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Clare Coleman
June 6, 2011
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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](http://bioguide.congress.gov) and the “People Search” section of the History, Art & Archives website, [http://history.house.gov](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. The date is June 6th, 2011, and we’re in the House Recording Studio. And today I’m with Clare Coleman, the former chief of staff for Representative Nita [M.] Lowey of New York, to discuss her memories of September 11th, 2001, and also the anthrax scare of October 2001.

Today, I’d like to begin with your memories of September 11th, 2001, and if you could, start in the morning.

COLEMAN: Well, it was a beautiful day, as I’m sure everybody will recall, and I was in Congresswoman Lowey’s office, her actual office, with a number of our staff. Mrs. Lowey was over in the Capitol building with our Foreign Operations Legislative Director. And we were having our beginning-of-the-week, “Mrs. Lowey’s in town, how’s the week going to go?” meeting when one of the interns came in to say that a plane had hit the Trade Center.

And our initial—I think everybody’s initial reaction was it must have been an accident, and a small plane must have hit the Trade Center. We got up and turned the TV on but continued with our meeting, and it was only when the second plane hit the South Tower that I knew—we knew that something terrible had happened, so I took off for the Capitol because I knew that I was going to need to be with Mrs. Lowey, and for some reason it didn’t occur to me that of course the televisions would be on in Dick [Richard Andrew] Gephardt’s office.

At the time, Dick Gephardt was the Majority Leader, Mrs. Lowey was the chair of the Democratic Congressional Campaign Committee, which made
her a member of the House Democratic Leadership, and they were in their “start of the week, what’s going to happen this week” meeting, the Members. And so I ran to the Capitol to try to get Mrs. Lowey and Beth Tritter, our Legislative Director, not necessarily out of the building, but just to be together. And by the time I got to the Capitol, the TVs had been on, and they knew that we were going to need to get back to the office.

Congresswoman Lowey’s district is directly north of New York City, in Westchester and Rockland counties. It’s a very heavy commuter district—a lot of folks work down in the city—and I think we all understood that if something had happened in the financial district, that something would have happened to our constituents and to folks that we knew. So in the first hour, I would say, Mrs. Lowey went into her office, and I think she tried to contact her own kids—she has three grown children, a number of whom do live in the city—and we were trying to get information. The first request was: find out everything that you can. So Mrs. Lowey was the Ranking Member of the House Foreign Operations Subcommittee, she continues in that role today, and so we were calling State Department, we were calling folks we knew in the NYC mayor’s DC office to try to see if there was any information.

In that period, the phones went dead, and I’m sure it was because there were so many people trying to use the lines, but I think it’s—I think from a House staffer’s point of view, it’s very unusual for the House communications system to fail in any way, and the phones went dead. CNN was reporting that there was a fireball on the Mall. They reported that there had been an attack at the State Department. Both of those accounts, of course, proved to be false. The Pentagon at that point had been hit as well, so there was a sense that more could be coming, and when the phones died, I decided to take us out of the building. So we evacuated down the staircase and into the street.
JOHNSON: Which building was this, which House office building?

COLEMAN: Rayburn, this building, on the other side of the building. So I told the staff we were going to go, and we got our stuff together, and we got the Congresswoman. Because she was the chair of the Democratic Congressional Campaign Committee, we had another place to go. We took them over to the Democratic National Committee, the DCCC has its headquarters on the third floor of that building, so we took everybody over to the DCCC, and we put the staff in a conference room, and we took Mrs. Lowey to an office, and we continued to try to get information, and that’s how we spent the first hour or so of that day.

JOHNSON: You left before there was a full-fledged evacuation of the Capitol?

COLEMAN: I was never aware that there was a full-fledged evacuation. When we were evacuating, there were other folks leaving the building, but I don’t recall seeing Capitol Hill Police in our hallway or being urged to leave the building at that time.

JOHNSON: What are your recollections of the Congresswoman during this period of uncertainty and then something that turned out to be a tragedy?

COLEMAN: Well, initially, I think just worried but very resolute. Very focused on just information, which was frustrating for us, for two reasons. One, information was very hard to come by, events were still happening, but also you’d like to think that the folks who have information are doing something better than letting us know, at least in the initial hours. So there was this search to address her questions, but a very frustrating search. A lot of “nobody knows, they’re going to call us back as soon as they know something, they’re going to let us know.” And almost no ability to talk to anybody in New York.
When the phones did come back up, when you could use your cell phone for example, or when we were over at the Democratic National Committee, those phones were working, but you couldn’t reach New York. The circuits were all jammed. And so I’m from New York, and my family lives there, and so I was trying to call home to tell them I was fine because of all the reports on the news. And I couldn’t reach my family in New York. I had to call my sister in California. I was able to get through there and let her know that I was fine and tell her to keep trying my parents so that eventually somebody would know that I was okay.

JOHNSON: How long did you stay over in the Congressional Campaign Committee building?

