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COMING APART

After 9/11 transfixed America, the country's problems were left to rot.

BY GEORGE PACKER

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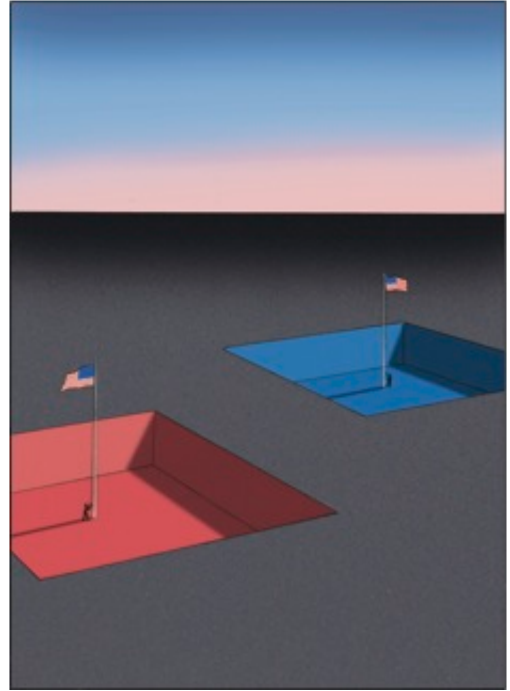
On March 31, 2004, four Americans working as guards for the private security company Blackwater were ambushed and killed by insurgents in the Iraqi city of Falluja, the charred remains of two of them dragged away by a mob and hung from a bridge over the Euphrates River. The incident, which led to a monthlong battle between the Marines and insurgents, marked the start of Iraq's descent into nationwide chaos, and added an iconic image of horror to the gallery that has been created in the decade since September 11, 2001: the collapse of the burning Twin Towers; the shipping containers in Mazar-i-Sharif crammed with hundreds of dead Taliban fighters; the videotaped beheadings of the journalist Daniel Pearl and the contractor Nick Berg; the demented eyes of the "shoe bomber," Richard Reid, after his arrest; the dental exam performed on the mouth of a captured Saddam Hussein; the digitally recorded humiliations of prisoners at Abu Ghraib; and the bloody corpse of Osama bin Laden, a photograph of which has not been released, obliging the public to use its battered imagination.



No national consensus formed around 9/11. Indeed, the decade since has destroyed the very possibility of a common narrative.

Chris Berman, a former Navy SEAL and an out-of-work commercial diver from Southern California, was hired by Blackwater a month before the ambush. Three days before the attack, he volunteered to take the doomed trip from Kuwait to Baghdad and on to Falluja—it was a food-escort detail—but at the last minute his place was taken by one of his friends, Scott Helvenston. A few hours later, Berman learned that television networks were broadcasting footage of the car Helvenston had ridden in, a Mitsubishi Pajero, riddled with bullets and engulfed in flames. Berman decided to accompany his friend's body back to the house of Helvenston's mother, in Florida, and for two days he waited for the coffin to arrive at the military airport in Kuwait; during that time, he began drawing

designs on napkins—ideas for armoring the Pajero, so that his colleagues might have survived the attack. That June, Berman quit Blackwater, and within a few months he had opened a factory in Kuwait that produced a sinister-looking black armored vehicle, called the Rock, for security companies working in Iraq. His timing was perfect—the most violent phase of the war was just beginning. The Rock was so successful that Berman decided to move into the much larger, more competitive, and more lucrative field of armoring military vehicles.

In 2005, four years after the overthrow of the Taliban, in Afghanistan, and more than two years into the Iraq War, U.S. troops were still scavenging "hillbilly armor"—scrap metal and bulletproof glass—to reinforce the lightly armored Humvees provided by the Pentagon. More and more American soldiers were being killed by powerful roadside bombs that had been planted by sophisticated fighters; the Pentagon, however, was mesmerized by its doctrine of high-technology warfare and initially refused to call the campaign an insurgency. No sooner was the word allowed than Vice-President Dick Cheney announced that the insurgency had entered its "last throes." The scandal of using shoddy equipment infuriated Berman, and he saw a business opportunity to do what the government was failing to do: protect troops. Military contracting, because of its classified nature, is one of the few industries that haven't departed American shores, and in 2006 Berman moved his operation to the United States. He chose to situate his company, Granite Tactical Vehicles, amid the fallow tobacco farms and abandoned textile mills of Surry County, North Carolina.

The company's factory is near the Virginia state line, in Mount Airy, North Carolina—the home town of Andy Griffith and the inspiration for Mayberry, R.F.D. The shopwindows on Main Street are crammed with goofy memorabilia from "The Andy Griffith Show," and there's still an old movie house across the street from Floyd's City Barber Shop. But the picture of small-town nostalgia crumbles in the surrounding streets, where dozens of factories—some the size of a small house, others several blocks long—are boarded up. Surry County, which has a population of seventy-two thousand, has lost ten thousand jobs in the decade since 9/11.

