



# The way of the Wolf

Pop culture feminist turned political activist Naomi Wolf tells **Rania Ghandour** that our next great battle is the fight for our civil liberties

**E**ver since she burst on to the literary scene with her book *The Beauty Myth*, Naomi Wolf has faced the slings and arrows of outraged critics.

But the feminist author and social critic says that her job does not involve seeking approval — it's simply to tell the truth as she sees it.

"Every book I've ever written has faced a barrage of criticism and then become conventional wisdom," she says on the phone from her home in New York.

The Yale graduate and Rhodes Scholar published *The Beauty Myth* in 1990. In it she railed against the manipulation of women by a cosmetics industry aided and abetted by the media. The New York Times described *The Beauty Myth* as one of the most important books of the 20th century.

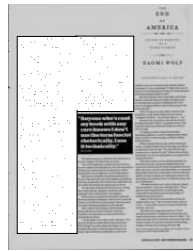
However, Wolf freely admits that the Times, along with all other mainstream media in the United States, has shunned her new book *The End of America: Letter of Warning to a Young Patriot*, which is a call to arms against a sea of troubles.

Wolf's warning that democracy is under attack in the US comes in the fervent hope that by opposing "the troublemakers" — the Bush administration — she and a rising tide of like-minded Americans can reverse what she calls a "fascist shift" in the country.

*The End of America* argues that since the beginning of George Bush's war on terror, Americans have been on a 10-step path that dictators such as Mussolini, Hitler, Stalin and Pinochet take to close down an open society: invoke internal and external threats, establish secret prisons, spy on ordinary citizens, arbitrarily detain and release people, restrict the press and so on.

In the aftermath of September 11, saying such things may have got Wolf death threats, as happened to fellow liberal commentator Susan Sontag, who was one of the first to speak out against American foreign policy. But in light of the changing attitudes





to the ongoing Iraqi military situation in which the US finds itself increasingly mired, the book's reception in America is an intriguing one.

Wolf, who arrives in Perth this weekend for the Perth Writers Festival, says the reaction to *The End of America* hasn't been as bad as she anticipated. "I was expecting a lot of resistance to this book and people have really embraced it," she says.

As an international feminist celebrity, however, Wolf is used to more reliable media coverage than the book has received.

After spearheading the third wave of feminism with *The Beauty Myth* and later works *Fire with Fire* (1993), *Promiscuities* (1997) and *Misconceptions* (2001), Wolf widened her focus to politics in the Clinton years.

She was involved in Bill Clinton's 1996 re-election bid and was an adviser in Al Gore's unsuccessful 2000 presidential campaign. Her former husband, journalist David Shipley, the father of her two children, worked for the Clinton White House as a speechwriter.

At 45, Wolf is savvy to the power of new technologies and is a regular blogger. She points out that the video of a talk she gave about her book has been viewed more than 330,000 times.

In spite of a mainstream media blackout, her message is getting through — mostly by word of mouth and in internet discussion groups. This grassroots support blurs political lines in its open debate of issues close to her heart such as whether the infamous practice of waterboarding (interrogating prisoners while pouring water on their faces to give a sensation of drowning) constitutes torture.

So does this open debate not counter her argument about restriction of the press as one of the Government's key 10 steps to shutting down a democracy? Isn't this impossible with the ever-increasing power of the internet?

Wolf deftly sidesteps, saying the internet is a double-edged sword.

"These technologies can be used either to amplify the forces of repression or amplify the forces of resistance or they can be neutral in how they are deployed," she says in her soft-spoken yet earnest manner. "The surveillance on the internet allows the White House to reach more deeply into our lives than Mussolini or Hitler were able to with their

surveillance structures.

"They were just opening people's letters and listening in on their phone calls but now the state has access to every single email I send or receive, or you do if you're in the United States."

Wolf cites examples that highlight what she calls the sad irony of a sanctimonious US which preaches the virtues of democracy abroad while cracking down on its own citizens. "It's in a way worse than being a second-tier repressive government like Morocco or Syria. In Iraq the US military has seized reporters who are working for CBS and AP and held them without charges and in abusive conditions."

Commentators at home and abroad have called her message alarmist and have taken exception to her use of the term "fascist shift".

