



The Dissemination of Banal Geopolitics: Webs of Extremism and Insecurity

James D Sidaway

School of Geography, University of Plymouth, Plymouth, UK;
james.sidaway@plymouth.ac.uk

Looking beyond the Iraq and Afghan battlefields, US commanders envisage a war unlimited in time and space against global Islamist extremism. “The struggle . . . may well be fought in dozens of other countries simultaneously and for many years to come,” the report says (*America’s Long War* <http://www.guardian.co.uk/usa/story/0,,1710062,00.html>).

Although it was well underway before, in the aftermath of “9/11” a state of generalized war-making on the part of key Atlantic powers (foremost the USA and UK) prevails.

War and a plethora of new strategies, military technologies and security procedures¹ have become everyday and ordinary. War is more or less taken for granted as the norm, fed (especially in the United States) by a daily media coverage about “terrorism”. Building on writings by Hannah Arendt, Michael Billig and more than a decade of critical writing about geopolitics, I termed this moment one of “banal geopolitics” in two prior *Antipode* Interventions (Sidaway 2001, 2003). Expanding the concept, Merje Kuss (2007:284) has since noted how amongst NATO’s new members in Central and Eastern Europe and the Baltic, the military alliance becomes “banalized—no longer a military alliance but a kind of cultural association—and fundamentalized—no longer a matter of politics but of deep identities and essences . . . Complex political issues are rendered simple and obvious, a matter of essences”.

Nonetheless, for all this daily (banal) reproduction of imperial and interventionist geopolitics (which again has deep antecedents in the Cold War), certain statements and moments have acquired a programmatic or key role. Amongst these is George W Bush’s visit to the collapsed World Trade Center (“ground zero”) in the days after September 11, 2001 (Ó Tuathail 2003). Another was Bush’s 29 January 2002, State of the

Union address about an “axis of evil”. The axis discourse harks back to Second World War allied narratives and the momentous struggle with the fascist powers. It has faded somewhat in recent years, as the “war on terror”, mutated into the “long war” (codified in the Department of Defense 2006 Quadrennial Review²).

Into this context of talk about a long war stepped the British Prime Minister. As the latest Israeli invasion of Lebanon reached its maximum extent in the summer of 2006, Tony Blair made a tour of the United States (the British media suggested that the US visit was a move to position himself for a future international post or for the US lecture circuit), during which he spoke to an audience at the World Affairs Council in Los Angeles. Blair’s speech³ of 1 August 2006 was—in many ways—unremarkable. We have heard before (and many have had to live or die with the consequences) of war “of a completely unconventional kind”. References to “elemental values” and that “terrorism must be confronted” are very well-worn themes (Coleman 2003). Nothing new there. This kind of talk goes back a very long way indeed, having antecedents and direct parallels with the interconnections between the American and British Empire more than a century ago (Kramer 2002). And, renewing 50+ years of Cold War policy, before leaving office, Blair (supported by his designated successor) committed the UK to replace its (US supplied) nuclear submarine launched weapons of mass destruction (to be used in undefined “extreme circumstances”). What David Edgerton (2005) has termed Britain’s “warfare state” is being rearmed for the new century.

Where Blair’s speech did appear to establish fresh terms (and this is what made the headlines), was in his geopolitical designation of “an arc of extremism stretching across the Middle East and touching countries far outside that region”. Iran and Syria were key members of the arc (“exporting terrorism”), participants in an “elemental struggle” between “reactionary Islam” and “moderate mainstream Islam”. Elements of the British foreign policy and diplomatic establishment—and large swathes of the British media—were horrified at the oversimplification here. Egypt, Kuwait and Pakistan (to pick but three) presumably were on the “moderate” side? A glance at reports by *Amnesty International* (<http://www.amnesty.org>) or *Human Rights Watch* (www.hrw.org) indicate that the police and security forces in these countries do not look very “moderate” to many of their citizens who fear to step beyond the tightly defined official parameters of politics. In this vision, Israel was not extreme; though those under Israeli bombardment in Lebanon or Gaza whilst Blair spoke might beg to differ. The Atlantic powers, who have occupied Iraq (resulting in tens of thousands of deaths as resistance and civil war ensued) under dubious pretexts, might also credibly be interpreted as engaged in extreme actions. Some geopolitical history is in order here too. Back in the late 1970s, the then US National

Security Advisor Zbigniew Brzezinski designated an “arc of crisis” from the horn of Africa, through the Levant, Iraq and Iran to Pakistan and Afghanistan, susceptible—so the narratives of the day went—to Soviet influence. This arc featured on the front cover of *Time* magazine, in the speeches of Henry Kissinger, and in due course informed the Carter doctrine (codified in another State of the Union address), laying the basis for a heightened American focus on (and preparedness for combat in) the Persian Gulf (see Sidaway 1998). The original Cold War framework faded, but the network of military bases, weapons systems and commitment to American deployment in the Gulf were steadily built up in subsequent decades.

