First Responses to 9/11

The following are some responses, from divergent perspectives, soon after the events of 9/11.

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In the wake of last week's terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon, New Yorker staff writers and contributors reflect on the tragedy and its consequences. This week's Talk of the Town is devoted entirely to the incident, and includes contributions from John Updike, Jonathan Franzen, Denis Johnson, Roger Angell, Aharon Appelfeld, Rebecca Mead, Susan Sontag, Amitav Ghosh, and Donald Antrim.

Suddenly summoned to witness something great and horrendous, we keep fighting not to reduce it to our own smallness. From the viewpoint of a tenth-floor apartment in Brooklyn Heights, where I happened to be visiting some kin, the destruction of the World Trade Center twin towers had the false intimacy of television, on a day of perfect reception. A four-year-old girl and her babysitter called from the library, and pointed out through the window the smoking top of the north tower, not a mile away. It seemed, at that first glance, more curious than horrendous: smoke speckled with bits of paper curled into the cloudless sky, and strange inky rivulets ran down the giant structure's vertically corrugated surface. The W.T.C. had formed a pale background to our Brooklyn view of lower Manhattan, not beloved, like the stony, spired midtown thirties skyscrapers it had displaced as the city's tallest, but, with its pre-postmodern combination of unignorable immensity and architectural reticence, in some lights beautiful. As we watched the second tower burst into ballooning flame (an intervening building had hidden the approach of the second airplane), there persisted the notion that, as on television, this was not quite real; it could be fixed; the technocracy the towers symbolized would find a way to put out the fire and reverse the damage.

And then, within an hour, as my wife and I watched from the Brooklyn building's roof, the south tower dropped from the screen of our viewing; it fell straight down like an elevator, with a tinkling shiver and a groan of concussion distinct across the mile of air. We knew we had just witnessed thousands of deaths; we clung to each other as if we ourselves were falling. Amid the glittering impassivity of the many buildings across the East River, an empty spot had appeared, as if by electronic command, beneath the sky that, but for the sulfurous cloud streaming south toward the ocean, was pure blue, rendered uncannily pristine by the absence of jet trails. A swiftly expanding burst of smoke and dust hid the rest of lower Manhattan; we saw the collapse of the second tower only on television, where the footage of hellbent airplane, exploding jet fuel, and imploding tower was played and replayed, much rehearsed moments from a nightmare ballet.

The nightmare is still on. The bodies are beneath the rubble, the last-minute cell-phone calls—remarkably calm and loving, many of them—are still being reported, the sound of an airplane
overhead still bears an unfamiliar menace, the thought of boarding an airplane with our old blasé blitheness keeps receding into the past. Determined men who have transposed their own lives to a martyr's afterlife can still inflict an amount of destruction that defies belief. War is conducted with a fury that requires abstraction—that turns a planeful of peaceful passengers, children included, into a missile the faceless enemy deserves. The other side has the abstractions; we have only the mundane duties of survivors—to pick up the pieces, to bury the dead, to take more precautions, to go on living.

American freedom of motion, one of our prides, has taken a hit. Can we afford the openness that lets future kamikaze pilots, say, enroll in Florida flying schools? A Florida neighbor of one of the suspects remembers him saying he didn't like the United States: "He said it was too lax. He said, 'I can go anywhere I want to, and they can't stop me.' " It is a weird complaint, a begging perhaps to be stopped. Weird, too, the silence of the heavens these days, as flying has ceased across America. But fly again we must; risk is a price of freedom, and walking around Brooklyn Heights that afternoon, as ash drifted in the air and cars were few and open-air lunches continued as usual on Montague Street, renewed the impression that, with all its failings, this is a country worth fighting for. Freedom, reflected in the street's diversity and daily ease, felt palpable. It is mankind's elixir, even if a few turn it to poison.

The next morning, I went back to the open vantage from which we had watched the tower so dreadfully slip from sight. The fresh sun shone on the eastward façades, a few boats tentatively moved in the river, the ruins were still sending out smoke, but New York looked glorious.

—John Updike

The one recurring nightmare I've had for many years is about the end of the world, and it goes like this. In a crowded, modern cityscape not unlike lower Manhattan, I'm flying a jetliner down an avenue where everything is wrong. It seems impossible that the buildings to either side of me won't shear my wings off, impossible that I can keep the plane aloft while moving at such a low speed. The way is always blocked, but somehow I manage to turn a sharp corner or to pilot the plane beneath an overpass, only to confront a skyscraper so high that I would have to rise vertically to clear it. As I pull the plane into a dismayingly shallow climb, the skyscraper looms and rushes forward to meet me, and I wake up, with unspeakable relief, in my ordinary bed.

