

AFTER 9/11

The limits of remembrance

By David Rieff

There is what has to be destroyed and there is what simply has to be clarified and looked at. A benevolent and grave examination—what force! Let's not bring flame where light is enough.

—Victor Hugo,
Les Misérables

On September 11, 2011, the tenth anniversary of the attacks that destroyed the twin towers of the World Trade Center, the official memorial will be dedicated at Ground Zero (the opening of the adjacent museum has been delayed and is now scheduled for 2012). Designed by the architect Michael Arad and the landscape architect Peter Walker and called “Reflecting Absence,” the memorial will be about eight acres in size and consist of two sunken reflecting pools, each surrounded by an enormous waterfall, the largest man-made ones in North America, according to the memorial’s official website. The names of the 2,982 people who died on 9/11 and in the failed 1993 attempt to destroy the twin towers will be etched on the bronze panels edging these memorial pools. The closing sentence of the memorial’s mission statement reads: “May the lives remembered, the deeds recognized, and the spirit re-awakened be eternal beacons, which reaffirm respect for life, strengthen

David Rieff is the author of eight books. He is currently writing a book about the global food crisis.

our resolve to preserve freedom, and inspire an end to hatred, ignorance and intolerance.”

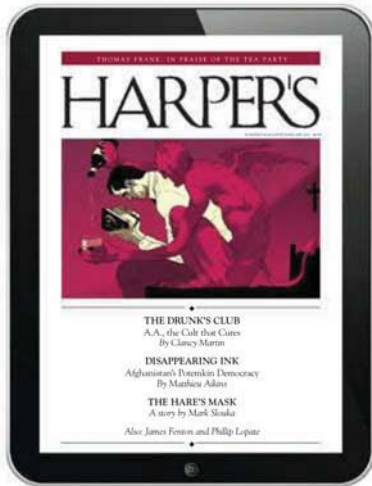
These are unexceptionable sentiments. A memorial is a place, and this will be a time, for solidarity rather than subtlety, deference rather than criticism, and piety rather than revisionism. But in affirming that remembrance is humanly necessary, we must not pretend that it is ever completely innocent, or, to put it more bluntly still, that it has no moral downside. It does, and that downside can be severe. So, in any particular commemoration, one needs to ask what the balance is likely to be between the costs of remembrance and its benefits. Even the prayerful conclusion of the memorial’s mission statement poses more questions than it answers. For although there is nothing morally problematic about remembering the fallen and honoring the heroism of the first responders, the call to “strengthen our resolve to preserve freedom” is anything but an innocent piety. It seems deliberately to echo President George W. Bush’s speech to a joint session of Congress nine days after 9/11, in which he argued that the attacks had occurred because the terrorists “hate our freedoms—our freedom of religion, our freedom of speech, our freedom to vote and assemble and disagree with each other.”

Even those who accept Bush’s account, despite its failure to consider the possibility that it was America’s

actions rather than the American way of life that the jihadis hated, presumably would grant that the president was making a political claim. The fact that the opening of the 9/11 memorial will mark an event that, to some degree at least, has been seared into the lives and consciousness of most Americans should not obscure the fact that the ghost at the banquet of all public commemoration is always politics—above all, the mobilization of national solidarity. Whether one is talking about Australians and New Zealanders celebrating ANZAC day by honoring their soldiers who died in the First and Second World Wars, the French commemorating the fall of the Bastille on July 14, or our own Fourth of July, the purpose of such ceremonials is what the great nineteenth-century French historian of nationalism Ernest Renan called the creation of “large-scale solidarity.” It is about the reaffirming of group loyalty rather than the establishing of historical accuracy, let alone the presenting of an event in all its moral and political complexity. The ceremonies commemorating the tenth anniversary of 9/11 will take place in this spirit.

It is important not to exaggerate. Whatever meaning history eventually assigns to the attacks of 9/11—and though they are often conflated, history is the antithesis of remembrance—it is highly unlikely that these commemorative events will do any harm to

Now you can read
Harper's Magazine
anytime, anywhere ...



... when you sign up
for our digital edition
through Zinio. Subscribe
today and have the next
12 issues of *Harper's
Magazine* delivered to
your PC, laptop, or iPad.

