

September 11, 2001

Document: George W. Bush, address to Congress (2001)

Historical Context

The attacks on the World Trade Center in New York City and the Pentagon in Washington, D.C., remain a fresh memory to most Americans. They will always remember where they were when they learned of it. Similarly, some people remember just where and when they heard about President Kennedy's assassination in 1963. But only older Americans can remember the most comparable event—the attack on Pearl Harbor in 1941.

Those watching the September 11 events unfold could scarcely believe what their eyes told them. At 8:45 A.M. American Airlines Flight 11, with ninety-two passengers and crew aboard, flew into the World Trade Center's north tower. Then just eighteen minutes later, with onlookers still trying to decide whether the first crash was an accident, United Airlines Flight 175 hit the south tower, killing the sixty-five passengers and crew on board. At 9:40 A.M., American Airlines Flight 77, carrying sixty-four passengers and crew, struck the Pentagon. A fourth airliner, United Airlines Flight 93, crashed near Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, at 10:10 A.M., killing sixty-four passengers and crew. The passengers of this flight had learned of the attacks in New York and Washington. They apparently determined to prevent their airplane from also being used as a missile. They rushed the cockpit and brought the plane down. By this time, the World Trade Center towers had begun to collapse. Many of the towers' occupants were killed, along with many firefighters and police who were trying to rescue them.

Extensive television coverage enabled many Americans to see live coverage of the towers' collapse. People relived the horror of the airliners crashing into the World Trade Center through taped replays. Nearly 3,000 people died in all. This single-day death toll on American soil ranked second only to the Civil War Battle of Antietam.

Responsibility for the attacks soon became public—a radical Islamist terrorist organization named al-Qaeda. This group was led by wealthy Saudi Arabian terrorist Osama bin Laden. It had previously organized an attack on the World Trade Center with a truck bomb, killing six people. Al-Qaeda had also organized truck bombings of U.S. embassies in 1998. In striking the World Trade Center and the Pentagon, al-Qaeda had chosen symbols of the U.S. economy and military.

Al-Qaeda planned these attacks because its members hated the United States for its influence in the Middle East. Some of the hated U.S. policies were the following:

- U.S. support of unelected regimes that seemed not to care about the average Arab, such as the regimes in Saudi Arabia and Egypt.
- The presence of the U.S. military in the Middle East.
- U.S. support for Israel.

Soon after the 9/11 attacks, anthrax-contaminated letters killed five people. These attacks closed congressional office buildings and several post offices. The anthrax letters apparently were unrelated to the terrorist attacks. But at the time, they added to the anxiety of Americans.

Importance

On September 20, President George W. Bush addressed a joint session of Congress and a television audience. Americans in stressful times look to their president for cues on how to react. President Bush offered words of comfort and unity while vowing a strong response. He promised a war on terror. Like the Cold War, he cautioned, this war would be a long one.

Based in Afghanistan, al-Qaeda became a target for the U.S. military. The government of Afghanistan was controlled by the Taliban, a radical Islamist group. They refused to surrender Osama bin Laden and other leaders of al-Qaeda. The United States and Great Britain responded by invading Afghanistan and hitting it with air strikes, beginning on October 7. But Osama bin Laden and much of the al-Qaeda leadership escaped, probably to the mountains of Pakistan. Bin Laden remained at large in 2006.

George W. Bush, Address to Congress and the American People, September 20, 2001

On September the 11th, enemies of freedom committed an act of war against our country. Americans have known wars—but for the past 136 years, they have been wars on foreign soil, except for one Sunday in 1941. Americans have known the casualties of war—but not at the center of a great city on a peaceful morning. Americans have known surprise attacks—but never before on thousands of civilians. All of this was brought upon us in a single day—and night fell on a different world, a world where freedom itself is under attack.

Americans have many questions tonight. Americans are asking: Who attacked our country? The evidence we have gathered all points to a collection of loosely affiliated terrorist organizations known as al Qaeda. They are the same murderers indicted for bombing American embassies in Tanzania and Kenya, and responsible for bombing the USS *Cole*.

Al Qaeda is to terror what the mafia is to crime. But its goal is not making money; its goal is remaking the world—and imposing its radical beliefs on people everywhere.

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The terrorists practice a fringe form of Islamic extremism that has been rejected by Muslim scholars and the vast majority of Muslim clerics—a fringe movement that perverts the peaceful teachings of Islam. The terrorists' directive commands them to kill Christians and Jews, to kill all Americans, and make no distinction among military and civilians, including women and children.

This group and its leader—a person named Osama bin Laden—are linked to many other organizations in different countries, including the Egyptian Islamic Jihad and the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan. There are thousands of these terrorists in more than 60 countries. They are recruited from their own nations and neighborhoods and brought to camps in places like Afghanistan, where they are trained in the tactics of terror. They are sent back to their homes or sent to hide in countries around the world to plot evil and destruction.

