

DISSENT FROM THE HOMELAND

essays after September 11



EDITED BY STANLEY HAUERWAS AND FRANK LENTRICCHIA

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FOR TAMMI BROOKS,
WHO GAVE US THE IDEA

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DISSENT FROM THE HOMELAND

Introductory

Notes from the Editors

The enemy of the moment always represented absolute evil,
and it followed that any past or future agreement with him was
impossible.—George Orwell, 1984

Intolerance of political dissent in the United States at the present time makes it necessary to say, before we exercise our right to work against the grain, that we, also, abominate the slaughter of the innocent, even as we find it unacceptably childish that Americans refuse to take any responsibility for September 11; unacceptably childish because the Americans in question are not (presumably) children.

Two weeks after the events of September 11, 2001, *The New Yorker* published a series of brief responses, including one by Susan Sontag, which began this way:

The disconnect between last Tuesday's monstrous dose of reality and the self-righteous drivel and outrageous deceptions being peddled by public figures and TV commentators is startling, depressing. The voices licensed to follow the event seem to have joined together in a campaign to infantilize the public. Where is the acknowledgment that this was not a "cowardly" attack on "civilization" or "liberty" or "humanity" or "the free world" but an attack on the world's self-proclaimed superpower, undertaken as a consequence of specific American alliances and actions?

Sontag went on to suggest that it requires no "courage" to kill with missiles and bombs from high in the sky, beyond the reach of the pathetic air defenses of the Taliban; that, in any case, "courage" is a morally neutral term, one that might reasonably be applied to the intrepid mass murderers of September 11.

It did not matter that Sontag said what most Americans have long believed: that politicians and media commentators speak drivel and lies, because that is their natural mode; that politicians and media commentators routinely infantilize us; that the United States is the world's one superpower—a truth we hold to be self-evident, so why do we proclaim it? No matter—Sontag said the unsayable when she wrote that the attacks were the result of specific American alliances and actions. So what kind of person is Susan Sontag, really, if she can say, in one breath, that the attackers did a monstrous thing and that the American government has done, and does, monstrous things too? She's a clear-eyed adult who rejects the widely held belief in this country that we represent Good, that God is on our side.

In so many words, Sontag said that the United States had, in the pursuit of its happiness, given unspeakable pain. For this she could not be forgiven. Vilification swiftly followed. The stalwart New York intellectual was savaged, especially in New York, and not by a few intellectuals—in New York, where so many seem to believe that their city had become the most grievous victim in modern history.

Now, more than two years later, Bush has cleverly turned the American public's attention to that supposed menace to American life, Saddam Hussein, when it is clearer than ever that a war on terrorism cannot be won and that whenever it is the will of Al Qaeda to do terror its will likely will be done. Unlike Al Qaeda, Iraq can be invaded and overwhelmed, and Saddam decapitated. But where is the evidence that Saddam is connected with bin Laden and that he—like Kim Jong Il of North Korea—had the means to deliver and detonate weapons of mass destruction in the United States? Bush's claims to have had evidence are empty because he has no evidence. The ability to deliver weapons of mass destruction anywhere on this globe at any time our so-called interests are threatened belongs to the United States, Great Britain, and Israel, and the United States and Israel have announced policies of preemption. If you are not an Israeli, a Brit, or an American—that is to say, if you are among the majority billions of this planet—you may well think that the United States, Great Britain, and Israel represent the axis of evil. Thanks to the lies of Bush and his lap dogs in the media, who were hot for war, the great majority of Americans now believe the double absurdity that Iraq was involved with September 11 and that Iraq represented a threat to the U.S. mainland.

A German political official was forced to resign for saying that Bush's strategies were in the mode of Hitler's; that the manufacturing of the Iraq menace and its consequent hysteria are intended to sustain the Republican regime and to divert American attention from a dying economy and the criminal corporate CEOs, those charged and those yet to be found out, so long in bed with Bush and Cheney, who have already done, and will continue to do, far more damage to American life than Al Qaeda will ever do.

In the firebombing of sixteen square miles of central Tokyo; in the firebombing of Dresden; in the nuclear obliteration of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, the United States of America attacked targets of no military significance and slaughtered several hundreds of thousands of civilians. Three thousand on September 11 is an obscenity, but one of a much lower order. In view of these criminal facts of American history, the largest obscenity of all is the howl of American self-pity in the wake of September 11.

