

September 11: Contemporaneous Memories and Reflections from the Day Itself

Text of a podcast on Stocktonafterclass

This is Ron Stockton

We are at the 20th anniversary of September 11. Isn't it interesting that I would not even have to tell you WHICH September 11 or explain why there would be a podcast focusing on a specific day? This is now an iconic moment in American history. It was a day when the world turned upside down, when so much that we knew to be true turned out to be not true.

At the time, I was keeping a journal so these observations are contemporaneous, mostly from the day itself.

To understand this podcast, it helps to know that Dearborn, Michigan, where I live and teach, has a very large Arab-American population. In 2001 it was probably 35-40% of the population of the city. Most of these were of Lebanese heritage, but some were of Yemeni background. I live in a neighborhood that has a majority Arab-American population. Many of my neighbors and students are of Arab heritage. As I tell you about stories and incidents, this background will be important context.

The September 11 attack happened on a Tuesday. It was a beautiful day. The first day of classes that semester was on Thursday, so this was the second day. I had a 10:30 class on Religion and Politics. My wife had gone to work already so I was alone in the kitchen, fixing my



cereal and listening to the radio. They announced that a plane had crashed into the World Trade Center. To be honest, my first reaction was to be a bit irritated. Once before someone had crashed a plane into the Empire State Building and I assumed it was something similar. I felt the same kind of irritation I feel when someone runs through a red light and causes an accident. I was totally unaware of how serious the incident was.

By the time I got to campus, it was obvious this was not a matter of a bad pilot. One of my colleagues had a small television in her room and brought it into the department office so everyone could watch. Several of us were sitting there, transfixed as our world fell apart.

Very quickly, we realized that four planes had been hijacked. Three were crashed into significant national sites -- the twin towers of the New York World Trade Center and the Pentagon. These targets represent the symbols of American economic and military might.

A fourth plane crashed into a field in Pennsylvania. It was on its way either to the White House or Capitol Hill. The passengers learned from cell phone conversations about the earlier crashes and realized they were going to be used as a missile to attack some significant site. They decided they were not willing to go quietly into that dark night, and rushed the hijackers. We are not sure what happened after that, but the plane went down.

There were several calls from planes to people. Two left messages on answering machines. One woman called her husband and said they had been hijacked. He was the Solicitor General of the U. S. and knew that the first plane had been crashed into the tower. He debated whether to tell her, but since they shared everything he did. He said they shared some personal moments that he would not discuss. No one asked him to.

As I left for class at 10:30, the south tower collapsed. During class, one of the students told us that the north tower had also collapsed. The students were very quiet at this information.

The White House and other major buildings were quickly evacuated, including the Pentagon and the Treasury. Ground transportation such as buses and trains stopped. Most shopping malls closed. All Daimler-Chrysler facilities shut down, as did much of Ford and GM. All airplanes were grounded and all airports were closed. A couple of years later, at one of those big ethnic dinners, I heard Norman Mineta, the Secretary of Transportation, say he had shut down the whole transportation system on his own authority, without consulting anyone else. He said that action had prevented other attacks. He said they had found box cutters (used in the hijackings) in other planes, hidden under the seats. The official story is that these four were the only planes involved. There were no others. But Mineta said otherwise.

A small government plane left Lansing without telling anyone. As it approached Ann Arbor people panicked. Suddenly it had two f-16s tailing it. The pilot was stunned. He hadn't the slightest idea what was the problem. Fortunately, they did not shoot him down.

Every Muslim and every Arab became a suspect. It was painful to watch the enemies of Islam spew forth their predictable venom against a religion and a people. The University Relations officer wanted to know if I would take calls from the media. Of course I would, to warn against over-generalization if nothing else.

The plane that crashed into the Pentagon collapsed a wing of that building. The Pentagon! We assumed the Pentagon would be protected with top security from attack.

We were swamped by rumors. One was that a car bomb exploded outside the White House. Another was that a Muslim man in Dearborn had been killed. A Gulf news service reported that someone representing the Democratic Front for the Liberation of Palestinian claimed responsibility. A truck with explosives was found under a New York bridge; a train was stopped near Boston because someone had a knife. The head of the Michigan Anti-Defamation League reported that synagogue in Lansing had been firebombed. All of these rumors were false. Alas, the story that a mosque in Montreal was firebombed was not false.

We knew almost immediately that the most likely suspect was Osama bin Laden. He was a Saudi billionaire (of Yemeni heritage) whose family became independently wealthy through their construction company. He went to Afghanistan in the 1980s to fight the Russians, and gained a high reputation among his men for courage, integrity, and benevolence. (There are two other podcasts on him, if you are interested). He was involved in the 1973 attack on the World Trade Center, which tried to bring it down by planting bombs in the underground parking garage. He was behind the bombings of the U.S. embassies in Kenya and Tanzania and the near sinking of the U.S. ship Cole.

