

COMMENT

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A day like no other



CATHERINE FORD
OPINION

This was beyond terror

She called it Terror in the Name of God. Some of us thought that 1964 book title was hyperbole. But nothing the former Vancouver-Kingsway member of Parliament and writer, Simma Holt, imagined could compare to Tuesday's horror in New York and Washington.

This was beyond terror, if there is a way of using the language with such force. And this wasn't done in the name of God, regardless of who is at the heart, what organization or country is to blame. There can be no God for those who excuse death and destruction in His name. And if anything can be godless, it is this act of concerted malevolence directed at the free world.

Holt was writing about the Sons of Freedom Doukhobors and their systematic campaign of arson and terror in the British Columbia Interior. How our definition of terror has changed, how our naivete has been shattered, how ugly and frightening the world has become in those 40 years.

Did any of us ever imagine we'd see death in real time, live and in motion on our television sets? Worse, did any of us ever imagine we'd not avert our heads, but sit transfixed, trying desperately to understand this really was happening.

It wasn't fiction. It just seemed like it. "It sounds like a movie; it sounds like a novel," said the CBC's Peter Mansbridge. Tom Clancy, whose thick adventure books of spies and sabotage seemed to come too close to the truth for comfort, was among the first "experts" to be interviewed. Maybe because we see fake death so often, with such casualness, we can watch our neighbours die and have to wait for the reaction. Or we seek meaning from men whose job it is to entertain us. When the truth comes that close to fiction, we have to remind ourselves nothing in the mind can ever compare to the brutality of what men will do to each other and justify it.

We are all Americans today. All of us who share this continent. Not because our differences have been forgotten, but because today those differences are irrelevant. Kill my brother; kill me. It doesn't get much simpler.

Nor does it get more elementary than a telephone call from a stranger, someone I've met but once, who needed to reach out to someone, anyone. It was only moments after the World Trade Center collapsed. A song of a generation ago was going through his mind: "Oh, God, pride of man/Broken into dust again." He paused. He whispered, "Jesus Christ, Almighty," and just before I heard the click of the connection breaking, his voice broke into an all-too-human cry of despair.

Self-styled anthropologist Robert Ardrey (he was better known as a successful playwright and screen writer until his 1961 book African Genesis) took the paradox of human behaviour — love and hate — and gave it a name, the amity-enmity complex. It is a simple proposition: In the face of a common enemy, a naturally territorial animal will permit others to violate personal and ownership boundaries, and will bond with members of the same tribe to fight together.

In The Territorial Imperative, Ardrey quotes Darwin's contemporary, Herbert Spencer and his study of the dual nature of humans: "In the same individual we find infinite capacity for tenderness, sympathy, charity, love and infinite capacity for cruelty, callousness, destruction, hate."

People who normally would have nothing to do with one another, or societies that are normally hostile, display goodwill and altruism toward each other in times of mutual threat.

"The police officer said to form a human chain... we held onto each other," said one worker evacuated before one of the World Trade Center towers collapsed, killing nobody knows how many.

All day Tuesday, nobody really wanted to think about that. Because the numbers could be unimaginable. Even in earthquakes, the toll in human lives in modern cities is countable.

How do you count the people buried under the two of the world's biggest buildings?

There were an estimated 50,000 people working in the World Trade Center. Many were evacuated. But how many? There are eight million people in New York City. How does a modern world do the ugly, medieval business of counting the bodies in an ugly, modern war? It could take days or weeks.

But each count will be a person who lived and loved, each person on a black and white list of names will be an individual, a cherished member of a family.

Eventually, we will use the shorthand of all scenes of mass death, we will talk about the numbers, we will use three words, World Trade Center, and the entire planet will know what we are talking about.

Eventually, that will replace what was the immediate analogy — Pearl Harbor, the sneak attack on the American fleet by the Japanese during the Second World War.

Demographics being what they are, the majority of people in New York City Tuesday weren't alive on Sunday, Dec. 7, 1941. All they know is grainy newsreels and the stark memorial in Hawaii.

The generations that were promised a life of peace and prosperity by their parents and grandparents, who lived through the Second World War now have their own form of war and their own touchstone.

We could have lived the rest of our lives without it.

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...OUR FLAG WAS STILL THERE...

America will never bend

MANY U.S. COMMENTATORS WROTE TUESDAY ABOUT AMERICA'S DAY OF TERROR. LEONARD PITTS, A COLUMNIST WITH THE MIAMI HERALD MAY HAVE PUT IT BEST:

LEONARD PITTS
MIAMI HERALD

They pay me to tease shades of meaning from social and cultural issues, to provide words that help make sense of that which troubles the American soul. But in this moment of airless shock when hot tears sting disbelieving eyes, the only thing I can find to say, the only words that seem to fit, must be addressed to the unknown author of this suffering.

You monster. You beast. You unspeakable bastard.

What lesson did you hope to teach us by your coward's attack on our World Trade Center, our Pentagon, us? What was it you hoped we would learn? Whatever it was, please know that you failed.

Did you want us to respect your cause? You just damned your cause.

Did you want to make us fear? You just steered our resolve.

Did you want to tear us apart? You just brought us together.

