“A main topic the Intelligence Committee discussed before 9/11 was how to get people to better appreciate the threats that were out there. This question was with the backdrop of the annual budget debates about priorities, and it’s fair to say that there was a frustration within the intelligence community as well as on the committee and among the staff, is how can we, as one small committee, try to advocate for capabilities that we thought were needed when the general public was not aware of the threats. There was no clear way to articulate it. This was just sort of theoretical. That day was revealing in that it was an event that finally might cause people to appreciate sort of the world that we’re living in.”

John Stopher
June 9, 2011
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Project Abstract

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

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

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

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

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

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

Citation Information

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

Albin J. Kowalewski is a Senior Historical Editor with the Office of the Historian, U.S. House of Representatives.
KOWALEWSKI: This is Abbie Kowalewski from the Office of the Historian, U.S. House of Representatives. Today’s date is June 9th, 2011, and I’m here with John Stopher in the House Recording Studio. In 2001 Mr. Stopher worked for the House Permanent Select Committee on Intelligence’s Subcommittee on Technical and Tactical Intelligence. Mr. Stopher, thank you for joining us today.

I’d like to open with just kind of a basic question of where you were on September 11th, what you were doing, and I was hoping to get a narrative, so to speak, of that day.

STOPHER: On September 11th, the committee was preparing to hold a hearing on military intelligence. The witnesses gather in the vestibule before the hearing, so we had a number of the senior military folks there, and we were getting ready for the formal hearing to begin, which was to review the annual budget request and capabilities for the intelligence community.

KOWALEWSKI: So it was perhaps more crowded than usual there?

STOPHER: As far as visitors go, yes, we had a number of people. There were about 20 witnesses representing the military intelligence community to support that hearing.

KOWALEWSKI: So where did you first learn of the plane going into the Towers?

STOPHER: There are TVs on in the vestibule area and the news was reporting on the first plane crash. It was here very shortly after the first plane hit where we first became aware of the event.
KOWALEWSKI: What was your reaction?

STOPHER: As part of the intelligence community, we were much more aware of the threats to our country. We were much more aware of them than the general public. The idea that an organization finally was able to create such an event was clearly a possibility, although nobody had any details that quickly in the morning. It dawned on us that this was not just an accident, as some of the early news reported. When the second plane hit it became very clear that it was no accident, and from that point, we began to wonder, what is the extent of it? So I think we were pretty quick to suspect that this was an intentional event because we were all aware of the interest in striking us. Now let me be clear, we were not aware of the specifics of airplanes being used as weapons and that sort of thing, but we knew that there were a number of people around the world that would like to target some of the areas inside the United States.

KOWALEWSKI: So did you evacuate immediately?

STOPHER: No. We kind of figured this is the business we’re in. The hearing was canceled fairly quickly, and we kind of went to work. It’s hard to recall exactly what we were working on, but people were back at their desks. There was some period of time that we were working and kind of preparing for the rest of the day, figuring it was going to be a busy day for us before the Capitol building was evacuated. There were the two strikes, and the Pentagon had not yet been hit, so it was after those first strikes when the Capitol was evacuated. It wasn’t terribly long.

So we were back kind of trying to figure out how to spend our day. Even normal days in the House Intelligence Committee carry a lot of surprises and
this was just a bigger one than normal, certainly. So we were trying to figure out what we needed to do.

**KOWALEWSKI:** Were you in communication at all with Chairman [Porter J.] Goss or the chairman of the subcommittee, Mike [Michael Newbold] Castle, at all?

**STOPHER:** After we evacuated, we were standing outside in the parking lot. It dawned on us later that that probably wasn’t the best place to be standing around. Chairman Goss was there making comments to the news media and that sort of thing. After a short while we were advised to move away from the Capitol building. Chairman Goss went off to what was described as an undisclosed location that was available to maintain communications, while the rest of the staff at found places to go around the Hill—Member’s and staff apartments. Nobody was permitted to access their cars and leave, so we were all stuck in the housing area right off the Hill.

