

# America and the World: The Twin Towers as Metaphor

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## I. America the Beautiful

O beautiful for patriot dream, That sees beyond the years  
Thine alabaster cities gleam, Undimmed by human tears!  
America! America! God shed his grace on thee  
And crown thy good with brotherhood  
From sea to shining sea!

*America the Beautiful*

On Oct. 24, 1990, I was invited to give the opening lecture of the Distinguished Speakers Series in celebration of the bicentennial of the University of Vermont. I entitled that lecture: "America and the World: Today, Yesterday, and Tomorrow."<sup>1</sup> In that talk, I discussed God's blessings to America: in the present, prosperity; in the past, liberty; in the future, equality. Somehow God had not distributed these blessings to everyone everywhere. I noted that Americans were very conscious of this unequal distribution of God's grace. I said that the United States had always defined itself, had always measured its blessings, by the yardstick of the world. We are better; we were better; we shall be better. Perhaps blessings that are universal are not considered true blessings. Perhaps we impose upon God the requirement that She save only a minority.

Today, we live in the shadow of an event that has shaken most of us, the destruction of the Twin Towers on Sept. 11, 2001 by a group of individuals so dedicated to their ideology and their moral fury at the United States that they conspired for years to find ways to deal a deadly geopolitical blow to America and those they deemed its supporters around the world, and they did this in a way that required sacrificing their own lives. Most Americans have reacted to the events with deep anger, with patriotic resolve, and yet with considerable and persistent puzzlement. Puzzlement about two things: why did this happen? and how could it happen? And the puzzlement has been laced with a good deal of uncertainty: what must be done, what can be done in order that such an event will not, could not happen again?

As I look back on what I said eleven years ago, I do not wish to change anything I said then. But I do feel a bit of unease about the stance from which I spoke. I wrote as though I were an ethnographer from elsewhere, from Mars perhaps, trying to understand this curious species, *humanus americanus*. Today, I think that is not good enough. I am to be sure a human being, and concerned with the fate of humanity. But I am also an American citizen. I was born here. I have lived here most of my life. And I share full responsibility, along with everyone else in my position, for what has happened here and what will happen here. I have a moral obligation to view America from inside.

So, I wish to look at America and the world a second time. But this time I do not want to see how Americans see themselves through the prism of the world, but rather how Americans have seen the world, and how Americans might wish to see the world from hereon in. And I am very aware that here I tread on contentious ground.

It is a rare president of the United States, in the twentieth century at least, who has not at some point made the statement that the United States is the greatest country in the world. I'm not sure our omnipresent public opinion polling agencies have ever put the question directly to the American public, but I suspect that the percentage of the U.S. population that would agree with such a statement is very large indeed. I ask you to reflect on how such a statement sounds, not merely to persons from poor countries with cultures that are very different from ours but to our close friends and allies - to Canadians, to the English, and of course to the French. Does Tony Blair think the United States is the greatest country in the world, greater than Great Britain? Would he dare think that? Does Pope John Paul II think it? Who, besides Americans and those who wish to migrate to the United States, believe this?

Nationalism is of course not a phenomenon limited to people in the United States. The citizens of almost every country are patriotic and often chauvinistic. Americans are aware of that, no doubt. But they nonetheless tend to note the fact that many people across the world wish to emigrate to the United States, and that no other locus of immigration seems to be quite as popular, and they take this as confirmation of their belief in American superior virtue as a nation.

But in what do we consider that our superior virtue consists? I think that Americans tend to believe that others have less of many things than we have, and the fact that we have more is a sign of grace. I shall thus try to elaborate the many arenas in which this concept of "less-ness" may be thought to exist. I shall start with the one arena about which most Americans seem to be quite sure. Other countries are less modern, meaning by modernity the level of technological development. The United States has the most advanced technology in the world. This technology is located in the gadgets found in our homes across the country, in the networks of communications and transport, in the infrastructure of the country, in the instruments of space

exploration, and of course in the military hardware that is available to our armed forces. As a result of this accumulation of technology, Americans consider that life in the U.S. is more comfortable, that our production competes more successfully in the world market, and that therefore we are certain to win the wars into which others may drag us.

