

Lessons for the Next Twenty Years: What We've Learned in the Two Decades Since 9/11[◆]

Introduction

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Today, our nation saw evil, the very worst of human nature. And we responded with the best of America—with the daring of our rescue workers, with the caring for strangers and neighbors who came to give blood and help in any way they could . . . The search is underway for those who are behind these evil acts. I've directed the full resources of our intelligence and law enforcement communities to find those responsible and to bring them to justice. We will make no distinction between the terrorists who committed these acts and those who harbor them.¹

With these words, President George W. Bush set in motion efforts that would lead the United States and partner nations into twenty years of armed conflict, resulting in over seven thousand U.S. and allied killed in action, over fifty thousand U.S. wounded, and hundreds of thousands of dead civilians worldwide. A few months later, he would again honor the nearly three thousand victims of 9/11, recognizing that “Every one of the innocents who died on September the 11th was the most important person on earth to somebody. Every death extinguished a world.”²

The War on Terror followed, and the ensuing twenty years saw the United States expend over six trillion dollars of U.S. military and foreign assistance appropriations, establish military commissions and a detention camp at Guantanamo Bay,

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1. Address to the Nation on the Terrorist Attacks, 2 PUB. PAPERS 1099 (Sept. 11, 2001).

2. Remarks at a September 11 Remembrance Ceremony, 2 PUB. PAPERS 1500 (Dec. 11, 2001).

engage in torture, and find and kill Osama bin Laden.³ At home, the last two decades saw the Congress' full-throated endorsement of previously untenable executive authorities, broad surveillance of Muslim and other minority American communities, the creation and subsequent reorganizations of the Department of Homeland Security, the Office of the Director of National Intelligence and National Counterterrorism Center, sweeping changes to the operations of the Federal Bureau of Investigation and the Department of State, and the prevention of any additional 9/11-type attacks against our country.

The last twenty years of American counterterror and national security efforts have had profound impacts on our nation and the world. A 2019 Pew Research Center survey suggested that approximately sixty percent of Americans believe the post-9/11 wars in Iraq and Afghanistan were not worth the costs.⁴ For those of us directly involved, as for the taxpayers who footed the bills, it is appropriate to ask, how did we do? What worked, and what didn't work? Were processes, policies, laws, and resources adequate to the requirements? Did we adhere to those policies and laws? And, perhaps most importantly, what lessons have we learned to ensure our nation and its allies can do better in the coming decades?

This special issue is more than a commemoration of the 20th anniversary of the 9/11 attacks, and more than an assessment of our responses to those attacks. This issue captures hundreds of lessons learned over the last twenty years in a straightforward format, unvarnished by politics, agency agendas, apology, or misdirection. Our authors represent nearly 700 years of collective government and national security experience, and include former officials who devised, led, oversaw, executed, and evaluated many of the efforts set in motion by President Bush when he addressed the nation on the evening of September 11, 2001, as well as those directed by Presidents Barack Obama and Donald Trump in the decades that followed.

This is not a "war story" effort, although it does include a few. Nor is it an effort to settle disputes from the past. It is a collection of personal reflections on what has worked and what has not, and the costs to and gains for our country of these twenty years of effort. It was written by people who were there; an extraordinary assemblage of experience and insight, with service in all three branches of government, the armed forces of both the U.S. and Canada, membership in both major political parties, and a common courage, generosity, and decency to share their insights and self-criticism to further enhance our collective security and advance the ideals our country is meant to embody.

Throughout March and April of 2021, I conducted a series of fascinating interviews to identify key lessons learned over the two decades since September 11, 2001. My conversations with leaders from the military, law enforcement,

3. NETA C. CRAWFORD, UNITED STATES BUDGETARY COSTS AND OBLIGATIONS OF POST-9/11 WARS THROUGH FY2020: \$6.4 TRILLION (2019) (a report of the Watson Institute of International & Public Affairs at Brown University)

4. Ruth Igielnik & Kim Parker, *Majorities of U.S. Veterans, Public Say the Wars in Iraq and Afghanistan Were Not Worth Fighting*, PEW RSCH CTR. (July 10, 2019), <https://perma.cc/9PAA-VBH3>.

homeland security, intelligence, treasury, oversight, legislative, technology, defense, civil liberties, and other fields all began with the question, “If you were sitting down to coffee with someone about to assume your former role, and you wanted to offer advice that would really help them succeed, what advice would you give them?” The ensuing conversations, scheduled for thirty minutes, routinely ran for one to two hours. After summarizing what I thought to be their main ideas, I asked each of these experts to consider turning those ideas, their lessons learned, into short, lightly footnoted essays for this Journal.

Through the essays that follow, I invite you into those conversations.
