WARNING CONCERNING COPYRIGHT RESTRICTIONS: The copyright law of the United States (Title 17, United States Code) governs the making of photocopies or other reproduction of copyrighted material.

Under certain conditions specified in the law, libraries and archives are authorized to furnish a photocopy or other reproduction. One of these specified conditions is that the photocopy or reproduction is not to be used for any purpose other than private study, scholarship, or research. If electronic transmission of reserve material is used for purposes in excess of what constitutes "fair use", that user may be liable for copyright infringement.
September 11 in History

A Watershed Moment?

Edited by Mary L. Dudziak

Duke University Press

Durham and London 2003
"The world will never be the same again," observers proclaimed on September 11, 2001, when hijacked airliners plowed into the World Trade Center, the Pentagon, and a Pennsylvania field. There seemed to be no way to describe the attacks in any familiar context. However, before the sun set on that horrible day, witnesses and journalists were already reaching into historical memory in order to make sense of what happened. They harked back to Pearl Harbor, described the sites of death and destruction as "ground zero," and characterized the situation as "war." Commentators wrote that the attacks were unprecedented. But at the same time, they searched for precedents. The terrorist attacks on that day were the most deadly and destructive assaults by foreign foes on the continental United States in the nation's history. Lacking a vocabulary as well as any historical precedents to place an event of this magnitude in some familiar and manageable context, the nation's leaders, pundits, and large numbers of citizens struggled to find reference points and searched for something familiar to draw out of historical memory. Almost immediately, they found those reference points in World War II and the Cold War. On one level, these responses seem unremarkable and even natural under the circumstances. But were they appropriate or even useful? Were there no other historical precedents or familiar markers to shape the response to September 11? This essay explores the impact of September 11 in terms of these historical reference points, and it raises some questions about other possible precedents that might have led to different responses.

Cultural critic Kenneth Burke describes moments of historical crisis as
calling for “frames of acceptance,” in which new situations are met with old frames. Although Burke derived his model from the Christian frame of acceptance utilized by the medieval Church, the model is suggestive for post-9/11 America. According to Burke, the old frame provides the parameters of response to a new crisis. Although “new factors... bewilders the old frame, which is not designed to encompass them,” the frame “will be extended to meet the new necessities by casuistic stretching.” Although previous terrorist attacks and other national emergencies offered a variety of frames to choose from, immediately after September 11 the Cold War provided the frame of acceptance. But the Cold War itself emerged from a World War II frame of acceptance, particularly the lessons of Pearl Harbor.

These historical frames of acceptance had immediate resonance in the wake of September 11. The memory of Pearl Harbor evoked the surprise attack that caused massive destruction and drew the United States into World War II. The references to “ground zero” recalled the apocalyptic nightmares of the atomic age, long dormant but now revived, complete with visions of civilians going about their daily business snuffed out in an instant. Snippets from the press on September 12 suggest how quickly these frames of reference reappeared in the national vocabulary. The Baltimore Sun quoted Neil Hare, a lawyer for the U.S. Chamber of Commerce who works near the White House: “I think we’re at war... I’m running. This is probably ground zero, and I don’t want to be anywhere near here.” The Boston Herald described the site of the World Trade Center as “ground zero of the worst terrorist attack in American history.” The Boston Globe noted that people in Washington, D.C., “‘live with the nightmare that their city is ground zero for a major terrorist attack.’” But September 11 was not an atomic attack. Nor was it another Pearl Harbor, where an identifiable enemy nation attacked a military base. September 11 was something new. As Americans struggled to make sense of what happened, they reached into their collective historical memories.

The immediate response in the press reflects this effort to meet the unfamiliar with the familiar, marking the event as both unprecedented and precedent. In a typical news report, Rosie DiManno wrote in the Toronto Star that on September 11

the heart of the American empire was Ground Zero. . . . Now U.S. fighter jets buzz overhead in a surreal tableau of war. . . . This is terrorism in the 21st century; faceless, pointless, fanatical and cowardly. But most alarmingly, it is unpredictable and it cannot be defended against. If the mightiest nation in the world was caught unawares, so pitously vulnerable to the whims of madmen, then there is no hope and sanity is doomed. . . . The world will never be the same again. . . . All that steel and concrete convulsing, shuddering, reduced in seconds to a mountain of debris and a mushrooming cloud of smoke and dust. . . . Defense officials were herded into secured bunkers deep inside the earth. . . . How could this happen? Who is doing this to us? . . . For Americans, the infliction of terror and bloodshed was the worst single incident calamity since Pearl Harbor. That was an act of war, drawing the U.S. into a global conflict. But at least they knew their enemy then, how to retaliate, how to avenge their losses, and how to affirm their power. But what is this, whose outrageous crime, who to punish? . . . The flexing of U.S. military might is what [Americans] crave, the annihilation of those who perpetrated this grotesquerie. And who can blame them for wanting blood? But vengeance and retribution will not give back to America, to the entire world, any sense of safety, of invincibility. There is no place safe from the beguile of madness and mania.3

In this one account, a journalist notes that the attacks were without precedent. Yet she draws on historical references: ground zero, the “tableau of war,” the “mushrooming cloud of smoke and dust,” and the memory of Pearl Harbor. She also asserts that Americans crave “blood” and “revenge” and the “flexing of U.S. military might.” But when this article went to press, the next day there were no polls to substantiate those assertions. The nation’s leaders and the press nevertheless quickly adopted the same assumptions, and soon the people accepted them, too.

