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We asked 10 leading figures for their thoughts on the events of September 11 and its ramifications throughout the past year. Here are their responses.

Interviews by Clare Dwyer Hogg, Clare Rudbeck and Tom Phillips

Sue MacGregor, broadcaster

"A few weeks after the attacks, a close friend came to lunch. She is married to a Palestinian Arab. We skirted round the subject for a while, for I sensed, as did she, that her views might not be those of most of my other friends. 'Nothing has changed,' she said. 'Admit it – what's changed about your life? Nothing at all. Except that perhaps you understand why it happened.'

On one level she was right. My stomach had stopped lurching every time I saw a plane approach the Post Office tower from my local London park. I had stopped what I knew was a shameful thing – casting suspicious glances at every robed and bearded Muslim man I passed in the street. And yet of course the world has radically changed. The United States, under a president who seemed uninterested in the outside world, is now more heavily engaged in it than ever. Just as the disparate Muslim world has found new reasons to unite, so US citizens cling together under their "God Bless America" posters. A year after, we appear closer than ever to war, but no longer a war against a country harbouring large cells of al-Qa'ida militants.

It is a war against a nasty tyrant who still happens to be in power, a convenient target for some unfinished business. In covering the greatest story of the new century, the British media have seized their opportunities with, on the whole, commendable grace. There have been remarkable and moving press interviews, photographs and radio and TV documentaries telling almost unbearable tales of personal anguish. The world feels a fragile place, but on this evidence, courage and magnanimity are not in short supply. Thank goodness."

Eric Hobsbawm, historian

"I experienced September 11 in a hospital bed and consequently I was in the position a) of being able to watch it all the time and b) of seeing it as the typical, passive public. The pictures were extraordinary; one couldn't take one's eyes off them. They were followed by a wave of sound, most of which was a sort of sentimental hysteria. When it wasn't sentimental hysteria, it was meaningless and dangerous waffle: all this stuff about the world having changed because of the necessity to fight global terrorism.

As far as we were concerned, it was an appalling human tragedy. But it didn't change anything in the world situation. It did briefly humiliate the United States, but it wasn't a greater threat to the US. Most of Europe had learnt to live with terrorism for the past 30 years. The extraordinary thing is the reaction by the US, and it is this, rather than the actual events of September 11, that did change the world. The US used it as an opportunity for asserting that it can run the world. And it is still doing it."

Iqbal Sacranie, Secretary-General of the Muslim Council of Britain

"When I heard the news I was frozen with dread. The actions of the terrorists on September 11 were evil and indiscriminate. Following the experience of the Oklahoma bombing in 1995, when Muslims were wrongly suspected, I was certain there was going to be a lot of irresponsible speculation which could lead to harm being done to innocent Muslims. Sure enough, this backlash materialised in the form of hate-mail and attacks on mosques, Muslim cemeteries and assaults on British Muslims.

For me and many of my colleagues in the MCB, there is no such thing as family life any more; we are under so much pressure. It cannot be right that an entire civilisation is tarnished because of the actions of a few. Terrorism has no religion. We must not fall into the trap of responding with anger

and hate. Our emphasis should be on justice, not vengeance. I am concerned at the direction in which the 'war on terror' seems to be heading. We are in danger of abandoning the course of international legality, and charting a new course based on brute force.

To avoid situations like this in future, we should try harder to build greater understanding between different cultures."

Roger Scruton, philosopher

"The principal thing that it has done is awoken people to the fact that the main threats to the world order now don't come necessarily from states but from private-enterprise terrorism of the al-Qa'ida kind. Thanks to the increased mobility of people around the world, and all the legal loopholes that have opened in order to facilitate this, terrorists have an open field. They can go anywhere and achieve just about anything, and there is no way of stopping them simply by threatening a state.

