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Never Any Doubt: A Resilient America

Tom Ridge

On September 10, 2001, most Americans were feeling good about their place in the world as a strong, unchallenged nation with a strong, expanding economy.

The ugliness and brutality of terrorism was viewed as an unseemly part of the modern world. With the exception of Oklahoma City and the 1993 World Trade Center bombing, such incidents occurred “over there” – beyond our borders. We were a superpower, enjoying a standard of living unequalled in the world, with friends to the north and south and oceans to the east and west. We were safe, secure, and many concluded, immune from such horrific acts.

It was absolutely unimaginable then that a small group of individuals, with limited funding, regardless of the intensity of their hatred, could conceive and execute an attack that could result in a catastrophic loss of life and economic devastation of hundreds of billions of dollars.

The attacks of 9/11 left the country stunned and in grief, but as I look back over the last ten years, it is abundantly clear that America was, is, and always will be an undeniably resilient nation.

We went from the bent knee of prayer to a battle plan, and have become a better, stronger nation for everything we have achieved.

In a decade's time, we strengthened our intelligence assets and partnered with allies and friends. We captured and killed terrorists and destroyed safe havens in Afghanistan and around the globe.

We undertook one of the biggest change management challenges of our time with the reorganization of the federal government. We stood up a new department, Homeland Security, combining twenty-plus agencies and 180,000-plus people. Federal, state and local authorities re-positioned as the country embraced an emotionally charged and strategically driven national mission. We did so with an eye toward the safekeeping of our civil liberties, our Constitution and the integrity of the American brand.

We improved preparedness and response capabilities and established layers of security throughout our aviation system. We embedded new technologies at our borders and deployed fingerprint-based screening and radiation portal monitors at our ports of entry. In light of the new security threat, we were compelled to think and act anew, and we did.

With public and private sector leadership and investment, we are more secure. But we remain a target nonetheless.

What we know now more than ever is that over the course of ten years, the threat remains strong and continues to change. We have thwarted some attacks, but we have also been fortunate that a few others have simply failed.

As we close one vulnerability, we should anticipate that terrorists will adapt and seek out another. They are patient, strategic actors and before them lays a map of the world and a centuries-old ideology of hate and intolerance that we resoundingly reject in the Western world.

This is a multi-generational threat, and war. And for that reason, we must always view security as an ongoing process, not an endpoint. A deliberative process, not a breathless reaction to all conceivable threats, is required at all times.

In that regard, it is helpful to view the threat of terrorism in the context of another threat we faced in the latter half of the 20th century – when two super powers armed with thousands of nuclear weapons had a very serious staring contest.

It was a time during which we built the strongest economy in the world, advanced the cause of civil and human rights at home and abroad, and demonstrated that our political and economic system could deal with that very real threat to our way of life while our citizens continued to enjoy and to promote the freedoms that are at America's very foundation.

We should have equal confidence in our ability to do the same in the twenty-first century.

But also, we must be committed to making sure that we have all of the tools and resources we need at our disposal. Because after taking fifty years to win the Cold War, while we emerged as the lone superpower, we were also left with a stockpile of weapons, tactics, and diplomatic relationships that were of little utility in the new security environment.

Adapting to this threat environment takes commitment. It takes collaboration. It takes a willingness to recognize and overcome what might be the single greatest threat in the fight against terrorism – one that affects all of our actions by not affecting action at all. Complacency.

When reporters ask me what worries me most, they expect me to say a nuclear event or a bio-agent. Those potential scenarios worry me, yes. But the important thing in my mind is that we continue to see the world through a 9/11 lens. More so, a 9/12 lens.

On September 12, 2001 we were grieving, but we had a sense of unity and an aggressive state of determination – that the perpetrators of the attack would come to justice and that we would take every step, every measure, every opportunity to make this country and its people more secure.

Every day, we have learned a little more. Every day, more people are working together to find security solutions and identify vulnerabilities. But every day, we get a little farther away from the tragedy.

So we have to be willing to look over our shoulders, and let the images and feelings of an unspeakable and intolerable tragedy motivate us. We also must be mindful that terrorists do not rest, so neither can we. We cannot underestimate the appeal of their belief system and their willingness to be patient in bringing the broader world to accept that belief system. We have wristwatches, but they have time. That means that in spite of the significant progress we have made, much work remains to be done.

