

War as Game

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“The enemy we’re fighting is a bit different from the one we war-gamed against.”

- General William Wallace, Commander of V Corps, 28 March, 2003

When asked what he [Iraq’s UN ambassador Mohammed Al-Douri] meant when he said, “The game is over,” he responded, “The war.”

- “‘Game is over,’ says Iraq’s UN envoy,” *Hareetz*, 12 April, 2003

NOW MIGHT NOT BE THE most appropriate time—with looped images playing on the television of Saddam Hussein’s statuesque fall from power—to consider the relationship of war to game. However, no war has ever been so enabled by the attributes, defined by the language, and played by (and against) the rules of the game than the war in Iraq. As the velocity of strategic movement was force-multiplied by the immediacy of the televisual moment; as the virtuality of high technology warfare was enhanced by the reality of low battlefield casualties; as the military and the media as well as weapon-systems and sign-systems became mutually embedded; as the viewer became player: war and game melded in realtime on primetime.

Regardless of the moment, to speak of war as a game is always to invite attack, and in keeping with the spirit of the new U.S. national security strategy, I would like to begin with a pre-emptive strike of my own. Let me be blunt: war with Iraq is not simply a game—it is a stupid game. I believe that it will prove to be a waste of lives, resources and the world standing of the United States. Indeed, it seems like a waste of time and intelligence even to speak of this war as rational activity, as a Clausewitzian continuation of politics by other means. Between the 11 September attack and the first shot of the second Gulf War, a mimetic war of fundamentalisms set a predestined

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course; in this regard, Bin Laden has succeeded. Hence, I will not attempt to justify my critical position by theoretical arguments or dress up my analysis in academic footnotes. A descriptive account and a pragmatic approach should provide a sufficient self-deconstruction for any reader not in the grip of a conspiracy theory about oil or with a

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theological predilection for self-righteousness. I intend to apply the commonsensical wisdom so nonsensically expressed by Yogi Berra, catcher, manager, and utility philosopher of the New York Yankees. His language games capture the contingencies and para-

doxes of life better than most academic semioticians. Two of his best-known utterances might appear to be contradictory, but in the context of the times, from the seismic shift of the 9-11 attack to the recurrence of the Gulf War, they aptly bracket our predicament. As the great Yogi said: "The future ain't what it used to be," and, "It's déjà vu, all over again."

It is safe to say that after 11 September, the future was most definitely not what it used to be, most certainly not for the United States. It was hard for us to imagine, let alone maintain, a link between a happy past and a rosy future after such an unexpected catastrophe, especially one in which terrorist technologies of mass destruction were so effectively multiplied by the media's technologies of mass distraction. The future, once consigned after the Cold War by Francis Fukuyama and other foreign policy experts to the dustbin of history as an out-dated notion, had once again become 'interesting.' How to make the future safe again? War-as-game would do the trick.

War-as-game, of course, is not the same as a war game (see the articles by Jim Dunnigan and Kenneth Watman). Yet the conflation and confusion of war with game would not be taking place were it not for the rapid development and proliferation of war gaming in the United States defense and foreign policies. Some local history can illuminate this point. In 1889 Major William Livermore of the Army Corp of Engineers joined William McCarty Little and Rear Admiral Alfred Thayer Mahan at the Naval War College in Newport, Rhode Island to establish the first modern system of war gaming in the United States. Taking their cue from the Prussians who successively used *Kriegsspiel* ('war play') to defeat the Austrians at Sadowa in 1866 and the French in 1870, the early U.S. war gamers were vindicated by the stunning victory of the Japanese over the Russians in 1904 (plotted out beforehand with newly created war games), and then with the successful anticipation of just about every aspect of the Pacific campaign of World War II against Japan (except the use of *kamikaze* tactics). The Naval

War College closed down its old tiled war gaming room in 1958, replacing it with the computerized Navy Electronic Warfare System (NEWS) that cost more than US\$10 million dollars and filled a three-story building. Today a single desktop computer in the Naval War College's new state-of-the-art McCarty-Little Hall outperforms all of the NEWS technology. From the early spatial movement of toy soldiers and cardboard ships on contoured sand tables to the live, virtual and constructive simulations of fully immersive environments, a quantum leap in verisimilitude has been made in war gaming. Improvement produced an ironic outcome: the better the simulation, the higher the risk of confusing war as game.

