

# **God's Democracy**

## American Religion after September 11

Emilio Gentile

Jennifer Pudney and Suzanne D. Jaus, Translators

Religion, Politics, and Public Life

Under the auspices of the Leonard E. Greenberg Center for the Study of  
Religion in Public Life, Trinity College, Hartford, CT

Mark Silk, Series Editor

---

**PRAEGER**

**Westport, Connecticut**  
**London**

# Contents

Series Foreword	vii
Preface	xi
Acknowledgments	xv
<b>Chapter 1 America Violated</b>	1
<b>Chapter 2 Where Was God?</b>	21
<b>Chapter 3 At the White House</b>	39
<b>Chapter 4 Moses of America</b>	59
<b>Chapter 5 Going to War, with God</b>	69
<b>Chapter 6 Sacred Imperial America</b>	83
<b>Chapter 7 The Great Awakening</b>	101
<b>Chapter 8 The Golden Calf</b>	119
<b>Chapter 9 A Political Religion, American Style?</b>	139
Notes	149
Bibliography	173
Index	181

# Preface

This book examines the consequences of the terrorist attack of September 11, 2001 on American religion, a civil religion based on the belief that the United States is a nation blessed by God, originating from a design of Divine Providence, with a mission to defend and spread “God’s democracy” throughout the world. I intend to use this expression to define the Americans’ concept of democracy, which has a religious matrix and is constantly inspired by religion, maintaining that freedom is a gift of God. Since the times of the first president, George Washington, all the United States presidents have ended their inaugural addresses by calling on God to bless America, and no president has failed to mention, at least once, his faith in Almighty God, in the divine origin of American democracy, and in the United States’ providential mission. The American president is not only the nation’s political leader, he is also the pontiff of its civil religion. Studying American religion helps to understand American politics, especially after September 11, even though this is not an easy task for European observers, who have to cope with various seemingly paradoxical situations, mainly due to the symbiosis between religion and politics.

The United States is a country of paradoxes. The most paradoxical American paradox may be the high level of religious fervor that distinguishes the people of the star-spangled republic from other peoples of the most industrialized and modernized countries in the contemporary world, while the Americans can boast their primacy for having confirmed and respected the lay principle of the separation between state and church. Since the year 2000, however, many Americans, both lay and religious, have feared that the “separating wall,” using Thomas Jefferson’s metaphor, between the state and church, may be seriously damaged by the attacks of a religious right. The latter found a political leader in President George W. Bush, elected in 2000 and reelected in 2004, who was determined to instill the values of a traditionalist, religious, conservative, and fundamentalist view in American society, culture, institutions, and home and foreign policies. In fact, as this book will show, the “separating wall” between state and church has never separated religion and politics, which have always lived in symbiosis in the United States, with the full approval of most of the population. Almost all Americans declare they are Christian, but the United States, which in the twentieth century became the greatest imperial power in human history, with the

richest economy and the strongest armed forces, has not carried out the Beatitudes preached by Jesus in his Sermon from the Mount. Furthermore, up to 1960, no Catholic person could be elected president. Up to 2000, no Jew had been proposed as candidate for the vice presidency. All the American presidents elected up to now have declared their faith in God, and in our times it seems impossible that an atheist may be elected as president of the United States, and predictably this situation will continue for a long time to come. The majority of Americans would now be ready to elect a Catholic, a Jew, a woman, and perhaps even a black or a gay to the highest office of the state, but would absolutely refuse to vote for someone who says he is an atheist, even if most Americans are convinced that it is not necessary to believe in God to be a good American or a morally decent person. This, too, is an American paradox.

Then the September 11 tragedy was added to these paradoxes. Just when America had become the only undisputed superpower of the planet, the nation which had won two world wars and the Cold War, it was attacked, terrorized, and humiliated in the heart of its territory, by 19 young fanatical Muslims. Armed with box cutters, they seized four American airplanes and, invoking the name of God, flew them in a suicide attack straight into the most important symbol of United States military power, the Pentagon, and into the Twin Towers of the World Trade Center, universal emblems of American civilization. Nowadays some suspect that what happened on September 11 in America was the fruit of a plot hatched at the summit of the Bush administration. This book does not deal with the events of September 11, nor with plots, but with how the Americans who believe in God reacted to the terrorist attack.

At the dawn of the twenty-first century the American nation suddenly found itself living in the age of empire and terror at the same time, discovering that it was vulnerable although protected by two oceans and the most powerful armed forces in the history of mankind, unrivalled in the world. However, the September 11 terrorist attack did not cause only a profound psychological trauma and political upheaval, it also affected the Americans' religious feeling, that is, their attitude towards God, the meaning and aim of existence, and their idea of good and evil. Millions of appalled Americans crowded the churches, synagogues, mosques, and temples, trying to relieve their sorrow and fear through prayer. Many wondered if God had abandoned America. Some fundamentalist preachers upheld that the terrorist attack was a sign that God no longer protected the Americans, punishing them for their sins. On the contrary, the president of the United States stated that America was a good nation, attacked by evil men who wanted to destroy God's democracy and set up an empire of evil. Bush declared "war on terror" to free the world of evil, appealing to God to bless Americans, once again called to fight to save mankind, as they did in the last century. The terrorists wanted to destroy America in the name of God, the American president began the war against the "axis of evil" maintaining that God was on America's side, and the American nation was fighting terrorism to follow the plans of Divine Providence. This, too, is a paradoxical situation.

The fusion between religion and nationalism is one of the distinctive features of God's democracy. The September 11 tragedy gave rise to an unexpected ferment in religious and patriotic feeling, just when many right- and left-wing American intellectuals were complaining about the nation's moral crisis, fearing for its unity. For over a decade civil religion in the United States seemed reduced to a halfhearted ritual. After September 11 it was suddenly rekindled, mainly due to President Bush, one of the most religious American presidents—as such, he is the protagonist of this book.

The main subject of the book is the attempt of the Republican presidency and the Religious Right to turn American civil religion into an American-style political religion, using the September 11 tragedy to arrogate the monopoly of defining good and evil to themselves, as well as the exclusive prerogative of defining the values and principles of “real Americans.” They fostered the revival of the myths of civil religion, from the myth of the “chosen people” to the myth of the “manifest destiny” of the nation to carry out a mission, following a traditionalist and fundamentalist view of religion and politics. It was a new experience of sacralizing politics, one strongly criticized and opposed by lay and religious circles, starting off a passionate debate on the nature, meaning, and function of civil religion in a democracy. Also those who criticized and opposed American religion in the age of empire and terror play a leading role in this book.

