

Wake up the World

America among the nations in the aftermath of September 11

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Drago Stambuk

WCFIA Fellow, Harvard University

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*If we are to survive
in a shrinking world
we must expand our hearts*

Croatia

I took an unusual route to diplomacy. My life, perhaps more than most, has been coloured by the events of larger history. My education and training were never geared towards diplomacy, though I always took a keen, if detached interest. The fact, however, remains that by profession I am a doctor, by temperament a poet, and only by circumstance a diplomat. Perhaps my view as an outsider, as a newcomer to the arena of international relations, makes my vantage point quite different from the accepted orthodoxy, particularly in the United States. Like every human being, my views are formed and reformed by my personal experiences. I believe opinions are inextricable from the events that caused them; and my formation is perhaps different from that of a more traditional political analyst. Consequently, this is not a research paper. These are midnight jottings. Fear, disappointment and hope set down as concisely as I can manage. As theses, perhaps my thoughts are half-formed, subjective, without citation. But I am not interested in any petty dogma of objectivity which threatens to eliminate human sentiment from our rational discourse: objectivity is an unattainable ideal. Instead, let me tell you, for once, what I believe, feel and think.

I was in London during the fighting in what was then Yugoslavia. Like anyone whose family and friends are put at risk by war, it was an unbearably tense time for me and for my entire people. Almost as disturbing as the fighting itself was the reaction of the international community. The predominant sentiment was indifference, and when decisions were made, they only aggravated the plight of Croatia. The imposed arms embargo severely impaired the ability of Croatians to defend themselves. It seemed that the international community would be glad to rid itself of a trouble spot, but the justice of the resolution itself did not seem to be on many minds. If the result was to be an imposed

Greater Serbia, it seemed a thousand leading thinkers, analysts, diplomats and professors heaved a collective sigh of “so be it...”.

I am aware that the events leading up to any war are not simple, but the immediate causes of the war in Yugoslavia were relatively straightforward. The Yugoslav army, at the time the fourth largest in Europe and under command of the Belgrade government, attacked a largely unarmed people, the Croats. The reason was that Croatia, following on the heels of a democratic election, sought the right to self-determination.

The city of Vukovar, in Croatia, was besieged by the Serbs for 100 days and on 18 November 1991 finally fell into their hands. I recall the BBC images of Vukovar citizens leaving their totally destroyed hometown with only a few plastic bags in their hands, staggering among the dried cornstalks, crossing the mine-strewn Slavonian mud, wrapped in layers of crumpled cloth, an eerie and lost column against the backdrop of a ghostly city. The Serbs had, in terms of manpower and weaponry, a many times superior army. After Vukovar fell, many of its citizens were murdered by the incoming Serbian troops, including over 300 hospital patients, buried in the mass-grave at Ovcara.

Theory loses sight of the reality of war, of the fact that these were people whose humanity was neither as abstract nor as calculated as an equation of national interest would have them be. It is the moral imperative to strive to halt wars, but our incapability to fully imagine others as entirely and validly human allows us to deal with human beings as equations, and to adjust our calculations accordingly.

The Croatian people, through sacrifices like those of Vukovar, ultimately managed to achieve self-determination against overwhelming odds; the international community stood aside, remaining spectators and letting the events take their course. Fortunately, in the case of the Croatian state, justice prevailed. But the final result of the break-up of Yugoslavia did allow for Serbs to reap some profit from their policies of ethnic cleansing. It should not be forgotten, after all, that the ultimate resolution of the Bosnian conflict, the Dayton accord, ultimately legitimated the policies of ethnic cleansing by allowing for the existence of the separate Serbian entity, rather than reflecting the ethnic composition that had existed in Bosnia before the war. This conclusion to the war surely had its bases in pragmatism rather than justice.

