



**Only Plane in the Sky (9/19/19)**

00:00:27 Amy Weinstein: Good evening. I'm Amy Weinstein, senior curator of oral history at the 9/11 Memorial & Museum. It's my pleasure to welcome you to tonight's program, which kicks off our Fall 2019 programming season.

As always, we extend a special welcome to our museum members and to those tuning in to our live web broadcast at [911memorial.org/live](http://911memorial.org/live). We also extend a warm welcome to the 9/11 survivors, responders, and family members who are with us to mark the launch of "The Only Plane in the Sky: An Oral History of 9/11" by Garrett Graff, the distinguished journalist and historian.

00:01:13 I suspect most of you are familiar with his considerable accomplishments. You probably don't need me to tell you that Garrett became the first blogger accredited to cover White House press briefings in 2005-- only a few years after the birth of that genre-- and that he has taught digital journalism at Georgetown. I could list prior books and awards received for "The Threat Matrix" and "Dawn of the Code War."

00:01:39 Instead, I'll follow my usual oral history practice and let Garrett Graff introduce himself to you as he did when first writing to me in February 2017. "I'm a magazine writer and historian, and I wrote a piece last September for 'Politico Magazine' about being aboard Air Force One on 9/11. The reaction to the piece really floored me. It was the most popular piece ever published by 'Politico.' I'm in the beginning stages of turning that article into a broader book that's an oral history of September 11. I'd love to tell you a bit about my project and see what might be available in the museum's archives and collection. Sincerely, Garrett."

00:02:24            That simple, genuine, persuasive email began an intensive collaboration in which Garrett and his very able research assistant, Jenny Pachuki-- an oral historian in her own right and our colleague at the museum for many years-- mined our collection of more than 1,000 oral histories, listening to hundreds of hours of testimony, and repeated that daunting undertaking at the Pentagon and Flight 93 archives.

00:02:51            A skilled interviewer and dogged researcher, Garrett recorded even more oral histories of his own. He used his journalistic talents and depths of compassion to insert just the right moments from each of those narratives into the book that became "The Only Plane in the Sky."

When you explore the museum, you walk through a compilation of voices recalling where they were when they first heard that something was wrong on that September morning 18 years ago. Perhaps you've spent a few moments in the audio alcoves, listening to a responder or survivor describe her actions that day.

00:03:29            Garrett... Garrett Graff did precisely that, but on a monumental scale. Like a potter working with clay, he shaped the stories he heard into a beautifully formed, artfully glazed watertight vessel: the 9/11 oral history book that achieved critical acclaim immediately upon publication. We're grateful to you, Garrett, for joining us to share your insights into that remarkable endeavor.

00:03:56            Following the program, all of you will have the opportunity to purchase his new book, "The Only Plane in the Sky." Please join me in welcoming Garrett Graff, in conversation with senior director of public and professional programs Jessica Chen.

(applause)

00:04:18 Jessica Chen: So, Garrett, thank you so much for joining us, and congratulations on the book. It is a tremendous undertaking, and I'm looking forward to getting into it with you. Um, I actually had the good fortune of being with you at the start of this project, having just joined the museum team maybe a couple of months before giving you a tour of the museum.

Um, and so, you know, we've heard a little bit from Amy about how this project began. But maybe you could talk to us a little bit more, you know, even as a journalist, how it was like, transitioning into the discipline of oral history, and what were some of the early decisions you made in terms of thinking and conceiving of the book?

00:04:51 Garrett Graff: Um, well, thanks, Jess, for having me tonight. And thanks to Amy for that very generous introduction. I'm very excited to be here. This community of the 9/11 Memorial & Museum was a very integral part of this project. And I am very grateful to be here and for the support that the museum showed this, and really honored.

00:05:19 Um, some of the voices in the book are here tonight, and I got to meet for the first time tonight, which was a very special experience. Um, so this, as Amy said, this book grew out of this article that I wrote for the 15<sup>th</sup> anniversary of 9/11 about being aboard Air Force One with President Bush, and I have been, my... I write almost exclusively about very uplifting and happy topics, and so my last book was about nuclear war...

(laughter)

00:05:53 Garrett Graff: And, and all of the Doomsday plans that the U.S. government had created during the Cold War. And in the course of that research, I'd gotten interested in President Bush's day, and how he sort of, at this moment when the nation so needed leadership, he was rushed aboard and hidden aboard this metal tube in the sky eight miles above the Earth, largely cut off from the country and what was transpiring below.

- 00:06:25           And the reaction to that piece, as Amy said, was just sort of fascinating to me. And there were two letters I got from readers that really stood out in my mind. Um, one was from a mother, a veteran, who had two children, seven and nine, who... She said she'd printed out the article so that when they were old enough to read it, she could explain to them why Mommy had left them to go off to war.
- 00:07:02           And the other was from another veteran, younger, Army, who'd done three tours-- two in Afghanistan and one in Iraq. And he wrote me and said that he'd been in middle school on 9/11, and had never really understood the trauma that the nation felt until the, until he had sort of seen this article, and seen the day through President Bush's eyes. And that just really stuck with me, that sort of this... We were now far enough removed from 9/11 that there were people serving in Iraq and Afghanistan who didn't have an emotional connection to 9/11 itself.
- 00:07:47           Um, and of course, actually, this year, the 18th anniversary, marks the first time that we are now deploying American servicemen and women to Iraq and Afghanistan to fight wars older than they are. Um, which is something that America has never had before. You know, every American who fought in World War II remembers Pearl Harbor. Everyone who fought in the Civil War remembered Fort Sumter.
- 00:08:11           They sort of had the emotional underpinning of what that, you know, had... What had sort of led us into that conflict. And to me, sort of the power of oral history that it brings to 9/11 specifically, and, I think, the importance of remembering the voices of this event, in particular, in our modern history, is that the story that we tell ourselves about 9/11-- now, when we tell it as history-- is neater and cleaner than the 9/11 that any of us experienced that day.
- 00:08:56           You know, we talk about it. Uh, uh... You know, it started at 8:46 with the first crash. It, at, it was over 102 minutes later with the collapse of the second tower, at 10:29 Eastern time. And that's not how any of us who

were alive that day experienced 9/11. The, we didn't know when it began.

