

## ALSO IN THIS ISSUE:

***The Junkman's Answer  
to Terrorism: Use  
More Asbestos***  
page 4

***PR Watch Launches Free  
"Weekly Spin" Email News***  
page 7

***Terrorism to End Terrorism***  
page 8

***The Pentagon's  
Information Warrior:  
Rendon to the Rescue***  
page 11

## TERRORISM AS PRETEXT

by Sheldon Rampton

References to Pearl Harbor prevailed during the first days following the terrorist attacks of September 11. President Bush joined a chain of pundits and government officials in warning that the "war on terrorism" would be prolonged and difficult like World War II and would require similar sacrifices. Whatever those sacrifices may entail, however, the public relations industry is determined to ensure that they do not include wartime frugality.

"PR Needed to Keep Consumers Spending," proclaimed a headline in *O'Dwyer's PR Online* on September 24. It cited marketing and PR executive Maureen Lippe's opinion that the "greatest service PR pros can provide in support of the country is to ensure that the consumer continues to buy."

The world's largest public relations firms all have offices in New York and Washington, D.C., and their employees felt the same shock, horror and confusion as the rest of the country when airplanes slammed into the Pentagon and the World Trade Center. Public relations pros joined other volunteers in disaster relief efforts and in raising money for assisting the survivors. America's home-grown propaganda machine nearly ground to a halt for several days as PR firms advised their clients to hold off for awhile on product launches, news releases and story pitches to reporters.

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## FLACK ATTACK

In the aftermath of September 11, there is no question that the United States faces a vicious and determined enemy. Unfortunately, the public relations industry is contributing mostly confusion to the campaign against terrorism.

On the one hand, PR firms have turned September 11 into an excuse to market ideas, causes and products that have nothing to do with stopping terrorism. Patriotism is being used to sell everything from automobiles to Star Wars and corporate tax breaks.

On the other hand, the label of terrorism is being liberally applied to environmentalists, public safety activists, civil libertarians and opponents of economic globalizations—to everyone, in short, who differs politically from the conservative social agenda of the Bush administration. The message seems to be, "If

you are not with the Republicans, you are with the terrorists."

Perhaps worst of all, the PR consultants who are advising the White House in its "war on terrorism" seem determined to obscure rather than clarify the motives behind anti-Americanism, at a time when clarity has never been more important. Some of the Muslim world's grievances against the United States are legitimate, and others are not. None of those grievances justifies the crimes against humanity that were committed by Osama Bin Laden's terror network, but if we wish to prevent terrorists from finding new recruits, we need to understand all of the motives—legitimate and illegitimate alike—that drive people to hate the United States.

In October, Carl Weiser, a Washington correspondent for the Gannett News Service, asked PR and mar-

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Terrorism, however, is more than violence. It is also the ultimate publicity stunt, and it did not take long before advertising and PR executives began to look for ways to use it as the ultimate news hook. Advertisers are using flags and patriotic imagery to sell everything from women's fashions to cigarettes and fast food. Think tanks, lobbyists and Bush administration are using the terrorism as a pretext to justify their long-standing shopping list of bad ideas and corporate welfare measures:

- The early wisdom, according to *O'Dwyer's* editor Kevin McCauley, was that the September 11 attacks had killed President Bush's Star Wars missile defense plan. "A missile defense system — even if it overcame the technical obstacles which have so far proved insurmountable, after billions spent — would have done nothing to stop the September 11 attack," McCauley observed. "Nor would it do anything to stop any other conceivable terrorist attack on the United States, none of which might involve missile delivery systems." Just six days after the attack, however, *O'Dwyer's* reported that defense contractor Boeing had hired Interpublic's Powell Tate PR firm to build support for the \$8.3 billion plan, which "now has gotten new life in aftermath of the terror attacks. ... Some Democrats, who had opposed Star Wars due to technical and budgetary reasons, do not want to oppose Bush during this national time of crisis."
- "US lawmakers are finally moving the return of the three-martini lunch ... to the front of the national agenda," *PR Week* reported with glee on October 15. "Unsure whether the best way to help their country is to offer pro bono work or to send hefty checks to relief agencies, flacks may put themselves to good use by revisiting their glory days, and by being the first to the trough," it joked. "To encourage consumers to spend, spend, spend, Congressional budget-crafting wizards are moving to allow taxpayers to deduct 100% of the cost of a business meal, removing a 1993 restriction that made such meals only 50% tax deductible. ... The motive for the return to government-assisted gluttony is to help the troubled restaurant and hotel industry, and to ease the general business tax burden."
- U.S. Trade Representative Robert Zoellick used the September 11 tragedy to call for fast-track negotiating authority to help President Bush expand the North American Free Trade Act (NAFTA) into a Free Trade Area of the Americas. "Trade is about more than economic efficiency," he wrote in the *Washington Post*. "It promotes the values at the heart of this protracted struggle." In a September 24 speech before the Insti-

tute for International Economics, Zoellick went further, laying the groundwork for a new McCarthyism aimed at anti-globalization dissidents. "Terrorists hate the ideas America has championed around the world," he said. "It is inevitable that people will wonder if there are intellectual connections with others who have turned to violence to attack international finance, globalization and the United States."

- The National Taxpayers Union called for a capital gains tax cut — a tax break that exclusively benefits the wealthy. "By reducing the rate at which capital

## Flack Attack *continued from page one*

keting executives what kind of campaign they would create to convince the Islamic world "that this nation is not the Great Satan, but good and generous." Rather than focus on significant issues of concern to Muslims, however, most of the responses focused on cosmetic concerns. One consultant thought American tourists need to behave more politely when traveling abroad. Jack Bergen, President of the Council of Public Relations Firms, suggested bringing journalists, editors and columnists from the Arab world to the United States so they could appreciate us better. According to Los Angeles consultant Rob Frankel, "This is a branding issue, plain and simple. ... Countries are no different than soap flakes or automobiles." In branding terms, he said, "we should be the gentle giant, not the menacing ogre. Or in corporate terms, we should be Federal Express, not Microsoft."

