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Bunker Busting and Bunker Mentalities, or Is It Safe to Be Underground?

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Not long after the invasion of Afghanistan in the wake of the 9/11 attacks in the fall of 2001, a debate about the development of a Robust Nuclear Earth Penetrator (RNEP) weapon, commonly referred to as a nuclear bunker buster, erupted in political and military circles in the United States. It called into question a moratorium on the development of low-yield nuclear weapons that had been in effect since 1994 in the United States. In a brief white paper on the issue of nuclear bunker busters, Global Security.org recalls the essential history of this moratorium: "Shortly after Bill Clinton entered the White House, Representatives John Spratt (D-S.C.) and Elizabeth Furse (D-Ore.) introduced an attachment to the FY 1994 defense authorization bill, prohibiting U.S. weapons labs from conducting any research and development on low-yield nuclear weapons. The measure, which was passed and signed into law by President Clinton, defined low-yield nukes as having a yield of five kilotons or less."[1] The Spratt-Furse amendment to the defense authorization bill was ultimately a response to a report—"Potential Uses for Low-Yield Nuclear Weapons in the New World Order"—issued by a group of Los Alamos

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nuclear weapons scientists in 1991. The report suggested directions for a post–cold war nuclear strategy, one no longer enmeshed in the logic of mutually assured destruction dominating the post–World War II period of confrontation between the two nuclear superpowers.[2] The hubris of the last years of Ronald Reagan's administration, as the world witnessed the collapse of the Soviet Union, is apparent in the title of the report.

Without delving into the detail of this debate of the early 1990s, suffice it to say that the issue of nuclear bunker-busting weapons came back in spades after the fiasco at Tora Bora, during which U.S.-Afghan forces shelled the mountainous redoubt of Taliban and al-Qaeda forces, cornering Osama bin Laden on the heights of Tora Bora and then allowing him to escape. World attention was briefly focused on the elaborate system of underground caves and passages crisscrossing the peaks and ridges of this extremely rough terrain. Occasional photographs of these passages and bunkers appeared in print and television media, attesting to the human-made reinforcement of the natural caves characteristic of the region. Little was said, of course, about the fact that the United States had furnished some of the funds and materials used to rework the natural hideouts in the Tora Bora region during the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan—in support of the guerilla fighters busily sapping the strength of the Soviet occupiers. The very existence of these bunkers and their effectiveness in countering the surveillance and the bombardment of U.S. forces in the fall of 2001 seemed to be an affront to the supposed overwhelming superiority of American military might. How dare these ragged fighters escape our gaze and the explosive power of our bombs and shells by going underground! Never mind the fact that bunker-busting technology would have had little effect on the deep underground passageways dug into Tora Bora. Never mind as well that the fundamental problem of bunker busters is ultimately not the size and force of the explosive warhead but the penetrating potential of the weapon. No matter how powerful the warhead, if a bomb cannot penetrate more than a few tens of meters into the earth, a deeply buried and reinforced bunker can easily survive the effects of the blast. Moreover, a nuclear bunker buster cannot even penetrate deeply enough in propitious terrain (let alone rough and rocky terrain) to avoid substantial nuclear fallout that jeopardizes the health of thousands of civilians in the immediate area surrounding the bunker under attack.

All of these rational elements of a truly careful debate about the feasibility and strategic implications of developing RNEP weapons could not

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overcome the veritable fascination—dare one say *fetishism*—that seemed to mark the notion of the bunker for the George W. Bush administration after the Tora Bora events. In the 2003 fiscal year budget for defense, an appropriation for research on RNEP weapons reappeared in the authorization bill (under carefully stipulated conditions), and it was not until fall 2005 (in the 2006 fiscal year appropriations debate) that this yearly appropriation was finally removed: "On October 25, 2005, US Senator Pete Domenici indicated that negotiators working toward an agreement on funding for the Department of Energy for FY2006 had agreed to drop funding for continued research on the Robust Nuclear Earth Penetrator (RNEP) project at the request of the National Nuclear Security Administration."[3] The obsession with attacking and destroying bunkers undoubtedly runs much deeper than military adventures on Afghan terrain, which simply brought it to the fore once again. It certainly ran deep enough, as events demonstrated, to provoke military strategists into acts of research and development that threatened the nuclear equilibrium of the period and had the potential to provoke another arms race, creating a new class of weapons with all the attendant difficulties of monitoring and securing new warheads.[4] In this essay, I would like to explore briefly, from a historical and strategic perspective, the fascination with bunkers and their putative safety in the modern era of warfare, beginning with reflections on texts by W. G. Sebald and Paul Virilio and culminating with a series of unsettling meditations about what many have termed the "bunker mentality" of the Bush administration. I will not be able to present anything like a complete historical argument here and will confine myself instead to highlighting potential directions for such a history.

