

## AuthorAffiliation

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THE hijacked planes that zeroed in on New York and Washington with such murderous accuracy obviously chose their targets for a reason. They didn't attack Los Angeles and Miami, after all. Why not? It's reasonable to assume that they chose cities and buildings that they believed had great symbolic and actual potency: the respective headquarters of the military and financial institutions whose decisions have tremendous impact throughout the globe.

As we've seen from the outpouring of support from around the world, millions of people love and admire the United States and its pre-eminent urban centers. But others hate us passionately. Not, despite President Bush, because we are the land of the free and good, but because the nation has embraced policies from which they feel they've suffered. Driven by calculated strategy and suicidal fanaticism, they've dealt a terrific blow to proud towers and command centers alike.

New Yorkers are rolling with the blow magnificently, despite the added shock of having it come both figuratively and literally out of the clear blue sky, shattering our sense of invulnerability. But that sense always rested on a truncated reading of history. While the particular form of the attack was fiendishly novel, New York, over nearly four centuries, has repeatedly been the object of murderous intentions. Through a combination of luck and power, we have escaped many of the intended blows, but not all of them, and our forebears often feared that worse might yet befall them.

The Colonial town was utterly vulnerable to attack by sea. Its citizenry worried about being bombarded by warships of the contending European empires seeking to seize its harbor and hinterland. Had not the English captured the Dutch village in 1664 simply by pointing ships' cannons at the wooden houses?

In 1776, when the city and country rebelled, the English invaded New York in history's largest amphibious landing to that point. That led to the destruction of a large part of the town, the flight of almost all its inhabitants and its further devastation by occupying British troops.

The postwar city rebounded miraculously. But the memory lived on to spur a mammoth outpouring of citizen volunteers to strengthen the city's defenses against the British during the 1812 war, though in the end it was Washington that was attacked and sacked.

During the 19th century there were few external threats of consequence. Confederate sappers did infiltrate the city in 1864 from Canada. They planted bombs in the big hotels and theaters, hoping to incinerate the entire town, but the fires were contained and the worst averted. Far greater damage was wrought during the 1800's by our own violent internal divisions, most horrifically the great draft riots of 1863.

There were, however, ill wishers aplenty outside the city. As New York had developed into the nation's financial capital, many in the South and West came to deeply resent what they depicted as their colonial subordination to Wall Street. Others detested the immigrants piling into Gotham's slums.

The Charleston Courier roared that the headquarters of "merchants and Mammon-worshippers" should "be blotted from the list of cities." And in 1860 a Southerner wrote a fantasy novel that imagined Gotham destroyed after an urban Armageddon that pitted working-class Irish against the city's business classes (an eerie prefiguring of the draft riots to come).

In the late 19th century, Western and Southern populist opponents of the "Money Power" in New York drew on its tradition of violent internal clashes to pen apocalyptic fantasies describing a city consumed by orgies of violence. One envisioned war between an "Oligarchy" of capitalists and a proletarian "Brotherhood of Destruction," culminating in a quarter-million corpses being stacked in Union Square.

Inside the city, there were fears that anarchists, a handful of whom had made windy pronouncements about dynamiting the city's elite, might yet blow the place up. There were virtually no such incidents until a hellish explosion ripped Wall Street in 1920 (with the House of Morgan and the Stock Exchange the likely targets, though no perpetrators were identified).

WITH World War I, there were again real foreign foes to contend with, and old anxieties about vulnerability to assault from the sea (and now the air) returned with a vengeance. Again, New York -- a financial and industrial powerhouse -- seemed the chief target. Propagandists concocted lurid posters, one of which depicted the city under air attack, with Lower Manhattan in flames, while a U-boat lurked near the ruins of the Statue of Liberty, its severed head half submerged.

But apart from a spectacular blowup of a munitions dump on a New Jersey wharf that shook skyscrapers and shattered glass in Times Square, defenses proved more than adequate. Similarly in World War II, a reported (but false) sighting of enemy bombers two days after Pearl Harbor engendered panic, and German submarines prowling the coastline kept tensions high (the enemy, said F.D.R. in 1942, could "come in and shell New York tomorrow night, under certain conditions"). The city again seemed a logical target, as it played a crucial role in convoying soldiers and supplies to Europe. In the end, however, coordinated air and sea patrols kept the city inviolate.

The Cold War and the arrival of nuclear weapons touched off a new round of fears, as 1940's writers and artists repeatedly hypothesized an atomic bomb being dropped on Manhattan. In 1945 Reader's Digest noted it was "now in the power of the atom-smashers to blot out New York with a single bomb. Such a bomb can burn up in an instant every creature, can fuse the steel buildings and smash the concrete into flying shrapnel."

By 1947 the magazine contemplated the added devastation of radioactive fallout. Its article "Mist of Death Over New York" imagined a nuclear explosion in the harbor that, within six weeks, would leave 389,101 New Yorkers dead or missing. Again, the presumption was that the Russians would attack New York on both symbolic and strategic grounds.

In recent decades, some opponents of the expanding global cultural and economic order of which New York and Washington were seen as headquarters, turned to terror. The resulting mayhem seldom touched New York's shores -- the first World Trade Center attack was a notable exception -- but fantasies about urban destruction exploded in popular culture. The popularity of cinematic depictions of overseas (or alien) predators wreaking havoc on New York and Washington, with the World Trade Center and Statue of Liberty as attendant casualties, was perhaps also fueled by antagonism to Big Government and Big Corporations.

Now these fantasies have been horribly realized -- one reason that we've repeatedly heard stunned witnesses exclaiming the devastation seemed "unreal" or "just like a movie." This is not to say that terrorists are copycats and that Hollywood's to blame, but rather that cultural producers, like almost everyone else, tend to assume that New York and Washington are the likeliest targets. One consequence of reality having caught up to fiction might be a new reluctance to spin such fantasies -- a reissue of "Independence Day" was just postponed -- though it's equally likely that someone is already hard at work on a mini-series.

More hopefully, our shattered sense of invulnerability will be replaced by a sober appreciation of the fact that, even as we mourn our casualties, take prudent precautions to prevent similar attacks, help track down and punish those responsible, and reconstruct our city, our generation of New Yorkers, like those that preceded ours, has witnessed and survived a cataclysm even worse than our imaginations had been able to conceive.

Illustration

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