These ideas are not just shallow and superficial. They are wrong. They do not even begin to address the serious issues that have driven a wedge between the United States and Muslims throughout the world. As the *New York Times* observed in October, "Thousands of words from American officials ... have proved no match for the last week's news, which produced a barrage of pictures of wounded Afghan children and of Israeli tanks rolling into Palestinian villages."

No amount of censorship can stop these images, and no amount of spin-doctoring can replace the need for real action. Unless the United States reaches out in earnest to the disenfranchised majority in the Muslim world, neither the shooting war nor the propaganda war can prevent the terrible events of September 11 from happening again.

gains are taxed, President Bush and Congress could help revitalize the sagging economy and bring new revenues to Washington — decidedly aiding our war against terrorism,” said NTU director of congressional relations Eric Schlecht.

- The Independent Petroleum Association of America (IPAA) used the terror attacks as a pretext to demand that the U.S. Supreme Court override a Clinton Administration decision blocking drilling for oil and natural gas in Montana. “The terrible tragedy of exactly one month ago and the uncertainty as to the reliability of foreign supplies make clear the importance of the United States developing its domestic natural resources,” said William Perry Pendley of Mountain States Legal Foundation, which represents the IPAA.
- The San Diego-based SureBeam Corporation took the opportunity to promote its food irradiation technology as a way to kill anthrax — even though it would take years and untold millions, if not billions, to install irradiation equipment in post offices throughout the United States. Worse yet, “SureBeam has made these claims without any supporting scientific evidence that the company’s ‘electron-beam’ irradiation equipment is capable of killing the anthrax bacteria or its spores,” observed a Public Citizen news release. “In fact, radiation is ineffective against anthrax spores, called ‘endospores,’ which are surrounded by numerous thick layers of material including protein and calcium.”
- The Cato Institute, a libertarian, corporate-funded think tank in Washington, DC, used September 11 as

a cue to carry water for the gun lobby, going so far as to argue that the terrorism problem on airlines could be improved by allowing passengers to carry guns. “Law-enforcement officers can’t be everywhere, but an armed, trained citizenry can be,” stated a Cato news release. “That’s why pilots, flight attendants and even trained passengers should be allowed to carry arms on board aircraft if they want to.” According to Cato staffer Robert Levy, “Armed civilians can deter crime. Armed civilians can mean safer planes, shopping malls, schools, and other public places.”

- Even the board of directors of the Pacifica radio network attempted to play the terrorist card as they faced public criticism from Pacifica’s audience and fired former employees. Charged by critics with engineering a political purge, the board was accused of plunging the Pacifica Foundation into a financial crisis as it faced mounting bills from lawyers and PR firms. Responding to charges of mismanagement, Pacifica vice chairman Ken Ford characterized critics as “zealots,” adding, “I see parallels between this group and al Qaeda, the terrorists who bombed New York. They have an innate anger towards society as a whole.” (Ford’s remarks prompted massive protests from Pacifica listeners, leading to his resignation on October 31, 2001.)

## ENVIRONMENTALISTS SILENCED

These examples of spin-doctoring in the wake of disaster merely continue the public relations rhetoric that was common prior to September 11, with “fighting terrorism” inserted as the new cause of the day. But while

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## THE JUNKMAN'S ANSWER TO TERRORISM: USE MORE ASBESTOS

Steven Milloy, the Cato Institute's self-proclaimed critic of "junk science," took the attacks on the World Trade Center as a cue to speak up for asbestos, which is still a product liability concern for manufacturers even though it was pulled off the market years ago due to its link with lung cancer.

"Asbestos fibers in the air and rubble following the collapse of the World Trade Center is adding to fears in the aftermath of Tuesday's terrorist attack," Milloy wrote in a September 14 column for Fox News. "The true story in the asbestos story, though, is the lives that might have been saved but for 1970s-era hysteria about asbestos." He went on to speculate that asbestos insulation might have delayed the steel framework of the building from melting "by up to four hours."

Milloy's column inspired a similar piece in the *Times* of London, followed by a *New York Times* story that said "some engineers and scientists are haunted by a troubling question: were the substitute materials as effective in protecting against fire as the asbestos containing materials they replaced?"

The only individuals quoted to support this theory, however, were scientists who had previously worked as paid expert witnesses for the asbestos industry during product liability lawsuits filed by cancer victims. None of these experts had actually done research comparing asbestos to other heat-resistant insulating materials in the event of a plane crash like the one that destroyed the World Trade Towers, and in fact there is no scientific evidence whatsoever to support the claim that asbestos would have delayed the collapse of the towers by even five seconds, let alone four hours.

It may be some time before anyone can assess the health consequences of the asbestos that was released into the air of New York following the terrorist attack. Asbestos was used in the first 40 floors of the World Trade Towers and ended up in the ash which covered the streets of the city and contaminated the air around lower Manhattan after the towers collapsed. Emergency personnel and others at the scene wore surgical style masks during the relief effort, but many

said that even with the masks, breathing was very difficult amid the choking, acrid smoke and dust blanketing the area.

Like Milloy, the industry-funded American Council on Science and Health (ACSH) went to pains to downplay the hazard. "Some activists are raising concerns about very low levels of asbestos in the air in Downtown Manhattan since the WTC tragedy," commented an ACSH news release.

The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency reported initially that its air tests found low levels of asbestos near the disaster, but a subsequent study by independent researchers found that the EPA tests did not detect all of the asbestos that was released.

