

Globalizing Insecurity: where do we go from here?

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Everyone agrees. Almost everyone. The world changed decisively on 11th September, 01. There is less agreement when it comes to answering the question: Where do we go from here?

Catastrophes inevitably produce a rich harvest of fear and insecurity. Many withdraw behind a defensive carapace – looking for scapegoats, fearful of enemies. But catastrophes can also bring people together in social solidarity. The Great Winnipeg Flood of 1997 generated enormous feelings of community and co-operation, uniting Manitobans of all social classes and every ethnicity in the battle against the common enemy. We suffered crippling losses to homes and farmland, and came within an ace of losing our city, but this extreme vulnerability connected each of us to our neighbours and to the wider Canadian and even world community. One could say this was because the “enemy” was not a people or nation. But a similar phenomenon experienced by Londoners during The Blitz: “We’re all in this together.”

That could be among the most profound lessons of 11th September. We’re all in this together: All of us who have in some way experienced extreme vulnerability, whether through terrorism in its various manifestations (both individual and state-sponsored), or through the kind of poverty which generates hunger and disease and breeds violent resistance. Since most of the world’s non-Western inhabitants experience ongoing vulnerability to famine, disease, natural disaster and civil war, one could argue that the bombing of the World Trade Centre, by forcing us to share their sense of vulnerability, has added the *globalization of insecurity* to the globalization of trade and finance and culture. No nation, it seems, however advanced its technology and however mighty its armed forces can any longer feel invulnerable to devastating attacks.

Recognizing our collective vulnerability in a world with tenuous boundaries might lead us to recognize also that we cannot save ourselves as individuals without working towards international solutions. Better airport security, yes, of course. Better intelligence gathering and analysis, sure. But also a greater concern for the plight of our geographically remote fellow human beings and a better and fairer sharing of the earth’s resources. If the catastrophe of 09/11/01 enhances our sense of solidarity with others who are vulnerable, it could bring us the mutual security we need while preserving the values that make us who we are. If we aren’t willing to rethink how to organize a more humane and just world, the alternative is ominous: Endless war against an amorphous terrorist enemy whose numbers are constantly replenished by poverty and injustice.

Even before the destruction of the World Trade Towers it was widely remarked that such phenomena as third world immigration, international trade and the Internet, collectively, were shrinking the world. Marshall McLuhan's famous phrase "the global village" became a cliché from over-use; but the supremely dramatic violence of twin towers crumbling to rubble has given an emotional reality and intellectual immediacy to that colourful slogan. The nineteen men who destroyed the Twin Towers and damaged the Pentagon demonstrated that our borders are unavoidably porous.

It would be naive to suppose that there will not be other large-scale terrorist attacks in North America and Western Europe. Next time it might be a dirty suitcase bomb spreading toxic radiation; or a smallpox-infected terrorist spreading his germs as widely as possible. Moreover, even in periods when no such attacks occur, the issuing of frequent "terrorist alerts" is guaranteed to keep everyone on edge. Our lives could easily be marked by a state of permanent low-grade anxiety, bursting out, from time to time, into acute panic when an attack actually occurs

In our culture, when people feel threatened they typically look to government for protection. As the 17th century English philosopher Thomas Hobbes noted, the first duty of government is to provide physical security to its citizens. We must concede that without security, freedom will perish. One of the great dangers facing us at present, however, is that in the pursuit of security we will lose the very freedoms and civil liberties which have defined us as a society.

Our challenge now is to resist falling victim to our own fears. Recurrent terrorist events can easily lead to a downward spiral in which the desperate pursuit of security leads us permanently to surrender many, if not all, of our fundamental civil liberties. Emergency measures have a way of becoming permanent, unless we actively take steps to prevent this.

Frequent recitations of the phrase "war on terrorism" are likely to smooth the path towards imposition of a permanent War Measures Act. As everyone knows, times of war are times when precious liberties – such as the right to freedom of expression, or the right not to be imprisoned without being charged and brought to trial – are sacrificed in the interests of national security. That bleak scenario would, of course, represent the ultimate triumph of the terrorists and their quasi-fascistic values. They would have succeeded in transforming our comparatively tolerant liberal society into something resembling the closed illiberal society which they favour. There is an old saying: Choose your enemies carefully, for you will become like them.

How can we prevent ourselves from becoming prisoners to our "war against terrorism"? First of all, we should desist from casual invocations of "war". In the near-term future, the means whereby future terrorist attacks can be most effectively prevented are much more likely to involve enhanced intelligence gathering and police actions than they are to involve the military option of soldiers, tanks and fighter-bombers.

Second, we should struggle, individually and collectively, not to succumb to irrational panic. If we must have tougher anti-terrorism laws and if we must give up some of our liberties, we should ensure that we do so only temporarily, using “sunset” clauses in the legislation, so that illiberal measures expire when the emergency has passed. And we should guard against over-reaction. The 1970 War Measures Act provides a good warning lesson. Those responsible for the kidnapping of James Cross and the murder of Pierre LaPorte were brought to justice by ordinary police measures. The arbitrary arrest of thousands of Quebec citizens and the suspension of civil liberties across the country were a panic-driven response that virtually no one was willing to defend a mere ten years later.

The challenge we face is to seek security in ways that do not radically undermine the deepest values of our civilization: respect for civil liberties, and solidarity with the plight of our fellow human beings, at home and abroad. In the race between fear and hope, let’s wager on hope.

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