A MOMENT OF CLARITY

IN THE CITY WHERE I LIVE, Washington, D.C., the cleanup was well underway by late September 2001, scant weeks after that bright Tuesday morning when men whom none of us had ever heard of hurled airliners into the twin towers of the World Trade Center and the Pentagon, and jolted us into a new and violent reality. The president of the United States had found his voice, speaking eloquently and compellingly, bringing the nation together to mourn, but also to fight. The secretary of defense was directing the preparation for that fight, readying our armed forces to strike back at those who had attacked us. Meanwhile, in New York City, the cleanup at the World Trade Center remained a daunting task; firemen, police officers, and volunteers from around the country had

William Bennett, Why We Fight: Moral Clarity and the War on Terrorism (NY: Doubleday, 2002).
formed a powerful team, working together under the leadership of Mayor Rudy Giuliani to repair and rebuild the greatest city in the world.

And elsewhere? Across the nation, patriotic ardor burned bright. Suddenly flags were flying everywhere, and everywhere we were singing the national anthem and "America, the Beautiful." Charitable donations and volunteerism were only the outward, visible signs of an inward wave of sympathy and solace for those who had lost loved ones on September 11. Righteous anger and resolve had joined in support of our leaders, our armed forces, our country. For the first time in a long while there was a palpable, shared sense that this was indeed our country, and that it was a country worth fighting for.

In the wake of September 11, the doubts and questions that had only recently plagued Americans about their nation seemed to fade into insignificance. Good was distinguished from evil, truth from falsehood. We were firm, dedicated, unified. It was, in short, a moment of moral clarity—a moment when we began to rediscover ourselves as one people even as we began to gird for battle with a not yet fully defined foe.

As someone who had done his share of worrying about the moral disposition of the American people in the 1990s, I was encouraged by what I was witnessing. But moments of moral clarity are rare in life, and they are exceedingly precious. They usually follow upon hours-years-of moral confusion; they seldom arrive all at once or definitively; and they are never accompanied by a lifetime guarantee. Could this one be trusted? It seemed we had truly begun to rediscover ourselves. But given where we were coming from, the voyage was bound to be lengthy and arduous, the route strewn with false turnings.

As if to remind myself of the dangers, I picked up the paper one morning and read how, in New York City, a journalist had approached a cluster of young people lounging in the sunshine in Washington Square Park, many of them students at New York University: They were within walking distance of the still-smoking ruins of the World Trade Center. Asked by the reporter whether they would consider taking up arms to defend their country and their civilization against those who, only two and a half weeks earlier, had incinerated to death thousands of their fellow Americans, each, in his or her own way, demurred. One said he was unwilling to endanger his personal hopes of becoming a filmmaker: "There are," he opined, plenty of "people who are more willing to fight, who have the mind-set of killing." Another objected that "we're not about causes here. We're about individualism." A third, trumping the other two, offered: "This is all [America's] fault anyway."

I'll admit that it made me a little angry, and the worst of it, as I well knew, was that this was hardly the only example of its kind. In the pages of newspapers, on television talk shows and call-in radio, in Internet chat rooms, in the weekly opinion magazines, in the intellectual journals, in the United States and in Europe and around the world, what happened on September 11, 2001, why it happened, and what should be done about it were the stuff of endless discussion.
And in that discussion, individuals expressing views like those of the young people in Washington Square Park, and many more voicing attitudes and arguments along similar lines, with greater or lesser sophistication, occupied one highly visible corner. However genuine might be their feelings of sympathy for the victims, however appalled they might be by what occurred that day, however persuaded that "justice" needed to be served, their response was nevertheless conditioned by the fact that they were, more or less habitually, skeptical if not disdainful of American purposes in the world and reflexively unprepared to rally to America's side.

Some of them were filled with love, some of them were filled with hate, and some were merely confused:

    Force will get us nowhere. It is reparations that are owing, not retribution.

    I firmly believe the only punishment that works is love.