We have strengthened information sharing in country and among allies and friends, but we still saw an attempted Christmas Day bomber come very close to his goals due to overt and repeated information

not being shared. This began with the bomber's own father expressing concern to authorities that his son had been radicalized. We need to create a culture of intelligence sharing where everyone feels empowered to hit the send button, to share more, not less.

We have bolstered communication technologies, but after hearing of the heartbreaking difficulty first responders on 9/11 had in speaking to each other with outdated equipment and disparate channel frequencies, an interoperable broadband communications system remains undelivered. If the tragedy of 9/11, the specific recommendations of the 9/11 Commission and the sustained pleas of police, firemen, and emergency service professionals cannot generate federal support for such a network, then what will it take?

We have instituted an entry system to validate who comes into the country, but have not created an exit system that ensures these same visitors leave and do not exploit an as-yet unfinished system. The technology exists but Congress has not kept pace. It is likely therefore that we have people among us who have overstayed their visas. Where are they now and what are they doing? Where is the sense of urgency needed to address this?

It would be easy to cite all the vulnerabilities we have yet to address and the 9/11 recommendations we have yet to meet. But as I know, Secretary Chertoff knows, and Secretary Napolitano knows, achieving these and other goals requires the navigation of a federal system where urgency does not come easily when politics, budgets, and bureaucracy are involved.

As citizens we are entitled to have expectations of our government relative to our security. What we cannot expect is that the government can create a fail-safe, risk-free environment. That perhaps has been a notion that makes many people uncomfortable. But ten years on from 9/11, we simply must be prepared to accept the fact that no matter how hard we try, another attack is likely.

Trying to determine what scenarios pose a threat to the United States is like trying to find a needle in a haystack. The solution, as we have found out, is to remove much of the haystack from the needle. But that does not mean that we must treat every person as a

potential terrorist or that every possible scenario must be explored.

Risks are ever present and cannot be eliminated. They must be managed. Priorities have to be set and trade offs must be made. That means we have to balance how much security is enough with our fiscal realities.

Do we spend billions defending commercial airlines against shoulder-fired missiles, or do we invest in nuclear detection technology to inspect the 20 million cargo containers shipped to our ports? Do we appropriate the money to complete the US-VISIT system or do we give states more money for equipment and training? Do we choose among adding more layers of security at chemical sites, addressing a different security risk in mass transit, or channeling that investment to a national health or energy security priority?

The needs and wants are limitless. Resources are not. So we must manage the risk carefully and judiciously. That responsibility is great and complex. And ten years later, it doesn't get any easier.

One of the biggest news stories of the year, one that capped a decade of emotion, was the killing of Osama Bin Laden. What we immediately understood, even long before it happened, was that despite the fact he was brought to justice, his death didn't mean much to the threat we continue to face. As Benazir Bhutto once advised: "You can imprison a man but not an idea. You can exile a man, but not an idea. You can kill a man, but not an idea." Bin Laden is gone, but the ideology lives on in others.

The images of home videos of bin Laden demonstrated that he was just one guy. Just one man – sitting in his easy chair, flipping the remote control, worrying about the gray hairs in his beard, frustrated when he'd flub the lines of his own scripts – those videos of warning we used to see. He was just a guy. Not much of a warrior. No super-human mystique about him.

But it only took that one guy and a few believers. Likewise, it only took one time, one difficult September morning, for America to understand that the world has changed and we must change with it.

Ten years is not a lot of time, but it was enough time to begin. It was enough time to commit ourselves to a new fight and

underscore an America we have long since known. Ten years is enough time to know that in the next ten years, the fight will still be with us. It will go on. But we will go on with it, as a stronger and more secure country, as the resilient and freedom-loving people we have always been, and as a nation that will always remember those we lost one September day.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Tom Ridge served as the forty-third governor of Pennsylvania before becoming the nation's first assistant to the president for homeland security in 2001 and, in January 2003, the first secretary of the newly created U.S. Department of Homeland Security. Ridge is the founder and CEO of Ridge Global, an international security and risk management firm, headquartered in Washington, DC.



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