

September Lightning



Popular Catholic priest Padre Marcelo dedicates a September 16 mass in São Paulo to victims of the September 11 attacks. Photo: Dado Galdieri.

By [RICARDO LEVINS MORALES](#)

When lightning flashes on a stormy night, the world is lit up for a brief, frozen second. You see the shape of the land, the path you have traveled. The lightning that struck on September 11 sent a hot, bright blaze across the political and cultural landscape, revealing things that we may rather not know—or want each other to know. In the brutal honesty of the moment, we stand with all our strengths and weaknesses exposed to the world.

The flash has dazed the left—we who fight the empire. *Our people have been attacked by people who oppose the people who oppress our people.* This is heartbreaking, angering and frightening. Understanding the complexity of the world is not a U.S. strength. We prefer our plots Hollywood-clear, our struggles a simple us-vs.-them. We're not prepared to know that our memories of simple struggles are false.

In the days following the flash, I heard despair expressed a thousand ways, all telling us that we are powerless, that solidarity is an illusion, that our world is beyond our ability to repair. *The paralysis of despair is a form of collusion with oppression.* This may seem harsh. The feelings, after all, are real. They also reflect how we've been manipulated and our complicity in that manipulation. It's a political matter: How we feel informs how we act. The antidote is detaching ourselves, strand by strand, from the debilitating web of cynicism.

A cross section of U.S. demographics is buried in the rubble. The grief, anger and confusion touch every community. The question is widespread and heartfelt: *We've always been so good. Why would anyone hate us so much?*

Revenge! The call comes mostly from a part of the community known as the mainstream, a peculiar U.S. euphemism for white people. Their self-esteem is high only when they can claim the mantle of victimhood. In their selective memory the wars of conquest on the plains are crystallized in a single moment called Custer's Last Stand. The dismemberment of Mexico is recalled as the Alamo. Slavery is forgotten. The long war in Indochina can be summarized in the attack on the *U.S.S. Mayaguez* in the war's last hours. The history of racism is reduced to reverse discrimination. They celebrate the moments when "we" were outnumbered and attacked. The present moment can be added to the list. It will not be connected to a million Iraqi deaths, colonial wars, death squad armies, torture centers, drug-dealing mercenaries or terrorist dictators. What matters is this moment, they insist. If we listen with care we might notice that the passion for vengeance, the love of victimhood, has its roots in a deeply repressed shame.

Real crime in real time. The liberal politicians stumble over each other to salute their commander. Soon they must ransack their districts for the \$40 billion they gave him. Later they will lose sleep over the images of collateral damage. Those who sign the death warrant of the innocents will protest that the punishment was too harsh. Like weather vanes they point the way the wind has gone.

The nation's managers appear gripped by rabid war frenzy. In reality it's pure calculation. They have seized the moment to move agendas that were biding their time. "You side with us or you are with the terrorists." The terms for a new Cold War, so much like the old: If you oppose us, you are the enemy. They have mistaken sorrow and anger for a groundswell of support, and the miscalculation will cost them. Beyond the rippling flags runs deep unease. Old images of endless war, draft cards and body counts were never truly erased. They lay dormant until needed. Now, they reawaken. The days of a unified, loyal rearguard for the empire are gone forever.

The brutal attacks of September and the unfolding aftermath will change the cultural landscape in ways we cannot foresee. But they will not have changed everything: The dead must be mourned, oppression is the fruit of greed, and hope is a revolutionary act.