“There was a whole discussion around that time of ‘What do we do now? The crisis appears to be past, from everything we are told. We really need to go back, and as elected officials, we need to go back and appear in public. It shouldn’t look like we are hiding out here, or that we are in danger.’”

Steve Elmendorf
June 1, 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 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

**Matt Wasniewski** is the Historian of the U.S. House of Representatives, a position he has held since 2010. Prior to becoming Historian, he worked in the House for the Office of the Clerk for eight years as a historical editor and manager. Matt served as the editor-in-chief of *Women in Congress, 1917–2006* (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 2006), *Black Americans in Congress, 1870–2007* (GPO, 2008), *Hispanic Americans in Congress, 1822–2012* (GPO, 2013), and *Asian and Pacific Islander Americans in Congress: 1900–2017* (GPO, 2017). He helped to create the House’s first oral history program, focusing on collecting the institutional memory of current and former Members, longtime staff, and support personnel. Matt earned his Ph.D. in U.S. history from the University of Maryland, College Park. His prior work experience includes several years as the associate historian and communications director at the U.S. Capitol Historical Society, and, in the early 1990s, as the sports editor for a northern Virginia newspaper.
This is Matt Wasniewski. Today’s date’s June 1st, 2011, from the Office of the Historian. And we’re doing an oral history interview with Steve Elmendorf, who was the chief of staff for Democratic Leader Dick [Richard Andrew] Gephardt at the time of 9/11. Steve, we just want to open up with a question we’ve been asking everybody, which is—trace your personal memories of that morning, September 11, 2001. Where were you? What were you doing?

We were in H-201 in the Capitol. And we had some sort of meeting going on, and we had a large conference room at the end of the office. And I can’t remember if it was a leadership meeting or—it was a Member meeting of some sort, and we were all sitting down there. It started at 8:00. And I remember about 8:45, somebody, one of our press people, came in, and he sort of whispered in my ear that there had been an explosion in New York at the World Trade Center. A plane had hit it, but it was an accident. And we sort of kept the meeting—I didn’t think it was urgent enough to interrupt the meeting. And they came back several minutes later and said there had been another plane hit, and, obviously, then we knew that there was something unusual going on here; it was not just an accident.

So I told Mr. Gephardt, and the meeting broke up. And he and I went down to my office, which was a little bit down the hall and where I had three TVs. And we sat in the office and watched the three TVs and saw what was going on and attempted to call Speaker [John Dennis] Hastert, who, I think by then, had already been spirited away. Attempted to call Andy Card [President George W. Bush’s chief of staff], and I don’t think we got through to him.
And then, at some point—it was obviously a very confused situation, as everybody remembers that morning—at some point, there was the report that the plane had hit the Pentagon. And then, at some point, the Capitol Police came through the corridor and said, “Everybody out.” And with a real state of urgency. Then Mr. Gephardt, who had a security detail, his security detail took him and disappeared. The rest of us were just sort of on our own to get out of the building.

I remember getting out of the building. I parked on the [Capitol] Plaza—that was before they had constructed the [Capitol] Visitor Center—my car was parked on the plaza. I got in my car and drove home basically because I really couldn’t think of anywhere else to go at the time. And then once I got home, I watched the news, and I got a call at some point from the Capitol Police, saying that Mr. Gephardt had gone to the secure location, and they wanted me to go to the secure location separately. He had gone on a helicopter. And so I got the car, and—at that point, it became clear that the Capitol had—while it had been a target, was no longer a target. So I drove back to the Capitol, and they put a group of us staff, Democrats and Republicans, in a convoy of SUVs and drove us to a secure location. Then we spent a considerable amount of time, we were there from probably noon until 6:00 or 7:00 that night.

We came back, everybody together with the Members on the helicopters, and landed on the West Front. And then there was the scene which everyone remembers of the Members singing “God Bless America” on the steps. And while we were at the secure location, I was sort of—the main thing that struck me there was that—our main source of information was CNN, still. We sat in a room, and, you know, it was the top leaders of the House and the Senate together down through the Whips, and we watched CNN. And
occasionally [Richard Bruce] Cheney—I remember Cheney called several times and sort of briefed people, but I don’t remember receiving any information that was any different from what I was watching on TV.

