Wednesday, March 27, 2024 / The Baltimore bridge collapse

[HALF SECOND OF SILENCE]

[BILLBOARD]

SCORING IN

SEAN RAMESWARAM (host): At dawn on September 14, 1814, noted slave-holder and anti-abolitionist Francis Scott Key woke up on a boat in the Baltimore Harbor.

He looked out at Fort McHenry, which was going on 25-hours of straight bombardment at that point, and through all the smoke and destruction, Key could see a flag.

As the story goes, he broke out a pen and wrote a poem.

That poem became our national anthem.

Key became a hero.

And we would name a million things after him – including the steel-arched Francis Scott Key Bridge which was situated just 100 yards away from where he stood when he wrote that poem centuries ago.

SCORING BUMP

SEAN: First thing on March 26, 2024, Key Bridge was struck by a massive container ship. It crumbled on impact.

What the bridge’s collapse means for Baltimore and these United States, ahead on *Today, Explained*.

[THEME]

SEAN: Ben Conark is a criminal justice reporter at the Baltimore Banner, but yesterday, everyone in his newsroom covered one story.

BEN CONARK (criminal justice reporter, *Baltimore Banner*): I woke up later than a lot of other reporters at the newsroom, which was about six in the morning. And I looked down at my phone and saw I had a missed call from my editor, which is never good. And I saw that there were some news alerts on my phone. Hmm. about a bridge collapse. Um, so I called my editor back and he was like, you got to get down there.

SCORING IN - Bubbling Over (BMC)

*<CLIP> TODAY SHOW: “this morning a stunning bridge collapse in Baltimore. MAN: the bridge is gone…holy hell..”*

BEN: So the ship was called the Dali. It had been in port and it was heading out around one in the morning. It is a, uh, you know, pretty cloudy night, pretty chilly. , the ship is, , being guided out of the port by two tugboats. The tugboats peel off around 1:09 in the morning. Sometime around 1:24, it seems is when the ship first starts to encounter some mechanical problems of some kind. It loses power. Uh, the lights are flickering. There are these big dark black, um, puffs of smoke coming out of the ship. which indicate obviously some kind of, um, mechanical issues that the ship is experiencing. And right around that time, it starts to veer off its course. Uh, it's heading right, or starboard. And this continues. Uh, the ship, um, calls out a mayday.

*<CLIP> CNBC: They were able to transmit information to officials at the port of Baltimore that they lost propulsion…”*

BEN: And, you know, first responders on the bridge are able to halt traffic.

*<CLIP> FIRST RESPONDER CALL: I need one of you guys on the south side, one of you guys on the north side, hold traffic on the Key Bridge. There is a ship approaching that just lost steering. So until we get it under control we gotta stop all traffic.*

BEN: I don't know if anyone really understood how significant that impact was going to be, um, but there were thankfully efforts to stop traffic from traveling over the bridge.What we don't know is if anyone was able to warn the construction crew. There was a construction crew, largely of Central and Latin American migrants on top of the bridge, uh, repairing potholes at the time. We know of eight people in this construction crew, , after , the ship hits one of the piers supporting the bridge. The bridge sort of buckles, , one part of it collapses, the other part teeters, the entire bridge goes down.

*<CLIP> FIRST RESPONDER: 313 to dispatch: The whole bridge just fell down! Start…everybody, the whole bridge just collapsed.*

BEN: And, you know, we know at the very least these eight men who were on the bridge repairing potholes plummet, , you know, more than 150 feet, I believe. , into the water, , two of them are pulled out. One of them goes to the hospital and is later released. One of them refuses medical treatment, which tells you a little bit about, you know, kind of the state of life really for migrant workers here. And six remaining people , are still missing and presumed to be dead.

SCORING OUT

SEAN: I think a lot of people wake up. Their friend send them this video of a bridge collapsing and they go, ‘Oh my god, this is my greatest fear, American infrastructure is crumbling.’ Is that what happened here?

BEN: I hate to be that guy, but it is too early to tell, but I think we have a lot of questions about the infrastructure. We have a lot of questions about the boat. I've been reporting on the questions that engineers have about this bridge design. , particularly around the support piers, right? These big A frame columns that are holding the bridge up. The question we're trying to ascertain is whether those piers were properly insulated from something like this. And the debate becomes, well, you know, how are you going to insulate a pier, a bridge pier, from a massive container ship? And kind of the most popular opinion floating around online yesterday was there's no way you design a bridge, um, to withstand a hit from a cargo ship. It just isn't done. And even secretary, uh, of transportation, Pete Buttigieg kind of suggested something similar,

*<CLIP> BUTTIGIEG: This is a unique circumstance, I do not know of a bridge constructed to withstand a direct impact from a vessel of this size …*