The events of September 11th, as grim as they were, offered the prospect of employment to a generation of working-class Americans who were born too late for good factory jobs. If the Bush Administration's "global war on terror" had gone the way of the Second World War, mass mobilization in the armed forces, combined with mass production in the factories, would have revitalized a stagnant national economy and produced a postwar boom. This didn't happen. Without a draft, the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan have been fought by less than one per cent of the population. The Pentagon, which wanted to keep those wars limited and short, avoided planning for large-scale manufacturing, even after its necessity became obvious. In 2004, Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld was questioned by a scout from the Tennessee National Guard about the lack of quality armor for his unit's trucks. "You go to war with the army you have," Rumsfeld replied. Even after this remark became infamous, the production of armor proceeded slowly, almost grudgingly, and troops

and vehicles remained dangerously exposed for years. Most new defense jobs at home turned out to be in data collection and intelligence, which required college degrees and specialized knowledge, or in the low-paying realm of airport and building security.

But the main reason that 9/11 didn't become a source of jobs, or of ideas for revitalizing the economy, was that the country wasn't thinking about its own weaknesses. President George W. Bush defined his era in terms of war, and the public largely saw it the same way. September 11th was a tragedy that, in the years that followed, tragically consumed the nation's attention.

The attacks were supposed to have signalled one of the great transformations in the country's history. Bush talked about ridding the world of evil, columnists wrote of "World War Three," and almost all Americans felt that, in their private lives and in the national life, nothing would ever be the same. But the decade that followed did not live up to expectations. In most of the ways that mattered, 9/11 changed nothing.

The prevailing conditions on that crystalline morning were unfavorable. Politically, the country was entrenched in two bitterly opposed camps. A few moderate Republicans, like Senator Lincoln Chafee, of Rhode Island, and Southern Democrats, like Senator Max Cleland, of Georgia, still survived in Congress, but their extinction was foreseeable. In a two-year period, Congress's impeachment of Bill Clinton and the Florida recount that was stopped by a similarly divided Supreme Court, handing the Presidency to Bush, had suddenly made America's great democratic institutions seem flimsy and entirely partisan. During the 2000 election campaign, the news media came up with a new, color-coded way of dividing the country—into red and blue. On the economic front, America was in a recession, the dot-com bubble having already burst. A culture of speculation and debt on Wall Street was beginning to suffer from its own lopsidedness, with unprecedented fortunes in technology and finance accumulating at the top, and incomes in the middle flattening out, as blue-collar jobs moved offshore. The problem of income inequality was worsening, thanks to enormous tax cuts that had been passed into law that spring. The budget surplus of the Clinton years was vanishing. Around Surry County, the smaller textile mills were closing down.

When Chris Berman arrived in Mount Airy five years after 9/11, county officials were so desperate for manufacturing work that they gave him a one-dollar lease on a former textile factory where Kentucky Derby Hosiery had once employed four hundred people—a pair of empty metal buildings, totalling a hundred and eighty thousand square feet, on a quiet street near a housing project. Berman said that he wanted to hire veterans. Surry County is full of them, and Larry Calloway, an ex-serviceman who helps veterans find work through the local unemployment office, filled up boxes with their applications.

For several years, the Pentagon has had plans to rebuild Humvees used in the war, and improve their armor, instead of buying new ones. Berman was determined to win such a contract, and in 2007 he began developing a model design that would remake the entire vehicle except for its chassis,

strengthening the Humvee's ability to survive a blast. He would employ at least three hundred workers rebuilding sixty vehicles a month, with Textron, a partner company in Louisiana, producing the rest. Berman is an intense, square-jawed man in his fifties, with a scarred body and a quick temper. "You will not burn in *our* vehicle," he said one day in late July, as he strode across the factory floor in cargo shorts and running shoes. Desert-tan pieces of Humvee cabs lay scattered about, some of them dented by 20-mm. test bullets. Overhead, a grid of conduit pipes followed the old floor plan, where hundreds of knitting machines had once stood. "With our design, you are totally isolated from the fuel cell," Berman said. "You will not collapse if you turn over. Look at it from a practical point of view—forget the morality. What does it cost to support a guy who loses his limbs for life? What does it cost to care for a guy who's paralyzed for life? What does it take to pay out a death benefit?" The thought that anyone—a competitor corporation, a government bureaucrat—would be indifferent to such issues drove him crazy. "Sometimes I want to take these guys in suits by their lapels and tell them, 'I'm going to take you somewhere you don't want to go and see how this Humvee does.' We put more money on T.S.A. people at the airport who are screaming at you like it's the Third Reich than we do protecting the people who are truly protecting us."

