

The Turn to War

11 September 2001: With the President (C)

Michael J. Morell

“
As I waited,
two young men
checked out of the
Comfort Inn in
Portland, Maine.

”

I slept fitfully, tossing and turning, setting and resetting the pillows and blankets. As the time on the hotel alarm clock ticked toward 3:30 a.m., the time I needed to get up, I became even more restless. This was not unusual. I had slept poorly during the previous eight months of this assignment because one of the many things I did not want to do was to sleep through an alarm and rush, unprepared, into my 8:00 a.m. briefing of the president of the United States. (C)

(b)(1)

After pulling myself out of bed a few minutes before the alarm was to go off, I quickly showered, dressed, made coffee, and waited (b)(1) to bring me the classified materials from which I would fashion the (b)(1) briefing for the president. These materials were to arrive (b)(1) from CIA Headquarters, through the Situation Room at the White House and on to the WHCA command post at the Colony Beach and Tennis Resort near Sarasota, Florida, where the president was spending the night. (C)

On this day, (b)(1) waited and waited; 4:00 a.m. came and went; then 4:30. I'm not patient by nature, and my impatience was getting the better of me. I paced the room, looked at the clock, paced some more, and checked the clock again. I called CIA Headquarters to ask if there was a problem there. "Nope," I was told, the material had been sent (b)(1) as we had agreed, at 3:30 a.m. I phoned the command post at the resort. "Yes," I was reassured, the briefing was just coming over (b)(1) and they would bring it over soon. (b)(1)

(b)(1)

(b)(3)(c)

All statements of fact, opinion, or analysis expressed in this article are those of the author. Nothing in the article should be construed as asserting or implying US government endorsement of an article's factual statements and interpretations.

SECRET//NOFORN
With the President

Twenty-one years into my career, I was a doing a job that fe(b)(1) would ever have. And I was having the time of my life.

I didn't know it then, but as I waited, two young men checked out of the Comfort Inn in Portland, Maine, a hotel I had stayed in two months earlier, when the president spent a long weekend at his father's oceanside summer home in Kennebunkport. Now, as I was sitting in Sarasota, 1,500 miles from Portland, these men took a short drive to the Portland International Jetport, where they boarded a 6:00 a.m. flight to Boston. In Boston, they would board American Airlines Flight 11, bound for Los Angeles. Their names were Mohamed Atta and Abdul Aziz al Omari. (C)

Air Force One had left Andrews Air Force Base, just outside Washington, DC, the previous morning. The president's schedule called for him to fly to Jacksonville, Florida, to participate in a variety of political events to promote his recently announced education bill. After the events in Jacksonville, he was to fly to Sarasota, arriving early in the evening. On the morning of the 11th, the president would join children in a classroom at the Emma E. Booker Elementary School in Sarasota. From there, he was to fly back to Washington and be back in the Oval Office by early afternoon. As the president's intelligence briefer, I was on board Air Force One as it went "wheels-up" on 10 September. (C)

At this point, I was eight months into what I was told would be a one-year assignment. Next to

servicing as the deputy director for intelligence, responsible for all of the Agency's intelligence analysis, I considered this the best assignment a CIA analyst could have. Carrying the Agency's best information and analysis to a president and helping to shape his view of the world is a deep honor and an even deeper responsibility. Twenty-one years into my career as an analyst, I was a doing a job that few would ever have. And I was having the time of my life. (C)

I saw the president every morning, Monday through Saturday. I briefed him whether he was working in the Oval Office or whether he was spending the weekend at Camp David. I traveled with him on domestic as well as international trips, including on family vacations. Indeed, on 10 September, I was just two weeks removed from having spent most of the month of August briefing the president at his ranch in Crawford, Texas. I had logged over 100,000 miles in the air during my year with the president. Many of those miles came on Air Force One, but many more were logged on American Airlines flights between Washington and Dallas. (C)

A briefing would generally include seven or eight items, each of them placed in a three-ring blue leather binder, with the words "President's Daily Briefing" embossed on the cover.

(b)(1)

It was my job to decide both what to show the president and how to brief it so that he took away the key points. I would usually "tee-up" each item in the briefing book with a few words—for example, the last thing we had told him about the topic, how this new piece advanced the story, and a preview of the key points. The president would read the piece, often quite carefully. He would then either ask me questions about the item's substance or, more frequently, ask the senior officials in the room with us questions about the policy implications. When that discussion ended, we would move to the next item in the binder. Fifteen minutes were usually allotted for the briefing, but it would frequently run much longer. (C)

Other officials in the room usually included Vice President Cheney, Chief of Staff Andrew Card, National Security Advisor Condoleezza Rice, and Director of Central of Intelligence George Tenet. The presence of these people made my job even more challenging because they were—as they should have been—intensely focused on what I was presenting to their boss. Occasionally, one of them would disagree with points in a piece and would say so in plain, direct language. (C)

On arguably the most important day of President Bush's tenure, his intelligence briefing was uneventful.

