

RESPONSE TO TERROR; EDUCATION; Once-Insular Americans Studying Up on the World; Culture: People strive to understand current events by learning about the Mideast and Islam.

Trounson, Rebecca; Hayasaki, Erika . Los Angeles Times ; Los Angeles, Calif. [Los Angeles, Calif]. 21 Oct 2001: A.1.

[ProQuest document link](#)

ABSTRACT (ABSTRACT)

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FULL TEXT

The young woman didn't know the name of the book she was after when she wandered into a Santa Monica bookstore. She just knew she needed to read it.

"What is their book, the one like the Bible?" she asked Margie Ghiz, owner of Midnight Special. The Koran, Ghiz said. Then the owner apologized; she had just sold out.

In that case, the woman asked, could she look at anything related? "I think I need to know more about how other people think," she said.

Long renowned both for collective indifference and relative ignorance about the rest of the world, Americans have been shocked out of their insularity by the Sept. 11 terrorist attacks.

Books about the Taliban, Palestinians and Islam are now top sellers as growing numbers of Americans, suddenly feeling vulnerable, try to arm themselves with information about issues and regions once deemed too complicated to grasp or too remote to affect them.

They are gathering at campus teach-ins on Afghanistan and U.S. foreign policy, and seeking foreign news in

newspapers, on broadcasts and on Web sites. They are calling Islamic education groups and buying maps and atlases.

And in far greater numbers than in recent years, they are signing up for language classes—especially Arabic. Also drawing applicants is the State Department's foreign service exam, the test for would-be diplomats. (A campaign to boost applications may also have played a role.) The number of registrants for the test, given at the end of September, nearly doubled from last year, to more than 23,000.

Academics, diplomats and other experts compare the sudden, urgent interest in foreign affairs to the national drive for improved math and science education after the Soviet Union launched the Sputnik satellite in 1957.

Much of the surge in public interest appears to stem directly from the terror attacks and their aftermath—a heartening example, experts said, of Americans trying to coax something positive from the horror. At the same time, several said the new focus on the world and America's role in it could prove ephemeral, lasting only as long as U.S. forces are engaged overseas or Americans feel threatened at home.

For now, though, "there's an explosion of interest," said Robert English, who teaches international relations at USC, specializing in Russia and the republics of Central Asia. "It used to be that someone who had a keen interest kind of stood out in my classes, but no one's passive right now."

Newspapers Reverse Tilt Toward the Local

In response not just to world events but also to the public appetite, newspapers that typically emphasize local and regional news have radically changed their approach.

"Now the local non-terror news has to fight for a spot on the front page," said Richard Tapscott, managing editor of the Des Moines Register. "The mix [of stories] has turned almost completely upside down."

Edward S. Walker Jr., president of the Middle East Institute in Washington, called the public's new interest in things foreign "fairly astounding."

Walker said the institute's Web site, which typically gets about 8,000 hits a day, has averaged 50,000 since the attacks. Many people are clicking on its primer, "Introduction to Islam," by M. Cherif Bassiouni, an Egyptian-born international law expert at DePaul University in Chicago.

"It can only help us if we all have a better understanding of these issues," said Walker, who was the State Department's top Middle East specialist before his retirement in April.

Robert Tiller agrees. An accountant living in Chino Hills, he recently spent his lunch hour at a Pasadena bookstore, searching for an atlas to help him locate Afghanistan, its capital, Kabul, and other foreign countries and cities in the news. Tiller said he read newspapers only rarely before Sept. 11 and knew little about Afghanistan or Osama bin Laden, the man U.S. authorities have accused of masterminding the attacks.

Now, however, he pays close attention. "I want to learn more about these terrorists' opinions about us," he said. "Now it affects me."

Diplomats and academics recall other bursts of American interest in foreign policy, generally in times of overseas

crisis involving the United States. The Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor and American forces' engagement in the Pacific led to public focus on those regions, as the Vietnam War did with Southeast Asia. The oil crisis of the 1970s and, briefly, the Persian Gulf War heightened interest in the Middle East.

With the exception of Israel, most Americans historically have not been very interested in the Middle East or Afghanistan, or in U.S. policies involving these complex, volatile regions.

Experts say that is largely because the issues and problems there seem very distant from most Americans' lives. Cultural, political and religious differences all contribute to a broad lack of knowledge and understanding.

"In this country, we've largely been immune to the problems of the Middle East," said Walker, who served at various times as ambassador to Egypt, Israel and the United Arab Emirates. "But now Americans are feeling very vulnerable and uncertain."

Store Has Trouble Meeting Demand

At Vroman's Bookstore in Pasadena, clerks fielded so many questions about the area that a prominent display now invites customers to "learn about Islam and the Middle East." Volumes on the crowded table include the Koran and histories of Afghanistan, the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and Islam.

Assistant buyer Mike Hatton said the store is having trouble meeting demand. "There's been just a huge run on books about the Middle East and Afghanistan," he said. "We have a display of about 15 titles, but we can't keep many of them on the shelves."

