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A Changed World

By BY PETER GRIER, Staff writer / September 17, 2001

A news photographer was walking through Manhattan toward home when she passed a candlelight vigil Thursday at 108th and Amsterdam. She'd had a draining day documenting recovery efforts near the rubble of the World Trade Center, but she stopped to take pictures anyway. The scene spoke to the diversity and strength of New York: a crowd of 25 people singing hymns in Spanish, clutching rosaries and crosses, and holding American flags.

As she started to work, a woman approached her and made a request in a thick Spanish accent. Would she lead them in a song they knew only as "Oh Say Can You See"? They knew the tune. They knew it was important, in some way. But they didn't know the words.

The photographer hesitated. Then she put down her camera and led them all in "The Star-Spangled Banner," the singers carefully following her voice and mimicking her words as tears streamed down their cheeks.

There's been a lot of crying in America - indeed, the world - the past six days. Seldom in human history have the tragedies of a few hours' time created so many spontaneous communities of comfort.

It's possible the short-run emotion won't lead to long-term cultural effects. Americans are a people who like to move forward. Too much dwelling on the past causes problems, like all those ethnic conflicts in the Balkans. Atlanta used to call itself "the city too busy to hate." In a way, the United States is sometimes the country too busy to remember.

But right now, that doesn't seem likely to be the outcome of the most devastating terrorist attacks ever. Last Tuesday was the worst single day for US casualties since the Civil War.

The costs of Tuesday's destruction will surely be felt in the US for years to come. There will be a huge cost in time - the minutes and hours spent in delays caused by new public-security measures. The cost in dollars to remove crumpled steel and masonry, and rebuild, is incalculable. The effects of the blow on the US economy could be profound.

Then there's the effect on Americans themselves. Will this strange new sense of vulnerability last? Will an emerging generation find its purpose in response to terrorism? Will a wounded nation turn inward? Will it stand for a long struggle with a faceless, shadowy foe?

Look at it this way. It's 8:48 a.m. on Tuesday, Sept. 11. Smoke is billowing from a jagged hole in the north tower of the World Trade Center. The book that holds America's defining mythologies has just been opened. "How we act in the aftermath of this tragedy will forge American civilization for the next 100 years," says historian Kevin Starr.

Part 1: The Attack

The first person on US soil to see that airliners were being turned into missiles was probably an air-traffic controller based in a windowless bunker in Nashua, N.H.

The job of the Nashua Federal Aviation Administration center is to handle long-distance air traffic once it has taken off and flown away from airport airspace. Early on the morning of Sept. 11, the controller in question was threading a number of airliners through and around the skies of New England. One of them was American Airlines Flight 11, which had left Boston's Logan Airport at 7:59 a.m., bound for Los Angeles with 81 passengers, 11 crew, and a full load of jet fuel.

About 15 minutes after takeoff, as Flight 11 cruised over western Massachusetts, the controller says he radioed permission for the aircraft to climb from 29,000 to 31,000 feet. Nothing happened.

He tried contacting the pilot on a regular radio frequency. Nothing. He switched to 121.5, an emergency frequency, and tried again. Nothing.

He and his colleagues noticed that the transponder - the electronic ID - of Flight 11 was not broadcasting. That was a very bad sign. At 8:28 a.m., the plane turned south, heading down the Hudson River toward New York City.

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