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America Can Remain an Open Society in the Face of Terror

BY DAVID KELLER

Due to the motivations of others beyond our control, the morning of Sept. 11 swept us past a historical threshold. The future will never resemble the past. Yet what this future looks like remains largely within our grasp.

The political structure of the United States is that of a liberal republic with origins in the British thinkers John Locke, Adam Smith and John Stuart Mill, and put into practice by the founders of our country, most notably Alexander Hamilton, James Madison and Thomas Jefferson. According to the philosophy of liberalism, each individual has rights and liberties (hence "liberal") which ought not be breached by the government.

In fact, the primary role of government is to protect the rights and liberties of individuals. As outlined in the Bill of Rights, individual rights secure freedom of association, freedom of speech and expression, freedom of lifestyle, freedom of religion.

For this reason, discrimination (that is, the violation of individual rights) on the basis of race, sex, ethnicity, religion or socio-economic status is unjust. Such are the features of an "open" society.

The causes behind the attack involve a complex constellation of factors including a backlash of Euro-American imperialism, hatred of Western capitalism and consumerism, a perceived defilement of sacred Saudi soil by the presence of the U.S. military, and allegiance to Israel.

In addition to these explicit factors, the implicit rejection of the very principle of a liberal republic plays a role -- a tragic irony given the fact that the terrorists used the features of our open society against us. Why the repudiation of liberalism? Interestingly, securing freedom of religion inhibits the government from promoting a particular religion, resulting in an essentially secular political system. In adamant opposition to secularism, Islamic jihad advocates a theocracy that bases civil law in an interpretation of religious law. On the theocratic model, it is just to discriminate against individuals on the basis of race, sex, ethnicity and religion. Such are the features of a "closed" society.

The greatest challenge we face is the manner of our reaction. If we discriminate against persons of Arabic ethnicity and/or Islamic faith outwardly through violence or inwardly through coldness, then we abandon the very political underpinnings of our society. If, in

the rage of retribution, we succumb to the xenophobia and intolerance of extremists, we become like them, and the terrorists win a second, and more profound, ideological victory.

Certainly some kind of measured response is justified. As His Holiness the Dalai Lama remarked last May during his visit to Utah Valley State College, in some situations exercising force is ethically appropriate, even for the passivist. Using force against an aggressor may be needed to inhibit the aggressor from committing continued violence, thereby safeguarding the aggressor from further self-degradation.

But there is also the danger of overreacting. Even more frightening than what has happened is what could happen. Nothing would promote the terrorist network's agenda more effectively than for us to flex our sizable military might and start wreaking havoc throughout the Muslim world.

A rash military response would provide the motivation for more suicide attacks, a subsequent escalation of violence, and the possible destabilization of the U.S. and global economy.

The rhetoric of hollow jingoism, declarations of war, and the simplistic portrayal of the current crisis in terms of a colossal "struggle between good and evil" is tantamount to painting a picture of America's relation to the rest of the world in only shades of black and white.

Fortunately there is another, more ethically sophisticated, alternative: to embrace peaceful Arab Americans and Muslims as our full fellow citizens with the respect that every individual in a liberal republic rightfully deserves, and to encourage members of those communities to seek prominent leadership roles in civil government. Such a reaction would demonstrate that it is possible for Islam to flourish in the secular political structure of a liberal society. The United States, we could prove, is not "The Great Satan," Islam's mortal enemy. This, I firmly believe, would discredit the operating assumption of Islamic jihad and substantially dispirit their inhumane crusade.

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