

# The debate raging across the nation: Is the Afghan campaign justified?



The U.S. perspective (from far left): A B-52 bomber drops its load; grieving New Yorker Michael James with a poster of his wife Gricelda, who worked as an administrative assistant at the World Trade Center; missiles addressed to Osama bin Laden waiting to be launched this week by the USS Enterprise and, below, U.S. soldiers undergo special-operations training at Fort Bragg, N.C.

RALPH HALLMON/AP, PETER CHENEY/THE GLOBE AND MAIL, RABIH MOGHRABI/AFP, GARY KIEFFER/ZUMA PRESS



# FACTORY CATASTROPHES EAST DIPLOMACY PROMISES CAPITULATE



Middle Eastern perspectives (from left): Osama bin Laden in his most recent videotape address; Afghans survey the rubble after U.S. cruise missiles hit Kabul; an Iraqi woman with her ailing child in a Baghdad hospital; a Palestinian youth prepares to throw a stone during an anti-Israeli protest on the West Bank this week.

AP, MOHAMMAD AZAM/AFP, KARIM SAHIB/STF, AP

at the root causes. The Nazis had grievances, and we in the West helped create them."

If the analogy seems far-fetched, remember that in the 1930s lots of people said just that: "Germany has grievances, over unfair war reparations and over the treatment of Sudeten Germans, and these must be understood and addressed."

No, the roots of the Holocaust lay in hatred (anti-Semitism) and ideology (fascism), and the roots of Sept. 11 lie in hatred (anti-Americanism) and ideology (radical Islam). To say otherwise — to say that the terrorists were driven to do what they did because of political or social conditions (they're deprived because they're deprived) — is to absolve them of moral responsibility for what they did. It lets them off the hook.

Yes, of course, we should try to defuse the grievances that so many Muslims seem to feel. Yes, we should try to break the Arab-Israeli impasse (and since Sept. 11 the Americans have been working to do just that by, among other things announcing support for a Palestinian state). Yes, we should try to fix the Iraq problem, and I'm glad you think we should consider over-throwing Saddam Hussein.

But I doubt that that is going to keep fanatics like bin Laden, as you say, "on the sidelines." Whatever gave birth to them, they have a life of their own that is beyond politics. Such an evil — and calling it that can't be avoided if we are going to beat these people, even if it offends your ears — has to be fought head-on, not explained away as the result of U.S. foreign policy or root causes.

**Salutin:**

I think it's perfectly arguable that U.S. policy is frequently, even basically, violent and bad for many humans on the planet. Therefore, it should be changed. And if it were, that would make the breeding grounds of terror less fertile.

But giving an explanation of why people around the world are justly pissed off about the effects of American foreign policy on their lives is in no way the same as issu-

ing a licence to some religiously crazed fanatics to slaughter innocent members of the American population, and then blaming those victims, and anyone who thinks it is, is as crazy as the terrorists are. It's a critique of U.S. policy, full of limits but useful nevertheless, and appropriate.

So take the guy run over by the bus and told that he brought it on himself. That sounds like a lousy experience and I don't know anyone, even on the left, who would do it. But if he gets up and staggers on without looking where he's going, you might point it out, with the intention of helping him not to get bashed again.

The point is not, or should not be, to lay blame — no matter how much people compulsively seem to enjoy playing that game, left, right and everywhere. The point is to understand, as fully as possible, what brought the situation to this point in order to prevent future disasters.

You say none of these questions like foreign policy touches on what bin Laden really hates. Well, who actually knows the insides of his hatreds and, if they do, who actually cares, as long as he doesn't have power to do much about it?

So I'd rather concentrate on what is giving him this power, which is at least to a large extent the sense of injustice felt by so many. Deal with that, since you aren't going to get anywhere arguing him out of his views anyway, no more than you would with any fundamentalist, in Afghanistan or on network TV. Without political resonance, if he wants to commit criminal or terrorist acts, he'd be just another criminal.

Something similar goes for the question about the roots of the Holocaust. You have theories; so do others. They may be true but they can't be proved. For the practical purposes of living our lives, the questions that matter are: Can anything be done to prevent such disasters or were they inevitable? You can at least say, in the case of the Holocaust, a lot more could have been tried than was tried, and a lot should not have been done that was done.

