

commentary

from other pens...

Attacks bring out penchant for unity

By Will Lester

Associated Press Writer

WASHINGTON — Partisan politics has gone out of style, at least temporarily, in the wake of the terrorist attacks in New York and Washington.

And nobody is predicting a return to politics as usual anytime soon.

The chairmen of the Republican and Democratic national committees, usually intense adversaries, finally agreed on something: national unity. National Democrats scrapped their fall meeting, Vice President Dick Cheney canceled a campaign rally in Virginia and candidates for governor in both New Jersey and Virginia canceled campaign events and pulled political ads. Advisers to the candidates were considering what approach and tone to take.

“We’re in absolutely uncharted territory,” said Bill Pascoe, campaign manager for Bret Schundler, Republican candidate for governor of New Jersey. “We’ll cross our fingers and say a prayer that we’re doing the right thing.”

A tone of harmony was set by members of Congress from both parties when they sang “God Bless America” on the Capitol steps Tuesday. Hours earlier, terrorists in hijacked airliners toppled the Twin Towers of the World Trade Center and severely damaged the Pentagon, near Washington, killing thousands.

President Bush’s job approval rating had soared to 72 percent by Thursday.

Such bipartisan good will could evaporate, however, as Bush’s father discovered after the Gulf War. His own job approval soared to 84 percent in March 1991 but dropped by half at the start of the next year, a victim of the sagging economy.

The governors’ races in New Jersey and Virginia were complicated by their proximity to the attack sites. The World Trade Center lies just across the Hudson River from New Jersey, and the Pentagon is in northern Virginia.

None of the campaign aides were sure when and how they would restart their campaigns. They planned to test the waters gingerly by the weekend or early next week.

“This is a hot topic of conversation today in my line of work,” said Ray Allen, a political consultant working with the campaign of Virginia Republican candidate Mark Earley.

The first political stage after such a national disaster is to rally around the flag during the emergency phase and avoid public talk of discord, said political analyst Stuart Rothenberg.

“Somewhere down the line, there are going to be differences of opinion on tactics and strategy,” he said. “The more decisions you have, the more differences of opinion.”

But in the “emergency phase,” even two of the most ardent of political foes, Democratic national Chairman Terry McAuliffe and Republican national Chairman Jim Gilmore, found common themes.

“There are no partisans today, only patriots,” McAuliffe said Tuesday, while canceling the Democratic National Committee’s meeting in Florida. “I know that you will join with your fellow citizens to demonstrate our solidarity as American people.”

Gilmore offered: “Americans are united in our resolve to move forward together.”

The terrorist attacks immediately made political debates about such issues as the budget and Social Security out of date, said Fred Yang, a Democratic strategist.

“Whatever we were dealing with Monday is out the window,” Yang said. “Life as we know it has been put on hold. After that, at least initially, we’ll be making this up as we go.”



‘War on terrorism’ needs to get real



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• commentary

Up until now, American officials have been routinely referring to a “war on terrorism” and have been conducting it routinely.

Now, after the gruesome events of Sept. 11 — this horrible 911 call, if you will — they have to fight a war for real.

The cliché of the day is that Tuesday was “another Pearl Harbor,” but the fact is that just 2,400 were killed by the Japanese — overwhelmingly military personnel.

The U.S. death toll from Tuesday could exceed that of any other day in history, including the Civil War’s Antietam, when 4,000 died, and Gettysburg, when 45,000 perished, albeit over three days.

President Bush indicated that he means to respond with at least one warlike policy, meeting out equal punishment to those who harbor terrorists and to the terrorists themselves.

Presumably that means if Osama bin Laden is deemed responsible for Tuesday’s terrorism, Afghanistan’s Taliban regime will suffer too.

It would be appropriate for the United States to use its high-tech weapons, including cruise missiles and smart bombs, to decimate a broad range of official Taliban targets.

And after the smoke clears from those attacks, America would be justified in striking other sites until bin Laden is served up to justice.

Beyond that, however, is the question of whether the United States will wage a full-scale war on terrorism — that is, on all the states and groups that attack innocents or American targets to advance their interests.

