
RESPONDING TO THE TERROR

Rajmohan Gandhi

Some reflections may have a place even, or especially, when war-drums begin to sound. From his all-seeing (and sometimes unfeeling?) perch, the Almighty no doubt gets the complete picture, but the rest of us see through a glass darkly. Moreover, our glass is slanted. Our reactions to Terror Tuesday, and to the speculation it triggered, were influenced by who we were, by where our loved ones were, by what we had just gone through, by the leanings, for and against, of our hearts.

In my case, emotions of horror, disbelief, pity, and the futility of pity were interrupted early on by a prayer that nothing should have taken my loved ones studying elsewhere in the U.S. to New York. And by a sudden realisation that the towers crumbling on TV surely contained numerous Indians and other South Asians. Osama bin Laden's name was being pronounced, and my mind returned at once to Charsadda, close to the Pakistan-Afghan border, where I had been only two days previously. I thought of retaliatory bombs raining on Afghanistan. I had gone to Charsadda to meet the descendants of Khan Abdul Ghaffar Khan, Badshah Khan or Baba as he is lovingly remembered in the NWFP, or the Frontier Gandhi, as some call him, one of the tallest figures in the modern story of the subcontinent, who had opposed Partition and championed Hindu-Muslim unity until the end.

In Charsadda I had met two of Badshah Khan's grandsons, Khan Asfandiyar Khan, president of Pakistan's Awami National Party, and his brother, Khan Sangeen Khan, sons of the party's ailing founder, Khan Wali Khan. If Afghanistan is bombed, I said to myself, it is the Pakhtuns who will get the medicine. The Khans are Pakhtuns. So are a great many Afghans and most inhabitants of Pakistan's Frontier province. If the Americans are clever and lucky, they will get Osama, but American bombs are unlikely to be confined to him and his collaborators. Thousands of innocent Pakhtuns may be killed. Let me be honest. I hated Terror Tuesday, pitied its victims and felt America's grief. But I did not want and do not want thousands of Pakhtuns to be killed.

As for the perpetrators of that terror, I felt they were image-worshippers—they worshipped the image of destruction. They probably sought revenge but yearned even more for pictures of horror on hundreds of millions of TV sets. Terrorism has its pleasures, for which some of its devotees plan, work and wait for years. While spelling instant death for victims and for some participants, terrorism's fulfilment may offer ecstasy for some moments to surviving participants and their sympathisers. But its consequences last a lifetime, spent by the survivors in darkness and ignominy.

Worse, some consequences—bombs, sanctions, deprivations, slurs—fall on individuals and groups who have nothing to do with terrorism's perpetrators. Their crime is proximity. Or a shared religion, ethnicity or appearance. Though proximity or association is not complicity, it incurs punishment. For this punishment of his innocent neighbours and associates, the terrorist bears primary responsibility.

In an ideal world, the retaliator would ensure that no innocent associate of a terrorist is hurt, but our world is not there yet. Along with other nations, India has learnt that the terrorist puts neighbours and associates in jeopardy, yet we in India also know, as do others, that administrations can either wink at damage to innocents or minimise if not eliminate such damage.

In the freedom, equality, opportunity and the rule of law that it offers, the U.S. is unlike any other country. The distressing attacks in some American cities on individuals thought to resemble suspects do not alter its basic character, which is multi-ethnic and multi-religious. America's stability and prestige matter to all. At this testing moment, America's friends watch that extraordinary country going about its task of capturing those who so pitilessly and shamelessly caused Terror Tuesday. In India and outside, these friends hope that the perpetrators are caught and punished, and also that in the process America does not make new enemies or new terrorists.

It is good though not enough that leading Americans (and Europeans and Indians) have publicly acknowledged a difference between terrorism and Islam. The difference between Afghans and terrorists, and between Arabs and terrorists, also requires underlining, and not merely in the U.S. If this is not done clearly and persistently enough, racial and religious discrimination will stand legitimised, and that evil, recently on the defensive after having disfigured societies and nations for centuries, will be given a new burst of life. The result could be a widespread and long-lasting chain of death and destruction.

In that talk on September 9 with Asfandiyar Khan, I had asked him about the Taliban and its religious fanaticism. He told me that Pakhtun nationalism, not Islam, was the real religion of a majority of Afghans. Some of them, now in ascendancy, had sought to intertwine religion with this nationalism, but the latter was the stronger driving force. It had been so even during the struggle, energetically backed by America, against Soviet occupation. At that time Afghans, Americans and Osama were on the same side. Any attack by the U.S. on Afghanistan will perhaps run into this nationalism.

At Wali Bagh in Charsadda, where I talked with Badshah Khan's grandsons, and in the days since Terror Tuesday, I have reflected on Badshah Khan's commitment to non-violence in a region steeped in revenge, and on the bloodshed that for decades the Pakhtuns have nonetheless seen or been part of. It seems to me, and the thought applies to India too, that a commitment to reconciliation across ethnic and religious barriers has to accompany any doctrine of non-violence or minimal violence.

The sharp, bitter cleavages often witnessed between, on the one hand, the Pakhtuns and, on the other, the Tajiks and Uzbeks of Afghanistan, or the Punjabis and Mohajirs of Pakistan, or the Shi-ite Iranian and the White Westerner, call for bold schemes of reconciliation. I think Badshah Khan's spirit would bless any such schemes. But I pray that impulsive U.S. acts do not blow up the divides. It is clear that the U.S. must do something. But something is not anything.

I am not enthused by claims that India has joined a principled global fight against terrorism. Not everyone has forgotten that the principled global struggle against communism left room for plenty of opportunism and oppression. India had felt disinclined to enroll in that alliance. Today a great deal of care is needed to ensure that

uncompromising opposition to terrorism is not hijacked into a battle against Arabs, Afghans or Muslims. I am troubled in particular by an apparent willingness in some Indians to embrace all of Israel's policies. I yield to no one in supporting Israel's right to exist and flourish, or in recognising Jewish pain down the ages, but I cannot accept that Palestinians should be denied their birthrights, or forced out of their land. I know that principles and national interests are different things, but does anyone claim that India's interests will be served by abandoning long-held positions and incurring the enmity of all the Muslims of the world, including on the subcontinent, as well as alienating millions of non-Muslims who sympathise with the Palestinians?

The TV clips we saw of a few Palestinians celebrating the terrorist attack on the U.S. misrepresented general Arab feeling. In any case instant reactions, set off by subjective factors, do not reflect a person's considered opinion. The Arab-Americans who have donated blood for the victims of the attack but who continue to ask for justice for Palestine may be truer representatives of the Arab point of view. Terrorism has hurt India, and a wish to learn from Israel in combating it may be defended, but aligning with Israel against the Arabs is unsound from every angle. The Government must clarify that it has no intention of doing so. ■

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A Two-Pronged Approach to the Afghan People

**“By night our missiles rain on them,
By day we drop them bread.
They should be grateful for the food
Unless, of course, they are dead.”**

Calvin Trillin
in the *Nation*, 29 September 2001