“That was very unusual. In fact, the House had never convened at another place in session. Now, Representative Rangel introduced a resolution to actually require the two Houses to be in session in New York City. Under the Constitution, the two Houses cannot convene for business outside the seat of government without the consent of the other House, and it has to be in one place, it can’t be the Senate in one city, the House in another. But that was finally converted to a resolution for a ceremony during adjournments. And the two Houses went to New York by train.”

Charles W. Johnson
June 9, 2011
Table of Contents

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Project Abstract</td>
<td>i</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Editing Practices</td>
<td>ii</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Citation Information</td>
<td>ii</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interviewer Biography</td>
<td>iii</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interview</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Notes</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Project Abstract

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

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

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

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

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

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

Citation Information

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

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 from the House History Office. Today’s date is June 9th, 2011, and I’m here with Charlie Johnson, the former Parliamentarian of the House, and we’re going to talk about his memories of the 9/11 attacks, and their effect on Capitol Hill, and also the anthrax attacks, which happened a little bit later that fall. And Charlie, the first question we’ve been asking people off the bat is, what are your memories of that morning? What was your routine that morning, on 9/11, and what memories stick with you?

That it was a day that started off very routinely with the usual morning hour preceding the 10:00 reconvening of the House for regular business. The morning hour began at 9:00 a.m. I had arranged for John Sullivan, my deputy, to be there for that opening, and Speaker [John Dennis] Hastert actually opened the House for a series of five-minute speeches. There were only two, I think, [Peter Anthony] DeFazio and maybe Cliff [Clifford Bundy] Stearns or Walter [Beaman] Jones [Jr.]. They were the usual suspects.

But then, as John went to convene the House, I learned today, he told the Speaker, who presided for about a minute, at 9:00 a.m.—that the first plane had hit, and that he had no other information, whether it was a single pilot or anything else. The Speaker didn’t really take it in at that point other than as a curiosity, and then he had left the chair immediately. And after the two morning-hour speeches, the House recessed until 10:00, as per authority. 10:00 was the fixed reconvening time.

During that 9:00, 9:15 period, I was driving in, and I heard on the radio that the first plane had hit, and it seemed like a total anomaly. I don’t think any
of us patched anything together, certainly on the first hit, and assumed it was going to be business as usual—the House reconvening at 10:00. Well, then in the 9:15 or so timeframe, the second building was hit, and that started a series of events, the House having recessed until 10:00 a.m., and the House having invited a guest chaplain to do the opening prayer. At 9:52, the Speaker was in the chamber eight minutes before the scheduled reconvening, with no explicit authority to reconvene any earlier than that, and Porter [J.] Goss happened to be in the chamber. The Speaker asked him to preside just long enough to declare the House in an indefinite emergency recess.

So we put some words together to the effect that the recess was being called on an emergency basis prior to the reconvening time. He recognized the guest chaplain. He just said the guest chaplain, didn’t even recite his name, who gave a one-sentence prayer, knowing of the danger. The Chaplain knew of the second attack, and it was a very perfunctory prayer, and then Goss immediately declared the recess (without even a “pledge of allegiance to the flag”), which lasted for 24 hours and 10 minutes until the next morning, the 12th, at 10:15, whatever the reconvening time turned out to be.

Hastert, as soon as he saw Goss take the chair, was immediately ushered out of the chamber to an undisclosed place with Dick [Richard Andrew] Gephardt. I didn’t know that at the time. We were just trying to get the chamber evacuated—have some semblance of authority for having reconvened the House. As we were walking out—I say we, there were no Members beside Goss at that time, the two who had participated in morning hour were gone and we were ushered out. And as I went out through the Speaker’s Lobby, at about five minutes of 10:00, I suppose, I saw the smoke billowing up from the Pentagon through the window on the south side of the Capitol. We were out in a line on the East Front lawn that was increasingly
asked to step back by the Capitol Police. No one had real information. Obviously there’d been three hits at the time, and they suspected a fourth, and everybody’s eyes were glued to the heavens. The only plane I saw was some kind of a security plane that was unmarked. We were out there for almost two hours. I say we, mostly staff, a few Members. I remember being with Ray [H.] LaHood, now Secretary of Transportation, a good friend, and no one had any real information.

