



# Psychodynamics of imagination failures: Reflections on the 20th anniversary of 9/11

Management Learning

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## Abstract

This article aims to advance the psychodynamic understanding of imagination failures by studying lessons learned in the US government's public inquiry into September 11th, 2001 (9/11). Analyzing the findings of *The 9/11 Report*, I theorize that two forms of macro-level hubris—America's "hubris of empire-building" and Al Qaeda's "hubris-nemesis complex"—amalgamated in a uniquely generative manner leading to events on 9/11. Previous studies of public inquiries often demonstrate that inquiry reports are monological story-telling performances used to create sense-making narratives that function hegemonically to impose a simplified version of reality to assign blame and depoliticize events in order to facilitate closure after shocking events. In contrast, findings here suggest that by constructing a critical narrative, *The 9/11 Report* may serve as a new type of public inquiry report that invites learning about the complex factors that underpin crisis. The article concludes by identifying fruitful areas of future research and ways to theorize further about the collective psychodynamics of macro-level hubris and the psychodynamic factors that hinder learning and contribute to imagination failures.

## Keywords

Psychodynamics, 9/11, public inquiry, macro-level hubris

*Prior to 9/11, "America stood out as an object for admiration, envy, and blame. This created a kind of cultural asymmetry. To us, Afghanistan seemed very far away. To members of Al Qaeda, America seemed very close. In a sense, they were more globalized than we were."*

Findings of the US government's public inquiry, *The 9/11 Report* (2004: 340).

## Introduction

As the 20th anniversary of September 11th 2001 (9/11) falls upon us, it seems appropriate to reflect upon what we can learn from that event that may add to the body of knowledge in management and organization studies. Following Grey (2009: 353), I use the 20th anniversary of 9/11 as a "license

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to think” and propose provocative ideas that may prove contentious, and even irreverent. I confess that I have a personal interest in this learning journey. I was airborne, flying as a 777 pilot for my former employer, United Airlines, on that clear, crisp Tuesday morning when nineteen suicidal Al Qaeda members hijacked four United States (US) commercial airliners in flight. In just over an hour, terrorists crashed two jets into World Trade Center (WTC) buildings in New York City and a third plane into the Pentagon in Washington DC. Meanwhile passengers and crew onboard the fourth airliner overpowered hijackers and diverted their aircraft to crash in rural Pennsylvania. It was the worst terrorist attack in world history, costing over \$3.3 trillion and involving at least 3000 fatalities from 90 countries (Carter and Cox, 2011). The exact body count will forever remain uncertain because many civilians working in the WTC as well as firefighters, police and other emergency responders either incinerated in the fire or were crushed beneath building rubble when the Twin Towers collapsed.

My previous role as a US commercial airline pilot and my current role as a UK business school professor provide me with a unique vantage point to reflect upon 9/11: An aviation industry insider, outside in academia, looking backwards. When presenting my analysis, I aim to join other critical management scholars and their interest in avoiding formulaic research (Alvesson and Gabriel, 2013) in order to write differently in organization studies (Grey and Sinclair, 2006; Kiriakos and Tienari, 2018; Gabriel, 2010; Tourish, 2020; Weick, 1999). “‘Writing differently’ is concerned with broadening, widening and deepening knowledge and understanding by giving our ideas space in which they can flourish, create new meanings, help us learn and become human” (Gilmore et al., 2019: 4). Embracing this perspective, I attempt to “think freely” and speculate in unconventional ways informed, in part, by my personal and professional experiences (Parker, 2004).

To accomplish this goal, I adopt a *systems psychodynamic* framework (Fraher, 2004b; Gould et al., 2001; Petriglieri and Petriglieri, 2019) as a way to investigate some of the psychodynamics that contributed to 9/11 thereby advancing a theory of macro-level hubris. Developed at the Tavistock Institute in the Post-WWII period, system psychodynamics provides a multi-level framework that considers individual behaviour, group dynamics and systemic factors in order to analyse conscious and unconscious group behaviours as a collective dynamic (Fraher, 2004a). Much has already been written about *what* happened on 9/11 (Bernstein, 2002; Greenwald, 2016; Pyszczynski et al., 2003). However, few studies investigate *why* 9/11 occurred, from a psychodynamic perspective, and what we can learn from this analysis. In this paper, I identify two forms of macro-level hubris—the hubris of empire-building and the hubris-nemesis complex—under-researched phenomena in management and organization studies.

My decision to problematize this area of inquiry is influenced by competing unconscious motives originating in my pilot-professor role. The first motive stems from my conviction that dysfunctional psychodynamics such as those identified here often underpin organizational failures in ways that lead to crisis (Fraher, 2020b). The second motive is to expose how people can be unwittingly commodified by a system that exploits their trust, encourages complacency and stifles imagination with little concern for individuals’ wellbeing. Learning more about macro-level psychodynamics and how they can prove devastating for employees is a fruitful area of research in the field of management and organization studies.

The remainder of this article is structured as follows. First, I discuss the research design and methodology. Second, I outline my theories of macro-level hubris. Third, I provide findings gleaned from *The 9/11 Report* and a detailed analysis using the hubris of empire-building and the hubris-nemesis complex as frameworks. And finally, I discuss the implications of the issues raised, contextualize the broader relevance of the findings, and suggest areas for further research, concluding with a summary of the paper’s key contributions.

## Research design

### *Public inquiry as data source*

Public inquiries and their artefacts, such as *The 9/11 Report*, have a long history of use as valid sources of empirical material for management researchers (Gephart, 1992, 1993; Turner, 1976). During a public inquiry, officials assemble knowledgeable individuals to produce an authoritative account of events which may then be used to develop further studies and reports with conclusions and recommendations that can guide subsequent government and nongovernment agencies' actions (Ainsworth and Hardy, 2012; Boudes and Laroche, 2009). Public inquiries and their reports have been described as public acts of organizational sensemaking that subsequently influence public policy and people's perceptions of a crisis, and through that influence, play an important part in simplifying the story, identifying lessons learned, restoring legitimacy, and facilitating closure after shocking events (Boudes and Laroche, 2009; Gephart, 1993; Sulitzeanu-Kenan and Holzman-Gazit, 2016).

