



UN/FRAMING THE GOLDEN GATE BRIDGE
4 VIEWS + 2 PLACES
TIMOTHY MOORE

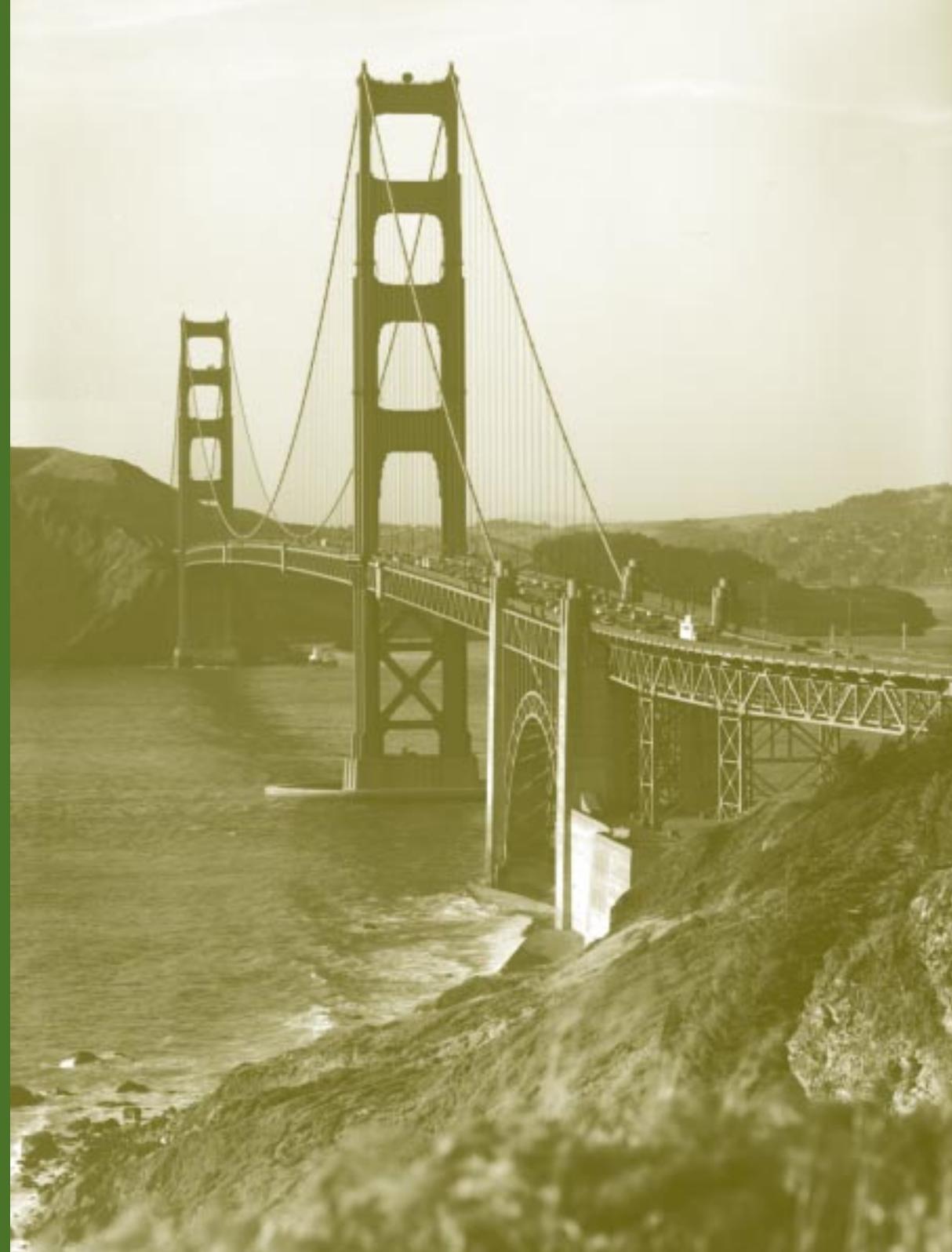
The Golden Gate Bridge is a site structured by two distinct places: above the bridge deck and below. Numerous social, economic, and political elements coincide in the Golden Gate Bridge landscape to create the values and meanings—the *framings*—that direct the Golden Gate Bridge view and define these two places.

For this project, I investigate four ascendant framings that influence the experience of looking at the Golden Gate Bridge landscape: national identity, global finance capitalism, circuit tourism, and mainstream preservation. I approach each framing by four principal views from the bridge site: the continental view (east), the Pacific view (west), the city view (south) and the country view (north). Together, the four framings dominate the values and meanings that enable the Golden Gate Bridge to persist and function as a visual system. The framings also direct the qualities and activities of looking in the two places that constitute the Golden Gate Bridge site, above the bridge deck and below.