People who knew the business said that Berman's design was among the best. There was one problem: the government kept putting off requests for bids, in part because the main Humvee manufacturer, a large corporation in Indiana called AM General, appeared to have enough clout in Congress to get the process delayed, staving off competition. In March, at a hearing of the House defense-appropriations subcommittee, Secretary of Defense Robert Gates said, "We should not put American lives at risk to protect specific programs or contractors." The public seemed unaware or unconcerned, because most Americans were no longer thinking much about the wars.

With the Humvee contract in limbo, Granite Tactical Vehicles was stuck in the research-and-development phase—at this point, it amounted to tinkering while the company waited on Washington. Berman's operation, which had looked poised to revitalize Mount Airy, had a workforce of barely two dozen people. And there was no guarantee that the contract, when it was finally issued—the rumored date for accepting bids is now this fall—would go to the best design. Berman's company was too small to employ an army of lobbyists working on its behalf in Washington. After five years, officials in Surry County were muttering that they might have to take their lease back.

The pressure was starting to get to Berman. He had shut down his profitable Kuwait business in 2008 in order to focus on the Humvee design—a mistake, he now realized. He had staked his children's education money and his retirement on Granite Tactical Vehicles. He was acutely aware of Mount Airy's outsized expectations. "We've had people come to the door looking for work who were middle- to higher-level management," he said. "They would do anything—janitorial, go from working with a pen to working with their hands—to feed their family. It's terrible."

Mark Driggers was one of the few locals who had got a job there. He was twenty-five, with a

light-brown crew cut, a blond beard, and small hoop earrings. He had spent six years in the North Carolina National Guard and done a tour in northern Iraq. He said of the experience, "In a nonjudgmental way, the over-all goal was to preserve freedom in our country so that what happened on September 11th could not and would not happen again." Fighting wars to change Muslim countries was pretty hopeless, he had concluded. "Let them deal with it themselves—maybe keep a finger in it over there—and do what we did for them in *this* country, for ourselves. Let's build the broken cities, build the broken towns and people, and make them feel our government's working for us, not against us." But, he added good-naturedly, "If you come over to our country and do what the terrorists did, we're going to shove our boot up your butt as far as we can."

In 2007, Driggers came back home from Iraq to find that everyone thanked him for his service and no one would give him a decent job. He bounced from one temporary job to another—at gas stations, auto-body shops, even Walmart—always the first to be laid off. Employers were wary of him because he could be deployed again on twenty-four-hours' notice. He had an auto-body certificate from the local community college, but it was about as useless as the driver's badge of honor that he'd won in Iraq. "There's people that can't go a year in their personal vehicle without having an accident, and I was overseas a year without one," he said. "It really made me think. As proud as I am of my military service, it's only two days a year that people think about the military—Memorial Day and Veterans Day. The rest of the days, people are like, I'm watching out for myself instead of helping the soldiers who go over to Iraq so they can preserve your freedom to choose who to employ. It hit me with a fifty-pound sledgehammer."

Jobs in Surry County were so scarce that a lot of Driggers's friends had to drive an hour to work in Winston-Salem or Greensboro. For women in the area, once mainstays of the sewing factories, the one job that seemed to have potential for growth was as a certified nurse's assistant; a few girls Driggers knew were considering going into adult entertainment in nearby cities. Demand at the National Guard armory, on Andy Griffith Parkway, was so intense that, for months at a time, the unit stopped recruiting. A friend of Driggers's from the Guard, whose girlfriend had just had a baby, went on active duty as the only way to support his new family and was now in Afghanistan—his third deployment.

Mount Airy's quaint façade, its last selling point to the outside world, left Driggers cynical. "You watched 'The Andy Griffith Show'? That's what this town lives off. It's not always going to be there. You only got so many people going to dress up like Floyd the Barber or Gomer Pyle and walk down Main Street. Kids my age are leaving the city because there's nothing here." It wasn't just that Andy Griffith's Mount Airy no longer existed. The America that the show idealized—a society in which every man had a job, inequalities of wealth were muted, and people were bound together in a tight community—no longer existed, either. In the relatively abundant postwar years, Mayberry, R.F.D., had seemed like Anytown, U.S.A. The Mount Airy that Mark Driggers had returned to from Iraq also

told a story—one of national decline. Ten years ago, the town might have felt like an irrelevant backwater, with the country's future taking shape in more dynamic and prosperous places like Silicon Valley, Cambridge, or Manhattan. Today, those enclaves seem increasingly like grotesque exceptions, celebrating the opening of Danny Meyer's latest restaurant while fourteen million Americans are more or less permanently unemployed, and millions more are in foreclosure or drowning in debt. Today, Mount Airy is representative, not marginal. It's become Anytown again.

