
8. America under Attack

Too Many 911 Calls?

Orange County (California) Register, September 18, 2001

I hesitate to jump right in with what occurs to me when horrible things happen like Tuesday's attacks on the East Coast. Several folks posed the question, however, "What is your response?" Now, finally, I do have more than the unprecedented emotional mess that was my first response, which included everything from anguish, sorrow for all those directly touched by the attack, to the deeply buried feelings I had as a kid when I experienced the outbreak, and then the rest, of World War II back in my native city, Budapest.

Of course, my first response was worry for the future of my kids and friends. I was holding my breath until I could make sure those close to me were OK, at least for the time being. Then my thoughts turned to what state of siege will emerge from all this! The rest of the day my heart was in my throat. Will Americans be feeling, henceforth, as we all felt in Europe back in the early 1940s?

Yet, as an academic political philosopher, I had to begin to try to sort things out—how should one make sense of something so monstrous? A couple of issues came to mind as I pondered all of it amid feelings of confusion, anger, impatience, and fury.

First of all, does this attack on the people of the United States possibly follow, somewhat naturally, from aspects of U.S. foreign policy? Not that any of it could justify the sense-

less, indiscriminate murder, but perhaps it could explain, in part, why those who are responsible, and their supporters, let their irrational hatred focus on the United States, specifically, the World Trade Center and Washington, D.C.? Or was this just what sometimes happens to good people, anywhere, when bad people, who are filled with unchecked envy and resentment and anger at some flaws in others, gain the upper hand—when they get hold of weapons and indulge themselves in the vicious ways they are wont to do, by wreaking utterly senseless havoc on the heads of anyone in their way whom they feel comfortable about hating?

What happened seems to me the result of a combination of the unmitigated viciousness of those who think in group-think and inflict their wrath on anyone, whether guilty of anything or not, who is a member of the hated group and of imprudent foreign interventions that have left the raging and vile enemies of the United States with something like an excuse for this massacre.

The idea that anyone working in private offices in New York's World Trade Center—or even at offices in Washington, D.C.—may be “punished” for what the terrorists allege is bad behavior by the U.S. government is outrageously evil. It pays no heed to such principles of civilization as due process and the rule of law. It employs the manners of raging beasts who have no patience with niceties, such as justice, fittingness, rights, and diplomacy.

That, by the way, is exactly why terrorism isn't the same thing as freedom fighting or resistance, which uses methods consistent with justice to gain freedom from, or retribution toward, a dictator or tyrant. Civilized warriors don't express their dismay, even outrage, by committing atrocities that they are supposedly protesting. Mass terrorists, people will-

ing to massacre thousands, with no regard for the issue of guilt or innocence, have no compunction about flailing about violently.

So the first thing to consider when trying to explain what happened is that there are nasty, unabashedly vicious people who want to do rotten things to others, never mind guilt or innocence, never mind the rule of law and due process. There really are such folks, and in some parts of the world, they are in power and very well armed. Since their evident lack of serious attention to how to flourish in this life has left them with little to lose, they are reckless in a way that no productive, striving human being would normally be. None of the cultural relativism preached at our institutions of higher learning can obscure this evil.

Yet there is also something else to be considered. These deeds cannot be excused, but a relatively decent country's government can act more or less intelligently and prudently in the face of the clear evidence of violent viciousness around the globe. It's a bit like not going out on the street when violent gangs are on the loose.

For example, the proper military policy of the government of a just and free society should be to defend its citizens against aggression from abroad. In modern American military policy, however, the United States is following what a particularly disturbing bumper sticker announces about the U.S. Marines: "We are the 911 of the World."

Well, trying to be 911 to the world is grossly imprudent and a violation of the proper authority of the military of a free and just country. To order the American military to leave its post, literally, by forgoing its sworn duty to stand ready to defend the Constitution and the citizens of the country is not only dangerous but an abdication of duty—

as if one's bodyguard were sent off to rectify all altercations in the neighborhood.