This response went far beyond symbols, language, and vocabulary. Plans drawn up in an earlier era as preparedness for a very different sort of attack immediately went into effect. Taking cues from Cold War atomic age emergency procedures, the president remained mostly airborne and flitted from one small city to another, drawing widespread criticism for his apparent flight in the face of danger. The defense establishment retreated to “secured bunkers deep inside the earth,” into fallout shelters constructed during the early years of the Cold War. And everyone talked about war, even though there was no identifiable enemy. Responding to frames of reference dating back half a century, the nation mobilized for battle.
War on Terrorism

As Americans struggled to come to terms with the shock and horror of the events of September 11, the president declared war and quickly deployed troops. As in the case of all wars waged by the United States since World War II, Congress did not declare this war. But few politicians or commentators questioned the president’s unofficial declaration of war. Three days after the attack, Congress overwhelmingly passed a resolution authorizing the president to use “all necessary and appropriate force” against the terrorists and the nations that sponsor or protect them. The nation had been attacked. Thousands of Americans were killed. War seemed the most appropriate definition of the situation. Declaring war provided a blueprint for action.

But was war the only option? What other historical frames of reference were available to shape the national response? The attacks were unprecedented in many ways. Never before had terrorists used such methods: transforming commercial airliners into weapons of mass destruction, hijacking planes with the intention of suicide missions, living and working within the nation for years in order to conspire, plot, and plan the attacks. The ghastly scale of death and destruction, the vast network of participants, the carefully coordinated suicide missions—all added up to a deed so cunning and vile that it almost defied definition.

Nevertheless, there were precedents. This was the worst, but not the first, terrorist attack on the nation. There have been many terrorist attacks, most of them domestic. Domestic terrorist attacks include the bombing of the federal building in Oklahoma City, the murders of abortion providers and attacks on clinics, and the Unabomber’s murder-by-mail. There have also been attacks on the nation by international terrorists. Many of these attacks occurred outside the United States. In June 1996 a truck bomb killed nineteen U.S. airmen in Dhahran, Saudi Arabia. Two years later, bombs exploded at two U.S. embassies in East Africa, killing 224 people in Nairobi, Kenya, and Dar es Salaam, Tanzania. Four men were convicted of conspiracy in the terrorist attacks. They were identified at the time as followers of Islamic militant Osama bin Laden, who was also indicted in connection with the embassy bombings. Bin Laden, originally from Saudi Arabia, was living in Afghanistan under the protection of the fundamentalist Taliban regime, and remained a fugitive. He was known to be the leader of the Al Qaeda terrorist network operating in several countries throughout the Middle East. On October 12, 2000, a small boat pulled up next to the destroyer USS Cole in Yemen’s port of Aden. A bomb exploded and ripped a hole in the destroyer, killing seventeen Americans and wounding thirty-nine others. Two suicide bombers carried out the attack. U.S. officials believed that they, too, were associated with Osama bin Laden. But nobody declared war.

International terrorist attacks also occurred on American soil, including the World Trade Center nearly a decade earlier. What distinguished this previous attack from the one on September 11 was its conventional method and the relatively minor damage it caused—minor only by comparison to September 11. On February 26, 1993, a bomb exploded in the parking garage underneath the World Trade Center. Five people were killed and more than a thousand were injured. The New York Times reported that the explosion “destroyed a multi-story parking garage beneath the trade center, knocked out power to the center and touched off fires that sent smoke billowing up through its 110-story twin towers and forced 50,000 people into a nightmarish evacuation that took all day and half the night.” President Clinton tried to quell the fears of the nation in the face of what appeared to be an act of international terrorism. “Working together, we’ll find out who was involved and why this happened,” the president declared. “Americans should know we’ll do everything in our power to keep them safe in their streets, their offices and their homes.” But he did not declare war on terrorism. Shortly thereafter, investigators discovered a plot to blow up the tunnels and bridges leading into New York. That plot was foiled, but had it succeeded, it would have wreaked unprecedented devastation.

