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INTRODUCTION

Jillian Baden Bershtein was a new third-grade teacher in Trenton, New Jersey on September 11, 2001. As news of the 9/11 terrorist attacks trickled through the school, she remembers “the day went by in slow motion” and “announcements calling students for early dismissal continually increased. Despite the kids’ curiosity, we were not to discuss the happenings, but we were instructed to assure them that everything was OK. This was hard to do, especially considering fewer and fewer students remained in class as the day went on.” She remembers that the distressing quiet was broken by an innocent, but alarming question from an eight-year-old: “Are we gonna die?”¹

On that Tuesday morning, American children witnessed something they had never seen before. Teachers weeping, lesson plans abandoned, school ending abruptly, and dazed parents instinctively showing up at local schools to whisk their children home; families huddling together and watching television news footage of the second plane hitting the South Tower over and over again. Panic and loss were everywhere. No one knew what might come next.

Few Americans in 2001 recognized the name Osama bin Laden. Today, the bearded cleric of terror is seared into our national consciousness. For the youth of America, he became in an instant the boogeyman, the monster under the bed. He hated Americans and had proven he could kill them. This reality, the sense of bewilderment and fear these kids witnessed during the attacks and in the years that followed, defines the 9/11 Generation. It’s important to identify these kids as a distinct group. The core was between the ages of five and fifteen, in the midst of their adolescence, when 9/11 forced itself upon

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America. For the youngest, this meant they had only just begun to learn about the outside world, perhaps studying another culture or world affairs in a social studies class. They were suddenly, violently thrust into danger, too soon for any meaningful comparison that might provide a bit of understanding. Most high school and certainly college age students fit more neatly into the Millennial generation; they possessed a broader introduction to other cultures and history, but that didn’t necessarily equate with understanding. They, too, were awestruck by the enormity of September 11.

In a heart-wrenching 2015 essay on the anniversary of the attack, journalist Emma Lord expressed, “What it was

Like to be 10 years old on 9/11.” Beginning starkly, she recounted exactly how the 9/11 Generation was shocked into existence: “I had no concept of what the world was like. September 11 didn’t change the world for me—it defined it. And it was more terrifying than I could have ever imagined.” Lord and her peers were, as she described it, a “sub-generation” who “were right in that sweet spot of childhood....We had no context, no ability to act, and no concept of the gravity of what had just happened.”

gravity of what had just happened.”—And no one could explain it to them. No one, neither parents nor teachers, could adequately convey to a 10- or 12-, or even a 15-year-old, what was occurring, beyond offering blandly “some very bad people did a very bad thing.” Adults couldn’t make sense of it, let alone describe to adolescents the reason for the biggest terrorist attack in world history. No one could explain why two of the most iconic buildings in New York City were sending towering plumes of acrid black smoke into a clear blue sky while debris and bodies rained down on the streets below. It was unfathomable.

In the midst of the chaos, President George W. Bush did his best to address the nation. “Thousands of lives were suddenly ended by evil, despicable acts of terror,” he announced. “Our way of life, our very freedom came under attack.” He unknowingly recognized the birth of the 9/11 Generation, asking Americans to pray “for all those who grieve, *for the children whose worlds have been shattered*, for all whose sense of safety and security has been threatened.” He tried to reassure shocked citizens that the government was still in control and America would persevere, but he inescapably announced the coming war: “A great people has been moved to defend a great nation,” adding, “America was targeted for attack because we were the brightest beacon for freedom and opportunity in the world.”²

The War on Terror had begun. It became in the minds of most Americans a contest between freedom and terror, good versus evil. America hoisted its flag high, marching forth to avenge September 11, seek justice, and bestow democracy to a dark part of the world.—That mission has not gone well, and the

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well, and the legacies of 9/11 have become deeply anchored within the 21st century—economic collapse, increased security measures at home, the war in Afghanistan and the war in Iraq, troubling tales of secret prisons and “enhanced” interrogation, a badly destabilized Middle East that has led to an historic refugee crisis, the Vietnam-like collapse of Afghanistan, a troubling partisanship at home that has complicated these and other pressing problems and a badly destabilized world on the verge of diplomatic collapse.

