



America's Response to 9/11

From the mountains of Afghanistan to the hunt for Osama bin Laden

A Nation Resolves to Act

Twenty-five years ago, the attacks of September 11, 2001, transformed America. At the World Trade Center, the Pentagon, and near Shanksville, Pennsylvania, 2,977 people were killed. Grief quickly became a national resolve: prevent another attack and pursue those responsible. That response would take American forces into Afghanistan, establish a controversial detention operation at Guantánamo Bay, and launch a hunt for Osama bin Laden that lasted nearly a decade.

The enemy was al-Qaeda, the terrorist organization led by bin Laden. Its sanctuary was Afghanistan, where the Taliban regime provided refuge. America's initial military objectives were to remove the Taliban from power, destroy al-Qaeda's operating base, and find its leader. American troops, intelligence officers, and Afghan allies would carry out the campaign together.

Into Afghanistan

On October 7, 2001, the United States and its partners began Operation Enduring Freedom. Airstrikes, combined with operations by small American teams and Afghan opposition forces, rapidly broke the Taliban's hold on the country. But overthrowing a government and capturing a terrorist network were different tasks. As Taliban and al-Qaeda fighters scattered, the pursuit moved toward eastern Afghanistan's mountains.

In December, attention centered on Tora Bora, a rugged region of caves and mountain positions near Pakistan. American aircraft bombarded suspected strongholds while Afghan fighters, supported by American personnel, advanced on the ground. This was the campaign many Americans remember as the effort to drive bin Laden from his caves. Yet he escaped. The early

military victories had deprived al-Qaeda of its sanctuary without delivering its leader into American custody.

Guantánamo and the Question of Detention

The pursuit also created a difficult question: what should the United States do with the people it captured?

On January 11, 2002, the first 20 detainees arrived at the American naval base at Guantánamo Bay, Cuba. The detention operation began at Camp X-Ray, whose outdoor enclosures became an enduring image of the new war. The base itself was longstanding; its use as a detention center for the post-9/11 campaign was new.

Guantánamo held men suspected of involvement with al-Qaeda, the Taliban, or related activities. Calling all of them convicted terrorists would be inaccurate: many were held without criminal charges or trial. The prison became a focus of disputes over prolonged detention, prisoner treatment, and the rights of people captured in a conflict without a clear endpoint.

The broader detention effort also included separate, secret CIA facilities. Looking back, the Senate Intelligence Committee's majority report, released in 2014, concluded that the CIA's coercive interrogation methods were ineffective at obtaining intelligence or cooperation and that claims about their effectiveness were inaccurate. Those findings remain an essential part of assessing the methods America used in its pursuit of security.

The War Expands

The expanding war on terrorism also became entangled with Iraq. Here the historical distinction matters: the 9/11 Commission found no evidence that Iraq cooperated with al-Qaeda in developing or carrying out attacks against the United States. The invasion of Iraq should not be remembered as an attack on the government responsible for September 11.

Meanwhile, the search for bin Laden continued. Its eventual breakthrough came through patient intelligence work. Investigators followed information about a trusted courier, a trail that led to a compound in Abbottabad, Pakistan, in 2010. For months, intelligence agencies examined the compound and assessed whether the elusive al-Qaeda leader was living behind its walls.

The Raid in Abbottabad

President Barack Obama authorized a raid. In the early hours of May 2, 2011, in Pakistan—still May 1 in the United States—American Navy SEALs entered the compound and killed bin Laden. He was not apprehended alive and later executed; he died during the operation, and American forces took custody of his body.

For many Americans, the announcement brought relief and a measure of justice. It could not restore the lives lost on September 11. Nor did bin Laden's death mean that al-Qaeda or the

danger of terrorism had disappeared. Obama acknowledged that continuing threat when he announced the operation's success.

Remembering the Response

America's response to 9/11 deserves remembrance in its full complexity. It demonstrated courage, persistence, and extraordinary military and intelligence skill. It also raised lasting questions about detention, interrogation, and the reach of wartime power.

Every September 11 we can honor the victims and those who served while examining the decisions made in their name. Remembering September 11 means keeping faith with the people we lost—and thinking carefully about how a democracy protects both its citizens and its principles.