Americans also consider their society to be more efficient. Things run more smoothly - at the work place, in the public arena, in social relations, in our dealings with bureaucracies. However great our complaints about any of these practices, we seem to find, when we wander elsewhere, that others manage things less well. Others do not seem to have American get-up-and-go. They are less inventive about finding solutions to problems, major and minor. They are too mired in traditional and/or formal ways. And this holds the others back, while America forges ahead. We are very ready therefore to offer friendly advice to all and sundry - to Nigerians, to Japanese, to Italians - about how they could do things better. The emulation of American ways by others is considered a big plus when Americans assess what is going on in other countries. Daniel Boone plus the Peace Corps comprise the bases of an evaluation of comparative political economy.

But of course most Americans would deny that the less-ness of others is merely material. It is spiritual as well. Or if the term spiritual seems to exclude the secular humanists, it is cultural as well. Our presidents tell us, and our patriotic songs remind us, that we are the land of liberty. Others are less free than we are. The Statue of Liberty stretches out its hand to all those "huddled masses yearning to breathe free."

Our density of freedom is visualized in so many ways. Which other country has the Bill of Rights? Where else is freedom of the press, of religion, of speech so honored? Where else are immigrants so integrated into the political system? Can one name another country in which someone arriving here as a teenager, and still speaking English to this day with a thick German accent, could become the Secretary of State, the chief representative of Americans to the rest of the world? Is there any other country where social mobility, for those with merit, is so rapid? And which country can match us in the degree to which we are democratic? Democratic not merely in the continuing openness of our political structures, the centrality of a two-party system, but also in our quotidian mores? Is the United States not the country which excels in maintaining the principle of "first come, first served" in the practices of daily life, this as opposed to a system in which those who have privilege get preference? And these democratic mores, in the public arena and in social life, date back at least 200, if not almost 400 years.

From melting pot to multiculturalism, we have prided ourselves on the incredible ethnic mix of real American life - in our restaurants, in our universities, in our political leadership. Yes, we have had our faults, but we have done more than any other country to try to overcome them. Have we not taken the lead in the last decades in tearing down barriers of gender and race, in the constantly renewed search for the perfect meritocracy? Even our movements of protest give us

cause for pride. Where else are they so persistent, so diverse, so legitimate?

And in the one arena where, up to 1945, we tended to admit that we were not the avant-garde of the world, the arena of high culture, has that not now all changed? Is New York not today the world center of art, of theater, of music performance, of dance, of opera? Our cinema is so superior that the French government must resort to protectionist measures to keep French audiences from seeing still more of it.

We can put this all together in a phrase that Americans have not used much, at least until Sept. 11, but which we largely think in our hearts: We are more civilized than the rest of the world, the Old World as we used to say with a token of disdain. We represent the highest aspirations of everyone, not merely Americans. We are the leader of the free world, because we are the freest country in the world, and others look to us for leadership, for holding high the banner of freedom, of civilization.

I have meant none of this ironically. I am deeply persuaded that this image of the less-ness of the rest of the world is profoundly ingrained in the American psyche, however many there may be who will be embarrassed by my presentation, and insist that they are not part of such a consensus, that they are (shall we say?) more cosmopolitan in their views. And it is in this sense, first of all, that the Twin Towers are a perfect metaphor. They signalled unlimited aspirations; they signalled technological achievement; they signalled a beacon to the world.

## **II. Attack on America**

What the United States tastes today is a very small thing compared to what we have tasted for tens of years. Our nation has been tasting this humiliation and contempt for more than 80 years.... But if the sword falls on the United States, after 80 years, hypocrisy raises its ugly head lamenting the deaths of these killers who tampered with the blood, honor and holy places of the Muslims. The least that one can describe these people is that they are morally depraved.

*-- Osama bin Laden, Oct. 7, 2001*

Osama bin Laden does not think that America is beautiful. He thinks Americans are morally depraved. Now, of course, there are some Americans who also think that most Americans are morally depraved. We hear this theme from what might be called the cultural right in the United States. But while the critiques of the U.S. cultural right and those of Osama bin Laden overlap up to a point insofar as they deal with everyday mores, bin Laden's fundamental denunciation concerns what he calls U.S. hypocrisy in the world arena. And when it comes to America in the world arena, there are very few Americans who would agree with that characterization, and even those who might say something similar would want to nuance this view in ways that bin Laden

would find irrelevant and unacceptable.

This was one of the two great shocks of September 11 for Americans. There were persons in the world who denied any good faith at all to American actions and motives in the world arena. How was it possible that persons who had less of everything worth having doubt that those who had more of everything had earned it by their merit? The moral effrontery of bin Laden amazed Americans and they found it galling.

