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Revealed: what really went on during Bush's 'missing hours'

Three months after the attacks on the Twin Towers there remains a mystery as to what happened to the President that day. William Langley pieces together the vital moments in the transformation of a presidency.

By William Langley

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A LITTLE after 6am on September 11, 2001, President George W Bush awoke in the magnificent surroundings of the Colony Beach and Tennis Resort on Longboat Key, a spindly coral island in the Gulf of Mexico, off Sarasota, Florida.

Founded 32 years ago by Dr "Murf" Klauber, a wealthy orthodontist and tennis lover, the Colony achieved fame through the success of its first resident professional, the celebrated tennis coach Nick Bollittieri, and now styles itself as "America's greatest tennis resort".

The previous evening Mr Bush had dined beachside with his brother Jeb, the governor of Florida, the state that had, albeit controversially, handed him the presidency. Now, on the morning of his 234th day in office, a light, warm breeze was slipping in from the ocean, and, after breakfast, Bush led his Secret Service crew on a four-mile run around the nearby Serenoa golf links.

On his return to the Colony, the President showered, changed into a lightweight, dark blue suit, and, still glowing from the morning's exertion, sat down for the first routine intelligence briefing of the day. It was 8am.

Fourteen hundred miles away, American Airlines Flight 11 was taking off from Boston's Logan International Airport bound for Los Angeles, with 81 passengers and 11 crew aboard. It would be followed 14 minutes later by the departure, from the same airport, of United Airlines Flight 175, also LA-bound, with 56 passengers and nine crew.

The President's briefing appears to have included some reference to the heightened terrorist risk reported throughout the summer, but contained nothing specific, severe or imminent enough to necessitate a call to Condoleezza Rice, his 47-year-old National Security Adviser who, at the same moment, was travelling through the rush hour traffic from her home in north-west Washington to her office at the White House.

The weather conditions along the entire eastern seaboard were what pilots call "severe clear" - bright and sunny with almost limitless visibility, and it was with a distinct pang of regret that at 8.20 Bush said farewell to Murf Klauber and his daughter Katherine, the Colony's general manager.

"Maybe he tells everyone he would have liked to stay longer," says Katherine Klauber, "but I had the feeling he meant it." One minute later, at 8.21, American Airlines Flight 77 left Washington's Dulles Airport for Los Angeles with 58 passengers and six crew aboard.

Mr Bush was in Florida to promote his administration's new education bill - a policy flagship which, to Bush's frustration, was wallowing in Congress and looking vulnerable to unwelcome amendments. His first stop of the day was to be at the Emma E Booker Elementary School in Sarasota - a 25-minute drive from the Colony.

Its children were nearly all black and mostly from inner-city neighbourhoods - a perfect background against which the President could argue his case. At 8.42, as the motorcade crossed back to the mainland on Highway 41, United Airlines

Flight 93 left Newark for San Francisco with 38 passengers and seven crew aboard.

Mr Bush arrived at the school, just before 9am, expecting to be met by its motherly principal, Gwen Rigell. Instead he was pulled sharply aside by the familiar, bulky figure of 51-year-old Karl Rove, a veteran political fixer and trusted aide of both Mr Bush and his father, George Sr.

Mr Rove, a fellow Texan with an expansive manner and a colourful turn of phrase, told the President that a large commercial airliner (American Flight 11) had [crashed into the North Tower of the World Trade Centre \(/news/main.jhtml?xml=/news/2001/09/12/wnyc12.xml\)](#). Mr Bush clenched his teeth, lowered his bottom lip and said something inaudible. Then he went into the school.

It might have been an accident - as Bush has since said, he saw footage of the crash on a TV in the school "and I used to fly myself, and I said: 'There's one terrible pilot. It must have been a horrible accident.' " But Mr Bush soon learnt that it wasn't.

At 9.03, as the President sat smiling anxiously in a class of seven-year-olds, United 175 smashed into the WTC's South Tower. At 9.05 the White House Chief of Staff, Andrew Card, 53, another long-time Bush friend and confidante, leaned in close to the President and whispered: "A second plane has hit the World Trade Centre. America is under attack."

This time Bush visibly flinched and caught his breath, but he said nothing. "I am very aware of the cameras," he recalled later. "I'm trying to absorb that knowledge. I have nobody to talk to. I'm sitting in the midst of a classroom with little kids, listening to a children's story and I realise I'm the Commander in Chief and the country has just come under attack."

