

Donna Mullins

Chief of Staff, U.S. Representative Rodney P. Frelinghuysen of New Jersey

**Oral History Interview
Final Edited Transcript**

May 23, 2011

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

“We worked for a Member of Congress who represented a district that was highly impacted, and so we had to go back to work. There was work to be done. I think there was work to be done for all congressional staffs. Obviously our nation had been attacked. You think of the things that monopolize time on Capitol Hill. Nothing could be any more significant than an event like this. Everyone’s attention as staff was focused on making sure their bosses were well-supported as they tackled what had happened to our country.”

Donna Mullins
May 23, 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:

“Donna Mullins Oral History Interview,” Office of the Historian, U.S. House of Representatives (23 May 2011).

Interviewer Biography

Kathleen Johnson is the Manager of Oral History for the Office of the Historian, U.S. House of Representatives. She earned a B.A. in history from Columbia University, where she also played basketball for four years, and holds two master's degrees from North Carolina State University in education and public history. In 2004, she helped to create the House's first oral history program, focusing on collecting the institutional memory of Members and staff. She co-authored two books: *Women in Congress: 1917–2006* (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 2006) and *Black Americans in Congress: 1870–2007* (GPO, 2008). Before joining the Office of the Historian, she worked as a high school history teacher and social studies curriculum consultant.

— DONNA MULLINS —
SEPTEMBER 11, 2001

JOHNSON: This is Kathleen Johnson with the Office of the House Historian. The date is May 23rd, 2011, and we're in the House Recording Studio. Today I'm with Donna Mullins, former chief of staff for Representative Rodney [P.] Frelinghuysen of New Jersey, to discuss her memories of September 11th, 2001, and the anthrax scare in October of 2001.

To start with today, can you trace your personal memories of September 11th, beginning in the morning?

MULLINS: Congressman Frelinghuysen had just returned to Washington. We had a scheduled markup in the House Appropriations Committee. He is a member of the Defense Appropriations Subcommittee, and their markup was that morning. I was in his office, and we were talking about the work of the day ahead when another staffer came into our office and pointed at the TV. At that time, they weren't flat-screen TVs, so they hung them on a shelf up in the corner of the Member's office. A member of our staff came in and said, "Something has gone terribly wrong in New York." It was the first images we saw of the first plane that had gone into the Trade Center. My boss took a look at it. I looked at him, and he looked at me, and I think we instantly knew that it wasn't an accident, even though the reporters had said it. I think we knew something was wrong, and it was beyond an accident.

Then the events of the day seemed to accelerate. I think for most of us, it both accelerated and stood still all at the same time. I remember that I called over to the Defense Appropriations Subcommittee, because we had a staffer over there, to let them know. They were the only staffer that wasn't

physically in our office. I think we almost immediately took stock of where everybody was.

Then, as the events unfolded that morning, the next thing I really recall was when my boss told the staff to go home. We didn't wait for anybody to tell us. I think it was once we saw the smoke from the Pentagon, which we could see out the back of our window in the Rayburn [House Office] Building, he told the rest of the staff that they should get in their cars or get on the Metro and head home. I remember him also telling them that they needed to check in with me once they got home so that we just knew everybody got home safely, and we would see what unfolded during the day.

My boss and I didn't leave. We waited until we knew where our staffer was who was in the Capitol building at the time. The police had stopped by once and told us that they were evacuating the building. By then, most of our staff had gone. I don't think all of them. But, at that point, the rest of the staff left. We waited because we were expecting our staff who was in the Capitol building to come back to the office. Then, quite some time later, I remember the police came back and said we had to evacuate the building and told us that our staff wasn't going to be allowed to reenter into the building so they would have been evacuated out of the Capitol building. I think we were able to confirm while we were still there that that staffer was headed home, actually, with the chairman of the subcommittee at the time. [Charles Jeremy] (Jerry) Lewis had taken all of the staff that was assembled for the markup to his house on Capitol Hill.

At that point, of course, the second plane had already hit. The Pentagon had been hit. By then, I think everybody knew the nature of what was occurring that day. Couldn't quite get our arms around it and our minds around it, but we knew. At that point, my boss said, "All right, we're going to leave. You get

home. You make sure the staff all gets home, and then, obviously, there will be work to be done.” His priority was, of course, to make sure that his wife and family knew he was okay. At that point, we departed the building, and then I think reassembled with the help of our district staff. [We] kind of connected later in the day, but I think like most staff, made our way home.

JOHNSON: Before you go any further, can you describe the scene when you left the building at this point?

