

The Fate of America and the War on Terrorism

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The Fate of America was published five days before 9/11. This talk was given at Barnes & Noble in Westwood, Los Angeles two months later and at a variety of other venues across the United States in the following months.

Good afternoon, and thank you for coming. It is good to be here with you and to discuss the topic of the fate of America. Needless to say, the timing of this topic, together with the timing of the publication of the book it is based on, is uncanny. The World Trade Center tragedy and the crisis we are facing as a nation have raised the question in many people's minds: What does it all mean? Yes, we all know the particular details of the unfolding events. We know there has been a horrendous loss of life and we worry about the future toll on life. We know that the world is rapidly changing before our eyes. But what is the significance of these events happening right now? What do they mean in the historical scheme of things, in the drama of our national psyche? What do they say about ourselves, about others, about the lives we lead as individuals and the collective life we have together as a nation? What can these events teach us about the past and the future?

As a critique of the American way of life, *The Fate of America* reveals the reasons for our surprised reaction to this crisis. It points to the importance of responding not only to the visible enemy "out there" halfway across the world, but the less visible, psychological and cultural menace stalking us within our own borders. This has in different ways led to our taking a stance in the world that gives other nations an unfavorable impression of us. This is not to justify the atrocities committed against us recently, but merely to reflect on the question, Why is America so disliked in these hostile pockets around the globe? If we focus exclusively on the military and geopolitical externals, and overlook the domestic and inner, spiritual dimension of this problem, we may miss the opportunity for growth that this crisis has presented us.

The Fate of America examines who we are as Americans today—what we hold dear, what we think is important, and what our priorities are and aren't. It explores how our national character has shaped our history and culture, and how the choices we now make in order to further develop our

character will determine our nation's fate or future. The book shows how the central force of our national character is, as the psychologist Carl Jung first observed, a heroic ideal. This is an ideal distinct from that of most other nations. It is basically an ideal of greatness; it is itself the aspiration to attain greatness and is very much responsible for the greatness our nation in turn has attained. Indeed, Americans strive above all to be great, whether in the sphere of commerce, technology and science, international affairs and military strength, space exploration, sports, or entertainment. The value of winning, of being No. 1, of excelling to greatness is inculcated into the American's psyche from an early age; this begins with the family, is reinforced in school, and is rewarded in the workplace. Perhaps in no other nation in modern times is hero worship as strong as it is in America. Film, television, popular culture, and sports abound with it. Heroic greatness, whether in the form of fame, fortune, or success, is America's answer to that perennial Platonic question, What is the "good life"?

However, it is precisely in regard to this ideal that America is in a state of crisis today. In a sense, the nation is suffering from a heroic-identity crisis: the ideal of what is heroic, of what constitutes greatness, is no longer clear. What was once heroic is no longer applicable in modern times. The heroes, conquests, and enemies of former times have become anachronisms. The North American continent no longer offers boundless opportunity for exploration, and even space travel has become routine. The debacle in Vietnam was America's first major experience of heroic failure on the international scene, followed by others.

More significantly, as political pundits often point out, with the Soviet Union and the global threat of communism now gone, America's role in the world has also entered a stage of uncertainty and redefinition. Power blocs are shifting and, with guerrilla wars promoting genocide, "rogue" states threatening regional destabilization (not to mention nuclear and biochemical war), and terrorism obviously increasing, priorities are not the same. America may remain the sole superpower, but given the way the world is evolving, acting as the policeman of the world is no longer in the nation's best interest as it was once believed to be.

