

# 9/11: The Hinge of History

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## SPEAKERS

Tricia Johnson, Brian Knappenberger, Garrett Graff, support message, Vivian Schiller

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support message 00:00

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T

Tricia Johnson 00:31

It's Aspen Ideas to Go from the Aspen Institute. I'm Tricia Johnson. Twenty years ago, the world unified after the terrorist attacks on 9/11. President George W. Bush's approval rating was high, NATO invoked article five in its charter and the Queen of England ordered the Star Spangled Banner be played. But the Unity was brief. Soon the White House launched a war on terror that bred distrust among Americans that still exists today. Brian Knappenberger is a documentary filmmaker who covered the fallout from 9/11.

B

Brian Knappenberger 01:04

So much anger, hatred and fear came out of that day. But it led us to make all of these decisions later that ended up failing us and not making us safer.

T

Tricia Johnson 01:18

Aspen Ideas to Go brings you compelling conversations hosted by the Aspen Institute. Today's discussion was held by the Aspen Ideas team. For Brian Knappenberger and journalist Garrett Graff, September 11, 2001 changed their careers. They knew it was a watershed moment for the nation and felt compelled to report on what happened next. Knappenberger went to Afghanistan and made his first documentary, turning his lens on a small village leveled by an early U.S. bombing campaign. Graff followed how the American government reacted to the terror attacks. Both say political leaders in the United States made serious blunders. Graff wrote a book about 9/11 and hosts the podcast Long Shadow which examines lingering questions after the attacks. Knappenberger is the director of Turning Point:

9/11 and the War on Terror, a docu-series on Netflix that highlights why America was attacked, the intelligence breakdown that allowed the attack, and how decisions by the nation's leaders have led to problems today. They're interviewed by Vivian Schiller, the director of Aspen Digital at the Aspen Institute. Here's Schiller.

V

Vivian Schiller 02:28

You know, what we're talking about today is not so much, you know, we're just past the 20th anniversary of, of 9/11 and there was a lot of discussion, very much of it very moving. And, you know, always shocking about what happened on that day, which all of us, of course, remember so vividly. Today, rather than that, it seems fitting now that we're past the anniversary not to talk about so much the events of September 11, 2001. But to talk about the legacy of September 11, 2001, because it's profound. And you know, Brian, you know, you have said that your framing for your documentary is that modern history can be divided into two timeframes: before 9/11 and after 9/11. And Garrett, in some of your writing, you wrote the events of September 11, 2001 became the hinge on which all of recent American history would turn. So that is, there's a lot to get into. And I'm eager to get into it. But I want to start by asking you, not so much your historical perspective, but a very personal question, which is, where were you? And what did you experience when you got the news? And which news did you get first? Garrett, I'll start with you.

G

Garrett Graff 03:58

Sure. So I was a college student. I was in college in Boston, and I was eating breakfast in the dining hall when a friend came by, must been around 9:15, and said that there had been two planes that had crashed into the World Trade Center. And I was a reporter for the college newspaper at the time and spent the day doing local reporting around the issue. And I remember running down to the newsroom of the newspaper and I must have gotten there a little after 10 because the I walked into the conference room where that you know, there was a TV on with the news and I could only see one tower and I was so confused about like, what was the camera angle that they were showing where the one tower was blocking the other tower and then And finally, someone explained to me that actually one of the towers had fallen. And I just remember, you know, what do you mean? Like the tower fell? Like, how is that possible? Like, that doesn't make any sense. And then I, you know, an hour or so later, I remember exactly where I was standing, when I saw the first photo of Osama bin Laden, and the first reference to this thing called al Qaeda. And I remember again, being so confused, because I had never heard of Osama bin Laden, and I had never heard of al Qaeda. And I couldn't understand how everyone on TV seemed so sure that this was the guy who had attacked us when I had never even heard of him. And when I talk about the day, when I sort of talk about the day in my work, I always try to come back to that experience, not because I have a unique 911 experience, because I actually think I have a uniquely boring 911 experience. But that that is indicative, I think, in the way that we sort of missed hell, the history of 911. Now, as we sort of talked about it is this discrete event, for flights begins at 846. In the morning, the whole thing's over 102 minutes later, with the collapse of the second power, there was the Pentagon, there was Shanksville, there was the Twin Towers. And yet, you know, for any of us who were alive that day, that's not the day that we experienced. And the day that we experienced, you know, we didn't know when the attacks began. We didn't know when they were over. We didn't know how many attacks there had been. And we didn't know what came next. And you know, that fear of what might be coming on Wednesday or in October, or 2002 is so important to understanding all of the dark decisions that the US government made after 9/11.