Driggers first applied at Granite Tactical Vehicles three years ago. He loved the idea of making better Humvees—a shoddy one that he'd driven over bad roads in Iraq had left him with neck and back trouble so severe that it was sometimes hard to get out of bed in the morning. Initially, Berman had no work available, but, in June, after Driggers had reapplied several times, he was hired to do odd jobs around the plant. One blistering day this summer, Driggers traded his grease-spattered jeans for his old uniform, flak vest, and helmet, got behind the wheel of one of Berman's Humvees, and test-drove the vehicle on a two-mile course near a gravel quarry and some cornfields. The dirt track's hairpin turns and three-foot holes were meant to simulate the rigors of rural Afghanistan. Inside the vehicle, Driggers felt instantly at ease, as if he were getting on a bicycle again, this time with a much more comfortable ride. It was one of his best days on the job.

Larry Calloway, the ex-serviceman who helps veterans, thought that Driggers was a very lucky man. Calloway occasionally secures a job for someone, but his days are largely spent helping the vets who come into his office obtain unemployment benefits. Most of them show up within two weeks of receiving their discharge papers. Calloway, a man with thinning hair, glasses, and a strong country accent, served during the Vietnam era, then became an energy trader at Duke Power, in North Carolina. After retiring, he went to work at the unemployment office in Mount Airy because it made him feel good. His generation had faced difficulties after Vietnam with the oil embargo, he said, but for these new veterans it was different. "There's not a cutoff point," he said. "It's been going on for ten years." He described the young vets who came back home expecting to find work in law enforcement, only to end up in fast food. Calloway said that the men would ask him, "Can you find me a job? I can't live off of twenty hours a week of minimum wage. My unemployment's out now, I went and got this training, what good's it done? Is there anything out there?"

Calloway wondered why the government didn't give larger tax breaks to companies that hired vets. (In early August, President Barack Obama proposed the Returning Heroes Tax Credit, a belated effort to help the country's one million unemployed veterans find work.) For five years, Calloway's hopes had been rising and falling on the potential contract for Granite Tactical Vehicles. The government had bailed out the big banks, he said, and then those same banks started charging nearly thirty-per-cent interest rates on the credit cards of some Surry County residents—people who had lost their jobs and their homes and still went to church every Sunday and prayed for things to turn around. Surry County had plenty of young men with a work ethic. All it lacked was jobs. "I believe that the

people that was the backbone of this country, that worked hard in this country—they got left behind," Calloway said.

As he spoke in his small office, Calloway apologized for getting emotional. "You're in rural America here," he said. "This is the backbone of the U.S. military. And when they come back from the war you want to tell them, 'Marry your sweetheart, have those kids, get that job'—like the World War Two generation. The generation that's coming back now, they need that same thing, they want that same thing." But none of the vets ever told Calloway that America owed them a better deal. They were too proud of serving their country to complain.

Of the three attacks that have provoked the United States into a major war—in 1861, 1941, and 2001—only one came as a complete surprise. Fort Sumter had been under siege for months when, just before daybreak on April 12, 1861, Confederate batteries around Charleston Harbor, after giving an hour's notice, opened fire on the Federal position. The Japanese attack at Pearl Harbor, on December 7, 1941, was a violent shock, but only in the nature and extent of the destruction: by then, most Americans had come to believe that the country would be dragged into the global war with Fascism one way or another, though their eyes were fixed on Europe, not the Pacific.

The attacks of 9/11 were the biggest surprise in American history, and for the past ten years we haven't stopped being surprised. The war on terror has had no discernible trajectory, and, unlike other military conflicts, it's almost impossible to define victory. You can't document the war's progress on a world map or chart it on a historical timetable in a way that makes any sense. A country used to a feeling of command and control has been whipsawed into a state of perpetual reaction, swinging wildly between passive fear and fevered, often thoughtless, activity, at a high cost to its self-confidence. Each new episode has been hard, if not impossible, to predict: from the first instant of the attacks to the collapse of the towers; from the decision to invade Iraq to the failure to find a single weapon of mass destruction; from the insurgency to the surge; from the return of the Taliban to the Arab Spring to the point-blank killing of bin Laden; from the financial crisis to the landslide election of Barack Obama and his nearly immediate repudiation.

Adam Goodheart's new book, "1861: The Civil War Awakening," shows that the start of the conflict was accompanied, in what was left of the Union, by a revolutionary surge of energy among young people, who saw the dramatic events of that year in terms of the ideals of 1776. Almost two years before the Emancipation Proclamation, millions of Americans already understood that this was to be a war for or against slavery. Goodheart writes, "The war represented the overdue effort to sort out the double legacy of America's founders: the uneasy marriage of the Declaration's inspired ideals with the Constitution's ingenious expedients."

Pearl Harbor was similarly clarifying. It put an instant end to the isolationism that had kept American foreign policy in a chokehold for two decades. In the White House on the night of December 7th, Franklin Roosevelt's Navy Secretary, Frank Knox, whispered to Secretary of Labor

Frances Perkins, "I think the boss must have a great load off his mind. . . . At least we know what to do now." The Second World War brought a truce in the American class war that had raged throughout the thirties, and it unified a bitterly divided country. By the time of the Japanese surrender, the Great Depression was over and America had been transformed.

