

The Craziest Walk Ever

The View from in Front of the Burning Pentagon on September 11, 2001

CrimethInc.

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Now that the United States has withdrawn from Afghanistan after a ruinous 20-year occupation, we can see the attacks of September 11, 2001 in a different light. Islamist jihadists were baiting the empire into a disastrous “war on terror” that they knew would polarize more people into their own camp, even as it inflicted unthinkable tragedies upon all sides—above all, upon those on the receiving end of imperialist violence. From the initial attacks to the US government response, the entire affair was calculated to channel conflicts resulting from capitalist colonialism into a religious war that would reduce the spectrum of possibility to a choice between rival militarisms.

The US occupation of Afghanistan did nothing to erode the power of the Taliban, over fully 20 years—we must conclude from this that it only strengthened them. The US occupation of Iraq set the stage for the rise of ISIS, which was only stopped by a more or less autonomous resistance in Rojava.

Settling for a choice between colonial militarism and fundamentalist militarism is “letting the terrorists win”—not only the ones who planned the September 11 attacks, but the ones who took advantage of them to extend profit-driven capitalist resource extraction projects further into the Middle East. There are other visions, other possible futures, and we should see to it that they are not buried.

One way to do this is to revisit the social movements that preceded the September 11 attacks and the subsequent invasions and occupations. On September 11, 2001, anarchists and others around the world were involved in a powerful movement against capitalist globalization. In the United States, thousands were preparing for what was expected to be a showdown at the upcoming meeting of the International Monetary Fund in Washington, DC. Building on powerful mobilizations in London, Seattle, Québec, and Genoa, they hoped to foster a worldwide movement that could abolish capitalism and replace it with horizontal social structures based in solidarity and mutual aid. The attacks and consequent war helped to disrupt this movement, though it continues to the present day—and likely remains our only hope of surviving ecological collapse.

Though the IMF protests never properly took place, thousands still gathered in DC on September 30, 2001 for what were effectively the first anti-war protests of the 21st century, opposing the US invasion of Afghanistan when no one else dared criticize the hawkish bilateralism of the US government. Let it be remembered that anarchists were at the front of this demonstration, clashing with the police in the name of protecting everyone from a disastrous war.

In the following account, two young anarchist organizers who had come to DC to prepare for the mobilization against the IMF describe their experience of the September 11 attacks, during which they stood before the flaming Pentagon, looking into the burning future that we now inhabit. This text is an artifact of a more innocent time—and a document of the moment when that innocence was lost. It’s also occasionally hilarious.

The following text is adapted from a version that appeared in Rolling Thunder in 2006. For an anarchist analysis of the significance of the September 11 attacks from that time, you could begin with this.

The Craziest Walk Ever

“Have you heard the news? Those motherfuckers just killed somebody in Italy!”¹

“It’ll be our turn next in DC. And Genoa is nothing compared to the heart of the beast. It’s fucking war, and somebody’s probably gonna die.”

Time always gives one a strange sense of perspective on events. Nothing has fundamentally changed. The enemy is still the same, and so is what I want, which is of course anarchy.

On the morning of the day this story takes place, we were ready to die. We weren’t really sure what that meant but I’m pretty sure it was at least a distant cousin to what embittered young men and women in Palestine feel. I don’t know. Those who die for the cause don’t come back to tell the tales.

It was September 11, 2001, and I was hungry, dirty, exhausted, and utterly happy. I awoke in my dusty sleeping bag on the floor of a strange little basement, beside two of my comrades, who were still asleep. Not only was I hungry, but I also had to piss, ideally in some vaguely hygienic location. Next door—although to be exact there was no literal door, only a sort of a metaphysical door where a more corporeal door should have stood—I could hear the rough sounds of two people engaging in a vocal act of passionate revolutionary love... and blocking my path to the bathroom and the kitchen.

While the details escape me, and in fact I’m pretty sure I never knew them to begin with, I had somehow ended up in this apartment preparing for total war against capital and the state. It was a pretty big apartment, enough to fit about a dozen scouts for the upcoming protests against the summit of the International Monetary Fund. Our job was simple—we were making propaganda for everyone who was showing up: posters, leaflets, wheatpasting material, and the inevitable badly photocopied and confusing map of downtown DC. We hoped to improve that last one.

