

## **United, we'll fight terrorism**

By Noel Pearson

*The Weekend Australian*

27-28 October 2007

In an opinion piece in *The Australian* last week ("Bush not the only problem", 19 October), Australia's doyen of foreign affairs, Owen Harries, reiterated the consensus conservative view "that nuclear proliferation is now a more urgent matter than it has ever been, and that the prospect of weapons in the hands of an increasing number of states with weak governments and poor security and control systems is imminent."

Then he added: "And, of course, there is the continuing problem of global terrorism, which is real enough even if it is sometimes grossly exaggerated." Harries is unusual among conservatives because he almost entirely separates the issue of nuclear proliferation from that of terrorism. This leads him to a conclusion that distinguishes his approach to terrorism from that of other conservatives.

Last year Harries wrote in this newspaper: "[a]lthough today we speak of the war on terror, there is nothing comparable to the Cold War in existence today. Osama bin Laden in his cave is not the Soviet Union of the '60s. The use of the term war with respect to terror is metaphorical...Despite lurid and absurd comparisons with Hitler's Germany, Iraq did not, and terrorism does not, constitute an existential threat." He acknowledges that nuclear proliferation is a great and imminent threat, but says there is no existential threat to the Western world today because no single actor possesses both immense destructive powers and a clear intent to use them against the West.

Unlike Harries, I propose that proliferation of weapons of mass destruction and terror should be viewed in the same context. The factor that links the two issues is the spread among Muslim populations of the "single narrative" of world history involving Western and Zionist global oppression of Muslims.

The extreme Islamist single narrative of Western oppression is, as Greg Sheridan has pointed out ("Wearing down the West", *Inquirer*, 12 May), enormously powerful because "any grievance at all, real or imagined, whether based in fact or fantasy or conspiracy, can be fitted into it". It provides an explanation for the Muslim nations' relative powerlessness and for the disappointments of Muslims living under dictatorial Middle Eastern governments or as vulnerable minorities in other societies. The battle for hearts and minds that is needed to undo it will be very difficult and protracted because almost everything Western powers do (except caving in to extremists) will be taken as confirmation of their oppressive proclivities.

Terrorist operatives, some political leaders and government officials, influential and affluent Muslims, ordinary Muslims who sympathise with terrorists and many ordinary Muslims who oppose extremist violence all adhere to one form or another of this single narrative. The narrative contains grains of truth and several points that are at least arguable, but essentially it is an unempirical and illogical, and therefore irrefutable, ideology.

The Western world has difficulty understanding the danger posed by the extreme Islamist single narrative because of the influence of the (originally Marxist) notion that ideologies serve the interests of an oppressor or the oppressed. Various aspects of the narrative are perceived by Western progressives as expressions of Third World resistance, and Western shame over its own worst contribution to ideology – the narrative of white racial supremacy – stops us from critically analysing anti-Western claims. Many Westerners, of course, do not share this leftist perspective, but because of Western secularisation and liberal individualism they nonetheless underestimate the power of religious and collectivist ideas.

The single narrative will continue to influence world affairs for decades. It will recruit individual Muslims to terrorism, it will influence some powerful people in Muslim nations, and it will provide opportunities for leaders who are in conflict with the West – including non-Muslims such as the North Korean leadership – to threaten the West by proxy. This is the connection between WMD proliferation and terror.

The virus of the single narrative started to develop before bin Laden sprang to prominence. What happened on the 11 September 2001 was an explosion of imagination that has worsened the West's situation.

The flight crews and passengers on the hijacked planes remained passive while Mohammed Atta and his accomplices took control, because they could not imagine that terrorism was taking a giant leap that fateful day, in terms of the scale of destruction and its ruthless fanaticism. They did not guess, as we would today, that it was a suicide mission. Today we recognise that there are many thousands of people who would not hesitate to cause widespread devastation regardless of its moral enormity.

The establishment of a paranoid Islamist narrative, the explosion of imagination and the risk of WMD proliferation together constitute an existential threat.

It must be admitted that, despite success in some areas, the Western world's anti-terror campaign has achieved little progress of strategic significance since 2001:

- The risk of significant terror attacks remains high.
- Violent extremists retain the support of a substantial minority of Muslims.
- It remains a distinct possibility that states with WMD capacity support terrorists or that armed states will develop in a radical Islamist direction.

Quick and decisive progress in influencing the behaviour of Islamists and their supporters was never going to be easy to achieve because of the irrational and viral nature of the ideology. The most unnecessary setback in the struggle against terror has been the divisions within and between Western nations.

