“We also spent some time going to the train stations in our district, where typically a lot of commuters would be coming home and we were thinking, anticipating, that there would be some who had been injured would be coming home on the trains and we could help with the transport of getting those folks to the hospitals in our district. Tragically, as we did that that night, we would wait in the train station, and the train would come in, and there’d be no one on it.”

The Honorable Michael Ferguson
May 18, 2011
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Interview     1
Project Abstract

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

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

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

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

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

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

Citation Information

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

Kathleen Johnson is the Manager of Oral History for the Office of the Historian, U.S. House of Representatives. She earned a B.A. in history from Columbia University, where she also played basketball for four years, and holds two master’s degrees from North Carolina State University in education and public history. In 2004, she helped to create the House’s first oral history program, focusing on collecting the institutional memory of Members and staff. She co-authored two books: Women in Congress: 1917–2006 (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 2006) and Black Americans in Congress: 1870–2007 (GPO, 2008). Before joining the Office of the Historian, she worked as a high school history teacher and social studies curriculum consultant.
JOHNSON: This is Kathleen Johnson with the Office of the House Historian. The date is May 18, 2011, and we’re in the House Recording Studio. Today, I’m here with Representative Mike [Michael] Ferguson of New Jersey to discuss his memories of September 11, 2001, and the anthrax scare of October 2001. To start today, I was hoping that you could trace some of your personal memories of September 11, 2001 beginning that morning.

FERGUSON: Just for the context, I was a brand-new Member of Congress. I had been elected the year before. I had just begun my service in January of 2001. My wife and I had two young kids at the time and so we had rented a place on Capitol Hill. It was over on the Senate side, and that morning I was walking across Capitol Hill over to the House side to my office in the Cannon [House Office] Building. And on my way over, my cell phone rang, and it was my chief of staff [Chris Jones], who had said that there was a plane that had flown into one of the towers at the World Trade Center. And, of course, from part of my district in New Jersey, you could see the Manhattan skyline. Many of my constituents worked in New York City, worked in the financial district, many of whom even worked in the Twin Towers. So that was obviously a grave concern because we thought there was a plane that had accidentally been flown into the Towers. He called me immediately when he knew that was on the news and was being reported. So I sort of quickened my step to get to the office a little bit more quickly that morning.

I went into my office and sat down and asked him what more he knew. As I was turning on the television to get more news, he said, “A second plane has flown into the other tower.” And it was at that moment that I first thought
that it could have been on purpose rather than just a horrible tragic accident.

I was hoping, praying, that it was just an accident, but when the second
tower was hit, we knew that it was more obvious that this was some sort of
attack.

It was strange, too, because just the night before, I had been home in New
Jersey in my district doing a Read Across America event with Mel Martinez,
who was the HUD [Housing and Urban Development] Secretary at that
time. He was in my district that day, Monday, the 10th, and he and I ended
up on the same flight, trying to get back to Washington Monday night.
There were terrible thunderstorms that were coming through the area, so he
and I ended up sitting on our plane on the runway in Newark Airport for
three or four hours. We got to know each other quite well, developed a very
nice friendship for us. But now when we see each other, we look back and
think about that that was the night before the world changed so dramatically
for our country and for so many people that we know and knew.

So I finally got back to Washington late that Monday night. They diverted
our flight. We were supposed to land at Reagan National. They ended up
diverting our flight to Dulles [Airport], so we ended up landing at Dulles
that night. I remember being very, very tired after all that travel, finally
getting to our place in Washington and getting some sleep that night and
going to the office the next morning, and this terrible thing had happened.

JOHNSON: You said your initial reaction when you heard that a plane hit the World
Trade Center was that it was an accident.

FERGUSON: I couldn’t believe that someone would do that on purpose. It didn’t dawn on
me that someone would fly a plane into a building on purpose in an act of
terror. But when the second plane hit, we said, “My gosh, this must be on
purpose.” And then your mind starts to reel because, my gosh, if they were
going to fly two planes into the World Trade Center Towers, what else could
they do?

JOHNSON:  When did you and how were you told to evacuate the Cannon House Office
Building?

FERGUSON:  Well there were so many different sources of information and directions that
morning, and there wasn’t really a coherent plan. My chief of staff and I
talked about—my first thought, frankly, was my family, who was on Capitol
Hill. My wife and our two young children were renting a place on Capitol
Hill, and the first thing I thought was—we were also getting information at
that time and you couldn’t tell what was reliable information, but there was a
rumor that there was a bomb at the State Department that had gone off. I
suspect that may have been because there was smoke from the Pentagon that
was drifting across the river. Maybe that’s what people were seeing, or
hearing, or thinking. There were a lot of rumors. It was tough to get accurate
information. So there was the discussion, and the rumors, and then the
information about the Pentagon being hit. Then there were rumors, and talk,
and news being reported about another plane, a fourth plane, and, of course,
many of us in Washington thought, “Well, gosh, maybe the target of that is
another Washington landmark, maybe even the Capitol building.”

So my first thought was to my wife and children and thinking that we should
del them out of town and, of course, my second thought was to my staff on
Capitol Hill in my office. So I talked to my wife, and it was very tough also
to get phone connection because I guess everyone was on their cell phones
and there wasn’t the bandwidth to handle all that traffic. So I finally was able
to connect with my wife, and I said, “Why don’t you pack up the kids? I’m
going to come home and we’re going to get off of Capitol Hill.” And then I
made the plans with my chief of staff to say, “You know what, we should
probably send everyone home. I don’t imagine there’s going to be work done
today and, for everyone’s safety, it probably makes sense to get people off of
Capitol Hill.” We made that decision on our own, really before we learned or
knew of any hard information about evacuation of Capitol Hill buildings.

JOHNSON: And where was the information coming from that you received? Was this just
from watching news on TV or was it something coming from the Capitol?

FERGUSON: Well, it was so many different sources and that was the challenge. We were
seeing things on the news, but we knew that the news wouldn’t be the most
reliable information for us personally in terms of our safety on Capitol Hill.
We were in touch with the Capitol Police and the House Sergeant at Arms to
try and get the most reliable information. We were also trying to be in touch
with our leadership, the Republican leadership at the time. Then, of course,
our staff was getting phone calls from their friends and colleagues on the Hill
about what they were hearing, so there was information coming from so
many different sources. It was a challenge, especially in the emotion of that
moment and of that day, trying to digest the fact that our country was under
attack, in a way that we had never experienced before.

