

# MISTAKE TO DECLARE THIS A 'WAR'

BY SIR MICHAEL HOWARD CBE MC DLITT FBA FRHISTS FRSL

When in the immediate aftermath of the attack on the World Trade Center the American Secretary of State Colin Powell declared that America was 'at war', he made a very natural but a terrible and irrevocable error. Leaders of the Administration have been trying to put it right ever since.

What Colin Powell said made sense if one uses the term 'war' in the sense of war against crime or against drug-trafficking: that is, the mobilisation of all available resources against a dangerous anti-social activity; one that can never be entirely eliminated but can be reduced to, and kept at, a level that does not threaten social stability.

The British in their time have fought many such 'wars'; in Palestine, in Ireland, in Cyprus and in Malaya, to mention only a few. But we never called them 'wars': we called them 'emergencies'. This meant that the police and intelligence services were provided with exceptional powers, and were reinforced where necessary by the armed forces, but all continued to operate within a peacetime framework of civil authority. If force had to be used, it was at a minimal level and so far as possible did not interrupt the normal tenor of civil life. The object was to isolate the terrorists from the rest of the community, and to cut them off from external sources of supply. They were not dignified with the status of belligerents: they were criminals, to be regarded as such by the general public and treated as such by the authorities.

To 'declare war' on terrorists, or even more illiterately, on 'terrorism' is at once to accord them a status and dignity that they seek and which they do not deserve. It confers on them a kind of legitimacy. Do they qualify as 'belligerents'? If so, should they not receive the protection of the laws of war? This was something that Irish terrorists always demanded, and was quite properly refused. But their demands helped to muddy the waters, and were given wide credence among their supporters in the United States.

But to use, or rather to misuse the term 'war' is not simply a matter of legality, or pedantic semantics. It has deeper and more dangerous consequences. To declare that one is 'at war' is immediately to create a war psy-

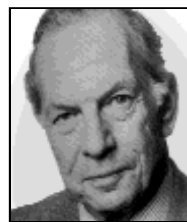
chosis that may be totally counter-productive for the objective that we seek. It will arouse an immediate expectation, and demand, for spectacular military action against some easily identifiable adversary, preferably a hostile state; action leading to decisive results.

The use of force is no longer seen as a last resort, to be avoided if humanly possible, but as the first, and the sooner it is used the better. The press demands immediate stories of derring-do, filling their pages with pictures of weapons, ingenious graphics, and contributions from service officers long, and probably deservedly, retired. Any suggestion that the best strategy is not to use military force at all, but more subtle if less heroic means of destroying the adversary are dismissed as 'appeasement' by ministers whose knowledge of history is about on a par with their skill at political management.

Figures on the Right, seeing themselves cheated of what the Germans used to call a *frisch, fröhliche Krieg*, a short, jolly war in Afghanistan, demand one against a more satisfying adversary, Iraq; which is rather like the drunk who lost his watch in a dark alley but looked for it under a lamp post because there was more light there. As for their counterparts on the Left, the very word 'war' brings them out on the streets to protest as a matter of principle. The qualities needed in a serious campaign against terrorists - secrecy, intelligence, political sagacity, quiet ruthlessness, covert actions that remain covert, above all infinite patience - all these are forgotten or overridden in a media-stoked frenzy for immediate results, and nagging complaints if they do not get them.

All this is what we have been witnessing over the past three or four weeks.

Could it have been avoided? Certainly, rather than



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what President Bush so unfortunately termed 'a crusade against evil', that is, a military campaign conducted by an alliance dominated by the United States, many people would have preferred a police operation conducted under the auspices of the United Nations on behalf of the international community as a whole, against a criminal conspiracy; whose members should be hunted down and brought before an international court, where they would receive a fair trial and, if found guilty, awarded an appropriate sentence. In an ideal world that is no doubt what would have happened.

But we do not live in an ideal world. The destruction of the twin towers and the massacre of several thousand innocent New York office-workers was not seen in the United States as a crime against 'the international community' to be appropriately dealt with by the United Nations; a body for which Americans have little respect when they have heard of it at all. For them it was an outrage against the people of America, one far surpassing in infamy even the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor. Such an insult to their honor was not to be dealt with by a long and meticulous police investigation conducted by international authorities, culminating in an even longer court case in some foreign capital, with sentences that would then no doubt be suspended to allow for further appeals. It cried for immediate and spectacular vengeance to be inflicted by their own armed forces.

And who can blame them? In their position we would have felt exactly the same. The courage and wisdom of President Bush in resisting the call for a strategy of vendetta has been admirable, but the pressure is still there, both within and beyond the Administration. It is a demand that can be satisfied only by military action - if possible rapid and decisive military action. There must be catharsis: the blood of five thousand innocent civilians demands it.

