

9/11: two years later

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9/11

AMERICA knows how to mourn and remember its losses. An elaborate ceremony was held at "ground zero" — the place where the twin World Trade Towers once stood before they were brought down by two airliners that smashed into them, piloted by ten suicide bombers. A ceremony was also held in Washington which had suffered from a terrorist attack as well. A few minutes after the first hijacked Boeing 767 hit the World Trade Centre, a similar plane ploughed into the Pentagon, just across the Potomac River from Washington.

A fourth plane, also commandeered by the terrorists, was brought down in the planes of Pennsylvania. It came down after a group of passengers, having learnt of what other planes had done, overpowered the hijackers and crashed the plane hundreds of miles short of Washington. No one will ever know what was the destination of the fourth plane.

Was it headed towards the White House or towards the Capitol, the seat of the United States Congress? Not allowing the plane to proceed towards its intended targets by a group of passengers was an act of extraordinary heroism. It has been celebrated by a book written by the widow of a passenger who seems to have organized his fel-

troops in nation-building in Afghanistan. His reluctance to get into nation building was shared by several of his senior associates, in particular defence secretary Donald Rumsfeld. According to journalist Bob Woodward's detailed account of policymaking in Washington as America prepared to attack Afghanistan, President Bush was inclined to let Kabul, once freed, be managed by the United Nations.

"Look, I oppose the military for nation-building. Once the job is done, our forces are not peacekeepers. We ought to put in place a UN protection and leave," Bob Woodward quotes Bush in his book, "Bush at War," telling his senior associates. In one of his discussions with his colleagues, President Bush also toyed with the idea of handing over the task of administering Kabul to the Organization of the Islamic Conference. The OIC in its meeting on October 10, 2001, two

administration began the countdown to the second 9/11 anniversary.

While Iraq was proving extraordinarily difficult to settle to any kind of state that could be described normal, Afghanistan saw the beginning of another uprising in its south-eastern provinces. There were almost daily encounters between the American troops and the troops of the Kabul government on the one side and guerilla forces on the other. It appeared that the persistent weakness of the government of President Hamid Karzai had given hope to the remnants of the Taliban who had begun to regroup in the difficult mountain terrain that runs along the south-eastern Afghan border with Pakistan.

What was the scorecard of preventing terrorism in other places and arresting or killing known terrorists in the two-year period since September 11, 2001? In the television

address by President Bush referred to above, the American chief executive claimed that great progress had been made on the war on terror. "We have exposed terrorist front groups, seized terrorist accounts, taken new measures to protect our homeland and uncovered sleeper cells inside the United States," declared the American president. Tom Ridge, U.S. Secretary of Homeland Security, also projected an air of confidence. "We are safer today and without doubt it is because of the new level of cooperation that the president has spearheaded with our allies around the world," he

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written by the widow of a passenger who seems to have organized his fellow travellers with the words "Let's roll!" That became the title of the book by Lisa Beamer, the widow of the hero who lost his life in the hijacked plane.

What the 19 hijackers carried out on September 11, 2001 was an act of extraordinary hate directed at America, its people and its leaders. The reaction in the countries spread all over the world was that of love towards the victims of that horrendous crime. In reliving that experience and remembering the reaction of the crime committed by the Egyptian Mohammed Atta, the apparent leader of the group of nineteen terrorists who assaulted America on that bright September morning, this is what Gerard Baker of the *Financial Times* had to say on the second anniversary of 9/11: "But only the crime of Mohammed Atta and his friends could have produced the love that flew into New York and Washington that day from Moscow and Paris and new Delhi and yes even from parts of Damascus and Riyadh and Islamabad."

In the 24-month period since that fateful day, what has America done in return for all that pouring of love? It has fought two wars, one that had the full support of the international community and the other that deeply divided it. The war in Afghanistan the world could understand, and understanding it, it could support. The 9/11 attacks were launched by a group of people who were trained and supported by Al Qaeda, an Arab group that had been provided a sanctuary by the Taliban regime of Afghanistan.

This sanctuary was turned into a training ground for terrorists by Al Qaeda and most of the graduates of these training camps directed their wrath at the United States. With 3,015 lives lost in the US in the attacks carried out by the Al Qaeda terrorists, America had every right in hitting back at the terrorists in Afghanistan.

