

# Letter from Londonistan

*In the war on terror,  
Britain still thinks it's 1999*

BY IRWIN M. STELZER

*London*

Myths are not the stuff of which sensible policy is made. So it is important to scotch the myth that Britain and America have similar and equally effective responses to the terrorist attacks they have suffered. The hard fact is that America has decided that it is engaged in a war, while Britain has decided that it is confronted with what the leader of the Tory party (historically the foreign policy tough guys) calls a “criminal conspiracy” and the *Economist* calls a “war on terror,” complete with quotation marks. Put differently, 7/7 has evoked a policy response very different from 9/11.

It is, of course, true that the citizens of New York and London reacted similarly to the attacks on them: with remarkable courage and heightened civic solidarity. But similar reactions by individuals caught up in the terrorist storm do not necessarily make for similar reactions by governments. President Bush responded to the destruction of New York's World Trade Center by proclaiming through a bullhorn, “The people who knocked these buildings down will hear from all of us.” And they did—the Taliban no longer control Afghanistan. Tony Blair, a stalwart when confronted with the idea of taking the attack on terror to wherever terrorism flourished, responded to the bombing on London's tube with eloquent appearances before the television cameras and the House of Commons, by convening meetings with leaders (although exactly who they lead remains uncertain) of the Muslim community to enlist their aid, and with his ministers to begin preparation for legislation that will be

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introduced, but not until some time in October, after the long, leisurely summer parliamentary recess. Bush critics wish that the president possessed Blair's eloquence; Blair critics wish that the prime minister possessed Bush's willingness to act.

One reason for the widely different responses is that America was attacked by foreigners, whereas Brits were horrified to learn that they had been attacked by fellow citizens. Americans know it is “us” against “them,” whereas Brits know that “they” are also “us.” Pete Hamill, that astute observer of New Yorkers, had it right when he wrote in his wonderful *Downtown: My Manhattan*, “Where I come from, the rules were relatively simple. . . . Don't look for trouble, because in New York you can always find it. But don't back off either.”

As Robert Conquest once observed, “Our cultures, our histories, grasp us with a thousand invisible fingers.” British history and culture are different, and hence have produced a different reaction to terror. British history is replete with instances of the defiance and eventual defeat of those who would destroy the country, and with examples of the famous stiff upper lip that makes American-style shouting extraordinarily difficult. But more recent history has tended to equate defiance with a shrug and an ability to show that “we can take it,” rather than with an accompanying willingness to destroy the enemy on the beaches, on the landing grounds, in the fields—well, you know.

British culture now dictates a confused response to terrorists. Start with the unwillingness of the majority of the British people to recognize that they are indeed in a war. The flak-jacketed, heavily armed men and women lining my road to Heathrow last week were cops, not troops. America is at war, Britain is playing cops and criminals. These are very different things, with important implications for policy. Just as the Clinton administration decided to respond to terror attacks as if they were bank heists—he sent the FBI overseas—Britain has insisted on

applying the law and procedures of the criminal justice system to terrorists. The entire panoply of legal procedures that prevent detention, deportation, and arrest of Muslim clerics calling for the blood of Britain's infidels is available to the as-many-as 3,000 terrorists whom the authorities estimate live in Britain, many trained in Afghanistan and Pakistan, or with actual battle experience in Iraq. Whatever rights U.K. law doesn't confer are available to the fledgling jihadists as a result of Blair's decision to sign on to Europe's Human Rights Act. Britain makes available to terrorists and preachers of mayhem, often at government expense, an entire industry of human rights lawyers and support groups. These resources will remain available to those who challenge the new powers the government will seek to curb the preaching of violence. The government also provides substantial housing and health care benefits to many men who reciprocate by trying to destroy it.

As if the decision to treat terror as a criminal matter did not place a large enough impediment in the path of the security forces, we have the infatuation of the British establishment with multiculturalism, and the pride with which its members and the left-wing press point out that 300 languages (soberer sources put the number at half that) are spoken in London.

