

Buy One, Get One Free

By Arundhati Roy

In these times, when we have to race to keep abreast of the speed at which our freedoms are being snatched from us, and when few can afford the luxury of retreating from the streets for a while in order to tinker with an exquisite, fully formed political thesis replete with footnotes and references, what profound gift can I offer you tonight?

As we lurch from crisis to crisis, beamed directly into our brains by satellite TV, we have to think on our feet. On the move. We enter histories through the rubble of war. Ruined cities, parched fields, shrinking forests, and dying rivers are our archives. Craters left by daisy cutters, our libraries.

So what can I offer you tonight? Some uncomfortable thoughts about money, war, empire, racism, and democracy. Some worries that flit around my brain like a family of persistent moths that keep me awake at night.

Some of you will think it bad manners for a person like me, officially entered in the Big Book of Modern Nations as an "Indian citizen," to come here and criticize the U.S. government. Speaking for myself, I'm no flag-waver, no patriot, and am fully aware that venality, brutality, and hypocrisy are imprinted on the leaden soul of every state. But when a country ceases to be merely a country and becomes an empire, then the scale of operations changes dramatically. So may I clarify that tonight I speak as a subject of the American Empire? I speak as a slave who presumes to criticize her king.

Since lectures must be called something, mine tonight is called: Instant-Mix Imperial Democracy (Buy One, Get One Free).

Way back in 1988, on the 3rd of July, the U.S.S. Vincennes, a missile cruiser stationed in the Persian Gulf, accidentally shot down an Iranian airliner and killed 290 civilian passengers. George Bush the First, who was at the time on his presidential campaign, was asked to comment on the incident. He said quite subtly, "I will never apologize for the United States. I don't care what the facts are."

I don't care what the facts are. What a perfect maxim for the New American Empire. Perhaps a slight variation on the theme would be more apposite: The facts can be whatever we want them to be.

When the United States invaded Iraq, a New York Times/CBS News survey estimated that 42 percent of the American public believed that Saddam Hussein was directly responsible for the September 11th attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon. And an ABC News poll said that 55 percent of Americans believed that Saddam Hussein directly supported Al Qaida. None of this opinion is based on evidence (because there isn't any). All of it is based on insinuation, auto-suggestion, and outright lies circulated by the U.S. corporate media, otherwise known as the "Free Press," that hollow pillar on which contemporary American democracy rests.

Public support in the U.S. for the war against Iraq was founded on a multi-tiered edifice of falsehood and deceit, coordinated by the U.S. government and faithfully amplified by the corporate media.

Apart from the invented links between Iraq and Al Qaida, we had the manufactured frenzy about Iraq's Weapons of Mass Destruction. George Bush the Lesser went to the extent of saying it would be "suicidal" for the U.S. not to attack Iraq. We once again witnessed the paranoia that a starved, bombed, besieged country was about to annihilate almighty America. (Iraq was only the latest in a succession of countries - earlier there was Cuba, Nicaragua, Libya, Grenada, and Panama.) But this time it wasn't just your or-

dinary brand of friendly neighborhood frenzy. It was Frenzy with a Purpose. It ushered in an old doctrine in a new bottle: the Doctrine of Pre-emptive Strike, a.k.a. The United States Can Do Whatever The Hell It Wants, And That's Official.

The war against Iraq has been fought and won and no Weapons of Mass Destruction have been found. Not even a little one. Perhaps they'll have to be planted before they're discovered. And then, the more troublesome amongst us will need an explanation for why Saddam Hussein didn't use them when his country was being invaded.

Of course, there'll be no answers. True Believers will make do with those fuzzy TV reports about the discovery of a few barrels of banned chemicals in an old shed. There seems to be no consensus yet about whether they're really chemicals, whether they're actually banned and whether the vessels they're contained in can technically be called barrels. (There were unconfirmed rumours that a teaspoonful of potassium permanganate and an old harmonica were found there too.)

