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The politics of paranoia

In an essay last week to mark the fifth anniversary of 9/11, Martin Amis hit out at the virulence of Islamism. Here, writer Pankaj Mishra lambasts Amis's 'moral superiority' and takes issue with the intellectual arrogance of political elites in the West who fail to understand the Muslim world. He argues that an out-of-touch US administration is repeating the fatal errors of the Vietnam War, resulting in a war on terror that is a political, military and intellectual fiasco

Pankaj Mishra
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'Force,' James Baldwin wrote in the late 1960s, as the cruel and futile American bombing of Indochina went on, 'does not work the way its advocates seem to think it does. It does not, for instance, reveal to the victim the strength of his adversary. On the contrary, it reveals the weakness, even the panic of his adversary and this revelation invests the victim with patience.'

This lesson of Vietnam, tragically unlearned, is now the lesson of Afghanistan, Iraq and Lebanon. The Western battle for hearts and minds is now an absurd irrelevance in much of the East, where those of us who feel bound to the West face the rage and hostility of a large part of the population with which we were for so long if not friendly then at least cordially estranged.

Television and the internet have helped stoke an unprecedented intensity of political emotion around the world. It is no exaggeration to say that millions, probably hundreds of millions, of people in societies historically subject to the West derive profound gratification from the prospect of humiliating the Anglo-American alliance that continues to believe so uncompromisingly - whether bombing remote villages in Iraq and Afghanistan or facilitating the destruction of Lebanon - in its right to dictate events around the world.

This explains why the crude anti-Western rhetoric of Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad and Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez attracts cheering crowds from Tehran to Jakarta and Shanghai; why the rants of Hizbollah's chief Sheikh Nasrallah make him a cult figure across the Arab world. It explains, too, why five years after 9/11, the Taliban and al-Qaeda appear to be resurgent and the terrorist methods of organisations such as Hizbollah and Hamas enjoy unexpected legitimacy.

Many people, such as Martin Amis last weekend, may continue to berate Muslims for their apparent incompatibility with 'Western' values of democracy and rationality. We could go on debating forever whether the terrorist acts of British Muslims are directly linked to British policy in the Middle East. But a more urgent question is: where will all this rage and distrust end? Are we hurtling towards the kind of wars that made the previous century so uniquely bloody? How can we change policies that have so comprehensively failed?

These questions are relevant in democracies, where responsibility for far-reaching decisions lies with political and business elites as well as such shapers of public opinion as journalists, columnists and think-tank pundits. There is no place for such questions in societies that men like Ahmadinejad and Nasrallah preside over, countries where intellectual debate and press freedoms are severely limited. Yet even as these questions have become increasingly urgent in democratic countries, the answers remain elusive. For the 'war on terror' is not just a political and military fiasco but also an intellectual one, combining fatally the arrogance of power with the arrogance of mind.

Shocked, like many Europeans, by the ferocity and unexpectedness of the First World War, French poet and essayist Paul Valery was one of the first to warn against intellectual over-reaching in a world grown bewilderingly complex and intransigent. 'The system of causes,' he wrote, 'controlling the fate of every one of us, and now

extending over the whole globe, makes it reverberate throughout at every shock; there are no more questions that can be settled by being settled at one point.'

Valery could sense that the West was no longer the sole engine of global history. 'Nothing,' he asserted, 'can ever happen again without the whole world's taking a hand and for this reason no one will ever be able to predict or circumscribe the almost immediate consequences of any undertaking whatever.'

The Thousand Year Reich, which collapsed after 12 years, ought to have buried the pseudo-scientific fantasy that human affairs can be ordered as precisely as a carpenter carves a table out of a block of wood. But advances in technological warfare strengthened the conceit, especially among the biggest victors of the Second World War, that they are 'history's actors' and as a senior adviser to President Bush told journalist Ron Suskind in 2004: 'When we act, we create our own reality.'

It is easy to blame this kind of ideological certitude on millenarian Christianity. But the war in Vietnam was the work of expensively educated, mostly secular and liberal do-gooders, the best and the brightest men in America, most of whom came to government from Ivy League universities, big corporations, Wall Street and the media. (Condoleezza Rice, formerly provost of Stanford, recently echoed the tone of the American 'problem-solvers' of the 1960s when she, implicitly believing that the Israeli bombing of Lebanon would turn the Lebanese against Hizbollah, told us that we were witnessing the 'birth-pangs of a new Middle East.')

