

Commemoration of September 11 September 11, 2011

I have vivid memories of September 11, 2001. My wife, Susan Ashley, had flown to Chicago that morning to attend a meeting of the Associated Colleges of the Midwest. She called from O'Hare, where she had just landed, to suggest I turn on television. Something very strange was going on. The airport, she said, had shut down.

I watched the horrifying pictures for a little while, then headed to school to meet with my class of first year students. The class was the one I am teaching again right now: The Search for Islamic Order: Yesterday and Today. The topic for the day was Sunni Orthodoxy as it began to take shape in the seventh and eighth centuries.

Of course, my students were already aware of the unfolding events. I knew it was impossible to hold class, so I suggested we retire to my house to watch what was going on. All seventeen of us hustled four blocks up Tejon Street, settled into the family room and resumed watching the drama. Soon came a knock on our back door. When I opened it, a woman student whom I happened to recognize as Susan's advisee marched in, joined us in front of the television set, and then started giving orders to members of my class. "Move over here. Don't do that." She had come unhinged. Amazingly enough the class paid little attention to this extraordinary behavior, so much were their eyes glued to television. When this woman suddenly got up and walked out the front door, I let her go. I later realized I probably should not have done that, but miraculously she got herself back to campus without incident. She ended up in the hospital later in the day.

I am not sure when we learned that Muslim radicals were likely responsible for the attacks on New York and Washington. Needless to say, the events imparted a special significance to the course I was teaching. The question : How were we to understand the place of these radicals in the context of Islamic history and Muslim belief? I don't think I have ever taught a more intense, motivated class than that one.

That afternoon President Kathryn Mohrman called a meeting here in the chapel to help students cope with the disaster. I remember speaking very briefly to this effect: the United States had suffered a symbolic blow but our government had not collapsed. Our society had not collapsed and would not collapse. We would recover, I said. That seems so obvious as I look back, but it was not perhaps obvious to some students on that day.

Two days later I tried to put the event in some sort of perspective for the Colorado Springs World Affairs Council meeting in the main ballroom of the Broadmoor Hotel. The speaker they had previously engaged could not reach Colorado Springs, so I played pinch hitter along with a faculty member from the Air Force Academy.

I tried in my remarks on that occasion to respond to an attitude of incredulity. How could anybody think of doing this to us nice Americans? I listed some reasons. We were and are the only superpower. We were and are credited (or blamed) for just about everything that happens in the

world, whether or not we can actually control those events. In retrospect, I think it is clear that Bin Laden, who had been expelled from Saudi Arabia and saw the King as the ultimate hypocrite, blamed us for the survival of the monarchy there. We were also seen as the determined supporter of Israel. We were the leaders of the world capitalist economy, and the World Trade Center may have symbolized that superiority in Bin Laden's mind. At least one person who heard that speech apparently thought I was saying we deserved what we got. That was scarcely what I meant. But I did mean to say that the attacks reflected a certain rationality, a certain courage, a certain idealism that was bound to be admired in some parts of the world. Most governments, though, including those of Muslim majority countries, expressed sympathy not for the perpetrators but for the victims of their attack and for the United States. There was no clash of civilizations. Muslims in this country shared in the horror we all felt, and they ended up suffering more than most of us as a result of the prejudice they began to encounter.

The question then was what we could do or might do as a nation to respond. Here is what I said in concluding my remarks that day:

“We cannot undo the physical and psychological damage that has been done. We cannot reverse the defeat we have suffered. Seeking and punishing those who were genuinely guilty may help us cope, but that may prove very difficult and costly. Retaliating in some fashion might be easier. We can kill thousands of innocent people at less cost than they did, but that would be to engage in the very evil we have found so offensive. Surely that is not what we have in mind.”

I continued: “We cannot change our colors. We cannot reduce our visibility or make ourselves poor [and less resented] or create a world that is entirely peaceful and just. We have given the lie to those who saw us as invulnerable to suffering, but we cannot abandon our connection to Israel or break diplomatic relations with every government that violates the rights of its citizens. We will never appear virtuous in the eyes of everyone.

“We can reinforce security at our airports and re-examine all our defenses. I am sure this will be done, just as I am sure that we will pursue the perpetrators and try to bring them to justice. But we should remember that a safer, more secure world is a world in which there is greater economic well-being, in which there are fewer festering conflicts, and in which justice is more evenly distributed. We cannot make a perfect world. The world has never been perfect and it never will be, but we can re-examine our policy in Iraq, we can renew our efforts to get a settlement between Palestinians and Israelis, and we can renew the interest we once showed in the well-being of some of the poorest nations in Africa and Asia by reviving an aid program worthy of the name. We can renew our commitment to the United Nations and other international bodies. We can seek to diminish the perception of arrogance and to identify ourselves anew with the common hopes and suffering of mankind. Maybe our current suffering will help us to do that.”

We have done some of the things I mentioned on that Thursday. We have been effective in combating al-Qaeda, but the security measures we took have made us a bit less free. We have overthrown the Taliban in Afghanistan but the new government there is not yet capable of self-defense. We have overthrown a regime in Iraq to fight terrorism and look for weapons of mass destruction, but the growth of a terrorist group linked to al-Qaeda is an unintended consequence, and it is not yet clear that the new democratic regime can survive, either. We are still in that

uncomfortable and delicate position of wanting both stability, which requires supporting monarchs and dictators, and wanting democratic change, which means supporting the overthrow of same. We are still the leaders of a world economy that is highly dependent on Middle Eastern oil. And a peace between Israel and Palestine, which would be enormously advantageous to our position in the whole of the Muslim world, continues to elude us. Meanwhile, we have spent heavily in lives and treasure to fight these battles in Afghanistan, in Iraq, and elsewhere without, of course, making ourselves either invulnerable or universally loved. That is the nature of international relations. 9/11 did not create these fundamental dilemmas, and no possible set of responses could have fully resolved them. I hope we have moved beyond blaming Muslims or Islam in general for our problems, but I am not sure about that.

It is possible that the Arab Spring will make it easier to support regimes in Egypt, Libya and Tunisia. I think we have come to understand that democratic regimes with Islamist support may be stronger than those governments that seek to repress Islamist opposition. (I am thinking of Turkey and Indonesia, in particular.) Surely we have come to understand in new ways that overwhelming military power, however necessary, does not suffice to transform countries from dictatorship to democracy. But none of these lessons follows directly from the events of 9/11.

For now I see 9/11 as a marker in our history, a date all of us who were alive then will remember, as my parents' generation remembered Pearl Harbor. Future historians may come to see it as a turning point in American history, but I don't see much evidence for that just now. Ten years after 9/11 our position in the world does not look very different than it did then. That's good because our position since the end of the Cold War has been strong. It's bad because that position, strong though it is, does not equate with the complete command of events we might like to have and others tend to attribute to us. As we remember 9/11, we have neither reason to celebrate or to despair.

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