
Part II Section 6.5

**THE “NEW NORMAL”**

“Secrecy sets barriers between men, but at the same time offers the seductive temptation to break through the barriers by gossip or confession. This temptation accompanies the psychical life of the secret like an overtone.”

- Georg Simmel, *On Secrecy and Secret Societies*

Simmel underscores the profound cultural work that goes into keeping secrets, for within secret societies there is always a corollary desire for revelation and exchange that must be constantly regulated for the organization to survive. I have examined some elements of this tension by showing how what may ultimately prove to have been an imagined loss of secrets at Los Alamos National Laboratory has nevertheless resulted in the entire U.S. nuclear complex reordering itself under hyper-security measures. In Simmel’s terms, I have argued that the particular “overtones” that resonate within the U.S. nuclear complex, and that constantly threaten to overturn its official secrecy, concern three linked areas: first, how secrecy performs as a general mode of social regulation within American society, not simply as a means of controlling technoscientific data about the bomb; second, the problematic foundations of race and citizenship within the nuclear complex; and third, how nuclear security relies on a mis-recognition of technology’s ability to perfectly control social relations and eliminate risk. The allegations of espionage at Los Alamos in 1999 put these repressed aspects of the nuclear complex on public display, briefly troubling a secret governmentality until unprecedented hyper-security measures were mobilized to re-establish the nuclear complex as a secret society, one that controls not only how weapons scientists think and behave, but also how much of America’s nuclear project remains accessible to a larger public sphere. In other words, the nuclear complex recapitulated its essential contradiction in 1999-2000: that official secrecy maintains the distinction between national security and national sacrifice. In striving to keep the internal (economic, environmental, and social) costs of the national security state invisible, state secrecy both produces and enforces an official fiction; namely, that the only legitimate forms of nuclear security and risk are located outside the territorial borders of the nation-state.

It is important, therefore, to recognize the social costs of legitimizing a new national discourse about the need to protect “America’s secrets.” The Wen Ho Lee affair was simply the first in a series of widely publicized U.S. “security scandals” in 1999-2000 involving a potential loss of classified information. Officials responded to these events by evoking “America’s secrets” as a self-evident category, one needing no further explanation but that should be protected regardless of the cost to the nation. For example, in 2000, after John Deutch, former head of the Central Intelligence Agency, acknowledged that he had illegally stored classified information about CIA covert activities on his unsecured home computer, and after a State Department laptop computer containing “above top secret” information was
lost, Secretary of State Madeleine K. Albright intoned: “This is inexcusable and intolerable. Such failures put our nation’s secrets at risk.”[32] That no one even bothered to question this open declaration from the State Department that the United States keeps “secrets” reveals perhaps the truest legacy of the Cold War—after all, the fact that states keep secrets is supposed to be a secret! But as America’s first multi-generational, global conflict, the Cold War, with all its expansive new forms of secrecy, became nothing less than an organizing principle in American society. One cultural legacy of that nuclear standoff is that an “at war” mentality is now a basic feature of the U.S. national imaginary, one that is easily provoked, deployed, and acquiesced to.

One of the most remarkable aspects of the U.S. response to the September 11 attacks on New York and Washington, for example, was the speed with which America went to war. Before the attackers had been identified, and therefore before the nature of the conflict or victory could even be imagined, President George W. Bush committed the United States to an all-out struggle against “terror”—a vague if powerful concept, more a structure of feeling than a military foe. Bush’s “war on terror” was inaugurated, then, not as a battle with a specific enemy or state (one definition of a war) but instead as a future-oriented governmental structure. Indeed, citizens were informed immediately by officials that this “new” war would be:

(1) planetary in its scope (merely starting in Afghanistan),
(2) expensive (requiring vast new military expenditures), and
(3) potentially unending (at the very least, occupying the foreseeable future).[33]

Speaking theatrically from various “undisclosed locations” in the fall of 2001, Vice President Dick Cheney named this dual reconfiguration of U.S. geopolitical policy and everyday American life as nothing less than “the new normal.”[34] Thus, the necessary project of responding to the unprecedented attacks on two American cities was formally linked right from the start to a broader domestic project of normalization and regularization of a specific wartime economy; in other words, hyper-security became an explicit national structure after September 11.

The “new normal” elevated many of the concerns of the hyper-security state evidenced two years earlier in Los Alamos to the national level. Racial profiling took the form of a nationwide dragnet for Arab nationals between the ages of eighteen and thirty-five, resulting in over 1,200 men being “detained” in secret by the Justice Department without being charged. Similarly, secrecy became an over-determined project of the post-9/11 American state. It began with an immediate effort to remove information from libraries and Web sites that might be useful to terrorists, but became a broader purge of government information from public access. In October, President Bush signed Executive Order 13233, which in effect seals presidential records (after the Reagan administration), and he proposed a new form of military tribunal for captured “terrorists” to ensure that trials could be conducted quickly, in secret, and rely on classified information.[35] Attorney General Ashcroft concurrently announced in a memorandum to all government agencies that the Justice Department would support official efforts to resist Freedom of Information Act requests from citizens and, in the form of the quickly passed Patriot Act, received expansive new powers for wiretapping and surveillance of U.S. residents.[36] In a congressional hearing on November 9, 2001, Ashcroft offered this perspective on critics of this expanded program of
governmental security: “To those who scare peace-loving people with phantoms of lost liberty, my message is this: your tactics only aid terrorists.”[37] After 9/11, secrecy was thus formally linked with silencing as a mode of controlling debate about not only the war effort but also America’s presidential past and its militarized future.

