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EXPLAINING



WHY DO THEY HATE US?

The question—asked in tones sometimes furious, sometimes bewildered and sometimes both—popped up again and again in newspaper headlines and on television and radio news programs in the days after the September 11 attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon.

Why did the terrorists hate America so much they wanted to destroy it? Why does much of the Muslim world seem so resentful of the United States? How could people cheer these atrocities?

The answers poured forth, in columns, in documentaries, on call-in radio shows and even in comic strips. But opinions vary widely on how successful the American media were in answering this deceptively simple question. Some Islamic experts say they were slow to provide thoughtful analysis but improved as the initial shock of the attacks diminished. Others argue that, for the most part, U.S. journalists failed to offer any real critical or historical context of the view of America from the Arab world, and, during this time of national trauma, feared putting forth anything smack-dab of criticism of the U.S. government.

Part of the difficulty is that there is no one right answer to what may have led to the attacks, and opinions differ widely and are fraught with emotion. Many journalists were challenged to find a balance between “blame America first” and “don’t blame America at all.” There were real concerns that in the days immediately following the attacks even broader stories that explored the roots of anger toward the U.S. would appear to rationalize or excuse the tragedy.

“Initially, the American media shied away from analyzing the reasons for the anti-American sentiments,” says Fawaz Gerges, a professor of Middle Eastern studies and international affairs at Sarah Lawrence College in Bronxville, New York. “There was a feeling that [that would be] legitimizing the attacks.”

Plus, most of the media’s attention and resources were focused on the victims and the nation’s security. As a result, some initial attempts to explain the animosity were simplistic. More thoughtful analysis followed, though some news organizations did much better than others.

Gerges and other Islamic experts say that certain efforts to broach the question stood out even in the first few days: in particular those of the Christian Science Monitor, National Public Radio and ABC News anchored by Peter Jennings. These outlets, they say, offered more varied viewpoints and a broader historical context than their competitors.

The September 27 Christian Science Monitor featured a 5,400-word, page one story by Peter Ford, with material from nine other contributors from around the Arab world, under the headline: “Why do they hate us?”

“The vast majority of Muslims in the Middle East were as shocked and horrified as any American by what they saw happening on their TV

How well have the American media done in analyzing why much of the Muslim world seems so resentful of the United States?

THE RAGE

By Alina Tugend

screens," Ford wrote. "But from Jakarta to Cairo, Muslims and Arabs say that on reflection, they are not surprised by it. And they do not share Mr. Bush's view that the perpetrators did what they did because 'they hate our freedoms.' Rather, they say, a mood of resentment toward America and its behavior around the world has become so commonplace in their countries that it was bound to breed hostility."

Ford tries to explain the apparent contradiction many Americans see: of Muslims who long to visit the U.S. and enjoy American-made products, and, at the same time, harbor a deep anger toward the country. The story quotes a U.S.-trained physicist in Yemen who says: "When you go there, you really love the United States. You are treated like a human being, much better than in your own country. But when you go back home, you find the U.S. applies justice and fairness to its own people, but not abroad. In this era of globalization, that cannot stand."

NPR and ABC News excelled, media watchers and academics say, both by including a greater range of experts and avoiding stereotyping. John Voll, a professor of Islamic history at Georgetown University and associate director of the Center for Muslim-Christian Understanding, says, "The absolutely best person on this was Peter Jennings. He constantly was reminding commentators not to make unfounded generalizations and was asking the right questions."

Although it is easy to be critical of today's journalistic efforts, coverage of the Islamic world was much worse several decades ago, Voll says. "If you take a 30- or 40-year perspective of media coverage of events in the Middle East, there's been an enormous improvement," he says. "Contemporary media coverage is light years ahead of the belligerent coverage of the 1960s." Islam, he explains, "was treated in the past as very exotic, backward and medieval. There was an arrogance [on the part of the media] that the idea of an effective, modern form of Islam was inconceivable, and that in order to be modern, it had to be a carbon copy of the West."

Nonetheless, Voll says it concerns him that many of those who interviewed him—even from major newsweeklies and TV networks—in the days after the tragedy seemed to start from an assumption that violence is endemic to Islam. "The first few weeks, I consistently got questions from reporters such as, 'Why is it that Islam is inherently violent?'" Voll says. "It's worse than ignorance because the questions were based on assumptions that a person knew something, and what that person knew was wrong."

