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Book Author(s): Benjamin S. Lambeth

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Introduction

On September 11, 2001, on a clear morning that will be forever remembered in American history, four jetliners—two Boeing 757s and two Boeing 767s, all on scheduled transcontinental flights from the East Coast and each fully laden with fuel for its coast-to-coast trip—were commandeered by radical Islamist terrorists almost simultaneously after their near-concurrent departures from Boston, Newark, and Washington, D.C., at approximately 8 a.m. Eastern Daylight Time. Upon being seized by the terrorists, the four aircraft were promptly turned into what would soon become *de facto* weapons of mass destruction against the United States and its citizens.

The basic facts of the terrorist attacks that fateful morning are now well enough known that they need no detailed elaboration here. Foremost among them, the first two hijacked aircraft (American Airlines Flight 11 and United Airlines Flight 175, both Boeing 767s) were flown within 18 minutes of each other into the twin towers of the World Trade Center (WTC) in New York City, ultimately reducing those long-familiar landmarks of the Manhattan skyline to 450,000 tons of rubble. The third aircraft (American Airlines Flight 77, a Boeing 757) was flown 40 minutes later into the southwest side of the Pentagon in Arlington, Virginia. The fourth aircraft (United Airlines Flight 93, also a Boeing 757), its planned target still unknown but thought to have been the White House or the U.S. Capitol building in Washington, D.C., fortunately had its mission thwarted before it could be accomplished by some brave and deter-

mined passengers who turned on their captors once they learned from frantic cell-phone conversations with friends and relatives on the ground what the other three airliners had just done. After an intense but failed struggle between the terrorists and their resisters, that aircraft was eventually brought to earth in a ball of fire in an empty field in western Pennsylvania. All of the terrorists (five on three aircraft and four on the fourth) and all passengers and crewmembers (250 in all) were killed in the four crashes. It remains unknown to this day whether and, if so, how many more potentially catastrophic hijackings had been planned for that morning and were at the brink of being carried out, only to have been averted at the last minute by timely federal action in canceling all further nonmilitary flights nationwide once the enormity and full implications of the morning's events had become clear. (As strong indications that additional hijackings had been planned, box-cutters—which were discovered to have been the weapons of choice in the four aircraft seizures—were found left behind by some passengers who were removed from grounded airliners that had returned to their gates only moments before takeoff.)¹

The attacks caught the nation and its leaders completely off guard. They also instantly defined the face of early 21st-century conflict. What for nearly a decade had come to be loosely called the “post–Cold War era,” for lack of a better phrase to describe the still-unshaped period that followed the collapse of Soviet Communism, was transformed in the short span of one morning into the era of fanatical transnational terrorism. Harvard University professor Samuel Huntington may have come closest to having captured the essence of this newly emergent era in his notion, first propounded amid great controversy in the early 1990s, of a growing worldwide “clash of civilizations.”² The attacks, planned and executed by a determined band of murderous Islamist zealots, made for the boldest hostile act to have been committed on U.S. soil since Pearl Harbor. They also repre-

¹ Norman Friedman, *Terrorism, Afghanistan, and America's New Way of War*, Annapolis, Md.: Naval Institute Press, 2003, p. 3.

² See Samuel P. Huntington, *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order*, New York: Simon and Schuster, 1996.

sented the single most destructive instance of terrorist aggression to have taken place anywhere in the world. The loss of life caused by the attacks exceeded that from Japan's attack on Pearl Harbor in 1941. The main target of the attacks, the twin WTC towers, contained office space for more than 60,000 workers, and 40,000 to 50,000 people routinely worked there during normal business hours—a testament to the extent of fatalities that could have been occasioned in the worst case. In the final tally, nearly 3,000 innocent civilians died as a result of the attacks.³ It did not take long for thoughtful people to begin wondering what the terrorists might have done to New York and Washington had they instead possessed a nuclear weapon or two.

