

What America did to itself after 9/11

Fear and xenophobia that followed destroyed US body politic & the so-called war on terror compromised civil liberties

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The Twin Towers were attacked on September 11, 2001

Like many Americans, 9/11 is a day I won't forget. I was 33, living in West Los Angeles, trapped in an abusive relationship and too underpaid by RAND to move out on my own. As had become my habit, I was sleeping on the futon with my dog, Ms Oppenheimer. As I was waking up, I saw the news coverage of the first tower falling. I thought it was a movie. Like many Americans, the trajectory of my life changed for both the good and the bad.

Prior to 9/11, I was a research associate at RAND. I had fled the University of Chicago's toxic environment and was trying to recover from the myriad traumas I had experienced there while also trying to finish my PhD in South Asian languages and civilisations remotely. Before 9/11, I worked on numerous projects for the Office of the Secretary of Defence, among other clients, but

rarely did I work on South Asia. One of my clients was killed in the Pentagon attack, but I never closely interacted with him. RAND was closed for several days. Its office in Virginia was right across from the Pentagon and many of my colleagues witnessed that crash first hand. When we returned to the office, I had already been contacted by various US government agencies and I casually mentioned this to a colleague. Within 15 minutes, RAND's then vice-president Natalie Crawford came to me and asked how much it would take to keep me. She also wrangled money to help me finish my PhD. The overnight raise helped me find a new home and begin a life free of abuse with my dog. It's terrible to say that 9/11 altered the trajectory of my life in a positive way. But it did.

But there were costs. I didn't set out wanting to be a scholar of Islamist terrorism. I studied Punjabi literature in graduate school and my intellectual interest lay in the politics of the Sikh diaspora, particularly the mobilisation of Khalistan. It would be decades before I could return to the subject. Overnight, all of my language work and time in Pakistan would be harnessed to study this threat that few Americans even knew existed.

As someone who often worked in policy circles and for government clients, I watched in horror as the US government sought to reduce a very complex challenge to "scalable projects". I watched as my government and fellow citizens began to view Muslims as a threat to our very way of life. I watched how a complicit media and pusillanimous members of Congress did nothing to stop the Bush administration's invasion and subsequent destruction of Iraq even though the justifications for doing so were rank lies.

The US Congress, keen to seem interested in and capable of protecting us, passed the ironically named The Patriot Act in late October 2001. It gave the government widespread powers of surveillance and severely compromised civil liberties. Yet Americans acquiesced to the sacrificing of their freedoms in exchange for an ephemeral perception of security.

As America went to war in Afghanistan, it hoovered up young men without the ability to discern who was an actual combatant from who was just a person caught in the wrong place at a life-changing time. We set up prisons in Guantanamo and Bagram and other dubious places across the world where persons were held without habeas corpus while being subjected to torture which

the Bush administration referred to as “enhanced interrogation techniques.” The CIA hired dubious contractors to develop these torture methods and paid these so-called “torture teachers” \$80 million. The US Congress would eventually conclude what had already been known: Torture is not effective and the testimony extracted under torture did not help capture Osama Bin Laden. It’s impossible to know how many people were detained across the known eight black sites, where the United States deposited captured persons. Many of those persons were innocent but were captured due to faulty intelligence, mistaken identity, or other absurd errors. The Bush administration even paid bounties of \$3,000-\$25,000 for anyone who would hand over a “possible terror suspect.” Of the 780 persons who were detained at Guantanamo, there were only eight convictions. Today 39 people are still held at the facility. They have never been charged with a crime, much less been tried.

I also believe that the so-called war on terror spawned the fascistic, hate-filled xenophobia that is destroying the body politic of my country. The Republican Party learned that fear and anxiety motivate voters. Trump perfected baseless fear-mongering to fan the flames of white males who fear the loss of their privilege and then harnessed it for political gains. Those who espouse these beliefs are not a minority. They are about half of this country and the entire Republican Party has sought to placate these boors, who harbour the insane belief that when women, racial, religious and ethnic minorities enjoy the full suite of rights enshrined by our constitution, white men must suffer a loss of rights. It’s as if they see rights as a pizza: More for us means less for them. For these Americans, Trump and the white male supremacist xenophobia we empowered were all that could block the browning of America. In this insane zeal, his supporters in and out of the US government attempted a coup on January 6.

I don’t know what Bin Laden envisioned to be the immediate aftermath of the [9/11 attacks](#). But I can say confidently that Bin Laden didn’t destroy America. America destroyed America.

This column first appeared in the print edition on September 11, 2021 under the title ‘America destroyed America’. The writer is a professor of Security Studies at Georgetown University. She is the author of In Their Own Words: Understanding the Lashkar-e-Tayyaba and Fighting to the End: The Pakistan Army’s Way of War.