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9/11, 25 Years Later
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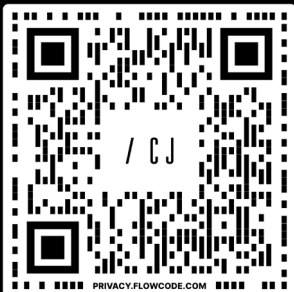
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9/11, 25 Years Later

The September 11, 2001, Islamist terror attacks on New York and Washington opened a tumultuous new era in American history. The United States went to war in Afghanistan, from where Osama bin Laden and al-Qaeda had plotted the attacks, and later invaded Iraq, seeking to end Saddam Hussein's regime and eliminate the threat posed by its suspected weapons of mass destruction. Intelligence agencies were reorganized and their powers expanded, the Department of Homeland Security was created, and Americans grew accustomed to long airport lines and more extensive surveillance. Proving its resilience, New York City began the long process of rebuilding Lower Manhattan and the ruins of the World Trade Center. For a generation, the complacent assumptions prevailing on September 10, 2001, seemed irrevocably past. History, far from ended, was on the move again.

A quarter of a century later, what has been the legacy of 9/11? That political views broadly sympathetic to those that motivated al-Qaeda have become increasingly normalized on the American Left is one of the more unsettling realities of the intervening years. Islamist violence is today routinely described by activists and prominent academics as a justified reaction to Western imperialism, with Hamas's October 7, 2023, massacre of innocent Israelis rationalized, or even celebrated, on U.S. campuses and in ongoing protests. Anti-Zionist attitudes, bleeding into overt anti-Semitism, are increasingly visible in progressive politics—and on the streets of American cities. Democratic socialist Zohran Mamdani could say in 2023, “We have to make clear that when the boot of the NYPD is on your neck, it's been laced by the IDF”—and be elected mayor of New York two years later. In the immediate aftermath of 9/11, and for many years afterward, all this would have been hard to imagine.

These discouraging trends, however, form only part of 9/11's larger legacy, which includes hopeful developments, too. Among these are the substantial erosion of Islamist power in the Middle East itself, the broad success and growing technological sophistication of U.S. counterterrorism efforts, and New York's impressive recovery and resurgence. Weighing the gains and losses since, how should we think about this historic event and its implications for our future? *City Journal* asked a distinguished group of thinkers to assess the 9/11 legacy and the challenges that lie ahead. They consider a broad range of issues, such as changes within radical Islam and the geopolitics of the Middle East, the rise of the “Red–Green alliance” in the West, the shifting priorities and legal and technological tools of counterterrorism, the constitutional scope of executive power, the transformation of New York City, and the economic and human costs not only of 9/11 itself but of America's post-9/11 wars.

Together, these essays take stock of what the United States and its greatest city learned, and failed to learn, from that dark opening to the twenty-first century, the consequences of which continue to shape American life and politics.

— Brian C. Anderson, Editor, *City Journal*

Did America Win the War on Terror?

It depends on where you look.

Arthur Herman

CEO, Freedom's Forge Solutions LLC

Anyone over 40 remembers the global war on terror. As announced by President George W. Bush, it was a multipronged effort on five continents to eradicate the networks that had inspired and supported the attacks of September 11, 2001, along with the jihadi Muslim extremist movement that had murdered not only nearly 3,000 people that day but thousands more around the world, including in Europe and Israel, over five decades.

By one (admittedly biased) estimate, calculated 20 years after the attacks, the war on terror had cost \$8 trillion, including hundreds of billions spent to bring about regime change in Iraq and Afghanistan, where over 7,000 American military personnel lost their lives and 52,143 were maimed and injured.

The war on terror also led to a radical restructuring of government under the Patriot Act, which enabled unprecedented cooperation among federal intelligence agencies and expanded federal powers of electronic surveillance to uncover terrorist networks and their supporters. It gave the Treasury Department a new global reach to find and shut down the financial networks that paid for terror.

Here we are, 25 years later, though, and some would argue that, far from having eliminated support for Islamist terrorism, we see its sympathizers embedded in our politics.

The skeptics would point not only to our failure through two “endless wars” to bring about democratic regime change as promised in Iraq and Afghanistan but also to the spread of jihadi sentiment in the streets of American cities—and even on the campuses of our most elite colleges and universities. They would point to a popular commentator (Hasan Piker) who has declared that America “deserved 9/11,” and yet shows up on the campaign trail for some Democratic politicians.

In the aftermath of 9/11, University of Colorado–Boulder professor Ward Churchill was fired for saying something similar (he referred to the victims as “little Eichmanns”). Today, he’d be chair of his department or running for Congress.

A skeptic can find other glaring evidence that those who wished us harm on 9/11 have found a sympathetic home here in the United States. Consider the ebbing support for Israel, whose efforts to defend itself against enemies committed to its destruction are routinely denounced as “genocide” in the same elite circles that express sympathy for Hamas and other terrorist groups whose aims are explicitly genocidal.

We’ve seen attacks on Jewish students at leading college campuses and in the streets of major cities, where the presence of pro-Hamas banners and Palestinian flags is no longer shocking. And we’ve seen the election, in the city with the country’s largest Jewish population, of a mayor who has

repeatedly equivocated when pressed about Hamas and anti-Israel extremism.

Even worse, the Biden administration's open-borders policy led to a flood of terrorist watch-list candidates hammering at our gates. According to data from U.S. Customs and Border Protection, border officials encountered at least 382 individuals on the federal terrorist watch list trying to cross the southwestern border illegally between fiscal years 2021 and 2024. How many more slipped through undetected is anyone's guess, but at least 99 were released after being detained—with at least 50 still unaccounted for.

The U.S. Muslim population has more than doubled, from roughly 2 million in 2001 to more than 4 million today. It would be outrageous to claim that any beyond a small minority of American Muslims are terrorists or terrorist sympathizers. Yet there is no denying that some heavily Muslim communities—including Cedar-Riverside in Minneapolis and, more recently, Dearborn, Michigan—have emerged as centers of concern over Islamist radicalization.

In Europe, the terrorists seem to have gained the upper hand. Major cities, from London and Paris to Brussels, Madrid, and Milan, regularly see masked and black-garbed Islamists flood their streets to protest and riot, while political leaders cower before the social and cultural crisis they have helped create.

It's true that America hasn't suffered another attack as catastrophic as 9/11, though not for want of trying by terrorists seeking to emulate their predecessors. Instead, we've endured a series of lone-wolf attacks, from the 2009 Fort Hood shooting and the 2013 Boston Marathon bombing to attacks on synagogues and Jewish individuals. What would have seemed monstrous before 9/11 has become a recurring feature of American life.

Was the global war on terror worth it? When considering that the radical Islamist movement once run remotely from bases in the Middle East or Somalia is now excused or openly celebrated here at home within the ranks of the Democratic Party, a reasonable person could answer: No.

Yet strangely, in the Middle East itself, the terrorist cause has rarely been weaker.

Over the past two decades, we've seen al-Qaeda reduced to a shadow of its former self, and likewise its more savage and apocalyptic successor, ISIS. Though the Taliban remains firmly in control of Afghanistan after the U.S. withdrawal in 2021, and violence by radical Islamist groups has surged in Pakistan, the opportunities for jihadis to export terror beyond their borders have shrunk.

Over the past two years, Israel has essentially destroyed Hamas as a conventional fighting force and steadily reduced Hezbollah from a strategic threat to a diminished one, with little or no pushback from its Arab neighbors.

Iran has long occupied the center of the global terror network—yet its power and influence are at historical lows. When Donald Trump entered the White House for the second time, Iran was the dominant power in Syria, Lebanon, Iraq, and Gaza, as well as a major force in Yemen through its Houthi proxies. Tehran was also being regularly courted by Turkey and Qatar and had built a formidable alliance with both Russia and China.

Now, Iran has been mostly forced out of Syria, Iraq, and Gaza. Its proxies are in retreat both in Lebanon and the Arab peninsula, while Turkey has been aligning itself with the major new geopolitical force in the region: the Israeli-Arab Gulf state alliance that Trump has fostered. As for Russia and China, their influence in the Middle East has been reduced to cameo appearances rather than starring roles.

The biggest change of all has been in Saudi Arabia. Under Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman, the country that spawned most of the 9/11 terrorists has moved slowly but decisively into the U.S./Israel camp—one might even say the Western camp.

As for Israel itself—now, as always, the prime target of the leftist/jihadi movement—the Jewish state has never been stronger regionally or more firmly entrenched as a U.S. ally.

If this is what losing a war on terror in the Middle East looks like, it's hard to imagine what winning might resemble.

So why the disconnect with what has happened here at home?

In the end, we must conclude that the success of America's jihadi enemies domestically has less to do with their intrinsic strength and more to do with us—specifically, with a lack of confidence in our own values and civilization, especially the Judeo-Christian values on which our civilization is built.

This is particularly true among our college-educated elite today, but its roots go back to the days and months after 9/11 itself. We saw it first in the Left's swift change of heart when it came to standing up to terrorism following the massacre of Americans on that day. After some initial enthusiasm for taking the fight to the enemy by stamping out al-Qaeda in Afghanistan and then seizing weapons of mass destruction in Iraq, it didn't take much—a few photos from the rogue prison at Abu Ghraib—to convince the Left that a robust response to Islamist terrorism “wasn't who we were.” The Left soon decided that U.S. efforts were only creating more terrorists than we captured or killed—or fueling Islamophobia. The best way to defeat terrorism, the argument seemed to go, was to admit that we were in the wrong, as we had been since at least 1948.

That's why it's no good blaming the Bush administration alone for serial policy failures in Iraq, or Afghanistan, or anywhere else. The Left was primed for defeat from the start, as epitomized by the Obama administration's decision to cultivate closer relations with the Islamic Republic of Iran while distancing ourselves from Israel.

American support of Israel, or lack of it, has always been a barometer of how we feel about ourselves. During the Six-Day War in 1967, Americans never felt stronger, and support for Israel cut across the political spectrum. Today, elites are down on America and about their own future prospects. Support for Israel has paid the price.

Soul-searching about the war on terror has an earlier analogue in questions that lingered after the end of the Cold War in 1989. Two decades later, some of us asked: “Who won the Cold War?” We wondered because we saw leftist academics enthralled by Communism and socialism more



firmly entrenched in our colleges and universities than ever before. Now their students are out in the world, with their deeply distorted views of the U.S. and the West. That view, in turn, resonates in today's politics, shaping an equally skewed view of the Middle East and Israel and of America's global responsibilities.

Objectively, America as leader of the West has rarely been stronger. It is the sole superpower; the builder of a grand alliance between Israel and the Arab Middle East; the world's biggest producer of oil and gas; the leader in AI compute and innovation, the decisive door to the future. The United States dominates the globe. And yet.

Rarely have political perceptions been more out of step with empirical reality. After the massacre of 9/11, we avenged our countrymen and defeated evil where it truly lived. What we didn't know then was that we would have to defeat it here, as well. ¶

The Shifting Landscape of Islamist Terror

Protecting the United States has been a success, but defeating the movement that made 9/11 possible has not.

