

9-11-2001

Lessons Learned, Forgotten, or Ignored



Our flag flies at half-mast in memory of the 9/11 terrorist attacks on the United States. The bravery displayed by our fellow Americans should give us great pride, and the anger against the perpetrators should not be forgotten. We need to remember and mourn the victims. We need to celebrate the bravery of the firefighters, police and others who gave their lives or sacrificed their health to save innocents. As a nation, we need to remember the impact of the attack and its effect on our economy and psyche. It is through the prism of history that we anticipate the future. For that reason, it is important to review the lessons learned, forgotten or ignored.

The Attack

It was a bright, clear early fall day in New York City, a vibrant and beautiful metropolis. New York stands apart as a financial and cultural world leader, with a blend of the old and new, with ethnic neighborhoods but a cosmopolitan attitude.



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A group of fundamentalist Muslim terrorists, suicide bombers, hijacked four commercial passenger airplanes and crashed them into significant targets. Two were flown into the World Trade Center and one into the Pentagon. A fourth flight had targeted the White House but courageous passengers intervened and caused it to crash into a Pennsylvania field.

After the first airplane hit the World Trade Center, most thought it was a terrible accident. When another aircraft flew into the second tower, we knew the truth. America had been attacked and our world had been significantly changed.

The day ended as one of the most catastrophic in American history. Most people remember exactly where they were and what they were doing at the time.



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The Victims

The attack victims included citizens from fifty-five countries, including the United States. Other than the terrorists there were no victims from Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Bahrain, Oman, Qatar, or the United Arab Emirates. While sources do not precisely agree, for our purposes the death tolls were:

World Trade Center – 2800

Pentagon – 125

Passengers and terrorists on the aircraft that struck New York and Washington – 221

Passengers and terrorists on the aircraft that crashed in Shanksville, Pa. – 45

Total – 3191

Numbers quantify the tragedy but fail to provide insight. Most of the people were quietly pursuing their lives as productive and responsible citizens. They were loved ones, parents, friends, business people, and a true cross representation of America and American commerce. They reflected the international character of New York City. Few, if any, had done harm to anyone in an Islamic country and most would have been appalled at the thought of harming another individual. Yet, they were the victims of this cowardly organization that seems capable of only striking the unsuspecting, weak or innocent. There are those who dislike the term terrorist to describe these extremists, but no other word is appropriate. Terrorist is a precise title.

The New York fire and police department's performance were exemplary. Three hundred forty-three firefighters and paramedics and fifty police and Port Authority officers lost their lives. It does not begin to tell the story of all the others, fighting to control the fires and restore order from chaos. The forty people on United Flight 93 demonstrated great courage. They were Americans at their best, taking action in the face of certain death. There will never be a full accounting of the great heroism and compassion shown to each other as people attempted to escape from the Twin Towers and the Pentagon. It was a terrible day for New York City, but the response of its citizens made it one of their finest hours.

New York City did not speculate nor hesitate. They understood and heeded the lessons learned by building the worlds premiere anti-terrorism program.

Our prayers and thoughts go out to the victims of 9/11 and their families.

The Terrorists

Every religion has extremists but none more so than members of the Islamic Jihad. It would be a mistake to blame an entire religion for the acts of a few. Timothy McVey and Terry Nichols, homegrown extremists, bombed the Alfred P. Murrah Federal Building in Oklahoma City. The act killed 168 people and injured an additional 680. The American community took action. Timothy McVey was executed for his crime. Terry Nichols was sentenced to life. Following that

example, the Muslim community has to remember one of the cries from the sixties, "If you are not part of the solution, you are part of the problem."

A purported grievance of the terrorists was the presence of infidels on Holy Land. They were referring to Desert Storm; the American led thirty-four-nation military action that, in 1991, pushed Iraq out of Kuwait. American troops, by request, were stationed in Saudi Arabia.

The argument is offset by the facts. Conflicts predated Desert Storm and continued well after it was over. American presence on Saudi Arabian soil was just another reason to recruit followers and conduct Jihad.

