

THROUGH THE PRISM OF 9/11

When US Defence Secretary Donald Rumsfeld told the Senate Armed Services Committee that, "The coalition did not act in Iraq because we had discovered dramatic new evidence of Iraq's pursuit of weapons of mass murder. We acted because we saw the evidence in a dramatic new light - through the prism of our experience of 9/11," he spelt out why the coalition of the willing suffers from a credibility gap.

Whether or not it was his intention, he identified a key problem for America – not everyone views the world through the same prism or template as Mr Rumsfeld and the White House.

The initial Bush-Rumsfeld interpretation of 9/11 was of an all-out declaration of war, worse than Pearl Harbour, because it exposed the vulnerability of American cities and populations to acts of terrorism. Even though the anthrax scare emanated from within the US, through the prism of 9/11, it graphically illustrated the range of weaponry through which the threat of annihilation might become fact. The Administration's reaction was a declaration of war on terrorism, which extended to any entities capable of inducing such terror.

In terms of military-trauma psychology, a defensive war by a terrified population has a definite prism, dictated by deep evolutionary fight-flight responses, harking back to threats by predators. Survival depends on rallying the group behind the leader, and with high morale and united will confronting the enemy.

America was forced to quickly define her enemies and friends according to the rules of the jungle. For example, if leaves rustle ominously, strike first pre-empt an attack. Iraq was a very ugly, suspicious, rustling leaf. Through the prism of 9/11, one had to strike. That it turned out less dangerous than at first thought does not mean that one should not have struck.

The coalition leaders rationalise that even though Iraq doesn't have nuclear, biological and chemical weapons, Saddam Hussein was still a terrorist to his own people. According to the prism of 9/11, however, the larger war on terrorism must be pursued unabated. In the jungle if you mistakenly kill three monkeys believing they were a tiger, their deaths are an acceptable tactical error, in pursuit of the killer tiger.

In this war, as in any other, such tactical mistakes are inevitable. Likewise, intelligence and communication, based on the prism and directed to the war effort must not be challenged, even if objectively untrue.

So far, so good. However, the views from the prism have shifted to broader sweeps of American *Realpolitik*. Accordingly, the Afghani and Iraqi conquests should have warned all Arab states to not harbour terrorists. Democratisation of the Middle East would improve conditions in states that breed terrorists, like Saudi Arabia, Syria and Iran, with consequent reduction in hostility towards America. The thrust toward a secure democratic Middle East would nudge the festering Israel-Palestinian problem toward

solution. Any oil, trade, or ideological gains would be a bonus. Such motivations could not be publicly stated. They had to be hidden behind an exaggerated Iraqi threat.

Lastly, the 9/11 prism is itself vulnerable to being hijacked for other purposes altogether. Using war against terrorism as camouflage, the usual falling in behind the leader in time of danger can be exploited for political and personal popularity, such as a second presidential term.

In all probability the prism of 9/11 has been used in each of these ways. As such, it explains why coalition leaders are not too bothered that the *causus belli* of Iraq's nuclear program has been exposed as false.

The prism and views associated with it are relevant on our own patch too, but with two additional concerns. Mr Howard's wider strategy to have America, and to a lesser degree England, as allies, comes at the cost of incorporating uncritically their prisms as his own.

A major concern for us also is the way Mr Howard uses the politics of fear to his own electoral advantage. Even before 9/11, he painted asylum seekers as enemies and potential terrorists, fire-walled and hyped up information about them, and used quasi-military tactics against them.

Our understanding of complex issues depends on the correct interpretations of perceptions. Not to act in the face of a potentially lethal attack is foolhardy. To exaggerate every suggestion of potential danger is paranoid. Unfortunately, at the moment we are left in the situation of not only fearing terrorists, but also not being able to trust what our leaders tell us, because their views have been exposed as biased by their personal emotions and ambitions.

Perhaps we need to apply our own intelligence, and reassess the prism of 9/11. Since the spectacular and deadly demolition of the Twin Towers, there have been few successful terrorist attacks, all of them lacking the sophistication and penetration of 9/11. Perhaps we are not dealing with an apocalyptic threat, a rival civilization or a religion, but with terrorist members of a diffuse murderous, criminal cult.

If we are to fight terrorism, we must clearly distinguish between criminal cult terrorism, state terrorism (like Saddam Hussein's), terrorism in wars, or acts of national liberation. Each requires its own tailored response. Targeted police actions worked effectively in Bali. Maybe this is the way to go, before leaping into a full-scale war, and its often unintended and costly consequences. We should also remember that war should be the last option.

Rather than seeing everything through a specific prism, we need unbiased intelligence to determine proper responses to threats properly defined.