

Ten Years After

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Ten years after the 1991 coup that finalized the demise of the Soviet Union, the events of September 11, 2001 handed the US ruling class an unequalled opportunity to consummate a long sought imperial ambition at the planetary scale. Clearly within grasp lay a new global unilateralism centered squarely on the US. Washington and Wall Street responded. The subsequent “National Security Strategy of the United States” recognized all too well this amalgam of power and aspiration:

Today the United States enjoys a position of unparalleled military strength and great economic and political influence.... This is ... a time of opportunity for America The US national security strategy will be based on a distinctly American internationalism that reflects the union of our values and our national interests. The aim of this strategy is to help make the world not just safer but better (US 2002).

This “distinctly American internationalism” was already mapped out in the political economic dictates of the “Washington Consensus” which by the late 1990s operated as the ideological fulcrum of global political and economic diplomacy. With potential competitors effectively sidelined by the 9/11 attacks – two European heads of state declared soon afterward that “we are all Americans now” – some sort of global US hegemony seemed assured, and the war in Afghanistan, the subsequent onslaught against Iraq, and even the more nebulous war on terrorism were all pursued in Washington as mop-up operations designed to cleanse the global *body politic* of any remaining opposition. In effect the US response to 9/11 sought to bring about a favourable “endgame of globalization,” wrapping US economic purpose in the multifold virtues of capitalist democracy. Defined by contours of class and nation, this self-interest was equally explicit in the revisionist moralism (if dubious history) by which “The National Security Strategy” gave neoliberalism its universalist pedigree:

The concept of “free trade” arose as a moral principle even before it became a pillar of economics. If you can make something that others value, you should be able to sell it to them. If others make something that you value, you should be able to buy it. This is real freedom To promote free trade, the United States has developed a comprehensive strategy (US 2002).ⁱ

Ten years after 9/11,ⁱⁱ that project lies in obvious ruin. Its global class optimism has thoroughly evaporated and the United States is dramatically weaker on the geopolitical and geoeconomic stage (Cowen and Smith 2009). Geopolitically, the US may have expanded its military basing around the world to an estimated 1045 facilities, but it remains mired in at least three declared yet apparently unwinnable and unending wars. First, in Iraq, rhetorical cessations of active military operations and Washington regime change notwithstanding, the US remains bogged down in a war debuted seven years ago as a cakewalk. Second, the Afghanistan war, with a cumulative price tag approaching \$500b for the

US alone, has lasted longer than the futile 1980s Soviet adventure with no clearer resolution or end in sight (*The Nation* 2011). Third, as regards the war on terrorism, the primary target, Osama bin Laden, remains elusive while al Qaeda offshoots have burgeoned around the world, and a regrouped Taliban has forced the US to negotiate with declared terrorists. The disarray ten years after may have been captured best in an unwittingly predictive 2001 headline from the satirical weekly, *The Onion*: “US Vows To Defeat Whoever It Is We’re At War With.”

In fact by wading militarily into Southwest Asia (the Asian swath of the “Middle East”) the US-led coalition has accomplished the opposite of a summary mop-up. The foreboding among US allies in the so-called coalition of the willing grew almost from the start as the Bush administration refused any meaningful consultation while claiming the right to prosecute pre-emptive wars, and nation after nation began to dribble out of the coalition. Support further dwindled with the 2004 revelations about widespread and even fatal US torture of war prisoners in Abu Ghraib and elsewhere, as a result of which the US found itself increasingly isolated and reviled. In short, as the former director of Britain’s MI5 conceded, these failed wars have made Europe and North America less rather than more safe: “Our involvement in Iraq, for want of a better word, radicalized a whole generation of young people – not a whole generation, a few among a generation – who saw our involvement in Iraq, on top of our investment in Afghanistan, as being an attack on Islam,” argued Baroness Manningham-Buller. “Arguably,” she continued, “we gave Osama bin Laden his Iraqi jihad” (quoted in Lyall 2010; see also Dunne and Mulaj 2010). Globally, and quite predictably, it has provoked a greater radicalization around the world which increasingly equates anti-American sentiment with pro-democracy movements.

The demise of US globalism has been economic as well as political and military. More explicitly than Afghanistan, the importance of the war in Iraq was patently geoeconomic insofar as that country had no involvement in the events of 9/11 and possessed no weapons of mass destruction. 9/11 was the golden pretext. A two-pronged geoeconomic strategy was involved. First, only in the narrowest sense was the assault on Iraq a war for oil, as so many on the left rather mechanically assumed; even less was it a war aimed simply at military dominance. Rather, by taking out a troublesomely independent if some-time allied autocrat, the US sought to stabilize its broad-based economic hegemony in the entire region. Hence the conservative cheerleading to the effect that the 2003 invasion should finish the work begun in the first Gulf War, and hence too the extraordinarily cost (and broadly documented incompetence) of reconstruction. Second, while the war fitted the neoliberal exhortation to divert tax funds from social provisions such as education, unemployment benefits or health care into the corporate coffers of the military industrial complex, the costs of war in fact intensified the economic crisis after 2007. If the wars after 9/11 were clear political failures, the “Great Recession,” as economists nervously called it, revealed

the failure of the core economic dynamic of neoliberal capitalism and with it the arrant surrealism of globalization's promise of perpetual prosperity for all.

