

10 years later: How did the 9/11 attacks change America?

By Roibín Ó hÉochaidh, NewsCenter | September 9, 2011

BERKELEY — A decade after the single deadliest attack on United States soil, how have the events of 9/11 changed America? That was the central question put to expert panelists by moderator Michael Krasny, host of KQED's "Forum," at a roundtable discussion Thursday to mark the 10th anniversary of the terrorist attacks on New York and Washington, D.C.



Avenue alike.

"It is hard to see a time when that will disappear," said Nacht. "What happened was unthinkable, but it happened in front of our eyes."

Nacht, a former dean of the Goldman School of Public Policy who served as assistant secretary of defense for global strategic affairs under President Obama, also linked the attacks, and the United States' response, to America's current economic woes.

"From what we know about bin Laden and al Qaeda, their aim was to provoke the United States to go into Afghanistan, where they thought we'd be in a quagmire," Nacht said. "They also thought we would so rev up our expenditures that it could really strain or even bankrupt us."

"Ten years later, we have unprecedented debt, unprecedented deficits, as far as the eye can see — it's not all related to 9/11, but the economic weakness of the United States was greatly accelerated by our response to 9/11," Nacht said.

James Patterson, professor of history at Brown University, added national confusion to the psychological mix, noting the impact of the terrorist attacks lives on in the psyches of Americans who had assumed that the United States was beloved around the world as a beacon of hope and defender of rights.

Even more than Pearl Harbor or the assassination of President John F. Kennedy, the 9/11 attacks stand alone as a seminal moment in the modern history of the United States, one that exerted the most profound effects on the politics, policies and psychology of America and its citizens.

For Michael Nacht, professor of public policy at UC Berkeley, the most fundamental impact of 9/11 is the sense of permanent vulnerability that haunts residents of Main Street and Pennsylvania

“The strong messianic sense that we really are doing good things in the world made 9/11 all the more hurtful and confusing,” said Patterson, before turning to the pervasive changes wrought on domestic policy in the wake of the attacks.

“Within two years we had the Patriot Act, the Department of Homeland Security, the TSA [Transportation Security Administration], which gets \$8 billion a year, and we had two wars — some of the longest in American history,” Patterson said.

Maintaining that the fears raised by 9/11 are “very much still there, just beneath the surface,” Jean Bethke Elshtain, professor of social and political ethics at the University of Chicago, highlighted the intensification of the long-running isolationism-interventionism debate within American society.

On the one hand there was the tendency to draw back in because this is what happens when you muck about in the world, Elshtain said.

“The other reaction was that we need to engage the world and we need to do it more knowingly, more tellingly and perhaps even more dramatically and at times more aggressively,” she added.

On the question of whether the United States is safer today, Elshtain advised Americans to follow the lead of other nations, such as Britain, that have learned to live with the sense of vulnerability and the ongoing threat of future attacks.

“You can never be absolutely secure and you can’t demand that of your government,” Elshtain said.

For his part, Nacht was heartened by the absence of al Qaeda-inspired ideology from the “Arab Spring” movements sweeping the Middle East.

“They want freedom. They want democracy. They want elections. They want jobs. They want governments that aren’t corrupt,” he said.

“This is actually a big ideological blow to al Qaeda that after 10 years you have these amazing revolutions in one country after another and al Qaeda is irrelevant,” Nacht added. “That’s a good sign for us.”

Held at the Banatao Auditorium in Sutardja Dai Hall, the event was organized by UC Berkeley’s Institute of Governmental Studies and the Robert T. Matsui Center for Politics and Public Service as part of the annual Matsui Forum series, which gathers together distinguished experts to examine important public issues in a roundtable format.

You can listen to a KQED radio broadcast of the event on Saturday, Sept. 10, at 2:30 p.m.

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