

ROB FOOT

THE LEFT'S DESCENT INTO THE ABYSS



SOMETHING TRAGIC and horrifying has happened to the Left—something that was visible long before September 11, 2001, though the events of that dreadful day served only to confirm it. It strengthened with the invasion of Iraq and the toppling of Saddam. Now, with conservative parties confirmed as the people's government of choice in both Australia and the USA, it's broken out all over. For years the Left has merely been irrational; now it has finally gone insane.

It's been a gruelling decade and a half for the Left. First, the Soviet experiment collapsed, taking the socialist dream with it. Then the satellites followed suit. Then the US-led coalition won the first Gulf War. Then George W. defeated the Democrats (twice). And in Australia, for the past nine years, the electorate obstinately stuck with the Left's ultimate hate object, John Howard, now Australia's second-longest-serving prime minister.

The Left watched all this with puzzled disbelief. All its old certainties had been swept away. It seems no one ever wanted socialism, except socialists. People did not hanker after utopia, after all. What they wanted, generally speaking, was reward for enterprise, a safe environment in which they and their children could prosper and thrive, and a serious say in what kind of government they got. They were actually prepared to support wars against tyrants, especially to liberate oppressed and brutalised populations, even if it meant fighting alongside the Americans. What on earth could they have been thinking?

To the Left, it was as if some huge, unknown force had rocked the political earth's tectonic plates and brought them into violent collision. The once-placid landscape of its ideological certainties was suddenly confused by inexplicable earthquakes and volcanoes. Something had gone horribly wrong. There were snakes in the watering holes, and scorpions fell with the rain.

Convinced of foul play, the Left reached for its card-index of familiar villains, and riffled through it. It didn't take long—it was right there under *A*: America. America

was the reason for everything: the end of dreams, the death of trees, the ruin of hope, the murder of light. It was all so very obvious; but could the world be trusted to understand? John Pilger, Noam Chomsky and (to a lesser—much lesser—extent) Phillip Adams, the venerable columnist at the *Australian* and one of the nation's declared "living treasures", were the Left's standard bearers in the campaign for global enlightenment.

These are the Don Quixotes of the old Left, riding through a countryside littered with Cold War ruins and phantoms, searching for the windmill with "America" on it. The world through which they spur their ancient

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Rosinantes has changed out of all recognition since their beliefs were set in cement thirty years ago, but they can't see it. Unerringly, they find the old familiar signposts; *American Evil: 15 miles; Iniquity of America: 3 miles.*

One could almost feel sorry for them, were it not for the damage they do, and the fact that their most attentive readers, deluded undergraduates apart, are those whose most earnest intent is to destroy us.

There is a paradox at the heart of the Left's support for the enemies of the West, whether implicit or explicit (it varies according to individual and circumstance). It is the very things upon which the Left most congratulates itself that inspire the deepest detestation of Islamic extremists. Among them are the enfranchisement of women, the abolition of sexual taboos, the free availability of contraception and abortion, the displacement of marriage and the family from the heart of the social condition, and, not least, the insistent subordination of religious discipline to the imperative of human desire.

It is principally for the success of the liberal project that the West is hated and despised by its Islamist enemies, to whom it represents a hideous contamination of fundamental Muslim values which are at the same time taken to be universal and ubiquitous. Their quarrel is not with modern technology or globalised capital, which they are happy to make use of, to the extent it serves their purpose. If the Left were able to think straight, it

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would see who its real enemy is—and it's not George W. Bush. As it is, the Left races towards the dark horizon, unflinchingly convinced that the enemy of its enemy must somehow be its friend.

At the same time, Osama bin Laden's own logic, full of incomprehensible eschatological references and fuelled by a centuries-old apocalyptic, still baffles the Left, whose philosophy rejects any recognition of the divine. The Left deals with the problem by disregarding it. The gaunt, cave-dwelling fanatic may have told us, over and over again, that he is motivated by the corrupting presence of US troops in the Land of the Two Shrines, hatred of liberal Arab governments, and the necessity of subjecting the world to a new theocratic Caliphate. But the Left knows better. What he's really talking about is America's tyrannising impoverishment of the rest of the world (more or less), and its rejection of the Kyoto Protocol. The Left always prefers its own reasons to anyone else's, even bin Laden's.

TAKE ARUNDHATI ROY, the Indian writer and activist. On November 7, she received the 2004 Sydney Peace Prize. As is the way of such things, she accepted the prize with a speech, which, when printed, runs to around ten A4 pages. It was an entirely predictable address, lacking in roughly equal parts common sense, historical perspective and intelligible commentary.

All the usual suspects are lined up for ritual denunciation: multinational corporations, America the hegemon, Bush and Blair, who are described as war criminals, (Saddam, unsurprisingly, is not); "civilisation"—the quotation marks are Roy's—the primary drivers of which are colonialism, slavery and genocide; Halliburton, Bechtel and the rest are exemplars of capitalist rapacity. A right old parcel of rogues.

