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THE SCENE (a.k.a. vpostrel.com)

Comments on current ideas and events

FREE SPEECH VICTORY: The [Foundation for Individual Rights in Education](#) has achieved another great victory for free speech on campus. In this case, dorm residential advisers had told students to take down patriotic posters they had put up after the 9/11 attacks. "They said we had to take it down because it offended people. We had an American eagle, a picture of the World Trade Center exploding and a column. We had to take everything down except a CMU basketball schedule," sophomore Don Pasco told the school [newspaper](#).

That violates not just free speech principles but university policy, CMU president Michael Rao writes FIRE in response to its inquiries (and its persuasive, principled directors): "The university's removal of any items considered offensive by some is not condoned," says his letter. "The university is taking steps to assure students in the residence halls that their right to post materials and express opinion on their room doors is protected," adding "The university does not and will not condone any of its employees limiting the free speech rights of its students." FIRE's report on the CMU case is [here](#).

Unfortunately, the CMU example is not an isolated case. FIRE's roundup of post-attack speech restrictions is [here](#). Michael Barone addresses the topic in his [latest online column](#). Because they also defend people who oppose military action (and, in some cases, are obnoxiously anti-American) FIRE, on whose advisory board I serve, has been getting piles of hate mail for defending free speech on campus. Send them [supportive email](#) and, even more important, [money](#). (They have a secure server for online donations.) [Posted 11/7.]

HIDDEN CARNAGE: Cleaning up my substantial backlog of email, I came across the following from reader Philip Coates, dated October 3:

Something has been troubling me recently:
 The coverage of the Sept. 11 attacks has

PUBLICATIONS ETC.

[Arts & Letters Daily](#)

[The New Republic](#)

[Opinion Journal](#)

[Reason](#)

[Slate](#)

been exclusively of physical damage to property. No dead bodies have been shown. While the objective has been to avoid upsetting people, in the long run this is like mentioning there was a Holocaust or genocide in Cambodia and never seeing the bodies piled in a grave or the piles of skulls—serving as witness and testimony to the magnitude of what happened.

It's essentially a lie not to expose the murderers in terms of what they actually wanted to achieve.

And it serves the aims of the pacifists when everyone works together to sanitize what happened.

Just as a Holocaust Museum was important so that people will never forget what evil is possible, so it is important for people to see fully what happened to steel their resolution to root it out.

A woman I know in New York said that it rained body parts in some streets near the World Trade Center.

Why have I not seen this mentioned in the press, with or without pictures?

I agree. Those who supported the slaughter in New York have no qualms about using photos of their wounded and dead to condemn U.S. military action—and journalists are not squeamish about showing us photos of such casualties, in this war as in earlier ones. The double standard, as Philip notes, perpetuates a lie. [Posted 11/5.]

HERSH QUESTION: Richard Myers, head of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, [is strongly denying](#) Seymour Hersh's report that soldiers met unexpected resistance and were seriously injured in the raid on Mullah Omar's headquarters. This is not the sort of story where the truth can stay hidden, so let's assume for the moment that Myers is telling the truth and Hersh's story is completely wrong, the sort of wrong that leaves a reporter discredited for quite a while. There's no reason to think Hersh just made up the story. Who fed him bad information—and why?

Hersh is hardly a beloved figure in military circles. But [Matt Welch's](#) warblog inadvertently suggests another group with a strong interest in making Hersh look bad: the Saudis and those in the U.S. government who want to stay on their good side. Welch calls readers attention to [this article](#) from the *Saudi Arab News*, reporting on a speech in which Crown Prince Abdullah, who runs the country, "lashed out at the US media smear campaign, accusing the newspapers of trying to drive a wedge between the Kingdom and the United States." Abdullah recounted an alleged conversation with President Bush, in which the president apologized "for what is carried by the newspapers which are trying to drive a wedge between the Kingdom and America and damage its reputation." Maybe Abdullah is lying—as Welch says, the White House press corps should ask some sharp questions about this claim—but he might just be telling the truth. After all, Tony Blair went out of his way during his feisty speech in Wales to say nice things about our good friends the Saudis. For whatever reasons, our fearless leaders seem determined to kiss up to Riyadh.

The Saudis' puppet press, meanwhile, dutifully [blames the Jews](#). [Posted 11/5.]

ISOLATIONIST ISLAM: Brink Lindsey, whose forthcoming book [Against the Dead Hand](#) is a must-read, has a [good piece](#) in *The New Republic*. Brink takes to task those who think that Islamist radicalism springs from the encounter with the global economy. To the contrary, he argues, the countries that foster Islamist utopianism are isolated from globalization. He writes:

It's true, of course, that many countries in the Muslim world are economic disasters. According to statistics compiled by economic historian Angus Maddison for the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, between 1985 and 1998, average per capita income declined in real terms in Iran, Iraq, Jordan, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Syria, the United Arab Emirates, and Yemen. By contrast, it rose 30 percent in Israel, 50 percent in Uruguay, 90 percent in Chile, and more than doubled in China, Thailand, and South Korea. Such absolute and relative decline surely feeds feelings of

inadequacy and hopelessness, thus heightening fanaticism's appeal.