So, I was utterly fucking happy. Often life is a hard thing, full of difficult decisions, personal tragedies, and the dreary weariness of a meaningless job. In better cases, there was no job, and the task was figuring out where the nearest dumpster with some vegetables was and a place to put my sleeping bag that wouldn’t involve getting too wet. Yet here I was, with both of those problems solved. The basement apartment, offered to us through shadowy means by a friend of a friend of a friend, was the perfect hideout. It was within spitting distance of the White House and most of downtown, and like all good hideouts, it had a distinct lack of windows—it was camouflaged by anonymity in a dehumanizing tenement block. The food problem was solved by the cornucopia of dumpsters in the nearby suburbs, where a certain organic food chain was literally overflowing with bread products and vegetables that were barely beginning the process of decomposition—and large amounts of decidedly vegan-unfriendly sugary treats. Dumpster crack, we called it.

And I was addicted.

I began engaging in all sorts of lewd fantasies about my upcoming breakfast. Orange juice and bagels—with those little onion bits that I normally detest—would be perfect. Some sugary smashed pastries would be perfect. I could imagine bathing in orange juice and building castles of bagels.

¹ For background on this reference, you could start with this article about the mobilization against the 2001 G8 summit in Genoa, Italy.

The noises next door finally reached a dramatic conclusion. Despite their temporary nonviolent blockade of my route to the kitchen, I was so filled with feelings of good will towards my fellow creatures (except cops and politicians, fuck those bastards!), including the two lovebirds next door, that I could not even hold my delayed breakfast against them.

The woman in particular impressed me. At first, I had written her off as a sort of well-meaning yet clueless reformist. Just a few months earlier, she had been giving workshops on nonviolence, yet she seemed to have transformed overnight into a bloodthirsty revolutionary with a plethora of creative—and decidedly not non-violent—ideas about how we could defend ourselves against the inevitable clash with the DC police. Love and revolution were in the air. I tiptoed to the kitchen.

I am not normally a morning person. That day, though, I was so brimming with happiness that I felt positively empowered. After all, when in life is the mission so simple? People were coming to try to shut down the center of neoliberal depravity that is the IMF, and we had to make sure they all had maps to get to wherever they needed to get to. Thanks to my magical Kinko's free copy card, which a friend had manufactured by drilling a little hole into it, and the benign negligence—or was it complicity?—of Kinko's employees, my job was pretty easy. My simple life was absolutely overflowing with meaning—but I needed help. After all, maybe fifty thousand people were going to show up to this protest, and that was more photocopies than I could make single-handedly.

In the kitchen, I concocted a fantasy in a fit of anarchist evangelism: I would go to the Starbucks only a block away, sit down next to the first pasty, tired, middle-aged bureaucrat of the Global Capitalist Death Machine I could find, and say, "Look, buddy. I know you hate your job, waking up to work nine to five and being a minor accomplice to all sorts of nastiness. Secretly, you realize your life is meaningless. Drop that cappuccino right now, 'cause I got meaning to spare. Forget this whole capitalist job deathtrap and join me in Kinko's."

My reverie was interrupted by the dull roar of the dump truck trash compactor. Fuck, and no one had taken out the trash! I grabbed the black trash bag and stumbled out the door into the bright sunlit morning. I waited by the trashcan, and within a few minutes the smiling trash collector, wearing an orange jumper, took the trash off my hands. He leaned over as if to tell me a secret:

"You heard, then? They just drove an airplane into the World Trade Center!"

"No shit! Well, you know, things are crazy nowadays."

I just smiled and waved goodbye as he went on to the next building. Man, the things people say in the morning. It was sort of interesting how he, the legitimate morning trash man, had his counterpart in me, the illegitimate midnight trash man. Our jobs had the same slogan: *Get the Trash*. I only hoped that I had lightened his load by removing enough of the trash from circulation to make up for the trash that I had just given him.

Anyway, I was never one to let a good breakfast or even meaningful anti-capitalist activity get in the way of going back to sleep in the morning. So, I tiptoed past the post-coital embrace of my pals and slithered back into my sleeping bag.