MULLINS: By the time we left the building, I have to say I think we probably stayed longer than most. I felt like it was just he and I. I remember he told me we weren't taking the elevators. We were on the fourth floor of the Rayburn Building. I remember we went down, something you don't use all that often, but those broad staircases through the Rayburn Building, down to the garage. I remember having quite wobbly legs, and my boss kind of cheering me on—that it was going to be okay, and we just needed to get to our cars and get home.

I felt like, at that point, I never got the sense of chaos in our building. The sounds you heard were TVs. Everyone had the TVs on. There wasn't an evacuation that took place all at once because it was police officers going up and down the halls telling people to leave. Much like our staff, some had left. When we left, it was really just the two of us leaving. I felt like it was pretty emptied out by then. I think the only reason I got to take my car with me is because I was with a Member because otherwise they were telling staff at that point to leave on foot and not to take their cars.

JOHNSON: This was before most people had Blackberrys?

MULLINS: Absolutely.

JOHNSON: How were you able to keep in touch with the staff during the day to check on their whereabouts?

MULLINS: It was hit and miss. I had a cell phone. Some of my staff had a cell phone. Not everybody even had a cell phone. What we asked folks to do—we kind of had a [phone] tree going. I took the staff list with me, which included also their emergency contacts. By the time I got home, which took some time, because I live in northern Virginia. I had to cross over the Woodrow Wilson Bridge, which was no easy feat that day. I remember calling staff at their home. Staff had talked to staff, so they were able to report that staff was home. Staff had called into the district office. I talked to some parents, and the parents had told me they heard from their child. Often, I'd call the parents, and I'd ask, "Have you heard from your child yet?"

Part of it was just getting a phone line we could use. It was almost like constant dial until you got a dial tone and you could reach out to someone. But I thought, pretty much by mid-afternoon, I had everyone on the staff accounted for. I knew they had all made it somewhere safe, if not home. Some had gone with each other. My one staffer was at Jerry Lewis's house. Not everyone had made it to their homes, but everybody was somewhere safe and accounted for.

JOHNSON: From what you recall, what was the reaction of the Congressman once he realized that this was an attack and it wasn't an accident?

MULLINS: He was very somber. I think the thing that crossed his mind first was that this was in his backyard. Both in Washington, but also back home. His district in northern New Jersey is a district where most people commute into Manhattan for work. The local train stations are packed from 5:00 in the

morning until 8:00 or 9:00 at night—a heavy commuter district. So I think he knew immediately that this was in his backyard.

I think, also, for him, it struck him at a lot of levels. It was his constituents, always his first and foremost concern, but also I think, in all of his years in Congress, he's been a Member that's been focused on—our nation's security is kind of his core mission, and so even as a member of the Defense Subcommittee, I think he was acutely aware that decisions were going to have to be made, resources were going to need to be brought to bear. We didn't know quite what we were dealing with at that point, but I think as an educated person on the topic, he probably had some early sense of what could have been the genesis of this. I think he realized that there was a lot of work to be done.

JOHNSON: Did he head back to the district that day?

MULLINS: He didn't. He stayed in Washington. He stayed in Washington overnight. He drove himself back to the district because there was no other way to get there afterwards. But I know that he was here for almost a 24-hour cycle because we had the district office arranged that we could talk to some of the local authorities on the ground in the district and, of course, talk to the state authorities. They hosted any number of kind of briefings, phone briefings, for Members. It happened fairly rapidly.

In some ways, there was no dissemination of any information other than what all of us were watching on the TV, for I think really the initial day. There wasn't much to be said beyond watching the events unfold. All those who could have otherwise briefed us were on the front lines of responding to it in the district. But by that night and into the next day, you started to get a stream of information. There was certainly that, which was focused on the

Capitol building, but there was also a stream of information really focused for the Members whose districts were in the immediate area of impact. I think there was that separate flow of information that was quite parochial. It was about what happened to people in their district.

JOHNSON: How did you and other members of the Congressman's staff, as events unfolded, how did you separate your own anxiety or personal feelings of loss with now what you had to do to help the constituents of your district?

MULLINS: I think it was difficult. I think, like everyone in the country, it was such a shocking event, and yet in our world, we had a district that was highly impacted. We worked for a Member of Congress who represented a district that was highly impacted, and so we had to go back to work. There was work to be done. I think there was work to be done for all congressional staffs. Obviously, our nation had been attacked. You think of the things that monopolize time on Capitol Hill. Nothing could be any more significant than an event like this. Everyone's attention as staff was focused on making sure their bosses were well-supported as they tackled what had happened to our country.

