

Five,
four,
three,
two,
one,
and still counting

This is not an essay about al Qaeda

On March 11, 2004 four bombs ripped through Madrid's mass transport system killing close to 200 people and wounding many more. Are there numerologists among al Qaeda?

Madrid's 311 and New York's 911 attacks were spaced exactly five semesters apart -- one for each point of the US pentagon. In both attacks public transportation systems were the vehicles of destruction. In the United States it was four jetliners; in Madrid it was four trains. Major systemic disruption was the obvious motivation and result of each. Three and nine, the first digits of each date, are both multiples of three and clear reminders of the Holy Trinity. The 311 bombings were the second of two major attacks on the transportation systems of a major and a minor player in the Iraqi occupation. The number one symbolizes God and solidarity with the world's oppressed.

Good timing requires some facility with numbers.

Once again terrorism has proven itself capable of influencing public opinion, but so what? Organized terror has always meant politics written with a bang. Terrorism today is the spark that bridges the unjust gap of social capacitance between those who have and those who do not. It is vengeance exploiting the natural weaknesses of democratic systems developed along side centuries of colonial exploitation and domination. It is recrimination with a shock. It is the price that Western society must now pay for its historically ill-conceived investments in human slavery, cultural arrogance, political oppression, and the associated reckless application of technological advancement and over consumption. We are now reaping the social harvest that our forefathers once sowed. Does this mean, however, that we must continue to sow the same bitter seeds?

Terrorism is a disease that thrives on the blatant hypocrisy that has plagued our planet for many centuries. What is new is the medium through which this hypocrisy is communicated. Instantaneous worldwide communication, rapid global transportation, and mass media are highlighting it as never before. Where previously the poor and oppressed saw themselves as victims of class difference, there was resignation. Today the oppressed see entire societies enjoying the same luxuries as their oppressive leaders and desire change. Moreover, they see others engaging in violent action to achieve this change, and want a piece of the action. In short, the citizens of wealthy nations can no longer afford to hide from what can no longer be hidden.

Terrorists do not themselves have to be victims of this injustice; they have only to feel

empathy with those who are. The promise of paradise, the glory of martyrdom, strong individual pride, the shared belief that the system is no longer capable of mending itself, and enough knowledge and money to build a bomb appear to be all that it takes. As none of these conditions are in short supply today, their coincidence is inevitable. Moreover, until the conditions that give rise to this coincidence are sufficiently addressed, and the coincidence thus eliminated, terrorism is likely to continue. Osama bin Laden and Al Qaeda's 911 may have been a fluke of history; alternatively, they may have been the start of a new, long, and difficult beginning.

In a democracy there are no innocent victims, only voters. Going after terrorists, while ignoring the conditions that give rise to them is a short term remedy for a long term chronic disease.

When the United States sought to destroy Osama bin Laden and Afghanistan's Taliban the world reluctantly approved. The shock of the Twin Towers was still fresh in everyone's mind. By the time the war ended many realized that a large number of Afghans were grateful that the Taliban were gone. Unfortunately however, the Taliban's rise to power was not entirely a coincidence; there was a real need for their presence. Afghanistan had been in a state of chaos for many decades, and it was important that someone finally take hold. That same state of chaos is gradually returning in Afghanistan and cannot be blamed on either Osama bin Laden or the Taliban who remain, albeit substantially weaker.

In contrast Saddam Hussein was hardly a serious threat to the United States, and the need to invade Iraq was not at all clear. However poorly mistreated the majority of Iraqi people were, they did not live in the state of chaos they are experiencing today. What the United States disrupted when it destroyed Saddam Hussein's government was much more than a dictator's prerogative; rather, it was a crudely balanced political system in which a well-organized ethnic minority dominated a politically much weaker religious majority. Such situations are not uncommon in the world. Important here is that one does not eliminate the ethnic bigotry and cultural arrogance that serves as the foundation for that domination by merely eliminating the leadership. One reason for the Bush administration's having overlooked this fact, is its own obvious sense of cultural, religious, and political superiority.

Though many view José Luis Rodrigues Zapatero's recent defiance of the United States government as a victory for al Qaeda, it is far better perceived as a victory for world democracy -- my own political bias. As George Soros so aptly put it, if the Bush bubble is not destroyed in the next election, Washington's arrogance will accelerate forward and matters will become far worse before they become better.¹

No, this does not mean that the United States should abandon Iraq; rather that USAmerican citizens should not expect others to cover for their own government's mistakes. Indeed, the United States should spend whatever is necessary until a newly

¹ George Soros. The bubble of American supremacy. The Atlantic Monthly. December 2003. [online document] <<http://www.theatlantic.com/issues/2003/12/soros.htm>> (05 April 2003)

elected Iraqi government can stand on its own and deal with the embittered Sunnis and terrorist spoilers, who have plagued the postwar terrain ever since the United States stood by while Iraqi vandals pillaged their country's own national treasures.

Although Spain's threatened withdrawal from Iraq has been criticized by many as an abandonment of the Iraqis, it is far better to view it as a small, but highly visible and effective reminder to the United States to stop acting unilaterally and work more closely with its allies. Spain's new leader has clearly stated that he would allow Spanish troops to remain, if the occupation were turned over to the UN in June. Although this is unlikely, it is also unimportant for the simple reason that the Iraqis will be little better off under UN than US command -- occupation is occupation no matter who is in control. Iraq's new government will be legitimized by its success among the Iraqi people. What the world thinks is only secondary in this regard.

What is needed in our global struggle against terrorism is cooperation among friends - not hegemony and the distorted application of principles made hallow through centuries of conflict. We have come too far to fall into the trap of ancient empire building. The only empires to be built today should be entrepreneurial and among competing entrepreneurs with government oversight to hold them in line. Were the United States to remain on its present course for the next four years things could only get worse.²

Spain's withdrawal will not help the Iraqi people, and may even cause them and US troops and their families to suffer more. In the end, however, it will bring the world closer to what many of us want, even if at a somewhat higher price -- world democracy and peace.

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² Chalmers Johnson. Sorrows of empire. Foreign policy in focus special report. November 2003. [online document] <<http://www.presentdanger.org/papers/sorrows2003.html>> (05 April 2004).