Crumbling pillars: Anarchy at home and abroad

by William F. May in the July 12, 2003 issue

The attacks on the World Trade Center on September 11, 2001, constituted an attack not simply on America but on the modern world order. One of the proud towers of the modern world is confidence in reason—not in the human power for reason (the ancient world celebrated that power) but rather the powers acquired through reason. Modern science yields technologies that benefit humankind. So we proclaimed on the surface of the moon: one small step for man, a giant step for mankind. However, today those hostile to modernity have argued that Western power leads only to the mastery of some men over others. So bring down the tower of technical reason.

The second tower of the modern world is the social contract state. According to Hobbes's account, the state comes into being in order to protect us from death. We give to the state a monopoly over the power of death through the police department, the fire department and the military. In exchange, the state assures us that when we go to sleep, we will not be murdered in the night; when we go to work, we will not be incinerated; when we read our mail, we will not be lethally infected.

Perpetrators of random violence seek to expose the social contract state in its relative powerlessness. Decades ago, when the Irish conflict erupted in the bombing of various pubs in London, a member of Parliament said, "From now on, every man his own magistrate." Scotland Yard cannot protect you. Random violence suffuses everyday life with uncertainty and therefore with a dread before the anarchic.

The terrorist attack doesn't seem to fit into the ordered cause-and-effect world of political means and ends. What is its political utility? What does one hope to accomplish by a propaganda of deed? Persuade the power-holders? Make life intolerable for the society at large so as to compel it to attend to a grievance that a minority finds unbearable? The terrorist attack seems only to galvanize hatred and fear.

Terrorism cannot be wholly understood as a political strategy. It also reflects a kind of religious ecstasy. Whatever the specifics of their religious tradition, terrorists have often depended for their foot soldiers upon ecstatics who stand outside the ordinary, practical world of means and ends. They consummate a deed that has become an end-in-itself.

Formally considered, the concept of an action which is an end-in-itself puts us rather close to the religious meaning of celebration. As Josef Pieper pointed out, “To celebrate a festival means to do something which is in no way tied up to other goals; it has been removed from all ‘so that’ and ‘in order to.’ True festivity cannot be imagined as residing anywhere but in the realm of activity that is meaningful in itself.” In the case of terrorism, of course, we are talking about a festival of death, a celebration that has its own priest and victim and that carries with it the likely risk that the priest himself will become one of the victims. The rest of us become awed witnesses to this liturgical action through the medium of the media.

A government seeking to stop terrorism—whether Russia, Indonesia, the United States or Israel—faces in reverse the same dynamics of irrational and counterproductive politics. Disproportionate retaliatory action is difficult to curtail because it offers, by discharging a boundless resentment, an immediate satisfaction, even though it may solve no problem. In this sense, argues Thomas L. Friedman of the *New York Times*, Ariel Sharon lives in the present. He offers no future.

In the first stage of the American reaction to the attack of September 11, American leaders seemed aware of the problem of shaping the future. The president talked about the importance of humility and the fair treatment of Muslims and about the ultimate necessity of nation-building in Afghanistan. The government seemed aware that, after overthrowing the Taliban government, we should not leave Afghanistan in the lurch, as we had earlier when we helped engineer the defeat of the Soviets there. If we simply kill a hundred possible terrorists in Afghanistan and do little about the swamp of poverty, hunger, despair and political disarray in that country and elsewhere in the Third World, we will fail to “dry out the breeding ground of terrorists.” We may simply produce thousands of terrorists in their place.

By October 2002, however, saber-rattling replaced staying power in our response to the world scene. In Afghanistan, we have engaged in what Michael Ignatieff has called “nation-building lite.” The passions of war aroused, we diverted attention from Afghanistan to the prospect of a preemptive strike against Iraq, not simply to

remove banned weapons but to replace the regime. Government leaders also proposed a long-term weapons policy that would brook no rivals among nations or any combinations of nations.

A rather clear vision of America and its role underlies the policies of hard-liners. Hawks liken America to ancient Rome. We are not a nation-state *primus inter pares*, but *primus super omnes*. Robert D. Kaplan notes approvingly the ascendancy of civilian tough guys in the Defense Department over the State Department. His book *Warrior Politics* (2002) carries the subtitle, *Why Leadership Demands a Pagan Ethos*. America occupies the position today of imperial Rome in stabilizing the world, and Kaplan recommends a sacred canon of literature to guide leaders who wield such power: Livy, Sun Tzu, Thucydides, Machiavelli, Hobbes, Malthus, Alexander Hamilton and Tiberius. Machismo rules. If you want to be a Tiberius today, get yourself elected president of the United States.

The hawks' critics, such as Joseph S. Nye, recognize the analogy to Rome but recommend an alternative response. The former assistant secretary of defense is no pacifist, no advocate of dismantling the world's superpower, no mocker of the value of order in world affairs. However, he asks that the United States think through what it takes to act appropriately as the country which "bestrides the world like a colossus," a country that "dominates business, commerce, and communications; its economy . . . the world's most successful, its military might second to none."

