

TIMES PAST  
**2001**

# THE DAY THAT CHANGED THE WORLD

On September 11, 2001, terrorists attacked the U.S., killing almost 3,000 Americans. Twenty years later, we're still dealing with the effects. BY JOE BUBAR



**Images of 9/11:** The Twin Towers after being attacked; fleeing one of the falling towers (*above*); the Pentagon after the attacks (*top right*); firefighters survey the wreckage in New York (*bottom left*).







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**F**or Lila Nordstrom and her classmates at Stuyvesant High School in downtown Manhattan, the day began like a typical Tuesday. The senior was in architecture class learning to draw blueprints, on the 10th floor of the school. Out the window, she could see the 110-story Twin Towers of the World Trade Center just a few blocks away. Then, in a flash, Nordstrom's life—and the world—changed forever.

"There was an earthquake-like rumble with a huge explosion sound," Nordstrom, now 37, says. "And we turned around, and the entire top of the World Trade Center was a huge ball of fire."

It was September 11, 2001. On that morning, 19 terrorists hijacked four American commercial jets and turned them into deadly airborne weapons.

They flew two planes full of passengers into the Twin Towers. The collisions caused the iconic skyscrapers to catch fire. Both buildings then collapsed with thousands of people trapped inside. About 30 minutes after the second plane hit, hijackers flew another plane into the Pentagon, outside Washington, D.C. It was originally en route to Los Angeles from Virginia. And a fourth plane crashed shortly afterwards in rural Pennsylvania. That aircraft, immortalized as United flight 93, was brought down as passengers bravely tried to retake the cockpit. Authorities believe it was headed for the White House.

The hijackings were part of a coordinated attack on the U.S., the likes of which had never been seen before. In all, 2,977 people lost their lives. The death toll was 574 more than the number who died in the Japanese attack on Pearl

Harbor during World War II (1939-45). But the damage went far beyond those who died. Twenty years later, the world remains a vastly different place than it was before the day known forevermore as 9/11.

"9/11 was a historical turning point," says Megan Jones, senior director of education programs at the National September 11 Memorial & Museum in New York City. "It affected the way we all live our daily lives, the way we perceive each other and see ourselves in the world, and it called into question our sense of security."

### Behind the Attack

To most Americans, 9/11 came as a complete shock. The decade before had seemed relatively peaceful. Back then, most Americans rarely thought about terrorism.

But in many Arab countries in the Middle East, resentment had been building. Some people in the region viewed the U.S. as a corrupting influence over their religion, culture, and politics. They took issue with America's support of its longtime ally Israel

and the ongoing U.S. military presence in the region.

In the late 1980s, a Saudi Arabian-born militant named Osama bin Laden formed a terrorist group called Al Qaeda. The group mainly operated in Sudan, Afghanistan, and Pakistan. It followed an extreme form of Islam that the vast majority of Muslims don't agree with. Al Qaeda insisted on using terrorism to "punish" Western countries for their perceived crimes against Islam. And it set its sight on the U.S. in particular.

Al Qaeda had been on U.S. officials' radar before 9/11. The group bombed two U.S. embassies, in Tanzania and Kenya, in 1998, and a U.S. Navy ship near Yemen in 2000. But nothing matched the scale and scope of 9/11, which Al Qaeda planned for years. Some of the hijackers attended flight school in the U.S.

The terrorists targeted the Twin Towers



**Lila Nordstrom**  
at a 2019 Congressional  
hearing for 9/11 victims

SPENCER PLATT/GETTY IMAGES (TWIN TOWERS); DOUG KANTER/AFP/GETTY IMAGES (FLEEING); ELI REED/MAGNUM PHOTOS (FIREFIGHTERS); PAUL HOSEROS/THE NEW YORK TIMES (PENTAGON); ZACH GIBSON/GETTY IMAGES (LILA NORDSTROM)

# Timeline THE U.S. POST-9/11



**U.S. troops** take cover from an explosion in Afghanistan, 2001.



**Terrorism suspects** in orange jumpsuits detained at Guantánamo Bay, 2002

## Oct. 2001 War in Afghanistan

In response to the 9/11 attacks, President George W. Bush declares a War on Terror and sends U.S. forces to oust the repressive Taliban regime that had been harboring Al Qaeda, the group behind 9/11.

## Dec. 2001 The Patriot Act

Congress passes legislation giving spy and law enforcement agencies new powers to fight terrorism. Some criticize the act as a violation of civil liberties, such as the right to privacy.

