

Living in the Unspeakable

The events of September 11 have irrevocably changed our lives and placed us in a time of personal and national trial. There has been much said about this incident, some of it very wise and some of it horseshit. Everyday we hear from another pundit rushing to the internet announcing their particular angle. Public commentators infantilize us with their pseudo-therapeutic bromides of grief management, confidence-building, and emotional healing. Yes, let's restore ourselves in communities, but let's not be absurd together, and let's not have others treat us as if we're stupid. Because of the daily congestion of electronic and printed traffic on the subject I never considered I had anything worth adding to the pile. But because of my relationship with the Pentagon and the intelligence community over the past sixteen years I've had numerous requests to share my observations from the defense point of view as well as my personal reflections. My thoughts are those of a private citizen not those of an expert or one whose opinion will necessarily make a deciding difference.

My interactions with the Pentagon have increased dramatically since 9/11. I have many friends posted there and I am naturally concerned about their well being. Thankfully, they are all safe. I have also been invited to be on a number of committees specifically formed by the events of 9/11. My impressions are that the military, as a whole, is urging restraint, well-considered plans, and intensified diplomatic, political, and economic measures, as well as the appropriate military interventions. The people I speak with are clear that this situation has no precedent to fall back on and the battle lines are none like we've seen in the past. These are men and women who deeply care about not only the country, but about the lives of the Marines, Airmen, Seaman, and Soldiers who put their lives in harm's way. In short, they are warning against going hot. And the final decisions, as always in a democracy, lie with our political leaders.

The situation is analogous to the physicians of the middle ages who came to the conclusion that bleeding their patients to restore their health didn't really work. Their patients, however, insisted on the bleeding treatment and since the physicians didn't know what else to do, they continued to bleed them. We know a large-scale mechanized

war will not work, but we're not really sure what will, so through the lens of CNN we see our aircraft carriers, armed to the teeth, steaming to the Persian Gulf. This placates and settles many minds, and upsets others. But those at the head of table know that "restoring health" requires building alliances, maintaining friendships (instead of using people and then throwing them away), distinguishing between Islam and the terrorists, blocking their economic clout, learning from our past mistakes, and bringing the perpetrators to justice. These are the elements that I also endorse.

For years I've seen the military and intelligence communities raise flags about the very real possibility of an event like this occurring. For the most part they have been waved aside and we now live with the horrible aftermath of our complacency. Since 1993 we've had five major terrorist acts committed against us here and abroad. And after each one they said this is just the start. I sat in on a meeting years ago where an Army Special Forces Colonel described the exact scenario we just experienced at the World Trade Center. As loud and as convincing as he was he couldn't rally any support upstream for the resources and assets to follow through. What our tax dollars did pay for were political correctness programs insuring our recruits didn't have their self-esteem damaged during boot camp and monitors making sure that in the morning runs the men "didn't show up" the women by running faster. Meanwhile 15% of our armed forces personnel are on food stamps because their pay checks don't cover food and rent. These are the same men and women who will spend this Thanksgiving and Christmas thousands of miles from their families.

We convinced ourselves that we were invulnerable, that the land of the brave was impenetrable. Soft and overfed we now face an opponent who has demonstrated that his disenfranchisement has become his ultimate weapon. As our poet said "If you don't have anything you don't have anything to lose." Remember that evil is impervious to a consciousness raising chat and that courage is a morally neutral virtue. We are called upon, individually and as a people, to re-examine our lives and priorities. We must close ranks, watch each other's backs, and in doing so not back down from building a mature democracy.

We also find ourselves in a moment of great opportunity. This offers itself on two connected tracks: as a historical evolution and as a consciousness evolution. It is

important to confront the aggressors and deliver the appropriate consequences with the collaboration of the international community. It is equally, if not more important, to recognize that violence will not end violence. History reflects this over and over. It's too much in our face to deny. Fighting for peace is like fucking for virginity. Historical and consciousness evolution means redefining who we are as Americans and as people. We know what we're fighting against, we need to stand for what we're fighting for and to ask the deeper question of why. Terrorists want to bring down more than buildings and it requires us to ask what we will fight and die for. My short list includes having my daughters be able to play basketball in shorts, accountable government, pulled pork sandwiches for my friends who want them, educational opportunities for all, evolutionary theory, free speech, the right to choose religious and spiritual practices, dancing, shaving, a multi-party political system. I was ashamed to be a human when I saw the attack and proud to be a human when I saw the fireman rushing up the stairwells while others were running down. This is the daily conundrum we live with as these two forces battle in our own bodies. Krishnamurti said it well, "War is but an expression of our everyday lives." We are the battle lines.

Instead of panicking or returning to "business as usual" commit to grounded compassion, pragmatic wisdom, and skillful action. Let awareness be your weapon. We are summoned to something great, fight not to reduce it to our smallness. These catastrophic events demand that we go to the deepest levels of a generosity of spirit. Be there for those who have suffered more than we have. Step beyond yourself and be of use to someone. Be courage in uncertainty. Be love in chaos. Take it easy but take it. This is what I tell myself.