

# How Did 9/11 Change the Way the World Sees the United States?

On the 20th anniversary of the September 11 attacks, four experts consider the event's global legacy.

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Passengers waiting at a bus-stop read details of the terrorists attacks on Washington and New York in newspapers in the eastern Indian city of Calcutta on September 12, 2001.  
Alamy/REUTERS/Jayanta Shaw JS/PB.

## **'With Iraq in flames, America's standing in the world was at rock bottom'**

*Fawaz Gerges, Professor of International Relations at the London School of Economics and author of Making the Arab World (Princeton, 2018)*

The morning after the terrorist attacks on the US, the French newspaper *Le Monde* ran a headline which summarised a widespread sentiment in Europe and the world at large: 'We are all Americans.'

There was an outpouring of sympathy and solidarity with the US worldwide, including the Middle East. Even in Iran, which had been under punishing economic siege from the US for two decades, 60,000 spectators observed a minute's silence during a football match in Azadi Stadium and hundreds of young Iranians held a candlelit vigil in Tehran. Iranian leaders sent sympathetic messages to their American counterparts, the first official contact between the two countries since the 1979 Islamic Revolution.

Instead of building on this goodwill and solidarity, the US launched a War on Terror, the greatest strategic disaster in its history. Thus, the US squandered an historic opportunity to undo the harm of its Cold War policies, which had led to the emergence of al-Qaeda, the group responsible for the 9/11 attacks.

The War on Terror was costly in blood and reputation. The so-called leader of the free world sanctioned torture and illegally invaded Iraq, destroying a state and creating a vacuum that allowed the rise of al-Qaeda in Iraq and ISIS. With Iraq in flames, America's standing in the world was at rock bottom.

Now, as the US abruptly ends its war in Afghanistan, the Taliban are back. Afghanis feel betrayed. The US promised security and freedom, but leaves behind a nation on the brink of civil war and collapse.

The War on Terror was a war of choice, not necessity. What if the US had used 9/11 as a catalyst to bring about transformative change in its relations with the Arab and Muslim world, rather than doubling down by invading Afghanistan and Iraq? It could have used its soft and hard power to help resolve regional conflicts and invest in human development, making the world safer and more prosperous.

Instead of declaring all-out war against real and imagined enemies after 9/11, the US could have gained hearts and minds worldwide and hammered a fatal nail in the coffin of extremism.

### **'The world continues to get America wrong'**

*Tim Stanley, Historian, columnist and leader writer for the Daily Telegraph*

In the aftermath of 9/11, the United States – victor of the Cold War and last superpower standing – suddenly looked vulnerable and sympathetic. Outsiders felt pity but also a sly hope that, after decades of running the world clumsily at arm's length, the Americans might recalibrate and become a humbler nation.

The opposite was perceived to happen: America became more like itself, proud, unilateral, dispensing vigilante justice with a cowboy president ('some folks look at me and see a certain swagger', joked George W. Bush, 'which in Texas is called walking').

The invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq looked like repeats of Vietnam: enrolment in US history courses in the UK took off as students, like me, wanted to understand why America kept making the same mistakes. The election of Barack Obama in 2008 seemed like a step forward; Donald Trump's victory in 2016, a leap backwards. The US, far from being united by the trauma of 9/11, was clearly stuck in a split between conservatives and liberals; the world obsessed over its knife-edge presidential elections because we wanted to know if we were to be run by a bully or a wimp.

Of course, the more I studied the US, the more complicated the picture looked. During the 2000 election, for instance, Bush ran as a critic of military over extension and nation building. His predecessor, Bill Clinton, had intervened in the Balkans and Iraq, and blown up a medicine plant in Sudan – the latter, in 1998, in retaliation for al-Qaeda strikes on US embassies. There were elements of continuity between pre- and post-9/11 policy.

And under the radar, some conservatives questioned the War on Terror. In 2016 Trump not only repudiated the Iraq invasion but blamed Bush for the Twin Towers. When he introduced this argument at a debate in South Carolina, the audience booed and Trump shouted back: 'Excuse me, I lost hundreds of friends!'

