

9/11 Ten Years On: What Have We Learned?

Michael B. Donley

9/11 reminded us that we cannot take our safety and security for granted.

We learned painfully that there are some individuals so disaffected, so radicalized, and so full of hate that they are willing to sacrifice their own lives, and take the lives of thousands of innocent people to make a political statement.

Before 9/11, few were aware there were people who hated America this much.

Our intelligence and law enforcement personnel had been working to connect the dots in a conspiracy we did not understand. For our part, as the 9/11

Commission officially noted, it was as much as anything “a failure of imagination.”

Now we know.

The events of 9/11 immediately called into question our national priorities, foreign and domestic policies, the openness and vulnerability of our society, our view of ourselves – America’s role in the world and the kind of country we want to live in. Some answers seemed clear and strong, like our determination to track down the perpetrators and bring them to justice. Other answers – like how many wars we should engage in, what to do with captured terrorists, or when to apply the use of deadly force -- seemed less sure, or more tentative. All these answers would need to be tested by time and experience, and it has been a time of testing.

The aftermath of 9/11 has tested our national determination and perseverance, tested the limits of how we think about our civil liberties and the lengths we

would or would not go to protect our security. It has tested our knowledge and understanding of one of the world's great religions, and of cultures and tribal histories of people far removed from 21st century North America and what we comfortably consider the norms of western civilization. The last decade has tested our willingness to accept sacrifice in pursuit of difficult tasks for a larger purpose – to put young men and women in harm's way, to support their families, and to care for those physically or psychologically scarred from their experience. The time in which we now live continues to test our willingness to be patient in shaping the conditions necessary for future stability in places like Iraq and Afghanistan.

Through this testing we have learned that Americans remain a people of great character. The bravery of those citizens on United Flight 93 over Pennsylvania intervened to disrupt the terrorists' deadly aims. Well before the fire and smoke of 9/11 had subsided in New York City and at the Pentagon, the dedication and heroism of our first responders, our firefighters and police officers was confirmed for all to see. We have learned more about the skill, professionalism, and dedication of our military personnel; of their perseverance in the face of adversity in harsh environments, and their devotion to duty in the face of multiple deployments. Young Americans have stepped up and answered the Nation's call in a time of need, and we now know for certain that America's next greatest generation is already among us.

As a nation, we have experienced great pride in our unity, joy in our successes, frustration in our setbacks, humility from our hubris. We have gained wisdom as much from our mistakes as from our accomplishments.

At a personal level, AP reporter, Pauline Arrillaga, described 9/11 as “...a life-is-too-short moment for us all, a shock to the system that forced us to stop, take stock and think about what mattered most.” Indeed, much of the recent coverage of this 10th anniversary has focused on how individual lives were changed.

While we will never forget the events of that day, we will never return to the world we thought we knew on September 10th, and the wars that have followed are now deeply embedded in our national conscience, we also know that people adapt and move on. With thoughts of lost loved ones still anchored in their memory, children grow, men and women find new purpose, remarry, begin new lives. The rhythms of life move forward.

My neighbor, Ben Salamone, lost Marjorie, his wife of 31 years, when American Airlines Flt 77 slammed into the Pentagon. Marjorie worked as a budget analyst for the Army. She and Ben raised two girls who went to Lee High School with the Donley girls.

Karl Teepe and his wife Donna lived with their two daughters in Centerville. An Army veteran, Karl worked for the Defense Intelligence Agency. He was also killed at the Pentagon on 9/11. Ben and Donna met at a support group for 9/11 families. And through the experience of their shared loss and grief, after a careful courtship, they became engaged in 2006. I’ve recently lost touch with Ben since we no longer commute together. But as reported a few years ago, he and Donna were slowly bringing their lives together, not by forgetting the memory of lost love ones, but by filling their separate homes with photographs of them as a couple and with each others’ children and grandchildren.

In the years ahead, we will continue to mark this anniversary through national days of remembrance; and we have built the memorials that will endure beyond the current generation, lest we forget. But always the narrative will return to the individual stories of people like Ben and Donna, and thousands of others: how each of us responded to tragedy, our empathy for the losses suffered by others, how our lives turned in new directions, and how we shaped the world that came after.

We have learned yet again that we best remember and bring honor to lost loved ones, by the changes reflected in our own lives, by our determination to live well and move forward.

In all that we have learned and relearned, there is much for which we can be thankful.

With the continuing hard work of our military and national security community, in concert with many international partners, we are thankful that we have so far been spared from more 9/11s.

We are thankful that within the nature of mankind as God has formed us, there is the ability to learn, to adapt, to rebuild, to move forward in our collective and personal lives. That within the same body, mind, and soul that prompts us to self-preservation, even to take the lives of others in our self-defense, there is also the impulse to help others, to build schools and clinics, to build institutions that will govern justly, to bring stability and security to the land, and to create the conditions in which humankind can live with one another in peace.

We give thanks to God for the impulse, for that enduring spark within the American character, to make our nation and the world a better place to live for ourselves and for our children, and for giving us the strength and hope to carry on.