

# ***Camus' Catch: How democracies can defeat Totalitarian Political Islam***

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**Editor's Note:** This is a version of a speech given at a conference organised by MedBridge Strategy Center, Camus: Moral Clarity in an Age of Terror, in Paris, 25 February, 2006.

...the Cold War was fought with not only weapons that were military or intelligence based; it was fought through newspapers, journals, culture, the arts, literature. It was fought not just through governments but through foundations, trusts, civil society and civic organisations. Indeed we talked of a cultural Cold War – a Cold War of ideas and values – and one in which the best ideas and values eventually triumphed.

And it is by power of argument, by debate and by dialogue that we will, in the long term, expose and defeat this extremist threat and we will have to argue not just against terrorism and terrorists but openly argue against the violent perversion of a peaceful religious faith.

it is ... necessary to take these ideas head on – a global battle for hearts and minds, and that will mean debate, discussion and dialogue through media, culture, arts, and literature. And not so much through governments, as through civil society and civic culture – in partnership with moderate Muslims and moderates everywhere – as globally we seek to isolate extremists from moderates. (Gordon Brown, British Chancellor of the Exchequer, February 13 2006)

I speak today from the democratic left and, mainly, about the left. But I am seeking interlocutors from, and alliances with, the much wider set of democratic and liberal traditions represented at this conference.

My argument is in three parts. First, the left has not seen the terrorist threat plain. Like the dreamy citizens of Oran in Camus' novel *The Plague*, it has embraced denial ('there are no rats') or worse – incoherent anti-Americanism ('the rats

are to be defended') or self-loathing ('we are the rats'). I set out what the threat actually is – Totalitarian Political Islam – and why it emerged. Second, I discuss two kinds of left-wing response to that threat – 'Left Kissingerian Realism' and 'Reactionary Anti-Imperialism' – which I criticise as inadequate, or worse. Third, I map an alternative response to the threat. I end by echoing Paul Berman's call for a 'third force' – a global network of networks through which democrats can wage the battle of ideas.

### 1. Seeing the threat plain

Camus warned us. As he predicted, the plague, after lying dormant for years in furniture and in linen has woken its rats and sent them to die in a happy city. Totalitarian Political Islam, to name the threat, is a theocratic fascism. It is a 'totalitarian impulse' which 'varies ideologically from group to group,' as Paul Berman has pointed out. It is organised in global networks that are neither states nor state actors, that are not party to international conventions and treaties, and that render traditional (or 'Westphalian') war-goals such as the defeat of an army or the defence of territory meaningless. We are also menaced by states – such as Iran – that sponsor, promote and protect those networks, and share the totalitarian impulse. Failing states, unable to fend off the networks or to safeguard their WMD secrets, are part of the equation. Whatever our views about the invasion of Iraq, Tony Blair was right to warn that 'it is a matter of time, unless we act and take a stand, before terrorism and weapons of mass destruction come together' and wage 'war without limit'.

However, to parts of the left the terrorists of al-Qaeda are no more real than were the rats of Oran to the dreamy city-dwellers in Camus' allegory. 'Why is Tony Blair trying to frighten us?' asked the *Spectator* (now *Guardian*) columnist Simon Jenkins... on the morning of the Madrid bombings. 'The Power of Nightmares' was the title of a BBC documentary that told us the threat was a mere fiction dreamt up by dastardly 'neocons' to boost western imperialism ... and then came a host of further terrorist atrocities, including 7/7. 'There is no threat, repeat after me, there is no threat,' wrote the film-maker Michael Moore, who looks at the terrorists in Iraq – the serial killers, the beheaders, the assassins of election workers and women assembly members, the mass murderers of the Shia in their mosques and marketplaces – and he sees the Minutemen of the 18th century democratic American Revolution.

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### The Dry Ground of the Left

This lazy response to the threat is reminiscent of the Chelmite villager in Sholom Aleichem's parable, *The Right Spot*. When they made the world the angels sprinkled souls in equal proportions. A handful of wise, another of the foolish. But over Chelm an angel's sack caught on the top of a mountain and out spilled all the foolish souls.

A Chelmite once went about on the outskirts of the town, searching for something on the ground.

'What are you looking for?' a passer-by asked him.

'I lost a ruble in the synagogue courtyard, so I'm hunting for it.'

'You poor Chelmite,' the stranger mocked him, 'why are you hunting for it here, when you lost it in the synagogue courtyard?'

'You're smart, you are!' the Chelmite retorted. 'The synagogue courtyard is muddy, whereas here the ground is dry. Now where is it better to search?'

(‘*The Right Spot*,’ from *A Treasury of Yiddish Stories*, edited by Irving Howe and Eliezer Greenberg)

I think parts of the left are searching for answers to terrorism on their own preferred ‘dry ground’: ‘Imperialist troops out now!’ ‘Victory to the heroic anti-imperialist resistance!'; ‘Blowback!’ ‘Bush is the real terrorist!’ ‘Stop the war on Islam!’ I don’t think they will find the ruble there.

But neither are we engaged in a ‘war on terror’ any more than World War Two was a ‘war on blitzkrieg.’ We are engaged in a conflict with Totalitarian Political Islam and our enemy uses not only terror but also ‘popular’ riot, electoral politics, and ideological warfare. The rhetoric of a ‘war on terror’ gets us thinking about security solutions. That is good, for security is important. But we need, above all, a *political* analysis of a *political* movement in order to develop a *political* response. That analysis must take the logical form of ‘if...if...then’ to grasp the historical roots of the threat and develop a viable strategy to defeat it.

