

In the Eyes of the World

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The assault on the World Trade Center was unpardonable, but it is important not to lose perspective, especially a historical one. For a response dictated by fury such as that now displayed by some American politicians, while understandable, is likely to simply serve as one more proof for Santayana's dictum that those who do not remember history are bound to repeat it.

The scale and consequences of the September 11 attack are massive indeed, but this was not the worst act of mass terrorism in US history, as some US media are wont to claim. The over 7,000 lives lost are irreplaceable, but one must not forget that the atomic raids on Hiroshima and Nagasaki killed 210,000 people, most of them civilians, most perishing instantaneously. But one may object that you can't compare the September 11 attack to the nuclear bombings since, after all, Hiroshima and Nagasaki were targets in a war. But why not, since the purpose of the nuclear bombings was not mainly to destroy military or infrastructural targets, but to terrorize and destroy the civilian population? Indeed, the whole allied air campaign against Germany and Japan in 1944-45, which produced the firestorms in Dresden, Hamburg, and Tokyo that killed tens of thousands, had as its central aim to kill and maim as many civilians as possible.

Similarly, during the Korean War, terror bombing of civilians was the policy of the US Air Force's Far Eastern Bombing Command, which was instructed to pulverize anything that moved in enemy territory. After indiscriminately dropping 1,400 tons of bombs and 23,000 gallons of napalm, the unit commander, General O'Donnell, uttered his famous lines: "Everything is destroyed. There is nothing standing worthy of the name. Just before the Chinese came we were grounded. There were no more targets in Korea."

During the Cold War, mass elimination of the enemy's civilian population, alongside the destruction of his armed forces or industry, was institutionalized in the strategy of massive nuclear retaliation that lay at the center of the doctrine of deterrence. In Indochina, where the US was frustrated by the fact that combatants and civilians seemed indistinguishable, indiscriminate killing of civilians was a central component of the American war. In the air war, US forces detonated 13 million tons of high explosive from 1965 to 1971, or the energy equivalent of 450 Hiroshima nuclear bombs. In the "counterinsurgency war" on the ground, 20,000 civilians were systematically assassinated under the CIA's Operation Phoenix program in the Mekong Delta.

But must not such actions against civilians be judged in the context of a broader strategic objective of sapping the enemy's will to fight and thus bringing the war to a conclusion? Then how different is this justification from the terrorists' aim to change the foreign policy of the US government by eroding the support of the country's civilian population?

The point is not to engage in a "maleficent calculus," as the 19th-century English philosopher Jeremy Bentham would have called this exercise, but to point out that the US government hardly possesses the high ground in the current moral equation. Indeed, one can say that terrorists like Osama bin Laden, an ex-CIA protégé, have learned their lessons on the strategic targeting of the civilian population from Washington's traditional strategy of total warfare, where damage to the civilian population is not simply seen as collateral but as essential to achieving the ends of war.

In the aftermath of the World Trade Center assault, the perpetrators of the horrible deed have been

called “irrational” or “madmen” or people that embody evil. This is understandable as an emotional reaction but dangerous as a basis for policy. The truth is the perpetrators of the deed were very rational. If they were indeed people connected with Osama bin Laden, their goal was most likely to raise the costs to the United States of maintaining its current policies in the Middle East, which they consider unjust and inequitable, and this was their way of doing it. They very rationally picked the targets and weapons to be used, paying attention not only to maximum destruction but also to maximum symbolism. The choice of the World Trade Center towers and the Pentagon as the targets, and American and United Airlines planes as the delivery vehicles doubling as warheads, was the product of cold-blooded thinking and planning. The loss of their own lives was factored into the calculation. What we saw was a rational calculus of means to achieve a desired end. In the view of these people, terrorism, like war, is the extension of politics by other means. These are Clausewitzian minds, and the worst mistake one can make is to regard them as madmen.

One metaphor that the Washington establishment has used to capture the essence of recent events is that of a second Pearl Harbor, with the implication that like the first, the September 11 tragedy will galvanize the American people to an unprecedented level of unity to win the war against still unidentified enemies. The other side, one suspects, operates with a different metaphor, that of the Tet Offensive of 1968. The objective of the Vietnamese was to launch massive simultaneous uprisings that, even if defeated separately, would nevertheless add up to a strategic victory by convincing the other side, especially its civilian base, that the war was unwinnable. The aim was to rob the US of the will to win the war, and here the Vietnamese succeeded.