Behaving like a Hobbesian state won't do the job. To effect outcomes it wants, such a nation must recognize the importance of "soft power"—cultural and ideological appeal—as well as the "hard power"—military and economic—at its disposal. We cannot wield power for long as "a single imperial power unilaterally struggling against multiple corrosive forces.'' Our influence in a turbulent world will decline swiftly if we spurn or bypass international agreements and institutions and if we define American economic interests narrowly, making financial decisions at a distance (which, in a global economy, too often resembles bombing at a distance). Politically and economically, we will leave behind only the tinder for conflagrations in the decades to come.

We cannot ignore the more interior threats of anarchy at home. Rome was a republic before it was an empire, and the empire eventually faltered after the soul of the republic withered. Roman history poses questions not only for imperial America but for the internal health of the republic of America. Nye wisely includes in his book on

foreign policy a chapter on “Democracy in America.” The threat to America from abroad stirs less anxiety than the potential for turmoil at home. One does not want to exaggerate here.

Obviously, nothing so traumatic has happened in present-day America as the shaking of the foundations which the Russians underwent in the ’80s, and nothing so upsetting as the turbulent politics of the late ’60s and ’70s in the U.S. Still, danger signs persist despite several decades of prosperity.

The deterioration of neighborhoods in our inner cities, the decline of elemental safety—never mind education—in many of our schools, the burgeoning of jail populations (to the point that we have the highest percentage of incarcerated citizens of any country in the industrial world), the great strains on the family, the general slackening of discipline, which a consumerist and media-driven society relentlessly encourages, and a huge transfer of wealth in the 1980s and ’90s (during this period, the upper 1 percent of Americans more than doubled its wealth, while the lowest 20 percent suffered an actual decline)—all these changes signal a community at risk.

Some 20 percent of American children live in officially calculated (and therefore underestimated) poverty; over 40 million Americans have no health care insurance; and well over 20 million are underinsured. The majority of those without health care coverage are the working poor, whose children attend schools vastly overcrowded and underfunded, with little access through the school system to those skills that might help them negotiate life in an Information Age.

Most worries about eventual turmoil in this country have centered on the emergence of a permanent underclass, not the temporary underclass of newly arrived immigrants but a permanent “internal proletariat.” In his *Study of History*, Arnold Toynbee defined an internal proletariat as a large body of people who are in the society but not of it, because they do not participate adequately in the fundamental goods which the society has to offer. Measured by that standard, the wealthiest nation the world has ever seen has been industriously creating an internal proletariat, thus preparing the way for the fulfillment of Toynbee’s prophecy that most “high civilizations” die, not by the weapons of outsiders, but by their own hands. They die by suicide, not murder.

The dominant class shows the most worrisome symptoms of an approaching instability. Classically, conservatives have prized order and abhorred instability and chaos. Their religious vision entailed a moral corollary: members of the guardian class should accept some measure of responsibility for sustaining the stability and well-being of the society at large. However, today many of the most successful members of our society, instead of sustaining order, have been rather busily engaged in what Robert Reich has called “the secession of the successful.” They tend to withdraw into gated communities, with private security guards and “enclaves of good schools, excellent health care, and first-rate infrastructures—all the while scoffing at almost all functions of government, thus cutting off the supply of taxes for most public undertakings—leaving much of the rest of the population behind.” Too many of the most favored and powerful have abandoned the Puritan ideal of the “city built on a hill” (language to which Ronald Reagan once appealed) and aspire to living in a mansion behind walls, where they can act out the anarchic fantasy of doing what pleases them.

Meanwhile, we have witnessed the sudden evanescence of stock values in institutions that seemed so tangibly ascendant—Enron, Worldcom, Global Crossing, McLeod USA, Cendant, Sunbeam, Waste Management, Dynegy, Qwest and Adelphia Communications. Chief executives in these and many other firms enjoyed salaries, bonuses and other perks as much as 400 times the average salaries in their companies. Half of the top 200 American chief executives received in 2001 an average of $50 million in stock options. (This device kept off the books actual corporate expenses against profits, thus jacking up the value of their own stocks.) Some executives took advantage of insider knowledge to sell off their company stocks before the bubble burst; and most chief executives enjoyed golden parachutes to escape future financial contingencies of the sort that ordinary earthlings face.

In a global, cyberspace economy, some corporate leaders tend to become an elusive, disembodied, aerial elite, emotionally protected by distance from the mayhem and suffering they wreak. Kevin Phillips has captured the pneumatic element in this withdrawal: Virtual corporations “were all head—for finance, legal, marketing, design, and research and development functions—and little or no body, in the sense of fixed manufacturing capacity.” This picture of all head and no body conforms to our cartoon images of the ghostly, the apparitional.

During this shedding of embodied life and responsibility, where were the purported guardians of the common good? Accountants belong to the only profession that explicitly carries the word “public” in its self-description—certified public accountants. But accountants compromised the clarity and integrity of their public role when they defined themselves solely as make-up artists, emphasizing quarterly reports for the sake of stock market prices or annual returns for tax purposes.

