

Remembering Syed Mohammad Ali on his birthday

SYED MUAZZEM ALI

SYED Mohammad Ali, one of the outstanding journalists of the country, and my beloved Boro Bhai (eldest brother), was born seventy-seven years ago this day. In our middle class families, Boro Bhai has a very special position; he is semi-friend, semi-confidant, and semi-guardian. I remember his visits home from Dhaka, where he was completing his Masters, to Gopalganj, where our father, Syed Mustafa Ali, was posted as Sub-Divisional Officer in the early fifties. He was affectionate, and very gentle and polite to everyone in the family, older or younger than him; yet we were too young to fully interact with him.

From those early days his desire was to be a journalist, and he used to write in different newspapers. After obtaining his Masters degree in English from Dhaka University in 1951, he began pursuing his dream profession on a full-time basis. In those days, the life of a journalist was uncertain and naturally, our father, a member of Assam Civil Service, would have liked his eldest son to follow his own footsteps, and that of his younger brother Syed Murtaza Ali, into the civil service. Boro Bhai had no such interest. He decided to move to Karachi, and joined the Evening Times as an Assistant Editor. Thereafter, he joined the prestigious daily Dawn. In 1953 he left for London, where in addition to receiving professional training, he worked for BBC and the News Chronicle.

It was after his return from London in 1956 that I began to know him closely. Whenever I entered his room I would find him bending over his small portable typewriter with a cigarette at his lips and a cup of tea on the small side table. Sometimes he would give me a neatly typed page, which he had just written and ask me to read it. As a seventh grader, I may not have fully comprehended the political connotation of the piece, but I appreciated its simple and lucid English. I do not remember having to open the dictionary too many times to check the meanings of the words he had used.

Boro Bhai was a very popular person, and many of his friends, of both sexes, would telephone home for him. He taught us how to receive phone calls and take down messages. To us he was a Pucca Sahib, who spoke softly, dressed smartly, and conducted him with great honour and dignity.

At that time, he was working in the Pakistan Observer, and whenever he had time and money, he would take us to restaurants like Casbah, Gulsitan, or La Sani. If he did not have enough money, we would go to "western style" dining room at the Fulbari railway station and have a four-course meal for two rupees each.

The purpose of taking us out was to give us a break and, at the same time, teach us table manners. I remember those days eating in those "western style" restaurants meant eating with fork

and spoon. One day Boro Bhai politely pointed out to us that an Englishman would only use spoon for taking liquid food like soup or porridge and that we should switch to eating with fork and knife. We mastered that quickly, but it was extremely difficult to use them as noiselessly as he did.

Boro Bhai was obviously interested in increasing the sphere of his activities. By the time I went to college, he had left for Lahore to join the Pakistan Times as its Assistant Editor. The management of the Pakistan Times soon nominated him to represent them at Asia Magazine, a colourful Sunday paper, and Boro Bhai left for Hong Kong in 1961.

That was the beginning of his three-decade long sojourn in South East Asia. From Hong Kong he moved to Bangkok to work as the Managing Editor of Bangkok Post, then on to Singapore as the Roving Foreign Editor of the New Nation. He returned to Hong Kong as the Managing Editor of the Hong Kong Standard, and then moved to Manila as the Executive Director of the Press Foundation of Asia (PFA). Finally, as the Unesco Regional Communication Adviser for Asia, he was based in Kuala Lumpur.