WASNIEWSKI: I’ll come back to that in a second. But most people, it sounds like, got their information from the media that morning, and that was the case up until the evening for you too?

ELMENDORF: Yes, I think there did not seem to be—once we were in the secure location, there was an information flow coming from official channels, Cheney and others. But there was not a real—the information flow was difficult. Certainly, in that first hour, when we were in the Capitol, there was no real communication. People’s Blackberrys went down, and people left, and nobody really knew what was going on.

WASNIEWSKI: Were you at all involved with events on the floor that morning? Because it was a very quick session, gaveled in, gaveled out. But you were in the meeting—

ELMENDORF: No, I was either in that meeting with the Members and then in his office with him or my office with him.

WASNIEWSKI: Tell me a little bit about going to the undisclosed location and the staff that were there and what was the atmosphere like? What was the car ride out like?

ELMENDORF: It was very strange. The car ride was sort of weird, and then, once we got there, you sort of had the sense that there was a group of people there who had been staffing that location who had been waiting since the Cold War for somebody to show up. And they didn’t have a lot of—they had some sandwiches and potato chips, but they had not really seen any of us ever before. So it was kind of—it was very surreal, actually. One thing I remember
most distinctly was each Leader had one staff person with him. The thing I remember most distinctly was, at one point during one of the phone calls with Cheney, Don [Donald Lee] Nickles, who was the Senate Republican Whip at the time, suggested that we ought to leave. He was sort of agitated, like, “Why are we all here? The situation is clear. We need to show continuity of government. We need to get back.” Cheney was clearly annoyed by this, and his voice sort of came out of the speakerphone in the middle of the table and said, “Don, we control the helicopters. We’ll decide when you leave.”

WASNIEWSKI: A couple of the people who we’ve spoken to who were there have kind of alluded to this tension between the executive and the legislative at that point. Other than Nickles, was there this sense that “We need to get back to the Capitol”?

ELMENDORF: There was a whole discussion around that time of “What do we do now? The crisis appears to be past, from everything we are told. We really need to go back, and, as elected officials, we need to go back and appear in public. It shouldn’t look like we are hiding out here or that we are in danger.” From the news reports at the time, there was a similar conversation going on and tension going on in the White House with the President [George W. Bush], of “Where should we take him? Shouldn’t he be in Washington to show that the government is functioning?” And there was clearly a tension between sort of the security apparatus, which wanted to be 100 percent sure that everything was over and everything was fine, and the Members, who were of the attitude of “We need to get back and sort of be with the other Members and show that we’re available and in charge.”

WASNIEWSKI: So there was a decision made at one point that there would be a press conference back at the Capitol. What was the—how did that evolve?

https://history.house.gov/Oral-History/
ELMENDORF: Well, there was a discussion between Hastert and [Thomas Andrew] Daschle and—I think [Chester Trent] Lott was the Republican Leader at the time—and Gephardt, really sort of the top four, about “What do we do now, and what do we do when we get back?” And it was agreed that we couldn’t just go back and go home or do something else. So we had to go back and make some sort of a public showing that we were at the Capitol and the Capitol was safe and secure and the symbol of democracy exists, and we should talk to the press. And then, I think, there was a discussion about—we knew that a lot of the Members were still around and had been—a lot of them had gone, I think, to the Capitol Police headquarters, that we really ought to gather all the Members and have some sort of joint event.

WASNIEWSKI: Do you have any distinct memories of that evening on the steps on the East Front when the Members gathered?

ELMENDORF: I remember it was very surreal to, A, fly again, fly in in helicopters, see the smoke coming out of the Pentagon, land on the Capitol grounds with a heightened level of security that now you’re sort of used to, walking around the Capitol grounds in the last 10 years, and see people with guns on their backs and drawn. At that time, it was very rare to see the Capitol Police with a machine gun or a shotgun or anything remotely like that. The security was obviously a lot more lax. And so I was very much struck by the—we landed, and there were all sorts of people with automatic weapons and SWAT gear surrounding us, surrounding the helicopters, guarding the Members when we were on the steps. There was a real feeling—it was dusk, you could see the smoke coming out of the Pentagon. There was a real feeling of “Boy, this is something new and different that we’ve never been through before.”