To be sure, bin Laden is scarcely the first person to make this kind of verbal attack, but he was the first person who has been able to translate that verbal attack into a physical attack on U.S. soil, one that caught America by surprise and, momentarily at least, helpless. Until that happened, Americans could afford to ignore the verbal attacks so rampant in the world as the babblings of fools. But fools had now become villains. Furthermore, the villains had been initially successful, and this was the second great shock. We were supposed to be in a position to be able to ignore such criticisms because we were essentially invulnerable, and we have now discovered that we are not.

It has been frequently said that the world will never be the same again after September 11. I think this is silly hyperbole. But it is true that the American psyche may never be the same again. For once the unthinkable happens, it becomes thinkable. And a direct assault on mainland America by a scattered band of individuals had always been unthinkable. Now we have had to establish an Office of Homeland Security. Now we have the Pentagon discussing whether they should establish what they call an area command, a military structure hitherto limited to the areas outside the U.S. covering all the rest of the world, that would cover the United States itself.

Above all we now have "terrorists" in our vocabulary. In the 1950s, the term "Communists" received expansive employ. It covered not only persons who were members of Communist parties, not only those who thought of themselves or were thought of by others as "fellow travelers," but even those who lacked sufficient "enthusiasm" for the development of a hydrogen bomb. This was after all the specific charge that led the U.S. Atomic Energy Commission in 1953 to suspend the security clearance of J. Robert Oppenheimer, the very person who was known as, and had hitherto been honored as, the "father of the atomic bomb."

The term "terrorism" has now obtained the same expansive meaning. In November, 2001, I watched a television program, "Law and Order." The plot for this particular episode revolved around the burning down of a building in the process of construction. The background to this was that the contractor had received the land from the city, land which had previously been a neighborhood garden, tended to by the community. There was opposition to this construction in the community. A group of young persons identified as "environmental activists" decided to burn down the building in protest. The complication was that, by accident, someone was in the

building unbeknownst to them, and died in the fire. In the end, the arsonists are caught and convicted. The interesting point of this banal story is that, throughout the program, the arsonists are repeatedly referred to as "terrorists." By any definition of terrorist, it is a stretch to use the term in this case. But no matter! It was so used, and it will continue to be so used.

We are the land of liberty, but today we hear voices - in the government, in the press, in the population at large - that we have accorded too much liberty, especially to non-citizens, and that "terrorists" have taken advantage of our liberty. Therefore it is said the privileges of liberty must give way to procedures that meet our requirements for security. For example, we apparently worry that if we catch "terrorists" and put them on trial, they may then have a public forum, they may not be convicted, or if convicted they may not receive the death penalty. So, in order to ensure that none of these things happen, we are creating military courts to be convened by the President, with rules to be established by him alone, with no right of appeal to anyone, courts that will operate in total secrecy, and are able to proceed rapidly to a conclusion - presumably to a death penalty, probably also carried out in secret. At the close of such trials, all we may be allowed to know is the name of the person so condemned. Or perhaps not even that. And in our land of liberty, this is being widely applauded, and at most halfheartedly opposed by a brave minority.

We consider, we have stated publicly, that the attack on America is an attack on our values and on civilization itself. We find such an attack unconscionable. We are determined to win the worldwide war against terrorism - against terrorists *and all those who give them shelter and support*. We are determined to show that, despite this attack, we are and remain the greatest country in the world. In order to prove this, we are not being adjured by our President to make individual sacrifices, not even the small sacrifice of paying more taxes, but rather to carry on our lives as normal. We are however expected to applaud without reservation whatever our government and our armed forces will do, even if this is not normal.

The extent of this requirement of "no reservations" may be seen in the widespread denunciation of those who try to "explain" why the events of September 11 occurred. Explanation is considered justification and virtual endorsement of terror. The American Council of Trustees and Alumni (ACTA), an organization whose founders are Lynne Cheney and Sen. Joseph Lieberman, issued a pamphlet in November 2001, entitled "Defending Civilization: How Our Universities Are Failing America and What Can Be Done About It."<sup>2</sup> It is a short pamphlet, which makes its points with remarkable pithiness. It says that "college and university faculty are the weak link in America's response to the attack." It continues with this analysis:

Rarely did professors publicly mention heroism, rarely did they discuss the differences between good and evil, the nature of Western political order or the virtue of a free society. Their public

messages were short on patriotism and long on self-flagellation. Indeed, the message of much of academe was: **BLAME AMERICA FIRST!**

The pamphlet devotes most of its space to an appendix of 117 quotations which the authors feel illustrate their point. These quotations include statements not merely of such persons as Noam Chomsky and Jesse Jackson but of less usual targets of such denunciations - the Dean of the Woodrow Wilson School at Princeton, a former Deputy Secretary of State. In short, the authors of the pamphlet were aiming wide.