So in the midst of that emotion and the horror, and in particular for our
office because we represented so many people who I knew would be affected
in a very personal way in New Jersey, rather than perhaps [how] a different
district in another part of the country might be affected. We were being
impacted in a very personal way. So working through all of those issues while
trying to simply manage information that was coming in and trying to do the
best thing for our personal safety, the personal safety of our families and of
our staff, it was a very, very challenging and difficult thing to work through
in the context of this unspeakably tragic day.
JOHNSON: When did you make the decision to head back to your district?

FERGUSON: Well the first thing I wanted to do was get my wife and children away from any possible danger, so I had just walked across the Hill to my office. I then walked back across the Hill. It was a beautiful sunny morning in Washington. I walked back across the Hill to our place because I had asked my wife to get the kids sort of packed up in the car and that I was on my way home and we were going to leave town. We really didn’t know where we were going to go. I just wanted them off Capitol Hill. As I was walking back across the Hill from the House side to the Senate side, of course, you have to walk past the Supreme Court. I was walking behind the Supreme Court, and there were a lot of other people walking around at that time too, probably mostly people going home from the offices they had just gone to, to try and figure out what they were going to do. Everyone was trying to manage the information of how safe we were on Capitol Hill.

JOHNSON: But there wasn’t a full-fledged evacuation at that point.

FERGUSON: Not at that point. As I was walking back past the Supreme Court, you could kind of see in your peripheral vision, there were a lot of people sort of walking around with, not with great urgency, but with purpose. And all of a sudden, there was a very loud boom. Looking back, I can only imagine that it was a sonic boom from one of the military aircraft that had been scrambled over Washington and were now flying overhead because there’s no evidence that there was a bomb or anything else that may have made that noise.

When that happened, me and everyone that I could see in my peripheral vision stopped and kind of winced and paused for about two or three seconds, and then everyone started to run because no one knew what that could have been. No one knew the world that we were living and the threats
that we were under. They were just starting to digest that and that was just a moment that just burned into my memory because it was frightening. It was frightening for our own personal safety, and it was frightening for those who we were going to see or to try and protect or to help.

So from there, I ran back to our place, and my wife at that point had the kids packed up in the car. She was quite frightened, and our children were little so they didn’t really know what was going on. And we got in the car and we drove east and I said to my wife Maureen, “Let’s drive east. Let’s just get on Route 50 and get out of Washington.” We were just trying to get out of the city because we figured, we didn’t know at that point what was going on. We didn’t know if there were bombs or other planes or anything else, so we just headed east and we went to Saint Michaels in Maryland, which is a little town out on the coast there of Maryland.

JOHNSON: And through all of this chaos and throughout the day, how did you stay in touch with your staff to see what their whereabouts were and to stay in touch with what was going on?

FERGUSON: It was very difficult because cell phone usage was so high that it was tough to get a call to connect. We went out to Saint Michaels in Maryland and we found a little motel and just checked into a motel because it was getting to be nap time for our children. So, we just checked into this hotel and turned on the TV to watch the news. It was very difficult to stay in touch with my staff, but I had told them and we had left things that everyone was to go home or as far away as they wanted to go, that obviously there were no sort of work requirements in the near future. The most important thing was our people’s personal safety. So I asked everyone to do that. I did also try to stay in touch, as best we could, with my district staff in New Jersey because we knew that there were so many families and constituents of ours that were going to be
impacted in a very personal and direct way. So I asked them to try and keep tabs of what was going on in terms of first responders from our district.

What happened was, many of the first responders from suburban New York, in New Jersey, for instance in Newark, in Jersey City, those folks seemed to be being called to Manhattan to help with the response. So, since many of those communities that were being called to New York, those first responders being called to New York were not actually in my district. What happened was a number of the first responders from my district were actually being asked to cover for those communities where their first responders were going to New York. So there was a lot of activity on that front in our district and we were just trying to be as supportive and helpful to those first responders as we could, and my staff was doing that back in New Jersey.

With our personal whereabouts, we went out to Saint Michaels in Maryland for the afternoon, trying to monitor the situation, obviously wanting to keep my wife and children out of the city. They were wanting to stay in touch with family, to let them know at least that we were safe, and by later in the afternoon, and as we get into the early evening, my wife and I said, “You know what, there are going to be so many people in our home communities and district that are going to be affected in such a direct way that we need to get back home.” So we at that point, packed up the kids again and drove back to our home in New Jersey.

We got home late in the evening. A couple members of my New Jersey staff were there waiting for me at our home. My wife took the kids inside. I got back in the car with some of my district staff, and we started driving around the district throughout the night to the various hospitals, fire stations, first aid squads, to check in with people to see were there injured coming home? Were there people who had been in the Towers or escaped from the Towers
coming back to the hospitals, back by the train or even by car, if that was possible, back to our district? And that’s what we spent that evening doing.

JOHNSON: Can you take a minute just to describe your congressional district, the district that you represented in 2001?

FERGUSON: Sure. My district at that time, it was about to change through the redistricting process, but at that time, it included parts of Union County, Essex County, Somerset County, and Middlesex County in New Jersey. So a lot could be considered suburban New York suburbs in Northern New Jersey. A lot of communities where the train lines would come through that would go right into Manhattan. A lot of commuters in my district were people who worked in Manhattan, who worked in the financial district in particular. You know, a lot of bedroom communities along the train lines. There were many, many of our constituents and neighbors and friends, were people who worked in the financial district or in Manhattan.

JOHNSON: You mentioned what you and your staff did that evening. And in the days that followed, specifically, what did you and your family do to try to help your constituents that had been directly impacted by the attacks on 9/11?

FERGUSON: That evening, that first night, the night of 9/11 going into September 12, we spent the night—I was driving around with my staff. We found several Dunkin’ Donuts stores, who were—people were just wanting to figure out something they could do and they were donating coffee and donuts that we were bringing to firehouses and first aid squads for folks who had been on-call for a long time at that point.

We also spent some time going to the train stations in our district, where typically a lot of commuters would be coming home and we were thinking, anticipating, that there would be some who had been injured would be
coming home on the trains and we could help with the transport of getting those folks to the hospitals in our district. Tragically, as we did that that night, we would wait in the train station, and the train would come in, and there’d be no one on it.

