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"John le Carré is Mr. Angry now that Smiley's day has gone". Spy Fiction and the Age of Anger

Abstract: This article examines the radical shift evident in John le Carré's post-9/11 novels and argues that the author emerged as both a fierce critic of the war on terror and an insightful guide into the expansive post-9/11 security state. John le Carré understood the power of ressentiment and its changing dynamics before and after the Berlin Wall came down, but his writing entered a new phase in the wake of 9/11. Le Carré's normally detached cynicism turned to anger and increased nihilism after the U.S. and Britain invaded Iraq, embraced torture and 'extraordinary rendition', and upended the precarious balance between liberty and security at home and abroad. After relating a brief history of spy fiction and its relationship to the post-9/11 national security state, I turn to le Carré's response to the 9/11 attacks by focusing on the novels *Absolute Friends* (2003) and *A Most Wanted Man* (2008). John le Carré's post-9/11 novels, like his previous work, stage tragic collisions between ordinary people seeking meaningful human connection in a dangerous world and the impersonal organizations responsible for making it that way. The institutions have changed since the Cold War, as have the perceived external threats justifying their existence, but le Carré demonstrated a unique ability to interpret and critique the post-9/11 security environment.

Keywords: *Pankaj Mishra*, *John le Carré*, *9/11*, *War on Terror*, *Absolute Friends*, *A Most Wanted Man*

> It is now clear that the post-9/11 policies of pre-emptive war, massive retaliation, regime change, nation-building, and reforming Islam have failed – catastrophically failed – while the dirty war against the West's own Enlightenment – inadvertently pursued through extrajudicial murder, torture, rendition, indefinite detention and massive surveillance – has been a wild success.
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> Pankaj Mishra, *Age of Anger: A History of the Present*

As the European powers brought nearly three fourths of the globe under its control during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, a feat made possible by their robust industrial capitalist economies, Pankaj Mishra notes they brought with them the same "unprecedented political, economic, and social disorder" responsible for two world wars, genocide, and totalitarian ideologies.[1] Our current 'Age of Anger' is rooted in the West's celebrated intellectual tradition, one harboring far darker impulses than most acknowledge. Mishra argues that Friedrich Nietzsche's concept of 'ressentiment' best describes a contemporary society "herded by capitalism and technology into a common present, where grossly unequal distributions of wealth and power have created humiliating new hierarchies" on a global scale. It is not the lofty rhetoric of eighteenth century Enlightenment thinkers that inspires our present, but the more nihilistic voices from that same movement and their nineteenth century descendants. Ressentiment in the twenty-first century is characterized by "an existential resentment of other people's being, caused by an intense mix of envy and sense of humiliation and powerlessness." John Locke's Social Contract reverts to Thomas Hobbes' "everybody against everybody else" as ressentiment born from exploitative capitalism and neo-imperialism "poisons civil society" and enables the "global return to authoritarianism and toxic forms of chauvinism".[2] The Cold War blunted

[1] Pankaj Mishra, *Age of Anger: A History of the Present* (Penguin Books, 2018), 10
[2] Ibid., 13-14.

the effects of ressentiment in the 'Third World' by propping up client states, but most of these regimes failed in the 1990s and early 2000s.

Pankaj Mishra traces how ressentiment influenced a burgeoning class of angry young men in the Islamic world and inspired the likes of Mohamed Atta and Osama bin Laden to provoke the very "clash of civilizations" Western thinkers and politicians anticipated after the Cold War. Legions of so-called "experts on Islam" peddled their wares "more feverishly after every terrorist attack" and recast Cold War absolutist thinking like "free world versus unfree world" and the "evil empire" for a new era.[3] In the immediate aftermath of the attacks the West, specifically the United States and Britain, rallied behind an aggressive foreign policy and the erection of a new national security state masking "boundless, direful ambition", in the words of journalist Spencer Ackerman.[4] Popular culture reflected this consensus by rolling out films and series featuring male protagonists charging into the post-9/11 landscape as vengeful warriors, embodying the West's righteous fury and eliminating the radical Islamist enemy by any means necessary. Characters like Jack Bauer from the long-running series *24* (2001-10) emerged as the archetype for the twenty-first century spy, a technologically sophisticated blunt instrument who shoots first and asks questions later. When answers are not forthcoming, Bauer expertly breaks his enemies (men, women, civilians, and even elected officials) through torture. Bauer, like George W. Bush, the American president who counted among his fans, embraced the credo that you do "whatever it takes".[5] An angry and fearful American public initially welcomed the massive and unaccountable surveillance state promising greater security at the expense of some civil liberties. Voices of dissent were rare and virtually no one was interested in hearing terms like 'blowback' when it came to understanding the connection between Al Qaeda's attacks and legacies of Western imperialism and Cold War military adventurism. The war on terror only exacerbated ressentiment at home and abroad, transforming the theoretical clash of civilization advanced by aloof political scientists into a self-fulfilling prophecy.