"The study, by the Virginia firm HP Environmental, found that the force of the explosions apparently shattered the asbestos into fibers so small that they evade the EPA's ordinary testing methods," reported *Newsweek* on October 5. "The EPA tests for asbestos particles greater than a half micron in size. . . . But the study concluded that there is such an overwhelming concentration of those ultrasmall particles that many are being missed by standard microscopy techniques. 'This stuff was just crushed, just pulverized,' says lead author Hugh Granger. 'As it turns out, when we now measure and look for these very small fibers in the air and buildings, we find them, and we find them in uniquely elevated concentrations.'"

Some evidence suggests that ultrasmall asbestos particles may actually pose a worse health threat than larger particles. Smaller particles tend to remain suspended in the air where they can be inhaled, and they may penetrate more easily into the depths of the lungs. "We probably will find out a lot more about the health aspects of asbestos from this event, unfortunately," said Dr. Alan Fein, chief of pulmonary and critical-care medicine at North Shore-Long Island Jewish Health System, who has treated several patients for "World Trade Center syndrome": respiratory distress stemming from relatively brief exposures of a day or two near the collapsed buildings.

corporate lobbyists have returned quickly to business as usual, environmentalists and other activist groups are still struggling to rediscover their voice.

The Sierra Club, America's oldest environmental organization, responded to September 11 with a unilateral ceasefire in its battles against the Bush Administration's anti-environmental policies. "In response to the attacks on America," stated a Sierra Club memorandum,

"we are shifting our communications strategy for the immediate future. We have taken all of our ads off of the air; halted our phone banks; removed any material from the web that people could perceive as anti-Bush, and we are taking other steps to prevent the Sierra Club from being perceived as controversial during this crisis. For now we are going to stop aggressively pushing our agenda and will cease bashing President Bush."

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In the aftermath of the terrorist attacks, Kimberley Strassel, a features editor at the *Wall Street Journal*, proclaimed with satisfaction that the attacks had pulled the rug out from under “America’s liberal activist groups — the environmental radicals, the animal-rights protesters, the archfeminists and the antiglobalization protestors. The indulgent world in which these groups had operated collapsed on Sept. 11. Most found themselves floundering for a message and scratching for funds; all are facing the realization that a decade of shenanigans may be over.”

Environmental groups are worried that the public policy agenda has been radically altered so that environmental issues will have a hard time receiving even passing attention. Topics such as energy conservation have been noticeably missing from public discussions of strategies needed for America to achieve energy self-reliance. Patriotism and self-sacrifice may be the rhetoric of the day, but apparently self-sacrifice cannot be allowed to include giving up gas-guzzling SUVs.

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***Conservative commentator Michael Fumento coined the term “tampon terrorism” to attack women’s groups that have raised concern about dioxin in chlorine-bleached tampons. At Reason magazine, tobacco industry apologist Jacob Sullum has used the term “tobacco terror.”***

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In fact, the Bush administration’s energy plan, based on fossil fuels and nuclear energy, makes America more vulnerable to terrorist attack than decentralized, environmentally sustainable energy sources such as wind power or rooftop solar energy systems. Russian security services have already warned the United States that the next terrorist target will likely be a nuclear reactor. Most nuclear reactors have been designed to withstand the crash of only a small aircraft. The crash of a jumbo jet like the ones that slammed into the World Trade Center and the Pentagon could release a deadly cloud of radioactivity that could cover a region the size of Pennsylvania.

As Derrick Jackson observed in the *Boston Globe*, “It is more than a bit ironic that we are at war in a region of the world where the politics of oil lay barely beneath the surface yet we insist on driving ourselves to our lowest fuel efficiency in 20 years. In its annual report on what cars get in miles per gallon of gasoline, the Environ-

mental Protection Agency revealed that this nation, despite all its ancillary angst over having to make friends with undemocratic Islamic regimes of the Middle East in the hunt for Osama bin Laden, has chosen dependency over sacrifice. Our addiction to sport utility vehicles has dropped the efficiency of America’s fleet of passenger cars to 24 miles per gallon, nearly 2 miles per gallon less than in 1988. The percentage of oil that we import has reached an all-time high of 54 percent. Two thirds of our oil consumption goes toward transportation. Americans now burn up 4 million imported barrels of oil a day. The bill for that oil is \$2 billion a day.”

Meanwhile, conservative think tanks such as the National Center for Policy Analysis have used the terrorist attacks as a pretext to renew calls for oil drilling in the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge, arguing that drilling in Alaska would “reduce our dependence on oil from distant lands. ... It is time to choose: our national security, or marginally protecting sea birds and otters.”

“There is no doubt that at this time of national emergency, an expedited energy-security bill must be considered,” said Alaska Senator Frank Murkowski in a call to open up the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge to oil drilling. “Opening ANWR will be a central element in finally reducing this country’s dangerous overdependence on unstable foreign sources of energy,” he said.

### **YOU, TOO, MAY BE A TERRORIST**

Even before September 11, corporate spin doctors were engaged in an ongoing effort to demonize environmentalists and other activist groups by associating them with terrorism. One striking indicator of this misguided preoccupation with environmentalists is the fact that Colorado Rep. Scott McInnis had scheduled congressional hearings on “eco-terrorism” to be held on September 12, one day after Congress itself was nearly destroyed in an attack by *real* terrorists. (The September 11 attacks forced McInnis to temporarily postpone his plans, rescheduling his hearings until February.)

As early as 1991, a leaked memo from the Ketchum PR firm outlined contingency plans to protect the image of Clorox by launching an ad campaign with the slogan, “Stop Environmental Terrorism.” Ron Arnold’s Center for the Defense of Free Enterprise has been tossing around the term “eco-terrorism” for years, defining it as “any crime committed in the name of saving nature,” which “includes but is not limited to crimes officially designated as ‘terrorism’ by the Federal Bureau of Investigation.” Arnold’s definition of “eco-terrorism” is so broad that it even includes activities such as sit-ins, trespassing and other forms of peaceful civil disobedience.

