

October 20th, 2004

# THE AMERICAN THINKER

[ABOUT](#)[CONTACT](#)[MERCHANDISE](#)[DONATIONS](#)[LINKS](#)[CONTRIBUTORS](#)[HOME](#)[ARCHIVES](#)

December/2003

[ARTICLES...](#)

## The Lessons of 9-11

October 20th, 2004

Not even President Bush's biggest fans claim that he's articulate, and the President himself cheerfully pokes fun at his inability to use the English language very well. But when it comes to the War on Terrorism, this isn't a laughing matter. Every time the President gives a major speech about the War - as he did again on Monday in New Jersey - he winds up asserting his policy, rather than explaining it. He alludes to "the lessons of 9-11," but never quite spells out what these lessons are. While the President's speeches are satisfying to those who already agree with him, they aren't persuasive to many of those who don't.

The immediate danger is that this latter group proves large enough to cost the President his re-election. The longer-term danger is that, even if the President wins on November 2, support for his policies overseas will continue to erode. This will make it more difficult in the years ahead for him and, to put it bluntly, for Western civilization itself - to prevail. So it's worth taking a moment to try and spell out the lessons of 9-11 - lessons the President's own policies make clear that he's learned, and lessons all the rest of us both here and overseas must learn quite literally to save our lives.

### A Tolerance for Horseplay

Sometimes, the best way to approach a big point is with a small story: Imagine that you are taking a pack of cub scouts to a ball game. For those of you whose lives have not been enriched by this experience, what you get is a day in which the kids will push each other, shove each other, throw food and generally wreak havoc - all to the incessant, high-decibel sound of jokes and insults, most of them relating to bodily functions. The trick is to allow the kids to have fun and blow off steam, and to intervene only when serious injury appears likely. In short, you need to have a very high tolerance for horseplay. You survive by focusing all your thoughts on the prospect of sitting in your La-Z-Boy that evening, with the remote-control in one hand and a drink in the other.

Now imagine that you take this pack of cub scouts to an exhibition of eighteenth-century Venetian glass. My friends, your tolerance for horseplay drops - to a very small fraction above zero:

*Okay, guys, listen up. From the moment we walk through these doors, there will be no pushing, no shoving, no throwing food and absolutely no goofing around. The cost of breaking one piece of this stuff is unacceptable, and "Oops, sorry," just won't cut it. So if I even think one of you is about to give a push, or a shove - I'm coming down on your head like a ton of bricks and you're out of this pack forever. No apologies, no exceptions, no second chances. Any questions, gentlemen?*

Those kids will have no trouble grasping the point: it's a different set of circumstances, so the scoutmaster's attitude has changed. The cost of a disaster is high, so his tolerance for horseplay is low. If you don't like it - too bad.

What we learned on September 11 is this: We are now living in a world in which a small number of people can kill a large number of people very quickly. They can hijack airplanes and fly them into buildings, spread anthrax spores through the mail, pour botulism into a city's water supply, detonate a "dirty" backpack filled with radioactive waste in a shopping mall, or even get their hands on a nuclear device and set it off in one of our cities. And so the lesson of 9-11 couldn't be more clear: our tolerance for political horseplay must drop, to just a small fraction above zero.

Now you see why going after al Qaeda and other terrorist groups is necessary, but not sufficient. As long as there are states willing to play footsie with the terrorists by giving them sanctuary, selling them arms, laundering their money, providing false passports, or helping them to shift people and equipment around the world - and as long as there are states whose own policies and actions threaten mass murder - civilization cannot be safe. Even if we had a first-rate intelligence service (and the CIA, alas, has a long way to go before it's razor-sharp and playing offense), in today's world trouble happens too fast to stop it. By the time you see an attack coming, it's too late. And so horrific will be the catastrophe that merely getting the creeps who did it won't be good enough. Since we cannot reasonably expect to stop every planned attack - to be successful 100 percent of the time - we no longer can tolerate the kind of regimes that would even think of helping terrorists or of launching their own attack.

This is why Saddam Hussein had to go. Whatever may turn out to be the truth about Iraq's weapons of mass destruction - and it looks like the recent Duelfer report has corrected the CIA's infamously wrong 2002 National Intelligence Estimate - there's no question but that Saddam Hussein was playing footsie with al Qaeda, with the PLO, and with Hamas, and that at the very least he was working with France and Russia to get the UN sanctions lifted and then resume his WMD program in some form. In today's ultra-dangerous world, this is more than enough to justify our overthrow of his regime.

### **Some Leaders are Crazy**

Equally important, the overthrow of Saddam Hussein sends a clear message to other governments that our tolerance for "horseplay" has dropped. Libya's Muammar al-Qadhafi obviously got the message. At least so far, neither Iran's mullahs nor North Korea's Kim seem to have figured it out. Whether they will in time to avoid a head-on clash with the US and our allies in the civilized world remains to be seen.

Personally, I doubt it - and for a reason that rarely gets talked about in polite company: the leaders of some countries are, quite literally, insane. There is nothing new or startling about this. It is sometimes the case that crazy people are also very talented, and throughout history such people from time to time have achieved political power. Think of Adolph Hitler, or Joseph Stalin. (Hitler's insanity is well understood; if you don't think Stalin was equally nuts, read Simon Sebag Montefiore's magnificent new [history](#) of the Soviet dictator and his Politburo comrades, *Stalin: Court of the Red Tsar*.) What is new is this: in today's world the combination of political power and insanity is too dangerous to tolerate. In a rich country, this lethal combination gives rise to nuclear weapons and the itch to use them, or to sell them to someone who will. And even in a

poor country, a leader who is insane can use the wherewithal of a state - its sovereign territory, its treasury, its diplomatic cover - either to acquire weapons of mass destruction that are less expensive than nuclear weapons, such as chemical or biological weapons, or to help terrorists to acquire these weapons.

Oliver Wendell Holmes was one of our country's greatest jurists, and one day a fellow judge accused Holmes of shifting his position on some issue. Holmes replied: "When the facts change, I change my mind. What do you do, sir?"

The lesson of 9-11 is that the world has changed, so we must change our policy for civilization to survive. Of course honorable people can disagree over how best to deal with a world in which a small number of people can kill a large number of people very quickly, in which access to weapons of mass destruction is widespread, and in which the leaders of some countries are clinically insane. By all means let us argue over which specific countries and organizations we need to target, how best to do it, and when. But there is no excuse for refusing to acknowledge that circumstances have changed, and that so too must our approach to national security.

Whatever may be his faults and shortcomings, President Bush "gets it." So do Great Britain's Tony Blair, Australia's John Howard, Italy's Silvio Berlusconi, Spain's (sadly defeated) Jose Maria Aznar, and others who understand what it will take to protect civilization from destruction. They resemble nothing so much as scoutmasters who have taken on the responsibility for looking after the kids and getting them home safely. And the world leaders who criticize them resemble nothing so much as selfish and self-centered parents who let others do the heavy lifting while they go shopping or sit home with their feet up. A bit of gratitude for the scoutmasters would be nice. A bit of help would be even better.

*Herbert E. Meyer served during the Reagan Administration as Special Assistant to the Director of Central Intelligence and Vice Chairman of the CIA's National Intelligence Council. His DVD on [The Siege of Western Civilization](#) is a nation-wide best-seller.*

***Herbert E. Meyer***

---

**[Go Top - Home](#)**