

Whose war?

George Bush called it an act of war. He has rarely been good with words, but this time he was quite right. And an astonishingly brutal and vicious act of war it was. Nevertheless, the stunning violence of the attacks of 11 September does not by itself signal the beginning of a new conflict. Analogies with Pearl Harbor are misleading not just because this time round the enemy of the United States has no obvious physical location, but because these strikes most certainly did not come 'out of the blue'.

The first task of any genuinely *political* analysis in this as in any war is to identify the fundamental conflict in question. By any standard, the circumstances of this apparently new conflict are exceptionally complex. The legacy of nineteenth-century orientalism and colonialism has played its part, as have the consequences of Western cold war compromises with warlords like Saddam Hussein and Osama bin Laden, US identification with the dictatorial Shah of Iran, the West's strategic obsession with the oil trade, its incessant bombings of Iraq, its provocative support for corrupt and unpopular regimes in Egypt and Saudi Arabia, and so on. So too has the ruthless autocracy of the present rulers of Afghanistan, Libya and Iraq.

But it is above all the war in Palestine that lies at the core of the present crisis. More than anything else, it is Israel's continuing occupation of Palestine that unites so much of what we like to call the 'Arab' world in common resentment of the United States and its allies. More than anything else, it is the repeated failure of the equally misnamed 'international community' to achieve a just settlement to the Palestinian conflict that has encouraged so many Arab militants to turn their back on this community once and for all, in favour of the seeming certainties of orthodox Islam. The broad shift in the Palestinian resistance from the mainly secular orientation of the PLO to the uncompromising fundamentalisms of Hamas and Islamic Jihad is itself a striking anticipation of what is fast becoming the general trend.

The vast majority of Western politicians have never come close to grasping the crucial importance of this issue across the whole of the Middle East. For most members of the region, Palestine remains an open wound in the heart of its political existence. The plight of the Palestinians is far and away the single most telling indication of both the comparative powerlessness of the Arab world and the apparent irrelevance of the United Nations when it dares to recommend action that goes against the immediate interests of the United States. There can be no chance of peace in what is already well on the way to becoming a newly global war until we have first achieved a just resolution to this quite specific conflict. The legal basis for such a resolution is already enshrined in long-standing UN resolutions which call upon Israel to recognize the right of Palestinian refugees to return to their lands, to end its occupation of the territories it invaded in 1967, and to dismantle the settlements it has since established, and continues to establish, in those territories. It is the US veto in the Security Council, coupled with Israel's indifference to international law, that has blocked every such attempt to achieve peace. A determination to impose these resolutions now would no more be a concession to terrorism than is the US determination to resist them proof of its commitment to democracy.

The effort to evade this well-defined political issue in favour of utterly nebulous moral categories (if not clichéd bigotries pure and simple) is itself part and parcel of the US-

Israeli strategy. Nothing could be more disastrous for relations between the Western and the Arab worlds than acceptance of Sharon's own ruinous version of a 'war against terrorism' as the model for a global version of this war. At this particular moment, nothing could be more disastrous for the world as a whole than a generalization of the equation that successive Israeli governments have sought for so long to establish: the equation of 'Palestinian' and 'terrorist'.

Terrifying and unjustifiable it most certainly was, but the attack on New York did not deprive the inhabitants of that city as a whole of their democratic right to self-determination, and at bottom it is indeed such self-determination which is at stake here. The point is not that the Palestinians themselves were in any way involved with these attacks, or (as virtually all Muslims are the first to insist) that the justice of their cause could ever justify the choice of such means to pursue it. The point is that this easy moral unanimity should not block us from grasping the decisive (and thus divisive) *political* question at issue. The struggle for a meaningful Palestinian independence and, by extension, the genuine empowerment of an *actually* international community is, and will remain, the struggle that most intensely polarizes and mobilizes political action in the Middle East. Any analysis of the present crisis that sets out from a different point of departure can only add to the rapidly accumulating profusion of mystification and misinformation. The fact that the majority of American politicians don't recognize the war between Israel and Palestine as a 'real' war at all is itself one of the most striking symptoms of just how blindly their country has accepted the Israelis' own understanding of terrorism against democracy.

What really happened on 11 September was not the opening shot in a new round of hostilities but an unprecedented interruption in the prevailing tendency of a war that is already much older than most of its combatants. For the first time since 1948, the fighters on what has consistently been the losing side, the side that has always been outnumbered, outgunned and outmanoeuvred, have finally managed to deliver a truly crushing blow against their opponents. Again, it is a blow that deserves the most unequivocal condemnation on both political and moral grounds: it has been duly condemned the world over. It should go without saying that a just end most emphatically does not imply the justice of all means to that end. Even as we condemn the attacks, however, we must try to understand where they came from.

Were we also to remember just how brutal even less desperately vulnerable peoples than the Palestinians or their supporters can be in times of war then perhaps we would pause before condemning the attacks on New York as the simple incarnation of evil and cowardice. As acts of war go, the bombings of Dresden and Hiroshima, undertaken against civilian targets at a time when their perpetrators were confident of certain victory, do not compare well with this latest outrage.

Our leaders prefer not to remember such things. But when Bush and Blair justify their impending decisions (I write in late September) in terms of a clash between virtue and terror or good and evil they not only adopt the very logic of their 'fanatical' opponents. They also disclaim any responsibility for the aggression that has pushed these opponents into the training camps of those who are all too willing to adopt the catastrophic principle of 'victory by any available means'. By doing so they may further push us further into what might truly become the war to end all wars. If it continues as its most recent phase has begun, then this is one war that neither side will ever be able to win.

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