
WE HAVE ALREADY LOST

John Le Carré

The Bombing Begins! screams today's headline of the normally restrained *Guardian*. Battle joined, echoes the equally cautious *International Herald Tribune*, quoting George W. Bush. But with whom is it joined? And how will it end? How about with Osama bin Laden in chains, looking more serene and Christ-like than ever, arranged before a tribune of his vanquishers with Johnny Cochran to defend him? The fees won't be a problem, that's for sure.

Or how about with Osama bin Laden blown to smithereens by one of those clever bombs we keep reading about that kill terrorists in caves but don't break the crockery? Or is there a solution I haven't thought of that will prevent us from turning our arch-enemy into an arch martyr in the eyes of those for whom he is already semi-divine?

Yet we must punish him. We must bring him to justice. Like any sane person, I see no other way. Send in the food and medicines, provide the aid, sweep up the starving refugees, maimed orphans and body parts—sorry, "collateral damage"—but Osama bin Laden and his awful men, we have no choice, must be hunted down.

Unfortunately, what America longs for at this moment, even above retribution, is more friends and fewer enemies. And what America is storing up for herself—and so are we Brits—is yet more enemies. Because after all the bribes, threats and promises that have patched together this rickety coalition, we cannot prevent another suicide bomber being born each time a misdirected missile wipes out an innocent village, and nobody can tell us how to dodge this devil's cycle, of despair, hatred and—yet again—revenge.

The stylized television footage and photographs of this bin Laden suggest a man of homoerotic narcissism, and maybe we can draw a grain of hope from that. Posing with a Kalashnikov, attending a wedding or consulting a sacred text, he radiates with every self-adoring gesture of an actor's awareness of the lens. He has height, beauty, grace, intelligence and magnetism, all great attributes, unless you're the world's hottest fugitive and on the run, in which case they're liabilities hard to disguise.

But greater than all of them, to my jaded eye, is his barely containable male vanity, his appetite for self-drama and his closet passion for the limelight. And, just possibly, this trait will be his downfall, seducing him into a final dramatic act of self-destruction, produced, directed, scripted and acted to death by Osama Bin Laden himself.

By the accepted rules of terrorist engagement, of course, the war is long lost. By us. What victory can we possibly achieve that matches the defeats we have already suffered, let alone the defeats that lie ahead? "Terror is theatre," a soft-spoken Palestinian firebrand told me in Beirut in 1982. He was talking about the murder of Israeli athletes at the Munich Olympics 10 years before, but he might as well have been talking about the Twin Towers and the Pentagon. The late Mikhail Bakunin, evangelist of anarchism, liked to speak of the Propaganda of the Act. It's hard to imagine more theatrical, more potent acts of propaganda than these.

Now Mr. Bakunin in his grave and Mr. bin Laden in his cave must be rubbing their hands in glee as we embark on the very process that terrorists of their stamp so relish: as we hastily double up our police and intelligence forces and award them greater powers, as we put basic civil liberties on hold and curtail press freedom, impose news blackouts and secret censorship, spy on ourselves and, at our worst, violate mosques and hound luckless citizens in our streets because we are afraid of the colour of their skin.

All the fears that we share—Dare I fly? Ought I to tell the police about the weird couple upstairs? Would it be safer not to drive down Whitehall this morning? Is my child safely back from school? Have my life's savings plummeted?—are precisely the fears our attackers want us to have.

Until Sept. 11, the United States was only too happy to plug away at Vladimir Putin about his butchery in Chechnya. Russia's abuse of human rights in the North Caucasus, he was told—we are speaking of wholesale torture, and murder amounting to genocide—was an obstruction to closer relations with NATO and the United States. There were even voices—mine was one—that suggested Mr. Putin join Slobodan Milosevic on trial in The Hague: Let's do them both together. Well, goodbye to all that. In the making of the great new coalition, Mr. Putin looks a saint by comparison with some of his bed-fellows.

Does anyone remember any more the outcry against the perceived economic colonialism of the G8? Against the plundering of the Third World by uncontrollable multinational companies? Seattle, Prague and Genoa presented us with disturbing scenes of broken heads, broken glass, mob violence and police brutality. Tony Blair was deeply shocked. Yet the debate was a valid one, until it was drowned in a wave of patriotic sentiment, deftly ex-ploited by corporate America.

Drag up Kyoto these days, you risk the charge of being "anti-American." It's as if we have entered a new Orwellian world where our personal reliability as comrades in the struggle is measured by the degree to which we invoke the past to explain the present. Suggesting there is a historical context for the recent atrocities is, by implication, to make excuses for them: Anyone who is with us doesn't do that; anyone who does, is against us.

Ten years ago, I was making an idealistic bore of myself by telling anyone who would listen, that with the Cold War behind us, we were missing a never-to-be repeated chance to transform the global the global community.

Where was the Marshall Plan? I pleaded. Why weren't young men and women from the U.S. Peace Corps, Britain's voluntary Service Overseas and their continental European equivalents pouring into the former Soviet Union by the thousands?

Were was the world-class statesman and the man of the hour, with the voice and vision to define for us the real; if unglamorous, enemies of mankind: poverty, famine, slavery, tyranny, drugs, bush-fire wars racial and religious, intolerance, greed?

Now thanks to Osama bin Laden and his lieutenants, all our leaders are world-class statement, proclaiming distant their voices and visions in distant airports while they feather their electoral nests.