In the first pages of Sebald's last completed novel, *Austerlitz*, the unnamed narrator speaks of travels to Belgium in the 1960s, during which several chance encounters with Jacques Austerlitz occur.[5] Austerlitz is a researcher whose institutional affiliation is not quite clear at this stage of the narrative. His office near the British Museum soon becomes the narrator's favorite haunt, where he listens to mesmerizing descriptions of Austerlitz's research while trying to decide whether to return to Germany to take up his professional life there. The enigmatic Austerlitz has embarked on a vast study of the rise of capitalism reflected in architectural styles in England and various other European countries, with a special interest in railway stations and in the notion of networks, of which railroads are the physical and architectural symbols.[6] He later admits that he was ill-advised to choose this

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dissertation topic, because the subject has a tendency to expand infinitely, preventing him from completing the project. It is through reflections on architecture that the two characters first strike up their acquaintance in Belgium.

One of the principal subjects of the conversations between Austerlitz and the narrator in these first days of their friendship is military fortifications. Says Austerlitz tellingly, “It is often our mightiest projects that most obviously betray the degree of our insecurity” (14). An architectural and historical presentation of the fortifications built to protect Antwerp ensues, and the discussion of this sustained construction project is the occasion for Austerlitz to remind the narrator of the extraordinary investment of time and creative thought that has historically gone into building fortifications: “No one today . . . has the faintest idea of the boundless amount of theoretical writings on the building of fortifications, of the fantastic nature of the geometric, trigonometric, and logistical calculations they record” (15). The conversation continues as Austerlitz recounts the history of the fortifications built around Antwerp and then proposes an explanation of their uselessness. Despite the geometric perfection of the architecture of such buildings, laboriously theorized over centuries to resist the force of projectiles and the invasion of foreign armies, they cannot ever fulfill their desired purpose. First, they compel their builders to adopt a defensive military posture, immobilizing large forces and resources, thus leaving the enemy free to maneuver just beyond their reach. They call attention, moreover, to the very geographical and topographical points of weakness they were conceived to protect, thereby informing enemies about where to launch a successful assault and considerably simplifying an opponent’s strategic planning. This is clearly the opposite of the desired effect. Finally, as fortifications grew in architectural complexity, the length of time it took to build and secure them made them obsolete even before they could actually serve their imagined purpose (15–18).[7] Austerlitz concludes: “Such complexes of fortifications . . . show us how, unlike birds, for instance, who keep building the same nest over thousands of years, we tend to forge ahead with our projects far beyond any reasonable bounds” (18).

All of this is recounted in a tone of obvious fascination with the thought and endeavor required to build such monuments to futility. The conversation with Austerlitz about these matters draws the narrator’s attention to a subsequent newspaper article about the fortress of Breendonk just outside of Antwerp, which he decides to visit. But there is a cruel twist: the article

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informs him that the fortress, surrendered to the Germans in 1940, had been transformed by them into a penal camp. The foreboding appearance of the structure and its painful past create a sense of dread, and the narrator enters the buildings only reluctantly after he arrives by train. As he penetrates into the bunkers of the fortress, the confusion of the architectural proliferation of passages, chicanes, and geometrical complexities within the walls and eventually in the underground passages leads to an experience of surreal and frightening incomprehension:

> From whatever viewpoint I tried to form a picture of the complex I could make out no architectural plan, for its projections and indentations kept shifting, so far exceeding my comprehension that in the end I found myself unable to connect it with anything shaped by human civilization, or even with the silent relics of our prehistory and early history. And the longer I looked at it, the more often it forced me, as I felt, to lower my eyes, the less comprehensible it seemed to become. (20–21)

The sense of doom only increases as the narrator visits additional narrow underground passages and identifies places where the torture of Nazi prisoners took place. As his meditation continues, the fortification and its attendant underground bunkers are transformed from places of protection and defense into places of death, as if they had never been anything else: "The fort was a monolithic, monstrous incarnation of ugliness and blind violence" (21).