Blair’s speech is unlikely to prove such a key geopolitical codification. After all, it reworks themes that already were in wide circulation (Daalder, Gnesotto and Gordon 2006; Mann 2004). Moreover, no British Prime Minister has really been in a position to be a key source of Atlantic geopolitical strategy since Churchill or Atlee more than 60 years ago. But it merits critical reaction and reflection, as the latest in a long series of abstracted geopolitical designations of good, bad and evil. Beyond this, however, it is worth countering Blair’s statement with other scripts and events, a deconstructive move and what Gerard Ó Tuathail (1996) has called an “anti-geopolitical eye”.

There are a number of ways to do this. Though it would be a fascinating exercise to chart the circulation and political consequences of conspiracy theories⁴ about the making and trajectory of the latest round of Anglo-American war-making, there is no need to resort to these in seeking ways to problematize Blair’s (and all the associated narratives) about “terrorism”, instability and security. We can begin by posing a few basic questions about the many sites of terror enabled by American and other western strategies back in the Cold War. Consider the trajectories of Guatemala, Chile or Indonesia, for example. Moreover, George W Bush has publicly confirmed the role of United States intelligence services in running a network of “extraordinary rendition” (involving kidnapping and extensive jailing without trial) of foreigners and their detention in a network of clandestine overseas prisons. Over the past six years, these have been extensively discussed, documented, debated (and often denied) in Europe, including detailed reports by the European Parliament and the Council of Europe⁵. Drawing on these reports, the map here (Figure 1), which I have provisionally entitled, the “web of extremism”⁶ is offered as a challenge to banal geopolitics.

This web of extremism (matched by a “web of deceit”), has come into being and is justified of claims to protect “our” collective security. Yet not only does this rest on enhanced insecurity for many: those non-combatant victims on the receiving end of the war on terror in Afghanistan, Iraq and elsewhere, but the energies poured into war making are counterproductive in terms of enhanced security. Who, what

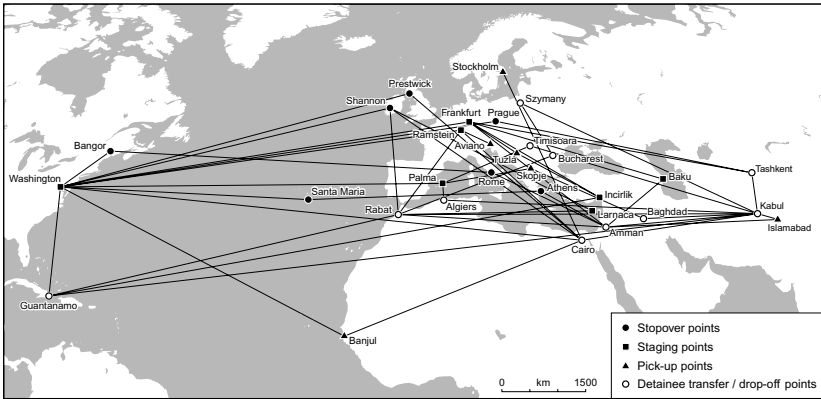


Figure 1: The web of extremism: secret detentions and unlawful inter-state transfers. Source: adapted from European Parliament (2006)

and where is secured? And who, what and where is thereby made less secure? As proposed by the International Relations scholar Barry Buzan (1983) during the latter years of the Cold War (and later finessed by feminist and other critiques of security discourses) the language of security should not be taken for granted. One critical response is to broaden its meaning, to focus on personal, social, economic and other aspects of being and feeling *secure* from violence, hate, disease, poverty and exploitation. Once we do this, then it becomes clearer how the latest round of war-making and the ways that it has become a taken-for-granted norm in the UK and the USA have profound opportunity costs in terms of other dimensions and experiences of “security” (McInnes and Lee 2006).

