

Ashes Over America (A Wake-up Call to the Nation)

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Ashes from the destructed World Trade Center towers plumed over New York City and lay inches deep in the streets. A smaller scene was duplicated at the Pentagon in Washington, DC. Such ashes, a metaphor for the work of terrorists, had fallen on other places around the world, and a few years earlier, had even fallen on New York City - but this was an event of horrific proportions by comparison.

Several times since this attack, as a community, we have gathered to share our feelings, send our prayers and embrace one another and the nation, as have communities across the world. And, again, at the beginning of this service, we have given focus to this opportunity to grieve and pray and begin the process of personal and community healing.

Such grieving, supporting and embracing is both necessary and appropriate. And it is also necessary and appropriate for our national leaders to assure us that all that will be done, that is morally possible, to bring to justice those remaining terrorists who participated in this attack.

However, these responses are insufficient within themselves to address this happening or to prevent more ashes falling on America in the future. We must seriously look for the remedies with a sense of immediacy.

With this future in mind, I share my personal perceptions about the larger meanings of this historical moment.

And the first is that these ashes represent a wake-up call for America. Whether we wish it or not, our nation is now directly subject to the concerns of the global community. There are no more geographic exemptions for the world's greatest power and most privileged people. The neo-isolationism of this power and privilege is over.

This does not mean that some politicians will not try to use this event to build and even stronger cocoon of isolation around us. But it does mean that for thoughtful Americans we must join the world community, not simply to root out terrorism, but to be genuinely concerned, beyond our own self-interest, about the global economy, about the global environment and about the quality of life of the globe's people.

The second observation has to do with big government. As I use it, "big" refers not necessarily to size, although size is important, rather to a powerful and pervasive influence.

Our nation was birthed out of an ambivalent attitude toward government - a knowledge of its necessity, coupled with a fear of its influence. Caught in this ambivalence, we have inevitably and erroneously equated the corruption and abuses of government with its size.

But the lesson of our history is clear - a big, or government powerful and influential, has made us what we are.

- It saved the Union.
- It freed the slaves.
- It translated all liberation movements into law and enforcement.
- It created the infrastructure for commerce.
- It provides both the external and internal security of the nation.
- It protects the weak from being exploited by the powerful.
- It regulates business and keeps the nation from being totally ruled by economic oligarchies.
- It provided the projects and programs that electrified the nation which made it an economic and military power in the world.

The list is endless. Needless to say, big government has been the only power pervasive enough to hold the fabric of democracy together and elevate the nation to its present quality of life. The corruption and misguided directions, so often characteristic of our government, are not due to big, rather, to small, unprincipled politicians elected by a small, self-centered citizenry.

When the terrorists attacked on Tuesday, it was only big government that had the power to respond. And if terrorists are brought to justice the world around, it will only be through the powers of big government. And if the shores of our nation are going to be secured from further terrorism in any measure, the only agent capable of doing so and the only agent capable of raising the resources to do so, is big government.

It's time to rethink the meaning of big government in the modern world. It's time to give big government its proper due. Its time for the citizenry to assume responsibility for how it is run, rather than scapegoating big government. And, it's time to quit listening to unscrupulous politicians who scapegoat big government as campaign issues.

The third observation I make is that we, as a nation, must at last lose our innocence. Loss of innocence is not to experience anguish or suffering - as so many of those at this present moment would have us believe. It is to admit one's complicity with evil.

American history, both nationally and internationally, is a record of such complicity:

- Our native American Indian holocaust.
- 200 years of both slavery and continued abuse of the black population.
- Over 200 years of various forms of subjugation of women.
- Our aggressive land grabs on the American continent.
- The contrived Spanish American war.
- Our economic exploitation of Central and South American and our aggressive military overthrow of legitimate governments in these countries in order to continue this exploitation.
- Our hypocritical and selective application of the democratic process in world affairs for economic and propaganda purposes.
- Our being the largest supplier of arms to other nations in the world and our simultaneous decrying of the use of these arms.

- Our exploitation and use of the lion's share of the world's resources.
- Our support of brutal, dictatorial political regimes around the world when it serves our perceived national good.

