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## Twenty Years After 9/11: a Health Worker's Perspective



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All those of us who are old enough recall what we were doing when we heard of the attacks of September 11, 2001. Since I live in Hawai'i, I was awakened by a friend living on the East Coast. He called to tell me to turn on my TV. When I did so, I saw the two towers of the World Trade Center on fire. I then watched the towers collapse.

On the following day, the University of Hawai'i Department of Family Practice (before the name was changed to Family Medicine) held a debriefing session with all staff, residents, and faculty in attendance. We came to some conclusions that we wrote about in the medical school newsletter:

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We are humans before we are healthcare workers; our humanity is still a core component of our effectiveness as healers. Thus, our presence and genuineness, in the form of compassion and, when appropriate, openness about our own feelings, are therapeutic. When we can share some of our feelings about a recent disaster, it encourages a healing partnership by making the relationship less hierarchical. . . .

We must seek productive ways that translate our responses to distant suffering into a medicine more responsive to the suffering before us. In this way, we can strive to incorporate social justice, equality, and compassion into both the practice of medicine and into the political response to acts of jarring violence. We suggest that we should feel, think, and act not as members of a particular ethnic group, religion, or nation – but, rather, as humans.<sup>[1]</sup>

One participant, a Muslim and Arab woman, was silent through most of the session, but at the end, she related that she first wanted to hear what others had to say. She told us that she had grown up with, and constantly lived with anti-Muslim, anti-Arab sentiments being expressed around her – such that she often found it most prudent to hide her ethnicity.

We wondered what the future would hold. Would this tragedy make Americans ponder why their country is hated by many around the world? Or would the U.S. hunker down like Israel and embody the national security state, arms pointed in every direction? The fearful consensus was, as has been borne out, that this trial would only serve to strengthen the impetus to meet force with force.

Indeed, 9/11 was followed by much flag-waving and George W. Bush's declaration of a "War on Terror." As the mastermind of the September 11 attacks, Osama Bin Laden (a Saudi), and the training camps of Al-Qaeda were in Afghanistan – the U.S. military began to plan for an assault on Afghanistan.

Richard Horton, the editor of *The Lancet*, wrote in a commentary published on October 6, 2001, suggesting that "The war against terrorism, announced by President Bush and endorsed by western political leaders in the immediate aftermath of the Sept 11 assault on America, will fail." He suggested instead that "health, development, and human rights" be the objectives of a public health approach to Afghanistan.<sup>[2]</sup>

The U.S. started bombing Afghanistan on October 7, 2001.

I attended the American Public Health Association in Atlanta in late October 2001. Against the backdrop of daily bombing runs projected on the megascreen of the CNN Center, I thought that I might find fellow health workers opposed to the war. After all, UN agencies such as the World Food Program and UNICEF had been drawing attention to the

humanitarian crisis in Afghanistan that pre-dated 9/11. Severe drought and twenty years of war in Afghanistan had led to conditions bordering on widespread famine. Shouldn't public health workers, who are concerned about the health and well-being of people, oppose the U.S. war on Afghanistan?

I buttonholed Victor Sidel, grand old man of social medicine, and invited him to chat over a coffee. His take on bombing Afghanistan was, "The U.S. has to do something. It can't stand by and do nothing." He criticized what he saw as my pacifist stance.<sup>[3]</sup>

It has taken nearly 20 years for the U.S. to leave Afghanistan. September 11 also served as one of the pretexts for the Iraq War of 2003-2011. All told, the first ten years of the "War on Terror" took on the order of 1.3 million lives.<sup>[4]</sup>

Since September 2001, we have endured twenty years of U.S. invasions of Afghanistan, Iraq, and wherever else the U.S. deploys its Special Forces, whether it is Africa or the Philippines. Twenty years of drone attacks, reaching its height under "Hope and Change" Obama, who devoted his Tuesday mornings to choosing the week's targets for extrajudicial assassination ("Sorry about the wedding party collateral damage"). Twenty years of torture chambers at Guantanamo and Abu Ghraib and Bagram Air Base and those hidden black sites around the world ("Yeah, Gina Haspel, you sure did a bang-up job running that black site in Thailand – we're going to give you the top job of CIA Director"). Oh, Julian Assange, Chelsea Manning, Edward Snowden, do you think you're going to let the people know what's really going on? Well, for your troubles, you're going to be psychologically tortured and placed in solitary confinement or exiled.

One economic sector saw its stock prices jump upward after 9/11, those of the arms manufacturers. As soon as the generals who oversaw the destruction of Afghanistan and Iraq and Libya retired from the U.S. military, they moved straight onto the boards of the weapons manufacturers. Lloyd Austin went from being commander of CENTCOM to the board of Raytheon. Meanwhile, the other pillar of the U.S. economy was the gambling house of debt financialization. When the casinos (i.e., the investment banks and their insurers) couldn't cover their own debts and crashed the world economy, the U.S. taxpayers (via Congress) bailed out the banks, and workers were foreclosed on their houses. Subsequently, the Affordable Care Act (ACA, or 'Obamacare'), touted as expanding the social good of health care to more people, essentially turned it over to the insurance and pharmaceutical industries.

However much the fabric of U.S. society has deteriorated in the twenty years since 9/11, it does not compare with the deliberate kinetic destruction wrought on the health services,

access to water and food, infrastructure, and economies of Afghanistan and Iraq. Prior to the Gulf War (1991-1992, waged by George H.W. Bush), Iraq had been a thriving society, a leader in science in medicine in the Arab world. [5] Now, subsequent to the U.S. invasion (2003-2011, started by George W. Bush and Dick Cheney), and the war against ISIS (2013-2017), Iraq is a shambles. And thanks to Donald Trump's utter incompetence, George W. Bush is now looked upon as a statesman. We are reminded that the U.S. destruction of the Middle East has been going on for much longer than the past twenty years. As Noam Chomsky often says, massive reparations are in order.

As noted by Chris Hedges, as the U.S. leaves, Afghanistan is, like when the U.S. invaded, in the midst of another humanitarian crisis:

Things are already dire. There are some 14 million Afghans, one in three, who lack sufficient food. There are two million Afghan children who are malnourished. There are 3.5 million people in Afghanistan who have been displaced from their homes. The war has wrecked infrastructure. A drought destroyed 40 percent of the nation's crops last year. The assault on the Afghan economy is already seeing food prices skyrocket. The sanctions and severance of aid will force civil servants to go without salaries and the health service, already chronically short of medicine and equipment, will collapse.[6]

As Hedges points out, the response of the civilized world is to freeze the assets of the Afghan central bank and deny the new government access to loans or grants.

In retrospect, it is obvious how the desire for revenge in the immediate aftermath of 9/11 has led us to where we are now. What if, instead, the pain engendered by 9/11 had encouraged us to recognize the pain of others – those who suffer from hunger, poverty, ill health, and exploitation? What if narrative and images death and destruction had prompted us health workers to demand an end to war?[7] What if we had sought instead to alleviate social ills and sought to ensure clean water, good nutrition, education, and health? Might we not all be better for it now?

*This article first appeared on Josh Freeman's Medicine and Social Justice blog.*

*Notes.*

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