Taking the TOPOFF

An Analysis of American Security Practices Post-9/11

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There is a question of necessity that remains axiomatic to contemporary discussions about international security in the post 9/11 global community. It asks: what actions are required to provide national security from a dynamic external world that threatens it? The "War on Terror" — as the American government's primary response to nascent threats of global terrorism — is rationalized as a necessary action for preserving American identity. As instrumental components for victory in the War on Terror, both America's foreign policy and its domestic security measures are characterized by a perceived need to reaffirm traditional notions of state sovereignty. Over recent years this has resulted in a plethora of state-based initiatives concentrated on securing America's borders and making impervious its values in the new global order. An integral component is the US Department of Homeland Security's Top Officials Three Program (TOPOFF 3), a congressionally mandated initiative designed to

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strengthen America's capacity to prevent, prepare for, respond to, and recover from large-scale attacks involving weapons of mass destruction (WMDs). While TOPOFF 3 is a domestic exercise constructed to stimulate the effects of possible terrorist attacks carried out on American soil, it has also exerted influence as an act of foreign policy, with countries such as Canada now participating in its exercise.[1]

In academia and elsewhere, there is a desire to make sense of contemporary security measures defying traditional paradigms set forth in mainstream studies of international security and foreign policy. Yet, as most understandings of security post-911 reproduce "the historically specific notions of space and time which inform the primary traditions of international relations," [2] they cannot account for modern practices of American (re)securitization. In deconstructing the historically specific ontology that rationalizes the rise of the modern state, the space for a re-theorization of current American security practices is opened. Questions about security are not, as some would posit, distinctly formed "out there" but rather "in here," where the very articulation of out there is made possible in the first place. As David Campbell argues, practices of security are not merely necessitated reactions to an external threat, but are also internally meditated acts of construction. In this case, TOPOFF 3 is better construed as a practice of insecurity, which serves—at least in part—to normalize the state-based power of American hegemony. To articulate these claims, this paper examines American security practices as products of a socio-political narrative informing much of contemporary international relations. It then demonstrates TOPOFF 3 as an integral part of this strategy, and the final section problematizes conventional interpretations of (in)security in order to re-evaluate TOPOFF 3's claimed objectives.

Securing the Homeland

The official story behind the War on Terror, as told by the American government, media and several academics, claims its advent as a rationalized response to an emergent global threat, for which the unpredictable events of 9/11 serve as symbolic and cataclysmic revelations.[3] This threat, in the form of global terrorism, is characterized as one that harnesses the pre-meditated use of violence to achieve identifiable goals. Thus, the prevailing trend in American security policy since 9/11, and arguably earlier, has been protecting primarily democratic values from externally induced enemies that fundamentally reject American culture.[4]

These concerns, the Bush administration claims, are amplified by fears regarding the potential use of WMDs from enemies that operate beyond borders, and outside traditional rules of warfare.[5]

Mainstream analyses of post-9/11 American security policies are suggestive about the conditions under which it is possible to think, speak, and make claims about a "politics of security." The framing of the War on Terror—as a calculated response to legitimate "identity" threats—is enabled by a socio-political narrative that reifies the necessities of the state to matters of political security. These notions percolate to contemporary discourse from the inception of Westphalia, where it is assumed that "traditional authority gave way to modern harmony."[6] Modern practices of statecraft appear as those which enframe pre-existing and boundary-sensitive identities to natural delineations in space and time.[7] The emergence of the state constitutes the emergence of the international condition. Whereas the state remains a place of safety and security, the external world is characterized as otherwise.[8] Matters of insecurity, and in this case, global terrorism, are always deemed to be originating out there to threaten the natural sanctity located within the borders of the nation-state.

But in deciding what security is and where it may be found, there is an inherent assumption made regarding how real security may be brought about. In this case, articulating the threats posed to the nation state remains a consistent necessity, which, at the same time, gives ample cause for expanding state-based practices of national security. These methods are both extrinsic (international) and intrinsic (domestic) in nature; the expressions of which are notable both in America's new foreign policy agenda, and in its proliferating domestic security measures post-9/11. Not surprisingly, the foreign policy agenda advanced by the current Bush administration is increasingly characterized by a retreat from multilateralism, an increase in military expenditure, and a willingness to act preventatively against its enemies.[9] The war in Iraq is justified on these grounds, as it is presented as a battleground on which to triumph over those who threaten liberty and freedom.[10]