Because the president was traveling, the briefing on 11 September would include only one of the other usual participants, Chief of Staff Card. The national security advisor or deputy national security advisor often traveled with the president, but this time the senior National Security Council official present was Captain Deborah Loewer, USN, the director of the White House Situation Room. (C)

As the NSC representative, Loewer would join the briefing. Her job was to obtain answers to policy-related questions the president might raise and, more importantly, to communicate things of interest back to Rice and her deputy, Stephen Hadley. On the flight from Jacksonville to Sarasota, I had told Loewer that I would meet her at 7:30 a.m., 30 minutes before the scheduled meeting with the president, to



THE VISIT OF THE PRESIDENT
TO
FLORIDA

MONDAY, SEPTEMBER 10 - TUESDAY, SEPTEMBER 11, 1991
OFFICIAL DOCUMENT

The book containing the itinerary for President Bush's trip to Florida on 10 and 11 September. Each person on the flight received one. (U) (Courtesy of Michael Morell and CIA Museum.)

show her what I would be briefing. Loewer wanted to be prepared, and I wanted to accommodate her. She had been in Kennebunkport, and I found her both friendly and helpful. (C)

At 7:55 a.m., Loewer and I went up the stairs to the president's suite, passing through Secret Service checkpoints on the way. We waited in the hallway outside the president's room. The president had just returned from a four and a half mile run around the golf course at the Colony Resort, and he was showering and dressing. While we waited and chatted with the president's personal aide, American Airlines Flight 11—a Boeing 767 with 92 passengers and crew members aboard—took off from Boston's Logan Airport. Flight 11 was the first of the four hijacked flights to take to the air. (C)

A little after 8:00 a.m., Chief of Staff Card opened the door, said "good morning," and motioned us in. We found the president seated at a table with a cup of coffee and a newspaper. He seemed surrounded by plates of fruit and pastries. When he saw us, he asked if we had enjoyed our night on the beach. I reminded him that my schedule did not allow for late evenings out, adding that I heard some waves but had not actually seen any. He said "Michael, you need to get a new job." He put down the newspaper and said, "Anything of interest this morning?" (C)

On arguably the most important day in President Bush's tenure, his intelligence briefing was uneventful.

(b)(1)

One issue in the briefing did catch the president's attention and caused him to pick up the phone to call Dr. Rice in Washington. The briefing was over by 8:25 a.m. Only four minutes earlier, the transponder on American Flight 11 stopped transmitting its Identification Friend or Foe beacon. (C)

Captain Loewer and I left the president's suite and quickly took the elevator down to take our places in the motorcade that would take the president to Booker Elementary.

(b)(1)

Soon joining me in the van were several senior White House officials, including political advisor Karl Rove, Press Secretary Ari Fleischer, and Director of White House Communications Dan Bartlett. I had become friendly with both Rove and Fleischer during the previous eight months. Fleischer and I would often talk sports, and Rove and I would often

SECRET//NOFORN
With the President

"Ari, I sure hope this is an accident and not terrorism." He paused for a second or two—the word "terrorism" hanging in the air—and said, "I sure hope so too."

banter about the PDB. Rove would say, "You don't have anything in that briefcase that CNN doesn't have." I would respond, "Karl, if you only knew what I know." (C)

Fleischer joined me in the back of the van, sitting in the row in front of me. We exchanged greetings and dove into newspapers. The president's photographer, Eric Draper, jumped in just as the motorcade began to pull out of the Colony Resort. It was a few minutes after 8:30 a.m. Booker Elementary was 20 minutes away in a working-class neighborhood of Sarasota. During the drive, at just after 8:45 a.m., American Flight 11 slammed into the north side of the North Tower of the World Trade Center, between the 94th and 98th floors. It was traveling at 490 miles per hour. (C)

Within minutes of the Flight 11's impact, just as we were pulling up to the school, Fleischer's cell phone rang. He listened for a few seconds and flipped his phone off. He turned to me and asked, "Michael, do you know anything about a plane hitting the World Trade Center?" I said "no," but I told him I would make some calls. As the motorcade came to a stop, I said "Ari, I sure hope this is an accident and not terrorism." He paused for a second or two—the word "terrorism" hanging in the air—and said, "I sure hope so too." (C)

