

# The shadow of 9/11

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In a week-long series, the National Post looks at the events of 9/11 and the decade that followed. Among the predictions in the days after the twin towers fell was that the attacks signalled the end of American complacency. But did they?

The United States has not suffered a major terrorist attack in the decade since 9/11, they say. For them to say that, though, requires a particularly narrow definition of "major." And a comparably narrow definition of "terrorist attack."

It requires that we do not consider the November 2009 shooting spree that left 13 Americans murdered and 29 others wounded at the Fort Hood, Tex., military base either to be "major" or "terrorism." Nidal Hasan, the Muslim army psychiatrist charged in the attack, did, we're told, shout "Allahu Akbhar" as he unleashed his semi-automatic; colleagues reported that he had a tendency of calling them "infidels" and that they deserved beheading and to burn in hell; and his public medical presentations were peppered with Koranic influences.

He also had an ongoing email correspondence with al-Qaeda recruiter Anwar al-Awlaki, who later praised Hasan as a "hero" who had performed his "Islamic duty." But these things can, evidently, be ignored.

It can't be that hard. President Barack Obama has done it. "We cannot fully know what leads a man to do such a thing," he insisted afterward. Last year, each branch of the U.S. military issued its own report on the Fort Hood shooting. They ignored it, too: Not one raised as relevant Hasan's radical Islamic outlook. General George Casey Jr., the Army's chief of staff at the time, explicitly warned against doing so. "We are a very diverse army," he explained. "This terrible event would be an even greater tragedy if our diversity becomes a casualty."

After the atrocity of 9/11, Americans told themselves they had been caught unprepared by the surprise of Islamist terrorism. In the dozen years since the end of the Cold War, the nation had taken "a holiday from history," conservative columnist George Will lamented. Former Republican House Speaker Newt Gingrich called the intervening years between the fall of the Berlin Wall and the fall of the twin towers a "lost decade," in which the United States sat passively as threats gathered. Liberal columnist Frank Rich called the planes hitting the

towers a wake-up call from a "frivolous if not decadent decadelong dream." President George W. Bush, in his second inaugural address, regretted that "after the shipwreck of communism came years of relative quiet, years of repose, years of sabbatical." This negligence would not happen again. This was the end of American complacency. Or so they said. But to believe that, or to believe Americans had been asleep at the switch, also, requires an unconventional reading of both history and the present. Because it's arguable that neither is true.

The United States, in fact, had begun its War on Terror three years before 9/11. It even called it that. The bloody bombings of American embassies in Tanzania and Kenya - more than 200 killed (12 Americans) and thousands injured - had woken up Washington long before 9/11 to the emerging threat of al-Qaeda and Osama bin Laden. "We are at war," declared CIA director George Tenet.

President Bill Clinton began hunting bin Laden. He had volleyed cruise missiles at his al-Qaeda camp in Afghanistan. Having missed bin Laden, Mr. Clinton ordered missile-equipped submarines to wait off the Pakistani coast for another chance. He levelled a pharmaceutical factory in Khartoum allegedly connected to al-Qaeda and suspected of producing chemical weapons. In speeches around the globe, Mr. Clinton raised the alarm again and again about nonstate actors, rogue states and terrorist groups as the looming new threat to the Western world order. Meeting with his incoming successor a few days before Christmas in 2000, Mr. Clinton told George W. Bush, "One of the great regrets of my presidency is that I didn't get him for you, because I tried to." He meant bin Laden.

Clearly it wasn't ignorance or indifference that obstructed Mr. Clinton and left America unprepared for 9/11. It was America's own conflicted nature. Al-Qaeda was plainly on the warpath: U.S. intelligence had intercepted bin Laden's plans to assassinate Mr. Clinton in the Philippines in 1996, and the Pope and the president of Egypt; his plot to destroy six American airliners over the Pacific Ocean; and the African embassy bombings were followed two years later by the murder of 17 sailors, and the wounding of 39 others, on the refuelling USS Cole in Yemen.

But for the American public these dangers were far too remote, mentally and geographically, to give the president licence to invade al-Qaeda's haven in Afghanistan.

"There was serious consideration about taking offensive measures against suspected al-Qaeda targets . immediately after the embassy bombings," says Christopher Preble, the Cato Institute's vice-president for defence and foreign

policy studies. "But given the context, and given the expectation of terrorism up to that point, it would have been seen as an overreaction to have launched a major military operation."

