

Gore Vidal's History of the National Security State

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Speaker in Video (SV): We stand in the presence of an awakened nation. Mainly, it is a new age.

Franklin Roosevelt in Video: The bad news and the good news with the defeats and the victories. The changing fortunes of war.

Harry Truman in Video: We're going to maintain the military bases necessary for the complete protection of our interests and of world peace.

Dwight Eisenhower in Video: We face a hostile ideology, global in scope, ruthless in purpose and insidious in.

John Kennedy in Video: Let all our neighbours know that we shall join with them to uphold aggression or subversion anywhere in the Americas.

George W. Bush in Video: By seeking weapons of mass destruction, these regimes pose a grave and growing danger. They could provide these arms to terrorists, giving them the means to match their hatred. They could attack our allies or attempt to blackmail the United States.

Gore Vidal (GV): Hollywood in Washington had always seemed to me since I spent a good deal of time in both politics and movies. There is a symbiotic relationship. They both deal with illusions and reality doesn't often play much of a part in fictional narratives, which is, after all, what we do in a movie on the screen and what we do with the candidate in politics. They belong together. The first person to realise that it was Woodrow Wilson. He was trying to get us into World War One. You had to get Hollywood aboard to get them to make movies demonising the Germans. And Hollywood never looked back or forward. And every president since has known that the movies, if you could harness them, was the way to get your programme across, particularly if you wanted to go to war. That was the way to get

people excited. Roosevelt first had radio, because he had a great speaking voice and everyone liked to hear the president. I'll never forget this one. You'll never hear this again from a president, but Singapore had just fallen to the Japanese.

Roosevelt in Video: Tonight the news is all bad. So far, the news has been all bad.

GV: Well, at that moment, the entire country, we will help you, Mr. President. You know, we want the news to be good for America again. Oh God, how he played the people and it's superb. Then newsreels came along. He proved to be just as good at newsreels as he was, as a voice. And he used to call them his Garbo. And you'll see him sitting at his desk.

Franklin Roosevelt in Video: Through the news shown on the screen. I want to thank the many thousands who have telegraphed and written to me since the election.

GV: Well, my little dog Fala has joined me here. You can see him sitting in the corner. He'll join us in a minute, and they play. They had the little dog. He had his grandchildren. He had Eleanor. I mean, it was just glorious stuff.

Franklin Roosevelt in Video: To all of you, I say we can now march forward. All of us together.

GV: And he got the New Deal through, built up the fleet and the air force that defeated the Germans and the Japanese. He's our first emperor. And he did it through radio and he did it through newsreels in those days, which would be like television now. He would have been just as good on TV, except they wouldn't let him on because he said substantive things. We're sorry, Mr. President, but this is not the message that Westinghouse wants to put out. The difference between Roosevelt and Truman, his successor, is enormous. Roosevelt, in his first inauguration, says we have nothing to fear but fear itself.

Franklin Roosevelt in Video: What we have to fear is fear itself.

GV: Then comes Harry Truman. There is a power, a monolithic power in the world today. That powers communism forever on the march. And he is frightening us about this terrible enemy called Russian and communism. Just saw the difference; it's night and day, night and day. Roosevelt hit the affirmative side and swept the nation. Truman got us deeper and deeper into great trouble and stirred the pot. And out of the pot comes McCarthy. Out of it comes the House un American Activities Committee. Out of it comes you're not a good American. You are seen reading a book without moving your lips, that is a sure sign of a communist, and I speak as a US senator. That was the game.

SV: This our country and all its people could be in danger of nuclear attack. In minutes by enemy missiles, in hours by enemy aircraft. Our cities, our farms, our factories.

GV: Well, I think I saw through the myths of the Cold War almost from the beginning. I was a Washington political kid from a political family. The joker in the deck was Roosevelt's death. Everyone who knew him knew he was dying. He was elected president four times. In the last race, it was clear that he was a dying man. But he had all his marbles. And he had all of his marbles at Yalta. He got more out of Stalin than Stalin got out of him.

