The McNamara Complex

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Shortly after the attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon I was participating in a panel discussion at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (M.I.T.) called "Technology, War and Terror." Although the panel had been billed as a "teach-in," the discussion was remarkably depoliticized. There was strikingly little analysis of United States policy in the Middle East and considerable talk of technocratic measures the U.S. might take to prevent future terrorist attacks—measures that ranged from improving airport security to enhancing development in the Third World so that there would be less poor people who felt left out of the great leap forward of globalization. Finally, an M.I.T. physics student approached the microphone and solemnly asked the panel if it wasn't true that the "problem" was not just Osama bin Laden, but, more broadly, "irrationality." Describing the presumed Islamic fundamentalism of the terrorists as just one manifestation of this irrationality, he suggested that M.I.T. had a special calling in the struggle against irrationality and that we all now had an obligation to fight terror by challenging irrationality wherever we found it—not least in the attachment of some members of the M.I.T. community to religious belief.

Looking into the face of this student I was reminded that rationality can itself become a fetish. A certain kind of attachment to rationality in the West can become so hyperbolic that it itself becomes—like the logical sophistry of scrip-

tural fundamentalists and legal strict constructionists recently described in Vincent Crapanzano's recent book on literalism as a cultural style (*Serving the Word: Literalism in America from the Pulpit to the Bench*)—a form of irrationalism wrapped in the garb of rationalism.

This Western fetishization of a spurious rationalism has been quite apparent in reactions to what, using a bland and colorless term for an epochal moment, we seem to be learning to call "the events of September 11." Thus many pundits, from *The New York Times*' Thomas Friedman down, have opined that the terrorists were not impelled by actual political grievances but by an atavistic reaction against rationalist modernity. As Friedman himself put it, "this is not a clash of civilizations—the Muslim world versus the Christian, Buddhist and Jewish worlds. The real clash today is not between civilizations, but within them—between those Muslims, Christians, Hindus, Buddhists and Jews with a modern and progressive outlook and those with a medieval one."[1] In a similar vein, Salman Rushdie has argued that the attackers of the World Trade Center were animated by "A loathing of modern society in general" and that they seek "the closing of those [Islamic] societies to the rival project of modernity."[2]

The crimes of September 11, such pundits keep telling us, were not really gestures of resistance against U.S. intervention in the Middle East or deluded expressions of solidarity with the long-suffering Palestinians, but were senseless manifestations of the derangement of a certain kind of Islamic mind by its encounter with the modern West. This theme is further driven home by the incessantly repetitive media evocations of the Taliban as the ultimate ambassadors for a reactionary traditionalism that bans everything from television to the mini-skirt. This is a media frame that exonerates U.S. policymakers from their partial responsibility for the derangement of Afghan society in the 1980s when, treating other people's country as a square on their cold war chessboard, they helped construct the very forces we now fear and deride, and it is a frame that reprises the stale dichotomies between tradition and modernity that were essential to the modernization theories of the 1960s and are now, at least within the academy, largely discredited. Within this frame the attacks of September 11 emerged not from a clash of interests, nor even from Samuel Huntington's "clash of civilizations," but from a clash between rationalist modernity and irrational tradition. This perception of the attacks is only compounded by the means of action chosen by the terrorists—an attack in which they deliberately destroyed their own bodies, thus violating the fundamental precept of Western economistic thinking, namely that actors rationally choose strategies that maximize their own well-being. (Never mind that the superpowers' posture of Mutual Assured Destruction during the Cold War was arguably based on a

similar willingness to achieve strategic goals through a technologically mediated embrace of suicide). In the context of a national security discourse that had already, since the end of the Cold War, begun to orient itself away from the grand struggle with a cunning but rational superpower rival (the Soviet Union) toward "rogue states" such as Iraq and North Korea—nations that supposedly could not be deterred even by nuclear threats to their very existence-- the suicide attacks amplified the sense that the U.S. was now at war with an incomprehensibly irrational "other" willing to annihilate itself in pursuit of its goals.

