

## **THE SPIRIT OF AMERICA: MORAL RESPONSIBILITY TO HUMANITY**

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November 7, 2002

It may appear presumptuous of me to give a talk on the Spirit of America to a highly sophisticated American audience. The reason is simple. The Spirit has possessed me. Throughout my life I have strived, in vain, to transmit it to my country. Whatever was planted of the Spirit of America was overwhelmed by Leninist weed that still plagues my country. One of the Leninist legacies we still have is that there is no person in Ethiopia today who owns land, although many young people are forced to die for it. Still, I am continuing the difficult self-assignment. What I would like to talk about, however, is not my failure to transmit the Spirit of America to my country; instead, it is a plea to every American to make it her/his mission to spread confidently the Spirit of America, the best of America, to our troubled world.

An Ethiopian philosopher who lived in the 17th century wrote: had God wanted Man to be a perfect being, He would have created him so. Instead, God equipped Man with intellect so that he could make himself perfect. Although humanity is moving toward perfection, it is still far from the goal. In that movement toward perfection, however, the Spirit of America leads. For me the Spirit of America embodies the best ideals and all the best that issues out of them.

--The Spirit of America is equality, in the true sense of the term, and in spite of Chief Justice Taney.

--The Spirit of America means freedom, not only for Americans but also for all humanity. I had written once: America "is built almost literally out of the rock of Liberty. The Statue of Liberty in New York harbor symbolizes this pervading spirit of liberty that Americans enjoy with deserving pride."

--The Spirit of America means the rule of law, and not of persons.

--The Spirit of America embodies opportunities for hard but rewarding work, for creativity, and for developing problem solving capacities, and for opportunities for prosperity.

--The Spirit of America is freedom from fear, an atmosphere that inspires confidence and happiness, and all the conditions that make life enjoyable.

--The Spirit of America includes kindness, compassion, and generosity.

--The Spirit of America is the American Dream, the dream of Martin Luther King Jr., which is also the dream of humanity.

Nearly 50 years ago in my years in Worcester I was introduced to this Spirit of America, the best of it. My enthusiasm for it was such that I tried to understand it, to internalize it, and to make it my own. But I was also hearing and reading about another America, where the Spirit of America was not only abandoned but also abused. Against the advice of many friends I took the Grey Hound to the southern States. What I saw and experienced there was unacceptable by any standard. It was clear that in those States the American Spirit was disfigured. At first it was not easy to understand how a medley of people who

escaped the persecution and oppression in their countries of origin, could institutionalize slavery and oppression. But repeating mistakes of past generations has been the predicament of humanity since time immemorial. In fact, I think it was to this predicament that the Spirit of America addressed itself.

Even with that unpleasant experience in the south I allowed myself to be possessed by the Spirit of America, because I was confident, as I still am, of its ultimate universal triumph. My faith was strengthened by a series of Supreme Court pronouncements, and by courageous Americans, both black and white, who struggled to bring the Spirit of America on its right and proper course in the southern states. No one, not even the worst tyrant will argue against freedom; he can only argue for the monopoly of freedom, for his own freedom to act as he pleases.

Although there is no denying the fact that much has been done to vindicate the Spirit of America, much more remains to be done, even as we begin the 21st century. America that enjoys harmony and solidarity within and will be infinitely stronger globally, because it will have the moral authority to persuade others. Abraham Lincoln stated a critical political truth when he said that no government can be half free and half slave. Today, this declaration is equally true for the whole world and for the whole humanity. Humanity cannot continue half free and half slave, half in wasteful affluence and half in abject misery. Scientists tell us that population pressure on one hand, and technological progress, on the other, are exerting so much pressure on our planet that the process is building up into a catastrophe that will endanger life on earth. Apparently, the concern is for the survival of humanity itself.

The concern for the future of humanity cannot be more important than the concern for the present state of humanity. Hundreds of millions of people live in servitude and abject misery each day without knowing whether or not they will have something to eat. Their nagging problem is for every today, not for tomorrow. It seems to me necessary, therefore, to pay attention to the condition of the greater part of humanity. Today's needs are real, and they cannot be postponed in order to satisfy tomorrow's needs. While scientific and technological progress marches on demonstrating, as we often like to say "the mastery of man over nature", we forget that man too is a part of nature; moreover, he is also dependent on non-man nature. The future concept of development may have to be designed not only to master nature, including man himself, because he needs to master himself, but also to care for nature, including man himself. It is imperative to have one eye on the present suffering of humanity and the other on the environment. We must have a proper perspective of ends and means. Man's destruction of the environment is only one aspect of the problem. The solution of that problem, however, is contingent upon the survival of man.

