



JAMES A. BAKER III INSTITUTE FOR PUBLIC POLICY
RICE UNIVERSITY

NINE YEARS LATER:
THE TRAGEDY OF SEPTEMBER 11, 2001

A HISTORIAN'S REFLECTION ON THE
NINTH ANNIVERSARY OF THE ATTACK

BY

DOUGLAS BRINKLEY, PH.D.

FELLOW IN HISTORY
JAMES A. BAKER III INSTITUTE FOR PUBLIC POLICY
RICE UNIVERSITY

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The Tragedy of September 11, 2001

*It was not a street anymore but a world,
a time and space of falling ash and near night.*

—Don DeLillo, *Falling Man* (2007)

Strange now to remember how we used to take the American flag for granted during the Cold War. It was omnipresent—even planted on the moon—but never truly appreciated as a banner of unity. Like good Americans, we would stand at attention and sing Francis Scott Key’s national anthem at ball games, use the flag as a podium prop in classrooms, or feel good about seeing the red, white, and blue displayed every Fourth of July. It was such a familiar icon, in fact, that tens of millions of Americans never bothered to think about it. It just *was*. There was something reassuring about seeing the flag wave above car dealerships and fast-food joints, but it offered no dazzle or meaning. It was a blasé symbol that life in the United States was business as usual.

All those sentiments evaporated on September 11, 2001, when two commercial jetliners crashed into the World Trade Center, one struck the Pentagon, and yet another burst into flames in a field near Shanksville, Pennsylvania. Thousands were killed in the most ghastly string of terrorist attacks in American history. As TVs across the land replayed footage of the destruction—smoke and ash rolling around in plumes and clouds in New York City—ad nauseam, psychic dismay blanketed households in all 50 states and beyond. Pensiveness engulfed the nation: everybody staring at the towers in despair. Scores of New Yorkers were fleeing from the crumbling towers, with garments over their mouths to limit inhalation of particulates. Scoundrels had punctured the post-Cold War myth of national security and geographical invincibility in just a few hours. The whole nation shook with sadness. Clearly, America would never be the same again. Harmony and naïveté had vanished. For a long, taut September day, we were paralyzed with fear and grief. Would there be more attacks? Was President George W. Bush asleep at the wheel? Our first instinct was to connect with loved ones to make sure they were safe. Telephone switchboards lit up like Christmas trees. If you knew anyone in New York or Washington, D.C., you were anxious for confirmation that they were out of harm’s way. Once that reassurance arrived, we all calmed down and wondered what to do next. That is when the miracle of America occurred.

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A transformative wave of post-9/11 patriotism, unseen since World War II, fanned out across the nation. There was a shared sense of belonging. As our confusion lifted and the dark cloud of hate dissipated, pride swelled inside our body politic and came bursting forth in the ubiquitous display of the star-spangled banner. Within hours, Walmarts and mom-and-pop stores sold out of flags. From closets, trunks, and garages, families dredged out Old Glory to fly in their front yards. Radio stations played Lee Greenwood's anthem "God Bless the USA" with pronounced regularity. Flag decals were slapped on car bumpers and office windows. Red, white, and blue ribbons were worn by even objective TV anchors.

The star-spangled banner was everywhere, filling up the variegated void. It felt almost unpatriotic not to be wearing or waving or singing about the flag. With these spontaneous eruptions of sentiment came the miracle: Overnight the gruesome images of the World Trade Center smoldering in ruin were countered by a blast of patriotism. Slogans like "United We Stand" and "God Bless America" appeared on billboards and T-shirts, with flags as their backdrop. The ever-so-familiar object spoke to our hearts, hopes, and aspirations. This was not a battle flag in the war against terrorism but a symbol of peace and unity in a world of chaos, a world gone wrong. It reminded Americans of past sacrifices, of George Washington's troops freezing at Valley Forge, of men losing limbs on Iwo Jima. History served as a great reminder that our times were not uniquely oppressive. John F. Kennedy's famous oration, "Ask not what your country can do for you but what you can do for your country," became the prevailing ethos as volunteerism flourished. Citizens queued up at Red Cross stations to give blood, eager college students signed up at their schools' ROTC offices, ready to help fight what President Bush called "the war on terror." In a novelty gesture, Great Plains farmers painted their livestock red, white, and blue. More than 16,000 citizens formed a human flag at Tucson Electric Park. Trucks roared down highways, flags waving from their antennas. People turned on their computers to find e-mail messages about duty, honor, country, and flag. Reminiscent of World War II, everyone understood that "we are all in this together."

