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UNDERSTANDING AMERICA'S TERRORIST CRISIS: WHAT SHOULD BE DONE?

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Transcript

David Theroux: Good evening, ladies and gentlemen. My name is David Theroux, and I'm the President of The Independent Institute. I'm delighted to welcome you to our program this evening entitled "Understanding America's Terrorist Crisis: What Should Be Done?" Our program features world-renowned author and man of letters, Gore Vidal, and is co-sponsored by *Harper's Magazine*. For those of you who have not seen his new book, Gore Vidal is the author of *Perpetual War for Perpetual Peace: How We Got to Be So Hated*. The Independent Institute regularly sponsors the Independent Policy Forum, a series of lectures, seminars and debates held here in the San Francisco Bay area, and featuring outstanding authors, scholars and policy experts to address major social and economic issues. After 9/11 for example, we began a program to examine key issues involved in the terrorist war, and our program this evening continues this dialog. As a result, we seek to get beyond left and right, and feature speakers who present their own views so that we have a better opportunity to sift through and make up our own minds. For those of you new to The Independent Institute, you can find information in the printed program that hopefully everyone got. To provide some background, The Independent Institute is a non-profit, public policy research organization. The Institute sponsors comprehensive studies of major issues, it publishes books and other publications, and these form the basis of numerous conference and media programs. You're all invited to visit our Web site at Independent.org for further information on Institute membership and other programs including our quarterly journal, which is called *The Independent Review*. This is the current issue and the cover article is on the destruction of medical privacy in the United States. In addition, many of you may be interested in receiving our free weekly e-mail newsletter called *The Lighthouse*, which critically examines current issues and reports on upcoming Institute events, publications and other programs. In the next few weeks, we'll also unveil our newest Web site, which is called OnPower.org, where you'll find many studies and other resources pertaining to the issues that are going to be discussed this evening.

Could the tragedy of September 11th be setting in motion a chain of events even more ominous than the attacks themselves? After retaliating against the Al Qaeda network and the Taliban, the Bush Administration speaks of bringing justice to an axis of evil countries not involved in the 9/11 attacks. All while Osama bin Laden and company have escaped, Afghanistan has been bombed into near rubble, countless

civilians have been killed, and millions of Afghans live in refugee camps. Meanwhile the Middle East teeters on the brink of a major war as innocent Israelis and Palestinians continue to be killed. World leaders view U.S. military intervention with increasing alarm, and international opinion indicates that the U.S. government is more hated than ever. Could U.S. policies be provoking this hatred and the threats to the safety of Americans and people around the world? And, if so, how can we produce a safer world? On the domestic front, Congress has passed a feeding frenzy of corporate welfare, pork measures and attacks on civil liberties, as special interest groups stampede to profit from the current crisis. For example, the new USA PATRIOT Act authorizes police and intelligence agencies to spy on any American. The Act was passed by Congress before it was even completely written, meaning, of course, that no one had read it when it was passed. Fearful of being labeled unpatriotic, the Senate passed the Act with only one dissenting voice. Compounding the absence of political debate, government officials have intimidated those in the public who've tried to raise questions. And so, there's been virtually no public debate. In effect, officialdom apparently believes the public should not be allowed to discuss these measures, to know what's really going on, or to question government authority. As a result, Washington unilaterally declares that the new terrorist war must be a global war without end, with no clear objectives, no enemy to be found who is clearly existing, no specified geographical area, and no clear strategy. The enemy is not on some front, does not have invading armies, navies and air forces, and since we are now all under government surveillance, apparently it could be any of us. James Madison, the master builder of the U.S. Constitution, noted in 1795, "Of all the enemies of public liberty, war is perhaps the most to be dreaded, because it comprises and develops the germ of every other. War is the parent of armies. From these proceed debts and taxes. And armies, debts and taxes are the known instruments for bringing the many under the dominion of the few. . . . No nation could preserve its freedom in the midst of continual warfare."

This evening we seek to facilitate a discussion of why terrorism now threatens America, and what should be done. So I'd like to welcome our participants, and you can find further information on each in your program. Gore Vidal is hailed as one of the most remarkable cultural and political critics of our time. Born at West Point, raised in the Washington, D.C. home of his grandfather, Oklahoma Senator Thomas Gore, he is a cousin of Al Gore and was a brother-in-law of John F. Kennedy. He has penned 22 novels, five plays, many screenplays and television scripts, more than 200 essays, and a memoir. His "American Chronicle" series of novels covers the entire history of the United States beginning with the book, *Burr*, and ending with *Washington D.C.* His non-fiction essays have been collected in eight volumes, and his latest book *Perpetual War for Perpetual Peace*, which I mentioned earlier, investigates the terrorist crisis. We are also pleased to have moderating our program this evening the San Francisco native, Lewis Lapham. In 1975, Mr. Lapham became editor of *Harper's Magazine*, one of the most distinguished magazines in American history. The author of many books, he received the National Magazine Award for his column, "Notebook," is the host and author of the PBS series "American Century," and he was host and executive producer of the weekly PBS program, "Bookmark."

Our panel of scholars this evening includes Barton Bernstein, who is on your left, who

is Professor of History at Stanford University. He received his Ph.D. in history from Harvard University. He is the recipient of two Koontz Prizes, the Goldstein Prize, and the Johnson Prize. Professor Bernstein is a world-renowned expert on U.S. foreign policy, the arms race, U.S. science policy, and weaponry. Next to him, Robert Higgs, a Senior Fellow in Political Economy at The Independent Institute, and Editor of *The Independent Review*, which I mentioned earlier. He received his Ph.D. in economics from Johns Hopkins University, and he has taught at the University of Washington, Lafayette College, and Seattle University. Among his books, his widely acclaimed *Crisis and Leviathan* shows how war crises are used by interest groups to cartelize economies. The result is all manner of pork, corporate welfare, the trampling of civil liberties and other repression. And rounding our panel, Thomas Moore is Senior Fellow at the Hoover Institution. He received his Ph.D. in economics from the University of Chicago, and has taught at Michigan State University, the Carnegie Institute of Technology, and UCLA. Dr. Moore has served as a member of the President's Council of Economic Advisers, and the President's National Critical Materials Council, for which he served as chairman. So at this point, I am very pleased to pass the baton to Lewis Lapham.

Lewis Lapham: Thank you. [Applause] Gore, I count it both an honor and a pleasure to talk to you on these subjects. And I gather from reading *Perpetual War for Perpetual Peace* that you would think that we are more threatened at this point by, not by the terrorists who may or may not be where we think they are, but by the mullahs in Washington. [Laughter] Is that a fair?