Such a policy entangles the United States in dubious and muddled ethnic, cultural, national, civil, and racial conflicts across the globe. And when this intervention affects people who are already half-crazy with envy, resentment, and some legitimate grievances, it may be expected that they will act completely outside of moral and civilized standards.

However much one can sympathize with some who seek U.S. support in these conflicts, it is wrong for the United States government—funded by all the people's taxes and providing all the people's military protectors—to give it. (There are exceptions: for example, when the country receiving military aid is clear and unambiguous about sharing with us certain central values, such as the defense of individual rights. If we have a treaty with such a country, of which there are hardly any, extending military support can be justified.) Simply to gallop over to the Balkans or the Middle East or anywhere else, under the guise of helping NATO or the UN, to become the peacekeeper of the realm, is wrong.

These two factors together—the vicious resentment or envy of America's great success and the mindless response to America's meddlesome military adventurism—have, I believe, produced the horrible deeds Americans experienced and watched all through the morning of September 11, 2001.

It will take years to come to terms with what happened. The families of those who were killed will be nearly immobilized from sorrow and pain, as will many others who have the capacity for compassion. But perhaps one slight silver lining could arise from this atrocity.

Maybe instead of spending tax funds on zillions of mat-

ters that are none of its business, our government will begin to recall the reason for its existence, “to secure (our) rights,” rather than parade about and serve as the vice squad of the globe. Diverting funds to subsidize all sorts of tasks, worthy and unworthy, has left the proper functions of the intelligence and military communities without sufficient support.

Once this is rectified, then perhaps the task of defending our rights, on all the intricate fronts where that’s needed, will be carried out in ways that might even prevent most terrorism in the future. But if government continues to be the Santa Claus of every pet project for every special interest group, its proper task of protecting the rights of its citizens will continue to be underfunded and neglected.

Hate Crimes and bin Laden's Gang*

Many people, especially those on campuses across the country, are concerned that retaliation may be made not only against those responsible for the September 11 massacre but also against those who harbor the perpetrators, who provide support to them, or who may be near them when a retaliatory measure is taken. I share some of these concerns, mainly the last, because innocent people should not be made to suffer for the viciousness of others.

I do, however, have a problem with the sincerity of this concern, when expressed by people who are, in another context, very eager to punish not just those who engage in what are called hate crimes but also those who spread hate—for example, by inflammatory speech or pamphleteering—without actually committing a physical assault.

Among those urging such punitive measures are the folks at the Southern Poverty Law Center in Montgomery, Alabama, who propose legal action against those who spread hate but do not engage in aggressive action against anyone. Morris Dees, the very popular leader of this organization, is famous for carrying out one of the Center's main missions, to "battle hate groups whose followers have violated the rights of others." They argue that such groups spread hate and induce gullible folks to commit crimes, and they believe that at least wrongful death law suits should be directed at such folks when those who are influenced by

them commit murder. If memory serves me right, they also urge criminal prosecution of such hatemongers.

Now if I am not mistaken, spreading hate is something quite a few people across the globe do. And certainly some of this hate is directed against Americans, especially those among Americans who engage in business. Indeed, who could doubt this now? Osama bin Laden and his cohorts are certainly spreading hate toward Americans, in fact toward all those who embrace the values associated with America, such as individualism—in the form of defending our unalienable individual rights—capitalism, commercialism, and the unabashed pursuit of happiness here on earth.

Now, it seems to me that if the campaign against hate crimes is justified here in America, something similar against all those who spread such hate against Americans and other Westerners—or anyone, for that matter—would also be justified. In short, pacifism isn't the right answer, as Mr. Dees certainly makes clear by his speeches and actions. Neither he nor his many supporters in the intellectual community believe that we should do nothing about, or be loving toward, those who spread hate. They believe, quite the contrary, that such people should be severely punished, even sent to jail.

So it seems, when it comes to hating some people, the answer to the problem—for many right-minded intellectuals—isn't love and understanding and turning the other cheek but firm punitive action! Yet, it seems, when such promulgation of hate goes on against stock and bond sellers, capitalists, and other completely innocent people who are the usual victims of terrorism, this hatemongering does not qualify for a harsh, merciless response.