Bruce Hoffman

Professor, Georgetown University's School of Foreign Service; Senior Fellow, Council on Foreign Relations

Twenty-five years after 9/11, the United States faces a disquieting paradox. On the one hand, the country has largely been spared another major terrorist attack. Only one lethal incident directed by a foreign terrorist organization has succeeded on American soil since 9/11: the 2019 shooting at Naval Air Station Pensacola by a Saudi al-Qaeda operative, which killed three sailors and wounded eight others. This record is a towering achievement. In the dark and fearful days after 9/11 and during the early years of the war on terror, such an outcome was a matter of hope rather than certainty. The horrific attacks in Madrid in 2004, London in 2005, Mumbai in 2008, Paris in 2015, Sri Lanka on Easter Sunday in 2019, and Moscow in 2024 underscore the importance of the 9/11 Commission's recommendations and the Intelligence Reform and Terrorism Prevention Act of 2004 in keeping the United States safe from another catastrophic attack.

On the other hand, the broader war on terror has produced a more troubling, and still unresolved, outcome. Al-Qaeda survived, spawning a global network of franchises, allies, and even more lethal offshoots. A decade ago, its Iraqi affiliate, rebranded as the Islamic State, resurrected the long-defunct but deeply venerated Muslim caliphate: the supranational political-religious

authority governed by Islamic law (Sharia). At its peak, the Islamic State controlled some 40,000 square miles and ruled nearly 8 million people across Iraq and Syria. After a five-year campaign involving some 90 countries, the group was ultimately defeated. But the ideology—and divinely ordained narrative—that sustained it, and has long guided al-Qaeda, remains a force driving both organizations.



The situation today therefore remains worrisome. The Taliban again rules Afghanistan, with al-Qaeda reportedly having recently reestablished its pre-9/11 terrorist training camp at Tarnak Farm. Al-Qaeda's affiliate in the Sahel, JNIM (Jama'at Nusrat al-Islam wal-Muslimin, or the Group for the Support of Islam and Muslims), has besieged

Mali's capital and threatens to overrun the country. In East Africa, al-Shabaab continues to undermine the stability of the Somali government, while the Islamic State's network of branches wages violent campaigns across Africa, the Middle East, and Asia. In recent years, its adherents have carried out attacks in countries as diverse as Iran, Turkey, Russia, and the United States.

Two factors explain the resilience of the Salafi-jihadi terrorist movement. The first is ideology. Both al-Qaeda and ISIS draw from the same intellectual tradition, rooted in the conviction that Muslims are under siege from foreign infidels, corrupt apostate regimes, and a Western liberal order fundamentally hostile to Islam. That worldview was most powerfully articulated by Abdullah Azzam, the Palestinian-Jordanian cleric who became Osama bin Laden's mentor. Building on the medieval theologian Ibn Taymiyyah's treatise *The Religious and Moral Doctrine of Jihad* and the writings of his own mentor, the Egyptian Islamist thinker Sayyid Qutb—especially his seminal work *Milestones*—Azzam transformed the concept of *fard ayn*, the individual Muslim's obligation to defend the faith wherever it is threatened, into a universal call to arms. Azzam was assassinated in 1989, but the clash-of-civilizations framework that he advanced remains the ideological bedrock of both organizations.

The second factor is organizational adaptation. After al-Qaeda's core leadership was decimated following 9/11, the group devolved authority to regional franchises. Within eight years, for example, its affiliate in Yemen, AQAP (al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula), had surpassed the parent organization as the most serious terrorist threat to the United States and its allies. ISIS replicated that model less than a decade later, dispersing into 33 formal "provinces" across nearly a dozen countries. This decentralized structure has enabled both groups to absorb repeated military setbacks while continuing to marshal fighters and resources to prosecute the war that bin Laden declared 30 years ago.

The differences between al-Qaeda and ISIS have always been more tactical and hence stylistic than strategic or substantive—matters of tone, not ideology or outcome. Both reject democracy

as incompatible with Islamic governance, both seek the restoration of a caliphate under strict Sharia law, and both frame Western influence and intervention in Muslim lands as necessitating violent resistance. When the Islamic State's founder and leader, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, announced the caliphate in June 2014 and declared himself caliph, he was not departing from bin Laden's vision but accelerating it.

With this bold move, al-Baghdadi dramatically upstaged al-Qaeda. His aim was to achieve what bin Laden had only promised: nothing less than redrawing the map of the Middle East, erasing



the artificial states and borders created by the Western powers after World War I, and laying the foundation for the resurrection of a Muslim empire stretching from Spain across North Africa, through the Middle East and the Caucasus, into South and Southeast Asia.

Though the new caliphate proved short-lived and ultimately fell to the international coalition arrayed against it, the surviving remnants of the Islamic State continue to derive satisfaction from having withstood the combined power of a massive coalition led by the most technologically advanced military in history: the U.S. armed forces. In one of his last publicly released video addresses, in 2004, bin Laden similarly boasted that al-Qaeda had defeated the Red Army in Afghanistan and forced its withdrawal in 1989. He even claimed to have set in motion the chain of events that led to



the collapse of the Soviet Union and the demise of Communism as a global ideology. Having survived the war on terror proclaimed by President George W. Bush, al-Qaeda, bin Laden argued, had demonstrated that the same fate would eventually befall the world's other superpower, the United States. For both ISIS and al-Qaeda, their continued existence reinforces the narrative that the ultimate triumph of Salafi-jihadism is divinely ordained.

If bin Laden were alive today, he might well be pleased. The enterprise he launched in August 1988 has survived decades of sustained, international counterterrorism pressure. And it continues to inspire violence and resistance, attracting new recruits and supporters who were not even alive on September 11, 2001. This is exactly what bin Laden's chief bodyguard,

Abu Jandal, said would happen. "In case of his death, I think he will be a symbol for all those who follow him," Abu Jandal told bin Laden's biographer, journalist Peter Bergen, as recounted in Bergen's *The Osama bin Laden I Know*. "His death will be a great force for stirring up everybody's emotions and enthusiasm to follow him on the path to martyrdom."

The result, a quarter-century after the epochal 9/11 attacks, is a movement that has defied predictions of its demise. It has franchised itself across continents, recruited fighters born after 9/11, and sustained an ideology compelling enough to inspire violence from North Africa to Southeast Asia. Protecting the American homeland has been a success. Defeating the movement that made 9/11 possible has not—at least, not yet. ¶



September 11's Long and Bloody Geopolitical Road

The attacks inaugurated a struggle to the death that dragged on for decades and only now might be reaching its conclusion—in Iran.

Martin Gurri

Author and Former CIA Analyst

For those of us who live in the Washington, D.C., area, the atrocities of September 11, 2001, were profoundly personal. I drove my children to see the scarred face of the Pentagon. I wanted them to remember that there was a cost to being American and that our way of life had been purchased in the blood of courageous men and women. Gazing at the wreckage, already draped in a huge flag, I felt a terrible sadness but great anger as well. That mix of emotions would shape our politics for years afterward.

But the consequences of 9/11 transcended the trauma and horror; they were primarily geopolitical. A struggle to the death began that day, dragging on for decades and only now, with luck, nearing its end in the fire and fury raining down from the skies of Iran. The conflict pitted the liberal West against the most radical forms of political Islam. Though the contest was quite disproportionate—“asymmetrical”—it has claimed American lives, drained American treasure, and shaped the world over the last generation.

Most Americans remain unclear about the nature of the conflict. For that, we have only ourselves to blame. President George W. Bush was never the fool portrayed by late-night comics, but neither was he a strategic thinker. The “global war

on terror” was a categorical error. We were not fighting terrorists—an endless and impossible mission, in any case. We were fighting the most radical and violent forms of political Islam: al-Qaeda and ISIS on the Sunni side of the sectarian divide; and the Iranian regime and its proxies in Syria, Iraq, Lebanon, Yemen, and Gaza on the Shia side. These groups often fought one another, but they shared the same grim vision of human relations: a slaughterhouse of infidels, with Americans first in line and themselves as righteous butchers.

Osama bin Laden, the mastermind who emitted his high-pitched laugh over the bodies of thousands of innocents, got exactly what he wanted from the crime: recognition as a major global player by the world's most powerful country. After 9/11, he could hardly be ignored. I was at the CIA when I watched the second airliner crash into the South Tower, and I knew immediately that the question I was asking myself would soon be asked of us, from the president on down: Who are these people? In the months and years that followed, I watched every bin Laden video and read every book by his second-in-command, Ayman al-Zawahiri—all in translation, alas, since I'm not fluent in Arabic—until a pattern emerged that could be applied, with reasonable

accuracy, to Islamist movements generally, including the Iranian ayatollahs.

Like the precursors of National Socialism in Germany, the Islamists are creatures of cultural despair. History has betrayed and humiliated them. Promised by their religion a place in a dominant caliphate, they instead find themselves living in weak, insignificant states whose societies imitate Western culture and whose rulers they regard as stooges of Western powers. The urge to annihilate history is overwhelming—it has taken the form of smashing ancient ruins and vandalizing museums. A romantic longing for the glorious but distant past combines with a revolutionary loathing of the present. The explanation is simple: decline resulted from the corruption of the faith. Muhammad's companions were a ragged band of virtuous believers who conquered half the world. That is the model. Islamists feel invincible because their religion makes them fearless, a conviction captured in their oft-repeated refrain: "You love life, while we love death."

They were certainly fond of killing. History had to be redeemed at the point of a gun and purified in rivers of blood. Al-Qaeda murdered 2,977 strangers on 9/11. Between war and executions, ISIS was probably responsible for more than 100,000 deaths; in a fit of nostalgia, it also brought back crucifixion and slavery. Nobody knows the total number of victims who have disappeared into the maw of the Islamic Republic of Iran, but estimates for the repression that put down recent street revolts run as high as 43,000 deaths. Multiply that by 47 years of violent rule, add the toll from its terrorist proxies, and you arrive at a terrible bottom line of extinction and suffering.





President Barack Obama, Vice President Joe Biden, and members of the national security team in the White House situation room getting live updates on the mission that would kill Osama bin Laden, May 1, 2011

Pete Souza via Wikimedia Commons

By their own reckoning, until recently, the Islamists were winning. The United States fought a brutal war in Iraq only to leave the country a semi-protectorate of Iran. Syria was already an Iranian satellite. In Afghanistan, American forces withdrew precipitously as the Taliban swept back into power. Hezbollah dominated Lebanon. Hamas ruled Gaza. The ayatollahs were quietly advancing toward a nuclear capability. Few in the West seemed to care. The anger that 9/11 sparked had been exhausted by years of costly, inconclusive wars.

That was the situation on October 6, 2023. The next day, everything changed. October 7 stands as a kind of bookend to 9/11: the moment Israel—and, more slowly, the United States—awoke to

the reality that indifference was not a safe option because Islamist violence would not simply burn itself out. The sociopolitical pathologies of the Middle East had to be confronted once again. On that day, Hamas added to the count of Islamist victims: about 1,200 were killed, many of them civilians, including women and children, with 251 taken hostage. The effect of these atrocities on Western opinion, however, was not anger or sadness but a surge of anti-Zionism that, in many quarters, spilled into anti-Semitism and has only intensified since. A considerable segment of the public in the United States and Europe, it turns out, shares in the Islamists' repudiation of history.