It is clear at this point that, even if the events of September 11 will not alter the basic geopolitical realities of the contemporary world, they may have a lasting impact on American political structures. How much of an impact remains to be seen. It does seem however that the puzzlement of Americans of which I spoke - why did this happen? and how could it happen? - is a puzzle to which we are not being encouraged to respond, at least not yet.

The Twin Towers are also a metaphor for the attack on America. They were built with great engineering skill. They were supposed to be impervious to every conceivable kind of accidental or deliberate destruction. Yet, apparently, no one had ever considered that two planes filled with jet fuel might deliberately crash into the towers, and hit the buildings at precisely the point, 20% down from the top, that would maximize destruction. Nor had anyone anticipated that the buildings could collapse slowly, overwhelmingly, and in everyone's view, bringing down other buildings in their wake. No one ever expected that the fires such a collapse ignited would continue to burn for months afterwards. The U.S. may be able to avenge the attack, but it cannot undo it. Technology turns out to be less than perfect as a protective shield.

### **III. America and World Power**

Anti-Catholicism, as it evolved [in Great Britain in the 18th century], usually served a dialectical function, drawing attention to the supposed despotism, superstition, military oppressiveness and material poverty of Catholic regimes so as to throw into greater relief supposed Anglo-British freedoms, naval supremacy, and agrarian and commercial prosperity, and consequently superior mode of empire.

-- *Linda Colley*<sup>3</sup>

I start with this quote from Linda Colley to remind us that the United States is not the first hegemonic power in the history of the modern world-system, but rather the third, and that hegemony has its cultural rules as well as its vulnerabilities. One of the cultural rules is that the denigration of others is indispensable to sustaining the internal self-assurance that makes possible the effective exercise of world power.

There is nothing so blinding as success. And the United States has had its fair share of success in the past 200 years. Success has the vicious consequence that it seems to breed almost inevitably the conviction that it will necessarily continue. Success is a poor guide to wise policy. Failure at least often leads to reflection; success seldom does.

Fifty years ago, U.S. hegemony in the world-system was based on a combination of productive efficiency (outstripping by far any rivals), a world political agenda that was warmly endorsed by its allies in Europe and Asia, and military superiority. Today, the productive efficiency of U.S. enterprises faces very extensive competition, competition first of all coming from the enterprises of its closest allies. As a result, the world political agenda of the United States is no longer so warmly endorsed and is often clearly contested even by its allies, especially given the disappearance of the Soviet Union. What remains for the moment is military superiority.

It is worth thinking about the objectives of U.S. foreign policy, as pursued for the last 50 years by successive U.S. governments. Obviously, the U.S. has been concerned with threats posed by governments it considered hostile or at least inimical to U.S. interests. There is nothing wrong or exceptional about this. This is true of the foreign policy of any state in the modern world-system, especially any powerful state. The question is how the U.S. thought it could deal with such threats.

In the 1950s and 1960s, the U.S. seemed to be so strong that it could arrange, without too much difficulty and with a minimal use of force, that governments it did not like either could be neutralized (we called that containment) or, in the case of weaker governments, could be overthrown by internal forces supported covertly by the U.S. government, assisted occasionally by a little old-fashioned gunship diplomacy.

Neutralization was the tactic employed vis-a-vis the Communist world. The U.S. did not seek to overthrow the Soviet Union or any of its satellite regimes in east and central Europe. Basically, it did not seek this because it was not in a military position to carry this out against the expected resistance by the government of the U.S.S.R. Instead, the U.S. government entered into a tacit accord with the U.S.S.R. that it would not even try to do this, in return for a pledge by the Soviet Union that it would not try to expand its zone. We refer to this in code as the Yalta agreement. If one doubts the reality of this agreement, just review U.S. foreign policy vis-a-vis the German Democratic Republic in 1953, Hungary in 1956, Czechoslovakia in 1968, and Poland in 1981.

