

and Aftermath of 9/11



9/11: The Terrorist Attack on the United States

David Greenberg

In the excerpt that follows, David Greenberg, a professor of history and journalism at Rutgers University in New Jersey, summarizes the 9/11 attacks, their impact, and the response. On that fateful morning in 2001, nineteen al Qaeda terrorists hijacked four planes, deliberately crashing two into the World Trade Center in New York City and one into the Pentagon in Washington, DC. The passengers of the fourth overcame the hijackers, and the plane crashed in western Pennsylvania. The attacks halted business and air travel nationwide. However, Greenberg explains, New York City bore the brunt of the attack. Indeed, of the 2,819 people who died that day, most lost their lives in the collapse of the World Trade Center. Congress quickly authorized a military response, Greenberg states. Pervasive

Photo on previous page: News spread quickly the day of the September 11, 2001, attacks, which killed thousands in the United States, destroyed the World Trade Center, and damaged the Pentagon. (Mike Nelson/AFP/Getty Images.)

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also led to dramatic domestic laws and policies that some claim violate civil liberties. Despite worldwide efforts, Greenberg points out, a year later, no end to the war on terrorism seemed in sight.

On Tuesday, 11 September 2001, nineteen members of the Islamic terrorist group Al Qaeda perpetrated a devastating, deadly assault on the United States, crashing airplanes into the Pentagon and the World Trade Center, killing thousands. The attacks shattered Americans' sense of security, threw the nation into a state of emergency, and triggered a months-long war in Afghanistan and an extended worldwide "war on terrorism."

A Devastating Attack

On the morning of 11 September, four teams of terrorists hijacked jetliners departing from Boston; Newark, New Jersey; and Washington, D.C. Once airborne, the terrorists, some of whom had gone to flight school in the United States, murdered the planes' pilots and took control of the aircrafts. At 8:46 A.M., the first plane flew directly into the north tower of the World Trade Center in southern Manhattan, tearing a gaping hole in the building and setting it ablaze. Seventeen minutes later, a second plane flew into the center's south tower, causing similar damage. At 9:43 A.M., a third plane plunged into the Pentagon in Virginia, smashing one wing of the government's military headquarters. The fourth plane appeared headed for Washington, D.C., but at 10:10 A.M. it crashed in western Pennsylvania, apparently after passengers, who had learned of the other attacks through conversations on their cellular phones,¹ rushed the terrorists. Compounding the horror, the south and north towers of the Trade Center, their structures weakened by the heat of the blazes, collapsed entirely, at 10:05 and

10:28 A.M., respectively. The attack was seen as an act of war, likened to Japan's 1941 attack on Pearl Harbor that brought the United States into World War II.

The scope of the carnage and devastation, especially in Manhattan, overwhelmed Americans. Besides the towers, several smaller buildings in the World Trade Center complex also collapsed. People trapped on upper floors of the towers jumped or fell to their deaths. Hundreds of firefighters and rescue crews who had hurried to the buildings were crushed when the towers collapsed. All told, 2,819 people died (because of confusion and difficulty in tracking down individuals, early estimates put the toll at more than 6,000). Thousands more suffered severe physical injury or psychological trauma. Others were displaced from their homes and offices for weeks or months. Some businesses lost large portions of their workforces or sustained financial setbacks. Neighborhood restaurants and shops, which depended on the World Trade Center population for business, struggled to stay solvent.

Shock and Panic

Americans responded to the atrocities with shock and panic. Early in the day, television news reported (but retracted) false rumors of other attacks, including a bombing at the State Department, heightening the uncertainty of what might still happen. States of emergency were declared in Washington and New York. The Federal Aviation Agency grounded all flights in the United States and diverted all incoming foreign air traffic to Canada. Federal officials evacuated the White House and Congress and then closed all federal buildings. The military was put on worldwide alert.

President George W. Bush, attending a political event in Florida, gave a brief statement at 9:30 A.M. noting

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an "apparent terrorist attack." He then flew around the country, to Air Force bases in Louisiana and Nebraska, as Vice President Dick Cheney supervised operations from a White House bunker. Bush drew criticism for his decision and for promulgating a story, which the White House later admitted was false, that his plane was a target of the terrorists. Shortly before 7 P.M., with the threat of further attacks diminished, Bush returned to the White House. At 8:30 P.M., he spoke from the Oval Office, vowing retaliation against not just the terrorists responsible for the assaults, but also those governments that supported or sheltered them. As Bush's comments suggested, American intelligence agencies already believed the Al Qaeda terrorist ring, run by the Saudi Osama bin Laden, was responsible, and that it was operating in Afghanistan, under the protection of the dictatorial Islamic regime known as the Taliban.

As Washington, D.C., coped with a national crisis, New York City faced an unprecedented urban emergency. Businesses closed for the day (and in some cases much longer), as did the subways. Manhattan became a sea of human beings fleeing the lower end of the island by foot. Bridges and tunnels leading into the borough were closed. The municipal primary elections scheduled for that day, including the mayoral contest, were postponed for two weeks. The stock market, located near the Trade Center, closed for the rest of the week. Rudolph Giuliani, the city's controversial mayor, won widespread praise for his confident, candid, and humane public posture during the crisis. In December, *Time* magazine named him "Man of the Year."

