The Turn to War

11 September 2001: With the President (C)

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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.

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

After pulling myself out of bed a few minutes before the alarm was to go off, I quickly showered, dressed, made coffee, and waited to bring me the classified materials from which I would fashion the briefing for the president. These materials were to arrive 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.

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.
Twenty-one years into my career, I was a doing a job that (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 seaside 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 serving 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)
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 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)

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
"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."

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 86th 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,
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 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)
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 takeoff. 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)
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 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 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)

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
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)(5) 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,
"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: (b)(1)

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 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)(3)(A); I pointed out (b)(3)(B); 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)
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)

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

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."

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 had 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)

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.

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

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 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, 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 workload 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 briefer 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)