## Jan. 2002 Guantánamo Bay

The U.S. opens a prison for terrorism suspects at a U.S. military base at Guantánamo Bay, Cuba. Accounts of abuse and a lack of due process spur calls to close it. Of about 800 people held there, 39 remain today.

## Nov. 2002 Homeland Security

A new Cabinet-level Department of Homeland Security is formed, folding together agencies from the C.I.A. to the Coast Guard. It's the biggest reorganization of the federal government in 50 years.

## 2003 War in Iraq

As part of the War on Terror, an American-led coalition invades Iraq and ousts its president, Saddam Hussein, from power. Most U.S. allies refuse to endorse the action. The controversial war ends in 2011.

because of what they represented. The giant skyscrapers stood near Wall Street in the cultural and financial capital of the U.S. They had come to symbolize America's economic power. Now, on the morning of September 11, people around the world were glued to their TVs. They watched in shock and disbelief as the towers went up in smoke.

On the ground in New York City, chaos reigned. Floods of people flowed from lower Manhattan. Their clothes and faces were covered with ash. Sirens blared as thousands of firefighters, police officers, and other first responders rushed to the World Trade Center.

Inside Stuyvesant High School, Nordstrom and her classmates tried to remain calm. Maybe it had been an accident, they thought. It wasn't until the second plane hit 17 minutes later that they realized the city was under attack.

A little more than an hour after the first plane had struck, the South Tower collapsed. The force sent a huge dust cloud rushing toward the school. Nordstrom and her classmates evacuated about 30 minutes later, just as the North Tower came crashing down.

Everyone around Nordstrom started running. Along the way, she

bumped into some of her classmates. They walked uptown through the city, which now resembled an apocalyptic movie. Cars jammed the streets, their radios blaring so people walking could hear the news. There were reports of all sorts of rumors and misinformation. Some news stations even reported that more attacks were coming.

"That was the scariest part," Nordstrom says. "You can run on pure adrenaline to escape, but you just don't know what else is going to happen."

Nordstrom couldn't get hold of her parents because the closest cell tower, on top of the World Trade Center, had collapsed. So she and a classmate walked about 10 miles to her classmate's home in Queens, across the river from Manhattan. Nordstrom spent

the night there, before reuniting with her parents the next day.

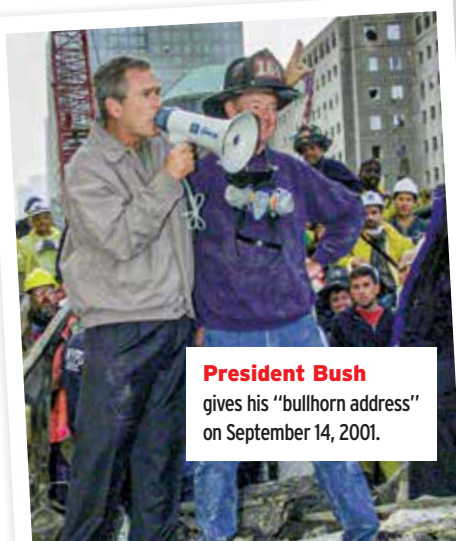
### America Responds

The attacks left the nation in mourning. The rubble of the World Trade Center would burn for months, covering lower Manhattan in a toxic haze.

But from those ashes also arose a great outpouring of national unity. People across the country put up American flags in their front yards. The nightly news told stories of incredible acts of heroism. People learned of office workers who had carried injured colleagues down smoke-filled stairwells. Stories also highlighted the first responders who had charged into the burning buildings, risking their lives—and in many cases losing them—to save others. However, the aftermath of 9/11 also led to an increase in racial profiling and hate crimes. Many Muslim Americans, Arab Americans, and immigrants became targets.

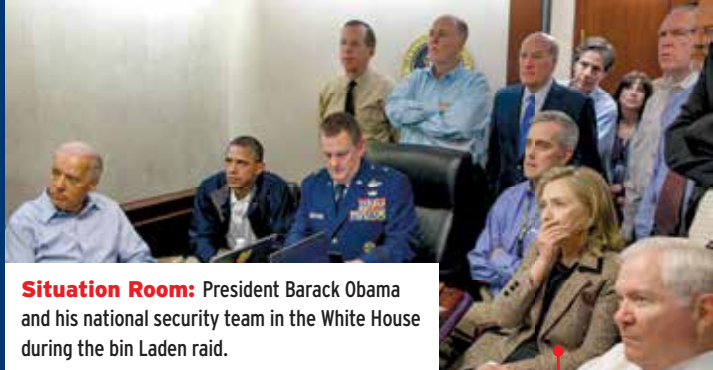
Meanwhile, the political response was swift. On September 14, President George W. Bush visited Ground Zero, the site of the World Trade Center wreckage. As he stood atop the rubble and spoke into a megaphone, rescue workers called out, "We can't hear you!"