The accord was not however intended to apply to East Asia, where Soviet troops were absent, thanks primarily to the insistence of the Communist regimes in China and North Korea. So the U.S. did in fact try to overthrow these regimes as well as that in Vietnam. It did not however succeed. And these failed attempts left a serious scar on American public opinion.

The United States, however, was able to enforce its will in the rest of the world, and did so without compunction. Think of Iran in 1953, Guatemala in 1954, Lebanon in 1956, the Dominican Republic in 1965, and Chile in 1973. The coup in Chile by Gen. Pinochet against the freely-elected government of Salvador Allende, with the active support of the U.S. government, occurred on Sept. 11. I do not know whether or not Osama bin Laden or his followers were aware of this coincidence of dates, but it is nonetheless a symbolic coincidence that many, especially in Latin America, will notice. It also points to a further metaphor of the Twin Towers. The Twin Towers were a marvelous technological achievement. But technological achievements can and will be copied. The Malaysians have already copied the Twin Towers architecturally, and a bigger skyscraper is being built right now in Shanghai. Symbols too can be copied. Now we have two September 11 anniversaries, on which victims mourn.

In the 1970s, U.S. foreign policy methods changed, had to change. Chile was the last major instance in which the U.S. was able so cavalierly to arrange other governments to its preferences. (I do not count the cases of either Grenada or Panama, which were very small countries with no serious mode of military defense.) What had caused this change was the end of U.S. economic dominance of the world-economy, combined with the military defeat of the United States in Vietnam. Geopolitical reality had changed. The U.S. government could no longer concentrate on maintaining, even less on expanding, its power; instead its prime goal became preventing a too rapid erosion of its power - both in the world-economy and in the military arena.

In the world-economy, the U.S. faced not only the hot breath of its competitors in western Europe and Japan but the seeming success of "developmentalist" policies in large parts of the rest of the world, policies that had been designed expressly to constrain the ability of countries in the core zone to accumulate capital at what was seen to be the expense of countries in the periphery. We should remember that the 1970s was declared by the United Nations the "decade of development." In the 1970s, there was much talk of creating a "new international economic order," and in UNESCO of creating a "new international information order." The 1970s was the time of the two famous OPEC oil price rises, which sent waves of panic into the American public.

The U.S. position on all these thrusts was either ambiguous discomfort or outright opposition. Globally, a counterthrust was launched. It involved the aggressive assertion of neo-liberalism and the so-called Washington Consensus, the transformation of GATT into the World Trade Organization, the Davos meetings, and the spreading of the concept of globalization with its corollary, TINA (there is no alternative). Essentially, all these efforts combined amounted to a dismantlement of the "developmentalist" policies throughout the world, and of course particularly in the peripheral zones of the world-economy. In the short run, that is in the 1980s and 1990s, this counteroffensive led by the U.S. government seemed to succeed.

These policies on the front of the world-economy were matched by a persistent world military policy which might be summarized as the "anti-proliferation" policy. When the United States successfully made the first atomic bombs in 1945, it was determined to maintain a monopoly on such very powerful weapons. It was willing to share this monopoly with its faithful junior partner, Great Britain, but that was it. Of course, as we know, the other "great powers" simply ignored this claim. First the Soviet Union, then France, then China achieved nuclear capacity. So then did India and later Pakistan. So did South Africa, whose apartheid government however admitted this only as it was leaving power and was careful to dismantle this capacity before it turned over power to the successor, more democratic, government of the Black African majority. And so did Israel, although it has always denied this publicly.

Then there are the almost nuclear powers, if indeed they are still in the almost category - North Korea, Iran, Iraq (whose facilities Israel bombed in the 1980s in order to keep it in the "almost" category), Libya, and maybe Argentina. And there are in addition the former Soviet countries which inherited this capacity - Ukraine, Belorussia, and Kazakhstan. To this must be added the other lethal technologies - biological and chemical warfare. These are so much easier to create, store, and employ, that we are not sure how many countries have some capacity, even a considerable capacity in these fields.

The United States has had a simple straightforward policy. By hook or by crook, by force or by bribery, it wishes to deny everybody access to these weapons. It has obviously not been successful, but its efforts over the past years have at least slowed down the process of proliferation. There is a further catch in U.S. policy. Insofar as it tries to employ international agreements to limit proliferation, it simultaneously tries not itself to be bound by such constraints, or to be minimally bound. The U.S. government has made it clear that it will renounce any such restraints whenever it deems it necessary to do so, while loudly condemning any other government that seeks to do the same.

