

FRONTIER SCIENCE/SOCIAL CHANGE

by Paul Von Ward

"9/11" PLUS FIVE BIRTHDAYS

History, when most real, is always personal. As I watched the World Trade Center towers implode on television five years ago, my joyful 62nd birthday mood was smothered by the smoke of lower Manhattan. Laughter-filled telephone connections from well-wishers gave way for frantic calls to friends and loved ones in New York City. While grieving the souls ripped from those buildings, I tried to keep a broader perspective - one nurtured by 40 years of professional religious, military, diplomatic, and international work.

In an article circulated globally (<http://www.newstories.org/911/paul.htm>) in the course of the emotional roller-coaster ride of that day I wrote:

...As we seek justice...understanding... revenge, [and] the path to a better future, let us remember that whatever we do consciously and energetically will come back to us many fold. As we do unto others, so we do unto ourselves.... To honor the dead we must strive to create a world in which justice and peace are the birthright of all people.... To be truly human we must rise above the emotions that divide, accept our part of the responsibility for the whole and learn from today how to create a better tomorrow.

Today, five years later, it is clear that the worst of my fears have been realized. We focused on revenge, not understanding, protecting self with no concern for the other. We squandered the worlds support for our initial search for bin Laden. We failed to lead the world in a more peaceful, cooperative direction. In a just universe we will reap what we have sown.

Letting fear and anger prevail over reflection, without taking a breath to call upon our deeper wisdom, our nation made two grave mistakes. We did not stop to learn enough about the suicidal hijackers, their sponsors, and real sources of support. We failed to consider the long-term implications of a policy of Lone Ranger/Tonto vigilantism. The results have been disastrous.

Offering fear-based support to inexperienced and ideological leaders, we Americans have made the Earth more dangerous for ourselves and others than it was before 9/11. The tragedy is that our ill-advised national policies have been a major factor in this degeneration of our own long-term security.

Launching a conventional military war instead of a focused rooting-out of individuals and small groups of fanatics spawned a plethora of new jihadists and other terrorist groups.

Warfare that has slaughtered innocent civilians, destroying homes and cultures, created enemies where none existed before.

The U.S./U.K.-led invasion of Iraq under false pretences earned us at a minimum scorn and, at worst, a billion-fold increase in enemies. In my part of the Georgia woods, only a stupid person would poke a stick in a hornet's nest without having a good plan for what to do when the hornets come boiling out seeking revenge. Iraq has proven to be filled with hornets.

The ancient Hebrew dictum of an "eye-for-an-eye", where a nation kills ten or twenty (or more) individuals - mainly innocent civilians - for each of one's own victims has been historically shown to be counterproductive time and time again. Fanaticism, as in unilateral military force in so-called regime-change invasions of another country, breeds even more fanaticism.

Acting like a one-eyed Cyclopean giant flailing about with massive military power we have reduced by 80-90% the nations that stood side-by-side with America on September 12, 2001. Powerful allies that numbered more than a hundred nations on that date can now be counted on one hand. Nations secretly joining the fight against us can now be found on every continent. Other societies of the world are neutral vis-à-vis America's future security, passively waiting to see when the globe's bully will get its comeuppance.

The American five-year, so-called "war against terrorism", in my view, has added 25 years (a full generation) to the struggle to achieve a harmonious global system of peaceful diversity. Rather than making progress in the largely Middle Eastern-based sabotage against American interests (starting with the 1979 sacking of the U. S. Embassy in Tehran), we have actually lost ground. U. S. "closing of the barn gate" after the fact by instituting controls over means that will not be used again by increasing numbers of terrorists serves the terrorist goal of limiting creativity and freedom in the West.

Foreign observers might logically conclude that it was the aim of America's political leadership to help serve the terrorists' ends. Not only has America's national security been undermined, the vitality of domestic institutions has been sapped. The constitutional rights of citizens and the balance of powers in Washington have been grievously weakened. The autocratic policies of the administration and the lack of a free and open debate about them must have our Founding Fathers souls turning in the grave, if they are still there.

The flawed designation of what we need to do to confront terrorist cells as "war" instead of a "civil police" issue nudges us farther right on the democratic-fascist political continuum. The emphasis on a war-footing, with officials arrogating so-called war powers, and fear mongering rhetoric from the government and the popular media have conditioned citizens to passively accept the expansion of centralized control over the way we think and live.

Along with the centralization of power and the diminution of our civil liberties, the profligate spending of the public treasury to fight an immoral war has drained the nation's resources for insuring our survival and mortgaged the future livelihoods of our grandchildren. In effect we have done more harm to ourselves than any likely terrorist group could have achieved.

Today, I publicly acknowledge my complicity, through my silence and acquiescence, in the first great tragedy of the 21st century: The warping of a limited conflict with a small number of fanatics into a global war between religions and cultures who could have learned how to live with differences.

In medieval England the word "tragedy" meant the demise of a great people whose duplicitous or immoral behavior brought about their own downfall. They saw its end as a sorrowful drama or disastrous event, eliciting pity or terror in all touched by it. America has failed to live up to its own moral standards and its potential destiny. We who have been complicit in the tragedy of this nation's leadership will be pitied in the opinions of all people.

My vow today is that by my next birthday I will have used my strength and talents in every way I can imagine to help my nation recover from this five-year deviation from a constructive role in the world and its positive destiny.