The United States should not launch “rage raids” against Iran, Iraq and Libya, but it certainly should intensify diplomatic, intelligence and military pressure against them.

On Monday, for instance, Iraq shot down another unmanned U.S. aircraft patrolling the no-fly zone. U.S. military officials believe that our pilots are now in danger of being shot down.

It would be appropriate — if it’s deemed feasible

— for the United States to wipe out Saddam Hussein’s air-defense system as a preventive measure. In effect, that action would be a strike against terrorism, too. Even if Hussein did not launch the assault on New York and Washington, he not only cheered it, but derived temporary gain from it as a declared enemy of the United States. A significant blow against him would even the tally.

In a war, it’s the rule that one expects help from allies and judges others in accordance with the degree of aid they provide.

China, Russia, Pakistan — and even France — have been giving technical and economic assistance to Iran and Iraq. They need to be put on notice that good relations with the United States depend on their cutting off that aid.

If this country gets help from its friends, it also should repay the friendship with solid support for Israel, the world’s No. 1 victim of terrorism.

The same Islamic radical movement that has vowed to destroy Israel has declared the United States its enemy. Indeed, Tuesday’s massacres were probably a consequence of the U.S.-Israeli alliance.

As another phase of war, the Bush administration needs to form a more solid intelligence partnership with its allies so that all of them are fighting terrorism jointly.

As numerous members of Congress have now observed, the United States has allowed its human intelligence capacity — its spy corps — to atrophy in favor of satellite and signal intelligence. That needs to be corrected by hiring more spies and more analysts who know Arabic and Farsi.

To enlist support, it’s important for both domestic and international reasons that the war not be

waged against Islam, which would be both counterproductive and unfair.

Domestic security obviously will have to be upgraded — probably involving armed marshals aboard airplanes — and measures need to be taken to anticipate future attacks.

The attacks of two days ago were a combination of the lowest-tech weaponry (knives and box cutters) and sophisticated planning and training. The fact that chemical and biological weapons weren’t used is a blessing — probably an indication that the terror network still lacks a deliverable capacity.

This won’t be the case for long, as hard as the United States and its allies try to keep our enemies from becoming more sophisticated. Unless they are defeated first, the terrorists may acquire nuclear devices too.

Undoubtedly, those who planned Tuesday’s attacks are cheering their success. They appeared to have tried to attack four major targets and hit three.

The evildoers struck at American material power, leaving our spirit intact.

They did not succeed in striking terror in the American population.

Partly thanks to sober, solemn television news coverage — anchors kept their cool even in the face of massive catastrophe — there was no panic anywhere.

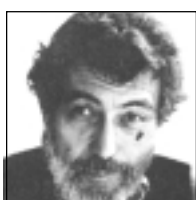
The President was not Churchillian or Rooseveltian in his address to the nation, but he had it right in saying that the terrorists destroyed steel and concrete, but not American unity or resolve.

To the contrary, the chances are that, as with Pearl Harbor, they have aroused American defiance. The Japanese naval commander Adm. Yamamoto said after Pearl Harbor that he feared the attack had awakened a sleeping giant.

It’s up to Bush to lead a war on terrorism to the same victory that the United States helped bring about in World War II.

(Morton Kondracke is executive editor of Roll Call, the newspaper of Capitol Hill.)

Teachers’ union wrong on merit pay



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I have helped organize unions, and I currently belong to two. But I do not support certain unbending labor-union positions — particularly the opposition of teachers’ associations to merit pay for individual teachers.

As an education reporter, I know how difficult it is to remove incompetent teachers. Of course, due process — fairness — is essential. But it takes many months or sometimes years to fire someone whose students keep falling below grade level — as the damage to the youngsters increases. Moreover, Steven Malanga of the Manhattan Institute reported recently that “New York principals fail less than 1 percent of teachers in annual evaluations.”

Years ago, while attending a New York City Board of Education meeting, I heard a black father, who had been a high-school dropout in the South and wound up in a dead-end factory job in New York that paid him \$90 a week. He said that his child was his only hope, and she was falling further and further behind each year in school.