BEN: But the engineers I'm talking to are basically saying, if you can't insulate the pier from a ship, then it should be moved, um, into shallower water. Other bridges have these big concrete, they're called dolphins, um, that are designed to deflect, uh, ships away from support columns. It's unclear to us exactly what level of protection these support piers had, um, but that's a major question. There are also questions about the ship. I mean, I think when you're talking about protecting a bridge, you're usually thinking about wind events, um, a ship veering slightly off course, maybe nudging a, a support column. Not a lot of people think about a ship that's completely lost power and steering, heading directly into a column pier. Was this a failing of infrastructure? Was this some unforeseen generational event that no one could have prevented?I think the jury's still out on that,

SEAN: Can you tell the uninitiated, the non-residents of the mid-Atlantic how important this bridge is to Baltimore?

BEN: Yeah, I mean, this is a really important bridge for a few reasons. The main reason is because the port of Baltimore, which the bridge is right next to, is a very important economic engine of the region. But as far as Maryland and Baltimore goes, , the port is one of the success stories of Baltimore. Baltimore has been through a lot. It's a city that's faced a lot of challenges over the last decades really. Um, but the port, at the port things have been going fairly well. There's a lot of economic activity. Um, it provides a ton of jobs in the region. So this bridge serves a few purposes. Um, for one of the main purposes is for all these cargo, uh, ships that come in and unload their wares and their goods at this port. The trucks need to take them places, and this bridge is right there to facilitate that. Um, it connects the southern tip of Baltimore City to the, uh, Dundalk area, which is in Baltimore County. And then there are commuters. Um, so the estimates are that there's about 35, 000 vehicles traveling over this bridge every day. One of the things that I think a lot of people are waiting to see how it shakes out for the rest of the week is what that commute is going to be like, , what is this going to do to traffic patterns in the area? You know, Baltimore is a city that's half full. Um, it's a city that was built for a million people and it currently has 500,000 people living in it. It's not like Miami where I lived before here, which is literally bursting at the seams.  
  
SEAN: Hm.   
  
BEN: It's not like DC, which is a constant traffic nightmare. Know if there are immediate concerns about sort of an, an overflow of traffic that has literally nowhere to go. Um, but I think the, the more acute concern is that .

These industrial shipping routes and trucking routes are going to be very disrupted.

SEAN: is there any short term fix? Is there any chance that before they rebuild this bridge, which could take, who knows, a year, two years, they can build, I don't know, a temporary bridge because this was such a crucial artery?

BEN: Yeah, I mean, I think that was like the first thing that people thought of. A lot of people, cause the, the 95 collapse happened fairly recently.

*<CLIP> CBS We have some good news for weary commuters around Philadelphia, take a look at this time lapse video, it shows road crews working around the clock to rebuild a section of I95 that collapsed a week and a half ago….*

BEN: A lot of people had that in mind. What might complicate a temporary bridge is that you're also dealing with a shipping lane right underneath the bridge. It feels to me like priority one here is going to be restoring shipping traffic and then priority two would be restoring vehicle traffic over that span that's no longer there. I don't know enough about building temporary bridges at this point to tell you whether you can build a temporary bridge high enough that a cargo ship can pass underneath it.

SEAN: President Biden said the federal government's going to cover this. They're going to rebuild this bridge. Do we have any idea when that starts happening and how much that costs and where that money comes from?

BEN: The federal government is certainly indicating that it's prepared to cover the cost of repairing the bridge.

*<CLIP> BIDEN: It’s my intention for the federal government to pay for the entire cost of reconstructing that bridge, and I expect congress to support that effort.*

BEN: But the cost of repairing the bridge is just one kind of fragment of the picture here. Uh, you know, there's going to be a ripple effect as far as economic impact goes. And it's hard to imagine that, you know, Baltimore is going to be unaffected by this, even if the federal government, you know, foots the entire tab for the bridge. As far as a timeline, I mean, that is, that's something that we're trying to figure out today. You know, there's a big question as to, you know, the timeline of erecting a bridge, for instance. How does that change when you're trying to restore shipping traffic underneath the bridge? It's a fairly unique situation.

SEAN: If you're terminally online like I can be sometimes, there's a lot of people blaming DEI for this bridge's collapse.

*<CLIP> TIK TOK: That barge is managed by DEI captive synergy group, if you go to their website the very first front of the page is talking about inclusivity, so…*

SEAN: Weirdly, there's all these conspiracy theories afoot about what may have caused this, not just a ship losing its power and a terrible, you know, tragedy. Is there gonna be a fight over rescuing Baltimore in Congress? Do we have any idea at this point?

