# INTRODUCTION AFTER 9/11 (2004)

*Chalmers Johnson, Blowback: The Costs and Consequences of American Empire, 2000.*

*In a speech to Congress on September 20, 2001, shortly after the terrorist attacks of September 11, President George W. Bush posed this question: "Why do they hate us?" His answer: "They hate our freedoms -- our freedom of religion, our freedom of speech, our freedom to vote." He commented later that he was amazed "that there's such misunderstanding of what our country is about that people would hate us. . . . I just can't believe it because I know how good we are."*

*But how "good" are we, really? If we're so good, why do we inspire such hatred abroad? What have we done to bring so much "blowjback" upon ourselves?*

*This book is a guide to some of the policies during and after the Cold War that generated, and continue to generate, blowback -- a term the CIA invented to describe the likelihood that our covert operations in other people's countries would result in retaliations against Americans, civilian and military, at home and abroad. Blowback was first published in the spring of 2000, some eighteen months before 9/11. My intention in writing it was to warn my fellow Americans about the nature and conduct of U.S. foreign policy over the previous half-century, focusing particularly on the period after the demise of the Soviet Union in 1991. I argued that many aspects of what the American government had done around the world virtually invited retaliatory attacks from nations and peoples on the receiving end. I did not predict the events of 9/11, but I did clearly state that acts of retaliation were coming and should be anticipated. "World politics in the twenty-first century," I wrote, "will in all likelihood be driven primarily by blowback from the second half of the twentieth century -- that is, from the unintended consequences of the Cold War and the crucial American decision to maintain a Cold War posture in a post-Cold War world."*

*During the first year after its publication, Blowback was largely ignored in the United States. Few of the mainstream book reviews took any notice of it, and the house organ of the Council on Foreign Relations, Foreign Affairs, wrote that "Blowback reads like a comic book."[1] Not surprisingly perhaps, the response elsewhere in the world was somewhat different. The book was quickly translated into German, Italian, and Japanese, and the foreign news editor of Der Spiegel even flew to California to interview me about it.[2]*

*Domestic lack of interest changed dramatically after September 11, 2001. The book was reprinted eight times in less than two months and became an underground bestseller among Americans suddenly sensitized to, or at least desperate to know about, some of the realities of the world in which they lived. The catastrophic events of the first year of the new millennium not only threw an unusual light on the self-proclaimed role of the United States as "indispensable nation" and "last remaining superpower," but also posed serious questions and new dangers for other governments that were suddenly asked whether they were for or against our "war on terror." The term "blowback" went from being an esoteric term of CIA tradecraft to virtually a household word, cropping up in discussions of the multiple disasters that were beginning to assail the United States -- from anthrax attacks on senators, the media, and other targets to Congress's gutting the Bill of Rights through passage of the Patriot Act (by votes of 76 to 1 in the Senate and 337 to 79 in the House). There was also a widespread sense around the world that America had it coming.*

***Blowback***

*Actions that generate blowback are normally kept totally secret from the American public and from most of their representatives in Congress. This means that when innocent civilians become victims of a retaliatory strike, they are at first unable to put it in context or to understand the sequence of events that led up to it. In its most rigorous definition, blowback does not mean mere reactions to historical events but rather to clandestine operations carried out by the U.S. government that are aimed at overthrowing foreign regimes, or seeking the execution of people the United States wants eliminated by "friendly" foreign armies, or helping launch state terrorist operations against overseas target populations. The American people may not know what is done in their name, but those on the receiving end surely do -- including the people of Iran (1953), Guatemala (1954), Cuba (1959 to the present), Congo (1960), Brazil (1964), Indonesia (1965), Vietnam (1961-73), Laos (1961-73), Cambodia (1961-73), Greece (1967-74), Chile (1973), Afghanistan (1979 to the present), El Salvador, Guatemala, and Nicaragua (1980s), and Iraq (1991 to the present), to name only the most obvious cases.*

