

THE RETRIBUTION CONUNDRUM

By William Nicoson

"It shall be life for life, eye for eye, tooth for tooth..."

Deuteronomy 19:21.

"If anyone strikes you on the right cheek, turn to him the other also..."

Matthew 5:39.

About two months ago I bought a heavy-duty chainsaw to trim away years of overgrowth in a hedge by my driveway. For at least five years the hedge had obstructed sightlines as my car backed from driveway to roadway. Weeks of further procrastination followed the tardy purchase. Then suddenly after breakfast on Wednesday, September 12, I grabbed the chainsaw, charged the hedge and proceeded to blast away at it with all my strength for most of the morning. After I filled three garbage cans with aromatic branches, the hedge seemed little reduced in size but monumentally more ugly.

I'm no expert in psychology and never dabbled in self-analysis, but it later occurred to me that, on September 12, I was reacting unconsciously to the catastrophic events of September 11. I was venting heavy-duty anger with a heavy-duty chainsaw.

Much more focused anger than mine has been ignited by the ghastly suicide missions against the World Trade towers and the Pentagon. In Alexandria, an Afghan American on September 12 was assaulted in a parking lot. His assailant later explained he was "angry" and "looking for vengeance."

Harassment of people of Middle Eastern and Southeast Asian descent has been reported in Huntington, N.Y., Palos Heights, Ill., and Seattle, Wash. The worst incidents occurred in Mesa, Arizona, where an Indian-immigrant owner of a gas station was killed by a gunman who told the police, "I stand for America all the way." At another gas station, a Lebanese American clerk drew gunfire but escaped, and gunshots were fired at the nearby home of a family of Afghan descent.

Undoubtedly troubled by such violence, President George W. Bush delivered a speech at the Washington Islamic Center, praising the contributions of Muslims to the nation and hailing Islam as a religion offering to billions of people "comfort and solace and peace." He condemned the reported racial violence in these words: "Those who feel they can intimidate our fellow citizens to take out their anger... represent the worst of humankind..."

That moral judgment is easy. Those assaulted were in no way responsible for the suicide missions against New York and Washington.

For those who were responsible, however, President Bush has expressed a different judgment.

On September 12 and in frequent statements since, he has called for retribution: “The United States of America will use all our resources to conquer this enemy.” Polls indicate that this is a judgment shared by a large majority of Americans.

Yet nagging questions trouble some, particularly in religious circles, who wonder how to reconcile retribution with the teachings of Christ (turning the other cheek) and of Paul (“Repay no one evil for evil...never revenge yourselves...” Romans 12:17, 19). The argument is that revenge begets revenge in a never-ending cycle which saps energy and resources vital for positive undertakings.

For example, in 1998 terrorists believed linked to terrorist mastermind Osama bin Laden bombed U.S. embassies in Kenya and Tanzania. In response, President Clinton ordered bombing raids on two African facilities believed linked to bin Laden (though the supposed chemical munitions plant turned out to be producing pharmaceuticals). The massacres of Sept. 11, 2001, may well have been designed as pay-back with interest. Some might indeed ask whether the cycle will ever end.

The short answer, however, to concern over retribution is that the “war” now being planned by the United States and its allies against terrorism is primarily motivated by the need for self-defense against future attacks rather than the revenge of “life for life, eye for eye.”

The more complicated answer is that the moral teachings cited against vengeance were intended to influence individuals rather than nations. Paul Tillich, among other philosophers, has deplored efforts to “make the state into a person” by applying strictures of personal morality to national decision-making (*My Search for Absolutes*, 106). Numerous practitioners of foreign policy (such as George Kennan) have argued that the only moral imperative for a nation is whatever best serves the interests of its people.

By that standard, the United States is embarked on the right course if, that is, it wins the war as promised. I’ve no desire to unleash my chainsaw against another hedge any time soon.

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