

9-11

WAS THERE AN ALTERNATIVE?

NOAM CHOMSKY

AN OPEN MEDIA PRODUCTION



First Published in the USA by Seven Stories Press

Copyright © 2001, 2002, 2011 by Noam Chomsky

“Was There an Alternative?” © 2011 by Noam Chomsky

“Reflections on 9-11” © 2002 by Noam Chomsky. First published by *Aftonbladet* in Sweden, August 2002, and in *11 September—ett år efteråt (September 11—One Year After)* (Stockholm: Aftonbladet, 2002).

The Open Media Series is edited by Greg Ruggiero and archived by the Tamiment Collection at New York University.

Front cover photo by Greg Ruggiero: September 11, 2011, view from Canal Street and Hudson.

Back cover photo, Official White House photograph by Pete Souza: President Barack Obama and Vice President Joe Biden, along with members of the national security team, monitor the mission against Osama bin Laden in the Situation Room of the White House, May 1, 2001. Seated, from left, are: Brigadier General Marshall B. “Brad” Webb, Assistant Commanding General, Joint Special Operations Command; Deputy National Security Advisor Denis McDonough; Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton; and Secretary of Defense Robert Gates. Standing, from left, are: Admiral Mike Mullen, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff; National Security Advisor Tom Donilon; Chief of Staff Bill Daley; Tony Blinken, National Security Advisor to the Vice President; Audrey Tomason Director for Counterterrorism; John Brennan, Assistant to the President for Homeland Security and Counterterrorism; and Director of National Intelligence James Clapper. Please note: a classified document seen in this photograph has been obscured.

First published by in Australia by
UWA Publishing
Crawley, Western Australia 6009
www.uwap.uwa.edu.au

UWAP is an imprint of UWA Publishing,
a division of The University of Western Australia



THE UNIVERSITY OF
WESTERN AUSTRALIA
Achieve International Excellence

This book is copyright. Apart from any fair dealing for the purpose of private study, research, criticism or review, as permitted under the *Copyright Act 1968*, no part may be reproduced by any process without written permission. Enquiries should be made to the publisher.

Book design by Jon Gilbert

Printed by Griffin Press

A full CIP record for this book is available from the National Library of Australia

*I would like to thank David Peterson and
Shifra Stern for invaluable assistance with
current media research particularly.*

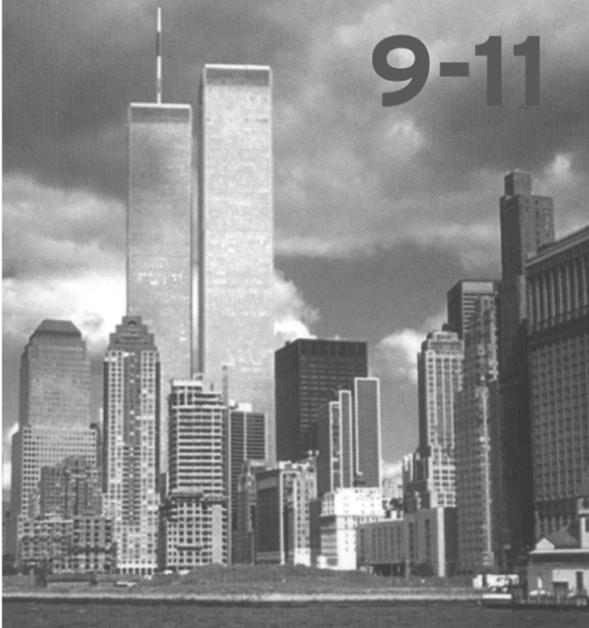
—NOAM CHOMSKY

Contents

Editor's Note	9
Was There an Alternative?	13
9-11	
1. Not Since the War of 1812	43
2. Is the War on Terrorism Winnable?.....	55
3. The Ideological Campaign	61
4. Crimes of State	71
5. Choice of Action.....	91
6. Civilizations East and West.....	103
7. Considerable Restraint?.....	123
Reflections on 9-11	147
Appendix A	
Department of State Report on Foreign Terrorist Organizations (October 5, 2001).....	157
Department of State Country Reports on Terrorism 2009 (August 5, 2010).....	163
Appendix B	
Recommended Reading	169
About the Author	171

NOAM
CHOMSKY

9-11



Cover of first edition of *9-11*.

EDITOR'S NOTE

The book you are holding was conceived, produced, and published as an act of protest. From the weeks immediately following the attacks in Washington and New York in 2001, to those immediately following the US assassination of Osama bin Laden in Pakistan in 2011, Noam Chomsky has highlighted the lessons of history and advocated adhering to the basic tenets of human rights as the best ways to break step from the drum beats for war. In opposing violence as a political solution, Chomsky's analysis of policy and media coverage in the United States poses difficult questions. Should the US obey the International Court? Should the US obey UN resolutions? Should the US abide by the same principles and rules to which it holds other countries? What have the US wars since 9/11 accomplished? The facts are harsh: Thousands of US soldiers have been killed on foreign soil. Untold numbers of people in Afghanistan, Pakistan, and Iraq have been killed, injured, displaced, or detained. What are the consequences? Is the world a better place? Was there an alternative?

Was there an alternative? This is now one of the great moral and political questions of our time, and it is the title

of Chomsky's new essay written to introduce this third edition *9-11*. Written in June 2011, Chomsky's text examines the impact and consequences of US foreign policy up to the assassination of Osama bin Laden in Abbottabad, Pakistan, and reflects on what may have resulted if the crimes against humanity committed on 9/11 had been "approached as a crime, with an international operation to apprehend the likely suspects."

