

INTRODUCTION

'... States like these, and their terrorist allies, constitute an axis of evil, arming to threaten the peace of the world ...'

With these words, the President of the United States of America addressed the people of his country in 2002. The states he was referring to - Iran, Iraq and North Korea - were, he said, manufacturing, or trying to manufacture, so-called weapons of mass destruction. Their agents were engaged in subversive activities against the West, which included sponsoring suicide missions in the Middle East and elsewhere. Mr Bush's State of the Union message might have gone unnoticed outside his own country, or at least forgotten within a few days, had it not been for the one phrase - *Axis of Evil*.

The speech as a whole drew both support and outrage from around the world. However, these much-quoted three words provoked criticism from friend and foe alike. They antagonised the moderates along with the extremists; they arguably influenced the result of an Iranian presidential election and threatened world peace by the venom with which they were uttered.

Three years later, Iran was still the great enemy, though the President added, perhaps as an afterthought, a few glib words addressed to the Iranian people:

'... As you stand for your own liberty, America stands with you.'

Glib certainly - are not all politicians' words so? - but probably also insincere, because by the middle of 2007, the same president was as good as threatening that same people with bombing and invasion. And even with a new president, relations are not of the best today.

There are surely some unpleasant rulers in the world. There are even a few who go beyond the pale of civilised behaviour. But since when is a country defined by its rulers?

No country can be truly said to be evil. Countries are composed of people. They may be ruled wisely and justly, by monarchs or presidents, by democratic assemblies or by autocratic tyrants, but people are just people. Each has its share of good and bad, of wise and foolish, of tolerant and bigoted, of cultured and ignorant.

And it is people who are hurt most by war.

It has to be said that the Iranian government is no exemplar of freedom, democracy and human rights, yet it is easy to forget the extent to which we make judgements about others, especially those we do not like, or whose way of life we do not approve, based on their nationality, religion or culture. Words such as *philistine*, *vandal*, *sodomite* and *tartar* have crept into our language and none of these is complimentary.

If we are honest, I think we will acknowledge that the savage resides in all of us. It only needs the right stimulus to surface - a speech, an ill-advised media report, an attack on our cherished beliefs, or a charismatic but misguided leader. But we all need friends in the world and slinging insults and threats is no way to make them. Even bad leaders can be seen as heroes when they are defending a nation's right to be a nation.

Iran and its neighbour Iraq occupy a unique place in the world and its history. Both are usually defined as being part of Asia, or even of the Middle East. Yet Teheran is closer to London than it is to Beijing - and, incidentally, closer to London than London is to Washington!

The fertile lands that form a crescent from the valleys of the Tigris and Euphrates to that of the Nile are widely recognised as being the cradle of civilisation. The area round Tabriz and Mount Sahand, to the south west of the Caspian Sea, has been claimed as a possible site for the mythical Garden of Eden. Be that as it may, it was these lands, throughout recorded history part of several Persian empires, that undoubtedly gave birth to monotheism and four of the world's major religions.

The city of Rayy, now a suburb of Teheran, is the supposed birthplace of the prophet Zoroaster, founder of Zoroastrianism. From another ancient city, Ur, near what was once the mouth of the Tigris and Euphrates, the prophet Abraham travelled north and west to become founder of two nations. According to legend, through his sons Isaac and Ishmael, he was the father of both the Jew and Arab peoples and as such holds a special place in the teachings of three faiths - Judaism, Christianity and Islam.

Iraq and Iran happen also to be two countries that, through the centuries, have been plagued more than most by war, invasion and terrorism on a vast scale. From prehistoric times, when hunter-gatherers first vied with agricultural settlements, until the twentieth century, when oil became the new elixir of life, these lands have witnessed the rise and fall of empire after empire. Neighbours from both east and west have sought to exploit their riches and knowledge. Confronted already by natural enemies, desert, flood, erosion and earthquake, they have continually had to face enemies of a different kind, and to endure conquests that resulted in immense destruction of both life and property.

This is the story of one of those conquests, and of possibly one of the greatest disasters ever to befall a people or a country. It is a story that finds parallels in the present day and we would be wise to learn its lessons.

Then, the conquerors came from the East. Within the space of fifty years, they had created the largest empire the world has ever known. They were called the Mongols.

The Mongol invaders were no more an evil people than are the Iranians, Koreans or, for that matter, the British or Americans today. They were no worse than other empire-builders and a lot better than some. One has only to think of Hitler, Prince Vlad of Wallachia, Pol Pot or Stalin to realise that Genghis Khan may not have been so bad after all.

I do not deny Mongol atrocities or condone them but, as I will try to show, some records quote impossibly high figures, given the probable size of the original populations. And the Mongols had their good points. They disliked ostentatious ceremony and despised gluttony (though not drunkenness). A few Khans were known for their charitable works and for their patronage of learning. No other peoples of the time showed a greater respect for women, or a greater tolerance of different religions. Indeed many cultures since - and not only those in the Persian heartland - could take a leaf from the Mongol book in that regard.

Of course, there are already plenty of books dealing with the Mongols. Indeed, they are quite 'popular' among historians. However, many of those books are learned historical works. They are expensive and not readily accessible to anyone with a general interest in the subject. The more readable among the rest seem to concentrate on the better-known emperors, Genghis and Kublai Khan, or on the Mongols' conflict with Europe. Moreover, they take a very Western view of the Persian Islamic Empire.

That is a pity. Events in the mid thirteenth century are too easily viewed with

early twenty-first century understanding and sensitivities, wherein West and East battle for valuable resources, flawed political ideas or religious ideals; wherein the supposed civilising kingdoms of European Christendom strive continuously to hold back the twin beasts of terror and oppression.

The Mongol conquests had no religious motivation. It is true that, having conquered, the Khans believed in their divine right to rule. However, they were not driven by spiritual ardour or missionary zeal; they did not have as an objective the imposition of one faith system on another.

That organised religion played a part in the story was incidental. Sectarian alliances were formed - on the Mongol side as well as among their opponents. Christians and Muslims pursued their centuries-old rivalries but, just as often, Christian fought Christian, and Muslim, Muslim.

What in the world has changed?