

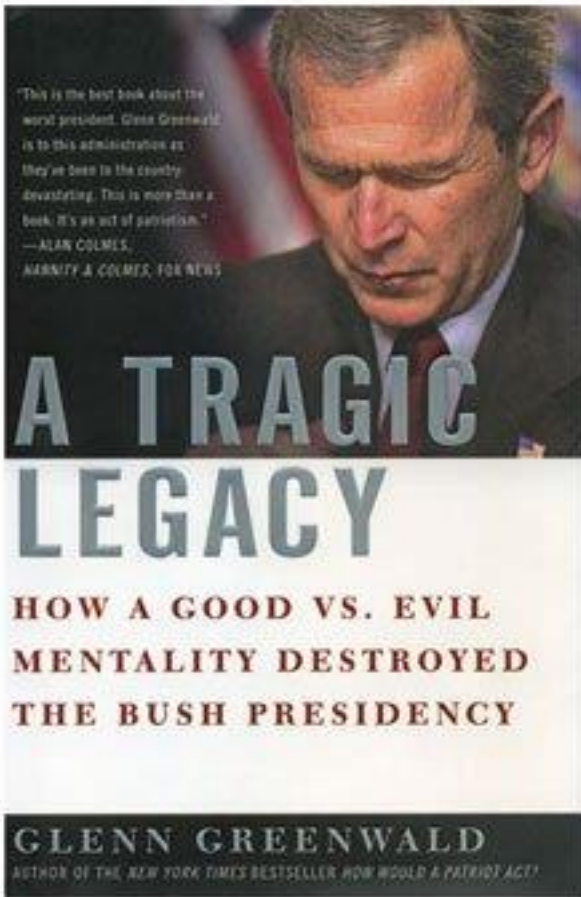
# A Simple Mind Run Amok

by Tom Palaima

Published Fri, Nov 16, 2007 at 12:00 am CST

The title of Glenn Greenwald's informative book is misleading in three ways. First, the historically naïve and religiously motivated Manichean worldview behind the foreign policy of George W. Bush has serious consequences for citizens of our country and human beings in every country. To assess Bush's good-vs.-evil mentality solely in terms of its impact on his presidency would be like judging the Helter Skelter philosophy of Charles Manson in terms of how it affected daily life for the Manson family out on the Spahn ranch. The real victims in both cases deserve our undivided attention.

In fact, *A Tragic Legacy* is not so narrowly focused. Greenwald identifies the victims of the Bush presidency, the harm they have suffered, and how that harm continues to be inflicted. He discusses the accomplices who have made it possible for a president with no electoral mandate to use the irrational, and now seriously diminished, support he gained from the events of 9/11 to do so much damage. These accomplices include compliant and co-opted journalists; neocon intellectuals like Victor Davis Hanson, who draw questionable lessons from history; members of Congress who favor career interests over the country; and uninformed, frightened, and polarized voters who are mostly unaffected by what happens to, and what is being done by, our all-volunteer Army and contract mercenaries far, far away.



Second, Greenwald means something specific when he speaks of the “tragic legacy.” He sets out to explain what he calls the “crashing and shattering defeat” of the Republican Party in the 2006 midterm election, a defeat “universally attributed to the country’s deep dislike of the president and his signature, legacy policy—the invasion and ongoing occupation in Iraq.” Yet Greenwald eventually takes up many other negative legacies of the Bush presidency.

The Bush White House has overridden the system of checks and balances in our government; violated long-held principles concerning how our government treats those it imprisons as enemies; diminished our global standing and our

ability to influence world affairs; spent and tax-cut us into crippling debt; concealed and distorted information about what our government is doing; and changed how we choose to go to war and conduct wars.

Greenwald lays out how the Bush administration and its collaborators have gotten us to believe in an endless war on terror that is right out of George Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four*. We have entered an ahistorical world of newspeak and nonspeak. Since Orwell was writing, in his own words, "directly or indirectly, against totalitarianism," we can see what our democracy has become.

The third, and perhaps most misleading, aspect of Greenwald's title is its implication that George Bush's good-vs.-evil mentality *has* destroyed his presidency. Would that this were true. Instead, as Greenwald explains, the Bush presidency and its supporters remain powerful enough to move our country toward another war and to control public debate on issues ranging from the use of torture to the erosion of our own civil liberties. Bush is recycling for Iran the same arguments and rhetorical strategies used in the run-up to the war in Iraq. The Bush presidency is still what it has always conceived itself to be, and it is still doing what it set out to do.

Greenwald makes clear that Bush's good-vs.-evil mentality is not merely a political strategy. The president believes the world is divided into good and evil. He believes the United States represents good.

It would therefore have been helpful if Greenwald had discussed this premise. Even a reference to a study like Michael J. Sullivan's *American Adventurism Abroad: 30 Invasions, Interventions and Regime Changes since World War II* (Praeger) would have signposted an inconvenient truth. The United States has not been a constant force for good in world affairs. In 26 of the 30 cases Sullivan examines from the start of the Cold War to the beginning of the Bush presidency, U.S. interventions destabilized democratic governments, supported dictatorships and military juntas, and caused "disproportionate destruction of life." We engaged in 10 invasions, 10 coups (including Iran in 1953), nine assassination attempts, and nine instances of overkill, often letting our economic interests override our declared national values.

Nonetheless, our commander-in-chief acts under the influence of powerful illusions about American goodness in foreign affairs and his own religiously based role in history. He is armed with the congressional joint resolution on Authorization for Use of Military Force and USA Patriot Improvement and Authorization Act. He believes he is called to continue fighting, by use of armed force, the "monumental struggle of good vs. evil." The lack of support in opinion polls for the war in Iraq and his presidency in general does not concern him, his advisers, or neocon thinkers.

