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Government Accounts of 9/11 Reveal Gaps, Inconsistencies

**Questions Arise About Who
Put Nation on High Alert;
A Threat to Air Force One?**

Panel Assembles Timeline

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WASHINGTON -- Shortly after a passenger jet crashed into the Pentagon on Sept. 11, 2001, Air Force Gen. Richard Myers raced back to the military headquarters from a meeting on Capitol Hill. The four-star general, acting head of the Joint Chiefs of Staff that day, went directly to the Pentagon's command center. With smoke spreading into the cavernous room, he ordered the officer in charge, Maj. Gen. W. Montague Winfield, to raise the military's alert status to Defcon III, the highest state of readiness since the 1973 Arab-Israeli war.


That account is based on interviews with Gen. Winfield and a former White House official. In the months after Sept. 11, President Bush had a different public explanation about who put the military on high alert. The president said publicly at least twice that he gave the order. During a town-hall meeting in Orlando on Dec. 4, 2001, Mr. Bush said that after the attacks, "one of the first acts I did was to put our military on alert."

As that suggests, despite intense attention paid to Sept. 11, public understanding of that day -- how government officials responded, what went smoothly and what didn't -- remains shrouded in confusion and misunderstanding. The independent commission appointed to study the terror strikes has said it considers piecing together a minute-by-minute picture of that day's events crucial to its task of deciding whether the country needs to take further steps to prepare for potential future crises.

Scores of interviews with those who played key roles that day or directly witnessed events suggest that some official accounts of Sept. 11 are incorrect, incomplete or in dispute. Among other things, the commission is examining such questions as how long Mr. Bush remained in a Florida classroom just after the World Trade Center strikes, whether there really was a threat to Air Force One that day, how effectively American fighter jets reacted to the attacks, and who activated the national-emergency-response plan. The 10-member bipartisan panel, which plans to hold a public hearing tomorrow, is expected to issue a final report in July.

The Sept. 11 attacks were unprecedented in American history, and few of the country's institutions were prepared for the shock or its aftermath. The day was so chaotic that accounts can be

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expected to differ in hindsight, making the task of painting an accurate picture all the more difficult. In an interview last November, White House Communications Director Dan Bartlett said, "Based on what we knew, or more importantly, what we didn't know, the proper course was taken." Regarding Mr. Bush's statements that he had ordered troops to a higher alert status himself, Mr. Bartlett said the president provided a "description that the public could understand" and spoke in "broad strokes." Gen. Myers and the Pentagon declined to comment.

Democratic members of the commission have said they are looking at whether some inaccurate accounts, rather than due to confusion, may have reflected administration efforts to make its response seem faster and better coordinated than it was. Richard Ben-Veniste, a Democratic commissioner, said the panel is also examining whether official accounts of that day could have diverted attention "from an overall level of unpreparedness."

A PRESIDENT'S LONG DAY

Mr. Bush's main movements on Sept. 11, 2001

8:46 a.m. Two F-15 fighter jets are ordered to scramble from Otis Air Force Base in Massachusetts to try to interdict hijacked planes heading toward New York.

8:46 a.m. American Airlines Flight 11 hits World Trade Center north tower.

Approx. 8:55 a.m. Bush motorcade arrives at Booker Elementary School, Sarasota, Fla. President notified almost immediately of first World Trade Center crash.

9:02 a.m. United Airlines Flight 175 hits World Trade Center south tower.

9:08 a.m. White House Chief of Staff Andrew Card whispers to president that "a second plane has hit the second tower. America is under attack." Bush remains in classroom at least seven more minutes.

9:30 a.m. Three F-16 fighter jets take off from Langley Air Force Base in Virginia and are directed toward Washington to protect the capital.

9:35 a.m. Bush motorcade leaves school for Sarasota/Bradenton International Airport, where Air Force One awaits. While en route to airport, Bush is notified that a plane has hit the Pentagon.

9:56 a.m. Air Force One takes off from Sarasota, initially heads for Washington.

