

‘Brutality smeared in peanut butter’

Why America must stop the war now.

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As darkness deepened over Afghanistan on Sunday October 7 2001, the US government, backed by the International Coalition Against Terror (the new, amenable surrogate for the United Nations), launched air strikes against Afghanistan. TV channels lingered on computer-animated images of cruise missiles, stealth bombers, tomahawks, "bunker-busting" missiles and Mark 82 high drag bombs. All over the world, little boys watched goggle-eyed and stopped clamouring for new video games.

The UN, reduced now to an ineffective acronym, wasn't even asked to mandate the air strikes. (As Madeleine Albright once said, "We will behave multilaterally when we can, and unilaterally when we must.") The "evidence" against the terrorists was shared amongst friends in the "coalition".

After conferring, they announced that it didn't matter whether or not the "evidence" would stand up in a court of law. Thus, in an instant, were centuries of jurisprudence carelessly trashed.

Nothing can excuse or justify an act of terrorism, whether it is committed by religious fundamentalists, private militia, people's resistance movements -- or whether it's dressed up as a war of retribution by a recognised government. The bombing of Afghanistan is not revenge for New York and Washington. It is yet another act of terror against the people of the world.

Each innocent person that is killed must be added to, not set off against, the grisly toll of civilians who died in New York and Washington.

People rarely win wars, governments rarely lose them. People get killed.

Governments moult and regroup, hydra-headed. They use flags first to shrink-wrap people's minds and smother thought, and then as ceremonial shrouds to bury their willing dead. On both sides, in Afghanistan as well as America, civilians are now hostage to the actions of their own governments.

Unknowingly, ordinary people in both countries share a common bond -- they have to live with the phenomenon of blind, unpredictable terror. Each batch of bombs that is dropped on Afghanistan is matched by a corresponding escalation of mass hysteria in America about anthrax, more hijackings and other terrorist acts.

There is no easy way out of the spiralling morass of terror and brutality that confronts the world today. It is time now for the human race to hold still, to delve into its wells of collective wisdom, both ancient and modern. What happened on September 11 changed the world forever.

Freedom, progress, wealth, technology, war -- these words have taken on new meaning.

Governments have to acknowledge this transformation, and approach their new tasks with a modicum of honesty and humility. Unfortunately, up to now, there has been no sign of any introspection from the leaders of the International Coalition. Or the Taliban.

When he announced the air strikes, President George Bush said: "We're a peaceful nation." America's favourite ambassador, Tony Blair, (who also holds the portfolio of prime minister of the UK), echoed him: "We're a peaceful people."

So now we know. Pigs are horses. Girls are boys. War is peace.

Speaking at the FBI headquarters a few days later, President Bush said: "This is our calling. This is the calling of the United States of America. The most free nation in the world. A nation built on fundamental values that reject hate, reject violence, rejects murderers and rejects evil. We will not tire."

Here is a list of the countries that America has been at war with -- and bombed -- since the second world war: China (1945-46, 1950-53), Korea (1950-53), Guatemala (1954, 1967-69), Indonesia (1958), Cuba (1959-60), the Belgian Congo (1964), Peru (1965), Laos (1964-73), Vietnam (1961-73), Cambodia (1969-70), Grenada (1983), Libya (1986), El Salvador (1980s), Nicaragua (1980s), Panama (1989), Iraq (1991-99), Bosnia (1995), Sudan (1998), Yugoslavia (1999). And now Afghanistan.

Certainly it does not tire -- this, the most free nation in the world.

What freedoms does it uphold? Within its borders, the freedoms of speech, religion, thought; of artistic expression, food habits, sexual preferences (well, to some extent) and many other exemplary, wonderful things.

Outside its borders, the freedom to dominate, humiliate and subjugate -- usually in the service of America's real religion, the "free market". So when the US government christens a war "Operation Infinite Justice", or "Operation Enduring Freedom", we in the third world feel more than a tremor of fear.