My assumption at that point, one the president later told reporters he shared, was that the crash was an accident. The image in my mind, as I was heading for a classroom that had been set aside for the senior staff while the president sat with a group of second-grade students in an adjoining classroom, was of a small plane losing its way in a storm or fog and hitting the World Trade Center. I figured the death toll would include only two or three people on the plane and perhaps a few more in offices at the point of impact. Still, I planned to make a call to follow up on Fleischer's question. (C)

From just outside the staff classroom, I called CIA's Operations Center. I intended to find out if anyone there knew any more than what Fleischer had just told me. It was a good bet they would. During my time as the president's briefer, I had come to rely on the group of hard-working officers in the center both to set aside for me key pieces of overnight reporting and to answer my many questions. I was a frequent caller. (C)

The phone, as usual, was answered by one of the operators on duty. (b)(3)(c)

I was told she was on another line and had several additional calls on hold. I then asked for (b)(3)(c) and a few seconds later he was on

the line. He told me essentially what Fleischer had told me, with one significant amplification. He said the initial reports indicated that the plane was a large commercial jet. My mental image of what happened started to unravel. (C)

As I flipped my phone shut and walked into the senior staff room, I looked at my watch. It was 9:00 a.m. In just three minutes, United Airlines Flight 175, a Boeing 767 with 65 passengers and crew members on board, would slam into the south side of the South Tower of the World Trade Center between the 77th and 85th floor. At impact, United Flight 175 was traveling at more 500 miles per hour. (U)

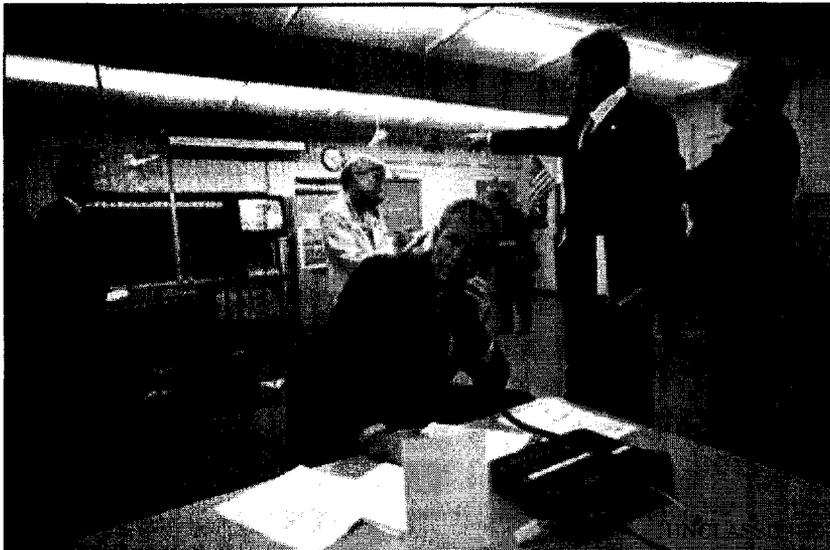
All of us in the senior staff area were stunned when we heard the news a few minutes later that a second plane had hit the World Trade Center. There was now no question: this was not an accident but a deliberate act of terrorism. In the classroom next door, the White House chief of staff made his way to the president, who was listening, along with 16 second graders and a large number of reporters and others, to a story about a girl and her pet goat. Card whispered in the president's ear: "A second plane has hit the World Trade Center. America is under attack." (U)

The president finished the session with the students and joined the senior staff. He made a number of calls on the secure phone that was always with the president just for such a contingency. He spoke with, among others,

SECRET//NOFORN
With the President

Vice President Cheney and National Security Advisor Rice. During one of these conversations, with the president sitting at a school-lunch table, the networks showed a tape of the second plane crashing into the South Tower. A staff member called the president's attention to the footage, a moment the president's photographer caught in a photo that can still be found on the White House Web site. (C)

I could only stand and watch as the president spoke on the phone. Still holding my briefcase, I was growing increasingly concerned about his safety as well as the safety of others at the school. After all, I said to myself, it had been public information for days that the president would be at Booker Elementary on 11 September. I wondered if a plane might come crashing into the school. I considered saying something to the agent in charge of



The president on the telephone from Booker Elementary School. Standing to the left, with his brief case, is the author. (U) (Photo: White House Web site)

