

THE UNITED STATES OF FEAR



Parliament has grown tired of the war on Iraq . Downing St is desperate to move on elsewhere. America lurches from one panic to another at the mere mention of a possible terrorist attack. When the 'evidence' used to throw the USA into a state of high alert is already 4 years old, you know there is an election coming.

If Bush sees the presidential contest slipping away from him such alerts will become commonplace. If the only thing that stands in between Dubya and defeat is a United States of Panic, then panic will replace Chad as the election trump card.

Non-Americans should resist the temptation of seeing this as a hugely entertaining piece of Vaudeville. Throw the world's only remaining superpower into a state of paranoid insecurity and it might just give a fresh mandate to Bush's gung-ho militarism. The prospect, then, of re-

establishing any meaningful framework of international law becomes zero.

Ironically the only person likely to share Bush's interest in playing the terrorist card is bin Laden. Al Qaida has no interest in a Kerry administration that would go back to diplomacy, dialogue and coalitions built (and run) within the full scrutiny of international law. It is in al Qaida's interest to get a second term for the Project for a New American Century.

Adventurism in Iran , a pre-emptive war in Korea , a few forays around South-east Asia in pursuit of al Qaida activists, would all do a power of good for terrorist recruitment in the muslim world.

Of course there will be problems for Bush in this. There has to be some finite limit to the number of logistics, procurement and provision contracts that Halliburton can walk away with. At some stage they may decide to cut out the middle man, take the budget and just run the country themselves. But for now Bush and bin Laden look like the Republican ticket.

'Buy me, get me free' is unlikely to figure on an election poster for George and Osama, but the ideological underpinnings become harder to separate.

The terrorist and the rogue state lay claim to a 'higher calling', rather than international law, in taking whatever action they choose. Arbitrary or extra-judicial killings are undertaken in the name of devotion or patriotism. Hostages are taken and tortured in Iraq , Abu Ghraib or Guantanamo Bay , and neither side of the conflict presumes that the Geneva Conventions or the Laws of War apply to them. The combatants become inseparable parts of a cancer that consumes the open, civil society.

It is into this confusion that the international anti-war movement has to step. In Britain and America there is a growing recognition that the public were bounced into a war on Iraq because Bush wanted one and Blair was his buddy. The alliance of 'Old Europe' and UNSCOM was sidelined and derided in its efforts to say that a compelling case for war remained unproven.

The two Inquiries in Britain revealed that, no matter how many caveats were removed from the intelligence reports on Iraq and weapons of mass destruction, the only people to be punished were the journalists who said it was all a stitch-up...and none of us were allowed to ask whether the war was legal. This is why a group of British MPs have sought to refer the legality of the war back to the United Nations. We have written to Kofi Annan, and to a range of national leaders, asking that the legality of the Iraq war be referred to the International Court of Justice for an 'advisory opinion'. This was done over Israel 's building of the security wall inside Palestinian territory. There is no reason why the same cannot be done over the legal standing of the Iraq War.

For many nations it raises equally urgent (and sensitive) issues about the legal status of pre-emptive wars. It has to be a matter that the United Nations addresses and resolves as a whole. To do so is neither a soft-option nor unpatriotic. It is simply asserting the right to be legal in the eyes of the international community rather than in the claims of the combatants.

We also need to step back and look at the Iraq war from a different angle. Throughout the 10 years of sanctions, there never was a peace agenda. The West agreed to construct a Middle East Zone that was free from weapons of mass destruction. Someone obviously forgot to mention this to Israel .

We promised too that we would work on the Martin Luther King dictum that "peace is not the absence of war but the presence of justice." We just forgot to include the Palestinians.

In fact, in the areas nominally freed from war or tyranny, the West has been far more obsessed with imposing a free-trade agenda than a justice one. In each of the conflict zones, whether the divisions had been around race, sect, religion or national self-determination, what the occupying powers insisted upon first was privatisation.

Post-war landscapes look like fiefdoms of patronage within vast fields of inequality and poverty. Taxpayers in Britain , Europe and the USA are being asked to cough up billion dollar budgets to militarise rather than repair these unequal landscapes, yet few believe we are any safer for it.

The real act of courage today would be for leaders to who would redirect wealth from war-making to peace-building. Just don't expect it to come from the overflowing coffers of the Bush election campaign. (the letters to Kof Annan and other national leaders can be found on the Labour Against the War website...)