Gephart (1992: 115) describes a public inquiry as a "ceremonial legitimator of state responses," facilitating sensemaking practices that create "institutionally sensible accounts" of activities in order to legitimize state and corporate responses to crisis. Products of public inquiries, such as inquiry reports, contain powerful narratives that can be used to deflect criticism and refocus attention away from government shortcomings, regulatory failures, and senior leadership accountability (Brown, 2005). To be seen as authoritative, an inquiry report works to improve believability, or verisimilitude, by conforming to expectations, assigning blame, and providing convincing evidence for accepting the report's interpretations of events and conclusions (Brown, 2003). Thus, Brown (2000) notes, public inquiries and their reports exert a significant amount of hegemonic influence that shape stories of past events and frame understanding of the future.

*The 9/11 report.* When assembling the findings for this paper, I predominantly focused on the empirical materials contained within the US government's public inquiry: *The 9/11 Report*. A 585-page document, this substantive report was created by an independent committee of five Republicans and five Democrats called the *National Commission on Terrorist Attacks upon the United States*, led by Thomas H. Kean and Lee H. Hamilton. The commission reviewed over 2.5 million pages of empirical materials, conducted 19 days of hearings with 160 witnesses, and interviewed 1200 people in ten countries, ranging from frontline personnel such as air traffic controllers to senior government leaders such as US President George W. Bush. The aim was to "provide the fullest possible account of the events of 9/11 and to identify lessons learned" (Kean and Hamilton, 2004: xvi).

The report paints a complex picture of the pre-9/11 time period. It concludes "September 11, 2001, was a day of unprecedented shock and suffering" for which America "was unprepared" (p. xv). However, rather than directly blaming agencies or specific individuals for this failure, as many public inquirers do, the report concluded that 9/11 resulted, in part, from a widespread "failure of imagination" (p. 339). In this paper, I investigate this failure from a psychodynamic perspective by adopting the research question: What was it that America failed to imagine prior to 9/11 and why?

*The 9/11 Report* was considered so well-crafted it was selected as one of five nonfiction finalists for the 2004 *National Book Award*, a renowned literary prize for excellence (Wyatt, October 13, 2004). Although available free online, the published version of *The 9/11 Report* sold over one million copies, quickly climbing the bestseller list. Warren (2007: 534) observed:

The literary achievement of the 9/11 Commission Report rested not only on its clarity, but also its elusiveness. . . . It demanded that readers train their interpretive powers not only on the accessible language of the commissioners, but also on the wounds behind the language.

This is an unusual approach for a public inquiry report.

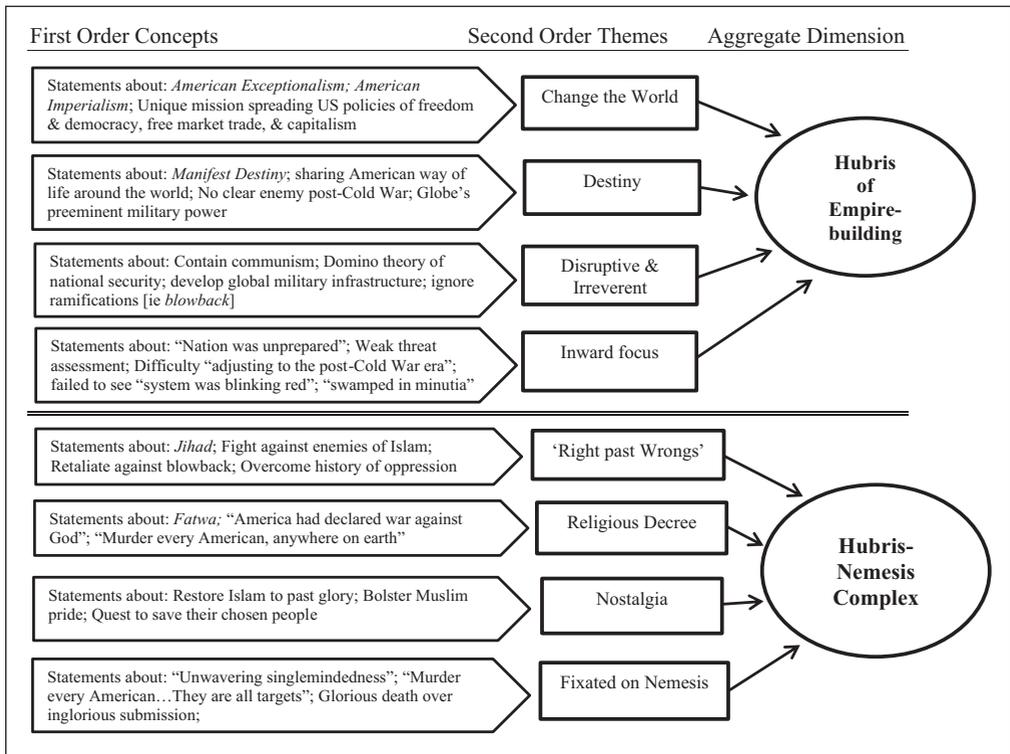


Figure 1. Overview of data structure.

Other management and organization scholars have used *The 9/11 Report* as a source of data and inspiration. For example, MacKay and Parks (2013) concluded that the report used both sensemaking and sense-giving strategies as an example of how public inquiries ensure their findings are relevant and authoritative in an increasingly uncertain world. Weick (2005: 435) was also drawn to the committee's choice of the word "imagination," suggesting that organizations differ in their ability to create cultures of imagination, stay grounded in reality and make sense of the unexpected: "The 9/11 Report can be read as a chronicle of ongoing struggles for alertness that becomes increasingly unsuccessful. . . a deterioration of the capability for mindfulness." Yet, none investigated the psychodynamics of imagination failures on 9/11.

### Iterative process

To analyze *The 9/11 Report*, I used an iterative process identifying themes, patterns and symbols within the 9/11 commission's public inquiry document to use as data. Following Gioia et al.'s (2012) holistic approach to inductive concept development I created a systematic presentation of first-order inquiry report-centric terms and codes which led to development of second-order researcher-centric concepts and themes, which then served as inspiration for the final aggregate dimension (See Figure 1). The question I held in the forefront of my mind as I developed my theoretical insights was how to account for not only the major emergent concepts in the public inquiry but also their psychodynamic interrelationships. For example, what purpose could it serve psychodynamically for the USA to fixate on its destiny while Al Qaeda fixated on nostalgia.