WASNIEWSKI: As to the actual event on the steps, the impromptu song and—do you remember anything specifically from that?
ELMENDORF: I remember it happening. I don’t remember how—there was no discussion ahead of time, at least that I was part of, of where we ought to all sing “God Bless America.” I think it sort of just happened impromptu.

WASNIEWSKI: In the days after, there were a couple of events. There was a security briefing on the floor the following day for Members? Mr. [Jonas Martin] Frost in his interview had talked about that. Do you have any recollections of that? It included both conferences and—

ELMENDORF: Well, I think that the House is a very partisan institution and had been leading up to that event. Gephardt and Hastert had had an up-and-down relationship. I would say it was not the warmest relationship. The staff always talk. But I was struck in the days and weeks after 9/11, with that briefing and other briefings, everybody sort of came to the room with a predisposition that this is a big national crisis and we all have to work together here. And I think all of the four Leaders in both institutions sort of started with that idea.

A big part of what the Leaders had to do was manage the Members. The Members—you know, the House is a big institution. You’ve got a lot of people with a lot of opinions, and you had a time of national crisis where people wanted to do things or not do things or go places. There was both between Gephardt and Hastert and Scott Palmer, who was the chief of staff [for Speaker Hastert], and me, there was a very constant communication with each other, and then a total cooperation with the Bush White House about “Let’s all sort of figure out together what we need to do to the extent that we have problems with the Members who want to do something different, we’ve all got to work together to sort of tamp it down.”

WASNIEWSKI: Were there any special requests that you remember in terms of dealing with Members that came through the Democratic Leader’s office? You know,
Members, maybe from New York or New Jersey, who had constituencies that were really traumatized by the event? Did the Leader’s office reach out to those Members?

ELMENDORF: We were very mindful of the Members—we were particularly mindful of the Members from the affected areas and what we could do to help them deal with the people they had to deal with. And I don’t remember any specifics, but I know that the New Yorkers were, obviously, and the Members from Massachusetts who had lost constituents, were, obviously, first in our minds.

WASNIEWSKI: Any specific events about the 12th? The House had gavelled out, gone into recess, on the 11th. And, essentially, the legislative day the 11th continued on the 12th. We come back in, the [House] Chaplain [Father Dan Coughlin] offers a prayer, and the Members go onto the floor to speak about the events. Is there anything about that day that sticks in your mind in terms of the mood? Aside from this sense that we needed to come together as leadership, any specific events on that day?

ELMENDORF: I think there was a sense among the Members, too, that we had to come together, and that this was, again, something that we had never been through before. There were Members who’d been around for a long time and been through times of terrorist attacks or national tragedy, but there was nothing that sort of rose to this level. I think most of the Members were happy to sort of follow the leadership of the White House and figure out, like, how do we—what message do we want to send to the country as a group? It was obviously a challenging time because you can’t just go sort of—you had the tension between “We can’t just go back and do normal business; doing suspension bills would seem a little odd in this environment.” On the other hand, you don’t want to just shut the whole government down and do nothing for weeks at a time. So there was a lot of discussion about, one, what
response do we need to do? What briefings—how do we keep the Members in the loop? And then how should we proceed over the next days to show the country that we are here and functioning, but also be mindful of what’s going on and be respectful of people’s need for some days of mourning before we sort of move on.

WASNIEWSKI: And, again, that was very much a collaborative process?

ELMENDORF: Totally.

WASNIEWSKI: You were talking with Scott Palmer, and it was Republicans and Democrats collaborating on that?

ELMENDORF: There was—and not just the days, the weeks, the months, I’d say certainly through the end of the year—there was a total openness and communication, collaboration between the Majority and the Minority and between both Houses. And to the extent that there were tensions, and there were down the road, between leaders below Hastert and Gephardt, both Hastert and Gephardt were very strong about—that we have to sort of hold those things together and not get into fights if we can avoid it.

WASNIEWSKI: That leads into another question, which is, how did 9/11 change your everyday job as chief of staff? What were some of the effects that you felt?

