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| |  | | --- | |  | | |  | | --- | | Reacting to Terrorism  An Essay by Jim Sleeper  [[audio](http://www.npr.org/ramfiles/atc/20010913.atc.30.ram)Listen to the essay](http://www.npr.org/ramfiles/atc/20010913.atc.30.ram).  No, this wasn't another Pearl Harbor, and not just because this time the enemy is so hard to pin down. The challenge we face is itself more elusive and frightening, but -- if we start thinking clearly about it -- more instructive. What can we learn? And how fast?   For one thing, the fact that the world's only superpower and its biggest global nerve center was brought so low by four civilian passenger planes makes a mockery of claims by some of our leaders that anti-missile defense systems can shield a society as open and diverse as ours. But the devastation and sheer cruelty behind it also mock claims by the powerless that violence by the oppressed is morally redemptive. Not this way it isn't.  The question isn't whether the powerless have a point; it's whether powerful America has enough will and moral resources to defend itself, not as the cockpit of a global imperium but as the wellspring of a politics that nourishes hope instead of fear. We have been such a wellspring, at times. We are that for new citizens every day. But now we are blocked by the bloody paradox that our newest technologies and corporate networks are defenseless against the oldest religious and tribal fanaticisms, which can be carried by those networks in every way.  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 intifada. It was the implosion of every excuse for brutality which anyone who still believes in politics could indulge in the name of anti-colonial or anti-imperial justice.   At same time, this paradox of new technology carrying barbaric impulses strips us 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 United States obliterates Afghanistan in the next 48 hours or that Israel rolls over Palestine. Any brief reduction in the number of suicide bombers would only be offset by a deeper, more determined rage.  It used to be relatively powerless people, like the young Martin Luther King Jr., who showed the powerful that violence is an end game without an ending. Now that powerless have been stripped by their would-be champions of the moral right to make that claim, we, the powerful, are left to find King's truths within ourselves, even as we learn fast to fight a new kind of war. We will have to be tougher and smarter than ever before, but also wiser and, if it is possible, more noble.    *Jim Sleeper, a former columnist for the Daily News, teaches political science at Yale.* | |

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