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Duckspeak Crusader
Greg Sheridan’s unique brand of seculo-Christian morality

"There is a core of faith in the US-Iraq coalition that will prevail in Iraq. And I am sitting in the office of Optimism Central, here in the Pentagon where Paul Wolfowitz, the US Deputy Secretary of Defense, chief intellectual architect of the Iraq invasion and high priest of the neo-conservatives, sits."

We’re not told how Greg Sheridan got so close to the centre of American military power in April this year. We may never know what strings were pulled by Bush-supporter and Australian publisher, Rupert Murdoch, or by Australian officials. However, Sheridan’s exclusive interview demonstrates the extraordinary access that the Australian’s trusted reporters have to the current US administration.

Foreign Editor for the Australian, Sheridan is a very powerful journalist, beholden to no-one except perhaps his employer. The Australian describes him as “the most influential foreign affairs analyst in Australian journalism”, a line repeated in promotion of Sheridan at an American-Australian Association function in New York this year.

Sheridan is a Catholic who, despite the “sex scandals...the general disarray and the rampant tomfoolery” in the Church, is “still a believer”. These influences—Murdoch and Catholicism—might explain the language he uses and the positions he takes against so-called Islamic extremism in column after column of newsprint. Sheridan’s brand of seculo-Christian morality has much in common with that of the two neo-conservative leaders he so fervently admires and supports, John W. Howard and George W. Bush. It’s now well-known that the American military-political machine is dominated by neo-conservatives: Wolfowitz, Cheney, Rice and Bush himself, all shrouded in a narrow Christian rhetoric. Philosopher Peter Singer identifies Bush as America’s “most prominent moralist”, saying: “No other president in living memory has spoken so often about good and evil, right and wrong”. Just as Singer dubs Bush “the President of Good and Evil”, we might call Sheridan Australia’s most prominent journalist of good and evil. His columns are peppered with the language of moral absolutism: “good versus evil”, “right versus wrong” and “us versus them”. These are the recurring emotive frames he uses to discuss the so-called ‘war on terror’ and the invasion of Iraq.

When one looks closely at this oeuvre, what becomes clear is that Sheridan is an ideologue, a crusader and an apologist for one of the most barbaric regimes on the planet. A regime whose acolytes, without question, back the war crimes and despotic violence suffered by those who disagree with its religious fundamentalism and lust for world domination. In Sheridan’s world view it is legitimate to vilify, denigrate and misrepresent your intellectual and political opponents, while maintaining your own position in the face of competing facts and analysis.

THE JOURNALIST OF GOOD AND EVIL
Despite Sheridan’s protestations that the ‘war on terror’ is not a war against Islam or a clash of civilisations, his columns repeatedly cast the world within a good versus evil framework, reflecting the pervasiveness of a post-Cold War ‘terrorism’ news frame in contemporary mainstream media report-
ing." This is reminiscent of the old Cold War news frame, which dramatised superpower rivalries and pitted East against West, or capitalism against communism.11 With the "reds" purged from under the beds, bomb-wielding Islamic fundamentalists have emerged as the new scourge of the modern world. As Christopher Kremmer notes:

"Media reporting on the war on terror is riddled with the simplistic notion that this is a battle between innately good, wise, Western, liberal, democratic paragons and dark-skinned, bearded, fanatical, evildoers."10

The concept of the Other being demonised to define and reproduce a positive self-image, personally and culturally, has reached widespread academic acceptance, particularly through the writings of Edward Said. Yet what is interesting about the terror news frame, and particularly Sheridan's invocation of it, is the Christian ethic implicit in depicting the 'war on terror' as a fight against evil:

"the evil men who murdered our people and others in Bali";11 "Hezbollah, and its evil dealings with the fallen regime of Saddam Hussein";12 "the evil and the danger represented by JI and its affiliates";13 "the pure evil that was communism";14 "the evil which the US and its coalition partners are fighting in Iraq";15 an "evil moment in the relationship between Islam and the West".16