**KOWALEWSKI:** So what did you do for the rest of the day? Were you ever able to get home?

**STOPHER:** Yes, it was later that day close to the evening. After leaving the Capitol parking lot, staff broke up into smaller groups. There were probably 10 of us in one of the staff assistants’ apartments. We stayed there for quite a while and were communicating by cell phone and Blackberry. And there wasn’t a lot of information at the time. In fact, some of the information that people were reporting turned out to be wrong, but we were just trying to stay on top of exactly what was going on. Although we were on the House Intelligence Committee, we really were disconnected from everybody. Eventually, we moved to one of the Members’ apartments, and we waited until we were allowed to leave, which I think was around 5:00 or 6:00 p.m. in the evening. It was a long day of sitting around and just wishing we could do more.
KOWALEWSKI: Okay. What was the mood like among the staff after you left the building? You had mentioned that people wanted to get back to work. People wanted to kind of make sense of all of this. What were people saying as you had evacuated and then as you kind of gathered into separate groups? Was it frustrating?

STOPHER: It wasn’t frustration. A main topic the Intelligence Committee discussed before 9/11 was how to get people to better appreciate the threats that were out there. This question was with the backdrop of the annual budget debates about priorities, and it’s fair to say that there was a frustration within the intelligence community as well as on the committee and among the staff, is how can we, as one small committee, try to advocate for capabilities that we thought were needed when the general public was not aware of the threats.

There was no clear way to articulate it. This was just sort of theoretical. That day was revealing in that it was an event that finally might cause people to appreciate sort of the world that we’re living in. So I wouldn’t say frustration, but it was a recognition that we are facing a new day. And it was a new day, not just because terrorism suddenly was with us. We knew that it had been with us in the decade before, but it was a new day in that people would become aware of the threat and perhaps we could begin to better deal with. Chairman Porter Goss would say, “The world didn’t change on 9/11, people just woke up to how it was.” So frustration was not the feeling I would describe on that day. It was really just trying to get a sense of, where will we be heading now.

KOWALEWSKI: It’s an interesting point, and it brings up questions about the next day at work. What was September 12th like?
STOPHER: I don’t remember that day specifically, but over the course of the next few days, the staff and Members were in a similar situation. We were trying to understand what was in the realm of possible moving forward. Congress works on a very regular schedule, regular order, known processes, etc. This was a very different event that we didn’t know immediately how it would galvanize the Congress, but we certainly knew we were going to need to consider different options. As you know, the Congress quickly passed a multi-billion-dollar appropriation to provide immediate resources. But we were as staff meeting, saying, “What do we believe that we need to do?” Even as a group of people who think about intelligence challenges and problems day in and day out, we were still limited by our imagination on what the country might do that is suddenly awakened to something like this.

As an example, staff typically work hard to find additional resources to do something that they felt was an important priority to address a need in the intelligence community. It’s not uncommon to work for years to help provide a few million dollars. We were now in a position where there was support for increasing the resources by billions of dollars every year, even the staff that worked these problems day in and day out couldn’t imagine the opportunities that were suddenly available. The executive branch was working the same change. They had been working under the belief that there would be no additional funds in that era for intelligence because many believed that the world was a safer place. It’s not that they truly believed that, but that was what the environment forced them to plan for.

The next day wasn’t a big event for us. It took us a while to come to grips with how significant the whole event was and what it really meant when the political system and the public aligned and recognized something was very important that had to be dealt with. If you recall, in the months before that,
there was a pretty big split along people who supported the President [George W. Bush] and those who didn’t. There was this question about the validity of the election. It was really great to see both parties come together in unified, solid support. We were dealing with this as a country now. That was one thing I will always remember, is how dramatic of a change that was, so quickly after the event.

KOWALEWSKI: I think one of the most obvious manifestations of that sentiment was when the Members gathered on the East Front of the Capitol that night, on September 11th. Do you remember?

STOPHER: I was not there. I recall seeing them coming together and spontaneously singing the national anthem. I think that was all part of it. It was a strong message to our nation and the world. The unity lasted for quite a while, which was nice. I think the very strong and unified support from both the House and Senate, both parties, made it very easy for our executive branch to respond without distractions. It was really great to experience this period.

KOWALEWSKI: How did 9/11 change kind of the daily mechanics of your responsibilities as a staffer?

