

9/11 and the War on Terror: Primary Sources

by Sophia



WHAT'S COVERED

Few events in U.S. history have transformed the worldview of a generation of Americans. The terrorist attacks on September 11, 2001 (9/11), was one of those events. As millions of Americans grappled with the aftereffects, President George W. Bush initiated the “War on Terror.” This war resulted in a major expansion of the U.S. presence in the Middle East.

This tutorial examines 9/11 and the War on Terror in three parts:

1. The Election of 2000

Prior to the 9/11 attacks, the nation experienced one of the closest and most contentious presidential elections in its history. In the aftermath of President **Bill Clinton**’s impeachment scandal, Republicans set out to “restore honor and dignity” to the presidency. Their candidate was **George W. Bush**.

Bush, the Governor of Texas and the eldest son of the former president, **George H. W. Bush**, portrayed himself as a “compassionate conservative” in domestic affairs and a believer in nonintervention abroad. His message appealed to party leaders and many Republican voters. It also attracted voters disgusted by the impeachment scandal and worried by U.S. involvement in Yugoslavia and Somalia.



PEOPLE TO KNOW

William J. Clinton

Democratic president from 1993 to 2001 who, as a “New Democrat,” advocated a compassionate conservatism that combined socially liberal policies with fiscal conservatism.

George W. Bush

Republican president and son of the former president (George H. W. Bush) who served as president from 2001 to 2009 following the contentious election of 2000; the terrorist attacks of 9/11 defined his term in office as he launched a “War on Terror” that committed American troops and resources to ongoing conflicts in Afghanistan and Iraq.

