

## ...And Now For Something Completely Similar



Since the doleful events of September 11, one of the points made by almost everyone, from the president to television commentators to the freshmen in my survey class, has been the radical newness of the era in which we now find

ourselves. "Four Days That Transformed a President, a Presidency and a Nation, for All Time," ran one *New York Times* headline, by no means the most hyperbolic of the past two weeks. There is no denying that we all have been changed to some degree by what one hopes will stand for a long, long time as the deadliest single day for Americans outside of a battlefield. And few American battlefields have ever come close. Though most other nations have had their cities attacked in the twentieth century—if not destroyed, invaded, or occupied—the United States has seen nothing like this since the Civil War. If foreign attack is the standard, then the last occasion can be pushed back to the Battle of New Orleans in January 1815, in which we lost exactly eight men. Perhaps most importantly, all the close rivals of September 11 in our history involved soldier and sailors, who at least knew that they faced death, not office workers and airline passengers in peacetime who by rights should have been more concerned with where they were going to have lunch than whether they would survive the day.

The recent events are new to us, then, if not to the people of London or Paris or Berlin or Tel Aviv or Hiroshima. The last decade has been an era when many people seemed to feel that nothing "real" had ever happened to them, nothing that tested their limits and characters. Suffused with a somewhat facile sense of the insubstantiality of modern life (and politics), middle-class people seemed to yearn for experiences more intense than what their suburban lives provided. Bourgeois anomie is an old story, but it seemed particularly virulent in the 1990s. Vast audiences sought out extreme experiences as entertainment—from slasher movies, to first-person-shooter video games, to thrill rides, to so-called "reality" television, to popular military history. Until last month, there was even a transportation disaster-themed restaurant, The Crash Café, being planned for Baltimore's Inner Harbor. At the same time, there was a bull market not just on Wall Street, but in evangelical religion and other forms of spirituality and self-help, all promising to connect believers to a realer reality than anything we have down here.

In a bewildering variety of ways, Americans sought to find and identify with something authentic and serious in their own personal histories, from a childhood trauma to a psychological syndrome to an ethnic heritage to a record of wartime heroism and 1960s activism. Occasionally these bits of personal reality were invented or exaggerated, sometimes by historians, but even the scrupulously honest among authenticity-free Americans had the vicarious option. So baby boomers and their children embraced a burgeoning cult of their World War II era forbears, a cult that was just gearing up for another round of Greatness, related to the HBO series "Band of Brothers," when the terrorists struck. And for political guidance, at least during this past summer when David McCullough pushed crotchety little John Adams to the top of the charts and Joseph Ellis continued to attract huge audiences for tales of the founding fraternity, we were supposed to look all the way back to the "Even Greater Generation," the Founders.

Now something real really has happened, not to one of the great generations,

but to us. And it is almost unbearable. With a political language devalued by decades of politicians declaring “wars” on every problem of the moment except those requiring military action, there is no available hyperbole that can contain our feelings in the face of such a tragedy, though most of them have been tried. But has September 11 really changed us forever? Has the nation set off down a fundamentally new and different path?

Many early indications suggest not. While President Bush’s spokesmen have mercifully eschewed the bombing-only tactics pioneered by Nixon and Kissinger (and pursued so frequently by Bush père and Clinton), their “new war” sounds suspiciously like most of the other ones since World War II: premised on vague but expansive abdications of congressional authority to the executive branch, and launched with little suggestion that the populace will be required to mobilize or sacrifice for the cause. The new war may go on for years, the administration says, and we might not be told much about it, and it will sometimes be dirty, but we can count on its not affecting us too much, since it will be conducted mostly through precision strikes, “special operations,” and commando raids. Ironically, “war” seems to be the chosen term this time around, not because war will actually be declared or a fundamentally new approach taken, but because all the older euphemisms (“police action,” “conflict,” etc.) lost their magic in previous postwar stalemates and defeats. The American people are aware of the quagmires and disappointments that this nonwar warpath has led us into before—and in the Cold War conflicts we at least had the benefit of knowing pretty clearly who and how we were to fight.

Nor is the same old “new war” plan the only depressingly familiar aspect of the present situation. The warnings that began on the very day of the attack—injunctions that Americans would have to give up some of their freedoms and forgo some democratic niceties in order to combat the threat—have an American history predating the United States itself. Faced with unruly Boston tax protesters in 1768, Massachusetts Lieutenant Governor Thomas Hutchinson advised his superiors that there would have to be “an abridgement of what is called English liberty” if the colonies were to remain part of the British Empire. Thirty years later, it was the prospect of war with France—and fear of revolutionists and French sympathizers at home—that had influential figures not just calling for but actually achieving such abridgements, in the form of the Alien and Sedition Acts. (The French Jacobins were the very first modern “[terrorists](#),” of course, though they favored the state-sponsored variety. And while Robespierre probably could have given Osama bin Laden a run for his money, Vice President Thomas Jefferson was considered the likely American terrorist mastermind of that era.) Mobs did most of the wartime liberty abridging during the nineteenth century, but the early decades of the twentieth proved to be something of a golden age for the official variety in America. Faced with seemingly diabolical threats like communism, anarchism, and the Hun, the U.S. government engaged in periodic spasms of trampling on the rights of citizens and immigrants in the name of internal security, beginning with the post-World War I Red Scare that led to mass arrests and deportations and the creation of the FBI. In asking for broader powers to detain suspected

terrorists without trial and to conduct electronic surveillance, John Ashcroft's Justice Department is only returning to the original mission behind its twentieth-century expansion. (Luckily for the country, the [usual southern conservative base](#) for crackdowns on the civil liberties of radicals and immigrants seems to be crumbling in Congress this time around.)



