A History of the 9/11 Attacks

On September 11, 2001, a group of Islamic extremists attacked the United States. They hijacked, or took control, over four airplanes. They flew two of them into the World Trade Center in New York City. A third plane hit the Pentagon building just outside Washington, D.C. The Pentagon is the command post for the country's military. The fourth plane crashed in a field in Pennsylvania. The attacks are often called "9/11." Nearly 3,000 people were killed in the attacks, including police officers and firefighters.

Al-Qaida was the group behind the attacks. Run by Osama bin Laden, al-Qaida was a group of Islamic extremists. They say they follow Islam, one of the world's main religions. Islamic extremists like those in al-Qaida believe different things from most Muslims, or people who practice Islam. They use Islam as an excuse to do terrible acts of violence. The religion is peaceful.
Carefully coordinated attacks

Bin Laden said the 9/11 attacks were planned because al-Qaida was angry at the United States. His followers thought the United States was too involved in the Middle East. For example, the United States sells weapons to Saudi Arabia, a Middle Eastern country. The United States also gives money to Israel, a Jewish country in the Middle East with many Muslims living in it. The land has been fought over for centuries. Bin Laden believed that Jews and Americans should leave the land.

Some of the extremists took flying lessons at American flight schools. Others snuck into the country in the months before September 11. On that morning, the 19 extremists boarded four airplanes going to California. They chose the flights because the planes were loaded with fuel for the long journey. Soon after takeoff, the attackers hijacked the four planes and took the controls.

Thousands of casualties

Meanwhile, American Airlines Flight 77 crashed into the Pentagon at 9:37 a.m. Jet fuel from the Boeing 757 caused a terrible fire. Part of the giant concrete building gave out. In total, 125 people were killed in the Pentagon, along with all 64 people on board the airplane.

About 20 minutes later, one of the two towers of the World Trade Center fell down. The building was designed to stand even with winds over 200 miles per hour and a large fire. However, it could not take the terrible heat caused by burning jet fuel. At 10:28 a.m., the other Trade Center tower crumbled. Close to 3,000 people died in the attack on New York. This number includes 343 firefighters and paramedics and 60 police officers. About 6,000 people were injured.

Meanwhile, a fourth plane – United Flight 93 – was hijacked soon after leaving Newark International Airport in New Jersey. The passengers and flight attendants heard about the attacks in New York and Washington. They decided to fight the hijackers.

The passengers fought the four hijackers, but did not land the plane. The plane crashed in a farm field in Pennsylvania at 10:03 a.m. All 45 people onboard were killed. No one knows what the hijackers' target was. Some people think they were trying to crash into the White House or the Capitol in Washington, D.C.

Bush declares war

President George W. Bush had spent the day flying around the country to keep safe. At 7 p.m., he returned to the White House and spoke to the American public from the White House.

“Terrorist attacks can shake the foundations of our biggest buildings, but they cannot touch the foundation of America,” he said. The attacks destroy steel, but they cannot destroy the country, he said.
On October 7, the U.S. went to war with Afghanistan and al-Qaida. Within two months, the Taliban government was defeated. The Taliban are Islamic extremists that gave help to al-Qaida. However, Taliban fighters attacked U.S. troops in Pakistan and the war continued.

Bin Laden also went into hiding. On May 2, 2011, he was finally tracked down and killed by U.S. forces. Later that year, President Barack Obama began bringing American soldiers home from Afghanistan. In August 2017, President Donald Trump said he was putting more soldiers into Afghanistan.

*Editor’s Note: The original published version of this article on the history of September 11 contained insensitive and problematic language to describe a very sensitive topic. This mistake has since been addressed, and the article has been updated. We apologize for this oversight, and we’re particularly grateful for educators who help us improve by speaking up and holding us accountable.*