*In a broader sense, blowback is another way of saying that a nation reaps what it sows. Although individuals usually know what they have sown, they rarely have the same knowledge on a national level, especially since so much of what the managers of the American empire have sown has been kept secret. As a concept, blowback is obviously most easily grasped in its straightforward manifestations. The unintended consequences of American policies and acts in country X lead to a bomb at an American embassy in country Y or a dead American in country Z. Certainly, any number of Americans have been killed in that fashion, from Catholic nuns in El Salvador to tourists in Uganda who just happened to wander into hidden imperial scenarios about which they knew nothing.*

*But blowback is hardly restricted to such reasonably straightforward examples. In its extended sense, it also includes the decline of key American industries because of the export-led economic policies of our satellites, the militarism and arrogance of power that inevitably conflict with our democratic structure of government, and the distortions to our culture and basic values as we are increasingly required to try to justify our imperialism.*

*The term "blowback" first appeared in a classified government document in the CIA's post-action report on the secret overthrow of the Iranian government in 1953. In 2000, James Risen of the New York Times explained: "When the Central IntelligenceAgency helped overthrow Mohammed Mossadegh as Iran's prime minister in 1953, ensuring another 25 years of rule for Shah Mohammed Reza Pahlavi, the CIA was already figuring that its first effort to topple a foreign government would not be its last. The CIA, then just six years old and deeply committed to winning the cold war, viewed its covert action in Iran as a blueprint for coup plots elsewhere around the world, and so commissioned a secret history to detail for future generations of CIA operatives how it had been done. . . . Amid the sometimes curious argot of the spy world -- 'safebases' and 'assets' and the like -- the CIA warns of the possibilities of 'blowback.' The word . . . has since come into use as shorthand for the unintended consequences of covert operations."[3]*

*The attacks of September 11 descend in a direct line from events in 1979, the year in which the CIA, with full presidential authority, began carrying out its largest ever clandestine operation -- the secret arming of Afghan freedom fighters (mujahideen) to wage a proxy war against the Soviet Union, which involved the recruitment and training of militants from all over the Islamic world. Various members of the current Bush cabinet were complicit in generating the blowback of 9/11. Former general CohnPowell certainly knows why "they" might hate us. He was Ronald Reagan's last national security adviser and then chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff during the George H. W. Bush administration. Others include former secretary of defense Dick Cheney, former National Security Council staff official Condoleeza Rice, former Reagan confidant and emissary to Saddam Hussein Donald Rumsfeld, former Pentagon official in both the Reagan and George H. W. Bush*

*administrations Paul Wolfowitz, and many more. Throughout the 1980s, these officials designed and implemented the secret war in Afghanistan and then, after the Soviet Union's withdrawal, made the decision to abandon America's Islamic agents.*

*The USSR's invasion of Afghanistan was deliberately provoked. In his 1996 memoirs, former CIA director Robert Gates writes that the American intelligence services actually began to aid the mujahideen guerrillas in Afghanistan not after the Soviet invasion of that country, but six months before it.[4] And in a 1998 interview with the French weekly magazine  Le Nouvel Observateur, former president Carter's National Security Adviser, Zbigniew Brzezinski, unambiguously confirmed Gates's assertion.[5]*

*"According to the official version of history," Brzezinski told the Nouvel Observateur, "CIA aid to the mujahideen began during 1980, that is to say, after the Soviet army invaded Afghanistan on December 24, 1979. But the reality, closely guarded until now, is completely otherwise: Indeed, it was July 3, 1979, that President Carter signed the first directive for secret aid to the opponents of the pro-Soviet regime in Kabul. And that very day, I wrote a note to the president in which I explained to him that in my opinion this aid was going to induce a Soviet military intervention."*

*When asked whether he regretted these actions, Brzezinski replied:*

> *"Regret what? That secret operation was an excellent idea. It had the effect of drawing the Russians into the Afghan trap and you want me to regret it? The day that the Soviets officially crossed the border, I wrote to President Carter, essentially: 'We now have the opportunity of giving to the USSR its Vietnam War.'"*
>
> *Nouvel Observateur: "And neither do you regret having supported Islamic fundamentalism, which has given arms and advice to future terrorists?"*
>
> *Brzezinski: "What is more important in world history? The Taliban or the collapse of the Soviet empire? Some agitated Moslems or the liberation of Central Europe and the end of the cold war?"*

