

'TIMELY, PROVOCATIVE AND THOUGHT-PROVOKING'

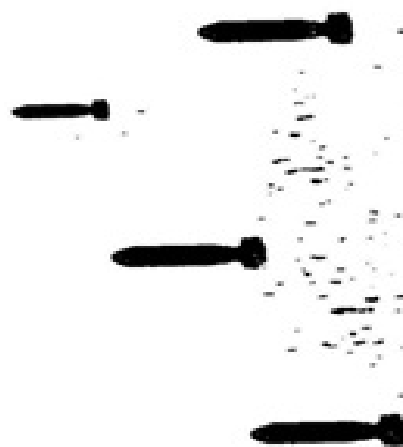
DAVID MEPHAM, *INDEPENDENT*

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**THE LIBERAL
DEFENCE OF**



MURDER



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To Marie. With all my love.

We must study how colonization works to decivilize the colonizer, to brutalize him in the true sense of the word, to degrade him, to awaken him to buried instincts, to covetousness, violence, race hatred, and moral relativism; and we must show that each time a head is cut off or an eye put out in Vietnam and in France they accept the fact, each time a Madagascan is tortured and in France they accept the fact, civilization acquires another dead weight, universal regression takes place, a gangrene sets in, a centre of infection begins to spread; and that at the end of all these treaties that have been violated, all these lies that have been propagated, all these patriots who have been tortured, at the end of all the racial pride that has been encouraged, all the boastfulness that has been displayed, poison has been distilled into the veins of Europe and, slowly but surely, the continent proceeds toward savagery.

– Aimé Césaire

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PROLOGUE: SEPTEMBER 11 AND *KRIEGSIDEOLOGIE*

Watching the towers fall in New York, with civilians incinerated on the planes and in the buildings, I felt something that I couldn't analyze at first and didn't fully grasp ... I am only slightly embarrassed to tell you that this was a feeling of exhilaration.

– *Christopher Hitchens*¹

This book seeks to explain a current of irrational thought that supports military occupation and murder in the name of virtue and decency. It will be recalled that those predictions of cakewalk towards a jubilant, free Iraq were not solely the product of the Bush administration. What has sometimes been called the 'pro-war Left' – in fact, a loose coalition of liberals, former radicals and ex-socialists – has shocked and awed former colleagues and comrades, with bold and strident claims about the great works that American military power could achieve in Iraq, and elsewhere. It has been of great service to the Bush administration that, in addition to the shock troops of Christian fundamentalists, Israel sympathizers and neoconservatives, it could boast the support of many prominent liberal intellectuals, some of whom still claim an affiliation to the Left. (A number of them even claim to represent the authentic Left against the 'pseudo-Left'.²) Some of these commentators are close to Washington or to figures who have been prominent in the Bush administration. Some have helped formulate policy, as when Kanan Makiya was called upon to help devise plans for the 'New Iraq'. And they have all performed a role of advocacy for the Bush administration and its supportive governments.

The reasons why their support should have been so useful are explored in more detail in the Conclusion. To put it briefly, they have helped to screen the war-makers from articulate criticism. They have taken threat-exaggeration out of White House press briefings (where it would be regarded cynically), and the moral exaltation of American military power out of the realm of the Pentagon (where it might result in laughter). This coalition is historically familiar, from unique, in many ways resembling the Cold War intelligentsia who pioneered 'Cold War socialism'. And it plays a traditional role in castigating dissent among the intelligentsia, which is why the arguments of the pro-war Left reach wider audiences through journals, newspaper columns, television slots and so on. As well as acting as conduits for the distribution of policy justifications, the liberal pro-war intellectuals help frame arguments for policy-makers in terms more palatable to potentially hostile audiences. The arguments themselves are antiquated and have not improved with age. They are symptomatic of the hegemony of what Jean Bricmont calls the 'interventionist ethic'.³ If it were not for certain widely held assumptions about the remedial power of conquest, originating in the age of European empires, the arguments would make no sense to anyone. In the chapters that follow I will excavate the origins of these liberal apologies for empire, and track their development over the course of three centuries, on both sides of the Atlantic.

Disaster triumphant

Many of the current batch of liberal advocates of empire have a history on the Left, often abandoned at some point after the collapse of the Soviet Union. For all but recalcitrant Stalinists, the human prospect following the collapse of the Russian superpower in 1989 was supposed to be a promising one. Fukuyama's sighting of an 'end' to history was notwithstanding his own dyspepsia, touted as a prospectus for universal accord. The one true model for society had been revealed by no less an authority than History, and that model enjoined free-market capitalism and liberal democracy. As Gregory Elliott observes, 'the locomotive of history had terminated not at the Finland Station, but at a hypermarket. A road leads to Disneyland?' There were some outstanding problems, of course: in place of Stalinist dictatorships emerged new particularisms of a religious or national sort that, while hardly systemic threats, clearly posed problems for the 'New World Order' that Bush the Elder had vaunted. It was in the course of engagement with these problems that former left-wingers decided at various points to pitch in their lot with what the French Foreign Minister Hubert Védrine had referred to as the American 'hyperpower'.⁴ The occasion for apostasy varied, but key moments were Saddam Hussein's invasion of Kuwait, the collapse of the former Yugoslavia, and the attacks on the World Trade Center. In the absence of states purportedly bearing the historical mission of the proletariat, many former Marxists, including anti-Stalinists, either made peace with centrist liberalism or morphed into the neoconservative opposites. American military power was now an ally of progress rather than its enemy.