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Elizabeth Whelan at the industry-funded American Council on Science and Health also uses the word “terror” to stigmatize activist groups. In her book, *Toxic Terror: the Truth Behind the Cancer Scare*, she attacks what she calls “the bad news syndrome” regarding pesticides and chemical contaminations of food and the environment. She has also coined the phrase “mouse terrorism” to ridicule animal tests used to assess product safety, calling such tests a “philosophy of ‘mouse terrorism,’ which sees a human health threat in any substance that causes cancer in rodents at extremely high doses.”

Michael Fumento, another prolific conservative commentator, coined the term “tampon terrorism” to attack women’s groups that have raised concern about dioxin in chlorine-bleached tampons. At *Reason* magazine, tobacco industry apologist Jacob Sullum has used the term “tobacco terror.”

Eric Dezenhall of the Nichols-Dezenhall PR firm refers to people who spread hostile rumors about his clients as “cyberterrorists” and advocates an aggressive strategy of attacking corporate critics. “Despite its sexy sheen, the real power of animal rights remains in terror,” Dezenhall stated in his 1999 book, *Nail ‘em! Confronting High-Profile Attacks on Celebrities and Businesses*. In a section of the book titled “Victims Groups as Cultural Terrorists,” Dezenhall lashed out at “attackers ... who use nonviolent terror to accomplish their goals.” What is “nonviolent terror”? Dezenhall was referring to “organized ‘Multiple Chemical Sensitivity’ (MCS) activists” who “intimidate doctors and research institutions that won’t diagnose MCS and other boutique disabilities.”

Sam Waltz, the former chairman of the Public Relations Society of America, has coined the term “ethical terrorism.” Waltz, who served in Vietnam-era army counterintelligence before going to work as a public relations executive for DuPont, uses the term “to describe the actions of those who raise questions about the motivation and integrity of an individual, company, or other entity, in order to gain the upper hand.”

## BEWARE OF GRANNIES IN TENNIS SHOES

Self-proclaimed “junk science” critic Steven Milloy has routinely used the label of terrorist to attack environmental groups and even scientists who raise concerns about health and environmental problems. In June 2001, he used the terms “taco terrorism” and “biotechnology terrorists” to describe anti-biotech groups who publicized the fact that Taco Bell taco shells contained genetically-engineered Starlink corn, which has not been approved for human consumption. That same month, Milloy joined other conservative commentators

at a conference titled “Environmental Extremism and Eco-Terrorism: The Costs Imposed on Americans,” sponsored by the Frontiers of Freedom Institute. “Eco-terrorists have corrupted our laws with junk science,” he said in reference to the Environmental Protection Agency and scientists involved in the study of endocrine-disrupting chemicals.

Speaking at the same conference, Edward Badolato of the Counterterrorism and Security Education and Research Foundation used an even broader definition of terrorism. The “northwest corner of the United States,” he said, was full of “different types of weirdos and environmental wackos, as some people call them — some of whom are involved in these terrible acts of domestic terrorism. With that in mind, it is important to note that in the past we were worried because terrorists around the world were just a plane ride away. Now it could be that nice little college kid down the street with that nice grandmother in tennis shoes, who may be part of or financially supporting one of these radical groups involved directly or indirectly in domestic eco-radical terrorism.”

R.J. Smith of the Competitive Enterprise Institute also spoke at the conference and argued that terrorism was ingrained in the philosophy of the environmental movement. “Instead of believing, as do traditional conservationists, that man and nature are part of the same nexus, and that the trick was to get the incentives right, they view man as somehow being alien in nature, a threat to the natural order,” Smith said. “That is why one hears environmentalists saying man is a cancer on the planet, a sort of invading virus that needs to be eliminated. This is a philosophical stream that runs through the leadership of most of the environmental organizations in America today.”

Just four days before the terrorist airplane attacks, KREM TV reporter Jeff Humphrey in Spokane, Washington published a report titled, “Cracking Down on Eco-Terrorism” in which he noted that Washington Congressman George Nethercutt “is even talking about the death penalty as punishment” for “eco-terrorists who kill their victims.”

With this kind of rhetoric running rampant in conservative circles, it is not surprising that Republican Congressman Don Young of Alaska responded to the September 11 attacks by speculating publicly that environmental wackos might be the real killers. “If you watched what happened [at past protests] in Genoa, in Italy, and even in Seattle, there’s some expertise in that field,” Young said. “I’m not sure they’re that dedicated but eco-terrorists — which are really based in Seattle —

there's a strong possibility that could be one of the groups."

The day following the September 11 attacks, the "Reagan Information Interchange," a website run by Ronald Reagan's son Michael, published an analysis by Mary Mostert, who opined that Osama bin Laden was "just a minor player" in the terror attacks. "Supporters of bin Laden say he doesn't have the ability to pull off such an attack," Mostert argued. "Who would want to, and could, destroy the World Trade Center? Does bin Laden have the ability to orchestrate the hijacking of four domestic airliners at about the same time from several airports and pilot them into the middle of the World Trade Center in New York and the Pentagon in Washington, D.C. from his bat cave headquarters deep in the mountains of Afghanistan?"

Instead of foreigners, Mostert argued, the culprits would probably be "other Americans" — specifically, "environmentalist and anti-globalist groups ... the radicals on the left" who were planning to protest economic globalization during upcoming meetings in Washington of the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank. "It sure looks to me as if the 'Battle of Washington' was begun yesterday with the bombing of the Pentagon and the World Trade Center," she wrote. "In a world with a population of 8 billion people, 100,000 well trained, dedicated terrorists with the technical ability and the money to plan, coordinate and execute an attack like we saw yesterday can make a lot of trouble, especially when they are pictured in a supportive media as mere 'protestors' and the police are labeled as the monsters."