This work is therefore a natural follow-on of the book *Le religioni della politica: fra democrazie e totalitarismi*, published by Laterza in September 2001 (Emilio Gentile, *Politics as Religion*, translated by George Staunton [Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006]). The fact that *Politics as Religion* was published at the same time as the September 11 tragedy was pure coincidence, but it contributed to the birth of this book, the fruit of an intellectual need and personal emotion. I had been studying American religion for some time, that is, since I became aware of it not through books but through direct experience, during my first stays in the United States in 1974 and 1976. In the following years, when I stayed there either on holiday or to study or teach, it was important for me to examine American religion closely, as it was one of the first and most lasting experiences of sacralizing politics in a Western democracy. One of these stays ended on the morning of September 10, 2001, after I had taken part in a meeting on the historical work of George L. Mosse, organized by the Mosse Program at the University of Wisconsin, in Madison. I had intended to make a stop in New York on the eve of my return to Italy, but it was impossible. When I returned to Italy the following day, I saw the terrorist attack and its consequences on television. If I had stopped over in New York, my fate may have been as a witness, a victim, or a survivor of the terrorist attack. Indeed, for over a quarter of a century I have always gone up the Empire State Building on the evening I arrive, and on the following morning up one of the Twin Towers of the World Trade Center, to say hallo to the city. I love it because my maternal grandfather lived there for over 50 years in the 1900s. He was an immigrant who became an American citizen, son of an Italian-American immigrant who was the

forefather of American families of Italian origin now down to the third or fourth generation. During my childhood, New York and America were constantly present in my imagination, through memories, parcels, letters, postcards, photographs, and magazines, and they were more familiar to me, without my ever having been there, than Italy or Rome. Consequently, I have always felt an instinctive liking for the United States and Americans, which, over the years, turned into a need to know and understand them better.

I mention these personal details so the reader will know that this book is not only the fruit of intellectual curiosity, but is marked by my emotional involvement in the September 11 tragedy. Emotion certainly influenced the way I carried out this research, but I made a great effort to prevent my liking for America from influencing this attempt at a historical, critical, and rational analysis of the myths of American religion, as they were and are now, to better understand the America of today and of the near future. The reader will decide if this effort has been successful.

E. G.

# America Violated

## A Peaceful Dawn

On Tuesday, September 11, 2001, the day was fine and began with New York's usual frenzied activity. The Twin Towers of the World Trade Center on the southern coast of Manhattan Island stood out, shining white against a limpid blue sky, while the host of 50,000 people who worked there daily began to flock into their respective 110 floors. The towers contained 15 business floors, the offices of 285 companies, 9 chapels, and 2 restaurants. Every day about 70,000 people visited the two buildings which had dominated the city's panorama since 1973, proud symbols of America's business and economic power.

Also in the United States capital the day began with its usual tempo. The 23,000 employees of the Pentagon were already at work in the enormous, imperious building, built during the Second World War as the seat of the defense department of the greatest military power in history, as inaccessible as a fortress. It was the same scene at the White House, the United States president's residence. However, the head of the CIA (Central Intelligence Agency), the American counterespionage organization, was not to give his usual daily report to the president that morning, informing him of the latest news gathered all over the world by the CIA's information network. George W. Bush, ensconced in the White House just eight months before, was in Florida campaigning for his education policy.

The weather was fine everywhere on the eastern coast of the United States. Airliners took off regularly. American Airlines Flight 11 to Los Angeles left Boston at 7:59 A.M.; United Airlines Flight 175 took off at 8:14 A.M. for the same destination; also, American Airlines Flight 77 headed for Los Angeles after taking off from Washington at 8:20 A.M., while United Airlines Flight 93 left Newark for San Francisco at 8:42 A.M., half an hour late. There were 19 young

non-American Arabs among the passengers on board the four planes, all of them in the United States with temporary visas. Mohammed Atta, a 39-year-old Egyptian engineer who had graduated in Cairo and done a postgraduate course in Hamburg, was traveling on Flight AA11, in business class. Atta had been in the United States over a year; he had attended a flight school in Florida. On each of the other flights there was a young Arab who had learned to fly a commercial jet airplane at an American flight school. An uneventful trip was expected for everyone on the morning of September 11, in the first year of the third millennium.

The twenty-first century began as an “American century”: the United States had become the undisputed world superpower after the collapse of the Soviet empire and the end of the USSR, decreed by the Soviet leaders in December 1991. On October 23, 1999 the *Economist* wrote that the United States towered over the world like a colossus—it dominated business, trade, and communications, it had the strongest economy in the world, and its military strength was unrivalled.<sup>1</sup> At the end of 1999, the French secretary of state, Hubert Védrine, stated that the supremacy of the United States then embraced economics, finance, the armed forces, lifestyle, language, and mass-produced products, which flooded the world, consequently conditioning minds and fascinating even its enemies.<sup>2</sup>

At the beginning of the third millennium, the United States was an empire, the mightiest known in history—a “hyperpower” both attractive and frightening, present everywhere in the world with its flag, soldiers, economy, and culture. The dynamic and seductive, sophisticated and popular “American way of life” was emulated and hated, wielding its power to charm over all peoples and in every continent, capable of working its way into every culture and society, changing them and leaving the mark of its lifestyle. And those who hated America were fascinated, resorting to imitation to fight it.<sup>3</sup>

## The Empire of Democracy

The idea of empire is usually associated with a single power conquering territory and peoples, then subduing and exploiting them. America considers itself a democratic nation, founded on the principles of liberty, equality, and happiness as the inalienable rights of human beings, bestowed on all of them by the Creator at birth. That is why the Americans refuse to call their country an empire and indignantly reject the accusation that they are imperialist, that is, a people that conquers, subdues, and exploits other peoples. At the end of the nineteenth century, in the age of European imperialism, the United States imitated the colonial powers of the Old Continent and conquered new territories outside its own continent, after the war against Spain in 1898–1899. The United States thus acquired the Philippines, Hawaii, some of the Samoan Islands, Cuba, and Puerto Rico, but its colonialism was limited: Cuba became an independent republic as an American protectorate in 1899, the Philippines were set on their way to independence in 1935, achieving it definitively in 1946, and in 1959 Hawaii became the fiftieth state of the United States.



However, there is another idea of empire, associated with the expansionist policy of a power which exercises its hegemony without conquering territories, setting itself up as a superior model of civilization and political, social, and economic systems, which are then to be transplanted in other countries as a civilizing mission to benefit humanity. Nowadays there are some Americans who are more willing to call their power an empire in the second meaning of the term, a “benevolent empire,”<sup>4</sup> because the term fits in with the view they have of America’s role and destiny in the twenty-first century. This view dates back to the origins of the United States; its founders were convinced from its birth that it was a nation chosen by God to be a model for the world and to redeem mankind.<sup>5</sup> The founding fathers used the word “empire” to define the new republic’s authority and propensity to carry out a mission. Under the banner of this myth, the United States expanded across the continent during the nineteenth century, from the Atlantic to the Pacific Ocean, from the borders of British Canada to the Caribbean Sea.<sup>6</sup> Various interlinked reasons were given to justify the conquering of the continent—which was carried out through treaties, purchases, and wars, and by wiping out the American Indians—the need to guarantee security for the “sacred experiment” of democracy and make it invulnerable to the greed of despotic and corrupt Europe; the need to satisfy the hunger for land of a nation with a rapidly growing population; and the carrying out of a “manifest destiny,” that is, a civilizing mission entrusted by God to Americans.<sup>7</sup>