And suddenly, in the midst of one of our nation's greatest tragedies—a tragedy beyond rational description—we felt good about ourselves. Words like *freedom* and *democracy* and *justice* flowed from our lips with revitalized conviction. Skyscrapers may have tumbled, but, as Key

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wrote during the War of 1812, “our flag was still there”—indeed everywhere. As tributes to our martyred dead proliferated, the postmaster general even issued a special American flag stamp to further remind us of our shared tradition. But once the immediate trauma of 9/11 was absorbed, a paroxysm of patriotism serving as the first response, citizens wanted answers. And revenge. Who committed this heinous crime? The shock of the 9/11 attacks consolidated the collective frustration at not being able to retaliate like we did after Pearl Harbor. As historian Lawrence Wright detailed in *The Looming Tower*—his brilliant, Pulitzer Prize-winning analysis of the rise of Al Qaeda during Clinton’s presidency—the backstory for the 9/11 attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon had its roots in the Clinton era. From 1993 to 2000, the world witnessed the growth of Islamic fundamentalism, the rise of Al Qaeda, and the breakdown of CIA intelligence gathering. Because Bush had only been president a little over seven months, it was hard to place blame for 9/11 squarely on his new administration (although it *did* happen on his watch). During the first months of 2001, FBI counterterrorism chief John O’Neill had been hot on the heels of Osama bin Laden and Ayman al-Zawahiri, but he came up short. Technology was only so helpful when running down a stateless enemy. After all, U.S. Predator drones didn’t know how to kill an enemy who lives in the mountainous caves of Afghanistan’s Tora Bora region, which is still unmapped by Google Earth. Nevertheless, U.S. intelligence had intercepted 34 bin Laden (or associates) communications that summer, some creepily indicating “zero hour is tomorrow” and that “something spectacular is coming.”

In a sense, America *had* been pre-warned. CIA director George Tenet had taken those warnings seriously after the bin Laden terrorist bombings of the U.S. embassies in Kenya and Tanzania in 1998 killed over 200 people, but he was something of a lone voice in government. “Before 9/11, bin Laden and his followers had been beset by vivid dreams,” Wright recalled. “Normally, after the dawn prayers, if a member of Al Qaeda had a dream during the night, he would recount it, and bin Laden would divine its meaning. People who knew nothing of the plot reported dreams of planes hitting a tall building.”

And hit a tall building Al Qaeda did—two tall buildings and the Pentagon for good measure. At first, the death toll from the 9/11 attacks was estimated by the media to be over 5,000. It wasn’t that high, but when the victims’ bodies were properly counted, the death toll was greater than

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that at Pearl Harbor in December 1941. At the World Trade Center alone, 2,602 people died. Another 246 were murdered aboard the four hijacked planes, and 125 others were killed at the Pentagon. Heroically, New York City firefighters tried to save lives by rushing into the World Trade Center inferno, only to find themselves engulfed in flames. A total of over 425 first responders died in the 9/11 tragedy. Congress immediately authorized billions of dollars to tighten security at airports, stadiums, schools, and hospitals. America was under siege.