COLEMAN: All day. We stayed there until 10:00 or so at night, 10:00, 10:30. Very late at night, the Capitol Hill Police organized a security briefing for the Members. It was over on the Senate side at the Capitol Police headquarters building. And so we drove Mrs. Lowey over, and I waited in the car for her to be finished, and that was, I would say, it was at least midnight before the Members came back out again.

JOHNSON: There was a press conference on the steps of Capitol Hill. Do you know if Congresswoman Lowey was there? There were about 100 Members that were present.

COLEMAN: Mrs. Lowey did go over to the event, and they sang and said a prayer. We didn’t go. Staff didn’t go.

JOHNSON: Do you know if the Congresswoman had a desire at that point, that sometime during the day, to try to get back to the district so she could be there and see what was going on firsthand?
COLEMAN: Well it’s not our district, it’s Mr. [Jerrold Lewis] Nadler’s district, and I don’t think we ever discussed it. Certainly, traveling that day was impossible, they were closing down all the flights, and there was this sense in the afternoon that we were all waiting. What I remember was there was a three or four hour period in the afternoon where it was very quiet. I finally sent the staff home around 3:00 once I had the sense that maybe it would be safe for them to get on the Metro. But we couldn’t have sent Mrs. Lowey home. We had folks who were coming down from New York, actually that day, staff of ours who it took them forever to get there because of the tragedy. All the transportation systems were knocked off, so I don’t think it ever occurred to anybody that she would go home right away. Also, I think her work was in Washington at that point.

JOHNSON: And how much communication after 9/11—you said it was very difficult to get in touch with people on that day—but how much communication did you have with the district office after 9/11, and what kind of work did you do to facilitate things with that office?

COLEMAN: Well, by my recollection, there were 96 constituents of Congresswoman Lowey’s who were killed in the Trade Center. And one of the very interesting and moving things about the experience was the next day, as I recall, we got a call from the Oklahoma City Congressman’s [Julius Caesar (J. C.) Watts Jr.] offices, the Member’s offices here, to offer us their condolences and also to give us some advice that was very valuable and really kind. They warned us that folks wouldn’t call right away, and that it was unlikely, you know, we were sort of gearing up for lots of phone calls and lots of requests for help, and they warned us that that wasn’t likely to be the case and that we should be prepared, however, for a surge of requests for help weeks or even months
after the attack, and that that would go on for years as families began grappling with their loss and rebuilding their lives.

So in the first couple of days, what we tried to do was get a sense of who was actually gone, right? Because, in the beginning, it wasn’t clear at all. There was a very long list of folks. It wasn’t really a list, but the sense that there were tons of people missing. The early reports were there might have been as many as 10,000 people in the building because there could be on any given day. I think because the attack was quite early, there weren’t that many people in the building, so there was a sense of trying to figure out were people hurt, unconscious, were there going to be survivors, and so families were very focused on that.

My family was affected—Billy Martin, who was my mom’s godson and like a brother to us, was on the 105th floor in Cantor Fitzgerald, so I certainly understood it from a personal point of view, that people were just focused on, “Is he alive? Is he coming back?” And so we focused on that, we focused on arrangements, if families wanted, either Mrs. Lowey or a member of our staff to represent Mrs. Lowey at any vigil or memorial service, and then we prepared statements. I remember working for hours trying to figure out what to say. Because Mrs. Lowey, of course, wanted to say something to offer her condolences to people. And we worked a lot—a group of us worked for a long time on what she might say.

JOHNSON: On September 12th, the House was back in session. What was it like being back at the Capitol so soon and knowing that the Capitol could have been a target?

COLEMAN: I would say I just felt very purposeful. There was this sense that we wanted to do everything possible to be helpful to New York, to the mayor [Rudy
Giuliani]. I think there was a strong sense in the New York delegation of being united together in wanting to do whatever we could. It was in those immediate days that a delegation from New York, New Jersey, Pennsylvania, Massachusetts went over to the White House, primarily lead by the New York delegation and in my judgment, primarily lead by Chuck [Charles Ellis] Schumer, New York’s senior Senator, and there was a conversation that they had with the President at which—it was the first time anybody had heard the $20 billion recovery number, which was sort of made up, I think, but there was that sense of—we didn’t have a real scope of the tragedy, we had no sense of how many people had died yet, but that when the Trade Center fell, we lost the office space equivalent to the city of Atlanta. So there was certainly going to be an enormous cost, and there was the sense that we were going to rebuild New York, you know, that real sense that we wanted to rebuild New York. So I don’t remember going into the Capitol feeling nervous or even focused on that. I think I went to the Capitol thinking we have work to do—let’s go do the work as fast as we can.

JOHNSON: When did you first travel back to your district in New York, or just back to New York City after the attacks?