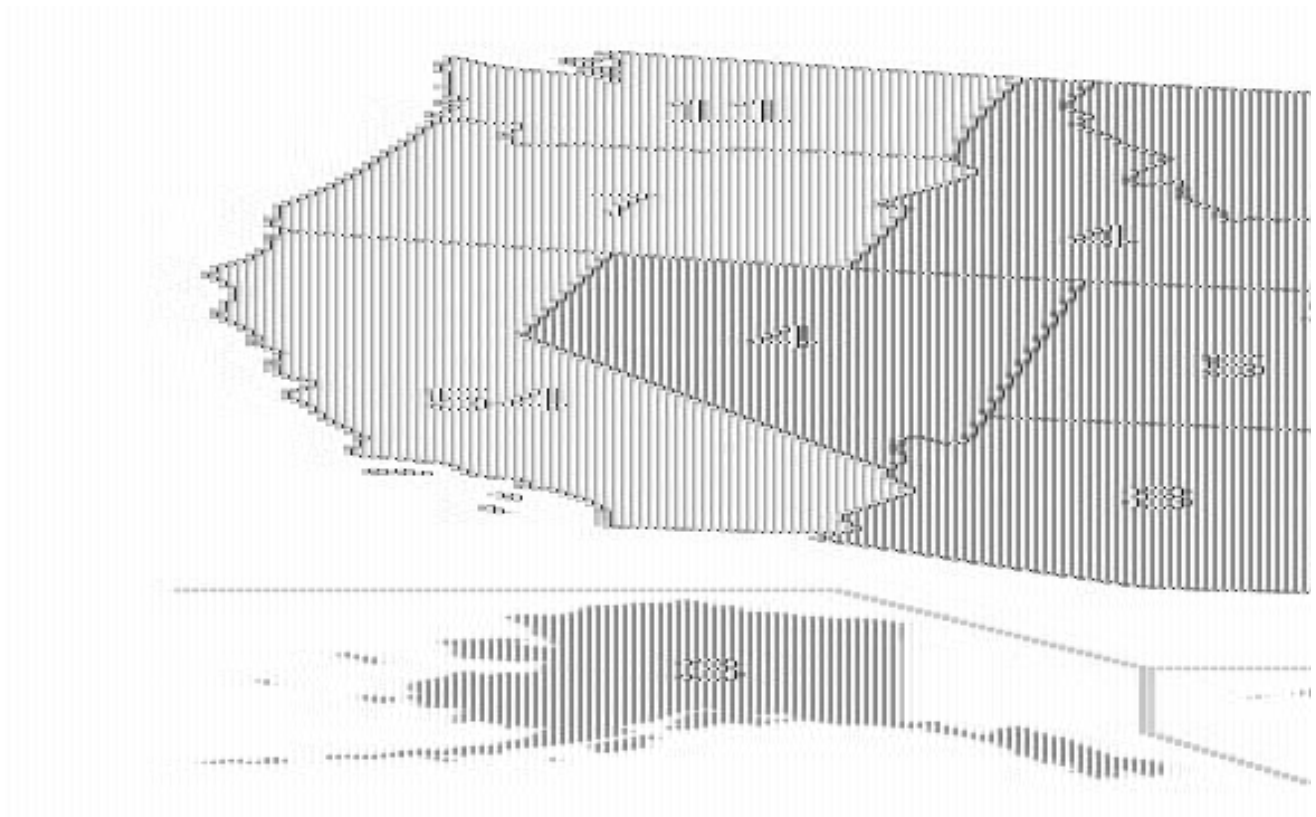
George H. W. Bush

Vice president under Ronald Reagan and Republican president from 1989 to 1993; navigated the

collapse of the Soviet Union and the “new world order” that followed the end of the Cold War, including Operation Desert Storm, which turned back Saddam Hussein’s invasion of Kuwait. The election between George W. Bush and Democratic candidate Al Gore, who was Clinton’s vice president, was incredibly close. Approximately 100 million votes were cast in the 2000 presidential election. Gore topped Bush in the popular vote by 540,000—0.5%.

The outcome was decided in Florida, where early returns revealed that Bush had won—by only 527 votes. Because of possible irregularities in four counties dominated by Democrats, Gore asked for a recount of the ballots by hand.

The election was ultimately decided by federal judges. When Gore protested the declaration of Bush as the winner, the Florida Supreme Court ordered the recount to continue. The Republican Party appealed the state court’s decision to the U.S. Supreme Court. On December 12, 2000, the Supreme Court ruled to stop the recount in a 5–4 decision. Bush received Florida’s 25 electoral votes and, with a total of 271 electoral votes (to Gore’s 266), became the 43rd president of the United States.



This map shows the results of the 2000 U.S. presidential election. While Bush was popular in rural areas and won the majority of states, which enabled him to win the Electoral College, Gore dominated in urban areas and in populous states, which enabled him to win the popular vote.

2. 9/11

Unlike George H. W. Bush and Bill Clinton, who sought a “**new world order**” in which the United States took an active role in international affairs, George W. Bush desired a foreign policy influenced by **unilateralism**.



TERMS TO KNOW

“New World Order”

Phrase coined by George H. W. Bush to describe his vision of American peacekeeping and international relations after the end of the Cold War.

Unilateralism

Conducting foreign affairs with minimal or no consultation with other nations, including one's allies. President Bush put his foreign policy approach into action immediately following the events of September 11, 2001. On the morning of 9/11, teams of hijackers from the Islamist terrorist group **al-Qaeda** seized control of four American airliners. Two of the planes were flown into the Twin Towers of the World Trade Center in New York City.



The Statue of Liberty with the World Trade Center burning in the background on the morning of September 11, 2001.



TERM TO KNOW

Al-Qaeda

A militant Islamist group founded by Osama bin Laden.