The cultural turn in the first few years after 9/11 was largely uncritical of the hyper-aggressive US response, as evidenced by the ever-popular political thriller and spy fiction genres. Authors and studios pressed into service by the White House to create content aiding the war on terror seemed to accept and channel Dick Cheney's prescription for the future wars to come: "We also have to work, though, sort of the dark side, if you will. We've got to spend time in the shadows in the intelligence world. A lot of what needs to be done here will have to be done quietly, without any discussion, using sources and methods that are available to our intelligence agencies, if we're going to be successful".[6] The incomplete victory in Afghanistan and years of stalemate in Iraq, a conflict based on manufactured intelligence, along with a parade of horrifying revelations about torture and prisoner abuse soured the American public on the forever wars fought in their name. Cultural representation followed suit. The same production team responsible for *24*'s Jack Bauer in the early 2000s created the more cynical and morally ambiguous *Homeland* a decade later. Carrie Matheson and Nicholas Brody, characters irreparably damaged in body and spirit by the post-9/11 conflicts, wandered the vast national security landscape as cautionary tales. By the 2010s, film, television, and literary responses to the interminable war on terror frequently expressed the West's apprehension about preemptive war,

[3] Ibid., 18-19.

[4] Spencer Ackerman, *Reign of Terror: How the 9/11 Era Destabilized America and Produced Trump* (New York: Viking, 2021), 24.

[5] Jane Mayer, *The Dark Side: The Inside Story of How the War on Terror Turned into a War on American Ideals* (New York: Anchor Books, 2009), 31.

[6] "The Vice President Appears on Meet the Press with Tim Russert", *The White House* (2001), *georgewbush-whitehouse.archives.gov*. On November 11, 2001, forty Hollywood executives met with senior advisor Karl Rove at the White House ostensibly to assist the Bush administration's post-9/11 messaging. While nothing concrete was agreed to, pro-war content tended to dominate the media landscape for several years after 9/11. See Matthew Alford, *Reel Power: Hollywood Cinema and American Supremacy* (London: Pluto Press, 2010).

drone strikes, torture, unchecked surveillance, and creeping authoritarianism. Post-9/11 culture discerned ressentiment's grip on the Western worldview before political establishments did.

One cultural icon associated with the world of spy fiction immediately declared the war on terror a dangerous overreaction. John le Carré (David Cornwell) spent four decades before 9/11 illuminating the human dimension of espionage during the Cold War and its aftermath, transforming the spy novel into one of the most significant literary genres in the post-World War II era.[7] Le Carré created complex characters with rich inner lives and narrated their experiences navigating the darkest corners of the amoral universe inhabited by Soviet and Western intelligence services. Reflecting on his lengthy career to a new class of recruits about to enter a post-Cold War world, George Smiley, le Carré's iconic character and personal avatar, delivered an unvarnished assessment of Cold War history. "We concealed the very things that made us right", said Smiley as he ran through a litany of Machiavellian maneuvers; "We protected the strong against the weak, and we perfected the art of the public lie.... And we scarcely paused to ask ourselves how much longer we could defend our society by these means and remain a society worth defending".[8] John le Carré contended with this dilemma in every novel since *The Spy Who Came in from the Cold* (1963). Always more than a spy novelist, le Carré was not destined to reside forever in the Cold War imaginary. If the first half of his career chronicled how the West dealt with "rogue forms of communism", le Carré wrote in 1990, the second half would likely revolve around the question "How was it going to deal with rogue forms of capitalism?"[9] Le Carré devoted his post-Cold War novels to grappling with the vagaries of transnationalism, specifically the deterioration of national sovereignty and increased connectivity among populations and cultures.[10] Making the case for a "moral order beyond ideology", le Carré continued to emphasize the erosion of human rights at the expense of indifferent bureaucracies and multinational corporations.[11] Le Carré tapped into ressentiment by daring to consider the victims of unchecked intelligence agencies. What happens when the bipolar world transitions into the multipolar? What if Britain and America can no longer convince the world they matter as much as they used to?

John le Carré understood the power of ressentiment and its changing dynamics before and after the Berlin Wall came down, but his writing entered a new phase in the wake of 9/11. Le Carré's normally detached cynicism turned to anger and increased nihilism after the U.S., with Britain's unfailing support, invaded Iraq, embraced torture and 'extraordinary rendition', and upended the precarious balance between liberty and security at home and abroad. The remainder of this article examines the radical shift evident in John le Carré's post-9/11 novels and argues that the author emerged as both a fierce critic of the war on terror and an insightful guide into the expansive post-9/11 security state waging it "in the shadows". After relating a brief history of spy fiction and its relationship to the post-9/11 national security state, I turn to le Carré's response to the 9/11 attacks by focusing on the novels *Absolute Friends* (2003) and *A Most Wanted Man* (2008). John le Carré's post-9/11 novels, like his previous work, stage tragic collisions between ordinary people seeking meaningful human connection in a dangerous world and the impersonal organizations responsible for making it that way. The institutions have changed since the Cold War, as have the perceived external threats justifying their existence, but le Carré demonstrated a unique ability to interpret and critique the post-9/11 security environment.