These 'problem-solvers' had little knowledge of Vietnam's history and culture, particularly of its tradition of fierce anti-imperial nationalism. What they did possess in abundance, as Hannah Arendt defined it, was 'an utterly irrational confidence in the calculability of reality'. They believed in the existence of a mortal threat from 'totalitarian communism' and were confident of their ability to defeat it and to shape human history to their advantage. (To beat 'communism' in Vietnam is to make the world safe for democracy and that sort of thing.) Not surprisingly, these men, the smartest guys in every room they entered, managed, first, to bring the world to the precipice of a nuclear war and then involve America in a war that cost millions of lives, without laying so much as a finger on communist regimes in the Soviet Union and eastern Europe which, always feeble than they appeared, eventually collapsed under the weight of its internal contradictions.

As the bombing of Vietnam escalated in 1967, a secret memo to President Lyndon Johnson by one of the Pentagon's problem-solvers spoke of 'the widely and strongly held' feeling that 'the establishment is out of its mind'. The experts were aware enough to know they were losing the war and to compile what became known as the Pentagon Papers, a chronicle of American decision-making about Vietnam that comprehensively described the intellectual deception and self-deception of the best and the brightest.

Although their gambles in the Middle East have failed disastrously, the Bush administration and its allies seem extremely unlikely to undertake similarly impartial self-examination. In a meeting with experts on Iraq last month, President Bush spoke of his sense of hurt at watching Iraqi Shias demonstrate against the Israeli bombing of Lebanon. We must also resign ourselves to the unlikelihood of objective analysis from cheerleaders for the government's actions in the US and British media, such as Fox News and the Sun, or ambitious academics who continue to peddle fantasies of an American Empire even as the new nationalists of the rising powers - China, Iran, Russia, Venezuela - gloat over the swift unravelling of Western credibility and influence.

The independent mainstream media have seemed most able to preserve a sense of reality in the public sphere. And yet while even relatively conservative figures such as Simon Jenkins, Max Hastings and Geoffrey Wheatcroft show an admirable and essential pragmatism, many distinguished and influential commentators of the liberal-left, while pronouncing on jihad and Islam, seem reluctant to engage with the lives or views of ordinary Muslims.

Martin Amis's essay on Islam and Islamism goes on for more than 10,000 words without describing an individual experience of Muslim societies deeper than Christopher Hitchens's acquisition of an Osama T-shirt in Peshawar and the Amis family's failure to enter, after closing time, the Dome of the Rock in Jerusalem.

'The impulse towards rational inquiry,' Amis asserts, 'is by now very weak in the rank and file of the Muslim male.' There are countless other startling claims (according to Amis, the army was on the Islamist side in the Algerian civil war) in his essay, whose pseudo-scholarship and fanatical conviction of moral superiority make it resemble nothing more than one of bin Laden's desperately literary screeds.

Such a bold and hectic display of prejudice and ignorance invites the dinner-party frivolity of Amis's genitals-centric analysis (constipation and sexual frustration) of radical Islam. But what forces us to take it seriously is not only that its author is one of our leading novelists, but also that his clichés about non-western peoples (they are all very irrational out there) and strident belief in 'Western' rationality are now commonplace in elite liberal-left as well as conservative circles in the government and media.

Writing on the Guardian's 'Comment is free' website, Harold Evans, the former editor of the (pre-Murdoch) Sunday Times, betrayed a familiar disconnection with everyday life in Britain when he asked us to accept severe constraints on our civil liberties since we confront something called the 'new Salafist totalitarianism', a 'barbarism' apparently more 'invidious' than German fascism.

Big words like 'Salafist totalitarianism' and 'Islamofascism' certainly help project the illusion of profound knowledge. They probably also satisfy the nostalgic desire of some sedentary writers to see themselves in the avant-garde of a noble crusade against an evil 'ism'. But they do not deepen our understanding of the diverse nature of Muslim societies or of the schisms and contradictions within those we call radical Islam. They are as much based on banal historical parallelisms as the rhetoric of the Cold War they unconsciously draw on.

As Hannah Arendt pointed out, the hardline intellectuals in the Fifties and Sixties who denounced as 'appeasement' and a 'second Munich' anything less than a state of full nuclear preparedness against 'monolithic communism' were 'unable to confront reality on its own terms because they had always some parallels in mind that "helped" them to understand those terms'.

People obsessed with the threat of 'Islamofascism' fail to notice that a loose network of fanatics and criminals hunted everywhere around the world resembles little the modern nation-state that in less than six years caused the death of tens of millions of people across Europe.

