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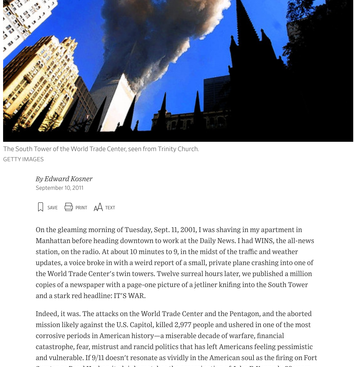
A Decade After



The South Tower of the World Trade Center, seen from Trinity Church.
GETTY IMAGES

By Edward Kosner
September 10, 2011

SAVE PRINT TEXT

On the gleaming morning of Tuesday, Sept. 11, 2001, I was shaving in my apartment in Manhattan before heading downtown to work at the Daily News. I had WINS, the all-news station, on the radio. At about 10 minutes to 9, in the midst of the traffic and weather updates, a voice broke in with a weird report of a small, private plane crashing into one of the World Trade Center's twin towers. Twelve surreal hours later, we published a million copies of a newspaper with a page-one picture of a jetliner knifing into the South Tower and a stark red headline: IT'S WAR.

Indeed, it was. The attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon, and the aborted mission likely against the U.S. Capitol, killed 2,977 people and ushered in one of the most corrosive periods in American history—a miserable decade of warfare, financial catastrophe, fear, mistrust and rancid politics that has left Americans feeling pessimistic and vulnerable. If 9/11 doesn't resonate as vividly in the American soul as the firing on Fort Sumter or Pearl Harbor, it plainly matches the assassination of John F. Kennedy 38 years before as a trauma that altered forever how Americans feel about themselves and their place in a remorseless world.

Ten years later, a thick scab has formed over the wound. It's almost impossible to recapture the shock, pain and agonized emotions of those days. The raw feelings are submerged, but daily life offers unavoidable clues—the cliché this time proving true—that things have irrevocably changed, and not for the better. If you doubt it, shuffle along for a half hour in any airport security line.

Much of this results from the inadequate resolution of what was essentially mass murder of innocent civilians in an act of war. The hijackers perished with their victims—no satisfaction there. The two wars that George Bush launched in retaliation for the attack have turned out to be the longest in American history, nearly the costliest, and among the most inglorious. Even the afterglow of the daring execution of Osama bin Laden in May barely lasted into the summer.

What's more, the airliner missiles—a truly new weapon of mass destruction—left a trail not only of blood and tears but of nagging questions, both peripheral and profound. A decade on, despite all the investigations and reports, they still tantalize: Why didn't the FBI brass follow up on field reports of visiting young Arabs trying the learn how to fly jumbo jets? Why didn't the New York fire department equip its men and women with radios that worked in skyscrapers before sending them into the burning towers? Most provocative: Did the Saudi Arabian elite finance bin Laden and his murderous crew with cash and nurture them with U.S.-based spies?

The spate of new books timed to the 10th anniversary of the attacks can't neatly secure these and so many other loose ends, but the best of them reanimate the tragedy of the day and its emotional impact on the survivors and doggedly track lines of investigation that the 9/11 Commission left muddled or unpursued.

"As soon as we got across the first street going south, the first tower collapsed," recalls high-school principal Ada Rosario Dolch, who led her 600 students to safety from their building two blocks from the World Trade Center. "I heard snaps, crackles and pops. Snapping, snapping. I looked back and saw this tsunami wave of blackness coming towards us. It was the first time, I remember, thinking, I'm going to die now. Phew. And then I saw that all the kids were running. It's the end of the world."

Principal Dolch, whose sister perished that day, is one of 25 contributors to Dennis Smith's oral history, **"A Decade of Hope" (Penguin, 384 pages, $26.95)**. An ex-fireman and a prolific author, Mr. Smith aims to show how 9/11 survivors repurposed their sorrow into good works designed to keep alive the spirit and memory of those who were lost. But the book's real impact is its resurrection of the anguished efforts of husbands and wives, parents and children, to get news of the fate of their family members that day and later to search the smoldering pile for traces of their dead. (Eventually, only 174 bodies were found intact; 21,744 body parts were collected.)

