Tariq the Tendentious

Russ Radcliffe

Tariq Ali
*The Clash of Fundamentalisms: Crusades, Jihads and Modernity*
Verso, $49.95hb, 342pp, 1 85984 679 3

The only consolation we can take from John Howard’s recent address to Congress is that so few Americans heard it: a few press-ganged congressional staffers, cleaners and perhaps a visiting school group from Iowa. Let’s hope they thought the USA’s greatest friend was Austrian. Howard’s sycophancy and support for an increasingly unilateralist doctrine of pre-emption against unspecified enemies, with no right of prior consultation, is enough to make you want to lob a few bricks.

It is unlikely that the recent visit to Australia of that famous smasher of imperialist windows, Tariq Ali, figured prominently in Howard’s briefing notes. Ali has lived in London since 1965, when his student activism attracted the attention of Pakistan’s military intelligence. He achieved notoriety as an anti-war activist when he and 25,000 others stormed the US Embassy in Grosvenor Square in 1968. Since then, he has edited *New Left Review*, written on history and politics, and produced plays and film scripts. He is currently working on the last in a quartet of historical novels on the confrontation between Islam and Christianity.

Insistently secular, Ali intends his new book, *The Clash of Fundamentalisms: Crusades, Jihads and Modernity*, to encourage ‘debate within and without the House of Islam’. The book’s strengths, and they are considerable, lie in his exploration of the founding myths and history of the Islamic realms, particularly the current state of affairs in Kashmir, Afghanistan, Pakistan, Iraq, Iran, Egypt and Israel. Though he relies heavily on Chalmers Johnson’s *Blowback* argument, his detailed dissection of the effects of foreign meddling is valuable.

Unfortunately, Ali reverts to the metaphoric brick, rather than the scalpel, when it comes to his analysis of the world’s only ‘empire’. The book’s cover depicts George W. as a bearded Mullah and a suit-clad Bin Laden at the President’s lectern. Get it? For Ali, American imperialism, ‘the mother of all fundamentalisms’, is as culpable and morally reprehensible as the Islamic variety that it confronts. It is a common enough view these days. Arundhati Roy recently described Bin Laden the Islamic variety that it confronts. It is a common enough view these days. Arundhati Roy recently described Bin Laden as ‘twins – becoming interchangeable’.

Ali’s America (maybe that should be Amerika) is an unrelentingly venal continuity from the slaughter of indigenous Americans to ‘daisy cutters’ in Afghanistan. Reminded of the ‘sour smell of history’, we learn that Roosevelt manipulated disputes with Japan to get the USA into World War II; that the Marshall Plan was a means of fighting ‘a protracted war against the old enemy’; and that the USA sprang a trap that drew the reluctant Russians into an invasion of Afghanistan. Japanese expansion, Stalin, Soviet ambitions in Central Asia, the building of decent open societies from the rubble of Western Europe do not make it onto Ali’s moral radar screen. In common with US hawks, Ali sees the world as a context-free zone of American aggression, where subjectivity and the power of agency are restricted to a lone superpower exerting its singular will on a world capable only of reaction.

There are many bad reasons for supporting American foreign policy. But there are also some very simplistic reasons for opposing it. Ali believes that it is impossible to have a principled agreement with the USA. Every Western intervention, humanitarian or otherwise, extends its imperial reach and confers a right to determine what constitutes civilised values, a ‘moral blank cheque of a selective vigilantism’. Liberal or left-wing supporters are derided as the ‘useful idiots of empire’ who provide legitimacy to a sordid agenda. Hence his recent attack on the so-called ‘belligerati’ — Salman Rushdie, Martin Amis and Christopher Hitchens — and his view that *The New York Review of Books* is the home of ‘power intellectuals’ who are careful never to displease the ‘imperial power’.

But an ideological anti-Americanism is hardly the same as a principled and historically aware anti-imperialism. Ali’s unwillingness to discriminate between the morality of NATO action in Kosovo or the British army in Sierra Leone and the US war in Vietnam provoked the cogent observation from Hitchens that he remembered ‘a time when the peace movement was not an auxiliary to dictators and aggressors in trouble’. In a recent public interview, I pressed Ali on what would constitute a just international intervention. He cited Vietnam’s invasion of the then Kampuchea. He apparently didn’t have a problem with the decade-long extension of Hanoi’s imperial reach at the cost of 50,000 primarily South Vietnamese conscripts and countless Cambodians.

