

NEW YORK

DAILY NEWS

DAY THREE

City's strength, wisdom transcend all the terror

By JIM SLEEPER

We are all New Yorkers," the French daily *Le Monde* said today. But devastation like this has hit even real New Yorkers in waves, a little differently depending on who and where we were.

Since the attacks trapped me safely 75 miles outside the city, I first drew myself up against my own incredulity, grief and frantic calls to friends. I stayed glued to TV, but the beautiful, bittersweet truth about New York's social fabric didn't hit me until the next morning, as I flipped through the Daily News' "Day After" photos and the dam of my grief burst.

The attackers and their few celebrants are too small and twisted to comprehend that while we are the epicenter of the problem, in a way, we are the bearers of the solution.

On the one hand, the fact that the world's only superpower was brought so low by four civilian passenger planes makes a mockery of any claims that anti-missile defense systems can shield a society as open and diverse as ours.

But on the other hand, the devastation and sheer cruelty behind the attack mock claims by the powerless that their violence is morally redemptive. Not this way, it isn't.

Anyone wondering whether "all-powerful" America has the will and the moral resources to defend itself — not as a superpower but as a wellspring of politics that nourishes hope instead of fear — needn't look to President Bush or the Pentagon; just look at all those ordinary New Yorkers, and their mayor, their hearts broken but their arms so strong to save. Terrorists can't appreciate that. Let's hope our nation's leaders can, because they need what New York has so abundantly.



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dantly.

We, of all people, can understand the bloody paradox that our latest technologies and corporate networks are defenseless against the oldest religious and tribal fanaticisms that are carried now on those high-tech networks, and even on planes.

What happened in New York and at the Pentagon wasn't John Brown's raid on Harper's Ferry or a guerrilla war in Vietnam or Peru. And it was no *intifadeh*. It was the implosion of every anti-colonialist and anti-imperialist excuse for brutality that anyone who still believes

in politics can indulge.

At the same time, this paradox of new technology carrying barbaric impulses also strips us, the powerful, of hope that we can annihilate an enemy's violence through more violence alone — as we did do in World War II.

Where are the battle lines now? Suppose the U.S. obliterates Afghanistan in the next 48 hours or that Israel rolls over the Palestinians. Any reduction in the number of suicide bombers will be offset by accelerated fires of rage.

It used to be relatively powerless people, such as the young Rev. Martin Luther King Jr., who showed the powerful that violence is an end game without an ending. Now the powerless have been stripped by their own would-be champions of the moral right to make that claim. And we, the powerful, are left to find King's truths within ourselves, even as we learn fast to fight a new kind of war.

The only good news is that we do see some of the strength and truth we need, on the streets of New York.

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9/11, the Lady And Our Town

New York Post, Tuesday, January 1, 2002

ON the glassed-in part of the observation deck atop the World Trade Center's south tower stood a wall bearing writers' comments about New York City, in letters a couple of inches high. One of those comments was mine, saying that while New York's capital and human resources come from all over the world, "its ability to draw them into the achievements of a civilization depends on the moral geography of its neighborhoods — crucibles of the civic culture" that give us not our glitter, but our glue.

It was nice to think about that up there as you looked out at upper Manhattan and The Bronx, Brooklyn, Queens and Staten Island, home to so many of the Trade Center's own workers — poor immigrants and their upwardly mobile children and grandchildren.

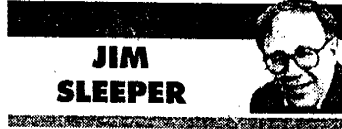
As the wall bearing my words disintegrated on 9/11, the old year passed for me, as it did for so many New Yorkers for reasons that were separate yet shared. But almost immediately, other walls went up across the city,



bearing messages and memorials for the victims, rescuers and survivors, ushering in a new birth of communal strength.

And, a few hundred yards from Ground Zero, an even greater testimony to our civic faith endured on Liberty Island, which has just reopened, ushering in 2002.

The terrorists who destroyed "my" wall and so many lives in the Twin Towers thought they'd toppled the colossus of a godless capitalist impe-



**JIM
SLEEPER**

rium on behalf of the god-fearing and oppressed. They didn't reckon with the sources of our real strengths in some of our least-famous places.

When our ordinary neighborhoods work well, they don't just filter out some of the city's noise and hard knocks; for kids, they keep alive a safe balance of play and social obligation beyond the family's front stoop.

That matters. Neighborhoods teach youths to become teammates, communicants, friends, lovers — and hence nurturers, uplifters and defenders. Neighborhood cultures that do this nourish understandings that commingle with those of other communities to set a standard of decency and a tone of impersonal affection in workplaces like the Towers and the larger city.

The terrorists didn't know this. They also didn't reckon with a tribute to our civic faith,

the lamp-bearing lady whose base bears part of a poem written for her unveiling in 1886.

You probably know the closing lines of Emma Lazarus' "The New Colossus," but here's the whole poem, which answers, with eerie foresight, those who've indicted this country for its strains of militarism and materialism.

Lazarus summons deeper strains, in lines that didn't become hackneyed even during the age of irony and cynicism preceding Sept. 11. Gently, she reproved this country's harsher critics:

Not like the brazen giant of Greek fame,

With conquering limbs astride from land to land;

Here at our sea-washed, sunset gates shall stand

A mighty woman with a torch, whose flame

Is the imprisoned lightning, and her name

Mother of Exiles. From her beacon-hand

Glows world-wide welcome; her mild eyes command

The air-bridg'd harbor which twin cities frame.