Granted, the haters in these instances live outside the jurisdiction of American law. Yet their deeds are not differ-

ent from the crimes committed by those influenced by domestic hatemongers.

Indeed, judging by the complete disregard these hatemongers have for innocent people, the indignation with their ideas and conduct should be far more intense than it is for the few domestic perpetrators of similar acts. So it would seem that the very same folks who are urging—and funding—Dees and his colleagues would eagerly urge our government to take action against the foreign haters and those who carry this hate into terrorist deeds against Americans and others whom they attack to make their point. One would suppose that retaliatory military action would be favored by such enemies of hate.

Alas, it does not seem so. Hating blacks, Jews, gays, and so on is not just vile and vicious but deserves forceful retaliation, from Dees' and his supporters' point of view. So why not retaliate against those who hate Americans, Jews, capitalists, and so on, only this time from abroad?

Maybe consistency is not a great virtue—Emerson has told us that a foolish consistency is the hobgoblin of little minds. But perhaps this is not about foolish consistency but rather about integrity. Those who are perfectly willing to retaliate against the perpetrators of domestic hate crimes would, I believe, show integrity if they demanded the same treatment for those abroad who hate Americans.

Government, Liberty, and Security

Yuma (Arizona) Sun, January 4, 2003

In the wake of recent concerns about terrorism, there has developed yet another controversy about the scope and size of government's role in society. The idea that liberty should be sacrificed to meet the challenge of security against terrorism has been widely encouraged by polls that pose the issue in terms such as: "Do you prefer greater security against terrorism even if it means the loss of liberty?" And often the answer to such a question is "yes." But that is because people are presented with false alternatives.

It is true that as long as a great many areas of society are under the control of government, when threatening situations arise, government will take up the task, often rather eagerly, of providing security. This means that in many public places, such as roads, parks, schools, airports, court houses, and so on the authorities will adopt inspection and search policies that appear to be a clear threat to our liberties. Rather than being able to just hop a plane after parking one's car, now one has to have the car inspected by some gendarme before it can be parked, stand in a long line and have all one's luggage scrutinized, and then often submit to random searches by, you guessed it, government agents. This sure looks as if liberty is taking a serious beating in favor of increased security.

But there is a mistake here. If I enter a bank and have to go through different security measures carried out by pri-

vate guards, this isn't an infringement of my liberty. Those who own the bank have the right to adopt security measures, great or small, to their heart's content. If I don't want to submit to them, I can either find another bank without such stringent security measures or avoid going to banks altogether. I am quite free, but so is the bank. So the bank's insistence on greater security is actually an exercise of its owners' liberty!

In my house, I may be paranoid enough to require people who visit me to empty their pockets and demonstrate their harmlessness in various ways. No one's liberty is infringed by that since no one has a right to be in my house without my permission. It may not be very pleasant to meet my terms when visiting me, but that hasn't got anything to do with the sacrifice of liberty for security.

The trouble lies not with increasing needed security measures but in having this done by the government in realms where the government hasn't any business operating. Why are government officials at airports? Airports have nothing to do with securing our rights, upholding justice, or other legitimate legal affairs. Airports are, in fact, no different from coffee houses or playgrounds or indeed any other place of private business. People seek a service and are provided with it on certain terms. In times of terrorist or other threats, even impending natural ones, the terms may become more cumbersome. But that is as it should be. If there is an increase in burglaries in my neighborhood, I will be more careful about letting people enter my home—I will check them out, ask them to identify themselves, and so forth. None of this violates their rights.

