America Should Be First

By GARY CHILSON
Paul Smith's College

Many think the events of September 11, 2001 changed the world. It certainly changed us. Perhaps, in the end, the change will be for the better. It is obvious, however, that America's war on terrorism will never be won through military and police action alone. We might, though it's not likely, kill or capture the terrorists of today but tomorrow there will be more. Without a fundamental change in America's role in the global arena, leading the world toward a sustainable civilization, the breeding grounds of terrorism will continue to produce a plague of desperate, hate-filled terrorists.

For me, the terrorist attacks raised the unsettling question of 'why?' Why us? We are a peace-loving nation generally more interested in ourselves than we are in the problems of people in other nations. What could we have done to be such a target? While nothing justifies such terrorist action, there must be some reason to it. The reason, moreover, can't simply be religious fanaticism. Religion has, throughout history, been used to justify unspeakable acts but underlying cultural and economic purposes have also been served at the same time.

I am convinced that in this millennial terrorism, culture clashes and economic imperialism create the breeding grounds for desperation and hopelessness. Religious fanaticism then warps and molds the hopeless, desperate people into terrorists and focuses their hatred on the U.S., which, while certainly not alone, represents the cause of the appalling situation the world must ultimately confront.

Our war on terrorism must, to be successful, address the cultural and economic conditions that breed terrorists. The terrorist attack opened our eyes to the hatred many people hold in their hearts for what Americans represent. It's time to consider why. What does America have to do with the cultural and economic conditions that breed terrorists? America, after all, stands for freedom and prosperity for all.

We are also among the world's most ardent supporters of globalization; a process many believe will bring Western civilization's peace and prosperity to the economically undeveloped regions of the world. If only the whole world was like us, then our economic similarities would largely erase the differences between people that breed so much hatred. Imagine a world modeled after the U.S., the pinnacle of Western civilization, where we enjoy a comfortable standard of living and our trivialized cultural differences are celebrated in our economically homogenized society.

In such a perfect world, a world without limits, perhaps such a vision would justify the current approach American policy promotes in the process of globalization. The planet, unfortunately, cannot afford the 9 billion people we expect by 2050 all living like Americans do today. One estimate suggests that even now, the resources of four more whole planets would be required just for the 6 billion plus already alive. Ascribing only the best of intentions to the goal of globalization, it is simply not sustainable.

The political rhetoric that proclaims the current structure and practice of free trade and free markets as the means to progress and prosperity for all is hollow. It can't be done. Yet its bright vision blinds us to the actual reality of our economic imperialism. In the current approach the result is corruption and crushing Third World debt which impoverishes billions of people, drives their unstable governments to cut social spending and rape their natural resources
to meet interest payments, and, of course, requires the U.S. military's presence around the world to protect our economic interests. Economic imperialism mines the world's wealth to make the rich even richer and creates the breeding grounds of hopelessness, despair, and desperation, as the poor get poorer.

Insulated as we are from the history of so much of the rest of the world, it is difficult to grasp all the many underlying forces that turn so many against us. Nevertheless, and perhaps I am totally mistaken, but it's my prerogative to offer a perspective that might help clarify how many may feel about America as the symbolic representative and visible defender of economic imperialism.

In our own experience in the Adirondacks and Northern Forest, we have seen the impact of large 'foreign' corporations. We have seen mega-stores and national chains seek out our small towns and villages in their never-ending lust for expansion. The benefits of such conventional economic development are widely proclaimed — more variety, lower prices, more jobs and increased tax revenues. We are told it must be good because the free market and competition are unquestioned icons of the American Way. Regardless, many people feel strongly enough to organize grassroots organizations to fight the invasion. These groups claim that such mega-stores and national chains would simply destroy our small town way of life as well as the locally owned businesses that contribute significantly to our community's history and culture as well as being the real strength of our economic vitality and stability.

In another example, multinational corporations have bought huge tracts of timber in the Northern Forest. These corporations are separated from the resource they own and the people who depend on it for their livelihood. A sense of place, a respect for the land and its people, has no weight in the bookkeeping decisions made in boardrooms thousands of miles away. When these corporations strip the land for short-term gain, ignoring the concept of sustainable yield that would generate an income for the region generation after generation, the communities and the lives of our people are destroyed.

In New York, an important foundation for our liberties is Home Rule. This reserves power to our local communities to control their own destinies, especially in such areas as zoning and economic development. The establishment of the Adirondack Park Agency by the state stripped away much of this local power and put it into the hands of people outside the region. While it is argued that it was for the greater good, many local residents have seethed with anger ever since at the injustice of being treated differently from their fellow New Yorkers simply because they live within a "Blue Line" that somebody drew on a map.

Maybe globalization is also like the environmental racism we sometimes hear about in this country. Our society routinely sites undesirable land use activities such as landfills, incinerators, power plants, hazardous waste sites, toxic chemical plants and the like, in communities that are less empowered to take political action to protect themselves because of poverty, illiteracy, and a history of hopelessness. Perhaps the fact that these communities in the U.S. are largely made up by people of color is coincidental. But in a similar vein, in the process of globalization we find less developed countries of color ideal dumping grounds for our hazardous waste, our dangerous factories, and resource-stripping practices that benefit our consumerism.

