

September 11 and the Failures of American Intellectuals

Robert Jensen

This essay critiques the main responses to 9/11 by US intellectuals and analyzes how these reactions reinforced a determined ignorance of the consequences of US economic, foreign, and military policy and a further depoliticization of the culture in general. As a class, faculty have the resources—material and intellectual—to make a serious contribution to progressive political and social change in the world. They need to start putting those resources to work.

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The Buddha is said to have spoken of enlightenment as emerging from the eggshell of ignorance, and that image has stuck with me since September 11, 2001. For too long, Americans had lived within an eggshell of ignorance about the world, a willed ignorance about the consequences of US economic, foreign, and military policy that to many felt like protection from the world—on the absurd assumption that what we do not know cannot hurt us—but in reality was always eggshell-thin. On 9/11, we saw how easily eggshells can crack.

This ignorance was perhaps most clearly expressed by the president of the United States. At an 11 October 2001 news conference, Bush told reporters he was amazed “when I see that in some Islamic countries there is vitriolic hatred for America.” He explained:

I’m amazed that there is such misunderstanding of what our country is about, that people would hate us. I am, I am—like most Americans, I just can’t believe it. Because I know how good we are, and we’ve got to do a better job of making our case. We’ve got to do a better job of explaining to the people in the Middle East, for example, that

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we don't fight a war against Islam or Muslims. We don't hold any religion accountable. We're fighting evil. And these murderers have hijacked a great religion in order to justify their evil deeds. And we cannot let it stand.¹

I give the American public the benefit of the doubt and assume that most were not quite as amazed as the president. But my experience is that Bush was not the only American who was inside the eggshell on 10 September 2001.

On September 11, we had the opportunity to emerge from that eggshell, newly engaged in honest attempts to understand the world and our place in it. But many Americans retreated back into that space, desperately trying to paste back together the old eggshell. On this front, Bush also took the lead. On 27 September 2001, Bush appeared at O'Hare airport in Chicago and encouraged people to "get on board," but not with a serious plan for educating ourselves. His advice:

When they struck, they wanted to create an atmosphere of fear. And one of the great goals of this nation's war is to restore public confidence in the airline industry. It's to tell the traveling public: Get on board. Do your business around the country. Fly and enjoy America's great destination spots. Get down to Disney World in Florida. Take your families and enjoy life, the way we want it to be enjoyed.²

So, a president who claims not to understand what is obvious to virtually everyone outside the United States—that no matter what the twisted theology and ideology of Al-Qaeda, lots of folks in the Arab and Muslim world object to US foreign policy for perfectly rational reasons—suggests that the appropriate responses are (1) explain to people in the Middle East why they do not understand their own lives, in part by cranking up a PR campaign and filling the job of Under Secretary of State for Public Diplomacy and Public Affairs with an advertising executive, and (2) to explain to people in the United States that they should go to Disney World, a fantasy park where one can ignore reality.

Of course the issue is not what Bush does or does not know about the world; there are people who tell him the things they think he should know, and Bush no doubt remembers some portion of that. The point is that the United States is a society in which people not only can get by without knowing much about the wider world but are systematically encouraged not to think independently or critically. Instead, they are encouraged to accept the mythology of the United States as a benevolent, misunderstood giant as it lumbers around the world trying to do good.

Much to my sadness, US faculty members—conservative and liberal alike—have for the most part either actively encouraged such avoidance or failed to fulfill their obligation to guide people toward the knowledge that would help deconstruct that mythology. This essay addresses those failures by looking at the main responses to 9/11 in the intellectual world (defined as university-based academics, journalists, free-floating pundits, and the think-tank crowd). I argue that there were five basic positions staked out after 9/11:

1. The Ultra-Hawks: These people started with the assumption that we had to respond to the attacks of 9/11 with massive military force, arguing that the United

- States is the benevolent empire, and the empire should do its work. If you disagreed with that, you were a fool, a dupe, or subversive.
2. The Hawks: This group conceded that there should be a debate about war, so long as that debate distorted, trivialized, and marginalized arguments against war. There was no need to analyze the situation beyond clichés about “Islamic fascism” and the assertion that the power to bomb = the right to bomb = the inevitability of bombing. After this pseudo-debate was over (quickly), the only possible path was war.
 3. The Cultural Doves: The focus of this group was the need to understand other cultures, while avoiding the crucial political issues and voicing little or no criticism of war.
 4. The Political Doves-with-Wings-Pinned: These folks said that bombing is bad policy but largely avoided doing anything to press that point or to confront directly the mythology of the culture, lest they offend, because offending people is bad.
 5. The Anti-Empire Crowd: This critique of American foreign policy and militarism from an internationalist perspective rejected intellectually and morally bankrupt claims about American exceptionalism, and engaged in public education and political organizing.

