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Afghanistan

Voices against war

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The war in Afghanistan has produced the most impassioned outburst of anti-war writing in the English-speaking countries since Vietnam. Unfortunately, while this finds an echo in the mainstream press in Britain, it is virtually excluded from the press in the United States, gripped as it is by an unparalleled reactionary mobilisation.

A first sign that the pro-war faction would not have it all its own way came just two days after the attacks in New York and Washington, in a courageous article by the London Guardian's opinion and comment editor Seamus Milne. Milne declared that "Americans just don't get it". Is it too much to hope, he asked, that people might make a connection between the attacks and what America has done to other people around the world? He added:

"It is this record of unabashed national egotism and arrogance that drives anti-Americanism among swaths of the world's population, for whom there is little democracy in the current distribution of global wealth and power. If it turns out that Tuesday's attacks were the work of Osama bin Laden's supporters, the sense that the Americans are once again reaping a dragons' teeth harvest they themselves sowed will be overwhelming... Already, the Bush administration is assembling an international coalition for an Israeli-style war against terrorism, as if such counter-productive acts of outrage had an existence separate from the social conditions out of which they arise. But for every 'terror network' that is rooted out, another will emerge - until the injustices and inequalities that produce them are addressed."

Milne's article produced 2000 emails to him and a storm of letters to his paper. He has returned to the attack several times since, especially to refute the call for a new 'benevolent' imperialism, implicit in Tony Blair's Labour conference speech, explicit in an article published by Oxford history professor Niall Ferguson.

Ferguson, with amazing candour wrote: "Political globalisation is a fancy word for imperialism, imposing your values and institutions on others. However you may dress it up, whatever rhetoric you may use, it is not very different in practice to what Great Britain did in the 18th and 19th centuries. We already have precedents: the new imperialism is already in operation in Bosnia, Kosovo, East Timor. Essentially it is the imperialism that evolved in the 1920s when League of Nations mandates were the polite word for what were the post-Versailles treaty colonies." (Guardian, October 30). Ferguson called for the US to move from an informal to a formal empire. Milne retorted that we should never forget the bloodshed and exploitation which were at the heart of the 'old' - especially British - imperialism, and are at the heart of the new one too.

Game over

Naomi Klein, a leading figure in the global justice movement, had an article syndicated in North America just three days after September 11 declaring "Game Over". What she meant by that was; "It's true: war is most emphatically not a game. And perhaps after Tuesday, it will never again be treated as one. Perhaps September 11, 2001 will mark the end of the shameful era of the video game war.... Since the Gulf War, American foreign policy has been based on a single brutal fiction: that the U.S. military can intervene in conflicts around the world - in Iraq, Kosovo, Israel -without suffering any U.S. casualties. This is a country that has come to believe in the ultimate oxymoron: a safe war.

"... The United States has become expert in the art of sanitizing and dehumanising acts of war committed elsewhere.

Domestically, war is no longer a national obsession, it's a business that is now largely out-sourced to experts. This is one of the country's many paradoxes: though the engine of globalisation around the world, the nation has never been more inward looking, less worldly...

"The era of the video game war in which the U.S. is always at the controls has produced a blinding rage in many parts of the world, a rage at the persistent asymmetry of suffering. This is the context in which twisted revenge seekers make no other demand than that American citizens share their pain.... A blinking message is up on our collective video game console: Game Over."

Since writing this Klein has produced another widely syndicated piece arguing that the global justice movement must redefine its strategy after September 11, and concentrate less on attacking the symbols of global capitalism - the big corporations and their designer labels - and concentrate more on the underlying issues. It has to be said that the exact meaning of Klein's article, and the alternative strategy she is proposing, is difficult to work out.

Testimony

In the UK Guardian a series of anti-war articles have been published by, among others, John Pilger, Paul Foot and global justice campaigner George Monbiot. The publishing of these articles is testimony to the fact that the Guardian - broadly sympathetic to the Blair government - wants to cater for that large part of its readership which is to its left.

Perhaps the most enraged critic of the US/British war has been Robert Fisk, the author of a wonderful book on Lebanon (*Pity the Nation*, Oxford University Press 1991), who writes for the London Independent on the Middle East. On November 8 Fisk published a stinging attack not just on the war, but on the lies peddled by the mainstream press: "How much longer must we go on enduring these lies?" he asked. He went on, "What, after all are we supposed to make of the so-called 'liberal' American television journalist Geraldo Rivera who is just moving to Fox TV, a Murdoch channel. 'I'm feeling more patriotic than at any time in my life, itching for justice, or maybe just revenge'." Fisk described these words as "truly chilling". He continued "Infinitely more shameful - and unethical - were the disgraceful words of Walter Isaacson, the chairman of CNN, to his staff. Showing the misery of Afghanistan ran the risk of promoting enemy propaganda he said. 'It seems perverse to focus too much on the casualties or hardship in Afghanistan...we must talk about how the Taliban are using civilian shields and how the Taliban have harboured the terrorists...'. Mr Isaacson was an unimaginative boss of Time magazine but these latest words will do more to damage the supposed impartiality of CNN than anything on air in recent years."