The range of work collected in this volume includes reflection on the political, social, aesthetic, theological, and ethical aspects of culture. This is a book about patriotism; justice; revenge; our relationships with Israel, Muslims, and Islam; American history and symbology; art and terror; and pacifism. All of the essays are united in the belief that America is threatened by the most powerful enemy in its history, the administration of George W. Bush.

As troubling as the failure of American secular intellectuals (though not those collected here) to intervene and question the war on terrorism is, this war has also seen the capitulation of church and synagogue to the resurgence of American patriotism and nationalism. Some—for example, the editors of *First Things*—have gone so far as to suggest that the resurgence of religious faith in the aftermath of September 11, 2001, may be the start of a religious awakening. God and country are back. Again, however, the Bush administration wants it both ways. They want America to be “religious,” but they want to make clear that this is not a “religious war.” With extraordinary speed George Bush has become a scholar of Islam, assuring us that Islam is a tradition of peace. We find it curious, given Christianity’s history, he does not find it necessary to assure us that Christianity is a tradition of peace.

We hope, therefore, the readers of this book may find the nonapologetic theological essays refreshing or, at least, different. It is no secret that many secular intellectuals have no time for serious theological work. Many assume that if everyone is well enough educated and has more money than they need, no one will need God. Accordingly the modern university has largely failed to help students appreciate those determinative religious convictions that shape the lives of the majority of the world’s peoples. It will be clear that the theologians and religious scholars whose essays appear in this collection have no use for apologetic strategies designed to reassure those on the right or the left that when all is said and done, religious faith is not all that dangerous.

Religious faith is dangerous. Jew, Muslim, and Christian know that there is much worth dying for. Faiths constituted by convictions worth dying for can also become faiths worth killing for. So questions of life and death are at the heart of any religious faith worth having. But it

is also the case that only a religious faith for which it is worth dying will have the resources to challenge idolatries justified by the presumption that America is blessed by God in a manner unlike other nations. “God Bless America” is not a hymn any Christian can or should sing. At least it is not a hymn any Christian can or should sing unless it is understood that God’s blessing incurs God’s judgment.

This is but a reminder that the babble unleashed by September 11, 2001, cannot be challenged on its own terms. Rather we must find the linguistic resources in communities that have found ways prior to September 11, 2001, not to be seduced by the false speech that is always our temptation. We quite literally, therefore, offer these essays as an “offering,” and hope that they may help us begin to speak truthfully against the lies that can so easily constitute our lives.

DANIEL BERRIGAN

After

When the towers fell
a conundrum eased;
Shall these inherit the earth
from eternity,
all debts amortised?

Gravity was ungracious,
a lateral blow
abetted, made an end.

They fell like Lucifer,
star of morning, our star
attraction, our access.

Nonetheless, a conundrum;
Did God approve, did they prosper us?

The towers fell, money
amortised in pockets of the fallen, once for all.

Why did they fall, what law
violated? Did Mammon
mortise the money
that raised them high, Mammon
anchoring the towers in cloud,

highbrow neighbors
of gated heaven and God?
“Fallen, fallen is Babylon the great . . .
they see the smoke
arise as she burns . . .”

We made pilgrimage there.
Confusion of tongues.
Some cried vengeance.
Others paced slow, pondering
—this or that of humans
drawn forth, dismembered—

a last day; Babylon
remembered.

ROBERT N. BELLAH

Seventy-Five Years

September 11, 2001. I am not sure that even now, more than four months later, I know how to think about it. I have heard young people say, "September 11 is the worst thing that ever happened to America." I am tempted to reply, "In your lifetime." I will be seventy-five years old this year and I have lived through quite a few dark days in my life. Perhaps it will not be entirely inappropriate for me to try to put September 11 in perspective by reflecting on some of those earlier moments.

