Eve Butler-Gee
Journal Clerk, Office of the Clerk

Oral History Interview
Final Edited Transcript
June 20, 2011

Office of the Historian
U.S. House of Representatives
Washington, DC
“While we were standing on the Mall, again, perfect day, perfect blue sky. Not a cloud. Cool, crisp. And it was right after they had told us that this plane was coming. And I remember standing there looking at that dome shining in the sun and praying. It wasn’t about the building. It was about what the building represented and how long it had stood there and what it meant to me. And just praying, “Please, God, don’t let anything happen to this beautiful place where so much work is done.”

Eve Butler-Gee
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Project Abstract

To commemorate the events of September 11, 2001, the Office of the House Historian conducted a series of interviews with former Members and staff of the U.S. House of Representatives. This collection of oral histories provides a multi-layered narrative of the events on Capitol Hill that day, from the morning floor proceedings, to the evacuation of the Capitol and House Office Buildings, to the press conference and impromptu gathering on the Capitol steps that evening.

These accounts reveal how the House responded to the challenges facing the nation in the weeks and months following the attack. Interviewees describe the return to work on September 12, the President’s address to a Joint Session on September 20, and the immediate changes in the legislative schedule. Some recall the implementation of new security measures, including restrictions on the mail in response to the subsequent anthrax scare. Several interviewees shed light on the role of Member offices in recovery and support efforts in the regions most affected by the violence. Individually, each interview offers insight into the long-term procedural changes that fundamentally altered the daily workings of the House. Together, the project’s collective perspective illuminates the way this dramatic event transformed the nation, from Capitol Hill to congressional districts.
Editing Practices

In preparing interview transcripts for publication, the editors sought to balance several priorities:

- As a primary rule, the editors aimed for fidelity to the spoken word and the conversational style in accord with generally accepted oral history practices.
- The editors made minor editorial changes to the transcripts in instances where they believed such changes would make interviews more accessible to readers. For instance, excessive false starts and filler words were removed when they did not materially affect the meaning of the ideas expressed by the interviewee.
- In accord with standard oral history practices, interviewees were allowed to review their transcripts, although they were encouraged to avoid making substantial editorial revisions and deletions that would change the conversational style of the transcripts or the ideas expressed therein.
- The editors welcomed additional notes, comments, or written observations that the interviewees wished to insert into the record and noted any substantial changes or redactions to the transcript.
- Copy-editing of the transcripts was based on the standards set forth in The Chicago Manual of Style.

The first reference to a Member of Congress (House or Senate) is underlined in the oral history transcript. For more information about individuals who served in the House or Senate, please refer to the online Biographical Directory of the United States Congress, http://bioguide.congress.gov and the “People Search” section of the History, Art & Archives website, http://history.house.gov.

For more information about the U.S. House of Representatives oral history program contact the Office of House Historian at (202) 226-1300, or via email at history@mail.house.gov.

Citation Information

When citing this oral history interview, please use the format below:
Interviewer Biography

Kathleen Johnson is the Manager of Oral History for the Office of the Historian, U.S. House of Representatives. She earned a B.A. in history from Columbia University, where she also played basketball for four years, and holds two master’s degrees from North Carolina State University in education and public history. In 2004, she helped to create the House’s first oral history program, focusing on collecting the institutional memory of Members and staff. She co-authored two books: Women in Congress: 1917–2006 (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 2006) and Black Americans in Congress: 1870–2007 (GPO, 2008). Before joining the Office of the Historian, she worked as a high school history teacher and social studies curriculum consultant.
JOHNSON: This is Kathleen Johnson with the Office of the House Historian, and the date is June 20th, 2011. We’re in the House Recording Studio, and today I’m here with Eve Butler-Gee, former chief journal clerk for the U.S. House of Representatives, to discuss her memories of September 11th, 2001, and also the anthrax scare that took place later that year. To begin today, can you trace some of your memories beginning that morning of September 11th, 2001?

BUTLER-GEE: I was scheduled that morning, it was a Tuesday, and the House is in session at 9:00 on Tuesday mornings for morning-hour debate. To get from where I lived in western Fairfax into the Capitol and get all my paperwork done before we went into session at 9:00, I got up very early in the morning, and that was my custom. That particular day, I remember clearly, I went through my usual routine. Went into the garage, got my things into the car, went out into the driveway to pick up my husband’s newspaper and bring it into the house, and it was an absolutely perfect day. And I know that people talk about that perfect September 11 day. The sun was just coming up and the sky was this incredible cobalt blue, and there was one star in the sky. And for some reason on that morning, I remember standing there in the driveway and just looking up and thanking God for my life and for my family. Now, that didn’t happen every morning. Usually, I grabbed the paper, threw it in the garage, and took off. But, for some reason, that was the experience of that morning. And I look back on that now and realize how significant that was, in some way, for me.