- If a major world religion (Islam) develops as a uniquely political religion, valorising the originary, conquering and militaristic state of Medina, lacking a separation of religion and politics, and, further, has the self-identity of the ideal and authentic expression of monotheism. If the religion, centuries ago, banned the reform and reinterpretation of itself and choked innovation and renewal out of Muslim

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lands, blocking the reformation that would have accommodated the religion and its believers to modernity;

- *If* in the societies in which this religion is dominant, the national, secular, often state-led modernising projects of the elites fail to develop the society and culture, and instead become stalled in corruption, tyranny, and cultural stagnation, leaving the rulers unable to secure the support of large sections of the people, reliant on authoritarianism to retain control;
- *If* economic and cultural competition, penetration, and dislocation press upon the middle class, sending it into panic and rage, disintegrating welfare systems established by the elites in the post-war period, ravaging old social relationships but not creating new ones, threatening the old exploiting classes – the bazaar merchants, the religious establishment, sometimes landlords;
- *If* the political leaderships and organisations of the broad liberal-left are weak and widely discredited for having uncritically followed the failed state elites;
- *If* the working class is weak, hobbled by economic decay and by a history of political capture by (now-discredited) Arab/Ba'athi nationalism and (now-collapsed) Stalinist communism;

*then* not only the middle classes (small manufacturers, shopkeepers, artisans, peasants, market merchants, frustrated university graduates) but also those classes created by primitive capital accumulation and pauperisation (a cast-off sub-proletariat, a mass of marginalised semi-proletarian poor and distressed petit-bourgeois) – who were, in truth, never really won over to secularism during the post-war years – are ‘opened up’ for recruitment by the traditional intellectuals of Political Islam, the ulemas (the body of Mullahs – Muslim scholars trained in Islam and Islamic law).

*Then* these forces can be swept up into a mass movement aimed inchoately at ‘the West’ or ‘Imperialism’ or ‘the Jews’ or ‘the Infidels,’ and pursuing the entirely reactionary ‘solution’ of using modern military technology (and, they hope, state power) to turn back the clock to the pure Islamic state of the 7th century based on Sharia law.

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Totalitarian Political Islam appeals to a bone-deep sense of humiliation. The anguished question: how did the very fulcrum of civilisation become dependent, defeated, backward, corrupt, and poverty-stricken? The Islamists answer: ‘They did it!’ – the Jews, ‘infidels’, ‘westernisers’, apostate Muslims, corrupt oil sheiks, and uppity women. As Sami Zubaida has pointed out, the Islamists offer ‘action and redemption’ and ‘an honourable identity to the disenfranchised and despised.’ And we have seen that deadly combination before.

There are ideological and psychological elements common to Totalitarian Political Islam and European interwar fascism – a deluded romanticism and a desperate reaching for transcendence, an eschatological irrationalism, magical thinking, and a search for order: a purity without spot in a society of granite. Totalitarian political forms and media-savvy leaderships are also an old story.

Intellectuals such as Sayyid Qutb, Mawlana Mawdudi, and Ruhollah Khomeini laid the foundations for the rise of Political Islam. Their breakthrough came when modern secular nationalism stalled in defeat and failure in the 1970s and 1980s, and the Stalinist-led workers’ movements lost the allegiance of major social layers. Totalitarian Political Islam became the repository of the hopes and dreams of millions... and has worked tirelessly to twist those dreams into nihilist fantasies. The result: not just a ghastly wave of terrorism from Iran to Algeria, Sudan to Afghanistan, Kashmir to Chechnya, New York to Bali, Madrid to London, Tel Aviv to Netanya, but also a wave of reaction that has left democracies confused, frightened, and eager to appease.

### 2. The Crisis on the Left

Parts of the liberal-left *cannot bring this threat into focus* because of grave weaknesses of its own. Left Kissingerian realism and reactionary anti-imperialism feed off each other, and frequently meld into one negativist ‘style.’ They share a religion of anti-Americanism, but they have different impulses and hinterlands. The first seeks to pull up the drawbridge on a mad world from which one can expect nothing, and is rooted in a certain kind of conservatism. The second seeks to march out into a corrupt world in pursuit of a total revolutionary transcendence, and is rooted in versions of authoritarian Stalinism and romantic third-worldist leftism. But for now the two are united: Matthew Parris and Simon Jenkins holding hands with George Galloway and John Pilger.