Through my experience of the recent history of the former Yugoslavia, my naivete with regards to international relations dissipated all but completely. Its companion, my idealism, however, has held fast. Decisions based purely on considerations of national interest will always be doomed to be unjust, and often inhumane, for the peoples of other nations that they affect. It is as such that I accepted and have maintained my activity in international affairs, first as the voice of the Croatian faction in the time of the fight for independence, and subsequently as a member of the Croatian diplomatic service. The kind of callousness that was shown to my people by the international community, and which continues to be apparent in the attitudes towards just causes in many parts of the world, should not be allowed to perpetuate itself infinitely. The East Timorese, the Eritreans, fought lonely battles until it became convenient for international players to allow their self-determination. History, up to the present day, has been a chess game of power, with the world's civilian population - the bulk of humanity - aghast, as both

spectators and pawns. We must force the great game to allow for the infusion of morality, even if only a small bit at first, rather than continuing to hold others hostage to our own self-interest.

The same moral short-sightedness which afflicts us in regard to our dealings with others also manifests itself in the way we treat our earth. Our limited resources, our irresponsible management of pollutants, the excessive destruction of habitat, are not only wasteful but threaten to endanger our own health in the not so distant future. Pursuit of material wealth is not only disrespectful in its treatment of other peoples, but is also fundamentally undesirable in the way that it idealises the most energy-consuming lifestyle as the most desirable. The American lifestyle, if achieved all over the world, would render our world unliveable. I do not wish to be alarmist, or to exaggerate; but our treatment of our earth is, at the moment, unsustainable and in its disenfranchisement of future generations, immoral.

Policies of national interest have, I believe, their roots in the belief that material wealth is the sole and ultimate goal of their own society. Our focus on material wealth provides a front for what is essentially eternal human greed, extending the disparity between the nations of the North and the South, and re-orienting our societies from traditional values to the cult of the self. We have to re-examine what material wealth and progress bring us, besides animosity and comfort upon comfort upon comfort. We are growing wealthier on the backs of others, and burdening the land with untenable exploitation. At the same time, the pace of our greed and our consumption has in no way diminished, nor been accompanied by spiritual growth. We have neglected our own spiritual health to the point where it is considered completely moral to act only for one's

own benefit, with little regard for the necessities of others. Secularism should not necessarily mean institutionalised faithlessness; nor does morality need religion as its base. But there must be something to fill our void, some commitment towards the values we claim to honour.

We cannot allow for our ethical foundations to be obscured by the rapidity of technological progress. As our material gains have continued, we have often forgotten the ethics fundamental to our society. The result is that we are ardently developing technology without any corresponding attempt to evolve our own humanity. It is of paramount importance to develop a new kind of education that would nurture our understanding of our obligations towards one another and, thus, change the way we lead our lives. Education should not focus on fostering opportunities for self-aggrandisement or financial profit.

The point is that we cannot allow for our behaviour, whether on a personal or on a national level, to operate on a purely self-centred basis, as our education system now seems to advocate. Pursuit of happiness for oneself should not be the ultimate goal; it is the pursuit of happiness for all which is of overarching importance. The purpose of education is not to increase a person's marketability for employers, as I was recently told by a Harvard student, but rather to ensure that the final result of the educational system is a citizenry that will embrace an agenda of greater social contribution on the local, national and global levels.

The protests against globalisation, so disparate in their calls for change are focussed mostly on political and environmental issues. They are the calls of a generation ill at ease with a system that allows for atrocities and extinctions to occur in our existing

soulless framework. They have never been a coherent or cogent voice, but the malaise of this generation is increasingly evident. Material comforts and technological progress will never be able to fill the moral void, no matter how often one readjusts economic theories.

Boston

I was still settling in at Harvard University at the time of the terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center. I recall the clumps of shocked people gathered about the Yard, the suddenly interrupted appointments, the brutal awakening of a school and a society emerging from the languor of summer. Every television set repeated the same horrifying images. Later, those images won prizes, but nobody was thinking of that quite yet. The dramatic and striking graphic displays proclaiming “America at War” were not yet completely designed, and even the speculation about the possible perpetrators and American plans of revenge were overshadowed briefly by horror, fear and solidarity. The United States was in shock and mourning, and the vast majority of people all around the world stopped and mourned with them. It was that day that I first took special notice of Harvard’s motto, proudly and prominently displayed on its buildings: *Veritas*. The Truth.