Religion accompanied and blessed the United States when it expanded across the continent, and continued to bless it when it crossed the oceans.<sup>8</sup> American missionaries preceded or followed traders and soldiers; the evangelizing spirit united with capitalist interests and geopolitical strategy. Urging for a crusade in the name of God, to make the world safe for democracy, inspired American intervention in the two world wars and during the Cold War.<sup>9</sup> For a long time men of religion in the United States rarely spoke out against these war operations, and then only halfheartedly. Only during the war in Vietnam did they protest more frequently.<sup>10</sup>

After the Second World War, the United States became a superpower in a state of “cold war” with the Soviet Union, the other superpower, competing for the military, political, economic, and cultural hegemony of the planet. The United States was then called an “empire without imperialists,”<sup>11</sup> because it refused to recognize its imperial role and continued to consider itself a beneficial power, uncontaminated by imperialist ambitions or the totalitarian aberrations of the godless communists. Nevertheless, the United States resembled an empire more and more during the half century of cold war, even though it was a democratic empire. In 1986 the historian Arthur M. Schlesinger Jr., who had been President John Kennedy’s adviser, wrote that nobody could doubt that an American empire existed. It was an “informal” empire, the historian explained, not colonial politically, but all the same abundantly equipped with imperial paraphernalia: armies, ships, bases, proconsuls, and local collaborators scattered everywhere over this unfortunate planet.<sup>12</sup>

At the end of the 1900s, it seemed that the “end of history” had arrived, that is, the universalization of Western liberal democracy as humanity’s final form of government, as the American expert in politics Francis Fukuyama stated in 1989.<sup>13</sup> However, four years later another American expert, Samuel P. Huntington, observed that the possibility of setting up a new world order, one founded on Western liberal democracy, was threatened by the danger of a clash of civilizations between different cultures and religions, which could spark off a global war.<sup>14</sup>

In the last decade of the twentieth century, America’s future seemed to depend solely on the choices it made. The last two United States presidents before the new millennium, Republican George H. W. Bush (1989–1993) and Democrat William J. Clinton (1993–2001), had nothing in common except the view of a world made in the image of God’s democracy. After the end of the Soviet Union, Bush aspired to a “new world order” founded on peace and harmony among nations. Clinton dreamed of a world of cooperating democracies. However, in a world where unfortunately there were still numerous regimes that denied freedom and human rights, both presidents had to decide on military interventions.<sup>15</sup> In February 1991 with the consent of the United Nations, Bush led a coalition of Western, Japanese, and Arab military forces in a war in the Persian Gulf to free Kuwait, occupied the year before by Saddam Hussein, the ambitious Iraqi dictator who aspired to supremacy in the Middle East. In four days the coalition forces drove the invader out of Kuwait and invaded Iraq, but they ended the war leaving the Iraqi tyrant in power. In the following 10 years he continued to challenge the United States and the United Nations with bellicose arrogance. Eight years later in 1999, backed by the Atlantic Alliance, Clinton ordered the U.S. Air Force to intervene with and bomb Serbia, forcing the dictator, Slobodan Milošević, to stop the ethnic bloodbath in Kosovo.

At the end of the twentieth century, the road to spreading and making it safe for God’s democracy throughout the world was still fraught with obstacles, but the undisputed power of the United States seemed capable of overcoming them.

### The Millennium Nightmare

At the beginning of the first century of the third millennium, the Americans were convinced that their military power excluded the possibility of being threatened again by a dangerous enemy, as the Soviet Union had been to them for half a century. The Americans celebrated the end of the Cold War, relieved and satisfied, hoping to be able to enjoy the profits of peace now that the expenditure for national security had been reduced with the end of the Soviet military threat.<sup>16</sup> In spite of the moaning and groaning of the millenarist prophets, both religious and lay, who continued to complain and deprecate the spiritual and moral decadence of American society and who predicted looming catastrophes, the Americans entered the new millennium fairly satisfied with being the richest and strongest nation in the world. They felt unconquerable and invulnerable, while new experts in international political strategy called “neoconservatives”—who

supported a Messianic realism that did not exclude using military force—planned the coming of a “new American century,” where spreading democracy would ensure the planet’s stability with a *pax americana*. The neoconservatives believed that the United States should no longer hold back from carrying out an imperial role, that is, averting the growth of any other power capable of threatening America’s world supremacy, even taking up arms if necessary. One of the main aims of their strategy was to prevent Saddam Hussein’s Iraq from becoming such a threat. The last two presidents of the United States in the twentieth century were urged to adopt this strategy for a “new American century,” but neither of the two paid any attention to the neoconservatives’ plan.<sup>17</sup>

However, the end of the millennium raised anxiety and fears. The passing from the second to the third millennium was awaited by some sectors of religious and popular culture prophesying imminent catastrophes, fruit of a tradition of apocalyptic visions whose roots lay in the Puritan origins of the American nation. The American revolution had been interpreted as an apocalyptic event, and during all the 1800s, millenarian movements believed in the imminent return of Christ. Apocalyptic millenarianism continued into the 1900s, fostered by the catastrophic events of the First World War, the Great Depression, the Second World War, and the nightmare of a nuclear threat during the Cold War. In 1992 Paul Boyer, a historian of American culture, observed that not only had millenarian prophecies and beliefs survived the secular twentieth century, but they actually showed strong signs of revival as it closed.<sup>18</sup> In 1995 a Gallup poll revealed that 61 percent of adults and 71 percent of young people believed that the world was about to end or be destroyed. Humanity would be wiped out by a spate of catastrophes caused by global warming, AIDS, hunger, overpopulation, viruses, and other unimaginable biblical scourges. The Hollywood film industry prospered by producing apocalyptic stories.<sup>19</sup> Books about the end of the world were bestsellers in the United States, and one of the most successful was the *The Late Great Planet Earth* by Hal Lindsay, published in 1970. He maintained that the Bible’s prophecies for the end of the world were about to take place, and that the battle of Armageddon was approaching and inevitable. Seven and a half million copies of the book were sold in the 1970s, and up to the 1990s 28 million copies were sold in 52 languages.

Some religious movements following the Judaic-Christian version of the premillenarian belief foresaw depraved and corrupt American society as being destined to end catastrophically—to make way for rebirth, the return of Christ, the coming of the millennium, the final war between the forces of good and evil, the Last Judgment, the end of history, and the eternal triumph of God’s reign. President Reagan loved apocalyptic prophecies. During the Gulf War in 1991, 15 percent of Americans declared they believed the war was the beginning of the Apocalypse and that it would bring Armageddon closer. A book by John F. Walvoord, published in 1974, called *Armageddon, Oil and the Middle East Crisis*, was updated and republished in December 1990: 600,000 copies were sold up to February 1991.<sup>20</sup>

Belief in the end of the world was widespread, especially among the fundamentalist evangelicals:

Nurtured by the dense network of colleges, seminaries, Bible schools, publishing houses, Christian bookstores, radio and television programs, and churches by the tens of thousands that sustain the vast subculture of late-twentieth-century U.S. evangelicalism, the conviction that God's plan for human history lies encrypted in ancient biblical texts remains very much alive as the century draws to its close. From pulpits, cassette tapes, orbiting communication satellites, and the pages of millions of paperbacks, the ancient cry rings out as it has for hundreds of years: "He Is Coming Soon."<sup>21</sup>

