

The unintended consequences

The primary victims of the terrorist attacks of September 11 were the three thousand people who were killed in New York, Washington and Shanksville. The secondary victims were those who were injured. The tertiary victims were the families of those who were killed or injured. But in a larger sense, all of us were the victims — regardless of where we lived, what language we spoke and what faith we practiced. The attacks had many consequences; some were intended, others, many more, unintended.

The opening salvo

The terrorists had several goals: cause massive loss of life and property in the US; cause significant loss to the US economy; enrage the US so that it would attack Afghanistan, causing massive civilian casualties, which would generate unrest among the Muslim world; precipitate riots in the Arab kingdoms, causing the monarchies to fall; boost the Palestinian resistance movement, leading to significant pressure on Israel to withdraw from the occupied territories and, finally, promote a global Islamic revival.

Never for once doubting the nobility of their cause, the terrorists came to believe that the end justified the means. Some of their goals were achieved immediately. The attacks, which cost less than a half-million

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dollars to carry out, resulted in more American deaths on American soil than the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor. They caused property damage of \$10 billion, and

erased \$63 billion off economic output, equivalent to Pakistan's entire GDP. The attacks also erased about half-million US jobs, and wiped off billions of dollars of market capitalisation. The stock market, which had lost its momentum even before the attacks, has still not recovered its stride. Over the next several years, the attacks are likely to depress US economic growth, as private investment is diverted toward security enhancement, and taxes are raised to fund the build-up in defense spending. Consumer confidence may stay depressed as people live on a day-to-day basis, in fear of the next big attack.

The attacks produced a spontaneous outpouring of support for the US on a global scale, something the terrorists may not have expected. But as they expected, the US did attack the Taliban and Al Qaeda forces in Afghanistan, causing thousands of civilian casualties. Much outrage was triggered by these counter attacks, but it failed to bring down a single Arab monarchy or to precipitate the withdrawal of US forces from the Gulf. Contrary to expectations, the US moved more forces in the region. Pakistan made a completely unexpected U-turn in its pro-Taliban policy, and agreed to join the coalition against terrorism. Russia allowed the US to base forces in Central Asia.

Contrary to the terrorists' expectations, Israel gained a license to attack Palestinians at will, and reoccupied the West Bank.

17/9/02

Consequences of 9-11

Similarly, India resorted to suppressing minorities in Kashmir and Gujarat, and threatened to invade Pakistan if it did not eliminate terrorist camps.

US reaction

The initial US reaction was one of intense shock. Questions were raised about who did it, and 'how could they do this to us'. The reaction quickly turned into anger. Right-wing zealots got a golden opportunity, and proceeded to lambaste the entire Muslim world. Evangelical Christians used the opportunity to attack Islam and its adherents. The battle cry became, "we will finish them off". Less than a decade after the end of Cold War, while Americans were waiting to reap the peace dividend, the rhetoric in Washington shifted to fighting a long war across sixty countries.

On the day of the attack, President Bush referred to the party that caused the attacks as being a faceless coward. A couple of weeks later, he named Osama bin Laden as the primary suspect, and recalling a poster from the Wild West, stated that he wanted him "dead or alive." Subsequently, he said that this war would not end with the defeat of Al Qaeda, but would continue until all terrorists of global reach had been brought to justice.

In January, he said the threat encompassed an axis of evil comprising Iraq, Iran

and North Korea. The ambit of this axis appeared to extend beyond these three countries, as a nuclear posture review leaked to the Los Angeles Times listed several other countries as well, including China and Russia. In June, the US president put forward a doctrine of "pre-emptive war." Even a staunch Republican stalwart such as Henry Kissinger called this doctrine a threat to international law. Undeterred, Bush put the UN General Assembly on notice last week that unless it was prepared to move against Iraq, the US would move on its own.

This slide toward all-out war has alarmed many, but pleased others. The archconservative Weekly Standard, read avidly by members of the White House, saw it as a logical progression in the Bush administration's thinking. Senator John Warner of Virginia stated that the president had graciously made his case before the UN, but if the UN failed to act, the US Constitution empowered the US to act unilaterally in its own defense.

Jingoism reached such a high pitch that even a liberal senator, Hillary Clinton, thought it appropriate to state on the one year anniversary of the attacks that the terrorists had attacked the US because they were envious of its wealth, and because they detested American liberties and freedoms. She said the terrorists did not realise they were attacking the greatest nation on earth, and that they would now face annihilation.

The US Congress passed the PATRIOT act that infringed on the every day freedoms and civil liberties of Americans. In practice, the act has been used selectively against Arab and Muslim Americans, and has led to racial stereotyping in the media and profiling by security personnel. Thus, the average American has become suspicious of people who are variously described as being of Middle Eastern descent. A recent poll conducted by Princeton Survey Research asked Americans to identify acceptable ways of fighting terrorism. Seven out of ten said that the country should place restrictions on immigration from Arab and Muslim countries, and four out of ten said that such people should be detained at airports for questioning solely because of their ethnicity and faith. Even more troubling, four out of ten now regard the entire Muslim world as their enemy.

If the terrorists hoped to rehabilitate the discredited thesis of Harvard's Samuel Huntington about a looming Clash of Civilizations, they have succeeded. If they wished to advance the cause of Islam, and relieve the suffering of Muslims, they have failed.

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