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HOW 9/11 CHANGED THE POLICY WORLD

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PROCEEDINGS

[sounds of people running, sirens]

[Reporter] This just in, you are looking at obviously a very disturbing live shot there. That is the World Trade Center and we have unconfirmed reports this morning that a plane has crashed into one of the towers of the World Trade Center.

KAMARCK: On 9/11, I was in my home in New York City, and I actually saw the plane crash into the first building, and at that point, as it did to everyone, it seemed like it was a horrific accident.

[Reporters] It does not appear that there is any kind of an effort up there yet, now remember—oh my god! ... My god ... That looks like a second plane.

RIEDEL: On September 11th, I was working in the White House. I was actually in the situation room a little bit before 9 o'clock that day. We had already heard vague news that an airplane had crashed into the World Trade Center, we didn't know whether it was just an accident or maybe a helicopter or something bigger. At about three minutes after 9, the door to the White House Situation Room opened and the senior duty officer came in and whispered in Dr. Rice's ear, a second airplane has hit the World Trade Center. America is under attack.

[Reporter] Oh my goodness, oh my goodness. We're looking at a live picture from Washington, and there is smoke pouring out of the Pentagon.

ANDERSON: I went to high school outside of Washington, D.C., in Northern Virginia. I had grown up just outside the city and a lot of my classmates and me had parents who worked in government, worked at the Pentagon who worked in Washington, D.C., and other government buildings there. We all honestly thought it might have been a school shooting. A few of my classmates who had been outside at the time had heard some sort of large, loud bang shortly through our prior class period that we were coming to the end of at this point. We did not really

know what it was, turns out that was actually the airplane hitting the Pentagon that was audible from a fair amount of distance.

[Voices] United 93, do you have information on that yet? Yeah, he's down. When did he land? He did not land. Oh, he's down? Yeah, somewhere up northeast of Camp David.

MALONEY: On the evening of September 11th. I was woken up by phone calls from friends and contacts in Tehran. They were people who knew I lived in Washington, and they were concerned about my safety and about America. It was for me at the time, really the first indicator of how shaken the world was by the attacks, and how broad and deep the sympathy runs among ordinary Iranians and among many others all around the world for this country and for the American people.

DEWS: On September 11th, 2001, nineteen al-Qaida militants hijacked four U.S. airplanes, crashing two of them into the World Trade Center towers in Manhattan and one into the Pentagon in Arlington County, Virginia. Brave passengers on the fourth plane, with knowledge of the horror unfolding that morning, attempted to retake control of their aircraft, causing it to crash near Shanksville, Pennsylvania. Nearly 3,000 people from all walks of life and scores of countries, including office and building workers, pilots, passengers, firefighters, police, and military personnel, died in the attacks and their aftermath.

In October, President George W. Bush announced the start of a military campaign to oust the Taliban regime in Afghanistan that had harbored al-Qaida leader Osama bin Laden, who planned the attack.

Now, twenty years after that terrible day, six Brookings scholars reflect on their personal experience of 9/11, and offer expert insights into how 9/11 changed policy and what the anniversary suggests for policy moving forward.

I'm Fred Dews, and this is a special edition of the Brookings Cafeteria podcast.

Here's Bruce Riedel, senior fellow in the Center for Middle East Policy at Brookings, who, prior to joining Brookings spent 30 years in the CIA, including postings overseas and working on the National Security Council in the White House. He was explaining, in the opening of this episode, what he experienced at the White House on the morning of 9/11 during the weekly senior staff meeting, during which he happened to be seated next to Condoleezza Rice, the national security advisor to President Bush. After the senior duty officer told Dr. Rice that a second plane had hit the World Trade Center.

RIEDEL: We were all set back to our offices. And about 10 minutes later the Secret Service came through and announced that the entire building was being evacuated on the assumption that the fourth airplane was headed towards the White House.

DEWS: Riedel said that during his eight years serving in the White House, they had never practiced an evacuation, and that there wasn't even a plan to re-group elsewhere.

RIEDEL: We were all just basically dumped out on the street and then the Secret Service closed off the compound.