At 9:30 a.m., President Bush went back to a classroom to speak to the nation.

the Secret Service detail just across the room from me, but I demurred. I figured he did not need someone telling him how to do his job. In any event, he already had quite a worried look on his face. (C)

At 9:30 a.m., President Bush went back to a classroom to speak to the nation. Surrounded by students, teachers, and news reporters, the president said the country had suffered an apparent terrorist attack. He promised to hunt down those who committed the crime, adding that "terrorism against our country will not stand." While the president was speaking, I wondered what the students were thinking. I was

also thinking that the story about the pet goat suddenly seemed so long ago. (C)

A few minutes after the president concluded his remarks, American Airlines Flight 77, a Boeing 757 with 64 passengers and crew members on board, crashed into the western side of the Pentagon. A close friend, a teacher in Arlington County, Virginia, later told me that he saw the plane fly over his school, just seconds from impact. One of the Agency's drivers, a gentleman with whom I had become well acquainted during my briefing assignment, was waiting at the Pentagon's River Entrance. The driver said the impact of the crash lifted his vehicle off the ground. At the time, a colleague on the briefing team was briefing Secretary Rumsfeld. (C)

When the president began speaking to the country, the Secret Service told those of us in the staff area to take our places in the motorcade "as quickly as possible." The president, they said, would be leaving for Air Force One immediately upon concluding his remarks. They added with some emphasis that once the door to President Bush's limousine closed, the "motorcade would wait for no one." I climbed back into the senior staff van and in a few minutes we were on our way to the Sarasota Bradenton International Airport. The airport was just three-and-a-half miles away. (C)

SECRET//NOFORN
With the President

For seconds no one said a word. Then someone broke the silence by whispering "my God."

News of the attack on the Pentagon greeted us at the airport. I began to wonder how many more planes had been hijacked, how many more targets there might be. I also thought of my family. My wife (b)(6) was probably at home. I wondered if she even knew yet what had happened. My children (b)(6) were at school in Fairfax County, Virginia. I prayed they would not be too frightened by what was occurring nor overly concerned about my safety. After all, I was about ready to board the most secure aircraft in the world. (C)

In fact, when the motorcade pulled up to Air Force One, I quickly noticed that security had been enhanced around the aircraft. A number of Secret Service agents, brandishing assault rifles, ringed Air Force One. Other agents, along with bomb-sniffing dogs, were checking every bag brought onto the aircraft. A long line snaked from the back door of the plane, where most of its passengers embarked and disembarked. Standing in that line, I saw the White House Chief of Staff's briefcase being inspected. My briefcase, with top secret material, and my overnight bag were inspected as well. (C)

Once everyone was aboard, Air Force One's engines roared to life. Normally, the Boeing 747's roll down the runway and its angle of ascent at takeoff was leisurely, like that of a commercial passenger jet. Not on 11 September, not

leaving Sarasota. The aircraft accelerated rapidly down the runway and began a steep ascent. It was 10 a.m. (C)

Once we were airborne, I asked the president's military aide, who was sitting nearby, if we were returning to Washington. (b)(1)

The plane was eerily quiet in those first few moments after the take-off. Most of the people on board were still in shock and were anxious about what still might happen. The president was in his office with a small number of close aides. From there, he ordered the nation's military to a high state of alert. (C)

I was huddled with several others in Air Force One's senior staff compartment, a small room with four seats not far from the president's office. Five or six of us, including the president's doctor and nurse, were watching televised news reports. There we watched people jump to their deaths from the top floors of the World Trade Center. We also watched the South Tower collapse and disappear into a plume of smoke and dust. For seconds,

no one said a word. Then someone broke the silence by whispering "my God." (C)

A few minutes later, but unknown to us at the time, United Airlines Flight 93, a Boeing 757 with 44 passengers and crew members aboard, crashed near Shanksville, Pennsylvania. Days later, we would learn that the Flight 93 passengers, aware of the hijackers' general intentions from speaking with loved ones on cell phones, had revolted and had attacked the hijackers, their actions possibly saving the lives of thousands of others. Months later, we would learn from a senior al-Qa'ida member in US detention that the US Capitol Building was the intended target of the Flight 93 hijackers. The Capitol was just 15 minutes flight time from Shanksville. (S)

(b)(1)

Some time later a senior member of the DFLP denied the initial claim. (S)

SECRET//NOFORN
With the President

As I turned to leave, the president said: "Michael, one more thing." He asked me to call the DCI. The president had become quite close to Director Tenet over the previous eight months. He trusted Tenet's judgment, and the director had developed a deep respect and fondness for the president. The president asked me to