In exploring possible answers, Chomsky reviews another notorious September 11 and major historical events, many of which are simply overlooked and forgotten in the United States. In discussing the operation against bin Laden, he also touches on the "imperial mentality" and the decision to name the mission "Operation Geronimo." "The casual choice of the name," writes Chomsky, "is reminiscent of the ease with which we name our murder weapons after victims of our crimes: Apache, Blackhawk, Tomahawk. . . . We might react differently if the Luftwaffe were to call its fighter planes 'Jew' and 'Gypsy.'"

For many who read Chomsky for the first time, his analysis can be disorienting because he focuses precisely on those facts that have been systemically under-reported or completely ignored by mainstream media. Consequences of US actions in Nicaragua, for example, are not widely known or remembered in the United States. As Chomsky said in an e-mail while we were working on the book, "These facts have been completely removed from history. One has to practically scream them from the rooftops."

Ten years after its original publication, the overlooked facts and difficult questions Chomsky poses in *9-11* con-

tinue to be heard over the rooftops of official history. Despite wars, despite indefinite detentions, despite drones and increasing militarization, people in this country and around the world have shown their resistance not just in the streets, but also by what we read.

A “Surprise Best Seller”—to quote the title of an article about it in the *New York Times*¹—9-11 has been published in more than two dozen countries and has appeared on multiple bestseller lists, including the *Washington Post*, the *Los Angeles Times*, the *Boston Globe*, and the *New York Times*. An article about it in *The New Yorker* stated, “9-11 was practically the only counter-narrative out there at a time when questions tended to be drowned out by a chorus, led by the entire United States Congress, of ‘God Bless America.’ It was one of the few places where the other side of the case could be found.”²

Published years before Facebook and Twitter were invented, people found out about the book largely through community bookstores, word of mouth, newspapers, public radio, and even CNN, where Chomsky debated the book as a guest on *American Morning* with Paula Zahn.³

Bookstores, particularly independents like St. Mark’s Bookshop and City Lights, became a driving force of distribution and sales. “Seeking to explain the book’s success,” wrote Michael Massing in the *New York Times*, “booksellers cite its succinct title, striking cover (a stark black-and-white picture of the twin towers before the attacks), low price . . . and accessible question-and-answer format. ‘People are coming in every day, asking, ‘What can I read that can give me some understanding of what’s hap-

pening?” said Virginia Harabin, the floor manager at the Politics and Prose Bookstore in Washington. “This is the one I recommend.”⁴

“The primary challenge facing the people of the world is, literally, survival,” writes Chomsky.⁵ If we indeed survive our government’s propensity for confrontation and violence over diplomacy, it may be because we break away from the news feed long enough to heed dissident voices like Chomsky’s, published in pamphlets, posted online, spoken at protests, and shouted from the rooftops.

Greg Ruggiero

July 12, 2011

Union County, New Jersey

NOTES

1. Michael Massing, “Surprise Best Seller Blames U.S.,” *New York Times*, May 2, 2002, B11.
2. Louis Menand, “Faith, Hope, and Clarity: September 11th and the American Soul,” *The New Yorker*, September 16, 2002.
3. *American Morning* with Paula Zahn, live debate with Noam Chomsky, May 30, 2002, transcript posted here: <http://www.cnn.com/TRANSCRIPTS/0205/30/ltn.01.html>.
4. Michael Massing, “Surprise Best Seller Blames U.S.,” *New York Times*, May 2, 2002, B11.
5. Noam Chomsky, “Delaying Doomsday: This Century’s Challenges,” April 24, 2008, distributed by the New York Times Syndicate and forthcoming in Noam Chomsky, *Making the Future: The Unipolar Imperial Moment*, City Lights Books/Open Media Series.

Was There an Alternative?

As I write (mid-June 2011), we are approaching the tenth anniversary of the horrendous atrocities of September 11, 2001, which, it is commonly held, changed the world. A few weeks ago, on May 1, the presumed mastermind of the crime, Osama bin Laden, was assassinated in Pakistan by a team of elite US commandos, Navy SEALs, after he was captured, unarmed and undefended, in Operation Geronimo.

Today is a rather ordinary day. The press reports terrorist attacks that killed dozens of civilians in Afghanistan, thirty-four more in Pakistan, and eleven in Iraq, where, as was just reported, the regular toll of about ten killed a day increased by 28 percent in May over April. The United Nations reported that May was the worst month for civilian casualties in Afghanistan since records began to be kept four years ago.¹

A few months earlier, in December, the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) called a rare news conference “to express deep concern that Afghanistan security had deteriorated to its worst point since the overthrow of the Taliban nine years ago and was preventing aid groups

from reaching victims of conflict.” The head of the Afghanistan office, Reto Stocker, said that the ICRC is “extremely concerned of yet another year of fighting with dramatic consequences for an ever growing number of people in by now almost the entire country.” He added that by every measure that the ICRC tracks, the situation has worsened throughout the country. The number of internally displaced people rose by 25 percent last year. Stocker added that “the Red Cross might be undercounting because it could no longer travel to many parts of the country.”²

This grim analysis was confirmed shortly after by the outgoing UN deputy special representative of the Secretary General for Afghanistan, Robert Watkins. He reported that the “security situation in Afghanistan has worsened to its lowest point since the toppling of the Taliban a decade ago and attacks on aid workers are at unprecedented levels.” Before the surge in NATO (that is, US) forces last year, he said, the insurgency was centered in the south and south-east of the country, but since the surge “we have seen the insurgency move to parts of the country where we’ve never seen [it] before,” UN relief agencies now have regular access to just 30 percent of the country, with mixed access for another 30 percent and hardly any for the remaining 40 percent.³

Meanwhile the vicious Sunni-Shi’ite conflict that was ignited by the US-UK invasion has since spread to the region more generally, with dire consequences and possibly worse to come.⁴

The most dangerous case is Pakistan. One of the leading specialists on Pakistan, British military historian

Anatol Lieven, writes that the war in Afghanistan is “destabilizing and radicalizing Pakistan, risking a geopolitical catastrophe for the United States—and the world—which would dwarf anything that could possibly occur in Afghanistan.” At every level of society, he writes, Pakistanis overwhelmingly sympathize with the Afghan Taliban, not because they like them but because “the Taliban are seen as a legitimate force of resistance against an alien occupation of the country,” much as the Mujahadeen were perceived when they resisted the Russian occupation in the 1980s. These feelings are shared by the military, who bitterly resent US pressures to sacrifice themselves for Washington’s war against the Taliban. Further bitterness is caused by the terror attacks (drones) by the US within Pakistan, sharply accelerated by Obama, and demands by the US that the Pakistani army carry Washington’s war into tribal areas of Pakistan that had been pretty much left on their own, even under British rule. The military is the one stable institution in Pakistan, holding the country together. US actions might “provoke a mutiny of parts of the military,” Lieven writes, in which case “the Pakistani state would collapse very quickly indeed, with all the disasters this would entail.”

