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FOOTNOTES

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NOTES ON TEACHING 9/11

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Dear Educators,

In advance of the tenth anniversary of September 11, 2001, I thought I would share some notes with you about "Teaching 9/11," based on my own presentations to high school students. But before I do, allow me to recommend just four essays that I have found very useful:

What Our Children Should Learn about 9/11/2001 (Footnotes, Sept. 2002)
By Adam Garfinkle
http://www.fpri.org/footnotes/0705.200209.garfinkle.childrenlearnabout9112001.html

Teaching about the Long War and Jihadism (Footnotes, October 2009)
By Mary Habeck
http://www.fpri.org/footnotes/1425.200910.habeck.longwarjihadism.html

Teaching about Jihadism and the War on Terror (Footnotes, October 2010)
By Barak Mendelsohn
http://www.fpri.org/footnotes/1507.201010.mendelsohn.jihadism.html

Somebody Else's Civil War (Foreign Affairs, January-February 2002)
By Michael S. Doran
http://evatt.labor.net.au/publications/papers/76.html

As today's high school students ranged in age from four to eight that fateful Tuesday morning, for many of them 9/11 is ancient history even though they live with the consequences of 9/11—namely, two wars (Afghanistan, Iraq), at least two low-level wars using special forces or drones (Yemen, Somalia), smaller-scale terrorist incidents (Fort Hood), thwarted or failed plots (the Times Square Bomber, the Underwear Bomber), and very intrusive procedures at the airport.

So the first thing we have to do is explain what exactly happened that day, then turn to why it happened, what our response was, and finally what are the consequences for today—for them.

I find the best way to get started on this is to ask them what they already know; whether it is knowledge based on their own vague recollections or stories they've been told by families and friends, or something they've been taught in school.

Based on what they report and what I fill in as I tell my own story of watching the events unfold on TV, I do a time sheet like this:

8:46 a.m. 1st plane strikes North Tower

9:03 a.m. 2nd plane strikes South Tower

9:37 a.m. 3rd plane strikes the Pentagon

9:59 a.m. South Tower collapsed

10:02 a.m. 4th plane crashes in an open field in Shanksville, PA

10:28 a.m. North Tower collapsed

Using the specific times makes it more concrete and helps students feel the mounting tension as Americans watched these events unfold on TV.

An excellent source of information is: http://timeline.national911memorial.org

I spend some time on the events in the fourth plane and how it came to crash in an open field rather than its intended target (the White House or Capitol Hill), as it is a story of courageous men and women who, knowing they were going to die, sought to avoid an even greater catastrophe for the nation. (I recommend students see the movie United 93 but not after they've just eaten—it's rough on the stomach—and not if they're younger than 15.)

It is also worth spending a moment discussing the phenomenon of hijacking because up until 9/11 our concept of a hijacking was that a group (or individual) takes over a plane, holds the passengers as hostages, and issues demands. The hijackings on 9/11 introduced an entirely new concept. While there were a few analysts in the 1990s who foresaw the use of planes as missiles to crash into tall buildings (including FPRI's own Stephen Gale), the average American would have considered this unthinkable.

I then ask: Who did it? Not who planned it (we will get to that later) but who carried out the plot? What countries did the 19 hijackers come from? Eventually we enumerate: 15 from Saudi Arabia, 1 from Egypt, 2 from UAE, 1 from Lebanon—all countries that at the time were friendly toward the United States. So, given the origins of the hijackers, why, I ask, did we attack Afghanistan? This leads to a discussion of an organization called al Qaeda, then headed by Osama bin Laden (a Saudi heir to a construction fortune), his deputy Ayman al-Zawahiri (a doctor from a prominent Egyptian family) and the main operational planner Khalid Sheik Mohammed (a Kuwaiti)—operating out of Afghanistan, given safe haven there by the Taliban regime.

