Brian Gaston
Director of Policy, U.S. Representative Richard K. Armey of Texas

Oral History Interview
Final Edited Transcript
June 30, 2011

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

"We always sort of say that the House is, it's the people's House. Either it is or it isn't. And you can understand and appreciate the need to want to protect tourists who are here if something bad were to happen. But I was always sort of the view, okay, you sort of put a plan in place. At some point if you shut down the Capitol to tourists and say tourists just can't come to the Capitol anymore. Okay, well, the terrorists have won."

Brian Gaston
June 30, 2011

Table of Contents

Project Abstract	i
Editing Practices	ii
Citation Information	ii
Interviewer Biography	iii
Interview	1

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.

Citation Information

When citing this oral history interview, please use the format below:
"Brian Gaston Oral History Interview," Office of the Historian, U.S. House of Representatives (30 June 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.

—BRIAN GASTON—
SEPTEMBER 11, 2001

WASNIEWSKI: This is Matt Wasniewski from the Office of the House Historian, June 30th, 2011. And I'm here today with Brian Gaston, who on 9/11 was the policy director for Majority Leader Dick [Richard Keith] Armey. And we're going to talk to Brian about his memories of that day, and one of the first questions we ask people is what was that morning like for you? Everyone has a very distinct memory of 9/11.

GASTON: Well, I remember the day very vividly, as most people do. And it was one of those things where I was actually driving to work. I was running late because we always had a staff meeting every morning at 8:30. And I was actually running late for that meeting, and I came into the Capitol, worked in an office, right off of Statuary Hall, in H226 of the Capitol. I run to the office—the meeting was upstairs on the third floor. I threw my things in my desk, grab my Starbucks coffee out of the pot, and head upstairs. And as I'm running up the stairs to the third floor, I see someone from the Speaker's Office—one of his communications people—running down the steps and clearly with a very frantic look on her face. And so I figure, okay, something's happening.

I go into the meeting, and the TV is on, and learn that one of the Towers had been hit by a plane, but no one was really certain what it was. And then, during the course of our meeting, the second Tower got hit by a plane, and then our meeting immediately broke up. It was probably understood there was a terrorist attack going on. So we all just go back to our offices, not really sure what to do.

About five minutes later, get an email [from] Scott Palmer, who was Speaker [John Dennis] Hastert's chief of staff, was like, "Come to the Speaker's Office. Bill Livingood, the Sergeant at Arms, is going to come in and brief us about what he knows at that point." So we go in the Speaker's Office, and the room was full—it's one of the big meeting rooms in the Speaker's Office. The room was overfull, and Livingood's telling us what he knows at this particular time, and no one really knows too much—this is like 9:30. And while we're in that meeting, I was actually standing up at one of the windows that looks down the Mall. During the course of that meeting, then you see this—we see this smoke coming from down the Mall. And someone was sort of opining that maybe it was, like, "Boy, that looks like that's down by the State Department." And I was sort of like, "That looks like it's over in Virginia." Because I live in Virginia, so I have a pretty good idea of the distance, and it seemed like it was not in the District of Columbia. Livingood immediately left the meeting, and the meeting broke up right then and there.

And so, at that point, we all go back to our offices, and people were turning on—all the TVs are on, so everyone's watching the TV. And then that's when the evacuation started. If it was an evacuation, it was a very haphazard. We didn't have the system that's in place today. That's one of the things we've learned from 9/11. We didn't have an evacuation system, sort of scientific evacuation, if one exists. But it was just basically Capitol Hill policemen, running to offices and knocking on everyone's door, coming in and saying, "You need to leave the Capitol immediately." You knew to leave the Capitol immediately because you knew what had happened so far, that two of the Towers had been hit by a plane. That something had just happened, most likely in my mind, it was like, it had to be at the Pentagon. It just seemed that it was further—it looked like it was clear over in Virginia, and the Pentagon seemed like a likely place for something like that. And

given where the smoke, where we're standing at the window, and where the direction from where that smoke was coming from. And so you knew something serious was happening, and so you took it seriously.

