
HOUSE ORGAN

Democracy, Security, Citizenship.¹ This essay is not about Islam versus Christianity or the East versus the West. Instead, it is about citizens versus insatiable oligarchic appetites.

I am not a security expert, nor do I claim the remotest knowledge of the dynamics underlying the present crisis. I speak as a human being, shocked, shaken and numbed by the barbaric brutality on display during the past month. I also speak as a citizen in a democracy. As a citizen, I have lots of questions — about the causes of the recent tragic events, about justice and accountability, but perhaps most important, about my own responsibilities in this dark hour.

At the outset, I believe it is a great tribute to the spirit of liberalism and tolerance here in the San Francisco Bay Area that the prevailing climate is not one of a lynch mob. Indeed, events such as the demonstration here today, with multiple views presented and heard, are exemplary of the moral heights that the spirit of democracy can attain. I have no doubt in my mind that it is such committed engagement that holds the key to peace and security for citizens worldwide.

Opinions differ on who the perpetrators of the September catastrophe actually are. Yet, the mocking malice of the former Saudi millionaire on television two days ago leaves even the most skeptical observer of international news with a certain moral certitude. That television performance, justifying the events of September 11, and threatening future hell was, for me at least, proof enough that what the world is dealing with here is a genocidal criminal. Regardless of how one spins it, I can not accept that any genuine lover of god, or of freedom, could contemplate, leave alone execute, such an atrocity. As an ex-colonial subject, I can not help but notice that if anyone has

¹Professor Ravi Rajan, friend and colleague, authored this essay after the terrorist attacks on September 11. Ravi sub-titled the essay, “Random Thoughts on the Recent Events,” which in my view doesn’t do justice to Ravi’s principled stance, the coherence of his argument, nor to the emotional intensity and honesty of the piece. I hope *CNS* readers agree — Jim O’Connor.

genuine cause for grievance, for economies plundered, for cultures destroyed, for freedoms extinguished, it is the people of the third world. Yet, none of the anti-colonial struggles attempted to annihilate their oppressors. My own country, for example, in breaking the yoke of colonialism, taught the British, and the West in general, the meaning of civilization. The same can be said for contemporary South Africa, and for many other regions of the world.

It is true that many a freedom movement has used violence as a part of its strategy. Indeed, there is room, even in the many pacifist doctrines, for the concept of just war. Yet, I believe that it is an insult to the revolutionary anti-colonial freedom movements to compare them with the perpetrators of the recent atrocities. The words, holy war, and the deeds — attacks on thousands of innocent people — do not constitute a revolutionary struggle, but represent a nihilistic, genocidal attitude. It is an attitude stemming from supreme arrogance and hubris, a lack of introspection, a disavowal of responsibility, and an anti-ideological belief that justifies and prescribes mass murder. It is also a mentality that promotes the hijacking of not just aircraft, but god, religion, culture, language, science, and art — all for its nefarious ends. It is, moreover, a mindset that brooks no debate or dissent, one that thrives by suppressing free expression.

It is a tribute to the liberal spirit that many people are seeking to explain the events of September 11 with reference to history and context. I salute this spirit. At the same time, I have no doubt in my mind that the perpetrators, whoever they are, are not heroes, or freedom fighters or advocates of justice, but egotistical, maniacal, killers, like the Hitlers and the countless other demagogues produced by Europe and elsewhere during much of the 20th century. Any true lover of freedom has a moral duty to resist these demagogues.

All this having been said, I can not, as a citizen, also help but notice the systematic perversion of the emancipatory ideals that underlay the anti-colonial struggles of the peoples of the United States and the third world. I refer to the erosion of the principles of democracy and freedom, and to the narrowing of the idea of security. From my non-expert vantage point, there seem to be five trends that characterize world history during the past two centuries. Each of these trends, I believe, is every bit as scary as the acute catastrophe of September 11, and in some respects, frame this catastrophe — even though I can not, for the reasons expressed earlier, accept them as explanations of the recent events. Let me elaborate.

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The *first* trend: it is clear that for all the media illusion to the contrary, imperialism, as a practice, is alive and well. It may not quite be practiced as it once was, with colonial powers carving up Africa amongst themselves in a conference at a European capital — though it often gets quite close. But little has changed in the foreign policies of the governments of the Western world. The game is still about controlling the world's resources — oil, cash-commodities, and access to warm sea ports. Even third world aid and international development are but tools toward this end. The story was and is one of unbridled greed, supplanted by ever sophisticated instruments of thought control. Twentieth century history is rife with examples of the overthrow of democracies that do not serve the interests of Western imperial hegemony. Indeed, those who proclaim the virtues of democracy and freedom the loudest have been among its worst abusers. It is nothing but a joke to watch the Blairisconi's of the world talk about emancipation and freedom. For all the propaganda effect they have in their home countries, the net moral effect they have on the rest of the world is of less worth than that of the dropping of a bull.