The responses to these earlier terrorist attacks were dramatically different from the response to September 11, and they had vastly different consequences for the nation. The attacks were considered crimes, and the perpetrators were treated as criminals. The criminal investigative apparatus of the nation moved into high gear to track down and prosecute the offenders. Although in a few cases of international terrorism the United States launched retaliatory military strikes on sites of suspected terrorist operations, there was no talk of war. In these earlier cases, the president promised swift and thorough action against the perpetrators, denounced the violent and ruthless acts, promised to provide security and called for calm. For Americans who were not immediately affected, life went on as usual.

After September 11, of course, life did not go on as usual. The sight of hijacked airliners exploding into buildings, the sheer magnitude of the attack, the collapse of the mighty trade towers, the crumpled walls of the Pentagon, the thousands dead, all gave rise to shock and horror. Nevertheless, these were the same sorts of crimes as the earlier attacks, although vastly more efficient and successful. They, too, might have been handled...
as the previous attacks had been: through the investigative processes of the criminal justice system. But the immediate response was to declare war, not to launch a criminal investigation.

Declaring war has a number of immediate consequences. One is that it elevates the criminals to the level of a legitimate enemy and recognizes their authority as leaders. It provides an opportunity for those who oppose U.S. policies to join armies to fight against us, making them soldiers for a cause rather than accomplices to a crime. In the case of an act of criminal terrorism, this strategy is problematic. U.S. officials immediately identified Osama bin Laden as the mastermind behind the plot and declared war on his Al Qaeda network as well as any government that tolerated terrorists within its borders. President Bush then declared, in classic Cold War terms, that those who were not “with us” in this war against terrorism were “against us”—both at home and abroad.

Internationally, this declaration had important consequences, forcing nations to be either our allies or our enemies. Within the United States, a declaration of war allows the government to compromise and constrict the normal workings of a democratic society in the name of national security. Most citizens willingly complied and rallied around their leaders. Trust in the federal government reached levels not seen since the early 1960s. Since 1958, the Gallup Poll has asked Americans, “How much of the time do you think you can trust government in Washington to do what is right?” The percentage of those who answered “most of the time” peaked in 1963 at 75 percent, fell to 25 percent in 1979, and hit its lowest point in 1994 at about 18 percent. The percentage climbed after that, reaching above 40 percent in July 2002, and then leapt to 60 percent a month after 9/11—the highest point in more than thirty years.

“Not since the Cold War has the government had such an important mission,” said Carroll Doherty, a political analyst at the Pew Research Center for the People and the Press. “So this trust is not so much a reflection of what government has done, but a hope for what government can accomplish.”

The September 11 attacks gave George W. Bush new stature as president of the nation in a way that the problematic election of 2000 did not. Taking office without a mandate, failing to win a majority of the popular vote and without a clear victory in the Electoral College, Bush’s presidency lacked legitimacy. By declaring war against terrorism immediately after the September 11 attacks, Bush became the leader of a nation at war. War, if it has widespread support, has always contributed to the popularity of presidents. Crime has done just the opposite. Declaring the attacks an act of war, rather than a crime, elevated Bush’s stature and boosted his sagging popularity. Within a month of the attacks, a president who had not been elected with an electoral majority achieved an approval rating above 80 percent.

**Echoes of World War II and the Cold War**

Pearl Harbor caught the nation by surprise and led to an official preoccupation with preparedness and national security, which outlasted World War II and shaped much of the domestic response to the Cold War. After September 11, the Pearl Harbor frame of reference emerged immediately and reverberated for days and months to remind Americans that war is the appropriate response to the attack. On September 12, 2001, Carl J. Colabrese, from Buffalo, New York, spoke for many when he said, “I finally know how my parents felt when Pearl Harbor was bombed in 1941. This is a calculated, focused attack on our nation. There’s this tremendous sense of fear. But we have to do all we can to keep things operating.” President Bush also invoked Pearl Harbor to rally the nation for the war on terrorism. On December 7, 2001, the sixtieth anniversary of the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor, the president spoke from the deck of the aircraft carrier Enterprise, which had just returned from the North Arabian Sea after commencing the first bombing runs over Afghanistan. Using the language of World War II, Bush said, “Like all fascists, the terrorists cannot be appeased. They must be defeated. This struggle will not end in a truce or a treaty.” Pearl Harbor, he said, was the start of a “long and terrible war” for America, yet out of that attack grew the most powerful navy in the world and a “steadfast resolve” to defend freedom. “And that mission, our great calling, continues to this hour, as the brave men and women of our military fight the forces of terror in Afghanistan and around the world. . . . Many of you in today’s Navy are the children and grandchildren of the generation that fought and won the Second World War. Now your calling has come.” The *Washington Post* also made a direct comparison to Pearl Harbor, noting the similarities: “After the sneak attack, crowds gathered outside the White House and sang ‘God Bless America.’ Soldiers armed with machine guns guarded government buildings. The FBI began rounding up suspicious foreigners. And the head of the Secret Service stared nervously at the sky, watching for suspicious aircraft. It was Dec. 7, 1941, 60 years ago today. Japanese planes had bombed Pearl Harbor, and the West Coast was in a state of panic.”