So I went on into work that morning. Proofread the [House] Journal, took the Journal up to the House Parliamentarians, went back down to my office,
collected the *Journal* book, which is a huge book that’s bound in leather, hand-bound, still, by the Government Printing Office, with marbled edges—a very beautiful book. And that went up with me every morning to the House Floor. And it was in that book that I wrote, and the other journal clerks wrote, those events that took place on the House Floor that were purely parliamentary in nature.

So I opened the book, and Speaker *pro tempore* [Timothy V.] Johnson of Illinois gavelled us into session. About 15 minutes into the session, and this was a place, there were only two Members on the floor for morning-hour debate. It was very quiet. There were very few other staff members there. And that was not unusual for morning hour. I heard somebody calling my name to my left, and down just below the dais was Teresa Austin, who was then a bill clerk, now is one of the tally clerks of the House, and she was beckoning me to come down quickly, that something had happened.

When I got down to the floor level of the House Floor, she told me that something had happened in New York. And we went around behind the seats to the Democratic Cloakroom, which was nearest to where I was sitting. And everyone was huddled around the cloakroom and watching the result of the plane having flown into the first Tower. And of course it was terrifying, and we were all commenting on it, and as we stood there watching, the second plane went in. That put the whole Democratic Cloakroom into a whole different mode because, clearly, this was not a coincidence.

I left the cloakroom, went back around to the dais, and told the House Parliamentarian John Sullivan, who was on duty that morning, that something really wrong was happening in New York. He subsequently
whispered to the Speaker pro tempore, who recessed the House at I believe 9:22. But still, this was an event that was dreadful and horrendous, but it was happening in New York. So, as was my custom, I left the Journal book at my desk at the rostrum, locked my drawer, and went on downstairs to my office in the basement level of the Capitol building until such time as the bells were to ring for attendance in the House for business at quarter to 10:00. I walked into my office, which is where all the floor staff had their offices, and into my section where the journal clerks were. There was one journal clerk on duty with me. The other journal clerk had worked late the night before and was on her way into work. As we watched the television sets on our desks, we heard a report from Jim Miklaszewski from the Pentagon, and while he was reporting, obviously something had happened. And the third plane had flown into the Pentagon.

At that point, I advised the assistant journal clerk, Ted Thomas, that I was pretty certain that we would be evacuated and told him that I was going back up to the floor because, as far as I was concerned, that was my job. That was what I was going to do. I called the other journal clerk, Florence Heacock, and told her not to come in, to go straight back home. And I left Legislative Operations, turned left in front of the Flag Office of the House, and went on down the hall to the little elevator the floor staff uses to go up to the House Floor level.

Coming at me, as I was going down the hall, was this entire wave of blue uniforms. It looked like thousands of them, all coming straight at me.

“Where are you going?” they asked. And I said, “Well, I’m the journal clerk, and the bells have rung for attendance in the House, and my Journal book’s up at the rostrum, and I need to go back up there.” And they said, “You’re not going anywhere.” I said, “But you don’t understand. The Journal book is
“up there.” [laughter] It’s funny what you fixate on when you’re in that situation. They said, “You’re not going anywhere. You need to evacuate.” And I said, “Well, the people in the Legislative Operations Office don’t know that yet.” And somebody, one of the policemen, said, “Well, then you go tell them. They need to get out, and they need to go down the hall to the West Front entrance of the Capitol,” which was just several doors down from where our office was.

I went back into the office and told Gigi Kelaher, who was the chief of Legislative Operations at the time, what the policeman had said, and everybody got their things together, and we all walked down the hall and out onto the West Front terrace and into that beautiful day. This, by the way, is the terrace on which Presidents are inaugurated. This is where the whole inauguration stands are set up. But normally it’s a lovely marble terraced affair that goes down to the Mall. As we came out of the door, the congressional Pages coming along with us, we looked over to our left and we could see the smoke coming up from the Pentagon. The Pages, who were with us, were experiencing this on their first day. They were crying. They were terrified. You can only imagine what their parents were thinking, and I’m certain they were wishing that they could be back home right that second.

But we all went down. Everybody was very calm, and you could see people coming from everywhere, just converging onto the Mall. We walked down several levels, down to the sort of flat, just before you get to the Mall. And all of us trying to get on our cell phones, and none of our cell phones worked. We wanted to let our families know that we were evacuating and that we were going to be fine. And we believed we would be because this was so difficult to take in—such a difficult thing to comprehend. We were all
working, sort of, on automatic. Other agencies were letting their people out, so, all of a sudden, you saw a lot of traffic going by. We went down the Mall some distance from the Capitol far enough that we could probably reach the Capitol in about five minutes, maybe less, but still on the Mall. And there we stayed.

