

The Last Defender of the American Republic?

An interview with Gore Vidal

by Marc Cooper

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HE MIGHT BE AMERICA'S LAST small-r republican. Gore Vidal, now 76, has made a lifetime out of critiquing America's imperial impulses and has -- through two dozen novels and hundreds of essays -- argued tempestuously that the U.S. should retreat back to its more Jeffersonian roots, that it should stop meddling in the affairs of other nations and the private affairs of its own citizens.

That's the thread that runs through Vidal's latest best-seller -- an oddly packaged collection of essays published in the wake of September 11 titled *Perpetual War for Perpetual Peace: How We Got To Be So Hated*. To answer the question in his subtitle, Vidal posits that we have no right to scratch our heads over what motivated the perpetrators of the two biggest terror attacks in our history, the 1995 Oklahoma City bombing and last September's twin-tower holocaust.

Vidal writes: "It is a law of physics (still on the books when last I looked) that in nature there is no action without reaction. The same appears to be true in human nature -- that is, history." The "action" Vidal refers to is the hubris of an American empire abroad (illustrated by a 20-page chart of 200 U.S. overseas military adventures since the end of World War II) and a budding police state at home. The inevitable "reaction," says Vidal, is nothing less than the bloody handiwork of Osama bin Laden and Timothy McVeigh. "Each was enraged," he says, "by our government's reckless assaults upon other societies" and was, therefore, "provoked" into answering with horrendous violence.

Some might take that to be a suggestion that America had it coming on September 11. So when I met up with Vidal in the Hollywood Hills home he maintains (while still residing most of his time in Italy), the first question I asked him was this:

Marc Cooper: Are you arguing that the 3,000 civilians killed on September 11 somehow deserved their fate?

Gore Vidal: I don't think we, the American people, deserved what happened. Nor do we deserve the sort of governments we have had over the last 40 years. Our governments have brought this upon us by their actions all over the world. I

have a list in my new book that gives the reader some idea how busy we have been. Unfortunately, we only get disinformation from *The New York Times* and other official places. Americans have no idea of the extent of their government's mischief. The number of military strikes we have made unprovoked, against other countries, since 1947-48 is more than 250. These are major strikes everywhere from Panama to Iran. And it isn't even a complete list. It doesn't include places like Chile, as that was a CIA operation. I was only listing military attacks. [1]

Americans are either not told about these things or are told we attacked them because . . . well . . . Noriega is the center of all world drug traffic and we have to get rid of him. So we kill some Panamanians in the process. Actually we killed quite a few. And we brought in our Air Force. Panama didn't have an air force. But it looked good to have our Air Force there, busy, blowing up buildings. Then we kidnap their leader, Noriega, a former CIA man who worked loyally for the United States. We arrest him. Try him in an American court that has no jurisdiction over him and lock him up -- nobody knows why. And that was supposed to end the drug trade because he had been demonized by *The New York Times* and the rest of the imperial press.

[The government] plays off [Americans'] relative innocence, or ignorance to be more precise. This is probably why geography has not really been taught since World War II -- to keep people in the dark as to where we are blowing things up. Because Enron wants to blow them up. Or Unocal, the great pipeline company, wants a war going some place.

And people in the countries who are recipients of our bombs get angry. The Afghans had nothing to do with what happened to our country on September 11. But Saudi Arabia did. It seems like Osama is involved, but we don't really know. I mean, when we went into Afghanistan to take over the place and blow it up, our commanding general was asked how long it was going to take to find Osama bin Laden. And the commanding general looked rather surprised and said, well, that's not why we are here.

Oh no? So what was all this about? It was about the Taliban being very, very bad people and that they treated women very badly, you see. They're not really into women's rights, and we here are very strong on women's rights; and we should be with Bush on that one because he's taking those burlap sacks off of women's heads. Well, that's not what it was about.

