



Thomas G. Palaima REGULAR CONTRIBUTOR

American ideals and the rights of others

At times of international crisis, we Americans really need to know who we are and how what we say and do translates into foreign languages. It is not enough to look into the mirror. We must see ourselves as others see us, across the traditional boundary between east and west.



Here is how we look to a scholar familiar with terrorism, Professor José Melena, director of the Cervantes Cultural Institute in Istanbul and recipient of the Euskadi prize, one of Spain's highest honors. Melena grew up in Spain under the Franco dictatorship and lived for many years under the daily threat of Basque-separatist terrorism. He has had terrorist bombs explode in his apartment building and colleagues blown up in their cars. He is a courageous and moral humanist.

"I have been following your Aegeanet discussions about the bloody events of the eleventh of September, and I now see clearly how important it is to use the right words in the right places. I watch people on American television declaring that things like the attacks on the World Trade Center and Pentagon 'can occur in other countries, but not in the United States.' TV channels over here broadcast commentary with the running header 'Attacks upon the U.S.' and tell us that the U.S. plans to carry out a military retaliation called Operation Infinite Justice.

"7,000 innocent people have been killed. We all deeply mourn them. The pride and sense of security of your nation have been injured. But the main victims of the terrorist attacks will be International Rights and Justice itself. State terrorism is a thousand times worse than plain terrorism. We must be cautious in supporting state terrorist actions. This is not a fight for freedom and democracy, without adjectives. It is a fight for U.S. Freedom and U.S. Democracy.

"I have lived with my closest loved ones through terrorism in the Basque region of Spain. My long experience is that, when we were suffering terrorist attacks, the

United States did nothing. U.S. officials told us: 'The terrorist attacks are internal affairs of Spain.' When we experienced an attempted coup d'état against our young democracy, the U.S. ambassador at Madrid spoke at once: 'This is an internal affair of Spain. The United States cannot be involved in the struggle.' After World War II, the United States supported our fascist dictator Franco in power. Freedom and democracy in my country were exchanged for permission to install U.S. military bases.

"There are other countries in the world whose citizens have shared the Spanish experience. American ideals seem to us remote and unreal. Infinite Justice, according to the Latin roots, is Unlimited Justice or Justice without Borders. But Justice must have limits and must have its own tools. Machines of war cannot bring about the kind of Justice we really need now.

"A human life is a human life. But 7,000 human victims of terrorism on American soil seem to weigh more right now than the 32,000 who have been killed in recent years by terrorist actions in Turkey.

"Americans then should not be surprised that in a recent poll, 86 percent of Spaniards are against any U.S. military action. I agree. This is not Justice. It is retaliation. But there is nothing new under the sun. The basic question was already treated by the Greek historian Thucydides: Powerful countries will always be tempted to use their power for pragmatic reasons."

In 1952 at the outset of the Cold War, U.S. State Department official Louis Halle discussed what the United States of America could learn from Thucydides, who commanded troops as a general in the great conflict between Athens and Sparta. Halle argued that we should not be seduced by our power and should remain "devoted to freedom and as dedicated to the rights of others as to [our] own."

We can no longer control our past foreign policy. We can still control the future. We need to make sure that our ideals control our powerful actions.

Palaima, a MacArthur fellow, is Dickson Centennial Professor of Classics at the University of Texas at Austin.