



The End of Illusions

The united state of America. BY DAVID TELL

EVEN AS THE SKY was falling Tuesday morning, September 11, visitors to the *Nation* magazine's website could find a freshly posted essay by Edward Said on the intellectual's role in the modern world. A true intellectual, Said declared, now makes it his mission to publicize those injustices that are "occurring in reality"—like the

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Israeli "occupation" of Palestine. And this work is hard, for the "dominant discourse" has all but smothered reality in a blanket of "counterfeit universals" designed to "create consent and tacit approval." Indeed, Said noted, so thoroughly has the propaganda of "unseen power" penetrated popular consciousness that even some intelligent people have come to believe in its empty "confections": "the West" and "democracy," on the one hand, and "rogue states" and

Middle Eastern "terrorism" on the other.

Now that two "confections," each carrying 20,000 gallons of liquid high-explosive, have flown across New York Harbor at 400 miles an hour and slaughtered 5,000 office workers (and counting) in the blink of an eye . . . well, how easy it becomes to forget that anyone in America once took seriously such arguments as these. That until recently, our custodians of respectable opinion, surveying the "dispute" between Arab suicide bombers and the Israeli schoolchildren whose blood they spilled, carefully constrained themselves to revile the sin but not entirely the sinner. That it was the policy of the United States government, in fact, to divvy up the equities just a bit—to insist that its friends in Jerusalem acknowledge, in the "sources" of antiquity, some claim to justice by the enemies at their gates.

No more, all gone, goodbye—vanished in the fireballs and, later that same day, in the television image of ululating hags and Palestinian Authority policemen in Nablus, dancing with joy on lower Manhattan's grave. It seems there is, after all, something very properly called Middle Eastern terrorism and something else, starkly different, very properly called the West. It seems the former means indiscriminately to kill anything associated with the latter—means to kill *us*. No, *has* killed us, and will no doubt eagerly kill us *again*, huge numbers of us at a time, given the slightest opportunity. What more bracing piece of information could there be than that? And who among us, having now absorbed it, is any longer susceptible to the imbecile morality of Edward Said's black-is-white dialectics—which would explicitly extenuate such obvious evil? No one, really. No one at all.

This unanimity itself bears inspection. Pearl Harbor is widely invoked as a historical parallel to last week's World Trade Center and Pentagon disasters. As a practical matter, the analogy is well short of perfect. But it is true, all the same, that one must

reach back as far as December 1941—and reaches in vain any further—to find any other instance in which Americans, as with a single mind and heart, were led to think and feel the same things, with such clarity and conviction, about something so important. And in the space of an hour.

We fret a great deal these days that the nation isn't indivisible any more, that our "mosaic" is badly frayed, that we no longer know who we are. It turns out that is nonsense. At the moment, America fairly vibrates with an almost tribal sense of identity, a fraternal concern that can barely be contained. We know exactly who we are. And we love ourselves as we should and must. Had they been asked for direct and personal assistance in the New York rescue effort last week, millions of Californians would have set out across the continent immediately, even if they'd had to walk.

And so with our politics. They are "fractured," we tell ourselves, over and over. A giant crevice of ideology and partisanship has opened beneath our feet, so broad and deep that critical decision-making, by voters or their government, has become all but impossible. Has it, though? Honestly, now: Isn't it true that, from the moment we started lashing ourselves about this alleged incapacity, no genuinely critical decision has actually confronted the United States—until now? And isn't it true, too, that we have just managed to defy our own well-practiced pessimism not once or twice but three times in a matter of days?

Thus, the United States has announced that it considers terrorist attacks on its citizens and property an act of war, not a crime. The United States has announced that it will prosecute this war unilaterally if need be. The United States has announced that its targets are not simply the men directly responsible for mass murders in New York City and Arlington, Virginia—but any group or government that has supported or sustained them, *and any group or government inclined to*

support or sustain others like them in the future. Each of these announcements represents a striking and hugely consequential departure from past policy and practice. And the entire exercise has been effected without ordinary public debate. Not because debate was suppressed or obscured by the emotion of the moment. But because debate was unnecessary. We are all thinking the same things, and reaching the same conclusions, and all by ourselves, individually, at lightning speed. Imagine: American politics is operating with supra-normal efficiency and effectiveness at the moment.

But not without self-doubt. The educated man mistrusts his passions,

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however appropriate, and the democratic man mistrusts consensus, however perfectly reasoned. No course of politics is ever entirely right, we figure, so we have already begun looking for errors at the margin, even prospective ones so improbable as to approach the ludicrous. It won't do indiscriminately to bomb Arabs overseas, or to lynch those of Arab descent who are our fellow citizens here at home, or to purchase the heightened security we need by mortgaging the First and Fourth Amendments—so we murmur in the op-ed pages of our leading newspapers. Odd that we should insult ourselves this way, cautioning against misdeeds that none of us has even contemplated. In the movie version, perhaps, martial law would be declared and nukes would drop. But this is not a movie, and the United States has no reason whatso-

ever to suspect that the real-life hero's role it now assumes might wobble into ambiguity.

Nor should President Bush, as he embarks on the Good War of a new century, have serious cause to fear that he will fail the standards established in the last. They are the wrong standards, in any case: This is nothing close to Pearl Harbor when you get right down to it. We are not the unarmed and inexperienced America of 1941; we are a global colossus. We are stunned and mourning, but we are not for a moment afraid of defeat. We do not need to hear, as White House counselor Karen Hughes bizarrely reassured us last Tuesday, that "your government continues to function"—for who among us worried that the government was broken? We do not need to hear from Bush himself that "my resolve is steady and strong"; we expect and demand as much. We really don't need to hear anything but the news, in fact. Rooseveltian eloquence would be almost frivolous at this point. Where America might be led, she has already arrived on her own.

Behind us, in a pre-formed coalition, stands the civilized world—the West. Before us are our enemies, and they are . . . what? In the first hours after the towers fell in Manhattan, television analysts narrowed the list of likely suspects by repeatedly dubbing their operation "sophisticated." The usage was spectacularly misapplied. A group of men truly intent on the massacre of innocents can usually pull it off. What distinguishes them is not their "sophistication," but instead—and simply—their willingness to do it. It is an impulse unique to barbarians. And in the present circumstance, we know with all necessary precision who the barbarians are, who their friends are, and where they live. Most of all, we know that they will conduct some future massacre—or massacres—unless we destroy them first.

So we will destroy them. And we have only to worry that we will slow ourselves down by worrying overmuch about how. ♦