As for politicians, they have increasingly depended massively on campaign funds from interest groups to keep them in office. Not surprisingly, many politicians have run for office opposed to the government as though it were a foreign power, not an instrument of national purpose. To that end, they have starved regulatory agencies so that they cannot perform their proper jobs or, as in the case of the Environmental Protection Agency, assigned them the task of doing themselves out of a job.

During a ten-year period, the Internal Revenue Service suffered a 26 percent decrease in permanent employees, despite a 14 percent increase in tax returns to monitor. Prosecutions of tax cheats dropped by half from what they were ten years earlier; also, the government selectively audited those making less than $200,000 a year much more often than the wealthy, partly because the tax avoidance strategies of the wealthy are especially difficult to monitor and enforce. More than 3 million corporations operate worldwide with no identifiable owners; moreover, wealthy individuals “may control as much as 17 trillion of assets in jurisdictions with opaque bank secrecy laws.”

Even in the wake of well-financed terrorist attacks, economic libertarians have fought reforms aimed at secret accounts, offshore tax havens, private banks, shelf corporations and correspondent accounts that accommodate and sanitize secret accounts. Companies that locate offshore to avoid U.S. taxes have not lost their freedom to bid for homeland security contracts paid for by taxes. The tax bill, signed into law in June 2001, failed to remove loopholes, and it reduced taxes, largely for the wealthy, by $1.35 trillion across a ten-year period.

Beneath such discrete policy debates lies the question of the readiness of the powerful to pay for civilization. As Oliver Wendell Holmes Jr. put it, “I like to pay taxes. With them, I buy civilization.” Concluding a book on *The Cheating of America*, Charles Lewis and Bill Allison return the issue of tax evasion and tax policies to the basic question of order vs. anarchy. “The role of law is one of the greatest inheritances of civilization, the great bedrock against anarchy and barbarism. And

the perils of having a financial Wild West . . . are all too real."

One might conclude that I have written the foregoing from the stance of a moderate conservative who derives the principle of justice from its contribution to the primary good of order. If we are arbitrary and overbearing in foreign policy and unfair in domestic policies, we will reap a whirlwind. Such reasoning assumes that, of the two basic goods, order is primary; justice, secondary.

Such a position, in my judgment, does not satisfactorily honor the claims of justice. John Stuart Mill once argued that the claim of justice depends upon its utility in producing good outcomes. Treat people fairly because if you don't, they will be upset, discontented and unproductive. Turmoil will ensue. That may be true in good part. However, Mill's argument overlooks the capacity of the silver-tongued tyrant—domestic or public—to obscure from his victims the fact that he has dealt with them unfairly. Injustice is independently wrong and not simply because it produces human turmoil.

Further, Mill fails to uncover the reason why people get upset when they discover that they or others have been treated unfairly. They grow angry with unjust treatment, not because such practice will produce bad outcomes but because, irrespective of outcomes, they perceive such treatment as wrong.

Order serves to protect a society against anarchy and the tyranny that follows in anarchy's wake. The French and Russian revolutions taught us that. However, at the deepest levels, the philosophical and religious traditions of the West tend to place truth and justice at the foundation of all else in our common life. Truth and justice are ultimate; order, while fundamental, ultimately derives from them. The Greeks expressed this view philosophically when they asserted that *nomos* (the law, the source of order) does not stand higher than *nous* and *logos* (that is, reason and the word). Rulers should not impose from the top down laws which are opaque and arbitrary, incapable of rational explication and defense.

Both ancient Jews and Christians expressed this priority religiously when they proclaimed that the God of order and peace is, first and foremost, righteous and just. To be sure, the first chapters of Genesis narrate the great ordering deeds of God, but righteousness enfolds them. God saw each of his mighty deeds and pronounced it good. The prophets warned that this cosmic ordering hardly sanctifies the machinations of thrones, parliaments, religious castes, plutocrats or other wielders

of abusive power. Indeed, the prophets actually saw God’s spacious justice as a way of creating order, whereas rulers of a prevailing order are most likely to see justice as a threat.

Finally, the New Testament daringly grounds both ordering and doing justly in the final reign of charity, so much so that scripture imputes to the Christ a role in God’s original ordering. The world comes into being through the Word, the Word which is “the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation; for in him all things were created, in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible.” This great charitable ordering of all things does not simply found and stabilize the world about us and create a way station for settlers in the middle of the road. In the rough terrain of politics, it creates a preferential option (respectful of order, but nevertheless pressing) for justice and charity.

So the story has it. He did not walk down the middle of the road but turned aside to help. He consorted with the disdained and the despised; he searched out the lost coin, the lost sheep; he spoke for the poor, the meek, the sick, the bereaved, the voiceless in the courts, and the silent in their graves. Christians and other monotheists have a responsibility to push politics and their own lives in that direction.

This article is adapted from William F. May's presidential address to the Society of Christian Ethics.