The writing that follows is the introduction to this analysis.

The view north, from the San Francisco headlands, showing the Pacific side of the Golden Gate Bridge. Photograph by Jet Lowe, 1984.

Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division, Historic American Engineering Record No. HAER, CAL,38-SANFRA,140-4.



Un/Framing the Golden Gate Bridge 4 views + 2 places

Today in San Francisco it's six o'clock on the first morning of winter, and I'm standing at the Golden Gate, near the bridge. It's dark, the purple sort of darkness when the sun still is rising in Nevada. Above me along the toll plaza, a man in brown camouflage watches anxiously—a soldier of the National Guard. The pulsed glow of traffic metering lights echoes the flashing airway beacons atop the bridge towers and the cascade rhythm of cable lamps skirting the horizon. The daily procession of morning traffic moves across the bridge to the city, with Pacific tides below also in heavy commute. Rhythm and cycle. The bay is rising with the sun.

The features of landscape and the natural world are powerful here. Twice each day, tides swell and rise beneath the bridge. Nowhere on earth is the flood tide more dramatic than between the Franciscan granite palisades sustaining the Golden Gate at Fort Point and Mile Rock. The ecological balance of Northern California pivots at the Gate, a channel only one mile wide but plunging 318 feet, at deepest, below the surface of the tide, a depth much greater than the ocean waters nearby or the entire bay commanding its inside.¹

San Francisco Bay is the largest interior saline bay in North America, covering more than 400 square miles with nearly two trillion gallons of water, its energy focused precisely at the one-mile gap that eluded explorers and mappers for centuries. For nearly a thousand miles, from Cape Mendocino in the north to San Diego farther south, the Pacific besieges the land relentlessly. But they were continental waters here that breached the northern barrier of the Coast Range and joined California's interior Great Valley with the sea. The Golden Gate is the sole outlet for the valley's sixty thousand square miles of watershed land and sixteen rivers sprung from the western slopes of the Sierra Nevada.²

The Golden Gate funnels bay water through its narrows at an average 4.6 million cubic feet per second, an estimated flow seven times greater than the Mississippi River at its mouth on the Gulf.³ The rate of water flow through the Gate is nearly a million times faster than the motoring tides atop its bridge.

The water recedes through the Gate more powerfully than it enters, estimates researcher Harold Gilliam: "On the average, one sixth of the bay flows out the Gate on the ebb." Pulled toward the Pacific by retreating ocean currents and fed by mighty rivers of the Sierra, ebb tide at the Gate occurs once each day. Most days, more water leaves the bay than enters it.⁴ Earth and moon have pushed and have pulled these waters since the continent's forming. Their struggles carved the Golden Gate and begot its bay.

The moon rarely shows in view from the Golden Gate. Clouds and fog often seclude it, even at brightest solstice, or the rising sun outshines it. But for ocean tides, the moon always leads. Tethered Pacific currents trail twelve hours behind. Their future tidal movements are the anticipation of lunar past: Sun seduces moon. Moon lures Pacific. Again as I watch daybreak, the Golden Gate holds balance: ocean-bound moon, Sierra-born sun.

— — —

I love a good view. When I went shopping for my first apartment in San Francisco, the flats I liked best had windows opening toward a good view. This amenity



Underneath the Golden Gate Bridge along the Fort Point battery, looking north toward the Marin headlands. Photography by Jet Lowe, 1984.

Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division, Historic American Engineering Record No. HAER, CAL,38-SANFRA,140-CA-31-20.

comes with a price, of course. Especially in pricey San Francisco, a city noted for extraordinary views, where renting or owning one can add significant cost to monthly expense. Advertised by one listing: *Bernal Heights studio near transit/freeways, city view, \$1100*. Promoted by another: *One-bedroom Victorian, Telegraph Hill, views, \$2400*.

After settling in with a moderately priced lease—overlooking a lively Mission street corner and some neighboring rooftops—I found myself one Sunday afternoon in the studio apartment of a new friend, mesmerized by what I saw. Inside the studio was quite small, but the scene from its bay window was expansive.

Facing northwest from Nob Hill, the window framed perfectly the perfect San Francisco view. On one side lay nearby Russian Hill, and on the opposite was Japantown, with the modernist spire of Saint Mary Cathedral. Situated among these in the distance was unbroken scenery of the Golden Gate and the entire span of the Golden Gate Bridge. *This view is the reason I should never move away*, whispered my friend, *I could make postcards*.

