

September 2001

To President George W. Bush and the Members of the US Congress:

The events of September 11th have made everyone understand how vulnerable a free and open society is to mass destruction and terror. But this terrible vulnerability is part of the strength of such a society, not a hallmark of its weakness. It takes courage to allow the free movement of people and ideas. That courage is predicated on voluntary acceptance of great risk, and not upon ignorance of its likelihood.

The immediate response to such a catastrophe is anger and hatred. But the system of laws that supports the US and its allies has been designed by generations of great people to ensure that anger and hatred are never given the final word. Justice, truth, and respect for individual differences are principles whose power far outweighs the thoughtless desire for revenge. More importantly, revenge breeds revenge. It seems terribly dangerous to provide individuals motivated precisely by the desire to increase pain and suffering the luxury of the war they so much desire. Such a war turns them from rigid, totalitarian cowards to soldiers; from failures who are willing to prey upon the innocent, to heroic exemplars of the fight against overwhelming external oppression.

The craven acts of terrorism perpetrated in New York and Washington are dignified intolerably by their classification as acts of war. The individuals who perpetrated these appalling events must be regarded and treated as criminals, as international pariahs, who have committed crimes against humanity, and who must be brought publicly and rationally to justice.

Our great technological power makes us increasingly vulnerable to the rigid madness of the ideologically committed and resentful. To turn against such madness with indiscriminate revenge seeking is merely to react in the same primitive and deadly manner. To risk the slaughter of innocent people in the hunt for such revenge is to absolutely ensure that constant episodes of international terror will come to be the hallmark of 21st century existence.

The entire world stands behind the US, in the hope that the commission of crimes against civilization can be exterminated. Such solidarity was absolutely unthinkable even fifteen years ago. The US therefore has an unparalleled opportunity to demonstrate its unshakeable commitment to its own principles, particularly under such conditions of extreme duress, and to provide the world with the hope that democracy and freedom can truly rise above the parochial ideological madness of the past. Such a demonstration would truly lift the American state above all past national institutions, and would continue the tradition of great spirit that allowed for the rehabilitation of Germany and Japan after the Second World War.

Perhaps the events of September 11 might therefore be regarded as the last atrocity of the second Christian millennium, instead of the first war of the third. In consequence, we implore you to react with discrimination, to target only those truly responsible, and to avoid the cruel and thoughtless errors characterizing humanity's blind and ethnocentric past.

Please punish only the guilty, and not the innocent. Otherwise the cycle of terror that seems an ineradicable part of human existence will never come to an end.

Sincerely,

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