

Two Months and Counting

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By Wade Huntley

I. Introduction

The following essay is by Wade Huntley, Director of the Program on Global Peace and Security at the Nautilus Institute. Huntley, reflecting on a recent visit to the site of the collapsed World Trade Center towers, asserts that responses to the September 11 attacks and their aftermath should include not just initiatives focused on the crisis but also the creation of new understandings of how the crisis is changing the basic terms of myriad global issues and relationships. Huntley calls upon individuals and non-governmental organizations with capacities for flexibility and imagination to build such new understandings both for their own sake and as guidance to decision-makers.

II. Essay By Wade Huntley

"Two Months and Counting"

By Wade Huntley, The Nautilus Institute

On November 11, I went to Ground Zero.

US President George Bush also chose this day - Veteran's Day, and the two-month anniversary of the attacks on the United States - to visit the site of the collapsed World Trade Center towers. I did not see President Bush. The site is vast, and he managed to elude the crowd milling at the eastern side of the perimeter.

I did see glimpses of the site through holes in the perimeter fencing. I saw clearly the burned carcass of one of the World Trade Center's smaller buildings, still standing but soon to be demolished. I saw cranes at work and trucks moving. I felt the outpouring of grief and consolation in the messages tacked along the fencing outside St. Paul's Chapel. I smelled the acrid odor of burning plastics still lingering in the air.

I had come seeking the reality of the event. Weeks of immersion in electronic and print media had

left me numbed, but also slightly alienated. I had heard the scale and the poignancy of the destruction is far more vivid in person. It is.

Yet, the experience was as much surreal as real. The juxtaposition of gleaming office towers and crumbled wreckage was jarring, incongruous. The scene had a fantastic, unnatural quality that defied rationalization. And still the experience was mediated, through the looks in the eyes of the police officers and construction workers bearing witness to the grotesque details inside the perimeter of the destruction, so that the rest of us would not have to.

Reflecting later on the lingering distance from the events one experiences even at Ground Zero, I realized that the difficulty I experienced is representative of a more ubiquitous challenge. Two months removed from the attacks, many of us still struggle to grasp their real and lasting meaning, even as we also strive to regain a sense of normalcy in our lives.

In the days immediately following the attacks, a tremendous consolidation of support for the immediate victims emerged throughout the world, along with an immediate global dialog seeking to begin reckoning the events' implications. As the immediate shock of events subsided, many heard a call to a deeper response. Around the world, individuals and organizations concerned with international issues have undertaken new initiatives to focus their skills and resources on the myriad of problems emerging from these events: understanding the nature of terrorism, the politics of South Asia, the requisites for U.S. policy responses, and the like.

As I contemplated the broader meaning of my experiences in New York, I began to wonder of the sufficiency of even this second, deeper level of responses. After leaving Ground Zero, I gradually came to see that the actual reality of the events was not to be found there at all. Rather, the reality was to be found elsewhere in the city. It was to be found in the odd mix of solemnity and hope of so many of the city's residents. It was to be found in the palpable nervousness and exhaustion with which New Yorkers, and so many others, greeted the news of a new airliner crash in Brooklyn. It was to be found in the young woman on the subway who patiently answered our newcomers' navigation questions, and then added, spontaneously and genuinely, "Thanks for coming."

Just as the reality of the World Trade Center destruction is to be found not simply at the site of the attacks, but throughout New York City, so must responses to these events be formulated not just in specific actions grappling directly with the current crisis, but in an even deeper, across-the-board rethinking of the terms of all parts of our lives. For individuals and organizations working on international issues, in particular, adding new crisis-focused initiatives to existing work risks doing both too much and too little. This response risks doing too much if new initiatives are tied too closely to the exigencies of the moment - in a context of high uncertainty and rapidly changing circumstances, today's priority can quickly become tomorrow's afterthought. More importantly, this response risks doing too little because it misunderstands just how the world really has changed since September 11.

