

# How does an open society contribute to peace & reconciliation? By fighting the roots of hatred

Jose R Rivera-Gonzalez – University of Essex<sup>1</sup>

Society at large has taken a beating in past months thanks partly to the media and its coverage of the second resolution against Iraq in the hemicycle of the UN Security Council. But more than the 'sterile' debate taking place in New York what should be a cause for concern in an 'open society' is the lack of impartiality of media coverage in favor of a war that is fast becoming ever more unpopular. It seems that politicians are not listening and some - such as British Prime Minister Tony Blair - are risking a lifetime of achievement by not being able – or not wanting – to articulate a permanent non violent approach to disarmament. And as war looms closer, far is the attempt at bringing the European Union and the United States to a workable partnership that would ensure a stable peace in an increasing belligerent world.

This atmosphere of doom is worsened by society's exposition to smear and disregard for tact and diplomacy brought forth, respectively, by intransigent columnists that should know better and Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld and his entourage of warmongering subordinates. What they say or write does not advance the cause for peace and reconciliation in a world that is in dire need of both after the events of September 11, 2001. Unfortunately, efforts by the New York Times in the US and The Guardian, Mirror and Independent in the United Kingdom are fighting a losing battle as 'newspapers' such as the Sun and The New York Post complement the bad faith bias of corporate media in the United States.

But the seeds of hatred that have been planted in our open societies come from way back. Two months after the events of New York a Cuban-American columnist, Carlos Alberto Montaner, wrote an article in which he vented a hastily constructed set of lessons that the political elites from Western Countries should derive from the still unfinished war in Afghanistan. The first lesson: 'that the U.S. must understand that the war [against terrorism] did not start on September 11 but in fact three years ago on October 12 1998, with the attack against the US Navy ship (USS Cole) in Yemen, offering a blunt critique to the response capability of Bill Clinton's administration. The second lesson – much more scandalous because of its preposterousness - argues that 'Americans now understand that a substantial part of the planet despises them'. The reasons according to Montaner are ingratitude (Europe), unanimous adulation to Osama Bin Laden (Middle East) and a multiplicity of unjustified grievances in Latin America. But according to this author's imprecise logic all anti-American feeling in the world feeds on one thing: envy. 'The United States – writes Montaner – is envied because it is a rich country, while a considerable part of the world is terribly poor, and a considerable amount of people believe that the two are related'. He is on the right track, however, he portrays US prosperity as being a, but not *the* cause of resentment towards this country. As if injury weren't enough Montaner adds: 'the people who would think along this line suffer from coarse ignorance. The rest of his article continues to hold to this position.

Civil people, ignorant or educated, must ask how such demeaning and one sided portrait of our divided planet contribute to the cause of peace and reconciliation. All throughout, the good intentioned nature of our open society has been battered by such declarations of opinion and intent with few opportunities in media for a riposte. Even the slightest argument against the course of war is met with smear and intimidation that denies the very essence of a peaceful society that thrives in

the free flow of ideas. The most obvious example is in the United States, where government has allowed levels of intrusion on the rights and private lives of individuals and groups that would have met fierce resistance in a pre-September 11 context. In Europe, the EU faces overwhelming strains that threatens to render useless a project of integration that has taken decades to forge. In more particular contexts the pro-war leaders of Spain, Italy and the United Kingdom bypass overwhelming public discontent to acquiesce the US Government's drive towards war in exchange for the spoils of a post-conflict situation where investment in a post-Saddam Iraq can be favorably accorded to those countries that auspiciously went along with this country's path of aggression.

In such unfavorable conditions, what could open societies in our countries do to preserve the peace and encourage closure and reconciliation?

- **By assuring the continuance and balance of the flow of ideas** - everyone, even an intransigent columnist, is entitled to their opinion and to express it. But the public deserves a better, much more elevated and evenhanded debate on terrorism and security issues, which at present are high in the list of concern for people.
- **By demanding of those who speak for them to strive for impartiality** - Passion runs high, so much so that it is hard to sift for a reasonably impartial argument that would serve the purpose of informing the people. Norberto Bobbio, an Italian political philosopher, argues that impartiality, contrary to neutrality, is the ability to accord reason to both sides, but also point to their mistakes, where their argument falls short. This way the parts involved might arrive at a workable consensus, but for that to happen each part must feel a measure of tolerance and respect towards the ideas of the other. By putting renowned intransigent hawks like Rumsfeld, Perle, or Wolfowitz in the public eye in areas where Colin Powell might work more effectively, the US government signals that it does not regard inflammatory rhetoric, such as that conveyed by the US Defense Secretary, as potentially harmful to positive efforts at disarming Iraq. Many governmental and diplomatic circles in Europe do not resent US policies but the arrogant impertinence with which the present administration pushes them to its strategic partners and allies.
- **By reversing the trend towards a police state and intolerance** - many do not see it, but has anyone considered that the terrorists might have already won? Who is capable of saying that the bypassing of the cherished US Constitution by allowing intrusion and profiling of US Citizens because of their national origin isn't what the terrorists intended in the first place? What about the citizens' sense of security? It is unsettling to see increasing feelings of mistrust towards neighbors, co-workers or foreigners; disappointing when thinking that now each person has to think more than twice before dissenting, the loss of a sense of humor - vital to appease what otherwise would be an unbearable grievance.
- **By fighting dogmatic opinion and petty misinformation** - much of the declarations made by the leaders of the Western World are made based on shaky and unverifiable facts that are passed as reliable information. When the press discovered that an Iraq report published by the British government was based on plagiarized outdated doctoral thesis officials dismissed the accusations saying that they were beside the point. I think it is disrespectful to constituents that their elected government would choose to sneer at critics instead of riposting with convincing arguments. While I am forced to agree with Montaner on the short handedness of a proper response to attacks against American targets, he fails to place the problem in a wider context. Hatred towards Western prosperity is bred – still – by

decades of erroneous and misplaced policies towards the Middle East from both, Europe and the United States. The very first problem that comes to mind is that of Israeli-Palestinian relations; the absence of a legitimate and viable Palestinian state and the obvious impotence of the Palestinian National Authority to exercise true sovereignty on its own territories. Add to that the perception that US support for a final solution is uneven in favor of Israel. After all even when it is true that Israeli soldiers kill Palestinians, they do so with American weaponry. An open society is an informed one and does not let itself be swayed by passionate and inflammatory rhetoric.