Bill Haydon, the traitor at the heart of John le Carré's *Tinker, Tailor, Soldier, Spy* (1974) is the ultimate 'espiocrat', a character blessed with the best Britain had to offer privileged young men "born for empire". Modeled after the infamous double agent Kim Philby, le Carré also gave Haydon a bit of

[7] John G. Cawelti and Bruce A. Rosenberg, *The Spy Story* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987), 157.
[8] John le Carré, *The Secret Pilgrim* [1990] (New York: Ballantine Books, 2017), 129.
[9] Ibid., 381.
[10] Robert Lance Snyder, *John le Carré's Post-Cold War Fiction* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2017), 9.
[11] Ibid., 18.

his mentor Graham Greene's perspective on the secret world: "Haydon ... took it for granted that secret services were the only real measure of a nation's political health, the only real expression of its sub consciousness".[12] What does spy fiction reveal about a nation's culture and politics? Specifically, how does the genre's popularity influence the manner by which the national security state operates in the post-9/11 security environment? A British invention, the emergence of the political thriller in the Victorian and Edwardian periods reflected Britain's mounting fears about national security and imperial rivalry in distant locations like Africa and Asia.[13] Successive generations of British, and eventually American authors, used the genre to comment on international politics and to reassert national values in the form of heroic protagonists like Ian Fleming's James Bond, whose brazen tactics and unapologetic 'Britishness' stood in stark contrast to Britain's diminished role in the world after World War II.[14] Spy fiction imagines and defines the enemy, who is usually depicted as the ultimate 'other' with obvious racial and cultural differences inherently threatening to imperial ambitions. Consequently, combatting the enemy justifies the most extreme violence in defense of the realm.[15]

Historically, the figure of the spy is a "locus for cultural fantasies", writes Allan Hepburn. The spy upholds the myth that human agency still matters in the cold and impersonal twentieth century.[16] Michael Denning claims spy thrillers have been "cover stories for our culture, collective fantasies in the imagination of the English-speaking world, paralleling reality, expressing that which they wish to conceal, and telling the 'History of Contemporary Society'".[17] Even John le Carré's tormented protagonists establish identities and evince agency in sprawling intelligence bureaucracies, acting as vehicles "for social critique because he [the spy] preserves individual agency. Never just acting on his own behalf . . . the spy switches between public and private selves without warning".[18] The intelligence bureaucracy in modern spy fiction, 'the Circus' in le Carré's universe, is a microcosm for the nation it serves.[19] The spy can either bend the service to its will, like James Bond, or become its creature, subsuming his identity (and soul) to the Great Game. Le Carré novels are littered with the wreckage of those who tried and failed to challenge the intelligence bureaucracy, and therefore the state. Only the rumpled George Smiley occasionally had success, but at great personal cost.

The post-9/11 spy thriller is even more transparent about channeling society's collective fears and fantasies than it was in the twentieth century. However, as Andrew Pepper notes, many literary scholars dismissed "the contributions that crime and espionage novels have made to ongoing attempts to map the significance of September 11 and its aftermath." The truth is, he counters, is that the genre "has excelled at the task of responding, often in critical and imaginative ways, to the security environment in the wake of the 9/11 attacks".[20] Pepper lauds John le Carré in particular for discerning the similarities and differences between police work and espionage when it comes to combatting terrorism. Moreover, in his post-9/11 novels le Carré demonstrates how the deterioration of state sovereignty on the "transnational stage" enables multinational corporations and private security firms to hijack the war on terror for their own ends.[21] As is often the case in le Carré's novels, ordinary people pay the price for both intelligence victories and failures.

[12] John le Carré, *Tinker, Tailor, Soldier, Spy* [1974] (New York: Penguin Books, 2012), 367.
[13] Wesley K. Wark, "Introduction: Fictions of History", *Intelligence and National Security*, 5.4 (1990), 1.
[14] Michael Denning, *Cover Stories: Narratives and Ideology in the British Spy Thriller* (London: Routledge, 1987), 13-14.
[15] Oliver S. Buckton, *Espionage in British Fiction and Film since 1900* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2015), xii.
[16] Allan Hepburn, *Intrigue: Espionage and Culture* (New Haven: Yale U.P., 2005), xv.
[17] Denning, *Cover Stories*, 2.
[18] Hepburn, *Intrigue*, 167.
[19] Toby Manning, *John le Carré and the Cold War* (London: Bloomsbury, 2018), 189.
[20] Andrew Pepper, "Policing the Globe: State Sovereignty and the International in the Post-9/11 Crime Novel," *Modern Fiction Studies*, 57.3 (Fall 2011), 403-404.
[21] Ibid., 422.