A *second* trend stems from the fact that for every bin Laden, there is a story of a Western governmental backer. I hardly need to belabor the fact that bin Laden himself drew a great deal of his early power from Western assistance, and this is true for the Taliban, Saddam Hussain, and countless others the world over through out the past eight decades. (It must be said here, though, that each of these people equally used the West for their own ends.) Each of these cases is a story of short-term opportunism, to gain access to resources in a region, to sell arms, or to put out of action governments, often democratically elected, whose policies are too nationalistic for the interests of the West. Each of these cases is also a story of the West turning the Nelson's eye when their protagonists abuse every civil liberty on the books. Moreover, each of these cases is about doubly punishing innocent citizens of these lands — first in the hands of tyrants and despots who serve the short-term interests of the West, and then in the hands of ever more evil bombs that reduce innocent souls to mincemeat. Indeed, each of these cases teaches us that it is foolish to imagine that one can cherish the right hand and chop off the left. Also, ultimately, the means do come to haunt the ends.

A *third* trend in recent world history is that of universalisms. They come in various forms. Some come in assumptions of civilizational superiority, whether religious, or cultural. The Italian Prime Minister Berlusconi's recent remarks, as well as several recent opinion editorials

in the *Wall Street Journal* are, quite frankly, at the same level of despicable arrogance as the pronouncements of the Taliban. Other types of universalisms dictate how personal lives are to be led. The assaults on women's right to choose and on the rights of gays in the United States are no better than their counterparts in Afghanistan that seek to wrap women in the burkha.

Yet other types of universalisms dictate how societies run their economies. The post-cold war world era has produced a new evangelism, headquartered in the IMF and the World Bank, whose high priests dictate policies to sovereign states without as much as an attempt at a decent field visit. The result: unprecedented starvation amidst a glut in food production, and growing destitution the world over. Indeed, for most people in the world; security is about basic access to food and water — security that is denied them despite the abundance of food. Again, it is those who shout freedom the loudest who refuse to acknowledge that access to food is a basic human right. In the meanwhile, entire intellectual traditions of political economy, such as the ethical school, and several varieties of socialist economics, have been systematically erased from the academia and policy think tanks, while at the same time, those disciplines, such as anthropology and geography, that offer insight, on the basis of grounded studies, are marginalized by policy makers. Little wonder that the U.S. New Deal, which was constructed on the advice of experts from a diversity of humanistic disciplines, was dismantled in one rhetorical flourish by smart mathematical modelers disguised as economists.

The *fourth* trend has been the steady diluting of democracy. At the outset, this exalted concept has been reduced to the problem of representation, at the expense of serving as a crucible to nurture various forms of diversity. The very idea of a melting pot, as opposed to a concept of unity amidst diversity, and, the huge fuss over the teaching of Spanish, as though a language would somehow challenge our spirit of citizenship or nationalism, are recent examples of how democracy has become increasingly monochromatic. Moreover, in the wake of Bhopal, an accident that killed as many as the September 11 disaster and left more destitute, it is also evident that our existent notion of democracy leaves little institutional space for popular worries — over issues such as nuclear risk and bio-safety — to be systemically addressed. And to add injury to the insult, the very oligarchs who are responsible for our foreign policy conspired to deny the popular vote during the last presidential election. Indeed, our very pride, as a democracy, has been scoffed at, and opportunistically abused.

Last, but by no means the least, there is the trend of institutionalized forgetting. In the world of media spin, in a context in which almost all our sources of information are controlled by four corporations, there is indeed little scope for we the citizens and members of society to learn the truth about anything. Indeed, the very manner in which a small TV station from Qatar has trumped the great American networks, while accommodating diverse views, however unpalatable they may be, in contrast to the often undisguised racism of Fox, CNN, or the BBC, speaks volumes on the state of affairs. Needless to say, few Americans have to this day seen the suffering wrought by the waywardness of the “smart” bombs in Iraq. On the other side of the coin, we have all lost the ability to listen, to reason, to negotiate with empathy. Gone is the fireside story, the parable, the village tribunal. All we have instead are variants of Aarnie in the various Hollywoods of the world, celebrating blood and gore, indirectly imploring even small children to take up arms and massacre. Sadly, we as a society have forgotten the simple, time-tested technologies of disciplining our own children, and find it expedient to send them off in droves to prisons where they do not belong.

In conclusion, I unequivocally condemn the perpetrators of the September 11 massacre. I also feel it is important for all of us to introspect and search. This is not about Islam versus Christianity or the East versus the West. Instead, this is about society and citizens versus insatiable oligarchic and demagogic appetites. It is about we, the people, about our rights, our sovereignty, our democratic aspirations. Our ideals have been appropriated, our goodwill abused by those who represent us — regardless of where we are from, East or West, or what faith we espouse, Islam or Christianity or Judaism or Hinduism or Buddhism, or indeed anything else.

If there is one thing we need to do, it is to take back our rights, and carefully nourish our ideals of freedom and democracy and justice for all. Moreover, we need to do this in partnership with our brothers and sisters from every race and nation in this world, build bridges, re-learn the ancient art of listening. For, at the end of the day, the world is round, and what goes around, comes around. Whatever we do, let us not enter into a holy war — whatever the provocation. Instead, let us brandish our humanity and grace, and turn the other cheek in the hope that one day, it will result in a kiss. — **S. Ravi Rajan**