What it was really about -- and you won't get this anywhere at the moment -- is that this is an imperial grab for energy resources. Until now, the Persian Gulf has been our main source for imported oil. We went there, to Afghanistan, not to get Osama and wreak our vengeance. We went to Afghanistan partly because the Taliban -- whom we had installed at the time of the Russian occupation -- were getting too flaky and because Unocal, the California corporation, had made a deal with the Taliban for a pipeline to get the Caspian-area oil, which is the richest oil reserve on Earth. They wanted to get that oil by pipeline through

Afghanistan to Pakistan to Karachi and from there to ship it off to China, which would be enormously profitable. Whichever big company could cash in would make a fortune. And you'll see that all these companies go back to Bush or Cheney or to Rumsfeld or someone else on the Gas and Oil Junta, which, along with the Pentagon, governs the United States.

We had planned to occupy Afghanistan in October, and Osama, or whoever it was who hit us in September, launched a pre-emptory strike. They knew we were coming. And this was a warning to throw us off guard.

With that background, it now becomes explicable why the first thing Bush did after we were hit was to get Senator Daschle and beg him not to hold an investigation of the sort any normal country would have done. When Pearl Harbor was struck, within 20 minutes the Senate and the House had a joint committee ready. Roosevelt beat them to it, because he knew why we had been hit, so he set up his own committee. But none of this was to come out, and it hasn't come out.

Marc Cooper: Still, even if one reads the chart of military interventions in your book and concludes that, indeed, the U.S. government is a "source of evil" -- to lift a phrase -- can't you conceive that there might be other forces of evil as well? Can't you imagine forces of religious obscurantism, for example, that act independently of us and might do bad things to us, just because they are also evil?

Gore Vidal: Oh yes. But you picked the wrong group. You picked one of the richest families in the world -- the bin Ladens. They are extremely close to the royal family of Saudi Arabia, which has conned us into acting as their bodyguard against their own people -- who are even more fundamentalist than they are. So we are dealing with a powerful entity if it is Osama.

What isn't true is that people like him just come out of the blue. You know, the average American thinks we just give away billions in foreign aid, when we are the lowest in foreign aid among developed countries. And most of what we give goes to Israel and a little bit to Egypt.

I was in Guatemala when the CIA was preparing its attack on the Arbenz government [in 1954]. Arbenz, who was a democratically elected president, mildly socialist. His state had no revenues; its biggest income maker was United Fruit Company. So Arbenz put the tiniest of taxes on bananas, and Henry Cabot Lodge got up in the Senate and said the Communists have taken over Guatemala and we must act. He got to Eisenhower, who sent in the CIA, and they overthrew the government. We installed a military dictator, and there's been nothing but bloodshed ever since.

Now, if I were a Guatemalan and I had the means to drop something on somebody in Washington, or anywhere Americans were, I would be tempted to do it. Especially if I had lost my entire family and seen my country blown to

bits because United Fruit didn't want to pay taxes. That's the way we operate. And that's why we got to be so hated.

Marc Cooper: You've spent decades bemoaning the erosion of civil liberties and the conversion of the U.S. from a republic into what you call an empire. Have the aftereffects of September 11, things like the USA Patriot bill, merely pushed us further down the road or are they, in fact, some sort of historic turning point?

Gore Vidal: The second law of thermodynamics always rules: Everything is always running down. And so is our Bill of Rights. The current junta in charge of our affairs, one not legally elected, but put in charge of us by the Supreme Court in the interests of the oil and gas and defense lobbies, have used first Oklahoma City and now September 11 to further erode things.

And when it comes to Oklahoma City and Tim McVeigh, he had his reasons as well to carry out his dirty deed. Millions of Americans agree with his general reasoning, though no one, I think, agrees with the value of blowing up children. But the American people, yes, they instinctively know when the government goes off the rails like it did at Waco and Ruby Ridge. No one has been elected president in the last 50 years unless he ran against the federal government. So, the government should get through its head that it is hated not only by foreigners whose countries we have wrecked, but also by Americans whose lives have been wrecked.