Last Tuesday there was no awakening. You found your way to a TV and watched. Unless you were a very good person indeed, you were probably, like me, experiencing the collision of several incompatible worlds inside your head. Besides the horror and sadness of what you were watching, you might also have felt a childish disappointment over the disruption of your day, or a selfish worry about the impact on your finances, or admiration for an attack so brilliantly conceived and so flawlessly executed, or, worst of all, an awed appreciation of the visual spectacle it produced.

Never mind whether certain Palestinians were or were not dancing in the streets. Somewhere—you can be absolutely sure of this—the death artists who planned the attack were rejoicing over the terrible beauty of the towers' collapse. After years of dreaming and working and hoping, they were now experiencing a fulfillment as overwhelming as any they could have allowed themselves to pray for. Perhaps some of these glad artists were hiding in ruined Afghanistan,
where the average life expectancy is barely forty. In that world you can't walk through a bazaar without seeing men and children who are missing limbs.

In this world, where the Manhattan skyline has now been maimed and the scorched wreckage at the Pentagon is reminiscent of Kabul, I'm trying to imagine what I don't want to imagine: the scene inside a plane one moment before impact. At the controls, a terrorist is raising a prayer of thanks to Allah in expectation of instant transport from this world to the next one, where houris will presently reward him for his glorious success. At the back of the cabin, huddled Americans are trembling and moaning and, no doubt, in many cases, praying to their God for a diametrically opposite outcome. And then, a moment later, for hijacker and hijacked alike, the world ends.

On the street, after the impact, survivors spoke of being delivered from death by God's guidance and grace. But even they, the survivors, were stumbling out of the smoke into a different world. Who would have guessed that everything could end so suddenly on a pretty Tuesday morning? In the space of two hours, we left behind a happy era of Game Boy economics and trophy houses and entered a world of fear and vengeance. Even if you'd been waiting for the nineties-ending crash throughout the nineties, even if you'd believed all along that further terrorism in New York was only a matter of when and not of whether, what you felt on Tuesday morning wasn't intellectual satisfaction, or simply empathetic horror, but deep grief for the loss of daily life in prosperous, forgetful times: the traffic jammed by delivery trucks and unavailable cabs, "Apocalypse Now Redux" in local theatres, your date for drinks downtown on Wednesday, the sixty-three homers of Barry Bonds, the hourly AOL updates on J. Lo's doings. On Monday morning, the front-page headline in the News had been "KIPS BAY TENANTS SAY: WE'VE GOT KILLER MOLD." This front page is (and will, for a while, remain) amazing.

The challenge in the old world, the nineties world of Bill Clinton, was to remember that, behind the prosperity and complacency, death was waiting and entire countries hated us. The problem of the new world, the zeroes world of George Bush, will be to reassert the ordinary, the trivial, and even the ridiculous in the face of instability and dread: to mourn the dead and then try to awaken to our small humanities and our pleasurable daily nothing-much.

—Jonathan Franzen

Several times during the nineteen-nineties I did some reporting from what we generally call trouble spots, and witnessing the almost total devastation of some of these places (Somalia, Afghanistan, the southern Philippines, Liberia) had me wondering if I would ever see such trouble in my own country: if I would ever feel it necessary to stay close to the radio or television; if I would sleep with the window wide open in order to hear the approach of the engines of war or to smell the smoke of approaching fires or to stay aware of the movements of emergency teams coping with the latest enormity; if I would one day see American ground heaped with the ruins of war; if I would ever hear Americans saying, "They're attacking the Capitol! The Pentagon! The White House!"; if I would stand in the midst of an American crowd witnessing the kind of destruction that can be born of the wickedness of the human imagination, or turn to examine American faces a few seconds after their eyes had taken it in; if I would one day see American streets choked with people who don't know exactly where they're going but don't feel safe where they are; and if I would someday feel uncontrollably grateful to be able to
get my laundry done and to find simple commerce persisting in spite of madness. I wondered if the wars I'd gone looking for would someday come looking for us.

