

# THE ALGEBRA OF INFINITE JUSTICE



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BY ARUNDHATI ROY

In the aftermath of the unconscionable September 11 suicide attacks on the Pentagon and the World Trade Center, an American newscaster said: "Good and evil rarely manifest themselves as clearly as they did last Tuesday. People who we don't know massacred people who we do. And they did so with contemptuous glee." Then he broke down and wept.

Here's the rub: America is at war against people it doesn't know, because they don't appear much on TV. Before it had properly identified or even begun to comprehend the nature of its enemy, The U.S. government, in a rush of publicity and embarrassing rhetoric, cobbled together an "international coalition against terror," mobilized its army, its Air Force, its Navy and its Media, and committed them to battle.

The trouble is that once America goes off to war, it can't very well return without having fought one. If it doesn't find its enemy, for the sake of the enraged folks back home, it will have to manufacture one. Once war begins, it will develop a momentum, a logic and justification of its own, and we'll lose sight of why it's being fought in the first place.

What we are witnessing here is the spectacle of the world's most powerful country reaching reflexively, angrily, for an old instinct to fight a new kind of war. Suddenly, when it comes to defending itself, America's streamlined warships, cruise missiles and F-16 jets look like obsolete lumbering things. As deterrence, its arsenal of nuclear bombs is no longer worth its weight in scrap. Box-cutters, penknives, and cold anger are the weapons with which wars of the new century will be waged. Anger is the lock pick. It slips through customs unnoticed. Does not show up in baggage checks.

President Bush calls the enemies of America "enemies of freedom... They hate our freedoms — our freedom of religion, our freedom of speech, our freedom to vote and assemble and disagree with each other." People are being asked to make two leaps of faith here. First to assume that *The Enemy* is who the U.S. government says it is. And second, to assume that *The Enemy's* motives are what the U.S. government says they are.

For strategic, military and economic reasons, it is vital for the U.S. government to persuade its public that their commitment to freedom and democracy and the American Way of Life is under attack. In the current atmosphere of grief, outrage and anger, it is an easy notion to peddle. However, if that were true, it is reasonable to wonder why the symbols of America's economic and military dominance — the World Trade Center and the Pentagon — were chosen as the targets of the attacks. Why not the Statue of Liberty?

Could it be that the stygian anger that led to the attacks has its taproots not in American freedom and democracy, but in the U.S. government's record of commitment and support to exactly the opposite things — to military and economic terrorism, insurgency, military dictatorship, religious bigotry and unimaginable genocide (outside America)?

It must be hard for ordinary Americans, so recently bereaved, to look up at the world with their eyes full of tears and encounter what might appear to them to be indifference. It isn't indifference, just augury. An absence of surprise. The tired wisdom of knowing what goes around eventually comes around. American people ought to know that it is not them but their government's policies that are so hated.

America's grief at what happened has been immense and immensely public. It would be grotesque to expect it to calibrate or modulate its anguish. However, it will be a pity if, instead of using this as an opportunity to understand why September 11 happened, Americans use it as an opportunity

to usurp the world's sorrow to mourn and avenge only their own. Because then it falls to the rest of us to ask the hard questions and say the harsh things. And for our pains, for our bad timing, we will be disliked, ignored, and perhaps eventually silenced.

The world will probably never know what motivated those particular hijackers who flew planes into those particular American buildings. They were not glory boys. They left no suicide notes, no political messages... All we know is that their belief in what they were doing outstripped the natural human instinct for survival, or any desire to be remembered. It's almost as though they could not scale down the enormity of their rage to anything smaller than their deeds. And what they did has blown a hole in the world as we knew it. Politicians, political commentators and writers (like myself) invest the act with their own politics, with their own interpretations. This speculation, this analysis of the political climate in which the attacks took place, can only be a good thing.

Is this America's war against terror in America or against terror in general? What exactly is being avenged here? Is it the tragic loss of several thousand lives, the gutting of 5 million square feet of office space in Manhattan, the destruction of a section of the Pentagon, loss of several hundreds of thousands of jobs, the bankruptcy of some airline companies and the dip in the New York Stock Exchange? Or is it more than that. In 1996, Madeleine Albright, then U.S. Secretary of State, was asked on national television what she felt about the fact that 500,000 Iraqi children had died as a result of U.S. economic sanctions. She replied that it was "a very hard choice," but that, all things considered, "we think the price is worth it."

So here we have it. The equivocating distinction between civilization and savagery, between the "massacre of innocent people" or, if you like, "a clash of civilizations" and "collateral damage". The sophistry and fastidious algebra of 'infinite justice'. How many dead Iraqis will it take to make the world a better place? How many dead mojahedin for each dead investment banker?

'Operation Enduring Freedom' (renamed from 'Infinite Justice') is ostensibly being fought to uphold the American Way of Life. It will probably end up undermining it completely. It will spawn more anger and terror across the world. For ordinary people in America, it will mean lives lived in a climate of sickening uncertainty: will my child be safe in school? Will there be nerve gas in the subway? A bomb in the cinema hall? Will my love come home tonight? There have been warnings about the possibility of biological warfare — smallpox, bubonic plague, anthrax — the deadly payload on innocuous crop-duster aircraft. Being picked off a few at a time may end up being worse than being annihilated all at once by a nuclear bomb.

The U.S. government, and no doubt governments all over the world, will use the climate of war as an excuse to curtail civil liberties, deny free speech, lay off workers, harass ethnic and religious minorities, cut back on public spending and divert huge amounts of money to the defense industry. To what purpose? President Bush can no more "rid the world of evil-doers" than he can stock it with saints. It is absurd for the U.S. government to even toy with the notion that it can stamp out terrorism with more violence and oppression. Terrorism is the symptom, not the disease. Terrorism has no country. It is transnational, as global an enterprise as Coke or Pepsi or Nike. At the first sign of trouble, terrorists can pull up stakes and move their "factories" from country to country in search of a better deal. Just like the multinational corporations.

