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Twenty-One Years Later: Reflections on 9/11

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9/11 Reflections: Trending toward a House Divided

Professor Scott W. Roenicke

Every September 11th, I reflect on the historic tragedy that befell our nation. I can't believe that the events of that horrific day transpired twenty-one years ago – it still seems like only a few years have passed. The anniversary of the attack is an emotionally challenging day for me. I was at my desk in the Pentagon when terrorists flew the aircraft into the building. For years, I had tried to console myself with the fact that I was in the wedge of the building on the opposite side from where the plane had breached – in other words, a safe distance from death given the massive size of the Pentagon. However, my contrived solace vanished after a colleague pointed out that, had the aircraft's angle of approach been slightly more pronounced, it would have passed directly through my office – an area of the building proximate to the offices of the Secretary of Defense and the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff. This meant that I was in fact roughly 25 feet from death. The fragility of one's own mortality is a sobering thought.

One hundred and eighty-four people lost their lives in the Pentagon that day. One of them was a neighbor in my Loudoun County community who had been a passenger on the plane. I'll never forget attending his funeral and offering my condolences to his widow who was left to raise two little girls by herself. There was such grief and hopelessness in her eyes. The memory still haunts me. I recall escaping the Pentagon as the building was engulfed in flames. As I fled, I remember wondering if this catastrophe was similar to what Lot had experienced as he escaped Sodom. I didn't want to look back, but I couldn't help myself. There was black smoke pouring from the entire breadth of the Pentagon, secondary explosions rocked the structure, and casualties were scattered outside the building. Survivors were being triaged by the brave first responders who had quickly arrived on the scene. Every 9/11 presents an enduring emotional challenge for me as my mind can't help but flash back to tragic memories such as these. I'm haunted by the recollection of those lost and the guilt of my powerlessness to help a single soul.

My life drastically changed that day, as did the reality and focus of all the military and civilian personnel in the Department of Defense. I served as a senior policy advisor on Russia to the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff. Prior to the attack, my efforts had been concentrated on mitigating the strategic risks associated with an inordinately weak Russia. We had sought to build a constructive, long-term relationship with Moscow, while managing competitive tendencies which could destabilize the bilateral relationship and the Euro-Atlantic region. Following the 9/11 attack, the United States under President Bush's leadership transformed the strategic paradigm to one of collaborating with nearly every country in the world to prosecute a comprehensive War on Terrorism.

For the next twenty years, we engaged in what appeared to be a moral crusade consisting of offensive military campaigns around the world, ostensibly to defeat terrorism. The U.S. gradually transitioned into the business of nation-building with the primary objective of transforming hostile regimes into democracies. However, those of us who were directed to support this strategy increasingly recognized it as a fundamentally flawed construct that only served to exacerbate a vulnerable strategic posture with competitor nations. It senselessly squandered our nation's "blood and treasure", as is evidenced by the rapid disintegration of the so-called "democratic" Afghanistan. Even back in 2008, strategic thinkers in Washington had recognized the nascent

catastrophic fissures emerging from this approach – both within our society and within our democratic alliances.

Twenty-five years of continuous war has considerably weakened our nation, and its socio-economic prospects of recovery. We had been focused on excising the metastasized tumors of terrorism and autocracy rather than treating the underlying diseases, which are myriad. As a result of these and other factors, our political, economic, and social cohesion has fractionated. One cannot legitimately conclude that the deplorable state of our nation is simply a result of Russian aggression against Ukraine or even the current Administration's flawed policies, although both have certainly contributed to the dire circumstances.

Immediately following the 9/11 attacks, I vividly remember when roughly 150 members of Congress from both parties stood side by side on the steps of the Capitol in quiet prayer and reflection, and then in an impromptu moment, solemnly sang "God Bless America." In the days following, we experienced bipartisanship like I'd never witnessed before, and which may not have existed in our country since the attack on Pearl Harbor. Those recollections seem both distant and implausible. Throughout the years since then, I came to realize that our country's most strategically consequential enemy isn't the Chinese, the Russians, the Iranians, or the North Koreans, but rather our internal political divisiveness. The topics of abortion, guns, Christianity, LGBTQ+, border security, immigration, the environment, elections, education, the pandemic, excessive government spending, health care, Supreme Court rulings, and the like, threaten to exacerbate divisive conditions that have already led to violence on our streets and in our Capital. This epitomizes a new "attack" on our nation, but it's even more pernicious and potentially consequential than the one on 9/11 because the enemy in this case is threatening our nation's cohesion from within.

The Roman Empire dissolved given conditions of equal severity, and my fear is that our nation is well on its way down this same road. When President Lincoln delivered an address to the Republican State Convention on June 16, 1858, he declared the now famous assertion that "a house divided against itself cannot stand." However, Jesus was actually the first person to express those sentiments when he stated that "[a]ny kingdom divided against itself will be ruined, and a house divided against itself will fall." (Luke 11:17) Having spent the early part of my career as a nuclear treaty expert, I'm somewhat proficient in legal terminology and the fine art of loopholes. I see no exceptions or legal loopholes in Jesus' forceful and unequivocal pronouncement. I tend to align with Pastor Andy Stanley's reasoning that it's generally safe to place your confidence in the declarations of any person who can predict and pull off his own death, burial, and resurrection. So then, the only questions in my mind are how much time do we have as a global leader of democracies, and is this fate irreversible?

