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World War 1 of Century Twenty-one?

By Prof Chee Yam Cheng

Editor's Note

Professor Chee Yam Cheng, our Editorial Board Member, was in New York attending the 14th International Symposium on Drugs Affecting Lipid Metabolism, when he learnt of the bombing of the WTC twin towers on 11 September 2001. He wrote this report not far from 'Ground Zero'.

BACKGROUND SCENARIO

It was a Tuesday morning and I awoke at 5am. Where was I? I was at the Sheraton Hotel in New York, having arrived a few days earlier. I was attending the 14th International Symposium on Drugs Affecting Lipid Metabolism from 9 to 12 September 2001 at the Hotel Hilton. I was still jet lagged but lucky that I could sleep till 5am rather than awaken at 3am. I looked out of the window of room 3721 on the 37th floor. The roads down below were deserted and the offices across the street empty. Tall buildings were everywhere. I returned to bed and tried to sleep for another 2 hours. It was the 11th of September 2001.

Later that morning, after a heavy American buffet breakfast, I was at the Grand Ballroom at 8.30 am listening to the plenary lecture. With the recent withdrawal of cerivastatin from the market by Bayer, the statins were being closely surveyed, monitored and re-evaluated. The lady chairperson midway through the lecture interrupted the plenary speaker with the announcement that the audience was to remain behind after the one-hour lecture for an important public announcement. The lecture concluded on time and the announcement shocked all present – that 2 hijacked commercial jets had crashed into the twin towers of the World Trade Centre (WTC) right here in lower Manhattan of

New York City this morning. We were advised to return to our hotel rooms and watch the TV, CNN and other channels for further announcements.

At the foyer of the ballroom, CNN was on the TV set just set up. It showed again and again, Tower 1 on fire about two thirds up, and Tower 2 on fire at about the same height. At the entrance to the Sheraton, I was denied access until I produced my door key (that was like a plastic credit card), gave my room number and my name. Security checked that my responses were appropriate before I was allowed to enter the lobby. Again TV sets were blaring out the shocking news to all and sundry. To get to the lift doors, I again had to state my room number and produce the key before I could enter the lift lobby.

Once in the solitary confines of my room, I breezed through the 8 channels available that were having "live" broadcasts and so got an overall picture of what had happened and what was happening. I could witness "live" the collapse of both towers as I glued my eyes to the TV set. On replay over and over again was the way the second tower was rammed and set alight. I supposed at 8.45 am when it first happened, the suspicion was it was an accident. By then the TV networks were already showing Tower 1 ablaze when the United Airlines jet came into view, sweeping past both towers and U-turning to speed towards and into Tower 2. This second dastardly coward act was replayed over and over again to show the deliberateness of the attack. It was no accident.

With Tower 1 burning, and spewing thick black smoke, there was not much

yellow-orange flames to see. But the moment the second jet impacted and plowed through Tower 2, it burst into flames and became a towering inferno. Some 100 tons of jet fuel ablaze enveloped the tower in bright orange, then a pall of thick black smoke. The announcer then said that 8 aircrafts had been hijacked early Tuesday morning. 4 were accounted for but nobody knew the whereabouts of the other 4. This later proved to be false. 4 aircrafts were hijacked, 2 each belonging to American Airlines and United Airlines. The 2 that were hijacked from Boston were crashed into New York's twin towers. One from Washington crashed into the Pentagon and the fourth from Newark airport, New York, crashed into a field in Southwest Pennsylvania.

It unfolded later that there were some 19 hijackers of Middle Eastern origin, and that some of them had stayed in the US for a long time. The hijackers had hijacked 4 commercial flights with their load of passengers, flight attendants and pilots, and successfully targeted the planes in 3 instances: the attacks on the twin towers and the Pentagon. These fully loaded missiles piloted by suicide pilots, murdered many a thousand people of different races and nationalities. While the manifests of the passengers and crew on board the jets allowed for their easy identification (because all on board died), the death toll at the twin towers and the complex of the WTC at New York is presently unknown.

What a tragedy! Words cannot describe the TV pictures of carnage and destruction, of loss and suffering, of heroes and victims. What did the nation do?



