

Ten years later, a vigilant nation grapples with existential questions

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IT'S a bit tricky, this business of consigning to history the attacks of Sept. 11, 2001.

Ten years have passed from the events of that terrible day — our generation's own Pearl Harbor. Now, the facts seem to have drifted a bit from our memories; we don't recall the names of the terrorists or the faces of some of those innocents who perished aboard the four ill-fated planes in fiery explosions of jet fuel and concrete.

Has the government response made us safer? Do we have in place the tools to guard against our enemies, particularly those who espouse violent extremist Islamic ideologies? Must we exchange our hard-won constitutional rights for security, and if not, will we leave ourselves unnecessarily vulnerable to the next 9/11?

Answering these questions may indeed be part of understanding the meaning of 9/11, particularly as our history replaces the fading facts of that day with images, commentary and a perception through a new decennial lens.

In the first few days following the attacks, Congress passed a set of laws cobbled together as the USA PATRIOT Act of 2001. With virtually no discussion and little debate, law enforcement was given new powers to surveil Americans, alleged spies and terrorists.

At the same time, our borders and ports of entry were first closed where they could be and later the subject of dramatically increased enforcement personnel. Immigration arrests, incarceration and deportations were ramped up and FBI agents were sent out to "interview persons of interest" who fit the profile of the 9/11 attackers. Some of the more important government responses to the 9/11 attacks include:

PATRIOT ACT EXPANSION OF LAW-ENFORCEMENT POWERS. In addition to authorizing increased use of intelligence wiretaps approved by federal judges operating in secret, the Patriot Act expanded government surveillance of suspected terrorists, military commission trials re-

GUANTANAMO BAY DETENTION AND INTERROGATION. Although much criticized by many, detention of terror suspects and military commission trials re-

INCREASED BORDER ENFORCEMENT. Dramatic increases in law-enforcement resources along both the Mexican and Canadian borders have followed the creation of the Department of Homeland Security. This despite the fact that the 9/11 attackers for the most part entered the country with valid documents.

allowed for "roving wiretaps," seizures of business and other records and investigations of single actors or "lone wolf" terrorists suspects. President Obama signed four-year extensions of these provisions with little fanfare in May of this year.

at home. As President Obama wrote in the National Strategy for Counterterrorism this June, "Though there are many potential threats to our national security, it is the

main the forum of choice for the U.S. government. After declaring high-value detainees such as Khalid Sheikh Mohammed would be tried in federal court like anyone else accused of a crime, all supposedly face military commission trials at Guantanamo. President Obama, however, recently signed an order allowing for indefinite detention without trial at Guantanamo. These actions, together with the death of Osama bin Laden at the hands of U.S. Navy SEALs, our military presence in Afghanistan and in Iraq and other security and military responses to 9/11, must be credited, for now at least, with keeping us safe here

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terrorist threat from al-Qaida that has loomed largest in the decade since Sept. 11, 2001. And yet today, we can say with growing confidence — and with certainty about the outcome — that we have put al-Qaida on the path to defeat." He warned, however, that, "success requires a strategy that is consistent with our core values as a nation and as a people."

We must consider whether the sacrificed lives of 9/11 and national-security laws such as the PATRIOT Act, Guantanamo Bay detentions, wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, pat-down searches of little old ladies boarding aircraft, X-rays and groping of our genitals are strengthening us for the next attack. We must examine our laws, our policies and our deployment of resources and ask whether in the post-al-Qaida Middle East we understand how and when U.S. interests will be attacked.

While many questions remain unanswered, after 10 years, we do know this: Measured debate, including asking the hard questions about expanded law-enforcement powers, stronger borders and capturing those who have or would attack us, make us stronger as a nation. We also know we are not required to die as a nation simply because some claim that reasonable security measures violate the U.S. Constitution. While we have — and will again — defend the Constitution with our lives, we must not sacrifice our families, our welfare and our posterity because we failed to defend our country or to hold accountable those who would kill us all. If our shared horrific experience of 9/11 has taught us anything, or if indeed made us better, then we will not falter in our vigilance or preparedness. Nor should we falter in the vigor of our debate, nor lose sight of our commitment to the U.S. Constitution.

All of it.