Because we know that Infinite Justice for some means Infinite Injustice for others. And Enduring Freedom for some means Enduring Subjugation for others.

The International Coalition Against Terror is largely a cabal of the richest countries in the world. Between them, they manufacture and sell almost all of the world's weapons, they possess the largest stockpile of weapons of mass destruction -- chemical, biological and nuclear. They have fought the most wars, account for most of the genocide, subjection, ethnic cleansing and human rights violations in modern history, and have sponsored, armed

and financed untold numbers of dictators and despots. Between them, they have worshipped, almost deified, the cult of violence and war. For all its appalling sins, the Taliban just isn't in the same league.

The Taliban was compounded in the crumbling crucible of rubble, heroin and landmines in the backwash of the cold war. Its oldest leaders are in their early 40s. Many of them are disfigured and handicapped, missing an eye, an arm or a leg. They grew up in a society scarred and devastated by war.

Between the Soviet Union and America, over 20 years, about \$45bn (£30bn) worth of arms and ammunition was poured into Afghanistan. The latest weaponry was the only shard of modernity to intrude upon a thoroughly medieval society.

Young boys -- many of them orphans -- who grew up in those times, had guns for toys, never knew the security and comfort of family life, never experienced the company of women. Now, as adults and rulers, the Taliban beat, stone, rape and brutalise women, they don't seem to know what else to do with them.

Years of war has stripped them of gentleness, inured them to kindness and human compassion. Now they've turned their monstrosity on their own people.

They dance to the percussive rhythms of bombs raining down around them.

With all due respect to President Bush, the people of the world do not have to choose between the Taliban and the US government. All the beauty of human civilisation -- our art, our music, our literature -- lies beyond these two fundamentalist, ideological poles. There is as little chance that the people of the world can all become middle-class consumers as there is that they will all embrace any one particular religion. The issue is not about good v evil or Islam v Christianity as much as it is about space. About how to accommodate diversity, how to contain the impulse towards hegemony -- every kind of hegemony, economic, military, linguistic, religious and cultural.

Any ecologist will tell you how dangerous and fragile a monoculture is. A hegemonic world is like having a government without a healthy opposition. It becomes a kind of dictatorship. It's like putting a plastic bag over the world, and preventing it from breathing. Eventually, it will be torn open.

One and a half million Afghan people lost their lives in the 20 years of conflict that preceded this new war. Afghanistan was reduced to rubble, and now, the rubble is being pounded into finer dust. By the second day of the air strikes, US pilots were returning to their bases without dropping their assigned payload of bombs. As one pilot put it, Afghanistan is "not a target-rich environment". At a press briefing at the Pentagon, Donald Rumsfeld, the US defence secretary, was asked if America had run out of targets.

"First we're going to re-hit targets," he said, "and second, we're not running out of targets, Afghanistan is ..." This was greeted with gales of laughter in the briefing room.

By the third day of the strikes, the US defence department boasted that it had "achieved air

supremacy over Afghanistan" (Did they mean that they had destroyed both, or maybe all 16, of Afghanistan's planes?)

On the ground in Afghanistan, the Northern Alliance -- the Taliban's old enemy, and therefore the international coalition's newest friend -- is making headway in its push to capture Kabul. (For the archives, let it be said that the Northern Alliance's track record is not very different from the Taliban's. But for now, because it's inconvenient, that little detail is being glossed over.) The visible, moderate, "acceptable" leader of the alliance, Ahmed Shah Masud, was killed in a suicide-bomb attack early in September. The rest of the Northern Alliance is a brittle confederation of brutal warlords, ex-communists and unbending clerics. It is a disparate group divided along ethnic lines, some of whom have tasted power in Afghanistan in the past.