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America has been under threat for a long time by dissident groups declaring war on America since several years back. That threat became war on the 11th of September 2001. "America Under Threat" became "America Under Attack" the caption used on all local TV broadcasts including that of CNN which is broadcast globally. So the whole world knew in less than one hour after it happened that war had been declared on America. Unlike the warfare of previous centuries, the enemy remained unknown. It was not another country or state. The enemy was hiding and elusive. It did not publicly declare itself. Such is the face of international terrorism.

Terrorism as the word implies seeks to strike terror. While America had previously fought wars on foreign territory, this time round, the enemy had struck stealthily and suddenly on home ground. There was no forewarning and no declaration of war to allow America to gradually upgrade its security alert. Perhaps the previous threats were not taken seriously enough. As it turned out, the hijackers were pilots trained in Florida, US by commercial aviation centres, not in this century but the last.

By 10am Tuesday morning, amid clear sunny skies of late summer in New York city, the WTC Twin Towers had disappeared into the ground, imploding in an avalanche of concrete, ash, soot and twisted metal. By late afternoon, the lower buildings also collapsed. The 110-storey high towers were reduced to 7 storeys of rubble, burning many dead and alive. It is estimated that some 50,000 people work at the WTC and may have been at their desks as early as 7am that morning. In the towers, many witnessed the planes crash. They were helpless to do anything except to call the authorities and home, and then make a dash for it. Few were to survive. At the 110th storey, that is already over 400 metres in the sky. Even the rescuers had to be exceptionally fit to climb 50 storeys in double quick time to render any help.

MEDICAL RESPONSE

I was back at the conference after noon. A representative from the New York Medical Association addressed us. She said there was a great need for qualified medical personnel

on the ground to help in trauma management, collecting of blood (phlebotomy) and organisational skills. There were some 2,000 of us registered in the meeting, many of us medical doctors but just as many were scientists. She mentioned that the public had volunteered as blood donors and centres have been set up to collect blood but the waiting time was 4 hours long. So I volunteered.

The area of lower Manhattan below Canal Street was a frozen zone. Heavy equipment such as tractors, excavators, cranes and others were being moved into the "war zone". Paramedics and ambulances were parked in the vicinity ready to evacuate victims pulled out of the wreckage. Further away at Chelsea Pier 61 were the holding area and blood collection centre. By 3pm that afternoon, 60 of the doctors at the meeting had been transported by the authorities to Chelsea Pier. I was not one of them. So my chance to see exactly how America organises this critical aspect of medical support did not materialise. My name was on the list and they said they would call for me if my help was needed.

Later I learnt that the response from the public and other doctors of New York City was overwhelming but live casualties were few. The mayor of New York asked for more and more body bags (to transport the dead and pieces of body parts) at each successive press briefing. Less and less medical personnel were required. Initially, the level 1 Trauma Centres had their fair share of injured to treat and they coped admirably. Later, they were left waiting for casualties to arrive. By the third day, there were hardly any casualties left. There were more dead than alive found in the rubble. The request for body bags climbed from 2,000 to 5,000 and then to 11,000.

For those injured by falls and fallen structures, orthopaedic and neurosurgeons could do the necessary together with the trauma surgeons. Of course, resuscitation of ABC (airway, breathing and circulation) at the site (later called "Ground Zero") was top priority for all the injured. For those nearer the floors where the aircraft literally knifed through the building, the intense heat of the fireball would have cremated many, and others badly burnt and charred would have had no hope. Those further away with severe burns

would have had difficulty evacuating themselves and being evacuated as they were so many storeys up and it was not long before the whole building plummeted into the ground. So I believe there was more blood and plasma collected than was necessary. The waiting for casualties became a despairingly futile exercise. The medicos were prepared but most casualties landed up in the morgue; not the hospital.

FORENSIC RESPONSE

As there were more dead bodies than warm casualties, there appeared to be a greater need for forensic pathologists than clinicians and surgeons. Rescuers dug at the rubble manually and recovered loads of dirt, bucketful by bucketful. Whenever they came across a body or a body part, sometimes aided by sniffer dogs, work would stop and a photographer called in to take pictures of the scene before extrication continued. Each body was put into a bag, labelled and taken away.

Thousands of lorry loads of rubble, twisted metal, steel girders and concrete beams were taken away from the scene as rescuers worked their way inwards from the periphery of the rubble pile. These lorries were directed to a landfill at Staten Island where the FBI and other agencies sifted the debris for evidence of any kind.