DID YOU KNOW

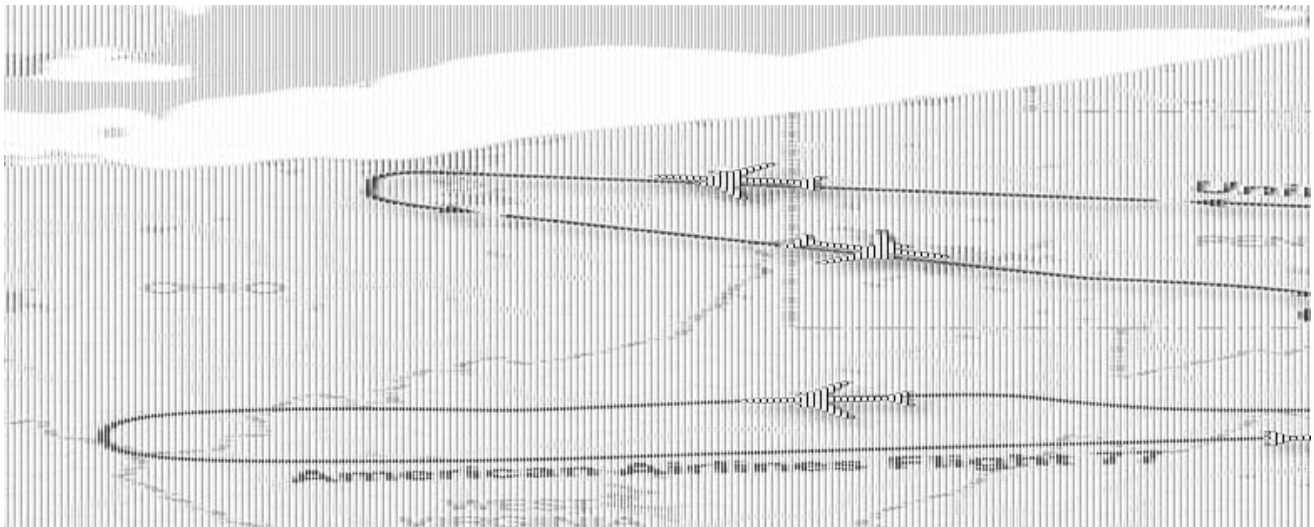
Morning news broadcasts began to provide video of the World Trade Center moments after the first plane hit the Twin Towers. Assuming that the first crash was an accident, the broadcasts captured the impact of

the second plane as it hit the other tower. In less than 2 hours, damage resulting from the impacts and the explosion of jet fuel caused the upper floors of both towers to collapse onto the lower floors, reducing both of them to smoldering rubble.

The passengers and crew of both planes as well as 2,606 people in the World Trade Center—including 343 New York City firefighters—died.

Additional Resource

Visit the [9/11 Memorial and Museum](#) to listen to the audio accounts of people who were involved in the 9/11 recovery.



Three of the four airliners hijacked on September 11, 2001, reached their targets. United Airlines Flight 93, on its way to impact the Capitol or the White House, crashed in a field in Pennsylvania as the result of a struggle between the passengers and the hijackers.

The third hijacked plane was flown into the Pentagon building in northern Virginia, just outside Washington, DC, killing everyone on board and 125 people on the ground. The fourth plane, also heading toward Washington, crashed in a field near Shanksville, Pennsylvania when passengers who were aware of the other attacks stormed the cockpit to disarm the hijackers. Everyone on board was killed.

That evening, President Bush promised the nation that those responsible for the attacks would be brought to justice. Three days later, Congress issued a joint resolution authorizing the president to use all means necessary against the individuals, organizations, or nations involved in the attacks. On September 20, in an address to a joint session of Congress, Bush declared war on terrorism:

President George W. Bush, War on Terrorism, 2001

“Tonight we are a country awakened to danger and called to defend freedom. Our grief has turned to anger, and anger to resolution. Whether we bring our enemies to justice or bring justice to our enemies, justice will be done

The terrorists practice a fringe form of Islamic extremism that has been rejected by Muslim scholars

and the vast majority of Muslim clerics—a fringe movement that perverts the peaceful teachings of Islam. The terrorists’ directive commands them to kill Christians and Jews, to kill all Americans, and make no distinction between military and civilians, including women and children

The terrorists are traitors to their own faith, trying, in effect, to hijack Islam itself. The enemy of America is not our many Muslim friends; it is not our many Arab friends. Our enemy is a radical network of terrorists, and every government that supports them

Our response involves far more than instant retaliation and isolated strikes. Americans should not expect one battle, but a lengthy campaign, unlike any other we have ever seen We will starve terrorists of funding, turn them one against another, drive them from place to place, until there is no refuge or no rest. And we will pursue nations that provide aid or safe haven to terrorism. Every nation, in every region, now has a decision to make. Either you are with us, or you are with the terrorists. From this day forward, any nation that continues to harbor or support terrorism will be regarded by the United States as a hostile regime.”



