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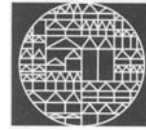
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C O M M O N W E A L



September 11, 2001

Millions of words have already been spoken and written about the September 11 terrorist attack on New York City and the Pentagon, an attack that destroyed the 110-story twin towers of the World Trade Center taking the unimaginable toll of more than five thousand innocent lives. What more can usefully be said about the cruelty and fanaticism of the suicide bombers, the horrific pathos of the last minutes of those trapped on the hijacked planes and in the targeted buildings, or the extraordinary dignity and heroism of the survivors and all those who came to their aid? America, and New York City in particular, can be a harsh, acquisitive place. But the response of New Yorkers and the nation as a whole to this terrible tragedy has revealed once again that the surface of modern American life is not the whole of American life, and that the "better angels of our nature" are there if we have the courage to summon them.

President George W. Bush and others have described the bombings as an "act of war." Congress moved swiftly to join the administration in promising a "devastating" military reprisal against those responsible. The nations of Europe and much of the rest of the world have voiced their support for the United States and for the effort to track down and punish the terrorists and their sponsors. Few dispute the right and the justice of fighting a "war" against terrorism, especially a terrorism whose utter disregard of human life suggests it is easily capable of using biological or even nuclear weapons next time.

Whom the United States should punish and how that should be done is much less clear, however. No group has claimed responsibility for the bombings. Early indications are that the terrorists come from many different Middle East countries and cannot be said to be the representatives of any one nation-state. Afghanistan is frequently mentioned as the haven or staging area for Osama bin Laden, the alleged mastermind of the plot. But how a U.S. attack on Afghanistan would either punish bin Laden or significantly disrupt his international network is not readily apparent. Only the most careful deliberation on the part of President Bush and his advisers is likely to result in a plan of action that will bring this confounding new threat to the nation's security under control. A disproportionate show of force that kills innocents yet fails to cripple an elusive enemy will only strengthen the terrorists' hand.

New thinking is needed, but Bush's unsteady performance in the aftermath of the bombings has done little to create greater confidence in his judgment and leadership. Certainly this administration's boastful unilateralism and naive isolationism now stand exposed as folly. The apparent size and complexity of the terrorist plan has also revealed a massive failure in U.S. intelligence gathering and analysis. That failure should not now be compounded by a failure to think through how the U.S. can best defend itself. The moral legitimacy of using military force is not in question; its effective and proportional use is. "The violence to the spirit, the death and the destruction of men, institutions and resources that inflicts and impends over our people and the world makes every attempt at cooler analysis feel like an indignity," the editors of *Com-*

HOW IT FELT

A report from Manhattan

monweal wrote immediately after the bombing of Pearl Harbor and the declaration of war on Japan and Germany. "We must try to distinguish between using the organized energies of the war to build a positive peace from merely dissipating those energies in destroying the symptoms and symbols of the forces fighting against us."

We are sixty years and a world away from that generation-defining crisis, but our moral condition is largely unchanged. However ruthless our enemy may be, our responsibility is still, as *Commonweal's* editors noted, to respect "the human and Christian precept that man must regard the good or evil of his act and leave the resolution of his life and history to God alone... We are accountable for the means we use." President Bush has not been issued a "blank check" of any sort to combat this great evil. The moral outrage with which we honor the dead and seek to hold the terrorists accountable must be the same measure by which we judge our own actions.

The challenge facing us is daunting, but we are not without guidance. Those who rejected nihilism and stood against evil in the past lead the way. In "September 1, 1939," W.H. Auden's famous poem on the Nazi invasion of Poland, he wrote (most evocatively for New Yorkers today) of sitting "in one of the dives/On Fifty-second Street/Uncertain and afraid" and of how "The unmentionable odor of death/Offends the September night." Auden went on to contemplate the majestic New York skyline, a monument and a symbol of humankind's achievement, an achievement shadowed by human vanity and the mystery of evil:

Into this neutral air
Where blind skyscrapers use
Their full height to proclaim
The strength of Collective Man,
Each language pours its vain
Competitive excuse...

As we have witnessed during these unforgettable days, the strength of collective man is used both to build and to destroy. All monuments to human genius are perishable. But the human spirit, as the response to this monstrous crime has shown, is made of less perishable material than skyscrapers. Auden ended his poem about the nature of evil in the modern world by looking hopefully to "the Just" and offering a prayerful petition:

May I, composed like them
Of Eros and of dust,
Beleaguered by the same
Negation and despair,
Show an affirming flame.

This city and this nation have shown an affirming flame to the world during these dreadful September days. It must be kept lit.

Like most people, I had no idea as I walked to work September 11 that four planes had been hijacked and one of them had slammed into the north tower of the World Trade Center. When Quanda Williams, *Commonweal's* administrative assistant, asked me as I passed her desk if I'd heard about the plane that hit the World Trade Center, I dismissed the incident as a tragic accident. Maybe a small plane had clipped one of the towers. That was 9 A.M. As is routine for me, I sat down in front of my computer, opened the *New York Times* Web page, and sipped coffee. The page took longer than usual to load. Something was amiss.

By the time the page loaded, United Flight 175 had already been driven through the south tower. Looking for news, I frantically went from site to site, trying to get video of the events. CNN, no. MSNBC, nothing. Paul Kane, our business manager, suggested the BBC. Bingo. They had live coverage. As the office gathered around the computer screen, the horrors unfolded. "They hit the Pentagon." "The south tower just collapsed." The rumors proliferated. "A third unidentified plane circling New York. They can't find it." All of us in the office stood watching the monitor, the video of the south tower's collapse played again and again. Hands covered mouths. Then the other tower went. At low resolution we saw the building fall.

The phones were useless for much of the day, but as the hours passed more information came. A terrorist attack, for sure. No third plane circling Manhattan. Everything closed: subways, commuter rail, bridges and tunnels, highways. The island went on lockdown. By the end of the workday, almost everyone had left. Staff members who live outside Manhattan had an uncertain journey ahead of them after limited outbound transit resumed. I was nervous about leaving, feeling decidedly agoraphobic.

The walk home, thirteen blocks away, like so much that day, was surreal. I had never heard Broadway so quiet. Downtown traffic was sparse. Pedestrian traffic was diminished. Many people huddled around television sets in restaurants and bars. Several people cried openly, on other people's shoulders, into cupped hands. Everyone was in shock, watching the ground as they walked more slowly than usual. I needed to stop at an ATM, and hated having to do so. The triviality of the act left me feeling cheap and disconnected. Once I reached my block, I ducked into church, slouching into a pew in the back corner. I knelt, tried to pray, but found I couldn't. Four others were present with me. We wept together.

When my cellular phone finally came back up at 8 P.M., I had fifteen voice-mail messages. The first was from a good friend. "Grant, this is Izzy Casaletto. It's like nine [A.M.] or