

A Perspective from the Periphery by David W. Orr

Thoughts on
America
Writers Respond to Crisis

In the immediate aftermath of the devastating terrorist attacks in New York and Washington, over ninety percent of the U.S. public favored some kind of military action against the alleged perpetrators. The President calls the event an "act of war." Some in Congress are ready to suspend a sizeable part of our civil liberties in order to combat the threat of terrorism. There can be no question that those who commit criminal acts should be apprehended, fairly tried, and punished. That much is clear, but little else is. This is the time to reassess many things having to do with the underlying structure of political discontent that leads to terrorism, as well as the specific causes of our vulnerability. Why do so many of the poor around the world hate us? Why are we so vulnerable? Most important, what can we do to break the cycle of violence and create security in the largest possible sense of the word?

The events of 9/11 will test our intelligence, wisdom, and foresight against the temptation to lash out in anger and frustration. At stake is the future of democracy and the kind of world we will make for our grandchildren. Before taking precipitous action that may lock us into perpetual conflict, it is time to consider what we know about this case and its larger context. We know, for example, that:

- the acts of 9/11 were remarkably cost-effective. For perhaps a few millions of dollars, the perpetrators used our equipment and facilities to cause untold billions of dollars of damage, and to seize control of western media for months. They have imposed a tax of hundreds of billions more to pay for remedial actions and subsequent economic losses;
- more devastating options throughout the U.S. are available to determined terrorists and to the merely deranged. The next round of terrorism could involve suitcase nuclear weapons delivered by van, chemical or biological materials, or simply disruption of basic services of communications networks, roads, and industrial infrastructure;
- our high-technology weapons are worse than useless. They create a false sense of security at a huge expense while preempting smarter options that promote real security; and
- from conflicts in Northern Ireland, the Balkans, the Middle East, and dozens of other places, we know a great deal about the dynamics of perpetual conflict in which positions harden, memory becomes myth, martyrs are deified, enemies demonized, and the political discussion narrowed in ways that prevent long-term solutions to the underlying problems that created the conflict in the first place. Human affairs have their own laws of action and reaction that displace logic, reason, and justice - which is to say that it is probable that a response in kind will trigger further violence. In such situations there is no victory possible for either side. Ever.

We also know a great deal about the larger context surrounding the events of 9/11, including the facts that:

- the global economy is becoming highly stratified, with a small number of very wealthy at the top, and several billions, some future terrorists, living in the desperation of "absolute poverty;"
- the U.S. is the world's largest vendor of weapons. Osama bin Laden and Saddam Hussein were once the recipients of U.S. military training and support;

- for fifty years the U.S. has engaged in political manipulation, trained and financed death squads, and funded repressive dictatorships, thereby contributing to a global pattern of violence and hostility;
- the present administration has chosen to ignore, violate, or abrogate international agreements on climate change, arms control, and chemical or biological weapons, but now it demands international cooperation. We cannot have it both ways. Either we are part of a global community or we must go it alone. If the latter, we will lose and lose tragically - even if we "win" a war with a particular terrorist.

Global corporations, with the help of compliant governments, have created a tightly coupled world in which ecological, economic, political, and technological effects of actions anywhere sooner or later touch everyone. It is a world vulnerable to disruption from a thousand sources. It is a world that cannot be sustained politically, morally, or ecologically. For all our hype about freedom, this emerging world system is neither free nor democratic. It is a world, rather, governed by a plutocracy of distant and unaccountable corporations and those in governments who do their bidding. But in the end, it is a world ruled by ironies of the sort that "what goes 'round, comes 'round." We aimed to be rich and powerful, but in so doing we have fashioned ourselves into a very large bulls eye, more vulnerable and despised than most care to admit. It is now time to re-examine old myths about globalization, economic growth, and national security.

It is time for a second American Revolution that would challenge the direction of American policy and the root causes of our vulnerability. Our Declaration of Independence must announce our separation not from a remote King, but from the arbitrary and capricious power of a corporate oligarchy. But this Revolution will require a second document: a Declaration of Interdependence - of people, future generations, and the larger community of life. This revolution must be grounded in the recognition that our real security has little to do with military gadgetry and everything to do with the health of farms, communities and ecosystems everywhere. The true patriots of our time will be those who see the connections between security, the health of democratic institutions, the fair distribution of wealth, and the protection of soils, forests, and biological diversity. They, like the patriots of 1776, know that political power without accountability will become corrupt and indifferent to the common wealth and future generations alike. This is a revolution rooted in the fact that no society that relies on distant sources of food, energy, and materials, or heroic feats of technology, can be secured indefinitely. This is a revolution that would aim to restore local sources of power: family farms, local enterprises, community prosperity, and ecological wealth.

For our generation, the equivalent of "the shot heard around the world" would be the resolute announcement that we intend to end our dependence on foreign oil and all fossil fuels by tapping American technological ingenuity to harness solar energy. That one act would remove us from the politics of an unstable region, improve our balance of payments, and reduce pollution and the emission of greenhouse gases while creating the basis for a durable and secure prosperity.

George Bush, Sr. once told us that "the American way of life is not negotiable." We know now the untruth of that assertion. No way of life based on waste, economic exploitation, military coercion, and a refusal to account costs fully is non-negotiable. The question before us is not whether we can maintain a way of life based on Middle Eastern oil, imported resources, ecological ruin, exploitation of the poor, and climate change. We cannot. Rather, the question is whether we can summon the wisdom to create a just, secure, and sustainable prosperity that no terrorist can threaten and that threatens no nation or the prospects of our children.