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THE CONSTRUCTION OF 'SEPTEMBER 11TH,

AND

THE NEW ZEALAND RESPONSE

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CONTENTS

- 1. Introduction**
- 2. Chapter One: 'As the Civilised World Watched in Horror ...'**
- 3. Chapter Two: Deconstructing 'September 11th'**
- 4. Chapter Three: The New Zealand Response**
- 5. Chapter Four: Afghanistan and Beyond**
- 6. Bibliography**

Introduction

“In defending democracy, we must not forget the need to observe the values that make democracy worth defending”.¹

On 11 September 2001, four hijacked passenger planes crashed in the United States. Two of the planes were deliberately piloted into highly populated buildings in New York City, one hit the American Defence Department (the Pentagon) in Washington D.C., and the fourth crashed near the small town of Shanksville, Somerset County, Pennsylvania. This thesis will examine how these events were constructed in mainstream Western discourse, and how these constructions helped shape the environment in which subsequent world affairs emerged. A principal focus of the study is the largely unquestioned resort to violent, military action in the wake of 11 September 2001, and it will be shown how the key constructions worked in conjunction with each other to support this development. The second central issue examined is the response of the New Zealand government. What would be the position of New Zealand’s Labour-led government, with its tradition of an independent, moral foreign policy and a commitment to a rules-based international order in the wake of the events?

My choice of this topic, and this particular approach, stems from my witnessing the extreme convergence of opinion that followed these events, both in the mainstream media and in general conversations with fellow New Zealanders. The clearly developing plans for aggressive retaliation, along with claims that ‘the world had changed’, led me to be concerned about the implications for human rights.

I found the theoretical works of Murray Edelman most accurately reflected the situation I was observing, and the thesis is thus largely informed by his writings.²

¹ Britain’s Lord Chief Justice Woolf, cited in the *Dominion Post*, 2 November 2002.

Edelman's fundamental premise is that politics are constructions of the publics concerned with them. This is not to argue that events themselves are not real – rather, that what they mean and whether they are noticed depends on observers' situations, and the language that reflects and interprets those situations.³ It is not 'reality' in any testable sense that shapes political consciousness and behaviour, Edelman argues, 'but the beliefs that language helps evoke about the causes of discontents and satisfactions'.⁴ Constructions, however, have real effects, and it will be shown here that in the wake of 'September 11th' the human rights of some have been, and continue to be, submerged by these dominant constructions.⁵

In Chapter One, the mainstream representation of 'September 11th' will be portrayed through a description of articles and pictures that appeared in New Zealand's capital city newspaper, the *Dominion*, throughout the month of September 2001. It is important to note that the objective here is not to analyse the media as such, but the mainstream *discourse*. While I personally agree with those such as Noam Chomsky, who argue that the media tends to be manipulative of public opinion, the constructions of 'September 11th' were almost unique in their dominance and uncontested nature. Accordingly, I have taken the *Dominion* to be reflective of this, and have not set out to assess the extent to which it was also influential in forming the dominant discourse.

Chapter Two will deconstruct 'September 11th' as it was identified in Chapter One, and will discuss the relationship of the constructions to the almost uniform Western response. Drawing on the theories of Edelman, Chomsky,⁶ and Edward Said, the particular representation of the victims, the events, 'the enemy' and the military

² Murray Edelman, *Constructing the Political Spectacle*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988. Edelman's conceptual framework is influenced by the work of George Herbert Mead, Lev Vygotsky, Michel Foucault and Jacques Derrida. Edelman, p. 9.

³ Edelman, p. 2.

⁴ Edelman, p. 104.

⁵ Due to space constraints, the human rights implications of changes in domestic anti-terrorism legislation following the events have not been able to be examined here.

⁶ Some of the theoretical framework of Chomsky's media analysis has been used here, in slightly modified form, to analyse aspects of the discourse. Herman, Edward S., and Chomsky, Noam, *Manufacturing Consent: The Political Economy of the Mass Media*, London: Vintage, 1994.

response itself will be carefully analysed. Said's arguments in *Covering Islam*⁷ have been used here in analysing the representation of the 'other', however the fundamental thesis of *Covering Islam* is based on that of Said's original work: *Orientalism*.⁸

Chapter Three will consider the response of the New Zealand government. The principal focus of this chapter is on the discourse in the New Zealand political environment, especially that of government Members of Parliament, and how this conformed with or deviated from the mainstream constructions outlined in Chapters Two and Three. International legal opinions on the military campaign will also be discussed here to throw light on both the New Zealand government's response and the military response in general, and it will be shown how, driven by the apparent 'inevitability' of the path to war, the Labour-led government contributed New Zealand troops to an unconstrained, United States-led campaign in Afghanistan.

In Chapter Four, it will be reiterated that, rather than any inherent justification or requirement for war, it was the discursive tide following the events of 11 September 2001 that led to a military campaign against Afghanistan, and that the New Zealand government was caught up in and in turn contributed to this tide. The changing nature of the constructions will also be identified in this chapter. As Edelman says, subjects and objects are continuously evolving constructions of each other, and it will be shown that substantial criticism has now emerged of the 'war on terror' as it relates to Iraq. Yet it will be maintained that while the constructions have evolved, the earlier, dominant constructions – and, indeed, the critical focus on Iraq – have served to obscure both the nature of the war in Afghanistan, as well as other features of the 'war on terror'. It will be argued, finally, that as we proceed in this era following 'September 11th' it is both morally and strategically imperative for human rights to be placed at the forefront of international relations.

⁷ Edward Said, *Covering Islam: How the Media and the Experts Determine How We See the Rest of the World*, London: Vintage, 1997.

⁸ Edward Said, *Orientalism*, New York: Pantheon Books, 1978.