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### 'Left Kissingerian Realism'

- **Item:** Recently, on a BBC political talk show, *Question Time*, Piers Morgan, ex-editor of *The Daily Mirror* (a tabloid newspaper of the left) mocked the idea that Arabs either want, or are capable of creating, democracy and freedom. Many in the audience, and on the panel, laughed along. 'Bring our boys home' was the idea. (I should say Morgan was sacked from the *Mirror* for publishing faked photographs of British troops abusing Iraqis.) When, in reply, the Labour International Development Minister, Hilary Benn, tried to speak about how humbled he was to meet democrats in Iraq, and spoke of their sacrifices, and of their purple-fingered joy on election day, no one seemed to want to listen, much less think. Eyes glazed over and the subject was swiftly changed to more comfortable ground – the sins of Bush-Blair.
- **Item:** The Iranian Ambassador, Dr Seyed Mohammed Hossein Adeli, spoke at the 2005 Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament's Annual Conference. According to the *Scotsman* newspaper the Ambassador delivered a stout defence of Iran's 'inalienable' right to develop a nuclear power supply. The enjoyment of the speech by the Conference was only slightly marred by those protestors who shouted 'Fascists!' at the ambassador. They were promptly ejected by CND stewards.
- **Item:** The former anti-war Labour MP, Alice Mahon, gave evidence in the trial of Slobodan Milošević at the International Criminal Tribunal for Yugoslavia (ICTY), the Hague, on 2 March 2006. After stating that, in her view, Milošević was the 'only one trying to keep Yugoslavia together' she went on, according to one report, to 'repeat a point that explained the position of Milošević's government – she likened the situation in Kosovo to that of Northern Ireland and its troubles. Milošević, she said, was only doing what any other leader faced with internal strife would do.'

I think the last item rather gives the game away. Alice Mahon has not really come to believe in the virtues of Roy Mason (the Labour Home Secretary who sought a tough 'security solution' in Northern Ireland). But any port in a storm – and that's largely what Left Kissingerian Realism is, I think. It is a ploy developed for a post cold-war world dominated by a 'Great Satan.' Knowing or not, parts of the left are now signed-up Westphalians.

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### Left-Westphalianism

The 1648 Peace of Westphalia made ‘nation-state sovereignty’ and ‘territorial integrity’ the new watchwords of international affairs. Military forces were recast as defenders of national territory not universal values. For all the good that such a shift represented (corralling religious wars, for instance) there was a tremendous cost. As Tony Blair has put it, for a Westphalian, ‘a country’s internal affairs are for it and you don’t interfere unless it threatens you’. Behind the order of Westphalianism a hundred tyrants ran amok while cynical-realism was the order of the day in the foreign ministries.

The left used to think it would be a truly historic moral gain when crimes against humanity trumped the claims of ‘national sovereignty’ and placed a genuine responsibility to protect, a solemn duty to rescue, upon an ‘international community.’ Paul Berman has made clear in his book *Power and the Idealists* that it was the left who argued most strongly for a humanitarian intervention – in the former Yugoslavia and elsewhere – and struggled to make such interventions work for the people not for big power interests.

But parts of the left have given up on that struggle. Faced with the puzzling contradictions of the new political landscape they are sullen and negativist – anti-this, anti-that, always anti-American, but deeply unsure what they are *for*. Faced with the colour-coded democratic revolutions in the ex-Stalinist states, the first signs of an Arab Spring, the purple fingers of an Iraqi voter, and the smiles of women – women! – cabinet members in Afghanistan’s newly elected government, many on the liberal-left are sitting on their hands. Some are even sneering and scoffing. Eyes are rolled, subjects are changed. The consequence is that swathes of people have been opened up to the reactionary anti-imperialists who *theorise* and *justify* all that negativism, scoffing and eye-rolling.

### Reactionary Anti-Imperialism – The Left as a Right

‘On the day when crime puts on the apparel of innocence, through a curious reversal peculiar to our age, it is innocence that is called on to justify itself’ wrote Albert Camus in *The Rebel*. Today’s reactionary anti-imperialists put the apparel of innocence upon political criminals by (mis)using the old Manichean categories of ‘imperialism’ and ‘anti-imperialism.’ Everything the USA does is reduced to ‘imperialism’ and is to be opposed. All ‘resistance’ to the USA is defined as ‘anti-imperialism’ and is to be supported. Reactionary anti-imperialism this offers ‘a

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general historico-philosophical theory, the supreme virtue of which consists in being supra-historical' (as someone once wrote about an earlier dogma). Complexity is rendered reassuringly simple, indeed cartoon-like – lurid caricatures, distortions of perspective and simplifications of meaning substitute for reason and sober analysis.

Listen to George Galloway, the UK Respect MP, apologist for Saddam, glorifier of the Iraqi 'resistance,' sycophant to the current Syrian dictator, and... political leader of the far-left in the UK, a feted figure on the US anti-war left. 'I was re-elected despite all the efforts made by the British government, the Zionist movement and the newspapers and news media which are controlled by Zionism.' His colleague Yvonne Ridley sits on the national council of Respect and stood as a Respect candidate in the last general election. She says, 'Israel is a vile little state. It's propped up by America. It cannot survive without American money...' [Respect] is a Zionist-free party ... if there was any Zionism in the Respect Party they would be hunted down and kicked out.' She explained that government support 'goes towards that disgusting little watchdog of America that is festering in the Middle East.' She went on to attack the Tories and Liberal Democrats, saying that all the mainstream parties are 'riddled with Zionists.' The mainstay of the Respect party is the Trotskyist Socialist Workers Party

Al-Qaeda's world-view has been summed up by Paul Berman:

Liberal civilisation is a fraud and a menace and is, in fact, the source of the world's unhappiness. Liberal civilisation is attacking the Muslim and Arab worlds from within, in the form of liberal Muslims, and from without, in the form of Western imperialism and Zionism.

