



Wednesday, September 12, 2001

A memorial tribute to the victims of Tuesday's tragedy

Vincent B. Khapoya, professor of Political Science, made the following speech at Wednesday's memorial service:

You will forgive me if I seem to struggle for words. I really don't know what to say.

I have often told my students how, growing up in Africa, in Kenya, I saw far too many people die, so much so that to this day, I am pleasantly surprised when nothing bad has happened to me at the end of the day. I have always lived with the feeling that anything can happen to me.

Having said that, I can tell you that none of this mind-set could have prepared me for the immense destruction that occurred Tuesday when hijacked planes slammed into the towers of the World Trade Center in New York and into the Pentagon.

The destruction is so incredible that even the authorities cannot hazard to guess how many people may have been lost. Already the death toll of firemen - about 200 confirmed dead - is the worst in New York City Fire Department's history. I don't know how one prepares for the terrible news of the real cost in human lives in their prime.

This country is at its best when responding to a crisis. We are blessed with the resources and the will to prevail in the face of a catastrophe and to pick up the pieces and move on, and we will. The gap left by those who perished will never be filled, particularly in the lives of their families, friends and neighbors. I can only hope that we, as a country, as a people, can find some comfort in our various religious faiths and in our knowledge of what these people meant to this great country.

Tuesday's tragedy was an unimaginable crisis that tore to the core of our sense of security. Some people have compared it to the attack on Pearl Harbor some 60 years ago. Unlike the attack on Pearl Harbor, however, this attack is harder to pin down. We don't know how "to exact punishment for this evil," to use President Bush's words. I dearly hope that we can resist the temptation to scapegoat our fellow citizens simply because they originate from the Middle East. I also hope that, for our own sake, we can draw some hard lessons from this terrible experience.

This is not the time to discuss lessons, however. It is a time to share grief with each other, to support each other however we can, and to resolve to go on. At this point, I can only echo the words of a cab driver in New York City, an immigrant from Egypt, who spoke for many of us immigrants from other lands. He said, "I want to pull over and cry. I love this country. America tried to help everybody. God Bless America."

SUMMARY

Vincent B. Khapoya, professor and chair of the Political Science Department, made this speech at Wednesday's memorial service.

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