It was in Peshawar, on the Pakistan-Afghanistan frontier, as the Red Army was falling apart and falling back. I badly needed a guide to get me to the Khyber Pass, and I decided that what I required was the most farouche-looking guy with the best command of English and the toughest modern automobile. Such a combination was obtainable, for a price. My new friend rather wolfishly offered me a tour of the nearby British military cemetery (a well-filled site from the Victorian era) before we began. Then he slammed a cassette into the dashboard. I braced myself for the ululations of some mullah but received instead a dose of “So Far Away.” From under the turban and behind the beard came the gruff observation, “I thought you might like Dire Straits.”

This was my induction into the now-familiar symbiosis of tribal piety and high-tech; a symbiosis consummated on September 11 with the conversion of the southern tip of the capital of the modern world into a charred and suppurating mass grave. Not that it necessarily has to be a symbol of modernism and innovation that is targeted for immolation. As recently as this year, the same ideology employed heavy artillery to destroy the Buddha statues at Bamiyan, and the co-thinkers of bin Laden in Egypt have been heard to express the view that the Pyramids and the Sphinx should be turned into shards as punishment for their profanely un-Islamic character.

Since my moment in Peshawar I have met this faction again. In one form or another, the people who leveled the World Trade Center are the same people who threw acid in the faces of unveiled women in Kabul and Karachi, who maimed and eviscerated two of the translators of The Satanic Verses and who machine-gunned architectural tourists at Luxor. Even as we worry what they may intend for our society, we can see very plainly what they have in mind for their own: a bleak and sterile theocracy enforced by advanced techniques. Just a few months ago Bosnia surrendered to the international court at The Hague the only accused war criminals detained on Muslim-Croat federation territory. The butchers had almost all been unwanted “volunteers” from the Chechens and Kosovars. But the bombers of Manhattan? It would take a moral cretin to suggest that an Israeli withdrawal from Gaza would have forestalled the slaughter in Manhattan? It would take a moral cretin to suggest anything of the sort; the cadres of the new jihad make it very apparent that their quarrel is with Judaism and secularism on principle, not with (or not just with) Zionism. They regard the Saudi regime not as the extreme authoritarian theocracy that it is, but as something too soft and lenient. The Taliban forces viciously persecute the Shiite minority in Afghanistan. The Muslim fanatics in Indonesia try to extirpate the infidel minorities there; civil society in Algeria is barely breathing after the fundamentalist assault.

Now is as good a time as ever to revisit the history of the Crusades, or the sorry history of partition in Kashmir, or the woes of the Chechens and Kosovars. But the bombers of Manhattan represent fascism with an Islamic face, and there’s no point in any euphemism about it. What they abominate about “the West,” to put it in a phrase, is not what Western liberals don’t like and can’t defend about their own system, but what they do like about it and must defend: its emancipated women, its scientific inquiry, its separation of religion from the state. Loose talk about chickens coming home to roost is the moral equivalent of the hateful garbage emitted by Falwell and Robertson, and exhibits about the same intellectual content. Indiscriminate murder is not a judgment, even obliquely, on the victims or their way of life, or ours. Any decent and concerned reader of this magazine could have been on one of those planes, or in one of those buildings—yes, even in the Pentagon.

The new talk is all of “human intelligence”: the very faculty in which our ruling class is most deficient. A few months ago, the Bush Administration handed the Taliban a subsidy of $43 million in abject gratitude for the assistance of fundamentalism in the “war on drugs.” Next up is the renewed “missile defense” fantasy recently endorsed by even more craven Democrats who seek to occupy the void “behind the President.” There is sure to be further opportunity to emphasize the failings of our supposed leaders, whose costly mantra is “national security” and who could not protect us. And yet indeed, my guide in Peshawar was a shadow thrown by William Casey’s CIA, which first connected the unstoppable Stinger missile to the infallible Koran. But that’s only one way of stating the obvious, which is that this is an enemy for life, as well as an enemy of life.