Of all the prized views in a city of prized viewscapes, a Golden Gate view is among the most treasured. Scenes of the Gate and its bridge circulate in countless reproductions on posters, photographs, and paintings, as well as on large outdoor murals near my Mission apartment. In the tourist shops of Chinatown and along the Embarcadero and Fisherman's Wharf, the majority of postcards for sale depict a view of the Gate and bridge. The Golden Gate scene pervades on coffee mugs, tee-shirts, shot glasses, key chains, snowglobes, plates, magnets, sweaters, jackets, neckties, hats, and fancy embroidered potholders—even on tiny collectable porcelain thimbles.

What is it about the view that so captivates our desires (and our dollars)? Generally, *the view* is a product of seeing the out-of-doors. It is a result of *looking at* the landscape and implies a *special kind of looking*. For activities of looking at the landscape, the view holds context, a framing—perhaps even narrative. Visual theorist Lucy Lippard notes that the view shows us what we are seeing and where we should look to see it. Landscape is both “the scene framed through viewing” and “the scene framed for viewing.”⁵ Or as I prefer to describe it, landscape is the scene framed for “looking.” *Looking at the view* is a directed sort of seeing for which framing provides the instruction, and interpreting the landscape is the objective.



The view northwest from The Presidio, toward the Golden Gate Bridge, Fort Point and the Marin headlands. Photography by Jet Lowe, 1984.

Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division, Historic American Engineering Record No. HAER, CAL,38-SANFRA,140-CA-31-2.

I might *look at* a landscape painting at a gallery, for example. The view of this landscape holds all the detail shown by the painting, the scene depicted inside the bounds of artist canvas. Framings lend context to the represented landscape: How should I direct my looking? What did the painter choose to include, and what was left out? Where in the painting do I look first? What is on the periphery? How does the depicted landscape connect with its surroundings, and what are my personal connections with it? These observations are beyond questions of taste or creative intent. They involve my unique relationship with the depicted landscape, and landscape in general, and my ongoing personal narrative with the scene I am seeing and the framings of my memories and experiences.

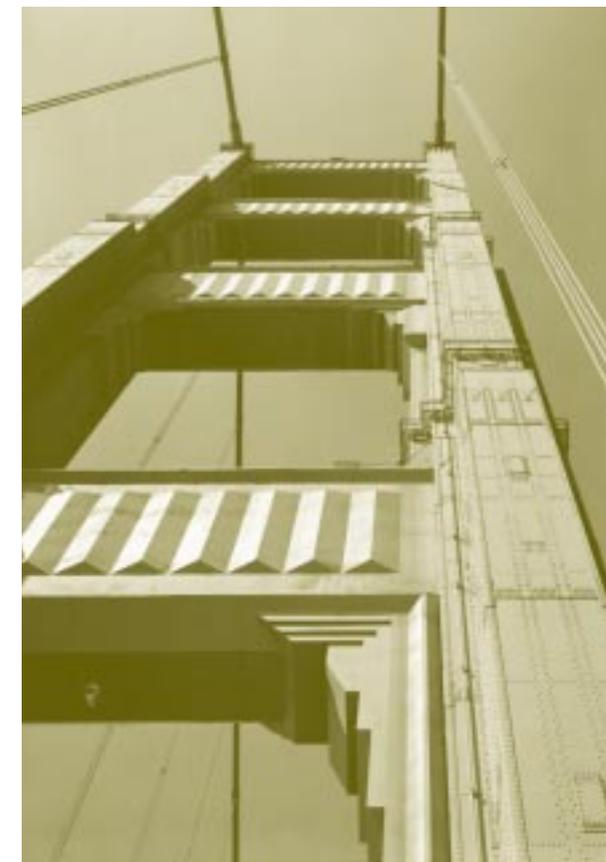
Looking outdoors at the actual landscape, framing can be less obvious, and the “directions” for looking often are more difficult to cite. Nonetheless we always seem to know when we encounter the view: There might be expansive space through which we can see a great distance. Perhaps an unusual landform or extraordinary architecture captures our gaze, a great vale or mountain peak, a body of water, a city skyline, or a noted monument.

The activities of looking at the view invest value in the landscape: as lookers, we

search out the view, find purpose in it, and invoke it for our senses. We leave our marks upon it using technology or convention to mold its landscape for our industries or pleasures. We fight to preserve it. We make photographs of it and poems and drawings and paintings to possess it for our own. We seek our humanity among it, our Deity, the Great Spirit, Goddess Earth, Mother Nature, the Cosmic Vibe. Our experience of the view fulfills us, defeats us, brings us fear or pleasure. It is our backdrop for place. Simply, the view shows us someplace we find ourselves drawn to see.