## Data analysis

To accomplish my analysis, I began by reading *The 9/11 Report* several times, developing a detailed timeline and description of key events. Next, I categorized potentially interesting statements and sections of the report, using them during several cycles of revision and refinement to generate inductive codes. Adopting Glaser and Strauss (1967) principles of constant comparison, codes were developed, collapsed, refined and discarded until a small number of core categories were identified. Through this process, a coherent image of events emerged which allowed me to develop my theoretical framework, grounding findings in the original evidence. Over time, the idea of theorizing macro-level hubris began to emerge from the empirical materials as an aggregate dimension.

Precedents for a psychoanalytically informed examination of macro-level psychodynamics are numerous. For example, psychodynamic researchers identified organizations as envious (Stein, 2000), manic (Fraher, 2014), miasmatic (Gabriel, 2012), narcissistic (Elmes and Barry, 1999), Oedipal (Fraher, 2017), paranoid (Cohen and Cohen, 1993), perverse (Long, 2008), resentful (Hirschhorn, 1997), and toxic (Fraher, 2016; Stein, 2007b), among other states. As I deepened my analysis, I revisited foundational psychodynamic studies of organizations for guidance and inspiration such as Menzies (1959), Hirschhorn (1988), Miller (1993) and Gabriel (1999), as a way to enhance my theorizing process. Following these examples, I paid particular attention to my own points of confusion, developing a reflexive process in which I questioned assumptions and asked myself why certain ways of thinking and acting were adopted, while considering the purpose these behaviors served, and for whom. Throughout this activity I embraced a process of “disciplined imagination” (Weick, 1989: 516). For instance, as an American and a retired US military officer, I had to challenge some of my pre-existing views about the neutrality of US government policies, the aims of American capitalism and the ramifications of a military presence in a foreign country. Once I was satisfied with the validity of my theoretical framework, I sought critical commentary from professional colleagues as part of an ongoing reflexive developmental process.

## Psychodynamic definitions

In the following section, I clarify definitions of hubris and narcissism, as I use them in this paper, and outline their unique psychodynamic characteristics at the micro- and macro-level. Specifying the characteristics of hubris is important because, as Sadler-Smith et al. (2017: 526) note, unlike other destructive dynamics such as charisma or narcissism, “hubris does not yet have an extensively validated theoretical apparatus.” Although micro-level studies often mistakenly use the terms interchangeably or suggest that hubris is a behavioral manifestation or “a predictable offshoot of unbridled narcissism” (Kets de Vries, 1990: 5), I will demonstrate that there are distinctions between collective hubris and narcissism at the macro-level (See Table 1).

### Micro-level

Hubris, defined as excessive pride or an arrogant state of self-confidence (Trumbull, 2010), is typically studied at the micro-level in management research. For instance, researchers have extensively examined the individual hubristic behaviors of managers and CEOs (Hayward and Hambrick, 1997; Hollow, 2014; Kets de Vries, 1990; Petit and Bollaert, 2012), entrepreneurs (Haynes et al., 2015; Hayward et al., 2006, 2010; Sundermeier et al., 2020) and politicians (Ronfeldt, 1994; Russell, 2011; Owen and Davidson, 2009; Sadler-Smith et al., 2017). This fixation on leaders’ hubris led Bollaert and Petit (2010) to suggest management researchers have succumbed to a “hubris fascination” and they urged scholars to use more imaginative ways to study organizational phenomenon.

**Table 1.** Macro-level narcissism versus macro-level hubris.

Macro-level narcissism	Macro-level hubris
Commonalities	
Desire for power Arrogance Sense of entitlement Overestimation of skills Underestimation of others Opportunism leads to increased risk-taking	
Differences	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Socially insatiable</li> <li>• Constant need of attention</li> <li>• Insecurity demands adoration from others</li> <li>• Must have accolades; Hates criticism</li> <li>• Needs reaffirmation of superiority in eyes of others</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Excessive self-confidence</li> <li>• Happy to 'go it alone' as sign of self-sufficiency</li> <li>• Overestimation of competence</li> <li>• Contempt for advice; Unconcerned about others' opinions/criticisms</li> <li>• Optimism creates insularity—insularity creates invulnerability</li> </ul>

Following this advice, Asad and Sadler-Smith (2020) conducted a micro-level study noting that narcissistic and hubristic leaders relate to power in fundamentally different ways: hubrists are intoxicated by success and achieving position of power while narcissists use power for reaffirmation and self-aggrandizement. Other recent micro-level hubris studies, such as Zeitoun et al. (2019) and Sundermeier et al. (2020) also adopt a different tactic, noting that there can be a “bright side” to leader hubris that is not often investigated such as creativity, vision and resilience.

However, studies of macro-level hubris are less common. Even when authors profess to write about collective hubris, such as Beinart's (2010) book about American hubris, they nevertheless analyze the micro-level behaviors of individual politicians, generals, entrepreneurs, and CEOs, not the organization as a whole.

### *Macro-level*

In this paper, I demonstrate that there are distinct psychodynamic differences between narcissism and hubris at the macro-level that have not been adequately elucidated in management research. As Table 1 demonstrates, narcissism and hubris collectives share several similar characteristics. Both involve an arrogant sense of collective pride, superiority and entitlement, along with an insatiable need for power; an overestimate one's own knowledge, skills and capabilities while underestimating the attributes of their competitors in a contemptuous manner; and a desire to not just succeed but to dominate others, leading to aggressive opportunism and increased risk-taking that can escalate to disaster (Levine, 2005; Schwartz, 1990; Stein, 2007a). However, these commonalities aside, the motivations underpinning these similar behaviors and the purpose they serve psychodynamically for the collective are quite different and therefore worthy of further analysis.

For example, narcissistic groups are needy, insecure, and sensitive to external criticism. As a result, narcissistic groups demand the attention and adoration of outsiders such as the media, public, customers, and politicians to reinforce their fragile self-image and constantly seek opportunities for reaffirmation of their superiority in the eyes of others. Any collateral damage incurred

during pursuit of these goals, if even noticed by the narcissistic group, is seen as warranted in service of their higher purpose. In order to demonstrate their supremacy, narcissistic collectives often denigrate competitors as unworthy and authority figures such as auditors or regulatory agencies as naïve, ill-informed, stupid.

Management researchers identified Enron, the disgraced US energy company, as a textbook narcissistic organization (Levine, 2005; Stein, 2007a). The company self-aggrandized its managers as ‘the smartest guys in the room’ while breaking laws, misleading Wall Street analysts, undermining auditors, destroying employees, and stealing from customers and investors without any sense of remorse. Levine (2005: 729) notes Enron’s insatiable greed and relentless pursuit of market dominance sustained a grandiose fantasy of the company as innovative, successful and beyond reproach, and the company manipulated this image as a way “to extract from others the admiration needed to protect a fragile sense of self.”

