
Suri: Fear and self-inflicted wounds have defined America since 9/11

By Jeremi Suri | September 10, 2016

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IMAGE 1 OF 2

Fifteen years ago, American self-confidence shattered amid the death and debris of the World Trade Center, the Pentagon, a field in Pennsylvania and four hijacked aircraft.

In our economy, our culture and our psyche, the ripple effects have been felt ever since.

Before these horrific terrorist attacks, we believed history was on our side. Perhaps rightly so - the forces of democracy and capitalism had torn down the walls of communist tyranny, and the world was poised for an era of "perpetual peace" enforced by unchallenged U.S. power. In fact, foreign policy was barely discussed during the 2000 presidential election. The world was going our way.



Then Sept.11, 2001, occurred. It was a shock because it was not supposed to happen. Overnight, the symbols of American freedom and prosperity - office buildings, tourist destinations, airports, parks and even sports arenas - became sites of potential danger.

We have lived in fear ever since that terrible day. The irony is that the fear, much more than the terrorists, has done enormous damage to our country.

Our efforts to protect ourselves have increased our suffering and left us less safe. Our policies designed to boost our economy have increased inequality and diminished investments in critical public needs. Most ironic, our fight against hateful terrorists has made us a more hate-filled society.

Breeding hate

We see evidence of it today. Donald Trump's rhetoric against Muslims, Mexicans, immigrants and women is an extension of similar words and attitudes expressed with ever more frequency since the United States began its "War on Terror." In the years that followed 9/11, President George W. Bush spoke of a "crusade." Sarah Palin and other tea party activists encouraged Americans to arm themselves and "stand their ground" against suspected intruders in their communities. Trump has only added more gasoline to this brewing hatred.

Our military failures in the Middle East make the hate deeper and more difficult to control. Since March 2003, we have spent more than \$2 trillion in Iraq on war and reconstruction. More than 4,000 Americans have died, and at least 150,000 Iraqi civilians have lost their lives. Yet, more than a decade later, the situation in Iraq and the wider region is worse and more threatening.

Out of fear, we fought a long and costly war in Iraq that has made us less safe, less influential and less wealthy. Many Americans are angry about this, and for good reason, but they are directing much of their anger at Muslims rather than trying to bring positive change.

What fear bought us

A similar story applies to the management of our economy. Fearing a loss in consumer

OPINION

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confidence after the Sept. 11 attacks, President Bush famously told Americans to "go shopping." In a matter of months, an inherited budget surplus turned into a deficit, with much of the money going to warfare, homeland security projects, tax cuts and other efforts to stimulate the economy. This was followed by reductions in government regulations on lending and business practices, many justified by the fear that restrictive laws would limit the country's ability to respond to new threats and competition. The 2008 recession triggered yet another set of larger spending projects to bail out bankers and businesses who were believed to be "too big to fail."

Fearful spending always makes for bad investment choices. Look at what the record budget deficits after Sept. 11, 2001, bought us: rising inequality, stagnant wages and crumbling public institutions. New spending went to consumers and investors, not the builders of schools, bridges, parks or even sidewalks. Only a few decades ago, American infrastructure was the envy of the world. Now our telecommunications, electric grid and public transportation are just above Third World standards.

Are we safer?

Where did all the money go? It followed the fear, not the country's needs. Spending on prisons, police and surveillance increased rapidly, just as budgets for education and infrastructure have fallen. Both Republicans and Democrats support transfer payments that support aging voters, but neither has taken a strong stand to protect investments in our future crop of talented citizens - many of whom are, incidentally, dark-skinned and female.

The clearest example of misspent money is evident in our airports. The Transportation Safety Administration, or the TSA, created in the aftermath of the Sept. 11 attacks, quickly ballooned into a massive federal bureaucracy of more than 50,000 employees with an annual budget in excess of \$7 billion. TSA employees search our luggage and bodies in long airport lines, and they add a fee to every airline ticket.

Although we need airport security, numerous studies have found that the TSA does not prevent determined individuals from carrying threatening items on aircraft. Inspector General

John Roth reported to Congress last year that the TSA "was assessing risk inappropriately" and could not "meet the mission the American people expect of it." And yet we continue to sacrifice our privacy, time and money at the airport for ineffective TSA procedures that address our fears, but do not protect our safety.

The generation of Americans who lived through the Great Depression and the Second World War followed Franklin Roosevelt's prescient warning that "the only thing we have to fear is ... fear itself." They built a society of hope and opportunity that we still benefit from today.

But since Sept. 11, 2001, our society has gone in the opposite direction. We have allowed fear to dominate our policymaking, our public rhetoric and even our local behavior. In this sense, the terrorists have won. The reactions of American leaders have done more to harm our society and diminish our future prospects than the crimes committed abroad. Our wounds are almost entirely self-inflicted.

A reason for optimism

But here is the good news: We still have time to reverse course. The history of the past 15 years can awaken us to the perils of politics based on fear and hate. What we need is more of a commitment to see beyond immediate and exaggerated threats, with a renewed focus on hopes and possibilities. Our leaders have a chance to re-introduce our country to the world and articulate a vision for increased cooperation so we can better manage climate change, nuclear proliferation and international trade. We also need a national economic policy that promises more opportunities for disadvantaged citizens through targeted investments, regulations and assistance.

Our leaders must talk more ambitiously about what we are for and less about what we are against. And most important, we must, as Americans, work toward rebuilding a civic culture that values conversation and compromise, discouraging hate, fear and violence. That is where the real courage resides - in the willingness to dream again, despite the scary shadows on the wall.

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