

What's Up With America: A Reflection For Stephanie, May 2002

I, along with 35 other PCTs-to-be⁽¹⁾, spent September 11, 2001, in an airport and then in a posh hotel. It was a personalized limbo, that pastel lodging, halfway between home and our new lives as PC-whatevers in the Dominican Republic.

We could turn on Miami cable and see the “planes going in and the flames shooting out.”⁽²⁾ We could switch stations to change the angle, or even, given that this was Miami, to change the language between Spanish and English. Thus, our limbo was perfectly situated in between the generalized Anglophone United States from whence we were gathered, and the specific Spanish-speaking place towards which we were bound. But, in fact, we were not going anywhere fast; due to the unavailability of flights to Santo Domingo, or anywhere, for that matter, we were guests of honor in a five star hotel for a full week.

During our sojourn, we could watch the continuous pornographic instant replay of disaster on cable and then go out for drinks at trendy South Beach clubs. Discussing how large aircrafts could unexpectedly collide with larger buildings was a somewhat surreal conversational accompaniment to sitting in a Jacuzzi and drinking beer. Not that we had much else to do, aside from the dance lessons someone convinced the Latino concierge to teach us.

Recently, another Volunteer friend was asking me, “What’s up with America?” I wasn’t on the same wavelength as she. I started to recite *America* by Allen Ginsberg.⁽³⁾

*America I've given you all, and now I am nothing.
America two dollars twenty-seven cents January
19, 1956
America when will we end the human war?*

She stopped me and told me she was worried about the country she would return to. Did I know what had happened September 11? “No,” I said, “I was just in limbo.”

In the Coral Gables Omni Colonade, the media barrage, complete with flag waving and “America Under Attack” headlines, had annoyed me. It all seemed unreal. “America Embraces Nationalism” or “We Don’t Know What Just Happened, But We’ll Play the Instant Replay,” might have been more appropriate headlines. In those early days when the big networks took a break from ad breaks, the images and the barrage of information overwhelmed any possibility of making sense of it all.

Finally, however—here & now—a few hundred miles away, I have started to read about

the real aftermath of September 11. And a new group of Volunteers are here, all of who were in the states after the tragedy, and none of who spent all that time in a bilingual five star hotel. I’ve read up and asked questions to those who lived in the U.S. after September 17, when my group finally left.

What I’m finding out worries me. I don’t like it. I am led to wonder if upon my arrival I will recognize the U.S. as the same democratic country I left. One of the new⁽⁴⁾ Volunteers told me that after September 11, some people “thought more carefully about what things they should say” about the U.S., about us and about our government. She further opined that she thinks the trend towards restraint is, simply, “good.” A late night talk-show host named Bill Maher was canned in early October of last year for calling President Bush’s characterization, that the 9/11 hijackers were “cowards,” hypocritical. More specifically, the host stated his opinion that it takes far more balls to pilot a jetliner into tall buildings than to command a military force from afar.

The President is busy advocating the consolidation of the FBI, the CIA and other intelligence agencies under one roof.⁽⁵⁾ My political friends back home tell me that the FBI has used the anti-terrorist fervor in the country to investigate certain left-of-center political organizations with more vigor. The IRS and the FBI went after the political advocacy group PETA for “funding terrorism” after the organization provided money for the legal defense of people accused of breaking into animal testing labs.⁽⁶⁾ Indeed, in the wake of September 11, Congress acted quickly to give law enforcement agencies broader leeway in picking whom to investigate and how.⁽⁷⁾

