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Time Period 9: 1980-Present

As the United States transitioned to a new century filled with challenges and possibilities, it experienced renewed ideological and cultural debates, sought to redefine its foreign policy, and adapted to economic globalization and revolutionary changes in science and technology.

Key Concept 9.1: A newly ascendant conservative movement achieved several political and policy goals during the 1980s and continued to strongly influence public discourse in the following decades.

Key Concept 9.2: Moving into the 21st century, the nation experienced significant technological, economic, and demographic changes.

Key Concept 9.3: The end of the Cold War and new challenges to U.S. leadership forced the nation to redefine its foreign policy and role in the world.

Disasters and the Politics of Memory

The controversy that erupted around the opening of the National September 11 Memorial and Museum on May 21, 2014, reminds us that much is at stake in the way disasters are remembered. Costing some \$700 million to build, with an annual operating budget of \$63 million, this was a remarkable investment in the production of public memory. It is an emotional experience to visit the museum. The entry pavilion, designed to look like a crumpled tower, is wedged between two commemorative pools, each containing a cascading waterfall, that sit over the footprints of the fallen twin towers. Visitors are invited to pause and reflect, but it is not easy to maintain a mood of respectful contemplation amidst the heat and hammer and roar of what is essentially a busy construction site, in a plaza encircled by buildings of glass and steel like the new “Freedom Tower” that now stands as the tallest skyscraper in the Western Hemisphere. Once inside, and underground, the solemn aura of the site is more enveloping. Visitors first encounter still and moving pictures of stunned and horrified eyewitnesses, hands clamped to mouths, watching the planes strike the



The Tribute in Light in remembrance of the September 11 attacks. (US Air Force/Denise Gould)

World Trade Center towers. Then they move forward amidst the murmur of recorded eyewitness testimonies toward a cavernous interior space, strewn with artfully arranged relics from burned-out fire engines to discarded shoes, before descending an escalator that spills onto a hallway covered with photographs, headshot after headshot of the victims. And then, finally, they arrive at the two exhibition rooms, one honoring the nearly three thousand men, women, and children killed in “a senseless act of terrorism,” the other recording the history of the 2001 attacks, and the bombing of the site eight years earlier in 1993.

What caused the controversy? The opening of the museum was marked by a dispute over the inclusion of a gift shop at this “sacred” site, stoked by the *New York Post* article “Little Shop of Horror” with its scathing tag line “Visit mass grave, buy a T-shirt.” This was no doubt galling for administrators who had vowed from the beginning that they would resist any temptations to cash in on the suffering. To defuse resentment, they reminded critics that all profits from sales were earmarked to cover the museum’s operating costs, and moreover that mugs, t-shirts, and other store items had been “carefully selected” to support the museum’s mission of “remembrance and learning.” This in itself is worth pausing over. The fact that every decision about what to include in the museum seemed to land officials in what chief curator Jan Ramirez called an “etiquette quagmire” makes it clear that this exercise in public memory was a fraught and contested one, beset by temptations to capitalize upon consumer demand for images of destruction, and an anxious awareness of how easily disasters lent themselves to political manipulation. No wonder officials, aiming at unity and consensus, and concerned with sending the right message, ended up playing it safe. The resulting 9/11 museum is less a site of explanation than one of emotional immersion that pays tribute to victims and first-responders, celebrates the resilience of the city and the American people, condemns terrorism, and bears “solemn witness” so that we will “never forget.”

The call to remember has become customary in the wake of catastrophes, institutionalized through the proliferation of atrocity and disaster museums across the country over the past few decades, from the Johnstown Flood Museum to the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum to the Oklahoma City National Memorial and Museum, and many more. So surely there was little likelihood that 9/11 would be forgotten. Natural and “man-made” disasters have long been extravagantly well documented. For centuries, they have been the subject of prolific cultural production, provoking sermons, newspaper reports, stories, reminiscences, songs, letters, artworks, museums, historical studies, and, more recently, movies, documentaries, and blogs. There is an undoubtedly therapeutic impulse driving these outpourings, the demand to make some sense of the havoc in order to cope with it, but there is also a commercial interest in play here. After all, most of these cultural responses to disaster are produced for sale in the market. American consumers have devoured sensationalistic portrayals of destruction since the

seventeenth century, when published sermons about calamity proved to be popular. Today, dramatic disasters are ever-present in the realms of news and entertainment. The 9/11 Museum surely owes its existence to the ingrained expectation that calamities are fascinating events that have something vital to teach us. As such it presents an instructive starting point for any investigation into the relationship between disaster and memory.

Of course, it can be argued that 9/11 was an exceptional event that had little in common with floods and fires and hurricanes. It was a premeditated attack, an act of terrorism. Nevertheless, it resembled more familiar natural and man-made calamities in its spectacular destructiveness. In any case, 9/11 became a disaster when President George W. Bush declared it to be one, a step that was required to mobilize federal institutions, including FEMA, as well as to authorize the billions of dollars of federal funds needed to manage what the Federal General Accounting Office called “one of the largest catastrophes this country has ever experienced.”