BEN: I do think, you know, this is a continuing theme. When Baltimore gets thrust into the national spotlight. , you usually get fairly racist reactions from certain demographics. I believe that is because Baltimore is a majority black city. This city is kind of used to being written off, um, overlooked. Uh, but it's the city, the people who live here take a lot of pride in this city. Um, it's a city that's really kind of fighting to overcome some of the economic stagnation that it's felt. As far as like congressional attitudes towards Baltimore, I would have to think, and maybe I'm being naive, that, uh, some of the, um, you know, racist vitriol on X is, is mostly contained to those types of grifting engagement seeking people and that actual public officials will take a more mature and measured approach to this, but that those might be famous last words given the state of Congress right now.

SEAN: And you've talked about the resiliency of Baltimore. How did you feel that yesterday? What are people saying? How are people feeling in the city right now?

BEN: When I first got down there yesterday, I came along a stretch of road that overlooks the bridge, and there were all these folks kind of gathered with their cell phones out, taking pictures. You could see the collapse span in the distance. And this guy came up to me, uh, and started talking to me. He had, he was born in 1969. Uh, and he was talking about how when he was five years old and in the mid 70s, him and his friends used to ride their bikes up and watch them building the bridge built. The bridge was, uh, open in 1977. , and the way that he looked out over the water, you could tell it was an emotional experience for him that that bridge was no longer there.

SCORING IN - Cloud Shaped Hole

BEN: I think what it comes down to, Sean, is that people in Baltimore have very strong ties to the city. The folks who live here, , a lot of them grew up here, , and they feel like that bridge is kind of part of their identity. I mean, you saw screenshots from the wire, , people's personal photos. There was a lot of emotional resonance, , that I think that folks never really realize how much a bridge could mean. Until it wasn't there anymore. People are spending their first few days after it happens really kind of reflecting on what that bridge meant to them and what life's going to be like without it there.

SCORING BUMP

SEAN: Ben Conark. Baltimore Banner. You can follow and support the work he and his colleagues are doing on this story right now at The Baltimore Banner dot com.

When we’re back, what the port of Baltimore means for the country.

[BREAK]

[BUMPER]

*<CLIP> THE WIRE’s FRANK SOBOTKA: Why offload in Baltimore except for a Baltimore gang will turn your ship around faster than any other port? And a Baltimore gang will make sure your cargo – all your cargo – gets where it needs to go faster than anywhere else.*

SEAN: *Today, Explained* is back and Sharath Ganapathy is now here with us.

SHARAT: I'm an assistant professor of economics at the Law School of Foreign Service at Georgetown University.

SEAN: Has anything like this ever happened before?

SHARAT: The scale is a bit unprecedented. The last time we've seen something like this was 2007 in Minneapolis.

*<CLIP> WCCO: It took just seconds to impact hundreds of Minnesotans. One of the busiest bridges in our state suddenly gone, along with 13 lives.*

*<CLIP> AP NEWS: Federal safety investigators say two key causes in the deadly bridge collapse in Minneapolis last year, the National Transportation Safety Board singled out structural elements called gusset plates.*

SHARAT: Other than that, the level of this is a bit unprecedented outside of wartime port blockades and closures.

SEAN: What are some of the specific ways we're going to feel the impact of the Port of Baltimore shutting down?

SCORING IN <ROWING WESTWARD>

SHARAT: In the short run, the port is closed, the bridge has collapsed, and really, nothing can get in or out of the port of Baltimore, with some minor exceptions. And that's going to affect, you know, daily life for both people in Baltimore. But also it's going to reverberate through supply chains all across the East coast of the U.S., as well as around the world.

*<CLIP> BLOOMBERG: “The point of Baltimore did 80 billion of cargo value lat year. That’s about 6.5 billion a month. So every month its restricted is going to cost the port a lot of money.*

SHARAT: So the Port of Baltimore is critical for two reasons. First, Baltimore itself sits on the I-95 corridor connecting essentially Boston to Washington, DC. But Baltimore, the Port of Baltimore, on top of that is important because it's really important for two types of goods. First is coal shipments. So lots of coal coming out of Pennsylvania and West Virginia is routed through the Port of Baltimore, through two shipping terminals to the rest of the world. So this coal supplies many power plants around the world.

*<CLIP> BLOOMBERG: We have some of the coal miners down sharply, in fact we have CONSOL Energy having its worst day of the year at this time….*

SHARAT: Second, it's also a really, really valuable for what's called roll on, roll off trade. So these are all vehicles that are being shipped into and outside of the United States.

SEAN: Hm!

*<CLIP> PORT OF BALTIMORE PROMOTIONAL VIDEO: Baltimore is number one in the US when it comes to ro-ro cargo, that’s roll on, roll off. These ships are just basically huge parking garages that deliver cars and other rolling cargo across the seven seas.*

SHARAT: You see massive terminals for, for example, Volkswagen shipping in cars from Europe to the United States.

