

# What if? The missed opportunity of 9/11: The missed opportunity of 9/11

by [Geiko Muller-Fahrenheit](#) in the [January 9, 2007](#) issue

After the September 11 attacks it took President Bush only six days to authorize the U.S. military to prepare for war against the al-Qaeda network and the Taliban regime in Afghanistan. Influenced by Vice President Cheney and Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld, Bush also issued the order to work out scenarios for a war against Iraq.

An entirely different approach might have been taken. Imagine if the president had addressed the nation in the following way:

*My fellow Americans: We have been hit. The attacks on the Twin Towers and the Pentagon have damaged every one of us. We are filled with anger and rage, for in 200 years our country has never experienced such an attack from the outside.*

So everything in us cries out for revenge. Should we give in to this cry? It would be the easier way. And I am sure you would support me if I mobilized our troops to hunt down the terrorists and those who helped them wherever they are hiding.

But I propose to take another route. It may baffle you—even infuriate you—at first hearing. But I ask that you consider it with care.

The assaults have shown us something we needed to know: we are vulnerable. Yes, we are an open country. We are a nation linked to other nations around the globe. Therefore, strangers can come into our country. They can hijack airplanes and steer them into high-rise buildings. Of course, we can improve our security measures. But the fact of our grave vulnerability remains.

The experience of this immense cruelty is, at the moment of such great suffering, also our moment of truth about the vulnerability that we share with others. For we can now empathize with other people who live through civil wars for years and even decades. We can now grasp how people feel when their cities have been bombed into heaps of smoking ashes. (And sometimes those bombs are ones that we have

built and delivered.) All this we can now feel with a special intensity.

What follows from this kind of knowledge that we have bought with so much grief? Should we try to close this window of vulnerability? To do that would turn our country into a prison. It would betray a heritage that we need to honor at all costs, namely, that we live as a free people in a free land. And we intend to keep it that way.

So we say to the world: We will try to learn from this bitter lesson. There is no special status for the United States. We are, together with all other peoples, guests on this planet, finite and mortal beings who are connected to each other, dependent on one another.

Therefore, we must not regard our “American way of life” as a privilege to be defended at any cost against the rest of the world, but rather, we must maintain it in such a way that it can become a way of life for other peoples as well, if they so wish. A way that respects the variety of cultures and religions. A way to protect the rights of all peoples.

We are stunned by the hatred that reveals itself in these attacks. But we need to see the causes that enabled it to grow. We need to find possibilities to decontaminate the conditions that have contributed to the planning and execution of these heinous crimes.

This implies the acknowledgment—and this may well be the hardest task I ask of you today—that our vulnerability is also an expression of our failure to meet peoples in other parts of the world as honest brokers for their needs. We need to accept our share in the injustices that are causing so much suffering. The evil is not simply out there; it is also with us and within us.

For a long time we have held onto our sense of national innocence. But it now lies buried under the rubble of the Twin Towers in New York.

Why do I suggest this turn?

Not because we have suddenly become cowards, but because we have gained the insight that our security is linked to the security of all peoples, and that our peace is connected to their peace. The freedom we cherish so much cannot be had without their freedom.

Many of you will say in anger that we have lost our nerve, that we are capitulating to the terrorists.

That is not the case.

America remains the most powerful nation in the world. But we are powerful enough to admit our vulnerability. We are sovereign enough to take this unprecedented turn. And thus we are not allowing the terrorists to dictate our response.

Does this mean that we let them get away with their crimes? By no means! They are murderers, and so they must be brought to an international court. We are calling on all the peoples around the globe, who so overwhelmingly share in our suffering, to assist us in identifying and prosecuting the assassins and their supporters.

Since we have good reason to suspect that they are members of the Islamic religion, we are calling on Muslim lawyers to assist us. A fatwa by Muslim spiritual leaders would clarify that such crimes are incompatible with the spirit of Islam. Muslim experts could help us in setting up an international court to which we will surely bring our claims and proofs.