Bitter exchange

Much of the best anti-war writing in the US has been in *The Nation*, the foremost US liberal-radical magazine, which could be broadly said to reflect the left in and around the Democratic Party, but includes articles from its left. *The Nation* has hosted a bitter exchange between Noam Chomsky and British-born journalist Christopher Hitchens. Hitchens, based in New York, enjoys a reputation as an independent radical writer who made it a personal crusade to hound the Clinton administration and debunk its 'progressive' pretensions. But war always sorts people out, as it did during the Gulf war when there were spectacular defections from the left, notably Fred Halliday and a pro-war position from the Marxist writer Norman Geras.

Hitchens has furiously attacked the US and international left for being soft on 'Islamic fascism'. Hitchens seems to be headed in the same direction as his brother Peter, once a particularly hackish member of the British Socialist

Workers Party, now one of the most reactionary journalists in Britain. Christopher Hitchens has now revealed - surprise, surprise - that "he is no longer a socialist".

The subsequent correspondence in *The Nation* however showed that American radicals and, especially, liberals were split over the debate. About 50% supported Hitchens, revealing the effect of the propaganda barrage in the US, particularly now that the immensely powerful US media has at last 'discovered' the appalling policies of the Taliban towards women and human rights in general.

Paranoid Muslims

On much the same tack as Hitchens, Salman Rushdie weighed in to declare that "paranoid Muslims are the problem" (*Guardian*, November 3). Rushdie's call to counterpose secularist-humanist principles to Islamic fundamentalism is of course quite correct. But exactly how the bombing of Afghanistan, and the installation of the Islamic Northern Alliance as the new government, is supposed to achieve this he did not explain.

Such was the balance of comment in Britain that on October 29 the Blair government accused newspapers of 'wobbling' in their support for the war. This came on the very day that John Pilger was given the front page and two inside pages of the *Daily Mirror* (circulation 3.7 million) to declare "This war is a fraud". Opinion polls showed at the same time that a majority favoured a pause in the bombing so that humanitarian aid to the starving could get through. Pilger wrote: "The irresponsibility of this conflict is breathtaking. It is not about terrorism. As Blair and Bush stoop to the level of the criminal outrage in New York, British soldiers are little more than mercenaries for the hidden agenda of US imperial ambitions...In the days of gunboats, our imperial leaders liked to cover their violence with the 'morality' of their actions. Blair is no different. Like them, his selective moralising covers the most basic truth. Nothing justified the killing of innocent people on September 11, and nothing justifies the killing of innocent people anywhere else."

No one has been more eloquent against the war as George Monbiot, author of the acclaimed book on privatisation in Britain *Captive State*. In his first piece after the attacks on the US he warned that the right would try to seize the offensive: "If Osama bin Laden did not exist, it would be necessary to invent him. For the past four years, his name has been invoked whenever a US president has ought to increase the defence budget or wriggle out of arms control treaties. He has been used to justify even President Bush's missile defence programme, though neither he nor his associates are known to possess anything approaching ballistic missile technology. Now he has become the personification of evil required to launch a crusade for good; the face behind the faceless terror... "Now Tuesday's horror is being used by corporations to establish the preconditions for an even deadlier brand of terror... radical opposition has seldom been more necessary. But it has seldom been more vulnerable. The right is seizing the political space which has opened up where the twin towers of the World Trade Centre once stood... The radical left is able to state categorically that Tuesday's terrorism was a dreadful act, irrespective of provenance. But the right can't bring itself to make the same statement about Israel's new invasions of Palestine, or the sanctions in Iraq, or the US-backed terror in East Timor, or the carpet bombing of Cambodia. Its critical faculties have long been suspended and now, it demands, we must suspend ours too."

Eloquent

One of the single most eloquent pieces of anti-war writing has been by Arundhati Roy, a piece widely syndicated. Roy declared: "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 World War II: 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. "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 civilization - our art, our music, our literature - lies beyond these two fundamentalist, ideological poles."

Finally it will surprise few readers that Edward Saïd has contributed some of the most eloquent denunciations of the war, and war hysteria. In the London Observer he wrote: "What is most depressing, however, is how little time is spent trying to understand America's role in the world, and its direct involvement in the complex reality beyond the two coasts that have for so long kept the rest of the world extremely distant and virtually out of the average American's mind.

"You'd think that 'America' was a sleeping giant rather than a superpower almost constantly at war, or in some sort of conflict, all over the Islamic domains. Osama bin Laden's name and face have become so numbingly familiar to Americans as in effect to obliterate any history he and his shadowy followers might have had before they became stock symbols of everything loathsome and hateful to the collective imagination. Inevitably, then, collective passions are being funnelled into a drive for war that uncannily resembles Captain Ahab in pursuit of Moby Dick, rather than what is going on, an imperial power injured at home for the first time, pursuing its interests systematically in what has become a suddenly reconfigured geography of conflict, without clear borders, or visible actors. "Manichean symbols and apocalyptic scenarios are bandied about with future consequences and rhetorical restraint thrown to the winds."