The potential disasters are heightened drastically by the fact that Pakistan has a huge and rapidly growing nuclear weapons arsenal, and also a substantial Jihadi movement. Both of these are legacies of the Reagan administration, which pretended it did not know that Zia ul-Haq, the most vicious of Pakistan’s military dictators and a Washington favorite, was developing nuclear weapons and was also car-

rying out a program of radical Islamization of Pakistan with Saudi funding. The potential catastrophe lurking in the background is that these two legacies might combine, with fissile materials leaking into the hands of Jihadis, in which case we might see nuclear weapons (most likely “dirty bombs”) exploding in London and New York. Lieven summarizes by remarking that “U.S. and British soldiers are in effect dying in Afghanistan in order to make the world more dangerous for American and British peoples.”⁵

The threat that US operations in what has been christened “Afpak”—Afghanistan-Pakistan—might destabilize and radicalize Pakistan is surely understood in Washington. The most significant documents to have been released so far from Wikileaks are the cables from Islamabad from US Ambassador Patterson, who supports US actions in Afpak but warns that they “risk destabilizing the Pakistani state, alienating both the civilian government and military leadership, and provoking a broader governance crisis in Pakistan without finally achieving the goal,” and that there is a possibility that “someone working in [Pakistani government] facilities could gradually smuggle enough fissile material out to eventually make a weapon,” a danger enhanced by “the vulnerability of weapons in transit.”⁶

A few weeks ago the tortured corpse of Pakistani journalist Syed Saleem Shahzad was found, probably murdered by the ISI, Pakistan’s powerful intelligence services. Shahzad was a highly regarded (and immensely courageous) investigative reporter who had been exposing how militants were “taking hold of some of Pakistan’s most powerful institutions, in particular the military.” His mur-

der, it is generally assumed, was a reaction to his exposures of what is recognized to be a “nightmare scenario,” steadily being brought closer to reality, with full awareness, by the Obama-Petraeus Afpak strategy.⁷

For such reasons as these, the most immediate and significant consequences of the bin Laden assassination are likely to be in Pakistan. There is much discussion of Washington’s anger that Pakistan didn’t turn over bin Laden. Less is said about the fury in Pakistan that the US invaded their territory to carry out a political assassination. Anti-American fervor had already reached a very high peak in Pakistan, and these events are already exacerbating it.

The US commandos who carried out the assassination were under orders to fight their way out if necessary. Had that happened, they would surely have received air and maybe ground support from US military forces, leading to a confrontation with the Pakistani army. Lieven writes that the Pakistani army is dedicated to protecting the sovereignty of Pakistan, and “if the US ever put Pakistani soldiers in a position where they felt that honour and patriotism required them to fight America, many would be very glad to do so.” If the likely disintegration of Pakistan followed, he concludes, an “absolutely inevitable result would be the flow of large numbers of highly trained ex-soldiers, including explosive experts and engineers, to extremist groups.” That is the primary threat he sees of leakage of fissile materials to Jihadi hands, a horrendous eventuality.⁸

The Pakistani military had already been pushed to the edge by US attacks on Pakistani sovereignty, including Obama’s drone attacks—which he escalated immediately

after the killing of bin Laden, rubbing salt in the wounds. As noted, that is in addition to the demand that the Pakistani military cooperate in the US war against the Taliban in Afghanistan, whom the overwhelming majority of Pakistanis, the military included, see as fighting a just war of resistance against an invading army.

US correspondents in Afpak are aware of the rising threat to security that has been enhanced by the bin Laden assassination. Jane Perlez reports the view of “a well-informed Pakistani,” close to the top military command, that “a colonels’ coup, while unlikely, was not out of the question” after the assassination. “An American military official involved with Pakistan for many years” concurs in this judgment. The result could be that army chief General Ashfaq Parvez Kayani, “the most powerful man in the country,” will be replaced by “a more uncompromising anti-American army chief,” commanding soldiers who are already “almost uniformly anti-American.” The Pakistani military-intelligence complex wasted little time reacting to the assassination. The ISI “arrested five Pakistani informants who helped the Central Intelligence Agency before the Bin Laden raid,” according to US officials. The top Army commanders, who run the military by consensus, demanded “that General Kayani get much tougher with the Americans, even edging toward a break, Pakistanis who follow the army closely said.” The commanders issued a statement that condemned drone attacks anywhere in Pakistan as “not acceptable under any circumstances.” The military authorities had “already blocked the supply of food and water to the base used for the drones, a senior

American official said, adding that they were gradually ‘strangling the alliance’ by making things difficult for the Americans in Pakistan.”⁹

A number of analysts have observed that although bin Laden was finally killed, he won some major successes in his war against the US. “He repeatedly asserted that the only way to drive the U.S. from the Muslim world and defeat its satraps was by drawing Americans into a series of small but expensive wars that would ultimately bankrupt them” Eric Margolis writes. “‘Bleeding the U.S.’ in his words. The United States, first under George W. Bush and then Barack Obama, rushed right into bin Laden’s trap. . . . Grotesquely overblown military outlays and debt addiction . . . may be the most pernicious legacy of the man who thought he could defeat the United States”¹⁰—particularly when the debt is being cynically exploited by the far right, with collusion of the Democrat establishment, to undermine what remains of social programs, public education, unions, and, in general, remaining barriers to corporate tyranny, a different topic I cannot pursue here.

