

Remembering 9/11

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Scott Kraft

For all of us here, this day—9/11—is one of those rare days that instantly calls up a set of feelings and images. For another generation, that date was December 7—Pearl Harbor. For my generation, that date was November 22—President Kennedy’s assassination. Of course, we all remember, where we were on 9/11, I’m sure. All of those dates are symbols. In a way they have something in common because they’re symbols of a moment when we as Americans felt less safe and less secure. Our bubble of security burst and we were all reminded how vulnerable we are.

At the *L.A. Times* and at other major news organizations across the country and across the world, 9/11 was the beginning of a period of challenges for journalists who were accustomed to sending reporters into dangerous situations. But in the past five years, we’ve sent our colleagues into situations more dangerous, more perilous, than ever before. All of us up here on this panel, along with our colleagues on the ground in places such as Baghdad, have spent most of our time for the past five years in one way or another trying to make sense of 9/11. The immediate reaction of the country was that 9/11 would change everything. I thought we all thought that five years ago today. But has it really? A recent Pew research poll found that a slight majority of Americans, just 51 percent, believe America has changed in a major way since 9/11, but interestingly many more—76 percent—said their own lives have changed very little, or not at all. Many today speak of the “new normal,” which actually some columnist invented after Katrina, but anyway we’re using it for 9/11, too. But the “new normal” is just the old normal with people piling through our luggage at airports.

To answer these questions, we have a truly heavy-weight panel of my colleagues at the *Times*. At the far end of the table is Sue Horton. She’s the Metropolitan editor of the *Times* and she’s been deeply involved in directing coverage of the local impact of 9/11.

To my immediate left is Marjorie Miller who has been at the *Times* for two decades and has been Foreign Editor since 2001. This is a job to which she came supremely well-qualified. She has held a series of foreign postings for the *Times*, including London, Jerusalem, Bonn and Mexico City.

And sandwiched in between them is Doyle McManus whom you may recognize from television. Doyle has been Bureau Chief in Washington for the *L.A. Times* for the past decade. His ample

resume covers the top beats in Washington, including covering the White House as well as national security and foreign policy. He's been posted as well in our New York bureau and from 1979 to 1981 in Beirut.

I'd like to start things off with a few questions of the panel and then they'll speak for a while and then we'd all like to take questions from the floor.

I'll begin with Sue. One lesson of 9/11 was that the United States was surprising vulnerable to a relatively low-budget, low-tech attack on its own soil. Have we learned that lesson in California and are we safer here than we were five years ago?

Sue Horton

Well, funny you should ask that question because we've just spent the last couple of months trying to figure that out in Los Angeles and California, whether we're any safer after billions of dollars and an awful lot of effort on the part of a lot of agencies. In typical newspaper fashion, we came up with the answer "yes and no."

The "yes" part is that we've spent an awful lot of money and effort to improve things, to bolster security across California. Let's talk a bit about the two places we've spent the most—the port of Los Angeles and the airport. We used very different approaches at those two places. At the airport everybody is a suspect. If you go to the airport every single person goes through the same screening, your bags go through the same screening. The 80 year old grandmother and the young Arab man go through exactly the same screening and that screening has gotten, as you've all noticed, ever more vigorous. Certainly that had an effect on certain kinds of things. It's highly unlikely after September 11, when the airports reopened, that anybody is going to get on the plane carrying box cutters or that anybody would be able to get into the cockpit to take out a pilot.

We've tended to fight the last war at the airports, so that it's not exactly confidence-inspiring that every plot involving air travel that's been discovered since September 11 we weren't prepared for. A shoe bomber got onto his plane with plastic explosives in his shoes. He was too incompetent to set them off in the end, but he was able to get through security. We started fighting that war and now we have to take our shoes off when we go through security. The London plot that was uncovered, now they're going to keep liquid explosives in all likelihood off airplanes.

But if you notice the terrorists' plots, they were not trying to get past the security that was in place; they were trying to find new ways that they could get through, and so it's not exactly confidence-inspiring. The fact is that we can't protect ourselves fully and that we've been lucky so far in that Al Qaeda seems to like the grand gesture kind of terrorism—if you can't fly planes into buildings or explode seven planes in the air at the same time, what's the point? There are a lot of vulnerabilities that we know about at the airport, for example, like we have this additional security that has caused very long lines that extend outside the terminals and that's an open invitation to terrorism. In some ways we're safer flying now and in some ways that we haven't even anticipated yet, we probably aren't.