On the domestic front too, America is in a state of transition. Here we find an explicit sense of disenchantment. Since Watergate, public officials and leaders have become subject to scrutiny in unprecedented ways, and naturally, it does not take much to discover that they have feet of clay. One investigation after another has led to the discrediting or resignation of congressmen, senators, and presidential aides. Presidents themselves have been increasingly exposed as liars. Cynicism has become a natural part of

our political landscape. Our traditional heroes—the frontiersman, cowboy, soldier, tycoon, astronaut, spy, and athlete—no longer inspire us the way they used to (though as our movies illustrate, the ideal image of a hero is still very much modeled on a macho aggressivity). The fall of America’s heroic ideal pervades every aspect of society. Drug abuse, crime, racial hatred and division, the rootlessness and cultural vacuity of the nation’s youth, the proliferation of cults, gangs, and militia groups, the decline of the American family as a two-parent, tight-knit unit, and the general, mindless pursuit of ambition for its own sake are all signs of heroic failure. This crisis of heroism, of confusion around the meaning of greatness, is the problem that underlies most of America’s other problems, which are but symptoms of this core disturbance.

The current terrorist crisis raises issues that cannot be successfully dealt with unless we also deal with our heroic-identity crisis. It requires attunement to complexity, rather than the simplicity and innocence of our traditional heroism. Unlike us, the cultures inclined toward Islamic fundamentalism have not undergone the transformation that came with the rise of rationalism via the Reformation, the Renaissance, the Enlightenment, the Industrial Revolution, the huge leaps in modern scientific understanding, and the spread of cosmopolitanism. As these cultures are still psychologically living in pre-modern times, in a predominantly religious and mythic worldview, the rather sudden introduction of our modern ways with their potential upheaval is threatening. Their method of dealing with their fear is reactionary, primitive, and as we saw on September 11th, evil, but what should we conclude about the fear itself? And how should we address it so that it does not come at us in such reactionary, primitive, and evil ways? President Roosevelt was right: we have nothing to fear but fear itself, and we may here add, not only our own fear, but the fear of others.

A clear definition of who the enemy is and a clear delineation between good and evil is no longer possible as it was in former times, and if we resort to thinking in such anachronistic ways, we will undermine ourselves. Everywhere in the media we see the reference to this current episode as America’s “new war.” But one must ask, what is it that makes it a new war? Is it merely that we are fighting guerilla terrorists who are hard to find, “shadows of shadows” as one commentator described them? What is really so new about that? In the days of colonial expansion the high seas were filled with pirates attacking the ships of the different empires, stealing their booty and killing the innocent men, women, and children aboard. That terrorism was hard to eliminate as well, but eventually, the imperial navies succeeded. Of course, there are a number of new factors affecting the

present situation, such as the cultural backdrop that I just described, but what would really make this a “new” war would be its departure from the *old* wars.

Old wars are based on an old model of heroism, a heroism that is defined by an enemy and motivated by the conquest or domination of that enemy. In America, this model of enemy-oriented heroism operated in the genocidal campaign against the Indians, in the Mexican War, the Civil War, the Spanish-American War, World War I, World War II, the Korean War, the Vietnam War, the Cold War, and the Persian Gulf War. After World War II, this model showed some indication of change insofar as the Marshall Plan mirrored the policy of enlightened emperors in the past who after defeating their enemies invested in restoring them and their cultures to their pre-war condition. The idea there was to advance them under a common umbrella rather than to merely subjugate them.

But the effort of the Marshall Plan was largely limited to that war, and enemy-oriented heroism continued well through the Cold War and is still strong. It has fueled the covert intelligence and military operations that have given America an image of Machiavellian cunning and ruthlessness in the eyes of many Third World nations. Americans seem innocently immune to this image and react with surprise, denial, and even indignation when confronted with it. But then again, our superficial media coverage does not inform us of what is well-known in these other parts of the globe, of the mountain of evidence that corroborates this image. How many Americans are acquainted with the clandestine role America has played in the Congo, Brazil, Iran, Bangladesh, Chile, Greece, Cypress, Central America, Indochina, and East Timor, to mention only some? Are they aware of the degree to which our intelligence has incited coups of democratically elected governments, subverted elections, and participated in the assassination of other countries’ leaders? Do they know that during these episodes in these countries *America* was seen as the terrorist? This is not to turn our own country into the enemy. Rather, it is to cast a light on our country’s enemy-oriented heroism so that it can stop being *its own* worst enemy.

