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American History: War on Terror

STEVE EMBER: Welcome to THE MAKING OF A NATION – American history in VOA Special English. I'm Steve Ember.

This week in our series, we look at America after the events of September eleventh, two thousand one.

(MUSIC)

DAN RATHER: "A stunning and cowardly strike on the United States. Terrorists send mighty skyscrapers crumbling to the ground. Many innocent people are dead. The president vows the killers will pay for this attack on America."

The United States changed as a result of the September eleventh terrorist attacks. CBS newsman Dan Rather expressed what many Americans were feeling.

DAN RATHER: "You will remember this day as long as you live. A series of coordinated terror strikes today at this country, its people, our freedom. Strikes that came without warning."

(MUSIC)

On the morning of that sunny September day that came to be known as 9/11, the nation came under attack from al-Qaida, an extremist group led by Osama bin Laden. Its targets were world-famous buildings representing America's economic and military power.

Al-Qaida operatives hijacked four American passenger airplanes. The hijackers were from Middle Eastern countries. Each group included a pilot trained to fly two kinds of Boeing airliners, the 757 and the 767.

At eight forty-six on that morning, one group of hijackers flew a Boeing 767 into the North Tower of the World Trade Center in New York City. Seventeen minutes later, another group flew a second 767 into the Trade Center's South Tower.

The planes exploded in fireballs that sent clouds of smoke into the air. The intense heat of the burning jet fuel from the planes caused structural failures that

brought down both buildings.

About an hour after the first plane hit the World Trade Center, another group of al-Qaida operatives flew a 757 airliner into the Pentagon, the headquarters of the Defense Department, in Arlington, Virginia. The plane exploded against a wall of the huge building where more than twenty thousand people worked.

A fourth group had taken control of another 757. But some of the passengers on that flight, United 93, had heard about the terrorist attacks through phone calls to their families. Several passengers and crew members attempted to retake control of the plane. It crashed near the town of Shanksville, Pennsylvania. Investigators later said the hijackers probably planned to attack the Capitol, a major government building in Washington, D.C., where Congress meets.

There was also concern that the White House could have been a target.

The 9/11 attacks saw the worst loss of lives on American soil since Japan attacked Pearl Harbor in nineteen forty-one. That attack caused the United States to enter World War Two.

GEORGE W. BUSH: "The pictures of airplanes flying into buildings, fires burning, huge structures collapsing have filled us with disbelief, terrible sadness, and a quiet, unyielding anger."

As expressed by President George W. Bush on 9/11, the attacks left Americans in a state of shock and disbelief. But that was soon replaced by anger and a resolve that this would not be allowed to happen again.

GEORGE W. BUSH: "These acts of mass murder were intended to frighten our nation into chaos and retreat. But they have failed. Our country is strong. A great people has been moved to defend a great nation.

"Terrorist attacks can shake the foundations of our biggest buildings, but they can not touch the foundation of America. These acts shatter steel, but they can not dent the steel of American resolve."

At Ground Zero, the site of the World Trade Center destruction, rescue efforts continued into the night. New York City Mayor Rudy Giuliani was asked if Arab-American or Muslim groups in New York might be targeted due to the nature of the attacks.

RUDY GIULIANI: "Just the opposite. They will receive extra protection. Nobody should engage in group blame. The particular individuals responsible, the groups

responsible, that's up to law enforcement, and it's up to the United States government to figure out. And citizens of New York should -- even if they have anger, which is understandable, and very, very strong emotions about this -- it isn't their place to get involved in this. Then, they're just participating in the kind of activity we've just witnessed, and New Yorkers are not like that."

And Giuliani spoke of the strength of the spirit of the people of his city.

RUDY GIULIANI: "People tonight should say a prayer for the people that we've lost, and be grateful that we're all here. Tomorrow, New York is going to be here, and we're going to rebuild, and we're going to be stronger than we were before."

(MUSIC)

On September twentieth, President Bush went before a joint session of Congress to declare a war on terror.

GEORGE W. BUSH: "Our war on terror begins with al-Qaida, but it does not end there. It will not end until every terrorist group of global reach has been found, stopped and defeated. [Applause]"

President Bush explained that the war on terror would be different from other wars.

GEORGE W. BUSH: "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. [Applause] From this day forward, any nation that continues to harbor or support terrorism will be regarded by the United States as a hostile regime."

(MUSIC)

President Bush demanded that the Taliban rulers of Afghanistan stop sheltering Osama bin Laden and surrender him. The president also called on the Taliban to close terrorist training camps in Afghanistan.

The Taliban refused. They demanded evidence that Osama bin Laden had been

involved in the attacks of 9/11. They said that if such evidence was provided, he would be tried in an Islamic court. The United States refused to provide evidence.

