

Last Words

As this issue went to press we received news of the attacks on the Pentagon and World Trade Center. Like everyone else we watched events unfold with horrified fascination, mesmerized by the images. Scenes of devastation, crying survivors, shell-shocked response teams—it couldn't help but conjure memories of other televised tragedies. But nothing seen before compares, in scale or heinousness, to what we witnessed on the eleventh of September.

Like many analysts, we have long feared that an attack of this sort was inevitable. Weak leadership and ill-conceived policies have left America vulnerable, and it was only a matter of time before our enemies exploited these failures. But we believed that such an attempt was still years away; enough time, we hoped, for America's leaders to take the steps needed to safeguard the United States. Unfortunately, it seems none of us fully appreciated the damage done to our nation's security by the Clinton administration.

Now we are struggling to understand the motivations of the attackers, an undertaking made more difficult by the lack of any subsequent statement. The absence of any claim to responsibility is no surprise, of course; there can be only one response to an act such as this, and those responsible know that any acknowledgement of involvement will only hasten their demise.

With no explanation offered, we are left to guess at one, taking our guidance from the talking heads that fill the screen, endlessly speculating. Three theories are advanced:

Cultural: Many hold that this incident reflects an ongoing clash of civilizations, a conflict between Islamic East and Christian West. Religious fundamentalists and their allies against the modern understand that this is a struggle for history itself, and their actions will only grow more violent as their influence wanes. Proponents of this view tell us that the West must see these bombings for what they are, a call to arms.

Economic: A minority point out the link between poverty, despair, and violence, noting that fundamentalism thrives among the poorest of the poor. Globalization has enriched some and filled others with hate, with round the clock images of the wealthy West taunting the world's powerless.

Political: There are a few, albeit only a small number, who locate the cause of this attack in American foreign policy. They contend that a half-century spent defending mercantile interests rather than advancing democratic principles has engendered hatred for this country.

It is our suspicion that all of these views are correct, that each describes a facet of the problem, and that any understanding must incorporate all of these viewpoints. Such a synthesis suggests that the enemy is more than just a man, a group, or even a nation. Instead, one must conclude that history itself is the cause of these attacks.

And so we must abolish the past. We must destroy both the ideas that inspire madness, and the individuals responsible for these acts. Our response must target not just camps and bunkers, but the libraries, universities, and churches in which these thoughts reside. We must eliminate any basis for hating us. Let us wipe clean the slate of history and make it ready to receive a new story.

Of course, our own thoughts must be purged, as well. It will require a massive effort, a strength of will difficult to imagine. But surely the price is worth it, for inaction on our part will only lead to greater horrors. This time there were 5,000 victims—how many the next? 50,000? 500,000? Five million?

We will begin by forgetting the twentieth century: the wars and conferences, the alliances and betrayals—all of it, gone. And if that proves to be inadequate, we'll forget the nineteenth, and then the eighteenth, and we'll continue until we've forgotten the reasons for hating. In their place we will devise a new history, one that leaves no room for monstrous acts like those of September 11. Only then is there the possibility of breaking free from this cycle of violence, only then is there the possibility of overcoming the real power that stands against us. Our enemy, it is clear, is memory.

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