The port is a very different approach. When a ship leaves its home port, 24 hours before it sails it has to provide the United States with cargo lists, passenger lists, crew lists, and that's all gone over while the ship is in transit, and then customs and coast guards and TSA authorities and Homeland Security decide which ships they're going to look at once they come here. We handle 40 percent of the cargo that comes in and out of the United States here in the ports of Los Angeles

and Long Beach. They can't do everything so they target and they look at specific ships. What that means is that they only x-ray about six percent of the containers that come in and they only actually open about .4 percent of the containers that come in. So, it's an awfully big haystack and we're not really looking for that many needles. We don't know – we'll find out that there is probably a better way of doing things than used to be done when there was no screening whatsoever. Will it protect us? We'll find out.

Scott Kraft – Another way of stopping terrorism in Southern California, and elsewhere, is to develop a better intelligence network. Several of the 9/11 hijackers spent some time in Southern California; there have also been some thwarted attacks planned against LAX and other places. How good is the intelligence gathering that the government is doing in Southern California and has it improved at all in the last five years?

Sue Horton That, of course, is the million dollar question. The least transparent thing for a journalist to look at is how intelligence gathering is going, since they really don't open that up to our inspection very often. But if there's one thing that we've learned from the foiled plot in London it's that intelligence, in the end, is really the way of preventing terrorism. And, some of the things that we've seen in California are disturbing in terms of how intelligence is working here. One thing that we saw is that in the days and weeks and months after September 11 the FBI did major sweeps of young Arab men living in the United States—any expired visa, any reason to send somebody home was taken. One question that comes is whether that actually removed some of the best sources of intelligence that the U.S. could have had. One of our reporters got an email recently from a young Yemeni man who got sent back. He was here on an expired student visa and got sent back right after September 11 and they were corresponding. He'd looked at the Chechnyan jihad websites pretty often and so he was just grilled and interrogated before getting sent back about this, and he wrote to our reporter, "Dude, you have to understand this—before 9/11 we were all jihadists." And he went on to explain that that didn't mean that they were all going to commit acts of terrorism and that didn't mean that they weren't all appalled by the actions of September 11. But these were probably the people who had the best chance of possibly hearing about things that were unfolding. The vast bulk of Muslims living in California or in the United States would tell instantly of any plots that they heard about, but they've got no chance, most of them, of ever hearing about a plot because they're not the kind of people who are involved in terrorist plots. There's concern among a lot of people that U.S. intelligence has been so heavy-handed that it has alienated the people who would most likely be able to help us.

Scott Kraft: And to circle back to your first answer, Washington has sent billions of dollars to California help in the anti-terrorism effort. What is that being spent on and is it doing any good?

Sue Horton: We need to do a lot more looking at that as a newspaper. The little things that we've taken apart suggest that while a lot of the things could be justified as money that was well spent, it's not a very coordinated effort. When we've gone in deep we've found some pretty disturbing things. One of our reporters, Charlie Orenstein, did a story last spring about how L.A. County spent the \$110 million it got in federal grants to prepare for bioterrorism attacks and some of the spending was just ludicrous. They spent \$60,000 hiring extras to pretend to have small-pox in the demonstration that they were doing. Another \$25,000 went to pay for the gift bags for those actors. The County bought 70 desk chairs that cost \$600 each. They bought 800 computers, even though they have 170 staff members working on bioterrorism. So some of this terrorism money, I think, is going to things that were under-funded before but aren't necessarily directly related to terrorism. We can do a lot more looking at this in the months to come.

Scott Kraft: Marjorie was based in London on 9/11 and was there to witness what we read about here. The amazing outpouring of support for America and Americans. We're in a much different place today. I think most of us would agree in terms of how the world views us. How did we squander our goodwill?

Marjorie Miller If you think that Sue sounded a little grim, wait until you hear me. I will go back to the amazing weeks following 9/11 because they were remarkable. Strangers would hear my accent and come up to me in the street and say how sorry and sad they were, and taxi drivers and Pakistani shopkeepers, and it was such an experience like nothing I've ever had anywhere in the world and, of course, you remember the French newspaper headline, "We are all Americans." The French were embracing us, if you can remember that. There were, back then, practical consequences of that. Everyone believed that we needed to be united in the so-called war on terror or in fighting Muslim extremism, and when it came to going into Afghanistan there was a coalition. There was widespread agreement that it was a base of training and logistics for Al Qaeda and we went after the Taliban with the coalition. Even in Afghanistan the Afghans felt that this was actually a rescue, not interference.