From the beginning of the European conquest and settlement of North America, colonists were highly attuned to the dangers presented by famines, plagues, floods, fires, earthquakes, storms, and Indian attacks. Puritan ministers insisted that these were all Acts of God, “fatherly afflictions” sent to recall sinners to the paths of virtue and salvation. As such, disasters demanded attention and the sort of soul-searching that was reinforced during designated Days of Fasting and Humiliation. These rituals were supposed to stimulate a profound reformation of self and society, but along the way there was growing sympathy for disaster victims. Sufferers initially were presumed to be sinners, at fault for their own miseries, but by the eighteenth century they had come to be regarded as innocent victims. Under the influence of evangelical Christianity, humanitarian sentiment, and nationalist enthusiasm, disasters became occasions for extolling the virtues of the American people, extending kindness and care to blameless sufferers, and rebuilding in ways that showcased American spirit and resilience. The Chicago fire of 1871 and the San Francisco fire and earthquake of 1906 are still remembered as occasions when communities came together to aid the unexpectedly homeless and to seize the opportunity to build bigger and better cities.

While it is certainly true that disasters have time and again brought people together, and have called forth remarkable acts of bravery and sacrifice, it is also true that the public memories of these events have obscured the ways in which calamities have been exploited to advance self-interested and divisive agendas. Over the past generation, social historians have begun to recover the experiences of subordinated communities in the midst of disasters, whether the working poor of Chicago who were denied relief funds that were channeled to middle-class property-owners in 1871, or the Chinese Americans of San Francisco who were refused aid, herded from refugee camp to squalid refugee camp, and hindered in their efforts to rebuild homes and businesses in 1906. That these experiences were overlooked in

contemporary accounts reminds us that public memories are rarely impartial or comprehensive.

Disaster museums and exhibits over the past forty years have done a much better job of restoring forgotten memories. Since the 1960s, curators at venues like the Chicago Historical Museum have taken on board the lessons of social justice movements, whether black rights or feminism, acknowledging the race, gender, and class inequities embedded in relief programs and recovery plans, and working hard to incorporate marginalized voices. The 9/11 Museum is formally committed to including as many testimonies as possible to ward against the dominion of any singular account or assessment of the attacks. But here inclusion has replaced analytical rigor as the standard of a successful museum. There is little attempt to interpret, let alone evaluate, the political uses to which the attacks were put, as if it is improper to take a political stand or to think more broadly about the geopolitical lessons. Similar protocols ensured that President Obama, in his dedication of the building on May 15, 2014, would skip over the war on terror, the military campaigns in Iraq and Afghanistan, and any assessment of the impact of 9/11 on surveillance or civil liberties, in order to focus on the heroism of first-responders and ordinary folks, and to affirm that that “Nothing can change who we are as Americans.”

This avowal that the museum ought to remain above politics, however, may well be what makes it such an important site of ideological imprinting. What we are left with is a common-sense interpretation of 9/11 as a terrible calamity from which we were obligated to recover as quickly as possible. At the end of the history exhibit visitors arrive at an installation showing an excerpt from the video “Project Rebirth,” a time-lapse moving picture of the rebuilding of the World Trade Center and the construction of the memorial pools. It is an absorbing sequence that seems indeed to illustrate what is described in the caption as the “human spirit coping with disaster.” What is not acknowledged, and what might easily be overlooked, is that reconstruction owed more to property rights, commercial incentives, capital flows, and political lobbying than to any “human spirit.” Much has been made of the decision to avoid rebuilding over the footprints of the twin towers, to preserve this patch of land as a tribute to the victims, but the restoration of the financial district speaks most powerfully to the power of commerce and capital.

The 9/11 museum includes Governor Mario Cuomo’s pledge, delivered in the wake of the 1993 bombing, to facilitate a rapid return to “normalcy,” an aspiration broadly shared in the aftermath of disasters; indeed, it is the threat of its erasure that makes ordinary life suddenly seem precious. The museum champions the declaration by architect Minoru Yamasaki that the original World Trade Center was a monument to trade and “world peace,” as well as the assertion by his supervisor, Port Authority director Austin Tobin, that the towers symbolized the importance of the “market” as a foundation of “freedom.” To hail the restoration of the World Trade Center as a return to normal is to celebrate the restoration of a particular form of American

finance capitalism. And surely this message reverberates as visitors emerge from the museum into the familiar scene of a bustling financial district. Of course, there are scholars, social commentators, and activists who argue that the current economic and political system is itself contributing to social and ecological catastrophes: the exhaustion of natural resources, the extinction of species, deepening droughts, intensifying hurricanes, rising inequality, and disorders on a global scale.

Take a few steps eastward from the 9/11 museum and you will find yourself in Zuccotti Park, the site of the Occupy Wall Street encampment where protesters gathered ten years to the month after the 2001 attacks to make the case that the system symbolically exalted by the twin towers was itself disastrous, responsible for a financial crisis that had wiped out 40 percent of the world's wealth in 2008. It surely says much about the way we imagine, and remember, disasters that a national memorial for the financial crisis and its casualties remains inconceivable.

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