My trepidation is that we're well on our way down a path of decline. As with my 9/11 miscalculation, we may think that we are a long distance from death and destruction, but in fact, it may be far closer than we might think. The Apostle Paul stated in the first chapter of the book of Romans, "although they knew God, they neither glorified him as God nor gave thanks to Him, but their thinking became futile, and their foolish hearts were darkened. Although they claimed to be wise, they became fools..." -- an apt description of Washington DC today. The consequence of such a mindset according to the book of Romans is that God gives such people over to baser inclinations if they continue to unequivocally deny His ways and sovereignty. So, can anything be done to rectify this? Should Christian policymakers in government resign themselves to this fate? My considered response is that we serve a holy and omnipotent God who can effect His perfect

will even in the most dire of circumstances. Certainly, He calls us to pray and to “fear” Him and His Almighty power, no matter how hopeless the situation might seem.

In less than two years, we will be entering an election cycle at the end of which a new President will be selected by the American people. More accurately, this individual will be sanctioned by the God who can both install and depose world leaders. Throughout our history, He has raised up Presidents from both the Republican and Democrat parties. Since we cannot presume to know the mind of God on this point, we must pray for whomever is raised up. My sincere prayer is that our future President will have an inclusive national vision and an intrinsic capacity to bridge the gap across the gaping political spectrum. This leader should ideally be a consummate diplomat who loves his or her country and the people in it, and someone who recognizes the ultimate consequences of the endemic atrophy facing our nation. My earnest hope is that this person has innovative ideas about how to quell the national conflict which, left to its own devices, will culminate in highly destructive civil disorder on a national scale.

From a Biblical standpoint, some of our political differences simply don’t allow for compromise given that God’s nature is diametrically opposed to certain political positions espoused by national leaders and parties. Nevertheless, there are pragmatic solutions to some of our national problems which don’t present clear contradictions to Scripture. It’s in these areas in which both parties should seek to work together with political civility. Furthermore, if the Christian truly believes that Jesus died for all people, and that our prime directive is to reach out to a desperate and dying world with the Gospel, then a combative and highly politicized approach to our fellow Americans is highly counterproductive to Christ’s paramount mission. After all, God is the only One who changes hearts and minds, and He exhorts His people to “show proper respect to everyone” (1 Peter 2:17) and to demonstrate genuine humility. We cannot compromise on God’s truth, but we can act and communicate as the light to the world that Jesus commissioned us to be. If we Christians cannot facilitate a more congenial national dialogue, I fear we are doomed to experience a greater national catastrophe than we had on 9/11, and one from which we will not recover as a unified nation.

That said, our national disunity is not our only serious national security threat. As a foreign policy expert, I can confidently affirm that the autocratic “barbarians” are already undertaking an assault on the gates of democracy, and our nominal response has been to throw more national treasure at the problem than we can afford to waste. While competent diplomacy and resolute policymaking may seem to be diametrically opposed concepts, they don’t need to be. However, resolute policymaking is inordinately difficult with a politically bifurcated polity.

Let me conclude by asserting that our only hope in “holding back the barbarians” is for national spiritual revival, clear-minded thought, resolute action, and truly representative political leadership where all parties can feel vested in making progress on problems about which it is genuinely possible for rational individuals to agree. In the absence of these conditions, we will be moving toward a more unified world, albeit one dominated by autocracies that will systematically erode the freedoms that God established through our Founding Fathers and that we have held so dear for nearly two hundred and fifty years.

Early in our Republic’s history, one of those Founding Fathers -- our third President and principal author of the Declaration of Independence -- made an insightful and potentially prophetic observation that remains relevant to our nation today. Thomas Jefferson declared the following: “God who gave us life gave us liberty. And can the liberties of a nation be thought secure when

we have removed their only firm basis, a conviction in the minds of the people that these liberties are the gift of God? That they are not to be violated but with His wrath? Indeed, I tremble for my country when I reflect that God is just and that His justice cannot sleep forever.” I believe in the enduring principles underpinning this country, and I am also confident in the power and wisdom of a sovereign God who can change the course of history. But our sovereign God also uses actions by individuals as well as developments on a national and global scale to affect His perfect will. It remains to be seen what His perfect will for the United States will be.

The author served his country for over 30 years within the Department of Defense and the White House, and now serves the students of Liberty University as an Associate Professor within the Helms School of Government.

Reflections on 9/11

Professor Christopher Rhoades

The morning of September 11, 2001, I returned home from an early morning basketball session with my Dad and a few of his friends in my hometown of Willow Springs, Missouri. After dropping me off, he showered and headed off to the District Nine office of the Missouri Department of Transportation (MoDOT) where he worked as a civil engineer. My Mom and younger brother and sister weren't far behind him in their commute to get to school. I turned on the TV as I prepared for my own commute to my temp job at the West Plains Welcome Center.

After jostling the antenna wires in hopes of getting better reception, I noticed that all three channels were only playing plane crash footage and stopped on NBC to take note. Particularly poignant in my memory was the side-by-side footage of the World Trade Center Towers collapsing and of people dancing in the streets of Gaza. Their response to the attack came as little surprise since I had kept tabs on the Clinton administration's Israeli/Palestinian peace efforts, Ariel Sharon's visit to the Temple Mount, and the subsequent intifadas during my late high school and early college days. These topics, along with the Kenya and Tanzania Embassy bombings and Khobar Towers attacks had receded from discussions in the summer of 2001. In their place was the Chandra Levy investigation and gas going over \$1 per gallon. Terrorism, the Middle East, and Islam would soon again come front and center in most of my class discussions at the local community college. "How could this happen?" "Who is the culprit?" "What should we do now?" All these questions and more seemed to be echoing not just on campus, but from every porch, pulpit, and podium of power nationwide.