But I also think, obviously, we had a Member who also had to tend to the needs of his constituents back home. Those didn't unfold immediately, but we knew there was impact. We knew there was loss of life. We knew that there were hundreds, if not thousands, of families wondering about the whereabouts of their loved ones. Only time would tell which of those people would return home and which of those wouldn't. It wasn't immediately known, but we knew, and so we really had to support the Member and support his district staff, as well as his DC staff, to get back to our desks and to be able to handle the work.

That wasn't easy. I think everybody needed their own time to digest what had occurred and our own feelings about it. I think for some of us, getting back to work was a good thing because it maybe otherwise occupied us. I think for others, it was very difficult to come back.

JOHNSON: During the days and weeks following 9/11, can you provide a few examples of some of the things that your office did to help the constituents?

MULLINS: Members had websites then. We didn't have much technology beyond that. I know that any information we received about locating families was a big focus initially. Where we could identify reliable sources of information for families, we posted it on our website. For people that needed counseling or needed handholding while they waited or once they knew that their family member had been lost, we posted all the available local resources we were aware of.

We had to be careful about not invading the family's privacy. We'd have some families contact us directly and say, "How can you help us?" But otherwise, you were maybe finding about it secondhand and thirdhand. To every local mayor, to our county officials, to our state officials, we tried to coordinate information, we tried to coordinate resources. We certainly posted it. We made folks as aware as we could that we were here to help, and not just in the immediate, but over the longer term. Whatever it is we could do for people. It was really about just identifying—whenever there's a national emergency, whether it's something like this or a natural disaster, things pop up that might be available to people. Our real goal was just to push that information out and put it wherever it might be made available to the families.

JOHNSON: When did you first return to the district after 9/11?

MULLINS: I returned at the beginning of the following week. My visit wasn't extensive. Once I got my immediate—I returned to the DC office immediately, and then I went up the following week. I thought more than anything, not that I added anything particularly more than—our district staff was terrific, and is terrific. Of course, many of them come from communities that were heavily impacted. It was really their friends and neighbors and members of their church or a father of a student in their child's school. It hit very close to home, and so it was really, more than anything, a show of support to the district staff and to make sure they had what they needed.

JOHNSON: Did the Congressman—you said it was a balance, a fine line, that you had to walk—but did he try to make a personal contact with some of the family members?

MULLINS: He did. Often we were reading in the newspaper. In the very early days, actually, we didn't know the scope. I remember local police officials and others telling us the way they were trying to get a sense of the scope was counting cars in the parking lots of the train stations that hadn't been picked up after a day or two. Some of those eventually got picked up because people were having a hard time getting out of the city, but a lot of them weren't. We didn't really know the scope. It ended up being well over 100 people who lost their lives in his district. I know that he personally reached out to every one of them, to their families.

Now they revealed themselves in different ways. Some families knew and kind of moved into that reality quite quickly, that their loved one wasn't coming home. Others held out hope for quite some time. You'd read a story in the paper, a profile of someone who had been lost. Maybe initially he [Representative Frelinghuysen] would pen a personal letter to them. He's known for his personal letters, handwritten letters, that he writes people. I

think he did a lot of that initially. Then I think when he thought the time was right, he privately reached out to the families, just to express his condolences, but it was never a public matter. We would inform him, and he'd ask for contact information, and then he would handle the outreach himself.

JOHNSON: Shifting back to the Capitol, the House is back in session on September 12th. What do you remember about that day and the week following? Especially since you had evacuated the building, you knew that it was a potential target, what was it like coming back here after what had happened?

MULLINS: I had forgotten. I think some memories, we all try to push away because, really, if you think about how scary the moment was, it would be paralyzing. I was reminded recently when more recent events impacted folks. One of my fellow former staffers on the Hill said, "I came to work in my flat shoes today." I thought that's how I felt the day after. I should forget about wearing a suit. I'm going to wear flat shoes, and I'm mindful. Because we didn't know that it was—we only know now that it was over, so to speak, at that moment. But we didn't know that in the moment. There could have been more attacks there. The country landed all the planes for a reason, right? So we didn't know.

Not all of my staff returned immediately. I didn't ask them to. I needed some help, so I asked for volunteers for folks to come back in. I know two of my staffers, and even one of my interns, showed back up to help. I gave people some choices about when to come back. I think some people weren't prepared. It was scary. We didn't dwell in the fear, but we certainly were mindful that we weren't going to hang around any longer than we needed to. We were going to do the work that we could do, which again, in the early days, was a lot of information-gathering but not a lot that you could actually

execute on. I think everyone was looking for something to do. Unless you were there, at Ground Zero, there wasn't much. Information-gathering and preparing and, of course, there was the work as the Congress went forward. So there was kind of our routine work to be done. We focused on that.