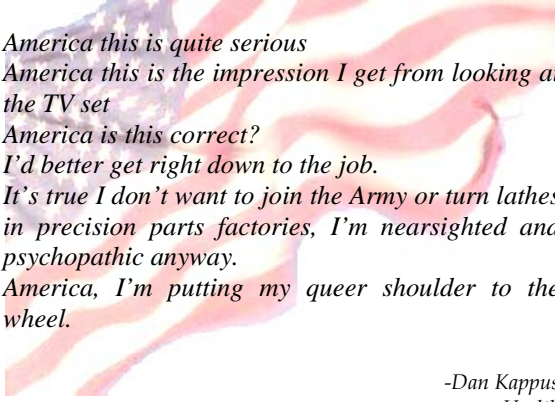
At the State Department’s website, the consular information sheets have gone through a linguistic transformation. The travel warnings and advisories no longer express concern about “armed Marxist rebel groups” or “militant separatist organizations,” but now almost ubiquitously refer to “foreign terrorist organizations.” Thus South America’s *Sendero Luminoso*, *Frente Armado Revolucionario de Columbia-Ejercito Popular*, *Frente Marti para Liberación Nacional* and similar organizations are no longer Maoist, Stalinist, Marxist or nationalist, but simply terrorist. The same can be said for Basque, Irish and Philippine separatists. “Terrorists” are people who don’t like U.S. policy, domestic or foreign.

I don’t want to live in a world superpower. I’m fine with neutrality, actually, and am a lifelong pacifist. War diverts resources from addressing

human needs, including development aid. But I fear that such iconoclastic opinions as mine will not be easy to express in the future. I worry that a majority of the U.S. population isn't bothered by blind nationalism in combination with occasional invasions of specially selected poor countries. As one Volunteer said to me, "Doesn't the world need someone to keep order?" I don't know about him, but I'm not especially interested in being a member of the Fourth Reich. I feel compelled to speak. I want to uphold my oath to "defend and protect the Constitution of the United States of America" by saying how concerned I am for my country. For my country, as Ginsberg wrote almost a full half-decade ago, is now in a "silly mood," and its government is fully misguided on many counts. As the folksinger Utah Phillips said, it's possible to "love your country, but not like your government."

I hope the fluttering flags will go away and that I'll hear a bit less America-love-it-or-leave-it schpiel. I hope that the racist anti-Arab editorial my mom sent me from a hometown paper is an

aberration from the norm and not an everyday occurrence.⁽⁸⁾ But I fear that I left the U.S. just in time, and can only hope that my experience in the Peace Corps and the cultural relativism I'll bring back home will somehow, however unlikely it may be, save my nation from itself, or at least bring some peace to a wracked world.



*America this is quite serious
America this is the impression I get from looking at
the TV set
America is this correct?
I'd better get right down to the job.
It's true I don't want to join the Army or turn lathes
in precision parts factories, I'm nearsighted and
psychopathic anyway.
America, I'm putting my queer shoulder to the
wheel.*

-Dan Kappus
Health

Cañada del Negro, San Pedro de Macoris

Notes

¹ There were 36 PCTs, two PC/Washington staff and Shanice Anderson's family.

² Korda, Rev K. (2001) "I Like To Watch." Musical composition with film collage.

<http://www.churchofeuthanasia.com>

³ Ginsberg, A (1959) *America* in Howl and Other Poems. San Francisco: City Lights Books.

⁴ The new group, as of this writing, came in February and will soon be replaced by a new new group in September.

⁵ The proposed cabinet level "Department of Homeland Security" to be headed by Tom Ridge.

⁶ I don't have the reference with me, but it was printed in *Mother Jones Magazine*. The accused were said to be suspected as "members" of the Earth Liberation Front—but note that political association is protected by the Constitution.

⁷ For example, the "Uniting and Strengthening America Act by Providing Appropriate Tools Required to Intercept and Obstruct Terrorism (USA PATRIOT) Act of 2001," passed in October of last year, allows foreign intelligence agencies to perform wiretaps on private Americans, allows the detention without charges for an indefinite time of resident foreign nationals suspected to be involved in terrorism and generally erodes civil rights. Depending on the reading one gives it, it may also criminalize the activities of those who organize civil disobedience or direct action. According to the Center for Constitutional rights, "Environmental activists, anti-globalization activists and anti-abortion activists who use direct action to further their political agendas are particularly vulnerable to prosecution as "domestic terrorists." http://www.ccr-ny.org/whatsnew/usa_patriot_act_2.asp.

⁸ Again, I am lacking the reference, but it was an Augusta, Georgia, *Chronicle* article, reprinted in the Sunday *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, which equated Arabs with terrorists.