Now we get to the difficult part—why did they do it? The single best source, I find, is Michael Doran's (previously mentioned) article in Foreign Affairs, January-February 2002, entitled "Somebody Else's Civil War." Prior to 9/11, he was busy studying al Qaeda texts, and, based on his reading, he saw 9/11 as the product of a civil war within Islam, waged by a tiny minority of extremists who hoped to usher in a new world order modeled on what they imagined life was like under Islam in the 7th century. Their war was not primarily against the United States but against the rest of the Muslim world for failing to practice Islam the way they felt it was supposed to be practiced.

To make that vision of the ideal society more concrete, it is worth describing life under the Taliban regime, which ruled Afghanistan from 1996 until we toppled the regime in 2001. The Taliban destroyed the 1,500-year-old statues of Buddha carved into the cliffs of Bamiyam, for they were an affront to Islam. They declared the Hazara, an ethnic group in Afghanistan that practiced Shia Islam, as non-Muslim and massacred many of them. (The Taliban and al Qaeda practice their version of Sunni Islam—Sunni and Shia being the two main branches of Islam.) They banned education for girls and carried out public executions of adulterers and homosexuals. As hard as it may be to believe, this is the kind of society that Al Qaeda would like to impose on the entire Muslim world (and then on the rest of us as well).

We then review the specifics of the U.S. response to 9/11—namely, the ultimatum given to the Taliban to give up al Qaeda, their refusal, and then our invasion. While we succeeded in quickly toppling the regime, we are still there 10 years later fighting an insurgency in what has become America's longest war. Toppling a regime is one thing but replacing it with a stable government is quite another, and while we have severely degraded Al Qaeda in Afghanistan, they have moved into Pakistan, and Al Qaeda affiliates or groups inspired by Al Qaeda seek to exploit the unraveling of governance in Yemen, Somalia, and elsewhere. Moreover, individuals not affiliated with any group but inspired by Al Qaeda have attempted to carry out terrorist plots here in the United States. Whatever disagreements policymakers have about prosecuting the war on terrorism, all would agree—whether Democrat or Republican—that the greatest threat we must protect against is the acquisition of weapons of mass destruction by terrorist groups.

Nonetheless, to put it in a different perspective, as my colleague Lawrence Husick says in an essay we are publishing this week,

an American is more likely to be hit by lightning than be a victim of a terrorist attack in the United States. And as a new study by the Rand Corporation says, more than 6 billion passengers have traveled on flights originating in the United States since 9/11/2001 and there has not been a single fatality due to terrorism on any of those flights. (See the new RAND book "The Long Shadow of 9/11.")

This letter only skims the surface but it may help you engage students in a discussion of 9/11, and you can easily assign many research projects based on the discussion, examining such topics as--

The specific terrorist incidents since 9/11 in the United States and abroad;

The difference between Sunni and Shia Islam, and the early history of Islam;

The philosophy of bin Laden and those who influenced his thinking (Ibn Taymiyya, Sayyid Qutb), and the relevant vocabulary (Caliphate, sharia, Quran, umma, jihad, kufir, salafi, takfir, jahaliya);

The primary sources, such as bin Laden's declarations of war in 1996 and 1998 (yes, this story begins well before 2001), all available on the web;

The distinction between Islamism, a political ideology, and Islam, a religion.

Finally, be sure to have your class tune in to one of our webcasts on Sept. 8, where we will explore the issues in more detail and examine the lessons of the last ten years. Students will have the opportunity to ask their own questions of our experts, including Lawrence Husick, our own hi-tech expert with a unique ability to explain complex issues in layman's terms; Ed Turzanski, who enjoys extensive experience in the American intelligence community; Jack Tomarchio, who held key positions in the US Department of Homeland Security; and Jan Ting, a professor of law at Temple University and a well-known commentator in the media (often in debate with Ed Turzanski).

Details on the webcasts can be found here:
http://www.fpri.org/events/2011/20110908.webcast.911.html

I hope you find this information useful in marking the tenth anniversary of 9/11 with your class.

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