V

Vivian Schiller 06:53

Right, I'll come to you in a second. But Garrett, you know, one of the things that I've heard you say on your podcast and elsewhere that I find so interesting is that those 17 minutes between when the plane hit the first tower, and the plane hit the second tower, were the most interesting moments of the day. Because so many people thought that it

was some kind of accident or a small plane. Just say a word about that because it so reflects the confusion about that day.

G

Garrett Graff 07:19

Yeah. So that 17 minutes, 8:46 to 9:03, to me, is always the most interesting moment of 9/11 because you see just how innocent a country America was that Tuesday morning. We were not a country that was conditioned to terrorism. We were not a country where people were afraid of being in public spaces. And that you see in those 17 minutes, sort of everyone have this same sort of collective shrug and you see, you know, New York City commuters continue to pour into New York City and sort of keep going to their desks, you know, you see people in the south power in the World Trade Center, just sit there and watch the the burning fire across the Plaza in the north tower, you see, you know, people on Capitol Hill. I quote in my book, Brian Gunderson, who's the majority leader of the chief of staff to house majority leader dick army that morning and he says, You know, I thought it was going to be like a bad school shooting, the type of thing that dominates nationally news, but doesn't actually change anyone's day. And even the National Security Adviser Condoleezza Rice and, and President Bush, they sort of have the same reaction, huh? What a strange accident. Let's wait and see more. And Condi Rice goes on into her 9am staff meeting and George W. Bush walks into that classroom in amibroker Elementary School and you just see like this country, in those 17 minutes that is completely unrecognizable to us now, in terms of sort of where our instincts go, where our fears go, and sort of what the the type of country that we have now become since 9/11.

V

Vivian Schiller 09:12

And we're gonna come back to that, the kind of country we have become. But Brian, let me turn to you. So tell me about your experience that morning.

B

Brian Knappenberger 09:20

I have a uniquely boring experience. Similar to what Garrett was talking about, I I was in Los Angeles at the time. And somebody called me very early, you know, in the morning and said, You got to turn on television and I turned on the television and watched I think I saw the second plane plane hit and you know, I was just, I was I was mesmerized by it. I was basically just so drawn into it. I probably didn't leave the screen much for for about a week. I was so I guess I had a similar thought to a Garrett, who are the People who are, you know, as this sort of name starts surfacing Osama bin Laden and they weren't al Qaeda, I'd never heard that before. So it's, you know, you're starting to trying to figure out and put the pieces together, I remember at one point going out to a restaurant to get some food and somebody had taken a big one of those big old tube TVs, you never see any more and put it on the bar, and the whole restaurant was kind of huddled around it, it was a worldwide, you know, certainly all over the United States, but worldwide kind of event where everybody's trying trying to figure it out. I was immediately compelled I wanted to make, I wanted to dig deeper, I knew that I knew that our country had changed dramatically. And I knew that this was something I needed to that I was I was drawn into, on a personal level. But this was sort of change the trajectory of what I was doing, what my work would be. And so I, I immediately started, I was interviewing people I wanted, I was my first intent, my first thought was to go to, to go to immediately to New York. But instead, I ended up going to Afghanistan right after the sort of initial fighting, died down and made one of my very first films, and I was I was still there, actually, on the one year anniversary of 911. In Afghanistan, which became a film called life after war, and eventually was a was a on PBS Frontline. But it was such a massively transformative period of time, being being there in in Kandahar, for me personally, and just understanding what was going on with that country that ever since that time, I'd want it I wanted to complete the circle and go back and figure it out. But and, and and, and chart the war, which I think ultimately was one of the most underreported wars and in the United States history. So it's, that's a

short version of it. But the the, it was something that I you that one of the main characters in that film said that it was like the tectonic plates of history were were shifting, and, and that we were, you know, we were kind of going we wanted to be right, there were those those plates were, were grinding most forcefully.

V

Vivian Schiller 12:21

You know, it's interesting, you both say that your experience that morning was rather boring. And yet for both of you, the events of 9/11 really shaped the trajectory of your careers. You know, whether it's Garrett, your books, and podcasts and articles and speaking and, Brian, of course, your extraordinary filmmaking, you both have some pretty harsh judgments about the role of the United States and the impact on the United States in the world. In the years coming after 9/11, Garrett, and your recent story in The Atlantic, you said the United States as both a government and a nation got nearly everything about our response wrong on the big issues and the little ones. So talk a little bit about that, please.

