What America Has Lost

*It’s clear we overreacted to 9/11.*

by Fareed Zakaria

September 04, 2010

Photos: Life Returns to Ground Zero

Life Returns to Ground Zero

Nine years after 9/11, can anyone doubt that Al Qaeda is simply not that deadly a threat? Since that gruesome day in 2001, once governments everywhere began serious countermeasures, Osama bin Laden’s terror network has been unable to launch a single major attack on high-value targets in the United States and Europe. While it has inspired a few much smaller attacks by local jihadis, it has been unable to execute a single one itself. Today, Al Qaeda’s best hope is to find a troubled young man who has been radicalized over the Internet, and teach him to stuff his underwear with explosives.

I do not minimize Al Qaeda’s intentions, which are barbaric. I question its capabilities. In every recent conflict, the United States has been right about the evil intentions of its adversaries but massively exaggerated their strength. In the 1980s, we thought the Soviet Union was expanding its power and influence when it was on the verge of economic and political bankruptcy. In the 1990s, we were certain that Saddam Hussein had a nuclear arsenal. In fact, his factories could barely make soap.

The error this time is more damaging. September 11 was a shock to the American psyche and the American system. As a result, we overreacted. In a crucially important *Washington Post*
reporting project, “Top Secret America,” Dana Priest and William Arkin spent two years gathering information on how 9/11 has really changed America.

September 11 Anniversary Package

- Inside Al Qaeda
- Why Osama Bin Laden Still Matters
- A Eureka Moment in the Middle of a Nightmare
- Photos: 9/11 Memorial Stalled in Bureaucracy
- 9/11’s Steel Beams Become Memorial Icons

Here are some of the highlights. Since September 11, 2001, the U.S. government has created or reconfigured at least 263 organizations to tackle some aspect of the war on terror. The amount of money spent on intelligence has risen by 250 percent, to $75 billion (and that’s the public number, which is a gross underestimate). That’s more than the rest of the world spends put together. Thirty-three new building complexes have been built for intelligence bureaucracies alone, occupying 17 million square feet—the equivalent of 22 U.S. Capitols or three Pentagons. Five miles southeast of the White House, the largest government site in 50 years is being built—at a cost of $3.4 billion—to house the largest bureaucracy after the Pentagon and the Department of Veterans Affairs: the Department of Homeland Security, which has a workforce of 230,000 people.

This new system produces 50,000 reports a year—136 a day!—which of course means few ever get read. Those senior officials who have read them describe most as banal; one tells me, “Many could be produced in an hour using Google.” Fifty-one separate bureaucracies operating in 15 states track the flow of money to and from terrorist organizations, with little information-sharing.

Some 30,000 people are now employed exclusively to listen in on phone conversations and other communications in the United States. And yet no one in Army intelligence noticed that Maj. Nidal Malik Hasan had been making a series of strange threats at the Walter Reed Army Medical Center, where he trained. The father of the Nigerian “Christmas bomber” reported his son’s radicalism to the U.S. Embassy. But that message never made its way to the right people in this vast security apparatus. The plot was foiled only by the bomber’s own incompetence and some alert passengers.

Such mistakes might be excusable. But the rise of this national-security state has entailed a vast expansion in the government’s powers that now touches every aspect of American life, even when seemingly unrelated to terrorism. The most chilling aspect of Dave Eggers's heartbreaking book, Zeitoun, is that the federal government’s fastest and most efficient response to Hurricane Katrina was the creation of a Guantánamo-like prison facility (in days!) in which 1,200 American citizens were summarily detained and denied any of their constitutional rights for months, a suspension of habeas corpus that reads like something out of a Kafka novel.

In the past, the U.S. government has built up for wars, assumed emergency authority, and sometimes abused that power, yet always demobilized after the war. But this is a war without end. When do we declare victory? When do the emergency powers cease?

Conservatives are worried about the growing power of the state. Surely this usurpation is more worrisome than a few federal stimulus programs. When James Madison pondered this issue,
he came to a simple conclusion: “Of all the enemies to public liberty war is, perhaps, the most to be dreaded, because it comprises and develops the germs of every other ... In war, too, the discretionary power of the executive is extended?..and all the means of seducing the minds, are added to those of subduing the force, of the people.

“No nation could preserve its freedom in the midst of continual war,” Madison concluded.