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The September 11 Terrorist Attack: America and the World

I would like to comment on one aspect of the destruction of the World Trade Center and the murder of over 5,000 innocent Americans. That aspect is our perception of America's place in the world community. In my view, the current general perception is inaccurate and harmful, and I would like to propose a correction:

I don't want to be misunderstood: My point is not to belittle America. Quite the contrary: What I would like to see is a re-direction of our perspective towards a more *global* conception of the family of man, a family of which America is a prominent member, but *not the hegemonist* member. It is only in such a context that America can achieve its objectives, which are (1) to protect and defend itself against the virulent, hateful anti-Americanism which has just taken thousands of innocent lives, and which will continue its rampage for the foreseeable future, and (2) to remain a respected and loved member of the international community of nations. These objectives cannot be accomplished if we subscribe to an America-vs.-the world paradigm.

That paradigm can be summed up under the label of American Exceptionalism -- a well known concept among sociologists. This is the view, in essence, that America is not only unique, but that it is also apart from all other countries. This view is held *both* by many patriotic Americans themselves, *and* by foreign and domestic America-haters. Most Americans feel, rightly so, that America is uniquely good. America-haters feel that America is uniquely bad -- Satan America. The point on which *Both sides* tend to agree is that America is uniquely *powerful*, that there is American hegemony in the world. Everyone agrees that we are *the only superpower*.

What is distinctive about this widely held view is that America is seen not only as unique, but as *uniquely* unique. After all, most people will agree that every country, culture or society *is* unique in some way or another. But many people attribute to America a separate sort of uniqueness. In addition to possessing, like every other society, a unique cultural, political and social character, America is viewed by people all over the world on both sides of the political spectrum as being in a class apart from all other countries -- American exceptionalism.

In fact, while there are some *quantitative* differences between America and other large countries, there is no *qualitative* difference that warrants the thesis of American exceptionalism: True, we have the largest GNP of any country, because we have a relatively large population and a relatively high per capita income. But we are neither the richest country of the world per capita, nor the largest, nor the most populous. Economically, we are the biggest kid on the block, but we are surrounded by other rich and powerful countries (Japan, Germany and the rest of the European community), other incredibly large and populous countries (China, India), other countries with enormous nuclear destructive capabilities (Russia), other countries with vast territory and natural resources (Canada, etc.)

I just returned from the Netherlands (connecting, by the way, with a Newark-San Francisco flight *one day* ahead of the flight that went down in rural Pennsylvania!) and I noticed, again, that the

quality of life and the standard of living in that country are at least on a par with ours.

Neither should it befall to America alone to defend democratic values. We share these values with a host of other countries (Western Europe, Canada, Australia, etc.), and an attack upon American democracy is an attack against all like-minded societies.

America cannot become the lightning rod for Third World, Muslim, or any other resentment. America is a member of the international community. It shares with the rest of the world responsibility for both what is good and what is problematic.

Similarly, the familiar argument that we have been targeted due to our unique support of Israel rings hollow: Yes, we provide the largest single share of economic and military support to that country (as well as to Egypt and the PLO too, by the way). However, support to Israel is a collective effort in which the Europeans and others are also actively involved, both at the material and the psychological level. So, again, the view of America being uniquely responsible in this area does not match reality.

It is good that President Bush, Secretary Colin Powell and others have now been talking about international coalitions in order to combat international terrorism. It is good that NATO has invoked section V of its charter, indicating that the conflict at hand is *not* between America and its enemies, but between a community of nations and its assailants.

The cliché -- and the truth -- is that the world has reached the age of *globalism*. The East-West confrontation of the Cold War has been replaced by the new North-South divide. The emerging line of differentiation and conflict pits the haves versus the have-nots. One billion people on earth, living mostly in the Northern hemisphere, enjoy decent lives. The remaining five billion are retreating. Africa, for example, is devastated by AIDS, war and starvation -- Add to this a growing religious fanaticism and nationalism in many parts of the world. This is the 21st reality. America happens to be *one* of the large, affluent countries of the Northern hemisphere.

Clearly, the North-South divide is the greatest challenge of the 21st century. Even mere enlightened self-interest dictates that the affluent North come to the rescue of the poor South. Otherwise, the invasion of the North -- both violent, as in the September 11 terrorist attack, and peaceful, as in the millions of legal and illegal immigrants into North America and Northern Europe -- will continue unabated, causing increasing economic and political dislocation, and demographic and environmental difficulties.

But I did not write this essay with solutions to world economic problems in mind. I am merely suggesting that we begin to view our problems as *global* rather than national, and that we cease placing America into a category by itself. America cannot become the whipping boy and the

lightning rod for Third World, Muslim, or any other resentment. America is a member of the international community, a powerful and relatively affluent member. But it *shares* with the rest of the world responsibility for both what is good and what is problematic on our planet. If we could re-orient ourselves to seeing things this way, perhaps greater progress could be made in the world, and this would certainly be a healthier and more realistic role and identity for America itself. No country can or should go it alone. The truth is: we are all in this together, America included.