For me, it cemented my resolve to join the US Army. My interest in military service came as an outgrowth of my interest in history. Friends enlisting after high school and the E3 spy plane event in China moved me closer to joining up. The military was also an enticing option for a nineteen-year-old who had only flown once, had never been to a foreign country or fired an automatic weapon, and had little prospects for interesting employment even with a college degree. The more I researched the options available with the Army, the more it drew me in, especially after 9/11.

Fast forward five years to the day later. On returning from a patrol in the Mahmudiyah District south of Baghdad, I scrambled out of an up-armored Humvee and dodged tanks and other military vehicles careening around the makeshift roadways on Forward Operating Base (FOB) Falcon to get to the phone trailer. It had become a quasi-tradition to call Mom on this date to commemorate, encourage, laugh, and cry. This call would be the culmination of that tradition as our family now felt the full effects of our nation's response to 9/11. I never fully appreciated the stress and strain my time in the Army had on my parents and grandparents until I resigned my commission after ten years of service. They maintained a stiff upper lip through so much and offered a flood of prayers and petitions on my behalf. In retrospect, I wish I was more mindful and appreciative of their support.

After my departure from the Army, it became apparent I had yet to learn my lesson when I took a position with Vinnel Arabia, a defense contractor training the Saudi National Guard. The position was largely administrative operations, and the threat signature in 2012 was not particularly concerning given where I had been with my past Army deployments. However, as bulletins from the embassy became starker, memories of a previous attack on our compound began to surface. After the events in Benghazi, I recall my boss, a former Army officer himself, sticking a bony

finger in my face and launching into a tirade about the failures of the military, the diplomats, and American foreign policy in general. Although my job as his sounding board was to dutifully smile, nod, and get back to work, many of his arguments stuck with me.

I am now more than ten years removed from the life and career that was arguably the result of the events of 9/11. Much of it is now a distant memory as I have become thoroughly docile and domesticated in the virtuous pursuits of home and hearth. Although my adventures garnered me the means and methods to pursue this soundly middle-class lifestyle coveted in middle age, I often wonder what all the time and treasure expended overseas was ultimately for. What did we accomplish? Would personal pursuits of the spiritual disciplines and tangibly productive labor have been better than my haphazard international meanderings during these years? Would a national agenda that emphasized cultural morality, civic solidarity, and economic independence have been a greater weapon against both the real and perceived threats of Islam and other state actors?

These last ten years now seem a near complete inverse of the previous ten I spent in the Army. Much to the chagrin of the GWOT-ers and to the delight of the Cold-Warriors, near-peer adversaries have come to the fore on the international stage while Islamic extremism appears an ever-diminishing “paper tiger.” In my children’s youth, they are witnessing Russia invading Ukraine. At their age, I saw Russia invade Afghanistan, my father saw Russia invade Hungary, and my grandfather saw Russia invade Poland. The voice of the “preacher” could not resound louder. “What has been is what will be, and what has been done is what will be done, and there is nothing new under the sun” (Ecclesiastes 1:9).

While boarding the C10 departing Iraq at the end of my unit’s tour in 2006, Lincoln’s words as noted by Stephen Spear’s book *Gettysburg* sprang into my mind. After the battle Lincoln asked, “Great God, what does it all mean?” At this juncture in history, I feel like I’m asking it again...and yet this peace remains:

“Whither shall I go from Thy Spirit? Or whither shall I flee from thy presence? If I ascend up into heaven, Thou art there: if I make my bed in hell, behold, Thou art there. If I take the wings of the morning, and dwell in the uttermost parts of the sea; even there shall Thy hand lead me, and Thy right hand shall hold me” (Psalm 139:7-10).

The author served in the US Army, positions with defense contractors including Vinnell Arabia, Orbis Operations, and COMTek, and is currently an Assistant Professor with the Helms School of Government Online.

May it Teach Instead of Define: A Captain's Reflection of 9/11

Christopher Wilson

The teachers at St. Ann Elementary School were acting strangely that day and kept darting into the hallways to have hushed conversations with each-other. An abnormal number of my classmates were being picked-up early by their parents. Finally, the announcement came over the intercom before we were dismissed: “today we pray especially for those involved in the tragedy in New York, Washington D.C., Pennsylvania, and for our country.”

September 11th was my grandpa's birthday. My mom had just sneaked him a birthday call from an empty patient's room when she saw the second plane hit the south tower on the news. She had no time to process it between running the labor and delivery department and picking us up from school that afternoon. My sister, brother, and I wasted no time asking her what had happened. None of us remember exactly how she described the terrorist attacks to us, but we all remember what she told us to do: “We need to pray for these people. We need to pray for our country.”

And so, we did just that—every day before bed and at the beginning and end of the day at school. Our school even had us sing Lee Greenwood's “God Bless the USA” on Friday afternoons until we left for High School.

September 11th, 2001 was a pivotal moment for the world and a crucible blow for the United States, but personal hindsight has proven it to be one of the most effectually sowing moments in my and so many others' lives. Faith and patriotism are defining aspects of many in my generation. When I joined the Army on July 2nd, 2014, I was consciously fulfilling a duty to both. What is interesting, though, is that my first memory of both of these virtues can be pinpointed to that singular September day when I was only a child. What makes 9/11 such a decisive theme for those born in the 1990s and early 2000s is not how it changed the world, but how it was our world.



