

How Has American Life Changed since September 11?

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Abstract

The changes in America since the attacks of 9/11 have included some unfortunate developments. I briefly discuss twelve: less tolerance for dissent, threats to civil liberties, neglect of social problems, incompetence of America's critical infrastructure, the policies of pre-emption and lack of regard for world opinion, the righteous and simplistic use of the rhetoric of evil to demonize others, the rise of a new American imperialism, American tolerance of state-initiated violence on the part of Israel, the role of American fundamentalist Christians in welcoming violence in the Middle East, the undue influence of American corporations on government policies, the rising costs of American unilateral action, and an increase in hate crimes in America against people from the Middle East.

It is time for Americans to speak out and stop the unilateral and unethical actions of our government and to demand that our leaders respect world opinion.

Introduction

On March 9, 2003, I gave a talk at a public program of the Smithsonian's National Museum of American History in Washington, DC in connection with their exhibit, "September 11: Bearing Witness to History." You can view some of the exhibit at www.americanhistory.si.edu/september11 and I recommend that you take a look. It is a chronicle about the attack on America of September 11, 2001, and I was deeply moved and humbled by it.

Viewing it, I remembered watching the aircraft on television, over and over again, hitting the second tower of the World Trade Center; people jumping from the burning buildings; the collapse, first of one tower and then the second; and the clouds of pulverized concrete, the smoke and chaos; I remembered the hurt and bruised people; the heroic firemen, policemen, ambulance teams, and other rescuers.

I remembered, too, the disbelief and the shock, the feelings of grief for the victims. I felt anger and rage at the "monsters" who carried out these "unspeakable" acts of violence. And I remembered the questions: Who did these things? Why did they do them? What in the world did they hope to accomplish?

The Smithsonian exhibit gives accounts of the searing events of 9/11, but it gives even more. It has become a living testament to how 9/11 has changed American lives, then and now, and perhaps forever. Each visitor to the exhibit is asked, "How has your life changed because of September 11, 2001?" Hundreds of thousands of people have answered and are still answering—often in heartbreaking detail. A September 11 Digital Archive, headquartered at George Mason University, has been established for the preservation and analysis of these testimonials.

In the talk that I gave on March 9th—and in this essay—I try to answer a similar question, not about my

personal life but about American society. I am deeply troubled by my observations, because they are largely negative. I am troubled, too, because I cannot forget the victims of 9/11 and their families. I have no wish to hurt them further by critical remarks; indeed, I wish to honor them. Yet the spirit of America can only be truly served by trying to seek the truth. Since 9/11, American society, regrettably, has not changed for the better.

Here, I give a dozen changes that may give many of us cause for concern [and I have added a few comments since March 19, 2003 when America's full-scale attack on Iraq began]:

Some Changes in America Since September 11, 2001

First, there is today **less tolerance** among Americans for dissenting views concerning our foreign policy. We hear some Americans calling others "anti-American" or "unpatriotic," because they have expressed critical remarks about the Administration's actions—especially the threats to attack Iraq. [After the attack on Iraq began, intolerance increased. To take an example close to home, Yale University student Katherine Lo hung an American flag upside-down as an anti-war symbol of America in distress. Several "young men broke into her suite and wrote messages on her bulletin board saying Iraqis and Muslims should be killed." (Beach 2003).]

Let us remember that Thomas Jefferson said that it is the duty of citizens to be critical of their government, because nothing can keep it right except their own vigilant and distrustful supervision (Berry 2003).

Second, our government has moved toward creation of a "**total surveillance society**," some would say a police state, here in America (Liptak 2002). The Homeland Security Act, the USA Patriot Act, the Total Information Awareness Program, and the Domestic Security Enhancement Act, all recently enacted or proposed, threaten civil liberties in the United States. Even well known conservatives, such as William Safire and Dick Army, have spoken out against these abuses to the American system of justice. After going to press, the Total Information Awareness

Program was withdrawn and the Domestic Security Enhancement Act (also known as Patriot Act II) did not pass, both proposals having met considerable resistance. Provisions from each, however, remain on the agenda of some members of the Bush administration.

