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Why 9/11 did not change America

For all of the talk about how America would never be the same, 9/11 did not fundamentally change America. US culture simply absorbed the attack

The massive explosion shook the building. The burning World Trade Center towers were already playing on the office televisions, so we knew immediately what that explosion meant—an airplane had hit the Pentagon across the street. We naturally (and unwisely) rushed to the windows of our office high-rise in time to see the American Airlines jet burn up in the massive complex. Helpless, I stood and watched the fire for what seemed like hours as it engulfed America's military headquarters. I was trying to understand what that fire meant for America, for the world, and for me. I'm still trying.

I was helpless that day but not totally uninformed. I worked at the RAND Corporation, a research institute mostly funded by the Pentagon. The World Trade Center attacks had interrupted a meeting I was attending on counterterrorism, attended by some of the foremost experts on terrorism in the United States. The meeting had signally failed to stop the tragedy across the street and the coincidence of the timing made us feel useless and small. What did it matter how we coded terrorist groups in our database when the Pentagon was burning?

Still, we intuited immediately who had carried out the attack. We had studied Osama bin Laden and al-Qa'eda, we knew of the group's relative sophistication, and we knew of its desire for spectacular attacks against the US homeland. Many in that meeting had spent years warning the government about the group and imagining attacks along the lines of 9/11. Even as we evacuated the building, they felt shaken but intellectually vindicated.

How we overreacted to 9/11

My PhD research at the time was into the domestic politics of foreign policy, and in particular into how and why the United States tended to overreact to threats. As solipsistic as the rest, I stared into the Pentagon

fire and wondered how we might overreact to such an attack. This was after all, a very big deal – thousands had died in the largest attack against the US homeland since Pearl Harbor. Staring at the fire in grief and frustration, I felt that no reaction could possibly constitute an overreaction.

I underestimated my home country. America remained true to its history. It responded to the attack with an all-out mobilisation that dwarfed even the significance of such a spectacular atrocity. It launched a 'Global War on Terror' that explicitly styled itself as a war against the technique of terrorism rather than just the perpetrators of the 9/11 attack. In the name of that crusade, it started several wars, spent trillions of dollars, overthrew regimes, restricted civil liberties at home, and tortured and assassinated suspected terrorists abroad. Many of the targets of these efforts had nothing to do with the 9/11 attack.

Before the 9/11 attacks, America was a country that demanded absolute security and judged its leaders by that standard.

The point of mentioning the overreaction on this anniversary is not relitigate all the controversial choices over the last twenty years. It is to note, with the benefit of hindsight, that even an event as spectacular and full of personal tragedy as 9/11 did not fundamentally change America. Obviously, the lives of many individual citizens and US foreign policy changed dramatically that day. But for all of the talk about how we would never be the same, US culture simply absorbed the attack into its existing frames and ideas.

America did not change

Before the 9/11 attacks, America was a country that demanded absolute security and judged its leaders by that standard. It was a country that mobilised slowly but completely against any threat to that security. It was a country whose difficulty in mobilising itself to action meant that it tended to fight all-out ideological crusades rather than simply wars. It did not understand or particularly like the world beyond its borders and was growing increasingly frustrated with immigration and globalization. 9/11 changed none of those fundamental features of the culture, even if it perhaps accelerated some trends. For all the soul-searching about 'why they hate us' or 'the role of Islam in the West', the trauma of that day occasioned no deep cultural change.

I did not imagine that outcome as I stared into the Pentagon fire twenty years ago. In the rush of events, I forget some essential facts about the

United States. It is large beyond human imagining, it is rich beyond historical comparison and it is self-contained to a degree that no other country could ever hope to achieve. It has sufficient size and power to avoid questioning its deepest beliefs and so it almost always does.

Even if it is impolite to say so, such a country can simply absorb the death and destruction of even a 9/11 size attack, just as it can absorb the much larger toll of the pandemic. It can quickly incorporate the lessons of a terrorist attack or pandemic into its existing political divides and cultural trends. And it can mostly ignore how the rest of the world feels about its response to such epochal events.

One can imagine historical developments big enough to change the culture of even such a powerful, insulated behemoth. History shows that it will happen eventually – perhaps the rise of China will do the trick. But the 9/11 attack could not.

And so we put out the fires, we rebuilt the buildings and we avenged those that we had lost. But we did not change.



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