This isn't to deny that there were fierce arguments, at the time and ever since, about the causes and goals of both the Civil War and the Second World War. But 1861 and 1941 each created a common national narrative (which happened to be the victors' narrative): both wars were about the country's survival and the expansion of the freedoms on which it was founded. Nothing like this consensus has formed around September 11th. On the interstate south of Mount Airy, there's a recruiting billboard with the famous image of marines raising the flag at Iwo Jima, and the slogan "For Our Nation. For Us All." In recent years, "For Us All" has been a fantasy. Indeed, the decade since the attacks has destroyed the very possibility of a common national narrative in this country.

The attacks, so unforeseen, presented a tremendous challenge, one that a country in better shape would have found a way to address. This challenge began on the level of definition and understanding. The essential problem was one of asymmetry: the enemy was nineteen Arab men in suits, holding commercial-airline tickets. They were under the command not of a government but, rather, of a shadowy organization whose name no one could pronounce, consisting of an obscure Saudi-in-exile and his several thousand followers hiding out in the Afghan desert. The damage caused by the attacks spread outward from Ground Zero through the whole global economy—but, even so, these acts of terrorism were different only in degree from earlier truck, car, and boat bombings. When other terrorists had tried, in 1993, what the hijackers achieved in 2001, their failure to bring down one of the Twin Towers had been categorized as a crime, to be handled by a federal court. September 11th, too, was a crime—one that, by imagination, skill, and luck, produced the effects of a war.

But it was also a crime linked to one of the largest and most destructive political tendencies in the modern world: radical Islamism. Al Qaeda was its self-appointed vanguard, but across the Muslim countries there were other, more local organizations that, for nearly three decades, had been killing thousands of people in the name of this ideology. Several regimes—Iran, Sudan, Saudi Arabia, Pakistan—officially subscribed to some variant of radical Islamism, tolerating or even supporting terrorists. Millions of Muslims, while not adherents of Al Qaeda's most nihilistic fantasies, identified with its resentments and welcomed the attacks as overdue justice against American tyranny.

A crime that felt like a war, waged by a group of stateless men occupying the fringe of a widespread ideology, who called themselves holy warriors and wanted to provoke the superpower into responding with more war: this was something entirely new. It raised vexing questions about the nature of the conflict, the enemy, and the best response, questions made all the more difficult by America's habitual isolation, and its profound indifference to world events that had set in after the Cold War.

No one appeared more surprised on September 11th, more caught off guard, than President Bush. The look of startled fear on his face neither reflected nor inspired the quiet strength and resolve that he kept asserting as the country's response. In reaction to his own unreadiness, Bush immediately overreached for an answer. In his memoir, "Decision Points," Bush describes his thinking as he absorbed the news in the Presidential limousine, on Route 41 in Florida: "The first plane could have been an accident. The second was definitely an attack. The third was a declaration of war." In the President's mind, 9/11 was elevated to an act of war by the number of planes. Later that day, at Offutt Air Force Base, in Nebraska, he further refined his interpretation, telling his National Security Council by videoconference, "We are at war against terror."

Those were fateful words. Defining the enemy by its tactic was a strange conceptual diversion that immediately made the focus too narrow (what about the ideology behind the terror?) and too broad (were we at war with all terrorists and their supporters everywhere?). The President could have said, "We are at war against Al Qaeda," but he didn't. Instead, he escalated his rhetoric, in an attempt to overpower any ambiguities. Freedom was at war with fear, he told the country, and he would not rest until the final victory. In short, the new world of 2001 looked very much like the bygone worlds of 1861 and 1941. The President took inspiration from a painting, in the White House Treaty Room, depicting Lincoln on board a steamship with Generals Grant and Sherman: it reminded Bush of Lincoln's "clarity of purpose." The size of the undertaking seemed to give Bush a new comfort. His entire sense of the job came to depend on being a war President.

What were the American people to do in this vast new war? In his address to Congress on September 20, 2001—the speech that gave his most eloquent account of the meaning of September 11th—the President told Americans to live their lives, hug their children, uphold their values, participate in the economy, and pray for the victims. These quiet continuities were supposed to be reassuring, but instead they revealed the unreality that lay beneath his call to arms. Wasn't there anything else? Should Americans enlist in the armed forces, join the foreign service, pay more taxes, do volunteer work, study foreign languages, travel to Muslim countries? No—just go on using their credit cards. Bush's Presidency would emulate Woodrow Wilson's and Warren G. Harding's *simultaneously*. Never was the mismatch between the idea of the war and the war itself more apparent. Everything had changed, Bush announced, but not to worry—nothing would change.

