

War Without End

THE DEFENSE DEPARTMENT and White House have decided that the United States now conducts “the Long War” rather than what previously was known as the War on Terror, then as the Struggle Against Violent Extremism, and briefly—as one revealing Pentagon study described it—a war against “the Universal Adversary.”

President George W. Bush said in his State of the Union message last month that the aim of his administration is to defeat radical Islam. This was a preposterous statement, made shortly before radical Islam began wrecking and burning embassies from Afghanistan and Indonesia to Damascus and Beirut. The United States is not going to defeat that.

There are a great many dismaying aspects of President Bush’s Washington, but nothing more so than this combination of the unachievable with the hortatory in giving a name and purpose to the military campaigns that already have the Army near exhaustion and a major part of the world in turmoil.

It is customary, politically desirable, and morally indispensable to say seriously what a war is about, if only so the public will know when it is over and when the declared and undeclared measures of exception that have accompanied it, justifying suspension of civil liberties, illegal practices, and defiance of international law and convention, will be lifted and the killing may be expected to stop.

What originally was to be a matter of quick and exemplary revenge, with lightning attacks and acclaimed victories, has now become the long war whose end cannot be foreseen. The citizen is told to expect the current suspension of constitutional norms, disregard for justice, and defiance of presidential power limits as traditionally construed to con-

tinue indefinitely. We are in a new age, America’s leaders say. The Democratic opposition seems to agree.

What started as the war against terror, proclaimed in the aftermath of the 2001 attacks, has undergone a metamorphosis. The initial interpretation was that the people responsible for the World Trade Center attacks and other terrorist outrages against Americans and their interests would be discovered, defeated, and probably killed, or less likely, brought to justice.

Surely that is what most Americans thought when the search was launched for Osama bin Laden and members of al-Qaeda. These previously unknown members of a marginal and sectarian band of politico-religious zealots were made into international celebrity-outlaws, together with their more recent successor, Abu Musab Al-Zarqawi—the latest to go on international television to defy and ridicule George W. Bush. The idea was that these men would be tracked down and dealt with, even if two countries had to be wrecked to do it—at a cost to the latter’s unwitting citizens the Pentagon prefers not to calculate.

Today Osama bin Laden and Mullah Omar are somewhere in Waziristan, tracked by the CIA and Pakistani soldiers with different degrees of enthusiasm. There is an insurrection in Iraq, which had nothing to do with al-Qaeda when it started, but from which al-Qaeda and Zarqawi now draw global publicity.

Elsewhere, violent and alienated members of the Muslim diaspora in Europe claim the brand-identification of al-Qaeda to dramatize their own exploits, as do discontented sons of Middle Eastern elites.

Yet even if you include the 9/11 casualties, the number of Americans killed by international terrorists since the late

1960s, which is when the U.S. State Department began its accounting, is about the same as that killed by lightning or by accident-causing deer or by severe allergic reactions to peanuts.

“In almost all years, the total number of people worldwide who die at the hands of international terrorists is not much more than the number who drown in bathtubs in the United States.” I quote John Mueller of Ohio State University, writing in last autumn’s issue of the authoritative American journal *Terrorism and Political Violence*. As Mueller concedes, there is a definitional issue. Few insurgents in Iraq are internationals; most are homegrown. If aspirant terrorists in London or Paris had nuclear bombs, the numbers would become different.

Nonetheless, a phenomenon that is scattered, limited, under control, and inevitably transient has been conflated by Washington and in international discussion with something that is huge and very serious: the upheaval that results from the desperation that exists among the Muslim masses and is directed indiscriminately against the Western nations, held responsible for Islamic society’s backwardness, poverty, and exploitation.

Al-Qaeda and individual international terrorists are the object of worldwide intelligence and police operations. They are a marginal phenomenon. The Bush administration’s conflation of them with the social upheaval in their world is exploited to perpetuate changes that provide a much more sinister threat to democracy than anything ever dreamed by Osama bin Laden. The radical threat to the U.S. is at home. ■

William Pfaff writes from Paris. Copyright the International Herald Tribune.

