NATIONAL TRAUMA

AND

COLLECTIVE MEMORY

EXTRAORDINARY EVENTS IN THE AMERICAN EXPERIENCE

SECOND EDITION

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Publisher's Note
The publisher has gone to great lengths to ensure the quality of this book but points out that some imperfections from the original may be apparent.

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Preface

This new edition emerged from the events set in motion by the terrorist attack of September 11, 2001. The distinctive features of the first edition are retained, and the revised book still covers the major traumas of the nation over the past hundred years. The basic design of the first edition is followed through refining and extending the concept of national trauma as it impinged on the personal lives of individuals. The book focuses on both the individual and collective responses of Americans to some of the most memorable events of their time and place. In a variety of ways, these responses work their way into perceptions of society as a moral community and into the collective memories of the nation.

The terrorist attack of September 11, 2001, became deeply etched into the memories of Americans as another day of infamy. It was on this day that nineteen men, armed only with box cutters and a willingness to die, changed the world. This day provided a reference point for Americans to organize their memories into "before" and "after." It was on this day that Americans experienced a trauma that unified the nation just as the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor had done. It was on this day that the previous edition of *National Trauma and Collective Memory* became out of date and a new edition was needed.

The new chapter on the terrorist attack of September 11 focuses on the intense sadness, fear, and anger generated by media reports on the tragic events. Assumptions were shattered with the loss of a sense of safety and security, and Americans struggled to find plausible explanations of how and why the attacks occurred. The sense of unity and solidarity immediately after the attack gradually dissipated as the nation became more highly divided than at any time since the Vietnam War. Restrictions were placed on the civil liberties guaranteed by the U.S. Constitution in an attempt to promote a greater sense of homeland security. If the primary objective of the terrorists was to instill fear within the general population, they could not have been more successful.

The volcanic effects of 9/11 should not obliterate the fact that our nation has been exposed to recurrent episodes of homegrown terrorism in recent years. I was a little uncomfortable in leaving out a chapter on the Oklahoma

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Introduction

1 • Collective Sadness, Fear, and Anger

The concept of trauma is applied primarily to extraordinary experiences in the personal lives of individuals. Trauma involves an element of shock, such as the shock of being stung by a bee, touching a live electrical wire, undergoing emergency surgery, or being in a serious automobile accident. These examples represent the essence of the trauma experience in the sense that an adverse happening that is unexpected, painful, extraordinary, and shocking has interrupted an ongoing activity. A trauma has an explosive quality about it because of the radical change that occurs within a short period of time.

Many of the most severe personal traumas grow out of abrupt changes in the quality of social relationships. Perceptions of danger, chaos, and a crisis of meaning replace previous feelings of safety and security. Such traumas include, for example, confronting the sudden death of a child or a spouse, being raped by a friend or an acquaintance, or being diagnosed as having the AIDS virus. These are traumatic events in the sense that a fracture has occurred in the lives that men and women have built. The rape victim becomes traumatized through a diminished sense of social value and personal integrity. The person diagnosed as having the AIDS virus is traumatized by the isolating effects of the disease and by the reduced opportunity for living a normal life. The magnitude of such traumas frequently makes people feel that they have become "damaged" or permanently changed.

The psychiatric components of trauma involve the many maladaptive responses that follow an encounter with a deplorable event. These include such symptoms as intrusive recollections of the event, recurrent nightmares and other sleep disturbances, eating disorders, feelings of detachment and estrangement from other people, impaired memory, difficulty in concentrating on everyday tasks, a sense of emptiness, and psychological numbing. In effect, the psychological and physiological responses to traumatic events add up to feelings of helplessness and a crisis of meaning in the personal lives of individuals. Restructuring a self-identity and reestablishing one's place in the broader scheme of human affairs become necessary.

The concept of trauma may also be applied collectively to the experiences

of an entire group of people. Here conditions of trauma grow out of an injury, a wound, or an assault on social life as it is known and understood. Something terrible, deplorable, or abnormal has happened, and social life has lost its predictability. Initial responses to a traumatic event are shock, disbelief, and incredulity. Chaos prevails, and people become uncertain about what they should or ought to believe. Individuals lose confidence in their ability to see the interrelatedness of events, and disturbing questions are raised about the linkage of personal lives with historical circumstances.

