

What Are We Made Of?

The guts to resist evil

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THE United States finally entered the First World War because of the nation's lingering outrage over a few hundred floating bodies from the sunken ocean liner *Lusitania*, which was torpedoed during Germany's unrestricted submarine warfare. More than two decades later, we declared war against the Japanese Empire after 2,400 of our sailors were surprised and killed on a Sunday morning at Pearl Harbor. In the aftermath of each attack, the United States did not seek the sanction of world opinion. Instead, it unleashed the dogs of war, precipitously so against countries that had promised and delivered death to our people.

In the days after Pearl Harbor, a dazed American public saw newsreels of victorious Japanese shouting "Banzai!" with arms outstretched on conquered American outposts. What terrible foes, we thought, to hate us so—so adroit at surprising us, so successful at killing despite our defenses.

Yet the generation of our fathers was not impressed by either images or rhetoric. In response, a rather innocent and unprepared nation in less than 60 months left both Germany and Japan in smoldering ruins. Both fascism and Japanese militarism were incinerated and have not plagued the world for over a half-century.

On September 11, the United States was attacked in a similar way. The only difference between Pearl Harbor and the assaults on the Pentagon and World Trade Center is one of magnitude. Ours now is the far greater loss. No enemy in our past, neither Nazi Germany nor Imperial Japan, killed so many American civilians and brought such carnage to our shores as the suicidal hijackers who crashed the very citadels of American power in our nation's two greatest cities. It may well be that more Americans died on the 11th than fell at Gettysburg or Antietam, or in fact on any other single day in American history. Surely, by any fair measure, we should now be at war.

But are we, and shall we be?

This generation of Americans is now at a crossroads. We must decide whether we shall continue to be the adolescent nation that frets over the trivial and meaningless while our enemies plot death under our very noses, or our fathers' children—who accept the old, the sad truth that "the essence of war is violence, and moderation in war is imbecility."

The voices of our therapeutic culture will be heard. Indeed, they already have. We all know the old litany of inac-

tion and self-loathing. Such seething hatred is inevitable, we are told, given our world swagger, and is the bothersome price of global activism. Should not we look inward, others will remind us, to examine why so many despise us so much?—as if people who practice neither democracy nor religious tolerance nor equality are our moral superiors. And are not these isolated terrorists emissaries of a new war that we do not understand and for which we are ill equipped?—as if we, the greatest military power in the history of civilization, cannot fathom the unchanging and eternal nature of blood and iron. Is not our support of democratic Israel the source of our calamity?—as if we should abandon the only democratic island in a sea of fanaticism and autocracy.

As in the case of the Marine barracks in Lebanon, the Lockerbie airliner downing, the slaughter of our servicemen in Saudi Arabia, and so on, we know well the vocabulary of prevarication practiced by our political and media pundits. We shall "track down and punish" the terrorists; we must "bring to justice the perpetrators," who can "run but not hide"; we will "act swiftly and deliberately," but of course at all times "soberly and judiciously." Etc. Then will follow the old nostrums: Europe must be consulted, moderate Arab states entreated, the U.N. petitioned. Few will confess that we are in our own outright bloody war against tyranny, intolerance, and theocracy, an age-old fight against medieval foes who despise modernity, liberalism, and freedom, and all the hope that they bring.

But Americans now must ignore the old lie, because at last they also know the new truth: Despite the braggadocio of past years, we have in fact done nothing—and so invited war onto our shores. Worse still, we have disguised that nothing in the rhetoric of the criminal-justice system, as if these enemy warriors were local misguided felons to be handed over to our courts. Our diplomatic experts could keep us in comfortable stasis with the usual whispers about the consequences of "polarizing" the Arab world or "radicalizing" moderate societies—folk perhaps such as the Palestinians who were celebrating on the 11th in their streets over news that thousands of bodies lay strewn in ours. Worse even still, after the launching of a few impotent cruise missiles, we could go on cloaking that nothing in the immoral vocabulary that we are too civilized to punish evil, or perhaps too comfortable or too sophisticated to kill killers.

And so Americans die; they are forgotten; and we do nothing—hoping that our enemies will at least do their awful work on our distant ships or barracks rather than at our doorsteps.

Yes, we are at a great juncture in American history. We can go to battle, as we did in the past—hard, long, without guilt, apology, or respite, until our enemies are no more. It was our fathers who passed on to us that credo and with it all that we hold dear. And so just as they once did, we too must confront and annihilate these killers and the governments that have protected and encouraged them. Only that way can we honor and avenge our dead and keep faith that they have not died in vain. Only with evil confronted and crushed can we ensure that our children might still some day live, as we once did, in peace and safety.

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