And the next morning, we would go to the train stations, and there were a number of cars parked in these lots, just sort of one every once in a while, a car parked in the lot owned by someone who just didn’t come home. That was a striking realization that there weren’t as many folks who were injured and escaped and came home. Essentially, if there were folks caught in those towers, they never came home.

JOHNSON: Did you see any makeshift memorials that people had started to put up for people that hadn’t come home or even some of the posters that were seen in New York City for people that were missing that hadn’t returned home?

FERGUSON: They were everywhere. They were at churches, they were at memorial buildings and town halls and communities throughout my district. You know, maybe in a park, there’d be a veterans’ memorial, in a park that would end up being a makeshift memorial. And then, of course, in New Jersey, as you can imagine, there are a number of areas that are like a parking lot or something with a beautiful vista of Manhattan. That day, they turned into viewing platforms for the tragedy that was unfolding in New York and soon after that, many of those became sort of makeshift memorials for people to be able to show their sadness and their prayers and thoughts for families who had lost loved ones.

Maureen and I, as we thought about this, I felt like I had almost two roles: one as a Member of Congress, who needed to try to provide for and care for the constituents of our district, but the other role was just as a neighbor and a
friend. As it turned out, there were 81 people from our district who were killed that day. My wife Maureen and I had first said, “Who from our hometown was lost?” There were three people from our hometown who were lost that day, and I said, “Maureen, what can we do?” And she said, “What do you do when someone loses someone in their family? You go visit them. You make them a dinner. You’re a good friend and a neighbor to them.” So that’s what we did for the three families who lived in our town.

Then I asked our staff to begin to compile a list of anyone, as we were learning who hadn’t come home, who may have still been missing, who was confirmed dead from the towns in our congressional district. I asked our staff to begin to compile that list, and every day for a few weeks after that, it seemed that that list got a little longer. Fortunately, the list of who was missing would get smaller and smaller each day, and sometimes it was someone who was then located who had survived, but more often than not, it was someone who we found had passed away.

So we began visiting all of those families. It probably took us a few weeks. My wife originally just made a big pot of chili, and some corn muffins, and chocolate chip cookies that she’s famous for, and we brought these dinners to these families just in our hometown, and then when we realized that this was going to be dozens and dozens of families in our district. My wife said, “We’ve got to reach out to everybody,” so she enlisted a whole group of her friends from church and friends from town to help make dinners. So we would then go with our staff to visit these families, first to bring them a dinner to let them know that we were available to them if they needed anything.

I brought my congressional staff with us to make sure that if they had issues they were trying to work through from Social Security issues—so many of
these families had mortgages and financial situations they were trying to work out, tax implications of the financial implications of what they were going through. There were so many more practical things that needed to be addressed, but it was difficult to address them in the emotion of that time, the aftermath of those weeks afterwards, but they needed to be addressed. So our staff was helping those families work through those issues. It was mostly widows, mostly young widows, 30-something, 40-something year old women who had just lost their husbands, had children running around the house as we were visiting with them. And in just utter shock in the aftermath of the loss for their family and the shock of having to deal with so many issues that they perhaps hadn’t had to deal with before because their husband sort of took responsibility for those things in their family.

What we also did, after visiting a few families, we thought—this was a part of an attack on our country and we should let these people know, these families who lost their loved one know, how grateful our nation is for the sacrifice that they made, not willingly or knowingly, but how they were victims of an attack on our nation on the principles of our country, the values of our country, an attack on America and they were a victim of that. So I started bringing each of the families a flag that had been flown over the Capitol. You could tell by the looks on people’s faces, that that was the most meaningful thing that we could have done for them that day because the meal was helpful and practical. The visit, the friendship, a hug, the help with tax issues, these other issues, practical issues they were dealing with, that was helpful with them. But helping them put into context the larger picture of their personal loss, the context of an attack on our country and recognizing that with a flag that had been flown over the Capitol—these families seemed to be most grateful for that.
JOHNSON: You touched upon this topic, but I wanted to ask you a little bit more directly. How did you and members of your staff separate your own personal feelings of anger and grief that you might have had, and especially since this affected your district and your constituents so closely, with your job and your responsibility of having to help your constituents and to be a spokesperson for your district?

FERGUSON: It was difficult. I have a physical reaction. I get chills even thinking back to some of these episodes. It was probably the most heartbreaking experience drawn out over so many days that I’ve ever experienced. When my wife and I and two of our staff would come visit with the families, mostly widows, sometimes parents of someone who had been killed from our district, sometimes what they wanted to do was share with you about their loved one; talk to you about their loved one, tell you the wonderful and amazing things about their daughter, or their son, or their husband, and in some cases, their wife. About who that person was, about what that person meant to their family, to their children, how good they were at their job, how talented they were as a dad, how devoted they were as a spouse.

Part of our job was just to be a support, to be someone to listen, to encourage, to pray for them, to let them know they’re being prayed for. We very much felt like our job was to sort of hold it together during those sessions because it was about the other person and their family, but so many times, we would leave that person’s home, and we’d go back and get in the car, and weep, just break down. Sometimes it was right afterwards, sometimes it would be that night. And frankly there were times, months and even years later, when we would think about that and become very emotional because it was very difficult. It was very difficult to separate the anger that we
felt about the attack from the impact it had on our neighbors. It all sort of became intertwined together. It was very, very difficult.

There were even some people who we knew. I’ll never forget in one town, in Summit, New Jersey, my wife and I had our list that we were working off of, and we were driving around to these different addresses of people who we believed had lost someone because even then, you were pretty sure. You didn’t want to visit a family if you weren’t certain that they had lost someone because that obviously—it was very difficult to get good information. We saw someone whose name we recognized, and we thought, “My gosh, I hope this is not the person who we think it is.” And we pulled up in front of the house and we realized it was the people that we knew and Maureen and I got out of the car and we started walking up the sidewalk to the porch. The woman, now a widow, was standing on the front porch with a couple of her neighbors and couple of her kids, and Maureen and I walked up the front path and we both were trying to hold back tears because we were realizing what was going on and this amazingly strong woman looked down at us and she said, “I just can’t believe it, can you?” That may have been the toughest visit that we did.

JOHNSON: Did you attend any of the vigils for the victims either at the Capitol or back in your district?

