

**It will never be over, but we must renew ourselves again**  
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**Opinion**

When Art Spiegelman told his story of September 11 in a graphic novel, he called it *In the Shadow of No Towers*. It was an arresting thought, the gloom cast not by the twin peaks of the World Trade Centre but by their absence.

We have been living in that shadow for 10 years - but it's time we escaped it. We need to declare the end of the post- September 11 era.

Of course that will be impossible for those directly affected. No one expects - and no one would ask - those still grieving for a loved one to put the September 11 attacks behind them just because an anniversary with a round number is looming. What deepens their tragedy is that it continues.

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The television documentaries, newspaper testimonies and eloquent reminiscences that have been flowing for days leave no doubt that for those directly affected, September 11 will never let them go. Artists and writers, too, will resist closing the book on September 11. Happenings on that scale take decades to process. As Salman Rushdie puts it: "I think these great events have to rot down. Maybe another generation has to look at it."

But if grief and art will necessarily stay fixated, the realm of politics needs to move on. Osama bin Laden is dead; George Bush and Tony Blair are long out of office. The two September 11 wars, in Iraq and Afghanistan, are not over but both have a timetable for troops to come home. The phrase of the age - "the war on terror" - has been retired.

As for al-Qaeda, it has been decapitated. As well as bin Laden, the network's new No.2 and chief operational planner was killed last month. The man branded its "foreign minister" was revealed to be in Pakistani custody a week ago. Most analysts say al-Qaeda is weakened, its capacity to act reduced.

Of course no one wants to tempt fate with complacency. For that reason, one aspect of the post-September 11 landscape will and should remain in place: vigilance. Police and intelligence agencies charged with protecting the public cannot revert to September 10. The threat has changed, but it has not disappeared.

Other aspects of the post-September 11 order persist, too. Guantanamo Bay remains open, one of the early disappointments of the Obama presidency.

The US "homeland security" apparatus created a decade ago is now well dug in. Given the tenacity of such bureaucracies - plenty of Cold War US military structures linger to this day - few would bet on this newer one allowing itself to be mothballed.

But it is the mindset that has to go. In those dazed days after the attacks, a new foreign policy doctrine was hastily assembled. It said that the world faced a single, overarching and paramount threat in the form of violent jihadism. Every other battle had to be subordinated to or subsumed into that one. And the call went beyond foreign policy.

Culture was to be enlisted in a clash of civilisations between Islamism and the West. Christopher Hitchens confessed he felt "exhilaration" as he saw the towers fall. At last

there would be war against "dull and vicious theocratic fascism. I am prepared for this war to go on for a very long time. I will never become tired of waging it, because it is a fight over essentials. And because it is so interesting."

Such talk has been a constant of the September 11 decade but its time has passed. For one thing, it's predicated on a mistake. The right way to regard the 2001 attacks was as a heinous and wicked crime, not a declaration of war. Eliza Manningham-Buller, the former head of MI5, argued in her first Reith Lecture that it was a war which "legitimises the terrorists as warriors". It is exactly what al-Qaeda wanted, feeding their fantasies of grandeur, and we gave it to them.

Second, post-September 11 thinking has led to grave and lethal misjudgments. The greatest of these is agglomeration, lumping disparate and complex threats under one easy heading. The most notorious example will always be Iraq, casting that as part of the war on terrorism even though there was nothing to connect Saddam Hussein to bin Laden.

But it worked in subtler ways, too. Egypt's Hosni Mubarak gained a new lease on office by insisting he was holding back the Muslim Brotherhood, which he portrayed as the Egyptian branch of the global jihad. The past week has brought fresh evidence that Muammar Gaddafi was playing the same game. The danger of the September 11 mindset is that it tries to compress all kinds of challenges into a single threat.

Vigilance is not the same as a careless, indiscriminating monomania. We should mark the anniversary with respect but we ought close this sorry and bloody chapter - and bury the mentality it created.

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