

**Reverend Daniel Coughlin**  
Chaplain of the U.S. House of Representatives

**Oral History Interview**  
**Final Edited Transcript**  
May 27, 2011

Office of the Historian  
U.S. House of Representatives  
Washington, DC

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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> and the “People Search” section of the History, Art & Archives website, <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:

“Reverend Daniel Coughlin Oral History Interview,” Office of the Historian, U.S. House of Representatives (27 May 2011).

## Interviewer Biography

**Matt Wasniewski** is the Historian of the U.S. House of Representatives, a position he has held since 2010. Prior to becoming Historian, he worked in the House for the Office of the Clerk for eight years as a historical editor and manager. Matt served as the editor-in-chief of *Women in Congress, 1917–2006* (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 2006), *Black Americans in Congress, 1870–2007* (GPO, 2008), *Hispanic Americans in Congress, 1822–2012* (GPO, 2013), and *Asian and Pacific Islander Americans in Congress: 1900–2017* (GPO, 2017). He helped to create the House’s first oral history program, focusing on collecting the institutional memory of current and former Members, longtime staff, and support personnel. Matt earned his Ph.D. in U.S. history from the University of Maryland, College Park. His prior work experience includes several years as the associate historian and communications director at the U.S. Capitol Historical Society, and, in the early 1990s, as the sports editor for a northern Virginia newspaper.

— FATHER DAN COUGHLIN —  
SEPTEMBER 11, 2001

**WASNIEWSKI:** This is Matt Wasniewski from the House History Office. Today is May 27th, 2011, and I'm here with Father Dan Coughlin, the former Chaplain of the House. We're going to talk about his memories of the period around 9/11. Father, to start today, we'd just like to open up by having you trace your memories of that morning. When did you arrive at the Capitol? What are your memories?

**COUGHLIN:** Well, I arrived at the Capitol a few minutes before nine, if I recall. I knew there was a guest chaplain, so I wasn't under really a great deal of stress. I'm the kind of person—I never listen to the radio in the morning. I get up real early. It's my prayer time, time for reflection and some reading. And as I entered the building, I was coming up the stairs, and a lady was coming down. "Isn't that terrible what happened in New York?" And I said, "What happened in New York?" And she said, "The plane ran into the Trade Center!" I said, "Really?" So with that, I continued on my way up to see the guest chaplain. It was Father Gerry Creedon, who was a pastor in Virginia, so not far away. I said, "Gerry, I understand there's a great tragedy happened in New York," and then he went a little bit more detail and so that was my first learnings. And I said, "Well, you're going to address this in the prayer?" He said, "I thought I'd wing it," and I said, "Gerry, I need this for the [Congressional] Record." So we turn over a prayer that he had prepared and had sent to us, so that we could file it for the *Record*—turned it over and just wrote three lines, and to this day, I remember the final line was: "And lead us, Lord, to a new day of peace and leadership. Amen."

With that, I had noticed, coming through Statuary Hall, that Speaker [John Dennis] Hastert was now at the other end of the hall, going my same direction, figuring he was ahead of me going into the [House] Chamber, but never saw him again that morning. Instead, Porter [J. Goss] came in to be the *pro tem* Speaker, and he says, with this, people start to see smoke coming from the Pentagon. And so the police start saying, “Well, we’re going to evacuate, we’re going to evacuate.” Porter says, “We’re going to go in, and we’re going to end early,” so about three minutes to 10, we went in, and he gaveled. I’m not sure he said, “The guest chaplain will lead us in prayer.” I’m not sure he used Gerry’s name. I can’t remember that, but Gerry briefly said the prayer, said, “Amen,” and Porter gaveled again and said, “The House will be closed until recall by the Speaker.”

So with that, the only thing Congress did that day officially was pray. So I’ll never forget that, and I tell that all the time because—I’ll back up a little bit in the sense that when I became the chaplain, previous year, everyone, including my predecessor, “Are you enjoying it?” and I said, “Yes I enjoy it very much being the chaplain. It’s a great honor.” But after 9/11, I could never say enjoy again. I just sensed that there was a *gravitas*—Latin word, gravity or you await—that the House took prayer and chaplaincy much more seriously, and I needed to grip that as well. It was not just mine to enjoy, so it’s most memorable and lots of details.

**WASNIEWSKI:** I’ll come back to that. Let me just back you up for a second.

**COUGHLIN:** Sure.

**WASNIEWSKI:** So Father Creedon recomposed his prayer when you still thought that what was happening was an accident? When did you really become aware, or was it just kind of this gradual dawning that something bigger was at play?