COLEMAN: I left on Sunday. So the attack was Tuesday morning, and we worked 19 or 20 hours a day the rest of that week. They didn’t adjourn until Friday, so Mrs. Lowey went home on Friday. And then my cousin had been killed—we never heard from him, and he’s never been found. I did go home at the end of that weekend, and I stayed for a couple of days into the middle of the next week. And then I came back for just a couple of days because the House was back in session, and we were negotiating the elements of the $20 billion package. And then I went up again for my cousin’s memorial service.
JOHNSON: While you were in New York, did you witness any makeshift memorials and, of course, you alluded to, but the people that were looking for loved ones that had been lost. Did you witness any of this firsthand?

COLEMAN: Yes, at St. Vincent’s, the hospital which has subsequently closed, down in the Financial District, all across the subway systems, these signs with photos of loved ones. We were certainly putting them up for Billy. I saw a lot of them and one of them—it didn’t happen on my initial visit—but I was back in October, about five or six weeks later, and, for the first time, I actually went to the site, and clean-up was underway, but you could see the twisted metal and it still smelled terribly. And people were taking photos at the site, which I found offensive to—it’s the plainest word, I was angry, I didn’t feel that it was appropriate for folks to be taking photos of the site as if it were, you know, the Empire State Building. But I also understood that that was the response of a person in grief. I still don’t like people taking pictures of that site—I don’t think they should ever take pictures of the site.

JOHNSON: How did you separate your own personal feelings of loss in this tragedy with the idea that you had to help represent the constituents from Mrs. Lowey’s district?

COLEMAN: I’m not always sure that I did, and I’m not sure that I needed to, necessarily. Because I was Mrs. Lowey’s chief of staff, I was the person she took to the Capitol and to the negotiations over the package. There were days when that was very difficult. Again, mostly I felt driven by this sense that we needed to do everything we could for people who didn’t want anything to do with us right now, you know? It wasn’t about connecting with the families or making sure that they knew how much Mrs. Lowey cared. It was about doing what you could so that when they were ready, when they wanted help, we would
have done appropriate things to make sure that, you know, the application process was smooth or they could get answers that they needed.

I felt a very strong sense of purpose around that, but I also was emotional about the work. I sat in a couple of meetings that were extremely disturbing during the negotiation. In one meeting—or actually I should say I sat outside a couple of meetings and sat inside some meetings that were disturbing. One meeting I sat outside was a meeting of the Republican Leadership with the New York negotiators, and that was joint House and Senate Leadership. We were in the Capitol, outside Speaker [John Dennis] Hastert’s office, waiting for the Members to come back out, and I remember Senator [Hillary Rodham] Clinton coming out and then Chuck [Schumer] coming out—Senator Schumer coming out, talking to us about what was going on inside and sort of how long we thought this was going to go. And the comment was made that inside the negotiation, the Senators from Oklahoma were protesting because when Oklahoma City had been bombed, they didn’t get anywhere near the kind of promise of financial support that had been pledged by the President [George W. Bush] in the aftermath of the attack. And that was incredibly demoralizing, disappointing, and kind of outrageous because the scope of the tragedy—again, at that point, we still didn’t know how many people were dead, and the scope of the tragedy was just self-evidently so much greater, and you don’t really want to see people comparing.

And I’ve been thinking about it a lot recently because of all the terrible natural disasters, particularly the tornados that have been doing such terrible damage and killing so many people around the country, and feeling that sense of empathy for the fact that nobody can really appreciate what’s
happening in Joplin, Missouri, right now, unless it’s happened to you. So very similar feeling back then, that folks just really didn’t have any idea.

JOHNSON: It’s been well documented that the New York delegation worked very closely together for obvious reasons. How long did this relationship continue past the month after 9/11?

COLEMAN: I would say for a good couple of years. I mean it’s a delegation that’s not necessarily known for getting along awfully well, although, you know, at the staff level we’ve always done extremely well together. But, you know, the Members are the Members, but having said that, I think everybody got together, and I formed some really great relationships. Peter [T.] King is a Republican Member. He and his staff I think did outstanding work during that period, but, just as a group, I think the delegation pulled together behind Jerry Nadler, particularly since it was his district, but also Carolyn [Bosher] Maloney did extraordinary stuff, and I think there was a sense that we’re going to sort of line up behind the leaders, line up behind Schumer and Nadler and Maloney, and do what we need to do to support them.

And I would say it lasted years. You know, the Homeland Security Committee was created in the aftermath of the attack, about a year later. Mrs. Lowey was an inaugural member of that committee. I did her committee work for a year. At that point, we were focused a lot more on [first responder] communications, arming municipalities with the tools they would need when it happened again. You know there was this strong sense that our vulnerabilities had been laid bare and that it was only a matter of time, whether it be cargo or an attack in the subway system, there were lots of speculations about what kind of attacks we might face.
But there was this really strong sense that we wanted to address the things that didn’t work on September 11th. For example, the fact that the police and the fire departments couldn’t talk to each other, and therefore a lot of people believed there were many more firefighters who died than needed to because the police knew what was happening—they were outside, and the firefighters were inside. So folks were really focused on things like that, and I think we hung together really well.