But not every writer or director is interested in critiquing the post-9/11 security environment, even decades removed from the event. Since the beginning of intelligence as a bureaucratic responsibility in the late nineteenth century, the relationship between spy fiction and real intelligence activities has always been incestuous and unnerving. Lurid spy fiction about German spies running amok across Britain prompted the Imperial Defence Committee to create the Secret Service in 1909.[22] In the US, the FBI and later the CIA invested in flattering portrayals of their officials and their missions in popular culture. In some cases, the CIA even ghostwrote scripts that served its interests.[23] The 'covert sphere', which comprises films, television series, video games, and novels, legitimizes and even empowers governments to wage secret wars with tacit support from the public. Timothy Melley defines the covert sphere as "a cultural imaginary shaped by both institutional secrecy and public fascination with the secret work of the state". Where else can the public learn about the work of the national security state other than popular culture? And if the intelligence bureaucracy can help construct sympathetic narratives via Hollywood liaison offices or by lending studios equipment and personnel, so much the better. The covert sphere is more than a cultural reflection of actual covert actions, Melley argues, "It is an ideological arena with profound effects on democracy, citizenship, and state policy".[24] Spy novelist Phillip Knightley wrote that his genre's "search for conspiracies and our fascination with betrayal shield us from reality and dangerously simplify the world around us. And the fictional glorification of spies enables the real ones to go on playing their sordid games".[25] 9/11 enabled governments to spend endlessly on national security, but selling the public on multiple wars while simultaneously retreating further into secrecy required forging a consensus capable of withstanding scrutiny. The covert sphere, resurrected from the dustbin of Cold War history and reconfigured for the war on terror, aided this purpose. "To put it crudely", Melley writes about the post-Patriot Act world, "it is illegal to disclose state secrets but not illegal to write espionage fiction".[26]

Few cultural figures as prominent as John le Carré dared to question or challenge the U.S. response to 9/11 in those first few weeks after the attacks. Sympathy and declarations of support poured in from all over the globe, and le Carré certainly counted among those who felt, in his words, "an enormous, inexpressible sympathy for the victims, for America", but he had already concluded the George W. Bush administration was both incompetent and dangerous to act responsibly.[27] In a foreword written for a new edition of *The Tailor of Panama* released in April 2001, le Carré renounced "[t]he new American realism, which is nothing other than gross corporate power cloaked in demagogy" and believed "quite simply and emphatically" that the U.S. is not "fit to run the post-Cold War world". Furthermore, he added, "George W. Bush is not fit to run America, or for that matter a single-decker bus, but that's America's business. Unfortunately, he has been given charge of the world's only superpower".[28] It is perhaps no surprise then that when the first bombs fell on Afghanistan six weeks after September 11, le Carré pulled no punches in a biting editorial entitled, "We have already lost the war on terrorism". His piece evokes many of the themes found in *Age of Anger*, specifically the West's perpetuation of 'economic colonialism' and the "plundering of the Third World by uncontrollable multinational companies". Le Carré mourns the West's lost opportunities after the Cold War to combat

[22] Graeme Shimmin, "Le Queux: How One Crazy Spy Novelist Created MI5 and MI6", *Graeme Shimmin, graemeshimmin.com.*
[23] See Tricia Jenkins, *The CIA in Hollywood: How the Agency Shapes Film and Television* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2016).
[24] Timothy Melley, *The Covert Sphere: Secrecy, Fiction, and the National Security State* (Ithaca: Cornell U.P., 2012), 5.
[25] See Wark, "Introduction: Fictions of History", 9.
[26] Melley, *The Covert Sphere*, 10.
[27] Adam Sisman, *John le Carré: The Biography* (New York: HarperCollins, 2015), 550.
[28] Adam Sisman, "From Cold War Spy to Angry Old Man: The Politics of John le Carré", *The Guardian* (2015), *www.theguardian.com.*

the "unglamorous enemies of mankind: poverty, famine, slavery, tyranny, drugs, bush-war fires, racial and religious intolerance, and greed".[29] Writing primarily to a British audience, le Carré condemned Prime Minister Tony Blair's willingness to serve as America's "eloquent white knight" in endless military adventures while misgoverning a nation "blighted by institutionalized racism, white male dominance, chaotically administered police forces ... and unnecessary public poverty".[30] Le Carré was not naïve; Al Qaeda had to be dealt with and military action in Afghanistan was "a horrible, necessary, humiliating police action," but he cautioned "when it's over, it won't be over".[31]