Well, unfortunately my car was parked inside the compound. I had no way to get home. So, I started walking. Was of course quite a day. The Pentagon was on fire. So, as I crossed the GW Bridge you could see the Pentagon on fire. Finally, after a little hitchhiking I did get home and I spent the rest of the day taking phone calls from various Middle East ambassadors, most importantly the Saudi ambassador, Prince Bandar, who wanted to know what we knew about the attack.

What we knew almost immediately was that it was al-Qaida. The manifests of the four airplanes had names on them that were the true names of al-Qaida operatives who we'd

encountered before, so we know almost immediately this was an al-Qaida terrorist operation we had been hearing reports of for months and months in advance of the actual.

DEWS: Elaine Kamarck, senior fellow in Governance Studies at Brookings and founding director of the Center for Public Management, had been preparing to give a lecture the next day in Toronto for the Canadian Government, and was taking a gym break when she saw the first plane hit, assuming like so many that it was a tragic mistake.

KAMARCK: Then I turned on the TV again and the second plane had crashed into it. At that point, it was becoming clear that this was no accident, that this was something intentional and quite serious.

By about 11:00 o'clock I gave up any pretext of working on this presentation and I called the people in Toronto and said, look, I don't think I can leave the city because my daughter is here and this traumatic event has just happened. She had called me from school crying because there were kids in her school whose parents were in the building and she was terrified. And I said, I think I'd better be here. And of course, what I didn't know at the time was that there was no way to fly anyplace anyways, because the next day they shut down the airspace, so I was never going to Toronto.

Anyway, the rest of the day was spent, like many Americans, watching the news, only for me it was also hearing the sirens coming from northern Manhattan going down from Westchester and all the surrounding suburbs, all the emergency personnel coming into the city. And that was quite awful.

And then a couple hours later I saw the people walking up from downtown. And you could see people just straggling along, and women whose feet were all blistered. Just lots of people, they'd left everything in their offices or wherever and they were just straggling Uptown

to get away from the devastation. So, it was a day that I'll remember quite well for a long, long time. It was a pretty traumatic day for everything.

DEWS: Suzanne Maloney, too, was preparing for a trip on September 12, as she explains. Maloney is the vice president and director of Foreign Policy at Brookings.

MALONEY: On September 11th, 2001, I spent the morning packing for a flight that was scheduled for September 12th. I had tickets to go to France for my brother's wedding, and my entire extended family was booked on flights for the 12th departing Boston Logan Airport and Washington Dulles Airport, the two airports that the hijackers used themselves for their own departures. The wedding took place, but my family wasn't able to attend.

DEWS: Maloney added that she had lunch plans that day with an Iranian journalist who happened to be visiting Washington, but she had no way to contact him to cancel.

MALONEY: I ended up going to the restaurant where we talked about the attacks and what it might mean for U.S. policy toward Tehran, until the manager told us he was shutting the restaurant down, like everything else in Washington, due to security concerns. By the way, that reporter was Maziar Bahari. He was later arrested by Iranian authorities as a result of his courageous reporting for Newsweek during the 2009 uprising in Iran. He's since been a pioneer in publishing citizen journalism from Iranians.

DEWS: John Hudak, a senior fellow in Governance Studies and deputy director of the Center for Effective Public Management, offers his recollection from the start of his senior year in high school.

HUDAK: I was actually a senior in high school on 9/11 and sitting in an assembly as the school year was starting back. We were having some morning assembly that I have no recollection of what it was about. And we started to come back from the assembly, I think it was

just the seniors, and you could see something weird was happening in the school. Something weird was happening in classrooms, and word had spread through the school that something was happening in New York. And teachers started to turn televisions on. There are these old tube televisions sort of suspended in the corners of the room and uh, you know it was pretty meaningful.

I grew up in a suburban town in Connecticut that was only about 75 miles from lower Manhattan, and so we had classmates who had family members who worked in the World Trade Center, who worked in other areas in lower Manhattan. And so, it became a very personal moment for our school like it did for a lot of people. And then after the day started to unfold, after the initial hours started to unfold, we also had classmates who had family members who were members of NYPD or FDNY. And as the towers began to collapse, you could see people in classrooms openly weeping, not knowing what was happening to family members of theirs who may have been trapped in the building.

