

Endless War? Why winning is for losers.

Written by David Keen

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DAVID KEEN, JUL 23 2008

The magical thinking behind the 'war on terror' has allowed a radical disconnect between problem and solution – most glaringly, between 9/11 and attacking Iraq. Hannah Arendt noted in *The Origins of Totalitarianism* that it can be very attractive when leaders offer solutions with a degree of certainty; the illogical nature of the proposed 'solution' (for example, eliminating the Jews as a remedy for Germany's military and economic problems) does not necessarily make it any less attractive. Arendt also noted that the need for certainty may be particularly intense in circumstances where people's own economic and social circumstances are precarious; she suggested that part of the appeal of fascism was that the identification of a clearly-identified enemy – whilst frightening – was less frightening and less disorienting than a world in which the source of insecurity remained obscure.

That analysis resonates today. In his book *What's the matter with Kansas?*, Thomas Frank provides a revealing case-study of how economic insecurity has fed into support for Bush and for right-wing politicians more generally. Frank argues that in Kansas (and, by extension, much of middle America), a longstanding hostility towards big corporations has been displaced into a 'backlash' politics that includes hostility towards foreign enemies, towards a range of 'outgroups', and towards the forces (like science, evolution, secularism and pluralism) that seem to undermine old and comfortable certainties.

Early instances of scapegoating were illuminated in Keith Thomas's classic study *Religion and the Decline of Magic*. Thomas noted that when suffering is not explicable within existing frameworks, human beings have tended to resort to magical thinking – in other words, to turn to solutions with no logical or scientific connection to the problem. The limits of medical knowledge in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, for example, created a powerful impulse to explain illness through 'witchcraft'.

Today, in the face of the 'disease' of contemporary terrorism and the increased disorientation and anxiety after 9/11, severe shortcomings in state-based and economics-based explanatory frameworks have helped to create political and intellectual space for explanations and prescriptions have once more led us into the realms of the superstitious and the persecutory. In many ways, we are witnessing a return to magical thinking – the belief and hope that we can re-order the world to our liking by mere force of will or by actions that have no logical connection to the problem we are addressing. And as with the old witch-hunts, it is the weakness of the victim that attracts the persecutor – the *lack* of weapons-of-mass-destruction, the *inability* to hit the US.

In the 'war on terror', key policy-makers have adopted (and sometimes openly expressed) the idea that you do not need evidence on which to base something as serious (and incendiary) as a war. Rumsfeld came close to acknowledging this with his statement that "absence of evidence is not evidence of absence of weapons of mass destruction". Notoriously, M16 chief Sir Richard Dearlove told a Downing Street meeting in July 2002 that in the US "the intelligence and facts were being fixed around the policy". In January 2007, Richard Perle noted that when it came to assessing the nuclear threat from Iran, "You can't afford to wait for all the evidence".

There are some indications that, for the Bush administration, the aim has not been to study reality (and then base behaviour on it) but to create reality. In the summer of 2002, journalist and author Ron Suskind met with one of Bush's senior advisers, who was unhappy with an article Suskind had written about the administration's media relations. The adviser commented that:

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guys like me were “in what we call the reality-based community,” which he defined as people who “believe that solutions emerge from your judicious study of discernible reality.” I nodded and murmured something about enlightenment principles and empiricism. He cut me off. “That’s not the way the world really works anymore,” he continued. “We’re an empire now, and when we act, we create our own reality. And while you’re studying that reality – judiciously, as you will – we’ll act again, creating other new realities, which you can study too, and that’s how things will sort out. We’re history’s actors and you, all of you, will be left to just study what we do.”

One rule of advertising is that you are selling not only the product but also the problem or threat that the product is alleged to address. To sell the toilet-cleaner, in other words, you have to sell the germs. By extension, to sell the ‘war on terror’, you have to sell the terror. Of course, 9/11 was a horrifying fact, as were the bombings in Madrid and London that followed the invasion of Iraq. But we now know that the threat from Iraq was systematically exaggerated. Moreover, for all the fears being whipped up in relation to Iran, the threat of a direct attack on the US by Iran is small, particularly when compared with the threat of total obliteration by the Soviet Union during the Cold War. Of 42 terrorist organisations listed by the US State Department, only a handful (all linked to al-Qaida) have ever attacked the US or indicated that they wish to do so.

