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The Real Tragedies of 9/11

Fri, 09/09/2011 - 4:02pm | posted by Jeremy Kolassa

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As the tenth anniversary of 9/11 approaches this Sunday, I cannot help but feel it will be a commemoration of not one, not two, but at least three different tragedies that have befallen the American people. The first is the obvious tragedy of the attacks themselves, which took thousands of lives in an act of barbarism and insanity. The second tragedy is what happened to the American consciousness afterwards. And the third is what our children understand about it.

I read earlier this week about a poll from the Associated Press-NORC Center for Public Affairs Research. The results were disquieting, to say the least. Some of the highlights:

- 71% of Americans favor surveillance cameras in public
- 47% support the government reading emails outside the US without a warrant
- 30% support the government monitoring emails within the country
- 58% support random searches involving full-body scans or patdowns at airports
- 35% support racial or ethnic profiling at airports
- 55% support the government snooping into financial transactions without a warrant
- 47% support a national ID card to show to authorities on demand (a "Show-Me" Card, if you ever watched *Fringe*)
- 64% believe it is "Sometimes necessary to sacrifice some rights and freedoms" in order to fight the war on terror
- 53% think you can't be too careful dealing with people (which is a slight improvement from 2002, I suppose, which was 58%, but...)
- 54% would, between counterterrorism and civil liberties, come down on the side of civil liberties

Like I said, disquieting. All but the last should be far lower; the last should be far higher. Only 54% would go for civil liberties? That means 46% would put counterterrorism operations above what it actually means to be an American?

This is what 9/11 has done to us. It has made us a living example of Benjamin Franklin's famous quote: "Those who would give up Essential Liberty to purchase a little Temporary Safety, deserve neither Liberty nor Safety."

9/11, and the endless fearmongering we received in the years after by politicians on both sides of the aisle not only tarnished but, I think, significantly warped our society. We have gone from being open and free to being paranoid and closed. That so many want the government to intrude into our personal lives, that so many are willing to give up their personal freedoms for illusory "safety," speaks to the Orwellian impact that day has had on us.

Yes, it is true that the pendulum is shifting, however slightly, back in the direction of civil liberties. Americans no longer see a reason for such fearmongering from our leaders and the national security state we erected in 9/11's aftermath, especially after ten years without another attack on U.S. soil and no hard evidence that TSA screening lines have made a difference. But there is still a long way to go, and the numbers are clear: it will be a tough fight.

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But it only gets worse.

Another tragedy from 9/11 is what the youth know and understand about it. This one strikes me on a personal level as well. I am much younger than most of the writers here, recently out of college. I was twelve when the towers fell, though I didn't know what happened until I got home from school. Half of my life has been consumed by this nightmare of a noose closing around Lady Liberty. I barely remember the times before that day, other than when I got my dog. For children born on or after that day, they don't have anything to remember. Their whole lives have been in the shadow of this disaster and the paranoia it has caused. These children will then grow up and become voting adults, and will think that these security procedures are "normal" and "acceptable" since, hey, as far as they know, they've always been done.

This is scary.

Nat Hentoff said in an interview with the Cato Institute (the interview is not online, I believe, so you'll have to take my word for it) that one of the things that scared him the most was our schools failing to teach our kids the story of the Constitution. He feared that this up and coming generation would not understand they actually have freedoms guaranteed to them, would not understand the battles fought for them, and would let them slip away without so much as token resistance.

There have been some attempts to educate children, such as Nickelodeon's *What Happened*, a half-hour—not nearly long enough—documentary with a 67 year old woman dressed up as a teen. (Yeah, I'm not sure if we should put it in the horror genre or not myself.) However, I don't think these attempts have truly succeeded, because not even adults really understand what happened behind 9/11. If they can't, can children? How can freedom and liberty be maintained when our children do not understand and will not support it?

Even if that pendulum I spoke about before does swing back towards civil liberties, if our children do not have that context for their understanding, it will only swing back towards civil repression, fast and hard. We need to educate our children—something our "education" system is notably incapable of doing—about what free speech really means, what the Bill of Rights truly means. If we do not, all the arguing for civil liberties we do now will be utterly meaningless to our grandchildren and those who come after.

That's the true tragedy of 9/11: that the adults now have been transformed into sheep, so willing to give up their vital liberties; and that the children who have come afterwards have no context with which to place it. I still hold out hope of rolling back the national security state that snoops in our emails, feels us up before we get on planes, and criminalizes civilian photography of law enforcement officers, but it will not be easy. For we will not just be going up against that apparatus, but also ourselves.

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