A VIRTUOUS GAME

With the future of the future at stake, *virtuous war* is leading the way in the hybridization of warring and gaming. Designed by the Pentagon, auditioned in the Balkans, and dress-rehearsed in Afghanistan, virtuous war took center stage in the invasion of Iraq. Virtuous war projects a technological and ethical superiority in which computer simulation, media dissimulation, global surveillance, and networked warfare combine to deter, discipline, and if need be, destroy the enemy. Ethically intentioned and virtually applied, drawing on the doctrines of just war when possible and holy war when necessary, virtuous war is more than a felicitous oxymoron. After 11 September, as the United States chose coercion over diplomacy in its foreign policy, and deployed a rhetoric of total victory over absolute evil, virtuous war became the ultimate means by which the United States intended to re-secure its borders, assert its suzerainty, and secure the holy trinity of international order—free markets, vassal states, and preventive wars. It became the only game in town.

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Obviously there is a difference between war and games. Unlike most games, war involves people dying. However, the technological properties and political imperatives of virtuous war skew the casualty rates, both off and on the battlefield. From a super-power perspective, the trend is pronounced: 270 U.S. troops died in the last Gulf War—over half by 'friendly-fire' or accidents; 18 soldiers killed in the Mogadishu raid; an astonishing zero casualty conflict for the NATO forces in Kosovo. In Afghanistan, by the end of the major hostilities in January, twenty U.S. military personnel were killed overseas in the line of duty, the majority of whom died in accidents or by friendly fire. Only one soldier, Sgt. First Class Nathan Chapman, was actually killed by hostile fire. As was the case in the Kosovo campaign, more journalists *covering* the war were killed by hostile fire—10 by the end of January—than U.S. soldiers fighting the war.

On the other side of the virtuous battlefield, figures for enemy casualties as well as civilians have always been hard to come by. We do know, compared to statistics a

century ago, the ratio of military to civilian casualties has become reversed: in war it is now 1:8. However, we still do not have solid numbers for the dead Iraqis, Somalis, or Serbs. As the war was winding down in Afghanistan, estimates of enemy combatant deaths ranged wildly. When Marc Herold of the University of New Hampshire calculated over 3,000 Afghan non-combatant casualties, a maelstrom of controversy erupted. And after the battle of Gardez in early March (in which eight more U.S. soldiers were killed in combat), General Tommy Franks openly declared, "You know, we don't do body counts." This was a policy that he would continue as commander of the U.S. forces in Iraq. Two weeks into the Iraq war, U.S. Central Command's chief spokesman, Captain Frank Thorp, provided a figure of 73 U.S. and British troops killed. When asked by a reporter from the *New York Times* about Iraqi dead, he stated that "the numbers are not knowable, and besides, that number may not be an indication of anything." One week later, after Baghdad was taken, a total of 138 U.S. and British troops were listed as killed. So far, the pattern of casualty rates resemble earlier virtuous wars: ratios of around 30-40 percent for troops killed by accident and friendly fire; 11 journalists killed (a death ratio roughly 16 times that of the U.S. and British military); and, after an extensive Google search of multiple news sources, the number of Iraqis killed range from 2,000-10,000 for troops and 1,000-3,000 for civilians.

Although represented by the military and the media as 'accidental' or 'incidental', friendly-fire ('blue-on-blue') deaths as well as the increased ratio of friendly-fire deaths to hostile fire deaths are built into the system of virtuous war. This partially reflects the increased complexity of networked warfare, in which precision munitions play a significant part. In the first Gulf War—and in spite of the images produced by the military briefings—less than 10 percent of the weapons used were 'smart'; by the second Gulf War, the figure was just under 70 percent (the figures seem to remain less precise than the weapons themselves). With increased precision comes an increase in lethality. This was evident in Afghanistan when three members of the U.S. Army 5th Special Forces Group team were killed and nineteen soldiers wounded after they mistakenly gave their own geo-coordinates for a satellite-guided JDAMS; and when two US F-16 pilots dropped a 500-pound smart bomb on Canadian troops engaged in a training exercise, killing four and wounding eight.