G

Garrett Graff 13:07

Yeah, you know, I've spent most of these last 20 years, as you said, covering 9/11, and how it's changed our politics and our government. And it is a major point of three other books that I've written even before I wrote my 9/11 history. And it's really striking. Now looking back, that we, I think, God, almost every aspect of the war on terror wrong, that we miss identified our allies, we miss identified our enemies. We at home, you know, unleashed a series of political forces that are sort of quite dark and tragic. And then, you know, in some ways, you know, as someone whose background is primarily in covering federal law enforcement and intelligence, the part that is most tragic to me is how we got our quest for justice wrong. And you know, that we compromised our morals and our values along the way. And, you know, here we are 20 years later. And I think, you know, our country is less free, more morally compromised, and more alone on the world stage than we ever have been. And that's particularly awful. When you look at the Grand arc of where 9/11 began, you know, this incredible moment of global unity of national unity President Bush's approval ratings in the 90s NATO invoking article five of its charter for the first and only time in its history and attack on one is an attack on all. You know, the morning after 9/11, the queen in England had her band play the Star Spangled Banner at her sort of morning parade the first time in 600 years that the band had broken with a tradition of its sort of mourning, you know, UK, patriotic music and the to start from there and to sort of end up where we are, I think is awful. And, you know, I think it is impossible to to understate how wide ranging the impact of those forces on least after 9/11 are. I mean, if you look in the United States are the election of Donald Trump is a direct result of the politics unleashed after 9/11. The insurrection on January 6, you know, is stems from the anti immigrant anti muslim nativist nationalist politics that the Republican Party embraced after 9/11. In Europe, Brexit and the collapse of the dream of a united continental Europe is a direct result of the destabilization of the Middle East that began after 911 in response to the war on terror. So I mean, this is this is something that has had super wide ranging negative consequences not just for the United States, but the entire world.

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support message 16:44

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withers in ailing ones, opportunity should never be limited by geography. No one ever solved a big problem by thinking small. It's never easy to overcome difficult challenges. It takes time and steady resolve. One thing is true. Everyone deserves an opportunity to succeed. Learn more at [waltonfamilyfoundation.org](http://waltonfamilyfoundation.org).

V

Vivian Schiller 18:03

Brian, how did we get this so wrong? I mean, it's not, you know, we've got you know that the actions of George W. Bush, but then we had eight years of Barack Obama, Trump now Biden, what how did this go cold so colossally How did we squander that that momentary flash of goodwill, at least towards most, I think, many brown people in this country would say it was never there for the beat? You know, from the from the first moments of 911? How, how did that happen? How did that play out? Yeah. How did we become a weakened nation?

