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THE 20TH ANNIVERSARY OF 9/11 AND SPORTS' RELIANCE ON "UNITY"

Patriotic pageantry in Jacksonville on the 10th anniversary of 9/11.

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Sports have arguably provided the [most visible rituals of remembrance](#) in the years after the 9/11 attacks. Beginning with somber ceremonies of mourning in the immediate aftermath of the tragedy and quickly turning to celebrations of military strength and national resolve, U.S. sports leagues and organizations have incorporated Air Force flyovers, "support the troops" efforts, "USA!" chants, emotional performances of "God Bless America," and other rituals into their daily routines. Despite the ubiquity of these events, there remain particular moments of emphasis. In 2021, one such moment was the 20th anniversary 9/11.

Many of the sports commemorations of September 11, 2021 were poignant, and they also continued to feature exaggerated performances of nationalism that warrant critical attention. [Scholars of public memory argue that memory](#) texts are often less about the past and more about managing the anxieties of the present. With this idea in mind, we can recognize that much of the post-9/11 memorializing in sport has been designed to help calm a nation shaken by tragedy and uncertain about the "war on terror."

Part of sports' appeal in moments of remembrance lies in its presumed ability to transcend differences and foster unity,

features that took on added significance in the context of heightened anxieties in 2021. Over the course of the year, the United States experienced an insurrection at the nation's capitol, a series of catastrophic climate events, a resurgence of Black Lives Matter activism, and an unprecedented public health crisis. All of this corresponded with the Donald Trump presidency, a disintegrating public sphere, and growing distrust of news and information. In short, there are good reasons why Americans might seek some affirmation of unity and shared and purpose.

Our focus is on [a video produced by the National Football League](#) (NFL), which aired before kickoff of all games on Sunday, September 12. It is a beautifully produced recollection not only of what happened on 9/11 itself but what presumably took place beginning the next day, on 9/12. Narrated by actor Steve Buscemi (a former fire fighter who, on 9/11, [returned to his old fire house](#) to help in rescue efforts) and featuring players and 9/11 survivors, the video shares "the story of 9/12." This narrative is bolstered by the painful images from the tragedy and a gentle, guitar-picked version of "Amazing Grace," suggesting that if, during 9/11 we were lost, in its aftermath we were found.



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A New York Giants fan reflects on the 15th anniversary of 9/11.

An emphasis on “unity” confirms this message. Former New England Patriots player Joe Andruzzi said, “Everybody in this country came together, no matter who you were, what nationality, what color you were. You came together as one.” Sean Egan, whose father was killed in the 9/11 rescue effort, declared, “This idea of, of unity, was something really special.” And Buscemi’s narration boasts, “After [9/11], we picked each other up. We did it by having faith and belief in one another and in something bigger than ourselves. We did it together.”

These sentiments are complemented by photos portraying a diverse array of Americans supporting one another and declaring their love for their country. In these words and images, there is no inequality, no discrimination, no hate. It is certainly an appealing and romantic message. It is also an illusion.

As much as we might wish to believe that “everyone” supported and cared for each other after 9/11, we know better. [Leaders advocated for war](#). Americans of Islamic faith were [targets of hate crimes](#). Political liberties [were restricted](#). And [dissent was characterized as unpatriotic](#). In other words, although there were countless acts of courage and grace in the aftermath of 9/11, there are plenty of reminders that the unity we claim does not extend to all.

If there were Americans in 2001 who felt alienated or marginalized, this was the case even more so in 2021. For those affected by the pandemic, economic stratification, racism, sexism, gun violence, climate change, or the many

other issues facing the nation, claims to “unity” might well be met with skepticism. Yet, especially in recent years, [sports leagues like the NFL have emphasized this symbolic theme](#) and, consequently, dismissed the legitimate reasons why some Americans feel disconnected and divided. The “9/12” video does this most obviously in its visual associations between 9/11 and the crises of today. In both the opening and closing narrations, viewers see contemporary images of protest and health care workers. The lesson is summarized by Buscemi:

“It’s 9/12 again. Today our country faces problems new and old and seems as divided as we’ve ever been. As a nation at our lowest points, we as a people find a way to rise the highest. As we remember and honor the memory of 9/11, let’s also never forget the lessons and spirit of 9/12. There is no problem we can’t solve, no obstacle we can’t overcome, no mountain we can’t climb . . . together.”

Buscemi’s concluding words are juxtaposed with iconic images representing America’s challenges and triumphs, all suggesting any hardship is merely an obstacle on the way to the inevitable greatness of the nation. This is a comforting, romantic version of American identity, but it is ultimately damaging if we hold up such symbols without confronting the very real forms of inequality and injustice that persist in the United States. Thus, “unity” cannot be our goal unless and until we first contend with our divisions. ■

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