As a policy, non-proliferation seems doomed to failure, not only in the long run but even in the middle run. The best that the U.S. will be able to do in the next 25 years is to slow the process down somewhat. But there is also a moral/political question here. The United States trusts itself, but trusts no one else. The U.S. government wishes to inspect North Korean locations to see if it is violating these norms. It has not offered the U.N. or anyone else the right to inspect U.S. locations. The U.S. trusts itself to use such weapons wisely, and in the defense of liberty (a concept seemingly identical with U.S. national interests). It assumes that anyone else might intend to use such weapons against liberty (a concept seemingly identical here too with U.S. national interests). Personally, I do not trust any government to use such weapons wisely. I would be happy to see them all banned, but do not believe this is truly enforceable in the contemporary interstate system. So personally I abstain from moralizing on this issue. Moralizing opens one to the charge of hypocrisy. And while a cynical neorealist (a category that

probably includes me) would say that all governments are hypocritical, moralizing jars badly if one wishes to attract support in other countries on the basis of one's comparative virtue.

#### IV. America: Ideals versus Privilege

To suggest that the universal civilization is in place already is to be willfully blind to the present reality and, even worse, to trivialize the goal and hinder the materialization of a genuine universality in the future.

-- *Chinua Achebe*<sup>4</sup>

[T]he opposition between globalization and local traditions is false: globalization directly resuscitates local traditions, it literally thrives on them, which is why the opposite of globalization is not local traditions, but universality.

-- *Slavoj Žižek*<sup>5</sup>

The story of U.S. and world power can be resumed quite simply at this moment. I do not believe that America and Americans are the cause of all the world's miseries and injustices. I do believe they are their prime beneficiaries. And this is the fundamental problem of the U.S. as a nation located in a world of nations.

Americans, especially American politicians and publicists, like to speak about our ideals. An advertisement for the "bestselling" book of Chris Matthews, *Now, Let Me Tell You What I Really Think*, offers this excerpt: "When you think about it, we Americans are different. That word 'freedom' isn't just in our documents; it's in our cowboy souls."<sup>6</sup> "Cowboy souls" - I could not have said it better. Our ideals are perhaps special. But the same people who remind us of that do not like to talk about our privileges, which are also perhaps special. Indeed, they denounce those who do talk of them. But the ideals and the privileges go together. They may seem to be in conflict, but they presuppose each other.

I am not someone who denigrates American ideals. I find them quite wonderful, even refreshing. I cherish them, I invoke them, I further them. Take for example the First Amendment to the U.S. Constitution - something correctly remembered at all the appropriate ceremonies as incarnating American ideals. Let us, however, recall two things about the First Amendment. It wasn't in the original Constitution, which means it wasn't considered a founding principle. And public opinion polls have often shown that a majority of the American public would change, diminish, or even eliminate these guarantees, in whole or in part, even in so-called ordinary times. When we are in a "war" such as the "war on terrorism," then neither the U.S. government nor the U.S. public can be counted on to defend these ideals, and not even the Supreme Court can be relied upon to hold

fast to them in an "emergency." Such defense is left largely to an often timid organization with at best minority support in public opinion, the American Civil Liberties Union, membership in which is often cited as a reason not to vote for someone in a general election. So, I am in favor of freedom of speech and freedom of religion and all the other freedoms, but sometimes I must wonder if America is.

The reason of course is not that there is absent a Voltairean streak in the American public, but that sometimes we fear that our privileges are in danger of erosion or disappearance. And, in such cases, most people place privilege ahead of ideals. Once again, Americans are not unusual in this regard. They simply are more powerful and have more privileges. Americans are freer to have the ideals because they are freer to ignore them. They have the power to override their cowboy souls.

The question before Americans is really the following. If American hegemony is in slow decline, and I believe it unquestionably is, will we lose the ideals because we will have less power to override them? Will our cowboy souls erect barbed wire around our national ranch in order to guard our privileges in danger of decline, as though they could not escape through the barbed wire? Let me suggest here another metaphor that comes from the Twin Towers. Towers that are destroyed can be rebuilt. But will we rebuild them in the same way - with the same assurance that we are reaching for the stars and doing it right, with the same certainty that they will be seen as a beacon to the world? Or will we rebuild in other ways, after careful reflection about what we really need and what is really possible for us, and really desirable for us?

