

War and Terrorism: Some Interim Reflections

If truth is, as the cliché has it, the first casualty of war, this is in no small part because the advocates of war would always have us think in black and white, whereas the truth is almost always — and especially in times of conflict — an altogether more nuanced and qualified affair. It is true that the attacks of September 11th have to be condemned as unforgiveably cruel and leading to nothing but further horror. On the other hand, it is also true that these are not literally senseless acts but have to be seen as a final explosion of rage against Western tolerance of, even connivance in, atrocities elsewhere. It is true that deliberately to fly planes into buildings is to put oneself outside the pale of human speech and rational exchange. But it is also true that such violently self-excommunicating behavior can only come out of intense frustration at earlier failures of the Western powers to lend any seriously attentive ear to the voice of reason. It is true that the Taliban regime in Afghanistan has been utterly loathsome. But it is also true that it is hypocritical to denounce and oust the Taliban while continuing in economic or military alliance with other regimes who spurn democratic process and whose record on women and human rights is almost equally vile. It is true that the US is a freer and more democratic country than many others, including some it now claims it needs to attack. But it is also true that the US has been relentless in suppressing democratic elements in the Middle East wherever these were seen to be against American interests; that it has been largely indifferent to the consequence of its economic self-aggrandisement for the degree of freedom enjoyed elsewhere in the world; and that its current fight against terrorism is issuing in some frighteningly totalitarian pieces of legislation.

These truths, in truth, are not very complex bits of dialectical thinking, but in the UK at least, although there has been excellently measured coverage in some of the newspapers, notably the *Guardian*,

Independent and *Mirror*, it has proved hard enough to find them acknowledged by any but a handful of politicians and some pockets of the anti-war movement. To adhere to these truths is, on the one hand, to insist on the importance of a space of protest to the left of those who have denounced all opposition to the war as an appeasement of the terrorists that reveals callous indifference to the suffering they have inflicted. It is to want to offer a roll call of all the citizens massacred on the streets and in the refugee camps of Palestine; to wish that a rose might be laid at some hallowed place of memorial for each child victim of the sanctions in Iraq; to insist on the grotesque disparities in the use and distribution of global resources; to expose the double standards of governments that preach the virtues of their own way of life while operating policies that actively preempt its extension to others. But it is also to want to hold open the space of protest against the infantile leftism that glibly attributes all evil to American imperialism, sees the terrorist attacks as more or less inevitable if not deserved, and has found it difficult to offer any straightforward denunciation of the Taliban regime, of the brutalities of Saddam Hussein, of the derisive attitude to democracy and human rights of many of America's most hostile opponents.

Both the marches called against the war in London (which were the biggest seen in the capital for many years) were testing occasions for those attempting to occupy any mid-way space of this kind. Many of the chants and slogans were politically naive or one-sidedly anti-American. It felt awkward demonstrating with people professing religious commitments, whether Muslim or Christian, that one could not share. It was above all hugely difficult to find oneself marching along with British Asian contingents proclaiming their adherence to the Taliban. Such groups, however, were small, easily avoidable, and had themselves, in any case, to co-exist with the lesbian-feminist or green or trade union affiliations marching immediately behind or in front. More importantly, as Tony Blair was going around the world making his large speeches about tolerance and multiculturalism, the demonstrations that he would never have joined — whose motivation he probably has not even understood — have been offering some altogether more concrete examples of its achievement. Here there has been evidence of a solidarity about the need for non-violent resolutions to global conflicts that has managed to transcend the quite considerable strains and stresses of religious and political diversity. Here there has been evidence of the reasoned and impassioned dissent that has been so sadly lacking in the House of Commons itself. (Seldom, if ever, in fact

can those who have committed us to war been allowed to voice so much cloudy sentiment with such little opposition in Parliament.)