Osama was in Afghanistan where the Taliban government renounced the bombing but said they could not give him up. The Afghan religious council also renounced the attacks, and asked that he be expelled from their country. Within days, a Pakistani delegation of high religious officials arrived and asked that he be turned over to the Americans. One wonders

how history might have been different if Mullah Omar, the Afghan ruler, had complied with those requests.

I was pretty sure there would be massive bombings of his camps in Afghanistan and perhaps elsewhere. I also knew we would topple the Taliban government. That night I said to Jane that we cannot allow a government to survive that would allow such an attack to be planned and organized within its borders. As someone who is very resistant to military activities overseas this was the first time I was speaking of military action even before my government. I could never have imagined how off track that war would get.

Let me read to you what I wrote in my journal that night: “Today we suffered a blow not just to our reputation and security but also to our psyche. Our wounds go to the very heart of our identity and self-image. Someone once wrote that because God is a concept beyond our comprehension, we are reduced to metaphors, all of which are inadequate. This has left us in a similar situation. The most common metaphor is Pearl Harbor, a sneak attack that killed over 1500 people. But that fails us. Pearl Harbor was destroyed because the Japanese air force swept down on us. Today we were attacked by our own passenger planes. Sailors were killed in Pearl Harbor, not civilians. And we knew our enemy -- a country and its government. To me, a better metaphor is of a sweet little girl who is violently raped. What has been destroyed is our sense of security and our Innocence. Innocence is our national sin, doing harm to others while thinking of ourselves as virtuous. We walk away from the Global Warming Treaty even as the glaciers melt; we walk away from three Racism Conferences in three decades, ostensibly because the world community, at least those with pigmented skins, think Israel is pursuing racist policies or perhaps because they want to condemn our historic involvement in slavery. Half of the world’s population lives under American economic sanctions. We refuse assistance to international organizations that provide abortion counseling. We provide weapons to the most oppressive regimes in the world. Today America lost its innocence.”

Other campuses in the state had closed – the University of Michigan, Michigan State, Wayne State – but we stayed open. I was asked if I thought that was a good idea and said I definitely did. With so many Arab-American and Muslim students, if we close we will send a message that we were afraid of our own students.

However, personally I thought briefly about dismissing my first class but decided I had a duty to stay with them and to help them deal with the issues. But there was little time to organize my thoughts. I just had to focus upon what I hoped would help the students. I decided that a thoughtful discussion of almost ANYTHING would be better than just sending them away. Seeing me in front of the class, distraught but not afraid, would be reassuring, and having students maintaining their identity as a class and discussing the issues with each other would in itself be a valuable service.

This was the second day of class. On the first day, I had started by discussing some Biblical passages to demonstrate how the meaning of a text changes over time. One verse I mentioned was from Jeremiah: “Would that my head were waters and mine eyes a fountain of tears that I could weep day and night for the slain.” That passage, I had told the students, would mean something if you were Armenian or Jewish, or Tutsi or Palestinian. But it means nothing to an American. We have not had a national trauma that would justify such extended grief. But today, just five days later, the comment about how irrelevant that verse was, is no longer true. Suddenly, it is as if that verse had just been sitting there for centuries waiting for us to need it and to call it up.

I told them that time as we know it has ended. The America that existed when we woke up this morning no longer exists. That America is gone, and we do not know what this new America is or what it will become. We can anticipate that the security services will have their powers enhanced. In this context, I am worried about Arabs and Muslims in the U. S. They are at risk. Those who have been politically active will have their files activated. Surveillance will increase. I am very careful about protecting the privacy of students, but I told them that a student once told me he was assigned to monitor Arab students and to report any extremist comments. (This shocked them). If the people who did this were American citizens (we did not know their identity at the time) the situation will be even more serious. When Jonathan Jay Pollard was found to be an Israeli spy, all Jews fell under suspicion. But you who are Arabs (or not) must not allow yourselves to be intimidated. We must continue to speak for justice. If you are involved in politics and are attacked, you should contact an attorney to insist on your rights. We cannot allow this crisis to compromise our freedoms.