On the credit side of the ledger, Roy lauds what she calls "resistance" (my quotation marks), which is a sort of generalised rejection of all of the above. She treads a little warily around the variety currently on display in Iraq, which she describes as being "as crazed and brutal" as the occupying Americans. She would prefer to see a secular, democratic, feminist, non-violent kind of resistance in Iraq, but thinks there's no room for it. Memo to Roy: Iraqis are working under the all too fragile protection of the Coalition forces to rebuild the country along those very lines.

Meanwhile, in Fallujah, the people busy doing the real resisting, including members of the old Ba'athist regime, might look a little askance at her claim that violence degrades the "vision, beauty and imagination" (mine, again) of the struggle, and positively balk at her insistence that women must be at the heart of it. After all, these are people for whom the torture and rape of political opponents and their families served as light afternoon

entertainment.

Among the catalogue of devilry for which the United States is to blame, Roy singles out Operation Desert Storm, launched by President George H.W. Bush in 1991. She cites tens of thousands of Iraqi casualties, bombardment by depleted uranium munitions, thirteen years of war zone hell, and half a million dead Iraqi children. Nowhere does she mention that Desert Storm had as its principal objective the liberation of the people of Kuwait from the horrifying oppression of their Iraqi occupiers.

This omission speaks volumes for the pathological condition into which the Left has sunk. The equation of the day was simple enough. Brutal invasion by tyrannical despot plus nil military response by the rest of the world equals appeasement and probable consequences too awful to contemplate (or to put it another way, Czechoslovakia plus Munich equals Auschwitz). Albert Langer, the veteran anti-Vietnam War campaigner, was the only one out of what remains of my generation of the Left to get the arithmetic right, at least in public. Conscious of one of history's more unambiguous lessons, President Bush decided to eject Iraq from Kuwait by military force to ensure that another dictator was not allowed to get away with it. No sensible observer could have failed to get the point. Even the United Nations saw it.

But the Left never accepted that Kuwait was the reason for the war, appearances to the contrary notwithstanding. Desert Storm could only have been about oil, American hegemony, profits for multinationals—all the tired, dreary Cold War detritus with which Roy larded her acceptance speech. For the Left, it was and remains psychologically impossible to accept that America is ever anything other than malevolent.

The United States is a country that, probably uniquely among nations, can claim without too much hyperbole to have actually been born in the fire of liberty. Could America have so abhorred the extinguishment of its flame in the deserts of the Middle East that its president should have sent his soldiers to re-ignite it, however imperfectly it might have burned there? Cue disbelieving laughter. The Left knows America better than that. Its pre-programming requires America always to be malignant.

ARUNDHATI ROY is typical of the Left's plunge into unreason—and worse—after 1990. Before that there had of course been instances of real malignance. Wilfred Burchett's case comes to mind—interestingly enough, he was one of Pilger's role models, according to the latter's most recent book, which probably says more about our most egregious expat than it does about Burchett. And there was the betrayal of the atomic secrets to the Soviets by

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American communists—a betrayal recently acknowledged, however reluctantly, even by historians of the Left, after fifty years of strenuous denial.

But for most of the past century, the broad Left had been perfectly well meaning, characterised in the main by a certain naive foolishness, which at least had the virtue of being mildly endearing, despite its debilitating propensity for being wrong about almost everything.

This will strike many as a generous view of the activities of the Left before and during the Cold War. But accepting that the Left has been generally driven by good intentions does not diminish its culpability; rather, it throws the movement's terminal folly into even sharper relief.

Sometime in the course of the twenty-first century, and probably sooner rather than later, the Left will have to confront the fact that it made the wrong call on almost every geo-political event of global significance during the previous hundred years. Coming to terms with this reality is going to be extremely painful for such rational members of the Left as still remain on deck. Knowing in its heart that the revolution would never come to its own neighbourhood, and never really wanting it to, the Left derived a heady, vicarious satisfaction from watching it blossom in suitably distant rice paddies, jungles, steppes, urban hellholes and deserts. Every time, regular as clockwork, the revolution turned up the newest thing in killing fields.

Intoxicated by its own zeal, though, the Left just couldn't see it, even if plenty of other people could. One of the most difficult things for the Left to explain, when the time comes, will be its refusal to heed the warning voices, clearly audible from the 1920s on. Even more discomfiting will be the need to reflect on the extent to which murderous and, indeed, plainly insane regimes—such as that which still rules in North Korea—were buttressed in their dystopian fantasies by the knowledge that the intellectuals of the West supported them.