(b)(1)

I said I understood and would make the call immediately. (S)

I returned to my assigned seat in the staff section of the plane and picked up one of the phones that sit beside almost every seat on the aircraft. The phone rang twice, and one of the Air Force officers working on the upper deck of the 747 said "Yes, sir. What can I do for you?" I asked to be connected to the DCI's office in Washington, and I gave him the number. The officer said, "Sir, we have been ordered to keep all the phone lines open for the president and the military aide." I told him the president personally had asked me to make the call. The officer said, "I'll put you right through." Within seconds, the phone in the director's office was ringing. (S)

The DCI's suite was in a crisis mode. Tenet had just made the decision to evacuate all personnel from the CIA Headquarters compound, and he and his staff were in the process of leaving his office suite when I called. (b)(3)(c) one of the director's secretaries with whom I had worked closely when I was the director's executive assistant, told me the DCI was not available. She

The White House, he said, had received a call indicating that Air Force One was a target of the terrorists.

handed the phone to the nearest official, and I found myself talking to Cofer Black, the head of the Counterterrorist Center and my boss when I had worked in the Center for a short time. (C)

Black was calm and collected. This did not surprise me. He

(b)(1)

and was used to finding himself in difficult situations. He told me what the Agency knew at that point, which was little beyond what the rest of the world knew. I passed on the president's message and asked that he share it with the director. As I hung up, I was not confident the DCI would get the word, given the evacuation and given everything that would be asked of Black over the next few hours. (S)

After signing off, I walked toward the president's office, without a clue about what my role should be at that point, but I wanted to see if I could be helpful in any other way. When Chief of Staff Card saw me, he took me into the president's private quarters. There, next to his office, the president would entertain senior guests or relax and sleep. I had looked into the room several times before on earlier flights, but I had never been in the private quarters before. (C)

(b)(1)

(b)(1)

I thanked Card for sharing the information, but I was not concerned.

(b)(1)

The military aide had told me a few minutes earlier that Air Force One was flying with fighter protection and with an AWACs plane overhead. I felt quite safe. (C)

The military aide also told me that a decision had been made to land for a short time at Barksdale Air Force Base in Louisiana. He said that this would allow the president to make another public statement and would allow additional food and water to be brought aboard, since we did not know how long we would be flying. He added that landing would also mean that a number of passengers—those not critical to national security—would be asked to deplane at Barksdale. He said this included the large number of White House domestic policy staff and two congressmen from Florida, Adam Putnam and Dan Miller, who had accompanied the president on his visit to Booker Elementary. I wondered what was in store for me. (C)

As we approached Barksdale, a local news channel playing on Air Force One's many video screens

SECRET//NOFORN
With the President



President with the commander of Barksdale Air Force Base. (U)
 (Photo: ©Reuters/CORBIS)

was reporting a possible terrorist incident at the base. Reporters in the area had noticed a significant enhancement in security at the base and had assumed the worst. They were unaware that the enhanced security was due to the imminent arrival of the president. On our final approach to the airfield, I glanced over at the military aide and saw that he had the list of passengers who would be staying with the president and of those who would remain in Shreveport. I asked him what the plan was for me. He said "Andy Card says you are to stay with us." It was 11:40 a.m. (C)

A few minutes after we came to a standstill on the Barksdale tarmac, the president walked down the steps of the jet ramp. Typically, presidential visits to military bases are full of pomp and

ceremony—a large group of soldiers and family members cheering and waving flags, welcoming remarks by the base commander, and a morale-boosting speech by the commander-in-chief. That was not the scene on 11 September. On that day, only a few officers met the president, and soldiers in full battle gear ringed his plane. The president shook hands with the officers, climbed into a vehicle and sped off. (U)

As I watched the president's arrival from one of the windows along the main hallway of Air Force One, two of the military stewards came through the plane to announce in a very pleasant way that for "security reasons" no one would be permitted to make cell phone calls or to give out the president's location. My heart sank. I had planned to call (b)(6) [redacted] I wanted to let her know I was okay and that I did not have any idea when I would be getting home. I hoped she was not worried. (U)

I was accustomed to remaining on Air Force One while the president was off the plane at an event. I preferred staying on the plane if the stop was to last only a few hours. I felt it was better than tagging along with the president and his party, when, with everyone working but me, I felt like a fifth wheel. Instead, I would read on the plane or relax with a movie. The only downside of that was the need to regularly shake hands with, or at least

smile at, the many local dignitaries who were given tours of Air Force One. Apart from the tourists, however, I was usually alone. (C)

