In its devastating surprise attack on the American homeland on September 11, 2001 (9/11), the global terrorist network al-Qaeda used suicide fighters to crash hijacked airliners into the Twin Towers of the World Trade Center, killing some 2800 noncombatants, and into the Pentagon, killing some 200 combatants. Since the Cold War ended a decade before, the United States reigned as the sole world superpower (SWS) in military and economic might. No rival great power state could seriously challenge American military force without suffering rapid, decisive defeat in retaliation. Despite this, however, with the terrorist attack, America’s historic invulnerability to foreign aggression on its soil, enjoyed since the 1812 War with Britain, was gone in a matter of a few hours.

Moreover, the 9/11 terrorist attack did not seek the defeat and surrender of the United States. Instead, it aimed to punish America for taking on the hegemonic role Britain had performed during the nineteenth century. That century was known as Pax Britannica, the century Britain used its naval superiority to rule the oceans to protect international trade from the disruptions of great power wars and high seas piracy. States need one of their number to take the lead, if they are to overcome the mutual distrust of each others’ intentions. To engage cooperatively in fair and honest trading, states must have the mutual assurance that they are not foolish to rely on what each other says. This mutual assurance is possible, so Hegemon Stability Theory holds, only when there is a single hegemon that holds both the economy and military rings, so to speak.¹ The deep worldwide depression of the 1930s, for example, resulted from the absence of a world hegemon. Britain was too weak in 1914 to stabilize the international free market economy and the United States was unwilling at the time to take on the role: hence, the two world wars.

The 9/11 attack by a terrorist network with global reach presented an unforeseen threat to the hegemonic role the United States had assumed. This attack, unlike the truck bombing of the Twin Towers in 1993, clearly revealed the network’s potential to deliver by surprise and at will weapons of mass destruction (WMD) against the United States, something no state, with its territorial location, could do and hope to survive. This form

¹ S. P. Lee (ed.), Intervention, Terrorism, and Torture: Contemporary Challenges to Just War Theory, 105–118. © 2007 Springer
of terrorism, whatever its content or purpose, I call perfect terrorism, perfect in the sense that, given its potential to involve WMD, even the SWS must fear its threat as a continuing clear and present danger.

The fact that the 9/11 attack hit the two most famous symbols of America’s economic and military dominance clearly signaled al-Qaeda’s intention to undermine the hegemonic role the United States reluctantly took on in 1945. Stability in the international economy for the last several decades has crucially depended on a reliable supply of oil, and most proven oil reserves are in Middle Eastern Muslim countries. The disruptive impact of modern secular culture and free markets on Muslim religious culture is intolerable to many of more than a billion Muslims, and not a few of them view the United States, because of its hegemonic role, as their real enemy. Hostile Muslims see 9/11 as dramatically initiating a cultural hot war that will be won only when the American hegemon withdraws from Muslim holy lands, especially from Saudi Arabia and other Muslim oil states.

With the world hegemon gone, extreme Islamic movements could more easily replace the existing moderate Islamic regimes. Extreme Islamic regimes could then significantly control the world oil supply and its wealth creation and use this wealth to empower Muslim minorities deeply embedded in Western states like Russia, France, Germany, Spain, and Britain, as well as, in particular, in the Muslim holy land of Israel. This limited victory over the SWS would be devastating. Not only would the international economy be seriously disrupted, harming most the people least able to bear it, but the military resources of all states would thereby be drastically weakened, thus facilitating the global spread of terrorist insurgencies.

Moreover, this limited victory is feasible because the American SWS is a liberal democracy. To realize its strategic aim, perfect terrorism has only to make the continued presence of the American hegemon in the Middle East more costly in American lives and fortune. Such costs are immediate and concrete, while the devastating economic consequences worldwide of the American withdrawal are remote and abstract. Americans tend to react more to immediate, concrete losses, particularly when the losses are on media display globally 24/7. The 9/11 attack may thus be seen as the first step in the al-Qaeda strategy of terrorism to intimidate the world hegemon for political purposes.

1. THE NECESSARY HEGEMON

Hegemonic dominance needs military supremacy to back its claim to deter states from unfair and dishonest trade practices and disruptive aggression. The only alternative is seeking peace through a balance of