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A Decade After 9/11: We Are What We Loathe

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By Chris Hedges

I arrived in Times Square around 9:30 on the morning of Sept. 11, 2001. A large crowd was transfixed by the huge Jumbotron screens. Billows of smoke could be seen on the screens above us, pouring out of the two World Trade towers. Two planes, I was told by people in the crowd, had plowed into the towers. I walked quickly into the New York Times newsroom at 229 W. 43rd St., grabbed a handful of reporter's notebooks, slipped my NYPD press card, which would let me through police roadblocks, around my neck, and started down the West Side Highway to the World Trade Center. The highway was closed to traffic. I walked through knots of emergency workers, police and firemen. Fire trucks, emergency vehicles, ambulances, police cars and rescue trucks idled on the asphalt.

The south tower went down around 10 a.m. with a guttural roar. Huge rolling gray clouds of noxious smoke, dust, gas, pulverized concrete, gypsum and the grit of human remains enveloped lower Manhattan. The sun was obscured. The north tower collapsed about 30 minutes later. The dust hung like a shroud over Manhattan.

I headed toward the spot where the towers once stood, passing dazed, ashen and speechless groups of police officers and firefighters. I would pull out a notebook to ask questions and no sounds would come out of their mouths. They forlornly shook their heads and warded me away gently with their hands. By the time I arrived at Ground Zero it was a moonscape; whole floors of the towers had collapsed like an accordion. I pulled out pieces of paper from one floor, and a few feet below were papers from 30 floors away. Small bits of human bodies—a foot in a woman's shoe, a bit of a leg, part of a torso—lay scattered amid the wreckage.

Scores of people, perhaps more than 200, pushed through the smoke and heat to jump to their deaths from windows that had broken or they had smashed. Sometimes they did this alone, sometimes in pairs. But it seems they took turns, one body cascading downward followed by another. The last acts of individuality. They fell for about 10 seconds, many flailing or replicating the motion of swimmers, reaching 150 miles an hour. Their clothes and, in a few cases, their improvised parachutes made from drapes

or tablecloths shredded. They smashed into the pavement with unnerving, sickening thuds. Thump. Thump. Thump. Those who witnessed it were particularly shaken by the sounds the bodies made on impact.

The images of the “jumpers” proved too gruesome for the TV networks. Even before the towers collapsed, the falling men and women were censored from live broadcasts. Isolated pictures appeared the next day in papers, including The New York Times, and then were banished. The mass suicide, one of the most pivotal and important elements in the narrative of 9/11, was expunged. It remains expunged from public consciousness.

The “jumpers” did not fit into the myth the nation demanded. The fate of the “jumpers” said something so profound, so disturbing, about our own fate, smallness in the universe and fragility that it had to be banned. The “jumpers” illustrated that there are thresholds of suffering that elicit a willing embrace of death. The “jumpers” reminded us that there will come, to all of us, final moments when the only choice will be, at best, how we will choose to die, not how we are going to live. And we can die before we physically expire.

The shock of 9/11, however, demanded images and stories of resilience, redemption, heroism, courage, self-sacrifice and generosity, not collective suicide in the face of overwhelming hopelessness and despair.

Reporters in moments of crisis become clinicians. They collect data, facts, descriptions, basic information, and carry out interviews as swiftly as possible. We make these facts fit into familiar narratives. We do not create facts but we manipulate them. We make facts conform to our perceptions of ourselves as Americans and human beings. We work within the confines of national myth. We make journalism and history a refuge from memory. The pretense that mass murder and suicide can be transformed into a tribute to the victory of the human spirit was the lie we all told to the public that day and have been telling ever since. We make sense of the present only through the lens of the past, as the French philosopher **Maurice Halbwachs** pointed out, recognizing that “our conceptions of the past are affected by the mental images we employ to solve present problems, so that collective memory is essentially a reconstruction of the past in the light of the present. ... Memory needs continuous feeding from collective sources and is sustained by social and moral props.”

I returned that night to the newsroom hacking from the fumes released by the burning asbestos, jet fuel, lead, mercury, cellulose and construction debris. I sat at my computer, my thin paper mask still hanging from my neck, trying to write and catch my breath. All who had been at the site that

day were noticeable in the newsroom because they were struggling for air. Most of us were convulsed by shock and grief.

There would soon, however, be another reaction. Those of us who were close to the epicenters of the 9/11 attacks would primarily grieve and mourn. Those who had some distance would indulge in the growing nationalist cant and calls for blood that would soon triumph over reason and sanity. Nationalism was a disease I knew intimately as a war correspondent. It is anti-thought. It is primarily about self-exaltation. The flip side of nationalism is always racism, the dehumanization of the enemy and all who appear to question the cause. The plague of nationalism began almost immediately. My son, who was 11, asked me what the difference was between cars flying small American flags and cars flying large American flags.

"The people with the really big flags are the really big assholes," I told him.