Meanwhile, in passing, an ancient civilization has been casually decimated by a very recent, casually brutal nation.

Then there are those who say, so what if Iraq had no chemical and nuclear weapons? So what if there is no Al Qaida connection? So what if Osama bin Laden hates Saddam Hussein as much as he hates the United States? Bush the Lesser has said Saddam Hussein was a "Homicidal Dictator." And so, the reasoning goes, Iraq needed a "regime change."

Never mind that forty years ago, the CIA, under President John F. Kennedy, orchestrated a regime change in Baghdad. In 1963, after a successful coup, the Ba'ath party came to power in Iraq. Using lists provided by the CIA, the new Ba'ath regime systematically eliminated hundreds of doctors, teachers, lawyers, and political figures known to be leftists. An entire intellectual community was slaughtered. (The same technique was used to massacre hundreds of thousands of people in Indonesia and East Timor.) The young Saddam Hussein was said to have had a hand in supervising the bloodbath. In 1979, after factional infighting within the Ba'ath Party, Saddam Hussein became the President of Iraq. In April 1980, while he was massacring Shias, the U.S. National Security Adviser Zbigniew Brzezinski declared, "We see no fundamental incompatibility of interests between the United States and Iraq." Washington and London overtly and covertly supported Saddam Hussein. They financed him, equipped him, armed him, and provided him with dual-use materials to manufacture weapons of mass destruction. They supported his worst excesses financially, materially, and morally. They supported the eight-year war against Iran and the 1988 gassing of Kurdish people in Halabja, crimes which 14 years later were re-heated and served up as reasons to justify invading Iraq. After the first Gulf War, the "Allies" fomented an uprising of Shias in Basra and then looked away while Saddam Hussein crushed the revolt and slaughtered thousands in an act of vengeful reprisal.

The point is, if Saddam Hussein was evil enough to merit the most elaborate, openly declared assassination attempt in history (the opening move of Operation Shock and Awe), then surely those who supported him ought at least to be tried for war crimes? Why aren't the faces of U.S. and U.K. government officials on the infamous pack of cards of wanted men and women?

Because when it comes to Empire, facts don't matter.

Yes, but all that's in the past we're told. Saddam Hussein is a monster who must be stopped now. And only the U.S. can stop him. It's an effective technique, this use of the urgent morality of

the present to obscure the diabolical sins of the past and the malevolent plans for the future. Indonesia, Panama, Nicaragua, Iraq, Afghanistan - the list goes on and on. Right now there are brutal regimes being groomed for the future - Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Turkey, Pakistan, the Central Asian Republics.

U.S. Attorney General John Ashcroft recently declared that U.S. freedoms are "not the grant of any government or document, but....our endowment from God." (Why bother with the United Nations when God himself is on hand?)

So here we are, the people of the world, confronted with an Empire armed with a mandate from heaven (and, as added insurance, the most formidable arsenal of weapons of mass destruction in history). Here we are, confronted with an Empire that has conferred upon itself the right to go to war at will, and the right to deliver people from corrupting ideologies, from religious fundamentalists, dictators, sexism, and poverty by the age-old, tried-and-tested practice of extermination. Empire is on the move, and Democracy is its sly new war cry. Democracy, home-delivered to your doorstep by daisy cutters. Death is a small price for people to pay for the privilege of sampling this new product: Instant-Mix Imperial Democracy (bring to a boil, add oil, then bomb).

But then perhaps chinks, negroes, dinks, gooks, and wogs don't really qualify as real people. Perhaps our deaths don't qualify as real deaths. Our histories don't qualify as history. They never have.

Speaking of history, in these past months, while the world watched, the U.S. invasion and occupation of Iraq was broadcast on live TV. Like Osama bin Laden and the Taliban in Afghanistan, the regime of Saddam Hussein simply disappeared. This was followed by what analysts called a "power vacuum." Cities that had been under siege, without food, water, and electricity for days, cities that had been bombed relentlessly, people who had been starved and systematically impoverished by the UN sanctions regime for more than a decade, were suddenly left with no semblance of urban administration. A seven-thousand-year-old civilization slid into anarchy. On live TV.

