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ByRetort

Victims of The Israeli Bombing of Lebanon, July 24,2006

Victims of the Israeli bombing of Qana, Lebanon, July 24, 2006 (Photo: Tyler Ricks)

ALL QUIET ON THE EASTERN FRONT

WE HAVE NO WORDS FOR THE HORROR OF THE PRESENT, for the ghostly bodies showing through the plastic wrap. No words for the faces of despair and elation bubbling from the TV screen, faces of hatred and madness and dedication to death, faces that have had the truth of “collateral damage” played out to them over the cell-phone videos even before the sound of the drone has faded.

THE BALANCE OF POWER IN THE IMAGE-WORLD IS CHANGING.

No one who witnessed the moral bankruptcy of the media during the Iraq campaign can be left with the least illusion about the world the networks show us. But something is shifting in the pattern of image dissemination. The reality of “statecraft” and “deterrence” is more and more on view. And it is a reality that lies at the heart of modernity. For more than a century, modernity and state terror from the air – modernity and mass civilian death – have been mutually constitutive terms. But never before so instantly, so vividly, so ubiquitously.

AND THIS SITUATION – THIS VISIBILITY – PUTS THE FORCES OF ORDER IN A RAGE.

“Our federal government,” says Donald Rumsfeld, “is really only beginning to adapt its operations to the 21st century. Today we’re engaged in the first war in history – unconventional and irregular as it may be – in an era of e-mails, blogs, cell phones, Blackberrys, Instant Messaging, digital cameras, a global Internet with no inhibitions, hand-held videocameras, talk radio, 24-hour news broadcasts, satellite television. There’s never been a war fought in this environment before.” (Speech to the Council on Foreign Relations, 17 February 2006) It is all so unfair, sighs the Torturer-in-Chief. It makes our Terror indistinguishable from theirs.

- Three years after the Iraq invasion, what is the balance sheet of the new round of Empire? Is Rumsfeld’s moment of gloom to be taken seriously? Is defeat in the image war (if “defeat” names the net effect of Abu Ghraib, Gaza, Fallujah, Qana, et al.) part of a wider crisis of U.S. hegemony? It would be easy to paint a picture of a U.S. face to face with the failure of its grand design. The misery and agony of the Iraqi civil war; the endless surge of anger across the Muslim umma; the accession of Hamas to (pseudo) state power; Israel’s uncontrollable violence; the resilience of Hezbollah; the fear (part real, part affected) of a spreading crescent of resistance from southern Lebanon to Syria to Iraq to Iran; even the weird spectacle of Ahmadinejad and Hugo Chávez kissing over the Katyushas.... Can this possibly have been what Cheney and Aznar had in mind? Beware, however, of taking the ordinary (unforgivable) chaos of imperialism for a sign of Empire in trouble. Empires are mostly makeshift and drenched in blood. Stuff happens. The barbarians are coming. But Empires survive, even flourish, on their own disorder. Look again at the past three years, and ask yourself if the preponderant fact is not that the U.S. has got away with its cynical assertion of imperial will. The “international community” barely pretended to resist. Any accounting of the present state of U.S. world domination must keep open the possibility that the one superpower retains the ability to crush or marginalize its opponents, and go on getting what it wants. But pessimism need only go so far. Hegemony is built on force, but also on consent. Even the client-kings (the groveling prime ministers) can be silenced by the pornography of war.

- What do Iraq's ruins tell us about the limits of American power? Even the darkest cynic could not have foreseen the invasion's bleak aftermath. By late September 2004 – a “routine” month, said the Pentagon – the insurgents had launched more than 2,300 attacks. Half of the population could not safely cast a vote. Two years on, civilian mortality exceeds 40,000, 50,000 ... who can say? There are nearly forty attacks each day in Baghdad, almost one hundred countrywide. The morgues are full. Freedom and democracy are confined to the air-conditioned bunkers of the Green Zone. The vast slum world of Sadr City has become a forcing house for terror. Humvees roll through Fallujah with the bodies of dead Iraqis strapped to the hood like deer, brain matter cooking in the sun. Let us recall the words of the young Yorkshire militant who detonated himself in the London bombings: “Your democratically elected governments continuously perpetrate atrocities against my people, and your support of them makes you directly responsible...We will not stop this fight.” So much for the “new beginning” proclaimed by Bush and Blair two months ago.

- There are many more Iraqs in the making. As we write, hundreds of civilians in Gaza and Lebanon are falling victim to American bombs dropped by Israeli pilots flying American planes. The U.S. is almost alone in blocking a ceasefire, and the effects on its credibility in the region are plain to see. This knee-jerk endorsement of the new round of Israeli terror is only the latest in a long chain of examples of the U.S. state's infatuation with its uncanny clone. Whatever “strategic” thinking is in play at the moment – isolating Syria, putting an end to the Shiite inter-national, pulling Christian Lebanon back into the U.S. sphere of influence – something beyond reason appears to be in charge. The U.S. sees itself in the Israel mirror. It sees the modernity it most deeply believes in: “democratic” and consumerist, totally militarized, compulsively quick on the draw. Israel is allowed to deliver widespread death from above – to do so peremptorily and unrestrainedly – because the U.S. allows itself the same obscenity. No Israel “lobby” or Christian millennialism could push the Americans into such geo-political madness without this obsessive bonding between the hegemon and its Zionist double.