And who is the us? If one follows the statements of Attorney-General Ashcroft, seconded by many others in the U.S. government, in the press, and among the public in general, the "us" is no longer everyone in the U.S., not even everyone legally resident in the U.S., but only U.S. citizens. And we may wonder if the "us" may not be further narrowed in the near future. As Zizek points out, globalization is not the opposite of localism, it thrives on localism, especially the localism of the powerful. The "us" is by no stretch of the imagination homo sapiens sapiens. Is homo then so sapiens?

## **V. America: From Certainty to Uncertainty**

"Darwin's revolution should be epitomized as the substitution of variation for essence as the central category of natural reality....What can be more discombobulating than a full inversion, or 'grand flip,' in our concept of reality: in Plato's world, variation is accidental, while essences record a higher reality; in Darwin's reversal, we value variation as a defining (and concrete earthly) reality, while averages (our closest operational approach to 'essences') become mental abstractions."

-- *Stephen J. Gould*<sup>7</sup>

Nature is indeed related to the creation of unpredictable novelty, where the possible is richer than the real.

-- *Ilya Prigogine*<sup>8</sup>

President Bush has been offering the American people certainty about their future. This is the one thing totally beyond his power to offer. The future of the United States, the future of the world, in the short run, but even more in the medium run, is absolutely uncertain. Certainty may seem desirable if one reflects on one's privileges. It seems less desirable if one thinks that the privileges are doomed to decline, even disappear. And if it were certain that the Osama bin Ladens of this world, in all camps, were to prevail, who would cherish that certainty?

I return to the question I raised before as one of the puzzles that Americans are feeling right now: what must be done, what can be done, that an event like that of September 11 will not, could not happen again? We are being offered the answer that the exercise of overwhelming force by the U.S. government, military force primarily, will guarantee this. Our leaders are prudent enough to remind us that this will take some time, but they do not hesitate to make medium-run assurances. For the moment, it seems that the American people are willing to test this hypothesis. If the U.S. government is receiving criticism at this moment, it is coming mostly from those who believe its expression of military power is far too timid. There are important groups who are pressing the U.S. government to go much further - to operate militarily against Iraq, and some would add Iran, Syria, Sudan, Palestine, North Korea. Why not Cuba next? There are some who are even saying that reluctant generals should be retired to make way for younger, more vigorous warriors. There are those who believe that it is their role to precipitate Armageddon.

There are two ways one can argue against this. One is that the United States could not win such a worldwide military conflagration. A second is that the United States would not wish to bear the moral consequences, first of all for itself, of trying to do so. Fortunately, one does not have to choose between realism and idealism. It is not belittling of our moral values that they are seconded by elementary common sense.

After the Civil War, the United States spent some 80 years pursuing its manifest destiny. It was not sure, all that time, whether it wished to be an isolationist or an imperial power. And when, in 1945, it had finally achieved hegemony in the world-system, when it had (in Shakespeare's choice) not only achieved greatness but had greatness thrust upon it, the American people were not fully prepared for the role they now had to play. We spent thirty years learning how to "assume our responsibilities" in the world. And just when we had learned this reasonably well, our hegemony passed its peak.

We have spent the last thirty years insisting very loudly that we are still hegemonic and that everyone needs to continue to acknowledge it. If one is truly hegemonic, one does not need to make such a request. We have wasted the past thirty years. What the United States needs now to do is to learn how to live with the new reality - that it no longer has the power to decide unilaterally what is good for everyone. It may not even be in a position to decide unilaterally what is good for itself. It has to come to terms with the world. It is not Osama bin Laden with whom we must conduct a dialogue. We must start with our near friends and allies - with Canada

and Mexico, with Europe, with Japan. And once we have trained ourselves to hear them and to believe that they too have ideals and interests, that they too have ideas and hopes and aspirations, then and only then perhaps shall we be ready to dialogue with the rest of the world, that is, with the majority of the world.

This dialogue, once we begin to enter into it, will not be easy, and may not even be pleasant. For they shall ask us to renounce some privileges. They will ask us to fulfill our ideals. They will ask us to learn. Fifty years ago, the great African poet/politician, Léopold-Sédar Senghor, called on the world to come to the "rendez-vous du donner et du recevoir." Americans know what they have to give in such a rendez-vous. But are they aware of something they wish to receive?

