

Some Questions in the Wake of September 11

Paul G. Harris
Associate Professor
Department of Politics and Sociology
Lingnan University

摘要

911 事件帶出了很多問題。我們在哪裡取得關於這個世界的訊息？這些訊息是否可靠？911 是否象徵了這個時代的國際關係？911 對美國的外交政策又顯示了什麼？美國發起的反恐怖戰爭是否西方世界與伊斯蘭世界交戰的序幕？「反恐怖戰爭」是否需要？我們應如何理解 911 事件和其後的事態發展？

The events of September 11, 2001 raise many questions, all of them interesting for students of international affairs, but also in many ways very disturbing and worrying for every conscientious person. Here I would like to ask a few of the many questions potentially raised by the events of "9/11," and at least suggest some possible answers (without claiming to have *the* answers). Merely raising these questions may at least provoke serious contemplation, if not agreement. It will of course be important for us to undertake open dialogue to find answers to these and other important questions arising from 9/11, and to act accordingly.

What does this event tell us about university students in Hong Kong? Their relatively muted reaction suggests that they do not care as much as perhaps they should about events abroad—even when those events are so atrocious. It also suggests that they are generally not interested in international news (with those of us who lecture in this area able to attest to this phenomenon), despite the very close connections between international events and conditions in Hong Kong. Certainly it shows that their knowledge of international affairs is very limited. Their resulting opinions are too seldom based on careful contemplation of events, instead often parroting spurious reports in the popular press. (Much the same might be said of students elsewhere, of course.) This shows how crucial it is for those of us in the academy to spark the curiosity of our students and to help them become independent, analytical and critical thinkers—not merely fashionable consumers of popular propaganda. Lingnan University, with its liberal arts mission, is especially well suited to this daunting task.

This in turn begs the question of where Hong Kong students get their information. Comments and questions from my students' following 9/11 suggest that they are being misinformed and fed anti-American propaganda by the Hong Kong media. For example, many students think that the American government itself—or, just as bizarrely, Israel's secret services—perpetrated the terror attacks on New York and Washington (and presumably the

subsequent anthrax attacks). They believe that the U.S. government planned all of this to gain control of unspecified valuable resources in Afghanistan. And, I am told, the Americans have *purposely targeted* civilians there. What is most worrying is that many students are looking for justifications for these perspectives, rather than questioning them and looking for more logical and likely answers. This suggests that propaganda remains a major component of our students' thinking, rather than well-informed critical analysis.

Broader questions are raised by 9/11. For example, are the events of 9/11 characteristic of contemporary "international" relations? The so-called "war on terrorism" is a "war" against all manifestations of an idea. It is a war against fanatics and their followers, sympathetic governments, and the multifarious means they have and could use to perpetrate terror. The terror attacks were operationalized by "religious" zealots hijacking airliners in an effort to promote the will of their self-indulgent, self-interested leaders living in caves, but who use modern microelectronics to communicate with their followers. The instruments used by those opposed to the terrorists and their friends include warplanes, ships, and commandos, but also sophisticated intelligence technologies, banking systems, ethical exhortations and humanitarian assistance. As such, 9/11 and subsequent events show that borders are much less meaningful and that governments have lost much of their sovereignty—even as they remain important actors. It shows that the important world actors are now almost countless and utterly disparate. It indicates that globalization is contrasted in some people's minds with a preferred Dark Ages or, perhaps even worse, an imaginary Utopia that is (yes, let's admit it and confront it) believed by too many misguided Muslims to come from killing *any* Jew or *any* American. Thus 9/11 reminds us that contemporary international affairs are a mixture of complex physical and empathic forces affecting countless state and non-state actors. The relatively simple days of a bipolar cold war between democratic capitalism and communism have been replaced by a dizzying and uncertain "war" between civilization and those who seek to destroy it through the bloody demoralization of innocents.

What does this 9/11 tell us about global perceptions of the United States? Much hatred of the United States and the West is pathological; no amount of public relations will destroy it. To be sure, we should not overlook the U.S.'s own neglect of much of the world and its unwillingness to share more of its wealth with the world's poor. We should not stop questioning its too-frequent unilateralism, especially lately. But we have to look at the facts of 9/11. In my mind, those facts require free thinkers to at least consider siding with the United States and its allies, and to actively oppose—rather than apologize for—the perpetrators of terror and their sympathizers. We must encourage the United States to use just means to achieve its aims. We should join with it,

when it acts justly, in opposing those who reject the civilized world.

Is this war going to be one between the West and the Islamic World? Hardly. The United States—many Muslims' Great Satan—has come to the aid of Muslims on many occasions in recent years. It spent its treasure and spilled the blood of its soldiers to feed people in Somalia; it defied a United Nations arms embargo to aid the Bosnians; it acted alongside NATO allies to protect Albanians in Kosovo. So many people want to ignore these events, or rationalize them using the most contorted logic to support their anti-Americanism. This gets us nowhere. It will not persuade the United States to do more on behalf of Muslims. Indeed, it might have the opposite effect. As things stand, the Americans are damned if they do (help Muslims) and damned if they don't. No wonder George W. Bush (wrongly) decided to ignore the Palestinians. Just like individuals, nations sometimes do the right thing, and sometimes they do not. We can hope for the United States to be special, to do the right thing all of the time. But we should not be surprised when it does not.

Should and can there be a just war on terrorism? Despite the horrible nature of the terror attacks, everyone should agree that the campaign against terrorism must be a just one. The United Nations and almost every civilized nation, including America's traditional enemies and antagonists, support a campaign against terrorism. But doing war in a just manner is not easy, smart bombs notwithstanding. What is heartening in recent events is that everyone fighting the terrorists, including those Americans now dropping the bombs, embraces the principles of just war. Civilians, while not immune to the effects of the bombing, are not being targeting – something that distinguishes the American combatants and their allies from their enemies in this conflict. The principles of just war will be hard to apply, but that the superpower is trying to do so is a sign of profound historical progress in international affairs.

What rules can we follow to understand and react to such events? Alas, there are no hard and fast rules. We must look at the details. Even those of us opposed to war may find ourselves supporting U.S. actions, at least as long as we think the Americans are doing their best to make those actions compliant with the very principles of justice consciously and purposefully rejected by the terrorists. Indeed, were they to have a more accurate picture of 9/11 and its implications for Hong Kong and its values, I suspect our students would earnestly join most of the Western world in supporting the campaign against terrorism—at least within the limits of civility and international justice.