The divided West's impotence in confronting Islamist extremism and terrorism is underlined by the failure of many Westerners to distinguish between political opponents (in their own country and in allied democracies) and real global enemies. There is no consensus in the West about who the real enemy is. According to some surveys, many people in Western nations believe the US is the world's most dangerous power.

The Right blames this lack of consensus on the influence on public opinion of leftist relativism. Progressive analyses contend that power structures in the West are responsible for most of the world's problems and conflicts. However, the Right carries a large part of the blame for the West's disunity. Internationally, there has been a change for the worse in the way political battles and campaigns are fought. At the turn of the millennium, an increasingly ascendant Right employed divisive tactics in their quest for domestic power.

This new style of political campaigning was pioneered in the US by strategists such as Lee Atwater and Karl Rove.

In the November 2004 issue of *The Atlantic Monthly*, Joshua Green's profile captured the essence of Karl Rove's ruthless political methodology: "(Rove) seems to understand – indeed, to count on – the media's unwillingness or inability, whether from squeamishness, laziness or professional caution, ever to give a full estimate of him or his work. It is ultimately not just Rove's skill but his character that allows him to perform on an entirely different plane. Along with remarkable strategic skills, he has both an understanding of the media's unstated self-limitations and a willingness to fight in territory where conscience forbids most others."

In last month's cover story in *The Atlantic Monthly*, on Rove's (and thereby George W. Bush's) fatal mistakes, Green identifies the Right's terrible error: "Rove, forever in thrall to the mechanics of winning by dividing, consistently lacked the ability to transcend the campaign mind-set and see beyond the struggle nearest at hand. In a world made new by September 11, he put terrorism and war to work in an *electoral rather than a historical context* (my emphasis), and used them as wedge issues instead of as the unifying basis for the new political order he sought."

The hyperbole and ruthlessness of the Right's political philosophy and methodology, recognised in Green's analysis of Rove, has created a situation in which the Right does not have a consensus behind the war on terror and the Left has turned mad with disorientation, so blinded by anger at the Right's political tactics that terror suspect Jack Thomas and David Hicks are portrayed as latter-day Rosa Parks and Nelson Mandelas in the struggle against rightist Western tyranny.

The West's domestic response to terror was originally one of national unity. The response of respected jurist and humanitarian Hal Wootten QC, in a letter to *The Australian* following the Bali bombing in 2002, struck me as correct from the beginning. He wrote: "Archbishop (Peter) Carnley's suggestion that Australian policies may have influenced the choice of Bali targets is plausible but unhelpful. If policy is bad, it should be revised for that reason, not in deference to terrorism. If it is good, it should not yield to intimidation. The real lesson is the importance of framing good, long-term policies." Alas, the political discussion about terror then turned into just another front in the culture wars between the Left and the Right.

This has been a tragedy and in 2007 we find ourselves a country starkly divided, not over how the threat of terror should be dealt with but over the nature of the threat and the identity of the enemy. In the minds of too many it is the US and Bush who are the threat, not radical Islamists.

It is appropriate that there should be vigorous democratic debate about how a campaign against Islamist terrorism should be conducted, but Australia and Western nations generally are still impotently grappling with basic questions about whether there is a threat and who the enemy is.

In a common law country such as Australia, the question of civil freedoms has been particularly fraught. Paul Kelly, in *The Australian*, has expressed the profound antagonism between Australia's executive government and the legal establishment. In my view, whatever the merits of Julian Burnside QC's criticisms of the Howard Government's treatment of refugees and its many sins, I would hate to live in a country where Burnside was in charge of national security.

The relationship between the rule of law and security is one that requires a balanced resolution. For this reason, the speech by former High Court chief justice Gerard Brennan to a conference in Brisbane in August was an important step in moving beyond the present impasse.

Brennan said: "Incursions on the rule of law may be essential to combat the risk of terror".

Brennan also said that "[o]nly a modicum of freedom can be traded for security without affecting the rule of law", and that "[t]he legal profession can seek to ensure that the values of the common law are preserved to the extent possible at the time when we are concerned by the threat of terrorism."

However, he continued, "[t]hat is not to suggest that it is the function of the institutional profession to oppose any law simply because it trespasses upon one of the values of the common law."

Earlier in his speech, Brennan pointed out that [m]ost lawyers are familiar with the danger created by ordinary criminal conduct...[b]ut lawyers generally do not know the true nature and extent of the threat posed by terrorism today."

There is an urgent need for transcendent leadership to emerge in the West. Cultural war is not the means to wage an effective war against terrorism.

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