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Politics

Deranging consequences of 9/11

REVIEW BY MARTIN AMIS

STATE OF DENIAL

by **Bob Woodward**

Simon & Schuster, £18.99; 576pp

GEORGE W. BUSH HAS prevailed in two general elections because, very broadly, male voters feel that he's the kind of guy "you can have a beer with". Whereas in fact George W. Bush is the kind of guy you can't have a beer with, under any circumstances: as they say at AA, he has come to treasure his sobriety. You can have a beer with John Kerry and Al Gore; and you can have a beer with Bush Sr and Bill Clinton (and pretty well all the others, including George Washington). But you can't have a beer with Bush Jr.

Bush Sr's mucker and soulmate, Brent Scowcroft, was surprised by Bush Jr's ascendancy. "As best Scowcroft could calculate," writes Bob Woodward, "George W. Bush didn't know who he was until he was about 45. And now he was President?" Five years later, old Brent sadly contemplates Bush Sr, who is "anguished" and "tormented" by the Iraq War and its aftermath. "Condi is a disappointment, isn't she?" says Bush Sr wanly (loath to blame his boy). "She's not up to the job." As for the other key players, Cheney seems unrecognisable ("It's a chorus. 'We don't know this Dick Cheney.'"); and Rumsfeld dependably remains "a wholly negative force".

And what about the inner inner circle — Laura? Every six weeks she has a session with Andy Card (Chief of Staff, since resigned). "I can't talk about that," says Card, when pressed for information on Iraq. "Well, he won't tell me either," says Laura. On weekends at Camp David, Laura takes long walks with Condi, so we may be sure she knows what's what. "He's happy with this," the first lady tells Card, referring to the first gentleman, "but I'm not. I don't know why he's not upset with this."

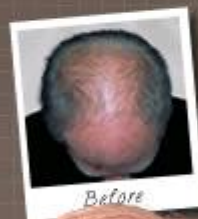
Is Bush "upset with this"? Or is he the only human being in the Western world who is "happy with this"? Psychohistorians have identified two internal mechanisms that allow us to live, for a while, with an unendurable truth: numbing (whereby the self is drained of affect), and also doubling (whereby the self divides into the ventricle that knows and the ventricle that doesn't). Bush isn't doubling. What he seems to be doing is bubbling: isolated from all discordant counsel, he has swaddled himself in "unshakeable conviction". The best reason for going into Iraq, in 2003, was to help bring about the


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healing of its people — a people often referred to in these pages as “an abused child”, “a traumatised child”. And what have we done to that child? As its new guardian, Bush can’t not know what he has done to that child.

One of the many deranging consequences of September 11 was the reification of American power. Until that date, “US hegemony” was largely a matter of facts and figures, of graphs and pie-charts. Thereafter it became a matter of options and capabilities, of war plans cracked out on the President’s desk. We can understand the afflatus, the rush of blood, in the White House: overnight, demonstrably and palpably, a tax-cutting dry drunk from West Texas became the most powerful man in human history. One wonders, nowadays, how it goes with Bush, in his glands and sinews. Post-September 11, he had the body language of the man in the bar who isn’t going anywhere till he has had his fistfight. Now he looks washed, rinsed, bleached, his flat smile an awful rictus; that upper lip has lost all its lift.

Students of history are aware that illusion — or, if you prefer psychopathology — plays a part in shaping world events. It is always a heavy call on human fortitude to acknowledge that such a thing is happening before our eyes, in broad daylight and full consciousness. On the opposing side we see illusion in its rawest form: murderous fanaticism. On ours, we see a vertiginous power-rush followed by a vacuum, and then a drift into helplessness and self-hypnosis. That vacuum was itself reified after the fall of Baghdad, when the plunder began and the soldiers stood and watched, and it slowly emerged that there was no policy for the peace. Then came a dual disintegration, like that of the twin towers: the collapse of the authority of the state, and the collapse of the value of human life.

In his two previous books on the foreign policy of the current administration, Woodward deployed his main journalistic strength — privileged access. *Bush at War* (Afghanistan) and *Plan of Attack* (the Iraq invasion) were the blushing beneficiaries of Washingtonian hubris, with all the key players queuing up to boast and gloat. In *State of Denial*, Woodward slinks through a tight-mouthed pall of failure. He gets a couple of creepy afternoons with Rumsfeld, but now the information is coming his way at one remove, if not two. If there is to be a further book, say in 2008, one fears that Woodward will be reduced to grilling the interns.

Still, we get a pretty fair idea of how it all happened. The dynamic was unanimity of belief: the establishment, by ideological filtration, of a yes-man’s land. Talented experts with dissenting views were sidelined: “Rumsfeld said that they needed people who were truly committed and who had not written or said things that were not supportive.” And so on, system-wide, in an atmosphere of feud and grudge, of tantrums and bollockings. In these pages, Powell, Rice and Rumsfeld are seen to agree on only one proposition: that the US Government is fundamentally “dysfunctional”. Woodward’s only real bombshell is the following: “If we get somebody (an enemy combatant) and we can’t get them to co-operate, we’ll hand them over to you.” That’s Bush to Prince Bandar of Saudi Arabia on September 13, 2001.

Two misleadingly comical anecdotes reveal the abysmal depths of coalition unpreparedness. Having allowed the dispersed Iraqi army to stay dispersed, the American viceroy started building a new one, catchily called the NIC (or New Iraqi Corps). It was pointed out, after a while, that this was the Arabic equivalent of calling it the FUQ. Similarly, when Frank Miller of the National Security Council joined a Humvee patrol in Baghdad (March 2004) he was heartened to see

that all the Iraqi children were giving him the thumbs-up sign, unaware that in Iraq the thumb (shorter yet chunkier) does duty for the middle digit.

But it may be that the Bush miscalculation was more chronological than geographical. In his sternly compelling book, *The Shia Revival*, Vali Nasr suggests that the most momentous consequence of the Iraq adventure is the ignition of the Muslim civil war. Not the one between moderate and extreme Islam, which is already over, but the one between the Sunni and the Shia, which has been marinating for a millennium. We can say, with the facetiousness of despair, that it's just as well to get this out of the way; and let us hope it is merely a Thirty Years' War, and not a Hundred Years' War. After that, we can look forward to a Reformation, followed, in due course, by an Enlightenment. Democracy may then come to the Middle East, with Iraq, in the words of one staffer (a month into the invasion), as the region's "cherished model".

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