

# Nationalism, Lies, and the Erosion of Trust: The Post-9/11 American Identity

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## ABSTRACT

In the aftermath of the September 11th, 2001 attacks, American national identity underwent a dramatic transition from one of optimism amid domestic stability to one of division and eroding government trust. This shift was driven by factors including the Bush administration's fabrication of evidence for the invasion of Iraq and its sanctioning of torture at Abu Ghraib and Guantánamo Bay, both of which contributed to significant disillusionment and shattered the public trust that had surged in the weeks after 9/11. This paper traces the shifting of America's national identity through the early 2000s, summarizing and analyzing existing literature on topics including the Patriot Act, deceit by the Bush administration to pursue their hawkish goals, the role of the media, state-sanctioned torture operations, and public protest. It concludes that the disillusionment forged during the years-long occupation of Iraq permanently fractured American political identity, contributing to significant political division and the collapse of government trust, both of which persist to the present day.

## INTRODUCTION

At the turn of the 21st century, American life was filled with optimism and domestic stability. The internet was developing, and the Cold War was over. The stock market soared, businesses made large investments for the future, and real income increased substantially ("Economic and Financial Developments"). This era of prosperity largely ended on September 11, 2001, when coordinated terrorist attacks killed thousands, and panic reigned. Broad public support for retaliation turned into an invasion of Iraq in 2003, and a drawn-out war based on lies that further destabilized the Middle East. This led to anti-war protests, significantly impacting the ethos of the 2000s in the United States. In post-9/11 America, an initial surge of nationalism transformed into a national identity marked by disillusionment with the Bush administration and increasing political polarization. While prolonged military engagement and the mounting economic costs of war contributed to declining public support, it was the deliberate government deception and the exposure of state-sanctioned torture that fractured American political trust in ways that persist to the present day.

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## **THE DAY THE TOWERS FELL**

At 8:48 AM on Tuesday, September 11, 2001, a hijacked plane crashed into the North Tower of the World Trade Center, a renowned landmark of New York and the global financial system. Eighteen minutes later, another plane hit the South Tower. A third plane crashed into the Pentagon, and a fourth in rural Pennsylvania (“U.S. Attacked” 1). These attacks incited immediate hysteria in New York City. People hid beneath cars and each other. Many others streamed out of Lower Manhattan to escape the dust and debris. Rescue organizations worked to evacuate Americans from the city. The financial capital of the world had shut down (“U.S. Attacked” 1). US officials, however, acted immediately. Hours after the attacks, President George W. Bush vowed to protect American citizens in the country and around the world with emergency response teams and a prepared military (“George W. Bush’s First Remarks”). The U.S. Armed Forces were “put on the highest state of alert,” and two aircraft carriers were sent to New York harbor (“U.S. Attacked” 1). The “full resources of [American] intelligence and law enforcement communities” were assigned to find those responsible for the tragedy (“George W. Bush’s First Remarks”). Among the American public, grief and fear turned into profound rage at al-Qaeda, the terrorist organization that carried out the deadly suicide attacks.

## **THE PATRIOT ACT: SECURITY OVER LIBERTY**

The 9/11 terrorist attacks prompted widespread American nationalism, calls for military retaliation, and overwhelming trust in Bush's leadership, allowing for a general acceptance of the Patriot Act despite its erosion of privacy rights (Podesta). In his speech on September 11th, President Bush asserted that the attacks on the World Trade Center would not “dent the steel of American resolve” (“George W. Bush’s First Remarks”). Indeed, terrorism on US soil united the country against the perceived heartless killers of the Middle East. This surge in nationalism allowed the Bush administration to pursue aggressive anti-terrorist measures. On October 26th, President Bush signed into law the USA PATRIOT Act, legislation that built on the proposed Omnibus Counterterrorism Act of 1995 (Rosenthal 19). The popular Act greatly expanded permissions for surveillance and intelligence operations. It included provisions that allowed tapping phone lines, tracking citizens, and monitoring computer activity without a warrant (Podesta 3). Despite its apparent privacy violations, the PATRIOT Act was widely supported by the American people. When polled, sixty-nine percent of Americans responded that the Act had been “about right” or had “not gone far enough” with restricting civil liberties. A significant majority believed that the PATRIOT Act was an explicitly “good thing for America.” Seventy-four percent of Americans supported the actions of the Bush administration, and ninety-one percent of Americans asserted that their civil liberties had not been affected by the legislation (“Preserving Life and Liberty”). The Senate also voted unanimously to pass the Authorization for the Use of Military Force (AUMF), which allowed Bush to use

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“all necessary and appropriate force” to respond to the terror attacks. A day later, the House of Representatives passed the resolution 420-1 (Perlez).

