



ADC SPECIAL REPORT

A periodic publication of the B'nai B'rith Anti-Defamation Commission Inc
No.20, May 2004

Editor's Introduction

ADC Special Report 20 does not deal with specifically Australian matters, but rather with an aspect of the larger issue of Western culture that informs modern Australian thought. In our article, Professor Victor Davis Hanson argues that the war against terror, particularly in Iraq, falls into insignificance in comparison to the culture war in the West between liberals and utopians.

Professor Victor Davis Hanson is Professor of Classics at California State University at Fresno. He is the author of some one hundred scholarly articles and editorials on classical and military history, and contemporary culture. His most recent books include *An Autumn of War*, *Carnage and Culture*, and *The Soul of Battle*. He has written for the *Claremont Review of Books*, the *Wall Street Journal*, *New York Times*, *The Weekly Standard*, and many other publications, and writes regular columns for *National Review Online*.

The views expressed are those of Professor Hanson, and do not necessarily reflect those of the ADC. If any readers have questions or comments, please contact me at zygier@bigpond.net.au.

Geoffrey Zygier
Editor

Wars for the West

Victor Davis Hanson

Can we stop for a moment, take a deep breath, and remember the hysteria of the last three years—and then learn something from it?

What did we do to deserve September 11? Cannot we provide a Marshall Plan for the Middle East? Who let our guard down—who became paranoid and passed the Patriot Act? Shouldn't we at least listen to what bin Laden is saying?

Why kill innocent civilians in Afghanistan? The British and Russians failed and so will we. The peaks are too high; the Northern Alliance is a sham. We can't fight during Ramadan. There are too few troops. After four weeks, let's face it: we are in a Vietnam quagmire. Who let bin Laden and Mullah Omar escape? Consensual government will never work with these people. We murdered tens of thousands of innocent Afghans. The country is no better off than before. Can't we get NATO or the UN into Kabul? Are our air-dropped food packages deliberately made to look like cluster bombs—and laced as well with fatty peanut-butter and jelly?

Who are these neocons? Wasn't the invasion cooked-up years ago for the Likud party? Don't preempt or be unilateral in Iraq—but who screwed up in not preempting before 9-11? If we strike Saddam Hussein there will be millions of refugees. Thousands of Americans will die. Moderate governments will fall. We will kill millions of Iraqis. The oil fields will go up in smoke. We want only cheap gas—we will cause gas to skyrocket if we go in. Pay the poor Turks—don't be blackmailed by them. There are far too few troops. It will be a bloodbath—it was a bullying walkover.

Our troops will be gassed; where is the gas? The sandstorm has ruined our momentum; we are in a quagmire. We will lose 3,000 troops taking Baghdad. The coalition is a sham; don't insult Bulgaria. We protected oil ministries while they looted 180,000 precious objects in the museum.

Why did he strut on the aircraft carrier? Why can't we find Saddam—why humiliate him with a dental exam? Was it really necessary to show the corpses of his sons? Why were they embalmed? Why isn't there more electric power? Be careful not to antagonize Sadr—who let Sadr get out of control? We are losing Afghanistan while we fight in Iraq. Rid the country of the Baathists; be careful in disbanding the Iraqi army. The Shiites are our friends—the Shiites are fanatics. Stay loyal to the Kurds; the Kurds are grasping troublemakers. More troops are needed. We need more Iraqis on the street or more of the UN or soldiers from Muslim countries or NATO to the rescue.

Do we remember the revolving door of hysterical critics who have periodically weighed in—a Noam Chomsky, Michael Moore, Norman Mailer, Alice Walker,

Barbara Streisand, Al Franken, Jessica Lange, Dixie Chicks, or Tim Robbins? Remember Scott Ritter, those forgettable congressmen who went to prewar Baghdad, and all the assorted Europeans who employed Nazi metaphors to demonize the invasion of Iraq? All of them did their small part to convince us that we were either crazy or immoral for taking out a mass murderer.

