

Defending Liberty After September 11

by
Daniel Bonevac, Ph.D.

Friedrich Nietzsche predicted that the twentieth century would be a century of great wars. Looking around Europe, he saw faith in God, in morality, and in other absolutes declining. Recognizing a “devaluation of values” and peering “beyond good and evil,” he could see only “the will to power” and the violent, indeed, total conflicts it made likely.

Nietzsche, of course, was right. In the century just past, nearly 100 million people died in wars. More than that ghastly number perished at the hands of their own governments. The chief culprit was indeed a totalitarianism that preached, in the words of J. K. Rowling’s character in the *Harry Potter* series, Lord Voldemort, “There is no good or evil; there is only power.” We defeated that totalitarianism decisively, but at incalculable cost – in two World Wars and in the Cold War.

OUR CURRENT ENEMIES

Our current enemies are different. They are not organized into any particular nation-state, though a limited variety of

countries give them succor. They are certainly not relativists. Inspired by a radical interpretation of Islam, they are adamantly convinced that they grasp the absolute truth. Imagine the certitude required to study for years, commandeer airplanes full of hundreds of innocent

people, and then slam them into occupied buildings, killing thousands more.

The terrorists of September 11 ripped a gash in America’s military and financial heart. They accomplished only a fraction of their goals – there is evidence that

they sought to kill 20 times the number of people they actually killed, and aimed to destroy both the Capitol and the White House – but they nevertheless staged the most devastating attack on the United States in its history. Like most terrorists attacks, moreover, the victims were innocent civilians with no connection to any conceivable grievance the terrorists might have.

It’s hard for us to understand how someone could justify such an act. But there is a long tradition in Islamic thought

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underlying it. However perverse it may seem, and however much it may deviate from the accepted teachings of Islam, the terrorists' ideology stems from two ideas with long pedigrees.

1). Tenth century philosopher al-Farabi, following Plato, thought all virtues were ultimately one – and identified them not only with the knowledge of good and evil, as Plato had done, but also with the

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knowledge of God. Plato, of course, had famously concluded that philosophers ought to be kings.

Al-Farabi, placing this in the context of Islam, concluded that religious leaders should be

political leaders. Whoever has the most knowledge of God must also have the most political virtue (the ability to benefit others through political leadership), the most moral virtue, and the greatest intellectual and communicative ability. So, al-Farabi concludes, political power should be concentrated in an *Imam*, the person with the greatest knowledge of God. The Imam can make mistakes; his knowledge and virtue are not perfect. But they are better than anyone else's, so no one is in any position to challenge his leadership.

The Imam is not infallible, but he is beyond challenge. Similarly, all who are higher than you in the religious or political hierarchy are more

knowledgeable and virtuous than you in all respects; you owe them absolute allegiance.

2). Avicenna, the eleventh-century Persian philosopher, believed that the proper goal of government and of individual action was the happiness of the people. So far, Avicenna and John Stuart Mill, the great champion of liberty, would agree. But Avicenna added that we must take into account happiness, not only in this life, but also in the life to come. So, he argued in favor of laws that required adherence to Islam.

The ideology that terrorists espouse takes this line of thinking one step further. The happiness or unhappiness we find in this world is temporary, but that of heaven or hell lasts an eternity. The otherworldly effects of an action infinitely outweigh its effects in this world. Thus, anything that spreads Islam is justified, no matter how much pain it inflicts in this life.

Put these two lines of thinking together, and you have a recipe not only for the kind of terrorism we witnessed on September 11, but also for the theocratic despotism that the terrorists champion. The ideal government consists in absolute rule by a religious leader who will impose religious law to force compliance with the dictates of the Koran. And absolutely any means would be justified in order to bring that about.

WHAT WE ARE

Understanding this helps us to understand both why we are targets and how we should respond. Osama bin Laden, his associates, and his supporters do not hate us for anything particular we have *done*. (France and Germany have both been the target of terrorist attacks, after all, even though neither has troops in Saudi Arabia,

gives strong support to Israel, or in other ways shares our foreign policy in the Middle East). The terrorists hate us for what we *are*. They attacked New York and Washington as centers and symbols of Western civilization.

Consider two ways in which we reject key theses in the above lines of thinking:

1). We think that there are different virtues and, more broadly, kinds of excellence that are independent of each other. Some people excel in bravery; others in leadership; others in intelligence; still others in wisdom. This sounds obvious to us, but it has sweeping anti-totalitarian implications. It means that no one person can be expected to excel in all ways relevant to running a government. The decisions of groups of people can in general be expected to be better than those of a single person. An oligarchy is thus better than a dictatorship, and a democracy is better than both. A religious leader, moreover, has no intrinsic advantage over anyone else in the virtues relevant to political leadership.

2). In the West, we learned slowly and painfully that the role of otherworldly considerations must be carefully constrained, precisely because they purport to trump all other considerations. The Inquisition and the religious wars that tore Europe in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries taught us that the noblest religious impulses motivate unspeakable evil.