Not on 11 September 2001. Sitting with me in the conference room, watching news reports, were the two US congressmen. While we were watching the day's latest updates on television, one of the congressmen, aware that I worked for CIA and provided the president with his daily intelligence briefing, asked me who I thought was behind the attacks. I told him I would bet every dollar I had that Usama Bin Laden's al-Qa'ida organization was responsible. (C)

The next day, after returning to CIA Headquarters, I found on my desk a press report quoting the Florida congressman telling reporters that a "senior national security official traveling with the president" had told him just hours after the attack that Bin Ladin was the culprit. A handwritten note on the piece, from one of my briefer colleagues, asked, "Are you the senior official?" I wondered as well. (C)

At 1:45 p.m., the president returned to Air Force One, and we left Barksdale. On the ground, the president had made a series of phone calls and had spoken to the nation—this time with a short delay as the media pool that travels with the president fed the tape to the networks. In his statement, the president said,

SECRET//NOFORN
With the President

"The United States will hunt down and punish those responsible for these cowardly acts." He added, "The resolve of our great nation is being tested. But make no mistake, we will show the world that we will pass this test." (U)

When Air Force One left Barksdale, it had considerably fewer passengers than when it arrived, but large pallets of water and food had been brought on board. The military aide explained to me that the Secret Service had decided that it was still not safe for the president to return to Washington and that we would fly to Offutt Air Force Base in Omaha, Nebraska, where the president would conduct a meeting of his National Security Council over the secure video link at the Strategic Air Command bunker. (C)

About 15 minutes from Barksdale, Andy Card walked into the staff section of the plane, where I was seated, and said "Michael, the president wants to see you." As I rose from my seat, I asked Card what the president needed, and he said, "He just wants to talk a bit." When I reached the president's office, he was on the phone with New York City Mayor Rudy Giuliani. I heard the president say [redacted]

(b)(1)

[redacted] The president was focused and determined, a perception of him that I would have a number times over the ensuing months. (C)

The president asked me who was responsible for the attacks. I said "Sir, I haven't seen any intelligence that would point to

The president asked me "when will we know [who was responsible for the attacks]?"

responsibility, so what I'm going to say is simply my personal view." The president told me he understood. I said two terrorist states were capable of conducting such a complex operation (b)(1) [redacted] I pointed out (b)(3)(n); that neither had much to gain and both had plenty to lose from attacking the United States. Rather, I said the culprit was almost certainly a nonstate actor, adding that I had no doubt that the trail would lead to the doorstep of Bin Laden and al-Qa'ida. (S)

The president asked me, "When will we know?" I said "I can't say for sure" and went on to review for him, with some specificity, how long it took CIA to have any certainty of responsibility for past attacks—the bombing of the Khobar Towers in Saudi Arabia,

the near-simultaneous bombings of the US embassies in Kenya and Tanzania, and the attack on the USS Cole in Yemen. I told the president that we may know soon and then again it may take quite some time. When I was done, I was surprised that I had committed to memory the history of the aftermath of the previous attacks. (S)

At this point, Ari Fleischer interrupted our discussion. Escorting a news photographer, Fleischer wanted to give him the opportunity to take photographs of the president in a crisis, the commander-in-chief at war. While the president and Fleischer chatted, the photographer, moving about the small room, snapped dozens of pictures. (C)



Air Force One lifting off from Barksdale AFB. (U) (Photo: ©Reuters/CORBIS)

SECRET//NOFORN
With the President

During my discussion with the president and Andy Card, I had no way of knowing that analysts at CIA Headquarters had already tied al-Qa'ida to the attacks.

After the photographer left, President Bush said nothing. He, Andy Card, and I just sat. One minute elapsed, then two, then three. I was beginning to feel uncomfortable. After five minutes, I asked the president if he needed anything else. The president said "No, Michael, thanks very much." I rose, left the room, and returned to my seat in an empty staff section of the aircraft. For the first time that day, I felt very tired. I closed my eyes, hoping I could sleep for a few minutes. But sleep never came. (C)

During my discussion with the president and Andy Card, I had no way of knowing that analysts at CIA Headquarters had already tied al-Qa'ida to the attacks. Agency analysts had acquired the passenger manifests of the four flights from the

Federal Aviation Administration and run the names against CIA databases of known terrorists. Hits came up on American Airlines Flight 77. Three passengers had known, and definite, links to al-Qa'ida. I would soon discover that I would fail to ensure that the president would be the first to learn that. (C)

