

before we do so. It's important for our fellow citizens to understand, when you think Patriot Act, constitutional guarantees are in place when it comes to doing what is necessary to protect our homeland, because we value the Constitution."

By that time, as he has since admitted, the President had not only ordered the warrantless NSA wiretapping and surveillance program and recommitted to it many times over, despite resistance from officials in the Justice Department and even, possibly from then-Attorney General John Ashcroft, but had been deeply, intimately involved in it. (No desire for classic presidential "plausible deniability" can be found here.) So this, as many critics have pointed out, was a lie. But what's more interesting — and less noted — is that it was a lie of choice. He clearly did not make the statement on the spur of the moment or in response to media questioning (despite the claims in some reports). He wasn't even "in conversation" in any normal sense. He was simply on stage expounding in a prepared fashion to an audience of citizens. So it was a lie that, given the nature of the event (and you can check it out yourself on-line), had to be pre-planned. It was a lie told with forethought, in full knowledge of the actual situation, and designed to deceive the American people about the nature of what this administration was doing. And it wasn't even a lie the President was in any way forced to commit. No one had asked. It was a voluntary act of deception. Now, he is claiming that these comments were meant to be "limited" to the Patriot Act as the NSA spying program he launched was "limited" to only a few Americans — both surely absurd claims. ("I was talking about roving wiretaps, I believe, involved in the Patriot Act. This is different from the NSA program. The NSA program is a necessary program. I was elected to protect the American people from harm. And on September 11, 2001, our nation was attacked. And after that day, I vowed to use all the resources at my disposal, within the law, to protect the American people, which is what I have been doing, and will continue to do.")

In other words, by his own definition of what is "legal" based on that "obscure philosophy" (and with the concordance of a chorus of in-house lawyers) but not on any otherwise accepted definition of how our Constitution is supposed to work, the President has admitted to something that, on the face of it, seems to be an impeachable act — and he has been caught as well in the willful further act of lying to the American people about his course of action. Here, however, is where — though so many issues of the moment may bring the Nixon era to mind — things have changed considerably. Our domestic politics are now far more conservative; Congress is in the hands of Republicans, many of whom share the President's fervor for unconstrained party as well as presidential power; and the will to impeach is, as yet, hardly in sight.

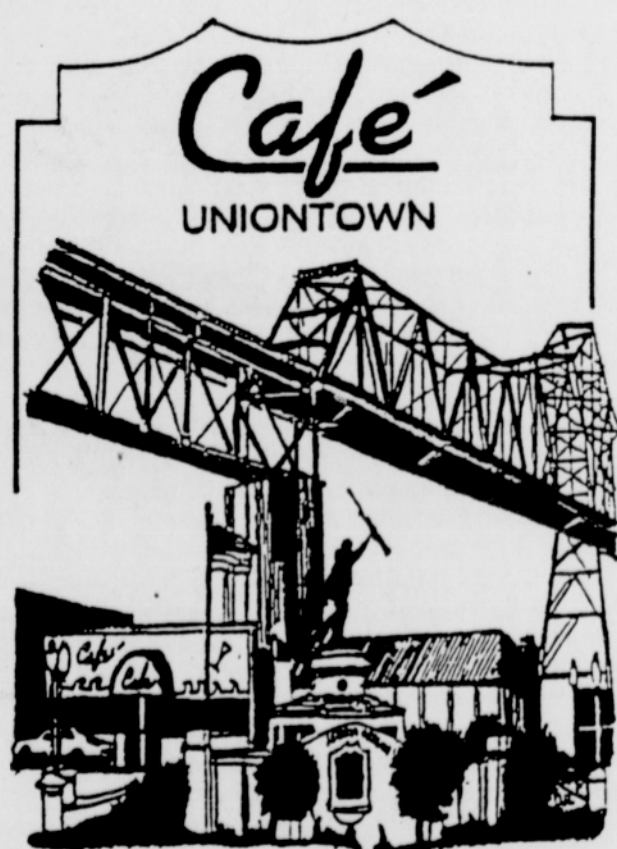
In his news conference defending his NSA program, the President took umbrage when a reporter asked:

"I wonder if you can tell us today, sir, what, if any limits you believe there are or should be on the powers of a President during a war? And if the global war on terror is going to last for decades, as has been forecast, does that mean that we're going to see, therefore, a more or less permanent expansion of the unchecked power of the executive in American society?"

"To say 'unchecked power'" responded an irritated Bush, "basically is ascribing some kind of dictatorial position to the President, which I strongly reject."

How the nation handles this crossroads presidential moment will tell us much about whether or not "some kind of dictatorial position" for our imperial, imperious, and impervious President will be in the American grain for a long, long time to come.

Tom Engelhardt is co-founder of the American Empire Project and the author of *The End of Victory Culture*, a history of American triumphalism in the Cold War, and also a novel, *The Last Days of Publishing*. He presides over *The Nation Institute's* TomDispatch.com ("a regular antidote to mainstream media"), from which this article has been reprinted.



