

# 911

## The Nation's Largest Emergency Before, During and After

It was a beautiful morning in the United States on Sept. 11, 2001. Nobody expected what was about to unfold — the worst international terrorist attack ever involving four separate but coordinated aircraft hijackings.

Many question what provoked the attacks, why they couldn't be prevented, and how they have changed life as we know it. This article reviews some of the events prior to that fateful morning, an overview of the attacks and the terrorists involved, and reactions and consequences since then.

The success and progress of the United States evokes feelings of admiration in combination with ironic feelings of resentment and hatred. Many antagonists feel that the United States has used this success to be a bully to other countries and only see its actions as aggressive, and they dislike its politics and culture. But many criticize more of what it hasn't done as opposed to what it has done. For these reasons, some believe that America somehow provoked and deserved the attacks.<sup>1</sup>

### Before

Sept. 11 marked “the deadliest terrorist attack in history.” “Before Sept. 11, the deadliest attacks were the bombings of airplanes, such as Pan Am flight 103, destroyed over Lockerbie, Scotland, in 1988 by terrorists linked to Libya, or the 1985 bombing of an Air India jet. Each of these attacks killed more than 300 people. The August 1998 bombings of the U.S. embassies in Kenya and Tanzania — before Sept. 11, the largest attacks on major buildings — killed 224 people; these attacks have been linked to al-Qaeda.”<sup>2</sup>

Additionally, the 9/11 attacks have seemed to accentuate a trend in terrorism of fewer attacks with more fatalities. In the past, some terrorist groups were careful not to cause mass killings while trying to attract the most attention, fearing that it could inhibit their supporters. “These considerations often affected choices of targets as well as the level of violence. Between 1969 and 1993, for instance, less



FEMA Photo by Andrea Booher

This airplane alert antenna once sat on the roof of one of the World Trade Center towers.

than a fifth of the IRA's victims were Protestant civilians, reflecting a deliberate choice to avoid alienating potential Irish supporters. As the terrorism expert Brian Jenkins has put it, terrorists used to want a lot of people watching, not a lot of people dead."<sup>3</sup>

Perhaps the beginning of terrorist attacks to hit hard on the home front from Muslim terrorists was when a man named El Sayyid Nosair with the aid of other terrorists shot and killed Rabbi Meir Kahane, the founder of the Jewish Defense League, on Nov. 5, 1990 after finishing a speech he was giving at the Marriott Hotel in midtown Manhattan. Nosair lived.

"Unlike the disciplined, self-sufficient coterie who carried out the September 2001 hijackings, however, the first U.S. cells were unstable alliances characterized more by boast and squabble than action, and there was no guarantee that the fiery anti-Western rhetoric coming out of the mosques would ever be translated into actual violence."<sup>4</sup>

Nosair seemed to be the first really intent on carrying out violence for jihad. During his trial he was acquitted of killing Kahane but was convicted of shooting two other men who tried to stop his escape. He was sentenced to 7.5 years to 22.33 years for these shootings — the maximum allowable sentence. Because nobody out of the dozen witnesses that testified against Nosair had actually seen him pull the trigger and because the mayor released the rabbi's body for burial before an autopsy was performed, there was no physical proof that Nosair's gun was the one used to kill Kahane.



Photo by James Tourtellotte

The 1993 WTC bombing was meant to topple the towers, one on top of the other, killing everyone inside and in their path. The debris from the collapse of the twin towers is shown.

Nosair was more than just an anti-Semitic though, several documents were later found in his apartment that suggested his future involvement in other terrorist attacks including the 1993 World Trade Center bombing along with other suggested targets for terrorist attacks. Ironically, his papers also contained direction to his associates to "topple the 'tall buildings of which Americans are so proud.'"<sup>5</sup>

The 1993 World Trade Center bombing was meant to topple the towers, one on top of the other, killing not only those inside but also anyone in their path. Due to other perceived larger priorities at the FBI, much of the investigation that may have led to the halting of

this act was put on hold while investigators were following the suspects' moves just a few weeks before the bombing. Six people lost their lives. Following the bombing, the FBI began to realize more fully the need for closer attention to this terrorist cell and provided more staff and resources to continue investigations into the World Trade Center bombing case.<sup>6</sup>