The principal points on which the Left is culpable can be put most simply in terms of bald numbers. There is more to the story than the brutal body count, but the statistics get to the heart of it. The Western Left supported the Bolshevik Revolution and its continuation under Stalin, which killed somewhere between 10 and 20 million. It opposed the war with Hitler, which cost 25 million; only when the cosy non-aggression pact between the century's two worst dictators was nullified by Hitler did the institutional Left change its tune. And the Left supported Mao's victory in China which, when transmogrified into the Great Leap Forward and the Cultural

Revolution, accounted for 30 million.

In contrast, the Left's arch-villain of the late twentieth century, General Pinochet of Chile, seems, according to recent reports, to have accounted for around 3000 people by death or disappearance. And during the post-independence ballot frenzy in East Timor in 1999—over which the Left hysterically demanded that Australia go to war with Indonesia—the number was little more than half that. That's still too many, and the Left's calls for appropriate retribution have merit; but it's nowhere close to beginning to rival the unending death roll of socialism's victims, which has so far attracted almost none.

THE LEFT got it wrong on these counts and many others beside: the historical record on that score is depressingly unambiguous, whichever way you try to cut it. But from the perspective of the generation that radicalised in the 1960s and 1970s, the most mortifying realisation, still looming, is that it was also wrong about Vietnam. Vietnam was our defining experience; it made us what we became, and usually what we remained. Vietnam was our seven years in the college of the Jesuits, even if it was not the first seven but the third that encompassed our incarceration—we were aged fourteen to twenty-one, give or take a few years either way. Vietnam shaped our attitudes to politics, authority, tradition, religion, the values of our parents, even our taste in music and art. It's inconceivable that we could have got it wrong.

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Sadly for us, and infinitely more tragically for the Vietnamese, it seems we did. Looking back on it, it's difficult to see why it should have been so hugely, awesomely wrong for the United States to send troops to South Vietnam to protect its ally—indeed, its client—from invasion by the nightmarish Stalinist regime to the north, and from destabilisation, or worse, by its insurgent surrogates in the south. True to its founding principles (then, as now), the USA put up tens of thousands of its best and bravest, and lost them.

At the same time, it had to endure a media barrage unknown by any nation previously at war, where every fault on its part was endlessly magnified, and every atrocity by the enemy largely ignored. No wonder it eventually withdrew. Such was the fragility of "US imperialism"—the all-powerful behemoth imagined into existence by the Left all those years ago, and which has remained the central plank of its radical platform ever since.

Not long after North Vietnam's victory in 1976, when reports of the re-education camps, torture of American

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POWs and forced trans-migration from the cities began to surface, some at least on the Left found reserves of decency enough to protest, including some veteran anti-war activists. This isn't what we were fighting for, they said, helpless, angry and ashamed. Maybe not: but that was what the North had been fighting for. They weren't dancing to our tune, after all; we were dancing to theirs. Today's Left, at least as exemplified by Arundhati Roy, still does.

The Left's folly over Vietnam was not best typified by Chomsky and the other ideologues who went to North Vietnam in the early 1970s with messages of support, and who have remained inexorably committed ever since. Rather it was showcased, in spectacular fashion, by Jane Fonda, at the time probably America's most talented actress, who was photographed sitting nonchalantly on an anti-aircraft gun in Hanoi, laughing defiance at the American warplanes that flew overhead. On a grimmer note—much grimmer—she also read out prepared propaganda pieces on North Vietnamese radio, in broadcasts aimed at the soldiers, including Americans and Australians, who were then defending South Vietnam's imperfect freedoms, and which were intended to bring about their demoralisation, defeat and death.

Vietnam, forcibly reunited, is among Asia's poorest and most miserable nations, victim of a quarter-century of oppression, poverty and "ethnic cleansing". More than a million people, perhaps twice that number, have fled to America, Canada, Australia and other countries, which have benefited hugely from their industry and enterprise—which have at the same time been denied to Vietnam, which desperately needs them. When the Left is finally ready to ask if it was wrong to oppose the war, and wrong to support the completion of the Vietnamese revolution, perhaps it will also be brave enough to ask the people of Vietnam, instead of just asking itself.

As Vietnam's plight became more pitiful, successive US administrations were lambasted by liberal critics for refusing to relax the prohibition on US investment that could lift the wretched country from the mire. It's a bizarre irony that a nation which fought a ferocious war against capitalism, and eventually won it, thanks in large part to the support of the international Left, should then have failed so dismally in prosecuting the socialist alternative that only American dollars could rescue it from the lamentable fruits of its victory.

As for Jane Fonda, she has never been forgiven by war veterans for what she did in Hanoi, and perhaps she could not reasonably expect to be. Perhaps none of us can. But in recent years she at least has apologised. She was young and foolish, she said; she didn't know what she was getting into, or how she would be used; she would go to her grave regretting it. To those who have come to their senses, she speaks for the entire 1970s Left.

