A Great Wound

We have taken a great wound, we Americans, and our first task is to rescue survivors if that is still possible, to grieve and to remain alert until we better understand what happened to us. The time will come soon enough to sort out the causes, who delivered this vicious attack and how we hold them accountable, then to assign official blame at home, if the facts require it. We should also begin deeper arguments about the political meanings, the failures in our own leadership and the role our government has chosen to play in the world. But right now, our minds are swimming in the same ghastly images. Dazed men and women, covered with dust, streaming north on foot from lower Manhattan. A TV videotape replaying the fiendish plot in which commercial airliners are turned into suicide bombs. The smoldering ruins at the Pentagon. The lost skyline in Manhattan. The bolt of fear: airliners are turned into suicide bombs. The smoldering ruins at the Pentagon. The lost skyline in Manhattan. The bolt of fear: airliners are turned into suicide bombs. The smoldering ruins at the Pentagon.

It may seem trite to say so, but the calamity does test our character. If we are shrewd about ourselves and truly brave, citizens will not yield to hysteria—or accept draconian new laws that undermine civil liberties—but will force these difficult questions into the political debate.
A Hole in the World

On Tuesday morning, a piece was torn out of our world. A patch of blue sky that should not have been there opened up in the New York skyline. In my neighborhood—I live eight blocks from the World Trade Center—the heavens were raining human beings. Our city was changed forever. Our country was changed forever. Our world was changed forever.

It will take months merely to know what happened, far longer to feel so much grief, longer still to understand its meaning. It’s already clear, however, that one aspect of the catastrophe is of supreme importance for the future: the danger of the use of weapons of mass destruction, and especially the use of nuclear weapons. This danger includes their use by a terrorist group but is by no means restricted to it. It is part of a larger danger that has been among the most part ignored since the end of the cold war.

Among the small number who have been concerned with nuclear arms in recent years—they have probably much all known one another by their first names—it was commonly heard that the world would not return its attention to this subject until a nuclear weapon was again set off somewhere in the world. Then, the tiny club said to itself, the world would awaken to its danger. Many of the ingredients of the catastrophe were obvious. The repeated suicide-homicides of the bombers in Israel made it obvious that there were people so possessed by their cause that, in an excitation of hatred, they would do anything in its name. Many reports—most recently an article in the New York Times on the very morning of the attack—reminded the public that the world was awash in nuclear materials and the wherewithal for other weapons of mass destruction. Russia is bursting at the seams with these materials. The suicide bombers and the market in nuclear materials was that two-plus-two that points toward the proverbial inevitable four. But history is a trickster. The fates came up with a horror that was unforeseen. No one had identified the civilian airliner as a weapon of mass destruction, but it occurred to the diabolical imagination of those who conceived Tuesday’s attack that it could be one. The invention illumined the nature of terrorism in modern times. These terrorists carried no bombs—only knives, if initial reports are to be believed. In short, they turned the tremendous forces inherent in modern technical society—in this case, Boeing 767s brimming with jet fuel—against itself.

So it is also with the more commonly recognized weapons of mass destruction. Their materials can be built the hard way, from scratch, as Iraq came within an ace of doing until stopped by the Gulf War and as Pakistan and India have done, or they can be diverted from Russia, or for that matter American or English or French or Chinese, stockpiles. In the one case, it is nuclear know-how that is turned against its inventors, in the other it is their hardware. Either way, it is “blowback”—the use of a technical capacity against its creator—and, as such, represents the pronounced suicidal tendencies of modern society.

This suicidal bent—nicely captured in the name of the still current nuclear policy “mutual assured destruction”—of course exists in forms even more devastating than possible terrorist attacks. India and Pakistan, which both possess nuclear weapons...
and have recently engaged in one of their many hot wars, are the likeliest candidates. Most important—and most forgotten—are the some 30,000 nuclear weapons that remain in the arsenals of Russia and the United States. The Bush Administration has announced its intention of breaking out of the antiballistic missile treaty of 1972, which bans antiballistic defenses, and the Russians have answered that if this treaty is abandoned the whole framework of nuclear arms control built up over thirty years may collapse. There is no quarrel between the United States and Russia that suggests a nuclear exchange between them, but accidents are another matter, and, as Tuesday’s attack has shown, the mood and even the structure of the international order can change overnight.