President Bush's September 11 had started out mundanely. Awakening at the White House early, he flew to a tennis resort in Longboat Key, Florida. He then went for a quick jog. Once showered, Bush received a CIA briefing, largely about Middle Eastern affairs. From the resort, Bush headed to a Sarasota elementary school event designed to promote his educational agenda. It was while reading "The Pet Goat" to second graders that news of the terrorist attack was whispered into the president's ear by his adviser Andrew Card. The time was 8:46 a.m. Although slow to respond, and determined to finish "The Pet Goat," Bush eventually left the school and ordered Air Force One to fly first to Louisiana and then to Omaha, Nebraska (as requested by the Secret Service). If America was under attack, the president had to be protected. POTUS—as the U.S. president is known by the Secret Service—had to be kept out of harm's way. It wasn't yet known if Washington, D.C., had been contaminated with biological or chemical agents. Nobody knew how many more terrorist attacks were yet to occur. Misinformation was rampant. Clearly, the president's life might be in jeopardy. "Immediately following the first attack," Bush told the country in a televised speech, "I implemented our government's emergency response plans."

Putting emergency response plans into action during a crisis was certainly President Bush's primary post-9/11 response. But as the facts emerged, it became clear that Bush had not paid attention to FBI information presented to him in August, information that strongly suggested that an Al Qaeda terrorist attack was imminent. The daily briefing on August 6, 2000, for example, had the unsubtle title "Bin Laden Determined to Strike U.S." In fact, the FBI report claimed that since Al Qaeda had bombed the U.S. embassies in 1998, "a pattern of suspicious activity in this country consistent with preparations for hijacking or other types of attacks, including recent surveillance of federal buildings in New York," had been speeding up. For all of his bully-boy

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talk, Bush had been oblivious to just how dangerous Al Qaeda really was. It was as if the U.S. government had institutionalized failure in dealing with Al Qaeda.

Initially, Bush was in a state of disbelief. He wanted to believe that the plane crashing into the World Trade Center was an accident: “My first reaction was—as an old pilot—how could the guy have gotten so off course to hit the towers?” Former White House chief of staff Andrew Card recalled thinking that the pilot must have had a heart attack. Meanwhile, Americans were glued to their TV sets, watching in horror as the second plane—Flight 175—hit the South Tower of the World Trade Center. At 9:39 a.m., American Airlines Flight 77, a Boeing 757, crashed into the Pentagon in kamikaze fashion, pulverizing the northern façade of the building. Somebody had masterminded an unprecedented attack on America. Bush counterterrorism “tsar” Richard Clarke was given the green light to authorize the Air Force to shoot down any potentially threatening aircraft that ventured into American airspace.

With U.S. forces placed on high alert, Bush received a telephone call from Russian president Vladimir Putin. “In the past . . . had the President put the—raised the—DEFCON levels of our troops, Russia would have responded accordingly,” Bush later recalled. “There would have been inevitable tension.” Therefore Bush, looking for a silver lining on the worst day of his life, described the phone call as “a moment where it clearly said to me, [President Putin] clearly understands the Cold War is over.” To his everlasting credit, Putin followed up with a telegram: “The series of barbaric terrorist acts, directed against innocent people, has evoked our anger and indignation . . . The whole international community must rally in the fight against terrorism.”

It was Senator Orrin Hatch (R-UT), a member of both the Senate intelligence and judiciary committees, who first publicly declared that Al Qaeda was responsible for the loathsome deed. His remarks were somewhat ominous. After being briefed by both the FBI and CIA, Hatch told the American public that the hard-eyed Osama bin Laden was the culprit. Only a crazy, evil fanatic like bin Laden would use hijacked commercial airlines as weapons of mass destruction. By 1:00 p.m., Secretary of Defense Rumsfeld told Bush, “This is not a criminal action. This is war.” Astutely, the *Washington Times* noted that “Rumsfeld’s instant declaration of war . . . took

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America from the Clinton administration's view to one that terrorism was a global enemy to be destroyed.”