That Washington was bent on fulfilling bin Laden’s fervent wishes was evident at once. As discussed in the text below, written shortly after 9/11, anyone with knowledge of the region could recognize “that a massive assault on a Muslim population would be the answer to the prayers of bin Laden and his associates, and would lead the U.S. and its allies into a ‘diabolical trap,’ as the French foreign minister put it.” The senior CIA analyst responsible for tracking Osama bin Laden from 1996, Michael Scheuer, wrote shortly after that “bin Laden has been precise in telling

America the reasons he is waging war on us. [He] is out to drastically alter U.S. and Western policies toward the Islamic world,” and largely succeeded: “U.S. forces and policies are completing the radicalization of the Islamic world, something Osama bin Laden has been trying to do with substantial but incomplete success since the early 1990s. As a result, I think it is fair to conclude that the United States of America remains bin Laden’s only indispensable ally.”¹¹ And arguably remains so, even after his death.

Was there an alternative? There is every likelihood that the Jihadi movement, much of it highly critical of bin Laden, could have been split and undermined after 9/11. The “crime against humanity,” as it was rightly called, could have been approached as a crime, with an international operation to apprehend the likely suspects. That was recognized at the time, but no such idea was even considered. It might also have been possible to follow the precedent of law-abiding states, like Nicaragua’s response to the massive US terrorist war to which it was subjected (discussed in the text below). Again, unthinkable.

In 9-11, I quoted Robert Fisk’s conclusion that the “horrendous crime” of 9/11 was committed with “wickedness and awesome cruelty,”¹² an accurate judgment. It is useful to bear in mind that the crimes could have been even worse. Suppose, for example, that the attack had gone as far as bombing the White House, killing the president, imposing a brutal military dictatorship that killed thousands and tortured tens of thousands while establishing an international terror center that helped impose similar torture-and-terror states elsewhere and carried out an

international assassination campaign; and as an extra filip, brought in a team of economists—call them “the Kandahar boys”—who quickly drove the economy into one of the worst depressions in its history. That, plainly, would have been a lot worse than 9/11.

Unfortunately, it is not a thought experiment. It happened. The only inaccuracy in this brief account is that the numbers should be multiplied by twenty-five to yield per capita equivalents, the appropriate measure. I am, of course, referring to what in Latin America is often called “the first 9/11”: September 11, 1973, when the US succeeded in its intensive efforts to overthrow the democratic government of Salvador Allende in Chile with a military coup that placed General Pinochet’s brutal regime in office. One way to get a sense of it today is to visit the Villa Grimaldi in Santiago with one of the rare survivors as a guide, who can describe the exquisite torture regime stage by stage, with doctors attending to ensure that the subject survives to the next and more horrific stage until almost inevitable death. An experience not easily forgotten. The goal, in the words of the Nixon administration, was to kill the “virus”¹³ that might encourage all those “foreigners [who] are out to screw us” to take over their own resources and in other ways to pursue an intolerable policy of independent development. In the background was the conclusion of the National Security Council that if the US could not control Latin America, it could not expect “to achieve a successful order elsewhere in the world.”¹⁴ Washington’s “credibility” would be undermined, as Henry Kissinger put it.

The first 9/11, unlike the second, did not change the world. It was “nothing of very great consequence,” as Henry Kissinger assured his boss a few days later.¹⁵

These events of little consequence were not limited to the military coup that destroyed Chilean democracy and set in motion the horror story that followed. The first 9/11 was just one act in a drama, amply reviewed elsewhere, which began in 1962, when John F. Kennedy shifted the mission of the Latin American military from “hemispheric defense”—an anachronistic holdover from World War II—to “internal security,” a concept with a chilling interpretation in US-dominated Latin American circles. The consequences are outlined by Charles Maechling, who led US counterinsurgency and internal defense planning from 1961 to 1966. He described Kennedy’s 1962 decision as a shift from toleration “of the rapacity and cruelty of the Latin American military” to “direct complicity” in their crimes, to US support for “the methods of Heinrich Himmler’s extermination squads.” In the recently published Cambridge University *History of the Cold War*, Latin American scholar John Coatsworth writes that from that time to “the Soviet collapse in 1990, the numbers of political prisoners, torture victims, and executions of non-violent political dissenters in Latin America vastly exceeded those in the Soviet Union and its East European satellites,”¹⁶ including many religious martyrs and mass slaughter as well, always supported or initiated in Washington. The last major violent act was the brutal murder of six leading Latin American intellectuals, Jesuit priests, a few days after the Berlin Wall fell. The perpetrators were

an elite Salvadoran battalion, who had already left a shocking trail of blood, fresh from renewed training at the JFK School of Special Warfare, acting on direct orders of the high command of the US client state. That act also framed a decade, which opened with the assassination of Archbishop Romero, the “voice for the voiceless,” by much the same hands, while he was reading mass.

The consequences of this hemispheric plague still of course reverberate.

All of this, and much more like it, is dismissed as of little consequence, and forgotten. Those whose mission it is to rule the world enjoy a more comforting picture, articulated well enough in the current issue of the prestigious (and valuable) journal of the Royal Institute of International Affairs in London. The lead article discusses “the visionary international order” of the “second half of the twentieth century” marked by “the universalization of an American vision of commercial prosperity.”¹⁷ There is something to that account, but it does not quite convey the perception of those at the wrong end of the guns.

