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CRISIS AND CATASTROPHE

The world appears to have changed on September 11, this year. This 'change' is not so much about something disappearing that has previously existed, making the way for something new; rather it is about how a profound sense of unpredictability and uncertainty has entered the way in which the political world is likely to function in a framework of war, militarization and generalized fear. Those who attacked New York and Washington through suicide-homicide missions, and the US and British alliance that has launched homicidal retaliatory military attacks on Afghanistan are equally responsible for plunging the world into its most serious crisis after World War II. The challenge for humanity now is to disengage itself from a path that seems to be unfolding in a direction of generalized disorder, a path jointly chartered as much by President Bush and Prime Minister Blair as by that quintessential 'terrorist', Bin Laden.

It is too simplistic to say that one man's terrorist is another man's hero. To say that yesterday's terrorist can become today's statesman may sound equally naive. When President Reagan in 1984 introduced to the world, from the White House gardens, a delegation of Afghan Mujahideen as "moral equivalents of our Founding Fathers," embedded in his naivete was a political irony that continues to blur the distinction between terrorisms. It would indeed remind us of the difficulty in defining the boundaries of the phenomenon called terrorism, particularly when two of the most powerful states in the world, the US and the UK, are engaged in a massive bombing campaign against a country,

Afghanistan, with an impoverished and war-ravaged population of mostly poor peasants. The Afghan people have already suffered from two decades of a dreadfully destructive war, which has been planned and executed by the USSR and the USA for their own adversarial cold war objectives. Once the superpower interest in Afghanistan dissipated, the people of that country were just abandoned to the mercy of those who were products of the very same war. The butchery of Afghan citizens by post-Soviet regimes in Afghanistan has been so horrendous that

it only demonstrated the total destruction of the entire political infrastructure in that

society during the proxy war fought by the USA and USSR on Afghan soil in the 1980s.

A succession of regimes of pre-modern autocracy was then imposed on Afghanistan by circumstances that were not defined by the Afghan people. Indeed, the incomparably oppressive Taliban regime is a product of American, Soviet and Pakistani 'real politics' of absolute self-interest that had no regard whatsoever for the general welfare and social-political progress of the Afghan people. In the current bombing campaign in Afghanistan, the Allied powers may succeed in toppling the Taliban regime, and perhaps capturing, 'alive or dead,' Bin Laden. They may also succeed in propelling the new century into a period where the politics of retribution and vengeance is likely to reign supreme

SPECIAL ISSUE ON THE GLOBAL CRISIS

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throughout the world. Sadly, the politics of vengeance seems to define the path ahead for the post-September 11 world. Bush, Blair and Bin Laden have already traveled on that path quite a distance.

Terrorism has been a specific political practice that has promised emancipation, and yet delivered only oppression and revenge. In the history of political ideas since the mid-nineteenth century, the advocacy of terrorism as a means of politics has met with a strong critique that has repeatedly demonstrated its – terrorism's—counter-emancipatory thrust. Terrorism, even in its most anti-systemic version, is nothing but a political statement of despair and will for vengeance. It devours the innocent and legitimizes the very adversary that it seeks to expose or weaken. Those who sought martyrdom by causing spectacular harm to the symbols of the American military and economic power achieved their goals at the expense of several thousand innocent people. Those who planned

this anti-American offensive operation of the most daring kind are now witnessing the continuing death of hundreds if not thousands of the innocent people whom they seek to emancipate.

Here perhaps lies a great paradox of the so-called 'war against terrorism', whether it is in Sri Lanka or in the West. Terrorism, though many tend to forget, has both anti-systemic and pro-systemic dimensions. The practice of terrorism has never been the monopoly of anti-state forces. Israel, for instance, is a preeminent practitioner of state terrorism in the Middle East. The United States has demonstrated no moral qualms whatsoever when its covert state agencies resorted to terrorist strategies in the developing world for decades, in order to protect its own interests. Its bombings in Libya, Iraq, Somalia and Sudan, not so long ago, were acts of global state terrorism, necessitated by rival practices of terrorism. The US has also supported, directly and covertly, politico-military outfits – in Iraq, Nicaragua, Afghanistan, Cuba, for example – that were 'terrorists' even in the simple, anti-statist, definition of the term.

The important point, however, is not about who is a 'terrorist' or who is the terrorist to enjoy legality and legitimacy; rather, it concerns the question of politically dealing with all forms of terrorism which encompass the 'good' and the 'evil' alike, terrorism of systemic as well as anti-systemic projects. This is an issue which the global state system and the anti-systemic movements have actually failed to grasp. Military retaliation, either in the form of suicide missions into crowded apartments in the heart of the 'enemy' country or high-tech bombardment from the blue skies, is the only language they seem to deploy in dealing with each other. Years and decades of demonization of the other – one as a primitive monster with a long beard and fiery eyes, hiding in caves and the other as a sinister beast in striped trousers with tentacles spread all over the world – has divided the world into two antagonistic camps of enmity and hatred. It seems that the post-September 11 world is now sharply polarized into two camps, with contending and mutually exclusivist claims to civilization and barbarism. When one side claims to represent civilization, the other side is barbarism. A discourse of absolute enmity seems to define the new phase of global politics, the politics of terroristic vengeance. President George

