

## **War on Terror and Other Threats to Democracy**

Authorities monitor personal communications, track travel patterns, infiltrate organizations and create profiles of citizens and their contacts. Flaunting international conventions and domestic principles of justice, they detain and interrogate in secret. Soldiers who criticize the tactics of humiliation and abuse of detainees abroad are sent to mental institutions. At home, the government registers and fingerprints all members of an identifiable segment of the population. Foreign visitors of the same profile are also fingerprinted. Occasionally, they are whisked away to a country where torture is the norm. It could well be the setting for a John Le Carre novel. It is also reminiscent of Ronald Reagan's description of the "evil empire" headed by the former USSR.

For many citizens of the mature democracies of the world, such measures are not only offensive but strike at their very identity, for identity is as much a product of social belonging as individual achievement, even in the most individualistic of cultures. Having known only the relative stability of post-World War II until September 11, 2001, the response of their governments is almost as disturbing as the tragedy itself. Actions of ministers, police and intelligence services counter the very notion of what constitutes for many the civilized world.

The often repeated declaration that the world changed on September 11, 2001, however, is debatable. What changed was that tensions throughout the globe presented themselves for the first time on American soil. Other countries have endured terrorist threats. There have even been attacks on American interests, but they were embassies in distant countries or naval ships docked in Yemen. By targeting the symbols of the three pillars of American global dominance - economic, military and

political - the terrorists of nine-eleven demonstrated a clear focus, sophisticated organization and abundant financing. They also demonstrated that the lives of American citizens, despite the great might of their nation, were vulnerable on their home turf.

After the early commiseration with the victims, people throughout the world and their governments responded to the legitimate fears of the United States by ensuring that their nations could not be used as a base for another attack. Nevertheless, democratic nations grappled to find the appropriate balance between security and citizens rights. It has been a painstaking process to develop the institutions and practices that guarantee the freedoms and rights that most people in the prosperous First World have enjoyed over the past four decades. Every democratic country has struggled at some point in the previous century to enfranchise and empower previously excluded citizens: women, aboriginal populations, Afro-Americans and South African blacks to name a few. To provide the assurances needed by the United States government, it was clear that some rights of some citizens would have to be sacrificed until the perpetrators were captured and brought to justice. Most governments did so willingly, not because they saw themselves as potential targets so much as the empathy they felt with those who had experienced the horror, and the shared values and interests they maintain with the United States. The intensity of the fear in the world's superpower, however, threatened to push governments to implement measures they and their populations deemed excessive and intrusive. The exposure of the plight of Maher Arar, an innocent Syrian-born Canadian citizen who was detained on a New York stopover and deported by American authorities to Syria, where he was jailed and interrogated, brought home to Canadian citizens the danger of their intelligence service's complicity in overreacting to the situation.

As fear commingled with anger, American society quickly united under the simplistic “with us or with the terrorists” decree by their president, and railed against any deviation in thought, whether from allies or from within. Harper’s was one of the few American publications to address the complexity in the early months after nine-eleven, enraging readers and advertisers. The Dixie Chicks and a handful of Hollywood personalities who dared to criticize the Bush administration’s tactics were shunned by their industries and even by the charities they supported, invoking memories of the infamous McCarthy blacklist.

By contrast, governments outside of the United States had the luxury of not running the world’s superpower and therefore not being the primary target of Al-Qaeda. This allowed for a more dispassionate appraisal of the situation, the causes and the possible long term remedies. In Canada, the media and citizens probed the dimensions of the terrorist threat and, within weeks of the attack, began to examine and debate the role of American foreign policy. The differences between the reaction of citizens of the United States and those of other countries stem not from any moral or intellectual superiority of other nations but by the level of fear induced by the tragedy. The fear in America was palpable.