**JOHNSON:** On September 20th, there was a Joint Session of Congress, and President Bush came down to speak to Congress. First, did you attend that, and, even if you didn’t, what do you recall about that event, that Joint Session?

**COLEMAN:** I didn’t attend. It would be unlikely—you know, staffers usually don’t go to any of those things. And I didn’t necessarily feel that I had much to hear from the President. Even though I’m a Democrat, I don’t mean that necessarily in a partisan way. I actually felt very strongly in the couple of months after the attack that the only folks I really wanted to hear from were Mayor Giuliani and Chuck Schumer. They were the New Yorkers. They understood what the city had been through. Mrs. Lowey attended and, of course, we talked to the press about the importance of sticking together, and, at that point, the President had been very firm and strong. You know, he had been to the pile, and I think he really connected with the folks on the pile when he was there, and people had the sense that we were going to stick together and work this out.

**JOHNSON:** You mentioned the press, and that made me think of press inquiries. What kind of inquiries did your office receive, and how did you handle that volume that came after the attacks?
COLEMAN: A lot of requests about how to help families. So one of the good things about the aftermath of the attack was that the government moved quickly to set up services for folks. You know, once we moved out of the Red Cross moment, right, where people are waiting and hoping to have their family members identified, to be reunited with their family members, once we moved out of that phase, which was relatively quickly, right, it became clear very, very quickly that nobody could have survived that collapse, the two collapses. It became a question of, okay, so what are the steps that families take, and press were very interested in hearing about how the Congress was going to connect folks to resources. So that’s primarily what we did.

But I would say the press was more focused in the first month or so on the stories of the folks who were lost, right. There were these incredibly moving series of stories done, both in local papers and in the New York Times which profiled all—or as many of the victims as they could profile—and it became a book, and it’s a really brilliant way of remembering the folks who were lost.

JOHNSON: You mentioned, it was J. C. Watts’ congressional district and how they reached out to your office. Were there other offices that didn’t have that connection but still wanted to do something to help and reached out to you that you recall?

COLEMAN: Not that I recall. I mean, I think people were kind in the first day, but this is a political atmosphere, and it remains a political atmosphere, so I think I had been in Democratic Leadership meetings in the immediate aftermath of the attack and was just completely stunned and devastated to see some Democratic staff make remarks that I considered to be completely inappropriate. For example, there were Democratic Committee staff saying of course New York is going to milk this for everything it can, and I was sitting in the back row, where the sort of more junior people sit, and shaking with
emotion and with rage that folks didn’t understand what we were going through in New York, and it was still at the stage where, you know, there were families who didn’t give up hope. And they weren’t ready to concede that their loved one was gone forever, and so there was this sense that that’s the stage we were in, and the political process had moved on to sort of who’s up and who’s down, and I remember actually putting my hand up in the meeting and saying, you know, “All we want right now is to get our people out of the ground.” That’s certainly all I wanted on behalf of my family and on behalf of the constituents that we were representing. We didn’t know that people were dead, I mean, I watched those Towers fall and thought there is no way that Billy is going to survive this, but you don’t know that, and we didn’t know that. So I think the families deserved more respect, and I didn’t think my colleagues necessarily showed us that respect.

JOHNSON: How closely did the Speaker’s Office work with the Congresswoman’s office and other Members in the New York delegation?

COLEMAN: I would say very closely. Both leaderships were incredibly involved. So the House at the time was in Republican hands, so Denny Hastert was the Speaker, and Dick Gephardt, as I mentioned, was the Majority Leader. We certainly had the sense that they—that key members of their staffs were involved in the negotiation, but, in the big print, they’re focused on how much, and since the President had committed publicly the day after to $20 billion to rebuild New York, it was less a question of how much than “on what” became the issue. How much for the families? How do you value someone’s life, and how do you attempt to compensate people for what they lost, and then how do you rebuild New York? What does the country owe a commercial sector in a very large city, how do you respond to that kind of—my sense was that the Speaker’s Office, the Leader’s Office, and then the
folks in the Senate in leadership were just focused on can we hammer out the broad strokes of the deal because you know in the end we didn’t even know that we were going to need to spend $20 billion. And, of course, if we had done it right, it would have cost a lot more. If we had made sure the air, for example, was clear, it would have cost so much more than what we actually spent.

**JOHNSON:** What do you think was the short-term effect of 9/11 on the institution, and then, following up with that, how do you think the attacks changed your day-to-day responsibilities as a chief of staff?

