
BEYOND BIN LADEN

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Events of the past week have underlined both the importance and pitfalls that beset discussion of international affairs. All areas of political and social life involve controversy and commitment: this is as true of debates on the family, the role of the State in the economy, education and the causes of crime.

But in no area of public discussion is there as high a dose of posturing, misinformation and irrationality as that of international issues.

There are, in broad terms, two conventional stances that arise in regard to international issues—complacency disguised as realism and irresponsibility posing as conscience. These poles have been evident in regard to the major cases of humanitarian intervention in the 1990s (Kuwait, Bosnia, Kosovo) and are present in much of the debate on the causes of globalisation and world inequality. They are present in very specific form in the question of what can be the future political system in Afghanistan.

For hard-headed realism, the international is a domain of power, mistrust and recurrence of conflict. This is the way the world, or god, or the market make it, and there is not much you can do. The most dangerous people are the do-gooders who make a mess of things by trying to make the world a better place: foreign aid, human rights, a lowering of the security guard, let alone education in global issues, are all doomed to failure.

Last week, in a typical realist calumny, one that allows legitimate international action only to States, President Bush cast responsibility for the terror attacks on, among others, NGOs (he had to spell out that this meant 'non-governmental organisations'). More ominous are the voices, now pushing a realist agenda, that were already under starter's orders on the morning of September 11 and are now in full canter: identity cards, immigration controls, National Missile Defence.

In the field of cultural speculation, the great winner has been the theory, first espoused by Samuel Huntington in 1993, that says we are entering an epoch that will be dominated by 'the Clash of Civilisations'.

The alternative view to realism has its own, equally simplistic, answers. This assumes that there is a straightforward, benign way of resolving the world's problems and that there is one, identifiable and single, cause of what is wrong. Two centuries ago, the cause was monarchy and absolutism, then branded as the cause of poverty, ignorance and war; over the past two centuries, it has

been capitalism and imperialism; now it is globalisation. More specifically, the US is held responsible for the ills of the world—global inequality, neglect of human rights, militarism, cultural decay.

It is not always clear what the 'America' so responsible is—this Bush administration, all US administrations, the whole of 'corporate' America, Hollywood or, in the implication of September 11, the whole of the American people and, indeed, all who choose to work with, or visit, or in anyway find themselves in the proximity of such people.

Both of these positions are, perhaps, caricatures, yet the themes they encompass are evident, and will be even more evident, in the crisis that has engulfed the world. There are, however, some core issues where, perhaps, an element of reason about international affairs may be sustainable.

First, history: much is made of the antecedents. Some involve the Crusades, others *jihad*, but the image of the Crusades means little to those outside the Mediterranean Arab world; *jihad* is quite an inappropriate term for the proper, Koranic, reason that the armies of Islam sought to convert those who were conquered to Islam.

As for the Cold War, it has contributed its mite to this crisis and, in particular, to the destruction of Afghanistan but in a way that should give comfort to few. One can here suggest a 'two dustbins' theory' of Cold War legacy: if the Soviet system has left a mass of uncontrolled nuclear, chemical and biological weapons, and unresolved ethnic problems, the West has bequeathed a bevy of murderous gangs, from Unita in Angola to the Mujahideen in Afghanistan.

A second issue that is present is that of culture. It takes two to have a 'Clash of Civilisations' and there are those on both sides who are using the present conflict to promote it.

Huntington's theory misses what is the most important cause of the events of recent days, and which will define the consequences in the Muslim world of what is to come, namely the enormous clash within the Muslim world between those who want to reform, and secularise, and those whose power is threatened, or who want to take power in the name of fundamentalism. This has been the basis of the conflicts going on these past decades in Pakistan, Iran, Egypt, Turkey and, most violently of all, Afghanistan.

Religious fundamentalists in all societies have one goal: it is not to convert other people to their beliefs, but to seize power—political, social and gendered—within their own societies. Their greatest foe is secularism.

The third and, arguably, most important and difficult issue underlying the crisis is that of the most effective and just way to combine the two instruments of international politics—force and diplomacy. Under international law, States are entitled to use force in self-defence. An element of retribution is part of any legal system, domestic or international. The UN is not some pacifist, supranational last resort, but a body which, in its charter and in the Security Council resolution 1368 of September 12, has authorised military action by States in this case.

At the same time, any use of force, in the immediate future or in the longer conflict promised by both sides, has to be matched by diplomatic and political initiative. This can cover each of the

separate issues that make up the greater West Asian crisis underlying these events, from Kashmir to Palestine, and on to Kosovo, but it must, above all, address the future of Afghanistan itself.

Here, the UN has, since 1993, been on record, and with the support of all the permanent members of the Security Council and all the neighbouring States, in calling for the setting up of a new government. The UN has insisted that this be broadly based, fully representative, multi-ethnic and opposed to terrorism. This is a goal which the current crisis requires and brings closer to view. It is also one which, it is generally agreed, the great majority of Afghans would support.

Freud once argued that the aim of psychoanalysis was to reduce extreme hysteria to everyday common misery. The function of reasoned argument, and an engaged scepticism, in international affairs is to do just that. ■

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