

THE DECADE OF 9/11

The 2001 attack organized by Usama bin Ladin on the New York “World Trade Center” and the Pentagon – and the intended-but-failed operation apparently aimed at the White House -- was the first major international assault in the continental United States since the Anglo-American War of 1812, long before the historical memory or even knowledge of most Americans. Consequently, although relatively small-scale and of only momentary duration in comparison to the devastating and long-lasting air raids conducted by American forces against Germany and Japan during the Second World War, the operation can be said to have psychologically, politically and economically reshaped America. In this article, I will show how the effects were played out to form the America we know in 2011.

The immediate effect of the attack was to legitimize the administration of George W. Bush whose election the previous year had been clouded by legal and procedural reservations. While the American Constitution specifies that elections are to be conducted under the supervision of the states rather than the federal authorities, Mr. Bush was proclaimed the winner of the election not by them but by the Supreme Court. Moreover, many issues of right to vote and the counting of the votes were, to say the least, controversial. But, while Mr. Bush’s immediate response to the attack gave little hint of leadership, he emerged as the only possible national figure.

The attack itself and the role to which it catapulted Mr. Bush not only enabled him to win the next presidential election but also to begin a series of processes that would shape at least the first four years of the policies of his successor, Barack Obama. So profound and so pervasive have been these changes that they have virtually transformed America.

Underlying all the changes and indeed making them possible was an entirely new sense of fear. While Americans had reason to fear that the Cold War could metastasize into a nuclear holocaust, that danger seemed remote to most people. An earlier (almost equally devastating) attack on a federal office building in Oklahoma by a right-wing native American extremist and various attempted assassinations of public officials had been dismissed as the acts of deranged people. In contrast, the highly publicized and visually evocative explosions in the heart of New York City conveyed a sense of danger to ordinary citizens in every neighborhood in the country.

Susceptibility to a sense of danger – particularly from foreigners -- had deep roots. Although Americans are a polyglot, immigrant people of all races and religions, each generation has struggled to throw off its background and become homogenously “American.” To speak former languages and to dress in traditional styles was considered to be “un-American.” As quickly as possible, immigrants or their children escaped from ethnically-oriented neighborhoods like New York City’s “Little Italy” to the homogenized suburbs where everyone spoke English, dressed in “American” style clothing and attended secular schools where they studied an “American” curriculum. It was thus, in large part, the fear of the foreign that resonated throughout America in the immediate aftermath of 9/11.

Even more important, in the shock of the events which were brought to every household on television, Americans began not only to fear “the foreigner,” but also what remained of the “the foreign” in one another.

This sense of danger had periodically reverberated in America. Shortly after the American Revolution in the 18th century, a similar panic swept the country and resulted in the “Alien and Sedition Acts” to suppress both criticism of the new government and also new immigrants (during the first of the country’s undeclared wars); then in the 19th century, laws were proposed but not passed by “nativists” (aka “the Know Nothing Party”) to restrict incoming Irish Catholics; and, at the end of the First World War, a “Red” craze was met even by expulsions of recent East European immigrants. After 9/11, a similar dread was seized upon by the neoconservative movement and adherents of the religiously-inspired, politically-extreme right to push a new agenda that in “normal” circumstances would not have been accepted by the public at large. So what was this new agenda?

In the immediate aftermath of the 9/11 attack, on October 26, 2001, the Congress passed and President George W. Bush signed the “Anti-Terrorism Act of 2001.” which removed many restrictions on the government’s surveillance of American citizens in violation of Constitutionally-guaranteed civil liberties. In a rare bi-partisan move, Republican and Democratic senators criticized the bill for its denigration of civil liberties, but it was, nevertheless, signed into law by President Bush.

The overarching statement of the fear of the foreign was the subsequent “Homeland Security Act” of November 25, 2002. It was embodied in a vast new Department of Homeland Security. With some 170,000 officials – not including a large number of contract employees – and a budget of nearly \$40 billion, it was the largest government agency outside the Department of Defense.

The Act contained provisions to encourage citizens to spy upon one another and report to government officials “suspicious” activities or statements. Perhaps the most extreme part of the Act was called “Total Information Awareness.” Awarded a separate budget of \$200 million, it was intended to create dossiers on the medical history, educational background, and personal communications of every living American. The program caused such an outcry that in January 2003 the Senate decided not to fund it, partly because it was believed to be unconstitutional, but it was never completely annulled.

Indeed, the major effects of the Homeland Security Act remain and were extended by four additional years by President Barack Obama on May 26, 2011. They can be experienced – cannot be avoided -- at every airport and most public buildings throughout the land. Even those citizens who stay at home are periodically warned of real or imaginary color-coded levels of threat. So the cumulative sense of danger is felt everywhere and is constantly reinforced.

Understandably, advocates of civil liberties protested that these new government programs undermined the traditional concepts of American civil liberties while proponents of the acts and the practices they set in motion argued that, while they restricted traditional civil liberties, they were a necessary part of what was termed “the war on terrorism.”