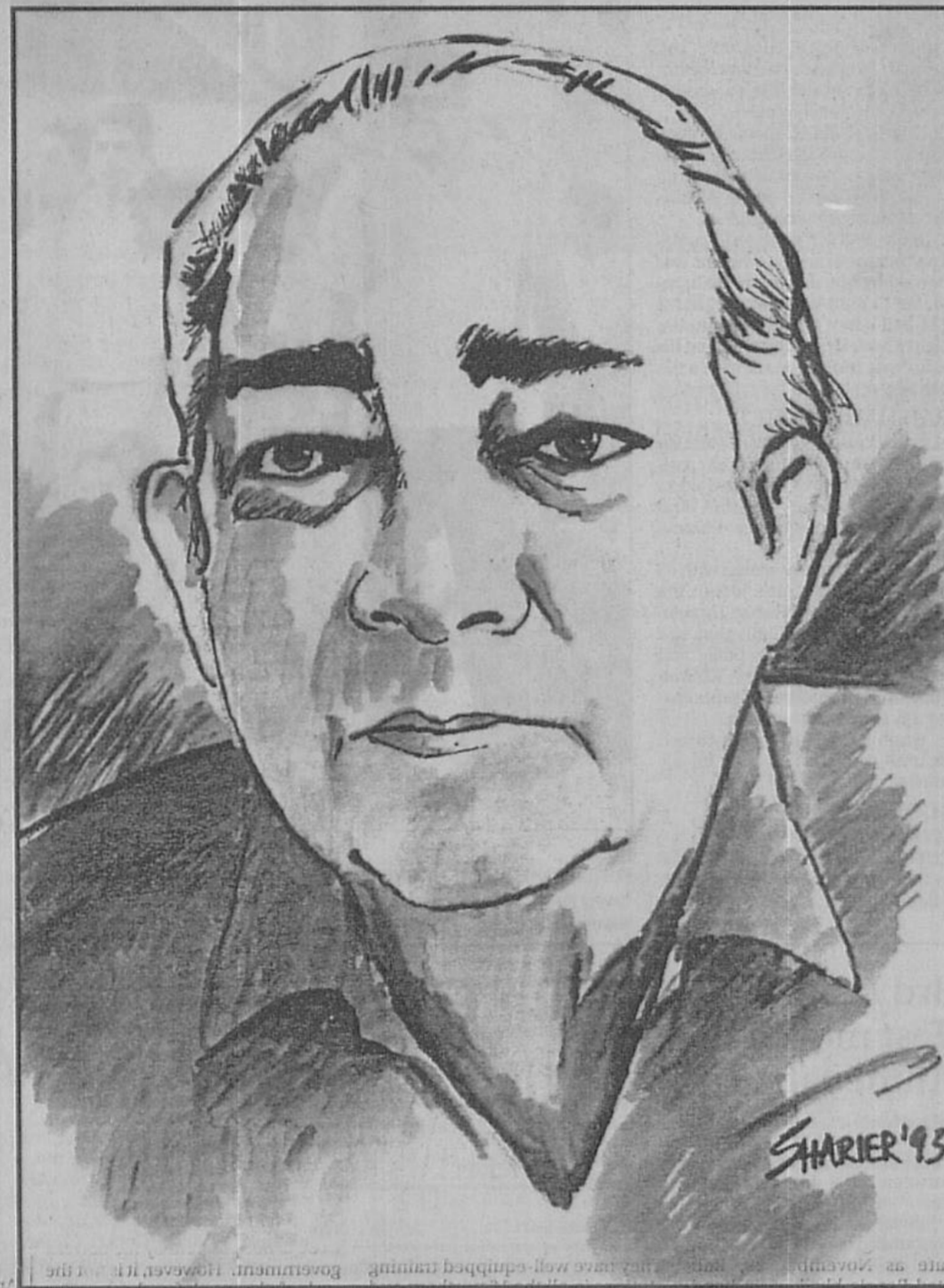
Boro Bhai had lived abroad for the major portion of his life, but his heart was firmly rooted in Bangladesh. Whenever and wherever I met him during that period in Warsaw or New Delhi, where I was posted, or in Hong Kong or Kuala Lumpur, where he was based, he would invariably talk about Bangladesh and how the country was doing under most trying conditions. When natural disasters would strike Bangladesh he would exclaim: "Oh God, what have we done to deserve this?"

During the liberation war he was based in Singapore and played an important role in building public opinion in favour of our cause by setting up friendship committees in Manila, Singapore, Kuala Lumpur, Hong Kong, Tokyo, and Bangkok. These committees included local writers and journalists and intellectuals from those capitals. At that time, there were very few Bengali expatriates living in that region. After the independence of Bangladesh, he came to Dhaka, and stayed for a few months. On the basis of that experience, he wrote the book, "After the Dark Night," frankly describing the newly independent country's problems and prospects without any fear or favour.