"Get up, man! You gotta run upstairs!"

Just as I was about to get back to bed, the crazy toothless landlord peers in and wakes me up, putting me in a distinctly bad mood. I feign grogginess, and he all but drags me out of my sleeping bag.

"They just blew up the World Trade Center! There's bombs going off!"

To think that I had doubted the trash man. There went my peaceful morning.

Not realizing the full impact of these events, I grabbed another crusty bagel and shambled upstairs with my comrades to our landlord's personal enclave, where, surrounded by cigarette butts and porn magazines, he had a small TV perched strategically on the filing cabinet across from his desk. Yes, the trash man was right. On the screen, there appeared to be some sort of James Bond movie playing. Or perhaps *War of the Worlds*. Except that the news reporter seemed to be actually panicking, uncertain how to comprehend, much less provide an advertising-friendly light chatter about a thousand people being incinerated.

The building was on fire, and there was definitely some sort of gaping hole in the World Trade Center. Then I heard a shriek from the news reporter. The tower just crumbled in place, like a demolition. Except that it was full of people, many of whom had been running the financial apparatus of global capitalism, pushing the buttons that calculated the numbers written in the blood of the poor.

Emphasis on the past tense.

I sat transfixed by the spectacle on the television. There were undoubtedly many janitors and cooks and window washers in there, even if they were in the minority. No, this was not good. I wasn't horrified, really, not sad, not scared, not surprised; this was just not something that I had expected to happen this morning. My brain was racing, yet somehow a useful analysis of the destruction of a sizable portion of New York City evaded me. The landlord, still in his boxers, just stood there slack-jawed. Behind me, the two lovebirds started cheering, including the person I had met just a few months earlier giving a nonviolence training. How times change!

"Well, I sure don't think that was us. I mean, no one told me about that. That was someone who was really fucking angry."

My logic is less than razor sharp in the morning. My good friend Colin had a serious and grave look upon his face. "Those kids are not thinking clearly," he said, rolling his eyes in the lovebirds' direction. "We've got to figure out what to do, and quick. This definitely changes our plans."

Before Colin could get another word in, a report came across the screen that the Pentagon had been hit with an airplane. There was a quick cut to the Pentagon, which now featured a burning hole in its side.

"Jesus Christ. That's not too far away. I mean, I can't say they didn't have it coming. The Pentagon's full of fucking murderers. But this is getting a little too close for comfort."

Suddenly, my razor-sharp deductive powers put it together that there might be even more planes in the sky that could be crashing into other parts of the US power complex. It seemed quite logical that another plane was going to crash into the White House, from which so much sheer horror was perpetuated throughout the world. We were literally a few blocks from the White House. The plane could miss and hit us! What about the debris? I wasn't exactly sure what happened when a plane crashed into a city, but it seemed likely to have ramifications for everyone nearby. All of downtown DC was more or less worthy of being destroyed in the eyes of many people on the planet, and we were unlucky enough to be in the middle of downtown. I wished I could put a black flag on the roof so whoever was behind this would know we were anarchists trying to fight capitalism and the state, who had no great love for the US government—so please don't kill us, thank you very much!

The television at this point was stuck on what appeared to be an infinite loop of the planes ramming into the World Trade Center, over and over and over again. Just in case we had missed

it. The news reporters were babbling and stammering. They mentioned that the death counts could be five thousand, ten thousand, fifty thousand. Another airplane had apparently been shot down somewhere near Pittsburgh.

We had friends in Pittsburgh. Then they mentioned that there was something like thirty more planes flying around unaccounted for somewhere.

“We’ve gotta get out of here.”

“My family has some land out of state. We can go there and just lay low,” suggested the former nonviolence trainer.

“I have a small car, we can fit everyone inside,” someone else chirped up. The landlord was glued to the screen, entranced by the images of endlessly repeating explosions. He seemed oblivious to our conversation.

“But we’d have to drive by the White House—is there a way out of the city from here without going near it or the Pentagon? Who’s got a fucking map of DC?”

We had several thousand of them, albeit as photocopies with housing locations for out-of-town activists on them. Oh yeah, and these maps also listed major corporate and government centers with little notes about their heinous deeds and connections to corporate globalization.