We are right to be sceptical about the selective use of international force. The ghosts of Europe’s racially justified imperialism will always haunt the liberal mind. But Ali closes his mind to real political dilemmas and international responsibilities. There is little sense of the tragedy and intractability of some histories, which, for example, drive Robert Fisk to his prediction that ‘a form of international colonialism’ may be the only way of putting an end to the ‘filthy war’ in the Middle East.

You may not want to go all the way with Robert Cooper, Tony Blair’s foreign policy adviser, who advocates ‘a new kind of imperialism — one acceptable to a world of human rights and cosmopolitan values’. Yet it is clear that crumbling, warlord-riven states remain dangerous incubators in a world of proliferating nuclear, biological and chemical weapons. After September 11, even the USA understands that it no
longer has immunity from a dangerous world. Throwaway comparisons with King Leopold of Belgium hardly represent serious engagement.

‘The subjects of the empire had struck back,’ says Ali of the attacks on the World Trade Centre. Despite this falling back into a lazy rhetoric of liberation, Ali has long warned of the likelihood of Al Qaeda gaining access to, and using, nuclear weapons. Yet he classes American action in Afghanistan as simply ‘a war of revenge’. His preferred strategy of a ‘police action’ invites the question as to what the fall-back position would have been should the Taliban have failed to help the FBI with their enquiries and Al Qaeda’s cosy relationship with the Pakistan military had deepened.

For Ali, the conflict has its roots in material interests. He rejects, quite rightly, Samuel Huntington’s notion of clashing cultural monoliths. He also dismisses any view that pits Islamic fundamentalism against secular modernity as simply a justification for war. Ian Buruma’s *NYRB* essay on anticosmopolitan ‘Occidentalist’ movements reminds Ali of the old *Pravda*, ‘which would lump all the USSR’s enemies into a single spurious target’. While we should be careful of the ‘part for whole’ rhetorical ploy that equates specific US interests with ‘Western Civilisation’, or Al Qaeda with Islam, there are clearly significant issues of value at stake.

Whatever the desperate conditions that gave rise to its appeal, Al Qaeda bears little relationship to twentieth-century liberation movements. Its members are not Islamic Sandinistas intent on delivering freedom and equality, and, despite their proclaimed compassion for their Palestinian, Kurd or Iraqi brethren, they offer little more than a closed theocracy based on a mythic past that would reverse whatever minimal freedoms they or their sisters might currently enjoy. The secularist Ali is right to insist that fundamentalists are to be found in all societies, but his line that the USA is ‘supersaturated with religion’ is an absurd equivalency.

A polemic fuelled by righteous anger is an effective weapon. Ali, like John Pilger, bears a trademark that, in the minds of his admirers, guarantees truth and justice in a world of lies and power. But, also like Pilger, he has a tendency to squander credibility by clumsy generalisation and tendentious evidence. Since the end of the Cold War, the triumphal West has failed to address international inequities or to make reparation for the authoritarian régimes that waged its proxy wars. Whatever justification there may be for the ‘war on terror’, Bush’s Washington is displaying increasingly unilateralist, ‘imperial’ tendencies. Ali’s disdain for the ‘apologists’ and liberal ‘dupes’ who would qualify his particular notion of ‘empire’, or who seek practical compromise to messy problems, blinds him to the fact that the USA is a deeply argumentative and contested democracy. This blindness ultimately relegates an important perspective to the margins of the wider argument.
Urgent Reading from *ABR*

Only $63.50 (incl. GST) for a year’s supply, or $117 for 20 issues, plus a complimentary book courtesy of PICADOR.* To receive *ABR*, just fill in your credit card details and mail or fax this form.

Name: ............................................................................................................................
Address: ......................................................................................................................
........................................................................................................................................
E-mail: ..........................................................................................................................
Amount paid: $ .......................................    Phone: ....................................................
Cheque or Credit Card:     Master    ☐    Visa    ☐    Bank    ☐
☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐
Full name on Credit Card: ..........................................................................................
Expires: .............................  Signed: ..........................................................................

Which issue would you like your subscription to start with? ..........................

*ABR* Subscriptions: PO Box 2320, Richmond South, Victoria, 3121
Phone: (03) 9429 6700/Fax: (03) 9429 2288/E-mail: abr@vicnet.net.au
* Offer valid in Australia only and to the first TEN subscribers.

* Offer valid in Australia only and to the first TEN subscribers.