**COUGHLIN:**

Well, after the prayer was over, we went out to the Speaker's Lobby, and somebody was evacuating, "Everybody out, everybody out!" And so we went down the stairs. "We want you to go towards the Library of Congress, go across the lawn. Get beyond that wall." If you know, there's kind of a wall that goes up about eight feet, no, five feet of a lawn. We're working across the lawn there towards the Library of Congress and I remember this because somebody took a photo and brought it back to me a year later. I was walking across that lawn with my arm on the shoulder of a Member, Howard Coble, and my arm around the waist of one of the recording clerks, and we got about two-thirds down the grass, and I was on a click in my mind. As a chaplain, am I going the wrong direction? Walking away rather than staying or walking back? So I said, "Excuse me, I'm going to go back." I started back, and I got, again, close to the parking, the lawn on the other end, and they said, "No, no. You can't come back here. You're supposed to go with the Members." Because people were trying cell phones. The big thing was, they wanted to get more information. They wanted to get in touch with family.

This gentleman had a walkie-talkie. I think he was a policeman or Secret Service of some sort, and he said, "Take him to the police station." So we got to the police station, we walked in, he said, "Father, you should go up to the sixth floor. That's where leadership's gathering." We walked in this room, and everybody was just mulling around, looked glued, like most Americans, to the TV set, just filled with questions. What's going on? The first was an accident, but now the Pentagon? We got to list our questions and priorities, and I said, "Okay, let's sit down. Where do we begin?" and somebody says, "I think we should be giving a prayer," so I led a prayer spontaneously and, then I left them. They knew at that time where the President was. They knew where Denny Hastert was. They weren't sure where the Vice President was,

and then they started answering their own questions, I take it, just like the rest of America.

I went downstairs and then began to see some other Members drifting in, and, again, they wanted to get to a land phone. They wanted to call home. They wanted to call their district, assure that they were fine and begin, I think, also to calm people down.

**WASNIEWSKI:** Do you remember who was part of that? Was that staff and Members?

**COUGHLIN:** Upstairs? No, that was all leadership from both sides of the aisle. Then what transpired the course of the day is that that group started gathering information, and they would, in turn, like every two hours, have a briefing. And before each briefing began, again, they would invite a prayer. At noon, I went over to St. Joseph's to attend a Catholic mass, and the church was quite full, and the priest who was presiding said a few words in his homily and began to break down. I think it was a relief for a lot of people who, if they hadn't cried or weren't really shaken, it was very touching. That was Father Gene Hemrick. After mass, I chatted with him briefly.

Then I had gotten in touch with the Senate Chaplain [Lloyd John Ogilvie], and I told him where I was. He lives very close by, so he came. He went back to see how his wife was, and then he came back, and so the two of us were, the rest of the day, in the police station as the briefings and more information came out. Until maybe 4:30 or 5:00 or something like that, they decided that the leadership was going to be on a speakerphone and wanted to talk to the Members. Police at that time were still urging everybody, "We're going to leave." Or "We're going to wait now for this briefing, and then everybody get away from the Capitol, get away from the Capitol."

Somebody came up with that extraordinary fact that airplanes all across the country were being brought down, the number I had forgotten, but it was just astounding—so that heightened every anxiety. With that, they had the briefing, and on speakerphone the Senate and House, and said that they were going to come back at 6:00, in for the news hour, but we should all leave. Members said, “We’re not going to leave. We’re not going to be a government in flight. We’re going to stay here,” and then the police stepped in and said, “No, we really want you to leave,” and this was the wrong time for a fracture, it seemed, but it was really heating up. They wanted them to leave, the Members did not want to leave, and they’d ask me to begin that with a prayer. And I stepped in—I usually never step into things, I always wait to be invited—but I stepped in, and I said, “I think we should just talk this out, and maybe we should end this session with some prayer.” And in time, they decided that the four leaders would come—two from the House, two from the Senate—both sides being represented on the steps, and everybody agreed, we’ll be back here before that. So that became kind of the reconciling moment.

