
RESPONDING WITH TERROR

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The date of September 11 has a powerful resonance in the annals of modern history. Twenty-eight years ago on this date, the Central Intelligence Agency-sponsored coup of General Augusto Pinochet overthrew the democratically-elected socialist government of President Salvador Allende in Chile and established a regime of terror which killed an estimated 35,000 people in the first few weeks and continued to brutalise Chilean society for some two decades. September 11 was also the date of the Camp David Accords which signalled Egypt's final surrender to American imperialism and Israeli Zionism, leaving the Palestinians at the mercy of the latter. And, September 11 was the day when George H. Bush, father of the current President of the United States, made his fateful speech to Congress announcing the war against Iraq - that supreme act of terror which killed an estimated 200,000 people in the course of that brief assault and which has led to the death of at least half a million Iraqi children over the next decade, thanks to the U.S.-dictated blockade of their country.

Betrayal of the Palestinians, the destruction of Iraq! One can reasonably assume that these two great devastations of the Arabo-Muslim world were vivid in the memory of those 19 hijackers on September 11 this year, when they commandeered four civilian aircraft owned by two major U.S. airlines, and smashed three of them into the World Trade Centre (WTC) and the Pentagon - nerve centres of U.S. financial and military power - while committing collective suicide in the process. The White House - the seat of America's political power - was probably to be struck by the fourth aircraft but something in the hijackers' plan went awry. Over 6,000 innocent civilians from 60 countries - some 500 of them from South Asia alone, including the son of a close friend of this writer - died within a couple of hours in a calculated and hideous act of terrorism carried out with stunning technical precision.

Hiroshima and Nagasaki, with their 220,000 dead, are of course the most famous of the numerous cities that the U.S. destroyed around the world in the 20th century with the deliberate, terroristic intent of targeting innocent civilians, just as civilians were targeted in their towns and hamlets alike throughout Indochina during the Vietnam War. The spectacular terror which destroyed the World Trade Centre and killed so many so callously pales in comparison. As one journalist has calculated, the death of 6,000 civilians means that this same

level of violence would have to be carried out every day for a whole year for the resulting death toll to match the death toll in Iraq over the past decade. Even so, this was the first time the Americans came to experience what it means for cities to be at the receiving end of such destructive force. This hijacking operation, carried out by less than two dozen individuals, was the largest attack on mainland United States in its history, larger than Pearl Harbour, while American armies, assassins and covert operators of all kinds have been active around the globe for well over a century.

And, because being at the receiving end of violence on their own soil was such a novel experience for the U.S. centres of power, this attack on a couple of buildings at the heart of the imperial centre produced effects that no amount of terror and destruction in the outposts - or even the secondary and tertiary centres - of the empire could have produced. An economy that was already slowing down went into a full-fledged downturn, and the week following the hijackers' attack proved to be the worst in the history of U.S. finance since July 1933, with the Dow Jones and the Nasdaq posting two-digit losses virtually every day and liquid assets losing \$1.4 trillion of their value over the week. The 30-year Treasury bonds continued to decline day by day amid speculation that further issues of long-term federal debt shall be required to fund the war-without-end that is now envisaged, not to speak of the reconstruction costs and coping with the expected recession.

Not just fresh investment but also consumer spending dried up and the working people paid the price. Some 116,000 jobs were lost in the airline industry alone during that week, and the twin fears of war and economic recession led to sales plummeting across North America. An emergency \$15-billion assistance package was quickly put together for the airlines while Boeing, the lynchpin of the American aerospace industry, threatened to fire 31,000 of its employees unless federal aid and subsidy came in. Insurance companies were in similar turmoil, with insurance claims arising from the World Trade Centre tragedy alone expected to exceed \$73 billion. The companies hit back by notifying airports across North America and western Europe that wartime coverage would be withdrawn as of September 24, calculating that governments would be forced to step in with subsidies to renew

that coverage, while airports would be forced to shore up their security systems, requiring more outlays and more subsidies.