FERGUSON: What I ended up doing, I think it was the next day. The Congress was immediately starting to work on legislation, both symbolic and substantive, to respond to the attacks. I know the congressional leadership was in close touch with the White House in terms of what was necessary from a military standpoint, what was necessary from an economic standpoint, to respond to the attacks. So, of course, I wanted to make sure that I was participating in those conversations and debate and legislating as much as possible, so I did
try to make my way back to Washington relatively quickly after we had gone home the evening of September 11, we had gone back to New Jersey. So I did make my way back to Washington relatively quickly because there was a flurry of activity here in Washington to try and address those things.

There were memorials, there were moments of silence, of course. There were a number of things that were going on back here in the House, but, of course, there were many things going on back home in New Jersey. It was a very difficult balance to want to be present in my role as a Member of Congress to be able to participate in and help with the legislating process that was necessary to respond to the attacks, but to also be present to the communities and families of my district, which had been impacted in a very personal and direct way. So there were a few things in Washington that I ended up missing, and there were a few things back home in New Jersey that I ended up missing because I obviously couldn’t be in two places at once.

What ended up happening, sometimes, was I would cover my legislating responsibilities in Washington, while my wife would go and participate in the memorials and prayer services that were going on at home in our district in New Jersey. And in the years since then, particularly in the first several years after 2001, September 11 was a very emotional and important day in my congressional district. In a number of the different communities, there would be many prayer services and remembrances, so I would try and get to as many of those as possible, but even then, there were so many on the same day in so many different towns and communities, you could never make it to all of them. But I would end up going to as many as I possibly could.

**JOHNSON:** In the months following September 11, if you had to estimate, how often do you think you traveled back to your district?
FERGUSON: Throughout my congressional career, I was back and forth every week. When we were in session in the House in Washington, I would be in Washington, and as soon as we would get out of session on the Thursday or the Friday, I would hop back on the train and head back to my district in New Jersey. And I would be there, usually over the weekends from Friday or so to Monday or so, depending on what the vote schedule was in the sessions in the House. So that was a part of my regular back and forth.

In the months following September 11, 2001, I was probably back and forth even more often because I’m sure there were times where there would be something going on back home in New Jersey on a Wednesday night or on a Thursday night, so if we finished votes at 3:00 or 4:00 on one of those days, I would run and catch the next train back to New Jersey. I could be home by 6:00 or 7:00 sometimes to be able to make it to a memorial service or a ceremony or sometimes there was a family that was dealing with a difficult issue or something that required my presence. So I would hop back and forth even more frequently than the weekly back and forth that sort of marked my congressional career.

JOHNSON: During this period, how closely did you work with the other members of the New Jersey delegation?

FERGUSON: Very closely. In fact, we were an interesting delegation because we were largely split down the middle from a partisan standpoint. Our two U.S. Senators had been Democrats, but our 13 House Members, there were seven Democrats and six Republicans. The New Jersey delegation, like many delegations, would find opportunities to work together. There were some issues that are more partisan in nature where the delegations maybe don’t work together as closely, but there are many regional issues, even prior to
9/11. There are always many regional issues, where a delegation, even if it’s members of different parties, will end up working together.

9/11 was something that put us all on the same page immediately. There were little nuisances of details of legislation that we worked on that maybe we didn’t always agree on, but we were bound together by a common experience and the common experience of our constituents. I would bet just about every district in New Jersey lost someone in the attacks of 9/11. If that’s not true, certainly there are people in every district in New Jersey who knew personally someone who was lost. So that kind of common experience, and all of the security measures that were necessary after 9/11—

There’s a stretch of northeastern New Jersey that touched my congressional district that’s called the most dangerous two miles in America because of the airport, the seaport. We have Newark Airport, Port Elizabeth, Port Newark, which is a major seaport, we have a number of oil refineries, many, many railroad lines that feed everywhere throughout the Northeast in terms of cargo and passengers. We knew, and the security officials of the country knew, that that was a prime place, if a terrorist organization really wanted to disrupt things in this whole quadrant of the country, that would be a prime place to try to attack. So we realized that type of vulnerability much more clearly after the attacks of 9/11.

Our delegation worked with our other colleagues in the federal government and with the administration to try and increase security measures, to find the resources that were necessary to harden those sites. We started using military terms like, “hard targets” and “soft targets,” which were more vulnerable and which perhaps weren’t as vulnerable. And what we found was so much of New Jersey was a really vulnerable target to terrorists, and we had to work very quickly and in a unified way to help harden those targets and to protect
those areas. So that was an experience both on the emotional side because of the impact the attacks had on our constituents. It gave us something more in common even than we had had before, and then in terms of the legislative response to the increased security measures for our home communities, that was something that brought us together as a delegation as well.

JOHNSON: As a Member of the House, did you sit in on a lot of security briefings? Were these common in the post-9/11 era, and, along those lines, were these divided by Republican Conference and Democratic Caucus or was this something for all Members?

FERGUSON: No, they were always for all Members. There were no partisan security briefings at all. I never heard anyone even suggest that, and if they had, I’m sure they would’ve been shut down immediately. This was a time of great unity in the Congress. It was a time of great unity in the House. There were very frequent security briefings, both Capitol Hill security briefings and briefings on our military activities. It wasn’t long after 9/11 that we began the military campaign in Afghanistan and briefings on the international goings-on and activities of al-Qaeda. There were very frequent briefings with the chairmen and others from the Joint Chiefs of Staff, with the Secretary of Defense, at times with the Vice President [Richard Bruce Cheney], with the President [George W. Bush]. When the Vice President and President would come to Capitol Hill, there were always a lot of questions about the ongoing, what became the ongoing War on Terror.

But the specific security briefings and military briefings on our various military activities were very common and very well attended. I don’t know if I missed any of them. If I did, it wasn’t common because first of all, I wanted to know what was going on and to be able to ask questions, if there were concerns from me or others in the House, to hear particularly from some of
our experts. I didn’t serve on the Armed Services Committee or on the Intelligence Committee, but there were folks who served on those committees who were very, very knowledgeable, asked great questions, and I learned a lot in that process. Much of it was classified, but at least I had a more of a peace of mind about what was going on and at least felt well-informed; such that if a constituent during a town hall meeting or folks at home had questions about these things, and as you can imagine in my district, with the impact that we had in a personal way, there were many, many questions from people in our district.

