
LOOKING INSIDE: Even Two Years Later, Memories Are Changing

By Mary L. Dudziak

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It has been two years since Sept. 11, *the* Sept. 11, two years since the day, we have so often been told, that "everything changed." This idea that Sept. 11 was a day of change has been ubiquitous. Perhaps it is a source of strange comfort. After all, how could such horror and sorrow not change all it reached?

So many months after, we still struggle to make sense of the world we came to inhabit that day. It is marked not as an event, like the blackout, or as a place, like the Oklahoma City federal building. Instead, we remember it as a date, as a moment frozen in time, a day that seemed to last so many more than 24 hours. Sept. 11 is remembered as a date that divides one era from another.

A memory is a gloss upon the past. Memories cannot hold the full cacophony of events. Instead, as Marita Sturken, an associate professor of communications at the University of Southern California, has argued, "The desire for narrative closure ... forces on historical events the limits of narrative form." We necessarily choose what to place in the story, and what to leave out. We make judgments about the story's meaning.

In 2002, the first anniversary was an occasion to come together in mourning. Crowds gathered for a memorial at Ground Zero. Services were held across time zones at the moment the first plane hit.

Reactions now are more complex. In Sean Penn's new short film "September 11," the Twin Towers appear only as shadows, blocking the sun. The devastation is represented by the shadows, cascading downward along a wall as each of the towers fell. Their collapse lets in a harsh sun that awakens the film's lone character to the death of his wife, which he had denied. The character is newly conscious of a harsh reality, one that pre-existed the tragedy. Sept. 11 is the occasion for both awareness and mourning.

Light and darkness figure in another remembrance: the Libeskind design for Ground Zero. When the World Trade Center stood, it was defined by towers that

blocked the sun. In the architect's rendering, the towers' destruction is remembered by the absence of shadow. Each year on Sept. 11, at the moment of first impact, no shadow would darken the space where the towers once stood.

Film and design, both forms of memory, capture a paradoxical element of Sept. 11. In our reaction to the horrific events, we experience the world as new yet we may also awaken to an awareness of a pre-existing reality. Sept. 11 is seen as a moment of light, a sharpening of perspective, the opening of a curtain on the world, whether old or new.

As Ground Zero has been readied for the physical rebuilding, another sort of post-Sept. 11 construction has been well under way. Consciously or not, we create the stories of the past we remember - we construct our memories of Sept. 11. The idea of change is one such construction, and it is a narrative move with profound consequences. Seeing the world as new has been a principal justification for departures from the past. Terrorism - foreign and domestic - had darkened U.S. soil before, but Sept. 11 was experienced as a loss of innocence, a confrontation with a new form of evil.

This new world surely required new security, and broad new authority for domestic surveillance was quickly given to the Justice Department. A "new kind of war" against an "axis of evil" justified reinvigorated American unilateralism and a dangerous new policy of pre-emptive war. Sept. 11 might have been thought to be an unspeakably horrific crime, requiring a global reaction to find and prosecute wrongdoers. Seeing it as a change that required these new policies was a matter of choice requiring its own justification.

A casualty of this approach has been the solidarity, at home and abroad, following the attacks. The American flag was, momentarily, a global symbol. Around the world in September 2001, many expressed a solidarity with Americans in their grief. The flags are gone now from most storefronts in Manhattan, car windows on LA freeways and front lawns in Minnesota. The flag took on a different meaning in the build-up to war. It was now a symbol of support for an exercise of U.S. military power. Here, some turned the stars into peace symbols on anti-war protest signs. Around the world, protesters burned the flag.

The trajectory of ideas linked with the flag is an example of a broader aspect of post-Sept. 11 political culture. In the aftermath of the attacks, the nation and the world have converged and diverged over the meanings of America. A moment of remarkable global solidarity has given way to new tensions with long-standing allies. At home, critics of Bush administration policy are called treasonous in a right-wing bestseller. The role of the nation in the world, a source of cohesion shortly after Sept. 11, has become the basis for division.

Was this a day when we all changed? Was this a marker between two eras?

Whether or not we have truly crossed a threshold to a new moment in history, it would be best to consider the past in light as well as in shadow, in critical awareness as well as in mourning.

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