Then we asked, then I said, “Okay, well now, before we all go our separate ways for a couple of hours, why don’t we end with some prayers?” Some people started reading some scripture passages. Others prayed silently, and I said, “I’ll just end with a blessing.” And as they were praying, it came to me, “God Bless America.” And so I said, “Do you remember this song?” And I started the song, and then we left. I gave a blessing, and everybody dispersed. I remember walking over on the palisades around the Senate. I was about to get my car. In fact, I think my car keys, I think, were back in the office, so I could walk home, but I wasn’t about to make the long walk, and I walked around the Senate, and then I started praying the rosaries—Catholic boy in time of stress. {laughter}

I have to back up and say I found a land phone in the police station, called my family and told them I was fine, asked how everybody was. My mother was in her 80s at that time. Just asking everybody to assure her, stay with her, and I'll be fine. I gathered back then on the steps, and it was not me. It was somebody else concluded that with the singing of "God Bless America." I didn't start that. I started the rehearsal {laughter}, a more private thing over in the police station, but somebody spontaneously, and that was the thing, afterwards, I heard most about, how that touched people all across the nation, that were willing to stand there and sing.

**WASNIEWSKI:** If I could just back up for a minute.

**COUGHLIN:** Sure.

**WASNIEWSKI:** So you're at the police station. Do you remember any of the prayers that you offered specifically or what you were drawing on at that point?

**COUGHLIN:** No, I really don't. I don't. I think, clearly, as I look back on it, I wasn't praying about enemies because we didn't know what was happening really. It was just drawing upon my own gripped feelings, and asking for peace, wisdom, I'm sure, some reconciling love. That's what comes to my mind now.

**WASNIEWSKI:** Other than the singing of "God Bless America" on the steps, are there any other memories that stand out from being at that event on the evening of the 11th?

**COUGHLIN:** I think what I remember, again, because walking out across the lawn with the Congressman and the clerk, I think it was *Roll Call* who took a photo of the back of us and asked, "What were you saying to them?" And I said, "I'm quite clear I wasn't saying anything. I did what I do most of the time as a

chaplain. I was listening. I was asking them questions about their feelings and their family and if they had been in touch. I was listening.”

When you asked what was I praying, I was praying more from what I was listening, in terms of people, for their families, for the nation, picking up on their concerns, their anxieties. It was kind of my way, and I think I’ve learned through the years that, even for me, it’s listening deeply and listening deeply even into the scriptures. It’s the source I draw upon. Any other details in the police station? No, other than they were very attuned that every briefing began with a prayer, and they were very attentive.

**WASNIEWSKI:** Let me just back up because this is a question that we’ve asked everybody, and it has to actually do with leaving the Capitol, so somewhat out of sequence, but was there ever a moment when you heard an alarm go off, when someone said, “Get out now.”

**COUGHLIN:** No, don’t remember that at all. Don’t remember that at all.

**WASNIEWSKI:** Okay.

**COUGHLIN:** It’s just in the hands of the police.

**WASNIEWSKI:** Let me move to the morning of the 11th. The interesting thing, and you’ve pointed it out, is that, really, the only thing that happens during the legislative day of the 11th prior to the recess is a prayer. But when that legislative day resumes the next morning, we come out of recess, there’s your prayer.

**COUGHLIN:** Right.

**WASNIEWSKI:** What a difficult prayer to have to put together.

**COUGHLIN:**

Yes. Yes. All through the years, I never did prayers much in advance, sometimes the night before, the day before if I thought the morning was going to be very complicated, and I wasn't going to have time to enter into the quiet time I needed to write the prayer. So on the 11th, I got back to my apartment, and I live alone, and I was still caught in all my feelings. I think I might have called my family, saw more things on television and didn't want to get too much more caught up in it other than—

Anyway, then I decided, well, I better write some things down, try to get some grasp on this because there's so many feelings—a whirlwind of feelings—and I didn't want to be blinded by that. I knew what was needed, at least in my perspective was some grounding, upon which, that was always my aim, that people could say amen to, grounding of some stability, some strength, and, for me, that was some kind of witness of faith. So I started writing down and, I think, mostly started writing feelings, and, well, often as I would, hope any of us would, you turn to good friends in time of need.

I turned to a book—I have a collection of books of Thomas Merton, Trappist monk, poet, and very involved in social issues, even from his cloister—what a great writer. Pulled up one of his books called *Seeds of Contemplation*, and I turned to a couple of pages. I thought it was an echo of what I was feeling about, and so there was one title that was called “Peace,” and I'll just read the first couple of lines, if I may. “If people really wanted peace, they would sincerely ask God for it, and He would give it to them. But why should he give the world peace, which is not really desired? The peace the world pretends to desire is really no peace at all. To some people, peace merely means the liberty to exploit others, without fear of retaliation or interference. To others, peace means freedom. To still others, it means leisure. To others it—” I took the book, and I threw it across the room

because I thought it was peace that we were looking for, and he was negating all the motivations and all the feelings that generate anything but peace. So I said, “I think I have to sleep on this.”