Vandals plundered shops, offices, hotels, and hospitals. American and British soldiers stood by and watched. They said they had no orders to act. In effect, they had orders to kill people, but not to protect them. Their priorities were clear. The safety and security of Iraqi people was not their business. The security of whatever little remained of Iraq's infrastructure was not their business. But the security and safety of Iraq's oil fields were. Of course they were. The oil fields were "secured" almost before the invasion began.

On CNN and BBC the scenes of the rampage were played and replayed. TV commentators, army and government spokespersons portrayed it as a "liberated people" venting their rage at a despotic regime. U.S. Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld said: "It's untidy. Freedom's untidy and free people are free to commit crimes and make mistakes and do bad things." Did anybody know that Donald Rumsfeld was an anarchist? I wonder - did he hold the same view during the riots in Los Angeles following the beating of Rodney King? Would he care to share his thesis about the Untidiness of Freedom with the two million people being held in U.S. prisons right now? (The world's "freest" country has the highest number of prisoners in the world.) Would he discuss its merits with young African American men, 28 percent of whom will spend some part of their adult lives in jail? Could he explain why he serves under a president who oversaw 152 executions when he was governor of Texas?

Before the war on Iraq began, the Office of Reconstruction and Humanitarian Assistance (ORHA) sent the Pentagon a list of 16 crucial sites to protect. The National Museum was second on that list. Yet the Museum was not just looted, it was desecrated. It was a repository of an ancient cultural heritage. Iraq as we know it today was part of the river valley of Mesopotamia. The civilization that grew along the banks of the Tigris and the Euphrates produced the world's first writing, first calendar, first library, first city, and, yes, the world's first democracy. King Hammurabi of Babylon was the first to codify laws governing the social life of citizens. It was a code in which abandoned women, prostitutes, slaves, and even ani-

mals had rights. The Hammurabi code is acknowledged not just as the birth of legality, but the beginning of an understanding of the concept of social justice. The U.S. government could not have chosen a more inappropriate land in which to stage its illegal war and display its grotesque disregard for justice.

At a Pentagon briefing during the days of looting, Secretary Rumsfeld, Prince of Darkness, turned on his media cohorts who had served him so loyally through the war. "The images you are seeing on television, you are seeing over and over and over, and it's the same picture, of some person walking out of some building with a vase, and you see it twenty times and you say, 'My god, were there that many vases? Is it possible that there were that many vases in the whole country?'"

Laughter rippled through the press room. Would it be alright for the poor of Harlem to loot the Metropolitan Museum? Would it be greeted with similar mirth? The last building on the ORHA list of 16 sites to be protected was the Ministry of Oil. It was the only one that was given protection. Perhaps the occupying army thought that in Muslim countries lists are read upside down?

Television tells us that Iraq has been "liberated" and that Afghanistan is well on its way to becoming a paradise for women-thanks to Bush and Blair, the 21st century's leading feminists. In reality, Iraq's infrastructure has been destroyed. Its people brought to the brink of starvation. Its food stocks depleted. And its cities devastated by a complete administrative breakdown. Iraq is being ushered in the direction of a civil war between Shias and Sunnis. Meanwhile, Afghanistan has lapsed back into the pre-Taliban era of anarchy, and its territory has been carved up into fiefdoms by hostile warlords.

Undaunted by all this, on the 2nd of May Bush the Lesser launched his 2004 campaign hoping to be finally elected U.S. President. In what probably constitutes the shortest flight in history, a military jet landed on an aircraft carrier, the U.S.S. Abraham Lincoln, which was so close to shore that, according to the Associated Press, administration officials acknowledged "positioning the massive ship to provide the best TV angle for Bush's speech, with the sea as his background instead of the San Diego coastline." President Bush, who never served his term in the military, emerged from the cockpit in fancy dress - a U.S. military bomber jacket, combat boots, flying goggles, helmet. Waving to his cheering troops, he officially proclaimed victory over Iraq. He was careful to say that it was "just one victory in a war on terror ... [which] still goes on."