He highlights the superb character of Bangabandhu, his great love for Bangladesh and his people, his generosity and indomitable courage, and the humane treatment that he extended to his political opponents, and even to those who had collaborated with the Pakistani occupation forces. The book is immensely interesting and gives the reader a glimpse of the major challenges that Bangladesh faced at the critical initial years of its nationhood. Incidentally, the book is cited as a reference book on Bangladesh in several universities in the United States.

Boro Bhai, during one of his

We lost Boro Bhai at the prime of his professional life. He was only 65 years old. Whenever I think about his death, I remember how suddenly and how fast he was taken away from us. In his death, the country lost an outstanding son of the soil and we lost our friend, philosopher, and guide.



trips to New Delhi in the late eighties, mentioned to me that after his retirement from the Unesco, he would like to return to Bangladesh and do something worthwhile for the country. Frankly, I was a bit apprehensive whether he and Nancy Bhabi, a Chinese-origin Singaporean national, would be able to adjust to life in Dhaka, and I was also worried about his health. He was contemplating bringing out a first class English daily from Bangladesh. While welcoming the idea, I expressed my concern about his health. Boro Bhai smiled and said, "I can easily spend the rest of my life in any South East Asian capital and survive on my Unesco pension, but instead of wasting my time, let me do something worthwhile for my country."

1989, and initially joined his original paper, Bangladesh Observer as its Editor. He finally got the license to start a newspaper and The Daily Star was born on January 14, 1991. His personal column "My World," which revealed his depth, forthrightness, determination, grace, and charm, was very popular. Soon The Daily Star emerged as a leading English daily in the country. I moved to Dhaka in mid 1992 from Bhutan, and this gave me and my wife Tuhfa and our two sons Nausher and Nageeb the opportunity to know Boro Bhai and Bhabi more closely. A visit to their flat in old DOHS was a rewarding experience for all of us. Many weekends, and on social and religious occasions, he would join other family members at our flat at Kahkeshan in Bailey Road.

He was particularly fond of Sylheti delicacies like shatkora and birmi rice that Tuhfa used to prepare especially for him. We lived on the top floor, and it was difficult for Boro Bhai to climb those stairs, yet his love and affection for us made him to go through the exercise.

Boro Bhai was an old school journalist who believed that trust and confidence of people must be maintained at all costs. Once he narrated to us how the Chinese Foreign Minister Marshal Chen Yi had, at the end of a conversation in 1964, suddenly mentioned that the conversation was "off the record," and had thus ended his golden opportunity of publishing a sensational piece at the height of Cold War. Despite the obvious temptations, Boro Bhai had maintained his journalistic ethics and had never disclosed the contents

of that conversation.

Sometimes he would meet our national leaders and we would pester him to tell us what they had talked about. He would give us his usual disarming smile and change the topic. At family gatherings he would remind us that his principal allegiance was to his readers and that we should keep it in mind before discussing any national or international issues with him. If the event went past his normal retiring hours, he would excuse himself by saying that he had "to bring out a newspaper the next morning."

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Just weeks earlier, Boro Bhai was admitted to a local clinic in Dhanmandi for a minor surgery. When Tuhfa, myself, and Nancy Bhabi met his doctor, the latter reassured us that the surgery itself was minor. However, in view of his general health condition, he apprehended that Boro Bhai might need blood transfusion after the surgery. Since it is always hazardous to take blood from professional donors, he enquired if my younger brother Syed Iqbal Ali and I could drop by the pathological laboratory for a blood test for that eventuality. After the test, the doctor confirmed that our blood group was the same and asked us to be in a state of readiness. Iqbal quipped, "We may not be as famous as Boro Bhai but at least we have the same blood."

The surgery went off well and he did not need any blood transfusion, but doctor sent a sample for biopsy. The worst fear came true; it was diagnosed that Boro Bhai was suffering from lung cancer. National Professor Nurul Islam told us that he should be sent abroad quickly for further treatment. We were in utter disbelief. Nancy Bhabi told us not to divulge full details to Boro Bhai and to persuade him to leave for Bangkok

soon.