00:09:21 We didn't know when it was over. We didn't know what was coming next. We, you know, and I talk about it in the book, you know, well into the afternoon, remember, the fear was that there were potentially as many as a dozen additional hijacked planes in the air.

00:09:43 Um, there was the fear that we... That these attacks were not going to be limited to just New York, and, and... And the Pentagon. You know, the Prudential Center in Boston was evacuated. The Sears Tower in Chicago was evacuated. Skyscrapers were evacuated in Los Angeles. Disney closed on 9/11, the only time it has ever closed in its history, sort of for a hostile act, I mean, for... Not for, you know, basically, natural disasters. And... And, like, that was the 9/11 that we lived.

00:10:23 And, and if, I think, when we look at and we think about a generation that we are now sort of turning the world over to, who are going to live their entire adult lives in the world sort of created and shaped by 9/11, um, the facts that we tell, the history that we tell of 9/11, doesn't account for the national reaction to 9/11. Because what drove the nation's leaders, which... What drove the decisions that we made after 9/11 were as much driven by the emotions of that day and the experience of the day as it was by sort of the cold facts of history as we write them down.

00:11:06 Jessica Chen: Yeah, and you know, so the book is comprised of 480 different perspectives of Americans who had a lived experience of that day. And I think you get a sense of, you know, there's a rough chronology to the book, but it's not a neat chronology. And certainly, I would say the book is driven more by emotion and by sensory experience at the various sites where the attacks are occurring and even, you know, in other parts of America, as people are trying to figure out what is going on.

00:11:31 And so, I'm curious, you know, what were some of the challenges in terms of weaving those stories together? And speaking particularly to the emotionality of the book, because, I think, even as somebody who works

in this material often, I was struck in a different way by the emotionality of reading these experiences put together the way you've put them together.

Did that emotionality surprise you, impact you, in a way that you, you may not have imagined? Or maybe you did?

Garrett Graff: Yeah, so... In what I hope will be the dumbest comment I make onstage tonight, I was really unprepared for how emotional writing a book about 9/11 turned out to be.

00:12:08

And it was... You know, both in the... As, as Amy said, the book is both a mix of archived oral histories from the 9/11 Museum, the 9/11 Tribute Center, the Flight 93 National Memorial, the Capitol Hill historian, the Pentagon historian, a number of other projects around the country, and then sort of original interviews that I did and collected myself, and... Jenny and I sort of assembled a pile of about 2,000.

00:12:44

We found about 5,000 across the country, and sort of loosely sorted that down to a pile of 2,000 that was the, the building blocks of the book. And ended up with about 480 voices in it. And most, most of the people in the book you sort of don't follow through the whole day.

There's probably only two or three dozen people who you sort of follow, start to finish, over the course of the day. And people sort of come and go as sort of their one moment of drama touches the day, or... And some people, you know, appear for a single observation.

00:13:25

Um, but what... What I found in the... reading through them, and listening to these stories, is... You know, as tragic as the, that day is, as, you know, the incredible sadness that underpins so many of the stories, there are these incredible stories of sort of hope and strength and bravery.

00:13:53           And that, I think, actually, when, when all is said and done, to me, one of the things that's actually interesting about the book is that it ends up in some ways being more hopeful and inspirational than you might imagine, given the subject matter.

00:14:11           Because the way that so many Americans reacted to that day is, I think, a testament to the incredible resilience of the human spirit. And you see that, you know, in ways that are sort of very famous. You know, the first responders at the Twin Towers. Um, you see that in the military officers at the Pentagon who rush out of the burning building, realize their colleagues are still trapped, and then turn around and rush back into the burning building.

00:14:46           And then you see it in these sort of, in very tiny sort of individual stories. Um, John Abruzzo, who, who we sort of follow as he's evacuated. He's a quadriplegic working in the North Tower on the 64th floor, for the Port Authority. And 12 of his colleagues team up and carry him down all 64 floors and get him out-- and get him out with minutes to spare, and sort of collectively put their, you know, their own lives on the line.

00:15:30           And sort of make very clear to him, you know, on the 64th floor, like, "John, we're not leaving without you." Like, "We," you know, "There is... You get no say in us evacuating you."

Jessica Chen: Yeah. I do want to get more into these moments and have you kind of share. Opening the book, though, we start in a place that couldn't be farther from the site of the attacks, or the sites of the attacks. We start in space, at the International Space Station. So, I'm curious if you could talk a little bit about, kind of, why start there? And, how does that kind of create a frame for the, for the book itself?

00:16:04           Garrett Graff: Yeah. So, this is actually a, a frame that I got from the 9/11 Museum. Because, if, if you walk through, you will see his quotes on the wall in the museum. Frank Culbertson, who was a NASA astronaut, was the one American off the planet Earth on 9/11. He was aboard the International Space Station.

