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Richard Cohen

Wounded City

NEW YORK—It has been a bit more than a month since terrorists took out the World Trade Center, and yet it seems that time has stood still. Instead of the city recovering, it still ails both physically and emotionally. Reminders of Sept. 11 are everywhere—the heavy police presence, a walk past a funereal firehouse. So much has changed, and the change, both surprisingly and frighteningly, seems permanent.

I fasten on Barry Bonds. This month he broke the home run record with 73. Before that, Mark McGwire had done it in 1998 with 70, and before that it had been Roger Maris's record for 37 years. Until Maris, Babe Ruth had held the record. It stood, seemingly untouchable, for 34 years. What once seemed so permanent has, in the modern era, become transient. We mark history and then we consume it.

Think back to recent events. During the impeachment of Bill Clinton, various members of Congress kept diaries for the occasion. They were participating in only the second presidential impeachment in American history, and they were sure—and so they told their diaries—that what they were doing was historic.

It does not seem so now. The impeachment, the whole Monica Lewinsky scandal, has come and gone and barely left a footprint. The same could be said about Whitewater, Filegate and the rest of the Clinton scandals. The once epochal is now mostly forgotten. Think of O. J. Think of Gary Condit and even—in the sense that it had so little effect on us at the time—the Gulf War. One day history, the next day trivia.

We have become accustomed to this pattern. Whatever happened—almost without exception—made almost no difference in our lives. This is not the case anymore. Just as the collapsing towers of the World Trade Center took other buildings with them, it seems the power of the explosions still cannot be contained. Some buildings are gone, but the entire city is imperiled.

New York is not so much a city as it is an idea. Once, it was a port and a manufacturing center. But in a way, New York lost World War II. Defense jobs went elsewhere—to the West, to the South. Manufacturing followed, and at the same time the port, with about 100,000 jobs, atrophied. The city reinvented itself as a corporate center. But a corporation is not a port or a factory. It's footloose. It can go anywhere.

That's not the case with some other major cities. London was bombed by the Germans, but while the children could be moved to the country, Parliament and Buckingham Palace could not. The king and the royal family stayed, sharing the risk. It's the same with Washington. Congress must meet there. The president lives and works in the White House. Washington is more than just a place. It is a function.

But not New York. What it has offered in recent times is the shared idea that an urban environment is attractive. The more people the better. A kind of abrasive closeness produced a sort of heat—and then creativity. Immigrant Jews from Europe coming into contact with African Americans up from the South produced American popular music. Irving Berlin's first hits were based on black ragtime music and so, a bit later, were George Gershwin's. Paris had Picasso vying with Braque to produce cubism. This is what cities can do.

But this proximity is precisely what now scares people about New York. It makes it and its signature buildings a potential target for terrorists. The urge is to disperse, to go where it is presumed to be safer. And why not? Location hardly matters anymore. Many people can work anywhere they want. And already, somewhat sheepishly, some are moving out—to the suburbs, to the country. Some corporations have largely relocated. They say they are coming back, but they will do—as they always do—what's best for their bottom line. It is the ultimate repository of the corporate conscience.

So I fear for New York. The abiding, unrelenting staying power of that one day, Sept. 11, cannot be denied. The heavy police presence, the sad shrines before the firehouses, the subway that used to go one way and now goes another—all these are wounds on a city that is weakened and bleeding still.

New York lost more than 5,000 lives Sept. 11. It lost revenues beyond reckoning. But the idea of the city, as lovely and ephemeral as a Sinatra song about it, may be the final, uncounted casualty.

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