



Stress Testing the USA

Public Policy and Reaction to
Disaster Events

John Rennie Short

Second Edition

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John Rennie Short
School of Public Policy
University of Maryland Baltimore County
Baltimore, MD, USA

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CHAPTER 1

Introduction to Stress Testing the USA

The new millennium was not kind to the United States. The first decade of the twenty-first century was a decade of disasters. Four stand out. The first, emerging out of 9/11, was the War on Terror and especially the invasion of Iraq in 2003, which caused the deaths of 4400 US military personnel and left 32,000 wounded. Its cost, always a guesstimate, is anywhere between \$740 billion and \$1 trillion and the total cost of subsequent 9/11 wars from 2001 to 2020 is estimated at \$6.4 trillion.¹ The true cost is probably higher but unknowable. How do we factor in the cost of depression, poor health, and substance abuse of returning troops long after the conflict has ended? By almost any criterion, it was a tragedy. American lives and treasure were lost; a hundred thousand Iraqis died and millions more were displaced and fled the country. The United States was tainted, not strengthened, by the war and at the end of the war was less rather than more secure from terrorism. Indeed, the reasons for and conduct of the war probably led to the recruitment of many more would-be terrorists. The invasion of Iraq motivated rather than weakened our enemies and undercut support from our traditional allies across the world. Begun under dubious premises, it soon became a blunder of epic proportions. The title of Thomas Ricks's 2006 book, one of the best books on the American military campaign in Iraq, says it all, *Fiasco*.

Second, Hurricane Katrina led to the drowning of a major US city, the loss of 2000 lives, and the destruction of property along the Gulf

Coast. It was less a natural than a preventable disaster, exacerbated by inadequate infrastructure, poor environmental management, and a tardy and ineffective governmental response. Years after the event, large parts of the city of New Orleans have yet to recover.

Third, in 2008 the Dow Jones Industrial Average plummeted from 14,066 on October 12 to 6626 in March 2009. Trillions of dollars of value on the stock market evaporated in the subsequent recession along with the financial security of millions of households. The economic ripples were felt around the globe. And fitting for its worldwide ripples, it is commonly referred to as the Global Financial Crisis (GFC). In the United States, house prices collapsed, seven million families lost their homes, four million jobs were lost in 18 months, and unemployment reached almost 10 percent. It was the Great Recession, a downward economic slide not seen since the 1930s.

Then, there was the BP oil spill in the Gulf of Mexico. On April 20, 2010, an explosion aboard the Deepwater Horizon drilling rig led to oil gushing uncontrollably from the underground reservoir. For 87 days, 53,000 barrels a day, almost five million gallons in all, escaped from the well into the Gulf of Mexico, poisoning the water, contaminating the beaches, and killing sea creatures and animal life. Day after day the televised images showed oil flowing uncontrollably from the deep earth into the sea. The event highlighted corporate indifference and government inadequacy in dealing with the risks of deep-sea drilling.

The second decade started well. A long recovery from the GFC was reducing unemployment. The economy was growing. The War on Terror continued but there was no longer the same existential threat. New Orleans was being rebuilt and the levees that surrounded the city were raised and hardened for future storms. The oil spill in the Gulf was brought under control and lessons were learned about the regulation of offshore oilrigs. By the end of the second decade, things seemed to be back on an even keel. Then, came 2020. A global pandemic swept the world, but death rates in the United States were higher than most other developed countries. By the end of February 2021, half a million people in the United States had died as a direct result of the virus. The pandemic revealed the major cleavage on US society and the flaws in US public health. The tardy response highlighted the crisis in governance. And in 2020, when George Floyd, a 46-year old Black man was killed by police, the latest in a long and seemingly endless death of black people at the

hands of police, it sparked not only national conversations about race, about policing but also about the very nature of US society.