The most important agenda for the present century may focus on human relationships. The dangers to humanity are no more restricted to superpower rivalry, or resources and markets. The contest in the present century will be not for the alliance and favors of states but for the hearts and minds of individual human beings. The experience of the last half of the 20th century has abundantly demonstrated that most states in the Third World,

especially in Africa, are against their own peoples rather than with them. The Spirit of America must reach out and touch these oppressed and exploited peoples of the world. In freedom and democracy, peace and security, progress and prosperity humanity must move together. There is none better equipped for that task and for that responsibility than America, armed with its true spirit and ideals.

Global Power and Affluence constitute the image of America in the minds of most people. But America is much more than mere Power and Affluence. The tragedy, however, is, that American ideals, which should and could be the distinctive pride of America, never come to the foreground. For the poor and the oppressed, power and affluence alone do not differentiate America from local autocrats. The oppression and exploitation of local power is what the abjectly poor in the Third World experience every day. They also feel, rightly or wrongly, that America is the source and strength of their tormenting local autocrats. When America economically and militarily supports tyrannical regimes that stand diametrically opposed to its ideals, it reduces America to sheer power, only bigger and more powerful than the local dictators. The moral authority that America could wield is lost. That is the most unfortunate thing both for America and for the world.

After the Second World War America played a significant and effective role in shaping the political map of the world. America's strong and determined stand for the independence and freedom of colonial territories was very much in line with its ideals, with the Spirit of America. It has to be said, too, that America's involvement and generosity in the reconstruction of the newly independent states by providing them with massive economic and technical assistance, and in training the necessary manpower was extremely important. I was one of the beneficiaries of this program.

It is during the Cold War years that America became more and more a physical power preoccupied in preventing the spread of communism rather than in implanting the Spirit of America. The result was that America found it necessary to be tied up with dictatorial regimes for geopolitical reasons. While America was attempting to hold dictatorial regimes on its side, the former Soviet Union was attempting to win the hearts and minds of the oppressed by promising them pie in the sky. American timidity to promote and to push the American ideals of democracy was no match for the aggressive Soviet drive to promote communism through revolutions. Obviously, it was easy to introduce communism to people that are oppressed and exploited, although it was equally easy to root it out not only because it was unworkable, but also because the ideology itself pointed to the means of its own destruction.

During the post-Cold War period America passed from competition to accommodation, accommodation of dictatorial regimes that oppress and exploit their own people. It is contrary to the Spirit of America to support

- regimes that sow the seeds of ethnic discord and hatred, and therefore, conflict among their own people
- regimes whose principal function is to instill fear and terror among their own people, and to deliberately impoverish them in order to turn them into docile servants;
- regimes that kill, torture and maim their own people at will;

--regimes that find the flimsiest reason to drum up war in which hundreds of thousands young and able-bodied people are decimated;  
--regimes that buy arms and build monuments while their people starve to death;  
--regimes under which thousands of prisoners are languishing in jail for over a decade without a day in court.

These are not mere allegations; they are facts. During the second week of October the election of Saddam Hussein by 99.99% was a major topic for jokes in all the news channels. In Ethiopia it is usually 100%, but has never deserved any mention because it is a case of accommodation. Even the one hour Amharic program of the Voice of America was reduced to thirty minutes under the pressure of the dictatorial regime. America accommodated those who stand against the Spirit of America, and closed the window of opportunity for millions who would be willing to learn.

In most Third World countries there are gruesome violations of fundamental human rights by tyrannical regimes. There are also gross violations by individuals but condoned by the regimes. Recently the Oprah show had something on Pakistani and Bangladeshi women. It is presumably customary in these countries for husbands to pour acid on their wives, if they find some cause for discontent. The face of one such woman was grossly disfigured. Oprah expressed a sentiment that is American. She said: it is difficult to see this and not do anything about it; and Oprah was going to help that woman. I wish every American government had that type of American reaction to the pains of peoples in the Third World. The pain and suffering of people in many countries has to be contagious if we are human. In Ethiopia a pregnant woman had a miscarriage in the torture chamber; I have seen men and women whose hands were paralyzed by handcuffs that can be tightened by screwing, or by electric wires. To this day people, including school children, are killed by the police in broad daylight. The policy of accommodation rationalizes such barbarous actions.

