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Text Size: [A](#) [A](#) [A](#)

- [Departments](#)
- [Breaking News](#)
- [Hot Topics](#)
- [Books](#)
- [HNN Blogs](#)
- [Features](#)
- [Roundup](#)
- [News Abroad](#)
- [News at Home](#)
- [Culture Watch](#)
- [Fact & Fiction](#)
- [Historians/History](#)
- [History Q & A](#)
- [Student Shortcuts](#)
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9-11-03: News at Home

## 12/12 and 9/11: Tales of Power and Tales of Experience in Contemporary History

By Michael Kazin

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*On Wednesday September 10, 2003 Mr. Kazin gave the following address at the Library of Congress in connection with the donation of a [digital 9-11 archive](#). (Disclosure: The archive was created by George Mason University and the City University of New York Graduate Center.)*

Some people may be puzzled by the title I chose for this talk. My purpose is to juxtapose the historical impact of events that took place on two highly significant days in the recent past. Then, I want to raise what I hope will be a few provocative suggestions about what we - as historians, archivists, and citizens - might think about what occurred.

9/11 is a date we know all too well - and will commemorate for the rest of our lives. But the consequences of what occurred late one evening nine months earlier may loom even larger to future historians who try to explain how the nation and the world were affected by the terrorist attacks. On December 12, 2000, the U.S. Supreme Court, by the margin of a single vote, reversed a ruling of the Florida Supreme Court and, in effect, handed the presidency to George W. Bush.

That decision did more than secure for the Republican Party control of both elected branches of the federal government. It brought to power an administration in which most of the officials who make foreign and military policy share an aggressive, self-confident view of the world and of America's place in it. Over the past two years, their actions - at home, in Afghanistan, and in Iraq - have put a frame around the meaning of 9/11 for most people at home and abroad. It's a tale of power - of vaunting rhetoric, determined diplomacy, the fighting of wars, and occupation of two nations - that have been familiar as history since Herodotus chronicled the "clash of civilizations" between Greeks and Persians 2500 years ago.

One could make a plausible argument that the historical import of 9/11 will depend to a significant degree on the election that was decided on 12/12. When President Bush declared that every nation had to make a decision-"Either you are with us or you are with the terrorists"-and then invaded Iraq to "confront the worst threats before they emerge"-- he was also making an historical argument: The attacks of 9/11, in his view, were a declaration of a new kind of world war. The U. S. would have to fight the enemy for years, perhaps decades, until our superior values and resources won a complete and total victory. Any other interpretation of what occurred on 9/11, the President implied, is either deeply mistaken or downright immoral. Unlike academic historians, Mr. Bush doesn't expend much energy refuting his critics' views. That's the privilege of being a part-time historian in charge of the largest economy and the mightiest military on earth. Of course, there's a down side for the President: he isn't eligible for tenure.

But if one looks at 12/12 as an event rather than a catalyst, it almost entirely lacks the emotional resonance of 9/11. In other words, as an historical experience, 12/12 doesn't rate, despite how momentous and controversial the Court's decision seemed at the time. How many of us remember where we were when reporters rushed up to Capitol Hill to read the decision?

Unless you're a true partisan of one party or the other, I suspect that other memories of the long election crisis - which dominated the news late that fall as completely as did 9/11 almost a year later - have also begun to fade. To my knowledge, there is no one collecting oral histories of the very long count or assembling a museum exhibit displaying images of sleepy election commissioners holding perforated punch cards up to fluorescent lights. The Commission on Civil Rights did collect some stories about black voters in Florida who claim they were prevented from casting a ballot. But that report was predictably controversial -- and has largely been forgotten.

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- [Media's Take on the News](#)
- [History Being Talked About](#)
- [Comments About Historians](#)
- [Historians in the News](#)
- [Pop Culture](#)
- [Audio History](#)
- [Top 10!](#)

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- [Rebunk](#)
- [Theory & Practice](#)
- [POTUS](#)

- Hot Topics
- [Quote/Unquote](#)
- [On the Hot Seat](#)
- [Iraq](#)
- [Terrorism](#)
- [Gay Marriage](#)



The contrast with the rich store of documents in the 9/11 archive is obvious. Spend just a few minutes with those documents, both written and visual, and you are overwhelmed with the passion of personal involvement. Almost every contributor has a sharp, indelible memory connected with the attacks. No event since John Kennedy's assassination in 1963 triggered such a massive emotional response. The individuals contributing to the Archive range from men and women whose spouses or children died on 9/11 to foreign tourists who sent in photos of the Trade Center they'd snapped from the deck of a Circle Line cruise on the Hudson River.

