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The Causes, Aftermath and Lessons of 9/11

By Anthony Gregory
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America suffered its deadliest terrorist attack eight years ago, on September 11, 2001. Nearly three thousand people, mostly Americans, were murdered, and thousands more wounded. The great institution of American and global capitalism, the World Trade Center, was destroyed.

Americans agree that we should remember 9/11. The current president has declared it a "National Day of Service and Remembrance" on which we should honor community service. This has been criticized by many conservatives as "statist" politicization of that horrific day. Some might respond that it was politicized by the last president too.

Indeed, within 24 hours of the planes hitting the Twin Towers, many Americans mourned but also reacted quickly with their thoughts of the event's political implications. Many on the right said that the attack showed the need for a more aggressive foreign policy. Others on the left said that it was time to stop being critical of big government. Calls for restricting civil liberties could be heard before the Pentagon fire was extinguished, and they continue to this day.

If it is fair game for people to politicize 9/11 in this way, as an argument for more government and less liberty, people should also feel free to advance different conclusions about terrorism. We must never forget that day, and it is also important, if we want to prevent such attacks in the future, to understand what led up to the event and what has transpired since.

Understanding the Atrocity

Why did it happen? One answer given was that the terrorists simply hated America for its freedom. Those who believed this tended to feel that war was the only answer -- war to

punish the evildoers and war to rebuild foreign societies so they would be free and no longer resent us. Another answer given was that the terrorists, although murderous criminals, were exploiting genuine grievances that many people in Muslim countries had against U.S. foreign policy.

Osama bin Laden repeatedly stressed the major objections: The U.S. had been supporting apostate dictatorships in the Muslim world, given one-sided support to Israel, occupied holy land such as the Arabian Peninsula, and enforced brutal sanctions on the Iraqi people that had left hundreds of thousands of Muslims, mostly children, dead. Americans are warned not to forget what happened eight years ago, but we must not assume history began on that date. Those in the Muslim world tend to have a much longer memory.

In 1953, the CIA helped to oust the once-democratically elected leader of Iran, [a man who had been featured as *Time Magazine's* "Man of the Year" just a year before](#), and replaced him with the corrupt and brutal Shah, a dictator who ushered in a period of torture, terror and mass inflation. Twenty-six years later we saw the "blowback" -- a term the CIA uses to describe the unintended reaction from American policy abroad -- in the form of the Islamic Revolution. Iran fell under the grip of fundamentalists, but most of the nation would not rally against America for purely cultural reasons. What united them was resentment toward the U.S. meddling in their country.

Meanwhile, as part of the Cold War, the U.S. began supporting agitators in Afghanistan so as to incite a Soviet invasion and bring about an overstretch of the Soviet military. Although today most Americans think of U.S. involvement in Afghanistan at the time as purely defensive against Soviet belligerence, President Carter's National Security Adviser Zbigniew Brzezinski admitted this was far from the case in [a 1998 interview](#):

"According to the official version of history, CIA aid to the Mujahadeen began during 1980, that is to say, after the Soviet army invaded Afghanistan, 24 Dec 1979. But the reality, secretly guarded until now, is completely otherwise. Indeed, it was July 3, 1979 that President Carter signed the first directive for secret aid to the opponents of the pro-Soviet regime in Kabul. And that very day, I wrote a note to the president in which I explained to him that in my opinion this aid was going to induce a Soviet military intervention."

These U.S.-allied Mujahideen in Afghanistan were championed as "[freedom fighters](#)," but many went on to form the basis of the Taliban and al Qaeda. The Taliban became one of the most brutal and backwards regimes on the planet, but as late as [May of 2001](#), the U.S. was sending tens of millions of dollars to the Taliban to finance its war on opium.

Throughout the 1980s, the fundamentalist Iranian regime, which had come about in reaction to the U.S.-installed Shah, was seen as the greatest threat in the region. Thus did the United States throw its support behind Saddam Hussein, who, along with his Baathist party, had been a U.S.-sponsored operative for decades in Iraq. An Iran-Iraq war ensued, wherein the [U.S. sent weaponry](#), material support, money and intelligence to the Iraqi dictatorship. At the same time, the Reagan administration secretly sold weapons to Iran, as well.