Again, President Bush deserves enormous credit for his attempt to implement the alternative paradigm. He has abjured unilateral action. He has sought, and received, a United Nations mandate. He has built up an amazingly wide-ranging coalition that truly does embody 'the international community' so far as such an entity exists.

Within a matter of days, almost, the United States has turned its back on the unilateralism and isolationism towards which it seemed to be steering, and resumed its former position as leader of a world community far more extensive than the so-called 'free world' of the old Cold War. Almost equally important, the President and his colleagues have done their best to explain to the American people that this will be a war unlike any other, and they must adjust their expectations accordingly. But it is still a war. The 'w' word has been used, and now cannot be

withdrawn; and its use has brought inevitable and irresistible pressure to use military force as soon, and as decisively as possible.

Now a struggle against terrorism, as we have discovered over the past century and not least in Northern Ireland, is unlike a war against drugs or a war against crime in one vital respect. It is fundamentally a 'battle for hearts and minds'; and it is worth remembering that that phrase was first coined in the context of the most successful campaign of the kind that the British Armed Forces have ever fought - the Malayan Emergency in the 1950s (a campaign incidentally that it took some fifteen years to bring to an end). Without hearts and minds one cannot obtain intelligence, and without intelligence terrorists can never be defeated.

There is not much of a constituency for criminals or drug-traffickers, and in a campaign against them the government can be reasonably certain that the mass of the public will be on its side. But as we all know, one man's terrorist is another man's freedom fighter. Terrorists can be successfully destroyed only if public opinion, both at home and abroad, supports the authorities in regarding them as criminals rather than heroes.

In the intricate game of skill played between terrorists and the authorities, as we discovered in both Palestine and Ireland, the terrorists have already won an important battle if they can provoke the authorities into using overt armed force against them. They will then be in a win-win situation. Either they will escape to fight another day, or they will be defeated and celebrated as martyrs. In the process of fighting them a lot of innocent civilians will certainly be hurt, which will further erode the moral authority of the government.

Who here will ever forget Black Sunday in Northern Ireland, when a few salvos of small-arms fire by the British Army gave the IRA a propaganda victory from which the British government was never to recover? And if so much harm can be done by rifle fire, what is one to say about bombing? I can only suggest that it is like trying to eradicate cancer cells with a blow-torch. Whatever its military justification, the bombing of Afghanistan, with the inevitable 'collateral damage' it causes, will gradually whittle away the immense moral ascendancy that we enjoyed as a result of the bombing of the World Trade Center.

I hate having to say this, but in six months time for much of the world that atrocity will be, if not forgotten, then remembered only as history; while every fresh picture on television of a hospital hit, or children crippled by land-mines, or refugees driven from their homes by western military action, will strengthen the hatred of our adversaries, recruit the ranks of the terrorists and sow fresh doubts in the minds of our supporters.

I have little doubt that the campaign in Afghanistan was undertaken only on the best available political and military advice, in full realization of its military difficulties and political dangers, and in the sincere belief that there was no alternative. It was, as the Americans so nicely put it, an AOS situation: 'All Options Stink'. But in compelling us to undertake it at all, the terrorists had taken the first and all-important trick.

I can also understand the military reasoning that drives the campaign. It is based on the political assumption that the terrorist network must be destroyed as quickly as possible before it can do any more damage. It further assumes that the network is master-minded by a single evil genius, Osama bin Laden, whose elimination will demoralise if not destroy his organisation. Bin Laden operates out of a country whose rulers refuse to yield him up to the forces of international justice. Those rulers must be compelled to change their minds. The quickest way to break their will is by aerial bombardment, especially since a physical invasion of their territory presents such huge if not insoluble logistical problems. Given these assumptions, what alternative did we have?

But the best reasoning, and the most flawless logic, is of little value if it starts from false assumptions. I have no doubt that voices were raised both in Washington and in Whitehall questioning the need and pointing out the dangers of immediate military action; but if they were, they were at once drowned out by the thunderous political imperative: Something Must be Done. The same voices no doubt also questioned the wisdom, if not the accuracy, of identifying bin Laden as the central and indispensable a figure in the terrorist network; demonising him for some people, but for others giving him the heroic status enjoyed by 'freedom-fighters' throughout the ages.

We are now in a horrible dilemma. If we 'bring him to justice' and put him on trial we will provide him with a platform for global propaganda. If we assassinate him - perhaps 'shot while trying to escape' - he will be a martyr. If he escapes he will be a Robin Hood. He can't lose. And even if he is eliminated, it is hard to believe that a global network that apparently consisting of people as intelligent and well-educated as they are dedicated and ruthless will not continue to function effectively until they are traced and dug out by patient and long-term operations of police and intelligence forces, whose activities will not, and certainly should not, hit the headlines. Such a process that, as the Chief of the Defence Staff rightly pointed out, may well take decades.

