

How Did the Media Cover 9/11?
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Ten years after the most horrific foreign attack on America (the British in 1812 and the Japanese in 1941), we are looking back to see how this attack affected our national character. Considering the horrific nature of 9/11, we responded with astonishing nobility and some expected missteps. We are a nation that habitually underestimates an enemy-and then overestimates this same enemy. It takes a while to get it right.

Watching how people in New York, especially the first responders, and those in Washington (Secretary of Defense Rumsfeld, running to help carry out wounded), and most of all, those brave crew and passengers on the flight headed to destroy the Capital Building in Washington, who fought the terrorists and died in the resulting plane crash in Pennsylvania, we saw how heroic we can be.

We might have expected a nasty backlash against American Muslims, but that really did not materialize. America does have a thuggish underbelly, but credit must go to President Bush for his efforts to kill this idea in its cradle.

So, according to the media, what in America's response to 9/11 was not our most glorious moment? The way we decided to retaliate against an enemy that was not a nation state, but rather a vicious cult of Islamists with international tentacles and funding. We began to go after them as one would deal with a Mafia: using the CIA and Special Forces in Afghanistan, where they were headquartered. That was a successful mission. Then, out of fear and anger, we opted for an all-out war: first against Afghanistan, and then against Iraq. We are still paying for that today, and in neither case have the results been good.

We are still a young nation, and we have a streak that still identifies with seventh president Andrew Jackson, who went after two British agents stirring up trouble with the Seminoles in Florida. He sent in troops to catch them and hang them, no trial. That is Jacksonian Justice. Vice President Cheney is the successor to that Jacksonian wing. He helped push an American public, hungry for vengeance, into the wrong war. His reasoning, again well-meaning and a page out of President Woodrow Wilson, was that we needed to \223drain the swamp\224 of the repressive Muslim World and replace it with democracy. Iraq would be a model for the rest of the region. Lovely idea, but our \223democracy projects\224 have only worked twice: in Germany and Japan, and nowhere else in the world. If you think democracy means voting, you have not understood its complexity. It worked in Germany and Japan not only because they were totally defeated, but because they were modern states.

The best TV documentaries reviewing the events of 9/11 were on CNN (most balanced); there was good coverage on CNBC, but with more emphasis on what we did wrong and how we missed all the clues beforehand. PBS had a lovely piece on the architecture of the new World Trade Center, and CBS may take the prize for an astonishing documentary that was being made before the Trade Center was hit-and just continued for the rest of the day. That documentary has been updated to include the horrific medical disaster confronting the first responders-particularly firemen---who are dying in numbers from Cancer and blood diseases from the toxic dust they breathed both that day and for months afterwards. Dr. Sanjay Gupta of CNN also explored this issue.

The updated reissue of the 9/11 Report has some very wise observations, explored by Charlie Rose. Our yielding to fear led to Abu Ghraib and the use of torture on Muslim captives---a decision that was ineffective and more damaging to us than to them.

And finally, one well-intentioned reminder not to blame innocent American Muslims was a movie on A&E. The Space Between was unfortunately manipulative. Every American character was either drunk, slutty, bullying, or ignorant. The heroes were a 10-year-old Muslim boy, his father, and his cleric. This heavy-handed stuff could have been much more useful if not such blatant propaganda.

684 words

Dr. Laina Farhat-Holzman is a historian, lecturer, and author of How Do You Know That? You may contact her at Lfarhat102@aol.com or www.globalthink.net.