It was important to avoid making a straightforward victory announcement, because under the Geneva Convention a victorious army is bound by the legal obligations of an occupying force, a responsibility that the Bush administration does not want to burden itself with. Also, closer to the 2004 elections, in order to woo wavering voters, another victory in the "War on Terror" might become necessary. Syria is being fattened for the kill.

It was Herman Goering, that old Nazi, who said, "People can always be brought to the bidding of the leaders.... All you have to do is tell them they're being attacked and denounce the pacifists for a lack of patriotism and exposing the country to danger. It works the same way in any country."

He's right. It's dead easy. That's what the Bush regime banks on. The distinction between election campaigns and war, between democracy and oligarchy, seems to be closing fast.

The only caveat in these campaign wars is that U.S. lives must not be lost. It shakes voter confidence. But the problem of U.S. soldiers being killed in combat has been licked. More or less.

At a media briefing before Operation Shock and Awe was unleashed, General Tommy Franks announced, "This campaign will be like no other in history." Maybe he's right.

I'm no military historian, but when was the last time a war was fought like this?

After using the "good offices" of UN diplomacy (economic sanctions and weapons inspections) to ensure that Iraq was brought to its knees, its people starved, half a million children dead, its infrastructure severely damaged, after making sure that most of its

weapons had been destroyed, in an act of cowardice that must surely be unrivalled in history, the "Coalition of the Willing" (better known as the Coalition of the Bullied and Bought) - sent in an invading army!

Operation Iraqi Freedom? I don't think so. It was more like Operation Let's Run a Race, but First Let Me Break Your Knees.

As soon as the war began, the governments of France, Germany, and Russia, which refused to allow a final resolution legitimizing the war to be passed in the UN Security Council, fell over each other to say how much they wanted the United States to win. President Jacques Chirac offered French airspace to the Anglo-American air force. U.S. military bases in Germany were open for business. German Foreign Minister Joschka Fischer publicly hoped for the "rapid collapse" of the Saddam Hussein regime. Vladimir Putin publicly hoped for the same. These are governments that colluded in the enforced disarming of Iraq before their dastardly rush to take the side of those who attacked it. Apart from hoping to share the spoils, they hoped Empire would honor their pre-war oil contracts with Iraq. Only the very naïve could expect old Imperialists to behave otherwise.

Leaving aside the cheap thrills and the lofty moral speeches made in the UN during the run up to the war, eventually, at the moment of crisis, the unity of Western governments - despite the opposition from the majority of their people - was overwhelming.

When the Turkish government temporarily bowed to the views of 90 percent of its population, and turned down the U.S. government's offer of billions of dollars of blood money for the use of Turkish soil, it was accused of lacking "democratic principles." According to a Gallup International poll, in no European country was support for a war carried out "unilaterally by America and its allies" higher than 11 percent. But the governments of England, Italy, Spain, Hungary, and other countries of Eastern Europe were praised for disregarding the views of the majority of their people and supporting the illegal invasion. That, presumably, was fully in keeping with democratic principles. What's it called? New Democracy? (Like Britain's New Labour?)

In stark contrast to the venality displayed by their governments, on the 15th of February, weeks before the invasion, in the most spectacular display of public morality the world has ever seen, more than 10 million people marched against the war on 5 continents. Many of you, I'm sure, were among them. They - we - were disregarded with utter disdain. When asked to react to the anti-war demonstrations, President Bush said, "It's like deciding, well, I'm going to decide policy based upon a focus group. The role of a leader is to decide policy based upon the security, in this case the security of the people." Democracy, the modern world's holy cow, is in crisis. And the crisis is a profound one. Every kind of outrage is being committed in the name of democracy. It has become little more than a hollow word, a pretty shell, emptied of all content or meaning. It can be whatever you want it to be. Democracy is the Free World's whore, willing to dress up, dress down, willing to satisfy a whole range of taste, available to be used and abused at will.

