

Reason or Irrationality: Time to Choose

Intellectually well-meaning criticisms of many policies of US governments have been internalised as hatred of America and Americans in the conscious or unconscious minds not only of the lunatic fringe of religious fundamentalists but also of large numbers of apparently rational people, particularly in the poorer countries. In the aftermath of the maniacal attacks of September 11 the foremost challenge will be to dispel the clouds of hatred if irrationality is not to triumph over reason.

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The coordinated terrorist strikes that killed thousands of innocent, unwary people in New York, Washington, DC and Pittsburgh on September 11, 2001 – a business as usual Tuesday – may well be the most horrific peacetime incident till date. The lives lost and people maimed were not just American, but came from different parts of the world. Before proceeding with this discussion, let us join the families of those dead in their grief and hope that more people may be rescued from the debris of destroyed buildings.

For America, it is, as is being repeated over and over on the continuous TV coverage, the first attack on the mainland after the War of Independence. It has left the US outraged, mournful, beleaguered and impatient for vengeance and retribution. And it has, sadly, resulted in an apparent declaration of war, belatedly, in response to one that had been declared long ago and repeated endlessly by the lunatic fundamentalists and several such outfits with their own codes of morality, based on the enslavement of women and a return to barbaric times. The dilemma of the war is that while on one side is a superpower and its people, on the other side are groups of individuals spread all across the globe with tacit or direct support of a few states without either economic or military might that can even remotely match that of the US. A war has, indeed, been declared. The identities of all the adversaries, however, are not so apparent.

It is not clear how the battles will be fought in the fuzzy theatres of this war. One thing is clear though: besides spilling blood and adding to the toll of those already dead in the undeclared and declared wars, the battles will be between value systems, ideologies, systems of ethics and morality and perhaps even unavoidably among faiths and peoples. It is this non-military aspect of the war which will surely change the mindset of people and may create firewalls of mistrust that we need to worry about in a deeper way, so that ultimately, irrespective of the military actions and its possibly protracted nature, unreason should not begin to reign over the mind of humanity.

It is necessary to state that the objective here is not to sit in judgment on America's intent to take appropriate countermeasures or to hunt down those who planned the hideous and diabolic mass murder. What if none is made accountable? Are such acts against humanity to be condoned as an unfortunate consequence of foreign policy failures of some powerful states, or the fallout of economic dominance of the developed world, or the vestiges of the cold war era or the senseless outrages of certain sections of people for whom the whole of western civilisation is an evil empire led by the US? As pertinent as these questions is the morality of the response to calculated acts of barbarism. Is barbarism to be repaid in kind? Will it make sense for the democratic polity to seek vengeance instead of justice? Further, there is, indeed,

very little to be destroyed in military terms, since the enemies such as the Taliban possess very little of military-industrial complex, as does the western world.

The ensuing conflict is not for territory, but over the minds. It is important to realise that the goals of the war and its battles are hardly militaristic; it needs extensive engagement with the minds of peoples, communities and individuals to prevent the fracturing of multicultural and pluralist society by the pervasion of hatred. In fact, the ominous possibility exists that military victory may prove to be very ephemeral and pyrrhic signalling the commencement of a new wave of terror using nuclear and biological weapons aided by intelligent use of information technology in a borderless world. Therefore, it may be pertinent for US to ponder over alternatives to a full-scale military retaliation, since the terrorist threat based on religious fundamentalism of various kinds that looms large has entered a new phase posing a common threat to a large majority of the forward looking, democratic civil society.

One of the most pathetic and, indeed, perverse positions articulated verges on the near adulation of the large number of 'motivated' ones who ruthlessly executed the suicide missions. It is often stated that, after all, it requires no mean measure of dedication and conviction from the killers to take their own life. Suicide missions have been a major feature of the faceless wars, which place the lives of innocent people at risk at all times and all places. And the essential weaponry in this is the grooming of suicide killers who value their own life even less than that of others. The human individual and weapon of death merges into one living piece of armament that can be dispensed with as easily as a bullet. And there are no factories needed for its manufacture. The supply of faceless sacrificial goats will never be enough for those who wage the holy wars and issue fatwas. What do we see in those individuals, most of them very young, who had ceased to value life – their own life and the precious lives of countless others? Do we see heroism, cowardice, or loss of reason? How did they reach a mental state in which life had ceased to mean so little? How did this dehumanisation occur? How is it possible to drive out even the most basic of instincts – the desire to live – completely out of the mind? What kind of evil workshop is it that which takes in ordinary people with dreams, loves and feelings as its raw material and transforms

the individual into a piece of ordinance? Is there any heroism in all this?