As I said, I get up very early in the morning, and I was still kind of like in a logjam in mind and prayer, and then finally, words from the Old Testament, from the *Psalms*, came to my mind. They’re the two lines that the Trappist monk, that Thomas Merton is—every prayer begins with these two lines, and they’re asking God to be with them as they begin their prayer: “Our help is in the name of the Lord. Lord make haste to help us.” And once I got that on paper, it just flowed. That’s really what we needed. We needed to just turn to the Lord and ask for His help. The rest of the words, I forgotten.

**WASNIEWSKI:** In the strike of balance between the tragedy that had happened—and some of the words you used were stunned, angry, violated. “We mourn our dead and reach out with prayer and acts of compassion to all those families splattered with blood and exhausted by tears.” But in the same prayer, you point out that, “We begin a new day of building security and peace through justice.” And you ask that God free American leaders from fear of any prejudice whatsoever. That’s a tough balance to strike.

**COUGHLIN:** Thanks for reminding me of the words and seeing that there was some balance in it. That was the struggle. The next day, I came to realize, as I had been in the chapel that long, and how many people listen to the prayer, I guess, especially at a moment like that, and I received a lot of comments on the prayer. And then, in the evening, one of the Members came to me, and he said, “Father, thank you for the prayer this morning, but I have to tell you what happened in my family last night.” He said, “The family was just glued to the television set and so forth, so finally I said to my son, he had needed to go to bed. So he got ready to go to bed, and as I went in to say good night to

him, and I said, 'Did you say your prayers?' And he said, 'Dad, I had trouble. I didn't know how to pray.'" And he said, "You didn't know how to pray? Why? What was wrong?' He said, 'I didn't know how to pray for those bad guys. I felt I should pray for our enemies. I didn't know how to pray for those bad guys. What should I ask God for those bad guys?' I don't know where it came from. I said to him, 'Son, you just bring them from your mind to God's mind, and God will do what's best for them.'"

**WASNIEWSKI:** Powerful.

**COUGHLIN:** It is. And then coming to realize the depth of faith, many of the Members. Occasions like that, any anniversaries as well. One of the greatest things, I think, are Members' great skills. I'm sure God sends them here with great gifts, but it's a skill that gets developed here. They're great at memorializing. I think part of it is so truthful, and they try to be such people of compassion that when something like this happens, their anguish is larger than their own. It reaches out to people and sensing the feeling of people, they know how to memorialize. They speak solid, deep truths and express in words, feelings that then lift everybody up on a common ground, and I've seen that time and again here.

**WASNIEWSKI:** In that vein, do you remember anything about the prayer vigil that was held in the Rotunda a few days after? Or really any other commemoration that was formal or informal in the weeks after?

**COUGHLIN:** I remember I had some personal difficulties when they started talking about the prayer vigil. I was afraid it was going to be a media moment. Look at us praying. And I'm all for prayer, and public prayer, but prayer for cameras? I believe in what the master says, "Beware of those who pray in public." I say that frequently, and it's tough about being Chaplain. You've got to be first

yourself and not any pretense. So I was really uneasy, and I didn't realize that no other motivation was really solid and it was going to be kept private, and then it was fine and cooperated with that.

But it was a wrestle for me, I have to really say. That's the biggest memory I have of it. What was said there, again, I'm not sure. Another big moment for me is when they moved the session of Congress up to New York. That was a big moment, and I remember wrestling along with that prayer.

**WASNIEWSKI:** That actually is one of my questions. Were you involved in any of the planning for that? Do you have any memories of it?

**COUGHLIN:** No, and that was, again—I thought, “Oh this is another one of those media moments, but I'll go along with it.” And I said, well, it's going to be just like reopening Congress. You just open it with prayer. Okay, the more it sounded like normalcy and routine, I knew just by being there was a great tribute to New York, that Congress was standing with New York.

Let me just insert that I forgotten where along the line I finally got back to Chicago, where I'm from, and through talking to my family, talking to friends, priests, others, I began to realize, 9/11 just touched everybody, and everybody's like, “Where were you when you heard all those kinds of questions?” I don't think anybody felt it as deeply as New York and Washington. I think it's because there's so much stretch in New York and here, I knew the anguish of it was being acted out, publicly, and then the Pentagon so close, and then Denny Hastert quite convinced that the plane that went down in Pennsylvania was headed here for the Capitol. But then worse, later on, was with anthrax trouble here. And then, after that, we had the stalker [sniper]. By the time the stalker came, within just two months later, Washington was beaten up terribly, emotionally.