Until quite recently, right up to the 1980's, democracy did seem as though it might actually succeed in delivering a degree of real social justice.

But modern democracies have been around for long enough for neo-liberal capitalists to learn how to subvert them. They have mastered the technique of infiltrating the instruments of democracy - the "independent" judiciary, the "free" press, the parliament - and molding them to their purpose. The project of corporate globalization has cracked the code. Free elections, a free press, and an independent judiciary mean little when the free market has reduced them to commodities on sale to the highest bidder.

To fully comprehend the extent to which Democracy is under siege, it might be an idea to look at what goes on in some of our contemporary democracies. The World's Largest: India, (which I have written about at some length and therefore will not speak about tonight). The World's Most Interesting: South Africa. The world's most powerful: the U.S.A. And, most instructive of all, the plans that are being made to usher in the world's newest: Iraq.

In South Africa, after 300 years of brutal domination of the black majority by a white minority through colonialism and apartheid, a non-racial, multi-party democracy came to power in 1994. It was a phenomenal achievement. Within two years of coming to power, the African National Congress had genuflected with no caveats to the Market God. Its massive program of structural adjustment, privatization, and liberalization has only increased the hideous disparities between the rich and the poor. More than a million people have lost their jobs. The corporatization of basic services - electricity, water, and housing - has meant that 10 million South Africans, almost a quarter of the population, have been disconnected from water and electricity. 2 million have been evicted from their homes.

Meanwhile, a small white minority that has been historically privileged by centuries of brutal exploitation is more secure than ever before. They continue to control the land, the farms, the factories, and the abundant natural resources of that country. For them the transition from apartheid to neo-liberalism barely disturbed the grass. It's apartheid with a clean conscience. And it goes by the name of Democracy.

Democracy has become Empire's euphemism for neo-liberal capitalism.

In countries of the first world, too, the machinery of democracy has been effectively subverted. Politicians, media barons, judges, powerful corporate lobbies, and government officials are imbricated in an elaborate underhand configuration that completely undermines the lateral arrangement of checks and balances between the constitution, courts of law, parliament, the administration and, perhaps most important of all, the independent media that form the structural basis of a parliamentary democracy. Increasingly, the imbrication is neither subtle nor elaborate.

Italian Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi, for instance, has a controlling interest in major Italian newspapers, magazines, television channels, and publishing houses. The Financial Times reported that he controls about 90 percent of Italy's TV viewership. Recently, during a trial on bribery charges, while insisting he was the only person who could save Italy from the left, he said, "How much longer do I have to keep living this life of sacrifices?" That bodes ill for the remaining 10 percent of Italy's TV viewership. What price Free Speech? Free Speech for whom?

In the United States, the arrangement is more complex. Clear Channel Worldwide Incorporated is the largest radio station owner in the country. It runs more than 1,200 channels, which together account for 9 percent of the market. Its CEO contributed hundreds of thousands of dollars to Bush's election campaign. When hundreds of thousands of American citizens took to the streets to protest against the war on Iraq, Clear Channel organized pro-war patriotic "Rallies for America" across the country. It used its radio stations to advertise the events and then sent correspondents to cover them as though they were breaking news. The era of manufacturing consent has given way to the era of manufacturing news. Soon media newsrooms will drop the pretense, and start hiring theatre directors instead of journalists.

As America's show business gets more and more violent and war-like, and America's wars get more and more like show business, some interesting cross-overs are taking place. The designer who built the 250,000 dollar set in Qatar from which General Tommy Franks stage-managed news coverage of Operation Shock and Awe also built sets for Disney, MGM, and "Good Morning America."

