

"A world of justice and peace would be different"

A response to the manifesto "Propositions: What We're Fighting For"

by 60 American intellectuals*

Ladies and gentlemen,

The mass murder by the terrorist attack on September 11th in your country, and the U.S. war in Afghanistan as a reaction to that terror also affects Europe, the Islamic world, and the future of all of us. We think it especially important that an open and critical dialogue take place throughout the world among intellectuals of civil societies about the causes and consequences of these events, to assess them and judge their significance. Please consider our response to your "Propositions: What we are fighting for" as a contribution to this.

There can be no moral justification for the horrible mass murder on September 11th. We agree with you wholeheartedly about that. We also share the moral standards that you apply, namely that human dignity is inviolable, regardless of sex, color of skin, or religion, and that striving for democracy is an important foundation for the protection of human dignity, of individual freedoms, of freedom of religion, and of the human rights specified in the UN Charter.

But it is precisely these moral values, which are universally valid in our eyes, that cause us to reject the war that your government and its allies (us included) in the "alliance against terror" are waging in Afghanistan-and which has cost the lives of more than 4,000 innocent bystanders to date, including many women and children-with the same rigorousness with which we condemn the mass murder of innocent bystanders by the terrorist attack. There are no universally valid values that allow one to justify one mass murder by another. The war of the "alliance against terror" in Afghanistan is *no* "just war"-an ill-starred historical concept that we do not accept-on the contrary, it flagrantly violates even the condition you cite, "to protect the innocent from certain harm". Democratic states possess sufficiently developed means under the rule of law to combat crime within their sphere of influence, and to call the guilty to account. What we need to do is to extend these proven means globally, in close cooperation with other states.

We cannot understand why you do not devote a single word of your appeal to the mass murder of the Afghan civilian population resulting from the bombing campaign conducted with the most modern weapon systems. The inviolability of human dignity applies not only to people in the United States, but also to people in Afghanistan, and even to the Taliban and the al-Qaeda prisoners at Guantanamo. In your appeal, you invoke the universality of your moral standards, while at the same time applying them only to yourselves. By this selective usage, you call precisely their universal validity into question drastically, thus evoking great doubts about the genuineness of your own avowal. How can the doubts raised about these moral standards in other

cultures be dispelled, if-of all people-the elites of U.S. civilization, who see themselves as advocates and guardians of these values, bring the belief in the universality of these values into discredit? Can we expect other nations and cultures to perceive the application of dual standards as anything but the expression of continuing Western arrogance and ignorance?

And, in view of the overwhelming evidence of the historical facts, we cannot follow you when you write that your country "At times ... has pursued misguided and unjust policies". The United States made an outstanding contribution to the liberation of Europe from the yoke of Naziism. However, as a leading superpower during the period of East-West confrontation, it was also largely responsible for grave abuses in the world. By numerous covert to directly military interventions, such as in Iran, Indonesia, Chile, Guatemala, El Salvador, Nicaragua, in the Iran-Iraq war on the Iraqi side, and many others, the United States supported regimes which ruled by state terrorism and million-fold murder of opposition forces, and prevented democratization processes. Frequently enough, freely elected governments fell victim to these interventions.

Many of the undersigned hoped that, after the collapse of the Soviet Union, a new era of disarmament, international understanding, dialog between cultures, and hope for the billions of people suffering from and humiliated by hunger and disease would begin. After four decades of hate, mutual threats, and the arms race, we expected and worked for the Western industrialized nations to put their creative potential in the service of overcoming poverty and environmental destruction, and developing democracy. But these expectations were disappointed. Instead, the United States concentrated its imagination and its scientific, technical, and economic capacities on strengthening its position as the sole remaining superpower in the world, and establishing a unipolar world order. In that order, it attempts to decide the fate of peoples largely on its own authority. Much evidence, such as the systematic establishment of U.S. military bases in the Balkans, the Middle East, and Central Asia, supports this assessment.

This makes analyses seem plausible according to which the United States, contrary to official proclamations, is not mainly pursuing humanitarian goals, combating terrorism, or seeking to prevent the spread of weapons of mass destruction, in the Middle East and in Central Asia, including Afghanistan, but rather is guided by geostrategic motives. Indeed, its access to the oil wells of this region, that are essential to the world economy, and to the oil transportation routes, considerably increases the United States' geostrategic options for strengthening its hegemonic position not only vis-à-vis the weakened superpower Russia and the rising regional power China, but also vis-à-vis Europe and Japan, for the next few decades.