So going back to the New York piece, I felt it was important, as long as it was routine, I did what I wanted. Then I was deeply, deeply moved by—they showed me where I was going to stand, and this was Washington’s Bible. And nobody touches it, but I did, and I opened it up, and I just wanted to read a passage. I opened a passage from *Isaiah*, and again it was a promise of Isaiah, and in the face of tragedy, closed it, and then somebody—one of the guards—turned towards me, but I already closed it and put it back down. So I was moved by the historic moment.

**WASNIEWSKI:** We’ve talked to a few people and that was their first time being up to New York and visiting Ground Zero. Did you visit Ground Zero?

**COUGHLIN:** We did that, yes.

**WASNIEWSKI:** Yes, what was that moment like?

**COUGHLIN:** I had a prayer prepared for that. I didn’t know, again, nobody really knew how that was going to transpire, whether because there was still so much security. There’s still so much working going on, smoke was still coming up, firemen were still in charge and in great grief—police and firemen both. But when, we got there, again, it was a line of buses, and so we were single file, and then we put on helmets—I think masks, too, if I recall—and we got out there, and we were all kind of around perimeter, and everybody just stopped and was still. And that was the prayer. I knew I couldn’t. Whatever people were thinking, anything I was thinking was so deep and it was still. There’s people working down there, and it was so far away in the midst of this smoke, still looking for remains is so moving. The silence just caught it all and was much more articulate than anything I would have said, so I never pulled the prayer out of my pocket.

**WASNIEWSKI:** Just because I'm thinking about it at this moment, did you ever visit as part of a congressional group any of the other sites—the Shanksville [Pennsylvania] site, the Pentagon?

**COUGHLIN:** I didn't. To this day, I haven't been to Shanksville, and I'll probably reach out and make a special trip to go there.

**WASNIEWSKI:** Let me ask and back up again, about the office. You have a staff as Chaplain. What happened to the office in these days and weeks after 9/11, with your memories? Were you in communication with your staff on the day of 9/11 or like so many other people, was it just people scattered? We've heard that from so many Members.

**COUGHLIN:** At that time, I think I had one young man working for me, and I don't remember being in touch with him at all that time. They evacuated, and what I do remember more was during the anthrax scare and also the stalker, talking to a lot of staffers in those times because there was so much anxiety. I remember the wonderful Navy doctors we have here, the House Physician. We're willing to give people an anthrax test, a swab, take a swab. They kept telling everybody, you would have had to been here. It was highly unusual, but they did detect some victims. But I remember they set up a couple of lines where they were going to do these tests. And I remember walking the line, trying to calm people down, and somebody who worked for the House physicians comes to me, "Father, you don't have to stand in line. Come with me." And they took me immediately to the office. I thought something happened and they were going to swab me in the office. I said, "I wasn't there. I was just working the line trying to calm people down."

I remember many young women during the days of the stalker, coming in, just talking about, that's where they would shop, that's where they got gas,

and murders took place there. People here on the Hill were so vulnerable in those days.

**WASNIEWSKI:** That was a difficult year.

**COUGHLIN:** Yes, it was.

**WASNIEWSKI:** Do you remember any special requests that were made of you in the weeks and months after, other than these public prayer vigils?

**COUGHLIN:** No, I don't. I think, like many Americans, I just wanted to get back into the routine of things. I remember there was a panel brought in by a couple of Members, one from each side, and there was a panel of Muslims. They wanted Members and staff to understand a little bit more about Muslims, and I remember attending that and thinking it was just the right thing to do. And there were some others. When we got in, all the argument about Iraq—I remember also, what did we learn from panels? What did we learn from Kosovo that will help us now in Iraq? Some of them looking back on other tragedies, where people were willing to draw the wisdom that came out of those tragedies and the goodness that came out of those tragedies. How to make the best use of that in facing what was in front of them. But I, like most people, I think, was just working back to routine and keep the routine going. Keep prayer faithful and honest.

**WASNIEWSKI:** Did your selection of guest chaplains, was that influenced by 9/11? Has the House—I'm ignorant about this—has the House ever had an imam or a Muslim prayer leader come give it?