That goodwill and unity lasted close to a year. I moved back to the States in 2001. Already we were preparing to go to war in Iraq and already the coalition was fraying over the question of intelligence and whether in fact Iraq was the right target when the bases of Al Qaeda were still being in Afghanistan and Pakistan. So, we ended up going to war almost alone, with Britain. The initial war was very fast and successful. Saddam Hussein was ousted. A large part of the people in Iraq and the Muslim world saw that with relief. They thought it was a good thing, but another part of Iraq was very fearful that that would lead to ethnic and religious conflict, to a civil war. Basically, that's what has happened. We have been bogged down in Iraq fighting an insurgency, with continuous bloodletting on our part and on the part of Iraqis. So, the war in Iraq has defined, really, the entire post-September 11 period for us internationally much more than the September 11 attacks and much more than the so-called war on terror. It has had several consequences in much of the world. In Europe and certainly in the Muslim world, it's become a symbol of U.S. arrogance. It is fueling anti-Americanism among our allies and friends and it's fueling hostility and hatred among Muslims which in turn is creating more extremists. So, in fact, we went into Afghanistan and we went into Iraq supposedly to fight terrorism, but the very wars are fueling terrorism. Why is that? If you go back to Osama bin Laden, he started as an anti-communist, fighting Soviets in Afghanistan, and he evolved into an anti-American, or anti-Western jihadist over the presence of U.S. troops in Saudi Arabia, which continued an ongoing presence after Gulf War I. He and people like him viewed that as an occupation by the infidels of Muslim land. Well, now they view the occupation of Iraq, because we're still there, and the occupation of Afghanistan, because we're still there, as further cause for a jihadi war.

Another consequence is that Iraq itself has become the new Afghanistan in that it's a real-time, real-life training base for jihadists. Before they went to Afghanistan and practiced in camps. Now they go to Iraq and they learn explosives and urban combat and they go back to Saudi Arabia or go back to Europe and hope to fight there. So, basically that's what's happened in the last five years; somehow, by becoming bogged down in Iraq, we have squandered that goodwill and unity that we had after September 11.

Scott Kraft You also talked about the region around Iraq. What did the administration specifically do to turn that region against the United States' interests and how does it go about fixing it? What is it doing to try to fix that?

Marjorie Miller It is the prolonged war that has turned people against us, the continued images every day of the bloodletting in Iraq, the failure to find any kind of resolution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Those images are also on television every day in the Arab world, and are used to justify the need to fight the West. The recent war in Lebanon between Israel and the Hezbollah is another example. Ostensibly, I believe, it was not a war of our choosing and certainly the timing of it wasn't, but the Lebanese government was calling for a quick cease fire and the U.S. and Britain were not supporting that. In fact, they were effectively allowing the war to go on for many days. In the Arab world, that and the larger Muslim world, that is seen as the U.S. not even supporting its moderate allies in Lebanon. And this has come back to bite us. In Britain where really the Prime Minister Tony Blair, who has been our staunchest ally, supported us wholeheartedly on Iraq and on Lebanon—he supported Bush in not calling for a ceasefire right away—is about to lose his job largely over these two issues. I did get a poll recently from a conservative newspaper, the *Daily Telegraph*, which said that a majority of British people want their government to adopt more aggressive measures in foreign policy, to combat terrorism internationally and more aggressive domestic measures. But at the same time the vast majority, more than five to one, say they want Blair to split from the United States and either go it alone internationally or go with Europe. Only eight percent said they believed Bush and Blair were winning the battle against Muslim extremism, and only 14 percent said they thought that Blair should continue to ally himself with the United States. So the Britain that was, you know, stopping me on the street five years ago really wants nothing to do with us right now.

Scott Kraft Why does it matter if the countries in Europe are trying to distance themselves from the United States?

Marjorie Miller Why does it matter if the French have another reason to hate us? Well, it matters in the positive and it can matter in the negative. It's simply that if we don't have a coalition we can't spread the burden. We went into Afghanistan with Europe and spread some of the early burdens of cost and the fighting. We could not get that same support in Iraq and we haven't been able to get funding for Iraq, we haven't been able to get follow-up funding for Afghanistan. It's been very difficult to get troops or peacekeeping forces in Lebanon. Also, going back to Afghanistan, things are a little shaky there. I was talking with my correspondent the other day and she said, "You know it's interesting because they're getting fed up with Karzai and they're getting fed up with the United States, but because Europe went there with us they're also fed up with Europe," and so it spreads the blame if things go south. That's not a bad thing, you know. It sort of balances things out. So we do need allies.

Scott Kraft Doyle, you just wrote a piece for the paper that has the question "Are we winning or losing the war on terrorism?"—which is a real question, but also a political question, especially as we approach the mid-term elections. President Bush says "yes" unequivocally; many others say no. Who's right, or is it just too early to tell?