In brief, ours is a history of the abuse of the democratic myth and our privileged status in the world. And we naively ask ourselves why some fanatical, political, religious extremists, raised in deprived third world countries, would want to attack such a wonderful place as ours.

We are an adolescent nation awaiting the maturity of this acknowledged complicity with evil. With such maturity come a gratitude rather than an arrogance toward privilege, a sharing rather than a hoarding of the earth's resources, an empathy rather than a contempt toward less developed nations, and a principled application of the democratic myth in the global community.

How we posture ourselves among nations as we respond internationally to this terrorist attack, will be a measure of our country's willingness:

- to see ourselves as others often see us
- to see ourselves as we really are
- to lower the facade of our innocence and see the world around us with different eyes

My last observation is that this tragedy we face is a reflection of a much larger mythic battle. Myth is a view of reality. It is our answers to life's compelling questions about the mystery of our existence. Myth is the filter through which we push our experience to create meaning. Every individual, every institution, every nation lives through and by myth. That is, all humans and the cultures they create are shaped by peculiar views of reality.

History is nothing more than the interpretations we give to the conflicts or consorts of myth. Every human contention and aggression is myth-driven.

The terrorists who attacked America were being driven by their personal interpretations of political and religious myths. While we, through our myths, may see them and their act as evil - they, obviously, saw it as nobility and even assuring of their place in everlasting glory. I remind us that the extremist Jews and Christians of Western history have shared this same kind of militancy along with extremist Muslims.

Most nations are reluctant to use massive weapons of destruction available to them because they know that the outcome can only be ashes falling upon their own heads. But those who live extreme militant mythologies, which offer eternal rewards for the mass destruction of their enemies, have no such reluctance.

The question is, what is the answer to this kind of extreme mythic militancy? I do not recall his name, but an expert in middle eastern affairs (to whatever extent there is such an expert) interviewed this week on television, suggested that we must look at terrorism from two different perspectives. First, we must, indeed, see it as a war and in this war must do all that is necessary to eliminate the threat of terrorism by eliminating the terrorist. Then, he reminded us that such action is insufficient because other terrorists will simply take their place. He went on to say that

we must not only eliminate the terrorist, we must eliminate the disease that creates the terrorist. I believe this perception to be the only answer to terrorism.

Even if President Bush could destroy the terrorists responsible for this horrific attack (who are still living), that would only be eliminating a momentary symptom of the real cause. Such may satisfy the spirit of vengeance, but it will not satisfy a peaceful future. It is like stopping the immediate epidemic without killing the germ that caused it.

This germ is mythic and cannot be destroyed by technological weaponry. It can only be either replaced by an alternative myth or contained and curbed by the mythic environment in which it resides.

This means there must be a global myth which essential parts are shared by the nations of the world. These shared parts must spring from an international affirmation of respect for the worth of all people. These mythic parts are a mutual acknowledgment:

- of the human interdependency with the natural environment
- of each nation's interdependency with the global community
- of the necessity of cooperation over violence as the means of international problem-solving
- of the right of all individuals and nations to peaceably live differing views of reality

While America cannot dictate how these shared parts will be expressed in the myth of other nations, it must model adjusting its own mythic perceptions to accommodate them. In my mind, such an accommodation will require two primary mythic shifts in our culture.

The first has to do with the American Dream. This Dream is predicated on two notions. The first notion is that every citizen should have the opportunity to improve the quality of their life. This is a notion which is consistent with the essential principle of egalitarianism that undergirds and sustains the myth of democracy. The second notion is that human worth is an external commodity which can be purchased through achieved position or financial status. This notion is false and counterproductive to democracy. And it is the root of America's self-centered pursuit of external rather than spiritual satisfactions. And when applied by our nation internationally, it instructs us to behave with the same greed orientation among these nations as it does internally within our own culture.

As long as human worth is externalized as a social commodity, it will not be possible for America to model effectively any of the shared mythic parts I have mentioned. So, the first step is to kill that part of the American Dream which defies the principle of egalitarianism and fosters spiritual corruption.