What happened was unspeakably hideous, cruel, senseless. The loss of thousands of precious lives, many of them cut down in the flower of their youth, has neither a moral nor a political justification. For once, President Bush's speechwriter was right: those who carry out such acts in the name of Allah blaspheme the name of Allah; they hijack Islam in the name of Islam; in the larger, largely humane world of Islam they are a dangerous, fringe element. And a danger to their own people, I would add. In their fit of fundamentalist psychosis they might have believed that they were serving the Palestinian cause. Their actual act was a gift to the Zionists, however, and it was just as well that Yasser Arafat was quick to denounce the act even though Saddam Hussein, true to form, did not have the decency to do so. (Interestingly enough, the Taliban denounced it too, and begged the U.S. to act sensibly and not use the tragedy as justification for further destruction of Afghanistan.)

Taking advantage of the anger and the human anguish arising from the tragedy, and exploiting the fears and frustrations arising from the prospect of a massive economic recession, the U.S. administration moved quickly to plan a new, globalised, permanent war; to expound what amounts to a new doctrine of America's right to use its might as it pleases; to expand the war-making powers of the Presidency; to put in place a new regime of infinite surveillance; and to demolish whatever restraints had been introduced after the Vietnam War on America's right to undertake assassinations and covert actions across the globe. All this was accompanied with hair-raising rhetoric, which tended at times to portray the coming war as a clash between the Judeo-Christian and Muslim civilisations.

President Bush called his so-called 'war on terrorism' a "crusade" early on, with no sense of the historical meaning of that word. Only expressions from a wide spectrum of opinion in the Muslim world made him retract that stance and start saying that the war was not against Islam as such but only against certain Muslims. Not to be outdone, the Pentagon named its planned operation 'Infinite Justice', a phrase not even from the Bible but from the lexicon of Christian fundamentalism. Not only Muslims but even liberal Christians were outraged, and Protestant pastors themselves pointed out that 'Infinite Justice' referred to God's own divine justice, an attribute that no human power ought to claim for itself, America's vision of its own omnipotence notwithstanding. The Pentagon sheepishly promised to reconsider the code name.

Congress swiftly passed a resolution authorising Bush to use wide powers in pursuit of this war on terrorism, asserting that "all necessary and appropriate force" could be used against nations, organisations and individuals. No nations or organisations were named, let alone individuals; the President could determine which one was to be attacked as he went along. Nor was there a time limit; he was authorised to act against present danger as well in anticipation of "future attacks". The powers were in some ways wider than a mere declaration of war could have bestowed, since such a declaration would name the country against which the war was to be waged.

Meanwhile, the Justice Department started putting together a package of proposed legislation giving the U.S. intelligence agencies much wider powers to wiretap telephones, enter into people's Internet accounts, deport suspected immigrants, seize evidence from suspects, including DNA samples, and obtain information from educational institutions, taxation records and a whole range of public and private agencies without a prior court order or a subsequent court review of the evidence. Attorney-General John Ashcroft is said to be actively considering permanent video surveillance in public places and issuing "smart cards" to all Americans, which the surveillance devices can read electronically so as to distinguish citizen from non-citizen, keep a record of the movements of citizens themselves in public places and to have quick access to personal data linked to each of the "smart cards".

It is also being contemplated that certain immigrants, chosen by intelligence at will, be required to report their activities regularly, like ordinary criminals on bail, and that airport security personnel be authorised to interrogate passengers at will and do on-the-spot check of their private baggage without having to explain why and what they are being suspected of.

Bush was blunt. The war is against a network of hundreds of thousands of people spread across some 60 countries, he said, and this war was, in his considered phrase, "a task that never ends". Echoing John Foster Dulles, the rabid Foreign Secretary of the Eisenhower years, who said that non-alignment was "immoral", Bush too has put the whole world on notice: if you do not explicitly join us in this global crusade, we shall treat you as a hostile country! Enemies are lurking in thousands of little corners, in dozens of countries across the globe, and America will choose its targets as well as its methods and timing of dealing with them as it goes along, according to its own convenience; every country must join up each time, or else it too becomes an enemy and perhaps the next target. This war - "unlike any we have ever seen," he said - shall be

perpetual but largely secret. Some of it shall be seen on television, he said, but much shall go unrevealed - even in success, he emphasised. Congressional leaders in Washington are now talking of putting the CIA "on a war footing" and cite with admiration the Israeli example of an open policy of assassinations without regard to legal niceties.

