SEP. 11, 2001: ATTACK ON AMERICA

Biographies, discussion questions, suggested activities and more
UNDER ATTACK

Setting the Stage

In 1971, when construction was completed on the 110-story “twin towers” of the World Trade Center in downtown Manhattan, they were the tallest buildings in the world. The hub of New York City’s busy financial district, the World Trade Center hosted 50,000 office workers and 200,000 visitors each day in 10 million square feet of office space. The twin towers were home to numerous financial and insurance companies among other businesses, in addition to shops, restaurants and an observation deck.

Prior to the events of September 11, 2001, the United States had been attacked only a handful of times on its home soil. These included the burning of Washington, D.C. by British troops in the War of 1812 and the bombing of Pearl Harbor by Japan during World War II. For the most part, America enjoyed a strong sense of safety and security made possible largely by its geography: The United States was separated from much of the rest of the world by the Atlantic and Pacific oceans and enjoyed peaceful relationships with its neighbors to the north and south, Canada and Mexico. The September 11th attacks shattered this sense of security and caused shock and disbelief across America and much of the world.

However, September 11th was not the first time that the United States was attacked by a radical foreign terrorist group—in fact, it was not even the first time New York’s World Trade Center had been attacked by such a group. About eight years earlier, on February 26, 1993, terrorists exploded a bomb in the parking garage below the World Trade Center’s south tower. Although the bomb did not critically damage the main structure of the building, the attack killed six people, injured more than 1,000 others and caused more than $500 million in damage. A massive FBI manhunt resulted in the arrests of a group of radical Islamic fundamentalists responsible for the attack, including Ramzi Ahmed Yousef, the mastermind behind the bombing. An FBI agent reported that after his arrest, Yousef expressed regret that the bomb had not successfully caused the south tower to topple into the north tower as he had planned.
At 8:45 a.m. on a clear Tuesday morning, an American Airlines Boeing 767 loaded with 20,000 gallons of jet fuel crashes into the north tower of the World Trade Center in New York City. The impact left a gaping, burning hole near the 80th floor of the 110-story skyscraper, instantly killing hundreds of people and trapping hundreds more in higher floors. As the evacuation of the tower and its twin got underway, television cameras broadcasted live images of what initially appeared to be a freak accident. Then, 18 minutes after the first plane hit, a second Boeing 767–United Airlines Flight 175–appeared out of the
sky, turned sharply toward the World Trade Center, and sliced into the south tower at about the 60th floor. The collision caused a massive explosion that showered burning debris over surrounding buildings and the streets below. America was under attack.

The attackers were Islamic terrorists from Saudi Arabia and several other Arab nations. Reportedly financed by Saudi fugitive Osama bin Laden's al Qaeda terrorist organization, they were allegedly acting in retaliation for America's support of Israel, its involvement in the Persian Gulf War and its continued military presence in the Middle East. Some of the terrorists had lived in the United States for more than a year and had taken flying lessons at American commercial flight schools. Others had slipped into the U.S. in the months before September 11 and acted as the “muscle” in the operation. The 19 terrorists easily smuggled box-cutters and knives through security at three East Coast airports and boarded four flights bound for California, chosen because the planes were loaded with fuel for the long transcontinental journey. Soon after takeoff, the terrorists commandeered the four planes and took the controls, transforming the ordinary commuter jets into guided missiles.

As millions watched the events unfolding in New York in horror, American Airlines Flight 77 circled over downtown Washington and slammed into the west side of the Pentagon military headquarters at 9:45 a.m. Jet fuel from the Boeing 757 caused a devastating inferno that led to a structural collapse of a portion of the giant concrete building. All told, 125 military personnel and civilians were killed in the Pentagon along with all 64 people aboard the airliner.