These five events broke all kinds of records: the longest foreign war, the costliest “natural” disaster, the biggest economic downturn since the Great Depression; the largest oil spill; and the worst pandemic since 1918. Not just a quiet police action like Grenada, a memorable hurricane like Andrew, an economic downturn as in the early 1990s, an “average” oil spill, or a typical epidemic like the flu. No, they were of such a magnitude, individually and collectively, that they provide a perfect storm of a combined stress test. They reveal what the mundane and the ordinary cannot. Not simply was the size impressive in each case, but so was the level of incompetence: military fiasco, an emergency response debacle, economic mismanagement of epic proportions, an environmental tragedy, a botched pandemic response that turned into a public health catastrophe—five huge disasters all in one decade. If triumphal success justifies social institutions, extreme failure should produce piercing critiques of them. The events represent extreme cases and thus the most profound of stress tests.

In this book, I will stress test the United States using these five case studies to highlight fundamental fractures in US society. Stress testing is a long-established procedure to determine the stability of a system. Software is stress tested to see how it reacts with heavy Internet traffic. So are our hearts when the doctor makes us ride stationary bikes and then monitors our heartbeat and blood pressure. Force is applied to containers to determine how they stand up to heavier-than-normal loads. Economists also bring stress testing into play when they utilize models to assess changing variables, such as when interest rates rise sharply, demand shrinks, or supplies dwindle. There is now an annual stress test of major US banks. Stress testing shows how a system responds to pressure and, if carried far enough, highlights the system’s weak spots. It reveals how a system responds in a crisis and exposes its deep structural flaws.

The stress testing used here is not an empirical technique but rather an analysis of the events in some detail and a widening of the frame of reference so that we move on from assigning blame to individuals to identifying the deeper and more profound causes. The stress test used here foregrounds a search for structural, endemic causes of the apocalyptic events of the new millennium rather than assigning individual culpability. It is so much simpler if we could just blame George Bush, Michael Brown, greedy bankers, the CEO of BP, Donald Trump: their failures, however

palpable, nevertheless transcend them. The size and impact of the disasters discussed in this book, like all good stress tests, tell us more about fundamental weaknesses in social structure than simply reconfirm the eternal verities of human frailty.

In 1979 during a televised speech to the nation, President Jimmy Carter addressed the looming energy crisis and the deepening recession. He said, "It's clear that the real problems of our Nation are much deeper." It was not a popular or successful speech. It is now described as the "malaise speech," much criticized for presenting problems not solutions. A year later, Ronald Reagan beat him in the presidential race. Reagan offered a sunny optimism, a hope in a future presided over by the United States. While there are many who believe that Reagan turned the country around, there are some, like me, who see his presidential victory as inaugurating a huge military buildup, rising deficits, and a massive transfer of national wealth from the poor and the middle classes to the very wealthy. Reagan's new dawn in America shone most warmly on the rich. The fate of Jimmy Carter's failed second presidential bid should be a warning to those who ask the United States to look at the deeper problems. A nation that is so invested in an optimistic future rarely takes time to attend to the anxieties of the present, let alone to acknowledge the failings of the past. It is a national habit to "put things behind us," "look to tomorrow," to "move to the next level," "win the future," a trait that is superficially constructive, but actually avoids any sustained search for structural weakness, as it alights upon the quick fix. The disasters are of such magnitude that they demand a sober assessment of the United States and its institutions rather than an unthinking affirmation.

I am perhaps genetically programmed to focus on problems. I was born in Europe, Scotland to be precise, where the past hangs heavy. The great years of Scotland's global eminence during the Enlightenment, when it was one of the centers of intellectual thought and then one of the epicenters of the Industrial Revolution, are long over. Located on the periphery of the periphery, shaded with the darker hues of Scottish Presbyterianism and burdened with long historical memories, late-twentieth-century Scotland was not a place to engender a fierce commitment to the future. It was not a place of despair; rising living standards took care of that. But it was a place where the future was to be managed with care, not embraced with abandon. I took these sensibilities with me when as an adult I relocated to the United States. I have now lived here for more than 30 years, my accent a constant reminder of where I came from. The result then is

a book written by someone raised in Scotland, the old Europe, but living in the New World of the United States. I have held onto my intellectual legacy but imbibed a belief in the future. A dour Scottish Presbyterianism meets a New World sunny optimism is the unlikely result. A foreign-born longtime citizen, I am reminded of my liminal (dis)location when Americans tell me I have a strong Scottish accent and my family in Scotland remind me that I sound very American. It is this awkward shifting space that provides the perspective for this book.