Michael Sherry, in his ambitious synthesis of the last half of the twentieth century, *In the Shadow of War*, notes that militarization shaped
American life after World War II. Virtually every national crisis, from the War on Poverty to the War on Drugs, brought forth a new war metaphor, if not a new war. During the Cold War, the apparatus of wartime became a permanent feature of American life. Sherry writes:

National security assumed permanent and paramount importance in American life, so that much of the nation’s treasure was devoted to it, its armed forces spread over much of the globe, and its science and industry were profoundly reoriented. . . . [W]ar defined much of the American imagination . . . to the point that Americans routinely declared “war” on all sorts of things that did not involve physical combat at all. Thus, militarization reshaped every realm of American life—politics and foreign policy, economics and technology, culture and social relations—making America a profoundly different nation. To varying degrees, almost all groups were invested in it and attracted to it—rich and poor, whites and nonwhites, conservatives and liberals (the last more so than is usually recognized today). Certainly, all were changed by it.9

Sherry’s insights help explain why, in a situation so unpredictable, the national response was remarkably predictable, on the part of leaders as well as citizens. When the president declared “war on terrorism” immediately after the September 11 attacks, he announced that this would be a “new” type of war. But the war he initiated was not really a new type of war. It was modeled on older wars—not on World War II, but on the various military actions of the Cold War. It was the Cold War that echoed most loudly across the post-9/11 landscape. The terrorists seemed to have brought into reality national nightmares that dated back more than half a century. Although the weapons they used were not nuclear bombs—they were in fact remarkably low-tech instruments such as box cutters—the villains seemed to personify the characteristics of the Communist threat: foreigners who infiltrated the nation, studied our technology, and used our own power against us. They blended into society, plotting against us while enjoying the good life they professed to disdain. They turned our own proud monuments of postwar technological and consumer triumph, commercial airliners and towering skyscrapers, into the means of our destruction. Like the suspected Communist spy, they represented the enemy within, loyal to a foreign foe. The worst Cold War fears seemed to have become a reality, more than a decade after the end of the Cold War. The Bush administration responded in Cold War fashion: increasing the defense budget by $48 billion (a sum larger than the entire defense budget of any other nation) and developing new nuclear weapons, according to a secret Pentagon report. The president also insisted on continued funding for the “Star Wars” missile shield, which would be useless as a defense against terrorist attacks.10

In terms of the politics of the Cold War, the war on terrorism holds some irony. Cold War priorities prompted the United States to oppose the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan when Jimmy Carter was president. At that time, the United States supported the Taliban against the Soviets, and Osama bin Laden was our ally. That relationship persisted for decades. As recently as the spring of 2001, the United States gave millions of dollars to the Taliban to help in the War on Drugs, to support a poppy eradication program in Afghanistan. Only the political satire magazine the Onion dared to raise the issue: “Former president George Bush issued an apology to his son Monday for advocating the CIA’s mid-‘80s funding of Osama bin Laden, who at the time was resisting the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan. ‘I’m sorry, son,’ Bush told President George W. Bush. ‘We thought it was a good idea at the time because he was part of a group fighting communism in Central Asia. We called them ‘freedom fighters’ back then. I know it sounds weird. You sort of had to be there.’”11

In its domestic ramifications, the waging of the war against terrorism resembled the waging of the Cold War more than it did World War II. Although Pearl Harbor served as a frame of reference, there were few domestic responses to September 11 comparable to World War II, when the nation went to war against an identifiable enemy. Perhaps the only similarity to World War II home-front practices is the treatment of people of Arab descent. Vigilante activity resulted in a burst of violence as Muslims became the targets of hostility, threats, racist slurs, assaults, and even murder. President Bush called for tolerance toward Muslims and noted, “We welcome legal immigrants but we don’t welcome people who come to hurt Americans.” Yet post-9/11 antiterror strategies targeted people of Middle Eastern descent. Government policies, although not as draconian as the internment of people of Japanese ancestry during World War II, resulted in the roundup of people of Arab descent for questioning and incarceration without charging them with any crime. Since September 11, the Justice Department has detained more than 900 people in connection with the attacks. On November 9, 2001, the State Department announced it would subject to special scrutiny male visa applicants aged sixteen to forty-five from twenty-six nations in the Middle East, South Asia, Southeast Asia, and Africa. Students were particularly at risk of investigation. In the first two months after September 11, federal investigators questioned students from Middle Eastern countries at more than 200 college campuses. The students were asked about the subjects they were study-