Voltaire wrote of awakening one morning in his youth to hideous screams echoing from a nearby town. He crossed a field to see what was going on, and saw some soldiers breaking opponents on the wheel in the town square in the hope that, in the midst of their horrible suffering, some might see the error

of their ways and convert. What was the anguish of the body compared to the salvation of the soul?

When Frances Hutcheson, Jeremy Bentham, John Stuart Mill, and other utilitarians speak of happiness as the goal of government and private action, they mean to take into account only the pleasures and pains of *this* world. That is not an oversight or a prejudice on their part. It represents a hard-won conviction that we can justify actions only on the basis of what we can know and defend against possible challengers.

THE IMPORTANCE OF FREEDOM

None of this implies that religious faith is irrational or illegitimate. But it does have some important consequences. The first and most obvious is religious tolerance. We cannot prove the correctness of any particular religious convictions, including anyone's theory of eternal reward and punishment. So, we must not prohibit or require adherence to any religion.

The second is a separation of church and state, at least to the extent that government decisions must not be based on religious convictions that some citizens don't share. The arguments of the public square must be public, based on considerations relevant to any citizen regardless of his/her religious beliefs. Your liberty must not be restricted on the basis of my religious beliefs.

The third consequence is defeasibility – a recognition that our beliefs and policies must submit to criticisms at the hands of others. At any point, we must recognize that we could be wrong. Our facts, arguments, and recommendations must compete in the

marketplace of ideas with those of others. That means others must be free to compete with us.

The fourth consequence follows closely: freedom of thought, speech, and association. The marketplace of ideas works to promote the truth only to the extent that it is free.

Freedom of religion, thought, speech, and association – these are fundamental to the American way of life. So is the scientific spirit of information gathering, argument, criticism, and response that constitutes the marketplace of ideas. These are precisely the features of American society that the terrorists reject.

It is no accident that American aid workers were imprisoned in Afghanistan for allegedly spreading the Christian gospel. Nor is it an accident that Islamic science, mathematics, and philosophy – the most sophisticated in the world for centuries – have produced little of significance for the past 800 years.

A LACK OF CONFIDENCE

The terrorists' misguided confidence indeed, their seeming certainty in the rightness of their cause – stands in stark contrast to the fecklessness of much of our own academic, cultural, and political leadership. We have been fighting terror inspired by radical Islam for more than 20 years. The seizure of hostages in Tehran was arguably the first strike against the United States. The 1980s saw a series of hostage seizures, the Pan Am 103 bombing, and attacks on United States troops. In the 1990s, terrorists detonated a bomb in the garage of the World Trade Center, blew up two of our embassies, and gouged a huge hole in the *U.S.S. Cole*.

We barely responded to most of these attacks. In the most recent, we lobbed a few cruise missiles at a Sudanese factory and a deserted terrorist camp. If it hadn't been for Monica Lewinsky, we might not even have done that. Meanwhile, we cut the military budget, abandoned our goal of being able to fight two wars simultaneously, and used the armed services as arenas for social experimentation.

Our inaction stems in part from an unwillingness to be disturbed. We have preferred to think of terrorist attacks as something like fire ant bites – painful, irritating, but no threat to our overall health. But it also stems from a deeper lack of conviction.

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For a long time now – at least since the Vietnam era – our elites have not really believed in the superiority of our own ideals.

Our universities have increasingly dedicated themselves to the proposition that all cultures and cultural artifacts are equally valuable. They no longer expect students to study the history and great works of Western civilization. Instead, they pour money into programs in

Women's Studies, Asian Studies, African-American Studies, and Middle Eastern Studies that portray Western civilization as villainous.

Our journalists find it a violation of professional ethics to share information with the government, label terrorists as terrorists, express a preference about whether the United States wins or loses, or even use the first-person pronoun 'we.' Many of our civic leaders find the Pledge of Allegiance and other manifestations of patriotism or religious faith faintly embarrassing.

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This is part of an even larger picture. Whitaker Chambers, in writing *Witness*, was convinced that he was casting his lot with the losing side of history. Socialism, he regretfully concluded, was bound to defeat capitalism and freedom. More recently, Paul Kennedy wrote of the decline and fall of the American empire.

Since the 1930s, the Left has looked to socialist countries – at various times the Soviet Union, Sweden, France, Nicaragua, even Cuba – as representing the wave of the future. It continues to interpret Ronald Reagan's triumph in the Cold War as resulting from a combination of Gorbachev's magnanimity and dumb luck.

Despite our resounding victory over totalitarianism, many see us as fighting against the tide of history, and as destined, and deserving, to lose.

In short, a large segment of our academic, cultural, and political leadership has lost confidence in America, its ideals, and its way of life. They do not believe that the United States will prevail over its adversaries. They do not believe that it should.

Why? I have no simple answer. But they share with socialism, I suspect, what Thomas Sowell has dubbed "the vision of the anointed." As part of an elite, they tend to think that elites can make better decisions than those that emerge through the democratic process. They consider themselves better informed, more sophisticated, and wiser than the people at large and even most

of the people's elected leaders. To that limited extent, at least, they share the ideology of our enemies.