STOPHER: Well, let’s first start with what my responsibilities were. I was the staff director of the Technical and Tactical Subcommittee, which has a couple jobs. One is, it’s geared towards the equipment that the intelligence community buys and thinking about the long-term planning. Some of those things take years to develop. They’re very expensive. Developing this kind of equipment is a slow planning process. This is very different than the part of the committee that deals with current events, human intelligence, and current operations. My job did not change much, regarding the annual
planning and budget review. For the kinds of technical programs that the nation builds to support the intelligence community, I continued to work with the appropriators to approve the money and the policies that go along with it.

It took quite a while for the whole process to adapt to the new reality and the opportunities. We used to describe the choices we were facing as, “What is the least bad option from among a bunch of bad choices? How do you pick the least worst?” For example, we couldn’t afford everything, so how do we determine what to do without? Eventually money started flowing, and before the money, the willingness, the recognition that from the President on down, there was a significant change to funding programs and the needs of the intelligence community.

So, to your question, our immediate job was to work with the community, the executive branch, as they were looking for support from the Hill and ensure that we were guiding them according to where our Members felt that they ought to be guided. I would say that that support was very strong. I don’t remember a Member saying, “Put the brakes on,” as if this just might be an isolated event. There was none of that. The question was, what capabilities do we need so that this does not happen again? The committee wanted to fix any fundamental flaws in the organizations, address anything that had been underfunded or identified as a deficiency. They wanted to make sure that it got addressed. Our job focused on ensuring support and providing encouragement with the executive branch.

KOWALEWSKI: What kind of demands were made of your subcommittee, in particular Press-wise especially, following 9/11?
STOPHER: Committee staff never dealt with the press. That was one of the wise rules that was appropriate when working with the intelligence community. However, there was an enormous demand on the Members. Members that served on the House Intelligence Committee have unique access to intelligence, and the rest of the Members turn to them for leadership and answers. Others wanted to know what did it mean? Where do we go from here? Big questions without clear answers.

So the Members were thrust in a position, for the very first time, where the media and the public as consumers, were demanding information and explanations and things that the Members aren’t used to having to do. Members spend a lot of time discussing what they do, except on the Intelligence Committee where keeping track of what is classified and what is public information can be very hard. But now they needed to provide leadership and confidence to the country while not saying too much about our intelligence capabilities. It’s a difficult position for them to be in and one which many of them really would prefer not to be in, but that is the position that they found themselves. And from that day on, the media made intelligence a prime subject area. So for the Members it was a big change. Before that day, you’d never hear the media discuss intelligence needs or global threats, and our Members were right in the middle of that.

KOWALEWSKI: The committee’s report for the Intelligence Authorization Act of 2002 came out on September 26th. It was published on the 26th, just a few days after 9/11, and it makes reference to not being able to hold additional hearings because of the disruption from 9/11. But in it, it says that the committee held over 100 staff briefings on programs, specific activities, and budget requests. So it sounds like the full committee itself as well as the
subcommittees were quite busy. Do you remember having to go to these meetings? Do you remember what was discussed there?

STOPHER: Well, we always had meetings. I couldn’t tell you the number was right or wrong, and I’m not sure what reference that 100 meetings was from.

KOWALEWSKI: That was from 9/11 to the publication date.

STOPHER: September 11th to the 26th?

KOWALEWSKI: That’s what I understand it to be, yes. I was curious if you had a sense in your mind that, “Wow, we actually did have a lot of meetings between—over those 15 days.”

STOPHER: Well, we certainly did have a lot of meetings. We were careful, though, to let the executive branch do their job. And so although we were very interested to know everything they knew—and a responsibility to conduct oversight, we had guidelines to not get in the way. So do our job to the degree we can. If I recall, the committee mark initially authorized one level of funding, and then a second authorization was passed at a higher level. That process was where the Members wanted to make a clear statement about authorizing higher levels. We were taking lots of briefings on programs, funding, and authorities at the time, but the 100 briefings may have also included briefings during the period that began before 9/11 but pertained to the annual authorization.

