

# WLADYSLAW PLESZCZYNSKI

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## Introduction

IT WAS A NIGHTMARE right before our eyes. Each of us remembers exactly how it unfolded and where we were and what we were doing and how we reacted when the realization set in that we had been attacked in the vilest and cruelest way.

That morning I was working in my home in a quiet northern Virginia suburb. At some point after nine o'clock I heard a distant thud. I assumed that someone was having a big tree cut down. A heavy felled bough often sounds like that when it hits the turf. But several minutes later my older son called from his high school a few miles away. He was making sure I hadn't gone into Washington that morning. Then he told me to turn on the television.

When I did, the screen communicated an unimaginable, unforgettable image: a World Trade Center tower standing alone and on fire. First thought: Why is there only one tower? Second thought: Could it be . . .—but the thought is interrupted

when the screen does in fact show two towers. Then out of nowhere a jetliner slices into one of them. It's hard to make sense of what the announcers are saying. Then that second tower collapses, and again the screen is showing a single burning tower. In time I would understand that television was already running replays of the attack on and collapse of the second tower while the first tower still stood.

If piecing together what had occurred and was occurring caused momentary confusions on September 11, there was immediate clarity in most everyone's response to the attacks on New York and Washington. Evacuation, search, and rescue from the outset saved countless lives even as it cost New York's selfless firemen unfathomable losses in a day of unthinkable losses. The heroism on display on September 11 rivals any in our history. In this volume lifelong New Yorker John Corry records a city at its most incredible.

But something else occurred right away, in a larger sense. The moment most Americans absorbed what was happening, their reactions did not dwell on denial or disbelief or other forms of evasive unacceptance. To the contrary, all such instincts were quickly suppressed if indulged in at all. A different reaction kicked in: We see what has happened. What are the facts? What are our options? What do we do now? What's next? Who is behind the attacks? When do we strike back? How do we prevent any further attacks? Variations on these questions were endless, but they all bespoke a national determination to respond to the unprecedented shock with cool purpose and steely resolve. As Daniel Pipes so eloquently captures the phenomenon, an aroused democracy is a sight to see.

Concomitant was an even larger instantaneous understanding about September 11. It was a historic turning point. Common sense told us so. One day we are blissfully safe and unsuspecting. The next we have been violated as never before in

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memory. Life cannot be the same again. It has instilled a new seriousness. Yes, the passage of time would ease the shock, the grief, the pain, and the anger. The strong U.S. response to the attacks also helped restore a sense of security, and likely created many deterrents against future attacks. But trauma leaves its mark. The possibility of further attacks remains an open concern. Whatever form they might take would surprise no one. A vigilant nation has no illusions. It carries on, as it must, stronger if sadder but with renewed purpose and lasting memory—and a permanent sense of loss.

In the American Enterprise Institute's 2002 Francis Boyer Lecture delivered in February, Norman Podhoretz opened by questioning "whether 9/11 hurled us into a new era of American history. Certainly this is how it seemed . . ." Whether it will continue to seem so is now open to some dispute. Yet in that very same lecture Mr. Podhoretz cited a passage from a 1947 essay by George F. Kennan in which Kennan expressed "a certain gratitude for a Providence which, by providing the American people with this implacable challenge, has made their entire security as a nation dependent on their pulling themselves together and accepting the responsibilities of moral and political leadership that history plainly intended them to bear."

Americans pulled together to wage the Cold War, and since September they have pulled together to support the war on terrorism. How long we remain pulled together we cannot know. As Roger Kimball notes, even "the foreseeable future" is not something we take for granted anymore. All we know for certain is that Americans retain an ability to unite when they most need to. They will defend their security—and once they sense they are secure again will feel free to go off in different directions. That's what a free people do.