    Where is the acknowledgment 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? How many citizens are aware of the ongoing American bombing of Iraq? And if the word cowardly is to be used, it might be more aptly applied to those [Americans] who kill from beyond the range of retaliation, high in the sky, than to those willing to die themselves in order to kill others.

We all know that one man's terrorist is another man's freedom fighter.

America, America. What did you do—either intentionally or unintentionally—in the world order, in Central America, in Africa where bombs are still blasting?

U.S. foreign policy is soaked in blood.

What is Osama bin Laden? He's America's family secret.... The savage twin of all that purports to be beautiful and civilized.... Now that the family secret has been spilled, the twins are blurring into one another and becoming interchangeable.

The World Trade Center disaster is a globalized version of the Columbine High School disaster. When you bully people long enough, they are going to strike back.

How we dare even prate about democracy is beyond me.

And so forth and so on. Of course, getting angry was no answer. Nor was it a sufficient response to mock the pretensions of such people, though I was sorely tempted to do so. After all, were it not for the vigilant exercise of American power, and the readiness of Americans to fight and die for liberty, the "individualism" cherished by those New York City college students would be as dead a letter in Washington Square Park as it was in Kabul under the Taliban. Now here
they were, basking in a moral luxury bought and paid for by the object of their contempt. That America's critics everywhere in the democratic West could speak of its faults without fear and without check—was this not itself a function, an artifact, of rights won and secured by America, of safety underwritten by America, of consciences set at ease by the beneficence of America?

But the real issue was how widespread such views were, and how connected they were with the feelings of other Americans, and what effect they could be expected to have on our newfound moral clarity. To judge from one perspective the public-opinion polls supporting the president and the war effort, the flags, the anthems—they were not widespread at all. ... had achieved, or perhaps never entirely lost, moral clarity about our nation. But how secure was it? And would it last?

**THESE WERE NOT IDLE QUESTIONS.** For the truth is that we were *all* caught unprepared by September 11.

By "we" I do not mean our government, our military, or our diplomats. Of course, they, too, had been caught unprepared. Much would soon be written about their terrible omissions, ranging from severe defects in intelligence-gathering and evaluation to our overly permissive immigration procedures, faulty policing, and the indulgent and self-deceiving posture we had assumed toward the world, particularly those who hated us, in the decade after the collapse of Soviet communism and the end of the cold war. On the issue of our physical vulnerability, I was reminded in those days of the prescient words of James Madison, warning in Federalist 41 about the "terrors of conflagration" and in particular about the dangerously exposed situation of the island of Manhattan, a "great reservoir of . . . wealth" that might be regarded "as a hostage for ignominious compliances with the dictates of a foreign enemy or even with the rapacious demands of pirates and barbarians."

All of this was highly relevant to our present situation. But when I say "we," I have in mind not so much the institutions of government as the rest of us: we, the citizens of the United States. And when I say that we were unprepared I am speaking not of physical unpreparedness but of intellectual and moral unpreparedness.

How was it that, in the wake of the bloodiest and most devastating attack on American citizens in our history, sensible and patriotic people could ask, "Did we bring this on ourselves, by the way we have behaved in the world?" Or, "If we go to war against them, does that make us as bad as they are?" Or, "Shouldn't we work on getting rid of the poverty and oppression that are the root causes of terrorism, instead of just adding to the killing?"

Such questions were hardly unanswerable; indeed, I mean to answer them in the course of this book. But that they could have been asked in all innocence, and that they should have been the first questions some of us asked, bespoke a deep ignorance not only about the rest of the world but more urgently and much more disturbingly about
America. And it bespoke an even deeper want of clarity about the difference between good and evil. September 11 had seemed to dispel this lack of clarity, or at least so I wanted to believe. But even those of us who were singing the loudest were asking such questions, the answers to which had been lost in the moral murkiness of, so to speak, September 10.

How had this lack of clarity come about in the first place? In many cases it reflected, in blander and more acceptable form, a well-developed, well-entrenched judgment about our country, and about the democratic West in general, that had come to dominate virtually every one of our major cultural and educational institutions. In time, this same adverse judgment had made itself felt in the opinions expressed in our leading newspapers, in the sermons preached in our churches and synagogues, in the causes supported by our major philanthropic institutions, in the positions on public issues espoused by the heads of our largest corporations, and everywhere in our politics.