Now that the operation has begun it must be pressed to a successful conclusion; successful enough for

us to be able to disengage with a reasonable amount of honour and for the benefit of the tabloid headlines to claim 'victory' (though the very demand for 'victory' and the sub-Churchillian rhetoric that accompanies it shows how profoundly press and politicians still misunderstand the nature of the problem that confronts us.) Only after we have done that will it be possible to continue with the real struggle that I have described above; one in which there will be no spectacular battles, and no clear victory.

Sir Michael Boyce's analogy with the Cold War is valuable in another respect. Not only did it go on for a very long time: it had to be kept cold. There was a constant danger that it would be inadvertently toppled into a hot nuclear war, which everyone would catastrophically lose. The danger of nuclear war, at least on a global scale, has now thank God ebbed, if only for the moment, but it has been replaced by another, and one no less alarming; the likelihood of an on-going and continuous confrontation of cultures, that will not only divide the world but shatter the internal cohesion of our increasingly multi-cultural societies. And the longer the overt war continues against 'terrorism', in Afghanistan or anywhere else, the greater is the danger of that happening.

There is no reason to suppose that Osama bin Laden enjoys any more sympathy in the Islamic world than, say, Ian Paisley does in that of Christendom. He is a phenomenon which has cropped up several times in our history - a charismatic religious leader fanatically hostile to the West leading a cult that has sometimes gripped an entire nation. There was the Mahdi in the Sudan in the late nineteenth century, and the so-called 'Mad Mullah' in Somaliland in the early twentieth. Admittedly they presented purely local problems, although a substantial proportion of the British Army had to be mobilised to deal with the Mahdi and his followers.

The difference today is that such leaders can recruit followers from all over the world, and can strike back anywhere in the world. They are neither representative of Islam nor approved by Islam, but the roots of their appeal lies in a peculiarly Islamic predicament that has only intensified over the last half of the twentieth century: the challenge to Islamic culture and values posed by the secular and materialistic culture of the West, and their inability to come to terms with it.

This is a vast subject on which I have few qualifications to speak, but which we must understand if we are to have any hope, not so much of 'winning' the new 'Cold War', but of preventing it from becoming hot.

In retrospect, it is quite astonishing how little we have understood, or empathised with, the huge crisis that has faced that vast and populous section of the world stretching from the Mahgreb through the Middle East

and central Asia into South and South-East Asia and beyond to the Philippines: overpopulated, underdeveloped, being dragged headlong by the West into the post-modern age before they have come to terms with modernity. This is not a problem of poverty as against wealth, and I am afraid that it is symptomatic of our western materialism to suppose that it is. It is the far more profound and intractable confrontation between a theistic, land-based and traditional culture, in places little different from the Europe of the Middle Ages, and the secular material values of the Enlightenment .

I would like to think that, thanks to our imperial experience, the British understand these problems - or we certainly ought to - better than many others. So, perhaps even more so, do our neighbours the French. But for most Americans it must be said that Islam remains one vast *terra incognita* - and one, like all such blank areas on medieval maps, inhabited very largely by dragons.

This is the region where we have to wage the struggle for hearts and minds and win it if the struggle against terrorism is to succeed. The front line in the struggle is not Afghanistan. It is in the Islamic states where modernising governments are threatened by a traditionalist backlash: Turkey, Egypt, Pakistan, to name only the most

obvious. And as we know very well, the front line also runs through our own streets. For these people the events of 11 September were terrible, but they happened a long way away and in another world. Those whose sufferings as a result of western air raids or of Israeli incursions are nightly depicted on television are people, however geographically distant, with whom they can easily identify.

That is why prolongation of the war is likely to be so disastrous. Even more disastrous would be its extension, as American opinion seems increasingly to demand, in a 'Long March' through other 'rogue states' beginning with Iraq, in order to eradicate terrorism for good and all so that the world can live at peace. I can think of no policy more likely, not only to indefinitely prolong the war, but to ensure that we can never win it.

I understand that this afternoon, perhaps at this very moment, the Prime Minister is making a speech exhorting the British People to keep their nerve. It is no less important that we should keep our heads. □

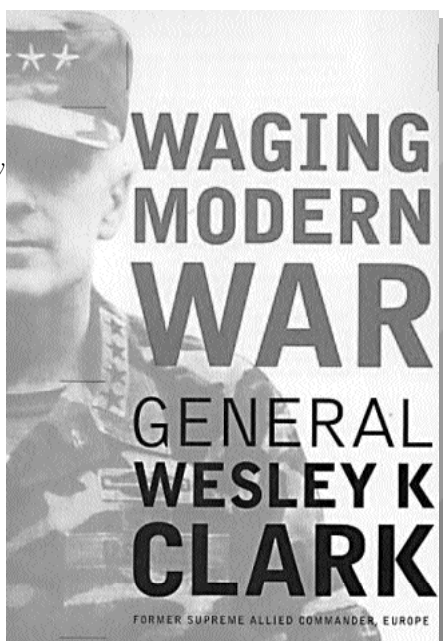
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