

# 9/11: the missed opportunity

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By Shahid Javed Burki

THE terrorists who attacked the United States on September 11 were obviously mortal enemies of America. They wanted to do great damage to the country and to the people they had come to hate. In this they were remarkably successful. But their attacks also had an impact they could not have envisioned or intended.

The attacks produced waves of sympathy for America. While "much of it poured from predictable sources, albeit in unfamiliar garb — the Queen ordered the guards at Buckingham Palace to play the 'Star-Spangled Banner'; NATO members invoked Article V in the name of collective defence, but plenty came too from some unlikely places. When Iranian mullahs, French editorialists and Chinese Communist Party officials rush to express support for America, you know something large has happened to international relations."

Over the longer term, however, the terrorists' assaults raised two important questions: what did they wish to accomplish by attacking the World Trade Centre in New York and the Pentagon and what has been the impact of their action in the United States and in the world abroad? As can be expected, there are many views on these two subjects. In the words of author Cynthia Ozick, the fundamental connectedness of events that result from human actions "burst upon Americans with horrific force when we understood, in a lash of fire and ash, the suicidal hijackers' single-minded motive. Their purpose was merciless, venom."

The debate on the terrorists' motives started soon after the attacks and continues to this day, a year after the event

But our concern in interpreting the broader meaning of 9/11 is not only to understand what Americans think were the motives behind the attacks by the terrorists. Even more important is the way America actually responded to those attacks. If 9/11 really changed America and with it the world, the change came from the reaction to that event.

The United States' initial response to the terrorist attacks was understood with compassion around the globe. There was also broad support for the war against global terrorism declared by President George W. Bush soon after the attack. The president, in his address to the United States Congress on September 20, captured the nation's — and perhaps also the world's — sentiments in well chosen words. "In the sacrifice of soldiers, the fierce brotherhood of firefighters and generosity of ordinary citizens we have glimpsed what a new culture of responsibility could look like. We want to be a nation that serves goals larger than self. We've been offered a unique opportunity, and we must not let that moment pass."

But America under the stewardship of the Bush administration allowed that moment to pass. As *The New York Times* put it in an edito-

tion originated with *The Daily News*, a city newspaper, and was introduced as a resolution by Representative Charles Rangel of New York. According to an editorial in *The New York Times*, the Congress' motive for returning to the city that served as the nation's first capital is to demonstrate solemn empathy over the events of last September 11." But, warned the newspaper, concerns about global terrorism must not take America away from the path it had charted for itself and which it encouraged the rest of the world to take."

This was not only the case for staying with the principles of governance with which the United States had long been associated but also with the evolving structures of global economy and finance. "In contemplating the coming decades, Congress should remember that international finance will be changing rapidly, and that the future can be secured only by adapting to a world of unfolding new rules, ideas and technologies," the newspaper went on to say.

There were two troubling aspects to the response of the Bush administration to the 9/11 tragedy. One, the tendency on the part of the American president to use moral absolutes

— good and bad, evil and virtuous, friend and enemy — in looking at the world around him. There were glimpses of this approach in his September 20 address to the US Congress. "Either you are with us or against us," Bush had then said. The full import of this approach was to become clear later as America began to craft its view of the world in light of the events of September 11. This was the second troubling aspect of the American response.

President Bush's first few pronouncements following the attacks seemed to indicate that he was prepared to

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The most telling consequence of 9/11 was to stall the move towards globalization, a process that was welding together the world's nations in pursuit of a common purpose — betterment of mankind's condition. This was developing into a project in which the rules of behaviour for nations as well as individuals were being crafted by near-universal consensus. Countries were prepared to shed some of their sovereignty to allow the birth of a new world order.

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the attacks and continues to this day, a year after the event that so shook America. There is a full spectrum of views on the subject. On one extreme is the interpretation that absolves America of all responsibility. To quote from Cynthia Ozick once again: the terrorists' hatred "was not for what we have done or have not done; it was for what we are." The terrorists, according to this view, were so enraged by American values, its culture and its place in the world today that they were prepared to sacrifice their lives to make their point.