When Bush met with congressional leaders after the attacks, Senator Tom Daschle, the South Dakota Democrat, cautioned against the implications of the word "war." "I disagreed," Bush later wrote. "If four coordinated attacks by a terrorist network that had pledged to kill as many Americans as possible was not an act of war, then what was it? A breach of diplomatic protocol?" Rather than answering with an argument, Bush took a shot at Daschle's judgment and, by implication, his manhood. Soon after the attacks, William Bennett, the conservative former Education Secretary, published a short book called "Why We Fight: Moral Clarity and the War on Terrorism." The title

suggested that anyone experiencing anything short of total clarity was suspect.

From the start, important avenues of inquiry were marked with warning signs by the Administration. Those who ventured down them would pay a price. The conversation that a mature democracy should have held never happened, because this was no longer a mature democracy.

At the time of the attacks, few educated Americans born after 1950 had any direct experience of war or persecution or cataclysmic failure. After 9/11, this gap in the résumés of intellectuals gave them both a sense of inadequacy—an outbreak of envy for the Greatest Generation—and a compensatory tendency to inflate the drama of the war on terror and their own role in it. This took place at a level of abstraction that is made possible when the fighting is eight thousand miles away. As a result, a number of the country's best minds mistook the post-September 11th era for a new American golden age.

One of them was Walter Russell Mead, a prominent member of the foreign-policy establishment—as a fellow at the Council on Foreign Relations—and also one of its best writers. In 2004, Mead published a slim book called "Power, Terror, Peace, and War: America's Grand Strategy in a World at Risk," and it is symptomatic of élite thinking during the Bush years. Mead's theme is the "American Revival," a self-confident ideology that amounts to conservatism in its latest, most aggressive model. The old New Deal order has broken down under pressure from free-market forces, nourished by traditional American values, which Mead calls "millennial capitalism." These revolutionary changes at home can be extended abroad, amounting to an "American project for world order." This global campaign to re-create the world in America's new image is embodied in a foreign policy called the Bush Doctrine.

Mead's sympathy is clearly with Bush and the Revivalists, and he enjoys taking jabs at the big-government bureaucrats and sentimental internationalists who can only get out of the way of this juggernaut: "Much of the background noise of the next generation will be the keen and eloquent wailing of the educated classes in the United States." Mead writes that America's future belongs to the "Jacksonians": lower-middle-class white Americans who are patriotic, religious, insular, self-reliant, ready to take the fight ruthlessly to the enemy abroad, and hostile to élites at home, their passions best articulated by George W. Bush in his "dead or alive" mode. In short, people like the residents of Surry County, North Carolina. Mead, who was educated at Groton and Yale, is confident that he knows and understands such people. Their perpetual rage, amplified on Fox News and on talk radio, pleases him, and since their power, right or wrong, is surely rising, he hails it. Mead's Jacksonians are also devotees of "millennial capitalism." "A Jacksonian revolt against élites is running in harmony with the structural needs of the economy," he writes. By this logic, laid-off textile workers will land in good jobs as long as they continue to despise pointy-headed experts who keep trying to mess with the economy. Mead's argument is a study in élitism that no longer believes in its own right to exist.

Soon after the book's publication, the Bush Doctrine lay in ruins, as the Administration's ambition

to mold Iraq into a tidy secular democracy came apart. Then, in September, 2008, the bottom fell out of "millennial capitalism." Suddenly, the whole notion of an American Revival looked like an absurd mirage. That a writer of Mead's calibre could fall under its sway underscores the intellectual confusion that followed the tremendous surprise of September 11th. In his eagerness to imagine an "American grand strategy in a world at risk," he didn't bother to notice the problems festering at home.

After the attacks, Americans asked, "Why do they hate us?" This turned out to be the wrong line of inquiry. The most pressing questions were about us, not them: our leaders, our institutions, our ability to act as a cohesive nation and make rational decisions, our power to take action abroad in a way that would not be a self-defeating waste. Starting with the intelligence failures that did not foresee the attacks, every major American institution flunked the test of the September 11th decade. The media got the W.M.D.s wrong. The military failed to plan for chaos in postwar Iraq. Congress neglected its oversight duties. The political system produced no statesmen. C.E.O.s and financiers couldn't see past short-term profits. The Bush Administration had one major success: it succeeded in staving off another terrorist attack in America. It botched almost everything else.

A great many counterfactual histories could be written about those years. If Al Gore had been allowed to take office, if bin Laden had been captured at Tora Bora, if the focus had stayed on Al Qaeda, if real nation-building had been tried in Afghanistan, if America hadn't gone to war in Iraq. All these alternative paths would have been helpful, but none of them would have been decisive, because the deeper problem lay in an ongoing decline that was greater than any single event or policy.

