Featured Views

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This Time, One Country Indivisible

The traditional left-right dispute is irrelevant to these abnormal times

by Richard Sennett

The United States is entering a new Vietnam era. Or, at least, certain things seem to me to be the same now as they were when America began to fight in Vietnam in earnest 40 years ago: now, as then, there is a strong desire for solidarity within civil society; now, as then, there is confusion about how to translate inner solidarity into warfare.

At the start of the Vietnam war, US politicians and generals had to convince the American people that there was a credible threat to the security of the nation. It is often forgotten today how quickly they did so; President Lyndon Johnson was handed a "blank cheque" right after the Gulf of Tonkin incident in 1964. In 1963 and 1964 support for the war was fervent, outside academic circles. Today, of course, no convincing is necessary.

The civil drama of Vietnam was how quickly that internal solidarity came apart. It soon became apparent that even young people who supported that war did not want to fight in it. For a long time, the American left has suffered from a malign amnesia in this regard: in avoiding the draft, middle-class youngsters passed the burden of fighting down to the white and black working classes. Within a few years, this class fissure helped to crack apart American solidarity.

The events this past week may seem to have ended "Vietnam syndrome" - the unwillingness of US politicians and the military to risk American lives abroad. Five thousand Americans are already dead. To judge by the call-in talk-shows - real community events in the US - Americans are now willing to fight. But, on the ground, there are already contrary signals. New York's Union Square, where many people have gone to light candles or lay flowers for the dead, is decked with peace symbols from the Vietnam era, as well as hand-scrawled signs demanding war. One of the largest signs in the square reads "An Eye for An Eye = Blindness".

No nation, anywhere, could eschew revenge when attacked as the US has been. But the trauma of the defeat in Vietnam meant that, for nearly three decades, the nation's leaders developed no new military policy. The military resolved to fight only wars that the US was sure it could win, as embodied by the Powell doctrine; the Reagan era, though bellicose in words, fought only small wars against weak states; the Clinton decade dithered in the Balkans.

The reason for this was not martial cowardice. By force of dollars, instead of arms, America controlled the world. The economy guaranteed our security. Last week, that guarantee ceased.

I think it needs to be emphasised that in the last decade Western Europe has been as indecisive as America’s leaders, and has also subscribed to the doctrine that money can do the work of guns. With the notable exceptions of Tony Blair and Joshka Fischer, European statesmen dithered in the Balkans. American policy-makers have rightly resented criticism and second-guessing by their European colleagues, who in practice have often seemed to follow the precept of Marshal Petain in the first world war, "we’re waiting for the Americans".

What is special about the situation of the US is the way that the waging of war unites the country. Historically, warfare has cemented bonds between those myriad fragments of American society that are at odds in peacetime. The first world war melted together immigrants who had recently arrived from Europe; the second world war began to fuse black and white Americans, a patriotic fusion which became even more pronounced in Vietnam.

In the second world war, few soldiers on the ground knew much about the countries they were fighting to protect; in Vietnam, none did. However, through fighting in these alien places, they became more American. But after the Tet Offensive of 1968, the Vietnam war marked a change in this historic pattern. The soldiers felt undermined by protesters at home; still, courage to fight against losing odds remained. Yet after Tet, many American soldiers came to respect the Vietnamese they were fighting.

Here, I think, is a grim contrast with the situation of today. Americans can easily imagine that others are filled with envy for their wealth. Americans cannot as easily imagine that others would so hate US culture that they would kill its citizens. Though the US is a deeply-religious nation, the violent hatred of much of Islam for American values seems inexplicable, unfathomable. The killing is certainly that; the foreign impulse to combat "evil" is, uncomfortably, the mirror of our own.

A country can be defeated by bombs; hatred of a way of life cannot be.

Like every other American, I do not want another Vietnam of military failure. But like many of the Americans who lit candles or placed flowers in Union Square, I do not want a "victory" over actual enemies that destroy the lives of millions of Afghanis, Pakistanis, Iranians, or Iraqis who have already suffered at the hands of their own rulers. I am not a politician or a military strategist: I have no idea how to fight terrorists effectively. I suspect our own rulers do not, either.

On the news programmes, the policy-pundits are full of plans for tightening internal security, so the same thing won’t happen again. But why should it? A suitcase full of deadly bugs might be next. Hysteria won’t serve day by day, and there was little of it after the attacks in New York; everyone in the city, from the mayor to ordinary people on the street, behaved admirably - calm, and generous to each other. An old leftist of my acquaintance believes we are entering a "pre-fascist" era, but my own sense is that in time people will, out of this same reasonableness, reject the curbs on civil liberties now being proposed.

There is a lot of talk about how the US will be fundamentally changed by these events, but little discussion about what the attacks tell Americans about themselves. Will they stop if the US re-asserts its military might, or do we Americans need to change our behaviour towards others in order to make ourselves ultimately more secure?

I believe the latter, but that sign "An Eye for an Eye = Blindness" seems to me only to waken memories of Vietnam, when such simplistic recipes split the US apart. What holds civil society together is neither ideology nor shared sorrow, and not even religion; it is the capacity to act effectively together day by day, toward some common purpose.

As we watched the second World Trade Centre tower collapse in a cloud of smoke, the porter in my building turned to me and asked: "Do you think people can handle it?"

Forty years ago, when President Johnson got his blank cheque, we thought we could; five years later we discovered we couldn't. And now?

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