The “war on terrorism” also had large-scale, wide-ranging and long-lasting international aspects. Thus, while it began with the military interventions in Afghanistan and Iraq during the Bush administration, the war on terrorism is continuing in the Obama administration today. Because these military actions have so affected American politics and the national economy, understanding them is crucial to an appreciation of America’s position in world affairs. They too have deep roots but were greatly accentuated by 9/11. Consider first Afghanistan.

Remote, impoverished and sparsely-populated, Afghanistan had traditionally been disputed between Tsarist Russia and Great Britain. It became important again because of the Cold War. The then Soviet Union had moved into the country to support a failing Communist government; in response, the nationalistic and religiously conservative Afghans had mounted an insurgency to drive out the Russians. And, sensing an opportunity to weaken the Soviets, an unlikely alliance of Americans, Pakistanis, and Saudi Arabians was formed. Each participant had its own objectives, but all used the ideological thrust of Islamic fundamentalism to achieve coherence and power. The result was success: the last Russian soldiers withdrew in defeat in 1989. But they left behind chaos.

Out of this chaos, emerged a new force, embodying the ideological thrust that the anti-Soviet coalition had found so essential – Islamic fundamentalism. That was the “religious scholars” or *Taliban* movement. It was with this movement that the architect of 9/11, Usama bin Ladin, associated himself.

Usama bin Ladin was not only a religious fundamentalist but also was an Arab nationalist who believed that the stationing of American troops in Saudi Arabia was both a religious crime and an act of imperialism. As we had done against the Soviets, he set out to weaken and so to drive away the Americans. Long before 9/11, the US government believed that he was involved in attacks on American installations, but it was, of course, 9/11 that galvanized efforts against him. And, since he had been given sanctuary in Afghanistan by its then ruling government, the Taliban, 9/11 gave the Bush administration both a reason and an excuse to invade Afghanistan. On October 7, 2001, American forces attacked.

Their assault was overwhelming: The Afghans had no defense against modern weapons. The Taliban government was quickly destroyed as some 5,000 Afghans were killed. However, neither the Taliban nor Bin Ladin were defeated: the Taliban reverted to a form of guerrilla warfare which continues to this day and Bin Ladin managed not only to survive but to inspire his movement from various hideaways until he was tracked down and killed on May 1, 2011.

Neither the defeat of the Taliban nor the death of Usama bin Ladin have brought an end to the American engagement. Today, a decade after the war began, the Obama administration remains committed to the war: America is spending over \$100 billion a year to maintain over 100,000 troops and even more mercenaries there. Not only is “victory” not in sight, but there is no sense of what victory might mean. No exit has been planned. In fact, there is speculation that American forces will remain for decades.

The war in Iraq came about from very different causes and produced different results. But, like Afghanistan, it has run a similar course.

After the Iraqis invaded Kuwait on August 2, 1990, America had fought one sharp but short war with Iraq in the administration of George W. Bush’s father. Then followed more than a decade of sanctions, aerial surveillance and occasional attacks designed to weaken the regime of Saddam Husain. To urge the public to support the war, the Iraqi regime was accused, wrongly as ultimately became clear, of attempting to build weapons of mass destruction. Finally, on March 20, 2003, the American assault began with a furious aerial bombardment

designed to “shock and awe” the Iraqis into surrender. In a campaign that lasted just three weeks, tens of thousands of Iraqi civilians and at least an equal number of Iraqi soldiers were killed and whole areas of the cities and towns were pulverized. On April 16, President Bush declared Iraq “liberated.”

But Iraq, like Afghanistan, devolved into a guerrilla war that cost the United States perhaps as much as \$3 trillion. Although victory was frequently proclaimed, the war proved to be unwinnable. President Obama is still maintaining 48,000 soldiers there. Although, this legacy of the Bush administration requires fewer soldiers and less expenditure than Afghanistan, it also has proven to be a strategic defeat. The war resulted in the rise of a state whose Shia Muslim leaders work in close accord with the fellow Shia Muslim country American officials see as their major Middle Eastern enemy, Iran.

Iran was earlier regarded as a linchpin of American Middle Eastern security and petroleum policy. So important was it believed to be that the Eisenhower administration had the CIA overthrow the democratically elected (but independently minded) government of Prime Minister Muhammad Mossadegh in 1952 and return to power the regime of the Shah. Through repressive actions similar to those of the current crop of Middle Eastern despots, the Shah brought about a revolution. He was chased from the country on January 16, 1976 by another Islamic fundamentalist movement that regarded his regime as an American puppet. Thus, a line was drawn – Iranian hostility to America and American hostility to Iran.

A series of ugly incidents followed: the staff of the American embassy were seized and held hostage in violation of diplomatic custom and the US Navy shot down an Iran Air passenger plane. These were the most dramatic of many confrontations, but all during the years of the Bush administration and continuing into the Obama administration, America has been engaged in threatening moves along the Iranian frontiers with occasional spill-overs into clandestine attacks.