The second primary mythic shift is to deny the legitimacy of the Messianic myth which has wrapped itself around the myth of democracy and pretended that they are synonymous. The Messianic myth rises out of Judaism and Christianity and roots itself back to the birth of the nation. For years it reflected itself in the notion of Manifest Destiny. But it has been a major staple of the speeches of religious leaders and politicians throughout American history - and found a special empowerment following World War Two. There are four facets of this myth:

1. America is God's chosen nation.
2. God is on America's side. Note, not that America is on God's side.
3. America is, therefore, invincible.
4. The purpose of America is to save the world for democracy. After all, God's nation is fueled by the democratic myth, therefore that is God's myth.

The war in Vietnam caused this myth to be questioned - particularly that facet about American invincibility. But it was restored as legitimate through the Gulf War. This war was about the control of oil. But in cloaking America's participation in the Messianic myth of saving the world for democracy - specifically Kuwait - we reinstated its honor in our national history.

I watched the televised service of Prayer and Remembrance held at the National Cathedral in Washington, DC on Friday. I was moved by the music, the spirit and some of the words. Yet, as I participated, it became obvious to me that the mythic perspective which served as its background was Messianism.

The American flag and the symbols of the Judeo-Christian faith linked; a Psalm from the Old Testament affirming God's righteous judgment upon the enemies of his people; the Lord's Prayer sung; the Bible as the source of authority; all appeals for healing and empowerment to deal with the issues confronting us to an omniscient god; the conclusion setting the mythic tone of warfare and triumph; singing the "Battle Hymn of the Republic"; and, all of it bracketed with speeches from the nation's two primary leaders of the Messianic Myth - the Reverend Billy Graham and the Reverend George Bush. I suspect it would have been of little difference had it been the Reverend Bill Clinton rather than the Reverend George Bush.

It seems to me, that this Messianic myth is a myth of profound arrogance and intolerance. And until we shuck the myth of democracy of its cloaking we will never, as a nation, be humble enough or caring enough about the plight of the global community, or accepting enough of alternative views of reality to model a myth that addresses the needs of the global community and particularly at this moment.

In essence, until we throw off this cloak of arrogance and intolerance, which sees our privileged status in the world as a right conferred upon us by God, we will continue to be the ugly American that garners the contempt and hatred of many parts of the global community.

The remaining question is: "What can we, as a nation, do in response to last Tuesday's attack on America?" Here are my answers:

- We can spread the word that America needs to join the global community rather than simply exploiting it. That is, we can contribute to a national change of lifestyle that will cause us to cease being the Robber Baron of the global community.
- We can acknowledge our national complicity with evil. We can affirm that even when we intend good it may rebound to bad. And we can express the humility that comes from such acknowledgment in our relationship with other nations.
- We can, with seriousness, enjoin the mythic battle of history. We can lay aside the Messianic myth and engage a mythic cloaking more consistent with the true spirit of democracy and model

such among the nations.

-- We can grant other nations the same right of self-determination we assume for ourselves.

-- We can understand that true patriotism has nothing to do with the blindness inherent in the aphorism: "My Country Right or Wrong" - rather, that it is an avowing and a living of the egalitarian principles of the myth of democracy - and know that our protests of our own nation's violations of this principle are expressions of patriotism.

I believe if we do not do these things ashes again will fall over America.

We can assure ourselves that if any of these suggestions are to become a national reality, their translation must begin in this religious community.

I close with one last observation: The event of this past Tuesday not only cost thousands of lives, it calls for a change in our cultural lifestyle and it will end up costing a staggering billions upon billions of dollars. For those of you who thought that little pittance of a tax refund was a windfall, you have a rude awakening ahead of you.

How could just a few people accomplish such an astounding impact on this nation? The answer is because these terrorists were willing to die for what they believed in the same manner that Martin Luther King, Jr. admonished the workers of the twentieth century Civil Rights movement to approach and engage their beliefs. We may not like this comparison, but it makes no difference how atrociously misguided we perceive the application of these terrorists' devotion to be or how evil we perceive the end result. The principle of history is clear: it is convicted devotion to belief which alters the course of human destiny.

Consider this: what impact on human destiny could this religious community have if it lived a similar devotion to its values of nobility?

So Be It.