Other problems experienced while trying to hunt down the supposed ringleader of the bombing — Ramzi Yousef — occurred during FBI and CIA investigations. They were conducted differently, which was often conflicting. They finally began working together. Finally, on Feb. 3, 1995, Yousef's whereabouts (then on the outskirts of Islamabad) were made known to authorities by one of Yousef's new recruits. Three days later they were able to arrest him. He boasted about his involvement in the World Trade Center bombing to authorities on the plane ride back to the United States. He said he had "hoped the

South Tower would topple 'like a tree' into the North Tower resulting in his calculation of 125,000 deaths." He later said the towers wouldn't be standing if he had had a little more money.<sup>7</sup>

It took investigators two years to track down Yousef, who traveled first class from European and Asian capitals to recruit more terrorists. Realizing this, investigators began to understand the extensive connections he had, which meant they were dealing with an organized terrorist network.

In 1980 the FBI and the New York Police Department created the first Joint Terrorism Task Force, which allowed more collaboration instead of competition between the agencies but, as demonstrated above, there were still some communication problems.

Another attack committed by one of our own, was the bombing of the federal office building in Oklahoma City by Timothy McVeigh in 1995. This incident resulted in the death of 168 people.<sup>8</sup>

## Definitions

**Al-Qaida:** Arabic for base or foundation. "The existence of this organization was announced on 23 Feb. 1998, as part of a World Islamic Front comprising groups from Egypt, Pakistan and Bangladesh. The term has no apparent antecedents in Islamic or Arabic political history: explanations range from a protected region during the communist era in Afghanistan, to it being an allusion to the Bin Laden family's construction company, to the title of a 1951 Isaac Asimov novel, *The Foundation*, which was translated into Arabic as *al-Qaeda*, and which describes the destruction of a mighty empire, *Trantor*." (Halliday, Page 19)

**Bioterrorism:** Term developed in the 1990s to describe terrorism with biological weapons, e.g., anthrax, botulism, plague, smallpox, etc.

**Ground Zero:** Term describing site of wreckage from the World Trade Center in New York after Sept. 11, 2001. It is also a United States military term for the site at which a major explosion occurs.

**'Iqab Allah':** A phrase used by Osama bin Laden following the Sept. 11 attacks meaning 'the punishment of God' and is used by protestors in the Arab world.

**Islam:** Religion revealed to the prophet Muhammad (610-632 AD). Currently has more than one billion believers with the breakdown of 90 percent Sunni, 10 percent Shiite, and smaller groups such as Ibadhis in Oman. Believers study the Koran, the word of Allah as revealed to Muhammad, and the hadith (sayings from Muhammad).

**Jihad:** Arabic for effort in military, spiritual and political efforts. Islamists use the term as a meaning for struggle.

**Muslim:** A believer in Islam.

**Osama bin Laden:** Born in 1957, Saudi Arabia, to a wealthy Yemeni building contractor. Self-appointed leader of al-Qaida.

**Suicide Bombing:** Used by several countries during the 20<sup>th</sup> Century. "The Quran prohibits suicide (verse 2:51) but not sacrifice in the cause of a just struggle." (Halliday, Page 20)

**Terrorism:** Used by individuals or groups to achieve political goals through intimidation and fear. Refers specifically to assassinations; hijacking of planes, ships or busses with civilians on board; and bomb attacks on buildings or civilians in public.

[Source: Fred Halliday, *Two Hours That Shook the World, September 11, 2001, Causes & Consequences* (London: 2002)]

Aug. 7, 1998 marked another dark day for the United States when it's suspected that Osama bin Laden's terrorist cells nearly simultaneously bombed U.S. embassies in Kenya, killing 213 of which 40 were embassy employees, and in Tanzania where 11 died. Many others were injured.



9/11 terrorists trained at flight schools within the United States.