In this respect Sheridan has much in common with Bush, who famously coined the term 'axis of evil' to bizarrely unite the otherwise disparate states of Iraq, Iran and North Korea. Singer notes:

"Bush often talks of "the evil ones" and even occasionally of those who are "servants of evil". He urges us to "call evil by its name", to "fight evil" and tells us that out of evil will come good. This language comes straight out of apocalyptic Christianity."17

The urgency with which Sheridan demands action against the "existential threat"18 of terrorism is reminiscent of the Christian prophecy that a dramatic rise of evil will precede the triumph of God's forces before the second coming of Christ. His frequent references to "evil men", his strident support for military action in Afghanistan and Iraq, his identification with the "good guy"19 and his childlike reverence for America as it "spreads its all-powerful wings"20 suggest a similar apocalyptic concern with the struggle between God's benevolent forces and His satanic enemies.

**WAR OF SURVIVAL**

On the first day of the Australian's coverage of the Bali bombings, Sheridan dubbed them the work of "evil men" who specifically targeted Australians.21 Three days later he deduced a motive behind this evil, proclaiming "They hate us for our oddly persistent goodness".22 A self-styled, homegrown terror expert, Sheridan chides the "self obsessed" liberal intellectuals who focus too much on failings of the West in analysing the causes of terrorism, instead of getting inside the minds of the terrorists.23 If terror is the result of evil, then what can be done but stamp it out with military force—it's all "they" understand. Debate about the structural causes of terrorism, like Western imperialism and the injustices inherent in global capitalism, is then closed.

By April this year, Sheridan was taking care to distance himself from Bush's "uncharacteristic slip of briefly using the term crusade",24 describing it as a term full of "menacing historical overtones of religious war for Muslims". Yet he himself had ascribed motives of "purely religious hostility" to what he describes as "Islamist extremists", such as al-Qaida and the Muslim Brotherhood. Responding to this hostility, Sheridan's writing reveals a distinctive tone of pious duty in the call to arms against Islamic terror. In an early post-Bali piece, 'This nation we love must face the threat, and fight', Sheridan speaks of facing the "existential threat" of terrorism and the need to fight for justice:

"As we bury our dead we must know that it is right to demand justice and to determine to prevail in the broader war on terror."25

This righteousness is linked to a patriotism borne of faith:

"I love it (Australia) because, of all the nations on earth, it's mine. I feel about it exactly as I feel about my family—of all the families in the world, God chose this one for me to be part of and look after. So, too, he chose this nation for me and I accepted his choice."26
The language of a God-chosen land has almost a Zionist flavour. Thus when 'Terror hit home' on 12 October 2002, evil had taken root in Sheridan's promised land, justifying and demanding a "war of survival".

Despite the religious overtones, Sheridan argues that the war on terror is not, as some have suggested, a war between civilisations, but a war within the Islamic world between moderates and extremists. He cites Anthony Cordesman of the Centre for Strategic and International Studies in Washington DC, arguing that the motive of the "extremists" is to "create an unbridgeable gap between the West and moderate Islam so that the extremists can claim political leadership in the Islamic community on the basis of their anti-Western posture".

This is a convenient position, as it absolves the "moderate" West of any responsibility for creating the "unbridgeable gap" between the Israeli and Arab regimes (a gap in part created by such war crimes as the assassination of Palestinian religious and political leaders by Israel, with the full if covert support of Washington, and the illegal invasion and occupation of Afghanistan and Iraq). It also ignores the crucial role of the American and Pakistani security intelligence services in the initial formation of 'extremist' Islamic organisations such as the Taliban in Afghanistan. Like Howard and Bush, Sheridan parrots the absurdity that Israel is the only democracy in the region and that by 'stabilising' Iraq, it will create the conditions for other Arabic regimes to embrace the market and 'democracy'.