The fundamentalist evangelicals supported the traditional values of Christian America rigidly and considered the secularized America which had emerged from the crisis and the transformations of the 1960s to be a materialistic, hedonist, and pagan country. They accused it of having driven religion out of politics and public life, forbidden Christian symbols in state institutions, barred prayer from schools, spread evolutionistic theories, legalized abortion, and fostered feminism, pornography, and homosexuality. That was why America now risked an inevitable, imminent punishment from the wrath of God, asserted television preachers like Jerry Falwell and Pat Robertson, foreseeing that a nuclear war would carry out the Bible's prophecies. According to a survey made by the magazine *U.S. News & World Report*, published on December 19, 1994, 61 percent of those interviewed had no doubts about Christ's second coming, and 53 percent of these believed that the world would end in the twentieth century in accordance with the Bible's prophecy. "No part of our history has gone for long without a fresh application of the patterns of apocalypse. And the ending of a century in the year 2000 (or, as some more accurately put it, in 2001) is bound to create that feeling of history taking a corner that always stimulates apocalyptic thinking," wrote Garry Wills, the historian of American culture, in 1990.<sup>22</sup> However, a few years later Daniel Wojcik, a scholar of American apocalypticism, pointed out that "if the years 2000 and 2001 pass uneventfully, perhaps the emphasis in American millennialist beliefs will shift from visions of the world as irredeemably evil and inevitably doomed to more optimistic views in which human beings are compelled to bring about millennial transformations through their actions, confronting crisis and working to overcome suffering in the tradition of postmillennial social reformists of the nineteenth century."<sup>23</sup>

In actual fact, at the end of 1999 the disaster the Americans mainly feared was technological, abbreviated to "Y2K," which simply stood for "Year 2000," with the "K" indicating "thousand." This did not refer to a new weapon of mass destruction, nor to the virus of a mortal pandemic, but was used to define the risk that computers all over the world would be blocked at midnight on December 31, 1999 with disastrous consequences in the financial, economic, and social sectors, because their memories had not been prepared in advance to distinguish between the numerals "1900" and "2000" when dating any operation.

The possibility of a computer catastrophe caused by the so-called “millennium bug” was taken very seriously. The American government set up a special President’s Council on Year 2000, to prevent the disastrous effects of the millennium bug. It was even feared that the Y2K effect would enable Russian computers to launch nuclear missiles against America. However, there was no catastrophe. “Remember Y2K? A Nostalgic Look at the Disaster That Never Was,” was the joking title of the popular *Time Almanac 2001*, recalling the millennium bug.

## Election Ennui

At the beginning of the third millennium, the Americans’ lives seemed destined to go ahead uneventfully: “2001 will be a year in which the world becomes a richer and sharply more decent place,” was what the English magazine the *Economist* predicted in its 2000 yearbook.<sup>24</sup> Forecasts for the United States were comforting. The American economy was enjoying its longest period of growth in history. Poverty and unemployment were at their lowest level for the last 30 years, and the federal budget could count on hundreds of millions of dollars on the credit side. “America is the dominant power in the world, militarily, economically and culturally. Its companies and icons are everywhere, yet its soldiers—although targets of terrorism all over the world—are nowhere engaged in combat.” However, the magazine added, “into this paradise has come a note of sourness. When America’s 43rd president is sworn in on Saturday January 20th, many Americans will feel unable to share his moment of triumph.”<sup>25</sup>

The year 2000 had been a presidential election year in the United States, but most Americans were unenthusiastic about the clash between the two candidates, the Democrat Albert A. Gore and the Republican George W. Bush. The eight years of Clinton’s presidency had ended with many religious and conservative Americans disgusted and offended by the scandalous conduct of an immoral president who lied and had even dared to defile the sacrality of the Oval Office, the United States president’s office, with his sexual behavior. The Religious Right had fought vainly to have the president, a lecherous sinner, removed from office through impeachment. However, the new presidency of the Republican Bush also began under a cloud. There were rumors of a scandal regarding the elections, not sex, for the very controversial way Bush had won over the Democratic candidate, who had received the majority of votes with over half a million more than Bush. In fact, when voting ended on November 7, a month of political and legal battles followed, while the votes were recounted rather chaotically in the state of Florida, where the governor was Bush’s brother. In the end, on December 9, the federal Supreme Court brought the dispute to an end, assigning the victory to Bush with a majority of just one vote, decided by the judges who had been nominated by Republican presidents. Thus George W. Bush, son of the 41st president of the United States and with the same name, became the 43rd president. The Democrats contested the decision of the Supreme Court and raised doubts about the

new president's legitimacy, but on December 13 Gore accepted defeat, publicly acknowledging his rival's victory in a sober speech to the nation on television. This was how the struggle for the presidency, which the *Time Almanac 2001* called "Election Ennui," came to an end.

## Terrorism Was Not Frightening

The same almanac mentioned the name of Osama bin Laden twice, as a rich militant Islamic extremist protected by the Taliban in Afghanistan, and furthermore that the American government had requested his extradition as he was believed to be involved in the terrorist attacks of August 7, 1998, against the American embassies in Kenya and Tanzania. However, the almanac forgot that 10 years earlier the United States had supported bin Laden with arms and money when he fought in the Islamic resistance against Russia's occupation of Afghanistan. Offspring of a very wealthy Saudi family, bin Laden had abandoned his affluent way of life to dedicate himself to Islamic radicalism and aggressive asceticism. He was converted to anti-American terrorism after the Gulf War because he thought that the presence of American troops in Saudi Arabia, the sacred cradle of Islam, was sacrilege.

That was when bin Laden began to hate the United States profoundly and ruthlessly, as the Islamic radicals believed it was the great Satan, an evil power both corrupt and corrupting that spread its poison throughout the world. It did so by means of its depraved customs and morals and by spreading pornography and sexual freedom; and furthermore, by protecting the state of Israel, it was trying to destroy Islamic civilization on its own territory. In 1992 bin Laden began his terrorist campaign against the West by founding the terrorist organization al Qaeda, which had its training camps in Afghanistan, then ruled by the extremist regime of the Taliban. The aim was to free Arab lands of the infidels, unite all the believers in Islam, and set up a Muslim community based rigorously on religious radicalism.

In 1998, bin Laden declared a holy war on the United States, inciting Muslims all over the world to gain paradise by killing as many Americans and Jews as possible, everywhere, without making any distinction between civilians and servicemen. He also announced terrorist attacks in the United States.<sup>26</sup>

However, on the morning of September 11 it is likely that most Americans, including those who were flying, did not know who bin Laden was. Islamic terrorism did not frighten them more than the millennium bug at the turn of the millennium. During the 1990s, Gallup polls showed that fewer than 10 percent, and often even fewer than 5 percent of Americans, gave the greatest importance to defense and national security. Also the two candidates for the presidency spoke little about terrorism during the electoral campaign. In his first electoral speech, Bush said that his presidency would give top priority to tracking down terrorists on American territory and fighting them back, but in the three debates between the two candidates, the subject of terrorism was not discussed.<sup>27</sup> Neither

the U.S. Congress nor the mass media paid much attention to the danger of terrorism.<sup>28</sup> The word “terrorism” was not even in the list of “key words” given by the *Time Almanac 2001*.