Echoes of the Cold War 43
ing, their academic achievement, where they lived, and their opinions of Osama bin Laden. College administrators said that this type of investigation of campuses has not been seen since the Cold War. Yet in nearly every case, the colleges cooperated with the investigations.12

Aside from racial profiling measures, there are few similarities to wartime home-front policies. During World War II, the nation’s leaders asked the people to make sacrifices. The government drafted men to fight, rationed foods and other goods, converted consumer industries into war industries, and asked citizens to support the war effort by buying war bonds, planting “victory gardens,” and conserving everything useful. Since the onset of the war on terrorism, the nation’s leaders have asked 
the people to do just the opposite: take trips, spend money, enjoy leisure time, and buy consumer goods. President Bush urged Americans to “fly and enjoy America’s great destination spots... Get down to Disney World in Florida. Take your families and enjoy life the way we want it to be enjoyed.” The government called up its volunteer army but did not draft anyone. It gave back tax dollars for people to spend, rather than asking citizens to invest or save.13

Government policies went counter to all efforts to conserve resources of any kind. President Bush opposed efforts to promote energy efficiency for cars or industries and did nothing to minimize the nation’s dependence on oil from the Middle East. The Bush administration proposal to drill for oil in the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge would reduce oil imports from the Middle East by only 4 to 5 percent, and not for at least ten years.14 These policies were not wartime policies, but they did echo the emphasis on consumer freedom and the “American way of life” that was central to Cold War propaganda. As Vice President Richard Nixon emphasized in the 1953 “kitchen debate” in Moscow, consumerism was the real stealth weapon that would trump the Soviets and win the Cold War.15

Unfortunately, the aspects of the Cold War that forced American leaders to adopt progressive measures are not present in the war against terrorism. We no longer have Communist leaders taunting the United States into improved race relations. As Mary Dudziak and Thomas Borstelmann have shown, the United States promoted the Civil Rights Movement at home to help fight the Cold War in the Third World, in an effort to win the hearts and minds of people of color as they threw off the shackles of white colonial rule.16 The Communists also promised impoverished people a redistribution of wealth, encouraging American leaders to provide workers with the fruits of affluence through home mortgages and education grants, and by mitigating the impact of poverty through the continuation of the New Deal welfare state. In the name of classlessness and prosperity, cold warriors hoped to avoid a Communist-inspired uprising of poor people at home and abroad. Those Cold War pressures are absent now.

It might have been otherwise. Immediately after September 11, many people asked the question, “Why do they hate us?” That question sparked an initial outpouring of teach-ins on college campuses, thoughtful editorials in the press, and vastly increased coverage of the Arab world in the media. It appeared as though, perhaps for the first time, Americans were genuinely interested in learning something about other countries, and about the role of the United States in the world. But that initial impulse withered quickly as President Bush whipped up the rhetoric of war. There were good Arabs and bad Arabs, and all we needed to know was if they were “on our side.” Because President Bush adopted a posture of good versus evil, the opportunity for national soul-searching about the American presence in the Arab world rapidly withered.17

Homeland Security

The war against terrorism, like the struggle against Communism, defines the enemy as a worldwide conspiracy, with cells operating in many countries around the world and with operatives infiltrating the United States as well. The Bush administration has borrowed language as well as policies from the days of the Cold War. The cold term “axis of evil” fuses the World War II memory of the Axis powers to Ronald Reagan’s Cold War description of the Soviet Union as the “Evil Empire.” The establishment of the Office—and then Department—of Homeland Security echoes the civil defense bureaucracy set up during the Cold War to bolster morale and develop visible security measures that would offer the illusion of safety against an unpredictable enemy with access to weapons of mass destruction.

Creating a sense of security after an attack of the magnitude of September 11 is virtually impossible, just as it was impossible to reassure a nation about the danger of an atomic attack after the world had witnessed the effects of an atomic bomb. In the early years of the Cold War, civil defense measures such as teaching housewives how to stock a fallout shelter, or training children to “duck and cover” in their school classrooms, offered the illusion that survival was possible in the event of a nuclear attack.18

Similar efforts to reassure a nervous public have emerged in the wake of September 11.