Another rule of advertising is that you minimise the cost of the product. Wolfowitz told Congress, “There is a lot of money to pay for this [the Iraq war]. It doesn’t have to be US taxpayer money. We are talking about a country that can finance its own reconstruction and relatively soon.” Bush underlined the apparent costlessness by promising a spending spree. He pushed through tax cuts in the run-up to war. And on 17 October 2001, he declared, “They want us to stop flying and they want us to stop buying, but this great nation will not be intimidated by the evildoers.” Yet somehow, sometime, the costs of war will have to be met. One detailed study puts them at three trillion dollars.[1] The likely cost in terms of human lives was alleged to be low in a ‘clean’ technological war. But US troop deaths have now been widely noted, and an October 2006 study in *The Lancet* suggested that some 655,000 Iraqis had died as a result of the US-led invasion – a careful calculation made by a team from Johns Hopkins university.

The increasingly obvious costs of the ‘war on terror’ potentially present a problem that is familiar to consumer society more generally: the problem of dealing with broken promises. Consumerism has to sustain itself in the face of a reasonably consistent and persistent failure to bring happiness by means of a new skirt, car, deodorant, floor-cleaner or whatever. The trump card is that the dissatisfaction arising from the false promises of advertising is not so much a problem as a solution: it creates continued demand! This is the perverse genius of capitalism, and it was implicitly celebrated in an unusually frank in-store 2004 campaign by London’s department store Selfridges, which reminded its customers, “You want it, you buy it, you forget it”. If skillfully manipulated, frustrated desires can be encouraged to home in on some new product, some new promise that is also unlikely to be fulfilled. The process can be remarkably seamless and shameless.

US officials have an impressive CV when it comes to selling the useless and expensive wars that sustain the country’s vast armaments industry, and the ‘war on terror’ is only the latest in a long line. Served either hot or Cold, these serial wars have not delivered what they promised – either to the ordinary citizens of America or to the wider world. After the stand-off with the Soviet Union (with its huge financial costs and horrendous human costs in the developing world) came the ‘war on drugs’ (which fuelled paramilitary abuses in Colombia, for example), and the US stand-off with ‘rogue states’.

The bizarre ‘beauty’ of the ‘war on terror’ is not only that it fails to remove the security deficit; it actively creates demand! First, it fosters a general sense of dread within the West: since we are ‘at war’, it is logical to conclude that the enemy must be powerful and pervasive. Punishments (like attacking Iraq) may also be taken to imply a crime. As Arendt observed in the context of the Nazi holocaust: “Common sense reacted to the horrors of Buchenwald and Auschwitz with the plausible argument: ‘What crime must these people have committed that such things were done to them!’”

A second element of creating ‘demand’ is that the ‘war on terror’ predictably produces new terrorists. *As in civil wars, ‘winning’ may not be the goal.* In many civil wars, attacks on civilians have radicalized them, generating rebels but also legitimizing economic exploitation and political repression under conditions of war and ‘states of emergency’. In

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the 'war on terror', tactics that are predictably counterproductive when it comes to 'winning' may nevertheless serve important functions in prolonging a conflict that is profitable, politically advantageous for many participants (not just the Western governments but other governments in Israel, Pakistan, the Philippines, China, Colombia and so on), and, in important respects, psychologically satisfying. Creating enemies 'proves' that the enemy is just as deadly and all-pervasive as earlier propaganda suggested. Iraq was labeled a source of terror, and it has obligingly become so. The whole fiasco is almost a copybook case of Hannah Arendt's 'action-as-propaganda', a concept she explained by pointing to "the advantages of a propaganda that constantly 'adds the power of organization' to the feeble and unreliable voice of argument, and thereby realizes, so to speak, on the spur of the moment, whatever it says."

This article is adapted from David Keen's Endless War? Hidden Functions of the 'War on Terror' (Pluto/University of Michigan Press, 2006). David Keen is also the author of Complex Emergencies (Polity, 2008), The Benefits of Famine (James Currey/Ohio University Press, 2008, paperback; Princeton University Press, 1994) and Conflict and Collusion in Sierra Leone (James Currey, 2005).

[1] Linda Bilmes and Joseph Stiglitz, 2008. *The Three Trillion Dollar War*. New York: W. W. Norton.