Usually when that type of thing—I was under the assumption, okay, if you leave, we're probably not going to get back in the building. So it's grab your car keys, grab your cell phone, all that type of thing. And that's exactly what I did. Then we just sort of worked our way out of the Capitol onto the plaza, and that would be East Side of the Capitol. We're just sort of in the parking lot area. And it's just very, it's haphazard, and sort of chaotic in some sense because it's not like you need to evacuate off this plaza. It was just get out of the Capitol.

And then, probably over the course of the next 30 minutes, it became this sort of a moving sort of space where you needed to move out. In terms of like, "Okay, we need you out of the plaza space, you need to move onto the grass." Then five or 10 minutes later, "Okay, we need you to move across the street to the"—and they're starting to put up, cordoning the section off. I think part of it might have been—I don't know this with certainty—but I think, at that time, there was still another plane in the air, and that had not crashed yet. I think it was of that view that that plane was targeted for somewhere in DC, whether it was the White House or the U.S. Capitol.

So then it started this whole, immediate evacuation to cross First Street by the Library of Congress, and they cordoned off the whole section. It was probably at that point that no one knew what to do. Where are you supposed to go? I was working for Dick Armey at that time, and I knew our political office was two blocks up the street on Pennsylvania Avenue. So a whole bunch of us thought, "Okay, that's where we're going to go." And it's in sort of—quite a bit of our staff was already there because it seemed like a natural

place to go. We're sitting in there. It's like 10:30, and we're just glued to the television set, watching both of the Towers come down, and all that type of thing. It really was quite the surreal day.

WASNIEWSKI: How did you communicate with staff while you were getting to a place where all of you could gather? Were you using cell phones at that point?

GASTON: My cell phone wasn't working. I mean, everyone was trying to use their cell phones, like some people had success, most people didn't. I wasn't able to use my cell phone. It was sort of a couple of us because we had evacuated the Capitol together, we were together, and then it was just, we consciously decided we'll go up to our political office. And then just happened to, when we got there, several of the other staff were there. It was just primarily verbal communication, and it's if you saw someone.

WASNIEWSKI: Do you have any memories about being out on the East Front other than being pushed back? What was the discussion like? What was the mood like? What was the atmosphere?

GASTON: Oh yes, I seem to recall it was a beautiful day. It was a beautiful, sunny day. And I don't want to say—I don't think anyone's really sort of panicked. But there was just sort of—people knew something was happening. Because at this point, everyone pretty much knew that obviously the two Towers had been hit. That likely the Pentagon had been hit or something. That there was some explosion, whether it was the State Department or the Pentagon, that something had happened. And then, when we got to the political office, you're seeing it on TV. At that point, when you're seeing it on TV, you knew the Pentagon had been hit. But I think, most likely when I was on that plaza standing outside the Capitol, some people were getting information, other people weren't. So you didn't know how relevant the information was and

how accurate it was. And, sometimes, sort of seeing is believing. Until you actually sit in front of the television set, it's being reported what has actually happened. Then that's when it really sort of set in, that the Pentagon had been hit by a plane.

WASNIEWSKI: How long were you at the office on Pennsylvania Avenue before you dispersed at a group, and where did you all go?

GASTON: Well, it was like we were there, and then it got close to noon, and then it's okay, at some point we have to eat. And it's, you couldn't come back to—they had the roads all blocked off. It was like all of the places, all of the restaurants up the street there on Pennsylvania Ave., like Hawk 'n' Dove and Hunan Dynasty, they were all just filled to capacity. And so a group of us said, "Okay, we'll go to Hawk and Dove." They had multiple TVs on there. You're just sort of trying to process the day. And so we sort of hung out there for a while, and you're not really learning anything new at that point. You knew that both the Towers had been hit, both the Towers have fallen. And the Pentagon had been hit, that the plane—you learned about the plane that had crashed in Pennsylvania, but you didn't really learn too much new. It was only about, probably, I think it was about 3:30 because your instinct in terms of like when we were evacuating from the Capitol, the instinct then was to like, okay, go to your car. But at that point, they had shut—I parked in the Rayburn parking garage, and there was an immediate shutdown. When they started the evacuation, there was an immediate shutdown. In hindsight, that was probably a good thing that they locked down the garages because we all knew if people like downtown, it took them four, five, six hours because the whole downtown federal government was evacuating at the same time. And so they actually probably did us a favor {laughter} by locking down the garages. Later that afternoon, it was around 3:30, we started

walking back toward the Capitol, and it was as long as you had your congressional ID, they would allow you to go into the parking garage to get your car so you could go home.