KOWALEWSKI: So no less busy than usual? For a standard—

STOPHER: It was certainly not less busy. It was busy. In fact, I think our committee had been operating on a fairly high tempo for quite some time because there was a number of things going on in the world before that time that kept us busy. But after 9/11, the number of briefings and meetings did increase
dramatically, that’s for sure, but I don’t recall if there were 100. But the committee often operated in two subcommittees: HACI [HUMINT, Analysis, and Counter Intelligence] and T&T [Technical and Tactical] that worked separately. HACI had people who were experts on the human intelligence side of things, and T&T had experts on technical matters. We would focus our efforts aligned in those areas and come together as a whole committee for general matters. Nobody could piece all of that information together, so 100 briefings were probably true overall, but it was spread through a lot of different staff and Members who were taking them at the time.

KOWALEWSKI: What executive agencies were you dealing with most prominently?

STOPHER: In 2001 the Director of Central Intelligence and the community management staff sat at the top of the intelligence community. That structure was the main interface. The DCI was also the director of the CIA, so clearly the CIA was involved. The CIA is an all-source intelligence agency that combines and integrates intelligence from across the community, so they were the agency to go to for understanding who the likely terrorists were. The CIA was the lead agency for most issues. There’s a variety of other elements of the community that support intelligence issues, such as the National Reconnaissance Office. The NRO takes pictures and collects electronic communications around the world and provides the collection to agencies that specialize in analyzing it. For example, the NGA [National Geospatial-Intelligence Agency] would look at training camps, or the National Security Agency would listen to their conversations. Each element of the intelligence would focus on a different aspect of this event, and we would work with each of them to find out what they knew, what were they
doing, and what their role was in responding to this. The committee spread out working directly with all of them.

**KOWALEWSKI:** Well, the next big event after 9/11 was the Joint Session on the 20th, when President Bush came to address both chambers on the House Floor. Do you remember that event?

**STOPHER:** I do. I watched it on TV, but I do remember it very well. I was very impressed with how President Bush delivered the message. I thought it was appropriate. I think he made—speaking either from an American citizen or as a committee staff, I felt like we knew that we were going to go fix the problem. He gave a lot of us confidence and optimism that we were moving forward with very deliberate objectives.

**KOWALEWSKI:** How closely did the intelligence community work with other committees that had overlapping jurisdiction? Foreign Affairs? Judiciary? Appropriations? Was there a lot of communication between the two committees and your subcommittee in particular?

**STOPHER:** My subcommittee did not have much of a need to work with Judiciary or Foreign Affairs, that sort of thing. We would work with Appropriations, specifically the Defense Subcommittee, about funding levels, where the needs were, and to the degree that we worked with them, tried to identify what we felt were really the best priorities and how to help the executive branch move towards those goals. The Armed Services Committee is similar because we share jurisdiction over the Military Intelligence Programs—this is the budget category that funds military specific intelligence programs. So we did not interact with other committees very much at all.

**KOWALEWSKI:** Okay. What about the Joint Committee created a few months later—the separate Joint Committee to investigate this whole thing?
STOPHER: Yes, the investigation, the 9/11 Commission.\(^3\) The Members of the HPSCI [House Permanent Select Committee on Intelligence] and the SSCI [Senate Select Committee on Intelligence] served on the joint committee, but the staff was separate, since our normal responsibilities continued and required us to stay focused and so they put together a staff to serve them. We really treated that as an independent group, and I think that was very appropriate. We didn’t feel that we were in a position to influence their recommendations at all. Initially, there was a pretty wide range of views on whether such a commission would be helpful. In the end, it turns out that they had a pretty good product that really served, I think, the American people as a very easy-to-read explanation of what happened. There are some rumors and things out there that I think they helped to clarify. So I think it was a good—the commission did a nice job for what they were asked to do. But we didn’t interact with them really much at all.

KOWALEWSKI: The reason I ask is because you talked about this sense that for the first time in a long time there was a sense across the board in the country that, okay, there was this—there was a common sentiment. Like people seemed to be coming together on both sides of the aisle. So I’m kind of curious to know how the House culture itself changed. How daily business changed. How your interactions with other staffers who may not even have been on the committee, who may have worked on separate committees, and not just on the much larger, overlapping committee jurisdiction, but whether or not you forged new relationships with other people outside the zone that you usually operated in.

STOPHER: Okay. So this does not have to do with the Joint Committee?

KOWALEWSKI: No, this does not. This is kind of—
STOPHER: Just in general.