Now, there was a group of us. We all scattered. So the Legislative Operations people that were in my little group of folks were Gigi Kelaher, myself, Terry Morris, the now-retired chief tally clerk of the House, Ted Thomas, who was my assistant journal clerk, Elsa Thompson, who was the daily digest clerk, and Pat Kelly, who was another daily digest clerk, who recently retired. And we sort of stood around, not knowing exactly what to do next. We got the sense that nobody really knew what to do next, but that we were at least out of the building. After some time, there came the same wave of blue uniforms, coming at us again and telling us that we needed to go further down the Mall. And I remember asking, “Why?” And the female police officer said, “We have gotten word that there’s another plane headed for us, and we don’t know if we can stop it. They have scrambled the jets from Langley, but we want to get you all as far away as possible in case something happens to the Capitol building.”

So back down the Mall we went. And this would be, if you’re looking at, the Capitol building is here. Then there’s this long expanse of green, then there’s the Washington Monument, then there’s another World War II Memorial, then there’s the Reflecting Pool, and then there’s the Lincoln Memorial. So it’s one long shot all the way down. So we went about three quarters of the way down the Mall and didn’t know what to do. We kept looking at the sky, and in a few minutes we heard the jets from Langley screaming over our heads, going due north. And there we were.
After a while, we were told that we needed to be prepared to take cover—that they didn’t know where the plane was. And Gigi Kelaher and I were standing around looking at each other and thinking, “This is the Mall. There are no trees. There are a few little trees on the edge, but take cover? What does that mean exactly?” Ultimately, because we tend to make jokes when we’re nervous, we looked at this little reflecting pool that was part of the decoration of the Mall. It was about five feet by four feet in diameter, and we said, “Well, if worse comes to worst, we’ll just dive in here.” So we stood there, and we waited.

One of the Members of Congress came by. He was on his cell phone. There had been a rumor that the State Department had been attacked. He was going to walk from the Mall to the State Department, which was quite some distance—I would say three to four miles at least—because his wife worked at the State Department and he was worried about her, and he couldn’t raise her on the phone.

There were vignettes like that throughout the time that we spent there on the Mall as a group. Everybody else sort of was fanning out, trying to find their own way. Two of our people decided—one, Elsa Thompson, lived on Capitol Hill. She decided to go home. Ted Thomas decided to walk all the way across the bridge into Virginia and have his wife come and get him there. And the rest of us stayed together as a group. There was a cab parked on the street there by the Mall, and we were standing around listening to what was going on, on the radio with him, and there was a lot of disinformation. In fact, the rumor about the State Department having been attacked was repeated on that radio broadcast.

After a time, and it was probably 12:00, 1:00, but I can’t say for sure, it dawned on us that we weren’t going to be able to get back to our cars, which
were parked in the basement of the Rayburn [House Office] Building, for some time. And that, furthermore, nothing was really keeping us there on the Mall except that we had been told to take cover or to stay there. But it was clear that our being on the Mall or not on the Mall was not going to make a difference. So one of us made the suggestion that we’d go over to a nearby restaurant, and at least there perhaps we could get a glass of water, we could watch what was going on, on television, and possibly use the pay phone to see if we could contact our families. So, at that point, we left the Mall and walked over to the restaurant—still not being able to be in contact by phone with anybody in the Clerk’s Office, or anyone else for that matter. The phones simply weren’t working.

So, as we sat in the restaurant, we were able, in fact, several of us, to call our families and have family members call other family members so there would be no question as to our safety. Still no sign of any plane coming toward the Capitol building. Eventually, after some time, I think around 4:00, Gigi Kelaher was able to contact Martha Morrison, who was the Deputy Clerk, or Assistant Deputy Clerk of the House. And Martha, who had spoken to the Clerk, Jeff Trandahl, told us that it would be all right for us to go back and get our cars and go home. And so we walked from the Mall up the Hill to the Rayburn parking garage, got in our cars, and drove home. The drive home took an incredible length of time, as one can imagine, but that was the effect of that day.

Since that time, and I really can’t believe it’s been 10 years. In many ways it seems like it happened yesterday and in many ways it does seem 10 years ago. I’ve had time to reflect on what that whole experience was about in terms of how we all recall it. It’s amazing. I can think only of my mother’s stories about Pearl Harbor. Everybody has a story about where they were, our
parents and grandparents, where they were when Pearl Harbor was attacked. In my generation, where were we when John Kennedy was assassinated? And now there are the stories about where we were on 9/11, and everybody has a vivid recollection of it.