Doyle McManus Well, Marjorie mentioned that the British poll showed that a large number of British don't think the west is winning the war on terrorism. The *L.A. Times* did a poll in June and it was striking to me in that 57 percent of the Americans that we asked that question—are we winning or losing?—said it's too early to tell. I think of Americans as usually being optimistic and bullish and if we're in a war, certainly a war for our survival, most Americans, I think, are going to want to say "by golly, we're winning." Fifty-seven percent said it's too early to tell and only about 24 percent said we were winning. Something like 15 or 16 percent said we're losing. People who answer a poll aren't the best authority on who's winning or losing but there clearly is a question out there. As my colleagues and I try to grapple with that tough

question are we winning or losing? you will not be surprised to find out as we did when we tried to answer the question of “are we safer?” we came up with the answer “yes and no.” But I don’t think that was a cop-out. This is a very complicated multi-level issue we’re looking at here, so let me tell you the “yes” side and then I’ll tell you the “no” side.

The yes side: the good news is that, as Dick Cheney said on television the other day, it is not inconsequential that there hasn’t been another attack in five years. It is, as the vice president said, just possible that someone in the federal government did something right. It’s interesting that he had to put it that way; he’s not sure what it was they did right. We’ve all heard lots of things that they appear to have done wrong, but he’s probably right. Something was done right. Our airplanes are safer, our ports are safer to some degree. We have made it more difficult for terrorists to strike the United States, at least until now. That early fear on 9/11 that everything was going to change and that American life was going to be irrevocably different and that we would live in fear and that we would live surrounded by security, that our economy would take an enormous hit, that nothing would ever be the same—all of that turned out to be overblown. Yes, there is more security at the airports, yes there’s more spending on security, but in fact American life and even the Constitution are still intact. These are all questions worth watching, but they are still intact. That’s the good news. Most of the experts we’ve talked to sort of summarize tactically. If you look at the war on terror, you look at what Special Forces have done, what intelligence has done, al Qaeda has not been dismantled, they’re still there. As you know, Osama and Al-Zawahri are still somewhere on the Pakistan-Afghanistan border and still making remarkably professional videos, and making them, in fact, with greater frequency than they have before. Their media strategy has been honed so that they release them in time for anniversaries and elections, so they haven’t been knocked out by any means but their operations have clearly been disrupted to some degree. We don’t know exactly to what degree. That’s the tactical side.

The bad news, the “no” part, is on the long-term strategic side. As it is often pointed out, as Americans we tend to think in business from one quarter to the next and from one annual report to the next. In politics, in Washington, where I live, we think that history comes in two-year election cycles. Osama bin Laden and his colleagues in the jihad think in terms of centuries. They’re in this for the long run and they have a much longer planning horizon, if you like. And the fact that al Qaeda Central, as the terrorism experts in the U.S. government now call it, al Qaeda Central has been disrupted, oddly enough means that there has been what I think in criminal law is sometimes called the “displacement effect;” the United States mainland isn’t being attacked any more, but European countries are. Al Qaeda Central isn’t directing every one of these plots, but what are called the al Qaeda affiliates are more robust and more professional, they’ve learned more technology, they’re using the Internet, and they’re improvising new forms of explosives.

And then you have the phenomena of homegrown terrorism. All that reflects what Marjorie was referring, unfortunately the events of the last five years have, whether we intended them to or not, radicalized more young Muslims in Europe, in the Middle East, have had the unintended effect of training more jihadists in more sophisticated forms of warfare than they knew before, and that’s our long-term problem. There is a larger, more wide-spread, more dangerous movement out there. That’s why I think the most interesting phrase in all of the torrent of words you’ve heard from George W. Bush over the last ten days, was a new phrase that turned up in some of those speeches—our President Bush and his people have begun likening this struggle to the Cold War and they’ve begun talking about it not as a war in which Special Forces are going to go in. The first phase of this war was dominated by a strategy called “kill and capture”—knock down doors, round people up, use intelligence, use the Special Forces, use things that Americans are good at, and they did and they claim, and as we can tell it is true, that they were able to remove three-

quarters of the known leadership of al Qaeda from the battlefield. That's three-quarters of the known leadership as they were known on September 10, 2001. Of course, then you have to ask Secretary Rumsfeld's question—Are they recruiting and training and deploying more terrorists than we are eliminating?—Unfortunately the consensus now among journalists, among intelligence experts and terrorism experts in the U.S. government, is that the answer to Secretary Rumsfeld's question is “no, they actually are deploying more people than we are able to take down.” So that is why you see a new shift into thinking of this as a war of ideas and as a struggle over the visions of the future of the Muslim world. The bad news is that the Cold War took 50 years; this one may take just as long.