Subscribe now by
visiting the digital
subscription store at
www.harpers.org



HARPER'S
MAGAZINE

America as a society, even if there is not likely to be very much to learn from it either, any more than there is from eulogies at a funeral. And in an important sense, for the relatives and friends of those who died on that day, remembrance will surely afford some measure of recognition and consolation, though of course not of closure, which is one of the more malign and corrosive psychological fantasies of our age. (The Latin phrase "*De mortuis nil nisi bonum*," "Of the dead speak only well," has often been parodied with the quip, "*De mortuis nil nisi bunkum*," but this is wrong. There is nothing admirable about candor during a commemoration, just something childish and conceited.) Remembrance is not valued for shedding much light on the truth in all its nuance and ambiguity. And that is entirely appropriate. The problem is both the degree to which remembrance nourishes illusions about how long human beings can remember and, far more seriously, the potentially grave political and historical consequences it can engender. After all, to remember may not just mean to grieve; it may also mean to harbor a vision of securing justice or vengeance long after it is time to put the guns away.

If you search online for the phrase "We will always remember 9/11," you will get 18,400,000 results. Alter the search slightly, to "We will never forget 9/11," and the total rises to 27,500,000. While it would be a mistake to be overawed by these numbers, the totals are still impressive. Americans are often said to fetishize change and feel unconstrained by history, whether personal or national—there are no second acts in American lives, and all that. Yet the assertions of fidelity to the memory of 9/11 that have already been deployed during the past nine commemorations of the attacks suggest a belief that what seems central to us today will continue to be at least as important to our descendants long after those of us who lived through 9/11 are dust. Harmless as the intentions behind such assertions may be, they carry risk as well, especially in a society as committed as ours is to confusing desire with fate, wish with reality, and the present with eternity. The

seventeenth-century French moralist La Rochefoucauld wrote that no one could stare for long at death or the sun. He was right, but when people are so committed to looking away from human transience, trying to stare for just a bit longer surely is in order.

The stark reality is that in the very long run nothing will be remembered. This may be an unpalatable truth, but it still needs acknowledging. This is not to say that on the tenth anniversary of the 9/11 attacks—which, after all, will be one of the historical high-water marks in the remembrance of the event—those who participate should forswear entirely the comforting illusion that we will always remember those who died. The alternative, which would be to state that sooner or later our descendants will forget about 9/11, just as we have largely forgotten about horrific events of the past, would be as unbearable as knowing well in advance the date of your own death.

All the great spiritual traditions affirm that our memories are as mortal as we are to a greater or lesser degree, whether it is in the Buddhist idea of historical and personal transience or in the chilling words of Ecclesiastes 1:11: "There is no remembrance of former things; neither shall there be any remembrance of things that are to come with those that shall come after." A sobering secular iteration of the same insight can be found in Shelley's poem "Ozymandias," in which the traveler tells of seeing in the desert a ruined, half-sunken statue of some great king from the distant past on whose pedestal was carved the legend "Look on my works, ye Mighty, and despair!" And yet of those works, nothing remained at all, just sands "boundless and bare."

To believe that our own great leaders, political controversies, and historical tragedies will somehow be immune from eventual oblivion has nothing to do with the realities of human existence and everything to do with our hopes and desires—always poor guides where history is concerned. What history shows is that even the most monumental achievements and martial accomplishments of human beings are ephemeral. The only real concern is what the outer limits actually are of our ability to remember, to celebrate, and to mourn. In June of 1940, as he tried

to rally his people to fight and win what he called the Battle of Britain, Winston Churchill said, "If the British Empire and its Commonwealth last for a thousand years, men will still say, 'This was their finest hour.'" What is remarkable about this speech is that even at his most rhetorical, Churchill, one of the most intransigent defenders of the British Empire, could not imagine it lasting more than a millennium. This is a claim with a time limit as opposed to the timeless promises made by the great desert monotheisms—Judaism, Christianity, and Islam.

Just as surely as human beings have life spans, so do empires. It is a lesson many in the United States who remain insistent that the American empire will not go the way of Rome, the Mughals, or the British would do well to take to heart. As the Renaissance historian Guicciardini observed, "All cities, all states, all reigns are mortal. . . . And so a citizen who is living in the final stage of his country's existence should not feel as sorry for his country as he should for himself. What happened to his country was inevitable; but to be born at a time when such a disaster had to happen was his misfortune."