In 1990, the U.S. went to war with Iraq after Saddam invaded Kuwait, although [a U.S. diplomat had indicated to him](#) that the U.S. would stay out of such a conflict. Propaganda about Kuwaiti babies being torn from their incubators, and an impending threat from Saddam to Saudi Arabia, got most of the American people on board. But it was a short war, and by 1992 the popular war was a faded memory as the recession and Perot took the presidential throne from the incumbent commander in chief.

At the end of the war, the U.S. had troops stationed in Saudi Arabia and, after destroying much of Iraq's sanitation infrastructure, implemented [sanctions](#) to be enforced through the United Nations, that cut off the Iraqi people from getting food and medicine from the outside world. Throughout the 1990s, the U.S. perennially bombed Iraq to enforce "no-fly" zones in the name of protecting the Kurds.

In May of 1996, UN ambassador Madeline Albright, soon to be elevated to become Secretary of State, was asked on *60 Minutes* about this the trade sanctions on Iraq. [This exchange](#) echoed ominously throughout the Muslim world:

Lesley Stahl: We have heard that a half million children have died. I mean, that's more children than died in Hiroshima. And, you know, is the price worth it?

Madeleine Albright: I think this is a very hard choice, but the price--we think the price is worth it.

Most Americans don't know about this exchange, or other grievances foreigners have against the U.S. empire, but the nonchalant way in which Albright weighed the lives of hundreds of thousands of children against the U.S. goal of undermining Saddam's government resonated far and wide. This dismissive attitude toward the foreigners affected by U.S. foreign policy still permeates American policy through and through.

It is such grievances that most directly led to 9/11. This is the conclusion of [Michael Scheuer](#), former head of the CIA bin Laden Unit. [Robert Pape](#), who conducted the most comprehensive survey of suicide terrorist attacks from 1980 to 2003, also agrees that the major factor behind such terrorism, by far, is resistance to an occupying power.

This understanding of foreign animosity is completely consistent with the thoughts of candidate [George W. Bush](#), sparring in a presidential debate in October 2000, saying that foreigners resent U.S. intervention in their lands. "If we're an arrogant nation, they'll resent us," Bush said. "If we're a humble nation, but strong, they'll welcome us."

Candidate Al Gore was clearly much more rhetorically devoted to the U.S. intervening abroad:

"Like it or not, we are now...the United States is now the natural leader of the world. All of the other countries are looking to us. Now just because we cannot be involved everywhere, and shouldn't be, doesn't mean that we should shy away from going in anywhere. And we

have a fundamental choice to make. Are we going to step up to the plate as a nation, the way we did after World War II, the way that generation of heroes said, okay, the United States is going to be the leader -- and the world benefited tremendously from the courage that they showed in those post-war years."

To which Bush replied,

"I'm not so sure the role of the United States is to go around the world and say this is the way it's got to be. We can help. And maybe it's just our difference in government, the way we view government. I mean I want to empower people. I want to help people help themselves, not have government tell people what to do. I just don't think it's the role of the United States to walk into a country and say, we do it this way, so should you."

After 9/11, the position Gore summarizes here became as popular as ever. But the original George Bush position became very taboo and politically incorrect.

In May 2007, at the Republican presidential debate in North Carolina, [Ron Paul defended non-intervention](#), and was asked if such a posture is still relevant after 9/11. He noted that in order to understand 9/11, we must understand that U.S. foreign policy was a

"major contributing factor. Have you ever read the reasons they attacked us? They attacked us because we've been over there; we've been bombing Iraq for 10 years. We've been in the Middle East -- I think Reagan was right. We don't understand the irrationality of Middle Eastern politics. So right now we're building an embassy in Iraq that's bigger than the Vatican. We're building 14 permanent bases. What would we say here if China was doing this in our country or in the Gulf of Mexico? We would be objecting. We need to look at what we do from the perspective of what would happen if somebody else did it to us."

When asked if the U.S. "invited" the attacks, Ron Paul answered clearly:

"I'm suggesting that we listen to the people who attacked us and the reason they did it, and they are delighted that we're over there because Osama bin Laden has said, "I am glad you're over on our sand because we can target you so much easier." They have already now since that time -- have killed 3,400 of our men, and I don't think it was necessary."

Candidate Rudy Giuliani responded:

"That's really an extraordinary statement. That's an extraordinary statement, as someone who lived through the attack of September 11, that we invited the attack because we were attacking Iraq. I don't think I've heard that before, and I've heard some pretty absurd explanations for September 11th."