As the profile of political Islam has risen under the impress of 'al-Qaeda', a modish concern of pro-war intellectuals has been the chastisement of religion, and especially Islam, as a source of reaction and irrationalism. Similarly, the gurus of spiritualism, New Age mysticism, Western Buddhism and 'postmodernism' have been berated as agents of the Counter-Enlightenment. Predictably, anti-imperialism has been incriminated by association with the enemies of progress.⁵ For figures such as Christopher Hitchens, the 'war on terror' is an urgent contest between the forces of secular humanism and Enlightenment, and those of medieval terror. To oppose it is to give succour to an implacable enemy. Sadly, as Adorno and Horkheimer observed at an incomparably graver moment, Enlightenment of this kind 'radiates disaster triumphant'. Nowhere has the brochure for humanist imperialism less resembled the practice than at the frontiers of the 'war on terror', whose bloody outcomes include violence of genocidal proportions in Iraq, and whose motifs include the resurrection of modes of torture abandoned by the enlightened despots of the eighteenth century, the mercenary armies of nineteenth-century imperialism, the ethnic cleansing and aerial bombardment of the twentieth century, and an unprecedented complex of global gulags. 'Progress' of this kind belongs in the annals of discredited ideas, along with Manifest Destiny, the civilizing mission, *Lebensraum* and the 'master race'. It happens to share its origins with all of these.

The strange death of irony

We were to hear a great deal after 9/11 that the response of the antiwar Left was 'delinquent', 'self-hating' and lacking in sympathy for its victims. The correlate to the

supposed indifference was the claim by Jerry Falwell and Pat Robertson that the attacks were punishment from God for having allowed homosexual intercourse and abortions to take place. According to Paul Berman, the 'left-wing Falwells' called for the US government to stop 'trying to preserve the Jewish state' and allow 'Saddam Hussein to resume his massacres (thus eliminating America's other putative sins)'.⁶ Rejecting the thesis of divine violence thus somehow, implies the innocence of the American state. At the least, this petulant outburst conflates a critique of the American state's foreign policy with an assault on cosmopolitan liberalism. The irony is that Berman could have found no surer supporters of Israel or American policy towards Saddam than Falwell or Robertson, while they are as robustly critical of the Left for undermining America as he is.

As the historian of ideas Corey Robin points out, Robertson and Falwell were not the only ones to think that 9/11 terminated a period of decadence. Mainstream pundits, such as David Brooks of the *New York Times*, made similar noises without the religious cues. Perhaps one should have seen it coming. In 2000, Robin had interviewed a pair of disillusioned neoconservatives, irate at what they saw as Clinton's paucity of global ambition. Irving Kristol had reviled the 'business culture' of conservatism, lamenting the lack of an 'imperial role'. For William F. Buckley, Jr, the emphasis on the market had become 'rather boring ... like sex'. The sighs of relief after 9/11 were palpable. 'What I dread now,' George Packer wrote, 'is a return to the normality we're all supposed to seek.' 'This week's nightmare, it's now clear, has awakened us from a frivolous if not decadent decade-long dream', added Frank Rich.⁷ For William Kristol and Robert Kagan, neoconservatives affiliated to the Project for the New American Century (PNAC), the 1990s had been 'a squandered decade', and there should be no 'return to normalcy'. Lewis Libby, then a Pentagon advisor and now a convicted perjurer, complained of a lax political culture that made Americans appear morally weak and slow to defend themselves. The attacks on Washington and New York offered an opportunity for the moral resuscitation of the American empire, providing the Bush administration with a rationale for an audacious and aggressive project. Or, as the National Security Advisor Condoleezza Rice claimed, they 'clarified' America's role.⁸

On the day that the attack on Afghanistan began, former *New York Times* editor James Atlas told the paper's readers that 'our great American empire seems bound to crumble at some point' and that 'the end of Western civilization has become a possibility against which the need to fight terrorism is being framed, as Roosevelt and Churchill framed the need to fight Hitler'. The alarming ease with which 'Western civilization' is conflated with the American empire is matched only by the implication that nineteen hijackers from a small transnational network of *ihadis* represent a civilizational challenge, an existential threat comparable with the Third Reich. But this has been precisely the argument of neoconservatives and liberal interventionists: there is an 'extraordinary threat', hence the need for 'extraordinary responses'. Failure to recognize this bodes ill for 'civilization'.⁹

This civilizational motif occasionally shades into the 'chaos' motif, in which the structures of civilization are threatened by societal breakdown. These were prepared and argued over long before 11 September 2001, and two elite US thinkers in the field of international relations were decisive in the production of this ideology. One is Samuel Huntington, a Cold War intellectual who had justified authoritarian regimes in the Third World and American military aid to security apparatuses in those states, which he insisted was 'politically steril

(not so, as [Chapter 3](#) makes clear). Huntington maintained, in 'The Clash of Civilizations' published two years after the final collapse of the Soviet Union, that the source of future international conflict would be civilizational fault-lines. A civilization, Huntington maintains is a 'cultural entity': China is one such, while the Anglophone Caribbean is another. This unit is defined by 'language, culture, tradition and, most important, religion'. The power of 'the West' is driving a growth in 'civilization-consciousness', particularly given the eclipse of nationalism and socialism. This process is underpinned by growing economic regionalism. Conflict is thus defined in the new era by 'What are you?' rather than 'Which side are you on?'. Citing the Orientalist scholar Bernard Lewis, Huntington concludes that the most likely conflict is with Islam, enraged as it is by 'Judeo-Christian' expansion, and embroiled as it is in several bloody conflicts. 'Islam', says Huntington, 'has bloody borders'. Ideas such as 'individualism, liberalism, constitutionalism, human rights, equality, liberty, the rule of law, democracy, free markets, the separation of church and state' belong to 'the West' and have 'little resonance in Islamic, Confucian, Japanese, Hindu, Buddhist or Orthodox cultures'. Huntington finishes by adumbrating an emerging 'Confucian-Islamic Connection' characterized by the 'Weapons States' of China, North Korea and the Middle East. Huntington's thesis has been extremely influential, particularly in light of the growing profile of religion, and provides much of the intellectual backbone to Sam Harris's *The End of Faith*. Even critics such as Michael Ignatieff have, as I will discuss in [Chapter 4](#), fallen for a version of Huntington's idea.¹⁰

