A Provocation at the World Trade Center

by Richard Kostelanetz

Recalling what I wrote twenty years ago, probably for the monthly *LIBERTY*

As I write, two days after the airplane attack, downtown Manhattan, where I live, is devoid of auto traffic, as auxiliary police have closed all the roads south of Houston Street. Even though radio announcers repeatedly called this the worst disaster in our history, there has been no panic, no looting. Stores are closed. Almost everyone is grim-faced and walking; a few have bicycles. The one friend known to work at the WTC has emailed me to say that she was late getting to her job and thus stayed home. So did the building neighbor whose law office is across the street from the WTC. I called the home of the fire captain with whom I regularly swim. As I look down West Broadway, where I once saw the twin towers, there is still continuously billowing smoke, now produced by Lord knows what. Because the winds customarily run off the Hudson River directly toward the east, those of us in SoHo, less than two miles to the north, have been spared the fumes.

The fact that it happened reflects first a failure of international intelligence, not only on our part but upon our allies', beginning with the Israelis, who have traditionally bested us at understanding the Arab world. The disaster also reflects a failure in airport security that apparently allowed some dubious characters with weapons to board not one or two or three but FOUR commercial planes around the same time. (Did other conspirators, likewise prospective suicidal pilots, fail to pass airport security elsewhere?)

Similarly, how could a plane from Boston destined for Los Angeles get to approach New York without generating an alarm? Aren't air controllers required to report any loss of contact, as happened here? Once one plane crashed into the 80th floor of a skyscraper, why wasn't the air force mobilized to intercept a possible successor?

   The fact that the WTC buildings disintegrated from below indicates to me that explosives must have already been placed in those buildings. One thesis of David Hoffman's brilliant, if neglected, book on the Oklahoma City disaster holds that explosives on a truck outside could not alone have caused the building's destruction from within. There must have been bombs placed within the Murrah building. In the WTC, as well as at the airports, there must have been a failure of security, not to mention intelligence.

   New York being an open city, the media have presented numerous press conferences live and unedited. They are instructive, mostly demonstrating vividly that reporters are more vulgar and opportunistic than politicians—painfully so.

   When I hear the American military promising an overwhelming response, I shudder. Who? Where? As I've written before, I have doubts about the existence of Osamu Ben Laden, who might be a convenient fiction created by our intelligence agencies and their flacks in the press to explain evil that cannot otherwise be identified, much as the epithet "virus" is used to explain illnesses that cannot be specifically diagnosed.

   Am I alone in thinking that the current Middle East conflagrations resulted from a provocation by Ariel Sharon, who knew how to win a coming Israeli election—incite Palestinians into violence that, Israelis believe, his opponents cannot suppress. Sure enough they went for it. Once Sharon's mob entered the Old City, some Palestinians reacted with violence, and Sharon eventually won. It seems obvious to me in retrospect that had they not thrown stones, Sharon would

have lost the election, the Palestinian economy would not have sunk into its current pits, and Middle Eastern peace might be more possible.

Likewise with this provocation. Military retaliation will only escalate risk for Americans, not only abroad, as before, but on these shores, as now. Hell, I wanted to see us retaliate massively until I recognized this is not a wise idea. Remember that these guys don't play by "civilized" rules. They come from an economy profligate enough to train young male jet pilots for suicide. Just as this attack was beyond common imagination, so could the next one be. Remember that father Bush established a precedent for opportunistic Middle-East bullying to revive sagging popularity at home. No matter what we do, don't kill innocent people; that's what evil people do.

Instead of falling for the terrorists' bait, we would do better to keep our enemies anxious expecting retaliation that does not come, instead focussing more upon airline security at home, not only in the terminals but on the planes. Consider, for instance, a more secure locked door to every airplane cockpit. For the past quarter century, El Al has put on every plane an armed security officer, usually a retired military man. A friend flying first class in El Al once told me that the burly young guy sitting beside him, as he put it, "didn't look first class." As these security guys have shot prospective hijackers dead, granting suicide bombers their final wish *before* any damage is done, El Al flights remain secure. With students doing pre-boarding security, rather than low-paid workers, El Al has also developed ways of identifying possibly problematic people before they ever get near a plane. (No one who has ever flown El Al can ever forget the interrogation. Tower Air, owned by Israeli, approached it during its short existence.)

If, as I suspect, American intelligence can establish a list of terrorists around the world, why not establish a

reward of one million dollars cash, nontaxable, to anyone delivering verifiable evidence that he has/they have taken out one of these perpetrators or potential perpetrators. Two subsidiary benefits of such a deputizing program would be keeping American soldiers at home, where they belong, and making the perps scared of those immediately around them. Should anyone on the list think his inclusion a mistake, he should be guaranteed safety if he turns himself into American authorities. A thousand rewards would cost a billion bucks, which is a lot less than Congress is willing to appropriate.

Secondly, and less popularly, may I reluctantly propose that we should consider forbidding all immigrants from Arab countries and all naturalized Arab-Americans from boarding airplanes originating in the US until the perpetrators and their accomplices are found. Quite simply, instead of merely showing "identification," prospective fliers will need to present a passport or other document that incidentally shows place of birth. Consider as well forbidding all immigration and visits here from afflicted countries.

Admittedly, this is a kind of "profiling" to which all politicians nowadays are piously pledged to oppose; but it is still privately done by those necessarily concerned with security, such as New York City cabbies. Thanks to relatives and contacts, Arabs here as well as Arabs who want to come have access intelligence and then incentive, apparently unavailable to the US government. Moderates in Muslim countries will need to prosecute terrorists, rather than tolerating them. I assume that many thus disadvantaged know someone who knows someone who knows something that should be conveyed to the corrective authorities. Consider this move to be the privatizing of international policing. (The wealthier among them might evade the restriction by founding their own airline, no doubt at some expense.) My wager is that, personally disadvantaged, Arab-Americans and Arab moderates abroad are more likely than any over-killing airforce to

swiftly realize WTC justice without causing needless additional damage at home.

P.S. later I proposed that the US could take peaceful revenge against Afghanistan by decriminalizing heroin the West, but the military-industrial complex ruled.