

An Introduction without a Beginning

How can you have a war on terrorism when war itself
is terrorism?

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In January 2017 Kellyanne Conway, an advisor to US president Donald Trump and admitted purveyor of “alternative facts,” invoked the memory of a “Bowling Green massacre” as a rationale for the Trump administration’s purportedly more muscular approach to fighting terrorism. Included in this new approach was a proposed travel ban on most Muslims seeking to visit or immigrate to the United States. Conway justified the administration’s anti-Muslim federal policies by claiming that Islam was consonant with terrorism, as evidenced by incidents like those at Bowling Green, Kentucky. Moreover, citing the Obama administration’s Muslim registry as precedent for the Trump administration’s proposed ban, she argued that Trump’s proposal was a reasonable response to the events in Bowling Green. “[T]wo Iraqi nationals came to this country,” she claimed, “joined ISIS, traveled back to the Middle East to get trained and refine their terrorism skills and come back here, and were the masterminds behind the

Bowling Green massacre of taking innocent soldiers' lives away
... Most people don't know that because it didn't get covered."³

Conway's story ignored important facts while creating outright lies. While focused on the fantasy of Muslim terrorists, Conway ignored several examples of domestic acts of terrorism perpetrated by white nationalists; acts that generated very few policy responses, much less travel restrictions. There were no policy realignments and remedies proposed to address the rise of domestic terrorism; indeed, in recent history the Trump administration praised members of alt-right organizations who chanted "Jews will not replace us" in the Charlottesville, Virginia, "Unite the Right" rally as "good people." Similarly, Conway's fabrication failed to recognize that the relatively few recent acts of violence perpetrated by Muslims within the United States involved US citizens who had little or no connection to the Middle East. Therefore, a travel ban based on Islamic religious affiliation would do very little to curb acts of domestic terrorism, whether perpetrated by white nationalists or Muslim Americans. Perhaps the most outrageous aspect of Conway's argument was its outright falsity; there was no Bowling Green massacre, at least not as she described it.

Although Conway would later admit that she misspoke about an alleged massacre in Bowling Green, Kentucky, her statement echoed several other lies perpetrated by presidential administrations to justify a never-ending war on terror. These lies frequently point to phantom terrorist activity on the part of Muslims—always presumed to have connections to the Middle East, despite the fact that the largest number of Muslims in the world reside outside of the Middle East—to justify an enduring national commitment to the War on Terror as well as to the global expansion of the battlefield to places not involved in any violent attacks on the United States.

Wars are frequently waged in the name of vanquishing alleged crimes that never took place. The US entry into the Korean war was based on the unsubstantiated claim that the Soviet Union had inspired North Korean aggression against South Korea. Yet there was no evidence of Soviet influence, and moreover, the evidence suggests that the South had initiated the civil war in Korea. In 1964, in an effort to justify US engagement in the Vietnam War, President Johnson claimed that US ships had been attacked, unprovoked, in the Gulf of Tonkin. The desire to vanquish this false attack drew the United States deeply into the Vietnam War, and forever impacted the lives of millions of Vietnamese as well as American soldiers drafted into the conflict. The Korean and Vietnamese lies make Kellyanne Conway's "alternative fact" seem rather inconsequential.

While the "Bowling Green" example is an especially brazen lie, it is not the only, nor most consequential, lie told to justify the current War on Terror. The 2003 targeting of Iraq as part of the War on Terror was based on the lie that Saddam Hussein's military had "weapons of mass destruction" (WMD) and that Hussein had aided the terrorist group al-Qaeda by providing logistical support to, and territory for, training. Neither of the rationales for the Iraq invasion was true, although each was accepted as truthful for far longer than the Trump administration's Bowling Green lie. And the consequences of the Iraq lie have been far more tragic, not only for Americans who have died in Iraq, but for the entire Iraqi society that has been transformed forever by the US military invasion and continued occupation. Some estimates place the Iraqi war dead (accounting not only for direct violence but also indirect forms of violence from sanctions) at around 1 million people, while the number of displaced Iraqis is perhaps even greater.⁴ But the US purveyors of

the Iraq lie never faced serious consequences; in fact, in a strange twist of fate, the perpetrators of the 2003 Iraq-WMD lie, such as former George W. Bush administration official David Frum, are now talking heads for left-leaning media, often lobbing the most blistering attacks on the Trump administration's fabrications. The War on Terror has become so normative that there are now pitched political battles between those who lied for the purportedly noble goals of defeating Saddam Hussein and those who lied to discriminate against global Islam in general. Within this discursive echo chamber, there is very little analysis of what constitutes the War on Terror, nor of whether it was ever based on legitimate goals in the first place.