I was born in 1927. Although I was too young to understand it, the stock market crash of 1929 had serious repercussions for my family. As I was becoming aware of the world in the middle 1930s, Hitler, Mussolini, and Stalin were all in power, and the Japanese were at war with China. I remember being the one who brought in the paper every morning, and in those days before television, it was the newspaper that we depended on for news (though I do remember listening to speeches by Hitler and Mussolini on the radio, and the reassuring words of FDR). How many mornings I saw huge black headlines reporting the latest disaster! In March 1938 came the *Anschluss*, Hitler's annexation of Austria. In September of that year there was the infamous Munich pact, through which the British and French handed over the Sudeten border area of Czechoslovakia to Hitler; followed early in 1939 by Hitler's occupation of the whole country. And on September 1, 1939, Hitler, now acting on the basis of a secret pact with the Soviet Union, invaded Poland. The period of appeasement was over; the Second World War had begun. One might think these were events in Europe, not events affecting the United States, but those of us who lived through those events, even a twelve- or thirteen-year-old child as I was at the time, knew that these terrible events were happening to the United States because they were happening to the whole world.

Auden's famous poem "September 1, 1939" was written, as its opening line tells us, in New York, and it expresses not only what an Englishman, but what many Americans were feeling at that moment:

I sit in one of the dives
On Fifty-Second Street
Uncertain and afraid
As the clever hopes expire
Of a low dishonest decade:
Waves of anger and fear
Circulate over the bright
And darkened lands of the earth,
Obsessing our private lives;
The unmentionable odour of death
Offends the September night.¹

Although the Polish campaign was over in weeks, many more dark headlines were to come. In April 1940 Hitler invaded Denmark and Norway with little opposition. In June he overran the Netherlands, Belgium, and France with lightning speed, although most of the British army was successfully evacuated from Dunkirk. The ensuing air war over Britain was inconclusive, and Hitler turned his attention from a possible invasion of Britain to what he expected to be a lightning campaign against the Soviet Union. In early 1941 the total failure of the invasion of Greece by Italy, Germany's ally, diverted his attention to the Balkans, where again he made short work of Yugoslavia and Greece. He was now master of almost the whole of Europe right up to the Soviet frontier, but he wanted more. On June 22 the Russian campaign began, initially with enormous success, driving to the gates of Moscow and Leningrad by the end of the year.

However breathlessly we watched the fall of Europe, on December 7, 1941, something terrible at last did happen to the United States. I have recently had to remind my younger friends that the horrifying attacks on New York and Washington on September 11, 2001, pale in comparison to the defeat suffered by the United States on December 7, 1941. Pearl Harbor was a military disaster of the first order. The U.S. Pacific Fleet was effectively destroyed, even if a few carriers absent from Pearl Harbor were spared. The United States being militarily incapacitated,

in the next six months the Japanese took the Philippines, Indochina, Burma, and the Netherlands East Indies. Perhaps the most shocking news was the sudden fall of the supposedly impregnable fortress of Singapore. In New Guinea the Japanese had come to within a few miles of the northern shore of Australia. That is what Pearl Harbor meant: the Japanese conquest of almost all of East and Southeast Asia. It would be hard to think of a greater defeat in American history.

And yet we won the war. After an enormous effort by the United States and its allies, including importantly the Soviet Union, the Germans surrendered in May and the Japanese in August 1945. World War II is what we all believed was the “good war,” the war against an evil so enormous that there could be no question of the justice of our cause. And the end of European fascism and Japanese militarism, among the worst regimes modernity has produced, was certainly a good.

But is it so entirely clear that we won the war? Wasn’t there a sense in which we were defeated in that war, and I don’t mean only by the early disasters? I would say that we were defeated to the extent that we became like the enemy we opposed. Early in the war we condemned the Germans for their indiscriminate bombing of civilians. By 1943 or 1944 we were engaging in the most terrible bombing of civilians in history. Hundreds of thousands died in the firebombing of Dresden, Tokyo, and other German and Japanese cities. And then on August 6 and 9 the United States unleashed the only two atom bombs ever to be used, unleashed them on the large, crowded cities of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. As an eighteen-year-old at the time, looking forward to immediate induction into the army, I, like most other Americans, had no doubt that using the atom bomb was the right thing to do. Only considerably later did I come to see it as second only to the Holocaust among the crimes of the twentieth century.

In a roundtable discussion on terrorism in a recent issue of *Harvard Magazine*, David Little points out that the only place in international humanitarian law where the word *terror* appears is in two 1977 protocols that supplement the Geneva Conventions protecting victims of armed conflict: “The civilian population as such, as well as individual civilians, shall not be the object of attack. Acts or threats of violence, the primary purpose of which is to spread terror among the civilian population, are prohibited.” Jessica Stern then responded: “But