## Current Issues

On the morning of September 11, terrorism was not America’s main worry. Summer was nearly over, and according to the press, the news that had upset the summer holidays the most was that shark attacks on bathers had been unusually frequent on the southern coasts. However, at the end of the summer, America’s greatest worry was probably the economic situation. Since the end of 2000, a period of economic recession had begun; there was a debit balance, unemployment was increasing, and the price of oil was rising—while to keep to the electoral program, the new administration continued undeterred to cut taxes, a move which had already poured 80 percent of its benefits into the pockets of 2 percent of the richest tax payers. “There’s a hint of panic in the air, and this can lead to bad politics,” commented the *New York Times* on September 11.<sup>29</sup> Consequently the president was losing consent. His “honeymoon” with the Americans, as the first period of a new presidency is called, was shorter than in the past. Spring and summer polls had shown a constant drop in public approval ratings, and they were still dropping on the eve of September 11.<sup>30</sup>

However, on that morning, the authoritative American newspaper gave importance to other issues. A group of scientists of the National Academy of Sciences, an eminent scientific organization, had made public a long report in favor of the federal government’s financing research on new series of stem cells extracted from human embryos, in order to develop their potential efficacy in treating serious illnesses like Parkinson’s disease, Alzheimer’s disease, diabetes in the young, and cancer.<sup>31</sup> The scientists maintained that over a hundred million Americans could benefit from this research. The newspaper declared that this request would probably stir up a political debate, because the new president, a very religious evangelical conservative, supported the “culture of life” and was therefore against both abortion and research on human embryonic cells, because he believed that this meant killing potential individuals. On August 9, in a speech to the nation on television, Bush said that every human embryo is unique, with the unique genetic potential of a human individual, and that he felt morally obliged, as president, to protect and encourage respect for life, in America and the world.<sup>32</sup> The president had decided not to allocate federal funds, although he permitted research to be continued on cells already extracted.

The influence of the new presidency’s traditionalist and religious conservatism also made itself felt in other fields. On the morning of September 11, the airplane passengers who read the *New York Times* found the news of unrest among the students in the state of New York, because the government had decided to oblige all public schools to adopt a “code of conduct” which regarded also what clothes the schoolchildren wore: scanty clothes were forbidden. Furthermore a

scholastic district in Massachusetts had forbidden girls to wear very low-cut tee shirts.<sup>33</sup> A similar code of conduct had been adopted by the North Carolina government, with a law that allowed schools to display the Ten Commandments.

On the morning of September 11, certainly more important news was the end of the electoral campaign in New York with six candidates taking part to succeed the mayor, Rudolph Giuliani, a popular but controversial personage, famous for having reduced crime by adopting harsh measures in one of the most violent cities in the world. The electoral campaign had ended the day before and the polls were to open on the morning of September 11.

In the meantime, President Bush was under fire from the Democrats who attacked his missile defense plan. According to the Democratic Senator Joseph R. Biden Jr., president of the Senate Committee on Foreign Relations, not only would the space defense plan cost astronomical figures, but it would also sacrifice national security to a theological belief, nullifying 40 years of efforts in a policy of weapon control. Furthermore, it would trigger clashes between the United States and its allies and create tension with Russia, while it would definitely not offer the protection promised by its supporters. The senator ended by saying that the administration would do better to modernize the air force.<sup>34</sup>

## Imperial Worries

These were the main news items on home affairs that Americans read in their most authoritative newspaper on September 11. There was no alarming news from abroad, even though the new president's style and the new administration's foreign policy had created some trouble in the United States' international relations.

Bush had no experience in international politics; he knew little about other countries and geography in general. "Nobody needs to tell me what to believe. However, I *do* need someone to tell me where Kosovo is," he said during the electoral campaign, and he was not joking.<sup>35</sup> Apart from frequent visits to Mexico when he was governor of Texas from 1994 to 1999, Bush had made only short trips overseas.

As presidential candidate, Bush had said that his foreign policy would give priority to national interest, in harmony with, and inspired by, Woodrow Wilson's internationalism, further declaring that the United States had a great goal to guide it—to turn this age of American influence into generations of democratic peace.<sup>36</sup> Bush refused to consider the United States an imperial power. In 1999 he said that America had never been an empire, and even when it had the chance to become one, it refused, preferring greatness to power and justice to glory.<sup>37</sup> When Bush mentioned foreign policy, which was not the main subject of his electoral campaign, he promised he would collaborate with America's strong democratic allies in Europe and Asia to spread peace; that he would foster the full development of democracy in the western hemisphere, united by a free market; that he would defend American interests in the Persian Gulf and



encourage peace in the Middle East, guaranteeing Israel's security; and that he would keep the contagious spread of weapons of mass destruction under control.

Once the presidency was won, it was clear the new administration would follow a unilateral tendency in foreign policy, inspired by a realism aimed at asserting the supremacy of American interests over international bodies and agreements.

On the morning of September 11, the barometer of the international situation did not forecast stormy weather for the United States, even though there had been a few brief, isolated storms in the last few months in its relations with Russia and China, and there had been some clouds in those with its Western allies. The latter did not like the new administration's beginning with a unilateral tendency, its refusal to ratify the Kyoto Protocol on curbing greenhouse gases, or its decision to take up the plans for a new space defense system again. At the beginning of 2001, following the arrest of an FBI (Federal Bureau of Investigation) agent who had sold information to the Russian leaders for 15 years, a dispute arose between the Russian and American governments which called to mind the times of the Cold War. Washington expelled 50 Russian diplomats accused of counterespionage, and Moscow retaliated likewise. Then the situation calmed down. At the beginning of April there was another international clash, between the American and communist Chinese governments, after a collision between an American spy plane and a Chinese military jet plane. The Chinese plane crashed and the pilot was killed, while the crew members of the American plane, forced to land on the island of Hainan, were held prisoner somewhere unknown. At that time relations between the two nuclear powers were already troubled, because China had threatened military retaliation if Washington agreed to Taiwan's requests for anti-missile weapons. The spy plane incident heightened the tension. Beijing accused the United States of violating China's national sovereignty, demanding official apologies as well as compensation for damages and the pilot's death, while Washington protested that the incident had taken place in international space, so refused to make its apologies, demanding that the American crew be released immediately. The crisis between the two countries could easily have worsened, but after about 10 days of difficult negotiations, a compromise was reached which saved the faces of both powers. The United States president expressed his sincere regret for the Chinese pilot's death, and the American crew was consequently freed.

On the morning of September 11, the main international news in the *New York Times* concerned the Middle East. In Istanbul a woman had blown herself up in the commercial and tourist center of the city—two police officers were killed and bloody pieces of the woman's body were flung everywhere. "There was blood all over the place, it was terrible," was how a woman office worker described the scene after the explosion. There was other news from the Middle East: the Iranian government rejected the United States' accusation that it was frantically looking for foreign technology to produce weapons of mass destruction, pointing out that Iran had been the victim of chemical weapons during the

war against Saddam Hussein's Iraq which had been backed by the United States. The newspaper reported that for the Iraqi government's part, it accused the American and British air forces of killing eight civilians during a missile attack in the so-called "no-fly zone," set up by the United Nations after the Gulf War in 1991 to keep the aggressive Iraqi dictator under control. In the meantime, Israel went ahead with building the dividing wall between the Palestinian and Israeli territories, decided on by the Sharon government to prevent terrorist attacks, while the series of Palestinian suicide bomb attacks continued, with Israel retaliating.