Now that was probably, for me, the most surreal aspect of the day because I go into the Rayburn parking garage, it's quiet. There's nobody around, there's a couple Capitol Hill policemen. I go to my car, and I'm pulling out of the Rayburn parking garage. At that point, I lived over in the Shirlington area of Arlington [Virginia], which is past the Pentagon out [Interstate] 395. And I think in the course of when I left the Rayburn parking garage and got to the complex (I live over in Shirlington off of 395), I may have encountered maybe four or five cars on the road, during that sort of six-, seven-, eight-mile drive. Because, at that point, if you recall, 395 heading north into the city had been shut down. I think that it was, like, shut down some time that morning. There was no traffic coming in 395 as I was heading southbound on it. And I probably encountered maybe four or five cars, and then my journey back home. And it was sort of surreal to drive out 395, across the 14th Street Bridge, past the Pentagon, and you see all this smoke. There's still a fire going on, and there's still smoke.

pulled into the parking complex. I lived in this sort of garden-style condominium complex, and I drove into the parking lot, and the parking lot was just full, absolutely full. Like everyone was—all these cars were there, which was unusual at that point of the day. But the parking lot, every space in the parking lot was occupied. I parked my car, I get out of my car, it is like deathly silent. And clearly, everyone was in their condominium and glued to the television set. I sort of did the same thing. I get out of my car, I go into my condominium, and the first thing I do is turn on the TV set. And you just sort of watch—I just remember being there, and for the next five or six

hours, you're glued to the television set and flipping channels and seeing what more you could find out.

WASNIEWSKI: As the afternoon progressed, were you able to communicate with people from your office via phone?

GASTON: I don't remember. I think at some point I did—it was at some point I did talk to my parents, and it seemed to me it was probably by the time I was able to get a call through on my cell phone, it was probably closer to noon.

WASNIEWSKI: Did you have any notice about the gathering on the Capitol steps that night? Was there any communication among staff about Members gathering on the East Front?

GASTON: I think I sort of knew about it. And what I probably knew—it's possible. I don't recall getting that. At that time, Blackberrys—I'm not sure if we had Blackberrys yet, or maybe some people did—very few people. It was sort of a new technology, but I know I didn't have one at that time. I probably learned about it when I was at home, in my condominium, watching the news.

WASNIEWSKI: So tell me about September 12th. What did you do on that day? What time did you come in?

GASTON: I mean, for me, it was like—I think some people were like, "Should I come to work? Should I not go to work?" And it's like, "I'm going to work." It wasn't even an issue. I'll tell you that day—the day after—really is not that vivid to me. And I just remember [thinking], "Of course I'm going to go to work." And I did, but, unfortunately, I just don't have much recollection of the day after.

What I have more of a recollection of is sort of the couple months after 9/11, leading up until, I guess it was the spring of 2002. Because, like I said, I worked in the Capitol, in an office off of Statuary Hall. And for those couple months, basically the Capitol had been shut down to tours. And that was a huge adjustment for me in terms of—my routine is I pull into the Rayburn parking garage, and I park right near the exit of the Rayburn parking garage, near the credit union in the basement of the Rayburn building. I get on the tram to go over to the Capitol, take the elevator up to the second floor. I walk out the second floor, and turn the corner, past one of the entrances to the House Floor, and walk through Statuary Hall. Usually there'd be tours, even in the morning because, invariably, you'd always see a Congressman with a group of constituents or a large high school group or something like that doing a tour, talking to students in the Capitol. But even then—in the Statuary Hall or in the Rotunda—but even during the course of a typical day, Statuary Hall's teeming with people. And working in an office right off it, you sort of just got used to that. It's sort of like, if you live in a house like I do now, near Reagan Airport, you notice the airplanes taking off, and then it just becomes just part of the usual background. And for me, that's what all the tours in the Capitol, that was sort of part of the usual background.