ELMENDORF: Well, there was—obviously, the security changed. We work in a unique building. It’s a public museum, it’s a public building, but it’s also an office building. And unlike the White House, which has a highly structured tour program and always has—it’s even more so now—the Capitol’s always been an open building where people can come in, and tourists wander around, and they poke their head into sometimes places where they’re not supposed to, but it was not a particularly secure building. And that all changed
dramatically after 9/11, and the access to the building not just for the public but for lobbyists and for other people coming for appointments became much stricter. And there was a constant sort of—we went through a whole series of briefings and conversations with the security people about preparing for a potential attack. And that was something that we had never dealt with before, and it had never been sort of front and center in our minds.

And I remember every staff person was given a set of instructions. They were given a whistle and a bottle of water. And I remember, my office was on the second floor, and we got a whistle, a bottle of water, and a rope ladder to go out the window if you needed to escape out the window, and a whistle. I said, “Well, what’s the whistle for?” and they said, “That’s if you’re stuck in the rubble. You should blow the whistle, and they’ll come find you.” And I actually found a lot of—there were significant numbers of our staff, and I think this was true on the Republican side as well, who were really afraid. I think there was obviously a lot of talk about retaliation, and that there would be more coming, and that the Capitol had been a target. And I think there were a lot of people who were truly concerned for, not just the couple months after, but a couple years after. That this was a place that they were working and that might get attacked someday and that this was something that they were nervous about. And they were worried about their families and their kids. And we had one staff person who was our intelligence, Brett O’Brien, who was our intelligence person and defense person. We used to joke he would go up and get the briefings from the CIA up on the fourth floor in the secure room, and everybody used to say, “Well, if Brett comes back and leaves, we know there’s a problem.”

But people had serious sort of, I don’t want to call it post-traumatic disorder, but they were worried. This had never been a place you had come to work—
before—that you had to worry. And that was all fostered even more by you came to work today, and there was just a much higher level of people searching your car when you were coming to park. There were people wandering around outside the building with automatic weapons, which you’d never had before.

**WASNIEWSKI:** Did you—somewhat related question. In your role, did you ever have to field concerns from the Members about the increased security, one way or the other?

**ELMENDORF:** There is a tension, and again, it’s not a partisan tension; there’s a tension on both sides of the aisle between Members who believe that you need to secure the whole place and shut it down. There had been a discussion, I think, even pre-dating 9/11—I don’t know whether it’s still going on today—about whether to build a fence around the Capitol. And people felt very strongly that, you know, this is the people’s house, and you can’t put a fence around it. There are Members who think we ought to lock everything down and worry most about security, and there are Members who think that you can never secure everything, and you overdo it, and you need to maintain the openness.

There were daily, weekly briefings, meetings, discussions about ways in which to secure, not just the Capitol, but the buildings. And should we put a different kind of glass in the Rayburn Building and Longworth and Cannon because someone can put a truck bomb in between Cannon and Rayburn or between Cannon and Longworth. There were all those scenarios where we went to a lot of meetings where the security people would brief us on these various scenarios, particularly the top four staff people: myself, Scott Palmer, Dave Hoppe, who was Lott’s chief of staff, and Pete Rouse, who was Daschle’s chief of staff. And we’d go to a lot of meetings where we’d get
brought on various scenarios, and asked our opinions for our bosses of should we do this or do that and how do we protect against people flying planes into the building again? So you hear all this stuff, which, prior to 9/11, I don’t remember ever going to a briefing about the security of the building. And we had a year after of conversations and discussions about it, which, obviously, raises your anxiety because these people are coming to discuss this with you because they believe there is some level of danger.

**WASNIEWSKI:** Yeah. As an aside, an echo of that is that when the Puerto Ricans—the nationalists attacked the House Chamber in ’54, there were discussions for months after of kind of framing the galleries with glass and cutting off access.

September 20th, President Bush comes to the House and Chamber and gives a message to a Joint Session on the attacks. Do you remember anything particularly about that event? About a week earlier, the House had almost unanimously voted an authorization for the use of military force. Do you remember what the mood was and maybe any special preparations for the President coming down on that date?

