

# What impact did 9/11 have on America?

Our panel examines the cultural and political legacy of the al-Qaida attacks and the US response in the decade since

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A door from a firetruck crushed by the collapse of the World Trade Centre displayed at the Smithsonian Museum in Washington, DC. Photograph: Win McNamee/Getty Images

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**Martin Kettle: 'US politics remains defined by an argument over tax cuts and government, which long predates 9/11'**



I covered American politics for the Guardian for four years from 1997. I moved back to Britain towards the end of August 2001. Three weeks later, the country I had lived in ceased to exist.

I occasionally wonder how US politics would have evolved if Al Gore had been president in 9/11. In the short term, the domestic impact would have been much uglier. The Republicans would have relentlessly blamed the Democrats for 9/11. Gore would have been under irresistible pressure to act as the right wanted, and I think he would have been compelled to give in. Whether he would have invaded Iraq, though, I doubt.

But Gore was not president. George W Bush was. America had to respond militarily to 9/11. But Bush squandered his advantages. That's partly why I see 9/11 and its aftermath more as a very important and influential interruption in the modern evolution of America and its politics than as a historic turning point. To me, Bush and Obama are the opposite sides of that interruption. I suspect that in a decade's time, a recognisable version of 1990s politics will have reasserted itself.

American politics before 9/11 was defined by the Republican, small-state and post cold war imperial triumphalism associated with Ronald Reagan. This, in turn, had provoked an immense effort by the Democrats, principally associated with Bill Clinton to claw back a majority by tactical accommodations while preserving a commitment to social justice and internationalism.

I think that this remains the essential divide in US politics in 2011. While there is no denying that 9/11 also opened up another set of agendas, which leave a continuing mark, US politics remains defined by an argument over tax cuts and government. This long predates 9/11, and was given added impetus by the Bush tax cuts of 2001. And it is also still dominated by an imperial "essential power" role, which reached an apotheosis in Bush's response to 9/11, with unilateralist wars and massively increased military spending. This, along with the tax cuts, is at the root of the deficit problem – though its roots lie in 1945, not 2001.

The fact that Bush's version of these agendas, after considerable political success following 9/11, was then swept away in 2008 has not meant that the US has swung lastingly to the left, any more than it was doing under Clinton. On the whole, the US remains a country drifting to the right, but in its own distinctive way that offers few practical models for places such as Europe. Obama was elected on a wave that has now broken on the rock of the financial crash and the recession. The pre-9/11 America has begun to reveal itself again, in a new form – but definitely recognisable. America's political argument remains centred on the role of government at home and imperial security abroad.

Ironically, 9/11 may have chipped away at the latter more lastingly than the former. Obama's best hope, and that of the Democrats more generally, still rests in the ability to win the domestic social justice and economic effectiveness argument among the voters. But it is very much an open question whether they will succeed.

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**Andrea LeBlanc: 'It is time to remember that there are other, better, nonviolent ways to respond to conflict'**



Ten years after the attacks of 11 September 2001, "Remember 9/11" is being repeated in all quarters of the US. More than merely being remembered on this the tenth, or any, anniversary, for some of us 9/11 has become the pattern indelibly absorbed into the fabric of our lives. But more important than remembering the *day*, is the legacy of 9/11, which, I fear, is a legacy of forgetting rather than remembering.

Have we, as Americans, forgotten what our nation was created to be, or have we ceased to trust those principles out of which it was conceived: our tested judicial system, which has served so well for so long, and the purposeful and sound reasons for checks and balances in government? Have we forgotten that revenge is not the same as justice?

Have we forgotten or wilfully sacrificed our humanity in our fearful frenzy to protect ourselves and our way of life, becoming the very enemy of those freedoms that are the basis of that very way of life? Have we forgotten that all actions have causes and consequences?

The attacks of 9/11 did not come out of nowhere. Have we forgotten that violence always begets violence, and that war is by definition terrorism? Have we forgotten to be curious first and afraid second, to ask questions and listen to the answers?

Have we forgotten that we always have choices, that the choice between doing nothing and responding violently is a false choice; that to allow anger or fear or despair to consume our lives is a choice and, if made, is an abdication of our responsibility for our lives and all our children's future; that our choices have repercussions on the lives of children everywhere.

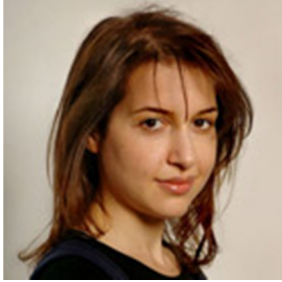
I believe it *is* time to remember, but to remember the true costs of 9/11 which far exceed the 3,000 lives taken so cruelly and deliberately; to remember to count the uncounted civilians whose lives have been shattered by our choice of war, the military men and women who return broken in mind and body or not at all, the untold amounts of money that has been stolen from the building up of human society and used rather to destroy.

It is time to remember that there are other, better, more effective, nonviolent ways to respond to conflict. It is time to remember that we have a choice about what kind of society we truly want to be.