The most obvious of these are the attempts to achieve airport security. When the public learned about the minimal training and low pay of air-

Echoes of the Cold War 45
port security guards employed by airlines trying to pinch pennies, people were justifiably outraged. After much clamor, the government took over the task, so now the poorly trained and underpaid airport security guards work for the government, under the watch of military personnel who now roam the airports in uniform, armed with menacing weapons. Most Americans and foreign visitors have patiently accepted the long waits in security lines at airports, the frequent checking of documents, the intrusions into their privacy as a result of random baggage checks, and the affronts to their bodies in routine pat-down searches. These measures give the illusion of security, as did the home bomb shelters and “duck and cover” campaigns of the early Cold War years. But just as the civil defense campaigns did nothing to minimize the danger of death from an atomic attack in the midst of an escalating arms race, these highly visible but feeble efforts at airport security offer little protection. Confiscating nail clippers and providing plastic knives with in-flight meals offer meager, perhaps even useless, safeguards against terrorism.\(^a\) More to the point, airport security is a Band-Aid approach to a problem that will continue to grow as long as anger against the United States festers around the world. The policies enacted in the wake of September 11—especially the military deployments—have done nothing to diminish that anger, and they have done much to intensify it. Polls taken in the Muslim world show that vast majorities of civilians harbor hostility to the official policies of the United States.\(^b\) Like fallout shelters, airport security measures offer the illusion of protection; but they will not provide safety. Safety will come only in the de-escalation of international tensions.

**Patriotism as Consumerism**

Patience at airports was only one of many ways that citizens expressed their acquiescence to wartime conditions. Americans seemed to forget their political differences and their culture wars to rally around the flag, quite literally. Patriotic symbols, proliferating instantly after the attack, became ubiquitous around the country and sparked a new market for patriotic consumer goods. Flags appeared on houses and in public spaces, on lapels, bags, bumper stickers, and billboards. Foreign journalists noted this patriotic spending frenzy. On September 29, 2001, the London *Guardian* described the scene at the Mall of America in Bloomington, Minnesota:

> You are never far from a flag in the Mall of America. All four miles of walkway are bedecked with red, white and blue banners, hammering home the warlike mantra “United We Stand.” The country’s biggest indoor shopping centre, on the outskirts of Minneapolis, reflects the patriotic fervour now in evidence across the stunned US. . . . Patriotism seems to go hand-in-hand with the shopping. A choice of how to spend money is one of the great “freedoms” cited by many in the mall as American characteristics. “I’m proud of our freedoms—perhaps we’ve even got too many—that’s why all this has been allowed to happen,” says Elizabeth Smith, 69, from Seattle. “We have so much more freedom here than in other countries.” Mike Wilson, a factory electrician from Muncie, Indiana, echoes this: “If you’re proud of your country, you need to show it all the time. I served in the military—I love my country.”\(^c\)

Topps, the bubble gum company that invented baseball trading cards in the 1950s, quickly produced and marketed “Enduring Freedom” card packets immediately after September 11. The cards, which came in several different sets, included a “God Bless America” sticker picturing the American flag, along with cards commemorating the war on terrorism, designed to educate and inspire support for the campaign. One card pictures “Army Paratroopers Boarding an Aircraft,” and quotes Bush on the back: “This war will not be like the war against Iraq a decade ago, with a decisive liberation of territory and a swift conclusion.” Another card pictures Bush with Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) director Joe M. Allbaugh and quotes Allbaugh praising all the federal, state, and local agencies for their cooperation and professionalism. Another shows Bush speaking to Muslims and quotes him on September 17 attempting to quell the growing anti-Muslim sentiments and violence. Another depicts Russian president Vladimir Putin offering sympathy for the United States. Other cards contain images and descriptions of warships and fighter planes.\(^d\) Consumer items such as these provide effective propaganda to build support for the war against terrorism.

“Enduring Freedom” trading cards may seem innocuous. But when citizens can buy patriotism, the essence of citizenship withers. Flags flew across the land at the same time that lawmakers debated and enacted legislation that included some of the most serious threats to civil liberties since the draconian measures of the McCarthy era. Less than two months after September 11, Congress passed the USA Patriot Act, authorizing new powers for law enforcement agencies. The bill granted federal agents access to e-mails and voice mails of suspected terrorists and allows for the prosecution of hundreds of people detained after 9/11 for immigration violations. The law expands the authority of the federal government to

---

46 Elaine Tyler May

47 Echoes of the Cold War
conduct electronic surveillance and wiretaps, screen computers, and access private records. It permits the detention of immigrants suspected of supporting terrorism for as long as a week without charging them with a crime or immigration violations. American Civil Liberties Union lawyers expressed concern that the law will harm civil liberties and give the federal government "unchecked powers." But there was little public outcry. By strategically naming the bill the "Patriot Act," political leaders benefited from the consumption of patriotism, by symbolically wrapping themselves in the flag.23

In addition to national legislation, across the country state legislatures debated measures that would require citizens to express their patriotism, reminiscent of the loyalty oaths of the early Cold War. In Minnesota, for example, legislators passed by a huge margin a bill that requires schoolchildren to recite the pledge of allegiance. Students and teachers may opt out, but they will then be singled out as dissenters. An editorial in a Minneapolis paper asked, "Should government mandate demonstrations of patriotism? Or is love of country something that occurs when government serves people well and protects the freedom to disagree?" With this bill, Minnesota became the twenty-sixth state to require the pledge of allegiance.24

