

Colorado Springs World Affairs Council
Luncheon in the Ballroom of the Broadmoor Hotel
September 13, 2001

What is the meaning of that which happened to us on Tuesday? I will share some preliminary thoughts with you and look forward to your questions and comments.

First and foremost, we learned that we are vulnerable. The world's only superpower is not as powerful as we thought it was, and as the world thought it was, three days ago. A symbol of our economic power went down in a pile of rubbish. A symbol of our military power suffered significant, though not crippling damage. We know that some of the world is cheering our defeat and praising the courage and skill of hijackers who achieved their mission. We may be able to punish those who planned and supported the action, but we cannot reverse the damage. Since the purposes probably did not extend beyond revenge and symbolic damage, the perpetrators may well feel that they have won the war by winning just one battle. They attacked the Evil Empire and they won.

Why would someone regard us as the evil empire, us who have always sought to stand for peace and justice in the world? Let me list some reasons:

—Our wealth invites envy. We use up a disproportionate share of the world's resources and show relatively little concern for world inequality. Our foreign aid budget has generally declined for forty years.

—Our power inspires resentment. We can and do influence a broad range of international outcomes. In the public imagination of many in the Third World control every aspect of every event. If the Oslo process fails, it is our fault. If Iraq's children get too little medicine, it is our fault. Saudi Arabia survives as an authoritarian monarchy because we support it. Ben Ali abuses the rights of Tunisians because we do step in and stop him. Surely, in our omnipotence, we make everything right in the world if only we wanted to.

—Our apparent invulnerability generates bitterness. Our technology permitted us to defeat Iraq, inflicting casualties while suffering few ourselves. America furnishes Israel with weapons that permit long-range assassination; Palestinians must commit suicide to harm damage Israel. While others suffer, we sit invulnerable, a continent away, protected by sophisticated technological weapons.

—Our support for Israel constitutes the proof in Arab minds that we do not represent justice and fair-mindedness. We speak as if we care about the Palestinians but we permit the Israelis to carry on with settlements and to use our weapons against them.

—We treat the United Nations as our tool, asking others to do their share and pay their

share, then refusing, when it suits us, to ratify international conventions or even pay our bills when things do not go our way. Whether the issues is missile defense or agreements to limit pollution, we appear to set ourselves above and apart from world sentiment.

—Our ideology identifies us with globalizing forces that generate change in people's personal lives. Urbanization, industrialization, international competition, improving communication and especially improving education produce new generations much more capable of thinking and acting for themselves. Some members of these new, young educated generations feel that things are out of control, that not even national elites have control of their countries. They reinvent and re-embrace religion as a means of recapturing control of their destiny, promoting modernization but opposing our degeneracy, which they confirm very easily by looking at our television and our motion pictures.

Which of these motives were dominant among those who planned and executed this attack? Everyone seems to think we will end up holding Osama bin Laden and his followers responsible, and he would probably agree with most of these propositions. Do they constitute a sufficient indictment to account for such drastic action? Probably not. What's missing to make it work is an ideology to hold it altogether and to justify violence. That ideology is probably Bin Laden's version of Islam.

Religion tells us very little about a person's politics these days. Politics often tells us a great deal about religion. For example, American religions have all been deeply affected by American democracy and the formal separation of church and state; the Church of England is a product of British politics, and the position of Catholicism is likewise a product of the French Revolution and that battles between church and state fought in the 19th and early 20th centuries. I could go on.

Similarly, in the Middle East, Islam in Turkey today is a product of the Kemalist revolution of the 1920s and its notion that modernization means a French-style opposition to any accommodation of religion by public institutions. Islam in Iran reflects a decision taken by Shah Ismail about the year 1500 to adopt Shi'ism as the state ideology; it also reflects the constitution adopted after the Khomeini revolution, a constitution that contains strangely contradictory elements. There is free and open debate about the relationship of religion and politics, whereas in Saudi Arabia, whereas in Saudi Arabia there is little such debate. The monarchy has succeeded in imposing a version of Islam called Wahhabism and defending that conception against all others.

Bin Laden lost his Saudi citizenship in 1994 for engaging in activities deemed contrary to Saudi interests. He was a contractor who made an immense fortune and became by the 1980s a vocal and visible Islamist. With the money he made, he went to Afghanistan and Pakistan to support the struggle of the mujahidin against the Soviet Union. Later he sought friendly refuge in the Sudan, dominated by an Islamist party under the guidance of Hasan al-Turabi. I have not seen a full discussion of the Bin Laden ideology, but I think we can assume it reflects these

political experiences and includes the following elements:

- The belief the only legitimate sovereignty is the sovereignty of God. The human domination of other human beings is utterly illegitimate. A just society must be regulated by God's law, the Sharia, the Holy Law of Islam.
- The world is divided between those who will work for such a society and those who stand in the way. Those who oppose it are evil, whether Muslims or non Muslims. Those who are its champions must fight evil wherever it may be and can expect God's reward for their efforts.

You can see that this sort of thinking makes it quite possible to slaughter all sorts of people in the name of justice. If American Muslims happened to die in New York, Washington, or Pennsylvania, and I will wager that some did, they would deserve it as much as Christians, Jews, or atheists, if they did not adhere to these principles.

He defines us as evil, and there will be tendency to define him and his followers as evil. The President seems to have started down that road. But it is slippery road and I think we would be best off to avoid falling into this same sort of dualistic thinking: that there are good and evil people in the world. It is too easy to go from there to identifying everyone who cheers for Bin Laden (those Palestinian children, for example) as evil, or even to thinking every Muslim is equivalent to everyone Muslim.

If Islam were the cause of this tragedy, it would have occurred long ago in every part of the world, everywhere there are Muslims. Most Muslims do not think in this dualistic fashion. Neither do most Christians and most Jews, although there are minorities in both these faiths who take more-or-less these positions.

I am inclined to think of Bin Laden's Islam as a product of his political preferences and ambitions, and to oppose his political projects not because they are evil but because they damage us and conflict with what we stand for. It is surely in our interests to protect ourselves from him and the sort of actions he has carried out against us.

We can say he has done evil things without falling into his dichotomization of the world into good and evil. And as far as I am concerned we can admit that his henchmen were extraordinarily brave in going to their deaths for something they undoubtedly believed deeply. I see no point in calling them cowards because they engaged in a kind of warfare for which we were unprepared.

What can we do? I will offer a few thoughts in conclusion. 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 more easily and 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.

We cannot change our colors. We cannot reduce our visibility or make ourselves poor 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.

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