As people struggled to understand the meaning of these attacks, there was a logical flash back to Pearl Harbor as the appropriate metaphor. I explained why that was not a good analogy, but then offered a better one, the story of David and Goliath in the Bible. The giant Goliath had been invincible in battle, and now he was challenging the Hebrew forces to send out their best warrior to fight him. All of the great heroes in the army stood back, but young David stepped forward. What happened next is the stuff of legend. Some scholars think “giant” was not a person but was a metaphor for a military force with an advanced technology. David was offered the armor of the king, presumably the best in the land, but declined. He knew you cannot fight a giant on its own terms. As the Bible tells us, he went to the stream and selected five small stones. Using a sling shot and those stones he brought down the giant. He used an alternate technology to attack the giant at its point of weakness. Until this morning, we Americans lived in the safest country in the world. We were invulnerable. No enemy could touch us. Now we know that was an illusion. We were not hit in our armor but in our weak spot.

There were pictures on television of Palestinians in Jerusalem cheering, and soldiers in Beirut camps firing guns into the air to celebrate. There were no more than three or four in that demonstration, but the media found them. Yasser Arafat, looking shaken, mumbled condolences to the American people but the media message was clear: the Palestinians love dead Americans. Ariel Sharon, the Israeli prime minister, standing in front of a giant American flag, was on television saying Israel stood with America.

I got a call from a Japanese radio service in Washington. We just heard that there were missiles falling on Kabul and the reporter wanted to know if I thought it was retaliation. I said it was too early to know. This was wise since the U. S. soon said we had nothing to do with the attacks.

The President delivered an inelegant speech that tried to use linguistic juxtapositions to inspire people. (“Terrorist attacks can shake the foundations of our biggest buildings, but they cannot touch the foundation of America. These acts shatter steel, but they cannot dent the steel of American resolve.”) I was disgusted at his speech writers. I was also disgusted at Bush, who kept waving his hands around in meaningless gestures. Obviously he was distressed but a President has to project an image of confidence to reassure the people. Bush

did not do that. I told a colleague it was like having James Buchanan as president during the Civil War.

A key point in Bush's speech was that "We will make no distinction between the terrorists who committed these acts and those who harbor them." This was a serious, chilling, and appropriate policy. But then Bush went on to explain why the attacks had occurred. He said our enemies hate us because we are a "beacon of light" and this was a war against civilization.

I think one of the jobs of a president is to maintain our sense of "innocence" in the world. I mentioned this concept earlier but let's revisit it for a moment. Innocence is a theological and ethical concept. It means that people who are a part of a structure of power can convince themselves that they are not responsible for anything that happens so long as they themselves did not commit an act of injustice. In the aftermath of these attacks there was an ongoing effort to convince Americans that we are a virtuous country acting only to promote civilization, prosperity, and freedom. People seem not to understand that those words imply western domination and impoverishment. They are threatening to poor people in the non-western world. A few years later I was in Jerusalem talking to a Palestinian intellectual. He said, "We tell people to be nice to the Americans or they will bring you democracy." Ouch!

Those twin towers had 45,000 people who worked in them and at least that many who visited them every day. I told the students those figures, which I had just heard, and said that probably everyone above the half way level would now be dead. I told them that between 25,000 and 30,000 people had just died. In retrospect those numbers were way off. The final total was around 2,900 in New York. But my miscalculation gave me a real insight into what happens in the midst of chaos. You make the best estimate that you can, and the best decisions you can, and realize that you are probably going to be second guessed by others later. And I was not alone in my error. The Defense Department said 800 people died in the Pentagon, although the correct number turned out to be 125. Fortunately, the wing that got hit was being renovated. That saved hundreds of lives.

Still, the numbers were catastrophic. Most of the elevators in the twin towers were immobilized so people had to rush down those stairs, all 110 floors. And some of those stairs were on fire and were unusable. People were jumping out of the towers to keep from being burned up. One policeman was killed when he was hit by a falling body. The country was captured by images of people jumping out holding hands. And there was a ghostly image of a man in silhouette as he fell. He was nicknamed Falling Man. There was a very good novel of that name based on that image. No one was ever able to identify him. About 300 New York firefighters were in the towers when they collapsed. All died. As someone said, "We were running down those stairs as fast as we could, and they were running up as fast as they could." Mayor Giuliani was shaken as he said both the Fire Chief and Deputy Chief had died. The hospitals discharged everyone who was not in a life-threatening situation in anticipation of a vast influx of patients. In the end, less than 2,000 people were taken to hospitals. I suspect many were for smoke inhalation. Four people were found alive in the rubble. Everyone who escaped the building was safe and everyone else was dead.



