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An Open Letter to the Signatories of a Statement in Favor of American Aggression

By Mahmood Delkhasteh and Simone Wright

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When sixty American intellectuals signed their names to a letter entitled '[what we are fighting for](#),' published by the Institute for American Values, some readers hoped to hear a voice of reason, some alternative to the American government's newest foreign policies following Bush's invention of an 'axis of evil' in his union

David Vest
[Grammy's of Constant](#)

[Sorrow](#)

March 3, 2002

Bernard Weiner

[War on Terrorism for Dummies](#)

Paul Cox

[Boycott Mel Gibson's "We Were Soldiers"](#)

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Bill Sutherland's Quest](#)

Eric Schaeffer

[Dear Christie Whitman:
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John Chuckman

[Why the Rest of Planet is Unnerved by America](#)

March 2, 2002

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[Sweat, Sex, Feet and the Working Class](#)

March 1, 2002

Brendan Sexton III

[What's Wrong With Black Hawk Down: an Actor Speaks Out](#)

Terry Diggs

[Why Twain's Pudd'nhead Wilson Still Matters](#)

David Krieger

[Nuclear Terrorism and US Nuclear Policy](#)

address. Instead they found that these intellectuals not only neglected to formulate alternatives to these aggressive strategies, but in fact gave the US administration their total support for the 'war against terrorism.' Many of the academics who signed this letter -Huntington, Fukuyama, Etzioni, Skocpol - are considered 'public intellectuals' in the United States, and are held in high regard as examples of how prominent individuals can combine intellectual and political activity. All of them, have, however, at the very least utterly failed to fulfill this important responsibility by signing this letter. For what is an intellectual if not someone who produces real alternatives to the current state of affairs and to official policies which have created the disastrous status quo at first place?

The signatories of this letter have not only failed to fulfill their social responsibilities in this regard. Despite their many references to human rights, they have also exposed their fundamental lack of faith in the universality of human rights by refusing to condemn the violation of human rights of those who must suffer in what they call a 'just war.' This basic hypocrisy raises doubts about whether these academics should be seen as intellectuals after all. Jean Paul Sartre once wrote that the world, seen from the perspective of the western ruling class, is divided into half a billion citizens and one and half billion indigenous people. The explanation of 'why we are fighting' unfortunately demonstrates that this world view is still very much alive and kicking; the only difference being that though the number of citizens, or those with the power to interpret the world, has remained constant while the number of indigenous has quadrupled. This letter fails to address the grievances of people exhausted by oppression; it fails to argue, propose and advocate the adoption of socio-economical and political policies which aim at tackling the causes of terrorism by reducing the ever-increasing level of world poverty. In fails to challenge discriminatory political and social policies in concrete terms.

The most striking disappointment of the letter is the signatories' total failure contextualize the

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Gideon Samet
[Sharon Must Go](#)

Rep. Ron Paul
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M. Shahid Alam
[Samuel Huntington: Peddling Civilizational Wars](#)

St. Clair / Cockburn
[Rumble from the Jungle: Ecuadorian Farmers Fight DynCorp's ChemWar](#)

February 27, 2002

Eric Hobsbawm
[The Future of War and Peace](#)

John Troyer
[About that WTC Memorial](#)

Mokhiber / Weissman
[Wired for Democracy or Business?](#)

Alexander Cockburn
[Daniel Pearl: Should His Editors Have Sent Him There?](#)

February 26, 2002

Jonathan Steele
[Kabul's Loss](#)

Vasily Streltsov
[The Pentagon in](#)

heinous terrorist acts of September 11th within the realities of America's discriminatorily foreign policy in the Middle East. They have instead actively followed the dominant discourse of the government and media, which deliberately isolates the two issues.

The most shocking oversight of this letter is that its signatories fail to question the sincerity of the American government's mission to 'fight terrorism,' even though it is obvious that the goals and means of this so-called war on terrorism are completely incompatible. This is naive, at best. One does not need to be an expert in politics, terrorism, or revolution (as many of the people are) to realize that the war against terrorism does not require a staggering annual budget of \$380 billion, or to know that spending \$10 billion to insemminate lies into the media is not aimed at fighting terrorism, but at manipulating public opinion into supporting the idea. It does not take an expert analyst to realize that the US government, devoid of real solutions to the chronic and worsening socio-economical problems of American society, has used the war to legitimize and detract attention away from itself. It has every interest in continuing to do so. No wonder there is so little public debate that addresses the actual context and causes of terrorism within and against the US today.