Perhaps the logic is too blinding for such an eminent analyst of foreign affairs, but it seems all too simple: where is the democracy in Israel? On the one hand, Iraq was a dictatorship with limited electoral participation under Saddam Hussein. People were regularly beaten, tortured and killed to maintain the regime, but Iraq under Saddam did not have stockpiles of WMDs. Compare this with Israel, which has a limited parliamentary system under the effective dictatorship of Ariel Sharon. People are regularly beaten, tortured and killed to maintain the Zionist regime which is illegally occupying land, and Israel does have stockpiled WMDs.

THE NEO-CONSERVATIVE INTELLECTUAL

An infinite number of monkeys given an infinite number of typewriters probably couldn't write _Hamlet_, but it can't be beyond the bounds of possibility for a piece of software preprogrammed with the Liberal Party's playbook to reproduce the thoughts of some of Australia's right-wing commentators.

Dennis Glover's _Orwell's Australia: from cold war to culture wars_ provides some useful insights into the coterie of senior newspaper journalists to which Greg Sheridan belongs—a group whose members:

- see it as their duty to shield their favoured politicians and promote their political causes while stabbing at their opponents from close range . . . today they are overwhelmingly on the side of the conservatives, supporting the Prime Minister's culture crusade.
- Orwellian language is their forte, and Orwell would immediately have recognised their vices.

Glover neatly draws a comparison between the 'newspeak' of Orwell's _1984_ with its “imprecision that justified political barbarism” and "ugly political sound bites that expressed the orthodoxy" of Oceania's ruling class—to the 'duckspeak' that has "infected much of Australia's contemporary political commentary". He notes that many conservative commentators have expressed sympathy for the ideas of Orwell, but that their work represents "at best an ossification of Orwell's ideas, reduced to a cliche . . . they represent everything he detested". Sheridan is a master of duckspeak—the art of saying something loaded with codes and meaning, without relying on the relevant factual analysis to create true believers. As Glover notes:

> If the speaker or writer can use Duckspeak without hesitation or embarrassment and the listener or reader can take it without twitching or reaching for a revolver, they are believers in the true faith.

John Howard is clearly one of Sheridan's 'favored politicians'. We don't have to dig very far into the bedrock of Sheridan's duckspeak to find his fervent support for Howard (or his 'stabbing' at opponents such as Mark Latham). A week after the Bali bombings, Sheridan gives Howard's handling of relations with Indonesia a near perfect score:

> In this respect the Government has performed exceptionally well this week. Roward's tone and substance have been as close to perfect as you could get in this type of crisis.

Over the year, Sheridan followed Howard's line so closely that a bad week for Howard symbolised a
Sheridan has adopted the shrill neo-conservative and peculiarly American rhetoric... his language of a God-chosen land has almost a Zionist flavour.

bad week for the war in July 2003, when terror suspect Al-Ghozi escaped from a Philippines jail: “This has been a landmark bad week in the war on terror, symbolised by John Howard’s difficult tour around Asia.” When Howard proffered a muted objection to what he saw as soft punishment for the alleged spiritual leader of Jemaah Islamiyah, Sheridan said he was “admirably and correctly restrained in expressing disappointment at the lightness of the four-year sentence given to Abu Bakar Bashir”. Even as Sheridan was lambasting Australia’s woefully under-funded intelligence capabilities after the Bali bombings, he was quick to shield Howard from blame, proffering: “None of this is a criticism of the Howard Government”. And, as if the conservative Howard government needed defence against critical voices, in a country where Murdoch’s conservative newspaper empire controls two thirds of the metropolitan daily newspaper market and more than 75 per cent of the lucrative Sunday market, Sheridan took up the fight against so-called ‘liberal’ intellectuals who “should realise it is possible that a thing can be true even if Howard says it is true”. In March 2004, when public criticism of the ongoing debacle in Iraq was again mounting, Sheridan launched a scathing attack against the ABC’s Radio National, Media Watch and, for its treatment of Howard, Lateline:

While all the perfidies of George W. Bush, all the wickedness of John Howard, all the agonies of the fallen angel Tony Blair are nightly excoriated on Lateline, can you remember the last time the program took a look at what motivates al-Qa’ida?