News reports, which were still being shown continuously on Air Force One's video screens, were now reporting the president's imminent arrival at Offutt Air Force Base. I did not know it at the time but a close friend of my wife's, who lives with her husband and three children in Omaha, was in her car on her way to pick up her children at school. While stopped at a traffic light, she watched Air Force One, on final approach to Offutt, pass

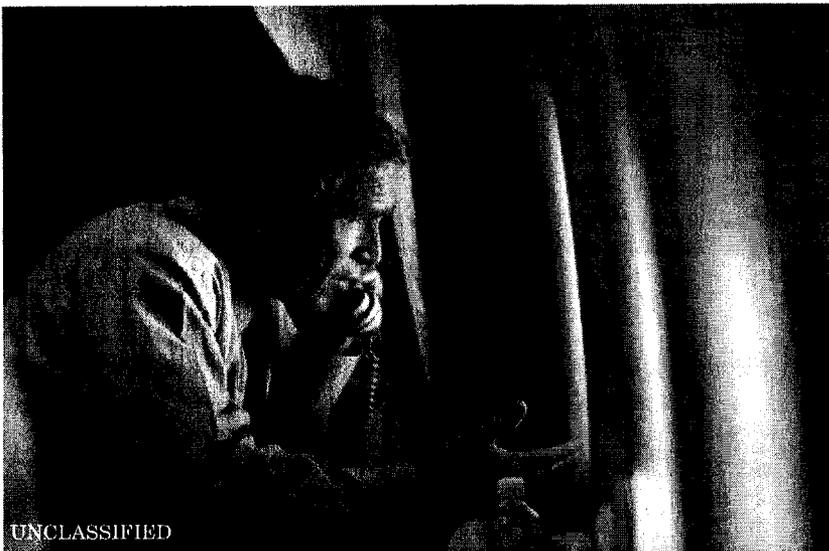
overhead. She later told (b)(6) that she wondered if I was on board. It was a little after 3:00 p.m. eastern time. (C)

I did not know how long we would be at Offutt, but rumors were circulating that we might spend the night there, so I decided to deplane with the president and his staff. The president was whisked away in what looked like the base commander's official car. The staff, including me, boarded buses that took us to the entrance of the underground bunker of the Strategic Air Command. (C)

(b)(1)

As we approached the bunker's command center, it was clear from the deployment of Secret Service agents that the president was already there, about to begin a video teleconference with his National Security Council. As I stood outside the door with other White House aides, Captain Loewer, who was with the president in the meeting, poked her head outside and motioned me in, saying "I think you ought to hear this." (S)

As I entered, I saw President Bush, Andy Card, and the SAC commander at a table in front of a large screen. On the screen, transmitting from three or four different locations, were senior officials from Washington. George Tenet was speaking. He was walking the president and everyone present through the information that tied three of the hijackers to al-Qa'ida. When



UNCLASSIFIED

The president on a phone in Air Force One. (U)

(Photo: ©CORBIS SYGMA)

"Embargoed from the president?" I asked. After a period of silence at the other end of the line, I said "Just send it."

he finished, the president turned and looked me straight in the eye. He didn't say a word, but his look told me he had been let down. I hoped my expression would tell him I had no idea what happened. (S)

I rose from my seat in the back of the command center and headed for the door. As I was walking out, the National Security Council was discussing whether the president should return to the White House or whether he should spend the night in Omaha. The director of the Secret Service, speaking from Washington, recommended against returning. He said there were too many unknowns to be able to guarantee the president's safety. The president responded firmly, simply saying "I'm coming back"

(b)(1)

I went into a nearby office and phoned the CIA Operations Center and asked to speak with the DCI's Executive Assistant, a job filled that day by an officer filling in for the actual EA, who was on leave. After expressing my frustration over not having been able to meet the president's expectations, I asked that the information the DCI had briefed to the president be sent immediately to Air Force One.

(b)(1)

A few minutes after takeoff, with Air Force One on the way to Washington, a steward brought me a six-page fax from the EA. Written on the cover sheet was a short note. It said, "Michael, sorry. Here's everything we have."

(b)(1)

As I began to read the documents, Andy Card walked up to me. I told him I had the key pieces of intelligence. He said, "Good, I think the president will want to go through it in a little bit." Card left, and I quickly set myself to study the package. I read through it several times, making sure that I understood the key points. I highlighted several passages in the talking points and a handful of sentences in the two reports. I set the material aside and waited. About 30 minutes later, Card again entered the staff cabin and told me the president was ready. (C)

I walked with Card toward the president's cabin, but we stopped short, instead entering the conference room. The president was sitting at the head of the conference table. I walked him through the documents, letting him read as much as he wanted.

