



It Happened Here

“SENSELESS,” “UNIMAGINABLE,” “CRAZY,” “UNFATHOMABLE”: as the World Trade Center fell and the Pentagon burned, those were the words that came to the lips of many Americans, on camera and off camera. We must beware those words. They have a way of carrying the war against us away from us, of fortifying our incredulity against the evidence of our eyes, of shutting down thought when thought is required, of lifting the obscenity that was visited upon

America back out of the realm of possibility. But the legacy of September 11, 2001, must be nothing less than a new sense of what is possible. When those planes flew into those buildings, the luck of America ran out. And so we must finally allow ourselves to be sobered out of our sensation of historical and geographical immunity. We must not let the tremor of what we have seen pass from us. It happened here.

“Senseless,” “unimaginable,” “crazy,” “unfathomable”: these words that preserve the catastrophe as a black idiosyncrasy of American experience, as an event too unlike the way we live to be incorporated into the way we think, must be resisted also on other grounds. They are simply false. It is not true that the attacks of September 11 were unimaginable; and anyway imagination is no longer necessary, now that we have memory. It is not true that they were crazy, except by our standards and the standards of civilization; but those are not the only standards in the world. It is not true that they were senseless, because they made sense to the people who carried them out, and to the individuals and the movements and the states that supported them or applauded them. It is not true that they are unfathomable; they were actions with reasons. These evil deeds were the results of beliefs. If we do not comprehend those reasons and those beliefs, then all we will do is mourn our dead and heal ourselves back into the traditions of our complacency.

History is asking more of this country than sorrow.

Let us start the rebuilding of our understanding of our place in the world by recognizing that we are living in a new era of anti-Americanism. This may seem surprising, in the aftermath of America's triumph in the cold war. “I am for peace,” the Psalmist declared in bewilderment, “but when I speak, they are for war.” This is America's bewilderment exactly. But perhaps the equivocal position of the United States in the post-cold-war world is not so surprising. For the victory of the United States, democracy, and capitalism demonstrated more than just their superiority to the Soviet Union, totalitarianism, and socialism. It was also a great demonstration of what used to be called American exceptionalism. The United States—and more generally the West, a geographical appellation that is really a moral appellation—was revealed to be peaceful and prosperous in a world that was more and more a political and economic shambles. A shattering difference in the fates of nations was made clear.

The spectacle of American happiness—we were pursuing what Jefferson instructed us to pursue and we seemed to be gaining it—provoked opposite reactions in the suffering regions of the world. Briefly, it provoked a love of America and a hatred of America. There were many who wanted an American happiness for themselves and their children, and they did what they could do to gain it. But there were many who chose to condemn what they could not attain—whose envy of America curdled into resentment, and whose resentment curdled into an analysis that made America responsible for the non-American conditions of their lives, and whose analysis curdled into ideologies of “resistance” against the symbols and the interests and the allies of the United States. This anti-Americanism had its spokesmen in America, too. “When will the smaller, lesser, weaker peoples,” Edward Said wrote in 1999, during the American-led war to rescue Kosovo from extinction, “realize that this America is to be resisted at all costs, not pandered to or given in to naively?” That was the “progressive” question and the “progressive” vocabulary in the 1990s.

Does anybody doubt that the crusade against globalization is to a significant degree a crusade against the proliferation of American values and American practices around the world?

For an alibi must again be devised: another wave of progress has come and gone, and many regions did not seize it. Instead they transformed the old charge that modernization was American imperialism into the new charge that globalization is American imperialism. The politics of anti-globalization has revived the old "North-South" analysis of the 1970s, a fatalistic and even paranoid view of social and economic failure that had the effect of trapping many states and societies in their failing ways. The United States has become once again the archetypal adversary of the wretched of the earth: and in the excitable warrens of militant Islam this conspiracy theory has been promoted into a theology, into an expectation of apocalypse. Thus it was that *Al-Ahram*, the government newspaper in Egypt, described the attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon as the "beginning of a war against globalization." The editorial explained that "[t]he real reason behind the terrorism is the widening of the gap between north and south." Never mind that poor people do not generally become murderers, and that the lesser, smaller, weaker peoples have sent many more immigrants to these shores than terrorists. We must welcome the immigrants. We must extirpate the terrorists.

