pour Harper's 15 Dec 2001
pour January 2002

NOTEBOOK

American jihad

By Lewis H. Lapham

War is the health of the state.
—Randolph Bourne

Fascism should more properly be called corporatism, since it is the merger of state and corporate power.
—Benito Mussolini

Three months ago I thought we'd been given a chance for a conversation about the future of the American political idea, the attacks on the Pentagon and the World Trade Center providing an impressive occasion for timely remarks on the topics of our foreign and domestic policy as well as an opportunity to ask what we mean by the phrases "public service," "common good," "civic interest." The newspapers were reporting daily proofs of selfless citizenship, not only on the part of the volunteers clearing the wreckage in lower Manhattan but also on the part of people everywhere else in the country giving of their money and effort to whatever need was nearest at hand, and I expected something of the same public-spiritedness to find a voice in the Congress, in the major news media, possibly on the television talk shows. Informed argument about why and how America had come to be perceived as a dissolute empire; instructive doubts cast on the supposed omniscience of the global capital markets; sustained questioning of the way in which we divide the country's wealth; the distinction drawn between the ambitions of the American national security state and the collective well-being of the American citizenry.

By December I knew that I'd been barking at the moon. The conversation maybe had a chance of taking place in magazines of small circulation, or possibly somewhere in the distant reaches of C-SPAN (at two A.M., on the stage of a college auditorium in Wabash, Illinois), but not in the chambers of Congress, not under the circus tents of the big-time news and entertainment media, not, except by special permission and then only with a word of apology, on network television.

Ted Koppel struck the preferred note of caution on November 2 when introducing his *Nightline* audience to Arundhati Roy, an Indian novelist and a critic of the American bombing of Afghanistan:

"Some of you, many of you, are not going to like what you hear tonight. You don't have to listen. But if you do, you should know that dissent sometimes comes in strange packages. . . ."

It wasn't clear whether Koppel was referring to Ms. Roy's opinions or to her sari, but at least he had the wit to know that she wasn't coming to the program with a press release from the Boeing Company. Most of the other security guards deciding what could and could not be seen on camera explained the absence of talking heads critical of the American "War on Terrorism" by saying that they couldn't find any credible experts inclined to make an argument both seditious and absurd. Thus Erik Sorenson, president of MSNBC, telling a reporter from the *New York Times* that apart from the raving of a few Hollywood celebrities there wasn't enough dissent in the country "to warrant coverage." Or Peter Beinart, editor of *The New Republic*, outraged by the noise of protest in the streets:

"This nation is now at war. And in such an environment, domestic political dissent is immoral without a prior statement of national solidarity, a choosing of sides."

In other words, as President Bush had become fond of saying to United Nations ambassadors and foreign heads of state, "Either you are with us, or you're with the terrorists."

As a means of quieting the distemper of the press, nothing works as well as the anodyne of war. Caught up in the memory of a tale told by Homer or Rudyard Kipling, the keepers of the nation's conscience gladly smother the peepings of dissent and quickly learn to stuff a sock into the mouth of an impiety. Show them a cruise missile or a map, and they become more ferocious than the generals. The scouts for the Sunday talk shows might have found it difficult to recruit skeptics, but they didn't have any trouble enlisting fuglemen to blow the trumpets of imperial advance—Tom Brokaw, impatiently wanting to know why the Army wasn't deploying ground troops, "in division-size force" somewhere south of Kabul; Dick Morris on Fox News, urging the Pentagon to boldly extend "civilization's war against barbarism" by occupying Libya and invading Iraq.

The eagerness to enlarge the theater of military operations—a strategy endorsed not only by the regimental commanders at Fox News but also by Newt Gingrich, Henry Kissinger, and Senator John McCain—seemed as senseless as the elevation of Osama bin Laden to a world figure on the scale of Fidel Castro or Charles de Gaulle, but by the end of October I'd begun to understand that the heavily armored media commentary fortified a broadcast studio and went well with flags, the rhetoric made of the same red, white, and blue bunting that decorates the speeches of President Bush—"We go forward to defend freedom and all that is good and just in the world," "We

value the right to speak our minds," "Our ultimate victory is assured." The viewing audience isn't expected to know what the words mean; we're supposed to listen to them in the way one listens to a military band playing "Stars and Stripes Forever" on the Washington Mall, or to Ray Charles singing "God Bless America" in a World Series baseball park.