This was in the week following the bombing in Madrid, and Sheridan parroted the argument that an amorphous ‘left-wing’ intelligentsia in Australia was acting as a form of fifth column for ‘terrorists’. Sheridan has adopted the shrill neo-conservative and peculiarly American rhetoric of using the term ‘liberal’ to describe a political position with which he disagrees (usually someone more rational or left-wing and often both). The use of this term is open to whatever interpretation suits Sheridan’s purpose. In “Writing off unreliable memoir” Sheridan favourably quotes an article by the usually suspect “liberal foreign affairs columnist” Tom Friedman in the New York Times. Why? Friedman’s column was critical of the Spanish government’s decision to withdraw its troops from Iraq. Sheridan described this decision as a ‘victory’ for al-Qa’ida: “a victory for bombs over solidarity among the democracies... Everything Friedman says about the Spanish Socialists applies with equal force to Mark Latham... Labor under Latham has weakened its position, apparently in response to the bombing”.45
UTILITARIAN DUCKSPEAK

Today too the enemy is clear. It is not the Iraqi people. It is Saddam Hussein's cruel and murderous regime, its deadly weapons of mass destruction and the support it gives to international terrorism. All war is terrible and should be treated with reverence and awe because it involves the disposition of human beings. But some wars are necessary. They are not only just but constitute the lesser evil of all available alternatives.

At the start of the Iraq invasion Sheridan was firmly committed to the duckspeak that Iraq posed a threat because there was an identified link between the regime, terrorists and WMDs (which we now know weren't there). At the same time, to treat war with "reverence and awe" is to accept its horrors as some form of divine penance. The "disposition of human beings" means wasted lives, horrible deaths, destruction and suffering. What "available alternatives" did the American regime even attempt over Iraq? At every turn they opposed and blocked efforts to prevent the war. In what sense was the illegal invasion of Iraq necessary?

Sheridan's reference to necessary wars and "lesser evil" invokes a type of utilitarianism evident in his claim that "labels don't matter—only results count": The Iraq invasion is going to be judged on its results. Only specialists will worry about its legitimacy if the outcome is a stable Iraq that represents its citizens' human rights much better than Saddam did.

So the end justifies the means. The body count of Iraqi civilians ("collateral damage") and the torture of prisoners in Abu Ghraib and Guantanamo Bay will be vindicated by a "favourable" outcome in Iraq. This means 'democracy'; but there is no way of determining when the 'war' is over. As Niran Koshy asks, "When will this War on Terror end? How will it end?". Similarly, Singer points to the "virtual certainty that war will bring great suffering, without any comparable assurance that it will have the desired good consequences".

Utilitarian arguments for war are an appeal to realpolitik sensibilities among conservative readers. Their (false) pragmatism should be read as a cover for the more contentious Christian morality that underlies Sheridan's support for the religio-imperialist war on terror.

THE COALITION OF THE SURPRISED

Three months before the invasion of Iraq, in the aftermath of the Bali bombings, Sheridan was leveraging public emotion to make a domestic justification for invading Iraq by naturalizing the dubious link between Saddam and al-Qa'ida: It is nonsense to suggest this tragedy shows we should concentrate on the war on terror and ignore Iraq. Gruesome as these terrorist outrages are, imagine what they would be like if they involved weapons of mass destruction. Iraq remains the most likely source of WMDs for al-Qa'ida.

And again: This week John Anderson told the Australian parliament what we all really know but try not to face, that there is a connection between terrorism and rogue nations with weapons of mass destruction.

At the outset of the Iraq war, when things seemed to be rosy for the invading powers, Sheridan was certain that WMDs would be found in Iraq and his language reflected this belief. A year later, Sheridan's soaring rhetoric took on a deflated tone as he was 'Mugged by Reality' when evidence of the US torture of Iraqi prisoners in Abu Ghraib prison came to light. But he had already been forced to grapple with the uncomfortable reality that the WMDs he used to justify his support for the war had not been found. It is here that Sheridan's backpedalling in the shifting sands of Iraq sink his leaden argument for war and expose its true secular-religious colours.