While Bush spent most of September 11 in Nebraska, at Offutt Air Force Base (our nuclear weapons command post), by late afternoon he headed back to Washington, D.C. Patriotism is anchored in deeds and Bush knew it. He was determined to address America from the White House, promising justice for the heinous attacks *soon*. Upon arriving in Washington on Air Force One (code-named Angel and on Al Qaeda's 9/11 hit list), the president asked to be whisked to the Pentagon for a secret meeting. The press never caught wind of it. According to Deputy Secretary of Defense Gordon England, a strong and in-command Bush told him, “Get ready, get ready. This is going to be a long war.”

From the secret Pentagon meeting, Bush headed to the White House. At 8:30 p.m., he had his third speech of the day. Destroying Al Qaeda was a policy objective he was duty-bound to achieve. “I've directed the full resources of our intelligence and law enforcement communities to find those responsible and bring them to justice,” he said from the Oval Office. And then, in a line that brought joy to the neoconservatives itching for a war with Iraq, the president flatly stated, “We will make no distinctions between the terrorists who committed these acts and those who harbor them.” A tough tone was set for the Bush administration's retaliatory approach. Democracy was going to shake the world. As Bush speechwriter David Frum noted, “When [Bush] laid down those principles, I don't know whether he foresaw all of their implications, how far they would take him. I don't know if he understood fully and foresaw fully the true radicalism of what he had just said.”

Any of the distraction Bush exhibited while reading “The Pet Goat” in Florida had vanished. With quick-draw firmness, his policy response was both primal and correct: get Al Qaeda. His vigilance in this regard was uncompromising. The public could almost feel the scepter in his clenched fist. Due to 9/11, the compassionate conservative had metamorphosed into a revenge-seeking hawk. There was one central problem, however. According to CIA director Tenet, Al Qaeda and the Taliban were essentially one entity. With Secretary of State Colin Powell, the administration moderate, stuck on a diplomatic mission in Peru, the neocons won out. Reflexive

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action prevailed over prudence. Just that week, in fact, *Time* had published a cover headline titled “Where Have You Gone, Colin Powell?” It was an analysis of how the hard-line conservatives had frozen Powell out of the main game. One of the most important U.S. foreign policy decisions ever had been made, and the secretary of state hadn’t even been properly consulted.

What shocked Americans most was how well-coordinated the 9/11 attacks were. To say that they were brazen is a gross understatement. It was a terrifying strike. Somehow nobody had considered that Al Qaeda was capable or willing to hijack planes in flight and crash them into buildings. With all American airspace suddenly shut down on September 11, it felt like the United States itself was being held hostage. After winning the Cold War, how had this become America’s folly and fate? The problem President Bush faced was this: who exactly to declare war on? The obvious choice was Afghanistan. That country’s Taliban regime had been, in effect, bankrolling Al Qaeda. Even more disturbing, Pakistan’s intelligence service, the ISI, had a huge stake in keeping the Taliban in power. It was painfully clear that the Taliban and Al Qaeda were practically one and the same. Yet carpet bombing Afghanistan was a tough proposition. The nation was almost as large as California, with primitive infrastructure and only a few paved roads. The Al Qaeda sanctuaries were in unmapped caves, and Al Qaeda was also operating in over 60 other countries. How could the United States manage to ferret out a faceless enemy scattered all across the globe?

While Americans tried to make sense of the tragedy, the White House started covertly blaming the Clinton administration for emboldening bin Laden. Bush believed that in 1998, when the U.S. embassies in Kenya and Tanzania were bombed, the chameleonic Clinton responded too tepidly. By not snuffing out bin Laden, Clinton virtually invited Al Qaeda to attack us again. “The antiseptic notion of launching a cruise missile into some guy’s, you know, tent, really is a joke,” Bush said. “I mean, people viewed that as the impotent America . . . a flaccid, you know, kind of technologically competent but not very tough country that was willing to launch a cruise missile out of a submarine and that’d be it . . . I do believe there is the image of America out there that we are so materialistic, that we don’t have values, and that when struck, we wouldn’t fight back. It was clear bin Laden felt emboldened and didn’t feel threatened by the United States.”

