



Outside the Beltway

9/11's Legacy Of Fear

DOUG MATACONIS · TUESDAY, SEPTEMBER 11, 2012 ·

Cato Institute Vice-President Gene Healy reflects in a short piece over at *Reason* on the legacy of the September 11th attacks and the world that has developed in the wake of them:

Today marks the 11th anniversary of the Sept. 11th terrorist attacks. What, if anything, have we learned? In a Saturday statement, President Obama struck an upbeat note: "The legacy of 9/11," he said, is "the ability to say with confidence that no adversary and no act of terrorism can change who we are."

Who's he kidding? For us ordinary schlubs who don't own our own planes, a trip to the airport provides less reason for optimism. We shuffle shoeless through the security line, at the end of which government agents will either grope us or look at us naked. And despite his campaign trail promises to "set an example for the world that the law is not subject to the whims of stubborn rulers," Obama has forged an expanded "Terror Presidency," with dangerous new powers for all future presidents to wield.

Sept. 11th has changed America radically — and not for the better.

As security analysts John Mueller (a Cato senior fellow) and Mark G. Stewart point out in an important new article in *International Security*, it's far from clear that any of this was necessary. Though the FBI initially insisted America was riddled with up to 5,000 trained Al Qaeda operatives, an internal agency memorandum, leaked in 2005, admitted that "To date, we have not identified any true 'sleeper' agents in the US." At a certain point, Mueller and Stewart suggest, the absence of evidence becomes evidence of absence.

"In the eleven years since the September 11 attacks, no terrorist has been able to detonate even a primitive bomb in the United States," Mueller and Stewart note.

If you're having trouble with pipe bombs, Weapons of Mass Destruction are almost certainly beyond your competence. Though, as the authors explain, erstwhile "enemy combatant" Jose Padilla once planned a domestic nuclear attack: "His idea about isotope separation was to put uranium into a pail and then to make himself into a human centrifuge by swinging the pail around in great arcs."

Mueller and Stewart quote anthropologist Scott Atran: "Perhaps never in the history of human conflict have so few people with so few actual means and

capabilities frightened so many.” And we have erected monuments to that fear — vast bureaucratic pyramids erected in Al Qaeda’s honor.

I made a similar point last year when we marked the 10th anniversary of the September 11th attacks, and I described our decade of lost freedom:

There’s no denying that America still faces a threat from international terrorism, and that law enforcement, the military, and intelligence services need to act to protect our interests and our safety. At the same time, though, what we’ve seen over the past ten years is that the balance between liberty and safety has begun leaning far too much in the direction of safety and, as Benjamin Franklin once famously said, those who give up liberty to purchase a fleeting sense of safety don’t deserve either. My greatest fear is that we’ll see another terror attack some day in the future and see even more power granted to the state. Before that happens, we need to step back and ask ourselves whether the price we’ve paid over the past ten years was worth it.

Little has changed in the year since that was written, of course, and the prospect that the War On Terror State that we’ve created over the past eleven years will ever be scaled back becomes less and less likely with each passing year. Indeed, now that we live in a country where both major political parties seem to be willing to sacrifice civil liberties in the name of some elusive form of safety, there isn’t even a dissenting voice on these issues beyond the small number of Members of Congress and the Senate who are willing to speak out but are decidedly in the minority. On top of that, the American people seem to have come to accept, grudgingly or not, the restrictions that have been placed upon them in wake of September 11th. Indeed, even the years or complaints of abusive behavior and violations of privacy, a majority of the public says that they think that the TSA is doing a “good job.” As for the rest of it — the drone attacks, the assassination orders, the enhanced interrogations and extraordinary renditions, and the warrantless wiretaps — I honestly don’t think that most Americans care about it. They’ve been told that all of this is necessary for the sake of “safety” and, with memories of that horrible Tuesday in September still fresh in their minds, they seem unwilling to even question the necessity or efficacy of what is being done in their name. Once the government tells them that all of this is necessary to “protect” the nation, very few people seem inclined to question their leaders. It all makes me wonder what things will look like ten years from now. The thing about a “War On Terror, ” or even just a conflict against largely stateless entities like al Qaeda, is that it’s very easy for the powers that be to claim that the threat continues to exist and that vigilance must be maintained. Any suggestion that any of these measures should be scaled back, or even merely reconsidered, is met with suggestions by those who advocate the policy that you don’t care about the safety of your fellow Americans, or even that you support the terrorists. All of this despite the fact that, as the study Healy notes discusses, the actual efficacy of many of these policies is questionable at best.

Finally, perhaps the most egregious example of the legacy of fear that the September 11th attacks helped engender can be seen in disturbing rise of Islamophobia almost immediately after the attack. It’s not unprecedented in American history, of course. In the wake of the attack on Pearl Harbor, there was

an alarming rise in hatred directed not just at Japanese-Americans, but at all Asian-Americans. It resulted in people who were citizens of this nation being forced into internment camps for no justifiable reason, and it manifested itself in war propaganda in the Pacific Theater that was blatantly racist in a manner that its counterpart in the European Theater simply did not reach. Today, though, Islamophobia is something that has become rampant on the right, led by people whose names I care not repeat but which would be familiar to pretty much everyone whose been paying attention for the past decade. It manifested itself most egregiously perhaps in things such as the irrational protests against the construction of an Islamic Community Center at a location several blocks from the site of the 9/11 attacks and the Koran burning by a preacher from Florida that led to widespread protests in Afghanistan and elsewhere. A terrible attack eleven years ago has fanned the flames of religious hatred among a large segment of the American public, and that's not a good thing at all.

None of this is to suggest that we shouldn't be acting to stop those forces that would attack us at home and abroad, quite the contrary actually. At the same time we're doing that, though, we need to be more careful than we have been these past eleven years about allowing this conflict to change us. It already has to some extent, and that's likely irreversible at this point, but we still have the time and the wisdom to make sure that fear of the "other" doesn't cause us to sacrifice the things that really make this country what it is.