• Andrea LeBlanc is a steering committee member of [September 11th Families for Peaceful Tomorrows](#)

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## **Hadley Freeman: '9/11 is like a scar: it has healed, but the mark will always be there'**



It is a fashionable cliché to sneer at anyone who claims that a major event will change a place, a political party, a world forever. Such cynicism is understandable: things generally don't change. No matter how chagrined people feel in the moment, all too soon, once again, politicians will lie, tabloid editors will hound celebrities, the rich will get richer.

But on the morning of 11 September 2001, in a hotel in downtown New York, it was, despite my early 20something fashionable cynicism, very hard to see how anything could ever be the same again. One second, I was sitting on my bed, eating a bowl of Shredded Wheat and watching Tracey Ullman being interviewed on breakfast TV; the next, the streets were filled with smoke, the air was full of screams and the world seemed like it was on the verge of ending.

In 2009, Fox News' Glenn Beck established something called the 9/12 Project "to bring us all back to the place we were on September 12, 2001 ... We were united as Americans." I don't know where Beck was on 12 September 2001, but I assume it wasn't New York City – because no one who was in the city at that time would ever wish to return to that date.

Of course, things haven't stayed at that pitch in New York, thank God. People are rude again. Jokes and sarcasm are allowed. But things are also different. New York has had to become accustomed to rightwing politicians and TV hosts citing it, alternately, as a place that epitomises America's vulnerability to terrorists, and, at other times, as a place that epitomises elitist liberalism and therefore isn't truly American.

For New Yorkers themselves, though, 9/11 is like a scar. Of course, it has healed. But the mark will always be there.

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## **Wajahat Ali: 'The one nation of many communities is remarkably resilient, learning – albeit grudgingly – from her costly mistakes'**



I have four Rs to offer for this anniversary of 9/11.

**Remembrance.** On that day, the two towers fell, but a nation of millions rose up as one. A decade later, the tragedy continues to reverberate around the world. There is forever a pre and post 9-11. There is no going back. The world still lives in the shadows of fallen towers. Some of us are still afraid of the bogeyman, both real and imagined, that lurk behind and in between them. We remember it as a day when 19 criminals hijacked a religion, and 3,000 innocent lives perished for the unfortunate realisation of their perverse, criminal ideology.

Sadly, their death continues to be exploited by some for the sake of profit: whether for an ever-expanding military-industrial complex that has mired the world in two expensive and myopic wars, an intrusive national security apparatus that at times makes us "feel safe" at the expense of "being free", or the promotion of extremist ideological agendas dividing Americans along religious and political lines.

**Reconciliation** – with our neighbours and citizens of different faith traditions and ethnicities who all share the same spiritual and cultural DNA of being "American," or at very least "fellow human". For those unfairly scapegoated and smeared simply due to wearing a turban, or beard, or having the wrong skin colour, an unfriendly passport, a multi-hyphenated last name, and for those unfortunates ones "at the wrong place at the wrong time", and the other footnotes in history barely remembered as the cannon fodder and collateral damage of errant missiles and improvised explosive devices, we hope you forgive us, as we try to move forward – together, again.

**Resilience.** For a nation attempting to break free from the looming shadow of a tragedy that, at times, made her succumb to her worst fears, hysteria and paranoia. Despite losing her moral compass, from time to time, in dealing justly with its neighbours both at home and abroad, the one nation of many communities is remarkably resilient, often learning – albeit grudgingly – from her costly mistakes, and still surviving in a volatile and uncertain economic and political climate.

**Resolve,** and hope that the United States – the multicultural laboratory of the world, the freakshow experiment running 235 years strong, the 21st century's cultural bouillabaisse, this unfinished rough draft, this perpetual work in progress, this fluke founded upon religious freedoms, tolerance, fairness, inclusivity and equal justice under the law – *this* nation resolves to implement in practice and reality the still unrealised, yet limitless, potential of its values.

- Wajahat Ali is a writer and attorney

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## **Michael Ratner: 'The loss of liberty in the wake of 9/11 will remain the legacy we have left our children'**



In the ten years since 11 September 2001, fundamental protections embedded in the American and international legal landscape over centuries have faced systematic evisceration, each encroachment justified by an endless war on terrorism.

The moment the Bush administration chose to label the attacks acts of war, rather than the heinous crimes they were, a careful groundwork was laid to allow for a future of cherrypicking which laws of war would apply and which would be ignored. As a result, thousands have been kidnapped: whisked away to detention facilities, from Guantánamo to medieval prisons like those at Bagram and Abu Ghraib, and to secret sites employing unspeakable acts of torture.

Detainees were held incommunicado, a fancy word for "disappeared": never informed of the charges against them. The few who were charged face trials before kangaroo courts called military commissions where newly-minted rules assure conviction; the majority, however, will remain prisoners of this so-called war indefinitely.

Habeas corpus, the legal means to test one's imprisonment in court, was abolished by President Bush and Congress. Though restored through legal challenge in the US supreme court, the Bush and Obama administrations, as well as the courts, continue to undermine that victory – best evidenced by Obama's retracted promise to close Guantánamo within a year of his inauguration.