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Yet for all of Bush's post-9/11 tough talk, a central historical question remained: Why didn't the Bush administration go after Al Qaeda more fiercely during his first seven months in office? In an interview with journalist Bob Woodward, Bush admitted that to some degree his administration had been negligent. In hindsight, he should have had his national security team develop a more aggressive plan from day one. "There was a significant difference in my attitude after September 11," he said. "I was not on point, but I knew he was a menace, and I knew he was a problem. I knew he was responsible, or we felt he was responsible, for the [previous] bombings that killed Americans. I was prepared to look at a plan that would be a thoughtful plan that would bring him to justice, and would have given the order to do that. I have no hesitancy about going after him. But I didn't feel that sense of urgency, and my blood was not nearly as boiling."

September 11 was a day of miserable memories for Americans. For all the heroics exhibited that day by New York firemen and police, the central lesson was that homeland security was a myth. Quick decisions were made to erect monuments to the stricken in Washington, D.C., New York, and Pennsylvania. Arguments ensued over what colored pencils would be used to sketch the architectural designs of these important structures. Accomplishing even this proved maddeningly complex. Nobody knew exactly what to do with the smoldering ruins near Wall Street. Some Americans wanted it to be designated a national battlefield site. Others thought a new Twin Towers should be constructed to demonstrate America's defiance in the face of global terrorists. Nine years after the attacks, how to develop Ground Zero is still open to vigorous debate.

On September 14, 2001, President Bush returned to Lower Manhattan to inspect the rubble of the World Trade Center. New Yorkers cheered for him as he struck the pose of a sheriff-like agent of revenge. Scores of firemen, policemen, and other disaster officials gathered around the president to hear his speech from Ground Zero. Because of all the street commotion, Bush's faint voice was hard to make out in the back rows. A few "We can't hear you" cries were shouted from the audience. A defiant Bush grabbed a bullhorn and became triumphantly emphatic. "I can hear you!" he said. "The rest of the world hears you! And the people who knocked down those buildings will hear all of us soon!" Wild shouts of "USA!" echoed through the crowd. Bush had struck a crowd-pleasing nerve. The widespread feeling was that America's enemies would soon

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be brought to their knees. There would be a row. A neoconservative shakeup was the order of the day. The Bush administration was in a pugilistic eye-for-an-eye mode.

Before the attacks of September 11, 2001, the foreign policy of President Bush, not yet distinguished by any defining initiative, was moving steadily in the direction of isolationism. During his first nine months in office, Bush made clear his intention to move the country away from—or entirely out of—a number of international treaties and military obligations. Indeed, early on George W. Bush discouraged hope for U.S. participation in the Kyoto Protocol, the environmental treaty directed specifically at the curtailment of global warming. His secretary of defense, Donald Rumsfeld, indicated that American troop strength in Europe would be reduced, despite protests from affected nations like Germany. The president himself shocked the international community by suggesting that the United States was planning a complete withdrawal from the Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty (originally signed in 1972 and regarded as a bulwark in the effort to reduce nuclear armaments). He also stood far back from Middle East peace negotiations, long a prime obligation for both Republican and Democratic presidents. In steering his own course, Bush announced that his administration would only engage itself in Middle East peace talks if both Israel and the Palestinians exhibited a realistic sense of diplomatic momentum on their own. The Bush White House simply wasn't going referee the bitter dispute à la Jimmy Carter or Bill Clinton.

In the aftermath of 9/11, Bush's attitude toward all things related to the Middle East stiffened notably. His stock character became that of an exterminator. A newfound vulnerability rose up in him. Claiming that America had been thrust into "a global war," Bush put America on high alert for another terrorist attack. Foreign affairs and domestic security became the administration's top priorities. In this regard, his administration continued to be a strikingly independent one, in a blatant departure from the multilateralism of his immediate predecessors (including his father). In some respects, Bush would remain isolationist in his outlook, even in the midst of the retaliation demanded in the post-9/11 world. In other ways, he was neo-Wilsonian, claiming that the world needed to be coerced into becoming democratic. Spurning bipartisanship, Bush's first eight months in the White House were an attempt at a radical reorganization of U.S. foreign policy principles.