Greenwald identifies the clever psychological and rhetorical strategies used by "enthusiasts for endless war" to shove "a complex world into a simplistic moralistic framework." By identifying Iraq and Iran as "Nazi-like Evil" and their leaders as Hitlers, and by implying that the use of diplomacy would have the

same disastrous results as Neville Chamberlain's appeasement of Hitler in 1938, Bush supporters accomplish two things, according to Greenwald.

They stifle debate by transforming the question of whether to wage war "from a mere political question into a moral and even psychological one. ... [B]y opposing war, one is revealed to be an appeaser of Evil and worse, weak, spineless and cowardly." When the question of going to war is framed in such terms, it would take real courage for any member of Congress to vote no.

Bush supporters simultaneously "challenge the president's courage and manliness-will he prove that he is a brave and devoted warrior for Good by recognizing Iran as pure Evil and treating it accordingly, or will he back down and reveal himself as a coward, one who submits meekly to political pressures and crawls away from the epic challenge of his time?"

Here readers of Greenwald might read Justin A. Frank's *Bush on the Couch: Inside the Mind of the President* (HarperCollins), to understand the president's psychological makeup and his acute susceptibility to such a challenge: the unresolved Oedipal complex, the desire to compensate by outdoing daddy, the adolescent omnipotence transformed into adult grandiosity, the lifelong atmosphere of extreme privilege and entitlement. This perspective helps explain his Wanted-Dead-or-Alive proclamations, the aircraft carrier landing and play-acting as a "passenger in a pilot's costume," the arrogance that does not want to face the moral complexities and limitations of presidential decision-making. Instead, the president substitutes black-and-white simplicity.

Frank's study reveals one of the worst and cleverest of the Bush administration's many political successes. It has "tapped into the part of our personality that hates external reality and prefers to cling to a simplistic, secure world view." As Frank explains, "George W. Bush behaves like a modern day version of the preachers during the witch-hunting days of Cotton Mather."

A substantial portion of the American electorate still wants to be reassured that their idea of goodness will prevail in a world where our primacy and invulnerability are suddenly no more. So they listen with keen ears when the Bush administration gives them a simple story of good and evil.

Greenwald reminds us that in April 2003, Bill Kristol, neoconservative Fox news contributor and *Weekly Standard* editor, proclaimed that the "battles of Afghanistan and Iraq have been won decisively and honorably. But these are only two battles. We are only at the end of the beginning in the war on terror and terrorist states."

Still, as Greenwald shows, the fact that our wars in Afghanistan and Iraq have since proved so costly, corrupting, and indecisive has not deterred Kristol from likening our hesitation to act militarily against Iran to the do-nothingness that followed Germany's occupation of the Rhineland in 1936. Kristol's Iraq *dÃ©jÃ vu* includes claims that any strategy that does not include attacking Iran "emboldens" the Iranian regime, "disheartens ... our friends in the region," and leaves our "allies more confused."

The sense of unreality a nonbeliever gets from reading neocon sources that Greenwald cites is almost hallucinogenic. For example, with no acknowledgment of how overstretched our military forces and national treasury already are, history professor Arthur Herman has proposed, in the neoconservative magazine *Commentary*, grandiose plans for air strikes on Iranian nuclear facilities and industrial infrastructure, and for seizing Iranian offshore oil wells and platforms. His literally fantastic conclusion is that “[b]y the time the campaign [is] over, the United States military would be in a position to control the flow of Iranian oil at the flick of a switch.”

Read that again: *at the flick of a switch*. Have neocon historians forgotten then-Deputy Secretary of Defense Paul Wolfowitz’s promise in spring 2003 that Iraqi oil revenues would pay the costs of reconstructing Iraq, and that we would be down to 30,000 troops by autumn 2003?

Greenwald’s analysis provides the answer. Neocons like Herman routinely will themselves to disremember. They expect with good reason that the American public will also forget anything that contradicts what the president declares in the here and now.

How about those of us who know better? Greenwald cites Evan Bayh, a Democratic senator from Indiana. Bayh thinks it would be a shame if we “soured an entire generation on the necessity, from time to time, of using force because Iraq has been such a debacle.” According to Bayh, Iran is “everything we thought

Iraq was but wasn't. They are seeking nuclear weapons, they do support terrorists, they have threatened to destroy Israel, and they've threatened us, too."

The first premise is nonsense. Ask the 156 members of Congress who voted against the military-force resolution in October 2002. A good number of Americans knew that Iraq wasn't what it wasn't. We also looked at the sources: George W. Bush, Dick Cheney, and Karl Rove. And even if Iran is what they say it is, we should seriously and openly debate whether military force is the best option, or even a feasible option.

The most frightening quotation in Greenwald's entire book, in my opinion, comes straight from George Bush's own 1999 book, *A Charge to Keep*: "My faith frees me. ... Frees me to make decisions others might not like. Frees me to do the right thing, even though it will not poll well. Frees me to enjoy life and not worry about what comes next." These are the anti-democratic, fundamentalist, what-me-worry? feelings of certainty to which the president's neocon advisers appeal, and which continue to sustain him.

As Greenwald sums up with some understatement, throughout a two-term presidency, Bush has been "fueled by a Congress controlled by loyalists in his party, a generally docile press, and a political movement that rarely opposed any decision he made." His presidency has "transformed the national character of the United States and fundamentally altered how the world perceives our country." And the political movement that has supported Bush "is not going anywhere."



Despite the convincing parallels Greenwald draws in his final chapter between “how isolated, weakened and unpopular Bush has become” and the “Vietnam-plagued Lyndon Johnson,” the Bush legacy will be very different from Johnson’s. As it looks now, there may not be any radical national change of course when Bush leaves office. That would be the most tragic legacy of all.

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