The American justice system is under attack, with people being held without access to lawyers, sometimes in secret detention with their hearings closed to the public, and sometimes without being formally charged with a crime. Suspects have been prosecuted for providing material support for potential future acts of terrorism, rather than for having taken part in an actual attack. And "members of Congress who try to question Attorney General John Ashcroft about such policies are either ignored or accused of aiding the enemy" (*The New York Times* April 20, 2003, p. WK8). Secret warrants to search people's homes can today be obtained with minimal judicial oversight.

Let us remember that Benjamin Franklin said that those who would trade liberty for security will find neither.

Third, the terrorist alerts and the preparation for an attack on Iraq [and then the war itself] have **distracted** us from many other problems. These neglected problems include the continuing battles for clean air to breathe and water to drink, safe food to eat, unpolluted land, preventing global warming and other threats to the life-sustaining capacities of the Earth. They include long-term funding for social security and Medicare, ensuring a thriving economy, making educational reforms, continuing support for basic research, and protecting us from corporate crime and executive theft. Also neglected are the efforts to break our addiction to oil, to commit to conserving energy, and to develop energy systems based on renewable resources and hydrogen.

All of these issues have been pushed from the center of attention in America. For example, the Bush administration has changed environmental policies by quietly settling many lawsuits. The results have been, to mention only a few, to remove wilderness protections for millions of acres in Utah, to reduce protections for endangered species, to reverse a Clinton-era ban on

snowmobiles in Yellowstone and Grand Teton national parks and road building in remote forest areas, and to soften rules on logging (*New Haven Register*, April 20, 2003, p. A11). Additionally, the Bush administration, in the Orwellian tradition of "Newspeak," has called the plan to allow more emissions from power plants "Clear Skies." Meanwhile, methylmercury levels in fish, partly attributable to such emissions, increasingly endanger the health of consumers (Natural Resources Defense Council 2003).

Make no mistake about it. Americans are at much more certain risk from inadequate attention to some of these domestic issues than they are from foreign terrorists. To take only one example, in the United States a person is killed in a motor vehicle accident every 13 minutes, for a total of about 38,000 deaths per year, and hundreds of thousands of people are injured (National Highway Traffic Safety Administration 2000). [By 2002, traffic-related deaths had increased to 42,850.] Many of these deaths and injuries are preventable by redesigning highways, including entrances and exits, redesigning vehicles, and fully enforcing traffic laws, especially speed limits.

The personal safety of Americans depends on adequate responses to these and other domestic challenges, which we now face with more than a trillion dollar loss in the American economy and federal deficits of \$300 billion or more a year.

Fourth, we have been made aware of **incompetence and routine mistakes** of our critical infrastructure. The FBI was found to have a pervasive inattention to security (Perrow 2002: 7). Fake driver's licenses are easily acquired and seldom detected. Information about two suspected hijackers was available to the CIA, FBI, and the Immigration and Naturalization Service, but was not acted on. "Repeatedly, tests of security at nuclear power plants show huge flaws, with promises of remedial action that never remediates" (Perrow 2002: 7). Years before 9/11 the Transportation Department publicized the failure of airport security. Investigators routinely carried fake bombs and weapons into airports and onto aircraft. Today, American seaports remain inadequately protected, as do the hun-

dreds of trains that run through American cities each day. The list goes on and on.

Although we are now making progress in correcting some of these mistakes and vulnerabilities, preparing for war on Iraq has taken funds and attention from building what ought to be the first line of America's home defense [and the war and its aftermath will take away huge additional sums].

Fifth, in the international community, the United States is starting to behave in ways that Americans abhor in others, like a **rogue state**. After 9/11, many Americans felt an understandable hatred for the terrorists and an urge to strike back at the perpetrators with all our might. But some Americans apparently view 9/11 as a license to kill and to act without restraint or concern for international law.

Even President Bush, for example, issued orders for the assassination of "terrorist leaders." This amounts to the murder of persons who have had no trial or legal review of their crimes and it accepts none of the responsibility that would come with a formal declaration of war, including adhering to the Geneva conventions (Beeman 2002).

Instead of focusing all our energies on capturing the elusive perpetrators of 9/11, we attacked the accessible Afghanistan, killing not only combatants but also more than 1,000 civilians, so far. At the same time we doled out foot-high stacks of \$100 bills—20 stacks to the million-to tyrannical warlords (Woodward 2002).