At that moment in Washington, 900 miles north, a squad of Secret Service agents stormed into the office of Vice-President Dick Cheney. Seated in front of a television set watching CNN, Cheney, 60, who, like Bush knew only the barest details of events, was seized by the arms, legs and his belt and physically carried through 150 yards of corridors, then taken by lift, down to the Presidential Emergency Operations Centre (PEOPS) - a subterranean bunker capable of withstanding an overhead nuclear explosion.

He was quickly joined there by Ms Rice, and Norman Mineta, the Secretary of Transportation. Donald Rumsfeld, the pugnacious Defence Secretary, was inside the Pentagon. "Dick's supposed to have a dodgy heart," said one of Mr Cheney's staff, referring to the four heart attacks the vice-president has suffered since 1980, not to mention the pacemaker-like device he had fitted in June. "But if he survived that ride, he could anything."

At 9.12 Mr Bush left the classroom. By now the reporters' mobiles were ringing non-stop, and no one needed to ask why the school visit was being cut short. In a small, back office, the President scribbled a brief statement in black felt tip on a yellow legal pad.

"Today," he declared on nationwide television, "we have had a national tragedy. Two airplanes have crashed into the World Trade Centre. We're going to hunt down and find the folks who committed this act. Terrorism against our nation will not stand." At 9.28, as Bush was readying himself to speak to the cameras, an air traffic controller in Cleveland heard screams coming over the radio channel from United Flight 93.

He called the plane, but received no answer. Two minutes later, Mr Mineta, in Washington, issued an unprecedented directive ordering the Federal Aviation Authority to close all US airports.

Before making his first statement, Mr Bush had spoken to Dick Cheney and watched a recording of events at the World Trade Centre. He seemed, to those around him, to be rigid with rage.

"He watched the TV videos a couple of times," says an aide who was with him, "and then he just wheeled away with this look of absolute - I guess you'd have to say disgust more than hatred - on his face, and he walked out of the room. I didn't hear him say much. He didn't have to."

By the time Mr Bush had finished his TV address, it was 9.35 and outside the school the motorcade was revving up again, this time to take the President to Sarasota airport where Air Force One was waiting.

Mr Bush by now knew the horror of what was happening, but not the full scale of it. At 9.36, just west of Cleveland,

United 93 made an abrupt unscheduled turn and began heading south-east towards Washington DC.

Seven minutes later, as Mr Bush, his entourage and the accompanying press corps were boarding Air Force One, American Flight 77 swooped low over the suburbs of northern Virginia and slammed into the Pentagon.

Donald Rumsfeld, the Secretary of Defence, was in his office on the eastern side of the building, in a meeting with Christopher Cox, the defence policy committee chairman of the House of Representatives. Mr Rumsfeld, recalls Mr Cox, watched the TV coverage from New York and said: "Believe me, this isn't over yet. There's going to be another attack, and it could be us."

Moments later, the plane hit. Mr Rumsfeld ran to the point of impact and helped load the wounded on to stretchers before retreating to the secure National Military Command Centre, beneath the building. There, he refused entreaties to evacuate even as the Centre filled with smoke.

By the time the President slid behind his executive desk on the plane, Mr Bush's first rush of anger appeared to have settled into a controlled, if tense, mood of resolve. "I guess we're at war," he said as the plane readied for take off. While his aides looked at him open-mouthed, he added: "This is what we're paid for, boys."

Then he called Mr Cheney on a secure line to the PEOPS and spoke in a similar vein. "Somebody's going to pay for this," Mr Bush coldly told the Vice President. "We are going to take care of them. Whoever did this isn't going to like having me as President."

In the hours and days ahead, many would question the wisdom of the administration's early "war talk", but Mr Bush never appeared in doubt of what the attacks meant. Mr Cheney, as seasoned an operator as there is in Washington, sounded composed. But above him there was total panic.

At 9.45 the Secret Service ordered the complete evacuation of the White House - United Flight 93 was still airborne and heading towards Washington. No one knew, or knows, for sure what its target was, but the obvious candidates were the Capitol building, Camp David - or the White House itself.

Agents ran from office to office screaming: "Get out! Get out now! This is real!" Within an hour, the Congress, the State Department, the Supreme Court, the Justice Department and just about every other federal building would also be evacuated.

Air Force One lifted off from Sarasota at 9.57. A few minutes earlier, the South Tower of the World Trade Centre had collapsed. It was unclear whether anyone on Air Force One - including the pilot - knew where the Boeing 747 was headed. "The object seemed to be simply to get the President airborne and out of the way," said an administration official.

"Mr Cheney was begging him not to make an immediate return to Washington. Mr Bush expressed his doubts, but the Secret Service was hassling him, and finally he said: 'OK, let's get moving, and we'll talk about it then.'"