- 00:16:29           And he was able to actually see the attacks unfold from the space station. He, he watched the collapse—I think it was the second tower, if I remember correctly-- from space. You know, looking down on Lower Manhattan, was able to see the dust cloud of the second collapse spreading across Lower Manhattan.
- 00:16:56           On the next rotation, goes over Washington, and is able to see the scar in the Pentagon and to see the emergency vehicles responding to the Pentagon. And then he sort of talks about how, you know, every rotation- - they come around, you know, every 90 minutes with the International Space Station over the course of the day-- and he sort of looks down to see what has happened next.
- 00:17:19           And what has, what they notice over the course of the day is the skies emptying out and the airplanes across the country being grounded until there's just, he can see just one airplane left flying across the United States, and it's President Bush flying back from Offutt Air Force Base in Nebraska to Washington, DC. Um, the title of the book, "The Only Plane in the Sky."
- 00:17:47           Jessica Chen: And so this is a historic moment, in that, you know, this is the first attack against America witnessed from outer space. And he's witnessing another historic moment unfolding that, you know, is not often discussed when we think about 9/11. Because the scale, the enormity of the day is so much that it eclipses everything else that's happening.
- 00:18:05           On 9/11, the F.A.A. makes, makes history by issuing an unprecedented full ground stop over U.S. airspace. And this is a moment that you cover in the book with oral history. Can you tell us a little bit about kind of the significance of that, and also kind of the, the emotion, as well as the decision-making that occurs, in, in a small space, but with enormous impact?



- 00:18:28            Garrett Graff: Yeah, so this is... You know, the book follows, not just the Twin Towers, Shanksville, and the Pentagon, but, you know, people in passenger jets, and... Passengers and crew in, in passenger jets around the country, and fighter pilots, and air traffic control towers.
- 00:18:50            And sort of one of the things that becomes clear as I was doing this history was that there was so much that day that happened that on any other day of modern American history, would be one of the most dramatic things that has ever happened in modern American history, and on 9/11, was, like, not even one of the ten or 12 most interesting things that happened that day.
- 00:19:18            And so there are these monumental, sort of Herculean stories that are sort of largely brushed over in the history that we tell, in part because, like, some of them unfolded, you know, within hours of 9/11, you know, sort of before anyone was really paying attention.
- 00:19:37            And there are sort of two that I spend real chunks of time in the book talking about, the first being the, this... this decision by the F.A.A. to ground every plane in the country. And when I say the F.A.A., I actually mean one guy, whose name is Ben Sliney, who's the national operations manager for the F.A.A. on 9/11, who was in charge of the U.S. airspace that day and was in the first day on the job. And he started that morning as the national operations manager for the F.A.A. And in the first 90 minutes of his first day, gives two orders that no American in history has ever given before or since.
- 00:20:25            The first is sort of shortly after the second attack, at the Pentagon-- the second crash in New York City-- to institute a nationwide ground stop, and any plane that is not in the air is not going to be allowed to take off.
- And then at, I think it's 9:42, a couple of minutes after the attack at the Pentagon, he issues the order to land every plane in the country at the closest airport, regardless of destination, and regardless of whether the airport is actually in any position to receive the number of airplanes that are about to land at it.

- 00:21:01           And this we sort of, we sort of only, I think, in our sort of national memory of 9/11, only remember sort of the back end of this story, which is the 38 planes that end up, the transatlantic flights that end up in Gander, Newfoundland. Um, the 7,000 passengers who were dropped into a town of 9,000 on an island off the Canadian coast.
- 00:21:28           And then, but it's sort of this incredible story. They landed 750 planes in the first ten minutes after this order is given, across the country, and effectively, you know, all but a few dozen are down within about an hour, hour and a half. And, you know, it was just sort of this huge undertaking, totally improvised.
- 00:22:01           No one had trained for this. We had no protocols to handle it. And that, and that really unfolded before most of us were sort of even really paying attention to that day, and then the other, of course, is the maritime evacuation of Lower Manhattan. Which again, is sort of one of these stories that most Americans, I think, particularly if you're not in New York City, you have only the vaguest memory, if at all, that this happened at all.
- 00:22:29           But that, over the course of the morning of September 11, there was this sort of makeshift armada of tugboats and passenger ferries, and fishing vessels, and pleasure yachts that led the largest maritime evacuation in history-- the larger than the British evacuation of Dunkirk. And it it was totally improvised, and it was sort of largely overseen, again, by this one guy, named Coast Guard Lieutenant Michael Day.
- 00:23:06           Um... And then some of the Sandy Hook pilots who sort of helped... who helped direct these, these boats along the coast of Lower Manhattan. And Michael Day sort of talks about it in the book, he's... In his oral history, you know. That he broke more laws that day than he has enforced in the totality of the rest of his entire Coast Guard career.

