

SOUND BITES, ISLAM AND FOGGY BOTTOM

In the light of the Sept. 11 attacks, many questions have been raised about the United States, her leadership, and her war against terrorism. At the same time, questions have been raised about anti-Americanism, Islam and the Arab world — as well as the oft-repeated question: “Why do they [i.e., Muslims, Arabs and others] hate us?” At this point real confusion emerges, when everybody mentions “we,” “they,” and “us,” assuming you know exactly who he or she is referring to. This is not a philosophical issue. It is a reality, or at least a perception we have all been living through since Sept. 11.

For these frequently raised questions, the pundits, talking heads and “experts” on Islam, on terrorism and the Middle East (very often the same individuals) are ready to give answers (never saying “I don’t know”) — albeit mostly fast, ready-made ones. The ease with which they answer these questions sometimes leads me to wonder, if the answer is so simple and clear, how did the policy-makers and strategists miss it — or, if the answer is known already, why do people keep asking the same question again and again? Is it to show their knowledge or to hide their ignorance — or both?

Unfortunately, over six months after the attacks, the sound-bite mentality remains the dominant approach in explaining and justifying the war against terrorism — and in understanding “the enemy.” Where else can you find a 24-hour flood — practically a bombardment — of sound bites, if not on CNN and Fox News (the latter just a bit louder)? CNN did not wait long before coining the term “America’s New War.” We

all remember “Desert Storm,” the “line in the sand” and other terms, made for television, with every crisis and subsequent military involvement in the last decade and more.

And, in each of those crises over the last 12 or so years, international correspondent Christiane Amanpour was there, on each new front line. Wherever she shows up, a war is coming if it is not there already — as many colleagues and friends reminded me at the beginning of last October. Welcome to CNN-ized foreign policy and the “Amanpour factor,” which is shaping the mood in the United States and abroad. Are these exaggerated observations, or a realistic characterization of what Americans — and the rest of the world too — have watched since Sept. 11?

These are thoughts in the middle of the road, just a few months after the launching of the war on terrorism. It is hard to be objective, especially when everyone — whether here or abroad — wants you to

be subjective: to fight their fight, to adopt their point of view, not to raise any doubt about the “right action,” not to question the whole issue. Not even to question the means used to explain what happened, how to avoid other terrorist attacks and how to combat terrorism in all forms. How many times in public or private discussions with people who assume they know who I am, and how I think and feel about the whole issue, has the same confrontation taken place? It was and still is painful, insulting and offensive to see that sometimes the “rules of engagement” boil down to just one: “With us or with the terrorists.”



AMERICANS HAVE
TO REVIEW AND
RESHAPE THE WAY
THEY SEE THE WORLD.

BY THOMAS GORGUISSIAN

What if I disagree with you but am also against the terrorists?

Still, so long after Sept. 11, I and many others continue to be reminded of how “sound bites” are occupying people’s minds and hearts. Even highly educated and extensively traveled people sometimes repeat the same ignorant sound bites and demonstrate insensitivity toward others’ culture, religion and civilization. Many examples of these insensitivities have surfaced in the past weeks and months.

Apologies and retractions for political or diplomatic reasons have become commonplace in the aftermath of Sept. 11. The White House itself apologized for the use

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of the loaded term “crusade” by President Bush, for example. The Pentagon changed the name of the military operation in Afghanistan from “Infinite Justice” to “Enduring Freedom.” What I have read and heard in the last weeks has urged me to stress that Islam and Muslims more than ever deserve a serious approach and deep understanding. Cultural considerations and cultural sensitivities are both vital components of a desired international coalition — not just during wartime but also during periods (years, one hopes) of peace — whether the approach is traditional diplomacy or public diplomacy. For the rest of the world to “buy American” requires not just better marketing — as many even in Foggy Bottom think — but a better product, which besides being tasty has to be healthy, or at least not harmful.

The world and the people overseas need and deserve a better approach and understanding. To reach

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the latter more has to be done than watching CNN, or viewing the world through the equation of *The Lexus and the Olive Tree*, or even weighing all crises with the measure of “clashes of civilizations.” The superpower has to review not just its policies but its ways and means of shaping those policies. “Why do they hate us?” The question and the issue still remain unanswered, or answered without knowledge, depth and sincerity. By changing the phrasing of this question itself to “How do they see us?” a great service would be done to the issue of understanding and sharing of global issues.

This more civilized title was the name of a panel organized by the Chicago Humanities Festival early last November, with foreign journalists as participants. Such panels remind us that there are many

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ways to look at our world, to handle the issues and to find solutions. Pardon me for saying so, but sound bites, tailored polls and well-phrased statements are not enough to popularize U.S. actions. And indeed, “smart bombs” cannot correct or fix “dumb” policies.

The day of peace is coming — we all hope soon. The anger, grievances and resentment toward America, which many like to call “hate,” are

not because of how Americans live, or how wealthy they are, or how healthy they appear, or because of their lifestyle. The rest of the world is expecting that, because Americans are the most powerful, most resourceful country in the world, they will come out of their arrogance and pay some attention to what is going on in the world. Americans have to review, reshape and reformulate the way they see the world — us. ■