There was going to be a clampdown.

“We gotta burn the maps.” Colin read my mind.

The news now had footage of how the collapse of the World Trade Center appeared from the streets of New York. There were people covered in grey dust, screaming, running down the street away from clouds of debris bellowing from the collapse. People were dying somewhere in those clouds, and there was a lot of screaming on the television. Then, on the blue scrollbar, it was announced that there were bombs going off outside the State Department.

“Wait a second, if we try to drive out of here, what if a bomb goes off near our car?”

“There are going to be thousands and thousands of people all trying to get out of DC—it’s going to be a clusterfuck. What if they target that?”

“Now we know how the Palestinians feel every day,” said Colin. It was probably the most sensible moment of the entire conversation.

After the hubbub had settled down, we decided it would be best to stay put for the time being. One of us went downstairs to burn everything a police officer or federal agent could hold against us. It was unclear what the future held, but martial law definitely seemed a none-too-remote possibility.

Lacking anything better to do, we all sat around and watched television. The news reporters and television commentators had gained some sense of composure by this time, and had begun pointing fingers.

“The government suspects Middle Eastern terrorist Osama Bin Laden, whose terrorist group previously attempted to blow up the World Trade Center.”

It sort of surprised me that there was no commentary from our esteemed leader George W. Bush, or really from anyone in a position of power. They must have all been hiding beneath their desks. The television just kept looping the segment of the World Trade Center falling, over and over again.

We started flipping through the channels. The same picture was on almost every channel. The death tolls varied widely, but they seemed to be in the thousands at least. There were more reports of the car bombs going off outside the State Department and maybe elsewhere in DC. The news occasionally flashed an aerial picture of the Pentagon pierced with a burning hole. Apparently,

the corporate media had already realized that even the American public had less sympathy with the Pentagon than with the World Trade Center.

“We have to do something other than just sit here.” Colin growled.

“How many chances do you get in your life to see the Pentagon on fire?” I asked.

“Let’s walk to the Pentagon,” said Colin, always a fan of walking.

Not a bad idea. How many chances do you get to see the Pentagon on fire? I had always sort of imagined triumphant anarchists storming the Pentagon, driving out the murderous number-crunchers and paper-pushers. Probably things would catch fire—I mean, how else to dispose of a place that had caused so many affronts to human dignity?

Here we were and someone else had set the Pentagon on fire. I wished that whoever had been behind the attacks had at least noticed that we had a rather important protest coming up in mid-October. If they could have only waited a few weeks! Alas, the US anti-globalization movement was apparently not on the radar of whoever had done this.

“Yeah, I’ll go with you.”

Why not? After all, there was nothing we could do to affect the situation by lurking about in the basement—and given the number of sketchy characters that had been hanging around, I would not have been terribly surprised if the police knew it was there. This would be a great excuse to clamp down on us anarchists. If they knew that a quorum of us could be found a few blocks from the White House we would be up shit creek—our little hideout was not nearly as safe as my companions seemed to think. Or maybe I was just being paranoid. Either way, a walk outside could only help. So Colin and I got our things together, and headed out into the light of day.

It was still pretty early, and the sun was shining. The streets around our block were strangely eerie and silent.

I guessed that everyone was inside glued to their televisions, as paralyzed as we had been just moments earlier. We walked around the corner, and within minutes we were approaching downtown DC. Total panic was in full swing. All sorts of white men in suits, no longer drinking their lattes as usual as they calmly ordered the full-scale destruction of our planet, were desperately trying to get the fuck out of their buildings. It was extremely bizarre watching the sort of capitalists who ordinarily travel by limousine hoofing it down the sterile streets, stumbling and panting and heaving.

We walked by the White House, and I half expected it to burst into flames before my eyes. Instead I got to witness the evacuation of the White House cooking staff. I saw a chef with a huge Swedish Chef hat perched precariously upon his head break into full gallop, presumably leaving the Little Boy Prince of the World to finish cooking his own steaks and foie gras. The whole thing didn’t look like tragedy, it looked liked absurdist farce. I half expected Bush to come running out in his underwear clutching hundred dollar bills in his hands. Whatever security forces were supposed to be present were clearly also busy getting the fuck out of there and were not in any way attempting to maintain law and order. It struck me that now would also be the perfect time to rob a bank.