**COUGHLIN:** Yes, yes we have, and before I was Chaplain and certainly before 9/11, to answer that clearly. But the first year, so it was before 9/11, I sent out a letter asking to refine our procedures, making them clear, what I was trying to send

out this letter. If you wanted a guest chaplain, what your office would do, what our office would do, and I was deluged with guest chaplains. I only came to realize that way that Congress is a paper organization and lands on somebody's desk, and maybe a summer intern thinks we ought to do something about this, whatever. But now it's worked out. Even then, soon, it worked out into a pattern where we have guests every week practically, if the weeks are predictable, where it used to only be once a month. And they're from different faiths.

**WASNIEWSKI:** You mentioned that there was, for you, personally, there seemed to be this change after 9/11 that it became a lot more serious, even more *gravitas* than there was before in the ritual of opening a session with a prayer on a daily basis. How did your relationship change with the Members, or did it change with the Members because of that feeling or emotion?

**COUGHLIN:** I think so. I think it probably did, and, certainly, each of those anniversaries that I was here for 10 years. It's true of coming from a vocation as a parish priest. It's those people who want to get married, those people who are having marital troubles, or those in a time of sickness or death, and you draw closer to a family or some members of a family—they never forget you. In some ways, it's a sadness of ministerial care, but it's most doctors and lawyers, I think, also, and priests are often about catching people in crisis. I believe strongly in an ever-faithful God and that we need to be ever faithful, and not just in times of crisis, so I always kind of press that, but it's true. There's the vulnerability that opens up. For a Christian like myself, it's all the secret power of the cross—the cross that leads to resurrection. And once the cross is embraced, once the cross is endured, endeared, it opens a heart to all kinds of new graces. So there's a theology of that, behind what I'm saying, but I don't expect everybody to embrace the theology, but I think even sometimes in

news media, they're grateful to statistics and the facts and so forth, but nowadays, too, they draw down to the personal because it's understanding a personal story that the viewer gets drawn into the real event.

**WASNIEWSKI:** Okay. I've got more questions here. You've mentioned anthrax. I'm going to move to anthrax, and then I'm going to come back and wrap up with some general questions about both events. Specifically, do you remember any of the events the day you were in the office and the anthrax because that was just a month after 9/11. Of course, it happened on the Senate side, but then the effect was, well, it's probably in the postal operations on the House side, too. Do you remember anything about the day that news broke?

**COUGHLIN:** No, I don't remember anything about the suddenness of the news. I think, like a lot of things, it's rumored long before you finally . . . so what our procedures are now going to be, where I should step in. I know I had called Lloyd Ogilvie and told them if I could be of any assistance to let me know. But no, I don't remember except that though the study was—nobody knew the details of the study—I knew certain people who were here on through the night for like three days running, just what are we going to do? How are we going to go about this? And we need to deal with the emergency and protection of people and the systems in the buildings. I knew some of the leadership people, Sergeant at Arms, and police, and doctors that were part of those meetings, and you could see the wear and tear on them. And if I caught them at all—a word of encouragement, never a question of curiosity. I just knew that they're working at it. But then, as I said earlier, when they decided that they had the information and they were going to give it to the people, but wanted to sort out who really was exposed, they were very detailed, but there were some people, who were just, "Well what if? What if?" And, again, more fright combined with the 9/11 fright, this fright just had some people

paralyzed, and they were just frightened. And as they're standing in line, we're never knowing. And we're never over on the Senate side even. They're frightened, so to deal with those moments were important for me.

**WASNIEWSKI:** The House also decided to close for five days during that stretch.

**COUGHLIN:** Yes, I remember that.

**WASNIEWSKI:** The Senate stayed open. Do you remember if people—the effect on morale generally, other than fright? It might have been fairly dispirited.

**COUGHLIN:** It was. And also, meanwhile, outside at that time too, there's so much—jersey barriers being set up, the visitors are no longer regular route, they're going way about, and it was such a—there were so many other changes happening that were discomfoting or not routine. You couldn't approach the Capitol on a given day and not expect that it was going to be a different entrance or different security procedure, and everybody knew for our good and for our protection. But the constant adjustment was, I suppose, in that sense, like people in flight, in conflict in territories around the world. Ours was much more sophisticated than what a lot of those poorer places go through, but it was very apparent externally. But I had even forgotten that the House—which is always more the creative end of the Capitol, of course, let everybody do their jobs that need to be done. Why get in their way?

