

REFLECTIONS ON SEPTEMBER 11

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Can you picture a 1619 Project in *The New York Times* under a President Clinton or Bush? During those years, there was no hand-wringing in national media about how the past should connect to the political future. No formal apologies given by major newspapers from the *Los Angeles Times* to the *Kansas City Star* for producing, over many decades, distorted first drafts of History. No stream of editorials, memoirs, television shows, and best sellers analyzing highly policed yet under-protected communities.

The political violence of September 11 came at a time when a substantial segment of political elites in the US seemed to view the country's history as a finished product. With the Cold War "won," the loudest defenses of democratic

ideals came from protests targeting the WTO and World Bank — not from street protests directed at governance within the United States, and not from the US government making a case for its geopolitical dominance on philosophical grounds. Dominance seemed a done deal.

From this perspective, it's no wonder that the violence on that Tuesday seemed to many in the US to come out of the blue. Forty-five days later, the Patriot Act launched a "suspect to protect" strategy: intrusive measures that treated the same people it purported to protect as potentially threatening suspects. Bank receipts, credit records, phone and email messages, internet activity — all became fair game for government surveillance. Air travelers had to see their intimate belongings through the eyes of the state. Would the US government regard marmalade as a liquid? New regulations gave odd questions practical relevance to everyday life.

If it was going to be tolerated by that powerful class of people unaccustomed to government surveillance, yet given to think the government was there to protect them, then any justification for "suspect to protect" measures would have to walk a fine line. Articulate the justifying threat too exactly, and the "suspect" part would seem implausible. But leave the threat too vague, and the intrusive measures won't seem to have any point at all.

Instead of building a public narrative that would make the attacks intelligible, the Bush administration operated with an air of facing a nebulous, senseless, existential threat. A loose association with "Muslims" would last long enough to be leveraged by the birther movement. And the winds of looming menace did not blow over. Instead, they accumulated. Threats that start-

ed out vague became more articulated. The lie that Iraq had weapons of mass destruction cost several hundred thousand lives. And 20 years later, the sky is full of other shoes, and they're all about to drop.

Imagine if the world today were the way the dominant national myth of United States in the late 1990s presented it — with the basic political questions settled once and for all. If we were looking back on September 11 from the perspective of a world like that, what might have stood out to us about the epoch most closely adjacent to 9/11? Possibly the very fact that much of political life suddenly came to be organized around a new and dire peril that until then hadn't figured in domestic or foreign policy.

But as things are, when we contrast that epoch with ours, what may stand out to us is the fact that back then, the threat itself was kept so nebulous, and the presumption favoring democratic ideals was left unspoken, as if democracy was too stable to be challenged. Can you picture a senator in the days of Clinton or Bush-trying to explain to the public, as Senator Mike Lee of Utah (R) did shortly before the 2020 election, that actually, the United States isn't a democracy — because, "instead," it's a republic?

The Trump years showed how to do something frighteningly intuitive right inside the United States: marshal a sense of existential threat to create political instability, and use both the sense of threat and the instability it creates to stoke skepticism about democracy. Like a restless dream, Trump's rhetoric cycled through narratives in which different characters would occupy the role of mortal enemy: people entering the United States from Mexico; immigrants from "shithole countries"; "Muslims celebrating

9/11”; the libs; the Dems; the “radical left”; the “Black Lives matter mob”; etc. Not a vague allusion to a shadowy security threat, hinted at after a singular violent event like the one in 2001, but an onslaught of narratives told loudly in advance of the many episodes of violence the tales would inspire. Charlottesville, the insurrection at the US Capitol, an attempt to kidnap Michigan’s governor — the violence let loose has been done by people who are not trying to hide it, because for them, it is a point of national pride.

Compared to indirect, stealthy violence, caused by drones that leave no footprint and obscure who exactly can be held responsible, does it seem more intelligible when violence is spectacular, visceral, and bombastic, with no ambiguity about its political opponents? If September 11, and Bush and Obama administrations’ extended non sequitur of responses to it, seem distant to many in the United States, it might be because the culture of threat bred by those responses, with its hazy justifications, discredited agents, and exposed lies, has grown, morphed, and become overshadowed by today’s differently chaotic version of the idea that the US faces existential peril.