The whole Patriot movement in the U.S. was based on folks run off their family farms. Or had their parents or grandparents run off. We have millions of disaffected American citizens who do not like the way the place is run and see no place in it where they can prosper. They can be slaves. Or pick cotton. Or whatever the latest uncomfortable thing there is to do. But they are not going to have, as Richard Nixon said, "a piece of the action."

Marc Cooper: And yet Americans seem quite susceptible to a sort of jingoistic "enemy-of-the-month club" coming out of Washington. You say millions of Americans hate the federal government. But something like 75 percent of Americans say they support George W. Bush, especially on the issue of the war.

Gore Vidal: I hope you don't believe those figures. Don't you know how the polls are rigged? It's simple. After 9/11 the country was really shocked and terrified. [Bush] does a little war dance and talks about evil axis and all the countries he's going to go after. And how long it is all going to take, he says with a happy smile, because it means billions and trillions for the Pentagon and for his oil friends. And it means curtailing our liberties, so this is all very thrilling for him. He's right out there reacting, bombing Afghanistan. He might as well have been bombing Denmark. Denmark had nothing to do with 9/11. And neither did Afghanistan, at least the Afghanis didn't.

So the question is still asked, are you standing tall with the president? Are you standing with him as he defends us?

Eventually, they will figure it out.

Marc Cooper: They being who? The American people?

Gore Vidal: Yeah, the American people. They are asked these quick questions. Do you approve of him? Oh yeah, yeah, yeah. Oh yeah, he blew up all those funny-sounding cities over there.

That doesn't mean they like him. Mark my words. He will leave office the most unpopular president in history. The junta has done too much wreckage.

They were suspiciously very ready with the Patriot Act as soon as we were hit. Ready to lift habeas corpus, due process, the attorney-client privilege. They were ready. Which means they have already got their police state. Just take a plane anywhere today and you are in the hands of an arbitrary police state.

Marc Cooper: Don't you want to have that kind of protection when you fly?

Gore Vidal: It's one thing to be careful, and we certainly want airplanes to be careful against terrorist attacks. But this is joy for them, for the federal government. Now they've got everybody, because everybody flies.

Marc Cooper: Let's pick away at one of your favorite bones, the American media. Some say they have done a better-than-usual job since 9/11. But I suspect you're not buying that?

Gore Vidal: No, I don't buy it. Part of the year I live in Italy. And I find out more about what's going on in the Middle East by reading the British, the French, even the Italian press. Everything here is slanted. I mean, to watch Bush doing his little war dance in Congress . . . about "evildoers" and this "axis of evil" -- Iran, Iraq and North Korea. I thought, he doesn't even know what the word *axis* means. Somebody just gave it to him. And the press didn't even call him on it. This is about as mindless a statement as you could make. Then he comes up with about a dozen other countries that might have "evil people" in them, who might commit "terrorist acts." What is a terrorist act? Whatever he thinks is a terrorist act. And we are going to go after them. Because we are good and they are evil. And we're "gonna git 'em."

Anybody who could get up and make that speech to the American people is not himself an idiot, but he's convinced we are idiots. And we are not idiots. We are cowed. Cowed by disinformation from the media, a skewed view of the world, and atrocious taxes that subsidize this permanent war machine. And we have no representation. Only the corporations are represented in Congress. That's why only 24 percent of the American people cast a vote for George W. Bush.

Marc Cooper: I know you'd hate to take this to the *ad hominem* level, but indulge me for a moment. What about George W. Bush, the man?