And as the telling starts, if somebody mentions 9/11, and somebody asks, “Where were you?” As the telling starts, what I’ve noticed is, we don’t listen to each other’s stories. We need to tell our story, but I’ve noticed that there’s a lot of crosstalk. Someone will start saying, “Well, I was such-and-such,” and the other person will interrupt and talk over and say, “Well, I was so-and-so.” And I think what it is, is the need to voice it, to say it out loud because it’s still a very fresh memory. The shock, in many ways, is still embedded in our memories that this thing happened on our shores, in the places where we felt the safest. And we just need to say it out loud. So thank you for the opportunity, I suppose.

JOHNSON: There’s many things I want to go back to in what you said, but the first thing is, the House came back in session very briefly that morning. Just to clarify, there wasn’t anyone from Legislative Operations, then, that was allowed to go back up to the [House] Floor?

BUTLER-GEE: Not as far as I know.

JOHNSON: And how unusual of a case would this be?

BUTLER-GEE: Oh, I don’t suppose it’s ever happened before. Because if you think about the fact that it is, in fact, the first time this has happened in this country, this way, then we had no precedent for it. And it was a question of safety. However, the Parliamentarian was very likely on the floor, and so was a Speaker pro tempore, and so was, I understand, the [House] Chaplain. And I
would have been glad to have been there if I’d been allowed to go up that elevator. {laughter} Very unusual.

When we recessed at that one-minute interval where the House came in and then recessed, we were still in the legislative day of September 11—and, in fact, remained in the legislative day of September 11 throughout the next few days because we did not adjourn. So it’s a parliamentary sort of artificial day, but it is because everything that takes place in the context of that opening of the session on September 11, has to take place in that day, regardless of what the calendar day is, until that session is adjourned. And that did not happen for several days thereafter.

JOHNSON: The House Journal is the official record of the proceedings on the floor, and if you or another journal clerk is responsible for that, but yet none of the journal clerks were there for that one minute, how does it appear, then, in the Journal?

BUTLER-GEE: It appears in the journal because we had to do it retroactively. And it was perfectly appropriate to do it that way because we were still in the legislative day. Official reporters of debate gave the time, told us what the time frame was, and that it was about. They gave us the exact time of coming out of recess and then going back into recess again. And we were just able, by that, and with the help of the Parliamentarians, to just account for that one-minute space of time.

JOHNSON: This was something that you put together on September 12th, when the House was back in session?

BUTLER-GEE: Yes. Once the House came back into session, we finally adjourned the House for the legislative day of September 11. Then that entire Journal was put together. Ordinarily, the Journal for the previous day’s proceedings has to be
completed at the end of that day regardless of how late the session of the House goes. And there’s an adjournment time. And then the *Journal* is prepared, and actually is being prepared by the journal clerk who is in the office downstairs while the journal clerk at the rostrum is writing it into the book. So that, essentially, the journal clerk downstairs is keeping track of the proceedings of the House by watching C-SPAN while the journal clerk on the floor is recording it in the book so that the Parliamentarians who sit behind the journal clerk can check the book any time they want to if they have a question. So we have technology downstairs and the old way of doing it and writing it in the book at the rostrum.

**JOHNSON:** You mentioned Gigi Kelaher, who was the Chief of Legislative Operations at the time. What are your memories of her during this time of crisis since the two of you spent so much time together?

**BUTLER-GEE:** You know, there’s very little that she can’t handle. She was very calm and, in fact, everybody was very calm. There was no panicking and screaming and flinging about. It was just a very calm, step-by-step progression of events. And into the subsequent days as well there were all sorts of thoughts we had about what would happen if this happened again. The House itself went into a discernment about how to evacuate and what the security measures should be, as did the whole country, of course. But Gigi was steady and calm and interfaced with the Clerk of the House, Jeff Trandahl, and with Martha Morrison, and they made sure to keep everything on an even keel. And the chief clerks, the journal clerk, the bill clerk, the tally clerk, the enrolling clerk, and the reading clerks all did likewise. It’s a bunch of people who have been through a lot in terms of what goes on in the House, and they’re not likely to lose their heads, even in a situation like this.
JOHNSON: After you returned home, some Members of Congress met on the Capitol steps for a brief press gathering, and then also when they broke out into song. Did you watch that on TV?

BUTLER-GEE: I did.

JOHNSON: What are your memories of that event?

BUTLER-GEE: I cried. In fact, I think that may have been the time when I allowed myself to cry. I was driven to get home to let my husband see me, to see that I was all right, to talk to my daughter, because I had a four-month-old grandson. And just to make sure the family was okay. And then I could allow myself to cry. And that was the moment when I really lost it, watching that happen. I love that it was spontaneous, and the feeling was, no matter what happens, nobody’s going to defeat us, either psychologically or in actual fact.

Coming back to the House the next day, we were all wearing flags in our lapels. There were red, white, and blue ribbons that people were wearing. All the cars on the highway were now showing and displaying the American flag. And the whole country went immediately to the displaying of the flag as a symbol of who we are and that this was not going to break us.

