

REFLECTIONS AFTER THE TERROR

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On September 11, 2001, America was changed forever. Our country is still reeling from the terrorist attacks which were designed to make us, forever after, live in fear. And as we watched the networks replay again and again the crash of United flight #175 into the World Trade Center; as we viewed the subsequent collapse of the twin towers which symbolized America's preeminence in the arena of world commerce; as we witnessed the devastation that shattered 5,000 lives, we all began to experience a strange new feeling – one called “vulnerability”. Along with shattered buildings and shattered lives, these acts of madness shattered certain myths about American life. Tonight, I would like to examine some of those myths and the lessons we are learning in the aftermath of the terror.

The Myth of Security

Not since the War of 1812 had an invader drawn blood in the nation's capital. In 1814, the British burned the White House, the Capitol, the Library of Congress, and the Washington Navy Yard. Of interest, the War of 1812 was occasioned not only by the impressment of our sailors on the high seas, but also, in part, by state-sponsored terrorism. The British were inciting Indians on America's frontier to terrorize the ever-expanding, upstart, former colony. Only after the decisive battle of New Orleans, when Andrew Jackson routed the British, was this war brought to a successful conclusion. In that battle, America suffered only eight casualties to the British's 2,500. Small wonder, then, that Andrew Jackson, who demonstrated resolute toughness in the face of adversity (hence the name “Old Hickory”), won the hearts of his countrymen.

With almost 200 years behind us without an invasion of our homeland; with vast oceans on either side and friendly neighbors above and below, America felt secure. In the process, however, we became complacent. With the collapse of the Soviet Union and the victorious conclusion of the Cold War, Americans set about spending the “peace dividend,” downsizing the military, and

generally proclaiming “Peace in our time!” Apathy and complacency became our unseen, unidentified enemies. We turned a blind eye to the true nature of the world around us and forgot the most important lessons of history, that eternal vigilance is the price of peace and that there is no “last” war, only interludes between wars. Complacency became our undoing. The myth of American security was shattered in the wreckage of the Pentagon, our symbol of *military* might, and in the rubble of the World Trade Center, the symbol of our *economic* might.

The Myth of Prosperity and Self Indulgence

Closely connected to the myth of security was the myth of prosperity and self-indulgence. If Americans had faith in anything, it was faith in our prosperity. Surely as long as we were prosperous, we would be secure.

Indeed, the mantra that had come to symbolize the spirit of the age for the past decade was, “It’s the economy, stupid,” implying that, perhaps, man really did live by bread alone. On September 11th, as we watched the twin towers of the World Trade Center explode and then collapse in a heap of rubble, we learned that it is more than just the economy – much more. Bank balances and stock portfolios – no matter how big or how diversified – do not protect against all of the uncertainties of the future.

For the better part of a decade, we had focused on capital formation and ignored the evidence of cultural disintegration that was all around us: rampant abortion on demand; radical homosexual activism; warehousing of the elderly; fatherless homes; out-of-wedlock births; rising divorce rates and serial cohabitation; the plague of pornography; and the loss of civility. We had put our faith in our material possessions and neglected the bedrock values that for more than two centuries have sustained our nation. Indeed, we forgot that these ideals are the very *source* of our prosperity.

Our culture had been on an ego-trip. We had defined liberty as the freedom to do whatever we want, when we want, without regard to the consequences. Since the 1960’s, “Do your own thing” had been our culture’s rallying cry. We lived for self-gratification: “If it feels good, do it.” “If you want it, buy it.” “If the baby is inconvenient, kill it.” The first duty is to self. The first right is the right of ego.

Having elevated the autonomous individual as the culture’s highest ideal, we allowed the social institutions that historically have provided the glue that binds us to one another – marriage, family, church – to atrophy. We thought that we did not have any problems that money could not solve, which is perhaps why we reacted with such unease as we watched the Dow Jones and Nasdaq averages

plunge in the aftermath of the attacks. The myth that we would be okay if we just had enough money exploded along with the Pentagon and the World Trade Center.

The Myth of Immortality

The third myth that went up in smoke on September 11th was the myth that we were somehow immortal.