Of course, it is not quite true that the criminals of September 11 were irrational—at least not if one understands rationality in the Weberian sense of a clear-headed ability to systematically match means to ends in the manipulation of the world around us. If Mohammed Atta and his cohort had been less rational in this sense, more than 3,000 people in New York and Washington might still be alive. But everything we know about them suggests a meticulous and chilling rationality. It was this methodical rationality that enabled them to take over four separate planes at the same time in a remarkably choreographed operation and, having taken control of some of the ultimate symbols of Western technological sophistication, to fly three of the heavily fuelled planes into buildings in a way that seems to have been optimized to cause as much destruction as possible. While the motivation behind the attacks has been glossed in American media commentary as one of violent irrationalism, the attacks were planned and executed with a technical rationality that bears all the marks of Osama bin Laden's training in engineering—the signature discipline of the institution where I teach and an institution, I might note, where many who go on to become American weapons designers and war planners receive their first training.

The response of the U.S. government to the September 11 attacks has been to denounce their perpetrators as evil or irrational in press statements while seeking to engage them in a sort of rational bargaining process in which the currency is violence and destruction. Thus when U.S. Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld announced on October 7 that the U.S. and the United Kingdom had just begun bombing Afghanistan, his announcement repeatedly invoked the idioms of economic management and bargaining. "We… seek to raise the cost of doing business for foreign terrorists who have chosen Afghanistan from which to organize their activities," he said, adding that the U.S. attacks would "make clear to the Taliban and their supporters that harboring terrorists is unacceptable and carries a price."[3] Nor was such language confined to the Secretary of Defense. Both before and after the attacks commenced, the media were full of calls to make the Taliban or bin Laden "pay a price," to show the "cost" of attacking the U.S., and so on. To give one more example, chosen simply because

The New York Times, the newspaper of record, decided to print it in their letters column, a Mr. Barry Silverstein said on September 21, "our only hope of defeating terror is a fury that shocks the world and any government that believes that it can harbor murderers with impunity. Our 'proportionate responses' to embassy, airplane and ship bombings have only made the murderers brazen enough to carry out the World Trade Center attack. We need a disproportionate response."[4]

We have been here before, of course, in a time and place called Vietnam. That war effort was led by another U.S. Secretary of Defense, Robert McNamara, who, like Donald Rumsfeld, had extensive business experience, having been CEO of Ford Motor Company, and who looked at the world through the lens of operations research. A 1997 article in *The New York Times Magazine* profiled McNamara as he visited his former antagonists in Vietnam twenty years after the war had ended in an effort to understand how a superpower with the greatest arsenal in the world had managed to lose a war there despite its use of the most modern management techniques to prosecute that war. The article observed that "during the war [McNamara] was so impressed by the power of statistics that he tried to calculate how many deaths it would take to bring the Vietnamese to the bargaining table. Now he wanted to know why his reckoning had been wrong, why the huge casualties that he had helped inflict had failed to break the will of the men in Hanoi. He came and left with the most durable stereotype between enemies: that the other side is not sufficiently swayed by loss of life…He noted that while 58,000 Americans had been killed, the most authoritative estimate—in a September 1995 article by General Uoc—put the number of Vietnamese deaths at 3.6 million. "It's equivalent to 27 million Americans!" McNamara exclaimed…"What I thought was—and I was wrong—that a very high rate of casualties would lead them to be interested in trying to find a less costly way of achieving their objectives—i.e., negotiations."[5]

We could pause here to note that it was not only the Vietnamese commanders who seemed inured to the loss of life. Instead, I will observe that McNamara was trapped within the mindset of what James William Gibson, in his book The Perfect War, calls "techno-war"—a mindset within which it is assumed that war is a bargaining process between two technical systems for warfighting and that the side with the most resources will win. Commenting on the ability of a tiny Third World country to humiliate a superpower in Vietnam, and on the inability of the U.S. to recognize the strengths of the Vietminh's low-tech strategic rationality, Gibson writes:

"The deeply mechanistic view of the world can see bicycles of the Third World only as compared to the cars of the West. Bicycles cannot "beat" cars and

trucks and railroads and planes. But in 1954 the Vietnamese beat the French in a battle at Dien Bien Phu. Thousands of peasants cut trails through jungles and across mountains; thousands more dug tunnels close to French fortifications; thousands more walked alongside bicycles loaded with supplies for the Vietminh army. Social relationships between the Vietminh soldiers and the peasantry were such that thousands of peasants could be mobilized for the war effort. Social relationships that are rendered invisible by the modern regime of power and knowledge can defeat a system of power that conceives the world only in terms of technical-production systems. At the time the French were amazed at their loss. The Americans were similarly amazed many years later. They did not learn from the French because they thought that the French simply did not have enough tools of war; the United States had many more."[6]

