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#### A sharper approach to loan default in offing

A new Wahiduddin committee gets on with the job

HE question of loan default may have resurfaced after a lull -- thanks to a disclosure that the government has formed a committee to go into the matter afresh. Its chairman Dr Wahiduddin Mahmud who had earlier headed a banking reform commission and produced an exhaustive recommendatory report on the subject will be extremely focused in his new assignment. It is a short-duration problem-specific mandate he is poised to fulfil in concert with Dr. Debapriya Bhattacharya, the CPD executive director; Kazi Abdul Mazid, a former MD of the Prime Bank; Moslehuddin Ahmed, a reputed audit firm partner; and Nazrul Huda, an executive director of Bangladesh Bank.

By hindsight, the 1972 banking nationalisation act put the NCBs out of reach of the central bank by providing the former with autonomy which, in effect, signified immunity to any centralised control. In present day terms, it means half of the banking system -- with the private banks around -- going out of the supervisory hands of the Bangladesh Bank.

The NCBs have since been the hot-bed of bad lending decisions, something which has only accentuated over the years feeding on political mentoring and patronisation of proteges. Currently, what seems alarming is that even the new loan recovery situation is far from satisfactory. Even loans given two years ago show a repayment default of up to 30 to 40 per cent. On paper, the nationalised commercial banks have been sticklers for collateral, legal documentation and what have you, but at the end of the day, they come out scathed with a litany of either extremely poorly performing or non-performing loans.

If a minister threw his weight around in getting a loan for somebody the MPs followed suit by offering ten loans to his favourites. That's how it has been with the lending operations of the NCBs giving them one liquidity crisis after another.

Autonomy for autonomy's sake is no good; it has to be purposeful and result-oriented, qualifications which will be only satisfied if the institution endowed with it is manned by efficient people capable of running it along strictly professional lines. The oft-cited model in terms of proper manning is the Palli Karma Sangsthan Foundation (PKSF) where the loan recovery figure has been at the constant level of 90 per cent.

As for the private sector banks, for quite sometime since their inception, these were bedevilled by loans sponsored by their own directors. Forty to fifty sponsoring directors were removed from the boards of these banks following central bank investigations and supervisory swipes which even led up to legal battles with them. At the end of the day they had to quit leaving the banks in a better shape. Bad loans are a matter of the past now. New loans are good, because the private banks would not take chances with them. In their own interest, they are giving loans they can administer and recover.

Keeping public sector banks impervious to influencepeddling can be difficult, but it is not impossible. What we need to do is to reorganise and streamline the NCBs so that they are devoid of trade unionism and sinecures. At the top, the quality of manning the central bank itself as a supervisory authority will be of crucial importance in the new scheme of things.

In the essence however, the question is not of public versus private sector banks, rather it is one of instilling the right motivation in them to deliver.

The committee headed by Dr. Wahiduddin Mahmud will be working to (a) devise a mechanism to write off bad loans; and (b) redefine loan default, an exercise necessitated by a weakening of the original definition pegged to election candidacy. As for scheduling and rescheduling of loans some international guidelines are likely to be put in place.

While wishing it success, we expect the committee to provide a fool-proof recipe against loan default.

### Those without shadows



HASNAT ABDUL HYE

HERE are conferences and seminars galore. If one of this fails to hog the headlines or its news is not splashed on the first page there is little to raise the eyebrows. Publicity, too, suffers from But the conference at national level held at Savar last week was one of its kind and organized for the first time, to boot. Except a weekly tabloid's coverage it was conspicuous by its absence in the print media. It is difficult to think that this omission was the result of a deliberate policy. The organizers and participants were given wide publicity two years back when some of them were the victims of arbitrary eviction and torture by the power that be. News about them were published day after day with photographs accompanied by sympathetic editorials. There was no dearth of support for their just cause.

If the first ever national conference of so called 'sex workers' failed to attract attention from print media it could be due to the circumstances surrounding the event. This time around there was no emergent crisis and no case of brutal oppression. It was a routine type of conference, though first of its kind. There was no crisis atmosphere or incidents bordering on sensational. The misfortune of the 'sex-workers' is that they do not make news in normal times. They live in a shadowland and "the light falls elsewhere", as the poet said.