(b)(1)
(b)(3)(n)

(b)(1)
(b)(3)(n)

The president thanked me, and I returned to my seat after a quick detour to the upper deck to shred the documents. (S)

I was not aware of it at the time, but as I briefed the president, Building 7 of the World Trade Center complex collapsed. The occupants of the 47-story building (b)(1) ing (b)(3)(c) had be (b)(3)(n) evacuated earlier that day. Just across the street from the twin towers, WTC 7 was fatally weakened by their collapse that morning. It was the last of the destruction resulting from the attacks nine hours earlier. (S)

It was early evening as we approached Andrews Air Force Base. Everyone on board was tired. It has been a very long day. The lights inside Air Force One had been turned off. Some of those in the staff section had their eyes closed; others were flipping, seemingly mindlessly, through newspapers or magazines. The president's military aide was standing in the aisle, looking out the window. He saw me looking at him, and he motioned me over. He pointed out the window and told me to look. (C)

The view from the window was surreal. One hundred yards off the tip of Air Force One's wing was an F-15. The military aide whispered, "There is one off the other wing as well; they're from the DC Air National Guard." The fighter was so close we could see

SECRET//NOFORN
With the President

I thought of the thousands of children who would never see their parents again.

the pilot's facial features. He seemed to be looking at us as well. In the distance below we could see the Pentagon, smoke rising from the northeastern section of the building and lights of emergency vehicles flashing. The scene refreshed memories of everything that had happened that day. It now seemed so long ago. Tears welled up in my eyes. (C)

The arrival at Andrews—at just after 6:30 p.m.—was as uneventful as our departure 36 hours before. Little was said as we deplaned. The president, his closest aides, and several Secret Service agents boarded Marine One and took off for the White House. The vast majority of the staff boarded vans that would take them to the White House as well. As for me, I walked alone across the tarmac, through the VIP departure lounge, and out to the parking area. I was expecting the Agency vehicle and driver I had earlier requested from the Operations Center. I found no car and no driver. (C)

I called the CIA Operations Center again and was told that the driver was on the way. I went back to the VIP lounge and watched the news for several minutes, but I could not concentrate. Instead, for the first time that day, I called Mary Beth. Her voice was reassuring. I told her we had landed at Andrews and that I was waiting for a car to take me back to the Agency, where I would get my car and

drive home. I told her I'd be home in an hour. She seemed relieved. (C)

The drive to McLean took us through Southeast Washington and past the Pentagon. I eventually saw the smoke and emergency lights from another perspective. I didn't get a good view, but the destruction I saw was sobering. Neither the driver nor I said anything during the rest of the trip. At Headquarters, the driver took me to my car. I thanked him, and he drove off. I got in my car and slowly pulled out. As I passed the main gate and left the grounds, I began to cry. (C)

I pulled into our driveway in northern Virginia, with the radio on and the president about to speak. I sat and listened for a few minutes before going into the house. I found (b)(6) on the sofa in our family room watching the president. We sat together and listened to the president talk to his grieving nation. He asked for prayers for the families of the victims, said America would overcome the terrible tragedy, and promised that it would emerge even stronger. And, in a major change in policy that would come to be known as the Bush Doctrine, the president said the US "would make no distinction between terrorists and the nations that harbor them." (U)

After the president finished, (b)(6) and I talked about the events of the day. I told her there was

too much to talk about in only one night and that I needed to sleep. On the way to our bedroom, I went into each of my three children's rooms. They were asleep, surrounded by stuffed animals. They looked as they did any other night, peaceful and content. I thought of the thousands of children who would never see their parents again. I kissed my three on their foreheads and said I loved them. (U)

Afterword

In the weeks following 9/11, the

(b)(1)
 (b)(3)(n)

The work load for the PDB briefing staff would increase enormously as the growth in the amount of material each briefer was required to sift through each morning forced even earlier waking hours on each member of the staff. For me that meant arriving at work three hours earlier than I usually did before 9/11. That increased workload was a reflection of the intensity of everyone's effort, at home and abroad, after 9/11. My sacrifices and those of the other briefers would pale in comparison to those of our intelligence officers and military personnel in Afghanistan and other places overseas in the weeks and months after 9/11. (C)

◆ ◆ ◆