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LANNY SOMMESE

BEGINNING OF THE END

Last year at this time, President Bush spoke of all the "political capital" he had earned and his intention to spend it.

Despite the narrowest win for an incumbent since Woodrow Wilson's victory in 1916, we heard grand talk about the creation of an "ownership society" and how the cornerstone of it would be the privatization of Social Security.

Remember Bush's inauguration address? Bush spoke the word "freedom" 27 times and "liberty" 15 times. It wasn't a surprise that the words "war," "Iraq," "Iran," and "terror" were not said at all.

Triumphalism was the mood just a year ago. The Republicans were now firmly in control of everything, but they forgot their natural inclination to overreach. They thought they had a mandate. What they discovered was how few people actually supported the most extreme parts of their agenda. When the truth started to seep out, everything imploded.

The GOP underestimated the widespread support for Social Security, arguably the best run and most successful government program in history. The scaremongering by the Bush administration that Social Security was approaching bankruptcy was seen as being as untrustworthy as the President's justification for the invasion of Iraq. Bush and the GOP overreached in the Terri Schiavo case, piously inserting themselves in a family tragedy for political gain. Except there was no political gain, only millions who were disgusted by the GOP's phony concern.

The threats by Senate Majority Leader Bill Frist to employ the "nuclear option" and end filibusters on judicial nominees failed to bring Congress to a standstill, for enough members of the Senate realized that doing this would destroy the Senate and forced Frist to back down. Hurricane Katrina and the woeful federal response to the storm stripped away the thin veneer of confidence from the Bush administration.

Finally, the revelations of recent weeks of widespread covert domestic surveillance by the Pentagon, the FBI and the National Security Agency confirmed the suspicions of many that the Bush administration was more interested in intimidation of its political enemies than in fighting terrorism.

Sure, odious legislation did get passed. The bankruptcy bill that condemns millions of Americans to debt slavery. Cuts in Medicaid and student loans to pay for tax cuts for the rich. An energy bill that gives subsidies to the oil companies and does little for energy conservation. A highway bill loaded with pork barrel spending.

But Social Security was saved. The Patriot Act may not survive in its current form. And the mendacity of the Bush administration was exposed for all to see.

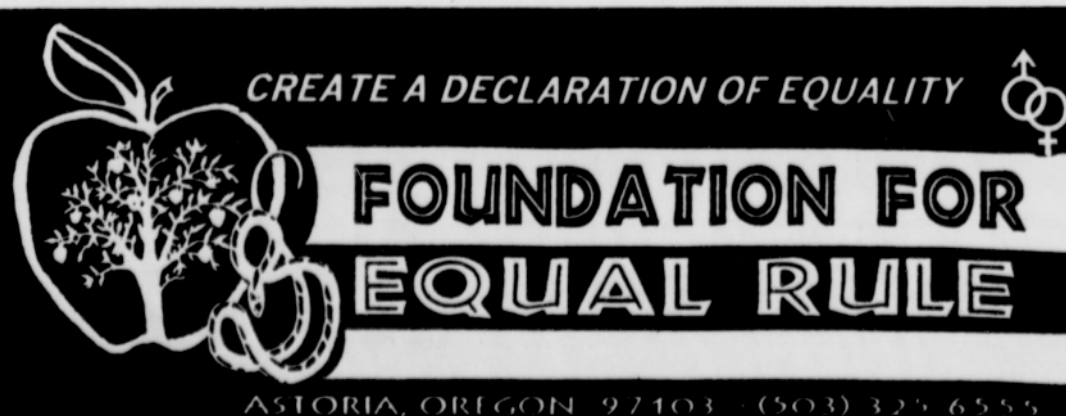
Overshadowing everything else was Iraq, and the steady drip of revelations that confirmed what many knew was true, that the Bush administration's invasion of Iraq was based on faulty intelligence.

The Downing Street Memos showed the Bush administration was determined to attack Iraq even though there was no evidence of weapons of mass destruction, no evidence of links to foreign terrorists and no evidence that Iraq posed a direct or indirect threat to the United States.

That no investigation took place shows the impossibility of integrity in a one-party Congress. The news that the United States operated secret prisons and employed torture on detained "suspects," most of whom were never charged with any crime, was a deep embarrassment. Equally embarrassing was the clumsy attempt to smear one of the most hawkish members of Congress, Pennsylvania Democrat John Murtha, for suggesting a withdrawal of U.S. troops from Iraq. The spectacle of Republicans who never served in the military attacking a decorated (USMC) combat veteran was a sorry one.

The President still clings to the hope that freedom and democracy are on the march in Iraq. The reality on the ground suggests otherwise. President Bush's approval rating is at an all-time low for a second-term President, but barring impeachment or incapacitation, we still have three more years of this man in the White House. But 2005 will likely go down in history as the beginning of the end of the Bush Presidency.

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