Other attacks linked to bin Laden occurred before and after these. Some al-Qaida cells were broken up in Uganda, India, Italy, Germany and Albania.<sup>9</sup>

Some progress was made in disrupting the network. "The FBI continued to investigate and indict al-Qaeda's senior operatives, and the CIA, working with local police and intelligence agencies, continued to identify and disrupt its cells around the world."<sup>10</sup>

Paul Bremer, former State Department counterterrorism chief under President Reagan, was asked to compile a report for Congress about how to deal with terrorism more effectively following the embassy bombings. He said: "The key point to any counterterrorism policy is to be able to disrupt the terrorists before they act. In order to disrupt terrorists, you have to know about them and what they're doing. And the only effective way to do that is to spy on them, and that means recruiting terrorists as informants."<sup>11</sup>

Even with some progress being made in striving to disrupt the activities of the cells, on Oct. 12, 2000 the USS Cole was attacked after pulling into a harbor in Yemen. Seventeen people died. As members of a German al-Qaida cell prepared to make their Sept. 11 attacks, the FBI, CIA and White House were failing to work together and communicate effectively. Bush had asked the CIA and the military to come up with a plan to invade Afghanistan and neutralize bin Laden as it became clear that an attack was eminent and could possibly happen in the United States. Ironically, the plan was completed the day before the attacks — Sept. 10.<sup>12</sup>

The world experienced much progress and relative peace during the 1990s. There was some worry of terrorism, but it did not seem to be a pressing concern to some. Larry Johnson, a former State Department counterterrorism specialist, made a statement in the New York Times a couple of months before Sept. 11. His message was to assure Americans they had little to fear. "Judging from news reports and the portrayal of villains in our popular entertainment, Americans are bedeviled by fantasies about terrorism. They seem to believe that terrorism is the greatest threat to the United States and that it is becoming more widespread and lethal. . . . Terrorism is not the biggest security challenge confronting the United States, and it should not be portrayed that way."<sup>13</sup>

In hindsight, his views have probably been altered. America was more prepared for conventional types of wars, as it has a strong military. This new kind of threat and

warfare was not something the United States was fully prepared to encounter. The challenge is to continue to strengthen its ability in traditional types of warfare, while enhancing its ability to predict, detect, and prevent future non-conventional attacks.

One of the problems with preventing the September attacks was the FBI and CIA each had pieces of information about the terrorists but failed to communicate effectively within their organizations and to each other.

The INS also had too little of information, which allowed the hijackers entry into the United States. These weaknesses and others were identified prior to 9/11 but were not acted upon quickly and appropriately to stop the attacks before they happened.<sup>14</sup>

Another reason some of the work of the terrorist cell went through the cracks was because of a lack of translators for wire taps on a couple of men that lived in Queens. Additionally, events such as the Oklahoma City bombing, 1996 Atlanta Olympics bombings, and the crash of Flight TWA 800 caused the investigative agencies to be spread too thin. Thus, they lost opportunities to “combat militant Islamic terrorism.”<sup>15</sup>

### *Osama bin Laden*

In tracking Yousef following the World Trade Center Bombing, investigators became more interested in Osama bin Laden. They originally saw him only as a financial supporter. They soon saw him as much more. Authorities had the opportunity to detain bin Laden while he was in Sudan, but because they didn't have enough concrete evidence to make a case hold up against him in a U.S. court, they had to bypass the opportunity. Unlike terrorists, we are forced as a country to uphold laws. He, subsequently, was made to leave Sudan and went into the protection of the Taliban in Afghanistan where he began to reconstitute al-Qaida. Jamal al-Fadl, an al-Qaida defector, supplied the United States with a lot of intelligence about the size, strength, mission and activities of the group.<sup>16</sup>

Osama bin Laden was born in 1955, the 17<sup>th</sup> of 57 children of a Yemenite father in the city of Jiddah. His mother is a Syrian. In 1968, the then 13-year-old bin Laden inherited \$80 million. He eventually fathered 13 children with four different wives.

Three events in 1979 seemed to mark a turning point for him. During this time, Egypt and Israel signed a peace treaty, the shah of Iran was toppled by the Islamic revolution, and the Soviets invaded Afghanistan. The Soviet invasion angered Osama bin Laden the most, determining to organize Islamic resistance against the ‘infidels.’<sup>17</sup>

Saudi Arabia is home to two of Islam's most sacred sites, Mecca and Medina. So, in 1990 when Iraq invaded Kuwait and the Saudi royal family requested American troops to be permanently stationed in Saudi Arabia, bin Laden increased his dislike for Americans. He was not quiet about his anti-Americanism and was probably known to U.S. intelligence services as early as the Reagan years.

