The Politics of Security: A View from New York Five Years After 9/11

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Abstract: The politics of security in the United States after September 11th 2001 has resulted in the expansion of executive power under cover of intense politicization. At the same time a new logic of collective security is emerging centered around »vital systems« as infrastructure becomes increasingly vulnerable to real attacks and natural disasters. The result is a discourse of preparedness marked by a historic bureaucratic reorganization. This reorganization will have long-term effects on the structure and logic of both domestic and global security, and will also co-exist uneasily with the Bush Administration’s focus on increasing the power of the executive office.

Keywords: Security, United States, Preparedness, 9/11, Rule of Law

When Michel DeCerteau, the late French scholar, famously sipped Manhattans from the 110th floor of the World Trade Center he felt like Icarus flying above the sea-like city, the power of perspective capturing a godlike rationality unachievable 418 meters down in the »dark space where crowds move back and forth.«¹ He described his orderly descent to the Manhattan streets below as an Icarian fall, but we are all now painfully aware of the towers’ own Icarian and iconic fall, an eruption amidst the order of the modern world. For us New Yorkers, for whom the skyline forms the daily visual landscape, the collapse of the towers evoked an impossible natural disaster: a mountain vanished; dust storms transforming lower Manhattan into an eerie, silent, archeological time warp; clouds raining thousands of pieces of paper like a surreal dream; a yawning, smoldering crater marked by a seemingly indelible plume under incongruously clear autumn skies. The sheer excess unleashed by the destruction overwhelmed any single interpretation of the cataclysm. As George Bataille writes, once excess is generated it must be spent, profitably or catastrophically.² The legacy of the attack lies not only in the human and material loss but also in the responses it provokes.

Security – national, domestic, »homeland«, global, private, and public – was and continues to be the frame through which

the attack is processed and evaluated. As an empty signifier, the proliferation of the word «security» complicates its meaningful apprehension. Security is not a static element that can be isolated, deduced, and measured in a formal sense, even if its effect can be clearly discerned. The subject of security certainly includes, but goes beyond, the physical integrity of a state to include the state’s ability to form, maintain, and reproduce its given political order. As our understanding of security changes so too will our political society. In this context, the task of understanding the politics of security five years after September 11th, 2001 calls forth two observations. The first concerns the predictable political manipulation associated with security-related matters. The second concerns shifts within the normative rationality upon which the logic of security rests.

Traumatic events are the raw material of history, and it can be no surprise that the attacks of 9/11 provided grist for political opportunism. One can postulate an almost irresistible political payoff that comes from expanding the reach of the term security. Designating something as a security issue, following the analysis of Barry Buzan, Ole Waever, and Jaap de Wilde, is a form of performative speech that triggers increased levels of state mobilization and «threat-defense» logic. Accordingly, a security designation moves issues from the public sphere into a less transparent, less democratic realm, justifying emergency or secrecy measures that can conveniently be used to mute criticism and remove actions from public scrutiny.3 The more traumatic the event, the greater its invocation in the name of security.

This dynamic underlies the widespread anxiety about a «permanent state of exception» as a legacy of September 11th.4 The manifestation of exception does not itself undermine a system. On the contrary, exception is a necessary function of sovereignty and integral to the political order; societal change itself is arguably premised on a productive tension between the system-changing and system-maintaining effects of exception.5 Major destabilizing events, such as September 11th, however, raise the fear that exception will cease to play a productive function and become pathological. The nightmare is the triggering of a self-sustaining, anti-democratic process giving rise to a permanent state of emergency and its teleological dead end of destroying the system in order to save it.

Such an outcome is never foreordained, though the Bush Administration has provided plenty of fodder for fears of unstrained and unreflective power. Given the Republican’s crude custodianship of the country’s conscience after September 11th it is too tempting to be a Cassandra and overlook that the United States has historically weathered worse governmental encroachments on civil rights and democratic principle. By the same token, we should not underestimate how the constitutional crisis being provoked by the Bush Administration under the rubric of national security is the thread connecting the most controversial aspects of US national and homeland security policy, including the use of torture, indefinite detention, «enemy combatant» status, Guantanamo Bay and secret prisons, reporting on implementation of the Patriot Act, warrants for wiretaps and domestic intelligence gathering.

