

The democratic police state

Thomas Friedman is a famous columnist on the New York Times. He has been described as “a guard dog of US foreign policy”. Whatever America’s warlords have in mind for the rest of humanity, Friedman will bark it. He boasts that “the hidden hand of the market will never work without a hidden fist”. He promotes bombing countries and says world war three has begun.

Friedman’s latest bark is about free speech, which his country’s constitution is said to safeguard. He wants the State Department to draw up a blacklist of those who make “wrong” political statements. He is referring not only to those who advocate violence, but those who believe American actions are the root cause of the current terrorism. The latter group, which he describes as “just one notch less despicable than the terrorists”, includes most Americans and Britons, according to the latest polls.

Friedman wants a “War of Ideas report” which names those who try to understand and explain, for example, why London was bombed. These are “excuse makers” who “deserve to be exposed”. He borrows the term “excuse makers” from James Rubin, who was Madeleine Albright’s chief apologist at the State Department. Albright, who rose to secretary of state under President Clinton, said that the death of half a million Iraqi infants as a result of an American-driven blockade was a “price” that was “worth it”. Of all the interviews I have filmed in official Washington, Rubin’s defence of this mass killing is unforgettable.

Farce is never far away in these matters. The “excuse makers” would also include the CIA, which has warned that “Iraq [since the invasion] has replaced Afghanistan as the training ground for the next generation of ‘professionalised? terrorists.’” On to the Friedman/Rubin blacklist go the spooks!

Like so much else during the Blair era, this McCarthyite rubbish has floated

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across the Atlantic and is now being recycled by the prime minister as proposed police-state legislation, little different from the fascist yearnings of Friedman and other extremists. For Friedman's blacklist, read Tony Blair's proposed database of proscribed opinions, bookshops, websites.

The British human rights lawyer Linda Christian asks: "Are those who feel a huge sense of injustice about the same causes as the terrorists – Iraq, Afghanistan, the war on terrorism, Guantanamo Bay, Abu Ghraib – to be stopped from speaking forthrightly about their anger? Because terrorism is now defined in our law as actions abroad, will those who support liberation movements in, for example, Kashmir or Chechnya be denied freedom of expression?" Any definition of terrorism, she points out, should "encompass the actions of terrorist states engaged in unlawful wars."

Of course, Blair is silent on western state terrorism in the Middle East and elsewhere; and for him to moralise about "our values" insults the fact of his blood-crime in Iraq. His budding police state will, he hopes, have the totalitarian powers he has longed for since 2001 when he suspended habeas corpus and introduced unlimited house arrest without trial. The Law Lords, Britain's highest judiciary, have tried to stop this. Last December, Lord Hoffmann said that Blair's attacks on human rights were a greater threat to freedom than terrorism. On 26 July, Blair emoted that the entire British nation was under threat and abused the judiciary in terms, as Simon Jenkins noted, "that would do credit to his friend Vladimir Putin". What we are seeing in Britain is the rise of the democratic police state.

Should you be tempted to dismiss all this as esoteric or merely mad, travel to any Muslim community in Britain, especially in the north west and sense the state of siege and fear. On 15 July, Blair's Britain of the future was glimpsed when the police raided the Iqra Learning Centre and book store near Leeds. The Iqra Trust is a well-known charity that promotes Islam worldwide as "a peaceful religion which covers every walk of life." The police smashed down the door, wrecked the shop and took away anti-war literature which they described as "anti-western".

Among this was, reportedly, a DVD of the Respect Party MP George Galloway addressing the US Senate and a New Statesman article of mine illustrated by a much-published photograph of a Palestinian man in Gaza attempting to shield his son from Israeli bullets before the boy was shot to death. The photograph was said to be "working people up", meaning Muslim people. Clearly, David Gibbons, this journal's esteemed art director, who chose this illustration, will be called

before the Blair Incitement Tribunal. One of my books, *The New Rulers of the World*, was also apparently confiscated. It is not known whether the police have yet read the chapter that documents how the Americans, with help from MI6 and the SAS, created, armed and bankrolled the terrorists of the Islamic Mujahideen, not least Osama Bin Laden.

The raid was deliberately theatrical, with the media tipped off. Two of the alleged 7 July bombers had been volunteers in the shop almost four years ago. “When they became hardliners”, said a community youth worker. “They left and have never been back and they’ve had nothing to do with the shop.” The raid was watched by horrified local people, who are now scared, angry and bitter. I spoke to Muserat Sujawal, who has lived in the area for 31 years and is respected widely for her management of the nearby Hamara Community Centre. She told me, “There was no justification for the raid. The whole point of the shop is to teach how Islam is a community-based religion. My family has used the shop for years, buying, for example, the Arabic equivalent of Sesame Street. They did it to put fear in our hearts.” James Dean, a Bradford secondary school teacher, said, “I am teaching myself Urdu because I have multi-ethnic classes, and the shop has been very helpful with tapes.”

The police have the right to pursue every lead in their hunt for bombers, but scaremongering is not their right. Sir Ian Blair, the Metropolitan Police Commissioner who understands how the media can be used and spends a lot of time in television studios, has yet to explain why he announced that the killing in the London Underground of the Brazilian Jean Charles de Menezes was “directly linked” to terrorism, when he must have known the truth. Muslim people all over Britain report the presence of police “video vans” cruising their streets, filming everyone. “We have become like ghettos under siege,” said one man too frightened to be named. “Do they know what this is doing to our young people?”

The other day Blair said, “We are not having any of this nonsense about [the bombings having anything] to do with what the British are doing in Iraq or Afghanistan, or support for Israel, or support for America, or any of the rest of it. It is nonsense and we have to confront it as that.” This “raving”, as the American writer Mike Whitney observed, “is part of a broader strategy to dismiss the obvious facts about terror and blame the victims of American-British aggression. It’s a tactic that was minted in Tel Aviv and perfected over 37 years of occupation. It is predicated on the assumption that terrorism emerges from an amorphous, religious-based ideology that transforms its adherents into ruthless butchers.”

Professor Robert Pape of the University of Chicago has examined every act of

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suicide terrorism over the past 25 years. He refutes the assumption that suicide bombers are mainly driven by “an evil ideology independent of other circumstances.” He said, “The facts are that since 1980, half the attacks have been secular. Few of the terrorists fit the standard stereotype... Half of them are not religious fanatics at all. In fact, over 95 per cent of suicide attacks around the world [are not about] religion, but a specific strategic purpose – to compel the United States and other western countries to abandon military commitments on the Arabian Peninsula and in countries they view as their homeland or prize greatly... The link between anger over American, British and western military [action] and al-Qaeda’s ability to recruit suicide terrorists to kill us could not be tighter.”

So we have been warned, yet again. Terrorism is the logical consequence of American and British “foreign policy” whose infinitely greater terrorism we need to recognise, and debate, as a matter of urgency.