Heroism that derives its sense of identity from fighting an enemy always requires an adversary and is at a loss without one. It is thus not surprising that events like the Persian Gulf War and the current war against terrorism are the only way we can call forth our heroic qualities. These are the only times we put aside our sharp differences between left and right, between Republican and Democrat, between black and white, and rally behind a common cause. We seem unable to call forth these qualities

ourselves purely for their own merit. It is troubling that we *need* an enemy in order to become a nation united in purpose.

But even then, all we have done is transfer the enemy-oriented heroism that is rife in our own country and that we act out among ourselves to an external enemy. Instead of white vs. black, right vs. left, rich vs. less rich, it is now America vs. the terrorists. The us-vs.-them dynamic intrinsic to enemy-oriented heroism has merely found a new face. That it is foreign only makes it a better rallying point. When Timothy McVeigh bombed the federal building in Oklahoma City, we did not declare a war against terrorism as we have done now because the enemy-oriented heroism—both his against us and ours against him—was too close to home. Waging war would have required a kind of self-examination we were not prepared to undertake, and, I am afraid, we may still be unwilling to undertake. What did it mean that a young American marine, a decorated veteran of the Persian Gulf War, could destroy lives in this fashion? Such a question would necessarily force us into the quandary of Pogo: “We have met the enemy and he is us.”

It goes without saying that our enemies in this war have an identical orientation and problem that they do not recognize. Their heroism is defined by caricaturing America as a diabolical enemy whom they need for a rallying point against which to vent their grievances and unite their people. When we meet their enemy-oriented heroism only with our own, we come down to the same level they are on. As Gandhi said, in practicing the policy of an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth, the whole world will soon become blind and toothless.

Naturally, an alternative kind of heroism would not cancel the basic need for an appropriate, enemy-oriented response such as what is required in a situation like this. An alternative heroism should enhance or deepen our traditional heroic style, not thoughtlessly replace it. After all, Gandhi’s pacifist approach to resisting his enemy without violating him could only have worked against a nation that had high standards of civility, such as the British. Does anybody imagine that if the Nazis had occupied India they would have been in the least deterred by Gandhi’s appeal to conscience and common sense? Pacifism is not for a world still in the grip of the law of the jungle that decrees that only the fittest survive.

The political reality here is that with an opponent who is himself purely enemy-oriented, one can only deal in an enemy-oriented way. Zealots like Osama bin Laden are beyond being influenced by a heroism that transcends the power principle, the principle of brute force and imposition of one’s will at all costs. Probably the time for that influence was when they

were children and young adults in school, learning about moral and social values and what it means to lead a good life. As Tolstoy said, “Give me the first five years of a child’s life, and you can have the rest.” That is why we need to address the cultural soil from which such fanatics spring. If we crop the weeds but fail to treat the roots, the culture will give rise to a new and even more ferocious, fanatical generation of terrorists, as the history of the Israeli-Palstinian conflict has demonstrated. As we see there, cutting off one head of the Hydra creates two more. But for us to be able to appeal to the leaders and people of those cultures in a fashion that transcends the power principle, we first need to embrace this kind of heroism. We need to explore moral and social values and learn what it means to lead the good life ourselves.

What would such a heroism look like? In contrast to an enemy-oriented heroism, it would need to be a citizen-oriented heroism. By this I mean two things, both interrelated and essential if it is to work. I am going to back into this model from the outside in, only because our focus now in this terrorist crisis is upon the outside, on the enemy as foreigner and other than ourselves. But it is the inside, the domestic and the spiritual, that is the foundation of this model and the factor that is crucial for it to work.

