NYC 9/11 Public Portal Document

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'Look at What They Did to Us'

NEW YORK—Small fires still smoldered this week in the tumbling ridges of twisted steel and pulverized concrete at Ground Zero NYC. A covered but incandescent anger also burns in this city even as it dresses its war wounds with clear and present heroism. Do not lose sight of that heroism, or of that deferred anger.

President Bush is said to have found a mission in responding to the Sept. 11 acts of mass murder. To visit Ground Zero is to understand that the American nation has found a duty: to remember what happened here every day forward and to inflict methodical and terrible retribution on those who killed or helped kill members of the American family.

The ruins of the World Trade Center twin towers resemble the crisis itself: You focus on the details that are relevant to you and make what you will of the rest. Etched in the broken girders and smashed skyscraper terraces hurled to earth is the easily discernible terrorist message of hatred and fury.

We also need to comprehend and heed the message of human decency, determination and love written by the rescue workers, police officers, firefighters and others who cling to this site two weeks on. They still work through numbing exhaustion to find bodies, limbs, clothing, mementos, anything amid a million tons of debris that might comfort the grieving families of their missing or dead brethren.

"There are families that want enough to fill a coffin and end terrible uncertainty," a policeman tells me as we stand in the unearthly silence of the ruins of World Trade Center Building 5.

The abstractions that rule Washington's official response—the building of "coalitions of the willing," the disputes over releasing or concealing evidence to other nations, the rearranging of bureaucratic fiefdoms in the Cabinet—seem remote and unreal here in the hole cut into Manhattan by suicide pilots from the Middle East.

War damage is suddenly part of New York's physical and emotional landscapes. To walk or drive near Ground Zero for the year it may take to clear the site will be like traveling through Berlin or Hamburg four decades ago, when a ghostly vacant city block would suddenly pop up between gleaming new skyscrapers. It is as disorienting as a missing front tooth in a beautiful smile.

Wiring, snapped beams and smashed ducts twist out of one corner of the American Express building jutting into the sky and disrupting the universe like a broken bone sticking up through skin. A cavern punched through the building wall next door by a flying Trade Center beam grins crazily down from the 10th floor.

How has Beirut—or the villages in Pakistan, Angola, Iraq or other places I have seen overrun by enemy armies—come to New York's financial district, I silently ask. At least here there is no panic, flight from an advancing army or chaos as I gaze out on the destruction visited on thousands I did not know, and on one person I did.

That person was Neil Levin, a genuinely good man who gave his life to public service for New York state. Named as head of the Port Authority of New York and New Jersey a few months ago, he died trying to help his employees escape their offices at the World Trade Center. I joined hundreds of others in fighting back tears through a memorial service Tuesday night at Temple Emanu-el. Then Mayor Rudy Giuliani stood up to speak and our tears stopped.

Giuliani has throughout the crisis found words and gestures so authentic and simple that they transcend eloquence. He asked the rabbi's permission to have the audience rise and give Neil the standing ovation we would have given him in life. A cathartic lifting of spirit followed words from Giuliani that were sorrowful but rallying for his New Yorkers: "Look at what they did to us."

Look at what they did to us all. As the nation works its way through a response, it must never forget the people who have labored through their shock and grief at Ground Zero to help and to honor others, who have deferred their anger to cope with more urgent demands, who speak with heartbreak and heroism in those accents the rest of us so often mock.

President Bush and his aides deny that the United States seeks vengeance. Politicians have to say that kind of thing when they are assembling "broad-based" coalitions abroad.

But the police officers, the firefighters, the iron workers and others at Ground Zero have earned more than diplomatic footwork or other forms of temporizing. They will wait, but they will not wait for very long if their anger seems to go unrequited.

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