The sadistic cruelty practiced in the depths of the fortified bunkers at Breendonk, remembered by the narrator more as a theater of torture than for any safety it ever afforded to soldiers or civilians, had already found implicit expression in Sebald's extraordinarily graphic, gruesome, and moving "Air War and Literature," the published form of the lectures he delivered in Zurich in 1997. In this essay, Sebald describes the devastation wrought upon German cities by the Allied fire bombing that began in 1942 and his fellow Germans' refusal even to remember these events, much less to think about what they meant.[8] The intensity of the bombing and the technical means adopted to carry it out transformed basements, bunkers, bomb shelters, and cellars—subterranean sanctuaries of all types—into tombs. The safety sought underground by civilians attempting to escape from the destructive fires provoked by the indiscriminant bombing was completely illusory, and their bunkers, makeshift or otherwise, ultimately became kill-

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ing fields. The stench of the aftermath attested to the presence of the thousands, the tens of thousands, of corpses buried alive beneath the rubble of the Allied onslaught. One could not escape by retreating below ground when the whole point of the bombing tactics was precisely to bring about the utter destruction of the edifices attacked—that is, to cause buildings, no matter what their architectural structure, to collapse upon themselves, completely leveled and returned to the flat barrenness of the surrounding plains, thereby rendering them literally and completely uninhabitable, whether above or below ground.[9]

"Air War and Literature" vividly re-creates events that Germans themselves refused to remember after the war, and there is no small irony in the fact that Sebald, too young to have experienced firsthand the events of which he speaks, is forced to take up the task of recollection. His descriptions in "Air War and Literature" call to mind certain brief autobiographical remarks made by another European thinker, who belongs to the generation immediately preceding Sebald's, the French urbanist, architect, and philosopher Paul Virilio, old enough to have experienced the Allied bombing of Nantes firsthand. As Virilio says in the opening pages of *L'Insécurité du territoire*: "The Second World War was my mother, my father. The extreme nature of the situations I lived through taught me, not simply about complacent violence . . . but about an unalterable vision of the world. The second war is an indispensable source of meaning for the second peace, which is ours."[10] Virilio's experience of the Allied bombings revealed to him the newest frontier of war's vectors, the unlimited expanse of the sky, from which weapons rained down to transform—in a matter of minutes—the cityscapes on which they were dropped. One thing is certain: from the start of the bombings, Virilio rejected the temptation to hide in basements to avoid the destruction: "What taught me my lessons was not the horror of those buried alive in basements, asphyxiated by gas lines that had broken, drowned by leaking water mains, but the sudden transparence, the visible change of urban space, the motility of inanimate objects, of the supposedly immobile buildings (simply put, when I heard the air raid sirens, I refused to go down into shelters, preferring garden courtyards, preferring the risk of shrapnel impacts to the imprisonment of ruins)" (16). To go below ground in order to escape the explosions (and Sebald makes this clear as well) was to discover that the bunker was not a safe haven and that the domestic and public architecture of walls and enclosed spaces was no longer the horizon that spectators and participants in the war were forced to heed. The new

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horizon was the verticality of the sky, and building architecture would have to be adapted to this new given in order to provide any safety at all.

Virilio's rejection of the illusory protection of the basement bunkers that were used for shelter in Nantes and his fascination with radically refashioned cityscapes after the bombings he witnessed brought him back, more than thirty years later, to reflections on the notion of the bunker, the visible remains of Hitler's attempt to build Fortress Europe. In Bunker Archeology, an exhibit for which he was the curator at the Musée des Arts Décoratifs in Paris at the end of 1975 and the beginning of 1976, Virilio displayed photographs of German bunkers that he had taken between 1958 and 1965.[11] In his hikes along the Atlantic coastline of France, the rediscovery of which was one of the fundamental pleasures afforded by the end of the hostilities of World War II, Virilio realized that one could walk great distances along that coastline without ever losing sight of a German bunker of some shape or form. The immensity of the architectural project of securing the coastline against invasion prompts the same sort of reaction that Sebald's Austerlitz had described: "The immensity of this project is what defies common sense; total war was revealed here in its mythic dimension" (12). Virilio will quickly designate Hitler's fortress composed of bunkers along the coastline as the last gasp in the story of defensive frontiers throughout history: "From the Roman *limes* to the Great Wall of China; the bunkers, as ultimate military surface architecture, had shipwrecked at lands' limits, at the precise moment of the sky's arrival in war; they marked off the horizontal littoral, the continental limit. History had changed course one final time before jumping off into the immensity of aerial space" (12).

