The Presence of the Past

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My title, "The Presence of the Past," does not mean what I thought it was going to mean a week ago. I had thought that I would talk about other issues of contemporary importance and interest. After Tuesday's terrorist attacks, however, I felt that I needed to talk about something else. Not that my initial concerns don't remain important—they do, but like many people I have been preoccupied by the present. Still, as I will suggest, the use of the past plays an important role in public interpretations of the events of the last couple of days, a process I expect will continue.

What can I offer you today? Not a lot of answers, but perhaps some tools for reflection and understanding: in this way the intellectual and educational enterprise we are engaged in here at Scripps College may help us deal more thoughtfully with the intense emotions we are feeling; it should help us think critically about these powerful events as they continue to unfold. My topic today, then, concerns history and trauma: the uses of the past in dealing with traumatic events; how cultural memory, personal memory and official historical discourse work together. Certainly, we are living close to these events, and it is premature to talk about the memories of them. How can we know what the full story will tell and when it will end? How can we say what the enduring effects will be and what form these memories will take? We are all rightly more concerned with the present and perhaps the future than with what this moment will look like as the past. However, our present experiences will form at least part of the stuff of the memories of the future and current interpretations—particularly in the news media—guide both how we feel about and how we place ourselves in this national experience. Moreover, these interpretations draw on images of and arguments about the past; in doing so, they remind us of the presence of the past and its uses.

We have struggled just to describe these terrorist attacks. How can we explain, using common language, what seems so exceptional, so extraordinary, so horrific? It is not so much that words fail us, but that there is an overabundance of images, borrowed and appropriated. We turn to familiar frames of reference: for me, and perhaps for others, the science fiction movies that taught us to imagine the alien invasion, the destruction of life as we know it in the context of the cold war. It's with some irony, then, that we draw upon these images in the post-cold war world, a world much more unstable than the cold war era, an instability that has been at least in part defined by the apparently newer threat of terrorism. Still, it was hard to see those planes crashing into the World Trade Center as real and life-size, as part of our present and not some canned image. Alternatively, I drew on images of the distant past to describe—but not explain—what I saw on t.v. As one friend pointed out, the storming clouds of dust and debris that rolled down the streets of lower Manhattan looked like lava from Vesuvius, the ash-covered survivors and surroundings like the remains of Pompeii. The skeletal fragment of one tower looked like some pre-Gladiator, unreconstructed view of the Roman coliseum, all images of a decayed and destroyed empire, from elsewhere in time and space, to describe the present-day U.S., the NYC where I had grown up. This recourse to analogies, then, serves to describe the radically unfamiliar in familiar terms. Similarly, in the uses of hyperbole, as one critic has recently said, the "comparisons say less about the reality of what has occurred than they do about the lack of credible reference points." Still, these mistaken or exaggerated comparisons are revealing—they tell us a lot about self-conceptions about the U.S. and how they are formed and perpetuated in moments of crisis. I want to focus on two statements that have already recurred in discussions over the past 48 hours. The first of these are the comparisons to Pearl Harbor. The second is the statement that the world, our U.S. world, will never be the same again.

> Always will our whole nation remember the character of the onslaught against us. No matter how long it may take us to overcome this premeditated invasion, the American people in their righteous might will win through to absolute victory.
> I believe I interpret the will of the Congress and of the people when I assert that we will not only defend ourselves to the uttermost but will make it very certain that this form of treachery shall never again endanger us. Hostilities exist. There is no blinking at the fact that our people, our territory and our interests are in grave danger. With confidence in our armed forces—with the unbounding determination of our people—we will gain the inevitable triumph—so help us God.

These were the words of Franklin Delano Roosevelt on Dec. 8, 1941, as he described the "date [not day] that will live in infamy." And they do sound roughly appropriate to our current state of affairs and perhaps familiar: the ominous sense of future memories, the characterization of alien attack, the assertion of strength and victory, the confidence in God's will. Editorials throughout the country have been quick in the past couple of days to make comparisons to the events of Pearl Harbor, as were some politicians. The New York Daily News titled its editorial, "The Day that Will Live in Infamy." The Washington Post read: "Not since Dec. 7, 1941, has the U.S. homeland sustained such an aggression. The nation responded then without panic but with iron determination to defend itself and punish the aggressors. The response today must be as decisive…" In 1941, however, unlike 2001, the enemy was known, a clearly defined nation state, the targets were military installations. That is not the case today, although one could certainly say that the targets of US military and economic might show the blurring of these distinctions in the post-WWII world. Against much urging, we cannot use the U.S. response to Japanese aggression in 1941 as a model for today—even if we want to. Rather than take these comparisons at face value, we should see them as efforts to familiarize the unfamiliar and, by building on an understanding of history and national identity, as contributions to the on-going project of nationhood. This process may be reinforced by the sense of collective grief we feel, or the desire to cope with our individual grief and fear by connecting with family and friends. My point, however, is that the personal process and the official, "public" process are different. It is this collapsing of personal grief into a national narrative that concerns me.

