

The World

USA ↔ Europe

Among the Lost: Illusions of Immortality

By JAMES ATLAS

ON Sept. 11, as innumerable commentators have noted, the death toll in the World Trade Center bombing was greater than at the Battle of Antietam; it exceeded, by several thousand, the casualties inflicted on Pearl Harbor. In our efforts to grasp the number, and the scale of destruction, we've been forced to conjure up comparisons from beyond our borders: to the Somme, or even Hiroshima, the first Ground Zero. The wreckage has no American precedent. As in every other sphere, only a global perspective will now serve.

Analogy is a basic tool of teaching. By saying that something is like something else, we find a way to talk about what otherwise has no identity or name. But part of what troubles us about this event is its novelty. From a local perspective, there is no analogue. That the United States managed to live through 225 turbulent years without experiencing mass murder on such a scale has prompted us to reach for comparisons that in fact dwarf the magnitude of what happened here. The loss of life in the financial heart of New York was heart-rending, unfathomable, nearly beyond our capacity to tolerate, but — if you take the long view, the very long view — nothing out of the ordinary. We're so spoiled by our good fortune, material and geographic, that we've never even needed a sense of scale.

The history of mankind is a history of anonymous and random slaughter — civilizations we think of as "civilized" were no exception. When Caesar marched on Rome, writes Plutarch, "the city was filled with uproar, consternation and terror such as had never been known before." Attacking the Numidians, "in a small part of a single day he killed 50,000 of the enemy." The world of antiquity was a vast killing field.

Nor did the bloodletting abate after that world vanished into history. Europe over the last millennium was as violent as in any period. George Steiner, in his eloquent essay "In Bluebeard's Castle," provides a corrective to our belief that the end of the Middle Ages, with its plagues and social anarchy, meant the end of barbarism. "The material realities of the inhuman are detailed, endlessly, in Western iconography, from the mosaics at Torcello to the panels of Bosch," Steiner observed. "It is in the fantasies of the infernal, as they literally haunt Western sensibility, that we find the technology of pain without meaning, of bestiality without end, of gratuitous terror."

What these images represent is a knowledge of the perishability of all civilizations. It's a lesson to which the familiar lore of American history has been notably oblivious. Our national habit of optimism resonates in our triumphal phrases: the City on the Hill, Manifest



Edward Keating/The New York Times

A rescue worker looks at the scale of destruction at the World Trade Center site a week after the attack.

Destiny, the New Deal. In this almost touchingly hopeful narrative, history is a progressive continuum from barbarism to liberation, a passage on our mission from darkness into light. What it fails to grapple with is the darker reality that civilizations, like all else, have a beginning and an end.

The highest civilizations are eventually brought low: The Persians destroyed the Acropolis; the Visigoths sacked Rome; the Vikings plundered Europe. They all go into the dark, and never peacefully. Our great American empire seems bound to crumble at some point. It used to be a point beyond the horizon of our imagining. But since Sept. 11, the end of Western civilization has become a possibility against which the need to fight terrorism is being framed, as Roosevelt and Churchill framed the need to fight Hitler.

Only a nation shielded from the possibility of its own demise could have produced a theory as cheerful as the one put forth by the political philosopher Francis Fukuyama a few years ago, that we had come to "the end of history." Mr. Fukuyama's argument was that the forces of totalitarianism had been conquered once and for all by the United States and the West, "the

end point of mankind's ideological evolution." Freedom had prevailed. Non-Western cultures were irrelevant. "For our purposes," Mr. Fukuyama wrote in a widely quoted — and widely derided — passage, "it matters very little what strange thoughts occur to people in Albania or Burkina Faso." Apparently it does.

Terror is the downside of globalization. Like AIDS and other deadly viruses that traverse international borders aboard jet aircraft, terrorism thrives on mobility. Our secure geographical fortress has at last been breached. Images of America transmitted on CNN that can rouse a foreign religious sect to rage; porous borders that enable terrorists to easily penetrate our defenses; clandestine information that can be exchanged via cellphone or satellite: the same technology that drives the West drives those who would threaten its survival.

Sept. 11 was, among other things, an education: It brought us closer to the proximity to death that has been a feature of daily life everywhere else on the globe at virtually every moment in its history. "The artifacts of death are embedded in the texture of European life," the writer Francine du Plessix Gray ob-

History everywhere is full of random and anonymous slaughter. Except in America. Until now.

serves. "Cemeteries and burial grounds are common features of the landscape; town squares are crowded with plaques and monuments to the dead." (Jewish refugees from Europe often refer to their homeland as a graveyard.)

NOW we, too, have a cemetery in our midst. Perhaps it will serve as a lesson in how to decipher the motives and intentions of those death-haunted, death-worshipping societies that have so suddenly come to occupy a central place in our consciousness.

Before they struck, we could think we had conquered the mortality of civilizations, just as we seem bent on conquering our own mortality. Heart transplants, a cure for Alzheimer's, unlocking the cellular secrets of aging would enable us to double our Biblical span: in the same way, our global isolation would protect us from the wholesale violence convulsing the rest of the globe. Like so many other rapidly discarded notions — war can be conducted without casualties; terrorism is confined to Europe — our exemption from the rules of history is a myth that it's getting harder and harder to sustain.

Edward Gibbon, upon completing "The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire," reflected on his own mortality and on the mortality of civilizations: "The present is always a fleeting moment, the past is no more; and our prospect of futurity is dark and doubtful." It has always been thus. That we belong to the cycle of history — not, as Mr. Fukuyama would have us believe, to its "endpoint," but caught within its motion of rise and fall — is a profoundly disquieting thought; who really believes that nothing is eternal?

But that thought can also be comforting. In its seemingly limitless power and prosperity, the United States has increasingly come to see itself as unique. To join the procession of states stretching backward and forward through time is to dispel the illusion that we stand alone in history, aloof from its wrack and turmoil. Acknowledging the inevitable transience and brevity of our own historical epoch could be the key to ensuring its long duration.