The same is true of the assassination of Osama bin Laden, which brings to an end at least a phase in the “war on terror” re-declared by President George W. Bush on the second 9/11.¹⁸ Let us turn to a few thoughts on that event and its significance.¹⁹

On May 1, 2011, Osama bin Laden was killed in his virtually unprotected compound by a raiding mission of seventy-nine Navy SEALs, who entered Pakistan by helicopter. After many lurid stories were provided by the government and withdrawn, official reports made it

increasingly clear that the operation was a planned assassination, multiply violating elementary norms of international law, beginning with the invasion itself.

There appears to have been no attempt to apprehend the unarmed victim, as presumably could have been done by seventy-nine commandos facing no opposition—except, they report, from his wife, also unarmed, who they shot in self-defense when she “lunged” at them, according to the White House.

A plausible reconstruction of the events is provided by veteran Middle East correspondent Yochi Dreazen and colleagues in the *Atlantic*. Dreazen, formerly the military correspondent for the *Wall Street Journal*, is senior correspondent for the National Journal Group covering military affairs and national security. According to their investigation, White House planning appears not to have considered the option of capturing bin Laden alive: “The administration had made clear to the military’s clandestine Joint Special Operations Command that it wanted bin Laden dead, according to a senior U.S. official with knowledge of the discussions. A high-ranking military officer briefed on the assault said the SEALs knew their mission was not to take him alive.”

The authors add: “For many at the Pentagon and the Central Intelligence Agency who had spent nearly a decade hunting bin Laden, killing the militant was a necessary and justified act of vengeance.” Furthermore, “Capturing bin Laden alive would have also presented the administration with an array of nettlesome legal and political challenges.” Better, then, to assassinate him, dumping

his body into the sea without the autopsy considered essential after a killing, whether considered justified or not—an act that predictably provoked both anger and skepticism in much of the Muslim world.

As the *Atlantic* inquiry observes, “The decision to kill bin Laden outright was the clearest illustration to date of a little-noticed aspect of the Obama administration’s counterterrorism policy. The Bush administration captured thousands of suspected militants and sent them to detention camps in Afghanistan, Iraq, and Guantanamo Bay. The Obama administration, by contrast, has focused on eliminating individual terrorists rather than attempting to take them alive.” That is one significant difference between Bush and Obama. The authors quote former West German Chancellor Helmut Schmidt, who “told German TV that the U.S. raid was ‘quite clearly a violation of international law’ and that bin Laden should have been detained and put on trial,” contrasting Schmidt with US Attorney General Eric Holder, who “defended the decision to kill bin Laden although he didn’t pose an immediate threat to the Navy SEALs, telling a House panel . . . that the assault had been ‘lawful, legitimate and appropriate in every way.’”²⁰

The disposal of the body without autopsy was also criticized by allies. The highly regarded British barrister Geoffrey Robertson, who supported the intervention and opposed the execution largely on pragmatic grounds, nevertheless described Obama’s claim that “justice was done” as an “absurdity” that should have been obvious to a former professor of constitutional law.²¹ Pakistan law “requires

a colonial inquest on violent death, and international human rights law insists that the ‘right to life’ mandates an inquiry whenever violent death occurs from government or police action. The U.S. is therefore under a duty to hold an inquiry that will satisfy the world as to the true circumstances of this killing.” Robertson adds that “The law permits criminals to be shot in self-defense if they (or their accomplices) resist arrest in ways that endanger those striving to apprehend them. They should, if possible, be given the opportunity to surrender, but even if they do not come out with their hands up, they must be taken alive if that can be achieved without risk. Exactly how bin Laden came to be ‘shot in the head’ (especially if it was the back of his head, execution-style) therefore requires explanation. Why a hasty ‘burial at sea’ without a post mortem, as the law requires?”

Robertson attributes the murder to “America’s obsessive belief in capital punishment—alone among advanced nations—[which] is reflected in its rejoicing at the manner of bin Laden’s demise”—though some who held that “The killing of Osama bin Laden was a just and necessary undertaking” expressed no joy while applauding the murder of a defenseless prisoner by an elite commando team facing no threat.²²

Robertson usefully reminds us that “It was not always thus. When the time came to consider the fate of men much more steeped in wickedness than Osama bin Laden—namely the Nazi leadership—the British government wanted them hanged within six hours of capture. President Truman demurred, citing the conclusion of Jus-

tice Robert Jackson that summary execution ‘would not sit easily on the American conscience or be remembered by our children with pride . . . the only course is to determine the innocence or guilt of the accused after a hearing as dispassionate as the times will permit and upon a record that will leave our reasons and motives clear.’”

The editors of the *Daily Beast* comment that “The joy is understandable, but to many outsiders, unattractive. It endorses what looks increasingly like a cold-blooded assassination as the White House is now forced to admit that Osama bin Laden was unarmed when he was shot twice in the head.”²³

Eric Margolis comments that “Washington has never made public the evidence of its claim that Osama bin Laden was behind the 9/11 attacks,” presumably one reason why “Polls show that fully a third of American respondents believe that the U.S. government and/or Israel were behind 9/11” while in the Muslim world skepticism is much higher. “An open trial in the U.S. or at the Hague would have exposed these claims to the light of day,” he continues, a practical reason why Washington should have followed the law.²⁴

In societies that profess some respect for law, suspects are apprehended and brought to fair trial. I stress “suspects.” In June 2002, FBI head Robert Mueller, in what the *Washington Post* described as “among his most detailed public comments on the origins of the attacks,” could say only that “investigators believe the idea of the Sept. 11 attacks on the World Trade Center and Pentagon came from al Qaeda leaders in Afghanistan, the actual plotting

was done in Germany, and the financing came through the United Arab Emirates from sources in Afghanistan.” In his own words, “We think the masterminds of it were in Afghanistan, high in the al Qaeda leadership. Plotters and others—the principals—came together in Germany and perhaps elsewhere.”²⁵ What the FBI believed and thought in June 2002 they didn’t know eight months earlier, when Washington dismissed tentative offers by the Taliban (how serious, we do not know) to permit a trial of bin Laden if they were presented with evidence. Thus it is not true, as President Obama claimed in his White House statement, that “We quickly learned that the 9/11 attacks were carried out by al Qaeda.”