(MUSIC)

On October seventh, the United States and Britain launched air strikes against Taliban targets. What became known as the War on Terror had begun.

Tribal groups from the opposition Northern Alliance led a ground attack. But suicide bombers had killed their leader, Ahmad Shah Masood, on September ninth, two days before the 9/11 attacks.

By November, Taliban control began to collapse in several provinces. Taliban forces fled Kabul, the capital. But the ouster of the Taliban government did not mean the end of the war on terror.

Some of President Bush's advisers had long supported an invasion of Iraq. As early as October two thousand one, Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld suggested that military action against Iraq was possible. Government officials accused Iraq of having links to terrorist groups like al-Qaida. They noted that Iraqi leader Saddam Hussein had used chemical weapons. And they said he was seeking to develop biological and nuclear weapons as well.

(MUSIC)

In October, two thousand one, Congress passed the U.S.A. Patriot Act. This law provided the government with more power to gather information about suspected terrorists in the United States. Critics said the law invaded constitutional rights to privacy. Civil liberties groups said the Patriot Act gave law enforcement and other agencies too much power.

In January two thousand two, President Bush gave his State of the Union report to Congress. He accused some nations of supporting terrorist organizations. He said the United States would not wait to be attacked by such groups. Instead, it would strike first at the countries that sheltered them. The president identified three nations – North Korea, Iran and Iraq -- as supporters of terror.

GEORGE W. BUSH: "States like these, and their terrorist allies, constitute an axis of evil, arming to threaten the peace of the world. By seeking weapons of mass destruction, these regimes pose a grave and growing danger. They could provide these arms to terrorists, giving them the means to match their hatred."

(MUSIC)

In two thousand two, the United States opened a detention center at its naval base at Guantanamo Bay, Cuba. Some of the fighters arrested in Afghanistan were sent there. They were not considered prisoners of war. Instead, the detainees were treated as "unlawful enemy combatants." As such, the Bush administration said they did not have the same rights as war prisoners under international treaties.

In the United States, the government also detained some foreign citizens, mostly for violating immigration laws. No terrorism charges were brought against these detainees. Human rights activists and some legal experts protested the detentions.

After 9/11, government agencies were criticized for failing to prevent the terrorist attacks. Critics said the agencies should have been working together to gather intelligence. Government officials said part of the issue involved legal restrictions on the gathering and sharing of intelligence.

(MUSIC)

The attacks of 9/11 had a major effect on the commercial aviation industry. The skies over Washington and other cities became strangely silent.

Washington's busy Ronald Reagan National Airport was closed for several weeks after the attacks. When it reopened, new security measures for inspecting passengers and their belongings were put in place. Similar measures were in force at other airports across the nation.

Fears over safety among the traveling public led to a drop in the number of airline passengers. As a result, the airlines began to use smaller planes. Costly changes were necessary to "harden" the cockpit, to prevent more terrorist attacks.

The increased security led to delays and other problems. But slowly, Americans began to fly again in greater numbers. But airlines had to work hard to win back the trust of the traveling public.

(SOUND: United Airlines commercial)

One carrier, United, ran a low-key television advertising campaign, in which actor Robert Redford, at the end of each ad gently suggested

ROBERT REDFORD: "It's time to fly."

In January two thousand three, the Department of Homeland Security opened for

business.

ANNOUNCER: "Maybe you see something suspicious, but you don't want to get involved. It's nothing, you think. Can you be sure?"

There was a lot to do.

ANNOUNCER: "If you see something, say something. Report suspicious activity to local authorities."

Transportation security, immigration, law enforcement, border protection. It represented the biggest government reorganization in more than half a century. All or part of twenty-two federal agencies and departments were combined into the new agency. Its job: to keep America safe in a world that had changed in a single day.

(MUSIC)

The War on Terror, which began after the 9/11 terrorist attacks on the United States, escalated in March 2003, when a coalition of American-led forces invaded Iraq. The mission, as stated by President Bush and British Prime Minister Tony Blair, was "to disarm Iraq of weapons of mass destruction, to end Saddam Hussein's support for terrorism, and to free the Iraqi people."

(MUSIC)

This is the final program of a summer series that has featured encore performances of some of our favorite programs. I'm Steve Ember. I hope you've enjoyed hearing some of these programs again – or possibly, for the first time. All summer, we've been at work on the production of a new series of THE MAKING OF A NATION, starting with program number one, which we'll have for you next week at this time.

You can find our series online with transcripts, MP3s, podcasts and pictures at voaspecialenglish.com. You can also follow us on Facebook and Twitter at VOA Learning English. Remember, American history "re-starts" next week at this time, in VOA Special English. See you then.