

REMEMBERING 9/11

by Charles R. Kesler

A YEAR LATER, WE'VE FOUND NO BETTER WAY to refer to the attacks on New York City and Washington, D.C., than "9/11." The simultaneous assault on two cities rules out a geographical name, like Pearl Harbor or Gettysburg. Probably the only other date burned so indelibly into the American consciousness is the Fourth of July, though it, unlike September 11, has a proper name: Independence Day. The massacres of a year ago are referred to almost exclusively by numbers (Arabic numerals, at that), by the date, which caught on partly because of the coincidence with 9-1-1, the well-known emergency telephone number. 9/11 was an emergency call answered by thousands of firemen and policemen, hundreds of whom lost their lives in the World Trade Center.

July 4 is significant for something Americans did; September 11 for something that was done to us. The identification of the vicious attacks with a date impresses us with the arbitrariness of the attacks on *that day*, emphasizes almost the fatedness of them, as though an existential stroke of doom had befallen us. We saw the images, over and over and over again, of those shimmering airplanes crashing into the Twin Towers, but it was still hard to fathom that the planes caused the buildings' collapse. Our minds associated the events together, the impact preceding the downfall, but that the one caused the other remained a thought somehow so appalling that it was hard to believe. We had to see the images again.

Still more unfathomable was the cause behind the cause—the terrorists' motive in attacking our people and buildings. How to describe it, to conceive it? It was (still is) hard for us, and so the day's events remained for a while an effect without a cause, a mystery; indeed, a kind of evil miracle. Our enemies saw in it Allah's hand. The word most used to describe it in the early going was "tragedy," which suggested inexplicable suffering, as though an earthquake had toppled the towers. Of course, "tragedy" also implied a tragic flaw: the Twin Towers' fall recalled, dimly, memories of the story of the Tower of Babel. The daring of the Towers' architecture, their very altitude, seemed to have invited the stroke of fate. And was man really meant to fly?

And so the political meaning of 9/11 has been less clear than one might have expected. To be sure, the political reaction has been impressive—a formidable military and diplomatic effort culminating in the war in Afghanistan, which crushed the Taliban, disrupted al-Qaeda, and sent

Osama bin Laden...somewhere he did not want to be. To the extent these operations had a slogan, it was "Let's Roll," the last recorded words of Todd Beamer, one of the passengers on United Flight 93, which crashed in the Pennsylvania countryside. His words were uttered at a very American moment, after the passengers had said a prayer and taken a vote to resist their murderous captors.

But "Let's Roll" became a kind of slogan precisely because it signaled heroic resistance in a moment of otherwise disheartening national paralysis. President Bush adopted the phrase when he led the nation to war in Afghanistan. But a year after 9/11, is America still rolling forward?

President Bush pointed out repeatedly that 9/11 had reminded Americans of the difference between good and evil, vanquishing the moral confusion of our times. There's little doubt that most Americans exhibit such moral confidence: they know who the bad guys are and why they are bad. Yet already there are signs that this patriotic resolve may erode—certainly there are many on the extreme Left who would like to erode it, and many more in the liberal center who may be unable to resist the extremists' arguments.

One of the great themes of liberal postmodernism is that the past has nothing to teach us: that history is all interpretation, and morals and politics are entirely relative. Is it to some extent a reflection of this view that the atrocities of 9/11 have not, like previous insults against America, been made into a watchword meant to engage our memory and our conscience? Think how past generations of Americans did this: Remember Pearl Harbor. Remember the Lusitania. Remember the Maine. Remember the Alamo.

Yet no one says, "Remember 9/11." We may wish it, but it's not on our lips, our billboards, or our televisions. We have not vowed it, at least not as we should. Without such a political watchword, we are prone to forget why and where we are "rolling." Victory loses its luster, and its urgency, when prescinded from the reasons we fight. Our enemies struck at us not so much because of anything we had done but because of the kind of nation we are; a nation that prays and votes freely. Let us defy them, and at the same time save ourselves, by recalling who we are and what we stand for. 9-1-1 is a call for help. 9/11 must be a call to arms. Remember 9/11.