B

Brian Knappenberger 18:38

Yeah, well, in some ways, the series, the series that we just kind of created, kind of drills down on all the specifics, partly of what of what Garrett just was just mentioning. We start even before 911, and look at the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, the the CIA support of the Mujahideen during that, that period of time in this sort of proxy war against the Soviets, the rise of al Qaeda during that time, the collapse about Afghanistan into this bloody civil war, after the Soviets left and and our kind of stepping away from from supporting that country. The increase increasing risk of terrorist acts, but on the part of our kind of dirt throughout the 90s, as they as they sort of one after another things, you know, East Africa, bombings leaving the USS Cole bombing, all the way up to two to 911 itself. And so we sort of look at that sort of back history. But, you know, your question is what happens after 911? In particular, we're really interested in in a sense of what you just asked what happened after 911 there was no question we were coming together in the spirit of global unity at that moment, we all kind of felt it, but we also felt this growing kind of anger and desire. hunger for retribution that, frankly scared me at the time. It I felt I felt that it was taking on a very kind of different kind of face, as well, as well, as, you know, these these sort of stories we're hearing of us coming together. So, you know, the decisions that were made after that are pretty dramatic. You know, when we look at two major, two major parts that we look at are the enhanced interrogation techniques program, the torture program. And we try to tell the story of how that was created, what was created, how Guantanamo Bay started, what happened, how, you know, what were who were the people that were initially brought to Guantanamo Bay, what were those decisions made behind the scenes, that, that justified however thinly, the the, the, the, the actions, the torture that was done at that period, during that period, we look at that. And we look at the way that has sort of America's standing in the world suffered as a result, I think of that. We also look at Mass suspicionless surveillance programs, programs, like stellar when they came into, right after 911 came in, you know, these sort of mass sort of dragnet surveillance programs that were also kind of seem to be at odds with constitutional protections, like the Fourth Amendment, or the five, five Foreign Intelligence Surveillance Act, things like that. So we, we we unpack those decisions that were very, very secretive. At the time, and, and conscientious people inside the administration came forward, we started learning more about this stuff. And but I think, a primary a primary set of decisions that that led to this moment, that of hyper partisanship, and kind of where we are now is the war in Iraq, this pivot from Afghanistan, which when I was there was a very optimistic place. You know, again, I was there one year, on the one year anniversary of 911. And I felt it, it was a it was a period of, of building, you know, I think there was a very palpable sense that, that Afghan citizens were sick of the Taliban were largely saw them as this oppressive kind of force. And we're glad to be rid of them. And the the sort of swift driving away of the Taliban. And the thinking that that was the end of the war. And then this this pivot of military gear and attention and resources to the Iraq War, that country and seemed to have no connection to 911 that seemed that in which there were doubts about weapons of mass destruction, right from the beginning, in which there were doubts, very strong doubts about whether or not there was any terrorist activity or all kinds of connections. And so I was saying this desire and drive toward the which seemed questionable to so many people, and ultimately was a disaster, that really eroded a lot of the institutions and, and trust in government media that we, that we are, that are, I think, driving, fueling some of what Karen just talked about this, this kind of this reaction, so.



So we go with that, you know, in some ways, that is that is a turning point in the in the war on terror. So we unpack all of that, and try to try to try to look at that step by step, these decisions that were made. That that didn't lead to that were that that were failures all by, as Gary just said, just failures all along the way, in the war on terror. And in particular, as we found out more about what was happening behind the scenes, how we you could compare that to what we were being told in public about this. This is one of the great I think revelations of the Afghanistan papers, Craig Whitlocks research and work is, is that even the officials at the highest levels understood that the war in Afghanistan was a failure. But the message we were getting in public was when they were painting this kind of rosy picture of events that we were turning a corner that there was light at the end of the tunnel that our goals are being met. So so this this all of this fuels, this kind of growing distrust, I think with government and with media and with for not pushing a little harder. That has led us to where we are now,

G

Garrett Graff 24:51

Brian, one of the things that sort of strikes me even as someone who studies this and has written a lot about it is that The more I sort of go back and look over these last 20 years, sort of, to me, the worse the picture appears, you know, you sort of forget about all these little things along the way. And I wonder it from your perspective, having done this huge, sweeping history, which I think is such an important corrective to the way that, you know, America goes about its geopolitics. So a historically that, you know, we've talked about 911, you know, as like, well, like, this is the day it started. Whereas, you know, what you do such a good job of explaining is like, America had been involved in this story for a quarter century beforehand, and we just hadn't noticed as a country that we were involved. I wonder, sort of as you go back and look at this, in the grand scope of history, like, what did you learn in the course of your documentary that sort of surprised you? As you, as you re examined this history that you had sort of lived in reported on along the way yourself?

B

Brian Knappenberger 26:12

Yeah, um, you know, it's a version of what we were just saying, I mean, what does? You know, I think even if you were, as I said before, there's I think this is one of the most underreported wars, the war in Afghanistan, in history. And I think even if you were paying attention to it, you got it in little pieces, you got little kind of revelations here, stories here a little sort of point, point to list sort of painting about what's happening. The one of the striking things about just just having this, embarking on this ambitious idea of how does this fit in into the scope of history is just is seeing how it all plays out and how it all kind of builds on each other. And, and the degree in which I think the thing that's so striking is the just to the degree at which people at nearly every level of government understood it was a failure. I mean, it was pretty clear, really, from I mean, the early part of the Afghanistan war, I think was successful, I think there was some, there was some strong moves made there. But But when you're when, when you're in the 2000 456 range, you begin, you start the beginning of a Taliban resurgence, and as states is mostly in Iraq, the the Taliban is coming back by 2007. Eight. They're ascended there. And, and, and, and you can almost point to what we experienced a few weeks ago, the fall of Kabul starting then, this is a slow motion, kind of taking over of the country that starts starts at that period of time, it goes very, very badly wrong. Obviously, the Iraq War by 2007, eight is going wrong. I mean, we've got two bad wars happening simultaneously. And our focus is split. When Obama comes in, he, he looks at the the Afghanistan, we call it the good war. And so he, you know, this is the war of that, of, of, of necessity. And so that's, that's how he looks at it. But really, it's clear, right from the beginning, from, you know, from high level officials, you know, from the Afghanistan papers and others, that they just really understood that this was failing badly that the decisions that were being made, were contributing to that failure, that we're ensuring that we might not be successful. And by the time you get to the surge, that becomes more and more obvious. And I think it's not an it's not just the sort of what officials were say saying in private. I mean, if you spend time talking with veterans and people that were there in, in Afghanistan in these wars, it seems clear to them right from the beginning, when they when, you know, during the surge when you're talking 2010 112 but 13, you know that none of that this isn't working, that it's a failure. So when you when you sort of string out this, this narrative, and understand the I think the