- 00:23:35           And that, you know, again, it's this incredible story that in any other day of the year, if we had evacuated a half-million people from the tip of Lower Manhattan with zero minutes' notice, in the space of, you know, about six hours, you know, that would be a very big historic event. And it's something that, you know, I think most Americans have no idea really occurred at all.
- 00:24:02           Jessica Chen: And I want to point out that within this, you know, this big moment, where there's all of these boats and these, these vehicles trying to just kind of take people to safety, there are also these incredibly tender, human, intimate details that come through with people's accounts, that I think, again, when we go back to this idea of fact versus experience, of emotionality versus chronology, you know, Tom Sullivan, a firefighter, remembers, "Mothers and nannies with infants in their arms were dropping our children down to us. At one point, we had four or five of them wrapped in little blankets, and we put them in bunks down in the crew quarters. I put four babies in one bunk, like little peanuts lined up in a row."
- 00:24:39           And it's, I think it's, you know, when you were going through these interviews, when you were connecting them, or when you were listening to these oral histories, you know, what was the effect of, you know, just these little moments? And what do you think is the, you know, kind of the impact of including them within these kind of larger, otherwise chaotic narratives?
- 00:24:58           Garrett Graff: Yeah, and it was something that I tried to spend a lot of time on, actually, in the book, because, again, when you sort of look at the difference between the experience and the history, what we remember as Americans from that day are the sights of 9/11. We remember watching it on television or watching it, you know, if you're a New Yorker, watching it unfold, you know, yourself here.
- 00:25:27           And yet, when you go through these oral histories, what really comes out is the way that 9/11 was a 360-degree sensory experience for everyone who it touched. And so, I spent a lot of time in the book trying to capture the sound of 9/11, the taste of 9/11, what 9/11 felt like to the touch.

- 00:26:00 Um, you know, when you go, when I got into the oral histories of the volunteer firefighters in Shanksville, you know, every single one of them talks about the smell of the crash site when they arrive in the field in Shanksville.
- 00:26:18 Um, you know, obviously, the first responders and the survivors of the collapse of the towers, you know, they talk about what the dust tastes like in your mouth, that it was like having a wool sock in your mouth, or it was like having a mouthful of Bisquick. And then, you know, everyone in Lower Manhattan that day talks about what the dust was like to walk through. You know, the cottony, marshmallowy, fresh-fallen snow of, you know, the six to 12 inches of dust that carpeted the, the city.
- 00:26:58 And then, what people remember, sort of coast to coast, that day-- probably some of you in that, in the room, no matter where you were-- was the quiet that settles over the country on 9/11. That both in New York City and then across the country, you know, businesses let out, schools let out, the airplanes were grounded. And so, you know, people talked about stepping out into Lower Manhattan that after... stepping out into Manhattan that afternoon, and just realizing how silent the city of New York was, for sort of the first and only time in its history. And that that was something that you'd sort of hear across the country.
- 00:27:40 And I quote a guy in Fargo, North Dakota, who talks about stepping outside that afternoon and realizing how silent Fargo, North Dakota, was. Because once you take away the planes, sort of suddenly, you know, this noise that is the backdrop of sort of our daily life that you never think about when it's there, you suddenly notice the absence and the quiet.
- 00:28:07 Jessica Chen: Thinking about the sensory experience of 9/11, something, again, as somebody who, who is around these stories very often, in addition to the Flight 93 crash site and the first responders and officials that had rushed there, another scene that I don't think I fully grasped just how difficult the circumstances were there, was when the military and

civilian Pentagon workers were leading the initial rescue efforts at the Pentagon.

- 00:28:33 And in particular, the story of Staff Sergeant Christopher Braman and Sheila Denise Moody, who was an accountant, struck me because he, he is somebody who is going in, again and again, to try to save people. She's the only person that he manages to save who actually ends up living. And I was wondering if you could talk a little bit about that story, because the way you frame it, it's, you see it, you feel it. You hear kind of the experience in a way that I don't think I'd quite understood before.
- 00:29:02 Garrett Graff: Yeah. So at the Pentagon, everyone who lived was rescued in the first 30 minutes. Um, and so, there was a, you know, sort of this incredible makeshift effort to rescue, you know, people trapped in the inferno in the Pentagon. And it was largely done by sort of military members who are sort of trying to rescue their co-workers, many of whom, you know, sort of rush out of the building, and then rush back in.
- 00:29:45 And Christopher Braman... And his story was, is one of the most famous of that. I think he, he ends up going in, back into the building, I think, four times, brings out four people. Um... And, and Sheila is the only one who lives. But that she ends up, she is... So, so a part of... I'll back up a second.
- 00:30:14 Part of what was so fascinating to me in working in this, in this story was the way that sort of random luck or fate or chance unfurls through that day. That sort of the way that decisions that we make 1,000 times a day without any, without thinking anything of at all end up literally being the difference between life and death on 9/11.
- 00:30:48 In New York, Michael Lomonaco, the chef at Windows on the World, would have been normally in his kitchen at 8:30 on Tuesday morning. But that morning of all mornings, he decides to stop and get a new pair of, a new pair of glasses at LensCrafters on the way in to work, in the shopping concourse underneath the World Trade Center. And so, he... 72 of his colleagues died that day, and he didn't, because he bought a new pair of glasses.

- 00:31:21           And in... And at the Pentagon, there are these two women, Louise and Sheila. Both of whom, it's their first day working at the Pentagon. And they're sort of sitting there, you know, it's 9:37 in the morning when the plane hits, and they are sitting there filling out their HR forms, you know, sort of trying to get oriented in their office.
- 00:31:48           And one of them goes to the fax machine to start faxing in the paperwork, and the plane hits at the precise moment she hits the send button on the fax machine. And so all she knows is that she's hit the send button and the building explodes around her. And so, she's standing there, being, like, "What did I do to the fax machine?" Which is not, like, a totally illogical reaction.
- Jessica Chen: At the Pentagon. (laughs)
- 00:32:19           Garrett Graff: Yeah, government I.T., I mean, it's not... It's not always what it's cracked up to be. And she... You know, Louise and Sheila, they end up sort of getting trapped in there. And Christopher Braman ends up coming in and... The smoke is so thick that the only way that they find each other is their clapping, and that they can hear sort of the clapping, and walk towards the clapping, and end up... He ends up rescuing her and pulling her out, and the other woman gets out of her own.
- 00:33:04           And they sort of meet back up on the lawn of the Pentagon, you know, just within minutes. And, you know, had it been, you know, five minutes longer before Chris Braman got into that office, you know, it's quite possible she wouldn't have made it.
- 00:33:21           Jessica Chen: I want to talk a little bit about people who had official roles on 9/11. And so, in the article that you wrote for "Politico," we get a sense of President Bush's experience and those who are surrounding him. One, one account, though it's brief, that struck me, was actually within the Pentagon with Donald Rumsfeld.

