

ROGER KIMBALL

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## What We Are Fighting For

### The Example of Pericles

MIDWAY THROUGH the long article on Afghanistan in the great eleventh edition of the *Encyclopedia Britannica*, one comes across this description of the inhabitants of that ancient mountain country:

The Afghans, inured to bloodshed from childhood, are familiar with death, and audacious in attack, but easily discouraged by failure; excessively turbulent and unsubmissive to law or discipline; apparently frank and affable in manner, especially when they hope to gain some object, but capable of the grossest brutality when that hope ceases. They are unscrupulous in perjury, treacherous, vain and insatiable, passionate in vindictiveness, which they will satisfy at the cost of their own lives and in the most cruel manner. Nowhere is crime committed on such trifling grounds, or with such general impunity, though when it is punished the punishment is atrocious. Among themselves the Afghans are quarrelsome, intriguing and distrustful; estrangements and affrays are of constant occurrence; . . . The Afghan

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is by breed and nature a bird of prey. If from habit and tradition he respects a stranger within his threshold, he yet considers it legitimate to warn a neighbour of the prey that is afoot, or even overtake and plunder his guest after he has quitted his roof.

That refreshingly frank passage, by Colonel Sir Thomas Hungerford Holdich, was published in 1910. I hope that the American and British troops now enjoying the hospitality of the Afghans are acquainted with this travel advisory. It is as pertinent today—in early 2002—as it was one hundred years ago.

I was put in mind of Sir Thomas's insightful commentary just before Christmas, 2001, when the *New York Times* took its quote of the day from one Faqir Muhammad, an officer in one of the many squabbling anti-Taliban armies: "This is what Afghanistan is," he said. "We kill each other."

Indeed. And not only each other, of course.

Sir Thomas's remarks are valuable not only because of their contemporaneity but also because they help us set today's issues in historical context. "The farther backward you can look," Winston Churchill once observed, "the farther forward you are likely to see." Early in the Peloponnesian War, a plague swept through Athens, killing thousands and demoralizing the survivors. In a rallying speech, Pericles (himself soon to die) noted that "When things happen suddenly, unexpectedly, and against all calculation, it takes the heart out of a man." Against the temptations of apathy and acquiescence, Pericles urged his listeners to recall the greatness of Athens, to face calamity with an "unclouded mind and react quickly against it."

As the shock of September 11 gives way to the reality of America at war, it is useful to take a page from Churchill and cast a backward glance. The pressure of contemporary events crowds us into the impatient confines of the present, rendering us insensible to the lessons of history—not least the lesson that

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tomorrow's dramas are typically unforeseen by the scripts we abide by today. Language itself conspires to keep us in the dark. I will return in a moment to Pericles. But I want first to dwell briefly on our tendency to use language to emasculate surprise. What a large quota of optimism language budgets into our lives! Already the consolations of normalcy have returned to everyday life. The fresh horror of the attacks has been domesticated—by time, by retribution, by the seemingly endless flow of words that have embroidered the event, analyzing, ordering, explaining. Out of the reestablishment of order, out of explanation, comes hope. And it is worth noting how regularly, in ways small and large, hopefulness insinuates itself into our plans and projects.

Consider only that marvelous phrase “the foreseeable future.” With what cheery abandon we employ it! Yet what a nugget of unfounded optimism those three words encompass. How much of the future, really, do we foresee? A week? A day? A minute? “In a minute,” as T. S. Eliot said in “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock,” “there is time / For decisions and revisions which a minute will reverse.” So much of life is a juggling with probabilities, a conjuring with uncertainties, that we often forget upon what stupendous acts of faith even the prudent conduct of life depends.

Had I been asked, on September 10, 2001, whether New York's Twin Towers would continue standing for “the foreseeable future,” I should have answered “Yes.” And so, in one sense, they did. Only my foresight was not penetrating enough, not far-seeing enough, to accommodate that most pedestrian of eventualities: an event.