It is quite astonishing, though predictable, how quickly one government after another has fallen in line. India of course joined the crusade and offered its airspace and naval facilities with shameless alacrity, putting the lives of Indians at risk of retaliation from those against whom India has offered its facilities. Musharraf then cited India's pre-emptive oath of allegiance as his reason for offering the same to the U.S.; India would otherwise have a strategic edge, he reasoned. Competitive servilities, one might say.

Tony Blair, who acts as Washington's agent while doubling as the British Prime Minister, flew across the Atlantic to register his presence at the moment of birth of this new era of perpetual war. The European Commission has been scurrying around formulating new policies of cooperation over the question of terrorism, urging individual members of the European Union to allocate more funds and build new systems of surveillance. The Russian Parliament has passed a bill to create an international body to fight terrorism and, aping the U.S. President, calls for the elimination of terrorists as well as the governments which are said to finance them.

China has been somewhat more shrewd, somewhat more independent; it urges a policy that involves presentation of concrete evidence, does not involve sacrifice of innocent civilians and is within the bounds of international law, but it also promises cooperation if the U.S. was more receptive to its interests in Tibet, Taiwan and Xinjiang - and on the issue of National Missile Defence. The U.S. has, in turn, moved quickly to put in place a new deal facilitating China's entry into the World Trade Organisation (WTO).

The less powerful, many of whom also happen to be directly involved - in some cases even directly targeted - are of course treated differently. On September 14 William F. Burns, Assistant Secretary of State for Near Eastern Affairs, called in the Ambassadors of 15 Arab countries, including Syria, which is otherwise one of the 'target' states, as well as the PLO, and imperiously read out to them a list of actions they were to undertake, including the arrest and prosecution of those on their soil who the U.S. designates as 'terrorists'. Everyone seems to have fallen in line, including Yasser Arafat, who has extended "full cooperation" (with the implicit promise that

the U.S. would press Israel for an immediate and durable ceasefire). Even President Mohammed Khatami of Iran has made sympathetic noises and expressed the wish to use the occasion to draw closer to the U.S. - which he has been wanting to do for some time. Iran has sealed its borders with Afghanistan, as have Pakistan and Tajikistan. China has gone so far as to seal its borders with Pakistan, blocking the Karakoram highway in the process.

An especially heavy burden has fallen on Pakistan, which was given the blunt choice of either getting treated the same way as the Taliban or meet U.S. demands: airspace, naval facilities, stationing facilities for troops and covert operatives, full revelation of what the Pakistan intelligence services know about Afghanistan, Osama bin Laden and allied elements. Pakistan tried to plead that such far-reaching cooperation with U.S. war designs in the region would rip apart the fabric of Pakistani society itself, but to no avail. Since then, a Gallup poll has revealed that 62 per cent of Pakistanis oppose any kind of cooperation with the U.S. against another Muslim country; whether this opinion can be mobilised for effective political opposition is yet to be determined.

In the midst of great fear of Taliban retaliation on the one hand and uncontrollable civic unrest on the other, foreign companies have pulled out of Pakistan and the U.S. Embassy itself is functioning with a skeletal staff. In these conditions, it remains unclear how all those foreign funds would pour in to solve Pakistan's economic problems, as Pakistan Finance Minister Shaukat Aziz is promising.

Better sense might prevail later. As of now, however, the only concession the U.S. has made to Pakistan - aside from offering some economic benefits, most notably the lifting of sanctions - is that it will not call upon Pakistan to lend its own troops for operations in Afghanistan. Musharraf of course yielded, but it is far from clear just where substantial elements among the corps commanders stand on this issue and where the violent protests that have erupted already might lead. It will probably all depend upon the nature, intensity and duration of the projected U.S. military operations in the region. Nor is it yet clear just what Musharraf's offer of "full cooperation" implies for such U.S. demands as that it immediately cut off fuel supplies to Afghanistan, but we do know that the Afghan clerics' invitation to bin Laden to leave voluntarily was obtained on Pakistan's insistence.

