrorism analyst, insisting that “Al
Qaeda has never had that kind of strength.” Bedlington continued, “I just came
back from a luncheon with about 15 specialists. If I dropped that like a rock
into a stagnant pool, there would be roars of laughter” (Woodward, 2002).
Likewise, Bush’s rhetoric of “evil” was becoming tiresome and worrisome to
many. He used the term evil at least five times in his State of the Union Address
and included countries such as Iran in this litany, which was itself undergoing
complex domestic changes. Furthermore, what Bush did not talk about in the
State of the Union speech was also significant. He did not mention Osama Bin
Laden and the Al Qaeda and Taliban leadership that he had failed to appre-
hend. Bush did not refer to the stunning deficits that his fiscal mismanagement
had produced, glossing over the reversal in 1 year from the largest surplus in
U.S. history to a stunning $100 billion plus deficit (with estimates rising by the
week). Bush claimed that the “state of the union had never been so good,” but
in fact during Bush’s presidency, the nation suffered one of the greatest 1-year
reversals and declines in U.S. history. The U.S. economy was suffering massive
unemployment, the Enron scandal was harming investor confidence and
pointing to glaring problems that Bushonomics had helped produce, while the
national deficit was skyrocketing.
Moreover, in his State of the Union Address, George W. Bush out-voodooed
Ronald Reagan in his calls for wildly increased military spending, a jump in
home security spending, large tax cuts for the wealthy, and a 9% increase in
basic government programs. Bush was willing to finance this budget with a
more than $100 billion deficit for 2002 and an $80 billion budget deficit for
2003. One tries to imagine the uproar this would create if the Democrats had
urged such irresponsible deficit funding of the government. It was startlingly
clear that the Bush administration was returning to the giant deficit spending
that had seen the Reagan years double the national debt, whereas Bush I in his
failed 4 years of economic mismanagement doubled the national debt once
again. Every responsible economist believed that it was necessary to keep the
deficit and national debt under control to ensure U.S. economic stability, but
once again the Bush administration embarked on a rash and dangerous eco-
nomic policy that could end in catastrophe for the U.S. and global economy.

Looked at more closely, Bush’s State of the Union Address could be read as a
cunning use of Terror War to push through his indefensible domestic programs
such as the Star Wars missile program, his tax break and giveaway for the rich,
and his social service programs that would advance a conservative agenda (i.e.,
people and charities would solve social problems and not government). The
“evil axis” countries could be used to legitimate producing the Star Wars missile
defense system that critics had claimed had not been proven workable.
Although on one hand the very notion of an axis of evil suggests Bush adminis-
tration geopolitical confusion and misunderstanding, on the other, it opens the
way to any military intervention whatever. And by calling attention to coun-
tries that produce weapons of mass destruction, it legitimates a missile defense
system that will at least allegedly protect the United States against nuclear mis-
sile attack.

Most incredible, Bush was using the Enron collapse to push his tax giveaway
program and discredited pension plan. Although Bush did not mention the
unmentionable name of Enron in his speech, the day after the State of the
Union Bush called for pension reform in the light of the Enron collapse using
the national tragedy to push his social security stock scam, telling workers that
with improved investment advice and some protection, they would be better
off with retirement plans in which they could choose to invest their own sav-
ings! As if the Enron scandal had not revealed the uncertainty of investment
and dangers in the stock market!

The emphasis on care, compassion, sacrifice, national service, and commu-
nity voluntarism in the State of the Union gave Bush credence as a compassion-
ate conservative, as opposed to a hard-right ideologue and shameless manipula-
tor of crisis and tragedy for his own political ends. But the emphasis on
patriotism, national unity, and moral community functions to identify his
party and policies with patriotism but also to identify anyone who criticized his
foreign or domestic policies as “unpatriotic.” Lynne Cheney, wife of U.S. Vice
President Dick Cheney and a longtime cultural warrior against the Left, has
been circulating texts documenting unpatriotic statements by university pro-
fessors. Since September 11, Ms. Cheney had been leading an assault against
dissenters to Bush administration policy on the grounds that they are not patri-
optic and supporting the president in a time of war and danger (Defense of Civi-
lization Fund, 2001).2 Stressing national unity and patriotism was thus provid-
ing a cover for suppressing dissent and difference and thus threatening to
undermine U.S. democracy, revealing the dangerous antidemocracy senti-
ments of the Bush-Cheney gang.

Moreover, appropriating the language of “moral community” for a conser-
ervative “homeland defense” against terrorism and “an axis of evil” redefines
community in conservative terms as those who identify with U.S. government policy. It also subordinates discourses of social justice, civil rights, and democracy to pulling together in the name of national unity, a move that can easily be used to suppress dissent and progressive agendas. Thus, the Bush administration is using the September 11 terrorist attacks and issues of national security to push through a right-wing agenda that is a clear and present danger to U.S. democracy as well as world peace.

Notes

1. Budget analysts noted that although it was claimed on page 396 of Bush’s budget that the 2002 deficit would be $106 billion, on page 417 it is admitted that “the amount of government debt outstanding at the end of this year will rise by fully $367 billion to a new world record of $6.1 trillion” (Oliphant, 2002). When Senator Fritz Hollings confronted Bush administration budget director Mitch Daniels with this discrepancy, Daniels admitted that “we hid it but you found it.” According to Oliphant (2002), the Bush administration plans to help cover the gargantuan deficit by raiding social security and Medicare.

2. Lynne Cheney and her right-wing allies had long dreamed of crushing radical voices of dissent in the university and had long waged a cultural war against their academic enemies. The conservative jihad was launched during the Reagan era when Ms. Cheney was head of the National Endowment for the Humanities, which she governed like a Taliban, rooting out all politically incorrect policies and personnel and going after progressives in the academic world. There were some speculations that the U.S. Left/Right culture wars were suspended in favor of national unity against terrorism, but obviously Cheney and her Taliban were not going to miss a chance to go after their long-time adversaries.

References


Douglas Kellner is George Kneller Chair in the Philosophy of Education at the University of California, Los Angeles, and is author of many books on social theory, politics, history, and culture, including Camera Politica: The Politics and Ideology of Contemporary Hollywood Film (with Michael Ryan); Critical Theory, Marxism, and Modernity; Jean Baudrillard: From Marxism to Postmodernism and Beyond; and Postmodern Theory: Critical Interrogations (with Steven Best).