

# Rereading America

## *Cultural Contexts for Critical Thinking and Writing*

Sixth Edition

Edited by

*Gary Colombo*

LOS ANGELES CITY COLLEGE

*Robert Cullen*

SAN JOSE STATE UNIVERSITY

*Bonnie Lisle*

UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA, LOS ANGELES

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- (p. 709). Is D'Souza, like Beveridge, arguing for the establishment of a worldwide empire? What differences do you see between these two articulations of the myth of American exceptionalism?
6. How might Paul L. Wachtel (p. 613) interpret D'Souza's depictions of "other" cultures and civilizations? To what extent, if any, do D'Souza's views of Islamic nations echo racist stereotypes? Is it possible to move beyond such stereotypes while still acknowledging the differences between different world cultures? Why or why not?
  7. Write a brief imaginary dialogue between D'Souza, John Taylor Gatto (p. 173), and/or Michael Moore (p. 153) on the importance of freedom in American culture. Would these critics of the American educational system be likely to agree that American civilization has created a "new way of being human" that is essentially superior to and more free than the ways of human beings found in "traditional societies"? Why or why not?

### EXTENDING THE CRITICAL CONTEXT

8. Locate and examine statements made by political leaders or members of the Bush administration justifying the U.S. invasion of Afghanistan and Iraq or any other relatively unilateral U.S. military action. To what extent do such statements echo ideas expressed in D'Souza's assessment of the United States and our meaning in the world?
9. Working in groups, debate whether or not you agree with the notion of U.S. exceptionalism. Do you believe, as D'Souza does, that the United States is "an oasis of goodness in a desert of cynicism and barbarism"—or that "America is a new kind of society that produces a new kind of human being"? Is there a basis in fact for such claims, or are they simply a matter of nationalism or prejudice?
10. Research the traditions, values, and attitudes associated with Islam. How does the information you gather substantiate or challenge D'Souza's depiction of Islamic cultures and their attitudes toward the West?

## *The Oblivious Empire*

MARK HERTSGAARD

*The idea that America is an "exceptional" country that produces a unique kind of human being is as old as the concept of America itself. Belief in American "exceptionalism" goes all the way back to the Pilgrims, who came to the "New World" to liberate themselves from what they saw as the decadent civilizations of "old" Europe. During the colonial period and the nineteenth century, this belief in the uniqueness of the American mission was repeatedly invoked to justify the destruction of Native American tribes and military*

*interventions against other sovereign nations in the Western Hemisphere. Today, political observers note the emergence of a “new exceptionalism”—the rebirth of the conviction that America has a special mission and meaning in world affairs. But as Mark Hertsgaard suggests in this selection, America’s sense of superiority may well be the very thing that’s feeding the flames of anti-Americanism around the world. A broadcaster and journalist who contributes regularly to The New Yorker, The Atlantic, Vanity Fair, Harpers, the New York Times, and the Washington Post, Hertsgaard has also authored five books, including Earth Odyssey: Around the World in Search of Our Environmental Future (1999) and the source of this selection, The Eagle’s Shadow: Why America Fascinates and Infuriates the World (2001).*

“Texans are the worst,” said the London cabbie. It was a fine late summer morning and we were waiting for the light to change so we could cross the Thames.<sup>1</sup> “I had one in the cab a few weeks ago, must have been in his thirties. We were driving past the London Eye<sup>2</sup> and he says, ‘What’s ‘at?’ I tell him it’s the London Eye, the tallest Ferris wheel in the world. He says, ‘We got one bigger than that.’ I thought, ‘Uh-oh, one of those.’ I mean, I don’t care if the Eye is the tallest in the world or not, maybe there is a bigger one in Texas for all I know. It’s the bragging and the arrogance that put me off. No matter what he saw, Texas had more. I forget what we passed next, a double-decker bus, maybe, or Big Ben<sup>3</sup>—something totally unique to London. He says, ‘What’s ‘at?’ I tell him. He says, ‘We got one bigger than that.’ After that I couldn’t be bothered.”