Terrorism is one of the great plagues of our time. We do not pretend to be able to eradicate it, least of all by waging a war against it. Because evil—and terrorism is evil—will not disappear from the face of the earth because we wish it away. It will stay with us as a threat and a temptation because it is in all of us.

This is a bitter day. Let us turn it into a day of truth and honesty.

What I ask of you today is a burdensome task, certainly heaviest for the families whose loved ones have lost their lives. But I am convinced that this is the only way to liberate ourselves and others from the vicious cycle of violence and counterviolence.

God bless America!

Of course, an address such as this seems the remotest of possibilities. What we know about the spirituality of President Bush and, more important, about the self-understanding of most Americans—indeed, of most human beings everywhere—suggests that such a text would stir up enormous disappointment and brooding anger.

Yet even though this “draft” may sound absurdly unrealistic now, it was not entirely unthinkable in the immediate aftermath of the attacks. There was a good deal of self-questioning. Some U.S. citizens wanted to understand where so much hatred was coming from, and they did not believe in retaliation. Numerous experts pointed to the growing misery in African and Arab countries as one of the causes of the anger and frustration that facilitate terrorism. They argued that improving the desperate situation of so many human beings in disordered states with oppressive governments would be not only in the noblest tradition of the American people but also in the nation’s best political and economic interests. As one person (who prefers to be anonymous) said to me right after September 11: “The irony of the story is that empathy with the weak, hungry and downtrodden that we know from churches, synagogues and mosques would have to become the leading concept of U.S. realpolitik.”

The sad fact, however, is that the administration in Washington did not give itself the necessary time to consider alternatives, nor did it allow the American people to think through the long-term effects of retaliation policies. Less than a week after 9/11, the “war on terrorism” was in the making. And not much more than a year after that, the Bush administration was advertising its inevitable invasion of Iraq to the American people as necessary because of Saddam Hussein’s supposed ties with al-Qaeda and his supposed possession of weapons of mass destruction. An extension of this war to include Iran is improbable but not unimaginable. Global politics has come under the spell of terror and counterterror, while economic and social disparities spread and the growing impacts of climate change go unattended.

It may appear utterly naive to suggest that vulnerability could be a key element in the politics of nations. But vulnerability is nothing to be abhorred; it is as inevitable and elementary as life itself. Only the dead are invulnerable (at least to human attacks). Together with all living things, we humans live on our ability to feel, to receive and to share. Our vulnerability makes us susceptible to both good and harmful impulses. It enables us to experience the heights and depths of love, as well as those of anger, hatred and distrust. What we need most is what we fear most. As we acknowledge that vulnerability connects us with all other human beings—indeed, with all living creatures—it can become the guiding concept for our attempts to create systems of security. Vulnerability is the fundamental reference point for our understanding of human equality and justice: its basic claim is that every human being has the same right to receive health care, to live in safe conditions, to have

access to education and jobs that provide decent living standards, to raise families, and to live and die with dignity. Accepting vulnerability as elementary for the human condition constitutes the foundation of human rights and of the integrity of all creation.

I assume that the Twin Towers had no special symbolic meaning for most Americans; nor did Europeans regard them as particularly significant. Tourists in New York saw them as an interesting site; bankers and managers saw the towers as just one of the many administrative centers for an increasingly globalized economy. But for the millions of people in the so-called Third World, the Twin Towers symbolized an economic world order that brought them misery and deprivation, high mortality rates for their children, treks of refugees, exploitation and humiliation.