What should be done? Should the terrorists who carried out Tuesday’s attacks be brought to justice and punished, as the President wants to do? Of course. Who should be punished if not people who would hurl a cargo of innocent human beings against a fixed target of other innocent human beings? (When weighing the efficiency—as distinct from the satisfaction—of punishment, however, it is well to remember that the immediate attackers have administered the supposed supreme punishment of death to themselves.) Should further steps be taken to protect the country and the world from terrorism, including nuclear terrorism? They should. And yet even as we do these things, we must hold, as if to life itself, to a fundamental truth that has been known to all thoughtful people since the destruction of Hiroshima: *There is no technical solution to the vulnerability of modern populations to weapons of mass destruction.* After the attack, Secretary of Defense Rumsfeld placed US forces on the highest state of alert and ordered destroyers and aircraft carriers to take up positions up and down the coasts of the United States. But none of these measures can repeal the vulnerability of modern society to its own inventions, revealed by that heart-breaking gap in the New York skyline. This, obviously, holds equally true for that other Maginot line, the proposed system of national missile defense. Thirty billion dollars is being spent on intelligence annually. We can assume that some portion of that was devoted to protecting the World Trade Center after it was first bombed in 1993. There may have been mistakes—maybe we’ll find out—but the truth is that no one on earth can demonstrate that the expenditure of even ten times that amount can prevent a terrorist attack on the United States or any other country. The combination of the extraordinary power of modern technology, the universal and instantaneous spread of information in the information age and the mobility inherent in a globalized economy prevents it.

Man, however, is not merely a technical animal. Aristotle pointed out that we are also a political animal, and it is to politics that we must return for the solutions that hold promise. That means returning to the treaties that the United States has recently been discarding like so much old newspaper—the one dealing, for example, with an International Criminal Court (useful for tracking down terrorists and bringing them to justice), with global warming and, above all, of course, with nuclear arms and the other weapons of mass destruction, biological and chemical. The United States and seven other countries now rely for their national security on the retaliatory execution of destruction a millionfold greater than the Tuesday attacks. The exit from this folly, by which we endanger ourselves as much as others, must be found. Rediscovering ourselves as political animals also means understanding the sources of the hatred that the United States has incurred in a decade of neglect and, worse, neglect of international affairs—a task that is highly unwelcome to many in current circumstances but nevertheless is indispensable to the future safety of the United States and the world.

It would be disrespectful of the dead to in any way minimize the catastrophe that has overtaken New York. Yet at the same

---

**ON THE WEB**

The *Nation* website (www.thenation.com) is being updated regularly with news and comment on the aftermath of the attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon. Also available are relevant articles from earlier years, including Robert Fisk’s interview with Osama bin Laden and a reflection on terrorism and justice by Aryeh Neier.

***

The UN’s World Conference Against Racism in Durban ended with a compromise declaration that managed to avoid “wild calls such as reparations, never mind a fundamental rethink of contemporary capitalism,” according to South African activists Dennis Brutus, a poet, and Ben Cashdan, a filmmaker. In a *Nation* web report, they ask, “Could it be that the whole multimillion-dollar event, including the NGO Forum, was a charade, designed to give the impression that the more enlightened elements of global civil society have bought into the empty promises of globalization?” That, they say, was the prevailing view of the 20,000 poor people from around South Africa who came to Durban and mounted what Brutus and Cashdan report as “the largest political protest in South Africa since the demise of apartheid.”

Also on the web, Columbia law professor Eben Moglen describes the decision by the Justice Department not to pursue the breakup of Microsoft as hardly surprising, because the troubled computer hardware makers who were once Microsoft’s enemies have changed their tune. Only Bill Gates can save them, Moglen writes, “by releasing a new operating system even more bloated, slow and enormous than his current excrescences, thus requiring a general round of expensive and pointless consumer hardware upgrading.” In the end, however, predicts Moglen, computers running on free software will become the norm, leaving Microsoft “headed for the boneyard after all.”

Can we learn anything about the general antitrust policy of the Bush Administration from what happened in the Microsoft case? Only, says Moglen, “that when corporate America was divided on what to do with Microsoft, there was room to care about competition. When all corporate players agree—which is the moment when antitrust law should be most important—it has the least influence on this Administration.”
The Dark Smoke

In the immediate, before-it-sinks-in aftermath of the September 11 attack, one of the first catch-phrases to take hold—and be widely deployed by TV commentators, politicians and citizen e-mailers—was, “this changes everything.” As the media cliché goes, time will tell how much of American life will be altered by the assault. Clearly, politics as we know it will not be the same in the weeks and months, and perhaps years, ahead. As Tim Russert observed, while hellish dust clouds billowed, “Suddenly the Social Security lockbox seems so trivial.”