The light went green, the cabbie hit the accelerator. “I like most Americans,” he added, “but it is quite amazing how they don’t know anything about other places in the world”—he shot me a sly glance through the rearview mirror—“unless they’re invading them.”

The cabbie delivered that little jab on September 10, 2001, but I doubt he would have repeated it two days later. In the immediate aftermath of September 11, the mood in Europe was one of shock and deep sympathy for Americans. “We are very sorry,” friends in Paris told me, as if I myself had been attacked. A couple of days later, in Prague, I happened to walk by the United States embassy one night on the way to dinner. The entire block was softly lit by candles well-wishers had left, along with hundreds of flowers and notes of condolence and encouragement. I found more flowers and notes at one of Prague’s most revered public places: the monument on Wenceslas Square where the student Jan Palach set himself on fire to

<sup>1</sup>*Thames*: River running through central London. [All notes are author’s, except 1–3, 7, 8, 11, 15–18, 23–26, and 30.]

<sup>2</sup>*London Eye*: Gigantic Ferris wheel built on the south bank of the Thames as part of the millennium celebrations in 2002.

<sup>3</sup>*Big Ben*: London landmark clock located on the main tower of Parliament.

protest the Soviet crackdown of 1968. "No Terrorism" read one message spray-painted onto the concrete. Newspapers across the Continent ran articles reporting similar acts of solidarity in Japan, Russia, and elsewhere, as well as commentaries declaring, "We are all Americans now."

The sympathy was genuine and genuinely touching, but as I continued in the following weeks to talk with people across Europe and to survey the local media, it was also clear that the terror attacks had not caused Europeans to forget whatever they had once believed about the United States. Good manners might have restrained the London cabbie from repeating his remark, but it didn't mean he'd stopped thinking Americans were arrogant know-nothings. History did not begin on September 11.

Horrified as they were by the tragedy in the United States, many foreigners were not exactly surprised. Most of them knew the reasons why the United States was resented, even hated, in parts of the world, and they usually had complaints of their own. A high school teacher in Spain offered condolences for the September 11 victims and their families, but he told me he hoped Americans would recognize that the tragedy was "a consequence of U.S. foreign policy," especially its one-sided approach to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Some Europeans went so far as to cite America's conduct overseas as a virtual justification for the attacks. Even those who rejected the argument that the United States had brought September 11 on itself admitted that America could be infuriating at times.

Perhaps nothing irritates foreigners more than America's habit of thinking it has all the answers, and the right to impose them on everyone else. An outstanding example was President Bush's first major speech after the terror attacks. Speaking before Congress on September 20, Bush declared that foreign nations had to understand that, in the impending U.S.-led war against terrorism, "either you are with us, or you are with the terrorists." Like Bush's declaration that he wanted bin Laden "dead or alive," this was more cowboy talk, the Wild West sheriff warning, "Do as I say or get out of town"—the very attitude that had irritated America's friends and enemies alike for decades. Never mind that many nations already had their own painful experiences with terrorism; they would follow Washington's orders or else.

The United States would never accept such ultimatums itself, yet the arrogance of Bush's remark went unnoticed by America's political and journalistic elite. The *International Herald Tribune*, the overseas daily published by the *New York Times* and the *Washington Post*, did not even mention Bush's statement until the twentieth paragraph of its story, deep inside the paper. By contrast, the French daily *Le Monde* highlighted it three times on its front page, including in the headline and first paragraph. If opinion polls can be trusted, ordinary Americans also saw nothing wrong

with their president's stance toward the rest of the world. Throughout the autumn of 2001, Bush's approval rating remained at above 75 percent.<sup>4</sup>

