

Amnesia 9-1-1

Is forgetting the lessons learned from the past a running thread in the American consciousness?

By NILAM DESAI

Apart from the 'Never Forget' memes, what does the 9/11 anniversary mean to the average American whose homeland was targeted, and whose adversaries succeeded in an evil, almost brilliantly executed mission? Have we learned anything from that history-altering event? Is 'Never Forget' actionable or merely an annual memory stamp, void of meaning?

My thoughts return to visiting my father during Covid isolation last year. Underneath the glass top on his dresser still lies the postcard of the World Trade Center (WTC) that I wrote to my parents with my thoughts days after 9/11. Could I ever imagine any time, any event in the future, that could be more horrifying than what I witnessed 20 years ago at Ground Zero?

Many years I watched the morning roll-call on 9/11, waiting for familiar names and remembering friends who shared that day with me at the WTC and the adjoining World Financial Center (WFC) complex where I worked. Most of us in the Tri-state area knew someone, or someone who knew someone, who perished that day.

After the recent events in Afghanistan, the sinking feeling I hoped I'd never feel again came over me. Watching the desperate Afghans chase a moving airplane, trying to hang on, knowing the enemy was waiting below. The days of being on edge return.

On 9/11/01, prevented by the NYPD from going to my office at the WFC, I joined the crowd across the street after the 2nd plane hit. People crying, mouths open aghast. People like me, emerging from the subway on their way to work, desperately looking for answers. "What's happening?!" From across the street, I kept looking straight up and then down at the crowds' faces for answers. The beautiful, symbolic buildings I passed through every day on my way to work, now towering infernos.

"A small plane hit the tower" I heard someone say. A woman next to me cried, covering her mouth with one hand and pointing upwards with the other. "WHAT?!", I questioned before I saw it. And then saw another as the crowd screamed in unison. People left behind, trying to decide how their life story would end. Angels launching themselves from high up in a final act on this earth. Visions and sounds no one can see or hear. Horrific.

Just as those in Afghanistan who in recent days attempted to control their futures, running from terror to risk jumping on the last flight to civilization and 'freedom', the memories of some of those left stranded in burning buildings who inched forward to make that final decision of how they wished to die that day 20 years ago came to mind.

The tears watching the hopeless situation, thinking of our friends in the Towers on 9/11 turned to frantic people stampeding, pushing me out of the way as the first



A helicopter flies past the World Trade Center after a commercial plane slammed into it, September 11, 2001.



Cars smolder in the street as the destroyed World Trade Center burns in New York, September 11, 2001.

Tower started to fall. Running from clouds of ash which seemed to chase us all the way to Chinatown in a strange way made me think of what some of the Afghans may have felt last week running from gunfire in the hills towards the border.

In the years that passed, 'Never Forget' becomes 'HOW can you forget?'

Even this evening while writing and listening to crickets chirping outside, an unusually loud airplane suddenly flew above the quiet neighborhood, disturbing sleeping llamas and the coyotes fighting

amnesia?

After 9/11, there was racial profiling at airports...until there really wasn't. Political correctness took over in parts of society. Protecting feelings trumped safety.

History became a mystery. Most never understood we were in the fog of war. Invade the enemy, hunt down the culprits, eliminate them, and return home to baseball and apple pie. "Normal life". End of story. Except it wasn't.

The stories our enemies were writing were work-in-progress. The threat, multifaceted.

When Wuhan began lockdown, when kids were beaten in Hong Kong, when women were assaulted by refugees in Europe, the response here from many at home was usually "That's not 'our' problem..." Until it was, and is, our problem. Our insular myopia often became our adversary's advantage.

To some, the post 9/11 years looked like we had politically correct leaders who increasingly sought to apologize, to not offend, to open doors and roll out welcome mats for those who may wish to harm us.

Leaders, who cleverly attacked as 'racists' anyone who questioned potential threats. Shaming those awake enough to sound alarm bells to protect the homeland. But the threats

wishing to change the world and our place in it, were already within. Some were held up high by those dismissing and clouding the historical impact of 9/11. "Some people did something..." they told the crowds drunk on bubbles of wokeness.

Journalists were sometimes told to not use the word "terrorist" because it emotes certain "feelings". Feelings over facts increasingly became the war cry for many in the past two decades.

Others in this country who looked "different" were sometimes treated with suspicion. For someone like me with an Arabic-origin name, many years before and following 9/11 were filled with profiling, isolation at airports, and mistrust. People judging without knowing or speaking. Flipping out because someone covers their head with a hijab, or triggered to safe spaces by a red baseball hat with white letters. Anger and division are often fear



People visit the National 9/11 Pentagon Memorial in Arlington, Va., on the 2018 anniversary of the attacks. The memorial, just outside the Pentagon building, features benches over reflecting pools for the 184 people who died in the attack.

underneath the stars. Instinctively, I ran to the balcony, no different than what I did the night of 9/11 to the sounds of military planes patrolling over the Manhattan skyline. It's become normal for me not to 'forget' in some way.

I've questioned why the media began to slowly minimize the coverage of the yearly ceremonies at Ground Zero. The event was tragic, and no one chooses to feel uncomfortable every year, because these days "Feelings Matter" most.

Many schools barely mention the deadliest event, an attack on our homeland, in their history classes. My daughter sometimes shared the story of her mom on 9/11 to her teachers in school.

Why have many deliberately downplayed 9/11 and the threat that remains thereafter?

How naive were we pre-9/11, and has our naiveté returned along with our

in disguise. Fear of the unknown, fear of differences....racial, political, ideological and many others.

While enemies appear gifted with patience, conviction, and the eyes of tigers, we were intentionally distracted. While Blacks and Whites argued over whose lives were more supreme and mattered most, it was half-time for those foreign-looking tanned folks like me who operated under the radar, or just took a breather from the craziness.

In the racial storms we picked sides, practiced synchronized group-think, swam in wokeness, and developed short attention spans thanks to tech swipe culture. Lack of depth, lost pride in who we are as a nation, little emphasis on critical thinking, increased intolerance, loss of purpose, and no value for the oxygen that was our freedoms.

A lesson from my high school driver's ed class re-entered my thoughts many times since 9/11. "Look high, wide, low and check your rear view mirrors." Look within borders to observe divisions. Look high, wide for dangers overseas in today's interconnected world to understand the impacts here. Lastly, revive common sense and monitor those rear view mirrors to know who's got our six.

The haze of war. As Sun Tzu says, "The whole secret lies in confusing the enemy, so that he cannot fathom our real intent."

My mind returns to the question, when I return to the postcard of the Twin Towers on my father's dresser: Could I ever imagine any time, or any event in the future, that could be more horrifying than what I witnessed that day, twenty years ago, on 9/11...?

That next chapter is ours to write. Not to white out, black out, cancel or have selective amnesia for moments in history that are uncomfortable to feel. Remember those lost that day. Learn from the past,

painful as it may be, in order to prepare the next generation for what lies ahead.



(PHOTO: COURTESY NILAM DESAI)

Nilam Desai is the director of Free To Be Coalition (freetobecoalition.com)