*Brzezinski, Carter, and their successors in the Reagan administration, including George H. W. Bush, Gates, Cheney, Rumsfeld, Rice, Wolfowitz, Armitage, and Powell -- none of whom has come forward to draw attention to this history -- all bear some responsibility for the 1.8 million Afghan casualties, 2.6 million refugees, and 10 million unexploded land mines that followed from their decisions, as well as the "collateral damage" that befell New York City in September 2001 from an organization they helped create during the years of anti-Soviet Afghan resistance.*

*The CIA supported Osama bin Laden, like so many other extreme fundamentalists among the mujahideen in Afghanistan, from at least 1984 on. In 1986 it built for him the training complex and weapons storage tunnels around the Afghan city of Khost where he trained many of the 35,000 "Arab Afghans." Bin Laden's men constituted a sort of Islamic Abraham Lincoln Brigade of young volunteers from around the Muslim world who wanted to fight on the side of the Afghans against the Soviet Union. In August 1998 on President Bill Clinton's orders, the Khost complex was hit with cruise missiles, in retaliation for bin Laden's attacks that month on the American embassies in Kenya and Tanzania. For once the CIA knew exactly where the targets were, since it had built them.*

*Osama bin Laden, the well-connected, rich young Saudi (he was born around 1957), was well positioned to become a close ally with other friends of the CIA: Prince Turki Bin Faisal, the head of*

*Istakhbarat, the Saudi Intelligence Service, and Lieutenant General Hameed Gul, head of Pakistan's Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI) agency, which America used to funnel money and weapons to the mujahideen in order to maintain a facade of deniability with the Soviet Union. Since 1982, the ISI also took the lead in recruiting radical Muslims to come to Pakistan, receive training, and fight on the Afghan side.*

*It was only after the Russians had bombed Afghanistan back to the stone age and suffered a Vietnam-like defeat, and the United States had walked away from the death and destruction the CIA had helped cause, that Osama bin Laden turned against his American supporters. The last straw as far as he was concerned was the way that "infidel" American troops -- around 35,000 of them -- remained in Saudi Arabia after the first Gulf War to prop up that decadent, fiercely authoritarian regime. Devoutly Muslim citizens of that kingdom saw the troops' presence as a humiliation to the country and an affront to their religion. Dissident Saudis began to launch attacks against Americans and against the Saudi regime itself. In June 1996, terrorists associated with Osama bin Laden bombed the Khobar Towers apartments near Dhahran airport, killing nineteen American airmen and wounding scores more.*

*That same year, the international relations commentator William Pfaff offered the reasonable prediction, "Within 15 years at most, if present American and Saudi Arabian policies are pursued, the Saudi monarchy will be overturned and a radical and anti-American government will take power in Riyadh."[6] Such a course of events has occurred elsewhere many times before -- in Cuba, Vietnam, Iran, Greece, the Philippines, and South Korea, where indigenous peoples fought hard to free themselves from American-backed dictatorships. Yet American foreign policy remained on autopilot, instead of withdrawing from a place where a U.S. presence was only making a dangerous situation worse. Only after the defeat of Iraq in the spring of 2003 did the United States announce that it would withdraw most of its forces from Saydi Arabia. By then, however, the gesture was meaningless. The United States has massive military forces concentrated in nearby Qatar, Kuwait, Bahrain, the United Arab Republics, and Oman, not to mention its newly acquired bases in such Muslim countries as Iraq, Afghanistan, Jordan, Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan, Pakistan, Djibouti, and in territories with large Muslim populations such as Kosovo, Serbia. All of this suggests future blowback against the United States.*

### The Nature of Political Terrorism

*The suicidal assassins of September 11, 2001, did not "attack America," as political leaders and news media in the United States have tried to maintain; they attacked American foreign policy. Employing the strategy of the weak, they killed innocent bystanders, whose innocence is, of course, no different from that of the civilians killed by American bombs in Iraq, Serbia, Afghanistan, and elsewhere. It was probably the most striking instance in the history of international relations of the use of political terrorism to influence events.*

