

July 2005

Reflecting on Terrorism...

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It is no easy task assessing the impact upon the operation of American government of the September 11 terrorist attack on the Pentagon and World Trade Center. Despite general agreement that the assault on two of the main symbols of American political and economic power represents the most significant national event since Pearl Harbor six decades ago, what changes we are likely to see in the nation's politics beyond the short term remain speculative.

No definitive historical guidelines lend much specific insight into how the nation might react and adjust to September 11. We are still reacting and adjusting. Perhaps the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor, a surprise by a foreign government that caused a significant loss of American life, represents the most parallel circumstance. But there are major differences between the two events. Pearl Harbor is now a distant memory, and most living Americans have no personal connection or intimate knowledge of the sneak attack. Unlike the air assault at Pearl Harbor, which occurred thousands of miles from American shores in a U.S. territory and was directed at military targets, the events of September 11 killed over 4,000 American civilians at work in two of the nation's most prominent cities. While reports of the Pearl Harbor attack trickled in by radio over the course of a few days in early December 1941, Americans experienced the events of September 11 almost as they happened via television. Japan was an identifiable enemy and the war against the Axis powers had the tangible goal of nothing less than the final surrender of our enemies. The war against terrorism is markedly different. This time, the enemy is a mysterious, clandestine target, spread around the globe (with cells operating even within the United States). An end to the posed threat is difficult for public officials and citizens to envision. Indeed, some question whether or not "war" is even the appropriate word to describe military and domestic efforts to make the nation secure. Still, beyond those immediately and directly affected by the September 11 tragedy, the terrorist attacks have already brought about changes in the lives of many Americans. *Domestic security will never again be taken quite as much for granted.* Government activity in regulating our lives has increased dramatically, from flying on airplanes to crossing the Canadian border to attending the Super Bowl. Overall, however, the short-term impact on ordinary citizens in the immediate aftermath of September 11 pales in comparison to that made after Pearl Harbor, when the nation prepared for a war perceived widely as a battle to save Western civilization. World War II mobilization affected all segments of American society and called for extensive personal sacrifices, including a military draft, the movement of women to the factory (Rosie the Riveter), and extensive rationing of many domestic, consumer goods ranging from sugar to automobile tires. Six months after September 11 the nation seemed, at least outwardly, back to business as usual, with surprisingly little disruption to most people's lives. Homeland security, now perhaps the nation's highest priority, may prove to be the biggest challenge facing

Americans. National security is no longer just about police and investigative agencies such as the FBI or the CIA, but about protecting citizens from such things as bio-terrorism (my biggest concern) to a disruption in the nation's agricultural production. All of this takes place in the context of a diverse society designed to be open, with little control over borders or the movement of individuals within. Homeland security is as much about bureaucratic implementation as it is about the decisions of elected officials. Many of the issues arising after September 11, remain unresolved and a matter of considerable conjecture. Many have forgotten what took place on that fine September morn...and others have intentionally politicized and confounded the events to the point of nebulousness.

For the rest of us, let us not forget...