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Although President Bush's cool indifference toward the United Nations (UN) before 9/11 distanced him from the world community, the gulf was largely forgotten in the aftermath of the attacks, when the vast majority of nations extended sympathy for the tragedy. For example, Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo, president of the Philippines, spoke eloquently about the horror of Al Qaeda-sponsored terrorism. "All humanity is diminished," she said. Queen Elizabeth II of Great Britain expressed her "growing disbelief and total shock." More surprising, nations with a tradition of animosity toward the United States laid aside their differences in the face of violence against civilians in Washington, D.C., New York, and Pennsylvania. "It's our humane duty to stand side-by-side with the American people despite our political conflict," Colonel Muammar al-Gadhafi of Libya said, calling the attacks "terrible." Fidel Castro was also moved to sympathy. His government issued an immediate statement condemning the attacks and expressing "its sincerest condolences to the American people for the painful and unjustifiable loss of human life."

The "Kumbaya" moment of post-9/11 world sympathy for America passed quickly. Perhaps this was inevitable. Nevertheless, a warrior-like President Bush refused to deviate from his "with us or against us" course as he turned America into a superlative martyr. In terms of policy, he seemed dismissive of the UN and NATO. He focused almost exclusively on protecting the United States from another terrorist strike. This overarching objective allowed him to spin any proposed U.S. policy as a righteous one. As "the only remaining superpower," the United States was still in the process of defining itself in the post-Cold War era in which Communism was no longer a formative element in U.S. foreign relations. With the breakup of the Soviet Union and the opening of China to market capitalism, Bush had inherited no serious enemies among nations. Unlike Clinton, he didn't even feel obliged to work with NATO allies to spread democracy in Eastern Europe. He responded to the global outpouring of post-9/11 sympathy in crisply diplomatic terms. "I thank the many world leaders who have called to offer their condolences and assistance," he said, but then switched to a harsher tone that would become the basis for his subsequent foreign-policy stance and the impetus for the basic philosophy known as the Bush Doctrine. "We will make no distinction," Bush said, "between the terrorists who committed these acts and those who harbor them." The statement indicated precisely how the

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“war on terror,” as the Bush administration termed its wide-reaching response to the 9/11 attacks, would differ from all wars in U.S. history.

In the past, America’s adversaries were other nations. The early twenty-first century, though, saw the rise of groups with international political agendas but without specific geographical bases or diplomatic recognition. In the developed world, there were NGOs (nongovernmental organizations) like Greenpeace, Amnesty International, and the Simon Wiesenthal Center that took advantage of advances in technology—especially in Web-based communications—to transform themselves from being what many regarded as inconsequential, fringe, or splinter groups into influential and powerful entities. Ironically, Al Qaeda operates with a similar model, recruiting members across borders and using technology to coordinate training, planning, and action.

Early reports linked the heavily armed, radical Islamist coalition to the attacks of September 11, 2001. American intelligence reports indicated that Al Qaeda’s leaders, including its founder, Osama bin Laden, had been given sanctuary in the mountains of Afghanistan along Pakistan’s border. On the day of the 9/11 attacks, Afghanistan’s Taliban leadership made a weak response to that insinuation, leading some observers to question whether the Taliban would even know whether bin Laden or anyone else was operating in the loosely organized, and very rugged, country.

As America commemorates the ninth anniversary of the 9/11 attacks, Bush’s dead-or-alive order for bin Laden is still being posted by the Obama administration. This manhunt has remained a central U.S. policy priority—for both Republicans and Democrats alike—since that fateful day.