

An Open Letter to Osama bin Laden

by WILLIAM A. COOK

Your "letter to the American people" arrived on the 24th of November via a translation provided by the Observer in Britain. I had not seen a copy of it in the American press although Mr. Sorensen wrote a column about it in the San Francisco Gate remarking about its absence in our corporate papers. My apologies for not responding before this, but I'm sure you understand.

Please don't assume that I write this response on behalf of all Americans; each of us cherishes our right to speak for ourselves though relatively few take advantage of that right or, if they do, find it difficult to gain access to the corporate media where they might be heard by their fellow citizens. But I do write from my heart with all the sincerity I can muster because your letter deserves a response, if only because you took the time to inform us of your grievances. Let's hope a dialogue can ensue that might bring an end to retaliation and vengeance executed in the name of God, but serves only to breed devastation, deprivation and despair for the innocent even as those who inflict their will on others reap the harvest of their greed and lust for power. As a man of self determined moral stature, I assume you will agree.

I find three areas of concern expressed in your letter: the first focuses on the past 50 years of "oppression" in Palestine; the second on the United States' support of governments, in both Arab countries and non-Arab, that bow before American power thereby suppressing and humiliating their own people and/or capitulating to American interests that exploit their people and their natural resources; and the third, your contention that Americans should submit to your understanding of the Quran since Allah's command that you cannot fail will result in America's destruction. I will attempt to respond to each of these concerns.

Let me begin with your second point regarding Palestine: "... that the Jews have an historical right to Palestine." "... this is one of the most fallacious, widely-circulated fabrications in history. The people of Palestine are pure Arabs and original Semites. It is the Muslims who are the inheritors of Moses..." Your contention rests on the proposition that the Semites are the true owners of Palestine. The origin of the word Semite can be traced back to the peoples that inhabited the lands around the Euphrates and Tigris rivers, Ethiopia, Arabia, Palestine, Phoenicia, and Syria. The term refers to the descendants of Noah's son Shem. These people were nomadic, moving around from the Mediterranean to Egypt. They include tribes that belonged to the Hebrew group of the Semites, the Habiru. Much more could be said about this affiliation of tribes that constitutes the Semites, but I think the point is clear: you and the Israelis are brothers and sisters; you are all Semites.

As brothers and sisters from the same family, wouldn't it make sense to join together to form a nation-state that incorporates all as citizens with equal rights for all, with shared resources, with mutual goals, bonded in love, peace and aspirations? Wasn't this in fact the way Muslims and Jews lived together for decades upon decades before the advent of Nazi Germany's attempt to exterminate the Jews? Wasn't that in fact the desire of most of the world's Jews as their numbers increased in Palestine as a result of the escape from Europe? Wasn't that the expectation of most of the world's population before resolution 181 was passed by the UN General Assembly and proposed splitting the land into two? Can we not resolve the horrendous conflict that has erupted between brothers and sisters where internecine warfare cripples families that should be living as neighbors? If Jews and Arabs attended their respective temples and mosques in peace in times past, why not now when we purportedly have risen in civilized stature? The question should not be, "Should there be an Israel or should there be a Palestine." The question should be, "How can we bring our respective families together to enjoy the fruits of the earth in harmony, mutual respect, and dignity."

Let's turn now to your second concern: American domination of nation-states and the consequences of that control. No where in your statement do you grapple with why America dominates these nations; no where do you differentiate among Americans who condone practices that result in that domination and those who do not; and no where do you offer alternatives to America's willingness to use its power to control, rather you undertake to justify your use of the same means to accomplish your end. Is not this a mirror image of the hypocrisy you level at the United States?

If we do not lead by moral force, we are by acquiescence the followers of those who fail to act and subjects of those who impose their will. That statement may be leveled at you as well as George Bush. But there are those who refuse to submit to your dictates as there are those who refuse to accept what the Bush administration does in their name. You need only read the hundreds of books and countless articles, watch the marchers who refuse to submit to their government's dictates, check the jail roles to see who would suffer rather than acquiesce to know that Americans are not of one mind when it comes to submission to their government's actions. Should you assert the right to kill any American, you offer this regime in America the right to slaughter civilians indiscriminately. Neither logic or morality can stand against this reality.

The issue cannot rest on retaliation. We must address why America has determined that it can lord it over other nations and bend them to its will. This issue cannot be addressed to the American people; they are ignorant of its cause. Government in America has become the victim of its own system: freedom to acquire wealth, freedom to buy communication of one's values and ideas, freedom to support those who run for office gives to those who have the wealth and drive to power the means to control the democracy. Over the past 50 years, corporations

have evolved into transnational corporations that use America as a base of operations even as they locate their headquarters off-shore in tax free places like the Caman Islands. They enforce their will through legislation controlled by those they have put into office. They create International Monetary Funds and impose World Bank regulations on nations to ensure their continued growth and profit. They are able to eradicate laws that protect workers and investors by creating trade agreements like NAFTA and GATT that contain no regulations that protect against child labor, or protect workers against risk or health hazards, and they provide no means to ensure continuation of employment or care for retirement. These companies move from country to country seeking the lowest paying wages to ensure the highest profit. They are parasites on humanity. These powerful corporations use American military might to protect their interests even as they gain increased wealth through the increase in military expenditure.