The soaring south tower from atop the Golden Gate Bridge deck. Photography by Jet Lowe, 1984.

Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division, Historic American Engineering Record No. HAER, CAL,38-SANFRA,140-CA-31-12.





Underneath the Golden Gate Bridge looking south toward the San Francisco abutment. Photography by Jet Lowe, 1984.

Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division, Historic American Engineering Record No. HAER, CAL,38-SANFRA,140-CA-31-38.

In the American West, *the view*—particularly one with an extraordinary landscape—engages a compelling history of collective visual experience. San Franciscans’ love affair with the Golden Gate view has endured since long before the city drafted its first charter in April 1850. Franciscan Father Pedro Font, considered in American history among California’s earliest Europeans—his arrival in San Francisco predates the city’s Mission Dolores and the Spanish Presidio garrisons—described the Golden Gate headlands in 1776 as a “very green and flower-covered mesa” with “breathtaking” views. Recounting Font’s experience, historian Pete Holleran notes that trees and buildings today block most views of the Gate that the Spanish missionary likely described.⁶

More than a century later, following decades of landscaping on Presidio headlands near the Gate—activity which involved primarily uncoordinated efforts of haphazard tree-planting and massive forest-building—a journalist for the popular 1895 *San Francisco Real Estate Circular* reported that, “in spite of protests from property owners,” the Presidio’s federal military regime insisted on continued forestation of the southern Gate with scene-stealing plantings criticized by residents as “interceptors of the finest view in the country.”⁷

San Franciscans more recently fought battles of the view by seeking to legislate height limits for Financial District office towers and high-rise condominiums. Protective measures petitioned onto city ballots in 1971–1972, then again in 1979 and 1983. Voters narrowly defeated each proposal, however, and citywide initiatives protecting the view waned somewhat in the booming 1990s, supplanted by local politics of gentrification and the so-called New Economy.⁸ The protectionist movement nonetheless helped assure a broad coalition of preservation activists that is quick to

defend established views of the Golden Gate against new skyscrapers and other perceived “Manhattanizing” development it deems threatening to the San Francisco landscape.⁹

Considering the Golden Gate Bridge as the prevailing modern San Francisco landmark, the Golden Gate view culminates in the shared values and narratives conveyed there by the experience of looking. These values and narratives are implicit to the view and are critical for constructing visual meaning in the San Francisco landscape. As local writer Dore Bowen notes: “We all look toward the same horizon. Without such views, *the city* as a symbol collapses.”¹⁰ The persistence of shared values and narratives signified at the Golden Gate requires the interpretation of framings that structure and define



Trestles and pillars: Looking underneath the Golden Gate Bridge from the San Francisco abutment toward the bay. Photography by Jet Lowe, 1984.

Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division, Historic American Engineering Record No. HAER, CAL,38-SANFRA,140-CA-31-18.



the Golden Gate view, the manipulations of ideas, histories, myths, and memories that lend meaning and context for looking at the Golden Gate Bridge landscape and beyond.

What are these framings, and how do they direct the Golden Gate view? What is the frame? Here is where the story really begins:

In its etymology, the word *frame* shares its derivation with *fram*, the Gothic *from*, itself denoting a departure, a separation, a derivation. The rhetoric of “from” articulates the structure of here and away, the spatial or figurative denotations of internal/external, assertions of inclusion or exclusion. *Frame* is a descriptive for this structure, a mechanism for denoting order and value.

Comparable, in theory, to the usefulness of the physical frame, the conceptual frame as a cognitive device gives focus to visual multiplicity and distills hierarchy and meaning from the complexities of visual information. For the experience of looking at the landscape, I call this analytical tool a *conceptual framing* or simply a *framing*.

Conceptual framings trivialize disparate visual meanings in the landscape for the preeminent signification of a singular narrative. The framings accomplish this by excluding or discounting multiple, frequently more individualized or explicit, meanings of the view. The ascendant conceptual framing engages a universal—often-grandiose—significance in the landscape and then focuses *lookers* on this implied meaning and value.

The view south toward The Presidio National Park and western San Francisco from atop the south tower of the Golden Gate Bridge. Photography by Jet Lowe, 1984.

Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division, Historic American Engineering Record No. HAER, CAL,38-SANFRA,140-CA-31-28.

How does this framing process differ from the analogous relationship of sign and signifier? The agency of the process essentially does not differ, except perhaps in breadth and scale: for the objective of interpreting the landscape—the “sign”—the conceptual framing provides the significance. Whereas, however, the sign and signifier compose a *textual* relationship, framing-the-view ascribes a comparative *visual* signification.

