American History: Terrorists Attack America on 9/11

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 begin the story of the presidency of George W. Bush. His first term came to be defined by the worst terrorist attack against the United States in the nation's history.

(MUSIC)

George W. Bush had been in office for less than eight months when the events of September eleventh, two thousand one, took place.

SOUND: "A lot of smoke in lower Manhattan."

"A plane has crashed into one of the towers of the World Trade Center"

"Good lord, this is just a horrific moment."
The day is remembered as 9-11.

(MUSIC)

On that morning, nineteen al-Qaida terrorists hijacked four large passenger airplanes on the East Coast. The planes were flying to California so they were heavy with fuel. Each group of hijackers included a trained pilot.

American Airlines Flight 11 had just left Boston, Massachusetts, when five hijackers seized control of the plane.

AIR TRAFFIC CONTROLLER: "Is that American 11 trying to call?"

MOHAMED ATTA (HIJACKER): We have some planes. Just stay quiet and you will be OK. We are returning to the airport."

AIR TRAFFIC CONTROLLER: "American 11, are you trying to call?"

FLIGHT ATTENDANT: "Number three in the back. The cockpit's not answering. Somebody's stabbed in Business Class, and I think there's mace that we can't breathe. I don't know – I think we're getting hijacked."

MOHAMED ATTA: "Nobody move. Everything will be OK. If you try to make any moves, you'll endanger yourself and the airplane. Let's stay quiet."

Shortly before nine o'clock, the hijackers crashed the Boeing 767 into the North Tower of the World Trade Center in New York City.

KATIE COURIC (NBC TV): "A plane has just crashed into the World Trade Center. It happened just a few moments ago."

NEW YORK FIRE DEPARTMENT DISPATCHER: "The World Trade Center Tower Number One is on fire. The whole outside of the building – there was just a huge explosion."

(MUSIC)

Five other hijackers seized United Airlines Flight 175, another Boeing 767 also on a flight from Boston.
A second hijacked plane flies toward the World Trade Center

AIR TRAFFIC CONTROLLER #1: "Hey, can you look out your window right now? Can you see a guy at about four thousand feet, about five [miles] east of the airport right now, looks like he's...

CONTROLLER #2: "Yeah, I see him."

CONTROLLER #1: "Is he descending toward the building also?

CONTROLLER #2: "He's descending really quick, too. Yeah. He's at twenty-five hundred feet. He just dropped eight hundred feet in one sweep [of the radar]."

CONTROLLER #1: "That's another situation."

VOICE: "Another one just hit the building -- hit it hard. The whole building just came apart."

They crashed the jet into the South Tower of the World Trade Center a short time after the first plane hit the North Tower.

DON DAHLER (REPORTER): "Oh, my God."

DIANE SAWYER (ABC TV): "My God."

CHARLES GIBSON: "That looks like a second plane. We just saw another plane coming in from the side..."

DON DAHLER: "You did..."

CHARLES GIBSON: "Yes, and that's the second explosion. You could see the plane come in. So this looks like some sort of a concerted effort to attack the World Trade Center that is underway in downtown New York."

(MUSIC)

The twin towers each had one hundred ten floors. They were the tallest buildings in New York and among the tallest in the world. They stood a few streets away from the New York Stock Exchange in the heart of the Wall Street financial district in Lower Manhattan.
REPORTER: "Oh, my goodness, there's another one."

The planes exploded in fireballs that sent clouds of smoke pouring from the skyscrapers. Thousands of people were in the buildings. Many workers on the floors below where the planes hit were able to escape. Others on the floors above were trapped. Some apparently felt their only choice was between burning to death and jumping. News cameras showed disturbing images of bodies falling from the towers.

The South Tower of the World Trade Center collapsed just before ten o'clock, after burning for almost an hour. The North Tower came down about thirty minutes later. It had been hit first and had burned for one hour and forty-two minutes.

DON DAHLER: "The second building that was hit by the plane has completely collapsed. The entire building has just collapsed, as if a demolition team set off—when you see the old demolitions of these old buildings—down on itself. And it's not there anymore."

(MUSIC)

Investigators later found that the intense fires from the jet fuel, burning for as long as they had, had caused the structures to fail.

The ruins of the two buildings quickly became known as Ground Zero.

Several other buildings in the World Trade Center complex were damaged or destroyed as a result of the collapse of the twin towers.

(MUSIC)

Another group of hijackers took over American Airlines Flight 77, a Boeing 757. The plane had taken off from Washington Dulles International Airport.

MILITARY RADIO COMMUNICATION: "OK, American Airlines is still airborne. He's heading towards Washington. I think we need to scramble Langley [Air Force Base] right now, and I'm going to take the fighters from Otis and try to chase this guy down if I can find him."
AP
One hijacked plane struck the Pentagon, the Defense Department headquarters

KATIE COURIC: "[Jim] Miklaszewski has some new information at the Pentagon. I hope you'll stand by and continue to talk with us, Mike?"

JIM MIKLASZEWSKI: "Katie, I don't want to alarm anybody right now, but it felt – just a few moments ago – like there was an explosion of some kind here at the Pentagon."

The hijackers crashed the plane into the Pentagon, the Department of Defense headquarters across the Potomac River from Washington in Arlington, Virginia.

JIM MIKLASZEWSKI: "We're on the E Ring of the Pentagon. We have a window that faces out toward the Potomac, toward the Kennedy Center. We haven't been able to see or hear anything after the initial blast. I just stepped out in the hallway. Security guards were herding people out of the building, and I saw just a moment ago, as I looked outside, a number of construction workers who have been working here have taken flight. They're running as far away from the building as they can right now."