A national trauma differs from a personal trauma in that it is shared with others. A rape victim or a person diagnosed as having the AIDS virus experiences some degree of stigma and is thrown back on his or her own resources. The trauma of the victim is an individualized experience that occurs within a context of otherwise normal and happy people. The victim runs the risk of being rejected, developing a sense of estrangement from others, and losing the support of significant others. In contrast, a national trauma is shared collectively and frequently has a cohesive effect as individuals gather in small and intimate groups to reflect on the tragedy and its consequences. Personal feelings of sadness, fear, and anger are confirmed when others express similar emotions.

The enduring effects of a trauma in the memories of an individual resemble the enduring effects of a national trauma in collective consciousness. Dismissing or ignoring the traumatic experience is not a reasonable option. The conditions surrounding a trauma are played and replayed in the national consciousness in an attempt to extract some sense of coherence from a meaningless experience. When the event is dismissed from consciousness, it resurfaces in feelings of anxiety and despair. Just as the rape victim becomes permanently changed as a result of the trauma, the nation becomes permanently changed as a result of a trauma in the social realm.

Responses to national trauma involve elements of fear and a sense of vulnerability. The fear response reflects a sense of danger and feelings of personal insecurity. For example, the Japanese surprise attack on Pearl Harbor evoked intense levels of fear that the attack was simply a forerunner of a planned invasion of California. People living on the West Coast conjured up images of living in an occupied country. The Cuban missile crisis was accompanied by a fear of nuclear war. Mass destruction and death were seen as possible outcomes. Thé terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon were seen as forerunners of additional calamities. Thus, national trauma evokes imagery of living in a dangerous world that is unresponsive to personal needs and interests.

Under conditions of national trauma, the boundaries between order and chaos, between the sacred and the profane, between good and evil, between

life and death become fragile. People both individually and collectively see themselves as moving into uncharted territory. The central hopes and aspirations of personal lives are temporarily put on hold, replaced by the darkest of fears and anxieties. Symbolically, ordinary time has stopped: the sun does not shine, the birds do not sing, and the flowers do not bloom.

The collective sadness of a national trauma grows out of the death symbolism that is involved either directly or indirectly. For example, the unexpected deaths of President John F. Kennedy and Martin Luther King Jr. evoked intense sentiments of grief, mourning, and loss. The feelings of sadness were intensified by reflections on the loss of significant leaders and the manner in which the deaths had occurred. For employees at the World Trade Center on 9/11, the journey to work became associated with a journey to death and destruction. With continuous news coverage, the sadness of Americans intensified as they identified with victims and their families. The sadness of such events is collective in the sense that it is shared with other people. On these occasions, the individual does not stand alone.

When collective sadness is accompanied by anger, a volatile situation frequently develops. For example, following the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor, collective anger was directed toward Japanese Americans living on the West Coast. The Japanese Americans were the most readily available target for venting a collective sense of rage and hostility toward the Empire of Japan. After the assassination of Martin Luther King, collective anger took the form of widespread destruction and looting in American cities. The actual sources of the stress were not clearly identifiable, while at the same time there seemed to be a need for some kind of action in response to a sense of outrage. Proximate symbols were substituted in order to vent the aggressive impulse. The facade of harmony and tranquillity in the social realm broke down as collective resentments became expressed in violent action.

It is primarily because of the blending of national identities with personal identities that individuals are drawn into the political arena during times of crisis. Through attachment to the United States as a society, Americans are set apart from all other peoples of the world. A distinction is sometimes made between "insiders and outsiders," between "friends and enemies," and between "those who are with us and those who are against us." An assault or challenge to national integrity taps into basic values and the moral foundations of society itself.

A national trauma involves sufficient damage to the social system that discourse throughout the nation is directed toward the disruption and the repair work that needs to be done. The disruption may take the form of a threat of foreign invasion, a collapse of the economic system, a technological catastrophe, or the emergence of rancorous conflicts over values, prac-

tices, and priorities. Whatever form the trauma takes, a significant and deplorable departure from the normality of everyday life is in process.