- **By confronting the hypocrisy of governments** - as bad as the US unbalanced approach towards the Middle East is, nothing is more cynical than the lip service that Arab Governments pay to the Palestinian cause for emancipation and the idea of democratization in the Middle East. This is evident in the lukewarm support of democratic institutions in Palestine and their own countries, from which the US turns a convenient blind eye. Egypt, a US key ally, has one of the most undemocratic political systems of the region. Saudi Arabia, custodian of the Islamic faith, is one of the most democratically backward countries in the Arabic peninsula; nevertheless – and in spite of the recent strains – its regime is still endorsed by the United States.
- **By questioning the role of intelligence agencies** - why did the CIA, the NSA, and the FBI ignore early warnings from their sources and their allies’ of an imminent attack in New York and East Africa?” Charles Duelfer, former vice chairman of Unscm, quoted in the observer points (Nov. 11 2001) to an answer: ‘unfortunately the US is not very good at recognizing long-term strategic threats. When he said this he was referring to Iraq, which begs the question: why the US did not neutralize the Iraqi strategic threat in 1992? The old structures in US intelligence and law enforcement remain in spite of their gross failure to save lives.
- **By establishing a civilized dialogue with the people of the United States on the reasons of anti-American feeling** - to simply regard anti-Americanism as an expression of envy is crude and insulting. Americans need to understand the grievances that feed the hatred of Palestinians. They need to understand the historical background of that hatred, especially in Latin America and the Middle East where people has suffered both, malicious intervention and indifference. Maybe there is nothing Americans can do about those who feel a pathological hatred towards the United States, but an open dialogue and the simple acknowledgement of grievances could start the healing of historical and profound wounds that linger in the collective psyche of many aggrieved countries.

## **What is to be done? An alternative lesson**

Peace and reconciliation can only begin to be achieved when Western Europe and the United States recognize their errors in foreign policy but also that their sources of wealth are not only the product of hard work and innovation but also of unfair trade practices and the obstinacy of financial institutions - public and private - to condone the un-payable foreign debt of developing countries.

The first step would be to remove the root of resentment in the Middle East, thus:

- The United States should work on the advent and establishment of a viable and legitimate Palestinian state, one that is democratic and in peaceful cohabitation with Israel;
- favor the growth of democratic and secular opposition movements in the rest of the Middle East, as part of its ideological commitment with democratic plurality;

- The encouragement and proliferation of free trade agreements that would include:

a) Fair trade; that is, fair and reasonable prices of third world exports. This would imply the gradual elimination of the Common Agricultural Policy and similar protectionist measures in the United States.

b) The explicit understanding that a market economy if the developing country in question decides – in the exercise of its sovereign prerogative – to establish it, must do so gradually and respecting the particularities of that country. It must also be understood that the American Economic Model is not the panacea or a ‘one size fits all’ mold from which to implement reform.

The absence in a country of a full market economy does not necessarily imply a reluctance to engage in one of the most human endeavors: to exchange. Neither should Western countries convey hostility towards the reluctant country. Throughout the economic history of humankind no other economic model has been more resilient and flexible as capitalism. It adjusts to any circumstance, which is why despite of differences the US is able to maintain bilateral relations with People’s Republic of China. Free and fair trade eventually opens door of human interaction, and socio-cultural exchange. This eventually sets the bases for a more plural, tolerant and democratic society.

In the absence of a better model, capitalism becomes a necessary condition to incentivize a democratic political system but it is not a sufficient one to nurture a democratic society. In counterbalance a vigilant state and its regulatory mechanisms must exist, not so much as obstacles but as safeguards to guarantee the protection of that state’s citizens against market fluctuations and the fear of inequality of condition. A strong, engaging civil society becomes the critical balancing act in this relationship. Therefore the abovementioned does not constitute an endorsement of capitalism, but a conditional affirmation that human activity develops through communication and mutual exchange of ideas. Trade can partially provide for that, but human beings, undeniably social, need also to cooperate with others, to declare their solidarity with the less fortunate.

Other critical goals that need to be achieved in order to begin healing the profound wounds left by hatred would be:

- Promote, but not force, the virtues of the western democratic model always respecting the sovereignty of the people as well as the country’s cultural and political heritage. Transformation should not be rushed upon countries that opt to follow the democratic path,
- Recognize the shortcomings and fallibility of the Western Democratic Model; that multiple conceptions of what is democracy exist – none of them perfect, but workable. If it includes a balance of good government and high levels of participation from society it may function well.

None of the above would imply the undermining of Western democratic practice but an improvement of it; a rise above the destructive path that greed and misguided feelings of superiority on the part of the West that bred hatred and resentment in the first place. That way, we as a society – innate creatures of peace – can prevent another cycle of hatred. We will evolve socially towards peace and reconciliation, and then perhaps the world will be a better place to inhabit.

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<sup>i</sup> The author holds a Master in Public Administration from the University of Puerto Rico, Rio Piedras and is a Ph.D. Research Student at the Department of Government, University of Essex in the United Kingdom.

E-mail: [cornershag@yahoo.com](mailto:cornershag@yahoo.com)

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