

Biden and Bush Urge Unity as Nation Remembers Sept. 11

Both President Biden and former President George W. Bush acknowledged that what has happened in the years since has only challenged the notion that Americans found strength in coming together.



By Katie Rogers

Sept. 11, 2021

WASHINGTON — As they traveled the country laying wreaths, strolling through crash sites in pastoral meadows and comforting families whose wounds are ripped open anew each year, two living presidents used the anniversary of the Sept. 11 attacks to urge Americans to come together in an effort to weather deep political and cultural divisions.

“On America’s day of trial and grief, I saw millions of people instinctively grab for a neighbor’s hand and rally to the cause of one another,” former President George W. Bush said from the United Flight 93 memorial outside Shanksville, Pa. “That is the America I know.”

But on Saturday, both he and President Biden acknowledged that what has happened in the years since has only challenged the notion that Americans prized coming together over choosing to grow hostile to one another’s differences. Mr. Bush’s decisions as president two decades ago led to a war in Afghanistan and another in Iraq, and he equated the ensuing rise of domestic extremism in the United States to the same poisonous beliefs that had inspired the hijackers.

Shortly after Mr. Bush spoke, Mr. Biden, whose drawdown of the war in Afghanistan has been criticized for its haphazard and violent end, arrived near Shanksville to lay a wreath and visit a boulder where, in 2001, a plane filled with passengers and crew members, who had wrestled control from hijackers, had hit the ground.

Their appearances seemed like book ends to a 20-year story of tragedy and division prompted by an unthinkable terrorist attack. But both of their remarks, solemn and laced with pleading, hinted that the next harrowing chapter of America’s future was still being written.

“Are we going to, in the next four, five, six, 10 years, demonstrate that democracies can work, or not?” Mr. Biden asked reporters gathered outside Shanksville. “We actually can, in fact, lead by the example of our power again.”

As president, Mr. Biden is struggling to move on from the far-reaching aftermath of the attacks. The end of the war in Afghanistan has been politically costly, and it has made it difficult for him to pivot to a foreign policy doctrine that would better position the country to fight what he feels are more pressing challenges: combating climate change, preparing for future pandemics and keeping pace with China.

In a prerecorded message posted to his Twitter account Friday evening, Mr. Biden gave an update of sorts to what he said 20 years ago about the country's ability to withstand a crisis like Sept. 11.

"We saw national unity bend. We learned that the unity is the one thing that must never break," he said in the video message. "Unity is what makes us who we are, America at its best. To me, that's the central lesson of Sept. 11. It's that at our most vulnerable, in the push and pull of all that makes us human, in the battle of the soul of America, unity is our greatest strength."

Mr. Biden has also been pressured by families of Sept. 11 victims to release more information on the origin of the attacks. This month, the president made good on a campaign promise to disclose long-classified documents that families of the victims believe could detail connections between the government of Saudi Arabia and the hijackers.

The families had called for Mr. Biden to do so or refrain from attending Sept. 11 memorial events. But on Saturday, he began his day in New York City. He and the first lady, Jill Biden, stood at the 9/11 memorial plaza with their Democratic predecessors, Barack and Michelle Obama and Bill and Hillary Clinton, who was a senator of New York 20 years ago.



Former President George W. Bush and Laura Bush, the former first lady, at the Flight 93 National Memorial outside Shanksville, Pa., on Saturday. Pete Marovich for The New York Times

Nearby was Rudolph W. Giuliani, a Republican who was the mayor of New York during the attacks and who is an unsparing critic of Mr. Biden, Mrs. Clinton and Mr. Obama.

Notably absent from the proceedings was another living president.

Former President Donald J. Trump had received information about the memorial event in New York City, organizers said, but his spokeswoman said he had chosen instead to visit a police station and a firehouse, where he spoke little about Sept. 11 and instead denounced Mr. Biden. Mr. Trump, who built much of his political brand in the divisive aftermath of the attacks, also issued a series of statements that criticized Mr. Biden's handling of the withdrawal from Afghanistan and praised his allies, including Mr. Giuliani, his personal lawyer, as "the greatest mayor in the history of New York City."

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Mr. Biden did not directly address Mr. Trump's criticism, but told reporters that there was no need for divisive political language.

"They think this makes sense for us to be in this kind of thing where you ride down the street and someone has a sign saying 'F so and so,'" Mr. Biden said, referring to the expletive-laden signs that are often spotted along presidential motorcade routes.

Instead, during various stops at all three memorial sites — Lower Manhattan, Shanksville and the Pentagon — members of the Biden administration tried to present a clear-eyed view of what unfolded that day, as well as size up the toll the aftermath has taken on Americans.

Vice President Kamala Harris said in remarks delivered near Shanksville that the tragedy of the attacks had shown how "fear can be used to sow division," and stressed that America's diversity was its greatest asset.

"If we do the hard work of working together as Americans, if we remain united in purpose," she said, "we will be prepared for whatever comes next."

Ms. Harris, memorializing the 40 passengers and crew members who fought back, encouraged Americans to remember their sacrifice.

“On this 20th anniversary, on this solemn day of remembrance, we must challenge ourselves, yes, to look back. To remember. For the sake of our children. For the sake of their children,” she said. “And for that reason, we must also look forward. We must also look toward the future. Because in the end, I do believe, that is what the 40 were fighting for: their future, and ours.”

People who have known Mr. Biden for decades, who was a senator of Delaware and chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee at the time of the Sept. 11 attacks, said they saw a parallel between what he had said in the aftermath of the attacks and the language he uses to guide Americans through the coronavirus pandemic.

“People were walking up to him,” said Margaret Aitken, who was press secretary for Mr. Biden when he was a senator. “He was literally stopping people on the street who looked upset and giving that message: ‘We’re going to be OK. We’re going to be all right. There’s nothing that when we come together as a nation we can’t overcome.’”

She added, “It’s very consistent with what he has been saying all along” through the pandemic.

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A version of this article appears in print on , Section A, Page 32 of the New York edition with the headline: Bush and Biden Join in Seeking Unity Amid Grief