

What It Takes

I THOUGHT MAYBE a few more actuaries might have responded to our November/December issue that covered the devastating events of Sept. 11. But so far, June Smyth of Toronto (Letters, p. 6) is the only one. And since part of her motivation for writing to us was to “provide food for thought for subsequent editorials,” I will oblige—gratefully.

First, Ms. Smyth chides me (albeit gently) for my U.S.-centric perspective. It’s certainly comforting to know that our ordeal is inclusive, that the psychic suffering so many in our country endure is shared by others who are not so directly affected. But we cannot afford to forget that America itself is what the terrorists saw embodied in those two towers and in the Pentagon, not simply the world in general. It’s the American flag that gets ripped apart in the Islamic street. It’s the American president who gets burned in effigy. However complicit other nations of the world may be in the causes of that rage, we are the target, not they.

And so, quite rightly, we protect ourselves. The choice is not fight-or-flight, not a simple either-or, but a series of

hard choices about survival, about reducing our vulnerability so we can fight back. Once upon a time we were proud of our vulnerability. It defined us. Back then, it really did take a village. Today, it takes a fortress, because a village just won’t do the job. Not for the foreseeable future, at least.

These aren’t really new choices for us. America has had to make them before, for better or worse, when we’ve been threatened in the past. And as Ms. Smyth correctly points out, they are not the only choices we need to make, just the most immediate ones. In the long run, we need to find out “why these people hate us so much.” We need to rebuild the village.

America is not single-handedly responsible for all the poverty and despair in the world. But we are, like it or not, the biggest kid in the village, and a lot of the smaller, weaker kids see us as a bully. We don’t see ourselves that way (and we’re not), but many of our friends are. And the bullied take notice—because what we don’t say and don’t do matters just as much as what we say and do.

Do we have the power to stop the

bullying? I don’t know. So far, our reluctance to exercise whatever power we have has caused more trouble than it’s averted. (We elected a president who thought it was too risky and presumptuous of us to try.)

Maybe we need to rethink that. Maybe we need to reexamine the nature of some of our friendships, not be shy about asserting our moral authority in the face of entrenched injustices—regardless of whatever our friends might want to hear. (More Israeli settlements on the West Bank? Women as chattel in so much of the Muslim world? Blatant misuse of resources in the face of devastating famine and disease in Africa? Not so fast, friends...)

We seem to be moving in that direction. I hope we continue. We are not perfect, and we continue to struggle to eliminate the institutional injustices in our own country. We should not be ashamed to expect the same of others. ●



EDITOR

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