Until the US air strikes, the Northern Alliance controlled about 5% of the geographical area of Afghanistan. Now, with the coalition's help and "air cover", it is poised to topple the Taliban. Meanwhile, Taliban soldiers, sensing imminent defeat, have begun to defect to the alliance. So the fighting forces are busy switching sides and changing uniforms. But in an enterprise as cynical as this one, it seems to matter hardly at all.

Love is hate, north is south, peace is war.

Among the global powers, there is talk of "putting in a representative government". Or, on the other hand, of "restoring" the kingdom to Afghanistan's 89-year old former king Zahir Shah, who has lived in exile in Rome since 1973. That's the way the game goes -- support Saddam Hussein, then "take him out"; finance the mojahedin, then bomb them to smithereens; put in Zahir Shah and see if he's going to be a good boy. (Is it possible to "put in" a representative government? Can you place an order for democracy -- with extra cheese and jalapeno peppers?)

Reports have begun to trickle in about civilian casualties, about cities emptying out as Afghan civilians flock to the borders which have been closed. Main arterial roads have been blown up or sealed off. Those who have experience of working in Afghanistan say that by early November, food convoys will not be able to reach the millions of Afghans (7.5m, according to the UN) who run the very real risk of starving to death during the course of this winter. They say that in the days that are left before winter sets in, there can either be a war, or an attempt to reach food to the hungry. Not both.

As a gesture of humanitarian support, the US government air-dropped 37,000 packets of emergency rations into Afghanistan. It says it plans to drop a total of 500,000 packets. That will still only add up to a single meal for half a million people out of the several million in dire need of food.

Aid workers have condemned it as a cynical, dangerous, public-relations exercise. They say that air-dropping food packets is worse than futile.

First, because the food will never get to those who really need it. More dangerously, those who run out to retrieve the packets risk being blown up by landmines. A tragic arms race.

Nevertheless, the food packets had a photo-op all to themselves. Their contents were listed in major newspapers. They were vegetarian, we're told, as per Muslim dietary law (!) Each yellow packet, decorated with the American flag, contained: rice, peanut butter, bean salad, strawberry jam, crackers, raisins, flat bread, an apple fruit bar, seasoning, matches, a set of plastic cutlery, a serviette and illustrated user instructions.

After three years of unremitting drought, an air-dropped airline meal in Jalalabad! The level of cultural ineptitude, the failure to understand what months of relentless hunger and grinding poverty really mean, the US government's attempt to use even this abject misery to boost its self-image, beggars description.

Reverse the scenario for a moment. Imagine if the Taliban government was to bomb New York City, saying all the while that its real target was the US government and its policies. And suppose, during breaks between the bombing, the Taliban dropped a few thousand packets containing nan and kebabs impaled on an Afghan flag. Would the good people of New York ever find it in themselves to forgive the Afghan government? Even if they were hungry, even if they needed the food, even if they ate it, how would they ever forget the insult, the condescension? Rudi Guiliani, Mayor of New York City, returned a gift of \$10m from a Saudi prince because it came with a few words of friendly advice about American policy in the Middle East. Is pride a luxury that only the rich are entitled to?

Far from stamping it out, igniting this kind of rage is what creates terrorism. Hate and retribution don't go back into the box once you've let them out. For every "terrorist" or his "supporter" that is killed, hundreds of innocent people are being killed too. And for every hundred innocent people killed, there is a good chance that several future terrorists will be created.

Where will it all lead?

Setting aside the rhetoric for a moment, consider the fact that the world has not yet found an acceptable definition of what "terrorism" is. One country's terrorist is too often another's freedom fighter. At the heart of the matter lies the world's deep-seated ambivalence towards violence.

Once violence is accepted as a legitimate political instrument, then the morality and political acceptability of terrorists (insurgents or freedom fighters) becomes contentious, bumpy terrain. The US government itself has funded, armed and sheltered plenty of rebels and insurgents around the world.