One of the most disturbing political casualties of 9/11 was the stifling of public debate and the emergence of a new political consensus. According to political scientist Lawrence Jacobs, "There's a real conformitarian spirit in America right now.... It's flipped gradually into an expectation that you won't raise critical issues, that you'll fall into line. It's the new 1950s."25 As in the Cold War, Democrats and Republicans closed ranks, and few if any dared to question the president or the administration. Republicans were quick to brand anyone who criticized the administration as "giving aid and comfort to our enemies." When Senator Tom Daschle opposed drilling in the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge, the Family Research Council compared Daschle to Saddam Hussein. When he raised questions about the military campaign, Trent Lott scolded, "How dare Senator Daschle criticize President Bush while we are fighting our war on terrorism?"26 Along with politicians, journalists, academics, and even entertainers faced censure for criticizing the nation's leaders. Tom Gutting of the Texas City Sun and Dan Guthrie of the Grants Pass Daily Courier (Oregon) were fired for suggesting that President Bush should have returned immediately to the White House after the September 11 attacks, rather than dart furtively across the country. Several television stations suspended ABC's Politically Incorrect when comedian Bill Maher questioned Bush's characterization of the terrorists as "cowards." Maher was forced to make a public apology for saying, "We have been the cowards, lobbing cruise missiles from 2,000 miles away. That's cowardly. Staying in the airplane when it hits the building, say what you want about it, it's not cowardly." The Washington Post noted that the networks caved in to pressure when White House spokesman Ari Fleischer denounced Maher, saying that Americans "need to watch what they say."27

Academic freedom also came under siege, reviving disturbing memories of the McCarthy era. On November 11, the American Council of Trustees and Alumni (ACTA), founded in 1995 by former National Endowment for the Humanities (NEH) chair Lynne Cheney and Senator Joseph Lieberman, released a report that included a list of names of academics who had made public statements that questioned aspects of the war on terrorism. Evoking McCarthyite tactics, the report stated that college and university faculty "have been the weak link in America's response to the attack," and urged alumni to express their displeasure to university administrators. On December 6, Attorney General John Ashcroft told the Senate Judiciary Committee that those who criticize the post-9/11 curtailment of civil liberties "aid terrorists... erode our national unity and diminish our resolve." Even the normal functioning of the judicial system was compromised in the name of national security. The establishment of military tribunals to try suspected terrorists moves the process farther from the system of criminal justice and closer to secret trials that do not respect due process.28

Domestic Security

Along with the invigorated stature of public officials, security concerns created new heroes among fire fighters and law enforcement officers, who suddenly achieved a newly exalted stature. The New York City police, who faced severe public condemnation in recent years for acts of brutality against racial minorities, rose above criticism as quickly as smoke rose above the twin towers. Since 9/11, the nation's police and security forces have gained a panache not equaled since the heyday of the FBI's "G-men" during the early years of the Cold War. Even after the revelations of serious problems of communication, discipline, and turf wars within and between the police and fire departments that led to catastrophic results on September 11, the stature of these agencies and their members did not diminish.29

Men in uniform—and they were almost all men—gained public reverence, while women faded into the background. Although many of the law enforcement officers were women, along with powerful women leaders.
the names in the headlines were all powerful men, from the terrorists to the heroes: the hijackers, Osama bin Laden, George W. Bush, Dick Cheney, Tony Blair. As in the Cold War, the time had arrived for an image of reinvigorated manhood. Powerful men appeared as the major players on both sides of the “good” and “evil” equation, while women and children seemed vulnerable, in need of protection, whether it was the widows of 9/11 firefighters or the women of Afghanistan. Of course, these women and children did need support and protection. But the framing of the media images, focusing on heroic men and dependent women, reinforced gender constructions that date back half a century.

Meanwhile, Bush and the Office of Homeland Security urged citizens to become “citizen-sentinels” and create a “national neighborhood watch” to become vigilant in spotting terrorist threats. Using the language of the Cold War era when “communist infiltration” was the prevailing fear, the government called for “improved domestic preparedness,” as the Christian Science Monitor noted, in order “to let people know what it really means to be prepared—to be vigilant,” so that “Americans can better provide for their common defense.” In July 2002 the Bush administration called for the establishment of the Tips program, which would recruit volunteers among delivery people, utility workers, and others whose jobs bring them into people’s homes to scope on their fellow citizens. The plan evoked visions of the excesses of the Cold War anti-Communist crusade when “naming names” of possible subversives was a sign of patriotism and schoolchildren viewed propaganda films in which patriotic youngsters turned in their parents to authorities.