KOWALEWSKI: I’m surprised that there wasn’t as much interaction there, and so I’m kind of curious to know what you remember about the House culture in general. Whether that was symptomatic of something much larger, or whether or not that was just the way the job description was written.

STOPHER: Part of the culture of the House Intelligence Committee was because of the classified nature of the work and the obligation to protect secrets—we had pretty rigid rules about who could come into the spaces and what could be discussed. But I will give you an example of one area that is fairly sensitive that we eventually ended up having to work closely with other committees.

Sometime after all of this, it became publicly known that the President had authorized a controversial program called the Terrorist Surveillance Program. And that allowed—I’ll just call it a streamlined way of listening in on phone calls, compared to the normal process. Now this was a very political issue, and it got to the argument of whether the President’s constitutional authority to protect Americans outweighed some of the statutory obligations of processes. I won’t comment on that, but it did open up quite a bit of dialogue between Judiciary and other committees about how to help get through this.

There was a lot of politics getting in the way, and our committee, particularly the Technical and Tactical Subcommittee, was looking at how do we take the laws that are, some would argue, outdated and modernize them in a way that many people believed they needed to be modernized. And others, quite frankly, they had different views. We had to work with other committees to get through this. So that is an example of a specific issue that extended beyond our jurisdiction and required us to work with other committees.
KOWALEWSKI: Interesting. Very interesting. What about the Capitol complex itself? What kind of changes did you notice just coming to work every day?

STOPHER: One of the sad things was the changes to the Capitol. Working on the Hill, to me, was a lot like a college campus. There were always protesters and tourists. Before, we were allowed to walk around on a significant part of the Capitol and have lunch, and those kinds of things. Fairly quickly a lot of that was blocked off. And, even as annoying as some of the protesters were, I missed them because the environment reminded you every day that it’s about the free speech, and that’s what we’re there for. I will always remember that as being a change. It may not sound like a big change, but to me, having experienced what it was like before and then, unfortunately, what it was afterwards, I thought that was really kind of sad. But that was my personal observation.

There was a lot of consideration given to continuous operations of the Capitol and the process as itself, and that extended down to the committees themselves. Each committee, as far as I know, I know our committee had to develop a plan with alternate sites, contact plans, certain equipment that you would have to have in a flyaway bag, and those kinds of things. So we all had to go through that, but that’s just smart planning. But it didn’t change the way we really worked or the way we operated on a regular basis. It was just planning.

So other than that, I wouldn’t say there was a great deal of change before and after. Certainly that the interest in intelligence issues from the public changed quite a bit. For example, just how you argue over what the country’s priorities and needs were was a very different argument after 9/11 than before. For example, pre-9/11 how to pay for prescription drugs, Medicare, those kinds of things were the priority, and it was generally accepted that
intelligence budgets were not going to change. That wasn’t the argument for the first time. It was, where are we going to bring this country as far as its capabilities? We knew that the President would get strong support for increases.

KOWALEWSKI: So the security measures put in place, the blockades, the barriers, the increased—the greater number of metal detectors and whatnot, that didn’t strike you as all that jarring?

STOPHER: No, it didn’t. And perhaps that’s because when you work in the intelligence community you pass through those kinds of things regularly. Whenever you visit an agency, there’s security checkpoints and processes. The changes to the Capitol building were relatively minor as far as I am used to. And, in fact, I’m having a hard time recalling, but I think in ’98, an officer was killed outside the door or right inside. Was it two officers?4

KOWALEWSKI: Two officers.

STOPHER: Chestnut was one of them and—

KOWALEWSKI: Gibson.

STOPHER: Gibson, yes. And that caused some security changes itself, so there had been some small changes even before 9/11. But the physical things like parking was more difficult; the side streets and things like that were small changes. But the barriers, they were the visible—that was the reminder that things had changed. But it’s kind of superficial. It didn’t change our day-to-day life.

KOWALEWSKI: That’s an interesting perspective, that the intelligence perspective coming and saying, “Well, this was kind of something I had been used to,” so to speak.
What about the commemorative session a year later? Did you take part in that at all? Do you remember?

