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Facing the Darkness Within

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Bob Ayres

Like so many of my fellow Americans, I am sifting through feelings of shock, anxiety, grief, and outrage in the aftermath of the September 11 attack on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon.



Photo by Andrea Booher/ FEMA News Photo

I am deeply disturbed, however, by President Bush's facile portrayal of a cosmic struggle between Good and Evil, with America starring in the role of Good, while those who planned and carried out these attacks against our nation personify Evil. This melodramatic typecasting is dangerous because it ignores the larger context in which we find ourselves. And if we fail to remember, and act without regard to this larger context, we are certain to make grave errors in the weeks and months ahead.

Terrorism is the name we give to violence perpetrated by others, especially by marginalized groups and extremist governments. More often than not, these acts of violence are in fact a response to expressions of institutionalized violence that the nation states themselves employ under the more temperate nomenclature of foreign and domestic policy. These policies, at the point of their implementation, are often acts of violence themselves, with consequences every bit as brutal and inhumane as those we have witnessed this week.

As a nation, we have been a force for good in the world, time and again standing up to oppression and injustice, coming to the aid of those in need.

We were also the first nation in the world to have developed atomic weapons, and the only nation to have deployed them — against civilian population centers. We have participated in the military overthrow of democratically elected governments; we have equipped and trained oppressive regimes to wage wars of terror against their own citizens; we have, for political reasons, withheld food and relief aid from peoples locked in the grip of famine. In the past few months, the Bush administration has insisted that we will not participate in the efforts of the worldwide community to address the issue of global warming, should that effort adversely impact our economy or our life style. The administration has insisted that although we are the world's largest consumer of fossil fuels, conservation has no meaningful place in our national energy policy. Meanwhile, in our rapacious exploitation of the planet's natural resources, we have decimated entire ecosystems, and pushed to extinction myriad species of animals and plants. Finally, there is a cultural violence implicit in the growing hegemony of our brand of capitalistic imperialism. Indeed, this particular form of violence is perhaps the strongest motivator of all for fundamentalist Islamic groups such as those implicated in this week's attack and other incidents over the past few years. As a nation, we are nearly blind to this form of violence, in part because so few of us ever experience a foreign language, culture, or religion at a depth that would allow us to see our own culture from someone else's point of view.

Our own society is among the most violent in the world. We produce violence. We consume it; we feed it to our children; we market it; and we

export it. Like the Romans in their coliseums, we are deeply addicted to violence as entertainment. More darkly still, we act it out against our lovers, our spouses, and our children.

Military action may be necessary to bring those responsible for Tuesday's attacks to justice. But it will never restore the sense of security we feel we have lost. True security will only be possible when we assume our place as a law-abiding, dues-paying member of the community of nations; when we respect the legitimate self-interests of others as we advocate for our own; when we extend liberty and freedom and justice to our own citizens, so that we can without hypocrisy champion these values by pointing to the leadership of our own example; when we choose to live more simply out of respect for our fellows and our planet; when we ourselves become less prone to violence.

Our military might is unparalleled. We have the power to begin a war that will make the wars of the last century pale by comparison. The hawkish voices in our government and those visiting the studios of our TV and radio stations in the days after the attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon would do well to give pause, and to think through the probable outcomes of the strategies they propose, lest in our response we prove ourselves to be indistinguishable from the enemy we so passionately seek to destroy — a people who project the darkness within themselves onto the lives of others whom they do not understand.

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