THINK ABOUT IT

1. Why do you think President Bush makes a point of distinguishing radical extremism from mainstream Islam?
2. According to President Bush, how will the United States respond to the 9/11 attacks?
3. What similarities and differences do you notice between President Bush’s response to 9/11 and U.S. containment policy during the Cold War?

In his speech, Bush blamed al-Qaeda leader **Osama bin Laden** for the attacks. A wealthy Saudi Arabian, bin Laden gained the attention of the United States in the 1980s when he joined the *mujahideen* to oust the Soviet Union from Afghanistan. The Soviets withdrew from the country during the late 1980s, but bin Laden and al-Qaeda maintained a presence in the country. In 1996, the **Taliban** gained control of Afghanistan’s capital, Kabul, and established a fundamentalist Islamic government.



PEOPLE TO KNOW

Osama bin Laden

Leader of the terrorist organization al-Qaeda who was behind the 9/11 attacks on the United States.



TERM TO KNOW

Taliban

A fundamentalist Muslim group that brutally ruled Afghanistan from 1996 to 2001.



DID YOU KNOW

After taking power, the Taliban prohibited women from attending school and banned Western films and music.

Bin Laden resented the U.S. military presence in Saudi Arabia during and after **Operation Desert Storm**.



TERM TO KNOW

Operation Desert Storm

The U.S. name of the campaign by coalition forces waged against Iraq from January to April 1991. Bin Laden also rejected American culture, including religious pluralism, multiculturalism, and consumerism. He opposed U.S. support for Israel which, along with Saudi Arabia, was home to Islamic holy places. For these reasons, bin Laden declared a “holy war” against the United States.

➔ **EXAMPLE** Al-Qaeda terrorists participated in an attack on the World Trade Center in 1993, in which a truck bomb exploded and killed six people. In 1998, members of al-Qaeda set off bombs at American embassies in Kenya and Tanzania that killed over 200 people. On October 12, 2000, al-Qaeda claimed responsibility for the suicide bombing of the U.S.S. *Cole*, which was anchored off the coast of Yemen, killing 17 American sailors.

Following the 9/11 attacks, U.S. intelligence believed bin Laden was hiding in Afghanistan. As a result, President Bush demanded during his speech to Congress that the Taliban turn bin Laden over or face attacks by the United States. By promising that the United States would “pursue” any nation that provided aid or sanctuary to terrorists, Bush added a preemptive war provision to his foreign policy—one that became known as the **Bush Doctrine**.