The CIA and Pakistan's ISI trained and armed the mojahedin who, in the 80s, were seen as terrorists by the government in Soviet-occupied Afghanistan. Today, Pakistan -- America's ally in this new war -- sponsors insurgents who cross the border into Kashmir in India. Pakistan lauds them as "freedom-fighters", India calls them "terrorists". India, for its part, denounces countries who sponsor and abet terrorism, but the Indian army has, in the past, trained separatist Tamil rebels asking for a homeland in Sri Lanka -- the LTTE, responsible for countless acts of bloody terrorism.

(Just as the CIA abandoned the mujahideen after they had served its purpose, India abruptly

turned its back on the LTTE for a host of political reasons. It was an enraged LTTE suicide bomber who assassinated former Indian prime minister Rajiv Gandhi in 1989.)

It is important for governments and politicians to understand that manipulating these huge, raging human feelings for their own narrow purposes may yield instant results, but eventually and inexorably, they have disastrous consequences. Igniting and exploiting religious sentiments for reasons of political expediency is the most dangerous legacy that governments or politicians can bequeath to any people -- including their own.

People who live in societies ravaged by religious or communal bigotry know that every religious text -- from the Bible to the Bhagwad Gita -- can be mined and misinterpreted to justify anything, from nuclear war to genocide to corporate globalisation.

This is not to suggest that the terrorists who perpetrated the outrage on September 11 should not be hunted down and brought to book. They must be.

But is war the best way to track them down? Will burning the haystack find you the needle? Or will it escalate the anger and make the world a living hell for all of us?

At the end of the day, how many people can you spy on, how many bank accounts can you freeze, how many conversations can you eavesdrop on, how many emails can you intercept, how many letters can you open, how many phones can you tap? Even before September 11, the CIA had accumulated more information than is humanly possible to process. (Sometimes, too much data can actually hinder intelligence -- small wonder the US spy satellites completely missed the preparation that preceded India's nuclear tests in 1998.)

The sheer scale of the surveillance will become a logistical, ethical and civil rights nightmare. It will drive everybody clean crazy. And freedom -- that precious, precious thing -- will be the first casualty. It's already hurt and haemorrhaging dangerously.

Governments across the world are cynically using the prevailing paranoia to promote their own interests. All kinds of unpredictable political forces are being unleashed. In India, for instance, members of the All India People's Resistance Forum, who were distributing anti-war and anti-US pamphlets in Delhi, have been jailed. Even the printer of the leaflets was arrested.

The rightwing government (while it shelters Hindu extremists groups such as the Vishwa Hindu Parishad and the Bajrang Dal) has banned the Islamic Students Movement of India and is trying to revive an anti-terrorist Act which had been withdrawn after the Human Rights Commission reported that it had been more abused than used. Millions of Indian citizens are Muslim. Can anything be gained by alienating them?

Every day that the war goes on, raging emotions are being let loose into the world. The international press has little or no independent access to the war zone. In any case, mainstream media, particularly in the US, have more or less rolled over, allowing themselves to be tickled on the stomach with press handouts from military men and government officials. Afghan radio stations have been destroyed by the bombing. The Taliban has always been deeply suspicious of the press. In the propaganda war, there is no accurate estimate of

how many people have been killed, or how much destruction has taken place. In the absence of reliable information, wild rumours spread.

Put your ear to the ground in this part of the world, and you can hear the thrumming, the deadly drumbeat of burgeoning anger. Please. Please, stop the war now. Enough people have died. The smart missiles are just not smart enough. They're blowing up whole warehouses of suppressed fury.

President George Bush recently boasted, "When I take action, I'm not going to fire a \$2m missile at a \$10 empty tent and hit a camel in the butt. It's going to be decisive." President Bush should know that there are no targets in Afghanistan that will give his missiles their money's worth.

Perhaps, if only to balance his books, he should develop some cheaper missiles to use on cheaper targets and cheaper lives in the poor countries of the world. But then, that may not make good business sense to the coalition's weapons manufacturers. It wouldn't make any sense at all, for example, to the Carlyle Group -- described by the Industry Standard as "the world's largest private equity firm", with \$13bn under management.

