

SHADOW BOXING

Desmond Manderson

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The stakes are high and our government is not thinking. Why? Because we have swapped rationality for myth.

A myth, said Roland Barthes, is a self fulfilling prophecy. It is a story about the way people are, or where they came from, which does not simply express a set of ideas (though it does that); it actively generates the conditions under which they flourish. If you believe it, it comes true. This can be a good thing. Stories about *ourselves* tend to fall into this category. A myth about Australian mateship might encourage us to treat each other equally. A myth about our sporting prowess will drive people to fulfill a sporting destiny which the myth instilled in them. The genius of a people lies in the myths that animate them.

But myths can be harmful. Stories about *others* tend to fall into this category. A stereotype does not just tell lies about other people: it transforms them, day by day, until they resemble the very image we have constructed for them. The great Palestinian writer Edward Said made the point many years ago, in a celebrated book called *Orientalism*. 'The East,' he argued, does not exist. It is an exercise in myth-making. The Orient - authoritarian, passive, and irrational - has always been a mirror image invented, centuries ago, to draw attention to our own best qualities.

Now the myth of the mysterious Orient is gaining new strength. In its current version, it is the story of an Islamic 'East' besotted with violence, contemptuous of freedom, and consumed by hatred. As if belief in

Allah any more than belief in Christ leads one to fundamentalism and intolerance. As if Muslim families desired to be left in peace and prosperity any less than our own.

In fact, both 'sides' in the current war are complicit in this myth making. Extreme fundamentalist sects play up the same myth of the authoritarian East to avoid any criticism of their oppressive and violent actions. And faced with the myth of Islamic terror, we respond with a violence which justifies the extremists' only argument: that violence is the only way. See the growing hatred in the demonstrations in Pashawar, Palestine, and Djakarta. We are inciting the very climate in which terror *gains* a foothold. Perhaps it is not yet too late to think about what our actions may in fact accomplish. One wearily predictable outcome can be well imagined. Yet another variety of tyranny in Afghanistan. A refugee crisis of unparalleled proportions. Rapidly escalating violence in Israel and Palestine. A fundamentalist coup in Pakistan. A dangerously radicalized Islamic government in Indonesia. Neither can perpetual war throughout the Middle East be readily discounted. Or nuclear war on the sub-continent. These are the dice we are so carelessly rolling today.

If all this happens, George Bush, Tony Blair, and John Howard will take it as proof positive that they were right all along - that the world must yet again be divided into two armed camps. East is East and West is West... But of course it proves no such thing. It proves rather that our myths have summoned into being the enemy of which we have long

dreamed. We will have made these governments and these perils by our own foolishness. We will have helped cause the evils we claim only to be responding against.

The forces of extremism have fantasies of their own. Against the myth of a monolithic despotic Orient, the myth of a monolithic West bent only on exploitation. This myth is crucial; for terrorism is in point of fact useless in addressing the real problems besetting these countries: poverty, disease, corruption, and the oppression of women. To avoid facing this fact, extremists need a myth to redirect these problems elsewhere. Furthermore, by replacing policy debate by death, ruin, and massive social dislocation, terrorism *breeds* the very conditions, the poverty and the despair, that fuel it. Terrorism too is a cause of the evils it claims only to be responding against.

Crucially, the terrorists and the warriors have much in common. They believe in the *same* myths and the *same* solutions. Each needs the other to justify their own importance.

So the developed world enjoys no monopoly on mythology – though we are perhaps the only people who think we do not have one. Our rationality is perhaps our greatest myth! But a rational approach would not seek to fuel the flames of resentment. Instead, it would attempt to *destroy* the mythologies that underwrite the conflict on both sides. One, by building bridges to other countries, not bombing them. And two, by demonstrating a genuine financial commitment to help alleviate poverty, and improve human rights through the auspices of multilateral bodies including WHO and the UN High Commission on Refugees.

In a recent and significant article in *Le Monde*, well known French intellectual and former politician Jacques Attali argued just this. When we act violently -

raze, invade, and impose - we mobilize the technological strength of the West. But it is precisely this strength which terrorism absorbs and turns back against us, as hijacking turns our machines and liberality against us, and anthrax turns our intricate networks of communication against us. Our great technological strength becomes our greatest point of vulnerability. And the more force we expend, the more vulnerable we become.

Instead, argued Attali, let us turn the tables. Let us turn the strength of the extremists against *them*. Their strength is the discontent of people and the anger it engenders. We turn it against them by exposing the lies that sustain their myths, and the incompetence of the solutions they propose. We show that we have better answers, not better weapons. The extremists' great rhetorical strength becomes their greatest vulnerability too.

The financial commitment behind this strategy is clearly not a problem. If the current government can spend \$5 million a day, indefinitely, on a myth, then it can certainly use that \$5 million a day in the pursuit of rational solutions.

A focus on aid, improving relationships, and multilateralism, runs directly counter to the policy of our government. But this is not a naïve idealism. First, the government's emphasis on treaties and trade reinforces the perception that Western countries, and the United States in particular, see every relationship as a "deal", and act only in response to their material self-interest. This myth is central to the hostility with which the developed world is increasingly viewed. A nation which is capable only of contract and never of sacrifice, is incapable of ethical action. Second, justice is by definition multilateral. Justice is not possible in a community of two. Love is possible. Agreement is possible. War is possible. But justice

involves the determination of rights, in a situation in which these must be balanced amongst a group of *conflicting* relationships or agreements. It implies not just you and me, but a *third party*. It therefore requires multilateral solutions.

The scandalous irrationality of the Australian government's current policy may have long term implications. Above all, we live on the doorstep of the largest Muslim population in the world, and certainly one of the most moderate. We are uniquely situated to forge a comprehending relationship with Indonesia. It is perhaps our global responsibility. Yet at the very moment when we ought to be doing everything we can in this direction, to forge a new closeness and to break down the myths that divide us, the present government has adopted a war footing which will without fail drive the moderates away from us. The government seems incapable of doing anything else. So much by way of leadership.

All around the world, myths are gaining shape and strength - about difference, hatred, and selfishness. They are starting to look increasingly like a new and unarguable reality. If they start to inhabit not only our nightmares but our daily lives, we will have no-one to blame but ourselves. We will have succumbed to the seductive power of myth, and it may be too late to try and wake up.

Ass.Prof. Desmond Manderson
Director, The Julius Stone Institute
of Jurisprudence.
Tel: 62 380 585 or 0411 701 858.
E-m: desmond@law.usyd.edu.au