

THE WAGES OF INNOCENCE

A Moral Diatribe

by

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"The time has come for the world to recognize that war, rather than an instrument for the elimination of terrorists and aggressors, is a crime against humanity." Club of Budapest declaration, February 2003

There are many good reasons to oppose starting a war with Iraq. (And make no mistake: if it does come to war, it will be because we, the West, started it. The US, Britain, and whatever other countries join them, will be launching an unprovoked military attack against another sovereign state.) High up on this list of valid reasons is the indisputable fact that it is being promoted and led by the worst president the United States has ever had and hopefully ever will have; worse than Grant, Harding, Coolidge ("The business of America is business") or Hoover, and very possibly more evil and crooked than Richard Nixon. Not to mention that even Saddam Hussein, for all his malevolent traits and numerous strategic follies, is still a lot smarter than George W. Bush. Any major enterprise we follow this guy into is bound to result in disastrous consequences for everyone. That alone should be enough to dissuade all of us, regardless of our political leanings in other matters, from falling into line behind Bush and Tony Blair on this one.

I believe it was Keith Richards who once remarked, "No one is innocent." Yes and no, though I certainly understand what he meant. The statement definitely holds water when applied to the American electorate, especially those who failed to tip the scales against establishing the Bush-Cheney junta in a position of power either by not voting or by casting their ballots for a third-party candidate who didn't have a snowball's chance in hell of winning. Not that the Gore-Lieberman ticket was anything to write home about, seeing as how both of them, opportunistic to the core, are thoroughly rubbish politicians quite capable of creating their own kinds of god-awful messes. But at least, as with Clinton-Gore, they had more *brains* going for them, in particular when it comes down to the main man, the dude who's got his finger on the little black button. In the case of Bush, it's the combination of mean-spirited aggressiveness and unrivaled stupidity that is diabolically dangerous, for the entire world. All the more so because right behind him, penning his scripts and pulling his willing strings, are some of the most cleverly ruthless war hawks and domestic fascists ever assembled in the White House and its governmental environs at one time.

Though personally I have never been a gung-ho fan of voting ("It only encourages them," as the Yippies used to put it), the 2000 election was such a clear wake-up call to action—the only kind of potentially effective action

then immediately available to us, the people, and with so much transpicuous writing writ large over so many walls—that it's nothing short of a dismally disheartening wonder that so few of us, including so many who should have known better, did the right thing. And now look at the cesspool we are steadily sinking into.

The British public are also not innocent. With their eyes wide open they elected and then reelected Tony Blair and his New Labour cohorts (one can't even call them pseudo-socialists, as all they inherited from the old Left is an annoying propensity for nannyism) with an overwhelming majority. Yes, one might could make a small case for the Brits by claiming they were lied to, that Tony & Co. were to a certain extent pretending to be genuine successors to their traditional Labour Party forebears. [George, you see, never lied about his agenda. Despite tongue-in-cheek references to 'compassionate conservatism,' he was always, and very obviously, the murdering governor (ca. 150 state-sponsored executions to his everlasting debit) from Texas hellbent on becoming the even more murderous president of the whole country.] Now Blair's mask is slipping badly, revealing a pitifully deadly caricature of Maggie Thatcher, one of recent history's most testosterone-ridden warriors against liberal social values.

To their credit, however, by way of partially redeeming themselves, huge chunks of the British populace are now making their opposition to the Blairite approach to (American-guided) foreign policy known, and in a demonstrably loud manner. But it may be too late, what with an insipidly pious-sounding Tony now attempting (albeit without the sneer and Texas drawl) to seize the moral high ground by claiming that attacking Saddam and killing thousands of innocent Iraqis is in the best interests of humanity. It is not, and even suggesting otherwise constitutes the most appalling hubris imaginable.

Yes, the Iraqi people are (by & large, and in this regard anyway) innocent, for the very reasons given by Bush, Blair, numerous other right-wing political leaders, and—which is truly astounding—the likes of such prominent 'good guys' as Vaclav Havel, Salman Rushdie, Bob Geldof, and God knows who else (maybe I'd prefer not to be told just now?) as justification for doing a Curtis ("Bomb 'em back to the Stone Age") LeMay on their homeland, in the vain hope that once the dust has settled and the bodies have either been buried or simply decomposed, democracy will miraculously descend upon them...along with the aftereffects of all those massively-destructive biological and chemical weapons that our pinpoint and less specifically accurate bombing will have released into the proximate atmosphere.

Saddam Hussein is a horrible dictator, a cruel despot, a truly nasty piece of work, probably no better and in some respects maybe even a touch worse than the very many evil leaders the US and other Western governments have supported, nurtured, helped to put in place for chrissake! and will in all likelihood continue to foster whenever it suits their political and economic purposes. As long as these characters are *our* sons of bitches, no problem; once they cease to be that, have outlived their usefulness (à la Bush Sr.'s erstwhile partner in crime, former Panamanian strongman Manuel Noriega), off with their heads. And, if needs be, the lives of as many of their subjects

as it takes to get rid of them. God may not, as Einstein pointed out, play dice with the universe, but it's seemingly okay for the George Bushes and Tony Blairs of this world to treat all the rest of us like a bunch of insensate balls bouncing around on a roulette wheel that's gone seriously out of control.