Language degraded into the currency of propaganda doesn't lend itself to conversations about the future course of the American political idea, and if in September I thought that the destruction of the World Trade Center and the Pentagon might teach us something about our own history as well as furnishing us with an English translation of the Arabic word for "student," it was because I'd neglected to ask where the profit was to be found in a cloud of black smoke rising from the ruin of lower Manhattan. Where was the silver lining, and where the blessings in disguise? *Qui bono?*, the oldest of the old maxims once learned in a high school Latin class. To what end, and in whose interest, do we astonish the world with the magnificence of "Operation Enduring Freedom"?

The attacks on the buildings in Virginia and New York were abominable and unprovoked, inflicting an as yet unspecified sum of damage and an as yet incalculable measure of grief, but, as Michael Howard observes elsewhere in this issue ("Stumbling into Battle," page 13), they didn't constitute an act of war. By choosing to define them as such, we invested a gang of murderous criminals with the sovereignty of a nation-state (or, better yet, with the authority of a world-encircling religion) and declared war on both an unknown enemy and an abstract noun. Like an Arab jihad against capitalism, the American jihad against terrorism cannot be won or lost; nor does it ever end. We might as well be sending the 101st Airborne Division to conquer lust, annihilate greed, capture the sin of pride. Howard regards the careless use of language as "a very natural but terrible and irrevocable error." If so, it is an error that works to the advantage of the American political, military, and industrial interests that prefer the oligarchic and corporatist forms of government to those of a democracy.

Absent the excitements of a foreign war, in what domestic political accident might we not have lost the wooden figurehead of President George Bush? Six months ago we were looking at a man so obviously in the service of the plutocracy that he could have been mistaken for a lawn jockey in the parking lot of a Houston golf club or a prize fish mounted on the wall of an Jacksonville bank. Having signed the law awarding $1.4 trillion of tax relief to the country's richest individuals, he'd reimbursed the people who had paid his ticket to the White House, but the smiling pose of "compassionate conservatism" was becoming hard to hold amidst the gradual recognition of both its fraudulence and rigidity. The economy was in trouble, the Senate had lost its Republican majority, the President's approval ratings were sliding into recession, and too many people still were wondering about the sleights-of-hand that won the electoral vote in Florida. All in all, not a promising outlook for a politician who had been told, and so believed, that the running of a government was no different than the management of a corporation.

On September 11, like Pinocchio brushed with the good fairy's wand on old Gepetto's shelf of toys, the wooden figurehead turned into flesh and blood. A great leader had been born, within a month compared (by David Broder in the *Washington Post*) to Abraham Lincoln. Suddenly we were looking at a man resplendent on the gilded throne of power, his speeches revealed as "Churchillian" in the bright new morning of a war that Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld guessed might last as long as forty years.

Which was, of course, good news for the defense industries and the military establishment. The Senate wasn't slow to take the point, voting, unanimously and without debate on October 2, to fund a $60 billion missile-defense system that to the best of nearly everybody's knowledge can't hit its celestial targets and offers no defense against the deadly weapons (smallpox virus, dynamite stuffed into a barrel of nuclear waste, etc.) likely to be delivered in rented trucks. But why bother with cowardly and disloyal argument? The nation is at war; civilization trembles in the balance, and what true American stoops to haggle over the price of freedom?

If the Senate cannot bring itself to question a proposition as false as the missile defense system, then what may we not expect in the months of crisis yet to come? The Navy will want bigger aircraft carriers, the Air Force another four hundred planes, the Army a set of tanks equipped with electronics so sophisticated that they can set up the targeting coordinates for each of the Koran's ninety-nine names for God.

Senator Carl Levin (D., Mich.), chairman of the Armed Services Committee, attributed the lack of debate about the missiles to the need for "unity" when America was under siege; similar flows of sentiment stifled the asking of rude questions about the war's long-term aims and short-term costs. The Democratic members in both houses of the Congress as silent as the chairs; no memorable speech or hint of eloquence; nothing but an obedient show of hands and the hushed thumping of rubber stamps.

