INTRODUCTION

By HAROLD JAMES

The tragic events of September 11, 2001, came as a terrible surprise, except of course to those who perpetrated them. The four aircraft hijackings, the use of the seized and fully fueled large aircraft as incendiary bombs directed against the perceived centers of American financial, military, and legislative life (on the assumption that the fourth jet was to have been targeted at the U.S. Capitol), and the massive loss of life shattered all assumptions. The terror immediately produced a flood of analysis, instant commentary, articles, books, and gradually also a smaller tide of semiacademic and academic analysis.

What was striking about the commentary was how inconsistent and changeable the mainstream of analysis proved to be. Almost all of the observers agreed that "nothing will remain the same." Many called it the beginning of the "post–new world order." But what constituted that newness became less and less clear as time passed, as other events speeded up, and as thinking continued.

One obvious and instant response was that the events showed the terrifying vulnerability of the United States. Terrorists could strike at will at the nerve centers of the American/global order—at the vast communications networks that constitute the ganglia of the international financial and economic system and at the brain of American military power.

But it was apparent quite soon that the destruction of the twin towers of the World Trade Center and the damage to many buildings in the New York financial district did not undermine the markets or prevent them from functioning. Neither were military operations greatly impeded by the attack on the Pentagon.

One immediate analysis of the military problem of pursuing terrorists was that it would be impossible for a modern state to locate the bases of nonstate actors and that an armed incursion into collapsed states such as Afghanistan, where the al-Qaeda network appeared to be centered, would only mean a long, costly, and ultimately futile guerrilla war. As the first operations in Afghanistan began, and nothing much seemed to happen, this theme became the mainstay of press commentaries.

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But when the hold of the Taliban/al-Qaeda force was suddenly destroyed and guided missiles were effectively coordinated with ground intelligence, a new belief was formulated: that the United States was, in a phrase coined by the French foreign minister Hubert Védrine, the world’s “hyperpower” (or, in the phrase of European Union commissioner Chris Patten, a “super-duper power”).

One frequent analysis after the attack suggested that the very integrated world of the 1990s (“globalization”) was finished and that countries would instead turn inward to follow their own national interest more closely at the expense of international cooperation.

But very soon the United States started building coalitions against terror and tried to involve international institutions—the United Nations, the Bretton Woods institutions—in the exercise. It even rejoined UNESCO.

One response to the attack was to think in terms of Samuel Huntington’s “clash of civilizations,” in which a reconstituted West would face a recurrent war with radical Islamicist states and also stateless organizations.

But it soon became clear that almost all Islamic states wanted to dissociate themselves from the attacks and, on the other side, that the instant solidarity of the industrial world after September 11 was superficial and nonproductive. *Le monde* had famously declared that “we are all Americans,” but European-American tensions were greater one year after September 11 than at any time in postwar history. So September 11 was followed by big clashes within civilizations and not between them.

The striking feature about these analyses was the high speed with which they oscillated: they were formulated, contradicted, reformulated, and contradicted again. Was the United States vulnerable or massively preponderant? Did it need allies and coalitions or not? Was globalization over or was it bound to continue? Was there a clash of civilizations or disunity within civilizations? Were human rights more important, since poverty and poor human rights might serve as a breeding ground for terrorism, or were they less important, as changing U.S. policy toward Russia and China seemed to suggest?

To take another analogy, all the prevailing interpretations had a short—surprisingly short—half-life. After telling us that “everything has changed,” the consensus swung round to “not much has changed,” since the debates about globalization, about unilateralism versus multilateralism, about nonstate actors are all quite old and clearly predate September 11.

With the problem of fluctuating and contradictory analysis in mind, the editorial committee of *World Politics* decided to hold a one-day con-
ference to attempt to examine whether it might be possible at least to formulate the questions that September 11 posed for world politics clearly enough so as not simply to generate short-lived opinion. The invited speakers tackled subjects such as the changing role of states and nonstates in the international order, the relationship between global terror and globalization, the importance of religion and notions of moral order, and the domestic reasons why some societies might be more unstable and pose more of a threat to the international system.

Presented here are some of the results: three articles that investigate the claimed association between Islam and authoritarianism; the interplay of religion and the international system; and the working out of the dynamics of the post–new world order in a region where religious unrest, globalization, and challenges to American hegemony all come together.