Looking backward as a means to look forward, the economic crises of the 1970s, following on the heels of the 1960s uprisings, failed to unseat capitalism. Arguably in fact the social, political and ideological struggles that shook the capitalist mode of production after the 1960s instantiated a new, stronger moment of capitalism that moved economic calculation even closer to the heart of social life. Geographically, the early days of crisis and the rise of neoliberalism were marked by a new phase of uneven development and a certain expectation that the so-called American Century had proven short and was now over. The opposite happened. Ten years after 9/11, casting an eye to global geoeconomics, it is tempting again to think in terms of the end of US hegemony. After all, the immediate causes of the epochal economic crash after 2007 -- far deeper and more intense than in the 1970s -- lay in the heartland of US capitalism itself. The crisis sprang from the local geopolitics of the largely urban housing market -- its class and racial contours -- and from the newly intensified and deregulated nexus between financial and construction capital, together with the globalization of development capital. To an unprecedented extent, not just in the US but in Europe, North America, Japan and Australia, the construction industry moved to the productive center of national economies, lending considerable weight to Henri Lefebvre's enigmatic anticipation that urbanization comes to supersede a narrower industrialization as the dynamo of capitalist expansion. Meanwhile as the economies of Europe and North America succumbed and embarked on a protracted economic crisis, deeper in some places than others, large economies in China, India and elsewhere proved more than competitive globally. A new phase of uneven capitalist development was evidently well underway as previously marginalized economies, most notably China, India, Russia, Brazil and South Africa (the so-called BRICS), registered explosive growth amidst crisis.

By 2011 the brazen class struggle woven into the language of free trade, globalization, and the broader geopolitical vision of US hegemony lay increasingly bare to view and yet thread bare, exposed by the screaming contradictoriness of bank bailouts and record corporate bonuses for some alongside austerity cut backs for the rest; low tax rates for the wealthy coupled with dramatic service cuts and unemployment for the poor. To put it bluntly, successive US administrations traded away their unprecedented global purchase, leveraged with almost 3,000 9/11 deaths. Unilateral globalism morphed into its ever present alter ego, a paradoxical reassertion of American exceptionalism within, yet over and above, global claims. Although there was no inevitability, in longer historical perspective 9/11 has come to mark not the fruition or regrouping of US global power but for the third time in a century -- first after 1919 then after 1945 -- its apparent demise. Just as before, homegrown nationalism was the Achilles heel of US global ambition (Smith 2005).

September 11th was very quickly rendered a national event -- “America Attacked,” led the September 12th *New York Times*. Almost as quickly it was a global event. Insofar as many far larger losses of life do not always receive such treatment we might reasonably ask, therefore, whose victimhood gets to count, and at what scale does it count. People from dozens of countries died at the World Trade Center – estimates vary from 78 to 130 -- but had this estimate of victimhood been the source of the event’s global significance it would presumably have counted against the primacy of the nationalist response. The scalar constitution of 9/11’s reception and representation were not instantaneous nor were their contours entirely inevitable; they were very rapidly manufactured, and some scales of response erased others. As time passes it is increasingly difficult to recall clearly that this was also a viscerally local event, and the resultant local geopolitics have been just as convoluted as the global shifts since 9/11. The event is remembered as an attack on New York’s World Trade Center and secondarily as a heroic national drama expressed in the struggle of United flight 93 passengers over Pennsylvania who fought unsuccessfully to thwart that plane’s hijackers, the saga since given the Hollywood treatment. Almost lost to historical memory, however, and a testament to the power of the local precisely in its contrived absence, is that the nerve center of US global militarism was fatally attacked: 184 people were killed as that plane crashed into the Pentagon. The almost totally absent television replays of a stricken Pentagon offer a dry scream to the constant looping and re-looping of World Trade Center footage. Where are the paeans to the Pentagon’s fallen heroes – generals and GIs, clerks and colonels -- to place alongside Trade Center first “responders”? Why did the World Trade Center become enshrined as the victim-laden “Ground Zero” when the Pentagon far better symbolizes US military might? These reactions too were not inevitable. Positioning America and the American people as a victim of global terrorism, victims of other nationalities notwithstanding, has its uses as preparatory propaganda for war whereas depicting the prostrate helplessness of the US military – a whole wing of the Pentagon in flames -- contradicts its projection of inviolable power. Between the Department of Defense and the national (indeed international) media, the extraordinary symbolism of such unprecedented vulnerability and destruction of US military power is all but blanked from the ideological screen in much the same fashion that the military orchestrated a news blackout on flag-draped body bags from Afghanistan and Iraq.