President George W. Bush, who was visiting an elementary school in Sarasota, Florida, at the time of the initial attack into the WTC north tower, was first informed of the event at 9:07 a.m. Eastern Daylight Time, a scant five minutes after the second tower was hit. He was rushed thereafter to Air Force One, the presidential Boeing 747, whereupon the White House set in motion the government's emergency response plan and suggested that the president proceed without delay to Barksdale AFB, Louisiana, the headquarters of 8th Air Force and the site of the nearest available military command post. (The government's response was largely coordinated by the Federal Emergency Management Agency, which promptly activated its 10 regional emergency response centers nationwide.)⁴

Shortly after the second hijacked aircraft struck the WTC south tower, Vice President Dick Cheney was escorted by his Secret Service detail to the president's emergency operations center, an underground facility beneath the White House that had been hardened to offer at least some resistance to the effects of a nuclear detonation. First Lady Laura Bush was simultaneously moved to an undisclosed location,

³ Early estimates were that as many as 6,800 had been killed. Fortunately, thousands of occupants of the two towers escaped the buildings just in time, between the moment of impact of the two aircraft and the eventual collapse of the buildings—caused by the melting of their upper steel girders as a result of the intense heat generated by the burning jet fuel—an hour or so later.

⁴ Edward Walsh, "National Response to Terror," *Washington Post*, September 12, 2001.

and selected congressional leaders were temporarily dispatched to a secure facility 75 miles west of Washington. Vice President Cheney had earlier been advised that yet a third hijacked aircraft was headed toward the White House.⁵ He accordingly urged the president to delay his return to Washington, saying: "We don't know what's going on here, but it looks like . . . we've been targeted."⁶

Immediately on the heels of the attacks, the Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) ordered all airborne domestic flights to land at the nearest suitable airport. The FAA also banned any further non-military takeoffs nationwide and, for the first time ever, halted all civil air traffic in the United States. As a result, some 33,000 airborne airline passengers were taken in by Canada as U.S. airspace was closed and incoming international flights were diverted and rerouted. At the same time, at the president's direction, a continuity-of-government plan that was rooted in the early days of the Cold War going back to the 1950s was set into motion. It was as a part of that plan that President Bush was kept airborne and moving aboard Air Force One until the apparent threat had subsided; that Vice President Cheney was briskly delivered to a White House bunker; and that House of Representatives Speaker Dennis Hastert (R-Illinois), second in the constitutional line of presidential succession, was flown by helicopter to a hardened facility away from Washington.⁷ On Cheney's counsel and escorted by armed Air Force fighters, Air Force One shortly thereafter took the president from Barksdale to U.S. Strategic Command's headquarters at Offutt AFB, Nebraska, where he conducted, for the first time since the attacks, a secure video teleconference (VTC) with the National Security Council (NSC) to review the situation and de-

⁵ William Safire, "Inside the Bunker," *New York Times*, September 13, 2001.

⁶ James Gerstenzang and Paul Richter, "Jets Had OK to Down Airliners," *Los Angeles Times*, September 17, 2001. Cheney later added that although some White House advisers were arguing for the symbolic value of an early return to Washington by the president, "we'd have been absolute fools not to go into a button-down mode, make sure we had successors evacuated, make sure the President was safe and secure." (Mike Allen, "Quietly, Cheney Again Takes a Prominent Role," *Washington Post*, September 17, 2001.)

⁷ James R. Asker, "Washington Outlook," *Aviation Week and Space Technology*, September 7, 2001, p. 33.

termine next steps. Only at 7:00 p.m. Eastern Daylight Time on September 11 did the president finally return to Washington to address the nation from the Oval Office. In that address, he affirmed that in responding to the attacks, as the nation surely would, the United States would “make no distinction between the terrorists who committed these acts and those who harbor them.”⁸

Earlier that day, even as the attacks were still under way, the alert status of U.S. forces around the world was raised to Defense Condition (DEFCON) 3, their highest alert level since the Yom Kippur War of 1973. Air National Guard (ANG) F-16 fighters were launched from nearby Andrews AFB, Maryland, to provide a continuous combat air patrol (CAP) over the nation’s capital. At the same time, Virginia ANG F-16s in nearby Richmond were put on the highest alert. E-3C airborne warning and control system (AWACS) aircraft were also placed on airborne orbits to monitor the airspace over New York City and Washington as tight restrictions were imposed on access to U.S. military installations worldwide.⁹ Many of those installations went to Force Protection Condition Delta, their most secure lockdown status. Private offices were also shut down nationwide, and the most frantic stock selloff since the 1987 crash ensued on the heels of the attacks.

