

# THE BOSTON PHOENIX

## **Is *The 9/11 Commission Report* the first American epic?**

BY DANIEL AARON, LESLIE DUNTON-DOWNER, AND HARVEY A. SILVERGLATE

*The 9/11 Commission Report* achieved singularity in the annals of American publishing even before it was available to the public. Five days before the *Report's* July 22, 2004, release, the bipartisan National Commission on Terrorist Attacks Upon the United States raced to complete its findings. Editors in the New York offices of W.W. Norton would have no opportunity to examine the document, which the company's president had already agreed to carry sight unseen. On July 17, the commission staff uploaded files of the *Report* to a secure Web site. Within 120 hours of the manuscript's completion, 580,000 copies of the authorized edition were printed, bound, shipped by air, received in bookstores, and shelved for sale at \$10 apiece. By noon in each US time zone on July 22, customers from Washington, DC, to Hawaii, and Alaska to Puerto Rico, had purchased copies of *The 9/11 Commission Report*. Never before in US history had a book manuscript been so quickly turned around and made available throughout the nation.

*The 9/11 Commission Report* soon reached the top of bestseller lists. Within eight months, some nine million copies of various editions had been sold or downloaded from the commission's Web site. Responding on Internet review pages, readers used the words "gripping," "riveting," "powerful," "American," and "universal" to describe the document. On October 13, 2004, the *Report* was nominated for the National Book Award in nonfiction. A *Washington Post* writer called it a "collective memoir" in the confessional mode, using an "ultra-spare, purposely unemotional — yet quietly seething — language of American pain."

Clearly, *The 9/11 Commission Report* struck a deep national chord, even as it resisted neat classification. It is a factual work, but in places it resembles fiction. It tells a story, but it is authorless. It is a written narrative, but it is informed by oral accounts. It tells of past events vital to the cohesion of a people, but it never loses sight of the fact that these events were era-changing, or that they have irreversibly altered the people's future course — their fate. It is saturated with information, but the narrative glue that holds the details together is composed of familiar story threads, well-burnished by generations of retelling. It speaks in the language of

its time, and addresses a national audience, but the narrative, extensively translated, engrosses a worldwide readership. Such an odd mixture of traits may at first glance suggest that the *Report* is a narrative anomaly, neither fish nor fowl. But these are also among the very traits that define the literary genre that the *Report* belongs to: [the epic](#). Of course, only Americans themselves can decide whether the *Report* is to be America's articulation of itself. Were that to happen, though, the *Report* could be the first work in American history to qualify compellingly as the nation's epic.

Epics articulate deep and lasting values that give collective life coherence over time, from generation to generation. Chiefly taken up with a people's common vision over the long haul, epics place action in a sacred temporal order that imparts continuity to secular facts and chaotic events. *The 9/11 Commission Report* may open in the middle of the story's action, for example, but it also ranges back in time, to recount earlier events that bear on the story's principal themes. It is not until a third of the way through that the *Report* considers "The Millennium Crisis" of 1999-2000. Seemingly unlinked threats follow — the USS *Cole* is attacked; the transition from the Clinton to the Bush administration yields a national fiasco — until a concluding account of US counterterrorism efforts through September 10, 2001, suggests that the unfolding story is not merely historical. Indeed, the *Report* presents 9/11 as the belated arrival of an apocalyptic event so fully anticipated as to appear preordained. Whatever their form — biblical visions, cosmic battles between good and evil, ideals worth dying for — sacred themes infuse even the most secular details of epic narratives with a glow of timelessness, and *The 9/11 Commission Report*, though fact-laden and bureaucratic, is no exception.

## **ABOVE AND BEYOND**

The epic qualities of *The 9/11 Commission Report* begin precisely where the *Report* diverges in style, scope, and content from other US commission reports. Such reports are designed to halt debate about an unsettling national episode, even as they may evade hard questions and assign blame or pursue all-too-convenient conclusions. A case-in-point is *The Roberts Commission Report* (1942), which investigated America's disturbing failure to prevent the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor, and saddled two American military commanders with the blame. (A Senate resolution exonerated them in 1999.) The commissioners made no attempt to explain or understand "the enemy" Japan, or the Japanese. Instead, the Roberts Commission satisfied itself with scapegoats, and broader questions were neither asked nor answered.