In contrast to fragile and insecure narcissistic organizations like Enron, I argue, hubristic collectives are confident, secure and able to internally validate their self-worth independent of external opinions. They are overly optimistic, often overestimating their knowledge, skills and vision, leading to a high sense of independence and self-sufficiency. And since hubristic groups are unconcerned with outsiders’ advice or opinions, they are often willing to ‘go it alone,’ fixated on what they perceive to be their unique attributes and goals, and higher ideals. However, feelings of optimism, overconfidence and self-sufficiency can create stagnation because hubristic collectives must insulate themselves from the realities of the external world in order to keep their vision alive and perpetuate their self-concept. This extreme state of self-absorption fosters feelings of invincibility as they pursue their preferred world vision with zeal. Although hubristic collectives may not intend to be destructive, their myopic focus inward and relentless commitment to pursue what is best for themselves at the expense of others often becomes destructive. Now that my use of psychodynamic definitions has been clarified, I return to *The 9/11 Report* and then weave the discuss of macro-level hubris and 9/11 together by applying my two theories.

## **Deconstructing the 9/11 report**

### *America before 9/11*

*The 9/11 Report* observed that, although the US had encountered surprise attacks by its enemies in the past, such as the Japanese bombing of Pearl Harbor in Hawaii in 1941 (p. 339), “the nation was unprepared” for the attacks on 9/11 (p. xv). And while the US intelligence community devoted significant energy to threat assessment after Pearl Harbor, the commission found no evidence that strategies developed to avoid surprise attacks in the past were regularly applied in the years before 9/11 (p. 346). The reasons behind this overconfidence are complex. After the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, a significant change came over international politics as the ‘Cold War’ ended. Roughly spanning between 1945 and 1990, the Cold War was an era of ideological differences and political hostility pitting Soviet-backed countries and America-backed allies against each other.

Americans celebrated the end of the Cold War with a mixture of pride and relief as capitalism spread to new markets worldwide and the US emerged “as the globe’s preeminent military power” (p. 340). However, in many ways, the US government had difficulty “adjusting to the post-Cold War era” (p. 103), failing to “address new threats” while focusing on “parochial considerations,” “swamped in minutia” of its own creation (p. 105-106). Big picture questions about the long-term ramifications of US strategies abroad and the impact of globalization were not widely discussed in mainstream American policy circles. And without a clear enemy, US national security programs and their budgets were cut back, as few government leaders imagined the nature of emerging threats (p. 93).

The USA struggled to grasp the paradox that although Cold War superpowers were no longer direct threats, the world was nevertheless an increasingly unsafe and inequitable place, in many ways due to US policies and actions at home and abroad as hubristic blindness took hold. Reflecting this paradoxical tension, a 1998 government commission led by US Senators Warren Rudman and Gary Hart entitled *National Security for the 21st Century*, evaluated US national security policies in the post-Cold War era (p. 479). Producing a comprehensive report, the Rudman-Hart commission issued stark warnings about new forms of security predicting: “America will become increasingly vulnerable to hostile attack on our homeland” and should expect heightened “levels of violence shocking to our sensibilities” (Lathrop and Eaglen, 2001: 2–3). Thus, this government report predicted several years before 2001 that a shocking attack such as 9/11 was quite likely. Yet, the Rudman-Hart Commission’s report was largely ignored, I argue, due to the psychodynamics of macro-level hubris.

There were other signs of America’s growing vulnerability. In 1993, Al Qaeda terrorists detonated a rental truck with 1200 pounds of homemade explosives in the parking garage under the New York World Trade Center, killing six people and injuring over 1000 (p. 341). Over the 1990’s Al Qaeda’s confidence grew and there were attacks on embassies and Western institutions in a variety of different international locations. In 2000, the US Navy guided missile destroyer, *USS Cole*, was attacked in Yemen. Foreshadowing methods used on 9/11, Al Qaeda suicide bombers rammed a small boat laden with hundreds of pounds of explosives into the Navy ship while it was pier-side refueling, killing seventeen sailors and injuring thirty-nine (p. 190).

Al Qaeda’s successful attack on the *USS Cole* was used in a widely disseminated propaganda video, galvanizing anti-American recruitment efforts within jihadist movements (p. 191). Yet, the danger of this growing anti-Americanism received little attention in US policy circles. Rather than signaling a growing crisis, the US government, news media and general public were given the impression that intelligence agencies and law enforcement were well-prepared to cope with the emerging terrorist threat because perpetrators were caught, damage was controlled, and fatalities were minimal.

As the millennium approached, Americans had their minds on other things, fixating on Y2K and the possibility of computer glitches disrupting their daily life, not Al Qaeda (p. 174 and 359). The November 2000 presidential election also proved distracting, resulting in a 36-day legal dispute requiring a Supreme Court decision declaring George W. Bush president. During the preceding election campaign, terrorism was rarely mentioned by either candidate (p. 108). Meanwhile, Al Qaeda operatives had already entered the USA and were taking flying lessons in various locations around the country (p. 223–227).

By the summer of 2001, *The 9/11 Report* found, “The system was blinking red” (p. 253): Security threat warnings emerged almost everywhere the US had interests, home and abroad. As the “drumbeat of reporting grew louder,” (p. 255) reports consistently described the high probability of a near-term, spectacular attack resulting in mass casualties on a calamitous scale (p. 257). The 9/11 commission found that, although the US intelligence community knew something terrible was imminent, agencies were inundated with too much information to accurately process. Most people presumed that the attacks, if they happened at all, would occur overseas as was the past pattern. Although Bin Laden had explicitly stated in an ABC interview, “If the present injustice continues. . . it will inevitably move the battle to American soil” (p. 48), few Americans imagined a foreign threat could possibly infiltrate US borders and attack domestic targets (p. 263).

### *Al Qaeda before 9/11*

The roots of the Al Qaeda terrorist organization that sponsored the 9/11 terrorist attacks reach back to an anti-Soviet—not anti-American—*jihad*, or a fight against the enemies of Islam (p. 55). In

Afghanistan in the 1980s, a young Osama Bin Laden and his colleagues joined rebel insurgent groups fighting against the Russian-backed communist government. Ironically, the Afghan war served as a proxy fight for Cold War aggressions because Bin Laden's rebel groups were predominantly armed and financed by the USA. Although hundreds of thousands of Afghan civilians were killed or forced to flee during the nine-year war, the rebels ultimately succeeded in driving the Soviet Army out of Afghanistan (p. 56). The success of this young group of Islamic idealists over their much larger, better-equipped adversary emboldened Bin Laden who began to dream of his own global jihadist network: Al Qaeda.