In his review of *The End of America*, *The West Australian's* literary editor Rod Moran questioned how Wolf was able to publish a book that is scathingly critical of the US administration if it is in full flight towards fascism.

Wolf believes her critics have simply forgotten their history.

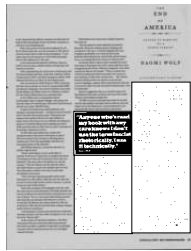
"The perception is that suddenly martial law descends, there are columns goose-stepping and crematoria," she says. "It doesn't happen that way; it happens gradually. It is a slow process from parliamentary democracy, which Italy and Germany were, to a closing down of society in a fascist state."

As history shows, when critics sounded the same warnings in Germany circa 1932, many said they were exaggerating the threat. Without raising her voice Wolf sounds the alarm even louder: "Then it reaches this critical turning point when everyone's too scared to say anything, so they (her critics) can f... off, frankly, because things are far too serious to not use the correct language. Anyone who's read my book with any care knows I don't use the term fascist rhetorically, I use it technically."

Moran's suggestion that as a Jewish woman she should have been more careful in her use of the word "fascist" particularly enrages her.

"I'd like to say on a personal note that I'm Jewish and the descendant of people whose relatives were all wiped out in the Holocaust. I am not inclined to use language like that in any way that is rhetorical."





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This sharp response is backed by her definition of the term “fascist”, of which there are many.

“One of the definitions is when the state starts to use terror against the individual to close the institutions of democracy and the practice of democracy. That’s exactly where we are right now in the United States.”

Wolf was so terrified of the political situation in the US at the end of last year, she initially cancelled her book tour of Australia. She relented but scaled back the tour which still includes her appearance in Perth.

“At that time, towards the end of last year, things were, in my opinion, heading towards the abyss politically in the United States,” she explains.

Wolf is part of a grassroots movement called the American Freedom Campaign, whose aim is to halt the erosion of civil liberties and push back what she terms “seriously terrifying legislation on the agenda”.

After a short time talking to Wolf it becomes obvious she does not feel terms like “seriously terrifying” are rhetorical, nor does she feel she is overstating the threat.

“Let me make it very clear to you,” she says. “You guys are living in a robust democracy in Australia. We’re living in a society where the dangers are so profound that when I walk through security at an airport (here she breaks off abruptly to move into

another room out of earshot of her children before resuming) I’ve got a quadruple ‘S’ (high risk) security threat on my boarding pass. People are being detained and worse going through security.”

She lists evidence such as the right of the White House to call any citizen an enemy combatant and to lock them up in solitary confinement for three years or stripping habeas corpus from prisoners and torturing them.

“We’re living in a society where tomorrow the President can say ‘Naomi Wolf, you’re an enemy combatant’ and I’m f...ed. and my kids are f...ed.”

However, she is at pains to not call the current US administration “fascist”, pointing out that in her book she talks about historical echoes to events in the US today.

“In looking at other violent dictatorships, including Germany’s, I am not comparing the United States in 2007 to nazi Germany, or Bush to Hitler,” her book states.

When I ask her bluntly if she wished she’d gone softer, or indeed harder with her message, she shoots straight back from the hip: “You mean harder than saying they’re a bunch of nazis?” before backtracking and saying “no, I’m not (saying that), I’m saying they’re using nazi tactics”.

Throwing caution to the wind she continues her anti-Bush attack by raising the alleged literal nazi connection with George W. Bush’s grandfather Prescott Bush, who was a director and shareholder of companies that profited from their involvement with the financial backers of nazi Germany. He risked prosecution in the Nuremberg war tribunal when it considered going after nazi collaborators.

“The Bush millions were made using slave labour from Auschwitz,” comes her startling claim. “There must be some family memory of the huge profits to be made from fascism and the huge danger of collaborating with fascists.”

Indeed, Wolf believes the invasion of Iraq was simple profiteering. “The war doesn’t make sense as a war — it only makes sense as a money-laundering exercise,” she says.

She rejects any suggestion that her virulent anti-Bush sentiment is misplaced in an election year which will end with a new face in the Oval Office. “I’m heartened that there’s a shift but at the end of the book I point out that we can have an election and nothing changes. Dictators love having elections.”

Naomi Wolf speaks tomorrow night at the Octagon Theatre, University of WA. Details: 6488 5555



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