

THE AMERICAN DREAM

LIBERTY, PROSPERITY, AND BEAUTY FOR ALL



Understanding September 11, 2001

August 2021

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PUBLISHED BY
Common Sense Society
Washington, D.C.
www.commonensesociety.org

Printed in the United States
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OVERVIEW

On September 11, 2001, the trajectory of American power changed. Under Osama bin Laden's direction, nineteen hijackers from the Islamist terrorist group al Qaeda launched a terror attack on the United States. By the day's end, nearly 3,000 civilians had been killed in the deadliest and most shocking terrorist attack in history.

Suddenly, the United States found itself at war. To win a war, a country must impose its vision of peace on its enemy. A country's leaders must ask, "what does it look like when we win?" and have a good answer for their citizens. Too afraid to clearly identify the enemy we faced, America's politicians called our country's response to the 9/11 attacks, "the War on Terror." We waged war against our enemies' tactics, rather than the enemy itself.

America fought the War on Terror with two decades of military operations and mass surveillance at home and abroad. We have destroyed sleeper cells and disrupted terror plots. But the expansion of government power used to deal with the unprecedented threat of al Qaeda and other terror groups were, eventually, turned on other Americans.

OBJECTIVES

1. Students will study the background and details of the 9/11 attacks.
2. Students will understand the use of terrorism as a political weapon.
3. Students will analyze excerpts from bin Laden's fatwas and declarations of war on America.
4. Students will discuss the problem of fighting a "War on Terror" not against an enemy, but against a tactic.

PSA (PRIMARY SOURCE ACTIVITY)

- A. Distribute Primary Source One and Two to students. Working individually or in pairs, they should read the excerpts and answer the questions in discussions with the class.
- B. Watch Primary Source Three on YouTube. Discuss questions and reactions with the class.

STANDARDS

NCHS World History Era 9; 2D

CREATE THE CONTEXT

[For homework or in class the previous day]

- A. Ask students to talk to their parents about their memories of 9/11.
- B. Have students read Background Essays "The 9/11 Attacks," "What is Terrorism?" and answer (or think about) the questions following the essay.

Background Essay: 9/11 Attacks

On September 11, 2001, a very clear, otherwise ordinary Tuesday morning, hijackers took control of two fully fueled airplanes and flew them into the 1,368-foot-tall towers of the World Trade Center, New York City's two tallest buildings. Within an hour, the burning jet fuel had softened the buildings' massive steel spines, and they collapsed—one floor falling into the one below it—until the pressure had reduced those giant symbols of American wealth into millions of tons of dust and scrap metal.

At the same time in Arlington, Virginia, outside Washington D.C., another set of hijackers flew their plane full of passengers into the Pentagon. Passengers on a fourth plane likely bound for the US Capitol—United Flight 93—courageously fought their hijackers, and the plane crashed into the ground near Shanksville, Pennsylvania, before it could reach its target.

The death of 2,996 people on September 11 was the work of Osama bin Laden and his shadowy terrorist group, al Qaeda. The attacks had been carefully planned and executed by dozens of people around the world, but the group had found refuge in Afghanistan, where a sympathetic, hardline Islamist government run by the Taliban had given it safe haven.

Bin Laden and al Qaeda wanted to spur a massive, global war between Muslims and non-Muslims. He promised more attacks, encouraging Muslims in America and Europe to join a jihad—or an Islamic holy war—against non-Muslims. For several years, bin Laden and al Qaeda had been bombing smaller American targets around the world, to little response. With the shocking scale of the 9/11 attack, he finally had the attention of the United States government and the American people.

Most Americans were angry and wanted revenge. More than that, though, they wanted to be safe from more attacks. President George W. Bush responded to the 9/11 attacks by launching a war against al Qaeda and the Taliban government in Afghanistan that harbored it.

But stopping future attacks would require the United States to track down and find al Qaeda operators hiding, like needles in a haystack, in every country on earth. In

the days, months, and years following 9/11, the United States set about disrupting terrorist networks and sleeper-cells all around the world, using a massive array of surveillance tools and secret military operations.

In 2011, a decade after a world-wide manhunt, Osama bin Laden was killed by US Special Forces in a raid on his compound in Abbottabad, Pakistan. By then, like their leader, al Qaeda had been on the run. Its members had spent the last ten years trying to avoid capture and death at the hands of the American military and law enforcement. In the next decade, however, new Islamist groups would pick up the mantle of Islamist terrorism against the United States and the West.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. Who was behind the attacks?
2. What was symbolic about the places al Qaeda attacked?
3. What did bin Laden want?
4. What was President Bush's response to 9/11?

Background Essay: What is Terrorism?

After the 9/11 attacks, America found itself at war—one that came to be called, “the War on Terror.” Terrorism is the use of violence against a country’s civilian population to achieve political change. American law defines it as, “premeditated, politically motivated violence perpetrated against noncombatant targets by subnational groups or clandestine agents.”

Terrorists are bullies who believe that, if enough death and destruction is rained down upon a people, it will demoralize a country and cause its leaders to accept the terrorists’ demands out of fear.