And I'll say one of the other things that I'm sure my colleagues who were here in D.C. at the time can remember, but where I lived was one of the main routes into the New York City airports for air traffic, particularly air traffic coming over from Europe. And the days after with the airspace over North America cleared, it was the first time in my life that I had heard the sky as silent. And it's one of those things that you don't really notice until something is not there. And on top of everything else that was sort of changing around us it was a three-day period of not seeing a single aircraft go overhead, which was a pretty chilling in an already chilling period.

DEWS: Scott Anderson, a visiting fellow in Governance Studies, was also a senior in high school, and continues his personal 9/11 recollection.

ANDERSON: It was early in the academic year. I remember as my first period class, which was essentially a shop plus class called Prototyping where we were building different things and devices. I think I was working on a boat at the time. And we were told to get into lockdown. Lock the door. Turn the lights off actually, as this was part of a protocol at the time that was related to any sort of sort of national security incident or violent incident that might arise at the school.

DEWS: Anderson, who is also a senior editor and general counsel at Lawfare and for the Lawfare Institute, and a senior fellow at the National Security Law Program at Columbia Law School, recounts watching the Twin Towers fall with his friends and classmates.

ANDERSON: It was a very difficult time for us in particular because we were in the Northern Virginia suburbs. A lot of my classmates had parents who worked at the Pentagon. We were watching the maps of the flights still in the sky at the time. People may remember there was believed to be another flight that might have been hijacked that was still in the air over Washington, D.C. and Northern Virginia that people thought was going to target some other site, and everyone was scared as to what that would be.

And several of my classmates actually did lose parents and family members and family friends in the attacks that day. And if I'm being completely honest, I still get a little emotional thinking about it. It was definitely a moment of immense stress and anxiety and fear of a sort that, frankly, I had never experienced up to that point.

DEWS: The last scholar to share their personal story from that fateful day is Madiha Afzal, a David M. Rubenstein Fellow in Foreign Policy at Brookings and a scholar on Afghanistan, Pakistan, U.S. policy toward the region, and also extremism.

AFZAL: On September 11th, 2001, I was in Lahore, Pakistan. I was in college. At that point, it was about 6:00 PM in the evening Pakistan time. So I was at home at my parents' home and I can't remember if the TV was already on or if someone called and asked us to turn on the TV, but we were watching as all of this started unfolding and it was of course shock, extreme worry, and then slowly a sort of a growing recognition of just the scale of the terror and the tragedy. And I'd been to New York, and of course we had friends in New York, family friends who worked there that we were very worried about, that we actually did not hear from until days later when they when they told us what had happened.

DEWS: Afzal added that her family's friends were safe in New York, but also added that, of course, nearly 3,000 were not. The memory of that terrible day for those of us who lived through it is indelible and even painful, especially for those who lost family and friends or whose lives were altered in other ways.

The events of that day also had a tremendous impact on the way we live and how our government operates. I asked the scholars to talk about the impact of 9/11 on their policy area. Three major themes emerged: 9/11's impact on the conduct of U.S. foreign policy and a new global war on terrorism; changes to the U.S. government itself as well as augmented presidential power; and a new national security architecture.

Let's start on the foreign policy side. Here's Senior Fellow Bruce Riedel again on what he thinks is the most important lesson learned from the 9/11 attacks.

RIEDEL: I think the most important lesson is you really have to think creatively. We knew that al-Qaida was planning a major operation inside the United States. But we hadn't thought enough about what could they do, how large an operation could they put on? There was a prior attack in France back in the 1990s that should have tipped us off. Back in the 1990s, an

Algerian terrorist group had hijacked in Air France jet. Was planning to fly it into the Eiffel Tower. The French were able to commandeer the airplane when it landed to refuel in Marseille. But that episode should have taught us that there was a lot of creative thinking going on in terrorist organizations about how to use airplanes as bombs in effect.

We had always thought of hijacking airplanes as simply a means to extort from us. Al-Qaida and its predecessors, these Algerians, had come up with the idea of using an airplane as a flying bomb.