Approx. 10:03 a.m. United Flight 93 crashes in Pennsylvania.

Approx. 11:45 a.m. After diverting from Washington, Air Force One lands at Barksdale Air Force Base in Louisiana.

Within weeks of the attacks, Mr. Bush had rallied the country and launched the campaign that ousted the Taliban and many al Qaeda leaders from Afghanistan. But events of Sept. 11 itself are likely to be revisited often in coming months, in part because of the commission, and in part because Mr. Bush's speeches and advertisements have made his performance on that day and its aftermath a pillar of his re-election campaign.

Classroom Visit

The day began with the president on his way to Emma E. Booker Elementary School in Sarasota, Fla., to promote his education bill, known as No Child Left Behind. White House staff members had redecorated a second-grade classroom, moving furniture and mounting banners for the benefit of the television cameras recording the event, Principal Gwen Rigell said.

The arrival of the presidential motorcade was marked by a cacophony of cellphones: staffers at the White House calling colleagues on the trip with news of the first plane crash into the World Trade Center. Within seconds, aides had informed the president.

At the Dec. 4, 2001, town-hall meeting in Orlando, Mr. Bush said, "I was sitting outside the classroom, waiting to go in, and I saw an airplane hit the tower -- the TV was obviously on. And I used to fly myself, and I said, 'Well, there's one terrible pilot.' " Several weeks later, he said essentially the same thing at another public event in Ontario, Calif.

Actually, no scenes of the first plane hitting the Trade Center were broadcast on television until late that night, when amateur video footage became available. The TV in the room where Mr. Bush waited wasn't even plugged in, according Ms. Rigell, the principal. "It's just a mistaken

12:16 p.m. FAA reports, and president is notified, that all civilian airliners have landed or were accounted for, and that there no longer was any danger from hijacked planes.

Approx. 1:30 p.m. Air Force One heads to Offutt Air Force Base, Neb., which has a secure underground bunker.

Approx. 4:30 p.m. President aboard Air Force One leaves for Washington.

Just before 7:00 p.m. President arrives at White House.

recollection" on the president's part, his spokesman, Mr. Bartlett, said in an interview. "There were lots of things going on fast at the time."

Just after 9 a.m., Mr. Bush took a seat in front of students, most of them from a poor neighborhood. He listened as teacher Sandra K. Daniels pointed to an easel, and the second-graders read aloud lists of words.

Then, White House Chief of Staff Andrew Card strode into the classroom, leaned down and whispered in the president's ear, "A second plane hit the second tower. America is under attack," Mr. Card has recounted.

Both Republican and Democratic commissioners have said they are focusing closely on what happened next -- and whether mere minutes could have affected the outcome on Sept. 11. The panel's investigators are looking at questions such as the timeliness of presidential orders about intercepting the jet that at 9:37 a.m. plowed into the Pentagon.

In a CNBC television interview almost a year later, Mr. Card said that after he alerted Mr. Bush, "I pulled away from the president, and not that many seconds later, the president excused himself from the classroom, and we gathered in the holding room and talked about the situation."

But uncut videotape of the classroom visit obtained from the local cable-TV station director who shot it, and interviews with the teacher and principal, show that Mr. Bush remained in the classroom not for mere seconds, but for at least seven additional minutes. He followed along for five minutes as children read aloud a story about a pet goat. Then he stayed for at least another two minutes, asking the children questions and explaining to Ms. Rigell that he would have to leave more quickly than planned.

Mr. Bartlett confirmed in an interview that the president stayed in the classroom for at least seven minutes. The spokesman said that as the president's staff was trying to learn more about the plane crashes, there was no need to talk to Mr. Bush or pull him away. The president didn't leave immediately after receiving the news of the second crash from Mr. Card because Mr. Bush's "instinct was not to frighten the children by rushing out of the room," the spokesman added. Mr. Bush's motorcade left the school at approximately 9:35 a.m., 32 minutes after he entered the classroom, according to a White House timeline and analysis of the uncut videotape.