Compare that to the world-view of George Galloway:

[I]n recent years, after the fall of the Soviet Union, unconquered Islam was the only territory free from the globalisation of capitalism and its imperialist foreign policy. The only people still resisting in the world, other than the Cubans, are the Muslims. This brings them into conflict with the tyrants, because Islam forbids its believers to accept tyranny and injustice. It commands the believers to stand up against injustice. And as Bush and Blair and Co. speak the very language of injustice and are, themselves, establishing tyranny around the world, inevitably this brings them into conflict with

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Muslims (...) Islam is the last unconquered territory. The Soviet Union is defeated. Socialism is defeated ... But, Islam is unconquered.

Today, as in the Stalinist era, one part of the Left is revolving in the orbit of an anti-American, anti-liberal, anti-Western totalitarianism while persuading itself it is doing the work of...’socialism.’

### Theorising Reactionary Anti-Imperialism

Intellectuals such as Alex Callinicos and Antonio Negri provide the theoretical rationale for reactionary anti-imperialism by reducing the complexity of the post-cold-war world to a single Great Contest: ‘Imperialism’ against ‘the resistance,’ or ‘Empire’ against ‘the multitude.’ Totalitarian Political Islam vanishes, only to reappear as part of ‘the anti-imperialist resistance’ or ‘the theurgical multitude.’ But this is a Faustian pact. Those who define Totalitarian Political Islam as ‘the resistance’ *redefine themselves* as critical supporters of Totalitarian Political Islam.

The result is that today’s reactionary anti-imperialist left is gripped by the same Manichean world-view and habits of mind that dominated a previous ‘left’ in the Stalinist period – from apologia to denial, from cynicism to grossly simplifying tendencies of thought, from the belief that ‘my enemy’s enemy is my friend’ to the abandonment of all who get on the wrong side of the ‘anti-imperialists.’

• **Item:** Hadi Saleh was a leader of the Iraqi Federation of Trade Unions. He was a socialist who was jailed, tortured and held on death row by Saddam for independent labour activity. Exiled, he raced back to Iraq in 2003 to rebuild and lead Iraq’s free trade unions. He was tortured and murdered by ‘the resistance’ in January 2005, provoking an international labour movement outcry. Alex Callinicos sneered at this ‘hullabaloo’ about a ‘collaborator.’

• **Item:** Asked on January 28 2004 ‘Do you think the anti-war movement should be supporting Iraq’s anti-occupation resistance?’ John Pilger replied, ‘Yes, I do. We cannot afford to be choosy.’

• **Item:** George Galloway, leader of the UK Respect party, spoke on Syrian TV in 2005. He said, ‘All dignified people in the world, whether Arabs or Muslims or others with dignity, are very proud of the speech made by President Bashar Al-Assad a few days ago here in Damascus (...) For me he is the last Arab ruler,

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and Syria is the last Arab country. It is the fortress of the remaining dignity of the Arabs, and that's why I'm proud to be here and addressing you this evening. (...) This murder of Hariri was deliberately planned and executed precisely to implicate Syria and to set in train the events which have unfolded.'

- **Item:** Socialist Workers' Party activist, Adam Yosef in his column in Desi Xpress attacked the gay-rights campaigner Peter Tatchell who had criticised the failure of the left to challenge radical Islam. He suggested Tatchell should 'attempt arresting Mugabe again, that would be worth seeing.' The article was illustrated by a photograph of Tatchell getting punched in the face by one of Mugabe's security guards. The column concludes with a call to Peter Tatchell and his 'queer campaign army' to 'pack their bent bags and head back to Australia.'
- **Item:** The Respect party faces questions about why the party dumped gay rights from its manifesto. Some allege Respect's right-wing Islamist backers demanded the exclusion of gay rights as a condition of their electoral support for the party.
- **Item:** Clare Short, ex-Cabinet Minister, Labour MP, and feminist, organises a meeting for the racist and totalitarian party, Hizb ut Tahrir, at the Houses of Parliament (1 March 2006), to which she invites all Members of Parliament. Hizb ut Tahrir openly calls for the re-creation of a Caliphate. Only Muslims will be allowed to elect the Caliph, who can only be a Muslim man. Non-Muslims may participate in the Parliament, but are '*confined to their voicing of complaints in respect to unjust acts performed by the rulers or the misapplication of Islam upon them.*' All offices of state are to be reserved to Muslims. Women are to be barred from 'ruling positions.' In December 2001 this is what Hizb ut Tahrir posted on its website about Jihad. 'Another distortion that is promoted is the idea that Jihad is only defensive. The protagonists of this idea again utilise certain misinterpretations to justify their positions ... two verses however, cannot abrogate the 119 other verses of Qur'an that suggest that Jihad is not merely limited to defensive war alone. These 119 verses, which are general and absolute, indicate that Jihad encompasses all of the following types of war: Defensive war, Offensive war, Limited war, Unlimited war, Protective war.'

### 'More Backward Than Fascism' – when the Left sang a better tune

The left used to know better. When Totalitarian Political Islam first emerged, the left defined it as analogous to fascism. In 1981, an Arab socialist, Salah Jaber, wrote

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that 'the fundamentalist movement shares many of the characteristics of fascism outlined by Trotsky: its social base, the nature of its political ideology, its fierce anti-communism and its totalitarianism.' Jaber pointed out that, in some respects, 'the fundamentalist movement is, in fact, *more backward* than was fascism' – it drives the historical clock backward to a reactionary utopia with more faith and zeal than the classical fascists.