You know, he was being, he... His official role was to lead the nation's response militarily to the attacks, and yet he was very clearly conflicted by, you know, this innate human desire to just try to help his colleagues. And so, his, the people, who were around him kept saying, you know, "You can't go there, you can't go there."

00:33:57                   And he just kept wanting to go there. And, and this repeats again and again. You know, whether it's a firefighter or whether it's, you know, a principal who is supposed to take kids to safety, but knows that her sister is trapped in the upper reaches of the North Tower. Can you talk a little bit about kind of, you know, similar kind of connections, connective tissues that you find as you, as you were putting the book together?

00:34:21                   Garrett Graff: Yeah... I'm glad you asked, because this is, this to me is one of the most interesting themes of the way that the government responds. Is that you sort of see all of these people torn between sort of the official response and the human response. And Don Rumsfeld is sort of the most clear example of it, which is, you know, he is the secretary of defense. He's the top... You know, Pentagon leader, the man who is in charge of the nuclear codes after the president, and he is under the official protocols, which he knows very well, because, remember, he has been a White House chief of staff and secretary of defense before.

00:35:12                   He is supposed to be evacuated from the Pentagon within minutes and taken to the mountain bunker in Raven Rock, in Pennsylvania. And instead, he goes down to the crash site, and, you know, sort of his whole protective detail is, like, trailing along behind him as he sort of marches down to the crash site.

00:35:36                   And they end up, you know, literally carrying stretchers and carrying wounded out of the Pentagon. And it was the exact right thing for him to do as an organizational leader. And it really endeared him to the military in a way that... You know, very few secretaries of defense have ever sort of had that relationship with the military before.

00:36:07           And yet, as a constitutional officer in charge of the nuclear codes, it was precisely the wrong thing for him to do. And Donald Rumsfeld doesn't return to the Pentagon's command center, the National Military Command Center, until about 10:30. And by that point, the attacks are all over, and Donald Rumsfeld has not given a single order during the entire time that the attacks are unfolding, and was entirely absent from the nation's response and to the point that, actually, at the White House, they think that Donald Rumsfeld has been killed. That they, you know, from the White House, they know the Pentagon's been hit. No one can find the secretary of defense. No one, no one has heard from him, and they assume he's dead or wounded.

00:37:02           And... And then, actually, you know, during this whole time is when Dick Cheney, in the White House bunker, gives the order to shoot down hijacked airliners. He and... Cheney and Rumsfeld finally connect on the phone at about 10:42 that morning, and Cheney says-- and again, this is all sort of fog of war, none, sort of people not really understanding what has transpired-- Dick Cheney says to Donald Rumsfeld, like, "We've shot down a couple of airliners." And Donald Rumsfeld is, like, "Huh." And is just, like, really taken aback, and sort of, you know, but all of this has unfolded while he's out doing the... You know, helping to rescue wounded from the crash.

00:37:57           Jessica Chen: I want to talk a little bit about that moment, the kind of, the military response that didn't happen. And yet, you include it in the book. Can you talk to us a little bit about kind of what unfolds and the significance of it?

Garrett Graff: Yeah, and this is, so... Dick Cheney is at the White House. He's whisked from the, his office at the White House into the bunker under the North Lawn in the minutes after the second attack, when they think that the, there are still hijacked airplanes on their way towards Washington-- United 93, potentially others. And... And it's this incredibly, you, dramatic and fateful moment at the White House.

00:38:45           You have the Secret Service yelling at staff, you know, "Take off your shoes and run!" And the Secret Service stays. And one of the Secret



Service agents in, in the book, you know, yells in the command center, "After impact, anyone who survives, go to the alternate command center and we'll continue working from there."

00:39:09            You know, most of the Secret Service agents that morning sort of expect that they're going to die standing post as the next plane hits. Cheney under the North Lawn, in this Cold War bunker... You know, this bunker runs 24 hours a day, seven days a week, and has since Harry Truman's time, and has never been used for its intended purpose before or since, except for the morning of 9/11. And Cheney ends up in this bunker with this Navy commander named Anthony Barnes, who is the director of the White House bunker, effectively, that day.

00:39:51            And Commander Barnes ends up being the one who goes to Cheney and says, you know, "Sir, we need permission to shoot down hijacked airliners that are inbound to Washington." And Cheney says yes, and Commander Barnes had never spoken publicly before talking to me for the book.

00:40:12            And he told me about how he went back to Cheney repeatedly, to sort of repeat the question and repeat the answer. Because he knew what a momentous moment this was, and he ends up sort of angering Cheney, who's basically, like, "Yeah, I've already told you. Shoot down the hijacked airliners. We don't have more time to talk about this."

