

What else could we possibly have done?

Joan Chittister | Jul. 7, 2006 From Where I Stand

We are a country held hostage by fear.

It's difficult to go through an airport these days -- and I go through lots of them here and around the world -- without doing some serious soul-searching about it. The famous question repeats itself over and over again in the tiniest of ways in me: Are we better off today than we were five years ago?

In Asia, for instance, I do not need to take off jackets and jewelry and buckles and cell phones as I go, not even my shoes.

In Europe there are no body scans and puffers as there are in Albuquerque.

In Africa and South America, they do not submit my computer to body scans of its own.

In those places, I forget for a moment that in the United States I live behind a wall that the world dare not penetrate. I forget for a while that we are a city under siege. I forget that I am going in and out of an armed camp called "the land of the free, the home of the brave."

What I cannot forget when I read the morning papers is that once upon a time, in the not too long ago, we didn't live this way. What happened?

If the question were asked about baseball instead of politics, somebody would be keeping a box score, a chart of gains and losses. In fact, managers and players would be hired and fired on the basis of it. But not in politics. Not us. Instead, we re-elect politicians to "stay the course."

So what is "the course"?

There's nothing esoteric here. Read the front page of any newspaper and the direction is clear.

Instead of working with moderate governments and the world community, instead of courting public opinion and international support, instead of trying to understand the U.S. image around the world and working to change it, instead of asking why gleeful children danced in the streets when the Twin Towers fell, instead of doing something positive to correct it, we fed right into it. We did the frontier thing and began to kill people ourselves. As in "That'll show 'em who's boss." Except that it hasn't.

So what has it done?

By defining the attack on the Twin Towers as the declaration of global war, it has made global war a reality. As a result, it provides an excuse for any authoritarian government to call its dissenters "terrorists" and suppress them. So much for the freedom of speech we like to say we're seeding around the world.

By launching high technology weapons against countries whose armies are under equipped and whose borders are porous, we have even managed to reinstitute a nuclear arms race. Iran and North Korea have joined the new race out of fear of what might happen to them if in the future they, too, fall afoul of either our bad intelligence or our horrendous swashbuckling and our unilateral decree that they are evil and in need of regime change.

In the face of almost half a century of negotiated peace and global understanding with Muslim nations from Africa to Indonesia, 19 terrorists managed to create what is now called -- assumed to be -- a "clash of civilizations" rather than a plague of religious extremists it so obviously is.

So we fight in the dark everywhere, claiming thousands of innocent lives and few "terrorists." We do it against those who claim no flag, no government, no terms of peace, and we may never know if we have managed to defeat them or not.

While old ladies and small children go on forever removing their jackets and shoes and cell phones in U.S. airport security lines, the United States has been exposed as a torture state.

The government refuses to submit its military behavior to an International War Crimes Tribunal and so, as far as the rest of the world is concerned, admits that its behaviors are in question.

And all of this on account of 19 politically independent, unauthorized fanatics. They provoked from us an all-out irrational response against the wrong people and now the whole world is asked to take sides.

Meanwhile -- has anybody noticed -- Osama bin Laden is still free somewhere and sending us tapes? The Taliban have returned to Afghanistan. Millions of civilians have either left Iraq, are internal refugees in their own country or have been killed there in order to protect them.

And here, in the United States, paranoia grips the land. The Constitution is being shredded one line at a time. We are facing a decade-long moratorium on social issues, because all our money is going into war against whom we don't know and where we're not sure. In the meantime, the richest country in the world cannot have universal medical insurance, day care services, subsidized housing or welfare programs, and the army is where the young go to get an education. If they make it back in any condition to go to school.

No, the world did not change after 9/11. We did.

The question is , what else could we possibly have done? Is there any kind of response that would have been more effective than what we did? And if so, why aren't we doing it?

From where I stand, it isn't that 9/11 did not demand a response. It's that the response we made has the smell of inanity. In fact, we may have done more to harm ourselves as a result of our response to it than any 19 -- 19! -- terrorists could ever have hoped.

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