JAMES BOWMAN

Keen About Death

The Lost Language of National Honor

"The Americans must know there are thousands of young people who are as keen about death as Americans are about life."
—Sulaiman Abu Ghaith, spokesman for al-Qaeda
(Quoted in *The Times* of December 28, 2001)

"I wish Ally McBeal and other shows could be there [in Afghanistan] to show them what the real world is like."
—Alice West, producer of *Ally McBeal*
(Quoted in "Pseud's Corner" of *Private Eye*, December 28, 2001/January 10, 2002)

DO WE SUPPOSE that "the real world" is more like what we see on *Ally McBeal* or more like that of al-Qaeda? It is an interesting question because an argument can be made that, for all the evil committed by Osama bin Laden and his henchmen, theirs is the world in which most of the human race has lived for most of its history—a world "keen about death" in all the areas of life where honor demands it. This is precisely what contemporary Americans do not and perhaps cannot understand. How is it possible to be "keen about death" without being deranged? Yet we make a mistake if we regard those parts of the world that are still obsessed with honor, as our own ancestors used to be, as being subject to mass psychosis.

For one thing, wars are fought for and about and by means of honor, even though we may no longer use the term. As the events of September 11 have revealed, the honorable response to being attacked, which is to retaliate against and punish the aggressor, is something so natural to the human condition that it takes a very small dose of reality to bring it back even from a very long slumber. We have seen this happen before, most notably after Pearl Harbor when suddenly the debate over the war that had dominated American political discourse fell silent and there was near-unanimity on the need to defend American national honor, even if that meant being "keen about death."

Not that, for the most part, we talked about the "day of infamy" in terms of national honor. The term itself had fallen out of favor after its use to justify the slaughter of the First World War and even then sounded at best old-fashioned, at worst a hypocritical dodge of the cruel and unfeeling. But if we no longer spoke the language of honor, the thing itself was suddenly uppermost in the minds of ordinary people. Now, no more than sixty years ago, do we find it natural to talk about "national honor," however. Although the word "honor" has been often in the mouths of Osama bin Laden and his lieutenants and allies, I have seen the expression only once used by an American: when Rich Lowry, editor of *National Review*, wrote that "For the public, the war on terrorism will probably be about nothing less than national honor, and that is not something that can be finessed or negotiated away in coalition politics." About this, Lowry seems to have been both right and wrong. The American war *was* a matter of national honor, but most Americans were unaware of the fact. Accordingly our leaders preferred to speak in terms of opposing the enemies of our country because of their uniquely heinous "evil" deeds rather than their affront to national honor.

The last time that the word "honor" appeared in the na-

tional discourse in anything like its original sense was the occasion on which Richard Nixon announced that his goal in the Vietnam war, which he had inherited from his predecessor, was "peace with honor." It was not Nixon's fault that America's speedy abandonment of its South Vietnamese ally after her own withdrawal from the war made a mockery of that slogan. He had already been dishonored for other reasons by that time and forced from office. But for a quarter of a century after Nixon's retreat to San Clemente (and then to Saddle River) no subsequent president or aspirant to leadership dared to use the word "honor" in any but the vaguest and most innocuous contexts. It was as if honor itself had been dishonored by his disgrace.

Moreover, Nixon's biographer, Stephen Ambrose, has also in the intervening years led the nation in a celebration of the now-aged and dying veterans of the Second World War as "The Greatest Generation" (the title of Tom Brokaw's book) on the grounds of the moral enormities committed by the powers over which they won their victory—as if it were only on that ground that America could claim her moral right to have fought back after being attacked. This historian has thus helped to encourage the mistaken but widespread view that America went to war in 1941 against the evil of Nazism and not in defense of her national honor. It is not coincidental that it is now routine for American presidents to adopt a similar view in justifying military action of any kind—the view that war in general can only be justified in terms of good and evil.

Thus in the wake of the terror attacks on New York and Washington, President George W. Bush duly proceeded to justify retaliation against his country's proclaimed enemies on the grounds not that they were enemies who had challenged America's honor but only because of their unique evil. In doing so he was following the example of his father ten years earlier in

characterizing the deeds of the Iraqi dictator, Saddam Hussein, and of his predecessor in the case of Slobodan Milosevic—who was awaiting trial on "war crimes" charges in The Hague at the time when the latest crop of evil-doers revealed themselves over Manhattan, Washington, and Pennsylvania. Ronald Reagan, too, had alarmed many people who feared what they saw as his warlike tendencies in describing the Soviet Union as an "evil empire" in 1982.

