

Confessions of a Terrorist

John le Carré

John le Carré raised the spy thriller to a high art form. His The Spy Who Came in from the Cold won him a global reputation. As the Cold War recedes into history, his talents are finding renewed expression in portraying the tortured condition of the new world order.

America has entered one of its periods of historical madness, but this is the worst I can remember: worse than McCarthyism, worse than the Bay of Pigs and in the long term potentially more disastrous than the Vietnam war.

The reaction to 9/11 is beyond anything Osama could have hoped for in his nastiest dreams. As in McCarthy times, the domestic rights and freedoms that have made America the envy of the world are being systematically eroded.

The hounding of non-national US residents continues apace. 'Non-permanent' males of North Korean and Middle Eastern descent are disappearing into secret imprisonment on secret charges on the secret word of judges. US-resident Palestinians who were formerly ruled stateless, and therefore not deportable, are being handed over to Israel for 'resettlement' in Gaza and the West Bank, places where they may never have set foot before.

Are we playing the same game here in Britain? I expect so. Another thirty years and we'll be allowed to know.

The combination of compliant US media and vested corporate interests is once more ensuring that a debate that should be ringing out in every town square is confined to the loftier columns of the East Coast press: see page A27 if you can find and understand it.

No American administration has ever held its cards so close to its chest. If the intelligence services know nothing, that will be the best-kept secret of all. Remember that these are the same organisations who brought us the biggest failure in intelligence history: 9/11.

The imminent war was planned years before Osama bin Laden struck, but it was Osama who made it possible. Without Osama, the Bush junta would still be trying to explain such tricky matters as how it came to be elected in the first place; Enron; its shameless favouring of the already-too-rich; its reckless disregard for the

world's poor, the ecology and a raft of unilaterally abrogated international treaties. They might also have to be telling us why they support Israel in its continuing disregard for UN resolutions.

But Osama conveniently swept all that under the carpet. The US defence budget has been raised by another \$60 billion to around \$360 billion. A splendid new generation of US nuclear weapons is in the pipeline, tailored to respond equally to nuclear, chemical and biological weapons in the hands of 'rogue states'. So we can all breathe easy.

And America is not only deciding unilaterally who may or may not possess these weapons. It also reserves to itself the unilateral right to deploy its own nuclear weapons without compunction whenever and wherever it considers its interests, friends and allies threatened. Precisely who these friends and allies are going to be over the next years will, as ever in politics, be a bit of a conundrum. You make nice friends and allies, so you arm them to the teeth. Then one day they're not your friends and allies any more, so you nuke them.

It is worth remembering here for just how many long hours, and how deeply, the US cabinet weighed the option of nuking Afghanistan in the wake of 9/11. Happily for all of us, but for the Afghans in particular whose complicity in 9/11 was much less than Pakistan's, they decided to make do with 25,000 ton 'conventional' daisy-cutters, which by all accounts deliver as much clout as a small nuke anyway. But next time it'll be for real.

Quite what war Americans think they are supporting is a lot less clear. A war for how long, please? At what cost in American lives? At what cost to the American taxpayer's pocket? At what cost in Iraqi lives? It is probably by now a state secret, but Desert Storm cost Iraq at least twice as many lives as America lost in the entire Vietnam war.

How Bush and his junta succeeded in deflecting America's anger from Osama bin Laden to Saddam Hussein is one of the great public relations conjuring tricks of history. But they swung it.

The American public is not merely being misled. It is being threatened, bullied, browbeaten and kept in a permanent state of ignorance and fear, with a consequent dependence upon its leadership. The carefully orchestrated neurosis should, with any luck, carry Bush and his fellow conspirators nicely into the next election.

Those who are not with Mr. Bush are against him. Worse – see his speech of January 3rd – they are with the enemy. Which is odd, because I'm dead against Bush, but I would love to see Saddam's downfall – just not on Bush's terms and not by his methods. And not under the banner of such outrageous hypocrisy.

Old-style American colonialism is about to spread its iron wings over all of us. More Quiet Americans are slipping into unsuspecting townships than at the height of the Cold War.

The religious cant that will send American troops into battle is perhaps the most sickening aspect of this surreal war-to-be. Bush has an arm-lock on God.

And God has very particular political opinions.

God appointed America to save the world in any way that suits America.

God appointed Israel to be the nexus of America's Middle Eastern policy, and anyone who wants to mess with that idea is: (a) anti-Semitic, (b) anti-American, (c) with the enemy, and (d) a terrorist.

God also has pretty scary connections. In America, where all men are equal in His sight, if not in one another's, the Bush family numbers one President, one ex-President, one ex-head of the CIA, the governor of Florida and the ex-governor of Texas. Bush Senior has some good wars to his credit, and a well-earned reputation for visiting America's wrath on disobedient client states. One little war he hand-launched was against his own former CIA pal, Manuel Noriega of Panama, who served him well in the Cold War but got too big for his boots when it was over. Power doesn't come much more naked than that, and Americans know it.

Care for a few pointers?

George W. Bush. 1978-84: senior executive, Arbusto Energy/Bush Exploration, an oil company. 1986-1990: on the board of the Harken oil company.

Dick Cheney. 1995-2000: chief executive of the Halliburton oil company.

