

## 9/11 - Black Tuesday Our Response to Terrorism

9/15/2001

Thomas A. Burns, Ph.D.

Chiloquin, Oregon

It is Saturday, four days after the terrorist “bombings” of the World Trade Center and the Pentagon on “Black Tuesday,” 2001. Even in Oregon it has been difficult to separate from the ongoing, media based information blitz which has followed these devastating events, events which nearly all people who are in touch with their humanity have deplored. Worldwide there is a sense that, somehow, everyone shares in the consequences. Over the past four days I have observed the following evolution in my own responses: 1) shock, 2) sorrow, 3) anger, 4) revenge – go get ‘em, 5) opening strategic reflection – caution, we need the participation of the international community if we are to eliminate the terrorist threat on a broad scale, and finally 6) inward examination – what responsibility may we have in motivating these terrorist actions. Some might claim a final stage in the process: stage 7) seeking reconciliation, even forgiveness, but I have not reached that point, and I am not sure I could recommend it if it ended in passivity. There is simply too much crying out to be DONE. My fear is that the evolution for many in the Country, and especially for our leadership, will not reach stage 6) in this sequence before they develop and commit to a plan of action and proceed to implement it. The military hawks are predictably stuck in stage 4), but fortunately the cooler heads in our national leadership have reached stage 5) and seem to be prevailing. Unfortunately, I have only heard hints to date [9/15/01] of anyone in a position of authority or wide-scale commentary who has arrived at and is discussing stage 6). One or two have mentioned stage 7), but even they have not given the search for reconciliation much emphasis. My contention is that if, as a country and an international community, we do not reach stage 6) in our understanding, the responses that we plan and execute will be mostly futile to resolve the current terrorist challenge.

If there is to be a realistic chance of “defeating” terrorism of the kind we have just experienced, the United States and all the countries of western culture will have to recognize that they have as much to adjust and correct as do the other countries and groups with whom we are in conflict. If the underlying motivations for terrorism are not addressed, there will be no basis to believe or claim that systematic terrorism of the kind we are seeing can be successfully challenged and eliminated. At best it will be only somewhat suppressed. It is most likely that unenlightened efforts to suppress terrorism will just lead to ever greater and more fanatical forms of terrorism. If the proposed “war on terrorism” is not

approached with the broadest consideration of the phenomena – in terms of stage 6) in our thinking, any War on Terrorism that we wage is likely to suffer limited cooperation and support from the world community of nations – especially those nations that are most crucial and that lie outside the inner circle of western nations. Such a war will look like the other misguided “Wars” we have waged – like the war on Drugs – a very expensive, never ending and doomed project from the start. Why? Because we lay the blame on producing countries and the drug lords and pushers and refuse to look at the weaknesses that lie within our own culture that make our citizens so susceptible to the escape drugs offer.

But before we can begin to “attack” terrorism, we have to understand what it is and what it is not. Otherwise we lack a defined sense of purpose and invite misadventures. “Terror” itself is an intense sense of fear engendering either the response of flight or paralysis. “Terrorism” is intentional activity by one party to promote the condition of terror in targeted others. The events of 9/11 easily qualify as terrorism by this definition. But 9/11 terrorism was terrorism at a particular social scale: cross-national terrorism, or extreme acts of violence committed by non-citizens in the recognized nation of other citizens that are intended to instill fear of further such violence. The difference between these terrorist acts and acts of war is the fact that terrorist acts are not officially sponsored by another nation or state and their goal is not related to conflicts over territorial power and control.

Unfortunately, it is easy for the definition of terrorism to be stretched so as to include liberation and insurrection movements, and in the extreme, even internal protest movements. While liberation and insurrection movements, and even protests, can include acts of terror, the primary purpose of these movements is to change the authority that has power and control so as to benefit directly the movement’s supporters. If we allow terrorism to get lumped together with liberation and insurrection/rebellion, and even internal protest, terrorists become simply all those opposing the established order. This is a dangerous over-extension of the terrorist concept, and when it occurs, it allows cover for the suppression of legitimate liberation, insurrection and protest movements. In the international context, this over-extension of the terrorist label can be used to justify either supporting or suppressing these movements in other countries simply in the name of American self-interest. In the domestic context, this same over-extension can lead directly to infringing or negating our basic Constitutional rights of freedom of speech and assembly/protest. So, our first obligation in responding to 9/11 is to appropriately limit our targets to the actual terrorists allowing for very careful extension to those who knowingly harbor and support them.