A citizen-oriented heroism harks back to the vision of our founders. They believed America had a special mission to lead the world toward freedom, toward an “empire of liberty,” the “brotherhood of man.” However, intertwined with the self-serving goals of capitalism and imperial power, this vision has not been without its dark elements. By exploiting other nations through unilaterally beneficial trade agreements and by dividing their political economies into rich and poor, thus exacerbating inequities already present, the empire of liberty has often looked and felt to these nations more like traditional empires of the past. President Hoover warned against such a foreign policy because it would not only lead to social unrest, revolutionary nationalism, and a need for American intervention escalating into wars; it would also lead to the eventual end of America’s leading position in the world. His concerns are even more relevant in our age of globalization. America presently has 5 percent of the world’s population but consumes 25 percent of the Earth’s natural resources—a disparity which could never exist without the practice of economic imperialism. Yet as time marches on, the rest of the world’s increasing population will need more and more of the Earth’s resources for its own sustenance. How will this disparity be resolved? And is it not part of the hidden backdrop of the current crisis? Does it not help fertilize the cultural

soil which gives rise to terrorism and its support among the marginalized and disenfranchised peoples of the world?

A citizen-oriented heroism would aim to move beyond treating foreign nations as the means to create profits for the wealthier nations who invest in them. It would not make a division between the people of one nation and those of another, but would see *all* as *citizens of the world*. We are not speaking here about world government, but a world in which it is understood that if one people or segment of the population is impoverished and left behind, everyone is affected. One cannot tout the benefits of globalization without considering its drawbacks and dangers. Globalization will be good for humanity as a whole only when practiced with ethical sensibility.

The differences in style and attitude between citizen-oriented heroism and enemy-oriented heroism are profound and many. Citizen-oriented heroism sees the hero as a healer rather than a warrior, a partner rather than a dominator, a collaborator rather than a competitor, a communicator rather than a conqueror, and an explorer rather than an exploiter. The citizen-oriented hero is strong but empathic, and can extend not only an iron fist but an open, helping hand. He is resolute but, if at all possible, nonviolent. He is related not only to the traditional masculine virtues but his emotions and the feminine as well: he knows how to live with his aggressive instincts and drives while also knowing how to be tender and nurturing. Americans do not have to look too far to find examples of such heroism. The Native American practiced citizen-oriented heroism and democracy naturally, inspiring Rousseau to call him the “Noble Savage.” And Thoreau and Emerson championed the idea that a life balanced with contemplation and introspection leads to the highest civility and freedom.

Applied to foreign policy, this model of heroism would encourage an approach to underdeveloped nations that primarily helps them to help themselves, fostering independence or self-sufficiency rather than dependence, and empowerment rather than power politics. It would not back military dictatorships just to protect our oil or geopolitical interests, nor would it engage in the kind of policies Hoover criticized—exploitation, elitism, and the promotion of inequity. If the so-called free enterprise we promote benefits only the ruling class of these nations, we merely reinforce the top-down model of socioeconomics that breeds enemy-oriented heroism among their own classes. Can we then be surprised that this should eventually be directed outwards at us? Indeed, as some political commentators have pointed out, bin Laden and his cohorts are members of the middle and upper classes, and in focusing their population’s grievances

against an external enemy like the United States, they cleverly preserve the hierarchy of exploitation in their own nations.

It is a fact that the percentage of national income that the American government spends on foreign aid to underdeveloped nations is less than that of other developed nations. Some argue that this is largely due to America's huge expenditures on national defense, expenditures that are surely fueled by the costs of our enemy-oriented heroism. However, if we wish to narrow the gap between the "haves" and "have-nots" of the world, shouldn't we take a lead in better equipping these underdeveloped nations with resources for economic development, family planning, health care, nutrition, and education? If these nations are to also move beyond enemy-oriented heroism, we need to bring them into the community of nations as partners. We need to make the marginalized, disenfranchised people of the world active-creative citizens of it, participants in it as opposed to pariahs. This would be a *real* coalition, a *lasting* coalition, and not just a military and temporary one. A paradigm shift from an us-vs.-them, enemy-oriented heroism to an all-of-us, citizen-oriented heroism would be a new world order in fact and not just name.

Turning to the domestic and spiritual level of citizen-oriented heroism, this is essential. The challenge for us to shift to this kind of heroism ourselves represents, I believe, the hidden meaning of the current terrorism crisis. It is not enough to make the people of *other* nations citizens of the world and more democratic. *We* need to become citizens of the world and to become more fully democratized. Indeed, how can we expect to enlighten others in the ways of democratic citizenship if we do not practice such citizenship ourselves?