Whether or not they considered themselves “citizen-sentinels,” most Americans followed their leaders uncritically and sought their own security in personal life. This response also echoed the behavior of Americans in the early years of the Cold War, when men and women sought security within the intimate realm of marriage and the family. After 9/11, Americans also turned to each other for solace and comfort. “Many people are looking around after these events and feeling like they want to get closer to the people they care about,” noted the Montreal Gazette. As one single woman noted, “Somehow, people want to connect.” Many New Yorkers interviewed after the attacks expressed their immediate desire to get close to another person on an intimate level. Newspapers reported “quickly kindled romances and rampant post-disaster intimacy.” In Denver, requests for marriage licenses went up 10 to 15 percent after 9/11. The proprietor at the Chapel of Love in the Mall of America in Bloomington, Minnesota, noted that while most of the mall’s shops went begging for customers, her business boomed. Couples rushed to the chapel to get married in a hurry. Some observers predicted that there might be a baby boom nine months after September 11.

Articles in the New York Times, the Los Angeles Times, and elsewhere noted the sudden outpouring of neighborliness and kindness among strangers and within communities. Spontaneous acts of generosity, a spirit of volunteerism and charity, and a coming together in the face of tragedy permeated the country. People reached out to their family members across the country and the world, contacted friends and kinfolk, offered assistance to people they hardly knew, donated generously to charities to help the families of victims. Political scientist Robert Putnam, author of Bowling Alone, in which he documented a drastic decline in community and civic life in recent decades, conducted a survey after 9/11. He concluded that in response to the tragedy, “almost instantly, we rediscovered our friends, our neighbors, our public institutions, and our shared fate.” This outpouring of community spirit saturated the media, the press, and the airwaves, garnering so much attention that it seemed to suggest that Americans normally-behaved with selfishness and hostility toward one another. The phenomenon prompted The Onion to quip, “Hugging up 76,000 Percent . . . Rest of Country Temporarily Feels Deep Affection for New York,” and to publish mock interviews with New Yorkers who couldn’t wait for life to return to normal so they could be mean and selfish again.

Despite the media fanfare, the quest for security was not all loving and sharing. In the first six months after September 11, the FBI conducted 455,000 more background checks for gun purchases than during the same period the previous year. The FBI also handled 130,000 more applications to carry concealed weapons. Gun ownership has also spread to new groups. For the first time, the Second Amendment Sisters, a national women’s pro-gun group, formed a chapter on a college campus. About fifty women at Mount Holyoke have joined the new chapter. One new member boasted, “One of my guy friends said, ‘You’re a chick with a gun—I’m scared.’” Women’s gun organizations have also proliferated, such as Mother’s Arms and Armed Females of America. Drawing a rather illogical connection to September 11, the Web site for Armed Females of America asserts, “Those who push for ‘gun control’ are of the same mindset as Palestinian suicide-bombers and the Taliban who kidnap women for rape and sex-slave trade. Both don’t like the possibility of armed citizens, in these cases, especially armed Women.”

The idea of “chicks with guns” may not be the most reassuring thought in the wake of 9/11. But we should remember that in the early years of the Cold War homemakers who stocked makeshift fallout shelters in

Echoes of the Cold War
their basements also served as visible icons of women doing their part to protect themselves and their families from danger. As in the Cold War, Americans have again embarked on political and cultural strategies in the name of national security that offer little protection, while enacting policies that escalate conflict and create more danger.

Conclusion

Kenneth Burke’s notion of “frames of acceptance” helps to explain the ways in which historical memories of World War II and the Cold War shaped official U.S. responses to September 11 and promoted the acquiescence of the American public. Those previous national crises provided precedents that allowed policy makers and citizens, consciously or not, to react to an unfamiliar situation in familiar ways. But these frames of acceptance may not have been appropriate. Thwarting political debate and stifling free speech in the name of national security and antiterrorism threaten the democratic values that we are presumably fighting to protect. Saber-rattling rhetoric, dividing the world into “good” and “evil,” censoring criticism of the nation’s leaders, embarking on murky military campaigns across the globe, inflating the defense budget, and folding political differences into a rigid consensus did not serve the country well in the Cold War, and will not serve the nation well now. Trumpeting consumerism, fawning over law enforcement officials, demanding displays of patriotism, retreating into the private world of family and sex, and creating the illusion of safety through visible but largely useless performances of security did not bring about the end of the Cold War and will not likely hasten the end to this crisis either. The Cold War consensus finally broke when the nation became embroiled in a tragic and unwinnable war that became so unpopular that a fierce and divisive national political debate eventually emerged. But it took the loss of many more thousands of lives, and many decades, before the Cold War finally ended. The United States may have “won” the Cold War, but it lost quite a bit of the process. Hopefully, the tragic consequences of Cold War policies and practices will evoke historical memories that yield a different frame of reference, so that the disasters of the Cold War era will not be repeated at the dawn of the twenty-first century.

Notes