His first reply was that he couldn't leave in such short notice and that he needed some time to make necessary arrangements at his office. He was finally persuaded. Thai visa was arranged, and our cousin the late Hedayet Ahmed, who was heading the Unesco regional office in Bangkok, made all the hospital arrangements. We saw him off at the airport within two days of his diagnosis.

Before leaving for Bangkok he went to The Daily Star office and spent some time with his colleagues. In his last piece dated October 1, 1993, he wrote under the caption, My World in a Suspended Animation: "As I will be going on two to three weeks leave for my regular medical check-ups, a bit of rest and an overdue holiday, in that order, probably from this afternoon, the column will not be appearing for the next three Fridays. During my absence, Executive Editor Mahfuz Anam will be in charge of the paper as the Acting Editor."

His condition deteriorated fast, and Hedayet bhai asked me to reach Bangkok immediately. Our youngest brother Syed Ruhul Amin also rushed from Zambia. Boro Bhai never knew that two of his loving brothers had come to see him.

He was already in a coma, and passed away on October 17, 1993.

After his death, his friends in Kuala Lumpur brought out a compilation of all the installments of his "My World" column. In Dhaka his autobiographical novel "Rainbow Over Padma" was published. The central character of the book, Rafique Anwar, and his Singaporean wife Sara bear striking resemblance to our very dear Boro Bhai and Nancy Bhabi.

Anyone interested in our politics and personalities should find this book immensely interesting and useful. It is a beautiful blend of personal narrative and a political commentary. The central character discusses the political situation of Bangladesh frankly and expresses his deep disappointment at the way things were moving in the country at that time.

It is a narrative filled with Boro Bhai's patriotism. I cannot resist the temptation of quoting a statement of the central character that is as valid today as it was when the book was written: "We must revive the vision and idealism that gave birth to

Bangladesh. I cannot believe that we do not have even ten million Bangladeshis, no more than ten percent of the total population, who cannot rise above their personal greed and lead the nation out of the valley of despair. Son, we must give them a chance. Otherwise we have no hope for Bangladesh."

It is difficult to pay tribute to one's elder brother as the thin line between our private and public life often gets blurred. I remember our late father who used to tell us jokingly: "If I put Khasru (Boro Bhai's nickname) on one side of the scale and the rest of you on the other, his side would be heavier." Father was obviously referring to his eldest son's qualities and not his body weight. Father also had infinite confidence in his eldest son and Boro Bhai more than met his share of responsibilities.

Our father, an honest and upright civil servant, had very few material possessions, and after his retirement from service, it was difficult for him to maintain our large family with his meager pension. Boro Bhai provided regular sustained financial support. Even after we all started working and after our father's death, he continued to send money to our mother.

When I recalled his generous support to his parents and the family, Boro Bhai reminded me that our father had to abandon his studies, just months before his MA examination, in order to join the government service and support his family after the retirement of our grandfather. Then he smiled and said, "After all, I did not have to leave my studies to support the family like our father did." It was so typical of Boro Bhai to underplay his contributions on any issue, public or private.

Boro Bhai will be remembered for his sterling qualities and his contributions. The Daily Star was his last contribution and here I must gratefully recognize the untiring efforts of Mahfuz Anam and all his colleagues for maintaining the high standard of the paper. Today The Daily Star can legitimately claim to be one of the leading dailies in the South Asian region. On his birthday, I pray for the salvation of our dear Boro Bhai's soul.

Syed Muazzem Ali is a former Foreign Secretary of Bangladesh.

The only way out

JOE CONASON

HOUSE Democrats want a "timetable" for American withdrawal from Iraq. Senate Democrats want a "year of progress" on Iraq. Senate Republicans want quarterly progress reports about Iraq. The White House offers a glossy brochure and a Web site as the US "plan for victory" in Iraq.

No wonder the American people -- who know that the president has lied to them repeatedly about this costly bloodshed -- have lost faith in George W. Bush, his party and his war, without gaining confidence in the opposition. Both sides are squandering the opportunity for a decent, honorable and constructive conclusion to the war because they will not face the realities honestly.