Jaber also saw the emerging tragedy. The left, he noticed, is confused because the Fundamentalists, *as part of this 'more reactionary' drive backwards*, can also seem to challenge 'capitalism' and 'imperialism.' This contrasts to the role of classical fascism as the brutish guarantor of big capital in the face of a mass workers' movement. Seeing the danger, Jaber pleaded with the left: 'any compromises proposed by the fundamentalists ... pose enormous dangers for all sections of the left, both moral and physical.' It was 'absolutely and under all circumstances necessary to combat its reactionary and medieval influence.'

Even the so-called 'anti-imperialism' of the Fundamentalists, Jaber observed, represented only an inchoate reactionary hostility to 'all the political and social gains of the bourgeois revolution.' It is the historic duty of the left to *preserve and extend* those gains until no one is left behind. Once upon a time, that used to be the very meaning of 'left.' It can be once again.

### 3. The Democratic Alternative: Camus' Catch

We must reconcile ourselves psychologically to the idea of a long war. The defeat of Totalitarian Political Islam – *given* its deep roots in the long-term organic crisis of the Arab and Muslim world, *given* the mass base it commands, *given* the current weakness of secular democratic forces – will look more like the defeat of Stalinist totalitarianism than the defeat of Nazi totalitarianism.

In waging such a long war Albert Camus can teach us something. Philosophical works such as *The Rebel*, and novels such as *The Plague*, are important, of course. But the *goalkeeping* should not be neglected. Camus was a goalkeeper for the Algerian football team and famously said, 'All I know most surely about morality and obligations, I owe to football.'

Do you know how a goalkeeper safely catches a dangerous high ball? He or she watches the ball like a hawk, follows its flight, forms a W shape with their thumb

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and first fingers, then a cradle with the other fingers and the palms, firm but flexible (too rigid and the fingers can break, too loose and the ball slips out), makes the catch, before finally ‘bringing the ball in,’ secure, to the body. And the goalkeeper must do all this calmly, even when under challenge. *Especially* when under challenge.

Totalitarian Political Islam is rather like a dangerous ‘high ball’ and our response, accordingly, should look something like Camus’ catch – a combination of steely resolve, co-ordinated action, flexibility, correct technique, and sheer bravery.

### Step 1: Eye on the ball, follow the flight

#### (the Doctrine of the International Community)

We have taken our eye off the ball. A shift was taking place in the late 1990s towards internationally co-ordinated humanitarian intervention, with a partnership – strained but real – between Europe and America at its heart. That partnership must be restored. Nothing causes Totalitarian Political Islam more joy than splits in that partnership, whether caused by US arrogance and unilateral intent, European hauteur or, worst of all, dangerous talk – actually, unserious bluster – about Europe as a ‘counter-power’ to the USA.

Tony Blair’s 1999 Chicago speech was an important statement of the ‘doctrine of the international community’ (as was *The Responsibility to Protect*, the neglected report of the Canadian-based International Commission on Intervention and State Sovereignty). Crux: security and the spread of democracy and social justice are *mutually entailing*. Their combination is the basis for both an ethical foreign policy and a hard-headed security strategy in the new century. This doctrine has been sidelined by the arguments about the Iraq war and discredited by the near-impeachable mistakes, and crimes, of reconstruction. We should reclaim that doctrine – debate it, revise it, enact it.

We democrats should seek the transfer of the authority and legal weight of sovereignty from the state to the ‘common life’ of the people who live within the borders of the state. The political philosopher and *Dissent* editor, Michael Walzer, has argued that if the state protects the common life (i.e. does not slaughter its own civilians and seeks to meet their minimal life-needs) then sovereignty is to be respected. But if the state violates the common life in appalling ways then, whether or not anyone acts, that state has already lost its claim to ‘sovereignty’ (I am aware these thresholds – ‘minimal life-needs,’ ‘appalling ways’ – are contested). So, as

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Martin Cook has argued, the ‘international community’ needs an international military force ‘dedicated to the high moral purpose of defending fellow citizens of the global common life.’

### Step 2: Form the correct ‘W’ shape to make the catch

– (have faith in our own constitutional identity)

Correct form matters, in goalkeeping and in politics. To defeat Totalitarian Political Islam we democrats must be for – and be seen to be for – ‘correct form.’ In other words, we must respect the rule of law, the Geneva Convention, and fair trials. We must be opponents of extraordinary rendition, incarceration outside legal norms, collective punishments, attacks on civilians, and torture. Why? First, it is morally right. Second, because it’s how we will win. We have entered a new mode of warfare – ‘global surveillance warfare’ – in which the most important front is always public opinion and the most important weapon is what the late Peter Fuller once called the ‘mega-visual culture.’ Totalitarian Political Islam does not aspire to defeat us democrats on the battlefield. It seeks to *demoralise democratic public opinion and divide it from democratic governments*. If the military strategist Clausewitz were around today he would surely identify *that* front – opinion – as the one on which to concentrate forces. And he would surely judge seminars, conferences, documentaries, TV and radio stations, blogs, podcasts, plays, poems, art, journals and books to be as important as more conventional weaponry.

We democrats must be for an absolute prohibition on torture. The pragmatic grounds are clear. In an era of global surveillance warfare torture allows the terrorists to frame the issues just as they please, hampers ideological combat against them and turns the raw terrorist recruit into the hard-line terrorist militant. Torture aids terrorists.