Even after it became clear that Islamist fundamentalists were behind the attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon, conservative attacks have continued. Tom Randall of the National Center for Public Policy Research used the September 11 attacks as a pretext for demanding action to stop "domestic terrorists" such as the Earth Liberation Front (ELF) and the Animal Liberation Front (ALF). "While these terrorists are small-time compared to the terrorists who struck the World Trade Center and the Pentagon and are not known to have killed anyone as yet, they appear to be intent on expanding their violence and putting American lives at risk," Randall wrote.

On October 7, the *Washington Times* published an editorial calling for "war against eco-terrorists," describing ELF and ALF as "key links in the web of violent environmental groups — an eco-al-Qaeda" with "a fanatical ideology and a twisted morality."

Even the Center for Media & Democracy, which sponsors *PR Watch*, has come under attack. The Guest

## PR WATCH LAUNCHES FREE "WEEKLY SPIN" EMAIL NEWS

*PR Watch* has begun a free weekly email newsletter that provides a weekly digest of recent news items from the "Spin of the Day" section of our website ([www.prwatch.org](http://www.prwatch.org)).

Like "Spin of the Day," the "Weekly Spin" features selected news summaries with links to further information about current public relations campaigns, public relations, propaganda and media spin. It is emailed free each Wednesday to subscribers. To subscribe, simply send an email to: <[weekly\\_spin-subscribe@yahoo.com](mailto:weekly_spin-subscribe@yahoo.com)>, or subscribe via the web by visiting the following URL:

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To read the latest entries in "Spin of the Day," visit the following URL:

<http://www.prwatch.org/cgi/spin.cgi>

Choice Network, a PR front group for steakhouses and taverns, used the terror attacks as a cue to weigh in based on the fact that *PR Watch* editors Sheldon Rampton and John Stauber wrote a book in 1997 titled *Mad Cow USA: Could the Nightmare Happen Here?*

"At home in the United States as well, extremist violence is funded—sometimes unwittingly—by dollars from 'peaceful' foundations and other nonprofits," stated an article on the Guest Choice website. "The John Merck Fund and the Turner Foundation fund the Center for Media and Democracy (CMD), which promotes the scare that 'mad cow' disease is present in the U.S. food supply. . . . Words deployed with the intention of causing panic are a form of violence, too. The 'mad cow' scare campaign in the United States is intended to frighten consumers to avoid the conventional meat supply and 'go organic.'"

*Editor's note:* The Guest Choice Network is notoriously sloppy with its facts, and this is a case in point. CMD has indeed received a grant from the Turner Foundation, but to date we have received no funding from the John Merck Fund. ■

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# TERRORISM TO END TERRORISM

by Sheldon Rampton

Both internationally and in the United States, the “war against terrorism” has provided propaganda cover for crackdowns on human rights and civil liberties. Like other PR efforts to capitalize on the September 11 tragedy, this rhetorical use of terrorism has a long pre-history. As early as 1976, a media plan developed by the Burson-Marsteller PR firm advised Argentina’s brutal military junta—then in the process of murdering thousands of Jews and leftists—to make over its image by “calling a meeting to examine terrorism and means of eliminating it,” thereby identifying “Argentina as a member of a group of free world nations condemning all classes of terrorism,” which “would immediately unite it with those countries which respect human rights and civil liberties.” In the wake of September 11, countries throughout the world have resorted to similar ploys:

- *O’Dwyer’s PR Daily* reported that Saudi Arabia hired PR giant Burson-Marsteller on September 14 to provide “issues counseling and crisis management” and to place ads in the *New York Times* expressing Saudi support for the U.S. in its time of crisis. The Saudis have been rewarded with a seat at the table as an ally in the fight against terrorism, even though much of Osama Bin Laden’s terror network (including Bin Laden himself and 15 of the 19 hijackers who flew the planes on September 11) came from Saudi Arabia and drew their inspiration and funding specifically from Saudi Arabian Wahhabi fundamentalists. The Wahhabi religious movement is the state religion of Saudi Arabia, the ideological underpinnings of the absolute monarchy which governs the country with an iron fist. Human rights groups such as Amnesty International have pointed to Saudi Arabia’s numerous cases of arbitrary arrest, prolonged detention and physical abuse of prisoners, which security forces commit with the acquiescence of the government. In addition, the government prohibits or restricts freedom of speech, the press, assembly, association, and religion.
- The dictatorship that governs Pakistan has also gotten an image makeover. It was held in contempt by the West prior to September 11, first for its repression of democracy at home and second for its ties with terrorists. (The Taliban’s rise to power was sponsored by Pakistan’s security forces.) Now that Pakistan has become our ally against Afghanistan, however, the song has changed. “It may be a good thing that Pakistan is ruled by a friendly military dictator,” opined *Newsweek* magazine, “rather than what could well be a hostile democracy.” Writing in the *Independent* of London, journalist Robert Fisk pointed out that this

attitude “is the very policy that dictates Washington’s relations with the Arab world. Far better to have a Mubarak or a King Abdullah or a King Fahd running the show than to let the Arabs vote for a real government that might oppose US policies in the region. . . . Future peace and stability requires sustained investment in solid secular democracies — not in stable dictatorships. Yet the United States is now laying the foundations of a long-term autocracy in Pakistan, a dictatorship not unlike those that lie like a cancer across the Middle East.”