A confrontation is brewing between the executive and the legislative and judicial branches of government that unsettles established principles of judicial review and separation of powers. At stake are the checks and balances that make executive power accountable to the Congress, the courts, and the press. The President has modified more than 750 laws through «signing statements» that assert the prerogative of the «unitary executive» to unilaterally interpret or fully ignore the law.6 As Bush so succinctly put it (though in a different context), «I’m the decider, and I decide what is best.»7 The transformation of the Presidency into an increasingly unaccountable office is resulting in new clashes between state’s authority and the national security powers of the federal government, turning civil liberties issues into states’ rights questions and leading even conservative supporters to worry that Bush considers the executive branch above the law.8 It is debatable to what extent Bush is breaking new ground or using September 11th to push presidential powers to the logical extremes identified 32 years ago by historian Arthur Schlesinger Jr., who warned then that the tension between the Presidency and other branches of government was producing «a conception of presidential power so spacious and peremptory as to imply a radical transformation of the traditional polity.»9 The lasting impact of this new version of the imperial presidency is unclear, yet internationally it has already caused a hemorrhage of US credibility among allies. Ill conceived and incompetently administered policies, especially in Iraq, are regularly fortified by a messianic hubris that hinders effective responses to proliferation, extremism, civil conflict, and nuclear programs in North Korea and Iran. As missed opportunities, scandals and setbacks multiply, the arrogance adds insult to injury: «We’re an empire now, and when we act, we create our own reality» blithely stated one of Bush’s senior advisers, «We’re history’s actors . . . and you, all of you, will be left to just study what we do.»10

7 «President Bush Nommates Rob Portman as OMB Director and Susan Schwab for USTR», News Release, The White House, April 18, 2006. http://www.whitehouse.gov/news/releases/2006/04/20060418-1.html. Bush is known for similar statements, such as the one he made to Bob Woodward in his book Bush at War that «I do not need to explain why I say things. That’s the interesting thing about being the president. Maybe somebody needs to explain to me why they say something, but I don’t feel I owe anybody an explanation.» Elizabeth Drew quotes a Republican lobbyist summing up the Administration by saying «It’s we just want it our way and we don’t want to be bothered by talking to other people about it.» See both quotes in «Power Grab» The New York Review of Books, Vol. 53, No. 11, June 22, 2006.
8 Grover Norquist, the arch conservative Bush supporter, said «If you interpret the Constitution’s saying that the president is commander in chief to mean that the president can do anything he wants and can ignore the laws you don’t have a constitution: you have a king.» Quoted in Elizabeth Drew, Ibid. On the issue of state’s rights versus national security powers see «New Jersey Demands Data on Phone Call Surveillance and Is Sued by U.S.» The New York Times, June 16, 2006, B1.
10 Ron Suskind, «Without a Doubt» The New York Times, Sunday, October 17, 2004, Section 6, p.44.
The Bush Administration's manipulation of September 11th is a textbook illustration of the «securitization» of key issues for political gain and their subsequent relocation from the sphere of «normal» to «panic» politics. But while we endure the manipulative securitization of many areas of social life and the mendacious politicization of serious security issues, we also interact everyday with a globally networked system of unprecedented vulnerability that turns mundane infrastructural systems into targets. This reality has resulted in shifts in the framing of security that are not reducible to cynical political power plays (though not immune from them either).

The most notable shift concerns the bureaucratic reorganization of US institutions of security. Foremost in this category is the Department of Homeland Security (DHS), the new, third-largest cabinet department with 180,000 employees whose mission of protecting national territory includes the formerly diversified functions of emergency management, intelligence analysis, customs and border protection, citizenship and immigration, transportation security, coast guard, and the secret service. Other notable bureaucratic restructuring includes the creation of the Office of Director for National Intelligence to integrate information from the existing disparate intelligence agencies, and the United States Northern Command (NorthCom) the first-ever military command for the continental US.

What is striking about DHS and NorthCom is the dual focus on terrorism and natural disasters. This reflects September 11th's catalytic effect on the post-Cold War perception of security issues from the old fear of nuclear war to the new fear of anarchic random attacks. While the vastly more destructive threat of all-out nuclear war lead to widespread psychic numbing due to the difficulty in imagining the unimaginable, the threat of terrorism in the wake of September 11th gave rise to a new awareness of vulnerability at the level of everyday life. The randomness, civilian targets, speed and types of destruction called for a response that emphasized preparation for «low probability – high consequence» risks previously associated with chemical leaks and nuclear power accidents. The existing model for this was emergency management, which, as Stephen Collier and Andrew Lakoff explain, grew out of the civil defense efforts and «all hazards» planning from the early to middle Cold War.