Mr Cheney, a former Defence Secretary, urged the President to head for the Offutt Air Force base near Omaha, Nebraska, which he knew from experience had a highly sophisticated strategic command centre. As the two men talked, Air Force One soared at an acute climb angle to 40,000 feet - its maximum altitude, where it was joined by an escort of F16 fighters from a base near Jacksonville, Florida.

At 10.06, as Air Force One was still climbing, United Flight 93 nose-dived into a field near the rural Pennsylvania town of Shanksville, killing everyone on board. The passengers, it now seems clear, had rushed the hi-jackers and precipitated the crash. In doing so, they may have saved the Capitol building, or the White House itself, from possible suicide attack. They lost their lives and, in doing so, almost certainly saved many more. Air Force One was told the news.

For much of the next two hours the presidential jet appeared to be going nowhere. The journalists on board - all of whom were barred from communicating with their offices - sensed that the plane was flying in big, slow circles.

Mr Bush was able to call his wife, Laura, who had been on Capitol Hill waiting to speak to the Senate education committee when the attacks began. She and the couple's twin daughters, Barbara and Jenna, were now in secure

locations.

"She couldn't have been more calm, resolved - almost placid," Mr Bush said later. "It was very reassuring for me. I told her: 'I'll be home soon'." But he wasn't.

As the President and Vice-President continued to discuss the options, the Secret Service was coming ever more firmly down on the Vice-President's side in recommending against an early return to Washington. (The Secret Service maintained a large field office inside the World Trade Centre, and initially many agents were thought to have been killed. This may have been a factor in Secret Service thinking.)

At 10.20 a report came in that a huge car bomb had gone off outside the State Department in Washington. It wasn't true, but it changed the picture once more. "There really is a fog of war," Mr Bush would say later. "You've heard about it, and you've read about it. Well, there is one."

At 11.45, Air Force One landed at Barksdale Air Force base near Shreveport, Louisiana. The official reason for landing at Barksdale was that Mr Bush felt it necessary to make a further statement, but it isn't unreasonable to assume that - as there was no agreement as to what the President's movements should be - it was felt he might as well be on the ground as in the air.

It was midday by the time Bush arrived at the base HQ in a Humvee escorted by armed outriders. As he reached the base, he saw its state of readiness signal upgraded to Defcon Delta - the highest possible level of alert, and the same footing as for a nuclear war.

Colin Powell, the Secretary of State, the administration's chief diplomat and its most experienced military man, had been sitting down to a working breakfast in Lima, Peru, with Alejandro Toledo, the Peruvian president, when he was handed a note saying the World Trade Centre had been attacked.

"Oh my God," gasped Mr Powell, "something terrible has happened." He made an immediate decision to return home.

On the eight-hour flight back, he told reporters that he would be contacting world leaders in the days to come. But it would be 10 hours before he was able to speak directly to his own leader, President Bush.

Why so long? In the weeks before September 11 Washington was full of rumours that Powell was out of favour and had been quietly relegated to the sidelines, but an administration official explained the lack of communication more simply: "I don't think, in those early hours, that the President was looking for a diplomatic solution."

From Barksdale, Mr Bush spoke again to Dick Cheney and Donald Rumsfeld, and also to Charles Schumer, a New York senator. At noon the US military was ordered on to Defcon Delta; 15 minutes later the country's borders with Canada and Mexico were closed.

The fog of war was growing denser, but the media were now starting to ask potentially awkward questions about the President's whereabouts, and why he had not returned to Washington. However grave a crisis, a President - or, at least, his handlers - must give thought to the top man's image, and by the time Bush reached Barksdale, three hours after the first attack, concern was mounting among his advisers that the distance he was maintaining from the action could have dire political consequences.

But still the debate raged between Mr Bush, Mr Cheney and the Secret Service. In an office on the base, Andrew Card, the White House Chief of Staff, was working the phones, taking soundings on the President's dilemma from whatever trusted quarters he could reach. When he emerged, Mr Card, too, advised that it would be reckless to return to the capital.

The President appeared to be in a double bind: if he insisted on going to Washington he could be accused of concentrating the terrorists' possible targets in one place and thereby endangering the functioning of government; if he stayed away he could just as equally be [accused of cowardice](#) (</news/main.jhtml?xml=/news/2001/09/14/wbush14.xml>) .

No one is sure where the story reported at this time of a "credible terrorist threat" to Air Force One came from. What can be safely said is that it served the White House's immediate purposes, even though it was completely untrue. As it was, while Mr Bush was on the ground at Barksdale, the White House let it be known that a threat - supposedly

"quoting a recognised code" - had been received, to the effect that "Air Force One is next".

