

An Attack Carried out with the Media in Mind
Interview with Tom Keenan
By Nadja Millner-Larsen
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Free Press: The mainstream media has used such terms as "America under attack" and publicized such slogans as "evil will be punished"; how has the media helped to shape the national fervor surrounding the events of September 11?

Keenan: Around noon on that bloody Tuesday, a Washington Post reporter asked an official at the National Security Council to explain what was happening, and was told: "We don't know anything here. We're watching CNN too." The events of September 11 were media events. The most important media actors in this story are the people who flew those airplanes into those buildings in order to get on TV. They did it for the images, the sounds, and the stories. Think of the iconic status of the targets or the timing and duration of the attack. Scripted from the movies, it had from its inception the ethereal irreality of fiction turned true, and as it played out in the ether of our shared experience it addressed us all as witnesses, together: wherever we were, we were watching too. Not understanding -- it short-circuited the frames of comprehension - but watching, because it was a publicity operation of unprecedented thoroughness, and required no shaping. There are mass graves with nearly thoroughness, and required no shaping. There are mass graves with nearly 7,000 corpses in New York, Pennsylvania, and Washington today because the killers wanted nothing more than exposure, and they knew where the contested terrain of their combat was located. They knew they could count on the camcorders, the live coverage, the cell phones and the Internet to make this event happen, and happen around the world in real-time: they aimed not just at the buildings, but at us. So pay attention, now, to the media and its shaping power, yes, but don't forget what happened there, on the ground and on the screen. Nearly 7,000 dead people, in a few seconds. As we worry about war, and our freedoms, don't let the new images overwrite the more distant ones. They deserve our continued attention.

As for the present fervor ... if by "the media" you mean the three U.S. major television networks and the one serious cable news channel (CNN)-and I say "if" because of course the media (a) also include newspapers and newsmagazines, (b) are not limited to the United States, and (c) often report news accurately and informatively-then the answer to the question "how" is straightforward: the media have defined the primary topics of discussion too narrowly, spent too much time with predictable experts and pundits, more or less followed the agenda of the Bush Administration by and large, and done very little original reporting. But more precisely: how have they shaped the nation's response? If the country is united anywhere, it is on television. For

better and for worse, the media have become the de facto vehicles of a national community which is not simply illusory, even if it is one born simply of shock and grief more than of the desire for justice or retaliation.

FP: Even Peter Jennings has suggested in a broadcast that the introduction of the "Homeland Commission" is somewhat reminiscent of a totalitarian regime; Has the Bush Administration been able to use the media, as a messenger to the people, to convince the public of America's need to change the face of not only its foreign policy, but its domestic policy as well? Have our own civil liberties been called into question?

Keenan: The shameful ugliness of the concept 'homeland defense' surpasses my ability to comment on it. The liberties of citizens, and those of our country's immigrant population, are obviously "under attack," too: already we've read of proposals for increased electronic surveillance, preventive detention, assassination of enemies of the state, armed guards on airplanes, and draconian restrictions on press coverage of military operations, among others, and we've witnessed arbitrary searches of and assaults on those presumed to be of Arab origin or Islamic faith. Of course the Administration seeks to organize and guide public opinion through the media, as do those arguing against its regressive proposals, and of course the Administration has the upper hand, especially when reporters and editors are worried about their own 'patriotism.' But here, partly because their own operation is at stake, the media are also often energetic, if not entirely reliable, advocates for many civil rights and liberties. These questions are debatable, and debated, issues, on our front pages and at the top of the newscasts, and there's no certainty that the proposals will become reality. The public is not convinced yet.

FP: The revenge mentality present in the nation has given rise to rampant racial violence. Has the media's portrayal of recent events harbored a need to construct, identify and punish the enemy even on a local level? Would it have been possible to instill another reaction, or was this reaction an unavoidable one?

Keenan: I apologize for repeating myself: the most serious violence in this story is the mass murder of September 11. Thousands of people died that day-bond traders and tourists, busboys and stewardesses-because they happened to be in 'enemy' buildings and aircraft, made into sacrificial proxies for the country they happened to be in. There is no possible equation which could relate the grim fact of their slaughter to the prejudice which it has spawned.

And it has spawned prejudice - criminal, unjustified, unforgivable violence, especially when it's effectively sanctioned by the state in the name of a so-called war on the dubiously undifferentiated amalgam of "terrorism." I don't think there's a "need" to do that, not for the state or for the media, especially when the ideological agenda of the apparent killers is so transparent, and so

transparently unrelated to their purported religious beliefs.

Some media reports and comments have no doubt contributed to a climate which tolerates violence. I don't think the reaction was unavoidable, and I don't think it's permanent. I confess that I have been surprised by the zeal with which most national media have reported on, and challenged, the new acceptability of 'profiling' and violence. Could we ever have imagined we'd see the President of the United States in a mosque, or be watching and reading repeated and impassioned reports on hate crimes and ethnic discrimination, only a decade after the shameful frenzy of prejudice that preceded the Gulf War?

FP: Can you suggest any alternative media we can turn to for information?

Keenan: As soon as you start reading two or three newspapers, and leave the information shores of these United States, the diversity of opinions, reporting, and sources is striking. We are not starved for news. So I can only suggest the obvious ones, and the more the better. Use the Internet and more primitive devices to watch television, listen to the radio, read newspapers and magazines and wire services from around the world. Take a look at www.bard.edu/hrp and www.infopeace.org for useful collections of articles and images and links. Scrutinize the Pentagon website, www.defenselink.mil, and the Revolutionary Association of the Women of Afghanistan, www.rawa.org, and the organization Crimes of War, www.crimesofwar.org; read the Arabic and Islamic media if you can, and try to make sure you don't only read and watch things you already know you agree, or disagree, with. And remember: although the source is important, what you do with it, how you read it, is even more crucial. So even if your info intake is restricted, work over what you get with care and patience: what's at stake is nothing less than doing justice to the lives and memories of those 7,000 dead people, and sadly, to the many more to come.

In this interview Professor Keenan managed to evoke and even diagnose that eerie feeling we all experienced while watching the events of 9/11. He reminds us that this is a time for heightened awareness of our role as citizens of this nation as we process the information fed to us by every radio station we listen to, every television we watch, every newspaper we pick up. These are images that will be repeated before our eyes for years to come. Keenan points out that these images include that of President Bush's visit to a mosque; that image may have stemmed from a racist backlash, but the visual aid we have received against that backlash would never have been seen during the Gulf War. Keenan has managed to remind me that these images are not black and white, they are in full color. Our individual identities as Americans are in the process of redefinition, we may be unsettled but we should not be convinced to abandon our rights. While I have been shocked, even threatened as witness to an excessive patriotism I have never before experienced, I wholeheartedly agree that "the public is not convinced yet", not completely.