Many foreigners agreed with Trump's criticism yet, strangely, assumed he would go to war within days of taking office. He turned out to be the least bellicose president since Jimmy Carter. The world continues to get America wrong.

### **'That Southeast Asia became the "second front" in the War on Terror was a blunder based on bad intelligence'**

*Minh Bui Jones, Editor of Mekong Review*

On the tenth anniversary of 9/11, I found myself in Washington DC talking to a well-known author on the legacy of the terrorist attacks. At one point he asked me about Islamic terrorism in Cambodia, where I was living at the time. The question startled me. In the seven years I lived there, I never thought of Islam and terrorism together.

That author's question tells you one thing about 9/11 in relation to Southeast Asia. Mostly, it is paranoia wrapped in ignorance. There are about 300,000 Muslims living in Cambodia today, a little more than one per cent of the population. Chroy Changvar, a riverside suburb in Phnom Penh, is their home (it was my home, too). There are brightly coloured mosques, folks living in wooden boats on the Mekong River, boys playing football on the riverbank and young women scooting about on motorbikes. This is a far cry from the image of Islam the American author had in mind: bearded men with Kalashnikovs and women in black chadors. The events in New York of 11 September 2001 made Southeast Asia's Muslim population visible in a new way.

The peaceful scene in my Phnom Penh neighbourhood can be seen in cities and towns across the region; but 9/11 distorted this humdrum reality. That this region became the 'second front' in George W. Bush's great 'War on Terror' – his administration sent 660 troops to the Philippines in January 2002, following the capture of al-Qaeda operatives in Singapore and Malaysia – was a strategic blunder based on bad intelligence. Of course, Cambodians and their Vietnamese neighbours know all too well where those sorts of mistakes can lead and they would have felt a sense of déjà vu as they watched US bombs raining on Afghanistan and Iraq. Some of their leaders even panicked and started cultivating a closer relationship with America's rival, China, as was the case with the Cambodian prime minister Hun Sen.

In the end, the War on Terror ended and the world moved on. But did it really? Growing up in Vietnam in the 1970s, I had an image of the US as impregnable and I wasn't alone. After 9/11, it looked vulnerable; I'm sure I'm not alone here either.

#### **'As US troops withdraw from Afghanistan, history threatens to repeat itself'**

Elisabeth Leake, Associate Professor of International History at the University of Leeds and author of *Afghan Crucible: The Soviet Invasion and the Making of Modern Afghanistan* (Oxford University Press, 2022)

In the aftermath of 9/11, the US led an ultimately failed invasion of Afghanistan that lacked a historical understanding of the state or its inhabitants. American policy planners and military officers seemed destined to repeat mistakes made by other foreign powers in the decades before them. This was not a case of the 'graveyard of empires' – itself an inappropriate moniker – striking again. Rather, it was a ready willingness to overlook Afghanistan's complicated 20th-century history.

American pundits and policymakers alike turned to the tropes of British colonial governance, focusing on Afghanistan and Pashtuns living on either side of the Afghan-Pakistan border as 'tribal', with the accompanying assumption that Afghan society was savage, martial and backwards. This underpinned policies like the Human Terrain System, in which social scientists supported military personnel in comprehending supposedly incomprehensible Afghanistan. These policies fundamentally overlooked Afghanistan's complex social and political relations and the dynamic ways Afghan elites and intellectuals had engaged with the international arena for decades. The US itself had fostered some of this modernisation in the era of Cold War competition, yet 21st-century narratives replaced a history of internationalism with a history of parochialism.

Early signs of this shortsightedness appeared in the 1980s during the Soviet occupation. CIA analysis focused on Afghan resistance fighters as tribal, ignoring the parties, elites and intellectuals who aspired to create a modern nation state. After 1989, the US largely refused to take an active role in rebuilding Afghanistan (or halting a civil war) and did not insist that resistance representatives take part in negotiations for the Soviet withdrawal.

History threatens to repeat itself in 2021, as US troops withdraw at a moment when not all Afghans are represented in political negotiations and civil war looms. What lingers instead is a humanitarian crisis and an overwhelming sense of uncertainty about Afghanistan's future.