We are being called upon these days to return to spiritual values, as though we had ever observed these values. But what are these values? Let me remind you. In the Christian tradition (Matthew 19:24), it is said: "It is easier for a camel to pass through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God." And in the Jewish tradition, Hillel tells us: "Do unto others as you would have them do unto you." And in the Muslim tradition, the Koran (52.36) tells us: "Or did they create the heavens and the earth? Nay! They have no certainty." Are these our values?

There is of course no single American tradition or single American set of values. There are, and always have been, many Americas. We each of us remember and appeal to the Americas we prefer. The America of slavery and racism is a deep American tradition, and still very much with us. The America of frontier individualism and gunslinging desperados is an American tradition, and still very much with us. The America of robber barons and their philanthropic children is an American tradition, and still very much with us. And the America of the Wobblies and the Haymarket riots, an event celebrated throughout the world except in America, is an American tradition, and still very much with us.

Sojourner Truth, telling the National Women's Congress in 1851, "Ain't I a woman?" is an American tradition. But so were those late nineteenth-century suffragists who argued for votes on the grounds that it would balance the votes of Blacks and immigrants. The America that welcomes immigrants and the America that rejects them are both American traditions. The America that unites in patriotic resolve and the America that resists militarist engagements are both American traditions. The America of equality and of inequality are both American traditions. There is no essence there. There is no there there. As Gould reminds us, it is variation, not essence, that is the core of reality. And the question is whether the variation amongst us will diminish, increase, or remain the same. It seems to me exceptionally high at the moment.

Osama bin Laden will soon be forgotten, but the kind of political violence we call terrorism will remain very much with us in the 30-50 years to come. Terrorism is to be sure a very ineffective way to change the world. It is counterproductive and leads to counterforce, which can often wipe out the immediate set of actors. But it will nonetheless continue to occur. An America that continues to relate to the world by a unilateral assertion that it represents civilization, whether it does so in the form of isolationist withdrawal or in that of active interventionism, cannot live in peace with the world, and therefore will not live in peace with itself. What we do to the world, we do to ourselves. Can the land of liberty and privilege, even amidst its decline, learn to be a land that treats everyone everywhere as equals? And can we deal as equal to equal in the world-system if we do not deal as equal to equal within our own frontiers?

What shall we choose to do now? I can have my preferences but I cannot, you cannot, predict

what we shall do. Indeed, it is our good fortune that we cannot be certain of any of these projected futures. That reserves for us moral choice. That reserves for us the possible that is richer than the real. That reserves for us unpredictable novelty. We have entered a terrible era, an era of conflicts and evils we find it difficult to imagine but, sadly, one to which we can rapidly become accustomed. It is easy to allow our sensitivities to be hardened in the struggle to survive. It is far harder to save our cowboy souls. But at the end of the process lies the possibility, which is far from the certainty, of a more substantively rational world, of a more egalitarian world, of a more democratic world - of a universality that results from giving and receiving, a universality that is the opposite of globalization.

The last metaphor that is attached to the Twin Towers is that these structures were, are, and will be a choice. We chose to build them. We are deciding whether or not to rebuild them. The factors that enter into these choices were and are and will be very, very many. We are rebuilding America. The world is rebuilding the world. The factors that enter into these choices are and will be very, very many. Can we maintain our moral bearing amidst the uncertainty that the world we have made heretofore is only one of thousands of alternative worlds we might have created, and the world that we shall be making in the 30-50 years to come may or may not be better, may or may not reduce the contradiction between our ideals and our privileges? In-sha 'a-llah.

## Footnotes

<sup>1</sup> Published in *Theory and Society*, XXI, 1, Feb., 1992, 1-28.

<sup>2</sup> The authors are Jerry L. Martin and Anne Neal.

<sup>3</sup> "Multiple Kingdoms," *London Review of Books*, 19 July 2001, p. 23.

<sup>4</sup> Chinua Achebe, *Home and Exile*, New York: Anchor Books, 2000, p. 91.

<sup>5</sup> Slavoj Zizek, *On Belief*, New York: Routledge, 2001, p. 152.

<sup>6</sup> *New York Times*, Nov. 28, 2001, p. E8.

<sup>7</sup> *Full House: The Spread of Excellence from Plato to Darwin*, New York: Three Rivers Press, 1996, 41.

<sup>8</sup> Ilya Prigogine, *The End of Certainty: Time, Chaos, and the New Laws of Nature*, New York: Free Press, 1997, p. 72.