



Written by [Jack Kenny](#) on September 11, 2011

## Has Anything Changed Since the 9/11 Attacks?

Americans displayed a respect for government that had been rarely seen since World War II. Politicians who had been winning elections by trumpeting their disdain for "big government" bureaucracies led the charge for creating a vast new cabinet-level Department of Homeland Security encompassing nearly two dozen agencies in more than 50 locations throughout the nation's capital. And with a minimum of groaning and grumbling, a people whose Constitution forbids "unreasonable searches and seizures" accepted airport security measures that banned nail clippers and shampoo from carry-on luggage and even required passengers to remove their shoes enroute to the terminal gates. The USA PATRIOT ACT, significantly increasing the power of the government to snoop and spy on our citizens, was adopted overwhelmingly in the House and passed in the Senate by a vote of 99-1.



But it didn't take long for all that good will and unity of purpose to dissipate. George W. Bush skillfully assembled and led a coalition of nations to topple the Taliban regime that had harbored the al-Qaeda in Afghanistan, where Osama bin Laden resided. But Bush soon made it clear he had other targets and other regimes in his sights. Within a few short months of September 11, the President called out Iraq, Iran, and North Korea as the "axis of evil" in his State of the Union address of January 2002. Each of those nations was ruled by a corrupt dictatorship, and each was believed to be pursuing the development of nuclear weapons. But in what sense they constituted an "axis" was never clear. Iran and Iraq had been bitter antagonists, at war with each other during much of the 1980s. Neither was closely tied to North Korea. And none of them had anything to do with the terrorist attacks of 9/11. And none of that mattered.

To be fair, neither Bush nor others in his administration said Iraq was involved in the 9/11 attacks. They just kept bringing up 9/11 when talking about the threat that Iraq allegedly posed. Because of the experience of 9/11, the argument went, we dared not allow "weapons of mass destruction" to remain in the hands of a "rogue" nation like Iraq, already hostile toward American and the coalition of nations that had driven its army out of Kuwait a decade earlier. And according to officials, there could be no doubt that Saddam Hussein had such weapons. We not only knew of the weapons, "We know where they are," Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld confidently assured viewers in a network television interview.



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Who knows? Perhaps war might have been averted if the interviewer, instead of merely accepting that assertion at face value, had handed the Defense Secretary a cellphone and suggested that he call the UN weapons inspectors in Iraq and tell *them* where the WMD were, since they had been back in the country for a few months by then and hadn't found them. Neither were they found after the United States and allied forces moved in and occupied Iraq.

But the propaganda had achieved its purpose. Congress had adopted a policy of seeking "regime change" in Iraq during the Clinton administration, but had not authorized war as the means. Rumsfeld was one of the signers of a January 26, 1998 letter to President Clinton urging him to take "military action as diplomacy is failing." With Defense Secretary William Cohen and Secretary of State Madeleine Albright leading the charge, Clinton tried to gin up public support for a war in Iraq, but the public wasn't buying it. President Bush began talking up "regime change" in the first half of 2002. But it wasn't until the public campaign about the alleged weapons of mass destruction began in earnest that the idea of using military force to "disarm" the Iraqi dictator gained popular support.

That was one thing that "changed" since 9/11. But the road to war was being paved long before that fateful day. While assistant Secretary of Defense, Paul Wolfowitz authored a memo in 1992 that called for military action that went beyond protecting American interests. Wolfowitz, who would become Deputy Secretary of Defense under the second President Bush, conceded that "the U. S. cannot become the world's 'policeman,' by righting every wrong," but should nonetheless "retain the preeminent responsibility for addressing selectively those wrongs which threaten not only our interests, but those of our allies or friends, or which could seriously unsettle international relations." In 1996, David Perle, who would later become chairman of the Defense Review Board in the Bush administration, teamed up with Douglas Feith and David Wurmser to produce a policy paper for Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu. Called "A Clean Break: A New Strategy for Securing the Realm," the strategy included "weakening, containing and even rolling back Syria. This effort can focus on removing Saddam Hussein from power in Iraq — an important Israeli strategic objective in its own right. "