Despite disputes about such assessments, we all largely agree that the concentration of vast power potentials in a single country, and the military capability of imposing one's own will on others are an important source of instability in transnational and transcultural relations. It has also become a source of the feeling of impotence and of humiliation in particular for those people who feel themselves to be victims of this imbalance of power. The presence of U.S. troops within reach of Islamic holy sites in Saudi Arabia, for example, which is obviously regarded by many Muslims as a thorn in their flesh and an attack on their own culture and self-esteem, symbolizes this imbalance of power that is felt to be a threat. Their own inferiority, perceived as

unjust, evokes an affective loss of inhibitions, mobilizing a huge potential for reaction, up to the willingness to sacrifice one's own life, too, in suicide assassinations. Such reactions, as a consequence of the instability of the balance of power in the present unipolar world order, are not specific to one culture. They could be triggered in any other part of the world and at any other time in new forms. A war of the winners against the suicide attacks of the losers is an anachronism. It eliminates scruples and mobilizes even greater willingness for terroristic attacks and terroristic military operations, as in the Israel-Palestine conflict. The current form of globalization, which heightens social inequalities and destroys cultural differentiation, contributes to the instabilities and tensions that erupt in violent reactions.

We are concerned to see that prominent persons in your President's entourage are demanding more and more aggressively from Europeans total obedience to America, and seeking to stifle any criticism from Europe by means of blackmail, with statements such as "Europe needs America, but America does not need Europe". The "unlimited solidarity" of our, and many another European government with the United States, and their willingness to support the War on Terror uncritically, is perceived by many people here as weakness and a deprivation of the right to decide for oneself. The political class in Europe has obviously not grasped that its obsequious submission to the superior and sole superpower is not only a policy without prospects, but is also creating a favorable climate for agitation by forces of the radical Right. And, to our regret, the governments of the EU member states have until now neglected to develop an independent EU foreign, security, and peace policy for the Near and Middle East, for Central Asia, and for their relations to the Islamic world, based on cooperation, and on the indivisibility of human dignity and human rights. Indeed, we must fear that, due to their lack of any clear vision, and despite their criticism, they will in the end be willing to give moral legitimacy to an American war on Iraq, or even participate actively.

Many of us feel that the growing influence of fundamentalist forces in the United States on the political elite of your country, which clearly extends all the way to the White House, is cause for concern. The division of the world into "good" and "evil", the stigmatization of entire countries and their populations, will tend to incite racist, nationalistic, and religious fanaticism, and to deprive people of their ability to perceive living reality in a differentiated way, and of the insight that differences and cultural variety are not a misfortune, but a blessing for all, and that even the most powerful persons on earth will only prosper in the long run if the world is seen as a whole, whose richness and beauty consists in the differences. Fundamentalism begins with declaring one's own culture to be the only true, good, and beautiful one. Fundamentalist reactions to the real conflicts in our world close our eyes to civilian and nonviolent solutions for these conflicts, and only speed up the mutual escalation of terrorism and war.

With dismay, we have also heard from our American friends and professional colleagues that scholars and journalists are being put under pressure and denounced as traitors if they discuss critically or reject their government's war policy. Make sure that the pluralism of thought and liberal tradition of your country are not impaired under the pretext of combating terrorism. Help to halt the advance of the fundamentalist mentality in the United States. Those American values which you refer to with pride are being tested.

There are certainly various ways to combat terroristic suicide attacks. We have different opinions on the subject. But we are all deeply convinced that respect for human dignity is a basic precondition for all approaches to a solution. Only if the view that the West, as the most economically and militarily powerful group of cultures, is serious about the universality of human rights and dignity, that this is not merely a phrase trotted out when it is convenient, becomes accepted throughout the world, and in the economically and militarily weaker nations and cultures, only then will the likelihood increase that terrorist suicide bombings will not find the intended response, but encounter vehement rejection in all countries. Only if the weaker people of this world feel certain that no state, no matter how powerful, will injure their dignity, humiliate them, or arbitrarily harm their living conditions, only then will these people find the strength and willingness to open their eyes and hearts to the moral values of other cultures. And only then will the preconditions exist for a genuine dialogue between cultures to begin.

We need morally justified, globally acceptable, and universally respected common rules of play for the way people live together, which emphasize cooperation instead of confrontation, and undermine the anxieties created by the accelerating changes in our surroundings and the constantly growing potentials for violence, as well as the security obsessions resulting from them. This will provide opportunities to structure the mainly business-oriented globalization more justly, to tackle worldwide poverty effectively, to defuse the global environmental hazards together, to resolve conflicts by peaceful means, and to create a world culture that can speak in not just one, but many tongues.

We call on you to engage in an open dialogue with us and with intellectuals from other parts of the world about this and other perspectives for our common future.

[Translated from the German by Timothy Slater]

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