But where the argument falls apart is in blaming globalization for Muslim countries' economic woes. For the sad fact is that, while newly liberated market forces have indeed fomented dramatic changes around the planet (mostly for the better), one place they haven't fomented dramatic—or even substantial—change is in the Islamic world. With a few notable exceptions—Turkey, Malaysia, Indonesia, some of the Gulf states—most Muslim countries have kept international economic integration at bay....

Afghanistan, Algeria, Iran, Iraq, Libya, Saudi Arabia, Sudan, Syria, and Yemen—all are under the microscope these days for their ties to Islamist terrorism. Guess what else they have in common? None belongs to the World Trade Organization—which, with 142 members, is hardly an exclusive club.

[Posted 11/3.]

PROGRESS AND PRECISION: Michael Barone makes an important point in his [latest column](#): The civilian casualties in Afghanistan, bad as they are, are both unintentional and inevitable. Until recently, no one would have expected every bomb to hit its target. In World War II, "precision" bombing meant dropping incendiary bombs in the general direction of lights. Michael writes:

What is remarkable about American precision bombing is that it works as well as it does. Since the Vietnam War, our military has developed laser-guided weapons that home in on targets with remarkable, though not total, accuracy. In the old days, something on the order of 90 percent of bombs missed their targets. Today, something on the order of 90 percent hit them. That means that we can inflict militarily significant damage nine times as great with the same quantity of explosives. And in the process, we reduce civilian casualties and collateral damage by a similar order of magnitude. This is a great triumph of American ingenuity.

What is newsworthy is not that there are still occasional civilian casualties. What is newsworthy is that so many bombs hit their

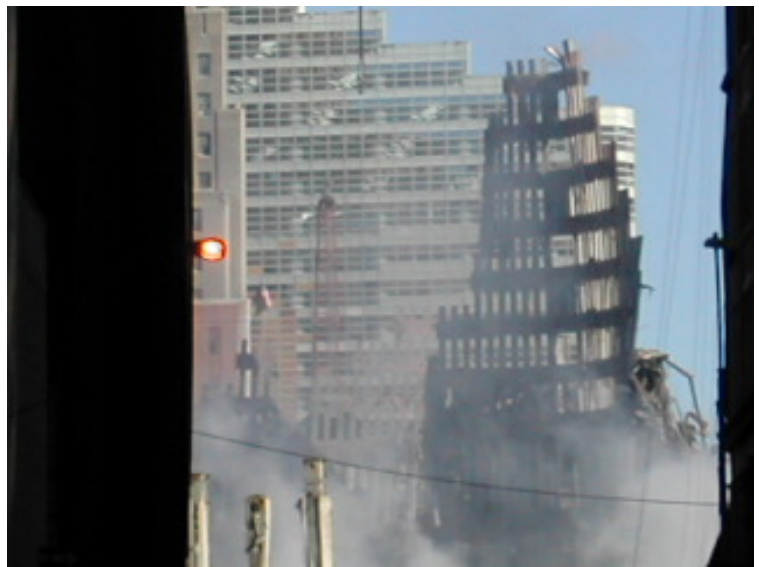
targets. This is the story the news media should tell, while pointing out that accuracy is still less than 100 percent.

Opponents of the U.S. military response to September 11's attacks have two great allies in their propaganda battles: The first is the American faith in technology, which leads us to believe that 100 percent accuracy is not just possible but to be expected. The second is the expectation abroad that America would show no mercy in retaliation for the September 11 slaughter. (A lot of patriotic Internet [folk art](#) expresses a similar theme.) If you expect mad, indiscriminate attacks, and if you need them to satisfy your myth of American vengefulness and American omnipotence, you'll turn inevitable screwups into deliberate attacks.

In fact, the operation in Afghanistan is not primarily retaliatory. If retaliation were the goal, it could be accomplished far more quickly, with no concern for precision. Instead, we are embarked on a war to eliminate an ongoing threat before it can become much deadlier. That is a trickier undertaking.

Finally, it's worth noting that the civilian casualties on September 11 were achieved with nearly 100 percent accuracy. They were intended. The civilians murdered were not "collateral damage." They were the targets. The only exception to the terrorists' 100 percent accuracy was Flight 93's crash in Pennsylvania, which caused fewer casualties than intended. [Posted 11/2.]