It is a cruel irony that the U.S., which has the most ardent, vociferous defenders of the idea of Free Speech, and (until recently) the most elaborate legislation to protect it, has so circumscribed the space in which that freedom can be expressed. In a strange, convoluted way, the sound and fury that accompanies the legal and conceptual defense of Free Speech in America serves to mask the process of the rapid erosion of the possibilities of actually exercising that freedom.

The news and entertainment industry in the U.S. is for the most part controlled by a few major corporations - AOL-Time Warner,

Disney, Viacom, News Corporation. Each of these corporations owns and controls TV stations, film studios, record companies, and publishing ventures. Effectively, the exits are sealed.

America's media empire is controlled by a tiny coterie of people. Chairman of the Federal Communications Commission Michael Powell, the son of Secretary of State Colin Powell, has proposed even further deregulation of the communication industry, which will lead to even greater consolidation.

So here it is - the World's Greatest Democracy, led by a man who was not legally elected. America's Supreme Court gifted him his job. What price have American people paid for this spurious presidency?

In the three years of George Bush the Lesser's term, the American economy has lost more than two million jobs. Outlandish military expenses, corporate welfare, and tax giveaways to the rich have created a financial crisis for the U.S. educational system. According to a survey by the National Council of State Legislatures, U.S. states cut 49 billion dollars in public services, health, welfare benefits, and education in 2002. They plan to cut another 25.7 billion dollars this year. That makes a total of 75 billion dollars. Bush's initial budget request to Congress to finance the war in Iraq was 80 billion dollars.

So who's paying for the war? America's poor. Its students, its unemployed, its single mothers, its hospital and home-care patients, its teachers, and health workers.

And who's actually fighting the war?

Once again, America's poor. The soldiers who are baking in Iraq's desert sun are not the children of the rich. Only one of all the representatives in the House of Representatives and the Senate has a child fighting in Iraq. America's "volunteer" army in fact depends on a poverty draft of poor whites, Blacks, Latinos, and Asians looking for a way to earn a living and get an education. Federal statistics show that African Americans make up 21 percent of the total armed forces and 29 percent of the U.S. army. They count for only 12 percent of the general population. It's ironic, isn't it - the disproportionately high representation of African Americans in the army and prison? Perhaps we should take a positive view, and look at this as affirmative action at its most effective. Nearly 4 million Americans (2 percent of the population) have lost the right to vote because of felony convictions. Of that number, 1.4 million are African Americans, which means that 13 percent of all voting-age Black people have been disenfranchised.

For African Americans there's also affirmative action in death. A study by the economist Amartya Sen shows that African Americans as a group have a lower life expectancy than people born in China, in the Indian State of Kerala (where I come from), Sri Lanka, or Costa Rica. Bangladeshi men have a better chance of making it to the age of forty than African American men from here in Harlem.

This year, on what would have been Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.'s 74th birthday, President Bush denounced the University of Michigan's affirmative action program favouring Blacks and Latinos. He called it "divisive," "unfair," and "unconstitutional." The successful effort to keep Blacks off the voting rolls in the State of Florida in order that George Bush be elected was of course neither unfair nor unconstitutional. I don't suppose affirmative action for White Boys From Yale ever is.

So we know who's paying for the war. We know who's fighting it. But who will benefit from it? Who is homing in on the reconstruction contracts estimated to be worth up to one hundred billion dollars? Could it be America's poor and unemployed and sick? Could it be America's single mothers? Or America's Black and Latino minorities?

Operation Iraqi Freedom, George Bush assures us, is about returning Iraqi oil to the Iraqi people. That is, returning Iraqi oil to the Iraqi people via Corporate Multinationals. Like Bechtel, like Chevron, like Halliburton.

Once again, it is a small, tight circle that connects corporate, military, and government leadership to one another. The promiscuousness, the cross-pollination is outrageous.

Consider this: the Defense Policy Board is a government-appointed group that advises the Pentagon. Its members are appointed by the under secretary of defense and approved by Donald Rumsfeld. Its meetings are classified. No information is available for public scrutiny.

