

HOPE AMIDST THE ASHES

A Call to Leadership

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Three days after the attacks on New York and Washington, I went to sit by the pond and watch the sunrise—my usual morning routine, although life seemed far from routine. As I sat quietly, a single flake of ash fluttered down and landed next to me. I wondered, could it have been borne aloft, hundreds of miles, from New York to here? Maybe, maybe not. But the truth is that the fallout from these events will touch us all, in ways we have yet to fully realize.

“Tragedy” and “disaster” have taken on stark new meaning for us as we mourn the loss of life, the suffering of the injured, and the pain of those whose loved ones are gone forever. As the days and weeks go by, we find the impact continues to spread as businesses close, employees are laid off, and the economy reels from the blow to our way of life. We are told to prepare for war, and we know this means more deaths—not only of those whom we can identify as perpetrators, but also our own best young men sent to hunt them down in a hostile land that has swallowed whole armies in the past. We must accept that war brings inevitable casualties among civilians too. And as we intensify the war on terrorists, we can anticipate that they will attempt to strike again, and again, at whatever targets they can find. These will be difficult times to say the least.

What can we do? It seems at first glance that this is all far beyond our reach, out of our control—the global events, these strangers from other lands attacking us, the high-level policy decisions that must

Seek first to understand,
then to be understood.

—Stephen Covey

be made to respond to this threat. Nothing could be further from the truth. We are leaders, and, as Robert Burkhardt said, leaders do not “sit back and watch the world go to hell.” In times like these, our families, our

communities, our nation and our world desperately need leaders.

In his book, *The Seven Habits of Highly Effective People*, Stephen Covey says, “Seek first to understand, then to be understood.” If we are to provide leadership in this crisis, we must first seek to understand what is going on: not just the dimensions of the attack, or the options for our response. We need to understand who the terrorists are, and what conditions have bred not just a few lone maniacs but an organized and well-financed army of thousands. We need to learn about the history, cultures and religions of the Middle East and Central Asia, an area about which we are woefully ignorant. We need to differentiate between our friends, our foes, and our own citizens of Middle Eastern origin. And as we take steps to protect our nation, as we must, we should also weigh thoughtfully what compromises and trade-offs we are willing to make between security and freedom.

Where do terrorists come from?

Terrorists are made, not born. Typically they have been raised in grinding poverty in the refugee camps that are the result of generations of struggle over disputed territories around the globe. They

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have grown up with a degree of hopelessness and disenfranchisement that have prepared them to commit any act, no matter how desperate. For the oppressed, powerless, poor, and hungry, it must be easy to blame those who are prosperous, powerful and free. On this darkly fertile ground seeds of hatred flourish. We might be tempted to ask, “What did we ever do to them?” However, we might also ask, “What have we failed to do to help them?”

As the most powerful nation on earth, we have the option of pursuing foreign policies that serve only our immediate interests, such as cheap oil or advantages in commerce. We have at times supported governments that suited these interests, even if they oppressed their own people, while the buffer of two great oceans historically allowed us to live in relative isolation from the rest of the world. Recent events have shattered that sense of isolation. A world in which there is prosperity, justice and freedom for all, not just for us, is surely in our best interests in the long run.

Security vs. Freedom

We need to tighten up, obviously. Airport security has been proven time and again to be lacking. We are told our law enforcement agencies need better tools and more powers. Naturally, cell phones and computers require new means to monitor illegal activities. At times like these we are anxious to have more security, but we need to know the cost.

In 1975, I lived in India for six months when that country was under martial law. On more than one occasion, I saw large groups of people being led away in chains, an image that sticks with me to this day. But the crime rate was low. Lots of security, not much freedom. Similarly, Russia under the Communists and Spain under Franco’s Fascists were quite “safe” but certainly not free. While we tighten up security, we need to be mindful of what we are trading off. And at some point, we need to consider whether it is possible to create enough security to protect us if we want to continue to live in great prosperity while so many in the world are living in poverty.

What can I do?

1. **Be a leader:** As leaders in our communities, we have a responsibility “first to understand, then to be understood.” We need to help others around us interpret these events and place them in an appropriate context. Our national leaders will be guided, to some degree, by public opinion, and public opinion is the cumulative result of people talking to each other, one on one, in communities all over the nation. Learn about what is going on, and share what you learn. Raise the level of dialogue to the most informed and thoughtful level possible. When you hear people make violent or extreme statements, question them, share ideas, dispel misconceptions, debunk stereotypes. Don’t be afraid to speak up.
2. **Think globally:** Learn more about the world, other cultures, other lands. Study geography, language, art, food, or music. It’s fun, and you’ll be a more well-rounded person for it. Think about the global impacts of the choices you make every day. Make choices that are more sustainable, like driving less, walking more, and creating less waste. Think about what you buy, where it comes from, and at what social, economic, or environmental cost it was produced. Write your elected officials and let them know what you think about foreign policy issues.
3. **Act locally:** The conditions of poverty, abuse and hopelessness that create sociopathic killers are, unfortunately, not unique to refugee camps in other lands. In every community, children are growing up right now who will be tomorrow’s murderers. Look around, find the work that needs to be done in your own community, and do it.

Hope arises amidst the ashes. We are seeing a new unity in America and an unprecedented opportunity for international cooperation. Dark days may lie ahead, but we must strive for the brightest possible outcome. Organize, teach, train, share, speak up, lead—it’s what we do. We are leaders.