Gore Vidal: I think that they are a clear and present danger. [Laughter] And we must be on guard against the Enron/Pentagon junta that governs us so idly. You were talking earlier about who was the most surprised by 9/11. I had figured out some time ago and one of the reasons that I have this little list in the book of unilateral strikes that we have made against second and third world countries, over 200 of them since 1949, 1950. And sooner or later somebody was going to get irritable. I mean it's bound to happen. The first law of physics is there is no action without reaction. Our rulers seem to be blithely unaware of this. They can do anything they like, and people can go lump it. I was betting not so much on a Muslim strike as a Panamanian one. The fury of Panama when we seized their ruler—Noriega—which automatically ended all drugs in America, have you noticed that since then? [Laughter] George Bush, Sr. did that for us because he cares. And we got another one. [Laughter]

I would also like to thank Brother Theroux, who has taken my James Madison quotation that I was going to begin with. People who belong to foundations stop at nothing. [Laughter] It has to do with that Rolodex. I don't know the sense of power it gives them. That was *my* Madison quote, and I don't share these too kindly. [Laughter]

Anyway, in answer to your question: yes or no, as the case may be. [Laughter] We have a war on terrorism, which is a war both on an unknown enemy and an abstract noun. Therefore, it's a war with no end, and it's a war that cannot be won, and it bears a resemblance to the war on drugs for the same reason. And the question then is in whose interest are these wars? Well, corporate [state] America is the usual explanation. And I dare say that it is good for certain businesses. We were entering a bit of a

depression at the time of 9/11, so if it was Osama's timing, it was very clever to hit us when we were really quite off balance. But these presidents as they go, get worse and worse—proving that Darwin was wrong. [Laughter] I'm a born-again creationist with the last 10 presidents. [Laughter] As the presidents get sillier and more reckless, the wars get more surreal. We blew up Afghanistan when all of our enemies who struck at us in the airplanes that day were Saudi Arabians. They aren't Afghans, and the Afghans were rather hurt that we were blowing up all their cities when we should have been taking out Riyadh and the Saudi royal family, and perhaps the rest of the families of Osama. So we hit the wrong people. Now part of it is interesting that, you've got a president that everyone knows he knows nothing. [Laughter] I mean there is not an idiot anywhere in our spacious plains who doesn't know that nothing much is going on, and he's given things to read. When he has to mention a country, you know he hasn't heard of it. [Laughter] When he got to his little war dance before Congress with Iran and Iraq and North Korea, I mean, now wait a minute. Then you realize he doesn't know what an axis is. [Laughter and applause] Obviously he hadn't spent too much time on the farm down there in Texas. So, everything becomes sort of blurred. Now the sinister side is the speed with which Clinton, after Oklahoma City, which I deal with in the little book, was ready with an Anti-Terrorist Act—speed of light with the most venomous dialog condemning the terrorism of McVeigh and of the so-called patriot movement across the country. Then of course they decided immediately, various of our freedoms were diminished—the Fourth Amendment specifically—and I was startled how fast he was with it. Now we have the USA PATRIOT Act, which was passed, I think it was the 20th of October after the infamous September 11th. Congress passed it, and as is their wont, didn't read it. I don't know what they feel they have against it, maybe they don't take it seriously. But that was a "terrific" piece of legislation reminiscent of one of my favorite emperors: Tiberius. He was actually rather a good scout, and certainly was very bright. And Tiberius, when he became emperor, the senate in a cringing moment sent him some legislation saying that they would accept in advance, sight unseen, any legislation that he wanted to send up to the senate of Rome. And he sent back a message, and he said, "You've lost your senses. Suppose the emperor has gone mad. Suppose the emperor is a raging enemy of Rome, and you didn't know it. You can't do that in advance." And they sent it back to him again, "Anything, Glorious Caesar, that you send us we will endorse." And he said, and I feel myself wanting to repeat Tiberius' words, "How eager they are to be slaves." Why is there so little opposition in Congress?

Lewis Lapham: We pay for them.

Gore Vidal: Yes, well, O.K., so we're back to the buying the best Congress money can buy. And would you say the same was true of the news media? By and large, the news media makes no objection. No, the same ownership, those who own the Congresses and the Presidents own the media. And it's all, everybody's working together.

Lewis Lapham: When you say that a succession of the last 10 presidents has gotten steadily worse, I think I agree with you, but I don't know as much American history as you do. So is there real change, let's say, since the Second World War, since 1945, 1947 when we begin to build the national security state?

Gore Vidal: Well, that was the great change, and it was enacted by Congress—the National Security Act. It was '48 or '49. By 1950, Harry Truman gave us a militarized economy, and it was Charles E. Wilson, who was an important honcho then, who said, “Why is it we’re always taken surprise by Pearl Harbors and so on. Why don’t we just stay armed all the time so we don’t have to re-arm ever? We’re just constantly armed.” Every now and then an ingenious idea does boll up from General Electric. And that was the genius idea. We have been at war, really, ever since 1950. And the list that I have kept my piece from being published in *Vanity Fair*, and even *The Nation* wouldn’t take it. They couldn’t face this list of places that we had struck at like gallant little Panama, which is close to my heart, as you can see. And I worry about Panama. [Laughter] We have been like a rogue elephant going around the world attacking this country and that country. And it used to be because they were going to go Communist. Many of them hadn’t even thought of it, but we would always find a Communist somewhere and we’d send in the troops. Finally, Ronald Reagan’s greatest moment was the invasion of Grenada. [Laughter] You know, it was full of Cuban Communists. Well there didn’t appear to be any of them there, but it was Alexander Haig, remember him? [Laughter] I miss some of these guys. [Laughter] Haig gave the game away when he said about Grenada as a military operation, he said, the Provincetown Fire Department could have done that invasion rather better than we did. [Laughter] So we have this perpetual war for perpetual peace, and it does a lot of damage in the world. It certainly damages other people’s view of us. But it has given an opportunity to those who do not like our Bill of Rights, and those freedoms that we used to enjoy, and are being curtailed. They could always talk about, oh, FDR shot some Nazis that he found on a beach in the Gulf, and Truman and FDR locked up the Japanese in concentration camps, and Abraham Lincoln suspended *habeas*. Well, these, however, were real wars. This is not a war. Because Junior says it’s a war does not make it one, because nobody has told him a war is between two countries. A country has an army, a navy, an air force, and a capital city, too. And they make stamps. [Laughter] Oh, I’d like to advise him for a week, you know, but the— [Laughter] I know we’re in a perpetual state of war, and I know that that’s the way the economy works, and that’s why we spend so much money on the Pentagon. But since the Vietnam War, where we lost 57,000 killed, since then, unless I’m wrong, I don’t think we’ve lost more than a thousand casualties in all of the productions in Panama, Grenada, the Gulf, and so on in the last 25 years, because I think that the Pentagon is now in the movie business.

Lewis Lapham: Well, they have the notion that American soldiers cannot go into what they call non-permissive environments. And therefore we stage colorful explosions in picturesque locations, and present them as advertisements for the wonders of democracy.

Gore Vidal: Well, they had to give up conscription after Vietnam because everybody was going to Canada or into a ministry.

Lewis Lapham: Or shooting their officers.