I had many, many constituents who wanted to know what was going on. And because I was able to participate in so many of both the security briefings and the military briefings, I had the ability to help put their minds at ease. Obviously not sharing classified information, but the information that was not classified that I was able to share, they were able to hear from their Member of Congress. Even the classified information that I knew about, that I could not share with them, I could at least share with them that there was very competent leadership with a lot of activities underway, and in that way, could help put their minds at ease, obviously without betraying confidence of classified information.

JOHNSON: Were these events that you mentioned back at the town hall meetings that were back in your district, were they organized by your office?

FERGUSON: Yes. We would do regular town hall meetings and other events. Members of Congress are invited to speak to groups all the time, even if it’s not a group or an organization that you helped organize, like a town hall meeting that we would organize ourselves, you frequently would speak to rotary groups and local chambers of commerce, schools, particularly university and high schools. Sometimes the school would gather the whole student body in the
gymnasium to hear from their Congressman. And then other times, even if it was just someone who stopped you in the supermarket or who stopped you after church to ask you what was going on. At least we had a lot of information that we had been briefed on on a regular basis to be able to share with our constituents to help be a conduit for that information, for them, and to help put their minds at ease a little bit, too.

JOHNSON: And you had mentioned a little while ago that on the night of 9/11, that there were people that just wanted to help back in your district. Did you also get a sense of that on Capitol Hill? Other offices that were reaching out to your office specifically just wanting to help out?

FERGUSON: Sure. There were many. The people who we were talking to most frequently were the other members of our New Jersey delegation, members of the New York delegation. We worked most closely together with those folks, partly because we had the common experience geographically, but also because we all had so many constituents who we were trying to manage all of the good will of so many people who wanted to be helpful.

There were many of my House colleagues from other parts of the country, who were not geographically close to any of the attacks, but who wanted information, who wanted to know, as part of the legislating process, wanted to know what are the impacts? What are the families in your district dealing with? What are the new security measures that you’re dealing with? We, in the New York and New Jersey delegations in particular, almost became a source of information for our colleagues around the country because the entire country’s Congress had to legislate, and it was part of our role to educate our colleagues about the impact, the very personal and direct impact and aftermath of the attacks. It was part of our role to educate our colleagues because they had to work on and vote on and pass legislation, much of which
was aimed at our region of the country. And many of them didn’t have personal knowledge or a geographic experience with our area, so the New Yorkers, the New Jersians, the folks from Connecticut, those delegations had a special role to play also and, of course, folks from Northern Virginia, folks from Pennsylvania as well because other impacts with planes going down there were involved in that process also. So we became a source of information almost for our colleagues in that regard.

JOHNSON: How did your office handle the volume of press inquiries that came after the attacks? And then, also, if you could give an example of some of the questions that they were asking you to answer.

FERGUSON: The national press was much more focused on the national figures. Our local press was very interested in the more personal angle and the more hometown view of what was going on. And it was largely, “How is the federal government responding to X? How is the federal government responding to Y?” So it was a lot of local newspapers, local media outlets, who had lots of questions and at some times, very hostile questions because the hurt was so deep in our communities and in our area of New Jersey. These reporters and members of the media, they were friends and neighbors of folks who had been lost, too.

And there was anger at times, there was a lot of frustration at times, and, of course, the federal government doesn’t typically move very quickly. So now I think in many ways, the federal government moved with lightning speed after the attacks. I mean, some of the legislation we passed and signed into law, set records I’m sure, with the speed with which it passed. But sometimes it didn’t and that can be a very frustrating process. Legislating can be messy, legislating can be difficult, and legislating can be slow. And in many cases, it was much quicker and much more efficient than it typically is to try and
respond to some of the urgent needs in the post-9/11 aftermath. But it wasn’t always as quick and as efficient and as helpful as it needed to be.

That was one of the challenges we had from our delegation, from our area, New York, New Jersey, Connecticut, and others, was trying to get the process moving more quickly at times when it wasn’t moving more quickly. Sometimes those were the inquiries that we received from our local media, was some frustration. “Why is it that the federal government isn’t responding more quickly in this particular way or that particular way?” It was just sometimes difficult questions to answer because what we, from the congressional delegations from that region, we’re spending a lot of energy prodding our colleagues and working with our colleagues and urging them on to work more quickly on some issues. Many issues were addressed very quickly, but some of the ones that weren’t—it was difficult. That was one of the challenges that we had as Representatives, was getting our colleagues to move with some more urgency, and it wasn’t always easy because they didn’t have necessarily the personal experience or the constituent inquiries that were helping us to move with greater dispatch.

JOHNSON: In your opinion, just based on what you’ve been talking about, what do you think should have been the legislative priorities during this time?

FERGUSON: Well, one of the first priorities, obviously, was the military campaign, to try and disable or disrupt Al Qaeda trying to keep them from doing this sort of this thing again. Obviously, that was the first thing on everybody’s mind. The next thing, certainly for those of us from the region, from the New York/New Jersey/Connecticut region, were very focused on the families who had been personally impacted. What was their financial state? There wasn’t that much you can do to someone’s emotional state from the federal government, but to help them with their financial impact of this.
We also had to deal with an insurance situation. And it sounds sort of unimportant in the scheme of things, but it actually ended up being quite important because I served at that time on the Financial Services Committee, which has jurisdiction over the insurance industry. I was very involved with what ended up being called the terrorism risk reinsurance legislation because with so many disasters and so many claims being made on insurance policies, it caused great disruption, as one can imagine, in the insurance markets and therefore made it more difficult the next time around for insurance companies and reinsurance companies, who back up insurance companies, to estimate risk. How could they estimate risk based on the brand new world that we were living in? A world where you’re not just concerned about a hurricane, or a tornado, or a fire, or some other so-called “act of God,” but the risk of a terrorist, causing a manmade disaster? That made it very difficult for the insurance industry, and, of course, if the insurance industry has a difficult time, any business and many times families, who were looking for insurance, also find themselves in a bind. Part of the recovery for our region was trying to get the insurance industry back on its feet. So we had to work very quickly on legislation and, because of my time on the Financial Services Committee at that time, I was very involved in that and served on the conference committee for that legislation when it was finally passed in conference with the Senate and signed into law.

**JOHNSON:** Did you find that your colleagues were for the most part receptive to the need for this kind of legislation?

**FERGUSON:** Yes, I think they were. The devil’s always in the details and working through details was always challenging, but the urgency with which it needed to be done, frankly, made people a little bit less concerned about some of the
details and sticking points. People were willing to compromise a little bit more quickly because they knew it needed to be done more quickly.