- Australia’s defense ministry cited the attacks in the United States to justify his government’s effort to prevent asylum-seekers from entering the country.
- In England, a PR advisor to the UK Secretary of State for Transport, Local Government and the Regions sent a memo to senior colleagues within an hour after the second hijacked plane hit the World Trade Center. “It’s now a very good day to get out anything we want to bury,” the memo suggested. The following day, the British government issued a proposal on new expenses for local councillors—one of the items mentioned in the PR memo as something “to bury.”
- China linked its support for the global campaign against terrorism to US support for China’s campaign against those advocating independence for Tibet and the Muslim province of Xinjiang.
- Russian President Vladimir Putin linked global efforts against terrorism to Russia’s brutal military campaign in Chechnya, where Russian forces continue to engage in extrajudicial executions, arrests, and extortion of civilians.
- In Egypt, Prime Minister Atef Abeid lashed out at human rights groups for “calling on us to give these terrorists their ‘human rights,’” referring to documented reports of Egyptian torture and unfair trials. “After these horrible crimes committed in New York and Virginia, maybe Western countries should begin to think of Egypt’s own fight against terror as their new model,” Abeid said.
- In Israel, Defense Minister Binyamin Ben Elizier bragged on September 14, “It is a fact that we have killed 14 Palestinians in Jenin, Kabatyeh and Tammum, with the world remaining absolutely silent.”
- The government of Colombia, which has a horrific, long-standing history of human rights violations perpetrated by members of the Colombian military and “illegal” paramilitary groups with close military ties,

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scored a victory in October when U.S. State Department official Francis Taylor publicly linked counter-insurgency in Latin America to the war on terrorism. U.S. military and economic aid to Colombia has climbed in recent years, including a recent \$1.3 billion U.S. aid package.

Terrorism has provided similar cover for the Bush administration in the United States. While the country was still reeling from the September 11 tragedy, Congress quietly approved the Bush administration's nomination of John Negroponte as U.S. ambassador to the United Nations. During his term as ambassador to Honduras under the Reagan administration, Negroponte covered up human rights abuses by the CIA-trained Battallion 316. The Bush administration had already appointed two other individuals to government posts with extensive involvement in the Reagan administration's war in Central America:

- Elliot Abrams, who pleaded guilty in 1991 to two counts of lying to Congress over his role in the Iran-Contra arms-for-hostages scandal, has been appointed to the National Security Council as director of its office for democracy, human rights and international operations.
- Otto Reich has become assistant secretary of state for Western Hemisphere affairs, the top post for Latin America. Reich is the former head of now-defunct Office for Public Diplomacy (OPD), which was disbanded after the House Committee on Foreign Affairs censured it for "prohibited, covert propaganda activities" inside the United States aimed at winning domestic support for the Contra war. The OPD's activities as part of "Operation White Propaganda" included dirty tricks such as falsely accusing reporters of trading pro-Sandinista stories for sexual favors from Sandinista-supplied prostitutes.

U.S. policymakers and even the news media itself have also used the terror of September 11 as a pretext for substantial restrictions at home on freedom of information and civil liberties. Pro-war commentators have been merciless in their attacks on the dissenters from the Bush administration's military campaign, describing them as a "cult of national suicide" or as "fifth column" allies of Osama bin Laden, and calling for action to suppress "anti-American rallies" on college campuses.

In mid-October, Congress passed the ambitiously-named USA PATRIOT Act, which stands for "Uniting and Strengthening America by Providing Appropriate Tools Required to Intercept and Obstruct Terrorism."

In addition to authorizing unprecedented levels of surveillance and incarceration of both U.S. citizens and non-citizens, several provisions of USA PATRIOT explicitly target people simply for engaging in speech protected by the First Amendment. It expands the ability of police to spy on telephone and internet correspondence in anti-terrorism investigations and in routine criminal investigations unrelated to terrorism; makes the payment of membership dues to political organizations a deportable offense; and creates a broad new definition of "domestic terrorism" that could target people who engage in acts of political protest and subject them to wiretapping and enhanced penalties.

The USA PATRIOT act was followed in November by a new executive order from President Bush, authoring himself to order a trial in a military court for any non-citizen he designates, without a right of appeal or the protection of the Bill of Rights.

"Mr. Bush has authorized military justice as an option for the government in a far wider array of cases than could ever be necessary," commented the *Washington Post*. "Any non-citizen whom the president deems to be a member of al Qaeda, or to be engaged in international terrorism of virtually any kind, or even to be harboring such people, can be detained indefinitely under his order and tried. The trials could take place using largely secret evidence. Depending solely on how the Defense Department further refines the rules, the military officers conducting the trials might insist on proof of guilt beyond a reasonable doubt, or might use some far lesser standard. The accused can be convicted without a unanimous verdict but with a two-thirds majority. Those found guilty would have no appeal to any court; and if found guilty, they could be executed. Such a process is only a hair's breadth from a policy of summary justice. The potential to imprison or execute many innocent people is large, the chances that such mistakes would become known much smaller."

#### **IF WE TELL YOU, TERRORISTS WILL KILL YOU**

These rollbacks in civil liberties have encountered only token peeps of protest from the news media, which can barely bring itself to complain about Bush administration efforts to muzzle the media itself. "There's been a collective decision to re-image the president, and the media is fully cooperating," observed magazine writer David Carr. "Journalists are very anxious to help him construct a wartime presidency, because we may be at war and he's the only president we have. When you have people with agendas serving as your eyes and ears, I just don't think you're necessarily getting the truth. It's just a more patriotic version of spin."

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When the White House, via National Security Advisor Condoleezza Rice, requested that the networks not air any future unedited videos of Osama bin Laden, the broadcast media's top managers meekly complied. "Thanks to the White House and its high-level courtiers in the media, we Americans—or those of us without the proper hardware—are now the only people in the whole developed world who can't actually hear what our enemy is saying about us. That's an odd distinction, considering we are also his main targets," observed New York University professor Mark Crispin Miller. "Although it was the terrorists who brought on this climate of official hostility to information, it is not they who are to blame for our surrender to it. With their box-cutters and barbaric zeal, they wrought destruction on our lives, property, and economy. But they could not hurt America's democracy. That is something that Americans alone can do."