From left to right: the author one month before the attack with his sister, immediately after, and present day with his fiancée

My siblings and I were happy-go-lucky kids—we did not think of the world outside of our own until 9/11—then it was everywhere. It took four days for us to find a store with an American flag left in stock. Homes, cars, schools, and clothes were proudly and defiantly draped in it – something so reverent that we were forbidden from letting it even touch the floor. It was universally impressed

upon me that good things like our country and neighbors are worth fighting for and brave Soldiers [like my dad] had to go away to keep them from doing it again.

My parents had divorced a few years prior, so I lived with my mom but stayed with my dad regularly. In 2001 Dad was a field-grade Army Intelligence officer and chemist with a decade of chemical and narcotics counter-terrorism background. He received a call before noon on 9/11, grabbed his Go-bag¹, and reported to the Defense Intelligence Agency headquarters at Bolling Air Force Base before I was out of school. Of course, I didn't know all of that at the time. But I would be entirely remiss if I did not attribute his example of service to country with rousing mine today.

Dad has long since retired, but the more I see of the world through service to our country the more I wonder how it came to be this way. His perspective on that hastily assembled joint task force is a unique one. In a recent conversation he reminded me that the US immediately went into REDCON-1²; the President was kept airborne [on Air Force One] and they were simultaneously trying to determine who was behind it and configure responses in escalation of force from covert to nuclear levels. We were at war, and as the nation became aware of al-Qaeda and the Islamic terrorist organizations behind it we were truly and spectacularly united. Following the unipolar moment of 1991, the US was the sole superpower with the greatest economy and military in history. When Osama bin Laden orchestrated an attack on American cities killing innocents from 80 countries, the world not only watched in horror, but also feared the full force and might of American retribution.

In his September 20th address to a joint session of Congress, President George W. Bush declared two things boldly, clearly, and to rapturous applause: “Our war on terror begins with al Qaeda, but it does not end there. It will not end until every terrorist group of global reach has been found, stopped and defeated,” and “Every nation, in every region, now has a decision to make. Either you are with us, or you are with the terrorists.”³ In response, the largest coalition of nations ever formed in human history joined in GWOT led by the United States: 196 countries supported the US effort financially and 59 sent their own troops.⁴ Never before had such supremacy been projected so globally.

Yet, in declaring a war without an achievable end-state, President Bush set the stage for an unwinnable and borderless war. The national and international unity which the United States enjoyed through the early years waned with each development: the 2003 Invasion of Iraq, 2006 spike in coalition casualties, 2008 recession, President Obama's failed troop surge(s), the 2011 withdrawal and 2016 resumption of operations in Iraq, and most recently the 2021 withdrawal from Afghanistan.⁵ Even for the early triumphs over the Taliban, termination of Saddam Hussein and Osama bin Laden, and territorial defeat of the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS), the legitimacy of American global leadership continues to flounder in ways inconceivable 20 years ago. The magnum opus of post-Cold-War American erosion thus far being our 2021 capitulation

¹ The military term for a pre-packed and staged bag for rapid deployment.

² Readiness Condition One, which equates to the highest national defensive status reserved for active war

³ George W. Bush, “Address to a Joint Session of Congress and the American People,” Whitehouse.gov (National Archives and Records Administration, September 20, 2001), <https://georgewbush-whitehouse.archives.gov/news/releases/2001/09/20010920-8.html>.

⁴ “The Global War on Terrorism: The First 100 Days,” State.gov (U.S. Department of State), accessed August 27, 2022, <https://2001-2009.state.gov/s/ct/rls/wh/6947.htm>

⁵ “Timeline: U.S. War in Afghanistan,” Council on Foreign Relations (Council on Foreign Relations), accessed August 27, 2022, <https://www.cfr.org/timeline/us-war-afghanistan>.

to the Taliban in Afghanistan, giving way to increasing aggression of transnational terror organizations and near-peer competitors like China and Russia alike.

Al-Qaeda's attack on the United States lasted less than three hours in 2001; but the Global War on Terrorism (GWOT) is currently without end politically and is still ongoing militarily through Operation Inherent Resolve in Iraq and Syria.⁶ Further, America's failure to follow-through on its public, national declarations have likely helped spawn the need for subsequent US operations. Less than 13 years after the United States, Ukraine, and Russia fought terrorism hand-in-hand with Chinese financial cooperation, Russia invaded Ukraine twice resulting in an expansion of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization and the largest US build-up of forces in Europe since the Cold War: Operation Atlantic Resolve. Similarly, China's Belt and Road initiative openly seeks to displace US financial and military hegemony.

Our country and the world have vastly changed since September 11th, 2001. From a political perspective, the international order could already be several steps into transition from a unipolar to multipolar world. According to the political scholar, John Mearsheimer, such transitions are characteristically marked by instability and war.⁷ It is no secret that the entirety of the U.S. military-industrial complex is restructuring away from counter-insurgency operations and toward large-scale combat operations (LSCO). As a current student in the Army's Maneuver Captains Career Course, I can personally attest to the openness with which professional military education courses are preparing us for LSCO with China and/or Russia specifically.