But the United States is also losing some of its easy optimism, chastened no doubt by the four events. There is now a deep sense of pessimism in the United States. In a poll conducted in January 2012 by Rasmussen Reports, 60 percent of people interviewed in a telephone survey responded that they felt the country was going in the wrong direction.² Eight years later in September 2020, it was 69 percent.³ Other surveys reveal similar if not higher levels of disapproval. There is a darkening mood to the national spirit. Not only is there a lack of confidence in specific government policies, but the belief in the idea of government itself is at an all-time low. Approval rating for Congress is in the single digits. Across the spectrum of political opinion there is a profound sense that the country has lost its way. Compounding the feeling of malaise, there is no general agreement in which direction it should be headed. Election results embody rather than solve the deadlock. The United States remains a house divided. While some propose even more military spending, deeper tax cuts, and further deregulation, some others argue that this is exactly the policy that got us into the present mess. While the sense of pessimism is shared, there is no general agreement on the direction of the way forward. There is a real sense that the country is floundering. In this book I will examine some of the events that got us into the present state. I will also look at how these events reveal some of the structural flaws that we need to address if we are to move forward. I will conduct a stress test of the United States.

The book is meant not to anchor us in despair because of the depth of the structural problems. It is not, I hope, solely a “malaise” book. However, optimism unconnected to realities is a naïveté that risks perpetual disappointment. It is only by identifying the profound problems can we address and overcome them. Only by soberly identifying the deeper origins of our crises can we map a successful path to the future. A belief in a better future requires a deeper understanding of the crises of the present.

Crises and disasters reveal, like nothing else, the fracture lines within a society. In this book, I will explore the five events to see what they reveal about the fracture lines, strengths, and weaknesses in US society. I explore their settings, causes, consequences, and representations. It is not a politically partisan exercise; rather, the events will be a prism through which to view issues of power, class, race, money, globalization, the meaning of patriotism and citizenship, environmental issues, and private influences on government and public policy. It will highlight the unexpected consequences of agreed-upon ideas. The book is less about assigning blame than about uncovering structural faults.

NOTES

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The War on Terror and the Costs of Empire

The War on Terror was first announced less than a week after the 9/11 attack on the United States. On September 16, 2001, George Bush said, “the American people understand, this crusade, this war on terrorism, is going to take a while.” Not only was a war announced, but it was also given a name, The War on Terror. And it was just not a war but The War. And the enemy was not a narrow group of antagonists but all those who would commit terror.

Waging a war is one of the biggest burdens for any society and the stresses of this war tested the United States to its breaking point. The War on Terror was an open-ended and vaguely strategized response that would quickly mire the United States in a fiasco in Iraq and then an open-ended and seemingly endless commitment in Afghanistan that strategists deemed, “The Long War.” How are we to situate this war? So soon after 9/11 it seems we have a simple origin: a swift response to an unprecedented attack on innocent civilians in the United States. In this reading, the shallow and narrow view, the resulting problems are then just short-term tactical blunders that tell us about the failings of the Bush administration and its flawed policies. This is the standard interpretation made attractive by its simplicity. And it can be made even simpler through personalization: Bush is to blame. Eager to assert military might, he was unconcerned about the postwar construction of the country he ordered to be invaded. And a slice of blame should be placed on Cheney: the

vice president who refused to believe intelligence that did not support his long-held belief that the United States should invade Iraq. And then there was Rumsfeld: the defense secretary whose arrogance covered an almost criminal incompetence in managing postwar Iraq. And there was Paul Wolfowitz, whose decades-long obsession with Iraq led him to promote the invasion of the country even while the World Trade Center was still smoldering and there was absolutely no proof of Saddam Hussein's involvement in 9/11. There is a lot of raw material for the simplistic blame-the-incompetents argument, but it does not provide a deep stress test. Change the president, vote out the administration, or change the policy and, according to this perspective, the problem is solved. But the flaws are much deeper than one misguided president, a war-mongering vice president, an arrogant and incompetent defense secretary, or an Iraq-obsessed advisor and far longer than a two-term administration. The Long War and its legacies continued long after the cast of characters responsible for the fiasco in Iraq had left the national political stage.

