

Rita Lasar, a founding member of September Eleventh Families for Peaceful Tomorrows, lost her brother Avrame (“Abe”) Zelmanowitz, on September 11, 2001. He could have escaped, but stayed behind to help a quadriplegic coworker, Ed Beyea. When President Bush mentioned Abe’s heroic actions in a speech at the National Cathedral in Washington, DC, Lasar expressed outrage that her brother’s sacrifice was being used to justify the invasion of Afghanistan. After the assault on Afghanistan began, Lasar joined a delegation to visit families who lost loved ones in the U.S. assault and to witness first-hand the impact of the bombings. Just before the one-year anniversary of her brother’s death, Rita Lasar wrote this commentary.

### Rita Lasar, “To Avoid Another September 11, U.S. Must Join the World” (September 5, 2002)<sup>3</sup>

When the planes hit the World Trade Center last September 11, my brother Avrame, who was in the North Tower, refused to join the evacuation because he was concerned for the safety of his close friend and fellow worker, a quadriplegic who could not easily leave. So Avrame stayed, hoping that help would arrive. When it didn’t, he and his lifelong associate died together, along with thousands of others innocent New Yorkers.

That day changed my life. It changed the lives of all those who lost loved ones in the towers.

It changed the lives of the relatives of those on the flight that crashed in Pennsylvania. It changed the lives of hundreds of families who lost loved ones in the Pentagon. And, perhaps to a lesser extent, it changed the lives of most people living in the United States.

In the months after the disaster, I often heard how September 11 changed the world. But I don’t think the attacks changed the world. And to the extent that Americans believe that September 11 changed the world, it is because they don’t know much about the world in which they live.

I have never heard anyone say that the horrific massacres of 1994 in Rwanda—which took more than five hundred thousand lives—changed the world. Nor have I ever been told that Indonesia’s massacre of two hundred thousand East Timorese during a twenty-year span changed the world. I have not even heard that the daily loss of eight thousand souls in sub-Saharan Africa due to AIDS changed the world.

Were these people less important than my dear brother?

Despite my own personal grief, I must conclude that, in light of these far greater calamities, September 11 did not change the world. What it did, in its own terrible way, was invite Americans to join the world, which is already a very troubled place. The question is whether we will accept that invitation.

Sadly, President Bush has no interest in doing so. He does not want the United States to join, or even cooperate with, the new International Criminal Court. He has also withdrawn the United States from the long-standing Anti-Ballistic Missile treaty with Russia, even as India and Pakistan shudder on the verge of nuclear war. He refuses to support international agreements that would alleviate global warming, and he will not seek to ratify the treaty banning land mines, leaving the United States in the company of Iraq, Iran and North Korea, Bush's "axis of evil."

And now the president is planning for a war against Iraq. Never mind that Iraq has committed no act of aggression against us that justifies war, that there has been no evidence linking Iraq to the September 11 attacks. Neither does the president seem to care that the world is opposed to an invasion of Iraq.

The international coalition that fought the first Gulf War was cemented by the principle that one country cannot invade another without provocation. Now the White House is poised to dismiss the coalition to launch an unprovoked invasion of Iraq.

An isolated United States is an unsafe country. As September 11 showed, there are no barricades high enough, no bombs big enough, no intelligence sophisticated enough to make America invulnerable.

We Americans have a choice.

We can conclude that we are alone, that we owe the world nothing and that the world owes us everything. This is the assumption implicit in Bush's "you're either with us or against us" stance, which is a shortsighted and self-centered philosophy.

Or we can open our eyes and see the abundance of opportunities for making the planet a safer and more just place, by actively participating in international organizations, multilateral treaties and protocols that advocate peace and social equality.

We can no longer afford a go-it-alone approach. If we want the world's help in getting at the roots of terrorism, we are going to have to start helping the rest of the world. We are going to have to comprehend that there are millions of people around the globe who understand all too well the horror of tragedies like September 11.

When that realization occurs, only then will we glimpse how September 11 changed the world.

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In the aftermath of the September 11 attacks, the government passed a number of measures restricting civil liberties, most notoriously the USA PATRIOT Act (the Uniting and Strengthening America by Providing Appropriate Tools Required to Intercept and Obstruct Terrorism Act of 2001). Approved overwhelmingly by Democrats and Republicans in Congress, many of whom acknowledged not read-

ing the bill, it gave the government broad powers to wiretap, arrest, and detain people “suspected” of having ties to terrorists. Although President Bush disclaimed anti-Muslim prejudice, it was clear that Muslims, South Asians, and other people of color were being targeted. These same groups were also subjected to verbal abuse and physical assaults, on the streets, in workplaces, and in their homes. As Monami Maulik, a community organizer of the Queens-based DRUM (Desis Rising Up and Moving), wrote soon after, “[D]uring this period of grief, we have had to endure perhaps the worst mass-scale anti-Arab, anti-South Asian, and anti-Muslim violence this country has seen.” Maulik, born in Calcutta and raised in the Bronx, worked with the New York Taxi Workers’ Alliance before helping to found DRUM in 1997. She wrote this essay on organizing after September 11 for *Manavi*, a South Asian newsletter based in New Brunswick, New Jersey.

## Monami Maulik, “Organizing in Our Communities Post-September 11th” (2001)<sup>4</sup>

Since the tragic loss of lives on September 11th, I find the need for organizing in my community is even greater in the coming years. But this is not because September 11th was or will be the only mass-scale loss of human lives. Since the Gulf War, over 500,000 Iraqi children have died as a direct result of economic sanctions imposed by the U.S. against Iraq. Are the lives of these children any less valuable? In the midst of realizing the mass-scale inhumanity of war and imperialism, grassroots organizing can be the source of hope for a building a world centered on social justice. What distinguishes organizing from services, advocacy, and relief-work is that organizing seeks to change the root causes of social injustice as opposed to responding to its symptoms. But the question becomes whether we are organizing to challenge the institutions that create oppression or to maintain the status-quo?

The tragedies of September 11th continue to deeply hurt the South Asian community at large on multiple levels. First, we have lost members of our community in the World Trade Center. Moreover, a large number of those missing were low-wage, undocumented immigrant service workers whose families do not qualify for federal aid and benefits. Second, during this period of grief, we have had to endure perhaps the worst mass-scale anti-Arab, anti-South Asian, and anti-Muslim violence this country has seen. Hundreds of incidents ranging from threats to beatings to killings have been reported around the country. Our homes, communities, and places of worship have been under siege. And these are only the incidents that are reported. Moreover, this anti-immigrant backlash is currently being institutionalized via new anti-terrorist legislation, racial profiling, and the suspension of hard-won civil rights. Thousands of immigrants have been illegally detained and