The consequences of this equation of multiculturalism with the virtue of tolerance began with a refusal of the Blair government to get control of Britain's borders. As a result, there are hundreds of thousands—no one, including the government, knows for sure just how many—of illegal immigrants roaming around Britain. And many of these are not at all like the Mexicans who come to America to find work. They are attracted by the generous welfare payments to which they seem to have immediate and unrestricted access, and in many cases by the freedom to preach jihad. Britain, after all, is the country in which Abu Hamza al-Masri preached jihad to Zacarias Moussaoui. One of the attendees at a July 10 lunch the queen gave for some 2,000 World War II veterans in the garden of Buckingham Palace—84-year-old Colonel Peter Hodgson, who fought his way across Europe—probably violated the spirit of the celebration when he told reporters, "This hopeless government . . . let bad ones into the country and we have no idea who they are."

More important to radical Muslims is the unwillingness of the Blair government to extradite illegal immigrants and terrorists who are wanted by the authorities in their home countries. London is known in international security circles as Londonistan because of the haven it offers international terrorists—men who in some instances entered Britain illegally but cannot be deported

because the Human Rights Act prohibits extraditing wanted criminals if they might be treated harshly in their home countries. That indeed is their likely fate in Morocco, Egypt, and other countries eager to apply home-grown justice—including what Pakistan's government calls "intensive interrogation"—of the sort that makes British elites squeamish.

But neither is the United States an acceptable deportation destination, since the Human Rights Act does not allow extradition to a nation that allows the death penalty. Deportation to France also seems to be off the table. The *Economist* reports that "Islamists" responsible for the 1995 bomb attacks on the Paris metro, "to French disgust, later found refuge in London." Whether last week's deal with Jordan—Britain is to extradite bad guys wanted in Jordan in return for a promise by the Jordanian government to treat returnees tenderly, and not execute them—will withstand judicial scrutiny and become a model for further such deals is difficult to determine.

So British policy remains: easy entry for potential terrorists; benefits for them while they are in the country; and relative safety from deportation and detention as enemy combatants. Little wonder that Britain's security services say another strike, more lethal than the one last Thursday, is a virtual certainty.

Providing haven for terrorists is apparently a small price for the London glitterati to pay for the advantage of feeling proud of their multiculturalism. Their children are sheltered from the massive influx of Muslims into some schools, and their own neighborhoods and social services are unaffected by the pressures created by an unassimilated immigrant population.

And continued belief in multiculturalism by the elites suits many Muslims just fine. Unlike immigrants who come to America in pursuit of the American dream, many Muslims come to Britain and other European countries determined not to assimilate into cultures they despise. They insist that neither British food is served, nor traditional British tolerance practiced, in the schools their children attend, demands the authorities find reasonable. Many of those children, unlike first-generation Americans, hold to their traditional ways with greater tenacity than their parents. This is especially true of young Muslim men eager to maintain their traditional dominance over women, a role threatened by the fact that Muslim girls are outperforming boys in school and in the workplace. Why Blair thinks that he can reach this group through the mostly moderate Muslims that constitute the outreach "network" or "task force" that he has established is unclear.

Indeed, Blair seems to share the view of all of the policymakers with whom I have spoken. They believe

that the planners of the 7/7 attack had as their goal inducing a draconian reaction by the government so that Muslim youths will be further alienated from British society. As the ever-consistent *Guardian* put it two days after the attack, "Whitehall's national community tensions team . . . always recognized that a public backlash could be as damaging to civic life as the terrorists' bombs. Particular concern focused on any mischievous linking of the words Islam and terrorism." The alternative to this "softly, softly" approach would be the extensive use of wartime-like measures such as detention. This would fly in the face of the belief of British officials that a crackdown would "play into the hands of terrorists" by alienating young Muslims even more than they now are.

