A decade has passed since Sept. 11, 2001, but the events of that day have never faded from the nation's consciousness. The response to the terrorist attacks was immediate, large-scale and long-lasting.

Our public policy continues to be shaped and influenced by the tragedy that killed nearly 3,000 Americans, while many of our political debates revolve around issues stemming from 9/11. Headlines about the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, protests in the Middle East, security measures in airports, immigration and even government debt remind us, in ways that are both explicit and implicit, of September 11.

After 9/11, safety and security became the paramount concern.

While many argue that the security enhancements made after September 11 were necessary, others have suggested that the cost was too high, and that the consequence has been an unprecedented erosion of our civil rights. The result has been an ongoing debate over which changes were necessary to ensure our safety, and which have crossed the line.

"This is a country where we're fiercely independent," said Rick Mathews, director of the National Center for Security and Preparedness at Rockefeller College in Albany. "We're free. We like our lifestyle here. But we're also pretty vulnerable, if a bad guy wants to do something. So we have to balance safety with our constitutional rights. We're still working through those issues. It's a major cultural change, and I think it's going to continue for a generation."

Mathews said that the response to 9/11 has been appropriate, and that the increased security and more aggressive surveillance has prevented attacks.

"Most of the public doesn't have a clue how many times we've stopped bad people from doing bad things," Mathews said. "Terrorists
plan long-term. They want to get us to a mindset where we're apathetic."

Dissent

Not everyone believes the response to 9/11 was appropriate.

After 9/11, "People were willing to say, 'Take away my rights,' " said Leonard Cutler, a professor of public law at Siena College who has written two 9/11-related books. "That concerns me."

"When you compromise the legal rights granted to you by the Constitution, it raises real questions," Cutler said. "I am opposed to sacrificing that which we are entitled to for national security purposes."

The terrorist attacks of Sept. 11 marked the first time American civilians had been murdered en masse by a foreign enemy on their own soil. Though sometimes compared to the attack on Pearl Harbor, most experts see key differences between the two events: the attack on Pearl Harbor targeted the military, and was carried out by a known enemy, as opposed to a shadowy, stateless terrorist organization that few Americans had ever heard of.

The attacks made Americans feel sad, fearful, anxious and angry, and those feelings still exist today, as the raw outpourings of emotion at the news of Osama bin Laden's death earlier this year showed. This lingering fear explains why Americans have voiced little protest as their privacy rights have diminished, experts said.

Sheldon Solomon, a professor of psychology at Skidmore College in Saratoga Springs and co-author of the 2003 book "In the Wake of 9/11: The Psychology of Terror," recently wrote a piece about the 10th anniversary of 9/11 for the Chronicle of Higher Education. In the piece, titled "Death," Solomon writes that Sept. 11 was all about death, saying, "September 11 tore a gaping hole in the collectively woven American cultural tapestry, stripping us of our shield against terror, exposing us naked to the nightmare of death; a nightmare (to adapt a phrase from James Joyce) from which we have yet to awaken." The images of the attacks, he writes, reminded Americans of their own vulnerability and mortality.

Solomon writes that Americans initially responded to 9/11 with "extraordinary compassion," but that "lingering fears of death also stoked hatred, righteous indignation and demands for lethal vengeance." At the same time, they also spent much of the past decade numbing themselves to their fears by gambling, watching TV, drinking and doing drugs, he said. "There's been too much denial of death and not enough affirmation of life," he wrote.
sense of gloom

Solomon said that Americans' feelings of gloom have been enhanced by continuing bad news -- the collapse of the economy in 2008, the ongoing wars, the debate over the debt ceiling, high rates of joblessness. He said that if the country was doing better, the 10th anniversary of September 11 might be less psychologically distressing; instead, it will likely reinforce the pain and terror people felt that day.

Solomon has conducted experiments showing that when people were reminded of death or 9/11, they were more likely to support former President George W. Bush. He said that the 10th anniversary would provide an opportunity for politicians to exploit 9/11 all over again. "I do think some of the same anti-Islamic sentiments and 'Go America' sentiments will be raised," he said. "The idea that you're with us or against us will be raised."