The American Chemistry Council (formerly known as the Chemical Manufacturers Association) made the threat of terrorism the centerpiece of its own newly aggressive campaign to roll back "public right-to-know" policies that enable citizens to learn about toxic hazards in their communities. Shortly after September 11, the *National Review* published an article by Jonathan Adler of the Competitive Enterprise Institute (CEI), calling on federal agencies to reconsider provisions of the Clean Air Act which require companies to prepare risk-management plans that detail potential chemical accidents and worst-case scenarios for what could happen to neighboring communities. By law, this information must be made available to the public—a practice that Adler now describes as "assisting terrorists." Such laws "actually promise to do more harm than good," stated a separate CEI editorial. "This information is only useful to groups that want to scare the public about chemical risks, or those who might use it for selecting targets."

This attempt to link right-to-know with terrorism has been ongoing since 1998, when the ACC hired former security agency personnel to write a report titled "The Terrorist Threat in America." The ACC's report, combined with aggressive lobbying, had already eroded public right-to-know laws even before the September 11 attack. The willingness of the U.S. Department of Justice to support these rollbacks (but not to reduce chemical hazards) prompted a August 14, 2000 letter to then-Attorney General Janet Reno from a number of leading environmental and public interest groups such as the National Environmental Trust and Sierra Club, along with labor representatives such as the Chemical Workers Union Council/UFCW, the United Steelwork-

ers of America and the Allied Industrial, Chemical and Energy Workers Union. "We are dismayed with the Department's role in impeding community right-to-know about chemical industry dangers while taking no apparent steps to eliminate these hazards at the source," the letter stated.

Many right-to-know rollbacks have focused on the Internet. Shortly after September 11, the Nuclear Regulatory Commission completely shut down its website. The state of Pennsylvania has decided to remove environmental information from its site. Risk Management Plans, which provide information about the dangers of chemical accidents and how to prevent them, have been removed from the website of the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency. The Agency for Toxic Substances and Disease Registry dropped from its website a report on chemical site security which notes that "security at chemical plants ranged from fair to very poor" and that "security around chemical transportation assets ranged from poor to non-existent."

U.S. Attorney General John Ashcroft has also issued a new statement of policy that encourages federal agencies to resist Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) requests. The new statement supersedes a 1993 memorandum from Attorney General Janet Reno which promoted disclosure of government information through the FOIA unless it was "reasonably foreseeable that disclosure would be harmful." The new Ashcroft doctrine rejects this "foreseeable harm" standard and instructs agencies to withhold information whenever there is a "sound legal basis" for doing so. "As with many of the Bush Administration's new restrictions on public information, the new policy is only peripherally related to the fight against terrorism," notes *Secrecy News*, a publication of the Federation of American Scientists. "Rather, it appears to exploit the current circumstances to advance a predisposition toward official secrecy."

The new climate in America prompted an eerily close-to-life parody in *The Onion*, a humorous newspaper that publishes satirical false news items. In the parody, Ashcroft is quoted saying, "We live in a land governed by plurality of opinion in an open electorate, but we are now under siege by adherents of a fundamentalist, totalitarian belief system that tolerates no dissent. Our most basic American values are threatened by an enemy opposed to everything for which our flag stands. That is why I call upon all Americans to submit to wiretaps, e-mail monitoring, and racial profiling. Now is not the time to allow simplistic, romantic notions of 'civil liberties' and 'equal protection under the law' to get in the way of our battle with the enemies of freedom." ■

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# THE PENTAGON'S INFORMATION WARRIOR: RENDON TO THE RESCUE

by Laura Miller and Sheldon Rampton

"I am not a National Security strategist or a military tactician," says John W. Rendon, Jr., whose DC-based PR firm was recently hired by the Pentagon to win over the hearts and minds of Arabs and Muslims worldwide.

"I am a politician," Rendon said in a 1998 speech to the National Security Conference (NSC), "and a person who uses communication to meet public policy or corporate policy objectives. In fact, I am an information warrior, and a perception manager. This is probably best described in the words of Hunter S. Thompson, when he wrote 'When things turn weird, the weird turn pro.'"

The Rendon Group's contract with the Pentagon was awarded on a no-bid basis, reflecting the government's determination to hire a firm already versed in running overseas propaganda operations. Rendon specializes in "assisting corporations, organizations, and governments achieve their policy objectives." Past clients include the CIA, USAID, the government of Kuwait, Monsanto Chemical Company, and the official trade agencies of countries including Bulgaria, Russia, and Uzbekistan.

"Through its network of international offices and strategic alliances," the Rendon Group website boasts, "the company has provided communications services to clients in more than 78 countries, and maintains contact with government officials, decision-makers, and news media around the globe."

The Pentagon stipulates that the Rendon Group will receive \$400,000 for four months of work. Details are confidential, but according to the *San Jose Mercury News*, Rendon will be monitoring international news media, conducting focus groups, creating a web site about the US campaign against terrorism, and recommending "ways the US military can counter disinformation and improve its own public communications."

## RENDON AND DESERT STORM

In dollar terms, Rendon's Pentagon contract resembles the \$100,000 monthly retainer that it received in the early 1990s from the Kuwaiti government as part of a multi-million-dollar PR campaign denouncing Iraq's 1990 invasion and mobilizing public support for Operation Desert Storm.

The Rendon Group's website states that during the Gulf War, it "established a full-scale communications operation for the Government of Kuwait, including the establishment of a production studio in London producing programming material for the exiled Kuwaiti Television." Rendon also provided media support for exiled government leaders and helped Kuwaiti officials after the war by "providing press and site advance to incoming congressional delegations and other visiting US government officials." Several of Rendon's non-govern-

mental clients also have headquarters in Kuwait: Kuwait Petroleum Corporation, Kuwait University, American Housing Consortium, American Business Council of Kuwait, and KPMY/Peat Marwick.

The Rendon Group's work in Kuwait continued after the war itself had ended. "If any of you either participated in the liberation of Kuwait City . . . or if you watched it on television, you would have seen hundreds of Kuwaitis waving small American flags," John Rendon said in his speech to the NSC. "Did you ever stop to wonder how the people of Kuwait City, after being held hostage for seven long and painful months, were able to get hand-held American flags? And for that matter, the flags of other coalition countries? Well, you now know the answer. That was one of my jobs."

