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Introduction

Rebuilding began only three days after the shock. With the ruins of the World Trade Center still burning, as they would continue to do for weeks after, and the smoldering rubble of what used to be the West's most significant symbol of economic wealth strewn across lower Manhattan, the bulldozers took up their work. The scale of what had happened was not yet comprehensible. Still, the first traces of 'Project Rebirth' were already under way.¹ New York City, shaken by a terrorist attack of unprecedented magnitude, had been in a state of paralysis, but was far from dead, and began to stir again beneath the pall of smoke and ash which had hovered over it for days. As Rudolph Giuliani, the city's mayor, put it: "Tomorrow New York is going to be here. And we're going to rebuild, and we're going to be stronger than we were before..."²

Ten years later, walking down Church Street from the north toward the site where the Twin Towers dwarfed everything else before two hijacked airplanes appeared out of a clear blue sky to bring them down, what meets the eye is a vast gaping space. With the debris cleared away, the stark barren plane is still as much a wound as it is a building site. But from amidst the bustling clatter the construction cranes protrude. Ground Zero is the place to watch the stricken American giant getting to its feet again.

Since that fateful day in the fall of 2001, however, the United States has not been merely rebuilding the famous skyline of its gateway to the world. On a less visible level, another, very different kind of reconstruction has been taking place. Over the last nine years, the nation has been

1 An initiative of the same name chronicles the reconstruction work at NYC's Ground Zero. <http://www.projectrebirth.org>, retrieved 03-20-2010.

2 Eric Pooley, "Mayor of the world", *Time*, December 31, 2001.

going through a process of ideological reorientation. The war in Iraq, to this day still not a ‘mission accomplished’, has further intensified this process.³ And just when things started to get back to normal, the nation had to cope with another shock: the most severe financial crisis since the Great Depression. Compared to the terrorists’ attack, the crash on Wall Street in the fall of 2008 meant a blow from the inside, and together, these events have considerably shaken both American self-confidence and Americans’ trust in their government. The crisis is far from over; the nation has not yet found its bearings. This holds true even though many find fresh hope in Barack Obama’s election as the 44th President of the United States. *New York Times* columnist Timothy Egan summed up the high expectations set for the new administration:

This was the first real 21st-century election – rejecting the incompetence of the Bush years [...] and the poison of media-driven wedge politics. As a nation, we rejoin the world community. As a sustaining narrative, we found our story again.⁴

The United States, the most powerful nation on the planet, has a remarkable record of re-defining its relationship with the world community. More significantly, it also has a remarkably successful record of recovering quickly from crises. The American “narrative,” however, is still strained by the traumatic experience of September 11, and a feeling of insecurity and vulnerability – unfamiliar to a nation that thought itself beyond the reach of its enemies – persists. Yet America is gradually recovering, and it is being assisted in the process by one specific group of citizens: its public intellectuals. They have mounted a significant effort to help heal the wounds incurred on September 11. While aware that the scars inflicted on that day will remain on the nation’s soul, America’s intellectuals consider two cures to be indispensable: explaining the past and construing the future for their people. Thus they have entered onto the public stage again, and very determinedly so. Their ideas become influential because they manage to reach political and religious organizations, the business community, and educational institutions which then disseminate the message further (while making it more palatable). In addition, the intellectuals themselves are well versed in using the main-

3 George W. Bush (in)famously used the term in his speech aboard the aircraft carrier *USS Abraham Lincoln* on May 1, 2003, declaring combat operations in Iraq to be over.

4 Timothy Egan, “This American Moment – The Surprises”, *The New York Times*, November 5, 2008. <http://egan.blogs.nytimes.com/2008/11/05/this-american-moment-the-surprises/?em>, retrieved 11-05-2008.

stream media as a platform, an amplifier and a distributor in this process. Even those parts of the public who do not pay attention are thus eventually affected – if only indirectly by the political decisions inspired by these ideas.