Now we didn't consciously think we were immortal, but as a culture, we lived in a state of blissful denial, pretending that death is not really the great equalizer that comes for us all. We made a fetish of youth, and clung to the self-delusion that we can escape the inexorable march of time through liposuction and facelifts. Frustrated in our quest to find the fountain of youth, we undertook to fund medical research which scavenges the parts of the youngest and smallest among us in a never-ending quest to offset the ravages that time inflicts on the rest of us.

In our increasingly secularized society, we rejected the idea of future rewards and divine judgment. We lived as though this mortal existence is all there is and as if it would go on forever.

As of September 11, we know better. Now we know that life is a fragile thing and that it can be snuffed out forever. There is no more denying our own mortality. When we saw 5,000 people die at one place, at one time, we quickly realized that it can happen to us, too.

Suddenly the adolescent nature of so much of our popular culture seemed grotesquely frivolous. We can never look at a youth-worshipping Calvin Klein ad again and, even for an instant, take it seriously. We are collectively embarrassed by the silly and superficial things that on September 10th we regarded as so very important. The myth of immortality lies buried beneath the rubble of the World Trade Center and the Pentagon.

These and other self-delusions came crashing down upon us on September 11th. The awful attacks, however, ignited a period of national introspection. And in the aftermath of the atrocities, we are learning (or *re-learning*) some important lessons.

Lessons Learned

The Role of Faith

For one thing, we are relearning the important role that faith plays in preserving a culture. It has been heartening to observe the reaction of the American people in the aftermath of these events. On the Sunday following the attacks and on

every Sunday thereafter, churches have been filled to overflowing. Our president called on us to observe a National Day of Prayer and Remembrance. The Supreme Court (for goodness sake!) for the first time in its history opened its' session this week with a first ever moment of silence. Bible sales are up twenty percent. Sales of books on Bible prophecy are up eighty percent. Rabbi Jacob Goldstein began his service for Rosh Hashanah, the High Holy Days that mark the beginning of the Jewish New Year, at ground zero, the site of the attack in New York. There he declared, "There are no atheists in foxholes," and "we are all in one big foxhole now."

And, notwithstanding the best efforts over the last four decades of media elites, academics, and federal judges to secularize American society, it was the Scriptures that were quoted at funeral and memorial services, not editorials from the *New York Times* or excerpts from Darwin's *Descent of Man From the Lower Order of Animals*. People called on pastors and priests to make sense out our calamity. They did not call psychiatrists, psychotherapists, or even the psychic hotline. The relevance of our national motto, "In God We Trust," seemed to become more apparent than before.

The Role of Family

In the aftermath of this tragedy, we relearned important lessons about the role of family in our culture. Hard-bitten executives now hug their wives and children tighter. And who was it that the passengers on the doomed airliners called in their last moments? Not their brokers, not their bosses, but their families. "I love you." "Forgive me." "Think of me." Family counts when the chips are down.

The Role of Freedom

Americans are also relearning to cherish their freedoms – especially their freedom from fear. The sounds of sirens in New York City and Washington, D.C., evoke a response among the hearers not heretofore known. Troop mobilizations remind us that freedom isn't free. The sight of Old Glory and the strains of the National Anthem once more bring tears to eyes that have long been dry.

In the midst of our great national mourning, a new sense of clarity has begun to emerge. Americans are once again beginning to focus on the things that matter most – faith, family, and freedom. Over the last several decades, these virtues were deemed by some to have become passé. Yet, suddenly, they are in fashion again.

The Value of a Virtuous Society

As our nation readies its response; as we begin to position the young men and women of our military in harm's way; as we ask our best and brightest to prepare to die for their country, it is important that we ask ourselves what is it we are asking them to die for? What is it about the American *way of life* that merits their giving up their lives to sustain it? It's a question we dare not fail to ask.

For several decades before the start of this war on terror that we are now embarking on, our country has been engaged in what some have called our "culture war." While the term "culture war" may seem exaggerated in the face of a war which uses guns, bullets, explosives, and, possibly, weapons of mass destruction—in a certain sense it has been, and continues to be, a "war." It is most assuredly a *battle* of ideas, a *conflict* of values. And the outcome of that war which continues to be waged, even as our military mobilizes, may significantly impact the success of America's war on terrorism or the next shooting war to come down the pike. For you see, in the final analysis, young men will not be willing to "walk through the valley of the shadow of death" unless the prize to be gained is deemed worth it.