For the last decade I have taught the course "The US War on Terror" to undergraduate students at a large public university in the United States and at an elite private university in Beirut, Lebanon. Although the student demographics of these two institutions of higher education could not be more different, I have noticed some strikingly similar student attitudes toward the War on Terror. For most of my students, especially those attending college right after high school, the War on Terror is a fixed reality of everyday life, something that has been a persistent feature during their lifetime and something that will forever endure. These students assume that travelers have always been screened at airports by something like the Transportation Security Administration (TSA) before arriving at their departure gate, that it is natural and usually permissible for the president of the United States to exert unilateral authority to prosecute warfare, that the government regularly collects private information from cell phones and internet searches, and that Muslims played little part in the making of the United States except in recent times as security threats. For my students the War on

Terror is just a part of everyday life; they don't always recognize that things weren't always this way, and that means that they aren't always aware that things *don't have to be* the way they are.

We are at a critical juncture in the world's history, as the global battlefield in the War on Terror continues to impact more and more aspects of our public and private lives within the United States, and as the global scale of violence and misery increases consistently. While my students in the US assume that the War on Terror is something that takes place *over there*, in places about which they often know very little, it is increasingly the case that the War on Terror is staged globally *and* within the US. Not only are American citizens' cell phone records and airport security protocols impacted by the War on Terror, but the state's capacity and willingness to police any protest that seems to challenge the existing political order within the US has become an embedded feature of everyday life. In the name of waging a war on terror, environmental justice activists, Black Lives Matter protesters, and Indigenous water protectors have faced the forces of War on Terror-inspired counterinsurgency warfare. Hence, the War on Terror is not just about vanquishing the perpetrators of the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks on the United States, it is also, and much more so, about securing the global power of the United States and the multinational corporations that US power is meant to secure.

My approach to teaching students about the War on Terror is to deconstruct what we take for granted about the war as it impacts our daily life. This means that I guide students through transforming notions of privacy and security from the 1970s to the present, showing them how public concern over government power has transformed from the Vietnam War and Watergate eras to the present. It is important to demonstrate that the War

on Terror's norms were made at a particular historical conjuncture and that there is an era prior to the current War on Terror when what we take for granted today would have seemed strangely odd and perhaps "un-American." At the same time that I show students how the War on Terror emerged at a particular historical moment, I also seek to challenge the notion that the War on Terror is somehow an exception to an otherwise benevolent era of US military hegemony. For so many of my students, the events of 9/11 (at least in the United States) are an exceptional moment in history that requires an equally exceptional response. I question my students' assumptions about the exceptionality of the US War on Terror by showing how the tactics used throughout the War on Terror have a long past, and in this sense I present the war as having a long history undergirding the structure of US settler colonial formation. What is confounding about the War on Terror is that it is both new and old—it is staged within a new epoch in American imperial culture, but it is continuous with a long history of American national development.

Fighting wars against terrorism has been something of an American pastime. The United States has long justified warfare based on the debasement of supposed enemies who, working outside of the state, are viewed as terrorists. For example, at the dawn of the nation's founding, the state waged war against Indigenous people—"savages" and "terrorists" according to the United States—in the name of manifest destiny and territorial expansion. This first and perhaps continuous war against terrorism at the nation's founding is referred to as the "Indian Wars." During the 1970s, under the framework of the US "War on Drugs," local, state, and federal legislatures passed laws targeting drug dealers and gang members as "street terrorists." In this iteration of a fight

against terrorism, drug dealers, and later gang members, were defined as irrational threats that needed to be vanquished via militarized police power. Around the same time as the War on Drugs, the United States supported “proxy” and “dirty” wars across Latin America in an effort to fight the “terror” of communism and popular democracy. Throughout the dirty wars across Latin America, the terrorist was the “guerrilla” fighter, the anti-colonial “terrorist” communist seeking to undermine liberal democracy. Fighting terrorism is a common rationale for the distribution of US state power domestically and globally.⁵

The challenge in finding a beginning for the US War on Terror is that fighting terrorism and terrorists has been a long feature of US imperial culture, although the figure occupying the role of terrorist, and the actions that characterize terrorism, have changed over time. In the present iteration of the War on Terror, Muslims occupy the role of terrorists, and the consequences in terms of ascendant Islamophobia have been dire on Muslim communities globally. Moreover, the geopolitical contexts within which the United States wages its fights against terrorism have transformed over time. From the expansionist territorial logic of America’s “Indian Wars” to the Cold War struggle to contain communism after World War II, the fight against terrorism has been continuous but executed in pursuit of different ends and in response to different perceived threats. In this way, the figure of the terrorist is a durable image, one that can be assigned to understanding different villains in the context of different historical conjunctures.