TERM TO KNOW

Bush Doctrine

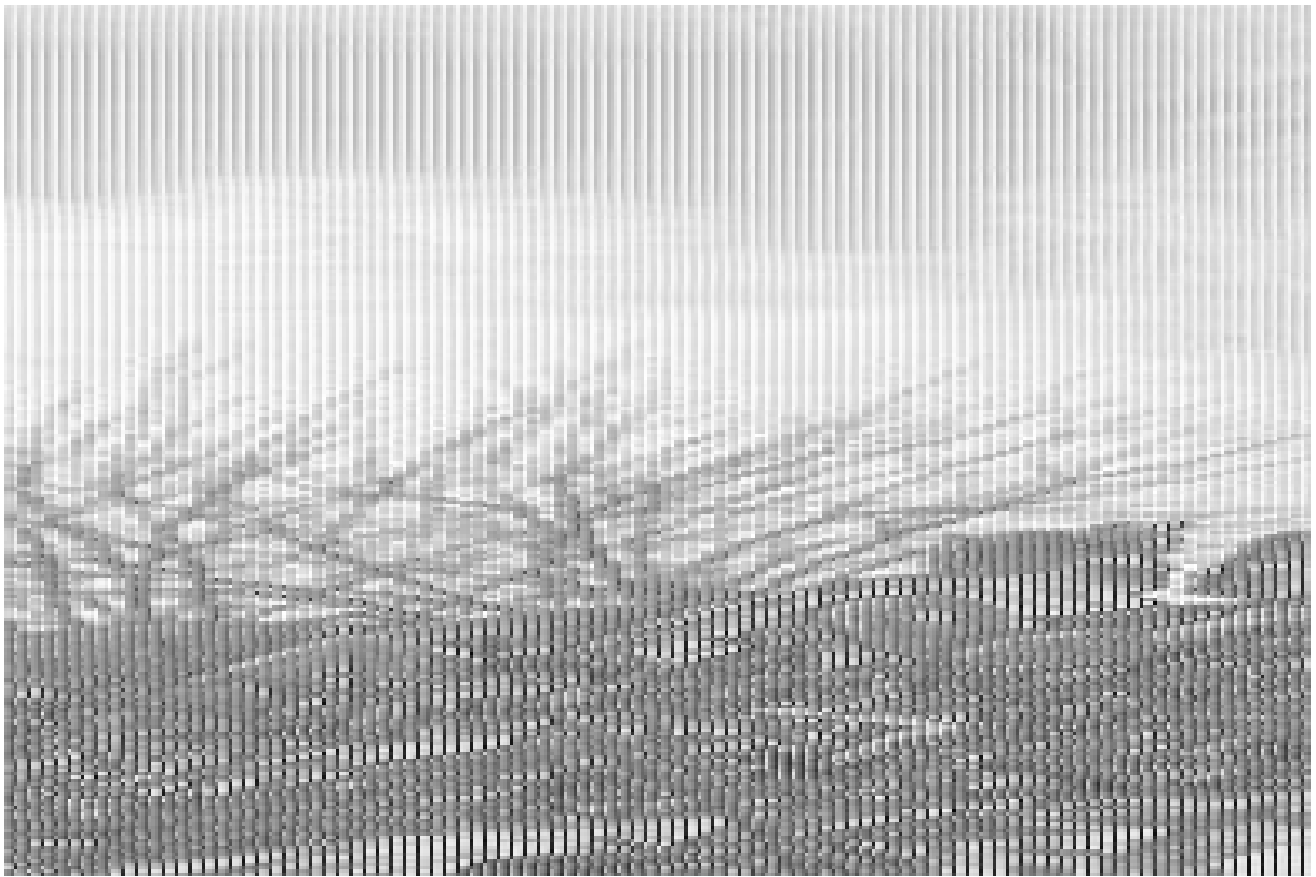
The belief that the United States has the right to protect itself from terrorist acts by engaging in preemptive wars or ousting hostile governments in favor of friendly, preferably democratic, regimes. Like containment policy during the Cold War, the Bush Doctrine has been the guiding principle of U.S. foreign policy, in terms of longevity and comprehensiveness, since 2001.

3. Foreign Interventions

The Bush Doctrine produced the two most significant foreign interventions that the United States had undertaken in the 21st century.

3a. Afghanistan

When the Taliban refused to turn bin Laden over to the United States after the 9/11 attacks, the United States responded with a bombing campaign that began on October 7, 2001. Shortly thereafter, ground troops invaded Afghanistan.



Marines fight against Taliban forces in Helmand Province, Afghanistan. Helmand was a Taliban stronghold.

credit: "DVIDSHUB"/Flickr

The conflict in Afghanistan was named **Operation Enduring Freedom** by its planners. U.S. forces, with British support, allied themselves with a coalition of tribal leaders who had been fighting the Taliban for several years. By November 2001, the operation ousted the Taliban from Kabul, destroyed al-Qaeda's training camps, and captured or killed a number of al-Qaeda's leaders. However, bin Laden and some of his followers escaped across the border to mountain sanctuaries in northern Pakistan. The United States assumed the burden of establishing a new government and rebuilding Afghanistan.



TERM TO KNOW

Operation Enduring Freedom

The name of the campaign waged against the Taliban in Afghanistan following the 9/11 attacks.

3b. Iraq

At the same time that the United States took control of Afghanistan, the Bush administration sought to intervene in Iraq, a nation that Bush had identified as part of an "axis of evil" (along with North Korea and Iran) and a threat to the United States.

Relations between the United States and Iraq had been strained since Operation Desert Storm in 1991.



DID YOU KNOW

Following Operation Desert Storm, peace resolutions authorized the United Nations to take any steps necessary to prevent Iraqi aggression. These included economic sanctions and military intervention if Iraq was found to be developing weapons. During the early 2000s, President Bush and his advisors referred to

these nuclear, chemical, and biological weapons that could destabilize the region as weapons of mass destruction (WMDs).