The plane exploded a hole into one of the five sides of the huge building.

And four hijackers seized United Airlines Flight 93, another 757. That plane had taken off from Newark, New Jersey.

CONTROLLER: "United 93, that traffic for you is one o'clock, twelve miles east on three-seven-zero."

UNITED 93: "Negative contact. We're looking. United 93."

People on the flight learned about the terrorist attacks in New York and Washington through phone calls to loved ones.

CLEVELAND CENTER CONTROLLER #1: "Looked like he descended there."

CONTROLLER #2: "I don't think so. United 93, verify 3-5-0 (compass heading)."

CONTROLLER #1: "United 93, Cleveland [Center]"

CONTROLLER #2: "Do you have United 93 south of Chardon?"
CLEVELAND CENTER: "We hear some funny noises we're trying to get him. Do you have him?"

CONTROLLER #2: "No."

Some of the forty passengers and crew members fought to retake control of the plane from the hijackers.

CONTROLLER: "United 93 was waving his wings as he went past the VFR aircraft. They don't quite know what that means. Rocking his wings."

Air traffic controllers and law enforcement officials struggled to make sense of the events taking place that morning.

AP
An emergency worker in a Pennsylvania field looks at the crater made by the crash of a plane hijacked by Islamic terrorists. People on the flight had rebelled.

WOMAN: "United 93 – Have you got information on that yet?"

MAN: "Yeah, he's down."

WOMAN: "He's down?"

MAN: "Yes."

WOMAN: "When did he land?"

MAN: "He did not land."

WOMAN: "Oh ... he's down? Down?"

MAN: "Yes, somewhere northeast of Camp David."

MAN #1: "OK, there is now on that United 93 ..."

MAN #2: "Yes."

MAN #1: "... There is a report of black smoke in the last position I gave you, fifteen miles south of Johnstown."

Flight 93 crashed in a field near the small town of Shanksville, Pennsylvania.
The intended target for Flight 93 may have been the Capitol, the building where Congress meets.

No one could be sure if other airliners were involved in the terrorist operation.

PETER JENNINGS (ABC TV): "The Federal Aviation Administration has actually gone even further than it did a few minutes ago. It was asking all planes not to take off. Now the FAA has ordered all aircraft currently in the air over the United States to land at the nearest airport."

Air traffic controllers began the complex job of getting all planes across the country – and those heading in over the Atlantic – onto the ground safely.

MIKE McCORMICK (AIR TRAFFIC MANAGER): "So this meant, at very early in the morning, as flights were halfway across the Atlantic Ocean to land in the United States, we had already initiated protocols to shut those arrivals off from the oceanic areas. And they had to make tough decisions, such as either turn around and go back to Europe or go to alternate destinations, which many of them did in Canada."

Canadian officials assisted. They allowed flights from across the Atlantic to land in eastern Canada, including at airports in Halifax, Nova Scotia, and Gander, Newfoundland.

(MUSIC)

Thick smoke and ash from the collapse of the Twin Towers

Almost three thousand people died in the 9/11 attacks.

WOMAN: "You got it coming into building number two on the ninety-seventh floor. People trapped."

FIRE DEPARTMENT DISPATCHER: "We're all around the building. We're completely around the building. We're into the building now."

Most of the victims worked in the World Trade Center.

(SOUND: RADIO COMMUNICATIONS)

The victims also included rescuers, among them three hundred forty-three New York City firefighters. They died trying to save others.
SOUND: "They're going to have to get a different elevator. We're chopping through the wall to get out ... Tower One."

(MUSIC)

Pictures of missing persons began to appear in the city as loved ones waited and worried.

Three days after the attacks, President Bush went to Ground Zero. He spoke to the rescue workers and promised that the attacks would be answered.

GEORGE W. BUSH: "I want you all to know, America today is on bended knee, in prayer for the people whose lives were lost here, for the workers who work here, for the families who mourn. This nation stands with the good people of New York City, and New Jersey, and Connecticut, as we mourn the loss of thousands of our citizens.

"I can hear you. The rest of the world hears you. And the people... And the people who knocked these buildings down will hear all of us soon."


(MUSIC)

Each day, thousands of visitors came to see the site and to honor those who died.

At the Pentagon, people left flowers and messages of sympathy near the heavily damaged wall. One hundred eighty-four people died in the attack on the Pentagon, including the victims on the plane.

(MUSIC)

It took months to clear the wreckage of the twin towers.

The attacks in New York changed the distinctive skyline of Lower Manhattan. The twin towers -- completed in nineteen seventy-three -- were gone.

The economic effects of 9/11 were felt far beyond America's largest city. The New York Stock Exchange stayed closed until September seventeenth. When it reopened, the Dow Jones Industrial Average -- a measure of leading stocks -- fell by what was then its biggest point drop ever in a single day.
Among the companies most affected by the attacks were airlines and other businesses that depend on travelers. The nation's skies were empty of commercial flights for three days after the hijackings. And when flights returned to normal, many people were too afraid to fly.

Thousands of hotel workers and others in the travel industry lost their jobs.

The shock and sadness of the 9/11 attacks brought Americans together less than a year after the disputed presidential election. In a show of patriotism, more and more American flags began to appear on homes, cars and businesses. Small American flag pins were worn by many Americans.

The attacks pointed to the work of Osama bin Laden and his al-Qaida organization. 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."

The War on Terror, and America after 9/11 will be our story next week.

(MUSIC)

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