In May 1996 he arrived in the eastern Afghani provincial capital of Jalalabad. “He created a special support base in Iraq, where on several occasions he met Kussai Hussein, the son of Saddam . . .”<sup>18</sup>

John Miller, a broadcast journalist, interviewed Osama bin Laden in 1998 when bin Laden mentioned he was declaring war on America. He stated: “We are sure of our victory. Our battle with the Americans is larger than our battle with the Russians. We predict a black day for America and the end of the United States.”<sup>19</sup> That was three years before the 9/11 attacks.

## *Understanding the Terrorists*

Understanding the terrorists behind the 9/11 attacks can help us better understand the enemy we are combating. “Bin Laden, it seems was Sept. 11’s premeditator, not its executioner.”<sup>20</sup>

So who were the executioners and what prompted them to commit such a heinous act? Those who committed the violence on that day firmly believe that violence against civilians is justified if a political or religious goal is met and feel they are martyrs for a just cause. There are justifications for war found in every religion, and it is too simplistic to characterize Islam because Muslims come from more than 50 states and several ethnicities and social groups. In like manner, it is not wise to simplify ‘the West’ as the modern world.<sup>21</sup>

There were 19 involved hijackers, of which only one was over the age of 30 at the time of the incidents — the presumed pilot that hit the North Tower of the World Trade Center, Mohamed Atta, born in 1968. Mohamed Atta was presumed to be the leader of all of the killers. These hijackers spent nearly two years preparing for the attack on 9/11.

The youngest was born in 1981. There were four pilots and 13 musclemen used to carry out intimidation and control of

## Excerpts from a spiritual handbook of instructions for the suicide attacks of 9/11

(This document was found in Mohamed Atta’s travel bag that didn’t get transferred to his flight.)

“The end is near and the heavenly promise within reach.  
“Open your hearts, welcome death in the name of God.  
“. . . nothing shall happen to the men who execute his plan.  
“God says that you have His blessings and His forgiveness and that nothing evil will happen to you as long as you follow the Almighty, he who created all, since the deeds and words of the Unfaithful shall not help them and shall not harm you, God is willing for you are faithful.  
“All western civilizations that enjoy power are very weak in their core.  
“In the plane, as soon as you get on, you should pray to God, because you do this for God, and everyone who prays to God shall prevail since you do this for God.  
“. . . you travel in order to meet God and to enjoy the journey. You will notice the plane will stop and then start flying again. This is the hour in which you will meet God.  
“When you begin your task, hit hard like a hero, for God does not welcome men who do not finish a task once begun.  
“. . . Heaven awaits you, waits for you and that there you will lead a better life, and angels are calling your name and are wearing their finest clothes for you.  
“The evening before you perform your deed:  
You shall recite that you are dying for God. Shave all excess hair from your body, perfume your body and wash your body. . . .  
“. . . Tell yourself that it is your duty to do so, understand it in its true spirit and convince yourself that you must commit this deed. . . .  
“. . . Check your weapon before your trip because you will need it for the execution of your act. . . .  
“Do not leave your house unless you are washed and clean, for the angels will forgive you if you are clean and have prayed to God. . . .”

passengers on the flights. In addition, the two logistics men used to organize activities prior to the attack were also on the flights.<sup>22</sup>

There were at least five other known supporters of the entire operation. In addition to Mohamed Atta, the three other pilots were Marwan al-Shehhi — presumed pilot of the plane that crashed into the South Tower, Ziad Jarrah — presumed pilot of the plane that crashed in Pennsylvania, and Hani Hanjour — presumed pilot of the plane that crashed into the Pentagon.

One of Mohamed Atta's travel bags didn't get transferred to his flight and was later found by authorities. Among other items and documents found in the bag was a spiritual handbook of instructions for the suicide attacks.

