

Play it Again, (Uncle) Sam

A Brief History of US Imperialism, Propaganda, and the News

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President Barack Obama and his administration almost took the United States to war with Syria in 2013 over claims that Bashar Al-Assad had used chemical weapons on the Syrian opposition. In what seemed like a replay of history, Syrians were paraded on television screens in ways reminiscent of Iraqis under Saddam Hussein and a host of other such “worthy victims.” In this essay, I examine some of the key wars that the US has engaged in over the last century and the part played by propaganda in winning public consent. With stunning consistency, the propaganda strategies used in one war are repeated and reproduced by the media with little critical scrutiny. I outline these strategies beginning with the 1898 Spanish–American War, which was pivotal in terms of setting up a framework that Uncle Sam would deploy repeatedly over the next century.

In the interest of brevity, I will only focus on what I consider are the key wars. Additionally, some of the historical detail and nuance of these wars has been excluded here in the interest of presenting a long view of US imperialism. I do, however, make space for moments when the news is contradictory and includes voices of dissent. Typically, this has happened wherever social movements have challenged the priorities and rhetoric of the political elite. I discuss these moments so as to offer hope to a new generation living under the tyranny of the “war on terror,” and to make the point that antiwar movements have in the past, and can today, successfully forge an alternative agenda of peace and international solidarity.

THE POLITICS OF EMPIRE

In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the structure and organization of the world underwent a dramatic transformation. For instance in 1876, on the eve of the scramble for Africa, European powers controlled only 10 percent of the continent, namely Algeria, Cape Colony, Mozambique, and Angola. By the beginning of the twentieth century, however, virtually the entire continent was colonized. A similar picture emerges in the rest of the world. Whereas during the mid-nineteenth century many countries were independent and autonomous, by the beginning of the twentieth century, the world had been more or less divided up among the “great powers”— England, Germany, France, and the US. These countries were the most developed capitalist centers and each had their own empires. Yet, they also competed with each other to gain greater access to and control over the world’s resources. Furthermore, these “great powers” were in competition not only among themselves, but also against older empires like Belgium, Spain, Portugal, Italy, Japan, and Russia.

The various wars that occurred during this period and up to the First World War were a product of this competition and the struggle over resources, new markets, and places for investment. In a nutshell, as theorists of imperialism have argued, imperial wars occur as a result of economic competition expressing itself in the military and political arena. Woodrow Wilson, writing in 1907 while president of Princeton University, made a similar observation:

Since trade ignores national boundaries and the manufacturer insists on having the world as a market, the flag of his nation must follow him, and the doors of the nations which are closed against him must be battered down. Concessions obtained by financiers must be safeguarded by ministers of state, even if the sovereignty of unwilling nations be outraged in the process. Colonies must be obtained or planted, in order that no useful corner of the world may be overlooked or left unused.¹

In order to ensure that “no useful corner” of the world be “left unused,” under the leadership of presidents William McKinley, Theo-

dore Roosevelt, William Howard Taft, and Woodrow Wilson, the US intervened in several countries between 1898 and 1920, from Nicaragua to Haiti and Mexico. These interventions occurred under both Democratic and Republican leaderships with both camps espousing a view that commerce follows the flag and that the flag follows commerce.

US Marine Corps Major General Smedley Butler, who participated in many of the aforementioned incursions into Central and South America, summarized the logic of imperial intervention as follows: "I spent most of my time being a high-class muscle man for Big Business, for Wall Street and the bankers. In short, I was a racketeer, a gangster for capitalism. I helped make Mexico and especially Tampico safe for American oil interests in 1914. I helped make Haiti and Cuba a decent place for the National City Bank boys to collect revenues in."² Butler, who had been quoted extensively by the news media for two decades when he was involved in various interventions, simply disappeared from the news after his 1935 book, *War is a Racket, and a related article critical of US intervention cited above appeared in the magazine Common Sense*.³ Often quite consciously, the establishment media have tailored their narratives of US wars to suit the aims of empire.

1898: THE SPANISH-AMERICAN WAR

The first major war that launched the United States onto the imperial stage was war with Spain in 1898. The immediate context for this war was Cuba, one of the last vestiges of Spain's once vast empire in the Western hemisphere. The US had trade dealings with Cuba in the range of \$100 million, and \$35-\$50 million in investments.⁴ Thus, when the Cuban revolution against the Spanish broke out in 1895, the US saw this as an opportunity to rid Spain from its backyard.