But I would plead ignorance rather than venality on behalf of my fellow Americans. The embarrassing truth is that most of us know little about the outside world, and we are particularly ill-informed about what our government is doing in our name overseas. For example, Americans are ceaselessly, and accurately, reminded that Saddam Hussein is an evil man, but not that American-enforced economic sanctions have, since 1991, caused the deaths of at least 350,000<sup>5</sup> Iraqi children and impoverished a once prosperous Iraqi middle class. The bloody violence between Israelis and Palestinians that raged throughout March and April of 2002 got plenty of media coverage in the United States. Nevertheless, many Americans remained uninformed about basic aspects of the conflict. A poll conducted in early May by the University of Maryland's Program on International Policy Attitudes revealed, for example, that only 32 percent of Americans were aware that more Palestinians than Israelis had died in the fighting; only 43 percent knew that most other countries in the world disapproved of America's Middle East policies; and a mere 27 percent knew that most countries were more sympathetic to the Palestinian than to the Israeli side of the dispute.<sup>6</sup>

In the wake of September 11, the question obsessing Americans about the Muslim world was "Why do they hate us?" But Muslims had long wondered the same about Americans. In a sparkling exception to most American news coverage, Sandy Toland reported on National Public Radio in January 2002 that nearly everyone he had interviewed during six weeks of recent travel through the Middle East resented the negative stereotypes attached to Muslims and Arabs by American movies, television, and news coverage. In Europe, stretching back to the novels of Goethe<sup>7</sup> and the operas of Mozart,<sup>8</sup> there had long been respect for the great achievements of Islamic civilization in culture, astronomy, architecture, and more. America, by contrast, regarded Muslims as primitive, untrustworthy fanatics, worth dealing with only because they had oil.

"You are dealing here with people who are almost childlike in their understanding of what is going on in the world," Gerald Celente, director of the Trends Research Institute in Rhinebeck, New York, told the *Financial*

<sup>4</sup>Bush's 77 percent approval rating was reported in *Time*, February 4, 2002.

<sup>5</sup>The justification for the 350,000 figure, which is considerably lower than some frequently cited estimates, is discussed in "A Hard Look at Iraq Sanctions," by David Cortright, *The Nation*, December 3, 2001.

<sup>6</sup>Americans' views of the Middle East conflict were examined in a poll conducted by the Program on International Policy Attitudes of the University of Maryland, released to the media on May 8, 2002, and available via the program's web site at [www.pipa.org](http://www.pipa.org).

<sup>7</sup>*Goethe*: Johann Wolfgang von Goethe (1749–1832), German poet, novelist, and dramatist.

<sup>8</sup>*Mozart*: Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart (1756–1791), German composer.

*Times* shortly after September 11.<sup>9</sup> "It's all: 'We never did anything to anybody, so why are they doing this to us?'"

Some Americans have taken refuge in the obvious answer: they envy our wealth and resent our power. There is truth in this, as I'll discuss, but it barely scratches the surface. The reason many foreigners don't share Americans' high opinion of themselves is simple: they dislike both how America behaves overseas and its attitude about that behavior.

America, foreigners say, is a trigger-happy bully that is both out for itself and full of itself. It feels no obligation to obey international law; it often pushes other countries around, forcing on them policies and sometimes tyrannical leaders that serve only American interests, and then, if they resist too much, it may bomb obedience into them with cruise missiles. Only an American would blink to hear the United States called the most bellicose major power in the world; to foreigners, the observation is obvious to the point of banality. America's high-handed behavior puzzles admirers of its domestic freedoms: how to explain the inconsistency? Less sentimental observers point out that this is how the strong have treated the weak throughout history. But, they add, what makes the United States uniquely annoying is its self-righteous insistence that it does nothing of the kind, that it is the epitome of evenhanded virtue and selfless generosity—the Beacon of Democracy that other nations should thank and emulate.

On November 10, 2001, President Bush made his first appearance before the United Nations General Assembly and, in a speech praised by the *New York Times* for its "plain-spoken eloquence,"<sup>10</sup> told the rest of the world it wasn't doing enough to help the United States fight terrorism. "Every nation in the world has a stake in this cause," declared Bush before lecturing his audience that the responsibility to fight terrorism was "binding on every nation with a place in this chamber." Yet on the same day—indeed, at the very moment—that Bush was admonishing others about their international responsibilities, his own administration was shunning negotiations in Morocco to finalize the Kyoto protocol<sup>11</sup> on global warming. Talk about an issue that every nation has a stake in! Already the earth's glaciers are melting, sea levels are rising, and catastrophic storms are becoming more severe and frequent—this after a mere 1 degree Fahrenheit increase in temperatures over the past century. The scientific consensus predicts 3 to 10.5 degrees of additional warming by 2100, bringing more violent weather, flooded coastlines, and social havoc. Yet the Bush administration insists on doing nothing to lower U.S. greenhouse gas emissions. No wonder foreigners resent us.

