

## Books

BY RACHEL HILLS

A damning view of America's loss of truth, liberty and justice.

# State OF EMERGENCY

IT IS HARD NOT to be cynical about a book titled as audaciously as Naomi Wolf's *The End of America: Letter of Warning to a Young Patriot*.

Throughout the Bush years, "America has gone to the dogs" titles have proliferated to the point they almost warrant their own section at the book store. Whatever their veracity, the cumulative effect of such books has been less to stir citizens to action than to dull them to arguments.

In part, this is a result of the natural resistance most of us feel towards anything that sniffs of hyperbole – something conservative commentators like William Kristol (and, in Australia, Gerard Henderson) have run with, positioning those who complain of stifled dissent as members of a hysterical far Left. In part, it's because the idea of a country as synonymous with liberty as the US shifting away from democracy is so foreign that we can't fully conceive it.

What makes *The End of America* remarkable is that Wolf manages to overcome these natural cynicisms, painting a picture of the US that is chilling without being overstated.

The book is premised on the idea that the US is undergoing a "fascist shift". Few would feel comfortable comparing the behaviour of the Bush Administration, however condemnable, to Hitler's National Socialists – but Wolf says her use of such terms is not "heated or even rhetorical" but "technical".

The problem, says Wolf, is that, "Americans tend to think of the shift to fascism in scary set pieces: the boots on the stairs, the knock in the middle of the night, the marching columns, the massive banners waving over city streets." In fact, the evolution from an open, democratic society to a closed, controlled one happens incrementally, and the people living through it "often experience a brighter

**THE END OF AMERICA: LETTER OF WARNING TO A YOUNG PATRIOT**  
NAOMI WOLF SCRIBE PUBLICATIONS, \$24.95

picture of what is going on than what the history to be written in the future will reveal" – particularly in the early stages.

"A shift toward violent dictatorship does not need to look like people being fed into ovens," writes Wolf.

So what does it look like then? *The End of America* identifies the steps taken by totalitarian regimes to close down free and open societies: identifying an internal and external threat (terrorism); establishing secret prisons (Guantanamo); developing a paramilitary force (Blackwater); monitoring ordinary citizens and infiltrating citizens' groups; arbitrarily detaining citizens; attacking academics, journalists and entertainers; framing dissent as treason; and subverting the rule of law.

Every one of these applies to the US post-September 11, says Wolf. In 2005, the *New York Times* exposed a program monitoring ordinary citizens' phone calls and emails without legal warrant. Last year, nine US attorneys were fired abruptly, reportedly for insufficient loyalty to White House policies. Wolf herself is searched almost every time she boards a US domestic flight.

Australians might see parallels here: most recently in the detention of Mohammad Hanef and the surveillance of activist groups in the lead-up to last month's APEC conference.

It is not safe to assume that this kind of harassment will only apply to guilty parties, or in exceptional circumstances, says

Wolf – governments and police can and do make mistakes, and the US president has claimed the authority to arrest anyone he deems an enemy combatant.

The US may not be a fascist state, says Wolf, but it is a "weakened democracy". And while we're unlikely to see a military coup, Wolf believes "we now have a legal infrastructure in place that could support a 'paper coup' – a more civilised, more marketable version of a real crackdown".

If it sounds a little out-there in Australia, Wolf says that's not the case in the States. Nor is it just a Leftie thing. "I am horrified at how much validation I'm getting by American citizens across the spectrum."

So what can be done to heal America's weakened democracy? A change of administration in 2008 won't be enough, says Wolf – a President Clinton or Obama would be just as concerning as President Bush without the proper checks and balances in place. Instead, the US need to lobby their representatives with demands to restore the rule of law.

Countries like Australia need to get involved, too, says Wolf. "If America is as powerful as it is constrained by democracy, there's no power in the world that could constrain an America unconstrained by democracy."

And if no one does anything? Says Wolf: "I don't think there is a choice." ●

**Naomi Wolf will be a guest of the Perth Writers' Festival in February.**