But the decisive shift, once again, has been strategic. From the vantage point of October 6,

the region today looks almost unrecognizable. Israel has crushed Hamas and occupies much of Gaza. Hezbollah, defeated and decapitated by Israel, has lost its grip on Lebanon. In Syria, regime change has installed a government openly hostile to Iran. The prime minister of Iraq, head of a multi-sectarian, multiethnic parliamentary democracy, traveled to Washington to bend the knee before Donald Trump; it is by no means the least remarkable aspect of this moment that the Iraq War seems to have been won retroactively. In Iran itself, the leadership has been decimated, the economy crippled, and the regime's nuclear program set back by years through coordinated U.S. and Israeli strikes. The long arc of violence that began with the shock and loss of 9/11 may, at last, be bending toward a satisfactory close.

The heart of the matter was always Iran, and here the conceptual blindness imposed by the war on terror led us astray. We treated terrorists as nonstate actors on the model of al-Qaeda: enemies we could destroy anywhere, by whatever means we chose, without the least compunction. But Iran was an ancient civilization with a recognizable government and a seat at the United Nations. A succession of presidents felt what might be called a Westphalian reticence about imposing American military power on Tehran.

Barack Obama's policies carried this logic to its conclusion. While relentlessly pursuing nonstate terrorists, he also released billions of dollars in frozen Iranian assets and struck a lopsided nuclear deal that, in effect, denied Tehran little of consequence. It was like sentencing the local bookie to death while desperately trying to befriend his boss, the mafia godfather. It couldn't work, and it didn't.

Though the architecture of the new Middle East will not be fully discernible until the Iran conflict is settled, much already seems decided. Russia is withdrawing from Syria. China declined to intervene on behalf of its Iranian ally. Europe is largely absent. Iran is a wounded shadow of its former self. The Islamist regime may survive, but it will require a long period of recovery, and it is unlikely ever to possess nuclear weapons. That

In the aftermath of 9/11, President Bush said that the Islamists “hate our freedoms.” That was not quite right. What they hated most was our power.

leaves the United States as the region's dominant power, with an opportunity to mold what comes next. The Gulf states—and perhaps Saudi Arabia, too—have discovered that they have more in common with Israel than with the Palestinians. The opportunity now exists to build a stronger Abraham Accords coalition capable of preventing any Iranian resurgence.

Twenty-five years after 9/11, we can acknowledge that the ensuing conflicts changed us—and not always for the better. At airports, we accept being groped by the TSA without a murmur. Through the Patriot Act, we granted the federal government unprecedented surveillance powers. We were afraid then, and with good reason. But perhaps the time has come to reconsider policies that treat every American citizen as a potential bin Laden. We are not the enemy. It is possible to be both safe and free. In the aftermath of 9/11, President Bush said that the Islamists “hate our freedoms.” That was not quite right. What they hated most was our power. It would be a fitting memorial to those who died—not only on that awful day but in all the struggles that followed—if we reasserted the freedom and primacy of the individual over the smothering protections of the state. ¶¶

The West Faces Two Islams

A long-forecast civilizational struggle increasingly plays out not in the Middle East but in Western countries themselves.

Zineb Riboua

Research Fellow, Hudson Institute's Center for Peace and Security in the Middle East

Published in 1996, Samuel Huntington's *Clash of Civilizations* predicted that, with the end of the Cold War, global conflict would center on the divide between Islamic and Western civilizations. Thirty years later, however, and a quarter-century after 9/11, the principal fault line runs through Islam itself, separating two ideological worlds.

Within Western diaspora communities, Islam has become intertwined with Third-Worldism and postcolonial theory, both of which see Western imperialism as the great evil of the modern era. Meantime, much of the Middle East and Asia has turned toward pragmatism, normalization, and acceptance of Western predominance as a geopolitical reality. The gap between these rival outlooks now exceeds the divide between Islam and the West that Huntington anticipated when his book first appeared.

After 9/11, American strategy focused on political Islam. Al-Qaeda and its eventual Islamic State offshoot, the Taliban, the Muslim Brotherhood, Hamas, Hezbollah, and Iran's Islamic Republic differed sharply in theology and tactics but shared a revolutionary ambition to overturn the Western-led order. Today, that Islamist challenge has fragmented. Al-Qaeda has splintered, the Islamic State has lost its caliphate, Egypt has outlawed the Muslim Brotherhood, and the Gulf monarchies increasingly treat Islamist movements as threats.

Iran remains the principal revolutionary holdout. The Islamic Republic defines itself through

opposition to the United States and Israel while sustaining a regional network of armed proxies. Yet the foundations of that project have weakened. Hezbollah has suffered major battlefield losses, Iranian influence in Syria has contracted, nationwide protests in 2019 and 2022 exposed deep domestic disillusionment, and the ideals of the 1979 Iranian Revolution command little enthusiasm among younger generations. Tehran still exports its revolutionary ideology, but its influence across the broader Middle East continues to wane.

Much of the Middle East has chosen a different course. The Abraham Accords institutionalized security cooperation and trade with Israel. Morocco expanded ties with Jerusalem to strengthen diplomacy, defense, and economic growth. The United Arab Emirates built partnerships spanning artificial intelligence, aviation, finance, and defense. Saudi Arabia evaluates normalization through the lens of security guarantees, advanced technology, its Vision 2030 modernization program, and regional stability. Across the region, partnerships are judged less by ideology than by the capabilities they deliver.

This transformation reflects a broader shift in how Arab and Muslim states understand statecraft. Scientific discovery, industrialization, and institutional innovation have long rewarded societies that adopt the world's most advanced technologies, regardless of their origin. Middle



Aidan Bartos via Unsplash

Eastern governments have embraced the same logic after experiencing the costs of resisting Western innovations—most notably, the Ottoman Empire’s centuries-long restriction on printing in Arabic script until 1727, which left the region lagging in the spread of knowledge long after Europe had surged ahead.

That historical stagnation gave rise to a century of Arab intellectual discourse centered on the crisis of modernity: the painful question of why Islamic societies had fallen behind the West. Thinkers such as Shakib Arslan, in works like *Our Decline: Its Causes and Remedies*, diagnosed cultural isolation and technological backwardness as the root of the problem and urged selective emulation of Western advances. Leading-edge technologies have become strategic assets because they determine military capability, economic competitiveness, and geopolitical influence. Leaders once legitimized through anti-Western resistance now measure success through modernization.

Western intellectual life has followed a different trajectory. Universities interpret the Middle East through postcolonial theory, with Edward Said’s *Orientalism* becoming one of the field’s canonical texts. Within that framework, the Israeli–Palestinian conflict serves as the paradigmatic story of settler colonialism and resistance. After

October 7, these ideas spread beyond academia into campus protests, divestment campaigns, professional associations, philanthropic organizations, and elections. Palestine became the organizing symbol for broader critiques of American influence, capitalism, and the liberal international order. Muslim identity merged with narratives of dispossession and resistance.

The consequences extend well beyond the campus. Anti-Israel activism once largely confined to Islamist organizations now operates comfortably within progressive politics. Zohran Mamdani’s appointment of Ramzi Kassem—who represented Ahmed al-Darbi after his conviction for the al-Qaeda-linked *MV Limburg* bombing—as New York City’s chief counsel illustrates that institutional migration. University encampments, municipal resolutions invoking “from the river to the sea,” and coalitions organized around decolonization reflect the same evolution. Revolutionary Islam now finds expression through postcolonial theory rather than religious doctrine. Iranian-aligned clerical networks in places such as Dearborn, Michigan, frame public life around opposition to American influence and solidarity with Tehran.

The same rift has hardened in Europe, where diaspora activism contrasts with the pragmatism of Middle Eastern governments. Universities

Political evolution within civilizations matters more than the boundaries between them.

and progressive institutions have embraced postcolonialism, entrenching narratives of permanent resistance and contributing to a sharp rise in anti-Semitism, particularly on British campuses, where incidents increased more than fourfold after October 7. Gulf states view these environments as incubators of radicalization. The UAE, for example, removed British universities from its state scholarship program—even though nearly 9,000 Emirati students had studied in the U.K. in recent years—while still funding study in Israel.

These trajectories suggest sustained confrontation. The version of Islam that has emerged within Western universities, activist groups, and progressive politics clashes with both the Western societies in which it operates and the Middle Eastern governments now abandoning revolutionary politics.

Three forces drive this collision. First, the opposing sides draw political legitimacy from different sources. Much diaspora activism is rooted in historical grievance, anticolonial struggle, and opposition to Western influence, producing an anti-system worldview in which cooperation with the U.S.-led order can itself signify submission or betrayal. Pragmatic Middle Eastern governments increasingly see cooperation with the United States and Israel as a means to strengthen security, attract investment, acquire technology, and accelerate economic growth. This divide now plays out across Western democracies, where boycotts, campus protests, municipal resolutions, and electoral campaigns target both Arab governments pursuing these partnerships and the Western institutions that support them.

Second, priorities have diverged between governments in the Middle East and North Africa and some of their diasporas in the West. Regional governments increasingly prioritize investment, technology, military strength, and economic growth. Saudi Arabia and the UAE, for example, are investing heavily in AI and data centers. Meantime, several pro-Palestinian movements in the West have expanded their campaigns from opposition to Israeli technology contracts to opposition to the data centers and cloud infrastructure supporting them. The divide increasingly places diaspora activism at odds with the economic and technological priorities of regional governments and complicates relations with the United States.

Third, Western institutions amplify the diaspora vision far beyond its demographic weight. Universities, philanthropic foundations, professional associations, media organizations, and segments of electoral politics have absorbed postcolonial ideas that recast Middle Eastern affairs through the lens of decolonization and racial justice. By contrast, Gulf restrictions on Islamist financing and expanding cooperation with Israel reflect a deliberate effort to contain the same ideological currents sweeping across Western public life. The United States and Europe thus face pressure from two directions: an ideological movement extending its institutional reach at home; and regional allies that regard that same movement as a direct threat.

Huntington was right that culture would matter after the Cold War, but he misidentified the principal fault line. Political evolution within civilizations matters more than the boundaries between them.

The United States will continue to confront Islamism in the twenty-first century. But the principal challenge will not come from Huntington's civilizational Islam, but instead from the version the West has itself helped cultivate: a diaspora Islam molded by Third-Worldism, postcolonial grievance, and a politics of permanent resistance. ¶¶



What We Have Forgotten About 9/11

Not the event itself and its grim losses, but the fundamental truth that a real difference exists between us and our enemies

Tal Fortgang

Legal Policy Fellow, Manhattan Institute

Twenty-five years after 9/11, the Islamist war against the liberal, democratic West still shapes our daily lives. Most Americans recognize that certain people and groups around the world want to destroy us—sometimes for reasons we can comprehend, sometimes not. Remembering 9/11 stands, in part, for the proposition that we will not allow the terrorists to win. Our laws, at least as written, have codified that remembrance. They reflect our national conclusion that foreign terrorist organizations are among the most depraved criminal enterprises imaginable. It was once commonplace to hear President George W. Bush declare that you were either part of the free world or aligned with the terrorists. Yet 25 years later, that ultimatum seems far less self-evident.

Consider the axis of leftism and Islamism—the Red–Green alliance, whose cultural and political prominence has grown in recent years. Dalliance with foreign terrorist organizations is part of its organizing ethos. The shocking proliferation of terrorist paraphernalia at post–October 7 protests in 2023 testifies to the rallying power of symbolism—in this case, a symbolism emphasizing sacrificial moral purity and conscientious opposition to decadent Western policies. In the Red–Green worldview,

9/11 signifies the moment Americans were forced to confront the consequences of their own evil, now visited upon them. Noam Chomsky often advanced versions of this argument on behalf of the Third-Worldist Left; clerics around the world (including some in the United States) have, unsurprisingly, echoed the Islamist account of America’s misdeeds.