STOPHER: I didn’t take part, and I don’t actually recall much about that. I remember on the day thinking, “If ever there was a day that something might happen, that’s certainly one of them.” But we had such—I’ll speak for most people—we had such high faith in our community to understand where the threats were and prevent them that I don’t know anybody who didn’t show up to work that day or any other day based on threat reporting.

KOWALEWSKI: That’s interesting. That asks another question of, did you hear of other people who left the Hill, who had worked here and decided, enough is enough, I can’t deal with the psychological burden, so to speak, and left?

STOPHER: Yes, I think there were a couple, but that is not uncommon on the Hill. This is a high-stress area to work. But some people became aware for the first time that the Capitol was a target, whether international or domestic. If the Capitol building is hit, it will generate worldwide attention, and so I think people became aware of that. If they hadn’t been before 9/11, they certainly were after.

Another thing was how the Capitol Police were changing their procedures as far as how to deal with or respond to threats. And you may recall, there were some small aircraft incidents that required everybody to evacuate the Capitol. Looking back on it, it was actually a funny situation. Since childhood, if there is an emergency we are brought up to very calmly stand up and walk out of the building in an orderly manner. And I remember that day [June 9, 2004], the Capitol Police had their guns out, yelling for people to run. I mean, two blocks away they were still telling people to run. There were shoes everywhere. This was chaos, only to find out that it was some small plane
that would have bounced off the dome if it hit it. I’m not criticizing. It was just a little bit amusing. I think we all had to go through kind of, “How do you react to the threats? What threats are real, and when do you ring the bell and get people out of the building?” So it’s not a criticism. It was just a learning period, and everybody was certainly on edge. If they were told to get out of the building, you get out. It was an interesting period of time.

**KOWALEWSKI:** Before we move on to anthrax—speaking of other threats—is there anything you would have done differently in your response? Maybe as staff director or just personally with regards to the after-effect of 9/11? The legislative after-effect—the legislative agenda of the committee? Your own interests? Anything you would have done differently?

**STOPHER:** Well, I would never cast it in a way that what was done fell short of what was appropriate at the time. Again, I think you take things one day at a time; eventually you are getting a handle on everything that happened. I can’t think of anything that I would have done differently. Certainly, there are programs that I would love for the country to spend more money on, but everybody has a different list of those things. But somewhere in there, there’s tension that balances it all. I would say no, there’s nothing I would do differently.

I think one of the best things we did, again, was we recognized that Congress has a role in all of this. And for the period right after, our role was to support the executive branch to deal with this problem. And there would be times later, when it was time to review policies, whether it was interrogation policies, or eavesdropping, or whatever it is. There would be time to get an understanding of whether the laws that we had were appropriate or not. We got out of the way, we were supportive, and then we got back into the annual
synchronized process where we review the requests, perform oversight, and help them along.

So no, I wouldn’t do anything differently. I think that we were very lucky to have the Members on the committee that we did. Porter Goss is really one of the greatest men that I’ve ever met with incredible judgment, and so I was very proud with him as chairman. There were just a number of Members, I think, who really did a great job. It was a great time to work on a committee. I would never have said that there was any politics in that committee back at that time. It was really a perfect committee to work on.

**KOWALEWSKI:** Was there anything else you wanted to add about 9/11 before we go to anthrax?

**STOPHER:** No. I’ll let you know if I think of something. Are we done?

**KOWALEWSKI:** Well, we’re going to move to anthrax if that’s all right.

**STOPHER:** Okay, sure.

**KOWALEWSKI:** So not unlike our discussion on 9/11. Where were you on October 15th? What were you doing? When did you first hear of the letter having been opened in Senator [Thomas Andrew] Daschle’s office?

**STOPHER:** That I don’t recall exactly. I vaguely remember hearing about it, and it was a strange event. I did become more interested when anthrax was found in an elevator right outside the Senate Intelligence Committee. I had been over there, and it was advised that anybody who had been in that area should go get checked, and just as a precaution they were put on antibiotics. So many of us did that. I think even if you had no reason to think that you were over in that area a lot of people got on the antibiotics just as a precaution. But it
wasn’t a big event in my recollection. From inside the intelligence community, there was no indication that it was a foreign terrorist threat. If it had been, we probably would have spent a lot more time on it, but again, I don’t think it was a big event that caused much change in the committee or how we were operating regularly.