Travelling in the Third World, I've found that to be an American sometimes means to be wondrously celebrated, to excite a deep, instantaneous loyalty in complete strangers. In the southern Philippines, a small delegation headed by a village captain once asked that I take steps to have their clan and their collection of two dozen huts placed under the protection of the United States. Later, in the same region, a teen-age Islamic separatist guerrilla among a group I'd been staying with begged me to adopt him and take him to America. In Afghanistan, I encountered men who, within minutes of meeting me, offered to leave their own worried families and stay by my side as long as I required it, men who found medicine somewhere in the ruins of Kabul for me when I needed it, and who never asked for anything back—all simply because I was American.

On the other hand, I think we sense—but don't care always to apprehend—the reality that some people hate America. To many suffering souls, we must seem incomprehensibly aloof and self-centered, or worse. For nearly a century, war has rolled lopsidedly over the world, crushing the innocent in their homes. For half that century, the United States has been seen, by some people, as keeping the destruction rolling without getting too much in the way of it—has been seen, by some people, to lurk behind it. And those people hate us. The acts of terror against this country—the hijackings, the kidnappings, the bombings of our airplanes and barracks and embassies overseas, and now these mass atrocities on our own soil—tell us how much they hate us. They hate us as people hate a bad God, and they'll kill themselves to hurt us.

On Thursday, as I write in New York City, which I happened to be visiting at the time of the attack, the wind has shifted, and a sour electrical smoke travels up the canyons between the tall buildings. I have now seen two days of war in the biggest city in America. But imagine a succession of such days stretching into years—years in which explosions bring down all the great buildings, until the last one goes, or until bothering to bring the last one down is just a waste of ammunition. Imagine the people who have already seen years like these turn into decades—imagine their brief lifetimes made up only of days like these we've just seen in New York.

—Denis Johnson

For almost a year now, Jerusalem has been under siege. Not a day goes by without something terrible happening: a man stabbed in a quiet street, a bomb exploding from a watermelon, a booby-trapped car. Just weeks ago, a suicide bomber blew himself up in the center of town, injuring dozens of innocent people. Shrewd enemies, hidden from sight, are fighting in this city of stone.

Every day, I go to Ticho, my coffee shop, which is in a garden in an old house in the heart of the city. Despite the threat of danger, everyone seems to go out. Often, it seems as if life is able to continue because of the shared illusion that "this won't happen to me." At Ticho, I read a newspaper or a book, or work on a manuscript. In the past, people who recognized me didn't
interfere with my privacy. But recently they have stopped to inquire after my health and to ask my opinion of the stressful situation.

I am a writer, not a prophet or a political analyst. Like everyone else, I am groping in this darkness. From a writer, people expect a wise word or a joke. But what can one say when what is happening blunts the few thoughts that one has? I try to overcome the uncertainty by working every day. I am in the middle of a novel, progressing sluggishly, writing and erasing. It seems that the daily disturbances are stronger than internal motivation. It is hard to be with oneself when everything around is burning.

I used to feel that those of us who had suffered in the Holocaust were immune to fear. I was wrong. We are more sensitive to danger. We can smell it. A few days ago, a Holocaust survivor came over to my table and enumerated the dangers ahead of us. During the war, he had been in three death camps. He was a master of dangers. There wasn't a danger that he didn't know in the most minute detail.

The daily disasters evoke images of the Holocaust. Fifty-six years have passed, and the images don't go away. Last night, a man approached me and said that he reads all my books with great diligence. Like me, he was an orphaned child during the war, roaming the forests and taking refuge with farmers. He, too, arrived in Israel. He is an engineer, and he is worried about Jewish destiny. Why do the Jews arouse such hatred? he asked. We had naïvely thought that all the anger and hatred toward us would disappear once we had our own state. I didn't know what to say. I have never dealt in abstract questions—I try to see the world in pictures. And so I kept quiet while he, dismayed, also kept quiet.

After the attack on America, I stayed up all night watching television. It had been a long time since I'd felt such identification with events that were happening so far away. The next day, when I arrived at Ticho, it occurred to me that all of us here were feeling this blow in our flesh. In modern Jewish mythology, America is the father figure who saved many Jews from the cruel Bolsheviks and Nazis by granting us a home. Now the loving father is united with his sons in a Jerusalem coffee shop, in grief over the evil that refuses to disappear from the world.

—Aharon Appelfeld

(Translated, from the Hebrew, by Dina Fein.)