The assassination of JFK made the late president into a martyr and his entire family into a royal family with a curse over its head. But the experience of 9/11 gave rise to a different sense of tragedy, a vicarious one. Many story-tellers highlight connections to someone who died or could have died that day. "I lost my former Sunday School teacher in Tower One," wrote a sales clerk from Elizabeth, New Jersey. "I didn't even know he worked there until that Saturday, my stepmother had a t-shirt that had his picture on it, saying that he was missing from the 99th floor. God Bless Elder Sean Booker who always had a smile and an encouraging word for any and everybody." (Katrina Simmons, 2/25/03)

A college student from Hattiesburg, Mississippi recalls, "I ran into a friend of mine who happened to be engaged to a man who lived just down the street from the WTC, and I wondered anxiously as she tried to get in contact with Reggie." (Cathy Baxter, 12/12/02).

There's an easy explanation of the contrast between the memory of 12/12 and 9/11. 12/12 was "just" politics. It ended a contest that, until Election day, stirred the passions of few Americans other than that rather small minority that chooses to consume political fare on a regular basis. Nothing vital seemed at stake. As journalist David Brooks joked about the campaign: "Watching the two candidates speak about their rival plans was like watching an ad war between cellular phone rate plans: My plan gives you more choices! My plan gives you more minutes! My plan gives you free prescription drugs on weekends and holidays."

But 9/11 was profound and deadly: two acts of mass murder committed at symbolic icons of the American republic. 12/12 happened, for the most part, to other people. 9/11 happened, one way or another, to everybody.

The claims of experience are rich and indispensable. But, of course, 9/11 was also a political event. The suicide bombers were acting at the direction of an organization whose aims are as sweeping as those of the Bush administration -- however reprehensible we find their tactics. And it is striking how little politics, in the usual definition of the term, seems to show up in the documents contained in the Archive.

To prepare for this talk, I conducted a brief word search from the almost ten thousand stories sent to the Archive. I chose a few "keywords" and names ubiquitous in speeches and articles about 9/11 and its political consequences. In the aftermath of the attacks, many commentators in the media hailed a rebirth of patriotism. But it's curious that only six percent of the stories in the Archive use either that word or its variants, "patriot" and "patriotic." Only nine percent of the stories mention either "terrorism" or "terrorists." What about George W. Bush and Osama Bin Laden-the two protagonists of the political story? In the different forms of his name, the President is mentioned in only five percent of the stories; he barely beats out Bin Laden, who, with or without his first name, appears in just four percent.

Abstract political terms fare even worse. Just one percent of story-tellers use the word "empire," and most who do are referring not to imperial dominion but to what is once again the tallest building on the Manhattan skyline. "Democracy" and "democratic" show up even less. And, surprisingly, "freedom" - a word claimed by individuals and groups from across the political spectrum - appears on fewer than five percent of the responses. The invocation "God Bless America" easily beats them all [831 responses- about nine pct].

Not surprisingly, terms referring to what is both intimate and routine proliferate throughout people's memories. Twenty-one percent of the story-tellers mention "family," sixteen percent "friends"; and thirty-six percent "work". "God" appears in just under a quarter of the stories; while "TV" or "television" shows up in forty percent of them.

In the future, serious students of these narratives will undoubtedly portray a complex and subtle set of responses and viewpoints. But it seems clear that most people who were moved enough by 9/11 to write up and submit a story of their experiences did not care to reflect on the political context or consequences of what occurred.

That wouldn't be remarkable if all or most of the stories had been collected a few days or weeks after the attacks. One would expect the shock of the event to drown out all other topics. But I'm told that the Archive didn't begin collecting stories until four months after 9/11; most were submitted a year after the event or later. Surely, this is enough time for writers to insert comments about Bush, Bin Laden, terrorism, and one or two of the wars the U.S. has waged since then, both in the name of stopping more such outrages. It's quite telling that so few people included a phrase in their stories like "the terrorists won't beat us" or vowed revenge on the leader of Al Qaeda.