Soldiers around my age who were taught a third world war was implausible, are now not asking *if* there will be another world war, but *when*. The American military is humble, battle-hardened, and only increasing in readiness. But all the expertise, virtue, and resources in the world cannot achieve an unfeasible political end-state. I will not envy the political leaders tasked with confronting the next attack on us, but I doubt we will have more than one more opportunity to learn the lesson: effective leaders set and achieve attainable goals and ineffective leaders do not enjoy their positions for long. The same is true of the United States on the global stage. The elected leaders who send American Soldiers to war have a sacred obligation to both ensure the cause is justified and the end-state is achievable.

To whom much is given, much is expected. A child can love his God and country, but a leader must do more. We must learn the lessons of the last twenty years and admit our past and ongoing deficiencies or doom ourselves to repeat them in the next conflict with terminal consequences.

Disclaimer: The views in this paper are entirely those of the author expressed under the principles of academic freedom and do not reflect official views of the Department of Defense or the U.S. Government.

The author is a graduate of the United States Military Academy at West Point and serves as an active-duty, infantry captain in the United States Army. He most recently served as a combat advisor team leader in North and Central Africa.

⁶ John Pike, "Operation Inherent Resolve," *Global Security Journal*, accessed August 27, 2022, <https://www.globalsecurity.org/military/ops/inherent-resolve.htm>.

⁷ John J. Mearsheimer, (2019). "Bound to Fail: The Rise and Fall of the Liberal International Order," *International Security* 43 (4): 7–50.

9/11 at Twenty-One Years

Dean Ronald Miller

As we commemorate the twenty-first anniversary of the September 11, 2001 terrorist attack on our own homeland, it seems particularly surreal that anyone 21 years of age or younger was not yet born when this world-changing event occurred. However, its impacts reverberate even into the present day. Even the shorthand used to refer to this historical event - 9/11 - is exceptional, as there are few historical events where the mere mention of the date evokes powerful memories for those who experienced it. As an assistant director and chief information officer at the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA), and a senior official with the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) at its inception in January 2003, I was actively involved in events in Washington, DC motivated by 9/11. Twenty-one years later, I wonder if the steps we took in response to 9/11 have left us safer, and whether our response has affected our unity as a nation.

A Seminal Event

Every generation has its seminal event, a shared experience which marks a seismic shift in the world's priorities and perspectives from where they were prior to that event. For my grandparents, who were part of the "Greatest Generation" as coined by television journalist Tom Brokaw, the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor on December 7, 1941, was just such an event, triggering World War II and changing the international balance of power when all was said and done. According to the Office of the Historian in the U.S. Department of State, America emerged from that global conflict as "one of the foremost economic, political, and military powers in the world."

For the Baby Boomers, the 1960s saw several world-defining events which altered the perception of America and its place in the world from where it was in the wake of World War II. The Cold War and its proxy wars – of which the Vietnam War was the most prominent – both animated and divided Americans. Moreover, the shock effects of the civil rights and feminist movements, the sexual revolution, and politically motivated violence (the Kennedy and King assassinations, race riots, the riots outside the 1968 Democratic Party convention, the Kent State National Guard shootings, et al.) shook America's self-confidence and, in many respects, its unity as a nation. The end of the Cold War, marked by the fall of the Berlin Wall and the relative calm that followed, did little to restore America's assuredness or consensus on its role in the international order.

However, 9/11 was one of those rare historical events that crossed demographic boundaries and brought Americans together, if only for a moment in time. A Pew Research Center poll taken in 2016 revealed:

Roughly three-quarters (76%) of the public include the Sept. 11 terror attacks as one of the 10 events during their lifetime with the greatest impact on the country...The perceived historic importance of the attacks on New York and the Pentagon, span virtually every traditional demographic divide. Majorities of men and women, Millennials and Baby Boomers, Americans with college degrees and those without a high school diploma rate 9/11 as one of the 10 most historically significant events to occur during their lifetime. And while they seem to agree on little else this election year, the survey finds that more

than seven-in-ten Republicans and Democrats name the attacks as one of their top 10 historic events.

The nearest historical event, the election of Barack Obama as the nation's first Black president, was a distant 40% in the Pew poll, although it should be noted that Black Americans ranked that event higher than 9/11 (62% to 58%) and included the civil rights movement when neither Whites nor Hispanics did. This speaks to how a particular group's experience affects their perspective of history and would be a topic of exploration for another time.

Suffice to say that few seminal events in American history transcended demographic boundaries like 9/11, and the government's response was intended to prevent another tragedy like it.

Where we are today

In response to 9/11, Congress passed the Uniting and Strengthening America by Providing Appropriate Tools Required to Intercept and Obstruct Terrorism (USA PATRIOT) Act of 2001, established the U.S. Department of Homeland Security (DHS), and declared a "War on Terror," a coordinated effort by the military and intelligence communities to attack transnational terrorism at its points of origin.

Today, most of the elements of the PATRIOT Act – which modified U.S. surveillance, intelligence gathering, and investigation policies to apply them to government anti-terrorism efforts – remain in place, and DHS is approaching the 20th anniversary of its establishment on November 25, 2002. While American forces withdrew from Afghanistan on August 31, 2021, after 20 years of conflict, the War on Terror continues, albeit primarily at a clandestine level.

The question of whether we are safer 21 years after 9/11 could be answered simply by the observation that no terrorist attack of that magnitude has been repeated on American soil. Some would say that achievement has come at the cost of American lives in Iraq and Afghanistan, and the loss of civil liberties and 1st Amendment rights because of the PATRIOT Act.

