War of words: **RICK SALUTIN** and **MARCUS GEE** cross swords in an e-mail replica o

Playwright, novelist and National Newspaper Award-winning columnist Rick Salutin writes on a wide range of themes and appears each Friday in the Comment section.

Also an NNA winner and columnist, Marcus Gee has written on international affairs for The Globe and Mail since 1991, covering conflicts in Kosovo, Indonesia and East Timor.

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Rick Salutin begins:
Here's my problem with calling this a war, as you have insisted. Calling it war leads to treating it in conventional, warlike ways: designating a nation as an enemy; bombing its territory with attendant destruction and casualties of innocents.

In the gulf war and the attack on Yugoslavia, at least there was no danger of retaliation. I think that was immoral and vile, but it had no concrete downside, or so it seemed then. Now, we're in a new situation. We know the other side, i.e. the bombers of Sept. 11 can inflict severe damage here with minimal means and, more important, they know it. Do you want more of this stuff happening here? I thought the point was to prevent it.

Look at the results already: The bombing in Afghanistan has been inaccurate, killed aid workers and other civilians or hit "fairly empty" (U.S. Secretary of Defence Donald Rumsfeld) training sites — none of which harms current capabilities of terrorists, but increases their morale and sense of righteousness. But once bombing starts, Rumsfeld and the military must justify it — an excuse for further bombing.

If retaliation happens here, as is likely, there's pressure to bomb the hell out of "them" even more thoroughly, which unleashes further response. So you have the cycle of mutual devastation. It doesn't take long to get into massive destruction "over there" and hideous scenarios here: biochem, nuclear, the whole long, yet simple list we keep hearing. And what has been accomplished? Terror has increased.

The question ought to be how to damp down the danger of escalation while dealing with the terrorists. Since they are a small group of dedicated people, a "police action," as it's called, makes the only sense, even if it's rhetorically unsatisfying to some. Find and deal with them, covertly if possible, including the ugly notion of "disappearing" them. I'm not talking pacifism. Their leadership and most dedicated cadres will not be dissuaded by any actions to deal with "root causes" of terror.

The Bush people have, so far, been adroit at deploying the rhetoric of war (more or less obligatory in the U.S. context) while containing the forces that could escalate the cycle. I see this as having to do with the core of the Bush team being technocrats, such as Colin Powell and business people such as Dick Cheney and W. himself. The economic effects of Sept. 11 have been understated but scary for those who think largely in terms of corporate profit, and more Sept. 11s may frighten the hell out of them.

I consider this a plus, compared to having Al Gore or Bill Clinton in power for this crisis. The Bush people have thus far sidelined those who think primarily in military terms (the Pentagon) or ideologically (Condoleeza Rice). But now that they've started bombing, it gets trickier. You can see the slippery slope in their notice to the UN that other countries may be added to their list.

Come to think of it, you yourself, among others, have talked about

the danger of falling into Osama bin Laden's "trap," i.e. creating a global showdown between Islam and the West, at the same time as you've been demanding the war mentality most likely to lead to it.
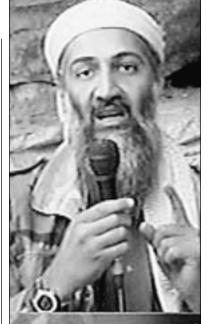
Marcus Gee responds:
What you seem to be saying is that we shouldn't hit them because they might hit back. If that were our policy, we could never respond to aggression of any kind.

As George W. Bush recognized right away, the attacks were an act of war. That is certainly how its perpetrators see it. In their videotaped statements, bin Laden and his associates have called this the first act in a jihad, a holy war, against the United States and all its citizens.

Given the gravity of the threat, hitting back is not only defensible but unavoidable. The United States and its allies can't expect to prevent future attacks through defensive measures alone. Even with airport security tight as a drum and air marshals on every plane, the terrorists could simply stroll into a shopping mall or a sports stadium and detonate a suicide bomb. The only way that Americans (and the rest of us) can feel safe again is if this network is destroyed root and branch.

Police action alone won't accomplish that, even the covert or deadly kind, because the network is hiding behind the Taliban. Washington gave the Taliban a month to surrender bin Laden and close his camps, and all it did was play games. That's why the bombs are falling now.