The disconnect between last Tuesday's monstrous dose of reality and the self-righteous drivel and outright deceptions being peddled by public figures and TV commentators is startling, depressing. The voices licensed to follow the event seem to have joined together in a campaign to infantilize the public. Where is the acknowledgment that this was not a "cowardly" attack on "civilization" or "liberty" or "humanity" or "the free world" but an attack on the world's self-proclaimed superpower, undertaken as a consequence of specific American alliances and actions? How many citizens are aware of the ongoing American bombing of Iraq? And if the word "cowardly" is to be used, it might be more aptly applied to those who kill from beyond the range of retaliation, high in the sky, than to those willing to die themselves in order to kill others. In the matter of courage (a morally neutral virtue): whatever may be said of the perpetrators of Tuesday's slaughter, they were not cowards.
Our leaders are bent on convincing us that everything is O.K. America is not afraid. Our spirit is unbroken, although this was a day that will live in infamy and America is now at war. But everything is not O.K. And this was not Pearl Harbor. We have a robotic President who assures us that America still stands tall. A wide spectrum of public figures, in and out of office, who are strongly opposed to the policies being pursued abroad by this Administration apparently feel free to say nothing more than that they stand united behind President Bush. A lot of thinking needs to be done, and perhaps is being done in Washington and elsewhere, about the ineptitude of American intelligence and counter-intelligence, about options available to American foreign policy, particularly in the Middle East, and about what constitutes a smart program of military defense. But the public is not being asked to bear much of the burden of reality. The unanimously applauded, self-congratulatory bromides of a Soviet Party Congress seemed contemptible. The unanimity of the sanctimonious, reality-concealing rhetoric spouted by American officials and media commentators in recent days seems, well, unworthy of a mature democracy.

Those in public office have let us know that they consider their task to be a manipulative one: confidence-building and grief management. Politics, the politics of a democracy—which entails disagreement, which promotes candor—has been replaced by psychotherapy. Let's by all means grieve together. But let's not be stupid together. A few shreds of historical awareness might help us understand what has just happened, and what may continue to happen. "Our country is strong," we are told again and again. I for one don't find this entirely consoling. Who doubts that America is strong? But that's not all America has to be.

—Susan Sontag

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The trouble with America

The year may have changed history, but some things haven't budged an inch. Osama El-Ghazali Harb wonders why, even when it asks the right questions, the US listens to the wrong answers

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In a matter of minutes, 2001 will be assigned to history, gone forever, but indelibly etched in human memory. This is a year whose events have already staked a claim to eternity. In the 20th century, the defeat of Nazi Germany, Hiroshima, the collapse of the Soviet Union are the only events that come close.

On 11 September, the United States, unchallenged leader of the international order, sole superpower of our times, received the worst blow it had ever suffered, Pearl Harbor aside. The culprit was unknown, the evidence shaky, the reaction
quick. A hastily assembled international coalition went out to fight a shady outfit. The "war on terror," at least in this first phase, went smoothly. The Taliban were pulverised, Al-Qa'eda was dismantled, and Bin Laden went missing. Many, however, wonder: What next, in this open-ended battle?

The future of the war depends on one question: have the Americans learned anything from 11 September? The hurried, compulsive reaction to the attacks on the Twin Towers and the Pentagon was somehow understandable. Americans wanted to hear nothing but words of comfort and condemnation. They wanted everyone on board their battleship, double quick and no questions asked.

But now, four months later, it is time for questions. It is time for the Americans to examine what happened, and to understand why. It is not enough to focus on the military campaign against terror, on security and the financial means of fighting this evil and stifling the governments and forces accused of supporting it.

The shocking thing about 11 September is that the attacks blew the lid on a bottomless well of hatred. Precise planning, disregard for human life, the choice of target: these aspects left the world speechless. Who are they, and why do they hate us? ordinary Americans asked. The official answer was as rapid and assertive as it was misleading and rash: the Arabs and Muslims did it. We're going to get them.

But why did it happen? Two competing answers emerged amidst a flurry of lobbying, finger-pointing, and arm-twisting. One blames the pro-Israeli bias of US policy in the Middle East. The other claims that Arab and Muslim societies are naturally prone to "terror." Needless to say, the Israelis and the pro-Israeli lobby adhered to the latter view.

According to the pro-Israeli view, "terror" results from fanaticism and the Muslim rejection of anything non-Muslim. These inborn traits, in turn, are the products of Muslim culture and insulated Muslim regimes. Fanaticism explains why Muslim people hate the United States and are aghast at the "desecration" of the holy sites in the Arabian peninsula. Terror, according to the same view, results from the lack of democracy in Arab and Muslim regimes, and the unequal distribution of wealth in Arab and Muslim societies. Vague expressions -- "conflict of civilisations" and "globalisation" -- were thrown into the pot for good measure.

