

Being in America on 9/11

W. Pol
Season
19.9.02

THE only sign of hysteria in New York on 9/11, a year after either the world changed or America changed (the two might be indistinguishable) was the prose in the newspapers. Some of it was so breathless it died in front of your eyes, suicide by syntax.

As a fellow practitioner of the world's second oldest profession, my heart went out to the hacks who had hacked themselves to death in the service of national hype. Images floated through my professional conscience. I could see so many of the hacks polishing their phrases for weeks, disturbing the serenity of countless vodka-bitters, the life-sustaining medicine of innumerable Scotch-and-sodas, all in anticipation of the piece that they would have to produce for that dramatic piece for the 9/11 edition — a report that would etch their place in the history of journalism.

My heart was particularly moved by the sportswriters searching for insidious ways and sinuous means to fit a national cause into a football game. But the good thing about sports journalists is their in-your-face honesty. They served their nation in bold type. Leave it to Op-Ed columnists and political commentators to communicate in normal sized Times Europa. The sports editor of *USA Today* chose a 14-point type for his body copy, and placed it in the centre of the page, just in case there were any myopic readers who could not read from right to left. I assume he was the sports editor, because no one less than that could have got away with the conceit.

Even the *New York Times*, always most excellent in its fact-of-the-matter approach to headlines (including the use of full stops, sometimes, to tell you that it had paused mid-headline), slipped towards phrases like "Doves on the Wing". That was the mood of the moment. Life had become larger than life.

And so when nothing

NOTES FROM DELHI

By M. J. Akbar

heartstrings were being plucked they had first rights to a twang. They took out ads in the *New York Times* remembering the day when their markets crashed.

Traffic was light and the air heavy. In New York, air means air waves. Radio and television were inundated with church bells and thanksgiving services. New Yorkers celebrate by going out. They commemorate by staying in. Most companies offered a holiday option to their employees, and the sensible took the option. Never was sense more popular than on 9/11.

On a normal morning a taxi ride to the airport can give you serious blood pressure, even when the taxi driver has decided to cooperate. On the morning of 9/11 the city's avenues became freeways.

The scene at the airport at noon was stunning. There was no one at the airline counter. Airline staff and security at John F. Kennedy airport outnumbered passengers by twenty to one. Since no one had much to do they chatted and laughed.

It will take a long time before the distance between conception and misconception is narrowed in America. Right now, Americans cannot tell the difference between Islam and Osama bin Laden. And George Bush, of course, cannot understand the difference between Osama and Saddam Hussein. A slightly different explanation is offered by the marketplace for Bush's obsession with Saddam. One of course is the son's Freudian desire to show daddy that he can do better.

was an almost conscious effort not to indulge in the sin of racial profiling; to avoid seeming hostile. Why else would so many people passing by on the streets smile at me? It could not be for my looks, but it could be because of my colour.

But the questions, hundreds of them, shot at me during the Ron Owens radio show where I was the morning's guest on the 12th were sharp, angry and almost unanimously suspicious if not accusatory about Islam. One listener did me the favour of suggesting that I seemed warm, friendly and reasonable, adding that I did not sound like a Muslim. I was on the radio show to promote the American edition of *The Shade of Swords: Jihad and the Conflict between Islam and Christianity*, and you can imagine that the title itself was a red rag to lots of bulls out there.

I can report that jihad has now become a part of the English language, like bazaar or kebab became part of the Anglo-Saxon dictionary in earlier times. You don't have to explain the word any more. But when it comes to shades of meaning it becomes a different story.

I wonder how many listeners believed me when I told them that, according to the specified, and written, instructions of the first Caliph after the Prophet, Hazrat Abu Bakr, you could not kill innocent non-participants,

particularly women and children, in a jihad, nor even destroy crops or a palm tree. It will take a long time before the distance between conception and misconception is narrowed in America. Right now, Americans cannot tell the difference between Islam and Osama bin Laden.