Robert Kaplan's much-derided 'The Coming Anarchy' is, on the face of it, a contesting thesis. Kaplan's argument, though mocked as 'the New Barbarism Thesis', was allegedly placed on the desk of every US ambassador overseas at the behest of Bill Clinton. Focusing on state failure, criminality and atomization as the chief forms in which anarchic conflict arise, Kaplan attributes these to resource scarcity and environmental degradation. In the new social landscape of Africa he depicts, 'hordes' of young men wait around for economic opportunities, licit or otherwise, constituting 'loose molecules in a very unstable social fluid, a fluid that was very clearly on the verge of igniting'. 'Disease, overpopulation, unprovoked crime, scarcity of resources, refugee migrations, the increasing erosion of nation-states', the sinister augury goes on, provide the basis for conflict, as in Sierra Leone, where a 'premodern formlessness governs the battlefield'. Dense slums appear as a result of 'overpopulation', and disease spreads, creating a virtual 'wall' around Africa that undermines its economic competitiveness. Elsewhere, Kaplan concedes that Africa's condition may owe a great deal to slavery and its partition by European powers; but the main cause of its Malthusian decadence is a deficit of 'social ingenuity' which is, he maintains, unevenly distributed among societies.¹¹

But Kaplan goes further: Fukuyama is right about the end of history, but only for the relatively privileged, highly urbanized groups of people living in sealed-off, gentrified societies. But with mass Arab migration everywhere else, and the rise of Islam as the alternative to nationalism, the shantytowns are turning Muslim, so that Israel will end up as a Jewish ethnic fortress amid a vast and volatile realm of Islam'. At any rate, 'in places where the Western Enlightenment has not penetrated and where there has always been mass poverty, people find liberation in violence'.¹² This was the situation that the purportedly negligent posture of the United States in the 1990s had seemingly allowed to stew, and which

would no longer be tolerated post-9/11.

Lean and mean patriotism was in, flabby moral relativism was out. After the attacks on Manhattan and Washington, wrote Judith Shulevitz in the *New York Times*, ‘tolerance for people with dangerous ideas seems frivolous compared with the need to stop them’. This new ‘sense of seriousness’, as she chose to call it, allowed her to understand the ‘urgent patriotism’ of Steven Spielberg’s ‘Band of Brothers’. The invocation of Americans in a collective struggle with fascism was not incidental: Spielberg’s focus on World War II, seen by many as a good ‘liberal’ war, had arguably been an effort to overcome the trauma of Vietnam and resuscitate liberal nationalism. Shulevitz continued: ‘Somewhere deep in my heart, I have always longed for a catastrophe like the present one’, as it would produce a ‘collective purpose’ comparable with World War II or the ‘Velvet Revolution’. It would sweep aside all triviality, such as ‘petty political squabbling’ and ‘enervating celebrity gossip’. An op-ed in the *Washington Post* mused that the hijackers ‘decided to attack the symbols of American empire, financial domination, military hegemony, strangely ugly buildings housing the people who rule this strangely ugly world despite our soft hearts.’ It was this softness, the failure to make this strangely ugly world beautiful, that had brought about such bloody consequences in Vietnam, Iran, Lebanon and Somalia.¹³

The neoconservative *Weekly Standard* carried an urgent appeal for a hardening of the American heart, urging policy-makers to ‘restore our awe’ and ‘majesty’ even if they had to ‘scorch southern Lebanon’. However much violent revenge was contemplated, the stentorian call for a new seriousness echoed broadly. ‘No longer will we fail to take things seriously’ pronounced Roger Rosenblatt of *Time* magazine. Graydon Carter, editor of *Vanity Fair* concurred: ‘I think it’s the end of the age of irony’.¹⁴ Within less than a month of irony’s departure, the United States Air Force was dropping food packages and cluster bombs on Afghanistan.

The hope that a nationhood retooled for war would restore collective purpose proved to be forlorn. The fixtures of American life, from celebrity gossip to school shootings, did not evaporate. By 2003, *Dissent* magazine complained that ‘a larger, collective self-re-evaluation did not take place in the wake of September 11, 2001’ – not as regards foreign policy, but rather the domestic culture that had formed during the ‘orgiastic’ preceding decade. An angry *New Yorker* article would later mourn the dissipation of ‘simple solidarity’ alongside the squandering of international goodwill by the Bush administration.¹⁵ Yet the sense that America would, and must, experience a national rebirth, was to become an indispensable early component of the ‘war on terror’ doctrine.

For if, as Lewis Libby explained, the problem was moral weakness, many now took great pains to enforce a censorious ‘moral clarity’. The previously disavowed bipartisanship of Congress and Senate was now ostentatious. At any rate Bush, like the Kaiser, no longer recognized political divisions. *Septemberlebnis* and *Burgfrieden* were accompanied by threats and repression. When Bush told the world, ‘You’re either with us, or against us’, he did not omit Americans from this injunction. The PATRIOT Act was rushed into law by politicians who had scarcely deigned to read its contents. More than 1,200 immigrants were immediately rounded up and detained without cause; antiwar activists were spied on¹⁶ and detained without justification, their activities disrupted by the FBI, and their messages received poorly, if at all, by a hostile press.