SV: Hoping to solve intricate problems of war and peace, President Roosevelt reaches the Yalta meeting.

GV: Roosevelt, the master politician, had made an alliance with Stalin. Stalin, contrary to the propaganda, wanted to be a normal country with other normal countries. And he got on with Roosevelt. He understood Roosevelt. Roosevelt understood him. They were both emperors and they were both continental powers. So they had hit it off, and they had a number of agreements which would have made Russia much more civilised, modern, a less tyrannical place. Then he drops dead and the most incompetent little man you could dream of succeeds.

Harry Truman in Video: I have done as you do in the field, when the commander falls. My duties and responsibilities are clear. I have assumed them. These duties will be carried on in keeping with our American tradition.

GV: Suddenly, Harry Truman, who understands nothing about international politics. He was a last minute choice for Vice President by Roosevelt. He was trying to soothe the right wing of the Democratic Party, particularly the South, which was racist and Democratic as it is now racist and Republican. Roosevelt felt he had to hold on to that to hold on to Congress, so he said I'll get rid of Henry Wallace. Henry Wallace had been his Liberal Vice president, an intelligent and worldly man, and replaced him with Harry Truman, who had many virtues and many demerits. One being, he just didn't know what he was doing in the big league. Truman proceeded to break every arrangement that Roosevelt had set up for a peaceful co-existence with Stalin. And Truman thought, Why not just stay armed all the time thinking about all the money that would be for the military budget each year and how good that would be for General Electric and General Motors? And we have remained armed ever since.

SV: Production board meetings, that we here in the United States are winning the battle of production.

GV: Well, you can't justify all of this money being thrown away. Well, nothing is going to education, nothing to health care. You can't justify it unless you find an enemy. Well, there are plenty of enemies if you look around for them and we found them. Truman was backed by a clever international lawyer, Dean Acheson, who was very empire minded. And he got Truman overexcited by Stalin and communism and how evil it was.

SV: Russia had occupied many new territories, bringing additional millions of people under communist control and serving notice that Soviet Russia was now a world power to be reckoned with.

GV: Truman fell for all of it, or he pretended to. They said Russia is on the march. They've lost 20 million people and where are they going to march, too ? They could barely get out of Middle Europa. They didn't have enough gas or enough tanks to take their cannons, their artillery back to Russia. They had to have horses drag them back. I mean, they were just about finished. And yet we start this thing: the Russians are coming.

SV: Mr. Truman delivers his message on the State of the Union.

Harry Truman in Video: This is an age when an unforeseen attack could come with unprecedented speed. We must be strong enough to defeat and thus forestall any such attack. For these reasons, we need well-equipped, well-trained armed forces for our own defence should the need arise.

GV: And then he devised the National Security State. Now the National Security State had about seven points to it. One was, never negotiate honestly with the Russians. Two was total rearmament and constant rearmament and develop the hydrogen bomb because they were going to get the atomic bomb one day. In other words, you created a totally militarised economy, which we are to this day. When Truman announced the National Security State and this huge military build-up in peacetime, Senator Vandenberg said, Well, I agree with you about the menace of communism, but if you're going to get after this long and expensive war, the money you want for a build-up, you're going to have to scare the hell out of the American people.

SV: This boy will grow up acutely aware that there are forces at large alien to his way of life, and he has seen the face and forces of evil. Communism is the word he is learning to understand.