Just as it's fine and dandy for successive Turkish governments to massacre Kurds, but not for Saddam to do it. Or for Saudi Arabia to execute women for adultery when even the Butcher of Baghdad doesn't do that. And for Ariel Sharon to get away with having been an active war criminal when he was Israel's defense minister (for which heinous deeds he is now facing charges in Brussels) and continue to be one, vis-à-vis his abominable treatment of Palestinians, now that he is (yet again) his country's prime minister. For Mugabe to impoverish his people, the government of Kuwait (liberated by the West, remember?) to continue on its authoritarian way unimpeded. For all those Central Asian republics (no longer in the grasp of the one-time "evil empire" which significantly collapsed without a single American military shot having been fired) to be just as despotic, equally as ruthless and undemocratic as the much-reviled Saddam (now that, with the help of having already bombed the bejabbers out of Afghanistan, we've figured out a more 'peaceful' way to get our grubby hands on *their* gas and oil reserves). The litany of Western transgressions is agonizingly long, thoroughly documented and, for the most part, fairly well-publicized.

But do take note of this recent news item concerning the above-mentioned Turks and Kurds. On February 19th *The Times* (London) reported that in return for agreeing to give access for American troops fighting a war against Iraq, Turkey is demanding "not only a substantially increased aid package, *but also clearance to follow invading American troops into northern Iraq to secure the country's southern borders, which are home to dissident Kurdish groups seeking a state of their own.*" Italics added by me so that you won't fail to realize that the true aim of this demand is to go in and wipe out said Kurdish dissidents. But hey, America needs Turkey, Turkey is a part of NATO, Turkey wants to join the EU. So to hell with those Kurds, as long as it's Turkey doing a dirty on them and not Saddam. This is the same Turkey, you may recall, from which President Kennedy agreed to remove American missiles aimed at the Soviet Union in return for Nikita Khrushchev taking his missiles out of Cuba, after Kennedy further gave his word that all plans for invading the Caribbean island would be scrapped.

The bottom line here is that the Iraqi people are not in a position to elect their leader, or even to overthrow him, even more so because (as Senator Robert Byrd informed his do-nothing congressional colleagues in an eloquent anti-war speech on February 12th) more than 50% of the Iraqi population is under the age of 15. All of which makes them as close to innocent as you can possibly get in the vile world of international power politics. And now George Bush and his buddies want to kill thousands of these kids in order, they say, to give them a chance to experience freedom and later on maybe vote. From the grave, no doubt.

In any event, Western-style democracy (the worst form of government except for all the rest, according to Churchill) is for the most part an alien concept in the Middle East. (Israel, as a Jewish state founded by immigrants,

and with too great an air of theocracy about it, doesn't even enter into the equation.) Taking this into account just might, if you will, somewhat diminish the absolute innocence of the Iraqi people. But even should such reasoning validly underline Keith's ultimately metaphysical statement (after which we may as well go a step further and make a contextual connection with original sin!), no one in his right everyday mind would use this as an argument for condoning premeditated mass slaughter.

Interestingly enough though, one thing both Bush the diehard Calvinist and the most narrow-minded Muslim fundamentalist must surely agree on is the perverse doctrine of predestination, ergo (though neither will accept all the logical inferences of this) from the Twin Towers to Afghanistan and, eventually, to thousands of mutilated corpses in a devastated Iraq. How's that for a chilling thought? Tony Blair, with a nervous smile on his face, assured Jeremy Paxman (in front of a studio audience and millions of BBC television viewers) that he and George Bush don't pray together. As a matter of fact, in their twisted hearts of war they do. And the chances of either getting struck by any kind of road-to-Damascus lightning bolt of conscience are practically nil.

Iraq was never about weapons of mass destruction, in the same way that Afghanistan was never about liberating suffering people or fighting global terrorism. Instead, the relentless bombing of one and now the planned blitzkrieging of the other is entirely about regime change and after that all the economic and strategic goodies which are meant to derive from replacing an existing government with one specifically designed to do America's bidding. The only guaranteed gainers from such wholesale rape are, as always, the most ambitious of world-conquering multinational corporations and (for as long as they're still useful) the politicians who work for them. To these obscene ends, both employ the might of the military.

As Major General Smedley Butler (in the first half of the last century among the US Marine Corps' most decorated officers) summed it up in 1933, once he was safely retired: "War is just a racket...conducted for the benefit of the very few at the expense of the masses." He then added, after portraying himself as having been a "gangster of capitalism" and describing his own extensive involvement in the war game (which primarily furthered the interests of America's biggest businesses, from oil to sugar): "Looking back on it, I feel that I could have given Al Capone a few hints. The best he could do was to operate his racket in three districts. I operated on three continents."