Whether President George W. Bush actually perceived Saddam Hussein as an imminent threat or invaded Iraq primarily to secure oil and bolster a flagging economy, his decision to act unilaterally without exhausting peaceful options tested democratic governments the world over. Those who resisted his “coalition of the willing” faced the real threat of economic retaliation from the major consumer nation in the world, which is also the nation that exerts the greatest influence on global investment and the capacity of governments to borrow. While the Bush action had the support of the American majority,

confirmed by his re-election in 2004, the ability of those nations who opposed the invasion of Iraq to withstand the consequences shows some integrity of their democratic systems. However, the sheer strength of the American economic power continues to push governments to go further than the majority of their citizens would like in meeting American demands for greater military spending, integration with American defence programs and redirecting foreign aid to Iraq and Afghanistan from the world's poorest nations.

There are democracies whose leaders willingly joined American forces in the invasion of Iraq, notably Britain, Australia and several former East Bloc countries. For many coalition members, however, the motivation had more to do with economic self-interest or self-preservation rather than a belief that the action was just, to the extent that reporters began to refer to the effort as the “coalition of the billing” (Dispatches, CBC Radio), pointing to the host of promises made by American government officials to forgive debts, open United States markets, reduce tariffs or infuse much needed cash into impoverished economies. This type of political and economic coercion, which diminishes the ability of governments to truly represent the will of their electorates, is not singular to the United States or its most recent war. If it were, the world's governments could expect relief from American pressure once the efforts to enervate Al-Qaeda produced an environment in which the American people could feel relatively safe. Like the excesses of Senator Joe McCarthy's House Un-American Activities committee during the Cold War, the more extreme measures the United States demands of the world community will dissipate upon re-examination. In fact, the recent resumption of vigorous public discourse in the United States, the engagement of media, human rights lawyers and civil society in meaningful political debate about their nation attests to the robustness of democracy in the United States.

Democracy is inherently messy. Governments must try to accommodate the aspirations and values of citizens who hold divergent perspectives while conforming to the constitution of the nation. Matters of principle pose particularly difficult challenges, especially when they ignite strong passions of those engaged in the debate. In this context, the division that has polarized opinion in the United States must be seen as healthy. The decision to wage war is a weighty matter that should evoke lively debate.

In every democracy, public discourse on the direction of the nation is critical to the integrity of government. It is when that debate is thwarted, either by suppression of the media, intolerance of dissension or the curtailment of a government's ability to make decisions consistent with the will of the population that tensions can become unmanageable and destructive. A study of juvenile delinquents in the United States found that the main difference between them and other youth in their community was lack of hope. When people do not see a way to change what they perceive is an unjust and intolerable situation, they become vulnerable not only to criminality but also radicalization. One only has to look at Depression era Germany, whose citizens elected Adolph Hitler, to see the disastrous global consequences of an aggrieved people. Even in today's Germany, disillusioned citizens in eastern regions are reviving Nazism.

The widespread antipathy toward the United States is not, as some claim, a matter of envy but rather a sense of injustice that stems from America's dogmatic approach to a development strategy that benefits its own corporate and consumer interests and further marginalizes all but a small proportion of the populations of other nations. Under the innocuous term of "globalization," the United States and other First World nations coerce governments to function within an ideological framework that does not meet the needs of their populations or respect local aspirations, values and customs. Through

institutions such as the World Trade Organization (WTO) and the International Monetary Fund (IMF), the United States and other First World nations have used their dominant status to facilitate the global expansion of transnational corporations. Theoretically, host nations benefit from corporate investment and trade that is stimulated by open markets. The reality is a widening of the gap between rich and poor nations and between rich and poor individuals within nations.

The ability of governments to make decisions on the most crucial matters, generating and distributing wealth within their nations, is constrained by the rules of international trade and the principles outlined in the Washington Consensus, the regulatory framework used by the IMF since the middle of the 1980s. The consensus effectively transfers power over substantial economic decisions from governments to corporations. Developing countries that need to borrow money from the IMF, the bank of last resort, in order to function are bound by conditions deriving from the free market ideology. They must restrain public spending, create a friendly environment for transnationals and minimize government intervention. By placing conditions on loans, the IMF has forced impoverished governments to privatize essential public services, including water, and accept genetically modified crops against their will, even when these measures have deleterious effects on their populations or producers. Governments have had to cut basic public services such as health, education and income support to achieve fiscal responsibility as defined by the IMF, even though such cuts jeopardize their long term prospects.