That was really, really hard for me to adjust to—was coming in every day, or like leaving my office at 10:00 to go to a meeting, and you open the door into Statuary Hall, and there's nobody there. And that went on for months. Then there was also the issue of ultimately a discussion about whether we would allow tourists ever to come back into the Capitol. Or to really regulate the number of tourists who would come in the Capitol, and that was a whole other discussion.

WASNIEWSKI: When did that discussion occur? Because stores were shut down for months, really.

GASTON: Right.

WASNIEWSKI: And do you have any memories of the general outlines of that debate?

GASTON: Yes, I do. I remember, at some point, because it was like, I know there was a discussion going on about it in the Speaker's Office, and probably with the Sergeant at Arms. There was a general concern in terms of what if there's some type of biological or chemical attack? At this point, the talk of "we'll provide the staff with the hoods in case there's some type of chemical or biological emergency" or something like that. And I think there was a legitimate concern about well, what if the Capitol's filled with tourists, and there's some biological or chemical attack? What's going to happen for them? And there's sort of this safety issue and evacuation and all that type of thing. It seemed to me there really was a—and there was sort of an effort leading toward we probably won't allow tourists back in the Capitol or may not allow tourists back in the Capitol.

I remember, I was working for Dick Armey at that time, and I remember he was sort of violently opposed to that. And I also remember David [Timothy] Dreier, who at that time was chairman of the Rules Committee, and he was sort of violently opposed to that as well. We always sort of say that the House is—it's the people's House. Either it is or it isn't. And you can understand and appreciate the need to want to protect tourists who are here if something bad were to happen. But I was always sort of the view, okay, you sort of put a plan in place. At some point, if you shut down the Capitol to tourists and say tourists just can't come to the Capitol anymore, okay, well, the terrorists have won. It's sort of like people know the risks probably. We all sort of know, at

some point, here we are in Washington, DC. We all know about the terrorist threats against our country, and you just got to make an assumption that there's sort of a big bull's eye on this town and on the Capitol and on the Pentagon and on the White House and anything that's related to the federal government or the legislative branch.

I always was of the view you still try and put the best plan you can in place, but, at some point, that's not our decision to make. You make the Capitol available to the people, and you let them decide whether they want to come here. You can't sort of prevent every bad thing from happening. And I just think there's just sort of like, at that point, if you shut the Capitol down to tourists and to the American people, the terrorists have won. You just try and put the best plan in place to deal with if there ever were an emergency. But you let people decide whether they want to come here or not.

WASNIEWSKI: That's ultimately the argument that won out.

GASTON: As it should have. {laughter}

WASNIEWSKI: Tell me a little bit of any other memories of any specific events in the weeks after 9/11. Because there's a lot going on. The 12th, we have Members come in, and give many speeches about the attacks. There's also a—from a couple of the interviewees we talked to—there was a memorable kind of meeting of both the Democratic Caucus and the Republican Conference in the House Chamber where they were briefed. Do you have any memories of that in particular?

GASTON: I don't. The one, sort of the vivid memory of sort of the weeks after 9/11, there was a lot of bipartisanship, {laughter} an awful lot of bipartisanship and fast action on a lot of pieces of legislation. The deal with 9/11—and as it should have been—here we were, our nation had just sustained this terrorist

attack. Obviously, we were ill-equipped for it, and we needed new tools to fight this sort of war on terrorism. And whether it was creating a new Department of Homeland Security or the [USA] PATRIOT Act or dealing with airport security, there was just a lot of bipartisanship that went on those next couple months. And important pieces of legislation were enacted. I think that was sort of one of the benefits. It's amazing, in terms of a crisis or something, where parties can come together. But, at that point, it's the welfare of the country. I think some people seem sort of surprised by it, but it just sort of makes sense. The parties and the people rallied together when you're faced with crisis. And we obviously needed to put some new tools in place to deal with this sort of war on terrorism that has no boundaries.