An event is as common as dirt. It is also as novel as tomorrow's dawn. “There is nothing,” the French writer Charles Péguy noted in the early years of the twentieth century, “so

unforeseen as an event.”<sup>1</sup> The particular event Péguy had in mind was the Dreyfus Affair. Who could have predicted that the fate of an obscure Jewish army captain falsely accused of spying would have such momentous consequences? And yet this unforeseen event, as Proust observed in his great novel, suddenly, catastrophically, “divided France from top to bottom.”<sup>2</sup> Its repercussions were felt for decades. We plan, stock-pile, second-guess, buy insurance, make allowances, assess risks, play the odds, envision contingencies, calculate interest, tabulate returns, save for a rainy day . . . and still we are constantly surprised.

In a thoughtful essay called “What Is Freedom?” the philosopher Hannah Arendt noted the extent to which habit—what she disparages somewhat with the name “automatism”—rules life. We are creatures of habit, schedules, and conventions. And thank God for that. For without habit we could never build character. And yet we are also creatures who continually depart from the script. Human beings do not simply *behave* in response to stimuli. We *act*—which means that our lives, though orchestrated largely by routine, are at the same time everywhere edged with the prospect of novelty. “Every act,” Arendt wrote,

seen from the perspective not of the agent but of the process in whose framework it occurs and whose automatism it interrupts, is a “miracle”—that is, something which could not be expected. . . . It is in the very nature of every new beginning that it breaks

1. Charles Péguy, “Memories of Youth” in *Temporal and Eternal*, translated by Alexander Dru (Liberty Fund, 2001), p. 70.

2. Marcel Proust, *Remembrance of Things Past*, vol. 2, translated by C. K. Moncrieff and Terence Kilmartin (Random House, 1981), p. 307. Proust, incidentally, shared Péguy’s awe in the face of the unexpected: “[W]henver society is momentarily stationary,” Proust wrote earlier in *Remembrance of Things Past*, “the people who live in it imagine that no further change will occur, just as, in spite of having witnessed the birth of the telephone, they decline to believe in the aeroplane,” vol. 1, p. 557.

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into the world as an “infinite improbability,” and yet it is precisely this infinitely improbable which actually constitutes the very texture of everything we call real.<sup>3</sup>

Every moment of every day presents us with the potential for what Arendt calls the “miracle” of human action, so familiar and yet ultimately unfathomable. That is why we find proleptic phrases like “the foreseeable future” indispensable. They declare the flag of our confidence, the reach of our competence. They domesticate the intractable mystery of everyday novelty. But they also serve to remind us that our confidence is deeply complicit with luck—that most fickle of talismans—our competence instantly revocable without notice. Which is to say that our foresight is always an adventure, practiced at the pleasure of the unpredictable.

This is something that P. G. Wodehouse, a philosopher of a somewhat merrier stamp than Hannah Arendt, put with his customary grace when his character Psmith observed that “in this life . . . we must always distinguish between the Unlikely and the Impossible.”<sup>4</sup> On September 10 it was unlikely that a small band of murderous fanatics should destroy the Twin Towers and fundamentally alter the political landscape of the world. It was not, alas, impossible.

The eruption of the unlikely is an affront to our complacency, an insult to our pride. We tend to react by subsequently endowing the unlikely with a pedigree of explanation. This reassures us by neutralizing novelty, extracting the element of the unexpected from what actually happened. I think again of Churchill. Summarizing the qualities that a budding politician should possess, he adduced both “The ability to foretell what

3. Hannah Arendt, “What is Freedom?” in *Between Past and Future: Eight Exercises in Political Thought* (Penguin Books, 1978), p. 169.

4. P. G. Wodehouse, *Leave it to Psmith* (Vintage, 1975), p. 128.

is going to happen tomorrow, next week, next month, next year”—and the compensating ability “afterwards to explain why it didn’t happen.”<sup>5</sup>

Today, the events of September 11 can seem almost inevitable. Reasons have been furnished for every detail. Pundits have rehearsed knowing genealogies for all the actors. Plausible itineraries have been repeated until they seem like predictions. All of those reasons and explanations were available on September 10. A look at the literature shows that some had been propounded for years. But they lacked the traction that events give to hindsight. Where were they when they were needed, at 8:00 A.M. on September 11? They were not part of the foreseeable future until that future, unforeseen, overtook us.