00:40:39            That order ends up getting translated out to the fighter pilots, and notably, sort of, two of them who we follow in the book, Heather Penney and Marc Sasseville, who are at the DC Air National Guard at Andrews Air Force Base, and are scrambled into the air with no weapons. And, you know, this... We were totally unprepared for this attack that day. And so they, we got these two planes into the air from Andrews, and they understand that they're being launched on a kamikaze mission.

00:41:22            That the only weapon that they're being sent into the sky with is their own fighter jet, and that if they encounter a hijacked airliner, their job is going to be to crash it into the hijacked airliner before it reaches whatever its intended target is. And... So they are shouting back and

forth to each other on the tarmac as they're sort of settling into their planes, "You aim for the cockpit, I'll aim for the tail." And sort of trying to talk through, like, what the procedure is to crash your own plane into a hijacked airliner.

00:42:01 And what is interesting about sort of this whole thing as it unfolds is, it's this incredible disconnect that morning between the experience that people are having and the impact that they're having. Because this conversation that Dick Cheney has happens at about 10:12 that morning, that's the best-- somewhere between 10:12 and 10:18 is the closest time frame that we can come up with, that the 9/11 Commission has come up with, for when Cheney gives the shoot-down order.

00:42:33 And Heather Penney and Marc Sasseville don't take off until about 10:30 from Andrews. And what none of them realize as these conversations are unfolding is, of course, Flight 93 has crashed at 10:03. There are no more hijacked airliners in the sky, and that, that, you know, they're sort of having these incredible sort of dramatic moments, and these sort of weighty conversations, without realizing that actually, like, history is over. Like, the day is done. And they have no sense that, you know, there are no hijacked planes left in the sky at that point.

00:43:11 Jessica Chen: Yeah, and I want to point out, too, that I think... Something that strikes me, particularly in the way that you laid out these oral histories is that, you know, these are trained pilots who understand what their duties are. Marc, you know, they literally say, "I'll ram the cockpit and I would take the tail." Marc Sasseville says, "I was going into this moral or ethical justification of the needs of the many versus the needs of the few." Lieutenant Heather "Lucky" Penney, "I genuinely believed this was going to be the last time I took off. If we did it right, this would be it."

00:43:40 And yet, of course, later, they find out that the passengers of Flight 93 launched the counter-assault. And she reflects, "The real heroes are the passengers on Flight 93, who were willing to sacrifice themselves." And it almost kind of creates this... You throw back to what Marc Sasseville was saying, he was still trying to kind of understand that in his own head. You have civilians on a plane who had figured that out and had already

carried that out by the time, even before this, this conversation was happening internally for them.

- 00:44:09 Which then goes back to kind of what you were saying about kind of the heroism and kind of the courage that comes through, met with an unimaginable circumstance. People have, make unthinkable, extraordinary decisions that have a huge ripple effect on everything else.
- 00:44:22 Garrett Graff: Yeah, and then, and then, of course, you know, the plane crashes in Shanksville, and one, to me, of the most breathtaking quotes in the whole book was the... Denise Miller, who is a police sergeant for the Indian Lake Police Department-- which is one of the small communities near Shanksville-- and is one of the first police officers to arrive at the crash site.
- 00:44:46 And she talks about how scared she was being at the crash site, because she's arriving and she knows just four facts: Two planes have hit the World Trade Center, one plane has hit the Pentagon, and the fourth plane has hit this field right here. And she assumed, rightly so, based on the knowledge that she had, the terrorists picked this field for a reason.
- 00:45:06 And she assumes that there's something under this field that the terrorists are trying to blow up, that they know about that she doesn't. And again, based on the incredibly limited set of facts that she has-- you know, she knows two planes hit the World Trade Center.
- 00:45:31 So, she's standing there assuming that there's, there are more hijacked airliners coming to crash into this field, and she's sort of standing there in this field surveying this crash, sort of watching the sky, waiting for the next plane that's going to come and hit this field. You know, because, you know, for that day, no one had any idea why this plane had crashed in this one sort of specific place in Shanksville.

00:46:01 Jessica Chen: So, I do want to, kind of... We're going to take some audience questions, so you can start thinking about those. I want to turn to a chapter in the book that's called "The 9/11 Generation." So, I'm going to give away my age. Rare, rare time I will do that-- I am 31.

But this chapter is interesting because it actually, it tracks, through oral history, by age, what people reflected on when they were a certain age in the book. So naturally, I went to where I was, eighth grade. It didn't really, totally, you know, kind of reflect my own experience. But then I found this one, which I'm going to read out loud.

00:46:35 Age 16, 11th grade. This is Tahlia Hein in New Jersey. "September 11 was also picture day in my high school. If you were lucky enough to have a last name like Anderson or Charles, you probably made it through the gymnasium queue before 9:00 a.m. Your smile looks genuine. If you were a Daniels or an Elton, you probably picked up on the fact that something had happened.

00:46:56 'Gossip spreads like wildfire in any high school, but hadn't yet gotten back to a classroom with a television. If you're a Gore or a Hein, like me, you were screwed. You had to watch the whole terrible thing unfold before your eyes, and then you had to sit to have your picture taken for the yearbook. The command to smile sounded like the worst insult."

00:47:16 And this is, for me, it captured something that I think will stand the test of time. Every teenager knows what it's like to have your picture taken at the beginning of the year for the end of the year, to be then canonized in a yearbook that everyone will have, forever in time.