Figure 1: Jefferson's "Terrorist" Plans Exposed: The Providential Detection. Political cartoon by unknown artists, ca. 1800.

Though always presented as clear-eyed wisdom borne of hard experience, calls for the restriction of civil liberties and the unleashing of government police powers have tended to come almost automatically from people with profound and preexisting doubts about whether liberal democracy and widespread individual freedom can survive in a world of hatred, war, and power politics. Alexander Hamilton, John Adams, and other Federalists, for example, had made their doubts about the staying power of the U.S. Constitution, as written, perfectly clear even before the French crisis of the late 1790s. On this and many later occasions, these doubts have arisen from an apparent distaste for debate, compromise, and individualism per se, with military crisis providing a golden opportunity to command greater political conformity and a more authoritarian style of governance. Over the past century, in fact, these retrenchments have been more easily accepted by the public and the political system than they were earlier in American history. The exposure of Hutchinson's advice created a scandal that pushed the colonies toward revolution, while the Sedition Act inspired the expansion of the opposition press it was meant to suppress. But just over a century later, Attorney General A. Mitchell Palmer, who oversaw the World War I Red Scare, became a serious presidential contender for his trouble, while his protégé J. Edgar Hoover remained a popular hero for a half century

afterwards. In the 1950s, government repression of radical political groups was the stuff of popular books and films like [\*I Was a Communist for the FBI\*](#), a hit in both media.



Figure 2: Poster for I Was A Communist for the F.B.I. (1951)

If answering terror by repressing civil liberties promises to take us back to the future, still another sadly familiar development can be detected in the present national mood. A certain note of grim self-congratulation has crept into many of the public commentaries and remembrances, a sense that a crisis like this might actually be rather healthy, a kind of exercise regimen for the body politic that will purge it of doubts and decadence and bring us back to more authentic values. "I didn't think this country could come together like it has. I thought we were too cynical," said the morning DJ on my car radio the week after the attacks, echoing the ecstatic paeans to national unity that began to issue from the media within hours of the World Trade Center's collapse. Overnight, two of the roughest media images going, those of New York City and its mayor, were transfigured to the point of sainthood, while all former political questions were declared to be petty disputes when compared to the coming struggle. A less benign side of the new era of good feelings was found by a *Seattle Times* [reporter](#) at a Colorado gun shop. While stocking up on ammunition in order to meet the present crisis, the regulars were debating whether Hitler or the Founding Fathers had said that "A country needs a war every 15 years to get united." They approved the sentiment, wherever it originated.

This is only the most recent occasion when war and crisis have been welcomed as opportunities for moral regeneration. Samuel Adams hoped that the Revolution would make Boston into the "[Christian Sparta](#)" that he imagined existed in the time of his Puritan forefathers. The Revolutionary War, and most of those that



followed, opened with a sometimes brief but always fierce celebration of the nation's redemption from partisan division and weakness of character. This effect skipped the little-ballyhooed Vietnam conflict, but that omission was more than made up for by the orgy of unanimity around the previous President Bush during the highly debatable Persian Gulf War.

It remains to be seen whether the present mood will mature into a Revolutionary-style "*rage militaire*," as the Bush administration initially seemed to hope, or whether the self-centered habits of the Clinton age will reassert themselves. As of this writing, my money is on the latter. The administration has shifted over to assuring people that something will be done to Osama and the Taliban someday, while encouraging the American people to do their patriotic duty the new economy way, by getting out there and consuming for the common good. Perhaps this time we'll use shopping bags instead of carpet bombs. That might be something new after all, though probably no more effective as foreign policy.

### **Further Reading:**

For two important works on the origins of the war-as-moral-regeneration theme in American history, see Charles Royster, *A Revolutionary People at War: The Continental Army and American Character, 1775-1783* (Chapel Hill, 1979) and Ann Fairfax Withington, *Toward a More Perfect Union: Virtue and the Formation of American Republics* (New York, 1991). For its presence even in the U.S.A.'s least successful conflict, the War of 1812, see Steven Watts, *The Republic Reborn: War and the Making of Liberal America, 1790-1820* (Baltimore, 1987) and Roger H. Brown, *The Republic in Peril: 1812* (New York, 1964).

For further evidence on the new era's lack of newness, and other political commentary, see "[Publick Occurrences Extra](#)," a new Weblog on the author's personal site.

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