The very limited interpretation that focuses on one administration's failure does not stand up to even the rudest of scrutiny. Even if we concentrate on the very immediate decisions, the responsibility quickly shifts from just a narrow group in the Bush administration. It was not just the president who made "wrong decisions" but the Congress, Democrats as well as Republicans, the Pentagon, and the Joint Chiefs of Staff. An embedded press provided cover and support. And early on, The War on Terror received tremendous public support. The conception and implementation of The War on Terror and the invasion of Iraq did not just reveal the mistakes of one administration and the failure of sensible leadership to emerge at a time of crisis; they also highlight the fundamental problems of a United States committed to global military intervention. I will refer to this commitment as Empire. From this wider frame and deeper historical context, the problematic nature of the invasion of Iraq suggests a longer and more complex genealogy. Big events, such as a long-running war, rarely have singular origins. And epic failures have multiple births. The catastrophe of the invasion of Iraq and the ongoing fallout from the War on Terror results from the imperial posture of the United States.

THE RISE OF EMPIRE

Immediately after the Second World War, the United States began a pronounced demobilization. By 1948 the numbers mobilized shrunk to just over half a million in the Army and less than half a million in the Navy from a peak of 11 million at the height of the war. Despite the vastness of the enterprise and the globality of the conflict, the United States was doing what it had always done—mass and rapid demobilization after war. The military was set to return to its default position of always small with little direct influence on the broad contours of public political debates. But this time was to be different as the United States began its rise as a global superpower.

It started as a defensive posture. In 1946 a young diplomat in Moscow, George Kennan, sent a long telegram to Washington outlining a containment policy for a perceived Soviet threat. In March 1947 President Truman announced to the world that the United States would “support free peoples who are resisting subjugation.” The Truman Doctrine, enunciated during a civil war in Greece, gave official weight to the notion of containment. It was a warning shot against what Truman and many others saw as Soviet expansionism. In a growing climate of postwar paranoia, Congress later on that same year passed the National Security Act, which created the National Security Council and the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) and reshaped the Department of Defense as the largest and most influential of government agencies. The world was reimagined as the stage for global conflict, a Manichean struggle between good and evil, right and wrong, democracy and capitalism against an expanding communism bent on world domination. The Bush administration framed the War on Terror as a similarly Manichean struggle.

The United States was able to imagine this global role for itself because it was the largest economy at the end of the Second World War. The old imperial powers such as the United Kingdom and France were bankrupt, and Japan and Germany were defeated. The Soviet Union experienced huge wartime losses of people and resources. A more sober assessment could have depicted the USSR as what Daniel Yergin called a “cruel, clumsy, bureaucratized fear-ridden despotism” just hanging on to power. But a Soviet Union of formidable power and efficiency was represented instead, all the better to frame the US response. From this “foundational paranoia,” emerged the outline of an imperial United States. It was never described in those terms. The words and images of Empire

and imperialism were tainted because of its association with European colonialism. For domestic consumption the United States was never an empire, simply a powerful force for good, keeping the darkness at bay, spreading the light of democracy and the unalloyed benefits of capitalism. America stood for democracy, freedom, and liberty. Who could question these ideals? And the obligatory answer is, only those promoting undemocratic regimes, unfree societies, and a totalitarian agenda. The United States was portrayed at home as a force against evil, a knight in shining armor, which allowed the country to be inextricably linked to the rest of the world as a nation permanently at arms. Now, "America's interests and responsibilities were unrestricted and global."¹

Paranoia increased in 1949 when communists gained control of China after decades of civil war, and the Soviets exploded their first atomic weapon. The response was a 58-page report produced by the newly established National Security Council. Known as NSC-68, the report outlined a global strategy for the United States of a massive buildup of military power to achieve "situations of strength." It was an open-ended commitment to an Empire of global reach and military dominance. However, the potential costs of the new role were initially too much for Truman. In 1949 the expanded global military presence was a plan, a hope, a fantasy. And although Truman enunciated his doctrine, US troops were not sent to Greece during its civil war. Between the rhetoric of Empire and the political realities, there was a large gap filled by caution, uncertainty, and a sober assessment of the costs.