In this book, seventeen of America's most important public intellectuals present their views on their nation's role in the post-9/11 world. They also present their views regarding their own role in American society. While coming from different professional backgrounds, they are all experts in foreign policy and engage in a vibrant, comprehensive debate. Howard Zinn, Francis Fukuyama, and Joseph Nye are all at home in academia, but they live in different worlds with regard to their political preferences. Anne-Marie Slaughter, James Lindsay, Nancy Soderberg, and Strobe Talbott share similar views on a range of issues. All of them have ties to the academic world, yet Talbott now heads what is arguably America's most influential think tank, while Slaughter joined the Obama administration. It is safe to say that John Bolton and Cornel West have little in common beyond their U.S. passports – at least politically. On a more personal level though, the Conservative hard-liner and the free spirit from Princeton – who has recorded his own hip-hop album with Prince and KRS-One – share a marked preference for anecdotes, featuring George W. Bush and Snoop Dogg, respectively.

The conversations with Bolton and Benjamin Barber took place the same day, separated only by a 30-minute walk down Fifth Avenue, yet the statements made were far apart. Both men have turned their backs on academia though, and the latter, just like Clyde Prestowitz, has founded his own think tank. Noam Chomsky, at odds with most views held in academia, nevertheless remains a faculty member at MIT, where he intends to stir controversy well beyond his recent 80th birthday. Robert Keohane, dressed in a tracksuit and returning slightly late for the interview from his daily cycling workout around the Princeton campus, proves a patient and amiable interlocutor. So does Michael Walzer, who feels that inviting the interviewer for lunch beforehand is in order. Jean Bethke Elshtain offers to help find the best flight connection to Chicago where she teaches. Zbigniew Brzezinski, a contemporary of Chomsky, gets straight to the point (and straight out the door) since, as an advisor to Obama, his time is limited. Michael Novak, *éminence grise* of the American Enterprise Institute who has a private website, takes the time to inquire about the interviewer's family.

What all of these professional thinkers have in common – besides their enigmatic personalities – is their commitment to respond to the state of their nation. Irrespective of their political preferences, they regard it as their task to both analyze the mistakes of the past and provide a plan for the future that they hope might prevent their nation from blundering again.

Public opinion is an elusive phenomenon, and in a country as big as the United States, different people are always going to be affected differently by a myriad of issues – which, in addition, are in constant flux. Still, a number of issues rise above the rest since they relate to events that everybody feels have changed their lives. That horrendous morning of September 11 is undoubtedly such an event. People's perceptions of their nation and the world were fundamentally shaken and the old system of values no longer holds. In search of orientation, the public embarks on a journey of recovery, re-thinking, and re-evaluation. Public opinion is more receptive than ever to the voice of experts – some of whom reinforce the status quo (advocated by parts of the Conservative camp), while others are committed to renewal and change (exemplified by Obama's campaign slogan 'Change We Can Believe In'). The opportunities are immense – the tragedy lies in the calamity that triggered them.

Public intellectuals have seized this rare chance to consolidate and strengthen their position in society, and act once more as a decisive factor in shaping public opinion. Since 2001, the book market – which traditionally boasts a sizeable current-affairs section – has been flooded with publications on American foreign policy. They are generally marked by an accessible, down-to-earth writing style, which renders them both comprehensible and appealing to a larger public. More often than not, a catchy title highlights the agenda, promising the customer sophisticated reading pleasure and a refinement of one's foreign policy knowledge. Intellectual loyalty to this mode of publication – the book – is striking, given the omnipresence of modern means of communication such as web forums, blogs, podcasts, newspapers, and magazines. However, authors (including the ones interviewed in this book) have implied that – especially when compared with the transitory electronic medium – books provide lasting, scientifically sound, and verifiable knowledge by renowned experts on the subject – in other words, a 'reality-check' on the innumerable statements floating around on the Internet. That doesn't mean that America's intellectuals neglect other media and restrict themselves to the compara-

tively lengthy process of voicing their opinions in a book every year or two. Commentaries, op-ed articles, reviews, and interviews on the subject abound in all major newspapers, and intellectual magazines cover the entire political spectrum.⁵ They bear witness to the extent that the current debate is geared toward the broad, educated public.

