

CIVIL LIBERTIES ARE AT STAKE

Richard Rorty

As the historian David Kennedy has remarked, terrorism is different from, and worse than, war. Wars have aims that might someday be achieved, thus bringing about an end to hostilities, but terrorism has no such aims. The object of terror is terror.

Still, our grandchildren will probably, for lack of a better term, use 'war' to describe the threat hanging over them, the situation that requires them to live in a garrison state: a nation in which everybody is accustomed to people in uniform roaring in, closing down buildings and public spaces, and arresting suspicious-looking people, without advance warning. They will probably think that Oceania has always been at war with Eastasia, and that it always will be. The idea of war and peace as alternating states may seem as irrelevant as Orwell suspected it might.

Most American intellectuals who spoke to the media about the terrorist attacks wondered anxiously whether the West would be

able to put itself on a war footing without eroding the liberties of its citizens—without endangering the right to privacy and the right to dissent. Maybe Orwell's pessimism about this ability will turn out to be justified. But maybe it will not. There were plenty of violations of civil liberties in Britain and America during the two world wars, but the institutions of constitutional democracy remained in place. With luck, maybe we can hang onto them.

I cannot help thinking—though I greatly dislike the thought—that the chances of doing so may be a bit better in Europe than in the US. Jerry Falwell's suggestion that the terrorist attacks may be attributable to God's anger at America's toleration of gays and lesbians, and to the activities of the American Civil Liberties Union, struck a chord in a sizable percentage of my fellow-citizens. So I hope that Europe may set the US a good example by keeping civil liberties intact, even if these murderous high-tech attacks become more frequent, and take place in more and more countries. ■

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FUTURE HOLDS NO GOOD

Fredric Jameson

I have been reluctant to comment on the recent 'events' because the event in question, as history, is incomplete and one can even say that it has not yet fully happened.

Obviously there are immediate comments one can make, in particular on the nauseating media reception, whose cheap pathos seemed unconsciously dictated by a White House intent on smothering the situation in sentiment in order to demonstrate the undemonstrable: namely, that 'Americans are united as never before since Pearl Harbor.' I suppose this means that they are united by the fear of saying anything that contradicts this completely spurious media consensus.

Historical events, however, are not punctual, but extend in a before and after of time which only gradually reveal themselves. It has, to be sure, been pointed out that the Americans created bin Laden during the Cold War (and in particular during the Soviet war in Afghanistan), and that this is therefore a textbook example of dialectical reversal. But the seeds of the event are buried deeper

than that. They are to be found in the wholesale massacres of the Left systematically encouraged and directed by the Americans in an even earlier period. The physical extermination of the Iraqi and the Indonesian Communist Parties, although now historically repressed and forgotten, were crimes as abominable as any contemporary genocide. It is, however, only now that the results are working their way out into actuality, for the resultant absence of any Left alternative means that popular revolt and resistance in the Third World have nowhere to go but into religious and 'fundamentalist' forms.

As for the future, no one (presumably including our own Government) has any idea what the promised and threatened 'war on terrorism' might look like. But until we know that, we can have no satisfactory picture of the 'events' we imagine to have taken place on a single day in September. Despite this uncertainty, however, it is permitted to feel that the future holds nothing good for either side. ■

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