Gore Vidal: And fragging the officers. I’ve served three years in the Second World War, and it wouldn’t have occurred to any of us to go through the shenanigans that

Bush and Cheney went through to stay out of the Vietnam War. One in the Texas Air Force, and the other one in an undisclosed area, somewhere [Laughter], which proved not to be Vietnam. But I think we believe more strongly in the country and in our virtue than these people. These people are for the most part rip-off artists. Notice that they're all gas and oil men from Cheney, to the two Bushes; I think Rumsfeld also. And what this is really about is oil, and it's Central Asian oil, which is what we've got our eye on. We do have practical motives every now and then. It's not just for the sheer glory that we get into a war like the Afghanistan. Afghanistan is the entranceway to Central Asia and five republics that used to belong to the Soviet Union that are now the largest suppliers of gas, natural gas, and oil. He who gets his hands on that will really control the world for a while. Henry Adams, who was something of a geo-politician, and his brother, Brooks Adams, had worked out that he who controlled Guangxi Province in China, northern China, would control the earth because it had the most metal, the most iron ore, and coal, which they used in those days. And so our whole business in the Philippines, in which Teddy Roosevelt went along with the Adams brothers, was to get our foothold on the mainland of Asia. So we get the Philippines from the Spanish. We don't let them set up their own country, which they wanted to do, and we become a great Asiatic power, and we end up being emperor of Japan, which was good going, but we never got Guangxi Province. Now we have the second big chance, which is forgetting about Persian oil, which is getting too dicey, and going to Caspian oil, and that is the background. And I've got a very nice story here from a surprising source, a quotation from a newspaper. I will appear to be currying favor, as the paper is your own *Chronicle*. [Laughter] And, I said, this was when I was going to start with James Madison. See, I've been ruined.

Lewis Lapham: Before David stole it. [Laughter]

Gore Vidal: Before he stole it, throwing me totally off key. [Laughter]

But the simple reasons behind the various provocations that led to the attack of 9/11 was precisely stated two weeks after the attack by your own *San Francisco Chronicle*, where Frank Viviano wrote, "The hidden stakes in the war against terrorism can be summed up in a single word: oil. The map of terrorist sanctuaries and targets in the Middle East and Central Asia is also, to an extraordinary degree, a map of the world's principal energy sources in the twenty-first century." That is what it is all about. So you see, you need never stray from the Bay Area if you want to know more than the editors of *Time* and *The Washington Post*. It also helps that a major player in the secret war for Caspian oil just happens to hang out in this area: Unocal.

Lewis Lapham:

That kind of geopolitical real politique is not what is presented to the American public. I mean, we're doing "God's work" presumably. It goes back to Woodrow Wilson. It's never clear whether he thinks that America is a religion or estate.

Gore Vidal: Religion, I think.

Lewis Lapham: Yeah. So he invades Mexico to teach the Latin Americans to elect

good men. Teddy Roosevelt takes Panama, because it's a mission of collective civilization, and so forth and so on. What is that about, Gore? I mean, we have the same thing with Bush. To Bush, it's a holy crusade.

Gore Vidal: Well that is an inheritance of our original Anglo-Saxon forebears. And the British Isles, I think, probably over the centuries, have produced more interesting, even amusing, hypocrisy than any other nation on earth.

Lewis Lapham: You're right on that.

Gore Vidal: And we're the heirs of the tradition. We can't stop lying about motivations. And it's just second nature to us to steal money and say it's for your own good. [Laughter] You'd just spend it stupidly. [Laughter]

Lewis Lapham: But again, our friends in Washington would tell us that the imperial mission has the full faith and backing of the American public, and I don't think that's true.

Gore Vidal: Of course it doesn't, my God, if we, every generation of Americans including mine had to be dragged into wars.

Lewis Lapham: Yeah.

Gore Vidal: The Second World War, 80% of the American people did not want to go back to Europe to fight, having been sold a lemon in 1917. Hence, FDR's series of provocations, and—I am a New Dealer, so this is not right-wing guff—Roosevelt provoked the Japanese into attacking us. The whole story is very clear now. It's all come to light. And he did it. Now people say, "Oh, how awful, he couldn't have done that. You must hate him to say that." I said, "No, I admire him. If that was the only way to defeat Hitler, well, provoke them so that they will strike us at Pearl Harbor." He had been re-elected in 1940. "No sons of yours will ever serve in foreign wars in any administration of mine." He stuck with that. He would like to attack the Germans, and he'd like to attack the Japanese, but he doesn't dare. So he provokes them into attacking us. This is Machiavelli on such a grand scale! I feel mean repeating something about a noble American President who ought to be on Mount Rushmore, and he ought to. But sometimes there are provocations that are necessary in a historic process. Hitler, we all agreed, was pretty bad. This doesn't often happen that you have somebody who's that bad. So Roosevelt was on strong "moral ground," although very weak "constitutional grounds." But we've had less worthy wars, too.

Lewis Lapham: Then I have read the reports in Washington, and they airily say that the American people would gladly accept 30,000 casualties during the invasion of Iraq. I don't believe that.

Gore Vidal: As long as it's somebody else being killed, they don't mind that as much as if they might be put at risk. But when we gave up the draft after Vietnam, and it's—it's a mercenary army, basically, and one of the conditions is, no member of Air Force, Army, Navy, is to be hurt. [Laughter] And this is difficult to do, but one result is the Air

Force planes fly at 35,000 feet.

Lewis Lapham: Yeah.

Gore Vidal: Where you can't see anything. That's why orphanages and schools are the targets whereas the military supply centers might not be so easy to get at. It's a weird world. A mercenary army that is not to be hurt, blowing up innocent countries, relatively innocent, like Afghanistan. But we do it. I liked your remark about having turned over our military to show business. There was a stroke of genius, and I don't think anybody thought it out, but we lost the war very badly in Vietnam. And we lost a lot at home, too. Then it was redressed. They made *Rambo* with Sylvester Stallone, and we won it on the screen.

Lewis Lapham: Oh, yeah.

Gore Vidal: And that's all anybody remembers, is Stallone winning the war in the jungle.

Lewis Lapham: That's right. We won it. Well, we now have the same thing. In Afghanistan, ABC News is denied entrance, is not invited to the battleground or even close to it. On the other hand, ABC, which is owned by Disney, has made a deal with Jerry Bruckheimer, who is the producer of *Gladiator*, *Black Hawk Down* and *Top Gun*. And Bruckheimer in conjunction with the Pentagon, will make a 14-part documentary series on the war in Afghanistan, and that is what will be presented on ABC as news. So it's a fairy tale. I mean, it's the equivalent of *The Fellowship of the Rings*. [Laughter] And as I say, we've been able to do this for 20 years with very few of our own people getting killed. At the same time, producing enormous sums of money for the defense contractors, and the various law enforcement agencies. I mean in your book, you talk about McVeigh, and I think, in a very interesting way, it's the most interesting commentary on McVeigh I've seen. And you make the point that McVeigh declared war on a government that he felt had declared war on its own people. I gather you share some of that sentiment.

Gore Vidal: I know why he did it. Yes.

Lewis Lapham: I mean, I don't endorse McVeigh's action. But do you think the American government has declared war on the American people?

Gore Vidal: Well the Branch Davidians at Waco had the impression that they were being destroyed by Bradley tanks.

Lewis Lapham: But it's also the constant, which you talk about here, again in a constant subversion of the civil liberties. The shredding of the Fourth Amendment. The seizing of private property, that the USA PATRIOT Act allows the government to tap anybody's phone, open anybody's mail.