While traumas become transitional events in the life of a nation, some traumas have more lasting effects than do others. Permanent changes were introduced into the nation as a result of the Civil War, the Great Depression, and the trauma of World War II. The shock of these events touched the entire fabric of the nation. Other traumas have intense emotional effects at the time of the crisis, but tend to have less enduring effects on the social system. For example, the trauma of President Kennedy's assassination elicited one of the most intense emotional responses in the history of the nation, but very few changes in national priorities or public policies grew out of the event.

The degree to which a nation dwells upon a trauma depends on the degree of closure that is achieved. For example, a few days in October 1962 were the most terrifying moments in the history of the nation. We were on the brink of nuclear war. However, the Cuban missile crisis subsided with the removal of the Soviet missiles from Cuba. The case was closed, and most people were able to put the episode behind them. In contrast, the lack of closure to the conditions surrounding the assassination of President Kennedy resulted in continued preoccupation with what happened in Dallas on November 22, 1963. Although this date is alive in the memories of many Americans, it was not an event that was associated with any clear policy implications or any line of action other than the quest for setting the historical record straight.

The emotions that are tapped by a national trauma grow out of what it means to be human. Universally, the ingredients of trauma include some form of bafflement, some level of suffering, and perceptions of evil in human affairs. The bafflement grows out of an encounter with chaos and an attendant loss of a sense of coherence. Perceptions of evil reflect the frustrations of human effort and the awareness that others do not share one's sense of morality and decency. Because of the suffering associated with trauma, individuals are unable to remain emotionally detached or indifferent. Traumatic experiences suggest that to be human is to be vulnerable and that efforts directed toward mastery and control over the outcome of events are limited in their effectiveness.

A national trauma frequently has enduring personal consequences of a highly disturbing nature for those who experience the event directly. For example, psychiatric studies have revealed that those who directly experienced the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor continued to suffer from flashback memories and recurrent nightmares. Although the attack itself lasted less than two hours, the experiences of fear, terror, and helplessness were of sufficient intensity to persist and to recur sporadically throughout the lifetime of the survivors.

On the fiftieth anniversary of the D-day invasion of Europe, interviews with survivors received a great deal of attention in the news media. Personal stories were told in a variety of ways about confronting the probability of one's own death, the sadness of seeing comrades killed, the feelings of survivor guilt, and the moral conflicts growing out of being required to kill others. The trauma of the event had a permanent impact on the thousands of men who participated in the heroic undertaking.

The traumas of the past become ingrained in collective memories and provide reference points to draw upon when the need arises. Hearing or reading about an event does not have the same implications as experiencing an event directly. However, as parts of the social heritage, events from the past become selectively embedded in collective memories. For example, following the opening of the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington, DC, an extraordinary number of people came. Museum officials found it necessary to request that people stay away or postpone their visit to a later date. The people came because the traumas of the past are important for reflections on the human condition. The horrors and atrocities inflicted upon human beings by other human beings in Nazi Germany became ingrained in historical memories as one of the major traumas of all times. In reflections on the Holocaust, it becomes clear that the range of worlds that humans are capable of creating is very vast indeed.

Social Disruption

An event becomes a collective trauma when it appears to threaten or seriously invalidate our usual assessments of social reality. Under such conditions, doubts emerge about the future as an extension of the present, and social events are perceived as discontinuous. Forces are operating that can be neither clearly understood nor controlled. It becomes difficult to integrate the problematic event with perceptions of the orderliness of social life. A deplorable condition has surfaced in the social realm that requires some form of remedial action. The integrity of the social fabric is under attack, and some form of repair work is needed to promote the continuity of social life.

The crises precipitating a national trauma are of two types. One consists of an acute crisis that impinges upon the normal course of events in an abrupt and dramatic fashion. The acute crisis is an unscheduled event in the sense that it falls outside the range of harmony and order within the social system. Acute crises include such events as the firing on Fort Sumter by Confederate forces at the beginning of the Civil War, the assassination of President Abraham Lincoln, the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor, and the assassination of President Kennedy. Although these were abrupt disruptions of the social

order, they were not isolated events. A great deal of collective stress and tension preceded each of them. However, each was generally perceived as "a bolt from the blue."