The American public’s mandate for retaliation was largely a result of trust in the Bush administration and in the political process in general. The National Election Survey found that American political trust in 2002 was higher than at any other time since the 1960s (Hetherington and Husser 323). Political trust was also directly correlated with support for the war (Hetherington and Husser 319). This connection can be explained by the pervasiveness of pro-war rhetoric shared by members of the Bush administration.

## **HAWKISH DECEPTION: THE WMD MYTH**

President Bush and his administration justified the invasion of Iraq with false claims to support their own preconceptions that Iraq posed an imminent threat to the United States. In the buildup to the US invasion of Iraq in March 2003, key members of the Bush administration lied about the danger posed by Iraq to the world order. President Bush and seven of his top officials made at least 935 false statements in the two years after 9/11 about the threat of Iraqi attack (Lewis and Reading-Smith). Falsehoods told by government officials were so effective that 80% of Americans supported Bush’s handling of Iraq in April 2003 (Roberts).

In July 2003, former ambassador, Iraq expert, and secret envoy to Africa Joseph C. Wilson IV published his findings after a trip to Niger to investigate whether or not Iraq had worked with Niger to acquire nuclear-grade uranium. Despite President Bush’s assertions that Iraq had recently sought uranium from the country, Wilson did not find any evidence of a partnership and publicly voiced doubt about the accusation. Days later, columnist Robert Novak leaked the identity of Wilson’s wife, CIA operative Valerie Plame, to the public, a fact disclosed to him by senior officials in Bush’s administration (Jehl). Though members of the Bush administration had broken the law by revealing the identity of a US spy, and an expert had directly questioned Bush’s justifications, few news organizations released the story, and it faded away amid strong nationalism and political trust (Isikoff).

Public support for the invasion of Iraq was partly galvanized by linking Iraq with terrorism and al-Qaeda. A poll released in April 2004, more than a year after the initial invasion of Iraq, revealed that twenty percent of Americans still believed that Iraq was responsible for the 9/11 attacks despite a complete lack of evidence (Gershkoff and Kushner 533). In reality, it was the 2001 invasion of Afghanistan, not Iraq, that was launched to target al-Qaeda. The majority of the lies, however, pushed the narrative that Iraq was on the verge of creating weapons of mass destruction (WMDs) (Lewis and Reading-Smith).

In September 2002, President Bush told the country that Iraq possessed biological and chemical weapons that could be used against Americans within forty-five minutes of a launch order. He also asserted that Iraq would be able to make a nuclear bomb in less than a year (Lewis and Reading-Smith). Thus, Bush argued that invading Iraq to depose Saddam Hussein, a “homicidal dictator who is addicted to weapons of mass destruction” (Purdum 1), was necessary and completely justifiable given the circumstances. In doing so, President Bush took advantage of the fear and intense nationalism present

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after 9/11 to act on his preconceptions and invade Iraq. Professor James Pfiffner argues that the president “failed to present a balanced or accurate view to Congress and the American people” and therefore “undermined the crucial trust upon which the nation depends” (Pfiffner 45).

Administration members Dick Cheney, Donald Rumsfeld, and Colin Powell made false claims to the public to push the pro-war narrative as well. At a national convention, Vice President Cheney declared that there was “no doubt that Saddam Hussein [had] weapons of mass destruction” to be used “against our friends, against our allies, and against us” (Lewis and Reading-Smith). When asked about the dearth of evidence linking Saddam Hussein to weapons of mass destruction, U.S. Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld gave a meandering reply about “known knowns” and “known unknowns” (“Obituary: Donald Rumsfeld”). In a speech to the UN, foreign policy figure and decorated army general Colin Powell stated that Iraq had a “massive clandestine nuclear-weapons program,” as told to him by “solid intelligence” (Neilan). The messaging was decidedly false, as active stockpiles of WMDs were never discovered in Iraq.