The 9/11 commission found that after this taste of success, Bin Laden developed plans to attack the USA "with unwavering singlemindedness throughout the 1990s" (p. 48). Experiencing America's powerful international influence and military presence in the Middle East as a direct attack on the Muslim way of life, Bin Laden published a *fatwa*, or Islamic religious decree, in an Arabic newspaper in London in 1998. Bin Laden wrote "America had declared war against God and his messenger" and he "called for the murder of every American, anywhere on earth, as the 'individual duty for every Muslim who can do it in any country in which it is possible'" (p. 47). When asked about killing civilians, Bin Laden did not differentiate: "We believe that the worst thieves in the world today and the worst terrorists are Americans. . .As far as we are concerned, they are all targets" (p. 47).

US government and military leaders were aware of Bin Laden's aggressive statements and most believed Al Qaeda was a credible threat. However, as the new Bush administration transitioned into the White House in early 2001, there was confusion about lines of responsibility and the viability of response options. Most people in government continued to underestimate Al Qaeda's skills and determination (p. 209). For example, in one national security memo, the use of force against Al Qaeda was dismissed because "there's nothing worth hitting in Afghanistan" and "the cruise missiles [the US would send] cost more than the jungle gyms and mud huts" they would destroy in terrorist training camps (p. 213). Although reliable US government sources observed "sooner or later, Bin Laden will attack U.S. interests, perhaps using WMD [weapons of mass destruction]" (p. 112) and the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) continued to track Bin Laden's movements, no additional efforts were made to intervene before 9/11.

To achieve his *fatwa* ambitions, Bin Laden needed to recruit educated young men to voluntarily give their lives to fulfil his aspirations and he capitalized on the conflation of church-and-state in Muslim countries. Nostalgia for Islam's past glory and the golden age of the Prophet Mohammed remains a powerful force in Middle Eastern countries and Bin Laden manipulated images of Islam's past greatness while stoking peoples' fear of change, globalization and Western values. Bin Laden also capitalized on pre-existing anti-Israel hatred and, by association, anti-US sentiments inflamed by pro-Israel US policies in the Middle East. By offering promises to restore Muslims' pride and power in the world using cultural and religious allusions to Islam, Bin Laden's aspirations involved both spiritual and material rewards for exacting revenge against the USA in ways that deeply resonated with his millions of followers' worldwide (p. 48).

## Analyzing macro-level hubris

In the following section, I return to my research question investigating from a psychodynamic perspective what it was that America failed to imagine prior to 9/11 and why? To conduct this analysis, I frame the causes of 9/11 as the clash between two forms of macro-level hubris: America as an example of the "hubris of empire-building" and Al Qaeda as an example of the "hubris-nemesis complex."

As previously defined, hubristic collectives are arrogant, overconfident and power hungry, displaying contempt for the skills and determination of others while overestimating their own

capabilities, creating an artificial sense of self-sufficiency and independence. Hubristic groups act as if they are above the problems their competitors face and their experience of success generates an optimism that fuels increased risk-taking. To perpetuate their fantasy of success, hubristic collectives must increasingly isolate themselves from external reality as a social defense in order to sustain feelings of uniqueness and invulnerability.

In this section, I argue that both America and Al Qaeda displayed hubristic psychodynamics which enabled each group to myopically pursue their preferred world vision with zeal, regardless of the dangerous implications for others—this perfect storm of dysfunctional psychodynamics amalgamated into 9/11. Yet, each group enacted the dynamics of their macro-level hubris in different ways.

### *Hubris of empire-building*

The history of America's empire-building aspirations perhaps dates back to the 1800s and a territorial expansionist philosophy called *Manifest Destiny* in which US leaders believed America was empowered by God to expand its domain and drive foreign countries out of North America (Pratt, 1927). A philosophy of *American Imperialism* followed, which referred to the US's cultural, religious and economic impact on indigenous people, such as Native Americans, and on other nations, such as Cuba, Puerto Rico and the Philippines, often supported by military interventions with expansionist aims (Ali, 2002). One of the most notorious examples of America's empire-building was the 1898 annexation of Hawaii against the will of many Hawaiians, allowing the US to gain a strategic military foothold in the Pacific Ocean with important economic advantages. Central to the concept of US empire-building is the theory of *American Exceptionalism* which supports the belief that America is a superior nation and Americans have a unique mission to share the American way of life and spread US policies of freedom, democracy and free market trade (Morgan, 2014).

At the height of the Cold War, the US embraced a domino theory of national security assuming that if communism could dominate one country, nearby countries would fall like dominoes. The US used this rationale for the war in Vietnam and to build thousands of military installations around the world to contain communist influences. Today, the US Department of Defense (2017) still has hundreds of thousands of personnel stationed on almost 5000 sites worldwide in 46 foreign countries under the guise of maintaining stability and providing a democratic presence. Of course, few countries have military installations on US soil. For many local people, American personnel seem less like friendly peacekeepers and more like foreign occupiers exerting a particular form of US imperialism (Johnson, 2000).

Although many Americans may be naïve about the implications of US policies abroad, the CIA had a term, first used in a 1953 *After-Action Report*, for the unintended consequences of, and subsequent retaliation for, US empire-building strategies: "blowback" (Johnson, 2006: 2). Johnson (2000: 9) presciently wrote *before 9/11*:

One man's terrorist is, of course, another man's freedom fighter, and what U.S. officials denounce as unprovoked terrorist attacks on its innocent citizens is often meant as retaliation for previous American imperial actions. . . All around the world today, it is possible to see the groundwork being laid for future forms of blowback.