For a motto that is so visible, it seems amazing to me the degree to which we are capable of ignoring its constant, noble exhortation. Perhaps I should ask forgiveness for being unfashionable, for believing in absolute morality and in truths. Obsolete though my views may appear to be, I cannot escape the idea that our practicality has obstructed our ability to search for the truth, just as our busy lives cause us to ignore the motto-bearing signs. In our busy and restless lives, in a society that has become complacent and self-satisfied, it seems merely another naïve and arcane absolute we can discount with the weapons of our invincible relativism, pragmatism, reason without soul. But hope, after all, arose last from Pandora’s Box, and, try as I may, I cannot wean myself from my beliefs. And though it may be lonely and frustrating to attempt to satisfy *Veritas*, it is one I

cannot end. Yes, there are, there must be, universal truths and values. If this is naïve and impractical, then perhaps these are qualities I value.

Shall I describe the alternative, the present academic creed? It is to hold monetarist economics sacred, to discount spirituality of any kind as obsolete, to mock the dinosaurs who believe in the paramount responsibility of humans to do good. In this standard view, we are a race of jostling children, reliable only in our greed, at best competitive, at worst malicious. It is to believe that we need not insist on dialogue, on the values we ourselves claim to hold so dear. We are doomed to being at constant odds with each other, to a “clash of civilisations”, of national interests, of profit seeking. There is something callous and selfish about this way of thinking; and though it is practical, economically orthodox, easy to understand, and popular in a way that appeals to humanity’s basest instincts, we cannot allow ourselves to believe in a philosophy the greatest virtue of which is moral convenience. Its continued predominance is an affront to many of the things Americans profess to believe. It is against everything we try to educate our children about: share, help others, don’t be self-centred, violent or retaliatory.

I am aware that universal values are debatable, and I will limit my definition of them to what I believe is the incontrovertible core: the respect for human dignity and for the earth we share. It will always be possible to question whether certain concepts of equality and freedom in which most Westerners believe are indeed universal, but I believe the argument can reasonably be made that people accept almost universally the right to existence of other nations. I do not personally believe the majority of any nation rejects the existence, in principle, of another nation. The Israel/Palestine conflict, which would seem to be the currently most obvious counterexample, is an exceptional situation.

It seems to me that the conflict between the two peoples stems from the fact that both consider the same territory their homeland. I hope and believe that Israelis and Palestinians respect the existence of the other people in principle. Even in such extreme situations, enmity stems not from a hate born of hate itself, of the “clash of civilisations”, but rather from the threat another state appears to represent. The conflict is not to be traced back to an ethnic or a historical hatred; it simply adopts that framework as an effective and emotional vehicle for political aims.

If we cannot believe that even these values are universally held, then our world is indeed a cold and hostile place, and we would be justified, for whatever it might still be worth, in being responsible only to ourselves. To believe that what is good for oneself is good in essence is a kind of nihilism; a rejection of any beliefs in the responsibility of humans to one another. It is a tempting and absolving conclusion, and has, I believe, bred an apathy and cynicism among those in the population who have seen the hypocrisy which drives external policy, and encouraged contented blindness in others who choose to believe that pure national interest can be compatible with their values.

I do not mean or want to suggest that moral values are entirely absent from the making of foreign policy, either in the United States or elsewhere. I fear, however, that pragmatism is the continuing trend. It may be true that there is little historical precedent for the foreign policy of a major power that took the welfare of other peoples very much into account, regardless of the religious and philosophical values which dominated in the given place or epoch. But the fact that something has always been a certain way does not make it morally justifiable. I do not deny that respecting the rights of other peoples is impractical, but why do we never question why practicality is the highest virtue?

“National interest” and “pragmatism” and a slew of other words are essentially the latest academic bywords for the selfishness that we should be seeking to overcome.