By contrast, the 9/11 Commission vastly exceeded its mandate. Like certain institutions within the American legal system that, under extraordinary circumstances, deviate from their established patterns — consider runaway grand juries that [defy a prosecutor's expectations](#), or those rare (but often memorable) Supreme Court opinions that speak with great latitude to

principles broader than the precise legal questions at hand — the commission felt compelled to push the envelope to take up matters of elemental concern to the nation's identity. In that vein, the commission actively probed the motives of Al Qaeda, and reconstructed a sequence of events in which Osama bin Laden and his associates planned and carried out their plot. Such probing into the workaday habits, operational plans, and ideology of the enemy, while unnecessary for assigning blame to parties in an unprepared America, is essential if the *Report's* goal is to understand what the attacks mean to the nation.

Taking this liberty, the commission pursued its mandate in an unconventional, yet quintessentially American manner, opening the way for the *Report* to engage in national storytelling. The *Report* speaks on behalf of the American people, represented by the evenly bipartisan 9/11 Commission. It addresses Americans as a single community of free individuals and calls on them to strengthen themselves through unity amid ongoing national debate. Official manifestoes of this kind tend to avoid poetic rhetoric, and certainly *The 9/11 Commission Report* is no "poem" in the traditional epic sense. But at 567 pages — the commission staff analyzed some 2.5 million documents and interviewed roughly 1200 people — it is undeniably a long narrative work. In oral cultures, poetic devices such as rhyme, meter, and alliteration aided memorization of lengthy works. In our culture, however, the epic voice is relatively prosaic. *The 9/11 Report*, if subtly poetic on occasion, speaks in the flatter, plain-talk, fact-seeking accent of the American democratic voice:

*Tuesday, September 11, 2001 dawned temperate and nearly cloudless in the eastern United States. Millions of men and women readied themselves for work. Some made their way to the Twin Towers, the signature structures of the World Trade Center complex in New York City. Others went to Arlington, Virginia, to the Pentagon. Across the Potomac River, the United States Congress was back in session. At the other end of Pennsylvania Avenue, people began to line up for a White House tour. In Sarasota, Florida, President George W. Bush went for an early morning run.*

*For those heading to an airport, weather conditions could not have been better for a safe and pleasant journey. Among the travelers were Mohamed Atta and Abdul Aziz al Omari, who arrived at the airport in Portland, Maine.*

Like traditional epics, the *Report* recalls age-old beliefs, motifs, and narrative formulae. We hear in it echoes of the early Protestant sermon, which typically included a lament, an acknowledgement of sinful behavior, hopes of redemption, and a vision of an earthly City of God. This is the burden of Michael Wigglesworth's *The Day of Doom* (1662), a bestseller in 17th-century New England. Its opening lines, "Still was the night, Serene and Bright, / when all Men sleeping lay; / Calm was the season, and carnal reason / thought so 'twould last for ay,"

are followed by a description of a sinful people engulfed in the horrors of Judgment Day. *The 9/11 Report* presents a comparable scenario. Millions of Americans are heading off to work when terror strikes. And the wheels of government are turning noiselessly when the minions of Hell crash into Eden. Disaster. But people endure the malicious attack, and the *Report* affirms the resourcefulness and steadfastness of both the victims and the survivors.

The September assault on an unsuspecting America repeats a theme as old as Homer: *the enemy infiltrates and causes great destruction*. Wily Greek warriors trick their Trojan adversaries by hiding inside a hollow wooden horse that the Trojans triumphantly drag into their citadel. Once inside, Greeks emerge from the horse to surprise the Trojans and sack Troy. In *The 9/11 Report*, no less cunning terrorists enter in the hollows of American jet airliners. Like the Trojans, Americans welcome the vehicles about to destroy them. The cheerful national disposition is captured in the hospitable phrasing of the weather predictions, which "could not have been better for a safe and pleasant journey." Further into the *Report*, employees of certain US governmental agencies revive another Trojan voice, Cassandra's. She was the clairvoyant princess of Troy whose strident warnings about the Trojan Horse went tragically unheeded.

