

# The New York Times

## A New Count of the Dead, But Little Sense of Relief

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The number tumbles. First 6,700, then 5,000. Down, down, down, 4,500, 4,000, now 3,300.

The death toll in the World Trade Center attack keeps falling as officials refine their count. When they are finished, the toll will be much smaller than anyone anticipated, probably about 3,000, less than half the number that made headlines in the weeks following the attack.

That is a fact. In historical terms it means that Sept. 11 can no longer be called the bloodiest day in American history. (That was Sept. 17, 1862, when at least 3,650 Confederate and Union soldiers died at the Battle of Antietam, and thousands of others were wounded.) In contemporary ones it means that the evacuation and rescue efforts were even more spectacularly successful than anyone imagined. The 400 rescuers who died helped save more people than anyone might have dreamed possible.

Mere numbers, of course, do little to diminish the nation's sense of horror.

And yet as the number has fallen, and been publicly recorded, people have reacted in a variety of ways, not all of them simple relief: one sister of a victim watched the number shrink and felt all the lonelier, briefly fearful that people might think the wholesale devastation that took her brother was somehow less epic; the mayor of New York excoriated reporters for chronicling the declining totals, describing it as a "macabre" exercise; military and political leaders have said the total does not for a second change their sense of outrage.

Historians and psychologists say that such a mix of relief and confusion, anger and insistence is not unusual, and maybe even to be expected. Over history, the early, dreaded estimates of death totals in cataclysmic events have had a way of taking stubborn hold. People invest in them, however broken their hearts. People come to defend them in certain ways, in part because they think worrying about definitively counting the deaths amounts to a conscious effort to diminish the event's awfulness.

No one is wrong in all this, and no one, however conflicted their emotions, feels that Sept. 11 was anything less than a cursed day. Much of it just has to do with how people process loss, how humans protect that which they cherish, how slowly some truths nudge powerful myths from the historical stage.

Lori Barzvi, whose brother, Guy, 29, worked at Cantor Fitzgerald and died in the attack, said she watched the numbers of dead and missing decline and felt something might be at risk. "I was afraid that it might be looked at as being less of a tragedy or it would be easier to forget because less people died," Ms. Barzvi said. "It is not that I wish that there were more people. It just made me feel a little bit more alone."

Joel Best, chairman of the department of sociology and criminal justice at the University of Delaware and author of the book "Damned Lies and Statistics" says that sometimes people's feelings can go beyond the strangely disconcerting sensation experienced by Ms. Barzvi. People can almost actively cling to high numbers of dead or hurt despite the fact that those numbers have been proven erroneous.

"People develop an emotional stake in defending a number," Mr. Best said. "They feel they have to defend it."

The phenomenon, while understandable, can also blunt what is objectively a good development. "If there are 3,000 dead instead of 6,000 dead that does not make the tragedy half as bad," Mr. Best said. "What people ought to see is the astonishing good fortune that we had in evacuating these buildings."

And yet the ability to feel anything like comfort can prove difficult. Some people ask, not without sound reasoning, how anyone can feel any better knowing that "only" about 3,000 people died. Even engaging in a discussion about the declining count has brought some people criticism.

"It appears to many people to be callous," said John Allen Paulos, a professor of mathematics at Temple University and author of the book "Innumeracy: Mathematical Illiteracy and Its Consequences."

"I have had conversations with people and I sense it a bit -- that concerns with the numbers is somehow unseemly."

Certainly, the United States diplomats, military leaders and members of Congress who have repeatedly cited the thousands killed in explaining why the country has gone to war do not think the lower total affects their rationale or the country's cause. For weeks, they cited 5,000 and 6,000 dead when it was public knowledge that the figure was substantially lower, although they probably were erring unintentionally.

Spokesmen for the Pentagon and the State Department, where Gen. Richard B. Myers, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, and Secretary of State Colin L. Powell have each referred to much higher death tolls in explaining the United States engagement, said the lower numbers changed nothing.