For many in the 9/11 Generation, there exists an overwhelming pessimism and distrust. Many question America's credibility in the world and wonder about the very salience of democracy. For others in the Generation, there was a sense of post-attack unity and resilience, a resounding patriotism to which President George W. Bush constantly called, insisting that it was a new generation's time to defend freedom. For still other members of the 9/11 Generation, patriotism and the defense of freedom meant persecution at home. Arabs and other Muslim Americans became in an instant a new enemy, potential terrorists who would become radicalized and continue the assault on the homeland. This in turn ignited a smoldering, largely underground radical Right-wing extremism devoted to purging America of the "other," anyone who was a non-white, Christian.

The reality, then, is that there exists no singular, monolithic 9/11 Generation. Like any generation, there are variations, as different regions, religions, ethnicities, socio-economic classes, and political outlooks influence how people see events and the world around them. Yet one thing is certain: no matter the variation, 9/11 profoundly impacted the youth of America and defined them as a distinct generation. They are not Gen Z—they are the 9/11 Generation.

Trailing and intimately connected to Millennials, they were already destined to hold a distrust of government and an unsettling sense that much of life was out of their own control. What could confirm this feeling more than the chaos of the attacks, both on that day and the dysfunction that followed? In the midst of their adolescence, the 9/11 Generation was ushered into a world of intense violence and stood witness to a government that seemed impotent in dealing with terrorism, let alone the myriad challenges faced by America and the world. They are a generation beset by chaos, a never-ending news cycle, and toxic social media that bombards them with seemingly unsolvable problems. Whether it's terrorism, mass shootings in schools and public spaces, an ever-worsening climate crisis, generational economic instability and debt, frenzied partisan combat, or global pandemics, the fear remains palpable and the psychological stresses never-ending. Older generations sometimes complain the 9/11 Generation seems disconnected, overly narcissistic, and more interested in pursuits of entertainment than confronting life and the future. Is this, to some extent, self-protection in an ever-complicated world, one in which life can end randomly and in an instant?³

An otherwise beautiful morning in mid-September assured the 9/11 Generation this was so. Planes struck buildings, skyscrapers unexpectedly crumbled, thousands died on live TV. America lost its innocence. How the nation responded, both immediately after and in the years that followed, has profoundly shaped the 9/11 Generation and the world they must ultimately lead. Attempting to tell that story is the goal of this book, which is both *about* and written *for* the Generation.

Most Americans, especially those from the 9/11 Generation, don't understand the broader story of that day, one that precedes and transcends the emotional 102 minutes that the vast majority of Americans think of when considering 9/11; that was the amount of time from when the first plane hit the North Tower, to the moment it crumbled. American memory seems inextricably wed to that singular time frame, as though it's a static moment. For a portion of the 9/11 Generation, it has in some ways become an unforgettable meme, appearing in everything from comics, cartoons, movies and music to varying facets of their social media world, all of it popular culture intended for their consumption. After more than twenty years, most memes are more about 9/11-related jokes than anything serious or memorializing.

Documentaries and books focus on a "tragedy to triumph" narrative that revolves around the 102 minutes, a tale of survivors and lost loved ones, buffeted by seeking justice against those who committed the great crime of attacking freedom. It's a story of victimization turned to resilience and triumph in the face of overwhelming destruction. A new genre of children's books and adolescent fiction address similar themes, as well as the needs of soldiers who were deployed so many times that their young children, their families, became a part of the military mission. Authors assure children that mommy and daddy were defending freedom and helping others in the world. Video games target 9/11 Generation youth with heroic tales of World War II, encouraging them to become the "Next Great Generation," then, in the midst of the Afghanistan and Iraq wars, game creators consciously changed the missions to battlefields in the Middle East.

There are important "truths," or at least interpretations, in these many portrayals, but they also offer a narrowly constricted view, one that obscures the fuller scope of 9/11.