Virilio takes two perspectives on the evidence provided by the Atlantic bunkers in the repertoire of photographs he assembles. The first is to see these constructions as evidence of the inevitable defeat of the Nazi armies. As he recalls to his readers, the German military tactics of World War II, as devised by Hitler and his generals, consisted of lightning offensive advances, known otherwise as the blitzkrieg, occupying territory, and moving ever forward. The arrival at the shores of the Atlantic Ocean meant the encounter with the limits of this strategy, since the watery realm left no possibility for occupation or colonization and, moreover, condemned an army built on the principle of movement to the static duty of defense: "With Fortress Europe, failure was inevitable. . . . Lightning war, which allowed the Führer to rapidly acquire all the western European coasts, would later oblige him to adopt a defensive strategy. The continental Finistère was the

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defeat of the Nazi offensive, and the Allies did not have to fire cannons or land a single soldier; implicitly, the defeat was in the inner logic of the Nazi state" (29). Despite the message suggested by certain popular war movies in the past few decades, which have romanticized U-boat maneuvering in the Atlantic, Hitler ultimately declined to develop the forces necessary to master either the water or the air.[12] Planted solidly on the last remnants of land before the Atlantic, the German bunkers mimicked fortresses and yet could not really function as such. They looked out over the vast expanse of a sea that could not be invaded and that held all the dangers of unlimited and uncontrollable military movements against the Reich. They were "the fantasies of a man fearing to advance over the sea, which gave birth to the last West Wall, the Atlantic Wall, looking out over the void, over this moving and pernicious expanse, alive with menacing presences; faced with the sea, Hitler rediscovered ancient terrors: water, a place of madness, of anarchy, of monsters, and of women, too" (30; translation slightly modified). The bunkers were the cenotaphs of the Reich's ambitions, and their very architecture was a curious mixture of rounded and sculpted lines, designed to resist artillery and bombs in their seamless concrete construction, and of the enclosed memorial space of a burial monument.

The second perspective adopted by Virilio has more to do with an analysis of the modernization of warfare that inevitably produced bunkers. Such constructions were the foreseeable product of a new military vector, aerial space, a space in which the vehicle, the airplane, had become both vehicle and projectile—and whose unimpeded flight over battlefields and enemy concentrations provided an unobstructed view of the sites that were its targets. The walls of ancient fortresses had towered over the surrounding topography, giving the defenders unhindered sightlines to observe the adjacent countryside. With the advent of military aviation, defenders needed to find shelter from the sightlines provided by mastering the empty expanse of the sky. They did so in part by building bunkers, which were characterized by the reduced asperities of their walls (rounded edges whose goal was to disperse the energy of explosions), moving these structures underground whenever possible or, at the very least, designing them to blend in with surrounding topographies in order to camouflage their locations. Warfare was quickly transformed into an escalating race organized around the invention and application of mechanisms of sight and thus of detection of the enemy hidden in bunkers. Virilio argues that the World War II bunker took on its particular characteristics precisely as a result of these develop-

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ments: “It was no longer in distance but rather in burial that the man of war found the parry to the onslaught of his adversary; retreat was now into the very thickness of the planet and no longer along its surface” (38). Ordinary constructions have roofs and walls that protect against the elements, but bunkers have to protect against elements that go beyond the natural, bombs built to destroy “ordinary” architecture:

> Linked to the ground, to the surrounding earth, the bunker, for camouflage, tends to coalesce with the geological forms whose geometry results from the forces and exterior conditions that for centuries have modeled them. The bunker’s form anticipates this erosion by suppressing all superfluous forms; the bunker is prematurely worn and smoothed to avoid all impact. It nestles in the uninterrupted expanse of the landscape and disappears from our perception, used as we are to bearings and markers.
>
> This unusual aspect of bunker forms—absolutely different from the forms of ordinary construction, scandalous on a snapshot—paradoxically is able to go unnoticed in a natural environment. (44)

Virilio’s insistence on the unnatural naturalness of the bunker, its capacity to mimic forms created by erosion, its refusal to function as a landmark, encapsulates the necessities of defensive strategies in an era of air warfare and ultimately of stealth bombing. If the airplane/projectile can see all, and if it can descend on top of its objective to destroy it from just about any direction, then the target must transform itself into a structure that both resists the force of explosions and makes it difficult for the pilot to pick out a human-made structure from the natural background in which it nestles.

The strategic trends toward concealment and burial represented by bunker construction during World War II were reinforced by the dawn of the nuclear era. If the destruction of Dresden and other German cities was striking to the eye of the observer contemplating the flattened rubble of these sites, one can only imagine how much more arresting the iconic photographs of the utterly destroyed landscapes of Hiroshima and Nagasaki must have seemed at the time.[13] The bunker, as it was conceived and built in all of its varieties by the German Reich along the Atlantic wall, would no longer suffice, but its general architectural principles still retained a certain familiarity, even for the modern observer, despite the fact that it was suddenly outmoded because of the destructive force of nuclear bombs: “The blockhouse is still familiar, it coexists, it comes from the era that put an

