

A moral squint: Bombs and chaos

by [James M. Wall](#) in the [December 12, 2001](#) issue

After a particularly heavy U.S. bombardment of Kunduz, al-Qaeda and Taliban fighters initially refused to surrender. Northern Alliance factions argued over how to arrange the surrender of Kunduz, provoking one U.S. official to describe the situation in and around the city as “chaotic.” His word reminds me of an exchange in Robert Bolt’s *A Man for All Seasons*. Cardinal Thomas Wolsey demands that Thomas More support a papal dispensation so that King Henry VIII can legally divorce his queen, who has failed to produce a male heir. When More refuses to intercede with the pope, the cardinal says, “You are a constant regret to me, Thomas. If you could just see facts flat on without that horrible, constant moral squint. With a little common sense you could have made a statesman.”

To which More replies: “I think that when statesmen forsake their own private consciences for the sake of their public duties they lead the country by a short route to chaos.”

With the Taliban removed from control in most of Afghanistan, the war lords who were defeated by the Taliban are moving back into power. It is a move that is anything but smooth. It is, in fact, chaotic, because the U.S. bombing campaign was so effective that no plans are in place to assemble a unified Afghanistan leadership.

At the end of the last Afghani war, when U.S.-led factions defeated the Russian occupying army, we left behind the chaos that set the stage for the Taliban. This time the U.S. is expected to hang around long enough to clamp down on the chaos and create some semblance of law and order in a land that has known only warfare for centuries.

Newsweek magazine speaks of the faint voices of opposition as though its reporters had to look long and hard to find any dissent. David Gates writes:

The new united-we-stand orthodoxy holds that we’re all engaged in a war of unquestionable good against inexplicable evil—that, in fact, the attempt to understand the enemy’s perception of us is disloyal—and that bombing

Afghanistan, approved by 90 percent of Americans, is both morally and practically justified.

Gates identified three writers who “refuse to get with the program”: Susan Sontag, Barbara Kingsolver and Arundhati Roy, each of whom has written and spoken about strong objections to the war. Roy writes: “The bombing will spawn more anger and terror across the world,” while Kingsolver says she dissents “because I love my country and I want to do the right thing.”

Meanwhile, the president’s repeated insistence that the war against terror will last a long time indicates that he is listening to those who want him to extend the war to all nations that “harbor” what Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld, who has seen too many movies, likes to call the “bad guys.”

Rumsfeld’s deputy Paul Wolfowitz, White House officials Condoleezza Rice, Karl Rowe and Karen Hughes, and chairman of the president’s Defense Policy Board, Richard Pearle, are urging Bush not to stop with Afghanistan. *New Yorker* writer Peter J. Boyer reports that Newt Gingrich, a member the Defense Policy Board, is urging the president to “confront Iraq even while the engagement in Afghanistan continues, and go after terrorist operations in Somalia and Sudan as well.”

We rarely read reports of the dissenters who write comic strips. But in a recent episode of *The Boondocks*, a young boy gives this Thanksgiving prayer:

Ahem, in this time of war against Osama bin Laden and the oppressive Taliban regime, we are thankful that *our* leader isn’t the spoiled son of a powerful politician from a wealthy oil family who is supported by religious fundamentalists, operates through clandestine organizations, has no respect for the democratic electoral process, bombs innocents and uses war to deny people their civil liberties. Amen.

His grandfather, speaking for the 90 percent who favor this war, responds: “This is the last time you say grace, boy.” Such patriotic support for the war was inevitable after an attack that this nation had previously experienced in modern times only at Pearl Harbor and in Alaska’s Aleutian Islands. The initial sense of outrage has continued, helped along by the administration’s spinning of American public opinion under the direction of Dorothy Beers, former CEO of a major American advertising firm. The repeated media reminders of the Taliban’s repressive treatment of women

have helped too, along with the media's respectful silence about Saudi Arabia and Kuwait, two autocratic regimes where women are repressed, but also regimes that just happen to be our Arab coalition allies. Consistency is not a virtue in wartime propaganda.

Expression of religious opposition—the “constant moral squint” that troubled Cardinal Wolsey—has gone largely unreported in the national media. Nor has much attention been paid to citizens who have serious moral and practical reservations about a bombing campaign designed to locate criminals. That campaign has resulted in the replacement of one Afghani faction we didn't like with other factions we hope we can control. None of them will win any human rights awards. But terrorists are not nation-bound and they are, by nature, elusive. Just ask the FBI, which is still combing the North Carolina mountains for the fellow who set off a bomb during the Atlanta Olympics.