And so, in thinking about the 9/11 Generation and the generations to come, I think something that I've been thinking about, working in the education department at the 9/11 Museum, is, what do you think is going to be... What are the stories that we need to continue to tell, and also, what are the hard things that... What will be hard to communicate about 9/11 that you hope this book will communicate?

00:47:50            Garrett Graff: Yeah. So, I thought this was one of the most interesting chapters that I worked on, because you see... You know, I go from babies right through college, sort of every, every person, you know, at every age in there. And it was sort of so fascinating to see 9/11 refracted through children's experience through the adults around them.

00:48:19            That sort of the way that the children, particularly younger, sort of don't realize... You know, they don't know what's going on, but they know that the adults around them are scared, and that, and are sad, and sort of how, how that reaction sort of shaped them.

00:48:37            For a number of them, they sort of talked about 9/11 being the first memory that they actually have in the world. And, and then, of course, as I was saying earlier, you know, we're now in the situation where you have a generation that have no memory of 9/11 whatsoever, and are increasingly sort of born after. I mean, a quarter of the U.S. population now has no memory of 9/11 whatsoever.

00:49:08            And that... And yet it is a world that-- you know, our politics and our international geopolitics-- is still the world that 9/11 created. You know, up until... You know, this week, or this month, we see, you know, the collapse of the Taliban peace talks, you know, sort of still unfolding and rippling through our country and the geopolitics of the world.

00:49:38            And, as I said earlier, I think what is just so important in that... is remembering the impact of 9/11 above and beyond the facts of 9/11. Because it just... When you look at the decisions that we made-- and I, you know, most of what I do in sort of my day job is covering national security. And, you know, I, sort of, the backdrop of 9/11 is every story that I write, about the FBI and counterterrorism, DHS, the rise of, you know, government surveillance, you know, the border.

00:50:22            You know, this, these are all things that are, were sort of fundamentally changed and altered by 9/11. And that that is something that's really

hard to underscore, sort of, just how much our country changed on 9/11. And, and I try to talk about that in the book during what I see as the most interesting moment of 9/11, which is the 17 minutes from the first crash to the second crash, the period from 8:46 in the morning to 9:03, when the country writ large, and New York sort of very specifically, sees the first crash and shrugs.

00:51:06 And sort of everyone sort of has some version of the same reaction of, "Oh, it's a small plane." "It's an aviation accident." "The pilot had a heart attack." "Air traffic control's having a really bad day." You know, sort of all of these reactions. I quote Brian Gunderson, the director, the... the chief of staff to the House majority leader that day, Dick Armey, who talks about, he sees it on TV as he walks into his morning staff meeting, and says that he sort of thought it was gonna be like a school shooting.

00:51:44 Sort of one of those stories that's, like, a big deal in national news, but doesn't fundamentally alter anyone's business that day. You know, doesn't fundamentally change anyone's schedule that day. And that... That was the experience almost everyone had at that first crash.

00:52:01 And one of the other sort of breathtaking quotes in, that I came across in this, was Peter Johansen, who's one of the New York Waterway ferry captains that morning, who talks about witnessing the first crash from his ferry. And they continue on to Wall Street Terminal. They dock, every single commuter on the boat gets off and walks into Lower Manhattan. And they're literally walking through the papers and envelopes fluttering down from the impact into the North Tower.

00:52:38 And yet there wasn't a single person on the boat who said, "You know what? This just kind of seems like it might be a weird day. I'm going to go work from home for the rest of the day." Sort of everyone sort of sees that crash and is, like, "Oh, that's just weird." Like, "Weird stuff happens in New York all the time."

00:52:54 And, and so, when we talk about sort of... When we sort of say in passing, like, well, "9/11 changed everything," I think it's really easy to forget just

how much, actually, 9/11 changed. And you know, when we talk about what it's done to our country, when we talk about what it's done to our culture-- you know, sort of what it's done to the world that we're handing off to a new generation... Like, look at last month, when you saw that video of the motorcycle backfiring in Times Square, and everyone runs for their life.

00:53:33

And, like, that's where America is today. And you go back to, you know, 8:46, Tuesday, September the 11th. And there was sort of room in our lives for weird stuff to happen without us being fearful, and that that's just sort of not where our country is anymore.

Jessica Chen: Let's take a few questions from the audience. We have mics that are coming down both aisles. We'll start in the back and work towards the front. Back there?

00:54:05

Audience Member: So, I've read a few of your... Or have listened to a few of the podcasts that you've appeared on since the book release. And my 9/11 experience, I was in preschool and pre-K. And it's one of the early things that I remember. And I, one of the things you sort of just mentioned, and, and I found interesting, the podcast is, "The Innocence of America That Existed Pre-9/11."

Garrett Graff: Yeah.

00:54:30

Audience Member: Obviously, it's after Columbine, which had an impact. But, you know, one of the reasons I bought this book, other than reading for myself, is passing down to a future generation, my children. And, you know, do you think that there's a world where America is ever that innocent again? Or do you think we're sort of stuck with where we are now?

00:54:49

Garrett Graff: I don't, I don't see sort of how we unwind, you know, sort of where we are right now. And, you know... And 9/11 was a part of this.

You know, it's not the... It's the major hinge in the modern world. I mean, I sort of talk about it as... You know, 9/11, I think, is sort of as clear a dividing line as we have between the 20th century and the 21st. And that in many ways, I think, when you look at our modern world, you know, 9/11 is where it started.

00:55:33

Jessica Chen: Right here, this gentleman. Just wait for the mic first-- just one second.