The leadership of al Qaeda has great influence in Afghanistan and supports the Taliban regime in controlling most of that country. In Afghanistan, we see al Qaeda's vision for the world.

Afghanistan's people have been brutalized—many are starving and many have fled. Women are not allowed to attend school. You can be jailed for owning a television. Religion can be practiced only as their leaders dictate. A man can be jailed in Afghanistan if his beard is not long enough.

The United States respects the people of Afghanistan—after all, we are currently its largest source of humanitarian aid—but we condemn the Taliban regime. It is not only repressing its own people, it is threatening people everywhere by sponsoring and sheltering and supplying terrorists. By aiding and abetting murder, the Taliban regime is committing murder.

And tonight, the United States of America makes the following demands on the Taliban: Deliver to United States authorities all the leaders of al Qaeda who hide in your land. Release all foreign nationals, including American citizens, you have unjustly imprisoned. Protect foreign journalists, diplomats and aid workers in your country. Close immediately and permanently every terrorist training camp in Afghanistan, and hand over every terrorist, and every person in their support structure, to appropriate authorities. Give the United States full

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access to terrorist training camps, so we can make sure they are no longer operating.

These demands are not open to negotiation or discussion. The Taliban must act, and act immediately. They will hand over the terrorists, or they will share in their fate.

I also want to speak tonight directly to Muslims throughout the world. We respect your faith. It's practiced freely by many millions of Americans, and by millions more in countries that America counts as friends. Its teachings are good and peaceful, and those who commit evil in the name of Allah blaspheme the name of Allah. The terrorists are traitors to their own faith, trying, in effect, to hijack Islam itself. The enemy of America is not our many Muslim friends; it is not our many Arab friends. Our enemy is a radical network of terrorists, and every government that supports them. . . .

Americans are asking: How will we fight and win this war? We will direct every resource at our command—every means of diplomacy, every tool of intelligence, every instrument of law enforcement, every financial influence, and every necessary weapon of war—to the disruption and to the defeat of the global terror network.

This war will not be like the war against Iraq a decade ago, with a decisive liberation of territory and a swift conclusion. It will not look like the air war above Kosovo two years ago, where no ground troops were used and not a single American was lost in combat.

Our response involves far more than instant retaliation and isolated strikes. Americans should not expect one battle, but a lengthy campaign, unlike any other we have ever seen. It may include dramatic strikes, visible on TV, and covert operations, secret even in success. We will starve terrorists of funding, turn them one against another, drive them from place to place, until there is no refuge or no rest. And we will pursue nations that provide aid or safe haven to terrorism. Every nation, in every region, now has a decision to make. Either you are with us, or you are with the terrorists. From this day forward, any nation that continues to harbor or support terrorism will be regarded by the United States as a hostile regime.

Our nation has been put on notice: We are not immune from attack. We will take defensive measures against terrorism to protect Americans. . . .

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This is not, however, just America's fight. And what is at stake is not just America's freedom. This is the world's fight. This is civilization's fight. This is the fight of all who believe in progress and pluralism, tolerance and freedom.

We ask every nation to join us. We will ask, and we will need, the help of police forces, intelligence services, and banking systems around the world. The United States is grateful that many nations and many international organizations have already responded—with sympathy and with support. Nations from Latin America, to Asia, to Africa, to Europe, to the Islamic world. Perhaps the NATO Charter reflects best the attitude of the world: An attack on one is an attack on all. . . .

After all that has just passed—all the lives taken, and all the possibilities and hopes that died with them—it is natural to wonder if America's future is one of fear. Some speak of an age of terror. I know there are struggles ahead, and dangers to face. But this country will define our times, not be defined by them. As long as the United States of America is determined and strong, this will not be an age of terror; this will be an age of liberty, here and across the world.

Vocabulary

casualties—people injured or killed

affiliated—associated

indicted—charged with a crime

embassies—the residences and offices of foreign diplomats

mafia—a secret criminal organization

imposing—establishing through force

fringe—relating to a group with marginal or extremist views

clerics—religious leaders

perverts—twists the meanings of

directive—something that directs and urges people toward an action or a goal

distinction—the marking of a difference

tactics—strategies

regime—the government in power

brutalized—harshly treated

repressing—keeping down

sponsoring—paying for

abetting—assisting

foreign nationals—citizens of other countries

journalists—news reporters

blaspheme—to insult God

disruption—disturbance

network—an interconnected group

liberation—the process of freeing

retaliation—the act of inflicting injury in return for injury

covert—secret

haven—a place of safety

pluralism—a condition in a society in which members of various ethnic, racial, religious,
and/or social groups are treated fairly