

NOTHING FUNNY TO SAY

Dave Barry Miami FL 9/16/01

No humor column today. I don't want to write it and you don't want to read it. No words of wisdom either. I wish I were wise enough to say something that would help make sense of this horror, something that would ease the unimaginable pain of the victims' loved ones, but I'm not that wise. I'm barely capable of thinking. Like many others, I've spent the hours since Tuesday morning staring at the television screen, sometimes crying, sometimes furious, but mostly just stunned.

What I can't get out of my mind is the fact that they used our own planes. I grew up in the Cold War, when we always pictured the threat as coming in the form of missiles - sleek, efficient death machines, unmanned, hurtling over the North Pole from far away. But what came instead, were our own commercial airliners, big friendly flying buses coming from Newark and Boston with innocent people on board. Red-white-and-blue planes, with "United" and "American" written on the side. That's what they used to attack us. They were able to do it in part because our airport security is pathetic. But mainly they were able to do it because we are an open and trusting society that simply is not set up to cope with evil men, right here among us, who want to kill as many American as they can.

That's what's so hard to comprehend: They want us to die just for being Americans. They don't care which Americans die: military Americans, civilian Americans, young Americans, old Americans, baby Americans. They don't care. To them we're all mortal enemies. The truth is that most Americans, until Tuesday, were only dimly aware of their existence, and posed no threat to them. But that doesn't matter to them; all that matters is that we're Americans. And so they used our own planes to kill us. And then their supporters celebrated in the streets.

I'm not naive about my country. My country is definitely not always right; my country has at times been terribly wrong. But I know this about Americans: we don't set out to intentionally kill innocent people. We don't cheer when innocent people die. The people who did this to us are monsters; the people who cheered have hate-sickened minds. One reason they can cheer is that they know we would never do to them what their heroes did to us, even though we could, a thousand times worse. They know that when we hunt down the monsters, we will try hard not to harm the innocent. Those are the handcuffs we willingly wear, because for all of our flaws, we are a decent people. And now we are a traumatized people.

The TV commentators keep saying that the attacks have awakened a "sleeping giant". And I guess we do look like a giant, to the rest of the world. But when I look around, I don't see a giant: I see millions of individuals - the resilient and caring citizens of New York and Washington; the incredibly brave firefighters, police officers and rescue workers risking their lives in the dust and flames; the politicians standing on the steps of the Capitol and singing an off-key rendition of "God Bless America" that, corny as it was, had me weeping; the reporters and photographers who have not slept, and will not sleep, as long as there is news to report; the people in my community, and communities across America, lining up to give blood, wishing they could do more. No, I don't see a giant. I see Americans. We may have the power of a giant, but we also have the heart of a good and generous people, and we will get through this. We will grieve for our dead, and tend to our wounded, and repair the damage, and tighten our security, and put our planes back in the air. Eventually most of us, especially the ones lucky enough not to have lost somebody, will resume our lives.

Some day, our country will track down the rest of the monsters behind this, and make them pay, and I suppose that will make some of us feel a little better. But revenge and hatred won't be why we'll go on. We'll go on because we know this is a good country, a country worth keeping. Those who would destroy it only make us see more clearly how precious it is.