President Aloft

The president learned the Pentagon also had been hit as his motorcade sped just over three miles to Sarasota/Bradenton International Airport, where Air Force One was waiting. At 9:56 a.m., the presidential 747 was airborne. Determined to avoid any dangers at lower altitudes, Air Force Col. Mark Tillman, the pilot, climbed so steeply that officials aboard said in interviews that the jet seemed to go almost vertical. It quickly reached the relatively safe altitude of 40,000 feet.

In the Dec. 4, 2001, town-hall meeting, the President said he didn't begin to make major decisions about the emergency until he was back aboard his plane. "I got on the phone from Air Force One, asking to find out the facts," he said.

As Air Force One left Sarasota, the president intended to return directly to Washington, Mr. Bartlett said. Mr. Bush initially had ignored advice from Vice President Dick Cheney, calling while en route to a White House basement command center, that Washington appeared to be under attack and the president for his own safety should remain away, according to an official in the vice president's office. Once airborne, Mr. Bush spoke again on a secure phone with Mr. Cheney, who relayed a new message that changed the president's mind, White House officials later said. The vice president urged Mr. Bush to postpone his return because, Mr. Cheney said, the government had received a specific threat that Air Force One itself had been targeted by terrorists. Mr. Cheney emphasized that the threat included a reference to what he called the secret code word for the presidential jet, "Angel," Mr. Bartlett said in an interview.

In a press conference on Sept. 12, 2001, then-White House spokesman Ari Fleischer said the threat tipped the scales for Mr. Bush. The president reluctantly agreed to remain away from Washington "because the information that we had was real and credible about Air Force One," Mr. Fleischer said.

After a stop in Louisiana, the presidential jet flew to Offutt Air Force Base in Nebraska. Offutt's deep underground bunker gave the president a secure place to hold a video conference with officials in Washington. Shortly after 4 p.m., he decided to return to the capital, arriving at the White House just before 7 p.m.

No Threat

Although in the days after Sept. 11, Mr. Cheney and other administration officials recounted that a threat had been received against Air Force One, Mr. Bartlett said in a recent interview that there hadn't been any actual threat. Word of a threat had resulted from confusion in the White House bunker, as multiple conversations went on simultaneously, he said. Many of these exchanges, he added, related to rumors that turned out to be false, such as reports of attacks on the president's ranch in Texas and the State Department. As for the Air Force One code name, Mr. Bartlett said, "Somebody was using the word 'angel,' " and "that got interpreted as a threat based on the word 'angel.' " (Former Secret Service officials said the code wasn't an official secret, but a radio shorthand designation that had been made public well before 2001.)

The vice president's office gave an account differing from Mr. Bartlett's, saying it still couldn't rule out that a threat to Air Force One actually had been made.

Days after the attacks, Mr. Cheney had said word of the threat had been passed to him by Secret Service agents. But in interviews, two former senior Secret Service agents on duty that day denied that their agency played any role in receiving or passing on a threat to the presidential jet.

An official in Mr. Cheney's office said in an interview that Mr. Cheney had been mistaken in saying the threat came to him via the Secret Service. The official said that instead, Mr. Cheney had received word of the threat from "a uniformed military person" manning the underground

PROBING HISTORY

The National Commission on Terrorist Attacks Upon the U.S.:

Created: Nov. 27, 2002

Staff: 10 commissioners, 80 full-time employees

Budget: \$15 million

Interviews: More than 1,000 people in 10 countries; President Bush and Vice President Cheney have offered to meet privately with the commission's chairman and vice chairman but not with all 10 commissioners, as requested

Documents: Panel has had access to two million pages of documents, including sensitive government intelligence

Final report: Due July 26, 2004

Source: the commission

bunker. The official said the vice president and his staff don't know who the individual was. And the official said that he couldn't say definitively whether or not a threat had been made. "I'm not in a position to know the answer to that question," the official in the vice president's office said.