John le Carré had just begun a novel that would become *Absolute Friends* (2003) when Al Qaeda struck, initially scuttling a project planned around a terrorist plot. Le Carré declared the novel 'dead in the water', but Bush and Blair's invocation of a 'Global War on Terrorism' and the growing drumbeat for a preemptive war against Saddam Hussein changed his perspective.[32] Enraged by Bush and Blair's blatant fabrications concerning an Al Qaeda-Iraq connection and the tragi-comic search for weapons of mass destruction, le Carré determined that "[t]he lies have been distributed are so many and so persistent that arguably fiction is the only way to tell the truth".[33] In January 2003, shortly before completing *Absolute Friends*, le Carré penned another editorial similar to his first entitled "The United States has gone mad." *The Times* published the piece just two months before the 'coalition of the willing' blitzed Iraq, marking a decade of sunken treasure, blood, and lost national prestige. "The reaction to 9/11 is beyond anything Osama bin Laden could have hoped for in his nastiest dreams", he wrote about the "surreal war-to-be". Dismayed by the Patriot Act and Britain's expansion of the Official Secrets Act, le Carré lamented, "As in McCarthy times, the freedoms that have made America the envy of the world are being systematically eroded".[34] He blamed the "compliant ... media" and "vested corporate interests" for perpetuating "one of the great public relations conjuring tricks of history". It brought him no pleasure, but le Carré once again predicted the disaster to come.[35] Friends, family, editors, readers, reviewers, and even le Carré himself recognized he was in danger of succumbing to what le Carré, a lifelong Germanophile, termed *alterszorn* ('the rage of age'). "I am now so angry", le Carré wrote a confidante, "that I have to exercise a good deal of restraint in order to produce a readable book".[36]

Absolute Friends has many of the elements one associates with le Carré's novels, such as individuals vs. institutions and the complicated internal lives of double agents, but there is no doubting 'the rage of age' left its mark on his first post-9/11 novel.[37] The story revolves around the lifelong relationship between Ted Mundy, the Pakistan-born son of a British military officer with an itinerant upbringing who settles for an uninspiring civil service career, and Sasha, a charismatic West German intellectual and anarchist who defects to East Germany only to become disillusioned with the oppressive regime. As a Stasi (East German secret service) officer, Sasha enlists Ted to pass intelligence to British intelligence. When the Wall comes down, thanks in part to Ted and Sasha's efforts, Ted abandons the secret world (and Britain) for his beloved Germany. Ted lands a job as a tour

[29] John le Carré, "We Have Already Lost the War on Terrorism: What Victory Can We Possible Achieve that Matches the Defeats We Have Already Suffered, Let Alone the Defeats that Lie Ahead", *The Globe and Mail* (2001), *www.theglobeandmail.com*.
[30] Ibid.
[31] Ibid.
[32] Sisman, *John le Carré*, 550.
[33] Ibid., 551.
[34] John le Carré, "The United States Has Gone Mad", *The Times* (2003), *www.thetimes.co.uk*.
[35] Ibid.
[36] Sisman, "From Cold War Spy to Angry Old Man".
[37] Phyllis Lassner argues that le Carré's post-9/11 novels are similar to his previous ones, but with a significant change in narrative style and voice. See Phyllis Lassner, "Paradoxical Polemics: John le Carre's Responses to 9/11", in Kristine A. Miller, ed., *Transatlantic Literature and Culture After 9/11: The Wrong Side of Paradise* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), 17.

guide in Munich and forms a makeshift family with a Turkish refugee and her son, essentially creating a life as far removed from the one he led as possible. After years of silence, Sasha contacts Ted after 9/11 in hopes the two can rekindle their relationship and make the world right again. Ted is a thinly veiled avatar for le Carré, manifesting the same outrage the author communicated in his editorials: "It's the discovery, in his sixth decade, that half a century after the death of empire, the dismally ill-managed country he'd done a little of this or that for is being marched off to quell the natives on the strength of a bunch of lies, in order to please a renegade hyperpower that thinks it can treat the rest of the world as its fiefdom".[38] Sasha is seduced by the vision of a mysterious Russian oligarch named Dimitri to create a socialist think-tank, what amounts to a library filled with left-wing literature and philosophy to counter American propaganda, and convinces Ted to join him on one last crusade against injustice. "Teddy. My friend. We are partners in a historic enterprise", Sasha pleads, "We shall do nothing to harm, nothing to destroy. Everything we dreamed of in Berlin has been delivered to us by providence. We shall stem the advance of ignorance and perform a service of enlightenment for all humanity".[39] But experienced le Carré readers know something is rotten in Munich.

Sasha is an easy mark, an idealist despite a lifetime of disappointment, but Ted is naturally more cynical. Dimitri is speaking their language, however, pushing all the right buttons for two world-weary radicals incensed by the state of the world:

> The war on Iraq was illegitimate, Mr. Mundy. It was a criminal and immoral conspiracy. No provocation, no link with Al Qaeda, no weapons of Armageddon. Tales of complicity between Saddam and Osama were self-serving bullshit. It was an old colonial war dressed up as a crusade for Western life and liberty, and it was launched by a clique of war-hungry Judeo-Christian geopolitical fantasists who hijacked the media and exploited America's post-9/11 psychopathy.[40]

Ted becomes suspicious upon learning Sasha's former CIA contact is behind the library scheme. Another red flag involves some money originating from the Middle East. Ted realizes that supposed book deliveries are actually bomb-making materials. When Ted reaches out to Nick Amory, an MI-6 contact from his previous life for help, the CIA, aided by a compliant German police, springs the trap and gun down the two friends in what the press later sensationalizes as 'The Siege of Heidelberg'. The world will come to know Ted and Sasha as Al Qaeda sympathizers, one with a Muslim girlfriend and a grudge against the West and the other a radical leftist and former Stasi agent. Nick is left to pick up the pieces, writing an anonymous account of the massacre identifying the extralegal CIA action as a new Reichstag Fire perpetrated by "agents of a self-elected junta of Washington neoconservative theologians close to the presidential throne".[41] Predictably, no one of consequence notices or cares about Nick's truth. The West falls into line behind the next phase of America's neoconservative crusade.