How can we account for a war on terror that has a past but that promotes itself as occupying a temporal zone never encountered before? Perhaps the silencing of past wars, of wars on, and of, terror is precisely the meaning of the US War on Terror. The US

War on Terror is a war of memory and meaning (as all wars are), one utilized to explain a particular cultural, geopolitical, and economic moment while repressing, or projecting onto others, previous incidents of US-led state violence. In this way, the War on Terror is something of a palimpsest, drawing on new meanings and memories to cover over the ruins of past violence. Yet, as with all palimpsests, the past is never fully concealed or subjugated, and it frequently emerges in the US War on Terror as something of a haunting. In this book I read the imperial culture of the War on Terror not only in terms of how it helps rationalize the war's military conflicts but also in terms of how it manages, and disavows, the historical realities of US imperialism.

The origin of the contemporary US War on Terror is usually traced to the post-September 11, 2001, war against nonstate actors who targeted US civilians to gain political goals. It is located in Iraq, Afghanistan, and increasingly, in an expanding geography of states across North Africa and the Middle East. And yet the War on Terror summons a wellspring of images and memories that invoke previous wars on terror, previous terrorists, and previous insecurities. In this sense the US War on Terror is a battle involving the unrivaled power of the US empire—its military and security infrastructure—as well as a battle over meanings and memory: it is both a material war with serious geopolitical outcomes, especially for its targets, as well as a discursive battle about the meaning of US empire, the place of America in the world, during a moment when the so-called “American Century,” defined by the Cold War, no longer exists.

War on Terror rhetoric frames the United States as a perpetual victim of violence rather than as the single most influential perpetrator, and justifies its prosecution of warfare as defensive, justified, and indispensable. This is not a new narrative about the

United States; in fact, it echoes the justification for all warfare, beginning with settler colonial wars against Indigenous peoples. As I argue throughout this book, the War on Terror is a contemporary iteration of an older American jeremiad about the indispensability of US global power to a rational world order. This has been the rhetoric of so-called Indian Wars, of Wilsonian Democracy, of the Monroe Doctrine, of the Cold War, to list a few examples. In each previous case, American violence is understood within the United States as occurring in reaction to threats against civilization and in fact necessary to the protection of civilization itself. Moreover, this narrative of American imperial culture not only justifies acts of state violence but also works to conceal past scenes of American imperial violence and settler colonialism while displacing American violence onto others in order to emphasize perpetual American vulnerability and precarity.

Although terrorism and cultural representations of terrorism were not new in September 2001, the spectacle and magnitude of the September 11, 2001, attack on the World Trade Centers in Lower Manhattan and on the Pentagon were watershed events that were understood to rupture time and space. September 11, 2001, became a date that established a pre- and post-9/11 era, with the post-9/11 era being a time when national identity seemed to reconstitute and erase previous and complex events. President George W. Bush would argue that there was a “before 9/11” and an “after 9/11,” and in this way he was successful in prosecuting a violent war against peoples and countries not related to 9/11 (in the case of Iraq, for example) and to be understood as beginning from a temporal and geopolitical “ground zero,” as in a new starting point, a “virgin land,” a “terra nullus.”⁶

Although the War on Terror is continuous with previous settler and imperial wars, the historical conjunctures that animate

the present War on Terror story are different than previous iterations. To put it most succinctly—the War on Terror is the name of American imperial culture in the era of globalization; it recycles long-standing tropes of US imperial culture to explain an epoch when the economy has globalized, precipitating multiple economic and social crises. Understanding the War on Terror requires a discussion of battlefields and their consequences, of revised norms about security and nationalism—it requires a discussion of all of the cultural meanings deployed to justify it—but in order to understand why the War on Terror replaced the Cold War, one has to recognize the importance of the ascendance of globalization on the changing arc of US imperial culture.

The new set of historical circumstances within which the contemporary US War on Terror is executed is, in its most basic form, the era of globalized capitalism. In the wake of the Soviet Union's dissolution, global Northern capitalists implemented an economic order that allowed US-based multinational corporations the ability to sell goods and use labor globally. The consequences of globalization have far-reaching consequences on many sectors of American political, social, and cultural life, including on the sort of US militarism required to sustain it.

Throughout much of the twentieth century, US geopolitical power was understood within the United States as benevolent and necessary for global order. Although politicians would make strenuous arguments about the necessity of US power in places like Southeast Asia, the Korean Peninsula, Latin America, and the Middle East, the cultural meaning of this stance was best articulated in 1941 by the editor of *Life Magazine*, Henry Luce, who argued that the era of American indispensability should be called “the American Century,” one in which American defini-