

SUSTAINING WISCONSIN  
EDITORIAL

## UNITED STATES IS NOT BLAMELESS

Joel Rogers

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In Joel Rogers's column of Sept. 17 ("United States is not blameless"), e-mail confusion caused publication of a version in which the phrase "world's leading terrorist and rogue state" occurs as a characterization of U.S. foreign policy in the late 20th century. The use of the word "terrorist" in this context was not intended for use by the author or the editors. We regret the error. (published October 15, 2001).

I'm writing this Thursday morning - just 48 hours after the heart-stopping, historic, maniacally successful and thoroughly nauseating terrorist attacks on the United States that found targets in New York City and Washington, D.C.

Given its subject matter, the delayed release of this column usually makes little difference to its content. But it may here, so let me just say that I am now, as you were Thursday morning, still ignorant of many things that by the time you read this may be old news to both of us - from the precise magnitude of death and injury that resulted from this awful act to some clear sense of what the United States and its allies propose to do in response, and to whom, and with what rationale or justice.

And truth be told, I am also - probably as you were on Thursday - in something of a state of shock. I am saddened to my bones, terribly angry, worried about the friends in New York and Washington from whom I've still not heard, and worried more about my country and what it may now do to itself and others. But I also, perhaps oddly, feel the peace of mind and focus that come with the declaration of a war.

The events of Sept. 11 (or "911," as it's already entered the demotic) have already been commented on so widely that further word is probably redundant. Or worse, they may be distracting from the heavy truth of those events, which includes the fact that they open a chasm of uncertainty that none of us is now prepared to bridge. Those events - widely heralded as the Pearl Harbor of the new millenium, a terrifying post-Cold War end of innocence - are clearly profound and forceful enough to change our world - mostly in bad ways. But having led reason to this precipice, the events of Tuesday abruptly turn away as guides.

Predicting what comes next is idle speculation, at once both empty and inappropriate to this moment's sorrow. And it must and indeed should be only that, since what comes next is a political question. How the question is answered is a fit and serious subject for national debate and discussion with the broader community of nations, which have not even started.

Already, however, an establishment consensus has formed on what broadly needs to be done, which is to extirpate, by root and branch, the terrorist infrastructure that presumably undergirded this attack, and which promises more unless it is utterly destroyed. The familiar argument is that the breadth and precision of what has been done - a precision that a local engineer neighbor confided to me (at an open school night we were both attending for our young daughters) extended down to identifying the precise floors of the WTC towers that would need to be struck to eventually precipitate their stunning inward collapse - requires a reach and sophistication, not to mention resources, beyond the means of any few individuals. And so the real "enemy" includes those who provide them succor, the leading suspects being the "rogue" states of Iran, Libya and Afghanistan.

There is of course agreement that before something awful is done to these states and their residents - to whom we shall presumably say, in John McCain's latest sound bite, "may God have mercy on you, because we will not" - we must first know their complicity in this particular act with certainty. But for much of the defense and intelligence establishment, proof

of their past complicity in terror has already been so abundantly supplied that the only real issue here is how far this event, via its effect on domestic and international opinion, will allow the truth of things to be pressed.

In considering that question, and the standards by which we might judge its answer, what is urgent to bring to this discussion are two things now absent. Two things, that is, in addition to an insistence on an appropriate process for decision-making, and appropriate evidence for the decisions that are made.

The first is better appreciation of the U.S. role in first producing, at any significant popular level, foreign support for the madness we have just witnessed. Here what must be said again and again - and said without in any way diminishing the inexcusable terror of what we have just seen, nor the undeniable good the United States has often done in the world - is that we ourselves, through much of the past 50 years, have behaved as the world's greatest terrorist and rogue state.

Merely listing the number of illegal assassinations, engineered coups, terrorizing police forces, military invasions, exercises of "force without war" and bombings the United States has supported or directly engaged in in our long period of Cold War - and continued to support and directly engage in over the past decade, well after the collapse of the Soviet Union - would take literally volumes. And behind that list stand the bodies of literally hundreds of thousands of innocents, most of them children, whose lives we have taken without any pretense to justice. As Amnesty International summarized in the mid-'90s: "Throughout the world, on any given day, a man, woman or child is likely to be displaced, tortured, killed or disappeared,' at the hands of governments or armed political groups. More often than not, the United States shares the blame."

That the siblings and descendants of our own terror's victims, if only in tiny measure, comprise some group intent upon a similar destruction of innocents in the United States may now be regretted, and must enrage, but it cannot shock. Avoiding more of them in the future surely means, in part, coming to terms to what we've done to their relatives in the past.

The second, also requiring determined repetition, is that our internal systems of domestic security, into which any additional precautions will need to fit, are in desperate disrepair. This extends from existing systems of airline safety - where ill-trained and poverty-wage workers improbably stand as our first line of defense against hijacking, and a deregulated industry that now operates without adequate safety standards - to our broader national strategy for promoting the broad goal of public safety.

For a generation now, we have sought public safety more through force than reason, and incarceration more than economic opportunity. Today we see the awful fruits of that: a prison population that has swollen in that time from a few hundred thousand to better than 2 million, a group of cities whose centers have rotted out almost entirely, a society where inequality and privilege stand at their highest peaks in history. This too cannot continue indefinitely if we are to be truly free of random terrorizing violence - whether dressed up as a moral or political crusade or not - which thus far has come less often from without than from within.

\* The only good thing buried in the rubble of last Tuesday, which I hope soon will make itself manifest, is some reason and truth in talking about these things.

I do not think this hope irrational. There are times when the terror of things reaches such a magnitude and visibility, when the whole world seems so suddenly transformed and deeply out of kilter, that - afterward, almost as suddenly - there is a collective intake of breath and, for a moment, some quiet instead of only further noise.

This is one of those moments. And, as awful as what produced it, it is one that I hope will last uninterrupted - for however long it takes us as a nation to have a searching conversation with ourselves.

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Caption: Joel Rogers

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