*Political terrorism is usually defined by its strategic objectives. Its first goal is normally to turn those domestic or international conditions terrorists perceive to be unjust into unstable revolutionary situations. To a wavering population, terrorist acts are intended to demonstrate that the monopoly of force exercised by incumbent authorities can be broken. The essential idea is to disorient that population "by demonstrating through apparently indiscriminate violence that the existing regime cannot protect the people nominally under its authority. The effect on the individual is supposedly not only anxiety, but withdrawal from the relationships making up the established order of society."[7]*

*Of course, such a strategy rarely works as intended: it usually has the opposite effect of encouraging people to support any strong reassertion of authority. That was indeed what happened within the*

*United States following the attacks of September 11, but not necessarily throughout the Islamic world, where the terrorists' objective of displaying America's vulnerabilities and destabilizing the world of the advanced capitalist nations was all too effective.*

*A second strategic objective of revolutionary terrorism is to provoke ruling elites into a disastrous overreaction, thereby creating widespread resentment against them. This is a classic strategy, and when it works, the impact can be devastating. As explained by Carlos Marighella, the Brazilian guerrilla leader whose writings influenced political terrorists in the 1960s and 1970s, if a government can be provoked into a purely military response to terrorism, its overreaction will alienate the masses, causing them to "revolt against the army and the police and blame them for this state of things."[8] The second Palestinian Intifada of 2000-03 illustrates the dynamic: terrorist attacks elicited powerful and disproportionate Israeli military reactions that led to an escalating cycle of more attacks and more retaliation, completely militarizing relations between the two peoples.*

*In our globalizing world, the masses alienated by such overreactions may be anything but domestic. The bombing of Afghanistan that the United States launched on October 7, 2001, inflicted great misery on many innocent civilians, a pattern repeated in Iraq, where the death toll of civilians as of August 2003 stood at well over 3,000, a figure that informed observers think may go as high as 10,000 as more evidence is collected.[9] Altogether, instead of acting to resolve the post 9/11 crisis, the United States exacerbated it with massive military assaults on Afghanistan and Iraq, two ill-advised and unnecessary wars that inflamed passions throughout the Islamic world and repelled huge majorities in every democratic country on earth.*

### *Afghanistan and Iraq*

*The two wars that the United States launched preemptively were the pet projects of special interest groups that used the attacks of 9/11 as a cover to hijack American foreign policy and implement their private agendas. These interest groups include the military industrial complex and the professional armed forces, close American supporters of and advisers to the Likud Party in Israel, and neoconservative enthusiasts for the creation of an American empire. This latter group, concentrated in right-wing, foundations and think tanks in Washington D.C., is composed of "chicken-hawk" war lovers (that is, soi-disant military strategists with no experience of either the armed forces or war) who seized on the national sense of bewilderment after 9/11 to push the Bush administration into conflicts that were neither relevant to nor successful in destroying al-Qaeda. Instead, the wars accelerated the recruitment of more suicidal terrorists and promoted nuclear proliferation in countries hoping to deter similar preemptive attacks by the United States. Two years after 9/11, America is unquestionably in greater danger of serious terrorist threats than it has ever been before.*

*The Afghan and Iraq wars resulted in easy American victories, but both soon reerupted as guerrilla struggles of attrition. Experience has shown that high-tech armed forces, such as those of the United States, are inappropriate, overly blunt instruments against terrorists and guerrillas. What was called for was international police cooperation to hunt down the terrorists and changes in foreign policy to separate militant activists from their passive supporters, whose grievances need to be addressed. The objective should have been to turn supporters into informers against the militants, thereby allowing them to be identified and captured. Serious high-level intelligence efforts against organizations like al-Qaeda and intelligence sharing with other services that may have greater access or capabilities than our own are also important in this context, as are collaborative efforts to interrupt financing of terrorist activities and prevent money laundering.*

