

Note from Robert Rodvik:

Long before the proto-Nazi Jesse Helms took over Foreign Relations there was a principled man in charge of US Policy. His name was J. William Fulbright, Chairman Senate Foreign Relations Committee, and as to dissent he had this to say: "To criticize one's country is to do it a service and pay it a compliment . . . it is a compliment because it evidences a belief that the country can do better than it is doing."

--J. William Fulbright, *The Arrogance of Power*,
Vintage Books; New York, 1966, p.25

Dissenters Fault Reactions to Attacks

by Michael Paulson

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The Sept. 11 terrorist attacks provoked a flood of religious responses. Americans flocked to churches, synagogues, and mosques seeking to make sense of tragedy. Clergy bemoaned the evils of terrorism and extolled the virtues of pluralism. And, as the United States sought to avenge the attacks, many religious leaders blessed the country's response.

Over the course of the year, the few audible voices that publicly questioned the quasi-official narrative of Sept. 11 have been ridiculed and criticized, often harshly.

But now, a year after the attacks, a handful of scholars is once again suggesting that there are other ways of looking at what happened last year, that perhaps the attacks weren't so shocking and the response not so justifiable.

"We academics are paid to sit on our butts and think, and yet we mainly underwrite the sentimentalities that the culture desires when we're supposed to be telling the truth," said Stanley M. Hauerwas, a prominent professor of theological ethics at Duke Divinity School. "I find the lack of dissenting voices to the current outrage of Americans about September the 11th, and the resulting attack on Afghanistan, to be absolutely horrendous."

Hauerwas and Frank Lentricchia, a professor of literature and theater studies at Duke, have edited a new collection of writings, "Dissent from the Homeland: Essays After September 11," that is being published on Wednesday, Sept. 11, in a special edition of *The South Atlantic Quarterly*. In the journal, 18 theologians, philosophers, and literary critics speak out against the war on terrorism, led by the two Duke professors, who complain in an introductory note that "this war has . . . seen the capitulation of church and synagogue to the resurgence of American patriotism and nationalism."

The publisher, Duke University Press, acknowledges in a foreword that the journal "is bound to cause trouble," suggesting that some may even call for the firing of Hauerwas and

Lentricchia. The journal includes a disclaimer from Hauerwas and Lentricchia, who write that "intolerance of political dissent in the United States at the present time makes it necessary to say . . . 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."

But Hauerwas, a pacifist who resigned from the board of the journal *First Things* because he disagreed with its response to the war on terrorism, said in an interview that the dissenting professors aren't looking for trouble. He said understanding the seriousness of the events of Sept. 11 does not require abandoning critical thinking about what happened next.

"The religious response has shown how deeply American Christianity is just that -- American -- and so much that has happened in the name of God has been nothing short of idolatry," he said. "The identification of God with America as a nation unlike other nations is just shocking from a theological point of view. All this 'God Bless America.' Well, God blesses Afghanistan, too, you know. It's unbelievable that Christianity has simply bought the American story in a way that there's no sense that God grieves for those that did the killing too."

The scholars who agreed to write under the label of dissenters offer a variety of critiques of the way Americans have understood what happened on Sept. 11, questioning why Americans are so ready to grieve the deaths of people they don't know and whether the military response is morally different from the attacks themselves.

In the journal, Robert N. Bellah, professor emeritus of sociology at the University of California at Berkeley, suggests that the United States' use of atomic weapons against Japan in World War II constituted terror, and that "it would seem that the United States . . . not so long ago perpetrated the greatest acts of terrorism in human history." Poet-essayist Wendell Berry writes, "Any war that we may make now against terrorism will come as a new installment in a history of war in which we have fully participated. . . . We are not innocent of making war against civilian populations."

Many of the scholars question the language used by the United States to describe its plight, particularly the use of words such as "war," "terror," and "evil."

"The point at which we need to show more footage of collapsing towers of people jumping to their death, when we raise the temperature by injunctions never to forget -- that is when something rather ambiguous enters in," writes Rowan Williams, who since writing his essay has been named archbishop-elect of Canterbury. ". . . Bombast about evil individuals doesn't help in understanding anything. Even vile and murderous actions tend to come from somewhere."

Several scholars question the motivation of the United States in launching its war on terrorism.

"Americans show with our car-mounted flags that we know the 'war on terrorism' is the code phrase for the preservation of our interstates, cars, suburbs, and the petrochemical octopus that feeds and clothes us," writes Susan Willis, associate professor of English at Duke.

Alasdair John Milbank, a professor of philosophical theology at the University of Virginia, declares that "There is every reason to suspect that this war is not simply a war against terrorism, but is also a war against multiple targets, designed to ensure the continued legitimacy of the American state and the global perpetuation of the neocapitalist revolution of the 1980s."

A critique of the complicity of religious leaders is a recurrent theme in many of the essays. One academic, Fredric R. Jameson, chairman of the literature program at Duke, says that "What is called religion today . . . is really politics under a different name."

The Rev. Michael J. Baxter, an assistant professor of theology at the University of Notre Dame, questions the way in which Catholic scholars, including numerous bishops, declared that the war on terrorism was acceptable under the church doctrine of "just war."

"Catholics have in effect denied their own membership in the Body of Christ in favor of membership in the body politic called the United States of America," Baxter writes. "Catholic identity is simply merged into American identity, as if the two are perfectly harmonious, as if there is absolutely no conflict between them."

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See also:

- Saying Goodbye to Patriotism, by Robert Jensen, *Counterpunch*, 11/12/01
- Las Vegas on list of 'unpatriotic' Americans, by Stacy J. Willis, *Las Vegas Sun*, 11/28/01
- An Organization on the Lookout for Patriotic Incorrectness, by Emily Eakin, *New York Times*, 11/24/01
- Naming--and Un-naming--Names, by Eric Scigliano, *The Nation*, 12/31/01
- Center For Constitutional Rights:
The USA PATRIOT Act: What's So Patriotic About Trampling on the Bill of Rights?
- Statement Of U.S. Senator Russ Feingold On The Anti-Terrorism Bill
From The Senate Floor, 25 Oct
[W]hen the rubber met the road, and Ashcroft sent up the Patriot bill, which vindicated every dire prediction of the spring, all fell silent except for Feingold, who made a magnificent speech in the US Senate on October 25, citing assaults on liberty going back to the Alien and Sedition Acts of John Adams, the suspension of habeas corpus sanctioned by the US Supreme Court in World War One, the internments of World War Two (along with 110,00 Japanese Americans there were 11,000 German Americans and 3,000 Italian Americans put behind barbed wire), the McCarthyite black lists of the 1950s and the spying on antiwar protesters in the 1960s. Under the terms of the bill, Feingold warned, the Fourth Amendment as it applies to electronic communications, would be effectively eliminated. He flayed the Patriot bill as an assault on "the basic rights that make as who we are." It represented, he warned, "a truly breath-taking expansion of police power."
--The Press and the USA Patriot Act -- Where Were They When It Counted?, by Cockburn & St. Clair, *Counterpunch*, 21 Nov
- IT CAN HAPPEN HERE
'Patriot' Act establishes socialist dictatorship, by Justin Raimondo, *antiwar.com*, 11/26/01
- The New McCarthyism by Matthew Rothschild, *The Progressive*, 1/02
- Repeal the USA Patriot Act, by Jennifer Van Bergen, *truthout*, 4/1/02