These tendencies do not, however, proliferate solely in outward reaching natures. The re-securitization of America is as much a domestic process as it is an international one. While there seem to be numerous examples of this, the use of biometrics is exemplary. In the post-9/11 climate, the biometrics industry has been transformed by a vast window of opportunity, in which it presents itself as the resolution to domestic security problems arising in a world of transnational terrorist activity.[11]

The emphasis in this case is on computerized documents, which increase efficiency and monitoring capabilities in a domestic space that is increasingly becoming open to a serpentine world, and thus increasingly needing security from it.[12] And while the use of biometrics functions as a single example of newly initiated US domestic security measures post-9/11, they point to a perceived need to securitize the borders of the American polity not only from without but also from within.

Locating TOPOFF 3

The TOPOFF 3 initiative functions as an excellent case study for contemporary American security practices, as it is tantamount to both domestic security measures and American foreign policy post-9/11. Despite recent notoriety, TOPOFF 3 was originally conceived in 1998 in the Department of Justice. Its intention is "to better coordinate the communication between existing emergency response agencies at the federal, state and local levels, as well as to more efficiently streamline the information flowing between them."[13] Amongst other ambitions are those of assessing the roles of non-traditional partners in crisis and consequence management; creating better operating frameworks for consequence management systems; and investigating national exercise programs in support of national domestic preparedness strategies.[14] In action, the exercise is constructed so as to simulate the effects of a real attack carried out on American soil. Participants are given little warning as to what scenarios they will face, including the location, date, and time of the simulated attacks.[15] As such, the exercise is heralded by its supporters as one designed to benefit the response skills of primarily senior American officials, in the name of national interest.

To be sure, the program has always been internationally orientated, if not explicitly, then at least subliminally. The State Department's fact sheet indicates: "the U.S. Congress, responding to terrorist events such as the 1995 Tokyo Sarin gas attacks, concluded that America's top government officials should receive better training to respond to complex attacks involving Weapons of Mass Destruction." In further official documentation there are references to terrorism as "a global threat in both aim and nature" and calls to "foreign governments to participate in TOPOFF 3 and other similar preventative courses of action."[16] To this extent, even from inception TOPOFF 3 cannot be disassociated from attempts to present a new American foreign policy agenda.

In its current phase TOPOFF 3 is more exemplary of American security practices seen under the Bush administration. The program has undergone dramatic changes in operation, administration and structure. These changes are both institutional and ideational in approach. The TOPOFF 3 exercise is now sponsored by the Office of State and Local Co-ordination and Preparedness, within the Department of Homeland Security.[17] This institutional reworking has been accompanied by massive increases in budgetary spending. Whereas the first TOPOFF exercise cost the federal government approximately $3 million, TOPOFF 3 was accorded a federal budget of nearly $26 million.[18] Federal spending on domestic preparedness for terrorist attacks involving WMDs alone has increased about 300 percent since the 1998 fiscal year.[19] The unprecedented swell of government funding flooding the department has provided TOPOFF 3 with ample opportunity to expand its agenda. It now actively seeks a growing number of participants not only from lower level domestic emergency response officials but also from related positions in the governments of international allies. In 2005, both Canada and the United Kingdom participated in the TOPOFF 3 exercise, and by 2007, Australia and Mexico are expected to join the ranks.[20]

The classification and designation of TOPOFF 3 as a matter of domestic security is hence ambiguous. While the purpose here is not to resolve this debate in any substantive manner, a discussion of it is not theoretically redundant: while the TOPOFF 3 program appears rather precarious when situated exclusively within either of these security rubrics, its ambivalence might actually point to the inability of mainstream studies of international security to wholly attest to emerging patterns of securitization.

Critically Thinking Security

Thinking critically about security must involve "skepticism about the claim that the modern state and state system offer the only plausible way of responding to questions about the political."[21] By challenging the statist approaches to international relations, alternative narratives provide nuanced interpretations which trouble overtly simplified stories of the state. As Campbell argues, historical accounts for state sovereignty often make myopic claims to epistemological certainties: "these narratives understand the state to be constituted by a secularized eschatology in which one form of social organization and identity (the Church) completely gives way to another (the State) at readily identifi-

able junctures (Westphalia)."[22] The emergence of the state however, was not so much the unearthing of pre-existent identities, as it was a multi-faceted transfer of power over the articulation of danger, neither linear nor progressive in nature. "Danger (death in its ultimate form) might therefore be thought of as the new God for the world of modern states, not because it is peculiar to our time, but because it replicates the logic of Christendom's evangelism of fear."[23]