My colleague Marilyn Rosenthal lost her son Josh on that day. He was an analyst for an international company. He had just completed a meeting with some Japanese clients. They rushed to the elevators but they were packed. Josh allowed his clients to get onto the elevator and he ran to the stairs. He was on the 50th floor. He never made it down. Marilyn later set out to interview the families of the young men who conducted the attacks. She wrote a book on her efforts but she died of cancer and the book was never published. She talked to a class once about her experiences during those interviews. She was particularly fascinated with the young man who had piloted the plane that struck her son's building. She said the two young men were very similar in many ways. Both were passionate about social justice and both saw international economics as linking together people from different parts of the world. "I really liked him [she said of that young man] -- until he killed my son." I admired that woman.



During the day another building collapsed, this one 47 stories. Two others were toppling.

The World Trade Center was involved in international trade and commerce so it was no surprise that people from around the world were among the dead. Accurate information was hard to get and reports were often wildly off base. Initial reports claimed that 60 Canadians had died and 1500 Pakistanis. Israel created a web site for Israelis who lost relatives or friends. On April 18, 2002 New York City released a profile of 2,617 death certificates. By place of birth there were 2,106 from America, Britain 53, India 34, Dominica 25, Jamaica 21, Japan 20, China 18, Columbia 18, Canada 16, Germany 16, Philippines 16, Trinidad and Tobago 15, Guyana 14, Ecuador 13, Italy 13, Ukraine 11, with lesser numbers from Korea, Poland, Russia, Haiti, Ireland, Pakistan, Taiwan, Cuban, and Jugoslavia, plus 143 others. Some of those would be highly-trained analysts, others on the maintenance crew. In his speech, the President specifically mentioned the large numbers of British and Israelis who died. Interestingly, there was not a single person born in Israel on the list, although there may have been dual passport Israelis born in Russian, Ukraine, the U.S. or elsewhere. The Anti-Defamation League said "several hundred Jews" died, with no mention of Israelis.

The hijackings were exceptionally well planned. They chose longer flights (Boston to California) because they would have more fuel. All hijacked planes took off at approximately the same time. Once one was hijacked, other departures would have been locked down so they all had to be in the air at once. Attendants do profiling for signs of nervousness. The hijackers showed none. They must have been very well trained. Think of how many times they had to get onto a practice airplane to overcome their natural nervousness. And the total cost of these attacks was \$200,000. That included combat training, air fare, flight training, and room and board in the U. S. Our security forces knew something was up. The airlines were on heightened alert but were not told why. Only later were we told that our intelligence agencies had learned of Al Qaeda cells within the country planning hijackings. The President himself had received a direct briefing on this subject but took no follow up.

I tried to think of how to describe these attacks. Words such as violent were inadequate. I settled on three: brutality, audacity, genius.

Let me share some anecdotes. These are in no particular order.

- The ACCESS website crashed because of hate calls coming in from all over the country. (ACCESS is a major social services agency serving the Arab-American community)
- The Dearborn police parked a police car in front of every single mosque and Arab organization in the city. They were not going to have any foolishness.
- My sister called from Missouri. She knew that I had been planning a trip and wanted to know if I was ok. She said people were panic-buying and that the grocery stores in Dexter had been bought out. That was true everywhere.
- My wife's car got keyed. From one end to the other.
- A few weeks later someone went throughout our mostly-Arab neighborhood shooting out windshields. Mine was one that got shot out.
- A colleague asked what I thought had motivated the attacks. When I tried to offer a context rooted in international struggles (after all I AM a political scientist), he got upset. He was more comfortable with the Bush explanation, they hate us because we are good.
- Another colleague told me that Osama was just interested in building up his fortune. These attacks had nothing to do with U. S. actions overseas or international relations. Those were just excuses. I could not understand her logic.
- One of my Arab students got entangled in these events. Two FBI agents came to see him. They wanted to know why his phone had been used to call one of the hijackers. They were not smiling when they asked. But it turned out to be not what it seemed. He had been in Miami once when an Arab guy on the street asked if he could use his cell phone. The student agreed. They chatted for a few minutes, and that was it. It turned out that the person was one of the hijackers. He was calling

one of the others. The FBI let my student go after they realized the nature of the contact.