The precision munitions of virtuous war have other targets as well, most notably the ever-lingering legacy of the 'Vietnam Syndrome'—the erosion of public support if body-bags come home in high numbers. The Vietnam Syndrome resurfaced at the beginning of the first Gulf War, and was countered by the Powell Doctrine of overwhelming force, which meant sending 550,000 troops to the Gulf and mounting a six-week air campaign before the actual ground war began. At the end of the war, the Vietnam Syndrome was officially declared 'kicked' by the first President Bush during a

speech at the Raytheon plant that made the Patriot missiles (which, according to Congressional Report 102-1086, destroyed 100 percent of Scuds during the war, 96 percent in testimony to Congress after the war, 25 percent after a review by the Army, and less than 9 percent after an independent review).

The low risk, high yield strategy of virtuous war has a logic of its own, in which the human role is shrinking in numbers and significance in an increasingly robotic battlespace. To be sure, 'boots on the ground' remain and will continue to be necessary in land warfare. But the pixels are already on the screen: at the macro-level of war gaming, 'OPLAN 1003 Victor' (the controversial war plan for the invasion of Iraq), called for three fewer divisions than had been recommended by Pentagon's traditionalists; and at the micro-level, virtuous war came of age when a Predator drone with Hellfire missiles first found an Al Qaeda "target of opportunity" in the Yemen desert and was ordered from six thousand miles away to shoot to kill.

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From the first to the second Gulf War, from Bosnia to Kosovo, and from Afghanistan to Iraq, virtuous war has taken on the properties of a game, with high production values, mythic narratives, easy victories, and few bodies. From the decision to deploy troops to the daily order of battle, from the highest reaches of policy-making to the lowest levels of field tactics and logistics, war games, computer simulations, and command post exercises make war into a game.

Drawing from my earlier work on this topic, I can reconstruct a short history of this development. General Schwarzkopf learned in 1988 that Iraq was using a software program supplied by an U.S. engineering company to run computer simulations and war games for the invasion of Kuwait. One response from the General was to prepare his own war game, and in July 1990 at U.S. Central Command in Tampa, Florida, command post exercise 'Internal Look '90' was run. According to a Central Command news release issued at the time, "command and control elements from all branches of the military will be responding to real-world scenarios similar to those they might be expected to confront within the Central Command AOR." Iraq invaded Kuwait while the exercise was still running, and Schwarzkopf recounts in his memoirs how Central Command often confused communications from the real invasion with the simulated event. At the height of the U.S. air campaign in Iraq, when smart bombs, stealth technology, and networked war made their debut on CNN, Schwarzkopf was famously confronted by ABC correspondent Cokie Roberts on a satellite link-up:

Roberts: You see a building in a sight, it looks more like a video game than anything

else. Is there any sort of danger that we don't have any sense of the horrors of war—that it's all a game?

Schwarzkopf: You didn't see me treating it like a game. And you didn't see me laughing and joking while it was going on. There are human lives being lost, and at this stage of the game [sic] this is not a time for frivolity on the part of anybody.

In the space of a single sound-bite Schwarzkopf revealed the inability of the military and the public to maintain the distinction between warring and gaming in the age of video.

Games returned with a vengeance for Gulf War II. In December, Central Command forward-deployed to Qatar to play Internal Look 2002. This time the media was invited along, and they willingly played the role of force-multiplier in the Bush Administration's game of coercive diplomacy/preventive war. The various tenets of the "RMA"—the revolution in military affairs—were fully evident in the Iraq War, not only in the unfolding of OPLAN 1003 V but by the high values placed on flexibility, speed, and information. The opening decapitation strike, the infowar of 'shock and awe', the reliance on light ground forces and precision munitions for a 'rolling start', all reflect Secretary of Defense Rumsfeld's efforts to implement a radical transformation in how the United States fights.

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However, like Schwarzkopf did twelve years earlier, the White House and the Pentagon are showing some sensitivity to the confusion of war as game. Before the war started, Deputy Defense Secretary Paul D. Wolfowitz visited the Council for Foreign Relations in New York City and said, repeatedly, "this is not a game":

Iraq has had 12 years now to disarm, as it agreed to do at the conclusion of the Gulf War. But, so far, it has treated disarmament like a game of hide and seek, or, as Secretary of State Powell has termed it, "rope-a-dope in the desert." But this is not a game.

