

# DISASTER FOR PAKISTAN

Peter Preston

Stand at the top of the Khyber Pass and look down to the parking lot of a border post and the arid desolation of Afghanistan beyond. Then, more crucially, turn and scan the hillsides to left and right; think of the Peshawar you've just left. This crisis isn't just about bringing some power-sharing *nirvana* to Kabul, Belfast-style. Nor about sorting out a network of serially deranged criminal gangs. It is also, one small step away, about the future of the Indian subcontinent and its 1.4 billion or more souls. It is already about Pakistan. The question of what Pakistan is and what it may become stands tabled.

Western assumptions go through the shredder day by day. Yesterday the assumption of wrath over nuclear proliferation vanished with the economic sanctions imposed on New Delhi and Islamabad when they tested their bombs tit for tat. The west's supposed love for democracy, manifest when more sanctions greeted General Pervez Musharraf's military coup, is also declared null and void. Needs must when the devil called Bin Laden drives.

But can I step off the narrow road that winds through the pass and sit on a rock 20 yards beyond? No: that is tribal territory where the Pathans hold devolved sway. Musharraf's army and police, even in good times, aren't welcome there, bound by treaty not to leave the tarmac ribbon.

A drive against smugglers? Pathans with televisions or something far more lethal on their backs merely jog up the hillside when authority arrives and raise two fingers. They're untouchable. The goods they bring in, the videos and guns and worse from the Gulf and China and Afghanistan itself, all go for a song in the subterranean supermarkets of Landi Kotal: another compromise in a nation built on compromise.

In one sense, it's good that the army rules Pakistan today (as it often does). If they were, for the moment, out of power, if the hapless politicians were taking another turn, then this would—for sure—be the cue for the tanks to roll back. At least Musharraf is stuck with answering the questions his very presence poses.

Some of them may not be as difficult as they seem. There are simmering demonstrations in the big cities as 30 or so religious parties find common cause against George W. Don't fret too much over that. Any demo in a country of 140 million can always rake in a few thousand banner-wavers and attendant *mullahs*. The army is used to coping. Noise doesn't equal seriousness.

Nor are the rumours of splits within the military, of counter-coups within a coup, worth much frowning time. Pakistan's army—

whatever its internal religious hues—knows where its loyalty lies: to the state first, and then to itself, its position and privileges. Division would blow that away. Musharraf is safe—and, pavilioned in the support of the residual mainstream political parties, can ride out immediate storms. American dollars, flowing again, sweeten any pill for the ruling elite.

But then the fault lines of compromise begin to heave. Some things are impossible. Seal the border with Afghanistan? How pat it sounds from Pentagon wizards who can't even seal off Mexico. The plain fact, from Chitral to Taftan, is that there is no border, only thousands of miles of mountains and desert. You can close a few crossing points but you can't make a wilderness non-porous—especially when what human life there is, the life of the tribe, swills back and forth, bound together by a history and a tradition that guards its independence against all interlopers whether they wear British, Russian, American or Pakistani army uniforms.

General Musharraf can't risk getting drawn into what would be essentially a civil war, which means, at root, that he has no ability to stop the flight of Afghan refugees if it becomes a flood. See the shanty towns on the left of the road out of Peshawar? Tin, straw and mud city, home for some two decades to the 1 million Afghans who fled the Red Army and subsided there into grinding poverty—and Catch 22 incarnate. They can't get a house until they have money, but the only jobs are smuggling, peddling ones. Crime is the thing that pays. It corrodes Pakistani society. Another tidal wave of refugees might sweep defences away.

And then, looking east, a long drive but only a couple of hundred miles distant as the jet flies, is the biggest difficulty of all: Kashmir, and India. The newspaper headlines in Karachi and Lahore may all be about Afghanistan, but they will fade. Kashmir never fades, in a way westerners can barely comprehend the one compromise Musharraf cannot make. His army might stand up to the *mullahs*, but it would not countenance a Kashmir sellout. And even if he were minded to negotiate the bands of let us say guerrillas rather than terrorists that fan out from Muzaffarad are zealots beyond his control.

