

## Imagine if bin Laden had taken a different path

- *May 5th, 2011*
- (2) comments

**William L. Spence**



**Up Front**

I'm afraid I don't remember Jeff Smith very well, but I do remember how he died.

Jeff and I both graduated from the University of Rochester's business school in 1988. He was a finance major, while I went into production management. I stayed in town to work for a manufacturing firm; he left for New York to start a career in investment banking.

Jeff was in the World Trade Center on Sept. 11, 2001, working on the 104th floor of the south tower.

I didn't know that when I heard the news reports. I'd switched careers by then, becoming a business reporter for the Daily Inter Lake newspaper in Kalispell, Mont. I spent the day watching news coverage of the terrorist attacks, seeing those unholy images of the towers collapsing over and over again.

It's my understanding Jeff called his wife after the first plane collided with the north tower. He said he was going to stay inside. Fifteen minutes later the south tower was hit, somewhere between the 77th and 85th floor. He left behind his wife and two small children.

As I watched the news that day, I remember thinking it was an act of war. This wasn't an attack on an isolated ship or building. It was an attack on our nation and demanded a strong response. I can't say President Bush's decision to invade Iraq was the right answer, but it certainly shifted the fight offshore and put the enemy on the defensive.

In various messages released over the intervening years, bin Laden justified 9-11 as punishment for America's support for Israel and its persecution of the Palestinians. He threatened us with more attacks if we didn't change our ways, told other coalition forces they were targets as well, and encouraged Muslims around the world to join his holy war.

Then he proposed a "reconciliation" if European nations would simply leave Muslims alone.

Later he offered America a truce if it would do the same. Eventually he returned to his boastful threats, including one bizarre message about the dangers of climate change.

I never understood why the White House didn't respond to his propaganda. It seemed such easy pickings, pointing out the obvious: that far from delivering salvation to the Palestinians, bin Laden's use of force spawned a catastrophe.

The 9-11 attacks guaranteed any future discussions would be at the point of a gun. They prompted the invasion of Iraq and Afghanistan. They led to thousands of military deaths, plus at least 100,000 civilian casualties in Iraq alone. Sectarian violence brought that nation to the verge of civil war and turned it into a gangland where murder, extortion and threats are almost commonplace, at least in some regions.

Whenever bin Laden trotted out his messages, the White House should have responded with a list of the bitter rewards his leadership earned for the Muslim people: teenage boys and girls strapping on explosives and wading into crowds of civilians to blow themselves up; national infrastructure destroyed; economic development set back for decades; neighbors being killed for talking to the wrong person or expressing the wrong opinion; an end to progress; an entire religion besmirched.

Contrast that with the leadership of Mohandas Gandhi.

It was 80 years ago today that British authorities arrested Gandhi for walking to the ocean to pick up a handful of salt. He'd spent months plotting the action. Sitting at his ashram quietly spinning wool, he considered numerous plans to free the Indian subcontinent from foreign rule and win independence for his people.

Rather than fly planes into buildings or storm the seat of power, he chose to protest the British salt tax by marching to the sea. That simple - nonviolent - action was enough to put the greatest superpower of the day on the moral defensive and keep it there until self-rule was achieved in 1947.

India's decades-long struggle for freedom came at a high price. There were vicious massacres, and thousands died in religious violence. Gandhi himself was killed by a Hindu extremist. But he is called "Mahatma" today because he advocated nonviolent resistance. He demonstrated the injustice of British rule without resorting to bloodshed.

How different would things be today if 19 hijackers had followed his lead 10 years ago? What if they'd simply flown the planes to Israel and let the passengers go, instead of allowing themselves to be consumed by hatred?

In this age of loyalty oaths and lock-step partisanship, maybe the real message from 9-11 is leaders must always be questioned. Rather than follow anyone blindly, we must

evaluate their goals and plans for getting there and use reason to determine if there's a better way.

Gandhi chose nonviolence and won. Bin Laden chose force and led his people into a multigenerational disaster. One has to wonder if he ever really looked at what he'd accomplished and despaired.

---

*Spence covers politics for the Tribune. He may be contacted at [bspence@lmtribune.com](mailto:bspence@lmtribune.com) or (208) 848-2274.*