In 2001, Americans were convinced that the United States was the center of the world. It was exactly a decade after the official end of the cold war and the triumphant eviction of Saddam Hussein from Kuwait. French Foreign Minister Hubert Vedrine had described us two years earlier as a “hyper-power.” Beyond geopolitics, we were the source and the center of the forces of globalization: technology, finance, entrepreneurship, movies, music, fashion, and the mores of modernity. As our critics never tired of reminding us, we were deeply self-absorbed.

September 11 intensified this view. Where once we had believed it was “all about us,” now we came to view the world as “us versus them.” President Bush’s ringing challenge to other governments—most of whom were scrambling to declare their support and solidarity after the attacks—was clear: You’re either with us or against us. But it wasn’t just Bush who...
adopted such language; nearly everyone did. A month after 9/11, Fareed Zakaria published a Newsweek cover story titled “Why Do They Hate Us?” “They” were a shadowy, global enemy, out to get “us” wherever and however they could.

Ten years later, America’s understanding of its place in the world has changed radically. It is now possible to attend high-level conferences in Asia and Europe and hear speeches and presentations in which the United States is barely mentioned. In Rio, Mumbai, Doha, Ankara, and even Berlin and Paris, deals are done and plans are made in both the private and public sectors that bypass the United States completely. In the Middle East, James Zogby, pollster and director of the Arab American Institute, reports that Arab populations no longer see everything through the lens of opposition to the United States, focusing instead on the failings of their own regimes. “The U.S.,” he argues, “has become almost irrelevant in this period.” That is an exaggeration, of course; millions of citizens across the Middle East still see the United States as a malevolent power. But it is true that one of the most important aspects of the Arab Spring, as Middle East experts have argued from the beginning, is that the debate is not about the United States, but about the relationship between citizens and their own governments.

More broadly, the financial crisis of 2008 and the debt-ceiling crisis of 2011 have dramatically diminished U.S. standing in the world, throwing our economic competence and political effectiveness into doubt. In 2005, Deputy Secretary of State Robert Zoellick gave his famous speech urging China to be a “responsible stakeholder.” This month, top Chinese officials publicly chided American leaders for their debt-deal brinksmanship. They were not just complaining about America’s handling of its economy; they were also criticizing the paralysis of the U.S. political system.

The mood of most Americans is understandably low. But the news is not all bad. For one thing, recognizing that not all roads must lead through Washington is the first step toward a new kind of international leadership that depends more on creating the conditions and coalitions for other nations to step up rather than trying to do everything ourselves. For another, if we are less central to world affairs, we are also hated less. We cannot be perceived as both irrelevant and the cause of every evil. One of the corollaries to this state of affairs is a downturn in the popularity of our adversaries. Iran is declining in favor among Arab publics, as is Al Qaeda. At the same time, countries like Brazil are suddenly worrying more about Chinese currency manipulation and strategic investment than about U.S. imperialism.

Moreover, a dose of self-doubt is, within reason, a healthy thing for any nation that holds itself to high ideals. The heart of American exceptionalism lies in our capacity—supported by both the design of our political system and our culture—to be honest about where we have fallen short. It’s time to recognize that many other countries—Sweden, Germany, Canada, Australia—have struck a better balance between public and private power, with the result that equality of opportunity actually means something. That our education and health systems are at the bottom of the charts for advanced industrial democracies. That much of our infrastructure lags behind not just Europe and Japan but also, increasingly, Singapore, South Korea, and parts of China. Seeing and speaking truth is the first step toward national renewal.

From this perspective, let us take the tenth anniversary of September 11 as an opportunity to see it in a different way. As a terrible human tragedy, always. As the slaughter of innocent civilians. And as the end of the post-cold-war era and the beginning of a twenty-first century in which the threats posed by other states are being joined by new menaces: networked terrorists, traffickers in illicit goods, proliferators, and the unpredictable intersection of humans and nature.

But today we should also see 9/11 as an event that connects us to the rest of the world rather than divides us from it. After a decade in which we watched and admired the courage of the citizens of Madrid, London, Bali, and Mumbai as they resumed their routines immediately after terrible terrorist attacks, perhaps we can accept that ours is a shared rather than a unique experience. We can remember that the citizens of more than 80 nations died on 9/11, the vast majority of them in buildings constituting the World Trade Center. Indeed, some of my Harvard Law students who were the most upset by the attacks were foreign students from countries racked by violence; they had been certain that the United States was the one place in the world that they could feel utterly safe.

Our original response to September 11 wasn’t irrational, to be sure. Any attack by an external enemy understandably creates a stronger sense of “us.” That is why virtually all Americans felt a deep satisfaction and sense of justice with the killing of Osama bin Laden. But, with a decade of hindsight and a better understanding of our place in the world, we might now consider defining “us” more broadly than we did back in 2001. We will remember the victims of September 11 no less if we place what happened ten years ago in the larger stream of human brutality, fanaticism, and tragedy. And we will honor them more if we use that remembrance to leave aside our campaign for national revenge in favor of a longer, harder, but no less necessary struggle for global justice.

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