the one of the benefits of history is understanding that the kind of you know, we did an interview with with goldeen, Hekmatyar and he talked about the kind of emotion that he felt that they felt when the Soviets finally left the the sort of swagger that they had the sort of feeling that they had taken back their country. And, and then and then the fact that that's how they feel now. So you so you're, you're, you're you're, you're looking at this broad scope of history and your understanding, not just the roots, but the but the failures that have been clear since 2005 567. And that I think is the most striking thing. I mean, it's it's, I guess it's a, it's not a singular kind of answer to your question, but it's the weight of those decisions over time. And and how clear they were both to people at highest levels and veterans on the ground. And the way it fit it fit into the to the the sense that Afghans had of themselves at that period. That, that that really, the cumulative effect, I think of all that was surprising. Does that answer your question? I feel like it's a giant answer to a question. But it is the it is the level at which people understood this, that this was a failure for the length of time, I think was was surprising.

G

Garrett Graff 30:49

Which I think is not unrelated to why we stayed for so long. I really think that, you know, 15 years of this war was just no one could figure out how to get out of it, and knew that it was going to I knew that we were going to lose and didn't want that loss to sort of, you know, happen on their deployment, their assignment, you know, their, their term, you know, or their, you know, their presidency.

B

Brian Knappenberger 31:23

Yeah, I think that's true. There's the old saying that, you know, we didn't find a 20 year war, we fought 21 year wars, that every year, there seemed to be a new plan. Of course, there's a huge turnover of troops, and that there wasn't a lot of or any real long term thinking as to how or what the goals were, and what it would mean to win this war.

V

Vivian Schiller 31:45

And, of course, we see that playing out in the backlash to to Biden's move to pull all the troops out and the tragedies that we're seeing there and the reaction at home, which is what I want to turn to, in our just remaining few minutes of this podcast, I want to come back to the US domestic legacy of 911. You talked a little bit about this earlier, Garrett. In fact, I'll quote a quote, you're a quote you. Were you. Yeah. From your recent story. You said the tragic consequences, cynical choices and poisonous politics. You write that the enemy we ended up fighting after 911 was ourselves. And you draw a line, you mentioned earlier you to align between the events of 911. And Donald Trump and what we're seeing in the polarization in America saying more about that.

G

Garrett Graff 32:34

Yeah, and this is like, I think, to me, one of the parts of, you know, this last week that it has been so hard is everyone's like, Well, you know, we seem so divided now. And we were so unified then. But to me, the two are actually very closely related, like the the polarization and the division that we have now is the direct result of the choices and the cynicism of the way that we pursued this war on terror. And, you know, you see that in the Republican Party in the stoking of, you know, anti muslim, anti immigrant, nativist nationalist politics. I mean, Donald Trump, you know, comes to the fore, on the back of the birtherism movement. I mean, the, you know, the by 2008, you know, the attack on Brock, Obama is, you know, this is Barack Hussein Obama, you know, the closet, Muslim Kenyan, raised in the madrasa in Indonesia, you know, sort of, etc, etc, etc, all of which, of course, is false. But, you know, I go back, you know, again, as I think about this, too, you know, Colin Powell had that meet the press segment in the fall of 2008. With with Tom Brokaw where he says, you know, a, none of that is true about Brock Obama. But but that's the wrong