Not that his description was not accurate. In the same way, there was plenty of reason for regarding the hijackers and their sponsors, like Saddam and Milosevic, as evil men. But there could be unforeseen adverse consequences to stressing their evil so much that people are not reminded that challenges to the national honor must be resisted whether they come as the result of unequivocal evil or not.

It could be argued, for instance, that it was not the talk of national honor when the nations of Europe went to war in 1914 that produced the postwar letdown whose consequences are still with us today. That was instead a popular response to the experience of having been sold a savage and destructive war after it became no longer tenable to regard the enemy as uniquely evil. As J. C. Squire wrote,

> God heard the embattled nations sing and shout:
> "Gott strafe England" and "God Save the King,"
> God this, God that and God the other thing.
> "Good God," said God. "I've got my work cut out."

In somewhat the same way, the Vietnam war was oversold as being against "the Communists"—presumably the same people as those responsible for the Soviet Gulag and whose armies were then keeping in subjection the nations of Eastern Europe—through fear that the alternative (of keeping South Viet-

nam in the American rather than the Soviet sphere of influence) smacked too much of old-fashioned "imperialism."

In both these cases, war-weariness after years of slaughter led people eventually to question the moral foundations of the war and to ignore the honorable ones. In 1917 and 1918 it was becoming easier to believe that the Germans, so far from being the moral monsters they were portrayed as being in 1914, were as much as the Allies themselves merely victims of the war, with its muddled "war aims," and the generals and politicians who were seen as keeping it going for sinister reasons of their own. Likewise, by 1968 and 1969, the Vietnamese enemy, the Viet Cong and the North Vietnamese, were looking not at all like agents of some Stalinist bureaucracy but rather worryingly like the gallant freedom-fighters they represented themselves as being. If that was the case, America was no longer fighting an evil empire. It was one.

The kind of romanticism that adopted this view of America's enemy in Vietnam is not quite extinguished even today. The almost reflexive anti-Americanism of many on the Left creates sympathy even for "assymetrical" attacks upon American hegemony by such staggeringly illiberal forces as those of Osama bin Laden. But the careful historian should recognize the central difference between the primitive honor-based culture represented by al-Qaeda and the Taliban and the "progressive" (if misguided) forces that America has been accustomed to opposing since the Second World War. Our new enemies, unlike the old, speak a language that we once spoke and that we might need to learn to speak again.

GUILT VS. SHAME

Anthropologists have long recognized the differences between what they call "guilt cultures" and "shame cultures." Ours is a

guilt culture, but like most guilt cultures it has evolved out of a more primitive shame culture of a kind that we still find in many parts of the world, including Afghanistan and other Muslim countries where honor remains of paramount concern among the ruling elites.

In shame cultures it is public behavior and reputation that are all-important. They are dominated by a masculine and military ethos that values above all (for men) bravery in battle, or in the assertion of status—or, to be more precise, the *reputation* for such bravery—and for women the reputation for chastity. A man cannot be shamed even by cowardice, a woman even by unchastity, so long as neither is made public.

We in the more highly evolved guilt cultures of the West may regard such cultural manifestations as primitive, but they are hardly extinct even among us—as the residual potency of such words as "wimp," "meek," or "milquetoast" (as applied to a man) or "slut" (as applied to a woman) suggest. We are ourselves the heirs of a long literary and cultural tradition that accepts and even celebrates the principle embraced, more or less explicitly by Osama bin Laden, namely, that "might makes right."

At some level, we still embrace this principle ourselves. It is fundamental to democracy, for example, since the sheer force of numbers of the majority is deemed by convention to constitute right. Or right enough. War itself represents an implicit acknowledgment that we believe (our) might will make right. Looked at in this way, the ancient rules of honor that were formulated on the same principle may not seem quite so anachronistic.

When in days of old men of a certain class were prepared to "call out" each other and fight duels over trivial slights, they were asserting this principle. To kill your opponent in single combat was in effect to establish that you were right. Thus Sir

Launcelot in Sir Thomas Malory's *Mort D'Arthur* insisted on his right to continue his adulterous affair with Queen Guinevere on the grounds that he could defeat in single combat any knight prepared to object to it. There's chivalry for you!

