A History of the 9/11 Attacks

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On September 11, 2001, Islamic extremists hijacked, or overtook, four airplanes and used them to attack the United States. Two of the planes were flown into the towers of the World Trade Center in New York City. A third plane hit a government building called the Pentagon just outside of Washington, D.C. The fourth plane crashed in a field in Pennsylvania. Over 3,000 people were killed, including more than 400 police officers and firefighters. The attacks are often referred to as 9/11.

Carefully coordinated attacks

Osama bin Laden’s extremist group, al-Qaida, was responsible for planning and financing the attacks. Al-Qaida claimed they were seeking revenge on the United States. They were angry that the U.S. gave money to the country of Israel, a Jewish state in which many Muslims live. The land has been fought over for centuries.

Al-Qaida was also upset at the U.S. for participating in the Persian Gulf War, which would eventually lead to the Iraq War, and for continuing to keep soldiers in the Middle East.
Some of the attackers had taken flying lessons at American flight schools. Others had slipped into the country in the months before September 11. The 19 men snuck box-cutters and knives through security at three East Coast airports. They boarded airplanes headed for California. The four flights were chosen because the planes were loaded with fuel for the long journey. Soon after takeoff, they took over the four planes.

**Thousands of casualties**

Meanwhile, American Airlines Flight 77 crashed into the west side of the Pentagon military headquarters at 9:37 a.m. Jet fuel from the Boeing 757 caused a devastating fire. A portion of the giant concrete building crumbled. In total, 125 people were killed in the Pentagon, along with all 64 people aboard the airplane.

Roughly 20 minutes later, the south tower of the World Trade Center crumbled. The skyscraper was built to withstand winds of more than 200 miles per hour and a large fire. However, it could not withstand the tremendous heat caused by the highly flammable jet fuel that was burning.

At 10:28 a.m., the other Trade Center tower fell to the ground. Close to 3,000 people died in the World Trade Center and the area. This number includes 343 firefighters and paramedics, 23 New York City police officers and 37 Port Authority police officers. They were struggling to help people escape from the buildings. About 6,000 people were treated for injuries.

Meanwhile, a fourth plane – United Flight 93 – was hijacked about 40 minutes after leaving Newark International Airport in New Jersey. The passengers and flight attendants heard about the attacks in New York and Washington, and decided to fight back. One of the passengers, Thomas Burnett Jr., told his wife over the phone, “There’s three of us who are going to do something about it. I love you, honey.”

Another passenger, Todd Beamer said, “Are you guys ready? Let’s roll.” Sandy Bradshaw, a flight attendant, called her husband and explained that she was filling pitchers with boiling water. She said that everyone was running to the front of the plane, where the hijackers were.

The passengers fought the four hijackers, but were not successful. The plane crashed in a farm field in western Pennsylvania at 10:03 a.m. All 45 people onboard were killed. No one knows what its target was. Theories include the White House, the U.S. Capitol or a nuclear power plant.

**Bush declares war**

President George W. Bush had spent the day flying around the country to keep him safe. At 7 p.m., he returned to the White House. At 9 p.m., he 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. “These acts shatter steel, but they cannot dent the steel of American resolve.”
He declared, “We will make no distinction between the terrorists who committed these acts and those who harbor them.” He was talking about a war that was to come.

On October 7, the U.S. led an international military force against Afghanistan and al-Qaida, whose headquarters was there. Within two months, Afghanistan’s Taliban government was removed from power. The Taliban are Islamic extremists who gave support to al-Qaida.

However, the war continued, as the U.S. and international forces attempted to defeat Taliban fighters in Pakistan, which borders Afghanistan. Osama bin Laden, who planned the September 11th attacks, was still alive. On May 2, 2011, bin Laden was finally tracked down and killed by U.S. soldiers at his hideout in Pakistan.

In June 2011, President Barack Obama announced that he would begin bringing U.S. troops home from Afghanistan. But in August 2017, President Donald Trump announced he was sending more American 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.*