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end to the strategic notion of 'forward' and 'rear' (vanguard and rearguard) and began the new one of 'above' and 'below,' in which burial would be accomplished definitively, and the earth nothing more than an immense glacis exposed to nuclear fire" (46). As the U.S. government reflected on the consequences of the impending nuclear arming of the Soviet Union, the immediate impulse was to prepare a protected underground space where war operations centered in the Pentagon could be moved in case of a nuclear attack. As one historian of the conception and construction of cold war command and control bunkers puts it, "By 1948 however, as a consequence of President Truman's declaration that the USSR was 'a clear and present threat to the USA,' worries grew regarding the vulnerability of the Pentagon to aerial attack from Russian bombers due to its enormous size and highly conspicuous signature from the air."[14] The largest building in the world at the time of its construction in 1941–42, the Pentagon had become a strategic liability within a decade of its completion. Aerial war with the threat of nuclear weapons had changed the architectural necessities of bunker construction—nothing above ground could be counted on to survive a nuclear blast.

Nick McCamley chronicles the construction of the bunker at Raven Rock, in eastern Pennsylvania, conceived as a command and control facility manned by a limited number of military personnel and completed in 1953. It was soon followed by the building of Mount Weather in northern Virginia, which was envisaged as a veritable alternate seat of government in the event of a nuclear war and was completed in 1958. These two underground facilities were among the first in the United States to take into account what might be needed to protect basic governmental infrastructure from the devastation of a nuclear conflagration. But the fear that provoked the building of these command bunkers and gave rise to a desire to place the U.S. government and war machine in the safety of a deep burial site was not limited to government alone. Scarcely more than a decade after the USSR demonstrated that it possessed the nuclear bomb, the Berlin crisis in 1961 significantly increased the chances of a nuclear confrontation between the United States and the USSR. It was the occasion for a speech by John F. Kennedy, pronounced on July 25, 1961, in which he evoked in direct and explicit terms the possibility of nuclear war and the potential necessity for the American population to take cover in fallout shelters. It had become important, he suggested, for civil defense authorities to "identify and mark space in existing structures—public and private—that could be used for

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fall-out shelters in case of attack."[15] Kennedy had finally put into words what everyone had implicitly understood since the early 1950s: "The American home had been put on the front lines of the Cold War."[16] If Europeans in France, Belgium, Holland, and Germany had in some sense absorbed the meaning of "bunker culture" as a result of having been targets of intense bombing campaigns during World War II, now it was the Americans' turn to experience this threat—one that was not actualized in the 1960s, however, as it had been for Europeans in the 1940s.[17]

In any case, Kennedy's speech touched off an intense debate within both government and the wider civilian community in the United States about whether to build fallout shelters and whether this was the responsibility of the federal government or of individual citizens. In *One Nation Underground*, Kenneth Rose describes the avatars of this national discussion, rendered explicit by Kennedy's rash brinksmanship (the Cuban missile crisis would soon follow the Berlin crisis). Strategists of all stripes eventually came to the same understanding: safety underground during a nuclear attack was an elusive concept at best. How deep to dig? How long would people need to remain underground? And what to do with less-prepared fellow citizens, who might fight to get into the bunker space of their neighbors? As Rose concludes, "The evidence indicates that very few Americans took any steps toward preparing their homes against nuclear attack. . . . After 1963, the public's involvement with the issues of fallout shelters and nuclear arms rapidly fell off."[18] Faced with the questionable efficacy of such shelters and the costs of building them, the Kennedy administration quickly backed off its calls for an ambitious national program of shelter building. Characteristically, Europeans were never swept up in the nuclear shelter hysteria of 1961–63. Paul Virilio explains why: "During this period, the myth of the anti-atomic-bomb shelter spreading like wildfire in the United States had no hold in Europe, where the memory of strategic bombing in 1943–44 removed all credence to a policy of 'passive defense.' Everyone realized from experience that populations would not have enough time to get to the shelters in case of a nuclear attack" (200). Those who had experienced the effects of intense bombing campaigns knew full well that not only was it difficult to survive such an experience in an underground shelter of any sort, but that life after the conflagration would be tenuous at best, as it had been for tens of thousands of Europeans for nearly a decade after the cessation of hostilities in Europe at the end of World War II.[19]

The era of aerial warfare and soon afterward of space warfare—when

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countries began to place satellites in geospatial orbits, the better to detect enemies' movements—meant quite simply that conventional warfare was no longer strategically viable. An adversary who moved across the surface of the earth was henceforth exposed to immediate attack. "The strategy of deception (or, to put it differently, the strategy of making use of decoy devices and disinformation) has won out over classical attack and defense strategies, to the point that 'offensive' and 'defensive' stages in strategy have almost totally coalesced" (201), as Virilio puts it so aptly. The only way an enemy can maneuver without detection is to use subterfuge and whatever technologies are available to mask his or her whereabouts and thus to trick the observer, who is glued to the video screen as instantaneous satellite or drone images of the surveillance target appear in ghostlike form. Virilio closes his catalog text on the Bunker Archeology exhibit with a final striking remark: "The *war of real time* has clearly supplanted the war in real space of geographical territories that long ago conditioned the history of nations and people" (206).