Hyper-security in perhaps its purest form, however, was evidenced by a series of terrorist “warnings” issued by the Justice Department and the newly formed Department of Homeland Security. These alerts were characterized by an absence of information about the source of the threat, the longevity of the risk, or the rationale for the warning. In essence, these state declarations of risk simply presented citizens with the category of “threat” itself (i.e., the official message was: something terrible might happen, somewhere, any second now); the alerts provided citizens with no conceptual tools for evaluating or accommodating this new danger. It was danger itself purified and amplified as national discourse. In March 2002, these terrorist warnings were institutionalized by the new director of homeland security, Tom Ridge, when he presented a color-coded ranking of the terrorist danger to citizens and state agencies, offering a hierarchy of risk in categories from red (severe risk)[38], to orange (high risk), to yellow (elevated risk), to blue (significant risk), to green (general risk).2XX Thus, the terrorist danger of 9/11 is now officially codified as a permanent aspect of everyday life. Paired with President Bush’s statement that nations are either “with” the United States, or “with the terrorists,” this new domestic warning system elevates “terror” to the defining category of an American world system, structuring both international relations and everyday American life. Consequently, hyper-security has become a dominant mode of governmentality after 9/11, a series of linked discourses and official practices that work through the mobilization of a named or unnamed, but always totalizing, threat.

Within this context, nuclear weapons, as the ultimate tools of threat, not surprisingly resurfaced as a central organizing principle in the U.S. war on terror. In his 2002 State of the Union address, President Bush formally linked terrorism with weapons of mass destruction, arguing that non-nuclear states that pursue nuclear weapons are a threat to civilization itself:

States like these, and their terrorist allies, constitute an axis of evil, arming to threaten the peace of the world. By seeking weapons of mass destruction, these regimes pose a grave and growing danger. They could provide these arms to terrorists, giving them the means to match their hatred. They could attack our allies or attempt to blackmail the United States. In any of these cases, the price of indifference would be catastrophic. We will work closely with our coalition to deny terrorists and their state sponsors the materials, technology, and expertise to make and deliver weapons of mass destruction. We will develop and deploy effective missile defenses to protect America and our allies from sudden attack. And all nations should know: America will do what is necessary to ensure our nation’s security. We’ll be deliberate, yet time is not on our side. I will not wait on events, while dangers gather. I will not stand by, as peril draws closer and closer. The United States of America will not permit the world’s most dangerous regimes to threaten us with the world’s most destructive weapons.[39]

While threatening preemptive strikes against regimes seeking weapons of mass destruction, and identifying Iran, Iraq, and North Korea by name as this new “axis of evil,”
Bush seemed also to be identifying nuclear weapons as tools of terror. However, the concurrent 2002 Nuclear Policy Review revealed that the administration was committed not to reducing but to expanding the use of the U.S. nuclear arsenal. In addition to taking all the steps necessary to go back into general nuclear weapons production, the Nuclear Policy Review identified the need for new generations of nuclear weapons (mini-nukes and earth penetrators) for potential use against the “axis of evil,” argued for targeting nuclear ‘weapons against non-nuclear states for the first time in U.S. history, and recommitted the United States to a national missile defense system.[40] This increasingly expansive vision of the nuclear state is revealed most directly by U.S. military budgets, which before 9/11 were roughly $330 billion a year, already higher than the military budgets of all of America’s NATO allies, Russia, China, and the so-called rogue states combined (Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists 2001). After 9/11, the Bush administration asked for and received an immediate $48 billion increase, and projected annual increases leading to defense budgets of close to half a trillion dollars a year by 2007 (Dao 2002).

At the start of the twenty-first century, then, the United States exists in the contradictory position of waging a global campaign against “terror,” focusing on states with nuclear ambitions, while simultaneously enhancing its own reliance on weapons of mass destruction. Rather than delegitimizing nuclear weapons within the international order, the terrorist attacks of September 11 have been mobilized to re-energize the nuclear fetish at home and abroad. The “new normal,” however, presents merely a purified version of the Cold War geostrategic program of global containment and technological control (but one not dependent on the future stability of any specific state). To this end, nuclear “terror” has been reconfigured as an infinitely expandable concept in the United States, one that links domestic and international politics, that ensures record defense budgets for years to come, and that ultimately empowers the hyper-security state (through the linked deployment of secrecy and threat) to imagine, perhaps really for the first time in history, a truly unlimited field of planetary action. Thus, it is important to interrogate the national insecurity about LANL (Los Alamos National Laboratory) not only in terms of its formal features but also in terms of how a discourse of “insecurity” informs larger policy debates over how to define the current position the United States holds as the world’s sole military “superpower.” The strategic manipulation of real or imagined “threat” is enabled by a secret governmentality (as the details are always “top secret”), but that secret governmentality is also further legitimated by the constant evocation of new threats (such as missing computer codes, phantom “WMDs,” and the always “imminent” terrorist act). If this circuit continues, then how the nuclear weapons complex evolves in U.S. policy and practice, and how citizens are positioned in regard to U.S. national (in)security over the next few decades, is very likely to be nothing less than an ever more strictly policed, ever more powerfully protected, nuclear secret.