question that the question is, so what if it was, you know, what, what would Why? Why is the fact that you might be a Muslim, disqualifying to participate in American civic life? And yeah, that was sort of the direction that we have seen the Republican Party's sort of run away with over these last 10 years, you know, birtherism. You know, remember Donald Trump's basically first act as president is the Muslim travel ban, you know, which was thrown out repeatedly by courts simply because he was so explicit over the fact that he was just trying to ban Muslims from the United States that there was sort of no other policy justification for it. And, you know, we look at our nation now, as if who knows how we got this divided in this polarized. But to me, you know, it is exactly the outcome of the political forces that we unleashed after 911 and sort of the demons that we created overseas and the demons that we embraced at home. And, you know, I'm, I sort of remained struck by, you know, sort of imagine the, like, different version of this war on terror, where George W. Bush sort of looks at Al Qaeda, and says what it is, this is a group of about 100 people with an identifiable ideology and an identifiable leadership, who exploited identifiable holes in our law enforcement, intelligence and aviation security, blanket to carry out their attack. Like, this isn't a all powerful, you know, Bond style villain super army, like this is a, this is a crowded bus of terrorists that we need to take on around the world. And the way that I'm going to do that is I'm going to throw \$3 trillion of American investment into energy independence and renewable energy and weaning ourselves from the corrupt regimes of the Middle East that we have backed for too long. And, you know, just sort of imagine how different of a war on terror that would have been, you know, I, we were I don't think we're ever close to that as the outcome. But you know, like, there was a very different path to that.

B

Brian Knappenberger 36:57

The Al Gore version.

G

Garrett Graff 36:58

Yeah, exactly. The Al Gore version.

B

Brian Knappenberger 37:05

So yeah, I mean, that that's just that's so right. One of the, I think, votes that that had, that we bring up in the series that I think kind of clarify, you know, points to that a little bit is, you know, we interviewed Barbara Lee, Congresswoman Barbara Lee, who, you know, right after 911. There's this the AU mF the authorization to use military force, which is a super open ended authorization to use force anywhere in the world doesn't name al Qaeda. It doesn't name a country, it just gives this sort of sweeping power of war powers to the President, which is typically, you know, that's, that's, that's what that's the job of Congress to Okay, wars. This is unit This is unanimous. This goes through Congress unanimously through the Senate and, and Barbara Lee is the single dissenting voice and that she's that she's the only vote against the EU, IMF, and her position is that this is this was a horrible attack, she feels the emotion as much as anybody but leaders at those moments should should have the calmer heads should try to and to try to chart the best path forward with this, but but we should be responsible with it, that that overwhelming military action is not going to do anything to stop terrorism. And, and she gets death threats, she gets a lots of death threats, she gets to 60,000 or something, she was telling me some some massive amount of hate mail. A lot of anger is directed at her. But she's right. She was the singular voice that kind of saw this and understood this, which is why I wanted to interview her. One of the first people I reached out to for this project. And so yeah, that so much anger came out of that so much hatred and fear came out of that day, that it led us to make all of these all of these decisions later that that just that that that were found that ended up failing us and not making us safer. And so and the other thing is, I think that this the war, this is one of the reasons why garretts peace in the last 12 minutes of our of our series is so good. I mean, he points out all the ways in which back to this idea that 911 was this sort of hinge of, of history that it changed, you know, brought us home Department of Homeland Security. It changed you know, our airports, the where architecture, it brought a lot of that Homeland Security money home and which fueled the kind



of militarization of our police forces around the country. This was this was a day that changed us in ways that we just couldn't have foreseen back then. And so that was, you know, I think I think we're still feeling its effects. A lot of the effects, we didn't really know, I mean that this also came at a period of time which the internet is exploding. we're communicating in different ways. I don't think we really understood or grappled with the idea of surveillance of internet communications, and what that that parallel fear and technological change was going to do due to us. I don't think we still understand some of that. But it's clearly, you know, we're still clearly grappling with how 9/11 changed us.

V

Vivian Schiller 40:35

As we wrap up, you know, Garrett, I heard you say on the air the other day that with this 20th anniversary, 9/11 moves from memory to history, which I thought was very interesting, particularly because one generally thinks of 20 years as a generation, that's sort of the classic measure of a generation and the people that are coming of age, the young people are coming into positions of leadership, either well, or maybe were born, but certainly not of an age to really understand what was happening, how can those who were not around who did not experience even, you know, that that that moment where the world changed? How can they think about taking this legacy as they come into positions of leadership around the world, the legacy of 9/11? And what what, what should they take forward? as, as as, as 9/11 moves deeper and deeper into history as for this country?