DEWS: Suzanne Maloney, vice president and director of Foreign Policy at Brookings, talks about lessons learned for the understanding of America's role in the world post-9/11.

MALONEY: The most important lesson from the 9/11 attacks for U.S. foreign policy, which is of course the broad field in which I work, and for the Middle East, was the horrific evidence that despite our standing then as the world's sole superpower and despite America's tremendous military strength and our natural defenses, our country still remained vulnerable to the threats that emanated from instability and extremism beyond our borders.

I think the attacks shocked the system, in some ways positively. We developed better mechanisms around intelligence sharing, especially within our own government. And many aspects of our response to the 9/11 attacks, including the decision to uproot the Taliban and al-Qaida in Afghanistan, along with the systems that we've put in place, have helped ensure that we never suffered another such devastating attack by foreign terrorists on the homeland.

That accomplishment, I find, is sometimes discounted precisely because of its success, and because the national debate on terrorism has changed, justifiably so, since that time because of changes in the context. But in the days and weeks and months after 9/11, it hardly seemed obvious that life for most Americans would ever revert to something like a pre-9/11 normal.

I think of that sense of dislocation a lot nowadays as we sit in the midst of another historic event and its aftermath, the global pandemic, and I wonder how we will reflect on this in 20 years, and what lessons we will have learned.

Of course you can't talk about the 9/11 attacks and the foreign policy responses without recognizing that the attacks and the shock that followed in their aftermath precipitated and enabled some truly disastrous, historically disastrous, foreign policy decisions, such as the 2003 decision by the Bush administration to invade Iraq and remove Saddam Hussein.

That policy drew wide, though not universal, support from across the policy establishment in Washington, and from many Americans in large part simply because of the patriotism inspired by the 9/11 attacks and by the conviction that many felt in the aftermath of 9/11 that we as a country could not be complacent about the most dangerous leaders getting their hands on the most dangerous weapons.

The catastrophic implications, though, of the decision to invade Iraq were evident to many at the time, and they continue to frame every aspect of U.S. policy in the Middle East and beyond in a way that is very negative for our own security, and of course for peace and prosperity in the region.

DEWS: Rubenstein Fellow Madiha Afzal also speaks to the problem of enduring extremism, and not just terrorism, a question she explored in her 2018 Brookings Press book “Pakistan Under Siege: Extremism, Society, and the State.”

AFZAL: The underlying premise is that extremism endures, especially ideological extremism endures, even after you decimate a terrorist group kinetically. And counterterrorism has been extremely successful if one looks at it, sort of the U.S. counter terrorism approach over the last two decades has been very successful.

But what has been less successful and what we've spent less time on is understanding extremism and countering extremism. And this is extremism across the spectrum. It doesn't have to be violent extremism. Just thinking about my work on Pakistan, what I learned through my work is that it is a very, very complicated deep-rooted thing to figure out what fosters extremism in a society. In Pakistan's case, through polling data through a lot of analysis of laws, education systems, politics, I found that it was Pakistan's own approach to its population—the state's laws, the education system, it's politics—that ended up fostering extremism. And that really becomes the root for how a population responds to terrorist groups' propaganda, for instance.

And so, until you tackle these deep roots at a context-specific level, you're not going to be able to counter extremism. You can counter it kinetically; you can kill the leadership of a terrorist group; you can displace a terrorist group; you can cut off their logistical support. But until you counter extremist and ideological terrorism, those terrorist groups will regroup and will come back. And certainly, that is the fear, if one looks at 20 years from 9/11, we have not done nearly enough to address any of that extremism.

DEWS: On the U.S. domestic side, 9/11 significantly altered the way we live and how our government operates, as Senior Fellow Elaine Kamarck explains.

KAMARCK: 9/11 really had a traumatic effect. It broke down the jurisdictional basis for governance that had existed for many, many, many decades, if not centuries. Before 9/11, you had the State Department and they took care of things in the world. And you had some other smaller agencies—USAID, USIA—they sort of dealt with the world. And of course, the Defense Department did. And then everything else was domestic.

Well, all of a sudden, these clean lines between foreign and domestic that our government had been built around all of a sudden, they were meaningless. All of a sudden, police had to do

intelligence; all of a sudden intelligence people had to talk to policemen on the beat. It was a real change in the way we've done things. And it took a while It took a while, but I think we we've made a lot of progress on that front.