He goes on in a similar vein:

Sending a few hundred inspectors to search an area the size of the state of California would be to send them on a fool's errand or to play a game. And let me repeat: this is not a game... Long ago, Iraq became accustomed to the fact that even when caught, the consequences could be negligible. And hence a new game entered the lexicon: cheat-and-retreat... Furthermore, according to these reports, the material is moved constantly, making it difficult to trace or find without absolutely fresh intelligence. It is a shell game played on a grand scale with deadly serious weapons... The purpose of Resolution 1441, I repeat, was not to play a deadly game of hide-and-seek or cheat-and-retreat for another 12 years. The purpose was to achieve a clear resolution of the threat posed by Iraq's weapons of mass terror.

On 22 January 2003, President Bush had a brief, unscripted exchange with the press:

This business about, you know, more time—you know, how much time do we need to see clearly that he's [Saddam Hussein] not disarming. This looks like a rerun of a bad movie and I'm not interested in watching it.

In other words, Iraq plays games and makes bad movies. As I stated at the outset, to treat war as a game is to invite attack. So too when the high expectations of a “cakewalk” were not met. Secretary of Defense Rumsfeld and the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs, General Myers, went on the offensive against a growing body of critics—some of whom, like retired General McCaffrey, were high-ranking officers who led the troops in the first Gulf War—of what had become simply known as the ‘the plan’. Pounding the podium during a press conference, Myers denounced those who chose to engage in “a great sport here inside the Beltway” and “to criticize something [the plan] that they’ve never seen.” After uttering his trademark ‘goodness gracious,’ Rumsfeld let loose with one of his fiercer remonstrations after a reporter queried him about ‘the plan’:

Q: Mr. Secretary, are you distancing yourself from the plans? You know, every time you say—

Rumsfeld: Oh, let me answer that. I'd love to.

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Q: —every time you say, “You know, it's not my plan; I'd like to take credit for it,” the people around you are saying, “See? He is distancing himself.”

Rumsfeld: Not at all. As I said, I think it is a superb plan. I was involved—

Q: But —(off mic)— with your philosophy and didn't your philosophy have a lot to do with how this came out?

Rumsfeld: Goodness, gracious! You know, it's like having a process that goes on for five or six months, with a lot of people in the room, people all talking, discussing, asking questions. I mostly ask questions. I—

Q: But you're the boss, though.

Rumsfeld: Well, I'm the boss, but I'm not the person who designs war plans.

Who then, fathered “the plan?” To be sure, the swiftness of victory as well as the success of the peace will determine whether it will be adopted—or orphaned—by all. But the plan seems to take on a life of its own; not unlike the Great Yogi's sense of *déjà vu* all over again, the past becomes the future as a feedforward loop of the already known, as the familiar that has no source. *Déjà vu* becomes a symptom—like the black cat twice-

seen by Neo in *The Matrix*—of a glitch in the simulacrum, of war with no rational origin but the game itself. *Déjà vu* might produce great visions among shamans, but among our current leaders it provides the false security of an uncertain future tamed by holistic simulations.

Of course, the White House and the Pentagon have key allies in this campaign to pre-empt the future. When the future becomes a feedback loop of simulations (war games, training exercises, scenario planning, modeling) and dissimulations (propaganda, disinformation, deceit and lies), the vaunted firewall between the military and the

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media is about as formidable as an Iraqi border berm. We face a full-fledged infowar. Less than a week into the invasion of Iraq, after decapitation strikes by cruise missiles and F-117's, breathless reports by journalists traversing the desert with the troops, and Defense Department briefings of 'awe and shock' over Baghdad, the fighting and

the reporting of the second Gulf War blurred into a combined information operation. Surfing the channels and scanning the pages of the U.S. media exposed media consumers to high cross-spectral doses of hi-tech exhibitionism and media voyeurism. Infowar, deployed after 11 September as the discontinuation of diplomacy by other means, became a force-multiplier in Iraq, a weapon of destruction as well as persuasion and distraction.