"Keep, ancient lands, your storied pomp!" cries she

With silent lips. "Give me your tired, your poor,

Your huddled masses yearning to breathe free,

The wretched refuse of your teeming shore.

Send these, the homeless, tempest-tos'd to me,

I lift my lamp beside the golden door!"

Some of those who were lost in the Twin Towers had passed under that lamp. Others were the children or grandchildren of those who had. Some who hadn't had that privilege and opportunity had found it at last in Trade Center employment and other opportunities around this town.

That my writerly tribute to them disintegrated means nothing if the "mighty woman with a torch" still stands in our harbor and our hearts. My New Year's resolution after 9/11 has been to commit Lazarus' civic credo to memory — and to help my country live up to it.

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NEW YORK'S WEEKLY NEWSPAPER

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NOVEMBER 5, 2001

JIM SLEEPER

Politically Incorrect, Heroic All the Same

Sooner or later, someone was going to say what New York firefighter Michael Moran said onstage at the benefit concert for New York on Oct. 20. He had lost his older brother, who was a battalion chief, and 12 fellow firefighters from his own Ladder 3 company at the World Trade Center. He was enjoying his first night out after weeks of hard work and dozens of funerals.



As a cable-television audience of millions watched, Mr. Moran took the microphone and roared, "In the spirit of the Irish people, Osama bin Laden, you can kiss my royal Irish ass!" A politically incorrect pandemonium ensued. Therefore, *The New York Times* simply did not report it, even though the newspaper covered the concert.

Now that American soldiers are in harm's way in Afghanistan, we should not forget what unarmed civilians like Mr. Moran and his brotherhood have taught us about how to risk life against death-embracing terrorists. It isn't pretty. It isn't correct. Therefore, let's report it and look at it.

Most Americans sense that this country's answer to the blood-thick bondings of terrorist groups depends on finding something just as potent in ourselves. We know that we saw it on Sept. 11, in the firefighters and others who proved as willing as suicide bombers to run toward death—but in order to save lives, not end them. Their sacrifice prompted humbling, sometimes surprising stirrings of patriotism in many of us.

What it didn't prompt was much public reflection about where such feelings come from. How does a liberal civic culture with a wide diversity of beliefs and racial and ethnic groups find its capacity for supreme sacrifice against enemies like those we face now? How do we manage to sustain the loyalties and virtues that are largely ignored by both diversity advocates and corporate management consultants?

Mr. Moran's manifesto offered an answer some don't want to hear: Most of the uniformed public servants who gave their lives were bound into a brotherhood that affronts civil-rights activists. At least 80 percent of New York's firefighters are white, Roman Catholic men



MICHAEL MORAN

like Mr. Moran, members of an intergenerational, "father-son" union often condemned as racially and sexually exclusive.

Adding irony to impropriety, the Maltese Cross on every firefighter's shoulder patch and cap is a relic of a holy war with Islam. The cross was the emblem of the Knights of St. John, 11th-century Crusaders who, according to the New York Fire Department's official history, were assailed by Muslim Saracen warriors with bombs containing the flammable naphtha, then with flaming torches. Hundreds "risked their lives to save their brothers-in-arms from painful, fiery deaths."

A myth, of course—but review the past six weeks and respect the power of myths. As with Mr. Moran's moment at the Garden, myths elevate dark passions and play them out. Sept. 11 reminded us that we have to build myths into young people's rites of passage, channeling them toward ends better than those imagined by desperate loners in Afghanistan, Columbine High School or the South Bronx. If we don't do that, sentiments far uglier than Michael Moran's start running deep and gathering force, in inner-city gangs, in white militias, even in certain Manhattan clubs.

Liberal-capitalist democracies are notoriously neglectful or openly disdainful of the need for coherent myths. Not only apostles of multiculturalism but also managers of corporate and public bureaucracies share that disdain.

Take multiculturalism first—as Mr. Moran did, after a fashion. Some firefighters do believe that their blood-thick ties couldn't be sustained without the racial, ethnic and sexual solidarity that fired Mr. Moran's manifesto. Are they wrong? From athletic teams to the Army, we've seen more than enough collective courage and loyalty to know that these virtues can be shared and strengthened across lines of race and sex, even if not overnight at the stroke of a judge's pen. It takes time and a carefully nourished cultural change.

What is far less clear is whether the virtues that drove the heroes of Sept. 11 are nourished equally well by the Wall Street and management cultures of those they tried to save—cultures that reward self-marketing over fidelity and adaptability over courage. Years ago, a study by the Rand Corporation found New York firefighters governed by work rules that made them a medieval guild by today's management standards. Their loyalties to one another and their mission are too strong for modern managers as well as diversity consultants.

And so, for better or worse, the sacrifices of old-boy networks like the one that bound Michael Moran to his lost blood brother and his brotherhood in Ladder 3 remain America's strongest answer to the Taliban's declaration that their people love death as we love life. We have shown them that we do love life, enough to risk death to save it. But the reasons run deeper than either social activists or corporate managers think.

Most of the uniformed public servants who gave their lives were bound into a brotherhood that affronts civil-rights activists.

Terry Golway will return to this space next week.