SCORING OUT

*<CLIP> VW AD: Vdub..representing Deutschland.*

SEAN: So where's all this coal and all these cars gonna go if the Port of Baltimore is out of commission?

SHARAT: There's a bit of a silver lining in the fact is, Baltimore is on the relatively highly populated East coast of the United States. So we have alternative ports. For example, and the port of Norfolk is a large coal terminal, and it's connected by the same railroads that go to Baltimore. All a lot of them go to Norfolk. So there are alternative ports. The same is true for roll on, roll off trade. There's a lot of capacity in, for example, the New York New Jersey area that can absorb much of this trade. Now there's going to be a definite short term consequence to this. Capacity is not instantaneously rerouted. There are ships and cargoes trapped and on its way to these ports. But in the in the medium run, we're going to see a lot of diversion. Corporations have realized in the last few years supply chains are vulnerable. They're going to have been taking steps to harden exactly where they can do things, but also alternatives. And if you're, you know, a shipper of coal or, goods, the first thing that you've been thinking about over the last few years is what do I do if something happens to my shipments or to any port or location where I'm going to. Now, in terms of the goods en route to the portal, or already into the port, the situation is a quite a bit more complicated. There's ships all over the sea. Some are going to have to reroute, some will go to New York, others will go to Charleston. But that's just a fraction of what's going on. We've also got all of the goods stuck in the Port of Baltimore. So some of those goods need to be relocated. There are going to be have to be sent up I-95 or down I-95 to other ports. Then there's also goods that are just going to be stuck in the port for a long time. So think about something like coal. Now we can put coal back on trains and send them back to the mines. But that's kind of ridiculous. So what's really going to happen is some of these goods, especially these real bulk materials, may just sit in the port for a long time until the port is completely reopened.

SEAN: It sounds like you're saying what's bad for Baltimore here could actually be good for other ports around the Eastern Shore of the United States. Does Baltimore get its business back eventually?

SHARAT: That's that's the billion dollar question in some sense. Right. So Baltimore's port has actually had a bit of a revitalization and rebirth over the last few years.

*<CLIP> CNBC: Ports America manages equipment at over 42 seaports. In the United States in partnership with the state of Maryland. They've put $550 million toward upgrades for Secret Marine Terminal at the Port of Baltimore.*

SHARAT: There's an old, decommissioned steel mill that's being rebuilt as we speak now for more logistics and shipping facilities.

*<CLIP> WMAR: Home to the once proud Bethlehem Steel and a workforce of 30,000. Sparrows point is just a shell of its old self, but plans to clean it up and allow new companies to move in have stirred hope here.*

SHARAT: And so Baltimore is going to have to make some serious, you know, trade offs in the short and medium and long run. So the question is how quickly can this infrastructure be rebuilt if it's relatively quickly? The port facilities themselves suffered minimal damage. So if you can get a ship in and a ship out, Baltimore could be back tomorrow. But if corporations and companies and logistics facilities decide this is going to be a long running issue and rebuild their capacity, for example, and, you know, Charleston and Norfolk or even in, Long Island or New York, then we're going to have a kind of rewriting of Baltimore's history. So both timing matters, but also the responses of all the companies and workers involved in maintaining and building the Port of Baltimore.  
  
SEAN: I read that Baltimore’s is the 9th busiest port in the United States, which sounds important but also maybe not irreplaceable? Does Baltimore’s port *need* to recover? Does the country need Baltimore’s port?

SHARAT: There's this large literature on kind of critical pieces of infrastructure – places that exist at a crossroads. And, you know, this is not some new literature. You know, people talk about the Port of Alexandria, people talk about all these ports in Europe, all across the world. And there's these great papers that look at, you know, these ports. Some of them were bombed in war. Some of them were shut down, but most of them, because they exist at a important crossroads, if those crossroads are important because the rest of the places they connect are important, they tend to come back.

SCORING IN—SUNLIT RHODES

SHARAT: And that's what's going for Baltimore. The question is: we do need Baltimore to be these crossroads and this bridge is kind of hampering that right now, right? So Baltimore can't be these crossroads. So if Baltimore can't be these crossroads, we could see another area reemerge. But if Baltimore can come back to being these crossroads, it's going to be very, very clear that, you know, a lot of the stuff that Baltimore is doing right now can still succeed.

SCORING BUMP  
  
SEAN: Sharath Ganapathy. Georgetown University

Our program today was produced by Miles Bryan and Jesse Alejandro Cottrell. We were edited by Matthew Collette and fact-checked by Laura Bullard and Hady Mawajdeh. David Herman and Patrick Boyd mixed the show.   
  
I’m Sean Rameswaram. The show is *Today, Explained*.

[10 SECONDS OF SILENCE]