

Bombs Are Its Only Vocabulary

An Address given by Harold Pinter on receiving an honorary degree at the University of Turin

Earlier this year, I had a major operation for cancer. The operation and its after effects were something of a nightmare. I felt I was a man unable to swim bobbing about under water in a deep dark endless ocean. But I did not drown and I am very glad to be alive. However, I found that to emerge from a personal nightmare was to enter an infinitely more pervasive public nightmare – the nightmare of American hysteria, ignorance, arrogance, stupidity and belligerence; the most powerful nation the world has ever known effectively waging war against the rest of the world.

“If you are not with us, you are against us,” President George W. Bush has said. He has also said: “We will not allow the world’s worst weapons to remain in the hands of the world’s worst leaders.” Quite right. Look in the mirror, chum. That’s you.

America is at this moment developing advanced systems of “weapons of mass destruction” and is prepared to use them where it sees fit. It has more of them than the rest of the world put together. It has walked away from international agreements on biological and chemical weapons, refusing to allow inspection of its own factories.

The hypocrisy behind its public declarations and its own actions is almost a joke.

America believes that the 3,000 deaths in New York are the only deaths that count, the only deaths that matter. They are American deaths. Other deaths are unreal, abstract, of no consequence. The 3,000 deaths in Afghanistan are never referred to. The hundreds of thousands of Iraqi children dead through American and British sanctions which have deprived them of essential medicines are never referred to. The effect of depleted uranium, used by America in the Gulf war, is never referred to. Radiation levels in Iraq are appallingly high. Babies are born with no brain, no eyes, no genitals. Where they do have ears, mouths or rectums, all that issues from these orifices is blood. The 200,000 deaths in East Timor in 1975 brought about by the Indonesian government but inspired and supported by America are never referred to. The 500,000 deaths in Guatemala, Chile, El Salvador, Nicaragua, Uruguay, Argentina and Haiti, in actions supported and subsidized by America, are never referred to. The millions of deaths in Vietnam, Laos and Cambodia are no longer referred to. The desperate plight of the Palestinian people, the central factor in world unrest, is hardly referred to.

But what a misjudgment of the present and what a misreading of history this is. People do not forget. They do not forget the death of their fellows, they do not forget torture and mutilation, they do not forget injustice, they do not forget oppression, they do not forget the terrorism of mighty powers. They not only don’t forget: they also strike back. The atrocity in New York was predictable and inevitable. It was an act of retaliation against constant and systematic manifestations of state terrorism on the part of America over many years, in all parts of the world.

In Britain, the public is now being warned to be “vigilant” in preparation for potential terrorist acts. The language is in itself preposterous. How will - or can - public vigilance be embodied? Wearing a scarf over your mouth to keep out poison gas? However, terrorist attacks are quite likely, the inevitable result of our Prime Minister’s contemptible and shameful subservience to America. Apparently a terrorist poison gas attack on the London Underground system was recently prevented. But such an act may indeed take place. Thousands of schoolchildren travel on the Under-ground every day. If there is a poison gas attack from which they die, the responsibility will rest entirely on the shoulders of our Prime Minister. Needless to say, the Prime Minister does not travel on the Underground himself.

The planned war against Iraq is in fact a plan for premeditated murder of thousands of civilians in order, apparently, to rescue them from their dictator. America and Britain are pursuing a course that can lead only to an escalation of violence throughout the world and finally to catastrophe. It is obvious, however, that America is bursting at the seams to attack Iraq. I believe that it will do this not only to take control of Iraqi oil, but also because the American administration is now a bloodthirsty wild animal. Bombs are its only vocabulary. Many Americans, we know, are horrified by the posture of their government, but seem to be helpless. Unless Europe finds the solidarity, intelligence, courage and will to challenge and resist American power, Europe itself will deserve Alexander Herzen’s declaration - “We are not the doctors. We are the disease”