Most of the intellectual class lined up behind the attack on Afghanistan, and the neoconservatives who had suddenly become spokespeople for the aforementioned ‘moral clarity’ (among them former crooks from the Reagan administration, as well as some entrepreneurial types who would try to elicit bribes from the Saudi monarchy and deceive federal investigators) were joined in spirit by a number of figures who had come from the Left. Christopher Hitchens, formerly associated with a strand of heterodox Trotskyism, repeatedly rallied to the defence of ‘American’ values, accusing the anti-war Left of ‘fascist sympathies’. Todd Gitlin, once of Students for a Democratic Society, supported the war on Afghanistan, and upbraided progressives for anti-Americanism. Michael Walzer, faced with antiwar protesters, wondered aloud whether there could be a ‘decent left’. Marc Cooper, also supporting war on Afghanistan, accused its opponents of ‘self-hatred’. The ‘liberal Marxist’ philosopher Norman Geras compared the Left’s assertion that the 9/11 attacks were caused in part by US foreign policy with Ernst Nolte’s claim that the Nazi Holocaust had to be understood as a ‘pre-emptive’ anticipation of a threat from the Soviet Union.¹⁷

Those who believed that a different response from the left would have prevented the Right from gaining the early initiative, and somehow compelled Washington to fight a ‘better’ war, missed an important point about the underlying imbalance of political discussions. The anti-war Left did have a strong intuitive explanation for the attacks on 9/11, which was that they were likely to be at least partly a consequence of US foreign policy – a point hardly debated now – and that this very policy ought to be changed. Secondly, the left had a practical and prudent response, namely not to undertake any course of action that would make the problem worse while also causing enormous suffering for tens of thousands of people who had not asked to be involved in the conflict. From this perspective, any reaction should have been more akin to a police hunt than a war. One thing the left did *not* have access to was the kind of knowledge that would demonstrate plausible ways to disable organizations such as ‘al-Qaeda’ other than through belligerence, since this knowledge tends to be the exclusive preserve of states and experts. And it lacked the kind of ‘visionary’ answer to the atrocity that the neoconservative right was now offering. Since the neoconservatives thrive on catastrophe, and since their argument is always that the United States should be aggressively expanding its dominion – especially now that it was facing a greater challenge than its leaders recognized – 9/11 was heaven-sent. The neocons had a narrative, a plan, and an obsession with Iraq as the last remaining hub of a senescent Arab nationalism; they were energetic and had all the right entrées to power, while the left was still reeling from historic defeats. And finally, the claims of the antiwar left that these attacks would be used to justify a wave of aggression that was by no means connected with catching the 9/11 criminals fell victim to an intense emotional and intellectual fug.

The language of ‘human rights’ imperialism and American exceptionalism

Even as left-wing anti-imperialism was treated to the full range of invective, the language of imperialism became more openly bruited.¹⁸ ‘Given the historical baggage that “imperialism” carries, there’s no need for the US government to embrace the term’, Max Boot argued, but ‘we should definitely embrace the practice’. The ‘historical baggage’ he referred to was the crime of ‘Old Europe’, to which the United States was an exception. Similarly, Robert Kagan described his homeland as a ‘behemoth with a conscience’ pursuing a liberal world order.

utterly different from Old Europe. Republican right-winger Grover Norquist argued that America was exceptional, the 'successor to European civilization, not its extension'.¹⁹

But these claims were not restricted to neoconservatives: as in so many other things, the and the pro-war liberals shared a common vocabulary. Christopher Hitchens hoped that the 'new imperialism' would aim to 'enable local populations to govern themselves', that the era of the client-state must be over, and that, 'if the United States will dare to declare out loud for empire, it had better be in its capacity as a Thomas Paine arsenal, or at the very least a Jeffersonian one'.²⁰ Michael Ignatieff, who had long been an advocate of 'humanitarian intervention', travelled to Afghanistan and noted with approval that America was indeed an empire, but condemned Bush for not taking the empire seriously enough. The empire's 'great notes', he later concluded, were 'free markets, human rights and democracy, enforced by the most awesome military power the world has ever known'. This stood in stark contrast to the 'colonies, conquest and the white man's burden' of older European empires.²¹

Many liberals across Europe were, if bemused by the language of empire, often more than satisfied with the conjoined lexis of human rights. In Germany, Gerhard Schröder's decision to participate in 'military operations to defend freedom and human rights and to create stability and security' was backed by his Green Party coalition partner and minister for foreign affairs, Joschka Fischer. The liberal British playwright David Hare 'strongly supported the American action in Afghanistan, not only as a legitimate act of self-defence but also as a humanitarian undertaking on behalf of a country desperately in need of relief'.²² In France Bernard-Henri Lévy (known commonly by his brand-name, BHL) distinguished himself as one of the most vociferous pro-American voices, supporting the occupation of Afghanistan, and was widely praised as a result.²³ Lévy had a lengthy background in the internal politics of Afghanistan, and was drafted to help support French diplomatic efforts in the occupied country. He has also practised advocacy as a journalist. For example, his widely praised but sensationalist book, *Who Killed Daniel Pearl?*, attempted on the basis of poor evidence – much of it gleaned from the claims of Indian intelligence and a caricatural understanding of Pakistan – to accuse the Pakistani state of the murder.²⁴ (Lévy has often been accused of treating the facts lightly.)²⁵ Similarly, his pro-American sentiments were elaborated in *American Vertigo*, a collection of journalistic essays based on a lightning tour of the United States that attempted to follow in the footsteps of Alexis de Tocqueville. Amid a clutter of cliché about American obesity and the co-existence of 'materialism' with fervid religiosity and despite some criticisms of the Usonian model, Lévy's mission is to reassure his audience that the 'American dream' is admirable and real. In particular, he disparages 'The Myth of the American Empire', admires Richard Perle, discovers that he shares 'antitotalitarian' axioms with William Kristol, and expresses delight in the idea that in 'the most powerful democracy in the world there finally appears a generation of intellectuals who arrive close to the top and can concretely work for the universalization of human rights and freedom'.²⁶

Fear and loathing in the Washington axis

Although the liberal supporters of Bush were confident that the same arguments applied with respect to an invasion of Iraq, the scale of the antiwar movement shook them. Salman Rushdie, in a widely published article, argued that there was an 'unanswerable' liberal case for regime-change, although he took issue with Bush's focus on weapons of mass destruction.