After 9/11, life in America changed in a few palpable ways: you needed I.D. to get into an office building, and boarding an airplane became an ordeal. But all the structural trends stayed on course: the stock market, after a setback, maintained its relentless upward climb; inequality soared, as Wall Street fortunes reached unimaginable new heights, while average wages began to decline; just about every remaining textile job in Surry County disappeared; Americans sank deeper into debt and depended more on their houses for wealth; the iMac progressed to the iPad; CBS News continued its descent into irrelevance and Fox News its corrosive rise, while newspapers kept cutting back or closing shop. The political division of America into red and blue hardened into the mutually hostile and unintelligible universes in which we live today. Bush, already viewed as illegitimate by many Democrats, became one of the most hated Presidents in American history; the writer Nicholson Baker even published a novella about the merits of assassinating him. Meanwhile, the Republican Party fell completely under the control of its most extreme elements, and "traitor" became a routine term for its opponents. For all the talk of national unity and a new sense of purpose, the terror attacks did nothing to bring together the country. America after September 11th was like a couch potato who survives a heart attack, vows to start a strict regimen of diet and exercise, and after a few weeks still finds himself camped out in the living room.

The Bush Administration collapsed in the late summer of 2005—not in Falluja or Kandahar but in the submerged neighborhoods of New Orleans. The response to Hurricane Katrina gave Americans such a devastating picture of official failure that it suggested something fatally wrong with an entire approach to governing. Iraq, of course, had provided evidence of high-level arrogance, incompetence, and neglect for two years, and Afghanistan for even longer than that, but, because these places were far away and American troops were risking their lives to serve the nation, the public wasn't ready to withdraw its support. When the footage came out of the Gulf Coast—when, for the second time in four years, a great American city looked like Kabul or Kinshasa—it was Iraq in fast motion, and right around the corner. Government at all levels, but especially in Washington, had failed to plan for the worst outcome, even when the entire country saw it coming. An Administration staffed by cronies neglected to take care of citizens for whom it had the greatest responsibility. Katrina made brutally clear that the White House had substituted passive, self-congratulatory bravado for serious organized effort. Like Iraq, New Orleans represented a failure of individual leaders, but also of national institutions.

After Katrina, support for the Iraq war evaporated. Having been asked for very little ever since September 11th, other than to take the Administration's way on faith, Americans had little trouble reframing their allegiances. This was the price of a foreign policy based on assertion rather than on persuasion. The war on terror had been a kind of confidence game: it depended on a belief in American virtue and ability that had proved unwarranted. With the exception of his advocacy of the surge, in 2007, Bush became an increasingly irrelevant figure, and his foreign policy crawled away from grand projects for "world order." When Vice-President Cheney called for new wars with Iran and Syria, there were no takers.

In the years after Katrina, Americans began to see that the same unstable combination of hoopla and neglect that had characterized the war on terror also characterized the decade's supposed economic boom. While the media were riveted by the spectacle of celebrity wealth, large areas of the country were—like Surry County—left to rot. The boom had been built on sand: housing speculation, overvalued stocks, reckless deregulation, irresponsible deficits. When the foundation started to crumble with the first wave of mortgage defaults, in 2007, the scale of the destruction became the latest of the decade's surprises. Hardly anyone foresaw how far the economy would fall; hardly anyone imagined how many people it would take on the way down. Even the economic advisers of the next Administration badly misjudged the crisis. The trillions of dollars spent and, often, misspent on wars and domestic bureaucracies were no longer available to fill the hole left by the implosion of the private economy. Reborn champions of austerity pointed to the deficits in order to make the case that the country couldn't afford to spend its way back to health. And, like the attacks that were supposed to change everything, the recession—which was given the epithet "Great" and was constantly compared with the Depression of the nineteen-thirties—inspired very little change in economic policy. Without

effective leadership, the country blindly reverted to the status quo ante, with the same few people making a lot of money, if a little less than before, and the same people doing badly, if a little worse.

This malignant persistence since September 11th is the biggest surprise of all. In previous decades, sneak attacks, stock-market crashes, and other great crises became hinges on which American history swung in dramatically new directions. But events on the same scale, or nearly so, no longer seem to have that power; moneyed interests may have become too entrenched, élites too self-seeking, institutions too feeble, and the public too polarized and passive for the country to be shocked into fundamental change.

In Amy Waldman's new novel "The Submission," a jury of New Yorkers unknowingly chooses the design of a Muslim American architect as the winning entry for a memorial to victims of Islamist terrorism. The city is soon consumed with rancor, accusation, counter-accusation, and violence, until even the novel's most thoughtful characters—American and foreign, Muslim and non-Muslim, élite and "Jacksonian"—withdraw into the narrowest perspective of their own experience. Calculating politicians and a vicious media make sure that citizens retreat from empathy, which offers the only path to unity, and arrive at the dead end of argument and grievance. Waldman's vision of a sick political culture is all the more convincing because of her background—she is a journalist who has long experience reporting from Islamic countries and from her own. Another kind of writer might have put a well-meaning thumb on the moral scales and sentimentalized the novel's Muslims, or its "Jacksonians." In Waldman's telling, the failure to create a unifying memorial belongs to everyone.