We passed through downtown and kept walking. We kept running into people panicking, and yet in other parts of DC life was going on as normal. On blocks containing government buildings, it was like an outtake from the Soon-To-Be-Apocalypse with employees running desperately down the streets. In the poorer neighborhoods, however, it seemed like life was more or less continuing as usual, although most businesses were shut as everyone was home watching events

unfold on television. Overall, it was a fine autumn day, and the strangeness of the situation seemed to dispel some of the inhuman gloom that lays upon Washington, DC.

We headed south until we finally arrived at the end of the road. On the other side of the river lay the Crystal City, the complex of glass-encased high-rise apartment buildings and fancy hotels that served the military bureaucracy of the Pentagon. On the other side, I could see columns of smoke rising up from the Pentagon. Reaching in my pocket, I took out an old instant camera and snatched a picture of the Pentagon on fire. I thought to myself, damn, this really is a once-in-a-life-time event. *Well, hopefully twice in a lifetime.* I asked Colin if he wouldn't mind taking our picture together in front of the burning Pentagon. So, we snapped a quick picture. No one saw us. I lost the camera before developing the film, which is probably for the best.

As we approached the dreadful hulk of the Pentagon, full-scale insanity became apparent around us. There was absolutely no order here. From what appeared to be one of the main doors to the building, Pentagon officials were pouring out in a mad rush, grasping their suitcases with looks of shock and awe upon their faces. At the nerve center from which the world's most fearsome military was directed, no one had any control. Smoke continued to billow ominously from the wreckage; the building was clearly burning up, and most employees appeared to have no fucking clue what was going on and were basically pissing their pants. It was sort of ironic seeing terror in the eyes of the functionaries of an establishment that had inflicted so much terror upon so many people throughout the world for so long. Were they really surprised that their misdeeds had come back to haunt them? Oh, how the mighty had fallen.

We watched the madness from afar at first, then crept closer. There weren't even any cops in front of the entrance to the Pentagon, no barrier between us and the burning building. Soon we, two avowed anarchists, were only a few yards from the Pentagon, an institution we had both committed our lives to destroying. This institution was on fire, and all of the people who worked there were running away from it. A thought came upon us. This was our once-in-a-lifetime chance. We could run into the Pentagon. Who knows what we might find? In theory, we could destroy computers, steal files, wreak all sorts of havoc. With no police presence, we might even be able to get away. A quick look at Colin and it was clear he was thinking the same thing. I leaned over to his ear and whispered to him.

"Should we do it?"

"I'm not sure. It might be the only chance we ever get."

We stood there mulling over the prospect. We took a few deep breaths, taking in the destruction around us. Running into the Pentagon to do something—anything—did seem tempting, especially as one employee ran out with a handful of papers and a laptop. These murderers were actually surprised that they were getting a taste of their own medicine!

But by this time, the police were finally showing up to begin cordoning off the Pentagon. Our chance was gone. It occurred to me that we were in a precarious position, since we appeared to be the only people present who were not running away.

"We don't have the slightest excuse to be here. I mean, we don't even have an excuse to be in DC."

We really didn't. What would the police do if they identified us? We were both your proverbial out-of-town agitators with arrest records at various anti-government events.

Wasn't it a bit mysterious that we just happened to be hanging around the Pentagon at the very moment it burst into flames? If they put us in the back of a car, would anyone ever see us

again? This moment would be a ripe opportunity to pick off two weird-looking guys with Charles Manson beards creeping around the Pentagon while it burned.

“We should get out of here. They’re gonna shut this whole fucking area down.”

That was observant—the police, who had been conspicuous in their absence for the duration of the madness around the Pentagon, had finally arrived. They seemed dazed and confused, but I expected that they were going to start asking questions any minute, and I sure didn’t want my name associated with any of this—much less my camera with the picture of me in front of the burning building!

We walked coolly away, until we were just out of sight.