Lee Ielpi, a highly decorated, retired FDNY chief, found his son Jonathan's body after three months, but stayed for six more looking for others—so long that a writer named him "ambassador to the dead." And there are glimpses of carnage that instantly etch themselves into memory. Fireman Ken Haskell describes finding a body sheared perfectly in half from head to toe: "His eye was open; expressionless . . . his face didn't have a mark on it."

It is impossible to read Lee Ielpi's narrative and others like it and the messages to the dead from kin in "The Legacy Letters" without weeping. And, for all the redemptive talk, the anger and politically-incorrect analyses of the survivors and like-minded politicians is a bracing reminder of how deeply the trauma of 9/11 is embedded in many hearts.

"They say the [extremist] imams don't speak for them," Rep. Peter King tells Mr. Smith about some of his Muslim constituents on Long Island. "If Catholic priests got up and said to kill all the Jews, I hope some Catholic leaders would stand up and say, This is wrong. When I ask why nobody in the Muslim community stands up, they say, That is not our tradition."

Many 9/11 families and others were incensed at the plan to build a mosque and cultural center close to Ground Zero. Even more fury was unleashed over the design of the National September 11 Memorial in the footprint of the fallen towers. The passionate battle over the memorial is nearly bleached out in **"A Place of Remembrance" (National Geographic, 224 pages, $19.95)** an anodyne picture-and-text album about the memorial. An elite design panel chose "Reflecting Absence," an austere pair of hollow square fountains set in a grove of 400 swamp oaks with the names of the victims inscribed on bronze parapets surrounding the pools. Relics from Ground Zero were to be displayed below ground in a museum on the site.

Architect Michael Arad's elegant abstraction infuriated many of the survivors. "You wouldn't go to Auschwitz and remove the death camp remnants and artifacts in order to better express our feelings," the brother of a lost fire officer fumed to Mr. Smith. The families were further outraged by the initial decision not to identify by unit the 406 firefighters, police and other first responders who died and to mix their names with those of the victims they tried to rescue. Ultimately, the first responders' affiliations were added, but not everyone was mollified.

There are more tales of heroism and slaughter in **"The Eleventh Day" (Random House, 624 pages, $30)** a detailed chronicle by the British journalists Anthony Summers and his wife, Robbyn Swan. But the book's essential contribution to the annals of the attack is its painstaking examination of questions the 9/11 Commission finessed in its 2004 report and in its newly published update: Did Saudi princes, charities or the military fund bin Laden and his hijackers, help them after they reached the U.S., and withhold intelligence that might have thwarted the attack or clarified the investigation afterward?

Fifteen of the 19 hijackers were Saudi as, of course, was bin Laden. With American airspace still closed, dozens of Saudi royals and members of bin Laden's extended family were airlifted back to Riyadh, most after only perfunctory questioning by the FBI. And just two days after the attacks, President Bush was smoking a cigar on the Truman balcony of the White House with Prince Bandar, the Saudi ambassador and man about Washington, in the company of Dick Cheney and Condoleezza Rice.

Pureeing their own research with published sources, Mr. Summers and Ms. Swan confect a circumstantial case involving protection money paid by members of the huge royal family to keep bin Laden's terrorism outside the kingdom's borders, intercession by Saudi cultural agents—likely spies—to help two of the hijackers in California, and stonewalling by Saudi intelligence after the attacks.

Provocatively, a 28-page section of the findings of the Joint Congressional investigation of 9/11 dealing with the Saudi connection was redacted on national security grounds. Mr. Summers and Ms. Swan report, by order of the White House. Former Florida Sen. Bob Graham, the one-time chairman of the Senate Intelligence Committee who headed the joint inquiry and is no liberal firebrand, told the authors that the Saudi government and elite helped some of the hijackers, if not all. The authors quote an official who saw the text before it was eviscerated saying: "If the 28-pages were to be made public, I have no question that the entire relationship with Saudi Arabia would change overnight."

These questions will recede again into the background this weekend when the memorial is dedicated and opens to visitors. One World Trade Center—mercifully no longer designated the Freedom Tower—is already 80 stories toward its ultimate height of 104. Ground Zero will be no more. But the nightmare of 9/11 will shadow the American imagination forever.

—Mr. Kosner, a longtime magazine editor, was the editor in chief of the New York Daily News on Sept. 11, 2001.

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