The *Observer* columnist Nick Cohen was eager to see the Iraqi National Congress assisted to power by Washington, so that they could 'replace minority rule with a multiracial, devolved democracy which stands up for human rights'. Further, he wanted to know 'how Noam Chomsky and John Pilger manage to oppose a war which would end the sanctions they claim have slaughtered hundreds of thousands of children who otherwise would have had happy healthy lives in a prison state'. He argued that the Stop the War Coalition was the biggest threat to Iraqi democracy, and that it consisted of enemies of 'Iraqi socialists and democrats who fervently wished for war. And finally, when Baghdad fell, he remarked that 'for a few weeks, the British Army was the armed wing of Amnesty International, whether it knew it or not.' This would have been a somewhat more plausible claim had not Amnesty International vociferously opposed the war on humanitarian grounds.²⁷

American newspapers were nevertheless encouraged by the 'anti-anti-American' fraternities among French intellectuals.²⁸ André Glucksmann, Pascal Bruckner and Roumain Goupil, former left-wingers outraged by European governments opposed to the venture, signed a statement supporting war on Iraq. Glucksmann accused the governments of France and Germany of repeating 'the arguments of Stalin's "Peace Movements" during the Cold War'. Jose Ramos-Horta, the former East Timorese freedom fighter, explained that 'sometimes war saves people', describing how he had 'rejoiced' at the US war on Afghanistan, and condemning the Spanish government for withdrawing troops from Iraq. In an interview arranged by the US ambassador to Poland, former Soviet dissident Adam Michnik told *Dissem* magazine that Polish forces were taking part in the war for 'freedom' and that 'we take this position because we know what dictatorship is'. He told readers of his pro-American Warsaw newspaper *Gazeta Wyborcza* that Saddam was part of an Islamist war against the 'godless West', and reminded them of the failure of 'appeasement' at Munich and Yalta. Ex-Trotskyist Iraqi exile Kanan Makiya argued strongly for the American war, and involved himself in the planning process for the post-invasion society to be constructed by America. Incensed by reports of Colin Powell's cautious attitude to war, Makiya described him as an 'appeaser' at a New York University debate in 2002. Describing the sound of bombs falling on Iraq as 'music to my ears', he later watched the fall of Baghdad on television in the company of President Bush.²⁹

Christopher Hitchens, by then a good friend of Deputy Secretary of Defense Paul Wolfowitz and convicted felon Ahmed Chalabi, argued that there would be no war deserving of that name, that the attack would be 'dazzling' and would be greeted as an 'emancipation', and enjoined the administration to 'bring it on'. He promised readers that Saddam did indeed possess weapons of mass destruction, and that the Baathist regime was connected to al-Qaeda through Islamist fighters operating in the north of Iraq. He chastised the 2 million anti-war demonstrators who gathered in Hyde Park:

the assortment of forces who assembled demanded, in effect, that Saddam be allowed to keep the other five-sixths of Iraq as his own personal torture chamber. There are not enough words in any idiom to describe the shame and the disgrace of this.

However, moral clarity was soon proving to be a taxing business. In March 2003, reporting the apostasy of Thomas Friedman, he explained: 'I am fighting to keep my nerve'. And again

the population of Baghdad was making a secret holiday in its heart as those horrible palaces went up in smoke, and this holiday will soon be a public holiday, and if we all keep our nerve we can join the festivities with a fairly clear conscience.³⁰

Michael Ignatieff was uncomfortable about being on the same side as the Bush regime, but he argued that the ‘case for empire is that it has become, in a place like Iraq, the last hope for democracy and stability alike’. Paul Berman, a champion of what he calls the ‘anti-totalitarian’ Left, argued that the war on Iraq was part of the same combat as that with al-Qaeda, because ‘al-Qaeda ... and Saddam’s Baath Party are two of the tendencies within a much larger phenomenon, which is a Muslim totalitarianism’. (In fact, Michel Aflaq, the doyen of secular Baathism, had been the son of Greek Orthodox Christians, and all the Baathist parties contained non-Muslim members, including Saddam Hussein’s foreign minister, Tariq Aziz.) The neoconservatives, Berman continued, were correct that ‘something fundamental has gone wrong in the political culture of the Middle East’ and that liberal democracy was the only solution. Distrustful of the neocons, however, he pleaded for

a left alternative to the neocon vision ... a left-wing passion for democratic and liberal internationalism, a left-wing passion for anti-fascism and anti-totalitarianism, a passion to try as much as possible to square the means with the revolutionary liberal and humanitarian ends.³¹

The British liberal commentator, and columnist for the *Independent*, Johann Harwood repeatedly claimed that Iraqis favoured intervention before the war, and (quite erroneously) that this was supported by research by the International Crisis Group.³² While allegations about the threat of Iraq’s ‘weapons of mass destruction’ and the alleged relationship with al-Qaeda were prominent within the ‘left-wing passion’ for war, especially salient was the argument that an American-led invasion would represent ‘liberation’ for the people of Iraq. The combination of arguments was exactly the same as that presented by the Bush administration – indeed, several of these commentators appear to have taken their cue from the press conferences and representations of figures in the executive.³³