The second part of the analogy to Pearl Harbor—in addition to the response to foreign aggression—concerns the almost unprecedented nature of that aggression. Here current discussions draw upon and contribute to ideas about American innocence. In its column, "America at War," the Washington Times editorialist wrote yesterday: "The sense of security we once may have felt—that we were safe from the brutality that is so often a part of life in other parts of the world—has been lost forever." To some extent this seems true: the U.S. has had the luxury of fighting most of its wars elsewhere. The cataclysmic bloodshed, the disruption of daily life has usually been someone else's burden. Where other nations, including our own allies, have suffered enormous casualties and economic and social dislocation, the U.S. has remained not only relatively unscathed but emerged from both world wars more powerful than before. Now we can experience what others, friend and foe alike, have experienced both as historic crises and as daily eventuality. Still this is only a partial story. If anything, this has been a willful innocence, a privilege, something we knew to be temporary and even false, although we too often reserved the "reality" for science fiction. We have lived in denial about the possibility of nuclear war or terrorist attacks. We should not confuse denial, even if it serves a psychological function, with innocence. Second, this claim of the unprecedented nature of events turns on the single importance of "foreign aggression," not, as the editorial says, on security from brutality. The American Civil War remains the bloodiest war in U.S. history, with more casualties than all other conflicts until the war in Vietnam combined. I worry, too, that the elision of the Civil War—as a "merely" domestic conflict not relevant to present concerns—will also encourage us to forget or ignore the centrality of slavery and race relations to the U.S. past and present. Wars, particularly foreign wars, have "unified" and defined "nationalism" by externalizing and demonizing enemies at home and abroad. It is more, not less, important to remember this as the idea of an external and demonic threat seems more appropriate. Moreover, U.S. society has been and remains one of the most violent. We have been immune from brutality in certain contexts, but we can only claim "innocence" by misrepresenting ourselves and using the most selective kind of reasoning and remembering.

Rather, the current discussions about the loss of innocence in the U.S. follow a recognizable pattern in our political culture. One part of this involves the concept of "American exceptionalism," of which innocence is a part. Another part involves the supposed vulnerability of this special national system. In the concept of American exceptionalism, the U.S. is both unique and exemplary. This uniqueness is marked most often by references to ideas of American mission—the will and special protection of God to spread the "American way of life"; the superiority of our political system, democracy; the superiority of our economic system that links capitalism with ideas of progress; and a sense of racial superiority that explains the possibility of this progress and the character of those individuals and groups—both within the U.S. and outside of it—who are a threat. Consequently, when President Bush went before the American people on Tuesday night, he explained that "America was targeted for attack because we're the brightest beacon for freedom and opportunity in the world. And no one will keep that light from shining." But the attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon were attacks on the symbols and institutions of American economic and military power. Similarly, an editorial in yesterday's Chicago Tribune entitled "The Vulnerabilities We Cherish," singled out a "free society" as the underlying cause of our weakness, combined with the "relative newness as a nation" that have historically made what is now the U.S. insecure. From the Puritan concern about worldly wealth, to the challenges of the Revolution, the War of 1812, the concern with naval power in the late 1800s, the sinking of the Lusitania, the bombing of Pearl Harbor, the threat of Communism, the editorial reminds us/teaches us about "sacrifice" and national triumph. We need to be more careful, however. This list of events is a useful catalogue of the rise US world power. The history of the US in wartime has not been a happy one for civil liberties; rather the exigencies of war have often rationalized the suspension of individual and group rights and freedoms. In this case, the aftermath of Pearl Harbor is a chilling precedent: the internment of Japanese Americans, including US citizens. I do worry about the unleashing of anti-Muslim and anti-Arab sentiment, both popular and official.

The claims of American innocence are tropes that have helped define American national character. In times of crisis, particularly but not exclusively in wartime, this understanding of innocence is reiterated, reinforced, and relearned. Not only Pearl Harbor, but also John F. Kennedy's assassination, the Vietnam War, the Watergate scandal, the Challenger explosion, and the Oklahoma City bombing have all been explained as precise moments when the US lost its innocence. Now it may well be that these events are defining moments not just for individuals but also for particular generations; the impact of each of those events is deeply felt and changes the way people of a certain age view the world. More precisely, we remember them as moments when we felt the world changed, but we went on, most of us, to live our lives. Part of what separates survivors from those who do not survive—as I felt this morning reading the first of the obituaries—is that their lives were interrupted mid-course while ours continue. The struggle of survivors is in part to come to terms with that rupture. We often talk about these traumatic events in a particular way: by marking where we were when xxx happened, the answer testimony to having lived through a certain life-changing event. But much of the discussion this week—as at other times—concerns the loss of not individual but national innocence. How many times can the US lose its innocence? In framing the issue in this fashion—about loss of national innocence—events such as the terrorist attacks work to contribute to an understanding of national identity.

Most of us—ironically not including myself—have spent a good part of the last couple of days watching television. We have probably seen the same images over and over again. This is not only because after the initial flood of events, there was much less information and airtime was filled with the repetitive images. It was also because these images—particularly the airplanes crashing into the WTC towers and the towers' collapse—have a relentless, perhaps cathartic, voyeuristic, yet terrifying effect. We have viewed these acts of terrorism in ways similar to the way we have experienced other recent events of national trauma, such as the Kennedy assassination, the Challenger explosion, the Oklahoma City bombing—on t.v. . My point here is not that these events are themselves comparable, but that the means with which we experience them is. The scholar Marita Sturken has argued, for instance, that such television viewing creates national meaning, shared participation, and experience. In the case of the Challenger explosion, psychologists found that individuals later remembered that they had first learned of the event while watching television—even though earlier interviews with these same individuals established that this was not the case. Even when informed of their earlier responses, they had no memory of them. To Sturken, this demonstrates how people "situate themselves within a 'national' experience of the event, sharing the shock of its spectacular and tragic failure with a national audience." She worries, however, that this process precludes mourning by falling back on scripts of the loss of innocence and the value of patriotic sacrifice. It is too early to tell if this will be the case with our experience of the acts of terrorism of this week. Right now we feel most keenly fear, vulnerability, and the loss of life. It may be too early to subject those powerful feelings to analysis—of the academic, not therapeutic, kind. But I have tried to suggest that even in these early moments, the efforts to interpret events—in the media, among public officials—may mislead us and we should be careful. Instead of innocence, I hope we can try harder to understand American power and the appeals of terrorism. Instead of hatred and desire for revenge, I hope that we can feel compassion for those who have lost and suffered.