At first, there was debate among members of the political elite about whether the US should go to war with Spain. Even sections of the business class were hesitant for fear of what war might do to the economy. Yet, a number of factors came together to propel the nation toward war.

Spain ruled Cuba with the utmost cruelty, and when the American public learned of this they were justifiably enraged. At the start of the

revolution, Spain responded with a reign of terror to isolate the leaders. Thousands of peasants and agricultural workers were put into concentration camps and left to die of starvation and disease. The yellow journals, which specialized in sensational and unverified news—particularly Joseph Pulitzer’s *New York World* and William Randolph Hearst’s *New York Journal*—carried lurid stories of Spain’s cruelty, and Hearst himself became a noted war hawk on the matter. This not only won public sympathy for the Cuban cause, but it also pushed a large section of the political elite to support Cuban independence, at least in spirit.

The advocacy journalism of the *Journal* and the *World* was bolstered by pro-imperialist voices such as Theodore Roosevelt, Henry Cabot Lodge, historian Brooks Adams, naval strategist Alfred T. Mahan, railroad tycoon James Hill and others.⁵ But it was not until the *Maine* disaster that the country tipped in favor of war with Spain.

In February 1898, the *USS Maine*, stationed in Havana on a “friendly visit,” exploded and sank.⁶ There was no clear evidence at the time as to what caused the explosion, and historians even today argue that there is no proof of an attack. Yet, seeing this as an opportunity to inflame public opinion, Hearst’s *Journal* argued that the *Maine* was deliberately attacked by Spain, even going so far as to produce a sketch showing how a mine or a torpedo had caused the explosion. With some exceptions, newspapers around the country at the time similarly gave a lot of space and attention to the *Maine* disaster, and beat the drums of war.⁷ The slogan of the time was “Remember the *Maine*, to Hell with Spain.”

In the two months following the *Maine* incident, there was a flurry of diplomatic engagement between the US and Spain. President McKinley took a position in favor of diplomacy rather than war. By April, it was clear that Spain was not only willing to give up Cuba but to concede to all of the US’s demands. Yet, this was not enough for the jingoist section of the elite.⁸ The US invaded Cuba under the guise of freeing the Cubans—a hollow justification given that Cuba would soon become a colony of the US in all but name. This was particularly evidenced by the Platt Amendment of 1901, which the US forced upon the Cubans, that inserted into their constitution that the US had the right to intervene unilaterally in Cuban affairs. The net

result was that between May and August of 1898, the US annexed and occupied the last territories that Spain held in the Caribbean and the Pacific: Cuba, Puerto Rico, Guam, and the Philippines.

Despite the successes of these conquests, there was opposition toward imperialism. The opposition included figures such as former president Grover Cleveland and eight members of his cabinet, William Jennings Bryan, various senators and members of House, the wealthy industrialist Andrew Carnegie, the president of the American Federation of Labor (AFL) Samuel Gompers, prominent intellectuals and writers like Mark Twain, as well as educators, social workers, and others.⁹ Close to half a million people joined the Anti-Imperialist League founded in November 1898. While many opposed US imperialism on the grounds of democratic principles and antiracism, there were also those who opposed annexation because of the potential “degeneration” of the white race if it were to mix with people of “inferior” races.¹⁰

If the Spanish–American War is seen as an exemplar of sensationalist propaganda, it was also a moment when the classic ideology of imperialism began to gain ground in the US. As Ilia Rodriguez argued in her analysis of six metropolitan daily newspapers’ coverage of the US occupation of Puerto Rico, the colonized were represented as the racialized “other” in need of colonial benevolence and administration. Puerto Ricans were described as being a “mixture of laziness and honesty—characteristics of an oppressed race—that render the Puerto Rican . . . a man to be carefully guided by wise hands.”¹¹

This rhetoric was not unique to the US but had its roots in European colonialism, best described by the English poet Rudyard Kipling as the “white man’s burden.” Kipling argued that the superior white race had a responsibility to bring civilization to the backward and inferior peoples of the world through colonization. The US adopted such a mission with zeal. The reluctant imperialist McKinley would later state that the natives should not be left to themselves as they were “unfit for self government,” and that such a course would only “expose them to the abuses of the other European powers and invite anarchy and chaos.”¹² Similarly, the Philippine Commission report released in January 1900 stated that “the United States cannot withdraw from the Philippines. . . . The Filipinos are wholly unprepared for independence, and if independence were given to them they could not maintain it.”¹³