The frustration of Tora Bora, which I described at the beginning of this analysis, must be seen in light of a broader perspective on the role the bunker has played in the imagination of both military and civilian populations in the modern era. The obsession with the bunker/bomb shelter, which was so much a part of European culture during World War II and of American culture during an intense period of the cold war, surfaced characteristically in the sequence of events at Tora Bora and in the subsequent plan to develop a nuclear weapon that would, once and for all, do away with enemies who would dare hide out of sight of the American juggernaut. In an era of warfare where surveillance reveals any targets that stand out on the earth's surface (and thus any enemy forces that dare to move), the victor is theoretically the one whose technologies of vision are the most precise and whose satellite coverage blankets the globe in real time. But the well-constructed and well-concealed bunker calls into question that vision: it can be deep enough and hardened enough to defy surveillance and attack. Small wonder that in the course of the Afghanistan and Iraq invasions, orchestrated more than a decade after the Gulf War had demonstrated the parameters of a new type of warfare based on speed and on real-time surveillance, the bunker reappeared as a challenge to the potentially overwhelming advantage of the American war machine.[20] The dream of a nuclear bunker buster to end all bunker busters is an avatar of the fantasy of total military dominance. In answer to the question posed in my title, then, one would have to say that faced with an adversary possessing satellite

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surveillance technology of the sort deployed by the United States, it is safer to be underground (preferably very deeply) than to be on the surface of the earth. And this fact is at the origin of all contemporary strategies employing the concept of "sleeper cells," that is, potential enemies hiding attack preparations by blending into civilian populations until the right moment. Sleeper cells are nothing but the manifestation in a sociological mode of the architectural concepts behind the notion of the bunker.

But if bunker busters are the dream of an American military that wishes to suppress all opposition to its force, better bunkers at home are always the flip side of the coin. We develop a technology to destroy their bunkers, but ours have to be impervious to attack. The back-and-forth between these two perspectives can well be seen to have given rise to a "bunker mentality," a metaphor that emerged as journalists encountered the secretive nature of the Bush regime in the wake of 9/11. The isolation of the administration from the normal reality check of confrontation with ideological adversaries in the field of public discourse has only reinforced this impression. Indeed, it is all but certain that when Vice President Dick Cheney disappeared from public view for long stretches of time after the 9/11 attacks, he was staying at Raven Rock or Mount Weather. The repeated refusal of the Bush administration to reveal how policies are debated and created within its inner circles inevitably leads to the conclusion that the Bush presidency exists in a "bubble." But that bubble is in no way transparent (and thus the metaphor of the bubble is misleading): it more likely takes the form of the hardened underground control room. Well before the invasion of Afghanistan and the failed encircling of Tora Bora, the administration had activated a strategy of shadow governance directly linked to government bunkers. In the March 1, 2002, *Washington Post,* Barton Gellman and Susan Schmidt broke the story of contingency plans, put into effect after the 9/11 attacks, to move top-level government bureaucrats to bunkers in order to manage the federal government in the event of a nuclear or biological attack on Washington: "President Bush has dispatched a shadow government of about 100 senior civilian managers to live and work secretly outside Washington, activating for the first time long-standing plans to ensure survival of federal rule after catastrophic attack on the nation's capital."[21] This decision was based on a presidential directive—never before actually applied—concerning contingency plans in the event of a nuclear attack and dating back to Harry Truman's presidency, when the threat of nuclear war had first reared its ugly head. The application of the directive in the aftermath of 9/11 began a rotation of high-ranking federal managers in and out of gov-

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ernment bunkers: “Officials who are activated for what some of them call ‘bunker duty’ live and work underground 24 hours a day, away from their families. As it settles in for the long haul, the shadow government has sent home most of the first wave of deployed personnel, replacing them most commonly at 90-day intervals.”[22]

A veritable obsession with governmental continuity was at the heart of the application of this directive—yet another avatar of 9/11. Moreover, whereas the first version of the contingency plans included only about a hundred important federal managers, they quickly evolved into a broad series of measures designed to insure that an increasingly large number of federal agencies would remain intact and operable in the aftermath of a disastrous attack. In June 2006, William Arkin of the *Washington Post* wrote about a massive federal drill designed to test the plans that had been mandated and created:

> On Monday, June 19 [2006], about 4,000 government workers representing more than 50 federal agencies from the State Department to the Commodity Futures Trading Commission will say goodbye to their families and set off for dozens of classified emergency facilities stretching from the Maryland and Virginia suburbs to the foothills of the Alleghenies. They will take to the bunkers in an “evacuation” that my sources describe as the largest “continuity of government” exercise ever conducted, a drill intended to prepare the U.S. government for an event even more catastrophic than the Sept. 11, 2001, attacks.[23]

The correlation between “continuity of government” and the survival mentality characteristic of the first wave of fear of nuclear attack in the 1950s is not difficult to imagine. Nor is it farfetched to see in these contingency plans the worst of the excesses of the bomb shelter movement of the Kennedy presidency. As Arkin puts it, the June 2006 exercise was “a focus of enormous and often absurd time, money and effort that has come to echo the worst follies of the Cold War.”[24] What had intervened between the first invoking of the contingency plans for governmental continuity after 9/11 and the practice exercise carried out in June 2006 was an inclusion of ever more government services in the plans—to the point that the number of officials designated for protection promised to clog the exit routes from the capital and to render any evacuation impossible: “The main defect—a bunker mentality that considers too many people and too many jobs ‘essential’—will remain unchallenged.”[25]

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There is more at stake here than the logistical impracticality of accomplishing the transfer of large segments of the government to bunkers in order to avoid the disorder occasioned by a nuclear or biological attack.[26] Historian Thomas A. Spencer casts the problem in broader and more troubling terms:

> I would argue that one should stop and consider this "shadow government" proposal in a more philosophical way. What does it mean to serve in a public office? Are those who serve the public allowed to do so in private? Shouldn't public officials do their duties in public? Isn't it wrong for the Vice President to spend half his time out of the public's view in a bunker? By doing this, isn't he working as a federal employee rather than a public official? Part of the role of those who serve the public is to be visible to the public, accessible to the public and, at the very least, to BE public.[27]

Exactly what is the status and—the crucial related question—the *accountability* of a large group of government officials hidden away in bunkers? It is striking, for example, that the mainstream media articles devoted to reporting about the activation of the contingency plan for establishing a shadow government studiously avoided naming the bunkers or providing any information about their whereabouts. Homeland security trumps representative democracy: the very basis of democracy ought to be that officials designated by elections to carry out the business of the country—and those to whom elected officials delegate managerial tasks—actually accomplish their work within view of the citizens who elected them in the first place. The figurative expression "bunker mentality," what Spencer calls a "delicious metaphor,"[28] applied with delight and rhetorical flourish by so many journalists since the Bush administration began reacting to the 9/11 attacks, turns out not to be so figurative after all. The obsession with governmental continuity, taken to the extreme in an era of defensive warfare as Virilio has described it, means that the hidden space of the bunker becomes the actual space of power, and the metaphor, now taken literally, becomes reality.

Notes

1 GlobalSecurity.org, "Weapons of Mass Destruction (WMD): Robust Nuclear Earth Penetrator," www.globalsecurity.org/wmd/systems/rnep.htm (accessed November 14, 2006).

2 Ibid. For a discussion of the implications of this report and the strategies it advocates,

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see Greg Mello, "The Birth of a New Bomb: Shades of Dr. Strangelove" *Washington Post*, June 1, 1997, consulted online at Los Alamos Study Group, www.lasg.org/archive/1997/birth-bomb.htm (accessed November 10, 2006).

3 GlobalSecurity.org, "Weapons of Mass Destruction."

4 I shall not address in detail here the strategic gamesmanship with nuclear moratoriums on testing and weapon building that the RNEP weapon represented. It may be the case, in fact, that the goal of the RNEP—namely, to destroy deeply entrenched bunkers—was secondary to the goal of loosening the boundaries of the nuclear equilibrium.

5 W. G. Sebald, *Austerlitz*, trans. Anthea Bell (New York: Modern Library, 2001). Hereafter cited parenthetically by page number. *Campo Santo*, an incomplete novel, was published posthumously in 2003. Sebald, *Campo Santo*, trans. Anthea Bell (New York: Random House, 2005).

6 The fascination with the railroad later finds its logic in Austerlitz's personal story, in which the reader discovers that as a very young child Austerlitz was put on a train by his parents in order to be carried away from Czechoslovakia and therefore away from almost inevitable death at the hands of the Nazis, as the ethnic cleansing of Czechoslovakia gained momentum.

7 The French Maginot Line comes inevitably to mind here.

8 W. G. Sebald, "Air War and Literature," in *On the Natural History of Destruction*, trans. Anthea Bell (New York: Random House, 2003), 1–104.