The legislative process after 9/11, at times, was remarkably efficient and fast. But one of the challenges was, as the days and weeks and months went on after the attacks, that freshness that remained in our minds and hearts, those of us from the areas, New Jersey, New York, Virginia, Connecticut, other places where we had constituents who were directly impacted, the freshness of that wound stayed for a long time. I think for folks who weren’t as directly impacted for districts and Members of Congress who represented districts, that weren’t as personally impacted, I think those wounds healed a little bit more quickly. So, one of the challenges that we had was reminding folks and reminding our colleagues that we still needed to be moving quickly on legislation to address some of these issues, and we needed to reach compromise a little bit more quickly and we needed people to put aside some of their own personal wishes and desires on legislation and quibbles with details of legislation. Some of that really did need to continue to be pushed aside to move the legislative process more quickly, even weeks and months later.

JOHNSON: How closely did you work with the Speaker’s Office, you and other Members of the New Jersey and New York delegations during this time?

FERGUSON: Very closely. We had to. The Speaker was tremendous in making sure that legislation was being shepherded quickly through the House. Speaker [John Dennis] Hastert was a marvelous human being anyway, a really good man and a good friend, but really rose to the occasion in this instance. But that happened on both sides of the aisle. I happen to be a Republican, so I worked very closely with my own Speaker from my own party, but there were few partisan differences during that time.
If the President came to the Congress and said, “This is something very important that’s necessary for us to respond in the aftermath of 9/11.” You found Republicans and Democrats working together seamlessly to say, “You know what? This is a historic and important time for the country and we need to come together.” Also, if Members of our delegations from the New Jersey delegation, or the New York delegation, or one of the other Members whose district was impacted very personally, if we as a delegation or as a group came together and approached our leadership or approached the White House to say this is something that is very important for our constituents to help in the recovery process, whether it was a security issue, a financial issue, any of these issues, transportation. There are so many different first responders who are impacted in such a remarkable way. If there was an issue like that, that we came together and approached our leadership, or approached the White House, or both, to say, “This is a need that we have identified, that our constituents have identified for us, that we need to bring to your attention.” They were remarkably receptive and helpful and, again, on a bipartisan basis.

JOHNSON: On September 20th, President Bush came to Congress to speak to the House and the Senate about the War on Terrorism, and this was for a Joint Session. What do you recall about that night and, specifically, what was the atmosphere in Congress among Members?

FERGUSON: The atmosphere was electric in a number of ways. There was a remarkable sense of patriotism that night. There was a remarkable sense of being a part of something bigger than ourselves. We hear that expression sometimes that we ought to be called to something bigger and more important than just ourselves. I don’t know if I’ve ever been in an atmosphere where that was embodied more than on that evening. It was emotional, it was unified, there
was incredible resolve in the House Chamber that night that we needed to respond and respond quickly, that America could not be taken down by such acts. That what we stand for as a nation could not be diminished or harmed by what was done to us that day. And that we would become stronger, that we could come back even better after this terrible tragedy.

The high school I went to in New Jersey had a Latin motto, called *succisa virescit*, which translated means “cut down, it grows up strong again.” And I thought about that a lot during those times, and that night, when the President addressed the Joint Session. That sort of sense was on peoples’ minds, to be supportive of our President, as the symbol of American strength and leadership at that time, and to be supportive of one another because we had to be supportive of our own constituents to help them to respond to this and to play the proper role that their government should be playing during the aftermath of that.

**JOHNSON:** I wanted to switch gears a little at this point and ask you about changes in security that you noticed around the Capitol, the changes that you witnessed and also if you think it might have served as a hindrance in any way to your job or the job that your staffers needed to perform.

**FERGUSON:** Well there are a number of different security measures that were taken post-9/11 on Capitol Hill in the Capitol complex. Certainly traffic patterns were much different: where you could park, where you could drive your car, for the general public was severely dialed back, severely limited compared to what it had been. They had to harden the Capitol as a target. It was a pretty soft target prior to 9/11. You could drive up next to the Capitol. You could drive up next to the House Office Buildings or the Senate Office Buildings, park right next door. Those were operating streets between them all. Now it’s
all part of a sort of hardened Capitol complex to make it more secure and to protect against a terrorist attack.

It certainly served and has served, I think, to make the Capitol a little bit less accessible to the general public. There are other measures now, especially after the anthrax scare in the months after 9/11, where all the mail that comes to the Capitol now goes through a screening and radiation process, for lack of a better term. And that made it difficult, too, because it meant that the mail coming to our offices was delayed by days and sometimes by weeks. It would have to be taken to a secure facility and treated and whatnot, and sometimes the mail was destroyed or harmed in that process. You’d get an envelope or a package from a child who made a craft in their kindergarten class that they wanted to send to their Congressman, and it would be mangled and sort of destroyed through that process of making sure that it was safe and secure. Those are small things, but it had served as a little separation. It had served to sort of keep constituents from being as close to their Member of Congress than they otherwise might be able to be.

So the security measures post-9/11 at the Capitol and for Members of Congress did have an impact, and I think have had an impact on maybe separating constituents and Members of Congress from one another, which is unfortunate. I was a civics teacher before I came to Congress. I believe so deeply that people need to be connected to their government, that they need to have access to their Representatives, that they need to be able to communicate effectively and frequently with those who represent them in government. So it saddened me to see that there were these little barriers here and there.

It really made Members of Congress like me and others find new ways of connecting with our constituents. So, on the one hand, it was unfortunate
that these barriers had been put up in different ways, but in other ways, it forced us to be a little bit more imaginative. It forced us to use our ingenuity a little bit more because, as a Member of Congress, you want to stay connected to your constituents for lots of different reasons.

JOHNSON: Can you provide an example of that, of how you had to become a little more creative?

FERGUSON: Well, you’d perhaps do your town hall meetings a little more frequently. You would find opportunities to bring people to Washington, bring students to Washington, and help them work through all the security measures that they had to work through. Our staff became more educated about the security measures that were in place and to help people to navigate those a little bit more quickly because, naturally, the more little barriers you put up to make it difficult for people to reach their Member of Congress, the less likely someone’s going to want to go through all of that. So we would train our staff to be more aggressive in reaching out to people who may be visiting Washington or maybe want to visit with me when I was home in New Jersey, to help them navigate the security a little bit more, to try and make it more likely that they want to go through the whole process to stayed connected to their Member of Congress.