Sheridan was a constant and loyal disseminator of the line that the Baghdad regime had WMDs and was prepared to use them. That they hadn't been used early in the 2003 conflict was put down to the efficiency of the coalition forces in deploying "its vast intelligence strength" ('"without the presence of coalition forces it could have used WMDs easily") and to Saddam Hussein's rational thinking ("use of chemical weapons would therefore be little short of a suicide gesture").

But by the end of the first year of the Iraq crusade, when the WMDs were more elusive than ever, Sheridan became increasingly befuddled, and formed a Coalition of the Surprised to share the embarrassment. Chief among Sheridan's tame sources was the former hotshot Australian ambassador-turned-analyst Martin Indyk, who he lauded as "impartial" because Indyk was a Clinton man. Sheridan was
“refreshed” that this impartial observer was also wrong on the nukes and nerve gas:

Refreshingly, if disconcertingly, Indyk admits that he, like everyone else, just does not know what happened to Hussein’s WMDs and why none of them can be discovered. 57

At first, Sheridan remained steadfast in his support for Howard and his mates in the ‘coalition of the willing’, maintaining they never deliberately deceived the public:

On the big things—such as Saddam Hussein’s weapons of mass destruction—Bush, Blair and Howard have told us the truth. 58

When a parliamentary inquiry cleared Howard of deception in March 2004, Sheridan took solace and tried to close off debate on this uncomfortable subject, saying the report “puts the Iraq issue to bed”. 59

The failure to find WMDs was not an intelligence failing or an act of political deception by Bush, Blair or Howard. Rather it was Saddam Hussein’s fault for telling us he had WMDs:

The only world leader who practised big deception over this issue was thus Saddam... It was Saddam who intentionally convinced the world that he had WMDs so the coalition had to act on that assumption. 60

This remarkable statement would draw accolades from even the most professional of duckspeakers. Yet if Sheridan had so much faith in the veracity of Saddam’s word, why did he not believe his protestations that his weapons were gone? Blaming Saddam rather than ASIO, ONA, MI6 and the CIA for the intelligence failure is desperate sophistry at its most laughable.

Yet despite his claim that the parliamentary report “puts the Iraq issue to bed” 61 Sheridan’s apparent unease about the missing weapons leads him to call for an explanation. He says it is “not good enough” that neither Bush, Blair nor Howard have offered a grand narrative on WMDs, even though “electorates no longer care about this issue”. 62 Interestingly, Sheridan revokes his earlier self-assumed authority to decide whether Iraq possessed WMDs, saying on 20 May this year: “These questions deserve to be answered and they cannot be answered by newspaper columnists or the speculations of former officials”. 63 Compare this with Sheridan’s certainty, on day two of the war, that he could answer these questions: “He certainly has biological weapons... he certainly has chemical weapons, which he has used before”. 64

The great irony, though, is not that Sheridan passes the buck when he gets it wrong on WMDs. It’s that he, alongside Federal politicians, moves the goalposts so that WMDs are no longer the reason for going to war. He decides that it was about regime change and altering the face of Arab politics in order to address the root causes of terrorism:

This nation we love must face the threat, and fight

The war in Iraq really does confront the roots of terrorism because it offers some hope of breaking the relentlessly destructive paradigm of modern Arab politics. 65

Having removed WMDs from the core of his argument for war, Sheridan comes back to the Christian moral framework and concludes that the war was a success because, “Hussein was an evil tyrant, and his removal is good for Iraq and the Middle East.” 66 Since evil is an absolute rather than relative concept, the task of God’s forces, when the conflict is framed as a battle between good and evil, is to root out this evil like a weed. Sheridan’s justification for war makes sense in this context. Even if the pre-emptive strike was illegal under international law and the threat falsely conceived because there were no WMDs, the war becomes a success within the religio-moral frame because, with Saddam deposed, it has reduced the net power of ‘evil’ on earth.
It's duckspeak that got him there, the quacking out of bureaucratic lines and official lies to keep the propaganda machine rolling.