Gore Vidal: I also have a long list of freedoms lost written about five or six years ago in *Vanity Fair*, and how in big agriculture, [government] has deliberately driven small

farmers out of business, so that they can have these vast conglomerates. And the ex-farmers turn into Timothy McVeighs. Some of them are crazier than others. And some of them are sadder than others. And an awful lot of them end up the way, as he did, as a sharpshooter in the Army. That's the only thing open to them, since they have lost agriculture, unless they want to work as peasants for agribusiness. That's one of the reasons no one has seen a decent ham sandwich since the Second World War. [Laughter] They keep those hogs in, they don't move for their entire life. Because they don't move, they can't work off diseases, and so on, so they're pumped full of penicillin, or whatever the antibiotic of choice. So we're eating what looks like gelatin, and it finally is old penicillin.

Lewis Lapham: In this book you have a quotation from Justice Brandeis, which is a very powerful quotation, which I'm going to read, and then, ask you to remark upon. He says, "Our government is the potent, the omnipresent teacher. For good or ill, it teaches the whole people by its example. Crime is contagious. If the government becomes the law-breaker, it breeds contempt for laws. It invites every man to become a law unto himself. The lawless government invites anarchy, to declare that in the administration of the criminal law, the end justifies the means; to declare that the government may commit crimes in order to secure the conviction of a private criminal would bring terrible retribution." Do you see?

Gore Vidal: Indeed, I do. And this is what made me interested in Timothy McVeigh. I read this, and he quoted this after he had been condemned to death. He hadn't spoken during his trial. And they said, "Do you have anything to say?" and he said, "Yes, I'd like to quote Justice Brandeis's dissent in *Olmsted*." And he didn't quote all of that much, but he did about half of it. And I was very intrigued. I was quite aware of how the government, what they had done at Waco, and also at Ruby Ridge. He had followed all that, and he decided that he would strike a blow at them. Well, I understood why he wanted to do it. I did not approve, obviously, of what he did. There are other ways of getting back at a government that you believe to be tyrannical and the enemy of the people at large. He wrote a marvelous piece which he got published just before he was killed, and it was about the deliberate militarization of the police, starting with the FBI. He said, you know, he said, "I'm a professional soldier." He got the Bronze Star for bravery in the Persian Gulf. He said, "I have fought to kill, and that's my job, and that's a soldier's job. Policemen are not military men. They are civilians, and their task is to protect the life and property of other citizens from misadventure or whatever." He said, "Once you start giving them tanks and SWAT teams and so on, you are destroying the military, and you're creating a machine that may not be controllable." They should have kept him alive a bit longer because, first, he might have said who the people were who helped him as even, I hate to have to say this, but there's an Iraqi connection in Oklahoma City. Well, I don't believe it, but anyway, the FBI seems to think there may be one, but they wouldn't follow up. They did absolutely no investigation. They wanted one lone crazed killer like Lee Harvey Oswald. McVeigh could not have made that bomb. He didn't have the expertise. And he probably could not have driven that Ryder truck from Kansas to Oklahoma City without blowing himself up. It's a highly volatile mixture he had. Others were involved.

Lewis Lapham: Go back to the point about the government being the teacher for

good or for ill. What kind of lesson do you think it is teaching us?

Gore Vidal: Government today?

Lewis Lapham: Yeah.

Gore Vidal: You can do anything you want if you have force.

Lewis Lapham: So that's the same lesson learned by the terrorists on September 11th. But, again, so our government has also taught the lesson of terrorism, I would say, and I assume you would say too.

Gore Vidal: Well, this long list that I've got: the IRS seizing people's property, ruining their businesses, attaching their bank accounts, and not telling them, so you write a check, and it bounces, and you lose your business, your credit. . . . Case after case after case of government running amok. And nobody doing anything about it. Congress just sits there, and deals in pork, and raises money through bribes.

Lewis Lapham: So what kind of country have we become or are we becoming? I mean, you are a man who writes lovingly about the American Republic. But that is no longer with us.

Gore Vidal: No, I—there's a sense of Asunción in the air in Washington. Paraguay is near. [Laughter]

Lapham: I see.

Gore Vidal: We are not what we were, but that goes without saying. That's probably the lament in every generation, but it is much more visible now. And to me the moment that really tore it was November 2000, when we allowed that election to be stolen by the Supreme Court. [Loud applause] A serious country would have been marching in the streets, but we aren't serious anymore. We don't care.

So thanks to almighty God and Rehnquist, Scalia, and Thomas, Sandra Day O'Connor and Kennedy, we have been given this President whom we did not vote for. And, I had great fun with the *New York Times* story trying to justify the recount in Florida. Remember *The Treasurer's Report* by Robert Benchley, years ago? He plays this treasurer of a company, and he's got all the charts that—

Lewis Lapham: Yes, Right. Right.

Gore Vidal: You know, everything is falling off the chart, and then he realizes he's got it upside down, and so these profits are not actually profits. They were, well, Enron. I've added the later joke to that, but anyway, that is what happened.

Lewis Lapham: That is what happened.

Gore Vidal: That is what happens, and how do you restore a country, which I often referred to as the United States of Amnesia, in which there is no collective memory of

anything before last Monday?

Lewis Lapham: Yeah.

Gore Vidal: It just, psssh, and watching television now, it's so silly. I mean, they come on and shout and they yell, and you can't remember anything you saw five minutes later.

Lewis Lapham: You're not supposed to.

Gore Vidal: And that's merciful. [Laughter]

Lewis Lapham: No, they have to get onto the next commercial.

Gore Vidal: Well, that's the name of the game.

Lewis Lapham: But is there any, I mean do you have any hope for restoration, as you say, or do you think that's impossible?

Gore Vidal: Where would it come from? Let's say you've had a great charismatic leader who really could sort of pull things together, kind of less shady Huey Long-type [Laughter]. . .

If you had such a figure he couldn't get on network television, so nobody would know about him. The *New York Times* would not give him a good review. They wouldn't write about it. So he would be just locked off with the vegetarian candidate, you know, and [Laughter] there goes Thomas Jefferson, our last attempt.

Lewis Lapham: So you're right, I don't think they would get on television.

Gore Vidal: No. And it's not as though we have great riches, humanly, on television.

Lewis Lapham: No.

Gore Vidal: At the moment. There is room. [Laughter]

Lewis Lapham: So what do we do, is the point.

Gore Vidal: Pray. [Laughter]

Lewis Lapham: But to whom? I mean not to [Applause]—

Gore Vidal: You pick yours, I pick mine. [Applause]

Lewis Lapham: I mean then we get to the position of [John] Ashcroft. We now have our Attorney General on record, as recently as last February in Nashville, talking to 6,000 religious broadcasters, and explaining to them that our freedoms did not come to us from human hands. Not a document. Not a Declaration of Independence. Our freedom is given to us by God, and he has also explained, when he goes around to

speaking at universities, that the United States has only one king, and that king is Jesus. And this is the Attorney General of the United States. And he's also on record as saying that the only verdict that he is interested in is the verdict of eternity, not history.

Gore Vidal: Hmm. That's very good. Yeah, well. He's not getting either.

Lewis Lapham: He is close in spirit to the disciples of Osama bin Laden, I would think.