Although I am delighted that we have captured as many alleged al Qaeda members as we have, including Khalid Shaikh Mohammed, think how many more we could have apprehended if we had not diverted time, money, and effort preparing for war on Iraq (Hart 2003) [and then attacking Iraq and taking on the responsibility for reconstruction].

Yet there is no credible evidence that Iraq had anything to do with the attack on America of 9/11. [As I write, some administration spokesmen and journalists challenge this assertion, by citing reports of contacts between the Iraqi government and terrorists, including bin Laden. But such reports fail to support the conclusion that Iraq and terrorists were conspiring together in

the 9/11 attack on America, anymore than would past contacts between Iraqi leaders, including Saddam Hussein himself, and Americans, such as Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld, prove that they were conspiring together.]

The truth is that Osama bin Laden viewed Saddam Hussein as an enemy of Islam. Thus, Saddam Hussein, despite his undoubted venality, is [or was] the wrong target in American efforts to bring the terrorists to justice. (Do not forget that none of the 19 hijackers of 9/11 was Iraqi.) (Mearsheimer and Walt 2003).

In September 2002, the White House published a new National Security Strategy that proposes policies of pre-emption, "**striking first** wherever danger breeds, and **acting alone**, if necessary" (Berry 2003). (Bold added.) Following these policies, the United States shows its disdain for the world community and declares itself to be above the law (Blum 2000; Fischer and Galtung 2002; Johnson 2000).

Sixth, since 9/11, American leaders and media have bombarded us with the **rhetoric of evil**. "This is a new kind of evil," President Bush said, "and we will rid the world of evil-doers." Viewing the world as a struggle between good and evil is not helpful. It is simplistic and explains nothing (Bell 2000). Instead of an analysis of the causes of human action, it is mere name-calling.

Worse, it has become a justification for our American terror against them. It demonizes the Other, and, because, according to this view, it is our duty to destroy evil, it urges us to bring death and destruction to the "evil" others, while believing that we are doing the right thing. As we Americans act on such a view, we transform ourselves from victims to evil perpetrators.

If you think that this is too harsh a judgment, put your fear and hate aside and listen carefully to bin Laden himself, because he is the mirror image of the same process (Perlman 2002). In his mind, he and his cause are good and the Palestinians and others in the Islamic world are victims, while, to him, it is America that is the evil empire.

But his simplistic and wrong-headed beliefs about good and evil, obviously, give him no

moral right to kill, just as Americans' simplistic and wrong-headed beliefs about good and evil give us no moral right to kill either.

Seventh, the rise to power of the New American Century group is now clearly evident. To put it bluntly, now that the Cold War is over, its members want the United States, among other things, to substitute the mission of **world domination** for the containment of Communism.

See www.newamericancentury.org/.

Apparently believing that the United Nations and other institutions of global governance are hopelessly ineffective, they are proposing a new kind of American imperialism (Elshtain 2003). My fear is that such aggressive American action, even-perhaps especially-with the good intentions of nation building, could lead to endless war and, eventually, to chaos.

I am reminded of George Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (p. 194): "The two aims of the Party are to conquer the whole surface of the earth and to extinguish once and for all the possibility of independent thought."

Eighth, Israeli military aggressions against Palestinians became more blatant and, because of 9/11 and the subsequent war on terrorism, many Americans, including our government, failed to condemn them.

There remains an urgent need for peace there, for the sake both of Israelis and Palestinians to be sure, but also to help promote cooperative and peaceful relations between Muslims and non-Muslims throughout the world. Moreover, because of America's lopsided role-arming and often tilting toward Israel-the lack of peace there makes any American presence in the Muslim world a possible source of controversy and conflict.

The United States ought to consider the proposals of the Jewish Alliance for Justice and Peace (aka *Brit Tzedek v'Shalom*), an American-Jewish group, for securing peace between Jews and Palestinians:

1. Return Israel to the 1967 borders.
2. Create a Palestinian state alongside Israel.
3. Recognize Jerusalem as the capital of both states.
4. Resolve the question of Palestinian

refugees.

