

# Ethics & International Affairs

2002 VOLUME 16 NUMBER 2



Carnegie Council  
ON ETHICS AND  
INTERNATIONAL AFFAIRS

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## THE SEPTEMBER 11 EFFECT

*Paige Arthur*

There is no single September 11 effect, if by “effect” we mean the way in which something—an event, for example—has influenced our lives. The simple fact is that last year’s attacks have reorganized the world in which we live in many ways. One year later, Afghanistan has a new government, the United States has a new cabinet-level department, and whole regions of the world have taken on a new significance through their relation to the antiterrorism campaign: Kashmir, Israel and Palestine, Central Asia, the Philippines, and Malaysia, to name a few.

A rather incongruous new language has emerged in September 11’s wake, one that unifies the various discourses on humanitarian intervention, just war, mock war (like the “war on drugs”), the politics of good and evil, and the security concerns of a potent realism. In the rush to provide reasons for particular actions, policymakers and pundits seemed to choose from these discourses at will. This is, perhaps, inevitable when one’s target keeps moving—is it al-Qaeda, the Taliban, Iraq, any terrorist group anywhere, an “axis of evil”?—but it is unsettling. Since it seems that the leaders of the antiterrorist campaign are not starting with well-defined objectives, but rather scripting them to fit as they go along, the public should be more careful in deciding which policies it wants to support.

To an extent, of course, acting and reacting is what politics is all about. That is no reason, however, to refrain from reflection and judgment. The articles in this Roundtable demonstrate the importance of critical thinking to debate on the antiterrorist campaign. In a public domain that often seems confident in the rightness of the United States’ current course of action, they offer a reminder that moral certainty is not something to be taken for granted. If rooting out terrorism is to benefit everyone, then the means employed to do so must be principled, they must not divert attention and resources from other pressing crises, and they must involve the cooperation of other peoples (and not simply their governments).

This is to say that a concern for September 11 should not lead us to an obsession with September 11. We should avoid the temptation—a strong one, given the enduring emotional impact of the attacks in the United States—of telescoping all our resources, priorities, and thinking toward one worry. We should avoid, then, the creation of a single September 11 effect, which would risk a fall into a consuming obsession, and which would forestall the processes of critique and revision necessary to democratic politics.