The Washington-based Center for Public Integrity found that 9 out of the 30 members of the Defense Policy Board are connected to companies that were awarded defense contracts worth 76 billion dollars between the years 2001 and 2002. One of them, Jack Sheehan, a retired Marine Corps general, is a senior vice president at Bechtel, the giant international engineering outfit. Riley Bechtel, the company chairman, is on the President's Export Council. Former Secretary of State George Shultz, who is also on the Board of Directors of the Bechtel Group, is the chairman of the advisory board of the Committee for the Liberation of Iraq. When asked by the New York Times whether he was concerned about the appearance of a conflict of interest, he said, "I don't know that Bechtel would particularly benefit from it. But if there's work to be done, Bechtel is the type of company that could do it."

Bechtel has been awarded a 680 million dollar reconstruction contract in Iraq. According to the Center for Responsive Politics, Bechtel contributed hundreds of thousands of dollars to Republican campaign efforts.

Arcing across this subterfuge, dwarfing it by the sheer magnitude of its malevolence, is America's anti-terrorism legislation. The U.S.A. Patriot Act, passed in October 2001, has become the blueprint for similar anti-terrorism bills in countries across the world. It was passed in the House of Representatives by a majority vote of 337 to 79. According to the New York Times, "Many lawmakers said it had been impossible to truly debate or even read the legislation."

The Patriot Act ushers in an era of systemic automated surveillance. It gives the government the authority to monitor phones and computers and spy on people in ways that would have seemed completely unacceptable a few years ago. It gives the FBI the power to seize all of the circulation, purchasing, and other records of library users and bookstore customers on the suspicion that they are part of a terrorist network. It blurs the boundaries between speech and criminal activity creating the space to construe acts of civil disobedience as violating the law.

Already hundreds of people are being held indefinitely as "unlawful combatants." (In India, the number is in the thousands. In Israel, 5,000 Palestinians are now being detained.) Non-citizens, of course, have no rights at all. They can simply be "disappeared" like the people of Chile under Washington's old ally, General Pinochet. More than 1,000 people, many of them Muslim or of Middle Eastern origin, have been detained, some without access to legal representatives.

Apart from paying the actual economic costs of war, American people are paying for these wars of "liberation" with their own freedoms. For the ordinary American, the price of "New Democracy" in other countries is the death of real democracy at home.

Meanwhile, Iraq is being groomed for "liberation." (Or did they mean "liberalization" all along?) The Wall Street Journal reports that "the Bush administration has drafted sweeping plans to remake Iraq's economy in the U.S. image."

Iraq's constitution is being redrafted. Its trade laws, tax laws, and intellectual property laws rewritten in order to turn it into an American-style capitalist economy.

The United States Agency for International Development has invited U.S. companies to bid for contracts that range between road building, water systems, text book distribution, and cell phone networks.

Soon after Bush the Second announced that he wanted American farmers to feed the world, Dan Amstutz, a former senior executive of Cargill, the biggest grain exporter in the world, was put in charge of agricultural reconstruction in Iraq. Kevin Watkins, Oxfam's policy director, said, "Putting Dan Amstutz in charge of agricultural reconstruction in Iraq is like putting Saddam Hussein in the chair of a human rights commission."

The two men who have been short-listed to run operations for managing Iraqi oil have worked with Shell, BP, and Fluor. Fluor is embroiled in a lawsuit by black South African workers who have accused the company of exploiting and brutalizing them during the apartheid era. Shell, of course, is well known for its devastation of the Ogoni tribal lands in Nigeria.

Tom Brokaw (one of America's best-known TV anchors) was inadvertently succinct about the process. "One of the things we don't want to do," he said, "is to destroy the infrastructure of Iraq because in a few days we're going to own that country."

Now that the ownership deeds are being settled, Iraq is ready for New Democracy.

