A History of the 9/11 Attacks

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On September 11, 2001, 19 militants hijacked four airliners and carried out suicide attacks in 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 the Pentagon just outside Washington, D.C. A fourth plane crashed in a field in Pennsylvania. Nearly 3,000 people were killed during the attacks, including more than 400 police officers and firefighters. Often referred to as 9/11, the attacks triggered major U.S. initiatives to combat terrorism and defined the presidency of George W. Bush.

Carefully coordinated attacks

The attackers were Islamic extremists from Saudi Arabia and several other Arab nations. Osama bin Laden’s al-Qaida organization planned the attack. It was allegedly in retaliation for America’s support of Israel, its involvement in the Persian Gulf War and its continued military presence in the Middle East.

The Tribute in Light rises above the New York City skyline in 2013 on the 12th anniversary of the terror attacks of September 11, 2001, on the United States. Photo from Wikimedia Commons
Some of the attackers had lived in the United States for more than a year and took flying lessons at American flight schools. Others had slipped into the country in the months before September 11. The 19 attackers easily smuggled box-cutters and knives through security at three East Coast airports and boarded airplanes bound for California. The four flights were chosen because the planes were loaded with fuel for the long transcontinental journey. Soon after takeoff, they hijacked the four planes and took the controls, transforming ordinary commuter jets into guided missiles.

Thousands of casualties

Millions watched on television as the planes crashed into New York buildings. At 9:37 a.m., American Airlines Flight 77 circled over downtown Washington, D.C., and slammed into the west side of the Pentagon military headquarters. Jet fuel from the Boeing 757 caused a devastating fire that caused a portion of the giant concrete building to collapse. All told, 125 people were killed in the Pentagon, along with all 64 aboard the airliner.

Approximately 20 minutes after the nerve center of the U.S. military was struck, the south tower of the World Trade Center collapsed in a massive cloud of dust and smoke. The skyscraper was built to withstand winds in excess of 200 miles per hour and a typical large fire. However, it could not withstand the tremendous heat generated by the burning jet fuel. At 10:28 a.m., the other Trade Center tower collapsed.

Close to 3,000 people died in the World Trade Center and the area, including a staggering 343 firefighters and paramedics, 23 New York City police officers and 37 Port Authority police officers. They were struggling to evacuate the buildings and save the office workers trapped on higher floors. Only six people in the World Trade Center towers at the time of their collapse survived. More than 6,000 others were treated for injuries, many severe.

Meanwhile, a fourth California-bound plane – United Flight 93 – was hijacked about 40 minutes after leaving Newark International Airport in New Jersey. Because the plane had been delayed in taking off, passengers onboard learned of events in New York and Washington by cell phone and Airfone calls to the ground. The hijackers claimed the airplane was returning to the airport. Knowing this was a lie, a group of passengers and flight attendants decided to fight back. One of the passengers, Thomas Burnett Jr., told his wife over the phone that “I know we’re all going to die. There’s three of us who are going to do something about it. I love you, honey.” Another passenger, Todd Beamer, was heard saying, “Are you guys ready? Let’s roll” over an open line. Sandy Bradshaw, a flight attendant, called her husband and explained that she had slipped into a galley and was filling pitchers with boiling water. Her last words to him were, “Everyone’s running to first class. I’ve got to go. Bye.”

The passengers fought the four hijackers. The plane then flipped over and sped toward the ground at upwards of 500 miles per hour, crashing in a rural field in western Pennsylvania at 10:03 a.m. All 45 people aboard were killed. Its intended target is not known. Theories include the White House, the U.S. Capitol, the Camp David presidential retreat in Maryland or a nuclear power plant along the east coast.
Bush declares war

President George W. Bush had spent the day being flown around the country to keep him out of harm’s way. At 7 p.m., he returned to the White House, and two hours later, he delivered an address from the Oval Office. “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.”

Operation Enduring Freedom was the American-led international effort to oust the Taliban government in Afghanistan and destroy Osama bin Laden’s al-Qaida group based there. It began on October 7. Within two months, U.S. forces removed the Islamic extremists from power. However, the war continued, as U.S. and coalition forces attempted to defeat a Taliban campaign based in neighboring Pakistan. Bin Laden remained at large until May 2, 2011. He was finally tracked down and killed by U.S. forces at his hideout in Abbottabad, Pakistan.

In June 2011, President Barack Obama announced the beginning of large-scale troop withdrawals from Afghanistan. Then, in August 2017, President Donald Trump announced that he was sending more American soldiers into Afghanistan, continuing a war that has been going on for the past 16 years.

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.