One does not have to look very hard to see that we are today increasingly heading towards what I describe in *The Fate of America* as a cultural tyranny. Contrary to a military tyranny, this would not have the external trappings of fascism, such as a dictator, secret police, concentration camps, and special judges. Nor would it be a social tyranny, that is, an oligarchy or plutocracy (though no one can deny that elitism is alive and well in America). As a cultural form of oppression, this tyranny would come from the people themselves, from their culture or way of living. This would be a subtle tyranny and hard to pinpoint precisely because there would be no one social body that visibly imposes itself upon another. America's addiction to the high life provides a perfect medium for such a tyranny. The effects of this addiction threaten both democracy and the moral health of the nation. They include material insatiability and excess; an unraveling of human relationships and family and community life due to the

rapid pace of modern technological life; empty hero worship and mass-mindedness; and numbing intoxication from drugs, gambling, and other forms of escape.

These are matched by the harmful effects of our condition of innocence, an unbridled belief in one's purity and an outlook which sees things only on their surface and one-dimensionally. Manifesting through what I describe as the social cults of novelty, freedom, happiness, childhood, and cynicism, this innocence also permeates our history of racism, war, and imperialism, as observable in how we have justified these. Always we have claimed Providence as our guiding principle in such matters, insisting, not unlike our current enemies, that God is on our side. In the Civil War, *both* sides made this claim with absolute certainty. A similar conviction in our righteousness characterized the near-genocide of the Indians and slavery and segregation, the latter of which was even initially approved by the Supreme Court. We are a nation addicted to innocence as much as to the high life, if not more so.

Certainly, education in America today needs to orient itself to these dangerous addictions and the priorities they compel us to focus upon: namely, the learning of what is necessary for a good life; the art of virtue, as Benjamin Franklin called it; and the duties or responsibilities of the citizen to society. Our leading educators are probably correct in their belief that if education, from the lower levels to the higher, does not become infused with democratic values, in a few generations Americans may no longer be living in a democracy at all, at least not as the Founding Fathers conceived it. The spiritual heritage, intellectual tradition, and political and humanistic vision of our founders will be lost. Indeed, our level of cultural literacy, our lack of familiarity with the great traditions that have shaped Western civilization, is appalling. Many thinkers warn that as the predominant trendsetter of modern civilization, America is leading the world into a postmodern version of the Dark Ages.

Today's education is so enamored with the mastery of science and technology in order to guarantee students jobs and keep America abreast in the Information Age, that students are ill-equipped to even ask the right questions about what is wrong with the quality of contemporary life. Young people today are not being taught how to think about, much less deal with, the problems of living—the problems of love and human relationships, the problems of evil and suffering, and the ethical issues that are attached to important and commonplace decisions alike. In catering to the cults of prosperity, technology and progress, American education accommodates the trend toward a purely survivalist, Hobbesian society instead of a genuinely

civilized and free society. Not only does modern education not create freethinkers, informed by such traditions as Greece, Rome, the Renaissance, and the Enlightenment, but it does not create thinkers at all. The emphasis is on doing, not thinking and critical reflection.

This issue of education is not purely institutional and limited to our schools and universities. Education, in the sense it is being discussed here, must become a social process, and not merely a phase of preparation for employment in the life of the citizen. The development of character and wisdom must become a matter of public discourse, particularly at a time when it has become so eclipsed. A citizen-oriented heroism must think and reflect, and not just act and do. The domestic and spiritual dimension of citizen-oriented heroism demands that the individuals in a nation cease seeking heroes outside themselves who are larger than life, but rather become heroes themselves in a natural and ordinary way. This implies a freedom that is not merely institutional, collective, and political, but rooted in the spiritual awareness and integrity of the individual. A nation can only be as spiritually evolved, ethical, and free as its individual citizens.

