Global Feuding: Regime Change and Retribution

A democratic society in its thirst for liberty may fall under the influence of bad leaders.
Plato, *Tyranny, The Republic* (c.400 BC, 8:563)

You can fight on the side of the angels and nevertheless commit crimes against humanity.
Desmond da Silva, Deputy Prosecutor at Sierra Leone Special Court, 2004

In 2001, global leadership accountability seemed to go wrong. The plane attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon and over Pennsylvania on 11 September (9/11) which killed around 3,000 civilians, subsequent further crimes termed ‘terrorism’ and the US-led military responses all represented retributive accountability. The 9/11 attacks rationalized US-led military retaliation, first in Afghanistan because it hosted al-Qaida, and then in Iraq, which was falsely linked with al-Qaida. The US-led action was presented in relation to a so-called ‘axis of evil’ – which included Iraq, Iran and North Korea – within the slogan a ‘war against terrorism’. The Iraq invasion appeared to mimic terrorist tactics – it was named ‘shock and awe’.

The purpose here is not to provide a complete account of events surrounding the 9/11 attacks, nor to assess whether the actions of the US or other parties were morally or legally justified. The aim is to describe and explain these happenings in the context of an era of accountability, in the light of information that was in the public domain and would therefore influence the calls for accountability. Why did action to oust a nasty despot, which should have attracted global praise, instead attract global criticism? What was the nature of the challenges to US, British
and other leaders in relation to the broader accountability movement? And why did these leaders pursue policies that were founded on so little evidence and seemed so unaccountable by contemporary norms?

Noam Chomsky points out that the public challenge to the military action against Iraq was categorically different to that in Vietnam, because it started before the invasion, and this ‘reflects a steady increase over these years in unwillingness to tolerate aggression and atrocities [by states]’. He talked of the ‘“second superpower”, public opinion’. And continued: ‘Not only was “revisionism” of the [US] political leadership without precedent; so to was the opposition to it.’

The argument in this chapter is that the events surrounding 9/11 fitted a bigger pattern of change about global leadership accountability, on all sides.

The context

The 9/11 attacks appeared as last-resort deeds by frustrated and ideologically extreme groups who could see no other means to question the way in which the US government used its power throughout the world. There were no threats or demands associated with this new form of international crime. It was not blackmail. The targets and the timing were the message – a dislike of the economic, military and political use of power by US institutions, their leaders, and those who supported them. The weapons were also new. They were, as the Cambridge Security Seminar in 2004 argued, ‘instruments of mass effect’, not weapons of mass destruction as popularist politicians claimed. They deployed a combination of spectacular, small-scale (in terms of war) violence and large-scale media reporting to achieve their impact. The Islamist network al-Qaida and its apparent leader Osama bin Laden were presented as culpable for most of the attacks.

In Iraq the work of UN weapons inspectors, led by Hans Blix, had been suddenly curtailed to permit the invasion in March 2003. A copious written response from the Iraqi government to the UN, to questions about its weapons programmes, was only made public by US authorities after thousands of pages had been removed. Bush justified the invasion by claiming that Iraq had posed a ‘grave and gathering threat to America and the world’. A CIA report, *Iraq's mass destruction weapons programs*, claimed in 2002:

> Iraq has continued its weapons of mass destruction (WMDs) programs in defiance of UN resolutions and restrictions. Baghdad has chemical and biological weapons as well as missiles with ranges in