The fact that Mr. Clinton was embroiled in a sex scandal at the time had even led critics in Congress to complain that his hits against al-Qaeda were a "wag the dog" distraction, and Mr. Clinton would not attack again. He never truly marshalled the legislative or official resolve for a serious fight. When intelligence agents spotted bin Laden on a hunting trip in Afghanistan, Mr. Clinton was asked to bomb the party, but the worry that he would kill several accompanying princes from the United Arab Emirates, an ally, in the process made him refuse. Given opportunities, Mr. Clinton worried about killing too many civilians, or provoking backlash, or upsetting foreign relations. In his memoirs, George Tenet recalled: "They wanted to hit bin Laden but without endangering U.S. troops or putting at significant risk our diplomatic relations." This is the ineffective way the United States once tried fighting al-Qaeda painlessly. It's how the United States has returned to trying to fight it today.

The rage and agony over the incineration of 3,000 Americans going about their workday changed that only temporarily: it galvanized the public around the need for incautious violence against the enemies, the need to disregard UN and world opinion, and around support for unsavory laws at home to ferret out fifth columnists. But, over time, after the horrible sight of those collapsing towers and the desperate humans leaping from the flames, were taken down from television screens out of sensitivity, the fury's momentum could not be sustained. The vengeful wars in Afghanistan and Iraq grew too long, too costly, too unseemly and the mounting body count - American and foreign - unsettled delicate public sensibilities. Warrantless wiretaps, waterboardings and indefinite detainments chafed Americans who prefer to imagine themselves above such draconian things. The return of political gamesmanship, impugning the Bush administration's allegedly ulterior agendas throughout, only aggravated the national unease.

The election of President Obama symbolized a nation's yearning to return to a more comfortable, less offensive place. He would clear out the Guantanamo Bay prison, despite the fact that 25% of its released detainees "return to the fight," according to the Pentagon. He would make security agencies play by the Marquess of Queensberry rules. He would bring the troops home from the Middle East. He began his presidency with a tour of apology for America's post9/11 behaviour: "America has shown arrogance and been dismissive," he

repented for world audiences; the government's actions after 9/11 had been "hasty . based on fear rather than foresight." Americans, he said, had lost "sight of our values."

And he has made Washington's conflict with al-Qaeda so sanitized as to be virtually futile. Mr. Obama has blocked any more prisoner transfers to Guantanamo and ended the unpopular practice of "enhanced interrogations." He has stopped capturing intelligence targets at all, preferring assassination-by-drone. After catching bin Laden, he had him shot and tidily disposed of, rather than smugly flaunting a photo of the bullet-riddled corpse in the face of the enemy, or even capturing and interrogating the terror kingpin for information.

The President has tried putting al-Qaeda's worst butchers in civilian courts, making them common criminals rather than enemies of the state. He has expurgated the governmental vocabulary of war: terrorism is now called "man-caused disasters"; "rogue states" are now "outliers"; "jihad" and "radical Islam" are no longer permissible terms. He has worked to avoid giving any offense to the tyrants in Iran and Syria, the world's leading terror sponsors. He's repurposed NASA to do outreach to the Muslim world and hired a homeland security chief, Janet Napolitano, to soothe us with lies that the "system worked" to stop terror attacks, where - as in the 2009 Christmas Day bombing attempt - it, in fact, failed miserably.

But after years of having to play the unfamiliar, increasingly uncomfortable part of bad cop, Americans wanted - and Mr. Obama gave them - permission to be agreeable again; to be the kind of people whose army chief of staff cares more for cultivating diversity than fighting enemies. They can swallow the largely harmless but meaningless theatre of airport security, and they have learned to raise alarms when they see suspiciously smouldering air passengers or packages. But there is a threshold Americans won't cross, at least not anymore, into the realm of total war against a sworn enemy. The United States has returned to its, perhaps not complacent, but more congenial pre-9/11 personality, concerned with domestic affairs, assured that the government (the same one that could not pre-empt the underwear bomber, the Times Square bomber, the shoe bomber or even the glaringly dangerous Nidal Hasan) will keep the country safe while trying to ingratiate itself to world opinion. And when Islamist terror at home does rear its head, as it did at Fort Hood, rather than having to worry, America can just delude itself that it isn't really terrorism at all.

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