And George Bush, of course, cannot understand the difference between Osama and Saddam Hussein. In his speech to the United Nations President Bush included in his list of reasons for the invasion of Iraq the charge that he killed children in front of their parents. A slightly different explanation is offered by the marketplace for President Bush's obsession with Saddam. One of course is the son's Freudian desire to show

happened it came as a bit of an anti-climax. Perhaps the authorities felt the need to manufacture some excitement. And so in Miami (where else, are you asking? Anywhere else, in the West on 9/11) the police did a movie-style car chase to catch three medical students because a woman thought they were speaking in Arabic in a restaurant and reported them to the guardians of law and order. It turned out that they were only speaking American, but one of them wore a Muslim skull cap. Dangerous thing to do.

Stories are floating around about two brown airline passengers who terrorized a plane because they went to the loo together. I am not going to indulge in racial profiling by describing their ethnicity. Suffice to add that the pilot force-landed the plane when one of them wanted to return to the loo, and insisted on going to the same one.

Capitalism, I am happy to report, survived 9/11 with flying colours. The brand name industry made sure that when history was written it would not be found wanting in the Emotional Outpouring Stakes. Chanel, Toruneau (New York's most famous watch shop), Mikimoto (Japanese pearls), Chopard (Swiss watch), Colettan (my knowledge base stops short of this word), Tiffany (famous for breakfast, diamonds and Audrey Hepburn), Saks Fifth Avenue (famous for 30 per cent discount after 100 per cent mark-up), Burberry (British checks), Steuben (glass), Hugo Boss (ordinary clothes at extraordinary prices), Bloomingdales (always happy to offer you for first job as salesgirl at slave wages) and Macy's made sure that when the

Practice from morning had taken any nervous edge off the laughter. When I asked the attendant which seat he had assigned to me, he said "Window". Then his face succumbed to a series of grimaces as he tried to communicate what he had been clearly told to keep his mouth shut about. Since he was human, he could not keep it to himself. "Sit anywhere anywhere anywhere... There's no one aboard..." he muttered, but he did avert his face as he said those hateful words.

I am about to make a claim. I must have been the only Muslim on a long-haul, or even a short-haul, flight in America on 9/11. If that constituted an invitation to tough security, the invitation was accepted. A large black man whose neck was twice the size of my head, took off my shoes, belt, wallet, pens, studied my attitude for danger signals, and informed me that if I felt a sharp prod between my thighs I should not consider it personal. It was duty, not affection.

Just to ensure that I did not become a racist, the procedure was repeated just before I boarded Flight 017 to San Francisco; this time it was a white man with a neck half the size of my head who was in charge of the physical. The size of the baton that examined the space between my legs was the same. I might add that I cannot recall having seen the soles of my shoes since I bought these boots. Now within half an hour I had seen them twice. They do not need repair.

San Francisco was deserted, but not on edge. There was a softer, less brittle mood; San Francisco remembered the day with flowers in its hair. There

better.

The second is that if you cannot locate Osama and Mullah Omar one year after conquering a country to find them, the second best thing to do is to change the subject. The fact that the CIA has been trying for months, without any success, to link Mohammed Atta (of 9/11 fame) with an Iraqi spy is no deterrent. A 21-page fact sheet that the White House released along with the Bush speech did not once connect 9/11 with Saddam Hussein. But when Bush comes to shove, all he wants is regime change in Baghdad, preferably by war.

I have very little sympathy for Saddam Hussein's dictatorship, or with any dictatorship for that matter, but I must point out significant achievement of Saddam Hussein. Iraq is the only issue on which India and Pakistan agreed on in the United Nations. Anyone who can make India and Pakistan agree on anything these days deserves some kind of medal.

Stray facts about 9/11. A figure has been finalized: that terrible day claimed 2801 victims. The bill for that day is over a hundred billion dollars, of which 21 billion went to New York city, eight billion to the airline industry and five billion as compensation to the victims. Dick Cheney, vice-president of the United States, disappeared to an unknown location both last year and this year on the fateful date. And the winning number that came up on this year's New York lottery, drawn on 9/11 was 911. What could have been the odds on that?

The writer is editor-in-chief, Asian Age, based in New Delhi.