Your weary tone when you get to some of the specifics (yes, we should do this; yes, we should do that) makes me feel that politics

bores you a little in this momentous time and you're anxious to get on to the big stuff like metaphysical evil and moral responsibility.

Personally, that stuff interests me too; it always has. But getting too much metaphysics mixed up in politics is almost always a recipe for social catastrophe (I'm thinking especially of the history of messianism). So I'd like to cast the bin Ladens and other absolutists (including anyone who takes seriously the notion of a cosmic battle between good and evil) out of the political arena by acting intelligently within the political realm.

As for Sunera Thobani, as I tried to say at more length in yesterday's Globe, I don't disagree with anything she said about the generally violent, exploitative record of U.S. foreign policy. But I do have a beef over what she failed to say in that speech: namely, that groups like bin Laden's are not legitimate representatives of the aggrieved and exploited, who are being used and exploited all over again for the purposes of a violent, authoritarian, racist, misogynist and obscurantist ideology.

**Gee:**

I'm not bored with politics. If Sept. 11 had never happened, it still would be imperative to end the futile struggle between Arabs and Israelis and to end the suffering of the Iraqi people under Saddam Hussein. But even if Washington could wave its wand and do both those things, I'm not sure it would defuse the sense of grievance that makes the Muslim world a breeding ground for terrorism.

Just as it's hard to know the insides of bin Laden's hatred, it's hard to know what makes so many Muslims so mad at the United States (though it's important to remember that many also admire it). One reason may be simple poverty, leading to envy and resentment of the rich and showy Americans.

Another may be the incitement of generally anti-American and often anti-Semitic media in countries such as Egypt.

Who knows? What I do know is that it's wrong to lay all this at the feet of U.S. foreign policy, especially at a time like this. Whatever the savants in the Cairo coffee shops may say, it's simply not true

that the United States has oppressed Muslims. In fact, in at least three occasions over the past decade when Washington employed its military power — in Bosnia, in Kosovo and in the Gulf after Iraq's invasion of Kuwait — those whom it was fighting to defend were Muslims.

We could argue all night about whether U.S. policy "is frequently, even basically violent and bad for many humans on the planet." (Tell that to the Kosovo Albanians who were freed from Serb terror. Tell that to the Somalis who were rescued from starvation when U.S. troops intervened to help end a famine.) What is wrong is to jump up right after 5,000 people perished in New York and say, "Aha, the chickens come home to roost."

You say that picking apart U.S. foreign policy right now doesn't give licence to the terrorists. I'm not so sure. When you condemn American misdeeds in the same breath as condemning Sept. 11, you draw a parallel — a moral equivalence — between what was done to Americans then and what Americans have done in the past. Intentional or not, that lends legitimacy to the terrorists.

**Salutin:**

So, we end with a call for silence and the curtailment of critical thought. And just how long should this go on? When do those of you on the right-thinking side of things tell those of us over here that we now may continue our critique of the way the world is going, U.S. policy included, without lending legitimacy to the bombers of the World Trade Center? This really smells of the worst days of the Cold War. Anyone who criticizes the United States for any reason . . . well, you know the drill.

What really dismays me about the current mess, aside from the potential for immensely greater death and destruction, is the way it has sent this society careening back in the direction of some of its worst impulses. Like xenophobia. Just talk to anyone who looks vaguely Arab or Muslim about what it's been like out there for the past month. And not just in the streets but in the genteel pages of The Globe ("I will never see another devout, turban-wearing Muslim without wondering — unfairly, I admit . . . was he part of it?"), the smugness and sense of cultural superiority, expressed by Italy's Silvio Berlusconi and endorsed by Robert Fulford in The National Post. The impulse to self-hate, reflected by

the desperate search for a Canadian connection to the Sept. 11 attacks, which was never found. The anxious need for American approval, reflected in the horror that we weren't mentioned in one of Bush's speeches. The fear to criticize, others and ourselves, because it is . . . dangerous?