DEWS: Senior Fellow Bruce Riedel, too, emphasized how the 9/11 attacks altered the very structure of the U.S. government.

RIEDEL: 9/11 not only transformed the way America sees the world, it also transformed the United States national security bureaucracy. Whole new institutions were created after 9/11. The Department of Homeland Security, the National Counterterrorism Center. All of these institutions, the Office of Homeland Security Advisor, Department of Transportation Security. All these things are the results of 9/11.

DEWS: John Hudak adds further insight on how the 9/11 attacks and their aftermath fundamentally changed not just the structures of government, but presidential power specifically.

HUDAK: One of the areas that I study is presidential power, and we learned a lot after 9/11 in terms of just how expansive the Office of the President can get. And there are a lot of ways in which presidential power has changed since 9/11—some of it has expanded, some of it has shrunken back after presidential attempts to expand it, or to try new things.

But I think one of the interesting lessons that has been learned is a lesson that's almost impossible to imagine right now in 2021, twenty years after this, and we talk a lot about the damage that hyperpolarization and hyper partisanship can do to the United States, and we see the damage and the effects of that every day.

But there's also a damage and a problem that can be created by hyper unity, where individuals believe in their president being able to do whatever he needs to do in a moment of crisis. And after 9/11, George W. Bush's approval rating skyrocketed overnight to over 90

percent, essentially doubling overnight, almost exactly doubling overnight. And it was a moment that, again, for those of us who lived through it, we remember that type of national unity, and we reflect on that moment of national unity in a positive way.

DEWS: And Scott Anderson echoes what John Hudak said about the increase in presidential power when he reflects how 9/11 introduced a set of new legal questions.

ANDERSON: If you had told someone in the year 2000 that you were a national security lawyer, outside of a handful of people—and I mean that quite literally, probably like less than a dozen—that would not mean a lot. They would not see that as any sort of area of study or unified field.

But after 9/11 it rapidly did. It's a set of legal questions that share certain commonalities that arise at the intersection of a lot of what were previously considered independent fields of law. And my generation of lawyers in a lot of ways was shaped by that 9/11 experience and the debate after it, because we were not only entering an environment where national security was driving a lot of very heated legal debates and litigation, but the debate over Guantanamo Bay and the military commissions and the legal arguments there in Supreme Court cases and political arguments in Congress all were defining aspects of our legal education as we went through first college and policy education and learning about that for people who studied politics and Middle East studies like I did, and then ultimately into law school living with the aftermath of that.

I think the biggest takeaway that one can get in this field from those days is the fact that when you are responding, in particular when Congress is responding, to a national emergency, there's an understandable and sometimes very justifiable instinct to say well, we need to give the executive branch what they need to respond to the situation and respond to the emergency. But it's important that you build in democratic safeguards and checks into that process.

DEWS: But Hudak explains what happened when those democratic safeguards and checks were not attended to in the aftermath of the 9/11 attacks.

HUDAK: But what ended up happening was Americans let their principles down in moments, things that they normally would have opposed, opposed during peacetime, came to oppose later. They were willing to back their president and to back their Congress no matter what. And it's those moments where executives in countries across the world have seized on that type of public unity to do very damaging things to the country.

And while our democracy came out okay on the other end of that type of national unity, and the Supreme Court pushed back against executive power, and the public eventually turned against some of the policies that were advanced, it shows us just how problematic of a moment we were actually in and that a different leader could have done very disastrous things to the to our democracy and to the Republic, and Americans would have applauded it in the moment, thinking it was for the better good and for the broader good.

DEWS: And here's Scott Anderson again.

ANDERSON: Fortunately, not all the statutes Congress enacted that year, the 107th Congress that enacted this huge wave of statutes that really changed the whole landscape around national security in the United States, was structured that way. The PATRIOT Act, among other provisions, had various provisions that did have sunsets and renewal requirements, and have led to some changes through the years and have led to some continuity through the years as people said no, these are new authorities we need to make permanent. Not everyone agreed with that, but Congress ultimately did.