JOHNSON: What was it like coming back to the Capitol the day after? The House was in session on the 12th, but realizing that the Capitol very well could have been a target?

BUTLER-GEE: Well, by then, of course, we had learned about Flight 93. And so it was very bittersweet because our sense was that that plane was headed for the Capitol building. Had it not been for those people, it could have been much, much worse. And that they gave their lives to save ours. That was predominant in my mind. Then the feeling I had was one of pride in my country, and a kind
of defiance and a desire to just do whatever I could to help us get past this thing that had happened and make plans so that if something, God forbid, should happen like that again, we would be prepared. I never, for example, as a journal clerk, ever wanted that *Journal* book to be left up there on that rostrum again. And we made some contingency plans after that, some months later, as to what we would do if the government had to continue and not in its usual place here in the Capitol.

**JOHNSON:** When you came back on the 12th, was the *House Journal* in the place where you had kept it on the rostrum?

**BUTLER-GEE:** It was. [laughter] Yes, it was.

**JOHNSON:** And what I was wondering about that is, of course, no one had ever thought of something like this happening—such a huge, catastrophic event. But what about for just evacuation drills or fire drills? What’s the policy for that, or procedure for that for the *House Journal*?

**BUTLER-GEE:** They began to drill us in evacuating the House and taking us down various routes. Certain parts of the staff would go down one stairway; another part would go down the other. Actually, it is a blur to me as to what the specifics were. I just know that we drilled, and drilled, and drilled. And we had information on how to leave the building in the event that we got separated from one another, how to find one another. We were assigned various quadrants and so forth outside. My recollection of that is a bit fuzzy, but I do recall that we continued to drill quite extensively and over a considerable period of time so that everybody was very clear what their escape route was. In so doing, it was sort of unthinkable that we would be brought to a place where we would have to contemplate a second attack, but not to do so would be foolish, also. And as far as I know, those practices are still in place.
JOHNSON: And if the House were in session, what would happen to the Journal? Would the journal clerk be responsible for taking it out?

BUTLER-GEE: You can be sure that if the House is in session, the journal clerk will have that book in hand from now on. {laughter}

JOHNSON: The week after September 11th was a very busy legislative week, and before we talk about some of the specifics, what I was wondering is, what changes did you notice? Because you were on the rostrum and you were able to witness, you were working, but maybe witness some of the goings-on with Members coming onto the floor in the week or the weeks after. Did you notice anything that was different?

BUTLER-GEE: Well, there was a great deal of passion. And I think it was very wise of the leadership to provide an opportunity for everybody to talk that wanted to about this occurrence. And I recall, if I’m right about this, and I reviewed the September 12 Journal just briefly, there were several resolutions expressing the sense of the Congress that this thing had happened and that we would carry on. And within the context of the debate around those resolutions there were many people who had a chance to speak on the House Floor about their concern, about their shock, about the desire to make sure that this sort of thing would not happen again, and the desire to move forward. That the United States was not going to be defeated or intimidated by this sort of a tactic.

Subsequently, as we went on through the next few weeks, we began to put together some legislation. The [USA] PATRIOT Act came up subsequently, and some safeguards about security and the cooperation between the various agencies, and those details were discussed in quite a bit of detail on the floor. And in fact, I think really for the first maybe month or two following the
attack, just about everything we did had the flavor of something different. We had a perspective we didn’t have before. I remember, too, that on the 14th [of September], the House stood in recess so that the Members could go to a special service at the National Cathedral for a day of remembrance. And that we stood in recess for quite a long time until the Members could go and return, and then we resumed business. Something about being in recess, knowing that the Members of Congress were praying at a national place of prayer, which the National Cathedral is, was appropriate, was good and proper, in the circumstances.

JOHNSON: Do you have any specific or personal memories of the House Leaders at this point—Speaker [John Dennis] Hastert, or Majority Leader [Richard Keith] Armey, or the Democratic Leader Dick [Richard Andrew] Gephardt—and how they might have responded to the tragedy?

BUTLER-GEE: I remember the emotion. I remember the resolve. I think on the part of all three of them there was a desire to have strong continuity, strong leadership. They came together as one at a time of crisis, and there was very little partisanship of any kind in any situation for quite some time in terms of anything that was debated on the floor. It was the realization that we were all in this together and that, at the end of the day, we were all Americans, and regardless of political party, this was a coalescence of Members of Congress who cared about their country and cared about the people they represented.

I do not recall any specific utterances by any one of the three, except that when we went back into session, the Speaker was in that chair, and Dick Armey and Dick Gephardt were at their leadership tables, and there was a sense of solidity, and a sense of, “We will go on, we will continue this,” that pervaded the chamber at that time. And as I say, continued to be that way for many months afterward.
JOHNSON: On September 20th, President Bush came down to Congress and led a Joint Session. Were you working on that evening?