"I can hear you! The rest of the world hears you," Bush yelled back. "And the



**President Bush** gives his "bullhorn address" on September 14, 2001.





**Situation Room:** President Barack Obama and his national security team in the White House during the bin Laden raid.



**U.S. Army soldiers** return home from Afghanistan, 2020.

## 2010

### James Zadroga Act

New legislation provides health monitoring and care to the first responders, volunteers, and survivors of 9/11. It's named after a New York police officer who died of a 9/11-related respiratory disease.

## 2011

### The bin Laden Raid

U.S. special forces kill Osama bin Laden (*right*), the leader of Al Qaeda and the mastermind behind the 9/11 attacks, in a compound in Pakistan.



## 2013

### Snowden's Leaks

Edward Snowden (*below*), an intelligence contractor, exposes a government program to spy on Americans and foreigners, fueling a debate about security vs. privacy.



## 2013

### Battling ISIS

A new terrorist group, the Islamic State (ISIS), forms in Iraq and Syria and carries out attacks worldwide. The U.S. declares the defeat of ISIS in 2018, but the group isn't entirely gone.

## Today

### Leaving Afghanistan

The U.S. signs a peace deal with the Taliban and announces plans to withdraw all remaining U.S. troops from Afghanistan by this fall. But many experts fear a Taliban resurgence after the American departure.

people who knocked these buildings down will hear all of us soon.”

Bush's “bullhorn address” echoed around the world. It essentially kicked off what he called the War on Terror. A month later, American troops invaded Afghanistan to topple the Taliban, an extreme religious group that controlled most of the country. The Taliban had been providing shelter for bin Laden when he planned the attacks. Then in 2003, an American-led coalition invaded Iraq. Bush portrayed the war as part of the larger fight against terror. U.S. officials believed Iraq's leader, Saddam Hussein, had hidden weapons of mass destruction, though none were ever found.

In 2011, U.S. commandos killed bin Laden in a compound in Pakistan. But both wars have had long-lasting consequences. More than 7,000 U.S. troops have died in the fighting, and more than 53,000 have been wounded. President Biden has announced that the U.S. is withdrawing all remaining troops from Afghanistan by September 11 of this year. Their departure will finally end what became America's longest war. But many experts say the Taliban may soon regain control.

The War on Terror is just one of the

many ways that 9/11 changed the world. In the U.S., it gave way to a heightened focus on national security. President Bush created a new agency called the Department of Homeland Security. He also put into place new procedures and laws. One of them, the Patriot Act, gave the government more power to protect against future terrorist attacks.

Debates have since raged over whether the added security measures have come at the expense of civil liberties. For example, the government's expansion of phone and email monitoring has called into question the right to privacy. In the two decades since 9/11, individuals inspired by extreme ideologies have carried out smaller attacks. Still, there hasn't been another successful large-scale attack on U.S. soil by a foreign terrorist organization.

### From Terror to Healing

Perhaps most of all, experts say, 9/11 shook Americans' sense of safety. It opened people's eyes to the threat of terrorism and altered the way they go about their lives. Ever since 9/11, soldiers with automatic weapons in airports, taking off our shoes before boarding a plane, and surveillance cameras on city

streets have all become commonplace.

For many survivors, the physical and emotional scars also remain. Nordstrom and her classmates went back to Stuyvesant High School about a month after the attack. At the time, health officials said the surrounding air was safe to breathe.

To Nordstrom, it felt like returning to a war zone. Friends and relatives of missing people had posted signs around the city. Cleanup crews continued to clear the burning rubble. And investigations would later reveal that the air near Ground Zero was then still toxic. As a result, Nordstrom and many classmates have suffered from health issues. Many first responders have as well. They've grappled with a range of diseases and conditions, from asthma to rare cancers. And many of them have dealt with post-traumatic stress disorder from witnessing the attack.

In 2006, Nordstrom started the organization StuyHealth to help ensure that former lower-Manhattan students receive health care and monitoring. For Nordstrom, helping other survivors of 9/11 has also helped her heal.

“Being able to turn it into something that felt productive and helpful,” she says, “has really been central to my ability to deal with it.” ●

**9/11 altered the way Americans go about their lives.**