How 9/11 Changed America: Four Major Lasting Impacts

Matthew
Green

Fourteen years ago the United States wasn't officially engaged in any wars. Few of us had ever heard of al-Qaeda or Osama bin Laden, and ISIS didn't exist. We deported half the number of people we do today. Our surveillance state was a fraction of its current size. And — maybe hardest to believe — you didn't have to take your shoes off at the airport.

America's involvement in the War on Terror — prompted by the 9/11 terrorist attacks — resulted in changing attitudes and concerns about safety and vigilance. It ushered in a new generation of policies like the USA Patriot Act that prioritized national security and defense, often at the expense of civil liberties. These changes had ripple effects across the globe, particularly in the Middle East, where American-led military operations have helped foment rebellions and unrest throughout the region.

These are four of the many dramatic transformations brought on by the events of that single day.

I. Ongoing wars

Less than a month after 9/11, U.S. troops invaded Afghanistan in an attempt to dismantle al-Qaeda, the terrorist group that claimed responsibility for the attacks, and remove the Taliban government. Two years later, in March 2003, the United States invaded Iraq and deposed President Saddam Hussein. Although not directly linked to the terrorist attacks, Hussein was suspected of producing weapons of mass destruction (although none were ever found), and the invasion was a key part of America's newly launched War on Terror under the leadership of President George W. Bush.

Our military involvement in Afghanistan turned into the longest-running war in U.S. history. And although formal U.S. combat operations ended in late 2014, the U.S. military remains deeply entrenched there, in an effort to help stem the ongoing Taliban insurgency.

In December 2011, remaining U.S. troops were pulled out of Iraq, leaving that nation in a far more volatile state than when military operations first began in 2003. And currently, as the Islamic extremist group ISIS — which sprouted from the resultant political instability of war– continues to grow and threaten the stability of Iraq and neighboring Syria, the U.S. has again resumed air strikes in that region.

After 9/11, budgets for defense-related agencies sky-rocketed: Homeland Security's discretionary budget jumped from about $16 billion in 2002 to more than $43 billion in 2011. Meanwhile, the budgets of the Coast Guard, Transportation Security Administration and Border Patrol have all more than doubled since 2001.

Since 9/11, millions of young U.S. soldiers have been deployed overseas, thousands have been killed, and many have returned home with debilitating physical and mental injuries.

According to U.S. Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration , roughly 3.1 million Americans entered military service between 2001 and 2011, and nearly 2 million were deployed to Afghanistan or Iraq. In that time, more than 6,000 American troops have been killed, and roughly 44,000 wounded. Of returning service members, more than 18 percent have post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) or depression, and almost 20 percent have reported suffering from the effects of traumatic brain injury (TBI).

California impact

California is second only to Texas in its contribution of recruits to the U.S. military. As of 2009, the U.S. Census reported roughly 118,000 active California service members. When you multiply that by the number of families and friends those soldiers left at home, the significance of the statewide impact becomes clear. In 2010 alone, nearly 6,000 military recruits were from California, according to the National Priorities Project.

The LA Times reports that as of August 25, 2014, 749 California service members from every corner of the state had been killed in Iraq and Afghanistan.

II. Immigration and deportation

With the goal of strengthening border security, the Bush Administration created the Department of Homeland Security in 2002, a cabinet-level office that merged 22 government agencies. Immigration and Naturalization Service and the US Customs Service — both formerly part of the Department of Justice — were consolidated into the newly formed U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE). The agency has overseen a massive increase in deportations, which have nearly doubled since 9/11.

According to the Department of Homeland Security's Yearbook of Immigration Statistics, there were roughly 200,000 annual deportations a year between 1999 and 2001. While that number dropped slightly in 2002, it began to steadily climb the following year. In the first two years of the Obama Administration (2009-10), deportations hit a record high of nearly 400,000 annually. About half of those deported in 2009-10 were convicted of a criminal offense, although mostly for low-level, non-violent crimes.

The Secure Communities program, established in 2008 and officially phased out in 2014, allowed local law enforcement to check the immigration status of every person booked in a county or local jail — even if not ultimately convicted of a crime — by comparing fingerprints against federal immigration records. The program resulted in numerous cases of undocumented immigrants entering deportation proceedings after being stopped for minor infractions (like not using a turn signal while driving).

By 2008, ICE had established Secure Communities information-sharing partnerships with just 14 local law enforcement agencies. In 2014, it had partnerships with every single law enforcement jurisdiction in the nation (all 3,181 of them).

III. The friendly skies

Long airport lines, full body scans, the occasional pat-down (for the lucky ones). It's all par for the course, nowadays, for air travel. But not so long ago, it wasn't unusual to show up at the airport a half-hour before a domestic flight, keep your shoes tied tight, and skip through the metal detector while sipping a Big Gulp, all without ever having to show an ID.

Before the advent of color-coded security threat warnings, pat downs were very uncommon, liquid was allowed, and the notion of having to go through full-body scanners was the stuff of science fiction. Heck, prior to 9/11, some airport security teams even allowed passengers to take box cutters aboard (the supposed weapon used by the 9/11 hijackers). Any knife with a blade up to four inches long was permitted. And cigarette lighters? No problem!

In the wake of the terrorist attacks, airport security underwent a series of major overhauls. And a service that was once largely provided by private companies is now overseen by the Transportation Security Administration.

Created in the wake of the attacks, the TSA is tasked with instituting new security procedures and managing screening at every commercial airport checkpoint in the country. It marks the single largest federal start up since the days of World War II. The agency is authorized to use watch lists of individuals who could pose flight safety risks. By 2007, it had already accumulated a database of over 700,000 names, according to the Department of Justice.

Although advocates argue that the changes have made air travel vastly safer, the additional security steps have also tacked on a significant amount of travel time for the average passenger, infringed on privacy rights and, in many instances, increased scrutiny of minority travelers, particularly those of Middle Eastern descent.

IV. A mushrooming surveillance state

The U.S. intelligence state boomed in the wake of 9/11. The growth resulted in a marked increase in government intrusion, primarily through a vast, clandestine network of phone and web surveillance.

Classified documents leaked last year by former government contractor Edward Snowden detail the expansion of a colossus surveillance state that has seeped into the lives of millions of Americans. The exponential growth of this apparatus — armed with a $52.6 billion budget in 2013 — was brought to light last year when the Washington Post obtained a "black budget" report from Snowden, detailing the bureaucratic and operational landscape of the 16 spy agencies and more than 107,000 employees that now make up the U.S. intelligence community.

Further audits reveal that the National Security Agency alone has annually scooped up as many as 56,000 emails and other communications by Americans with no connection to terrorism, and violated privacy laws thousands of times per year since 2008.