The principled grounds for absolute prohibition were expressed by Jean Amery, an Auschwitz survivor and Belgian resister who was tortured by the Nazis. In his book *At the Mind's Limit* Amery noted that torture did not just signal the psychosexual depredations of the individual perpetrator. Torture was also ‘the key to the identity of the society responsible for it.’ With that insight in mind Michael Ignatieff, the writer (and newly elected Member of Parliament in Etobicoke-Lakeshore, Canada) has urged democrats to *defend their constitutional identity*:

[Amery] helps us to see why torture should remain anathema to a liberal

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democracy and should never be regulated, countenanced, or covertly accepted in a war on terror. For torture, when committed by a state, expresses the state's ultimate view that human beings are expendable. This view is antithetical to the spirit of any constitutional society whose *raison d'être* is the control of violence and coercion in the name of human dignity and freedom.

We should have faith in this constitutional identity. It is all that we have to resist the temptations of nihilism, but it is not nothing. It is the paramount duty of political leaders in a democracy under attack to keep the forces of order intently focused on the political requirement of maintaining legitimacy (...) we are fighting a war whose essential prize is preserving the identity of liberal society itself and preventing it from becoming what terrorists believe it to be. Terrorists seek to strip off the mask of law to reveal the nihilist heart of coercion within, and we have to show ourselves and the populations whose loyalty we seek that the rule of law is not a mask but the true image of our nature.

### **Step 3: Form a cradle with the other fingers and the palms**

**– (a battle of ideas against Totalitarian Political Islam)**

An Opinion Poll taken after 7/7 found that six percent of British Muslims thought the attacks were 'fully justified' – that translates to 100,000 British Muslims (*Daily Telegraph*, July 2005). Even if we read that statistic sceptically, this is plainly a crisis that no law or police force can tackle. We need a battle of ideas.

The novelist Salman Rushdie, who knows the true face of Totalitarian Political Islam, has argued that the UK government's reliance on 'traditional, but essentially orthodox Muslims' is mistaken. The 7/7 terrorists emerged from a crisis *within* that orthodoxy, *within* a stultifying traditionalist world that includes 'many whose views on women's rights are antediluvian, who think of homosexuality as ungodly, who have little time for real freedom of expression, who routinely express anti-Semitic views, and who, in the case of the Muslim Diaspora are – it has to be said – in many ways at odds with the (Christian, Hindu, non-believing or Jewish) cultures among which they live.'

Rather than bolster tradition we democrats might better seek to creatively encourage and aid those who seek an historic reformation of Islam. As Rushdie says '[we need]

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a move beyond tradition – nothing less than a reform movement to bring the core concepts of Islam into the modern age, a Muslim reformation to combat not only the Jihadi ideologies but also the dusty stifling seminars of the traditionalists.’ This is a huge task. ‘Creating and sustaining such a reform movement will require above all a new educational impetus, whose results may take a generation to be felt.’ Islam, says Rushdie, must be prised free from ‘the hands of the literalist Islamofascists’ who have imprisoned Islam in their ‘iron certainties and unchanging absolutes’ (*Times*, August 11, 2005).

Instead, all too often we have accommodation to, retreat before, and appeasement of fundamentalists.

- **Item:** The desperate search for a privileged Muslim interlocutor from within orthodox traditional Islam has led the British government to the Muslim Council of Britain, led by Sir Iqbal Sacranie. In 1989 Sir Sacranie said ‘Death is perhaps too easy’ for Salman Rushdie. Today he rails against the perversion of homosexuality and urges Muslims to boycott Holocaust Memorial Day.
- **Item:** In 2004 a UK play that dealt with sexual abuse inside a Sikh temple was violently attacked by Sikh fundamentalists and closed down. The author Ms Bhatti, who is a Sikh, was forced into hiding after receiving a series of death threats. To her shame, a Labour government minister refused to condemn the religious zealots on national radio. Salman Rushdie responded: ‘It has been horrifying to see the response. It is pretty terrible to hear government ministers expressing approval of the ban and failing to condemn the violence, when they should be supporting freedom of expression.’
- **Item:** Yusuf al-Qaradawi, a reactionary cleric who defends suicide bombing, the execution of homosexuals, and wife-beating was embraced by Labour’s London Mayor, Ken Livingstone, who said Qaradawi was ‘truly, truly welcome.’
- **Item:** According to leaked documents, the Foreign and Commonwealth Office is now poised to reach out beyond the stuffy traditionalists of the Muslim Council of Britain to... the radical Islamists of the Muslim Brotherhood! As the writer Nick Cohen put it, about an earlier FCO effort to appease extremism, ‘the Foreign Office ... abandon[s] Arab liberals in a fruitless quest for the approval of their enemies on the religious right.’

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### Combative Democracies

Enough, already. We need to create *combative democracies* marked by the proactive defence of the liberal constitutional order and the open society and we need to promote both as non-negotiable normative ends. And we should seek a more active role for an educated and aroused civil society.

In 2006 British Totalitarian Islamists marched on a public street with placards screaming ‘Europe, You’ll Come Crawling When the Mujahedeen Come Calling.’ The police looked on. Incensed passers-by were told that if they did not go away ‘in ten seconds’ they would be arrested. Here was Camus’ ‘curious reversal’ in which ‘innocence is called on to justify itself.’ Well, enough of that.

