
FORTRESS AMERICA

Achin Vanaik

On September 11 morning, two hours before we were supposed to land at Washington's Dulles airport, our plane got diverted to Montreal, Canada. Making our way down by land over the next two days into upstate New York, Maryland and Washington, one was able to get an insight into the public mood not just from the international CNN-type broadcasting stations or the major dailies but from a host of local TV stations and local newspapers as well as from the average citizen one met and spoke with. The popular reaction provided sources of both hope and despair. Hope, in that the shared moral outrage expressed across boundaries of race, religion and ethnicity testified to the existence of a universal humanitarian decency. Despair, that this potential for a moral sensitivity that is impartial and universal was stymied by the rapid surfacing of a predominantly nationalist insularity of response to the tragedy.

The main question that preoccupied Americans was not why did this happen but how could it happen? Or rather, insofar as the why question was posed it was quickly disposed of to most people's satisfaction. The perpetrators are mindless terrorists or religious fanatics who hate America and what it stands for, which is decency, democracy, freedom, etc. Rare were the voices (mostly religiously inspired pacifists or uncompromisingly liberal elements) who were prepared to say that the U.S. must not seek revenge by waging war on Afghanistan or engage in activities that would itself amount to terrorism, i.e. killing the civilians of other countries. Rarer still were the voices of those who were prepared to point out, even as they expressed their pain and outrage against the attacks on New York and Washington, that the U.S. Government's actions abroad have helped create the breeding ground from which sub-state and combat group terrorists have emerged.

Wholly admirable was the way in which people across the country united to support and offer help in carrying out the necessary relief measures. Similarly, there was a perceptive and sensitive discourse in the media on what the efforts to avoid such attacks in the future might portend regarding restriction of civil liberties, thereby weakening the freedoms and decencies of American society. Barring the fringe, most public political figures opposed attacks on Americans of Arab, South Asian origin or on ordinary Muslims in the country. That would be a betrayal of the values that the U.S. is supposed to stand for. Even rightwing Republican leaders made it a point to say that this was not a war between the West and Islam but between the rest of the world and terrorism.

Largely absent, however, was any recognition of the problems caused by American foreign policy. The record here is simply awesome, both in numbers and scale. It includes the nuclear

bombing of civilians in Hiroshima/Nagasaki, the use of chemical weapons in Vietnam where over two million civilians were killed, the use of sanctions since the Gulf War which have led to the deaths of 1.2 million Iraqis of whom 500,000 were children. Instead of any media self-introspection on these grounds, there was an even stronger display of self-righteousness than usual. Civilisation, best represented and led by the U.S., was under attack. Therefore, all those (whether countries, groups or individuals) who might refuse to support what the U.S. Government intended to do in retaliation were effectively enemies of not just the U.S. but of all civilised values.

Given such a mood, it was hardly surprising that two leaders of Israel should try and seize the opportunity to harden the attitudes of the American Government and public towards the plight of the Palestinians. The former Israeli Premier, Mr. Benjamin Netanyahu, called for the destruction of the Palestinian Authority as a terrorist outfit while Mr. Ariel Sharon called Mr. Yasser Arafat another Osama bin Laden. They were supported by numerous prominent American personalities declaring in print and TV/radio that now America knew what Israel has been suffering all along. Matters were not helped by repeated broadcastings of film clips of Palestinians celebrating the attacks. Mr. Arafat's act of donating blood was not an effective counter in the public relations battle being waged by the American right and Israel at this juncture.

One thing is quite clear. Even if the evidence the U.S. Government is accumulating is not sufficient to establish a legally defensible case about an accused or suspect (Osama bin Laden in this case), it simply could not afford to admit as much. The public desire for revenge is so strong that it has to act. There are several historical precedents for this, the most recent being after the 1998 bombings of U.S. Embassies in East Africa. The U.S. bombed a pharmaceutical complex in Sudan which suffered unknown "collateral damage" (i.e. civilian deaths) and has ever since blocked an independent U.N. investigation into its claim that it was justified in doing so because it was part of Osama bin Laden's network of activities.

Of course, the U.S. Government is not simply responding to domestic pressure. The speed with which 'long range thinking', was put into place was also remarkable. It is clear that it wishes to seize this opportunity to launch something like an 8-10 year campaign to attack (on all continents) all armed sub-state groups (and selected regimes) which are considered to be unacceptable to American interests. So the issue is not just Osama bin Laden and his network but the overthrow of the Taliban regime itself, followed by other targets to be highlighted as and when Washington chooses.

