BATTLE HYMN OF THE REPUBLIC

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I consider the attacks carried out in this city, New York, on September 11 as heinous and barbaric. I am not one of those who proclaim political non-violence. As a student of politics in colonial and postcolonial countries, I have become convinced that when the structures of domination in the modern world are so deeply rooted in the ability to deploy massive and efficient violence, it is neither possible nor justified to insist that those who fight against unfair domination must at all times eschew the use of political violence. But I know of no anti-imperialist or anti-colonial politics that will justify the killing of more than five thousand ordinary men and women in a deliberate act of violence against a civilian target.

Even if, by some contorted political logic, one were to think that one was at war with the United States, it would be a hard act to justify, even as an act of war. I believe that such deliberate and calculated acts of massive terror have emerged out of a politics and an ideology that are fundamentally mistaken and that must be rejected and condemned. Such ideologies of religious or ethnic fanaticism are widespread today and they are by no means restricted to any one religious community. I am one of those who argue that we must sympathetically understand the reasons why so many people all over the world are persuaded by such ideologies of fanaticism. However, that is not to say that we must sympathize with or endorse their politics.

Having said that, let me turn to the question of the response to these acts of terror. Within hours of the event, the US president announced that his country was at war. Immediately, the analogy was being drawn to Pearl Harbour. Not since World War II, we were told, had America been attacked in this way. I have been asking ever since, why was it necessary to make that announcement? How was the determination made so quickly? Was it because war is such a familiar trope in the public memory of Western countries?

>From fiction to history books to the cinema, there are innumerable sources of popular culture in the West that have taught people what war means and what one ought to do when one's country goes to war. We saw it in his country last week when people flew the flag, lined up to donate blood or sang the Battle Hymn of the Republic in memorial services in church. An unprecedented act of violence was made comprehensible by framing it as an act of war. Perhaps George W. Bush, inexperienced in the affairs of state, was closer to the popular understanding than the seasoned veterans of the state department when he said that he wanted Osama bin Laden "dead or alive". Revenge and retaliation are also familiar sentiments of war. So when President Bush said, albeit within his somewhat limited political vocabulary, that he would "smoke 'em out and hunt 'em down", he was using a rhetoric long familiar in the American national language of warfare.

It is now clear that by declaring a war so quickly, the US decision-makers have found themselves pushed into a corner from which they are having a hard time getting out. Three weeks after the attack, there has been no visible military response. Experts are trying to tell people that this is not a conventional enemy; it has no country, no territory, no borders. There are no obvious targets that could be attacked. It could take a long time to build an international coalition and strike effectively at the enemy.

This is not a war against a country or a people. It is a war against terrorism. But having been told that this was a war, the people are dismayed by the lack of any recognizable response. There is a virtual volcano of rage and frustration that has built up in this country. The people are in no mood for metaphorical wars. They are, if I may use some plain language too, baying for blood.

In the absence of a clear enemy or target, the rhetoric is frequently slipping into unconcealed religious, ethnic and cultural hatred. And it is not merely rhetoric either, because there have been attacks on mosques and temples, assaults on foreign-looking men and women and at least two killings. Senior leaders, including the president, have attempted to reassure Arab-Americans that their safety will not be jeopardized. And yet the rhetoric of cultural intolerance continues.

Responsible leaders speak on radio and television of what must be done with the uncivilized parts of the world, of keeping a close watch on neighbours with Arabic names and of people who wear diapers around their heads. They peak of "ending" states like Afghanistan, Iraq, Syria, Libya and "finishing off" Islamic militants in Lebanon and Palestine. If this is how the elite speaks, can we blame ordinary people for making sense of this war as a conflict of civilizations?

We can and should, I think, ask questions about responsibility and accountability. If the war on terrorism is a war unlike any other this country has fought, as we are now being told, that should have been clear from the first day. Why then mislead everyone by invoking the familiar language of retaliation against enemy countries and enemy peoples? If the US is indeed the only superpower in a new world without borders, the cultural resources of traditional war will be singularly inadequate and inappropriate for that new imperial role.

Has the leadership acted responsibly in preparing both itself and the country for such a role? I do not think so. We see and hear all around us the signs and languages of traditional American nationalism, unmindful even of the fact that the patterns of immigration into this country in the last few decades have been so vastly different from those of previous decades.

There is another huge question of responsibility concerning America's role in the rest of the world. Given its overwhelming military and economic dominance, every action by the US in any part of the world cannot but have enormous repercussions on those states and societies. Has America acted responsibly in weighing the long-term, and often unintended, consequences of its actions? I will not speak here of West Asia, for instance, where American policy has had enormous historical impact; there are others who are more qualified than me to speak on that subject.

Let me speak of Afghanistan where, in the early Eighties, the US fought a long proxy war against the Soviet Union. It is said to have been the biggest Central Intelligence Agency operation in history. The US—in collaboration with the military regime in Pakistan and the retrograde conservative monarchy of Saudi Arabia—organized, trained, funded and armed the Afghan militants, encouraged their Islamic ideology and applauded when they successfully drove out the Soviet troops. I heard Zbigniew Brzezinski, a familiar figure in the corridors of Columbia University, say on television last night that when the last Soviet soldiers crossed the Amu Daria back into the Soviet Union, he felt very very good. He also said that he would have felt even better had he known at the time that that would be the beginning of the collapse of the Soviet Union.

I don't suppose he even thought for a moment the disastrous consequences the American involvement would have on the region. The Taliban was born in the Eighties in the *mujahedin* camps in Pakistan. Osama bin Laden became a hero of Islamic militancy at that time. The Pakistani army itself became deeply afflicted by the ideology of Islamic fanaticism. The results are now there for all to see. Has the US ever accepted that it has some responsibility for what was done to the region and what the region is now doing to the rest of the world?

The question should be asked today when battleships, bombers and commando units are taking up positions for military operations. Is anyone thinking what might be the consequences for Afghanistan of another deadly war? We heard the other day that the council of *ulema* has recommended that Osama bin Laden be asked to voluntarily leave Afghanistan. There is only one conclusion to be drawn from this. The religious leaders are terrified of that might become of their country and people if the US chooses to attack. And what about the consequences for Pakistan where a reluctant army, the only organized institution of the state, is being forced to lay the ground for an American invasion? What about the consequences for all of South Asia where there are two countries with nuclear weapons and a political atmosphere seething with religious and sectarian conflict?

Like it or not, comprehend it or not, the US is today the world's only imperial power. As such, everything it does has consequences for the world as a whole. It is not only the collateral damage of military action that American defence analysts must think of. American leaders must also necessarily think of the collateral damage they do to the history of societies and peoples all over the world. If the US is the world's only superpower, it must be responsible for its actions to the people of the whole world, not to some mythical international coalition hurriedly and cynically put together, but to countries and people—yes, ordinary and innocent people—who suffer the consequences of its actions.

I am not persuaded that either the American leadership or the American people are aware of the enormous moral responsibility contemporary history has put on them. In the aftermath of the attacks on the World Trade Center, President Bush could only think of the "Wanted" poster he had seen in Western movies. While the whole world is looking for an American policy that is flexible, sensitive, attuned to the enormous changes that have taken place in the world in the last decade or so, what we will probably get is more of the familiar American arrogance, bludgeoning and insensitivity. Perhaps, sadly, the first war of the twenty first century will end up no differently from the many wars of the twentieth. ■

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