

THE SECOND STORY

By Michael Ventura

September 9, 2011

A column I wrote shortly after 9/11 (see “9/11: America Ungoverned, Oct. 5, 2001) opened with this: “*The Los Angeles Times, USA Today, Time* and *Newsweek* agree the first plane hit at 8:45am EDT; *The New York Times* says 8:48; *The Wall Street Journal*, ‘about 8:50.’ *The Los Angeles Times, USA Today, Newsweek*, and *The Wall Street Journal* report the second plane hit at 9:03; *Time* and *The New York Times* say 9:06. According to *The Los Angeles Times, USA Today, Time*, and *The Wall Street Journal*, the South Tower collapsed at 9:50; but *The New York Times* puts it at 9:59 and *Newsweek* at 10:00. ... These sources almost unite about the collapse of the North Tower, but not quite: 10:28, say *The Los Angeles Times* and *The New York Times*; 10:29, *Time* and *Newsweek*; *USA Today* puts it at 10:30 and *The Wall Street Journal* at ‘about 10:30.’”

Even though everyone watched, no 9/11 historian can fix exact times. Then, as with any event, as time passed Zelda Fitzgerald’s Law kicked in: “People always believe the best story.”

Not until after 11:30 EDT that day did I take notes, and only because a second big story needed documenting, since it was sure to be erased by cultural denial and photo-op propaganda.

Shortly after the first plane hit, President Bush gave a curt, tentative statement, then disappeared. About an hour after the second tower’s collapse, Newt Gingrich made his Pearl Harbor comparison. At 11:39am, Fox’s Edie Donahue articulated all we knew: “The target... is America. The enemy, at the moment, is unknown.”

Soon after, a live press conference was given by one in authority: Joseph Lawless, of Boston’s Logan Airport, tried to explain how hijackers boarded two planes.

Noon. Three hours have passed since the attack began without one word from an elected American official. Minutes after noon, Palestinian Liberation Organization leader Yasser Arafat spoke: “We are completely shocked.” I was more shocked that Arafat addressed my country at length before any elected American.

Minutes later, one elected American, New York Mayor Rudy Giuliani, gave a live statement, unscripted and clear. While he spoke, a caption line ran Bush’s only quote so far: “an apparent terrorist attack.” No one knew Bush’s or Vice President Dick Cheney’s whereabouts. At 12:47pm, CNN’s Judy Woodruff reported: “It has been difficult to get in touch with members of Congress. It seems like there’s no game plan in operation.”

At 12:39 word was out that Bush’s plane landed at a base near Shreveport, La. Incredibly, at 12:51, CNN ran a Taliban news conference by Wakil Ahmed Mutawakil. Difficult to absorb, even now, that Arafat and the Taliban weighed in before Bush. Five minutes later, ABC reported that in Shreveport “the President looked grim. His eyes were somewhat red.” The only hard data: No national security official traveled with the president. ABC’s Peter Jennings broke news-anchor protocol to say, with forceful emphasis: “The country needs words from its president *in Washington.*”

1:08: More than three hours after the second tower collapsed, there was a message from Bush. But the sound didn’t transmit, and the picture jerked. Then the picture ran

backward! Then it went off. ABC filled in that a helicopter landed at the capital; unidentified people got in; it flew off.

1:12: CNN split the screen. On the left, a taped message from Bush said, “We will do whatever is necessary to protect America and Americans.” On the right, the second plane smashed into the tower. I’m no Bush fan, but I was shocked at this display of outright contempt.

Then reporters reported obvious lies. They didn’t state that opinion, but their deliveries were just this side of sarcasm: Bush didn’t go live in Louisiana because there was no uplink (then why didn’t he go live from Air Force One in flight?). Later another report was quickly discredited: Air Force One had been a target.

1:38: Sen. Joe Biden gave ABC a live interview from Washington, D.C., the first by an elected national figure. Biden, prophetic: “If we have to alter our civil liberties, change our institutions, then we’ve lost the war.”

Biden said Bush was definitely headed back to D.C. At 1:51, CNN reported Bush definitely was not. At 1:53, Senator Chris Dodd said weakly, “You haven’t heard as much from some of the leaders as you might like.”

Internal federal communications had broken down if two prominent U.S. senators knew no more than we.

2:55: Fox reported Bush’s political advisers want him in D.C., but the Secret Service wanted him underground at NORAD in Colorado.

Then, flash: The president landed in Nebraska! “Some reporters are being taken to an undisclosed location where they are to be given a briefing by an undisclosed official.”

3:16, Fox: Two aircraft carriers are en route to protect New York City, and Marines are en route to D.C.

3:22, CBS: Dan Rather said the day’s second smart thing, namely that what has happened is “the fate of power, power and the nemesis which is always generated by power.”

3:30: Confirmation that Bush has landed at the Strategic Air Defense Command near Omaha. ABC’s Ann Compton, traveling with the president, phoned Peter Jennings, whose inflection said it for the nation: “Annie, can you hear me? *What* are you doing in *Nebraska*?”

Jennings asked where Bush was. Compton replied, “He disappeared down the rabbit hole, Peter.”

A minute later Jennings spoke with George Stephanopoulos, former senior staffer of the Clinton White House: “Doe President have any say at the moment, basically, if the Secret Service guys say go here or there?” Jennings knew Stephanopoulos knew we knew that the commander in chief is the boss of the Secret Service. Stephanopoulos stuttered away the question and let his stutter make his point, then improvised a passably generous response.

On my kitchen table, as I watched, lay the *Newsweek* that hit the racks the day before (and vanished from racks almost as soon as it appeared). Cover photo: Bush. Cover headline: “The Secret Vote That Made Bush President – The Untold Story of the Supreme Court’s 5 to 4 Ruling.”

3:48: The president’s lawyer, White House counsel Karen Hughes, gave a live statement: “The president, vice president, and speaker of the house, are all safe.” End of

statement. Seven hours after the attack began, that's the best the White House could manage. Incredible then, incredible now.

4:33: Air Force One in flight to D.C.

6:00: Fox News' Brit Hume: "We didn't know [Bush] was going [to Nebraska]. Perhaps he didn't know either." 6:35. Hume again: "There have been remarkably few official statements."

6:38: Air Force One lands at Andrews Air Force Base. At 6:41, 10 hours after the attack began, Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld gave the first live press conference by someone in command who had top access to intelligence. He said nothing substantive. Attorney General John Ashcroft weighed in at 7:16 with nothing else substantive. At 7:24, Speaker of the House Dennis Hastert and Senate Majority Leader Tom Daschle led an outdoor Congressional group sing of "God Bless America."

8:31pm EDT: Nearly 12 hours after the attack began, 10½ after the towers collapsed, President Bush read a speech live from the Oval Office. Nothing substantive. No questions allowed. Soon brilliantly staged photo ops, a natural need for reassurance, a swiftly cowed media, and a polite 9/11 Commission allowed the official memory-loss of that day's White House cowardice and dysfunction. No accountability was demanded. So we got the USAPATRIOT Act and Iraq instead. Oh, well

This is a version of Ventura's column from Oct. 5, 2001, updated to reflect on the events of the day with the hindsight of the past decade in mind.

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