We have been fighting two wars all along. The easier one was against the fascists in the Middle East, whom we demolished in Afghanistan in less than eight weeks and routed in Iraq in three—while rounding them up worldwide and preventing another 9-11 attack here at home. But the other challenge? Now that has been nearly impossible to win. For here in the West we are split into two widely divergent groups who disagree about almost everything that has transpired since September 11, a cataclysmic event that apparently exposed a widening fault line.

On the one side are those who believe in Western exceptionalism, the unique menu of individual freedom, personal liberty, consensual government, capitalism, rationalism, free markets, religious tolerance and self-critique. These believe that Western liberalism historically has been the only hope for mankind, inasmuch as it is an evolving concept that allows criticism and change, and incorporates widely divergent religions and races under its singular cultural aegis. Western societies are multiracial, not multicultural as a Rwanda or Iraq, and thus offer divergent peoples the common ground of shared values within the now much maligned nation state.

The West is, of course, not perfect; but its sins are those of mankind, of which it seeks to ameliorate through constant moral questioning. For those who embrace these values, our miracle of security, affluence, and freedom is entirely logical, and of course allows people a level of decency and civility not found elsewhere in the world—whether in the commonplace that means water that doesn't make you sick, toilet paper in public restrooms, cars that halt at stop signs, and lines that queue up rather than mobs that rush, or in the exalted sense a Bill of Rights, media that are free, and officials who are accountable.

This classically liberal vision is always under assault on the left by utopian totalitarians, devils who demand coercive government powers to force us to be angels, and on the right by autocratic romantics who believe in the superiority of a pure religion, race, or nationality. Thus we must defend the promise of the West and its manifestation in America almost constantly. Indeed, it seems to me in these trying times that the greater sin is for thinking people to remain silent and allow the idea of America to be slurred without retort than it is for the ignorant to so breezily condemn it. We made no claims that we were perfect, only far better than the alternative and thus had the moral obligation and indeed the power and skill to defeat our enemies and preserve our culture.

On the other hand in this great divide at home are civilization's discontents. Perhaps it is the comfort of Western liberality, affluence, and leisure that has made them so smug, guilt-ridden and hypercritical, inasmuch as so many are

so upscale. Or maybe it is a sincere belief that American society is inherently exploitive and believes only in an equality of opportunity rather than their own far more important equality of results.

Many seem aristocratic and resent a radically egalitarian popular culture that caters to those well outside the university, sophisticated media, or the general intelligentsia. After all, America pays a lot more attention to “American Idol” and an array of grasping wannabees on “The Apprentice” than to Guggenheim-prize winners, university-press poets, and independent film-makers. Those who are very skeptical of what America is about seem very unlikely to go to NASCAR, listen to talk radio, join Rotary, or own a plumbing supply business.

For the last three years these most influential Americans among the intelligentsia have argued that the United States either should not, or could not, retaliate against our enemies. We lacked both the power and a clear sense of moral right to take the “law” into our own hands and move unilaterally. And so every step of the way, in almost every 24-hour news cycle, we have seen a litany of criticisms about our ability or right to take action. Such fury has been deductive—preconceived distrust of the United States always looking for and finding yet another proof that we are either wrong or weak.

If the former group of defenders of the West accepts the tragic view of mankind—we are all flawed and thus seek to craft a civilization that can ameliorate our more glaring sins in the brief time allotted to us on earth—the latter is surely therapeutic: give us enough money, education, or power and we can create a perfect person who will worship reason rather than a mere religious totem, and thus soon make the world a perfectly fair and equitable place. For some, the pantheon is a Churchill, C.S. Lewis, or Tolkien, for others Michel Foucault and Edward Said.

So now we come to the earthquake of Iraq, and the divide has become a gaping abyss. Yes, there is real controversy over troop levels, the mission and purpose of our stay, and the costs of reconstructing Iraq. But behind the conundrum rest very, very different views of what the West and indeed the world should be. This fight for the future of Iraq is turning out to be for more than a referendum on democracy in the Middle East, but rather a trial of our own culture here at home.

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