WASNIEWSKI: Tell me, how did your job as policy director change? What was your job like before and in the months and weeks after? Did it change substantively?

GASTON: I'm not sure if it changed substantively, but you saw a lot of action on critical pieces of legislation. And Dick Armey, who was the Majority Leader, the Speaker had tasked him to sort of manage the whole creating the Department of Homeland Security. And the Speaker's Office was very engaged, obviously, on other aspects and of something like the PATRIOT Act and air transport security. It was really sort of a whole, collaborative effort between the Republican and Democratic Leadership in the House and the Senate. You did see quite a few pieces—over the next four, five, six months you saw really, sort of landmark legislation move through those chambers and get signed into law by the President. And so I'm not sure so much other than maybe it was a more, maybe more heightened pace. There was a sense of urgency to getting these things done.

WASNIEWSKI: Over the long term—we've had interviewees who told us, well, the bipartisanship lasted for six or seven months, but they picked up a—people

have expressed that the relationship between Hastert and Mr. [Richard Andrew] Gephardt was markedly different after that for the duration of their service together. Did you pick up on that kind of change among leadership generally? That there were things they would cooperate on that, in the past, they hadn't? And did that fade after a while?

GASTON: Well, yes. I'm not sure. I worked for Dick Armey up until 2002, that's when he retired. And in 2003, I went to go work for Roy Blunt, who, at that point, became the new Majority Whip, and was his policy director for the first year and a half of that. But, at the same time, Steny [Hamilton] Hoyer became the Minority Whip. And one of the things that Roy Blunt did is that he reached out—and when he became the Whip, and the Majority Whip in 2003—he reached out to Steny Hoyer. Now this has nothing to do with 9/11. But I think it was, he reached out to Steny Hoyer, who was a Minority Whip, because he sort of figured, "Okay, there's some things we're going to have to work on together." And both Hoyer and Blunt are sort of institution guys that care about the institution of Congress. And so Roy reached out to Steny Hoyer, and they started this thing where they start having lunch once a month in each other's office; just the two of them. And it was sort of like for an hour and a half, once a month, Hoyer would come over to Roy's office and have lunch, and the next month Roy would go over to Hoyer's office and have lunch in his office. And basically, what you know, started out as sort of okay, this is sort of a professional, working relationship, ultimately developed into a personal, friendly relationship. They now socialize, they're very good friends.

You hear a lot about how partisan this place is, and there's a lot of truth to that. And to some degree, it's by design because—and the fact that you see the House, particularly in the last 15–16 years, flipping from Democratic

control, to Republican control, back to Democratic control, now to Republican control. So the stakes are a little bit higher. It's sort of like the people say, "Oh, it used to be so great. It just seems people were more civilized." Well, yes, okay, for 40 years, up until 1994, Democrats controlled the House. Of course, it was going to be more civilized. The Republicans pretty much had become a pretty compliant minority. And when you sort of see that with every election it's the possibility the House could flip. Well, of course, it's going to create a more partisan atmosphere because the stakes are a lot higher. But even in all that, you do see examples of where people work across party lines. I don't buy this, you know, and the whole fact that things may be so partisan on the House Floor and all this type of thing that, that sort of damages relationships. There are relationships that develop. And there are things in this Congress that where Members develop relationships with colleagues on the other side of the aisle.

WASNIEWSKI: Do you—were you at all involved, did you go to New York for the one-year commemoration of 9/11?

GASTON: I did not. I did not go.

WASNIEWSKI: Okay. Did you at any point go to New York and go to 9/11—go to the Trade Center site?