In sum, I propose, the hubris of empire-building differs from macro-level narcissism in the way it manifests four distinguishing characteristics: power, rationalization, methods and orientation (See Table 2). First, empire-building collectives desire power to change the world and establish a new way of life which, they believe, will create a better world order. Second, empire-building collectives confidently rationalize the zealous pursuit of their goals by claiming it is their responsibility or

**Table 2.** Four characteristics of hubris of empire-building versus hubris-nemesis complex.

Characteristic	Hubris of empire building	Examples: America pre-9/11	Hubris-nemesis complex	Examples: Al Qaeda pre-9/11
Power	Change the world	American Exceptionalism; American Imperialism; Spread US policies of freedom, democracy, free market trade	Fight nemesis; Right past wrong	Jihad: Fight against enemies of Islam; Retaliate against blowback
Rationalization	Destiny	Manifest Destiny; share American way of life;	Religious decree	Fatwa: “America had declared war against God”
Methods	Disruptive, irreverent	Contain communism; develop global military infrastructure; Ignore blowback	Nostalgic	Restore Islam glory and muslim pride
Orientation	Inward	Weak threat assessment; difficulty “adjusting to the post-Cold War era”; “Nation was unprepared”	Fixated on nemesis	“Unwavering singlemindedness”; “Murder every American”

destiny as unique people to achieve their mission. Third, the methods empire-building collectives use are intentionally disruptive, irreverently violating established formal and informal expectations, customs, protocols and laws. Fourth, empire-building collectives have an inward orientation, arrogantly isolating themselves as a sign of their innovation, independence and self-sufficiency. Thus, empire-building collectives are indifferent to external opinions, contemptuous of advice, and unconcerned about others except to disparage them in a derisive manner.

*Hubris-nemesis complex*

Although the US and Al Qaeda share some hubristic commonalities there are distinct differences in the way each enacted the four distinguishing characteristics discussed in Table 2. For example, empire-building collectives are inwardly focused isolationists however “hubris-nemesis” collectives are obsessed with another group, drawn into a mythological battle between good and evil which is used to justify their retaliatory behaviors.

Hubris and nemesis have a long history of use as a cautionary narrative in military strategy [e.g. Sun Tsu, Clausewitz, Napoleon] and in certain religious traditions, from Christianity [e.g. “pride goeth before a fall”] to Confucianism and Hinduism [e.g. “pride bringeth loss”] (Ronfeldt, 1994; Sadler-Smith, 2018; Trumbull, 2010). In Greek mythology Nemesis, the goddess of vengeance, personified the wrath of the gods against humans behaving hubristically, such as Icarus and Phaethon, who attempted to assume God-like powers of flight (Beinart, 2010). Reverence for the law and a sense of disciplined restraint were valued in Greek literature and hubris was characterized less as a state of mind and more as an offense against the world order, an arrogant violation of societal boundaries (North, 1966). In mythology, Nemesis punished human vice and rewarded virtue, curbing human excesses such as arrogance, contempt and pride, and reinforcing positive behaviors such as humility, generosity, cooperation and respect (Bordoni, 2019).

Exploring these mythological examples, Ronfeldt (1994) proposed the “hubris-nemesis complex” as a way to analyze how hubristic political leaders can become drawn into escalating cycles of dysfunctional dynamics involving another powerful force—their “nemesis”—leading to their

downfall. Thus, in Ronfeldt's example, nemesis becomes the force hubristic leaders such as Fidel Castro and Adolf Hitler struggle against. Ronfeldt (1994: 16) identified several key psychodynamic features that create the "hubris-nemesis complex" which, I argue, were present within Al Qaeda prior to 9/11.

When groups enact the hubris-nemesis complex, they view their nemesis as arrogant and contemptuous for committing inexcusable offenses against a higher world order—a violation that must be atoned for. They use their conviction to deeply held ideals to justify their hatred and aggression, preferring what they believe to be "a glorious death over inglorious submission" to their nemesis' domination (Ronfeldt, 1994: 16). Their grandiose aspirations involve both material and spiritual dimensions that justify a zealous pursuit of a special destiny that had previously proved elusive. Thus, groups with a hubris-nemesis complex frame their desire for power as a requirement for retaliation—to right a past wrong—not power for personal gain. However, their aim is to dominate nevertheless and they often overestimate their own skills and competence while underestimating those of their hated nemesis. By achieving their retaliation, groups with a hubris-nemesis complex believe they will overcome a history of oppression orchestrated by the nemesis and can then assume their rightful place in the world. Thus, the hubris-nemesis collective characterizes their goal to attack their nemesis as a quest to save their chosen people. To accomplish this goal, they justify increasing levels of aggression, violence and self-sacrifice as warranted in order to fulfil societal hopes, rectify historical wrong doings and achieve previously denied aspirations of greatness. Meanwhile, the nemesis may be unaware that their behaviors have instigated such vitriol and hatred.

Returning to the four distinguishing characteristics (power, rationalization, methods, orientation) previously discussed in Table 2, there is evidence that all are present in the hubris-nemesis complex as well. However, the four characteristics served different purposes for Al Qaeda than they did for America. First, similar to empire-building collectives, groups with a hubris-nemesis complex desire power to change the world. However, their motivation for power is to defeat their nemesis, overcome historical prejudice and achieve their rightful destiny. For example, Al Qaeda characterized their *jihad* as a fight against the enemies of Islam and identified Americans as their prime targets. Second, both groups rationalized their zealous pursuit of goals as a form of destiny. However, Al Qaeda justified their actions in religious terms as a *fatwa* because "America had declared war against God." Third, the methods Al Qaeda used to motivate action were predominantly rooted in nostalgia. By attacking America, its nemesis, Al Qaeda hoped to restore Islam to past days of glory and bolster Muslim pride. Finally, while empire-building groups have an inward orientation, hubris-nemesis groups have a singular fixation on their nemesis.

## Discussion

In this paper, I aimed to provide psychodynamic clarity about 9/11 on its 20th anniversary, offering insights into some of the factors America failed to imagine before 9/11 and why, thereby advancing a theory of macro-level hubris. My analysis shows that 9/11 resulted from the engagement of two forms of macro-level hubris that collided in a particularly dangerous and generative way: America's hubris of empire-building and Al Qaeda's hubris-nemesis complex. Caught up in the psychodynamics of their particular form of hubris, both America and Al Qaeda became detached from reality, isolating themselves within a fictional story that rationalized their escalating behaviors and shielded them from painful realities. For the USA, the painful pre-9/11 reality was that the world does not want the American way of life. And for Al Qaeda, the painful pre-9/11 reality was the golden age of Prophet Mohammed will never return and the image of Islam is forever tarnished by their terrorist tactics.