To dominate the world is not necessarily to know most parts of it well; self-absorption among Western policymakers and commentators grew especially fast after the end of the Cold War, when history seemed to have ended, and non-Western societies required close attention only when they suffered a humanitarian crisis or when they embraced 'Western' values of democracy and free-market capitalism. For instance, the writings of Martin Amis, our latest expert on the Muslim mind, in the pre-9/11 decade reveal a deepening fascination with celebrity, pornography and anti-communism in the West, but no sign, apart from a trip to China with Elton John, of any meaningful engagement with the politics, religions and literatures of the East.

Waiting for Iran to overthrow its Islamist rulers and to adopt Western-style democracy, Western elites could only be startled when the Iranians elected Ahmadinejad and united behind a nationalistic aspiration for nuclear bombs, or when Palestinians chose Hamas over the largely secular Fatah. This intellectual and political bewilderment compels many media commentators to seek the guidance of 'dissident' figures who have an air of authenticity (they lived out there once, even if it was years ago) and authority and are often able to confirm an apparently unshakable conviction in the West's moral superiority. In recent months, many respectable journalists and columnists in Britain and America have chosen to exalt Dutch politician Ayaan Hirsi Ali as the likely initiator of an Islamic Reformation.

Hirsi Ali, who suffered genital mutilation as a child in Somalia, offers a moving account of her personal ordeal in a brutally patriarchal tribal culture. Unfortunately, her tendency to blame, usually violently, Islam for most of modern society's ills deprives her of influence among even moderate Muslims. The path to Islam's internal reform and modernisation is arduous. But to endorse Hirsi Ali as the Martin Luther of Islam is to show two fingers to most Muslims. So why do it?

It is as if the rage, fear and contempt that have overwhelmed many people in the non-Western world have also overwhelmed some of the brightest people in the West, distorting their vision to the point where some extraordinarily crude fantasies - insulting Islam into a Reformation, boosting an American Empire, bombing entire societies into democracy - appear to them as practical solutions to the problems of living in an overcrowded world with people who are not and, perhaps, do not wish to be like them.

This aggressive moral posturing increasingly betrays our own dangerous state of confusion about who we are and what we represent. Columnists talk of fighting for 'our values', as proponents of greater 'toughness' continue a relentless assault on civil liberties and the failed 'war on terror' exposes ordinary people to panic.

And so we ask again: where will it all end? Paralysed by a hysterically inflated threat of totalitarian communism, public opinion in America remained behind the unwinnable war in Vietnam until it was too late and millions of lives were already doomed. Convinced of a mortal threat from 'Islamofascism', an ideological chimera of their own making, many of this country's brightest men and women reflexively assert that superior force will vanquish it. But, as James Baldwin wrote, the blind use of force merely adds to the body count and it is ultimately fatal to create too many victims. The victor can do nothing with these victims, for they do not belong to him but to the victims. They belong to the people he is fighting. The people know this and as inexorably as the roll call - the honour roll - of victims expands, so does their will become inexorable; they resolve that these dead, their brethren, shall not have died in vain.

When this point is reached, however long the battle may go on, the victor can never be the victor; on the contrary, all his energies, his life, are bound up in a terror he cannot articulate, a mystery he cannot read, a battle he cannot win.

Fortunately, the mass of ordinary citizens in Britain, though largely excluded from decision-making, has sensed clearly the moral and strategic emptiness of the 'war on terror'. Recent opinion polls show a majority to be increasingly convinced that the vain policies of our political and intellectual elites have made us less safe than before.

The time for changing these policies, however, is running out fast. We have no choice but to find new forms of co-existence in an interdependent and highly politicised world, where it is no longer possible to enjoy the imperial luxury of remaking reality, and in which the many enemies created - and united - by these blundering attempts can also unleash devastating forms of violence.

For the disaster in Vietnam, which had little resonance outside East Asia, will seem nothing in comparison to the consequences of America and Britain's failure to accommodate themselves to new geopolitical facts they cannot alter. Given the deepening climate of paranoia and chauvinism, it may be too much to expect a rigorous examination of our old assumptions. But this is urgently required if later historians are not to marvel at how mindlessly we raced towards catastrophe.

About the author

Pankaj Mishra was born in 1969 in northern India and now divides his time between London and India. He is the author of *The Romantics: A Novel*, *An End to Suffering* and, most recently, *Temptations of the West: How to Be Modern in India, Pakistan and Beyond* (all published by Picador). He contributes literary and political essays regularly to the *New York Review of Books* and the *New York Times*.

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