“What gets us into trouble is not what we don't know; it's what we know for sure that just ain't so.” Mark Twain’s famous maxim comes to mind while reading an article we wrote on September 28, 2001, shortly after terrorists attacked America.

Not that we didn’t get some things right. We predicted that “the momentous events that occurred on September 11, 2001, will forever shape the nation’s history and our thinking about world affairs and national security . . . . [The changes] will be profound in the collectively transformative influence they will have on us.”

That, if anything, was an understatement. 9/11 arguably changed us more as a society than any other single event since the Civil War.

Of our five specific forecasts, none proved more prescient than the first, predicting an end to the sense of safety from external enemies Americans had enjoyed since revolutionary times. We noted that “after September 11, we will no longer feel as physically safe and secure as we have throughout most of the nation’s history. We have seen, in effect, the end of American innocence.”

More than we could have then imagined, Americans have suffered since 2001 a growing sense of vulnerability heretofore almost absent from national life. It’s impossible to exaggerate the significance of the new national mindset. From it has come the new Department of Homeland Security, heightened security across all walks of American society, and a burgeoning national security industry estimated to be costing taxpayers some $75 billion annually.

One other thing we got right was our prediction that we are facing an enemy like no other. We stated that “ultimately we must [understand] that some people will never like us and will seek to destroy us no matter how much we attempt to understand them . . . . It is not an enemy with whom we can reason or negotiate. It is not an adversary who someday will be a friend. This is an implacable foe—and there will be no peace between us until terrorism is eliminated root and branch.” Most Americans now understand this stark reality only too well.

Finally, we were both correct and incorrect in anticipating our foreign policy would turn decisively toward promoting traditional American values. We predicted that “American foreign policy will return more and more to an articulation of American core values . . . [while terrorists continue to] operate in countries that have non-industrial economies, no democratic traditions, and authoritarian rulers. That is the great divide in the world today: American values of capitalism, freedom, and democracy versus [authoritarianism].”

Paradoxically, however, while promoting many traditional values since 9/11, we have also undermined many others, endorsing torture, ignoring the Geneva Convention, authorizing warrantless wiretaps, and carrying on a
two-front war that has deeply divided the nation while incurring much anti-American sentiment in the Middle East.

Supporters of “enhanced practices” will point out that national security has compelled us to do these things. And they may be right. Nevertheless, we have conceded some of our most cherished values in the fight against terrorism. To be sure, this is not the first time America has abrogated core values in defense of national security. We did it repeatedly in both World War I and II. However, we have never done it as openly, as widely, or as long as we have now, raising profound questions about American values and our continuing commitment to them.

There were other things in our article we missed completely. We predicted that America’s entrenched ethnocentrism would dissipate as we came to understand better the forces driving terrorism. We observed that “as a people we have demonstrated a general unwillingness to learn much about the world more broadly and specific cultures more particularly. Americans, for example, know little about Islam, despite the fact that more than 1.2 billion people practice it, and in America more people are Muslim than Episcopalian.”

But that diminished ethnocentrism hasn’t happened. Instead, Americans have reacted with a strong wave of neo-isolationism not seen in this country since the 1930s. Isolationism has been a strong force throughout American history, finding its antecedents in the early history of the Republic and appearing and reappearing regularly in times of national crisis or challenge. In retrospect it seems not surprising to see its appearance in the post-9/11 world. Perhaps the most difficult forecast we made is also the hardest to evaluate today. How have we done on the critical task of balancing freedom with security in wartime? In 2001, we noted that “for many, . . . personal freedoms comprise much of what it means to be an American. But in the times ahead we must adjust and adapt these fundamental rights to the exigencies of war . . . . [While] security may trump personal liberty in times of critical national emergency, . . . we also need to be mindful of one of history’s most reliable maxims—those who value security over liberty usually end up with neither.”

The unresolved question, then, is whether we’ve achieved this balance. Certainly legions of dismayed airline passengers answer this question differently from perhaps equally numerous citizens who believe one can never have too much security. Our society on this question is much divided. It may be another ten years before we know who is right.

Meanwhile, the quest continues—to understand 9/11 and what it has meant to us, our traditions, our values, and our country. And most important of all, what it will come to mean to us in the years and decades ahead.

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