Less than 15 minutes after the terrorists struck the nerve center of the U.S. military, the horror in New York took a catastrophic turn for the worse when the south tower of the World Trade Center collapsed in a massive cloud of dust and smoke. The structural steel of the skyscraper, built to withstand winds in excess of 200 mph and a large conventional fire, could not withstand the tremendous heat generated by the burning jet fuel. At 10:30 a.m., the other Trade Center tower collapsed. Close to 3,000 people died in the World Trade Center and its vicinity, including a staggering 343 firefighters and paramedics, 23 New York City police officers and 37 Port Authority police officers who were struggling to complete an evacuation of 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. Almost 10,000 other people 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 on board learned of events in New York as they were heading on to Washington via cell phone and Airfone calls to the ground. Concluding that the aircraft was not returning to an airport as the hijackers claimed, a group of passengers and flight attendants planned an insurrection. 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 and are suspected to have attacked the cockpit with a fire extinguisher. 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 10:10 a.m. All 45 people aboard were killed. Its intended target is not known, but theories include the White House, the U.S. Capitol, the Camp David presidential retreat in Maryland or one of several nuclear power plants along the eastern seaboard.

At 7 p.m., President George W. Bush, who had spent the day being shuttled around the country because of security concerns, returned to the White House. At 9 p.m., he delivered a televised address from the Oval Office, declaring “Terrorist attacks can shake the foundations of our biggest buildings, but they cannot touch the foundation of America. These acts shatter steel, but they cannot dent the steel of American resolve.” In a reference to the eventual U.S. military response he declared: “We will make no distinction between the terrorists who committed these acts and those who harbor them.”

Operation Enduring Freedom, the U.S.-led international effort to oust the Taliban regime in Afghanistan and destroy Osama bin Laden’s terrorist network based there, began on October 7, 2001. Bin Laden was killed during a raid of his compound in Pakistan by U.S. forces on May 2, 2011.
President George W. Bush was just 8 months into this first term as president of the United States on September 11, 2001. Bush learned of the attacks while visiting a Florida elementary school. In October 2001, George W. Bush authorized the invasion of Afghanistan; its Taliban-led government was suspected of harboring Osama bin Laden. Bush also took other actions in an effort to bolster American safety and reassure Americans, including the creation of the Department of Homeland Security.

Osama bin Laden was the mastermind behind the September 11th attacks, and the leader of a terrorist organization called al Qaeda (meaning “the base” in Arabic). The son of a wealthy Saudi family, bin Laden resented what he saw as growing Western influence in the Middle East and became radicalized as a young man. In 1988, he formed al Qaeda with the expressed intention of perpetrating symbolic acts of terrorism to help further his goal of creating a unified Islamic state. He went on to advocate for violent “jihad,” or holy war, against the West. In addition to the 9/11 attacks, bin Laden is believed to have been behind a number of other attacks, including the 1998 bombings of the U.S. embassies in Kenya and Tanzania and the bombing of a U.S. Navy destroyer, the USS Cole, while it was docked in Yemen. After a 10-year manhunt, bin Laden was finally located and killed by a U.S. Navy SEAL team in Pakistan in 2011. Photo Credit: Hamid Mir [CC BY-SA 3.0 (https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/3.0)], via Wikimedia Commons

Rudy Giuliani, a former federal prosecutor, was nearing the end of his two terms as the mayor of New York City on September 11, 2001. A lifelong New Yorker, Giuliani was praised for his decisive action in the immediate wake of the attacks, while heading up rescue and recovery efforts. His poise under pressure was credited with helping the city to remain calm. Giuliani was dubbed “America’s Mayor” by the media, named “Person of the Year” by Time magazine and was even knighted by Queen Elizabeth II. In 2008, Giuliani ran for president, but dropped out of the race after disappointing showings in early primary races. Photo Credit: Gage Skidmore [CC BY-SA 3.0 (https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/3.0)], via Wikimedia Commons
Of the many stories of heroism and selflessness on September 11th, perhaps none is more inspiring than that of the crew and passengers of Flight 93. Facing near certain death, they took action to overpower the hijackers, likely saving hundreds if not thousands of lives on the ground. Today, the 7 crew members and 33 passengers of Flight 93 are memorialized at Shanksville, PA, near where the plane crashed, and around the memorial pools at the National September 11 Memorial in New York, NY.

DID YOU KNOW?