### *Suicidal Terrorism*

Suicidal terrorism is not a new tactic used by terrorists but has been around a long time. However, it has become more common in recent years. "Among the reasons these groups choose suicide terrorism are the fear it generates and the ability to execute accurate, large-scale attacks without sophisticated technology."<sup>23</sup>

It is important to note that suicide attackers generally do not work on their own but are influenced heavily from a larger terrorist network. They are simply not killing on a rage. Their attacks are effective and accurate in that they can make last minute decisions to kill more people before a bomb goes off, for example, and can get very close to their targets.

Lord Chalfont, one authority, was quoted in a newspaper article as saying the following regarding suicide terrorists: "The whole time that I have been involved in terrorist operations, which now goes back to 30 years, my enemy has always been a man who is very worried about his own skin. You can no longer count on that, because the terrorist [today] is not just prepared to get killed, he wants to get killed. Therefore, the whole planning, tactical doctrine, [and] thinking [behind antiterrorism measures] is fundamentally undermined."<sup>24</sup>

Studying suicidal terrorism is quite complex because there are many factors involved in understanding the intent of the suicide. There is a question of whether a terrorist wanted to die or was merely ready to die if necessary. Some who have committed suicide may have thought they weren't going to die because they were misled by their organizers into believing that they would escape unharmed.<sup>25</sup>

Suicidal terrorism can be affected by cultural factors including religious beliefs, which label when suicide and the manner in which it is committed is allowed and by what people believe happens after death. Many suicide terrorists are indoctrinated with the importance of the cause and what must be done to carry it out. These influencers can be those as close as parents and friends but also extends to writers. A charismatic leader may also indoctrinate these individuals with promises and/or blessings.<sup>26</sup>

There are many situational factors that dictate the justification for suicide. Some may see it as their only alternative and a better one than being tortured or imprisoned for long periods of time. Personality seems to play a factor as well, but it is extremely difficult if not impossible to study personalities of suicidal terrorists.<sup>27</sup>

Even with the rise of suicidal terrorism in recent years, it is still very rare. Additionally, even though some believe future suicide attacks on American soil are "inevitable," they can be prevented to some degree if proper intelligence is gathered

about the terrorist organization and their plans are stopped before suicide attackers can begin their mission.<sup>28</sup>



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## During Sept. 11, 2001

8:45 a.m.

American Airlines Flight 11 was deliberately flown into the North Tower of the World Trade Center in New York, approximately 45 minutes after its take off from the Logan International Airport in Boston traveling to Los Angeles. Among the 92 passengers on board were five terrorists.

9:03 a.m.

United Airlines Flight 175 was deliberately flown into the South Tower of the World Trade Center, approximately 45 minutes after its

take off from the Logan International Airport in Boston enroute to Los Angeles. Five terrorists were onboard.

9:38 a.m.

American Airlines Flight 77 was flown directly into the southwest side of the Pentagon in Arlington, Va., approximately one hour 15 minutes after take off from the Washington Dulles International Airport traveling to Los Angeles. Among the 64 people on board were five terrorists.

10:06 a.m.

United Airlines Flight 93 crashed into a field near Shanksville in western Pennsylvania, approximately one hour 15 minutes after take off from Newark International Airport in New Jersey. Among the 46 people on board were four terrorists.<sup>29</sup> The intended target of this hijacked plane is not known, but it is believed that passengers overpowered the terrorists, thus preventing the aircraft from being used as a missile.

Shortly after the planes were flown into the World Trade Center towers, they each collapsed. Many rescue personnel and innocent victims were killed including 343 firefighters. It is estimated that the combined attacks resulted in the death of approximately 3,000 people.

The 19 hijackers belonged to the al-Qaida terrorist network. According to investigators and records of cellular phone calls made by passengers aboard the planes,

the hijackers used knives and box cutters to kill or wound passengers and the pilots, then commandeered the aircraft, which the hijackers used to destroy pre-selected targets.

Chuck Allen was in the North Tower when the plane hit. “His wife is Palestinian. Sabah Allen-Hassounah reads the Arab newspapers every day and receives al-Jazeera, the Arabic-language news channel. . . . Sabah knows many of the leaders of the Arab world personally. She is also familiar with that dubious organization al-Qaeda, and she knew that the Egyptian pediatrician Ayman al-Zawahiri was the true head of the group, that bin Laden was really only its front man.”<sup>30</sup>

## After

The events of Sept. 11, 2001 have international significance, as there were individuals from many different countries who were directly killed or affected by the destruction of that day. Additionally, it will affect policies, relations and opinions of many for generations to come.