Over at Pier 61, the field morgue was busy but identification of persons difficult. Over at the Armoury on Lexington Avenue, a huge machinery was set up for relatives of missing persons to file a report and fill in a detailed questionnaire of the missing person. They had to give answers to the person's characteristic physical features like scars, tattoos and anthropometric data. Dental history and records, and any X-rays were also asked for. It was explained that the teeth would probably have survived the intense heat better than any other body structure. They also had to provide samples of any cells of the missing person, in particular, they were asked to bring in hair, hairbrushes and toothbrushes of the missing. These were required for DNA matching. All were told that these processes would take months to complete.

Of the initial 100 or so bodies discovered on Tuesday, less than half were positively identified and released. The rest had to

wait. The most gruesome body part found so far was the lower half of a woman's body. Identifying missing persons would take a long, long time. From reports of missing persons was compiled an estimated number of the probable death toll from this horrendous tragedy. Meanwhile, the companies that used to operate out of these buildings had their own staff lists and were trying to account for the living and the dead. Yet how many tourists and other passers-by were hit will be more difficult to determine. From latest reports, citizens of several other nations were also reported missing. They were from Britain, Australia, Germany, South Korea, Mexico, India, Japan and Switzerland. Identifying them would be even more arduous.

AMERICA'S RESPONSE

On Tuesday evening, President George Bush gave a short sombre and solemn address to the nation. The US saw "evil". It was an "act of war" as minute by minute, fear enveloped the country. National security was at stake. Who was the enemy? For those old enough to remember, it was a day reminiscent of Pearl Harbour but the comparison falters. The kamikaze pilots were from Japan. The pilots of the hijacked aircraft were not known to be from any country at war with America; worse still, they turned US commercial jetliners into weapons of mass murder, killing innocent lives on board (including a 2-year-old child) as well as on the ground. At the Pentagon, casualties included a 3-star General and officers of the Army and Navy.

Within 24 hours, the 18 (and later 19) hijackers were identified and named. The FBI-led manhunt throughout the US found that the US-trained pilots had executed the attacks and Osama bin Laden, a Saudi Arabian exiled in the deserts of Afghanistan, was confirmed as a prime suspect for this carnage and madness. Meanwhile all airports in the US were closed by 9.20am on Tuesday. Those in flight outside US were directed to Canada, others in flight within US were told to land at the nearest available airport. There was chaos on the ground but travellers accepted the situation once they understood that airport security had failed and the Federal Aviation Authority had

tightened the rules. Investigations also revealed that the White House and even Air Force One were among the targets to be hit.

By the third day, it was less and less one of hope, rescue and recovery of human lives. It was more and more one of mourning and grief. The President visited the sites of destruction, on the third day at the Pentagon, Washington, and on the fourth day at the WTC site, New York. He shared in the tears and the weeping as well as to thank and encourage the rescuers and heroes, some of whom died trying to save others. The military might of the US began to strengthen as reservists were called up for action. World leaders sympathised with the nation and showed support for the President's stand that America "would make no distinction between the perpetrators of this crime and those that harbour them". America would retaliate "but at a time and place of our choosing".

Friday, the fourth day, was declared a national day of prayer and remembrance. A memorial service was held at the National Cathedral in Washington that morning. Besides the Christian religious leaders, the Muslim cleric also took part. The message was to be strong and steadfast; that evil would be overcome; that the Lord God Almighty would be a God of comfort and love to them who mourned, and a source of strength and wisdom to those that lead America forward out of the shadow of the valley of death into the glorious future. The President's address at the Cathedral mentioned lists of names of those who stood at their posts and gave their lives as a result. That afternoon, the President was dressed in casual clothes when he visited the rescue workers at the WTC in New York. Amidst the piles of dirt and rubble, he thanked them for their devotion and dedication to duty, again and again risking their lives in the dangerous search and rescue mission at hand. That night throughout America, there was a candle light vigil in the streets, at restaurants and public places. Thus ended the nation's day of prayer and remembrance.

MY IMPRESSIONS

I did not choose to be in New York to be an eyewitness, first or second hand to this horrendous tragedy. But I was left stranded

there, holed up in the hotel room and unable to return home on my scheduled flight. What else could I do but learn of the events as they unfolded on television and were reported upon widely in the local newspapers. I wanted to know what was happening and when I could get out. In the process of seeking this information I was left with a vivid impression of how America coped with the aftermath of the senseless destruction, resolved to retaliate and began the process of recovery and healing.