<sup>9</sup>Gerald Celente's quote appeared in the *Financial Times* of September 29–30, 2001.

<sup>10</sup>Bush's speech was reported, and praised, in the November 11 edition of the *New York Times*.

<sup>11</sup>*Kyoto protocol*: U.S. refusal to ratify the 1997 United Nations-sponsored Kyoto protocol which aimed at reducing greenhouse gas emissions below 1990 levels worldwide has been seen as an example of American arrogance and unilateralism.

American elites sometimes talk of our nation's isolationist tendencies, but the correct adjective is unilateralist. The United States has hardly shunned overseas involvement over the years; we simply insist on setting our own terms. This tendency has become especially pronounced since victory in the Cold War left us the only remaining superpower. Determined to keep it that way, senior officials in the first Bush administration drafted a grand strategy for the new era (which got leaked to the *New York Times*):<sup>12</sup> henceforth the goal of American foreign policy would be to prevent any other nation or alliance from becoming a superpower; the United States would rule supreme. This strategy lives on under George W. Bush—which is no surprise, since Vice President Dick Cheney and other key advisers were the ones who devised the strategy for Bush's father. Shortly after taking office, the administration of Bush II announced it was going to withdraw from the Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty, a cornerstone of nuclear arms control for the past thirty years, in an assertion of unilateralism that evoked dismay not just from treaty partner Russia but from the entire global community. Bush's oddest rejection of global cooperation was his refusal to join, even retroactively, the accord against bioterrorism reached in July 2001 that could hinder future anthrax attacks. The United States delegation walked out of the negotiations because the Bush administration refused to accept the same rules it demands for Iraq and other "rogue states": international inspections of potential weapons production sites.<sup>13</sup>

I don't mean to pick on Mr. Bush. Double standards have a long bipartisan pedigree in American foreign policy. Bush's father uttered one of the most feverish declarations of American prerogative in 1988, while serving as Ronald Reagan's vice president. Five years earlier, when the Soviet Union shot down a Korean Airlines passenger jet over the Pacific, killing all 276 people on board, the United States had condemned the attack as further evidence of the "evil empire's" true nature, rejecting the Soviet explanation that the jet was acting like a military aircraft. Now the tables were turned: the United States had shot down an Iranian civilian jet it mistakenly believed was a military craft. All 290 passengers died. When Bush senior was asked if an apology was in order, he replied, "I will never apologize for the United States. I don't care what the facts are."

Democrats have been just as bad about this kind of thing. In 1998 critics at home and abroad were condemning the Clinton administration's launch of cruise missiles against Iraq as at best unnecessary and at worst a self-serving ploy to weaken impeachment proceedings against the president. But no, Secretary of State Madeleine Albright modestly explained, "if we have to use force, it is because we are America. We are the

<sup>12</sup>The first Bush administration's grand strategy is described in *The New Yorker* of April 1, 2002.

<sup>13</sup>Bush's rejection of the verification protocol for biological weapons was analyzed by Milton Leitenberg in the *Los Angeles Times Book Review*, October 28, 2001.



indispensable nation. . . . We see farther into the future." As Rupert Cornwell, the Washington correspondent for the British newspaper *The Independent*, observed on another occasion, "No one wraps self-interest in moral superiority quite like the Americans do."<sup>14</sup>

Americans are a fair-minded people, however, and I doubt that a majority of us would support such hypocrisy if we were truly aware of it. I believe most of us would instead urge that the United States bring its global behavior into accord with its domestic principles. But that might threaten what Washington considers vital national interests, so the powers that be resist. Since America is the land of both Hollywood and Madison Avenue, our official response has instead been to hire public relations experts to do a better job of "getting our message out" overseas. Brilliant touch, no? After all, the problem couldn't possibly be our policies themselves.