In the Renaissance, the laws of honor were a subject of intense interest and were codified by Castiglione and a host of other, mainly Italian, authors of handbooks of how what amounted to a new class of courtiers were to behave so as to maintain their honor as members of the elite, which was marked out by such honor. The point of such books was to explain, among other things, what classes of insults or injuries could not be endured by a gentleman without resort to combat. The most serious of these, and the most certain to result in a challenge, were imputations against a man's truthfulness or his courage, but there were also a number of forms that such imputations could take. Hamlet, a trained courtier of the period, goes through the list of them in one of his soliloquies:

> Am I a coward?
> Who calls me villain? breaks my pate across?
> Plucks off my beard, and blows it in my face?
> Tweaks me by th' nose? gives me the lie i' the throat
> As deep as to the lungs? who does me this?
> Ha!
> 'Swounds, I should take it: for it cannot be
> But I am pigeon-liver'd and lack gall
> To make oppression bitter, or ere this
> I should have fatted all the region kites
> With this slave's offal . . .

In the twentieth century it became fashionable to say that Hamlet was, in the words of Laurence Olivier's voiceover to his filmed version of the play, "a man who could not make up his mind." But no contemporary of Shakespeare would have seen it that way. From the moment that he learns from the

ghost of the murder of his father, Hamlet says, "Haste me to know 't, that I, with wings as swift / As meditation or the thoughts of love / May sweep to my revenge." Of course the irony of wings of thought would have been apparent, but no one would have supposed that Hamlet was debating with himself whether or not he ought to do what in honor any man of the time would have supposed himself obliged to do. His hesitation *might* have been, for the audience as for Hamlet himself, a result of cowardice, but it could hardly have been as a result of his calling into question the entire foundation of masculine honor as it was understood in his time.

This is not to say that Shakespeare himself might not have been calling that foundation into question. But the enjoyment of the play by its Elizabethan or Jacobean audience, like that of the Athenian audience for Aeschylus' Orestean trilogy, depended on what would have been at the time the all-but-universal assumption that Hamlet was obligated in honor to avenge his father's murder, particularly since he had no redress at law against the man who was now king of Denmark. It is true that the obligation in honor to avenge a murdered kinsman was already dying out in Western Europe in Shakespeare's time, because justice was in the process of being nationalized. That's why Sir Francis Bacon described revenge as "wild justice." But the principle of the vendetta has survived into the present day in parts of the world where political and legal authority is weak, including the streets of our major cities.

By the eighteenth century, the honor culture of Western Europe and the emerging American republic only required that a gentleman who had been cuckolded or insulted show himself willing to shoot and be shot at *pro forma* by issuing or accepting a challenge and then allowing his seconds to negotiate with his adversary's. Actual combat rarely resulted. It was enough to prove one's courage by showing one's willingness to face an

armed opponent—and occasionally, as in the case of Alexander Hamilton, whom we now venerate as being among the wisest of our Founding Fathers, death would still result.

The Victorians, like ourselves, were somewhat embarrassed by the survival of such primitive behavior into their time, and they finally put an end to the cult of the duel (in Britain and America, though not everywhere on the Continent). But at the same time they recognized that honor and the things it made men do could not simply be abolished. For among the things it made men do was fight in wars, and they were not as yet so advanced as to suppose that wars could be abolished. The result was the revival, as they saw it, of the medieval rules of chivalry in revised and updated form which—whether the rules were actually observed or not—served as the ideal for gentlemanly and soldierly behavior right up until the First World War, when such things began to seem merely quaint.

There were other factors in the discrediting of honor that ensued after that war. Simultaneously with it there were explosions in Europe and America of feminism—which was naturally opposed to the masculine and patriarchal canons of honor that decreed a woman's honor (that is, her chastity) like her person the property of her husband, father, or brother—and of psychotherapy. The latter by its very nature would come to see the individual psyche as supreme and not the social standards to which the individual was subordinated by the demands of honor. In the diagnosis of "shell shock"—or as we now call it "post-traumatic stress disorder"—as much as in the indiscriminate slaughter of the trenches that provoked it, the death knell of honor was sounded. Now the remnants of the honor culture still survive in their pure form only where, at the margins of our society, the law and the social sanctions of mainstream culture are weakest and where all-male cultures are still suffered to exist.

