

America learned all the wrong lessons from 9/11

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A more restrained response was possible in 2001 — one that could have avoided two failed wars, trillions spent and a persistent surveillance state



By Leon Hadar

Twenty-five years on, it's worth asking not what happened on September 11, 2001, but what Washington decided it meant — and whether those conclusions were the right ones. The attacks themselves were a genuine trauma and a genuine crime. But the policy inferences drawn from them were, in large part, a catastrophe of their own whose costs are still being paid in blood, treasure and institutional credibility.

Lesson one: That the attack proved the world was more dangerous than ever

The instinct after 9/11 was to treat the attacks as evidence of a uniquely hostile world requiring a uniquely expansive American footprint. But this reasoning ran backward. Al-Qaeda's ability to strike New York and Washington was not a sign of American weakness or insufficient global presence — it was, in no small part, a byproduct of that presence.

Osama bin Laden was explicit that US troops stationed in Saudi Arabia, sanctions on Iraq, and unconditional backing of Israeli policy in the occupied territories were his grievances. None of this justifies mass murder. But foreign policy realists have long argued that ignoring the causal chain between intervention abroad and blowback at home is not moral clarity — it's strategic malpractice. The lesson drawn instead was that America needed to intervene more, not less, everywhere.

Lesson two: that nation-building was the answer

Afghanistan began as a plausible, narrow operation: destroy al-Qaeda's sanctuary, punish the Taliban for harboring it. It metastasized into a 20-year experiment in building a liberal democratic state in a country that had rebuffed every previous empire's attempt to remake it. Iraq was worse: a war of choice, justified by intelligence that collapsed under scrutiny, that had nothing to do with the attacks and everything to do with an ideological conviction that American power could remake the Middle East by force.

Both wars reflected the same wrong lesson — that the cure for terrorism was democratic transformation imposed at the point of a rifle. The result was not stable, pro-American democracies. It was two decades of insurgency, sectarian war and, in Iraq's case, the conditions that produced ISIS.

Lesson three: that security and liberty were naturally in tension, and liberty should yield

The Patriot Act, warrantless surveillance programs, indefinite detention at Guantanamo, an entire architecture of executive power built on emergency authority — these were all sold as temporary and proportionate. Most became permanent. The lesson embedded in this response was that a free society facing a determined but numerically tiny terrorist threat should default to expanding state power rather than treating that expansion as the exception requiring the heaviest justification.

A limited-government tradition would have insisted on the opposite: that emergency powers sunset, that surveillance be narrowly tailored and that the burden of proof always sit with those seeking to expand state authority, not with those defending

constitutional limits on it.

Lesson four: that credibility required endless commitment

Perhaps the most durable wrong lesson was that withdrawal — from Iraq, from Afghanistan, from anywhere — would be read by adversaries as weakness, and that credibility demanded staying no matter the cost or diminishing returns. This is the logic that turned two wars meant to last months into wars that lasted decades.

It treated an open-ended military presence as an end in itself, divorced from any realistic theory of what more time and more troops were actually buying. The eventual, chaotic withdrawals from both countries did not happen because the lesson was learned — they happened because the bill finally came due.

What the right lesson would have looked like

A more restrained response was available in 2001: a focused campaign against al-Qaeda's leadership and sanctuary, a refusal to conflate a terrorist network with a general license for regime change and a hard look at how forward-deployed American power in the Middle East was generating the very resentment it was meant to suppress. That path was politically unavailable in the climate of 2001 and 2002 — grief and anger rarely produce patient strategy.

But a quarter-century later, with two failed nation-building projects, trillions of dollars spent and a surveillance state that outlived every rationale offered for it, the case for that more modest reading of 9/11's lessons looks considerably stronger than the one Washington actually acted on.



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