One faction within the Bush administration, which included Vice President **Dick Cheney** and Secretary of Defense **Donald Rumsfeld**, believed that Iraq was stockpiling WMDs despite UN inspections and economic sanctions. Members of the administration argued that a recalcitrant Iraq would embolden al-Qaeda and other terrorist groups.



PEOPLE TO KNOW

Dick Cheney

Vice president under George W. Bush who wielded unusual power and influence in the White House and urged the invasion of Iraq in 2003.

Donald Rumsfeld

Secretary of Defense under George W. Bush who, along with Vice President Dick Cheney, advised the ill-fated and preemptive war in Iraq to defend the United States against perceived threats.

Although others in the administration, including Secretary of State **Colin Powell**, advised caution, the case for intervention in Iraq was presented to the American people. Although UN inspectors located and destroyed stockpiles of Iraqi weapons after Operation Desert Storm, members of the administration argued that some weapons remained.



PEOPLE TO KNOW

Colin Powell

U.S. Secretary of State under George W. Bush who helped to implement the “War on Terror.”

In October 2002, President Bush told the nation that the United States was “facing clear evidence of peril, we cannot wait for the final proof—the smoking gun—that could come in the form of a mushroom cloud.”

In 2003, Colin Powell told the United Nations General Assembly that Iraq had built a chemical weapons factory, that Iraqi dictator **Saddam Hussein** was hiding WMDs in his palaces throughout the country, and that Iraq was trying to procure uranium from Africa to build a nuclear bomb. All of these assertions, which were based on secret information provided by an informant, were later proven false.



PEOPLE TO KNOW

Saddam Hussein

President of Iraq from 1979 until a U.S.-led coalition of forces removed him from power in Operation Iraqi Freedom in 2003.

Although the United Nations dismissed these claims, the United States ended relations with Iraq on March 17, 2003. The United States had a small coalition of supporters, including Great Britain, Australia, and Poland, but most of the international community opposed preemptive intervention in Iraq. On March 19, the United States launched **Operation Iraqi Freedom**.



