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A Pearl Harbor à la Française

The response of France, and the West, must be stripped of all sentimentality.

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Sometimes things happen that we cannot believe. Such events exceed our categories and befall us without our being able to understand them. What happened in Paris on the night of Friday, November 13, to Saturday, November 14, is the stuff of nightmare or fiction, including for those who witnessed it. The Paris of concerts, of café terraces; Paris, the theater of a happy and carefree younger generation, became a scene from a bad crime series. As has been said, war has been declared on us. This is a war without avowed enemies, without fronts, without an opposing army, carried on by a few determined individuals, ready to die, who can rise up anywhere. The disproportion is stupefying: seven or eight people can terrorize entire crowds. We are not afraid of death, the jihadists proclaim, as a way of declaring their superiority. But it is life they fear, and so they ceaselessly trample it, slander it, destroy it, and prepare candidates for martyrdom from the cradle. As witnesses have noted, the assassins arrived unmasked, ready to kill and to be killed. They went to the massacre calm and serene.

Their success was total. Where others—pathetic clowns with knives or jammed rifles—had failed, they succeeded. And they hardly bothered to justify their acts. Yes, they invoked Syria or Israel, but this is pure rhetoric: they kill us not for what we do but for what we are. Our crime is to exist; we are guilty of living in free and egalitarian societies. The true motor of fundamentalism is not so much fastidious respect for tradition (which would be akin to rigor) as fear of an existence based on autonomy, perpetual innovation, and the dislocation of authority. To tolerate the West would be to come to terms with the progress of reason, free thought, and individualism.

The progress of freedom is inseparable from the hatred of freedom and of women's rights, especially hatred of women's liberation. This liberation constitutes a fundamental symbolic change. Hence these new generations of Islamic converts born in Europe, these blue-eyed emirs, without a place in their own societies, who search for reassurance in

rigid rules. For those who stab, who shower passers-by with bullets, there is the conviction of winning salvation by murder, in a dimension that is at once apocalyptic and nihilistic. These young men are certain that they live in the end times: a dark eschatology persuades them to hasten the coming of the Last Day by carnage. A great bath of blood will purify sinful humanity and prepare its return to the primordial caliphate.

This nihilism draws from two sources: it is both messianic and fascist, and recalls the “long live death” of the Falangist José Millan-Astray, the rallying cry of the partisans of Generalissimo Franco in 1936. The self-radicalization of those who receive revelation via the Internet goes along with self-redemption by death given and received. Given this syndrome, there is reason to fear a kind of performance propaganda by which Friday’s macabre exploits would elicit still more high callings. Shootings, throat-cuttings, decapitations are powerful aphrodisiacs for radical Islamists, moved as they are by the voluptuous passion of the crime. Their dream is to set the French against one another, to isolate the Muslim community in order to expose it to violence. They want to trick us into the blind reprisals, into which the whole extreme Right seems ready to plunge. But the better we protect law-abiding French Muslims, the better we undo the plans of the God-crazed.

What, then, is to be done?

We change nothing of our habits; we live as if terrorism did not exist, going about our jobs with the usual nonchalance. We counter the assassins with the disdain of the civilized. Domestically, we suspend the constitutional rights of imprisoned jihadists, and gather them in internment camps, as has been proposed. We subject all individuals flagged as terrorism suspects to preventative incarceration and take away the freedom of the 3,000 individuals within our borders listed as potentially dangerous islamists. We neutralize the militants who have returned from Syria, unceremoniously expel questionable imams and preachers of hatred, and close Salafist mosques.

The soft-headed would like us to pay for our interventions in Muslim countries. This is utter foolishness. Besides the fact that these interventions saved Muslim lives—Sarajevo liberated by NATO in 1995 is a good example—it is precisely in Syria, where our interventions until now have been quite limited, that the Islamic State has achieved its greatest success. For France, for example, not to have responded in 2013 to the invitation of the government of Mali to block the al-Qaida offensive in the north of that country would have been to betray an ally and, by inaction, to ignore a direct threat to Europe. France should take on a larger role in the international coalition that includes the United States, Russia, Iraq, and Iran to conduct a massive bombardment of Mosul and Rakka, the two capitals of Isis in Iraq and in Syria. We must spread terror in the fiefdom of the terrorists; they must be gradually smothered and given no respite until

they are completely eradicated. This would of course require settling the question of the Sunnis in Iraq and giving them the place they deserve, as General David Petraeus understood in 2007. There will be plenty of time afterward to take care of Assad and manage his succession.

Paris should remind Washington of its debt in this region: the United States is not only responsible for the invasion of Iraq in 2003, under what turned out to be a false pretext, but also for having evacuated its troops too early, beginning in 2011. The rise of the Islamic State, which President Obama dismissed as “the junior varsity,” was facilitated by the Americans, due to the fatal error of Paul Bremer, head of the American occupation in Baghdad in 2003, in dissolving the Baath party and sending the officers and staff of Saddam’s army into hiding. To this should be added another imperative: to give massive assistance, including heavy weapons, to the Kurds in Erbil as well as in the north of Syria, since they are the only ones at present to have won two decisive victories over the Islamic State—at Kobani and at Sinjar.

Finally, there are the 1 million refugees who have entered Europe in recent months, among which there is no doubt a tiny but decisive percentage who have infiltrated on behalf of Isis or al-Qaida, and who are waiting for the opportunity to strike. This is what Angela Merkel, in her ostentatious generosity, has refused to see: harsh toward the Greeks in June, she welcomed the Syrians in August, demonstrating an altogether imperial charity. Without consulting the small countries of Eastern Europe, she imposed on them tens of thousands of pedestrian migrants, whom she saw, moreover, as a cheap, educated workforce. Looking to come out on top both sentimentally and economically, she practiced a kind of profitable altruism. A month later, once the enthusiasm and silliness had passed, she had to go meet the Turkish autocrat Erdogan at Canossa, bending to the will of the hidden godfather of Isis, an active member of the Muslim brotherhood who dreams of the Islamic domination of Europe and of the recreation of the Ottoman Empire. The exporting of violence into the streets of Paris, London, and Berlin thus comes about through these columns of refugees, in which, among the exhausted children and adults, a few war-hardened jihadists are hidden.

We will have to establish a conditional hospitality, stripped of all sentimentality, in which every candidacy will be carefully examined—a policy subject to the immediate closing of the borders as necessary. The assassins have won a first round and have brought in an ample harvest of corpses. It is our duty to destroy the assassins.

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