Perhaps more significantly, the unity we had as a nation in the immediate aftermath of 9/11 eroded as we prosecuted the War on Terror and effected the largest reorganization of government since World War II with the creation of DHS. The war in Iraq is believed to have been justified because of faulty intelligence regarding the presence of weapons of mass destruction in that nation. The Bush Administration in which I served as an appointee to FEMA and DHS is forever burdened with this intelligence failure, and Operation Iraqi Freedom resulted in the subsequent loss of over 4,400 American lives.

The American polity is at its most divisive and contentious since perhaps the 1960s, or maybe even the pre-Civil War era according to some historians. While the efforts put in place by the federal government to keep us safe have ostensibly been successful, they may have come at a great cost to our cohesion as a republic as public trust and confidence in the veracity of our government officials has diminished. The question for future statesmen and stateswomen is whether that trust can be restored; in my opinion, we fail to do so at the peril of our union.

The author was a presidential appointee under President George W. Bush and served in the Federal Emergency Management Agency, the Homeland Security Transition Planning Office, and the Department of Homeland Security. He was recognized by Federal Computer Week in

2002 and 2003 as one of the recipients of the Federal 100 Award because of his leadership at FEMA and DHS in their responses to the threat of transnational terrorism.

A Retrospective of 9/11

Professor Grayson Story

Part I: The Road to War, “The Long War”

My personal road to 9/11 began nine years previously upon induction to the U.S. Naval Academy and continued through graduation and commissioning in May 1996. Our active-duty service commitments would end in Spring 2001, at which time we would be required to decide whether or not to continue serving as Navy or Marine Corps Officers. Personally, I felt that leading Marines and Navy Corpsmen was God’s perfect will for my life at the time, and life in general was beyond good.

“We few, we happy few, we band of brothers . . .”ⁱ

The active-duty ranks were filled with many experienced veterans of Operations DESERT SHIELD/DESERT STORM (i.e., Coalition operations to protect Saudi Arabia from an Iraqi Army assault and the counterattack to oust Saddam Hussein’s regime forces from Kuwait, respectively) and Operation RESTORE HOPE in Somalia. Two things many failed to realize were that: The monolithic threat of the Soviet Union had fallen, and thus the adversary against whom our grandfathers, our fathers and we had organized, equipped and trained to fight since the end of World War II was gone; and the focus on that monolithic threat had created strategic ‘blind spots’ against smaller, irregular threats, like non-state actors using the tactic of terrorism.

By early 2001, the newly inaugurated President George W. Bush had promised a reinvestment in the Defense Department and the Intelligence Community (IC), both of which had been subjected to deep programmatic funding cuts under President Clinton as a peace dividend from the Cold War and the qualified success of Operations DESERT SHIELD/DESERT STORM. The culture of the armed forces began to change as well. In the mid-/late-1990s senior military leaders focused too greatly on a ‘zero defects’ mentality which had many Servicemembers afraid to make mistakes, otherwise risking their profession for the types of errors from which young leaders learn. Junior leaders were not allowed to be less-than-perfect and learn by making mistakes, correcting deficiencies and inculcating the lessons that differentiate great teams from marginal ones. Likewise, our formations became less focused on war-fighting skills and lethality and more focused on ‘soft’ skills. Moving into the new millennium junior leaders were reinvigorated and felt less risk-averse to meet the challenges with a changing of the guard New, emerging technologies like unmanned aerial vehicles (aka ‘drones’) and advanced space-based command and control systems.

“For he to-day that sheds his blood with me shall be my brother . . .”ⁱⁱ

On 25 June 1996, a car bombing in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia targeted the Khobar Towers, a U.S. Air Force housing complex, killing 19 U.S. Airmen. Reports indicated that Usama bin Laden (UBL) had facilitated shipments of explosives to Saudi Arabia some months before the bombing. The month before the attack, UBL transferred his base of operations for al Qaeda from Sudan to Afghanistan. However, Iran, a Shia-led theocracy, was found officially and legally responsible for the terror attack. Regardless, many terrorism researchers consider the Khobar Towers terrorist attack to mark the resurgence of terrorism led by non-state actor jihadists against U.S. interests.

The next five years realized other notable terror attacks and U.S. counteractions. On 7 August 1998, the U.S. Embassies in Nairobi, Kenya and Dar-es-Salaam, Tanzania were attacked, respectively killing 213 and 11 and wounding approximately 4,000 and 85 additional people. Less than two weeks later, President Clinton ordered a cruise missile strike against UBL and the core al Qaeda leadership in Khost Province, Afghanistan and Khartoum, Sudan, codenamed Operation INFINITE REACH. This response aimed to kill UBL and senior core al Qaeda leadership. It was also the first known use of the Doctrine of Preemption to underpin a military strike against a non-state adversary.