Americans will continue to misunderstand the world, and our place within it, until we face the full truth of how our government has acted overseas—a fact made powerfully clear to me in South Africa, where . . . enthusiasm for America . . . is balanced by the anger of those who recall that the United States was a firm, long-standing supporter of apartheid.<sup>15</sup>

### Why Don't They Love Us?

The ferry from Cape Town takes forty minutes to reach Robben Island, the notorious prison where Nelson Mandela<sup>16</sup> and other South African freedom fighters were jailed during their struggle for freedom. The ferry lands at a jetty two hundred yards from a complex of low buildings with corrugated tin roofs that is the prison proper. A sign retained from apartheid days reads, in English and Afrikaans, "Robben Island. Welcome. We Serve with Pride."

There are now guided tours of the island, and what makes them especially compelling is that they are conducted by a thin man in a white windbreaker named Sphiwo Sobuwa. Speaking in a flat, deliberate tone, Sobuwa said he had been imprisoned at age seventeen after being captured smuggling arms for the ANC's<sup>17</sup> military wing. Interrogated, beaten, denied a lawyer, he was sentenced to forty-eight years in jail. He served fifteen years, all on Robben Island, before the crumbling of apartheid enabled his release in 1991.

As he ushered us into the prison's entry hall, Sobuwa recalled how he spent his first two years in solitary confinement because he didn't speak Afrikaans. A warden told his group of arriving prisoners that no talking was allowed, but since Sobuwa didn't understand Afrikaans, he asked another

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<sup>14</sup>Rupert Cornwell's remark appeared in *The Independent* on July 27, 2001.

<sup>15</sup>*apartheid*: The South African government policy of racial segregation, abolished in 1992.

<sup>16</sup>*Nelson Mandela*: Nelson Rolihlahla Mandela (b. 1918), South African political leader, elected president in the nation's first post-apartheid multiracial elections in 1994.

<sup>17</sup>*ANC*: The African National Congress, a South African political organization, led by Nelson Mandela from 1991 until 1994, prominent for its opposition to apartheid.

inmate what was going on. The warden decided to make an example of Sobuwa. "I was sent to A section, the torture section," he told us. "I could not write or receive letters. I could not speak, sing, or whistle. Food was slipped underneath the grille of my cell. Those two years were the hardest."

We pushed through a door into an open-air courtyard, where we listened to Sobuwa recount other punishments common on Robben Island. Most humiliating was the guards' game of ordering an inmate buried in the ground up to his neck and then leaving him there all day to roast in the sun while guards took turns urinating on him. More gruesome was the practice of hanging a prisoner upside down from a tree and waiting as the hours passed for him to pass out and, in one case, to perish as the body's blood supply gradually accumulated in the brain, starving it of oxygen. But of all the deprivations—punishing physical labor, numbing boredom, inedible food, lack of heat—Sobuwa said the blackout on news was the hardest to bear. Inmates did their best to compensate. "The guard towers had no toilets," he explained, "so guards would relieve themselves in newspapers, then throw the papers down to the ground. We would retrieve those papers, scrape them off, and read the news they contained. We didn't care what kind of mess was inside, we wanted that news."

Hearing about such abominations firsthand makes visiting Robben Island as unforgettable as a pilgrimage to Dachau or Hiroshima.<sup>18</sup> And talking with a man like Sobuwa rescues foreign policy from its usual abstractions, making concrete the implications of such diplomatic double-talk as "constructive engagement," the Reagan administration's justification for its unswerving support for apartheid. When I interviewed Sobuwa at his cinder-block house in a Cape Town township, he said his work had taught him to distinguish between Americans as people and the American government. He had little good to say about the latter. Washington, he pointed out, as well as Israel, had supported apartheid—and thus the oppression on Robben Island—until the very end. Furthermore, he said, "it is a trend among United States presidents that so-called Third World countries must be destabilized. America believes in solving problems not by negotiations but through military pressure."