The only section of the archive that offers political comments in any abundance is that which features digital art. And here, the dominant messages are colorful illustrations of the widespread desire, present in any manmade tragedy, to present the nation as unbowed and united. There are lots of collages of rippling flags and bald eagles soaring upwards from smoking rubble. Of the images I viewed, my favorite is one created by Julio Enmanuelle, of Newark, NJ. It's a pentagonal design enclosing a flag, a star, and one of the WTC towers. Around the five borders, one can read a chant of reassurance: "Be Strong, Strong Families, Strong Homes, Strong Country, God Bless America."

Both the personal stories and the graphics convey the same tale of communitarian bonding, the unending wake of an entire nation. That community is protective - often in self-sacrificing ways - and deeply affectionate of one's fellow citizens, or of anyone who happened to be caught in the Twin Towers or Pentagon that day.

It's the same emotion, I think, that most people feel when they sing God Bless America or write those words on a poster or plaster them on their car bumper. "Land that I love," "Stand beside her and guide her", "my home sweet home." These are not martial lyrics. In fact, there's less overt political content in the song than in the Star-Spangled Banner, which was, after all, written in the heat of a battle. Irving Berlin even considered God Bless America a "peace" song when he wrote the version of it that became famous in 1938.

Most of the tales of experience collected in the Archive did not require the kind of political response that the Bush administration made to 9/11. Policy-makers essentially decided to tell a story taken in part from the memory of World War II and in part from that of the Cold War. 9/11, like the attack on Pearl Harbor, began a long armed conflict with totalitarian zealots for control of the world, or for large parts of it. One conservative exponent of this view, who also worked for the Reagan administration at the end of the Cold War, states bluntly, "It's amazing how similar Islam is to Marxism. I mean, it's the same thing all over again."

Not only conservatives took this general position. Such writers on the left as Paul Berman and Christopher Hitchens also argued that 9/11 began a war of arms and values against an implacable form of tyranny. However, true to their ideological heritage, they defined the threat as fascism with an Islamic face. Of course, men and women on the Right have been more prominent in espousing what they see as a crusade for freedom-and only they have the power to carry out their ideas.

There were alternatives. Consider a counterfactual tale of power: Imagine that Al Gore did win the electoral votes of Florida (or West Virginia, for that matter). Would he have decided to follow the spirit of the "new security agenda" he outlined during the campaign? This asserted a commitment to multilateral methods and such transnational concerns as protecting the environment. At one point in 2000, Gore attacked his Republican opponent for being "stuck in a Cold War mindset." It's hard to imagine that Gore wouldn't have gone to war to overthrow the Taliban. Yet it's also hard to imagine him initiating the conquest of Iraq against the wishes of a majority of NATO members, much less a majority of the Security Council.

On the other hand, a Gore administration would have had to deal with a Congress, controlled, if narrowly, by the other party. And this may have quickly hollowed out the reality of "United We Stand." Would Republicans, resentful at Bush's defeat -- after he'd been officially certified as the victor in Florida -- have sought a measure of legislative revenge? Would we have watched televised hearings into intelligence lapses under Clinton and Gore during the 1990s-a woeful failure to heed multiple warnings about the threat posed by Al Qaeda?

What we do know is that Bush's policies- and the messianic rhetoric with which he defends them -- widened and exacerbated a dispute with the tale many people outside our nation wished to tell about 9/11. As the left-wing historian Eric Hobsbawm puts it, "The world merely saw a particularly dramatic terror attack with a vast number of victims and a momentary public humiliation of the USA. Otherwise the situation was no different from what it had been since the Cold War ended, and certainly no cause for alarm, for the globe's only superpower. Washington announced that

September 11 had changed everything, and in doing so, actually did change everything, by in effect declaring itself the single-handed protector of a world order and definer of threats against it."

So we're challenged to make sense of two kinds of stories about what happened on 9/11 and what that event should mean. One kind is dominated by, saturated with the memories of ordinary Americans and visitors from other countries; they are horrible, painful, exhilarating, wonderfully specific and quotidian. The other stories are fixed on matters of war and diplomacy; they make fierce claims about international justice and peace- and the role of the United States in either advancing those ideals or setting them back.

