

9/11: What else it taught us

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Boston Globe:

Sept. 11 transformed the world of American ideas in many ways—fueling sharp debates about America’s role in world affairs, about the clash of religions, about freedom and security. Money flowed into counter-terrorism research. Universities hired experts on Islam and the Middle East; students flocked to courses on any subject they thought might help them understand what had happened.

The attacks also began to reshape our knowledge in ways that didn’t make headlines, revealing gaps in our knowledge of terrorism, of the costs of security, of the human response to trauma. Stirred to help, specialists in one field after another began asking new questions—using their expertise, whether it was mathematics or psychology, to puncture the veil of shock and mystery surrounding the events of that day.

Elaine Scarry, the Harvard English professor, applied the kind of close-reading normally reserved for literary scholarship to phone calls and official reports related to the hijacked airplanes, and has since written several books about national security. Yaneer Bar-Yam and Kawandee Virdee of the New England Complex Systems Institute built a mathematical model to predict the location of attacks by insurgents in Afghanistan. Michael Johnson, a biologist at the University of Illinois-Chicago, started developing antibiotics that would be useful against anthrax and other potential bioweapons. John Jost, a social psychologist at New York University, studied the effect of terrorism on the ideological inclinations of the people it targets. (He found that it makes them more conservative.)

What follows is a sample of the research and thought that have been undertaken as a result of the Sept. 11 attacks. By no means should it be taken as an attempt at a comprehensive survey—nor even as a “best of.” Some questions remain maddeningly unanswerable, but 10 years later, this snapshot gives a sense of the countless ways that 9/11 changed not just how we engage with the world, but what we know about it.

Read the whole story: [Boston Globe](#)