Arts & Letters

FILM

[Something New]

Guess Who's Coming to Landscape?

By Steve Sailer

DURING AN ACADEMY AWARDS season when we're pestered to pretend we admire liberal fantasies like "Brokeback Mountain"—in which he-man Heath Ledger plays the straightest gay ever—it's refreshing that the unheralded "Something New" honestly explores a genuine social issue—the dire marital prospects of the upper-middle-class black woman—with insight and no political axes to grind.

"Something New" is burdened with perhaps the most forgettable title since the straight-to-landfill 1979 Joe Mantegna film "To Be Announced," yet it proves one of the more acutely observed romantic comedies of recent years. It's not exceptionally funny, but as a lively social study, "Something New" is a small but worthy addition to the genre pioneered by Jane Austen.

Kenya McQueen is an offspring of the traditional black high bourgeoisie, that reclusive and starchy class from which Condoleezza Rice emerged. Armed with a Stanford law degree and a Wharton MBA, she's up for partner at a corporate law firm and has just bought a house in Baldwin Hills, the black Beverly Hills. All she's missing is a backyard garden to

relax in during her few hours away from the office ... and a boyfriend.

Like so many affluent black women today, she can't find a black man of comparable status. At Harvard Law School, for instance, black women now outnumber black men three to one. Moreover, according to the 2000 census, black men are 2.65 times more likely to have a white wife than a black woman is to have a white husband. Because interracial marriage skims off so many of the most eligible black bachelors, African-American women—like Asian-American men, who face a mirror-image dating disparity—have become increasingly opposed to intermarriage.

Kenya's brittle attitude doesn't help her search either. Every time she's out with her girlfriends—also educated, attractive, and unattached—she ends up itemizing what they call The List of the seven not-so-minor prerequisites she demands in a man.

My 1997 article "Is Love Colorblind?" was the first look at the frustrations that interracial marriage causes both black women and Asian men. In response, I've received over the years several hundred e-mails, often quite eloquent, from women like Kenya offering their own views and experiences. The film's portrayal of the heroine rang true.

The script by Kriss Turner, a black woman who writes for Chris Rock's sitcom, is also admirable for how it handles the career subplot. Making partner depends upon how well she handles a major client's CEO, who is paying for a *pro forma* "due diligence" analysis of an acquisition he passionately wants to make. Most movies would concoct a bogus "social conscience" plot twist for the heroine to wrestle with, such as her shocking discovery that the target firm clubs baby seals. Instead, "Something

New" offers a realistic problem, the kind of test of personal integrity that happens far more often in business: Kenya unearths evidence that the target firm would be a disastrous investment, but that's the last thing her client wants to hear.

Meanwhile, a friend sets her up on a blind date to meet a Brian at the Magic Johnson Starbucks. Brian turns out to be handsome, witty, and laidback. He is, however, very white. (He's portrayed by Simon Baker, yet another Australian leading man who can do a perfect American accent.) Adding to her discomfort, he can read her emotions. He knows she's racially prejudiced, while he's not, and he is rather amused by her predicament. So she ducks out after five tense minutes.

But when Kenya asks an acquaintance about finding a landscape contractor, the small businessman she's sent is Brian. Eventually, after many plausible complications, love blooms among her backyard's new bougainvillea.

And that's when the trouble really starts. Love stories require resistance from society to be interesting, and "Something New" isn't lacking. Strikingly, almost all the objections come from blacks. Her mother and brother are rude to Brian because he's white and lower middle class. And Brian begins to tire of her kvetching about race. Then her brother introduces her to an IBM ("Ideal Black Man"): a well-bred black lawyer, played by Blair Underwood ("LA Law") in the suave manner of Billy Dee Williams endorsing Colt 45 malt liquor.

The happy ending won't surprise anybody, but it's fun to see a movie, for once, where the white guy has more soul than the black guy. ■

Rated PG-13 for sexual references.