

[Eckersley, R. 2001, Middle Americans yearn for a spiritual sea change, *The Sydney Morning Herald*, 3 December, p.12.]

After the war, building a durable peace

Richard Eckersley

With the war on terrorism in Afghanistan close to a victorious end and the growing speculation about what happens next, it seems a good time to raise a fundamental issue that so far appears to have been overlooked: at one level, Americans and those who stand against them in the war may agree.

Commentators on the terrorist attacks on the US fall into two broad camps. In one are those who say that the US's persistent, often self-interested, meddling in the affairs of other nations and the gross global inequalities in wealth make the attacks explicable (although not justifiable). The American people may be 'innocent' victims of the attacks, but the American nation is not.

In the other camp are those who say the terrorists (and many in the first camp) are driven by a hatred of America (and modernity more generally) and all it stands for: its lifestyle, its values, - and its success. Jonathan Rauch, writing in *Atlantic Online*, says the terrorists, like radical environmentalists and anti-globalists, are driven by a horror of the open society, with its 'uncontrolled political and social change', 'spontaneous creativity', 'freedom from the tyrannies of overlords' and 'freedom to build and inhabit a fluid, creative culture'.

There is another perspective, which in some sense straddles these two viewpoints. It seems to have been missing from the analysis, which is not surprising given that it is, at first glance, far removed from the terrible events of September 11 and requires a different frame of reference. It concerns the evidence that Americans themselves have deep concerns about their own society and lifestyle.

One exit poll conducted at the last American presidential election found that a majority of voters said the most important issue influencing their vote was not jobs, education or taxes, but moral and ethical values.

In a wide-ranging 1999 survey of Americans' views on the last and next century, the Pew Research Centre found that despite a prevailing mood of economic and technological triumphalism, Americans expressed misgivings about the moral climate, 'with people from all walks of life looking sceptically on the ways in which the country has changed both culturally and spiritually'. Only a minority (44 per cent) said life in America had got better since the 1950s.

A 1999 Gallup poll found that 49 per cent of Americans believed there was a moral crisis in the US, while another 41 per cent believed there were major moral problems. Asked about the changes in moral and cultural values since the 1960s, 32 per cent thought that on the whole the changes had been good because the country had become more tolerant, while 64 per cent thought they were bad because it had become too permissive. Only 23 per cent admitted to being optimistic about future moral and ethical standards in the US, while 43 per cent were pessimistic.

These results support those of another survey, conducted in 1998 by *The Washington Post*, Harvard University and the Henry J. Kaiser Family Foundation. The survey found that 76 per cent of Americans thought the country was ‘pretty seriously off on the wrong track’ when it came to values and moral beliefs. Over half (55 per cent) believed ‘people and groups that hold values similar to yours’ were losing influence in American life in general, while 66 per cent said Americans were ‘greatly divided’ over the most important values.

While the moral qualms appear to have existed for some time, they may have intensified and clearly reflect the characteristics of the modern American way of life. A 1995 study, *Yearning for Balance*, conducted for the Merk Family Fund, says Americans share a deep and abiding concern about the core values driving their society. They believe that materialism, greed, and excess characterise the way they live and underlie many of their worst social ills.

The report notes that focus group participants agreed firmly that there is a tension between their own priorities and those of society. ‘They view this tension as underlying many of the other concerns they raised....When pressed on their views, people insist they are talking about a single core problem with many aspects, not a list of separate issues.’ ‘Too much of a good thing’ was the phrase many people used, with freedom and material abundance uppermost in their minds.

‘The frenzied, excessive quality of American life today has left people yearning for balance in their lives and in their society. They feel that an essential side of life centered on family, friends and community has been pushed aside by the dominant ethic of “more, more, more”, and they are looking for ways to restore some equilibrium.

‘People associate the public discourse today with acrimony, divisiveness, and gridlock; most do not want any part of that... When they hear each other describe common concerns about misplaced values, children, and the environment, and have a chance to explain their longing for a more balanced life, a spark appears -- people begin to imagine the possibility of change.’

Research by a Harvard economist, Juliet Schor, has identified a new form of consumerism marked by ‘competitive acquisition’. In her book, *The Overspent American*, she says large numbers of Americans spend more than they say they would like to, more than they realise they are spending, more than is fiscally prudent, and in ways that are collectively, if not individually, self-defeating.

It comes as no surprise, then, that the ‘ecological footprint’ of each North American – a measure of their consumption pressure on the earth’s resources – is about twice that of Western Europeans and more than six times that of people in low-income countries, according to the World Wide Fund for Nature. If ever there was a nation that does not need to consume more, for its own sake and for the sake of the rest of the world, it is the US – except, of course, in terms of the modern global economic system.

We have heard a good deal recently about the heroic role of the American consumer in propping up the global economy, and concerns that the terrorist attacks will tip the American and global economies into recession. Americans have been urged to ‘spend, spend, spend’ in an attempt to forestall this eventuality. Despite the social and environmental costs, American leaders have told the world the American lifestyle is not open to negotiation – apparently not even with their own citizens.

At this level of analysis, then, we can find at least some common ground between the American people and those who 'hate' America. President Bush has said that Americans are re-assessing their priorities in life in the wake of the attacks. If September 11 proves to be a tipping point in the American way of life in this sense, then it will indeed be one good to come of the tragedy, as Bush remarked.

As we begin to plan the peace after the war, America – and the rest of the West - will have to think hard about these fundamental issues of lifestyles and values if that peace is to endure.

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Note: The published version included some deletions and other minor editorial changes.