## **MEDIA COMPLICITY: SILENCING DISSENT**

The popular media also did much to spread a pro-war narrative to Americans. The press adopted a “subservient role” (Sahlane 754) by constantly corroborating the rhetoric of the government in an “almost impenetrable din” (Lewis and Reading-Smith). This consistent propagation of Bush’s message aimed to ensure that Americans continued to trust their leader. The media disparaged the anti-war position as well, categorizing activists as ignorant and uncivil, and protests as disorderly, violent, and supported by few (Sahlane 754). For example, NPR reporting from October 26, 2002, emphasized that turnout at a Washington, D.C., protest against a potential Iraq War was “fewer than 10,000”, noting that it was “not as large as the organizers of the protest had predicted.” In reality, the true number was greater than 100,000 people, a fact that NPR conceded after receiving thousands of complaints (“Times, NPR Change Their Take”). Therefore, despite the growing movement against the war, the media attempted to slow the spread of dissent among the masses. Given the stark difference in the coverage of pro-war and anti-war groups, it is not surprising that the country became increasingly divided over the war and its legitimacy.

## **DIVISION AND TORTURE**

Political divisions deepened as millions of Americans protested the misguided and costly invasion of Iraq and Bush's leadership, while others continued to support the president's foreign policy. Despite the president’s May 2003 speech that the mission in Iraq had been “accomplished” and that the war was over, American casualties in Iraq would continue for several more years (Temin). During this time, over two trillion dollars of taxpayer money were spent on the war, and thousands of American lives were lost (“Millions Protest”). Once at eighty percent, US public approval for the Iraq war crossed below fifty percent in January 2004 (Puar). Amid these falling approval ratings, the once united American public

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became increasingly divided over continuing the US presence in Iraq. While most Republicans believed that the war in Iraq would successfully neutralize Iraq and improve living standards for Iraqis, a majority of Democrats saw the war as a costly endeavor that would isolate the US globally while encouraging anti-Americanism in the Middle East (Yankelovich).

News of the acts of torture by American soldiers in Abu Ghraib and Guantánamo Bay shocked the American public and further strengthened the anti-war position. On April 28, 2004, CBS News released photographs taken at the Abu Ghraib prison in Iraq. In these photos, American officers were shown smiling next to tortured Iraqi detainees. This startling juxtaposition sparked shock and outrage in the US, leading many to oppose the war on moral and humanitarian grounds (Hernandez 2). Perhaps the most shocking torture method was the use of homosexual and feminizing sex acts to degrade and dehumanize prisoners. These practices were directly in violation of the Muslim faith practiced by nearly all of the Iraqis (Puar). Scholars such as Hernandez have drawn comparisons between the Abu Ghraib abuses and the public lynchings of freedmen in the Reconstruction South after the US Civil War (Hernandez 2). The only difference is that the torture inflicted in Abu Ghraib was sanctioned by US soldiers and government officials rather than by the KKK, a fringe, white-supremacist hate group. When Vice President Cheney was asked about the barbarous torture methods employed by US forces, he asserted that America would have to “work with the dark side” to fight terrorism. He also suggested that being ruthless was an integral part of the war that would end terrorism and bring peace to the region (“Dick Cheney”).

Conversely, anti-Americanism spread in the Middle East as a result of the United States’s “war of prevention” (Sanger and Burns), and contributed to the rise of the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS). ISIS would later play a central role in the Syrian Civil War that killed hundreds of thousands of Syrians and displaced more than ten million of them (“Syria’s Civil War”). The decision to invade Iraq and the resulting ISIS-led exacerbation of the war in Syria had global effects, too. A mass migration of Syrian refugees to Europe led to a rise of anti-immigrant sentiment on the continent that challenged the idea of open borders in the Schengen Area, and inspired the withdrawal of the United Kingdom from the European Union (“Syria’s Civil War”).

News about human rights violations at a CIA “black site” in Guantánamo Bay, Cuba, did more to prove to Americans that the military was not interested in following the agreed-upon laws of war (Pearlman). The practice of illegal and indefinite detention, unfair trials, and torture in Guantánamo Bay violated the Third Geneva Convention, the Convention Against Torture (CAT), and several other global laws intended to protect human rights in war (Pearlman).