BUTLER-GEE: I was working on that evening, but I was not on the House Floor. He essentially delivered the message that we all expected him to deliver, and he delivered it with strength and resolve. And I would have loved to have been in the chamber, but I was not on that occasion in the chamber. I was down in the basement in my office, and another person was at the rostrum.

In those circumstances, where there’s an address to a Joint Session of Congress by a President, the rostrum staff is not all there, because, in essence, although it may not seem so, the delivering of a message by the President is a message from the President delivered in person by the President, but it is not in and of itself a parliamentary action. The House recesses to receive the message from the President and then goes back into session. So the message is received into the House by the House, and that’s a parliamentary action. But other than that, the House is in recess for business while the address is being conducted. If you think of it as the many messages that come from the White House from the President throughout the year, all of them are delivered by the White House Secretary and recorded in the *Journal*. In this case, if you think of it this way, the President is bringing his own message with him and delivering it in person—reading the thing out loud, in essence.

So in terms of a journal clerk being needed on the floor, it’s not necessary. And frequently what happens in those occasions, and especially in this one, the officers of the House, the Clerk, the deputy clerks, and so forth, occupy the seats at the rostrum that are normally occupied by the regular floor staff. And so, in this instance, I was not on the floor.

https://history.house.gov/Oral-History/
JOHNSON: What security changes did you notice at the Capitol and in the House office buildings directly after the attacks?

BUTLER-GEE: Oh my. Well, I guess the first thing was coming into the Rayburn Building and having the undercarriage of my car, and everyone else’s for that matter, checked for bombs with mirrors. There were dogs and policemen all over the place. You would be stopped every morning at the entrance to the garage, and then, again, there would be security set up for getting on the subway, the little train that goes from the Rayburn Building over to the U.S. Capitol. You used to be able to just walk on over there, but now you would be going through metal detectors, and the same sort of thing that one does in airports with the same sort of business of taking all of the things out of your pockets and purses being examined and so forth. That was the first, most noticeable thing.

Also, no one could walk around the Capitol at will any longer. In other words, if you didn’t have an ID and you weren’t working in the Capitol as a person who was a member of the staff, you did not get to just wander around the Capitol building. You had to be escorted by a Member of Congress, staff, or you just simply didn’t get to do that. It used to be, prior to that, that tour guides would bring dozens of tourists in in the summertime and tour them all over the place. They would come in through the front door on the East Front of the Capitol and just fan out. That didn’t happen anymore. In fact, there was a considerable amount of restriction as to who could and could not be in the Capitol building. And the same held true for the House office buildings, and for that matter, on the Senate side as well. It was basically a high-security facility, and the plans were put in place very quickly, I thought, considering that there was no forewarning of this.
There was never, ever anybody allowed on the floor unless you were floor staff, but back in the day, if the House was not in session, if you wanted to bring a friend or a relative onto the House Floor to show them what it looked like, you were able to do that. No longer was that allowed, unless the Speaker had authorized it. And there were just dozens of things like that, especially after the anthrax attack, where we simply shut the Capitol down and wouldn’t let anybody in, which was for their own safety.

JOHNSON: Before moving to anthrax, I just wanted to ask you about floor access. Was there anything different that you or other people that were floor staff had to do to gain access to the floor—something that had tightened up in those regards? Or did you just have to show your ID as you did before?

BUTLER-GEE: Just with the ID. But then, the Speaker’s Lobby itself, which is just outside the House Chamber doors, was always manned by security. Always. And that security was probably enhanced. There were probably more people there than were before. But it was always an extremely secure portion of the Capitol where, in fact, you weren’t allowed to even step into the Speaker’s Lobby unless you had your ID badge.

JOHNSON: What do you think was the short-term effect of 9/11 on the institution?

BUTLER-GEE: I think short-term, the effect had to have been more in terms of resolve and dedication than in terms of sort of the nuts and bolts of security or no security or what was changed. It’s always the case, that when something you value is threatened, you value it more. We have been very safe and very secure in this country, and I think it was a real shock to learn that we were vulnerable. It was not as though we did not know that this was a possibility—that a terrorist attack was a possibility. And all the intelligence agencies had been working on that for years, and certainly we were well

https://history.house.gov/Oral-History/
aware. But there was something audacious about the way this was done. The likelihood of it was so much more obvious that it changed the way we felt, at least in my opinion, about serving our country.