**COLEMAN:** Well, I certainly think it did bring the body together for a time. It was a shorter period of time perhaps than I would have liked, but, of course, we went from the attack on the Trade Center and the Pentagon to the anthrax attacks on the body in October, and then the war beginning early the next year, relatively early the next year. Certainly, the conversation about invading Iraq beginning almost immediately. So I do think that there was a sense of patriotism. I certainly saw some things that weren’t, in my judgment, very patriotic, but, in general, I think there was more of a sense of the institution coming together and, after the anthrax attacks, the importance of the institution, this sense that it was okay to defend the government, it was okay to defend the House of Representatives, it was important to stand up and say Congress is an important institution, which, you know, now you see the debate—you’ve seen the debate over the last couple of years play out about the [Capitol] Visitor Center, for example. Should we have spent that kind of money to build the Visitor Center, and the Visitor Center was actually well underway before September 11th, and I think it got much more secure and much more well thought through in terms of security after the 9/11 attack. But I actually was there last week, and I thought, “This thing is gorgeous,
and this is what Americans should have had to visit their Capitol,” and the
fact that something terrible had to happen—two terrible things, officers
killed by a gunman entering the building and killing them [in 1998], and
then the attack on September 11th—to make the Congress say, “This is
worth it, and we are going to invest millions of dollars in this beautiful new
facility,” I think is kind of sad. I think the institution deserves more support.

In terms of my job, just a lot more focus, so a lot more coordinated and
focused with New York City because, as I said, Congresswoman Lowey
represented a district to the north of the city. We didn’t have any part of
New York City at the time of the attack. But a real sense of sort of lining up
behind those city members and making sure, in our committee work, that we
were doing what was right. So, if there were funds that needed to be put into
a bill or language that needed to be supported, I think the New Yorkers came
together to say okay, Mrs. Lowey’s on Appropriations and on Homeland
Security, so there are two places then where issues come up related to the
attack, issues come up related to the rebuilding of New York, issues come up
related to our security going forward. Because, of course, the sense was New
York was then and continues to be a very likely target, so there were lots of
places where you could be helpful, keep an eye out, stand up for New York.

The chiefs of staff always met regularly—they continue to do that I’m sure—but
during that period, we sort of got together and instead of chatting away
about what our bosses were up to, there was sort of a list, and we would go
down it, and it would be like, “Nadler’s doing this, Maloney’s up to this,
Peter King’s doing this, Lowey’s going to do this, Schumer says we’ve got to
do this.” In a bipartisan way, people were showing up and delivering for New
York, and I think as a chief, that felt good.
The hard part is the staff. I was 31 at the time of the attack, and so not that old, but very old compared to the rest of my team. We had interns in the building that day, we had 22-year-old staff assistants, most of our LAs [legislative assistants] were 25 or 26. So not that long out of their parents’ house and mostly alone, you know, not partnered. So nobody to go home to necessarily, maybe some roommates who are their age and as freaked out as they are. We had parents who were completely melting down, and we had to hold the team together, so I think a lot of what you do as a chief at a time like that is show up and be as calm as you can and make it about the work. That was slightly more difficult for me because my family was falling apart. It was a disaster in New York. Just an unimaginable disaster to lose Billy, so there was this sense that like when you weren’t at work, you were kind of all about “Was there anything you could do at home?” And when you were at work, you were about keeping it really level and keeping people sort of focused. And it wasn’t until anthrax that most of our folks fell apart. But during anthrax, a whole bunch of people broke down in tears in the office, said they weren’t sure they could do it anymore. I think there was a sense of personal threat, that September 11th woke up in them but they didn’t really feel it until the House mailroom tested positive for anthrax.

JOHNSON: What specifically were you able to do, especially after anthrax, to try to balance the safety concerns for your staff versus the job that you had to do?

COLEMAN: We spent a lot more time together. And that may sound weird, but there is this sense that, even more so than Mrs. Lowey, the staff is watching you. You’re the person who stands between her, the Member, and the team, and I think the team learns to line up behind the chief. At least in our office, the
team lines up behind the chief. And so, we did a lot of talking about how people might feel. I told them that I wanted to give them the freedom not to come in or some flexibility. I created our own emergency forms and began collecting information for them. “Who’s your first contact, who’s your second contact?” And I asked them to pick people who perhaps weren’t in the same geography. Don’t make me call New York if I can’t get to New York. I asked them what their blood types were and if they had any allergies to medications. I had the real sense that I was going to have to take care of them, and I think they liked knowing that I would.

And I distinctly remember during the anthrax attack thinking to myself about what would happen if we got an envelope, and feeling like—I’ve never served in the military—but this sense of, like, I will never leave these kids, ever, like I will be the last person out of this building. Mrs. Lowey and the staff are going to get out, and it doesn’t matter if I do. And that, I’m sure, was a bit dramatic, my mother would say, related to the events of the couple of months. But just feeling a strong, strong sense of obligation and recognizing that those staff were depending on me not to lose it, and so you don’t, you just go to work.

**JOHNSON:** There’s been a lot of things that you’ve talked about that lead me to other questions, but one follow-up I wanted to ask, when you talked about the delegation and the chiefs, and how closely you worked together, was there ever any sense of rivalry, or did people really work well together and divide up the tasks that needed to be done?

