

New York City lights Drowned innocence and found bravery

By Raoul Felder

Past the TV cameras, past the barricades and the yellow police tape with black printed letters that isolates crime scenes, past the exhausted men sitting down, red-stained eyes staring off into nowhere, is the mute testament to the best and worst of man.

The celebration of the human condition that enables men whose height barely reaches that of a bear on its hind legs to build an edifice a quarter-mile high, is no less diminished by the ability of other men to destroy it in a moment of hate and madness and attains its final validation in the efforts of still other men who respond to the distress of destruction.

Security is tight. Even with their sirens wailing and lights flashing, going south on the East River Drive, police at two checkpoints stop obvious, although unmarked, police vehicles. To show a badge is not enough — badges can be duplicated. ID cards are examined.

Coming off the East River Drive, the streets are silent and empty; not dust, but something more like the fine white powder on the faces of rich old women floats in the air, settling on every standing object: cars and streets, and on the stands of displayed fruit outside of empty Korean grocery stores. Oranges, peaches, pears — all lined up in boxes, neatly set out, all covered by the fine white powder — waiting to be sold to customers who will never come.

Facing west, the half-light at the end of the day turns the drifting mists of white powder into a sepulcher-white gauze curtain. Against this light, exhausted police officers, firefighters, priests, construction men and people of all the various trades and skills that are the stuff of modern urban life, walk east, heads down, spent, like some strange and disparate army leaving a battle to be relieved, greeting the line of passing newcomers headed west. Along the way, at the sides of the road, are makeshift tables containing supplies of face masks, gloves, bottled water; the frames of burnt-out automobiles, the inside melted so that all that is left is a barely recog-

nizable twisted piece of metal that once was a steering wheel and the blackened skeletons of the metal tubes that once supported seats; the shells of police cars, covered with dust now turned brown, their windows shattered, remnants of dashboards, steering posts and floors.

Ahead, west, is an enormous amphitheater, a space that was once sidewalks, streets, intersections and buildings, now filled with 200 or more people wearing a dozen different uniforms, at work moving things, equipment, some bent over makeshift tables laden with charts and blueprints, operating vehicles of every sort,



cranes, earth-movers, vans, forklifts and trucks.

Surrounding the amphitheater on the east side are the ruins of one of the towers of the World Trade Center amputated at about the fourth story. Next to it is the empty space that was the other tower. Behind the stump of the tower is a mountain of wreckage appearing, at a distance, like some enormous prehistoric beast fallen, in death, on its side. On closer look it is a pile of bits and pieces, shards, metal strips, glass, chunks of concrete, the detritus of modern architecture and the massive pointed entrances to the World Trade Center, now grotesquely twisted as if a child's plaything made of clay.

Yeats' lines come immediately to mind:

"Things fall apart; the center cannot hold;

Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world;

The blood-dimmed tide is loosed, and everywhere

The ceremony of innocence is drowned . . ."

Searching for people alive under the rubble, although

common sense and logic says they are not there, is a job of patience. Men stand in a line, the first one carefully picking up one piece of debris at a time, handing it down to the man behind, and he to the man behind him, down to the man at the end of the line who deposits it in a refuse truck to be taken away.

The men doing the work, digging for the living and ultimately finding the dead, are the invisible men — the men with T-shirts cut off at the shoulders, with tattoos of barbed wire around their biceps — the men who the people in suits with manicured hands and the women wearing perfume look past and through, who are somehow there when this sort of work has to be done.

People who have seen the corpses of cities after wars and looked at its dead buildings can determine the cause of death as surely as a pathologist examining a cadaver. In the destruction that modern war brings to cities the walls of buildings are usually left standing. The buildings are destroyed by bombs from above or ordnance that comes down in a curved trajectory. The

insides are blown up, the blast directed upwards, and the walls left, in better or worse shape, standing. Here, the burning jet fuel turned the spine of the towers to molten metal that ate the heart from the towers until the walls fell in upon themselves.

Some distance from the wreckage, in the center of the now artificially lit amphitheater, just before the canvas-covered fire department command center, stood two dainty chairs, their legs and back formed by thin bamboo shaped pieces of wood painted gold. In one sat a blackened-faced firefighter, rubber-trousered legs akimbo, holding a bottle of water, a white line across the top of his forehead where he had taken off his helmet. On the chair next to him his helmet and jacket.

Ten minutes uptown, in the restaurants along Park Avenue and in the East Sixties, people had just begun looking at dinner menus.

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