Participation in the *Golden Gate Bridge visual system*—the complex interplay of all scopic modes and visual activities involving the bridge site—is participation in this framing process of visual signification. There are all sorts of devices, physical and cerebral, that enable this participation to occur. *Lookers* engage—or rebuff—the prescribed devices of signs and framings, the narrative of the observer and the observed, the significance of social memory and collective meaning among visual texts of history, myth, and culture. Some views are “good,” other views are “bad.” Looking is acceptable, or it is discouraged. Visual activities are sanctioned or are prohibited. Views are celebrated, or they are denied.

The conceptual framings that influence visual activities involving the Golden Gate Bridge result not only from a culmination of meta-narratives imbued by Western history, myth, and culture, but also from the social exchanges governed by hegemonies of national identity, global finance capitalism, mainstream preservation, and circuit tourism,¹¹ among many constituent elements. The leverage of transportation, local economics, and



Looking north toward the Golden Gate Bridge from the visitor center plaza. Photography by Jet Lowe, 1984.

Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division,
 Historic American Engineering Record No. HAER,
 CAL,38-SANFRA,140-CA-31-1.

“homeland” security,¹² for example, further codifies visual activity engaging the bridge and directs the value and meaning of looking among the meta-narratives and circumstances of the Golden Gate Bridge visual system. The discourse that persists among the various hegemonies and their constituent elements—and the visual compulsions of their ideologies relative to the Golden Gate landscape—is itself a dynamic system of interpretation, debate and revision.

It is important also to acknowledge the internal, personal framings that we each hold uniquely and that influence our looking at the Golden Gate. I refer to these personal narratives as *internal* framings because they constitute the accumulation of our particular histories, ideas, and memories of the visual world as made manifest by our unique ways of “seeing” in the world. Whereas *external*

framings of the view thrust visual meaning upon us for the impression of a collective social value or the persuasion of social doctrine or convention—such as patriotism, cultural achievement, or economic value, among countless others—internal framings function as the unique, innate “lens” through which each of us looks and interprets in the world.

Whether internal or external, conceptual framings are rigid, but not absolute. We typically don’t consider the busy molecules of picture frames—the physical sort—their positive and negative ions vibrating perpetually as with any solid object in the world. Likewise, the conceptual framing denotes an ever-shifting demarcation of metaphor, thought, and social consciousness. We may not notice the subtle daily shifts of meaning

and value in the conceptual framings we engage. Yet the influence of these framings overall strongly directs the methods by which we interact and reason in the visual world, and the cognitive results of our experience.

The ascendant external framings made manifest in the Golden Gate Bridge visual system serve to maintain and proliferate visual significations of the place we call the Golden Gate Bridge. The framings thereby also maintain and proliferate the hegemonies that support them—the four ascendant systems of national identity, global finance, capitalism, mainstream preservation, and circuit tourism. Participation in the Golden Gate Bridge visual system can affirm the power of the hegemonies or challenge the establishment, values, and continued manifestation of these ascendant external framings and their supporting hegemonies, and the visual compulsion of their ideologies. This writing is a conversation of these encounters.

Notes

- 1 Harold Gilliam, *San Francisco Bay* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1957), pp. 71–87.
- 2 Harold Gilliam, pp. 71–87.
- 3 Harold Gilliam, pp. 71–87.
- 4 Harold Gilliam, p. 81.
- 5 Lucy R. Lippard, *The Lure of the Local: Senses of Place in a Multicentered Society* (New York: The New York Press, 1997), p. 4.
- 6 Pete Holleran, “Seeing the Trees Through the Forest: Oaks and History in the Presidio,” in *Reclaiming San Francisco*, ed. James Brook, Chris Carlsson, and Nancy J. Peters (San Francisco: City Lights, 1998), p. 340.
- 7 Pete Holleran, p. 344.
- 8 Recent terminology coined to represent the “new” influence of the Internet and World Wide Web on the global economy.
- 9 James Brook, [Introduction], in *Reclaiming San Francisco*, ed. James Brook, Chris Carlsson, and Nancy J. Peters (San Francisco: City Lights, 1998), p. 6–7.
- 10 The author gratefully acknowledges this eloquent margin note by visual theorist and writer Dore Bowen, whose contributions, criticisms, and encouragement were vital to the process of completing this manuscript.
- 11 The realm of the mainstream tourism industry, which encourages travel from one prescribed tourist sight to the next, and so on, as a circuit system.
- 12 In reference to the Homeland Security Administration, formed in 2003 under the direction of President George W. Bush in the aftermath of the September 11, 2001, attacks on New York and Washington, D.C.