The second type of crisis is chronic, enduring, and long-lasting. A chronic crisis lacks the dramatic beginning of an acute crisis, but builds in intensity with the passing of time. This is the type of crisis that grows out of persisting contradictions within a social system. Conditions become deplorable, and problems emerge that require the attention of the nation. Rather than a volcano-like intrusion into an otherwise orderly system, a chronic crisis grows out of enduring conflicts within a social system and the emergence of a crisis of authority. The Great Depression and the Vietnam War are prime examples of a chronic crisis in the social realm.

While the stock market crash of 1929 is typically regarded as the beginning of the Great Depression, it was not in and of itself a national trauma. Certainly the collapse in the price of stocks was traumatic to many investors, but not to the entire nation. The stock market has a volatile quality to it, and the fluctuation of prices was widely recognized as a market characteristic. What was different about the early 1930s, however, was the scope and severity of the economic decline that ensued. As banks began to fail with increasing frequency and as levels of unemployment escalated, the nation confronted one of the most severe traumas in its history. Economic hardship took its toll on all major sectors of the economy. Capitalism was in a state of crisis, and the free enterprise system failed to work. Economic hardships translated into fear, vulnerability, and a sense of despair. The trauma of economic failure had an indelible imprint upon the consciousness of the entire society.

The trauma of the Vietnam War grew out of conflicts over American foreign policy. The nation became more highly divided than at any time since the Civil War. The government was committing troops and resources to a war that a significant number of Americans regarded as immoral and unjust. The combat veterans in Vietnam became unclear about the purposes of the war and what the United States was trying to accomplish. Before the war was over, several million American men and women served in Vietnam but failed to achieve any major victory. It became increasingly evident that it was a war we could not win. After the fall of Saigon, most Americans wanted to forget about the war and put the nightmare behind them. Many veterans returning from Vietnam were unable to make a smooth reentry into civilian life and continued to suffer from post-traumatic stress disorders. The enduring pain and suffering experienced by the veterans commanded the attention of the nation.

It is not the scope of human injuries, deaths, and suffering alone, however, that makes an event a national trauma. For example, the American fatalities in the Korean War were only slightly less than those suffered in Vietnam or

in all of the Pacific during World War II. Much of the fighting for the hills in Korea was fierce, and many American lives were lost. The war in Korea was certainly traumatic for the men who fought in it, but we do not think of the Korean War as a national trauma in the same way we think of the Vietnam War as a national trauma. Public opinion was polarized over U.S. involvement in Vietnam in ways in which it was not regarding the commitment of troops to Korea. We did not win the Korean War in the usual sense of winning a war, yet it did result in a stalemate that succeeded in stopping the spread of communism. Our national objectives had been achieved. The military effort was never officially designated as a war, but only as "a police action" under the auspices of the United Nations. The military engagement was perceived as proper and just not only by the policy makers but also by the American public generally.

Several of the major collective traumas of the 1960s and 1970s grew out of the problems of political and criminal violence. Attention came to be focused on the causes, conditions, and consequences of violence in American life. The fear of personal victimization and the rhetoric of law and order were evident in public discourse and debate. Many Americans were shocked at the violence directed toward participants in the civil rights movement. Others were shocked at the scope of violence in urban riots and looting following the assassination of Martin Luther King Jr. One of the most intense emotional experiences in the history of the nation followed the assassination of President Kennedy. Concerns about violence in the public sphere were subsequently extended to include concerns about such intimate forms of violence as rape, child abuse, and spouse abuse.

The major traumas of the twentieth century led to recognition that the orderliness of society is a human creation. Serious and unexpected problems emerge regardless of how well a society is organized. For example, the spectacular technological achievements of the twentieth century were accompanied by extraordinary tragedies. The ingredients of trauma were embedded in such technological accidents as the sinking of the *Titanic* in 1912, the explosion of the *Hindenburg* in 1937, and more recently the explosion of the space shuttle *Challenger* in 1986. Each of these events dramatized the dangers inherent in the modern world. To adequately understand the place of trauma in the human experience, it is necessary to examine the conditions that give rise to catastrophes that no one actually intended or wanted.