From that construction, it is obvious that I put myself in the latter category (with the implication, of course, that it is the appropriate analysis). But here I am more interested in what we can learn about American intellectuals from the other four categories.

In certain intellectual and political circles, it is easy to criticize the Ultra-Hawks; their demand for a reflexive patriotism is a profoundly anti-intellectual position that inhibits meaningful attempts at critical thinking and democracy, which are inextricably linked. The Hawks are marginally more sophisticated in their approach, realizing that crude nationalism is not always effective. But in the end, there is little meaningful difference between the Ultra- and Regular-Strength Hawks. Both groups ignore evidence and arguments that undermine their positions because the realities of power allow them to ignore.

That is, I suspect, why, a few weeks after 9/11, a Canadian Broadcasting Corp. radio producer who wanted to set up a debate between the anti- and pro-war positions called saying that she might have to cancel the segment because she could not find a pro-war faculty member in the United States to debate me on the air. I was incredulous, and told her that certainly people were not afraid of debating me (I am not that formidable or well known). She agreed, and said it had nothing to do with me. The pro-war folks she had talked to simply said they were not interested in a debate, with anyone. Most likely, their refusal was based in the quite accurate assessment that they had won. So, why get mixed up in a public debate in which you would have to defend your views when your views have already prevailed?

But, for all the problems that I think are quite obvious in these Hawk positions

(assuming one believes that facts, not just ideology, matter in determining a course of action and that moral considerations are relevant to policy discussions), it is often the case that one can learn more from looking closely at the positions of what, at first glance, appear to be one's allies. I do not take this to be a case of petty backbiting, but rather an examination of what I consider to be some fundamental flaws in US intellectual and political culture. My target is not a specific political position, but the way in which US intellectuals have contributed to the depoliticization of the culture more generally.

The Cultural Doves strike me as well intentioned, which makes them extremely dangerous. For example, after 9/11, many non-Muslims rushed to stores to buy books on Islam. There is nothing wrong with wanting to know more about Islam, and of course, a full understanding of what happened on 9/11 involves knowledge of Islam. But far more important for most Americans is expanding their knowledge about US foreign policy. That is, 9/11 involved theology, but it was primarily a political, not a religious, event. I think this tendency in the United States to want to explain things in cultural, not political, terms is dangerous in an already deeply depoliticized society.

I do not expect much, in terms of analysis or action, from the Cultural Doves. I want to concentrate on the Political Doves-with-Wings-Pinned and try to bring into sharp focus some of the current intellectual and political problems I see. To do this, I am going to quote extensively from myself, in an exchange I had with Tom Palaima, a classics professor at the University of Texas. Tom has always been thoughtful and engaged in his interactions with me and has tried, in his own way, to be supportive of my political work. He makes his own attempts at sharing his views with the public through op/ed writing, which I support, even though I rarely agree with the approach he takes in his writing. He is clearly a serious scholar in his field, and I have no reason to think he is not a principled person. But even with all those endorsements, I think his approach to politics exemplifies some of what is wrong with the US academy.

This exchange started after I had been publicly condemned by the president of the University of Texas for writing articles critical of the mad rush to war after 9/11. On the evening of September 11, I wrote the first of what turned out to be many opinion pieces about the events and the war that followed. In addition to postings on various websites, some of these essays also appeared in mainstream commercial newspapers. That first night's piece, which was posted on websites under the title "Stop the insanity now," appeared three days later in the *Houston Chronicle* under the headline "US just as guilty of committing own violent acts."³ In that essay, I condemned the 9/11 attacks but also pointed out "this act was no more despicable as the massive acts of terrorism—the deliberate killing of civilians for political purposes—that the US government has committed during my lifetime." The op/ed, and that sentence in particular, touched off an avalanche of negative reaction, much of which was directed toward the UT administration. The following week, UT President Larry Faulkner published a letter in the *Chronicle* in which he (correctly) pointed out that I do not speak for the

University and described me as “a fountain of undiluted foolishness on issues of public policy.”⁴

Tom was critical of the president’s actions but also critical of me, and I tried to answer his points and explain my decisions.

First, in my response to his criticisms about my writing, he thought it untoward of me to “act as if your piece was reasonable and inoffensive.” I found the marriage of the two descriptions interesting, implying that reasonable should be inoffensive. I think my writing was, and continues to be, reasonable—that is, I present accurate factual evidence, rational arguments, and a defensible conclusion. I also understand that it is offensive to many people. It is hardly surprising that some very reasonable presentations are also very offensive to some. Anyone who has ever taught material that deals with political and social issues knows that students who hear a point of view that contradicts what they have long been taught may well be offended; it is sometimes a sign that learning is taking place.