Can any American believe that this country has to fear another nation in this world? Why then do we have troops in 150 nations around the world? Because the corporate interests demand that we protect their investments. They are not there to protect Americans. How do you resolve this issue? By force against a far superior force? I don't think so. Force inflicted, by terrorist acts or any other means, guarantees only retaliation, increased suppression of freedoms around the globe, and increased force by those already in power.

Would it not make more sense to bring all the nations together that are victims of this world-wide industrial revolution with its concomitant abuses inflicted on the poor of the world to stand against the trans-nationals? Why after three major industrial revolutions in England, Europe, and America do we stand by and let the trans-nationals tell us that these "underdeveloped" countries must endure the heartache, deprivation, poverty, disease, pollution, dangers, and uncertainties of the industrial revolutions just as England, Europe, and America had to? Haven't we in the "developed" west put legislation in place to protect our workers, to protect our futures, to protect our natural resources and the environment? Why deny that protection to the new industrial nations? Why pay pennies per hour to workers? Why offer no health protection? Why pollute their streams and cast smog over their people and the land? Why allow these corporations to create hatred for America for profit? Can't all of those who abhor this exploitation, Mexicans, Americans, Indonesians, Chinese, Vietnamese, Cambodians, and those in Bangladesh gather together to present to the UN, to the whole world, the disparity that is inflicted on our communities by those few who possess the wealth? This may take marching in the streets, it may take years to accomplish, but it will bring about a peaceful resolution to the issue not a continuation of the slaughter of the innocents.

Do not preach that God demands that the oppressed have a right to return the aggression. What God commands those He has created to destroy their brothers and sisters? Unite to win, don't destroy. Proclaim the need to share the wealth of the world with all its inhabitants, not provide for the few; argue the need for

compassion for those who have nothing, condemn power for the elite; extol those who share their time, their resources, their love with the deprived and destitute of the world, and decry those who hoard, inflict usury, and relish their selfishness. There are Americans who loath the power these corporations have over their democracy, and they speak out against it. They follow the path of Henry David Thoreau and stand against the government when it acts contrary to what is right. Join with them and with your brothers and sisters in nations across the globe to protest the inequity of the distribution of the world's resources. You and all against oppression fight against a new colonialism, one dominated and enforced by the few over the many by control of the governments of nation states rather than by occupation, but with the same results control of the masses and the resources. But the people of the world stood peacefully in past ages against colonialism and oppression: Gandhi in India, Martin Luther King and Malcolm X in America, Mandela in South Africa, the Muslims in Algeria, and in other places around the globe. It can be done peacefully again.

Let me now move to your third concern. Your belief that you must impose your religion on America repeats what Urban II attempted to inflict on Muslims and Jews in the creation of the crusades in the 10th and 11th centuries. He, too, cried out that "God wills it!" He, too, was wrong! Now we have Christian fundamentalists raising the cry that God wills the second coming, requiring that the Jews be reinstated in Judea-Samaria while Ultra right Orthodox Jews proclaim that God has bestowed Judea back to them through Abraham; but each group reads from a different book, Genesis or Revelations, and each arrives at a different understanding of why God wants the Jews in Judea. Which group has God's ear and knows with certainty what He commands? Does Eitam in Israel? Does Falwell in America? No, none do; nor do you. Neither you nor any man can inflict your will on another and have him accept it in his heart; nor can you legislate belief in another's soul. Indeed, what you claim America does to the peoples of the world, you would proclaim you have a right to do! You do not have that right; America does not have that right. There are 5.8 billion people in the world; they behave in multitudinous ways because they are each distinct in nature, temperament, personality, local customs, beliefs, and mores. How can one person or one group legislate how all will behave or believe? What utter nonsense to assume that would be possible or desirable. Diversity is the nourishment of the global community; it enriches our souls, our minds, and our hearts. We must relish that, nurture it, delight in it. We don't need one righteous religion imposed like a monolith on our communities, whether that be fundamentalist Christian or fundamentalist Islamic. We need, rather, tolerance, compassion, love, and mercy. Let's accept the reality of our errors, but not condemn; let's reach out for unity the better to bring about change without retaliation or vengeance; let's seek equity through peaceful means that all may find peace in life and hope for the future.

Let me close now, Osama, with this thought: vengeance is a disease that multiplies, divides, and becomes the scourge of humankind; it is anathema to creation because it destroys what exists. We must, together, give living a chance

so that our children and their children can experience the fruits of this earth and share them with their brothers and sisters. Peace to you and to all whom you love.

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