Even though the US claimed to be liberating Spain's colonized people, this was not the reality. If Spain had used concentration camps to isolate revolutionaries and radicals from the general population, the US only reintroduced these methods. It is unclear how many people died in such US concentration camps. One estimate by General Bell is that in the Philippines, one-sixth of the population (about 600,000 people) on just one island (Luzon) was wiped out.¹⁴ This process was referred to as "pacification." Various other methods of torture were also employed, such as forcibly pumping prisoners full of water up to five gallons at a time, so that the body became unrecognizable.¹⁵ Commenting on the horrors committed in the Philippines, Mark Twain wrote that the American flag should have "the white stripes painted black and the stars replaced by the skull and cross bones."¹⁶

Overall, the Spanish–American War is instructive of how modern imperialist wars would be conducted and sold to the public. In particular, there are three narratives that would become a rubric for future wars. The first is the "rescue" narrative, wherein the US highlights the suffering of others in order to position itself as a savior. These "worthy victims," as Edward Herman and Noam Chomsky have argued, are given media attention in order to win public sympathy.¹⁷ Yet, once the US intervenes the victims soon learn that the "rescue" narrative is apocryphal and that instead intervention was designed to further imperial ambitions. Second, a dramatic event such as the sinking of a ship often becomes the turning point in escalating jingoist rhetoric in the push for war. Third, after the initial incursion, occupation and colonization is justified on the grounds that, should the US leave, it would result in chaos because the native population is unable to govern itself. This is the White Man's Burden narrative, which advocates the necessity to civilize the native subject seen as "half devil, half child."

THE TWO WORLD WARS

Between 1876 and 1914, the six major imperial powers had grabbed twenty-five million square kilometers of the world and had colonized over *half a billion* (521 million) people. With almost the entire globe carved up, the dynamic of colonization from then on would be marked

by a struggle among the great powers, between imperial “haves” and “have-nots,” over a process of re-division. In the case of the First World War, the “haves” were Britain, France, and Russia, later joined by the US to form the “Allied” powers; and the “have-nots” were Germany, Austria-Hungary, Italy (which later switched sides), and Turkey.

The US did not initially join the war. Influential sections of the political elite and, by and large, the public did not want to intervene in the “European quarrel.” The establishment news media reflected this opinion, and influential independent media such as *Appeal to Reason* and other radical newspapers took strong antiwar positions. Antiwar sentiment was so strong that in 1916, Woodrow Wilson’s reelection campaign adopted the slogan, “He Kept Us Out of War.” This sentiment continued such that, in 1920, when Eugene Debs, the Socialist candidate jailed for his antiwar views, ran for president from prison, he won over a million votes.¹⁸

Despite his promises, Wilson, who had rejected intervention in 1914, found himself in the war camp by 1915, and the US did enter the war in April 1917. A series of events precipitated the entry of the US into the war. First, the banking industry, led by the house of J. P. Morgan, initiated a campaign to intervene in the war as a way to enter foreign markets. In order to win the American public, they enlisted the help of twelve publishers and 197 newspapers.¹⁹ Second, Britain sought to win the American public and initiated a massive propaganda campaign relying on 260,000 influential citizens to make its case, along with an inundation of newspapers, posters, cartoons, pictures, maps, and so forth. In essence, the propaganda concentrated on presenting Germany as the aggressor and as guilty of committing horrendous atrocities on innocent people. An inflammatory (and false) report, the Bryce report, provided grist for the mill by stating that German officers had raped Belgian girls, bayoneted a two-year-old child, and sliced off a woman’s breast.²⁰ When the Germans sunk a British passenger liner, the *Lusitania*, which was also carrying rifle cartridges, it became a galvanizing moment. The ship attack triggered the rescue narrative, paving the way for US entry into the war.