But with that sort of check in place, at least we're confident that they are subjected to regular scrutiny by our most democratic branch and reconsideration. But absent that, you're

begging for dramatic changes in the legal landscape, and in what different political branches of our government can do that may come out of alignment with the actual facts surrounding us and become unintentional changes in really the fundamental separation of powers that is usually supposed to operate around some of the most basic and important questions our country faces.

DEWS: Bruce Riedel spoke earlier to the fundamental changes the U.S. federal government made in the wake of the 9/11 attacks. He and all the scholars in this special episode spoke to the enduring effects across their policy areas.

RIEDEL: No event in American history since the end of the Cold War so transformed the federal government and those transformations will continue. No one wants to get rid of the Department of Homeland Security. No one wants to get rid of the National Counterterrorism Center. The wars that were started as a result of 9/11 may come to an end, but this transformation of the United States government will go on for the foreseeable future.

DEWS: Elaine Kamarck, too, sees enduring transformations in how the U.S. government approaches security, public health, and other challenges.

KAMARCK: What 9/11 tells us moving forward is the importance of taking what is often called an all of government approach to problems; that in fact it's very difficult to put a problem or a function just in one place in the government; that the world is complicated, whether it's 9/11 and terrorism, which runs the gamut from the CIA to the cop on the beat, or whether it's a pandemic, which again runs the gamut from international pandemic spotting to local health agencies and county level health agencies.

The jurisdictional lines are all blurred in the future, and it calls for a much more agile government. And I wrote an essay for Brookings just a year ago calling for how to how to make

a more agile government, because the problems we have don't fit into the 20th century boxes anymore.

9/11 was kind of a wakeup call for how the 20th century government just wasn't equipped to deal with the 21st century problems, and now in the 21st century we've had a massive terrorist attack and a pandemic. As if anybody needed any more evidence.

DEWS: John Hudak considers how the increased power of the presidency that he described earlier has continued throughout the two decades since 9/11, but he also cautions that lack of accountability in an atmosphere of hyper unity such as followed the attacks can be a problem.

HUDAK: When we look at what Congress has done in terms of giving President Bush and all of his successors a blank check through the authorization for the use of military force in Afghanistan, which then-President Bush was able to spin into getting a second AUMF for Iraq, presidents have used those blank checks to fight wars against terror all over the world, in Africa, in other places in the Middle East, in Pakistan. And it shows that those types of blank-check policies are not only dangerous, especially when they do not reflect the initial cause, the initial basis for granting the president that power, but it's extraordinarily difficult to take it back. And we have seen presidents of both parties abuse the AUMFs in very serious ways.

And in addition, we've seen other policy changes: enhanced interrogation techniques, which some people will call torture of detainees; expanded surveillance of American citizens and others through the USA PATRIOT Act.

These are all policies that a lot of Americans have come to regret. And we've seen that it has come because of a moment of crisis, and because of that moment of national unity where Americans were willing to give their elected officials blank checks. And doing the type of

oversight and accountability after the fact, especially for a president during wartime, is extraordinarily difficult and oftentimes a losing cause.

And so, when these moments happen some unity is good, and I think in an era of COVID we're seeing the challenges that disunity can cause. But too much unity and unity without accountability can be really damaging for the democracy and damaging for the Republic. And what happened after 9/11 could have been a second tragedy of institutions of our government if it wasn't for the public finally holding elected officials accountable, and the Supreme Court in particular pushing back against what administrations wanted to do with detainees and other activities in a war setting.

DEWS: And so, in the realm of national security, what will be the big issues in law and policy moving forward? Scott Anderson also acknowledged the importance of accountability in our laws and policies aimed at safeguarding the country, but also stresses the need for continued reevaluation of those approaches.

ANDERSON: We are to this day, 20 years later, still living with not one, but two authorizations for use of military force, one adopted a few days after 9/11, one adopted the subsequent year in relation to Iraq, that are still being used as a legal basis for all sorts of military operations overseas. And in a lot of ways, a lot of our main counterterrorism military operations overseas, many of which were not anticipated or debated by Congress at the time they were enacted.

