

Do You Have a Photo ID, Young Man?

Does stringent security make the Sept. 11 memorial safer—or a hassle to visit and an infringement on our civil liberties?

By [Mark Vanhoenacker](#) | Monday, Sept. 10, 2012

The National September 11 Memorial & Museum in New York is a profound, beautiful monument to the lives lost in the 1993 and 2001 terror attacks at the World Trade Center. But the iron curtain of security surrounding the site forms its own monument: to our successful adaptation to the realities of a post-9/11 world, and perhaps to choices that speak less well of us.

Advance tickets are required to enter this public, outdoor memorial. To book them, you're obliged to provide your home address, email address, and phone number, and the full names of everyone in your party. It is "strongly recommended" that you print your tickets at home, which is where you must leave explosives, large bags, hand soap, glass bottles, rope and bubbles. Also, "personal wheeled vehicles" not limited to bicycles, skateboards, and scooters, and anything else deemed inappropriate. Anyone age 13 or older must carry photo ID, to be displayed "when required and/or requested."

Once at the memorial you must go through a metal detector and your belongings must be X-rayed. Officers will inspect your ticket — that invulnerable document you nearly left on your printer — at least five times. One will draw a blue line on it; 40 yards (and around a dozen security cameras) later, another officer will shout at you if your ticket and its blue line are not visible. Eventually you'll reach the memorial itself, where there are more officers and no bathrooms. You're allowed to take photographs anywhere outside the security screening area — in theory if not always in practice.

Eleven years after 9/11 and a year after the memorial opened, it's time for a freedom-loving people to consider the purpose and impact of such security measures. Let's ask the experts — and ourselves — three questions. Is enhanced security necessary at the memorial? Are the specific measures in place likely to be effective? And what is their cost to a free society?

At first glance, the need for security at the Sept. 11 memorial seems self-evident. The memorial stands on some of the most sacred ground in America; a third attack there would be an unimaginable blow. But just because an incident would be tragic doesn't mean it's a serious possibility. Depending on who's counting, either

14 or 16 people in America have been killed by Islamic extremists since 9/11 — 13 at Fort Hood, Texas. There have been other plots, of course, disrupted by law enforcement, though a recent study described about half of those as “essentially created or facilitated in a major way by the authorities.” Meanwhile about 15,000 Americans are murdered annually. Tobacco claims the lives of around 440,000 Americans per year. In 2011, lightning killed 26.

Counterterror experts I spoke with differed on the level of security required at the Sept. 11 memorial. But even among those who said they understood the enhanced security, nearly all couched that understanding in terms of the site’s iconic status, not actual risk to the memorial. Richard Barrett, coordinator for the U.N.’s al-Qaida and Taliban monitoring team, described the likelihood of an attack on the memorial as “incredibly small.” Max Abrahms, a counterterrorism fellow at Johns Hopkins University, said that although the memorial’s “extra psychological importance” warrants heightened security, “it’s now clear that sleeper cells are not infesting our country . . . al-Qaida can hardly generate any violence at all.” In policy circles, al-Qaida and the term “strategic defeat” increasingly go together.

Of course, even if there is little risk to the site, the security measures may have some emotional value. The best argument I heard for enhanced security is the comfort that it gives some 9/11 family members and survivors. A representative for the September 11th Families’ Association told me they “appreciate all measures taken to insure the safety of visitors.” The president of the World Trade Center Survivors’ Network said much the same — though he also acknowledged a “diversity of opinion” among members. But not everyone is comforted by heavy security. John Mueller, a counterterror expert at Ohio State University and the Cato Institute, says that “visible security measures dealing with terrorism tend to make people more anxious about it.” He has research to back himself up.

If the purpose of elaborate security is to protect raw nerves rather than to address an active threat, it’s reasonable to ask how long it will be in place. Some memorial documents refer to controlled access during an “interim operating period” that runs through the end of 2013; others promise “open access . . . from all sides” only when the entire World Trade Center site (not just the main tower) is fully rebuilt. It’s unclear when that will be — 2016? TBD? (It wasn’t any clearer to a spokesman for the memorial.) And if the security measures are a response to an active threat, wouldn’t it be ill-advised to dispense with them the day the WTC site is finished?

For the sake of argument, let’s assume the memorial really is at risk. Are the current measures effective?

It's not giving anything away to point out that the memorial's security measures — at least the visible measures to which visitors are subjected — will not prevent a well-planned attack. Many of the most onerous requirements, even if they were effective deterrents, are unevenly enforced. For example, the requirement to provide names, addresses, et cetera in advance is undermined by the occasional distribution of a few same-day, timed tickets at several downtown locations and by the controversial ticket allocations to tour operators. (If an additional goal of named, prebooked tickets is to prevent reselling and control capacity, then the memorial could simply get rid of all tickets and count visitors as they enter and exit.) Then there's the photo-ID rule, without which the requirement to give your name is meaningless. It's at once overly restrictive — how many 13-year-olds have photo ID? — and largely unenforced (my ID was requested on only the first of my three visits).

