

The Great Debate: Is Anti-Americanism Xenophobic?

Caspar Hewett reports on the proceedings of a discussion held at Newcastle Playhouse on 5th March 2003

Thanks to Annie for writing the notes on which these proceedings are based

As part of Northern Stage's Colour Season, The Great Debate, The Ashton Group and Northern Stage organised this discussion to look at the impact of US and British foreign policies.

Chair: Caspar Hewett

Panel

Rachel Ashton, Director, Lockerbie 103

Jon Bryan, Lecturer in Sociology, Newcastle College, The Great Debate

Doug Henderson, MP

Peter Hetherington, Regional Affairs Editor, The Guardian

Ian Ferguson, journalist and co-author of Cover up of Convenience

Des Dillon, Writer, Lockerbie 103

The chair, Caspar Hewett opened the proceedings by introducing the panel and by outlining the subject of the discussion; issues raised by the play Lockerbie 103 and, more generally, attitudes towards the impending war.

The first speaker, Jon Bryan, began by looking at the advertising information for the discussion which asked "Who are we most afraid of - Terrorists? Iraq? The US Government? The Axis of Evil? British politicians?" He pointed out that the question is very leading in that it encourages us to look at the relative risks associated with each of these, but obscures the fact that there is a hidden assumption underlying the question - one that assumes we should be afraid of all these things. Bryan did not think that it is about weighing one risk against another. As a sociologist Bryan is more interested in why a question like this is being asked at all. He sees it as a sign of our times, reflecting a mood in society which focuses on people's insecurities, a mood described by some writers as a 'culture of fear'.

Bryan suggested that we should question whether the statement that the British Public are against attacking Iraq is true. He thinks it probably is, but that the reasons that people are against the war are many and varied; some are pacifists, some anti-imperialists, some anti-Bush and so on. Having been on the anti-war demonstration in London in February Bryan found that the people attending had a strikingly wide variety of perspectives and it was clear that the march did not represent a coherent anti-war movement in the way it might have in the past. There was a touch of anti-Americanism - but perhaps not an open anti-Americanism. Bryan drew attention to the way George W. Bush is often presented as being stupid, simplistic and trying to show his dad what he can do. There is underlying all of this an anti-American attitude. Whether we like it or not, Bush was elected by the American people, and Bryan expressed concern that when people joke about Bush, they are really having a go at Americans in general.

In closing Bryan stated that he is against the war in Iraq because he has seen the evidence of the harm wars cause. The war in 1991 did nothing to help the people of Iraq and he is unconvinced that we should simply "forget our history" and allow yet more barbarity to take place - and that is the only way to describe it. Any war in Iraq will be over quite quickly because of the amount of devastating firepower that the US and Britain are able to unleash and Bryan is not prepared to support that.

Ian Ferguson opened with the comment that George Bush Sr. once described Saddam Hussein as "our kind of guy" yet now Saddam has fallen within America's 'terrorist of the month' category, alongside Osama bin Laden. He argued that the link between them is very tenuous. Ferguson sees a theme running through the Lockerbie investigation; that of expediency. Implicating Libya at the time was an easy target, while they are the equivalent of Albion Rovers in terms of their terrorist threat.

Doug Henderson congratulated Rachel Ashton and Des Dillon on the play. He went on to point out that the USA suffers from great isolationism, and that that is the audience that George W. Bush addresses himself to. However opinion on the war in USA is also split. Henderson is very opposed to USA unilateralism - He sees the US as imperialistic. For Henderson, Iraq is not a threat, and the motivating force is oil. He argued that Britain should not get tied into this.

Peter Hetherington felt that Lockerbie 103 has a deep resonance today. On 10th anniversary of Lockerbie he spoke to Father Jack Keegans, who lived near the crash site who said "Don't forget British airbases were used to raid Libya. Hundreds lost their lives . . . Iranian airbus . . . I don't have faith in government, just in humanity." Another person who lived near the crash site said the last thing he wanted was retribution. Hetherington expressed a fear that the approaching conflict could become a third World War. He pointed out that the people of Lockerbie, and those who have been involved in war, are those who are most cautious about it. It is very easy to start a war and very hard to stop one. To go to war now without support, or the legal mandate of the UN risks destabilisation.

Caspar Hewett called for questions and points from the floor.

There was a representative of the families affected by Lockerbie present who asked, given that Jack Straw had turned down the demand for a public enquiry, what should be done next in terms of the campaign for a public enquiry.