Tom also suggested that I had “initiated an inflammatory argument” with my article, which I think gets the sequence of events wrong. I would suggest that the hawkish and inflammatory rhetoric of the Bush administration, members of Congress (both Republican and Democrat), TV anchors, pundits and many others within the first hours after the attack “initiated” the argument and made it necessary for people with antiwar politics to respond immediately and decisively. As I explained to Tom, I knew perfectly well that the piece I wrote would anger the majority of Americans. I pointed out that my goal at that moment was not to convince everyone that a war would be wrong; I knew that would be impossible. My goal was to reach out to progressive people who might be struggling for a way to understand the events of the day, to give them an analysis that would be otherwise hard to find in the mass media, to let them know that they were not alone. My email traffic of the days, and months, after 9/11 suggests that I—and many others writing and speaking in similar fashion—accomplished that. To do that, however, I knew that many people would be angry with me.

Tom’s response to this was to point out that I had admitted I “did not care about how the majority of people would react.” Indeed, I not only knew that many would be angry, but I did not care, in moral terms. (I cared in strategic terms, but made a judgment that the goal of reaching one segment of the US public outweighed the effect of angering another segment). I did not care then, and I do not care now, because I believed, and continue to believe, that the lives of people outside the United States who would be targeted in a US war were more important than the feelings of people in the United States. My intention was to help build an antiwar movement that could derail the expected US military response. If a successful movement could help save innocent lives, would that not trump concerns about offending or angering some Americans? In fact, would not one be morally obligated to offend Americans?

I am not succumbing to delusional self-aggrandizement. I did not actually think my op/eds, radio interviews, or public talks would turn the tide, and I was not naïve about the chances of stopping the US attack on Afghanistan. But, whatever the

chances, the calculation that I, and others like me, made seems to me, in retrospect, to have been right. One could argue that a less confrontational strategy could have been more effective—though I do not see any evidence for that—but that is a tactical issue, not a question of principle.

A slight personal digression: Tom also suggested that I “delight in the politics of confrontation,” which I think misunderstands what motivates me and, I suspect, many other leftists and antiwar activists. In many settings, such as the work I do on sexual violence and pornography, I rarely act confrontationally; other strategies are more appropriate and effective. In certain other political situations in which I think it is effective, I do confront directly. But I never delight in it. It is a strategic decision that I make (though, I must admit, sometimes my anger is a factor). Such confrontations often do leave me feeling momentarily pumped up from an adrenaline rush, but when that has passed, I usually feel incredibly sad. It takes something out of me, not because I am tired or may have been beaten up rhetorically, but because such exchanges make me realize just how profoundly anti-human is the culture in which I live. It is those moments that I wonder how anyone survives in a world structured on such values. It is in those moments that I feel the weakest, the least able to sustain hope.

But here is the single most distressing thing that Tom said to me:

All I can say, Bob, AGAIN is that I am glad for you that you can view the world in such black and white terms, a world where Bob Jensen carries and promotes truth and virtue, and those who react to the things he does should be judged without considering what he has done to provoke such reactions, or what he might have done to make the outcome different.

As I have explained, I did consider the reactions that my work could be expected to provoke, and I judged the negative reactions to be less important than what I believed, and still believe, to be a compelling political goal that easily outweighs offending some. But the distressing part of that paragraph to me is that Tom seems to be taking refuge in—and implicitly making a virtue out of—what he describes as his inability or unwillingness to form a clear conclusion on which he could act, meanwhile denigrating my attempt to do precisely that. In his formulation, I am reduced to a simplistic thinker who can only see black and white, while he sees the many shades of gray.

I have never claimed to be a big thinker or an important theorist. I think I have a fairly accurate and healthy intellectual self-image: I am a competent, hard-working second-tier intellectual. I have never broken new ground, but I can do reasonably decent work building on the insights of others. I am far from the most sophisticated thinker in the world, but I think I have mastered the basics of informal logic and argumentation. And I realize that the world is a complex place.

I also realize that no matter what the complexity of the world, we have moral obligations that do not go away simply because we might be less than absolutely certain about causes and consequences of actions in that complex world. One of the tasks of an intellectual should be to look for patterns in

that complexity that can guide us in making moral and political decisions. The importance of that task increases dramatically when one lives in the most powerful country in the history of the planet, a country in which leaders have demonstrated repeatedly a willingness to use horrific levels of violence to impose their will on others.

I do not see the world in black and white. The shades of gray bedevil me as much as the next person. But I do not think those shadings absolve me of my responsibility. We should approach that responsibility with great humility and openness to counter-arguments. We should always keep in mind that we act with imperfect knowledge; history reminds us that no small number of people who acted out of certainty about the accuracy of their analysis and righteousness of their moral stance have brought upon the innocents of the world suffering beyond description.