But the evolution of those statutes and the way they have been used has been facilitated by the fact that they had no sunsets, they had no end dates. There is no mechanism built in that said, Congress has to reconsider and reevaluate and think about this a little bit more and maybe perhaps make some adjustments down the road as circumstances in the world change.

DEWS: Anderson explains that national security law and policy is in what he calls a unique moment 20 years after 9/11.

ANDERSON: We are really for the first time substantively engaging with the effort to bring down some of the legal and policy structures that have dominated since the 9/11 attacks and adapt them to what we think is our new normal, at least for the foreseeable future, the new set of challenges facing the United States and the world.

That means moving away from broad global commitments to targeting counterterrorism—counterterrorism is still going to be a policy priority, but not the all-consuming number one goal that it really has served as in a lot of ways over the last two decades—and recognizing that peer competition with other major powers like Russia and China is likely to be a higher security priority for the United States and therefore needs to be a higher policy priority in terms of our legal authorities, our funding, our resources, and what we do with ourselves in the world.

That is really going to be the big debate going forward, is saying well what parts of the post-9/11 legal architecture, policy architecture are things that we need to keep? What parts of that reaction to the 9/11 attacks are reasonable measures and reasonable perspectives that we need to maintain? And which are lessons that we need to start moving away from and recognizing they no longer apply in the current set of priorities the United States is facing?

DEWS: In the wake of the recent events in Afghanistan, with Taliban forces taking over all the country's provincial capitals and Kabul itself in less than two weeks in August, we are reminded that 9/11 also just precedes the 20th anniversary of the U.S. and NATO military campaign to oust the Taliban in the first place. With the end of our military mission in Afghanistan, a mission conducted under four presidents, what broader foreign policy and

security lessons come to mind? Here's Scott Anderson again on what he sees as America's biggest security priorities moving forward.

ANDERSON: I think one of the biggest ones that we see, much like the post-Vietnam generation that at least my parents were in, is a newfound humility about what the United States can accomplish using military force. The halcyon post-9/11 days of people saying the United States can reshape foreign countries, impose new legal and political orders there—not just in a matter of years but sometimes in a matter of weeks or months that people will just fall into democracy once the United States takes out the tyrannical regimes that were, you know, controlling them at the time—seems incredibly naive 20 years after the fact.

And once you get past those sorts of assumptions and begin to see the use of military force as a much more limited tool, it means both that the United States and other countries as well might and should be more judicious in how they choose to use that military force. There's a role for it, but it's not the panacea that some may see it as in some certain cases.

But also the need to begin to develop and strengthen other tools: diplomacy, development, other sorts of mechanisms that we use to advance our interests overseas that can work towards the same goals, perhaps in ways that are more subtle and less easy to detect than a squadron or a military operation, but that nonetheless are working in that direction and may provide more sustainable progress in the long run than suddenly displacing the existing political structure and being optimistic about what will come next.

I think that's likely to be my generation's experience, is a newfound appreciation for the limits of this military power. The challenge will be to translate that into legal authorities and into policy lessons that will communicate forward to the next generation. Because, again, we saw the post-Vietnam generation wrestle with a lot of these same questions, a lot of the same issues, but

the debates of that era didn't prevent, and the lessons were not always fully communicated onto the generation that ultimately encountered 9/11. If they had been, I think they would have approached it somewhat differently.

And so, the challenge now is to find a way to build those lessons into a new capacity that allows us to address threats to us and address new security national security challenges. But in a way that is more sustainable and more likely to achieve an outcome that is consistent with our interests and our values than those we pursued in the past.

DEWS: Madiha Afzal's answer to the question of what lies ahead as we contemplate the 20th anniversary of the 9/11 attacks starts with the Taliban's takeover of Afghanistan but broadens our perspective beyond just a focus on counterterrorism.

AFZAL: 9/11 after 20 years and thinking about the fall of Kabul and of Afghanistan to the Taliban really just underscores to me how much counterterrorism is only one part of the equation, and countering extremism has to be the other part.

It underscores that the ideological fight is much harder, that the ideology endures, and it also underscores how, though we thought we had come so far in terms of countering terrorism, we now stand at a point where the Taliban is in control of Afghanistan, where this will certainly embolden jihadist groups in the region, including next door in Pakistan, including other groups within Afghanistan, including al-Qaida, which intelligence estimates now say will grow faster than had been understood before.