**ELMENDORF:** Well, there was, again, an extreme level of security about it. It was the first time he’d come to the building since then, and the idea that you would have the entire government in one place, with everyone knowing the entire government was going to be in one place, so the whole security apparatus was discussed. There was a discussion within our group of leadership about the message around this. And there was always this tension, which continued throughout the Iraq War, of there were a lot of people in the Democratic Caucus who did not like George Bush. And then there were people who believed that at this moment of national tragedy, that even if we didn’t like George Bush, it was important to respect him as the President and to show national unity. And there was definitely—and in any caucus, there’s tension
about that. There were people who were not fans of his who thought he was using this event to gain too much power and that there should be some brakes put on.

But I think the general attitude of the leadership was that we needed to stand with him, and we needed to respond. And I think that the speech—to the extent that there was any, I don’t think there was ever a group meeting with the whole caucus about the speech. But I know there were discussions at the leadership level of, we have to make sure that is not the State of the Union address, where there is a partisan back-and-forth and people sitting on their hands and clapping or not clapping. You know, that we needed to sort of appear as one at this event.

WASNIEWSKI: Let me jump ahead to September of 2002. There was a commemorative joint meeting that was held in New York City. How involved was your office in preparations for that, and do you have any memories of that event?

ELMENDORF: We were very involved in it, and, as I recall, there was some—I think there may have been some controversy, controversy may be too strong a word, but there was definitely some back and forth about who went and who sat where. I have vague memories of New Yorkers being mad they weren’t included in some various things, but I don’t remember specifically at this point.

WASNIEWSKI: Did you attend that event?

ELMENDORF: I did not.

WASNIEWSKI: Let me ask you as an aside—did you ever, at any point in that year, in the weeks after 9/11, travel to Ground Zero with Mr. Gephardt?
ELMENDORF: Yes, we went. I’m trying to remember when we went. I remember going, but I don’t remember how soon thereafter it was.

WASNIEWSKI: Any impressions or memories from that visit?

ELMENDORF: Well, you know, it’s—particularly in the months afterwards, it’s a very hard place to go and not be struck by the enormity of it all. How you can have these two large buildings with thousands of people in them, and then, all of a sudden, there’s just two big holes in the ground. I think we were there fairly soon thereafter, so a lot of the rubble had not been taken away. And it was something.

WASNIEWSKI: Let me shift gears a little bit, and we’ll come back to 9/11. But let’s talk about the anthrax attacks, which just happened five weeks, really, after 9/11. It was very shortly thereafter. Started on the Senate side, of course, with letters to Mr. Daschle. But very quickly, the concern became that the House mail system, too, was affected by this. And do you remember that discussion?

ELMENDORF: I think, in retrospect, there are people who think we overreacted. There was a whole discussion afterwards about—because I remember we sent the Members home at one point, which the New York Post had a famous headline, and I can’t remember exactly what it said, but it made fun of us. It’s hard to—in retrospect, yes, I agree, we probably overreacted. But, at the time, you had to remember we were living in this just constant daily barrage of information coming at us about the potential for people to blow up the buildings, kill people, attack it in any way, shape, or form. So there was a mindset among the senior staff and the Members that we weren’t scared, but nobody wanted to be in a position to get blamed if we didn’t react and, all of a sudden, we discovered anthrax in the tunnels and people started dying.
There was a whole scenario where they thought the Capitol ventilation system could be poisoned in some fashion. So people had a lot of wacky ideas about how terrorists were going to attack us, but we had professional security people from the Department of Defense and the CIA and everybody who were telling us that these guys were trying to think of ways to kill us, and nobody thought that they would take airplanes and crash them into the World Trade Center and cause them to fall down, so there was no sort of theory that was too outlandish to us, and we were very concerned. And we came to a conclusion jointly, both Hastert and Gephardt—there was no finger-pointing, I think, between us—that we don’t need all these Members wandering around here. Let’s get them home, and then we’ll figure out what’s going on and come back next week.

WASNIEWSKI: And then the Senate caused problems by staying in. [laughter]

ELMENDORF: Yes, and then the Senate—that was one of the rare occasions where there was either—I don’t know whether it was a lack of communication or intentional, but the two bodies did not end up in the same place. And there was a little bit of finger-pointing between us, but, at the end of the day, I think we got through this.