Throughout it all, the National Military Command Center (NMCC) in the Pentagon remained up and running. To help protect the air approaches to the Washington, D.C., and New York metropolitan areas, the Navy’s Atlantic Fleet immediately put to sea two aircraft carriers, USS *George Washington* and USS *John F. Kennedy*, as well as five cruisers and two destroyers mounting Aegis radar systems. Moves also were implemented immediately after the attacks to update contingency plans for military operations in the most likely areas of possible U.S. combat involvement worldwide. The aircraft carrier

⁸ Michael Grunwald, “Terrorists Hijack Four Airliners, Destroy World Trade Center, Hit Pentagon; Hundreds Dead,” *Washington Post*, September 12, 2001.

⁹ The fullest available details on these and other immediate U.S. military responses may be found in *The 9/11 Commission Report: Final Report of the National Commission on Terrorist Attacks Upon the United States*, New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2004, pp. 20–46.

USS *Enterprise*, just exiting the Persian Gulf region en route home from a six-month deployment there, was turned around on the personal initiative of its commanding officer and was subsequently ordered to remain in the region for an indefinite period of time.¹⁰ At the same time, USS *Carl Vinson* was about to enter the Persian Gulf to join *Enterprise* and thereby double the normal number of carrier air wings in that part of the area of responsibility of U.S. Central Command (CENTCOM). As the day drew to a close, Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld declared that until better information could be made available, “all one can offer by way of assurance is a seriousness of purpose.”¹¹ Rumsfeld added that “there is no question but that [what the nation had experienced that day] was a vicious, well-coordinated, massive attack.”¹²

Although no one immediately claimed responsibility for the attacks, it did not take long for U.S. government officials to find strong evidence that the wealthy Saudi Arabian exile, Osama bin Laden, and his Islamist al Qaeda terrorist network had been behind them.¹³ Senator Orrin Hatch (R-Utah) said that during a briefing earlier that day, the Senate Intelligence Committee had been told of electronic intercepts showing that “representatives affiliated with Osama bin Laden over the airwaves [were] reporting that they had hit two targets.”¹⁴

¹⁰ Greg Jaffe, “U.S. Armed Forces Are Put on the Highest State of Alert,” *Wall Street Journal*, September 12, 2001.

¹¹ Rowan Scarborough, “Military Officers Seek Swift, Deadly Response,” *Washington Times*, September 12, 2001.

¹² Dana Priest and Bradley Graham, “U.S. Deploys Air Defenses on Coasts,” *Washington Post*, September 12, 2001.

¹³ In one such reported indication, al Qaeda members in Afghanistan had been overheard to say shortly after the Pentagon was hit that the attackers were following through with “the doctor’s program,” in apparent reference to bin Laden’s principal deputy, Ayman Zawahiri, an Egyptian physician who was commonly referred to informally as “the doctor.” (Bob Woodward, *Bush at War*, New York: Simon and Schuster, 2002, p. 40.)

¹⁴ Dan Eggen and Vernon Loeb, “U.S. Intelligence Points to Bin Laden Network,” *Washington Post*, September 12, 2001. See also Jerry Seper and Bill Gertz, “Bin Laden, Cohorts Are Top Suspects,” *Washington Times*, September 12, 2001. Al Qaeda, Arabic for “the base,” was established by bin Laden in Peshawar, Pakistan, in the late 1980s as a welfare organization to pay pensions to the widows and orphans of Arab combatants who had died while

Lending strength to these suspicions, in a videotaped message at his son's wedding the previous May, bin Laden had called for such attacks against the "infidel West." Three weeks before the events of September 11, he told a London-based Arabic magazine of a pending "unprecedented attack, a very big one" against U.S. interests.¹⁵ The attacks that finally occurred were soon assessed to have been an expansion and refinement of the failed 1993 plan to bomb the WTC that had been devised by terrorist leader Ramzi Yousef and financed by bin Laden.¹⁶

The day after the attacks, a *Washington Post*–ABC News poll reported that 94 percent of all Americans supported taking military action against the perpetrators, with more than 80 percent favoring a military response even if such strikes led to war.¹⁷ A *USA Today*/Gallup/CNN poll showed that 86 percent of its respondents saw the attacks as an act of war against the United States.¹⁸ Columnist

fighting Soviet troops alongside the Afghan mujaheddin. It later expanded, with bin Laden establishing businesses, training camps, and money-laundering rings in Afghanistan, Pakistan, Sudan, and throughout the Middle East, supported by his estimated wealth of some \$250 million. It is an umbrella organization that embraces dozens of militant Muslim groups worldwide, with bin Laden providing the funds, training facilities in Afghanistan, and overall guidance but not necessarily daily control over those groups' activities. (Ahmed Rashid, "Al Qaeda Has Network of Sleepers Across North America," *London Daily Telegraph*, September 15, 2001.) Bin Laden's organization was responsible for the attacks on the U.S. embassies in Kenya and Tanzania in August 1998 and on the destroyer USS *Cole* at pierside in Yemen in October 2001.