KOWALEWSKI: It took a while for the potency of the anthrax to become kind of publicly known. It took it—I don’t know—I can’t remember how many days, but it was a while before people realized how dangerous this strain was. How finely milled it had been that you could flick the envelope, essentially, and a puff of anthrax would disperse.

STOPHER: Yes. In fact, we had several briefings on that. We had experts who came in and had expert testimony about what is involved in creating the spores of that quality, that consistency. And it was clear that it was not just an insignificant thing. Again, it was curious. A few people died that were way out of town, up the East Coast or something. There were some mailrooms in Philadelphia or New Jersey that were shut down. So it was just a strange thing that—again, we didn’t have intelligence reporting on that I can recall. This issue highlights a very important difference between our committee and others. This appeared to be a domestic issue and a law enforcement issue, which is not our jurisdiction. We were interested to know if it could possibly be from something that could fall under our jurisdiction, but I don’t think it ever got to the point where we were involved other than the kinds of briefings, what I’d call technical briefings, and maybe some updates on the investigation, I think.

KOWALEWSKI: Do you remember the decision to shut down the House? It was kind of controversial because the House and the Senate—there was some tension there.

https://history.house.gov/Oral-History/
STOPHER: Well, I don’t remember the decision. I remember I came into work that day and parked in the garage and found myself inside of the locked building. I think it was Rayburn. So I don’t remember the decision, but I do remember being a little surprised that everything had shut down.

KOWALEWSKI: But you were able to get in the garage? [laughter]

STOPHER: I got into the garage. There was an area in the garage that you could pull into that—somehow I was able to end up in a locked part of the building. And it's kind of funny. I never realized you could actually get locked into a building. But I was locked in, and I had to back my way out. I expect you could just walk out a door. So no, I wasn’t aware that decision was made. [laughter]

KOWALEWSKI: So where were you getting the bulk of your information from during this period? Who did you call after that? Do you remember?

STOPHER: Once I left?

KOWALEWSKI: Yes.

STOPHER: I don’t remember. I came in early. I was one of the early guys that would normally get there first, and I’m sure some message went out that I didn’t have, at least that early. [laughter]

KOWALEWSKI: Anthrax—it may have not had much of a direct effect on committee operations, but it was certainly—it was terrifying to a lot of people throughout the Hill. What are your memories of how that incident in particular affected the staff and the culture of the House and the Capitol itself?

STOPHER: Well, I think people were bothered by it. I think there was an accumulation effect where staff were maybe—I certainly remember some discussions where
people were more concerned. Concerned might not be the right description, perhaps they were more aggravated. There were some practical problems that this created. All of the mail that came to the Capitol building was sent somewhere across the country, and it was put through a radiation process that—when we eventually got our mail, which was significantly delayed, it was crispy and it fell apart easy. And that was the constant memory, or the reminder, that we were still concerned about the threats that were out there. But honestly, I don’t think the anthrax slowed the committee down at all. I don’t even remember how long we were closed but it wasn’t very long, and we were back at work pretty quickly.

KOWALEWSKI: So other than the mail, do you remember any other changes to the Capitol complex itself following anthrax, as opposed to following 9/11?

STOPHER: Well, there were some issues with people delivering things to the committee. If somebody wanted to deliver something by hand, it became a bit more of an issue. There were some very small things that—again, it was not significant to our doing our job. There just was a growing list of little things that people would have to deal with. I don’t recall, again, anthrax being a big event for us.

KOWALEWSKI: Those are really all the questions that I had today. Is there anything else you wanted to add about the way the committee operated following 9/11? The legislative agenda? The way hearings were conducted? Did that change at all, or was that still pretty much straightforward as it was before? Whom you invited? Whom you requested?

STOPHER: Well, I’d hate to say this, but the committee before 9/11 was—it was a great place to work in that the Members really worked well together. There was a point after that where there was a divide between people who—some of them
wanted to focus on who was responsible for the failures, if you want to call it a failure. And I want to be careful because obviously it was a failure, but what that really means as far as intelligence goes, that’s a very different kind of discussion. Some people wanted to focus on more moving forward, and how can the committee help the country position itself so it never happens again. And certainly part of that would be understanding what happened and what was wrong, but that started the committee on a path that has really changed it forever. I think it’s unfortunate that the committee since then has not been as closely united in how it approaches its role. And I think some of that is a result also of just the attention that the world—the public—has on intelligence. It’s no longer a committee that—before, I’m not sure people really knew who served on it very much. Today, it’s really a platform to speak on a wide number of issues, so it’s changed the character of the committee quite a bit.