Even for le Carré the ending of *Absolute Friends* was despairing. Reviewers eagerly anticipating the novel were taken aback by the blistering political commentary and strident anti-Americanism. Those who shared his perspective on the Iraq war expected some moral victory in his protagonists' tragic end. Alec Leamas made the choice to die on his own terms in the shadow of the Berlin Wall in *The Spy Who Came in from the Cold*, but there is no redemption for Ted and Sasha. Steven Poole of *The Guardian* regretted the novel's "monotonous expression of anger" because le Carré retained "enormous and undimmed skills as a storyteller". Regretfully, Poole concludes, "Where once there

[38] John le Carré, *Absolute Friends* (New York: Little, Brown, and Company, 2003), 301-302.
[39] Ibid., 341.
[40] Ibid., 321.
[41] Ibid., 448.

was a subtle knife, here is only a blunt stick".[42] The novel's reception from more centrist publications indicates le Carré was an unwelcome voice of opposition within a Western culture essentially supportive of the war on terror. *The New York Times*' Michiko Kakutani called *Absolute Friends* "a clumsy, hectoring, conspiracy-minded message-novel meant to drive home the argument that American imperialism poses a grave danger to the new world order". Le Carré always believed this last point, but Kakutani accuses him of the same "black and white moralism that Mr. le Carré's nemesis, the Bush administration, is so fond of".[43] Years later Kakutani praised *Our Kind of Traitor* (2010) because, in her view, "Mr. le Carré has set aside the dogmatic, anti-imperialist, anti-Western ideology" infecting his first few post-9/11 novels. Less discerning reviewers like Daniel Johnson of the *Daily Telegraph* dismissed *Absolute Friends* out of hand, positing that le Carré is not up to the challenge of writing for the post-9/11 world: "John le Carré is Mr. Angry now that Smiley's Day has gone".[44] Not for the first time, critics declared prematurely that le Carré was an anachronism, a relic from a bygone geopolitical era.

Absolute Friends was not a simple screed targeting American foreign policy and the war on terror. Ted and Sasha are reminiscent of Magnus Pym and his Czech handler Axel, le Carré's characters from the critically acclaimed novel *A Perfect Spy* (1986). Le Carré excavates Ted and Sasha's past lives and charts their evolving idealism from the radical 1960s through the tumultuous start of the twenty-first century. The novel asks, how prepared or capable is the left of opposing the unrelenting march towards war and authoritarianism? Christian Caryl wrote an incisive 2004 review of *Absolute Friends* and *The Little Drummer Girl* (1983), le Carré's first novel about terrorism, arguing that the aging spy novelist is not an ideologue dashing off simplistic calls to action. "The sense of ideological exhaustion is just too overpowering", Caryl notes, "the feeling of loneliness and drift that infuse the hero [Ted] just too stark".[45] Moreover, le Carré is as unsparing in his treatment of the forlorn old leftists as he is the American shock troops bearing down on them. "Nowhere do Sasha and Mundy even come close to formulating a coherent counterprogram" to the war on terror, Caryl argues. The book "reflects the diffuseness and confusion of the contemporary radical left just as much as it skewers the Bush administration".[46] *Absolute Friends* reflects Pankaj Mishra's interpretation of ressentiment because le Carré demonstrates how blowback derives from past misdeeds. He also empathizes with the victims of Western imperialism and Cold War competitiveness.

The Nation lauded *Absolute Friends* for its fiery attack on Bush's war on terror, seemingly gratified that someone with the stature of John le Carré shared its worldview, but reviewer Patrick Smith also detected his fatalism when it came to the Left, "Le Carré seems to suggest that there is little hope, in our media-manipulated world of appearances, that rational thinking can triumph over the connivances of corporate-funded politicians who find fearful populaces their surest way of retaining power". It is a bleak assessment, Smith acknowledges, "but scarcely unbelievable".[47] *Absolute Friends* is angry, and sometimes the characters act as mouthpieces for leftist editorial writers like le Carré, but the novel also maps the fraught moral and political landscape after 9/11 for his future characters. Le Carré found it "deeply depressing" that the West moved so quickly from the Cold War to a new era of "unlimited wars in the future", he said in a 2004 interview. "And I suppose that's what I was fighting

[42] Steven Poole, "Spies and Lies", *The Guardian* (2003), *www.theguardian.com*.
[43] Michiko Kakutani, "Adding Reality's Worries to a Thriller", *The New York Times* (2004), *www.nytimes.com*.
[44] See Sisman, *John le Carré*, 556.
[45] Christian Caryl, "Le Carré's War on Terror", *The New York Review* (2004), *www.nybooks.com*.
[46] Ibid.
[47] Patrick Smith, "A Near Perfect Spy Novelist", *The Nation* (2004), *www.thenation.com*.