At about 11:30, or quarter of 12:00, we were told there was a briefing down in the police headquarters on the Senate side, where I went with Ray, and Senator [Robert Carlyle] Byrd was there, and we were briefed about evacuation from the Capitol. Then everyone who had been outside on the East Front was advised to go home, certainly not to go back into the Capitol. But they did allow us into the parking areas under the office buildings to retrieve our cars. So by 1:00 I was driving home.

Again, still unaware of that fourth plane. I can’t remember when I actually learned of that fourth plane. Certainly didn’t assume, necessarily, that it was headed toward the Capitol, but all indications are that it was. There was a numbness, an unawareness, which gradually gave way to an apprehension, and to a personal relief. From that point on, every day as I sat in my office for the next three years, there wasn’t a day that went by that I didn’t think of those people in the plane that had been taken down in Pennsylvania who were true heroes and certainly saved a lot of lives in the Capitol itself.

WASNIEWSKI: Going back to 9/11. So you went home in the afternoon, and were you at all a part of any discussions about the House coming back into session that day?

JOHNSON: One or two phone calls. Not that day. There was clearly no plan—the recess that had been declared, we all believed, was sufficient to carry over for
perhaps as many as three days. The House can’t recess or adjourn for more than three days without the consent of the other House, but the spontaneous gathering on the steps that night by Members to sing “God Bless America” was reassuring—as the Speaker was at his secured location, and I didn’t know where that was. There was no discussion later that day about reconvening that day. Members were coming back to the site to show that symbol of unity, which was very effective, but I was not there to observe it, I saw it on television.

WASNIEWSKI: Let’s go back to the chamber. Do you remember when the order to evacuate was given, and how many people were in the chamber at that point? No Members?

JOHNSON: Just Porter Goss, as far as I can recall. As I said, the two Members who had participated in morning hour had gone a half hour earlier and the Speaker, just long enough to be escorted out while Goss was presiding. I know that in Porter Goss’s mind, and I’ve spoken with him several times since, that was as meaningful an experience as a public official that he had, and he recalls it vividly. You know, he later became CIA director and handled himself with distinction. He had been a presiding officer on that occasion just long enough—there being no explicit authority for aborting recesses, to make it appear that there was inherent authority, which there was. There had been precedents for immediate recesses, but not with emergencies of that type.

WASNIEWSKI: That was my next question. What was the next closest precedent as Parliamentarian? Looking back, was there something to draw on, or was this a unique experience?

JOHNSON: Well, we didn’t look at the time for a precedent. We just sensed that there had to be an authority in any parliamentary body, without a formal motion
to adjourn, and taking the time to do that, that there had to be an inherent mechanism. But later on, we found—not contemporary examples of recesses—there had been some false alarms—there clearly had been disturbances in the gallery. Which at one point, the most egregious moment I can remember security-wise was a prolonged demonstration in the chamber where Carl [Bert] Albert, Speaker, ordered the galleries to be cleared. There was another occasion when a person strapped with plastic explosives stood up and yelled but was unable to detonate the explosives on his body. But as far as other recesses for an emergency purpose, there weren’t any in the 40 years that I was there.

WASNIEWSKI: And one question about Porter Goss. Why Porter Goss? Did he just happen to be—

JOHNSON: Just happened by, you know? We thought it was appropriate that a prestigious senior Member, a member of the Rules Committee at the time, be in the chair in the absence of the Speaker. But, clearly, the Speaker was third in line for the Presidency, and precautions had been taken, and there was a secure location for him, and for Mr. Gephardt, Minority Leader at the time.

WASNIEWSKI: What are your memories of the 12th when the House comes back from its extended recess? What was your morning like then?