I have called this judgment adverse. It was also perverse. For forty years, leading educators and intellectuals had been saying and writing and teaching that the United States was no better and might even be worse than its enemies; that Western "civilization," sometimes mockingly put in quotation marks, was a mask under which one perfidy after another had been visited upon the poorer nations of the world; that good and evil themselves were matters of perspective, if not of mere opinion. Some of the noblest ideas ever framed by the mind of man, including democracy, patriotism, honor, and freedom, had been systematically drained of meaning to some younger Americans, they were now without content altogether.

The result, I would argue, was to sow a truly widespread and debilitating confusion as to our most basic national purposes, a confusion that was expressed in various forms in the wake of September 11. It was expressed by public figures who tended automatically to categorize the attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon not as acts of war but as a species of natural disaster, requiring unstinting generosity toward the victims, perhaps even some limited police action abroad, but not any arousal of the American national will. It was expressed by other college students—we will meet them, too, in the pages of this book—who actually wanted to show solidarity with their country but found themselves inhibited to the point of speechlessness by what they had been taught about its fundamental inequities and flaws. And it was expressed to perfection in the innocent questions I cited just a moment ago about our very legitimacy.

Why, I wondered, were not more of us angry? Why did so many, especially in the country's elite, seem to back away from any hint of righteous anger as if it were some kind of poisonous snake? In the national media, anger was discouraged, denigrated, even mocked. God forbid we should act out of anger, or express a sense of righteous indignation. This raised a question in my own mind: How had such a vocal and influential minority of Americans come to believe that, to be moral, we must disavow and rise above our anger? Why wasn't anger itself considered a moral response to unprovoked attack? And why did so many people who really were
angry hesitate to say so, as if it were something shameful?

That inhibition was well exploited by those whose characteristic response to the events of September 11 could be captured in the disabling phrase "Yes, but . . ." Yes, they would concede, what happened on September 11 was to be condemned in no uncertain terms, but (to quote the director of a center for constitutional rights) "people feel that there must be an alternative policy, that war cannot be the only answer." Yes, we had been attacked, but any classroom discussion of those attacks (according to a curriculum guide at Brown University) must include a call "for understanding why people resent the United States." Yes, terrorism should be eliminated, but the way to combat it (declared a scholar of international law) was by "arrest[ing] the criminals with the goal of achieving justice, not revenge," and by working to ameliorate the "cultures of poverty, oppression, and ignorance" in which terrorist impulses are supposedly bred. Yes, we had to do something, but in beginning to act (wrote an oped columnist) we were inciting jingoism, trampling civil liberties, and encouraging a "nationalist undertow that is culturally conformist, ethnically exclusive, and belligerently militaristic"-becoming, in short, just like our declared enemies. Yes, a terrible wound was inflicted upon us, but (according to a concerned citizen writing to a local paper) the courage we needed was not the courage to avenge the wound but "the courage and honesty to search our souls and recognize our [own] wrongdoings."

Why do they hate us? This was the earnest and finally irrelevant question many of us put to ourselves after September 11. For a while it seemed to emblazon itself on the cover of every newsweekly, to occupy every nightly discussion on television. Why do they hate us? As if, by sympathetically attempting to see things from their point of view, we might figure out some way to satisfy their grievances, or assuage them with an apology. For if they hate us, the reasoning went, it must be-mustn't it?-because of something we had done to them.

I shall have more to say about this peculiarly damaging habit of mind, in which self-abasement and deference to the viewpoint of the "other" mixed unpleasantly with a new and deadly form of American hubris. Here let me just observe that if the "they" in question were extremist Muslims of the Osama bin Laden type, it was really not very hard to understand why they hated us. They had been more than forthcoming about their sentiments for a very long time, and after September 11, bin Laden himself was permitted to expound the theme at length on our home screens. Their vicious rage was not obscure; neither, as they had made spectacularly clear by their self-immolating actions, was it to be appeased.

