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9/11 & COVID-19

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Nineteen years ago, September 11, 2001:

7:59 am: American Airlines Flight 11 departed Boston for Los Angeles. 8:14 am: United Airlines Flight 175 departed Boston for Los Angeles. 8:20 am: American Airlines Flight 77 departed Washington DC for Los Angeles. 8:42 am: United Airlines Flight 93 departed Newark for San Francisco.

8:46 am: American Airlines Flight 11 exploded when it hit the World Trade Center North Tower (WTC1), floors 93–99.



My Cumberland colleague Bob Eisenbeis and I were in the NABE breakfast plenary session at the Marriott Hotel in WTC3, adjoining the South Tower. We heard the explosion. The building shook. The ballroom chandelier swayed overhead. The speaker ceased talking. The session ended. Everyone started a rapid but orderly exit. Through the hotel foyer's windows smoke, debris and pandemonium greeted our eyes.

I was able to exit quickly through the emergency doors of the Tall Ships Bar on the southernmost side of the hotel and onto Liberty Street. I was a lucky one. I had come down from hotel's upper floors for a 7 A.M. morning coffee meeting. I had checked out of the hotel and had my briefcase with me.

Exit onto Liberty Street. Turn right, away from the North Tower – the only direction that made any sense. Cross West Street on foot; no cars moving. Quickly help two injured folks get up. Redirect a hysterical young mother pushing a stroller, who has stopped in her tracks, overcome. “Go over there!” I yelled, pointing at the Hudson River and away from the WTC complex. Zombie-like, she started to put one foot in front of the other and move her stroller and baby in that direction.

On the knoll across from the old *Wall Street Journal* escalator entrance, I turned to look at the smoking North Tower. The scene is indelibly etched in my brain. To this day I can close my eyes and see the two people jumping to certain death from the floor above the fire. They were holding hands. They elected a 100-floor fall to concrete over being burned alive.

At 9:03 am I was still looking at the North Tower on fire when United Airlines Flight 175 hit the South Tower, floors 77–85. The plane was a blur. The explosion was the loudest sound I recall hearing. The fireball was ten stories tall and ten wide. Army training kicked in, and I estimated the fireball size and counted the “flash-to-bang” time by instinct.

The rest of my story has been told many times in articles and blogs and speeches on 9/11 anniversaries – one year there were three speeches in one day. The largest audience to hear my story was a national meeting of YMCA directors; I talked about faith and 9/11. Another time I stood before students who were very young when 9/11 happened. Some years there were videotapes or live TV interviews.

Until 2020, the story has always been the same. But today, events in our country call for a new chapter to be added to this story.

By day's end on 9/11, all flights in the United States had been grounded. Most of the rest of the world followed America's lead. Air marshals were on the planes that resumed flying a few days later. Congress funded an emergency aid package without much partisan political squabbling, although there was some of it. America launched the Transportation Security Administration (TSA). Everyone in the world who flies now uses it or a variation of it; you have no choice and you cannot break the rules without being penalized.

There was and there still is a debate about privacy rights, and a few people may still say, "I won't let TSA inspect my luggage – I'm a free person and you can't search me." But acceptance of air safety measures is now very widespread.

America was warned about the 9/11 attacks and ignored the warnings. The 1993 World Trade Center garage bombing was the most pronounced warning (<https://www.state.gov/1993-world-trade-center-bombing/>). America had known about Al Qaida for years and about its training of terrorists. Americans had experienced the hijacking of airplanes. The rest of the world knew, too.

Yes, after 9/11 things changed. Result: How many hijackings can you remember in the last 19 years? Think about it. Do flyers today fear for their safety from a hijacker-terrorist attack? No.

But flyers do fear for their safety from a different type of terrorist in 2020.

Here's a YouTube of a mother and daughter being removed from a commercial flight because of their refusal to wear masks. It takes less than a minute to view it: <https://www.youtube.com/embed/eWPK29BY1a4>. Note these facts, please. No masks. Forcible eviction from the plane. The plane's passengers are applauding her eviction, not her no-mask stance. (Listen closely to words of the passengers, including one calling her a "dumbass.") Note the guards, all of whom are Caucasian. The unmasked woman yells "Racism at its best!" There is no evidence of racism, but she screams it anyway.

