

Unclear future: 9/11: Ten years later

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In the immediate aftermath of 9/11, Americans were unified. We had all been attacked, and we knew what we were defending. References to Pearl Harbor sprang readily to mind. This was our moment to stand up and stand together.

Or so it seemed at the time. Ten years later, the war on terror drags on, and we find ourselves in an era of partisanship and polarization. The historical analogies come not from our times of unity but from the decades when we were most divided against ourselves—the sectional rivalries before the Civil War or the conflicts of race, class and ethnicity that marked the end of the Gilded Age. Compromise starts to seem impossible, because we are not sure that there are any shared goals that we might approach by different methods. Every policy decision takes on the dimensions of an ultimate choice between good and evil.

There were early warning signs after 9/11 that this might be where we were headed. Fears provoked by the background of the hijackers spilled over into ethnic profiling, a general suspicion of immigrants and aggressive expressions of Christian nationalism. It was confusing to watch military operations targeted against a terrorist network and its individual leaders, rather than against another state. We were not sure who the enemy was or how we would know when the war was finished, and the early assurances that this was not a war against Islam did not always hold up against the crusading rhetoric that takes over precisely when we are not quite sure what we are doing.

The result over the intervening decade has been a narrowing of our public discourse. The urgent need to strengthen public security and be on the lookout for domestic terrorism combined with the recession that followed the 9/11 attacks to focus our politics on questions of security and economic efficiency, and the arguments have remained confined within those limits ever since. Appeals to democracy and freedom, to the openness of American society, to diversity and to human dignity—all

of which were prominent immediately after 9/11—are now seen largely as rhetorical flourishes.

We do not understand our ideals clearly enough to argue about how to implement them, so we argue about whether we are secure and what we can afford. Since we are not sure about where to locate security in relation to our other values or what larger goals economic efficiency is supposed to serve, it is hardly surprising that the arguments do not take us very far together.

Like an individual suffering from posttraumatic stress disorder, we may be collectively unable to see what is happening to us. Americans responded well to the initial shock of 9/11 with a reaffirmation of our unity and our most important values. But fear and uncertainty have taken their toll. Ten years later, we find ourselves less clear about who we are and less able to envision a common future than we were before.