In the three or four months before the attacks, the store had sold only two copies of "Taliban: Militant Islam, Oil and Fundamentalism in Central Asia," published last year by journalist Ahmed Rashid. Now it's tough to keep in stock. Nationally, sales of the book—which documents the rise of the current Kabul government, the Afghan civil war and the consequences of U.S. policies—have increased tenfold since the attacks.

Retired bank manager Whitney Barrick, 68, made his way through the store clutching a copy of "Taliban." He said he had waited a week for the book and was eager to read it.

"I haven't read that much about [Afghanistan] before," he said. "Until they blew up the World Trade Center, it wasn't on my radar."

At Midnight Special, Ghiz said she is having trouble keeping Arabic dictionaries in stock. At Amazon.com, eight of the 10 best-selling books in the week after Sept. 11 were on subjects related to the attacks.

Universities Scramble to Provide Knowledge

Universities report a similar hunger for knowledge, with students crowding into courses and seminars—some hastily added—on subjects ranging from terrorism to globalization to germ warfare. On campuses nationwide, hundreds have attended '60s-style teach-ins, eager to explore everything from the Afghan civil war to American foreign policy decisions that have fanned the flames of resentment of the United States.

In response to the events of Sept. 11, UCLA created 50 new seminars aimed at giving undergraduates, especially freshmen, perspectives on issues emerging from the attacks. The subjects range from a look at America's role as

the world's only superpower to case studies of militant Islam in Uzbekistan and Sudan.

Seemingly overnight, students "want to know more and think harder" about the world and the U.S. role in it, said UCLA political science professor Geoffrey Garrett, who teaches one such seminar. "Everything is so much more pressing now, so close to home."

The United States has always had "such a diffident, hesitant relationship" with other countries, said Garrett, who also is the university's vice provost for international studies. "Knowledge of the rest of the world in the U.S. is remarkably limited, but maybe these events will change that."

Interest runs high at campuses throughout the country. The University of Texas at Austin has held two dozen special seminars and classes, with several more scheduled for the next two weeks.

"There's obviously a high emotional urgency to people's interest now," said Edwin Dorn, dean of the university's school of public affairs and a former undersecretary of Defense. "And that's a healthy thing, exposing Americans to a part of the world and a religion that most are very unfamiliar with."

The sudden interest has cropped up elsewhere, with Web sites on anything related to the attacks reporting dramatically higher traffic. Nine of Google's "top 10 gaining queries" during September related to the attacks. Among them: Taliban, Afghanistan, Osama bin Laden and Nostradamus, the 16th century astrologer believed by many to have predicted major catastrophes.

Other examples abound. Shabbir Mansuri, founding director of the Council on Islamic Education in Fountain Valley, said first-time calls from individuals and groups seeking information about Islam have "run into the dozens."

"It's like they're saying: 'Oh my God, who are these people? Let's find out,' " Mansuri said.

Arabic Classes Attract More Applicants

Language schools from east to west also are attracting callers and applicants. At Washington's Middle East Institute, which offers classes in Arabic, Persian, Turkish and Hebrew, Walker said applications for Arabic have doubled in the last month.

And at the Monterey Institute of International Studies, program manager Jeanie Watts said she has been fielding four to five times the normal number of inquiries about Arabic classes. In response, the private Northern California school has added an intensive Arabic course to its January term.

What all this shows, said Gideon Rose, managing editor of Foreign Affairs magazine, is that international affairs, in the space of a few weeks, has gone from a "boutique subject" for most Americans to the focus of impassioned public debate. Since Sept. 11, the magazine's articles have been cited more often and traffic on its Web site has soared, he said.

"You get the sense that instead of being read by a rather small audience, many, many more are paying attention," Rose said. "That's gratifying, but you wish there were a less depressing way for Americans to have to consider the outside world."

Illustration



Caption: PHOTO: Religion student Sean LaFreniere was looking for a copy of the Koran in Portland, Ore., but it was sold out. The Sept. 11 attacks have sparked interest in subjects long ignored by Americans.; PHOTOGRAPHER: Associated Press

Credit: TIMES STAFF WRITERS

DETAILS

Subject:	Social impact; Geography; Islam; Terrorism; Social conditions &trends -- United States--US
Location:	United States US
Publication title:	Los Angeles Times; Los Angeles, Calif.
Pages:	A.1
Number of pages:	0
Publication year:	2001
Publication date:	Oct 21, 2001
Section:	Part A; National Desk
Publisher:	Los Angeles Times Communications LLC
Place of publication:	Los Angeles, Calif.
Country of publication:	United States, Los Angeles, Calif.
Publication subject:	General Interest Periodicals--United States
ISSN:	04583035
Source type:	Newspaper
Language of publication:	English
Document type:	Feature
ProQuest document ID:	421668441
Document URL:	https://www.proquest.com/newspapers/response-terror-education-once-insular-americans/docview/421668441/se-2?accountid=14512
Copyright:	(Copyright (c) 2001 Los Angeles Times)
Last updated:	2017-11-14

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Los Angeles Times

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