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How should we deal with the challenge facing mankind?

FROM MR RICHARD LAMING

Sir, National governments are indeed losing their ability to control events, as Sir Peter Smithers suggests (letter, September 23), but in my view he draws the wrong conclusions about how they should now act.

Ceding authority to the United States is an abdication of responsibility which will provoke even more of the resentment and opposition about which we are all so concerned. The alternative approach is to build new international institutions that can regulate the global marketplace, fight international crime and protect our common environment in a manner that is fair to all. Hegemony by one country, however benign, cannot achieve this. Multilateralism can.

The First World War gave us the League of Nations. The Second World War produced the United Nations. The challenge now is to create a third generation of international institution without fighting the third world war first.

Yours faithfully,
 RICHARD LAMING
 (Director)
 Federal Union,
 PO Box 44404, London SE1 7TZ.
 September 27.

From Dr Alistair J. Sinclair

Sir, Sir Peter Smithers showed great prescience 40 years ago when he predicted that governments would lose control of events and that natural law would prevail. However, it does not follow that, to regain control of our future, every civilised country must "support the United States unconditionally". If the United States Government were implementing clear plans based on a coherent philosophy, then it might be justified. But its actions are of the "survival of the fittest" order. It is reacting blindly and instinctively to events instead of taking control of them.

Our future depends on our working out in substantial detail what kind of future we wish to make for ourselves — a philosophical task, rather than a religious or political one. The last time that Western civilisation took refuge in religion, we had centuries of poverty, ignorance, and superstition known as the Dark Ages. What kind of future is that?

Yours sincerely,

ALISTAIR J. SINCLAIR,
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September 23.

From Mr Guy Herbert

Sir, I think Sir Peter Smithers's fears of the power of terrorist groups are misplaced. Nasty though they've been, Osama bin Laden's direct successes are astonishingly minor given the vast resources and fanatical supporters said to be at his command. Infiltration and sabotage on any scale require personnel and organisation beyond the means even of powerful nations, and purblind fanatics aren't very good at it.

The real damage done by Islamist violence has been in the domestic overreaction to it, from mad bans on flying with nail scissors to suspension of our fundamental law and freedom and turning over the functions of representative government to an alternative set of self-satisfied figures within the military-industrial complex.

Let us by all means root out the poisonous groups that threaten our way of life. But it is mistaken to demand "unconditional support" for our leaders when we, unlike many Islamists, understand that they can be wrong. Western civilisation can be saved by spreading its values — including international pluralism and self-interested, independent states — not by destroying them.

Yours faithfully,
GUY HERBERT,
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September 28.

From Mr John Cuningham

Sir, Only the deluded would follow Sir Peter's advice to give the US unconditional support.

In the game of "old-fashioned national politics" America remains the lead player par excellence and, under President Bush, far and away the greatest threat to Homo sapiens.

Yours sincerely,
JOHN CUNINGHAM,
61 Gough Way, Cambridge CB3 9LN.
September 23.