The essays in this collection were commissioned in the first

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months after September 11, when the post-attack intensity was at its freshest and most raw. They were written and completed months later, when a certain balance had returned to American life—in no small part because of the unity and purpose that sustained us in those first post-attack months. But like any unprecedented historic jolt, September 11 continues to roil our collective mind. We continue to ponder what changed that historic day. What remained of the old? What is truly new? Initially it was tempting to think that we could quickly dispense with the worst of the pre-attack world, whether the frivolousness of our cultural pursuits or the fecklessness of our politics and foreign policy. But then we learned that the past conditions are present in permanent ways. Change can only take us so far. We remain who we are, and what is thought to be lasting change can always turn out to be no more than an accretion that doesn't stick.

The clearest areas of discernible change have come in our foreign and domestic policies. In her essay Anne Applebaum captures our new geopolitics: their unmistakable new definition, the challenges, the dangers—and the sense that we have only seen the opening stage of a long-term realignment. This revolution in foreign policy will remain the overriding issue of our public life, no matter how much our chronic reluctance to engage the world will try to cloud that perception.

In our domestic politics, as Byron York reports, partisan considerations have remained as strong as before, with the exception of national security matters where public expectations temper partisanship well before it reaches the water's edge. Paradoxically, the president's duty to lead on foreign policy gives him a political advantage his congressional opponents can't match. By the new year they were responding with an ever sharper voice on domestic issues, and even probing for openings on national security matters. Against a president en-

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joying strong national support, one sensed they were doing so at their own political risk.

As Daniel Pipes demonstrates, the Islamic world has gone through a more turbulent patch since September 11. The disproportionate influence that the radical Islamist movement imposed on that world well before al-Qaeda's attacks on the United States was strengthened further by terrorism's stunning success of 9/11—but only until a revived America turned the tables to bring about 11/9 and the ouster of al-Qaeda's Taliban protectors in Afghanistan. As never before, it is understood that American assertiveness is the main deterrent against Islamist terror, and a stabilizing force in a cultural sphere long beset by too many historical demons.

If Islam remains tormented and disheveled by the many unfortunate turns in its history, of which the aftermath of September 11 is only the latest in a long series of humiliating disappointments, America has tended to evade greater confrontation not only with its own immediate history but with the history of the civilization to which it belongs and the history of mankind even more broadly understood. When we react it is more by instinct and intuition. Two essayists seize the opportunity September 11 has opened to reflect in the most profound sense on what it is we are fighting for, as Roger Kimball puts it, and why we are fighting, despite, as James Bowman explains, having lost our ability to speak the language of honor—or to understand an enemy motivated by the most primitive form of the same language.

There is instructive uplift in Mr. Kimball's historical reflections, whether on the humbling enormity of a single event or the fragility of a civilization that treasures freedom and tolerance. Mr. Bowman is less confident, if only because our opinion-shaping elites have drifted so far away from the common understandings and meanings that should unite us all. The danger

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remains that we will go on acting on instincts we cannot, or are not allowed to, put words to.

Then there is Hollywood, long the purveyor of a popular culture antithetical to any deep commitments to American institutions or even to the idea of America the Beautiful. September 11 left it stunned and not a little clueless. The result, as John Podhoretz reports in series of memorable vignettes, has been both silly and embarrassing. America's popular culture remains on hold, uncertain if it has anything but its old habits to fall back on, yet sensing that perhaps, just perhaps, they will no longer do.

What a contrast New York has offered, though the lessons it taught have not been fully appreciated. Much has been made of the sterling leadership Mayor Giuliani displayed after the attacks, which above all won him the adulation of the very same media and artistic elite that had hounded him throughout his tenure. As John Corry ever so gently reminds us, there was nothing different about Giuliani on September 11. His mayoralty had in fact left New York well prepared to withstand the worst. Not coincidentally, New York's neighborhoods of ordinary folk led the way as well. Once again we were reminded where America's real strengths lie.

The strengths of this book are its seven individual contributors, and I trust readers will be as grateful to them as I am for their astute and thoughtful essays. I would also like to thank John Raisian, director of the Hoover Institution, for encouraging me to undertake this project and for the inspiration and support he gave me every step of the way. Together, we wish to acknowledge the significant support of the Robert R. McCormick Tribune Foundation. Its partnership made this project possible.