5. Evacuate Israeli settlements now in the occupied territories.
6. Terminate state-initiated violence and terrorism.
7. Urge the United States government to pursue a foreign policy toward the region based on these principles (*New Haven Register*, November 18, 2002, p. A3).

Ninth, the role of American fundamentalist Christians in welcoming violence in the Middle East (especially between Israel and Palestine) has become a thorn in the side of peace negotiations. These American evangelicals believe that some biblical end-of-time violent upheaval and Judgment Day is coming-and many wish to hasten it into reality. They believe that the armies of Satan will cross the Tigris and Euphrates bent on evil destruction, but that Jesus will return and destroy them, ushering in a thousand-year reign of Christ (Boyer 2002). The attack on America of 9/11 has led these groups to believe that these events are imminent and it has agitated expectation and action among them.

Many of them also believe that the United Nations represents an evil one-world government prophesied in the Book of Revelation. Hence, they see the UN not only as a threat to the rightful national sovereignty of the United States, but also as an instrument of Satan. They believe, additionally, that Islam is a false religion and are often outspoken about it. And, despite their support of Israeli aggression, they believe that Jews, if they are to be saved when Judgment Day comes, must convert to Christianity.

Obviously, these are troubling obstacles to peace and global institutions, especially if these fundamentalist Christians have any influence on American foreign policy, which, unfortunately, they appear to have at the present time.

Tenth, the greed and cronyism in the American corporate world have become increasingly apparent, as large contracts are being written for transforming public monies into private wealth during the coming reconstruction of Iraq. [Before the official start of the war, Halliburton Co. was already under contract to control fires and repair damage in the Iraqi oil

fields. On April 18, 2003, it was announced that the U.S. government awarded the Bechtel Corporation a contract that could reach \$680 million to help rebuild Iraq, including the nation's power, water, and sewage systems (*New Haven Register*, April 18, 2003, p. E4).]

[The details of many of these contracts are not available to the public because they have been classified in the name of national security. Many were not put out for competitive bids. Moreover, the numbers of top government employees, both civilian and military, who have left government and now are employed directly or indirectly by the corporations and companies receiving these government contracts serve to remind us of the enormous and growing power of the military-industrial complex in America, about which former President Dwight D. Eisenhower warned us when he left office.]

[I sincerely hope that my colleague, David E. Apter (2003), is wrong in his judgment that we may be witnessing a right wing coup d'etat in the United States.]

Eleventh, we have become increasingly aware of the costs of unilateral action. Yale economist William Nordhaus estimates the direct costs of war with Iraq at between \$50 billion and \$150 billion. Taking into account rebuilding Iraq after the war and the effects on the economy, he estimates the costs in a worst-case scenario could go as high as \$2 trillion. [After reviewing several estimates, Michael Marien (2003) concludes that the total cost of the war in Iraq will be between \$127 and \$682 billion].

But, of course, these figures do not include the human costs of the war, the lives lost, the suffering and despair.

Twelfth, hate crimes in the United States against immigrants, especially against people who are-or who appear to be—from the Middle East have increased. According to an FBI annual report, incidents of hate crimes "targeting people, institutions, and businesses identified with the Islamic faith increased from 28 in 2000 to 481 in 2001—a jump of 1,600 percent. Muslims previously had been among the least-targeted religious groups" (*New Haven Register*, November 26, 2002, p. C4).

Conclusion

So what ought we to do? How should we Americans honor the memory of the victims of 9/11?

Certainly, let us apprehend the perpetrators, but let us do so by maintaining "a decent respect to the opinions of mankind," as it says in the American Declaration of Independence (Lievens 2002). Let us cooperate with the international community by working within multilateral institutions, such as the United Nations, and *bring the criminals to justice* under the law.

And yes, let us protect ourselves against future terrorist attacks, but let us not destroy ourselves and American society, our values and our civil rights, as we do so.

At the same time, let us not bring violence to countries that are no clear and present danger to us. Rather, let us help build a world where the conditions that create terrorists no longer exist (Whitney 2003).

If we want peace and not endless war, let us negotiate and encourage others locked in conflict—such as the Israelis and Palestinians—to negotiate. **Let us be willing without preconditions to talk with any one, anywhere, any time, for however long it takes to resolve our grievances and settle our disputes.**

Let us always remember that what others believe may be true and what we believe may turn out to be false.

