

Tortured Ideas: a response to Harvey Sapolsky

Written by Peter Vale

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PETER VALE, FEB 21 2011

IR – SO, WHO IS IT FOR?

It is often said that the study of International Relations is either for the world's people or for national politics. This cliché usefully explains the chasm between Harvey Sapolsky and myself.

And anyone reading his Blogs and my own will recognise that we occupy different intellectual and political universes, and know that there is little chance that that the divide between us will be bridged in the 800-odd words that follow.

But let me respond to some of the points made by Professor Sapolsky, if only to protect my integrity.

AMERICA'S WAR ON THE MOSLEM WORLD

Just because an American President called it "The War on Terror" does not mean that it is perceived, or accepted, as such in the rest of the world – particularly in the Global South. This is the point: *ex cathedra* statements from American leaders may mean something in the west, especially in Britain, but elsewhere they send a different message. Deliberately, then, I called the series of events around 9/11 "George W. Bush's war in the Moslem World" because that is how it is seen throughout much of the world.

But there is more here than the Speech Act and what invariably follows, so, let the following mix of personal anecdote and an analysis make the points that are important.

When the Cold War ended, I was invited to join a Blue Ribbon Panel which deliberated on "Global Change and America's Security". The group – which included several former (US) Secretaries of Defense and a former Director of the CIA – met several times. At the time, I thought it was a great opportunity to think about building a peace, more secure world, But as I reflect on the encounters, it is plain that the object of the exercise was to recast the "War against Communism" into a "War on Islam". For me, within all that talent, expertise and learning in the group, little imagination was directed in escaping the destructive Hobbesian binary which turned America's world view into a simple idea of "Allies" and "Enemies".

As a result, while George W. Bush may not himself have been a Neo-Con, the early running in his Administration, by the likes of Donald Rumsfeld, Richard Perle and Paul Wolfowitz (and others, besides), advanced discourse in US Security and policy circles which closed off the possibility that there were other ways to understand the world than that offered by power and the hubris that nine years later has now led to so much destruction – and, dare I say, torture and incarceration.

9/11 was an immense tragedy, not only for the United States but the world. But it was not difficult to predict, as I unhappily did^[1], that America's response to it would not draw from the Enlightenment but from the Old Testament thinking that had chartered its foreign policy making for the best part of two centuries.

I was a Fellow at NYU in the build up to the Invasion of Iraq. While the liberal press was faithful in reporting the harassment of Moslems in America and, indeed, American Moslems, there was no gainsaying that the hegemonic

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discourse – to use Gramsci – was antagonistic towards Moslems throughout the world.

This has all continued notwithstanding the election of the current President who has had several efforts to engage the Moslem world closed down by America's security establishment.

MORGENTHAU

There is no confusion as to how policy is made – even in the Global South we know that it is by osmosis. But I think that Professor Sapolsky might want to pick up a copy of Hans Morgenthau's *POLITICS AMONG NATIONS* – it is (I believe) still being published — to appreciate the drift in my original argument. The point is this: Morgenthau (borrowing from Machiavelli) positions his theoretical ruminations by looking over the shoulder of the statesman. But, on this issue too there is more, alas.

First, in the absence of empirical evidence, I'm not willing to accept Professor Sapolsky's claim that "most American IR scholars who commented upon the decision to invade Iraq were totally against it". As I have already suggested, the mood was very much for some kind of response – believing that the invasion of Afghanistan was insufficient. The search for the mythical WMDs not only compounded the idea that something should be done but, and this is equally important, that it should be done **BECAUSE** most of the rest of the world – including the United Nations – wanted more evidence that Saddam Hussein's Iraq was hiding something.

All this did was send the signal to the global IR fraternity – or rather critical voices in this fraternity – that nothing had changed in American IR, despite the discipline's critical turn.

(Incidentally, it has always struck me as somewhat deceitful that the US – the only country that has used an Atomic Bomb – should be so exercised by the fact that others might, or might not, have it. But this of course is a topic for another day!)

IMAGE

Professor Sapolsky's imagery – "every punch is remembered and returned harder" – is unfortunate but revealing. While it carries an echo of Robert Jervis's *Security Dilemma*, it is not developed sufficiently to suggest Jervis's sophisticated resolution of the dilemmas he so carefully identified. Instead, Professor Sapolsky bends towards the fatalism of Thomas Hobbes and the false hope which politicians – who condone torture but only if it is cold and rational – offer the world.

[1] Vale, P. 2001. A time for deep reflection. *Mail & Guardian*. 14-20, September. Johannesburg.

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