Discussion thus takes place in the public sphere, a forum that is, at least potentially, accessible to all. Obviously, it is the privilege of a limited number of established protagonists – eminent *literati* – to interact with a growing audience. Some of them have by now attained the status of celebrities, and they seem to enjoy the comforts of fame. Traveling the country on extended book tours, gracing TV shows with their expertise, they are brilliant minds with a devoted following.⁶ Occasionally, some of them succumb to the temptation and play to the grandstand. Others will change their mind on a specific issue only to defend their new position just as vehemently as the one held dear not long before. In any case, these opinion-leaders address the American people directly in search of support for their points of view. They therefore feel the need to adapt their style and approach to the task at hand, i.e. to boil down complex foreign policy issues and explain their implications to (and for) the ordinary citizen. Academic heavyweights in their professional lives, these public intellectuals are prepared to compromise some of their standing among their peers in order to reach out to a larger audience beyond the ivory tower.

The debate is also public in yet another way. Contributors themselves are interrelated. Constituting an informal network, they constantly respond to each other, acting and reacting within the boundaries of what can be regarded as a sub-genre in the field of current-affairs books. Interplay takes place in the form of critical reviews as, for example, in a recent

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- 5 Readers face a large selection: From the Conservative *National Review* (founded by William F. Buckley in 1955), *National Interest* (1985), and the recent *American Interest* (2005), to moderate and liberal magazines like *The New York Review of Books* (1963), the venerable *New Republic* (1914), *Foreign Affairs* (1922), and *New Yorker* (1925). More on the fringes are the Neoconservatives' organ *Weekly Standard* (1995), and the leftist *Nation* (1865) or *Dissent* (1954), to name just a few. Most of these magazines have a comparatively – at times surprisingly – small circulation. They make up for this by their respective formats, which are tailor-made for their specific audiences. Since their readership is extremely interested and engaged in politics, and since they have a loyal following in the crucial circles of the political establishment, they exert considerable influence.
- 6 Cornel West has managed to bridge the seemingly unbridgeable gap between the Ivy League and Hollywood, appearing in both the second and third part of the science-fiction blockbuster *The Matrix*. Epitomizing the phenomenon of blurring boundaries, West simply played himself; his character is named 'Councillor West'.

issue of the *New York Review of Books*, where the author tackles the issue of (American) empire by comparing five contrasting publications on the subject.⁷

This public debate is the response of America's intellectuals to the growing demand by the well-educated and influential sectors of the public to understand their nation's current role on the global stage. As members of the media, the political establishment, and the business community, they bring these issues to the attention of the broader public. As a result, a growing number of Americans want to know what their 'men and women of letters' have to say about a whole host of current issues such as, what led to the catastrophe of September 11? How best to prevent a similar catastrophe, and how best to restore America's damaged reputation – without sacrificing the nation's exceptional standing? What to expect of Obama? How to become once again the *city upon a hill*?⁸

Still, the nation's leading thinkers did not wait around for a jump-start from the public. In fact, most have been trying rather vigorously to reclaim the spotlight for themselves. They feel a need to position themselves – to sharpen their profiles – so as not to become increasingly irrelevant, pushed aside by growing competition from political journalists, Internet bloggers, and a host of television and radio experts (the so-called *pundits* such as Ann Coulter, Bill O'Reilly, Michelle Malkin, Glenn Beck, and Rush Limbaugh). The best way to remain in the public eye is to set up one's stage in the nation's square. Today's intellectuals have done exactly that. By initiating, steering, and perpetuating a national debate on America's future, they discuss and define their nation's role in a world that has changed since September 11.

7 See Alan Ryan, "What Happened to the American Empire?", *The New York Review of Books*, Vol. 55, No.16, October 23, 2008.

8 In 1630, John Winthrop warned the Puritan colonists who were to found the Massachusetts Bay Colony that their new community would be a 'city upon a hill', watched by all the world.