The world did not change

Lessons that might have been learnt from September 11 have been lost on the US, writes **Tom Palaima**

On September 23, Carlos Fuentes published a reverently pessimistic essay about the terrorist attacks on the United States and their likely non-effect on US foreign policy. Fuentes added the September 11 slaughter of innocents to his own list of sacrileges against humanity within living memory: Verdun and the Marne, Guernica and Coventry, Auschwitz and Hiroshima, Tlatelolco and Río Mozote.

While stating categorically that nothing can justify the World Trade Center-Pentagon atrocity, he expressed concern that Americans would remain myopic about the international actions of their government. He produced a second list, a catalogue of crimes against humanity over the past 40 years in Vietnam, Chile, Uruguay, Argentina, El Salvador, Guatemala, Iraq and the Balkans, all, in his view, attributable to foreign-policy decisions made by "los Estados Unidos de Amnesia".

Clever, but it is not right: amnesia is not the same as ignorance. This explains why the debate here about whether or how far to curtail rights of free speech in the interests of national security has had no intensity. Some 55 per cent of Americans agree that our government should routinely read our private email transmissions, and six out of ten go for good old-fashioned wire-tapping.

Bliss would seem to be ignorance about the historical significance of government surveillance, whether in Eisenhower's America, Pinochet's Chile or Big Brother's Oceania.

Fuentes's essay appears in the online version of the Argentine newspaper *Clarín* (www.clarin.com). Few American periodicals would publish it, and not, as you might think, because of its "anti-American" sentiments. His lists would bewilder their readership.

How many Americans would recognise that all the human carnage on Fuentes's first list was wrought by legitimate governmental authority? Military history buffs might recognise Verdun, Picasso lovers the Basque town of Guernica. Second world war veterans might recall Luftwaffe raids on Coventry. Auschwitz would resonate and Hiroshima might cause an anxious pause. But who would identify Tlatelolco as a Mexican Kent State, or Río Mozote as a Salvadoran My Lai carried out by US-trained troops? Who would grasp what Fuentes's list has to do with our response to Osama bin Laden?

Robert Jensen, journalism professor at the University of Texas at Austin, anticipated Fuentes's second list in an editorial published in the *Houston Chronicle* three days after the WTC-Pentagon attacks. Jensen, too, stated categorically that the terrorist murders were so "reprehensible and indefensible" that "to try to defend them would be to abandon one's humanity". But he pointed out that when the US attacked terrorism with massive force in Sudan and Afghanistan, civilians were killed and a pharmaceuticals plant destroyed. He pleaded that we recognise the humanity of our fellow man across political boundaries and restrain our government from being, in Martin Luther King's words, "the greatest purveyor of violence in the world".

Jensen is no Fuentes. His piece was shrill and ran against the grief, horror and desire for retribution felt then by our entire nation. The president and regents of UT Austin were flooded with expressions of outrage at Jensen's un-Americanism. Two weeks later, professors at City University of New York created similar problems for their trustees by holding an informational seminar on America's new war.

UT president Larry Faulkner responded in the *Houston Chronicle*. He acknowledged Jensen's constitutionally guaranteed rights to free speech, clarified that Jensen's views were not official views of the university, expressed his own personal disgust with the article, and exercised his own free-speech rights in declaring that Jensen "has become a fountain of undiluted foolishness on issues of public policy".

The CUNY trustees also resorted to rhetoric to close off debate. Admitting that they could not fire the offending professors, effectively for educational patriotism, they extended a public invitation to them "to take a hike" of their own volition. The UT story is also playing out, depressingly, mainly as a personality conflict. Some faculty are concerned about the free-speech implications of a university president publicly attacking the views of a faculty member.

Others think that Jensen overstepped the boundaries of decency by publishing anything that could be construed as an apology for terrorist actions three days after they took place. The political climate before September 11 had already become so hostile to the distorted image of a liberal professoriat that Faulkner had to say something publicly and quickly and with enough force to assure taxpayers, legislators and people of influence that the lunatics were not running our asylum.

This all reveals a lot about American attitudes toward free speech and intellectualism. It implies that the ideas expressed in free speech are trivial. There was no need to engage Jensen's — or Fuentes's — views on American foreign policy, or even to report the contents of the CUNY seminar.

In Texas, dismissive name-calling was ironically the deftest political and intellectual response the well-respected president of a major university could make to protect his faculty from adverse consequences of a colleague's public opinions. In such a climate, who needs amnesia? Forget about free speech. And let the ideas of Carlos Fuentes float unanswered in cyberspace.

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