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The Year in Review: The Ten Leading News Stories of 2011

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And thus 2011 comes to an end, like every year before it. The year came with its own surprises and controversies, tragedies and headlines. And, with the closing of the year, we find the need to put the year into some kind of historical perspective. We are chronological creatures, and the span of year is enough to require some accounting.

Here, without strict ranking by priority, are the biggest news stories of 2011 as I have seen them.

1. The Arab Spring

In just a matter of months, the political map of the Arab world has been reshaped. It started with student protests in Tunisia and Egypt, and then swept through much of the Arab world, especially in North Africa. Regimes in Egypt and Tunisia fell first, followed by foment and revolutionary fervor elsewhere in the region. The collapse of the Mubarak regime in Egypt was followed by initial euphoria, but that was severely dampened in the following weeks as it became clear that the Egyptian military was very much in control. Of even greater concern was the rise of Islamist groups to power and influence throughout the region. The greatest trophy of the Arab Spring was the toppling of the Gaddafi regime in Libya, with Libyan insurgents assisted by NATO backing. Meanwhile, Syrian dictator Bashar al-Assad

held ruthlessly to power. At the end of the year, the future shape of the Arab world is anything but clear. One fact remains of interest: No Arab regime fueled by large oil deposits (such as the Gulf States) has yet been reshaped to any serious degree by the Arab Spring.

2. Tsunami and Earthquake Kill Thousands in Japan

Americans will forever remember 9/11. For the Japanese, it will be 3/11 — the March 11 tsunami and earthquake combination that wiped several coastal cities and villages off the map, killing as many as 20,000 people. An earthquake on the sea floor off Japan's coast triggered a tsunami that left massive devastation in its wake. The combined catastrophe was made far worse when it was discovered that sea water had breached one of Japan's major nuclear power facilities. It was later conceded that the reactor at the Fukushima Daiichi nuclear plant had experienced a complete meltdown, though the level of contamination outside the plant is still not yet known. The sheer scale of the combined disasters is without precedent in the industrialized world.

3. The Death of Tyrants and Terrorists

History will record the year 2011 as a bad year for tyrants and masterminds of terror. Muammar Gaddafi was toppled by insurgent forces in Libya, bringing his 41-year dictatorship to an end. Gaddafi would eventually be shot as he tried to escape capture, having eluded pursuers for weeks after his regime fell. Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak was forced to resign, and was put on trial. As the year ended, it was unclear that the aged former ruler would live to see that trial concluded. Americans were told on May 1 that its most targeted enemy, Osama bin Laden, had been killed by an elite force of U.S. Navy SEALs, who invaded his fortress in Abbottabad, Pakistan. The mastermind of the September 11, 2001 attacks in New York City and Washington, D.C. and the leader of al-Qaeda, bin Laden had declared himself to be an enemy of the United States and Western powers until his death. Also killed in a separate action was the American-born terrorist Anwar al-Awlaki, head of al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula. At the very end of the year, North Korea's "Dear Leader" Kim Jong-il died of a massive heart attack. His youngest son, Kim Jong-un, believed to be age 28, was declared by the North Korean press to be the "Great Successor" within the hermit kingdom.

4. Occupy Wall Street

For a few weeks, it looked as if the 1960s had returned to some American cities. It began with a call for protestors to arrive at Wall Street in New York, ready to take a stand against financial and economic injustices. It mushroomed into a huge protest movement, with crowds of generally young people pitching tents and "occupying" strategic areas around Wall Street and in cities across the nation. This came after rioting young people rampaged through the streets of London weeks earlier. The Occupy Wall Street movement

was, in the end, not so much a movement as a meeting of sorts. The crowd lacked a consistent message or defined goals. Some commitment to anarchy seemed to doom the movement to being little more than a massive publicity stunt. Nevertheless, a sizable portion of the U.S. population indicated some support for the protest in spirit. In the end, the movement was driven off the streets by police action and cold weather.

5. Natural Disasters in the United States

2011 was a year of tragedy for many in the United States. Massive systems of tornadoes brought devastation to communities in Alabama and Georgia. A path of cyclonic devastation was visible from the air as passenger planes approached Atlanta's Hartsfield-Jackson International Airport months later. Another massive tornado brought death and destruction to Joplin, Missouri. The Joplin tornado shifted a hospital off its foundation, destroyed entire neighborhoods, and left no one in the regional city unaffected. Over 5,000 Joplin residents were left homeless. In Texas, drought and wildfires tormented residents. The Northeastern United States was hit by a major hurricane, leading to massive flooding. Washington, D.C. was, of all things, the epicenter of an earthquake, causing cracks in major facilities and historical sites, including the Washington Monument.