The "tragedy and triumph" narrative can't explain the all-important question of "why?" Why did nineteen men board planes and perpetrate suicide hijackings? Nor can the "tragedy and triumph" narrative fully address the American rationale for the War on Terror, the many

problems that resulted, and how it changed both the nation and the way others around the world view the United States. Until the 9/11 Generation confronts these realities, they will remain in a sort of perpetual “Free Fall,” a never-ending cycle of anxiety and catastrophe. Their existence revolves around a Tuesday morning in September and the national challenges that followed. This book is an attempt to explain the 9/11 Generation’s youthful realities and urge the many, varying members of that Generation to do better than their parents and grandparents have done in response to a tragedy that shook not only America, but the world.

A Note to the Reader

As an historian and teacher, my experience in post-9/11 America has been unique. Like most who lived through September 11, I remember the attack and where I was, even the course I was teaching. Yet as I’ve inevitably grown older, my students have remained the same relative age, typically between 17 and 23, and with certain traits that all college-age students share, but also distinctions that belong to the circumstances of their changing times. This has afforded me an opportunity, a front-row seat, to witness the dynamics of generational change and how time fades even a national memory.

When the towers first fell, I watched students react with shock and pain, attend candlelight vigils, and worry as the nation headed to war. Some embraced the patriotism of the day and joined the military. All made it home, though not without scars, both physical and emotional. As time moved on, my classes mirrored the national debates concerning 9/11 and the wars that followed. On one of the early anniversaries, I asked students what had gone through their minds as they got ready for the day. These students—the core of the direct 9/11 Generation—embodied all of the residual fear and chaos that had swept through America. One young woman spoke of seeing a plane in the morning and, as she put it, “freaking out.” Others spoke of sadness. When discussing the ongoing wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, several students insisted they “supported the troops,” but not the war. A Marine Corps veteran, a striking, smart young man who had served two tours in Iraq, calmly responded that he didn’t believe anyone could support the troops, but not the war. The troops, he insisted, were on a mission that defined the war, and America needed to support the whole package. That led to

discussions of Vietnam, troop morale, and the home front. We didn't agree on every point, but all worried about a post-9/11 world that seemed increasingly out of control.

More than ten years after the attacks, in any attempt to explore my own feelings about September 11, I researched

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and began teaching a new history course called "The 9/11 Generation." The opening day of the semester always began by asking, "What do you remember about 9/11?" It was a way to engage students and allow for shared experiences. As time moved on, especially by 2019, I consciously changed that opening question to "What do you know about 9/11," simply because students couldn't remember what they hadn't experienced. The students were aging out. Then came Covid, an all-encompassing, massive societal upheaval that further separated America's youth from so much of what had come before.

Once we returned to in-person classes, I again changed my opening day question: "Does 9/11 even matter anymore," I asked a group of students. "What do you mean?" boomed one young man, "of course it matters." I asked why. He had no answer, and neither did his classmates. They still understood that September 11 was a defining moment for America but couldn't explain it, even though they were still raised in the cultural chaos that had followed. As the semester progressed, students learned why the attacks still matter, yet that post-Covid class experience, and every semester that follows, provides me with an important lesson: 9/11 is fading; it has become history, and like so much of our history, we have yet to learn its important lessons. That's the primary reason for this book: my hope that lessons can be learned. Throughout these pages you'll enter almost ten years of my classroom and hear from my students, the members of the 9/11 Generation, about what 9/11 means to them.

Notes

- 1 Jillian Baden Bershtein "Are We Gonna Die? Answering my Third Grade Students on 9/11," PBS, September 9, 2014, <https://www.pbs.org/newshour/education/classroom-911-one-teachers-story>
- 2 Emphasis added. George W. Bush, "Address to the Nation on the Terrorist Attacks," September 11, 2001, The American Presidency Project, accessed January 29, 2018, <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/index.php?pid=58057>
- 3 Jean M. Twenge, *Generation Me: Why Today's Young Americans Are More Confident, Assertive, Entitled—and More Miserable than Ever Before* (New York: Atria Books, 2014).