1. The United States embassy in Beirut was bombed on 4-18-1983, killing 63 and injuring 120. The regional director of the CIA was one of the victims.
2. There was a truck bomb attack on the multinational forces barracks in Beirut, Lebanon, on 10-23-1983 and 220 marines and 79 members of the French military were killed.
3. Islamic Jihad kidnapped and murdered an embassy official with a military and CIA background, William Buckley in Beirut, Lebanon on 3-16-1984. He was violently tortured and eventually videotaped a confession. It was not enough. They continued the torture until he reportedly died of a heart attack.
4. A truck bomb was used in an attempt to topple the World Trade Center on 2-26-1993. Six people were killed and roughly 1000 were injured. This event alone should have triggered an ever-vigilant response.
5. Iraq leaders attempted to assassinate President Bush, Sr. on a trip to Kuwait. 4-14-1993.
6. The Khobar Towers, in Saudi Arabia, were truck-bombed on 6-25-1996 killing 19 Americans and injuring 515 members of the multinational force. While extensive security steps were in process, the Saudi's had warned they were insufficient.
7. The USS Cole was attacked in Aden harbor, Yemen, on October 12, 2000, killing 17 sailors and injuring another 39.

For our discussion, the grievances expressed by these people are meaningless in the face of their violence against the innocent. The implication is clear. The only way is their way. That is, the total loss of freedom, the destruction of democracy and America, and world domination by the Muslims.

In the eyes of the terrorists, the higher the number of casualties, innocents included, the greater the operational success. The free people of the United

States, an avowed target, tend to view the captured terrorists with compassion. In abstract terms this is understandable. We not only advocate for the underdog, but fight for the right of others to support their cause. We believe in both personal and human rights. We would like to embrace them and “just be friends.” In real terms, however, the terrorists have vowed to kill every American man, woman and child. Given the 9/11 demonstration of their commitment, it is foolhardy to ignore this lesson. They are our enemies, plain and simple, who are waiting to wreak even greater havoc. The danger is when we fail to focus our attention on the perpetrators and treat all Muslims and Islamic countries the same way. Clearly they are not. Turkey is a modern Muslim country with a sectarian government. They have long been our friends and trusted allies. Saudi Arabia is repressive. Iran has a young, vibrant population that protested a rigged election. They yearn for greater freedom but their government has vowed to destroy Israel and the United States.

Downsizing the Intelligence Community

The Clinton administration, focused on economics, drastically cut the military and intelligence budgets even as American interests were being attacked. Monday morning quarterbacking allows deep criticism but there is no reason to assume President Clinton would deliberately endanger our country. This is a lesson learned. Do not cut the intelligence budget when the country is under attack. Yet, the current administration is ignoring it. This contention is supported by the following quote from George Pataki, the Governor of New York at the time, in a 9/07/2009 article written by Ashley Martella (newsmax.com).

“In the 90’s, the Janet Reno Justice Department reportedly issued a memo known as the “wall of silence” that prohibited the sharing of information between law enforcement agencies. Pataki says that was a contributing factor to 9/11.

“The fact that the FBI and the CIA couldn’t share information I think in retrospect clearly was one of the major problems because the terrorists, the hijackers were here in the U.S. and the FBI had some information, the CIA had different information, but they could not coordinate. And that was a self-imposed Clinton administration restriction that had tragic consequences. I fear that too many of the actions of this Obama administration have the potential, let’s hope it never happens, but have the potential to open us up to further attacks.”

The consequences

The first consequence was the sense of lost security. America was vulnerable. While the nation was on guard against nuclear weapons, the terrorists had used a weapon of opportunity, our air transportation system, to attack our country.

Any student of history knows that significant events seldom happen suddenly. There are leading indicators and warnings. These are not always noted nor correctly recognized. The attack on 9/11 is a prime example.

There are a number of conspiracy theories regarding 9/11. They include “letting it happen” by our government, our government perpetrating it, and the Russian government perpetrating it and recording the entire event via satellite. Speculation will occur in any event where all of the facts are not clear or where people simply do not want to accept explanations. We are not going to honor this tradition. The truth is simple. America was attacked, innocent people were killed and there are still people out there who want to do it again. The greatest failure is far more obvious, and a lesson learned, the failure to recognize the obvious threat and prepare to counter it.