As Americans, we are not familiar with the roots of the type of international terrorism that resulted in the “bombings” of New York and Washington. We do not understand the sources for it, perhaps because at some level it is too painful to acknowledge this source. In these cases, the cause is more broadly cultural – not just political or economic. And most astonishing is the fact that it is our culture – secular western culture – that is seen as the oppressor by these terrorists. Since we “won” the cold war and most communist countries collapsed and fragmented, we have become so accustomed to celebrating our culture as THE culture that we cannot imagine the very idea that western culture, built on its commitment to secularism, can be viewed as oppressive to anyone. After all we stand for freedom, opportunity and the ability to make something of one’s self. How can that set of principles be seen by anybody as oppressing them? We need to dig deeper for the answer. And one thing is for sure: the problem cannot be legitimately characterized by the simplistic view that it is a contest between the forces of “civilization” – freedom, democracy and free enterprise – and the “forces of evil” that would try to defeat “our” way of life. However comforting it may be to view the situation in these terms, it is just too convenient to allow ourselves to settle into and to commit to this illusion. The problem is not just “out there.”

Not until we humble ourselves just a bit and release the notion that all other cultures of the world should recognize our superiority and necessarily model themselves after us, can we begin to understand what motivated the “terrorists” to bomb the World Trade Center and the Pentagon [symbols of world capitalism and western military might] with symbols of our own technological sophistication – our Boeing jumbo jets. We need to recognize that for the groups that conducted the terrorist actions of Black Tuesday, western culture – with America as its supreme representative – is the “evil” oppressor that has actively sought to impose its way of life on other countries around the world, many of whom do not share the western perspective or worldview. If we release our assumption that the western perspective is absolutely the only “right” and “true” way societies can shape themselves and be successful, a legitimate argument can be made for the fact that the way western commerce has conducted itself – aided by western politics, technology and military might – constitutes a form of economic/environmental/secular imperialism whose collective effect over time amounts to a kind of cultural “terrorism.” When enough citizens of non-western cultures feel powerless to oppose the imposition of western secular culture on their non-western religious cultures for a long enough period of time, one predictable consequence is that some of the most sensitive people in these cultures will resort to violence. And if the groups these people form are not successful in blocking the encroachment of the West with protests and regional

terrorist acts, their level and scope of violence will escalate. If these “terrorists” have access to sufficient resources, can find somewhere from which to stage their operations, are patient and deliberate in their planning, are persistent in their attempts, have a suicidal commitment from their members, and have an adversary whose society is so easy to access as our own, then they can address their violence in the most dramatic and effective ways to the heart of America. 9/11 is the climax of exactly this sequence of events.

To understand the mind of these “terrorists,” we have to recognize that the rational, scientific, technological, materialistic, individualistic, and secular focus of western culture is fundamentally repugnant to them and to their cultures, which hold that some mix of intuitive, spiritual, environmental, and communal capabilities, values and principles are most important. Until Americans and all of western culture understands this, until we recognize the need to respect cultures whose worldviews are very different from our own, until we see the need to back off our “crusade” to impose our system and perspective on the non-western cultures of the world, terrorism of the type we saw on Black Tuesday will continue to rest on very fertile soil.

The people and groups that we perceive as “terrorists” are legitimate culture heroes for many non-western people and countries. These “heroes” are regarded as defending an alternative way of life that is under profound pressure, whether this alternative way of life is specifically informed by Islamic or Hindu or Buddhist, or some other spiritual/communal perspective. History clearly reveals that any religion, including Christianity [e.g. the Crusades], can be “used” to support and justify some of the most inhumane activities imaginable. Whether Christian or Muslim or Hindu, etc., when fundamentalism, with its absolutist and literal beliefs is taken far enough, it can easily serve to justify terrorist activities. The problem of 9/11 is not an Islamic problem; it is just the case that currently the broad-based Islamic fundamentalist movement in many countries around the world is the most fertile ground for systematic anti-western reaction.

