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The political capital of 9/11

The Bush administration never hesitated to exploit the general public's anxieties that arose after the traumatic events of September 11, 2001. Testifying on Capitol Hill exactly 53 weeks later, Donald Rumsfeld did not miss a beat when a member of the Senate Armed Services Committee questioned the need for the United States to attack Iraq.

Senator Mark Dayton: "What is it compelling us now to make a precipitous decision and take precipitous actions?" Defense Secretary Rumsfeld: "What's different? What's different is 3,000 people were killed."

As a practical matter, it was almost beside the point that allegations linking Baghdad with the September 11 attacks lacked credible evidence. The key factor was political manipulation, not real documentation.

Former CIA analyst Kenneth Pollack got enormous media exposure in late 2002 for his book "The Threatening Storm: The Case for Invading Iraq." Pollack's book promotion tour often seemed more like a war promotion tour. During a typical CNN appearance, Pollack explained why he had come to see a "massive invasion" of Iraq as both desirable and practical: "The real difference was the change from September 11th. The sense that after September 11th, the American people were now willing to make sacrifices to prevent threats from abroad from coming home to visit us here made it possible to think about a big invasion force."

Middle East correspondent Robert Fisk, with the London-based Independent newspaper, was on the mark when he wrote: "Iraq had absolutely nothing to do with 11 September. If the United States invades Iraq, we should remember that."

But at psychological levels, the Bush team was able to manipulate post-9/11 emotions well beyond the phantom of Iraqi involvement in that crime against humanity. The dramatic changes in political climate after 9/11 included a drastic upward spike in an attitude – fervently stoked by the likes of Rumsfeld, Dick Cheney and the president – that our military should be willing to attack potential enemies before they might try to attack us. Few politicians or pundits were willing to confront

the reality that this was a formula for perpetual war, and for the creation of vast numbers of new foes who would see a reciprocal logic in embracing such a credo themselves.

One of the great media cliches of the last two years is that 9/11 "changed everything." The portentous idea soon became a truism for news outlets nationwide. But the shock of September 11 could not endure. And the events of that horrific day – while abruptly tilting the political landscape and media discourse – did not transform the lives of most Americans. Despite all the genuine anguish and the overwhelming news coverage, daily life gradually went back to an approximation of normal.

Some changes are obvious. Worries about terrorism have become routine. Out of necessity, stepped-up security measures are in effect at airports. Unnecessarily, and ominously, the USA Patriot Act is chipping away at civil liberties. Yet the basic concerns of September 10, 2001, remain with us today.

The nation's current economic picture includes the familiar scourges of unemployment, job insecurity, eroding pension benefits and a wildly exorbitant healthcare system that endangers huge numbers of people who are uninsured or underinsured. Two years after 9/11, the power of money is undiminished – notwithstanding every platitude that bounced around the media echo chamber in the wake of September 11.

During the last months of 2001, many media powerhouses heralded the arrival of humanistic values for the country. Typically, the December issue of *O* – "The Oprah Magazine" – was largely devoted to the cover story "We Are Family." In the lead-off essay, Oprah Winfrey served up a heaping portion of sweet pabulum. "Our vision of family has been expanded," she wrote. "From the ashes of the World Trade Center, the Pentagon, and that field in Pennsylvania arose a new spirit of unity. We realize that we are all part of the family of America." Later in the glossy, ad-filled magazine, the "We Are Family" headline reappeared under Old Glory and over another message from Oprah, who declared: "America is a vast and complicated family, but – as the smoke clears and the dust settles – a family nonetheless."

From the vantage point of the present day, the late-2001 claims about a new national altruism invite disbelief if not derision. No amount of media spin about "the family of America" can negate the fact that gaps between wealth and poverty have never been wider. What kind of affluent family would leave so many of its members in desperate need?

As measured by poll numbers, President Bush's fall from popular grace this year has brought him back to about where he was just before 9/11. That decline runs parallel with slumping myths about the transcendent aftermath of September 11. Subsequent

events have brought sobering realities into focus.

Recent news about Halliburton and Bechtel cashing in on the occupation of Iraq is a counterpoint to revelations that the White House strongly pressured the Environmental Protection Agency in the days after 9/11 to mislead the public about dangers of airborne toxic particles from World Trade Center debris. The EPA's Office of the Inspector General reported last month that "the desire to reopen Wall Street" was a major factor in the Bush administration's misleading assurances. Although the public was told that everything had changed, powerful elites gave the highest priority to resuming business as usual.

After September 11, while many thousands of people grieved the sudden loss of their loved ones, a steady downpour of politically driven sentimentality kept blurring the U.S. media's window on the world. Politicians in high office, from President Bush on down, rushed to identify themselves with the dead and their relatives. Cataclysmic individual losses were swiftly expropriated for mass dissemination.

In a cauldron of media alchemy, the human suffering of 9/11 became propaganda gold. Sorrow turned into political capital. The human process of mourning is intimate and often at a loss for words; journalists and politicians tend to be neither. Grief borders on the ineffable. News coverage gravitates toward cliches and facile images.

In tandem with the message that September 11 "changed everything" came an emboldened insistence on the U.S. prerogative to attack other countries at will. In a bait-and-switch operation that took hold in autumn 2001, emblems of 9/11 soon underwent double exposure with prevailing political agendas.

Displayed by many as an expression of sorrow and solidarity with the September 11 victims, the American flag was promptly overlaid on the missiles bound for Afghanistan. In TV studios, like angelic symbols dancing on the heads of pins, the Stars and Stripes got stuck on the lapels of many newscasters.

Network correspondents routinely joined in upbeat assessments of the U.S.-led assault on Afghanistan that took the lives of at least as many blameless civilians as 9/11 did. Later, the U.S.-led invasion of Iraq, which overthrew a regime in Baghdad with no links to the September 11 hijackings or Al Qaeda, took more civilian lives than 9/11 did. For the United States, moral reflection could not hold a candle to the righteous adrenaline of war.

Two years ago, W.H. Auden's mournful poem "September 1, 1939" suddenly drew wide media attention. Set amid the "blind skyscrapers" of Manhattan, where "buildings grope the sky," the poem seemed to eerily echo the World Trade Center calamity with words that closed the first stanza: "The unmentionable odor of death /

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Offends the September night."

The concluding lines of the next verse received less notice during the terrible autumn of 2001. But we now have more reason to consider their meaning: "Those to whom evil is done / Do evil in return." ■

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