Ian Ferguson felt that it is reprehensible that the Labour government has not pursued a public enquiry. The conclusions of investigation into Lockerbie left us with more questions than answers. The trial left us feeling cheated, as there was no defence and no explanation. Nine days before PanAm 103 flew, there was one seat left on the flight, but by the time it flew it was only two-thirds full. Were people given warnings? And more importantly, why has this information been restricted for reasons of 'national security'?

Doug Henderson thought that there is no substitute for campaigners continually raising the issue. Plays like Lockerbie 103 give prominence to the issue. The comedy in the play helps to reinforce the seriousness of the matter.

Peter Hetherington also thought it scandalous that there has not been a public inquiry. The governments involved should be embarrassed by the façade of a trial.

One member of the audience asked whether the mute character in the play was there to make a point about the complicity of language in miscarriages of justice. Des Dillon said that the mute character is indeed a metaphor for the way Fahima and Magrahi were not allowed to speak. As the character Ali says "I am a man with a barrel of apples, who can't get into the market."

Rachel Ashton added that the attack on the mute at the end of the play is intended to raise the question of evidence. The viewer is encouraged to believe that there is a pervert at large because of trust in the character Annie. But she gets it wrong. She is part of the culture of fear. The mute's best friend, Tommy, also cannot protect him as he has been damaged by what he saw at Lockerbie. Everybody blames Tommy, but he is also a victim.

There was a question from the floor on how many people were on the flight. Ian Ferguson said that the flight was a third empty, which is absurd before Christmas. This information was withheld for some time on the grounds of national security. Ferguson questioned why should it be a matter of national security. Reporters have been blocked again and again in trying to get hold of these facts and it is unclear why.

The panel were asked if they thought politicians could stop the impending war.

Ferguson expressed trust in individual politicians, especially those who have stood up to Tony Blair. But he felt that, with the wheels in motion, Blair and Bush would not and could not stand down. He does not trust the machinery of politics to stop it. Doug Henderson was also sure that the war would happen, and felt that this was clear as long as six months ago. It is more a case of how we get to that point. The Turkish decision whether to let troops use their soil could only delay things, probably by as little as two weeks. Henderson argued that people have to make their voices heard for the politicians to react, but this now needs to be on a global scale. He saw a lot of instability ahead.

Peter Hetherington recognised public hostility with regard to the war, as people do not believe what they are being told. Their intelligence is being insulted. Hetherington pointed out that Britain follows the USA very closely, yet the US have already shown their lack of support for Britain on issues from farm subsidies to environmental policy. He questioned why we fear the USA turning against us, when they already have.

Bryan drew attention to the way that, during the 1991 Gulf War, there was a hairdresser in Newcastle which displayed a sign "No Iraqis here." This points to the way war can become an expression of racism. Bryan stated that all too often anti-war people become pro-war when they are asked which side they are on.

The chair asked for two final points or questions from the floor, after which the speakers would be asked to respond and make closing remarks.

One audience member felt it curious that there is a debate about whether there would be a war, because in fact we already are; Sanctions are an act of war. The USA already bombs Iraq for "aggressive acts", when all they have done is swept them with their radar. The current escalation of conflict is not so much the start of a war as the end of one.

Another member of the audience stated that the point that is little accepted is the lack of a link between Iraq and Al-Quaida and asked the panel what they thought Middle-America's view on this is.

Peter Hetherington sees America as an insular country with a population that tends to believe what it is told. There is no proven link between Iraq and Al-Quaida, but to state that there is has become a safety valve for the forces, as they have been unable to find Osama Bin Laden. They feel they must hit out at something, and USA is convinced of its righteousness in doing so. However, Peter Hetherington reminded the audience that opinion in USA is also split; 40% are opposed to war according to one poll, but this opposition is suppressed. He finished by commenting that brute force never tackles terrorism.

Doug Henderson pointed to Donald Rumsfeld's statement that one reason for the attack on Iraq was links with Al-Quaida. When told this was untrue Rumsfeld's response was that one or two people involved were based in Iraq. However this is in the 'cover' area - an area not controlled by Saddam Hussein.

Ian Ferguson stated that he lives in France, is married to an American, and used to live in the USA. America is such a big country, and many people feel quite removed from Washington. They are concerned about their own doorstep. The media feeds the American people nonsense. George W Bush may not know the capital of the Czech Republic, but this is because he does not need to. The USA has a huge military stock, and the need to use it. The price of the warheads is suppressed. The mentality says, "Watch out 'they' are going to get us."

Jon Bryan said that he likes to think that some Americans are against the war. It is hope for the future. After the Cold War America has looked for another bogeyman'. That is the frightening attitude.

Caspar Hewett closed the proceedings by thanking the panel, The Ashton Group and Northern Stage for supporting the event and Mo Lovatt for organising it.