The American administration was more worried about the news from Afghanistan. The *New York Times* reported that the White House had no sure information about the death of Ahmed Shah Massoud, the leader of the United Front, the last force that opposed the Taliban regime. Massoud was the victim of a suicide attack made by two Arabs who had introduced themselves as journalists. "This is a gift sent by God," a Taliban commander commented, "I'm really pleased." The Afghan government denied it was involved in the attack. Nevertheless, the daily commented, anything confirming that the murderers were Arab would prove that those who maintained that foreign Arabs, like Osama bin Laden, played a constantly greater part in decision making among the Taliban, were right.<sup>38</sup>

### A Predicted but Unconsidered Risk

Since 1992, bin Laden had been closely observed by the United States, as the American government thought that he, above all, inspired the new anti-American terrorism. In the last eight years there had been numerous Islamic attacks against American targets, in Africa and the Middle East, but only one had been made on American territory. In New York on February 26, 1993, a truck bomb exploded in a garage of the World Trade Center. There could have been thousands of victims, and the police thought it was a miracle that there were only six dead and just over a thousand injured. Those guilty of the attack were discovered and convicted. Ramzi Yousef, the terrorist who had placed the bomb, said he had hoped to kill 250,000 people, to avenge the Palestinians and punish the Americans for supporting Israel. Two hundred twenty-four people, including 12 Americans, were killed in the attacks on the United States embassies in Africa. The latest attack made by Islamic terrorists against American targets was on October 12, 2000, with a suicide attack against the ship *USS Cole* in a Yemen port, where 17 sailors were killed. President Clinton had given orders to hunt down bin Laden and kill him; consequently the al Qaeda bases in Afghanistan were bombed.<sup>39</sup>

The millennium bug had had repercussions on the problem of terrorism as well: it was feared that the bug could cancel computer data files and block communications between anti-terrorist agencies, thus encouraging terrorists to act.<sup>40</sup> The American government was warned and all the counterterrorism agencies were mobilized. Some Islamic terrorists who were planning to carry out attacks in the United States were arrested. An Arab loaded with explosives destined to

blow up the Los Angeles airport was discovered at the Canadian border. Then the anti-terrorist alarm was called off, and terrorism was no longer on the agenda. No Gallup poll results, either during 2000 or the first eight months of 2001, considered the issue of terrorism important enough to be worth investigating on a national scale.

However, during the first half of 2001, federal agencies reported the danger of new Islamic terrorist attacks against United States interests. On June 30, a CIA report maintained that bin Laden was planning a large-scale attack against the United States with catastrophic consequences, and another report on August 6 repeated that bin Laden was determined to strike the United States on its own territory. Nevertheless, in the following days the imminent danger of a terrorist attack was not discussed by the president or his advisers, and from May to September not even the press or television paid it any attention. The main news about anti-terrorist initiatives in the days preceding September 11 regarded security measures in military bases abroad and warnings to Americans not to go to Arab countries.

## Terror in the Heart of America

The 19 Arabs who were flying over the United States on the morning of September 11 were certainly thinking about bin Laden.

It was just after 8:00 A.M. President Bush was going by car to a primary school in Sarasota, Florida, to be present at a reading exercise of the schoolchildren there. At 8:50 A.M., as he was about to enter the school, he was privately informed that an airplane had crashed into the North Tower of the World Trade Center at 8:46 A.M. It was thought to be an accident. At 9:05 A.M. the president was sitting in class among the pupils when his private secretary entered the classroom and whispered in his ear that a second plane had hit the other tower: America was under attack. While he was heading for the airport, Bush learned that a plane had crashed into one side of the Pentagon at 9:37 A.M., reducing it to rubble. Later, when his plane had taken off, he was told that a plane had crashed in a field near Shanksville, Pennsylvania, at 10:03 A.M. Perhaps the terrorists wanted to fly the plane into the White House or the Capitol, but had been prevented by some passengers who rebelled after finding out about the attack on the World Trade Center from their cell phones—the plane ended up crashing to the ground.

The 19 Arabs on board the 4 planes carried out the terrorist attacks. They overcame the crews and killed the pilots with small knives and cutters, then flew the planes like missiles into the most important symbols of American power and wealth. The sequence of the second attack on the World Trade Center was seen live on television by America and the rest of the world, while the tower which had been struck first burned like a torch.

It took six years and eight months, from 1966 to 1973, to build the towers, whose structures were capable of resisting even if hit by the largest airplanes of that period. In its September 24, 2001 issue *Newsweek* commented

that when the towers were raised 30 years before, they were greeted as the first buildings of the twenty-first century—instead, they were its first victims.<sup>41</sup> The two towers disappeared from New York's skyline in 1 hour and 40 minutes, the length of time between the first attack and the collapse of the second tower. The South Tower was the first to collapse, at 9:59 A.M. producing a gigantic cloud of dust, smoke, and debris, which spread, whirling violently like a volcanic eruption, blotting out the sky and enveloping thousands of terrified people fleeing in a suffocating darkness that spread for nearly a mile around, raining down innumerable fragments and scattered papers which floated haphazardly and lazily in the tumult of the dense cloud. This horrendous scene was repeated at 10:28 A.M. when the North Tower imploded. In a few hours the World Trade Center became Ground Zero, the name given to places where an atomic explosion has taken place. At 10 30 A.M. on September 11, a monstrous and shapeless "third tower" took the place of the white and slender twin towers. This mass of smoke and fire was produced by 1,800,000 tons of debris, shapeless blocks of concrete, mixed with an intricate forest of broken girders and twisted steel gratings, which once made up the elegant external structure of the two towers, now looking like the mutilated rib cages of shattered skeletons. Thousands of people, men and women of 80 nationalities, hundreds of firemen who had raced to the two buildings, together with dozens of policemen, rescuers, and passersby, died—were wiped out—in this heap of debris.<sup>42</sup>

Rescue operations began immediately, arduous and risky because of gas leaks, explosions, collapsing walls, and fires, and continued feverishly and uninterrupted round the clock for days, in the hope of finding survivors. Then hope gave way to desperation and horror. Digging in this mountain of rubble as high as seven stories, few bodies were found while scraps of human remains were continually being pulled out. The work to remove the tons of debris went on for a year and was carried out with compassionate care, in an effort to find even the tiniest fragment of human remains and the slightest sign that could make it possible to identify the victims. Straight after the two towers collapsed, the mayor, Mr. Giuliani, ordered 30,000 coffins, preparing for the most dreadful possibility that few had managed to escape before the collapse. Fortunately a later body count turned out to be much lower. After six months 287 bodies and 18,937 fragments of human remains had been recovered, which allowed 972 victims to be identified. In the summer of 2002, when the works to clear out the site ended, less than half of the victims' remains had been identified, while thousands of human fragments were still waiting to undergo DNA tests for identification: almost 20,000 of them made it possible to identify 1,092 victims. The bodies of 1,731 human beings were dispersed. About 3,000 people perished at the World Trade Center, as well as 343 firemen and 60 police officers. One hundred twenty-five died at the Pentagon, and 256 passengers of the four airliners were killed. Only 18 people were pulled out alive from the ruins of the World Trade Center: 12 firemen, 3 police officers, and 3 civilians, all of them saved by September 12.<sup>43</sup>

## A Grief-Stricken Community

On the morning of September 11, the United States was a seriously bewildered nation tottering on the brink of chaos.<sup>44</sup> For the first time in the history of civil aviation all airplanes were ordered to land, flights were cancelled and airports closed, as were government and public buildings, financial centers, the Wall Street exchange, offices, and schools. The United States seemed to be paralyzed.