Ron Paul answered back, explaining that the Golden Rule had something to do with this:

"I believe very sincerely that the CIA is correct when they teach and talk about blowback. When we went into Iran in 1953 and installed the shah, yes, there was blowback. A reaction

to that was the taking of our hostages and that persists. And if we ignore that, we ignore that at our own risk. If we think that we can do what we want around the world and not incite hatred, then we have a problem. They don't come here to attack us because we're rich and we're free. They come and they attack us because we're over there. I mean, what would we think if we were -- if other foreign countries were doing that to us?"

That was in 2007, but a similar narrative explaining the motivations for the 9/11 terrorists could be understood in 2001 as well.

The Response to 9/11

What should have been done in response to September 11? [Ron Paul recommended](#) the most proper response to an attack by a stateless enemy, one worthy of our republic: Actually target the terror masterminds and principals through the Constitutional process of the Letters of Marque and Reprisal. Treat the terrorists like pirates. Go after them directly, instead of waging endless and unwinnable wars to recreate the Middle East. Another reasonable course of action would have been to recognize the difference between the Taliban and al Qaeda and go after the latter. There were indeed "training grounds" in Afghanistan, but the planning for 9/11 occurred mostly in the United States and Germany -- the training in Afghanistan was mostly training for ground combat. When [the Taliban offered up Osama bin Laden](#) in October 2001, perhaps the U.S. should have negotiated.

But this is not the path we went down. Instead, the Bush administration took us into a war with Afghanistan and then Iraq. Osama bin Laden fled from Afghanistan before the end of 2001, according to most experts, and now the goal has apparently shifted to promoting democracy, stamping out opium and keeping Pakistan in line. Many, many thousands of Afghans have died, millions have been displaced, and [821 Americans](#) have fallen in that theater of war, with no end in sight and no discernable mission.

President Bush also took us to war with Iraq on the basis of propaganda that has turned out to be totally false: Saddam had [no weapons of mass destruction](#), no operational ties to al Qaeda and no involvement with 9/11. The declared American goal soon became one of bringing democracy and stability to Iraq. A socialist Iraqi constitution was drafted and a new U.S.-allied regime in Iraq with friendly ties to Iran and deference to Sharia law was born. Alliances would shift over the next several years, culminating in the celebrated U.S. "[surge](#)" of 2007 that cynically involved paying off Iraqi militias to fight "al Qaeda in Iraq" rather than U.S. forces. Such bribery, as well as the fact that the Sunnis had effectively lost the civil war by then and Iranian intervention had reduced Sadrist belligerence, was probably what really stemmed the bloodshed temporarily.

[More than four thousand](#) Americans have been killed, tens of thousands wounded. [Independent estimates](#) of Iraqi dead range from a hundred thousand to a million.

And of course, Osama bin Laden has yet to be found. This should be no surprise. As early as [March of 2002](#), only six months after 9/11, President Bush made it clear that finding Osama was no longer a major priority:

"As I say, we hadn't heard much from him. And I wouldn't necessarily say he's at the center of any command structure. And, you know, again, I don't know where he is. I'll repeat what I said: I truly am not that concerned about him. I know he is on the run. I was concerned about him when he had taken over a country. I was concerned about the fact that he was basically running Afghanistan and calling the shots for the Taliban. But, you know, once we set out the policy and started executing the plan, he became -- we shoved him out more and more on the margins. He has no place to train his al Qaeda killers anymore. And if we find a training camp, we'll take care of it -- either we will or our friends will."

But Bush did say he was "deeply concerned about Iraq, and so should the American people be concerned about Iraq. And so should people who love freedom be concerned about Iraq."

Osama is not in Afghanistan. Saddam, who did not turn out to be nearly the threat he was made out to be, has been dead for years, and Iraq never attacked or plausibly threatened to attack America. Why are U.S. forces still in either country? Neither nation is going to be turned into the type of democracy imagined by the neoconservatives in the foreseeable future. A few more years and a few thousand more American deaths isn't going to make or break those countries, and practically everyone knows it. There are, however, far more potential recruits for the anti-American terrorist cause than ever before, and according to our own government, [al Qaeda and the Taliban](#) are more closely linked than ever.

