



Future Threats Were Topic Planned for 9/11

Attack on the Pentagon Interrupted Members' News Conference Already Set for That Morning

By Alexandra Jaffe, *Roll Call* Staff, Sept. 6, 2011, Midnight

This week, as the nation prepares to observe the 10th anniversary of 9/11, Roll Call looks back at how Capitol Hill responded to the attacks and how that day's events changed — and didn't change — life in Washington.

Cathy Travis came into the office about 9 a.m. on Sept. 11, 2001, ready to prep her boss, then-Rep. Solomon Ortiz (D-Texas), for a news conference with the seemingly mundane title "Is America Prepared for Future Threats?"

Ortiz wanted to address deteriorating conditions at military bases, joining then-Rep. Curt Weldon (R-Pa.) in outlining a request for funding he planned to make that week.

Bud Deflaviis, Weldon's press secretary, had seen the attack on the World Trade Center unfold, but he decided to go on with the scheduled event.

"My thought was, 'Why not go?' You often get asked questions that aren't completely germane to the topic at hand, and obviously there were some national security concerns here," he remembered thinking.

Travis, too, realized there would be something unique about this news conference. Before reminding Ortiz that his attendance was required, she called Deflaviis.

"Bud," she said, "I think that the answer for our question today is going to be different than we thought it was going to be."

The news conference began a few minutes after 9:30. Both World Trade Center towers had been hit. Weldon, then vice chairman of the Armed Services Committee, was minutes into his opening statement, steering the discussion toward the deteriorating military bases, when American Airlines Flight 77 crashed into the Pentagon.

Rep. Silvestre Reyes (D-Texas), also in attendance, remembers being handed a note that said the Capitol was being evacuated. He passed it along to Weldon, which brought an end to the news conference.

Ortiz said he saw the attack on the Pentagon unfold on the muted TV in the corner of the room and told Weldon it was time to go. Deflaviis remembers a reporter interrupting Weldon to let him know what was unfolding on the screens behind his head.

At that point, all hell broke loose and moments blended together, becoming difficult to distill years after the fact.

Those involved remember rushing from the room and into the silent third floor of the Capitol. Tours had already made it to the exits, so the groups remaining upstairs found themselves walking down empty, echoing staircases.

Reyes, who was formerly chief patrol officer at the U.S.-Mexico border in El Paso, Texas, went into officer mode.

"Your training takes over," he said. "Part of you doesn't want to believe that this is happening, but the other part is telling you that there's a threat. Get out."

Deflaviis employed a different kind of training: He prayed as he rushed down the stairs.

The group encountered a brief bottleneck on the way out, and when they eventually emerged, all took a quick look at the sky before racing away from the Capitol. Then they scattered, to figure out how to continue doing their jobs.

What they hadn't done was answer the suddenly ironic question posed by the news conference. After leaving the Capitol, they weren't sure whether they had the answer anymore.

"There was so much uncertainty," Ortiz remembered. "We didn't know what to expect. "

In the days following the attacks, Congress had an overwhelming desire for more information, to explain, to analyze. But Reyes said that what was expected of him and his colleagues was not necessarily to explain — it was to admit that they could not.

"What was expected of me as a Member of Congress was to understand that there was more that we didn't know than we actually knew and to understand that there could be additional attacks," he said.

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