The picture changed instantly. No more could the President be accused of sheltering in the safety of far-away Louisiana; now he was a hunted man - the main target. Within a week, though, Ari Fleischer, the White House press secretary, had all but admitted the story was completely untrue.

Who cooked it up? Most fingers point at Mr Cheney. "It did two things for Dick," says a well-informed Washington official. "It reinforced his argument that the President should stay out of town, and it gave George W an excellent reason for doing so."

A few minutes before 1pm, therefore, after just over an hour on the ground, Mr Bush agreed to fly to Nebraska. "As much as anything," said Andrew Card later, "he didn't want to use up any more time talking about it. He knew he'd be criticised, whatever. But it was the right thing to do."

The President was taken back to his plane in a camouflaged Humvee surrounded by armed guards, and at 1.15, Air Force One took off - as Mr Cheney had wanted - for Offutt, Nebraska. Twelve minutes later a State of Emergency was declared in Washington.

From the plane, Mr Bush - keeping one line open to Mr Cheney - also talked to New York's mayor, Rudy Giuliani. "I know that your heart is broken and your city is wounded," Mr Giuliani remembered the President saying. "But we will give you everything we can.

"He sounded very calm, very purposeful," the mayor remembers. "He said: 'We're going to rebuild the city. And we're going to get whoever did this.' The last bit didn't sound like an afterthought."

At 2.50pm, Air Force One touched down at Offutt, and Bush was taken into an underground bunker - again one designed to withstand a nuclear blast. The sprawling base, one of the most heavily-defended in the USA, is home to the US Air Force's 55th Wing, which flies Boeing 747s specially adapted for military use in reconnaissance and intelligence gathering.

As Mr Cheney had pointed out, it also houses an advanced strategic command and communications centre, from which Bush was able to teleconference directly with Mr Cheney and Ms Rice in the White House, Mr Rumsfeld in the Pentagon, and members of the National Security Council. The meeting lasted a full hour.

According to Ms Rice, the President opened it by saying: "This is an attack on freedom, and we're going to treat it as such. We have to minister to the country, and deal with the horrors, but we're not going to lose focus. We have to mobilise the world and rid it of this scourge."

She and her aides were able to tell Mr Bush that there were already "good indications" that the source of the attacks was Osama bin Laden's al-Qaeda network.

At 4pm, as the meeting broke up, Bush again expressed a wish to return to Washington. More than six hours had passed since the last attack, and now a split was developing between the Secret Service, which wanted to keep the President overnight - and by some accounts, indefinitely - at the base, and White House aides who could see ever more clearly the political consequences of his failure to return to the capital.

Ari Fleischer was consulted, and reported that the President's absence was becoming an increasingly difficult issue to deal with.

Mr Bush settled the argument himself. That night he would have to address an astonished and furious nation on prime time television. "I'm not going to do it from an air force base," he said, bluntly. "Not while folks are under the rubble." At 4.36 pm, the presidential jet took off for Washington. Mr Bush called Laura: "I'm coming home," he said.

Air Force One, flanked throughout the 1,200-mile-long flight by F16s, landed at Andrews Air Force base just after 6.30pm, and 25 minutes later Mr Bush re-entered the White House to applause from the skeleton staff who had been permitted to remain. He was taken down to the PEOPS where Laura was waiting together with Mr Cheney and his wife Lynne. "I just gave her a big hug," he said later.

Minutes later Colin Powell arrived, having been helicoptered to the White House from the airport after flying back from

Peru. He and Mr Bush embraced.

The Secret Service wanted the Bushes to spend the night in the bunker. An elderly sofa bed was duly produced. Mr Bush gave an entertaining account of what happened next to Newsweek magazine. "I said: 'We're not sleeping there. I'm really tired. I've had a heck of a day and I'm going to sleep in my own bed'."

The agents reluctantly backed down, but warned that, "if we have any threats, Mr President, we'll come and get you".

"And sure enough," said Mr Bush. "We are in bed at about 11.30, and I can hear a guy breathing quite heavily. 'Mr President, Mr President! There's an unidentified aircraft heading towards the White House!'"

"So we get out of bed. I'm actually in my running shorts with a T-shirt, old shoes. Grab Barney, grab Spot [the Bushes' dogs]. Laura has no contact lenses so she's holding on to my arm. We get into the elevator, and straight down into PEOPS.

"The orderly starts making up the bed - the bed I refused to sleep in. And I'm thinking, you know: 'Where's the phone? What the heck is going on? Attacked again.'

"Then an enlisted fellow walks into the briefing room, and goes: 'Good news Mr President. It's one of ours'."

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