

AMERICA'S TALIBAN

Jerry Falwell blames gays and lesbians for terrorist attacks

by Bob Roehr

The religious fanaticism that killed thousands at the World Trade Center and the Pentagon is not confined to Muslims or to distant lands. The United States has its home-grown extremists and religious fundamentalists who brazenly display their intolerance and disbelief in the fundamental principles upon which our government is founded.

In a breathtakingly stunning display of bigotry, the Rev. Jerry Falwell and televangelist Pat Robertson tried to lay responsibility for the terrorist attack at the feet of gay men, lesbians and political liberals with whom they disagree. It came during the Sept. 13 edition of *The 700 Club* broadcast on television and cable outlets across the country.

"I really believe that the pagans and the abortionists and the feminists and the gays and lesbians who are actively trying to make that an alternative lifestyle, the ACLU, People for the American Way—all for them who have tried to secularize America—I point the finger in their face and say, 'You helped this happen,'" Falwell said.

Robertson replied: "Well, I totally concur, and the problem is we have adopted the agenda

at the highest levels of our government. And so we're responsible as a free society for what the top people do. And the top people, of course, is the court system."

Right-wing preacher James Dobson of Focus on the Family joined the blame game during his radio show Sept. 13. "Yes, I believe that the attacks are God's punishment because we are in a moral decay in this country, with abortion, forcing children to be taught about homosexuality, removing God from the schools, sexual immorality on television and in our government. And this is God's way of punishing the wicked."

Reactions to the statements were swift. Lorri Jean, National Gay and Lesbian Task Force executive director, said Falwell's intolerance "has its roots in the same fanaticism" that led the terrorists to launch their attack.

Salon.com news editor Joan Walsh called the pair "America's counterpart to the Taliban. If they had their way, this would be a Christian state. They'd make common cause with the Taliban to strip women of many rights, persecute gays and punish godless infidels. The only silver lining of this tragedy is that it brings out the invidi-



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ous agenda of the Christian right, where it can be repudiated."

Frank Kameny, who many consider to be the father of the modern gay movement, said, "Our American fundamentalist Christians...are fully as much moral fascists as are the Taliban, whom they would gladly emulate if they thought that they could get away with it."

David Scoven, executive director of the gay group Virginians for Justice, said: "In their single-mindedness and self-absorption, they missed the message that true Americans gave in response to the attack: zero tolerance for religious extremists whose lives are devoted to proliferating hate and profiting from it. Jerry Falwell has now exposed himself and his organization clearly to all Americans, and there is no doubt that the backlash from his pathological statements will be overwhelming."

The White House quickly denounced Falwell's remarks. "The president believes that terrorists are responsible for these acts," spokesman Ken Lisaius said. "He does not share those views and believes that those remarks are inappropriate."

Jane Holmes Dixon, acting Episcopal bishop of Washington, said: "I am proud that the White House immediately disassociated itself from such hateful statements. It is beyond shameful to seek to divide us by alleging that some of us are culpable because we hold beliefs different from those of Robertson and Falwell."

Mike Thomas, writing in the *Orlando Sentinel*, a city warned by Robertson in 1998 that flying rainbow flags would cause God to strike them with hurricanes, cited Falwell's remark that God "lifted the curtain of protection" from the United States.

"What does this mean?" he asked. "God chose not to alert the FBI? If God is the terrorist they portray him to be, then Middle Eastern zealots are the least of our worries."

Falwell responded to the backlash by clarifying his remarks during a phone call to CNN late Sept. 13. "I would never blame any human being except the terrorists, and if I left that impression with gays or lesbians or anyone else, I apologize."

Falwell then issued a statement Sept. 17 further begging for forgiveness. "I apologize that, during a week when everyone appropriately dropped all labels and no one was seen as liberal or conservative, Democrat or Republican, religious or secular, I singled out for blame certain groups of Americans.... The only label any of us needs in such a terrible time of crisis is American."

Rush Limbaugh, of all people, said the apologies are not enough. The conservative radio talk show host issued a statement Sept. 17.

"I was profoundly embarrassed and disappointed by their comments," Limbaugh said. "They can try to take them back all they want, but the bottom line is that their words are indefensible." □

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