As Philip Knightly argued in his book *The First Casualty*, the nationwide propaganda campaign sought to “rally the forces of good against the forces of evil.”²¹ The war was no longer a European affair but be-

came a crusade, the duty of every “honorable” man. To further these efforts, in 1917, Wilson established the Creel Commission, named after former journalist George Creel, which was formally called the Committee on Public Information (CPI). The CPI was the first large-scale government propaganda office. Wilson argued that US intervention was in the “national interest,” and the CPI furthered that notion using pamphlets, speakers, advertising, newspapers, and more.²² As Knightly noted, people in the news business were some of the best recruits for the government’s propaganda efforts and the “editors of the *Times*, the *Express*, the *Daily Mail*, the *Evening Post*, and the *Chronicle* and the managing director of Reuters all did their bit.”²³ And if this wasn’t enough, Creel mobilized some 75,000 citizens, called Four Minute Men, who volunteered to travel the country giving literally millions of pro-war public speeches, specifically targeting Germany as the enemy of democracy. Based in part on this propaganda blitz, sections of the American public changed their position on the war.

If the rescue narrative employed during World War I pertained to Belgian victimhood, during World War II it was the genocidal conditions that Jews faced at the hands of the Nazis that became central. The actual causes of the Second World War are similar to those of the first. While Britain and France sought to hold onto their empires, Germany and Japan pushed back against the greater powers’ stranglehold. The US and Russia, in the meantime, attempted to take advantage of these conflicts to build their own empires. The immediate context was the economic crisis of the 1930s, known as the Great Depression. Various countries built protectionist blocs to defend their weakened economies. These economic struggles then turned into a military conflict to annex rivals’ territories and markets. Yet, US intervention into this war was presented as one for democracy and against fascism. As the Council on Foreign Relations, an organization that worked closely with the US State Department, put it:

If war aims are stated which seem to be concerned solely with Anglo-American imperialism, they would offer little to the people in the rest of the world and will be vulnerable to Nazi counter-promises. Such aims would also strengthen the most reactionary elements in the United States and the Brit-

ish Empire. The interests of other people should be stressed, not only those of Europe, but also of Asia, Africa, and Latin America. This would have a better propaganda effect.²⁴

Indeed, there could not have been a more powerful rescue story than that involving the Nazi holocaust of Jews. Yet, these victims too would find the rescue story to be hollow. As Arthur Morse in *While Six Million Died* argued, the Allies “by a combination of political expediency, diplomatic evasion, indifference and raw bigotry . . . played directly into the hands of Adolf Hitler even as he set in motion the final plans for the greatest mass murder in history.”²⁵

From as early as 1933, the US knew of the conditions for Jews. Yet, it had strict immigration quotas and did not open up its border to Jews fleeing sure death. Even after the horrors of Kristalnacht in 1938, when the Nazis rounded up 20,000 Jews and sent them to concentration camps such as Dachau and Buchenwald, President Roosevelt failed to act. The US’s immigration policies stayed the same. In 1939, the *St. Louis*, a ship carrying 936 Jews fleeing persecution, was turned back, forcing the passengers to return to Europe where many of them died in Hitler’s gas chambers. The US refused to bomb the tracks to Auschwitz or its crematorium—even though Allied bombers flew over Auschwitz to bomb Nazi factories. Few people know this history, so well documented by Morse and other historians, thanks in large part to a pliant news media system that presented this war as the “good war.” The galvanizing moment for the US’s entry into the war was the attack on Pearl Harbor.

Replaying the motifs developed in 1898, the Second World War had both worthy victims and the drama of Pearl Harbor, just as the First World War had Belgian victims and the *Lusitania*. But the third element—the fate of the victims—is more varied. In the case of European Jews the US did not absorb the flood of immigrants but did support the plan to create a Jewish state in Palestine. This plan furthered the oil interests of Western nations in the Middle East. Thus, even though the US claimed to champion national self-determination, it did so only in cases where it advanced its own interests.

THE VIETNAM WAR

The dynamic of imperialism changed after the Second World War. Whereas the first two world wars involved inter-imperialist rivalry among a number of powerful nations, after 1945 the world would be dominated by the US and the USSR. Up until 1991, when the Soviet Union collapsed, this rivalry between the two superpowers, and their attempt to create “spheres of influence,” characterized international politics in a bipolar world.

Vietnam had been a colony of France since the late nineteenth century. France appropriated the best farmland from the people, ran rubber plantations under slavery-like conditions, and raised illiteracy rates through ill-conceived colonial educational strategies.²⁶ On the eve of the Second World War, almost all of East Asia, with the exception of Japan, was ruled by colonial powers either directly or indirectly. Britain dominated the area, but the US and Japan challenged this. In 1945, a national liberation struggle led by Ho Chi Minh declared independence from France.

