

9/11's legacy of lost liberty

September 11, 2012

Eleven years have passed since al-Qaida used a band of box cutter-wielding terrorists to attack the United States. Many people will take a moment to reflect on what America lost that day in Lower Manhattan, at the Pentagon and in a field in southern Pennsylvania. Far too few, however, will consider what was taken from us as a result of that day, not by terrorists, but by our own government.

America's losses on 9/11 were staggering. Gone were 2,996 lives, \$100 billion in property, the New York skyline as we knew it and the sense of security that Americans enjoyed. All of those losses were brought on directly by al-Qaida and its 19 hijackers.

But the losses didn't end there. Americans lost liberties. We lost privacy. We lost trillions of dollars. In many ways, we lost any reasonable claim of a limited, constitutional government. And all of those things were taken, not by a group of hijackers, but by our own government.

In the days following 9/11, Sen. Charles Schumer, D-N.Y., declared, "the era of a shrinking federal government is over."

Shortly after the attack, Schumer's prophesy became reality. A new era of big government was born in the wake of 9/11 that continues today, with no sign of shrinking.

The new era of big government can be tracked back to a 14-month period between September 2001 and November 2002. During that time, government launched the War on Terror, ratified the Patriot Act, founded the Transportation Security Administration and created the Department of Homeland Security.

On Sept. 20, 2011, George W. Bush declared a War on Terror, sparking military operations that have, to date, sacrificed the lives of 6,594 Americans and will ultimately cost taxpayers approximately \$4 trillion, according to a report by Brown University's Watson Institute for International Studies.

Later, in an 18-hour period on October 12, 2001, both houses of Congress rammed through the Patriot Act. The act imparted the federal government with a disturbing array of new powers, many of which fly in the face of the United States Constitution. For example, the Patriot Act allowed the government to:

- Force records custodians, such as libraries, schools, social work institutions and Internet service providers to turn over records to the federal government without explanation or justification.
- Seize assets from charities, even without probable cause.
- Require the release of records from telecommunications and financial services companies without any court order.
- Spy on citizens using a Cold War-era statute designed for tracking the covert activities of Soviet agents.
- Imprison American citizens without proper due process.

On Nov. 19, 2001, the Transportation Security Administration was born. The bureaucracy, best known for harassing and molesting travelers in airport terminals, not only cost Americans a total of \$60 billion since 9/11, but a number of lawsuits are winding their way through federal court claiming that the TSA's screening tactics violate Fourth Amendment protections against unreasonable searches and seizures.

If that weren't bad enough, the TSA is also bad at doing what it was designed to do. The TSA is responsible for allowing 25,000 security breaches, according to House subcommittee on National Security chairman Rep. Jason Chaffetz, R-Utah.

A year later, in November 2002, the Department of Homeland Security was formed. Since its founding, Homeland Security has cost taxpayers nearly \$700 billion. The cabinet department has spied on Americans, been engaged in inappropriate data mining on American citizens and illegally intercepting mail. In addition, a Homeland Security database meant to track people who are considered threats to national security has been filled with members of groups that comprise about one-third of the American population, including pro-gun, anti-death penalty, pro-abortion, anti-abortion, pro-Second Amendment, anti-war and Tea Party activists, according to information compiled by the Cato Institute.

It was bizarre and disturbing when the government's response to 9/11, one of the biggest failures in the history of government, was to implement even more government.

Since 9/11, and largely as a product of the government's response to the terrorist attacks, the federal budget has doubled from \$1.9 trillion in 2001 to \$3.8 trillion today. To put it another way, in 2001, the federal government spent \$6,752 per person in America. This year, the government will devour \$12,090 for each American.

In fact, as hard as it may seem to believe today, the federal budget was balanced in 2001 with a \$127 billion surplus left over. The Congressional Budget Office estimates that the 2012 budget will finish \$1.1 trillion in the red.

The price tag of the federal government's response to 9/11, including domestic spending and the War on Terror is now estimated at over \$5 trillion, according to The Fiscal Times. This money came from the pockets of taxpayers -- and will continue to for years to come. It also came from lenders, such as China, and from the printing press, which led to a devalued, inflated dollar.

The sheer number of people constituting the federal government workforce has grown dramatically, as well. From 2000 to 2012, the population of the United States has risen 11.7 percent. Over that same time period, the number of federal workers (excluding U.S. Postal workers) has increased from 1.78 million in 2000 to 2.21 million in 2012, or 24.2 percent.

Perhaps the worst result of government's response to 9/11 was the total disregard for Constitutional rights resulting, not only from the aforementioned Patriot Act, Transportation Security Administration and Department of Homeland Security, but from the precedent that these bureaucracies set. Rights have been removed, rejiggered, ignored and trampled to the point that the Fourth Amendment has become a historical footnote, rather than an ironclad restraint on federal powers.

In the weeks and months after 9/11, it was popular to declare "the terrorists did not win" as Americans returned to daily life, as if the American lifestyle was the reason for the attack. But it wasn't.

America wasn't subjected to terrorist attacks because America had too much liberty or too many freedoms. It wasn't because America was too rich or too powerful. The attacks, according to Osama bin Laden and the al-Qaida masterminds behind the terrorist attacks, were due to the U.S. military and economic sanctions against Iraq, the presence of American troops in Saudi Arabia and America's support of Israel.

In that sense, the terrorist did not win. America has continued to trip over itself to defend Israel, even when Israel is the aggressor. The age of expansionist American foreign policy is still alive and well. In fact, the 9/11 attacks led to military action which cost a total of 300,000 lives in Iraq and Afghanistan, according to numbers compiled by OWNI, a French media website. In the terrorists' attempts to make U.S. to become more limited and less intrusive in its foreign policy approach, it's fair to say they lost convincingly.

But Americans have lost, too. That loss didn't come to terrorists or to radical Islam. That loss came to our own government.

The government has done what terrorists never could: take away freedoms, privacy and Constitutional rights that were fundamental to what it means -- or, more accurately, what it meant -- to be American. Government has multiplied in size and exploded in scope. It has taxed, borrowed and spent until it is forever impossible to restore federal spending to what it was before 9/11. While America was not defeated by 9/11, American principles have been beaten to death in the 11 years since.

While terrorists and American principles both lost badly in the wake of 9/11, there is one undisputed winner: big government.