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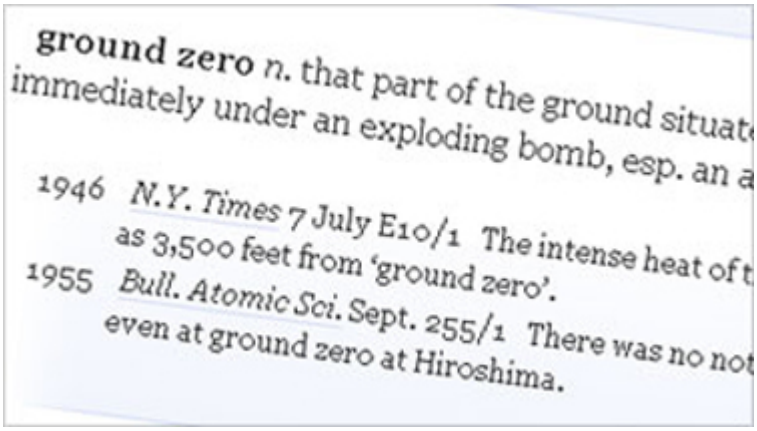
Only Linguistic Impact of 9/11 Is "9/11" Itself

Dennis Baron · Thursday, September 15th, 2011

The terrorist attacks on 9/11 happened ten years ago, and although everybody remembers what they were doing at that flashbulb moment, and many aspects of our lives were changed by those attacks, from traveling to shopping to going online, one thing stands out: the only significant impact that 9/11 has had on the English language is 9/11 itself.

Although expressions like "ground zero," "Let's roll," and "weapons of mass destruction" got new resonance after 9/11, at least for a time, and the word *terrorist* itself became a lot more visible, only *9/11* has entered the language as a phrase that will live in infamy. New York's Mayor Bloomberg actually wants to retire *ground zero* in favor of the site's official title, "The World Trade Center and the National September 11th Memorial and Museum." But he still uses the phrase *9/11*.


ground zero *n.* that part of the ground situat
immediately under an exploding bomb, esp. an a

1946 *N.Y. Times* 7 July E10/1 The intense heat of t
as 3,500 feet from 'ground zero'.
1955 *Bull. Atomic Sci.* Sept. 255/1 There was no not
even at ground zero at Hiroshima.

> *Ground zero,* first used in 1946, originally referred to the site of the atomic bomb that exploded over Hiroshima on August 6, 1945. 9/11 changed all that. [image: entry from the *OED*]

Other 9/11 words have faded as well. "Roadside bomb," the terrorist tool of choice that was so popular for a time that I named it "word of the year" two years running, seems to have fizzled. We still hear *jihad*, but it predates 9/11. And now that *Osama bin Laden* has been swallowed up by the sea, he's dropped out of our vocabulary as well, along with the brief post-9/11 interest in studying

Arabic. Both *threat level* and *TSA,* which came on the scene as a result of 9/11, are mostly joke terms used by late-night comics, not serious vocabulary items. And as for *war on terror,* while the phrase still pops up from time to time, it's not particularly useful, in part because it doesn't refer to a real war.

A roadside bomb explodes in Baghdad.

