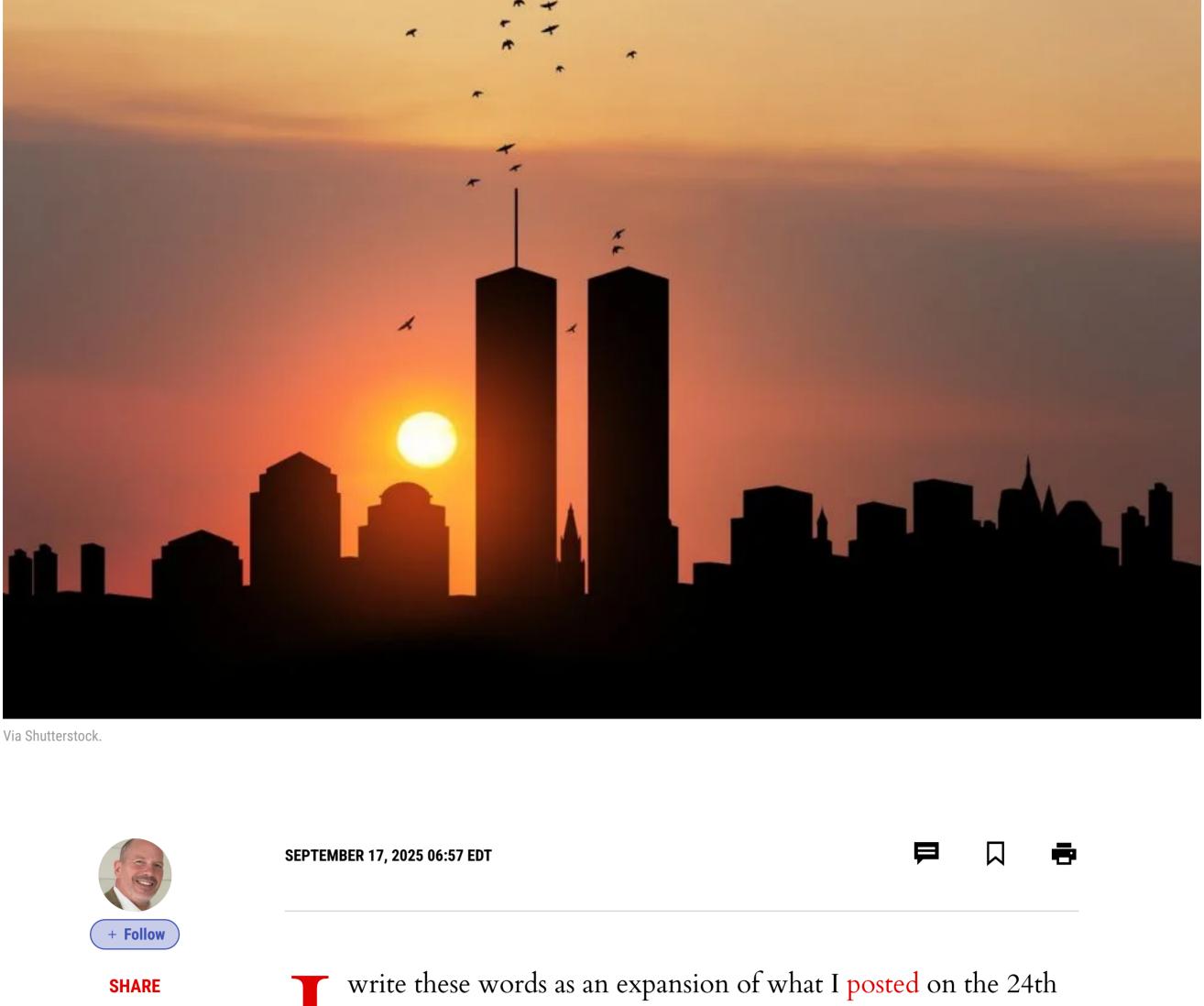
HISTORY

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24 Years Later: 9/11 in the Rear-view Mirror Americans mark the 24th anniversary of the September 11 attacks as political violence again shakes the country. The writer recalls his own 9/11 experience in

Washington in the context of recent assassinations and attempts on public figures in the United States. His account warns that Americans must recover unity to confront real external threats. **BY CHRISTOPHER FORD**





such remembrance has become a part of our collective identity, but rather merely the description of a performative act one does on a certain day each year — if one remembers at all — before the flighty

shallowness of the modern, social-media attention economy moves us all along to the next thing. And that makes me deeply sad, because I think remembering those

anniversary of the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks in the

however, it's increasingly clear that for many Americans today,

United States. Despite the widely-covered anniversary,

"remembering 9/11" isn't a phrase that describes a condition in which

events — and their aftermath — is in some respects more important than ever for America. Some of my students these days are too young to remember 9/11 directly at all, of course, but many of us still do. In a stunningly short time on that beautiful September morning 24 years ago, viciously radicalized ideologues who loathed our country and everything it stands for killed more Americans than had died at Pearl Harbor.

I myself was running a US Senate subcommittee staff at the time for Senator Susan Collins of Maine, and I had an appointment that morning in my office with a senior official in the US Secret Service with whom I was negotiating to host some Congressional Fellows detailed over from that organization to help us in our work. Needless to say, my friend at the Secret Service didn't make our appointment that morning — though, rather remarkably, his assistant called to apologize for his having to miss the meeting. Shortly thereafter, a friend called me to say that from his office in the

Old Executive Office Building, he could now see a plume of smoke

office suite, saying that we needed to leave the building now.

rising from the general direction of the Pentagon. A moment after that, an agitated Capitol Police officer banged on the door to our

hope of intercepting Flight 93.