Anybody who hates modernity hates America. Anybody who hates freedom hates America. Anybody who hates privacy hates America. Anybody who hates human rights hates America. Anybody who hates ballots and bookshops and newspapers and televisions and computers and theaters and bars and the sight of a woman smiling at a man hates America. Osama bin Laden and the terrorists of Al Qaeda chose the United States as their target in perfect accordance with their beliefs. Philosophically speaking, we are their mortal foes and they are ours. But to the hatred of America they add another virulence, the hatred of Israel. In the same breath bin Laden calls for the killing of Americans and the killing of Jews. "We will see again Saladin carrying his sword," he ranted on a tape that surfaced this June, "with the blood of unbelievers dripping from it." By unbelievers, of course, he means those who do not believe what he believes: this is an enemy by whom we should be proud to be known.

The religious dimension of bin Laden's war against Zionism is perfectly clear. In his view, he wins heaven who wreaks hell. Bin Laden is waging a holy war, which is always the unholy war of all, since it drags the most sacred things into its crimes. The common view is that he is seeking to punish America for its association with Israel, but the contrary is also the case. He wishes also to punish Israel (and Jews generally) for being so remorselessly American, that is, so secular, so liberal, so enthralled by enlightenment, so unimpeded by the burdens of the past. Israel poses the same threat to bin

Laden's picture of the world, the same challenge to his horror of liberty and equality, as the United States does, and Israel is flourishing right there in the orbit of Islam. Its vitality represents a rebuke to its torpid region. For this reason, the terrorist war against the United States and the terrorist war against Israel is the same war. This is as it must be, for the principles of the United States and the principles of Israel are the same principles, the same brazenly modernizing ideals. If not for anti-Americanism and anti-Semitism, those two towers would still be standing.

THIS WEEK THERE does not seem to be anybody in America who does not agree that this is a war. Under the influence of those infernal images, the nation appears to have discovered the virtue of indignation. But can we bind this anger? It will not be easy. Americans are athletes of the emotions, and we live in a society for which anger is merely "healthy," that is, valuable for its lack of consequences. It is also true that the resumption of ordinary life is the only real victory over all this death. But this time the anger of America must not be regarded as just a sentiment, for it represents also a proper assessment of our situation. We were attacked. We are vulnerable. We have enemies. This is a war.

So how shall we fight this war? We cannot fight it as we fight other wars. Our adversary is not a state and not an army: the defense professionals warn of the difficulties of "asymmetric warfare." But surely one of those asymmetries is an asymmetry of power. We are spectacularly stronger and more resourceful than the suicidal cabals that have been formed against us. We require a lot more intelligence (judging by what happened last week, we require any intelligence at all) and a lot more cunning; but above all we must state clearly as a nation, to ourselves and to the world, that we are preparing to kill anybody who is preparing to kill us. Is this a policy of assassination? It is not, because assassination is too grand a term for the murder of murderers. It is a policy of self-defense. And it is not a policy of retaliation, but a policy of active and sustained aggression against all individuals and groups whom we have confidently identified as terrorists. These murderers may be in our midst, or they may be in Afghanistan or Iraq or Syria or Pakistan or the Sudan; but it is impossible to believe that we cannot find them if we genuinely wish to find them. President Bush was right to proclaim, moreover, that "we will make no distinction between the terrorists who committed these acts and those who harbored them." Our adversaries are not states, but they cannot survive or succeed without the support of states. It is time to raise the costs of such support. (It is also time for the Saudis

to cease their filthy little games.) For pursuing such a policy, we will assuredly reap more hatred, but only in places where we are already despised; and behold what the absence of such a policy has already reaped.