Audience Member: Yeah, I have two quick questions. I've always wondered, the passengers who took down United 93, do you think they were trying to stabilize the plane and save their lives, or crash it and prevent further terrorist attack? And the other thing is, did that astronaut take photos or video or anything?

00:56:01

Garrett Graff: Yes, there, I think you guys have some of the... I, we run one of the photos in the book. And I think, and there are photos from the International Space Station that day.

And... So... Flight 93... So... We always shorthand, "This is the passengers who took back Flight 93." It's the passengers and the crew. And I sort of draw that distinction because when you sort of talk to family members of the crew, they sort of feel like they have been written out of the history that we tell of Flight 93.

00:56:50

And so I sort of always try to draw the distinction, and I, and I hope I've said it correctly every time in the book, to try to draw the distinction that it was a joint effort by the passengers and the crew on Flight 93. And, and I think... I don't know that we know what their ultimate intentions were. I don't think there is... And you might, sort of, have a more precise understanding of this than I do.

00:57:21

I don't think we have any reason to believe that they thought that they had a capability to take back the plane and land it safely. Because I don't,



I don't think that we have a reason to believe that there was any capability among the passengers and the crew left to pilot and land the plane, because the pilots had been killed.

00:57:53           And... The, the cockpit voice recorder that we have makes it seem like it was ultimately the, the hijackers who crashed the plane. But that they sort of only did so basically when they realized that they were about to lose control of the plane and be overpowered by the passengers and the crew.

00:58:20           And that they talk of the... They talk in the cockpit voice recorder about, you know, "Don't crash the plane yet. Wait until they get into the cockpit, and then put it down." And then, as the passengers and the crew get into the cockpit, they put the plane down.

Audience Member: Wasn't there one passenger, had some kind of aviation experience?

00:58:49           Jessica Chen: I believe there was, but I think, you know, going...

Audience Member: Commercial.

Garrett Graff: Yeah.

Jessica Chen: Yeah, but going off of the recordings, and, and it's covered well in the book, I think you, you have the recordings that say that they were trying to take back the plane, but also, but there was no kind of explicit suggestion that they were taking back the plane to land it or to gain control of it, but they knew that they wanted to take it back.

Garrett Graff: Yeah.

Jessica Chen: All right, maybe we have time for one more question. Right there.

00:59:17 Audience Member: I'm curious, how did this project change your perspective on the day and the country writ large?

Garrett Graff: Mmm. So I... In a couple of different ways, and I've covered some of it tonight. I think for me, part of it was just the realization of how much unfolded over the course of that day that was really improvised.

00:59:48 You know, sort of just these incredible stories of the way that Americans, you know, individually, organizationally, institutionally, officially, responded to a day of absolutely sort of unprecedented challenges.

01:00:10 And, you know, whether that's, you know, Ben Sliney or... Or Michael Day, or Vice President Cheney, or President Bush. I think America was... America was lucky to have the people in the positions that it had them in on 9/11. And that I think we are lucky that we had the leadership that we had on 9/11. And I say that without wanting to get into sort of any sort of discussion of anything that happened thereafter, but on, on 9/11, I actually think our government responded very well.

01:01:00 And... And then I think, to me, the second thing was, that, that really did sort of change my perspective on the day, was realizing... Realizing just how much it has changed our country in ways that we sort of don't even trace back to 9/11 anymore. You know, that... You know, so much of the stuff that I write about in sort of my day-to-day national security reporting, we don't even think about that being part of, you know, the world as it was changed after 9/11.

01:01:48 And... And I think that that... Again, sort of coming back to thinking about, you know, what's the memory that we hand off to a next generation of this event, is really trying to figure out, like, how you capture and explain how different the United States was before 9/11, and

sort of how much of our modern world was created because of 9/11, or in reaction to 9/11.

01:02:24 Because, you know, we have a quarter of the country now who literally doesn't remember 9/11 at all, and a much larger percentage of the country that has never known, you know, any adult life that wasn't post-9/11 America, you know. And you see that in, like, lots of different ways, right? Like, you, like, you go back to, you know, the way that 9/11 starts, and you're, like, "Okay, on Tuesday, September the 11th, you were allowed to bring knives on a plane."

01:02:59 And, like, you try to sort of say that to people now, and they're, like, "Well, like, that's dumb." Like, like, "Who hadn't thought of that before?" But, like... And, you know, there are sort of all of these little things. I mean, you could carry liquids on a plane on 9/11. I mean, sort of all of these things that, you know, we, we can barely remember these things taking place, you know, before.

01:03:26 Jessica Chen: So on that note, I'm going to welcome everyone to pick up a copy of Garrett's book, "The Only Plane in the Sky." It's being sold just outside the auditorium. If you sign up for a museum membership at the table, just across from the book sale, you'll receive 20% off your book tonight. Also, if you sign up as a benefactor level or above, you'll receive the book for free.

01:03:46 Next Thursday, September 26, we have partnered with the Central Intelligence Agency to bring you three key perspectives on 9/11, one of whom is profiled in Garrett's book-- or included in Garrett's book. Former acting C.I.A. directors John McLaughlin and Michael Morrell and former C.I.A. senior paramilitary officer Phil Reilly will discuss how the agency was uniquely positioned to support policymakers and military operations in the crucial 15 days immediately following the attacks, as well as how 9/11 ushered in a new era of intelligence work.

01:04:16

If you haven't booked tickets for that, you may do so at [911memorial.org/programs](http://911memorial.org/programs). Thank you so much for joining us tonight. We hope you come back for more programs. Thank you, Garrett.

(applause)