The US, despite its propaganda claims, was not prepared to recognize Vietnamese self-rule. It spent billions to finance France’s war to retain control over Vietnam. After Vietnam was divided into two zones, the US pursued a policy of preventing national elections so that Ho Chi Minh would not come to power; instead it sought to establish an anticommunist state under US control in South Vietnam.²⁷ The puppet regime installed by the US was extremely unpopular, and the National Liberation Front (NLF) formed in 1960 launched a struggle for independence. It was in this context that policy makers in the US drew the conclusion that a military intervention would be the only way to squash the NLF. The public narrative was that the South needed to be defended from communist aggression. The so-called “domino theory” of Soviet expansion was developed in this context, and the policy of containment became the default US position on global communism.

In 1964, the Gulf of Tonkin incident served as the perfect justification for troop escalation and war. In a speech to the nation, President Lyndon B. Johnson stated that the destroyer, the *USS Maddox*, had been attacked by the North Vietnamese. The official story was that

the *Maddox* was on “routine patrol” in the Tonkin Gulf and faced an “unprovoked attack” by Vietnamese torpedo boats. The truth, however, was that the *Maddox* was on an intelligence-gathering mission and, more importantly, was never fired upon. Eyewitness accounts state that the Vietnamese torpedo boats weren’t even in the area.²⁸ Yet, the establishment media carried these claims without question. Even though information that contradicted the administration’s propaganda was available to the press, they simply amplified the official propaganda line.²⁹ The key ingredients of the original war narrative were present—the drama of yet another attack on a ship (like the *Maine* and the *Lusitania* in decades past) combined with worthy South Vietnamese victims who needed to be rescued from the menacing communist threat. In fact, right up to 1968, the establishment media barely deviated from the government’s propaganda.³⁰

After 1968, however, antiwar voices would play a more prominent role. The three television networks now included an equal number of pro and antiwar guests. In fact, after 1970, antiwar guests outnumbered pro-war guests and editorials went from four to one in support of the war, to two to one against.³¹ What precipitated this change? Several factors converged to shift media coverage. First, the Tet Offensive, a coordinated attack on the part of the NLF starting in January 1968, showed that the US was not winning the war in Vietnam. This pushed sections of the political elite to take a more public stance in opposition to the war. As Daniel Hallin argued, it was only when debates emerged in Congress over Vietnam policy that the establishment media created a space for dissenting views.³² Second, the antiwar movement and the GI rebellion moved the public in an antiwar direction. The antiwar movement held teach-ins and demonstrations that educated the public on what the war really was about, and soldiers returning home would speak at these events and talk of atrocities committed by the US. But more importantly, soldiers refusing to fight an unjust war exerted powerful pressure on the establishment. Third, the sheer amount of death and destruction was starting to take a toll. Through the reports of investigative journalists like Seymour Hersh, Americans learned of incidents such as the My Lai massacre, during which hundreds of unarmed civilians—including women, children, and the elderly—were massacred in cold blood. Addition-

ally, tens of thousands of US soldiers died in Vietnam, which led people to question whether the war was worth it.³³ It was in this context that the establishment media began to incorporate more dissenting viewpoints.

Eventually, the US lost the war in Vietnam and withdrew its troops. The Vietnam syndrome, which refers to the resistance on the part of the American public toward US engagement in wars and the commitment of troops, was its consequence. In order to counter this, the tactics of war and its corresponding propaganda strategies underwent a change.

PROPAGANDA AFTER VIETNAM

After Vietnam, sections of the political elite came to believe that it was media coverage of the war that led to US defeat. They argued that television distorted the war by showing graphic images of the dead, turning Americans against the war.³⁴ While television did show some images of casualties, it was nowhere near the claimed volume. One study of evening news reports between 1965 and 1970 found that only about 3 percent showed heavy fighting with the dead or wounded.³⁵ Another study found that TV war stories featuring images of casualties—such as a soldier being lifted onto a helicopter—were brief and in the minority of all reports filed.³⁶

Regardless of the reality, the myth that the media cost the US the war gained ground. Future war planners decided that they could never again risk uncensored media coverage of wars. The interventions in Granada in 1983 and Panama in 1989 were testing grounds for a new model of US propaganda that involved tight control over information. By the time of the Gulf War in 1991, the system of media censorship had been all but perfected. Then Secretary of Defense Dick Cheney, expressing his thoughts on the media, would say after the war: “Frankly, I looked on it as a problem to be managed. The information function was extraordinarily important. I did not have a lot of confidence that I could leave it to the press.”³⁷ Cheney was drawing from his own experiences at skillfully managing the press during the Panama invasion, when the press had restricted access to the battlefield and were then provided stock images that aided the war effort.