In the world of street gangs, for instance, a violent response (or the threat of a violent response) to insult or injury offered to one's honor—sometimes described as being "dissed"—is probably at least as common as it was among eighteenth-century gentlemen. But the dominant society regards such standards of behavior and value as primitive and unnecessary, something that is probably the product of poverty. It is widely supposed that these devotees of street honor can be educated out of it with the help of "anger management" classes or appeals to economic self-interest. But when we ourselves are dissed, we too are capable of reverting to the privileges of the man of honor, who thinks himself entitled to respond to insult or injury with violence simply for the sake of his honor and irrespective of the moralist's dilemma as to whether he has been attacked by terrorist or freedom fighter.

HONOR FOR POSTMODERNS

But although the language of honor has been almost extinct in our Western culture for nearly a hundred years, the events of September 11 were just the latest reminder that honor itself never entirely disappears. Almost as terrifying as the hijackings was the terror of liberal and progressive-minded people confronted with the specter of an old-fashioned, even primitive form of wild masculinity arisen out of the deserts and mountains of the Far East and still speaking its strange language of honor. Here, for instance, is Osama bin Laden as quoted by Tony Judt in the *New York Review of Books*:

> Our brothers who fought in Somalia saw wonders about the weakness, feebleness, and cowardliness of the US soldier [he said] . . . We believe that we are men, Muslim men who must have the honour of defending [Mecca]. We do not want American women soldiers defending [it]. . . . The rulers in that region

> have been deprived of their manhood. And they think that the people are women. By God, Muslim women refuse to be defended by these American and Jewish prostitutes.[1]

The charge of effeminacy is a familiar and ancient cause of quarrel—that is to say, violence—in all honor cultures, though there are doubtless many in ours who could cite as one reason for refusing to respond to Osama's challenge the fact that we would thus be acquiescing in his implied disparagement of women. Like any eighteenth-century gentleman, he obviously meant to be provocative. But it is not as if he and his soldiers do not genuinely believe in our weakness and effeminacy, and regard fighting as an honorable task for men. As one of his young soldiers wrote home to his parents in the context of praying for martyrdom: "My great father, don't be upset, this is the men's task, not the women's, who are sitting in the houses. We will meet each other in paradise. You truly raised your son to be brave, not a coward." A poem recited by Hamza bin Laden, son of Osama, on a videotape purported to have been made in front of a wrecked American helicopter, praised the leader of the Taliban as "our emir Mullah Mohammad Omar, symbol of manhood and pride."

It ought to be but probably is not unnecessary to say that the point of such language is not to be insulting to women but to disparage our manhood. Nor is it coincidental that Peggy Noonan, Maureen Dowd, Camille Paglia, and others have written that manly men are, since the attacks, suddenly "in" again. In the same way, as Bernard Lewis reminded us in the *Washington Post* last September 16, the Japanese belief at the time of the attack on Pearl Harbor was "that the United States,

1. "Osama bin Laden, December 1998, from an interview with al-Jazeera television . . ." Tony Judt, "America and the War," *New York Review of Books*, November 15, 2001, p. 4.

despite its wealth and strength, was unmilitary and indeed cowardly, and would easily be frightened out of Asia." The same idea lay behind the attacks on New York and Washington, and, says Lewis, "the calculation is not at first sight unreasonable. The abandonment of Vietnam, the flight under attack from Lebanon and Somalia, the recent preemptive withdrawal and evacuation [of U.S. Marines from Jordan] because of a (probably planted) intercept indicating a threat of terrorist action, all seem to point in that direction."

We have our own means of slandering the manhood of our enemies—not by a direct accusation of effeminacy but by a sort of passive-aggressive resort to quasi-scientific authority. Thus Robert McElvaine argued in the *Washington Post* that the "religion" that "motivates the Taliban" is not Islam but "insecure masculinity. These men are terrified of women."

Other ways of answering the charge of effeminacy also tend to be psychotherapeutic in origin. To charge our enemy with being crazy serves the double function of making him less than fully human and not a moral agent and making ourselves and our precision-guided ordnance into a therapeutic necessity. We are, as it were, surgeons cutting out a human cancer and not (as we like to put it) on the "level" of those who perform deeds of terror.