Gore Vidal: Oh, I'd think very like. I think they understand each other. I've got a wonderful quote from *Time* magazine, which is incredible, but it's very Ashcroftian. [Laughter] This was right after 9/11. A guy called—do you know Lance Morrow?

Lewis Lapham: Yeah.

Gore Vidal: I see the name every now and then, and avoid the work, but this time, I couldn't put him down. It's something I never thought I'd see in an American paper, and if I can't find it, I won't see it again. [Laughter] Here we go. Now this is a full-page think piece by Mr. Morrow. "For once, let's have no fatuous rhetoric about healing. Healing is inappropriate now and dangerous. There will be time later for tears of sorrow." They always like to get the word time in anything in *Time* magazine. [Laughter] "A day cannot live in infamy without the nourishment of rage. Let's have rage. What's needed is a unified unifying Pearl Harbor sort of purple American fury. A ruthless indignation that doesn't leak away in a week or two. Let America explore the rich reciprocal possibilities of a fatwa. A policy of focused brutality does not come easily to a self-conscious, self-indulgent, contradictory, diverse, humane nation. . . . America needs to relearn . . . why human nature has equipped us all with a weapon called hatred."

Lewis Lapham: That's extraordinary.

Gore Vidal: I mean, you know, Goebels never pulled it off that well. [Applause]

Lewis Lapham: When was that? Oh, you just told me.

Gore Vidal: That was a week or so after 9/11. Not helpful, not helpful for our peculiar situation in history.

Lewis Lapham: Well, perhaps I can turn to the panel.

Gore Vidal: They will lead us.

Lewis Lapham: They will show us the way out. Right? [Laughter]

Gore Vidal: Into green pastures.

Lewis Lapham: We have been reduced to prayer over here. So maybe Barton Bernstein can offer us a more secular notion.

Barton Bernstein: Well, actually, Lewis, I was hoping you were going to offer me the mandate of leading the group in prayer. [Laughter] But if it's secularism you want, as you notice, David shrewdly—one might even say, guilefully—built upon a Madison quote, which was first found elsewhere, and my tasks were various. I could either devise something to say, or borrow shrewdly. And I actually asked Gore Vidal whether he would share with me some of those pages that he didn't use. And the issue now is whether what you hear is pages he loaned me, or whether I have to do it myself. You'll find the cadence varies. The humor is not as good. The pungency is lacking, thus, unfortunately this is autonomous and less derivative than I would prefer. I wanted to talk about two themes that are central to much of what brought us together. That is terrorism and intervention. As humans, whether American or not, we certainly do, and properly should, deplore the killing of non-combatants, who by definition, are, or virtually are, innocent. But not only has President Bush, I guess we now refer to him as George the Second, or Bush the Younger, or the cheerleader who is president. I'm not quite sure of what the designation should be. I guess we know who I'm speaking about. He's told us that what happened on 9/11 was unique. It was the incarnation of an extreme evil virtually unmatched in human history and certainly in the twentieth century, that these things should not happen to America. And yet let's just scan briefly a little bit of history. If one of the defining criteria of terrorism is action against non-combatants, and I think we should properly revile the killing of about 3,000 mostly Americans on 9/11. Let's think of not the towers in New York City, but let's try some other nouns that may resonate interestingly in history. Let me try, not at random, Dresden, Hamburg, Hiroshima, Nagasaki and Tokyo. I picked those five nouns of cities because in each of them at least 35,000 people were killed, and some of them, Tokyo and Hiroshima, the numbers may come closer to 100,000. Now it's true they weren't Americans, and it's true it was a war. And furthermore it's true that, for the most part, those who died were non-combatants. And furthermore it was known that non-combatants would be primarily killed. It was not an accident. It was not bombing going astray. It was conception implemented with shrewdness, acuity, vengeance, and lethality. So what is so markedly distinctive about 9/11? Well, one, it happened to us—America. Secondly, it happened in New York City. Some Americans might have thought of that, but there's a kind of narrow patriotism in much of this. And furthermore one of the distinctions often used, and I think wonderfully un-compelling, is that terrorism recently was not state directed, and of course, the action against Dresden or Hamburg or Hiroshima, Nagasaki or Tokyo was state directed. And that is certainly a difference. Whether it's a compelling moral difference, I seriously doubt. Let me move to the issue of intervention, that is, speedily, George the Second told us that the appropriate answer was to destroy Osama bin Laden, the Al Qaeda network, all those who harbored him, all those who supported him, and others so associated. Of course there's been some failure. He, referring not to George the Second but to Osama bin Laden, presumably continues. Parts of the Al Qaeda network presumably do, although lower level people have been gotten. But let me offer you a hypothetical. Let's assume for a moment that indeed the President of the United States has thus enacted a series of military actions, which indeed had gotten bin Laden and the Al Qaeda network. Nobody else killed, no non-combatants, had not torn up Afghanistan, had not destroyed other people. How many of us would think that this was a proper response? My suspicion is that—I, myself, am a bit ambivalent about this—most of us would have a visceral reaction, that a parsimonious, focused military

act, getting the malefactors and not others, is a warranted and not an unwarranted act. Some of us would be troubled by the notion of an eye-for-an-eye kind of modern-day American Hammurabi Code. Some of us might well be troubled by the fact that this seems to depart from notions of procedure and law, that there's something unsystematic in wanting and indeed arrogant about it. It is, but why primarily should so many of us be concerned about the acts the American government took? Well, first of all, of course, they were arrogant. Secondly, the contention was that 9/11 was unique, not simply in details on that day in New York City, etc., but really in substance, that things like this had not happened in history to anyone before. But furthermore, we know, of course, that much of the killing conducted by the American state in Afghanistan has been against non-combatants, not against combatants. Bombing is remarkably inefficient. It hits some people near where we aim, if the intelligence is not unduly defective, and may even get some of the right people as well. It tears apart a nation. And now a President, who said he would never go into the nation-building business, has announced he's going into the nation-building business, will do it in some fashion for some time, in ways he'll define, at cost not specified, to produce results unclear. But what this leads one to, if I may come back to the original theme with which I began and moved in rather desultory and spastic fashion, that indeed the United States is a terrorist state. It's not unique, but it is a terrorist state. [Applause]

Lewis Lapham: We now move on to Robert Higgs.

Robert Higgs: For most of us, national security policies and practices are remote from our immediate experience. What we know about them is what we see on television, what we read in the newspapers. As a result, I think we are apt to become the victims of illusions, and in the short while allotted to me, I would like to speak of three particular ways in which I think many of us are subject to illusions, and to contrast those illusions with what I take to be reality. Illusion number one: The U.S. Defense Department protects the American people in America. Reality number one: The Defense Department occupies itself overwhelmingly in preparing for, or engaging, in foreign wars against persons who do not, in fact, pose serious threats to the American people in America. During the Cold War, the Defense Department prepared for wars in Europe, Asia, the Middle East, and elsewhere against the Soviet Union and its surrogates. In so doing, the military establishment routinely protected regimes that at least pretended to oppose Communism, no matter how tyrannical or murderous those regimes were. Since the end of the Cold War, the Defense Department has undertaken to defend certain persons, many of them none too savory, in Kuwait, Saudi Arabia, Kurdistan and Southern Iraq, in Somalia, Haiti, Bosnia and Kosovo, as well as the usual suspects, Western Europe, Japan, and South Korea. Very little of this activity has had a direct connection with actually protecting the American people in America, and much of it has had no genuine connection whatsoever. Illusion number two: The Defense Department has the motivation and the capacity to effectively manage the vast resources placed at its disposal in a way that enhances the security of the American people in America. Reality number two: The Defense Department [DoD] is either unable, or unwilling, to deal seriously with its decades-long engagement in massive waste, fraud and mismanagement, especially, but not exclusively, in its relations with the big contracting companies. The Defense Department will not even obey the laws with regard to its own accounting practices.

