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Subject: Threat or promise

Some of us got together at the Independent Sector meeting in Atlanta over the weekend. We talked about graduate school and jobs and careers and personal lives, most of which seem to be going reasonably well -- mine being the most settled, stable, predictable, and uninteresting (except for the excitement generated by the new beard, of course). September 11 is still a focal point of discussion. Was September 11 truly a moment of historic importance? Is it true that "after September 11 things are never going to be the same"? If so, in what way will things be different? Is September 11 to be taken as an omen of further bad things to come -- not simply terrorist acts but a retrograde turn in world politics -- or will September 11 mark a new and deeper understanding of the U.S. role in the world?

Thirty years ago I was very active in a movement to advance international education as part of the general education of all undergraduates, much as I've hoped philanthropy would become part of the education of all undergraduates. I was part of an organization called the National Commission on Foreign Language and International Studies. Our effort was ill-timed. We were simply ignored as student interest turned domestic and private; business majors and MBAs began to dominate things on campus and they had no interest at all either in learning about international issues or in acquiring foreign languages. ("After all, everybody's going to speak English, anyway.")

Does September 11 signal the possibility of a new seriousness about the world? Is the U.S. model of "globalization" now in question? If so, is the challenge to globalization a bump in the road or a major detour? And apart from the economic dimension, have international political affairs suddenly taken on new complexity as well as new seriousness? If so, should we think of such changes as threats or as promise of new opportunity?

Suddenly our discussions of international education and foreign language study of thirty years ago seem relevant and even urgent again. The difference is that the focus is no longer Western Europe but the Middle East and Asia, and the languages are not Spanish and French but Arabic and Chinese. Not only that, the education of all undergraduates will have to include some serious engagement with Islam and Buddhism and their critiques of modernism and secularism as well as Christianity.

None of that strikes me as a threat. Perhaps it takes a crisis or a dramatic event like September 11 to break us out of our dogmatic slumbers -- our of fluent apathy -- and get us back into the world, back into "active engagement in projects of worth." Fortunately, you're liberally-educated and well-prepared for whatever comes. All of the members of

JAF-XI came to the program with at least some international experience. That means the future is exciting and full of promise, as it should

RLP