

PRESS & MEDIA

## Over There

“Foreign News: What’s Next?” by Michael Parks, in *Columbia Journalism Review* (Jan.–Feb. 2002), 2950 Broadway, Columbia Univ., New York, N.Y. 10027.

While much of the U.S. news media’s coverage of foreign affairs since September 11 shows “American journalism at its best,” they largely missed the boat in covering a telltale string of earlier attacks on the United States by Islamic extremists, observes Parks, the interim director of the School of Journalism at the University of Southern California.

There were attacks on the World Trade Center in 1993; on apartments housing U.S. Air Force personnel in Saudi Arabia in 1996; on U.S. embassies in Kenya and Tanzania in 1998; and on the USS *Cole* in the Yemeni port of Aden in 2000. These incidents were reported episodically, sparking only limited investigative reporting and few follow-up stories on U.S. antiterrorism, immigration, and intelligence efforts or on the sources of anti-Americanism abroad.

Even when the U.S. Commission on National Security, chaired by two former senators, concluded in January 2001 that “Americans will likely die on American soil, possibly in large numbers,” at the hands of foreign terrorists, few news organizations passed this assessment on.

Study after study has shown that in the decade after the Cold War and the Persian

Gulf War ended, network newscasts, newspapers, and newsweeklies sharply trimmed international coverage. But in doing this they were going against the preferences of a substantial part of their audience, Parks maintains. He cites a pre-September 11 survey showing that most Americans ranked protecting the United States from terrorist attacks as the country’s top foreign-policy priority.

Yet that same 2001 survey and others indicate that only about 30 percent of Americans are interested in foreign news, about half as many as are interested in local news. Even CNN and other news organizations strongly committed to foreign coverage, Parks notes, were cutting staff before September 11.

News executives such as Paul Friedman, executive vice president of ABC News, don’t think September 11 changed much. “I don’t share the cockeyed optimism that we have all learned our lesson and will now rededicate ourselves to foreign news,” he says. “The [public] interest simply isn’t there.”

Other news executives disagree, reports Parks. They see the situation “as a test of the journalistic craft, of persuading readers and viewers to read and watch what they need to know and understand.”

RELIGION & PHILOSOPHY

## What’s Wrong with Human Rights?

“The Attack on Human Rights” by Michael Ignatieff, in *Foreign Affairs* (Nov.–Dec. 2001), 58 E. 68th St., New York, N.Y. 10021.

Even human-rights activists have been plagued by doubts in recent decades: Isn’t the claim that all humans are endowed with certain inalienable rights just a mask the West uses as it seeks to impose its values on other cultures? The critics—from Muslim fundamentalists to postmodernist academics in the West—have a point, argues Ignatieff, director of the Carr Center for Human Rights at Harvard University’s Kennedy School of Government. But it’s not the one they think they have.

“Rights discourse is individualistic,” he says. “But that is precisely why it has proven an effective remedy against tyranny, and why it has proven attractive to people from very different cultures.” Setting basic standards of “human decency” empowers the powerless.

The push for human rights has not come exclusively from the West, Ignatieff points out. Though the West took the lead in drafting the Universal Declaration of Human Rights in 1948, representatives of Islamic and other non-