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After the Fall

By Marian Salzman
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All the news over the past few months about holding the trial of Sept. 11 mastermind Khalid Shaikh Mohammed in downtown Manhattan, then moving it away, has gotten me thinking about the many ways that Sept. 11 has become a marker. We divide life into “before” and “after,” use the event as a way of judging the world and hold it up as a yardstick for understanding news (“another Sept. 11,” “the next,” “worse than”). When horrible attacks happen in Madrid or Mumbai, citizens there call it their Sept. 11. It’s a shorthand that’s all too easy to understand, as it refers not only to senseless and tragic killing but also to the way cultures are transformed—from open to closed, from peaceful to at war, from placid to on edge.

To use a literary metaphor, the attack was our *Paradise Lost*. We were kicked out of the Garden and lost so much innocence. Remember when we could travel with shoes on our feet and lotion in our carry-ons? When office towers in Times Square weren’t routinely evacuated over security threats? When our government didn’t have an excuse for wiretapping or waterboarding? Or for starting wars it had no business starting?

Along with the specific ways the tragedy has affected travel, security, civil liberties and foreign policy, it has had a pervasive effect on American confidence, both in the country’s infallibility and in its role in the world. Ten years ago, as we were laughing at ourselves for having ever been worried about Y2K, we felt invulnerable and trusted that the U.S. of A. was the global center of gravity. Now we’re afraid, for our personal

safety and for our place in the world. Reporting from the World Economic Forum in Davos, New York Times columnist Thomas Friedman wrote that forum participants were asking, “Is the ‘Beijing Consensus’ replacing the ‘Washington Consensus?’” On a less lofty plane, people talk at dinner parties about whether they should be learning Mandarin. It’s kind of a joke, but not really.

It could be argued that Sept. 11 is what kept Republicans in power in the 2004 election. In a deeply shaken nation, fearmongering became a bona fide political strategy. Tom Ridge revealed that he was pressured to elevate the terror alert level during Bush’s re-election campaign. (Other Bush administration officials strongly denied this.) Clearly, Bush and Cheney used it to their advantage, and now Sarah Palin is singing that tune.

Fearmongering is still with us under the Obama administration. President Obama’s lofty goal of closing Guantánamo quickly ran into fierce not-in-my-backyard opposition, as politicians argued that we couldn’t have detainees on American soil. Back in the 1990s, Timothy McVeigh, who was arguably an American terrorist, got a fair trial. That was “before.” Now, in the “after,” we seem to be stuck with secret tribunals and extraordinary rendition—and with a growing chorus of questions about whether this is at all compatible with American values.

And if Sept. 11 kept the Republicans in the executive branch, then was it not a factor in

the financial mess we're in now? If the Bush administration hadn't been in power, would we have had the bubble-inflating, regulation-trashing policies that led to the subprime mortgage crisis and Great Recession? It's a sad irony that what the terrorists didn't accomplish in 2001, the housing crisis did in 2008. It shook America's superpower status in ways that are harder to recover from. It replaced hubris with humility and swagger with suffering. And this time around, our president can't tell us to shop our way out of it.

Sept. 11 was supposed to be the end of the age of irony, as Graydon Carter so infamously said. We got over that one quickly and have Gawker and Perez Hilton to prove it. But in so many other ways, we haven't bounced back, and probably never will. "The terrorists have won" is often said as an ironic joke, but in some ways it's true: Our "after" is so unlike our "before."

The country has changed, and it has grown more fractious and divided than ever. (Friedman's central argument is that we're "making people nervous" because of what other countries see as our "political instability.") It's worth noting that one of our most polarizing public figures has spun Sept. 11 into a marketing slogan for his political agenda. Glenn Beck's populist 9.12 Project is officially based on 9 principles and 12 values--smaller government chief among them--but those numbers aren't a coincidence: The mission statement says the project is "designed to bring us all back to the place we were on September 12, 2001. The day after America was attacked...we were united as Americans, standing together to protect the greatest nation ever created."

I don't agree with Beck's views or believe his road map is the best way back, but I think a lot of us would like to return to something like the America we used to live in.