Scott Kraft In recent weeks a few commentators have suggested that government and the media, in particular, might be hyperventilating unnecessarily about the terrorist threats, and made the point that despite 9/11 the chances of an American dying in a terrorist attack is still insignificant, less than being killed in a car accident, for example. So it does raise the question “Should we even care and is the intention that has been focused on the anti-terror effort more of a political decision than a decision based on reality?”

Doyle McManus The scholar you are referring to is a wonderful, quirky, brilliant, iconoclastic man named John Mueller who teaches at Ohio State. Actually, for football fans you'll be amused to know he holds the Woody Hays Chair in National Security at Ohio State. His scholarship is not like Ohio State football. He's always taking end runs and coming at you from a place you wouldn't expect him to. John Mueller said not only are your chances as an American of dying from terrorism far less than your chances of dying from a freeway accident, your chances of dying from terrorism are less than your chances of drowning in the bathtub. And he is statistically correct—so far. But for that to remain correct we have to stay lucky for quite a long time. I think John Mueller's more serious point is this—it is possible for the United States to defeat itself, if you will, if we overreact. If we suspend the Constitution, if we cripple our economy with spending that we don't examine to make sure it's wise. If we convince ourselves that the imminence of terrorism is so great that we stop living our daily lives, Mueller and a few others have argued that our fears and our attention to the problem has been abetted by what they call “the terrorism industry.” And there is such a thing. The army of consultants in Washington—undeniably the target of a terrorist attack someday—the companies that sell their services, the scholars who have made their reputations on this and, yes, Mueller have not accused President Bush and the Republicans of inventing the threat for political use, but he does point out as Karl Rove also pointed out, some years ago, that this is a good issue for Republicans to run on. I'm not going to take sides in that particular argument, but I will admit that I think it is worth once in a while catching our breaths and asking ourselves, “Okay. Are we hyperventilating and should we calm down a little bit and keep what I think is a serious problem in some perspective.”

Scott Kraft The president's legacy has been closely linked to 9/11. That legacy seems to be up for grabs at the moment. Can you tell us a bit about the evolution of Bush's actions on terrorism, his strategy for terrorism and the impact that's having on his legacy although it's early yet?

Doyle McManus Well, if you think back to the days after September 11, that was a period that I think you could reasonably characterize as sort of a controlled national panic. We had this enormous threat and we didn't know how to deal with it. There was a long list of measures taken in enormous haste. Guantanamo was invented very quickly because they had to stash people picked up in Afghanistan. All of those new legal authorities written up by the office of the vice president's counsel and the house counsel, a lot of the early FBI sweeps that Sue referred to where

the premium was on rounding up everybody who looked suspicious as soon as possible because you didn't know what was out there and you didn't know how soon the next attack would come, that was sort of phase one. Phase one was the phase of panic, and that I think led maybe not directly, but led to the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq which I'm not implying here were merely the product of the panic. But that was part of the early stage.

Then we've gone through in Washington a long period of reorganization building new institutions in the United States government for a problem that we're not going to solve in one or two years but that may take a generation or two to solve. So you have the invention of the Department of Homeland Security then you have new parts of the military, you've got the Director of National Intelligence. Now what we are seeing is a kind of interesting phenomena—it's what I would call the course correction. The fact that the president and vice president, who are not men who voluntarily admit to mistakes very often, are saying, "Yeah, we've made some mistakes here and there and we're going to fix them." The fact that the Congress of the United States, and three Republican senators in particular, have insisted that the rules for detainees have to be brought back into line towards the Constitution and the rules of the Supreme Court.

We are again settling in for the long run. Now, what is this going to mean for George W. Bush's legacy? He's already making an argument in the heat of this election campaign—in a more explicit way than the people of the administration have made before—that he deserves credit for the fact that there has been no second attack in five years. Now, for many years we would ask that question and officials were reticent to make that claim explicitly because they never knew if the next attack was going to come next week, they didn't want to be caught at. I have a sneaking suspicion that the fact that we're less than two months away from an election has made it a wiser calculation to sort of roll the dice and hope we don't have an attack. But for those of you who didn't hear President Bush's speech this evening, just before we gathered for dinner, it was striking, it was a speech on the anniversary of September 11 and he devoted an enormous amount of time to the issue that all the talking heads, like me, have been saying he's going to try to stay away from during this campaign, and that's the issue of Iraq. He went back to Iraq time and again in that speech, saying Iraq is the central battleground and, in effect, staking his legacy on the outcome in Iraq. So, I think that George W. Bush is convinced that it is the central battleground in the war on terror and that he is willing to stake his historical legacy on success in Iraq.

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