I mention these homely incapacities to provide a kind of signpost or reminder. Even the extraordinary circumstance of wartime begets its anesthetizing versions of the ordinary. Our complacency exposed us to surprise on September 11. New complacencies now compete for our allegiance. In part, this results from the pressure of familiarity. Sooner or later, a state of permanent emergency comes to seem like a normal state of affairs. Ceaseless vigilance by nature ceases to be vigilant. But there are other ingredients involved in the return of complacency. Already one senses impatience on the part of the media. From the very beginning of this conflict, President Bush warned that the struggle against terrorism was going to be long, that it would be measured in years, not weeks or months. But a protracted battle does not accord well with a 24-hour news cycle, with the demand for screaming headlines, new developments, clear victories.

5. Winston Churchill, *The Churchill Wit*, edited by Bill Adler (Coward-McCann, 1965), p. 4.

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There is no single antidote to these liabilities. Nevertheless, Churchill was right about history providing the best corrective to our myopia. We need to look backwards if we are to extricate ourselves from the constrictions of the present. The “relevance” sought for the present time is best acquired from guideposts that have outlived the hectoring gabble of contemporary fashion. We are often asked if our “values” have kept pace, have “evolved,” with the dramatic changes our political and social reality has seen in the past several decades. But values, I think, do not so much “evolve” as change keys. That is to say, our underlying humanity—with its essential moral needs and aspirations—remains constant. And this is why, for example, the emotional and psychological taxonomy that Aristotle provides in his *Ethics* and *Rhetoric* is as fresh and relevant to humanity today as it was two and a half millennia ago.

## MODELS OF FREEDOM

Which brings me back to Pericles. What lessons does the great Greek statesman have for us today? Does his example as a leader of the Athenians at the beginning of the Peloponnesian War have a special pertinence for us as we embark on what promises to be a long struggle with an often faceless foe? Does Pericles, in short, point the way for us?

To answer these questions, one first wants to know: what is it that Pericles stood for? To what sort of society was he pointing? What way of life, what vision of the human good did he propound?

In his history of the Peloponnesian War, Thucydides recounts the public funeral oration that Pericles, as commander of the army and first citizen of Athens, delivered to commemorate those fallen after the first year—the first of twenty-seven,

be it noted—of war with Sparta.<sup>6</sup> The short speech is deservedly one of the most famous in history.

The funeral oration outlines the advantages of Athenian democracy, a bold new system of government that was not simply a political arrangement but a way of life. There were two keynotes to that way of life: freedom and tolerance, on the one hand, responsible behavior and attention to duty on the other.

The two go together. We Athenians, Pericles said, are “free and tolerant in our private lives; but in public affairs we keep to the law”—including, he added in an important proviso, “those unwritten laws”—the lawlike commands of taste, manners, and morals—“which it is an acknowledged shame to break.” Freedom and tolerance, Pericles suggested, were blossoms supported by roots that reached deep into the soil of duty.

Athens had become the envy of the world, partly because of its wealth, partly because of its splendor, partly because of the freedom enjoyed by its citizens. Athens’ navy was unrivaled, its empire unparalleled, its civic and cultural institutions unequalled. The city was “open to the world,” a cosmopolitan center, political life was “free and open,” as was private life: “We do not get into a state with our next-door neighbor,” Pericles said, “if he enjoys himself in his own way.”

Of course, from the perspective of twenty-first century America, democracy in Athens may seem limited and imperfect. Women were entirely excluded from citizenship in Athens and there was a large slave class that underwrote the material freedom of Athens’ citizens. These things must be acknowledged. But must they be apologized for? Whenever fifth-century Athens is mentioned these days, it seems that what is

6. The funeral oration runs from book 2.35 to 2.65 of Thucydides’ History. I follow the Rex Warner translation.

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stressed is not the achievement of Athenian democracy but its limitations.

To my mind, concentrating on the limitations of Athenian democracy would be like complaining that the Wright brothers neglected to provide transatlantic service with their airplanes. The extraordinary achievement of Athens was to formulate the ideal of equality before the law. To be sure, that ideal was not perfectly instantiated in Athens. Perhaps it never will be perfectly instantiated, it being in the nature of ideals to inspire emulation but also to exceed it.