The regime spends millions of dollars for arms when millions of peasants starve every year. Without relief assistance from America and Europe the magnitude and frequency of death by starvation would have exterminated Ethiopian peasants by now. Ethiopia has been receiving relief food assistance for more than thirty years, most of it from America. Yet, there is no doubt whatsoever that Ethiopia has the potential to produce surplus. A policy that has turned all peasants into landless serfs, primitive farming methods, oppression and exploitation, population growth, and land degradation have incapacitated the Ethiopian peasants and reduced their productivity. As long as the peasants are not liberated to become masters of their own destiny, famine will continue to decimate them; and the country will continue to depend on food assistance. In this connection it is relevant to remark that Western response to the threat of starvation is relatively swift while the underlying policies that debilitate agricultural production hardly attract attention. In spite of millions of dollars of assistance that we often hear about, the condition of the majority of people not only in Ethiopia, but also in the whole of Africa, is shameful. Let me quote what David Lamb, in *The Africans*, wrote:

The streets of every African city and village are filled with an appalling number of

deformed bodies, crippled beggars dragging themselves across intersections; leprosy victims whose limbs are stumps; even well-dressed businessmen and college students with braces and withered arms or legs. This is very shameful, but true. Such abject poverty and sickness is rampant not because there are no natural resources or trained manpower. It is because the tyrants who rule Africa do not care as long as they are able to sustain themselves in power; it is because, in most of Africa, the climate of fear is so suffocating that most intellectuals prefer to serve America and Europe. In this respect it can perhaps be said that the West, especially America, is getting back at least a portion of its foreign assistance! Such regimes that are accountable to no one and provide no opportunities for dialogue rule by brute force. The anger and frustration of opposition groups often leads to terrorist tactics. Wherever it may be, tyranny is the breeding ground for terrorism.

Terrorism brings me to Nine-Eleven. September 11 was the date for the Ethiopian New Year, 1994. I was at my daughter's home in Addis Ababa for dinner when a person telephoned to tell us to tune in to CNN. We did. We were all traumatized. The New Year spirit evaporated. Suffering from an excruciating headache, I left. What happened on Nine-Eleven was inhuman, diabolical, depraved, and senseless. Human life, the most precious gift of all, by some malaise of fanaticism, was turned into an instrument for the destruction of life. Certainly, those innocent people in the airplanes and the buildings were not the targets. The mind that has lost its function as an individual agent could not distinguish between friends and foes, children and adults, young and old. These fanatics, even in their madness, could not believe they could impoverish or weaken America. Their target was the Spirit of America and the new universal culture that is emerging.

A universal culture of humanity is in the making. Information technology is breaking the fortress of ignorance, irrationality, superstitious beliefs and taboos. People in all parts of the world are learning about each other. This new knowledge is inspiring freedom from the tyranny of culture. It is turning individuals into autonomous agents who are no more willing to remain servile instruments of tyrants. All dictators consider autonomous individuals to be their deadliest enemies. Their total control over the faceless masses will be seriously jeopardized and undermined by the radical questions that autonomous individuals raise. Radical questions introduce attitudinal changes that break away from backward looking values, thus reducing tension and conflict. With this universal culture humanity will move together toward the same ideals and dreams. The emerging universal culture is based on the liberation and empowerment of individuals, on democratic values of unity in diversity. It is a departure from armed struggle to political combat with open dialogue and debate between opposing views. The new culture of humanity will enlarge the human potential by releasing the creative energies that are presently suppressed in most parts of the world. This is the culture and morality of Henri Bergson's open society.

The old culture is based on irrationality, force, and superstition that are intended to oppress and exploit the weak, the women, the children, and the minorities. It is a very rough road of tension and conflict leading to a dead end. This is the culture and morality of Henri Bergson's closed society where the herd moves round and round in a circle. Such a petrified culture that fails to serve living human beings has lost its relevance and

value.

The dynamic and powerful nature of the emerging culture of humanity cannot be underestimated. Nor can we ignore the inner tension and conflict in the old cultures. The old cultures are battered from within by enlightened elements, and from without by the aggressive and inescapable forces of the new culture of humanity, especially science and technology. Nine-Eleven is a barbaric manifestation of the desperation of the old and dying cultures.

