The Terrorist Attacks of September 11, 2001

On the morning of September 11, 2001, hijackers commandeered two U.S. commercial airliners—American Airlines Flight 11 and United Airlines Flight 175—and crashed them into the twin towers of the World Trade Center in New York. A short while later a third hijacked plane — American Airlines Flight 77 — was crashed into the Pentagon outside Washington, D.C. A fourth plane— United Airlines Flight 93 — crashed in a field in Pennsylvania after passengers decided to resist the hijackers who had taken control. Its intended target is unknown. Because the planes were laden with jet fuel, the crashes ignited massive fires. Both World Trade Center towers collapsed after burning for more than an hour. The attacks killed more than two thousand nine hundred people.

Within hours intelligence agencies had learned that the hijackers were associated with the militant Islamist group al-Qaeda, led by Osama bin Laden (1957-2011), the son of a wealthy Saudi family, and aided by the Taliban government of Afghanistan. Al-Qaeda and bin Laden cited U.S. support of Israel, the presence of U.S. troops in Saudi Arabia, and sanctions against Iraq as motives for the attacks. The attacks—the most extensive and orchestrated terrorist attacks in U.S. history—led to an invasion of Afghanistan by U.S. and allied forces.

The Government Reacts

President George W. Bush (1946-?) was visiting a Florida school at the time the planes crashed. He spoke briefly on television, indicating that the country had experienced "an apparent terrorist attack," and then disappeared from public view for hours as he was flown from one military installation to another for security reasons. Meanwhile the White House, Capitol, and other government buildings were evacuated. The first lady, the vice president, and other top officials were taken to secure locations. The Federal Aviation Administration grounded all domestic air flights and diverted U.S.-bound transatlantic flights to Canada.

Bush returned to Washington, D.C., late in the afternoon. That evening, in a nationally televised address, he promised to bring the terrorists to justice and noted "we will make no distinction between the terrorists who committed these acts and those who harbor them."

Three days later Congress authorized the president to use "all necessary and appropriate force" against those found to have been involved in the terrorist attacks. On September 20, 2001, before a joint session of Congress, Bush issued an ultimatum to Afghanistan's Taliban government. He wanted all al-Qaeda leaders turned over to U.S. authorities; all terrorist training camps closed; and every terrorist handed over to the appropriate authorities. The demands were not open to negotiation: "The Taliban must act, and act immediately," Bush warned. "They will hand over the terrorists, or they will share in their fate." The Taliban rejected the ultimatum.

The United States and allied forces launched a war against Afghanistan and drove the Taliban from power in less than three months. A multinational peacekeeping force was assembled to help U.S. forces secure the country, while a new government was installed. Although the military operation was deemed a success, security was difficult to maintain in Afghanistan because of continued rebel uprisings. In addition the U.S. failed to locate bin Laden.

The Victims of September 11, 2001

The vast majority of casualties from the attacks were at the World Trade Center towers. More than two thousand seven hundred people died there; about two hundred died at the Pentagon; and forty-three at the Pennsylvania crash site. The area of wreckage and debris at the World Trade Center site became known as "ground zero." Rescue, recovery, and
cleanup operations lasted for months. More than $1 billion in charitable contributions was raised for the victims and their families.

Within two weeks of the attacks Congress passed the Air Transportation Safety and System Stabilization Act to provide financial assistance to the airlines—lawmakers feared that lawsuits might bankrupt the industry—and to protect the U.S. economy. Congress also created the September 11th Victim Compensation Fund of 2001 to provide public compensation to victims (or their relatives) who had been killed or physically injured in the attacks. The fund, which was available to claimants who agreed not to sue the airline companies, paid out about $7 billion to the survivors of 2,880, or 97 percent, of the individuals killed in the attacks. Some 2,680 injured persons were also compensated by the fund. The average death award was in excess of $2 million per claim; the average injury award was approximately $400,000.

The 9/11 Commission Report

In 2002 the president and Congress created the National Commission on Terrorist Attacks upon the United States to investigate all of the circumstances relating to the terrorist attacks. For nearly two years the commission reviewed relevant documents and interviewed more than one thousand people, including captured al-Qaeda operatives, to re-create the events leading up to and occurring on and after September 11, 2001. Its report, which became known as *The 9/11 Commission Report*, traces the plotting, execution, and aftermath of the attacks. The commission learned that all nineteen hijackers were from nations in the Middle East; sixteen of them were Saudis. Six of the men were "lead operatives"—the best trained of the team. Four of these men, who piloted the hijacked planes, had studied for months at U.S. flight schools. The lead operatives lived in the United States for up to a year before the day of the attacks. Thirteen were "muscle hijackers" selected to assist in overpowering the flight crews and passengers. They came to the United States only months before the attacks after undergoing extensive training at al-Qaeda camps in Afghanistan.

According to the report, all of the hijackers were selected by al-Qaeda because of their willingness to martyr themselves for the Islamist cause espoused by bin Laden. However, the commission also discovered that very few people within al-Qaeda knew the details and scope of the hijack plan before it was carried out.


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