Against Totalitarian Political Islam’s anti-modernism, irrationalism, fear of freedom, loathing of the woman, hatred of the Jew, and the cult of master-slave human relations, we must wield a more powerful animating idea and educate citizens in devotion to it. I am in Paris so I do not need to cast around for that idea. It is the great promise of the liberal democratic revolutions of the 18th century – the animating moral ideas of liberté, égalité, fraternité; the rights of man; life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness. We make those beautiful ideas the property of every individual by our efforts to continue – and extend globally – the social democratic, feminist and human rights revolutions of the 19th and 20th centuries.

We must not be embarrassed to treat these animating ideas as sacred. It is not the least of the baleful consequences of postmodernism that a trite cynical deconstruction of all ideals, a playful relativising of all values, and a glib mockery of the notion of truth *saps the sinews, and erodes the identity, of a combative democracy* – terrorism is always ‘terrorism’ and democracy is always ‘democracy.’ Inverted commas have come to replace reason. Irony has displaced intellectual responsibility to ones fellows.

We need an alternative intellectual and cultural model to the Zealot and the Deconstructionist. The Italian democratic political philosopher Norberto Bobbio wisely called on us to adhere to ‘the most salutary fruits of the European intellectual tradition, the value of enquiry, the ferment of doubt, a willingness to dialogue, a spirit of criticism, moderation of judgement, philological scruple, a sense of the complexity of things.’ This mentality we must pit against what Paul Berman has called ‘the paranoid and apocalyptic nature of the totalitarian mindset.’

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### Step 4: Make the catch – make urgent global international solidarity with democrats in the Muslim and Arab world

The interdiction of terrorists is, of course, vital. But if there is not always to be another terrorist to interdict then civic cultures need to overwhelm despotic cultures. That means urgent international solidarity to strengthen the position of the democrats in the Arab and Muslim world, and the influence of progressives and reformers within Muslim communities in all countries. This is the very heart of the battle of ideas.

There are many straws in the wind. One is the 2006 manifesto ‘Together Facing the New Totalitarianism.’ The authors – Ayaan Hirsi Ali, Chahla Chafiq, Caroline Fourest, Bernard-Henri Lévy, Irshad Manji, Mehdi Mozaffari, Maryam Namazie, Taslima Nasreen, Salman Rushdie, Antoine Sfeir, Philippe Val, Ibn Warraq – express the precious idea that this is a fight of all democrats against Totalitarianism. They write:

After having overcome fascism, Nazism, and Stalinism, the world now faces a new totalitarian global threat: Islamism. We, writers, journalists, intellectuals, call for resistance to religious totalitarianism and for the promotion of freedom, equal opportunity and secular values for all. (...) This struggle will not be won by arms, but in the ideological field. It is not a clash of civilisations, nor an antagonism of West and East that we are witnessing, but a global struggle that confronts democrats and theocrats.

Like all totalitarianisms, Islamism is nurtured by fears and frustrations. The hate preachers bet on these feelings in order to form battalions destined to impose a liberticidal and unegalitarian world. But we clearly and firmly state: nothing, not even despair, justifies the choice of obscurantism, totalitarianism and hatred. Islamism is a reactionary ideology which kills equality, freedom and secularism wherever it is present. Its success can only lead to a world of domination: man’s domination of woman, the Islamists’ domination of all the others. To counter this, we must assure universal rights to oppressed or discriminated people.

We reject ‘cultural relativism,’ which consists in accepting that men and women of Muslim culture should be deprived of the right to equality, freedom and secular values in the name of respect for cultures and traditions.

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We refuse to renounce our critical spirit out of fear of being accused of ‘Islamophobia,’ an unfortunate concept which confuses criticism of Islam as a religion with stigmatisation of its believers.

We plead for the universality of freedom of expression, so that a critical spirit may be exercised on all continents, against all abuses and all dogmas.

We appeal to democrats and free spirits of all countries that our century should be one of Enlightenment, not of obscurantism.

If we could forge such a global alliance of democrats it would be the best answer to the myth that ‘the west’ is engaged in a ‘war on Islam.’ As we argued in the post 7/7 online statement, ‘Unite Against Terror’:

The vast majority of the victims of al-Qaeda’s violence have been Muslims. Those who have suffered at the hands of violent Islamic Fundamentalist movements in Iran and Algeria have also been ordinary Muslims. This terrorist violence is not a response by ‘Muslims’ to the injustices perpetrated upon them by ‘the west.’ Western democracies have been responsible for some of the ills of this world but not for the terrorist murders of these deluded Bin-Ladenists. These attacks did not begin in 2003. The first attempt to blow up the World Trade Center took place ten years before, in 1993. These terrorists do not hate what is worst in the societies they attack, but what is best. They despise individual liberty, critical thought, gender equality, religious tolerance, the rights of minorities and political pluralism. They do not criticise democracy because it sometimes fails to live up to its principles; they oppose those principles.

If we fail to strategically frame this conflict as democracy versus totalitarianism, we lose.