Even a country as wealthy as Canada has endured constraints on its democracy under the Washington Consensus. Under threat of restructuring by the IMF in the last decade of the twentieth century, successive federal governments privatized public assets and, in 1995, slashed spending on

universal publicly funded services that most Canadians view as fundamental to their national identity. When citizens challenged the cuts, politicians and economists proclaimed the measures as “inevitable,” and, because all political parties participated in cutting back social programs at either the federal or provincial level, voters had no avenue to have their will respected. Many responded by shunning the ballot box, perceiving government as irrelevant or, as posited by author John Ralston Saul, as mere administrators rather than policy makers. Voter turnout declined steadily over the decade of the nineties. More telling is that 40 per cent of non-voters surveyed said they were interested in politics, elections or both. Similar trends are evident in European countries whose governments have focused on balanced budgets and investor-friendly policies at the expense of social investment.

The wealthier countries in Europe and Canada, because they have well developed economies, are more resilient than nations locked into dependency on IMF loans. In these countries, there is little recourse for citizens. In Argentina, for example, large numbers used peaceful public protests to force the resignation of a succession of presidents who attempted to meet the demands of the IMF by curtailing social spending. The current president, despite promises to the contrary, has succumbed to the bank’s demands. Argentineans are again pursuing peaceful means to change government policy. They still maintain hope.

Exacerbating the tensions in many developing countries is the willingness of the United States government to wield its formidable political, economic and military might to impose a single economic model on countries with differing histories, cultures and structures and to secure access to resources. The United States has always used its military might to protect its overseas interests, particularly those corporations extracting or harvesting resources in developing countries. It has supported and

occasionally installed some of the most brutal of dictators, from General Augusto Pinochet in Chile to Saddam Hussein in Iraq to guarantee its supply of industrial inputs such as copper and oil or to maintain a strategic presence in areas where it wants to exert greater political influence. Its continuing military support of the House of S'aud, the unelected and repressive regime that rules oil-rich Saudi Arabia and its readiness to acknowledge the short-lived cabal that overthrew the elected president of Venezuela indicate a serious rift between the rhetoric and the deeds of America's commitment to democracy.

An estimated 2.8 billion of the world's people live on less than two dollars a day. Many more work in sweatshops under appalling conditions to produce brand name products for First World markets or in occupations unprotected by the most basic health and safety standards. Citizens of the Third World are paying dearly, with their health and even their lives, for the ever increasing profits that transnationals provide their predominantly First World shareholders. Such conditions are a breeding ground for radical movements. If established democracies are to subdue terrorist threats, particularly those directed at the world's most powerful nation, they must address the root causes. The amorphous nature of terrorist organizations limits the effectiveness of a purely military response. Furthermore, military interventions can contain frustration and grievances only at the expense of democratic principles and, because they are costly, the neglect of other urgent needs of their societies. In order to restore the rights and freedoms they cherish, First World nations must enable those democracies in developing countries to have the same right they enjoy to truly represent the will of their people. They cannot demand that those countries follow the exact path and adopt the same value system that generated prosperity for the First World. These countries are functioning in a different environment and have been shaped by different cultural and historical experiences.



A first step would be the reworking of the Washington Consensus. Several nations of South America, responding to their electorates, have been requesting that social development be incorporated into the overall development strategy. From their knowledge of local conditions, the need to address the social deficit is as important as fiscal prudence. To accommodate such legitimate priorities, wealthy countries must end the practice of using the IMF and WTO to advance the corporate interests of their wealthier members and provide developing countries with an opportunity for meaningful input into the regulation of global interaction. The world needs a modern equivalent to the New Deal that rectified inequities of the Great Depression.

The path of democracy has never been and cannot be linear. The need to resolve matters of competing rights is a cumbersome process, and the outcomes at any given time are imperfect and temporary. People who make up the electorate can make mistakes, and sometimes they need time to reflect and make reparations. The strength of democracies lies in the ability of this form of government to enable populations and their elected representatives to explore different avenues, even at the risk of failure, in ways that reflect the society in which they live and function. Only dictatorships are efficient.

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