In this instance there is a crucial shift regarding exactly who and/or what is being secured. The state no longer remains a reactionary force which secures the public from external threats, rather it takes on a necessary role of (in)securing in order to reaffirm its own role as the sovereign. The birth of the state parallels the "simultaneous emergence of an inner/outer and us/them."[24] The inception of the social contract marks the inception of a new divide between inside/outside and secure/insecure, which constitutes the mutual existence of each. That is, as the state's legitimacy is partly granted in promises to protect its citizens from external dangers, the existence of these dangers is necessitated. At least some notions of insecurity must originate in here to constantly reaffirm an out there which keeps *here* in.[25]

Thus, contemporary practices of "national security" can be reconstituted as acts of imagining insecurity. Campbell labels this the foreign/Foreign policy structure. Whereas *Foreign* policy refers to the articulation of insecurity from without, *foreign* policy refers to the articulation of security from within.[26] In either case, "the state, and the identity of 'man' located in the state, can therefore be regarded as the effects of discourses of danger that more often than not employ strategies of otherness. Foreign/foreign policy thus needs to be understood as giving rise to a boundary rather than acting as a bridge."[27]

This article provided specific examples of Foreign/foreign policy. In the first case, the justification for the war in Iraq elucidates Campbell's notion of Foreign policy; in the second, the increasing use of biometrics in domestic security illustrates his claims to foreign policy. Yet programs such as TOPOFF 3 are intrinsically unique, as they engage simultaneously in practices of foreign/Foreign policy. TOPOFF 3, as an exercise conducted on American soil, clearly articulates the danger that roams within the boundaries of the state. At the same time, however, it acknowledges the sources of this danger as external to the state itself and encourages other governments to participate in cooperative security measures to combat blatant international threats to modern states, e.g., global terrorism.

Importantly, political analyses of security measures post-9/11 should not understand burgeoning programs such as TOPOFF as merely innovative, but also suggestive. The real lessons learned from 9/11 were not about security but rather insecurity. The appearance of global terrorism, marked with the potential threat of WMDs, demonstrates an unprecedented ability to drive fear into the minds of Americans, and citizens of several other nations around the globe. This ability is tempting to say the least. In many ways this war "has the form of a conspiracy, of an event that is impossible to do away with. The result is that it is already perpetual, before having been started … It opens towards an endless war that will never take place … and it is this suspense that awaits us in the future, this diffuse topicality of blackmail and terror in the form of a universal principle of prevention."[28] As much as global terrorism is characterized as decentralized, diffuse, and capricious, emergent security measures such as TOPOFF 3 possess an equal ability to operate beyond borders, outside specified rules, and without a distinct face.

However, the ultimate objective of TOPOFF 3 is not the destruction of borders and centrifugal points of power, rather it is the reification of them. The definitive reason for this particular form of "preventive terror" "is not to prevent the criminal act, to bring into being the Good, or to correct the irrational course of the world. It is to create a securitized order, and a general neutralization of peoples on the basis of a final non-event."[29] In the case of the non-event, the manifestation of social and political realities is transposed from an immediate consequence of specific actions and events to a virtual horizon of the future. That is, catastrophic events of global terrorism are anticipated, envisioned, programmed and prepared for so much that they need not occur at all, as they are already virtually taking place.[30] The virtual horizon—on which the war on terror is being fought—effectively separates chaos (which follows actual events, and often leads to change) from fear, so that the latter may be isolated and used for control. For Baudrillard, "the goal here is the end of history … on the basis of a preventative terror putting an end to any possible event."[31] And for Campbell, it is the reification of traditional, though imagined, notions of state sovereignty. In either case, it is imperative to ask what is at stake in accepting contemporary security measures as beneficial and necessary to our safety and prosperity.

Conclusion

This analysis problematizes conventional understandings of international/national security to offer acumen regarding American security practices post-9/11. It is correct to say that there is an exigency concerning security in the global community. But what, exactly, is the pressing situation which requires action? The answer, in this case, is contingent to the framing of the question. For the most part, global terrorism is theorized as an unprecedented form of violence that threatens the sanctity of modern nation-states. This interpretation is not entirely inattentive, though it makes persistent assumptions about what security is, and how it may be actualized. As security is understood to be something endemic to the moral space of the state, the state is concurrently given authorization to take the necessary actions required to ensure this natural condition. Thus, programs such as TOPOFF 3 appear as viable, and perhaps innovative, remedies for the ills of international terrorism.