A collective trauma grows out of the shared experience of a deplorable event that falls outside the range of ordinary human experiences. This form of trauma is evident in such natural disasters as earthquakes, volcanoes, hurricanes, floods, and tornadoes. Such natural disasters result in the loss of human life, demolished homes and property, and the destruction of commu-

nity. Humans are reminded that their life plans are subjected to disruptions in unintended ways when the forces of the physical world become hostile and unfriendly. Yet natural disasters are less the subject for analysis in studies of national trauma than those disruptive events that grow out of the social worlds that humans have created.

An extraordinary event becomes a national trauma under circumstances in which the social system is disrupted to such a magnitude that it commands the attention of all major subgroups of the population. Even those who are usually apathetic and indifferent to national affairs are drawn into the public arena of discussion and debate. The social fabric is under attack, and people pay attention because the consequences appear to be so great that they cannot be ignored. Holding an attitude of benign neglect or cynical indifference is not a reasonable option.

Newsworthy Events

Calamities and tragedies in the social realm provide the core ingredients of a newsworthy event. Extraordinary disruptions gain attention and arouse widespread public responses. The news that is reported daily tends to emphasize dramatic events, unusual happenings, and moral disorders. The activities of ordinary people are seldom reported unless they are engaging in social protest or acting in opposition to some established institution. Rather, it is the disruption of everyday life that constitutes the newsworthy event. Something unexpected has occurred and adjustments to changing circumstances are required. Disruptions of the social order become prominent in conversations throughout the country.

Such shocking developments as the mass suicides at the People's Temple in Guyana, the school shootings at Columbine High School, and the bombing of the Alfred P. Murrah Federal Building in Oklahoma City command the attention of the nation for an extended period of time. Such episodes intrude into everyday life and serve to define the moral boundaries of society. These events are significant primarily because of the large number of people that respond to them and because of the opportunities they provide for examining selected aspects of social life.

Disruptive events become a national trauma only when the very institutional foundations of society are subjected to a challenge. For this reason, the criminal conduct of Richard Nixon as president of the United States was a national trauma in a way in which crimes embedded in Olympic competition or the mass suicides in Guyana were not. Deviance and criminal conduct, wherever it occurs, is disturbing to a social system. However, it becomes a national trauma only when it shakes the basic structure of society and the orderly progression of social life as it is generally known and understood.

A unique feature of news in modern society derives from the fact that the activities of a small number of people are observed selectively by millions of spectators. Messages that originate at some central location are disseminated over a large geographical area. People pay attention to news events because of their need for living in a meaningful cosmos. The millions of people who watch the evening news and read a daily newspaper are seeking information for linking personal lives with an ultimate set of values. In this process, news events provide stimulants for reflecting on social norms and deviancy, on public attitudes and behavior, and on social trends and unusual developments. Awareness of societal happenings serves to modify and clarify everyday assumptions and thus establish a firmer link between oneself and the broader scheme of human affairs.

The selective task of individuals in responding to the news is separating the genuine from the spurious, the illusion from the reality, and the authentic from the inauthentic. Routinely, the pronouncements of government officials are disproportionately reported as newsworthy events. Both the Red Scare of the 1920s and the fear of communism during the McCarthy era were intensified by the credibility the news media gave to the outrageous claims of public officials. Both public officials and the news media may misinform the public because of incomplete information about the topics of concern. Yet in some cases, misinformation may stem from the ideological and economic conditions under which the news media operate.

Audiences respond not only to the basic facts being transmitted by the news media, but also to the special meanings that people as individuals give to events. The construction of reality is a continuous process in our everyday lives, and in this respect we are all news makers. Through reading or listening to the news we extend our awareness beyond the range of experiences available in our immediate environment. Remote events become part of our general understanding of social relationships, life in our society, and what it means to be human.

Events in the broader society are of practical importance in establishing references for orienting our lives. One illustration of this process is the social game in which individuals recall the routine activities of their lives when they were interrupted by some major event of societal importance. This game takes the form of a question such as "Where were you when you heard about the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor?" This question could easily be asked about the death of President Franklin Roosevelt, the assassination of President Kennedy, the resignation of President Nixon, or the terrorist attack of September 11.