It is true that in their daily lives there is nothing that can be

tional. The life they have chosen have become so familiar that it is as mundane as that lived by other marginalised groups. But this is taking a very superficial view and a complacent attitude. The sex workers cannot be compared with any other groups, however forlorn they may be in society. The exploitation, humiliation and abuse that they are subjected to day in and day out have no parallel. They suffer the cruellest of treatment, injustice and indignities for the lowly life. The irony is that

documented in details. Violence to women reaches its apogee in the profession that they have been forced to adopt. Through connivance among concerned parties it has become institutionalized and thereby made to stay forever. The irony is that though allowed to carry on with their life of shame and humiliation law does not formally recognize them. But they have not been criminalized either. With licence or permission from local authorities they can ply with their

little information was available about rehabilitation, it could be safely assumed that those who were released from the vagrants home or managed to escape from there returned to their old profession in different locations, mostly temporary and floating. Instead of being concentrated in a particular place they were forced to spread out over the interstices of the city.

The problems of the sex workers are many and intricate in nature. First and foremost is the very fact of their livelihood which originates and

is perpetuated by a network of very

inhumane and exploitative forces.

place of residence and forcible incarceration should be considered as infringements of their fundamental rights. Above all, the law should enjoin upon the authorities to take steps for their rehabilitation in a life of dignity and social acceptability. The law will not be designed to preserve the status quo.

Women are so vulnerable and weak and they can be victimized by so many people ranging from near relations to government agencies it may not be possible to help all reluctant women to avoid their cruel

fate. For socio-economic reason it

may be equally difficult to rehabili-

tate all of them or even a significant

number. But however idealistic, the

goal should be there and no efforts

n this direction should be spared.

There should be regular monitoring

of the number of new entrants and of

those who are rehabilitated through

the efforts of the government and

others. The existence of 'sex work-

ers' should be regarded as a chal-

lenge for the society and its leaders

in all walks of life. It is an apotheosis

of hypocrisy to condemn and

despise the unfortunate women

who are caught in the web of decep-

tion and degradation without owning

any responsibility to right the wrong.

particularly awareness about AIDS

One of the World Bank Vice

President, during her meeting with

some 'sex workers' a few years back

highlighted the risk of AIDS and advised them about safe sex. She must have gone back with great satisfaction on her achievement in meeting the 'fallen women' and her colleagues must have congratulated on her courageous foray into an area considered out of bounds. In addition to advice on AIDS couldn't she and the Bank (by extension all donors) think about rehabilitation programme and a long-term strategy to reduce the incidence of this social malaise? Must the NGOs working in this field think only of window dressing the status quo? And why should they confer the sobriquet 'sex workers' when it only serves to reinforce the image of a life of shame and humiliation? How about using the nomenclature "personal service providers"? In the first national conference of

'sex workers' at Savar the speakers and organizers demanded recognition of their services and a law to this effect which will also protect them from all forms of exploitation. From bitter experience they have little hope that there can be any help to avoid their cruel fate. Therefore they want their rights as 'sex workers' to be recognized so that they do not suffer from various handicaps. The ball is now in society's court. It should not only meet their legitimate demands but go beyond these so that they don't have to accept this profession and when they do because of unavoidable circumstances, there is an escape route.

The most poignant image of the outrageous eviction of 'sex workers' from Narayanganj two years back was the face of one of them. It was so swollen from beating that one of her eyes was invisible. She had climbed a tree within the compound of the vagrants centre and frantically tried to attract the attention of passersby for sympathy and help. That image should haunt society again and again as long as their

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it is not a life of their own choice. Many have been forced into this life of degradation by criminal-like men while some may have entered the profession as the livelihood of last resort. Their tragedy does not cry out for justice with the same stridency as that of other aggrieved groups because it takes incrementally and in silence. Heartless husbands or lovers criminals, local leaders and local administration are all complicit in the unfolding of their life of shame and misery. There is a deep conspiracy of silence about their lives and livelihood. It is convenient to have them as captives and to pretend that they do not exist. Their service, sex is sold as in the black market. They are also smuggled out for greater profit. The service provided by them is considered as just another commodity. But they do not get a fair price for the 'commodity' they sale, the network of intermediaries appropriates the lion's share.

