

INTERDEPENDENCE DAY, SEPTEMBER 12, 2010 – LIKE IT OR NOT!

Less than a year ago, the world celebrated the fall of the Berlin Wall. Back in 1989, when the two "independent" fragments of post-war Germany – symbolizing the two worlds of the Cold War – merged into a single interdependent whole, hope was kindled that the world might finally be on the path to a genuine interdependence in which cooperation, reciprocity and common work would finally allow a global democratic response to such global challenges of war, nuclear proliferation, drugs, predatory markets, environmental change and north south inequality that had defied nation-based solutions .

Yet since that time new walls have gone up – between the United States and Mexico, between Israel and Palestine, between an enlarged yet more paranoiac Europe and the Islamic neighbors it now fears, between a nuclear India and a nuclear China, and between North and South Korea. In the United States, once a global leader in fostering multilateralism, multiculturalism and global institutions, the terrorist attacks of 9/11 have provoked a new and dangerously parochial unilateralism – a corrosive fear of immigrants, of "outsiders" and of the "other." The planet's most multicultural nation is today deeply fearful of the very openness and tolerance that render it so pervasively multicultural. America's anti-Muslim, anti-foreigner, anti-internationalist tea party movement has become a powerful talisman for reactionary populists everywhere, for all those who equate politics with usurpation, democracy with tyranny and the world beyond national borders with wickedness.

In short, in this tenth year of the new Millennium, fear has become the overriding political reality of once brave and democratic nations, including the great American hegemon. And fear breeds not only parochialism and resentment, but weakness. Ironically, the brute realities of the world that inspire these fears, this yearning for a bygone independence, are themselves irreversibly interdependent. They are immune to the kinds of nationalist posturing by angry citizens and proudly sovereign governments that the new politics of fear have thrown up.

So it is that we face a twenty-first century interdependence with eighteenth century independent "sovereign" institutions. Global warming will not yield to the responses of a few virtuous nations acting alone: all must respond for the responses of any will be meaningful. Likewise, terrorism is a function of neither rogue states nor adversarial nations but of pathological NGO's like al Qaeda that belong to no state and that already practice a form of malicious interdependence. The global financial crisis demonstrated a similar logic: global markets in finance and capital turned out to be untethered from the oversight and regulation of single states or their national banks and treasuries. It is no longer possible to separate out issues of environment from those of economic inequality, issues of inequality from those of terrorism. The skein is global, the framework planetary.

That is why the new gospel of interdependence can no longer be regarded as a twentieth century appeal to aspirational ideals but must instead be seen as reflecting a post-Millennial realist acknowledgement of brute realities our nation state system simply cannot address. That is why the supposedly tough unilateralism of President George Bush, Jr. was actually a form of soft idealism that failed to win America any victories, while the seemingly compliant multilateralism of President Obama is actually a

mandate of hard-headed realism that will in the long term serve both the nation and the world more judiciously. Neither gated town nor walled nation nor insular state is capable of survival in the novel interdependent environment.

Any one looking thoughtfully at the new world Americans faced on September 12, 2001 had to know sovereignty would never again suffice as a response to terrorism -- or any other earthly peril. For it was apparent that the world's most powerful sovereign nation had been able to do nothing to thwart the onslaught of resolute terrorists operating in the new sphere of global interdependence. Our sovereign borders meant nothing; the killers came from the inside. Our sovereign defenses were irrelevant; the murderers wielded box cutters and turned our own civilian aircraft into weapons. Our formidable sovereign economy was beside the point; fear had paralyzed its efficacy even as interdependence removed it from the controlling purview of the American government.

How could we hope to succeed against these new enemies with the strategies and institutions of an antiquated unilateralism? The invasions of Afghanistan and then Iraq, manfully undertaken, were futile old school responses (nail the state that attacked us!) in the face of new school realities. America missed its chance to draw new and productive lessons from new interdependent forms of global antagonism.

There were some, however – American, European, African, call them global citizens – who, pondered the lessons. Responding to the unfamiliar new logic of interdependence, in the year following 9/11 a group of scholars, artists, intellectual as well as political, religious and civic leaders conceived a new project: to gather each year in a global city to consider how representatives of the world's citizens might meet across borders, across generations, and across faculties and disciplines to imagine and construct a world of cooperative interdependence as flexible and dynamic as the world of malevolent interdependence we faced, a world of global malevolence for which nation states were no longer a match. We began with a "Declaration of Interdependence" ([available on-line](#)).

Starting in 2003 in the capital of American independence, Philadelphia—what better place to consider the new meaning of interdependence?—and continuing in Rome, Paris, Casablanca, Mexico City, Brussels and last year Istanbul, we have been meeting annually on September 12—"Interdependence Day"—around specific challenges of interdependence: reconciling religions that ought to bind us together but have instead often torn us apart; turning the immigration of labor and capital into assets rather than deficits of a just global economy; understanding how what binds global cities together might offset what divides the sovereign nations to which cities belong.

On September 10-12 in Berlin, for the eighth consecutive year, over 150 delegates from dozens of countries, including forty young people assembled in their own parallel congress, will meet in the city that tore down its wall two decades ago. This year's theme is climate change and interdependence. Not whether there is man-made climate change, but how citizens can respond to its perils despite the obstructive sovereignties that stand in our way. We will question the psychic walls that have gone up inside our heads even as the traces of the physical wall in Berlin were vanishing. Inspired by fear, these

new walls insulate without offering safety. They're walling in the good without keeping keep out the bad. They demarcate and "inside" and "outside" that no longer exist.

We seek then to find new portals, windows that let in distant light, bridges across the now empty moats that cannot afford us security. We will survive now only together, recognizing strangers as obligatory neighbors, seeing in fearful 'others' images of ourselves.

What happened in Berlin in 1989 and in New York on September 11, 2001 augured a new reality: interdependence as the condition for human survival. In Berlin on September 12, we will inaugurate a movement which – reaching out across the world's vanishing borders citizen by citizen – may effect what mighty nations one by one can no longer achieve: the possibility of a just and peaceful existence. One which, however, will of necessity be both cooperative and common.

Benjamin R. Barber

New York City, September 1, 2010