JOHNSON: Even outside of your office, did you notice or get a sense of what the atmosphere was like at the Capitol the day after and in the weeks after? Did people seem anxious or were people really just getting back to work?

MULLINS: It was a very quiet place. I think it was very somber. Often, when there's tragedy, whether it's personal or it's national, people find relief in humor. They find relief in spending time with friends and collegial time. There wasn't any of that. There was definitely a bonding, I think, that went on among the community, but it was a quiet one. I think people were looking to each other. There was a common experience that bound us all together. I think there was shared experience and shared camaraderie, but it was of a very quiet sort.

JOHNSON: That just made me think of one of the vigils that you said that you attended.

MULLINS: At the reflecting pool.

JOHNSON: Right, at the reflecting pool. Can you describe your memories of that event?

MULLINS: I remember it much like those days you just asked me to describe. It was a very quiet thing. It was at dusk and then into the darkness. It was mainly staff. I think surely others were probably there, but I think for the most part it was congressional staff around the reflecting pool. The reflecting pool is aptly named. It was just a quiet time to reflect on both the events that had happened, and I think that's where you started to get a sense of what, for a

long time, was a community resolve to see ourselves through it. I think that's where I first kind of felt that none of us were alone in this.

There was no one with a megaphone. It wasn't like the President's [George W. Bush] moment, which was highly appealing on Ground Zero, where he had the megaphone, with the firefighter. This was almost the reverse, but I think it had the same impact for a lot of us, which is, the way we are going to get through this is as a community. That even in our shared grief and our shared fear and anxiety that—you look up at the Capitol building and realize that as difficult as the task would be, I wouldn't want to be anywhere else. I had worked on the Hill for a long time. This is kind of what all those years of work were meant—we had an important job to do. I think that's what we felt. That's what I felt that night.

JOHNSON: After 9/11, did you work very closely with other members of the New Jersey delegation?

MULLINS: We did. We always had a high level of camaraderie, but even with our colleagues from New York and Connecticut, I think that there was a unique set of issues that perhaps the rest of the Members of Congress didn't have to address the way that we did, or maybe not with as much urgency as we did. I felt like there was a high degree of cooperation, both among the delegations, our state's governors. There had always been occasion, both to work together. There were few occasions, obviously, where we found ourselves maybe arguing over priorities, but this wasn't one of them.

JOHNSON: What about the Speaker's Office? Did they reach out to you, especially since your district had been so heavily impacted?

MULLINS: I can't recall a particular instance, but I know that our Members felt that, both with the White House and with the leadership in Congress, that there

was special care-taking of the Members whose districts had been immediately impacted because there was a specific set of needs. I don't know that it would be much different than it would be for, right now, the Members whose districts are being flooded in the Mississippi or that have just experienced tornadoes. Those are obviously very different events, but I feel that there's always been a strong tradition here of when Member's backyards are impacted, to make sure that their needs are care-taked.

I remember the White House having stand-alone meetings for the Members of the districts that were immediately impacted. I remember because I drove quite a number of the New Jersey Members up to a meeting that they were called to at the White House, and it was one of the Members that were impacted. I felt like both in the leadership of the House, but also the White House, there was outreach.

JOHNSON:

Across the country and on Capitol Hill, there were many commemorative displays and people wanting to demonstrate their patriotism. Were people contacting your office, either looking for any sort of commemorative items, or did people even call you looking to donate things?

MULLINS:

I don't remember hearing from folks wanting to know where they could participate, but I do remember we spent a lot of time making sure that each of the communities—our district was made up of 58 small-town Americas. I think each one of them, some more than others, virtually none of them were left unscathed by this. I remember we would track very carefully what each of those communities were doing so that the Member could participate and support in those events or memorials in any way he could. I know, over time, some of our communities had asked for, this was later, but had asked for pieces of the World Trade Center to use in their memorials. A lot of things were donated to those communities. Flags and emblems and things that had

been found at Ground Zero or that were used at Ground Zero. In addition to the, of course, people who were lost in our district, there were a lot of first responders that went into Manhattan to help. A lot of them and their acts of courage were recognized, too.

I think there were enough national means by which people could contribute initially. The music stars had held an event. I didn't get the sense that we were being contacted by others, saying, "Are there things we can do locally?" Locally, there were a lot of efforts around individual families.

JOHNSON: What about the press inquiries that your office received? How did you handle the higher volume, and what were some of the things that the press asked you to answer?