**WASNIEWSKI:** How did the long-term effect, the mail policy for instance—did that have any changes for your office, the way you received requests from folks?

**COUGHLIN:** {laughter} Our photos were fried, and a lot of things were delayed or ruined in the process, but it was a small price to pay. Again, I think it brings you back to the Pennsylvania fields, you know? It could have been much worse. One of the things that does stand out in my mind was, we—once we start the

training for evacuation, I was surprised that I wasn't supposed to go with the people who worked on my floor around my office. I was supposed to go with leadership. Again, it redefined the job. And then, when things became a little bit more established that they were most concerned people who really believe in this institution, everyone's concerned about keeping the institution going and alive, and I was supposed to be the key part of helping what was left, what was remnant, to keep it going in some ways. I never thought about that at the time, but the plan was developed by people much smarter than me and surprised to find my place in it.

**WASNIEWSKI:** I have about three or four wrap-up questions focusing on 9/11, but certainly if it strays into the anthrax. If you were asked to pick one very strong visual of 9/11, either the day or the weeks after, no matter how much time has passed or will pass, what's the one thing that will stick with you, in terms of a memory?

**COUGHLIN:** I think the two that I described. One is standing on the steps singing "God Bless America." The country was violated and still being patriotic and standing with these people who were going to do their very best to bring this country to a new day of understanding. That and walking across the lawn—evacuating because even grammar school children do that—but it's such a matter of routine. When it's very real, the feelings that are stirred up in that, just all questions with no answers. And then a grace, really, when deep down, am I going the right direction? Walking away, or am I needed back there? And then real clearly, with the help of someone who had a walkie-talkie, led to leadership where I should be.

**WASNIEWSKI:** It's the 10th anniversary in September. Ten years have gone by. With that kind of perspective, is there anything you see differently about 9/11 now than you did on the day that it happened?

**COUGHLIN:** I think America is so strong and so called in today's world to be leaders. And we, somehow, living in a democracy, keep saying, "Oh, well, we need a leader in the White House. We need leaders in government. We need new leaders," and so forth. No. No, no, no. Because it is a democracy, all of us need to be exerting great, great leadership. And that is a commitment to this country, a commitment to care for each other, to love this country, to sacrifice for ourselves for the good of others, which upon this country is built and the principles of, "Give me your tired, your wounded, and into this land of freedom." We need to face some government issues together. We need to erase some racial and religious bigotry together. We need each of us to be stronger leaders, that we're believable people, we're a believable country.

Too often, I think we're caught up in the materialism this country offers, and we're judged by the material products and way of life, which is carried often by the media to the rest of the world, and that's what America, rather than people who love their family, and their neighborhood, and their city, and their country, and they're willing to be law-abiding citizens to protect that from everybody. Too often, you have the money, you get away with it. And the money you can afford to do it, whatever it is. Money is blinding us from our true authenticity. We are a great country, great people, great sacrificing people because we have higher values than sometimes our basic daily needs. And a moment like 9/11 calls us to stand up straight and to be stronger, and then we slink back to our comfortability, so God has his way with us.

**WASNIEWSKI:** In that same perspective, narrow it a bit. How did 9/11 change the House? The Hill? Just the institution here? Or did it not?

**COUGHLIN:** I think it did for a while. I think it did forever in some areas, that there are the people around the world that we don't know real well, and they don't know us real well. It's weird because we are the leadership and because we

have the resources. We are the ones that need to get to know them and enter more into dialect with them, so they understand us better and call us to be the better people that we can and could be. There can be no more neglect or indifference. I think that got shaken in this, and that can change forever, but It's so easy here because there's so much, even on Capitol Hill, stimulus from self-interest of entities and bodies and political interests that blind us. And so, sometimes you see all we need is the money. All we need are enough votes. We've got the power. It can paralyze people, blind people. I go back often enough in my own thinking of the great sins. Everybody can name their own sins and so forth, and they usually tend to be sins of the flesh and passions, but I go back to *Isaiah*, the blind, we can't see anymore. There are things—the deaf, you can't hear what people are saying. Paralyzed, how many Americans feel paralyzed? The lame who limp through life, and they could maybe, with hope, stand up straight. Those are the things that grip me, and those are the things I continue to pray for, that we be free. Free, healthy people who embrace the law, embrace one another and are free to do so. Do it freely. I think that's the way God has with us, inviting us to be His children. Be as free as children.

