

A letter to an American friend

The average American is decent, honest, kind, friendly and good-hearted. But the US Government policies are often debatable

New
2-1-04

The column on Fox News (The News, Dec 20, 2004) elicited some interesting responses. The ones from across the Atlantic tended to accuse me of an "anti-American" bias and of spreading "hate" - an assessment I can't really agree with. In that context, I thought that this week it would be appropriate to run a letter that I wrote some time ago to an American friend who was with me in college many years ago. This letter was written after the US attacks on Afghanistan had already commenced and while the campaign for moving into Iraq had started, the actual war had not yet begun. I hope the rest of the missive is self-explanatory. So without further ado, here's my letter to Joe.

Dear Joe,

Believe it or not, I was actually expecting that you'd be writing in response to that particular John Pilger article I sent out. So let's see if I can explain the intent behind my e-mailings.

You misunderstand where I'm coming from. Having lived and studied in America, I do appreciate all the great things about the States, I really do. I won't list them here otherwise this email would get just too long - but, let me repeat, I really do appreciate them. But that appreciation does not mean that I can't comment on the negatives either - it's that old freedom of expression thing. Just like the US has the right to comment on the world, the world has the right to comment on it. If the US government criticises Saddam Hussein, does that mean it hates Iraq the country itself and all Iraqis too? I hope not.

Similarly, if I criticise US government policies, it does not mean I hate



Khusro Mumtaz

The writer is a banker
and freelance writer
khusro_m@yahoo.co.uk

Out of my head

the US itself or Americans either. It only means that I disagree with certain policies and the particular people making them. Also, my criticising American policies and the American government does not prevent me from criticising Pakistani policies and the Pakistani government, and, believe me, I do plenty of that too. Even the best place in the world (which, in many ways, the US is) can work to become an even better place.

It's not an "either/or" case (unlike what Bush told Musharraf post-September 11 "either you're with us or against us") - at least, it shouldn't be. Things are not black and white and are often grey - the truth is usually quite complex, as you yourself say. For instance, I am in vehement disagreement with the detestable September 11 attacks - nothing, absolutely nothing can justify them - but I also oppose the reprisal attacks on Afghanistan by the US and its allies which have resulted in more civilians being killed than died on September 11 - these civilian casualties are continuing to this day.

In the mainstream American media (and especially television which is the instant purveyor of "truth", not just domestically in the US but globally as well), you must admit, you usually only get one side of the picture (if I'm wrong about that, let

me know). So if I pass on certain articles presenting the other side of the picture (since the mainstream is already doing a good job of giving us the "official" uncritical interpretation of events, I don't feel the need to circulate articles which are in agreement with them and with which I may even agree). It is not with the intention of spreading "hate" but with the hope that the scope of the discussion is broadened a bit. I may not even agree with everything in those articles (I probably agree with much, but not necessarily all of it - and in some cases perhaps only a little bit) - but if you don't hear the opposing point of view how will you know what it is?

One can't be the defence lawyer, prosecutor, judge, jury and executioner all by one's lonesome self. One can't hide one's head in the sand and tell oneself that everything is right with this world - which is what the American print media was doing in the case of those articles/essays I sent you earlier written by Booker Prize-winning novelist and social activist Arundhati Roy. I really would like to hear from you as to what exactly was so threatening or dangerous about those Arundhati Roy articles that not a single American paper or magazine was willing to publish them, whereas they had seen print all over the rest of the world, including Europe.

You may think the writings/editorials/commentaries I'm sending out are me "carping at the world" and that this is not "constructive". But I like to think that as a citizen of the world I am free to disseminate information in the hope that people start forming more informed opinions - which may not be mine and that's

fine as long as they have been shaped by keeping as many facts and opposing points of view in front of them as possible (all these viewpoints can be completely rejected also, of course, but they should be discarded only after due consideration).

If, for instance, you are writing to your Senators, as you say you are, and if even a smidgeon of information gleaned from any of the pieces I sent you has worked itself into your correspondence then I think the articles were indeed useful. I may not write to a US Senator directly but by writing to you, a person who is writing to the Senator, I'd like to think I'm being of some use. After all, the US government does derive its power from the people and you're "the people".

Look, I think the average American is decent, honest, kind, friendly and good-hearted. But US Government policies are often debatable. This is what we're trying to do - have an open and frank debate about US policies and somewhere along the line, hopefully, a greater understanding can be reached. But if there is no debate there never will be a solution or a meeting of the minds. In that regard, I would love to receive articles or thoughts from you which would broaden my own horizons. For instance, I would really be interested in knowing what you're writing to your Senators and Congressmen about.

And, of course, our friendship is not affected and hopefully never will be affected.

All the best,

Khusro

Postscript: Joe never did tell me what he wrote to the Senator but we continue to be friends.