What if we were stopped a little further down the road? Looking around to make sure no one could see us, we began a mad sprint to get as fucking far away from the Pentagon as we could.

The way back was not nearly as easy as the way there.

Like a beast that was slowly awakening from being dealt a near-lethal blow while asleep, the machinery of the state began kicking into action, confused and angry. The buzz of police sirens could be heard in the distance. We could see the road we had walked there in the distance, too. It was swarming with police.

There was an entrance to the interstate nearby, so we ran up onto it as quickly as we could. What followed was straight out of a post-apocalyptic zombie movie: not a soul was on the highway, and we walked straight down the middle of I-95 for what seemed to be an eternity without a car in sight. In the distance, smoke was rising, bodies were burning, police sirens were wailing, but we had found the straight and narrow road the fuck out of Dodge. The highways crossed over each other like twisting snakes, and again, we heard sirens howling behind us. Did they see us? Were they coming for us? Were they busy with something else? Maybe they were closing the highway down! We scrambled off the road into the traditional hiding spot of robbers, outlaws, and anarchists—the bushes. We waited for the coast to clear, hearts beating out of our chests and Godspeed, You Black Emperor! blasting in our heads. When the sirens passed, we ran out of the bushes and straight up an embankment. At the top of the grassy embankment was a fence, which we leapt over in desperation, only to end up in Arlington cemetery! Judas fucking Priest!

We ran, passing through countless rows of white crosses standing mute in the autumn sun. We ran through the flags and the fields, with the lamentations of legions of restless ghosts blowing in the wind around our feet. We ran until we came to a hill, and we climbed the hill. We climbed the hill, and there, sitting at the top, were two men. Their clothes were even more tattered than our own. Their bodies were even filthier than our own. Their beards were even more Mansonesque than our own. They were swilling malt liquor from a forty-ounce bottle in a brown paper bag. They were homebums, and they were watching the Pentagon burn.

“Sit down, brother,” one of them suggested. The other extended his arm, his meaty fist clutching the forty, wordlessly offering me a swig from it.

I shook my head. “Thanks, man, but we’re lost. How the fuck do we get out of here?”

The first homebum gave us surprisingly lucid directions out of the cemetery, and we turned to leave. At the last moment he looked me dead in the eye and intoned, “But be careful. There’s guns, guns, GUNS IN THE GRAVEYARD!”

With this last piece of disquieting information ringing in my ears, we fled back down the hill. The homebum—who had filled a role in my afternoon comparable to that played by the one-eyed oracle in ancient Greek tragedy—proved more or less accurate in his assessment of the local

geography. We crawled through more bushes, jumped over more fences, and somehow ended up in the idyllic backyard of a suburban home.

At least now we just appeared to be two maniacs who were getting ready to break into a house, as opposed to two maniacs at the scene of a national catastrophe surrounded by police. We crept around the yard to the road and beheld a great crowd standing at the top of an embankment overlooking the highway. Not a soul looked at us or even seemed to notice us. Instead, with the air of a macabre neighborhood barbecue, everyone from small children to grandmothers was staring into the distance, watching the Pentagon burn. It seemed almost festive; people did not appear upset—perhaps surprised, if anything—and most seemed happier than your average employees at work. It was, after all, a pleasant autumn day. There seemed to be a spirit of racial harmony that contrasted sharply with the usual terrorizing racism of Washington, DC. Black, Latino, Anglo-Saxon—it didn't matter, everyone was in their front yards watching the Pentagon burn. In almost dead silence, with a bit of small-talk here and there. After a moment, we bid adieu to the assembled neighbors and continued down the street.

We were totally disoriented at this point, with little idea where we were or how to get home. It was getting later, and I was still feeling a little paranoid.

It seemed that if we ran around the streets of Arlington, Virginia too much longer while full-scale chaos was in motion, we were almost guaranteed some trouble. While I usually welcome a tussle with the cops, today was not going to be a good day for that sort of thing. So, what to do?