Condoleezza Rice. 1991-2000: on the board of the Chevron oil company, which named an oil tanker after her.

And so on.

But none of these trifling associations affects the integrity of God's work. We're talking honest values here. And we know where your children go to school.

In 1993, while ex-President George Bush was paying a social visit to the ever-democratic Kingdom of Kuwait to receive their thanks for liberating them, somebody tried to kill him. The CIA believes that 'somebody' was Saddam Hussein. Hence Bush Junior's cry: 'That man tried to kill my Daddy.' But it's still not personal, this war. It's still necessary. It's still God's work. It's still about bringing freedom and democracy to the poor, oppressed Iraqi people.

To be an acceptable member of the Bush team it seems you must also believe in Absolute Good and Absolute Evil, and Bush, with a lot of help from his friends, family and God, is there to tell us which is which. I think I may be Evil for writing this, but I'll have to check.

What Bush won't tell us is the truth about why we're going to war. What is at stake is not an Axis of Evil – but oil, money and people's lives. Saddam's misfortune is to sit on the second biggest oilfield in the world. Iran's, next door, is to possess the world's largest repositories of natural gas. Bush wants both, and who helps him get them will receive a piece of the cake. And who doesn't, won't.

If Saddam didn't have the oil, he could torture and murder his citizens to his heart's content. Other leaders do it every day – think Saudi Arabia, think Pakistan, think Turkey, think Syria, think Egypt – but these are our friends and allies.

In reality, I suspect, Baghdad represents no clear and present danger to its

neighbours, and none to America or Britain. Saddam's weapons of mass destruction, if he's still got them, will be peanuts by comparison with the stuff Israel or America could hurl at him at five minutes' notice. What is at stake is not an imminent military or terrorist threat, but the economic imperative of American growth.

What is at stake is America's need to demonstrate its over-arching military power to all of us – to Europe and Russia and China, and poor mad little North Korea, as well as the Middle East; to show who rules America at home, and who is to be ruled by America abroad.

The most charitable interpretation of Tony Blair's part in all this is that he believed that, by riding the tiger, he could steer it. He can't. Instead, he gave it a phoney legitimacy, and a smooth voice. Now I fear, the same tiger has him penned into a corner, and he can't get out. Ironically, George W. himself may be feeling a little bit the same way.

In One-Party Britain, Blair on a lousy turnout was elected supreme leader by about a quarter of the electorate. Given the same public apathy and the continued dismal showing by the opposition parties at the next election, Blair or his successor will achieve similar absolute power with an even smaller proportion of the vote. It is utterly laughable that, at a time when Blair has talked himself against the ropes, neither of Britain's opposition leaders can lay a glove on him. But that's Britain's tragedy, as it is America's: as our governments spin, lie and lose their credibility, and the supposed parliamentary alternatives to them merely jockey for their clothes, the electorate simply shrugs and looks the other way. Politicians can never believe how little they deceive us.

So the point in Britain is not which political Party will form a government after the looming shambles, but who will be in the driving seat.

Blair's best chance of personal survival must be that, at the eleventh hour, world protest and an improbably emboldened UN will force Bush to put his gun back in his holster unfired. But what happens when the world's greatest cowboy rides back into town without a tyrant's head to wave at the boys?

Blair's worst chance is that, with or without the United Nations, he will drag us into a war that, if the will to negotiate energetically had ever been there, could have been avoided; a war that has been no more democratically debated in Britain than it has in America or the UN. By doing so, Blair will have helped provoke unforeseeable retaliation, great domestic unrest, and regional chaos in the Middle East. He will have set back our relations with Europe and the Middle East for decades to come. Welcome to the party of the Ethical Foreign Policy.

There is a middle way, but it's a tough one: Bush dives in without UN approval and Blair stays on the bank. Goodbye to the Special Relationship.

The stink of religious self-righteousness in the American air recalls the British Empire at its worst. Lord Curzon's cloak sits poorly on the shoulders of Washington's fashionably conservative columnists. I cringe even more when I hear my Prime Minister lend his Head Prefect's sophistries to this patently colonialist adventure. His very real anxieties about Terror are shared by all sane

men. What he can't explain is how he reconciles a global assault on Al Qaeda with a territorial assault on Iraq.

We are in this war, if it takes place, in order to secure the fig-leaf of our special relationship with America, to grab our share of the oil pot, and because, after all the public hand-holding in Washington and Camp David, Blair has to show up at the altar.

'But will we win, Daddy?'

'Of course, child. It will all be over while you're still in bed.'

'Why?'

'Because otherwise Mr. Bush's voters will get terribly impatient and may decide not to vote for him after all.'

'But will people be killed, Daddy?'

'Nobody you know, darling. Just foreign people.'

'Can I watch it on television?'

'Only if Mr. Bush says you can.'

'And afterwards, will everything be normal again? Nobody will do anything horrid any more?'

'Hush, child, and go to sleep.'

Last Friday an American friend of mine in California drove to his local supermarket with a sticker on his car saying 'Peace is also Patriotic'. It was gone by the time he'd finished his shopping.

© David Cornwell 2003.

This is an expanded version of a contribution to the openDemocracy global debate on the Iraq crisis published on www.openDemocracy.net