We didn't know it at the time, but United Airlines Flight 93 — which had left Newark, New Jersey, earlier that morning for San Francisco before being hijacked in mid-flight — was then on its way toward Washington, DC, apparently intending to do to us at the US Capitol what American Airlines Flight 11 and United Airlines Flight 175 had done to the Twin Towers in Manhattan, and what American Airlines Flight 77 did to the Pentagon. As I assembled my staff at our pre-established emergency rally point outside, facing DC's Union Station, two deep "booms" echoed

around, which we feared were the sounds of more terrorist attacks,

but which turned out to be Air National Guard F-16s from Andrews

Air Force Base going supersonic overhead as they raced westward in

Lots of folks have their own "Where were you on 9/11?" stories, of

course, and there's nothing particularly special about mine — except

perhaps that those of us in the US Capitol complex at the time should

perhaps be especially grateful for the amazing, self-sacrificial courage

of the passengers of Flight 93 for storming the cockpit, attacking the

al-Qaeda terrorists there with their bare hands and causing the plane to crash in that fateful Pennsylvania field before it could reach its intended target. That's the sort of thing that we ordinary folk like to *think* we could do in extremis to save so many lives, but dear Lord, could we really? I also later learned, by the way, that those intercepting F-16s had scrambled so fast from Andrews that they were still unarmed. Their pilots were going to ram their planes suicidally into Flight 93 to bring it down.

So much about that day still takes one's breath away.

I tell "my" 9/11 story so many years later not because it has any

today to remember that 9/11 was deeply, terribly real. And I

particularly want us to remember what happened thereafter in

particular significance in itself, but because I want my fellow citizens

Remembering what followed

America, because much of it makes me feel just as proud of us as a people as does remembering those courageous passengers and Air Guard pilots. To be sure, in the wake of those horrible attacks, an entire generation of American national security policy pivoted toward countering radical Islamic terrorist threats, and we spent decades mired in

gamesmanship and crass partisanship. Ours was then an America that prized public service, recognized that we need government institutions that work, understood that this is nowhere more true than in defending against foreign adversaries who wish us ill and was willing to pull together to this end across domestic divisions and accept great risks and burdens to preserve our freedoms and protect our interests in a dangerous world. I think we are still that America, or at least that we can be that America once again, if we allow ourselves to stop hating and fearing

reclaiming the greatness that our system of government, our deepest values and our history continue to make possible. Nevertheless, it is with a guarded hope for our collective future that I

These cults have pulled us dangerously away from our better selves as

a nation and a people, and they stand egregiously in the way of us

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[Kaitlyn Diana edited this piece.] The views expressed in this article are the author's own and do not necessarily reflect Fair Observer's editorial policy. Comment Login

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My 9/11 story

conflicts in the Middle East. The United States had, I would argue, little choice but to respond forcefully, but there is clearly a great deal to regret about the impact that period has had upon our life, political culture and role in the world. The unhappy political and geopolitical aftershocks of those ill-fated engagements will be with us for a long time yet, I fear. But here's what I think is an even more important point. In our country's moment of need, in response to unprecedented threats, a

generation of Americans stepped up boldly and served our country —

in the armed services, in our intelligence agencies and in the new

apparatus then being built for homeland security. The American

taxpayer, moreover, was willing to support all this, resourcing

national security policy to the hilt with a minimum of foolish

each other more than we do our real enemies. America's new divisions We've still got a lot of work to do, of course. The day before this year's anniversary of 9/11, America suffered another episode in its lamentable history of periodic political violence, with the horrific assassination of conservative activist Charlie Kirk.

That appalling crime — along with the assassination of two

Democratic lawmakers in Minnesota in June, not to mention the

near-miss assassination attempt against President Donald Trump

from reclaiming America's political culture from the cults of

reciprocal demonization that have so afflicted it.

himself on the campaign trail in 2024 — suggests how far we still are

look back today upon that terrible September morning in 2001, when this Senate staffer and Navy intelligence officer stared in shock at the roiling rubble of the Twin Towers on television while a pyre of black smoke rose from the Pentagon on the horizon and from that wreckage in a field near Stoneycreek Township, Pennsylvania. You don't need to have a personal "9/11 story" to be a part of America's collective and continuing 9/11 story. You just need to

remember that it is possible with moral courage to pull together in

politics, we are patriots and fellow citizens together, and that foreign

ideologues violently arrayed against the values and freedoms that

immeasurably more grave than the domestic issues that divide us.

made this Republic so great present threats and challenges

times of need across the poisonous polarities that separate us.

Remember that though we may believe different things about

So let's remember all that, and let us work together as fellow Americans to write the next chapter in this national story, for our own children and grandchildren to proudly tell about us.

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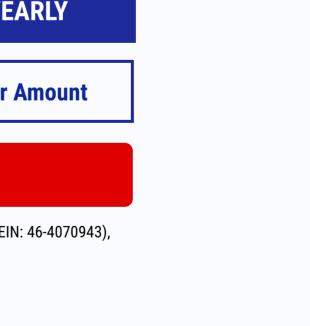
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