General John Wickam, former commander of the 101st Airborne Division and subsequently Army Chief of Staff, once visited the battlefield at Antietam. Looking over the Confederate positions along Bloody Lane where, in September 1862, several Union assaults were repulsed with a staggering loss of life, General Wickam marveled, "You couldn't get American soldiers today to make an attack like that." In explaining why men fought in the Civil War, why they would march shoulder to shoulder into murderous fire, climb over mutilated bodies of friends and hurl themselves into entrenched lines, historian James McPherson suggests Civil War soldiers were willing to die for principles. They were motivated to do what they did out of their sense of duty, honor, and religious faith.

Ask any high school or college student today, "What would you die for?," and the answer is likely to depress. And so the question recurs: "What is it that we prize so highly, that we hold so dear, that we would ask our best and brightest to sacrifice their lives to defend? It must be a virtuous society. Nothing less would make the sacrifice worthy. Nothing else would ennoble the injured and dead. There must be a moral equivalency between the sacrifice we are asking and the object of that sacrifice.

George Washington once said that the trail of the Continental Army into its winter quarters at Valley Forge could be traced by bloody footprints in the snow. What drove those courageous patriots to such sacrifice? What carried the Army Rangers up the cliffs of Pointe du Hoc on D-Day? What made uncommon valor a

common virtue on the black sands of Iwo Jima? What kept the Marines going in the ice-bound Hell that was the Chosin Reservoir?

It was virtue. Men will not willingly sacrifice themselves in the full bloom of life unless there is something worth the sacrifice, something worth dying for. Virtue is the very foundation of self-government. Virtue is the seedbed of freedom and prosperity.

The virtues that Americans have always defended – those things that have ennobled the sacrifices of grieving wives, mothers and fathers, sons and daughters – are what we commonly refer to as “our way of life.” These virtues are family, faith, and freedom. These are the eternal verities, the bedrock virtues on which our American civilization stands.

We cannot ask the nation’s young men and women to go forth into danger merely to defend a grasping consumerism. We cannot expect mothers to kiss their sons on the cheek and send them off to war to defend the right of pornographers to exploit our women and children. Who would ask an aviator, perhaps with a wife and children back home, to fly into a blizzard of anti-aircraft fire so that pornographers can purvey filth to his kids? Can we demand that our soldiers enter into the horrific Moloch’s maw of combat so that the innocent unborn can continue to be slaughtered in abortion clinics?

President Bush has summoned the nation to war. Since those awful moments on the morning of September 11th, we indeed have been at war. We did not seek this war. For long years, we have done everything to avoid it. Nevertheless, it came to us, unsought and unbidden. It is here.

And so as a nation we face the great unknown that lies ahead, and as we prepare for the sacrifices that undoubtedly will come, we are compelled to ask of ourselves: What is it we are fighting for? If it is not for a better, more virtuous nation, then we are fools, knaves and worse.

And that is where the culture war comes in. Because, you see, it is the outcome of our internal culture war – our struggle for the soul of America; our struggle to define America’s way of life – that will shape our will on the field of battle.

At the Family Research Council, we have enlisted in the culture war. Our motto has been “family, faith and freedom” – but it is not just a catchy slogan. It embodies what we believe should be our way of life.

So we contend for religious liberty and for the rights of people to exercise their faith in the public square, no less so than in their prayer closets.

We contend for the right to life despite those who would cheapen it through abortion, infanticide, and euthanasia.

We fight for the sanctity of marriage and resist the radical homosexual agenda which would devalue marriage by extending the sacred covenant to domestic partnerships or civil unions of homosexuals.

We join conflict with pornographers who claim that the Constitution grants them a right to pollute our environment with smut.

And yes, while we affirm that virtue is its own reward, we know that a virtuous society inures to the common good.

Do you really think that when our troops from Delta Force crawl into Osama bin Laden's cave in Afghanistan or into the face of the muzzle of a terrorist machine gun, that they are doing it so that women can kill their children, so that pornographers can peddle their smut, so that people of the same sex can marry? If those *features* of American life become the *fixtures* of American life, I fear that our nation may not long endure.

At FRC, we strive to build upon the heritage our forefathers bequeathed to us through their blood and sweat, toil and tears. As Benjamin Franklin observed, "Only a virtuous people are capable of freedom."

May we also be deserving of our freedom.

Nothing less than the future of America hangs in the balance.