CONCLUSION
Given that for Sheridan, this has been a moral war between good and evil, with a (utilitarian) moral imperative to maximise good and minimise evil in the world, it would be interesting for Sheridan to reflect on the teachings of Paul in his Bible:

Do not repay anyone evil for evil... Be not overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.67

Or Jesus, from his Sermon on the Mount:

Do not resist one who is evil. But if anyone strikes you on the right cheek, turn to him the other also.68

Do the people of Afghanistan and Iraq feel overcome with good? Perhaps they can take heart from this wonderful piece of duckspeak from Bush in a May 2003 speech, the one declaring the war in Iraq was over:

We have more work to do in Iraq. A free Iraq, a peaceful Iraq will help change an area of the world that needs peace and freedom. A peaceful Iraq and a free Iraq is part of our campaign to rid the world of terror. And that's why the thugs in Iraq still resist us, because they can't stand the thought of free societies. They understand what freedom means. See, free nations are peaceful nations. Free nations don't attack each other. Free nations don't develop weapons of mass destruction. There will be a free and peaceful Iraq. What's taking place in Iraq is the evolution of a society, to be democratic in nation—

As for Greg Sheridan, where else can you go when you are publicly lauded as Australia’s most influential foreign affairs analyst? It’s duckspeak that got him there, the quacking out of bureaucratic lines and official lies to keep the propaganda machine rolling. As Orwell noted in his famous article, ‘Politics and the English Language’:

In our time it is broadly true that political writing is bad writing. Where this is not true, it will generally be found that the writer is some kind of rebel, expressing his private opinions and not a ‘party line’. Orthodoxy, of whatever colour, seems to demand a lifeless, imitative style... When one watches some tired hack on the platform mechanically repeating the familiar phrases—bipartisan, atrocities, iron heel, bloodstained tyranny, free peoples of the world, stand shoulder to shoulder—one often has a curious feeling that one is not watching a live human being but some kind of dummy: a feeling which suddenly becomes stronger at moments when the light catches the speaker’s spectacles and turns them into blank discs which seem to have no eyes behind them... If the speech he is making is one that he is accustomed to make over and over again, he may be almost unconscious of what he is saying, as one is when one utters the responses in church. And this reduced state of consciousness, if not indispensable, is at any rate favourable to political conformity.69

Orwell would almost certainly have regarded Sheridan as a ‘Blimp’,70 a fulminating member of the militaristic and imperialist middle-class intelligentsia wedded to glorified notions of Empire, loyalty and morality. This wouldn’t be such a bad thing if the Australian press and the Murdoch papers in particular were open to dissenting voices, but unfortunately they’re not. Sheridan is one of a whole phalanx of conservative and neo-conservative columnists at the Australian, and there are others like him at all the other ‘quality’ papers. Quack, quack!

8. Martin Hirst & Robert Schütze, ‘Aliens Down Under? The Australian at War and the “Big Lie”’, in Global Media Go to War: Role of News and Entertainment Media During the

Greg Sheridan, 'An Insult to Our Original Bootpeople', Australian, 6 November 2003.


Sheridan, 'Danger of the Extreme'.

Singer, The President of Good and Evil, p.242.

Sheridan, 'A Threat We Ignore at Our Peril'.

Sheridan, 'This Nation We Love Must Face the Threat, and Fight'.

Sheridan, 'Mugged by Reality'.


Ibid.


Ibid.


Ibid.

Sheridan, 'Americans Try to Psych Rational Opponent'.

Greg Sheridan, 'Address the Root Causes of Terrorism', Australian, 1 April 2004.

Sheridan, 'Impartial Perspective from Cockpit of History'.


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