When the World Trade Center was attacked, I was teaching a class on ethics and science at M.I.T. in which we were beginning to read about the bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. I was curious to see whether the events of September 11 would change the students' perceptions of that earlier tragedy. They had read a short article defending the atomic bombings as a way of shortening a brutal war, as well as a long and tortured piece by former national security adviser McGeorge Bundy in which he wondered whether it might have been possible to induce a prompt Japanese surrender without dropping the bombs by bargaining with the Japanese government over the survival of the emperor and the imminent invasion of Japan by Russia. They also read an excerpt from the moral philosopher Michael Walzer's book Just and Unjust Wars in which he argued that the bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki was absolutely unacceptable because it was carried out with the deliberate intention of causing large numbers of civilian deaths—an act expressly forbidden by contemporary theories of just war.[7] Reading the students' essays, I was struck that—only two weeks after terrorists had deliberately killed several thousand civilians in New York and Washington, in an attack that had sliced deeply into the consciousness of everyone I knew, the vast majority of the students in my class swept aside Walzer's argument against the bombing of Hiroshima. Most of the students' essays used the language of cost-benefit analysis to argue that, if more lives were saved by ending the war promptly than were expended in the bombing, then it did not matter whether these were the lives of civilians or official combatants. Most of the students did, however, criticize the bombing of Nagasaki as unnecessary—a gratuitous waste. A moral discourse was displaced by, or collapsed into, a language of managerial rationality in these M.I.T. students' thinking. This language of managerial rationality and cost-benefit calculation is an enormously powerful force in our time. It was the language of U.S. war planners in Vietnam. It is the

language of U.S. weapons designers and war planners today, and it is also, to shift to a different contemporary context, the language of the economists and corporate planners who superintend structural adjustment and economic globalization. It is a language within which people become abstractions whose interests, indeed their very chances for survival as living beings, can be weighed and measured and then assigned in a matrix of calculation. It is also, if we stop to look beneath the foreign accent and the invocations of Allah, the language of Osama bin Laden. Like Robert McNamara, he is also trying to calculate how many casualties his enemy is willing to endure before it will bargain on the terms of the U.S. role in the Middle East and, though he works from a cave rather than from the Pentagon, he is as interested as Robert McNamara ever was in the body count and its relation to his operational goals.

The politicians and the pundits tell us that the problem with Osama bin Laden, al Qaeda, and with the "rogue states" that sponsor them, is that they are evil, that they are irrational, and that they refuse to embrace modernity. I would like to suggest here that the problem is in a sense the reverse. They have internalized only too well the calculative discourse of technical rationality which is an essential part of modernity, and we should not allow the fact that they may wear turbans and beards to blind us to that. In this sense the problem is not that we have failed to spread modernity, whatever we take that problematic term to mean, but that we have spread it only too well so that the technical rationality of our own alchemists of death in the weapons laboratories and the Pentagon is now mirrored by men in caves with laptops and encrypted satellite phones calculating their own perfect war. There is in the U.S. today a sort of obsession with technique—a sense that the experts and planners can save us if only they are let loose to redesign airport security and the public health infrastructure and to manage the war in Afghanistan. While it obviously makes sense to take all the precautions we can against future attacks, we must realize that the discourse of technical rationality is part of the problem as well as part of the solution and that, unless we ask fundamental political questions about the relationship between the U.S. and the rest of the world, the U.S. will find the cognitive and technological tools of modernity being used against it. Then it may find itself repeating in Afghanistan the lessons it failed to learn from the tragedy of Robert McNamara in Vietnam.

Notes

[1]Thomas Friedman, "Smoking or Non-Smiking?" *New york Times*, September 14, 2001, p. A27.
[2]Salman Rushdie, "Yes, This is About Islam." *New York Times*, November 2, 2001, p.A25.
[3]Rumsfeld and Myers Briefing on Enduring Freedom, http://www.defenselink.mil/news/Oct2000/t10072001_tl1007ds.html, accessed October 31, 2001.
[4]Barry Silverstein, letter to *New York Times* September 21, 2001 p.A26.
[5]David Shipton, "Robert McNamara and the Ghosts of Vietnam." *New York Times Magazine,* August 10, 1997, p.30.
[6]James William Gibson, *The Perfect War: Technowar in Vietnam*. Boston: Atlantic Monthly Press, 1986, pp.17-18.
[7]Michael Walzer. *Just and Unjust Wars: A Moral Argument With Historical Illustrations*, New York: Basic Books, 1977, pp.263-268.