Soldiers, of course, are never innocent, as Buffy Sainte-Marie so poignantly clarified in her song (made famous by Donovan) "Universal Soldier." And certainly not on 'our side,' now that civilians are no longer being conscripted. But then, draftees during the Vietnam War who didn't either flee to Canada or Sweden or claim conscientious objector status were likewise culpable. When there's a clear choice available not to take a human life, other than in the most extreme extenuating circumstances (e.g., in self-defense), and you don't opt for it, then you're a killer. Should we therefore cheer, each & every time, in the unlikely event that a few British or American planes get shot down during the holocaust we are intending to visit on a (by

now and surely compared to us) practically defenseless victim country? That's for you to decide, though I'll be the last to blame anyone who does.

It's quite amazing when you think of it. Not only are we insisting that Saddam get rid of his WMDs (fair enough; but while we, along with Israel, keep ours, mind you), we're also telling him to trash his strongest means of defense against attacking armies. Iraq's al-Samoud 2 missiles, for example, *could* be modified so that they no longer exceed (by a mere 30 kilometers) their permitted range. Instead of "drop the gun or I'll shoot," it's "drop all your guns and then I'll damn well shoot you." Nor are we offering, as we should (indeed, ought to have a long time ago), in return for full compliance with UN disarmament resolutions, to both rescind those inhumanly crippling sanctions we imposed *and* promise, preferably in the form of a treaty, not to attack Iraq, now or in the future. But no; it's "do what we say, after which we'll think about the rest." By even the meanest diplomatic standards, that is simply not good enough.

Alas, it's the very best an already-defanged Saddam can possibly hope for. In short, he's a dead duck whose goose was well cooked a long time ago. Yes, long before George W., who is merely the pit bull selected by what Gen. Butler called the "Big Boss, Super-Nationalistic-Capitalism," which is also to say '*supranational* capitalism.' It was in the works during the Clinton administration and was initially set in motion when Bush Sr. and his gang tricked Saddam into attacking Kuwait. (Have we so soon forgotten the taped conversation between the Iraqi dictator and then-American Ambassador to Iraq Gillespie, in which the lady gave Saddam the White House's green light to go for it? Obviously we have.) While in historical actuality, Iraq's torturous fate was determined as far back as the 1920s, when the occupying British, in the aftermath of World War I, drew the modern state's borders in such a way as to deny it all but the scantest access to the sea in order to exercise *de facto* control over its vast oil resources.

Now a repulsively degenerate US president and a cowardly-beyond-words British prime minister are happily gloating over the assured outcome of a war that hasn't the slightest moral leg to stand on. In the words of one of the thousands of placard holders at the February 15th Washington, D.C. peace rally: "I hope God can forgive them, because I surely cannot."

Morality. The African continent is being decimated by AIDS. Despite urgent pleas from the UN Secretary General (the first *black* UN Secretary General, as Nelson Mandela made no bones about reminding the world), there's simply not enough Western cash available to try and obliterate this scourge. Millions of people on that very same continent, a continent the West marauded for slaves in order to help build their own economies, are faced with imminent famine. Same story, the West is strapped for boodle just now. Debt relief for other parts of the so-called Third World? Sorry, not today. Rain forests vanishing, pollution choking us, global warming...these and numerous other ever-worsening exigencies, all answered by cold, calculating, utterly destabilizing blah-blah-blah. Hell, there's not even sufficient bread in the 'company coffers' to offer British firefighters a decent pay rise. But there *are* tens of billions of taxpayers' dollars and pounds easily on hand to blow Iraq to smithereens and afterwards occupy it.

Is that what you told the Pope, Tony? "I'm sorry, Your Holiness, but in the real world in which I live, the innocent always pay." If he were being up front and honest, he would have. George Bush has drawn the battle lines. For his phony war on terrorism it was: "If you're not with us, you're against us." With Iraq he's pushed the envelope still further, blackmailing the international community with: "One way or another, there *will* be a war. Either the United Nations authorizes the action or we will go it alone and destroy both Iraq *and* the UN."

Well, my battle lines are equally unambiguous. Everyone is entitled to his or her opinion, no matter the topic. But to my mind, those who favor this most unjust of wars, a war that will at once virtually annihilate a nation and establish the most far-reaching and horrendous of precedents (giving America the right to do whatever it wants anywhere, including the right to curtail anybody's civil liberties at any time), are drenching their hands with the same blood Bush and Blair are about to spill. And whoever refuses or is too morally lazy to oppose the impending horror, at the very least with a silent prayer, is ultimately as guilty as the active perpetrators.

So, yes, Keith was right: no one is innocent, if only because none of us can afford to be.

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