

U.S. Must Punish Only the Guilty

Timothy McVeigh was a terrorist. He hated the government of the United States with such fanatical passion that he conspired with others to, and on April 19, 1995 succeeded in, reducing the Alfred P. Murrah federal building in Oklahoma City to rubble with a homemade bomb, killing or injuring almost 700 innocent people in the process.

Mr. McVeigh also was an Anglo Saxon who claimed to be a Christian.

There was, though, no subsequent vengeful rain of cruise missiles and - to coin a phrase - B-52 droppings on Anglo Saxon Christians throughout the world. No U.S. administration would dream of holding all Anglo Saxon Christians accountable for the aberrant actions of only a few of them.

So it must be with the members of any and all ethnic groups and with the adherents of every religious faith.

Consequently, the overwhelming hope which unites university faculty in New Brunswick with their colleagues - not only in this province but throughout the world - is that reason will prevail in the collective mind of the wounded colossus south of us; and that, in the weeks to come, the restraint of its response to the depravity of the Oklahoma bombing will also characterize its agenda for action in the aftermath of the recent events in New York and Washington.

However, the U.S. administration seems convinced Osama bin Laden, an Arab radical and suspected terrorist who now reportedly enjoys the support of the Taliban, the rulers of Afghanistan who share his Muslim faith, masterminded the recent destruction and carnage at the World Trade Center and the Pentagon.

As a result, disturbing rhetoric which bodes ill for the Afghans in particular, and for Muslims in general, is flowing from all quarters

of U.S. society, including the highest levels of its government.

Given the appropriate stimuli, grief and anger are common among human beings; in the present circumstances, the monumental despair and unmitigated rage of our American neighbours are readily understandable.

Nevertheless, these heightened emotions must not be so indulged as to become the rationale for the scything of another swath of indiscriminate destruction through yet more innocent bystanders - though, this time, on the other side of the world.

In a letter to President George W. Bush and the Members of the U.S. Congress signed by numerous esteemed academics from all parts of the Western Hemisphere is the simple statement "revenge breeds revenge".

Nothing could be more true; the events in the Holy Land, Northern Ireland and elsewhere have confirmed this over the years as the body count has continued to mount.

The letter goes on: "The craven acts of terrorism in New York and Washington are dignified intolerably by their classification as acts of war".

We could not agree more.

To so describe them elevates, by definition, the deranged fanatics who perpetrated these outrages to the level of "warriors" in the eyes of those whom they seek to convince that they are fighting a "holy war" against the United States.

Wars have a way of spreading - Laos and Cambodia saw a considerable measure of involvement in the Vietnam conflict.

Consequently, in any military response, the U.S. must be careful that it does not ignite a conflagration which quickly runs out of its control.

Furthermore, the declaration that they have been successful in starting a war is exactly what the terrorists want; and the situation was not helped by the ill-chosen vocabulary of President Bush in his recent announcement of a "crusade" against terrorism.

The Muslim world in general, according to numerous reliable reports, has perceived this unfortunate choice of words to be a veiled threat directed more against Islam itself than against the terrorism of a handful of misguided extremists.

We are keeping our fingers crossed that his subsequent clarifications have been well received.

It is one thing to threaten to bomb Afghanistan further back into the Stone Age than the Russians already did only a decade ago; it is quite another to carelessly offend the shared sensitivities of the world's Muslims - who reportedly number almost two billion - and, in so doing, risk precipitating the new Holy War between Christendom and Islam.

That, after all, seems to be the ultimate *raison d'être* of the recent campaign of terror against the United States.

Therefore, only the guilty must be punished.

If American retribution against bin Laden and others of his ilk is warranted, let it be meted out only to them, and not to the vast majority of innocent Muslims, within Afghanistan and elsewhere, who both believe in, and observe, the Koran's prohibition of the taking of innocent lives.

At this terrible time for all of humanity, Muslims are unjustly being forced to endure an additional burden; that of a collective blame which they have neither brought upon themselves nor even remotely deserve.

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