Korea changed everything. On June 25, 1950, at Ongjin, northwest of Seoul, fighting broke out between the Democratic People's Republic of Korea, (DPRK, henceforth North Korea) and the Republic of Korea (ROK, henceforth South Korea). North Korean forces quickly overran much of the peninsula as South Korean forces scattered and ran. By mid-September the North Korean Army had pushed all the way south to Pusan in the far south of the peninsula. The United States sent troops to South Korea, persuaded the United Nations (UN) to get involved, and quickly pushed the North Koreans all the way back north to the border of China on the Yalu River. The Chinese Army also entered the conflict supporting North Korea and launched a counteroffensive that pushed the US-UN forces back to the 38th parallel. Rapid advances and retreats on both sides stalled by June 1951, and the war became a static trench war. The divide between North and South created after the cease-fire in 1953 formed a front line between the communist and capitalist

blocs of the Cold War. The Korean War was a bloody encounter. From hostilities breaking out in 1950 to the armistice in 1953, military and civilian casualties and deaths are estimated at between 4.2 and 4.7 million. It also marked the beginning of the US Empire.²

The Korean War propelled the United States into a permanent global empire. The sudden advance and stunning success of the North Korean Army called into question the credibility of the fledgling superpower of the United States. Korea turned a tentative notion and inchoate desire into the hard reality of Empire as US troops were shipped to the peninsula, North Korea was invaded, and permanent military bases were established. Korea crystallized the postwar paranoia, allowing a quadrupling of the US defense budget, the official adoption of NSC-68, and the domestic acceptance that the United States would have a permanent military presence far from home. The war in Korea “occasioned the enormous foreign military base structure and the domestic military-industrial complex to service it.”³

The Empire that first emerged from the Korean War is now a sprawling archipelago of military bases around the world, a vast military-industrial security complex backing a pervasive worldview dominated by visions of global hegemony. There are now at least 800 bases with 200,000 US military personnel spread around the world in at least 80 countries at a cost of \$150 billion a year.⁴ From the ending of the Second World War until today, the United States has redefined itself as a national security state with global reach, while war and military involvement were normalized by a self-fulfilling predisposition to paranoia.

There were always critics of Empire. The title of the American Anti-Imperial League established in 1898 summed up their basic position. There were also the critics who argued, and continue to argue, that expansion overseas diverts the nation from the construction of true democracy at home.⁵ Opposition also came from more unusual sources. President Eisenhower, a Republican and former military leader, gave a farewell address to the nation on January 17, 1961, in which he warned his fellow Americans of the political influence of a military-industrial complex of “an immense military establishment and a large arms industry.” He spoke of the grave implications of a huge defense establishment. It is still an amazing speech. Eisenhower was a professional military man, supreme commander of Allied forces in Europe during the Second World War, and no stranger to war. And yet he realized the dangers of a rising militarism and in a striking metaphor of arms spending spoke of “humanity hanging

from a cross of iron.” It was a recurring worry to Eisenhower. He gave a speech in the first year of his presidency in 1953 when he warned of excessive defense spending. The farewell speech was not a rushed afterthought; Eisenhower worked on at least 20 drafts. The final version was the result of a decade of rising concern with the emergence of an American Empire.