We have to understand why America is so hated. Unfortunately, to date westerners, and Americans in particular, have made very little real effort in this direction, choosing instead to ignore the fact that this sentiment may have a legitimate basis.

To rid the world of this most recent form of terrorism, the countries of the West really have only two choices that can be successful. And neither of these alternatives invokes the military option. The first is intellectually driven and requires a major change in policy: to decide politically, economically and militarily to respect the cultures that are informed by a significantly different

cultural perspective and stop the intentional and inadvertent pressure to remake these “underdeveloped” countries in our own image. Following this approach, the West can stop exporting so vigorously its secular, media based culture and stop “buying up” the resources of non-western countries and/or creating conditions where these countries become economically subservient to western countries in the process of their own “development.” In short, we can decide to stop acting internationally from a western cultural, ethnocentric position and restrain the use of western power and secular commerce to insist that non-western cultures conform to our vision. We can cease the pronouncements – which have almost become underlying assumptions – that American culture embodies “the way, the truth, and the light” for all nations of the world to follow. The fact is that we do not have THE answer.

The second choice available to America and western culture as a whole is to reclaim its own spiritual/communal base and understand and discover the forces of restraint and respect for non-western countries from the inside. For a long time now, many have identified the need for a movement of spiritual renewal within the West, though not as a means to address the terrorism issue. Unfortunately, most of these calls have come from the purveyors of Christian fundamentalism, which contains within it the seeds of the same narrow and misguided perspective that justifies the current terrorist activities from which we are seeking sanctuary. The last thing we need is a Christian fundamentalist revival in the West that sets us on a course to make the world “safe for Christianity,” a 21<sup>st</sup> century religious crusade which disrespects and demeans other cultures and their faiths due to misguided spiritual causes. This form of spiritual renewal just substitutes religious imperialism for secular imperialism and leads to total world terror, or Armageddon.

Should America and the West elect a spiritual/communal renewal, we must distinguish between religious revival and spiritual renewal. Spiritual renewal concerns the rediscovery and reintegration into culture of the awareness that a spiritual or sacred principle or thread, which ultimately connects all of existence at a non-material, but very real, level, pervades all of life. Promoting the experience of existence at this unified or sacred level is at the core of every religion. The problem is that each religion defines in literal terms the specific beliefs and rituals that are claimed to bring the individual or group to this awareness. When, subsequently, individual religions claim that theirs is the only or the superior path to spiritual awareness, religion itself can easily become the basis for aggressive behavior that is in direct conflict with the essential meaning which is at the core of spiritual awareness itself. This is the religious dilemma: how to bring people to the essential spiritual experience of the sacred, to the awareness of the unity, connected and oneness of all of existence –

together with all it implies about the significance of self and the respect and responsibility which must be expressed for others – without losing the true meaning of the experience in the dogma and ritual of each individual religious path. Only if western culture has reached sufficient maturity to clearly distinguish between religious and spiritual revival and only if it can elect and insist on spiritual renewal alone, should it adopt the spiritual renewal and spiritual reintegration path to address the terrorism problem, along with a myriad of other related problems. It is not at all clear that this level of maturity exists, but it is certainly time to pose the challenge to America and the West.

The by-word that we are all hearing now is that America's response to the awful terrorist attacks of Black Tuesday must be "Smart." A fully coordinated international campaign informed by a western perspective, led by western diplomacy, and utilizing western military might as a final strategy is not smart enough. A truly smart response must be framed by leaders whose reflection and planning has fully explored and incorporated stage 6) in the evolution of our responses. If we can act with the awareness of our own participation and responsibility in the terrorism that has descended upon us, perhaps we will all be able to reach the point where we really evaluate the two non-military alternatives outlined above and leave open the door that one day we may achieve reconciliation and true closure for the events of Black Tuesday. I look forward to the possibility of that full closure for terrorism. It will take a truly enlightened and dedicated leadership across many diverse countries to make that day possible.

Unfortunately, it is much more likely that we will muddle through utilizing some strategy between 4) and 5), lose sight of who the terrorists are, and end up fomenting an escalation of the terrorism threat.

It is up to all of us to decide what will emerge from the rubble – on America's front porch.