*Instead, in the wake of 9/11, the United States came up with a particularly cynical and destructive strategy. It sent CIA agents to Afghanistan with millions of dollars to bribe the same warlord armies*

*that the Taliban had defeated to reopen the civil war, promising them air support in their new offensive. The warlords, with a bit of help from the United States, thus overthrew the Taliban government and soon returned to their old ways of regional exploitation. Afghanistan descended into an anarchy comparable to that which prevailed before the rise of the ruthless but religiously motivated Taliban. The propaganda apparatus of the Pentagon claimed a stupendous U.S. victory in Afghanistan, but, in fact, leaders of the Taliban and al-Qaeda escaped and the country quickly became an even more virulent breeding ground for terrorists.*

*In the first year after Afghanistan's "liberation," the production of opium, heroin, and morphine, controlled by America's warlord allies, increased 18-fold, from 185 to 3,400 tons. Even British prime minister Tony Blair admitted in January 2003 that 90 percent of the heroin consumed in Britain came from Afghanistan.[10] Previously vacillating supporters of terrorists have been drawn into militant organizations. Muslim governments that in the past have cooperated with the United States, especially Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Indonesia, and Pakistan, are facing growing internal dissent. In most of the world, the spectacle of the world's richest and most heavily armed country using its air power against one of the world's poorest quickly eroded the moral high ground accorded to the United States as the victim of the September 11 attacks. Our "preventive wars" insured that Afghans, Iraqis, and their supporters will have ample motives long into the future to kill any and all Americans, particularly innocent ones, just as the American military slaughtered their civilians with its "shock and awe" bombing campaigns against which there is no defense.*

*The war with Iraq that followed the Afghan conquest had even less justification and subverted the system of international cooperation that the United States had worked since World War II to create. Immediately following 9/11, American leaders began to fabricate pretexts for an invasion of Iraq. These were then uncritically disseminated by American print and television media, leading a majority of Americans to believe that Saddam Hussein was an immediate threat to their own safety and that he had personally supported al-Qaeda in its attacks of 9/11. Since there was no evidence for any of these propositions, the American public formed its impressions based on stories planted by the president and his followers and then endlessly repeated and embellished by complicit journalists and networks.*

*The United States will feel the blowback from this ill-advised and poorly prepared military adventure for decades. The war has already had the unintended consequences of seriously fracturing the Western democratic alliance; eliminating any potentiality for British leadership of the European Union; grievously weakening international law, including the charter of the United Nations; and destroying the credibility of the president, vice president, secretary of state, and other officials as a result of their lying to the international community and the American people. Most important, the unsanctioned military assault on Iraq communicated to the world that the United States was unwilling to seek a modus vivendi with Islamic nations and was therefore an appropriate, even necessary, target for further terrorist attacks.*

*History has shown that the most important virtue in the conduct of international relations is prudence -- being cautious and discreet in actions, circumspect and sensible in what one says, suspicious of ideology, and slow to jump to conclusions. During the Cold War, the superpower confrontation imposed a high degree of caution on both sides. A mistake by one party was certain to be exploited by the other, and both the United States and the USSR knew how readily the other would take advantage of impetuous and poorly thought-out policies. After 1991 and the collapse of the USSR, the United States no longer felt this pressure and seemed to lose all sense of prudence. For example, President George H. W. Bush kept a tight leash on the same ideological and inexperienced neoconservatives who, in his son's administration, have been given free rein. This loss of common sense guarantees an even more lethal era of blowback than America's policies during the Cold War*

*have already generated.*

**The United States and East Asia**

*The preoccupation of the United States after 9/11 has been primarily with the Islamic world. Yet East Asia remains an area of great, perhaps even greater, concern. The richest satellites of the United States are Japan and South Korea, but they are anything but firm within the American orbit. In December 2002, the Pew Research Center conducted a survey of national attitudes in forty-two countries. A stunning 44 percent of South Koreans were found to hold unfavorable views of the United States, exceeding France's 34 percent and Germany's 35 percent. A Korean Gallup Poll conducted around the same time found that some 53.7 percent of South Koreans held "unfavorable" and "somewhat unfavorable" views of the United States. This group included upwards of 80 percent of the college students polled.[11]*