So, as Lenin used to ask: What Is To Be Done?

Well...

We might as well accept the fact that there is no conventional military force that can successfully challenge the American war machine. Terrorist strikes only give the U.S. Government an opportunity that it is eagerly awaiting to further tighten its stranglehold. Within days of an attack you can bet that Patriot II would be passed. To argue against U.S. military aggression by saying that it will increase the possibilities of terrorist strikes is futile. It's like threatening Brer Rabbit that you'll throw him into the bramble bush. Any one who has read the documents written by The Project for the New American Century can attest to that. The government's suppression of the Congressional committee report on September 11th, which found that there was intelligence warning of the strikes that was ignored, also attests to the fact that, for all their posturing, the terrorists and the Bush regime might as well be working as a team. They both hold people responsible for the actions of their governments. They both believe in the doctrine of collective guilt and collective punishment. Their actions benefit each other greatly.

The U.S. government has already displayed in no uncertain terms the range and extent of its capability for paranoid aggression. In human psychology, paranoid aggression is usually an indicator of nervous insecurity. It could be argued that it's no different in the case of the psychology of nations. Empire is paranoid because it has a soft underbelly.

Its "homeland" may be defended by border patrols and nuclear weapons, but its economy is strung out across the globe. Its economic outposts are exposed and vulnerable. Already the Internet is buzzing with elaborate lists of American and British government products and companies that should be boycotted. Apart from the usual targets - Coke, Pepsi, McDonalds - government agencies like USAID, the British DFID, British and American banks, Arthur Andersen, Merrill Lynch, and American Express could find themselves under siege. These lists are being honed and refined by activists across the world. They could become a practical guide that directs the amorphous but growing fury in the world. Suddenly, the "inevitability" of the project of Corporate Globalization is beginning to seem more than a little evitable.

It would be naïve to imagine that we can directly confront Empire. Our strategy must be to isolate Empire's working parts and disable them one by one. No target is too small. No victory too insignificant. We could reverse the idea of the economic sanctions imposed on poor countries by Empire and its Allies. We could impose a regime of Peoples' Sanctions on every corporate house that has been awarded with a contract in postwar Iraq, just as activists in this country and around the world targeted institutions of apartheid. Each one of them should be named, exposed, and boycotted. Forced out of business. That could be our response to the Shock and Awe campaign. It would be a great beginning.

Another urgent challenge is to expose the corporate media for the boardroom bulletin that it really is. We need to create a universe of alternative information. We need to support independent media like Democracy Now!, Alternative Radio, and South End Press.

The battle to reclaim democracy is going to be a difficult one. Our freedoms were not granted to us by any governments. They were wrested from them by us. And once we surrender them, the battle to retrieve them is called a revolution. It is a battle that must range across continents and countries. It must not acknowledge national boundaries but, if it is to succeed, it has to begin here. In America. The only institution more powerful than the U.S. government is American civil society. The rest of us are subjects of slave nations. We are by no means powerless, but you have the power of proximity. You have access to the Imperial Palace and the Emperor's chambers. Empire's conquests are being carried out in your name, and you have the right to refuse. You could refuse to fight. Refuse to move those missiles from the warehouse to the dock. Refuse to wave that flag. Refuse the victory parade.

You have a rich tradition of resistance. You need only read Howard Zinn's A People's History of the United States to remind yourself of this.

Hundreds of thousands of you have survived the relentless propaganda you have been subjected to, and are actively fighting your own government. In the ultra-patriotic climate that prevails in the United States, that's as brave as any Iraqi or Afghan or Palestinian fighting for his or her homeland.

If you join the battle, not in your hundreds of thousands, but in your millions, you will be greeted joyously by the rest of the world. And you will see how beautiful it is to be gentle instead of brutal, safe instead of scared. Befriended instead of isolated. Loved instead of hated.

I hate to disagree with your president. Yours is by no means a great nation. But you could be a great people.

History is giving you the chance.

Seize the time..