

TERRORISM AND NONVIOLENCE

BY Arun Gandhi

Understandably, after the tragedy in New York and Washington DC on September 11 many have written or called the office to find out what would be an appropriate nonviolent response to such an unbelievably inhuman act of violence.

First, we must understand that nonviolence is not a strategy that we can use in a moment of crisis and discarded in times of peace. Nonviolence is about personal attitudes, about becoming the change we wish to see in the world. Because, a nation's collective attitude is based on the attitude of the individual. Nonviolence is about building positive relationships with all human beings ? relationships that are based on love, compassion, respect, understanding and appreciation.

Nonviolence is also about not judging people as we perceive them to be ? that is, a murderer is not born a murderer; a terrorist is not born a terrorist. People become murderers, robbers and terrorists because of circumstances and experiences in life. Killing or confining murders, robbers, terrorists, or the like is not going to rid this world of them. For every one we kill or confine we create another hundred to take their place. What we need to do is to analyze dispassionately what are those circumstances that create such monsters and how can we help eliminate those circumstances, not the monsters. Justice should mean reformation and not revenge.

We saw some people in Iraq and Palestine and I dare say many other countries rejoice the blowing up of the World Trade Center and the Pentagon. It horrified us, as it should. But, let us not forget that we do the same thing. When Israel bombs the Palestinians we either rejoice or show no compassion. Our attitude is they deserve what they get. When the Palestinians bomb the Israelis we are indignant and condemn them as vermin who need to be eliminated.

We reacted without compassion when we bombed the cities of Iraq. I was among the millions in the United States who sat glued to the television and watched the drama as though it was a made for television film. The television had desensitized us. Thousands of innocent men, women and children were being blown to bits and instead of feeling sorry for them we marveled at the efficiency of our military. For more than ten years we have continued to wreak havoc in Iraq ? an estimated 50,000 children die every year because of sanctions that we have imposed ? and it hasn't moved us to compassion. All this is done, we are told, because we want to get rid of the Satan called Sadam Hussein.

Now we are getting ready to do this all over again to get rid of another Satan called Osama Bin Laden. We will bomb the cities of Afghanistan because they harbor the Satan and in the process we will help create a thousand other bin Ladens.

Some might say "we don't care what the world thinks of us as long as they respect

our strength. " After all we have the means to blow this world to pieces since we are the only surviving super-power. Do we want the world to respect us the way school children respect a bully? Is that our role in the world?

If a bully is what we want to be then we must be prepared to face the same consequences as a school-yard bully faces. On the other hand we cannot tell the world "leave us alone." Isolationism is not what this world is built for.

All of this brings us back to the question: How do we respond nonviolently to terrorism?

The consequences of a military response are not very rosy. Many thousands of innocent people will die both here and the country or countries we attack. Militancy will increase exponentially and, ultimately, we will be faced with another, more pertinent, moral question: what will we gain by destroying half the world? Will we be able to live with a clear conscience?

We must acknowledge our role in helping create monsters in the world and then find ways to contain these monsters without hurting more innocent people and then redefine our role in the world. I think we must move from seeking to be respected for our military strength to being respected for our moral strength.

We need to appreciate that we are in a position to play a powerful role in helping the "other half" of the world attain a better standard of life not by throwing a few crumbs but by significantly involving ourselves in constructive economic programs.

For too long our foreign policy has been based on "what is good for the United States." It smacks of selfishness. Our foreign policy should now be based on what is good for the world and how can we do the right thing to help the world become more peaceful.

To those who have lost loved one's in this and other terrorist acts I say I share your grief. I am sorry that you have become victims of senseless violence. But let this sad episode not make you vengeful because no amount of violence and killing is going to bring you inner peace. Anger and hate never do. The memory of those victims who have died in this and other violent incidents around the world will be better preserved and meaningfully commemorated if we all learn to forgive and dedicate our lives to helping create a peaceful, respectful and an understanding world.

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