It has also brought into consciousness, at least among certain people, the value of having proper national sovereignty, as opposed to religious authority, as the principal source of law. The great problem of the Middle East is that there is no real sense of the legitimacy of the nation state; all legitimacy has to be traced ultimately back to religious law, which doesn't necessarily respect boundaries, and doesn't have an even-handed view of what territory is. The American system, by contrast, is the ultimate expression of the nation-state idea; that the law claims its validity from the people who are resident in a particular place, extending impartially to all who are citizens, regardless of their faith and so on. I think it has brought home to people the clash between two completely different conceptions of legitimacy. Unfortunately the nation state, the source of the only kind of legitimacy we really can live by, is under threat from Europe and the whole "globalising" process. All these things have been brought to our attention by September 11.

The initial response to that day was the intervention in Afghanistan, and that changed things for the better. It brought home to the Afghans how much better it is if they can achieve the national identity of the nation state they once had, instead of tribal and religious forms of conflict."

Susie Orbach, psychotherapist

"I think September 11 has changed the world profoundly. On the one hand, it's brought the West out of a kind of political amnesia; on the other, the US constructed the response in such a way that it's marked by demonisation and an untextured, unfruitful political conversation. It has been a psychologically very frightening moment, in which one needs the capacity to think very widely, think anew, challenge one's assumptions. And yet, in public discourse, the emphasis has been on collapsing difference, on moving away from subtlety.

There has been a reordering of America, with the US strutting its power, taking the events of September 11 to position itself – as it always has – as the country not subject to external threat. Since the attacks, this has become more explicit. September 11 has solved a lot of the US's internal problems. It has created unity and reinforced an illegitimate presidency. It is very frightening to see Britain in partnership with that.

This is not to say that people are not really concerned about Afghanistan or Iraq or the Middle East, or all those issues we ought to think hard about in order to come up with proposals that increase the possibility of managing conflict. But our response to them is different, it's more inadequate. I think that many people in Britain thought that, with the election of Bush, there would be a movement toward Europe, politically and economically. Ideologically, people are stunned by the automatic alliance with the US – not our emotional response, which is understandable, but our government's alliance with the US response to September 11: its push for war on Iraq and its minimal response to the Middle East situation.

It would also be crazy to pretend that there hasn't been an increase in racism. In this sense, the

internal political situation in Britain is far more fraught."

JG Ballard, writer

"I'm not completely sure what I feel, partly because I can't help feeling that the Americans don't know what they feel. It was a frightening and horrific thing. The American response at the time – the invasion of Afghanistan, banishment of the Taliban, attack on all the al-Qa'ida bases – struck me as very impressive and measured. Now, things seem less sure – the Americans have picked on Saddam Hussein as the next target because they need a target; they don't feel they've really got to grips with whoever was responsible for September 11. That's rather frightening: what happens after Iraq? Maybe they'll find a European country they don't like.

I think September 11 struck a huge blow at America: not just physically, but at our idea of America. After the Second World War, America was a proud nation but not overbearing; in the past 10 years, it has seemed overnight. September 11 showed that it has an Achilles heel. It made us look hard at the USA and ask if it was too powerful. There's a sense that America feels itself to be invincible, and when a country feels that, it's usually heading for a fall. The fact that Americans are so puzzled that they're disliked is itself a sign that something is at fault. They think the September 11 attack was spurred on by envy. I don't think people do envy the US; the al-Qa'ida hijackers were driven by hatred.

America has no fall-back position. It has to be confident and proud and feel invincible. Losing is not for Americans. I think people have started to rethink their attitudes to America, conscious that US culture is swamping the planet. There's a sense that America is locked into the 20th century and all it stood for, while in Europe we're moving on. I think, in a curious way, September 11 made Europeans more conscious and prouder that they are Europeans."

Richard Dawkins, scientist

"I felt a savage anger, and an instant bonding with America. For all its faults, the USA is a major centre of world civilisation, in some ways (admittedly not many) the greatest there has ever been. It was under attack from a pre-medieval barbarism, incapable of developing advanced technology but happy to parasitise the technology of the very society it enviously wanted to destroy with it.