GASTON: I did that as a tourist, yes. Yes, I did that. I'm trying to think when it was. I think the first time I got down to the site was probably—in fact, it was probably in 2003. I think it was in 2003 because I also got an opportunity to go into the Statue of Liberty, which had been closed at that point. I actually got an opportunity to go into the Statue of Liberty. I was working for Roy Blunt at that time. And I was going up to New York, and one of our staff happened to know that I was going up to New York, and she had a good

relationship with the company that had the Homeland Security contract for—they were trying to develop a plan for reopening the Statue of Liberty. Like how do we get—they clearly need an evacuation plan, and they're very concerned in the Statue of Liberty. It's obviously some type of someone releasing a chemical or biological weapon in there. There's only one way in and one way out of the Statue of Liberty. {laughter} And so the company that had the Homeland Security contract, they were like, "Yes, you can go in." They wanted Members and staff. I was working for the Majority Whip at that time, and they were sort of keen on people coming up and sort of seeing like, "This is what we're dealing with," and all this type of thing. And so I did get that opportunity to go into the Statue of Liberty very early in the morning, when I was up in New York and with someone from the Park Service and just sort of understanding the issues that we're dealing with.

WASNIEWSKI: One other event—and I'll move on from 9/11 for a few minutes—that a lot of our interviewees have recalled is the President [George W.] Bush's speech to the Joint Session of Congress on the 20th. Do you have any memories of that? Were you in the chamber?

GASTON: I was not. I was watching it on TV at home, yes. I think part of it—and I know this sounds awful, and maybe cause I'm sort of jaded and cynical—at that point, I've gone to State of the Union addresses. It's sort of one of those things like, okay, I was always told, "You've got to go to at least one convention. You've got to go to at least one. Democratic or Republican, you've got to go to one convention because you just have to experience that." So I've been actually to a couple. But it's one of those also things like, while you're here in Congress, you need to go to a Joint Session or to a State of the Union address or something like that. Or when some foreign dignitary or prime minister is speaking to a Joint Session of Congress. You should always

try and attend one of those. And at that point, I'd been to a couple State of the Union addresses. So my view was I prefer to be at home and watch it on TV. And I know that sounds awful, but it's like there's only so many you can do. And I was of the idea I'll give up my seat for somebody else. {laughter}

WASNIEWSKI: I'm going to switch gears to the anthrax attacks, which happened five weeks later. It's a story that happens on the Senate side first because the attack happens in their mail system.

GASTON: Right.

WASNIEWSKI: Tell me about a little bit about your memories on the effect on the House side because it did have some fairly immediate effects. The House ended up recessing for five days and going away, and there were fears about the postal system on the House side of the Capitol also being affected. What was your perspective?

GASTON: I tend to be one of those people—and in terms of it was because, obviously, we had the experience of the Senate. And if I remember correctly, I think some of those offices were shut down for months. And they were working on a temporary—I think there were—I think some Senate offices were relocated to—was it GAO [Government Accountability Office] or something like that? Yes, and off campus. So it was obviously very destructive on their side. I worked in the Capitol. We really didn't have—I think for a congressional office where you have lots of mail coming into those offices, I think there was obviously a legitimate concern. We didn't really have to deal with that aspect of it in the Capitol. You just didn't have the quality or the quantity of mail coming into U.S. Capitol offices that you do in congressional offices because you're not getting all the letters from home from constituents and things like that. But it was just sort of something you were just sort of aware of. But I

just don't remember it ever really being disruptive on the House side because there was never really—I think there was one, I can't remember. I think it was somewhere in Longworth, but there might have been a case where they thought there was an anthrax attack, and maybe those offices were shut in one hallway for I can't remember for how long. But I might be misremembering that.

WASNIEWSKI: I don't think that they ever actually found anything on the House side, but there were a couple offices that were shut.

GASTON: Yes, and there were alerts, in terms of, "Oh, there might have been an incident," and then we found out there wasn't an incident.

WASNIEWSKI: A lot of staff described—that we've interviewed—that they felt a little beleaguered at that point. You know, 9/11 had just been five weeks earlier, and then, you know, the anthrax attacks.

GASTON: Yes, there's something new. Right. Yes.

WASNIEWSKI: Yes. And any sense of that in your office or in your recollection of that period?

