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The Real War: September 11 and its Lessons

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Thursday, September 11, 2003

Exactly two years after the September 11 terrorist attacks in New York and Washington, Lawrence F. Kaplan laments that many of us have become "September 10 Americans." Among others, Kaplan is shocked by how quickly millions of Americans have returned to a sense of normalcy as if September 11 had never happened.

This phenomenon is not evenly distributed among all Americans. Kaplan, writing in *The Wall Street Journal*, cites data indicating that "Evangelical Christians, whites, residents of rural areas, southerners, and self-described conservatives evince more concern about the response to September 11 than do secular Americans, African Americans, residents of cities, non-southerners, or self-described liberals." September 11 Americans expect the nation to be involved in a long and difficult struggle against terrorism, with our cherished liberties and way of life very much at stake. September 10 Americans just want a return to normal patterns of life with no long-term change in national priorities. [see Kaplan's *Wall Street Journal* column]

Kaplan, a specialist in foreign affairs, does take sides: "That most of us have resumed living by September 10 rules would hardly matter but for the inconvenient fact that America's foes still play by September 11 rules." The world really has changed, and America is now the target of choice for those who nurse grievances and hate what they understand as the American way of life. There is no going back to September 10.

Journalist Steven Brill reminds us that the focus of media attention on September 10 had been "the sex life of an obscure California congressman (Gary Condit)." The superficiality of that "lead story" now seems oddly embarrassing. The images of civilian airliners, packed with passengers, slamming into the "twin towers" of the World Trade Center and the Pentagon forced an interruption in everyday concerns and mundane preoccupations—at least for a time. Churches reported a surge in attendance and some observers declared that a national revival was at hand. But revival has not come, and Americans show no discernable increase in moral or spiritual concern. The academic left is back to blaming America alone for all the world's ills and the news media have found new scandals to exploit.

The nation does seem to realize that September 11 catapulted America into a new global situation, in which events in distant lands can and will have repercussions right here at home. Some of us are now more aware of the complexities of the international scene and the reality that no nation is an island. We have been unforgettably instructed that America has enemies.

Armed with that knowledge, most Americans support what President George W. Bush named the "War on Terror." American military forces now fight and serve in Iraq, Afghanistan, and regions beyond, but many of our fellow citizens just want the troops to come home and for the nation to move on. Really? We may decide to withdraw from the world, but the world has announced that it will not withdraw from us.

The combined task of military action and nation-building in Iraq and Afghanistan has turned out to be far more complicated and costly than expected, and the mission will not be completed any time soon. Add to this the reality that so many international pots are boiling over, and America can sit on only so many lids at one time. The job of being the world's only superpower comes with hard choices and high price tags.

Winston Churchill, no stranger to such realities, told us so. “Never, never, never believe any war will be smooth and easy, or that anyone who embarks on the strange voyage can measure the tides and hurricanes he will encounter. The statesman who yields to war fever must realize that once the signal is given, he is no longer the master of policy but the slave of unforeseen and uncontrollable events.” No one had to tell Churchill that war was often necessary. But he would insist in return that war is never easy or uncomplicated. In some real sense, it is never really over.

I think I know why evangelical Christians are listed among those with a greater sense of September 11’s meaning. We have been taught by Scripture to expect trouble, and to know that trouble is not just a function of world politics, but of the human heart. We have tasted the exceeding sinfulness of sin, and we know that evil is no stranger to humanity. Its eruption, writ small or writ large, should not shock us. We also know that no permanent peace will come as a human achievement.

The September 11 attacks should increase our determination to speak the truth, to spread the Gospel of Jesus Christ, to humble ourselves before the living God, and to summon us to battle. The nation is now called to fight the “War Against Terror,” but the church is called to a larger and even more serious warfare—a struggle “against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers over this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places.” [Ephesians 6:12] This battle knows no borders and no nationalities. That warfare did not begin on September 11, 2001, but we did see its face on that awful day. There is no going back.

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