There has never been any reason to doubt what the FBI believed in mid-2002, but that leaves us far from the proof of guilt required in civilized societies—and whatever the evidence might be, it does not warrant murdering a suspect who could, it seems, have been easily apprehended and brought to trial. Much the same is true of evidence provided since. Thus the 9/11 Commission provided extensive circumstantial evidence of bin Laden’s role in 9/11, based primarily on what it had been told about confessions by prisoners in Guantanamo. It is doubtful that much of that would hold up in an independent court, considering the ways confessions were elicited. But in any event, the conclusions of a congressionally authorized investigation, however convincing one finds them, plainly fall short of a sentence by a credible court, which is what shifts the category of the accused from suspect to convicted. There is much talk of bin Laden’s “confession,” but that was a boast,

not a confession, with as much credibility as my “confession” that I won the Boston marathon. The boast tells us a lot about his character, but nothing about his responsibility for what he regarded as a great achievement, for which he wanted to take credit.

Again, all of this is, transparently, quite independent of one’s judgments about his responsibility, which seemed clear immediately, even before the FBI inquiry, and still does.

It is worth adding that bin Laden’s responsibility was recognized in much of the Muslim world, and condemned. One significant example is the distinguished Lebanese cleric Sheikh Fadlallah, greatly respected by Hizbollah and Shia groups generally, outside Lebanon as well. He had some experience with assassinations. He had been targeted for assassination: by a truck bomb outside a mosque, in a CIA-organized operation in 1985. He escaped, but eighty others were killed, mostly women and girls as they left the mosque—one of those innumerable crimes that do not enter the annals of terror because of the fallacy of “wrong agency.” Sheikh Fadlallah sharply condemned the 9/11 attacks, as did many other leading figures in the Muslim world, within the Jihadi movement as well. Among others, the head of Hizbollah, Sayyed Hassan Nasrallah, sharply condemned bin Laden and Jihadi ideology.²⁶

One of the leading specialists on the Jihadi movement, Gerger suggests that the movement might have been split at that time had the US exploited the opportunity instead of mobilizing the movement, particularly by the attack on

Iraq, a great boon to bin Laden, which led to a sharp increase in terror, as intelligence agencies had anticipated. That they had anticipated it, which was already clear enough at the time, was confirmed by the former head of Britain's domestic intelligence agency MI5 at the Chilcot hearings investigating the background for the war. Confirming other analyses, she testified that both British and US intelligence were aware that Saddam posed no serious threat and that the invasion was likely to increase terror; and that the invasions of Iraq and Afghanistan had radicalized parts of a generation of Muslims who saw the military actions as an "attack on Islam."²⁷ As is often the case, security was not a high priority for state action.

It might be instructive to ask ourselves how we would be reacting if Iraqi commandos landed at George W. Bush's compound, assassinated him, and dumped his body in the Atlantic (after proper burial rites, of course). Uncontroversially, he is not a "suspect" but the "decider" who gave the orders to invade Iraq—that is, to commit the "supreme international crime differing only from other war crimes in that it contains within itself the accumulated evil of the whole" for which Nazi criminals were hanged: the hundreds of thousands of deaths, millions of refugees, destruction of much of the country and the national heritage, and the murderous sectarian conflict that has now spread to the rest of the region. Equally uncontroversially, these crimes vastly exceed anything attributed to bin Laden.

To say that all of this is uncontroversial, as it is, is not to imply that it is not denied. The existence of flat earthers does not change the fact that, uncontroversially, the

earth is not flat. Similarly, it is uncontroversial that Stalin and Hitler were responsible for horrendous crimes, though loyalists deny it. All of this should, again, be too obvious for comment, and would be, except in an atmosphere of hysteria so extreme that it blocks rational thought.

Similarly, it is uncontroversial that Bush and associates did commit the “supreme international crime,” the crime of aggression. The crime was defined clearly enough by Justice Robert Jackson, Chief of Counsel for the United States at Nuremberg, reiterated in an authoritative General Assembly resolution. An “aggressor,” Jackson proposed to the Tribunal in his opening statement, is a state that is the first to commit such actions as “Invasion of its armed forces, with or without a declaration of war, of the territory of another State. . . .” No one, even the most extreme supporter of the aggression, denies that Bush and associates did just that.

We might also do well to recall Jackson’s eloquent words at Nuremberg on the principle of universality: “If certain acts of violation of treaties are crimes, they are crimes whether the United States does them or whether Germany does them, and we are not prepared to lay down a rule of criminal conduct against others which we would not be willing to have invoked against us.” And elsewhere: “We must never forget that the record on which we judge these defendants is the record on which history will judge us tomorrow. To pass these defendants a poisoned chalice is to put it to our own lips as well.”²⁸

It is also clear that announced intentions are irrelevant, even if they are truly believed. Internal records reveal that

Japanese fascists apparently did believe that by ravaging China they were laboring to turn it into an “earthly paradise.” We don’t know whether Hitler believed that he was defending Germany from the “wild terror” of the Poles, or was taking over Czechoslovakia to protect its population from ethnic conflict and provide them with the benefits of a superior culture, or was saving the glories of the civilization of the Greeks from barbarians of East and West, as his acolytes claimed (Martin Heidegger). And although it may be difficult to imagine, it is conceivable that Bush and company believed that they were protecting the world from destruction by Saddam’s nuclear weapons. All irrelevant, though ardent loyalists on all sides may try to convince themselves otherwise.