According to a report by the department's own inspector-general, dated February 15 last year, "We identified \$1.1 trillion in department-level accounting entries to financial data used to prepare DoD component financial statements that were not supported by adequate audit trails, or by sufficient evidence to determine their validity." That was \$1.1 trillion that could not be validated. Continuing to quote, "In addition, we also identified \$107 billion in department-level accounting entries to financial data used to prepared DoD component financial statements that were improper because the entries were illogical, or did not follow accounting principles. Further, DoD did not fully comply with the laws and regulations that had a direct and material effect on its ability to determine financial statement amounts." And to think, Congress is wasting time holding hearings on the shortcomings of Arthur Anderson and Enron, which are veritable paragons of accounting probity by comparison with the Pentagon. Now, obviously, various parties benefit from this blatant lawlessness and public irresponsibility, but my time does not permit me to take up the question, *cui bono*. Illusion number three: Since September 11th, everything is different. Reality number three: Very little of any significance has changed in the allocation of funds and the material conduct of the U.S. military-and-intelligence apparatus since September 11th. The most noticeable change is that the Bush administration and Congress have seen fit to give vast, additional amounts of taxpayer money—amounts projected to increase annual defense spending by some \$120 billion in the next five years—amounts that, in large part, are certain to be wasted in the usual fashion. Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld himself said in testimony last year before Congress, and I quote, "We have an obligation to taxpayers to spend their money wisely. Today we are not doing that." The destruction of the World Trade Center, not to speak of the damage to the Pentagon itself, will remain forever an indictment of the failure of U.S. defense and intelligence policy. The most curious upshot of this terrible failure is that the President and Congress have not seem fit to punish those responsible for the failure. No heads have rolled. Hell, nobody's even had his wrist slapped. Instead, the failed defense and intelligence establishment is now being rewarded with the greatest infusion of new taxpayer money it has seen in a generation. [Applause]

Thomas Gale Moore: I want to address what should be done. It's part of the title of this forum. Let me go back to last September, when President George Bush declared, "Our war on terror begins with Al Qaeda, but it does not end there. It would not end until every terrorist group of global reach has been found, stopped and defeated." As David pointed out in his introductory remarks, like the war on illegal drugs, the war on terrorism cannot be won. We'll always have homegrown terrorists such as Timothy McVeigh or the Unabomber. There'll always be a few people in the world who hate us. So we have to face that fact, we cannot win that war. Now Bush has called for a new national plan for Afghanistan. He did this earlier this week, inserting, "We will stay until the mission is done." What is the mission? How will we know when it's done? Will it be when we get bin Laden, dead or alive? We may never find his body, so Bush's pronouncement is a recipe for staying indefinitely in Afghanistan. Now, our desire for revenge after 9/11 is natural. We are the strongest power the world has ever seen, not only in absolute terms, but relative to the rest of the world. Our overwhelming success in the Gulf War came with only 148 U.S. deaths. Our victory in Kosovo, without any fatalities. Our conquering of Afghanistan with only a handful of casualties is giving the impression that our military is invincible. Nevertheless we should be careful, and

think carefully about where we are. To quote Lord Acton, "Power tends to corrupt and absolute power corrupts absolutely." And we are getting corrupted absolutely. Our military, no matter how invincible, cannot eliminate the suicide bomber, the terrorist who will die for his cause. As long as people hate us, we will be vulnerable. The Israelis have been trying in vain to stamp out the Palestinian terrorist attacks. Ariel Sharon, who came to power promising security through stronger action, has seen a rise in violence since he took office and an increase in Jewish deaths. His billet of military efforts has just produced more violence. And we, in Afghanistan, have killed 3,000 or 3,400 Afghan civilians, about as many as died in 9/11. Secretary Powell, last week, made the same point about Israel. He said to the Israelis, "No matter how effective the Israeli defenses will be, there will still be people who will resort to violence and terror. The anger and the frustration will still be there." Now why can't the administration understand that terrorism against the United States, like that against Israel, cannot be eliminated by military might?

While we cannot eliminate terrorism, we can reduce its frequency and violence. We should consider its roots. This does not mean that we are justifying the attacks on our people and our land, but that we recognize the terrorists have objectives. Osama bin Laden has told us why he's attacking us. It is because we had troops in the holy territory of Saudi Arabia. In fact, he was not notably against the United States prior to the Gulf War, and it was when we stationed troops in Saudi Arabia that he turned his hatred to us. And in his first tape after 9/11, he promised, "I swear to God that America will not live in peace before all of the army of infidels depart the land of the prophet Mohammed." Not only does he feel this way, but so do many millions in the Islamic world. Since 9/11, we have deployed troops in Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, Kurdistan, and Georgia. Also in the Philippines and Colombia. We are talking about stationing our troops in the Sudan and Yemen. In fact, we are pressuring the Yemens to take our troops. In each of these countries, the local populous resents our presence. In Muslim countries, the opposition is particularly hostile, since they see Christianity on another crusade to invade Israel. Wherever we have bases, the local population resents those troops. In Okinawa, the natives strongly opposed the U.S. soldiers stationed on their island. Many of the South Korean population hate the American military in their midst. American troops abroad furnish both a motivation for terrorism and a target. If we brought our men and women home, would we be safer or less safe? I think the answer is clear. We would reduce the motivation to attack us. Americans would be seen more as we think we are, peaceful people who wish good things for the world. I realize this goes against the grain which seems as giving in to Osama bin Laden, but if our objective is to reduce terrorism, it's the most practical and probably the only way to do it. Let us not let a misguided machismo stand in the way of protecting our people and reducing violence in the world, bringing our troops home. By the way, why do we have soldiers in Germany and Okinawa, I thought the Cold War was over? Bringing our troops home would increase our security, not decrease it. Even before September 11th, more than 60,000 U.S. military were operating in over 100 countries around the world. No wonder people consider America an imperial power. If we also reduced our unseemly favoritism for Israel by taking a more neutral stance, our credibility in the world [Loud applause]—our credibility in the world, and especially in the Arab countries would increase immensely. This too, would help reduce the hatred that many feel towards the U.S. George W. Bush explained to Congress why the

terrorists hate America. He said, "They hate what we see right here in this chamber—a democratically elected government. They hate our freedoms. Our freedom of religion, our freedom of speech, our freedom to vote, and assemble, and disagree with each other." The President is wrong. According to a Zogby International poll released last week, a majority of people in five Arab countries and three non-Arab Islamic states, view our freedom and our democracy with favor, but overwhelmingly they disapprove of our policies towards the Arab nations and the Palestinians. Kuwait, for example, who [you] remember we rescued from Iraq, liked our freedom and democracy by 58 to 39%, but only 6% viewed our policies favorably, and a huge 88% disapproved of our policy in the Middle East. Other Islamic countries had almost identical views. And this poll was taken before Israel sent its military into the West Bank. Finally, attacking western Iraq, or any other Middle Eastern country, would only increase the number of terrorists that will seek to get revenge. Let us reduce terrorism, not increase it. The policies currently being followed and those being talked about will only produce more 9/11s. Security cannot come from violence. We should follow Thomas Jefferson's advice from his first inaugural—peace, commerce, and honest friendship with all nations and tangling alliances with none. Thank you. [Loud applause]

Lewis Lapham: I'm taken by the three statements, weren't you? Did you think that was good news?