The hideous event will naturally dominate the national conversation. There will be little media space for other matters. The budget battle, the disappeared surplus, the Bush tax cuts, campaign finance reform, patients’ bill of rights, trade tussles, global warming—Washington’s agenda will be overwhelmed by the attack, to the President’s distinct advantage. And the terms of political discussion will dramatically shift—again, mostly to George W. Bush’s advantage. Two hours after the first explosion, Representative Curt Weldon, a Republican from Pennsylvania, declared, “The number-one responsibility” of the government is not education or healthcare but the “security of the American people.” And national security hawks quickly began to shape the debate to come. The issue for them is not what causes such unimaginable actions. On Day One did you hear anyone—in an attempt to understand, not justify, the horror—ask, Why would someone want to commit this evil act? Or note that in this globalized age, US policy—its actions and inactions overseas (justified or not)—can easily lead to consequences at home? No, the national security cadre, out in force, mainly raised questions of how best to bolster the military and intelligence establishment.

Before rescue efforts were up and running, the friends of that establishment were mounting an offensive. Former Secretary of State James Baker blamed the Church Committee, the Senate panel that investigated CIA misdeeds in the 1970s, for what happened: “We went on a real witch hunt with our CIA…the Church Committee. We unilaterally disarmed in terms of intelligence.” Newt Gingrich assailed rules on intelligence gathering that limit CIA interaction with known terrorists, and he asserted that the intelligence budget (about $30 billion) was “too small.” Others decried the prohibition on government-sponsored assassination. Dan Quayle urged that the President be granted “extraordinary powers internationally and domestically” to deal with terrorists. (Asked what he had in mind, Quayle replied, “I’m not going to get too specific.”) John McCain, Orrin Hatch and Bob Graham—the last of whom chairs the Senate Intelligence Committee—gripped that the United States has concentrated too much on technical intelligence (spy satellites and high-tech eavesdropping) and has been negligent in the ways of “human intelligence”—humint, in the parlance of spies. More money would have to be poured into humint, they and others remarked. Hatch also complained that “we’ve allowed our military to deteriorate” and that the “Russians have a better tactical fighter than we do.” Former Secretary of State Lawrence Eagleburger used the moment to claim that “the defense budget is woefully underdone.”

Some hawks and others did criticize US intelligence for failing to detect the plot. Kenneth Katzman, a terrorism expert at the Congressional Research Service, said, “How nothing could have been picked up is beyond me—way beyond me. There’s a major, major intelligence failure, specially since the [previous] Trade Center bombing produced such an investigation of the networks and so much monitoring.” No doubt, there will be official inquiries. But the knee-jerk goal for most of the inquirers will be additional funds for the intelligence community and the Pentagon. The spies will defend their actions and plead, if only our hands were not tied, if only we had more money.

Given the horrors of the attack, these pleas will probably have resonance. But the operating assumptions at work deserve close assessment. Human intelligence against closed societies and secret outfits has long been a difficult, almost impossible, endeavor. Hurling money at it is likely no solution. During the Vietnam War, when resources were unlimited, the CIA failed spectacularly at humint, essentially never penetrating the inner sanctums of the enemy. Its record of infiltrating the Soviet government was unimpressive (and the same goes for China, Cuba and other targets). As for lifting existing restrictions, imagine the dilemmas posed if the CIA actually managed to recruit and pay murderous members of terrorist groups. What would the reaction be, if one of the September 11 conspirators turns out to have had a US intelligence connection?

Do not be surprised if the national security establishment even tries to accelerate its push for Star Wars II before the debris is cleared. The event tragically demonstrated the limits of a national missile defense system. (And consider how much worse the day would have been had the evildoers smuggled a pound of uranium onto any of the hijacked flights.) But the loudest theme in American politics—perhaps the only audible theme—in the time ahead will be the quest for security. With those drums beating, the fans of national missile defense will continue to argue that this remains a dangerous world full of suicidal maniacs wishing the United States harm and that all steps must be taken as fast as possible. Moreover, how many politicians will now question Bush’s budget-busting request to raise Pentagon spending by 10 percent? Speaking about Bush, Senator Hillary Clinton said, “We will support him in whatever steps he deems necessary.” Whatever steps?

As the nation absorbed the shock, leaders and media observers repeated the nostrum that the best way for the country to respond to such a foul crime is to return to normal and signal that the nation’s spirit and resolve cannot be undermined. In that
vein, one challenge is to not allow the attack to distort the country’s political discourse. Unfortunately, extremism begets extremism, and the dark smoke of a dark day will not be easily blown away.