It is only when government gets into the act of providing the needed security, apart from protecting our rights, that the issue of rights violation arises. This is because govern-

ment is supposed to be in the business of protecting our rights, so when it worries too much about other kinds of security, and in the process, subjects citizens to all kinds of scrutiny, it seems that government has switched roles. Rather than protecting us from violations of our rights, government is now engaged in just the activities that are considered, normally, to be rights violations. Random searches by government agents of citizens who haven't done anything to deserve this treatment are completely unseemly in a free society. Except that government has usurped so many areas of social life—schools, transportation, athletics, and so forth—that it is nearly omnipresent with its meddling ways.

When government takes charge of all these areas of our life, it becomes a bully, even though the same efforts made by private parties would be quite acceptable. IBM or K-Mart or even a grocery store could install preemptive security devices, and no one in his right mind would construe that as a sign of tyranny or as a violation of anyone's rights. It is, after all, their own realm they would be taking care of.

And usually there are alternatives to turn to, where different means of providing preemptive security are used, so one doesn't have to comply with IBM, K-Mart, or the grocery store with the draconian security measures. When, however, government adopts these measures, they do seem tyrannical because government may not use prior restraint—that is, preemptive measures, such as random searches—and because government has monopoly powers in all public places.

Anti-Americanism Isn't Unusual*

For those who were utterly surprised by September 11, 2001, it may be useful to recall that America has always been hated by most of those around the world who are well positioned, the elite of most societies, as well as their intellectuals, and the ones who speak out on issues—pundits, artists, national leaders, celebrities, and such. It is mostly the silent majority who admires the American ideal, not those who rule over them.

In nearly every country around the globe, it is well understood that the kind of society that America had at one time aspired to become, a fully free society, would take seriously the contention that everyone is equal in having the unalienable natural—not government-granted—rights to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness, among others. And this means that no one may rule others without their consent.

Now consider how many countries around the globe are under the rule of some dictator or family or clergy or single political party! How can anyone imagine that in such societies those on top would eagerly welcome the notion that America was founded on? Sure, that notion is far from having been fully realized, even in the United States, although more so here than in most other places. And most folks in the United States do take seriously their right to their own lives, if not all their liberties and all the ways they might

pursue happiness. Out of this has arisen a society in which few apologize for wanting to be happy, even for seeking a good deal of pleasure in life. And they take it as given that they need ask no one's permission to do this.

And there's the rub. In most other societies it is still pretty much accepted that people are not their own masters but subjects of someone else—the king, the government, or some other head of society. In many societies it is still usual to refer to the inhabitants as subjects, not citizens. So, how could the folks who enjoy the position of rulers, and those others who do well enough in such systems—the ones who can speak out in books, magazines, newspapers, and especially, political forums—admit that the American idea is a good one?

Add to this that elites and dreamers have always found fault with the bourgeoisie everywhere. Bourgeois values—which are mundane and not too dramatic, focused on having a decent life here on Earth, being successful in one's profession and so forth—offend those who aspire to the old-fashioned values of valor and glory and self-sacrifice, values found mostly in military battle! Nor does the bourgeoisie share the fantastic utopian notion of a perfect world in which all will be equally healthy, wealthy, and wise, made so by government regimentation!

America is the quintessential approximation to a bourgeois society, aspiring to be neither an aristocracy nor a utopian dreamland. In consequence, those around the globe who are sitting pretty, in societies that still carry on with the ancient regime of top-down rule, find America a threat and even go so far as to want to destroy it. And because of its relatively free institutions, sadly, a great many more Americans wallow in self-criticism than inflate themselves with pride. (Even I fall into that mode too often.)

It is interesting that many abroad who speak and write about the United States complain that Americans don't much care to hear them and pay little heed to their belly-aching. Well, no wonder! Why would most of the citizens and leaders of a country that has done better than most in pleasing the bulk of its ordinary citizens want to take advice from those who are basically flops at that mission? Why use even Western Europe as a model of how America should be governed, of which institutions it should cultivate and which it should dismantle?

No, America, though flawed and even losing sight of its virtues, is still a much better place for people who want to go about their own business — who don't want to be sacrificed to anyone else's dream, than any other place on earth. America has every right to dismiss most of what the finger-wagging leaders from abroad have to tell it. The default position should not be, "heed them for they have superior insight into public affairs," quite the contrary. More likely they could learn a thing or two from the new, but much to be admired, American experiment in social life.