Concerning the Pentagon, many in the United States and Europe see it as perhaps nothing more than a huge five-sided spider's web of military might. For millions of people in Latin America and the Caribbean, in Asia and in the Pacific, however, the Pentagon is the mighty fortress of the omnipresent, invincible superpower. For them it is the command center for big and small wars, for the open and covert operations by which the U.S. has exercised its might in ways that they can never forget. Whether in Cuba, Guatemala or Nicaragua, in Panama, Colombia or Chile—how much destruction, humiliation and hatred have those interventions and “destabilization campaigns” caused? Similar images are true in Africa. And most recently, the omnipotence of the Pentagon has acquired a nightmarish presence in Arab countries. What causes so much anger is not just the insatiable thirst for oil, nor the gulf wars as such, nor unconditional U.S. support for Israel. It is the additional humiliation, the experience of emasculation that cries out for revenge.

From the perspective of those who have been humiliated by the West—and especially by the United States—those attacks on the Pentagon and the Twin Towers were not a declaration of war and thus the beginning of a “new era”; the attacks were nothing other than the continuation of the everyday war of which they had been the victims for so long. In their view, the “low intensity warfare” that had destabilized their lives had simply come back to the place where it had originated. Time and again, the United States had sent out its marines and exported its wars. Now, for the first time—and for the entire world to see on television—this murderous violence had returned to the centers of America's might.

Some five years after 9/11, the site of the World Trade Center remains an open wound between the surrounding high-rise buildings. But plans for a new tower are in place, and it will be higher and more spectacular than the Twin Towers ever were. The design will leave an open space for Ground Zero, a space of memorial to those who perished there.

What will be remembered? What will the function and purpose of that memorial be? Will it be a place of mourning or a stage for nurturing anger? Will it provide the space needed not only to remember the death of 3,000 human beings but also the horrible deaths of other human beings in other places of pain? Will there be, for example, a memorial to the 16,000 human beings of Bhopal, India, who died when a poisonous gas explosion occurred in a plant owned by the American firm Union Carbide? Or again, will there be space to remember the destruction wreaked by the rockets that President Clinton unleashed against the pharmaceutical plant of Al-Shifa in Sudan in August 1998?

To put the question another way, will the way September 11 is remembered in the U.S. lead to a strengthening of compassion for the many forms of suffering that human beings endure around the world? Will it be inclusive enough to embrace the pain of victims in other places? Or will it be exclusive, reserved for America's victims only? As the matter currently stands, it appears that the latter option has preference. It looks as though the attack on the Twin Towers will be regarded as a singular crime that cannot be compared to any other crimes. This kind of exclusive remembering will change the 9/11 memorial into a shrine of America's hurt, destined to stoke the fires of revenge. If it goes in that direction, Ground Zero in Manhattan will foster selective memory and prolong the hermeneutics of denial that has followed America's messianic project like a sinister shadow.

In the U.S., most people still tend to think that going to war means that a resounding victory will follow; in Europe, most people tend to think that nothing can be won by going to war. This is the point at which one can observe a profound difference in the cultures of remembering between Europeans and Americans.

Truth about the past and empathy with those who bore the burdens are part of the process of healing the wounds of separation and distrust. I am not saying that the growth of the peoples of Europe toward a sustainable community has been completed. There will always be new challenges and stumbling blocks, from within and from without; the relationships with the African nations and those in the Middle

East may prove to be the most important. Yet, despite all these reservations, I am convinced that the European Community is a historic and even unprecedented experiment in reconciliation politics.

There is certainly no reason to be triumphalistic about this process. A grave reminder of the indecisiveness and rivalry among European nations became visible in the way they mishandled the civil wars among the Balkan peoples after the disintegration of Yugoslavia. Another example of disunity was the approach of European countries to the war against Iraq. Some chose to enter the U.S.-led "coalition forces," while others, notably France and Germany, decided not to be (directly) involved. Much work remains to be done, and it may well be that the Europeans and their political leaders will not live up to the lessons that their history has offered to teach them.