6. Sports Scandals Explode

College football had a very bad year, with scandals at Ohio State University and the University of Miami taking most of the headlines for most of the year. The head coach lost his job at Ohio State, while *Sports Illustrated* called for the University of Miami program to be shut down. Baseball's Barry Bonds was convicted of obstructing justice as Major League Baseball sought to regain its moral grounding in light of drug scandals. Then, a scandal of epic proportions erupted at Penn State University, as a Pennsylvania grand jury handed down indictments in a case involving the sexual abuse of young boys. It became clear that several of the most significant leaders of the university had failed to stop — or even to report — the sexual abuse of boys by former assistant coach Jerry Sandusky. Within days, the president of the university was forced out and fabled head football coach Joe Paterno was fired. A vice president and the athletic director were arrested. The nation hardly had time to think about the meaning of the Penn State scandal when another scandal of the sexual abuse of boys erupted in the basketball program at Syracuse University. Every leader in America was put on notice — there can be no toleration of sexual abuse, and no failure to report suspected abuse to legal authorities.

7. The European Union Fights for Survival

The economic crisis that exploded in 2008 continues to reverberate around the world. 2011 will be remembered as the year that Europe had to act decisively to save the Euro and the so-called Euro-zone of nations within the European Union. The nations had

attempted a monetary union without a fiscal union, but the prized achievement of European cooperation, the Euro, was threatened when it became clear that Greece was in danger of defaulting on its debt. The crisis in Greece revealed a large crisis of sovereign debt within Europe, as well as major cultural divisions that could no longer be denied. As the year ended, an agreement brokered by Germany and France bought some time for the Euro, but with a significant loss of national sovereignty for member nations. Unelected technocrats took power in Greece and Italy, and Great Britain refused to join the agreement to save the Euro, which it had never adopted. European governments and businesses understood that the collapse of the Euro remained a clear possibility. The larger issue remained the survival of the attempt to forge a new European identity on secular and economic terms.

8. Political Frustration in the United States

The American political scene was marked, above all, by a sense of frustration on the part of the public. President Obama and the U.S. Congress shared disastrously low ratings with the American people. Congress played continual brinksmanship with the threat of shutting down the government and President Obama found that blaming the previous administration for the nation's economic woes and high unemployment no longer worked. Americans grew more nervous about the threat posed by the nation's towering national debt and both major parties geared up for the 2012 national election. On the Republican side, the campaign for the presidential nomination began earlier than ever, but with no consistent front-runner. All that is likely to change when actual voting takes place very soon after the New Year.

9. Notable Deaths take the Headlines

Steve Jobs, the iconic co-founder of Apple, resigned as CEO in August, announcing that his fight with cancer left him unable to lead the company. He died just six weeks after making that announcement. Jobs' death became a signal event for the year, with massive news coverage and media refection. All this pointed to Jobs as the symbol of the digital age, the inventor of the iPad, the iPod, and the iPhone. But the cultural attention prompted by Jobs' death also pointed to the vast role that digital technologies now play in our world and in our lives. Other notable deaths of 2011 included former First Lady Betty Ford, former Congresswoman Geraldine Ferraro, and movie star Elizabeth Taylor, along with political figures Sargent Shriver and Warren Christopher.

10. The Redefinition of the Book and Publishing

Centuries after the invention of the printing press, the book experienced another transformation with the arrival of electronic books (or e-books) and reading devices such as Amazon's Kindle. 2011 may well be remembered as the year that readers had to decide whether to read a book in print, or on screen. Publishers revealed in 2011 that many mass-

market titles were selling more in e-book form than in print. Meanwhile, Barnes & Noble and Amazon brought out new and very inexpensive digital reading devices. The Barnes & Noble Nook reader established the company as a major player in the digital market, explaining in part why Barnes & Noble survives into 2012 while major competitor Borders Books did not. Borders collapsed and closed all of its stores after a series of failed rescue bids. Meanwhile, Amazon released its color tablet known as the Kindle Fire just in time for Christmas, selling millions. Still, the printed book holds its place — and so do brave independent bookstores. Novelist Anne Patchett and others opened a new independent bookstore in Nashville in 2011, Parnassus Books.

Of course, 2011 will be remembered by individuals in different ways. For many, the year will be remembered for events far more intimate and personal than these major national and world events. Deaths, births, marriages, graduations, retirements, and other milestones mark our years. All of these meld into our memory. Those of us who shared the year 2011 are left with plenty of reasons to reflect, to remember, to hope, and to pray.

I am always glad to hear from readers. Write me at mail@albertmohler.com. Follow regular updates on Twitter at www.twitter.com/AlbertMohler

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