Bush in his rustic vocabulary described the shape of the world to come as one where (there are no choices: "either you are with us or with the terrorists." The post-September 11 world will have to learn, and learn anew, how to engage with terrorism politically. As long as the world refuses to move away from military engagement with 'terrorism', 'terrorism' will have no reason to disappear as a weapon of engagement with the adversary. Those who hold the absurd belief that the US or Western enemy could be defeated by means of increasingly spectacular individual and collective terrorism – biological warfare may be their latest military strategy – are not just a bunch of mad men. They are practitioners of a particular kind of politics that romanticizes death and destruction as legitimate political action. It is the same kind of politics that the Western democracies too have practiced under the guise of international legality and legitimacy, against a host of enemies in Palestine, in Iraq and now in Afghanistan. The logic of rationalization of these two forms of terroristic practice is the same: vengeful military action should determine the shape of politics to come. But, this approach to politics is self-defeating, because politics of terrorism can only beget politics of terrorism. It, in other words, militarizes politics. As recent world experience demonstrates, the danger of terroristic militarization of global politics is that the process of confrontation becomes increasingly invisible, unpredictable, enormously destructive and tragically spectacular in terms of human cost.

In engaging terrorism politically, the responsibility for first political initiative lies squarely with the US and its European allies. And that political engagement should begin in the Middle East, in the unfolding conflict involving Israel and the Palestine. It will also require a totally fresh look at the politics in the Middle East as well as Western South Asia where anti-American and anti-Western politics of despair seems to concentrate, giving rise to a radicalism of the suicidal kind. But the West will have to disabuse its own mind from the old categories of thinking and seeing the world. The Western powers at the moment do not seem to have a language other than militaristic terrorism in order to engage the world. The world constructed after the cold war seems to have entered an irreversible phase of catastrophe.

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This issue of *Pravada* focuses on the aftermath of the September 11 attack on New York and Washington DC by suspected Islamic radicals. Among the analysts are leading philosophers, thinkers and writers from Asia and elsewhere.

THERE ARE MANY ISLAMIS

Edward Said

Spectacular horror of the sort that struck New York (and to a lesser degree Washington) has ushered in a new world of unseen, unknown assailants, terror missions without political message, senseless destruction.

For the residents of this wounded city, the consternation, fear, and sustained sense of outrage and shock will certainly continue for a long time, as will the genuine sorrow and affliction that so much carnage has so cruelly imposed on so many.

New Yorkers have been fortunate that Mayor Rudy Giuliani, a normally rebarbative and unpleasantly combative, even retrograde figure, has rapidly attained Churchillian status. Calmly, un sentimentally, and with extraordinary compassion, he has marshalled the city's heroic police, fire and emergency services to admirable effect and, alas, with huge loss of life. Giuliani's was the first voice of caution against panic and jingoistic attacks on the city's large Arab and Muslim communities, the first to express the commonsense of anguish, the first to press everyone to try to resume life after the shattering blows.

Would that that were all. The national television reporting has of course brought the horror of those dreadful winged juggernauts into every household, unremittingly, insistently, not always edifyingly. Most commentary has stressed, indeed magnified, the expected and the predictable in what most Americans feel: terrible loss, anger, outrage, a sense of violated vulnerability, a desire for vengeance and unrestrained retribution. Beyond formulaic expressions of grief and patriotism, every politician and accredited pundit or expert has dutifully repeated how we shall not be defeated, not be deterred, not stop until terrorism is exterminated. This is a war against terrorism, everyone says, but where, on what fronts, for what concrete ends? No answers are provided, except the vague suggestion that the Middle East and Islam are what 'we' are up against, and that terrorism must be destroyed.

What is most depressing, however, is how little time is spent trying to understand America's role in the world, and its direct involvement in the complex reality beyond the two coasts that have for so long kept the rest of the world extremely distant and virtually out of the

average American's mind. You'd think that 'America' was a sleeping giant rather than a superpower almost constantly at war, or in some sort of conflict, all over the Islamic domains. Osama bin Laden's name and face have become so numbingly familiar to Americans as in effect to obliterate any history he and his shadowy followers might have had before they became stock symbols of everything loathsome and hateful to the collective imagination. Inevitably, then, collective passions are being funnelled into a drive for war that uncannily resembles Captain Ahab in pursuit of Moby Dick, rather than what is going on, an imperial power injured at home for the first time, pursuing its interests systematically in what has become a suddenly reconfigured geography of conflict, without clear borders, or visible actors. Manichaeic symbols and apocalyptic scenarios are bandied about with future consequences and rhetorical restraint thrown to the winds.

Rational understanding of the situation is what is needed now, not more drum-beating. George Bush and his team clearly want the latter, not the former. Yet to most people in the Islamic and Arab worlds the official US is synonymous with arrogant power, known for its sanctimoniously munificent support not only of Israel but of numerous repressive Arab regimes, and its inattentiveness even to the possibility of dialogue with secular movements and people who have real grievances. Anti-Americanism in this context is not based on a hatred of modernity or technology-envy: it is based on a narrative of concrete interventions, specific depredations and, in the cases of the Iraqi people's suffering under US-imposed sanctions and US support for the 34-year-old Israeli occupation of Palestinian territories. Israel is now cynically exploiting the American catastrophe by intensifying its military occupation and oppression of the Palestinians.

Political rhetoric in the US has overridden these things by flinging about words like 'terrorism' and 'freedom' whereas, of course, such large abstractions have mostly hidden sordid material interests, the influence of the oil, defence and Zionist lobbies now consolidating their hold on the entire Middle East, and an age-old religious hostility to (and ignorance of) 'Islam' that takes new forms every day.