America failed to imagine the impact that US empire-building strategies had on other nations or see the resultant blowback created by US policies and actions abroad that was clearly present and widely documented before 9/11. As America's denial deepened other people, particularly religious fundamentalists in the Muslim world, viewed the USA—not as the beacon of hope or champion of democratic values that most Americans believed, but rather—as “the world's biggest bully” (Nye, 2002: x). The uncomfortable emotions embedded within this conflict were difficult for many Americans to imagine, as President Bush famously asked: “Why do they hate us?” (Johnson, 2006: 2). Thus, the inward facing psychodynamics of empire-building allowed the US to remain in a comfortable state of denial about the growing security threat even as the “system was blinking red” in the summer of 2001.

Meanwhile, Al Qaeda was operating under its own distortion of reality drawn into aggression against America—their nemesis—in order to enact the psychodynamics of the hubris-nemesis complex. As *The 9/11 Report* described, Al Qaeda had an “unwavering singlemindedness” to attack the USA and “murder every American, anywhere on earth.” Al Qaeda's excessive confidence was rooted in the belief that they were uniquely chosen to achieve their *jihadi* goals and this rationalized their terrorist aims because they believed it was their destiny to attack their nemesis. If the US had not been consumed by the psychodynamics of empire-building, they might have imagined the emerging threats. If Al Qaeda had not been consumed by hatred for its nemesis, it might have recognized the contradictions between its *fatwa* against Americans and the tenants of the Muslim religion. In the end, both serve as examples of organized failures of imagination blinded by macro-level hubris.

Reconsidering Brown's (2003: 95) observation that inquiry reports are “monological storytelling performances that function hegemonically to impose a particular version of reality on their readers,” one must wonder what reality the US government's commission aimed to impose on the readers of *The 9/11 Report*. Interpretations of the report vary which, I believe, was intended by the 9/11 commission. Some readers are cynical about the professed aim to provide “lessons learned.” rather than assign blame. For example, Falkenrath (2005: 178) noted “The commission's “failure of imagination” is more of a slogan than an argument: it sounds good but is an almost indecipherable muddle.” Falkenrath is particularly critical about the commission's reluctance to explicitly blame anyone or clearly state what should be done differently in the future to prevent future 9/11-like attacks. Indeed, it is unusual for a public inquiry report to not offer this clarity. In addition, when the report was released in 2004, it was too late to function hegemonically as a monological storytelling performance or to provide guidance to government policy makers who quickly enacted post-9/11 legislation such as the 2001 USA Patriot Act to strengthen national security, 2001 Aviation and Transportation Security Act which increased airport security, or 2002 Homeland Security Act which reorganized twenty-two federal agencies into the Department of Homeland Security.

Nevertheless, the narrative of *The 9/11 Report* and its assessment that America “failed to imagine” the growing terrorist threat is a valuable characterization because it invites readers to consider the range of possible explanations—now and into the future—as new information comes to light. Recently, there has been a “historic turn” in management and organization studies as scholars reinterpret past events, engaging reflexively to challenge previous assessments in search of alternative and perhaps more uncomfortable explanations of events such as colonialism, racism, misogyny, scapegoating, and other examples of power dynamics and exploitation (Clark and Rowlinson, 2004; Fraher, 2020a; Wadhvani et al., 2018). Rather than aiming to impose a particular hegemonic interpretation of reality, as previous public inquiry reports do, *The 9/11 Report* empowers readers to consider implications for themselves. Thus, this government report serves as a different sort of

public inquiry report and may signal a shift away from inquiries simply serving as ceremonial legitimators of state responses towards generative studies of systemic factors.

Other examples of this new form of public inquiry may be forthcoming, warranting further research. For example, the public inquiry into the 2019 Christchurch mosque terrorist attacks seems to be adopting a similarly critical narrative as a way to invite analysis into the complex influences that contributed to the New Zealand shootings. A 2020 US Congressional inquiry into the multiple crashes of the 737 Max identified a systemic combination of mismanagement, engineering flaws and oversight lapses involving the manufacturer Boeing as well as the Federal Aviation Administration tasked to ensure public safety (Chokshi, 2020). And, hopefully, government investigations into the Covid-19 pandemic will provide generative studies of the range of factors that contributed to the 2020 global crisis as a way to learn, imagine, and become human, increasing our awareness of our interdependence.

## Conclusion

This article investigates some of the psychodynamics that contributed to 9/11 in order to advance a theory of macro-level hubris. Understanding the psychodynamics of macro-level hubris helps identify and explain what America failed to imagine prior to 9/11 and why. Through this investigation, this article makes five contributions to management research and organization studies.

First, this paper contributes to the use of public inquiry reports for research purposes. Previous studies of public inquiries demonstrate that inquiry reports are typically used to assign blame, depoliticize events, and legitimize institutions, as a way to lessen public anxiety, restore confidence and facilitate closure after shocking events. In contrast findings here suggest that, by adopting a critical narrative, *The 9/11 Report* may serve as a new type of public inquiry report that invites a different sort of learning, emphasizing analysis of the complex influences before, during and after crisis. By identifying 9/11 as a failure of imagination, the commission invited further scrutiny into events of 9/11 rather than seeking to lay blame and expedite closure as previous management and organization studies found when examining public inquiry reports.

The second contribution this paper makes is to document a clear distinction between micro-level and macro-level narcissism and hubris, which has not previously been elucidated. Although macro-level narcissism and hubris share some similar characteristics such as arrogance, entitlement, superiority, and a need to dominate others in ways that can lead to increased risk-taking, in this paper I clearly articulate how the motivations behind these behaviors and, perhaps most importantly, the purpose they serve psychodynamically differ significantly. In sum, hubristic collectives engage in an ongoing psychodynamic process in which excessive optimism and overconfidence requires the denigration of others in order to sustain feelings of success and self-reliance, which creates isolation from the outside world and detachment from reality, further heightening feelings of invulnerability and idealism, while generating optimism and overconfidence. Unlike needy and insecure narcissistic groups, which require constant validation from outsiders, hubristic collectives adopt an arrogant state of isolationism accompanied by a foolish underestimation of others' competence, capabilities, and motivation.