But his tour guide conversations had made Sobuwa realize that not all Americans supported their government's policy. He was grateful for those who had joined the protests that eventually forced Western governments, including that of the United States, to endorse apartheid's demise. He was unaware that America's new vice president had, as a U.S. congressman in 1985, voted against urging Mandela's release from jail,<sup>19</sup> but then neither

<sup>18</sup>*Dachau or Hiroshima*: Respectively, site of a World War II-era Nazi "death camp" and the Japanese city that, along with Nagasaki, was the first populated area to be targeted by nuclear weapons.

<sup>19</sup>Dick Cheney was one of only eight members of Congress who voted against the resolution urging the government of South Africa to release Mandela from jail and initiate negotiations with the African National Congress. See Joe Conason's story in Salon.com., August 1, 2000.

were most Americans aware of this aspect of Dick Cheney's past. What Sobuwa did know was that Bill Clinton had a lot of nerve. "He came here a couple years ago to visit Mandela and speak to our Parliament, and he told us South Africa should cut its ties to Cuba because Cuba was a bad government. Well, when we needed help during our liberation struggle, Cuba gave it. When we needed food, Cuba provided it. For someone who did not help our struggle to come now and ask us to distance ourselves from someone who did, that is very arrogant behavior."

Arrogant but, alas, not atypical. The United States has long pressed South American nations to cut ties with the Castro government. Likewise, in June 2002 George W. Bush announced that Yasir Arafat had to go as the Palestinian leader. Free elections had to be held, said Bush, but Washington would push for a Palestinian state only if those "free" elections got rid of Arafat.

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Washington's might-makes-right view of such matters was succinctly expressed by Henry Kissinger when, as President Richard Nixon's national security adviser, he privately defended overthrowing the elected government of Chile by saying he saw no reason why the United States had to allow Chile to "go Marxist" simply because "its people are irresponsible."<sup>20</sup> Testifying before the U.S. Senate on the day of the coup, Kissinger claimed the United States had played no role in the 1973 coup that toppled Allende. But voluminous government documents show that Kissinger, as head of the so-called Forty Committee that supervised U.S. covert actions between 1969 and 1976, was well-informed about how the CIA had ordered a coup in 1970 that had failed to thwart Allende and, in 1973, had at least condoned if not actively aided the Chilean military men who, under future dictator General Augusto Pinochet, imposed martial law and eventually killed 3,197 Chilean citizens.<sup>21</sup>

Note the date of the U.S.-sponsored assault on democratic government in Chile: September 11, 1973. Note the estimated Chilean death toll—executions plus military casualties—of 3,197 people. Is not the congruence between that coup and the World Trade Center attack striking? True, one was authored by religious fanatics and the other by a state, and the events were separated in time by twenty-eight years, yet both took place on the same date and caused comparable numbers of deaths. Nevertheless, this eerie coincidence passed virtually unremarked in the United States.

This is self-defeating. It's no secret to Chileans that the United States helped bring to power the dictatorship that ruled them for seventeen years.

<sup>20</sup>Kissinger's quote about Chile and his activities with the Forty Committee are described in "The Case Against Henry Kissinger," by Christopher Hitchens, in *Harper's Magazine*, February and March 2001.

<sup>21</sup>The death toll resulting from the 1973 coup in Chile is documented by John Dinges in *The Condor Years: How Pinochet and His Allies Brought Terrorism to Three Continents* (New York: New Press, 2003), chapter 1.

Nor are the people of El Salvador and Guatemala unaware that the United States gave money, weapons, and training to the military governments that killed so many of their fellow citizens in recent decades. In Guatemala, a truth commission sponsored by the United Nations concluded in 1999 that “American training of the officer corps in counterinsurgency techniques” was a “key factor” in a “genocide” that included the killing of 200,000 peasants.