The exploitation, cruelty, indignity and misery that have become the hallmark of the life of sex worktrade through their managers and protectors. Obfuscation about their status is convenient for all parties. The moral guardians of society are kept happy through denial of formal recognition under the law. Multitude of Mrs. Warrens in the profession and their male collaborators can exploit the hapless victims caught in the dragnet of the traffickers. Local leaders get their regular protection money along with law enforcers. Last but not the least, they can be evicted when the area of their residence becomes prime real estate. The plight of their lives and the uncertainty surrounding them were brought into sharp relief two years ago when some of them were forcbly evicted from the red light area in Narayanganj. The action was so drastic, arbitrary and ruthless that it made news in the front page in print media serially for several weeks The government of the time explained that their eviction was necessary to rid the area of sinful activities. It was also announced that they would be properly rehabilitated. Though subsequently very

Absence of law allows criminal minded men including their near relations (and collaborating women) to force the hapless victims to accept a demeaning and lowly life. For the same reason they are at the mercy of those who organize their activities and give protection for the same. By defining and specifying conditions under which women can engage in this profession a law can prevent, if not all, a significant number of cases where women are brought into red light areas against their will. Particularly, employment of girls of minor age should be considered as a heinous crime. The law should criminalise the activities of the operators and their accompli ces and not the poor victims. The law should also have provisions to safeguard their economic rights and punish intermediaries who exploit them financially and otherwise. Among others, the law should protect them from extortion by government agencies and local leaders. Arbitrary eviction from their

Unfortunately, efforts for prevention and rehabilitation are conspicuous by their absence. The government does not have an agenda in this regard. The NGOs, aided by donor money, concentrate exclusively on olight continues. dissemination of health information,

#### Mirror and wife



MOHAMMAD BADRUL AHSAN

OOKING in the mirror, he thought of his face. It looked sleepy with puffy cheeks and swollen eyes, reminding him that he had enjoyed a sound sleep in the night before. He ran his fingers over the stubbles, which covered his face like rootstocks of plants. He vawned in front of the mirror, blurted out his tongue, and suddenly realized that his nose was disproportionate to his face.

He turned and twisted his nose by the tip as if a skeptic pinched a small fry by the tail and flipped it for inspection. He wondered how he could not have noticed this flaw unti this morning, how it went undetected for years although he had been standing in front of the mirror

This morning he realized that he didn't like his face, its symmetry ruined by that clumsy nose. He thought he had more than enough flesh in his cheeks to account for what was missing in his nose. His

nose was too small for the size of his face, and it looked like a midget stashed between two fat people smile. As he spread the foam over his face and got ready to shave, he thought it was going to be a waste of time. This face couldn't be improved with anything so long as that pathetic nose stood there like a

As the razor cut its first swath in the foam on his face, he thought if it was too late to consult a plastic

whole face of the world would have changed. Edmond Rostand, the French playwright, writes in Cyrano de Bergerac, " A large nose is in fact the sign of an affable man, good, courteous, witty, liberal, courageous such as I am." In Lord Byron's *The* Age of Bronze, Proud Wellington boasted that he had a nose curled like an eagle beak, which he used for a hook to suspend the world.