Those of us on the House Floor staff and, in fact, all the staff in the Congress, are serving their country. It’s not just people who serve in the military. We serve our country every day. And I think that the short-term effect of 9/11 was to remind us why we were here, doing what we were doing. And, again, the feeling I had and the feeling others voiced was nobody’s going to stop us from doing what we do for the American people. In many ways, for a while, because human nature is what human nature is, we coalesced in a way that was really wonderful to see. There were many kindnesses. People went out of their way to be especially good to one another, which is not to say that we’re not civil and collegial generally, but this had a different feeling to it. And I think that, for me, was probably the short-term effect.

We got things done a lot more quickly. There was a lot more motivation. There was stuff going on that we needed to get taken care of. And we did it efficiently and well, and we fast-tracked a great deal of things that had to be dealt with in the wake of 9/11. It was done with collegiality and with a sense that this was important.

**JOHNSON:** Did you feel that your day-to-day responsibilities were altered in any way after the attacks?

**BUTLER-GEE:** No. I don’t recall. We certainly didn’t do anything differently in terms of the actual doing of our jobs. That went on the same way.

**JOHNSON:** Earlier you brought up anthrax, and I was thinking that we could turn our attention to that topic. So this was a little over a month after the attacks on
9/11, and the first question I wanted to ask you about was, from what you remember, who was providing the information to your office on what was taking place with the anthrax scare?

**BUTLER-GEE:** The Office of the Clerk made sure that we knew. I brought along with me, as you know, several memoranda that we received about what anthrax was, about what was being done, about what we should be concerned about and what we should not be concerned about. And the Clerk’s Office, Jeff Trandahl and his staff, were very good about keeping us informed. Arrangements were made for medication if we needed it, broad-spectrum antibiotic, should the occasion arise. At no time do I recall the Capitol building, per se, having had an incident, but there were incidents in the Senate, as you know, where letters had been opened.

And I do remember that it just—we had not yet gotten over the shock of 9/11, and here was this other thing. I was numb. A lot of us were just numb. We read what we were given, we heard what we were told, we were prepared to take care of our health, and we were clear that nobody was going to put us at risk. But in the wake of the actual 9/11 attacks, it seemed to be almost anticlimactic in a way, as though it was just one more occasion that we needed to rise to, and that if we handled the 9/11 attacks, we can handle this. And in fact, thank God, it didn’t get any worse.

**JOHNSON:** Since the two events did occur so soon after one another, do you think that there was an emotional fatigue?

**BUTLER-GEE:** Yeah. I think so. We were just numb. And I remember thinking, “Good Lord, when is this ever going to stop?” And we would talk about that. “My God, what’s going to be next?” But, again, there didn’t seem to be—one would expect a negativity. A kind of a, “Dear me, the sky is falling.” And I
don’t remember that any of us really felt that way. It was just, “Okay, fine, we’ll deal with this too.” And of course, the media were doing what the media does. [laughter] Friends of mine were saying, “Are you all right?” Underneath it all you were thinking, they were probably saying, “Should I come for that dinner party or maybe stay home?” But it was just a lot to take in. And thankfully, it resolved itself in the sense that there were no subsequent attacks. And I guess we really will never know what that was all about.

JOHNSON: The House recessed for several days so there could be an environmental sweep to check for anthrax.

BUTLER-GEE: Correct.

JOHNSON: What happened to your office during that time?

BUTLER-GEE: They went through all the air ducts. They went through, apparently with some sort of sniffer machine that checked to make sure there was no powder or anything on the floor. They, I think, may have—and I’m not sure about this—but I think they used a [cleaning] solution that they got so that whatever air ducts or whatever were wiped down or wiped out or whatever. Since we weren’t there, it’s hard to understand exactly what the procedure was because we were asked to leave. And we were fine about that—one time when we were really fine about not coming to work. [laughter]

But it was all handled, again, very efficiently and thoughtfully, I think. I didn’t sense that there was an overreaction. The House Physician’s Office was prepared to do what was necessary in the event that somebody started showing symptoms. There were some people who had a somewhat psychosomatic reaction. I was not one of them. But, you know, that does happen, especially when you’re unnerved and you’ve already had a shock. So
I think it was very wise for them to send us home for a few days and let us just kind of, if nothing else, it gave us a chance to get a breather and sort of assimilate all of this stuff and come back a little better grounded.

JOHNSON: Some Member staff and committee staff relocated. They had some temporary facilities that were set up in GAO [Government Accountability Office]. That wasn’t something that your office did because you were floor staff?

BUTLER-GEE: They didn’t have us do that. No.

JOHNSON: From what you remember, were there any major changes in procedures for your office that were results of either 9/11 or anthrax?

BUTLER-GEE: We made a contingency plan that I’m not at liberty to discuss. And each component part of the rostrum activities—the bill clerk, the tally clerk, the journal clerk, blah, blah, blah, all of that—each piece of what goes on at the rostrum was examined and contingency plans made for the eventuality of an evacuation in advance of, or in reaction to, a subsequent attack of some kind. And, as far as I know, those plans are still in place.