Switch to Asia<sup>22</sup> or the Middle East and the same point applies. Virtually every one of Washington’s allies in the Middle East is an absolute monarchy where democracy and human rights are foreign concepts and women in particular are second-class citizens. But they have oil, so all is forgiven. Likewise, in South Korea everyone knows that the United States chose the generals that ruled their country from the end of World War II until 1993; the facts came out during a trial that found two of the surviving dictators guilty of state terrorism. Ferdinand Marcos of the Philippines, General Suharto of Indonesia, General Lon Nol of Cambodia—the list of tyrants that Washington has supported in Asia is widely known, except in the United States.

Again, what offends is not simply the ruthlessness of American policies but their hypocrisy. The United States insists on the sanctity of United Nations resolutions when they punish enemies like Iraq with arms inspections, but not when they oblige its number-one foreign aid recipient, Israel, to withdraw from occupation of Palestinian territories in the West Bank and Gaza. On trade policy, Washington demands that poor countries honor World Trade Organization rules against subsidizing domestic farmers or industries because these rules enable U.S.-based multinational firms to invade those countries’ economies. Without blushing, Washington then lavishes billions of dollars in subsidies on our own agriculture sector (dominated, by the way, by those same multinationals) and imposes tariffs against foreign steel imports. Why do we violate fair play so brazenly? Because we can. “The United States can hurt us a lot worse than we can hurt them,” grumbled one Canadian trade official.

Then there is our self-serving definition of “terrorism,” a concept America’s political and media elites never apply to the United States or its allies, only to enemies or third parties. No one disputes that the September 11 attacks against the United States were acts of terrorism; that is, they targeted innocent civilians to advance a political or military agenda. When the Irish Republican Army exploded bombs inside London subway stations and department stores in the mid-1990s, that, too, was terrorism. So were the Palestinian suicide bombings in Israel in early 2002, and Saddam Hussein’s

<sup>22</sup>The findings of the United Nations–sponsored Commission for Historical Clarification, as well as American support for Asian dictators, were summarized in *Blowback: The Costs and Consequences of American Empire*, by Chalmers Johnson (New York: Henry Holt, Owl Books, 2001), pages 14 and 25–27, respectively.

use of poison gas against Kurds in Iraq in 1988. But when Israel attacked Palestinian refugee camps in April 2002, demolishing buildings and killing or wounding many civilians, was that not also terrorism? When the United States lobbed Volkswagen-sized shells into Lebanese villages in 1983 and dropped "smart bombs" on Baghdad in 1991, many innocent civilians perished while Washington sent its geopolitical message. The napalm dropped during the Vietnam War, the bombing of Dresden,<sup>23</sup> and the annihilation of Hiroshima and Nagasaki in World War II—these acts all pursued military or political objectives by killing vast numbers of civilians, just as the September 11 attacks did. Yet in mainstream American discourse, the United States is never the perpetrator of terrorism, only its victim and implacable foe.

These and other unsavory aspects of America's overseas dealings are not completely unknown in the United States. Academic specialists, human rights activists, and partisans of the political left are familiar with this history. Glimpses of the truth appear (very) occasionally in mainstream press coverage, and the CIA's role in subverting democracies and overthrowing governments was documented by congressional investigations in 1975. In 2002 Samantha Powers published a book, *A Problem from Hell*, that meticulously documented how Washington deliberately chose not to intervene against some of the worst acts of genocide in the twentieth century, including Pol Pot's<sup>24</sup> rampages in Cambodia, ethnic cleansing in Bosnia,<sup>25</sup> and tribal slaughter in Rwanda.<sup>26</sup> The book received considerable attention within media circles; its message got out. But in general, critical perspectives on American actions are given nowhere near the same prominence or repetition in government, media, and public discussion as is the conventional view of the United States as an evenhanded champion of democracy and freedom. Thus the basic direction of American foreign policy rarely shifts, and Washington creates for itself what the late *Wall Street Journal* reporter Jonathan Kwitny called "endless enemies"<sup>27</sup> around the world. Worse, average Americans are left unaware that this is happening, and so are shocked when foreigners don't love us as much as we think they should.