In explaining Mr. Bush's movements, top White House political strategist Karl Rove has said that as late as 4 p.m. on Sept. 11, there were still reports of civilian jetliners aloft and unaccounted for, posing a separate threat to Air Force One. In an interview published Oct. 1, 2001, in the New Yorker magazine, Mr. Rove referred to reports of "three or four or five planes still outstanding" at 4 p.m.

But Benjamin Sliney, the senior Federal Aviation Administration official in charge of nationwide air-traffic control that day, said in an interview that there were no such reports. He and an FAA spokeswoman said that at 12:16 p.m., the agency informed the White House, Pentagon and other arms of the government that there weren't any additional hijacked jets aloft, as all commercial planes had landed or been diverted away from the U.S.

Other government officials said in interviews that Mr. Bush received a briefing before 1 p.m. while at an Air Force base in Barksdale, La., during which he was told that the skies were clear of any potentially hijacked planes. Mr. Bartlett said in an interview he didn't know where Mr. Rove got the information about planes still being in the air in the late afternoon of Sept. 11.

Scrambling Fighters

The U.S. military began responding to the attacks on the morning of Sept. 11. The independent commission is examining how a variety of obstacles -- including the location of fighter jets, peacetime limits on how those planes operate and the timeliness of orders to shoot down hijacked airliners -- hindered the Air Force's reaction.

The Air Force has disclosed that on Sept. 11, no fighters that were armed and on alert were stationed closer than 130 miles to either New York or Washington. At Otis Air Force Base in Massachusetts, two F-15 fighters scrambled upon receiving word of a hijacking -- at almost the same moment that the first jet hit the World Trade Center. Their distance from New York meant the fighters had almost no chance to intercept the second jet that hit the Trade Center 16 minutes later, according to Brig. Gen. Donald Quenneville of the Massachusetts Air National Guard.

Officials with the North American Aerospace Defense Command (Norad), the joint U.S.-Canadian force responsible for protecting continental air space, said in interviews that fighter basing on Sept. 11 reflected Cold War-era fear of attacks from overseas, not from hijacked domestic airliners. Since Sept. 11, the Pentagon has said it has moved additional fighters closer to Washington, New York and other major cities to protect against domestically launched terrorist attacks.

Norad fighters stationed at Langley Air Force Base near Hampton, Va., conceivably might have reached the Washington area in time to shoot down the hijacked plane that hit the Pentagon, Capt. Craig Borgstrom, one of the pilots who scrambled from Langley, said in an interview. But the three fighters in Virginia remained on the ground for a full 50 minutes after Norad had learned from the FAA that passenger jets had been hijacked, and 27 minutes after the second World Trade Center tower had been hit, according to Norad. The independent panel, formally known as the National Commission on Terrorist Attacks Upon the United States, has said it is investigating the cause of that delay.

Retired Air Force Maj. Gen. Larry Arnold, who was in command of all Norad fighters in the U.S. on Sept. 11, said in an interview that the slow reaction at Langley reflected initial confusion about whether an attack on the U.S. was really under way. He also blamed what he said was relatively late notification by the FAA that one or more hijacked planes seemed to be headed for Washington.

Gen. Arnold also said an overall shortage of armed-and-ready aircraft at the time caused Norad to hold back until it knew where the danger was coming from. "We had so few airplanes on alert anywhere," he said. "If we got a resource airborne, and it went in the wrong direction, we didn't have anything else to back it up."

The FAA has said that it notified the military immediately when it determined that one or more jets had probably been hijacked.

Peacetime Restrictions

Once they got in the air, the Langley fighters observed peacetime noise restrictions requiring that they fly more slowly than supersonic speed and take off over water, pointed away from Washington, according to testimony before the commission. (Gen. Quenneville of the Massachusetts Air National Guard said the fighters from Otis Air Force Base ignored peacetime rules because the lead pilot concluded they faced an extraordinary situation.)