On 12 October 2000, the *USS Cole*, a guided missile destroyer, was attacked by an explosive-laden small craft, in the Gulf of Aden, Yemen during a routine refueling stop and port visit, killing 17 and wounding 37 U.S. Sailors. The Sudanese Government was officially and legally held responsible for this terror attack. The evidence for the findings and judgment were two-fold: retaliation for the INFINITE REACH cruise missile strike and the Sudanese government's protection of al Qaeda senior leaders, including UBL himself, and their continued affiliation. *The 9/11 Commission Report* states,

“On 25 January [2001], [CIA Director] Tenet briefed the President on the *Cole* investigation. The written briefing repeated for top officials of the new administration what the CIA had told the Clinton White House in November [2000]. This included the "preliminary judgment" that al Qaeda was responsible, with the caveat that no evidence had yet been found that [bin Laden] himself ordered the attack in March 2001, the CIA's briefing slides for Rice were still describing the CIA's "preliminary judgment" that a "strong circumstantial case" could be made against al Qaeda but noting that the CIA continued to lack "conclusive information on external command and control" of the attack.”ⁱⁱⁱ

Although direct evidence of al Qaeda involvement was murky, the strategic message of these terror actions was clear: U.S. Citizens and those who support U.S. interests abroad are legitimate targets for those who despise American values and believe that Western liberalism cannot peacefully coexist with a fundamentalist interpretation of Islam, particularly al Qaeda and its affiliates.

Indications and warning chatter collected by the IC forecasted that terror organizations had not only an appetite for but were operationally planning attacks against more U.S. interests. The bombings of the Khobar Towers, the U.S. Embassies in Kenya and Tanzania, and the *USS Cole* compelled the Department of Defense (DoD) and the IC to . Violent extremist organizations (VEOs) do not recognize international law, political boundaries or civil norms. Using terror as their chosen set of tactics, they are just as willing to engage military targets as they are murderous plots against non-combatant civil populations. In fact, targeting of non-military targets imposes unexpected war-costs on civil populaces who fund professional armies and navies to defend against such threats.

Part II: The First Day of “The Long War”

That Tuesday was a beautiful North Carolina late-summer day. We headed into base about 0415 for morning physical training – stretch, three-mile run, 1,000-yard swim, three-mile run, calisthenics, cool-down. A quick staff huddle with our Regimental Commander followed at about 0715. He was headed to Marine Corps Air Station Cherry Point to catch a flight to the Marines' Mountain Warfare Training Center near Bridgeport, California. We, his Battle Staff, were set join

him within a couple days. For the past month, we had been on an alert assignment at Camp Lejeune as the Marine Corps' Air Contingency Marine Air-Ground Task Force (ACM), designed to be a 24/7 expeditionary force-in-readiness for no-notice worldwide deployment. My staff role was as the S-2 (Intelligence) Officer for the Regiment assigned as the ACM.

"This day shall gentle his condition . . ."^{iv}

While our S-2 (Intelligence) Marines were training on a new version of the Intelligence Operations System (IOS) at Second Marine Division Headquarters, I was in the same building as a student in an Anti-Terrorism/Force Protection Course. We began training about 0800. Approximately 46 minutes later a hijacked American Airlines Flight 11 was flown into the North Tower of the World Trade Center. Within ten minutes of impact, the Chief Instructor informed me and another trainee, also an Intelligence Officer, that something terrible had occurred and that we were released from the course immediately. (We thought it was a ploy to get other non-intelligence students involved in building intelligence packages as part of the course.) Then he told us this was not a drill. We headed to the Second Marine Division G-2 (Intelligence) Director's Office just in time to see the raw footage of the North Tower. Within a few minutes, at approximately 0903, American Airlines Flight 175 hit the South Tower. The Division G-2 Colonel, a combat veteran, gave assurances of support. Knowing our Regimental Commander was preparing to leave the base, we phoned the Staff Duty Officer to find him. Once connected we informed him of what we knew, then he directed me to get our Intelligence Team and the new IOS back to the Regimental Command Post. The Team was standing by with the new IOS and we piled everyone and the system into a SUV and arrived at our Headquarters just before Flight 77 was flown in The Pentagon. Our Regimental Headquarters transitioned within the hour from a peacetime Command Post to a wartime Combat Operations Center.

This was not a rumor; we knew we were at war; and we were certain who our enemy was. On the way back to the Command Post with our Intelligence Team, my phone had registered several missed calls. The missed calls from early that morning were much different than the later ones. The first day of "The Long War" was my 27th birthday.

Part III: The Primary Lesson Learned from "The Long War"

For the next several days we orders came and went as the Nation pivoted on a war-footing, and 9/11 became a clarion call for service. We deployed for mountain warfare training within the next several days, rumored to be preparing for a campaign in Afghanistan. What most strategists gather from history is that no army fights well in the middle of an Afghan Winter.

"From this day to the ending of the world . . ."

One primary strategic lesson drawn from the post-9/11 military campaigns in Afghanistan and Iraq offer insight when considering the diplomatic and military elements of National power:

Conditions-based policies and strategies for the use of military force matter.

In the days following 9/11, a conversation about American values ensued as the Nation began to debate and decide feasible, acceptable and suitable response options to the terror attacks. Domestic uncertainty and international tensions necessitated a deeper understanding of the American democratic landscape. What were Americans willing to accept to thwart the possibility of terror reaching U.S. shores again? The curtailment of civil liberties? The possibility of engaging overseas

without clearly defined political and military conditions for the cessation of hostilities against a non-state terror group?