- Meanwhile, beyond the hardened borders of the American homeland a new geography of state terror is emerging. Its way stations are Afghanistan, Poland, and Romania, its backcountry a planetary gulag of black sites serviced by the apparatus of “rendition.” (Dredged from the history of American slavery, the term denotes the forced return of “fugitives from labor” to the plantations of the south.) Guantánamo is the public face of this new internationalism, concealing an extraterritorial netherworld of the detained and disappeared, a faceless cargo loaded onto unmarked jets by agents with “sterile identities.” The territory of the nation-state has always been more or less inconvenient to capital, which routinely relies on enclaves and entrepôts, offshoring and outsourcing. Now the “torture haven” has joined the tax shelter and maquiladora in the cartography of free enterprise.

- Secret terror abroad is matched, within the U.S. and Britain, by the state's ruthless drive to legitimize its own lawlessness. “Democratic” states have always finessed or ignored rules and charters when it suited them. But the current U.S./U.K. axis is now embarked on the re-imposition of absolute sovereign impunity, through the structural dismantling of the rule of law: torture and assassination are proclaimed as executive prerogative; international tribunals shrugged aside; habeas corpus and trial by jury revoked; personal privacy abolished; even the minor inconveniences of docile courts and craven legislatures are shunted to the sidelines. The new Hobbesian state seeks not only to unfetter its every movement but also to intimidate and isolate its citizens – all under the rubric of “security.” Once upon a time, the law provided a genuine means of defense against the excesses of power; but such a strategy depended on the state's willingness to acknowledge its own limits. No such willingness survives. Effective opposition once again lies solely with popular resistance, with direct action and pressure from the streets; the state's wholesale erasure of legal restraints is fast emptying out the time-honored language of “human rights.”

- What, ultimately, is the health of capitalism in the present age of war? Is oil still the tonic of the times? The occupation and demolition of Iraq were never intended to feed America's petroleum addiction. Neither were they meant to capture a single scarce resource. The White House oilmen dreamt of a war paid for by oil, but with primitive accumulation – the seizure of a vast new realm of raw materials and potential labor power – as the goal. History proved otherwise: if the U.S. can do what it wants, it may not get what it wants. Iraqi oil is a pitiful shambles: the oil wells are silent, wrecked pipelines and flow stations the casualties of civil war, while theft and corruption fuel not the U.S. Treasury but the insurgents. The Americans still hope that the new Petroleum Law will, as intended, offer up two-thirds of the Iraqi reserves to the supermajors, but Bremer's dreams of exemplar privatization have gone with the wind. Predictably, the oil markets have thrived on insurgency and disorder. ExxonMobil has posted its highest net profits in history: the four supermajors gained over \$40 billion in 2005. But Big Oil seems anxious, with good reason. Yesterday's Congressional warmongers now point to "unreasonable profits" and call for a "windfall oil profits tax." On the distant horizon, prospects are still more ominous. The line between profit and chaos is thin. The collapse of the U.S. global oil acquisition strategy has never been closer. Evo Morales nationalizes Bolivian oilfields, Hugo Chávez champions a more assertive OPEC, and the Chinese – more ruthless and corrupt than any supermajor – have the African and Caspian fields within reach. What the oil business wants – to quote a CIA operative – is a stable apple cart. What military neo-liberalism has so far delivered is simply blood and fire. Not oil.

- We may, or may not, be living through the start of World War III. The all-knowing networks may yet precipitate a global conflict in which tens of millions, rather than tens of thousands, die. What we have – what we face in the immediate future – is already bad enough. Trying to describe the pattern of interests and ideologies at stake in the bloodbath, we find ourselves reverting to the best of those who faced the first world conflagration 100 years ago. "Capitalist statecraft is caught in a trap of its own making, and cannot exorcize the spirits it has conjured up." (Rosa Luxemburg, Junius Pamphlet [1915])

- Capitalism and militarism are distinct formations, each with a logic of its own. So are capitalism and nationalism, capitalism and modernity, capitalism and the state. Likewise anti-capitalism and revolutionary Islam. But in each doublet, capitalism seems to us at present the determinant force. It provides the conditions, it sets the limits, and its necessary instability (its insatiable appetite for world-making) drives the wider chaos forward. The need for new markets is unstoppable, but it seems they cannot always be carved out through force of arms. The dispossession of Iraq produced only violence and bloodshed. The WTO lies in ruins in Doha. Yet the original sin of robbery must be repeated if capital accumulation is to continue. Capitalist "statecraft" – and the possibility of forms of resistance to it – still hold the key to the century to come.

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