We are left with two choices: either Bush and associates are guilty of the “supreme international crime” including all the evils that follow, crimes that go vastly beyond anything attributed to bin Laden; or else we declare that the Nuremberg proceedings were a farce and that the allies were guilty of judicial murder. Again, that is entirely independent of the question of the guilt of those charged: established by the Nuremberg Tribunal in the case of the Nazi criminals, plausibly surmised from the outset in the case of bin Laden, though the opportunity to prove the case in court was withdrawn by Obama.

A few days before the bin Laden assassination, Orlando Bosch died peacefully in Florida, where he resided along with his accomplice Luis Posada Carilles and many other associates in international terrorism. After he was accused of dozens of terrorist crimes by the FBI, Bosch was

granted a presidential pardon by Bush I over the objections of the Justice Department, which found the conclusion “inescapable that it would be prejudicial to the public interest for the United States to provide a safe haven for Bosch.”²⁸ The coincidence of deaths at once calls to mind the Bush II doctrine, which has “already become a *de facto* rule of international relations,” according to the noted Harvard international relations specialist Graham Allison. The doctrine revokes “the sovereignty of states that provide sanctuary to terrorists,” Allison writes, referring to the pronouncement of Bush II, directed to the Taliban, that “those who harbor terrorists are as guilty as the terrorists themselves.” Such states, therefore, have lost their sovereignty and are fit targets for bombing and terror; for example, the state that harbored Bosch and his associates. When Bush issued this new “*de facto* rule of international relations,” no one seemed to notice that he was calling for invasion and destruction of the US and murder of its criminal presidents.³⁰

None of this is problematic, of course, if we reject Justice Jackson’s principle of universality, and adopt instead the principle that the US is self-immunized against international law and conventions—as, in fact, the government has frequently made very clear, an important fact, much too little understood.

It is also worth thinking about the name given to the operation: Operation Geronimo. The imperial mentality is so profound that few seem able to perceive that the White House is glorifying bin Laden by calling him “Geronimo”—the Apache Indian chief who led the coura-

geous resistance to the invaders who sought to consign his people to the fate of “that hapless race of native Americans, which we are exterminating with such merciless and perfidious cruelty, among the heinous sins of this nation, for which I believe God will one day bring [it] to judgment,” in the words of the great grand strategist John Quincy Adams, the intellectual architect of manifest destiny, long after his own contributions to these sins had passed. Some did comprehend, not surprisingly. The remnants of that hapless race protested vigorously. The same was true elsewhere, notably in Mexico, where there was great outrage and disbelief—among people who have not forgotten that the “heinous sin” was carried out in territories stolen from Mexico in a war of aggression.

The casual choice of the name is reminiscent of the ease with which we name our murder weapons after victims of our crimes: Apache, Blackhawk, Tomahawk. . . . We might react differently if the Luftwaffe were to call its fighter planes “Jew” and “Gypsy.”

The examples mentioned would fall under the category of “American exceptionalism,” were it not for the fact that easy suppression of one’s own crimes is virtually ubiquitous among powerful states, at least those that are not defeated and forced to acknowledge reality. Other current illustrations are too numerous to mention. To take just one, of great current significance, consider Obama’s terror weapons (drones) in Pakistan. Suppose that during the 1980s, when they were occupying Afghanistan, the Russians had carried out targeted assassinations in Pakistan aimed at those who were financing, arming, and training

the insurgents—quite proudly and openly. For example, targeting the CIA station chief in Islamabad, who explained that he “loved” the “noble goal” of his mission: to “kill Soviet Soldiers . . . not to liberate Afghanistan.”

There is no need to imagine the reaction, but there is a crucial distinction: That was *them*, this is *us*.

What are the likely consequences of the killing of bin Laden? For the Arab world, it will probably mean little. He had long been a fading presence, and in the past few months was eclipsed by the Arab Spring. His significance in the Arab world is captured by the headline in the *New York Times* for an op-ed by Middle East/al Qaeda specialist Gilles Kepel; “Bin Laden was Dead Already” (May 7). Kepel writes that few in the Arab world are likely to care. That headline might have been dated far earlier, had the US not mobilized the Jihadi movement by the attacks on Afghanistan and Iraq, as suggested by the intelligence agencies and scholarship. As for the Jihadi movement, within it bin Laden was doubtless a venerated symbol, but apparently did not play much more of a role for this “network of networks,” as analysts call it, which undertake mostly independent operations.

As already discussed, Operation Geronimo might have been the spark that set off a conflagration in Pakistan, with dire consequences. Perhaps the assassination was perceived by the administration as an “act of vengeance,” as Robertson concludes.³¹ And perhaps the rejection of the legal option of a trial reflects a difference between the moral culture of 1945 and today, as he suggests. Whatever the motive was, it could hardly have been security. As in the case of the “supreme international crime” in Iraq, the bin

Laden assassination is another illustration of the important fact that security is often not a high priority for state action, contrary to received doctrine.

There is much more to say, but even the most obvious and elementary facts should provide us with a good deal to think about when we consider 9/11 and its consequences, and what they portend for the future.