**Terror in America**

S o it has come to this. The entire modern history of the Middle East—the collapse of the Ottoman Empire, the Balfour declaration, Lawrence of Arabia’s lies, the Arab revolt, the foundation of the state of Israel, four Arab-Israeli wars and the thirty-four years of Israel’s brutal occupation of Arab land—all erased within hours as those who claim to represent a crushed, humiliated population struck back with the wickedness and awesome cruelty of a doomed people. Is it fair—is it moral—to write this so soon, without proof, when the last act of barbarism, in Oklahoma, turned out to be the work of home-grown Americans? I fear it is. America is at war and, unless I am mistaken, many thousands more are now scheduled to die in the Middle East, perhaps in America too. Some of us warned of “the explosion to come.” But we never dreamt this nightmare.

And yes, Osama bin Laden comes to mind—his money, his theology, his frightening dedication to destroying American power. I have sat in front of bin Laden as he described how his men helped to destroy the Russian Army in Afghanistan and thus the Soviet Union [see Fisk, September 21, 1998]. Their boundless confidence allowed them to declare war on America. But this is not really the war of democracy versus terror that the world will be asked to believe in the coming days. It is also about US missiles smashing into Palestinian homes and US helicopters firing missiles into a Lebanese ambulance in 1996 and American shells crashing into a village called Qana and about a Lebanese militia—paid and uniformed by America’s Israeli ally—hacking and raping and murdering their way through refugee camps.

No, there is no doubting the utter, indescribable evil of what has happened in the United States. That Palestinians could celebrate the massacre of thousands of innocent people is not only a symbol of their despair but of their political immaturity, of their failure to grasp what they had always been accusing their Israeli enemies of doing: acting disproportionately. All the years of rhetoric, all the promises to strike at the heart of America, to cut off the head of “the American snake” we took for empty threats. How could a backward, conservative, undemocratic and corrupt group of regimes and small, violent organizations fulfill such preposterous promises? Now we know.

And in the hours that followed the September 11 annihilation, I began to remember those other extraordinary assaults upon the United States and its allies, miniature now by comparison with yesterday’s casualties. Did not the suicide bombers who killed 239 American servicemen and 58 French paratroopers in Beirut on October 23, 1983, time their attacks with unthinkable precision?

There were just seven seconds between the Marine bombing and the destruction of the French three miles away. Then there were the attacks on US bases in Saudi Arabia, and last year’s attempt—almost successful, it turned out—to sink the USS Cole in Aden. And then how easy was our failure to recognize the new weapon of the Middle East, which neither Americans nor any other Westerners could equal: the despair-driven, desperate suicide bomber.

And there will be, inevitably, and quite immorally, an attempt to obscure the historical wrongs and the injustices that lie behind the firestorms. We will be told about “mindless terrorism,” the “mindless” bit being essential if we are not to realize how hated America has become in the land of the birth of three great religions.

Ask an Arab how he responds to the thousands of innocent deaths, and he or she will respond as decent people should, that it is an unspeakable crime. But they will ask why we did not use such words about the sanctions that have destroyed the lives of perhaps half a million children in Iraq, why we did not rage about the 17,500 civilians killed in Israel’s 1982 invasion of Lebanon.

And those basic reasons why the Middle East caught fire last September—the Israeli occupation of Arab land, the dispossession of Palestinians, the bombardments and state-sponsored executions—all these must be obscured lest they provide the smallest fractional reason for the mass savagery on September 11.

No, Israel was not to blame—though we can be sure that Saddam Hussein and the other grotesque dictators will claim so—but the malign influence of history and our share in its burden must surely stand in the dark with the suicide bombers. Our broken promises, perhaps even our destruction of the Ottoman Empire, led inevitably to this tragedy. America has bankrolled Israel’s wars for so many years that it believed this would be cost-free. No longer so. But, of course, the United States will want to strike back against “world terror.” Indeed, who could ever point the finger at Americans now for using that pejorative and sometimes racist word “terrorism”?

Eight years ago, I helped make a television series that tried to explain why so many Muslims had come to hate the West. Now I remember some of those Muslims in that film, their families burnt by American-made bombs and weapons. They talked about how no one would help them but God. Theology versus technology, the suicide bomber against the nuclear power. Now we have learned what this means.

Robert Fisk is Middle East correspondent for the London Independent.

(Adapted from Fisk’s September 12 column for the Independent.)

**ALICE TRILLIN**

A lice Trillin, a good friend of The Nation, died on Tuesday, September 11. She was known to Nation readers primarily as the affectionate literary target of her husband, Calvin “Bud” Trillin, but anyone who knew Alice, or read her pristine prose (including her hilarious Nation review of Bud’s Alice Let’s Eat), or was familiar with her work for educational television, or was on the receiving end of her friendship will understand the sadness we feel.
Copyright of Nation is the property of Nation Company, Inc.. The copyright in an individual article may be maintained by the author in certain cases. Content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.