Wurmser, a resident scholar with the American Enterprise Institute, went even further, with a call "to strike fatally, not merely disarm, the centers of radicalism in the region — the regimes of Damascus, Baghdad, Tripoli, Teheran and Gaza. That would establish the recognition that fighting either the United States or Israel is suicidal." All that was needed, Wurmser reasoned, was a pretext to "strike fatally" the designated enemies. "Crises can be opportunities," he wrote. In *Where the Right Went Wrong*, Patrick J. Buchanan noted that Wurmser published his war plan on January 1, 2011, nine months before 9/11.

Richard Clarke, Bush's counter-terrorism chief, would later write of his dismay when he arrived at the White House on September 12, 2001 for what he thought would be a round of meetings on terrorist attacks.

Instead I walked into a series of discussions about Iraq. At first I was incredulous that we were talking something other than getting Al Qaeda. Then I realized with a sharp physical pain that Rumsfeld and Wolfowitz were going to take advantage of this national tragedy to promote their agenda about Iraq. Since the beginning of the administration, indeed well before, they had been pressing for war with Iraq.

The Defense Secretary, Clarke wrote, argued that Iraq offered better targets for bombing than Afghanistan did. "At first I thought Rumsfeld was joking. But he was serious and the President did not reject out of hand the idea of attacking Iraq."



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By that time much of the American populace had either forgotten or was vaguely aware that the United States had been bombing Iraq, off and on, for 10 years over violations of the "No-fly zone" and for alleged violations of the cease-fire that ended the Gulf War. Secretary Albright had said in a TV interview in 1996 that maintaining an economic embargo in an effort to bring Saddam to heel was worth the death by disease and malnutrition of, up to that point, half a million Iraqi children. When the abuse and obscene degradation of Iraqi prisoners at Abu Ghraib came to light, columnist Joe Sobran observed, sardonically, that the pictures "threaten to undo all the good will we've so painstakingly built up by bombing Arab cities and starving Arab children."

So nothing has changed since 9/11, save for the fact that with President Obama bringing hope and change to the world, we are now bombing in more countries, making more orphans and widows out of children and wives in Iraq, Afghanistan, Pakistan, Yemen Somalia, Libya — not bad for the winner of a Nobel Peace Prize. We are even bombing people by remote control with something our government has named, with unusual candor, Predator drones. Yet Republicans often fault Obama for not being tough and militaristic enough, especially when a day goes by that we haven't threatened to obliterate Iran over its nuclear program, or at least warn the Iranians to stop "meddling" in the affairs of their good neighbor, Iraq.

Things haven't changed in that regard since Harry Truman took America to war in Korea without so much as a "by your leave" to the Congress of the United States. It hasn't changed since Lyndon Johnson used a phony, trumped up "incident" in the Gulf of Tonkin to go to war in Vietnam. Nothing has changed since the first President Bush launched our first war with Iraq to strengthen the United Nations and establish a "new world order."

As for the assault on constitutional liberties — the spying on Americans, the "monitoring" of phone calls and electronic messages, the indefinite detention, without charges or trial of people designated "enemy combatants," regardless of whether they had even picked up a weapon or been near a battlefield — well that, too, is a part of the legacy of what historian Harry Elmer Barnes long ago called "permanent war for permanent peace." In the early days of the Cold War, a brilliant young journalist wrote that it was necessary for Americans to "accept Big Government for the duration — for neither an offensive nor a defensive war can be waged, given present government skills, except through the instrument of a totalitarian bureaucracy within our shores."

That essay, published by the Catholic magazine *Commonweal* in 1952, was penned by William F. Buckley, destined to a conservative icon. Nearly 60 years later, it does not appear that "present government skills" at fighting offensive or defensive wars have improved to the point where liberty can co-exist with them. Technological advances aside, it's not at all likely that government skills have improved since James Madison warned:

"No nation could preserve its freedom in the midst of continual warfare."

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