But I will tell you, during 9/11, I would just say we had a remarkable committee, both the Members and the staff that supported it. I wish that the kind of reporting on it could be accurate, or at least more comprehensive as far as what the job is that they do day in and day out, and how well the intelligence community actually did day in and day out. I will tell you, for all of the criticism that the intelligence community took following 9/11, I think one indication that that criticism was a little misplaced is the fact that we—all of the staff, and all of the Members, showed up to the Capitol building day in and day out without worrying because we knew how good we—the intelligence community—were. We had confidence in them to prevent attacks. And we lived knowing that the Capitol building was one of the prime targets of the terror organizations around the world. So knowing that and having the confidence to show up to work every day I think is a
testament to our conviction that they actually were doing a great job.

Anyway, that’s all I would have to say.

KOWALEWSKI: Can I ask you something about congressional oversight?

STOPHER: Yes.

KOWALEWSKI: Was there any—the Commission Report says there needs to be better oversight. I believe they used the word “dysfunctional,” so to speak. It’s “dysfunctional.” How did the intelligence committee and the House respond to that? It was a few years down the road, but—

STOPHER: I can’t recall how the House responded to that. I think, quite frankly, they probably didn’t say a lot. Because while I think that the commission hit on the right problem. That they didn’t clarify it, and in fact, their—well, their recommendation—they didn’t quite get to what I think was a problem. You started with the question of, what is oversight? And I think that’s worth a bit of discussion. What does it mean? There are some people that believe that holding a hearing and publicly lashing somebody for failure is good oversight. It’s a tool, I think, to maybe get some results.

But I think more of what the commission was getting to was—our committee would identify deficiencies in the intelligence community. And I’ll give you one example that was—every year, you could hear the Members talk about it on the floor and that is whether or not we had a sufficient number of linguists within the intelligence community to address some of the hard languages that we really needed to be equipped with. And every year the Members would advocate for adding billets, adding funds, or whatever. So why did those kinds of things never get into the budget? And I’m not going to explain my view on that, but it was the disconnect between priorities of the authorizers who study things long term. I think that the committee is
constructed to go out and engage with the agencies and really understand their needs and things. Then you have to work with the appropriators—they’re structured very differently. In between those two things is where the system doesn’t work well, and I would say is the dysfunction.

Now, the House tried a couple things. They tried to create a special panel within the Appropriations Committee to address this. That no longer exists, and I don’t think that actually was set up to work appropriately. Some people have talked about a Joint Committee—House and Senate. I think that has different risks. If you only have one committee doing this job, I could see without the debate and different ideas, you could end up with other problems. So I think that there is, “dysfunction” is one word. Let me just say there are some challenges with the authorizers being able to do their job. If you want to call it oversight, then that’s one way to describe it, but, fundamentally, one of the jobs is for the committee to make sure that we are equipping the country with the capabilities that it needs, and it’s the way the Congress receives a budget, makes budget allocations, makes policies, and all that. It just is a bit disconnected.

I think it is true that there are issues that undermine the oversight, but I think oversight is not—in the context it really needs to be fixed—it is not whether or not you call an agency head on the carpet and wire-brush them. That’s not the oversight improvements that are needed. It’s more the, how do you work with the executive branch to identify the needs and address them with Congress’s role, which is the statutory or budget resources to address them. So that’s what I would have to say about the oversight dysfunction.
NOTES

1 The House Permanent Select Committee on Intelligence.
2 On the evening of September 11, 2001, Members of Congress gathered on the East Front steps of the Capitol where they spontaneously sang “God Bless America” in a demonstration of patriotism after the terrorist attacks.
3 The National Commission on Terrorist Attacks Upon the United States, also known as the 9/11 Commission.
4 Reference to the July 24, 1998, shooting at the Capitol, during which two Capitol Police Officers, Jacob J. Chestnut Jr. and John M. Gibson, were killed.