To submit someone to such instant psychoanalysis is to humiliate him, irrespective of any scientific merit there may be to the diagnosis. But the subtext—that women are weak and not to be feared—is perhaps not so distant from the very un-P.C. charge of effeminacy as the evolved elites might wish. There is no equivalent back-door method of insulting the enemy when it comes to racial, ethnic, or religious taunting. Although there has historically been little reticence among belligerents when it comes to proclaiming the superiority of their own cultures to those of their enemies, the injudicious com-

ment by Silvio Berlusconi, the Italian prime minister, suggesting such a superiority of Western and Christian culture over Eastern and Islamic culture, was almost universally condemned. It might be all right for our side to claim to be fighting for secular, tolerant, and multicultural government, but pointing out that the theocrats on the other side were none of these things could still get you into trouble.

True, there are good political reasons for being careful about such things, but at the most fundamental level, disparagements of the enemy's religion or culture are hardly meant to be taken more seriously than aspersions cast on his sexual potency. The point of Osama's taunt was just to serve as a reminder of why it is necessary to respond to violence with violence. Because, that is, when you run away from a fight, as we did in Somalia, you encourage your enemy to think you weak and afraid (as the language of honor conventionally—stereotypically, if you are a feminist—regards women as being) and unwilling to defend yourself. He will therefore think himself licensed to attack you again and again until his attacks become intolerable, by which time it may well be too late to do anything about them. This is the iron law of conflict that only wishful thinking can deny. At another level, the challenge is put in words both familiar and shocking: the words of a taunting playground bully. Surely, the more advanced and progressive people among us must be asking themselves, grownups do not have to respond to such a primitive and childish challenge?

Ordinary Americans have less trouble with the playground morality according to which international relations are carried out. Polls suggested that they instinctively felt the need to hit back without having, anymore, much in the way of language in which to describe or justify their feelings. "I don't see that we have a choice," David Harrell of Brownsville, Brooklyn, told

the *Washington Post*. "We were attacked and bloodied, and a nation has to defend itself." The popularity of the war and of the soldiers fighting it were only bolstered by the military successes of November and December, which did not depend on any sophisticated adumbration of American "war aims" or even very much confidence that it was a war against "terrorism" and not against Islam.

But the rhetorical prosecution of a war is a serious problem of the elites. Ordinary soldiers, particularly in a professional army, have their own sense of honor, which is largely independent of war aims, and military action was not in any case controversial, except on university campuses. But this does not mean that evidence of a rhetorical gap opening up between our leaders and ordinary people is a matter of no moment.

HONORABLE COWARDICE?

In the immediate aftermath of the attacks, for instance, there was a brief controversy about whether or not the terrorist acts had been "cowardly." President Bush called them so, just as President Clinton had done with the terror attacks on the USS *Cole* and the American embassies in Kenya and Tanzania when he was in office, but others wondered what was cowardly about blowing yourself up for a cause you believed in. Bill Maher, host of "Politically Incorrect" on ABC television, briefly outraged the nation's wounded sensibilities by suggesting that the terrorists had not been cowardly at all while American armed forces *had* been so when they had responded to earlier acts of terrorism by firing cruise missiles, from a long way off, at what may or may not have been places once inhabited by the malefactors. Interestingly, a spokesman for Osama bin Laden, in denying at first that he had been responsible for the attacks,

himself said that al-Qaeda would have scorned to have been a party to "such cowardly acts" as the terror bombings.

Leaving aside for a moment the understandable anger, pique, or desire to be provocative of all these speakers, what is there to be said about the bravery or lack of it displayed by the hijackers? How, wrote Celestine Bohlen, in the *New York Times*, could a word meaning "a shamefully excessive fear of danger" (as Webster's defines it) be applied "to the killers who brazenly passed through airport security, coolly boarded four airliners, overpowered the crews and flew straight to their targets and to their own fiery graves. The implication" of such an epithet applied to such people, thinks Miss Bohlen, "is that the masterminds are cowards because they have not taken responsibility for their actions, or that the killers are cowards for selecting helpless victims." But this, she claims, would be to do violence to the meaning of the word, and she calls in for support Jesse Sheidlower, the North American editor of the *Oxford English Dictionary*.