He carefully looked again in the mirror and checked his nose. It was short and small, its bridge flat and decided to wear his moustache as it was. Not much one could do to save a lost cause, he said to himself, and trimmed the moustache with utmost caution, not to make worse what was already bad. He vainly tried to pluck the gray

hairs in his moustache with tweezers, which proved like the proverbial many-headed dragon, whose every head, when chopped, grew back manifold. Then this incredible urge came in him to break the mirror. He uttered to himself the French saying

For a while he swum in sorrow his nose tracking the miseries of life in the manner it brings a prospector to his fortune. Life is unfair, he realized again, as people are differentiated in their talents, skills and organic endowments, and thrown into this world to compete with each other. How can all examinees, sitting for a test on different sets of questions, do equally well? How could people with varied intellectual levels, grasp the same truth if radars of varying capacities don't capture

shape if compared to other men, which must be why his tempera ment and characteristics are also different from them. He looked in the mirror and thought of his face. He had so much similarity with the dissimilarity of rest of the world. He was one amongst many, alone in his uniqueness. It occurred to him that man was aregarious in his mind, yet so lonely in his mirror! He caressed his cheeks with the

palm of his hand and marveled how t was a daily struggle to maintain that smoothness on the skin of his face. Now his nose looked like a barbarian in the civilization, a blemish in the immaculate, a freak in the funhouse. Ah! It made his face look so deplorable! Only if that nose could be fixed, only if it could be raised in the ridge, stretched in length and narrowed at the tip!

He told his wife at breakfast that he had looked in the mirror and didn't like his nose. She smiled at him and said it was not news to her since she had noticed it a long time ago. How come she never mentioned it to him, he wanted to know She replied that it never bothered her, except when he snored.

Mirror and wife, he was angry with both. How he has been facing them every day, yet each of them surprised him this morning. Two of man's most intimate friends, he felt they had cheated him.

Mohammad Badrul Ahsan is a banker

# CROSS TALK

It occurred to him that man was gregarious in his mind, yet so lonely in his mirror! He told his wife at breakfast that he had looked in the mirror and didn't like his nose. She replied that it never bothered her, except when he snored... Mirror and wife, he was angry with both. Two of man's most intimate friends, he felt they had cheated him.

surgeon. He felt ashamed of his face after all these years, and wanted to blame all his failures on it. That damn nose must have undermined his capacity to throw his charm on the world. Then he remembered a wise man saying that a pretty face was worth a thousand recommendations. How could anybody have a pretty face with an awful nose like that?

He couldn't ignore his nose this morning ever since he became aware of its shortcoming. recalled what Blaise Pascal, the French mathematician, physicist and moralist, had said, that had Cleopatra's nose been shorter, the

depressed in the middle like a ridge going under the rising water. His nostrils were big for the size of his nose, giving the impression of a entrance in a narrow house. And his nasal hairs jutted out as if one had glimpses of an unkempt garden through broken fence.

When he finished shaving his face, the desire to trim his moustache came as natural conclusion. For a while he fancied with the shape of his moustache, from handlebar to bushy to a small patch like Hitler's, and neither looked suitable for his nose. He despaired like a shopper who couldn't buy anything in a day's shopping, and that the world is full of fools, and he who would not see it should live alone and smash his mirror.

It was only the nose for god's sake, he tried to convince himself. He breathed, smelled, sneezed and snored with it and for so long as he could do all of those without any difficulty, what did it matter what size was it? Somewhere inside him, he knew he was bluffing himself, that he wished a perfectly symmetrical sharp nose had adorned his face, which would have made all the difference in life. It occurred to him that he was sniffing sorrow with his nose, that this peculiar organ of his was becoming nosy besides being ugly.

all the radio waves? Yet his heart filled with the juice of

resentment, and a terrible bitterness. filled his mouth. How could he aet the similar smell of life with his lousy nose compared to someone whose nose was perfect, well shaped and well proportioned, long and sharp honed with a sculptor's skill? How could he know if the same rose smelled equally sweet or same odor smelled equally foul to him and the other man?

