

The fine arts of resistance

art

THE first lady of the United States sees herself as a patron of literature. Laura Bush evidently has failed to transfer her enthusiasm for reading to her husband. To her credit, however, she has been known to invite to her literary soirees writers who have little in common philosophically with her husband.

But there are limits to her indulgence. A conference on Poetry and the American Voice, scheduled for February 12, had to be postponed indefinitely once it became apparent that many of the invitees intended to use the occasion to publicize their concerns over what was then the projected war against Iraq. One of them, on receiving the invitation, immediately launched an e-mail campaign to solicit submissions for an anthology of anti-war verse. He was inundated with responses.

Had it taken place, the conference would have concentrated on three poets: Walt Whitman, Emily Dickinson and Langston Hughes. As Katha Pollitt remarked in *The Nation*, it would be hard to find three more subversive writers: "Whitman's epic of radical democracy, *Leaves of Grass*, was so scandalous it got him fired from his government job; Hughes, a communist sympathizer hounded by [Joe] McCarthy, wrote constantly and indelibly about racism, injustice, power; Dickinson might seem the least political, but in some ways she was the most lastingly so — every line she wrote is an attack on complacency and conformity of manners, mores, religion, language, gender, thought."

None of them, Pollitt wrote, would have had any time for the Bush clan's socio-political values. "It's hard," she added, "to

WORLD VIEW

By Mahir Ali

not least in the award last month of the best-documentary Academy Award to Michael Moore's excoriation of American gun culture, 'Bowling For Columbine'. Moore happens also to be the author of *Stupid White Men*, a hilarious treatise that lays bare the nature and inclinations of the Bushies — and which, remarkably, appears to have found a semi-permanent perch on bestseller lists throughout the English-speaking world.

Moore's opinions are not universally shared in Hollywood, but many prominent actors and actresses, from Martin Sheen and Susan Sarandon to Robert Redford, have been willing to

frontational depiction of the massacre constitutes not just an extraordinarily powerful comment on a particular instance of barbarity but an indictment of war per se. The (possibly apocryphal) story goes that when the Germans found Picasso in Paris in 1940, they pointed him out as the artist responsible for *Guernica*. No, the painter is said to have responded, you are the ones responsible for *Guernica*.

Guernica was first displayed at the Paris Exhibition of 1937, where many visitors reportedly found it too difficult to gaze upon. A German guide to the exhibition dismissed it as a disorderly array of corpses created by a madman.

The painting, which had been paid for by the Spanish Republic before it was overrun by Franco, found a permanent home in Madrid only after the fascist dictator's demise in 1975. Since 1985, a tapestry of Picasso's poignant masterpiece has hung outside the United Nations Security Council. An appropriate venue, one would have

thought. The UN is supposed, after all, to forestall wars. And *Guernica* serves up as good a reason for avoiding warfare as humankind is ever likely to be offered. It depicts, among other victims, a mother clutching a dead child, screaming her agony unto the heavens. No one who gazes at the painting can escape her howl of despair.

Yet when the arms inspectors presented their evidence to the Security Council in February — and even more symbolically, when Colin Powell offered his thoroughly unconvincing argument for aggression — the UN decided to drape the mural with a blue banner bearing the organization's logo. Spokesmen assured journalists it was a temporary measure, and Kofi Annan implicitly denied that he had anything to do with the decision.

But the harm is done, and popular impression

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hard," she added, "to imagine them cheering the bombing of Baghdad."

The conference may have been put off, but it wasn't entirely a wasted effort: there were poetry readings right across the US on February 12.

But it did not begin there. Washington's response to the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, has spawned a veritable sub-genre of literature. A singularly powerful diatribe in verse, Emmanuel Ortiz's 'A Moment of Silence Before I Start This Poem', marked the first anniversary of the outrage. It would be superfluous to quote it, because it has found its way to every corner of the world via the Internet.

Nor did it end there. Even a perfunctory web-search reveals thousands of instances of verse diametrically opposed to the Bush administration's stance. And poetry is by no means the only creative response to the cowardly new world in which we find ourselves. Cartoonists all over the world have been working overtime, trying to capture the unprecedented surreality of the present circumstances: to cite but two examples out of thousands, The Guardian's Steve Bell and The Australian's Bill Leak have been exceptionally successful in exposing the absurdity of the Bush-Blair doctrine.

Not surprisingly, musicians have also boldly risen to the challenge of trying to make sense of the world we live (and die) in. Some of them — Pete Seeger and Joan Baez, for example — are veterans of the movement against the Vietnam War. More intriguingly, well-known artistes not normally associated with political activism have deemed it necessary to react to the new militarism: Madonna and George Michael, for instance, have lately come up with significant (albeit not particularly militant) challenges to the new status quo.

Hollywood's broad hostility to the Bush regime has also manifested itself in subtle ways —

put their careers on the line by heeding their consciences.

They are in respectable company, historically. Ideological as well as artistic conformity has been anathema to some of Hollywood's brightest stars, including Charles Chaplin and Marlon Brando.

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The latter requires little comment: it enjoys totemic significance all around the globe. The former, painted in 1937, was a commissioned response to a specific incident: the bombardment by the Luftwaffe of a Basque town, in support of Generalissimo Francisco Franco's Falangist insurgents during the Spanish Civil War.

The attack of April 26, 1937 — market day in Guernica — has gone down in history as the first wilful targeting of a civilian population from the air. The town was built mostly of wood, and the use of incendiary bombs by the Nazi air force reduced virtually the whole of it to ashes. "We tried to enter," wrote war correspondent George Steer, who was among the first journalists to reach the site of the outrage, "but the streets were a royal carpet of live coals; blocks of wreckage slithered and crashed from the houses, and from their sides that were still erect the polished heat struck at our cheeks and eyes."

Thousands — many of them children — died in what Steer correctly assumed to be a testing ground for Hitler's ordnance. Picasso's grotesque and con-

forever will be that the UN conspired to spare the US a degree of embarrassment that it thoroughly deserved.

Now there are scenes all over Iraq echoing Guernica. The British poet Tony Harrison has written of "a small child's shrapnelled scalp scooped of its brains" and "flayed off human flesh like hanging chads". His compatriot Harold Pinter, a renowned playwright, also committed a poem to print in which he envisioned: "Your head rolls onto the sand/ Your head is a pool in the dirt/ Your head is a stain in the dust/ Your eyes have gone out and your nose/ Sniffs only the pong of the dead/ And all the dead air is alive/ With the smell of America's God."

There was a report the other day of a five-year-old who mistook the bright shell from a cluster bomb for a toy. It blew up as soon as he touched it. The shrapnel can be extracted from his legs, but Ali Mustafa will never see again. His namesake Ali Ismail Abbas, aged 12, who has been robbed not only of his family but also of his limbs, is being tended to at a hospital in Kuwait. "I will not be able to go to school any more because I don't have arms," he is reported to have remarked. "If someone hit me I would not be able to defend myself." His lament is a near-perfect metaphor for what the US has done to his country.

And the UN covered up a painting that offered an inkling of what war would entail.

Another British playwright, David Hare, has this to offer: "At some level," he says, "I believe this administration does not even know why it chose Iraq ... The intention to destroy the credibility of the United Nations ... is not a byproduct of recent American policy. It is its very purpose. Bush chose Iraq not because it would make sense, but because it wouldn't. He did it, in short, because he could."

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