EMBEDDING THE GAME

The wild cards in this new infowar were the embedded journalists. After the protests by the press of being excluded from the U.S. invasions of Grenada, and the first Gulf War, the Defense Department came up with the idea of selectively placing journalists in the various armed services, aboard ships at sea as well as on the frontlines of the battlefield. It was, given the new technological capabilities of the media as well as the uncertainties of the outcome, a courageous decision by the Pentagon. Yet, as a war long-billed as virtuous and rapid failed to achieve success according to the plan, that is, before images of POWs, unexpected casualty rates, and the fog (and sandstorms) of war became a public issue, the Pentagon might have viewed it as a regrettable decision.

Moreover, lost in the hoopla over the stories and images streaming in from the desert was the fact that the military had taken over the television studios. Retired Generals and flag officers exercised full spectrum dominance on cable and network TV as well as on commercial and public radio. The new public affairs officers of the military-industrial-media-entertainment network included Clark and Sheppard on CNN, Nash and Hawley on ABC, Kernan and Ralston on CBS, McCaffrey and Meigs on NBC,

and Olstrom and Scales on NPR. Fox News alone had enough ex-military to stage their own Veteran's Day parade. A relationship that had always been intimate in times of crisis now appeared incestuous. Color commentary and shades of opinion were effectively reduced to the nightscope-green of videophone verite in the desert and red, white, and blue in the studios.

In addition to the content bias created by a pre-selection of what can be said by whom, a techno-aesthetic kicked in with visual vengeance. When the war premiered, the television studios introduced new sets that mimicked the command and control centers of the military. FOX

News actually referred to its own, without a trace of Strangelovian irony, as the "War Room." Computer-generated graphics of the Iraq battlespace were created by the same defense indus-

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tries (like Evans and Sutherland, Digital Globe and Analytical Graphics) and commercial satellite imaging firms (like Space Imaging and Earthviewer.com) that supply the U.S. military. The networks showcased a veritable Jane's Defense Review of weapon-systems, providing 'virtual views' of Iraq and military hardware that are practically indistinguishable from target acquisition displays.

Once again, the image won out over the word. When pictures proved hard to get, celebrity anchors were reduced to googling their reporters for substitutes: in the course of one day, Peter Jennings and Ted Koppel, both from ABC, asked reporters in the field to "give us a word-picture of that." Supporting the troops became the method and mantra of avoiding any analysis or value judgments on whether force was justified, under what circumstances, and with what potential consequences, intended or not. By the week's end of the war, the only general criticism was that the campaign was not following the Pentagon's pre-script of "shock and awe." War is unpredictable like that.

Obviously, there are multiple forms and a wider range of media now in play, but I want to focus on the transformations triggered by this intimacy between primetime media, realtime media, and the military. Again, some history might be helpful. By now there should be no need to rehearse the fall-of-the-wall and rise-of-the-internet story, but we do need to take account of how the coeval devolution of the Soviet Union into Russia and of ARPANET into the Internet produced important new constellations of power. Many international relations scholars saw the end of the Cold War as an occasion to spin theories over the merits of multipolar over unipolar state-systems, or like Kenneth Waltz, to wax nostalgic over the stability of a bipolar order. These debates

continued to be predominately state-centric as well as materialist in their interpretation of how power works. The United States has emerged as the dominant military and economic power, and even in Paul Wolfowitz's worst-case nightmares, it is difficult to identify even potential peer competitors on the horizon. Post-Cold War, post-911, we witness instead the emergence of a *heteropolar matrix*, in which actors are radically different in identity and interests (state, corporate, group, individual) yet suddenly comparable in their capability to produce global effects. These actors function nodally in real-time networks rather than interacting contiguously in territorial politics. To tell their story we must operationalize a concept that aptly captures this new interpenetration of media and war: infowar.

INFOWAR

Information warfare is essentially a struggle between intelligence and force, signs and weapons, of mind and body. Notorious for its many definitions, the meaning of infowar shifts with escalating phases of violence. In its most basic and material form, infowar is an adjunct of conventional war, in which command and control of the battlefield is augmented by computers, communications, and intelligence. At the next remove, infowar is a supplement of military violence, in which information technologies are used to further the defeat of a foreign opponent and the support of a domestic population. In its purest, most immaterial form, infowar is warring without war, an epistemic battle for reality in which opinions, beliefs, and decisions are created and destroyed by a contest of networked information and communication systems.