And this essentially means to me that the threat endures. This phase of the War on Terror that we had put behind us, or that we had thought we had put behind us because we thought we had successfully countered the terrorist threat.

It's going to be harder for us to turn the page on this, given the threat continues from that region as well as other parts of the world. We know that in areas such as Nigeria, Boko Haram, a terrorist group, lives on, we know and poses a huge threat. And we know that for all of these groups, while their tactics might be different, while their targets might be different, there is an ideological underpinning to these groups that remains that we have still yet left to tackle systematically.

And going ahead, that should be our goal. I've written a piece for the Brookings Blueprints papers on how we can use education reform and critical thinking to counter this kind of extremism. Certainly, you know internationally, globally, our focus needs to be much more on this going ahead. Of course, while keeping our counterterrorism posture going as well.

DEWS: There are so many issues related to the 9/11 anniversary and the myriad events that followed that I haven't covered here: the conduct and end of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, where we just witnessed the rapid takeover of that country by the Taliban and new terrorist attacks from an ISIS affiliate there; plus the proliferation of extremism and terrorist groups to other parts of the world, and the fact that there have been no new attacks on the American homeland, the uneven burden borne serving abroad by members of the U.S. military and diplomatic corps and their families compared to the civilian population. And, of course, the heart-wrenching stories, the pain, and the loss carried by all who endured those terrible hours in New York, in Arlington, and in the sky above Pennsylvania.

All these factors and many more are important facets of the 9/11 story, and I'm certain that each of us in our own way is marking the occasion.

I'll leave the last word on the impact of 9/11 in the policy realm to Suzanne Maloney, our vice president and director of Foreign Policy.

MALONEY: The 20-year legacy of the 9/11 attacks is one that is, in many ways, heroic in the sense that we have not seen another such attack on the American homeland. But it's also tragic, and tragic for several reasons. One is that 9/11 taught us that what happens in the Middle East doesn't stay in the Middle East. And it should have taught us that our own national interests rely not merely on stability at a leadership level in the region, but on ensuring that we're helping to advance good governance and prosperity and opportunity for the people of the Middle East and elsewhere around the world.

I worry today that in our haste to undo some of the damage of prior foreign policy decision-making, Americans and our leaders and many other capitals around the world are prepared to disregard those lessons and leave the Middle East to its own devices. I'm afraid that won't end well for the citizens of the Middle East or for the rest of us around the world.

We face a very different array of threats today as compared to the 9/11 era. We really are in a different era entirely and I think that in many respects the pandemic put a close to a time when we turned toward the Middle East as the greatest source of potential threats to the stability of the world and to our own national security interests. We are now much more focused on a disparate array of threats, including great power competition, the threat to democracy from authoritarianism, and the rise both in military and economic terms of China and what that will mean for America's role in the world.

We need to approach these challenges with the same degree of rigor and seriousness and robust debate across a wide array of political spectrums in order to ensure that the policies that we're adopting, that the approach and decisions that we make when we're faced with what appear to be very grave national security challenges, is truly tested against the possible outcomes. I

think that we have learned some difficult lessons from the 9/11 period, but for us here at Brookings, I think that is probably the most important one.

DEWS: You can read more research from Brookings scholars on our 9/11 resource page on the Brookings website. And also on September 10, the day this episode airs, Brookings hosted a discussion on the legacies and lessons of 9/11, hosted by the New Yorker's Susan Glasser and featuring a conversation with Ryan Crocker, who served as United States ambassador in Afghanistan and Iraq, and Brookings President John R. Allen, a retired U.S. Marine Corps four-star general and former commander of the NATO International Security Assistance Force and U.S. Forces in Afghanistan, a discussion followed by a panel of experts from Brookings and the foreign policy community.

My thanks to the Brookings scholars who shared their personal 9/11 stories and insights for this episode: Madiha Afzal, Scott Anderson, John Hudak, Elaine Kamarck, Suzanne Maloney, and Bruce Riedel.

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Until next time, I'm Fred Dews.