America was careful in choosing its targets in Afghanistan. It tried to give an opportunity to the Taliban regime to abandon its support to Al Qaeda. It was only after the American ultimatum was ignored that Washington launched a war on the Taliban. Much to its relief, the Taliban regime folded quickly and, after a little over two months, America and its allies were in control of Afghanistan.

In the internal high level discussions that led to the American invasion of Afghanistan President George W. Bush had repeatedly shared his distaste for involving the US

days after the beginning of the Afghan campaign, had passed a strong resolution condemning international terrorism, particularly when committed in the name of Islam.

This approach stood on its head in Iraq, the second major campaign launched by the US in the two-year period since the 9/11 attack. The United Nations was deeply involved in Afghanistan before the US went into the country and also later once Kabul fell to the Northern Alliance forces. Among the countries that supported the US war in Afghanistan were Pakistan, Iran and Afghanistan's Central Asian neighbours to the north. At one point even the French offered to provide 50 combat planes to participate in the air war.

The American campaign in Iraq did not have that kind of international support. Washington attacked and conquered Iraq without receiving the approval of the United Nations. Its policy was bitterly opposed by France, Germany and Russia and did not have the support of the Muslim states. America went into Iraq virtually alone, receiving help only from Britain whose own involvement became the subject of a high-level judicial inquiry, the first phase of which was concluded before the observance of the second 9/11 anniversary.

While the regime of Saddam Hussein crumbled even faster than that of the Taliban, the post-conquest period in Iraq turned out to be much more difficult than was the case in Afghanistan. Most of the killing of American soldiers was done by the armed militia who either remained loyal to the Baathist regime of Saddam Hussein or were extremely disturbed by the US inability to supply basic services to the country's citizens. Two massive suicide attacks in Iraq, one in Baghdad and the other in Najaf, killed scores of people. The UN representative in Iraq died in the Baghdad bombing while the attack in Najaf claimed the life of a popular Shia cleric who had supported America's nation-building efforts in Iraq.

All this seemed to suggest that terrorism had found a new home in Iraq. As the economist Paul Krugman wrote in one of his weekly columns for *The New York Times*, Iraq, before the invasion of its territory by the US, was free of terrorism. It was also not harbouring terrorists. After the invasion, much of the terrorist activity in the world was taking place in Iraq and the country was also turning rapidly into a terrorist haven. President Bush acknowledged this in his TV address to the nation on September 7, as his

said.

But some analysts have presented a different picture. According to one group, in the last two years the eight largest attacks by Al Qaeda and its affiliates have left more than 320 people dead. Many others have been killed or injured in attacks inspired by Al Qaeda. Of the twelve major attacks attributed to Al Qaeda since September 11, 2001, three were carried out in Pakistan — on March 16 against Christian worshippers in an Islamabad church; on May 11, 2002 on the French technicians working with the Pakistan Navy in Karachi; and on July 14, 2002 on the US Consulate in Karachi. Twenty-seven people were killed in these attacks, eleven of them foreigners.

But, at the same time, considerable progress was made in weakening the command structure of Al Qaeda. A number of its senior functionaries including Khaled Shah Mohammed, Al Qaeda's third ranking officer and the co-planner of the September 11, 2001, attack was arrested by Pakistan's security forces and handed over for interrogation to the US authorities. Riduan Isamuddin, also known as Hambali, alleged leader of Jemaah Islamiyah and said to be mastermind of terrorist attacks in Southeast Asia, was captured in Thailand. Islamic militant, Imam Samudra was sentenced to death on September 10, 2003 after being convicted of playing an important role in the October 12, 2002 bombing in Bali that killed 202 people.

Is America winning the war it launched right after September 11, 2001? At best the picture is mixed. While there is no doubt that Al Qaeda's command structure has weakened, there are indications that its organization is changing its approach, having become decentralized. Has Al Qaeda and related organizations lost their safe havens and the sanctuaries they need to operate? Having lost the welcome afforded them by the Taliban regime in Afghanistan, is Al Qaeda able to move on to some other place, some other country? From the accounts of a number of newspapers and magazine it appears that Iraq is now ripe for becoming the centre of Islamic terrorism.

What should be perhaps most disturbing for the Americans is that the love and good will that was shown towards them by countries around the globe has been replaced by considerable apprehension at the way the 'world's superpower is conducting itself. Such a dramatic change in attitude does not augur well for international peace and for the orderly evolution of a new world system.