"Our country was attacked, thousands of innocent Americans and citizens from other countries were killed and the terrorists have threatened to kill more," said Philip Reeker, a deputy spokesman at the State Department. "We are waging a campaign in self-defense."

Along those lines, psychologists and other experts suspect that the change in the death toll will mean little in how this disaster affects the American psyche. That enduring, collective sense of horror, these experts say, results in part from the fact that so many people around the country experienced the intense trauma of watching the towers collapse on television, and perhaps felt almost as if they were there. And the towers, the signature of the downtown skyline, were such recognizable icons that many people had almost a personal relationship with the buildings themselves.

Perhaps most importantly, psychologists say, is that the scale of the disaster on Sept. 11 was so incomprehensibly great, that even when the number of people who died was cut in half, the loss remained just as incomprehensibly great.

"If you hear about a car accident in which one person died versus one in which four people died, that is experienced much differently psychologically," said **Jennifer S. Lerner**, an assistant professor of decision science and psychology at Carnegie Mellon University in Pittsburgh, who is studying how Sept. 11 influenced risk perception and economic behavior. "But if there is a train wreck and 100 people died versus 104 people died, you are not going to pay that much attention to whether it is 100 or 104, because it is already beyond the threshold where you count individuals."

In any disaster of such proportions, these experts say, we tend to form memories and an outlook on life that will be unaltered by a lowering of official death counts.

"Our grief is not proportionate to the number of people who died," said Shelley E. Taylor, a professor of psychology at the University of California at Los Angeles, whose research focuses on how humans deal with stress and trauma. "Our grief depends first on the personal impact, if we knew someone, and second to the sense of loss that pervades everyone psychologically because of the loss of innocence and the realization of our vulnerability, and none of those things are affected by the reduction in the number of casualties."

Historians, too, are wrestling with what to make of the smaller death toll. Even in the course of a single conversation, several seemed to revise their thoughts about what, if anything, the smaller death toll will mean in the way history records Sept. 11, 2001.

Robert Jay Lifton, a psychiatrist and historian who published a book in 1999 about the Japanese cult that released poison gas in the Tokyo subways, said the lower number may mean that as time passes, "there can be a gradual sense in people's minds that the disaster was not as vast as they had thought." But, he added, given that this attack was on civilians and not on soldiers on a battlefield, the lower numbers may not have an effect on how people perceive the vastness of the calamity.

"This was a unique attack and its standing as an historical experience has to do with it being a terrorist attack, as opposed to an event in war time, for which we have different standards," he said.

Ultimately, historians said, the historical importance of Sept. 11 is still being defined on a day-by-day basis, from the fate of the war in Afghanistan to the effort to rebuild Lower Manhattan to any realignment of relations among world powers, like the United States and Russia.

David M. Kennedy, a Stanford University professor of history, said that to him it was clear that the drop in the Sept. 11th death toll would have no effect on its standing in history. "The whole experience is what has made an impact on us and will remain in our memory, and the absolute number is irrelevant," he said.

He noted, for example, that few Americans know how many people died during Pearl Harbor (2,400), and yet it does not change the significance of the event.

"None but a few specialists and historians will know the exact number," Mr. Kennedy said of the Sept. 11 attacks, which as of the latest official count, left 3,533 dead, including 189 at the Pentagon and 44 at the crash site in Pennsylvania. "But the magnitude of the event is well established and will be remembered." And that truth is felt most powerfully by the families whose loved ones died. "It just doesn't mean anything," said Warren B. Nelson of St. Louis, whose son, David W. Nelson, 50, a senior vice president at Carr Futures, died in the attack. "A whole lot of people got killed, whether it is 3,000 or 6,000."

Elizabeth Crawford, David Nelson's wife, said that when she finds herself in a room of say 50 or 60 other widows or family members of victims, she is already overwhelmed by grief. But she said that perhaps in some way, solace can be taken from the decline. "Any family that does not have to go through what my family is going through, is a wonderful thing," said Mrs. Crawford, who lives in Brooklyn with two children, ages 8 and 4. "I do say, 'Thank God it is less than we had thought.' I wish David would have been one of those who got out. But it was out of my control."