But it is also true that I live in a country that drops cluster bombs in civilian areas. I have never lived anywhere that was the target of a cluster bomb, but I suspect that when a cluster bomb detonates above a person and those couple of hundred individual bomblets are dispersed to do their flesh-shredding work, the world looks pretty black and white. I suspect that when one sees a child pick up an unexploded bomblet from a cluster bomb, which then explodes and rips off the child's head, the world looks pretty black and white.

Should the world look any less black and white when one lives in the country that drops the bombs? When the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff explains, in response to a question of why such a weapon is used, that "We only use cluster munitions when they are the most effective weapon for the intended target,"⁵ how long can we allow ourselves to paint pictures with grays?

Beyond that, I think Tom missed one important thing in his comment about "a world where Bob Jensen carries and promotes truth and virtue." That assumes that I operate with a self-centeredness common among academics, in which the goal of the game is to show others how important *my* ideas are, and how great *my* theory is, and how ground-breaking *my* latest article or book is.

Well, I do not feel terribly special. When I talk about politics, I do not see it as Bob Jensen's truth and virtue, because I am acutely aware of how my work is not original. By that, I do not mean that I plagiarize, but that I realize both how I am using the work of others and, more importantly, how my analysis of a current situation is not simply mine but a movement's. In my case, I work closely with two people in Austin. One of them, Rahul Mahajan, and I sometimes write together.⁶ But when we do, we both know perfectly well that another colleague in the collective could just as easily put her name on every piece (for political reasons, she chooses not to), even if she was not part of the process or writing or editing that specific article. And when I write alone, both of them are in my brain. We work as a collective, within a larger movement. So, there quite literally is no Bob Jensen truth and virtue. There is Bob-Jensen-as-part-of-the-Nowar-Collective-as-part-of-a-larger-anti-empire-movement truth and virtue. I draw on that collective and that move-

ment, and I am accountable to it. That is what I take into the world as a writer and speaker.

Finally, my title—“September 11 and the Failures of American Intellectuals”—is a rather arrogant statement, implying that I will dissect the failures of other intellectuals, not any of my own. But in a very real way, I think the failures are mine as well. In some ways, Tom was right in his criticism of me, though I do not think he is right in his defense of his own approach or in his assessment of my motives.

I have done very little in recent years to build with colleagues a progressive intellectual community at the University of Texas. When I first got to UT, I made some efforts, but in the past few years, I have let my anger about what I see as a highly privileged class of people hiding in that privilege get in the way of organizing among my colleagues. If I am serious about my claim to be a political person, such self-indulgence is unacceptable. I am often too quick to judge, too harsh, too blunt with faculty colleagues. In part, because I have established connections with other intellectuals through a political movement, I have not felt a need to attend to faculty relationships on campus. It may be the case that any efforts made to build a critical, progressive intellectual community among faculty at that particular historical moment at UT would have failed, and I could make an argument that it was more important for me to put my energies elsewhere. But it also is entirely plausible that I missed an opportunity, for which I am accountable.

In the end, we all know how to rationalize our choices. Humans are extremely good at that, and faculty members are especially good at it; self-righteousness and self-indulgence are perhaps the most crippling occupational hazards for academics. Not only are we privileged in material terms, but also we are intellectual workers who get plenty of practice in rationalization. As a class, faculty—and intellectuals more generally—need to reduce significantly the ways in which we rationalize the reasons we so often hide in our privilege.

This matters, not just for the sake of our own dignity, but because we have the resources—material and intellectual—to make a serious contribution to progressive political and social change in the world. If we do not do that, we have to answer not only to ourselves but to the people of the world who have a right to expect more from us.

Notes

- [1] George W. Bush, White House News Conference, 11 October 2001. Text available at <http://www.whitehouse.gov/news/releases/2001/10/20011011-7-index.html>.
- [2] George W. Bush, O'Hare International Airport, Chicago, 27 September 2001. Text available at <http://www.whitehouse.gov/news/releases/2001/09/20010927-1.html>.
- [3] Robert Jensen, “U.S. Guilty of Committing Own Violent Acts,” *Houston Chronicle*, 14 September 2001, A-33. Text available at <http://www.chron.com/cs/CDA/story.hts/editorial/1047072>.

- [4] Larry Faulkner, "Jensen's Words His Own," *Houston Chronicle*, 19 September 2001, A-39. Text available at <http://www.chron.com/cs/CDA/story.hts/editorial/1053207#jensen>.
- [5] "DoD News Briefing—Secretary Rumsfeld and General Myers," U.S. DoD News Transcript, 25 October 2001.
- [6] Essays available at <http://www.nowarcollective.com/analysis.htm>.