MULLINS: Initially, as gory as it sounds, they wanted to know if we knew how many people were lost in our district, and who. Of course, we didn't view it as our place, even if we were aware of details, to be providing them to the press. Our district has lots of local hometown newspapers, and they were actually quite robust at that time. Today, not as robust, but certainly then. They did their own reporting, obviously, locally, of families, but we often got inquiries, even from beyond our district, just wanting to know. Everyone was most interested in the personal impact stories. We would get those inquiries.

Of course, they'd want to know how the Member was spending their time. Had he been making outreach to the families, had he been attending local events? We got that set of inquiries. Then you also got the other set of inquiries with regard to what he thought the appropriate response was to the attack. He got those both as a Representative of a district that was highly impacted from the Northeast, a commuting district to New York, but also because he was a member of the Defense Subcommittee. He handled most of

them directly. I think he felt that this wasn't a time for printed press releases; this was a time for direct dialogue, so he handled most of the press inquiries himself. If there were inquiries that we just didn't think were appropriate for us to respond to, we didn't.

JOHNSON: As chief of staff, how do you think your job changed in the aftermath of 9/11?

MULLINS: Our focus was clearer than it had ever been. I think the intersection of our work at home on behalf of our constituents and the work the Member does here in Washington, that intersection was clearer than it had ever been. I think it gave a clarity to our work, a focus to our work. Not that we hadn't had it before, but it was far more distinct now.

I think the other element it added was probably more of the management side of my work, which is I had a staff of—I want to say 16 people at that time. And they had to be care-taken, too, because they had been through a lot, and they were going to continue to go through a lot. They were going to have to handhold these families and communities—their own, in the case of the district staff—but even in the Washington staff.

Whereas maybe management of my staff wasn't the kind of top priority on a day-to-day, as Capitol Hill staffs go, you kind of sign up for what it is. Its long hours, low pay, and interesting work, and you just do it. You don't gripe about it. If everyone has that attitude, you don't spend a lot of time managing staff. I had to spend more time making sure that my staff was okay and that they were okay to come back to work and they could manage their work and get the job done.

JOHNSON: One of the watershed moments after this as far as Congress is concerned was the Joint Session that took place on September 20th, when President [George

W.] Bush came down to Congress to speak. What do you recall of that event? Again, if you could just describe the atmosphere, the feeling, among the Members and the people that were there that day.

MULLINS:

I spent almost 18 years on Capitol Hill. I would say that there are maybe three or four times where it's so clear and so distinct that history has been made and is being made of such consequence. I think that was the feeling—in the events of the day, in the immediate events, even care-taking a district with lots of people who wouldn't come home. When President Bush and our elected leaders—we were still standing. At that point, I think we knew enough about the intent that we were all reminded that it could have gone—it was so bad as it was, and it could have been worse. Almost something from a science-fiction, where the Capitol no longer existed, or the White House had been hit.

The fact that we were still standing—all of the things that I think as a young staffer when I first came here or those Members who were once a Page and then became an elected Representative or if you were the Capitol Hill policeman or the woman working in the cafeteria—often, we're wistful. We walk out at night, we see the Capitol building, we have this kind of feeling. But you really had the feeling this is why we have the government we do, that we were strong as a country, we had a strong leader. We have a bipartisan Congress who, any given day, don't get along much with each other, but it was such a feeling of unity and of purpose, and I think everybody knew.

By then, you had kind of settled with the reality a little bit. You'd wake up and still think, this isn't real.

We're still standing, I think is the takeaway of most people. It was the kind of first lift. We're still standing. That's as important as grieving those who

aren't. Maybe more so over the time. For the personal families, grieving never ends and the loss is so acute and real.

But that's one thing my boss always taught me because we always had sad cases in our office that we'd deal with of all kinds. We had a young woman who went on a vacation and never returned from it. We worked with the family for three years trying to find her. There's kind of always tragedy. I think what my boss taught me is it's how you respond to it, both personally, this is the talk he gave his staff, which he did give his staff a talk. It's how we respond to it personally as an office and as a country. That night was about how we were going to respond to it as a country. That's what we all felt.

JOHNSON: What security changes did you notice around the Capitol in the post-9/11 era?

MULLINS: I think as staff, many of us thought maybe not enough. I think the most visible things we saw are the things we now see—although they've been made prettier with flowers and other landscaping—it was the big cement Jersey walls that went up. I think for some of us, there were some attempts to put in more emergency evacuation procedures and the like. I think, like anything, changing the procedure around a place like this is never easy. There were certainly attempts to kind of establish better notification and evacuation plans. We practiced a lot. We certainly experienced that.

