

Neither their war, nor their peace

Retort

2003

WE HAVE NO WORDS FOR THE HORROR TO COME, for the screams and carnage of the first days of battle, the fear and brutality of the long night of occupation that will follow, the truck bombs and slit throats and unstoppable cycle of revenge, the puppets in the palaces chattering about “democracy,” the exultation of the anti-Crusaders, Baghdad descending into the shambles of a new, more dreadful Beirut, and the inevitable retreat (thousands of bodybags later) from the failed McJerusalem.

WE HAVE NO OLYMPIAN PREDICTIONS.

We do not know what happens next. We shall not ape the ludicrous certainty of the CIA hacks on the news, trotting out tonight’s “analysis” (tonight’s excuses for a half-million dead and wounded in a single laser-guided week).

THE BEST WE CAN OFFER IS NEGATIVE WISDOM, addressed to comrades in a dark and confusing time.

Look through the mind-numbing speeches in the Security Council to the real pressure, the mass disaffection, that is making the present prewar scenario unlike any other. This is the real ground for optimism, we believe—limited optimism—in an otherwise nightmarish situation. The dreary ghost of “public opinion,” which the states of the world are normally so adept at conjuring and pretending to obey, has suddenly become a destabilizing factor in the final arrangements for war.

Schroeder thought he could call the pacifist beast into the streets strictly in order to take the Reichstag, and then retreat gracefully to the usual politics of “meeting our international obligations.” Blair thought the eternal British love affair with “their finest hour” would steer him past the familiar shoals of anti-Americanism. It has all turned out to be more difficult than Straw and Chirac ever dreamt. Let us keep up the crude pressure of refusal. Let us keep on setting the diplomatic lapdogs at each other’s throats.

This is a war for Global Capitalism, not for Oil alone. The annals of oil are an uninterrupted chronicle of violence, genocide, and the cynical lawlessness of the corporate frontier. Iraq itself was born from this vile trinity. Now oil men parade the corridors of the White House. All five permanent members of the UN Security Council speak obediently for oil companies that have proved themselves specialists over the years in “regime change,” whenever it suits their interests. Nobody, not even Bush, contests the fact that the US industrial-military machine is a hopeless oil junkie.

War is inevitable, it is said, not because of American imperialism but because of its addiction to the automobile. Dirty mobility is what America means by freedom. All of which is true. Petroleum is global capitalism’s great lubricant, its key means of production. But the case is not proven that Iraqi oil, specifically, is a necessary part of the world picture. In hard cash terms, the Iraqi embargo matters little for corporate profits. Pay heed to the yearly reports and “position papers” churned out by Haliburton and Shell. What they truly covet is not sabotaged wells in the desert, but the deep-water fields beneath the warm seas of the Bight of Benin, the Gulf of Mexico, and coastal Brazil.

So let us not see in the slaughter of Iraqi civilians only the murderous logic of the S.U.V. It is not oil capital but capital in general that we must confront. Look around as you march up the Boulevard of Shame, at the bland

headquarters of Bechtel, Esprit, and Chevron. Which of the three has the cleaner hands worldwide? To fixate on a single commodity and its detritus obscures the full horror and ruthlessness hidden by the word “globalization”: primitive accumulation, predatory and profligate, careering forward on a planetary scale.

In the destruction of Baghdad resides the logic of empire. Oil is a metaphor for something more lethal, more destructive. What is at stake is the true madness of the world market, the hubris of an imperial “grand design” intended to make the world safe, once and for all, for capital. The map of the oil-rich Middle East will be redrawn, but that will be only the beginning.

“American internationalism reflects...our national interests...a single sustainable model for national success”: such is the breathtaking monism of the new National Security Strategy. Is it any wonder that the costs of empire mount? More than half of all Federal funds flow to the military. American “bases” metastasize across the planet—in 130 countries by the last count, and rising steadily. The homeland economy is bloated and debt-ridden.

As for the miserable fantasy of the war as a blow struck in the name of the Iraqi people against their oppressor—the “mercy by any means necessary” thesis—the best we can do in the face of such Looking Glass politics is go back to Edmund Burke. Long ago he had this to say about the sudden discovery of human wickedness that regularly precedes an invasion: “It is not with much credulity I listen to any, when they speak evil of those whom they are going to plunder. I rather suspect that vices are feigned or exaggerated, when profit is looked for in their punishment. An enemy is a bad witness: a robber is a worse.” These are words for the times. The earth is crammed full of atrocities, and tyrants are always the true humanitarians.

What matters on a march is speech, not speeches, the centrifuge of voices, rhythms, and banners, not the hectoring of stale celebrities. Least of all does it matter what CNN makes of the occasion. We recognize that, whether we like it or not, part of what’s happening here is a numbers game, a counting of heads. But don’t expect the stenographers of power to do anything else than traduce what you see.

Trust your senses. A march, among other things, materializes the dead percentages in the polls and takes life for a moment off the flickering screen. It is a reminder—a fleeting and artificial one, but nonetheless welcome—of what the public realm could be.

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