JOHNSON: Well, then, for some reason I knew that the Speaker was in an undisclosed location for more than one day—and he may have gone back to that undisclosed location, I’m not sure—but he did come back and reconvene the House. The House then heard speeches by its party leaders, [Richard Keith] Armey and Gephardt on the occasion, and then, obviously, didn’t conduct business that day. But I haven’t really briefed myself as I perhaps should have on the full extent of business on the subsequent day. The immediate danger,
sense of immediate danger, was past. The anthrax situation hadn’t come until October 17th, I believe, over a month later.

It was clear that the two Houses could continue to recess on the next day, which they did again. It wasn’t until the anthrax situation that there was a discussion of an alternative site because there didn’t appear to be a security danger to the Capitol at that point. So beyond the fact that there wasn’t business conducted right away, as there later was with anthrax, to have an alternative meeting site potentially.

WASNIEWSKI: And do you remember anything about the mood in the chamber that day?

JOHNSON: No. {laughter} It was still hard to focus on. I don’t recall that a lot of Members came back to the floor. Their solidarity moment was the night before on the Capitol steps, so I really can’t recall the mood.

WASNIEWSKI: How did you keep in touch with your staff throughout all of this?

JOHNSON: By cell phones. When people stood out on the East Front for those two hours, and then my staff was out there, eventually dispersing to go home, there was some talk about going up the street to a restaurant, celebrating the fact that we were still there. We didn’t do that. There were constant calls back and forth about staying home until we’re sure when the business was going to resume.

WASNIEWSKI: And did you attend any of the other tributes or ceremonies in the Capitol that occurred in the days and weeks after that?

JOHNSON: Oh, yes.

WASNIEWSKI: Any memories particularly stick out?
JOHNSON: The memory of the gathering in the Rotunda for a religious ceremony. That had its own procedural anomalies, if you will. Tom DeLay the Majority Leader was insistent that the Senate be invited to the House for a Joint Session in the chamber of the House, either a Joint Session or a ceremony. Since the 1830s, the rules and the precedents had suggested strongly that no religious ceremony would be permitted in the House chamber. But [Thomas Dale] DeLay was insistent, and the House adopted a concurrent resolution that called for the Senate to be invited to the House Chamber for that religious ceremony. The Senate, wisely, I think, and [Chester] Trent Lott was the Majority Leader at the time, and I questioned the appropriateness of having it in the chamber. I didn’t think it was appropriate, for the reason just stated about the number of times that Speakers have been importuned to have religious ceremonies on the floor, and the fact that the Senate, as a co-equal branch, wouldn’t want to necessarily have to come to the House Chamber, that the Rotunda was the appropriate place. And so the Senate adopted its own concurrent resolution saying, “No, we’ll meet you in the Rotunda, in recess.” And the House finally acquiesced, but I was actually happy that that was the decision, that was the venue.

It was a very meaningful service, as I recall. Clergy, interdenominational, interfaith clergy on that occasion, it was well-organized. I can’t remember the actual date of it, but there was so much speech-making on the floor. As I sit here, I don’t have a vivid recollection of any one speech or group of speeches. I did attend, a year later, the ceremony in New York at Federal Hall for the one-year dedication near Ground Zero, and then at Ground Zero itself.

WASNIEWSKI: How was that meeting unusual? The House hadn’t met too many places off-site, right?
JOHNSON: That was very unusual. In fact, the House had never convened at another place in session. Now, Representative [Charles B.] Rangel introduced a resolution to actually require the two Houses to be in session in New York City. Under the Constitution, the two Houses cannot convene for business outside the seat of government without the consent of the other House, and it has to be in one place, it can’t be the Senate in one city, the House in another. But that was finally converted to a resolution for a ceremony during adjournments. And the two Houses went to New York by train.

I accompanied that trip, and there were a series of speeches in Federal Hall by the Vice President—[Richard Bruce] Cheney and Hastert really kind of co-preserved. And I’d never been to Federal Hall where the first Congress had met in 1789, and it was beautifully arranged, it really was. And then there was a procession to Ground Zero, which was several blocks away, for a dedication at Ground Zero.

WASNIEWSKI: Did you go along?

JOHNSON: That was one year after the terrorist attack.

WASNIEWSKI: Yes. Did you go along on that procession?

JOHNSON: Yes.

WASNIEWSKI: Was that the first time you’d been up to Ground Zero?