The other thing we would do is use technology more. And as technology would advance over the years, we would find ways of using that technology to help people stay in touch with us. We would end up using email a lot more than U.S. mail. We would ask people, if they had a request or something they needed to send us paper on, we’d ask them to fax it rather than to send a letter, just because it was going to end up being more reliable and we’d get it more quickly. We’d use our webpage more to invite people to access information that they needed through the internet. So there were a lot
of ways that it sort of forced us to be more imaginative and to be more ingenious, if possible, about using technology to stay connected to our constituents because the new security measures separated us a little bit from our constituents in ways that we didn’t like.

**JOHNSON:** You brought up anthrax, and I wanted to ask you a few questions about that before we finish today. From what you recall, and, of course, these were the attacks that took place in October [2001], so this was about a month after September 11, who was keeping you, a Member of Congress, and all the Members of Congress, abreast of the unfolding events, as far as the anthrax scare?

**FERGUSON:** The Sergeant at Arms and the Capitol Police were keeping us most updated as to what was going on. It became strangely enough . . . typically in any office, the mail is opened by a designated person, right? And in our office it was usually an intern or, not a member of the senior staff, but maybe a member of the junior staff, would be the designated mail person. All of a sudden on Capitol Hill, it became not only the least desirable job on Capitol Hill, it became potentially a dangerous job to open the mail. That’s awful. So we, of course, had to employ all sorts of new procedures and tactics for who was opening the mail, including using gloves, including sometimes doing it outside. It was very unpleasant, not just because of the possible implications of anthrax in your mail, but because of the sense of danger in the office, the sense of vulnerability for folks in the office. Here you have staff who are working on Capitol Hill, many of whom experienced 9/11 personally on Capitol Hill. They’re a little bit on edge anyway and nervous just about the new world that we’re living in and here they’re now potentially right in the crossfire, so to speak, of a mail attack with anthrax.
So, then, of course, there were times when there would be a scare. Our office didn’t receive mail with any kind of white powder in it, but if an office nearby or in our building received a package with white powder, the whole office, the building, would need to be shut down and cleansed. And there were times when we couldn’t work in our offices. There were times when we couldn’t get into our own building because it had been quarantined. It had been shut down, with all sorts of biological monitors and things to test for possibly dangerous substances. So that was typical of those weeks and months post-9/11, particularly with the anthrax scare.

And for us, again, in New Jersey, there was a personal angle because the anthrax that had been mailed to the Senate offices had a postmark in New Jersey, so there were all sorts of investigations and law enforcement activities at home in New Jersey, trying to track down these folks. Who may have sent this? What procedures need to be taken now at the postal facilities in New Jersey or elsewhere to clean the equipment that may have handled that piece of mail and spread it to another piece of mail? The implications go on and on and on. And again, for those of us in New Jersey, it had a very personal component to it.

JOHNSON: The House recessed for five days beginning on October 17 for a complete environmental sweep of all the office buildings. Did your office move to the temporary quarters over in the GAO [Government Accountability Office] facilities?

FERGUSON: Some of our staff did that. Between Blackberries and cell phones, some folks went to our New Jersey office and were able to work out of there. I think we had a couple of members of our staff go over to the temporary offices just to sort of make sure we had a presence there, our phone was ringing and whatnot. But we largely made do with other technology. Some people
worked from home. Between email and cell phones, you can really get a lot done even if you’re not able to be in the office, and that’s what our staff largely did.

JOHNSON: As a Member of the House, how did you balance safety concerns for your staff on the heels of 9/11 and now with the anthrax scare with your responsibilities of running a congressional office?

FERGUSON: We balanced them very carefully. Again, because of the personal nature of the impact we felt in our district, on our neighbors, on our friends, we always erred on the side of safety. Of course, every congressional office has a lot of work that needs to be done: legislative work, constituent service work. There’s a lot of work that needs to be done on a regular basis, and members of our staff work very diligently and very hard to serve our constituents.

But, at times, if there were safety concerns, if there was a time when people didn’t feel safe in the office, if there was a time when we needed to be out of the office, if there was a time when we needed to be evacuated, we never messed with the safety concerns of our staff. Some might say, “Well didn’t that put you in a tough place with your constituents, if somebody’s request wasn’t being responded to as promptly, or someone’s letter wasn’t being returned to them with a response as promptly, or someone’s problem with the social security administration that your staff was trying to help them with was delayed by a few days more than it otherwise would have been? Doesn’t that put you in a vulnerable place with your constituents who expect great service?” And the response, of course, was our constituents were remarkably understanding if there was a security problem and they were much more understanding, I would suspect, than someone from perhaps another district that wasn’t personally impacted by 9/11 in the way that we were. So we took the security concerns very seriously for our staff or anyone else, and people
were willing to cut us slack on that because they knew the implications of what would happen if we weren’t careful about security.

JOHNSON: How would you describe the morale of your staff having to handle 9/11 and then anthrax? How did this affect your office?

FERGUSON: I was fortunate to have great staff, first of all. They’re troopers. Folks who work on Capitol Hill do it because they—they don’t do it to get wealthy. They don’t do it for the glory, necessarily. They do it largely because they really feel like they’re part of an important process for our country. They do it because it’s meaningful and it’s an opportunity. That’s one of the reasons why salaries on Capitol Hill for staff are as low as they are. It’s because people are willing to do it for less money because there’s such meaning in the work that they get to do.

Our staff were no different. They certainly fit the description that I just gave. And they were also very devoted to helping us accomplish what we were trying to accomplish in the Congress and in the House at that time. Again, because most of them had friends and neighbors and others who were impacted in a very personal and direct way by the events of 9/11, morale was—you’re always trying to make sure that morale is high. I didn’t have to do too much to keep the morale high for our office staff because, generally speaking, they had a great sense of purpose as most staff on the Hill do. But our staff in particular, I think, because of our situation, because there were 81 people from our congressional district who were lost on 9/11, felt a particular sense of purpose. And if they had to deal with the sacrifices of the security measures, if they had to deal with the sacrifice of sometimes feeling not as secure as they’d like at work, knowing that they could be potentially in some sort of danger, whether it was terrorist attacks in the ways that we saw on 9/11 or terrorist attacks through anthrax and mail, or in any other way, they
felt a great sense of purpose and were willing to make those little sacrifices in terms of their own personal security feelings because they felt like they were doing something important for the country.