‘Islamic nihilism’ and American annihilation

The discourse of human rights and their preservation had been adequate to galvanize widespread liberal support for military intervention in the former Yugoslavia. However, the wave of aggressive American expansionism prescribed by Bush demanded something more. Wars that would accumulate a heavy body-count, and that would involve the use of weapons designed to maximize damage to the population, such as cluster bombs and daisy-cutters, required a suitably dehumanized enemy. American renewal in its combat with the enemy ‘Islamic fascists’ as Bush eventually designated them – would combine domestic with international repression. And while the Bush administration was rounding up Muslims and erecting its network of secret prisons to complement the prison multi-complex that was being opened in Guantánamo, the Islamophobic demagoguery of public commentators was swift and copious. It is of course a staple of American rightist bigotry that, as Pat Robertson recently put it, Islam is ‘a worldwide political movement meant [sic] on domination’. The liberal

media watchdog, Media Matters for America, has documented dozens of cases of the particularly egregious form of Islam-bashing from the right.³⁴ Yet some of the most sedulous efforts in demonizing Islam have emerged from Bush's liberal defenders.

BHL, who styles himself an opponent of religious fundamentalism, was a key signatory to the statement, 'MANIFESTO: Together facing the new totalitarianism' (the 'new totalitarianism' in question being the Islamic kind); and – while he makes a crude distinction between 'moderate' and 'extremist' Islam – he does not hesitate to attack the signs and symbols of Islam as such. Thus, essaying on the condition of Muslim women, he informed us *ex cathedra*, that '[t]he veil is an invitation to rape'. Adam Michnik wondered about 'the relationship between the terrorists who appeal to the Islamic religion, and the reality that none of the leading religious leaders of Islam condemned the crime'.³⁵

The claim that there was something specifically and uniquely wrong with Islam was widespread. For Hitchens, it was a psychological deviation, a triumvirate of

self-righteousness, self-pity, and self-hatred – the self-righteousness dating from the seventh century, the self-pity from the 13th (when the 'last' Caliph was kicked to death in Baghdad by the Mongol warlord Hulagu), and the self-hatred from the 20th.³⁶

Responding to claims that US foreign policy had motivated the attacks, Hitchens expostulated that

the grievance and animosity predate even the Balfour Declaration, let alone the occupation of the West Bank. They predate the creation of Iraq as a state. The gates of Vienna would have had to fall to the Ottoman *jihad* before any balm could begin to be applied to these psychic wounds.³⁷

One might note in passing that, according to the logic of such argument-by-reference-to-atavistic-spiritual-remnants, it would be difficult to object to someone bent on explaining the modern Zionist movement in terms of a Mosaic psychic imbalance stored in the collective unconscious of Europe's Jewish population.

Telling an audience that the claim that suicide attacks in Palestine are driven by despair was 'evil nonsense', Hitchens remarked that those who do it adore their 'evil mullahs' (even where the attackers happen to be secular, as is often the case), and their 'evil preaching' (and 'vile religion'), and further that the act is an 'evil, wicked thing'. Even if we consider this with large helpings of interpretative charity, this is a myopic argument. In most of the research on suicide attacks, the decisive factors are political rather than religious ones. For example, Robert Pape's study of suicide attacks notes that, until 2000, the vast bulk of such attacks around the world had been carried out by secular-nationalist or Marxist groups. The strongest correlation was between the incidence of suicide attacks and the presence of an occupying army. Luca Ricolfi's study of Palestinian suicide attacks finds that religion is an enabling factor, but does not 'mould individuals, forcing them to become martyrs'. Among the relevant motivations are constant humiliation and 'severe material deprivation' – a miserable condition in which 'reality has shrunk to a minimum', thus providing the maximum space for myth and the symbolic in politics. Neither pecuniary nor religious motives are adequate explanation in themselves. It is the crushing and suffocating reality of contemporary

Palestinian society that drives some people to carry out these actions.³⁸

To dismiss conclusions based on solid empirical data as ‘evil nonsense’, and to insist dogmatically on those that are incompatible with that evidence, surely betrays an attitude more befitting a fundamentalist preacher than a secular humanist intellectual. Yet supporters of the ‘war on terror’ have often presented their Islam-bashing as part of an enlightened war of reason against entrenched superstition. Christopher Hitchens, if relentlessly reductionist about the role of Islam in inspiring ‘evil’, is at least willing to attack other religions. *God Not Great* affirms the not-so-contrarian title of Hitchens’s recent polemic, which seeks to hold religion responsible not only for the theocratic tyrannies of ancient and modern times without qualification, but also for the secular tyrannies of modernity. An obvious ramification of Hitchens’s strident anti-theism is his willingness to blame the Islamic religion for the ruin of Iraq under the US-led occupation; this alongside a complete failure to notice that sectarian religious parties are the closest allies of the occupying forces that he supports. Although it is true that Hitchens has always been hostile to religion, this animosity has only recently been mobilized to whitewash the crimes of American foreign policy.³⁹

Sam Harris was widely celebrated for his book, *The End of Faith*. Yet his central claim is that, while Christianity and Judaism have largely foresworn their savage past, the key threat is Islam, the thrust of whose doctrine is ‘undeniable: convert, subjugate, or kill unbelievers; kill apostates; and conquer the world’. He goes on to add that

‘Muslim extremism’ is not extreme among Muslims. Mainstream Islam itself represents an extremist rejection of intellectual honesty, gender equality, secular politics and genuine pluralism ... Muslims intentionally murder non-combatants, while we and the Israelis (as a rule) seek to avoid doing so ... [T]he people who speak most sensibly about the threat that Islam poses to Europe are actually fascists.⁴⁰

When Christopher Hitchens countered Sam Harris’s ‘irresponsible’ argument that fascists were the sole repository of good sense in respect of the Islamic threat, he boasted: ‘Not while I’m alive, they won’t [be]’.⁴¹ An advocate of war against ‘Islamic fascism’, he thus now finds himself competing with fascists of the non-Islamo kind for the most ‘sensible’ line about the Muslim ‘threat’.

