

Introduction: September 11, 2001

September 11, 2001. At 8:46 on a beautiful morning in New York City, American Airlines Flight 11 slammed into the north tower of the World Trade Center. The events that followed shook people in the United States to the core. As they began to gather around televisions, people stared in disbelief as seventeen minutes later a second plane flew into the south tower.

Within minutes, another airliner filled with passengers crashed into the Pentagon in Washington, DC, and another into the ground in Pennsylvania. There could be little doubt that the United States was under attack. All planes in flight were diverted to the nearest airports. U.S. fighter jets were ordered into the air. The White House was evacuated. Horror-stricken, the world watched as the Trade Center towers crumbled to the ground. Nearly three thousand died in the attacks.

In the days that followed, many struggled to understand what had happened. Not since the War of 1812 had the mainland of the United States been attacked. And not since the Civil War had so many people in the United States been killed in a single day.

The specter of the unknown and the invisible crept into the lives of every one. The use of civilian airliners as flying bombs loaded with fuel was unprecedented. Many people in the United States wondered what would be next. Who was responsible? What could we do to protect ourselves? Why was this happening to us?

Within hours of the attacks of September 11, news organizations reported that U.S. officials believed Saudi militant Osama bin Laden, the head of the terrorist organization al Qaeda, was behind the airplane hijackings. In May 2011, after a ten-year-long search, U.S. special forces found and killed Osama bin Laden in his compound in Abbottabad, Pakistan.

Although September 11, 2001 was a pivotal event for many people in the United States, terrorism did not begin that day. Terrorism has a long history in the modern era. It is a threat that many people around the world deal with on a regular basis. In recent decades, improved transportation and communication, coupled with the creation of weapons of mass destruction, have made the threat from terrorism greater.

September 11 heightened concern about terrorism worldwide, and especially in the United States. The U.S. government changed its foreign policy, leading wars in Afghanistan and Iraq that it claimed were necessary to fight terrorism. There were also changes at home. September 11 created a climate of fear and uncertainty, but also a spirit of patriotism, as people in the United States struggled to cope with the changes heralded by the attacks that day.

Today more than a decade later, people in the United States must consider important questions in a context sharpened by the death of Osama bin Laden: What are the motivations for terrorism? Why was the United States attacked? How great is the threat of terrorism? What is the best way to prevent terrorism?

In the following pages, you will have the opportunity to explore these questions and others as you consider the course the United States should take in response to terrorism. In Part I of the reading, you will examine the historical origins and purposes of terrorism as well as its evolution over the years. Part II explores the threat that terrorism poses today, and considers both international and homegrown threats. In Part III, you will be confronted with the same questions facing U.S. policy makers: What is the best way to respond to terrorism? What must be done overseas? What should be done in the United States?