

By Elizabeth Miller

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My father, [Douglas C. Miller](#), would have turned 56 on July 11. He was a New York City firefighter who gave his life on September 11, 2001, at just 34 years old. His life and so many others were violently taken that day — and far too soon.

I am among the many loved ones who were left behind. I was only six years old on 9/11, the day my world turned upside down. Many of the other [2,976 victims](#) also had young loved ones — children, nieces and nephews, grandchildren. In the wake of that tragic experience, many of us have dedicated our time to advocating for a more peaceful and just world.

Amid our grieving process, many 9/11 families, like mine, have asked for answers — and we want a resolution. Twenty-two years later, it seems clear that plea agreements in the case against the 9/11 accused are our only chance.

At age 11, I wrote to President George W. Bush, begging him to end the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. “We should be the good country, the peaceful country, but we’re not,” I wrote. Even then I knew that meeting violence with more violence would never bring back our loved ones, and I felt that our leaders wrongly believed that a violent fight against the concept of “terror” would help address our collective grief. It only brought more death, destruction, and [civilian](#) casualties. My entire sixth-grade class cosigned my letters to the president, but no reply ever came.

Growing up as a 9/11 kid, I was often asked to participate in patriotic remembrance events around the anniversary of the attacks. My high school made announcements and celebrated my father’s heroism. In college, I spoke at a local 9/11 anniversary event, calling for peace and forgiveness, reminding attendees that the attacks were the actions of the few, not the many. My family was never invited back. Though we laugh about it now, it hurts to feel as if my lived reality is not what people want to hear about.

For years I felt different. Sure, I was one of many children who lost a parent that day, but I never felt people understood my response to the tragedy. I was desperate for answers; to intimately understand the who, what, where, and why of 9/11. I studied the culture, religion, and politics of the Middle East and North Africa, conducting research on terrorism and the radicalization of Osama bin Laden. That led me to study the US response to the 9/11 attacks.

What I learned was deeply upsetting. I read about how hundreds of Muslim men were rounded up and sent to Guantánamo Bay Naval Base, where they were detained [without charges](#) or access to lawyers. I learned how others, including the five men who would later be charged with planning and supporting the 9/11 attacks, were tortured at [CIA black sites](#) in foreign countries. All of this was done in the name of justice for victims like my father. But I felt the United States had abandoned its commitment to human rights and the rule of law. I was ashamed.

In 2020, I joined a 9/11 family-member organization, [September 11<sup>th</sup> Families for Peaceful Tomorrows](#), full of people like me who wanted to turn their grief into calls for peace. Since its formation, in 2002, the organization has advocated for peace, justice, and the rule of law. After meeting other 9/11 kids, many of whom studied the same things I did, finally I didn't feel so different.

I also learned about the [legal proceedings](#) against the five men accused of planning and supporting the 9/11 attacks. After all these years, the case is still in "pretrial hearings," largely because the US government [classified](#) all the information about the defendants' torture at CIA black sites prior to their being sent to Guantánamo.

In my desperation to learn more, I have traveled to Guantánamo three times. I looked into the eyes of 9/11 "mastermind" Khalid Sheikh Mohammed. It was shocking. Despite how he's been labeled, he looked like a fragile, weathered old man. As everyone in the observer gallery stared at him, he stared back. I sat with my loss and pain while listening to oral arguments, and couldn't help thinking that I did not, could not, stand for the cruelty and torture these men had experienced.

On another visit, in [March 2022](#), the prosecution informed us that they had initiated a discussion of plea agreements with defense teams. This would require the accused to plead guilty, and in turn, the government would take away the death penalty. But after months of concerted efforts between the prosecution and defense teams,

[negotiations stalled](#)

. More than a year later, our families were informed by the prosecution that we were likely to return to a process of endless litigation, due to the government's failure to move the plea agreements forward.

It had become clear that the proceedings would not provide any public information about the planning of the attacks. And with the military commissions system as it is, we may never get answers. The pretrial hearings have gone on for over 10 years, with no end in sight. Public sessions are regularly canceled, rescheduled, and closed, which I have witnessed firsthand in trying to observe such proceedings. The dysfunction of the system will not change. This is why negotiating plea agreements for the five accused is the best and only path to resolution for 9/11 families.

Other advocates among 9/11 families, like sisters [Leila and Jessica Murphy](#), who lost their father, Brian J. Murphy, have also traveled to Guantánamo Bay, where they have experienced the [same delays](#).

Still, they continue to advocate for plea agreements. Law student

[Aidan Salamone](#)

, who lost his father, John Patrick Salamone, also recognizes the failure of the military commission system. As he wrote in a *New York Times*

letter to the editor earlier this year, "I doubt my grieving mother could have possibly imagined that, 22 years later, her teddy-bear-clutching little one would still need to call for 9/11 justice."

In May, some of us got together to write a [letter](#) to President Biden, urging him to remain committed to plea agreements so that 9/11 families can see some level of justice. Our letter was [addressed on the Senate floor](#) by Sen. Dick Durbin (D-IL), where he noted that "these families were robbed of true justice when the administration at the time decided to torture and abuse detainees in our nation's custody, and throw them into an untested legal black hole rather than trusting America's time-tested system of justice."

Furthermore, Durbin implored the administration to enact a timely review of the "policy principles" necessary for the progress of plea agreements. Despite this, we have not seen any

progress, and received only a generic printed response from Biden, thanking us for the letter we sent. The president's letter made no mention of 9/11 or Guántanamo.

Our stories are often invoked in the name of national security, but the voices of 9/11 kids who call for peace, justice, and the rule of law regularly go unheard. But we will continue to advocate for resolution. We don't need replies from our leaders, we need action. We strongly believe that the Biden administration's commitment to plea agreements for the 9/11 accused are the *only* action that will bring any resolution and healing for the loss of our loved ones.

It's been nearly 22 years without our loved ones, and without answers. Twenty-two years of holidays, birthdays, and other special occasions, all experienced with a profound piece of our hearts missing.

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