I talked to Bruce Schneier, a leading thinker on security and the man who coined the term “security theater” to describe measures that are visible or intrusive but also pointless or ineffective. Schneier responded to a description of the memorial's visible security with a pointed question: Is the memorial to the victims — or to our collective stupidity? The tactics, Schneier said, “assume we can guess the plot. But as long as the terrorists can avoid them by making a minor change in their tactics or target, they're wastes of money.” What isn't a waste of money? “Investigation, intelligence, and emergency response — stuff that doesn't require you to guess the plot.”

The counterterror expert I spoke to who offered the most unequivocal support for enhanced security at the site was Kip Hawley, a former head of the Transportation Security Administration. Hawley saw both threat-based and emotional justifications for heightened security. But even he would not enter into a discussion on the effectiveness of the specific measures at the memorial. Neither would a Sept. 11 memorial representative, except to say that the security protocols are appropriate for the twice-targeted WTC site.

Again, for the sake of argument, let's assume there is a risk and that the Sept. 11 memorial's security regime effectively lowers it. Then it's worth it, right?

Maybe not even then. I suggested to Schneier that although the security measures wouldn't stop a coordinated attack by al-Qaida, they might deter a lone actor. He agreed but noted that the security measures wouldn't stop that lone unsophisticated actor — they'd only shift the location of his attack. In terms of lives lost, if not symbolism, an attack would be just as bad “in a million places,” said Schneier. In many — a crowded mall or train — it might be much worse.

But doesn't the 9/11 site deserve special protection? That's essentially the view of experts who supported enhanced security simply because the site is so iconic. Schneier calls that an emotional argument "which will cost lives, rather than save them, if the money could be better spent elsewhere." Schneier's approach doesn't account for the emotional weight of the 9/11 site. And who knows — presumably there's plenty of "smart" security, too, behind the scenes. But his point — that every dollar we spend on security theater is a dollar we don't invest in smarter security — gets harder to ignore each time your memorial ticket is checked, scanned, or drawn on with the blue pen.

Why else might the Sept. 11 memorial's security not be worthwhile? Because it makes the site less open and accessible. Bizarrely, the Web page that lists the memorial's limited hours (10 a.m. until 6 or 8 p.m., depending on the season) also describes the memorial as a place "meant to be experienced at all times of the day." I asked Barrett if he could think of any similarly restricted locations; he suggested hotels in Kabul and Islamabad.

In terms of balancing America's most cherished values, no other American memorial marking a terrorist act has struck anything like the "balance" New York has. The Oklahoma City memorial, the Flight 93 memorial, even the Sept. 11 memorial at the Pentagon: None require advance names, photo ID or airport-style security, let alone all three. The outdoor Oklahoma City memorial — open 24/7 year-round — seems more concerned with helping visitors find nearby doggie daycare than burdening them with byzantine rules and regulations. Abroad, access to highly urban memorials in freedom-loving countries better acquainted with terrorism — Spain, the United Kingdom — is unfettered. Neither the memorial to the London July 7, 2005, attacks nor the Madrid station bombing memorial require preregistration, ID, or security checks.

The Sept. 11 memorial's security is perfect in at least one inadvertent sense: There's no better place to consider our national reaction to 9/11 than at the memorial, and its security regimen inspires us to do just that. Indeed, much of the memorial experience — the ID requirements, long lines, senselessly repetitive checks of home-printed documents, restrictions on personal belongings, agents snapping between diligence, boredom, and aggression — recalls nothing so much as post-9/11 air travel.

That irony, however sad, is worth confronting. Was physical safety the only point of our breathtaking expenditure of lives, money, and goodwill after 9/11, or was the point also to defend our way of life? Have we remembered — in Barrett's words — "what we are fighting for . . . as well as what we are fighting against?" Are we proud of becoming a country where we must show ID to buy a bus ticket — even when (as recently happened to me) you don't buy the ticket until

you've reached your destination? Ours is a government that has banned scissors from Liberty (as in, Statue of) Island — and we are, it seems, a people who don't really mind.

Then again, maybe we're beginning to mind a bit. Some memorial visitors aren't entirely happy with its resemblance to a Demilitarized Zone; others aren't quite ready to accept that police there might delete pictures from your camera. You don't need to be a card-carrying member of the National Rifle Association to sympathize with the Tennessee nurse who faced possible felony charges for asking where she might check the gun she'd inadvertently brought to the memorial. Nationally, too, there are flickers of a renewed debate over how Americans balance security and freedom — whether it's Tea Partiers protesting intrusive airport pat-downs or the New York Times' series about whether it's time for the pendulum to swing back toward “civil liberties and individual privacy.”

The Sept. 11 memorial's designers hoped the plaza would be “a living part” of the city — integrated into its fabric and usable “on a daily basis.” I thought that sounded nice, so I asked Schneier one last question. Let's say we dismantled all the security and let the Sept. 11 memorial be a memorial like any other: a place where citizens and travelers could visit spontaneously, on their own contemplative terms, day or night, subject only to capacity limits until the site is complete. What single measure would most guarantee their safety? I was thinking about cameras and a high-tech control center, “flower pot”-style vehicle barriers, maybe even snipers poised on nearby roofs. Schneier's answer? Seat belts. On the drive to New York, or in your taxi downtown, buckle up, he warned. It's dangerous out there.

Krystal Bonner contributed to this report.