Blackberrys became a fact of life. They had never been so before. They gave them out to Members initially and had no plans really, I don't think, to give them to staff. I know that my boss said, "If it's for security and I have it, then all my staff is going to have it." So we all had Blackberrys, which we thought was very thoughtful of him, until we started getting emails at 3:00 in the morning. Blackberrys, I think, probably, when you look back at it, are one of

the more lasting impacts of 9/11 because they became a way of life, whereas we had never had them. I think we'd had them once at a political convention. They had given Members Blackberrys, but they weren't widely in use.

I think over time, obviously, there have been more layers of security on Capitol Hill. I think we've all experienced what happened at the airports. Similar things have happened here in terms of just screening. Can't walk into the Capitol building like you once used to. There's now the big Visitor Center you go through. There's more screening. The boxes in the hallway of the emergency hoods. I know those are in the offices as well. There's more now than there used to be. I think there are panic buttons now. [Sentence redacted.] We didn't have a panic button. We had a code. Those are the kind of changes I think we saw in security.

JOHNSON:

As time went on, even maybe just in the next month or so, did you still have a lot of constituents coming to visit your office in DC, or did that really slow down for quite a while?

MULLINS:

Initially, it completely went away because there was no means of traveling. Even a state as close as New Jersey, there was no way really to get here. I don't recall we had many visitors in the office for probably the first month or so.

I was surprised, actually, how quickly Washington returned to business. We started to get requests for appointments again from lobbyists and associations and people that wanted to come and visit. I think there was part of us that thought, "Really? {laughter} Do we have to go back to this?" But it was part of getting back to business. There were still people that came into town and they had issues other than 9/11.

I think for offices like ours, that sometimes was hard because that felt like the only thing that was going on, or should be going on, maybe, is the better way to say it. When that kind of return to business happened, we welcomed—we loved seeing families and school groups and constituents who were here to visit the Capitol. We thought that was great. It took a while. I'd want to say it was several months until we really, fall months, until we started to see people returning. Washington business as usual returned sooner than that.

JOHNSON:

When you mentioned school groups, that made me think of an article I came across. The Congressman, when he was back in New Jersey, was speaking to some schoolchildren about what had happened. Was that something that he tried to do a little bit more often after 9/11?

MULLINS:

He had always done it often. He never brags about it, but he goes to a school every week. He tries to, at least, once a week. He tells me that it always reminds him, if you can't explain it to students, then it's unexplainable. It really helped him focus on what really, of all the things that demand his attention in Washington, that which is most important. Visiting with students helped him keep that perspective. I don't think anyone forgets that when President Bush got this news, he was with a group of students.

So I also think he was very mindful of what impact this was having on younger kids. He had two young daughters that were in grade school and high school, I think, at the time. I think that would be right. So I think he was mindful that kids needed to understand it. I remember him saying that he thought that the First Lady's [Laura Bush] efforts in that regard were really important and that if he could help amplify it a bit, especially in the backyard, where so many kids, if they didn't know someone, they knew someone who knew someone. He's always done it, but I think he did more of it.

JOHNSON: I also wanted to ask you a few questions about the anthrax scare that took place about a month later. First off, how did your office stay informed of what was quickly going on with the anthrax scare?

MULLINS: I felt that in this instance, I would say that I think the House did a really good job, the Capitol complex did a really good job, of communicating, getting information out to staffs, holding briefings where chief of staffs could go and get direction. It was fast-moving in terms of, was your staffer in some place where they had to get tested? We had one that did but didn't have to take the Cipro because they were deemed as not in the immediate proximity of the anthrax. I felt like the House as a whole was pushing out a lot of good information on which we could operate.

JOHNSON: The House recessed for five days once anthrax was found on the Senate side so there could be an environmental sweep. How did this affect your office?

MULLINS: It was adding insult to injury. I think at that point, staff was already so exhausted and so worn-down by the events, and then for this to happen on top of it. If we had made any progress in giving staff a bit of sense of security back, it was, again, I think, very shaken by the anthrax incident.

I also think, practically, it was really frustrating because there is ongoing work. To be shut down, literally, for five days was hard. We had a lot of work to do. We went off and camped out at the General Services Administration for the week, which provided us four walls but not much else. You're already kind of pretty low in the well of just energy and confidence about your workplace, and so it didn't help much.