Former Israeli Prime Minister Binyamin Netanyahu, an outspoken proponent of this view, hastened to tell Americans: "The Arabs and Muslims do not hate you because you support Israel. They hate Israel because it is an extension of you and your culture." The clear aim of the Israeli right wing and the Israeli lobby in the US was to use 11 September as an excuse to drag the United States even closer to Israel. The common argument was: "We are both up against Arab and Muslim terror. You Americans must now understand what we poor Israelis have been going through. You must make up your mind and stand with us against Arab and Muslim terror -- especially its most virulent (Palestinian) form." Israeli Prime Minister Sharon was fairly blunt. Immediately after 11 September, he called...
Yasser Arafat Israel's Bin Laden and cancelled a scheduled meeting between
Arafat and Shimon Peres. This is the tune Israel and its US lobby have been
humming since 11 September.

In Asia or Europe, the US or the Middle East, terrorism can be traced to religious
and ideological fanaticism, tyranny, and social and economic woes. But the
Americans should also realise that the attacks of 11 September were closely
related to half a century of US bias toward Israel, a bias that runs counter not only
to the will of the international community as a whole, but also to America's
cherished principles of freedom and self-determination.

US policy in the Middle East is destined to cause hatred, bitterness and despair
among Arabs and Muslims, regimes and citizens alike. The political and
economic elites, indeed, have shown considerable restraint in responding to US
policy in the Middle East, and in trying to understand the complexity and
intricacies of US decision-making. The common people were less fussy. For
them, this policy was nothing but relentless abuse. To ordinary Arabs and
Muslims, the fancy aid packages, the sugar-coated words from US officials meant
nothing.

More puzzling is that the United States has failed to grasp such a simple matter.
How could the mighty intelligence services, the opinion pollsters and the lavishly
funded think tanks miss the point so determinedly? To this day, influential
American columnists pontificate with amazing conceit about the emergence of
terror and how it came to target the United States, without mentioning any of the
obvious facts. The result is disturbing. In a recent poll conducted jointly by the
International Herald Tribune and a Washington-based centre, less than one out of
five Americans believes that US foreign policy was responsible for the 11
September events. Worldwide, the figure is three out of five.

Arabs and Muslims, as well as the European nations, have been warning the
United States that its Middle East policy is risky. President Mubarak, for one, told
the Americans that half the causes of terror are linked to the Arab-Israeli conflict.
Yet no one thinks to apply the analysis so expertly expounded by US and Israeli
columnists to Israel itself. Is the creation of a state based on religion in the middle
of the Arab world not a credible motive for the revival of fundamentalism? Have
tyrannical regimes in the region, Saddam's for example, not used the Palestinian
issue to boost their own legitimacy? Even the undemocratic regimes that prevail
so widely in the Arab world base their political credibility on the Arab-Israeli
conflict. In more prosaic terms, are the region's economic woes not caused, at
least in part, by the pressure of Israel's military might?

Israel's threatening presence and belligerence toward the Palestinians is the main
cause of terror in the region. Terror may have other underlying causes, but the
US's abiding bias toward Israel provided the main motive for the 11 September
attacks. The Americans have vented their wrath on Afghanistan, but the hijackers
were Arabs for the most part; and the Arabs have every reason to be outraged by
the situation in Palestine. The Americans may now be seeking other victims, but
they would do better to focus on treating the causes of the dilemma: namely, finding a just and urgent solution to the Palestinian problem.

Egyptians are entitled to speak assertively on that matter. We signed a peace agreement with Israel over 20 years ago. We reiterate our commitment to peace on a daily basis. We had been fighting terror for far longer than the United States. And we are aware that further terror attacks, even against the United States, will hurt us too, exactly as 11 September did. Unfortunately, we see no sign that the United States has learned anything from the cataclysm that befell it last autumn. Its tragically misguided veto-wielding at the UN Security Council is a case in point. If the death of over 3,000 Americans and the destruction of major symbols of American civilisation is not enough to make the US administration see the trouble with its policy, what is?