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BATTLING THE BEAST

Trying to find some words of wisdom for my children on the evening of September 11, I turned to a collection of poetry and stumbled on to one of the most quoted poems of the twentieth century, "The Second Coming." William Butler Yeats, writing in 1919, in the wake of World War I's devastation, documented the disintegration of faith among those on whose backs civilization rests and the consequent disintegration of civilization itself. It struck me that his words were

perhaps more apt for our time than for his own.

*Things fall apart; the center
cannot hold;
Mere anarchy is loosed upon the
world,
The blood-dimmed tide is loosed,
and everywhere
The ceremony of innocence is
drowned;
The best lack all conviction,
while the worst
Are full of passionate intensity.*

The lack of conviction of our own elites, and the passionate intensity of our opponents, is only too obvious.

Yeats, like Nietzsche, foresaw conflict. His vision of a looming attack on Western civilization has an eerily prescient ring:

*. . . somewhere is the sands of
the desert
A shape with lion body and the
head of a man,
A gaze blank and pitiless as the
sun,
Is moving its slow thighs,
while all about it
Reel shadows of the indignant
desert birds.*

After September 11, it's tempting to see Yeats as describing not the conflict of the century gone by but that of the century to come. Having triumphed in what George Will has dubbed "The War Against the Totalitarians, 1939-1989," we suddenly seem to be engaged in a new War Against the Terrorists, 2001-?

But that is not quite right. Our fight, as President Bush has stressed, is broader than Osama bin Laden or Afghanistan. It

is both broader and more specific than terrorism. Yeats concluded his poem,

*. . . what rough beast, its hour
come round at last,
Slouches toward Bethlehem to be
born?*

What beast, indeed? As I've suggested above, the ideology that inspired the September 11 attacks, and festers in many parts of the Middle East, is not merely terrorism, a willingness to use violence directed against innocents for political ends. Nor is it Islam itself, which is compatible with many different political attitudes. Nor, sadly, is it the ravings of a few fanatics. It is a radical interpretation of Islam that stems from ideas that reach far back into Islam's history. Indeed, their source is one of the great works of Western civilization, Plato's *Republic*, which both advocates the rule of the philosopher-king and recommends censorship and other severe restrictions of freedom to realize a utopian vision. We are again at war with totalitarians, though this time totalitarians who are not at all cynical in their claim to be in complete possession of the truth.

FIGHTING FOR FREEDOM

What must we do? Fight, yes – fight to protect ourselves and our liberties from those who seek their destruction. Our liberty – political, intellectual, religious, and economic – is what the terrorists most hate. We must defend it. Not with the terrorists' "passionate intensity," of course, or the certainty that we possess the truth, but with the full confidence that the liberties we defend are prerequisites for finding the truth.

We should be confident that we are on the right side of history. We have four great advantages over our current enemy.

First, we have seen the “utopia” that the terrorists would impose on us. We are competing, not with some socialist vision in which the state withers away and the people fish in the morning, hunt in the afternoon, and talk in the evening – realized temporarily, if at all, in some people’s vacations! – but with real societies such as those of the Sudan or Afghanistan. The world has seen their vision of the future. Few will adopt it willingly. We know that it’s inferior to our own vision.

Second, it’s no accident that we are a nation of vast wealth and power. We are rich and powerful because we are free. Our willingness to subject our convictions to competition in the market place of ideas is our greatest source of strength. Our products will beat their products; our weapons will destroy their weapons; our soldiers will outfight their soldiers; our ideas will trounce their ideas. The reason is simply that our products, weapons, military strategies, and ideas emerge from a competitive process that is both free and ruthless. No totalitarian society can match that.

Third, we have been fighting totalitarianism in one form or another for a long time. We have already won the battle of ideas. We have a rich history of justifications for and defenses of liberty, including such thinkers as John Locke, Edmund Burke, Thomas Jefferson, John

Madison, John Stuart Mill, Ludwig von Mises, Friedrich Hayek, and Robert Nozick. The intellectual challenge now is primarily within Islam, to show that it is fully compatible with liberty. Fortunately, there are ideas with deep roots in the Islamic tradition (in al-Ghazali, a skeptic, and Averroes, an Aristotelian, for example) that support such a position.

Finally, though our elites have too often “lacked all conviction,” events since September 11 point in hopeful directions. In the United States, what really matters are the convictions of the

people. The displays of patriotism evident to all in the past three months show that Americans’ faith in America is as strong as ever.

Even our elites have been

learning the limitations of their easy relativism as they realize that they would have no place at all in a country ruled by the Taliban. We do not lack conviction; we simply become complacent about articulating and defending our convictions when times are good. Under attack, however, we are fierce in their defense.

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Daniel Bonevac is a professor of Philosophy at the University of Texas at Austin. His e-mail address is:
<mailto:bonevac@mail.utexas.edu>

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