We also, again, had a local incident in Hamilton, New Jersey, which is in Congressman [Christopher Henry] Smith's district. Since my boss, again, his role in the Appropriations Committee, he worked closely with Congressman

Smith in terms of responding to the Hamilton incident, in terms of making sure that the postal workers there were able to get tested, the patrons were able to get tested. Again, there was this kind of very local element as well to what was occurring here on anthrax. It was frustrating. It was frustrating.

JOHNSON:

As one of the leaders in the Congressman's office, and you talked about the emotional fatigue and maybe morale being affected, what did you do to try to somehow make things better for the staff?

MULLINS:

I had them over to my house for dinner, I remember. We got Chicken Out, and I got a feast. We all just sat at my house. We got together, away from campus, just together. I had them all bring their boyfriends, girlfriends, spouses, whoever it was that they wanted, just to all hang out. I think it was the first time. It was maybe two, three weeks after 9/11, I want to say. We let ourselves laugh. We let ourselves have some fun. We just all acknowledged that we were all dealing with it differently, but that our goal was to make sure everybody moved forward. I think that helped a lot.

We did more of that. When we had one of our evacuation drills, we said we would take advantage of it and go to what used to be a waterfront restaurant that was reachable by walking from Capitol Hill. So we chose a place where we knew we could all gather and get a bowl of clam chowder and a beer or something, even if it was the middle of the day. Sometimes we just needed to gather together. I think we did a lot more of that. We were always a collegial group of people, but I think we tried to spend more time with each other outside the office as well as at the office.

JOHNSON:

A related question, for you, specifically, how did you balance safety concerns for the staff versus your job of running a congressional office?

MULLINS: I think flexibility really was the key. As long as we could get the job done, I was going to be less rigid about how we got it done. If someone needed to leave early in the afternoon because a walk would do them good, or they wanted to come in after the traffic in the morning, wanted to find a different way to come in, maybe. You know, some people didn't want to get back on the Metro. What I said to them, as well as what the Congressman said to them, is, as long as we get the job done, it doesn't matter how we get it done, and so give everybody the ultimate flexibility.

We gave people long weekends. Once travel kind of resumed, go home. We wanted to make sure everybody got to see their family. Some went sooner rather than others—time with family, time with friends. Then everybody just redoubled their efforts. We were just more flexible, I think, with everybody.

JOHNSON: What do you recall were the major changes in the office policies or procedures as a result of 9/11 and also anthrax?

MULLINS: Certainly, far more focus on having a plan. We did pretty well without one. I think, by nature, we knew we needed to check in with each other, that we needed to have a safe place to go. We put more process into place so that people had a real understanding of it.

I also think the other thing that changed is that we didn't take certain threats—even if we thought that they weren't real—from constituents or from people that would write or phone the office or visit the office. I think we took those things more seriously. Whereas staff may have erred on the side of this probably is no big deal, I think we erred on the side that you should take no chances.

The boss will not be happy about this remembrance, but we had a constituent who had written threatening letters over the years, and I finally

reported it. I think this constituent got a visit from the Capitol Police, and they talked about it. They reported back that this was someone who clearly had a lot of anger about the government but didn't pose any threat. I think what we learned is we need to rely on the experts and that we shouldn't make those judgments on our own. I think that's probably the biggest difference now.

I think that's probably true for most Members and most chief of staffs. If there is something that you think is threatening or that you think is of concern, you don't hesitate anymore. You ask for help from the experts. I think that's a good thing. I think every day all of us have to take calculated risks, but I think we learned that it would be better to err on the side of just making sure, as opposed to just letting it go by the wayside and hoping it wasn't anything. I think that's probably the biggest change.

JOHNSON:

Did you find that with the increased security, and even the issues with mail coming so slowly after anthrax, that there was somehow hindering of direct contact with constituents that you used to have?

MULLINS:

I do. It's much like being able to visit the Capitol. It used to be you could just go into the Capitol, whether you worked here or you didn't. You were able to visit the Capitol and visit the buildings, contact your Member. Certainly, that changed. The mail situation, I think, over time, has been replaced by email, so it's less a burden to people. Now everybody sends emails. Very few people write letters anymore, anyway. I think that's resolved itself with technology.

The Member I worked for still regularly holds old-fashioned town hall meetings where anyone can come, but part of the security procedure now is that you notify the local police department that you're having a town

meeting. More often than not, they'll send a police officer just to keep an eye on things. That didn't use to be the case, unless you had some reason to believe that you're going to have a particularly raucous group of people there that might get out of control on an issue. That was always a rare thing, anyway. That's an example of how security protocol has changed, but also how just kind of the environment has changed.