9 The fate of the World Trade Center had already begun to be prepared by the tactics used in the Allied bombing campaign.

10 Paul Virilio, *L'Insécurité du territoire* (Paris: Galilée, 1993), 15. Unless otherwise indicated, all translations are my own.

11 Paul Virilio, *Bunker Archeology*, trans. George Collins (Princeton, NJ: Princeton Architectural Press, 1994). Hereafter cited parenthetically by page number. This is a translation of the catalog/book produced by Virilio for the exhibit of the same name and published originally as *Bunker Archéologie* (Paris: Centre Georges Pompidou, 1975).

12 Wolfgang Petersen's film *Das Boot* (1985) is, in fact, the perfect antidote for such romanticizing. The second half of the film is centered on an extended sequence during which the German submarine, badly damaged by an encounter with Allied warships at Gibraltar, sits precariously on the bottom of the ocean in a grotesque rendition of the bunker/cenotaph. The crew members miraculously repair the vessel and limp back to base. The muted triumph of their return, however, is immediately and tragically interrupted by a random Allied aerial bombing and strafing attack that kills a number of them, including their profoundly humanitarian captain, and summarily sinks the submarine at its mooring. The aerial vector of the modern warplane definitively trumps even the vaunted submarine.

13 I have in mind, for example, the photographs of bombed-out Hiroshima, containing the grotesque skeleton of Genbaku Dome standing out against the utter destruction of the leveled city surrounding it. In fact, the shock of contemplating such photographs has diminished little over the past few decades. See, for example, the following: www.mctv.ne.jp/~bigapple/dome.gif (accessed January 10, 2007), or for an aerial photograph of the devastation, www.moonofalabama.org/images/Hiroshima-big.jpg (accessed January 10, 2007).

14 Nick McCamley, *Cold War Secret Nuclear Bunkers: The Passive Defence of the Western World*

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during the Cold War (Barnsley, UK: Leo Cooper, 2002), 15. The 9/11 hijackers of American Airlines flight 77 had no trouble, of course, recognizing the Pentagon's "conspicuous signature" when they arrived in the airspace over Washington, D.C.

15 Quoted in Kenneth D. Rose, *One Nation Underground: The Fallout Shelter in American Culture* (New York: New York University Press, 2001), 2.

16 Ibid., 4.

17 The ultimate actualization of the threat of an air attack when the 9/11 events occurred provoked a veritable public psychosis, which Americans have yet to overcome. Understanding European sympathy for the United States immediately after the 9/11 attacks surely requires remembering that the form the attacks took was closely related to the experience of being bombed that characterized World War II in Europe.

18 Rose, *One Nation Underground*, 10–11. There are many similarities between the short-lived public interest in personal protection in the event of a nuclear war and the public interest in personal protection against biological terrorism in the wake of the anthrax scare of September 2001. All sorts of advice was dispensed about making one's home safe from such an attack, but the public's interest in actually carrying out the necessary measures (whose effectiveness was suspect from the beginning anyway) quickly waned.

19 See Tony Judt's extremely sobering historical description of that decade in *Postwar: A History of Europe since 1945* (New York: Penguin Books, 2005).

20 The elaborate shell game played by Saddam Hussein as he dodged American forces and bombings in the first weeks of the U.S. invasion (only to be found later in a provincial bunker) is another case in point. See Michael R. Gordon and Bernard E. Trainor, "Iraqi Leader, in Frantic Flight, Eluded U.S. Strikes," *New York Times*, March 12, 2006. The second attempt to kill Hussein, on April 7, 2003, using two 2,000-pound conventional bunker-busting bombs, demonstrated that bunker-busting and precision weaponry, supposedly limiting civilian collateral casualties, were largely incompatible. Eighteen Iraqi civilians paid with their lives for being in the neighborhood of the tremendous percussion wave generated by these two huge bombs.

21 Barton Gellman and Susan Schmidt, "Shadow Government Is at Work in Secret," *Washington Post*, March 1, 2002.

22 Ibid.

23 William A. Arkin, "Back to the Bunker," *Washington Post*, June 4, 2006.

24 Ibid.

25 Ibid.

26 Let us not forget that the bumbling federal "inexperts" of Hurricane Katrina fame are the very ones outlining contingency plans for the evacuation of designated federal officials from Washington. Not particularly promising for the officials involved, one might suggest . . .

27 Thomas M. Spencer, "Bush in the Bunker," History News Network, George Mason University, March 11, 2002, http://hnn.us/articles/614.html (accessed January 15, 2006).

28 Ibid.

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