“Freedom and democracy are under attack,” said President Bush the following day. Leaders from around the world called the events of Sept. 11 an attack on civilization itself.

“The coordinated attack was an act of war against the United States.” President Bush said in a Sept. 20, 2001 address to a joint session of Congress: “Our war on terror begins with al-Qaeda, but it does not end there. It will not end until every terrorist group of global reach has been found, stopped and defeated.”

Virtually every nation condemned the attack and joined the U.S. led coalition to fight terror on several fronts: diplomatic, economic, intelligence, law enforcement, and military. Operation Enduring Freedom, the military component of the coalition, began on Oct. 7. The first targets were the al-Qaida training camps and military installations of the Taliban regime in Afghanistan. Islamic extremists from around the world including North America; Europe; Africa; the Middle East; and Central, South and Southeast Asia had used Afghanistan as a training ground and base of operations for worldwide terrorist activities. Within months, the Taliban was driven from power, and nearly 1,000 al-Qaida operatives were arrested in more than 60 countries.

Abu Zubaydah, in charge of recruiting and placement of al-Qaida terrorists around the world and very close to bin Laden was captured about six months after the September attacks.<sup>31</sup>

## *New Roles for Emergency Responders*

Just as it has for the nation as a whole, the world in which emergency responders work has changed in fundamental ways since Sept. 11, 2001. Members of professions already defined by their high levels of risk now face new, often unknown, threats on the job. At a basic level, Sept. 11 terrorist events have forced emergency responders to see the



Photo by James Tourtellotte

Some believe that America somehow provoked and deserved the 9/11 attacks.

incidents they are asked to respond to in a new light. At the World Trade Center, 450 emergency responders perished while responding to the terrorist attacks — about one-sixth of the total number of victims. Hundreds more were seriously injured. In this light, the terrorist events are also forcing emergency responders to reconsider the equipment and practices they use to protect themselves in the line of duty.

At major terrorist-attack sites, emergency workers face a staggering range of hazards. Not only do they confront the usual hazards associated with building fires — flames, heat, combustion by-products and smoke — they also must be prepared to deal with rubble and debris, air choked with fine particles, human remains, hazardous materials (anhydrous ammonia, freon, battery acids), and the potential risk of secondary devices or a follow-on attack. Some conference participants indicated that many currently available personal protective equipment (PPE) ensembles and training practices were not designed to protect responders from this range of hazards or were not supplied in sufficient quantity at the attack sites to meet the scale of the problem.

The scale of terrorist events, their duration, and the range of hazards require many



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emergency responders take on atypical tasks for which they are insufficiently equipped and trained. The nature of the destruction at the World Trade Center and the Pentagon reduced opportunities for primary reconnaissance and rescue — important tasks for firefighters in large structural fires. Conversely, police officers became engaged in activities they usually do not do: “busting up and hauling concrete,” scrambling over a rubble pile, and removing victims and decayed bodies and body parts.

In sum, the definition and roles of an emergency responder expanded greatly in the wake of the terrorist attacks, but few of the responders had adequate PPE, training, or information for such circumstances.

This will be a challenge for the future. Additionally, weapons of mass destruction are certainly an item that must be considered and also who it is that has access to these types of weapons and whether or not they would use them against us. Not only are there changes that need to be made to protect emergency responders, those in each branch of the military must work together; and U.S. intelligence agencies need to communicate more effectively with each other and appropriate others. Changes must also be made in the mindset of all Americans to be prepared to do their part in the current climate.<sup>32</sup>

The United States has changed because of the events to a realization that its people are suddenly insecure in their homeland, a foreign feeling for most Americans. Much is to be learned and rectified from the events of Sept. 11 to prevent future attacks and to stop terrorism.

“There are two frequent responses to any great historical event, both inappropriate if not downright mistaken: to say that everything has changed and to say that nothing has changed.”<sup>33</sup>



FEMA Photo by Andrea Booher  
One of the Sept. 11 airplane engines sits in the Staten Island landfill.

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Notes:

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