Despite Voll's experience, there were many media reports—including coverage of President Bush's repeated remarks—that emphasized that Islam is a peaceful religion. Still, Aslam Abdullah, chief editor for the Los Angeles-based monthly *Minaret*, the largest Islamic newspaper in North America, fears that message was lost amid questioning of how the religion could be related to the attacks. This is worrisome, he says, not only for what that tells Americans, but also for what it says to those in the Middle East. "These things are also read overseas," he says, and can confirm the beliefs of many in Islamic countries that "Islam and Christianity are inherently opposed to each other."

In the early days of the coverage, Gerges says, the American media to a certain extent "paralleled the government's

view." The message was essentially that those who hate the U.S. do so because of its freedom and democracy.

Serge Schmemmann of the New York Times echoed such sentiments on September 16. He wrote in a commentary that the terrorists carried out the attacks "solely out of grievance and hatred—hatred for the values cherished in the West as freedom, tolerance, prosperity, religious pluralism and universal suffrage, but abhorred by religious fundamentalists (and not only Muslim fundamentalists) as licentiousness, corruption, greed and apostasy."

Mark Patinkin, a columnist for the Providence Journal, took much the same tone in his September 16 column, "Extremists Scorn Freedom and That's Why We're Hated." He wrote that the U.S. is "committed to holding that torch [of freedom] aloft around the world, and perhaps it's a threat to extremist cultures...."

Four days later, Patinkin wrote that he had received a number of letters criticizing his column and blaming U.S. policy for much of the hatred. He said he understood those concerns, but added, "unlike them, I don't blame America first."

The cable news channels endlessly discussed what guests and anchors saw as the causes of the attacks. On September 12, Sen. John McCain on MSNBC's "Hardball with Chris Matthews" blamed the "propaganda [people in Arab countries] are subjected to.... This is a natural conclusion of hate being inculcated into these children."

Perhaps the most emotionally charged example of such reasoning came when CBS anchor Dan Rather appeared on "The Late Show with David Letterman" September 17. Letterman asked an often tearful Rather what led up to the attacks. "They hate America... They want to kill us and destroy us," Rather said. "Who can explain madmen and who can explain evil? They see themselves as the world's losers. They'd never admit that,

They see us, we have everything. We win everything. They see themselves and think, we should be a great people, but we're not. It drives them batty."

Other pundits asserted that the anger and resentment against the U.S. stemmed not from its freedom but its policies—such as American support of Israel, the maintaining of U.S. military bases in Saudi Arabia, sanctions against Iraq and widespread backing of authoritarian regimes in the region. But those who did offer up such analysis sometimes found themselves harshly criticized and even ridiculed.

Susan Sontag, in a brief but fiery essay in the September 24 issue of *The New Yorker*, wrote: "The voices licensed to follow the event seem to have joined together in a campaign to infantilize the public. Where is the acknowledgement that this was not a 'cowardly' attack on 'civilization' or 'liberty' or 'humanity' or 'the free world' but an attack on the world's self-proclaimed superpower, undertaken as a consequence of specific American alliances and actions?"

The next day in the *Washington Post*, staff writer Peter Carlson charged that Sontag's "tone—belligerent, self-righteous and anti-American—is astoundingly wrongheaded." The conservative *Weekly Standard* awarded its first Susan Sontag certificate, to recognize "inanity by intellectuals and artists in the wake of the terrorist attacks."

Perhaps Sontag did choose the wrong tone—her points came across as a one-dimensional attack on the U.S. rather



PHOTO: AP/WIDEWORLD

Newsweek's Farned Zakaria wrote a lengthy piece that explored various elements that contribute to anger toward America in the Arab world.

than an exploration of the true complexity of the issues. It's a delicate balance.

Debate and dissent were easy to find in the liberal press. For example, in the Web magazine Salon and in The Nation magazine, heated discussions over the causes and effects of the attacks raged. Outspoken writers, like Andrew Sullivan, Christopher Hitchens and Noam Chomsky, weighed in.

Generally speaking, and not surprisingly, criticism of U.S. policies in mainstream newspapers and broadcast media was gentler and less pointed. Nonetheless, Gerald Seib, the Wall Street Journal's deputy Washington bureau chief, says he was surprised by the favorable response he received from readers following columns he wrote about the attacks.