Life is about to imitate art. On September 11, 2011, the consecration of Ground Zero will finally take place. The ceremony will testify primarily to a decade of squabbling and inertia, and the design is an unhappy compromise that satisfies no one. It's a fitting coda to a year that saw another seriously belated milestone: the delivery of justice to Osama bin Laden.

One of the fault lines that runs through "The Submission" is the gulf between New York and the rest of the country. As the jurors in the memorial competition argue about the implications of their blind selection, one of them says, "Every American has the right to create—it's our birthright. We all understand that. We're New Yorkers! But will the heartland? They're much more narrow-minded. Trust me, I'm from there." Later in the novel, another juror says, "We think so differently, so atypically, here. We're such a minority in our own country. Liberals, I mean."

For most of the decade after September 11th, liberals from New York and elsewhere felt marginalized, misrepresented, ridiculed, scapegoated, and, worst of all, ignored. For this treatment to befall that group of Americans who, by their own lights, got the decade mostly right—to be so reviled and so vindicated—inflicted a kind of painful pleasure. But the enduring problem for liberals, as for everyone else, is not whether history will judge them wise or foolish regarding the war on terrorism; it is, rather, the way that the past decade has splintered them away from other Americans. This fracture comes with a steep price: in today's toxic atmosphere, liberals are no less cynical, shortsighted, and

parochial than anyone else, and they understand their fellow-Americans just as badly as they themselves are understood.

When liberals look at red-state voters, they see either a mob of pious know-nothings or the insensible victims of militarism and class warfare. Surry County is as deep red as anywhere in the country: last year, after an acrimonious fight on the Mount Airy town council, a recycling initiative barely survived opposition by Tea Party supporters, some of whom considered it a step toward socialism. And it's true that the country's wars and economic distress have found most of their casualties in places like this. Yet Surry County's veterans and workingmen don't think of themselves as victims. Their pride is too stiff for that. Nor do they sound like "millennial capitalists" looking to fight the next war for American grand strategy. They are too seasoned by trouble for that. They defy fixed categories, which means that they have to be figured out the hard way—on their own terms.

On the day in July when Mark Driggers drove one of Chris Berman's Humvees around the two-mile dirt track, an employee named Roger Holt was also out at the test course. Holt, who is forty-nine, grew up working in the region's textile industry and on its tobacco farms; his mother was a cleaning lady at the old Kentucky Derby Hosiery factory. In 2006, Holt became one of Berman's first hires, at eleven dollars an hour—a little less than he had made at a textile mill in 1985.

As Humvees roared and rolled over the red clay track, past the cornfields, Holt, a soft-spoken man with a sad blue-eyed smile and a gap between his front teeth, talked about America's wars. "When we got in World War Two, we fought as a country, we fought as a united country," he said. He would never forget where he was on September 11th—at a meeting of maintenance men, in Winston-Salem. Some of the men had done jobs in New York, on buildings adjacent to the towers. In Mount Airy, Holt recalled, all the local shops quickly sold out of American flags. But it bothered him that, in the new wars, soldiers had to answer to the media for every wrong move. That had helped tear the country apart. "We're all human," he said. "Put them under a microscope and wait for them to, excuse me, fuck up—if we do that while our boys are protecting us while we sleep, we'll never be united again." Holt believed that the only thing that could bring the country together again would be another world war. "That pulled us out of the Depression," he said. "But I'd hate to see it."

Another employee, who had been listening in, spoke up. He was a welder who gave his name as Rock, which was the name of the armored vehicle on his black T-shirt. "All hell's gonna break loose by the end of the year," he said. "We can't take it anymore. This is the Corporate States of America—I don't give a damn what anybody says. Everybody across this country's lost their homes, took pay cuts. Who's lobbying for us? Nobody. Who's making laws for us? Nobody." Rock started to walk away. "Something's gotta break sometime."

Holt stroked his shaggy mustache. After Pearl Harbor, he remembered, one Japanese soldier said to another, "We've awakened a sleeping giant." Holt smiled at the thought. "They knowed they was in for a fight," he said. "We don't have that respect in the world anymore, because we're not united.

We're letting the world pass us by."

When the test drives were finished, Holt and Mark Driggers drove the armored Humvees back to the factory—an apparition of the Iraq War in the streets of Mount Airy. The factory buildings felt almost deserted, but Chris Berman still hopes to fill them with workers. He imagines outfitting the plant with a row of welding stations that have been custom-designed for veterans in wheelchairs. "A lot of veterans left decent jobs to fight for a cause they believe in, and they come back to what? A country full of unemployment," he said. "You were your kids' hero when you went, but three years later, when you might be losing your home or you're impoverished, you might not be your kids' hero anymore." ♦

ILLUSTRATION: GUY BILLOUT

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