**Introduction to How Did This Happen: Terrorism and the New War**

James F. Hoge, Jr., and Gideon Rose

http://www.publicaffairsbooks.com/books/how-sum.html

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With the Cold War over and the economy booming, the United States relaxed during the 1990s, letting go the tension it had sustained for decades. All that changed on September 11, 2001. Suddenly the world rushed in, striking brutally at symbols of the very wealth and power that had underwritten the public’s geopolitical nap. The nation awoke that morning to find itself at war. But it was a strange kind of war, one without front lines or massed troops, fought in the shadows against an elusive enemy, without a clear sense of where it would lead or how it would end. When the attacks against the World Trade Center and the Pentagon were followed by a spate of letters bearing anthrax bacteria, shock and anger turned to panic. Citizens debated the merits of different gas masks, and politicians considered overriding pharmaceutical patents in order to produce massive quantities of antibiotic drugs that experts agreed were inappropriate for all but a few potential victims and would be necessary only for a vastly larger and more systematic attack.

Neither complacency nor hysteria, obviously, are good ways of approaching American national security. Measured determination is more appropriate, grounded in facts and sound judgments about the nature of the challenges facing the country and the alternative responses available. This book is designed to offer such facts and such judgments, to provide the basis for informed discussion of what has happened and where to go from here. The authors of the chapters are leading experts in their respective fields, and many of them issued warnings about lurking dangers or glaring vulnerabilities long before the current crisis. Now, belatedly, we know to listen.

The first question the book addresses is posed by its title: How did this happen? The short answer is because some very determined people wanted to make it happen and were able to
outwit the defenses erected against them. Causation is a complex issue, however. Airplanes crashed into the World Trade Center and the Pentagon because hijackers had boarded them intent on committing an act of radical evil. Yet, much earlier, the terrorists themselves had become guided missiles, driven by the training and support they had received, by a perverse interpretation of one of the world’s great religions, and by a hatred for the United States and all that it stood for. They were able to carry out their mission, furthermore, only because they managed to evade the searching eyes of American intelligence agencies and slip through a porous domestic security system.

During the final years of the twentieth century, the number of terrorist attacks worldwide declined, but the number of casualties per attack rose. Experts felt the latter trend was ominous. They generally agreed that the risk of a catastrophic strike was still low, but worried that a new kind of terrorist driven by fanaticism and hatred rather than limited political objectives might try to cause true mass destruction. They were right to worry.

One man in particular epitomized the changing face of the threat. Osama bin Laden, son of a Saudi construction magnate and supporter of the Afghan mujahideen in their struggle against Soviet occupation, developed a vast terrorist network and organized a series of deadly attacks on U.S. installations around the world. He sought to oust Americans from the Middle East, overthrow so-called moderate Arab governments, and create a unified Muslim nation based on a puritanically oppressive theology.

Bin Laden saw the stationing of U.S. troops in Saudi Arabia, the 1991 war against Iraq, and American support of Israel as just the latest episodes in a long history of Western humiliations of the Muslim world. Media coverage of Palestinians hurt or killed during clashes with Israelis, meanwhile, fanned the rage of his followers and of Arabs and Muslims more generally--many of whom found bin Ladenís radicalism appealing as a response to the poverty, frustration, and repression of their daily lives.

Bin Ladenís attacks have been planned carefully and financed through an extensive network of funding sources and secure economic pathways. The success of the most recent strike, however, also depended on the vulnerabilities of an open and ill-prepared society. Intelligence services cannot foil all terrorist plots, and developing appropriate benchmarks against which to judge those services' performance is difficult. Still, the September 11 attacks required extensive preparations in the United States and elsewhere, and fragments of information scattered here and abroad might have rung alarm bells had the dots been connected. Diminished human intelligence resources, a scarcity of regional experts, and poor coordination among information-gathering agencies helped keep the picture from being pieced together. In the execution of the operation itself, meanwhile, the terrorists boldly exploited the loopholes in the U.S. immigration and commercial aviation security systems, which were designed less to guarantee protection than to speed people and planes through as fast as possible.

Although they succeeded in bringing down the twin towers, the terrorists will not manage to provoke the "clash of civilizations" that their leader desires, nor will they spur drastic changes in the U.S. presence in the Middle East. But they have changed the world in other ways, etching the divide between the twentieth and twenty-first centuries far more sharply than the millennium celebrations ever did. Three challenges in particular now loom large: how to fight back against
the people responsible, how to reduce our vulnerability to future attacks, and how to engage the world so as to lower the number of future attackers and those who might support them.