Such games reveal more than interesting topics of conversation. We tend to draw on news events as benchmarks for linking the past with the present in our personal lives. Important occurrences are useful in marking social time

in much the same way that birthdays, anniversaries, getting married, getting a job, becoming a parent, changing place of residence, and attending a funeral are used by individuals as reference points for assessing the quality of their lives. Such events are used creatively for constructing the meaningfulness of past experiences and anticipating the future.

When a trauma intrudes into our lives, ordinary time seems to stop, and our everyday pursuits are put on hold. Our equilibrium has been upset and our engagement in a continuous flow of events has become problematic. The tragic occurrence is replayed over and over in our minds as we seek to understand what has happened and why it happened. By becoming a marker in the lives of individuals, it provides a framework similar to the way in which primitive peoples measured time without clocks or watches. Events that occurred in the personal lives of individuals prior to a trauma become mentally separated from the events that occurred after the trauma. This is especially the case when the trauma is of the magnitude of the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor, the bombing of the federal building in Oklahoma City, or the terrorist attack on the World Trade Center. Turning points occurred in the social life of the nation and in the personal lives of individuals.

If the official news sources are perceived to be inadequate or if the news converage is regarded as untrustworthy, individuals pool their intellectual resources in attempts to make the event coherent. Imagine, for example, the Japanese Americans living in the San Francisco Bay area on December 7, 1941, who suddenly found themselves suspected of being enemy agents, or the confusion of residents of Japan after the world's first encounter with the atomic bomb on August 6, 1945. These are examples of dramatic events that cannot be understood in terms of past experiences. Under these conditions, individuals react not as separate entities but in collaboration with others in the quest for understanding and action. Through deliberation on the event in question, a pattern of agreement tends to emerge for the construction of plausible explanations of events and their implications.

The communication patterns associated with trauma at the individual level differ from the communication patterns associated with trauma at the national level. At the individual level, many people are particularly reluctant to communicate negative information to the persons who may be affected by it. The uncertain outcome of transmitting undesirable information was evident long ago in ancient Sparta, where the messenger who brought bad news was sometimes put to death. The stigma associated with such forms of trauma as rape or being diagnosed with the AIDS virus leads to withholding information from friends, relatives, and coworkers. Because of this tendency to keep bad news of a personal nature to themselves, individuals are frequently cut off from the social supports that otherwise may be available.

Box 1
Symbolic Event: The Invasion from Mars

Vague perceptions of personal vulnerability and the dangers of the world in which we live were evident in 1938 when Orson Welles's broadcast of a fictitious invasion from Mars precipitated a mass panic. The radio broadcast was structured to have interludes of music interrupted by news reports from New Jersey on the landing of the Martians. As on-the-scene reports of "the invasion" came in, the level of hysteria mounted in the New York City area. Approximately 6 million people panicked in response to the broadcast.

Many people fled the area. One man drove all the way to Cleveland before he discovered that the broadcast was a hoax. It was a time in which it was difficult for the individual to know what to believe. Anything and everything seemed possible. Hundreds of people dropped to their knees to pray, thinking that the end of the world had come. Grown men wept and college students trembled. Perhaps no other episode in modern times has so completely terrorized so many people.

The announcement that the program was a dramatization of *The War of the Worlds* by H.G. Wells was either not heard or ignored by a large number of listeners.

Tensions stemming from the unemployment of the Great Depression and the seriousness of the war crisis in Europe had produced a susceptibility to suggestion. The panic was intensified by individuals responding to the fear exhibited by others.

In contrast, news of a national trauma tends to be communicated very rapidly, not only by the news media but also by the exchange of information at the personal level. Telephone lines frequently become overloaded with a large number of calls as individuals reach out for support and personal reinforcement. Serious disruptions of the social order are shared collectively and become associated with the need to talk about their meanings and implications. In this respect, national traumas tend to have cohesive effects within interpersonal networks in ways in which traumas of a highly personal nature do not.

Under conditions of serious social disruption, individuals frequently desire more information than the news-gathering agencies can make available. This especially occurs during times of crisis and may be noted in reactions to urban riots, natural disasters, or unsolved mass murders. Social life becomes disrupted and people make collective attempts to arrive at some adequate understanding of the events in question. Individuals verify and modify their assessment of events by engaging in conversations with others. Because of