The Trap of Humanitarian Wars

Irvine (California) Freedom News Wire, April 2003

In moral philosophy, altruism (or humanitarianism) has two versions. Under one, everyone must think of, and work for, others first, and what counts for this is up to the beneficiaries. In short, your help is what the beneficiaries consider to be help, not something objective one can know without knowing what the beneficiaries want. Under the other, one must still think of, and work for, others first, but what counts for this is something knowable by anyone, which could even conflict with what the beneficiaries would like to have done for them. The first is subjective, the second objective, altruism or humanitarianism.

In connection with domestic public policies, one can see this distinction clearly when government gives cash to welfare recipients, so they can get what they want for it, as opposed to when government gives them food or food stamps, insisting that the poor should get what is really good for them whether they like it or not. Both run risks—the first may amount to throwing money away since the poor may squander it; the second may offend by being paternalistic.

When a government goes to war for the sake of helping people in foreign countries, it is always a puzzle whether that government ought to follow the subjective or objective humanitarian policy. Should it just do for those who are in dire straits what they would like to have done for them, or

should it provide what will actually do the people in these countries some good? The first approach trusts the people, rightly or wrongly, to know what will benefit them; the second trusts the invading forces to do so. This is a paradox of humanitarianism—to do good for others, we sometimes need to treat them as children and impose this good on them. Otherwise, all the help may be for nothing because those receiving it will squander it.

Many in Iraq, for example, seem happy to have gotten rid of Saddam Hussein's dictatorship, but this doesn't mean they want what the American leaders believe would be best for them, namely, a liberal democratic regime. Instead, huge rallies have been held to demand that Iraq become an Islamic country, run by Muslim clerics and other leaders. While Islamic rule may be more popular there than Saddam Hussein's rule was, it would be pretty harsh on the members of many minorities who do not embrace the Islamic faith, or not, at least, the version favored by the majority.

The impending democracy in Iraq would then mostly likely be illiberal. That is to say, those who do not share the faith of the majority would not have constitutional protection against being bullied by the majority. It would be as if, say, the Jehovah's Witnesses or some other evangelical faith became the majority in America and could impose its religious practices on everyone else. Instead, now the members of these sects must try to persuade people, and if sent on their way, they have to leave.

In fact, a just society would never tolerate having a morality or religion forcibly imposed, apart from the minimum protection of everyone's basic rights. That much protection is required so that everyone has the chance to choose whether to do this or that, including whether to embrace this or that faith. The rest is entirely a matter of choice,

otherwise it doesn't count for much at all. Doing what is right or following a religion because of threats from others, especially government, doesn't count as doing what is right or following a religion at all.

Humanitarian or altruistic intervention is thus paradoxical. It aims to do good for others, especially political good, but then it treats these others as if they were children and can't be trusted with deciding how they should act. Yet, if a country's leaders have decided to tax their own people billions and billions to give real help to the people of other countries, and those people don't want this help but want to do what is politically wrong, how is one to proceed?

Perhaps the lesson to be gleaned here is that humanitarian wars are wrong, period. The billions of dollars the citizens of a country pay to keep a standing military should not be wasted on tasks that are hopeless. Americans should not be required to make the effort to help people who may not even want our help or only want it to do something not much better than that from which they were liberated.

It isn't as if Iraqis were incapable of taking part in a liberal democratic political order, but the large majority of them may not want to do so, even if that's wrong. American government officials should make up their minds — will they fight humanitarian wars that get them into the mess of having to impose the right system on unwilling people abroad, or will they confine themselves to fighting to defend the people they are supposed to serve?

If the second, then the only thing that made the war in Iraq just is that Saddam Hussein was very likely to unleash weapons of mass destruction against U.S. citizens and their allies. OK, so he cannot do this any longer. Thus now the U.S. military needs to leave and not play daddy or nanny to the Iraqis.