Much of the hyperbole of a "completely changed world" resonating through so many reactions in the days following September 11 overlooked how little novelty the attacks actually displayed. Hijacking of jetliners for political purposes is almost as old as jetliners themselves. Knives, the principal weapons used to achieve the hijackings, are one of humanity's most primitive weapons. The destruction of the World Trade Center towers with massive loss of life was first attempted in 1993. Osama bin Laden has been a known organizer of terrorist attacks for at least that long, and declared "war" on the United States years ago. The innovative use of jetliners as weapons would not have been as shocking if the attacks had not succeeded (if, for example, plans for them had been discovered and circumvented). The attacks themselves, while a wake-up call to many, did not themselves reveal much new in the world.

What has changed the world is the character of the US government's response to the attacks.

The Bush administration quickly settled on calling the attacks "acts of war," and declaring that the United States is "at war" not just with the network of agents responsible for the attacks, but with the entire phenomenon of global terrorism. US policy responses have sought to follow this characterization. The effect of this US response on world politics has been transformational, amplified by two unusual circumstances.

The first unusual circumstance is current US global preeminence. Although characterizations of the United States as the "only remaining superpower" are simplistic, the United States clearly has found itself with a global reach few societies in history have experienced. As a result, the US approach to its role in world politics defines major features of the global political environment. US decisions as to its vital national interests, basic international orientations and core foreign policy goals constitute "givens" to which other states must react.

The second unusual circumstance is the rapidity with which the United States government redefined its core national interests in reaction to the attacks. The understandable need for this redefinition does not diminish the import of its swiftness. Rarely do governments, especially governments of major states, overhaul their core foreign policy orientations overnight (except in the context of major internal regime transition, as in the case of Russia's withdrawal from World War I as a result of the Bolshevik revolution).

The fundamental reorientation of US international priorities in the wake of the September 11 attacks, amplified by these unusual circumstances, was akin to an "earthquake" in the firmament of contemporary world politics. Other countries, to varying degrees, now face a transformed set of constraints and opportunities: Russia, China, Pakistan, India, Iran, Israel, and Britain are just a few of the states now redefining their own policy orientations accordingly. In an interdependent, globalizing world, the seismic waves of this earthquake reach well beyond the military security, homeland safety and civil liberties issues at the forefront of the current crisis. Potentially no issue or problem in the world has been left unaffected by this transformation.

This transformation, subtle but profound, creates a fundamental imperative for individuals and organizations throughout the world with missions focusing on international issues. This imperative is to react to the events of September 11 not simply with new initiatives focusing on the crisis, but with across-the-board rethinking of the terms of all their work. Compartmentalized initiatives provide a psychological solace: they satisfy demonstrably the desire to react purposefully, while also reclaiming normalcy through the continuity of preexisting missions and projects. But the potential transformation of myriad issues should compel fresh inspection of these missions. We must not simply react to the crisis, but also build a better understanding, in precise and dynamic terms, of how the world has changed, and how it has not. Perhaps missions and projects will need revision; perhaps they won't. Either way, doing this work will create deeper, broader, and more holistic responses more likely to productively meet the widespread new needs this transformed world has created.

This work is hard. It requires critically examining core precepts of our worldviews at a time when the security of our convictions is most wanted. It demands that we come to terms with the gravity of change not just in the world, but in our own lives.

This challenge is hard enough for individuals and non-governmental organizations that at least can draw on the flexibility of their small size and the imaginativeness that often characterizes their leadership. This challenge is all the more difficult for the most important organization active on international issues and involved in the current crisis: the United States government. Encumbered

by bureaucratic momentum and shepherded by leadership not known for its creativity, the U.S. government is not ideally suited to produce the innovative, forward-looking thinking demanded by the brave new world that America's own current actions are creating.

Thus, the imperative for other individuals and organizations worldwide concerned with the current crisis is also an urgent responsibility. New understandings to match new world conditions, required for their own sake, are also a resource the United States and other governments vitally need as they struggle to make timely and critical decisions in very uncertain contexts. Individuals and organizations with the capacities for such new thinking have an obligation to undertake it.

A few of us - the police officer guarding the gates to hell, the young woman offering unguarded gratitude - already know the new reality. Most of the rest of us are still struggling to catch up. Let us not waver, for the world will not wait.

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