Is one of those stories more significant, more worth telling than the other kind? How might we bring the two kinds of stories together - those of high politics and of popular experience?

As it happens, historians not so long ago spent a good deal of time and passion debating such questions. In the 1960s, many scholars called for a "new history," a history "from the bottom up." They argued that the only way to understand the past was to place at the center of it the work, the families, the sexual behavior, the health, the dreams, and the disappointments of ordinary people. These millions of mostly anonymous folks may not have taken part in politics, either because they were legally barred from doing so or because they didn't feel that the contest for state power made much difference in their lives. But the true task of historians was to discover the complex pattern of those lives - to write the history of societies as a whole - instead of dwelling further on what kings, presidents, tycoons, and generals had done. As one scholar memorably put it, the history of menarche should be taken as seriously, if not more seriously, than the history of monarchy (Peter Stearns).

Traditional historians argued back. Governments, they pointed out, have always structured and often determined the fate of everyday lives-through taxation, conquest, established religion, and a myriad of other powers. "Contemporaries may have thought that their history was shaped by kings and statesmen, politics and diplomacy..." wrote Gertrude Himmelfarb facetiously. But "New historians know better. They know that 'high politics' are ephemeral and epiphenomenal, to say nothing of being elitist and sexist."

By now, most scholars recognize that this debate was "profoundly wrongheaded," to use a phrase favored by one of my grad school professors. Societies are made and remade through the actions and attitudes of millions of individuals and groups. But, to paraphrase Marx, those millions do not make history as they please. They live within a world of powerful rulers and the institutions and laws that express and enforce their power. And the same goes for terrorists who learn how to fly passenger jets.

To write a satisfying history of 9/11 and its aftermath, historians will have to integrate it with a history of 12/12 and the ways its consequences dovetailed with the memories of the attacks on American soil. A focus on popular experience and attitudes alone can lead one to overplay the importance of temporary responses.

For example, just a few months after the attacks, Robert Putnam, the Harvard sociologist, celebrated the discovery that "levels of political consciousness and engagement are substantially higher than they were a year ago in the United States." In a poll he conducted, large percentages of Americans reported greater trust in their local and national governments, their police, their shop clerks, their neighbors, even their local media. They also said they were watching TV less and spending more time working on community projects and following the political news.

The Mississippi college student I quoted testifies to a similar spirit: "I will...never forget how the people of Hattiesburg came together. Churches held memorials, people donated blood, and people were just a little bit kinder to one another."

Putnam, like many other commentators, compared the country's mood to that during World War II. He called on President Bush to support a big expansion in the AmeriCorps program and to reinvigorate citizenship education in schools. Perhaps a new age of altruism and service was dawning. Perhaps another "greatest generation" was being born.

Two years later, that trial balloon has gone rather flat. In fact, it may never have really lifted more than a few feet off the ground. Putnam downplayed the date of his survey -only a month after 9/11, when US troops were just landing in Afghanistan, and many Americans assumed that one or more new terrorist attacks were imminent. He also failed to point out that, according to his own poll, there was only a tiny boost in the number of people who claimed they'd become locally active as opposed to trusting governments to manage the crisis for them. For example, only six

percent were more likely to work on a community project and only one percent to attend a public meeting.

The shock of 9/11 had not been sufficient to alter the political culture. Without a massive effort by the federal government and political leaders, the new era of citizen involvement proved quite ephemeral indeed. Strangely, given his past work, Putnam didn't inquire whether Americans were joining bowling teams in greater numbers.

President Bush hasn't been much more successful as a prophet. Right after 9/11, he chose to emphasize the more aggressive meaning of "God Bless America": the sense of American righteousness, the duty of God's people to vanquish evil in the world, that the title of the song conveys--as does its initial rise to popularity during World War II. For the President and his top advisors, the "light from above" illuminated the path all Americans should follow. For over a year, this interpretation was quite popular-- or at least no other viewpoint was able to compete with it.

On the first anniversary of the attacks, Nan K. Mims, who described herself as a "US Army widow," contributed her reflections to the Archive. "History was in the making and I was living through it," she wrote about 9/11, which she watched on TV from her home in Georgia. "It became clear to me that this will not be a conventional war and that the forthcoming events in human history will be unprecedented. I thought of the Crusades of early centuries, thinking of all those who died in the name of Christianity. Was this so different?" Mims thanked God for George W. Bush and was equally thankful that Al Gore had not been elected.