We need to probe into the systemic malady that drives even the last iota of reason out of the minds of the men and women who are not only willing to extinguish their own valuable life, but also take it away from thousands of others in the hope of attaining martyrdom. Perhaps, some of them hope to acquire some kind of divine status as a reward for killing others. Do any of these faiths preach reward for such dastardly acts? Is it possible to take a charitable view of those who cynically foster hatred, dehumanise, and drive out even the will to live out of the minds of desperate and disillusioned young people? It is clear that these suicides were not in the least spontaneous decisions arrived at out of free will but the result of meticulous psychological manipulation of possibly sensitive, caring and loving young people, preparing them for the 'supreme sacrifice'. The wrongs and inequities in the tragic history of human civilisation cannot be an adequate excuse for bending sensitive minds to carry out mass murder.

The cult of violence, xenophobia and hatred will eat into the very fabric of a knowledge-based, multiracial, multiethnic, multicultural and pluralistic society. Irrespective of the differences over the ramifications of globalisation, the new millennium is inexorably moving towards a society characterised by the networking of different peoples and cultures. If the faceless wars are allowed to run its course, where can the global society be expected to go? Will it not lead to a world brimming with hatred and unreason, characterised by mutual mistrust between dissimilar peoples? Seen in this light, are only the extremists alone to be blamed for transforming the dislike of policies or perspectives into a hatred of whole people and their institutions? It is time to sit up and ponder over these questions, so that we do not allow unreason to take the place of reason in the collective mindset of peoples or communities. It is perhaps time to ensure that the power and perceived arrogance of a superpower does foster hatred in the mindset of the powerless.

It is impossible not to do look back on the kind of prejudices and attitudes surfaced from various combinations of historical, social, political, cultural and religious situations, which might have got internalised in the minds of many people. There is a nagging feeling that more often than not, the intellectually well-meaning criticisms of many policies of the US administration

have been internalised in the conscious or unconscious mind as a form of hatred of America and Americans. Such an attitude pervades in the minds of not only the lunatic fringe of religious fundamentalists, but also in a large number apparently rational people, particularly in the developing and underdeveloped countries.

Come to think of it, much of the cold war ideological posturing and proxy wars have had a pathological impact on the mindset of even people who were far removed from the heat and fire of the debates, but were passive or unwitting participants in the kind of attitudes that fostered hatred of US, and implicitly nurtured some form of loathing of its people and institutions. It is necessary to examine the perversions hidden in these approaches that have tended to glorify violence as the preferred means to attain the chosen goals. And we have seen how such violence has only served to institutionalise violence, disempower people and perpetuate injustice.

Sadly, many of those who are the proponents of such a cynical attitude have no compunctions whatever in using funds or support from the US or the western world. Ironically, many of these people have been able to express themselves freely under a value system that they want to destroy. It is likely that, somehow, indirectly, the failure to distinguish between a criticism of a US policy and the American people have, as it were, contributed to the deaths of thousands of innocent people. It is important to recall that in each instance, whether it was the south-east Asia, west Asia or South Africa, there were also people in US, from pop singers to generals, who did not go along with official policy. They did not merely dissent, articulating a different view, but many among them also engaged themselves in bringing about a change in what was seen as faulty policies.

In the aftermath of the maniacal attacks on innocent people, we stand at some kind of a crossroad where certain things may be altered in a permanent way. Let us earnestly hope that hatred will not become the hallmark of the new millennium. The foremost challenge in the coming days will be to dispel the clouds of hatred that will otherwise lead to the triumph of irrationality over reason. In the end, it is far more important for US to win friends than vanquish enemies. Rational thinking must ensure that the response to terror does not end up opening the gates to an Age of Irrationality and endless conflict. **EPW**

[The opinions expressed herein are entirely that of the author and not of the institution.]