Political theory is invaluable to studies of international security, not because it provides answers to problems of terrorism, but rather, because it finds recurrent answers to be exigent. Seeking comfort in the state seems a relatively benign response to times of insecurity, but is complacent nonetheless. The War on Terror is not fought against terrorists, it is fought against citizens. This is—as Baudrillard claims—the true victory of global terrorism, as the system begins to terrorize itself under the auspices of national security.[32] Ultimately, it is our autonomy that is at stake—not simply the autonomy to move freely, but also the autonomy to think critically. TOPOFF 3 is in fact less about combating a harsh reality, and more about manufacturing one. Though this picture is assiduous, it can be contradicted, disillusioned and unraveled: this is not a matter of finding answers, but of asking new questions.

Notes

[1] United States Department of Homeland Security, Press Room, "TOPOFF 3 Exercise,"
http://www.dhs.gov/dhspublic/interapp/editorial/editorial_0588.xml
(accessed March 20, 2006).
[2] R.B.J Walker, *Inside/Outside: International Relations Theory as Political Theory* (Cambridge: Cambridge University, 1993), 6.
[3] Arthur Kroker, *Born Again Ideology* (C-Theory, 2005)
http://www.ctheory.net/articles.aspx?id=546 (accessed April 12, 2006).

4 James S. Robbins, "Al-Qaeda vs. Democracy," *International Security Affairs* 9 (2005): 1.

5 Ibid. See also Donald M. Snow, *United States Foreign Policy: Politics Beyond the Waters Edge* (Belmont, CA: Thomson and Wadsworth, 2005).

6 David Campbell, *Writing Security: United States Foreign Policy and the Politics of Identity*, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 1992), 41.

7 Richard K. Ashley, "Living on Border Lines: Man, Post-Structuralism, and War," in *International/Intertextual Relations: Postmodern Readings of World Politics*, eds. James Der Derian and Michael J. Shapiro (Lexington, MA: Lexington Books, 1989), 304.

8 Ibid.

9 See Donald M. Snow, *United States Foreign Policy: Politics Beyond the Waters Edge*, chapter 9.

10 James S. Robbins, "Al-Qaeda vs. Democracy," 1.

11 Benjamin J. Muller and John Measor, "Securitizing the Global Norm of Identity: Biometric Technologies in Domestic and Foreign Policies," (presentation, Global Norms Under Siege: Non-Intervention, Human Rights, and Abstention from Torture, Queen's University, Belfast, North Ireland, May 20, 2005) http://www.dahrjamailiraq.com/covering_iraq/archives//000277.php#more (accessed March 19, 2006).

12 Ibid.

13 Department of Homeland Security, "TOPOFF 3 Exercise."

14 Ibid.

15 United States State Department, Office of Counter-Terrorism, "TOPOFF 3 (Top Officials) Fact Sheet," (2002) http://www.state.gov/s/ct/rls/fs/2002/12129.htm (accessed March 18, 2006).

16 Ibid.

17 United States General Accounting Office, "Bioterrorism: Coordination and Preparedness," (2001) http://searching.gao.gov/query.html?qt=+bioterrorism&charset=iso-8859-1&ql=&x=0&y=0 (accessed March 19, 2006).

18 Ibid.

19 Ibid.

20 Department of Homeland Security, "TOPOFF 3 Exercise."

21 R.B.J Walker, "The Subject of Security," in *Critical Security Studies*, ed. Keith Krause (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 1997), 62.

22 David Campbell, *Writing Security*, 41.

23 Ibid.

24 Murray Forsyth, "Thomas Hobbes and the External Relations of States," *British Journal of International Studies* 5 (1979); 207.

25 See R.B.J. Walker, *Inside/Outside: International Relations Theory as Political Theory*, preface.

[26] See David Campbell, *Writing Security*, chapter 2.

[27] Ibid, 42.

[28] Jean Baudrillard, trans. Alex Barder, "The Mask of War," *C-Theory.Net* (2005) http://www.ctheory.net/articles.aspx?id=494 (accessed March 21, 2006).

[29] Ibid.

[30] Ibid.

[31] Ibid.

[32] Ibid.