In New York City the accoutrement of exploded office life that had blown with the acrid ash into Brooklyn streets – budget sheets and resumes, memos and letterhead – were still being picked up days and weeks later. The stench of the “pile” – the ten storey brightly lit heap of smoldering rubble where the World Trade Center had been – lingered for weeks depending on wind speed and direction. Brutal attacks on Muslims and Arabs (and those confused as such) escalated in the wake of 9/11, some of them deadly. A pervasive, trenchant and longer term anti-Muslim and anti-Arab stench also layered city conversations and the media much like the ash on cars. Plans for reconstruction duly emerged from politicians,

planners, corporate executives, architects and op ed writers. Some proposed replica towers, others new towers, some designed monuments, others proposed an open space, a memorial park, but the latter possibility had little traction given the rents to be garnered from such valuable land. Still others argued for a region-wide or at least citywide strategy insofar as New York's rise as a global city, symbolized by the Trade Center, was premised on city facilities and infrastructure and a regional labour force. Attempts were made to tie the reconstruction of "the site" to a larger gentrification and redevelopment of Manhattan's financial district, largely at the expense of workers, long term residents and small merchants in nearby Chinatown and other neighbouring communities.

While pre-crisis gentrification was certainly evident, most notably in condo construction, more radical and regional alternatives were eschewed and official plans for publically subsidized private reconstruction quickly focused on a small area – 6.5 hectares – comprising the site itself. But progress was very slow, a major fire destroyed much of the damaged Deutsche Bank building, and several workers were killed. Opportunistic corporate office construction commenced on nearby private property, but the site itself saw little immediate transformation. For a decade it persisted as a combined "barren pit" (Dunlap 2010) and tourist magnet. A year after Hurricane Katrina hit New Orleans, that city's mayor, deluged by complaints that rebuilding was non-existent, hit a maelstrom of protest when he parried criticism with the observation to CBS that "You guys in New York can't get a hole in the ground fixed and it's five years later." Only after ten years did the phase of demolition and dig-out draw to an end (Dunlap 2011). The E train on the Eighth Avenue subway line still, defiantly or otherwise, posts "World Trade Center" as its southbound destination.

"The Arabs and Muslims who do exist in the American perception are overseas and foreign," writes Alia Malek (2010). They are largely invisible in their American home, he suggests: "we glimpse them as subjects of geopolitics" In 2010 in a sprinkling of towns in Europe as well as North America anger simmered as plans to built mosques serving local immigrant workers faced Christian scrutiny. The indivisibly local and global geopolitics of 9/11 is nowhere more evident than in the right wing hysteria that erupted that summer around plans to build a community center in downtown Manhattan. Quickly dubbed by detractors, "the ground zero mosque," this proposal galvanized broad-based anti-Muslim and anti-Arab anger into hatred and also escalated from the local to the national and international scales. At issue was the planned construction of a community center, 300m from where the towers had been; it would provide meeting spaces and programs, a gym and a pool, playgrounds and childcare for workers and residents in the downtown. Variously called the Cordoba House (after the Spanish city where Muslims, Christians and Jews co-existed in the centuries prior to the Inquisition) or Park51 (the development site was at 51 Park Place), it was also an interfaith center, devoting 10% of its space for religious services and functions for multiple religions including Christianity and Judaism as well as Islam;

the Muslim space was slated for the basement. The project had a catholic architect and an Arab developer and was coordinated by a liberal imam, Abdul Rauf. Rauf, 61, eschewed radicalism of every stripe, was openly pro-American having lived in the US for more than four decades, and like his father had long worked for interfaith dialogue with Christians and Jews – so much so that some Muslims felt he had lost touch with his own faith (Barnard 2010). A memorial to the victims of 9/11 was also included in the project.

None of this prevented an electric, hateful demonization of Rauf as an extremist and a terrorist determined to insult America by building a mosque on this “hallowed ground.” Demonstrations against the community center were orchestrated around the country and right wing vituperation fanned the flames; anti-Arab and anti-Muslim bigotry drowned out any reasoned defense of the project on free speech or constitutional grounds, and Rauf began to receive death threats. No other event since 9/11 expressed simultaneously the lived, visceral reality of American nationalism and its utter alienation from yet within that same social reality.