WASNIEWSKI: Do you remember the effects of—and you’ve alluded to this a few times, but the morale? The kind of beleaguered-ness among staff? Did the anthrax kick it up?

ELMENDORF: Oh, the anthrax—particularly in the Senate because Daschle’s Senate office had to be evacuated, and they had to go work somewhere else, and they had a much higher level of personal concern for people who might have been infected in the Hart Building or exposed in the Hart Building. So it added to this whole sense of this is a hard place to work, and we all have to be worried
and vigilant, and every day it was not business as usual. And the only up side of it, I thought, was that it did create relationships and bonds between the top leaders and the top staff that endured afterwards: that maybe these people weren’t as bad as we thought they were. The sort of daily partisan conflict that we’d been engaged in, that there were sometimes bigger issues, and we could work together and try and do things in concert sometimes. It didn’t last long, but it was [laughter].

WASNIEWSKI: Tell me about the long-lasting effects of anthrax.

ELMENDORF: Well, it totally shut down the House mail system, basically. After that, I used to tell people, don’t—I used to get things at my office, whether it be Christmas cards or invitations or whatever. And just, all the mail had to go to this offsite place. And the chance of you getting something that was sent was usually five to six weeks after you were supposed to get it. So it sort of changed that whole mode of communication with the Capitol. It used to be that you could come by and drop something off at an office, and you can’t do that anymore. Fortunately, there’s email, and the Internet is a more robust level—method of communication than it was in 2001. But it did really sort of cut—the combination of the security and then the concern about people dropping stuff off and having chemicals in it—it just sort of cut a whole level of communication off with the Congress for a while.

WASNIEWSKI: Go back to some more general questions about September 11th. What are your lasting memories of that event? Is there any one particular memory that stands out? One visual that comes to mind, regardless of the time that’s elapsed?

ELMENDORF: I’d say two things. The visual is of coming back that night in the helicopters and seeing sort of the smoke coming out of the Pentagon and sort of feeling
like you were coming back to a city that was under siege. Having never been in Washington in wartime, it was very stark, the helicopter ride and the combination of seeing the smoke in the Pentagon and then landing and seeing the level of security that was around us, that was not just people that you used to see around the White House, but that you just had never seen this at the Capitol before. And I think the main thing, or the most important thing that I remember most about the day, is the moment of “We got to get out of here” in the Capitol. It went from sort of we’re sitting in my office, we’re trying to figure out what’s going on, we’re doing sort of all the things you do in terms of calling people, to the Capitol Police coming down the hallway and basically ordering everybody out of the building in a very tense way, where there was no back and forth about “What do we do now?” It was like “Oh [expletive], we better get out of here now.”

And then everybody, in a relatively disorderly way, just fleeing. There was no plan for “What do we do if we have to evacuate?” Subsequently, that was part of the whole conversation about security, was everybody had a place to go, and I remember there was a plan of how to evacuate. There was no plan of how to evacuate. Some people didn’t really know where to go, and, actually, most people went home, like I did. It was like “Well, get in the car and go.” My main sense—when I left, my main sense was to get as far away from the building as I could get.

**WASNIEWSKI:** Two follow-up questions on that. Of course, you went to the undisclosed location. Had there been any talk prior to that in your career that, if there was some kind of event, whatever it was, that the Leaders would go to this undisclosed location? Or did that kind of just happen on the fly?
ELMENDORF: None. I don’t ever remember a conversation about this. I do remember there had always been this conversation about the Greenbrier [bunker] and what to do with the location there, at one point, I remember, early in my career. But I don’t ever remember—there was never a briefing or a discussion or a drill about—not even a terrorist attack, but what do you do if there’s a fire? {laughter} Nothing. We were woefully unprepared for something like this.¹

WASNIEWSKI: And how did you communicate with office staff on that day? Because we’ve talked to a few people who have said they were in the Capitol, they were told to leave, they got out, they went back to their office in Rayburn or Cannon or wherever, and there were no staff.

ELMENDORF: Right.

WASNIEWSKI: How did you, was it just cell phone?