Modern terrorism has a long history. Between 1968 and 1985, there were 653 airplane hijackings globally, with 531 fatalities. Palestinian and left-wing terrorist groups had been hijacking planes, usually bargaining with the lives of the passengers in exchange for money or the release of prisoners. Because the ability of small terror cells to commit large-scale violence was limited, terrorists relied on the media to amplify and bring attention to their cause.

The terror attacks on 9/11 were different. This time, there were no demands and no room for negotiation. The terrorists who hijacked the planes knew that they would die in the attack and believed themselves to be soldiers fighting in a holy war. Airplanes were used as weapons, not only to kill the plane’s passengers, but to inflict massive casualties on people on the ground and in landmark buildings that represented America.

Even more alarmingly—as we would learn in the subsequent months and years—groups like al Qaeda were growing even more ambitious in their desire to wage war. They sought nuclear and biological weapons that could murder Americans at an even more massive scale.

THINK ABOUT IT

1. What is terrorism and what do terrorists want?
2. What is symbolic about the places al Qaeda chose to attack?
3. What is the difference between the terrorism of the 1970s and 9/11?
4. How do you stop a terror attack? What actions would be justified in stopping one?

Background Essay: Islamism

Because of the scale and horror of the 9/11 attacks, al Qaeda became the most famous Islamist group, but it was not the first. Islamism is a political movement that was formed in Egypt by a group called the Muslim Brotherhood in the late 1920s.

Sometimes called “political Islam,” in order to distinguish it from the type of Islam practiced by most of the world’s Muslims, Islamism fuses the religion of Islam with elements of fascism and communism, the two totalitarian systems that were then emergent in the West. It rejects both democracy and freedom and its adherents believe that all non-Muslim governments, laws, and principles are illegitimate. Their goal is to replace non-Muslim governments with a single Caliphate, or a traditional Islamic government that spans the globe, ruled according to Shariah, the Arabic term for Islamic law.

After World War II, Islamist ideas quickly spread around the world. They were embraced by politicians and leaders in every Muslim country and they also came to Europe and the United States through Middle Eastern immigrants.

Some Islamists are attracted to the idea of doing violence themselves. They want to fight their enemies using campaigns of terrorism. But many more of the Muslim Brotherhood’s leaders were non-violent. They were middle-class professionals or students in college and graduate school. That didn’t prevent them from being radicals. They sought to overthrow the American form of government—which was based on the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution—and to create a new one based on Islamist principles.

These Islamists were non-violent, but they were not pacifists. They shared the goals of the Islamist terrorists—known as “jihadists” or “mujahadeen”—and supported them financially and morally. This Muslim Brotherhood network spawned dozens of Islamist terror groups over the decades, including al Qaeda.

It is important to understand that not all Muslims are Islamists; in fact, most are not. Islamists of the Muslim Brotherhood have waged war on Muslim countries, especially Egypt, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates, for not following Shariah closely enough and for having good relations with countries like the United States and Israel.

In 2011, a protest movement known as “the Arab Spring” swept through much of the Middle East, including Tunisia, Egypt, Libya, and Syria. In the United States, the media showed pictures of young people in the streets, fighting for

justice and toppling dictators. Many in the Middle East, however, saw the Islamists of the Muslim Brotherhood behind the protests. Islamists hijacked the “Arab Spring” and came to power in Egypt, forcing the people to live under brutal Islamic law for two years before being toppled by yet another revolution.

In Iraq and Syria, an Islamist group declared itself a Caliphate (or the Islamic State) in 2015. This group, known in the West as ISIS, was legendary for its terrifying barbarity. It inspired tens of thousands of Muslims around the world to commit small but deadly acts of “lone wolf” terrorism on their own, against their fellow citizens in the United States, Europe, and the Middle East.

ISIS’s Caliphate allowed the world’s Muslims to see the violence and depravity of Islamism, and the popularity of its ideas began to recede. By 2019, the United States military had defeated the final ISIS stronghold in Iraq. And, in the years following the Arab Spring, almost all the Muslim countries in the Middle East distanced themselves from the Islamists of the Muslim Brotherhood, whom they recognized were trying to topple their governments. Islamism—an idea that bin Laden and others had believed would unite all Muslims—was replaced by nationalism, as Saudis, Egyptians, Emiratis, and others rejected the Islamist vision of the political future for Muslim peoples.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. What is Islamism and to which Western political systems is it related?
2. What is the goal of Islamists and what is the place of violence as a means to achieving that goal?
3. What is the relationship between Islam and Islamism?
4. Why do you think the Muslim peoples of Saudi Arabia, Egypt, and the United Arab Emirates, among others, rejected the Islamist vision of the political future?

WHY DO THEY HATE US?

Many Americans did not understand why al Qaeda had declared war on the United States and began murdering Americans in large numbers. “Are we responsible?” Some asked. “Could we have done something to provoke them? How do we make them stop?” These questions are best answered by reading bin Laden’s words, as interpreted by the 9/11 Commission.