¹⁵ Seper and Gertz.

¹⁶ In what later was widely presumed to have been a related action, the Afghan opposition leader Ahmed Shah Massoud was killed in northern Afghanistan just the day before the airliner attacks against the United States by a bomb detonated by two men posing as Arab journalists, with Massoud's associates immediately blaming bin Laden.

¹⁷ Richard Morin and Claudia Deane, "Poll: Americans Willing to Go to War," *Washington Post*, September 12, 2001.

¹⁸ Mark Memmott, "Poll: Americans Believe Attacks 'Acts of War,'" *USA Today*, September 12, 2001. That same day, an explosion in Kabul, first thought to have been U.S.-initiated, was later attributed by the Pentagon to the Northern Alliance opposition group as a presumed retaliation against the attack on Massoud. (John Ward Anderson, "Pentagon Denies Role in Explosions in Afghan Capital," *Washington Post*, September 12, 2001.) It is plausible that Massoud was killed to deny the United States a capable Afghan ally in any attempted U.S. retaliation for the imminent terrorist attacks, although that connection to September 11 has not yet been proven. Some powerful anecdotal evidence in support of that interpretation

Charles Krauthammer captured a growing sense among many Americans when he noted that the attacks had constituted not just a crime but an act of war and that suggestions being aired by some officials that the appropriate response should be to bring those responsible “to justice” were fundamentally wrong-headed. One might bring criminals to justice, Krauthammer remarked, but “you rain destruction on combatants.” The perpetrators, he added, were “deadly, vicious warriors and need to be treated as such.” He identified the enemy, “whose name many have feared to speak,” as radical Islam.¹⁹

Russia's President Vladimir Putin was on chorus with most of the immediate worldwide reaction when he commented: “What happened today underlines the relevance of the offer of Russia to unite the powers of the international community in the fight against terrorism,” a problem he portrayed as “the plague of the 21st century.”²⁰ Within hours of the attacks, Putin spoke over the telephone with the president's national security adviser, Condoleezza Rice, and shortly thereafter sent President Bush a cable declaring that “barbarous terrorist acts aimed against wholly innocent people cause us anger and indignation.”²¹ Similarly, Britain's Prime Minister Tony Blair said that the perpetrators “have no value for the sanctity of human life.” He vowed that Britain would stand “shoulder to shoulder” with the United States.²² The respected British news weekly *The Economist* later characterized the events of September 11 as “acts that must be seen as a declaration of war not just on America but on all civilized people.”²³

is offered in John Lee Anderson, *The Lion's Grave: Dispatches from Afghanistan*, New York: Grove Press, 2002, pp. 183–219.

¹⁹ Charles Krauthammer, “To War, Not to Court,” *Washington Post*, September 12, 2001.

²⁰ David R. Sands and Tom Carter, “Attacks Change U.S. Foreign Policy,” *Washington Times*, September 12, 2001.

²¹ “Angered Putin Calls for Coordinated Response,” *Moscow Times*, September 12, 2001.

²² George Jones, “We Will Help Hunt Down Evil Culprits, Says Blair,” *London Daily Telegraph*, September 12, 2001.

²³ “The Day the World Changed,” *The Economist*, September 15, 2001, p. 13. Less than a month later, the magazine would further characterize those events as “one of the biggest

The attacks of September 11 represented something fundamentally new with respect to international terrorism, at least as far as the United States was concerned. They amounted to a wholesale redefinition of the phenomenon, elevating it from being essentially an occasionally lethal nuisance to having become a core strategic threat to U.S. security. Indeed, the conventional image of “terrorism” as it was most commonly understood before September 11 failed utterly to capture the full magnitude of what occurred that grim morning. At bottom, the attacks constituted the first truly unrestrained manifestation of an orchestrated and open-ended campaign of stateless asymmetrical warfare against the United States. Worse yet, they showed a willingness on the part of the perpetrators to cause indiscriminate killing of innocent civilians, to the point of using, without compunction, any and all varieties of weapons that might be available.²⁴