ELMENDORF: As I remember, it was just cell phone. I don’t think we had Blackberrys then. So I think it was just you called your cell phone, and—somebody had my cell phone number when I got home and called me and said, “You should come back and go to this place.” I remember cell phones were working because I remember during the drive to the secure location, getting a phone call from John King at CNN basically asking if I was going to the secure location. And he knew where I was going and wanted to know if that was in fact where I was going, which I found interesting. So we clearly were in communication where their phones were working.

WASNIEWSKI: Looking back on 9/11 and also the anthrax attacks, is there anything that you wish in retrospect that the response of the leadership could have been different?
ELMENDORF: No. I think we did what we needed to do. I wish we had been prepared in some fashion for an event of this scope, but it was hard to imagine something like this happening before it happened. Now we have all sorts of plans and processes, and we imagine all sorts of horrific things happening, but, at the time, it just was not something we ever thought about. And I think the leadership—I think they responded well and worked together and showed me that when you’re in a time of crisis, people can put aside their partisan feelings or their personal feelings and sort of rise to a higher purpose.

WASNIEWSKI: Two more questions. We’ve asked our recent interviewees, because it just happened, what was your feeling—your reaction when you heard the news that Osama bin Laden had been killed?

ELMENDORF: I thought it was a good thing. This guy had clearly planned this event and killed a lot of people and got what he deserved.

WASNIEWSKI: And one last question, which is, of course, this is for the 10th anniversary of the attacks. Has your perspective on those attacks and how they changed American history, how they change the institution of the House—has that changed over the last ten years? Do you feel any differently about them now than you did in the weeks afterwards?

ELMENDORF: Well, I think they’ve changed—I think there are two lasting impacts. One, as a country, we spent an enormous amount of effort and resources and time in a response. And I guess we didn’t really have any choice, but it’s unfortunate that we had a lot of resources that could have gone to other things and went in response to this. And second, I think the security—the constant emphasis on security around our elected officials and in Washington in general: I think it’s been a challenge to find the right balance. And I lean a little bit toward the people who say don’t build fences, and you can’t a hundred percent
protect everybody. You have to be prudent, you have to do the right things, but, at the end of the day, we live in a free society. Congress, as an institution, is available to the people, and it needs to stay that way. And I think there has been some amount of, sort of the over-securitization, if that’s a word, of Washington and of people who don’t look to me like they need security details running around with security details because it’s now sort of become part of their status. And I think that all has to be sort of carefully monitored.

WASNIEWSKI: Okay. That’s all the prepared questions I have. Is there anything else that you’d like to address?

ELMENDORF: The only other moment I remember, and I’m trying to remember exactly what it was that is sort of distinct, is sometime in the weeks after, there was one—legislatively, we were doing, I think we were doing a bill to sort of deal with the airline liability issues post-9/11. It was a very high-level, contentious discussion among all the Leaders. And to me, this was sort of symbolic of how people sort of came together. Tom [Thomas Dale] DeLay, who was, at that time, the [Republican] Whip, had a particular opinion. And we were in a room in Hastert’s office, sort of negotiating this bill, and the general conventional wisdom prior to this had always been that DeLay had helped make Hastert Speaker and that Hastert never spoke up to DeLay. We were trying to reach an accommodation on this bill, and we finally got to a deal, and DeLay—I can’t remember for what reasons—but he objected, and Hastert just turned to him and shut him down and said, “We’ve agreed to this, Tom. We’re not going to discuss it anymore.” And, to me, it was symbolic of sort of the chance of us reaching bipartisan accommodation on things had not been very great, and the mood in the moment had changed to the point where we—once Gephardt and Hastert and Daschle and Lott
agreed to something, it was like, everybody else, including the other leaders, were sort of told to sit down and shut up.

**WASNIEWSKI:** And that mood persisted for months afterward. Was there ever a turning point when it kind of reverted back to the norm?

**ELMENDORF:** The House is always partisan. But, I think, until we left, there was, between Scott Palmer and myself and Hastert and Gephardt, a much better relationship post-9/11 than there was pre-9/11.
NOTES

1 Reference to the Greenbrier bunker in White Sulpher Springs, West Virginia, built during the Cold War to accommodate Members of Congress in the case of a nuclear war.