We cannot defend freedoms by suppressing them, nor can we defend human rights by violating them. The American government has aggressively violated many rights of many humans in its war against terrorism. This is most clearly illustrated by its treatment of its prisoners of war in Guantanamo Bay. Despite a public outcry against their brutal treatment and arguments by scores of international human rights organizations and the International Red Cross that these detainees are prisoners of war, the American government has stubbornly defined them as criminals. Even if, for the sake of argument, we assume that these prisoners are criminals, according to the American legal maxim of 'innocent until proven guilty,' they are innocent and should receive treatment in accordance with their human dignity. Shackling them, shaving their beards and keeping them in

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[ABM Treaty: Alive or Dead?](#)

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[A Prayer for America](#)

February 25, 2002

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[Interrogated at US Border](#)

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[ADL Blinks, Settles Spying Case](#)

Alex Lynch
[Naked from Sin: The Ordeal of Nahla and Sami Al-Arian](#)

John Chuckman
[Ashcroft Speaks in Tongues](#)

February 24, 2002

David Vest
[Skate Date](#)

February 23, 2002

Tom Turnipseed
[Axis of Evil and Media Monopolies](#)

Bahour/Dahan
[Cracks in the Occupation](#)

open cages is in total violation of their human and legal rights. The American legal code is based on a belief that no human being should ever be treated in such an inhumane manner, no matter what the crime is. But perhaps this code is meant only for Americans? If so, then we should not talk about civilizing codes of behaviour. Europe knows this, and has declared its condemnation of the inhumane treatment of prisoners at the Cuba camp. The signatories of this letter claim to believe in the universality of human rights. Why should we not wonder about the sincerity of their claims?

Perhaps their belief is based on the traditional American ideology of human rights, which is in essence a discriminatory understanding of both human and right because it holds double standards for Americans and 'others.' The signatories of this letter claim that to become American is easy; that 'people from everywhere in the world come to our country with what a statue in New York's harbor calls a yearning to breathe free, and soon enough, they are Americans...'. True, if we define the act of becoming American solely by receiving a work permit and an American passport. There is, however, another side of the coin which the signatories have failed to point out: it is also easy to become non-American and to be stripped off of the rights which American citizens are allegedly entitled to. Within hours after the terrorist attacks on September 11, almost the entire Moslem population of America became suspect. Within days, hundreds of Moslems were illegally arrested, thousands were attacked and millions began to live with fear in the land of freedom. Overt discrimination against anyone with a Moslem name or even a Middle Eastern look became justifiable. This rampant discrimination has also infected academic institutions across America, and it is hard to imagine how the signatories of this letter can fail to see that American citizens of Middle Eastern descent - and those who advocate for their rights - are facing widespread injustices regarding scholarships, loan, and intellectual freedom.

Perhaps the most disturbing aspect of this letter is

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Crimes](#)

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Duke,
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[The Devil and Georgie
Bush](#)

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that its signatories consciously legitimize the murder of innocents, so long as it is accompanied by the murder of combatants. They argue that 'within strict limits, it can be morally justifiable to undertake military actions that may result in the unintended but foreseeable death or injury of some non-combatants.' In practice, this translates into a green light for the murder of innocent people. Here again we observe that despite their claim to struggle for justice, the signatories do not believe in the universality of human rights. Such a statement indicates that they are far more faithful to the principle that the "goal justifies the means". This principle, however, is in total violation of the spirit and principle of the sanctity of human life. It also reveals that power, and not freedom, form the core of their guiding principles. We must ask, in light of Satre's argument about the world of 'men' [sic] and 'others,' whether any of the signatories would support the bombing and killing of American citizens (inside or outside of America) if a few suspected terrorists hiding among them could also being killed? Would they call the massacre of Americans as justifiable 'collateral damage'?

When these signatories give their total support to government in its war against terrorism, they also support new draconian legislation that emerged in the wake of 11 September to provide the government with legal means to fight terrorism, such as the 'Patriot Act' and a slew of other ad hoc rulings. It is well known that these laws were ratified in order to increase security at the price of limiting citizens' freedoms. The articles of universal human rights, however, were written to be in harmony with one another. There is no zero-sum relation between them, and the extension of one right does not contradict the others. In other words, we should be able to see all human rights within any single right, as they are intertwined expressions of the total right of the total human. To prioritize one right over another, or invoke it at the expense of others, is nothing but sophistry - the very same sophistry which authoritarian and totalitarian states have always used in order to legitimize the oppression.

