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NEWSLETTER

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Why does everyone hate America?

by Jon Western, Ph.D.

September 11 -- What possibly could have motivated someone to commit such despicable acts? Even in light of increasing global terrorism and the 2500-year history of recorded warfare, September 11 was a particularly egregious day -- more than 4,000 human beings dead in less than two hours.

In the wake of these events, Americans all around the country are asking themselves: "Why?" "How could anyone do this?" As our struggle for understanding the events of September 11 and its aftermath leads to self-reflection, one question, in particular, seems to have captivated public discourse and commentary: "Why do so many people, especially those in the Islamic world, hate the United States?"

It is important to remember that September 11 was not caused by some universally-held hatred of all Muslims towards the United States. Despite the occasional television pictures of young men in Islamic parts of the world celebrating the deaths of American citizens, burning American flags and beating effigies of American leaders, we must be careful not to infer broad generalizations from a few television pictures or to exaggerate the degree of anti-American hatred. There are more than 6 billion people in the world, including more than one billion Muslims, and the vast majority of them have not participated in these demonstrations or other anti-American activities.

About this issue...

Based on widely disseminated information, we can conclude that September 11 almost certainly was orchestrated by

(Continued on page 2)

(Continued from page 1)

Osama bin Laden. Bin Laden, who was born in Saudi Arabia, has sought to portray his organization as an ardent defender of Islam in the face of U.S. imperialism. However, his agenda appears to be more political than theological,

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more pragmatic than ideological. His principal goal is to eject the United States from Saudi Arabia, not for the protection of the Islam, but more parochially to destabilize King Fahd's regime and to take control of Saudi Arabia himself.

Prior to September 11, this cause did not inspire a widespread following. With the hundreds of millions of dollars that he inherited from his father's construction empire in Saudi Arabia and a decade of recruiting young men into his terrorist network, bin Laden had only been able to mobilize somewhere 5,000 – 8,000 people to his cause.

More worrisome for the United States in the long run, however, is whether or not future terrorists will find a greater source of support around the world for attacking the United States. While we must be careful not to overstate the degree of *hatred* directed toward the United States and draw categorical conclusions about groups of people, we also should not gloss over the increasing sources of anti-American *resentment* that exist in the world, and in the Middle East in particular. Increasingly people around the world resent American policies that appear overly self-centered and indifferent to the plight of many. It is this resentment that eventually could lead to more overt hatred and, ultimately, to more direct violent attacks on the United States.

Perhaps the greatest source of resentment toward the United States is American indifference to the vast inequality in the distribution of the world's wealth and consumption of the world's resources. A recent

United Nations report noted that more than three-fourths of the world's population live in poverty. More than half of the world's population – just over 3 billion people – live on less than \$2 a day. Furthermore, despite having less than 5% of the world's population, the United States consumes roughly one-third of the world's resources. These disparities do not go unnoticed around the world.

Another source of increasing resentment towards the United States is the seeming callousness of American military policy. The United States produces and sells more than half of the world's military equipment – too much of which is used by corrupt dictatorial regimes (with American complicity) to draft young men and children into their armies to control dissent within their own borders. For example, in Egypt, which is the second largest recipient of U.S. assistance in the world, the United States gives the regime \$1.3 billion per year, with roughly two-thirds of that in military assistance. In a country with widespread poverty and hunger, the United States sends more guns than food. The U.S. has similar military assistance programs propping up non-democratic regimes in Saudi Arabia, Kuwait and elsewhere.

The United States also continues to provide Israel – the largest recipient of U.S. aid -- with massive amounts of military assistance. When systematic violence breaks out between Israelis and Palestinians, rightly or wrongly American weapons are seen by many in the Islamic world as the source of Israeli power and ultimately the repression of the Palestinians.

So what can the United States do to reduce resentment towards itself? First, we must never forget that the United States has great things to offer the world. The American (albeit imperfect) experiment of social tolerance and inclusiveness is still a profound advancement in the evolution of human interaction. For all of its faults, New York

(Continued on page 3)

(Continued from page 2)

City, perhaps more than any other city in the world, represents that experiment. Buddhists, Christians, Jews, Muslims, and as well as countless racially, ethnically, and culturally diverse groups interact as neighbors and build democratic communities of shared values and mutual respect.

Second, we must never forget that the world has great things to offer us. We should redouble our efforts to learn more about this planet's vast diversity of peoples, cultures, and values. Too often we conceptualize the world through a lens that does not allow us to fully appreciate and understand events in the world around us. There are many opportunities for us all to learn more. We can establish letter writing exchange programs with other schools elsewhere in the world to gain other people's perspectives. We can travel throughout the world via internet, or better yet travel, study, and live in another country for awhile. We can also learn a great deal about the world from our own diverse communities of immigrants by volunteering in community organizations and helping a neighbor.

Third, we all must encourage our leaders and other Americans to implement a foreign policy consistent with the values of democracy and respect for human rights – the core principles embedded in the U.S. Constitution and the Bill of Rights. Too often, however, American foreign policy is too self-centered in the pursuit of American interests. This only adds to global resentment towards the United States. We have seen that when the United States commits itself to the promotion of genuine human rights and democracy, it can be a powerful force for progress in global society.

Finally, we must also remember that within the United States, people – including kids -- can make a difference. The relative openness of our government institutions and society give us all kinds of opportunities to exert influence. For example, non-governmental advocacy organizations play a more significant role in U.S. and international policy than ever before. Amnesty International, a leading international human rights organization, celebrated its fortieth birthday this year. The organization, which now commands respect from virtually every country in the world, began with a small group of friends organizing a small letter-writing project to encourage corrupt regimes to release political prisoners. The effort gained momentum and arguably has transformed fundamentally the way the world – including the United States government -- understands human rights. There is no reason to think that with more of us caring about the world and demanding more consistency to the values of true democracy and human rights that we can't transform American foreign policy, reduce anti-Americanism around the world, and make the world safer for all of us.

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