At 1,776 feet, the new 1 World Trade Center, completed in 2014, is now the tallest building in the United States. The number 1,776 represents the year 1776, when the United States declared independence from Great Britain.
Five minutes after the North Tower collapses

FDNY deputy chief coordinates the clean-up effort, September 25, 2001
CONCURRENT EVENTS

U.S. ECONOMIC DOWNTURN
At the turn of the 21st century, the United States was suffering from a sluggish economy as a result of a manufacturing slowdown and the bursting of the so-called “dot-com” bubble in 2000. Even prior to September 11, 2001, unemployment was on the rise; the situation worsened after the attacks. October 2001 saw the biggest one-month loss of jobs in America in more than 20 years.

$ U.S. DEBUT OF THE EURO
In January 2000, Europe was united by a common currency—the euro—for the first time since the reign of Charlemagne in the 9th century. The euro became the new currency for 290 million people in the 11 countries of the European Union. The unified currency made it easier to travel and do business across Europe, and it was hoped it would increase integration and help spur the European economy.

SLOBODAN MILOSEVIC EXTRADITED
In June 2001, deposed former Yugoslav president Slobodan Milosevic was extradited to the Netherlands to face a United Nations tribunal for war crimes and genocide. Over the previous 10 years, hundreds of thousands of people were killed as violence broke out in the Balkans region after Slovenia, Croatia and Macedonia declared independence from Yugoslavia. Milosevic targeted ethnic Muslims and Croatians in the largest act of genocide since the Holocaust. In addition to Milosevic, more than 160 other people were indicted by the United Nations tribunal.

TIMOTHY MCVEIGH EXECUTED
Also in June 2001, U.S. Army veteran Timothy McVeigh was put to death by lethal injection at a federal penitentiary in Indiana. Four years earlier, McVeigh was convicted of exploding a truck bomb outside of the Alfred P. Murrah federal building in 1995, killing 168 people, including 19 young children who were in the building’s daycare center at the time of the blast. It was the deadliest domestic-based act of terrorism in American history. McVeigh and his accomplice Terry Nichols were members of a radical right-wing survivalist group who had grown angry and suspicious of the U.S. federal government after several violent incidents between the government and groups with which McVeigh and Nichols sympathized.

STEM CELL RESEARCH
The early 2000s saw rapid advancement in the field of stem-cell technology. Stem cells have the potential to develop into many different types of cells, giving scientists hope that they can eventually be used to treat a variety of diseases and medical conditions from macular degeneration to diabetes to Parkinson’s disease. However, as human embryos are one of the sources of stem cells, their harvesting caused controversy, particularly in the United States, over the ethics surrounding their procurement and use.
In his address to the nation on September 11, 2001, President George W. Bush said, “Terrorist attacks can shake the foundations of our biggest buildings, but they cannot touch the foundation of America.” What do you think he meant by this? Do you agree?

It is believed that the passengers and crew of Flight 93 fought back against the hijackers and likely saved the plane from being flown into another building, saving the lives of many more people on the ground. How do you think it would have felt to be aboard Flight 93? Would you have made the same decision? How would you describe the passengers and crew?

In what ways do you think America and Americans changed after September 11th? Which of these changes were positive, and which were negative?
SUGGESTED ACTIVITIES

FOUND POETRY
Ask students to watch videos from the short series “Remembering 9/11.” As they watch, have them jot down 15-20 words, phrases and lines that they find most powerful. From these, ask students to create found poetry about the events of September 11, 2001.

TRIBUTES AND MEMORIALS
Ask students to research tributes and memorials to the victims of September 11th. Then, in small groups, have them create their own tributes, incorporating aspects of the event they found the most moving and their own hopes for the post-9/11 world.

RISING FROM THE ASHES
Ask students to research 1 World Trade Center. Then, have students prepare presentations on the new building. Topics can include technology; the ways in which the building recognizes its historic site; and the ways in which it embraces the future. As a group, discuss the new building: What were the most interesting things they learned? Would they feel safe working there or living nearby? In what ways is the new building a living memorial?
RESOURCES

Infographic: World Trade Center Reborn
http://www.history.com/topics/9-11-attacks/infographics/word-trade-center-reborn-infographic

Video: Remembering 9/11
http://www.history.com/topics/9-11-attacks/videos/ground-zero

Video: 9/11 Timeline of Events
http://www.history.com/topics/9-11-timeline

Speech: Text of President George W. Bush’s address to the nation on September 11, 2001

Video: New Yorkers remember 9/11, 15 years later