JOHNSON: As floor staff, were you asked to sit in on any security briefings specifically because you were working in the House Chamber?

BUTLER-GEE: Kathleen, I think so. Once or twice, but honestly, it does not stick in my memory. I seem to remember we met once or twice as a group with various people who were kind of trying to help us understand what would be required of us and how we would evacuate and so forth. And then we subsequently had the evacuation drills. But I cannot recall the details of it. It just seemed to make sense that that would have been what we should be doing.
JOHNSON: That’s fine—just a few last-minute questions, wrap-up questions for today, your lasting memories of September 11th. You talked about many of those today, but if you had to pick one or two visual memories, some sort of image that you think no matter how much time passes will stay with you, what would that be?

BUTLER-GEE: The dome. While we were standing on the Mall, again, perfect day, perfect blue sky. Not a cloud. Cool, crisp. And it was right after they had told us that this plane was coming. And I remember standing there looking at that dome shining in the sun and praying. It wasn’t about the building. It was about what the building represented and how long it had stood there and what it meant to me. And just praying, “Please, God, don’t let anything happen to this beautiful place where so much work is done.” And, after a time, I found I was having nightmares about being out in the middle of the Mall unprotected and the planes coming in, this plane was coming in. But my predominant memory is that beautiful, white dome sparkling. I mean, just sparkling in the sun. And the leaves on the trees sparkling with the sunlight, and the green grass, and all these good people waiting for an opportunity to either go home to their loved ones or go back to work. Then the other memory is the memory of that morning and how that sky looked the morning of 9/11.

JOHNSON: Earlier I asked you what you thought the short-term effect of the attacks were on the institution. It’s only been 10 years, but in that case, what do you think the longer term effect on the institution might have been?

BUTLER-GEE: A loss of innocence. I mean, we think of ourselves as a very sophisticated country. We’re certainly technologically precocious enough. But there was an innocence still, you know? There was a sense that we don’t always do everything right, but we try. And to know that you are that hated really
hurts. I think the long-term effect of it has been that everything we do, whether we take public transportation, whether we get on an airplane, whether we come into a building, and not just these buildings, our entire life has been changed by this one act of terrorism. Instead of being in that place of innocence and optimism, we’re now spending an inordinate amount of time and money anticipating the worst that can happen to us.

It has changed our national culture. In my opinion, it can’t have done anything else. And I worry about what our children carry with them unconsciously about having to kind of watch what they put in plastic bags when they get on airplanes and watch Mom and Dad go through metal detectors. It has created a fortress mentality in a country which used to love to live free. And it’ll be some time. The world will never be the same. Not just this country—the world will never be the same again because we know these things can happen. So the trick is to recapture the innocence and the optimism in spite of it. And that will take some doing, unfortunately.

JOHNSON: How did you feel when you heard the recent news of the killing of Osama bin Laden?

BUTLER-GEE: That’s difficult. And I have to say I was ambivalent. This is a man who got up every morning, said his prayers, got dressed, and went to work. And his job was to figure out how many people he could kill. That was his job. That’s what he did for a living—how to kill the most people [in the] most efficient and most disastrous way possible. There’s something intrinsically evil about that. Not that it just happened. And it hasn’t got to do with us. It has to do with people all over the world who don’t agree with him. There’s something intrinsically evil about that.
It’s unfortunate that he had to be stopped the way he was stopped because it was a human life. But there are times when the greater good has to be served. Read your Old Testament. [laughter] It’s full of the same sort of thing, and it doesn’t make it right. It just makes it what it is. It makes it how human systems protect themselves from evil.

Did it make me feel safer? No. Because, of course, he has deputies, and people actually have already taken over for him. It didn’t make me feel safer. Did it make me feel vindicated? No, because his dying didn’t teach him anything. But it needed to be done. For no other reason, perhaps, than just to say, there are certain things that civilized people cannot tolerate. And that kind of evil is one of them.

JOHNSON: Lastly today, how do you think that day, the events of 9/11, may have changed your life?

BUTLER-GEE: Well, I still cry when I think about the folks on Flight 93. Those people gave their lives. The Bible says, “You give your life for your friend. There is no greater love than that.” They knew they were going to die, and so at the very least, they were going to prevent other people from dying. If they had not, I might not be here, you might not be here. Who knows what would have happened? Life is precious, and I think I feel a personal debt to the passengers on that flight. And I don’t think I’m going to take for granted what I have and what this country means to me. I think perhaps that’s what I take away from it.

JOHNSON: Is there anything else that you wanted to add today that we hadn’t covered?

BUTLER-GEE: I don’t think so. We covered quite a bit.

JOHNSON: Well, thank you very much for coming in today.
BUTLER-GEE: You’re welcome. It’s my pleasure.