In his October 24 column, Seib wrote, "This isn't to say there aren't legitimate complaints about America in the Islamic world. Surely there are. A decade of bombing Iraq looks increasingly gratuitous, given how little it had done to change the situation on the ground. There's no doubt the U.S. was much more eager to end the Iraqi occupation of Kuwait than it has ever been to end the Israeli occupation of the West Bank and Gaza. More broadly, the U.S. has been hostile to the very idea of Islamic governments replacing secular ones, and has failed in its obligation to help Islamic countries such as Pakistan when the Cold War's end reduced their usefulness to Washington's policy makers."

But he also argued that the U.S. has done much on behalf of the Muslim world that is lost in the propaganda of Osama bin Laden and his ilk.

Seib received "whole tons of e-mails from people saying 'thanks for doing that,'" he says. Only a few told him that he "shouldn't raise these points."

Seib was based in Cairo from 1984 to 1987. "There's a real lack of understanding of the nuances of the Arab world," he says. "It's silly to pretend we don't want to know. We're not saying why it's rational, but why irrational thoughts are so prevalent."

Steven L. Spiegel, professor of political science at the University of California in Los Angeles, says that people "are thirsting to know. They want to hear specialists and in-depth foreign analysis, not just a retired general fiddling with a map for two minutes."

Adds David Anable, president of the Washington-based International Center for Journalists, the media need "to explain why America does what it does—how we have intervened for national interests, which is understandable, but not understood."

Anable says, though, that "after [the media] caught their breath and got past the spot news coverage, I think they've done a better and better job."

For the most part, columnists and talk shows led the charge in examining the anger question. Lengthy news reports were much harder to come by. A notable exception: The October 15 edition of Newsweek devoted 15 pages to a multipart special report, "Why Do They Hate Us? The Politics of Rage."

Fareed Zakaria, editor of Newsweek International, wrote the main piece. In his introduction, Zakaria notes that "the immediate reaction to the murder of 5,000 innocents is anger, not analysis. Yet anger will not be enough to get us through

what is sure to be a long struggle. For that we need answers."

He then provides a welcome historical context often lacking in shorter, less detailed articles, noting that the rage at America is relatively recent and that in the 1950s and 1960s "it seemed unimaginable that the United States and the Arab world would end up locked in a cultural clash."

Zakaria looks at the separate elements that underpin much of the anger in the Arab world: authoritarian and oppressive rulers, a failure to modernize and join the global economy, the growth of religious fundamentalism, and the role of U.S. policies.

The media's mixed response to this issue may stem from a nagging problem: the fact that foreign news had virtually fallen off the media map before September 11. That can also account for the utter surprise many Americans expressed when learning of the outpouring of resentment in much of the Middle East. "We paid very little attention to the rest of the world for a long time," Anable says. "We have to catch up and study like mad what we have ignored for decades."

International news accounted for one-third of the network evening news agenda at the start of the 1990s, according to the Washington, D.C.-based watchdog group the Center for Media and Public Affairs. If news about the Persian Gulf War is included, it jumps to about half. In 1999, it made up 21 percent of coverage. Things are no better in the print world, where newspapers, with some notable exceptions, have

The current crisis has compelled the media "to stop shrugging off the rest of the world," says David Anable of the International Center for Journalists.



severely cut back or eliminated their foreign news bureaus altogether. In 1998, AJR counted only 286 correspondents working abroad as full-time staffers or on exclusive contracts for all of the nation's daily newspapers. An AJR survey that compared regional newspapers' 1963 and '64 editions with 1998 and '99 papers showed a decline in international and national news, while the space devoted to business, sports and features increased (see "Then and Now," September 1999).

Increasingly, those hungry for a broader and less American-centric perspective of the situation have turned to foreign media outlets, in particular the BBC, Canadian Broadcasting Corporation and British newspapers, such as the Guardian—which experienced a huge jump in Web site visitors after September 11.

"When you don't cover the rest of the world, it's hard to know what they think," notes S. Robert Lichter, president of the Center for Media and Public Affairs. "I'd love to blame the media, but it's the public—foreign news is a tough sell. There's not much of a popular market out there for it."

Not true anymore. The current crisis may reverse the shift away from foreign news, many media experts believe, because readers and editors have been made brutally aware of how actions in seemingly faraway lands can have deadly consequences. "If there's any pluses, it's that we're compelled to stop shrugging off the rest of the world and be concerned about our fellow citizens," Anable says. "That requires a great deal of effort now on the part of journalists, which is being made, and effort by readers, which also is being done. Now we're looking at why instead of what—it's very healthy and long overdue." ■

Alina Tugend, a freelance writer based in the New York City metropolitan area, wrote about the New York media's efforts to chronicle September 11 in AJR's October issue.