"I don't think from any point of view we could call these perpetrators cowardly," Mr. Sheidlower agrees. "Objectively, you have to say that what they did, while malevolent, was also a very brave act. 'Dastardly,' maybe." But "dastardly," apart from being old-fashioned-sounding, includes within its semantic field the idea of cowardice. Which points up another reason for using the word "cowardly" unmentioned by either Ms. Bohlen or Mr. Sheidlower. This is that such a usage represents a harkening back to the days when violence was regulated—or at least was supposed to be regulated—by rules of honor, also sometimes referred to as a "gentlemanly" code. To strike your enemy in the back, when he is not looking or has not got his armor on or is unprepared to give a counterblow, was thought to be cowardly because only someone would do it who feared being beaten in a fair fight.

This is also why President Bush also used the qualifier "faceless" with "coward." Knightly equals—assuming that we lived, as some people still suppose we once did live, in a chivalrous society—would face each other "like men," with devices on their shields indicating who they are. The elementary sense of fairness involved is still to be found in boxing matches or other sporting events, where play is not commenced until both sides declare themselves ready. But terrorists who skulk in the shadows and strike us when we are not looking would say that it is precisely because they would be beaten in a fair fight by our professional soldiers that they have the right to strike when we are not prepared to respond, and to strike civilians. The whole point of terrorism is that it is the only weapon available to those who would have no chance in a fair fight against an overwhelmingly superior enemy. How else are they to have a chance to seek justice against power that refuses them what they want?

In making such an argument, the terrorists can appeal to the example of all the guerrilla warriors who have been romanticized by the Left and, to a greater or lesser extent, the popular culture during the last half century. Mao. Ho Chi Minh. Fidel. Che. America, even in spite of herself, loves these stories of little bands of the faithful and virtuous who stand up to and who finally defeat mighty and presumptively corrupt empires. It is precisely how we characterize the war that effected our own founding as a nation. In Vietnam it was most likely the shock of suddenly finding ourselves in the role of the evil empire, and our enemies in that of the Founding Fathers, which ultimately made the continuation of that struggle unsustainable. It is not the least of the ironies of the present struggle that terrorist Muslims from the honor culture of the desert depend on the work done by Western popular culture, which

they loathe, to romanticize and honor people like themselves and to take away the stigma of the dastard from their deeds.

For in the West, little honor any longer attaches merely to being the mightier warrior, or to using our power to bring order, peace, and good government to troubled and violent regions of the world. We have in the quarter-century since the fall of Saigon very often been inclined to accept the post-honorable view of terrorists as freedom fighters whose murderous behavior is to be sympathetically understood, if not necessarily excused, in the Middle East, South Africa, Central America, and other places where we have declined, often in spite of what seemed to significant numbers of Americans to be in the national interest, to become engaged ourselves. Even now, there are those on the left who would seek to explain or excuse the Arab terrorists of September 11 as men who had no other way in which to express their grievance—a grievance always assumed to be justified by their claims of suffering—against a much more powerful and presumptively oppressive authority or suzerainty.

It is true that this explanation is somewhat stretched in the case of the United States, which exercises no *de jure* authority in the homelands of the terrorists. But there are many academically respectable precedents for their counterargument that American "hegemony" (useful word!) in their region of the world is the *de facto* equivalent of an imperialist power—since local authorities are too timid to resist American economic, diplomatic, and military might in the alleged interests of the aggrieved—and that therefore it is to be as legitimately resisted as George III was by the American colonists 225 years ago. And if their tactics are somewhat different from George Washington's, it is only a reflection of their relative weakness. Terrorism is thus merely an assertion of their right to moral and political autonomy in the only way available to them.

THE NEW PATRIOTISM

Fortunately, there are few Americans outside of university faculties inclined to believe this anymore. The patriotism that has been so much in evidence since the events of September 11 is both new and not new. It is new in its intensity and in the willingness it implies among ordinary people to see their government assume new powers in order to avenge the attack on America. It is not new in that Americans have always been a patriotic people and are periodically awakened by events to renewals of their patriotism. But this particular revival may be different from the revivals that followed Pearl Harbor, say, or the Iranian hostage crisis. On the one hand, the postwar individualism of American society has had few demands made on it since Vietnam—and few were made even then on those who did not actually have family members fighting there. Now the army's recruiting slogan appeals to recruits to become "An Army of One" and our leaders tell us that we can best support the war effort by shopping.

On the other hand, our adversary represents not only Islamic fundamentalism but also the kind of primitive honor-culture from which we have become so remote that even Islamic fundamentalism looks familiar by comparison. When the Arab hijackers struck, they confronted America not only with the first attack by a foreign power upon the continental United States in over a century and a half but also with a challenge to national honor of a sort to which liberal and progressive thinking, accustomed to taking a global view of every problem, had almost taught itself to feel immune.

