

American Conundrum

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Many honest and thoughtful Americans seem genuinely perplexed these days – perplexed about who they are, about their place in the world, about their own goodness. While they know they are enraged given what has just happened to the country, they are unsure about a lot of other things. They don't know whether the events of September 11 have made them bigots and xenophobes for profiling "Arab looking" people in airport lounges, or whether they have a right to the kind of panic they are expressing. They are not so sure any more whether their civil liberties are more important than nerve gas or small pox. They don't know whether they should be livid at the actions of mass murders, or whether they should, as well, direct some of their anger at skewed policies that, invariably, favor national allies over dispossessed people, policies that are among the ostensible reasons for the September 11 attacks. And they don't know whether they should "negotiate with terrorists" by listening for any truth there might be in their claims about what we as Americans do in the world (listening, in order to perhaps save thousands of American lives), or whether they should balk at any such notion.

The capacity for this kind of introspection, for this kind of inner moral conflict, is what makes this country and its people so great. White Americans exhibited it during the civil rights struggles of the 1950s and 1960s, when they were made to juxtapose and reconcile cherished political ideals such as federalism and States' rights with the civil rights of America's black citizens. Then came Viet Nam, and Americans actualized this capacity as the country nudged the meaning of patriotism away from blind jingoism and toward a greater concern for our national ideals and our moral standing in the community of nations. This kind of critical self-doubt is what is beginning to emerge post-September 11, paradoxically *during* a long moment of moral certainty and national pride.

As a citizen and a New Yorker, my own brand of flag waving is indeed about solidarity with other Americans, particularly those I personally knew (now dead at the hands of terrorists) or who may die in battle on my behalf – about not standing for the kind of offense against my country and its peoples that we have all just suffered. But there is more to it than that.

Since September 11 I have witnessed Americans begin to search their souls and the common soul of the country, to attempt what is always necessary in order to learn from a tragedy such as this – that is, to hold several conflicting truths in their heads at the same time and to understand that where we go from here will take more than might and resolve, but vision and a new consideration for and of people we thought we could dismiss as irrelevant to our lives — people we thought we could appease with aid and relief while being viewed as accomplices in the denial of their right to self-determination and the democratic freedoms we claim to cherish.

I speak in this instance of the Palestinians, a people painted with a broad brush in

American media as a small community of thugs (if Americans only knew). One of the many unpleasant truths of bin Laden is that he is a cold blooded killer *and* a man of faith believing that he and his people (Arab and Muslim) have suffered indignities and atrocities at the hands of the very same nations leading the coalition that, rightly, seeks his life. I think that when he attacked my country, when he blew to pieces several thousands of my people and rendered others fatherless, motherless, or childless, when he yet threatens my own life and the lives of those I cherish, he forfeits his own life as well. For I have no doubt that he, along with his devotees, must and will be made to pay for his madness.

But along with other Americans I am wondering what role we have played in creating that madness. I am wondering what our arrogance in the world, our lack of concern and our blithe ignorance for and of the plight of people like the Palestinians and many others will bring down on our heads in the future. I am wondering this in a world in which it is now crystal clear that the response to perceived injustices can take insidious and hellish forms, and move undetected past great armies, over walls and fences and across oceans, right into our homes, arcades and work places. I wonder these things at the same time I wonder whether it is simply the case that a great, rich and modern nation will always, to some degree, be resented in a world still filled with people who remain obscure and poor, whether or not we have anything to do with that obscurity and poverty. Here are the conundrums. Here are the ironies. Here are the dangers.

It does not lack resolve or lessen our patriotism to suggest that with greatness such as ours comes the *responsibility* to open our eyes and ears to the pleas of people who view us as taking an active role in their destruction, the responsibility to rethink what we mean by "foreign policy." Or will we wait for others to fashion their own "gods" of vengeance to unleash upon us and upon our children? Will battle ships and fighter jets save us in a world where the weapons can be selected from the quotidian elements of any urban landscape? A truck? A plane? A car?

It may seem too soon to raise these questions, too soon after the fallen have lost their lives, too soon after our ships and planes have been launched to respond to the mass murder of our people. But is it really too soon, given what we may yet face?

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