America with its freedom and democracy, with its technological dynamism and affluence, and with its might and confidence represents the aspirations of all humanity, the seeds of the new universal culture. Neil Armstrong, the American who landed on the moon, did not say it was a giant step for America; he said it was a giant step for mankind. Viewed from this perspective, therefore, Nine-Eleven was an attempt to arrest the march of the new culture of humanity from its dynamic center. I believe that is why the well-known French newspaper Le Monde came out with a headline: WE ARE ALL AMERICANS. That is why for those of us who knew America and who imbibed the Spirit of America, who benefited from the kindness and generosity of America, and who became energized by the freedom and confidence of America, the pain of Nine-Eleven was no less than what Americans felt. Nine-Eleven was not an attack on America alone. It was an attack on all the achievements, and the aspirations of humanity.

It has been said frequently that the world has changed since Nine-Eleven. Yet, in the behaviors of states we do not see the slightest deviation from past practices. But there must be a radical departure from past practices if we desire to create a safer world for all humanity. Nine-Eleven must force us all to raise radical questions; and radical questions need radical answers, not conventional responses. The beaten track of international relations has failed to provide the conditions for a safe world. The Spirit of America must chart a new course based on certain principles:

1. We must recognize the universality of humanity. Human beings everywhere have the same needs and the same aspirations.
2. It must be recognized by all that without a condition of peace in every country it will be difficult to ensure international peace and development. It can be reasonably assumed that the vast majority of ordinary men and women of the world desire peace and development.
3. The United Nations, which at present is largely an organization of sovereign states needs to be transformed into an organization of sovereign nations represented by governments that are formed through genuine and freely contested elections. The sovereignty of the people must replace the sovereignty of states.
4. The world has to formulate some moral principles that govern international relations. What happens in many countries of the world to minorities, old people, women and children, and even to ordinary citizens cannot be tolerated. If we accept the universality of humanity and the principles underlying the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and all the other international human rights conventions, the pain and suffering of peoples everywhere must become our concern. No tyrant should be allowed to hide behind some

cultural particularity.

5. Scientific and technological progress must voluntarily submit to international moral principles. Otherwise, humanity will be in extreme danger of extinction. It was in 1954 that Lord Russell wrote: "There are men who profess to have in a small bottle a sufficient supply of deadly microorganisms to destroy the whole human race". We have reached a stage where scientific and technological progress can equip one individual to be more dangerous for humanity than even a state. Moreover, it is time to realize that scientific and technological developments that precede social and moral development will be extremely dangerous. The developed world needs to curb its greed and stop supplying arms and military technology to Third World countries that have totally different priorities.

In the numerous United Nations declarations and international conventions of human rights there are sufficient principles that could serve as the basis for international morality. In any type of social life, whether at the individual or state level, rights have commensurate duties. There is, therefore, a need for an international institution that will enforce the duties of states. The European Union has already started to move in that direction.

The new and radical problem of terrorism of the 21st century may not be resolved by conventional means. Wounded pride may only lead to inconsequential labors. Radical problems need radical solutions. Armed struggles are going on in various parts of the world. If past experience serves as a lesson, it is futile to label some armed struggle as friendly and others as antagonistic. Every armed struggle has a terrorist component and is an attempt to maintain or to seize power by force. The morally correct position may be to exert maximum pressure on both warring parties in order open all vistas for civil and political freedom. The elimination of force as a means of maintaining, or for acquiring, power has to give way to accepting the verdict of the people through the ballot box.

The problem of terrorism can be terminally resolved when the Spirit of America pervades the whole of humanity, ordinary men and women in the whole world. Dictatorial regimes that are the breeding grounds for terrorism cannot be expected to help in its eradication. There is an Ethiopian proverb that expresses peasant wisdom. It can be roughly translated as follows: One who solicits the assistance of the thief when looking for his stolen ox will never find it.

The American Spirit must come out of its heavy shell of commerce and expediency and show its best aggressively. If and when that happens America will have the moral authority to lead the world. Then, it will not be necessary for America to demand respect; it will command respect. America's ideals can benefit the vast majority of humanity; America has the power to break the will of any tyrant without using force; America has the economic and technological resources to assist the less fortunate. It is imperative, therefore, for Americans to remain free from fear and continue to sing loudly and proudly: "Land of the Free! Home of the Brave!" Above all America must command with its ideals, not with its power. Let me restate my conclusion in the words of Abraham Lincoln. It is from a speech he delivered in Edwardsville, Illinois, on September 11,

1858: "Our reliance is in the love of liberty which God has planted in our bosoms. Our defense is in the preservation of the spirit which prizes liberty as the heritage of all men, in all lands, everywhere."

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