In late August 2010 a Southern Christian fundamentalist, Terry Jones, pastor of the “Dove World Outreach Center” in Florida, entered the fray. He adorned the grass in front of his church with a makeshift sign reading “Islam is of the Devil,” and announced that he would burn a Koran on the ninth anniversary of 9/11, then revised the plan by inviting any and all to donate copies of the Koran to a large bonfire planned for that day and encouraged others to join an “International Burn a Koran Day.” This threat raised anti-American sentiment in the Arab world, drew condemnation in the UN, caused an intensification of global military preparedness, and was only cancelled after pleas from the Obama administration. At least two Koran burnings did proceed in Tennessee, and in Afghanistan two protestors were killed during angry demonstrations against the American Koran burning (Rubin 2010). After the Reverend Jones resumed his crusade in March 2011 and burned a Koran in Florida, riots broke out again in Afghanistan resulting in dozens of deaths including several UN workers.

Landscapes express and absorb social truths in the sense that past and present events are written into the soil and concrete and into the visual and other sensual apprehensions of a place. Past truths are kept alive if at all only by memory and spoken word, recorded image and written account. Thus the global ironies of this district of Lower Manhattan are manifold. As the right wing reaction to the “ground zero mosque” escalated, there was no complaint that the same “hallowed ground” already sported an adult sex shop, off-track betting location, and a strip club. It was also forgotten that the neighbourhood was until recently the host to a mosque only a half mile from the site. Nor was the collective urban memory excavated to reveal the historical geography of the neighbourhood’s southern part which, until the 1950s, was known as Little Syria. From the late nineteenth century this quarter of Lower Manhattan was home to Arab immigrants from throughout the Middle East. In a further irony, Mohamed Atta who piloted one

of the planes into the World Trade Center was trained in Cairo as an architect and urban planner, but it was an earlier urban planning project -- building the on and off ramps for the Brooklyn-Battery Tunnel, and later urban renewal for the World Trade Center -- that leveled much of Little Syria in the late 1940s.

Loss of US global power in the first decade of the twenty-first century is signified most sharply by a series of other local events that add up to something larger, namely the revolutions and uprisings in North Africa and elsewhere in the Middle East in 2011. The rapid and unexpected ouster of Ben Ali in Tunisia was quickly followed by uprisings and clampdowns throughout the region – Algeria, Yemen, Syria, Jordan, Iran, Sudan, Bahrain – but especially in Egypt where the three-decade-old Mubarak dictatorship was overthrown by two and a half weeks of street revolt. The Tunisian revolution suddenly made ousting Mubarak a graspable goal for Egyptians and the opportunity was taken as the US sat by, powerless to prevent or even ameliorate the demise of one of its major allies. The immediate causes of the revolution were poverty, unemployment and dramatic food price rises, leavened by inveterate government corruption and repression. The final straw in Egypt came as workers in sector after sector walked out, threatening a general strike, and the Egyptian military, armed with US tanks, jets and ammunition, refused to support the US-backed dictatorship but moved quickly if carefully to reassert its power after Mubarak's departure. Then came the uprising in Libya and the assault on Colonel Kaddafi's dictatorship which turned into a civil and then international war, courtesy of a UN-backed no-fly zone, so-called . As different social classes, groups and factions struggled for power in the spreading revolts throughout the region, the outcome radically unclear, the impotence of US global power in the region only became more apparent. Military might they had, but given their habitual support for key dictatorships in the region, available clients among the opposition movements they largely lacked.

Ten years after it is even more apparent than it was then that in and of themselves the events of September 11th did not so much change the world as express changes already in train. But events never happen “in and of themselves,” and willy nilly 9/11 has changed the world. For one thing, it may not be too sanguine to suggest that an increased precarity of the nation state now prevails. It is by no means the end of the nation state as some in the 1990s were tempted to predict, and the post-1970s phase of globalization has variously strengthened some nation states while weakening others. Many states have been economically weakened while others, as with the US, are militarily strengthened; others have been politically and/or culturally strengthened while losing military and economic power as states. By contrast, the nexus between the local and the global has been strengthened, albeit highly unevenly, at the expense of the national. None of these developments are entirely new but together they add further fuel to the argument that a state-centric geopolitics is increasingly arcane. As demonstrated by the backfire of Egyptian attempts to shut off the internet in mid-revolt, and even more powerfully by the fallout from the

embarrassing 2010 Wikileaks revelations of broad state malfeasance, the precarity of states is intensified by their failure so far to wrest control of corporate internet communication. By corollary, the loss of US power and the rise of pro-democracy movements, whether driven by class or religion, race or forms of transnationalism that simultaneously eschew existing states, puts the question of revolt and revolution squarely on even the most realist of geopolitical agendas.

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Notes

ⁱ Tellingly, the main text of this document refuses the authority of the International Criminal Court, yet invokes the roles of the big three global economic institutions – the International Monetary Fund, World Bank and World Trade Organization -- while eschewing in silence any mention of the global body charged with maintaining global peace and order, namely the United Nations.

ⁱⁱ Not without misgivings, I resort to the shorthand “9/11” as a fait accompli of the nationalist response.