The dead in the World Trade Center, the Pentagon and a field in Pennsylvania were used to sanctify the state's lust for war. To question the rush to war became to dishonor our martyrs. Those of us who knew that the attacks were rooted in the long night of humiliation and suffering inflicted by Israel on the Palestinians, the imposition of our military bases in the Middle East and in the brutal Arab dictatorships that we funded and supported became apostates. We became defenders of the indefensible. We were apologists, as **Christopher Hitchens** shouted at me on a stage in Berkeley, "for suicide bombers."

Because few cared to examine our activities in the Muslim world, the attacks became certified as incomprehensible by the state and its lap dogs, the press. Those who carried out the attacks were branded as rising out of a culture and religion that was at best primitive and probably evil. The Quran—although it forbids suicide as well as the murder of women and children—was painted as a manual for fanaticism and terror. The attackers embodied the titanic clash of civilizations, the cosmic battle under way between good and evil, the forces of light and darkness. Images of the planes crashing into the towers and heroic rescuers emerging from the rubble were played and replayed. We were deluged with painful stories of the survivors and victims. The deaths and falling towers became iconographic. The ceremonies of remembrance were skillfully hijacked by the purveyors of war and hatred. They became vehicles to justify doing to others what had been done to us. And as innocents died here, soon other innocents began to die in the Muslim world. A life for a life. Murder for murder. Death for death. Terror for terror.

What was played out in the weeks after the attacks was the old, familiar battle between force and human imagination, between the crude instruments of violence and the capacity for empathy and understanding. Human imagination lost. Coldblooded reason, which does not speak the language of the imagination, won. We began to speak and think in the empty, mindless nationalist clichés about terror that the state handed to us. We became what we abhorred. The deaths were used to justify pre-emptive war, invasion, Shock and Awe, prolonged occupation, targeted assassinations, torture, offshore penal colonies, gunning down families at checkpoints, massive aerial bombardments, drone attacks, missile strikes and the killing of dozens and soon hundreds and then thousands and later tens of thousands and finally hundreds of thousands of innocent people. We produced piles of corpses in Afghanistan, Iraq and Pakistan, and extended the reach of our killing machine to Yemen and Somalia. And by beatifying our dead, by cementing into the national psyche fear and the imperative of permanent war, and by stoking our collective humiliation, the state carried out crimes, atrocities and killings that dwarfed anything carried out against us on 9/11. The best that force can do is impose order. It can never elicit harmony. And force was justified, and is still justified, by the first dead. Ten years later these dead haunt us like Banquo's ghost.

"It is the first death which infects everyone with the feelings of being threatened," wrote **Elias Canetti**. "It is impossible to overrate the part played by the first dead man in the kindling of wars. Rulers who want to unleash war know very well that they must procure or invent a first victim. It needs not be anyone of particular importance, and can even be someone quite unknown. Nothing matters except his death; and it must be believed that the enemy is responsible for this. Every possible cause of his death is suppressed except one: his membership of the group to which one belongs oneself."

We were unable to accept the reality of this anonymous slaughter. We were unable because it exposed the awful truth that we live in a morally neutral universe where human life, including our life, can be snuffed out in senseless and random violence. It showed us that there is no protection, not from God, fate, luck, omens or the state.

We have still not woken up to whom we have become, to the fatal erosion of domestic and international law and the senseless waste of lives, resources and trillions of dollars to wage wars that ultimately we can never win. We do not see that our own faces have become as contorted as the faces of the demented hijackers who seized the three commercial jetliners a decade ago. We do not grasp that Osama bin Laden's twisted vision of a world of indiscriminate violence and terror has triumphed. The attacks turned us into

monsters, grotesque ghouls, sadists and killers who drop bombs on village children and waterboard those we kidnap, strip of their rights and hold for years without due process. We acted before we were able to think. And it is the satanic lust of violence that has us locked in its grip.

As Wordsworth wrote:

Action is transitory—a step, a blow,
The motion of a muscle—this way or that—
'Tis done; and in the after-vacancy
We wonder at ourselves like men betrayed:
Suffering is permanent, obscure and dark,
And has the nature of infinity.

We could have gone another route. We could have built on the profound sympathy and empathy that swept through the world following the attacks. The revulsion over the crimes that took place 10 years ago, including in the Muslim world, where I was working in the weeks and months after 9/11, was nearly universal. The attacks, if we had turned them over to intelligence agencies and diplomats, might have opened possibilities not of war and death but ultimately reconciliation and communication, of redressing the wrongs that we commit in the Middle East and that are committed by Israel with our blessing. It was a moment we squandered. Our brutality and triumphalism, the byproducts of nationalism and our infantile pride, revived the jihadist movement. We became the radical Islamist movement's most effective recruiting tool. We descended to its barbarity. We became terrorists too. The sad legacy of 9/11 is that the assholes, on each side, won.