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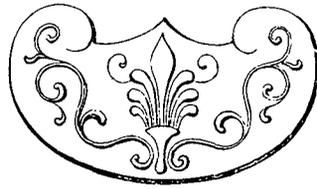
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THE HOME FRONT: LEFT, RIGHT, AND (ELUSIVE) CENTER

Perpetual War for Perpetual Peace: How We Got to Be So Hated, by Gore Vidal. Thunder's Mouth Press, 160 pages, \$10

Why We Fight: Moral Clarity and the War on Terrorism, by William J. Bennett. Doubleday, 170 pages, \$19.95

What's So Great About America, by Dinesh D'Souza. Regnery Publishing, Inc., 218 pages, \$27.95

Where We Stand: 30 Reasons for Loving Our Country, by Roger Rosenblatt. Harcourt, Inc., 194 pages, \$16.95

Book Review by Christopher Flannery

[S]ince 1947 America has been the chief and pioneering perpetrator of 'preemptive' state terror. . . .

For several decades there has been an unremitting demonization of the Muslim world in the American media. . . .

Once we meditate upon the unremitting violence of the United States against the rest of the world . . . one begins to understand why Osama struck at [America] . . . in the name of 1 billion Muslims. . . .

WELCOME TO THE WORLD OF GORE Vidal. Looking down from his villa, *La Rondinaia*, nestled in 12 lovely acres perched high above Italy's Amalfi coast, Vidal thinks that he sees things unnoticed by lesser mortals—especially those very lesser mortals who have been proudly and defiantly flying the American flag this past year.

In *il mondo* Vidal, "most of today's actual terrorists can be found within [American] governments, federal, state, municipal" (a note for innocents: Vidal does not mean terrorists working *against* our governments). The unremitting terror that America inflicts upon the outer world is amply mirrored by the terror inflicted by the American "police state" upon its own citizens. America's terrorist police state is in the grips of a "Pentagon junta," goaded on by the "neofascist" *Wall Street Journal* and promoted by the "provincial war lovers" at *The New York Times*, whose "mindset" is essentially indistin-

guishable from the neofascists down the street. And the afflicted citizenry? Sheep. And not just your garden variety, easily bewildered, too easily led but lovable lambs. No, these are sheep worth loathing.

Vidal concedes that Americans today are endangered by an "absolutist religious order," but the danger emanates from the U.S. Justice Department and the Supreme Court, where a Christian conspiracy is afoot that traces its roots back to real fascists. The immediate occasion for Vidal's book is the September 11, 2001, attack on the United States for which Osama bin Laden takes credit, but the book consists mainly of old Vidal essays from *Vanity Fair* and *The Nation* on other subjects. Most of its pages are devoted to Timothy McVeigh and the bombing of the Alfred P. Murrah Federal Building in Oklahoma City on April 19, 1995. "With both bin Laden and McVeigh," writes Vidal, "I thought it useful to describe the various provocations on our side that drove them to such terrible acts" and make them "understandable."

Conspiracy theorists to this day continue to speculate (with Vidal) that McVeigh was connected with international Islamist terror networks—but that is tame stuff. Vidal wants his readers seriously to consider the possibility that the Oklahoma City bombing was a conspiracy by agents of the federal government analogous to the Nazis' burning the Reichstag in 1933—to justify further strengthening of the American terror-police state. And September 11? Well, it never hurts to keep an open mind.

Gore Vidal has always liked to be a naughty

boy, but it is hard for him to keep it up at 77. His perverse passions are beyond the wane. He comes across as an aging scold, desperately applying the rouge. To give him his due, he can still pretend to be aroused by a remarkable variety of objects. To get a sense of his range, imagine him sporting with ironic pride a World War II uniform and wandering around his medieval town of Ravello, crying from the heart: "Remember Ruby Ridge and Waco—and stop persecuting the pedophiles!" But although his book manages to be eccentric, intemperate, and paranoid, it is primarily lazy.

He markets his book as a work of intellectual and political daring, too explosively heterodox for even the most left-wing American publication. In truth, although its eccentricities can be inadvertently amusing, the book is the bearer of tired old news. Its central message has been rehearsed and rehashed by and for the intellectual, cultural, and academic establishments of the Western world for decades. The message is—hold on to your hats—that in this troubled and complex world the essential thing to understand is that Americans are not "the good guys."

Vidal is about as shocking as Julia Child. As he himself boasts, his odd little collection of recycled essays was "an instant best-seller" when first published in Italian and was quickly "translated in a dozen other languages." The American edition has been for weeks on the (neofascist!) *New York Times* best-seller list. In his brief American tour to promote the book Vidal was greeted with gleeful applause by (sheepish?) audiences of college students and other well-fed