Infowar has a history that goes back at least as far as Sun Tzu, who identified the ability to subdue an enemy without killing him as the "acme of skill" in warfare. From its earliest application in the beating of gongs and drums, to the more sophisticated use of propaganda and psychological operations, infowar has traditionally been deployed by the military as a "force-multiplier" of other, more conventional forms of violence. With the development of mass and multiple media, infowar took on new forms and greater significance in the modern policy. New organizational structures enabled by information technologies began to transform the nature and culture of commerce, politics, and the military, effecting a gradual and uneven shift from rigid, centralized hierarchies to fluid, nodal networks.

Infowar has become the umbrella concept for understanding the new network wars. As the infosphere engulfs the biosphere, as the global struggle for "full spectrum dominance" supplants discrete battlefields, as transnational business, criminal, and terrorist networks challenge the supremacy and sovereignty of the territorial state, infowar has ascended as a (if not *the* most) significant site for the struggle of power and knowl-

edge. Under the mosaic of infowar we witness the emergence of cyberwars, hackerwars, netwars, virtual wars, and other kinds of information-based conflicts that ignore and defy the usual boundaries between domestic and foreign, combatants and non-combatants, war and peace itself. More a weapon of mass persuasion and distraction than destruction, infowar nonetheless shares some common characteristics with nuclear war: it targets civilian as well as military populations and its exchange-value as a deterrent outweighs its use-value as an actual weapon.

Infowar couples sign-systems and weapons-systems. Command and control, simulation and dissimulation, deception and destruction, virtual reality and hyperreality: all are binary functions—sometimes symbiotic, other times antagonistic—of infowar. Networks of remote sensing and iconic representation enable the targeting, demonization, and, if necessary, killing of the enemy. In its ‘hard’ form, infowar provides ‘battlespace domination’ by violent (GPS-guided missiles and bombs) as well non-lethal (pulse weapons and psychological operations) applications of technology. In its ‘soft’ form, infowar includes a virus attack on a computer network or the wiping out of terrorist organization’s bank accounts. In its most virtual form, infowar can generate simulated battlefields or even create ‘Wag-the-Dog’ versions of a terrorist event. In any of these three forms, infowar can be offensive (network-centric war, Trojan horse virus, or public dissimulations) or defensive (ballistic missile defense, network firewall, or preventive media).

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A GAME OF MIMESIS

The charge of moral equivalency—in which any attempt at explanation is identified as an act of exoneration—should not deter investigations into the dangers of the mimetic relationships operating in war and games. People go to war not only out of rational calculation but also because of how they see, perceive, picture, imagine, and speak of each other: that is, how they construct the difference of other groups as well as the sameness of their own. Bin Laden and Saddam Hussein are not the first to mine this act of mimesis for political advantage. From Greek tragedy and Roman gladiatorial spectacles to futurist art and fascist rallies, mimetic violence has regularly overpowered democratic discourse.

The question, then, is how long after Baghdad has fallen will this mimetic game of terror and counter-terror last? Bush, Bin Laden and Saddam Hussein need their mimetic foes—it takes two to play. Without a reciprocal hatred, their politics and prophecies lose their self-fulfilling powers. Historically, terrorist movements either evolve into states, or, without a mass base, they quickly weaken and rarely last longer than a decade. And empires inevitably, by over-reach or defeat, fall. However, this mimetic struggle, magnified by the media, fought by advanced technologies of destruction, and

unchecked by the UN or U.S. allies, has now developed a logic of its own in which assimilation or extermination become plausible solutions, credible policies.

Under such circumstances, one longs for the sure bet, a predictable unfolding of events, or at least a comforting conclusion. "At this stage of the game" (as Schwartzkopf said in the midst of GW1), I have none, because the currently designed game, to rid the world of evil, cannot possibly find an end. Inevitably, what Edmund Burke called the empire of circumstance will surely, and let us hope not too belatedly, trump Bush's imperial game as well as Bin Laden's terrorist one. When tempted in the interim by the promise of virtuous war to solve the world's problems, we best listen to the great Yogi: "If the world were perfect, it wouldn't be." 