The president's recent speech on the war continued his execrable record of mendacity, especially with his exaggerated claims about the Iraqi role in the battle of Tal Afar and his insistence that the Iraqi armed forces are well on the way to independence. Two months ago, his own commanding officer, Gen. John Abizaid, testified in the Senate that after two years of supposed training, only one of a hundred Iraqi battalions is capable of operating on its own. One of a hundred! If the general spoke truthfully, how many decades would the Iraqis need before they could operate alone?

Worse, the president failed to admit what every officer and expert knows: The liberation of Iraq from Saddam Hussein has turned into an occupation that is provoking resistance among the Sunni Arabs and attracting jihadi fighters from all over the region. Even Sen. Joe Biden, the ranking Democrat on the Foreign Relations Committee and a supporter of the war, admits that "the hard truth is that our large military presence in Iraq is ... increasingly part of the problem," although he also says we must maintain troops there as "the only guarantor against chaos."

Those remarks reflect a reality that many leading Democrats, particularly those who have supported the war, like Hillary Clinton and Joe Lieberman, have been reluctant to confront. But while Biden is beginning to articulate what is wrong, he and his Democratic colleagues remain as clueless as the president about what to do.

In a speech the other day, Biden proposed a complex, four-part solution that includes a "contact group" of allied nations to encourage cooperation among Sunnis, Shiites and Kurds, a better Iraqi civil administration, a more effective training regime for Iraqi military units, and a more effective counterinsurgency strategy. This is mostly wishful thinking, mostly a more verbose version of Lieberman's usual happy

talk.

These senators' colleague John Kerry, who has often proved how hard it is for him to think or speak clearly about Iraq ever since last year's presidential campaign, has not made much progress either. He wants a schedule, too: "a target schedule by which you begin to turn over provinces, by which you specifically begin to shift responsibility" to the Iraqi military. He complains that without such a "concrete" plan, "a lot of people fear that it's going to be more of the same." With such a plan, it will also be more of the same.

As for Clinton, she is busy trying to convince New Yorkers that she has always been critical of the president's conduct of the war, including his decision to invade. She has had some difficulty explaining why we didn't know this sooner. She seems to think that if the Iraqi elections proceed as planned, we will be able to start withdrawing -- which is yet more wishful thinking.

As for House Minority Leader Nancy Pelosi and Rep. John Murtha, and the House Democrats who have endorsed Murtha's call for withdrawing most troops before next summer, they have offered no realistic assessment of what that would mean for US interests or for the Iraqis themselves.

What both the president and his hapless critics have refused to acknowledge is that we are in a bind. We cannot provide enough troops to pacify Iraq -- indeed, we can scarcely maintain the current level of troop strength for an additional year. We cannot train the Iraqi army and security forces quickly and thoroughly enough to pacify their country before we will be forced to reduce our own commitment. And we cannot leave abruptly without an unacceptable risk of civil war that eventually widens into a dangerous regional conflict involving Iran, Jordan, Turkey, and possibly Israel.

There is a decent and honorable way out that has been addressed by the Iraqis themselves but that no American politician, not even the brave Murtha, is willing to mention: negotiations with the Sunni insurgents. The elected Iraqi government, representing a population eager for us to leave, should begin talks with rebels who are willing to discuss laying down their arms, in exchange for an orderly and scheduled American departure. That is the only way to transform the US occupation from a stick into a carrot -- and to extract some kind of victory from what is becoming a strategic disaster.

Joe Conason writes a weekly column for Salon and the New York Observer.

After suicide bombing now what?

DR. FAKHRUDDIN AHMED writes from Princeton

HOW have we come to this? Bangladeshi suicide bombers killing Bangladeshi civilians! Low level violence has been a part of Bangladeshi life for at least the last fifteen years. But this is a quantum jump. There is no rhyme or reason behind such gratuitous violence except that the perpetrators are hell-bent on getting their way. True teachings of religion or compassion for humanity are irrelevant to their zeal. Warped understanding of "religion" permits these murderers to celebrate mayhem.