The point to bear in mind is that both the ideal of equality before the law and the cultivation of an open, tolerant society were new. They made Athens the model of democracy for all the republics that sought to follow the path of freedom—just as America is the model of freedom today. Pericles was right to boast that “Future ages will wonder at us, as the present age wonders at us now.” To continue the theme of aviation, we might say that in Athens, after innumerable trials elsewhere, democracy finally managed to get off the ground and stay aloft. In Periclean Athens what mattered in assuming public responsibility, as Pericles said, was “not membership in a particular class, but the actual ability which the man possesses.” To an extraordinary extent, within the limits of its franchise, Athens lived up to that ideal.

It is also worth noting that life in Athens was not only free but also full. When the day’s work was done, Pericles boasted, Athenians turned not simply to private pleasure but also to ennobling recreation “of all kinds for our spirits.” For the Age of Pericles was also the age of the great dramatists, the age of Socrates, the great artist Phidias, and others. Freedom, skill, and ambition conspired to make Athens a cultural as well as a political paragon.

A recurrent theme of the funeral oration is the importance

of sound judgment, what Aristotle codified as the virtue of prudence. The blessing of freedom requires the ballast of duty, and informed judgment is the indispensable handmaiden of duty. A free society is one that nurtures the existential slack that tolerance and openness generate. Chaos and anarchy are forestalled by the intervention of politics in the highest sense of the term: deliberation and decision about securing the good life. When it comes to cultural activities, Pericles said, Athenians had learned to love beauty with moderation—the Greek word is *euteleias*, “without extravagance”—and to pursue philosophy and the life of the mind “without effeminacy,” *aneu malakias*.<sup>7</sup> Culture and the life of the mind were to be ennoblements of life, not an escape from its burdens, not a decadent pastime.

The exercise of sound judgment was required in other spheres as well. In their conduct of policy, Athenians strove to be bold, but prudent, that is, effective. “We are,” Pericles wrote, “capable at the same time of taking risks and of estimating them beforehand.” The exercise of sound judgment was not simply an intellectual accomplishment; it was the tithe

7. In “The Crisis in Culture,” Hannah Arendt provocatively suggests that Pericles “is saying something like this: ‘We love beauty within the limits of political judgment, and we philosophize without the barbarian vice of effeminacy.’” Arendt links political judgment with “that curious and ill-defined capacity we commonly call taste”: “The activity of taste decides how this world, independent of its utility and our vital interests in it, is to look and sound . . . [I]ts interest in the world is purely ‘disinterested,’ and that means that neither the life interests of the individual nor the moral interests of the self are involved.” Like political judgments, she says, judgments of taste operate by persuasion rather than demonstration, “the judging person—as Kant says quite beautifully—can only ‘woo the consent of everyone else’ in the hope of coming to an agreement with him eventually, This ‘wooing’ or persuading corresponds closely to what the Greeks called *peithein*, the convincing and persuading speech which they regarded as the typically political form of people talking with one another.” See *Between Past and Future*, pp. 213–24.

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of citizenship. “We do not say that a man who takes no interest in politics is a man who minds his own business,” Pericles observed, “we say that he has no business here at all.” He did not mean that every citizen had to be a politician. What he meant was that all citizens had a common stake in the commonwealth of the city. And that common stake brought with it common responsibilities as well as common privileges. At a time when everyone is clamoring for his or her “rights”—when new “rights” pop up like mushrooms throughout society—it is worth remembering that every right carries with it a corresponding duty. We enjoy certain rights because we discharge corresponding responsibilities. Some rights may be inalienable; none is without price.

Something similar can be said about democracy. Today, the word “democracy” and its cognates are often used as fancy synonyms for mediocrity. When we read about plans to “democratize” education or the arts or athletics, we know that is shorthand for plans to eviscerate those activities, for lowering standards and pursuing them as instruments of racial or sexual redress or some other form of social engineering. Tocqueville was right to warn about the dangers of generalizing the principle of equality that underlies democracy. Universalized, the principle of equality leads to egalitarianism, the ideology of equality.

The problem today is that the egalitarian imperative threatens to overwhelm that other great social impulse, the impulse to achieve, to excel, to surpass: “always to be best and to rise above others,” as Homer put it in one classic expression of the agonistic spirit. Radical egalitarianism—egalitarianism uncorrected by the aspirations of excellence—would have us pretend that there are no important distinctions among people; where the pretense is impossible, it would have us enact compensatory programs to minimize, or at least to paper over, the differences.

The results are a vast increase in self-deception, cultural degradation, and bureaucratic meddlesomeness.