Clearly, the American People demanded action, and the Congress authorized the use of military force to confront terrorism, specifically al Qaeda and its affiliates, wherever they were discovered. Terror groups had to be dismantled to the greatest extent possible. By late-Fall 2001, U.S. Special Operations Forces (SOF) and Marines attacked to seize Taliban-controlled regions providing geographic sanctuary for al Qaeda strongholds in eastern and southern Afghanistan. U.S. Special Operations Command was given an execute order to find, fix and finish al Qaeda globally, since the terror group had proven their global reach and its ability to freely move throughout Asia and parts of Europe. Winter 2001-2002 saw the opening of the Afghan theater of operations as well as lesser-known operational theaters in the Philippines, Africa and former Soviet satellite states. Many neo-Conservatives argued that the U.S. should use 9/11 as a *casus belli* for conducting counter-terror operations in as many as 16 countries, from the Maghreb, sub-Saharan Africa and the Arabian Peninsula to Central and East Asia. However, 9/11 provided a *casus belli* to complete what many strategic planners saw as unfinished business in Iraq. By Spring 2002, the U.S. began preparing for a completely different campaign in Southwest Asia without have yet explained what conditions should be achieved in Afghanistan. In late-Fall 2002, Operation COBRA II was approved for execution, and larger conventional (non-SOF) formations began strategic deployment to Kuwait for integration into a multi-national Combined Joint Land Force Component Command under U.S. Central Command. On 5 February 2003, Secretary of State Colin Powell delivered an address to the United Nations using the pre-text of Saddam Hussein's potential development and use of weapons of mass destruction in a terror role against the U.S. and its Allies.

This predication began to conflate several National Security fixtures, including goals for counter-terror operations in Afghanistan with more U.S.-favorable conditions in Iraq thru regime change. Secretary Powell's speech also failed to describe such operations in terms of the enemy – one of non-state actors (i.e., al Qaeda, the Taliban), the other a state regime (i.e., Saddam Hussein, the Ba'athist Party). In both cases, these operations violated, ironically so, the six terms and conditions of the Weinberger-Powell Doctrine for the post-Vietnam Era use of military force set by former Defense Secretary Casper Weinberger and General Colin Powell, the Secretary of State during 9/11:

1. The United States should not commit forces to combat overseas unless the particular engagement or occasion is deemed vital to our national interests or that of our allies.
2. If we decide that it is necessary to put combat troops into a given situation, we should do so wholeheartedly and with the clear intention of winning.
3. If we do decide to commit forces to combat overseas, we should have clearly defined political and military objectives.
4. The relationship between our objectives and the forces we have committed — their size and composition—must be continually reassessed and adjusted if necessary.
5. Before the U.S. commits combat forces abroad, there must be some reasonable assurance that we will have the support of the American people and their elected representatives in Congress.
6. The commitment of U.S. forces to combat should be a last resort.^{vi}

In retrospect, the counter-terror mission in Afghanistan violated points 3, 4 and 6; while operations in Iraq violated points 1, 3, 4 and 6. The most serious statute of the Weinberger-Powell Doctrine

breached by both was point 3. Since the U.S. did not set “clearly defined political and military objectives” at the outset, Operation ENDURING FREEDOM – Afghanistan (October 2002 – December 2014)/Operation FREEDOM’S SENTINEL (January 2015 – August 2021) misaligned its original counter-terror mission with a counterinsurgency campaign and Allied effort at nation-building. Similarly, Operation IRAQI FREEDOM (March 2003 – November 2011)/Operation NEW DAWN (September 2010 – September 2011) devolved from a miscalculated regime change mission, couched as counter-weapons of mass destruction intervention, into a counterinsurgency campaign. Both campaigns ended in strategic failure with thousands of Allied casualties and more than a hundred thousand enemy and civilian non-combatant casualties. Each remains a blight on U.S. global credibility with Allies and partners.

Part IV: A Requiescat of Love

Twenty-one years ago, seems like a lifetime ago, seems like yesterday – perhaps both, at the same time. It seems like the former because of the hard days, because we experienced things that others have not, some things that physically, emotionally, psychologically break strong men, things that kill. It seems like the latter, because of more than a thousand days spent in deserts and mountains, hundreds of others spent reuniting with and raising families, and hundreds more visiting friends and graves. We have come to remember those things, but particularly that day. And, because of the ones sacrificed in face of the enemy during the campaigns that followed, because of the ideals for which they gave what Lincoln called “the last full measure of devotion,”^{vii} because they loved what they left behind more than they feared what lay ahead, we would do it all over again, in a heartbeat. In their final days they shared with us gifts of duty, of valor, and of love. That love reminds us of the Apostle Paul’s first letter to the Corinthian Church in which he writes, “So now faith, hope, and love abide, these three; but the greatest of these is love.”^{viii} Paul’s sentiment serves to expound on Christ’s own declaration, “Greater love has no one than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends.”^{ix} In our remembrances we thank God that we had such friends 21 years ago and that most of us live still as witnesses to that day.

Disclaimer: The views in this paper are entirely those of the author expressed under the principles of academic freedom and do not reflect official views of the Department of Defense or the U.S. Government.

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ⁱ Shakespeare, William. (1599). *Henry V*.

ⁱⁱ Shakespeare.

ⁱⁱⁱ National Commission on Terrorist Attacks. (2004). *The 9/11 commission report*. Retrieved 25 August 2022, from <https://911commission.gov/report/>.

^{iv} Shakespeare.

^v Ibid.

^{vi} Record, Jeffrey. (2007). *Strategic Studies Quarterly*, Volume 1, Issue 1, Fall 2007. Retrieved 26 August 2022, from https://www.airuniversity.af.edu/Portals/10/SSQ/documents/Volume-01_Issue-1/Record.pdf

^{vii} Lincoln, Abraham. (1863). *The Gettysburg Address*.

^{viii} English Standard Version (ESV), I Corinthians 13:13.

^{ix} Ibid, John 15:13.