Cheap Chinese! There are few better things to eat after walking to watch the Pentagon burn than cheap Chinese food. We also suspected that the restaurants offering this fare might be ideal for laying low. Around the corner was a classic Chinese restaurant in one of the rundown strip malls that litter America, and the Chinese joint was—miracle of miracles—still open for business this September the 11th. I emptied my pockets, counted the quarters and nickels, and managed to scrape together enough for some vegetables and rice. The lone employee seemed to be happy some customers had appeared, and didn't even appear to find us strange. An irrepressible fan of Chinese hot mustard, I covered my portion in the yellow tangy substance and turned around to watch the TV.

It seemed as if nothing had changed since the morning. Our dear President George W. Bush was still nowhere to be seen. Instead, the footage of the falling towers (with shots of the Pentagon infrequently intermixed) was being played over and over again as if with the intention of inducing hypnosis. The talking heads of the media seemed to be somewhat more in control of themselves than earlier, and were now repeating “Middle Eastern terrorists” and “Bin Laden” over and over again, although there seemed to be no concrete evidence yet.

I was relieved that they were not mentioning the word “anarchists,” as this gave us a little time. However, it was pretty clear over noodles and fortune cookies that this would be the perfect excuse for a witch hunt against us and anyone else the government considered a threat. Colin and I sat, mostly in stony silence, trying to figure out the implications of this day for the movement—and how the hell we were going to get home.

“We should eat slowly. Look, we're pretty safe here. No one knows we're here. We can just sit here and eat until it gets dark and we can get home.”

“That's going to be a while yet.”

“Well, better safe than sorry.”

When night finally began to fall, we bid a fond adieu to our host at the Chinese joint and proceeded down the road.

We asked the few pedestrians we encountered for directions, and eventually found our way home through endless alleys and bridges and back streets. When we arrived at our little hideout, we looked around to make sure we weren't being followed, then employed various comical anti-surveillance techniques that mostly involved walking in circles, before finally stepping inside. Apparently, the landlord had gone back into his porn- and cigar-laden cocoon, and our friends were inside chomping at the bit as they planned their getaway.

Colin and I argued that we had to compose some sort of anarchist response, and quick. There was only going to be a short window of time between September 11th and the inevitable government clampdown. If we could manage to pull together a quick response, we could at least get our views out there. People were confused and terrified, easily manipulated by the heartless fuckers who were surely going to launch some sort of war in the not-so-distant future. Right at that moment, however, the US power structure was utterly paralyzed. If we had our act together, we could do something inspiring and historic then and there before the government even had time to respond with its witch hunts and wars.

There were a host of practical questions to discuss: should we carry on with the IMF protests, should we flee underground before the roundups began, should we go to the public with our own answers about why some people had hated the US government and corporations enough to ram a plane into their headquarters? There was so much to do and so little time.

“When those bastards declare war, we gotta march in the streets of Washington, IMF or not, just to show people everywhere that we're against the fucking US government, too.”

“Then we really gotta get the fuck out of dodge.”

“Man, that was the craziest fucking walk I've ever taken.”

Twenty years ago, we were ready to die. Or more precisely, to be murdered in cold blood by the state, as had happened to Carlo Giuliani in Genoa. That was a price worth paying for our dreams of a more compassionate world. We thought, not entirely without reason, that they were going to shoot at us, and we were headed to the front lines anyway, to lay down our lives if it came to that. And then history outpaced us—not, I fear, for the last time—and our thunder was stolen by people with drastically less concern for human life than ourselves.

Is the world a better place? Are we any closer to the revolutionary situation we dream of as a result of the decisions we have made or failed to make? And at whose feet can be lain responsibility for this sorry state of affairs, and for all the bloodshed and sorrow that took place that day and the days before it and the days after? Ours, theirs, the corporations', the governments'? Twenty years ago, we were ready to die. For better or for worse, there is no doubt that the years to come will provide us with many more opportunities to ask ourselves if that is still the case.

Gentle reader, the rest is up to you.

Further Reading

Shortly after September 11, 2001, a cell of the CrimethInc. Ex-Workers' Collective produced a text entitled “After the Fall” in an attempt to analyze the causes and ramifications of the events of that morning. Those days—and these—demanded much more than words in a newspaper or on a computer screen, but we still stand by this piece of writing as possibly the most clearheaded and prescient statement to come out of the anarchist milieu at that time. The future is still unwritten.

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