**WASNIEWSKI:** Just a couple more questions. Recently, we learned of the death of Osama bin Laden and the reaction of the country was mixed. We saw news reports of people celebrating in the streets, and yet a number of people, folks who I have talked to, there's a strange ambivalence there, too. Did that affect you in any way, having been so close to the events of 9/11 itself?

**COUGHLIN:** It's nothing really to smile about at all, but my own reaction is laughable in the sense that I had left Congress a couple of weeks before that. I was in Chicago when I heard the news early in the morning, and I thought if I was back in Washington, I'd have to come up with a prayer today. My God is so

good. {laughter} Took me out of that situation. That was my basic reaction. Took me out of the situation because—what do you mean? Well, would it be a eulogy, or would it be like one of psalms, a triumphant march of God's victorious power? I'm glad I didn't have to get into that.

**WASNIEWSKI:** One last question. We've talked a lot about how you have viewed 9/11 changing the House, changing the Hill, changing the country. But for you personally, how do you think those events, again with 10 years perspective, shaped your life, changed your life?

**COUGHLIN:** I thought, as a Catholic priest, I believed in a universal Catholic world, a faith that touched people all around the world. It was only since I've been here and particularly events of 9/11 and subsequent growth from that, I'm very parochial. Like most people, I like my comfort zones. And I'm glad now to be back in Chicago with my family, but this place changed me into thinking that if we're going to be leaders in America, we need to know more, and we need to stretch more, and to love more. Indifference stinks. And when we're so caught up in ourselves that we're indifferent to problems that are right down the street or even across the world, and we don't need enemies to make us think better.

I get very apprehensive when we try to look around the world and try to find new enemies and kind of gear ourselves up, gain our own power because we have the enemies. I think that's fictitious in a contemporary world. I think it's a little more ancient times, when we used to fight our own borders, too much over borders. I just think when you look back at the history of this America, this country, it was born on the Renaissance. That's where they got all these great ideas. It was born out of all kinds of problems in Europe, and they brought them over here where we can do better, and we're Renaissance people.

They weren't dumb people. As we were building this place for government. The building across the road is a library. They were going to think differently. They were going to know more. They were going to change the world. Americans have still got to grab hold of that, and, with our technology, we can do that—not just for our good, but for the good of the world. I think that's part of the wonderful thing about, still, the thrill of space and leaders from around the world back when Americans having a piece of that because it takes us beyond ourselves. That speaks a lot of theology to me, but I think it's deeply human, very human, for every single one of us, and that's what makes us great. That's what will be remembered, by the lives we've touched and changed.

One of my greatest lines is that when we're interested in trade and so forth, the greatest export America's got is freedom of religion. No other country does it as well as we do, with separation of church and state. Religion is strong, government is strong. Religion makes mistakes, wanting something from government. Government makes mistakes, demanding something from religion. We make mistakes. We're the best experiment going in the history of the world, and I believe that, when you look around the world, they need some heavy doses of our freedom of religion.

**WASNIEWSKI:** Very good. I've hit all the questions, touched on them.

**COUGHLIN:** Good, okay.

**WASNIEWSKI:** Is there anything that I'm missing?

**COUGHLIN:** No. You were very good, and you let me go on. Thank you.

**WASNIEWSKI:** Thank you very much.<sup>1</sup>

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> When reviewing his transcript for publication, Father Dan Coughlin provided additional memories from the day:

“First, leadership and many Members from both Houses evacuated the Capitol building and were directed by the Capitol Police to a local police station. All of them trying desperately to contact their families, but no one could find live phones. At first, I found myself with leadership gathered on the sixth floor, and I led them in a prayer. Everyone was asking questions and searching for a communication system. I soon left them and went through the building, looking for other Members and staff who were finding their way to the police station as well. This went on for quite a few hours with intermittent groups and prayer. The police kept exhorting us to leave the Capitol area and go home. Leadership spoke through some conference calls, supporting the message ‘Go home.’

“Much later in the afternoon, leadership announced they would return to the Capitol around the news hour. As the news hour approached, Members gathered quite informally on the steps of the Capitol. The Senate would make a brief statement, and the Speaker would make a brief statement, and then all were supposed to leave the Capitol and find their way home. Earlier in the day, I and the Chaplain of the Senate, had led Membership in vocal prayer, and I had encouraged singing the ‘National Anthem’ and ‘God Bless America.’

“I learned later that the brief gathering on the steps of the Capitol, which ended with the singing of ‘God Bless America,’ invited people in their homes and other public gatherings across the nation to join spontaneously in the singing.”