- As far as I can recall, none of my students left class that day. But many Arab females got calls from their mothers to return home. As soon as the classes ended, they went to the front of the building where they were picked up by family SUVs. In those days, SUVs were not the norm, as they are today, so seeing those lined up as if it were the end of the day at the local junior high school was something that stuck in my mind.
- CNN immediately shifted to all-terrorism all-day, all the time. For a couple of months, literally, there were no commercials, just news coverage. There would be a short time in the evening when there would be some “normal” news, but that was it.
- Immediately, there were conspiracy theories. A friend in the neighborhood told me that the whole thing was a set up. The attacks were conducted by the CIA (or perhaps the Israelis, according to whether it was an odd day or an even). How could they recover passports from a plane that was burned up? How could there be Koranic passages found with the hijackers? The bodies of the hijackers were planted to implicate them. [In fact, the bodies were incinerated, as were those of the victims]. And the towers were brought down by an implosion. And the Pentagon was not really hit. It was blown up from inside. Why do you think so few people died in that building? And many Muslims have been murdered but the media are covering it up. I could appreciate that Arabs and Muslims did not want to be blamed for this, but hearing these things was painful.
- [Note that there were also conspiracy theories in the general population. 911-Truth and Architects and Engineers were typical. A former student came by a couple of months later to explain their logic. He left some videos. But but those emerged later, not as spontaneously as the ones I just reported].
- One of my Arab students from a few years earlier came by to talk. He was angry. “It was a sucker punch. They caught us off guard. It won’t happen again.” He used a couple of bad words to describe the hijackers.

- A few days after the attacks I had a sit-down conversation with four Arab-American students. One was a passionate advocate of community interests. I asked them to think: “What if those hijackers had been students at the University of Michigan-Dearborn?” The student put his face in his hands. “Don’t even think that.”
- A friend who was an immigrant from Yemen was very upset at the attacks. He said to me, “I came to America to get away from these people and now they are following me.”
- Our granddaughter, who was five, spent the night that weekend. She asked if we had heard about the building that got blown up. I said we had, and it was terrible. She agreed but did not seem distressed. She was just making sure I had heard about it. She said her mom had cried. Our grandson in Arizona, also five, was told by his parents about what happened. Later he asked about the war. When they told him there was no war he said there would be. “Tucson, Arizona is going to war against another state.” He had the idea right, we are going to war against an “other.”
- We saw an Arab woman, dressed in traditional garb, walking along the sidewalk. She had been collecting dandelion greens in a field and was walking home, double time, with her collection. She was carrying a small American flag. She was afraid.
- Many Arab students told me stories. People shouting at women in hijabs as they drove by. Being called “Osama,” in a derogatory way. Being told to go back where they came from. One student told me her father told her she should never again refer to herself as an Arab. She should say she is a Syrian. That would be safer. But there were also positive stories. A supervisor told one student that if anyone caused her trouble, let him know. He would not tolerate that kind of thing. People said to their classmates or workmates, “We know you were not responsible for this.” One student had a small family business. The owner next to him put an anti-Arab poster on his car and parked it in front of my student’s shop. He asked a policeman if he could do anything. The officer said that under the law this was offensive but

not a violation. But then he went over to that other shop and told the owner that if that sign did not disappear he would declare the car to be abandoned, and haul it away. And if there were an altercation with the Arab businessman, he, the officer, would deal with it in his own way, and he would not file an official report.

- Everyone was afraid. People had trouble sleeping. We were advised to turn off the television except for an hour a day, just to keep informed. One night I woke up. I had it in my mind that Chicago had been hit. I love Chicago and knew that if I wanted to cause distress to Americans I would blow up Chicago. [I was thinking of the Hancock building]. I went downstairs and turned on the television to see what might have happened. Fortunately, Chicago was safe.
- We were really worried about further attacks. We did not learn this until later but there was a fear in the intelligence community that someone had snuck a nuclear weapon into the country, across the Mexican border, so they believed. This was not just a scare tactic. People in their memoirs wrote about how they were desperate, realizing that the weapon was out there somewhere and they could not find it.
- A couple of days after September 11, I came into a classroom and saw a backpack, unattended. No one seemed to know who owned it. I was really afraid, perhaps irrationally afraid. I wanted that thing out of my classroom so I took it to the Dean's office. That was illogical, once I thought about it. Had it been an explosive device, it would just have blown up the Dean's office. But fear is not always rational.
- That evening, we went a service at our church. People needed reassurance, and a chance to talk, but it was disappointing. After some *Bible* passages (Psalm 46 and Matthew 5) and singing *A Mighty Fortress is Our God* we had a "Time for Sharing." One member told about her neighbor who had shaved his beard to look less Arab. That was a good start but somehow the discussion veered into a critique of American foreign policy. It was a valid critique but dissecting American foreign policy was a conversation that could have taken place on September 10. And not everyone agreed with the critique. The meeting was off course and the minister wisely called it to an early end. Jane and I left feeling worse after the meeting than

before. The things that should have been said did not get said and the wounds and pain present in that room were not addressed. Maybe that meeting was a microcosm of what was happening in the rest of the country.

These are my memories and my stories of a terrible day. Thanks for listening.