What has changed today is where expressing such sentiments might get you. In articulating the inescapable conclusion of this line of thinking—“America deserved 9/11,” as he put it—Hasan Piker has entered today’s Democratic mainstream, not the pariahdom that would have resulted in the early years after 9/11. (To leave no doubt about his views, he recently moved a framed copy of the *New York Times* cover page from September 12, 2001, to be visible over his shoulder while streaming.) Several Democratic Socialists of America candidates have displayed oddly conciliatory instincts toward al-Qaeda and 9/11. Drawing a moral equivalence between the U.S. and its enemies has become an important signal in progressive politics, with 9/11 equivocation as its touchstone.

In our mimetic culture, a transgressive message delivered under the guise of forbidden truth can



Ella de Kross via Unsplash

influence millions of susceptible minds. That is what happened in late 2023, shortly after Israel began its counteroffensive in Gaza, when Osama bin Laden’s 2002 “Letter to America” went viral on TikTok. As the *New York Times* reported, the letter prefigured our Red–Green moment perfectly:

One video with nearly 100,000 likes showed a TikTok user at her kitchen sink with the caption: “Trying to go back to life as normal after reading Osama bin Laden’s ‘Letter to America’ and realizing everything we learned about the Middle East, 9/11, and ‘terrorism’ was a lie.” In a video with more than 60,000 views, another user said the letter showed her that America was a “plague on the entire world.”

Such messaging, amplified by algorithms, feeds young Americans’ worst instincts while advancing the Chinese Communist Party’s broader efforts to sow division in the West. But that explains only half the equation. Exposure to bin Laden’s

justifications for murdering innocents is one thing—but why would anyone find those justifications compelling? And why did they resonate in November 2023?

To be sure, some of the initial videos were likely inorganic, scripted to create the impression that freethinking young people were reclaiming Islamism from its paranoid American critics. But at least some young Americans proved receptive to the idea that suicide attacks targeting civilians were an understandable, if extreme, response to America’s actions abroad and its support for Israel. Our revulsion toward terror, rooted in a tradition of morally constrained violence, has been eroding. Replacing it is an alien, Manichaean morality preoccupied with heroes and villains, in which the good are licensed to do whatever they deem necessary to liberate themselves from the evil.

Complementing the new morality is the contention that the United States is a force for evil, perhaps uniquely so in world history. How could

such a notion catch on? Here the thesis offered by critic Paul Berman in *Terror and Liberalism*, analyzing the world's rush of sympathy to the perpetrators of suicide bombings in Israel during the opening years of the 2000s—what might be called the era of High Islamist Terror—becomes inescapable:

There was, in short, an idea that each new act of murder and suicide testified to how oppressive were the Israelis. Palestinian terror, in this view, was the measure of Israeli guilt. The more grotesque the terror, the deeper the guilt. And, if unfathomable motives appeared to drive the suicide bombers forward, the oppressiveness of Israel was likewise deemed to be, by logical inference, unfathomable—a bottomless oppression, which had given rise to the maximum of violence, which is suicide murder.

So, too, with 9/11—and, years later, the macabre spectacle of October 7. If others launch such attacks against us, the assumption must be that they are responding to something intolerable in our own conduct. The alternative—that their violence is irrational and unjustifiable, compelled by some condemnable approach to solving our differences—would require admitting that Western ways of governing and ordering society are, in key respects, superior to those of our rivals. Better, then, to concede the opposite: we made them do it, and we had it coming.

Ironically, this conclusion follows from the liberal pretension of universal rationality advancing toward the future, which leaves no room for fanatic theocrats lashing out with hatred for the West. Yet by turning the accusatory finger inward, it systematically undermines the liberal project to the point of inevitable collapse. It is little wonder that progressives have offered so little resistance to the Red-Green march through their institutions. Until they can say that America and its allies are better than their enemies and deserve to prevail, they will keep ceding ground to those who equivocate about 9/11—if not worse.

George W. Bush, much maligned, was actually right: you are either with us or against us. Our

terrorism laws are designed to force institutions around the world to choose between affiliating with the United States—its markets, citizens, and institutions—or aligning with groups we have designated as a uniquely dangerous class of adversary. Congress has prohibited all forms of support for foreign terrorist organizations, which “are so tainted by their criminal conduct that any contribution to such an organization facilitates that conduct.” In upholding that principle, the Supreme Court has ruled that even some forms of speech may constitute prosecutable material support if they confer a benefit on a terrorist group.

Our enforcement of these laws, however, lags behind their apparent implications. Expressions of support for terrorist organizations abound, from city streets to conferences where some American lawmakers voice enthusiastic backing. Some of this activity may be protected by the First Amendment. But some of it—from conspiring to disrupt American military supply chains to stealing and burning American flags—is surely not. Yet investigations and prosecutions remain rare.

There is at least one reason for this. As I argue in the forthcoming autumn issue of *City Journal*, courts have been reluctant to hold defendants liable for supporting terrorist organizations, inventing new requirements of knowledge and coordination that the law itself does not impose. This is the legal, highly technical expression of a broader shift over the past 25 years. We have not forgotten 9/11, but we have forgotten that a real difference exists between us and our enemies—and that Americans are right to insist that their nation belongs to those who believe in Americanism, not those who aid and abet its enemies. ¶



The Emergency Presidency at 25

September 11 launched an era of executive power that has only expanded in the years since.

Michael McConnell

Richard & Frances Mallery Professor, Stanford Law School; Senior Fellow, Hoover Institution

Twenty-five years ago, we suffered the most devastating attack on U.S. soil since Pearl Harbor. Ratcheting up the shock from the death and destruction at the heart of Manhattan was uncertainty about the future: When might the terrorists strike again? Three days after the attack, President George W. Bush visited Ground Zero and delivered, impromptu, some of the most stirring words any president has spoken. Climbing atop a pile of rubble with a megaphone in hand, he was interrupted by voices in the crowd, complaining that they could not hear him. “I can hear you!” Bush responded. “I can hear you, the rest of the world hears you, and the people who knocked these buildings down will hear all of us soon.” Loud chants of “U.S.A., U.S.A.,” ensued.

That same day, the president declared a national emergency. The attacks, he explained in Proclamation 7463, and the “continuing and immediate threat of further attacks,” required the government to activate extraordinary powers, effectively putting the nation on a wartime footing. The directive would lead to far-reaching changes to the national security apparatus, to domestic surveillance practices, to immigration and travel policies—and to a string of wars that seems never to end.

Bush’s statement that the dangers were “continuing” as well as “immediate” proved more prescient than he could have known. We live in the shadow of the 9/11 emergency a quarter of a century later. Every president since Bush has extended the emergency declared that day. The extraordinary powers that the nation’s 43rd president invoked on September 14, 2001, have become ordinary.

The effect is to concentrate power in the hands of one person, the president of the United States. In one sense, this would be no surprise to the Framers of the U.S. Constitution. They created a single executive in part because the contingencies of public affairs demand what Alexander Hamilton called “decision, activity, secrecy, and dispatch”—features characteristic of a one-person executive but inherently lacking in a numerous legislative assembly. Hamilton further pointed out that “energy in the executive . . . is essential to the protection of the community against foreign attacks.”

Yet the Constitution contains no emergency clause. An emergency may provide occasion for the exercise of powers that are latent in ordinary times, but it does not create new constitutional powers. This, too, was deliberate. As Justice

Robert Jackson wrote during the Korean War, the Founders “knew what emergencies were, knew the pressures they engender for authoritative action, knew, too, how they afford a ready pretext for usurpation. We may also suspect that they suspected that emergency powers would tend to kindle emergencies.”

We now live in an age of unending emergencies: 9/11, the financial meltdown of 2008, and the Covid-19 pandemic being the most prominent. Not surprisingly, each pitted emergency response against civil liberties, and each left the White House playing a more dominant role in the American republic.

The transformation has unfolded in stages. To be sure, President Bush invoked unilateral authorities under the National Emergencies Act, a statute enacted in 1976, but for his most dramatic and long-lasting actions, he turned to Congress, as the Constitution demands. He went to Congress for authorization to start the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, and to Congress to get greatly expanded powers of national security surveillance. Congress passed two Authorizations for Use of Military Force, as well as the USA Patriot Act, by overwhelming bipartisan majorities. Both statutes remain in force today.

Thus, for all the talk of his executive unilateralism, Bush assumed his increased emergency powers the way the Constitution stipulates: by getting them through Congress.

The Covid emergency likewise led to vastly increased executive powers, arguably with even greater impact on civil liberties and ordinary life: closures of houses of worship and of schools, vaccine mandates, suppression of dissenting opinion about fact and policy, landlord-eviction moratoriums, and the like. For the most part, the presidents during Covid, Donald Trump and Joe Biden, also went to Congress for their emergency powers.

But unlike George W. Bush, Biden frequently did not abide by the restrictions and guardrails Congress placed. For example, the Biden administration imposed a nearly universal

The president's ability to seize power by declaring emergencies has become a grave danger to our constitutional system of checks and balances. This is not a Donald Trump problem—it is a presidency problem.

vaccination mandate in the name of the Occupational Safety and Health Act, a statute designed to address dangers stemming from the workplace, not from outside sources then affecting the workplace. And when Congress's short-term eviction moratorium expired, the administration extended it and expanded its scope. (The Supreme Court invalidated both actions.) Thus, Covid represented a step not only toward greater constriction of the freedom that Americans have over their private lives but also toward executive-branch action lacking legislative warrant.

As for Trump, he has declared approximately 20 national emergencies in just over five years in office, far more on an annual basis than any predecessor. In no major area apart from taxation and expenditures has Trump gone to Congress to authorize the exercise of new powers.

His tariff executive order of April 2, 2025, is typical. Invoking a statute that does not even mention tariffs and had never before been used for that purpose, Trump declared an “emergency” and an “unusual and extraordinary threat” based on “large and persistent” trade deficits, and on that basis unilaterally raised taxes amounting to hundreds of billions of dollars on American firms



that import foreign goods. Putting aside whether American trade deficits are truly a “threat” (most economists say no), it is hard to call a condition persisting for half a century an “emergency,” let alone “unusual and extraordinary.” We have run a trade deficit every quarter since 1974; and as a percentage of GDP, the deficit has barely moved up or down in the last dozen years. If this is an emergency, then every problem a president sees is an emergency, and he can take action to address it without bothering to deal with Congress.

The president’s ability to seize power by declaring emergencies has become a grave danger to our constitutional system of checks and balances. This is not a Donald Trump problem—it is a presidency problem. It requires little imagination to see what future presidents of a different ideological disposition might do with these powers.

There is an obvious solution, but it will require Congress to stand up and act—and to do so with such overwhelming majorities as to override the inevitable presidential veto. The National

Emergencies Act must be amended to change the nature of congressional oversight. Under the current version, presidential declarations of emergency last only a year but may be extended unless Congress passes a joint resolution disapproving them. The rub is that joint resolutions are subject to presidential veto, which means that a president may keep emergency powers in place with the support of as few as one-third of the members of either house of Congress.

