

Less Revenge, More Reason and Responsibility

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Shock and horror were natural responses to the terrorist attacks of September 11. Anger can surprise no one, nor can a fierce determination to be self-defensive for the future. Of course, we must do what is necessary to protect the innocent from assault, including capturing known terrorists and pursuing suspected accomplices. But does this justify a "war on terrorism" without any specified limits, or reprisals against every state or group thought to "harbor" terrorists? We ought to think carefully before we endorse such open-ended, potentially disastrous policies.

We can begin with the question, "What is it about us that they hated so much?" The technical proficiency of the terrorists in commandeering and piloting jet planes, and in orchestrating four attacks has attracted widespread attention. Far less attention has been given to the psychological capacities of the terrorists and how these provide insight into their cause. Yet persons prepared to die for their cause and exhibiting cold-blooded, rational calculations, rather than fanatic frenzy, demand our attention. It would be comforting to believe that the terrorists were insane and that they were overcome by hatred for us. But they were not insane and, although they knew they would cause the deaths of many, they had lived among Americans for weeks, even months, without overt hostility. It is probable that the terrorists viewed the thousands killed on September 11 as "collateral damage", however difficult this may be for us to

accept. It is likely that they thought of these deaths as not unlike the "collateral damage" resulting from errant "smart" bombs or the thousands of slow deaths resulting from economic sanctions against Iraq.

Had the terrorists simply wanted to massacre Americans, then it is far more likely that they would have flown jets into nuclear power plants or into football stadiums during Sunday games. The terrorists' "war" against America is more than anything else an iconographic war, and therefore it was aimed at dominant symbols, or icons, of what is globally regarded as the American way of life. President Bush seems to have had some glimmer of this when he proclaimed that terrorism was an attack on freedom.

Bush had the right point, but the wrong values in mind. What the terrorists despised and sought to defeat was our arrogance, our gluttonous way of life, our miserliness toward the poor and starving; the exportation of a soulless pop culture of Madonna, hip hop, lewd entertainment, Levi's, coke, and the golden arches; and a domineering attitude that insists on having our own way no matter what the cost to others. Unfortunately, the American way of life is now associated by millions of the world's citizens with exploitation, oppression, and humiliation.

"We stand for the permanent hopes of humanity", President Bush declared to the United Nations General Assembly on November 10. Of course we do, provided that we decide what all of humanity should hope for, which, coincidentally, never conflicts with our own interests. That perspective is

generally accepted beyond our own borders. Consider, for example, that not among the hopes for humanity, according to our government, is a Comprehensive Nuclear Test Ban Treaty, a successful International Criminal Court, an effective international treaty in response to global warming, an international ban on the sale of small firearms or a ban on antipersonnel landmines, among other things. Ironically, since the United States did not pay its arrears on dues to the United Nations until after the tragedy of September 11, there is some question whether the future of the UN was hoped for by humanity

The issue is not to point fingers. This is not a "blame game", nor is it an attack on or defense of the American way of life. The point is rather to end the threat of terrorism for all people and to ensure peace as a necessary first step towards nonviolent dialogue and eventual justice and humanity for all humans. So, we really face two problems in responding to the events of September 11. The lesser problem, although it seems the greater in the immediate aftermath of the destruction of the World Trade Center and attack on the Pentagon, is protection from further terrorism. In our ignorance it may seem that any means serving this end is justified. But the greater problem in the long run has to do with the conditions that give rise to terrorism, violence and warfare.

The key is not to respond to the lesser problem in a way that greatly increases the risk that we will have the bigger problem. And yet, the bellicosity of the United States, its if-you-are-not-with-us-you-are-against-us attitude, and its zeal to use overweening power may do just that. We cannot afford to harden the

hearts of those who fear us or to send thousands of new recruits into their arms. Nor must we permit our righteous indignation or desire for revenge to mask our interests in profiting from the results of just punishment. Finally, we must detach our just efforts to apprehend those responsible and to protect ourselves from any assertion of the superiority of our culture, our Americanism.

To truly stand for the permanent hopes of humanity, we must make honest and long-term efforts to end human misery and the despair and hopelessness that serve as the breeding grounds for hatred. The terrorists will have attained their ultimate victory if, in abandoning our principles, we become like them. But this is exactly what will happen if our response is grotesquely disproportionate to its capacity to solve real problems underlying terrorism. Hence we need more reason and responsibility, and less revenge.

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