**COLEMAN:** So I would say there was no sense of rivalry among the chiefs, and we are a pretty competitive delegation. We can take it as a joke sometimes, we can take it lightly, but this is a delegation that fights really hard about credit and who’s the leader, and I’ve certainly been involved in a number of knock-
down, drag outs with my colleagues, and they would probably say that I played it pretty tough. I don’t have that sense at all related to the work after the attack among the chiefs. And, again, among the Members, I think they hung together really well. Maybe over time somebody thought, “I should have gotten more credit in the press for X or Y.” I’d be the first to tell you we have those fights all the time.

But, no, the New York chiefs of staff get together once a year at the holidays, and it’s a bipartisan evening for us. I go every year I can, and I look forward to it every year. There are guys on the other side of the aisle—some of them are still here, most of them are now like me, off the Hill—who I will always feel close to, even though we don’t agree on anything, because we got to know each other as people during that process, and they were great guys, and women, of course, I’m sorry. Both women and guys, but mostly guys on the other side.

JOHNSON: An important topic that we haven’t covered yet is security. What security changes did you notice immediately after the attacks?

COLEMAN: Well, obviously, the security getting in and out of the building began to be what it is today, which is pretty onerous. Mrs. Lowey and I actually shared a car, so she would drive it in most days of the week, and I would drive it on the days she wasn’t around, and so the car security got much more intense. They would inspect your undercarriage and go into your trunk, and I remember in the early days of that—now everybody I think has got the program—but, in the early days, there’d be a line stretched down the block of people trying to get in. And there was the usual sort of Members trying to skip it, staff trying to skip it. “I’m very busy, I’m very important” kind of stuff going on. I don’t think people settled down right away.
And then there became the changes in accessing the Capitol, which I regret. I think the Visitor Center is gorgeous. But I came here first as an intern in 1990 and got to go to the top of the dome with my Member of Congress, and I’ve been to see the catafalque where Lincoln lay after his assassination, and there’s a whole secret world of amazing stories in the Capitol itself. The public can see some of it now, they see it under much more restrained circumstances. I think there are staff who’ve arrived in the days since September 11th who actually don’t know that that Capitol exists because it’s much harder to go to the Capitol now, even as a staff member. You used to be able just to go to the train and get on it and go on over, and now you can’t get over unless you’ve got a staff ID. Somebody like me couldn’t go over to the Capitol after this and take a wander through that building. So, for that reason, I haven’t been in that building for years, and it’s a gorgeous piece of work. I regret that part of the change.

JOHNSON: Except for longer lines and perhaps just things not being as quick as they used to be, do you feel that the security might have impeded your work at all or the work of the House?

COLEMAN: Well, I can tell you that we didn’t love all the extra fire drills. [laughter] You know, there were a lot more explicit emergency procedures. When you walk into a House office building now, there’s an all-clear sort of tag that they put on the doors when they evacuate, so that stuff might have been a good idea. We probably should have had all those things all along, but I think the expectation of your emergency procedures is much higher. The way they drill, you know, we got an emergency, outdoor location, outside the Rayburn building, and everybody had a go box—it was supposed to be a bag, but we had to have lots of stuff. So I still have a box that’s underneath my desk downtown, it’s pretty much the same box that it was in September, like, in
October of 2001, 10 years later. But I think it drilled into us this sense that this was going to be a part of our lives forever.

And the Capitol Hill Police I think got much more aggressive, both with us and in the building in general. And sometimes that wasn’t very pleasant because it had been kind of a collegial, nice place to be, and then there was more this sense that like everybody was the enemy and everybody was to be suspected. For those of us who had been on the Hill a long time before the attack, that wasn’t what it was like here before. So that’s sad too.

JOHNSON: You talked about anthrax in passing, but I wanted to ask you a few more specific questions about that. The events were happening so quickly with anthrax. Do you remember who was disseminating the information, who was really in charge of letting the Members’ offices know what was going on?

COLEMAN: My sense was that the Sergeant at Arms office was in control of the information. I felt like it came out relatively quickly. The House was getting very negative press about its reaction, so the initial anthrax traces were found in the Senate, and the House adjourned early for the week and sent the Members home. What I recall was that we got killed in the press for doing that—that they weren’t brave enough to stand—and then, of course, the next day or that night the testing was done in the House mailrooms, and anthrax was found in the House mailrooms. I think the press sort of backed off at that point once there was evidence that there was anthrax on the House side as well.

We were shut down for a week. At that point I think we already—chiefs of staff already had Blackberrys, as I recall, so we could continue to get updates from the Sergeant at Arms’ offices. And, of course, they were communicating with the Members as well. We weren’t prepared at all to work off-site, and
you know the idea that you would take work home, sensitive work, I think I would have said we were discouraged actively. You came to work on the weekends if you needed to work, you stayed late, but you didn’t—this was a different world. You couldn’t log in from your laptop at home and do your constituent mail. You had to show up in the office if you had to write a memo for your boss.