It is unclear to me why we have so weak a sense of kinship as a human race. Surely our responsibility to the welfare of our species, of our earth, is more significant and sensible than any responsibility to the artificial and blurred constructs of race, ethnicity, nation or culture? Internationalism and environmentalism are both dismissed as trite by the jaded mainstream of the West, but this is nearsighted in the extreme. The distribution of humanity across races and religions is random, an act of nature. Every nation and every ethnicity has the same range of people acting morally or immorally. It can serve no constructive purpose to condemn entire nations of people, or in condemning their government, inflict extreme misery on them. Who would you be now if born in Kabul, Mogadishu, Pyongyang? The lack of solidarity with those we call foreign is a cover, an unchallenged and illogical excuse, for the welfare of “Me”, by any means possible, as opposed to the welfare of “You”.

It seems to me that those generating theories at comfortable university chairs or making decisions in backrooms and parliaments no longer reflect on the actual reality, in human terms, outside their own world. They may know the histories, the statistics, the political structure of the nations they study, but when they make their decisions or spin their theories, do they fully realise that the reality of a Baghdad schoolchild is every bit as complete, full and important as their own? That the death of a man’s wife in the Congo is as difficult to bear for that man as it would be for a Harvard professor? We are one people, incomparable with anything else we know; “foreignness” must not obscure the validity of every human’s life. If you prick us...

Respect for the welfare of the people of other nation must become evident not only in our lip service, or in the way we handle our personal lives, but also in a brand of policy making that does not consider solely its own national interest. Ideally, one can hope for a foreign policy that respects the welfare of foreigners as much as it does that of its own people. For right now, any step in that direction will do.

New York

The events of September 11 marked a fundamental change in the position the United States occupies in the world. It became painfully, tragically apparent that the events and movements of the outside world can have an effect on what can occur within the United States itself. It was a wake-up call, and was taken as such, though I fear it was not taken in the right direction. I had hoped that it might put an end to American unilateralism and lead to a closer examination of foreign policy.

Indeed, there were brief indications that the United States might be more willing to consult with other nations. George Bush presented a long speech to the United Nations, and the United States paid its UN dues. Subsequent events have shown, however, that the United States has instead become an even angrier hegemon, and I fear that its actions may translate into even greater conflict. In its plans against Iraq, the United States threatens to alienate some of its closest allies, not to mention damage relations with China and Russia, while many Muslims who might otherwise have remained moderate will become convinced that, between Israeli policy in Palestine and United States actions in Afghanistan and Iraq, the United States itself has declared war on an entire religion. I do not, of course, agree that there would be any truth to that perception; but it would certainly provide fertile training grounds for the next generation of terrorists if it gained currency.

No country can remain both free and invulnerable. The United States, like all other nations, should realise that the safety of its people must rely in part on goodwill from those abroad. Escalation of attacks, the adoption of a policy of clash rather than dialogue, is bound to increase retaliation. American solutions at the moment are makeshift and temporary panaceas. What will Afghanistan be in twenty years? What

about a post-invasion Iraq? The United States must address the root of terrorism; even if it is, by nature, irrational, the United States can no longer afford to ignore how it is perceived by the outside world. It needs to look ahead, to emphasise its relations with the Arab world, with Central Asia, as well as how it is seen there.

And sometimes, *mirabile dictu*, the United States will have to compromise, not only its morals which it is used to compromising, but perhaps also some of its material wealth, its influence, its power. Yes, the United States is still the hegemon, but no longer one omnipotent in its nature. There is no military force, perhaps, that can match the American army, but pernicious minds have found a way to challenge America as a nation by seeking to make war against civilians rather than an army. This new vulnerability means that the United States can no longer afford to act heedless of the concerns of other nations. If the United States continues to act without any concern for the opinions of its allies, it may well become isolated. If it does not take into account the effect its policies may produce on nations, particularly those that are not its allies, it puts itself at ongoing risk. The United States needs to strive for more international legitimacy, broader consultation, framing its actions within a stronger and more decisive UN.

Unilateralism as a way of handling international affairs can never sustain a safe and prosperous society. On both a moral and a pragmatic basis, the United States must join the ranks of nations, as the most important member perhaps, but not one which stands alone. And perhaps this would be also the first step towards a basis of international alliance built on mutual respect and just conduct.

A wake-up call indeed, which has, in one way or another destroyed American complacency vis-à-vis the rest of the world. What policies have sprung from it do not, as yet, bode well. We can only hope someone heeds the alarm clock, sooner rather than later.