That scream has critically important implications if she is asymptomatic but carrying COVID-19. Her infectious droplets have a potential range of up to 20 feet. Here is a link to an important research paper that describes how aerosolization of SARS-CoV-2 works and how the six-foot distance standard that originated decades ago is now very much antiquated with COVID-19: "Two metres or one: what is the evidence for physical distancing in covid-19?," *British Medical Journal*, <https://www.bmj.com/content/370/bmj.m3223>. And here's why masking protects folks like those on this airplane: "Promoting mask-wearing during the COVID-19 pandemic: A policymaker's guide," Resolve to Save Lives, <https://preventepidemics.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/08/Promoting-Mask-Wearing-During-COVID-19.pdf>.

After 9/11, our country mobilized under responsible leadership, and our leaders set examples by their behavior. This time around, with COVID-19, federal and state leadership has been haphazard, chaotic and often deplorably inadequate (Florida is a sad example of repeated failure). We have had repeated warnings of the pandemic threat (just as we were warned of an imminent terrorist attack in the runup to 9/11). The pandemic warnings came in the form of SARS, MERS, Ebola, bird flu, H1N1, Zika, etc. We stepped up preparations for a while, but then stopped. Then we cut funding for research.

(<https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/to-your-health/wp/2018/02/01/cdc-to-cut-by-80-percent-efforts-to-prevent-global-disease-outbreak/>)

Two months ago, as the global pandemic raged, our federal government even withdrew from the World Health Organization (WHO) ("Trump Said He Would Terminate the U.S. Relationship With the W.H.O. Here's What That Means," <https://time.com/5847505/trump-withdrawl-who/>). Put your politics aside if you can, and think about what people would do if the US withdrew from the IATA and stopped supporting worldwide aviation safety. Would you still fly and feel that everything was back to business as usual? And now the US is the only major country not participating in the worldwide COVAX vaccine initiative ("U.S. says it won't join WHO-linked effort to develop, distribute coronavirus vaccine," *Washington Post*, https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/coronavirus-vaccine-trump/2020/09/01/b44b42be-e965-11ea-bf44-0d31c85838a5_story.html).

Think about what Americans would do if we made TSA screening optional. Try out this script: You can fly with or without screening. If you want to be screened, we will screen you, but we will allow unscreened people to fly with you. Would you take that flight? Is this scenario business as usual? Why is a COVID-19 death any different than a terrorist bomb death? Isn't an unmasked, infected person carrying a tiny terrorist bent on infecting others? Statistically, many people's chances of surviving a coronavirus infection are good, yet those tiny viral hijackers have killed more than 60 times the number of Americans who died on 9/11.

The world has changed in the wake of COVID-19, just as it changed after 9/11. Then, the US led the world's response. Now, the US has an awful record. We will see the next chapter as we watch school openings around our nation. And then we may or may not see it in the election outcome. In a political race that appears to us to be too close to call, the "coronavoters" may be the wild card; they originate from diverse subsets of the electorate. A coronavoter may be a Democrat, Republican, independent or a previously disinterested voter return for this election.

Here's a final personal note.

After 9/11, one question lingered in my mind: Why me? Why did I get lucky? Why had I come down from the upper floors early? Why did I go to the NABE breakfast that morning and not to the risk management breakfast meeting I was invited to at the Windows on the World restaurant at the top of the North Tower?

9/11 changed me. But that is a story I have told many times and will continue to tell whenever asked. Next year will be the 20th anniversary of 9/11. I hope to be alive. Maybe I'll have a chance to speak with some students if we can again safely assemble for an anniversary remembrance.

Please let me end by calling attention to Joyce Ng, a survivor of WTC3, whose book *Hotel 9/11* captures survivors' personal stories (<https://www.amazon.com/Hotel-11-History-Survivors-Center/dp/0997860510>). Joyce is working on a sequel. She has my draft for inclusion in it. Joyce, thank you for your hard work and commitment to turn a 19-year-old tragedy into a learning experience for everyone. Remembering the past and learning from the present can teach us how to take care of the future.

Please be safe and careful.

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