Gore Vidal: Wonderful news. [Laughter] Keep spreading the good news. [Laughter]

Lewis Lapham: We have some questions on the cards, Gore, and one is: "What is the difference between the United States' war on terrorism and Israel's war on terrorism?"

Thomas Gale Moore: Darn Little.

Lewis Lapham: You just answered that question.

Gore Vidal: Well, I think it was well laid out, yes.

Lewis Lapham: O.K.

Gore Vidal: It needs to be a little more even handed in our dealings with the Muslim world. Terrorism is terrorism in any case. We should have turned over the whole thing when we were attacked, if it was indeed Osama who did it. The whole thing, this was perfect for the U.N. Kofi Annan is well trusted. [Applause] And this is for CIA/FBI. This is for police work, not military work. And it's again, that mixing up of the military with the other. You know, a few years ago in Italy, the Mafia, in Palermo, blew up the Chief of Police and his wife in a car as they were driving in the great state through Palermo. Had it happened in Dallas, the United States would bomb Dallas. The Italians did not bomb Palermo, even though all the Mafia does its shopping there, and you know, you're bound to hit some of the family. Instead they sent the police after them, and they got about half of the leadership of the Mafia. And that's Italy, which is not known for being terribly attentive. [Laughter]

Lewis Lapham: I have a question for Bob Higgs: "Peace and free trade go hand in

hand, but because of our special interests, we can't even lower tariffs on textile imports from our poor, new ally in Pakistan. In other words, is there a way of reconciling our economic interests with our declared faith in liberty, and what Tom was trying to say, an even-handed policy?"

Robert Higgs: Oh, indeed, I think the two interests go hand in hand. It's been observed by wiser men than I that when goods cannot freely cross borders, soldiers will. In the middle of the nineteenth century it was well understood that free trade was one of the most effective policies to promote peace. And although it's certainly not the only policy that would tend to promote peace, it certainly would work in that direction.

Lewis Lapham: Even though we have all the deck loaded in our favor? In other words, there is something like I think 36 or 37 wars going on in the world today, and most of them are about the control of a single commodity. I'm sorry, you know more about this than I do.

Robert Higgs: Well, the objective of free trade is simply to withdraw government discretion from telling people with whom they may make exchanges, and there's nothing in that withdrawal that promotes war whatsoever. Wars are the work of governments, and the government policy of free trade is simply a policy of hands-off, of saying to people, if you wish to buy and sell with people from Pakistan, go to it. If you wish to deal with the people of North Korea, go to it, and of course, nothing in that sort of commerce would bring about violence. Free trade is the kind of exchange from which everyone benefits, that's why they enter into it. [Applause]

Lewis Lapham: Gore, another question is to you: "Does the word 'liberal' mean anything anymore?"

Gore Vidal: The last time I looked, it didn't. [Laughter]. However, the great triumphs of our civilization, and we have had a few, were all liberal measures. I remember the first debate, I remember, in Congress was 1935, and Roosevelt had introduced Social Security, and I fear my conservative grandfather was against it, but it finally passed. But the right wing said, "If this passes, you will cease to have a name and only a number." You were going to lose your name if Social Security went through. Well, it went through. I have now lived long enough to see that the conservatives were right. [Laughter] The Social Security number is now our tag, our prisoner's tag. It's used for taxes, it's used for plastic cards. It's used for everything to keep control over us, little knowing that back then those fools were right, the honking geese, not that I'm for revoking it.

Lewis Lapham: Another question to you is: "Would things have been any different had your cousin, Al Gore, had been elected President of the United States?"

Gore Vidal: Consanguinity forbids my candor. [Laughter]

Lewis Lapham: There's also a question that touches on Bob Higgs about the illusions of the Defense Department. Is there any way of revealing those illusions? I

mean, can those be made clearer? Have those illusions been in effect for long, and how long are they likely to stay in effect?

Robert Higgs: They are illusions of very long standing, but they need not remain forever, and a number of people have made it their business to try to reveal the reality. One source, you'll find on the Web at Independent.org. Look under defense and foreign policy on our Web site, and I believe you'll find many illusions shattered there.

Lewis Lapham: Do any of you think that the United States has plans to proceed with a war against Iran or in Central Asia and act with an even more active imperial foreign policy? Do you think that's possible?

Gore Vidal: Oh, of course. You don't build up a great army unless you intend to use it. This poor Jefferson figured this out at the very beginning, as did Madison in the *Federalist Papers*. And then you don't have a standing army because you'll use it, and it'll be very expensive. And what happens? Poor Jefferson ends up inventing the Navy, because we were busy fighting the Barbary pirates, so he gives us a navy, which he didn't really think we ought to have, but we fell into that one. We fall into a lot of things.

Lewis Lapham: Will there be any sense or means or way of our shrinking our military presence?

Gore Vidal: When you have a country so deeply crooked, how do you straighten it out? I don't know, but I think we will run out of money. I mean, there are signs. And I think the world shows a certain fatigue with us, which I think is going to get worse.

Lewis Lapham: This question is, is grassroots activism relevant?

Gore Vidal: Oh, yes, I think it's probably the only thing that might be useful at any given moment. . .

Lewis Lapham: I want to ask the panel if they think grassroots activism is relevant? Tom Moore began to talk about the kind of idealism that we ought to put into action. But what is to be done?

Thomas Gale Moore: Well, as I said, I think what we first should do is pull our troops out of the rest of the world and let the Defense Department be a Defense Department defending us from our soil here, not from the rest of the world. And then, as Thomas Jefferson said, we should trade with the rest of the world. I would agree with Bob that the best thing we can do for the rest of the world is trade with them. I think it's obscene that we have barriers to buying textiles from poor state countries in Africa. That's the one thing they have to sell us that could make them money and get them out of poverty. I think it's obscene that we have these restrictions on purchases from poor countries. We ought to be allowing these imports that would help the rest of the world get out of their abject conditions. That's what we should be doing.

Lewis Lapham: And what about at home? What about domestically?

