

The West and its challenges

Tony Abbott

The West's contribution to the contemporary world is corruption, depravity and violence, say the Ayatollah Khomeini, Osama bin Laden, Abu Bakar Bashir and other evangelists for terrorism. To the authors of September 11 and Bali, Western civilisation is an abomination in the eyes of God to be wiped from the face of the earth. To Al Qa'eda and its offshoots, every country which does not adopt a particular version of submission to Allah is a blasphemous usurpation. The separation of church and state is a satanic perversion akin to privatising God.

The hallmarks of Western civilisation are scientific and cultural curiosity, belief in the equality of man, freedom under the law, and a sense that diversity is a potential source of strength not weakness. Unfortunately, what the contemporary West takes most pride in: pluralism, libertarianism, feminism and multiculturalism, is what much of the Muslim world most stridently rejects, even to the extent of cheering when passenger jets are flown into civilian skyscrapers.

Victor Davis Hanson is right about the West's total supremacy in any contest between armies. But this kind of military superiority is irrelevant when the enemy is a civilian with a bomb belt under his shirt. If the fall of the Berlin Wall ended one era, September 11 marked the beginning of another that could turn out to be longer and more dangerous than the struggle against Soviet communism. Unlike hostile governments, people infatuated with death are hard to threaten, impossible to reason with and have nothing to lose.

The challenge is to identify and infiltrate terrorist groups, isolate and disarm terrorist states, disrupt and pre-empt terrorist strikes but, most of all, to address the issues which can turn otherwise unremarkable human beings into agents of human sacrifice. Although the 'war on terrorism' has an important military dimension, it's a war which weapons can't win because, even in death, (in a twisted version of the aphorism that the blood of

the martyrs is the seed of the Church) terrorists gain a kind of victory.

If the war on terrorism just involves finding targets and destroying them, it will fail and, in the process, the West will end up sacrificing its values in order to save them. But it won't fail for the reasons usually advanced: because it involves American unilateralism or a surfeit of 'hard' over 'soft' power.

Josef Joffe thinks that America must put the 'co' back into 'coalition'. Should America try to work within the United Nations if it can? Of course. Should America take traditional friends into its confidence? Yes. Should America avoid giving offence? If possible. But why should America accept a French veto over how it might protect its own citizens when the French would never accept an American one. More plausibly, Michael Ignatieff thinks that the 'martial plan' must be succeeded by a 'Marshall Plan'. Yes, as long as reconstruction is serious and can't be caricatured as giving Baghdad a new KFC.

It's not enough for Western civilisation to demonstrate its technological prowess, military strength and material abundance. It needs to show moral strength which even its critics can recognise and come to admire. Iraqis will not embrace pluralist democracy because they hear lectures (in English) about George Washington and affirmative action. They want hard evidence that America and its allies (unlike the old regime) will deliver on their promises.

Huntingdon was right about the challenge of mutant forms of Islam but wrong about the inevitable clash of civilisations. Fukuyama was wrong about the end of history but right about the potential appeal of liberal democratic values. Compared with the West's golden rule: 'do to others as you would have them do to you', the bitter maxim: 'kill and be killed' only makes sense as a rule of life by assuming away all human solidarity.

Despite the emotional, cultural and imaginative abyss separating a New York metrosexual from a fundamentalist mullah, there is common ground based on shared humanity. But it would take at least a latter-day T.E. Lawrence to find it, not people seeking an 'exit strategy'.

It would be easier for others to respect Western civilisation if the contemporary version had less emotional distance from Burke's notion of society as a partnership between those who are living, those who are dead and those who are yet to be born. The West's wealth and openness are an irresistible magnet. Its narcissism, materialism, and arrogance offend billions of people who might otherwise find its traditional virtues resonant with their deepest instincts.

The 'war on terrorism' is not primarily a test of military technology or of social service delivery. It's a test of character. In a culture conditioned to be in two minds about everything, Western leaders need to match their adversaries' conviction and clarity of purpose and Western citizens need to be more dedicated to enhancing civilised life than suicide bombers are to taking it. The task is not to win over intellectuals addicted to finding fault (to have a debate about Iraq which is really about us) but to demonstrate to the wider world that those noble aspirations about the poor huddled masses yearning to be free are really meant.

Post September 11, there are some encouraging signs that Western society is not as decadent as it seemed. For instance, America, Britain and Australia made the moral judgment that a leader who had used weapons of mass destruction to murder his citizens, invaded his neighbours and funded suicide bombers had forfeited any claim to legitimacy. They made the prudential judgment that removing the Iraqi dictator would do more good than harm. It was the geo-political equivalent of interfering in a particularly savage domestic and took similar physical and moral courage. But people who can respect the 'Western way of war' are not necessarily impressed by the Western way of life, which is why winning the war is turning out to be easier than winning the peace.

For Britain and Australia, involvement in Iraq was not 'doing America's bidding' but sharing the burden of upholding common values. Historically, America, Britain and Australia's instinctive responses to foreign challenges are almost identical. A common language, similar cultures, entwined histories and countless personal links mean that there will be a tendency to think and act as one people rather than three countries. In any event, a

strong and confident country with working alliances will be the most effective force for good and the best friend to all.

In Australia, there has been a timely rediscovery of the Anzac tradition. Generally, there seems to be new respect for people who take risks for others rather than demanding that others take risks for them. It's not that lobbyists, financial planners and psychologists are redundant or that they don't sometimes need courage in their daily work. It's just that a threat to national security gives a new perspective to most domestic issues (although there are still people who feel they can't possibly worry about Saddam Hussein while they have John Howard to deal with).

The 'down with us' brigade, identified by Roger Scruton, is still around although there is a new tendency to stress responsibilities over rights and unity over diversity. The habit of being non-judgmental of other cultures but hypercritical of our own seems less entrenched. Multiculturalism means that migrants aren't expected to pass Australian-ness tests, not that anything goes. In East Timor, Afghanistan and Iraq, Australian soldiers have seemed like models of chivalry. Perhaps

their example might mean that long neglected ideals of honour, duty, and service henceforth play a bigger part in the life of the West.

The sensuality, licence and frivolity (which so enrages the authors of September 11 and Bali) are still on display but at least some countries have shown a newfound ability to call things by their true name and take commitments seriously.

It would be a happy paradox if the terrorist threat prompted a rediscovery of sterner and higher virtues and thereby renewed the West's appeal to a wider world. ♦

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