Although what eventually became Operation Enduring Freedom, the initial military component of the ensuing U.S. global war on terror, did not begin until October 7, nearly a month later, it was clear from the very first days after the attacks that the Bush administration and the nation would take forceful action in response to the outrage of September 11. Indeed, immediately after President Bush was informed that the second WTC tower had been hit, he recalled that his precise thought at that moment had been: “They have declared war on us, and I made up my mind at that moment that we were going to war.”²⁵ He so informed Vice President Cheney when he finally succeeded in contacting him five minutes after the third hijacked airliner was flown into the Pentagon. It soon became clear that the American response would be multifaceted and would consist not just of military operations but also of focused diplomacy, coalition-building and sustaining, heightened intelligence operations,

intelligence failures the world has ever seen.” “Testing Intelligence,” *The Economist*, October 6, 2001, p. 31.

²⁴ As a result of the attacks, fuel-laden jetliners now meet the federal criteria for weapons of mass destruction, weapons hitherto associated solely with nuclear, chemical, or biological threats.

²⁵ Woodward, p. 15.

efforts to track down and freeze or disrupt the financing of al Qaeda's activities, immigration control, enhanced homeland defense, and extensive police work. Yet there was little doubt that the leading edge of this response would be an air-dominated campaign to extirpate bin Laden's al Qaeda network in Afghanistan and that country's ruling Taliban theocracy, which had provided the terrorists safe haven and a base of operations.²⁶

If raw news reporting may be said to represent the first draft of history, then this study seeks to offer a contribution to the second draft, namely, a more comprehensive, systematic, and analytical effort to integrate such reporting on the Afghan war into a coherent pattern that makes sense. Based on a comprehensive marshaling of the publicly available evidence, the study assesses the conduct of Operation Enduring Freedom from October 7, 2001, through late March 2002 against Afghanistan's Taliban rulers and bin Laden's al Qaeda infrastructure in that country. It focuses on joint and combined military activities at all levels, including special operations, space support, and all other combat and combat-support contributions to the precision air war that constituted the campaign's centerpiece. Its goal is to provide a well-buttressed account of the U.S. military response to September 11 aimed at helping to inform the U.S. policy community and U.S. public opinion, as well as to provide an analytic foundation for future such assessments once a more detailed record of that response becomes available.²⁷ The study first describes how senior officials in Washington and at CENTCOM developed the initial plans preparatory to the start of Operation Enduring Freedom, including the crafting of an appropriate force employment strategy, the deter-

²⁶ Evidently anticipating a U.S. retaliation, bin Laden had recently moved his headquarters to a new base in the Hindu Kush mountains in northeastern Afghanistan, where hundreds of al Qaeda combatants were fighting alongside the Taliban. Most of the foreign al Qaeda Arabs were said to live in restricted military compounds in Kabul and Kandahar. "Taliban" is the Afghan Dari variant of a Persian plural word for self-styled students of the Koranic text.

²⁷ For an earlier effort along similar lines to assess Operation Allied Force against Serbia's President Slobodan Milosevic in 1999, see Benjamin S. Lambeth, *NATO's Air War for Kosovo: A Strategic and Operational Assessment*, Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND Corporation, MR-1365-AF, 2001.

mination of needed U.S. and allied air and other assets in theater and elsewhere, and the securing of regional basing support and other bed-down needs. It then reviews combat operations from opening night through the achievement of the war's initial declared goals, from the early establishment of air control over Afghanistan to the rout of the Taliban in December 2001 and the subsequent Operation Anaconda, a U.S. Army-led effort two months later to root out the last remaining enemy holdouts in Afghanistan's Shah-i-Kot valley. With that as background, the remainder of the study considers what worked well during those operations, where unanticipated problems arose, and revealed deficiencies in the American military repertoire that might be correctable by improvements in training, tactics, techniques, procedures, and, in some cases, equipment and concepts of operations.²⁸

²⁸ Although Operation Enduring Freedom persists to this day at a lower level of intensity, with U.S. and allied forces waging a continuing counterinsurgency effort against residual Taliban holdouts, this study focuses solely on the major joint and combined operations to break up al Qaeda's terrorist infrastructure and end the Taliban rule that constituted the first six months of U.S. combat involvement in Afghanistan.