Today there are two kinds of freedom that are predominant in America: one is political freedom or liberty, which supposedly has an ethical dimension, and the other is an innocent or paradisaic freedom, a make-believe condition in which things require no effort or have no cost. The latter is characterized by the mentality that life should be easy and gratifying, that the way of least effort is the best way, that getting a free ride or something for nothing is a good deal. If anything, this kind of freedom is defined by negation—by what it is *not*, by what you *don't* have to do and what *isn't* expected from you. Indeed, it is so passive that it is practiced with utter unconsciousness and goes unrecognized for the regression to childhood that it is. It places no ethical demands or responsibilities upon citizens. People today thus believe that they are free to do whatever they like, as long as they are not harming anybody. But there is a huge gulf between the obligation to not harm anybody and the obligation of meaningful service to society or to other human beings. In Greece, the height of personal freedom was seen as the voluntary pursuit of social duty or responsibility, namely, philanthropy, understood here not in the modern sense of charity but in its original sense as “love of man” (*philanthropia*).

This third kind of freedom, personal freedom, is what our democracy needs to be infused with. With its sense of ethical responsibility, it alone would deepen and advance our democracy. It would reflect not only a return to the Jeffersonian ideal of an enlightened citizenry, but in fact a leap forward to a democracy that has never been practiced widely in this nation

or any other nation in modern times. It would entail a heroic ideal in which the citizen's values revolve around the expression of personal freedom via the cultivation of character and service to others and society as a whole.

Thus, in a citizen-oriented heroism, I work on enhancing the possibilities of *your* citizenship as well as my own, as you work on enhancing the possibilities of *my* citizenship as well as your own. We are all in a collective alchemical laboratory together, in a mutual effort to refine the quality of our civilization. In this paradigm, the citizen is more in service to culture and civilization than to the nation and nationalism. However, in the long run, this would contribute to making us a better nation too by making us better people. By defining freedom in terms of deep, personal values as opposed to merely the right to seek self-gratification through prosperity, citizen-oriented heroism is also integral to alleviating such problems as racism, poverty, gang violence, the drug epidemic, and the disillusionment of our youth as witnessed in massacres like at Columbine High. Again, one could argue that these are all symptoms of our underlying crisis in heroism, of our confusion around the meaning of greatness.

As the historian Arnold Toynbee illustrated, civilizations and nations that fail to respond creatively to the challenges that new eras bring sooner or later fall by history's wayside. Given the spiritual condition of our nation—an impoverished one by comparison to the great civilizations of the past—it is not difficult to see how our ability to respond creatively is jeopardized, and how the nation is in grave danger of decline in spite of its prosperity. As Toynbee also explained, many a nation has suddenly and unexpectedly collapsed at the height of prosperity and world power. Americans should not automatically assume that they are exempt from the same forces of history that toppled those nations, or that simply focusing on the external threat of terrorism will spare them from having to deal with their internal problems. In fact, we should be concerned that the present crisis, important as it is, does not become another distraction from what ails us domestically and spiritually. We should remember that at the end of the Roman Empire, all energy was focused on trying to stave off the barbarians sacking Rome, while the civilization itself—its quality of life and cultural values—festered and declined. It is this that undermined Rome even more than the invaders.

At this critical juncture of history, with a failing, old heroic ideal and the introduction of the new era of globalization, we need to ask ourselves: What is, indeed, genuinely heroic? What is the good life? And what constitutes a lasting, viable civilization? These are introspective, spiritual questions that must be wrestled with in people's hearts and souls. They cannot be resolved solely by social or government programs administered

from the top-down, no matter how innovative or effective those programs are. Real social change must come from people, forged through public discourse and studied at all levels of education. It must involve not a faceless crowd, but persons. And because the change involves our own understanding of ourselves—the forces in our character and culture—it too must be spiritual and citizen-oriented. To cite Gandhi once again: “We must be the change we wish to see in the world.” I also especially like these words from Abraham Lincoln. They speak to our times with as much relevance as to his own, and I conclude with them: “The dogmas of the quiet past are inadequate to the stormy present. The occasion is piled high with difficulty, and we must rise—with the occasion. As our case is new, so we must think anew, and act anew. We must disenthrall ourselves, and then we shall save our country.” Thank you.