JOHNSON: And you were a young Member. This was your first term in which you were elected and you suddenly inherited this incredible tragedy that personally affected your district. Did anything in your life prepare you for what you now were faced with?

FERGUSON: Just faith in God. [laughter] I had just turned 31 years old. I was a brand-new Member of Congress. I had never been elected to anything before being elected to Congress. I was relatively young. I was relatively inexperienced. I had great energy and great enthusiasm for my work and a wonderful family. My wife is an incredible person and so personally supportive of me during those times. I don’t know what could really prepare you for that sort of an experience, but because of the friends and family that I have, and, frankly, faith that perhaps, if anything, prepared me at least a little bit to deal with all of the responsibility and the difficulty of that time.

Those are probably the things that did it to the extent that I was prepared at all. There are times in our lives when we have opportunities to try and rise to challenges and that’s sort of how I saw it at that time. Not that I was the most experienced or most prepared to address those challenges and that responsibility. I wasn’t the most prepared or the most experienced, but I just saw it as an opportunity to try and rise to a challenge and I just tried the best that I could.

JOHNSON: What are your lasting memories of September 11 and, specifically, if there’s one visual memory that you think no matter how much time passes, will stick with you, what would that be?
FERGUSON: Well both the images on TV of the Towers that I grew up looking at and visiting when our family would take a day trip into Manhattan and visit the Towers, that visual will always be with me. I have on my desk still a little coaster from one of the TV or radio stations that came in to visit with me to talk about broadcasting issues, and it has on it just an outline of the New York skyline and, of course, the most prominent thing in the New York skyline for a long time was the Twin Towers, the World Trade Center. And it has that outline of the two Towers, just a simple gold line on a black coaster of the New York skyline. You get lots of little trinkets and things that people give you, t-shirts and hats and things, when you serve in Congress, and you don’t end up keeping all of it because you couldn’t. But that’s something I’ve kept with me since then and it still sits on my desk and I use it every day, thinking of that image of the Towers.

I still can’t drive in and out of New York, I still can’t drive along the [New Jersey] Turnpike and Jersey City by the Statue of Liberty and look across the river and look at the skyline and still can’t imagine that they’re not there anymore. Now they’re rebuilding and there’ll be a wonderful memorial there and a new tower, but that image. I prefer not to think necessarily of the image of those towers on 9/11. I like thinking about the image of those towers on September 10, and that’s what I hope I’ll keep with me from 9/11.

JOHNSON: Looking back, is there anything that you wish that you could change, as far as the response of your office to 9/11 or the House in general, how they responded to the attacks?

FERGUSON: It’s funny. I don’t tend to be a looking back kind of guy. You know, I probably should be more than I am, but I’m always kind of a look forward kind of a guy.
JOHNSON: As a historian, I have to ask.

FERGUSON: Sure. We need to. And I teach history, so we always have to look back, right? Helps us to look ahead. But certainly information flow was so challenging that day. It was tough to get good information and therefore it was tough to give good information. Perhaps I wish that we were able to get more and more reliable information about what was going on that day because you want to give your staff, your constituents, your family, you want to give them as much information as you can. And, as a Member of Congress, you’re looked to as a source of information, right? So you want to be a good source of information, but you don’t want to give bad information and you don’t want to spread rumors. You have to be really discerning about the information that you give out and try to discriminate between what’s reliable information and what’s not. So that was a real challenge that day.

And now, obviously, there are better mechanisms and procedures in place to get that information to people, but I sure wish on that day, I’d been able to give better information to my wife and family. I wish I had been able to give better, more accurate information to our staff and to our constituents. Even just the mechanism for getting information out was exposed to be vulnerable there because it was rare when you could get a cell phone call to connect. It was very difficult and in panic situations like that when panic can be so widespread with good reason, information is a great currency. And if you don’t have it, you’re poor. So that was certainly a regret as I think back on that.

In the days since, when I think about information flow and our response to 9/11, there were two instances in the years after 9/11 when there were two scares on Capitol Hill, when it was thought that a plane, or actually a plane breached the air space over the Capitol, over Washington, when they weren’t
supposed to be there. And on both occasions, I was in the Capitol building during that time. I think both times we were actually in the midst of votes on the floor, so pretty much every Member of Congress was on the floor of the House. The first one of the two was the worst because—this is burned into my memory. When I have memories of 9/11, some of the memories of 9/11 aren’t on 9/11, they’re post-9/11, but they’re so reminiscent of 9/11 that it’s very much a 9/11 memory.

We were in the midst of votes, hundreds of people on the floor of the House in the House Chamber, and one of the Capitol Police officers, a plainclothes Capitol Police officer, came busting into the chamber. I was looking across the chamber—I was on the Republican side—I was looking over at the Democratic side and a Capitol Police officer in plain clothes came busting into the chamber and running down the aisle toward the rostrum toward the well of the House. And the first thing that went through my mind is, “Something’s terribly wrong,” because I’d never in years seen that happen before. Capitol Police officers, there’s really no reason for them to come onto the floor and there’s certainly no reason for them to be running on the floor unless there’s something terribly wrong. So, from there, I looked to the door that I was standing next to and another Capitol Police officer was coming in to that door yelling, “Everybody out, everybody out,” waving his arms, “Everybody out.” And, of course, there was some panic, there was some yelling, there were guests in the gallery that were trying to be evacuated as well. And, of course, no one knew exactly what was going on, but all we knew was there was something terribly wrong and we needed to get out of the Capitol building. So we were kind of working our way out of the House Chamber, which is on the second floor of the Capitol, so we were all being ushered down the large wide marble stairways down the stairways down to the first floor so we could leave the building. And, of course, with that
bottleneck, you’re moving relatively slowly, but everyone was trying to be
calm, kind of trying to be supportive of one another.

And I remember walking down those stairs saying a little prayer and thinking
to myself, “This could be the last 30 seconds of my life. What should I be
doing?” And, of course, that’s why I was praying. I never thought that before.
I had never thought in my head at the time that I was existing in, “This could
be the last 30 seconds of my life.” The lasting impacts of 9/11 on our
country, but even on each of us personally, are pretty profound.

JOHNSON: I think that’s a good way to end today, unless there’s anything else that you
wanted to add.

FERGUSON: No.

JOHNSON: Thank you very much for coming in today.