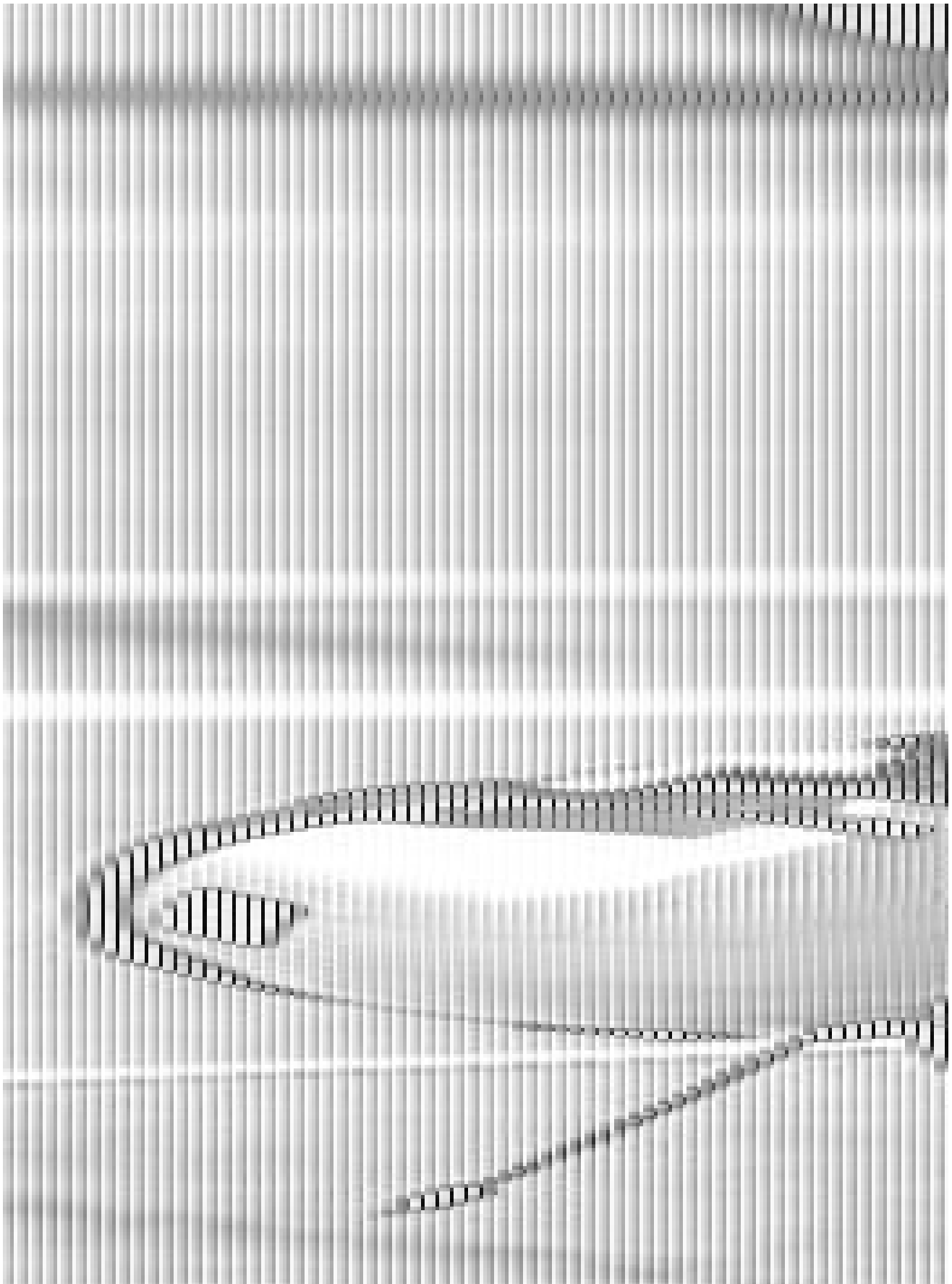
TERM TO KNOW

Operation Iraqi Freedom

The name of the American invasion of Iraq based on a suspicion that Saddam Hussein had WMDs. Like the intervention in Afghanistan, the operation against Iraq initially went smoothly and appeared to end quickly.

➞ **EXAMPLE** U.S. forces occupied Baghdad, the capital of Iraq, within a month of the invasion.

Americans watched on television as U.S. soldiers and Iraqis toppled statues of Saddam Hussein, who was deposed and went into hiding. In May 2003, President Bush proclaimed victory on the deck of the U.S.S. *Abraham Lincoln*, with a banner reading “Mission Accomplished” prominently displayed behind him.



President Bush gives the victory symbol on the aircraft carrier U.S.S. *Abraham Lincoln* in May 2003.



Although intervention in Afghanistan and Iraq resulted from slightly different motives, the occupation and reconstruction of both nations proved to be difficult, complex, and seemingly endless. There were few American deaths during the initial phases of both campaigns. However, thousands of Afghans and Iraqis died, and infrastructure and services in both countries were destroyed. The invasions destabilized both nations, leading to violent sectarian conflicts. Rather than being seen as a liberator, the invasions produced widespread resentment toward the United States. The United States was not prepared for long periods of occupation in either location and had not anticipated the law-and-order problems involved with occupation.



SUMMARY

Following the close election of 2000, President George W. Bush had little time to implement his domestic and foreign agendas. Instead, he focused on developing an appropriate and effective response to al-Qaeda's deadly attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon on September 11, 2001. Shortly after the attacks, the United States began a "War on Terror." U.S. forces attacked Afghanistan, which harbored Osama bin Laden, the mastermind behind the 9/11 attacks. Later, President Bush ordered an invasion of Iraq based on the belief that Saddam Hussein was hiding weapons of mass destruction and sought to build more. Both invasions indicated that the United States was following the Bush Doctrine, but the difficulties that followed showed that the administration had not foreseen the consequences of doing so.

Source: This tutorial curated and/or authored by Matthew Pearce, Ph.D with content adapted from Openstax "U.S. History" openstax.org/details/books/us-history

REFERENCES

President George W. Bush's Address to the Nation on the September 11th Attacks, September 20, 2001, George Bush Whitehouse Archives. Retrieved from bit.ly/1Y6MnM2



ATTRIBUTIONS

- [Election Map](#) | License: Public Domain
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TERMS TO KNOW

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