This provision should be amended to provide that emergencies cease after a year unless Congress passes a joint resolution affirmatively extending them. Such a motion should have fast-track status and be exempt from a filibuster. This would mean that no emergency can persist without the support of both the president and a majority in Congress. This reform would preserve the executive energy, speed, and dispatch necessary to deal with genuine emergencies while also ensuring that the people’s representatives get a vote on efforts to make permanent changes to how Americans live. ¶



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Protecting New York from Terror Today

A discussion with
former NYPD director
of intelligence analysis
Mitchell Silber

Judith Miller

Contributing Editor, *City Journal*;
Adjunct Fellow, Manhattan Institute



Hudson Graves via Unsplash

Soon after 9/11, law enforcement and national security officials identified the perpetrators of the deadliest terrorist attack in American history.

While Osama bin Laden, the attack's architect, was killed in 2011 and al-Qaeda is now a shadow of its former self, New York faces no shortage of potential threats a quarter-century after September 11. Police Commissioner Jessica Tisch recently said that New York City now confronts the most perilous threat environment that she has seen in her 18 years in government. "It's an everything, everywhere all at once terrorist threat environment," said Rebecca Weiner, the New York Police Department's Deputy Commissioner for Intelligence and Counterterrorism.

Today, the threats are so wide-ranging, idiosyncratic, individualized, and unpredictable that they require an extensive and creative

response—and not just from the NYPD. Protecting New York, which remains the world's top terrorist target, increasingly requires coordination among federal homeland security agencies, some 18,000 state and local law-enforcement groups, and nonprofit organizations like the Community Security Initiative.

Created in 2019 by the UJA-Federation of New York and the Jewish Community Relations Council with an initial \$4 million grant supplemented by philanthropists, CSI is a community-based counterterrorism and security organization that helps protect New York's 1.8 million Jews and the city's some 3,400 synagogues, schools, camps, museums, and other Jewish institutions against threats that have soared since Israel's response to Hamas's invasion of the Jewish state on October 7, 2023, the deadliest attack against Jews since the Holocaust.



“We can’t pick and choose which threats we try to prevent,” observes Mitchell Silber, a former NYPD director of intelligence analysis who has headed the CSI since its establishment. “We must try to thwart all of them all at once.” In 2025, his group passed along to law enforcement some 221 of these suspected “threats to life.” This year, the rate has increased.

In interviews with me, Silber described some of what the NYPD and nonprofits like his are doing to prevent another mass-casualty attack in the city and protect New York Jews from growing threats posed by the Left and the Right, as well as by religiously, ideologically, and grievance-motivated groups and individuals. The current environment, he says, is “a perfect storm—the most precarious moment for American Jews since their arrival on American shores 352 years ago.”

Nationally, four deadly attacks (two of them in the New York metro area) on Jewish targets over a 14-month period from October 2018 to December 2019, which left 16 people dead, led Jewish national security experts to conclude that Jews could no longer rely solely on the NYPD’s impressive resources for their protection. Jewish New Yorkers—the largest Jewish population outside Israel—account for roughly 25 percent of America’s 6 million Jews. About 60 percent of all hate crimes and extremist plots targeting New York and New Yorkers are directed against Jews.

“The threat has changed,” said Silber. “So has our culture. While most people agreed after 9/11 that terrorism was evil and civilians were innocent victims, now terrorism’s evil seems up for debate and Jews are often seen as legitimate targets. On the internet and even from some politicians, you hear that Jewish terror victims are fair game.” Because of Israel’s massive response to October 7 in Gaza, he said, “it’s not uncommon to hear social-media influencers and even politicians say, ‘they had it coming.’”

Fortunately, says Silber, the NYPD’s intelligence and counterterrorism “architecture”—the post-9/11 counterterrorism programs created by former Police Commissioner Raymond Kelly, Central Intelligence Agency veteran David Cohen, and the late Michael Sheehan, a former government official and military officer—“remains intact, durable and effective.”

Since 9/11, the NYPD, working with the Federal Bureau of Investigation’s New York Joint Terrorism Task Force—which includes representatives from some 50 federal, state, and local agencies—has thwarted roughly 20 known terrorist plots, along with dozens more never publicized, against the city and its residents.

Some 36,000 officers conversant in 168 languages—roughly 1,000 assigned to counterterrorism—are now supported by a fleet of boats patrolling the waters around Manhattan, counter-drone aircraft, explosive-detection dogs, bomb squads, heavy-weapons teams, additional plainclothes officers, a dozen detectives embedded

“Mass casualty can now be the result of a simple grievance—an individual who drives a car bomb into a building. Grievance is the taproot of all evil.”

— Mitchell Silber

with police departments overseas, and more than 2,600 Argus cameras linked to a data center staffed by intelligence analysts. There, AI-driven algorithms help detect “anomalous” packages and behavior. “AI doesn’t need to take lunch breaks or go to the bathroom,” Silber said.

With the NYPD’s operational and intelligence practices in its institutional DNA, Silber’s CSI employs what he calls “a layered defense.” His staff, which has grown more than fourfold since October 7—from six to more than 30—advises institutions on how to “harden” themselves against attack by installing cameras, coating windows with shatter-resistant film, and establishing safe rooms and emergency procedures. CSI also trains personnel at Jewish institutions to deter and respond to terrorist attacks, should the worst occur. This year alone, the team has worked with Jewish groups on 33 university campuses along the Amtrak Northeast Corridor from Boston to Washington, D.C., where many New Yorkers attend college.

Increasingly, however, cyber defense, some of it AI-assisted, lies at the heart of CSI’s post-9/11 deterrence effort. The group’s “threat detectors,” many of them young, troll social media and public internet platforms—Telegram, TikTok, Facebook,

and Instagram—in search of often-atomized dangers. To detect and counter what Silber calls “grievance-fueled” threats, “you need to be in the Telegram chat rooms—on Gab, 4Chan, and other deep and dark parts of the internet.” Intelligence analysts using AI-guided algorithms scanning the web help threat detectors spot Islamic State and Iran-linked plotting, signs of online radicalization, overt threats to kill and seek revenge, and other forms of violence.

The threats don’t just involve New York. In November 2024, one of Silber’s threat detectors—“Ali,” as he asked to be called, in order to protect his identity—found an alarming post in a chat space on Telegram. “The message screamed ‘Islamist,’” Ali recalled. Following the username, Ali saw myriad disturbing posts—an Islamic State video, a manual on how to assemble a rifle, and a photo of the user holding a knife in front of an Islamist flag. Reviewing the posts, he identified the user and his location—Brazil. He passed the posts to a partner in Brazil who, in turn, passed them along to the FBI and Brazilian law enforcement.

A month later, Brazilian police announced the arrest of Thiago José Silva Barboza de Paula, 44, on suspicion of terrorism in São Carlos, a university city and research hub in southeastern Brazil. A subsequent indictment charged him with working to recruit Brazilians for the Islamic State and Boko Haram and efforts to establish an Islamist caliphate in Brazil and Latin America. A search of his house turned up replica firearms, a machete, and bomb-making manuals and chemicals for making explosives. As a result of what the Brazilian police dubbed “Operation Machete,” Barboza was convicted of membership in a terrorist organization and preparing acts of terrorism. In 2025, he was sentenced to 11 years in jail, later reduced to eight years. This past January, Leandro Claro Telles, aged 16, one of his “students” recruited online, was also arrested, again with FBI support. He was charged with seeking to buy weapons and explosives. Barboza has denied the charges and is appealing his sentence.

“The global jihad still wants to return to the U.S.,” said David Cohen, who helped develop

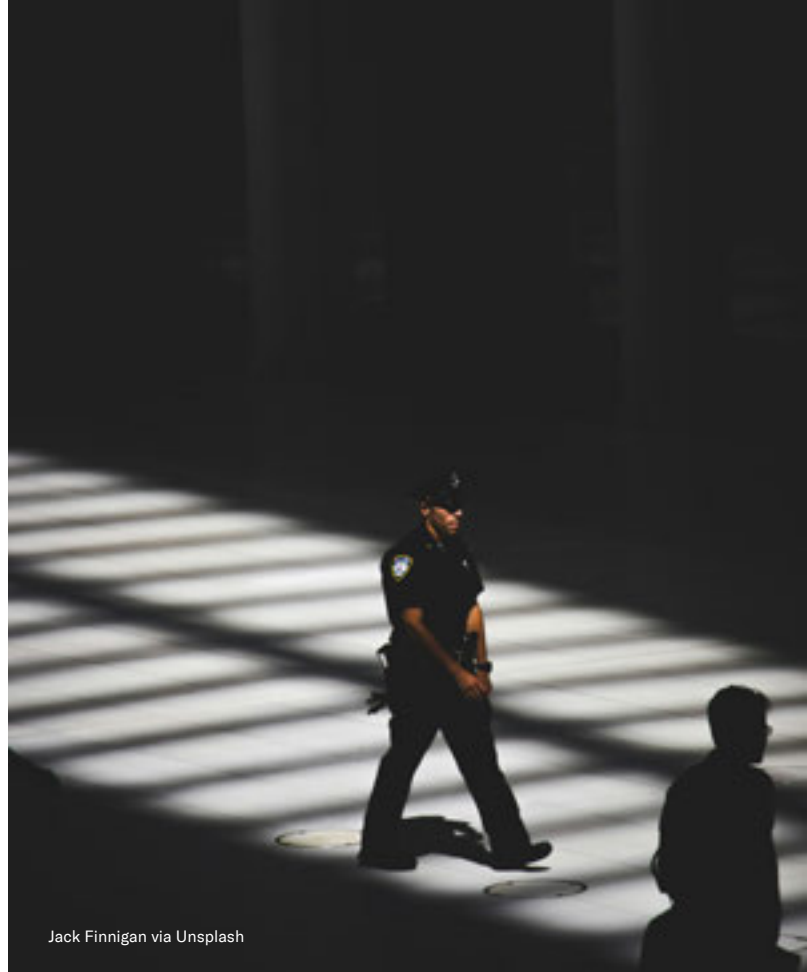
the NYPD's groundbreaking counterterrorism program and applauds Silber's work. But perpetrating mass murder no longer requires the involvement of an organized group like ISIS or Iran. "Mass casualty can now be the result of a simple grievance—an individual who drives a car bomb into a building," he said. "Grievance is the taproot of all evil." And today, he added, Americans—particularly, young Americans—seem to have "grievances galore."

Silber, too, worries about the youthfulness of those posting violent messages. There's "a lot of activity in the 16–19-year-old range, and those as young as 15."

However vital they are to the intelligence network that protects New York, groups like CSI, which has a \$6.3 million budget this year, cannot operate effectively—much less expand—without indirect government support. Some of that aid comes through the federal Nonprofit Security Grant Program, created by Congress in 2004. Though the program has distributed roughly \$300 million annually in grants through the Department of Homeland Security's Federal Emergency Management Agency to help nonprofits (many of them Jewish) enhance security, funding was reduced and delayed this year.

In 2024, institutions affiliated with CSI received \$43 million in grants. But by July, the Trump administration had approved grants for only 1,600 of the 6,000 applications submitted in 2025—just 27 percent, a significant decline from previous years. FEMA spokespersons have attributed the delays to the state agencies that administer the grants and to repeated Department of Homeland Security shutdowns related to immigration-enforcement disputes. The program's supporters remain unconvinced. In an email statement, Senator Kirsten Gillibrand, the New York Democrat, called the funding "essential to protecting New York from terror threats and supporting nonprofit groups who keep our communities safe."