Some American observers dismiss the relevance of what I have just said by arguing that the Europeans have been able to pursue their happy social and pacifist maneuvers only because the mighty American eagle has protected them from the evils of the world. Michael Hirsh, for instance, is bold enough to declare (in an April 2005 article in the *Washington Monthly*):

Set aside for a moment the precipitous invasions of Iraq. America spends more on defense than the rest of the industrialized world combined not because it is inherently belligerent or militaristic but mainly because America is today more than just the "lone superpower." It is the stabilizer of the international system. American power overlays every region of the planet, and it supplies the control rods that restrain belligerents and arms races from East Asia to Latin America, enabling globalization to proceed apace. . . . Yet, for too many post-cold war Europeans, this stabilizing structure of American power has been so hidden as not to be worthy of note. Why exactly do they think their governments can afford to spend so little on defense (thereby subsidizing the European welfare state)? As with the children in *Anna Karenina*, "there is no need for us to think about that, it's all ready for us."

There is a lot that is sorely wrong with such a statement. The most cynical aspect of Hirsh's reasoning is that he describes the commitments to welfare states in Europe as a kind of child's play made possible by the big father in Washington, who is altruistic enough to do the bloody work. (Does Hirsh not know that the building up of

these “welfare state” systems has been a very costly process indeed, taking the lives of thousands of trade unionists and laborers and going back to the second half of the 19th century—that is, long before the rise of the U.S. to superpower status?) If one were to take Hirsh’s argument to its logical conclusion, the African Americans of New Orleans owe their misery to us Europeans because Washington needs to (indirectly) subsidize our lavish “socialist” programs—so there’s no money left to look after the poor within the borders of the U.S.

The point is that due to their many ground-zero experiences, European nations have learned the lesson that the functioning integrity of societies is as much dependent on social stability and just labor relations as it is on their military establishments. For the U.S., on the other hand, the experience of being the global winner has become a trap. President Eisenhower’s prophetic warning about the danger of the “military-industrial complex” tending to become the all-encompassing economic factor has become all too true.

Hirsh is correct when he admits that the U.S. is spending more money on the military buildup than all the industrialized nations combined. But the reason he offers is wrong: his idea that this is a historic necessity so globalization can “proceed apace” is a piece of propaganda that carries America’s redeemer-nation image to its militaristic extreme. It is not possible, as Hirsh suggests, to “set aside for a moment the precipitous invasions of Iraq,” as if they were a kind of minor mistake to be discarded in the formulation of the grand equation. They are part and parcel of the global conquest for the American empire. What would hinder any outsider from thinking that these invasions are stark examples of the U.S. military-industrial complex feeding on itself? “The only arms race is the one that we are having with ourselves,” says former president Jimmy Carter.

In his book *America Right or Wrong*, the British correspondent and researcher Anatol Lieven raises the question of “why a country which after the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, had the chance to create a concert of all the world’s major states—including Muslim ones—against Islamist revolutionary terrorism chose instead to pursue policies which divided the West, further alienated the Muslim world and exposed America itself to greatly increased dangers.” Such a question needs a nuanced response. One contribution to an answer lies in the issue I discussed earlier: How can we deal with vulnerability? What is the relationship between experiences of vulnerability and cultures of remembering and the political-military options derived from them? As Lieven implies, 9/11 provided the U.S. with



the opportunity to create a new and comprehensive global concert against terrorism. It missed the opportunity. The West is divided, and we can now observe new levels of anti-Europeanism and anti-Americanism. The alienation of predominantly Muslim countries has reached new intensity. And the U.S., in its quest for invulnerability, has become more insecure than it ever was before.

It will not suffice to put the blame on President Bush and his administration alone. The temptation is there, and it will increase as the Iraqi quagmire continues to get worse. But this would be a sort of scapegoating, and it would prevent us from looking at the underlying issues.

Many people around the world are waiting for American political leaders great enough to admit the misdeeds of the U.S., and courageous enough to redefine its role among the nations of the world. The acknowledgment of vulnerability that the people of the U.S. share with all peoples would prove to be a more honest and creative way forward than the illusionary pursuit of invulnerability.

*This article is adapted from Geiko Muller-Fahrenheit's book America's Battle for God: A European Christian Looks at Civil Religion (Eerdmans).*