NOTES

1. Faris Ali, "Suspected Suicide Bombing Kills 34 in Pakistan," Reuters, June 11, 2011, <http://www.reuters.com/article/2011/06/11/us-pakistan-blasts-idUSTRE75ArTQ20110611>; "Bombings Kill Dozens in Pakistan," *New York Times*, June 11, 2011, <http://www.nytimes.com/2011/06/12/world/asia/12peshawar.html?ref=world>; Hashim Shukoor, "At Least 21 Killed in Afghanistan Attacks," *Truthout*, June 11, 2011, <http://www.truth-out.org/least-21-killed-afghanistan-attacks/1307889681>; Jack Healy, "Car Bombings and Shooting of Family Kill 11 in Iraq," *New York Times*, June 11, 2011, http://www.nytimes.com/2011/06/12/world/middleeast/12iraq.html?_r=1&ref=world.
2. Alissa Rubin, "For Red Cross, Aid Conditions Hit New Low in Afghanistan," *New York Times*, Dec. 16, 2010, http://www.nytimes.com/2010/12/16/world/asia/16redcross.html?_r=1.
3. "Afghan Security Worse in a Decade: UN," *ABC News*, February 24, 2011, <http://www.abc.net.au/news/stories/2011/02/24/3147163.htm>.
4. See Nir Rosen, *Aftermath: Following the Bloodshed of America's Wars in the Muslim World* (Nation Books, 2010).
5. Anatol Lieven, "A Mutiny Grows in Punjab," *National Interest*, March/April 2011, <http://nationalinterest.org/article/mutiny-grows-punjab-4889>.
6. The fullest discussion of this critically important material is by Fred Branfman, who had exposed the grotesque US war against the peasants of northern Laos at the time; "Wikileaks Exposes the Danger of Pakistan's Nukes," *Truthdig*, January 13, 2011, http://www.truthdig.com/report/item/wikileaks_exposes_the_danger_of_pakistans_nukes_20110113/.
7. "James Lamont and Farhan Bokhari, "Murder of Pakistani journalist raises awkward questions inside the regime," *Financial Times*, June 3, 2011, <http://www.ft.com/cms/s/07b440aae-8e08-11e0-bce5-00144feab49a.html#axzz1PwOPdzyc>.
8. Lieven, *Pakistan: A Hard Country* (Public Affairs, 2011).

9. Jane Perlez, "Pakistan's Chief of Army Fights to Keep His Job," *New York Times*, June 15, 2011, <http://www.nytimes.com/2011/06/16/world/asia/16pakistan.html?pagewanted=1&r=1&hp>.
10. Eric Margolis, "Osama's Ghost," *American Conservative*, May 20, 2011, <http://www.amconmag.com/blog/osamas-ghost/>.
11. Anonymous (Michael Scheuer), *Imperial Hubris: Why the West is Losing the War on Terror* (Washington DC: Potomac, 2004).
12. Noam Chomsky, *9-11* (New York: Seven Stories Press 2001) 45-46.
13. Armand Toprani and Richard Moss, "Filling the Three-Year Gap: Nixon, Allende, and the White House Tapes, 1971-73," *Passport: The Newsletter of the Society for Historians of American Foreign Relations* 41, no. 3 (2011): 4-5.
14. David Schmitz, *Thank God They're on Our Side* (Chapel Hill, NC: The University of North Carolina Press, 1999).
15. Lubna Z. Qureshi, *Nixon, Kissinger, and Allende: US Involvement in the 1973 Coup in Chile* (Landham, MD: Lexington Books, 2009).
16. John Coatsworth, "The Cold War in Central America, 1975-1991," in *History of the Cold War* Vol. 3 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 2010).
17. Harold James, "International Order after the Financial Crisis," *International Affairs* 87, no. 3 (2011): 525-537.
18. The first war on terror was declared by the Reagan administration, which came into office announcing that a primary focus of foreign policy would be state-directed international terrorism, "the plague of the modern age," "a return to barbarism in our time," and so on. The impressive rhetoric had considerable merit, though not exactly as intended. The toll of Reagan's war on terror included hundreds of thousands of corpses in Central America, over a million in Angola and Mozambique where Reagan was strongly supporting the apartheid South African regime in its defense against "one of the more notorious terrorist groups" in the world (1988, Nelson Mandela's African National Congress), tens of thousands in the Middle East, and much else. All dispatched to the memory hole along with other matters of little consequence.
19. I know of no comprehensive study, but it seems quite clear that reactions were considerably different in the West and the Global South, where events of little consequence tend to be remembered. The remarks that follow are adapted from my comments shortly after the assassination, at <http://www.zcommunications.org/there-is-much-more-to-say-by-noam-chomsky>.
20. Yochi Dreazen, Aamer Madhani, and Marc Ambinder, "Goal Was Never to Capture bin Laden; The Navy SEALs Knew Their Mission was to Kill the al Qaeda Leader, Not Take Him Alive," *The Atlantic*, May 3, 2011, <http://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2011/05/goal-was-never-to-capture-bin-laden/238330/>.
21. Geoffrey Robertson, "Bin Laden Should Have Been Captured, Not Killed," *Daily Beast* accessed through Yahoo! News, accessed on June 23, 2011, http://news.yahoo.com/s/dailybeast/20110503/ts_dailybeast/13863_osamabinladendeadwhyheshouldhavebeencapturednotkilled_1.

22. Eric Alterman, "Bin Gotten," *The Nation*, May 23, 2011.
23. Robertson, *Daily Beast*, 2011.
24. Margolis, *American Conservative*, 2011.
25. Walter Pincus, "Mueller Outlines Origin, Funding of Sept. 11 Plot," *Washington Post*, June 6, 2002.
26. Fawaz A. Gerges, *The Far Enemy: Why Jihad Went Global* (Cambridge, 2005, 2009); Gerges, *Journey of the Jihadist: Inside Muslim Militancy* (Harcourt, 2006).
27. Haroon Siddique, "Iraq inquiry: Saddam posed very limited threat to UK, ex-MI5 chief says," *Guardian*, July 20, 2010, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/uk/2010/jul/20/iraq-inquiry-saddam-mi5-chief>.
28. The preceding four quotes can be cited in "The International Tribunal for Germany: Contents of the Nuremberg Trials Collection," *The Avalon Project: Documents in Law, History, and Diplomacy*, 2008, http://avalon.law.yale.edu/subject_menus/imt.asp.
29. Associate Attorney General Joe D. Whitley, "Exclusion Proceeding for Orlando Bosch Avila," US Department of Justice, file A28 851 622, A11 861 810.
30. Graham Allison, "How to Stop Nuclear Terror," *Foreign Affairs*, January/February 2004.
31. Robertson, *Daily Beast*, 2011.