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**

So 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 disproportionally. 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.)

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**ALICE TRILLIN**

Alice 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.