The media pool system, formed after Granada, allowed the military to control the movement of journalists and to restrict where they went and what they saw. Journalists were taken to selected sites in Iraq during the first Gulf War of 1990–91 and not allowed to interview soldiers without a military “minder” present. Additionally, reporters were not allowed to pass on stories until they were inspected by the military.

In the absence of direct access to the war, reporters were treated to press briefings with images of precision bombing and laser-guided missiles hitting their target. The military claimed that this was a new form of warfare in which civilians would not be harmed because “smart” technology allowed for “surgical strikes.” This was not true. Only 7 percent of the ordnance was “smart.” And the “smart” technology wasn’t all that smart, as 70 percent missed their target.³⁸ Both smart and dumb bombs killed civilians and destroyed the infrastructure including electrical power, water, sanitation, and communication facilities. This was not an accident, but an avowed goal of the campaign. Over 200,000 people died as a result of this war. When award-winning journalists Jon Alpert and Maryann DeLeo sent in video footage of the destruction and civilian casualties, NBC and CBS refused to air their videotapes. The media also squelched reports of “friendly fire.”³⁹ Douglas Kellner noted of the 1991 Iraq War that such “control of press coverage was unprecedented in the history of US warfare.”⁴⁰

POST-COLD WAR IMPERIALISM

After the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, the US emerged as the lone “hyperpower” in a unipolar world and assumed the role of the global “protector” or “global cop” out to defend democracy and peace. At the time, there were at least two visions of US imperialism. The one, advanced by a section of the elite known as “neoconservatives,” was that the US should take an aggressive approach in realizing its foreign policy objectives and not worry about appeasing its allies. The other vision was advanced by proponents of a more liberal imperialism that sought alliances and built multilateral ties in waging “humanitarian” wars.⁴¹ Under President Bill Clinton, the latter won



the day and it was the euphemistic “humanitarian” wars that would dominate during the 1990s.

The first display of humanitarian motivations was evidenced during the 1991 Gulf War, when it was argued that the US was rescuing the Kuwaitis from Iraqi aggression. One story that caught the imagination of the nation was the murder of Kuwaiti babies. Allegedly, Iraqi soldiers had snatched babies from their incubators and thrown them onto the floor or bayoneted them—a story reminiscent of German atrocities during World War I. Yet, like its predecessor, this claim was false. Instead, it was a public relations stunt planned by the PR firm Hill and Knowlton with the cooperation of the daughter of the Kuwaiti ambassador at the time, testifying to this before a congressional committee. Politicians, including President George Bush, cited this story as the truth and the media simply echoed them without checking the facts.⁴² Certainly, it made for a more palatable excuse than control over oil resources—the real motivation for the Gulf War. Thus, in addition to tight control over media coverage, discussed above, the classic propaganda strategy involving worthy victims was resuscitated.

In fact, humanitarian wars are entirely based on the narrative of the US as protector of worthy victims around the world. Thus the interventions in Haiti, Rwanda, Bosnia, Yugoslavia, and so on in the 1990s were justified in these terms. However, in all these cases the conditions of the victims that the US claimed to alleviate either stayed the same or deteriorated. In 1999, for instance, North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) bombing of Serbia was meant to stop the “ethnic cleansing” of Albanians from Kosovo. Yet, the situation for the Kosovar Albanians only worsened after the NATO intervention. As if that were not bad enough, there is evidence to suggest that President Clinton and British Prime Minister Tony Blair knew beforehand that the war would exacerbate the conditions for Albanians but went ahead anyway.⁴³ The 1990s did not, however, have dramatic moments that would immediately fuel war, such as the bombing of naval vessels or cities like Pearl Harbor. Yet the attack on the World Trade Center in 1993, the bombings of US facilities in Saudi Arabia in 1995 and 1996, the embassy bombings in Kenya and Tanzania in 1998, then the attack on the *USS Cole* in 2000 all laid the groundwork for the War on Terror.