Soon after the hijacked civilian planes smashed into the World Trade Centre, the dominant electronic media set out to identify all sorts of people as the culprits. The PLO and the Popular

Front for the Liberation of Palestine were the early favourites. By noon, the focus shifted to Osama bin Laden. By afternoon the channels were abuzz with the idea that bin Laden could not have done it without the diabolical expertise of Saddam Hussein.

The focus on Iraq soon became so alarming that Secretary of State Colin Powell as well as Vice-President Dick Cheney and others were eventually forced to say on record that Iraq had nothing to do with it. Indeed, Powell has been the cool head in Washington, arguing that the U.S. ought not to go around shooting all over West Asia and should judiciously concentrate on one major target at a time, and that Afghanistan should be the first. He is also the one arguing that too much of an escalation against Iraq at this time, when the U.S. wants Arab governments to join it in a coalition against the Taliban, would be counterproductive.

Senior Pakistani statesman Niaz Naik revealed on the BBC a personal conversation he had had with Colin Powell well before the recent events, in which Powell had spelled out the set of U.S. demands which have now been presented to the spellbound television-watching world as non-negotiable and a retaliation against the "attack on America". These included that the Taliban hand over Osama bin Laden and, in Bush's words "deliver to the U.S. authorities all the leaders of Al Qaeda... Give to the U.S. full access to terrorist training camps" - demands which the Taliban would find impossible to accede to even if it wanted to. The emphasis is significant: it is the United States, not some international tribunal or United Nations forces, which shall take custody of these people and places. The tactic too is obvious: present non-negotiable and impossible demands, issue a short notice, and invade. That there shall be an invasion is clear, but there is still a far-reaching debate within the U.S. government as to what kind of invasion it would be.

A decade of the most brutal military and economic warfare without committing ground troops or trying to occupy large chunks of Iraq has not succeeded in toppling Saddam Hussein. Chances of success of that sort of warfare in Afghanistan are even more remote; as one of the Taliban put it, "We don't even have a factory which could be a reasonable military target." Direct landing in Kabul or Kandahar would only turn the Taliban into phantoms scurrying around in the hinterlands, bleeding the U.S. militarily and financially, and winning new allies in the face of a foreign occupation force. Bin Laden's numerous camps are perfectly well known to the Americans since he initially built them with their money and assistance. But he is a moving target, with a widespread following, and

with numerous camps, many of which are dug deep under the mountains.

One of the likely scenarios is a round of massive bombings and well-orchestrated commando operations to disorganise and soften up the targets, killing a great many number of people and hoping that many of those killed would be the Taliban and members of Al Qaeda. This could then be followed by actual landing and taking over ghost cities, from which the surviving civilians would have fled, as a prelude to establishing a U.N-sponsored Afghan administration drawn from among the enemies of the Taliban, and settling down to a long-term scorched earth operation from some bases inside Afghanistan but mainly from the outside.

Hence, there are two emphases in American pronouncements thus far. Bush emphasised to the U.S. public time and again that there shall be casualties this time and that the campaign shall be prolonged. And, there is enormous pressure on Pakistan, Azerbaijan and Tajikistan to provide base facilities, and upon Russia to use its influence in this regard. The information obtained from Pakistan's Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI) would be crucial for even a moderate level of success of the American design. Pakistan's historic involvement in Afghanistan on the side of the Americans and its geopolitical location may yet come to haunt Jaswant Singh's dream of turning India into America's "most allied ally", as Pakistan was once called.

What does all this portend for Afghanistan? It is a country devastated by some two decades of the most brutal warfare and, since the fall of the People's Democratic Party of Afghanistan (PDPA) government, equally brutal forms of rule. For a population of roughly 26 million, there are six million land mines dug into its earth which kill or maim 100 people a week. There are 3.6 million Afghan refugees in Pakistan and Iran, and another one million or so internal refugees, hungry and homeless, who roam the country hoping to survive another day. It has suffered three consecutive years of drought, and the combined effects of war, misrule and drought has meant that until only a few days ago the U.N. World Food Programme was feeding three million Afghans in the countryside and some 300,000 in Kabul itself. Virtually the whole of that institutional infrastructure has now collapsed under the threat of a U.S. invasion, and those who are now deprived even of that meagre rations are facing imminent death even without the U.S. firing even a shot - just like the Iraqi children who die not of bullets but for lack of the food and medicine which the U.S.-imposed embargo denies them.