Terrorism as a phenomenon may never go away. But if it is to be contained, the first step is for America to at least acknowledge that it shares the planet with other nations, with other human beings who, even if they are not on TV, have loves and griefs and stories and songs and sorrows and, for heaven's

sake, rights. Instead, when Donald Rumsfeld, the U.S. Defense Secretary, was asked what he would call a victory in America's new war, he said that if he could convince the world that Americans must be allowed to continue with their way of life, he would consider it a victory.

The September 11 attacks were a monstrous calling card from a world gone horribly wrong. The message may have been written by Osama Bin Laden (who knows?) and delivered by his couriers, but it could well have been signed by the ghosts of the victims of America's old wars. The millions killed in Korea, Vietnam and Cambodia, the 17,500 killed when Israel — backed by the U.S. — invaded Lebanon in 1982, the 200,000 Iraqis killed in Operation Desert Storm, the thousand of Palestinians who have died fighting Israel's occupation of the West Bank. And the millions who died in Yugoslavia, Somalia, Haiti, Nicaragua, Chile, El Salvador, the Dominican Republic, Panama, at the hands of all the terrorists, dictators and genocidists whom the American government supported, trained, bankrolled and supplied with arms. And this is far from being a comprehensive list.

For a country involved in so much warfare and conflict, the American people have been extremely fortunate. The strikes on September 11 were only the second on American soil in over a century. The first was Pearl Harbor. The reprisal for this took a long route, but ended with Hiroshima and Nagasaki.

This time the world waits with bated breath for more horrors to come.

Someone recently said that if Osama Bin Laden didn't exist, America would have to invent him. But in a way, America did invent him. He was among the jihadis who moved to Afghanistan in 1979 when the CIA commenced its operations there against the Soviet invasion. Bin Laden has the distinction of being created by the CIA and wanted by the FBI.

But who is Osama Bin Laden really? Let me rephrase that. What is Osama Bin Laden? He is America's family secret. He is the American President's dark doppelgänger. The savage twin of all that purports to be beautiful and civilized. He has been sculpted from the spare rib of a world laid to waste by America's foreign policy: its gunboat diplomacy, its nuclear arsenal, its vulgarly stated policy of "full-spectrum dominance," its chilling disregard for non-American lives, its barbarous military interventions, its support for despotic and dictatorial regimes, its merciless economic agenda that has munched through the economies of poor countries like a cloud of locusts. Its marauding multinationals that are taking over the air we breathe, the ground we stand on, the water we drink, the thoughts we think. Now that the family secret has been spilled, the twins are blurring into one another and gradually becoming interchangeable. Their guns, bombs, money and drugs have been going around in the loop for a while: the Stinger missiles that greet U.S. helicopters were supplied by the CIA; the heroin used by America's drug addicts comes from Afghanistan.

Now Bush and Bin Laden have even begun to borrow each other's rhetoric. Each refers to the other as "the head of the snake." Both invoke God and use the loose millenarian currency of good and evil as their terms of reference. Both are engaged in unequivocal political crimes. Both are dangerously armed — one with the nuclear arsenal of the obscenely powerful, the other with the incandescent, destructive power of the utterly hopeless. The fireball and the icepick. The bludgeon and the axe. The important thing to keep in mind is that neither is an acceptable alternative to the other.

President Bush's ultimatum to the people of the world — "If you're not with us, you're against us" — is a piece of presumptuous arrogance. It is not a choice that people want to, need to, or should have to make.

Nothing can excuse or justify an act of terrorism whether it is committed by religious fundamentalists, private militia, people's resistance movements — or whether it is dressed up as a war of retribution by a recognized government. The bombing of Afghanistan is not revenge for New York and Washington. It is yet another act of terror against the world. Each innocent person who is killed must be added to, not set off against, the grisly toll of civilians who died in New York and Washington.

People rarely win wars, governments rarely lose them. People get killed. Governments molt and group, hydra-headed. They use flags first to shrink-wrap people's minds and smother thought, and then as ceremonial shrouds to bury their willing dead. On both sides, in Afghanistan as well as America, civilians are now hostage to the actions of their own governments.

## EXISTENTIAL PSY-OPS

The ground war in Afghanistan heated up when the Allies revealed plans to airdrop a platoon of crack French existentialist philosophers into the country to destroy the morale of Taliban zealots by proving the nonexistence of God. Elements from the feared Jean-Paul Sartre Brigade, or 'Black Berets', will be parachuted into the combat zones to spread doubt, despondency and existential anomie among the enemy.

Hardened by numerous intellectual battles fought during their long occupation of Paris' Left Bank, their first action will be to establish a number of pavement cafes at strategic points near the front lines.

There they will drink coffee and talk animatedly about the absurd nature of life and man's lonely isolation in the universe.

However, humanitarian agencies have been quick to condemn the operation as inhumane, pointing out that the effects of passive smoking from the Frenchmen's endless *Gitanes* could wreak a terrible toll on civilians in the area.

Speculation was mounting that Britain may also contribute to the effort by dropping Professor Stephen Hawking into Afghanistan to propagate his non-deistic theory of the creation of the universe.

This is only one of several Psy-Ops operations mounted by the Allies to undermine the unwavering religious fanaticism that fuels the Taliban's fighting spirit. Pentagon sources have recently confirmed rumors that America has already sent in a 200-foot tall robot Jesus, which roams the Taliban frontlines glowing eerily and shooting flames out of its fingers while saying, "I am the Way, the Truth, and the Life. Follow me or die."

~LARRY JOSEPHSON