

WHAT PRINCIPLES?

In the wake of the September the 11th events there has been an amazing realignment of friends, foes, and principles. Osama bin Laden whom the US had earlier supported against the Russians became enemy number one, and the Russians who used to be enemy number one have become allies against bin Laden. Condemnation of Russia on the principle that it used state terrorism in Chechnya became irrelevant overnight. Up to the 10th of September, the US condemned on principle Israel targeting the organizers of terrorism. Suddenly it became national policy to get bin Laden dead or alive. Yet the principle for Israel remained the same in the US view, as it curried Arab support.

One may say, “That is *realpolitik*.” Well, it is. But if the logic of the moment dictates our actions, what does this say about the enduring nature of values and principles? We like to think that it is they which guide us. The facts may indicate that they are but high-minded symbols bound by prevailing survival strategies.

On September the 11th, America was gripped by fear. The immediate survival imperative was to stop those with no inhibitions about megadeaths of innocents causing more destruction.

A number of strategies of survival was theoretically possible. Each could have been logical according to circumstances, and each could be backed by principles, which could conflict with others that would back other strategies of survival. For instance, it was conceivable to give in to terrorist demands, such as to stop supporting Israel, remove sanctions against Iraq and get out of Saudi Arabia. If the US was a hostage to immense power, surrender could have been justified by the principle of saving lives. On the other hand, by using all its might including unconventional weapons, the US could exact revenge and kill the terrorists in their caves. This could have been justified by the principle of necessary self-defence and national interest. As another example, if the terrorists were seen as criminals and the US had confidence in its capability to deal with them as such, the ‘war’ against terrorism could be seen as a police action to bring the criminals to justice. The principle of law and order would satisfy this strategy. Each strategy has a counterbalancing principle. Because surrender and appeasement invite further demands, the principle of not giving an inch because they will take a mile comes in. Countervailing revenge killing of terrorists are Geneva Convention principles of not hurting civilians.

In our modern globalized world, strategies of survival include short and long term needs of many intertwining countries, and within them of leaders and the general population. As they conflict, principles blur. For instance, the US may ingratiate the tyrants of some countries which spawn terrorists in order to secure their current support and later oil supplies. Our prime minister may go to war beside the US to enhance his political survival in the short term, and invest in reciprocal loyalty if Australia needed it in the future.

Perhaps the beguiling simplicity of principles as symbolic guides relates to earlier tribal times when survival was precarious, yet strategies of survival were few, clear, local and constant. Apart from the massacre of innocents, a further horror of planes impacting into the World tower buildings was of primitive fanatics destroying civilization and civilized mentality (for instance by evoking primitive fear and hatred).

In fact we have been dragged to the harsh geographical and historical sites of tribal warfare. The greater danger is being dragged into world scale tribal warfare.

That is bin Laden's aim. He appeals to tribal visions, values, myths and principles. He portrays America as the great predator/enemy who has to be killed. His ultimate aim is to be the new tribal prophet, who would impose the values and principles of Al Qaeda and the Taliban on a world scale.

The terrorists have to be extirpated and civilization preserved. But what should guide us thereafter if the old principles are insufficient?

First, tribal mentality should be recognized and exchanged for a more universal one, essential to survival and happiness of a civilized, globalized, yet highly weaponized world. We could start with ourselves. America could change its powerful ethnocentricity which has earned it hatred from much of the world. Locally and currently, we can resist the government extracting loyalty votes by fanning primitive survival fears through demonization of refugees.

Second, reliance on old principles could be exchanged for universal wisdoms which have now really come into their own as necessities. They include knowing ourselves and others, "Man, know thyself!" and "Do unto others as you would have them do unto you."

Paul Valent is a traumatologist and writer. His latest book is "From Survival to Fulfillment."