*In Japan's poorest prefecture, the tiny island of Okinawa, some thirty-eight American military bases are located under terms of the 1960 Japanese-American Security Treaty, and revolt against our military presence is endemic. As I discuss in this book, the situation in Okinawa is as volatile as that surrounding the Berlin Wall in 1989: when the inevitable anti-American explosion occurs, it is likely to unravel the entire U.S. presence in East Asia, just as the breaching of the Berlin Wall brought down the whole edifice of Soviet satellites in Eastern Europe.*

*Elsewhere in East Asia, the United States has repeatedly interfered in the domestic affairs of Indonesia, the world's largest Islamic nation. The Pew survey cited above found that whereas in 2000, some 75 percent of Indonesians said that they had a favorable opinion of the United States, by 2003, 83 percent said that they had an unfavorable opinion. Despite Indonesia's long tradition of a relaxed and heterodox approach to religion, outrage against America's arrogant and racist attitudes toward Muslims has started to turn the country toward Islamic fundamentalism and militancy.[12] This is a potential disaster for the United States.*

*Despite the salience of Islamic terrorism against the United States, the two superpowers of East Asia, China and Japan, as well as the militarized standoff between the United States and North Korea, are likely to matter more in the early decades of the twenty-first century. China is the fastejt growing economy on earth, capitalist in orientation but not a demofifi-ffl (refuting a cherished tene^ofj\mejr^^ inevitably go together) China has a highly educated population four times larger than that of the United States and is the only nation on earth that has the potential to defend itself militarily against the United States. A Sino-American war would be an even more catastrophic rerun of the Vietnam War.*

*Japan remains a manufacturing powerhouse despite being trapped for over a decade in a political and economic malaise caused partly by its docile subservience to the United States. North Korea is one of three nations, along with Iraq and Iran, that President Bush identified as members of an "axis of evil" in his 2002 State of the Union address. Although Bush insisted that Saddam Hussein had nuclear weapons, he did not; whereas North Korea does, as well as the missiles with which to deliver them. This book, in part, surveys the blowback that has already come from the Western Pacific region in the past and that is almost certain to follow in the future.*

*The Wages of Imperialism*

*Since 9/11, the number of significant terrorist incidents has grown and increased in intensity. These include the attempt on December 22, 2001, by Richard Reid, a British citizen, to blow up a Miami-bound jet using an explosive device hidden in his shoe; the bombing on October 12, 2002, of a nightclub in Bali, Indonesia, killing 202 vacationers, most of them Australians; the May 13, 2003,*

*explosions at three residential compounds and the offices of an American defense contractor in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia; the killings three days later, on May 16, 2003, of some 33 people at a restaurant and Jewish community center in Casablanca, Morocco; the use of a car bomb on August 5, 2003, to attack the new Marriott Hotel, a symbol of American imperialism, in Jakarta, the Indonesian capital; the deaths of atTeast 19 people in an explosion at the Jordanian Embassy in Baghdad, August 7, 2003; and the blowing up of the United Nations compound in Baghdad on August 19, 2003, killing Sergio Vieira de Mello, the secretary general's special representative, and many others. There have also been numerous assassinations of American officials and business people around the world and 184 American service personnel died in Iraq in the six months since May 1, 2003, when Presi-dent Bush ostentatiously declared that the war was over.13*

*Beyond terrorism, the danger I foresee is that we are embarked on a path not so dissimilar from that of the former Soviet Union a little more than a decade ago. It collapsed for three reasons -- internal economic contradictions, imperial overstretch, and an inability to reform^ In every sense, we were by far the wealthier of the two Cold War superpowers, so it will certainly take longer for similar afflictions to do their work. But it is nowhere written that the United States, in its guise as an empire dominating the world, must go on forever. The blowback from the second half of the twentieth century has only just begun.*

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*Cardiff, California*
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