It is refreshing to turn to Pericles and remind ourselves that a passion for democracy need not entail the pursuit of mediocrity. Democracy is a high-maintenance form of government. Freedom requires the disciplines of restraint and circumspection if it is to flourish. Athenian democracy was animated by freedom, above all the freedom to excel, and it inspired in citizens both a healthy competitive spirit and “shame,” as Pericles said, at the prospect of “falling below a certain standard.”

In all this, Pericles noted, Athens was “an education to Greece,” a model for its neighbors. At the moment he spoke, at the beginning of a long and ultimately disastrous war, his words must have had special resonance. In celebrating what the Athenians had achieved, he was also reminding them of all they stood to lose. His funeral oration was therefore not only an elegy but also a plea for resoluteness and a call to arms. It is a call that resonates with special significance now that the United States and indeed all of what used to be called Christendom is under attack by a worldwide network of terrorists. Pericles was right: The open society depends upon the interdiction of forces calculated to destroy. “We who remain behind,” he said, “may hope to be spared the fate [of the fallen], but must resolve to keep the same daring spirit against the foe.”

The view of society and the individual’s responsibility that Pericles put forward was rooted in tradition but oriented toward the future. He did not think much of the custom of public funeral orations, he said, but he felt bound to observe it: “This institution was set up and approved by our forefathers, and it is my duty to follow the tradition.” At the same time Pericles reminds us of the claims of the future by stressing the future’s main emissaries: the children of Athens. “It is impossible,” he suggests, “for a man to put forward fair and honest views about

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our affairs if he has not . . . children whose lives may be at stake.”

The vision of society that Pericles articulated in the funeral oration has exercised a permanent fascination on the political imagination of the West. Although occasionally lost sight of, it has always returned to inspire apostles of freedom and tolerance. But it is imperative that we understand that the view of society that Pericles described is not inevitable. It represents a *choice*—a choice, moreover, that must constantly be renewed. It is one version of the good life for man. There are other, competing versions that we would find distinctly less attractive. In the West, Pericles’ vision, modified by time and circumstance, has proved to be a peculiarly powerful one. It was absorbed by Christendom in the eighteenth century and helped to inform the democratic principles that undergird British and American democracy.

But we would be untrue to Pericles’ counsel of vigilance were we to think that some of the alternatives to this vision were incapable of inspiring strong allegiance. This was true when Pericles spoke. His entire speech presupposes the contrast between the Athenian way of life and another that was inimical to it. It continues to be true. The spectacle of radical Islamists dancing joyfully in the street when news broke of the September 11 attacks on New York and Washington should remind us of that fact.

Indeed, the status of Pericles’ vision of society as one alternative among others was dramatically sharpened by the events of September 11. For that attack was not simply an attack on symbols of American capitalism or American military might. Nor was it simply a terrorist attack on American citizens. It was all those things but more. It was an attack on the idea of America as a liberal democratic society, which means that it was an attack on an idea of society that had one of its primary sources in the

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ideals enunciated by Pericles. It was, as Binyamin Netanyahu put it, a furious salvo in “a war to reverse the triumph of the West.” Netanyahu’s words should be constantly borne in mind lest the emollient tide of rationalization blunt the angry reality of those attacks.

#### SHATTERED ILLUSIONS

Many illusions were challenged on September 11. One illusion concerns the fantasies of academic multiculturalists, so-called. I say “so-called” because what goes under the name of multiculturalism in our colleges and universities today is really a polysyllabic form of mono-culturalism fueled by ideological hatred. Genuine multiculturalism involves a great deal of work, beginning with the arduous task of learning other languages, something most of those who call themselves multiculturalists are conspicuously loath to do.

Think of the fatuous attack on “dead white European males” that stands at the center of the academic multiculturalist enterprise. As a specimen of that maligned species, one could hardly do better than Pericles. Not only is he a dead white European male, but he is one who embodied in his life and aspirations an ideal of humanity completely at odds with academic multiculturalism. He was patriarchal, militarist, elitist, and Eurocentric, indeed, Hellenocentric, which is even worse.

