

9/11, 19 Years Later

by **George Friedman** - September 9, 2020

It has been 19 years since 9/11. For me, it was pivotal moment of terror. For many others, once the initial paralyzing fear was gone, it was just a massive overreaction. And since then, a generation has emerged that has no memory of 9/11 and for whom it has little meaning. 9/11 was similar to Pearl Harbor. Both reminded Americans of their vulnerability, and both conjured images of national catastrophe. Both taught the lesson that danger and devastation might come at any moment without warning. The lesson of Pearl Harbor defined the Cold War. Pearl Harbor was a strike and defeat that came out of nowhere. So, too, a Soviet nuclear strike might come from nowhere. And thus, we swore never to stop watching, never to let our guard down, to always remember Pearl Harbor.

When the Cold War was over, the prevailing view was, naturally, that we had won. The world was no longer filled with danger. The Single Integrated Operational Plan for nuclear war was replaced with the Single Integrated Global Market. U.S. power was unmatched and great-power war was a thing of the past. So it was time for the invited to go to Davos and make plans to reengineer the world. Such a fantasy always emerges from the pain and weariness of wars to end all wars.

Desert Storm did not damage the fantasy – it was seen as a stunning display of U.S. might that should warn off future enemies and avert future wars in the Middle East. Instead it triggered the next one, a trigger to which the U.S. was oblivious. The U.S. went to war to protect Saudi Arabia, but did not anticipate the rise of al-Qaida in response.

What's worse, the U.S. in the 1980s had helped create its future attacker. The Soviets had invaded Afghanistan in 1979, and the U.S. saw this as a marvelous opportunity to pay back the Russians for Vietnam. The Saudi government feared the Soviets, and so it funded the revenge and recruited fighters. The Pakistanis also feared the Soviets and thus provided the terrain to train an anti-Soviet force. The United States oversaw all this and trained the fighters. The fighters went to Afghanistan to regain the land seized by the Soviet infidel, and used the money and training for the next round.

There was a “Rambo” movie in 1988 in which Sylvester Stallone joins the mujahideen, bringing man-portable anti-air missiles to the freedom fighters who were deeply grateful for the gift. They were happy for the training and weapons to wage war against the enemies of Islam. But in the real world, they were not grateful. We had used them to bog down the Soviets. And they had used us to learn the overt and covert arts that, they hoped, would defeat the Soviets – and then defeat us.

Their intention was to recreate the caliphate. For that they needed an enemy, and after the Soviet withdrawal and collapse, the U.S. was the one. If they struck the U.S. and the U.S. did not strike back hard, the Arab world would see that the U.S. was weak. If the U.S. struck back hard, everyone would see that the U.S. was the enemy of Islam. From a political point of view, attacking the U.S. was a win-win. The tactical solution was to send operatives to the U.S. to learn to fly planes, hijack some and hit the global symbols of the U.S.: the World Trade Center, the Pentagon and the Capitol.

I was awoken by a member of my staff to the news that a plane had hit the World Trade Center. I figured it was an incident; during World War II, a U.S. bomber slammed into the Empire State Building amid a thick fog. I knew there were intense anti-U.S. movements in the Islamic world – less than a year earlier, al-Qaida had killed 17 U.S. sailors in an attack on the USS Cole – but as with Pearl Harbor, we knew something was coming but had no idea what it would be.

It was a day of terror. There are those who would later say the U.S. overreacted. I would love to have seen them on 9/11. The country was first stunned and then terrified. The terror came from not knowing what other covert forces were deployed in the United States, and when and where they would strike. The one thing I knew was that we had been hit hard, and whoever planned this operation was smart, his operatives extraordinarily brave. In a war you are prepared to risk death. On 9/11, we met men who were freely going to their death. It reminded me that day of the kamikazes at Okinawa. The soldier who chooses death as a tactic is the most dangerous enemy imaginable.

For me, the most stunning thing was the cool coordination of the attack, after operating for months in the U.S. without detection. We didn’t know they were here, nor did we know what other plans had been made in Afghanistan. Even as events unfolded on the morning of 9/11, we couldn’t scramble planes in time to interdict the hijacked flights. Al-Qaida hit us hard, they achieved their goal in the Islamic world, and we had no response, obviously poor intelligence and no idea what was next. Anyone not terrified that day was not in touch with reality.

I remember that evening my wife and I walked a deserted road. The planes that ought to have been

flying overhead to land at the airport weren't there. We had a personal ache. The U.S. was at war, and two of our children would fight in that war. Our daughter, then a captain in the Army, was trained in military intelligence. She would serve two tours in Iraq. Our son, a lieutenant, was in Air Force Space Command. Our daughter would be in danger, that was certain. Our son could be as well, and given the events of that day, we didn't know if Colorado Springs, where he was located, was the next target.

It is one thing for your country to be at war and to go to war yourself. It is a terrible thing to send your children to do what ought to be your job. I didn't have to predict where our daughter would be deployed, nor was I confused at what my son's mission might be. I had no mission, except to be stunned, terrified and of no use, except to call the play-by-play on something I really didn't grasp.

Lenin said that the purpose of terror is to terrify. Al-Qaida's mission was accomplished. Aircraft were grounded for a few days, and I had to make a trip to Oak Ridge the first day planes were flying again. I flew commercial, which demonstrated the unimportance of the trip and of me. On boarding the plane, I looked at the other passengers as they looked at me. I decided that if any headed to the cockpit, I would strike him in the back of the head with my computer. What I would do with the next guy I had no plan for. But I am sure all the passengers had similar ineffective plans.

The most frightening thing for me was the meeting. There was no Power Point presentation. Americans do not speak without Power Points, but there was no such preparations this time because everyone at the table was as lost as I was. I understood what Adm. Husband Kimmel, commander of the U.S. Pacific Fleet, had to have felt on Dec. 8, 1941. We were afraid and defeated.

There are those who say we allowed fear to take control of us. You bet. Fear is God's way of telling you you're in trouble and need to think hard. As for those who claim to have remained cool and collected, I really have one wish before I die (actually one of many), which is to be able to go back and see Mr. Calm and Cool around noon on 9/11 and then a week later. We were all terrified because that was the appropriate response. Whatever errors were made in the following years of war, there was no second 9/11 in America – and not for lack of trying on al-Qaida's part. But the U.S. shut them down. That is something worth noting.

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