

The Political is Personal

Asma Barlas

Last September, shortly after President George W. Bush asked the (in)famous question about the hijackers of 9/11—“why do they hate us?”—I gave a talk in Ithaca, suggesting several plausible answers. My point, however, was not just to provide a laundry list of grievances against the US, but to demonstrate why I thought that the question itself was disingenuous and wrong-headed.

So far as grievances go, I argued that the ideological underpinnings of post-World War II US foreign policy were, at best, unsavory as evidenced by policy documents written by the Council on Foreign Relations in 1941 and the CIA in 1954. The former advocated US control over a “Grand Area” that included, in the words of L.S. Stavrianos, “the entire world outside German-dominated Europe,” in particular, the oil-rich Middle East. The CIA, on the other hand, argued that, in the face of “an implacable enemy” (communism) “acceptable norms of human conduct do not apply. We must destroy our enemies by more clever, more sophisticated and more effective methods than those used against us. [And Americans must learn to] understand and support this fundamentally repugnant philosophy” (Tim Weiner, “Making the Rules in the World between War and Peace,” *New York Times*, August 19, 2001).

I then gave examples of how both strands of thinking have shaped US policies and why, as a result, many people now identify the US “with the political, social, and economic forces that are responsible for [the misery of the oppressed, underrepresented and poor segments of the population who experience not] individual liberty, the rule of law, and economic prosperity, but ...the worst traits of American culture, including materialism, militarism, and racism” (Stephen Zunes, “US Policy Toward Political Islam”; Alternet.org).

I was careful to note, however, that this does not mean that the US is to blame for all the ills of the world or that attacks against it were justified; rather, the point of my critique was to try and explain reasons for terrorism rather than claiming that the reason “they hate us” is because they themselves are evil and not because of anything “we” may have done to them.

My talk was well received, but not so its edited version published by the *Ithaca College Quarterly*. In calls and letters to the college president, Peggy Williams, as well as in the local and college newspapers, alumni, parents, and others, likened me to bin Laden, called me a left-wing anti-American radical, accused me of corrupting America’s youth, and demanded to know “how dare Asma Barlas hate us?” Some alumni cut off their contributions to the college and others insisted that I be censured.

I have not looked to see if my name has appeared on the list of “anti-American” faculty prepared by the American Council of Trustees and Alumni (ACTA) under the leadership of Lynn Cheney, the wife of the invisible yet ubiquitous vice president. This throwback to 1950s McCarthyism, which ruined innumerable people’s careers by accusing them of being un-American, arises in a line of thinking now espoused by the president himself:

“if you’re not with us, you’re against us.” It seems there can be no principled dissent, even in a democracy, but only treasonous disagreement.

These purificatory cycles of patriotic cleansing are not that dissimilar from religious and ethnic movements in their urge to purge differences by appealing to the chimera of an authentic identity. In one case, the appeal draws on secular values (patriotism) and in the other, on religious (moral righteousness) but both equally sacralize the idea of a pure and unpolluted (“the real”) identity. (Of course, in “real life,” both can and do coalesce and, when they do, one has events like the Nazi-sponsored holocaust.)

Meanwhile, it may a sign of the times that few colleagues came to my defense (and many who did don’t even know me personally). Among the handful on my campus is the president who took the unusual step of writing an op-ed in the local newspaper defending free speech and my right to exercise it and also noting the irony of the fact that I left Pakistan several years ago because I was not free to express my opinions there.

She was referring to my dismissal from the foreign service by Zia ul Haq in 1983. What most people don’t know is that I was fired for comments I made privately, in my diary and also at a dinner (to wit, that we deserved buffoons like Zia as our leader). I became the first federal government officer to be dismissed for voicing ideas in private because no one recognized my right to do so. In fact, the then foreign secretary, charged with investigating my misconduct, observed virtuously that while everyone was thinking what I had said, no one had been rash enough to say it!

Lately, I’ve been comparing these two events in my life and I readily see the differences between them. The rule of law ensures that I don’t stand to lose my job today, although a tenured Palestinian professor was fired recently for comments he made eight years ago about Israel. Also, my public condemnation followed a public critique by me; hence, the exercise of free speech was reciprocal. Further, even though it is reprehensible, the new McCarthyism does not advocate killing dissenters, as extremist, religiously-based vigilantism does.

But, then there are the unsettling similarities: the censure for speaking what many people consider unspeakable, the desire to control dissent (even in a democracy), and the silence of colleagues when one is faced with adversity. I don’t know if the personal is political, as feminists say, but I do know that the political has been ineffably personal for me in the price I have had to pay for voicing certain views both in Pakistan and in the US.

(Asma Barlas is associate professor and chair of the Department of Politics at Ithaca College, New York.)