So a lot of us weren’t really prepared to do off-site work, and that was really challenging because Mrs. Lowey was home in New York, and everything was working in New York. The district office was in the district office, and the DC office was spread out all over the world. We didn’t have an alternate location, or at least I chose not to put us in the alternate location we were offered, so I worked from a couple of different places. Friends of mine in the city [DC] offered me office space. Some folks worked from home. Mostly people couldn’t work. Because you couldn’t get into the building to get your files, and you couldn’t log in remotely, and so you sort of worked with what you had and tried to keep the staff kind of moving. And Mrs. Lowey was very impatient with that, as I recall. You know, “Let’s go,” and we were like, “We don’t have our stuff, all our stuff is up there.” So that was hard.

**JOHNSON:** You mentioned the reaction with the House deciding to recess, which, of course, was very negative. This, on top of the anthrax scare, on top of 9/11 being so close, what was the morale like in your office?

**COLEMAN:** It was bad. There was one other incident that happened that doesn’t have anything to do with the Congress, but there had been a plane crash in New York, in Queens, which is another borough of New York City, around this same time. And when the plane crashed, again, initially, there was a sense of was this yet another terrorist attack? And it wasn’t, it was just a crash, but it crashed into a residential neighborhood in Queens, a neighborhood that had
already been hit pretty hard by the September 11th attack. So I think there was a real sense among the staff that—and I remember a staffer saying to me, “I’m not sure we’re going to live to see the end of the year.”

It was a very emotional time for people, and there was this sense that life was short, and some folks wanted to go home. There was a lot more sense that, maybe not permanently, they wanted to get home. Folks that perhaps wouldn’t have gone home until Thanksgiving or Christmas were trying to get home in the fall. I have staff who I think made decisions at that point not to stay, to go to graduate school or whatever, to get on with their lives, but not to stay. And I understood that, and, as I said, a number of folks broke down, emotionally, which they hadn’t really done after September 11th. They had just come to work and done what we asked them to do.

**JOHNSON:** From what you recall, were there any major changes in office policies as a result—or office procedures—as a result of the attacks and then also of anthrax?

**COLEMAN:** Just the sense that we needed those emergency procedures and that I thought for sure I was going to have to pull somebody out of the—like there was a real sense that you were going to need that medical information. I actually still collect it in the job that I have now. I ask the staff for it, it’s voluntary, they don’t have to tell me, but I don’t know that they quite appreciate how I feel about being responsible for them. So I think our team really got that something could happen to us, and that I needed the information in order to try to do the best I could to take care of them.

**JOHNSON:** I wanted to ask you just a few wrap-up questions from what we’ve talked about today. The first one is about some of your lasting memories of September 11th and, specifically, if there’s one or possibly two visuals that,
no matter how much time passes, you think will stick with you. What would those be?

COLEMAN: I remember watching on CNN in the afternoon, so hours after the Towers actually fell, watching them play the rerun of the Towers falling, which, of course, they did endlessly for days and days. And what I remember, I was sitting with our legislative director, alone, Mrs. Lowey was in another room, and it was the first time all day that I had not been really with Mrs. Lowey or with the rest of the team, and it felt like a break. I had sat down for a minute. I think what had happened was we had typed up remarks for Congresswoman Lowey, and we had been working on that for several hours. She was very anxious to have it, and we gave it to her, and then there was this period where nothing was happening because she was reading. And so I sat down for a minute with Beth, and I looked up at the screen, and they were showing the Towers fall, and I think that’s when I really understood that there was no way that Billy could have [lived], no way. He was dead. At that point, I had talked to my family, they weren’t saying that, and I wasn’t going to say it to them, but I certainly felt like I get it, I understand what has happened, and I understood what it meant. So that for me was a very difficult moment.

The other moment, I would say, was as we were evacuating the building. As I said, it was a gorgeous day, everybody talks about how beautiful the day was, it really was a beautiful day. And we didn’t have far to go. We had like two and a half blocks between the Rayburn Building and the Democratic National Committee, and I remember sort of scurrying behind the staff, everybody in front of me, looking up at the sky and thinking, sort of anything could happen. I had no idea what was going to happen for the rest of that day, and you were sort of acting on your best idea of safety without
any real knowledge of if what you were doing was actually going to keep people safe. That image of the combination of the sky and the staff, as if I were their teacher, moving the line, has also really stuck with me from that day.

JOHNSON: It’s been almost 10 years since the attacks, and, in that time, you’ve been able to reflect some, as all people have. What is your perspective now that this amount of time has passed? Has anything changed, has your perspective changed with the passage of time?