He is their prisoner, too. When and if the Afghan crisis subsides, he will be back to crisis as usual—but this time with some sparkling new weaponry, courtesy of the Yanks, and his bomb internationally sanctified. He will be back in the paradise from which the end of the cold war expelled him: one of Washington's best beloved. The "war" against terrorism will cement army rule for as long as it lasts. None of this comforts. Much of it, before too long, could make the pursuit of Bin Laden look the most trivial sideshow.

I should be clear about the Pakistan I know and, in many ways, love. It is a curiously peaceful, kind country. You may still walk its cities and towns without threat. The people are clever and ambitious and warm. But there are too many of them: too many, proliferating, to feed or to harness. And the finest minds, in despair, go overseas, where their talent can bloom. A disaster waiting to happen—unless it can catch its breath and find a stable governance that has the flexibility of democracy built in as India's does.

This week Pakistan's unelected president will decide what compromises he can make and where he must duck for cover. He's

an intelligent and often reasonable man. But there won't, in the end, be any compromise unless freedom can at last take root here.

The enemy of my enemy is my temporary friend? Islamabad and New Delhi both find themselves ranged against the enemy of terrorism. A wise west might make something of that. A wise west would care for Pakistan as more than a series of air bases set on the edge of the Hindu Kush. A wise west would wonder not just what Pakistan could do for it in the pursuit of prime suspects, but what it now, at a moment of test, could do for Pakistan.

Courtesy *Guardian*

Peter Preston is a British journalist

## COMMENTARY AND ANALYSIS

Susan Sontag

The disconnect between last Tuesday's monstrous dose of reality and the self-righteous drivel and outright deceptions being peddled by public figures and TV commentators is startling, depressing. The voices licensed to follow the event seem to have joined together in a campaign to infantilize the public. Where is the acknowledgment that this was not a "cowardly" attack on "civilization" or "liberty" or "humanity" or "the free world" but an attack on the world's self-proclaimed superpower, undertaken as a consequence of specific American alliances and actions? How many citizens are aware of the ongoing American bombing of Iraq? And if the word "cowardly" is to be used, it might be more aptly applied to those who kill from beyond the range of retaliation, high in the sky, than to those willing to die themselves in order to kill others. In the matter of courage (a morally neutral virtue): whatever may be said of the perpetrators of Tuesday's slaughter, they were not cowards.

Our leaders are bent on convincing us that everything is OK. America is not afraid. Our spirit is unbroken, although this was a day that will live in infamy and America is now at war. But everything is not OK. And this was not Pearl Harbor. We have a robotic President who assures us that America still stands tall. A wide spectrum of public figures, in and out of office, who are

strongly opposed to the policies being pursued abroad by this Administration apparently feel free to say nothing more than that they stand united behind President Bush. A lot of thinking needs to be done, and perhaps is being done in Washington and elsewhere, about the ineptitude of American intelligence and counter-intelligence, about options available to American foreign policy, particularly in the Middle East, and about what constitutes a smart program of military defense.

But the public is not being asked to bear much of the burden of reality. The unanimously applauded, self-congratulatory bromides of a Soviet Party Congress seemed contemptible. The unanimity of the sanctimonious, reality-concealing rhetoric spouted by American officials and media commentators in recent days seems, well, unworthy of a mature democracy.

Those in public office have let us know that they consider their task to be a manipulative one: confidence-building and grief management. Politics, the politics of a democracy—which entails disagreement, which promotes candor—has been replaced by psychotherapy. Let's by all means grieve together. But let's not be stupid together. A few shreds of historical awareness might help us understand what has just happened, and what may continue to happen. "Our country is strong," we are told again and again. I for one don't find this entirely consoling. Who doubts that America is strong? But that's not all America has to be.

Susan Sontag is one of America's leading writers.