Rendon was also a major player in the CIA's effort to encourage the overthrow of Saddam Hussein. In May 1991, then-President George Bush, Sr. signed a presidential finding directing the CIA to create the conditions for Hussein's removal. The hope was that members of the Iraqi military would turn on Hussein and stage a military coup. The CIA did not have the mechanisms in place to make that happen, so they hired the Rendon Group to run a covert anti-Saddam propaganda campaign. Rendon's postwar work involved producing videos and radio skits ridiculing Saddam Hussein, a traveling photo exhibit of Iraqi atrocities, and radio scripts calling on Iraqi army officers to defect.

A February 1998 report by Peter Jennings cited records obtained by ABC News which showed that the Rendon Group spent more than \$23 million dollars in the first year of its contract with the CIA. It worked closely with the Iraqi National Congress, an opposition coalition of 19 Iraqi and Kurdish organizations whose main tasks were to "gather information, distribute propaganda and recruit dissidents." According to ABC, Rendon came up with the name for the Iraqi National Congress and channeled \$12 million of covert CIA funding to it between 1992 and 1996.

ClandestineRadio.com, a website which monitors underground and anti-government radio stations in countries throughout the world, credits the Rendon Group with "designing and supervising" the Iraqi Broadcasting Corporation (IBC) and Radio Hurriah, which began broadcasting Iraqi opposition propaganda in January 1992 from a US government transmitter in Kuwait. According to a September 1996 article in *Time* magazine, six CIA case officers supervised the IBC's 11 hours of daily programming and Iraqi National Congress activities in the Iraqi Kurdistan city of Arbil. These activities came to an abrupt end on August 31, 1996, when the

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Iraqi army invaded Arbil and executed all but 12 out of 100 IBC staff workers along with about 100 members of the Iraqi National Congress.

## TODAY'S PR WAR

The work of the Rendon Group is only one element of the Bush Administration's PR campaign. The United States has established "instant response" communications offices in Washington, London and Islamabad, and senior administration officials are regularly talking to Arabic news media.

The *Wall Street Journal* reported on November 8 that the Army's "4th Psychological Operations (Psyops) group" designed leaflets and radio broadcasts inside Afghanistan "to persuade enemy fighters to quit, and to convince civilians that U.S. bombs raining down on their country will result in a better future for their families."

A separate advertising campaign is headed by Charlotte Beers, a former Madison Avenue advertising executive who was recently named the State Department's Undersecretary of State for "public diplomacy" (the official government euphemism for "public relations"). The *New York Times* reported that Beers is "planning a television and advertising campaign to try to influence Islamic opinion; one segment could feature American celebrities, including sports stars, and a more emotional message."

In an October interview with *Advertising Age*, Beers said public diplomacy "is a vital new arm in what will combat terrorism over time. All of a sudden, we are in this position of redefining who America is, not only for ourselves under this kind of attack, but also for the outside world." The corporate-funded Advertising Council is reportedly working with Beers on developing the campaign. According to *Advertising Age*, the Ad Council "has boiled its message down to one strategic idea: freedom."

Hollywood executives have also joined the White House brain trust, conferring with administration officials on ways to help spread the U.S. message at home and abroad. "It's possible the entertainment industry could help the government formulate its message to the rest of the world about who Americans are, and what they believe," said Bryce Zabel, chairman of the Academy of Television Arts and Sciences.

Voice of America has dramatically increased its radio broadcasts in Arabic, Dari, Pashto, Farsi, and Urdu, but has had difficulty reaching crucial elements of the Arab population in the Middle East. "We have almost no youthful audience under the age of 25 in the Arab world and we are concerned that . . . this important segment of the population has enormous distrust of the United

States," said Marc Nathanson, a spokesman for the Broadcasting Board of Governors, the entity that oversees international public broadcasting operations for the United States.

## TO KNOW US IS TO LOVE US

Many of the people charged with masterminding the propaganda war seem handicapped by a naïve belief that the US is simply misunderstood abroad. "They hate us out of ignorance," is a common trope. Communications strategies are being developed on the assumption that if "they" just knew how good "we" are and how much we love "freedom," then they will support the war.

"How is it that the country that invented Hollywood and Madison Avenue has such trouble promoting a positive image of itself overseas?" asked Rep. Henry Hyde, chairman of the House International Relations Committee. President Bush has expressed similar bafflement. "I'm amazed that there's such misunderstanding of what our country is about that people would hate us," he said. "We've got to do a better job of making our case."

Lee McKnight, director of the Edward R. Murrow Center at Tufts University's Fletcher School of Law and Diplomacy, says this inability to understand the thinking of the Arab world is the single biggest reason that the United States is winning the military battle but losing the propaganda war. "We can't convince anyone we're right if we don't understand their point of view," he said.

The spin doctors and politicians have failed to realize that propaganda cannot hope to change opinions when fundamental US policies remain the same. "No amount of media management will matter if the US is not also seen—and actually working on—ways to resolve some of the intractable conflicts which have served to feed fanaticism and anti-US sentiment throughout many Arabic and Islamic nations," McKnight said.

"The United States lost the public relations war in the Muslim world a long time ago," says Osama Siblani, publisher of the *Arab American News*. "They could have the prophet Muhammad doing public relations and it wouldn't help."

"The calculus of human suffering is far less clear from the perspective of the Middle East," observes Princeton University history professor Nicholas Guyatt, "and the awful images of Sept. 11 fade quickly when supplanted by Israeli attacks on Bethlehem or even the 'collateral damage' of the U.S. bombing campaign in Afghanistan." The U.S. cannot hope to win the battle for hearts and minds until its leaders realize the importance of deeds in addition to words and begin to promote real democracy, peace and human rights in the Muslim world. ■