JOHNSON: Yes. Just a real sense of pride in the fact that I was even there. It was a historic occasion that it was the first time, really, the House had even ceremonially met outside the seat of government. For the Bicentennial, in 1989, there had been a ceremony in Philadelphia, at Independence Hall, and I attended that
as well. But it wasn’t considered a joint gathering of the two houses, particularly.

**WASNIEWSKI:** On the 14th, the House had passed a bill authorizing the use of military force, on September 14th, and then a couple days later on the 20th, the President [George W. Bush] came down and spoke to a Joint Session. Do you have any memories of kind of milestone legislative activities like that, of the Joint Session?

**JOHNSON:** Well, the PATRIOT Act, I think— the use of force preceded the PATRIOT Act, but the use of force joint resolution, as first drafted by the White House, was very broad. It was in effect, constitutionally, a declaration of war against terrorists wherever they were in the world, whenever they could be uncovered. It was narrowed to focus on the terrorists who had been involved on that occasion and passed in that form. It wasn’t like the debate on the Kuwait invasion in 1991, which was where the use of force was constitutionally at issue and the role of Congress certainly at issue. Congress knew it was playing a role. In fact, the resolution was drafted to assert that this was consistent with, not pursuant to, but consistent with the War Powers Act of 1973, which required congressional involvement on the use of force. But that went through very quickly, and I think unanimously. I don’t think anyone opposed the use of force in response to the terrorist attack. But the PATRIOT Act, later on—I can’t recall how much later on—but there were all kinds of constitutional issues which later emerged. It’s since been reauthorized several times. The issue of surveillance of citizens without going to the FISA [Foreign Intelligence Surveillance Act] Court for search warrants have remained ever since, but the whole mood was one of, certainly, patriotism and security as a paramount issue.
WASNIEWSKI: Do you have any memories about the Joint Session on the 20th when the President came down?

JOHNSON: Well, not specifically. There had been a few special Joint Sessions. There was one on health care under [William J.] Clinton. I think there was another one more recently. The one on energy under [James Earl] Carter [Jr.]. But, for the most part, presidential appearances had been State of the Union annual events. George W. Bush was greeted warmly in a bipartisan way. Other than a few pundits, there were no Members who were critical of his location in the chamber at the time. But I just remembered it being a very emotional time and unity within the House, certainly, and the Senate.

WASNIEWSKI: A lot of security procedures went into place in the weeks and months after. Anything stick out to you immediately impression-wise? We had some people—and I’ll give you one example, who—someone who had worked just off of Statuary Hall, and in the weeks and months afterwards, what got him was that it was so quiet in Statuary Hall because there were no tourists.

JOHNSON: Oh, yes. That lasted for a long time.

WASNIEWSKI: And anything stick out like that?

JOHNSON: Clearly, the Capitol is a place where people would visit, and you could sense the change and the quietness all the time. You walked through the Rotunda, Statuary Hall, you would think it was after hours, after 4:30, which had been the closing time for the public. But it was all day, all night, for months. The issues I saw develop were the security issues. You could just see the security fortress mentality take hold very quickly outside the Capitol with the streets restricted and all the blockades and what have you. That was a very visible manifestation rather quickly. What struck me were the extent to which the plans for the [Capitol] Visitor Center had to be reevaluated with security
paramount. And it delayed and increased the cost of the Visitor Center immensely.

So over time, I kind of related those two—the physical appearance of the exterior of the Capitol. I think you still had to have two security screenings, one to get into the Capitol and one to get into the gallery. I don’t think that changed particularly. Obviously there were more checks, more new police who have come along in recent years who don’t know the Members as well, and everybody, including staff, was being stopped. But I don’t have really a vivid impression because my job was to focus on procedures and not to get too wrapped up in the moment, consistent with the notion that the Capitol should be an open place for visitors. And that wasn’t always easy.

WASNIEWSKI: So what are some of the long-term procedural issues that came about after 9/11? You had alluded to recess authority earlier.