If federal dollars for nonprofit counterterrorism groups are constrained and political support



Jack Finnigan via Unsplash

is tepid, the same is true at city hall. New York Mayor Zohran Mamdani, whose criticisms of Israel and its leadership have created what Silber calls a "permissive environment" for potential terrorism against Jews, has so far neither reduced funding for the NYPD programs that have helped prevent another 9/11 nor boosted funding or voiced support for them.

As mayor, Mamdani now sits through briefings on the nonstop threats facing the city—an experience that may have thrown what Silber calls "buckets of ice water" on his oft-stated desire to eliminate what Commissioner Tisch considers vital counterterrorism programs. But, Silber notes, the city has done little to strengthen those capabilities. "The NYPD is trying to police the city and carry out its counterterrorism mission with 34,000 uniformed officers—the same number we had in 1994," he said. "But the city has added a million more people since then. Do the math." ¶ ¶

Distrust in Tech Is Undermining National Security

A backlash against modern counterterrorism tools poses a serious challenge to our ability to protect the nation.

Danny Crichton

Fellow, Manhattan Institute

The ongoing evolution of technology can obscure just how dramatically our counterterrorism capabilities have improved since the attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon in 2001. The 9/11 Commission's description of how, before al-Qaeda struck, "the system was blinking red" now almost reads like a period piece. Printed photographs of most-wanted terrorists were passed from hand to hand among intelligence operatives, while coordination took place in person or over the phone. Following up on leads required weeks of painstaking investigation. The United States paid a terrible price for those limitations.

Contrast that with today. The ubiquity of smartphones gives law enforcement access to vast amounts of data for tracking suspects. Advanced artificial intelligence can identify potential threats in real time and route cases to the appropriate investigators. Modern software platforms can break down information silos across agencies. Many of the 9/11 hijackers operated in the United States under their real names and were already known to authorities. Such weak tradecraft would stand little chance against today's technological capabilities.

Graphic by Brittany Evanelia





Yet these critical counterterrorism advances are under increasing threat—not from foreign adversaries with better training or greater resources, but from opposition at home. Since the start of the second Trump administration, a backlash against technology companies has intensified across many sectors, especially law enforcement. If left unchecked, it could reverse a quarter-century of progress in counterterrorism. The best response is greater openness about how these technologies work and the safeguards that govern them.

City councils are increasingly targeting companies like Flock and technologies like SoundThinking's ShotSpotter, seeking to limit data collection that critics argue has a disparate impact on certain racial groups. Companies such as Palantir, which use AI to detect anomalous behavior, face mounting opposition from protesters who claim that the government is embracing unchecked digital surveillance. Even the data centers that power these platforms have become targets. New York recently became the first state to pass a temporary moratorium on their construction.

Some of these disputes reflect the long-standing tension between civil liberties and public safety. More troubling, however, is that the tenor of the debate reveals a growing distrust among citizens, government, and technology providers—one that threatens to erode the substantial progress made in counterterrorism over the past quarter-century. If that impasse persists, confronting the next generation of lone-wolf extremists—a central focus of counterterrorism efforts today—will become more difficult.

The irony is that confidence in these technologies should be higher than ever. In the 25 years since the Twin Towers fell, New York City—and the

United States more broadly—has prevented another large-scale terrorist attack. Sweeping intelligence reforms, improved information-sharing among federal, state, and local agencies, and advances in technology have all helped make the country far safer than it was in 2001.

Yet that very effectiveness is increasingly seen as the problem by antipolice activists, who view law enforcement's ability to track down and arrest criminals and potential terrorists as a success to be reversed. Consider Darializa Avila Chevalier, a police and prison abolitionist who is likely to become the next congresswoman representing Upper Manhattan. In a wide-ranging interview in June, detailing her approach to policing, she said that “there's more harm being perpetrated, not only on the folks who engaged in the harm, but also on the victims of the harm.” The implied moral equivalence between perpetrators and victims is chilling—but it is no longer rare.

The questioning of a fundamental goal of American government—ensuring domestic tranquility—comes just as the scale of potential future terrorism is growing. In a recent report by the Soufan Center, Jacob Ware describes a “five-alarm counterterrorism fire,” driven by the rapid radicalization of young people across the West, often cultivated by overseas terrorist networks recruiting children as young as eight. The combination of pervasive social-media use and algorithm-driven engagement is exposing children to extremist ideas at ever younger ages, creating conditions that, Ware argues, “lubricate the radicalization process.”

Once these impressionable youth are radicalized ideologically, a range of threat actors can take advantage. In Sweden, the Foxtrot Network, believed to be funded by Iran, has recruited several teenagers to assassinate dissidents and other regime enemies. I interviewed researcher Daniela Richterová, who highlighted Russia's “gig economy” model of terrorism in Eastern Europe and globally, where saboteurs, recruited online, “can bid for a job as if they were an Uber driver.” Bombing a building can be done for as little as \$1,000.

As the threat evolves, the scope of these systems will inevitably evolve as well, in ways that many law-abiding citizens will find uncomfortable.

Countering these emerging threats will require more sophisticated analysis of larger volumes of data, powered by increasingly advanced artificial intelligence, along with a greater willingness to intervene earlier rather than respond after the fact. As the threat evolves, the scope of these systems will inevitably evolve as well, in ways that many law-abiding citizens will find uncomfortable. Data not traditionally considered part of counterterrorism—including, potentially, school records and pediatric mental-health notes—may increasingly be incorporated into intelligence systems if they are to identify the next generation of threats. The alternative is an increasingly militarized civic life, in which everything from attending a ticker-tape parade to worshipping at a synagogue becomes a potential target.

Rebuilding trust will take time. No one is arguing that counterterrorism agencies should operate without guardrails or accountability. Yet many cities adopt contracts with technology providers behind closed doors, with little public scrutiny. That feeds a cycle of distrust: officials know that these tools are vital to public safety, but they also fear the organized activists who routinely oppose them at public hearings.



A FEMA photographer at Ground Zero

Photo by Doug Welty, FEMA via Wikimedia Commons

There is reason for optimism. Most Americans want safe public spaces and reject terrorism in all its forms. Winning and maintaining that broad public support will require greater transparency and a clearer account of what government and technology companies are doing—and why these tools matter. Officials are understandably reluctant to reveal operational details, but they can do a much better job explaining how modern technologies, paired with well-funded policing, have saved lives and made the country safer.

We have come a long way since those harrowing images from Lower Manhattan at the dawn of a new century. After 9/11, patriotic resolve and confidence in government helped usher in some of the most important law-enforcement and intelligence reforms in American history. Today, the backlash against technology and modern counterterrorism tools poses a serious challenge to our ability to protect the nation. It is a challenge that we must meet. ¶

The Staggering Financial Cost of 9/11

Quantifying in dollar terms the toll taken by a horrific event and its many consequences

Robert VerBruggen

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The terrorist attacks of 9/11 killed nearly 3,000 people, damaged the health of many exposed to the aftermath, destroyed billions of dollars' worth of property, and brought the nation's air-transportation system to a halt. Over the longer term, they also prompted sweeping policy responses aimed at strengthening homeland security, retaliating against those responsible, and adopting a more hawkish approach to the Middle East.

Over the past quarter-century, researchers and budget authorities have quantified the financial cost of this horrific event and its many consequences. In commemoration of the 25th anniversary of the attacks, I have sought to combine several of these efforts, extrapolate where necessary, and convert the amounts to 2025 dollars.

No one can fully tally the consequences of an event as momentous as 9/11 or know how American policy would have evolved had the attacks never occurred. Even a conservative accounting, however, puts the cost well above \$100 billion in lives, health, property, and broader economic damage. Including the longer-term policy response, roughly \$1 trillion in homeland security spending and another \$1 trillion for the war in Afghanistan can reasonably be attributed to the attacks.

More debatably, one might add another \$1 trillion or more for the war in Iraq. Other attempts to quantify the broader costs of the post-9/11 security state and counterterrorism have gone much higher. A 2021 study from Brown University's Costs of War Project, for example, assessed the total budgetary impact at \$8 trillion.

To put these figures in context, America's annual GDP is about \$30 trillion, federal spending about \$7 trillion, and federal debt held by the public a little over \$30 trillion.

Estimates of 9/11's costs differ in important ways, and some can't simply be added together. One would not want to count, for example, both the loss of a building and the loss incurred by the insurer that paid for it. Similarly, while the costs to the New York area matter in themselves, some took the form of businesses relocating elsewhere in the United States rather than leaving the country or ceasing to exist. And some federal agencies created after 9/11, including the Department of Homeland Security and the Transportation Security Administration, assumed functions previously performed by other agencies or private actors.

To estimate the nationwide costs conservatively, I confine the analysis to five well-defined categories: 1) lives lost in the attacks; 2) longer-term health effects; 3) the short-term economic slowdown; 4)



William Justen de Vasconcellos via Unsplash

sustained increases in homeland security spending and the resulting transportation delays; and 5) foreign policy. Each component is estimated separately, with the sources explained below, so readers can disregard or adjust any individual estimate as they see fit.

Start with the price in lives lost. In cost-benefit analysis, federal agencies have long wrestled with how to value a human life. In one sense, the cost is infinite; yet individuals and governments plainly place limits on what they are willing to spend to save a life. Economists address this through the Value of a Statistical Life (VSL), which estimates society's willingness to pay for small reductions in mortality risk. The VSL is inferred from evidence such as the wage premiums that workers demand for riskier jobs and from survey data, and it tends to rise as living standards increase.

At the time of 9/11, the Department of Transportation used a number that amounts to about \$5.5 million in 2025 dollars. Multiplied by the 2,977 fatalities, that's a cost of over \$16 billion.

Beyond the lives lost, many people exposed to the attacks suffered lasting health problems. The federal government has compensated victims and paid directly for their care; those expenditures provide a useful, if imperfect, proxy for the resulting costs. To avoid double-counting, payments for those killed in the attacks should be excluded, since those are already captured by VSL estimates. Keep in mind, too, that the compensation programs may have underpaid some victims, missed others entirely, and covered some health conditions not actually caused by 9/11.

In 2025 dollars, the Victims Compensation Fund initially awarded a little less than \$2 billion for injuries, followed by another \$20 billion in total payments after being reopened in the 2010s to address new claims. In addition, the World Trade Center Health Program and its predecessor have spent more than \$8 billion in 2025 dollars (including New York City's 10 percent share). That makes roughly \$30 billion.

In a single day, the 9/11 attacks claimed thousands of lives and caused immense destruction. They also prompted a range of policy responses aimed at retaliating against those responsible and preventing similar attacks in the future, multiplying the costs to the United States many times over.



Partha Narasimhan via Unsplash

As for 9/11's short-term economic damage, studies of the effect on U.S. GDP, including business interruptions, generally estimate losses of \$80 billion to \$160 billion (in 2025 dollars), as summarized in a 2011 review by Adam Rose and S. Brock Blomberg. Most of those losses resulted from reduced air travel and tourism during the two years following 9/11.

Then there are the homeland security costs. For fiscal years 2001 through 2017, the Office of Management and Budget estimated total federal homeland security budget authority, regardless of whether the funds flowed through the Department of Homeland Security (which did not yet exist in 2001). The Stimson Center compiled these figures in a 2018 report.

