Prior to September 11, 2001, most Americans felt secure and blessed. They were grateful for the wealth that nature and hard work had provided and comfortable as citizens of a hegemonic power, a self-identified “greatest nation on earth.” This sense of comfort existed even for many who had little by way of a personal share in America’s material bounty. Most Americans felt happily isolated from the worst perils of a troubled world.

Most paid only minimal attention to that world even as the US military patrolled it and American corporations profited mightily in it. Americans understood that, but were also content living in a land unto itself—self-protected and free, a nation in some ways much like a cowboy or space explorer. As well, many in “real” (noncoastal, nonurban) America were prone to finding the rest of the world insufficiently American.

Within a year after September 11, however, many Americans and non-Americans (including myself) saw the nation much like Brent Scowcroft, G. H. W. Bush’s National Security advisor, viewed Dick Cheney when he said that he “didn’t know him anymore.” America had seemed to go to a dark place in its national psyche, a place from which it only began to emerge toward the end of the Bush years when Katrina struck New Orleans and Wall Street misbehavior caused the global economy to collapse.

The Bush administration rejected the Kyoto Protocol and occupied Baghdad, and this and the verbal and policy hostility and bluster that came with it provided the world with a disheartening beginning to the new millennium. Unintentionally, those years may also have sparked a nascent global public consciousness in the form of a near-universal rejection of American leadership. Even some Americans
began to wonder about the wisdom of unfettered hegemonic power. This at least temporary shift in global outlook could, in time, lead to a rethinking of how the world governs itself.

The 2008 election of Barack Obama partially restored global confidence in America, a confidence that has again waned since the 2010 reentrenchment of conservatism and the ensuing legislative gridlock and a continuing global inability to act decisively regarding climate change and other global concerns. This ongoing reality reminds the world that extreme conservatism could again come to power in America. Rethinking a world dominated by an unpredictable hegemonic power is now essential.

This rethinking is necessary because our world is stunningly good at forgetting the past, even one so recent. American conservatism, for example, has adapted little since the Bush years and America's media sometimes report as if those eight years, and the intense global reaction to them, never happened. Mitt Romney's presidential candidacy was as belligerent regarding the Middle East as the Bush administration had been. Indeed his foreign policy views were guided by many of the same people. Romney was, in 2012, more inclined to climate change denial than Bush had been despite Romney's own quite decent climate record as governor of Massachusetts. As well, Romney's economic and social policy assertions during the campaign made Bush's inaction in New Orleans during Katrina look like the humane ministrations of Mother Theresa.

Doubts regarding hegemonic power have emerged in this still new century, but what alternatives are possible? One this book will explore is the possible emergence of a new actor on the global stage: a global citizen's movement, inevitably a long process, but one entity that could spur interest in collective global action on urgent matters. If trust in such a movement were to build, perhaps even global security could in time be dealt with cooperatively. Before any inquiry into how citizenship might evolve in the face of global economic integration, we need to explore hegemony and the risks associated with highly concentrated global political power.

Sometimes in global affairs, as in everyday living, we must experience the consequences of getting things wrong in order to slowly begin to imagine how they might be better. After eight years of Bush and Cheney many, including a majority of Americans, came to appreciate where they did not want to go. The Bush years and since have been full of horror and hope. The hope is very far from realized, but it remains alive.