Thomas Gale Moore: I must say, Gore made a reference to the Roman Empire, and it occurred to me the other day that Attorney General Ashcroft was probably the worst appointment since Caligula appointed his horse to the Senate. [Laughter and applause] And so we are losing our freedoms right and left. I could go down chapter and verse. The [USA] PATRIOT Act that eroded a lot of our freedoms. And even when the courts try to intervene, the Justice Department under Ashcroft won't stop. The State Department last month listed a number of countries that have human rights violations, like China and North Korea, and they condemned them for having thrown people in jail for long periods of time without charging them, and had secret trials. Why didn't they list the United States in that list too? What we're doing here to our freedoms I think is just terrible.

Lewis Lapham: We are as one. Yes. Also, there are a lot of questions that have come in about wanting further remarks from all of you on the situation in Israel, to comment on your attitudes toward the Israeli occupation. What do you think about that? Go ahead.

Gore Vidal: Well, Sharon in Lebanon gave us a foretaste of what his administration would be like, and he seems to be out of control. And whatever comes out of this he has no exit in mind other than Armageddon, and that's serious. At this point, if we had a government in the United States, we might do something quite active. Just draw a line in the sand, if nothing more, and say, "Look, we've given you a lot of aide over the years and we would like a little something back, like peace." [Applause]

Lewis Lapham: Tom?

Thomas Gale Moore: Well, Ariel Sharon when he ran for office, promised two things. One was to torpedo the Oslo procedures, and the other was to bring security to Israel. Well, he's batting 500%, which in baseball is pretty good. He got rid of the Oslo Peace Accord, and he is a disaster. What I think the Saudis proposed is the only sensible thing to do. You go back to the 1967 line with some adjustments. But what was supposedly a generous proposal at Camp David was not very generous—85% of the settlers would have stayed on the West Bank. And they would have been divided, and the effect would have been dividing the West Bank into four separate cantons not contiguous. And the Israelis were going to control the borders, the skies, and the water supply. It's a little hard to call that an independent state they were talking about. [Applause]

Lewis Lapham: Gore, this is from a person who has read your book who says, "What are some of the other ways of getting back at a tyrannical government that are not as extreme as McVeigh?" What other means without blowing up a building in Oklahoma City?

Gore Vidal: Well, an unpleasant letter to Janet Reno [Laughter].

Lewis Lapham: I mean, if we give it a thought. But if we have nobody in the Congress making the argument?

Gore Vidal: Well, we don't because we don't have representative government. We gave that up some time ago. They represent, yes, but only corporate [state] America. They don't represent the citizens. So in the absence of corporate government, you're going to have a lot of independent contractors like Timothy McVeigh, which is indeed the chaos and anarchy that Judge Brandeis was warning against when government, which is the great teacher itself, runs berserk and becomes criminal in its actions against the people. It is a criminal government, and its main targets for its crimes are the people of the United States, who are well and truly ripped off in the interest of "the Russians are coming, we've got to stop them, we've got to stop all drugs, all terrorism everywhere on Earth." I think of these dumb statements that come out. Are we going to also alleviate all pain? Why not? It's a great goal. I'd go along with that, except in the case of certain people. [Laughter] We all have our lists of exemptions [Laughter].

Lewis Lapham: Do any of our historians have a notion of how to get back at a tyrannical government without blowing up a building?

Robert Higgs: I think many people have already discovered how to act individually to withdraw their assistance from a government they regard as fundamentally illegitimate. They do that simply by taking every opportunity they find, and looking for new ones, to withdraw their support, to not obey the laws they regard as unjust. And little by little those individual acts of dis-allegiance add up. David Hume observed way back in the early eighteenth century that every government rests on public opinion. And so long as public opinion supports the legitimacy of a government, even when it acts tyrannically, that government will persist. But when people finally take it upon themselves to act, at least individually, by doing what they can to withdraw every ounce of help from an illegitimate government, then that government will eventually fall. [Applause]

Lewis Lapham: We're coming to the end of our allotted time, Gore. Would you like to sum up the evening, or the book, or our present condition?

Gore Vidal: I don't like that phrase, allotted time, all right. [Laughter] Old age is not for beginners. [Laughter]

Lewis Lapham: This question is addressed to me. It's about the imperial presidency. "Who do you see in Congress safeguarding the Republic?" I don't see very many people in Congress. I happen to like Fritz Hollings. And Kucinich in the House.

Gore Vidal: I like Leahy.

Lewis Lapham: Bonior. I'm not a Washington person. I mean, there are some—even Byrd has been one of the few Senators who has spoken about the absence of debate and the lack of dissent. But I myself don't see a powerful figure in Congress the way there may have been 20 or 30 years ago.

Gore Vidal: Well, it's shifted over to the Executive, and the wars have done that.

Lewis Lapham: I don't see a figure of a stature of say someone like Sam Ruben.

Gore Vidal: No, or even Lyndon Johnson before he was Emperor.

Lewis Lapham: Yes. [Laughter] Or Johnson. And I don't think that's a function of my age, I think that's partly a function of television, in a funny way. I think Clinton is a character made by and for television. I think that if Reagan was an actor playing a politician, Clinton was a politician playing an actor.

Gore Vidal: Well, he was also the greatest waste that I've ever seen in a Presidency. [Applause]. Clinton had everything.

Lewis Lapham: Had everything. But he understood the economy. He could explain it.

Gore Vidal: Yes. It was all there, and then under there was this grubby boy who was deranging him.

Lewis Lapham: But I remember the front page of the *New York Times*, to give you a sense of where I think we're at. On the day that the impeachment trial of Clinton began in the Senate, I was in the Senate gallery. And that story appeared on page one of the *Times*, below the fold. And above the fold there was a large photograph of Michael Jordan who was retiring that day from the Chicago Bulls. And there were 200 reporters in the Senate gallery, and there were 6,000 reporters in the United Center in Chicago. And that kind of told me where our politics were at. The impeachment of the President of the United States is not as big a story as the retirement of Michael Jordan.

Gore Vidal: So Caligula was "right" [Laughter]—in his appointments anyway.

Lewis Lapham: One more? This question is, "You all seem to agree the United States in some way provokes attacks like 9/11. Do you think hatred from religious extremism plays a role?"

Gore Vidal: Yes. Very simply, yes. And I regard the greatest disaster ever to befall the West was monotheism. [Applause]

Lewis Lapham: In show business, there's a saying that you always try to find a line to walk on. And it means I don't think you get a better one than that.

Gore Vidal: Particularly if there's water. [Applause]

David Theroux: Ladies and gentlemen, I want to especially thank Gore Vidal for his superb work and for taking the time to join with us. I want to thank Lewis Lapham for kindly moderating our program tonight, and for an excellent panel, including Barton Bernstein, Robert Higgs, and Thomas Moore for their comments. [Applause]. And most of all, I want to thank all of you for joining with us and making this evening such a successful program. As I mentioned earlier, Gore Vidal is going to be on his way shortly to the outer lobby to autograph copies of his book, *Perpetual War for Perpetual Peace*, and we hope that you will pick up a copy. Also, for those who have not seen a copy, we have copies of Robert Higgs' book *Crisis and Leviathan*, and I'm sure that Bob would be delighted to autograph his as well. Please visit us at Independent.org, and

we look forward to you attending future Independent events. Thank you and good night.

[END]