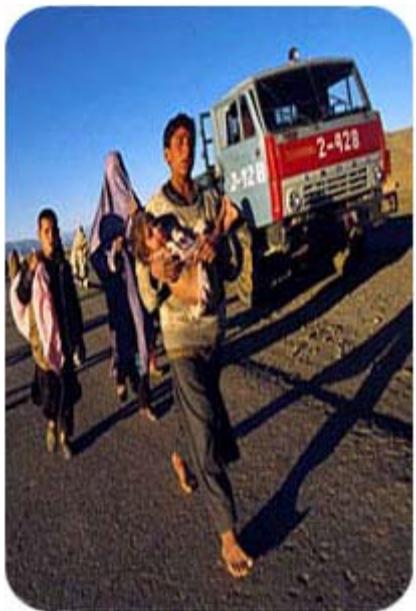


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Bomb, and We Loose



Whatever George W. Bush may say, this is not the first war of the 21st Century. To describe the awesome destruction in New York and Washington as 'war' is to misunderstand both what happened, and how we must confront it.

Wars take place over land or resources, over who should govern and on what terms. There are formal parties, between whom a peace, a surrender or a ceasefire can be brokered.

What happened in America was a crime - of enormous international proportion - that has to be pursued and prosecuted at an international level. But the terrorism we are pursuing is rooted in ideology, poverty, hatred and despair. None of these can be bombed into submission.

Retaliatory bombing would cede victory to the terrorist. It would confirm all prejudices about the West and turn out to be the best recruiting sergeant the terrorists could wish for. If Afghanistan is to be the (likely) target, bombing will kill civilians in far greater numbers than armed militants. And for every terrorist killed we would have created 10 more to take their place. If Osama bin Laden is the prime suspect, and his Al Qaida 'network' reaches into 34 countries, you have to ask how many bombing raids would be entertained before today's coalition of compassion fell apart in disagreement and disarray. The real challenge of our time is to think about combating terrorism in fundamentally different terms.

If there is to be a first strike against terrorists it must come from the world banking and financial institutions and not from NATO. The funding for terrorist organisations comes from crime, from drugs and from donations, but all the money is laundered through the banking system and allowed to be parked until needed. We should give the

World Bank a remit to structurally adjust these accounts; reducing their balances to zero and redirecting monies towards into the areas of poverty, hopelessness and despair where terrorists do their recruiting.

Perhaps the first of these areas has to be Afghanistan itself. As the UN and Aid agencies withdraw their staff in expectation of a military strike they left a grim warning for us all. Afghanistan is in abject poverty and at the end of a three-year drought. If the grain that Aid agencies were distributing does not reach mountain villages before the snows arrive up to 5 million people freeze or starve to death. It will be described as the West's 'first strike' and an exposure of the hollowness of our humanitarian credentials. Britain and America must lead the way in ensuring that the grain gets through and the bombs don't.

This should be the first step in a renewed diplomatic initiative in the Middle East. It has to be an initiative that addresses Arab grievances as well as civil poverty and be under the aegis of the United Nations rather than NATO. Restoring the integrity of the UN is probably a precondition of creating social partners in the region who will, in turn, be the best advocates of more inclusive alternatives to fundamentalism and terrorism.

Finally, Britain should make a commitment to pursue terrorists through judicial rather than extra-judicial means. If the International Criminal Court is fit for the Lockerbie trial and for Milosovich it must be the channel through which we pursue terrorists. You cannot stand for the rule of law and a respect for the free and open society at the same time as practicing rough and arbitrary reprisals.

This will be a difficult period for the US administration, for everything I've advocated is at odds with its approach to foreign policy. It will, painfully, have to address the fundamentals of what generates such hostility towards it, but it need not do so alone.

Britain is right to stand 'shoulder to shoulder' with America in this moment of unbelievable grief. But the true friend also finds the courage to warn you of the dangers of turning a specific tragedy into an even wider disaster. This is the compassionate conversation that has to take place between Blair and Bush.

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