There has been unfortunate talk—and not only from Silvio Berlusconi—of a "crusade." Crusade, of course, implies a delicious ignorance of history. Was Mr. Berlusconi really proposing to set free the holy places of Christendom and smite the heathen? Was George W. Bush? And am I out of order in recalling that we (Christians) actually lost the Crusades? But all is well: Signor Berlusconi was misquoted and the presidential reference is no longer operative.

Meanwhile, Mr. Blair's new role as America's fearless spokesman continues apace. Mr. Blair speaks well because Mr. Bush speaks badly. Seen from abroad, Mr. Blair in this partnership is the inspired elder statesman with an unassailable domestic power base, whereas Mr. Bush—dare one say it these days?—was barely elected at all.

But what exactly does Mr. Blair, the elder statesman, represent? Both he and the U.S. President at this moment are riding high in their respective approval ratings, but both are aware, if they know their history books, that riding high on Day One of a perilous overseas military operation doesn't guarantee you victory come election day.

How many American body bags can Mr. Bush sustain without losing popular support? After the horrors of the Twin Towers and the Pentagon, the American people may want revenge, but they're on a very short fuse about shedding more American blood.

Mr. Blair—with the whole Western world to tell him so, except for a few sour voices back home - is America's eloquent white knight, the fearless, trusty champion of that ever-delicate child of the mid-Atlantic, the "Special Relationship."

Whether that will win Mr. Blair favour with his electorate is another matter because the Prime Minister was elected to save the country from decay, and not from Osama bin Laden. The Britain he is leading to war is a monument to 60 years of administrative incompetence. Our health, education and transport systems are on the rocks. The fashionable phrase these days describes them as "Third World," but there are places in the Third World that are far better off than Britain.

The country Mr. Blair governs is blighted by institutionalized racism, white male dominance, chaotically administered police forces, a constipated judicial system, obscene private wealth and shameful and unnecessary public poverty. At the time of his re-election, which was characterized by a dismal turnout, Mr. Blair acknowledged these ills and humbly admitted that he was on notice to put them right.

So when you catch the noble throb in his voice as he leads us reluctantly to war, and your heart lifts to his undoubted flourishes of rhetoric, it's worth remembering that he may also be warning you, sotto voce, that his mission to mankind is so important that you will have to wait another year for your urgent medical operation and a lot longer before you can ride in a safe and punctual train. I am not sure that this is the stuff of electoral victory three years from now. Watching Tony Blair, and listening to him, I can't resist the impression that he is in a bit of a dream, walking his own dangerous plank.

Did I say "war"? Has either Mr. Blair or Mr. Bush, I wonder, ever seen a child blown to bits, or witnessed the effect of a single cluster bomb dropped on an unprotected refugee camp? It isn't necessarily a qualification for generalship to have seen such dread things—and I don't wish either of them the experience - but it scares me all the: same when I'll watch uncut, political faces shining with the light of combat, and hear preppy political vices steeling my heart for battle.

And please, Mr. Bush—on my knees, Mr. Blair—keep God out of this. To imagine God fights wars is to credit Him with the worst follies of mankind. God, if we know anything about Him, which I don't profess to, prefers effective food drops, dedicated medical teams, comfort and good tents for the homeless and bereaved, and without strings, a decent acceptance of our past sins and a readiness to put them right. He prefers us less greedy, less arrogant, less evangelical, and less dismissive of life's losers.

It's not a new world order, not yet, and is not God's war. It's a horrible, necessary, humiliating police action to redress the failure of our intelligence services and our blind political stupidity in

arming and exploiting fanatics to fight the Soviet invader, then abandoning them to a devastated, leaderless country. As a result, it's our miserable duty to seek out and punish a unch of modern medieval religious zealots who will gain mythic stature from the very death we propose to dish out to hem.

And when it's over, it won't be over. The shadowy bin Laden armies, in the emotional aftermath of his destruction, will gather numbers rather than wither away. So will the hinterland of silent sympathizers who provide them with logistical support.

Cautiously, between the lines, we are being invited to believe that the conscience of the West has been reawakened to the dilemma of the poor and homeless of the Earth.

And possibly, out of fear, necessity and rhetoric, a new sort of political morality has, indeed, been born. But when the shooting dies and a seeming peace is thieved, will the United States and its allies stay at their posts or, as happened at the end of the Cold War, hang up their boots and go home to their own back yards? Even if those back yards will never pin be the safe havens they once were.

John le Carré is the author of 18 novels, including his most recent, *The Constant Gardener*.

NOT IN OUR NAME

Signed by Alice Walker, Gloria Steinem, Jane Fonda, Robin Morgan, Noeline Heyzer and many others.

Worldwide Sisterhood Against Terrorism and War.

We women who are Muslims, Christians, Jews, Hindus, Buddhists, Sikhs, Jains and women of many beliefs from the countries that lost lives in the terror of September 11th, unite on these principles:

We will not support the bombing or U.S. invasion of Afghanistan, for it would only punish suffering people, and increase the hatred on which terrorists feed. No military action has ever ended terrorism.

We stand with our sisters in Afghanistan who are suffering and dying under the gender apartheid and sexual terrorism of the Taliban. The world has endangered itself by failing to heed their pleas. We must help them build a democracy that includes women.

We believe the mass murders of September 11 were crimes against humanity that must be prosecuted. All terrorists must be brought to justice. We pledge to judge people by their acts, not the group into which they were born. We will boycott financial institutions that refuse to disclose the flow of funds to terrorists. We will target and expose political leaders who refuse to require disclosure.

To stop the spiral of terror and vengeance, we believe there must be an act as positive as the terrorist act was negative.