I don't relish these attacks any more than you do. I don't think Americans relish them either. Despite what some people may say, this is no blind and vengeful lashing back. It's a defensive war, designed to prevent the future attacks that the terrorists have promised.

NATO recognized that when its 19 members invoked the part of the NATO charter that allows them to strike back when one of them comes under attack. The United Nations, similarly, has recognized the right to self-defence that applies to all UN members.

The risks in this war are obvious to everyone — the risk to innocent civilians, the risk of a larger conflict, the risk of an Islamic backlash. But as Tony Blair of Britain has put it, the risks of inaction are far worse.

Salutin:
Communicating on this subject is even harder than I'd expected. I don't think anything I said proposed inaction. But the trouble with declaring war and saying you're going to destroy them "root and branch," however satisfying it may be as oratory (or not), is that it tells you nothing about what you are actually going to do.

If it implies conventional war, as we now have, with missiles and high-altitude bombs, we can already see it's ineffective and counterproductive. It mainly encourages and motivates the other side. What I meant by a police action isn't cops at airports; it's the truly nasty, black ops stuff that went on in the Cold War. I don't like that stuff, but you can at least say it's effective and unlikely to precipitate a catastrophe.

I also think it's muddle-headed

and self-defeating to accept bin Laden's contention that this is a jihad, or civilizational clash, or good versus evil, or what have you, and thus fight it on his preferred terms. I grant that kind of conflict is what the fundamentalists want, but you can see that even they aren't confident they can gather support on that basis. If the West could defuse two time bombs, Palestine and the sanctions, it would leave the fundamentalists with a retrograde, mainly religious agenda which the rest of the Muslim world does not seem particularly inclined to support, at least not into a massive war with the West. The fundamentalists would still yearn for their jihad, but have a lot harder time making it happen.

I also think it's worth noting that none of that agenda — the secular and even the religious component — amounts to a cry to go after the West or the U.S. in their homelands. It's more like a sacralized Islamic call of "Yankee, go home and leave us alone." Not quite a matter of cosmic conflict.

Gee:
So, if we just do what bin Laden wants us to do, he'll go away? That is the import of what you are saying. If only we could get the sanctions off Iraq, and the Israelis out of the Palestinians' hair, then his support would dry up and everything would be all right.

Two problems with that. First, it rewards terrorism. If bin Laden discovers that he can make the United States change its Middle East policies by crashing planes into buildings, then he will keep crashing planes into buildings. Others like him will be encouraged to do similar things. If we have learned anything in three decades or so of fighting terrorism, is that making concessions under threat is fatal.

Second, the changes you are talking about would not satisfy him. He doesn't just want the Israelis out of the Palestinians' hair, he wants them out of the Middle East. He thinks they're an alien, infidel presence in the "Muslim nation" and he will not be satisfied until "the Jews" (as he puts it) are wiped from the map.

Now, I agree that creating a Palestinian state and lifting the blockade of Iraq would remove a grievance that many Muslims hold against the United States. But how, exactly, should Washington go about doing that? It has been working at least since Camp David in 1978 to broker a Middle East agreement that would give the Israelis the security they need and the Palestinians the homeland they deserve.

For various reasons, the brokering didn't work. What should Washington do now? Cut Israel off at the knees? Order it to pull out of the West Bank and Gaza Strip tomorrow, without any deal on borders of security, and let the chips fall where they may?

As for Iraq, the United Nations (not just the United States) has kept its partial blockade on Iraq because Saddam Hussein refused to give up his weapons of mass destruction — chemical, biological, nuclear. If it simply lifts the blockade now and

walks away, Saddam could do something that would make Sept. 11 look like a picnic. Yes, the sanctions are hard on the Iraqi people, but that is mainly because Saddam refuses to distribute the food and medicine he is allowed to buy.

I don't like the way bin Laden is framing this fight as a "clash of civilizations" either. He doesn't represent civilization; he represents its antithesis. But I do think it's a fight between good and evil. Bin Laden is the nearest to an embodiment of pure evil I've come across in my lifetime. A creature like him can't be explained away or pandered to. He must be fought.

That means all sorts of things: better policing, better security, diplomatic pressure and your "black ops." All these things are being tried. But it may also mean going in and overthrowing his protector, the Taliban, a regime that keeps little girls from going to school. Would that be such a tragedy?