The economic impact of the attack has been downward revised over the years. At the time, it was thought to have a negative effect of nearly 5% of GDP. The real effect was a 2-3% drop in the stock market. Of far greater concern, money was shifted from productive use to defensive spending. An economic surplus eventually disappeared into the war on terrorism.

The 9/11 Commission recommended a number of policy and infrastructure changes. Some involved the intelligence services, blamed for not finding out about the attack. One solution was to layer a new bureaucracy over a group of existing agencies. The slow process of rebuilding a new intelligence service that could deal with terrorist threats was begun. This was not a conventional enemy nor could conventional means be used to combat the terrorists and prevent future attacks. The reasons—they recognized no limitations, laughed at the Geneva Convention and exercised extreme brutality. Our intelligence people had to work inside these organizations or with others who were ready to kill them in a heartbeat. The Hollywood world of cold war intelligence with genteel agents passing messages under the table and practicing a Marquis of Queensbury mentality was over.

The consequences of the attack included invasions of sovereign countries.

On October 7, 2001, with the consent of congress, Operation Enduring Freedom was launched in Afghanistan. The intent was to wipe out al-Qaeda and their allies, the Taliban, a group we had backed when they were fighting the Soviet Union.

The United States and a small coalition of allies invaded Iraq on March 20, 2003, with authorization from congress. The premise for the invasion was weapons of mass destruction. At the time, nearly everyone believed Iraq was in an advanced stage of nuclear weapons development and represented a clear danger to the world. The games Saddam Hussein played with the United Nations inspectors

deepened the suspicion. After the invasion, the weapons were not found, creating a political firestorm that continues today.

In both of these operations, still ongoing, the American military and allies have performed admirably. Our nation owes them a great debt and we gratefully thank them.

Who was responsible for missing the attack on the World Trade Center? Who missed the fact that Saddam Hussein was running a bluff? Was it the result of a weakened intelligence operation? The American way is to search for someone to blame. If the guilty one cannot be found, find a scapegoat. The Bush Administration was blamed for what went wrong, ignoring all of the truths that surrounded the issues.

Lessons Forgotten or Ignored

A strong intelligence service is required to protect American interests. Following 9/11, operatives came out of retirement, shifted to dangerous positions and took steps to defend us. Some performed services at great personal sacrifice to themselves and their families. They have prevented another attack on America and they should be our heroes.

The current administration is downsizing and demoralizing the very people we must count on to keep us safe. They are under attack by elitist pacifists living in ivory towers, who throw a friend or foe under the bus at the slightest personal threat.

The world is a more dangerous place than in 2001. Nuclear weapons in Pakistan are targeted opportunities for the Taliban. North Korea is not just ignoring pressure on nuclear issues, but may be selling the technology to others. Iran is very close to developing a nuclear weapon. Israel, who might well be the first target of a nuclear-armed Iran, is considering options to destroy Iran's capability. Our economy is in recession and our world debt and dependence on oil clearly have reduced our leverage in the international arena.

Our intelligence service needs to be reinforced and expanded, not demoralized or down sized. The government needs to ask how they have kept us safe, instead of prosecuting agents for taking legal steps to protect us. People who have served in the military take orders from the brass. The argument about "doing the right moral thing" is ludicrous. The invulnerability of the chain of command is ingrained in all military personnel. Like it or not, it is essential, and those that violate it will be prosecuted.

The results of the next attack will be different and the consequences potentially far more devastating. Does anyone really believe the terrorists will not use a

nuclear weapon if they get their hands on one? It is incomprehensible to think about a weapon exploding in Manhattan, Washington DC or Los Angeles.

It could result in a complete government takeover, in effect making America an authoritarian state. We all lose if that should happen. A democratic, free America would pass from history. The fallout from a partial nuclear destruction would be staggering. If Israel bombs Iran, the price of oil will double or triple overnight, if available at all.

All of our systems, social and economic, must be protected and secured from the effects of terrorism if they are to function correctly.

What forces stand between the America citizens and chaos? It is our intelligence service and our military forces. It is the New York City Counter Intelligence group. It is firefighters and law enforcement across America.

Mourn the past but prepare for the future. Enable those who keep us safe. Show our appreciation by demanding that government follows the lessons learned.

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