PILGRIMAGE: On Sunday, I made a pilgrimage to lower Manhattan with three other people from the conference *Reason* co-sponsored with the London-based Institute of Ideas. My companions were all Brits, although one has lived in the U.S. for 10 years and has applied for citizenship. She'd vacillated before, she said, but September 11 decided the matter. No more safely cynical British distance.



[Click for QuickTime video of the rising smoke](#)

Thanks to this [October 4 piece](#) by the WSJ's Claudia Rosett, I wasn't surprised to find that ordinary pilgrims can't get very close to where the Twin Towers once stood, or even really comprehend the catastrophe. Claudia wrote:

There is no place from which ordinary pedestrians can get a full sense of the scale of the destruction. It is more a Lilliputian experience of peering from low in each city canyon toward distant segments of the devastation. You work your way from Fulton Street down to Battery Park, sometimes on Broadway, sometimes herded away to the east—seeking the next narrow, hurried view, trying to guess what the fallen giant, in its entirety, must look like.

Signs posted on the fences and roadblocks state: "Warning: No cameras or video equipment. Violators will be prosecuted and equipment seized." But while the ban on unauthorized photography applies only within the cordoned-off area, guards yell and wave at people on the open streets when they raise their cameras, until they stop filming. Like lingering by the roadblocks for a longer look, photography here becomes a furtive, harried deed—a small defiance of authority that is surely not what most of these folks are remotely after.

Maybe it's because a few weeks have passed, but no one obeys the signs. (I wanted to snap a photo of the people taking pictures in front of the forbidding signs.) As we were leaving, police came up and

fussed mildly at some of the photographers, but I doubt if any cameras were seized. There's no reason to prohibit photography and every reason to allow it. Photographs are a form of mourning, a way of taking away some tangible reminder that the attacks really happened and that you saw their effects—even at great distance. Photos are our relics.

The ruins look just like they do on TV, stylized and sculptural. The vacancy is huge, but seems small because you view it from such a great distance. (New Yorkers used to walking those blocks probably get a stronger sense of the devastation.) The smell isn't as overpowering as I'd been told, just a constant air of burning plastic. Two things struck me most, both verbal. The first was this haiku, strapped to a police railing, a tribute to the Towers' architect:



The second was what a policewoman, bundled against the cold so thoroughly that all you could see were her eyes, told us. It will take two years to clear the site. It's still burning down 70 feet. It is much worse than you can see. It is full of broken metal and body parts.

I think the American people, and the world, need to see Ground Zero—the way it really looks, not the distant, sanitized version for TV and tourists. They tell us they don't show us out of respect for the families of the thousands of people who were crushed, pulverized, or blown to bits. Maybe they're right, but if it was me, or my loved ones, I would want the world to see the slaughter of the innocents.

Now you turn on CNN and see people-in-the-street saying George Bush is wrong to call the perpetrators of this massacre "evil doers," because that phrase is so black-and-white, so biblical and judgmental. So uncool, so unsophisticated, so earnest. So true. [Posted 11/1.]

CELL RESEARCH: As expected since September 11, senators have struck a deal not to vote on bills either to criminalize ["therapeutic cloning"](#) or, from the contrary side, to expand embryonic stem cell research, [reports National Review Online](#). The NRO story obscures important distinctions—notably the one between cloning cells and cloning people—that don't matter from its zygotes-are-babies point of view. But I give them credit for tracking the issue.

And at least they haven't directly signed on with Jeremy Rifkin to oppose human genetic engineering. Not so their conservative competitor, Bill Kristol, who before 9/11 was helping to promote a left-right petition against cell cloning in particular and human genetic therapies in general. I gathered responses to the petition, which you can read [here](#). Both scientific freedom and many, many lives are at stake. [Posted 11/1.]

THIRD PLACES: My latest *D Magazine* column, on designing malls to be more than "machines for shopping," is [here](#). This is the [column I was writing the week of September 11](#). [Posted 11/1.]

RESILIENT CONSTRUCTION: In other architecture news, *Architecture Week* [reports](#) on a 1945 plane crash into the Empire State Building. That crash led the World Trade Center's designers to construct those towers to withstand the impact of a plane, thereby buying time for thousands of people to escape on September 11. [Posted 11/1.]

FINAL WORD ON L.A. FLAGS: Michael Wells sends [this link](#) to a *Daily Telegraph* story on plans to paint the Hollywood sign red, white, and blue. It appears to be largely lifted from [this Los Angeles Times](#) story.

This reminds me of a caveat that is useful in these days of international news reading: British journalists

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don't have the same scruples about sourcing that American reporters observe. Not only are clip jobs common, but so are one-incredible-source stories. (Did you read the one about how the Taliban is secretly crucifying people? Think about it: The only point of horrendous execution is to scare the public. If they were crucifying people, they wouldn't hide it.) Read with care and skepticism. [Posted 11/1.]

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