There are a sufficient number of Americans who believe otherwise and think that the terrorists' attack was provoked in part by the way the United States was conducting its affairs in a highly integrated world. According to a senior editor of an American newspaper, by ignoring a long list of genuine complaints on the part of many people in the world, "and denouncing an enemy that hates us for what we are, not for what we say and do — or they think we do — President Bush has created an all-purpose bad guy whose existence allows him to sidestep any examination of American policy."

The bad guy image painted of Osama bin Laden was used to provide cover for some erosion of civil liberties ordered by the Bush administration. These included the attachment of "enemy combatant" status to some American citizens which took away from them the right to engage legal help or to examine the evidence presented against them. It also included ordering the deportation of hundreds of illegal immigrants without due legal process.

On September 5 and 6, the United States hosted a high level conference on anti-Americanism. This "was an unusual step indicating the depth of American concern about the increasingly globalized phenomenon," wrote the novelist, Salman Rushdie, in an article contributed to *The Washington Post*. Rushdie reminded his readers of what Britain's *Guardian* newspaper had described the American personality — "a type of personality which is intense, humourless, partial to psychobabble and utterly convinced of its own importance."

rial that appeared on September 8, 2002, three days before the observance of the first anniversary of the tragedy: "Most of us had expected the country to be a different place by now and the fact that it is not can be attributed largely (though by no means exclusively) to Mr. Bush's failure to leverage the political and moral capital September 11 provided."

Several other people asked equally searching questions as *The New York Times* did in its editorial. Dramatist Tony Kushner, the author of a powerful play, 'Homebody/Kabul', staged after 9/11, wrote about tragedy's paradox — any tragedy, not just the one America lived through on September 11, 2001. "Tragedy's paradox is that it has a creative aspect: new meaning flows to fill the emptiness hollowed out by devastation." But what were the meanings that rushed into the feeling of emptiness caused by the terrorists' attacks? Kushner, and others like him, asked many questions.

Are we dedicated to democratic, egalitarian principles applicable to our own people as well as to the people of the world? "Do we understand that 'our own people' and 'the people of the world' are interdependent? Will we respond with imagination, compassion and courageous intelligence, refusing imperial projects and infinite war. The path we will take is not available for prediction... Urgency is appropriate but not an excuse for stupidity or brutality... We are all engaged in shaping the interpretation, and in the actions, we are all implicated."

The Bush administration — and to a lesser extent most important segments of the American society — was to interpret 9/11 as a defining moment in the country's history. To take just one example of the depth of the US response to the terrorists attacks, on September 6, 2002, a date close to the first anniversary of the attacks, the US Congress met at Federal Hall in Wall Street in New York for an hour-long session. This was the first time the US Congress had returned to New York after its opening session more than two centuries ago.

The idea of holding such a symbolic ses-

cate that he was prepared to dispense with his propensity

to go alone without worrying about the rest of the world. This approach was held in abeyance for a while but only for a while. According to Robert G. Kaiser, an associate editor of *The Washington Post*, "Beginning with the December 2001 decision to withdraw from the 1972 Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty, a succession of policy choices revived the administration's reputation for unilateralism and infuriated old allies..."

"The ABM Treaty decision particularly upset the French and Germans who considered the pact the foundation of nuclear arms control. It was followed in January by Bush's announcement in his State of the Union speech that Iran, Iraq and North Korea constituted an 'axis of evil.' This infuriated Europeans trying to build bridges to Iran, and South Koreans and Japanese trying to work with North Korea. The administration stuck by the term, although it never explained how these three unconnected nations constituted an axis — 'an alliance of two or more countries to coordinate their foreign and military policies' according to one dictionary definition."

The most telling consequence of 9/11 therefore, was to stall the move towards globalization, a process that was welding together the world's nations in pursuit of a common purpose — betterment of mankind's condition. This was developing into a project in which the rules of behaviour for nations as well as individuals were being crafted by near-universal consensus. Countries were prepared to shed some of their sovereignty to allow the birth of a new world order.

This is not to say that this process did not have opponents. There were bloody protests against globalization in Seattle, Washington, Prague and many other places. But those involved in these protests belonged to the fringes of the evolving global society. They did not represent the majority of the world's citizens. Unknowingly, of course, and unfortunately for the world, Osama bin Laden and his Al Qaeda produced an environment which helped the anti-globalization forces to realize their purpose.