When the Americans first heard the news that a plane had crashed into one of the World Trade Center towers, they were amazed and incredulous. A witness who was going to work when he heard that a plane had struck the World Trade Center said:

There was no panic, just puzzlement: how *does* a plane, on a sparkling day, crash into a skyscraper so tall you can see it for miles? Something felt wrong. I hurried upstairs, logged on to America Online and turned on CNN.

Minutes later, I watched a jetliner zoom across the television screen and explode as it crashed into the Trade Center's second tower.<sup>45</sup>

Over two hundred million Americans followed, on television and at the same time, every moment of the tragedy at the World Trade Center after the first plane attacked. Over 60 percent of them confessed that, even though they were anguished and horrified by what they saw, they could not take their eyes off the screen, which continued to show the sequence of the terrorist attacks and repeats of the towers collapsing, the scenes of terror, panic, and horror among the fleeing people.

Like on-the-spot witnesses of the tragedy, this is how Americans saw flames and smoke billow out of the top of the North Tower and the second plane fly into the South Tower, exploding inside the skyscraper and producing an enormous ball of fire. They saw groups of people clinging to the windows of the two skyscrapers, surrounded by smoke and flames, and men and women jumping off into space to escape from an atrocious death, falling towards a death just as atrocious. A witness who worked in an adjacent building said he had seen at least 14 people jump off.<sup>46</sup> Bodies and objects falling from the towers struck and killed some people on the ground as well. Soon after, millions of Americans saw the two towers suddenly and unexpectedly collapse with thousands of people still imprisoned inside, while crowds of men and women swarmed along nearby streets, fleeing in the desperate search for refuge under a dense rain of debris and sheets of paper and with an enormous cloud of suffocating dust looming over them, following and then enveloping them like a monster killer. And when the cloud began to clear up, revealing the terrifying sight of the mass of ruins towering above the place where the World Trade Center had stood, millions of Americans saw firemen, police officers, and civilian volunteers moving like whitened specters on the mountain of rubble, looking for survivors among hidden chasms and tottering heaps of concrete and steel girders. They saw the bloody faces and tortured bodies of the injured, and a stream of people leaving Manhattan crossing Brooklyn Bridge, like an exodus of survivors fleeing the horrors of a war.

Then during the day and night of September 11, the day after, and the following days, the Americans saw hundreds of men and women of every race and age with grief-stricken faces, sometimes silently showing photographs of their loved ones who worked in the World Trade Center, imploring people for information in the desperate hope that somebody could reassure them that these loved ones had survived. The streets and squares around Ground Zero were turned into sacred places by the crowd gathered in prayer day and night, keeping vigil with burning candles. At the same time numerous small altars appeared everywhere, along the sidewalks and the gratings enclosing gardens, on the walls of buildings and in subway stations. Each altar held the picture of a person missing in the World Trade Center, with flowers around it, the American flag, and messages of sorrow, memories, and faith. While the site was being cleared, the Americans saw human remains recovered from the rubble, and they followed the silent ceremonies with firemen and police officers rendering honor to the bodies of their companions, wrapped in the Stars and Stripes and saluted as fallen in battle. When the body of a fireman was recovered, the machines were stopped, a "deathly silence" fell, and everyone took off their helmets and saluted the body wrapped in the American flag, which was carried away religiously by companions. The ritual was repeated many times during the day, the night, and the following day.

Seeing both the catastrophe and the mourning at the same time turned the Americans into a single grief-stricken community, which plunged suddenly from its pride and sense of security in an unbeatable nation to the terror of a nation attacked and horribly wounded in the very heart of its power, discovering that it was vulnerable. "We are all in the Third Tower now, which rose instantly from the collapse of the other two," wrote Nancy Gibbs, the *Time* journalist.<sup>47</sup>

## No Longer Invulnerable

Humiliation for being taken by surprise and for the success of the terrorist aggression was added to the terror and horror of the catastrophe, to the sorrow for the victims. The terrorists were treacherously knowledgeable when they chose their emblematic targets, to inflict not only sorrow for a ruthless carnage on the great Satan, in the name of God, but also a symbolic mortal blow to its power, pride, and prestige, at the same time humiliating the infidel and blasphemous Western civilization which the United States represented. Probably when choosing the targets to attack, the terrorists saw the two towers as symbols of the infidels' religion, so their attack was meant to be a kind of divine punishment against Western idolatry. After all, the American press itself called up the Promethean fascination of the World Trade Center towers after September 11:

The towers inspired awe and fascination. The building was also emblematic of our country's deepest aspirations. Skyscrapers are an American invention, and the World Trade Center was among the last to reflect something of the visionary ideals of progress and technology that so defined the last century. How high can we build? How high can we fly? Can we reach the moon?<sup>48</sup>

The two towers were so majestically imposing that they gave off an aura of sacredness; one felt awed and fascinated, they were the cathedrals of America, the minister of a church in New York stated on September 16; and now the cathedrals had disappeared.<sup>49</sup>

Together with thousands of unaware and innocent people, the feeling that America was inviolable was also a victim of the terrorist attack on the Pentagon and the two towers. The theologian Peter Ochs said that the greatest shock for his students, six months after the terrorist attack, was to discover that America was vulnerable: "I didn't know that *we* could be attacked."<sup>50</sup> In a few hours the way Americans perceived the world was radically changed:

Our national world, as we understood it—standing alone, virtually invincible—no longer exists. Foreign powers, however they are ultimately defined, have breached our borders, and there can be no absolute promise that they will never do so again. We must reconstruct our understanding of our nation and its meaning in our lives. We must defend it in its newly recognized vulnerability.<sup>51</sup>

This is what Joanne B. Freeman, teacher of history at Yale University, wrote on September 28, reminding her readers that only in the early years of the republic had Americans felt vulnerable in the same way, fearing the power of the enemy they had fought against to gain independence. In 1814 the British army occupied and torched Washington; however, since then, the Americans had not undergone an attack on their territory. Protected by two oceans and the most powerful military apparatus the world has ever known, the American nation felt inviolable. Only Hollywood films about catastrophes had thought up war attacks on the United States, carried out by Soviet infiltrators, madmen aspiring to dominate the world, or aliens—but the United States always won. On the contrary, at the beginning of the twenty-first century, just when the United States was at the height of its power, undisputably superior to all the nations in the world, 19 Islamic terrorists dedicated to suicide and armed with small box cutters, managed to seize 4 American jetliners and turn the apocalyptic nightmare of the imaginary catastrophes into terrifying reality.

