



## Tears of sadness, and opportunities

Maeve Connaughton

Disbelief was the immediate response to the events of 11 September in the United States. The latest technologies of instant news meant that billions of us witnessed the sight of several thousand people perishing in front of our eyes. The sense of horror, the numbness and the shock is already a cliché, but only because such a reaction was so universal. The thought that those television pictures represented so many fellow human beings dying a truly awful death is still a bit hard to get your head around.

Following from that was a basic feeling that there is just no justification, no excuse for acts like these. Airline cabin crew, people travelling from one city to another, office workers—these do not, by any stretch of the imagination, constitute anything like a legitimate target. The American capitalists and politicians and generals, who do bear a huge share of responsibility for the sum total of oppression in the world, emerged more or less unscathed. Those who lost lives, limbs, loved ones were largely ordinary working-class Americans, or Europeans or Asians or whatever bit of the planet they happened to hail from.

And then came the question: what happens now? History, politics, but mostly common sense brought the realisation that this wasn't going to end here, that this was the beginning of something terrible. The rulers of the USA were going to see to it that this horror would be compounded by others, that some poor, suffering people somewhere were going to get bombed or starved or both. And who knew where it could all end?

Then George W Bush emerged from his bunker to proclaim: "Through the tears of sadness I see an opportunity." For him and his class, this tragedy is something they intend to turn to their political advantage. A wave of patriotic tub-thumping will help them out of their problems, they hope: the Stars and Stripes should prove a fine blindfold to obscure the realities of an economy sliding downhill, with all that entails.

A war on an enemy abroad hides a war on working people at home. The world's money men followed the American lead. The aviation industry, not least in Ireland, has been trying to sack workers for months, and the attacks in the US provided a heaven-sent pretext. These redundancies are down to the terrorists, they said—the unspoken implication being that opposing them somehow revealed a lack of sympathy for the corpses in the World Trade Center rubble. Going quietly to the dole office was almost your patriotic duty, your contribution to the global war on terrorism.

The same excuse is being deployed to accelerate state attacks on our hard-won civil rights. Within days the European Union was 'harmonising' anti-terrorist laws. Harmony is a strange concept to mention in connection with penal laws that will allow police even more time to frame political suspects, that will give them a freer hand in suppressing any form of dissent they choose to criminalise, that will make it even easier for them to murder anti-globalisation protestors.

Politicians from Belfast to the Basque country are gleefully jumping aboard the anti-terrorist bandwagon. Those who still aren't satisfied with everything the Irish republican movement have surrendered are exploiting the carnage in America to demand even more capitulation in the form of decommissioning. Now, the IRA have been responsible for a good few stupid and unforgivable killings in their time, but they are not in the same league as those who deliberately set out to murder thousands of innocent civilians. For that

matter, neither are they in the same league as the terror that the United States intends unleashing sometime soon.

Some of those killed in New York may never be identified because they were 'illegals'. The compassion that people have shown towards their plight hasn't led our own Department of Justice to cease regarding an immigrant without official documents as tantamount to a criminal. The new-found indignation at the Taliban regime among the governments of the 'free world' doesn't mean that those fleeing it and other brutal dictatorships will find an open door in Ireland or elsewhere in Fortress Europe. Racists around the world took Bush's declaration of war as a signal to attack people of colour. When passions as bestial as these are stirred, it's easier to see what kind of a war is being hatched.

As this is being written, we are still waiting, expecting every morning to learn that the United States have added another atrocity to that of 11 September. It is cold comfort, perhaps, to bear in mind that US imperialism is not as strong as it likes to think it is. Since Vietnam, America has run shy of full-scale military involvement, except against a completely powerless enemy. It arms militias to fight its battles by proxy. It launches short-term bombing campaigns from thousands of miles away where it can easily scurry back to safety. It gathers coalitions of governments together before doing anything.

So Bush is unlikely to commit large numbers of ground troops to Afghanistan where so many empires have been humbled in the past. Whatever attacks he launches will have to be calculated not to upset any of his allies. He will also be forced to take account of opposition to the war at home and abroad. What seems probable is something like the campaign against Iraq: air strikes for a while, then occasional attacks from time to time, and political and economic isolation to round it all off. But none of this minimises the devastation that this would wreak on people who desperately need justice and food, not war.

Bertie Ahern nearly tripped himself up presenting Irish airports and facilities before the Americans even got round to asking. Although he quickly labelled anyone who disagreed as being on the side of the terrorists, there has been a healthy opposition to the war-mongering here. This has been helped somewhat by the revelation that official emergency plans still amount to 'Put your head between your legs and kiss your arse goodbye' – something which should remind us that shutting down Sellafield, and all the other Sellafields, is the only real defence against nuclear catastrophe. The prospects seem good for a movement against Ireland's involvement, demanding that not an inch of Ireland's airspace nor a drop of Ireland's oil go to the slaughter of innocent civilians.

Such a movement will need to win over those who have gone along with the war. At least some of them are doing so out of a sense that something must be done about what happened. This instinct is perfectly justified: those killed in the attacks do deserve justice. Opponents of Bush's war will have to make sure that Uncle Sam isn't allowed to occupy the seat of righteousness, because the CIA and the American government don't know the meaning of the word justice. Advocating some mechanism for independently investigating the attacks and bringing those responsible to account – whatever form that might take – would be one way of cutting through the lie that if you're not behind the White House, you're a terrorist sympathiser. Military retaliation won't bring justice; the movement against military retaliation can.

But there are so many other atrocities that need to be vindicated as well – most of them inflicted by the imperial powers now priming their missiles: the United States, Russia, Israel, Britain, you name it. It was this injustice without remedy that created the desperation that created the determination to strike at America that found an inexcusable and twisted expression on 11 September. The Palestinians can't wait for their freedom, the poor of the third world can't wait for a life free from poverty, oppression on a global scale can't wait to be eradicated. A man interviewed on the news after signing the book of

condolences at the US embassy said that the only solution was to create a fair world. Now, as we see the barbaric cruelty that the 21st century could hold in store for us, is the time for socialism to enter the stage.

*Red Banner 11*  
November 2001