Islam’s alleged incompatibility with ‘Western’ values is frequently emphasized. W. Hutton, a liberal supporter of New Labour and signatory to the Euston Manifesto, wrote following the verdict of an ‘honour killing’ trial that

many Muslims want to build mosques, schools, and adhere to Islamic dress codes with ever more energy. But that energy also derives from the same culture and accompanying institutions that produced British-born suicide bombers. The space in which to argue that Islam is an essentially benign religion seems to narrow with every passing day.⁴²

It is worth pausing to consider the proximate cause of Hutton’s scepticism about the prospect for coexistence: he sensed that the ‘honour killing’ of a young woman by her father and uncle was not only ‘alien’ but also ‘connected to the family’s religion – Islam’. Honour killing, which the UN estimates claims 5,000 lives each year, is forbidden in mainstream interpretations of Islam, while the practise extends well beyond Muslim societies. It might be

added that the murder of women is not at all ‘alien’ to the ‘West’ which, Hutton avers, must ‘stay true to itself’.⁴³ But the theme of specifically Muslim repression of women, and the accompanying figure of Western militaries as emancipators, is one that frequently emerges in the apologetic discourse on the ‘war on terror’.

Martin Amis, like his friend Hitchens, makes the link between his sense of Enlightenment and his hostility to Islam explicit. In his memoir *Experience*, Amis remarks at least twice that he thinks about Israel ‘with the blood’. He adds that he will ‘never be entirely reasonable about her’. Indeed, blood comes up quite a bit: he pines for a lost love who has gone to ‘give blood’ for Israel. To declare openly that one will never be rational about a defining political issue of the day advertises a sort of fanaticism. Yet this is how the mysticism of blood and soil, the giving of life’s fluid back to the land itself, is converted into a liberal apologia for Zionism. He is presumably still thinking ‘with the blood’ when he encounters a gatekeeper at the Holy Mosque in the Arab Quarter of Jerusalem and declares: ‘I saw in his eyes the assertion that he could do anything to me, to my wife, to my children, to my mother, and that this would only validate his rectitude’. He repeated this charming little anecdote in an anfractuous and fatuous three-part polemic for the *Observer* entitled ‘The Age of Horrorism’ in which the story of Political Islam is retold as a pseudo-psychoanalytical drama, with sexually repressed Muslim males raging against the unwittingly attractive American female.

Amis told *The Times* in 2007, in spittle-lathered manner, that

there’s a definite urge – don’t you have it? – to say, ‘The Muslim community will have to suffer until it gets its house in order.’ What sort of suffering? Not letting them travel. Deportation – further down the road. Curtailing of freedoms. Strip-searching people who look like they’re from the Middle East or from Pakistan ... Discriminatory stuff, until it hurts the whole community and they start getting tough with their children ... They hate us for letting our children have sex and take drugs – well, they’ve got to stop their children killing people.⁴⁴

This confession was later attacked by the literary critic Terry Eagleton in the introduction to his book *Ideology*, producing some exchanges that were invariably referred to as a literary ‘spat’. The fact that Amis had been recruited to lecture at Eagleton’s place of employment, the University of Manchester, provided an added frisson. When asked about his comments by the columnist Yasmin Alibhai-Brown, Amis offered obsequious observations about her Shalabi identity (‘the more dreamy and poetic face of Islam, the more lax and capacious’, it ‘endeared you to me, and made me feel protective’), but was dismissive of Eagleton’s criticism. With his now characteristic stridency, he insisted that he was only confessing to a momentary sensation, not recommending anything. So: ‘Can I ask him, in a collegial spirit, to shut up about it?’ Perversely, he added: ‘The extremists, for now, have the monopoly of violence, intimidation, and self-righteousness.’⁴⁵ Since the term ‘extremists’ in this usage clearly excluded those who had invaded and occupied Iraq under a rhetorical mantle of self-righteousness, Amis’s statement constituted a simple performative contradiction, but served to corroborate his earlier claim of Western innocence.

Innocence, or as Anatol Lieven calls it, ‘original sinlessness’, is certainly relevant here. George W. has outlined its dimensions: ‘I’m amazed that there’s such a misunderstanding of what our country is about that people would hate us. I’m – like most Americans, I just can’t

believe it, because I know how good we are.’⁴⁶ Of course, ‘most Americans’ do not deviate from the traditional American foreign policy, but the point about Bush’s faux *naïveté* is that it is a performance that deliberately evokes childhood, that land of pre-sexual innocence. When American presidents mimic Little Orphan Annie, as Gore Vidal once put it, they are inviting audiences to forget everything and once more partake of an ‘idealism’ that would otherwise seem rather soiled by the accretions of memory and history. They encourage a psychological regression in which listeners identify America with how they felt about it as a child – any criticism of it is therefore an attack on one’s childhood memories, and draws a powerful defensive response. More than that, the evocation of childhood is itself a powerful reassurance of fundamental ethical innocence.⁴⁷

So it is that, as American-led military forces have invaded Muslim countries and Israel has bombarded its Arab neighbours, the argument has been raised that, in fact, Muslims and Arabs are themselves invading ‘us’ (because they are jealous of our freedoms). This has produced a batch of neologisms, such as ‘Eurabia’, the title of a polemic by the right-wing British writer Bat Ye’or, which argues that Europe is being taken over by Arab Muslims in a curious alliance with EU state leaders, while also directing European leaders away from their proper alliances with Israel and America. And ‘Londonistan’, the name of a book by the British neoconservative Melanie Phillips, maintains that the UK is incubating a future Islamist terror regime, in which London is ‘a global hub of the Islamic jihad’, with thousands of British Muslims actively supporting terrorism, and hundreds preparing to strike the mainland. Neither author actually coined the phrases, but they have popularized them among supporters of the hard right, while overlaying them with racist dramaturgy.

