

“THE TERRORIST ACTS OF SEPTEMBER 11, 2001 IN THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA”

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Abstract: *This week’s 22-year marker of offers an opportunity to reflect and take account of how the world and the United States has changed over the course of this generational time span. However, any assessment aiming to weigh the costs and benefits of U.S. national security responses and approaches across four U.S. administrations will offer only a partial snapshot.*

Key words: *memory, international coalitions, democratic governance stability, counterterrorism.*

INTRODUCTION

Americans will never forget the coordinated terrorist attacks on September 11, 2001, against the country’s financial center in New York, its global military headquarters at the Pentagon, and its civilian air transportation system. The images of New York police and firefighters rushing into the burning World Trade Center to rescue those trapped and the memory of their sacrifices will not fade from memory. America, its NATO allies, and the U.N. Security Council responded with swiftness and ingenuity to protect its citizens in the immediate aftermath and deployed measures to protect their citizens, established new government agencies, and undertook numerous military operations overseas intended to eliminate threats and enhance stability.

The protective actions taken over 22 years have produced important gains in security at home but these gains came with major human, financial, and strategic opportunity costs. The United States led international coalitions into three major wars in Afghanistan, Iraq, and against the Islamic State group in Syria and Iraq; it also conducted military and intelligence operations in dozens of other countries. Admittedly, tallying gains against costs yields inconclusive results. What emerges clearly, however, is the consistency with which some of the biggest challenges emanate from unforced U.S. policy errors and unpredictable consequences of well-intended actions.

Today, the United States of America is more secure on the home front from foreign terrorist attacks yet faces increased domestic terrorist threats. America’s efforts to promote freedom and democratic governance in the world faltered. Freedom globally has stagnated and deteriorated since 2005, and the significant stresses on America’s own democratic system have risen dramatically in recent years.

The strategic ledger accounting for 20 years of effort remains decidedly mixed. There have been undeniable gains and signs of progress, but they came at great costs and too

often spawned new challenges. However, there are lessons to be learned as the United States of America looks toward a national security strategy for the next two decades.

In the wake of, no additional major foreign terrorist attacks took place within the United States of America itself. This is the result of multiple lines of effort. The United States of America created new institutions, including the Department of Homeland Security, Directorate of National Intelligence, and National Counterterrorism Center. It substantially increased resources for intelligence and law enforcement agencies as well.

In addition, the United States of America implemented new security procedures to restore confidence in air travel. It developed new military and intelligence capabilities that helped thwart numerous plots and track down terrorist operatives and leaders, most notably Osama Bin Laden in 2011. The United States of America substantially enhanced its capacities to track and shut down terror finance networks, and it adapted its approaches to address terror threats in the cyber realm, staying in front of rapidly changing technologies. U.S. military and intelligence agencies created or strengthened counterterrorism partnerships across the globe, and these joint efforts helped the United States of America achieve more than it would have on its own.

These military, intelligence, and law enforcement efforts produced a key result: enhancing security at home. But some of these initiatives came with substantial financial, moral, and strategic opportunity costs.

America recognized the need to redefine national security and elevate non-military tools of national power but fell short in making a fundamental shift toward a new approach.

A few years into the initial U.S. policy response to the 9/11 attacks, the United States of America started to recognize the limits of a military-centric approach, with many political leaders, policymakers, and analysts calling for prioritizing diplomacy, economic tools, and political and ideological engagement. This growing recognition led to modest reforms, but the main structures and resources dedicated to so called “hard” security remained front and center. Efforts to integrate “smart power” as a central concept in U.S. national security failed to achieve the promised and desired results. Too often, the United States of America repeated past patterns of behavior in not using foreign assistance and other related tools effectively to achieve U.S. policy objectives.

CONCLUSION

The wars in Afghanistan and Iraq removed authoritarian rulers from power and produced a qualified and tenuous sense of freedom in those countries that remained vulnerable to many security threats and challenges. The costs of these wars to these societies, America, and other coalition partners were substantial. But one gain that will endure are new generations of Afghans and Iraqis born after the start of these wars and who grew up in imperfect but more open societies. This new generation has shown a desire for positive change, as witnessed by the numerous waves of protest movements in Iraq in recent years and the continued participation in an open but imperfect electoral

system. And while recent events in Afghanistan cast a dark shadow on these generational gains, Afghan youth and women who had access to education and leadership roles will likely make it more difficult for the Taliban to reimpose an old order.

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4. Professor Diana Hess worked with Jeremy Stoddard, then a graduate student, and a team of other graduate students on the first stage of the study analyzing the non-profit and U.S. State Department curricula: Kristen Buras, Ross Collin, Hilary Conklin, Eric Freedman, and Keita Takayama; and with Jeremy Stoddard and Shannon Murto on the second stage focusing on the textbooks.
5. More detailed descriptions of our findings will be available in Diana Hess, Jeremy Stoddard, and Shannon Murto, "Examining the Treatment of 9/11 and Terrorism in High School Textbooks," in *Educating Democratic Citizens in Troubled Times: Qualitative Studies of Current Efforts*, etc. Janet Bixby and Judith Pace (Albany, N.Y.: SUNY Press, forthcoming 2008).