Senses must vary from man to man, as does sensibility, he reasoned with himself. Like the nose, his brain, heart and other organs also must be different in size and

## Thoughts about America

don't know a single Arab or Muslim American who does not now feel that he or she belongs to the enemy camp, and that being in the United States at this moment provides us with an especially unpleasant experience of alienation and widespread, quite specifically targeted hostility. For despite the occasional official statements saying that Islam and Muslims and Arabs are not enemies of the United States, everything else about the current situation argues the exact opposite. Hundreds of young Arab and Muslim men have been picked up for questioning and, in far too many cases, detained by the police or the FBI. Anyone with an Arab or Muslim name is usually made to stand aside for special attention during airport security checks. There have been many reported instances of discriminatory behave iour against Arabs, so that speaking Arabic or even reading an Arabic document in public is likely to draw unwelcome attention. And of course, the media have run far too many "experts" and "commentators" on terrorism, Islam, and the Arabs whose endlessly repetitious and reductive line is so hostile and so misrepresents our history, society and culture that the media itself has become little more than an arm of the war on terrorism in Afghanistan and elsewhere, as now seems to be the case with the projected

While true in some respects, this is quite misleading. America is more than what Bush and Rumsfeld and the others say it is. I have come to deeply resent the notion that I must accept the picture of America as being involved in a "just war" against something unilaterally labeled as terrorism by Bush and his advisers, a war that has assigned us the role of either silent witnesses or defensive immigrants who should be grateful to be allowed residence in the US. The historical realities are different: America is an immigrant republic and has always been one. It is a nation of laws passed not by God but by its citizens. Except for the mostly exterminated native Americans, the original Indians everyone who now lives here as an American citizen originally came to these shores as an immigrant from somewhere else, even Bush and Rumsfeld. The Constitution does not provide for different levels of Americanness, nor for approved or disapproved forms of "American behaviour," including things that have come to be called "un-" or "anti-American" statements or attitudes. That is the invention of American Taliban who want to regulate speech and behaviour in ways that remind one eerily of the unregretted former rulers of Afghanistan. And even if Mr Bush insists on the importance of religion in America, he is not authorised to enforce such views on the citizenry or to speak for everyone when he makes proclamations in China and elsewhere about God and America and himself. The Constitution expressly separates church and state

There is worse. By passing the Patriot Act last November, Bush and his compliant Congress have suppressed or abrogated or abridged whole sections of the First, Fourth, Fifth and Eighth Amendments, instituted legal procedures that give individuals no recourse either to a proper defence or a fair trial, that allow secret searches, eavesdropping, detention without limit and, given the treatment of the prisoners at Guantanamo Bay, that allow the US executive branch to abduct prisoners, detain them indefinitely, decide unilaterally whether or not they are prisoners of war and whether or not the Geneva Conventions apply to them -- which is not a decision to be taken by individual countries. Moreover, as Congressman Dennis Kucinich (Democrat, Ohio) said in a magnificent speech given on 17 February, the president and his men were not authorised to declare war (Operation Enduring Freedom) against the world without limit or reason, were not authorised to increase military spending to over \$400 billion per year, were not authorised to repeal the Bill of Rights. Furthermore, he added -- the first such statement by a prominent, publicly elected official -- "we did not ask that the blood of

innocent people, who perished on September 11, be avenged with the blood of innocent villagers in Afghanistan." I strongly recommend that Rep. Kucinich's speech, which was made with the best of American principles and values in mind, be published in full in Arabic so that people in our part of the world can understand that America is not a monolith for the use of George Bush and Dick Cheney, but in fact contains many voices and currents of opinion which this government is trying to silence or make irrelevant.

The problem for the world today is how to deal with the unparalleled and unprecedented power of the United States, which in effect has made no secret of the fact that it does not need coordination with or approval of others in the pursuit of what a small circle of men and women around Bush believe are its interests. So far as the Middle East is concerned, it does seem that since 11 September there has been almost an Israelisation of US policy: and in effect Ariel Sharon and his associates have cynically exploited the single minded attention to "terrorism" by George Bush and have used that as a cover for their continued failed policy against the Palestinians. The point here is that Israel is not the US and, ercifully, the US is not Israel: thus, even though Israel commands Bush's support for the moment, Israel is a small country whose continued survival as an ethnocentric state in the midst of an Arab-Islamic sea depends not just on an expedient if not infinite dependence on the US, but rather on accommodation with its environment, not the other way round. That is why I think Sharon's policy has finally been revealed to a significant number of Israelis as suicidal, and why more and more Israelis are taking the reserve officers' position against serving the military occupation as a model for their approach and resistance. This is the best thing to have emerged from the Intifada. It proves that Palestinian courage and defiance in resisting occupation have finally brought fruit.

