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The widening gyre: reflections on September 11

It has escaped no one's understanding that the targets of the terrorist attacks in Washington and New York on Sept. 11 were both real and symbolic. This was a strike against not only the financial epicentre of the world and the hub of US military defence, but against everything these monuments to prosperity and power represent. There could be nothing more real than the terrorists' other target, civilians: thousands dead and wounded, thousands more bereaved. But a terrorist attack on civilians has a devastating symbolism nonetheless, for it undermines our sense of personal freedom, security and peace. So potent, so resonant, is this effect that other nations have rallied round, declaring themselves to be under attack by implication.

For many people in these first days of outrage and sorrow, any talk of political "reasons" for mass murder is offensive. Few commentators have ventured to reflect on the chronic failure of diplomacy in the Middle East or on how feelings of desperation and of hatred toward the United States could have reached such a catastrophic pitch. Politics, when it is merely politics, can at least be discussed by pundits and negotiators, and amid their talk it is possible to hope that nations will inch toward some sort of understanding. But terror puts an end to talk.

Extremism is the defining social pathology of the modern age. The many political and cultural fanaticisms of our era have led to genocide, oppression and the erasure of history. They have spawned barbarisms as diverse in their senselessness and enormity as the gassing of Jews, the massacre of Rwandans, the subjugation of women, the military conscription of children, the execution of doctors and the destruction of ancient artifacts. In chronic forms, extremism is rekindled with each generation, lodging in the hearts and

minds of Irish girls who dodge rocks and expletives on the way to school and of Palestinian boys who dance in the streets while "America burns." These children in different corners of the world have something essential in common: an early education in hatred.

The enemy that "hides in shadows" is more than this terrorist cell or that. It is more than one hostile regime or another. With all due respect to President Bush, this is not "a different enemy than we have ever faced," and to speak in terms of ultimate good and evil is to ready ourselves to slide into a reductive extremism of our own. Ultimately, the enemy is the human propensity to let reason be subverted and to allow conviction to assume pathologic dimensions. Lodged in our psyches, it is an enemy we will never eradicate. We can only strive to hold it at bay by ensuring the preconditions of peace, preconditions that include health and education, and understanding of human history and aspirations, and global equities of power and prosperity.

By the morning of Sept. 12 the events in New York City and Washington were no longer termed "acts of terrorism" but "acts of war." These are words chosen to prepare the ground for a loosening of restraint. While NATO deliberated, our publications staff gathered to reflect on the implications of these events, to turn our thoughts to the office workers and emergency personnel who perished and their families, and to those searching for survivors and working in emergency rooms. As the falcon of violence turns in a widening gyre,¹ we wait for the next deadly swoop of wings, wondering what new anarchy has been loosed upon the world. — CMAJ Sept. 12, 2001

Reference

1. Yeats WB. The second coming. *Michael Robartes and the dancer*. Dublin: Cuala Press; 1921.