Admittedly, the anti-war movement represents only a minority of the British electorate (albeit a substantial one) and is highly unlikely at the present time to put pressure on any of the major political parties. But small and politically impotent and heterogeneous in its composition though the seam of opposition is, there is still a coherence and integrity about its outlook that is lacking in the government. The Prime Minister professes to share some of the goals of those opposed to the war. At the Party conference last October, he received many accolades for his speech outlining his vision for the new world order. He was, he told us, committed to the resolution of the Palestinian situation, to the promotion of global justice, to the elimination of poverty in Africa, and so on. But he is also, of course, as aggressively committed as ever to the expansion of the existing capitalist world order, and would do nothing that might detract from Britain's competitive role within the global economy. He has assured us of his concern to protect the environment, but his government has done little to curb the car culture, has presided over the near collapse of the railway and has just agreed with the expansion of Heathrow airport (again, to maintain the UK status in the airflight market). And all this while sparing no expense on the military hardware and its support systems in Afghanistan. The rhetoric is one thing, the policies that New Labour is actually pursuing are quite another.

Nothing brought home more forcefully the insincerity of what gets said about the need for a fairer world order, respect for other cultures and a sustainable economy, than the enthusiasm of the politicians over the return of Concorde to the air after its lengthy grounding following the Paris crash. Ecologically this is a dinosaur of a plane that would never have gained a licence under the regulations on environmental pollution brought in since its launch. At around £1,600 a transatlantic flight it hardly qualifies as a mode of transport for the humble masses. But it was hailed as the returning Phoenix of everything successful and wholesome and ordinary about the Western way of life. Here were people cheerily flying again into New York at supersonic speed, washing down the usual Beluga caviar with the usual vintage Krug. And here was Mayor Giuliani coming aboard at Kennedy to welcome the return to normality and to invite the incoming visitors to "spend, spend, spend." Such skewed and obsessional commodity fetishism, presented as if it were emblematic of who "we" are in the West, of our conceptions of the "good life" and our cultural priorities, seemed unworthy of the Twin Tower victims and a sad advertisement for

Western hegemony. Its ritualistic behaviors are surely at least as bizarre as any associated with the religions of the East. I cherish the freedom of speech that allows me to express these points. I do not make light of the benefits I enjoy from living in a relatively enlightened society. I would always prefer to find myself in a community where those *in extremis* are inclined in their final words to say "I love you" rather than "God is Great." But it is at the same time becoming increasingly hard to find a spiritual home in a society that views shopping as symbolic of its freedom, and Concorde flights as representative of its *jouissance*. If, as so much of the media hype would have us believe, it is essentially to preserve the pleasures and privileges of this form of affluence that the war against terrorism is being waged, then all those in the US and Europe who feel that this is a grotesque and dangerous distortion of the issues, should make clear their dissent, express their differing sympathies and insist on more adequate political representation.

The zealots of the war meanwhile would appear to have rather little patience with considerations of this kind. They feel vindicated by its progress to date and have been vocal in proclaiming its successes. They have poured scorn on the pessimism of those who spoke in its opening weeks of Afghanistan as a graveyard of superpowers and predicted a new Vietnam. They have gloated over the rapid collapse and defection of the Taliban forces. It may indeed be the case that by the time this column is published the last pockets of Taliban resistance will have been overcome, and the war more or less ended, at least in Afghanistan: there is now, of course, much Bush and Rumsfeld talk of its extension to Iraq, Sudan, Yemen and Somalia (and in recent days some obedient echoes also from the Foreign Secretary here in the UK). It may even be the case that Osama Bin Laden has been captured and destroyed or (much less likely) brought to trial. But whether or not this proves to be the outcome, nothing will alter the fact that once again it has been the symptoms rather than the causes of terrorism that have been targeted, and that sooner or later these will erupt again, quite possibly in even more disastrous forms. In Palestine, where Hamas has seized the advantage of the relentless economic and military pressure on the Arafat administration, the terrorists have been even more active since September and the violence is now escalating out of control. Nothing, moreover, will have altered the fact that innocent lives have yet again been revenged through the further loss of innocent life. Nothing will remedy the dreadful injuries: the blindings and brain damage and blasted hands and legs that have wrecked the lives of so many children in Afghanistan. Whatever triumphs they proclaim in Afghanistan, the

victors in this war will have done nothing to alter the sense of those who have throughout opposed it that they have been right to do so: right because terrorism thrives rather than withers in the face of violent response, and is most unlikely to disappear so long as its underlying motives remain unaddressed; right because there is no cause that can render it just for the richest and most powerful nations on earth to visit destruction of such magnitude upon the most destitute and politically reduced; and right because of the horrors of the humanitarian crisis that has already been visited upon the war refugees, and which may well prove even more catastrophic for them in the coming Winter months.