Carlyle invests in the defence sector and makes its money from military conflicts and weapons spending.

Carlyle is run by men with impeccable credentials. Former US defence secretary Frank Carlucci is Carlyle's chairman and managing director (he was a college roommate of Donald Rumsfeld's). Carlyle's other partners include former US secretary of state James A Baker III, George Soros and Fred Malek (George Bush Sr's campaign manager). An American paper -- the *Baltimore Chronicle and Sentinel* -- says that former president George Bush Sr is reported to be seeking investments for the Carlyle Group from Asian markets.

He is reportedly paid not inconsiderable sums of money to make "presentations" to potential government-clients.

Ho hum. As the tired saying goes, it's all in the family.

Then there's that other branch of traditional family business -- oil. Remember, President George Bush (Jr) and Vice-President Dick Cheney both made their fortunes working in the US oil industry.

Turkmenistan, which borders the north-west of Afghanistan, holds the world's third largest gas reserves and an estimated six billion barrels of oil reserves. Enough, experts say, to meet American energy needs for the next 30 years (or a developing country's energy requirements for a couple of centuries.) America has always viewed oil as a security consideration, and protected it by any means it deems necessary. Few of us doubt that its military presence in the Gulf has little to do with its concern for human rights and almost entirely to do with its strategic interest in oil.

Oil and gas from the Caspian region currently moves northward to European markets. Geographically and politically, Iran and Russia are major impediments to American

interests. In 1998, Dick Cheney -- then CEO of Halliburton, a major player in the oil industry -- said, "I can't think of a time when we've had a region emerge as suddenly to become as strategically significant as the Caspian. It's almost as if the opportunities have arisen overnight." True enough.

For some years now, an American oil giant called Unocal has been negotiating with the Taliban for permission to construct an oil pipeline through Afghanistan to Pakistan and out to the Arabian sea. From here, Unocal hopes to access the lucrative "emerging markets" in south and south-east Asia. In December 1997, a delegation of Taliban mullahs travelled to America and even met US state department officials and Unocal executives in Houston. At that time the Taliban's taste for public executions and its treatment of Afghan women were not made out to be the crimes against humanity that they are now.

Over the next six months, pressure from hundreds of outraged American feminist groups was brought to bear on the Clinton administration.

Fortunately, they managed to scuttle the deal. And now comes the US oil industry's big chance.

In America, the arms industry, the oil industry, the major media networks, and, indeed, US foreign policy, are all controlled by the same business combines. Therefore, it would be foolish to expect this talk of guns and oil and defence deals to get any real play in the media. In any case, to a distraught, confused people whose pride has just been wounded, whose loved ones have been tragically killed, whose anger is fresh and sharp, the inanities about the "clash of civilisations" and the "good v evil" discourse home in unerringly. They are cynically doled out by government spokesmen like a daily dose of vitamins or anti-depressants. Regular medication ensures that mainland America continues to remain the enigma it has always been -- a curiously insular people, administered by a pathologically meddling, promiscuous government.

And what of the rest of us, the numb recipients of this onslaught of what we know to be preposterous propaganda? The daily consumers of the lies and brutality smeared in peanut butter and strawberry jam being air-dropped into our minds just like those yellow food packets. Shall we look away and eat because we're hungry, or shall we stare unblinking at the grim theatre unfolding in Afghanistan until we retch collectively and say, in one voice, that we have had enough?

As the first year of the new millennium rushes to a close, one wonders -- have we forfeited our right to dream? Will we ever be able to re-imagine beauty?

Will it be possible ever again to watch the slow, amazed blink of a newborn gecko in the sun, or whisper back to the marmot who has just whispered in your ear -- without thinking of the World Trade Centre and Afghanistan?

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