*Beowulf* offers an Old English epic model of enemy infiltration equally applicable to *The 9/11 Commission Report*. Like the America depicted in the gleaming sunrise of September 11, the sky-scraping medieval citadel of Heorot, built and named by the Danish king Hrothgar, initially presents an idyll of political serenity and social ease:

*And soon it stood there,*

*finished and ready, in full view,*

*the hall of halls. Heorot was the name*

*he had settled on it...*

*The hall towered,*

*its gables wide and high....*

*So times were pleasant for the people there*

*until finally one, a fiend out of hell,*

*began to work his evil in the world.*

*Grendel was the name of this grim demon....*

*he had dwelt for a time*

*in misery among the banished monsters....*

*Then as dawn brightened and the day broke*

*Grendel's powers of destruction were plain. \*\**

Out of the blue comes diabolical Grendel. Like America's terrorists, he is a dangerous operator, grudge-holding and destructive, excluded from the splendors within Heorot's towering hall. Like the Twin Towers, Heorot proves too lofty and too visible for its own good: it spawns brutish envy and unsettles cosmic balances. The unprepared people of Heorot and their hapless leader Hrothgar are at first overwhelmed by their attacker, until Beowulf arrives with his men to defeat the monster, restore peace to Heorot, and strengthen Hrothgar's leadership.

The *Report* presents America's attackers as an alarmingly new enemy, a hybrid of the very different kinds of foes to be found in Homeric epic and *Beowulf*. Al Qaeda operatives follow a discernable (even if decentralized) chain of command, plan actions in advance, and execute an ingenious ruse. To a degree, they are a "worthy adversary," akin to the Greek army that fittingly opposed the Trojan forces in warfare. Their actions call for counterattack, and in Part 10, "Wartime," the *Report* describes US military campaigns in both Afghanistan and Iraq. But terrorists are also portrayed as descendants of Grendel, a primeval malevolence that rises up from the shadows cast by soaring abundance to flatten perceived imbalances. In Part Two, "The Foundation of the New Terrorism," Al Qaeda's motivations are expounded: "It is the story of eccentric and violent ideas sprouting in the fertile ground of political and social turmoil." Bin Laden is quoted: "It is saddening to tell you that you are the worst civilization witnessed by the history of mankind." His unrelenting intention to attack what he calls the "far enemy," America, is characterized as a byproduct of disproportionate US influence in the Middle East, and the poverty that makes predominantly Muslim countries vulnerable to radical Islam.

In the story told by the *Report*, America's new enemy is partly of its own making, and so too are the narrative's heroes, who struggle to deliver the country from evil. These include elected officials, military personnel, and employees of the federal government. Part Nine, "Heroism and Horror," introduces individuals and groups who risked and often gave their lives on September 11. Among them are city rescue squads, firefighters, and police. There are valiant citizens on the ground, and the passengers and crew aboard United Flight 93, who died defeating the hijackers' scheme to crash the commandeered aircraft into the Capitol. Bereft of a miraculous

rescuer like Beowulf, *The 9/11 Commission Report* calls on the American people to serve as their own collective hero, and seeks to ensure the nation's survival by restoring its faith in the miracles of self-government. The narrative voice that Republican and Democratic commission members forged to tell the story of 9/11 itself expresses a heroic America, unified and strengthened by adversity. The *Report's* concluding statement foresees ongoing heroism in Americans and their ideals, trusting the democratic process to save the country from future perils: "We look forward to a national debate on the merits of what we have recommended, and we will participate vigorously in that debate." The *Report's* authors do not doubt the resilience of their democracy or the capacities of their compatriots.