Americans had gotten used to small doses of fear in their lives: fear caused by crimes, natural disasters, and even their home-produced terrorism, like what happened in Oklahoma City. But they were not prepared *for this*, *U.S. News & World Report* commented on September 24. The magazine added that not even the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor, brought up by many commentators, was comparable to the shock of September 11, because Americans knew their enemy at Pearl Harbor; they knew his address—but they did not know who this enemy was; they did not have his address. This is the terror of terrorism: the enemy can work beside you, with you. In the following days, the death of five people caused by the bacillus of anthrax, sent by mail to newspapers and Senate offices, made Americans even more afraid of being exposed to an invisible, lethal terrorist threat.

Those who drew up the report of the National Commission on Terrorist Attacks wrote that September 11 was a day of shock and unprecedented suffering in the

history of the United States, that the nation was unprepared, and that at 8:46 A.M. on the morning of September 11, 2001, the United States was a nation transformed.<sup>52</sup> Fareed Zakaria, editor of *Newsweek*, observed that September 11 was the end of the end of history for the United States.<sup>53</sup> The myth that the United States was invulnerable had collapsed, nothing would be the same any more. These words, continually repeated, revealed a tragic and hostile world, and the tragedy of September 11 violently awakened the Americans to this reality.

## Fear and Anger

Edward T. Linenthal, a historian of American religion and culture, compared the perception of reality after September 11 to the sight of a “fractured landscape”: he had the feeling Americans lived in an alien landscape, foreboding and terrifying, and were looking for the resources to face it, and find a new normality.<sup>54</sup> A poll carried out in the first weeks after the attack revealed that 7 out of 10 Americans were depressed and a third suffered from insomnia. Their sense of security had been profoundly shaken. Fear would reign among them for a long time, a Kansas City psychoanalyst declared at the end of September.<sup>55</sup> Even if the passing of time tended to alleviate the depression, *U.S. News & World Report* observed in November, the traumatic effects had left a feeling of anxiety when perceiving reality and imagining the future.<sup>56</sup> At the end of 2001, the psychologist Garland DeNelsky commented that what had happened on that terrible Tuesday had drastically changed the lives of Americans, an immense change which was probably irreversible, because the new combination of potentially devastating technology, ideological extremism, and fanatics ready to commit suicide for their cause made any scenario of mass deaths and suffering for the people conceivable. Another mortal terrorist attack against this nation, God forbid, the psychologist added, would wound its already diminished sense of security even more deeply.<sup>57</sup>

According to some approximate estimates, at least 40,000 people among the survivors, witnesses, and rescuers suffered severe psychological traumas caused by the terrorist attack. Based on collective traumatic experiences in the past, it was expected that at least a third of the people more directly involved in the September 11 tragedy would be disturbed after the trauma because of stress, with recurring nightmares, and would be incapable of recalling the experience of the tragedy without living it again physically.<sup>58</sup> Research carried out in the following months showed that many Americans had reacted to September 11 with emotional suffering, fear, depression, and anguish, naturally more acute among the inhabitants of New York and the direct witnesses, but also widespread among the millions of Americans who had seen the tragedy on television. Research carried out between October and December in the state of New York, in Connecticut, and in New Jersey, revealed that 75 percent of those interviewed complained of traumatic symptoms, while 48 percent declared they were above all angry, even furious. According to a poll of the *New York Times* and CBS News, in the



days straight after September 11, 85 percent of Americans were in favor of military action against those who had organized the terrorist attack, and 75 percent thought military action was right even if it involved killing innocent people.<sup>59</sup> Some representatives of the Republican right brutally expressed their desire for revenge, like the writer Ann Coulter, who had lost a friend in the attack on the Pentagon: “We should invade their countries, kill their leaders and convert them to Christianity. We weren’t punctilious about locating and punishing only Hitler and his top officers. We carpet-bombed German cities; we killed civilians. That’s war. This is war.”<sup>60</sup> The Republican Senator John McCain, a hero of the Vietnam War who had competed with Bush for the Republican candidacy in the 2000 elections, expressed the Americans’ anger in less brutal words when he stated that, after shedding a tear for the future victims of the war, it was necessary to undertake to kill as many enemies as possible and as quickly and ruthlessly as possible, because they had started a war not wanted by America, and the blame for innocent victims would fall on them.<sup>61</sup>

Two months after September 11, a nationwide survey showed that almost 45 percent of adults and 35 percent of children still had stress symptoms. Six months later, people who had not been directly involved in the tragedy still suffered from its traumatic effects, which appeared as anxiety and fear of new terrorist attacks capable of striking them and their loved ones directly. All over the country, people feared that an invisible enemy was present, capable of using even nuclear devices and bacteriological weapons to spread death and destruction in the United States. However, as William Langewiesche, a correspondent of *The Atlantic Monthly* observed, in the weeks following September 11 the Americans’ fear arose not so much from the terror of death as from the sensation that collective control was lost, from the impression they were being dragged headlong into an apocalyptic future which their society was not prepared for.<sup>62</sup>

## And the President Spoke

On September 11, the president of the United States was picked up in Florida and for the whole day moved from one military base to another on the presidential airplane and escorted by fighter planes for fear of another attack, keeping contact with the vice president, who carried out his functions in the anti-atomic bunker of the White House. Only in the evening did the president return to the capital.

After learning that a second airplane had crashed into another tower of the World Trade Center, Bush had no doubt that America was under attack, and he decided that the United States was at war. At 9:30 A.M. on September 11, he made his first brief comment to the nation, broadcast from the primary school in Sarasota, saying, “Today we’ve had a national tragedy. Two airplanes have crashed into the World Trade Center in an apparent terrorist attack on our country. . . . Terrorism against our nation will not stand.”<sup>63</sup>

A few hours later, speaking from an air base in Louisiana, the president assured the Americans that the government was doing everything necessary to

protect America and the Americans. "The resolve of our great nation is being tested. But make no mistake: we will show the world that we will pass this test. God bless."<sup>64</sup> At 8:30 in the evening, in his message to the nation from the Oval Office, Bush said that the terrorist attack was aimed at America's way of life, its freedom, intending "to frighten our nation into chaos and retreat. But they failed, because our country is strong." America, he said, "was targeted for attack because it was the brightest beacon for freedom and opportunity in the world. And no one will keep that light from shining. Today, our nation saw evil, the very worst of human nature. And we responded with the best of America, with the daring of our rescue workers, with the caring for strangers and neighbors who came to give blood and help in any way they could." The government was ready to pursue and punish the culprits. No distinction would be made between the terrorists who committed these crimes and those who protected them. "America and our friends and allies join with all those who want peace and security in the world, and we stand together to win the war against terrorism."<sup>65</sup> On the morning of September 11, the "accidental" president, as he was called sarcastically for the way he had obtained the presidency, turned into the supreme commander and head of the nation at war.

The age of empire had become the age of terror for violated America.<sup>66</sup>