Today a discourse of «preparedness» is ascendant, signifying an important shift in the framing and practice of security to include natural disasters as well as human maliciousness. NorthCom's official mission, for example, «includes domestic disaster relief operations that occur during fires, hurricanes, floods and earthquakes» and flu pandemics, while the DHS is infamously responsible for both terrorism and hurricanes. Collier and Lakoff identify «preparedness» as a new normative rationality for an emerging logic of «vital systems security.» Vital systems security is the security discourse for the era of infrastructure vulnerability, and it is distinct in its aims, objects, form of rationality, and apparatuses from the other major discourses of security dealing with sovereignty and biopolitics.

Vital systems such as roads, water, medical services or stock markets are not only integral to a state's internal political and economic order, but to the global political economy. Port security, for example, is as much about maintaining the circulation of commodities as it is about preventing the importation of a weapon. Stephen Flynn, an outspoken former Coast Guard commander, testified before the US Senate that «the entire worldwide intermodal transportation industry would effectively be brought to its knees – as would much of the freight movements that make up international trade» by the response to a cargo container attack today. This «soft underbelly of globalization» makes vital systems security a form of global security.

The bureaucratic restructuring after 9/11 also brings into sharp relief the conflicted competencies of federal, state, and local, as well as public and private, actors. This is certainly part of any process of institutional change, and as with all bureaucratic restructuring there are new opportunities for boondoggles, inefficiencies, and pork politics that undermine the preparedness principles upon which this massive effort is based. Of greater academic concern is the ambiguity created by the preparedness security discourse and the corresponding bureaucratic reorganization. On the one hand, one could read into the overlapping and crosscutting responsibilities of the DHS and NorthCom a marked blurring of the military and civilian realms. The echo of permanent wartime mobilization has been turned into the overlapping and crosscutting responsibilities of the DHS and NorthCom a marked blurring of the military and civilian realms. The echo of permanent wartime mobilization

11 See Buzan, Waever, and de Wilde, Op. Cit., p.34.
12 The Department of Defense and the Department of Veterans Affairs are the two largest cabinet departments, followed by DHS. The DHS was formed in November 2002, NORTHCOM in October 2002, and the Office of the National Director of Intelligence in December 2004.
17 Stephen J. Collier/Andrew Lakoff, «Vital Systems Security» ARC Discussion Paper 2006, http://www.anthropos-lab.net/publications/doc/ Collier_Vital%20Systems.pdf. Collier and Lakoff describe vital systems security as referring to «the protection of systems that are critical to maintaining economic and political order. These include key infrastructures (roads, electricity grids, communications, food and water supply), key institutions (markets and governmental entities), and key public services (hospitals).»
18 While vital systems entail a rationality of preparedness, state enemies and population problems such as hygiene and poverty were approached, respectively, through the rationalities of strategy and insurance. See Ibid., Chart 1: Political Logics of Collective Security.
19 Ibid.
22 www.defense.gov/pubs/Institute%20Working%20Paper.pdf. Collier and Lakoff describe security as the protection of systems that are critical to maintaining economic and political order. These include key infrastructures (roads, electricity grids, communications, food and water supply), key institutions (markets and governmental entities), and key public services (hospitals). While vital systems entail a rationality of preparedness, state enemies and population problems such as hygiene and poverty were approached, respectively, through the rationalities of strategy and insurance. See Ibid., Chart 1: Political Logics of Collective Security.
23 Ibid.
Der »Dschihadismus«: Gewaltideologie einer politischen Sekte

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Abstract: The fight against terrorism with traditional instruments of power like armed forces, police and repressive diplomacy often misses the intended effect. The recognition that organisations of fighters under the ideology of the »jihad« have similarities with the structures of sects, must be taken into account in the fight against the Islamic terror. The leading heads of the Islamic terror are rather »propagandists of the jihad« than hierarchic leaders and, therefore, quickly replaceable. If individual people of a terrorist organisation get killed or force is used on its adherents, the idea of jihad will rather win than lose popularity. Because of that, a theological and political analysis of the ideology of the Islamic terror, by the western-Christian communities and the muslim parishes, must become the aim of all efforts.

Keywords: Islamistischer Terrorismus, Terrorismus, Dschihadismus, Sekte, Islamismus, Terrorismusbekämpfung


1. Charakteristika von Sekten

Der gewaltbereite Islamismus und Dschihadismus ist bisher selten unter dem Sektenaspekt betrachtet worden, da bei der...