9/11 Revisited
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It has now been two years since the horrific attack on the American people of September 11 2001. Serious historians are still years away from the perspective necessary to place the events of that tragic day in proper historical context. They will do so in time, and their reflections will be evaluated and reevaluated perhaps for as long as there is an America.

One aspect however of the assault seems certain; the passage of time will not reduce the significance of the event in our history.

Who did what, why and how, will be endlessly debated, but clearly 9/11 will rank as one of the transformative events in American history--as consequential as the decision by the British in the 1750's to change the nature of imperial rule after the French and Indian War--as momentous as the decision of British General Thomas Gage to send troops to Lexington and Concord in April 1775--as critical as Lincoln's decision to resupply Ft Sumter in 1861--and as grave as Harry Truman's decision to use the atomic bomb on the Japanese in 1945.

Each of these pivotal moments marked a profound turning point in American history. And 9/11 is now inextricably linked to each of them.

How ultimately 9/11 will change us, we yet do not know. However, as we struggle to think about September 11 and its meaning, we do clearly see how the attack has altered the course of events since then. Five changes in particular bear close attention:

- **America's new military posture has caused a fundamental realignment with many traditional western European allies.** The Iraq war precipitated the break--more fundamentally the prospect of a world dominated by one super power is not likely to be tolerated by the French or the Germans. Both countries have gone out of their way to cripple the war effort in Iraq. The President's recent decision to seek a rapprochement with them in the UN, based on our need to pacify and stabilize Iraq will not resolve the fundamental problems between them and us. What the new international order will be like, and who will be aligned with who is not clear now. What does seem clear is that the World War II Cold War alignment seems destined to be reshaped by American reaction to the September 11 attack.

- **The 2004 election seems likely to be a referendum on post Iraq policy, and how the nation wages war against terrorism.** Many pundits continue to believe that the 2004 presidential election will hinge on the state of the domestic economy, but it is becoming increasingly clear that the Iraq war has become the defining issue in the race for the Democratic presidential nomination. Former Vermont Governor Howard Dean, now leading in Iowa and New Hampshire, has made his opposition to the war the core issue of his campaign, and his strident and sometimes-vitriolic rhetoric against President Bush substantially explains his ascendancy in the Democratic field. True enough, Dean gathers his support from the most leftward leaning Democrats and those most likely to think of Bush's 2000 election victory as illegitimately won, but he has pulled the entire
Democratic field, with the exception of Senator Joseph Lieberman, to a criticism of Bush's handling of Iraq bordering on frenzy.

- The ballooning of our national deficit to around 450 billion will initiate a serious national debate over government spending. The political fault lines of this debate are well established. From the Ronald Reagan era, we have learned that tax cuts coupled with increased military spending are an effective barrier to increased government programs, and from Lyndon Johnson's domestic spending and his Vietnam War expansion, we learned that new social spending programs and huge war expenditures would have calamitous effects on the economy. We cannot both cut taxes and increase spending. The American people usually figure that out before the politicians do. In 1992, Reform Party candidate Ross Perot's only serious contribution to the national discourse was the focus he gave to the deficit, and he eventually changed the contours of the presidential debate. He forced both major party candidates--George Bush senior and Bill Clinton--to deal with the issue as a central feature of their agenda. Something very much like that is going to happen again.

- The 9/11 attacks have deepened the gulf between those who value liberty and those who value security. In any free society, there is always conflict and tradeoff between the liberty we enjoy and the security we desire. And in past times of turmoil, Americans have temporarily ceded some individual liberty in return for more collective security. But today no rational policy--indeed no policy at all--has been forthcoming to deal with the inherent tensions between the goals of a free America and the goals of a secure America. National immigration policy is one example. No consensus exists on how to protect our borders and yet keep the American dream alive for those yearning to migrate here. The borders remain porous and government leaders, largely motivated by politics, refuse to engage the country in a badly needed national debate about an immigration policy that permits a reasonable number of immigrants to migrate here and still maintain our collective security.

History teaches many lessons; one highly relevant to 9/11 is that the meaning of events only becomes clear after some time has elapsed. How we understand events often does change with time. Moreover, we may come to think of 9/11 differently than we do today. The ink of that clichéd first draft of history is still not dry.

But, however, the future comes to view 9/11, there is no doubt that what happened that fateful day changed America forever. Those halcyon pre-9/11 days are gone forever. We can mourn them, but we can't return to them.

The challenge going forward is to make sure that the changes produced by 9/11 lead to a better America--our challenge is to make some lemonade out of the lemons dropped on us. This is what America has always done with every major crisis it has faced. The smart money is betting we will do it again.

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