Today, Obama has adopted almost all of the draconian Bush practices, save for permitting the worst forms of torture like waterboarding. But hooding, sleep deprivation and isolation are still permitted. The president has also ruled out any semblance of accountability for Bush administration officials responsible for waterboarding, practically ensuring its recurrence.

The United States is a changed country. Most don't seem to care. Until they do, the loss of liberty in the wake of 9/11 will remain the legacy we have left our children. None of us are safer. All of us are less free.

- Michael Ratner is president of the [Centre for Constitutional Rights](#)

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## **Peter Preston: 'The wheels have begun to fall of Thomas Jefferson's old wagon'**



In one sense, 9/11 changed nothing. The America of 8/11 was already too bureaucratic, too constitutionally sclerotic, too fearful and yet too complacent, too damned conservative (small "c") for comfort. It had, after all, just appointed George W Bush its commander-in-chief. But the years since the Twin Towers attack have made matters much, much worse.

Bureaucracy? Lump every imaginable failed or failing agency into something called a department of homeland security and – bringing airports to a grinding halt – deem the job done. Constitutionally moribund? The founding fathers concocted a balance of powers between president, Congress and states designed to meet the tests of the 1700s and 1800s. But gridlock 2011 in a world and a country that needs leadership but can't get it (with another wretched election just over the horizon)? Forget it, alas.

The wheels have begun to fall of Thomas Jefferson's old wagon. Nobody in their right mind thinks it fit for purpose any longer. Yet nobody has the will or the power to do anything about it.

Fearful? See the hysteria – the straightforward panic – that ensued as 9/11 brought terrible destruction via every TV screen. The lush, plastic dross of urban and suburban life has left individual resilience far behind (except in old frontier legend). There's a hurricane coming. Head for the hills. Yet complacent because, in a swill of fat-sodden comfort eating, no one can find a way to break free. The nation that set men on the moon doesn't apparently believe in science any longer: in evolution, global warming, in facing a future the Tea Party doesn't endorse.

I've always loved the US. I've visited more than 40 states, driven this way and that, spent time learning the country, its politics, its people, feeling its restless ambition. But where has all the ambition gone? Where's the resolve to fix economic crisis? Where's the leadership that commands respect? Where is the intellectual ability to put fear (including fear of extremism and immigration) in its place? It's as though America has shrunk after 9/11, the wind knocked out of its body by one sucker punch. Time to get off the floor and start fighting again.

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## **Carie Lemack: 'I learned that people I had never met often wanted the same thing as me – to live peacefully'**



It's been 10 years since my mother's murder. I cannot speak for all Americans, only for myself, when I say that in the past 10 years, I have had to grow up – not just because my mother was so brutally murdered, but also because the events of her murder required it. Like many, I had to learn about parts of the world I had only vaguely heard of before, had to listen to grievances I had previously been ignorant of, had to cope when people celebrated the violence that wreaked havoc in my life and shattered my mother into countless pieces.

But some things about me and, I would hazard to say, America, have not changed. I channelled my mother's curiosity and optimism, and welcomed the opportunity to travel to foreign lands, ultimately learning that people I had never met often wanted the same thing as me – to live peacefully. Like the forefathers of my nation, I joined with others to speak out and try to make as many rights as possible out of the wrong that had been committed against me, ultimately changing the structure of our nation through the passage of the 9/11 Commission's recommendations into law.

Mom taught my sister and me that we can fix any problem we set our minds to. As she was, before 9/11, I remain convinced of the power of everyday ordinary citizens, especially when imbued with passion and the moral authority that comes from experiencing tragedy and fighting to prevent it from happening again. Indeed, 10 years later, I have seen firsthand that, to paraphrase Margaret Mead's famous statement, they are the only thing that can achieve that. And while the pain of her murder will never cease, living a life my mother would be proud of remains my goal to this day.

- Carie Lemack co-founded [Global Survivors Network](#) after her mother, Judy Larocque, was murdered on AA11 on 11 September 2001

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## **Paul Pillar: 'There is no reason to suppose reorganising the US intelligence community has made Americans safer'**





In searching for a fix to prevent recurrence of the national trauma of 9/11, Americans reassured themselves with the characteristically American belief that by applying enough ingenuity, resources and determination, any problem can be solved and any threat neutralised. The chosen fix focused on intelligence, partly because intelligence historically has served as a scapegoat for failure, and partly because, given how the Iraq war was sold to the public, intelligence was in particular disfavour in the years following 9/11. Moreover, at the tactical level, any terrorist attack is by definition an intelligence failure, even though, in this instance, US intelligence had provided strong and prescient strategic warning of the threat.

The 9/11 Commission fulfilled public yearnings and achieved national catharsis by making its chief proposal a reorganisation of the US intelligence community – reorganisation being the favourite American response to problems when better ideas are lacking. There is no reason to suppose that rearranging boxes on the community's organisation chart has made Americans safer – and it has not. The net effect of the reorganisation was to create more bureaucracy and more lines across which information must flow.

Other measures since 9/11, such as enhanced security for civil aviation, have made Americans marginally safer. But like any other open society, America remains vulnerable to terrorist attack no matter how much its institutions are reformed.

- Paul Pillar is a former senior CIA counterterrorist officer and professor at Georgetown University, in Washington, DC