There are many such things that we understand intellectually but feel we must live as if we didn't know. Doubtless there are sound human reasons for our wanting to live inside the illusion—or, with apologies to Freud, acting as if this illusion did have a future. For to live with the consciousness that all nations and all the major events that mark their histories are as mortal as individuals would be paralyzing, if one could even call it living. Is the truth fearless, as some Buddhist sages say? Perhaps. But there is also such a thing as too much truth. The difficulty is how to navigate between eternal remembrance and the despair-inducing realities of extinction, not just of individual human beings but of our traditions and what we have cared about and deemed important and worth remembering. To understand this, it is not necessary to look to the distant past but rather to far more recent historical events.

George W. Bush said that 9/11 was the twenty-first century's Pearl

Harbor, and to the extent that analogies between one war and another are ever right this one was. Before 9/11, the last time several thousand Americans were killed on U.S. soil in an attack by a foreign force was when the Japanese bombed Pearl Harbor. President Franklin Roosevelt famously referred to December 7, 1941, as "a date which will live in infamy." It was a perfectly reasonable thing to say at the time, just as it is entirely appropriate for people today to insist that September 11, 2001, will always live in our memories. But look out for what is contained in the small print. Even in the heat of the moment, FDR very sensibly did not say that the date would live in infamy forever. He knew better than that. Instead, FDR was speaking in the here-and-now, not for some Chinese history book in the twenty-third century, let alone for eternity.

There is little doubt that on December 7, 1951, ten years after Pearl Harbor, the date did indeed continue to live in infamy for most Americans, just as 9/11 does today. But the fate of the memory of Pearl Harbor offers instruction in just how transient the vivid remembrance of even fairly recent historical traumas can be. Anyone with half a heart who goes to the Pearl Harbor memorial today will be immensely moved, perhaps even moved to anger as well as grief. But how many Americans actually remember the 1,177 American sailors killed on the U.S.S. *Arizona* that day, most of whose remains lie directly underneath the memorial? And before very long, those who lived through the attack, or were old enough to know that it had occurred, will have left us. What will remain then will not be memory but remembrance, which, again, may be many things, positive as well as negative, but is always a form of politics.

And what about the "live in infamy" part? During the 1950s many Americans would not buy German cars, and anger at the Japanese remained palpable. It is tempting to argue that the reconciliation with Germany took place because the Germans themselves acknowledged their guilt, and, in important ways,

KEEPREADING



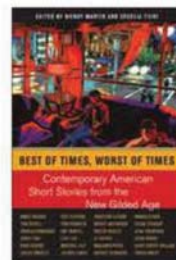
Black in Latin America

HENRY LOUIS GATES, JR.

"A fascinating and engaging journey.

—Laurent Dubois, author of *Avengers of the New World*

\$26.95 • CLOTH



Best of Times, Worst of Times

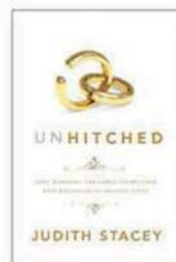
Contemporary American Short Stories from the New Gilded Age

Edited by WENDY MARTIN and CECELIA TICHI

"Powerful in the range of social and political issues it addresses through fiction."

—Amy Tucker, author of *The Illustration of the Master*

\$24.00 • PAPER



Unhitched

Love, Marriage, and Family Values from West Hollywood to Western China

JUDITH STACEY

"Clever and practical blend of research, history and anecdote."

—Kirkus Reviews

\$27.95 • CLOTH

created a state whose essence was to become the antithesis of what Nazi Germany had been. A similar process of reconciliation, followed by forgetting, took place with Japan, even though no similar contrition occurred in that country after World War II. Indeed, the degree to which the Japanese continue to refuse to acknowledge the crimes they committed during the war is an ever-present source of anger among the Koreans and Chinese, who were the principal victims of those crimes. And yet almost no one in the United States thinks angry thoughts about the Japanese every December 7. To be sure, some continue to commemorate the event, but in the case of Pearl Harbor, we have gone not only past memory but past remembrance in any living sense. Can anyone imagine an American rejecting a solicitation to contribute to Japanese relief in the aftermath of the recent earthquake and tsunami because of Pearl Harbor? The idea is preposterous. And yet it would not have been so on December 7, 1951. That war is over, not just in reality but in people's hearts. And all wars end. The long war against the jihadis will be no exception, unimaginable as that may seem at the present moment.