The perpetrators of the September 11 assault are operating with a similar calculus and, despite the current jingoistic talk in Washington, it is not certain that they are wrong. Will the American people really bear any burden and pay any price in a struggle that will persist long into the future, with no assurance of victory—indeed, with no clear sense of who the enemies are and of what “victory” will consist of?

The media are full of news about an alliance against terrorism, conveying the impression that coordination among key states combined with the outrage of citizens everywhere will give a Washington-led coalition an unbeatable edge. Perhaps it will in the short run, although even this is not certain. For the problem is that, as in guerrilla wars, this is not a war that will be won strictly or mainly by military means.

If it was bin Laden’s network that was responsible for the World Trade Center attack, then the underlying issues are the twin pillars of US policy in the Middle East. One is subordination of the interests of the peoples of the region to the untrammelled access by the US to Middle East oil in order to maintain its high-consumption petroleum-based civilization. To this end, the US overthrew the nationalist government of Mossadegh in Iran in 1953, cultivated the repressive Shah of Iran as the gendarme of the Persian Gulf, supported antidemocratic feudal regimes in the Arabian peninsula, and introduced a massive permanent military presence in Saudi Arabia, which contains some of Islam’s most sacred shrines and cities. The war against Saddam Hussein was justified as a war to beat back aggression, but everybody knew that Washington’s key motivation was to ensure that the region’s most massive oil reserves would remain under the control of pro-Western elites.

The other pillar is unstinting support for Israel. That Arab feelings about Israel are so elemental is not difficult to comprehend. It is hard to argue against the fact that the state of Israel was born on the basis of the massive dispossession of the Palestinian people of their country and their lands. It is impossible to deny that Israel is a European settler-state, one whose establishment was essentially a displacement from European territory of the ethnocultural contradictions of European society. The Holocaust was an unspeakable crime against humanity, but it was utterly wrong to impose its

political consequences—chief of which was the creation of Israel—on a people who had nothing to do with it. It is hard to contradict Arab claims that it was essentially support from the United States that created the state of Israel; that it has been massive US military aid and backing that has maintained it in the last half century; and that it is deep confidence in perpetual US military and political support that enables Israel to sabotage in practice the emergence of a viable Palestinian state.

Unless the US abandons these two pillars of its policies, there will always be thousands of recruits for acts of terrorism such as that which occurred on September 11. And while we may condemn terrorist acts—as we must, strongly—it is another thing to expect desperate people not to adopt them, especially when they can point to the fact that it was such methods that targeted civilians as well as military personnel, combined with the Intifada, that forced Israel to agree to the 1993 Oslo Accord that led to the creation of the Palestinian entity.

Another reason why the strategic equation does not favor the US is that there are a great many people in the world who are ambivalent about terrorism. In contrast to the European reaction, the response to the September 11 event in the South has been muted. A survey would probably reveal that while many people in the Third World are appalled by the hijackers' methods, they are not unsympathetic to their political objectives. As one Chinese-Filipino entrepreneur said, "It's horrible, but on the other hand, the US had it coming." If this reaction is common among middle-class people, it would not be surprising if such ambivalence towards terrorism is widespread among the 80 percent of the world's population marginalized by current global political and economic arrangements.

There is simply too much distrust, dislike, or just plain hatred of a country that has become so callous in its pursuit of economic power and arrogant in its political and military relations with the rest of the world and so brazen in declaring its cultural superiority over the rest of us. As in the equation of guerrilla war, civilian ambivalence in the theater of battle translates strategically to a minus when it comes to the staying power of the authorities and a plus when it comes to that of the terrorists.

In sum, if there is one thing we can be certain of, it is that massive retaliation on the part of the US will not put an end to terrorism. It will simply amplify the upward spiral of violence, as the other side will resort to even more spectacular deeds, fed by unending waves of recruits. The September 11 tragedy is the clearest evidence of the bankruptcy of the 30-year-old policy of mailed-fist, massive retaliation response to terrorism. This policy has simply resulted in the extreme professionalization of terrorism.

The only response that will really contribute to global security and peace is for Washington to address not the symptoms but the roots of terrorism. It is for the United States to reexamine and substantially change its policies in the Middle East and the Third World, supporting arrangements that will promote equity, justice, and genuine national sovereignty for currently marginalized peoples.

Any other way leads to endless war.

P.S.

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