What has not changed, however, is the US position, which has been escalating towards a more and more metaphysical sphere, in which Bush and his people identify themselves (as in the very name of the military campaign, Operation Enduring Freedom) with righteousness, purity, the good and manifest destiny, its external enemies with an equally absolute evil Anyone reading the world press in the past few weeks can ascertain that people outside the US are both mystified by and aghast at the vagueness of US policy, which claims for itself the right to imagine and create enemies on a world scale, then prosecute wars on them without much regard for accuracy of definition, specificity of aim, concreteness of goal, or, worst of all, the legality of such actions. What does it mean to defeat "evil terrorism" in a world like ours? It cannot mean eradicating everyone who opposes the US an infinite and strangely pointless task; nor can it mean changing the world map to suit the US, substituting people we think are "good guys" for evil creatures like Saddam Hussein. The radical simplicity of all this is attractive to Washington bureaucrats whose domain is either purely theoretical or who. because they sit behind desks in the Pentagon, tend to see the world as a distant target for the US's very real and virtually unopposed power

From my point of view, the most shocking thing of all is that with few exceptions most prominent intellectuals and commentators in this country have tolerated the Bush programme, tolerated and in some flagrant cases, tried to go beyond it, toward more self- righteous sophistry, more uncritical self-flattery, more specious argument. What they will not accept is that the world we live in, the historical world of nations and peoples, is moved and can be understood by politics, not by huge general absolutes like good and evil with America always on the side of good, its enemies on the side of evil When Thomas Friedman tiresomely sermonises to Arabs that they have to be more self-critical, missing in anything he says is the slightest tone of self-criticism. Somehow, he thinks, the atrocities of 11 September entitle him to preach at others, as if only the US had suffered such terrible losses and as if

lives lost elsewhere in the world were not worth lamenting guite as much or drawing as large moral conclusions from

One notices the same discrepancies and blindness when Israeli intellectuals concentrate on their own tragedies and leave out of the equation the much greater suffering of a dispossessed people without a state, or an army, or an air force, or a proper leadership, that is, Palestinians whose suffering at the hands of Israel continues minute by minute, hour by hour. This sort of moral blindness, this inability to evaluate and weigh the comparative evidence of sinner and sinned against (to use a moralistic language that I normally avoid and detest) is very much the order of the day, and it must be the critical intellectual's job not to fall into -- indeed, actively to campaign against falling into -- the trap. It is not enough to say blandly that all human suffering is equal, then to go on basically bewailing one's own miseries: it is far more important to see what the strongest party does, and to question rather than

I was stunned when a European friend asked me what I thought of a declaration by 60 American intellectuals that was published in all the major French, German, Italian and other continental papers but which did not appear in the US at all, except on the Internet where few people took notice of t. This declaration took the form of a pompous sermon about the American war against evil and terrorism being "just" and in keeping with American values, as defined by these self-appointed interpreters of our country. Paid for and sponsored by something called the Institute for American Values, whose main (and financially well- endowed) aim is to propagate ideas in favour of families, "fathering" and "mothering," and God, the declaration was signed by Samuel Huntington, Francis Fukuyama, Daniel Patrick Movnihan among many others, but basically written by a conservative feminist academic, Jean Bethke Elshtain. Its main arguments about a "just" war were inspired by Professor Michael Walzer, a supposed socialist who is allied with the pro-Israel lobby in this country, and whose role is to justify everything Israel does by recourse to vaquely leftist principles. In signing this declaration, Walzer has given up all pretension to leftism and, like Sharon, allies himself with an interpretation (and a questionable one at that) of America as a righteous warrior against terror and evil, the more to make it appear that Israel and the US are similar countries with similar aims.