<sup>23</sup>*Dresden*: One of the world's most beautiful cities before World War II, Dresden, Germany, was the site of a particularly violent attack by Allied bombers in 1945 that resulted in 35,000 to 135,000 casualties and destroyed many of the city's original buildings.

<sup>24</sup>*Pol Pot*: Communist leader (1925–1998) who seized the government of Cambodia in 1975 and instituted a repressive regime that became infamous for its policy of systematic murder of rival groups and forced labor in the "killing fields" until Vietnam invaded in 1979. Pol Pot retired in 1985.

<sup>25</sup>*ethnic cleansing in Bosnia*: After Bosnia and Hercegovina declared their independence from Yugoslavia in 1992, Serbian and Croat Christian forces in Bosnia began a systematic campaign of "ethnic cleansing" to exterminate the majority Muslim population.

<sup>26</sup>*Rwanda*: In 1994, the Hutu tribe joined Rwandan government troops in a genocidal attack on their longtime rivals, the Tutsi clan, that resulted in between 500,000 and 800,000 casualties.

<sup>27</sup>Kwitny's phrase was the title of his illuminating and comprehensive book *Endless Enemies: The Making of an Unfriendly World* (New York: Congdon & Weed, 1984).

Ignorance is an excuse, but it is no shield. “Although most Americans may be largely ignorant of what was, and still is, being done in their names, all are likely to pay a steep price . . . for their nation’s continued efforts to dominate the global scene,” veteran Asian affairs analyst Chalmers Johnson wrote in his fierce book, *Blowback*. America’s tendency to bully, warns Johnson, will “build up reservoirs of resentment against all Americans—tourists, students, and businessmen, as well as members of the armed forces—that can have lethal results.”

“Blowback” is a CIA term for how foreign policy can come back to haunt a country years later in unforeseen ways, especially after cases of secret operations. Thus Johnson quotes a 1997 report by the Pentagon’s Defense Science Board: “Historical data show a strong correlation between U.S. involvement in international situations and an increase in terrorist attacks against the United States.” A glaring example is the Iranian hostage crisis of 1979. To protect American oil interests, the CIA in 1953 overthrew the elected government of Iran and installed Shah Reza Pahlavi (an act a subsequent CIA director, William Colby, described as the CIA’s “proudest moment”).<sup>28</sup> The shah ruled with an iron hand, murdered thousands, duly became widely hated, and was forced from power in 1979. Residual Iranian anger led to an attack on the United States embassy in Tehran and seizure of fifty-four hostages, a crisis that doomed Jimmy Carter’s presidency.<sup>29</sup>

Because Johnson’s book was published in 2000, it was unable to address the most spectacular of all cases of blowback: the September 11 terror attacks. But in the October 15 and December 10, 2001, issues of *The Nation*, Johnson explained how the CIA supported Osama bin Laden<sup>30</sup> from at least 1984 as part of its funding of the mujahideen, the Islamic resistance to the Soviet Union’s occupation of Afghanistan. The CIA funneled its support for bin Laden and other mujahideen, including building the complex where bin Laden trained some thirty-five thousand followers, through Pakistan’s intelligence service. But bin Laden turned against the United States after the 1991 Persian Gulf War, when “infidel” American troops were stationed on the Islamic holy ground of Saudi Arabia to prop up its authoritarian regime. The September 11 attacks, Johnson concludes, were the blowback from America’s covert action in Afghanistan in the 1970s, and the cycle is probably not over: “The Pentagon’s current response of ‘bouncing the rubble’ in Afghanistan [is] setting the stage for more rounds to come.”

<sup>28</sup>The quotes from Johnson, *Blowback*, are from pages 33 and 4, respectively.

<sup>29</sup>The definitive account of America’s actions in Iran, including the help that the local *New York Times* correspondent gave to the coup plotters, is found in Kwitny, *Endless Enemies*, pages 161–78.

<sup>30</sup>*Osama bin Laden*: Son of one of Saudi Arabia’s wealthiest families, Osama bin Laden (b. 1957) founded the international terrorist organization al-Qaeda in 1988, which has since been linked to numerous attacks on U.S. targets around the world, including the assaults of September 11, 2001.