The language of this letter is eclectic and

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February 14, 2002

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[Ante Pavelic
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[Dear Jeb Bush,
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ambiguous. Criticisms of American foreign policy or negative aspects of the American way of life are clouded in ambiguous and non-committal terms. This not only allows for multiple interpretations; furthermore, it does not define who is responsible for carrying out this commitment, or what resources they can draw on to do so. There is only the pledge of sixty 'intellectuals.' However, when it comes to supporting the government in its war against terrorism, the writing becomes vivid, clear and uncompromising. Most importantly, it names a specific guarantor for carrying out these policies: the American state, a state that boasts of the strongest military and economical might in the world.

If the signatories of this proposition really want to propose effective ways to combat terrorism, they must not support the American government's line on terrorism. They, as intellectuals, could focus on analyzing the causes of terrorism today. They could try to communicate this with the American people. They could explain the context in which terrorism emerges and spreads: the consequences of domination and exploitation; the fact that small islands of affluence are surrounded by vast seas of poverty; the endless perpetuation of discrimination and despotism. They could argue that the dictatorship of capital in the form of multi-nationals and the failure of western democracies to control the incursion of these institutions into less powerful nations has meant that the common people of these countries have effectively lost control over their natural and human resources. In another word, they could argue that terrorism is a blind and hateful reaction to a type of relation, dominant in our world today, which produces great inequalities between people, which divides the world into dominator and dominated, and which leaves the latter with, as Fanon argues, nothing more than their rage.

It is misleading for these intellectuals to explain the contemporary anger among non-western people against the American government by resorting to theories such as the 'clash of civilizations.' Civilizations do not clash but

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February 13, 2002

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interact, exchanging knowledge and information. It is only the uncivilized elements of civilizations that clash with each other. Neither does it make sense to attribute this anger to the envy of the poor because, if the information about the terrorists is correct, they were all from well-off families. Both explanations discredited, what is left? Only to make suggestions for how America could move out of its hegemonic position and make a real attempt to remove world poverty and set an example for the democratization of the world. It would, of course, be difficult to make such a proposal. It is much easier to support sending planes and to massacre innocent people in the Islamic world, praising those within it who also support this, and condemning as terrorist-lovers those who do not.

At the moment it is easy to win popular support for this populist position since most Americans, deprived of hearing the truth about their country's foreign policy, support such actions. Sooner or later, though, the war will be over, and the people will know that they have been betrayed not only by their government, media and institutions, but by the very intellectuals whose legitimacy was based on the values of freedom. Because more than any other time in America's history, the main casualty of this war against terrorism has been the very freedom which the government is waging a war to defend. Someday, when the hysteria has died down, the signatories of this letter will be called on to answer for and justify their position, both to themselves and to the general public, when it emerges that they have dismantled all the institutions which were designed to defend and extend human freedom - most importantly, the institution of the critical American intellectual. They would be wise now to reconsider what it is they are really fighting for, and what, in the end, is worth it.

Mahmood Delkhasteh and **Simone Wright** are working on their doctorates in sociology at the London School of Economics. They can be reached at: M.Delkhasteh@lse.ac.uk

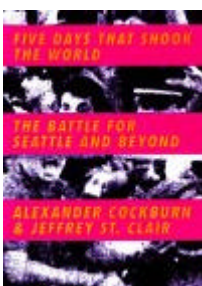


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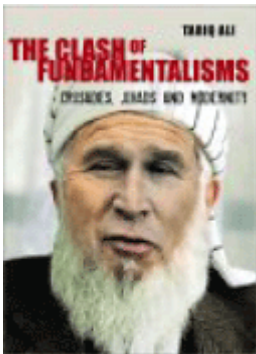
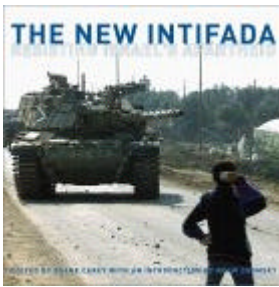


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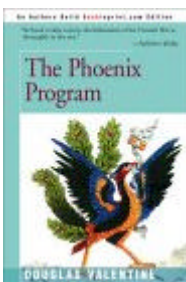
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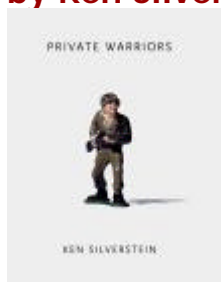
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