JOHNSON: Recess authority had not been incorporated into House Rules in any more formal way until a task force was formed several months later by Speaker Hastert and Leader Gephardt that was co-chaired by Chris [Charles Christopher] Cox from California and [Jonas] Martin Frost from Texas, a Republican and Democrat in a bipartisan way. They remained truly bipartisan. Ended up with a disagreement near the end potentially as to what might or might not require a constitutional amendment, in the case of a serious depletion of Membership, to allow the House to reassemble—to reconstitute itself, or to be reconstituted. The Senate, of course, had the authority under the Constitution to be reconstituted by appointments of governors when vacancies occurred. So the vacancy and incapacity issue was of some constitutional concern.
The statutory approaches in the succession law for the presidential succession, in the event of simultaneous death, and then primarily what could be done by internal rules changes, it was on that latter category that I focused a lot of attention over the duration of the Cox/Frost task force.\(^1\) We ended up with bipartisan agreement. There wasn’t any disagreement on the need to have emergency recess authority both during sessions and during overnight adjournments so that the House wouldn’t need to reconvene at the prescribed moment, but could remain—with the Speaker’s consultation with minority—in recess, pending further decisions beyond the time to which it had recessed or adjourned. And those rules changes were quite readily accepted.

Where the dispute really arose was in the question of disability. Assuming a horrible catastrophe, say a bombing of the Capitol, and a large number of deaths of Members, or presumed deaths, under the precedents and under the Constitution, a quorum of the House consists of a majority of those Members living and sworn. And that means that if someone’s a Member-elect, hasn’t taken the oath, they don’t count toward a quorum. But if suddenly 420 sworn Members were known to be dead, then the size of the House would clearly be the remaining 15, a quorum being 8 of the 15, a majority, which obviously would have been intolerable as an unrepresentative body for the country.

And so the discussion immediately shifted, with Republicans and Democrats going in somewhat different directions. Republicans wanted to allow a reduced quorum in the event—not of deaths—it was clear that there would be replacement elections in case of death—and the Congress by law originated in the House ended up requiring States to hold special elections within 49 days of deaths of at least 100 Members dying because of the same
catastrophic occasion. The term “catastrophic occasion” is in the rules, it’s undefined beyond that. But there were some Members—Brian Baird of Washington, particularly—who wanted to allow appointment of Members in one of several ways. [To allow] replacement Members either as surrogates for Members who were incapacitated, whose names were known in advance, either by appointment of the replaced Member, the governor or the state legislatures, but not necessarily in a short time by election, as all Members had always been, and continue to be.

The only way you can get into the House of Representatives is to be elected, not to be chosen or appointed. And so, together with a group including former Senator [Alan Kooi] Simpson, he proposed a constitutional amendment, having been advised by people like Norm Ornstein that it was unconstitutional to have any internal rule or law that allowed a reduced quorum based on incapacity. There had to be an amendment to the Constitution, and you should allow some expeditious way of bringing in new un-elected Membership pending the next regular election. Baird opposed the rules change that the Republicans ended up proposing, which is still controversial—although never been changed by the Democrats when they became the majority party. It basically says that after 72 hours of fruitless attempts to locate Members, in the event of a catastrophic occasion where at least 100 were missing—maybe presumed dead, but not known to be dead—that there could be a reduced number, announced by the Speaker, that would constitute a quorum for the interim until the House was replenished. Either until they reappeared or until there were some action taken to declare seats vacant, either by the House or possibly until the next election.

And so that was a very controversial issue, about what the House could do in allowing a smaller quorum to conduct business in the event of a catastrophic
occurrence. There are still some scholars who feel that what the House ended up doing was unconstitutional because they were not taking into account Members who were presumably still alive and counting toward the quorum, and that is—by clear precedent in both Houses—the requirement for quorum of majority of those living and sworn.

**WASNIEWSKI:** And did you weigh in at all on the topic of the House meeting off-site at a special site in the event of an emergency?

