

Trauma, solidarity, and division

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Societies shift between experiences of division and moments of solidarity. It is collective trauma that often triggers such shifts.

When Osama Bin Laden organized acts of horrific mass murder against civilians on September 11, 2001, he declared that “the values of this Western civilization under the leadership of America have been destroyed” because “those awesome symbolic towers that speak of liberty, human rights, and humanity have... gone up in smoke.” What happened, instead, was that Americans recast the fearful destruction as an ennobling narrative that revealed not weakness, but the strength of the nation’s democratic core.

Before 9/11, American had been experiencing a moment of severe political and cultural division. In its immediate aftermath, the national community was united by feeling, marked by the loving kindness displayed among persons who once had been friends, and by the civility and solicitude among those who once had been strangers. This idealizing emotional and moral framework spread from individual encounters to the world, from the family to the business community, from the city



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of New York to the American nation, and from the American nation to (Western) civilization as a whole. Stock traders, firemen, and secretaries alike became subjects of heart-wrenching stories of pluck and determination, fighting and often dying side-by-side. Residents of small towns sent messages, not just of condolence, but of identification.

“Arkansas Prays for You” and “Southwest Airlines Loves NYC” were scrawled at the wreckage site. While only one small segment of New York City was materially affected, 2,813 particular persons perishing within it, social narratives portrayed an attack on “America;” ordinary citizens expressed themselves with the plural first-person pronoun “we;” and Le Monde announced, “Today, we are all Americans.” NATO declared its determination to defend the United States, and Europe’s moral debt from World War II was symbolically repaid.

The Bush administration channeled this solidarity outward, into a holy war against the nations, religions, ideologies, and individuals it blamed for the traumatic attack. Such sweepingly ambitious and disastrously miscalculated war-making, no matter how effective tactically, could never be won. Its dogged pursuit not only undermined post-9/11 solidarity but intensified divisions inside the “homeland” itself.

Barak Obama offered a way out of this new trauma — “We are not red and blue states, but the United States” — but his presidency triggered an intense polarization that Donald Trump rode to power. Trump’s militantly anti-democratic presidency created a national trauma every bit as dangerous as 9/11. The defeat of this malignant threat provided a new moment of solidarity, which Joe Biden has tried to channel inward, into domestic reconstruction, rather than outward, into war. If the Biden presidency fails, we will fall back into the morass of division once again.

MEMBERS OF THE YALE FACULTY REFLECT ON THE LEGACY OF 9/11

Twenty years after the Sept. 11, 2001 attacks, the tragic consequences of that day continue to resonate across the world. On this somber anniversary, members of the Yale faculty reflect on the painful and complicated legacy of 9/11 and how the trauma of the event, which for a time created unity in the United States, has in the decades since led to a more divided nation and dangerous world.

Read more: “[Reflections on a global tragedy \(https://news.yale.edu/2021/09/09/legacy-911-reflections-global-tragedy\)](https://news.yale.edu/2021/09/09/legacy-911-reflections-global-tragedy).”

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