GV: Truman said, Don't worry. First thing he did, loyalty oaths. All throughout the government, everybody had to swear a loyalty oath. Throughout the university, throughout high schools, teachers. You've got to go up and swear allegiance to the United States or else you're a commie. I mean, we had imported fascism. Then the only person to stand up against him was the true heir of Franklin Roosevelt, and that was former Vice President Wallace. Truman was using a threat that the Russians were going to interfere in the Yugoslav affairs and Greek affairs. And he said, Wallace said this is no this is not a Greek crisis, as the administration likes to tell us, it's not a Yugoslav crisis. This is an American crisis. We have a government that is now pledging itself and us to fight on the side of any government, no matter how terrible if it says it's anti communist or anti-Russian, we're on their side. And we're now demanding of every janitor and every school house in the United States, to swear

loyalty to the union. We've never done this before. The fact that half the country had been involved in the military should have been quite enough to demonstrate the loyalty of the people of the United States. Harry Truman is acting like a European dictator and getting away with it. Why? Because the rulers of the country, just the same as now, corporate America that makes its money out of armaments, and graft, and media, thought it was a good idea to frighten the people. More scared they are, the more they appropriate. More tanks you can sell.

SV: Here in Russia, you see the reason why we are spending billions of dollars in defence production. Why your family is paying the highest taxes in our history? The leaders of Russia tell us their only concern is the defence of their own nation. Is this so? Or are they ambitious for world conquest?

GV: Everything was militarised to fight communism. Monolithic, atheistic and godless- it's much worse than atheistic. Communism forever on the march. So that changed the United States forever. We have never ceased to be a National Security State. We've kept on more and more armaments year after year, greater and greater appropriations of the military. So we're in the midst of an arms race, which goes on even as you and I sit here and chat. We have been forever at war. Meanwhile, the empire is chugging along. Harry Truman eventually goes away. And we get Dwight Eisenhower, and he said, thank God we have a President, me, who understands the military and they will steal everything in sight. And these civilians don't know anything about it and everything they ask for, they're getting. And we'll be bankrupt by the time they finish. So Eisenhower at least held back the Pentagon.

Dwight Eisenhower in Video: Good evening, my fellow Americans. We now stand 10 years past the midpoint of a century that has witnessed four major wars amongst great nations. Three of these involve our own country. We have been compelled to create a permanent armaments industry of vast proportion. Now, this conjunction of an immense military establishment and a large arms industry is new in the American experience. We recognise the imperative need for this development. Yet we must not fail to comprehend its grave implications. We must guard against the acquisition of unwarranted influence, whether sought or unsought, by the military industrial complex. The potential for the disastrous rise of misplaced power exists and will persist.

GV: And he said, this is going to change everything and the way our country is governed to change us politically. It will change us spiritually. And then part of the speech, which I've always loved, nobody ever quotes it. After all, he'd been president of Columbia University. He said the effect of all of this money coming to our universities, even though it's for the Physics department, the Nuclear department is going to affect all education. And if the universities are not the home of free investigation, suddenly our knowledge of the world is curtailed by this huge amount of money, which will control the responses of everybody, including the History department. You didn't say that, but that was his meaning. So that's how that started. Did anybody pay attention? No, they didn't.

In the greatest story of a momentous year, John F. Kennedy defeated GOP standard bearer Richard Nixon. One of the closest Presidential elections on record. The youngest man ever elected President takes the burden from the oldest ever to hold the office as America enters the critical and challenging 60s.

GV: Along comes Jack Kennedy. And Jack was very bright about many things, but he was brought up in the house of a very right wing family without much imagination about the rest of the world, and without much knowledge of the rest of the world. But Jack was a quick learner. But here arrived with all these right wing views. Where Eisenhower and Truman were too old, tough politicians, neither Truman nor Eisenhower believed in the threat of world communism. But they knew it played for the dumb dumbs like nobody's business. Russians are coming. OH, communists. Godless atheists? Godless atheists. Oh no. Does this mean that we have to get up at five o'clock every morning and commit abortions all day long under the red flag? Yes, that's what it means. The dumbest things were pumped into our poor people's heads, and the Russians weren't going anywhere this time. We're still talking about, well Jack came to power in 1960. Khrushchev is trying to make changes. Khrushchev has already made his famous speech denouncing Stalin. He's trying to start a new chapter. Jack, I'm afraid, believed in what the two old presidents knew was cynical nonsense, with which they could get elected and get appropriations for the military and just have the country on a platter. Jack was genuinely high minded. He wanted to free the world, you know, just like Bush, you know, who loves freedom and liberty and so forth and so on.

