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The New Alchemy: Turning Tragedy to Profits

Bill Cushing · Saturday, September 11th, 2021

As we mark the 20th anniversary of the September 11 attacks on the United States, it might be wise to pause and take stock of what has resulted from the event that has certainly marked the lives of any American older than 28, some perhaps even younger.

Like most governmental reactions to catastrophic events, 9/11 produced its fair share of poorly-reasoned over-reactions. Among the resulting bad ideas, the Patriot Act and its love child, the Department of Homeland Security stand tall for starters.

And the less said about the Transportation Security Administration, the better.

The aforementioned bureaucracies are of course high on the SNAFU list and not just because they are wasteful, have proven ineffectual if not incompetent, and seem prone to corruption. The greater pity is that those “qualities” are expected, but the inevitable deed that bothered me the most was the name that eventually became attached within years of the event: Patriot Day.

This is a lousy idea not widely discussed, examined, or legislated over and actually constituted my first and greatest fear in the aftermath. I hoped upon hope that the day would never acquire some government-sanctioned official name.

Good luck on that consideration.

Unfortunately, then-President George W. Bush started the ball rolling as he—in a bipartisan manner—proclaimed the following Friday, September 14, as a [National Day of Prayer and Remembrance for the Victims of the Terrorist Attacks on September 11, 2001](#). That set things in inexorable motion. A month later, the House called for a national day of mourning.

Meaningful substance would eventually be replaced with slick style. The seeds for commercialization were packaged but not yet delivered.

That would happen eight years later, in 2009, when President Barack Obama changed the official name to Patriot Day and National Day of Service and Remembrance, couching it in terms of “giving back.” That marked the moment that the day would start shedding its impact and importance. It has since winnowed down to the now-standing Patriot Day, and its dilution into a handy catchphrase is now well-established. At that moment, the seeds for exploitation were ready for planting.



I don't get much agreement with my stance—at least not right away. After all, many reason that it is good to memorialize relevant events by giving such days their own distinct monikers. Like Thanksgiving or Christmas, Memorial Day or Labor Day, the appellation sustains importance of the act into our national psyche along with whatever corresponding emotions are expected to set in.

I offer a contrary position to that belief.

My argument is that the name, like most of the legislation born out of the event, ends up trivializing the actual incident to the point of cheapening it rather than instituting its importance. No matter how noble or high-minded the intent might have been at the start, eventually the “memory” marking a day meant for reverence morphs into a marketing tool.

The September 11 attacks are still a tad too fresh in our minds for completely crass commercials, but we are going down that road.

Already two major automotive businesses have employed Patriot Day as a marketing tool. Some lesser-known but generally male-demographic products have also used the day to move inventory under the guise of patriotism. I doubt this will be the last we see of a bubbling up of ads and special deals emblazoned with flags and the phrase of “Never forget.”



I anticipate seeing some business announce, “Never forget that we offer the best deals anywhere”—or something to that effect. I bet it's coming, perhaps even in my lifetime.

I imagine that by the 50th marking of the day, 9/11 will have become completely weakened. And without any perspective.

Fourth of July, Labor Day, President's Day: all are big sale days for stores, dealers, and various merchants. In fact, as proof, I point to Memorial Day as the most obvious example. It is intended to honor those who died—usually in some pretty gruesome fashions—while engaged in war. Yet it has become a day for hawking appliances, cars, computers, clothes, televisions, what-have-you. Can anything be more vulgar or opportunistic?

That is meant as a rhetorical question, not a challenge.

On the other end of the spectrum, think of December 7, Pearl Harbor Day. There is nothing flashy or fashionable in the name. It is simple direct, and therefore not easily fabricated or remolded into some marketing gimmick. That, I believe, is the main reason it remains a day of reflection, not retail.

In the meantime, perhaps in the case of September 11, we should call it National Pay-triot-day.

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