There has not been a second terrorist attack in the U.S. since 9/11, but Americans continue to worry about the possibility of such an attack, experts said.

"I think before [Sept. 11] Americans thought terrorist attacks happened elsewhere," said Richard Lachman, a professor of sociology at the University at Albany. "Even though there hasn't been another terrorist attack, and 100 times as many people are killed in car accidents each year, people are more nervous." The attack on 9/11 "was different from anything that happened in the U.S. before," he said. "It was a really spectacular attack in the worst sort of way. It's gotten constant attention, and it was exploited by the Bush administration."

Policy-wise, the biggest changes since Sept. 11 have occurred in the area of civil liberties and national security. Today, the emphasis is on preventing future terrorist attacks, rather than investigating and prosecuting past crimes.

After 9/11, the controversial Patriot Act, which expanded the authority of American law enforcement for the purpose of fighting terrorism, was passed, and the U.S. Department of Homeland Security created. The use of torture had long been banned by the U.S., but techniques such as water boarding and enhanced interrogation were used on terror suspects, although President Barack Obama later banned such practices. The National Security Agency began eavesdropping on people living within the U.S. without obtaining warrants, something the agency had never done before and that civil liberties groups decried as illegal.

aggressive policing
In the Capital Region, residents got an up-close look at one of the government's new prevention-fighting strategies when two Muslim men were arrested in a sting operation and charged with conspiring to aid a terrorist organization. The entire scheme was orchestrated by an FBI informant, and critics complained that neither man would have gotten involved in the scheme if not for the manipulation of the FBI informant. But both were found guilty, and officials hailed the case as a successful terrorism-prevention effort.

New information about how the war on terror is fought continues to surface.

Last month, news reports informed the public of how the CIA has helped transform the New York Police Department into one of the most aggressive domestic intelligence agencies in the country; as part of a human mapping program, the department has sent undercover officers, known as "rakers," into minority neighborhoods, where they've monitored bookstores, bars, cafes and mosques.

Mathews said the Patriot Act enabled "law enforcement to go after suspected terrorists much, much earlier, before crimes are committed."

He said the bombing of Oklahoma City in 1995 inspired law enforcement agencies to rethink how they approached terrorism -- "we realized we weren't prepared to respond to weapons of mass destruction and terrorist acts -- and that those efforts accelerated after 9/11. One big change entails teaching responders about how terrorists think and plan for attacks.

Mathews said that today's terrorists are much more likely to work alone than in the past; the 9/11 terrorists, for instance, operated in cells. "They're using handguns and smaller weapons," he said. "So now we're having to train again, and change our practices and procedures to respond to these changes." Mathews said terrorists are always looking for new ways to attack or intimidate people, which keeps law enforcement and responders on their toes.

"It's an evolving thing," Mathews said.

Mathews also said that some secrecy is necessary.

"If we told everyone about all our procedures and tactics, we'd be giving away the shot," he said.

CIA ROLE

Cutler said news of the partnership between the NYPD and CIA disturbed him. "The CIA is not a domestic agency," he said. "Serious questions have to be raised." He said one of the more troubling
developments since 9/11 "has been the Kafkaesque notion of holding individuals in detention indefinitely, and not telling them why they're being held."

When Obama was elected, he promised to end many of the Bush tactics used in the war on terror; one of his biggest promises was to close the prison at Guantanamo Bay, where terror suspects have been detained without trial for years. But that didn't happen, and for the most part Obama has continued the practices of his predecessor. Critics said this has legitimized those tactics, and made them a more official and established part of U.S. policy.

The American Civil Liberties Union recently released a report titled "A Call to Courage: Reclaiming Our Liberties Ten Years After 9/11," in which the group argues that too much has been sacrificed in the name of national security.

Melane Trimble, executive director of the Capital Region chapter of the ACLU, said the ACLU has been trying to educate the public about civil liberties and the changes of the past 10 years.

"The ACLU is here to tell people there's a need for balance," she said. She said the public has been too willing to give up rights in exchange for safety, but that this is changing. "Ten years later, people are able to look at what was a rational response to 9/11 and what was not," she said.

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