In this context, I want to close this Intervention with a deeply personal account of danger, insecurity and its consequences. On Friday 19 January 2007, my usually lively and healthy 10-year-old daughter—Jasmin Leila Sidaway—suddenly collapsed at home in Plymouth and could not be revived. The arrival of an ambulance with a paramedic team was delayed because the digital navigation system they were using had not been updated to include the street where we lived. But when they arrived, oxygen and repeated shots of adrenalin made no difference. It turns out that Jasmin Leila had contracted a deadly bacterial infection which caused her sudden death. Samples of the bacteria were later detected amongst classmates. It seems that Jasmin contracted the infection at her school. This bacteria [known as *Staphylococcus aureus* producing Panton-Valentin leukocidin toxin (PVL-SA)] is almost impossible to treat once it takes hold (Morgan 2005) and like allied pathogens (known as MRSA), it has spread as a cause of infection and mortality in British public hospitals during the last decade or so. This is not accidental.

Such infections are rarer where standards of hospital cleanness and hygiene are maintained. The privatizations of hospital cleaning (and many other procedures within a publicly funded health system) have proven highly profitable for contractors: whilst conditions and terms of labour and standards of cleanliness have declined over more than a decade of marketization and privatization (Pollock 2004).

I later discovered that the public hospital in Plymouth was a documented site of such multiple infections⁷ and it not hard to imagine how it has spread back and forth between the hospital and the community. Though an individual tragedy, the connections between Jasmin and wider vectors of disease, infection and mortality affecting millions (Farmer 2003) are evident. To paraphrase Jason Burke's (2003:8) writings about the current war in Afghanistan waged by a US-led coalition, such connections are "the culmination of a huge and complex historical process".

A few months before, Jasmin had brought home a letter from her school. This letter to parents was about the prospect of emotional turmoil and behavioural difficulties amongst the children of service families (of which the naval port of Plymouth has many) "during a period of hostilities, even if their parent is not one of those who is deploying to a war-zone" (Letter to parents of children attending Gossewell Primary School, Plymouth 19 October 2006). The period and place of "hostilities" seem generalized: banal geopolitics. But whose security is being enhanced through all this? Certainly the security of arms contractors and of the reactionary elites amongst our allies in the "war on terror" is bolstered. But it did nothing for Jasmin Leila's "security" and it will do nothing for yours. Oppose it.

Acknowledgements

A version of this Intervention was presented at a panel session on Banal Imperialism at the San Francisco AAG meeting (April 2007). I am grateful to the audience, co-panellists and the organizer (Steven Flusty) for responses. Thanks also to James DeFillipis, Jason Dittmer, Robina Mohammad and Matt Sparke for comments on an earlier draft.

In celebration of Jasmin Leila's life, a small fund for critical scholarship is being established by the RGS-IBG. Please see: www.rgs.org/JasminLeilaAward.

Endnotes

¹ See Graham (2006, 2007) on what this means for Arab, Afghan and Somali (and increasingly also Western) cities.

² <http://www.defenselink.mil/qdr/report/Report20060203.pdf>

³ The text of the speech is available at <http://www.pm.gov.uk/output/Page9948.asp> A video recording is also available via the BBC at http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/uk_news/politics/5236896.stm

⁴ Five minutes on the internet yields dozens. Start with <http://www.911Truth.org> and www.loosechange911.com. Wikipedia (<http://en.wikipedia.org/>)

wiki/9/11_conspiracy_theories) contains a useful review of the conspiracies and refutations. In the light of a nuanced critical understanding of meaning and truth, what merits analysis and scrutiny here are the political consequences (and geopolitical assumptions) of different truth claims about 9/11.

⁵ The latest report was issued by the Council of Europe on 8 June 2007. See <http://www.coe.int/T/E/Com/Files/Events/2006-cia/>

⁶ Since “rendition” was also used in the *antebellum* United States, to refer to the return of black people to enslavement across the Mason–Dixon line, one reader has suggested the alternative title of “the new triangle trade” as an appropriate way to associate a highly (im)moral past geography and link it with today’s injustice.

⁷ There were 10 PVL-SA infections acquired in Derriford Hospital, Plymouth in the month before Jasmin was killed by the same bacteria. See http://news.independent.co.uk/uk/health_medical/article2091880.ece

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