How easy it has become for "the world's only superpower" to think of itself as the honest broker between Arab and Israeli in the Middle East or nationalist and Unionist in Northern

Ireland or Serb and Muslim in the former Yugoslavia. America could patronize those who were engaged in what it inevitably saw as petty regional squabbles because of her power and wealth, but also because of a liberal and unheroic habit of mind by which she saw herself as not being bound by the same rules of honor that made those disputes so intractable. American mediators and peacemakers (and especially American academics) got into the habit of talking of "the cycle of violence" as if they could scarcely imagine themselves and their country caught up in anything so absurd.

Ordinary Americans, by contrast, found it much more natural to revert to the idea of honor, even if the word itself remained elusive. When the tabloid *Globe* reported (alas, probably inaccurately) that Osama bin Laden had been killed in a U.S. bombing raid on December 15, it claimed that he "met his end whimpering like a coward" and that his comrades "told him to stop complaining and die like a man." It may come as a surprise to those for whom "honor" seems a hopelessly old-fashioned, even primitive concept, that there is still a mass audience in America who can readily understand what it means to "die like a man." For all of our sakes, we should be glad that there is. But is it not also the case that the elites should be reintroduced to this useful terminology? Thus we read in the *Wall Street Journal* that

> If we really intend to extinguish the hope that has fueled the rise of al-Qaeda and the violent anti-Americanism throughout the Middle East, we have no choice but to re-instill in our foes and friends the fear and respect that attaches to any great power . . . .
>
> Only a war against Saddam Hussein will decisively restore the awe that protects American interests abroad and citizens at home. We've been running from this fight for 10 years. In the

> Middle East, everybody knows it. We're the only ones deluding ourselves.[2]

"Fear," "respect," "awe"—these are the things that our grandfathers meant by "honor." If we think these are good things for us to have, perhaps we ought to start using the word again as well, and go easier on the insistence, so uncomfortably like our enemy's, that we are fighting a war of good against evil. Nor is our experience in the twentieth century with universal principles as the motivation for political and military action very encouraging. Why are we—rhetorically anyway—so reluctant to fight not as the party of universal peace and justice but simply as Americans, a people under attack?

It seems a fact not entirely unrelated to its language of good and evil that our political culture was convulsed by a wave of hysteria about security that resulted in confiscation of nail files and the like at airport screening stations. An honor culture would regard such excessive concern for safety as a sign of cowardice. Here is something that our leaders could do to show leadership: announce that security will *not* be tightened, but call upon the men of America to be vigilant and to resist aerial terrorists—as in fact the men (and women) of America have been doing on their own and without any exhortations from their leaders, for example on American Airlines flight 63 when Richard Reid tried to set off a bomb in his shoe. Honor means, among other things, not submitting to threats, and an appeal to honor in such a case would not only be remarkably efficacious against hijackers but also contribute to national pride and morale.

For America wins no friends by the kind of moral chauvinism that insists at every turn that she is better than her enemies.

2. Reuel Marc Gerecht, *Wall Street Journal*, December 19, 2001, p. A 18.

In some ways, this is worse than the more familiar sorts of ethnic or religious chauvinism that we so ostentatiously eschew and more likely to inflame the discontented of the world. A poor man will listen with interest and gratitude to a rich man who tells him that he may become as rich as he is, but he will turn away in disgust from a rich man who tells him that he may become as good as he is. Why, in any case, do we cling to what is inevitably seen as a hypocritical insistence on our moral superiority to our adversaries when so much of the world understands at once and instinctively the simple right of a nation under attack to defend itself?

It is an interesting question, that of whence comes this assumption that we occupy a higher moral level than our would-be adversaries—particularly since it so often occupies the minds of those who, in another context, argue forcefully that America's culpable exercise of political, economic, and military power in the world puts her *beneath* the level of that power's innocent victims. Perhaps a counterattack would allow her to *rise* to their level? But among most of those who use such an argument, a natural pride in the achievements in liberalism and tolerance and democracy among the nations of the West allows a degree of neglect of the basic sense in which we are, always have been, and always will be on the same level as those who attack us: the level of being required by the demands of honor to answer a blow with a blow—or a series of blows—or else to sacrifice our self-respect as well as our respect in the world.