

Sam Barney-Gibbs

Professor Anthony DiMaggio

POLS 232 - War on Terror in Media, Politics, and Memory

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The Making of a Know-It-All Nation: How Americans Fear Deteriorated Communication

When considering the image of a quasi-perfect life living by the guidelines of the ‘American dream,’ one may argue a healthy family and lucrative work to be at its basis. Rick Picardo is a stellar example; now 67 years old, he meditates on his past largely through two lenses: himself as a father of three and also as a long-standing NBC media employee. From the 9/11 attacks on the World Trade Center to virtually all its cultural reverberations, Picardo’s perspective encapsulates and also alludes to the happenings of American politics post-9/11, specifically emphasizing the intensity and speed of ideological, social, communicative, and thus political changes. The bilateral narrative provided by Rick Picardo with both paternal and occupational perspectives gives credence to the extraordinarily fearful needs of the United States post-9/11 that revolved around gluttonous intelligence searching (on behalf of the United States government) and the same for information (on behalf of the American public), forever altering and eventually deteriorating the dynamics between the media, politicians, and laymen.

Rick’s experiences as a father through the attacks on 9/11 can understandably be compared to and highlight a general comprehension of mass behavior during and after the attacks; with this knowledge, one can identify the novel needs of the American ‘family man’ and how the drastic change of mindset affected media action and political behavior. The most prominent and importantly relatable aspect of Rick’s story was the emphasis he put on his sense of home: his children and his town. He has three children who were young and in school on September 11, 2001, in their hometown of Middletown, New Jersey. Rick said he was on his way

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to the Academy bus that takes him into Manhattan where he works at NBC Studios. As many Americans like him can relate, he typically listens to news radio on his way to the bus station, but he did not that morning, already signifying a lack of knowledge as to what happened at around 8:45 a.m. in Manhattan. As he waited for a bus that never came, he finally tuned in and was absolutely stunned to hear the news that the twin towers had been struck. One of the first things he did was rush home to check on his wife and kids, and this is where he turned the news on his television: specifically, he recalls watching footage of President Bush's stoic reaction to being briefed on the situation, truly emphasizing the sudden dissociation everyone — from the president to the common citizen — felt. Rick's oldest child, his son, was shown live footage at school; his oldest daughter ended up being dismissed from class to go home; his youngest daughter stayed in school the entire day, blinded to what had happened until the day after. All of this demonstrates that different levels of information were manipulated from the top-down, whether it was the decision of teachers, school administrators, or Rick and his wife. This widespread reaction specific to the sensitivity of 9/11 would eventually mimic, in a grandiose yet revolting way, the manner in which the American government handled information and intelligence with the War on Terror as a whole with diversion and misinformation seen even in this one household. Rick also explained how Monmouth County, where he and his family resided, became a natural hotspot for aid but also dire loss: the county's geographical placement was important as it sits on the coast, significantly separated from, but directly south of downtown Manhattan. He said the scent of smoke was overwhelming and the number of cars of

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Middletown-natives who worked in the city but never came home was confounding — Rick said the era of being “fat and happy,” so blind to political problems outside people’s front doors, was instantly crushed as they understood that even semi-distanced news can hit too personally. This would foster an era of overcompensation: an unquenchable thirst for intelligence and information. Another side to this phenomenon, however, was the transition from overarching, borderline-subconscious ignorance to selective, voluntary unawareness. After 9/11, Rick found himself using the hour and a half bus ride back from Manhattan to recover from the day’s coverage; especially just following the attacks, he would wind down, compartmentalize, and put on his “dad hat” so both he and his kids wouldn’t have to fully comprehend and cope with the toll 9/11 took on the psyche of the average American. He shared how at Yankees games he would attend, official gun-carrying military men would all of a sudden be lurking discreetly and how professional drivers in Manhattan went “from wearing turbans to Yankees hats,” signifying a lack of trust — mutating to staunch racism — toward both Muslim-appearing people and also simply other non-white Americans. The United States government imitates Rick as much of the media and public imitates his children: through their distress, the latter two subjects feed into ill-advised behaviors on behalf of the latter two subjects that continues to this day.

Having identified these common anxieties, the responses on behalf of the media and political realms become extremely relevant in demonstrating how attempts to quell fear actually perpetuated and globalized it in destructive manners via the media: a true middle man. Rick was working for NBC at the time and was told he needed to find a way into the newsroom in the

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heart of Manhattan less than 24 hours following the attacks, underlining a liability put on journalists that was, to Rick, unforeseen in such a penetrating, draining manner, even when compared to coverage of the Columbine massacre. He ended up spending three days straight “camped in the edit room” and out in a terrifyingly vacated Manhattan constantly obtaining raw footage; he recalled vividly how gut-wrenching it felt in the ominous silence, the incessant smoke scent, and the traumatic view forced upon him as firemen dug dead bodies out of rubble with their bare hands. Journalists, in Rick’s eyes, were the epitome of the general American response to 9/11 as it relates to irrational fear-building. The only way for the public, media, and government to cope with such graphic and sudden loss was and still is overcompensation and dissociation — what once was blissful ignorance became a ceaseless means to gain intelligence and thus an ever-lasting amount of information provided to eager citizen’s ears, seemingly regardless of its veracity. Rick shared that never before were he and his colleagues so terrified to not only be working in a reputable building near the twin towers but also to be producing content that holds such capacity for political weight and manipulation. The tone in the newsroom had never been so serious, chock-full of walking on eggshells, but also the duty had never been higher to provide answers to questions left largely unaddressed or misaddressed by the government: from the average mom to the reporter to the military official, dynamics among communication had forever become complicated and intensified. Rick said that, paradoxically, aggravated production of heavier news content translated to a quasi-sedation among journalists; though objectivity is a foundational ethic of the field, never before had he felt such a culture shift

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centered on extreme removal from the news they were producing. As public concerns/needs metastasized, ending the overarching era of journalistic-political complacency and disconnect in the average citizen, the journalist was essentially pressured into an oddly familiar but now necessary numbness, separating these two worlds. But not only was the citizen-journalist connection tainted but so did that between the citizen and politician (innately through the media). Rick said, “I hate to use this word, but it was brilliance,” on Al-Qaeda’s behalf, for the mass attention they knew they would obtain via uber-defensive American politicians, quasi-stupefied media, and voracious everyday Americans. He attributed this borderline hysteria to a boom in globalized media coverage and controversy — though it gave the impression of stimulated thought and awakening to the American people, he believes the political climate post-9/11 is cradled by an insanely fast-paced political news cycle out of higher, broader demand, breeding misinformation from the top (government), middle (media), and down (everyday conversation).

Through the eyes, mind, and heart of Rick Picardo, one can conclude that the attacks on 9/11 swiftly set a specifically fearful, ominous stage for what would become the War on Terror as the newfound informational needs of the American people dictated the processes of the media and federal government in the United States. Rick contextualizes national urgent panic that is so drastic due to maximal respite from international knowledge, and what can only be self-absorptive priorities, as *the* motivator for novel chaotic, noxious interactions between politicians, media, and the American public. Horror grew into an insatiable necessity for transparency, which have become issues still faced today: fabricated intelligence leads to

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dissemination of misinformation, misinformation leads to socio-political division and racism, and these differences cultivate ill-informed political action domestically and abroad. These revolutionary, convoluted chains of command and altered demand have forever changed the ways in which these three quasi-factions interact with each other and the global community at large for better but mostly for worse.