The fires were still roaring at the World Trade Center and the Pentagon when the air began to fill with alarms about the morality of a serious campaign against terrorism. David McCullough preached on CNN that "I'm afraid that it will also mean a curtailing, trimming up some—maybe even eviscerating of the open society [that] we know." (This is the same man who is making a mint off an admiring biography of the author of the Alien and Sedition Acts.) The editorial page of *The New York Times* warned that "[t]he temptation will be great in the days ahead to write draconian new laws that give law enforcement agencies—or even military forces—a right to undermine the civil liberties that shape the character of the United States." Military forces? The editors of the *Times* have been spending too much time at Blockbuster. Who in the American government is suggesting that we tear up the Constitution or perish? The notion that we cannot destroy terrorism without destroying liberalism, or that the fight against terrorists transforms us into terrorists, is *bien pensant* demagoguery, and its only effect is to inhibit the already inhibited. Our security need not be purchased at the price of our scruples. Now we have been shown that we are not secure. Is there really no significant change in our national security policy that is warranted by what we have witnessed? If the charnel house of lower Manhattan changes nothing, then we will deserve to despise ourselves.

But in truth it is hard to speak of policy when all that fills the mind is tragedy. The ashes of Manhattan cover the entire land. The pictures wound and wound and wound. The planes slam every time for the first time, the buildings fall every time for the first time. Over and over our brothers and our sisters die. These are the records of a defeat, and of a derangement of the universe. Eloquence is stupid. We have been slaughtered. Even if we live in a culture of forgetting, this we must never forget. ■

Brooklyn Dispatch

Under the Bridge

By PAUL BERMAN

I AM WRITING seven or eight hours after the attack, and, through my study window in Brooklyn, I see black plumes still billowing from lower Manhattan. In the morning, from my rooftop, I watched the first flames encircle the twin towers and the black cloud float over the harbor. The smoke seemed oddly speckled with glinting white spots, which I at first thought might

PAUL BERMAN is author of *A Tale of Two Utopias: The Political Journey of the Generation of 1968* (Norton).

have been gulls. But they were papers sucked out of the burning buildings. Some of the specks were also, I later learned, human body parts. A silvery necklace as wide as a building seemed to drop from one of the burning towers. I thought it might have been part of the façade, tearing away. It was not the façade. The smoke cleared for a brief second, and the tower was gone. Below me, on Brooklyn's Atlantic Avenue, fire engines began to scream, trying to push their way through traffic into Manhattan.

By late morning huge parades of people from Manhattan had begun to make their way on foot across the bridges into Brooklyn and were dragging themselves along Atlantic Avenue, some of them still wearing masks over their mouths and noses, a white soot on their clothes and shoes. I went out into the street. Lower Atlantic Avenue has been a largely Arab district for some 70 years, filled with storefronts adorned with Arabic letters and names. Here and there among the crowd, people were hurling curses at Arabs and at foreigners. A round-faced man declaimed, "Don't let any more of these foreign Arabs come into this country no more! They hate us!" I stopped at a store where I know a clerk from Morocco. He has told me he admires the moderate and tolerant views of the late king of Morocco and of the new, young king. Now the clerk was standing taciturn behind the counter, his face compressed. Outside, the round-faced man was shouting, "We gotta get rid of all these foreigners!"

AT SMITH STREET a woman who said she worked near the World Trade Center stood on the sidewalk, dust on her clothes; she, too, spoke against the Arabs. "This is where all these hateful people live!" she said, gesturing up Atlantic Avenue. I asked her what she had seen. She said she had seen people hurl themselves to the ground from very high floors of the World Trade Center. "Where is Bush?" she said, exploding in anger. "Where was the Army?" She had seen a terrified old man on the Brooklyn Bridge, unable to walk any further because of his panic, clutching a pole.

I walked to the Brooklyn Bridge and tried to cross into Manhattan, but I was turned away by the police. I tried to cross on the Manhattan Bridge, and I got part of the way over the river before I was turned back again. So I joined the endless stream of people going the other way, into Brooklyn—the vast and varied crowd that resembled a crowd in almost no other place on Earth, faces that were African, Asian, Latin, European—the whole of mankind. A Hasid sped by on a roller scooter. Near Long Island University, the sidewalks were filled with students passing out water, as if to the runners in a marathon.

It was a gratifying scene of communal solidarity. But on Fulton Street, as I beaded back to my home, I saw that the storekeepers had pulled down their metal shutters and the street was empty. A cop told me that looters had begun to run up and down Fulton Street. In exchange for that information, I told him a rumor I had heard from one of his colleagues on the Manhattan Bridge: that large numbers of cops could not be accounted for and were prob-

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