It is commonly assumed today that the time for writing grand narrative interlacing secular and sacred themes is over. We no longer blend the terrestrial and the celestial, the divine and the earthly. All the same, from the first sentence of *The 9/11 Commission Report*, describing a historical sunrise in a blessed America, and well into the narrative, the heavens enclose a dense sphere of action. The Twin Towers of New York City figure in an aerial setting, and preservation of the Capitol and the White House occurs in the sky. Civilian and military personnel fight Alien Bombers for control of the earth below, and conversations between the airborne and the grounded propel the action. Aerial goings-on also carry more than personal or political significance: God is literally invoked by Americans responding to the attacks, and by the jihadist hijackers who represent Al Qaeda's maverick branding of Islam.

Little wonder that the *Report's* concluding recommendations are as mixed as the nature of the enemy it portrays. The "worthy adversary" requires the new Department of Homeland Security to work in concert with a whole host of governmental entities in the US and overseas to protect the country from the formidable menace it poses. But the Grendelian monster, lurking enviously on the rim of an overconfident and richly endowed civilization, and programmed in the large scheme of things to return one day to wreak havoc and set things right — this Nemesis appears to inspire guilt, and to call for soul-searching. The *Report* consequently includes recommendations designed to make America appear and act less loathsome to people struggling to live with dignity under its long silhouette. One such recommendation begins: "The U.S. government must define what the message is, what it stands for. We should offer an example of moral leadership in the world, committed to treat people humanely, abide by the rule of law, and be generous and caring to our neighbors."

## **CHASING AHAB**

Members of the 9/11 Commission have been accused of producing a report with no author, but the cursive signature of each hints at a felt involvement. Like the signatories of the Declaration of Independence, they pledge their Lives and Fortunes and sacred Honor to the nation's

founding principles. Like the Declaration of Independence, the *Report* is a piece of committee work. So was the King James Bible of 1611. So too, in a way, were the immense epics of antiquity, whose "authors" wove together story strands passed down to them by predecessors. In the end, their material is only anonymously "authored." Homer names his Muse, and the *Beowulf* poet speaks for an epic tradition. If anything, the "authorless" character of *The 9/11 Commission Report* belongs to a [time-honored practice of epic storytelling](#).

American annals abound with episodes and heroes worthy of epic treatment, but no single story or series of linked events has thus far been turned into a [literary epic of the American people](#). A few works — notably Walt Whitman's *Leaves of Grass* (1885) and Herman Melville's *Moby-Dick* (1851) — have, for different reasons, assumed epic dimensions. The latter, in particular, has the length and heft, the range and philosophical depth of an epic. It juxtaposes the transcendental and the material; it is a celebration and a jeremiad; it springs from native cultural ground and is universal; and it pits the human against the primordial. But while certain literary works have, at different times in America's past, achieved epic qualities in the eyes of some, none has emerged as America's uncontested epic.

In his keenly observed analysis of American politics and manners, *Democracy in America* (1835-'40), Alexis de Tocqueville noted that the American tended "to his private concerns as if he were alone in the world" and then gave himself up "to his commonweal as if he had forgotten them." The American alternated between "the most lively patriotism" and the most selfish cupidity. Tocqueville's observation has proved prescient but not necessarily predictive. Some insist that, since 9/11, America has been irreversibly transformed. If Americans remain unchanged, then September 11 may be remembered as just another July 4, November 11, or December 7, a "historical" day whose singeing particularities are largely forgotten. *The 9/11 Commission Report* could well go down as a minor blip on national literary radars. But if the country has been triggered by 9/11 to recall its past or imagine its future in ways that have never accorded with its individualistic and short-term interests, then it should be promising to follow the fate of *The 9/11 Commission Report*. At the moment, it is surely, at the very least, a narrative of the epic kind. Beyond that, the curious *Report* may turn out to be America's first enduring story about itself.

*Daniel Aaron is Victor S. Thomas Professor Emeritus in the Department of English, Harvard University, and the author of numerous books on American literature and history. Leslie Dunton-Downer's most recent work, with co-author Alan Riding, is Essential Shakespeare Handbook. Harvey A. Silverglate is a criminal-defense and civil-liberties lawyer, and a frequent Phoenix contributor. The authors can be reached at [has@harveysilverglate.com](mailto:has@harveysilverglate.com).*