"Banning the governors of New York and New Jersey from speaking is the ultimate political decision," said one relatives' group, led by retired Deputy Fire Chief Jim Riches.

NEW YORK (AP) -- America gathered again Tuesday to mark the 11th anniversary of the Sept. 11, 2001, terror attacks with familiar ceremony, but also a sense that it's time to move forward after a decade of remembrance.

As in past years, thousands were expected to gather at the World Trade Center site in New York, the Pentagon and Shanksville, Pa., to read the names of nearly 3,000 victims killed in the worst terror attack in U.S. history. President Barack Obama was to attend the Pentagon memorial, and Vice President Joe Biden was to speak in Pennsylvania.

But many felt that last year's 10th anniversary was an emotional turning point for public mourning of the attacks. For the first time, elected officials weren't speaking at the ceremony, which often allowed them a solemn turn in the spotlight, but raised questions about the public and private Sept. 11.

"I feel much more relaxed" this year, said Jane Pollicino, who came to ground zero Tuesday morning to remember her husband, who was killed at the trade center. "After the ninth anniversary, that next day, you started building up to the 10th year. This feels a lot different, in that regard. It's another anniversary that we can commemorate in a calmer way, without that 10-year pressure."

Commuters rushed out of the subway and fewer police barricades were in place than in past years in the lower Manhattan neighborhood surrounding ground zero. But blocks from the site, Ron Patiro needed to consult with security guards about where he could walk his two dogs. "It's still a military zone," he said.

Families had a mixed reaction to the changing ceremony, keeping politicians away from the microphone in New York for the first time.

For Charles G. Wolf, it's a fitting transition.

"We've gone past that deep, collective public grief," says Wolf, whose wife, Katherine, was killed at the trade center. "And the fact that the politicians will not be involved, to me, makes it more intimate, for the families. ... That's the way that it can be now."

But Pollicino said it's important that politicians still attend the ceremony.

"There's something missing if they're not here at all," she said. "Now, all of a sudden, it's `for the families.' This happened to our country - it didn't happen only to me."

Political leaders still are welcome to attend the ground zero ceremony, and they are expected at the other commemorations, as well.

President Obama and first lady Michelle Obama plan to attend the Pentagon ceremony and visit wounded soldiers at Walter Reed Army Medical Center. Biden and Secretary of the Interior Ken

Salazar are expected to speak at the Flight 93 National Memorial near Shanksville, at the site where the hijacked United Airlines plane went down.

Officeholders from the mayor to presidents have been heard at the New York ceremony, reading texts ranging from parts of the Declaration of Independence and the Gettysburg Address to poems by John Donne and Langston Hughes.

For former New York Gov. George Pataki, this year's change ends a 10-year experience that was deeply personal, even as it reflected his political role. He was governor at the time of the attacks.

"As the names are read out, I just listen and have great memories of people who I knew very well who were on that list of names. It was very emotional," Pataki reflected by phone last week. Among his friends who were killed was Neil Levin, the executive director of the Port Authority of New York and New Jersey.

But Pataki supports the decision not to have government figures speak.

"It's time to take the next step, which is simply to continue to pay tribute," Pataki said.

The National Sept. 11 Memorial and Museum - led by Mayor Michael Bloomberg as its board chairman - announced in July that this year's ceremony would include only relatives reading victims' names.

The point, memorial President Joe Daniels said, was "honoring the victims and their families in a way free of politics" in an election year.

Some victims' relatives and commentators praised the decision. "It is time" to extricate Sept. 11 from politics, the Boston Globe wrote in an editorial.

But others said keeping politicians off the rostrum smacked of ... politics.

The move came amid friction between the memorial foundation and the governors of New York and New Jersey over financing for the museum - friction that abruptly subsided Monday, when Bloomberg and New York Gov. Andrew Cuomo announced an agreement that paves the way for finishing the $700 million project "as soon as practicable."

Before the deal, Cuomo, a Democrat, and New Jersey Gov. Chris Christie, a Republican, had signaled their displeasure by calling on federal officials to give the memorial a financial and technical hand. Some victims' relatives saw the no-politicians anniversary ceremony as retaliation.

"Banning the governors of New York and New Jersey from speaking is the ultimate political decision," said one relatives' group, led by retired Deputy Fire Chief Jim Riches. His firefighter son and namesake was killed responding to the burning World Trade Center.

Spokesmen for Christie and Cuomo said the governors were fine with the memorial organizers' decision.

Of course, it's difficult to remember 9/11 without remembering its impact on the nation's political narrative.

After all, "9/11 has defined politics in America" since 2001, said Costas Panagopoulos, a Fordham University political science professor. "At the end of the day, 9/11 was a public tragedy that affected the nation as a whole."