Let us understand that when most people do harmful things to others, it is often not because they are inherently evil beings, but because they are desperate or because they believe, just as we do, that they have just cause and are doing the right thing. Thus, let us not dehumanize others by calling them names, such as "evil-doer," because to do so prevents us from thinking and understanding. Rather, let us recognize that problems have causes and that they also have peaceful solutions.

Let us recognize, too, that most people everywhere value roughly the same things. At the broadest level, they want freedom and well-being. They want life and good health, a job, a decent level of living, comfortable housing, a happy home life, education and opportunities for their children, personal safety and peace.

When their survival is secure, they also want to lead self-fulfilling and meaningful lives (Bell 2002). Let us Americans work cooperatively with others to achieve these values not only for ourselves, but also for all people everywhere.

Finally, as we Americans act on the world stage, let us act ethically. Let us deal with others with respect, restraint, understanding, honesty, fairness, and generosity. If I had lost loved ones on 9/11, I would want to honor their memory not by vengeance, but by working for a future world of truth, justice, reconciliation, and peace.

Epilogue (May 1, 2003)

But the deed is done; Americans did attack Iraq.

It was an unnecessary war, a failure of diplomacy, a tragedy for humankind. For I believe, as many people do, that continued inspections and multilateral actions would have eliminated any violent threat that Iraq may have represented to its neighbors. Moreover, Iraq was never of any clear and present danger to America's homeland.

Am I glad that Saddam Hussein is no longer in power in Iraq? Yes, of course. He led a brutal, authoritarian, repressive regime.

Yet I regret America's rush to war without sufficient opportunity for peaceful solutions and without support from the United Nations. I regret the death, destruction, and disorder it caused; the injured victims and grieving survivors—American, Iraqi, or other—may continue to suffer for the rest of their lives. And I regret, too, the pillaging of the cultural heritage of the cradle of civilization with the sacking of Iraq's museums. "Stuff happens!" said Secretary of State Donald Rumsfeld, dismissing as trivial one of the greatest cultural disasters in half a millennium (Rich 2003).

[Since this article went to press, we have learned that we have still more to regret. The Tuwaitha Nuclear Research Center in Iraq has been thoroughly ransacked. Mohammed ElBaradei, head of the International Atomic Energy Agency, had warned U.S. officials in letters on April 10th and again on April 29th that the Center, 30 miles south of Baghdad, contained radioactive materials that urgently needed to be

protected and he proposed that his experienced IAEA inspection and security personnel be allowed to assist in the task of securing them. His offer was not accepted. Now, those materials—including partially enriched uranium, cobalt 60 and cesium 137—are missing. Reports indicate that some ordinary Iraqi citizens living near the Center have been falling ill. Moreover, if such materials have fallen into the hands of terrorists, they could be used to produce a dangerous "dirty bomb" (Pincus 2003; *The Baltimore Sun* May 20, 2003).]

Where is America now headed?

I fear that the corporate oligarchy will grow even stronger and lead America down a path toward world domination, turning to other countries—Iran, Syria, North Korea, and elsewhere—and forcibly attempting to recast the world to suit its tastes. At the same time, I fear that such a course would undermine civil liberties in the United States, erode our electoral system, and threaten social programs affecting the environment, education, and health. And I fear, too, that it will fail to effectively deal with—perhaps even increase—future attacks on America by nonstate terrorist groups.

Nonetheless, I do have hopes for a better future. I hope that America and the international community will help the people of Iraq build a future of their own choosing and that the Iraqi people will choose a future of law and justice, reconciliation and tolerance, development, free and fair elections, public liberties, and peace.

I hope, too, that we Americans will give voice to our basic decency and stop the unilateral and unethical actions of our government; that we will demand that our American leaders learn to respect the opinions of other nations and to participate as equal partners in the multilateral negotiations and joint actions of the international community.

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Notes

1. After going to press, the Total Information Awareness Program was withdrawn and the Domestic Security Enhancement Act (also known as Patriot Act II) did not pass, both proposals having met considerable resistance. Provisions from each, however, remain on the agenda of some members of the Bush Administration.

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