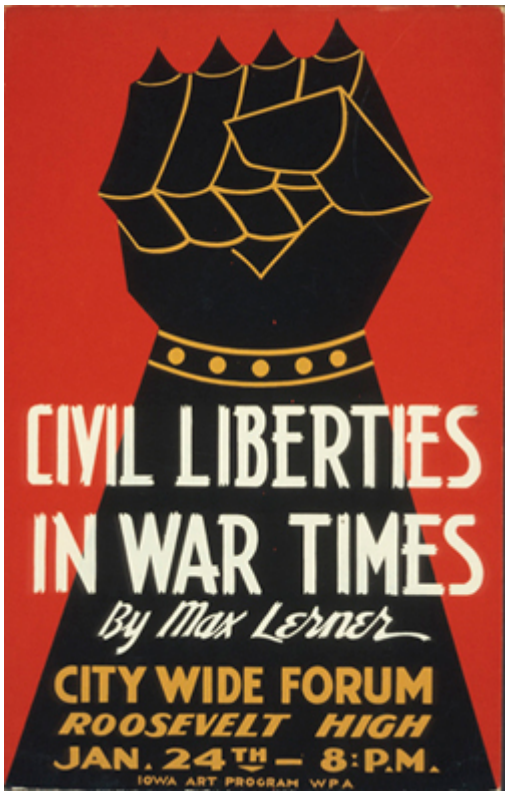
9/11 is an unusual term for English, which doesn't have a lot of specific dates in its lexicon. Those that do exist typically take the long form of the date, like *the Fourth of July* (that phrase, also commonly *July Fourth,* but never 7/4, stuck almost immediately after the signing of the Declaration of Independence—though more in the English of John Hancock than that of George III). Yes, people say *September 11* as well, but *9/11* seems to have become the expression of choice, rolling off the tongue a little more smoothly. We may have been influenced by *7-11,* possibly because, like the convenience store, *9/11* has become a brand.

No one really says *November 11* for Veterans' Day any more; and December *7* has faded from the national vocabulary as veterans of World War II become scarce. *Cinco de Mayo* has an even more limited appeal, plus any immigration reformer/English-only fanatic will tell you that it's not even English. For many years *April 15th* enjoyed some resonance as tax day, but its meaning has blurred in the post-Tea Party era. And of course there's *Juneteenth,* emancipation day (June 19), which is, unfortunately, not as prominent as other American historical dates.

The Brits have *November 5* (Guy Fawkes Day, for those who need a translation), and *1066,* but America's 9/11 paved the way linguistically, as well as in the annals of terrorism, for the latest British date-event, *7/7.*

The non-linguistic impact of 9/11 is unquestioned: the attacks cost us big-time in terms of lives and dollars. They also changed our daily behavior: we show up early at the airport to be x-rayed and patted down, and we can never remember whether nail scissors are allowed, or only nail clippers. We may no longer have to turn on our laptops to prove that they're laptops, but we still have to

take them out for inspection by TSA agents who probably suspect that all computer code is Arabic in disguise. Surveillance cameras proliferate on our city streets, and many Americans seem blithely unaware that the Patriot Act, passed quickly in response to 9/11, suspends most Constitutional protections against illegal search and seizure.



As this WPA poster reminds us, during World War II, as now, defending civil liberties takes a back seat to civil defense.

The linguist Geoff Nunberg explains that 9/11 had a minimal linguistic impact because the events of that day directly affected only a relatively small number of people. That wasn't the case, he reminds us, with World War II, the source of may words and phrases, including *ground zero.* Other wars brought us words as well. After William the Conqueror defeated Harold, the English king, at the Battle of Hastings, English began absorbing vast quantities of French vocabulary. Had events gone the other way in 1066, we'd all be eating freedom fries today.

William Duke of Normandy, known as the Conqueror and bent on régime change, defeats Harold, the English King, at the battle of Hastings. Had things gone the other way, we'd all be eating freedom fries. ["The death of Harold," detail from the Bayeux Tapestry; the text reads, *Harold rex interfectus est.*]

We've forgotten the date when the "shot heard round the world" was fired (it was April 19, 1775, the date of the Battles of Lexington and Concord, and it's still celebrated as Patriot's Day in Massachusetts, though not always on the 19th but on the third Monday in April, whatever date that happens to fall on). So perhaps 9/11, which does not seem poised to become a Monday-holiday, will eventually fade from the language as well, along with other memories. But even though I remember agreeing with critics who called the World Trade Center ugly when it went up in the 1970s, and I associate that part of the city with stores selling cheap and probably bootleg electronics, it's still eerie for me to see the twin towers looming in shots of the lower Manhattan skyline in movies made before 9/11, and I still remember exactly what I was doing when reports of the attack started coming in.

Not the forever stamp: No one remembers the date when the shot heard round the world was fired. Will we replace 9/11 in our national vocabulary with some other historical marker?

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