COLEMAN: It was an opportunity for America to come together in a way that, in the end, I think we squandered. I was in Africa in January of 2002, so just a few months after the attack, on a congressional staff trip, looking at health programs, particularly HIV/AIDS programs. And we were in Côte d’Ivoire—the Ivory Coast—and Burkina Faso, two countries that in the last 10 years have seen an enormous amount of civil war and strife. Very poor countries, very heavily impacted by HIV and AIDS, and it was an extraordinary experience for lots of reasons, but everywhere we went in those two countries, people, strangers, would approach our group and tell us how sorry they were for what had happened on September 11th, which I found extraordinary. We were in places where folks who had housing had dirt floors and cinderblock walls and sort of thatched roofs. Not everybody had that kind of luxury, some people did. And there was no sense that there was television anywhere around them. I don’t remember hearing or seeing a lot of radio, so I had a disconnect of how they even knew. But the folks we talked to in those two countries said again and again that they were heartbroken for the United States, that they were so sorry for our loss. And at the time I thought, “Nobody in America knows who you are.” These are the poorest of the poor, they’re in a desperate situation—average American doesn’t think about them.
If something terrible happened, as things have—terrible things have happened in those two countries in the last 10 years, I think the average American doesn’t know and never connects. And so I was really struck by their empathy and their compassion, people who had nothing.

I think that’s what we squandered. We squandered it in the United States, and we squandered it around the world. This sense that people really had America’s back—we had each other’s for a time, we had it politically, we had it as a culture. And we lost it relatively quickly because we disagreed about the war, because we began to disagree about the $20 billion, because we disagreed about the [USA] PATRIOT Act, and we disagreed about the TSA [Transportation Security Administration]. All those decisions that the country made began to rip us apart instead of put us together. I still think we didn’t live up to our best idea of ourselves, and there was that opportunity.

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

COLEMAN: I was glad, but it didn’t change anything for me. I think the military’s done an extraordinary job. I think we’ve put them through—them and their families—just through so much in this war on terrorism, and I think they deserve a lot of credit. At great risk, that team—but everybody, everybody who’s ever been in Afghanistan and in Iraq in my judgment. But it didn’t change anything for me. You know, Billy Martin is dead, and he was irreplaceable, he’s never coming back, and there’s nothing that anybody can do or say to change that for my family and for all the thousands of other families who changed that day.

JOHNSON: With that idea of change, beyond personal tragedy, how do you think the events of 9/11 changed your life?
COLEMAN: Well, it changed my work for a time. I did not only do time on Capitol Hill working on terrorism and public health. When I finally left the Hill, my first job was in terrorism research and public health research, so I did different work because of it, and I think you care about different things. I think there were folks who after the attack up here wanted to leave. I think, for some people, it made them focus on how much we work and how hard we work and that a lot of us spend a huge amount of time with Members, and, at the end of the day, maybe we should be spending that time with somebody else who loves us. I didn’t feel that way, I felt more committed to my Member, more committed to my home state, and, for a time, certainly more committed to the institution. And when the institution disappointed me, then you just went back and relied on the affection you had for your state and for your Member. And so I think I stayed longer than perhaps I might have because there was a sense that, like, you didn’t want to leave the fight when it was underway.

JOHNSON: Looking back, is there anything you wish that you could change from the way that your office responded to the attacks or the way that the House responded to the attacks?

COLEMAN: Well, from the House’s perspective, I actually think that the request for $20 billion, which came out of a really good place, set us up in a lot of respects for the fights that were to come. And, in the end, I think it’s proven to limit our ability to address the needs of folks. I think probably the biggest aftermath—the biggest tragedy in the aftermath—are the sicknesses related to the folks who were working on the pile. And that we didn’t keep our commitment to those people, whether they were military or civilian, and most of them are civilian, and many of them are sick. I don’t think our government took them seriously, and I don’t think we lived up to our
promise to them. So, from an institutional perspective, I wish we had taken a step back and not put a hard—what we didn’t know was a cap, but turned out to be a cap on what the government was willing to do to support folks in the aftermath. I think the aftermath went on a lot longer than the government expected it would because of the illnesses, and, you know, we’re rebuilding at the Trade Center, but there’s still a huge amount of work to be done there, and a lot of compromises have been made along the way.

Personally, I don’t see anything that I regret about the way we pursued it as an office. I think we were respectful of the families in our district. There were families that were extremely angry, and some of them were angry in a partisan way, and some of them were just angry that this terrible fate had befallen someone they loved. I think we were careful and respectful. I think we continued to focus on helping communities make good decisions. Sometimes they weren’t making good decisions. When every municipality in Westchester County wants a helicopter, then you’re going to disappoint them. That’s not sensible. But I think we did pretty smart work there, too, to walk the line between yes, our communities are at risk, but, no, you may not have, you know, the equivalent of an Apache helicopter for Mamaroneck. I felt good about that, too.

JOHNSON: Was there anything else that you wanted to add today?

COLEMAN: I’m thrilled that the House has invested the resources and the time in this kind of project. I think for those of us who love the institution—and I am a House girl, never worked in the Senate, never wanted to—it’s great to see the body pay attention to the experience of the institution at a very difficult time.
NOTES

1 The Capitol Visitor Center was completed in 2008.