

## American Forgetting

Instead of expanding, we contracted. Instead of a new juncture, we retreated to old ways. It's all there at the construction site.

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At the construction project that has replaced the site of one of America's greatest national traumas, there is a sign with the telephone number of the Port Authority police "in case of an emergency." This would be ironic were it not so sad. Everything about the enormous urban square where the World Trade Center once stood, once burned, once fell, is terribly sad because it has been so sanitized. THIS IS A SPECIAL PLACE, says one small sign on the construction fence, but there's no sign that that's true. Everything has been done to make it seem ordinary. Girders, cranes, gravel, hard hats—it looks no different from the places nearby where luxury condos rise. THINK BACK. MOVE FORWARD. IT'S TIME reads a billboard that has the unmistakable odor of ad agency. Americans like history as long as it's over fast enough.

Six years ago there was a moment. How long did it last? Long enough to seem indelible and authentic. After the greatest terrorist attacks on U.S. soil and the deaths of nearly 3,000 people in New York, Washington and a field in Pennsylvania, there was a moment when it seemed that the sheer scale of the event would evoke a response of answering enormity, in thought, in action and in behavior.

That is not what happened.

Instead we launched a war, a cheap bait-and-switch by an administration that figured it could simply replace one Middle Eastern bad guy with another in the public mind, trade an Osama bin Laden card for a Saddam Hussein. Our so-called leaders knew that the most terrifying thing about a War on Terror was that it was a war without borders, nationality or country. They decided to pretend otherwise by invading Iraq. Today it may be that things are better in one part of that country, not so good in others, but the bottom line is that there remains no compelling reason why the United States should ever have invaded in the first place, and certainly none that can be linked to the events of September 11.

Six years along, and there is little evidence that the intelligence apparatus of the nation is much better than it was on Sept. 12, 2001, when pay-phone messages picked up two days earlier that said "The match begins tomorrow" and "Tomorrow is zero hour" were finally translated. Entrenched government bureaucracies, a resistance to and ignorance of new technology, and a lack of communication among agencies still remain. With so many fiefdoms, programs and initiatives—and so little overarching leadership—it is hard to tell what has improved. But intelligence wonks suspect that if there were another attack, the discussions about our shortcomings would be remarkably similar to those we heard in 2001.

Instead of trying to understand and therefore counter the mind-set of those who hate us, and to rally our allies in their communities, American jingoism has produced an ugly strain of anti-Muslim thought and

chatter. That has hampered intelligence gathering, since Arab-Americans are loath to cooperate with government agents who solicit them as sources but treat them as suspect. Such suspicion has broadened to encompass other newcomers; the most reliable wedge issue in this country is now immigration. Government focus has been on rote oversight of visitors from other countries, a scattershot course that is no more likely to deter terrorism than taking off your shoes at the airport does. It does, however, sometimes deter foreign-born doctors from being able to work in poor and rural areas that have been neglected, and foreign graduate students from attending American universities and doing the research here they have in the past.

There was a moment when it seemed that what had happened to this nation would result in an unparalleled display of those things that make America great: audacity, community, a sense of the future as a broad plain upon which this country could make its mark for good. Instead, at almost every turn, our government and, yes, many of our citizens took the narrowest road. Instead of expanding, we contracted. Instead of a new juncture, we retreated to old ways.

It's all there at the construction site. Tourists peer through the fence, but it's hard to understand what they think they're seeing. Everything that once spoke of the magnitude of the events of September 11 is gone. As much as its jagged smoking ruins were once a symbol for unparalleled disaster, now its bland expanse is a symbol of how narrow and parsimonious the long-term response has been. It's business as usual there, except for one small section of the fence with a listing of the names of those who died in letters so small that you almost have to squint to read them. Remember how we said we would never forget them? We forgot them. If the spirit of the day had prevailed, the sense that this was a moment like no other and demanded a gesture in kind, someone would have had the guts to leave this national graveyard solemn, empty and still. Instead there is a sign there that says that the job now is "to recover the 10 million-sq. feet of commercial space lost in the attacks." How American. It's all about the real estate.

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