And many indeed are alienated, either because they have been unsuccessful in work or school, or because their version of Islam precludes adopting British mores. Take that alienation of young Muslim men from British society, add jihad-preaching clerics and the uninhibited right of British Muslims to return to Britain after attending radicalizing madrassas in Pakistan and Afghanistan, mix in the unwillingness of British leaders to seem hostile to Muslims, and you get some strange happenings—happenings that further distinguish British from American policy.

Britain, with the wreckage of 7/7 only recently cleared, even now is willing to allow Yusuf al-Qaradawi, a Muslim cleric who defends suicide bombings, to enter the country to attend an August 7 conference. This cleric has justified the killing of Israeli women because they are "militarized. . . . I consider this type of martyrdom operation as an indication of the justice of Allah Almighty." He has backed the execution of homosexuals "to maintain the purity of Islamic society," called for the killing of Jews when "the Hour of Judgment" arrives, and says that wife-beating is acceptable with "the hand, but not with the stick." He is barred from entering the United States because of terrorist connections. Absent a change of position by the Blair government, Sheikh al-Qaradawi will soon share a Manchester platform with speakers who claim that the Bush administration assisted the 9/11 terrorists, and that Israeli security had advance knowledge of the 7/7 attack but refused to tip off the British authorities.

Al-Qaradawi's reception on his last visit tells us a great deal about the differences between Britain and the United States. London mayor Ken Livingstone, a hard-left politician who blames the 7/7 bombings on U.S.-U.K. foreign policy, embraced al-Qaradawi, told him that he is "truly, truly welcome," hailed him as a "leading progressive Muslim," and denounced al-Qaradawi's critics for fanning the flames of "Islamophobia." Contrast that with

New York mayor Rudy Giuliani's decision to have Yasser Arafat removed from a 1995 concert at the Lincoln Center when the Palestinian terrorist ignored a list, sent to the U.N. by the city's host committee, of countries not to be invited.

None of this is to argue that the policymaking elite is completely unrepresentative of the broader British electorate. Most Brits do understand that not all of their country's some two million Muslims (about 3 percent of the population) are terrorists, and very few have attempted to retaliate against mosques and Muslims since July 7. Like the elite, a majority now believes that Blair's decision to go to war in Iraq alongside America incited the terrorists to strike, no matter how many times Blair reminds them that several terror attacks, including the one on the World Trade Center, preceded the entry of coalition forces into Iraq.

So the prime minister is in a tough spot. Unlike Bush after 9/11, Blair after 7/7 could not count on broad support for a crackdown. He is meeting resistance to any plans to tighten the antiterrorist laws not only from the usual suspects on the left of his party, but from the Tories. He is inheriting the whirlwind of his refusal or inability to constrain illegal immigration, or close Britain's gates to newcomers from lands in which terror is preached. He has tied his hands by signing on to Europe's Human Rights Act, giving British judges a weapon with which to prevent detention and deportation. And he has contributed to the creation of a sense that multiculturalism is an unalloyed virtue.

No one surpasses my admiration for Tony Blair's principled stand on Iraq, a stand for which he has paid a high political price. Blair likes to say that his party is best when it is bold. So is he—and when he has an unconflicted view of the right and wrong of an issue. That was true when it came to Iraq: He saw what he thought was right, and he did it. But when it comes to issues such as immigration, extradition, and the application of the power of the state at home, he is torn between humanitarian and civil rights principles, and the need to wage war against Britain's domestic enemies. So although he was "totally opposed" to allowing al-Qaradawi to use Britain as a platform for his views, the prime minister felt bound by legal processes not to use the powers he has to exclude the cleric. That is just one example of the extent to which he is the prisoner of a dominant political class that is preventing Britain from responding to the threat the nation faces—and that threatens the durability of the Anglo-American alliance.

Blair is not at his best when his vision of what is right is blurred. Perhaps a summer's reflection will provide him with a clearer view of what he must do to win the battle on his home front. ♦