Causes of the War in Afghanistan 2001 – Present

A Day of Infamy

There are certain dates in American history that linger through the years. July 4, 1776; November 11, 1918; and December 7, 1941, are just a few examples. In recent history, the date of September 11, 2001, has certainly been added to the list. Most Americans who are old enough to remember have crystal-clear memories of that fateful day. The terrorist attacks in New York, Washington D.C., and Pennsylvania on September 11, 2001, forever changed the United States of America. Let's take a moment to learn about this tragic and history-defining event.

Background

Wars and hatred have been around in the Middle East for centuries. Much of this is fueled by religious conflict between Islamic groups and nation states. Countries such as Iran, Iraq, Syria, and Afghanistan have seen a series of changes in power and purpose through the years. In the latter of these countries, Afghanistan, those changes were to have a large impact on the growth of terrorism in the region.

Osama bin Laden was an Islamic leader responsible for turning many anti-Soviet fighters into terrorists willing to kill innocents as a part of a holy war, or jihad, against the West. In the 1990s, bin Laden issued fatwas, or Islamic declarations, calling for all American troops to leave Saudi Arabia and the Middle East region. His declarations were strongly critical of the United States and its role and presence in the Middle East following the Gulf War of 1990 and 1991.

Bin Laden criticized U.S. policy supporting Israel, U.S. sanctions on Iraq following the Gulf War, and a number of other issues relating to the U.S. and the Middle East. In 2000, the terrorist group Al Qaeda, led by bin Laden, attacked the USS Cole, then stationed in Yemen. Seventeen American sailors were killed.

Bin Laden and his terrorist organization continued planning and preparing for a much larger strike against the United States. Their goal was to cripple American economic, military, and political power. By mid-summer 2001, there were 19 Al Qaeda terrorists on U.S. soil, and the final targets were selected. Terrorists would strike the World Trade Center towers in New York City, the Pentagon just outside Washington D.C., and a third major target, which captured terrorists later said was the U.S. Capitol building.

September 11, 2001

On the morning of September 11, 2001, terrorists boarded four separate flights taking off from major airports on the Eastern seaboard. The terrorists chose flights that were going across the country because the planes would have a heavier fuel load and thus would be more destructive upon impact. The plan was to use the planes, with innocent civilians inside, as directed missiles to strike their targets on suicide missions.

Out of Boston, American Airlines Flight 11 took off at 7:59 a.m. with a total of 87 crew and passengers, as well as 5 hijackers. The plane was taken over shortly after taking off, and it was crashed into the North Tower of the World Trade Center at 8:46 a.m. This was the first plane to
strike. Roughly 20 minutes later, United Airlines Flight 175, also originating from Boston, struck the South Tower of the Trade Center. This flight had 60 passengers and crew on board, as well as 5 terrorists. The explosions in New York rocked the Trade Center towers, and within 2 hours, both towers had collapsed and over 2,000 people had been killed.

Leaving Washington Dulles Airport that morning, American Airlines Flight 77 was carrying 59 crew and passengers when 5 hijackers overtook the aircraft. The plane was turned around and crashed into the Pentagon building, just outside of Washington, D.C. One hundred twenty-five people were killed in the explosion. A fourth plane, United Airlines Flight 93, originated from Newark, New Jersey, and was carrying 40 passengers and crew and 4 hijackers. Once hijackers took over the plane, passengers heard from phone calls that the three other planes had been hijacked and crashed. With this knowledge, the passengers tried to retake the plane, forcing the terrorists to crash it in a field outside of Shanksville, Pennsylvania. All were killed upon impact. The plane's likely target was the U.S. Capitol building in Washington.

At the end of the day, 2,996 people were killed on September 11th because of the four hijacked planes. The vast majority of them were in New York, where the Trade Center towers collapsed. Many were trapped above the explosion point in the towers with no way to safety. The casualty toll includes the many brave police and firefighters who rushed into the burning buildings to save those in danger but never made it out.

Consequences

The attacks of September 11th forever changed the United States. President George W. Bush and the United States government saw them as an act of war, and terrorists had killed thousands of innocent civilians with no provocation. A strong military response was formed, and the United States began what has been termed the War on Terror. This war has been fought in various ways, with air strikes, ground forces, and special operations forces in numerous Middle Eastern countries.

It is best known through the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, which cost thousands of American lives but eliminated pro-terrorist governments that posed a threat to United States security and interests. The War on Terror continues today and will continue for years to come as the United States uses its military might to ensure that another September 11th does not occur.

The U.S. also tracked down some of those responsible for the attacks. Osama bin Laden eluded capture for many years but was finally tracked down and killed by U.S. Navy Seals in 2011 at his hideout in Pakistan.