**JOHNSON:** Yes. We, number one, said that they couldn’t have alternative sites outside DC, one for the House, one for the Senate. The Constitution said, in another “place,” not in other “places.” But, beyond that, at the opening of every new Congress since then the House has adopted a concurrent resolution on Opening Day authorizing the House and Senate to meet in alternative sites outside of the District of Columbia. Now the Constitution allows either House to meet at an alternative site in the District of Columbia. Fort McNair is publicly known to be an alternative site if it were secure in the event that the House Chamber or the Capitol were not available, and the Senate could meet somewhere else in the District of Columbia.

The House was known to be ready to meet at Fort McNair. The Senate was not publicly known to be prepared to meet in any particular place that I know, but we pressed hard for the subsequent Congresses to delegate authority to the Speaker and Majority Leader of the Senate, or President pro tem of the Senate, to declare joint places of meeting. The House has passed that concurrent resolution every year, every Congress. The Senate has never adopted it, for some inexplicable reason—they’re a continuing body, and they can reconvene in another place in the District, or even outside the seat of government, without having to give that advance authority. They could do so on an ad hoc basis as conditions required. So that’s still an area of

https://history.house.gov/Oral-History/
disagreement, potentially, between the House and Senate. I’ve never understood the Senate’s reluctance just to adopt a resolution to give the authority in advance rather than to require it on an ad hoc basis.

**WASNIEWSKI:** That’s something of a segue to the anthrax attacks, which, of course, again, over on the Senate side, in mid-October of 2011, but fairly quickly after that, the House decided to recess for an extended period because of concerns that its postal system had been contaminated.

**JOHNSON:** That was done by concurrent resolution. I was reminded today that on October 17th, the two Houses were in session when it was known that there had been that exposure on the Senate side. The House had done business, including a conference appointment, and a short-term continuing appropriation resolution. I guess it was Leader DeLay who announced the program by saying that the two Houses would be in adjournment by concurrent resolution from the 17th to the 23rd of October. The 17th, I think it was a Wednesday, so the 23rd would have been a Tuesday, and the two Houses could go out for that period. They needed a concurrent resolution.

But one of the little nuances in the resolution was that we said that they could convene at another place. Recall authority could be given to the Speaker jointly with the Senate President *pro tem* acting jointly to convene at such times and places as they deem necessary. That was an acknowledgment that if the anthrax threat had become a pervasive issue that Congress could have gone to another place outside the District, if necessary. It’s the first time we established that authority in an ad hoc way in an adjournment resolution. But, of course, they needed to test the entire Capitol complex. I think the only contamination found was in the Senate office buildings, nothing in the
Capitol itself. But until those tests were completed, and any remediation, they weren’t going to come back into the Capitol.

**WASNIEWSKI:** Do you have any particular memories about the mood or the atmosphere on the House side? It must have been—people must have felt a little beleaguered after 9/11.

**JOHNSON:** I think that’s right. There was. There was a connectedness, it was unmistakable. The anthrax source was so obviously different and undisclosed at the time, but by the time later October rolled around—I think they did the PATRIOT Act after the anthrax scare. I can’t recall that timetable. But, no, it was not business as usual in the minds—certainly in the minds of staff and, I know, Members.

**WASNIEWSKI:** What were some of the changes in the wake of the anthrax attacks for everyday office business for you and your staff?

**JOHNSON:** None, really. Everybody felt that the Capitol Physician, the Architect [of the Capitol], and the [Capitol] Police, together—at least I had this sense of security that when they said you could come into the Capitol and work, there need not be undue apprehension. And most of the people I observed carried on that way.

**WASNIEWSKI:** Did the change to the mail procedures have any effect?

**JOHNSON:** Well, yes. That has been an inconvenience ever since. In some offices, the inside mail, and especially the delay in delivery, and the way that mailings were unsealed and resealed and—I’m still not sure that that was the most effective way—but I know that anthrax through mail was obviously a big concern. But more often than not these days, communication is electronic, and so the mailings aren’t as important as perhaps they still were then.
WASNIEWSKI: A couple of wrap-up questions, general questions, about both events, but focusing maybe a bit more on September 11th. What are some of your lasting memories of that day? Is there any one particular thing that stands out as a visual?