This is not a war against terrorism but an effort to establish maximum freedom of military-political activity (of a kind and scale never before envisioned) for the U.S. throughout the world.

Returning to India after the Washington trip, one was again shaken by much of the public and media response. After initial expressions of horror, the main preoccupation seems to be how India can obtain enough foreign policy benefit, i.e. swing the U.S. Government over to 'our' side against Pakistan and its sponsorship of terrorism in Kashmir. The overall result is that only a small minority (though bigger than the even smaller minority in the U.S.) of publicly articulated opinion declares that in the fight against international terrorism, it is not just sub-state actors/combat groups (whether or not supported/sponsored by states) that are the culprits but that states themselves are guilty of directing/executing terrorism.

Indeed, that the sustainability, diversity of forms, and sheer scale of state terrorist acts and campaigns is qualitatively greater and more dangerous than that of sub-state actors. Moreover, among the culpable states is not just Pakistan and its behaviour in Kashmir and Afghanistan but India (in Kashmir and the Northeast), Russia

(in Chechnya), China (in Tibet), Israel, and a host of numerous other states with, of course, the U.S. itself as far and away the worst offender.

To any morally impartial view which seeks to fight international terrorism no matter who is responsible for it, the idea of establishing a concert of nations led by the U.S. as the main international mechanism (regardless of its getting a manipulated sanction from the U.N.) through which one must fight terrorism, is utterly unacceptable. One cannot legitimise as the main correctors/policers of international terrorism those who are themselves guilty of terrorisms which then not only goes unpunished or unrecognised but is made unrecognisable. The double standards involved here are not just morally shameful but politically counter-productive because they will lead to more widespread bitterness and alienation reinforcing the appeal of those who claim that sub-state terrorism is the only form of retribution to the strong to whom the principles of justice do not apply. It is time to stand up and oppose the U.S.-led coalition which will wage war on Afghanistan and to call on India not to join it.

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TIME FOR SERENITY

Fidel Castro

No one can deny that terrorism is today a dangerous and ethically indefensible phenomenon, which should be eradicated regardless of its deep origins, the economic and political factors that brought it to life and those responsible for it. The unanimous irritation caused by the human and psychological damage brought on the American people by the unexpected and shocking death of thousands of innocent people whose images have shaken the world is perfectly understandable. But who have profited? The extreme right, the most backward and right-wing forces, those in favor of crushing the growing world rebellion and sweeping away everything progressive that is still left on the planet. It was an enormous error, a huge injustice and a great crime whomever they are who organized or are responsible for such action. However, the tragedy should not be used to recklessly start a war that could actually unleash an endless carnage of innocent people and all of this on behalf of justice and under the peculiar and bizarre name of "Infinite Justice." In the last few days we have seen the hasty establishment of the basis, the concept, the true purposes, the spirit and the conditions for such a war. No one would be able to affirm that it was not something thought out well in advance, something that was just waiting for its chance to materialize. Those who, after the so-called end of the cold war, continued a military build-up and the development of the most sophisticated means to kill and exterminate human beings were aware that the large military investments would give them the

privilege to impose an absolute and complete dominance over the other peoples of the world. The ideologists of the imperialist system knew very well what they were doing and why they were doing it. After the shock and sincere sorrow felt by every people on Earth for the atrocious and insane terrorist attack that targeted the American people, the most extremist ideologists and the most belligerent hawks, already set in privileged power positions, have taken command of the most powerful country in the world whose military and technological capabilities would seem infinite.

Actually, its capacity to destroy and kill is enormous while its inclination towards equanimity, serenity, thoughtfulness and restraint is minimal. The combination of elements—including complicity and the common enjoyment of privileges—the prevailing opportunism, confusion and panic make it almost impossible to avoid a bloody and unpredictable outcome. The first victims of whatever military actions are undertaken will be the billions of people living in the poor and underdeveloped world with their unbelievable economic and social problems, their unpayable debts and the ruinous prices of their basic commodities; their growing natural and ecological catastrophes, their hunger and misery, the massive undernourishment of their children, teenagers and adults; their terrible AIDS epidemic, their malaria, their tuberculosis and their infectious diseases that threaten whole nations with extermination. The grave economic world crisis was