### **Step 5: Secure the catch by bringing the ball into the body**

**– (Global economic development-as-freedom)**

A goalkeeper knows a catch is not secure until the ball is brought back ‘into the body.’ In political terms, that means we need to fashion for the longer term a new security for the world’s peoples – a global covenant for a new century. The defeat of Totalitarian Political Islam is, ultimately, inseparable from the pursuit of global

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economic development-as-freedom, to use Amartya Sen's happy phrase. He argues that 'a process of expanding the real freedom that people enjoy ... requires the removal of major sources of unfreedom: poverty as well as tyranny, poor economic opportunities as well as systematic social deprivation, neglect of public facilities as well as intolerance or over-activity of repressive states.' In similar terms the British Chancellor of the Exchequer, Gordon Brown, has argued that we must:

...tackle injustices that breed resentment [and] show by the empowerment of poor countries through debt relief, aid, and support for education healthcare and economic development that globalisation comes to be seen not as a cause of injustice and poverty but a force for social justice on a global scale.  
(13 February, 2006)

The idea that capitalism has created a world in which workers have 'nothing to lose but their chains' is plainly wrong. But the idea that capitalism has created a world which is, in important respects, *inhuman* remains valid. Anthony Giddens has called ours a 'runaway world.' The democratic socialist Max Shachtman expressed a similar thought in the late 1950s when he said that 'capitalism is ... increasingly incapable of coping with the basic problems of society, of maintaining economic and political order.'

Alongside its surging productivity and ceaseless innovation – the growth in wealth, income and life-expectancy cannot be ignored – a voracious and out-of-control economic system threatens to eat up the resources of the planet, churn up communities, exclude the 'redundant,' corrode social institutions, and overwhelm representative democracy. Many fear that everything it touches – and it touches *everything* – is being turned into a commodity to be bought and sold, priced but devalued. We feel cheapened by that. And we feel insecure and harried – at the mercy of forces we have created, while in many parts of the world basic human needs remain unmet on an appalling scale. As Sen reminds us, despite 'unprecedented increases in overall opulence' the world 'denies elementary freedoms to vast numbers – perhaps even the majority of people.'

Totalitarian Political Islam offers no real answer to any of this – it brings penury to any society it controls. But it feeds on moods of ennui, anomie, frustration and discontent. And, within Europe, racism and the failure to accept and integrate Muslim minorities makes it easier for a new Jihadist identity and imaginary to fill the void.

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We democrats must offer a better answer. Humanising a ‘runaway world’ by tethering the global economy to development, and tethering development to freedom and social justice, will marginalise the lure of what Albert Camus called ‘primitive baying at the moon’.

Speaking in 2004, Tony Blair pointed to the intimate connection that exists between fighting against terrorism and for social justice:

We know now, if we didn’t before, that our self-interest is ultimately bound up with the fate of other nations. The doctrine of international community is no longer a vision of idealism. It is a practical recognition that just as within a country, citizens who are free, well educated and prosperous tend to be responsible, to feel solidarity with a society in which they have a stake; so do nations that are free, democratic and benefiting from economic progress, tend to be stable and solid partners in the advance of humankind. The best defence of our security lies in the spread of these values [and] we cannot advance these values except in a framework that recognises their universality...  
(March 5 2004).

And what are these universal values? Blair said they were ‘freedom, democracy, the rule of law, religious tolerance and justice for the oppressed’.

### Conclusion: Toward a Third Force

I have argued that we democrats need to restore the doctrine of the international community and the partnership between the US and Europe, respect our own constitutional identity by adhering to the rule of law, due process and human rights, wage a cultural ‘cold war’ of ideas, make urgent international solidarity with democrats in the Arab and Muslim world, and promote global economic development-as-freedom.

Paul Berman suggests that we should establish a new ‘Third Force’ along the lines proposed by the French Prime Minister and democratic socialist, Leon Blum, during the 1940s. An anti-totalitarian global network of politicians, trade unionists, intellectuals, democracy activists, journalists, poets, artists and writers, organised in each country according to national conditions, would seek to loosely co-ordinate global efforts to support, and so end the isolation of, democratic ideas and organisations in countries threatened by Totalitarian Political Islam.

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It would challenge the arguments of those in the west who seek to apologise for totalitarianism, or who cringe and accommodate, and so sell the liberal democratic inheritance; and it would educate a new young generation in the difficult glories of democratic and liberal culture. For example, if liberal education is being eased out of the academy by postmodern relativism and contentless ‘critique’ then it will have to be taught *outside* the academy by online universities, alternative school curricula, reading groups, and through new media, such as blogs, online intellectual journals, and forums for democrats fighting the battle of ideas.

This is not the time for cowering, or for ‘reaching out’ to the Muslim Brotherhood. It is the time to reach out for the glittering prize Abraham Lincoln sought at Gettysburg: a new birth of freedom. Let’s give the last word to Paul Berman:

The panorama of the Terror War cri[e]s out for this kind of activism in our own time – a Third Force, different from the conservatives and the foreign policy cynics who could only think of striking up alliances with friendly tyrants; and different from the anti-imperialists of the left, the leftwing isolationists, who could not imagine any progressive role at all for the United States. A Third Force, neither ‘realist’ nor pacifist – a Third Force devoted to the politics of human rights and especially women’s rights, across the Muslim world; a politics of ethnic and religious tolerance; a politics against racism and anti-Semitism (...) a politics of secular education, of pluralism, and law across the Muslim world; a politics against obscurantism and superstition; a politics to fight poverty and oppression; a politics of authentic solidarity for the Muslim world, instead of the demagogic of cosmic hatreds. A politics, in a word, of liberalism, a ‘new birth of freedom.’

Let’s roll.

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