“You people,” he said to the impassive school board members, “are responsible when my child’s not learning. You and the principal and her teachers. When you fail, when everybody fails my child, what happens? Nothing. Nobody gets fired. Nothing happens to nobody — except my child.”

In New York City, as in many other cities, hundreds of thousands of students keep falling further and further behind. Mayor Rudolph Giuliani has continually insisted that a key way to achieve accountability in school systems is to provide merit pay for teachers who make a measurable difference in their students’ progress. But New York City’s United Federation of Teachers refuses to agree. The union will only accept a plan that will give additional pay to ALL teachers in a school that improves. This approach protects incompetent teachers, who will continue to convince many children that they’re incapable of learning.

I’ve written several books based on years of reporting in classrooms, and there is no mystery to discovering who the good teachers are. You can tell the failures not only by spending time in their classrooms, but often the effective teachers, with pride

in their work, will identify their failing colleagues.

There’s another way to tell. Harvey Scribner was the chancellor of the New York City school system in the 1970s. I often interviewed him and followed him around as he tried mightily to bring accountability into the system. As he told me:

“Setting criteria for the staff in each district can finally, and fairly, alter the tradition that a teacher is guaranteed his job for life, no matter how he performs.”

Scribner had one flaw. He was not a politician. He had clear principles, and his commitment to the students precluded any backtracking to pressures from the powerful United Federation of Teachers. The union finally ran him out of town.

While Scribner was still in office, we were talking about teacher evaluations. He told me of a school in Massachusetts where, for five years, children had been moving each year into a fifth-grade math class with reasonable skills gained from their previous teachers. But, for five years, those kids who had gone into THAT fifth-grade class came out of it with marked deterioration in their knowledge and understanding of math.

The students were not at fault. But if this same fifth-grade teacher each year had tenure, it would have been very difficult to remove her, as incompetent as she was.

Scribner believed, and I agree, that once a teacher survives his or her probationary period, licenses should be renewable, depending on an evaluation of how well that teacher’s students have been learning. And, he added, there would have to be explanations for those children who had not been learning. Children with hearing or vision problems, for example, are often not examined until their conditions become so disabling that they can’t be overlooked.

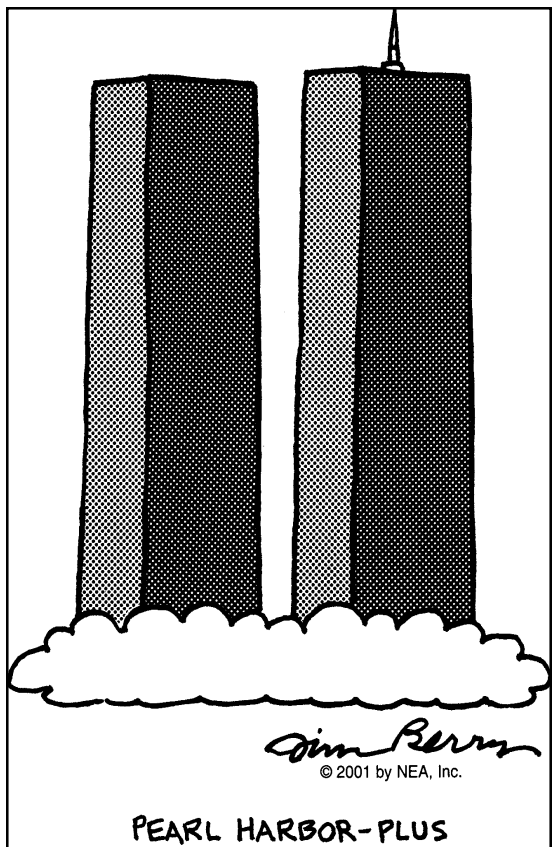
But more often than not, there are teachers who are not certified in their subjects or are unable to connect to children. It’s not a question of different teaching styles. I’ve known first-rate teachers with many different ways of teaching. There are, however, people in many fields with inferior communication skills.

And there are also teachers who do not believe that children from poor neighborhoods and broken homes can learn very much.

In all the talk about school reform, the president and legislators should focus on actual accountability, including merit pay.

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