The justification put forward for the hostility to Iran is the belief that it is working toward the development of nuclear weapons. This belief has been constantly reasserted despite the firmly set-forth and repeated findings of Western intelligence agencies and the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA), both during both Bush and Obama administrations, that Iran stopped its nuclear program a decade or perhaps longer ago. The charge that Iran is about to “go nuclear” has been used by the Obama administration to justify a new round of sanctions against the Iranian regime.

Why, one must ask, is the Obama administration so determinedly going

against its own expert advisers on this issue? And why has Israel so adamantly encouraged it?

The answer according to most specialists on Middle Eastern affairs – I among them – is that the nuclear issue is not at the heart of American-Israeli policy. America has come to terms with the acquisition of nuclear weapons by other powers for over half a century and indeed is often criticized for not doing enough to discourage their spread. Recently, it assisted India in the nuclear field although India is not allowing even the level of inspection of its facilities offered by Iran. Israel, as is well known, has itself been engaged for half a century in precisely the development and deployment of nuclear weapons that it accuses Iran of attempting to do. Indeed, unlike Iran (but like Pakistan and India) it has refused to sign the nuclear non-proliferation treaty and has kept its nuclear weapons program secret.

What appears to be a stronger motivation for Israeli policy is the Palestine issue. Just as it supported action against Saddam Husain because its strategists argued that so long as the Palestinian people on the West Bank and Gaza believed they might get support from a sympathetic state, they would keep resisting Israeli occupation and confiscation of their land, so, today, Israeli strategists see Iran as supporting resistance (from Hamas in Gaza), potential hostile action (from Hizbollah in Lebanon) and refusal of Syria to reach a peace accord over Israeli occupation of Syrian territory on the Golan Heights. Absent Iran, all of these centers of opposition to Israeli policy might collapse.

But most American strategic thinkers believe that the Israeli policy is highly detrimental to American interests. Many see Israel as the cause of terrorist attacks on America. Consequently, despite the deep involvement of Israel in American politics and the general American support for Israel, President Obama has repeatedly sought to distance the American government from at least some Israeli policies. In his latest encounter with Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, the President called for a peace based on the frontiers that existed before the 1967 Arab-Israeli war. His statement, to be sure, called for minor adjustments of frontiers but necessarily involved the removal of the nearly 700,000 Israeli settlers who have illegally taken over most of the West Bank. Mr. Obama's position is not new: it has been the proclaimed (if not actively pursued) policy of all previous American administrations. But, the Israel regime reacted furiously to Mr. Obama's declaration.

As a guest of the Republican Party opposition to President Obama, Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu went before the American Congress effectively to denounce the American policy and, by inference, President Obama. With the

Congressional audience well prepared by a barrage of propaganda and by a major campaign by Israeli supporters in their electoral districts, Mr. Netanyahu demonstrated a more impressive show of support than the President could have done. The net effect was two-fold: first, as a number of American journalists and others observed, the Israeli prime minister showed that he had more support in the American legislature than had the American president; and, second, Mr. Netanyahu argued for an aggressive American policy toward Iran. As a commentator in the Israeli newspaper *Maariv* remarked “those who are scared of peace yesterday got their wish. Those who are scared of war will be a lot more scared today.”

Whether or not the United States supports the Israeli threat to Iran, the Obama administration is already involved in what could be a new counterinsurgency war in Libya and Yemen and there is danger that it may be enticed into hostilities with Syria. Moreover, fears are being spread about competition, perhaps ultimately leading to war, with China. Indeed, what some analysts fear may be a state of perpetual war may loom ahead. Such a view of the future is promoted by a powerful body of opinion on the political right in America and is led by the movement that was so influential in the Bush administration, the neoconservatives.

Bolstering this movement is what President Dwight Eisenhower called “the military-industrial complex.” This alliance of military equipment manufacturers and the military establishment now controls well over half of the discretionary funds of the American government – a figure equivalent to military expenditures all the other nations of the world. Using their financial power, the arms manufacturers have built a powerful constituency in the American Congress and have convinced a large part of the public that any diminution of their role in the economy will lead to a depression. To underline this fear, the armaments industry, with the encouragement of the Defense Department, has diversified procurement of equipment so that in virtually every congressional electoral district there is a business whose owners – and workers – depend upon defense allocations.

“Allocations,” of course means the spending of money. And it is precisely the lack of money that is today most worrying to the Obama administration. The American economy is today underwritten by massive borrowing. The current American level of debt (over \$14 trillion and roughly equivalent to the Gross Domestic Product) is the highest in American history and much of current deficits of \$2 trillion is borrowed abroad with about \$1.5 trillion from Japan and China. The biggest burden is, of course, the military, a figure apparently impossible exactly to quantify but reasonably put (not including the military

components of NASA) at an overall total of over \$1.2 trillion. The Congress is unwilling to cut military outlays while being willing, even eager, to cut expenditures on education, health and other social programs and investment in basic infrastructure.

So the ultimate challenge ahead of the Obama administration – a challenge that almost certainly the President will not choose to address until after the 2012 elections – is getting America economically, politically and psychologically back on track.

It will be a close race.

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