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9/11 reconsidered, this time honestly

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By Charles R. Church

Reading Susan Sontag's short yet trenchant essay about 9/11 in the September 24, 2001, *New Yorker* forced me to remember that time. Our politicians and pundits, treating us as credulous children, kept feeding us Pablum instead of reality after the terrible attacks. But these were no cowardly assaults on freedom or democracy or, worse yet, civilization, as we were told repeatedly. Rather, they resulted from our own conduct and alliances in the Middle East. While reflecting once again on that terrible day, let us this time think as grownups.

The assault should not have come as a total surprise. Yet I am not referring to the now-infamous briefing to President George W. Bush on Aug. 6, 2001, titled: "Bin Laden Determined to Strike the U.S." Rather, thanks to Boston University Professor Andrew J. Bacevich's free online course titled, "The War for the Greater Middle East" (www.edx.org ^[3]), I will write of other, clearer warnings that demonstrated — as Bacevich maintains — that Al Qaeda (AQ) and others already had started a war against us.

We surely gave them ample provocation, albeit (here's the crying shame) without realizing we had done so. After the Persian Gulf War, the U.S. maintained these military forces in the region:

- Troops in Kuwait
- Airbases in Turkey and Saudi Arabia
- The 5th Fleet in the Persian Gulf

Further, the U.S. continued to nurture its intimate bond with Israel, a nation many Arabs despise.

Then, in December 1992 the U.N. detailed mostly American troops to the almost entirely Muslim Somalia, to relieve the near-apocalyptic famine that had descended on that failed state. That sounds like a blessing, not a provocation, doesn't it? But we didn't leave after the famine had ended. Our mission became an exercise in "nation building," and Somalia united to rid itself of this now-hostile occupation. Bin Laden described the struggle as a "holy war." The story ended badly for us, with Black Hawk helicopters downed in

Mogadishu, and troops slaughtered. The mission soon was terminated, while Bill Clinton attempted to put a brave face on what became a debacle.

The fruits of our incursions were not long in coming, and they were bitter indeed, given the hundreds of lives lost and the enormous damage inflicted:

- In 1993, AQ exploded a Ryder rental truck in a parking garage beneath a tower at the World Trade Center.
- In 1996, a truck filled with explosives ripped the entire facade off one of the Khobar Towers employed as military barracks for U.S. Air Force personnel in Dahrhan, Saudi Arabia. This time, Iran and Hezbollah were the culprits.
- In 1998, AQ detonated what Bacevich describes as “monster truck bombs” at the U.S. Embassies in Kenya and Tanzania.
- In 2000, AQ attacked yet again, this time in Aden Harbor, Yemen. An explosives-laden launch approached the destroyer U.S.S. Cole as it fueled, the boat’s occupants waving amicably. The explosion tore an enormous breach in the vessel’s hull.

Plainly, Bacevich is correct in arguing that AQ was waging war against the U.S. during those years, but our leaders from both parties either failed to connect the dots, or, more likely, elected not to treat us as adults by sharing that ugly truth. Hence, the shock of the 9/11 events hit us with even greater devastating force. Alas, we citizens didn’t realize that the U.S. already was at war long before the planes struck.

With that greater understanding, I like to imagine, wholly against all evidence to the contrary, I fear, that we citizens might have had the courage and moral acuity after 9/11 to raise such a clamor in the face of Guantanamo’s indefinite detentions, our extraordinary renditions of kidnapped suspects to countries that would torture them for us, CIA black sites, and all that torture we ourselves inflicted that our leaders would have been forced to abandon those atrocities. Since so many of those odious activities were conducted in secret, at least for a time, we could not have prevented our government-gone-mad from initiating them. But reports began to seep out. And we surely knew about Guantanamo, where hundreds, many of whom had never harmed us, were being imprisoned incommunicado. Shortly after the attacks, Dick Cheney, with remarkable candor, had declared: “We’ll have to work sort of the dark side, if you will. We’ve got to spend time in the shadows in the intelligence world. A lot of what needs to be done here will have to be done quietly, without any discussion, using sources and methods that are available to our intelligence agencies ... It’s going to be vital for us to use any means at our disposal basically, to achieve our objectives.”

We can’t say we weren’t warned. And yet our nation remained mostly silent about the atrocities we were inflicting, until a new government did most of the work for us.

Charles R. Church is a human rights lawyer who, as a Senior Fellow at the Center for Policy and Research, Seton Hall Law, recently spent a week at Guantanamo, serving as an observer/journalist at pretrial proceedings for the 9/11 case. He lives and practices law in Salisbury.

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