In September 2000, a full year before the events of September 11, 2001, a neoconservative document produced by the Project for a New American Century (PNAC) argued that the US should use overwhelming military force to take control of the gulf region. To realize this goal, the report stated that it was necessary to have “some catastrophic and catalyzing event—like a new Pearl Harbor.”⁴⁴ Such an event presented itself with the attacks on the twin towers, and the neocons grabbed this opportunity to launch a propaganda campaign.

THE “WAR ON TERROR”

The rhetoric of the War on Terror shares some similarities with that of the Cold War in that both logics envision a powerful enemy against which the US must fight an ongoing war. Both also rely on a politics of fear and of what might happen should the US not act to stop its “enemies.” In the case of the War on Terror, however, the enemy is a racialized “other”—the menacing Islamist terrorist. Drawing on older Orientalist stereotypes developed by Britain and France, and add-

ing several new dimensions including the “clash of civilizations,” the political elite demonized an entire religious group in order to advance an imperial agenda.⁴⁵

The war on Afghanistan in 2001 was presented as a war of retaliation, one intended to capture and execute the purported mastermind of the 9/11 attacks, Osama bin Laden. Even though the vast majority of the 9/11 perpetrators were Saudi Arabian (as is bin Laden) the US chose to collectively punish the Afghan people while continuing to prop up its ally Saudi Arabia. Yet, the rescue narrative was not left out: the US claimed to be rescuing Muslim women from the brutal regime of the Taliban. All of a sudden, Afghan women who had been suffering under Taliban rule since 1996—when they were allies of the US—became the subject of numerous stories in the corporate media. Yet, like the other victims before them, Afghan women too found that their condition would only stay the same or deteriorate under US/NATO occupation.⁴⁶ In short, despite the passage of a century, the three central elements of war propaganda developed in 1898—the rescue narrative, the dramatic event (9/11), and paternalistic occupation—continue to hold sway.

The Iraq War would also reflect these elements. In the lead up to the war, the administration argued that Iraq had ties to al-Qaeda and 9/11, and that they possessed weapons of mass destruction. Even though they were lies, these two major justifications were developed with great skill, and before long the media were awash with stories that passed off propaganda as news.⁴⁷ Shortly after the war, real proof would emerge to confirm that Iraq neither possessed weapons of mass destruction nor had ties to al-Qaeda. It was then time to highlight the Kurdish victims who suffered chemical attacks, even though the worst chemical attacks occurred when US still considered Saddam Hussein an ally. Through selective recollections of history, victims were again produced for heroes to rescue.

The real goal of intervention in Iraq was to advance the US’s geopolitical aims in the region and to secure control over oil resources. Even mainstream figures such as the former Federal Reserve chair Alan Greenspan would admit to the oil motivation.⁴⁸ Yet, despite the revelation of the truth behind the propaganda, the US continued its occupation, a war and occupation that led to deaths of about a million Iraqis

and over four thousand US soldiers. In order to justify occupation, the masters of spin argued that the US could not leave Iraq because the country would be thrown into chaos. The US therefore had a “responsibility” to stay the course for the sake of the Iraqis and in order to stabilize the country. We have come a full circle back to the Spanish–American War when the “white man’s burden” argument was advanced to justify US colonization of Spain’s territories. More than a century later, the American public was again told that the US needed to stay in Iraq because the natives weren’t prepared for self-rule.

CONCLUSION

War propaganda has a habit of repeating itself. The all-too-real suffering of people at the hands of local or foreign oppressors has been used repeatedly to launch wars that advance an imperial agenda while forsaking the victims. Imagined attacks on ships like the *USS Maine* and the *Maddox* and real attacks like the ones on the *USS Cole*, Pearl Harbor, and the twin towers of the World Trade Center become moments to bolster patriotic fervor. And if slogans like “remember the *Maine*,” were used by war makers over a century ago, today it is “remember 9/11.” Then, as now, the establishment media act as the official propaganda arm of the war effort. Yesterday there was William Randolph Hearst, today there is Rupert Murdoch. But as previous wars show us, it is possible to resist the onslaught of propaganda and build an alternate agenda of peace. Students, soldiers, and investigative reporters who refused to accept the framework for Vietnam outlined by the political elite set themselves the task of uncovering the truth and then bringing that truth to the public. Today, this is exactly the burden and responsibility that a new generation must bear in relation to the ongoing, and seemingly endless, War on Terror.

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12. Ibid., 288.
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14. Ibid., 188.
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