Critics notwithstanding, the empire grew and expanded. There were ebbs and flows in the course of Empire. Plotting the Department of Defense (DOD) budget, for example, reveals four postwar peaks. There was the huge spike of the Korean War when annual defense spending reached \$500 billion (in 2002 dollars), two smaller spikes topping \$400 billion during the Vietnam War and Reagan’s military buildup in the 1980s, and then a huge increase in the wake of 9/11. By 2010 the DOD total budget, including the costs of the war in Iraq and Afghanistan, was \$685 billion—doubling from the 2001 figure. Defense spending now accounts for 23 percent of all federal spending in the United States. A complex web of connection links the military with armaments manufacturers and political representatives. The revolving door propels former military and political figures into lucrative corporate appointments as lobbyists and consultants. The arms industry provides jobs in congressional districts, keeping politicians in power. The manufacturers promote more value-added technologies to a military eager to spend and to politicians eager to burnish their commitment to defense spending. A lethal alliance of politics, economics, and military promotes a continual spending on war despite its designation as “defense spending.” The United States is the single biggest military spender in the world, responsible for almost 40 percent of total global arms spending. Its military expenditure is now greater than the next 10 largest military powers combined.⁶

Once the Empire was established it soon developed an expansionary dynamic. Threats, both real and imagined, included phony missile gaps, a Vietnamese peasant uprising recast as a Communist takeover, national liberation movements perceived as communist insurgents, and a Soviet Empire on the verge of collapse portrayed as an expansionary force. Local events reimagined as global conspiracies all helped to fuel imperial expansion. And even when the Soviet empire did collapse in 1989, there was no long-lasting peace dividend. As we will see, the US role was reimagined from a containment of communism to the single global power responsible for global security. The bipolarity of the Cold War was replaced by

the unipolarity of American power reaching across the globe. In a stunning twist, the collapse of the USSR signaled not the abatement of the US Empire but its enlargement and expansion.

Empire fed on itself: a vast military-industrial-security complex was established with a huge and insatiable appetite for expansion and growth. Its tentacles reaching into every state and congressional district ensured widespread political support for a distribution of bases abroad and an unwavering acceptance at home that the United States could and should pursue global reach to maintain hegemony.

Empire needs a shadow. To justify the huge costs, an equally large counterforce needs to be imagined, created, or invented. This was easy during the Cold War when an “evil” Soviet empire fitted the bill. With the USSR’s demise came a brief period of uncertainty before global terrorism became the shadow of the US empire, standing for everything bad against everything good, the evil empire counter to the good empire. The Empire needs enemies, which have to be of some consequence to justify and legitimate their counterweights. Acts of terrorism are thus seen as acts of war, assassins as criminal masterminds. Shadow empires, if absent, are soon manufactured and invented. And if no specific animus is found, then a more general notion of maintaining a global order is employed or a vaguely defined global terrorist threat is conjured up.

The shadow can be strategically invoked. As the war on Iraq failed to show progress and criticism was mounting, Rumsfeld circulated a 15-point memo on April 19, 2006. “Keep elevating the threat,” he noted in point 14. The next point went on to say, “Talk about Somalia, the Philippines, etc. Make sure the American people realize they are surrounded in the world by violent extremists.”⁷ It is in the interests of many leaders to jack up the level of threat and portray a picture of a United States beleaguered by enemies. The shadow justifies Empire.

As a vital prop of Empire, the shadow is always there, real or imagined. A permanent threat is invoked, morphing over time from Soviet expansionism to global terrorism. A never-ending threat is used to justify American military power, promote the Pentagon’s global footprint, justify massive military expenditures and evoke the public’s support of Empire. The United States is placed on the path of persistent conflict, recurring national security crises, a never-ending war. A permanent war, either in process, or in preparation, is the tragic outcome of the US Empire.⁸

