

# The Dark Smoke

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In the immediate, before-it-sinks-in aftermath of the September 11 attack, one of the first catch-phrases to take hold--and be widely deployed by TV commentators, politicians and citizen e-mailers--was, "this changes everything." As the media cliché goes, time will tell how much of American life will be altered by the assault. Clearly, politics as we know it will not be the same in the weeks and months, and perhaps years, ahead. As Tim Russert observed, while hellish dust clouds billowed, "Suddenly the Social Security lockbox seems so trivial."

The hideous event will naturally dominate the national conversation. There will be little media space for other matters. The budget battle, the disappeared surplus, the Bush tax cuts, campaign finance reform, patients' bill of rights, trade tussles, global warming--Washington's agenda will be overwhelmed by the attack, to the President's distinct advantage. And the terms of political discussion will dramatically shift--again, mostly to George W. Bush's advantage. Two hours after the first explosion, Representative Curt Weldon, a Republican from Pennsylvania, declared, "The number-one responsibility" of the government is not education or healthcare but the "security of the American people." And national security hawks quickly began to shape the debate to come. The issue for them is not what causes such unimaginable actions. On Day One did you hear anyone--in an attempt to understand, not justify, the horror--ask, Why would someone want to commit this evil act? Or note that in this globalized age, US policy--its actions and inactions overseas (justified or not)--can easily lead to consequences at home? No, the national security cadre, out in force, mainly raised questions of how best to bolster the military and intelligence establishment.

Before rescue efforts were up and running, the friends of that establishment were mounting an offensive. Former Secretary of State James Baker blamed the Church Committee, the Senate panel that investigated CIA misdeeds in the 1970s, for what happened: "We went on a real witch hunt with our CIA...the Church Committee. We unilaterally disarmed in terms of intelligence." Newt Gingrich assailed rules on intelligence gathering that limit CIA interaction with known terrorists, and he asserted that the intelligence budget (about \$30 billion) was "too small." Others decried the prohibition on government-sponsored assassination. Dan Quayle urged that the President be granted "extraordinary powers internationally and domestically" to deal with terrorists. (Asked what he had in mind, Quayle replied, "I'm not going to get too specific.") John McCain, Orrin Hatch and Bob Graham--the last of whom chairs the Senate Intelligence Committee--griped that the United States has concentrated too much on technical intelligence (spy satellites and high-tech eavesdropping) and has been negligent in the ways of "human intelligence"--*humint*, in the parlance of spies. More money would have to be poured into humint, they and others remarked. Hatch also complained that "we've allowed our military to deteriorate" and that the "Russians have a better tactical fighter than we do." Former Secretary of State Lawrence Eagleburger used the moment to claim that "the defense budget is woefully underdone."

Some hawks and others did criticize US intelligence for failing to detect the plot. Kenneth Katzman, a terrorism expert at the Congressional Research Service, said, "How nothing could have been picked up is beyond me--way beyond me. There's a major, major intelligence failure, specially since the [previous] Trade Center bombing produced such an investigation of the networks and so much monitoring." No doubt, there will be official inquiries. But the knee-jerk goal for most of the inquirers will be additional funds for the intelligence community and the Pentagon. The spies will defend their actions and plead, if only our hands were not tied, if only we had more money.

Given the horrors of the attack, these pleas will probably have resonance. But the operating assumptions at work deserve close assessment. Human intelligence against closed societies and secret outfits has long been a difficult, almost impossible, endeavor. Hurling money at it is likely no solution. During the Vietnam War, when resources were unlimited, the CIA failed spectacularly at humint, essentially never penetrating the inner sanctums of the enemy. Its record of infiltrating the Soviet government was unimpressive (and the same goes for China, Cuba and other targets).

As for lifting existing restrictions, imagine the dilemmas posed if the CIA actually managed to recruit and pay murderous members of terrorist groups. What would the reaction be, if one of the September 11 conspirators turns out to have had a US intelligence connection?

Do not be surprised if the national security establishment even tries to accelerate its push for Star Wars II before the debris is cleared. The event tragically demonstrated the limits of a national missile defense system. (And consider how much worse the day would have been had the evildoers smuggled a pound of uranium onto any of the hijacked flights.) But the loudest theme in American politics--perhaps the only audible theme--in the time ahead will be the quest for security. With those drums beating, the fans of national missile defense will continue to argue that this remains a dangerous world full of suicidal maniacs wishing the United States harm and that all steps must be taken as fast as possible. Moreover, how many politicians will now question Bush's budget-busting request to raise Pentagon spending by 10 percent? Speaking about Bush, Senator Hillary Clinton said, "We will support him in whatever steps he deems necessary." *Whatever* steps?

As the nation absorbed the shock, leaders and media observers repeated the nostrum that the best way for the country to respond to such a foul crime is to return to normal and signal that the nation's spirit and resolve cannot be undermined. In that vein, one challenge is to not allow the attack to distort the country's political discourse. Unfortunately, extremism begets extremism, and the dark smoke of a dark day will not be easily blown away.