For some of us, at any rate, it seemed to have become a harder task to extend to our values and our purposes the same degree of open-minded sympathy we were ready to extend to theirs. It was harder still, evidently, to muster a stouthearted response to their implacable intentions. "Don't let hate grow in our hearts" read a sign a friend of mine noticed in a hardware store soon after September 11. It made a perfect counterpart to "Why do they hate us?" In both there was the same unwillingness to credit the objective reality of our situation, the same wishful notion that the problem we faced lay wholly within ourselves, in
our emotions and attitudes, and that the solution therefore lay in an adjustment of those attitudes.

Well, I had not seen much hate in American hearts—a bit, very copiously documented in the press in the form of scattered bias incidents against Muslim Americans, but not much. What I was seeing instead was either a reluctance or an inability to find words, ideas, arguments, rhetoric, or models adequate to the gravity of the crisis and to the heroic scale of commitment that was needed to face and overcome it.

Of one thing I was sure: The critics of American purposes would not cease their work. I was also sure of something else: Their sentiments, when framed as criticisms of American purposes, were not shared by large numbers of people. But neither were those sentiments being answered, either because the answers to them had been forgotten or because the answers had never been learned in the first place. I sensed in my bones that if we could not find a way to justify our patriotic instincts, and to answer the arguments of those who did not share them, we would be undone.

And that is when I resolved to write this book. *Why We Fight* is my effort to answer the questions being asked about this war—not only in the immediate aftermath of September 11 but as our counterattack got underway and to this very day—questions that can only intensify in the coming period as the battle widens and opposition to it grows and becomes more articulate. *Why We Fight* we justified in replying to force with force, or should we have pursued another route, especially the route of international law? Is our culture "better" than others, and on what moral and intellectual grounds can it be defended? Why do they hate us—and who exactly are "they," whom do they represent, and what do they stand for? Were we dragged into this war by our "one-sided" support for Israel, and what is the rationale behind our friendship with that country? Is there something suspect—something jingoistic—about plain old-fashioned patriotism?

Moral questions all, and my answers are likewise framed largely in moral terms. This is not, in other words, a book about policy. I have not tackled the issue of our military strategy, though anyone attending to my, arguments can readily deduce that I wholeheartedly advocate pursuing this war to final victory. Nor do I say anything about what our immigration policy should be, though it is well known that in general I am both pro-immigrant and fully in favor of strong steps to control our borders. I touch only lightly on issues of civil liberties, though I would defend both the idea of military tribunals for terrorists accused of war crimes and the detention of suspects within our own borders for questioning. The matters dealt with here are mostly of a different order; their connection with policy is implicit, not explicit, and I have deliberately refrained from making concrete recommendations.

Throughout this book I have tried to differentiate between the doubts held by well-meaning Americans and the arguments of the critics who feed those doubts. To the latter I have tried to respond fairly, and at their strongest rather than at their weakest points. I also hope that I have not ceded any ground. For there is, in truth, much to be angry about in the positions some of these critics espouse: much that is
meretricious, much that is inspired less by reason or evidence than by simple ideology and, yes, moral perversity. They have caused damage, and they need to be held to account.

The damage is to be measured in our loss of memory. In one way or another, there has been a great forgetting, and the result has been a kind of unilateral disarmament. Now we have been caught with our defenses down—our intellectual and moral defenses as much as our physical ones. Many of us have allowed ourselves to forget what we once knew about this country, which Lincoln called the "last, best hope of earth," and we have forgotten why he was right to call it that. Many of us have forgotten what we once knew about our unique institutions of government, and we have neglected to implant in the hearts of our young people the never-ending duty to preserve and protect them. Many of us have forgotten what we once knew about our freedoms and our decencies, and we have forgotten why, time and time again, we have had to rally ourselves to the point of ultimate sacrifice to defend them. Many of us have forgotten the truth we once knew about the heritage of our Western civilization, and we have all but forgotten where we put the key to that truth, or whether we have a right to reclaim it.

The time has come to begin remembering, and to rearm.

-New Year's Day, 2002