John Kennedy in Video: Let the word go forth from this time and place to friend and foe alike that the torch has been passed to a new generation of Americans born in this century, tempered by war, disciplined by a hard and bitter peace, proud of our ancient heritage and unwilling to witness or permit the small undoing of those human rights to which this nation has always been committed and which we are committed today, at home and around the world.

GV: National Security State under Kennedy blossomed, of course. He ordered after the Berlin Wall the biggest build-up in our history until then. It was larger than the one Roosevelt had ordered in 1940. His inaugural address gives it away; we will bear any burden to see that liberty, or whatever it was, triumphs around the world. He saw himself in heroic terms. He wanted to make his mark, believed in the Cold War, or he believed in the White Knight vs. the Wicked Knight. So I think he was more tolerant of the idea of war. He said once, where would Lincoln have been without the Civil War? Just another railroad lawyer? Oh, that's about it. I mean, he figured out wartime presidents just as this silly little thing we have now as president. They know that's how you make it in the history books. I remember talking to him when he came back from the Vienna Conference with Khrushchev and I was full of the usual Liberal complaints. And I said, But you know, there seems to be so really little an issue between our side and their side. I said it's pretty clear Khrushchev isn't marching anywhere. And Jack quite agreed to that, even though he had to pretend how dangerous the Soviet

Union was and they were getting ahead of us. But he said, in this kind of politics, it is the appearance of things that matters. So the National Security state was doing very well. So in the long run, we go back to my notion that the only art form the United States has ever created is the TV commercial. That is our art form, and that's how we control people. And it's a world of illusions and it's a world of false claims.

George W. Bush in Video: We're fighting and winning the war on terror. Thank you all.

GV: Now the National Security State still exists. Only it isn't communism anymore, it's terrorism.

George W. Bush in Video: I signed the largest increase in defence spending in a generation.

GV: If we had a decent media, which we do not have or anything close, these people wouldn't be allowed to get away with this stuff. They'd just be stopped.

George W. Bush in Video: Iraq continues to flaunt its hostility toward America and to support terror. The Iraqi regime has plotted to develop anthrax and nerve gas and nuclear weapons for over a decade. States like these and their terrorist allies constitute an axis of evil arming to threaten the peace of the world.

GV: But we're told about ourselves and our great strengths and how much loved we are, forget it. Our strength is there, but it's the kind of strength that blows off your hand while you hold up the grenade. It's a suicidal strength, as well as a murderous one. Remember that practically everything that you're told about other countries is untrue.

Colin Powell in Video: Saddam Hussein is determined to get his hands on a nuclear bomb.

Condoleezza Rice: Iraq provided some training to Al Qaeda.

Tony Blair: That threat is real.

Dick Cheney: There's more there than we know.

Donald Rumsfeld: There isn't any debate about it.

George W. Bush in Video: I don't know what more evidence we need.

GV: Today, we're in a peculiar limbo. 9-11 proved to be a pretext for getting rid of the old republic, which has not been in very good shape for a long, long time. Now we're in a strange, strange situation. There is nothing in our history to guide us. The world is running out of fossil fuel. We've got our eye on Iran. We have the fields [oil] in Iraq. We have our eye

on the pipelines that run through Afghanistan, and we have a dictatorial system as best personified by the USA Patriot Act, which just removes us of our Bill of Rights. Do we just go further and further along the road toward total war? We're sort of like somebody going along a minefield, you know, dropping matches, waiting to hear the bang. The bang might us all out. I think everybody should take a sober look at the world about us. This is the most serious thing that has happened in the history of the United States. Knowledge is power. We need an honest new system.

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