What about the rest of the Bangladeshis? Are they going to allow this carnage to continue? Iraqi insurgents suicide bomb the occupying American soldiers. Palestinian suicide bombers attack Israeli occupiers. In the eyes of Bangladesh's suicide bombers, the average Bangladeshis must also be the occupiers of Bangladesh! Clearly, the average Bangladeshis are not good enough according to whatever twisted scale these murderers follow, so they must be bombed into submission and conformity.

Bangladeshis rose as one in 1971 against the accumulated injustices perpetrated on them by the Pakistanis over 24 years of misrule. However, during the nation's life and death struggle,

LETTER FROM AMERICA

This is 1971 all over again. Prosperity, leadership in world agencies, and the world's respect beckon Bangladesh on one hand. On the other, the same dark forces that fought against Bangladesh's birth are now attempting to take Bangladesh back to the dark ages. The choices are as starkly different as that.

there was a tiny fraction of Bangladeshis who sided with Pakistan, and to spite the new nation, through murder exacted terrible retribution from Bangladeshi intellectuals and average Bangladeshis just before the nation was born. Perhaps it is these elements that now have resorted to suicide bombings to reverse history. Perhaps they want Bangladesh to be like Pakistan once again. So what is next? Bombing of mosques during prayers? Gang rapes with impunity? Honour killings?

Bangladeshi Americans are stunned and dismayed. They can be forgiven for not seeing this coming with such ferocity. What about the government? The Daily Star was replete with articles and letters warning the government of the imminent threat posed by the religious extremists. Let us be charitable and say that the government, too, was blind-sided by the ratcheting up of the violence. However, there is no excuse now. The BNP government must realize that

they too do not figure in the future these terrorists would like to usher. For the bombers, Bangladesh is a stepping stone for something bigger. It will be suicidal for the current or future governments to downplay the mortal threat to the nation posed by the suicide bombers and their backers.

It would be wrong to characterize and dignify these criminals as "religious" extremists. They violate every tenet of the Islamic faith, such as, "there is no compulsion in religion," and "if anyone kills an innocent human being, it is as though he has killed all of humanity." Like other major religions, suicide is forbidden in Islam. Therefore, the very act through which they purport to effect revolution is anti-Islamic. The suicide bombers and their backers do not have any religious grievance whatsoever. Many of the laws of Bangladesh go back to the era of the British, who made sure that none of the laws contradicted the sharia. These are criminals pure

and simple, and must be treated as such.

The overwhelming majority of the people Bangladesh are moderate in their outlook on life and religiously tolerant. People tend to judge others by how they are. For the average Bangladeshi, it is not easy to attribute the worst motive to a fellow Bangladeshi on suspicion alone. That is why many Bangladeshis at home and abroad were slow to recognize this malignant cancer spreading within the Bangladeshi society.

These are homegrown terrorists; therefore, it should be relatively simple to infiltrate their ranks. Surely, the Bangladesh intelligence agencies must have a good idea about their leadership structure, recruiting methods, and sources of finance. It must immediately choke off the financial sources that support the terrorists. If there are 2000 would-be suicide bombers, they and those who indoctrinate them must all be quickly rounded up and thrown in jail. Their leadership must also be apprehended

and brought to justice. If they resist arrest, Rab should be allowed to fight it out with them. The schools that provide suicide bombers must be closed right away. Parents of would be suicide bombers must be put on notice. The government must realize that it was a mistake not to have taken action against the likes of Bangla Bhai when it had a chance. This must not happen again. The government must not treat any terrorist with kid gloves any more.

This is 1971 all over again. Prosperity, leadership in world agencies, and the world's respect beckon Bangladesh on one hand. On the other, the same dark forces that fought against Bangladesh's birth are now attempting to take Bangladesh back to the dark ages. The choices are as starkly different as that. The government of Bangladesh has a unique opportunity. If it is sincere, in a non-partisan way, and leads the fight against the forces that would like to destroy Bangladesh as it currently exists, the overwhelming majority of the Bangladeshis at home and abroad will join it and come to its assistance. There are far too many patriotic Bangladeshis of goodwill and courage, both at home and abroad, willing to defend the nation against the handful of dastardly terrorists. If the threat is taken seriously, this is an eminently winnable fight. The alternative is too horrible to contemplate.