

Failure of Imagination

LIKE MOST AMERICANS, over the past month I've run the full gamut of emotions. Shock, disbelief, denial, outrage, heartbreak, reflection. Often, these emotions are only seconds apart, kaleidoscopic and disorienting. How does one process the horrible realization that the smiling family portrait we pose for today might be used on television to make millions weep tomorrow? The events of Sept. 11 have left us all struggling to make sense, not only of our lives as individuals, but as citizens of a democracy.

America is a good place. We are good people. We find it incomprehensible that anyone would consider us worthy of what's been done to us in New York City and Washington, D.C. On Saturday morning, I listened to a radio interviewer ask a pointed, poignant question to a man named Yossef Bodansky, a terrorism expert who has written a book about Osama bin Laden. It was a question a battered child might ask his tormentor, hoping to make sense of the pain.

What could we possibly do, asked the interviewer, that would satisfy this man bin Laden?

Bodansky's answer was chilling. It sounds flippant, but there was no flippancy in his voice. He was deadly serious.

"Move to another planet," he suggested.

Not an option, of course. But there may be some

valuable advice here. For some time now it almost seems as if we as a nation have already been living on another planet, a planet on which we assume that our own goodness, decency, and innocence will protect us from the malevolent machinations of evil men. For more than 200 years, the rest of the world has cast the United States as either an overbearing bully or the naïve innocent, playing in a cynical world of cunning foreigners, clueless, ingenuous, vulnerable. As long as we play by the rules we hold dear, the rules

that make us decent people, nothing can touch us. Our goodness and strength will see us through.

We were wrong.

We've heard much

over the past few weeks about how much things have changed, how nothing will ever be the same again. I wonder. Perhaps the planet we need to move to is this one.

Have we finally, at long last, lost our innocence? Do goodness and strength necessarily have to be naïve? *New York Times* columnist Tom Friedman, in another post-attack weekend interview, said that what happened to us on Sept. 11 was not so much a failure of intelligence as a failure of imagination. That neither we nor our leaders ever imagined such a thing happening in just that way. How can good, decent people imagine such a thing?

But our adversaries did. Their imagination followed on page 6

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lowed no rules but their own. And the power of that imagination is all too obvious.

Does the ability to imagine such things, and take the necessary steps to avoid them, automatically make us bad people? I don't think so. Does the ability to imagine a serial killer make the mystery writer himself a psychopath? Good parents all over the world imagine the terrible things that can befall their children, and watch over them fiercely as a result. Child rearing becomes a delicate balance between freedom and surveillance. And if we sometimes err on the side of the latter, at least our children will live to complain to us about it.

Innocence and naiveté never could protect us. And now, brute strength isn't even enough. We and our leaders are going to have to embrace the imagination of our enemies. Which means that "against the rules" is no longer the same as unimaginable. And nothing is unimaginable anymore.

It does not mean that we must become our enemies in order to fight them. We will still be good people. But we can no longer be battered children, trying to make sense of the evil that's pounding us. There really are bad people out there, and they want to hurt us. To be able to fight back effectively we must be able to fully imagine what they are capable of. And we may have to be willing to do things, as a nation and individuals, that we could never before have imagined ourselves doing.

There are people in our government who know how to fight terrorists. They remember the mistakes of ignorance and arrogance we made in the past and know how to avoid them now. We should listen to them. They may advise us that we can't play by our traditional rules. What they tell us may be distasteful, even abhorrent.

We should listen to them.

People will emerge who will say they told us how we should have protected ourselves from terrorism but we didn't listen. We should listen to them now. And we should listen to the ones who warn us about acts of terrorism to come. We'll be tempted to consider them cranks and crackpots. What they tell us may sound outrageous, outlandish, expensive, inconvenient. Unimaginable. But we should listen and heed.

Because it isn't unimaginable. Someone has already imagined it.



EDITOR

Sept. 17, 2001

No doubt much will have happened between this writing and publication. Printing schedules are only so flexible, and I simply could not write about anything else. I'll be very surprised, however, if any of this is obsolete by then.

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