The fiscal 2001 budget provides a useful pre-9/11 baseline. Following assumptions used elsewhere in the 9/11 cost literature, one can estimate the

additional spending attributable to the attacks by supposing that homeland security spending would otherwise have grown at 3 percent annually in nominal terms. In fact, homeland security budget authority doubled between fiscal years 2001 and 2002 and had doubled again by 2008.

These calculations, adjusted to 2025 dollars, indicate nearly \$1 trillion in additional budget authority through 2017, with excess spending averaging about \$60 billion annually over the final five years of the series. (Even assuming a 5 percent annual baseline increase, the total excess still surpasses \$800 billion.)

Extending the figure through the present is more speculative, since the official series was discontinued and a recent surge in the DHS budget clearly reflects the pandemic rather than some belated consequence of 9/11. If the roughly \$60 billion in annual extra spending observed

at the end of the official series is carried forward through fiscal 2025, the total rises to about \$1.4 trillion. In principle, one could subtract the private airport-security spending that existed before 9/11, but it amounted to only about \$1 billion per year in 2001 dollars, a rounding error in this context.

The short-term economic damage reported above includes the immediate travel disruptions. But enhanced airport security has imposed lasting costs on the private sector, as individuals and businesses bear the burden of longer screening delays under the TSA than under the private security system it replaced. One estimate put the price tag for those at \$10 billion yearly in 2010 dollars, broadly consistent with a newer, though less formal, analysis by economist Mallika Pung. As a rough extrapolation, multiplying that figure by 23 years (to minimize overlap with the short-term losses already counted) and converting to 2025 dollars yields an estimate of more than \$300 billion.

These numbers are, admittedly, some of my least certain. But they comfortably top \$1 trillion total.

Finally, there are the foreign policy expenditures. The Afghanistan war was launched in direct retaliation for 9/11 and became part of the broader global war on terror, which also included, most controversially, the invasion and occupation of Iraq. Beyond the initial response, however, it becomes increasingly debatable as to how U.S. foreign policy would have evolved had 9/11 never occurred.

These wars are federal undertakings with readily available budget figures—though one can certainly challenge, for example, whether soldier pay adequately compensates for the burdens and risks that soldiers face, and the official totals leave out future spending, such as veterans' health care. Even so, the Pentagon's estimates of direct taxpayer costs are substantial. Adjusted for inflation, they total \$1.2 trillion for the war in Afghanistan through fiscal 2024, plus another \$1.2 trillion for the wars in Iraq and Syria, which are reported together.

The figures above represent a conservative approach to tallying 9/11's costs, focusing on

clear consequences of the terror attacks for which publicly available, reasonably well-defined estimates exist. The attacks imposed many other costs as well, including additional security spending by state and local governments and private entities (which one early post-9/11 estimate put at more than \$10 billion yearly), the opportunity costs of money devoted to terrorism insurance, and much else. The 2021 Brown University Costs of War study arrived at its roughly \$8 trillion estimate by including items such as interest payments on new debt, projected future health-care costs for veterans, and increases in the baseline Department of Defense budget beyond direct war spending.

In a single day, the 9/11 attacks claimed thousands of lives and caused immense destruction. They also prompted a range of policy responses aimed at retaliating against those responsible and preventing similar attacks in the future, multiplying the costs to the United States many times over. A quarter-century later, Americans are still paying for many of these obligations.

What's the takeaway? Because the indirect costs far outweigh the direct damage, some might argue that the United States overreacted. Taken to its logical conclusion, this view suggests that, had we simply cleaned up and declined to retaliate, we could have avoided trillions of dollars in "security theater" and "forever wars." But it is mistaken to assume that such restraint would not have invited further aggression by signaling weakness, and unrealistic to believe that a nation subjected to an attack of this magnitude was even capable of responding in that way. A vigorous response to mass murder was both justified and likely inevitable.

This analysis cannot resolve a quarter-century of debate over retaliation, preemption, occupation, surveillance, and homeland security. It does, however, demonstrate that a single successful terrorist attack can impose trillions of dollars in costs on the United States—and that preventing such attacks carries immense value. ¶ ¶

How the Private Sector Rebuilt Ground Zero

A government-led effort was plagued by politics, bad ideas, and delays, but private initiative drove New York's broader comeback.

Steven Malanga

Senior Editor, *City Journal*; Senior Fellow, Manhattan Institute

On the morning of September 11, 2002, I was crossing Midtown Manhattan as the clock neared the moment, one year earlier, when the first plane struck the North Tower of the World Trade Center. Along the way, I watched construction workers slowly put down their tools and join pedestrians lining the sidewalks. By 8:46 AM, I had reached Grand Central Terminal. In its great hall, where hundreds of people are normally in constant motion, travelers stopped and stood silently beneath the massive domed ceiling. The familiar buzz of Manhattan vanished. The stillness lasted only a few moments before people began moving again, as New Yorkers always do.

A year earlier, when I had finally arrived home late that afternoon after being stranded in Manhattan for much of the day, the idea of the city moving on seemed unimaginable. When



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Mayor Rudy Giuliani told the nation that the tragedy's scope "will be more than any of us can bear ultimately," I wondered how life could ever return to normal. New York had spent the previous eight years enjoying a glorious revival—crime had plummeted, the economy had added hundreds of thousands of jobs, and businesses and residents had poured back into the city. Lower Manhattan itself had rebounded from the exodus of the 1980s. But in the immediate aftermath of the attacks, people were already asking: Who would come to Manhattan now? Who would stay? Those questions only got louder in the weeks and months that followed.

By September 2002, two things were apparent. First, the momentum that New York had built over the previous eight years had not disappeared. Essential institutions like the NYPD, despite the

devastating losses it suffered on 9/11, continued to serve the city well. And neighborhoods across the other boroughs that had revived during the city's resurgence maintained their sense of order and industry in the months following the attacks, helping sustain New York through its darkest hours.

Second, turmoil increasingly engulfed the effort to rebuild Lower Manhattan. Though governments and private foundations pledged enormous resources, the state-led process was soon overwhelmed by competing interest groups—many hostile to commercial redevelopment—that sought to remake the World Trade Center site into everything from subsidized housing to a vast memorial cemetery. Years were lost to these battles. Only after officials tired of the endless wrangling and deferred to the lone private developer with a meaningful stake in the site did rebuilding finally move forward. By then, rather than leading New York's post-9/11 revival, the World Trade Center redevelopment followed the resurgence already underway across the rest of the city.

Early on, it was clear that a rebuilding effort directed by a government commission with access to billions in public funds could become a giant racket. New York politicians, who had warmly embraced President George W. Bush when he promised federal support for reconstruction, quickly showed their priorities. Among their first requests was funding for a high-speed rail line from Schenectady to Lower Manhattan—a fanciful project scarcely relevant to the city's recovery. Even as they passed a fat state budget filled with extravagant goodies, Albany legislators asked the feds for \$12 billion to offset projected tax-revenue losses from the attacks. Giuliani, by contrast, pledged to cut the city's budget by \$1 billion to cope with the economic fallout. Asked what the federal government could do to help, he called for a federal tax cut, arguing that New Yorkers should be allowed to keep more of their own money instead of sending it to Washington.

New York Governor George Pataki appointed a commission filled with experienced business executives to help guide the redevelopment, but I quickly got an uneasy feeling about the

group's direction. In July 2002, it hosted a massive "listening" session at the Javits Center, inviting thousands of New Yorkers to weigh in on the site's future. Partnering with the commission were organizations with scant interest in commercial redevelopment, including the Natural Resources Defense Council, the NOW Legal Defense and Education Fund, and the Ford Foundation.

The event stood in sharp contrast to the heroism

Even as squabbles consumed the memorial and redevelopment efforts, communities across the greater New York region quietly found ways to honor their own dead.

and stoicism that New Yorkers had displayed on 9/11. Thousands of attendees, many recruited by the participating groups, were divided into facilitated discussion circles, with grief counselors on hand and journalists asked not to disrupt the groups' "dynamics." Unsurprisingly, many of the ideas that emerged didn't have much to do with restoring the site to commerce, though the terrorists had targeted the World Trade Center precisely because it symbolized America's economic power. More surprising was how readily many previously sensible commissioners embraced this sentimentality, drifting toward a vision of the site that bore little resemblance to what the World Trade Center had been.

Politicians assumed that events like this reflected the direction of public opinion. In a meeting with families of those killed on 9/11, Governor Pataki suggested that perhaps nothing should

be built where people had died and that the site should remain sacred ground. John Whitehead, the former investment banker leading the redevelopment commission, envisioned surrounding that vast memorial with attractions that would turn Lower Manhattan into a tourist destination—a “Disneyland of Death,” as I dubbed it in the *Wall Street Journal*. The *New York Times Magazine* weighed in with a series of designs that imagined the center of the site vacant, while surrounding it with postmodern buildings devoted to various civic uses. In some renderings, Lower Manhattan resembled a postapocalyptic landscape.

The 25th anniversary of 9/11, then, offers an opportunity not only to remember the dead and honor those who sacrificed their lives doing their duty that day—but also to admonish the living.

Much of this failed to inspire the public, and interest gradually waned. The same was true of the effort to build a privately financed memorial and museum. Fundraising lagged for years as projected costs ballooned to roughly \$1 billion. The memorial’s design—two vast reflecting pools—embodied the prevailing style of modern shrines, emphasizing absence rather than the heroism and fortitude displayed that day. The original plan did not even distinguish the police officers and firefighters who died in the line of duty, a decision reversed only after public outcry. Ultimately, businessman-turned-mayor Michael Bloomberg took over the troubled project, cut hundreds of millions from its budget, and persuaded wealthy donors and businesses to finance it. Even then, the museum did not open until 2014.

Even as squabbles consumed the memorial and redevelopment efforts, communities across the greater New York region quietly found ways to honor their own dead. Nearly six in ten of those killed at the World Trade Center were not New York City residents. They commuted each day from the Hudson Valley, Westchester, Long Island, and New Jersey. Late on the evening of 9/11, police in Middletown, New Jersey, counted 192 cars still sitting in the commuter lot at the town’s train station. While many stranded residents eventually made it home from Manhattan, 37 never returned. They were among the 147 people from Monmouth County killed in the attacks. To honor them, the county commissioned sculptor Franco Minervini to create a memorial of an American eagle clutching a twisted steel beam from the World Trade Center in its talons.

Entire families from these communities perished. The 9/11 memorial in Hazlet, New Jersey, honors John and Sylvia Resta, a husband and wife who worked together at Cantor Fitzgerald and died together in the North Tower. Beneath their photographs is a painting of a small angel resting its head on a cloud, titled *Baby Resta*. Sylvia was seven months pregnant. Her unborn child—unnamed, without a history, and absent from the official death toll—was nonetheless another victim of that day.

Back at Ground Zero, the first signs of real progress emerged, and the private sector drove the change. Developer Larry Silverstein had first established a foothold at the World Trade Center in 1987 with the opening of 7 World Trade Center, a 47-story office tower beside the North Tower. When New York and New Jersey privatized the World Trade Center complex, after three decades under the Port Authority, Silverstein won the lease and closed the deal just weeks before the 2001 attacks. On 9/11, his 7 World Trade Center also collapsed. Unlike the Twin Towers, however, it had not been directly struck, allowing everyone inside to evacuate safely.