‘Londonistan’, a contemporary equivalent of the old anti-Semitic term ‘Jew York’, has entered the lexicon of the ‘war on terror’, is used without apparent irony by defenders of Western liberalism such as Christopher Hitchens and Nick Cohen, and is now commonplace in American newspapers. The precise definition of the term is hard to pin down, its connotation exceeding its denotation. For Hitchens, it refers to the presence of a Muslim minority in London, many of whom are refugees from ‘battles against Middle Eastern and Asian regimes which they regard as insufficiently Islamic’. They ‘bring a religion which is not ashamed to speak of conquest and violence’, says Hitchens, an author rarely ashamed to speak of conquest and violence.⁴⁸

Similarly, as the American government arbitrarily detained thousands of Muslims,⁴⁹ while cultivating hostility towards them with its rhetoric, and kidnapped people all over the globe and subjected them to torture in secret prisons that easily out-do their Stasi precedents, it was not long before the argument was heard that Muslim countries are in fact resuscitating twentieth-century barbarism. In May 2006, a story appeared in the Canadian *National Post* that was subsequently picked up by a number of right-wing newspapers and websites, as well as some liberal ones. It claimed that Iran was planning to pass laws that would oblige non-Muslims to wear badges to indicate their ethnicity, so that they could be distinguished from the public. Replete with ‘Nazi’ references and illustrated with photographs of Jews bearing the yellow stars imposed by the Third Reich, this story turned out to be completely false – and, to be fair, both the *National Post* and the *New York Post* have since removed the story from their websites. One effect of this ceaseless stream of anti-Muslim propaganda was revealed a few months later. A Gallup poll released in August 2006 found that almost four in ten

Americans thought that Muslim Americans should be obliged to carry special ID, which at least hints at the idea that barbarism is not the exclusive property of non-Americans. In March 2006, it was found that negative impressions of Islam among Americans had almost doubled since 2002.⁵⁰

Indeed, given the palpable hostility of these commentators, one would expect a seam of accompanying violent rhetoric. And that is what we get. Against this unspeakable enemy, Sam Harris mandates torture as a form of ‘collateral damage’ in the ‘war on terror’. Nicholas Cohen has argued that anyone even suspected of terrorism by the intelligence services should be deported, even if they are likely to be tortured, and suggested that torture may be necessary under certain circumstances. Christopher Hitchens stops short of this, but is strangely drawn to eliminationist rhetoric. Following the November 2004 siege of Falluja, Hitchens remarked that ‘the death toll is not nearly high enough ... too many [jihadists] have escaped’. Similarly, about the Islamists, he had this to say:

We can't live on the same planet as them and I'm glad because I don't want to. I don't want to breathe the same air as these psychopaths and murders [sic] and rapists and torturers and child abusers. It's them or me. I'm very happy about this because I know it will be them. It's a duty and a responsibility to defeat them. But it's also a pleasure. I don't regard it as a grim task at all.⁵¹

He later told those present at the christening of the David Horowitz Freedom Center that ‘it is a sort of a pleasure as well as a duty to kill these people’. He also commiserated with his friend Martin Amis on his unfortunate desire to ‘punish’ Muslims: What does one do with thoughts like this? How does one respond ‘when an enemy challenges not just your cherished values but additionally forces you to examine the very assumptions that have heretofore seemed to underpin those values?’⁵² Will it be necessary to destroy liberalism in order to save it? It is quite something to witness liberals collapse into this kind of nonsense and still call themselves liberals or even leftists; but for them to claim that they have been coerced into this by the ‘enemy’, and complain about it as if it were only another burden for the white man to bear, is surely a matchless stroke of self-satire.⁵³ By a familiar alchemy, then, the manifest intolerance, prejudice and hostility of both liberal and neoconservative pundits towards Muslims is articulated in terms of *Islamic* intolerance, prejudice and hostility. Such projection is, as later chapters will further elaborate, a classic feature of imperialism, including in its most barbaric modes.

In a recent book, *Imperial Grunts*, Robert Kaplan compares the current multifaceted wars against various selected Islamists to the nineteenth-century wars against Native Americans. In fact, he describes how soldiers in places as different as Colombia and Afghanistan greeted him by welcoming him to ‘Injun Country’ – a quite commonplace reference in American imperial ideology. ‘This is breathtaking’, said David Rieff. ‘Here is a serious writer in 2005 admiring the Indian Wars, which in their brutality brought about the end of an entire civilization.’ Kaplan’s book lauds the foot-soldiers of the empire, the ‘imperial grunts’ as he calls them, and celebrates the fact that ‘by the turn of the twenty-first century the United States military had already appropriated the entire earth, and was ready to flood the most obscure areas of it with troops at a moment’s notice’. ‘Islamic terrorism’, he maintains, has become ‘the sharp edge of a seeping anarchy’. The enemy, the barbarian, can thus be compared with the Indian

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