against in *Absolute Friends* and that, for as long as I can, is what I will continue to fight against. I would long for more comprehension and a greater respect for the victims of our dreams".[48]

The story of one such victim inspired le Carré's 2008 novel *A Most Wanted Man* (*AMWM*). Murat Kurnaz is a Turkish citizen and legal resident of Germany who was arrested and detained on baseless terrorism charges, first at Bagram Air Force Base in Afghanistan and then Guantanamo Bay, Cuba. U.S. and German intelligence services mishandled the case from the start and sought to cover up their mistake while Kurnaz languished. Le Carré befriended Kurnaz and wrote a blurb for a memoir detailing his ordeal.[49] Le Carré decided to return to the war on terror as a topic after writing *Mission Song* (2006), a novel about corporate greed and corrupt national bureaucracies pillaging the Congo. *AMWM* places the character Issa Karpov in a similar situation to Murat Kurnaz. *AMWM* focuses on both the mysterious Issa and his Kafkaesque nightmare and the business of spying in a changed international security and policing landscape. Issa is a living legacy of Russia's brutal war in Chechnya, a sensitive and damaged soul whose Russian colonel father raped his Chechen mother. A devout Muslim with dreams of serving his beset community as a doctor, Issa is detained and tortured by multiple countries before landing in Hamburg as a stateless refugee, carrying nothing but the number to his dead father's bank account. A sympathetic Turkish family takes Issa in and contacts Annabel Richter, a lawyer specializing in human rights who is determined to protect Issa from state abuse. Annabel and Issa meet with Tommy Brue, a British banker who did "a little of this and that" for MI-6 in the past, and determine Colonel Karpov's dormant account is the product of collusion between British intelligence and the Russian mafia. Annabelle enlists Tommy's help to shield Issa from the prying eyes of Germany's myriad security services, arguing that protecting him is their moral duty as citizens of the West. "In my law school we talked a great deal about law over life", she tells Brue. "It's a verity of our German history: law not to protect life, but to abuse it. We did it to the Jews. In its current American form it licenses torture and state kidnapping. And it's infectious. Your own country is not immune, neither is mine".[50]

Issa is immediately tracked by Günther Bachmann, a domestic intelligence officer with a checkered past and a talent for cultivating Muslim sources. Bachmann would rather use Issa than arrest him. However, Bachmann is stuck heading a small investigative unit in Hamburg because he offended federal espiocrats anxious to follow their American benefactors' agenda. Hamburg is "a guilty city", Bachmann explains, not only because of its Nazi past but also for acting as a "second ground zero", nurturing Mohamed Atta and other extremists before 9/11.[51] Bachmann regards Issa as a small fish useful for baiting a shark, a wealthy philanthropist named Abdullah who is suspected of funneling arms to unsavory characters across the Middle East. Bachmann wants to turn Abdullah and learn more about the worst actors in the region, but his superiors sense an opportunity to deliver both Issa and Abdullah to the CIA on a silver platter. Bachmann feared "[t]he running feud between those determined to defend civil rights at all costs, and those determined to curtail them in the name of greater national security, was approaching critical mass", but he had no idea that his side already lost.[52] Bachmann convinces a skeptical Annabel that Issa's cooperation will give him legal status, but she feels badly about manipulating him.

The improbable team of Bachmann, Tommy, and Annabel enact a scheme to transfer Issa's inheritance to Abdullah's charity and follow the money. However, the CIA intercedes with the help of

[48] Melissa Block and Robert Siegel, "David Cornwell Discusses His Novel *Absolute Friends*, Which Was Written under His Pen Name, John le Carré", in Matthew J. Bruccoli and Judith S. Baughman, eds., *Conversations with John le Carré* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2004), 173-174.
[49] Sisman, *John le Carré*, 562. Murat Kurnaz's memoir is entitled *Five Years of My Life: An Innocent Man in Guantanamo*.
[50] John le Carré, *A Most Wanted Man* (New York: Scribner, 2008), 89.
[51] Ibid., 54.
[52] Ibid., 99.

MI-6 and German federal authorities and arrest both Issa and Abdullah immediately after the transaction. They also deport the helpful Turkish family for good measure. Annabel and Brue stand in stunned silence, but Bachmann knows he's been duped. "Where have you taken him?" Bachmann asks Newton, an old CIA acquaintance responsible for the kidnapping. "Abdullah? Who gives a shit. Some hole in the desert, for all I know. *Justice has been rendered man. We can all go home*". Bachmann is dazed, "What's rendered? What justice are you talking about?" Newton then delivers the novel's last bit of dialogue, mocking Bachmann's (and the readers) naiveté when it comes to the proper way to wage the war on terror:

> *American* justice, asshole. Whose do you think? Justice from the fucking hip, man. No-crap justice, *that* kind of justice! Justice with no fucking lawyers around to pervert the course. Have you never heard of *extraordinary rendition* No? Time you Krauts had a word for it! ... Abdullah was killing Americans. We call that original sin. You want to play softball spy games? Go find yourself some Euro-pygmies.[53]

Like *Absolute Friends*, *AMWM* ends with unaccountable American agents and their collaborators committing brazen human rights violations. While *AMWM*'s principal characters are "humanly authentic persons", Robert Lance Snyder notes, secondary characters are "ciphers of a supervening ideology or institutional cause".[54] In Newton's case, he embodies the worst excesses of the war on terror while Bachmann's feckless superiors prove that American ideology is entrenched throughout all Western intelligence bureaucracies.[55]

The different receptions for *Absolute Friends* and *AMWM* is revealing. With few exceptions, critics disliked le Carré's caustic first post-9/11 novel, but after five disastrous years in Iraq readers seemed ready to move on from culturally conservative renderings of the war on terror. Spy novelist Alan Furst admired le Carré's "moral anger ... written from a seductive point of view" and called *AMWM* the "strongest, most powerful novel ... for representing the sheer desperation of those whose job it is to prevent another 9/11".[56] British writer Robert McCrum compared le Carré's "unbridled rage" to Hamlet's condemnation of the rotten state calling the novel's ending "a devastating and phantasmagoric finale expressive of our times".[57] Le Carré was condemned in 2003 for (mis)directing his anger towards the victimized U.S., but by 2008 some of the same publications applauded his blistering attacks on Bush and Blair's follies. Andrew O'Hagan of *The New York Times* named le Carré "the world's most reliable witness to the vicissitudes of international paranoia". However, Michiko Kakutani was unmoved by *AMWM*, writing that "Mr. le Carré's contempt for the U.S.' post-9/11 approach to the war on terror not only makes for a story told in blacks and whites – with none of the grays that distinguished his famous Smiley novels – but also results in an ending that the reader can see looming a mile off".[58] It is not le Carré's 'contempt' for U.S. foreign policy that bothers Kakutani, but the supposed toll 'the rage of age' exacted on his otherwise brilliant oeuvre.

But what if Smiley's day really is gone? Not just the bipolar Cold World dynamic, but also the very notion that intelligence can be effective, purposeful, and sometimes even justified in the right hands. *Absolute Friends* and *AMWM* in particular depict an intelligence bureaucracy dependent on technology and at the mercy of paramilitary "hillbillies from the Farm" to render American justice.[59] There simply is no room for Smileys in the ranks, that is to say seasoned professionals capable of

[53] Ibid., 321-322.
[54] Snyder, *John le Carré's Post-Cold War Fiction*, 105.
[55] Matthew A. Bellamy, "Spy Culture and the Making of the Modern Intelligence Agency: From Richard Hannay to James Bond to Drone Warfare", Ph.D. diss. (University of Michigan, 2018), 316.
[56] See Lassner, "Paradoxical Polemics", 21.
[57] Ibid.
[58] See Sisman, *John le Carré*, 580.
[59] Pepper, "Policing the Globe", 414.

shrewd Machiavellian maneuvers when necessary but acts of decency and humanity as well. Günther Bachmann comes close, but even with his talent he could not see the extent to which his own bureaucracy had made his kind irrelevant until it was too late. John le Carré's post-9/11 novels dramatize Pankaj Mishra's blistering assessment of the West's post-9/11 posture quoted at the beginning of this article. Dressing neo-imperialism in the guise of philanthropy and messianic democracy has only kicked up the dust of ressentiment to the point the dust storm envelopes us all.

John le Carré's novels are angrier and more nihilistic after 9/11 because he never lost his touch when it came to describing the human condition in relation to international events. "For me, the intelligence experience that I had, that formative time in my life, has simply become a vehicle, a stage, a theater, that I use to express other things", he said in a 2019 interview.[60] After 9/11, le Carré evoked the plight of the individual in a world riven by ressentiment. His writing explored the consequences of failed states, a compliant media, and cynical political leaders eager to stoke the fires of fanaticism and undo democracy. Le Carré's interviews from the 2010s until shortly before his death in 2020 emphasize his worries about the "absence of critical argument" and a new fascist threat on the horizon.[61] "We seem to be joined by nothing very much except fear and bewilderment about what the future holds. We have no coherent ideology in the West, and we used to believe in the great American example. I think that's recently been profoundly undermined for us. We're alone".[62] If the forever wars ever end, John le Carré will count among its greatest historians and, more importantly, a deeply moral and empathetic voice of resistance.

[60] Scott Simon, "John le Carré Fears for the Future in 'Agent Running in The Field'", *BPR*, 2019, *www.bpr.org*.
[61] Amy Goodman, "John le Carré (1931-2020) on the Iraq War, Corporate Power, the Exploitation of Africa & More", *Democracy Now!* (2020), *www.democracynow.org*.
[62] David Bianculli and Terry Gross, "John le Carré Reflects on His Own 'Legacy' of Spying", *NPR* (2017), *www.npr.org*.