These examples of how our own people feel overwhelmed by outside forces might help us better understand some of the rage that such helplessness can create. Even here, sometimes our anger and frustration flare into violence. There is an important difference, of course, in the extent of our anger and violence compared to people in Third World nations. This difference lies in the contrast between our people, who are highly educated, have resources, and a political culture that empowers our citizens and gives us hope, and the people of less developed nations who have none of these advantages and are simply overwhelmed without hope. Were we as poor, illiterate, and politically powerless to fight for our way of life as are the vast majority of people in the world, we would probably feel hopeless and desperate ourselves.

To me, terrorist attacks on us are the misguided acts of desperate people fighting against impersonal, remote, and overwhelming forces they have no way of understanding or controlling in any peaceful way. While there is certainly no justification for killing innocent people, and those who commit such crimes must be brought to justice, we should also seek to eliminate the cause of such desperation if we hope to end terrorism and bring peace to the world.

How, then, could Americans help lead the world toward a better vision of peace and prosperity — a vision of a sustainable global civilization? While there are no panaceas, I believe that first, and foremost, we should seek independence from those nations we depend upon for the energy and raw materials we consume in such prodigious amounts. The theory of free trade and comparative advantage makes a great case for itself but, in reality, like any dependent, we resent and fear our dependency and seek to control the source of our supplies in order to protect ourselves. With the rhetoric of free markets to cloak our actual practice, we seek to control the nations we depend on through political, economic, and military means. Being powerful enough, we succeed even though we find ourselves going to war just so we can drive to work. It is the forceful imposition of our extravagant demands that drive people to hate us. The goal of a sustainable civilization of
peace and prosperity requires Americans to develop an efficient society, where efficiency is measured not just in dollars but also in terms of the materials and energy used to achieve our high quality of life.

In energy, for instance, we should realize the full cost of maintaining our unsustainable petroleum based economy, taking into account not only the costs of production, transportation and distribution, but also the costs of pollution, global warming, and maintaining our military presence overseas to protect our foreign sources. The fact that the Middle East holds the world’s largest petroleum reserves makes our dependence on that region a national security catastrophe. If we really included all the costs associated with fossil fuels then the alternative, a sustainable solar-hydrogen based economy, seems cheap by comparison.

In contrast with our President’s current energy proposal, which seeks energy independence by draining America faster, our energy plan for the nation should focus aggressively on promoting energy efficiency, the use of renewable and perpetual energy sources, and the development of the infrastructure necessary to support a hydrogen-based economy. In so doing, we not only reduce our dependence on Middle East oil, which reduces the onerous and hateful presence of our military in the region and the terrorist threat from fanatics that see us defiling their holy land, but we also reduce our contribution to global warming, oil spills, acid rain, and smog. We are the world’s most guilty polluter and morally should take on the responsibility of cleaning up our act anyway. Moreover, our leadership in this direction would help develop the technology needed by less developed nations to leapfrog fossil fuels in their own development efforts, further reducing pollution in the world and the ruinous foreign exchange and trade problems that drive so many nations into bankruptcy just to purchase foreign oil.

Likewise, we should not seek to extract more of our non-fuel mineral reserves in our effort to reduce our dependence on foreign sources. Instead, we should seek to reuse and recycle the minerals we already use. While cheap in comparison to the true cost of fossil fuels, solar-hydrogen energy is more expensive than the current, subsidized price of fossil fuels. Higher real energy prices would promote practices that minimize the extraction of virgin resources. Recycling aluminum, for example, uses 95 percent less energy and produces 95 percent less air pollution and 97 percent less water pollution in the bargain.

As a nation, should we muster the political will to create a sustainable society for ourselves, we would not only reduce the major cause of terrorism, we would also reduce the single greatest threat to the world’s ecosystems – the use of fossil fuels. In that effort, we here in the Adirondacks and Northern Forest can actually play an important role. While not rich, we aren’t desperate and we have some incredible resources to draw upon to effect the process of developing sustainable communities. We are an empowered people, able to participate in the decisions that affect our lives. We are also committed to progress and change and our market economy is among the most powerful and flexible in the world. Our experience in developing sustainable communities can serve to help teach other regions in North America and, to some extent, other parts of the world.

Comments?
Please direct your comments, suggestions or ideas for material for AJES to Gary Chilson, Editor, Adirondack Journal of Environmental Studies, Paul Smith’s College, Paul Smiths NY 12970, chilso@gpaulsmiths.edu.

MAILBOX

Dear Editor:

Reference is made to your article in AJES 8(2) 2001, “Greening Tourism.”

The “... undeveloped region of the Adirondacks and Northern Forest” gave many of us an income from the earliest days because the area was “undeveloped.” Visitors to this area do not come to see development of which there is ample outside of the Adirondack Park. They come to enjoy hunting, fishing, camping and the many attributes not found outside.

Too many controversial issues are decided by a few at the expense of the many. If the New York State voters were given the opportunity to decide, not everyone would be satisfied, but democracy would prevail and we accept the decision of the majority.

It is encouraging to note that many residents of the Adirondack Park have come to understand that reducing the relative wild character of the Park reduces its attractiveness to tourism, New York State's second most important industry.

During World War II, I was stationed at the John Rogers Airport, flying R5Ds for the Navy. I enjoyed the atmosphere of Honolulu with the Royal Hawaiian Hotel the tallest building. We changed clothes there for a swim. I would not be interested in going back to Hawaii now with all its high-rise buildings.

Sincerely,

Clarence Petty
Coreys #5
Tupper Lake, NY 12986