

THE New York Times just ran an article about the trouble teachers were having in deciding what to tell students on Sept. 11. That's a serious question. This is a moment for moral clarity, and here are the three lessons I would teach:

· Lesson No. 1: Who are they? This lesson would emphasize that while most people in the world are good and decent, there are evil people out there who are not poor, not abused -- but envious. These extremists have been raised in societies that have failed to prepare them for modernity, and the most evil among them chose on Sept. 11 to lash out at the symbol of modernity -- America. As the Egyptian playwright Ali Salem put it in Time magazine, "Beneath their claims ... these extremists are pathologically jealous. They feel like dwarfs, which is why they search for towers and all those who tower mightily." Their grievance is rooted in psychology, not politics; their goal is to destroy America, not reform it; they can only be defeated, not negotiated with.

Assigned reading: Larry Miller's Jan. 14, 2002, essay in The Weekly Standard: "Listen carefully: We're good, they're evil, nothing is relative. Say it with me now and free yourselves. You see, folks, saying `We're good' doesn't mean `We're perfect.' OK? The only perfect being is the bearded guy on the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel. The plain fact is that our country has, with all our mistakes and blunders, always been and always will be the greatest beacon of freedom, charity, opportunity, and affection in history. If you need proof, open all the borders on Earth and see what happens. In about half a day, the entire world would be a ghost town, and the United States would look like one giant line to see The Producers. ... So here's what I resolve: To never forget our murdered brothers and sisters. To never let the relativists get away with their immoral thinking. After all, no matter what your daughter's political science professor says, we didn't start this."

· Lesson No. 2: Who are we? We Americans are not better than any other people, but the Western democratic system we live by is the best system on Earth. Unfortunately, in the Arab-Muslim world, there is no democracy, too few women's rights and too little religious tolerance. It is the values and traditions of freedom embraced by Western civilization, and the absence of those values and traditions in the Arab-Muslim world, that explain the main differences between us.

Assigned reading: An Autumn of War, by the military historian Victor Davis Hanson: "Our visionaries must be far clearer about the nature of our struggle. In their understandable efforts to say what we are not doing -- fighting Islam or provoking Arab peoples -- they have failed utterly to voice what we are doing: preserving Western civilization and its uniquely tolerant and human traditions of freedom, consensual government,

disinterested inquiry and religious and political tolerance. ... We must cease the apologetic tone we have developed with the Arab world, and make it clear that their ministers who hector us are not legitimate without elections, their spokesmen are not journalists without a free press, and their intellectuals are not credible without liberty. The right to admonish Americans on questions of morality is not an entitlement, but something earned only through a shared commitment to constitutional government."

· Lesson No. 3: Why do so many foreigners reject the evil perpetrators of 9/11 but still dislike America? It's because, while we have the best system of governance, we are not always at our best in how we act toward the world. Because we want to drive big cars, we support repressive Arab dictators so they will sell us cheap oil. Because our presidents want to get votes, they readily tell the Palestinians how foolishly they are behaving, but they hesitate to tell Israelis how destructive their West Bank settlements are for the future of the Jewish state. Because we want to consume as much energy as we please, we tell the world's people they have to be with us in the war on terrorism but we don't have to be with them in the struggle against global warming and for a greener planet.

The point, class, is that while evil people hate us for who we are, many good people dislike us for what we do. And if we want to win their respect we need to be the best, most consistent and most principled global citizens we can be.

Assigned readings: The U.S. Constitution, Woodrow Wilson's Fourteen Points speech and the Declaration of Independence.

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