Though Silverstein knew he would not have much control over rebuilding the Twin Towers site, which government had effectively taken over, he quickly committed to replacing 7 World Trade. As soon as debris removal at Ground Zero was

completed in May 2002, he began construction, despite efforts by the redevelopment commission to stop him until a comprehensive master plan was in place. Media opinion was reflected in a *Daily News* editorial headlined “Butt Out, Larry,” urging him to surrender his stake in the site. Government officials threatened to withhold the Liberty Bonds that Congress had authorized to finance rebuilding, and one state official denounced him as “greedy.” But Silverstein persevered. “I simply did not listen to all the naysayers because I was spending my money, not theirs,” he told me for a *Wall Street Journal* feature. “Fortunately, I had no government involvement in 7 World Trade, which gave me the opportunity to do what I do best.”

Even after the new 7 World Trade Center opened in 2006, government leaders continued to pressure Silverstein. State and city officials pushed him to accept a below-market lease with a Chinese company for an international center in the building. Silverstein refused when the prospective tenant could not provide adequate financial guarantees and instead leased the space on his own terms. Within a year, the tower was home to blue-chip tenants like Moody’s, with 1.1 million square feet leased at rents roughly 50 percent higher than those offered in the proposed China deal.

Silverstein’s initiative proved decisive. As 7 World Trade Center neared completion, the state reached a deal granting him development rights to three additional sites, while he ceded the parcel designated for One World Trade Center. That symbolic “Freedom Tower” opened in 2014. Silverstein opened 4 World Trade Center in 2013 and 3 World Trade Center in 2018. The final Silverstein Properties site, 2 World Trade Center, broke ground in July of this year. The complex is now home to tenants including Condé Nast, Uber, and Ameriprise Financial. The attacks destroyed roughly 13 million square feet of office space; more than 11 million square feet have since been rebuilt.

The interminable delays and political battles over the World Trade Center meant that its redevelopment contributed little to New York’s

post-9/11 recovery. Between 2002, when the attacks’ economic effects rippled through the city, and mid-2014, just before One World Trade Center opened, New York added nearly half a million jobs and roughly 400,000 residents. Rather than fleeing, businesses and investment continued to flock to the city, while neighborhoods that had begun reviving in the 1990s grew stronger still. Communities devastated by the city’s decline in the 1960s and 1970s, like Bushwick, finally started to revive. Despite the stagnation at Ground Zero, New York’s tech sector, which had taken root in Lower Manhattan during the 1990s, began a new round of growth.

After some false starts in the early days of his administration, Mayor Bloomberg also found his footing. City government’s chief contribution to the recovery was providing the basics: preserving and improving public order by keeping crime low, controlling costs—especially the social-welfare spending that had helped cripple the city in the 1970s—and making it easier to build through rezonings that opened areas like Manhattan’s Far West Side to a new business district.

Today, many of the lessons of 9/11 and its aftermath have been forgotten or were never learned. New York and other American communities are more vulnerable after a period of open borders and the rollback of security measures adopted after the attacks. During the pandemic, New York stopped enforcing many of its most basic laws, contributing to troubling increases in everything from violent crime to shoplifting that have only now started to recede. Meantime, a new politics at city hall has revived the extravagant social-welfare spending that once brought New York to the brink of bankruptcy, alongside higher taxes and heavier regulation reminiscent of the antibusiness mindset that bogged down the redevelopment of the World Trade Center.

The 25th anniversary of 9/11, then, offers an opportunity not only to remember the dead and honor those who sacrificed their lives doing their duty that day—but also to admonish the living. ¶ J

The Resilient City

New York showed a steady hand in its post-9/11 recovery—its present mayor should heed the lessons.

Nicole Gelinas

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Two months after 9/11, the *New York Times Magazine* published a special issue titled “Beginnings—an Issue About the Next New York.” Its theme reflected an urban-planning zeitgeist far removed from the workaday world of business and real estate: it was time for something completely different. “The attack may hasten the end of moneyed Manhattan’s glittering excesses,” enthused one writer, an outcome that would be “just fine.” One architect declared of Ground Zero, the destroyed World Trade Center site, that “we should not rebuild the superblock. The World Trade Center was basically a shopping mall with the towers and the other buildings on top of it. . . . [T]here’s this amazing opportunity.” More than a year later, New Yorkers were puzzling over a fantastical state-driven “master plan” for the site, centered on an unbuildable “spire” of a tower.

What is striking from the perspective of a quarter-century later is not how much New York’s economy and cityscape changed after 9/11 but how much they didn’t. Eventually—after years of disputes and delays between the Port Authority of New York and New Jersey, which owned the site, and developer Larry Silverstein, who held the development rights under a long-term lease—New York rebuilt the superblock, replacing most of the roughly 12 million square feet of space lost at the Twin Towers complex with four architecturally unremarkable but perfectly serviceable curtain-wall glass towers. The first opened in 2006; the most recent, in 2018. The Oculus, the indoor

public space connecting the towers, is a high-end mall; elsewhere in the complex are a food court and an Eataly. If you were waiting for Manhattan to rein in its “excesses” after its people were attacked, you would still be waiting. The greatest success of Lower Manhattan’s rebuilding is how normal it all turned out.

The fact that 9/11 changed so little in this regard was a good thing. What New York had done in the two decades before the attacks to recover from the fiscal crisis of the 1970s had worked well. The city’s basic strategy, alongside driving down crime beginning in the early 1990s, was simple: grow the private-sector economy by encouraging the development of office buildings and apartments to attract high-paying white-collar jobs and workers. Those jobs, along with tourism, would replace the manufacturing base that had been leaving the city since the mid-twentieth century. In 2000, just before the dot-com bubble burst, New York had come tantalizingly close to reaching 3.8 million jobs, a level not seen since the city’s 1969 peak.

Though Gotham fell just short of that total before companies began shedding jobs in the months leading up to 9/11, the city, having recovered so robustly from the downturns of the early 1980s and 1990s, had demonstrated that it could weather recessions without falling into structural decline or suffering the prolonged job and population losses of the 1970s. As William Dudley, then-president

of the New York Federal Reserve, put it in a 2016 speech: “By the mid-1980s, the resiliency of the city’s economy was becoming more apparent. Citywide employment barely declined during the wrenching recessions of the early 1980s—the first time in a long while that the city’s economy had outperformed the nation’s.” That momentum held through the turn of the millennium. By 2000, the 1987 stock-market crash and the ensuing early 1990s recession seemed like “just a hiccup in what ultimately turned out to be a remarkable upturn in the city’s performance and prospects.”

Moreover, the jobs being created were well suited to a city attracting both educated and manual workers from around the country and the world. New York expanded its white-collar (professional and business services) employment by 25 percent between 1990 and 2000, demonstrating that even as it continued to lose financial-industry jobs, it could replace them with new positions in technology, law, and other sectors. The city also increased its information-sector employment by more than 10 percent, showing that it could become a national hub not only for old media but also for new digital media. Finally, the booming tourist sector—with employment growth of nearly 18 percent since 1990—created jobs, many of them well-paying, for restaurant and hotel workers as well as performers and entertainers.

And though the financial sector itself grew more slowly, each new position at the top of this increasingly rarefied industry paid far more, with annual bonuses skyrocketing from an average of \$15,500 per person in 1990 to \$100,500 by 2000. Wall Street’s move upmarket generated ample tax revenue to support a massive public-sector

workforce as well as ever more redistributive spending on homelessness and social services. By 2000, the city’s population had topped 8 million, crossing another key psychological threshold: New York had finally regained the 1 million residents it had lost during the 1970s.

In the months after 9/11, as the Ground Zero fires continued to smolder, it was no surprise that New York voters, despite all the talk of “rethinking,” “reimagining,” and the like, instead chose continuity. That November, they elected Michael R. Bloomberg, a political unknown, with barely a majority vote, even as the *New York Times* endorsed Bloomberg’s opponent, Mark Green, a traditional New York Democratic politico. After the trauma they had just suffered, New Yorkers were apparently determined to preserve a city led by private-sector growth.

The instinct was sound. Bloomberg made some missteps at Ground Zero, including, as Silverstein recounted in his memoir, dismissing the idea that Lower Manhattan needed millions of square feet of new office space. But the mayor changed his mind when the market proved him wrong, and he was instrumental in persuading Goldman Sachs, the marquee investment bank, to keep its headquarters near the Trade Center site. Many of the city’s top-tier private-sector companies and jobs have continued moving to Midtown; but Lower Manhattan, by sticking to pragmatic development, has built and retained a vibrant economy of its own, with Trade Center tenants including Condé Nast, Moody’s, Spotify, and top-tier law and marketing firms. New York finally surpassed its 1969 jobs peak in 2008 and then powered through the Great Recession,



recovering lost jobs more quickly than the nation as a whole. Between 2009 and 2018, the state comptroller noted, “the current expansion is not only the largest on record, but also the fastest,” with the city gaining more than 800,000 jobs in less than a decade, “nearly double the number added in the 1992–2000 job expansion.”

Since the lockdowns of 2020, New York has struggled to resume its four-decade trajectory. The city’s job growth has lagged the nation’s, with tourism-related employment still nearly 4 percent below its 2019 level.

On the eve of the 2020 pandemic, the city had nearly 4.6 million jobs, including tens of thousands at the new World Trade Center, and its population was pushing past 8.5 million. September 11 was receding into history—an event that had marked the city with tragedy but had not harmed Gotham over the long term. Any worker or visitor downtown would encounter a Class A office campus that could belong to any leading global business district. New York didn’t reimagine itself because it didn’t need to.

Since the lockdowns of 2020, however, New York has struggled to resume its four-decade trajectory. The city’s job growth has lagged the nation’s, with tourism-related employment still nearly 4 percent below its 2019 level. Though professional and business employment has grown by 3 percent since then, that growth stalled in 2024–25, mirroring a national trend. Artificial intelligence may be cutting into the city’s entry-level office jobs, but New York’s status as a high-tax city whose public services—particularly its infrastructure—have failed to keep pace with its previous growth

may also be weighing on its prospects, as Florida and Texas successfully compete for high-paying jobs.

Worse, after choosing continuity in the wake of 9/11, the city is once again talking about “reimagining” itself. New York’s Democratic Socialist mayor, Zohran Mamdani, represents a decisive break from the approach that prevailed from the 1980s through the pandemic: support private-sector growth, the only reliable source of the tax revenues needed to sustain big government. Many previous mayors, from Bloomberg himself to Bill de Blasio, pursued taxes on high earners, but Mamdani has often seemed to want to drive wealthy executives out altogether.

In early July, however, the mayor helped break ground on 2 World Trade Center, the last of the five office towers to rise from the destruction downtown. Standing alongside executives from Silverstein Properties—Larry Silverstein, now 95, remains the site’s builder—Mamdani cheered not just the skyscraper’s symbolic significance but its practical impact as the future home of American Express and a driver of New York’s economy. “This building will support approximately 21,250 jobs,” Mamdani crowed. “It will be a story of growth.”

Most of New York’s post-9/11 mayors could have given this appropriately boosterish speech. But Mamdani’s words were notable because, unlike those predecessors (with the exception of Bill de Blasio), he hadn’t won office the previous year on a growth platform. The word was missing from his victory and inauguration speeches, and whenever he talked about real-estate developers and big corporations, it was to use them as a foil.

That even Mamdani, seven months into office, has begun to recognize that New York City must grow before it can do much else is a testament to the strength of a long-running economic consensus—one durable enough to withstand the losses of a day that a generation of New Yorkers will never forget. ¶ ¶

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