GASTON: Because it's, again, it's a little bit different when you're in a leadership office in the Capitol, and you just you don't see that. In a congressional office, you're in a—or you're in a Cannon office—it's an office with three offices, a Member's office, a reception area, and the chief of staff office behind it, and then the big staff office, legislative staff office. So it's a much more intimate setting. In the Capitol, it's sort of things are sort of spread out, and you just don't have that type of mail coming into the Capitol. Sometimes we were sort of immune to that and probably didn't have much of an appreciation for

what congressional offices were experiencing and the staff in those offices were experiencing.

All I just remembered is that, at some point, when they were sort of x-raying or whatever they were doing to the mail, and I always sort of referred to it—it came very crispy. {laughter} Sort of this crispy mail. You try to pull the envelope open, and it was sort of, looked like it had been charred. And there was just stuff—I don't know what they were doing, radiating the mail or something like that. But the system's gotten so much more sophisticated since that. {laughter}

WASNIEWSKI: So you didn't get a sense from staff at that point that, at least folks that you were dealing with on a day-to-day basis. Wow, some of the interviewees who we talked to have said that they were—especially among younger staff. And they were getting—the congressional offices were getting calls from concerned parents of kids in their early 20s, "Why are my kids there? What are you doing to protect my kids?"

GASTON: No, I did. Yes, I did hear that. And I think that's sort of natural. Particularly because you have people in those offices who are opening the mail. They're taking a letter opener, and they're slicing open the mail, and they're doing that to hundreds and hundreds of pieces of mail on a daily basis. So, yes, there would be a sort of legitimate concern. I did hear about that. You have these young people, interns even, who are opening mail and all this type of thing. And if something were to happen in that office, if there was something, anthrax, in any of those letters that were being open, pretty much everyone in that office was being exposed because it's a very intimate setting. So that's why I think there was a need to—because of what had happened on the Senate side—that something had to be done where the mail needed to be screened. Because it seems like an easy way to sort of get to people.

WASNIEWSKI: I'm going to shift gears and go to some broader questions. What are your—and you can discuss this in terms of 9/11 and also anthrax in that broad period—but what are your lasting memories of the events of that fall? Is there—you may have described it already—but is there one particular visual that just sticks with you when you think 9/11?

GASTON: Well, there's actually two. It's really two visuals. It's leaving the Capitol, driving home out 395 south, past the Pentagon, and just how eerie it was. In terms of not encountering any people, pulling into the parking lot of my condo complex, and getting out of my car, and it's like you see all these cars, and the parking lot's just teeming, overfull. And it's just deathly silent. That's sort of something that sort of sticks with me.

The other is also because I endured it every day until tourists came back to the Capitol. It was also the eerie feeling of working in a place that was alive when tourists were in the building. I know a lot of people who work in the Capitol, they complain about all the tourists. But that's sort of what makes the Capitol thrive, and the city for that matter. Washington, DC, depends on all the tourists. We all curse them when we're like driving through town and things like this. But it's sort of what makes Washington, DC, in some sense, the fact that all these people want to come here and visit this place. They want to visit the Capitol. It really sort of makes the city breathe, in some sense. I think that was a very vivid memory for me. A lasting memory was just that everyday walking through Statuary Hall, walking in the Capitol, and not seeing any tourist for months and months and months. And just being—it was just too quiet. I'd gotten used to the airplane noise. {laughter}

WASNIEWSKI: That might lead into my next question, which is, again, looking back at the period, is there anything you wish in retrospect that you could change about the response, in those weeks or months afterwards, to 9/11?

GASTON: Other than I think we probably could have let the tourists back in the Capitol sooner than we did. But that's easy for me to say. I'm not the person who—and I have a full appreciation for what the Sergeant at Arms, Bill Livingood, has to deal with, and the Capitol Police. You just want to make sure you have sort of something—you've got to put some type of plan in place. And we sort of saw this when there were evacuations, post-9/11, when an evacuation system was put in place. The air space that was limited, and when a plane encroached that air space, the evacuation that would happen. It's easy to say that, yes, we should have let the tourists back in sooner. But I always have an appreciation for why it might have taken longer to sort of have a plan in place for that.

