

Why Symbols Become Targets

Bijal P. Trivedi
for National Geographic Today

September 13, 2001

Physically little more than a striped cloth, the American flag is for many people a powerful symbol of the United States—representative of every right and privilege endowed by the Constitution, and every value that holds the American democracy together.

It is drenched in emotion, memory, and experience. The Pentagon and the World Trade Center are also powerful symbols, of economic and military might. They were targeted by terrorists in Tuesday's attacks because they are revered symbols around which the psyche of the country is tightly wrapped.

The horror and enormous death toll that occurred because of the high density of human life these symbolic buildings harbored heightened the impact of the attackers' message.

"The creation of symbols seems to be hard-wired into human brains and human personalities," said Christopher Simpson, professor of communications at American University in Washington, D.C. "People build symbols to try and express themselves, and these expressions reflect their culture."

Political and religious movements wrap their ideology and goals in symbols—crucifix, hammer and sickle, swastika—or buildings or monuments. These symbols make a statement and evoke potent emotions.

For something to be accepted as a symbol, it must translate the visions and goals of the people that surround it. The World Trade Towers and the Pentagon did just that.

The sophisticated structure of the slender, crystalline twin towers made them especially inviting symbols of America's achievement—glass and steel pillars reaching into the clouds, their ethereal surfaces reflecting the changing moods of New York City.

The World Trade Center represented the elite and the powerful; its tenants were household names. It was the financial hub of the country, and even, some would argue, the world.

The Pentagon, squat and sturdy, seemed an isolated and impenetrable fortress, much like the common idea of America itself. It harbored the means and plans for defending the U.S. from all attacks.

"Here in the U.S., there is a very strong emotion that these symbols are neutral or universally good. They have no questionable aspects," said Simpson.

For those who view the United States with disdain and hatred, the World Trade Center and the Pentagon are also symbols. One can be seen to represent America's pervasive cultural and economic imperialism, the other its political and military grip.

Destruction of the twin towers removed the tallest buildings from the country's most powerful city, altering its famous skyline forever. The attack on the Pentagon has shattered the nation's complacency.

The attacks on Tuesday showed painfully that the terrorism that continues to shake the foundations of other regions

around the world can also permeate American soil.

But while symbols can be damaged and destroyed—even to an extent we could not have imagined before Tuesday—the values and attitudes for which they stand cannot. America's immediate resolve to repair and rebuild, yet also to remember, is symbolic of that.

- National Geographic Today, 7 pm. *ET/PT in the United States, is a daily news magazine available only on the National Geographic Channel.* [Click here to request it.](#)

© 1996-2008 National Geographic Society. All rights reserved.