But such a tale of 9/11 was increasingly contested as the administration moved towards war in Iraq. In the bloody, frustrating aftermath of the invasion, it has almost disappeared from sight. Recent opinion polls portray a nation about as evenly divided along partisan lines as it was on 12/12. And there's more talk about whether there's a light at the end of the tunnel in Baghdad than about America being the light of the world.

Unfortunately, one result of the mounting skepticism about the U.S. armed mission in the Middle East is likely to be a wider gulf between the two kinds of history I've been discussing. The events of 9/11 made the experiences of ordinary people seem more vital than ever before--something momentous and shocking and heroic had occurred, and all Americans felt part of it. Many were convinced, as the phrase that rapidly became a cliché had it - that "nothing would ever be the same." The NYU historian Tony Judt looked out his office window on the morning of 9/11 and wrote that he'd seen a new century begin. That may be case when it comes to security in public places. But it would be hard to find clear evidence of a major transformation in any other area of national life.

And in one critical respect, the U.S. is very much the same. After a brief hiatus following the attacks, Americans once again mistrust politicians and their maneuvers; most believe they compose a class interested mainly in saying and doing whatever is necessary to keep themselves in power. When they fail, it only reinforces our skepticism about the project of remaking the nation or the world in the first place.

Such attitudes are not and cannot be shaped by a single event, whether 9/11 or 12/12. Their causes reach back into the anti-statist origins of the American republic itself - to the desire for what Tom Paine called an "empire of liberty" from overweening governments that helped led to the separation of powers in our Constitution. This anti-statism weakened somewhat in the two-thirds of the twentieth century; three waves of progressive reform, two world wars and one cold war made government activism look, if not entirely successful, at least essential. But activists on both the left and the right cheered and abetted the crisis of the liberal order in the late 1960s and the 70s. And the liberal crackup renewed a broad cynicism about authority in general, and political authorities in particular, shared by millions of Americans who were not very interested in politics at all.

Unintentionally, social historians were reflecting this attitude when they argued that writing the history of ordinary people was morally superior to focusing on the tale of governing elites. The collective memory of 9/11 has bolstered an analogous kind of thinking among millions of Americans who know little, if anything, about historiographical disputes. Encouraged by the media, they created a profusion of instant, largely nameless heroes -- ordinary people doing extraordinary things.

With the partial exception of Rudy Giuliani, the only acknowledged heroes of 9/11 were the firefighters, police officers, priests, and good samaritans without portfolio who calmly sought to rescue people from the crumbling towers -- and the passengers who battled terrorists on Flight 93, although most probably knew they would all go down together. In the two hot wars the US has

fought since 9/11, the only public hero, or rather heroine, is a rather unlikely figure: Jessica Lynch, a soldier who lost her way and then stumbled into celebrity. In contrast with every successful conflict in the past, from the War of Independence to the Gulf War, not a single general or policy-maker can claim a small fraction of the honors Private Lynch has received.

If one believes that history should be a democratic endeavor, this may be a laudatory development. But it also signifies a strong desire to separate the positive, the uplifting tales of 9/11 from the less noble but more portentous consequences of 12/12. The interaction between leaders and led, between those who make policy and those who must cope with their handiwork, has always been essential to the fate of societies and the people who dwell within them.

We need a history that explains how that vital dialectic works -- how experience, both of the routine variety and of extraordinary events like 9/11 and 12/12, offers opportunities and sets limits for leaders, elected and appointed. In modern societies, the "public" is always a fragmented beast that runs in several directions at once. One or more paths may lead to the creation of a social movement capable of altering or destroying the plans of the powerful. But others lead mostly to dead ends of spectatorship or apathy.

That kind of history of our own time is still unwritten. When it is, it will be a tale fraught with contention, ideology, and pain—a history that, if done well, will defeat attempts to daub it with romantic hues of communal unity, vigilant warriors or virtuous anti-warriors, or the Almighty's fondness for one nation over any other.

But it is the only type of history that can make sense both of experience and of power—and thus help future citizens find their way in a world that is unlikely to become any less difficult to understand or dangerous to live in anytime soon.

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