How the World Changed and Who Changed It After September 11th

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On September 11th, 2001 during the long walk from the office a few blocks from Ground Zero where I had begun my day to my home in Northern Manhattan, it was obvious that the attacks in Lower Manhattan and, as we later learned, Washington DC, had changed the world and the U.S. During those first weeks and months when much of Lower Manhattan was inaccessible and the paper kept printing the names of the dead, everybody in New York was aware that the world, and our city, was not going to ever be the same.

Gradually, however, things slowly became, for many of us, the same as before. Although few people in New York were more than two degrees of separation from somebody who died in the attacks, many of us knew nobody personally who was killed on September 11th. Memories of September 11th have never gone away, but for many of us they have receded into the background only to be brought to the forefront by an incident, remark, experience, or, too frequently, the speech of a politician driven more by ambition or partisanship than by concern for real New Yorkers.

The terrorists who attacked the U.S. on that day thought that their attacks would cripple the U.S.; that this would be one of a series of attacks that would ultimately destroy the U.S. They had made the mistake of letting their Messianic and radical ideology cloud their view of the U.S. The U.S., for all of its problems, was not, in fall of 2011, an empire that could be destroyed by a few ceramic knife wielding zealots taking over the cockpits of a few airplanes. The strength, sophistication and resiliency of the American people, economy and security forces prevented al-Qaeda’s hopes from becoming real in this regard.

Nonetheless, the U.S. is considerably weaker, by most measures, than it was ten years ago. The American economy is still reeling from a major recession; the American image in the world is still suffering from the effects of unpopular wars and arrogant foreign policy choices, the military is still overstretched and American soft power is probably in decline as well. The reason for this is that while Osama Bin Laden and his followers underestimated American society and its ability to withstand a terrorist attack, the country’s leaders made a series of decisions since September 11th that, regardless of why they were made, have resulted in a weaker U.S.

It is somewhat ironic that the worst single thing for the U.S. to come out of September 11th, measured in human lives, cost or almost any other way, was not the event itself but the Bush administration’s decision to go to war in Iraq eighteen months later. It is possible that the U.S. would have engaged in that war of choice had there not been an attack on September 11th, but it is difficult not to recognize how the events of September
11th made the decision to go to war simpler for the administration and, more importantly, made it much easier for President Bush to gain support for his decision from the American people.

The war accelerated the deficit problems which the U.S. now confronts and which have proven to be a major reason why the U.S. is still stuck in this recession. Had the country been in stronger fiscal health when the recession hit, it would have been much easier to develop job creation and other programs to fight unemployment and ameliorate some of the worst impacts of the recession.

It would be inaccurate to link the current American decline too directly to the events of September 11th. This would be giving Bin Laden too much credit. Had there been no attacks, it is certainly possible that the Bush administration would still have led the country into damaging and extremely costly wars, perhaps even in Iraq. It is almost certain that the Bush administration would have sought to cut taxes and found ways to spend money thus creating the debt-related problems the U.S. now faces, but this might have happened more slowly or less dramatically.

A decade after the attacks it is clear that that day, at least symbolically, was the moment when the heady days of the post Cold War period gave way to a period, perhaps not irreversible, of American decline. Accordingly, many will assume there is a causal relationship as well, but that is still something of an overstatement. September 11th may have changed everything, but in September of 2011, America’s leaders probably changed everything even more.