G

Garrett Graff 41:35

I think it really is a very poignant 20 year mark. I mean, when we look at those 13 Americans, the 12 Marines and one us sailor who were killed in Kabul, during the pullout, you know, only two of them were old enough to have been out of diapers on 9/11. And the, you know, idea that these wars have been going on so long, that they are now increasingly being fought on both sides by people who were too young to remember the catalytic events of the of the war is a really striking and sad moment. I think that this is a real question that you asked Vivian is a real tough one, because I don't know how much America can really put any of this genie back in the bottle 20 years later, you know, that, I think we are going to be reckoning with the challenges that 9/11 have injected into our political and civic life for a very long time to come. You know, not the least of which are is the like literal, actual, you know, Bill from this war. You know, the, the the Pentagon estimates that the payments, the health care, costs of war on terror veterans will peak in 2050, that, you know, that the the health care costs of this war are going to continue to rise for the next 30 years, even though we are now, you know, effectively out of Iraq and Afghanistan, in this is gonna be a real, you know, century long challenge that we have to sort of overcome. overcome this. Brian, I wonder if I could ask you sort of one more question about your series. You know, as we look back at these last 20 years, you know, this is our moment when we really begin to take stock of a lot of historical figures and their legacies. And I wonder, sort of as you were doing your work and interviewing these people and looking at the record whose opinion, you know, who did your opinion most change about? I mean, either sort of positively or negatively, as we were going back through your project, like who, who really changed the way that you thought about them?

B

Brian Knappenberger 44:22

That's an interesting question. I think part of what we try to do is understand the reasons behind some of the decisions that were made. So I wouldn't say that it went from negative to positive, it might have gone from negative to still negative. If it changed, but it was interesting to, to, you know, I didn't want to just only sort of criticize the the the decisions that were made or what what was what happened. I wanted to understand why those decisions were made, and so on. There was an effect of going back, putting your placing yourself back into that those moments of that day and the fear of that day. And and understanding why people were scared. You know, if you've talked to people, I mean, your book does this so well, it talking to such a broad range range of people both in administrations

and people that were victims. And, you know, that's that's, I think, similar to what we tried to do. But when you talk to people in the FBI who are trying to investigate, you know, United 93, we talked to Jacqueline McGuire, Dale Watson, people that were alberto gonzalez, I mean, we, we, I tried to have some space of getting into their mindset to see what what they were thinking and why there was a real fear of, for instance of a second wave that, you know, I think maybe we kind of forget about that about that. But there was there was a real high on the list of priorities was this cannot happen again, immediately. So so how do we do that? So, a lot of decisions were made in the fog of war, as Andrew card says, in our inner peace, or in the fear that came after 911 that that led to this and I wouldn't say that necessarily changed it, but it made it more my opinion of their leadership, or my opinion of that, you know, them as historical figures, but it did help understand it helped gave context and purpose to, to what came later. Even if what came later was will not go down in history, as you know, will go down history is some of the biggest mistakes, you know, we've made as a country, I think.

V

Vivian Schiller 46:47

Well, Brian and Garrett unfortunately, we're out of time. This is such a fascinating conversation to understand how the threads of 9/11 continue to reverberate through every aspect of our life today. Thank you for shedding light on this. And thank you for your your documentary work, Brian, and your and your writing, Garrett. You contribute so much to this dialogue and I look forward to further conversation. So thank you. Thank you for being here with us. Thank you. And thanks, everybody for listening. Brian Knappenberger is an award winning director of documentaries, including "Nobody Speak: Trials of the Free Press," and the "Internet's Own Boy: The Story of Aaron Swartz." His latest project is the Netflix series "Turning Point: 9/11 and the War on Terror." Since the U.S. announces exit from Afghanistan, Knappenberger has helped get 10 people out of the country. Garrett Graff is a historian and journalist. His book "The Only Plane in the Sky: The Oral History of 9/11" is a New York Times bestseller. Vivian Schiller leads Aspen Digital at the Aspen Institute. She's the former president and CEO of NPR. Their conversation was held September 13. Check out the show notes for a link to Graff's recent article in The Atlantic and the trailer for Turning Point. Make sure to subscribe to Aspen Ideas to Go wherever you listen to podcasts. Follow Aspen Ideas year round on social media at Aspen Ideas. Today's show was produced by Marci Krivonen and me with help from Ava Hartmann. Our music is by Wonderly. I'm Tricia Johnson. Thanks for joining me.

S

support message 48:37

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