JOHNSON: Well, I watched the movie *United 93*, or whatever that flight was that went down in Pennsylvania. It portrayed the clear targeting of the Capitol, and it also suggested the ineptitude of FAA and the Air Force trying to coordinate. Having watched that reaffirmed my sense of pride in still working in the Capitol, but the constant awareness from that point on at least, there was a threat to the Capitol. You could see it develop not just in barricades but in the way the traffic patterns outside became more and more restrictive. For me personally, it was kind of a gradual awareness, an accumulated set of experiences that these were troubled times but that the business had to go on. The purpose of the terrorists would be greatly enhanced if they felt they were stopping the business of government from continuing. That remained kind of uppermost in my mind.

WASNIEWSKI: Almost all of our interviewees have talked about how this was such a completely out-of-the-box, unexpected event, but looking back on it with 10 years’ perspective, is there anything you see in those weeks around 9/11, or after, in the anthrax attacks, that you think that could have been handled better? We could have done better? House could have done better?

JOHNSON: Well, certainly the intelligence information that we later learned was there, or should have been there, at the airports. It was a daunting notion that we were that inept from an intelligence standpoint. I don’t know about the congressional response security-wise and politically. I think one of the salutary aspects was, at least for a time, a very partisan leadership became bipartisan in a cooperative spirit. And that was good. People of common
decency, like Hastert and Gephardt, did, at least for a while, appear to be more willing to communicate with each other. Unfortunately, that’s faded from time to time over the years, as the highest leaders in the House don’t really communicate as they did traditionally, when I began working here on a regular basis, and on a friendly basis, with social gatherings as well. That is a thing of the past. But there was that momentary time when security of the nation was visible as a unifying concern among all the Members. It’s certainly still there. Manifests itself in different ways politically these days.

WASNIEWSKI: And a final question—10 years. Has your perspective of 9/11, or the events of that fall, generally, changed over time?

JOHNSON: I’ve thought about it in the context of national security and prevention of terrorism. This may sound like a political reaction, where the “Star Wars” kind of spending was what we really had to worry about, or whether we should be worried about non-state-sponsored terrorists, much more individual, unusual source. And, of course, the creation of the Homeland Security Committee, in retrospect, I guess I should add, which happened five years later, and that wasn’t done easily. The creation of what is now a permanent, standing committee on homeland security, which began as an ad hoc committee to write the Homeland Security Act of 2002, which created the Department of Homeland Security and the jurisdictional machinations there. That was a long history that really involved jurisdictional jealousies, continuing overlaps among House committees and also among Senate committees.

But the idea that there needed to be a more centralized committee to which intelligence information could be brought in addition to the House and Senate intelligence committees on homeland security is still a problem to this day. Government reaction, whether it’s terrorist related, or natural disaster
related, there are so many catastrophic possibilities, and I don’t think we’ve really come to grips with a total range of responses because so much of it costs so much money these days. I am concerned that institutionally, while the Homeland Security Committee seems to have taken on some meaningful jurisdiction, there are some powerful committees like Transportation, who feel they have jurisdiction over port security and airport security, Judiciary on immigration issues, and Ways and Means on customs-related issues. Those jurisdictional fights are still very possible.

And so my approach, in responding, I think, to most of your questions is to have been to try to recall what procedurally I have seen. I know I haven’t given a complete response because a lot of it has been ad hoc, but there needs to continue to be bipartisan cooperation in streamlining the House’s ability financially and by rule to continue to have an open legislative branch while addressing security issues. That’s my biggest concern.

WASNIEWSKI: Okay. Are there any topics I haven’t touched on, any questions you thought you wanted to cover?

JOHNSON: No, I don’t—I know the moment I walk out the door, the answer will be yes, but. {laughter}
NOTES

1 A bipartisan task force created in the wake of the terrorist attacks on September 11, 2001, by the Committee on Rules, led by Representatives Charles Christopher Cox and Jonas Martin Frost to examine how the House should proceed with issues regarding the incapacitation of Members.

2 Reference to the Strategic Defense Initiative (nicknamed “Star Wars”), a proposed defense system to protect the United States from nuclear attack during the Cold War against the Soviet Union.