Afghanistan is in this state as a consequence of the anti-communist, Islamised crusade that the U.S. cynically waged there before abandoning it to its own miseries. This is the country that the mightiest empire in human history has now set out to subjugate with all its technological and financial might, but with little chance of success.

AMERICA cannot win but it shall not suffer either. The Afghans shall not be subjugated but they shall suffer and perhaps even a majority of them might perish or become homeless and get consigned to a subhuman existence. That is the asymmetry of power in our time: those who rule the universe shall not be victorious against the poorest and the most wretched of this earth; those who refuse subjugation shall be made to suffer miseries that no previous period in human history inflicted on the powerless. War shall be permanent because the war cannot end without justice and justice is what the U.S. has set out to deny, permanently. The war shall be globalised because in this period of globalisation there is a singular power whose task it is to guarantee regimes of injustice throughout the world. And much of this war shall be secret, like much of the movements of finance capital because finance capital is what this war serves and therefore imitates. Bush is right: this is truly "a task that has no end" - until someone rises to end it.

Will there be organised opposition to these imperial designs? That is still hard to tell. Haaretz, the Israeli newspaper, mentions a poll taken in 30 countries in which only the U.S. and Israel are shown to be the countries where majorities are in favour of war: three-fourths in Israel, an overwhelmingly war-mongering society in any case, but only a bare majority in the U.S., with 54 per cent. Will even this majority hold once the immediate shock and grief have been absorbed and put in some perspective? Will the majority shrink or expand if Americans begin to die in obscure places? It is too soon to tell. What is already heartening is that there is great opposition to the type of military operations that involve large numbers of civilian deaths, and a student movement of anti-war activists is beginning to emerge on many campuses.

A brief word about this particular form of fighting which is called "terrorism". Bush was careful enough to say that America's enemy was that particular "terrorism" which "has global reach". In other words, he is not particularly concerned with the great many varieties, which include the Irish Republican Army (IRA) in Ireland, the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) in Sri Lanka, and the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) fraternity in India.

Nor is "fundamentalism" the issue: Taliban fundamentalism is bad but Saudi fundamentalism is good, and Bush himself of course speaks the language of that Christian fundamentalism which defines the Far Right in contemporary U.S. "Terrorism with global reach," the designated enemy, is the one that challenges American power.

This is a complex and important subject. Briefly put, "terrorism" is what comes when the Communist Left and anti-colonial nationalism have both been defeated while the issue of imperialism remains unresolved and more important than ever. Hatred takes the place of revolutionary ideology. Privatised, retail violence takes the place of revolutionary warfare and national liberation struggles. Millenarian and freelance seekers of religious martyrdom replace the defeated phalanx of disciplined revolutionaries. Un-reason arises where Reason is appropriated by imperialism and is eliminated in its revolutionary form.

There were no Islamic terrorists in Afghanistan before the Americans created them as a counterweight against the secular Left. Islamism arose in Iran to fill that space which had been left vacant with the elimination of the secular, revolutionary Left by the CIA-sponsored regime of the Shah. Islamic secret societies arose in Egypt after imperialism and Zionism combined to defeat Gamal Abdel Nasser's secular nationalist project. The Hamas arose in Palestine because the cosmopolitan Palestinian nationalism was denied its dream of a secular state in the historic land of Palestine where Jew and Arab could live as equals. What gets called "terrorism with global reach" today is a mirror of defeat but also the monster that imperialism's Faustian success made possible and which now haunts its own creator. The loss of over 6,000 lives in the blaze and collapse of the World Trade Centre is the price the victims and their families paid for the victory of imperialism.

America can never defeat "terrorism with a global reach" because for all its barbarity and irrationality, religiously motivated "terrorism" is also a "sigh of the oppressed", and if some Palestinians cheered it, that too was owed to the fact that even an "opiate of the people" is sometimes mistaken for the medicine itself. The only way to end this "terrorism" is to re-build that revolutionary movement of the Left whose place it occupies and with whose mantle it masquerades.

The author wishes to register that he has written this essay with the memory of Taimur in his heart, a lovely boy who was last seen on the 94th floor of the World Trade Centre.

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