

Our poor, our weak, our hungry

American people are beginning to understand their connection to the whole world. Their leaders must understand it too

The Guardian, Saturday September 15, 2001

Thousands of people have been murdered in New York and Washington; America mourns and the world mourns with it.

The American government is readying itself - and the world - for action. This action would seem to derive from the concept of a "clash of civilisations", a school of thought that Islamist extremists subscribe to, since they, we understand, view America, or even the whole of western civilisation, as a hegemonous monolith; an enemy to be feared and, if possible, destroyed.

This is exactly the kind of thinking that thinking people must avoid. And yet it is reciprocated (if indeed it was not initiated) by the west. In the past decade there has been a growing tendency to see the terms Arab, Muslim, fanatic, even terrorist as practically interchangeable. When EgyptAir flight 990 fell into the Atlantic in 1999 killing 217 people on board the US explained within minutes that the Egyptian pilot was an Islamist fanatic who had decided to commit suicide. Even after Egyptian newspapers published a photo of him with his little daughter holding an inflatable Father Christmas, the US insisted he was an Islamist fanatic.

You could almost say that US officialdom, the media and Hollywood dreamed this nightmare into reality. And ordinary Americans have paid the price. But looking back, it is as though somebody had been working on a series of drafts. A "fanatic" in an Egyptian aircraft, a mystery boat crashing into the side of the USS Cole, and now this horror. Was somebody working out what could be done, what you could get away with? The prime suspect, we are told, is Osama bin Laden. It may have been him. He cannot have expected that this massively criminal act would do him any good, and it has put back - who knows for how long - the causes that we are told he professes to care about.

Why did he do it? Because he hates America and wants to damage her? Because, Iago-like, he revels in his hatred? Then why does he not gloat? Why has he said it was not his doing? The too-easy thing about having a fanatic perpetrator is that you can ignore logical questions to do with purpose and motivation.

What if it wasn't him? What if the men who did it thought they were working for an Arab or Muslim cause - but were not? We saw images of Palestinians dancing in

the streets after the news broke. It needs to be said that they were shameful images. It also needs to be said that the same three pictures were shown again and again, that correspondents on Arab news channels said they were isolated incidents and that the scale of the disaster had not yet become clear.

Next day nobody was dancing; the US consul-general in Jerusalem received a 12-inch stack of faxes and condolences from Palestinians and Palestinian organisations. Later, a correspondent in Jerusalem for the Today radio programme reported with surprise that people seemed able to make a distinction between the American people and their bereavement and the American state that had suffered a "deserved" blow. People in the Middle East have learned to make an automatic distinction between the state and the people. It is a faultline that could become more dangerous if regimes are pushed further from their people by the need to placate America in the near future.

America needs to look at its foreign policy, its stance on the international court of justice and the Kyoto agreement, its contribution to the suffering of the Iraqi people, its bombing of Libya and Sudan, its long-standing position on the Arab-Israeli conflict, and ask itself why 16 men were prepared to kill and die to bring down the symbols of American commercial and military might.

No price can be put on the pain that has hit so many people in one instant. How can it be prevented from ever happening again? A letter from a Canadian says: "Nothing justifies what was done on Tuesday. But we must ask ourselves how we have contributed to conditions that cause people to hate us this much. Then we must set about eradicating those conditions and injustices."

The world has had repeated proof that terrorist actions cannot be combated by security measures alone. The underlying cause, the why, has to be addressed. And listening to official responses I am filled with fear. Experts have opined that the US has to hit "someone" within 10 days, that cruise missiles targeted somewhere in the Middle East are the only appropriate action. The deputy secretary of state, Paul Wolfowitz, said that "the whole civilised world has been shocked... and even portions of the uncivilised world have started to wonder whether they're on the wrong side". How's that for the official American view of the planet? There is talk of a \$20bn war chest, of the full resources of the American government, of combat patrols over Washington.

It will not be enough. The US will only be safe when the puppetmasters can no longer find people willing to lay down their lives to harm it. The nation that once said "give me your poor, your weak, your hungry" needs to look at itself through the eyes of the world's dispossessed. During the last year, and before the catastrophe, it was starting to do so. It seemed that the people of the most powerful country in the world were starting to let themselves see more clearly what was happening in the world around them. More articles were appearing, more people were asking questions. Sections of the US administration were even

demurring slightly at the unconditional, eternal support they were supposed to extend to the state of Israel.

Those people have now joined the ranks of the grieving. It should not have happened. It should not happen again. Maybe it won't, if in their grief Americans make common cause with other sorrowing humans. There is evidence that many are doing just that. And the leaders should listen to their voices.