The good news is that Pericles survived September 11. The spurious brand of multiculturalism that encourages us to repudiate “dead white European males” and insists that all cultures are of equal worth may finally be entering a terminal stage. Figures like Edward Said and Susan Sontag, Harold Pinter, and Noam Chomsky continue to bay about the iniquity of America, the depredations of capitalism, and so on, but their voices have been falling on increasingly deaf ears. The liberal media began

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by wringing its hands and wondering whether the coalition would hold, whether we were fair to “moderate” members of the Taliban, whether the Afghans were too wily for Americans, whether the United States was acting in too “unilateral” a fashion. On Christmas Eve, in a masterpiece of understatement, the *Wall Street Journal* ran a story under the headline “In War’s Early Phase, News Media Showed a Tendency to Misfire.” “This war is in trouble,” quoth Daniel Schorr on NPR. At the end of October, R. W. Apple warned readers of the *New York Times* that “signs of progress are sparse.” Et cetera. Every piece of possible bad news was—and is—touted as evidence that we may have entered a “quagmire,” that we are “overextended,” “arrogant,” “unresponsive” to the needs and desires of indigenes. It is too soon to say which way the rhetorical chips will ultimately fall. But, as of this writing anyway, a constant string of victories has the liberal pundits frustrated and baffled. They had been waiting for a repeat of Vietnam, and the Bush administration disobliged by giving them a conflict in which America was in the right and was winning.

The hollowness of the left-liberal wisdom about the war brings me to another illusion that was challenged by the events of 9/11. I mean the illusion that the world is basically a benevolent, freedom-loving place, and that if only other people had enough education, safe sex, and access to National Public Radio they would become pacific celebrants of democracy and tolerance. This is the temptation of utopia—Greek for “nowhere”—and it must be acknowledged that America’s fortunate geographical position in the world has long encouraged certain versions of this temptation. The extraordinary growth of America’s wealth and military power in the twentieth-century—like Athens’ great wealth and power in the fifth-century B.C.—have kept the wolf from the door and the marauder from our throats. They have also abetted the illusion of invulnerability. But in-

creased international mobility and the widespread dissemination of technological know-how have conspired to neutralize or at least attenuate those advantages. September 11, which brought the destruction of foreign attack to American soil for the first time since the War of 1812, made it abundantly clear that we have implacable enemies, enemies we cannot hide from, effectively appease, or negotiate with, enemies that will struggle to the death to destroy us. “Allah Akbar!” shout a group of Taliban prisoners, and then they set about detonating hand grenades, killing themselves and their guards. The supreme Taliban leader Mullah Mohammed Omar put it with all possible clarity when he said that for him and his followers “The real matter is the extinction of America, and God willing, it will fall to the ground.”

A third illusion that was challenged on September 11 concerns the morality of power. It has been fashionable among trendy academics, CNN commentators, and other armchair utopians to pretend that the use of power by the powerful is by definition evil. Violence on the part of anyone claiming to be a victim was excused as the product of “frustration” or “rage”—emotions that for mysterious reasons are held to be exonerating for the dispossessed but incriminating when exhibited by legitimate authority. Hence the ponderous scramble to uncover “root causes”: that is, the search for sociological alibis that might absolve the perpetrators of evil from the inconveniences of guilt. Another quotation from Charles Péguy: “Surrender is essentially an operation by means of which we set about explaining instead of acting.”

This favorite liberal pastime has not been abandoned, but it looks increasingly rancid. As the commentator Jonathan Rauch wittily put it shortly after the terrorist attacks, the cause of terrorism is terrorists. September 11 reminded us that with power comes responsibility. Power without resolution is per-

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ceived as weakness, and weakness is always dangerously provocative. In the aftermath of September 11, we in the West have often been cautioned against exciting Islamic rage. My own feeling is that it is salutary for our allies and our enemies alike to understand that American rage, too, is an unpleasant thing. Pericles commended the Athenians on their “adventurous” spirit that had “forced an entry into every sea and into every land.” Everywhere, he noted, Athens “left behind . . . everlasting memorials of good done to our friends or suffering inflicted on our enemies.”

Since the 1970s, we have tended to flinch from such frank talk; we shy away from talk of forcing anyone to do anything; we seem ashamed of acknowledging that we have enemies let alone acknowledging that we wish them ill; we are embarrassed alike by the perquisites and the obligations of power. Such squeamishness is precisely part of the “effeminacy” against which Pericles warned. We desperately wish to be liked. We forget that true affection depends upon respect.