My first thought was: "Religion strikes again." And so it proved (when Mohammed Atta's notebook was published). It's possible for political fanaticism alone to drive people to suicide attacks, but it's hard. Religion makes it easy because, to the deluded perpetrators, it isn't suicide at all. It's a wonder that human bombs, such as those that terrorise Israel, aren't more common. Perhaps they soon will be in America. And here, if Blair goes on playing poodle to Bush.

I was moved by the heroism of the New York firemen; by the faces of the bereaved; the agonising slow fall of tiny human forms; the inspirational, hands-on leadership of Mayor Giuliani – and the embarrassing contrast with President Bush, who spent the day zig-zagging aimlessly around the country in his private plane, like a squawking chicken. In the days that followed, my solidarity with America took a battering as the Bush tendency muscled in, the nauseating 'God bless America' became the unofficial national anthem.

I thought that the defeat of the odious Taliban was handled surprisingly well. But George Bush's identification of all trouble with a single abstract noun – 'terror' – is characteristically silly. The main way I have changed is in my attitude to religion. I used to think religion was harmless nonsense, entitled to at least some respect. I'd now drop the 'harmless'. And the last vestige of respect."

Tony Benn, activist and former Labour MP

"It was the most appalling tragedy for wholly innocent people. Its significance, now that we can see it against a historical perspective is, I think, very profound. Even a superpower on the scale of the

United States is not invulnerable. It has, in a way, driven President Bush to adopt the same techniques as al-Qa'ida, ie, bomb innocent people to make a political point. One of the victims in the US has been civil liberties. The Charter of the UN has been torn up and now we are on the eve, we are told, of a war that would be illegal under the charter and in which far more innocent people would be killed than died on September 11.

The alternative between Johannesburg trying to save the world and Washington trying to destroy it is the thing that comes to my mind. That choice is becoming sharper. A year ago, anyone who was against the war was a usual suspect; now overwhelming opinion is against another Iraq war. Not just in Britain, but in America, very large numbers of people are opposed to it. September 11 has focused our minds on the choice we have to make. Do we go for revenge, or do we try to build a new world order that is durable and is based on justice and peace?"

AS Byatt, novelist

"It's changed the world because we've moved into a stage where hypothetical fears are now known to be realities. There always were articles on what would happen if terrorists attacked a big city. Now we know. Americans I know have reacted with dignified grief and a determination to get on as normal. I admire them. I feel much less sympathy with the public rhetoric of George Bush, which happens not to be the kind of rhetoric I like. I am a pacifist.

When Bush said: 'Whoever is not with us is against us,' Europeans suddenly felt they were European and not American. The word 'crusade' was a mistake. My feeling about that has intensified rather than lessened. What Tony Blair thinks is complicated, and this is the most interesting part of the puzzle for me.

The world has changed. If you stopped to think about risk, you knew intellectually that you were in danger; September 11 made us feel it. It made us feel we were in danger, as opposed to knowing."

Ian Jack: Writer and editor of 'Granta'

"I am not saying that the events of September 11 weren't terrible – of course they were. But so far they haven't substantially changed the way the Western world lives, unlike the two world wars of the last century. At the time, there was a lot of speculation about how our culture would change – how Hollywood films would become less violent, how tall buildings would go out of fashion. I can see no evidence of this.

The truth is that it is too early to say. A war with Iraq could change the world more seriously – but Iraq had nothing to do with September 11. What September 11 seems to have done is to supply the USA with an emotional lever for a war against a Muslim state. Another unpredictable consequence is that America is now less popular in the rest of the world than it was before 3,000 innocent people died there. You need a very poor political sense – step forward President Bush – to achieve that.

In the issue of Granta that was devoted to how writers felt about America, Harold Pinter wrote that it was 'a fully-fledged, award-winning, gold-plated monster'. Now that sentiment seems much less extreme, given Washington's selfish and ultimately self-damaging stance towards the rest of the world on a whole range of issues, from Palestine to global warming.

One last thing. Imagine this was September 1940, one year after the Second World War broke out. Were the newspapers filled with feverish anniversary-itis as every bit of the media is today? No – far more serious things were taking place. Doesn't that suggest that September 11 is a spectator event and that we have yet to feel its consequences? Let's hope we don't."

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