

CIVIL LIBERTIES ARE AT STAKE

Richard Rorty

As the historian David Kennedy has remarked, terrorism is different from, and worse than, war. Wars have aims that might someday be achieved, thus bringing about an end to hostilities, but terrorism has no such aims. The object of terror is terror.

Still, our grandchildren will probably, for lack of a better term, use 'war' to describe the threat hanging over them, the situation that requires them to live in a garrison state: a nation in which everybody is accustomed to people in uniform roaring in, closing down buildings and public spaces, and arresting suspicious-looking people, without advance warning. They will probably think that Oceania has always been at war with Eastasia, and that it always will be. The idea of war and peace as alternating states may seem as irrelevant as Orwell suspected it might.

Most American intellectuals who spoke to the media about the terrorist attacks wondered anxiously whether the West would be

able to put itself on a war footing without eroding the liberties of its citizens—without endangering the right to privacy and the right to dissent. Maybe Orwell's pessimism about this ability will turn out to be justified. But maybe it will not. There were plenty of violations of civil liberties in Britain and America during the two world wars, but the institutions of constitutional democracy remained in place. With luck, maybe we can hang onto them.

I cannot help thinking—though I greatly dislike the thought—that the chances of doing so may be a bit better in Europe than in the US. Jerry Falwell's suggestion that the terrorist attacks may be attributable to God's anger at America's toleration of gays and lesbians, and to the activities of the American Civil Liberties Union, struck a chord in a sizable percentage of my fellow-citizens. So I hope that Europe may set the US a good example by keeping civil liberties intact, even if these murderous high-tech attacks become more frequent, and take place in more and more countries. ■

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FUTURE HOLDS NO GOOD

Fredric Jameson

I have been reluctant to comment on the recent 'events' because the event in question, as history, is incomplete and one can even say that it has not yet fully happened.

Obviously there are immediate comments one can make, in particular on the nauseating media reception, whose cheap pathos seemed unconsciously dictated by a White House intent on smothering the situation in sentiment in order to demonstrate the undemonstrable: namely, that 'Americans are united as never before since Pearl Harbor.' I suppose this means that they are united by the fear of saying anything that contradicts this completely spurious media consensus.

Historical events, however, are not punctual, but extend in a before and after of time which only gradually reveal themselves. It has, to be sure, been pointed out that the Americans created bin Laden during the Cold War (and in particular during the Soviet war in Afghanistan), and that this is therefore a textbook example of dialectical reversal. But the seeds of the event are buried deeper

than that. They are to be found in the wholesale massacres of the Left systematically encouraged and directed by the Americans in an even earlier period. The physical extermination of the Iraqi and the Indonesian Communist Parties, although now historically repressed and forgotten, were crimes as abominable as any contemporary genocide. It is, however, only now that the results are working their way out into actuality, for the resultant absence of any Left alternative means that popular revolt and resistance in the Third World have nowhere to go but into religious and 'fundamentalist' forms.

As for the future, no one (presumably including our own Government) has any idea what the promised and threatened 'war on terrorism' might look like. But until we know that, we can have no satisfactory picture of the 'events' we imagine to have taken place on a single day in September. Despite this uncertainty, however, it is permitted to feel that the future holds nothing good for either side. ■

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THE ONLY ALTERNATIVE TO GLOBAL TERROR

Rohini Hensman

Father, Son and Holy War

My apologies to Anand Patwardhan, but I can't resist the temptation to borrow the title of his film as an apt description of what is happening in the world right now (i.e. October 2001, the month after the terrorist attacks in the USA). Whether the father is Saudi billionaire Mohammed bin Laden, with his close ties to the Saudi royal family, the son is his estranged offspring Osama, who is enraged every time he thinks of infidel American troops stationed on the holy soil of Saudi Arabia, and the holy war is the *jihad* which the latter has declared against America and Americans; or the father is George Bush Sr. who started it all with his war to defeat Saddam Hussein by gradually exterminating the people of Iraq, the son is George Jr., who has trouble opening his mouth without putting his foot in it, and the holy war is the crusade the latter has declared against, well, let us say vaguely specified enemies who happen to be Muslims—in both cases, the themes of religious communalism, militarism and machismo are inextricably intertwined.

There is even an uncanny similarity in the ways that the two sons think, if we ignore the cowboy rhetoric of one ("wanted - dead or alive," "smoke 'em outa their holes," etc.) and the pious expressions of the other ("may God mete them the punishment they deserve," etc.). Bush tells us, "either you are with us, or you are with the terrorists" (statement of 20/9/01); Osama tells us the entire world is divided into "two regions—one of faith...and another of infidelity" (statement of 7/10/01). In other words, they both want us to believe that the population of the world is divided into two camps, one headed by Bush, the other by bin Laden.

If this is true, then we are heading into an epoch of unlimited violence and terror. South Asia is right at the centre of the conflict, and could suffer the most from it. For example, if the war goes on much longer, General Musharraf could be overthrown by even more extremist communal forces in Pakistan, who would then have nuclear weapons in their hands. On the other side of the border, there could well be a hidden agenda behind the BJP-led government's enthusiastic support for the US war. What do they hope to gain from it? Not US mediation in Kashmir to put pressure on Pakistan to stop cross-border terrorism—Foreign Minister Jaswant Singh made it very clear that mediation would not be welcome. Belligerent speeches by Kashmir's Chief Minister Farouq Abdullah and Home Minister L.K. Advani, as well as aggressive firing across the border the same day that corruption-tainted Defence Minister George Fernandes regained his ministry, suggest that what they want is the US go-ahead to do exactly what Big

Brother is doing: i.e. to bomb Pakistan as the US is bombing Afghanistan, on the same pretext of "a war against those who harbour terrorists". That could be the prelude to a nuclear war.

For those of us who are opposed to both camps, the only way to avert such a catastrophe is to build a viable third alternative—a new non-aligned movement for human rights and democracy—at top speed. This will become obvious when we take a closer look at the two camps which have already constituted themselves. But first we need to be clear what we are talking about when we refer to 'terrorism'.

What do we mean by 'terrorism'?

The first kind of definition of terrorism is lack of definition. Eqbal Ahmad, after going through at least twenty US documents on terrorism, came up with a surprising (or perhaps not so surprising) discovery: not once was terrorism defined. And he concluded that this was quite deliberate: "If you're not going to be consistent, you're not going to define" ("Terrorism: Theirs and Ours", Alternative Radio programme). Since September 11, we find the definition chopping and changing, according to expediency. First it is made clear that only acts of violence against US citizens are acts of terrorism; the same acts against citizens of other countries don't count. When some governments whose support the US wishes to retain question this, the definition is expanded slightly. At no point are similar acts of violence committed or supported by the US defined as terrorist.

Ranged against this are counter-definitions by anti-globalisers like Vandana Shiva, who classify hunger, poverty, unemployment and environmental degradation as terrorism; we can call this an economic reductionist type of definition. One problem is that it is so wide that it becomes impossible to define a strategy to fight it; it is a bit like trying to make tables, chairs, beds, windows and doors with a tool-kit consisting entirely and solely of a hammer: you end up unable to make any of them. Another problem is that terrorism as political violence is nowhere acknowledged, so that it becomes possible to join hands, as Vandana Shiva has done, with terrorists of the Sangh Parivar in the struggle against globalisation. I would say that even disasters like Bhopal and Chernobyl, which kill and injure tens of thousands of victims, should not be classified as terrorism, because they occur in the pursuit of economic gain and therefore require different remedies (e.g. health and safety and environmental legislation which makes them impossible).