Such paradoxes typify current U.S. policy. In Iraq, the U.S. supported the Islamists who soon came to head up the new Iraqi government and ally it with the interests of Iran. In the midst of the civil war that followed the U.S. invasion, the balance of power between factions has led to bizarre de facto alliances with the U.S. The American mission in Iraq became increasingly unclear over time, as the administration boasted a meaningless "[handover](#)" in April 2004, prided itself on the elections of 2005 that were followed by mass violence, ignored [the Baker report](#) and launched its "surge," paid off the Sunni militants that had previously offered a ceasefire in exchange for a bribe, and eventually capitulated to the Iraqi government with the Status of Forces Agreement last year, which gives Obama a couple more years to withdraw before we know whether we're leaving at all. Meanwhile, the U.S. is supporting the two major Kurdish factions in the North, who are united and at relative peace now, but may find themselves at war with the Iraqi government over oil-rich Kirkuk in the future. Throughout the 1990s, the U.S. backed the Kurds against Saddam with its "No-Fly Zones," even as America also supported the Turks against the Kurds.

The foreign policy paradoxes after 9/11 get stranger than that. The U.S. has apparently been supporting the fanatical Mujahideen-e-Khalq in Iraq, an Iranian Marxist faction that had been allied with the Atallah Khomeini, only to then side with Saddam Hussein against Iran. In Pakistan, America is reportedly backing [Jundallah](#), an organization with probable ties to al Qaeda and likely once led by Khalid Shaikh Mohammed, 9-11 mastermind.

What's more, all this violent intervention is counterproductive to American security. Michael Scheuer has said that U.S. foreign policy has played right into the hands of America's enemies. Although Osama's longterm goal is to get the U.S. out of the Middle East, his

strategy to do this was to lure us into a counterinsurgency sand trap, bleed us dry and bankrupt us. So long as the wars continue, Osama will be winning.

The Post-9/11 Assault on Liberty

In light of the attacks, most Americans came together, and most rallied behind the president and federal government. Polls taken in the weeks after 9/11 revealed a dramatic resurgence in trust and approval in the federal government. This was despite the fact that 9/11 was the largest government failure in living memory. The U.S. government had spent about forty billion a year in intelligence gathering and processing, and failed to prevent the attacks.

For one example of many mishaps, the FBI refused to allow a criminal investigation of two of the hijackers weeks before 9/11. A high official at the agency denied a warrant to Minneapolis agents who wanted to search Zacarias Moussaoui's computer. He had come to flight school, paid cash and wanted to learn how to fly a 747, but not take off and land, and had lots of fishy questions about the airplane's mechanics and how much damage could be expected from its crashing. The FBI, misapplying the FISA law, denied the search warrant in the face of tons of evidence satisfying the standards under FISA, even after a flight school official pointed out to the FBI "that a 747 loaded with fuel can be used as a bomb," and after one of the head Minneapolis agents warned the main FBI office that Moussaoui might "take control of a plane and fly it into the World Trade Center."

This was just one mishap out of many. [As Peter Lance has reported](#), the FBI had been infiltrating al Qaeda operatives in the United States since 1989. Intelligence failure after intelligence failure, in the midst of the assassination of Rabbi Kahane in 1990, the first World Trade Center bombing in 1993, the 1996 bombing of the Khobar Towers, the 1998 African embassy bombings and the attack on the USS Cole in 2000, typified the gross ineptitude of America's massively financed and empowered federal intelligence apparatus prior to 9/11.

But one ironic result from 9/11 has been that, insofar as the terrorists truly hate our freedom, the government has given the terrorists what they wanted. Our freedom has been under continual attack for the last eight years in the name of fighting terrorism. While proponents of a militaristic society do not want to sacrifice the interventionist foreign policy that motivates America's enemies, they do seem willing to [sacrifice](#) those very liberties they claim are the real reason we are hated. However, whereas relinquishing the empire, despite being agreeable with some of our enemies, would be of no long-term harm to our country (indeed, a constitutional republic cannot survive long as an empire), the sacrifice of our freedoms has been something that only America's enemies should want to see.

First came [a roundup of hundreds of suspected terrorists](#) and "material witnesses," now long forgotten, who were denied due process for months. Next came the Patriot Act, which empowered the federal government to spy on communications with even fewer safeguards than existed under the 1978 Foreign Intelligence Surveillance Act, itself a deviation from Constitutional due process. The Act also allowed for sneak and peak surveillance -- searching people's property without letting them know for months on end -- and the issuance of National Security Letters that violated the First Amendment by prohibiting their recipients

from informing anyone, including their own lawyer, that they got them. This provision was overturned as unconstitutional in 2004.