Nothing could be further from the truth, since Israel is not the state of its citizens but of all the Jewish people, while the US is most assuredly only the state of its citizens. Moreover, Walzer never has the courage to state boldly that in supporting Israel he is supporting a state structured by ethno-religious principles, which (with typical hypocrisy) he would oppose in the United ates if this country were declared to be white and Christian

Walzer's inconsistencies and hypocrisies aside, the document is really addressed to "our Muslim brethren" who are supposed to understand that America's war is not against Islam but against those who oppose all sorts of principles, which it would be hard to disagree with. Who could oppose the principle that all human beings are equal, that killing in the name of God is a bad thing, that freedom of conscience is excellent, and that "the basic subject of society is the human person, and the legitimate role of government is o protect and help to foster the conditions for human flourishing"? In what follows, however, America turns out to be the aggrieved party and, even though some of its mistakes in policy are acknowledged very briefly (and without mentioning anything specific in detail), it is depicted as hewing to principles unique to the United States, such as that all people possess inher ent moral dignity and status, that universal moral truths exist and are available to everyone, or that civility is important where there is disagreement and that freedom of conscience and religion are a reflection of basic human dignity and are universally recognised. Fine. For although the authors of this

sermon say it is often the case that such great principles are contravened, no sustained attempt is made to say where and when those contraventions actually occur (as they do all the time), or whether they have been more contravened than followed, or anything as concrete as that. Yet in a long footnote, Walzer and his colleagues set forth a list of how many American 'murders" have occurred at Muslim and Arab hands. including those of the Marines in Beirut in 1983, as well as other military combatants. Somehow making a list of that kind is worth making for these militant defenders of America, whereas the murder of Arabs and Muslims -- including the hundreds of thousands killed with American weapons by Israel with US support or the hundreds of thousands killed by US- maintained sanctions against the innocent civilian population of Iraq -- need be neither mentioned nor tabulated. What sort of dignity is there in humiliating Palestinians by Israel, with American complicity and even cooperation, and where is the nobility and moral conscience of saying nothing as Palestinian children are killed, millions besieged, and millions more kept as stateless refugees?

All in all, this declaration of principles and complaint addressed by American ntellectuals to their Muslim brethren seems like neither a statement of real conscience nor of true intellectual criticism against the arrogant use of power but rather is the opening salvo in a new cold war declared by the US in full ironic cooperation, it would seem, with those Islamists who have argued that "our" war is with the West and with America. Speaking as someone with a claim on America and the Arabs, I find this sort of hijacking rhetoric profoundly objectionable. While it pretends to the elucidation of principles and the declaration of values, it is in fact exactly the opposite, an exercise in not knowing, in blinding readers with a patriotic rhetoric that encourages ignorance as it overrides real politics, real history, and real moral issues. Despite its vulgar trafficking in great principles and values," it does none of that, except to wave them around in a bullying way designed to cow foreign readers into submission. I have a feeling that this document wasn't published here for two reasons; one is that it would be so severely criticised by American readers that it would be laughed out of court and two, that it was designed as part of a recently announced, extremely wellfunded Pentagon scheme to put out propaganda as part of the war effort, and therefore intended for foreign consumption

Whatever the case, the publication of "What are American Values?" augurs a new and degraded era in the production of intellectual discourse. For when the intellectuals of the most powerful country in the history of the world align themselves so flagrantly with that power, pressing that power's case instead of urging restraint, reflection, genuine communication and understanding, we are back to the bad old days of the intellectual war against communism, which we now know brought far too many compromises, collaborations and fabrications on the part of intellectuals and artists who should have played an altogether different role. Subsidised and underwritten by the government (the CIA especially, which went as far as providing for the subvention of magazines like Encounter, underwrote scholarly research travel and concerts as well as artistic exhibitions), those militantly unreflective and uncritical intellectuals and artists in the 1950s and 1960s brought to the whole notion of intellectual honesty and complicity a new and disastrous dimension. For along with that effort went also the domestic campaign to stifle debate, intimidate critics, and restrict thought. For many Americans like myself, this is a shameful episode in our history, and we must be on our guard against and resist its return.

Courtesy: Al-Ahram Weekly