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Requiem for the World we Know

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Recently, I met some senior British diplomats. Conversation moved to the impending war in Iraq and its “rationality”. It became heated. I wish to share a piece of Bushspeak the discussion ended with, leaving me stunned. “Remember, there will be war. The us wants it. But if you are with them now, it will count afterwards.” With us, or against us. No other choice.

There will be war. Even as I write, United Nations (UN) inspectors have been asked to report back about Iraq’s full compliance and complete disarmament. Even as anti-war protests grow across the world, even as France and Russia and — maybe — China hold out the promise of a veto in the United Nations Security Council on sanctioning war. Even as all this happens, the war machine is ready to trundle into Iraq’s deserts, before summer sets in and dehydrates GI Joe.

There will be war. It will be bloody and wretched. It will be in our world. What will this war do to our world? Will it bomb the world order — as we know it — into smithereens? Let us be clear. This war will not only decide Saddam Hussein’s destiny, it will also decide the fate of the UN. It will decide the fate of the idea that the world order is built not on brute force and power, but on equality of nations. There will be a regime change. But Saddam will not be the only one to be dethroned. Something else will also be, something much more long lasting and precious — global democracy, as we know it.

Sentimental claptrap, some will say. The world order has changed. What is this morality? What is justice? “Grow up!” they will exhort. But, like many others, I believe otherwise. Therefore, I also argue otherwise.

Firstly, the new world order is being built on the fact that strength — military and economic — and influence will dominate policy completely. It has amazed me that, every time the US-UK conglomerate justify the war,

they say it is about an undemocratic leader whose people live in fear and oppression. Maybe. But if these self-same proponents of democracy would only listen to their own people, they would be less gun-ho about going into battle. I hope they teach themselves this lesson in democracy.

What about global democracy? If it is fear that haunts Iraqi people, then equally it is fear of US reprisals that drives the world community. Foreign policy is viewed through the prism of good relations with the US today. How nonchalant the media was, when it reported the Turkish parliament's shock refusal to grant US permission to use the country as a second front in the war. It carped about how the prime minister would now lose the US \$15 billion aid package. It didn't talk about the ethicality of the decision. It was all about lost bribe (blood) money.

Overt arm-twisting is germane to international relations. But its existence has always been condemned as a wrong. Now, this blatant and shameless display of might and money power justifies it and makes it right. When in the new world order, be like the new world order. Then what is wrong if North Korea moves on its nuclear weapon programme? And many other countries follow. Isn't the best defence of the weak to mimic the strong?

Secondly, the new world order will be about making bilateral business transactions — to secure the mutual interests of the rich. It will not be about a rule-based system in which governments aim to protect the needs of the poorest and those most marginalised. Multilateralism would become a dirty and tired "old world" word.

The US has made it clear that national — business — interests will decide its foreign policy. It has walked out of the Kyoto Protocol on climate change, killed negotiations to strengthen the Biological Weapons Convention and torpedoed plans to prevent patent protection for access to essential drugs. This list goes on and on. But the basic premise is the same: unilateralism of the richest and most powerful is the new world order.

It is also a messianic worldview. Much like the British Empire, expanding to keep peace in the world and 'civilise' it. The national security doctrine released last year by George Bush said that it was his job to make sure that the world is "not just safer but better". But this dispensation is not a humble one. It is arrogant and assertive. It is about narrow interests, not global interests. This war is about asserting US pre-eminence over Earth.

What does this mean to all the things we care about — from fair trade rules to climate change? Will we need to change strategy and to accept that the era of global democracy is gone? Should we now heed the pragmatists and realists, and accept that we all will get only what the US wants? If this is so, the developing world should quickly make its peace with the devil. Then, perhaps, it will get some crumbs to help it survive trade, climate change, indeed the future. Play the dirty game. Make the deals. Accept, and rejoice.

If this is the new world order, then why should national politics be any different? This Bush doctrine is about the rightness of the power of the rich and powerful. It is not about the quality of justice, which depends on the equality of power that compellingly prevents the strong from doing what they have power to do, so that the weak don't have to accept what they are told to accept. Do we abandon this fundamental principle as well?

I place this question to you as a requiem for the world we know.