I think for a while, it made people reluctant to visit Washington. I think that's changed. I think Mayor [Rudy] Giuliani's spirit about come back to New York—there was less of a campaign around it in terms of Washington, but I think people came back. I think people are still here, even if they have to bide their time in the lines at the Visitor Center as opposed to just walking in. But I think people returned to Washington just as robustly as they did in New York. I don't think it's diminished it over time. I just think it's not as fun as it once used to be. It's not as easy as it once used to be. That's true of a lot of things, I guess.

JOHNSON: I had a few wrap-up questions before we end today. What are your lasting memories of September 11th, and, in particular, if there's one visual or one image that you think will really stick with you, no matter how much time passes, what would that be?

MULLINS: I think the look on my boss's face that morning, that will stick with me. I think the people of Chatham, New Jersey, who lost a lot of people. It's this beautifully quaint little town—the perfect ice cream parlor, the perfect Main Street, the perfect train station. I know it because my boss would campaign at that train station on Tuesday morning on Election Day every year, shaking people's hands. That was one of the parking lots where they counted the cars. Too many of them never got picked up. They have this plaque now at the

train station that says, "In memory of those who went to work and never came home."

I think two years later actually, my boss was at that train station, and he called me and said, "Someone came up and shook my hand and said, 'Never forget.'" He said, "I shook his hand, and I told him I'm never going to forget." I think that's our lasting memory, is to never forget those who didn't come home. I think that's it.

JOHNSON: It's been almost 10 years. Do you feel that you have a different perspective now that you've had time to reflect on the events that took place?

MULLINS: It's hard to believe it's been 10 years. I think the country's moved on in many ways, which is a good thing. I think it's probably been harder for me to move on, and for people maybe that felt very directly impacted by it. But that's the resiliency of America. We do move on. I do think that we're stronger as a country, even if we have more burdensome security procedures at the airport and elsewhere. Much like that Joint Session or the reflecting pool or what happened in the little towns in my boss's district, there is such a determination to build from this.

I'm proud of where our country is 10 years later. It's not perfect. There's been a lot more loss as a result of 9/11, in battles we've waged elsewhere. But as a country, here at home, I feel we're much stronger. We're building from it. I hope that's true. Can't take away the pain from the families. I don't think we can take away any of our personal pain from experiencing it, but we're moving ahead, and that's a good thing.

JOHNSON: Looking back, is there anything you wish you could change from either the Congressman's response to 9/11 or the House as well? Anything that you wish that could have been done differently?

MULLINS:

That's a good question. I think it is the nature of this institution that the people that wear the Member's pins are the center of attention and the center of focus of all the efforts. That's staffs' jobs, that's the institution's job. These are the 535 people we've elected to represent our interests, so that's rightfully so. I think there could have been a bit more care-taking of the staff who had been here that day, much like you saw at the Pentagon. There was a real focus on the people who worked in that building that day—not just the Secretary of Defense, but on the collective community. I think it's a minor thing in the scheme of world events, but I think it's always worth remembering, much like at the Pentagon, this is a place populated by not just 535 people, but by thousands. They were all impacted that day, and they all had to come back and work really hard to respond to the events of that day. I think sometimes there could have been more care-taking of that.

Again, I think everyone here is pretty resilient. We all know what we've signed up for in some respects when we came to work here. It's a marvelous, wonderful place where you see world history unfold in front of you, and we certainly did it that time. Whether you were the lady in the cafeteria who got us cups of coffee two days later or you were the Capitol Hill policeman who kept us safe or you were the Members of Congress who had to figure out what to do, I think everybody did their job and did it pretty well.

JOHNSON:

How did you feel when you heard the recent news of the killing of Osama bin Laden?

MULLINS:

I think my response was pretty simple. It was like, "Okay, finally, that's good. That's good. It's about time." I think that was my response.

JOHNSON: Lastly, how do you think the events of September 11th and the months following, how do you think those affected your life and continue to affect you in years to come?

MULLINS: I think it's given us all a different perspective. I was older than most people. Staff were all young. I was older than most of them. I think it gave us all a different perspective on our lives. As I shared with you, I left the Hill within the year. It wasn't a mindful decision, but when I look back at it, I think it probably played a part. It certainly played a part in what direction my life took, which is after I did my work on behalf of those families and communities, I really felt my work was done. In many respects, I couldn't do anything after that that would have mattered more. It was a good time for a change. I think, like anyone, it informs a new perspective on how you spend your time and energy in life. Life is a precious thing.

JOHNSON: Is there anything else you wanted to add today?

MULLINS: I don't think so. Thank you for doing this project. I appreciate it.

JOHNSON: Thanks for coming in today.