In April 2004, Bush asserted:

"[B]y the way, any time you hear the United States government talking about wiretap, it requires -- a wiretap requires a court order. Nothing has changed, by the way. When we're talking about chasing down terrorists, we're talking about getting a court order before we do so. It's important for our fellow citizens to understand, when you think Patriot Act, constitutional guarantees are in place when it comes to doing what is necessary to protect our homeland, because we value the Constitution."

And yet, at the end of 2005, [we learned](#) that the National Security Agency, an organ of the military, had been spying on American telecommunications without even the safeguards guaranteed by the newly amended FISA. This illegal surveillance was legalized -- at least by statute; the program is still unconstitutional -- last year, with Senator Obama voting for it.

Shortly after 9/11, we saw the birth of a detention policy completely at odds with the principles of habeas corpus. Citizens were stripped of their right to a trial, and foreigners were rounded up and deprived of both the protections of prisoners of war and the legal privileges afforded to criminals. The Geneva Conventions and Bill of Rights were abandoned. Thousands of foreigners have been unjustly detained and tortured, many who were apprehended by warlords in exchange for a cash reward. Hundreds were released from Guantanamo when it became clear they were innocent of anything but being in the wrong place (Afghanistan or Pakistan) at the wrong time (after the U.S. had gone to war). This was after officials had assured the American public that only the "[worst of the worst](#)" were being detained. While the Court has extended some protections to Guantanamo, [President Obama is now seeking to preserve indefinite and lawless detention](#) at [Bagram](#) in Afghanistan.

A policy of "extraordinary renditioning" came to life, whereby suspects are transferred to foreign regimes like Syria or Morocco to be interrogated brutally. This policy has ensnared a number of innocent people, such as Canadian citizen Maher Ahar. [Under Obama](#), renditioning has apparently been expanded to include non-terror suspects.

All-out war has been waged on the Bill of Rights since 9/11, accompanied by the creation of the Department of Homeland Security, the militarization of domestic police, the nationalization of airline security (which fails to keep weapons off planes but harasses normal Americans daily), a "[no-fly list](#)" that prevents more than a million Americans from traveling freely (which some in the current administration [want to use to disarm those Americans](#)), "[fusion centers](#)" that chill free political speech, and a ridiculous color-coded terror alert system that we now know was [a political farce](#). A series of [supposed foiled terror plots](#) have turned out to be similarly dubious.

Economic freedom has also taken a hit. We have seen financial privacy eroded in the name of stopping terrorism and a military response to 9/11 that has cost, in direct terms, at least a trillion dollars, and whose long-term costs are probably many times that. Furthermore, the fog

of war has allowed the domestic leviathan to advance. Under the false patriotism, President Bush was able to push through his expansion of Medicare, his enormous farm bill, and record-busting deficits with a Republican Congress afraid to confront their president at wartime. The monetary and fiscal response to 9/11 coincided with the economic response to the dotcom bust: Credit expansion to keep Americans shopping, building and buying homes and living it up, so as to reflate the economic bubble, only to see it all collapse last year and bring on the greatest economic depression of a lifetime.

Moving Forward

It is considered crass in some circles to point out all this horror that surrounds the events of 9/11, both before and after. Yet to truly honor those Americans who were peacefully living their lives, working in the great system of global capitalism, only to be slaughtered on that Tuesday morning eight years ago, we must appreciate why it happened, what the full implications of the attack and the U.S. response to it have been, and what will truly keep Americans safer in the future. The answer is not to keep sacrificing the freedoms and values that some Americans believe are the reasons we were attacked. The answer is to abandon the policy of foreign intervention and rely on our liberties -- our right to bear arms, for example -- to protect us.

The U.S. has been an interventionist empire under both parties for the better part of a century. September 11 occurred after years of such interventions. The current administration is virtually identical to the last administration in clinging to this counterproductive and unconstitutional foreign policy. At the core of this continuity is a philosophical problem, a dedication to intervention in our national culture that must be questioned and confronted. Our true hope for security and freedom lies in restoring the constitutional limits on presidential power, bringing the troops home from around the world, and restoring the republic.