Salutin:
The central task is not to make bin Laden go away; it's to strip him of the support he has throughout the Arab and Muslim worlds, which makes him the formidable threat he is. For example (The Guardian): "Palestinians sat transfixed in front of their television sets as the satellite channel . . . rebroadcast portions of bin Laden's tirade. . . . From the kitchen at the back . . . Widad Abu Akar . . . screamed, 'Don't you dare say he's a terrorist.' In the past year the house has been hit five times by Israeli tank shells and missiles; and now bin Laden has mentioned it worldwide on television."

Fundamentalism acquired this appeal because secular forces failed to deliver on the crying social, political and economic needs of the region. The bizarre result is that antidemocratic fundamentalists are becoming the electorate's choice, as in Algeria, where the military denied them a rightful victory. In many African states, Muslim fundamentalists may not (yet, anyway) share the terror premises of bin Laden, but do embrace the notion of Islamic law replacing secular models. This is a set of forces which can't be wished away. The question is, can they be countered or moderated through resolving the sorest points, like Palestine and the brutal sanctions?

Would that mean rewarding terrorists? Hardly. The cause of the Palestinians and dying Iraqi kids does not belong to the terrorists; they just exploit those causes. It means depriving them of that chance and the support they gain thereby, especially since you grant that Palestinians deserve a state and Iraqi kids don't deserve to die. It isn't giving in to terror, it's doing the right thing, and reaping certain benefits.

How could the U.S. do it? Pressure the Israelis into abandoning the settlements in the occupied territories, and give security guarantees. The U.S. has gone through greater contortions, like underwriting Islamic fundamentalism and Osama bin Laden and Saddam, then demonizing them. They can manage these shifts. There would surely be a political price to pay in the U.S., but Bush and the Republicans are better able to pay it than the Democrats were. Bush is President because the Jewish vote in West Palm Beach didn't get properly registered.

The media price would be more severe: charges of appeasement by columnists like George Will, Charles Krauthammer, yourself I guess. But the payoff, a damping down of the appeal of terrorism, would be worth the rough ride, and could be sold to Americans now better than at any time in the past. As for Saddam, reincorporate him as the Western client he once was, or overthrow him, as the U.S. could have done during the gulf war and chose not to.

As for your thoughts on this being about good versus evil, embodiments of pure evil, etc. — this language virtually mirrors that of bin Laden about the West, and the problem with it is, it does not lead toward a lasting solution. Get rid of bin Laden, but create masses of new followers in his steps? Fanatics may always be with us, but where possible it's a good idea to try to keep them on the sidelines rather than create situations in which they and their message can thrive.

The other thing that scares the crap out of me in this kind of language is the pretext it offers for re-

pression of debate and opposition in our own society. In the U.S. this week, we saw Bush use it to deny Congress information; then to pressure the news media to self-censor. Fighting evil is a great excuse for shutting down (or up) everyone you dislike. Up here, we heard calls for cabinet ministers to be sacked, just because they sat through a speech by [University of British Columbia professor] Sunera Thobani that some people found offensive.

Gee:
I'm glad you mentioned Sunera Thobani and her fiery speech, the one that "some people found offensive." When she let fly at "bloodsoaked" U.S. foreign policy and called the United States "the most dangerous and most powerful global force unleashing horrific levels of violence," she expressed a view that is, sad to say, pretty common — the view that if Americans were attacked, it was in some wayy their own fault.

The rubble had barely settled in Lower Manhattan before people like The Globe's Naomi Klein, The Toronto Star's Haroon Siddiqui and, in a milder way, even you, were lining up to explain that they had brought it on themselves by acting like bullies in the world.

That struck me as not only offensive (you lean over a guy just run over by a bus and tell him he should have looked both ways before crossing) but misleading. People like bin Laden may oppose what the United States does, but what they truly hate is what it is — the home, as they see it, of materialism, secularism, licentiousness, etc. You can't defuse that by fixing the Arab-Israeli impasse or lifting sanctions against Iraq.

Blaming Sept. 11 on U.S. foreign policy is like blaming the Holocaust on the Treaty of Versailles. It may be true that the way the Allied powers stepped on Germany after the First World War helped to lay the groundwork for the rise of nazism, but you wouldn't say that the day we liberated Auschwitz. You wouldn't say, as people like Thobani now do: "Yes, we deplore this mass slaughter, but we have to look