Thus, a key contribution this paper makes to management research and organization studies is to answer the call of Sadler-Smith et al. (2017) for theories to help researchers understand the destructive nature of hubris. However, questions remain about the causes and outcomes of macro-level hubris signaling fruitful areas for further study. For instance, under what conditions do purported strengths such as ambition, competitiveness, innovation, and confidence swing too far in the direction of dysfunctional hubris such as arrogance, over-confidence and contempt? And under what circumstances, if at all, do potentially hubristic groups become more humble, collaborative

and restrained? Investigating these research areas can further elaborate upon the psychodynamic differences between hubristic and narcissistic groups, which is warranted. It may be that the rise of 24/7 news and proliferation of technology platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, YouTube, and Twitter, and the endless stream of communication they create, adequately satiates needy narcissistic groups' desires for attention, rendering them less potentially dangerous and destructive in their pursuit of accolades and social validation. In contrast, societal changes such as divisive foreign policies, the rise of populism, instability of governments, loss of public trust, prolonged military conflicts, and expansion of technology may create an environment of uncertainty ripe for the expansion of hubristic collectives willing to optimistically 'go it alone' regardless of the risks and repercussions. If this is the case, we might expect to see an increase in hubristic and a decrease in narcissistic organizations, an area worth investigating.

Third, this paper contributes to the growing interest in destructive leadership and the dark side of organizational life (Fraher, 2016; Maitlis and Ozcelik, 2004; Padilla et al., 2007; Thoroughgood et al., 2012). In addition, this paper joins other critical leadership scholars in their theorization about excessive optimism and its detrimental influence on organizational performance. Although positive cultures may inspire organizational members to work hard, innovate, trust and collaborate, improving workplace performance, there are documented downsides to extreme optimism (Collinson, 2012) and excessive positivity (Alvesson and Einola, 2019). For example, excessive optimism can make it difficult for collectives to cope with reality, address challenging problems, deal with bad news and engage in critical debate, as was the case in America prior to 9/11. Excessive optimism can foster an inability or unwillingness to engage cognizant and reflexive capacities, contributing to mindlessness that traps organizations into problematic patterns of thoughtlessness, irrationality and immobility (Alvesson and Spicer, 2012). As the body of literature in destructive leadership demonstrates, dysfunctional collective states can be malleable, transient and situational (Fraher, 2016, 2017; Padilla et al., 2007; Sadler-Smith, 2018; Thoroughgood et al., 2012). However, more research is warranted into how and when collectives veer towards dysfunctionality, such as the macro-level hubris outlined in this paper.

A fourth contribution of this study is to theorize the psychodynamics of empire-building as another fruitful area for further study. Many contemporary organizations attempt to gain power and dominate others for self-aggrandizement in this manner. For instance, consider the Wall Street firms that contributed to the 2008 financial industry crisis (Stein, 2013) or Apple under the leadership of Steve Jobs (Bell and Taylor, 2016). More recently, big Tech companies such as Uber, Amazon, Google and Facebook have also earned reputations as arrogant, overconfident and particularly ruthless empire-building organizations, happy to crash into new markets, unconcerned by outsiders' opinions or criticisms, willing to exploit employees, break international laws, challenge regulators, and violate local customs to achieve their corporate vision (Satariano and Stevis-Gridneff, 2020; Satariano and Tsang, 2019). Another sort of empire-building organization worth analyzing is pharmaceutical companies such as Johnson & Johnson or Purdue Pharma, manufacturers of prescription painkillers. These corporations are involved in thousands of lawsuits worth billions of dollars for their aggressive marketing of addictive drugs that allegedly caused the world's opioid crisis and the death of hundreds of thousands of consumers (Hoffman, 2019). Researchers might investigate how empire-building organizations such as these develop and sustain high levels of optimism during lawsuits, bankruptcy, and consumer fatalities or by what other means they create insularity, deny reality and sustain overconfidence and invulnerability. In contrast, researchers could study other organizations in similar industries to determine how and why they resisted the seduction of empire-building in order to operate responsibly.

Fifth, this paper demonstrates that further theorizing about the hubris-nemesis complex is also warranted. Researchers have long identified that companies mimic competitors in certain industries

such as beverage, airline, fast food, carmakers, athletic shoes, toys, and telecommunications using imitation strategies to stay competitive (Rivkin, 2000). These organizations may prove to have a propensity for developing a hubris-nemesis complex that keeps them fixated on competing with rivals, often at great sacrifice, rather than focusing on creating their own unique innovations. For example, consider the Coke versus Pepsi “cola wars” of the 1980s that caused Coke to modify its well-established drink formula to offer customers “New Coke” with disastrous results. In the airline industry, the success of Southwest Airline’s point-to-point, low-frills operating model caused many major airlines to unsuccessfully mimic Southwest’s operations. United Airlines developed ‘United Shuttle’ and ‘Ted,’ Delta Airlines developed ‘Song,’ and Air Canada developed ‘Tango.’ All three companies used an ‘airline within an airline’ strategy, mimicking Southwest, at considerable financial loss. And in telecommunications, competition between MCI, AT&T and eventually Worldcom resulted in an \$11 billion accounting fraud that led to company bankruptcy and employee prison terms. Researchers could study the psychodynamic factors that draw companies into the self-destructive rivalry that underpins the hubris-nemesis complex. They might be able to identify organizational factors that lead to increased risk-taking or investigate why companies remain committed to a hubris-nemesis rivalry long after it stops being strategically viable, financially lucrative, or logically motivated.

In sum, I have discussed America’s empire-building hubris and Al Qaeda’s hubris-nemesis complex as separate phenomenon because I believe that each theory can be independently investigated further by researchers, as discussed above. However, in this study, I found these phenomena amalgamated in a perfect storm of organizational dysfunction that caused 9/11. Other studies may, or may not, find organizational hubris interrelates in this manner. Nevertheless, the discussion here signals several valuable avenues for further research into the psychodynamics of macro-level hubris.

## Epilogue

When I began thinking about writing this paper, I decided that I should go to *The National September 11 Memorial and Museum* in New York City on the site of what was the Twin Towers. I felt conflicted. I didn’t know what I might find or feel, or if I could handle the experience of going inside. As I approached the museum, I felt angry and sad, annoyed and hopeful, curious and judgmental—all at the same time. I started with the fountain pools adjacent to the museum. Some people were clearly mourning there, younger people—I was surprised. And then I was surprised that I was surprised. Maybe they had lost someone: a parent, a relative, a neighbor. It was a somber experience. Then buses began arriving and people were running, pushing behind me, jostling to take a better selfie with their iphone in front of the reflection pool. I was in their way. They wanted to get on to the next thing and I was slowing them down. On the other side of the plaza, lines to enter the museum grew. Kids were running around in the hot summer sun as families queued like it was a new Disney ride: ‘9/11—the experience.’ It’s hard to reconcile. Perhaps, the first step in avoiding imagination failures begins by noticing the present.

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