## **DISILLUSIONMENT AND PUBLIC PROTEST**

As Americans learned of the torture taking place in these two American prisons, the public became more disenchanted with the US government. Once seen as moral and democratizing, many denounced US officials as criminals. Protesters specifically condemned President Bush, Dick Cheney, and Donald Rumsfeld. Bush was criticized for distorting available intelligence about Iraq’s WMDs (Lewis and Reading-Smith), Cheney was called “Satan,” “Darth Vader,” and “Machiavellian” for his contributions to

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the pro-war movement (“Dick Cheney”), and Rumsfeld was pressured to quit for his role in the misinformation (“Obituary: Donald Rumsfeld”). In a widely circulated image, the three men were likened to pigs due to their central role in the killing of hundreds of thousands and the displacement of millions (see fig. 1):

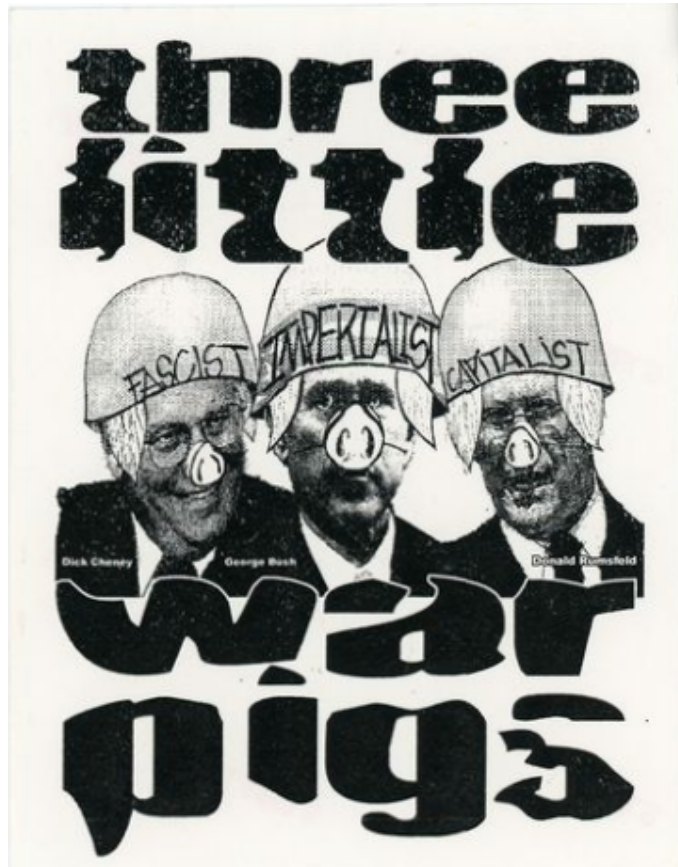


Fig. 1. *Cheney, Bush & Rumsfeld -- Three Little War Pigs*. 2019. Courtesy of the Richard F. Brush Art Gallery, *JSTOR*, <https://jstor.org/stable/community.29571692>. Accessed 14 Nov. 2025.

The image references the children’s story *The Three Little Pigs* to mock the three American officials and portray the Iraq War’s justifications as flimsy and simplistic. On September 15, 2007, thousands of anti-war protesters staged a “die-in” near the US Capitol building in Washington, DC (Boorstein et al.). The protesters, part of a growing group of disillusioned Americans, argued for an immediate end to the war in Iraq and for the impeachment of President Bush and his accomplices (see fig. 2). Thus, the



terrorists who killed thousands of their American countrymen. While an invasion of Iraq was largely supported in 2003, public opinion soon split along party lines. The latter parts of the 2000s were marked by division, protest, and shock at the government's lies and at the atrocities committed by the supposedly moral and just American military. In fact, division and the lack of political trust from this time have never gone away. According to the Pew Research Center, public trust in the government peaked at sixty percent immediately after 9/11. That number plunged during the Iraq War and has continued to decline. Today, just seventeen percent of polled Americans trust the government to do what is right in most or all cases ("Public Trust in Government"). Therefore, the distinct American identity forged during the occupation of Iraq and the Global War on Terrorism as a whole remains a core facet of American society today.

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