From "America Under Attack", the theme changed to "America United". The rallying to help in any way, the patriotic response evidenced by an exuberant display of American flags of all sizes (the shops had no more flags left to sell), donations in cash and kind by corporations and individuals, was immense. Yes, the Americans were very angry but fear did not paralyse them into inaction. Their leaders had faith in divine guidance and were open about everybody's need to pray and seek spiritual help and wisdom. It was not about religion but about recognising their need for a higher power to over-rule on behalf of America. Their simple prayer? "God bless America."

Airports were closed throughout the country within 35 minutes of the first aircraft crash in Manhattan. Never had this airspace lockdown happened before. For 2 days and more, there was no air travel. Heightened security measures were instituted before airports re-opened. Wall Street closed till the following Monday; again such a long closure had never happened before. The Americans were determined that the terrorism that destroyed the 2 towers would not translate into a meltdown of New York's financial services. Access to the many buildings at Wall Street had to be restored for business to resume. The buildings had to be structurally safe, repairs to the many shattered windows completed, roads and offices cleaned up before people could report back to work.

New technology assisted in 2 critical aspects. Cellular phones proved their value in gold. On board the hijacked aircrafts, several passengers called home to tell what was happening. And for those trapped in the rubble, their calls helped

rescuers locate them and gave much hope to their loved ones that they were still alive. Some called to say they were evacuating the building but they never made it. The Internet was used to provide information about those found dead or alive, as well as to post lists and photographs of those missing, and therefore presumed dead. Hospitals, emergency service agencies and other bodies in the rescue effort helped grieving relatives locate the whereabouts of the victims by giving relevant and updated information on their websites.

Medically, surgical skills were required to fix bones, organs and stop the bleeding. Many who were escaping the towering infernos and the apocalyptic collapse of the 110-storey buildings also needed help for their respiratory problems. Acutely, it was for burns of the respiratory tract from smoke inhalation and also for the ash and soot inhaled. A few days later, it was for those with “asthma” and in the long-term, the risks of breathing in asbestos were made known to the public.

Children saw the pictures on television. How did adults explain anything at all to them? What were they told? Is this war?

Why? Who? The schools closed and then re-opened. The curriculum for the first few days was replaced by counselling sessions.

The animals of lower Manhattan were not neglected either. They were collected and given food and lodging. Their owners had fled the scene or had died. The American SPCA took charge.

The 2 symbols of American might - military in Washington, and financial in New York - were hit and devastated. But to Americans, this setback is temporary. “In God, We Trust” and 2 of the Hymns sung in the National Cathedral exemplify their resolve. For now it is “Our God is a Mighty Fortress”. For tomorrow, it would be “Battle Hymn of the Republic”.

EPILOGUE OR PROLOGUE?

The fifth day, Saturday, was a day of funerals and memorial services. By courtesy of the many TV stations, I “entered” into many cathedrals and churches and “participated” in their services. One could not help but be emotionally moved. Likewise for Sunday, it was a day of worship for America. The TV theme had changed from “America United” to “America Rising”. After the third day, no more lives were saved from “Ground

Zero”, which had become “Ground Hero” as the many workers of rescue became workers of recovery. The death toll was estimated to be over 5,000 (more than twice that at Pearl Harbour).

Finally Monday dawned. It was the 17th of September. At 9.30 am the New York Stock Exchange opened to the cheers of everyone - but the market nose-dived. That evening, I managed to leave New York via Newark on SQ, after having left the hotel some 6 hours earlier. I had witnessed a tragedy beyond words; grief and suffering beyond measure; heroism most valiant. And I entered into the trauma - mental, spiritual, fiscal and physical - inflicted upon New York City.

To ensure the failure of the terrorists’ intention to terrorise the nation and strike fear into the people, America took steps to rescue, recover and “normalise” activities of life soonest possible. 50,000 reservists were called to duty out of over 1.5 million of the reserves. America is at war and she will not be alone. The war against international terrorism will spare no people and no country. It will be long and protracted. It will not be easy nor cheap. But the President has vowed to “rid the world of evildoers”. ■