Let me tell you about my people. We are a vast and quarrelsome family, a family rent by racial, cultural, political and class division, but a family nonetheless. We're frivolous, yes, capable of expending tremendous emotional energy on pop cultural minutiae — a singer's revealing dress, a ball team's misfortune, a cartoon mouse.

We're wealthy, too, spoiled by the ready availability of trinkets and material goods, and maybe because of that, we walk through life with a certain sense of blithe entitlement. We are fundamentally decent, though — peace-loving and

compassionate. We struggle to know the right thing and to do it. And we are, the overwhelming majority of us, people of faith, believers in a just and loving God. You, perhaps, think that any or all of this makes us weak. You're mistaken. We are not weak. Indeed, we are strong in ways that cannot be measured.

Yes, we're in pain now. We are in mourning and we are in shock. We're still grappling with the unreality of the awful thing you did, still working to make ourselves understand.

But there's a gulf of difference between making us bloody and making us fall. This is the lesson Japan was taught to its bitter sorrow the last time anyone hit us this hard, the last time anyone brought us such abrupt and monumental pain. When roused, we are righteous in our outrage, terrible in our force. When provoked by the violence of barbarism, we will bear any suffering, pay any cost, go to any length, in the pursuit of justice.

I tell you this without fear of contradiction. I know my people, as you, I think, do not. What I know reassures me. It also causes me to tremble with dread of the future.

You see, there is steel beneath this velvet.

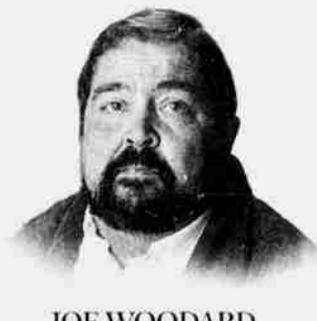
As Americans we will weep, as Americans we will mourn, and as Americans, we will rise in defence of all that we cherish.

Still, I keep wondering what it was you hoped to teach us. It occurs to me that maybe you just wanted us to know the depths of your hatred.

If that's the case, consider the message received.

And take this message in exchange: You don't know my people. You don't know what we're about. You don't know what you just started.

But you're about to learn.



JOE WOODARD
OPINION

Many will believe oracles predicted U.S. horror

Given the carnage of the terrorist attacks on the United States, the temptation to look for signs and portents of the Apocalypse, the End Times, will become overwhelming.

And the first focus of the search for apocalyptic prophecy will almost certainly be the 16th century French mystic Michel Nostradamus.

In 1555, Nostradamus, a Jewish physician and forced-convert to Christianity in St. Remy, France, began writing what would become a collection of almost a thousand quatrains, four-line stanzas arranged in 10 "centuries" of 100 stanzas each that predict — very obscurely — future events.

The quatrains that seem most to bear on the attacks Tuesday are Century X's stanzas 72-74:

"The year 1999, seventh month, From the sky will come a great King of Terror: To bring back to life the great King of the Mongols, before and after Mars to reign by good luck.

"The present time together with the past will be judged by the great Jovialist: The world too late will be tired of him... The year of the great seventh number accomplished, it will appear at the time of the games of slaughter: Not far from the great millennial age, when the buried will go out from their tombs."

University of Calgary religious studies professor Irving Hexham is unimpressed. "All this Nostradamus stuff is rubbish," Hexham said.

"You can see predictions in his quatrains only after the events he's supposedly predicting. So it's like seeing faces in a cloud."

Despite the magnitude of the American tragedy, Hexham, an evangelical Christian, dismisses quasi-religious attempts to see the Apocalypse or End Times in the events.

"It's horrible, but even if 50,000 people died at the World Trade Center, we should remember that four or five times that many died in a single night, in a single fire-bomb raid on Hamburg (by British bombers in 1944). Hundreds of buildings were destroyed, yet Hamburg continued to live and function as a manufacturing centre."

After Nostradamus, the search for apocalyptic prophecy will look to the Bible, particularly Christ's warning of the signs of the end of the world — "You will hear of wars and rumours of wars" (Matthew 24:6) — and the End Times predictions in the New Testament's Book of Revelation and the Old Testament's Book of Daniel.

Biblical literalist and Christian social commentator Bill Shaw of Medicine Hat said that the World Trade Center attack seems to herald a "new phase in human history," but that "it's too early to say whether there's any prophetic content in the attacks."

Shaw insisted that any prophetic interpretation of attacks on the U.S. must await identification of the perpetrators.

Calgarian Sayed Soharwardy of the group Muslims Against Terrorism said that the Apocalypse or End Times have a place in Mohammed's prophecy. In the End Times, the Dajal or Devil will begin to build a world empire, "and the Prophet Jesus will appear at the Grand Mosque in Damascus and recruit an army to defeat the devil's empire."

However, said Soharwardy, it is "absolutely forbidden" in true Islam for individuals to try to kick-start the End Times, by provoking that Last Battle with the Devil.

U of C religious studies professor Eliezer Segal said the temptation to look for Biblical predictions of world events comes from a confusion of the Judaic prophets tradition with the ancient Greek oracles.

"The prophets weren't painting factual scenarios about specific events to happen in the future," Segal said. "They were speaking to their own times, warning people of the consequences of their behaviour."

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