But for the rest, the reality of catastrophic error,

repeated through three full generations, is simply unbearable. Endlessly self-righteous, unwaveringly convinced of their own rectitude, their folly is best summed up in the famous words of one who, from the very first, knew them better than they were ever to know themselves: "Useful idiots", said Lenin, flicking them off with curt contempt. The Left must have thought he was talking about somebody else.

SMALL WONDER the Left has gone mad. The burden of error piled upon error, mistake on mistake, is too much to bear. Worse yet is the mute, unendurable reproach of the murdered millions. They were the ones who paid the price for the Left's idealism, the nihilistic or utopian fantasies that contradicted all human experience. The West itself never paid; it was far too rich, and far too sensible, to take the Marxist yearnings seriously enough to try them out for itself. But its radical academy inducted in and indoctrinated the second and third world's most able and ambitious students—and sent them home, with their heads full of nonsense, to govern pre- or proto-industrial societies that conformed to the prescriptions of Marx about as closely as they resembled the back end of the moon.

The results speak for themselves. It was at the feet of his radical professors in Paris that Pol Pot received the ideological training that he deployed to devastating effect in Cambodia. Those on the Left who offered apologies for the Khmer Rouge (and there was no shortage of them in the 1970s) should have experienced the moral equivalent of a near-death experience when the full extent of the horror became known. Still—even with the Cambodian people at their feet and the Left's demented dreamers at their elbows, that generation of sad teenagers was never able to account for more than a mere two million, a long way short of the benchmark. John Pilger, who naturally blames it all on the West, will never be able to see how much they derived from his little corner of it.

At the end of the Cold War the Left could have woken from the nightmare and faced its demons, even driven them out. But that was too hard, too harrowing; self-recognition could come only at the cost of its soul. Instead the Left sought solace in a deeper darkness.

The beginning of the Left's slide into the abyss came in 1990. Fifteen years on, we are looking at the mutations bred of the dark. Today, people who are otherwise intelligent allow themselves to believe that it was the US government that blew up the Twin Towers, not bin Laden (who long ago admitted to it). And according to whispers around the internet, American astronauts never landed on the moon at all: those wonderful, exhilarating images were fakes. This is territory once occupied only by the genuinely certifiable; now the Left has made it its own.

Today the infection of rabid anti-Semitism, rendered

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acceptable to the Left by its determination to identify with America's enemies, however repellent their sentiments, has crept from its latter-day nest in the Middle East to the mainstream media, where it goes largely unremarked, except by alert bloggers. Last July Margo Kingston, web diarist at the *Sydney Morning Herald*, blurted out—in an unmistakable echo of the ancient libel—that politics and the media in America and Australia are controlled by the international Zionist lobby. A few months later, in December, she and Phillip Adams were among those entrusted with judging nominees for the Walkleys, Australia's premier awards for excellence in journalism.

With such judges handing out the candy, it's no wonder journalists find it easier to sympathise with terrorists who torture and decapitate helpless civilians than with US marines, especially if they refuse to take chances with a merciless enemy who thinks that feigning surrender is not a violation of the rules of war, but merely a useful means of gaining the battle-field advantage.

If anyone doubts that the Left has really gone insane,

consider this. In 1998, Osama bin Laden issued a fatwa calling on Muslims everywhere to fulfil their religious duty to Allah by killing Americans wherever they find them. Six years later, after a stream of atrocities that culminated in the attacks of September 11, and, later, the fatal bombings in Bali, Madrid and Jakarta, he approvingly quoted the Left's arch-propagandist, Michael Moore, in a surreal attempt to persuade the American people to vote for John Kerry.

The Left could have recoiled in revulsion at the attempt by America's most murderous enemy to ally himself with its own agenda and program. It did not. Instead, Kerry's losers paraded around the internet with "sorry" messages that, sickeningly often, included a plea to the master terrorist not to kill them, since they had not voted for Bush. Those who had done so deserved everything bin Laden had in store for them.

Welcome to the abyss. And to think that once I was one of them.

Rob Foot contributed "Perils of the Postmodern Pathway" in the September issue.

PASSING THE HARP

That dent in the bonnet of my wife's car—
I might press it back straight from underneath—

soft metal, simple task.
No, she says, I think I'll keep it.

Passing the Harp Hotel the other night—
thump!—she smote a drunk jaywalker hip and thigh.

He rolled off, called from the kerb "I'm OK",
and his mates told her the same.

At home soon after she didn't feel OK.
Over it now?—almost, but happy

for the bonnet to represent
her slight lingering depression.

Passing the Harp with her these days,
thump! I mutter—by way of therapy.

(The Harp, with its tall ads: "tonight
on the big screen the big fight" ...)

Max Richards