

A snapshot of history can tell us much about today

Over the Aug. 25 weekend, while paging through an old Life magazine (Nov. 20, 1970, 50¢) at the Stepan Inn bed and breakfast in Nacogdoches, I was transfixed by a small black-and-white photograph of two



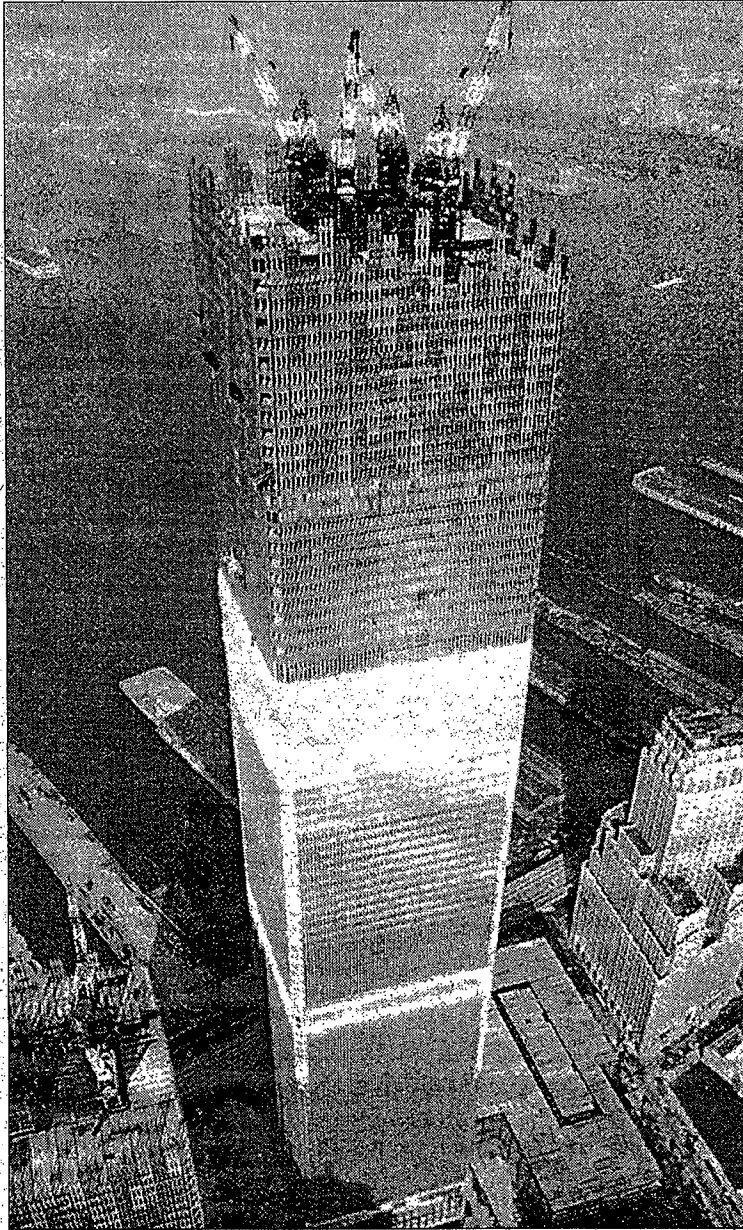
skyscrapers under construction, one nearing completion. The caption read: "Misguided flocks of migratory birds have been crashing into New York's Empire State Building ever since it was built 39 years ago. Now they have a bigger target in New York's 110-story World Trade Center." The muse of history is fond of cruel tricks, but she outdid herself with this photo and caption.

By Nov. 20, 1970, a decade of violent events had Americans examining their values and beliefs. The trial of Lt. William Calley for his actions at My Lai had begun eight days earlier. Twenty-four American soldiers died in Vietnam during the last week of October. The magazine's cover story provided a distraction: "CO-ED DORMS. An intimate revolution on campus."

What was true then is even truer now in our electronic age. How long can we focus on things that matter? How do we know what matters and what to do about it? What meaning does the terrorist attack on the World Trade Center now have in our lives?

When I visited the special Sept. 11 photographic exhibition in New York City in November and walked to the barricades ringing the zone of destruction, shops in Chinatown already were selling remaindered patriotic T-shirts. One showed the twin towers over an American flag and beneath the letters FDNY. At the base of the towers were two fire trucks and the phrase "We Salute Our Heroes." Another had a fighter plane, emblazoned USA and GOD BLESS AMERICA, streaking upward above our flag and the words "America's New War" and "Aiming High for Victory."

I took it as a good sign that such shirts were no longer hot items. What combat trauma psychiatric specialist Jonathan Shay calls "the primal rage of Americans after September 11, 2001" had already spent much of its fury. Only one photograph in the Sept. 11 exhibition showed lust for indiscriminate retaliation: "Nuke Them All" scrawled across a pane of soot-covered glass. Most Americans concentrated on the heroism of the rescue workers and expressed deep sorrow at the tragic



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human loss. We trusted our government and military leaders to take a strong, but measured response.

As I traveled last month along Route 21 to Nacogdoches, 500 miles round trip, I looked for the lingering effects of Sept. 11. Very few businesses, homes or churches had the American flag on display. I counted five or six. Of dozens of churches with marquees in communities such as Lufkin, Madisonville,

Redland and Kennard, only one made direct reference to Sept. 11. The First Baptist Church in Crockett reverently proclaimed "In Remembrance of Them, God Bless America." Other churches had returned to the business of saving souls, organizing picnics and encouraging passers-by to be "sowing seeds of kindness." The message of the Centralia Bible Believers Baptist Church had a Sept. 11 subtext, giving thanks that we

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Caption of photograph at left, in a November 1970 issue of Life magazine

are "Still Under God." It was important to capture this snapshot before the Sept. 11 anniversary machine revs up. I took this return to normalcy to symbolize our enduring American belief in humanity that tempers our understandable desires for retribution. I hope I was not naive.

The local newspapers in Nacogdoches and Tyler that weekend contained but two short articles about terrorism and government powers to spy on terrorism. Otherwise they were filled with stories of murders across our great land, county court proceedings, the looming baseball strike and church matters. No stories or editorials covered ongoing military operations in Afghanistan or the claims of some government leaders that we must make a "pre-emptive defensive strike" against Iraq because "war has already been thrust upon us."

Fears that the USA Patriot Act might prove again Samuel Johnson's view of the link between patriotism and scoundrels are also rare in communities along Route 21. But you can find them on the Web sites of the American Library Association and the Unitarian Universalist Association. The latter quotes American realist philosopher Ralph Barton Perry: "If patriotism is the last refuge of a scoundrel, it is not merely because evil deeds may be performed in the name of patriotism, but because patriotic fervor can obliterate moral distinction altogether."

So far Americans have remembered this, and that is good.

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