

# Comment

Someone once said that nobody ever forgets where they buried the hatchet. Since the end of the Gulf war the strains of victory have been disrupted by the sound of the frantic excavation of hatchets. The undoubted skill, intelligence and courage of the allied commanders and their troops should not blind us to the fact that, in Earl Haig's phrase in 1918, this was a 'victory for munitions'. The grim scale of battle and its human cost is obvious in the carnage of the Iraqi retreat along the Kuwait-Basra road. It remains to be seen the allies' diplomatic sophistication and finesse can match the precision of their weaponry. Politicians are now reaching into the wardrobe of memory, searching for a blueprint which can be dusted off and adapted to fit this year's fashions.

In the months following any major war optimism, tinged with relief, regret, and a measure of penitence, is often the mood of the moment. We need to be reassured that the sacrifices and the moral compromises we may have made have all been worthwhile. The secular expression of this 'purpose of amendment' is the determination to create structures which will limit, if not entirely prevent, the outbreak of any similar conflict in the future. It is a universal and abiding ambition to ensure that a just peace is an enduring monument to the futility of war. Against this background allied optimism about the establishment of a new world order is at its most attractive and its most dangerous.

The root of the present crisis lies in a spectacular attempt to establish a new world order by the victorious powers after the First World War. The conclusion of the Gulf War has distracted attention from the crisis that afflicts virtually all of the new national states created by the treaties of the 1920s. From the Baltic to Baghdad, Belfast to Bratislava, the story is the same: ethnic and religious rivalry leading to civil disorder and international tension. A platform of this new world order was that wherever possible national and political boundaries should coincide, these frontiers being guaranteed by international treaty and collective security. The administration of these new states was to rest on the initiative and consent of the governed. The British and the French incorporated these ideals into their own settlement of the Middle Eastern territories of the defunct Ottoman empire. However, their basic intention was the establishment of 'colonialism on the cheap'.

Under cover of League of Nations mandates Iraq, Syria, Lebanon and Palestine were absorbed into the Anglo-French sphere of influence. The British opted for a form of control in their territories which endured until recently and which the Americans, acting as the 'new colonial power', look like taking up. Ruling dynasties were strongly supported and given British advisers. Expensive garrisons were avoided by a reliance on air power and the rapid deployment of military armour in the maintenance

of security. The difficulties of establishing western style political systems in a tribally, racially and confessionally mixed region was never been properly understood by the Arabists in the Colonial office of the 1920s. President Wilson, a former Professor of History, and the presiding genius at the peace conference after 1918, may be forgiven for seeking an academic solution to complex ethnic and social problems. Practically speaking the easiest way to endure western influence in the area has always been to support whichever tribal despotism is able to hold power. This was the pre-War policy with regard to Sadaam Hussein's Iraq and will be the post-war policy with respect to Syria, which is largely controlled by President Assad's family. Idealism often founders on the rock of expedience.

The evidence suggests that the broad lines of this policy will be followed as the Middle Eastern component of the new world order is shaped. Some grievances will be redressed and some shifts in the balance of power made. Western favour will be transferred to Syria from Iraq. Syria will be rewarded for its support by the concession of a long-standing claim to Lebanon; Assad will be allowed to establish Greater Syria. Egypt, with its population of 45 millions crammed into a habitable area the size of Holland will receive some investment from the oil-rich states it helped to defend, and will reassume something of its leadership of the Arab world lost after Camp David. The ruling families will remain as long as they are useful, although they will be told to clean up their act and allow some democratic participation in government. But what about the Kurds whose independent state mysteriously disappeared between international treaties in 1920 and 1923? What about the Shiites in southern and central Iraq who have risen against their minority Sunni rulers? What about Israel? What about the Palestinians? Is the new world order going to bury one hatchet by ousting King Hussein in order to turn his Bedouin kingdom into the Palestinian state as considered by Churchill at the Cairo conference of 1921? The projected new world order begins to look suspiciously like the old one.

In October 1939 Pius XII wrote:

Perhaps it is time to turn our eyes to the future, instead of the past; what lies before us? Those who hold the fate of kingdoms in their hands assure us that, once the bloodthirsty discords of the present moment have been laid aside, they will introduce a new order of things, based on the foundation of justice and economic settlement. But is it really to be a different, is it really to be (what is more important) a better and a happier age? At the end of this war there will be fresh pacts, fresh arrangements of international relations. Will they be conceived in a spirit of justice and peace, or will they disastrously repeat our old and our recent failures?

*Summi Pontificatus*, 20 October 1939

Grandiose phrases have short shelf lives.