Tell me, what is dangerous about discussing the misdeeds of U.S. policy "in the same breath" as what happened on Sept. 11? Not because they are equivalent, or because the one caused the other, but because they are connected. Related. The world is a big, interconnected place, at least the one I live in. It's not divided into discrete, mutually repelling spheres of light and darkness, good and evil, the way it is in the realms of myth and theology, and the way you sometimes, though not always, seem to describe it. Who, for instance, gave Osama bin Laden his big boost, leading to him being the threat he is to the West today? The USA and the CIA! Complexity? You bet.

All the best

**Gee:**

I'm not asking you to stop thinking critically. I'm asking you to start. For years, people like you have been caricaturing Americans as gun-toting, Bible-thumping crusaders who try to cram Big Macs and the American Way down the throats of an innocent world. In this cartoon planet, everything bad can be traced back to Washington, from ruined rain forests to Third World sweatshops to (these days) Osama bin Laden.

I'll tell you why that's dangerous: because it incites hatred against Americans. There's a direct line between the irrational anti-Americanism that is rife in so many parts of the world and the attacks of Sept. 11. Have you noticed that many of the things bin Laden and his ilk criticize about the United States — its supposed arrogance, its soulless materialism, its junk culture, its predatory capitalism — are echoed almost to the word by its critics in the West.

(If you think that sort of thing doesn't incite hatred, consider that Islamic militants say to Americans what anti-Semites say to Jews: That if only they'd be less pushy, less arrogant, less money-grubbing, then people might not hate them so much. It's no coincidence that bin Laden spews hate against Jews and Americans with equal passion.)

I'm interested that you mention the Cold War, because the same sort of thing happened in those days. Every time the Soviets did something terrible, apologists rushed to point out that the Americans had once done something just as bad.

Let's call this the "yes but" response. Yes, the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan is probably a bad thing, but what about Vietnam? Yes, it's wrong to jail Soviet Jews for wanting to emigrate to Israel, but what about the blacks who went to jail in the Deep South for fighting segregation? Yes, Moscow sent dissidents to the gulag, but what about all the Americans persecuted during the McCarthy-era witch hunts? The aim was to equate the flaws of

the world's greatest democracy with the crimes of its greatest tyrant.

Now the same crowd is saying the same "yes but" about Sept. 11. Yes, it was a tragedy, but what about U.S. support for Israel, what about the sanctions against Iraq, what about the whole "blood-soaked" history of U.S. foreign policy?

Whatever you may wish, this sort of thing does lend legitimacy to the terrorists. It also weakens our own effort to confront them. One reason that Soviet communism survived so long despite its manifest failures is that intellectuals in the West refused to see it as it was — not as an alternative way of organizing society, as valid in its own way as our own, but as a hate-filled utopian ideology headed by people who would sacrifice any number of lives to achieve their goal of remaking the world. It took an old cornball like Ronald Reagan to call it what it was: an evil empire. People laughed at him for saying that, as they laugh now when George Bush talks about the "evil doers," but saying it helped to strip away the varnish of legitimacy that the Soviets had enjoyed for so many years. We have to confront bin Laden's hate-filled people with the same unblinking honesty. Instead of echoing their twisted critique of the United States, we have to denounce it as the dangerous, demonizing prejudice that it is.

If we really want to go out on a limb, we might even try saying that there are good things about the United States and the values it represents. It's not cultural superiority to say the spread of American ideals like individual liberty and economic freedom have allowed the people in the Western world to achieve a higher level of comfort and freedom than any group in history. It's not smug to say the universal rights that have flowered most in the United States, Canada and other Western countries — the right to free speech, to choose those who govern us, to equal treatment before the law, to equal status for men and women — are valid for everyone. Ask the people of Taiwan, who have embraced democracy (while at the same time holding on to their Chinese culture). Countless others around the world would do the same, given half a chance.

Am I saying we should stop criticizing the Americans now that they are under attack? Of course not. There's a lot to criticize — capital punishment, hostility toward the United Nations, racial division. Americans do it all the time themselves. For all their essential faith in the American way of life, they're the most self-critical people in the world.

So please don't say you're being silenced. I'm not trying to shut you up. I just happen to think you're wrong. We're having an argument. That's allowed in our society — and one of the reasons it's worth fighting for.

**WHO'S RIGHT? YOU DECIDE**  
Write and let us know what you think. [focus@globeandmail.ca](mailto:focus@globeandmail.ca)