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Panel: Reflections on a Global Year: The Worldview, Post 9/11

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How has the world changed? What has been the effect on art and literature? What is the ongoing effect likely to be?

I’d like to tell you that when September 11 dawned in New Zealand 17 hours before it did in Iowa, two huge flags were unfurled on the top of Auckland Harbour Bridge – A New Zealand flag and an American flag. They flew half-mast.

It’s now 8.30 on Thursday morning there and a number of memorial services were held throughout the country, yesterday New Zealand time.

So, we’re away ahead of the rest of the world -- in most things.

We were horrified by what happened in New York a year ago, and remain horrified that such vicious mass murder can be committed by insane young men in the name of a religion. Sadly, it’s a fact of history that all religions have produced these fringe fanatics who don’t so much worship God as pretend to take his place down here.

But in practical ways our world has not been changed greatly by the terrorist attack on New York a year ago.

New Zealanders travel internationally more than any other people in the world, probably because of our isolation. That’s become more difficult because of security precautions, and officials everywhere are less welcoming.

But tourism in New Zealand had increased dramatically because it’s seen as a safe place.

The most obvious and frightening effect everywhere was the clear proof that technology nowadays is such that a small group of people with a lot of money can inflict major catastrophes on others. You don’t have to confront armies with armies any more.

Understandably it gave America the jitters – not only because of the loss of life but because of the scary, spectacular, dramatic imagery of it all.

The important point is that how New Zealanders and the countrymen represented by the IWP writers react to September 11 is insignificant compared with how the United States reacts to it.

America can brush us all aside and do almost what it will. Which means that how America reacts to it in the future is a matter of critical importance to everyone of us.
Because I've been a writer, journalist and broadcaster all my working life, I want to discuss the effects on language, effects which disturb me and, I think, most New Zealanders.

Bear in mind that the cultural similarities between my country and the US are much more profound than the differences.

Some of the things we have in common, for example, are appalling television, dreadful fast food, an irrational attachment to the motor car, and a selfish attitude towards the problems of other less fortunate people. So we feel quite at home here.

But there is a difference. In the opinion of most of us, American culture’s flaw at the public media level is gross sentimentality. This is whipped up by xenophobic television and has taken a sharp turn for the worse since last year.

Let’s look language, because as writers we’re guardians of our languages. We should be defending them against abuse because they are the instrument with which politicians, religious leaders, corporate leaders and others try to manipulate us.

Take a few words that have been heavily abused by the media since last year. There was a moving letter in the New York Times two weeks ago from the father of someone who died in the Twin Towers that day. The suggestion had been made that Newark International Airport should be renamed Liberty Airport in honour of the heroes who died that day.

The letter said that his daughter was not a hero, she was an innocent victim, that most if not all the people who died that day were innocent victims and he asked why couldn’t they be called that.

Here was a man confronting his grief with honesty. Semantically, the abuse of the word hero is sad because when everyone’s a hero, no one is. (That letter reminded me of a touching essay by, I think, Plutarch, who wrote to his wife after their daughter died.)

Some Americans we know behaved with extraordinary bravery that day but the word hero has been so debased by the media orgy we’ll have to think of another one. The media won’t help us, so let’s hope America’s fine writers will.

This awful abuse of language has been compounded by the suggested naming of September 11 by the Bush administration as Patriots Day.

The inference from this is that the people who died that day – some of whom were not even Americans – died in some special way for their country; whereas they died because a bunch of well financed, psychopathic, religious lunatics decided to make some unfathomable gesture by sacrificing the lives of a lot of ordinary people. They died – and
I insist like the father of that young woman who died – as innocent victims. Not as patriots.

Other excesses I’ve heard on television include a commentator calling September 11, 2001, “one of history’s darkest days”.

I hope none of the 13 million people at present in danger of death by starvation and Aids in Africa heard this. Or the people of Rwanda. Or other people in Africa and Asia who have suffered the most appalling hardships while most of us complain about our salaries.

And that’s just dealing with the contemporary world not with history.

Let’s talk about the words democracy and freedom/liberty. Many American leaders say these words as though they have democracy and freedom in a glass display cabinet in Washington DC. No one else has them and you have to ask nicely to get a look at them.

Behave yourself, do what you’re told, open your borders to unrestricted trade and they’ll lend you some of it.

The fact is that some of us have purer forms of democracy than America does, if the power of individual vote is measured. The Senate and the Electoral College are notably undemocratic institutions. A case can be made that Americans are locked into a 200-year old document that was a miracle of good sense and literary skill in its time.

And I think generations of Americans should be grateful for the protection the Bill of Rights has given them.

But the Constitution is revered and documents that are revered are not adequately examined, even after two hundred years. (BOOK)

Most Westminster systems of government are more purely democratic in many ways. An unelected official such as Donald Rumsfeld could not even get in the cabinet door let alone have the power he has.

But, anyway, I don’t even revere democracy – and the framers of the American Constitution didn’t either. James Madison said, and I certainly agree with him, that democracy was just the best of a lot of bad government systems.

To start with, the idea that 51 percent of votes automatically arrives at truth and wisdom is ridiculous. I like the definition of the great English novelist, Evelyn Waugh, that “a majority is an irrational lump of opinion”. The important thing is that, over the long-term, democracy does tend to get things roughly right. Look at it like a graphline, and the median is what makes it tolerable.
Another thing about democracy is that it should be measured as much by how it treats its minorities as how it listens to its majority.

I heard a television commentator last week refer to September 11 as “a strike against democracy”. Again, to me, this is self-delusion perpetuated by media. No one in the Middle East or anywhere else says, “I hate America because it’s a democracy”.

If they hate America, it’s because of its power against which they feel powerless, and maybe they hate what the Islam puritans think of as the excesses of the consumer society. Was it an accident that the primary targets were the World Trade Centre and the Pentagon? It’s more complex even than that, so to say it’s simply a strike against democracy is, I believe, again delusory.

What about freedom. I have as much as any American and so do millions of other people. The only difference in our case is that we inherited the awful British defamation laws to inhibit freedom of speech. These laws have the hilarious effect of prohibiting me from calling our Prime Minister a liar because she could sue, but allowing me, if I wanted to, to call her an old slag or just stupid. That’s abuse and she can’t sue.