At public hearings last May, members of the Sept. 11 commission from both political parties raised questions about whether a faster response by the Langley fighters could have put them in range to stop American Airlines Flight 77 before it plowed into the Pentagon, and at least prevent the deaths of 125 people on the ground. Norad has said that commanders now have broader authority to suspend peacetime restrictions under certain emergency conditions.

Even if fighter pilots had arrived in Washington promptly, there would have been another hurdle: They hadn't received orders that at the time could come only from the president to fire on civilian airliners, according to Gen. Arnold. Mr. Bush has said repeatedly that he issued such a shoot-down order, but the White House hasn't publicly disclosed when he did so. The commission is trying to determine precisely when the order came, said Philip Zelikow, its executive director.

Mr. Zelikow said the panel's investigation also includes why the shoot-down order, whenever it was given, applied only to hijacked planes headed for Washington. This limitation meant that if there had been additional hijacked planes headed for other targets, fighters couldn't have tried to stop them. Since Sept. 11, the military has been given independent authority to shoot down hijacked passenger jets under certain circumstances.

Secret Service

Adding to the uncertainty about the military response that morning, there are differing accounts on what prompted Secret Service agents to try to protect the White House by calling in yet another airborne unit: the District of Columbia Air National Guard.

Brig. Gen. David F. Wherley Jr., who was in charge that day of the 113th Fighter Wing of the D.C. Air National Guard, stationed near the capital at Andrews Air Force Base, said in an interview that minutes after the Pentagon was hit, the Secret Service phoned the fighter wing's operations center. Gen. Wherley said Becky Ediger, a senior Secret Service agent on duty at the White House, told him the president had authorized the vice president to pass along orders to

shoot down hijacked civilian jets, if that was necessary to keep them from hitting any building near the White House.

Two White House officials involved in responding to the crisis that day said in interviews that the Secret Service acted on its own. But the Secret Service denied that in a written statement responding to questions. "The Secret Service is not authorized to, nor did it, direct the activation or launch of Department of Defense aviation assets," the statement said. Current senior Secret Service officials said that the agents' actions on Sept. 11 had been ordered by the vice president. The official speaking for Mr. Cheney said he didn't know whether the vice president had directed the agents to call the fighter wing and wouldn't be able to find out.

Gen. Wherley said he swiftly sent aloft four of his F-16s at Andrews, after first getting permission from Norad. However, these fighters weren't on active duty protecting against threats to the country, the general said. As a result, the first two fighters to take off weren't armed.

Mr. Bartlett, the White House spokesman, said that a swifter military response to the events of Sept. 11 would have been impossible because of "the unconventional nature of this attack." Even after the second Trade Center tower was hit, he said, "specific commands would have required much deeper knowledge of the [terrorist] operation that was under way."

Emergency Plans

In his address to the nation from the Oval Office on the night of Sept. 11, Mr. Bush said that "immediately following the first attack, I implemented our government's emergency-response plans." But in interviews, federal officials said that in fact, lower-level government employees activated the Interagency Domestic Terrorism Concept of Operations Plan.

Adopted in the late 1990s in response to an executive order from President Clinton, the 36-page "Conplan" details the responsibilities of seven federal agencies. It gives the Federal Bureau of Investigation responsibility for activating the plan and alerting the other agencies that a terrorist attack has occurred.

FBI spokesman Paul Bresson said the Conplan was activated quickly on Sept. 11, without any input from the president or White House. Because the Trade Center crashes were so widely known from television coverage, he said, most of the participating federal agencies swung into action without waiting for FBI notification.

A former Bush White House official said in an e-mail response to questions that the president "was actually not involved in making decision on 9/11 about emergency plans until he formally signed a disaster declaration" three days later, on Sept. 14. The White House didn't respond to written questions about the president's role in activating the Conplan.

Apart from the Conplan, some Democratic members of the Sept. 11 commission have said it is examining whether the White House should have had its own internal plan in place, itemizing steps the president and his staff might need to take in the event of a major terrorist attack on U.S. soil.

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