Addressing a joint session of Congress on the evening of September 20 the President congratulated the assembled politicians for their bravery in a time of trouble, thanking them "for what you have already done, and for what we will do together." Fortunately for the friends of good government, the patriotic news media have quarantined the tone of irony for the duration of the campaign against the world's "evildoers"; otherwise the President's speech might have evoked not only a round of brisk applause but also a gust of appreciative laughter. What the Congress had been doing (in concert with the White House and the federal regulatory agencies and brazen with the pretense of assisting the war effort) was looting the country's public interest on behalf of its well-placed private interests—the Interior Department relieved of its power to veto mining projects on public lands; the pharmaceutical companies negotiating the right to sell their drugs at the customary high prices in the event of a biological or biochemical catastrophe; the insurance industry collectively seeking a $10 billion deductible; best of all, the economic "stimulus

package" passed on October 24 by the House of Representatives in the amount of $101 billion, the bulk of the stimulant administered to wealthy individuals and corporations.

Asked about the apparent senselessness of the repeal of the corporate alternative minimum tax, Dick Armey (R., Tex.), the House Majority Leader, justified the gifts ($1.4 billion to IBM, $833 million to G.M., $671 million to G.E., etc.) by saying, "This country is in the middle of a war. Now is not the time to provoke spending confrontations with our Commander-in-Chief." In answer to a related question as to why the $15 billion soothing of economic wounds suffered by the airline industry didn't allot any money, none whatsoever, to the 150,000 airline workers who had lost their jobs in September, Armey observed that any help extended to such people "is not commensurate with the American spirit."

Who but a decadent Arab could have thought otherwise? Like Senator Levin, Congressman Armey understood that in time of war the United States can't afford the distraction of petty domestic politics. The promise of prescription-drug benefits for the elderly will have to wait; so will nearly everything else that most people associate with the words "national security"—repair of the nation's roads and schools and the prospect of decent health care for the 43 million citizens who can't afford to buy it at the going rate.

The country's corporate overlords don't associate the phrase "national security" with the health and well-being of the American public; they define the term as a means of acquiring wealth and as a reason for directing the country's diplomacy toward policies that return a handsome profit—the bombing of caves in the Hindu Kush preferred to the building of houses in St. Louis or Detroit. The work goes more smoothly when conducted in an atmosphere of constant dread, and how better to magnify that dread than by declaring a war against terrorism? Enemies on every hand and all of them unseen; nothing safe, not even a postcard from a maiden aunt. Happy to be of service and proud to protect the American people not only from bearded strangers but also from themselves, the Congress in September hurried to the task of forging legal shackles and restraints, also to the broadening of the government's police powers and the further destruction of the Bill of Rights. By the end of October the President had signed the USA PATRIOT Act, 342 pages of small print that hardly anybody in the Senate or the House of Representatives took the trouble to read but which nevertheless permitted the attorney general to expand telephone and Internet surveillance, extend the reach of wiretaps, open financial and medical records to searches for suspicious behavior and criminal intent. Two weeks later he signed an emergency order (conceding that it set aside "the principles of law and the rules of evidence") allowing him to remand to a military tribunal any foreign national about whom he had "reason to believe" a rumor of cohabitation with a terrorist organization, a nihilist author, or an anarchist idea. The F.B.I. in the meantime was rounding up legal immigrants of Middle Eastern descent (5,000 of them as of November 15) to inquire about their connections to Saladin and the Third Crusade. Although the corporatist distaste for the Constitution is nothing new (cf., the deliberate weakening of the First, Fourth, and Six Amendments over the last twenty years), the guarantee of an always present danger extends the government's prerogative to enforce whatever rule of law happens to prove convenient to the rule of money.

On November 11 in Atlanta, standing in front of a photomontage of heroic New York City firemen, President Bush told his audience that the nation "faces a threat to our freedoms, and the stakes could not be higher." What he said was true, but not in the way that he intended. We have more to fear from the fatwas issued in Washington than from those drifting across the deserts of Central Asia. The agents of Al Qaeda might wreck our buildings and disrupt our commerce, maybe even manage to kill a number of our fellow citizens, but we do ourselves far greater harm if we pawn our civil rights and consign the safekeeping of our liberties to mullah John Ashcroft and the mujahedeen in the hospitality tents of American crusade. ■