ENTANGLEMENTS AND BLOWBACK

A global presence means that the United States can be entangled by political events around the world. The manager of the global world order may quickly become caught up in national and local situations that confound, confuse, and penalize. On November 26, 1979, the ruling elite of the Soviet Union, the Politburo's inner circle, decided to invade Afghanistan. A month later, on Christmas Eve, troops from the 40th Soviet Army were deployed. The Soviet, and before them the pre-Soviet Russian governments were long interested in the country situated close to its southern border, a zone made vulnerable by the explosive mix of ethnicities, nationalities, and religious affiliations. The country was the single biggest recipient of USSR foreign aid. In 1978 a small urban-based, Communist party overthrew the existing government that itself was established after a coup against King Mohammad Zahir Shah in 1973. The events were a result of internal tensions and not Soviet expansionism per se, but the new socialist neighbor was appreciated by the Soviets who stepped up aid. The new regime was thuggish and deeply factionalized. It forced its policies too quickly and brutally on the Afghans, and when it faced extreme resistance it jailed and killed opposition members. The growing repression whittled away most of the remaining support and soon most of the rural areas were in open revolt. The government in Kabul appealed for Soviet aid. The Soviets believed that the regime would not remain in power without military intervention and the removal of the president. Soviet troops entered the country, killed the existing president Hafizullah Amin, and established Babrak Karmal as president. Soon there were over 100,000 Soviet military personnel in the country.

In the summer of 1979 Carter had authorized funding of anticommunist guerrillas in Afghanistan. Aid and money from the United States increased during the 1980s. Aiding the guerrillas was seen as a way to drain the power and prestige of the Soviet Union. Afghanistan was a wound that could be deepened to bleed the Soviet empire. The United States joined Saudi Arabia and Pakistan in funding and training resisters to Soviet occupation. There were diverse groups, such as Tajiks and Pashtuns, and competing warlords. The insurrection also caught the imagination of Islamicists who saw the struggle as a jihad, a holy war between the followers of Islam and the godless communists. Mujahedeen, roughly translated from Arabic, means people undertaking jihad. Arabs such as Osama bin Laden joined the fight. The United States in effect

helped pave the path to power for the Taliban that later provided refuge to bin Laden.

On August 2, 1991, Iraqi troops invaded the oil-rich Persian Gulf state of Kuwait. The United States swiftly responded. This was Empire 2.0, when there was no risk of nuclear war as the Soviet Union had faded into history. There was the Carter Doctrine to uphold, and Kuwait was an oil-rich state. Under President George H. W. Bush, the United States initiated sanctions and organized a coalition of international forces to force the Iraqis out of Kuwait. Alliances and loyalties can quickly change. Iraq was controlled by Saddam Hussein, previously supported by the United States in the Iran-Iraq War (1980–1988). With that war now consigned to history, Saddam Hussein was no longer an ally but now the enemy. The Gulf War was a great success for the United States. The Saudi government footed more than half of the total bill, and the coalition forces defeated the Iraqis in a stunningly quick campaign with very few casualties. The coalition forces were poised to topple the entire Hussein regime but stopped well short of Baghdad. The failure to topple Hussein rankled many right-wingers who were to become influential members of the next Bush's presidency.

The entry of infidel troops into Arab lands outraged radical Islamicists such as Osama bin Laden. Buoyed by the defeat of the Soviet superpower in Afghanistan and motivated by a deep anti-modern, anti-US sentiment, terrorist groups began to form. Following on from the entry of US troops into the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, a sustained terrorist campaign was launched against the United States and its interests abroad. There was a blowback of costs and consequences to Empire.⁹

Throughout the summer of 2001, Al Qaeda recalled its senior operatives to Afghanistan. The US intelligence-gathering communities reported enormous "chatter." On the morning of September 11, 2001, 19 young Arab men boarded four westbound aircraft on the east coast of the United States, which they hijacked soon after takeoff. At 8:46 A.M., American Airlines Flight 11 flew directly into the North Tower of the twin-towered World Trade Center. Seventeen minutes later, United Airlines Flight 175 crashed into the South Tower. Little more than 30 minutes later, American Airlines Flight 77 crashed into the outer ring of the Pentagon in Washington, DC. On the final hijacked plane, United Airlines Flight 93, the passengers, now aware of the hijackers' deadly mission, struggled to regain control of the plane. It crashed into a field in Shanksville, Pennsylvania, killing all on board.