At least since the end of the Vietnam conflict, the United States has vacillated in discharging its responsibilities to power. Whatever the wisdom of our involvement in Vietnam, our way of extricating ourselves was ignominious and an incitement to further violence. The image of that U.S. helicopter evacuating people from our embassy in Saigon is a badge of failure, not so much of military strategy but of nerve.

Even worse was our response to the hostage crisis in Iran in 1979 and 1980. Our hesitation to act decisively was duly noted and found contemptible by our enemies. And the fiasco of President Carter’s botched rescue attempt, when a transport vehicle and one of our helicopters collided on the sands of the Iranian desert, was a national humiliation. President Reagan did effectively face down the Soviet Union, but his halfhearted

response to the terrorist bombing of a U.S. Marine barracks in Lebanon in 1983 contributed to the tattered reputation of America as (in Mao's phrase) "a paper tiger."

The Clinton administration sharply exacerbated the problem. From 1993 through 2000, United States again and again demonstrated its lack of resolve even as it let the U.S. military infrastructure decay. In Somalia at the end of 1992, two U.S. helicopters were shot down, several Americans were killed, the body of one was dragged naked through the streets of Mogadishu. We did nothing—an action, or lack of action, that prompted Osama bin Laden way back then to reflect that his followers were "surprised at the low morale of the American soldiers and realized more than before that the American soldier was a paper tiger and after a few blows ran in defeat."

It was the same in 1993, when terrorists bombed the World Trade Center, killing six people and wounding scores. Bin Laden applauded the action but denied responsibility. No one really believed him; nevertheless nothing was done. (One of the wretches jailed for that atrocity commented: "Next time we'll do it right.")

It was the same in June 1996, when a truck bomb exploded outside a U.S. military barracks in Saudi Arabia, killing nineteen Americans. There were some anguished words but we did—nothing. It was the same in 1998 when our embassies were bombed in Kenya and Tanzania, killing hundreds. The response was to rearrange some rocks in the Afghanistan desert with a few cruise missiles.

It was the same in October 2000, when suicide terrorists blew a gigantic hole in USS *Cole*, killing seventeen sailors and almost sinking one of the U.S. Navy's most advanced ships.

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Like Hamlet, we responded with “words, words, words,” and only token military gestures.

In the wake of September 11, it appears that this policy of bellicose vacillation has changed. Still, as of this writing in early 2002, one hears plenty of voices urging not caution but abdication. The left-liberal establishment cannot long bear to see a strong America regnant. It was chastened by disaster but incited by the prospect of losing hold of its illusions. Yet there are also encouraging signs, not least President Bush’s State of the Union address at the end of January, that America is prepared to follow through on its promise to eradicate terrorism and hold responsible those states that sponsor, finance, or abet it. In this it is reclaiming a central part of Pericles’ vision. “Make up your minds,” Pericles said toward the end of his great oration, “that happiness depends on being free, and freedom depends on being courageous. Let there be no relaxation in the face of the perils of the war.”

Let me end with a different historical parallel. Among the neglected masterpieces of Victorian political thought is Walter Bagehot’s book *Physics and Politics*. Published in 1872, it outlines the requirements for the survival and advance of civilization. Bagehot’s ideal is the civilization that he inhabited himself: the liberal democratic polity of nineteenth-century Britain where most disputes were settled in law courts and politics was pursued through discussion, not arms. But Bagehot was canny enough—one might say he was grown-up enough—to understand that such a polity had been made possible in the first instance by force and that it could be maintained in the long run only through the distillates of force that economic might and military prowess represent. “History,” Bagehot wrote, “is strewn with the wrecks of nations which have gained a little progressiveness at the cost of a great deal of hard manliness,

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and have thus prepared themselves for destruction as soon as the movements of the world gave a chance for it.”<sup>8</sup> In the context of our discussion here, Bagehot’s observation looks like a summary of Pericles’ funeral oration, or at least a central part of it. Does Pericles point the way? The alternative is cultural suicide.

8. Walter Bagehot, *Physics and Politics: Or, Thoughts on the Application of the Principles of “Natural Selection” and “Inheritance” to Political Society*, edited with an Introduction by Roger Kimball (Ivan R. Dee, 1998), p. 58.