Knowing this, it is time to stop postponing the question of what collective memory of the kind that is being expressed in the tenth-anniversary commemorations of 9/11 is actually good for, and what are its risks. In order to do this, one has to consider the morally or psychologically unpalatable possibility that at some times and in some contexts forgetting may actually be preferable to remembering. This is not a view that finds favor anywhere today, from the nationalist right to the human rights-driven left. Most decent people are for forgiving, but one is highly unlikely to hear many good words said in defense of forgetting. Perhaps we are all too influenced by George Santayana's overly admired warning that "those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it"—a sentence that ignores entirely the fact that history, like individual psychological behavior, is at least

partly governed by what Freud called the unconscious chain of repetition. Perhaps we assume the ethical superiority of remembrance over forgetting because we have all been told so often that to remember is to be responsible while to forget is not only irresponsible but the very emblem of a fall into some species of moral cowardice or civic nihilism. After all, even Jesus enjoined his followers to forgive those who had trespassed against them, not to forget the affront altogether.

There is no getting around the fact that forgetting has been the ace in the hole of some of the worst people in history. Hitler asked the rhetorical question about who in 1939 remembered the mass slaughter of the Armenians by the Turks as proof that the Nazis could do anything they pleased without any risk. But remembrance does not just console; it can inflame as well. As a reporter during the Bosnian war, which was in large measure a conflict fueled by memory (or, more precisely, the inability to forget), I learned to hate, but above all to fear, collective historical memory. Remembrance can make history itself seem like nothing so much as an arsenal full of the weapons needed to keep wars going and peace tenuous. Will the remembrance of 9/11 have this effect when peace is less of a remote possibility? It is too soon to tell. As was demonstrated by the relief and exultation that erupted spontaneously in many parts of America when it was announced that Osama bin Laden had been killed, the wounds are still too raw. For now, at least, there can be no question of forgetting, or even of forgiveness. But if it is too soon to move toward either, surely it is not too early to ask the question of whether peace will ever be possible without eventually considering both. Even the work of mourning, essential as it is, must end if life is to go on.

Such a conviction may seem counterintuitive. And no one in his or her right mind would expect the loved ones of those who died on 9/11 to forget. Perhaps it is even too much to ask them to forgive. But if one should not demand forgetting and, on the tenth anniversary of the attacks, join in that sorrowful remembrance, sooner or

later it must come. And no, forgiveness is not enough. Most wars do not end with one side gaining an absolute victory and thus being able to dictate the terms of the adversary's physical as well as psychic surrender. The United States, France, Britain, and the Soviet Union could write the textbooks German schoolchildren used after Germany's surrender. And in South Africa, the African National Congress's understanding of that country's history could be installed as the official narrative. But take Northern Ireland, or the former Yugoslavia. In both places, those who warred against one another continue to believe that they were right. And if they have kept the peace, it is not because they have forgiven one another but because, for all sorts of reasons specific to each conflict, most of them have decided to turn the page, which is a kind of forgetting. The long war against the jihadis will almost certainly end in a similarly ambiguous way, with an unhappy compromise that denies definitive victory to anyone. There will be no Japanese surrender in Tokyo Bay, no Nuremberg trials for the Taliban, no South African-style Truth and Reconciliation Commission in which Mullah Omar or Zawahiri or whoever is leading the Taliban by then will confess to his crimes in exchange for amnesty. In short, there will be no closing of accounts, and sooner or later we shall just have to learn to live with that fact.

In the meantime, we would do well to consider the possibility that if our societies were to expend even a fraction of the energy on forgetting that we now do on remembering, and if the option of forgetting were seen as at least as available as the duty of remembrance, then the peace that must come eventually might actually come sooner. It is an austere creed. The great South African author Nadine Gordimer once said that she thought writers should write as if they were already dead. To ask people to forgo remembrance, or at least to envisage that possibility, is in effect to ask people to act as if they were already dead. Will it ever be possible for us to give up the memory of our wounds? We had better hope so, for all our sakes. And after the commemoration ceremonies are over would be a good time to begin. ■