Identifying the Terrorists

American officials had little trouble identifying the terrorists or how they achieved their feat. Mostly Egyptians,



Saudis, and Yemenis, the perpetrators included both recent immigrants and those who had lived in the United States for several years. Some had already been under suspicion but had managed to conceal their whereabouts. Authorities also alleged that Zacarias Moussaoui, a French Muslim of Moroccan descent who had been arrested in August after suspicious behavior at a flight school, was intended to be the twentieth hijacker in the plot.

Officials also determined quickly that the hijackers belonged to bin Laden's Al Qaeda group. For several years, bin Laden had been organizing and bankrolling terrorist activities around the world, directed against the United States, other Western nations and individuals, and pro-Western Arab governments. He worked with a coalition of fanatical Islamic groups, mostly in the Arab world, but also in Southeast and Central Asia, including Egyptians who had assassinated their leader, Anwar Sadat, in 1981. These extremists opposed secular, modern, and Western values, called for the withdrawal of

After the terrorist attacks in New York September 11, 2001, rescue personnel combed the rubble of the fallen Twin Towers but found few survivors. (Doug Kanter/Getty Images.)

American troops from Saudi Arabia, and adopted unrelenting violence against civilians as their instrument.

Responding to Terrorism

Bin Laden and his associates had struck before. They engineered the 1993 World Trade Center bombing, the 1996 assault on an American military barracks in Saudi Arabia, the 1998 bombings of the American embassies in Kenya and Tanzania, and the 2000 bombing of the USS *Cole*, a destroyer anchored in Yemen. The Bill Clinton administration had responded to these attacks by prosecuting those perpetrators whom it could apprehend, by (unsuccessfully) seeking legal changes to ease the tracking of terrorists, and by launching military strikes in 1998 against Sudan and Afghanistan, which supported Al Qaeda. The administration had also successfully thwarted earlier conspiracies, including a planned series of bombings on New Year's Eve 2000.

Few doubted, however, that more-severe reprisals were needed after 11 September. On 14 September, Congress passed a resolution authorizing the use of military force to fight terrorism. The United States also secured a resolution on 12 September from the United Nations Security Council endorsing antiterrorism efforts, which, while not explicitly approving military action, was generally interpreted as doing so. After a mere four weeks—longer than some war hawks wanted—American and British forces began bombing Afghanistan. Despite a massive call-up of military reserves, the U.S. government remained wary of using American ground forces. Instead, Western forces bombed key targets while providing aid and coordination to the Northern Alliance, a coalition of Afghan rebels who did most of the actual fighting. On 13 November, Kabul, Afghanistan's capital, fell to the allies.

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On 22 December, a new, interim government friendly to the United States took power.

The Domestic Response

The domestic response to the 11 September attacks was almost as dramatic as the military action abroad. A surge of patriotism gripped the nation. Citizens flew flags, sang "God Bless America," and donated money to the victims' families, the Red Cross, and firefighters' and police officers' associations. The efficient performance of many federal and state agencies—law enforcement, emergency relief, environmental protection, and others—boosted public confidence in government to levels not seen in decades. President Bush appointed Pennsylvania Governor Tom Ridge to his cabinet as the director of "homeland" security, while other officials ordered the closer monitoring of sites ranging from nuclear reactors to reservoirs.

Congress granted new powers to law enforcement officials. The so-called USA Patriot Act, passed in October, gave authorities greater latitude in placing wiretaps and reading E-mail, prompting a national debate about whether civil liberties were being needlessly curtailed. Also controversial was a massive Justice Department dragnet that caught up hundreds of immigrants, mostly Middle Easterners, many of whom were jailed for months for technical violations of immigration laws.

An Atmosphere of Fear

In the immediate aftermath of the attacks, fear was pervasive. For several days, bomb scares proliferated. More troubling, starting in late September, several politicians and prominent news organizations received in the mail packages containing deadly high-grade anthrax spores.

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Five people died from the disease, although many more who were exposed recovered by taking antibiotics. Federal officials suspected that the anthrax was circulated not by Al Qaeda terrorists, but by Americans; nonetheless, the weeks-long scare, marked by news of sudden deaths and hospitalizations, fueled Americans' sense of insecurity.

Fear also centered on air travel, which decreased in the short term as many Americans realized how lax airport security was. Airports immediately tightened their security procedures after 11 September, creating long lines and frequent delays, but their policies remained erratic and far from foolproof. Months later, airplanes were still transporting bags that had not been screened, and private firms, not public employees, remained in control. Although air travel rebounded to normal levels, the airlines benefited from a perception after 11 September that they faced bankruptcy, and Congress passed a bailout bill giving them \$15 billion in federal subsidies. Republican legislators blocked a plan to extend federal support to laid-off airline employees as well.

Within a few months after the attacks, daily life across America had essentially returned to normal. Fighting in Afghanistan sporadically erupted to top the news, and developments in the "war on terrorism"—whether the apprehension of alleged Al Qaeda members or the administration's plan to create a new cabinet department devoted to domestic security—attracted much comment. But other events, notably a wave of corruption scandals at several leading corporations, also vied for public attention. The war effort, which had successfully ousted the Taliban, still enjoyed wide support, as did President Bush. The administration began planning for an attack on Iraq; although the regime had no demonstrable links to Al Qaeda, its program to develop nuclear and chemical weapons now appeared, in the wake of 11 September, to be an intolerable danger. A year after the 9/11 attacks,

no end of the "war on terrorism" seemed imminent, as bin Laden and most of his top aides remained at large, and polls showed that a majority of Americans considered it likely that there would be another terrorist attack on their own soil.

Note

1. It was later discovered that few calls were made using individual cell phones. Most were made using the aircraft's built-in seatback phones.