

# Remembering 9/11

Dr. Herbert London



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From the building I reside in, I can see the World Trade Center (WTC) site, where a hole in the ground is a constant reminder of the 9/11 terrorist attacks on the United States. But in the area surrounding the WTC site, what we local residents call “our hole,” there is extraordinary development.

The Goldman Sachs building is going up across the street. A supermarket is being built two blocks away. High-rise buildings seem to rise magically, as if defying construction requirements. Battery Park, where there are sweeping views of the Statue of Liberty and Ellis Island, has been refurbished with a magnificent fountain and new gardens. A dramatic tunnel is under construction, connecting the subway system to the Staten Island ferry terminal.



Construction continues at Seven World Trade Center, which was destroyed during the attacks on September 11, 2001.

Despite “our hole,” downtown New York is alive, prospering, and electric with possibilities. In many essential ways this description is a metaphor for the United States five years after the 9/11 attacks.

Our country has been scarred but remains resilient. The attack has clearly affected American attitudes. People are wary about unidentified packages in the subway system, and September 11 continues to be a day of remembrance and sadness. However, the dynamism that characterizes the United States is undiminished.

As I stood on Church Street staring at the WTC site last September 11, five tourists asked if I would join them for a spontaneous rendition of “God Bless America.” My wife and I sang as tears rolled down our cheeks. We were united with strangers who wished to recall what America stands for. We were sad but steadfast; united in our appreciation of America and determined to resist those

who would destroy our way of life.

To some degree, 9/11 has faded from our collective memory. Patriotic sentiment is recalled, as my experience would suggest, but it has lost its immediacy. What is most noteworthy is that the spirit of America remains intact.

William Tyler Page wrote in *American Creed*, “I ... believe it is my duty to my country to love it, support its Constitution, to obey its law, to respect its flag, and to

defend it against all enemies.” Surely there are many in this land of the free who have the constitutional right to disagree, but, in my opinion, the overwhelming majority of Americans embrace this sentiment. Pegged into this position are words such as love, honor, loyalty, pride, devotion, and sacrifice, words that suggest an emotional attachment. But patriotism for most Americans is not only reflexive emotion; it is also reasoned argument.

Alexis de Tocqueville in *Democracy in America* claimed that customs, traditions, and a reverence for the past are emphasized, but that patriotism for Americans is a state of mind in which “citizens ... grapple with the various aspects of America which are not so rose-colored.”

As I see it, 9/11 has brought to the fore liberal patriots who believe that they must work for political change consistent with their interpretation of the national creed and conservative patriots who maintain an allegiance to the nation based on what the Founding Fathers intended. The differences are textured, representing perspective rather than the basic concepts, which remain largely undisturbed.

September 11, 2001, was a fateful day for the nation, yet remarkably the notion of “my country, right or wrong” has not gained a foothold. Americans may be justifiably angry about those who would attack our land and people, but we are perpetually self-critical, as any viewing of television news would suggest. We also have a well-ensconced memory of the good and a faith in our ability to change when that is necessary.

Hence my recollection of the horror of five years ago evokes a belief in human possibility and the stirring example of Americans who pick themselves up, dust themselves off, and look to shape the days ahead.

Jacques Maritain once noted that what set the United States apart from other nations is that it is in “a continual state of becoming.” The destruction the nation endured has forced Americans to look in the mirror to see strengths and warts, to regard the remarkable achievements and the challenges over the horizon.

There are, of course, those who embody the “historical grievance” position. What they see are only flaws. In each overheated claim they make, there is an incremental decline in the spirit that sustains patriotism. After all, why should anyone care about a nation of colonizers and imperialists, words that have been transmogrified into crimes?

Five years of reflection after the 9/11 attacks have refurbished Americans’ belief in their country.

In the end, even reasoned patriots

who carefully weigh errors, mistakes, tragedy, and accomplishment will find something positive on which to hang patriotic sentiment.

That hole in the ground sits as a reminder of human frailty and imperfectability, but it has not sapped a belief in ourselves or the will for regeneration.

There is a park soon to be completed where the World Trade Center once stood majestically. Several days ago I walked on this newly constructed path, and in the shadow of the Twin Towers that remains embedded in my mind, I noticed a row of seedlings about to blossom.

Five years ago there was only dust on that ground, now flowers are about to bloom. Here is the United States five years after 9/11: In the midst of despoliation, life appears doggedly fighting for a place in the sun. ■



A participant in a public meeting held by the Lower Manhattan Development Corporation and Port Authority holds a sign showing her support for rebuilding the site.

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