I think some people lament that all the streets that were blocked off around the Capitol complex. But, in hindsight, I went to a briefing in terms of why there was a need to block off the streets between the Cannon, the Longworth buildings, and the Rayburn buildings in terms of if a truck came up there, and just pulled up beside the Cannon building or something like that, and it was loaded with how much whatever. It could basically level the whole Cannon building and part of the Longworth building. That's real. There's no doubt that there are people who don't like our way of life and who are determined to destroy our way of life. It's probably not that much of a hardship that they've blocked off all the streets around the House and Senate office buildings. And I'm just glad those ugly planters are gone. {laughter} Those barricades that were put up.

WASNIEWSKI: Aside from the obvious changes, security-wise, did 9/11 change the House as an institution?

GASTON: I don't think it has. I'm not sure exactly what you—in terms of what way you might mean that.

WASNIEWSKI: Any—I mean security was what people have kind of come back with when we asked about changes—

GASTON: Oh, yes.

WASNIEWSKI: But in terms of the way the House functions on a day-to-day basis, on the way staff interact, did 9/11 have any long-term changes? Effects?

GASTON: No, probably not. It's like anything else. In terms of—there was an immediate change in the sense that the change that you notice, there was a lot of bipartisanship. But it was bipartisanship dealing with legislation and issues as a result of 9/11. So it doesn't surprise me that six or seven months after that, when you're going back into the business of moving legislation that's totally unrelated to anything with 9/11, that the partisanship starts. That's what defines who Republicans are and who Democrats are. And if it isn't partisan, it's like, okay, well, then there's no difference between Republicans and Democrats, you know? And at the same time, I always make this point that yes, there is a lot of bipartisanship on the issues that define the key issues that define core Republicans or core Democrats. But there's also a lot of bipartisanship that happens on legislation that routinely passes, like NASA reauthorization or National Science Foundation—bills that sort of they get these huge, bipartisan votes, but they're not party-defining issues. That's the business of doing government and managing government, a lot of those bills. But it's either we're for tax cuts or we're against them. It's we're for more spending, or we're for less spending. Well, of course, those are going to lead to partisan debates. I think that's how the Founding Fathers intended it to be.

WASNIEWSKI: And a final question: is your perspective, 10 years later, on 9/11 any different than it was in the weeks after? Has it changed the way you evaluate it as an event?

GASTON: I haven't really given that much thought. I don't think things—I mean, in terms of one of the things that you had asked, in terms of like what is change? You're right, the security has changed. But even then, having worked up here for a long time, you adapt to it. I know some people say, "Oh gosh, the security's so tight." And they sort of lament that. And it's more people who haven't been to the Capitol before coming for the first time. For us, you just get used to it. It's the car checks when you're driving into the parking garages in the morning by the Capitol Police, the car checks by the Capitol Police. And at first, you notice that. Then it just becomes part of the routine. And it's like anything else. Now going to the Capitol, or any of the buildings, and you've got to go through the metal detector, and you've got to put your things on the conveyer and get it screened. At first, that was probably an adjustment, but now it's become pretty routine. Just sort of like how airport security in some sense—well, maybe that's not so routine with the new scanners. {laughter}

But it had gotten to that point. Initially, you're at the airport, and you never knew what you were going to encounter when you got to the security line. It's one of these things that you can be standing in that line for a half an hour or for an hour and a half. Now it's gotten pretty routine. The airports have gotten it down to a pretty good—you don't really hear too many glitches now where there's like you've missed your flight because you couldn't get through the security. {laughter}

WASNIEWSKI: Okay. That's all the prepared questions I've got. Is there anything that I've missed or any other items you wanted to talk about? Any other specific memories we haven't covered?

GASTON: No. I think that may be about it.

WASNIEWSKI: Okay.

GASTON: I hope this was helpful to you.

WASNIEWSKI: It was. It was. This has been a learning process, and everyone has different memories of the day. So it's piecing them together it's very helpful. Well, thank you for your time.

GASTON: Yes, I'm going to have to make sure to watch this because I'm curious to find out what the Dick Armey story is. {laughter}

WASNIEWSKI: Yes, I don't know what the Dick Armey story is yet either.