- Gore Vidal:** You mean George W. Bush, the cheerleader. That's the only thing he ever did of some note in his life. He had some involvement with a baseball team . . .
- Marc Cooper:** He owned it . . .
- Gore Vidal:** Yeah, he owned it, bought with other people's money. Oil people's money. So he's never really worked, and he shows very little capacity for learning. For them to put him up as president and for the Supreme Court to make sure that he won was as insulting as when his father, George Bush, appointed Clarence Thomas to the Supreme Court -- done just to taunt the liberals. And then, when he picked Quayle for his vice president, that showed such contempt for the American people. This was someone as clearly unqualified as Bush Sr. was to be president. Because Bush Sr., as Richard Nixon said to a friend of mine when Bush was elected [*imitating Nixon*], "He's a lightweight, a complete lightweight, there's nothing there. He's a sort of person you appoint to things."
- So the contempt for the American people has been made more vivid by the two Bushes than all of the presidents before them. Although many of them had the same contempt. But they were more clever about concealing it.
- Marc Cooper:** Should the U.S. just pack up its military from everywhere and go home?
- Gore Vidal:** Yes. With no exceptions. We are not the world's policeman. And we cannot even police the United States, except to steal money from the people and generally wreak havoc. The police are perceived quite often, and correctly, in most parts of the country as the enemy. I think it is time we roll back the empire -- it is doing no one any good. It has cost us trillions of dollars, which makes me feel it's going to fold on its own because there isn't going to be enough money left to run it.
- Marc Cooper:** You call yourself one of the last defenders of the American Republic against the American Empire. Do you have any allies left? I mean, we really don't have a credible opposition in this country, do we?
- Gore Vidal:** I sometimes feel like I am the last defender of the republic. There are plenty of legal minds who defend the Bill of Rights, but they don't seem very vigorous. I mean, after 9/11 there was silence as one after another of these draconian, really totalitarian laws were put in place.
- Marc Cooper:** So what's the way out of this? Back in the '80s you used to call for a new sort of populist constitutional convention. Do you still believe that's the fix?
- Gore Vidal:** Well, it's the least bloody. Because there will be trouble, and big trouble. The loons got together to get a balanced-budget amendment, and they got a majority of states to agree to a constitutional convention. Senator Sam Ervin, now dead, researched what would happen in such a convention, and apparently everything would be up for grabs. Once we the people are assembled, as the Constitution

requires, we can do anything, we can throw out the whole executive, the judiciary, the Congress. We can put in a Tibetan lama. Or turn the country into one big Scientological clearing center.

And the liberals, of course, are the slowest and the stupidest, because they do not understand their interests. The right wing are the bad guys, but they know what they want -- everybody else's money. And they know they don't like blacks and they don't like minorities. And they like to screw everyone along the way.

But once you know what you want, you are in a stronger position than those who can only say, "Oh no, you mustn't do *that*." That we must have free speech. Free speech for what? To agree with *The New York Times*?

The liberals always say, "Oh my, if there is a constitutional convention, they will take away the Bill of Rights." But they have already done it! It is gone. Hardly any of it is left. So if they, the famous "they," would prove to be a majority of the American people and did not want a Bill of Rights, then I say, let's just get it over with. Let's just throw it out the window. If you don't want it, you won't have it.

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1. For further details on this history see also William Blum's edifying and exhaustive *Killing Hope: U.S. Military and CIA Interventions Since World War II* with 55 chapters spanning interventions throughout the world from 1945 to 1994 and three appendices, the third of which lists 40 U.S. government assassination plots of prominent foreign individuals since the end of WWII and his 1993 work *Rogue State: A Guide to the World's Only Superpower*. In September 2002 in an article entitled "Why Terrorists Hate America", Blum closed with the words,

If I were the president, I could stop terrorist attacks against the United States in a few days. Permanently. I would first apologize to all the widows and orphans, the tortured and impoverished, and all the many millions of other victims of American imperialism. Then I would announce, in all sincerity, to every corner of the world, that America's global interventions have come to an end, and inform Israel that it is no longer the 51st state of the USA but now -- oddly enough -- a foreign country. I would then reduce the military budget by at least 90% and use the savings to pay reparations to the victims. There would be more than enough money. One year's military budget of 330 billion dollars is equal to more than \$18,000 an hour for every hour since Jesus Christ was born. That's what I'd do on my first three days in the White House. On the fourth day, I'd be assassinated.