America is now at war. It accepts that the struggle will be lengthy, will involve casualties, and may have no neat or clear end. The initial targets are in Afghanistan, but Washington has vowed to pursue terrorists elsewhere as well. Disparate and uneasy states have been corralled into playing supporting roles in the coalition, but how many will stay on stage as the action proceeds remains to be seen. Some of the more tentative backers are states that have themselves been accused of supporting terrorists.

As the conflict has reshaped diplomatic relations, so has it disrupted the debate about the transformation of the U.S. armed forces to meet the challenges of the post-Cold War world. That debate had pitted believers in new threats and new responses against the entrenched supporters of the status quo, and had taken place within what seemed to be a relatively narrow budgetary constraint. After September 11 the funds will be there, but the question of what to spend them on remains open. The Bush administration’s arguments about new and unconventional threats have been validated, but its early responses to those threats--notably an overemphasis on missile defense and an aversion to messy foreign interventions--have not.

Larger budgets remove some of the pressure to make choices between new force structures and expensive Cold War weapons systems. For the immediate future, there is money for both. Still, there will be debate about the kinds of adaptations that will be necessary if the war on terrorism becomes a central task of American foreign policy in the years ahead and if the armed forces are expected to help wage it. However the military is reconfigured, trying to prevent and respond to the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction will be among its top priorities.

At home, the open, secure life Americans took for granted is under stress. Fear is palpable--of bombings, hijackings, and biological or chemical attacks. Some curtailment of civil liberties is to be expected, along with the inconvenience of tightened security and the cost of making America safe in a shrunken world. The faltering economy now worries a public that had gotten used to lasting prosperity. Washington is offering confidence-building talk and fiscal-stimulus muscle, including a $15 billion bailout of the airlines. But the pressures of economic slowdown and enlarged public expenditures are canceling out yesterday’s budget surpluses. If no quick upturn emerges, deficits loom.

In the realm of homeland security, the hijackings have provoked a scramble to improve protection of airplanes, airports, nuclear power plants, and other vulnerable facilities. For their part, the anthrax incidents have prompted an urgent re-evaluation of the public health system’s readiness to counter future biological attacks. Other sectors cry out for similar attention. The exponential growth in transnational commerce has left American borders and ports underguarded and ill equipped to police increased flows of goods and people. Private aviation remains far less regulated than its commercial counterpart. Critical infrastructure in telecommunications and other areas remains vulnerable to mass disruption. None of these challenges is yet receiving the attention it deserves. Nor is it clear that the new director of the Office of Homeland Security, Tom Ridge, will have the authority to effectively coordinate the efforts of disparate government bureaucracies and congressional committees.
The attacks of September 11, finally, have driven home the need for the cooperation and support of partners abroad in achieving crucial American goals. Recent opinion polls show a sharp increase in public support for engagement. At the government level, the Bush administration has moved swiftly to reduce frictions between the West and its former Cold War adversaries, Russia and China, in order to address new common threats. Globalized scourges such as terrorism, drugs, and organized crime cannot be effectively countered by one nation, no matter how powerful. The same can be said of transnational problems such as infectious diseases and global warming. Even nation-building is being dusted off as a requirement in some instances. President George W. Bush’s call for the United Nations to lead such an effort in Afghanistan once the military campaign is over stands in stark contrast to the abandonment of that country after the Soviet occupation was repulsed in the 1990s.

The time may have come, as well, for the United States to reconsider whether the close relations it maintains with repressive authoritarian regimes to assure regional stability in the short term truly serve its interests in the long term. In the Arab world in particular, populations that are experiencing explosive growth and high levels of unemployment are effectively being abandoned by inefficient, corrupt, and repressive regimes. Seeing little alternative, many answer the call of radical Islamist movements. For its own safety and stability, accordingly, the United States should consider pressing for the gradual opening of political and economic spaces to allow the people of this region to partake of the fruits of modernity and not just its toxins.

As we mourn the dead, we must also absorb the lessons, some of which are grim. Additional terrorist attacks on America are likely. Chemical and biological weapons may be used. September 11, an outrage and a tragedy for us, is an inspiration for terrorists. Only preparedness, determination, and, ultimately, self-confidence can offset the forebodings. The moral that Winston Churchill chose for his towering history of a previous global conflict is as apt now as it was then:

In War: Resolution.
In Defeat: Defiance.
In Victory: Magnanimity.
In Peace: Goodwill.

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