Written between 2002 and 2004 by a group of former officials comprising both Republicans and Democrats, the 9/11 Commission Report is an invaluable resource for understanding what happened on 9/11, moment-by-moment.

THE 9/11 COMMISSION REPORT (2004)

“Why do ‘they’ hate us?” ... “What can we do to stop these attacks?” Bin Ladin and al Qaeda have given answers to both these questions. To the first, they say that America had attacked Islam; America is responsible for all conflicts involving Muslims. Thus, Americans are blamed when Israelis fight with Palestinians, when Russians fight with Chechens, when Indians fight with Kashmiri Muslims, and when the Philippine government fights ethnic Muslims in its southern islands. America is also held responsible for the governments of Muslim countries, derided by al Qaeda as “your agents.” Bin Ladin has stated flatly, “Our fight against these governments is not separate from our fight against you.” These charges found a ready audience among millions of Arabs and Muslims angry at the United States because of issues ranging from Iraq to Palestine to America’s support for their countries’ repressive rulers.

Bin Ladin’s grievance with the United States may have started in reaction to specific U.S. policies but it quickly became far deeper. To the second question, what America could do, al Qaeda’s answer was that America should abandon the Middle East, convert to Islam, and end the immorality and godlessness of its society and culture: “It is saddening to tell you that you are the worst civilization witnessed by the history of mankind.” If the United States did not comply, it would be at war with the Islamic nation, a nation that al Qaeda’s leaders said, “desires death more than you desire life.”

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. Why is it important to know why our enemies fight us?
2. What would the United States have to do to satisfy bin Laden and al Qaeda?
3. Would it be worth it, to stop the attacks? How would your life be affected?

Primary Source Two

BIN LADEN'S FATWAS

Before engaging in battle, Islamic law commands soldiers and leaders to explain to their enemies why they fight, citing sources to establish the legitimacy of the struggle according to Shariah. Suicide bombers and jihadists often record a video for this purpose. These statements are sometimes called, “fatwas”—or Islamic religious legal rulings—regardless of whether the author has the legal authority to issue a proper fatwa. Al Qaeda and every Islamist terror group believes it is their duty to do this, so there are always footnotes and references to legal texts and rulings.

It is important to understand that these statements or fatwas from Islamists do not have to be consistent with real, authentic Islam. Even a mistaken idea about what Islam requires of its adherents is real, in the sense that it motivates a terrorist or an enemy to act. In other words, if it is real to him or her, we must take it seriously when we try to combat it.

BIN LADEN FATWA (1998)

The ruling to kill the Americans and their allies—civilians and military—is an individual duty for every Muslim who can do it in any country in which it is possible to do it, in order to liberate the al-Aqsa Mosque [Jerusalem, Israel] and the holy mosque [Mecca, Saudi Arabia] from their grip, and in order for their armies to move out of all the lands of Islam, defeated and unable to threaten any Muslim. This is in accordance with the words of Almighty Allah, “and fight the pagans all together as they fight you all together,” and “fight them until there is no more tumult or oppression, and there prevail justice and faith in Allah.”

We—with Allah’s help—call on every Muslim who believes in Allah and wishes to be rewarded [in the afterlife] to comply with Allah’s order to kill the Americans and plunder their money wherever and whenever they find it. We also call on Muslim ulema [scholars], leaders, youths, and soldiers to launch the raid on Satan’s US troops and the devil’s supporters allying with them [Muslim countries allied with the United States, like Saudi Arabia, primarily], and to displace those who are behind them so that they may learn a lesson.

BIN LADEN DECLARATION OF JIHAD (1996)

I say to our Muslim brothers across the world: your brothers in Saudi Arabia and Palestine are calling for your help and asking you to share with them in the jihad against the enemies of God, your enemies the Israelis and Americans. They are asking you to defy them in whatever way you possibly can, so as to expel them in defeat and humiliation from the holy places of Islam. God Almighty has said: “If they seek help from you against persecution, it is your duty to assist them.”

Cavalry of Islam, be mounted! This is a difficult time, so you yourselves must be tough. You should know that your coming-together and cooperation in order to liberate the holy places of Islam is the right step towards unification of the word of our umma under the banner of God’s unity. At this point we can only raise our palms humbly to ask God Almighty to provide good fortune and success in this matter.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. Why do Islamists announce why they fight?
2. Who is the enemy, in bin Laden’s eyes?
3. Whom is bin Laden encouraging to take up arms against the enemy?

VIDEO—9/11: AS EVENTS UNFOLD

In 2018, the Transportation Safety Administration (TSA) created a short video based on audio recordings from the morning of September 11, 2001. It features the events of 9/11 as they unfolded through the eyes of first responders, air traffic controllers, dispatch personnel, airline employees, pilots, citizens—and the terrorists themselves. Listening to these clips will convey some of the panic and tragedy of those few hours. Watch and discuss.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EEogeIIQJzU>

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. How did the calls from the airplanes make you feel?
2. Once the second plane hit the World Trade Center, what did the air traffic controllers understand about what was happening?
3. When someone said, “a new type of war,” what did he mean?

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