

9/11: AMERICA UNGOVERNED

By Michael Ventura

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The Los Angeles Times, USA Today, Time, and Newsweek agree the first plane hit at 8:45am EST; 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 -- an extraordinary disagreement about an event everyone watched. 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."

In the shadow of the atrocity, these details have no importance. Still it's striking that a historian, comparing the most authoritative news sources in America, will be unable to discover the exact moment of these terrible events -- though by the time the second plane hit, every news organization in the country was fixed upon the World Trade Center. If such (seemingly) easily verifiable details are already lost to history, how much trust can be put in reports about, say, Osama bin Laden -- a figure known mostly from his own propaganda (certainly not to be trusted) and from our seriously flawed intelligence services? Also, there have been virtually no reports about other terrorist networks (with whom we are, after all, going to war). As I write, Americans still have zero dependable data upon which to base opinion about our government's actions. This, in itself, is terribly dangerous.

There were two horrors on September 11. The first and greatest was the attack itself. The other horror is something about which America seems now to be in denial: On a crucial day in its history, our nation appeared to be not only abysmally uninformed but ungoverned.

We can only hope our government's actions that day don't prefigure our future.

Shortly after the first plane hits, President Bush gives a curt, tentative statement and disappears. About 11am EST, an hour after the second tower's collapse, Newt Gingrich is the first to liken this attack to Pearl Harbor. At 11:39 Fox's Edie Donahue states the shocking truth: "The target this morning is America. The enemy, at the moment, is unknown." Soon after that, the first live press conference by anyone in authority is given by whom? One Joseph Lawless, the security director responsible for Boston's Logan Airport, from which two hijacked planes took off. Then, a little after noon, Yassar Arafat speaks: "We are completely shocked." I am far more shocked that Arafat is addressing my country at length before my president does. Minutes later, New York Mayor Rudy Guiliani gives a live statement -- the first live on-camera response from an elected American official since the towers collapsed two hours

before. He is calm, determined, honest, unscripted. While he speaks, the caption-line is still giving President Bush's only quote thus far: "an apparent terrorist attack." No one knows where Bush is. No one knows where Vice-President Cheney is. At 12:47 CNN's Judy Woodruff reports: "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 is that Bush has landed at a base near Shreveport, La. Incredibly, at 12:51, there is footage of a Taliban news conference by one Wakil Ahmed Mutawakel. It is difficult to absorb that Arafat and the Taliban have weighed in before Bush. Five minutes later ABC reports that in Shreveport "the president looked grim. His eyes were somewhat red." The only hard information is that there are no national security people traveling with the president. ABC's Peter Jennings, breaking protocol for news anchors, says forcefully that the country needs words from its president in Washington.

1:08: More than three hours after the second tower collapsed. A taped message from President Bush. But the sound isn't transmitting, and the image is jerky. Then the image goes backwards. Then it goes off. ABC reports that a big helicopter landed at the Capitol, people got in and flew off; it's unknown who they were or where they went.

1:12: CNN shows a split screen. On the left, a taped Bush is saying, "We will do whatever is necessary to protect America and Americans"; on the right, footage of the second plane smashing into the tower. I'm no Bush fan, but I'm shocked at this display of open contempt.

Bush is already in the air again, whereabouts unknown, by the time his footage is shown. Later a lame excuse is given that Bush didn't go live in Louisiana because there was no uplink, though everyone knows that Air Force One can uplink to anywhere in the world. There will also be reports, later discredited, that Air Force One was somehow a target. Which doesn't explain why Bush, at an Air Force Base, could not get into the rear seat of a fighter-bomber and, with full fighter escort, proceed to D.C. -- from Shreveport he could have gotten there in a half hour. What is going on?

1:38: Senator Biden gives a live interview to ABC (to my knowledge, the first by an elected national figure): "If we have to alter our civil liberties, change our institutions, then we've lost the war." Biden says Bush is definitely headed back to D.C. But at 1:51 CNN reports that Bush is definitely not headed back to D.C. At 1:53 on CNN, Senator Dodd understates mightily: "You haven't heard as much from some of the leaders as you might like."

2:35: Guiliani live again: "The number of casualties will be more than anyone can bear."

2:55: Fox reports that Bush's political advisers want him in D.C., but the Secret Service wants him underground at N.O.R.A.D. in Colorado. Then a flash: The president has landed in Nebraska, and "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, Marines are en route to D.C. 3:22, Dan Rather: 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 base near Omaha, Neb. ABC's Ann Compton, traveling with the president, is on the phone to Peter Jennings, whose inflection says it all: "Annie, can you hear me? What are you doing in Nebraska?"

When he asks where Bush is, she replies, "He disappeared down the rabbit hole, Peter."

A minute later Jennings is talking to George Stephanopoulos, former member of the Clinton White House, and he asks: "Does the president have any say at the moment, basically, if the Secret Service says go here or go there?" Jennings knows what we all know: The president is the Commander in Chief; the Secret Service answers to him; he, and he alone, is responsible for where he is. Stephanopoulos stutters as the question and its silent answer hang in the air. He improvises as generous a response as he can. The point has been made.

On my table, as I watch, is the Newsweek that hit the racks the day before (and disappeared from the racks the day after). The cover is Bush, and the headline: "The Secret Vote That Made Bush President - - The Untold Story of the Supreme Court's 5 to 4 Ruling."

3:48: For the first time an administration official, White House counsel Karen Hughes, gives a live statement: "The president, vice-president, and speaker of the House are all safe." It is astonishing that this late in the day the White House has nothing more to say.

4:33: Air Force One, the president aboard, is headed back to D.C.

6:00: Fox's conservative Brit Hume says, "We didn't know he [Bush] was going there [to Nebraska]. Perhaps he didn't know either." Thirty-five minutes later Hume adds, "There have been remarkably few official statements." At 6:38 Air Force One lands at Andrews Air Force Base in D.C. At 6:41, Secretary of Defense Rumsfeld gives a live press conference -- nearly nine hours after the towers collapsed, a cabinet-level official finally speaks.

7:13, James Woolsey, former CIA director: "It is clear now the United States is at war. The question is with whom."

7:16, Attorney General John Ashcroft weighs in.

7:24, Speaker of the House Dennis Hastert and Senate Majority Leader Tom Daschle, along with many other Congressional people, all break into "God Bless America."

7:53, CNN's Jeff Greenfield: "We are going to wake up tomorrow in a different America. Our luck has run out."

8:31: Nearly 12 hours after the attack began, 10 and a half after the towers collapsed, President George W. Bush reads a speech live from the Oval Office.

The attack was an atrocity. The reaction that day, at the top levels of our government, was disgraceful. There has been every effort since to erase that impression, and one can only pray that it isn't all show. Americans understandably have chosen to forget that part of the horror of September 11 was that America seemed ungoverned. Like it or not, these are the individuals we must trust to do what's necessary. But it's difficult to get over the impression that we are governed by frightened people, who don't know what they need to know, and whose first concern is their own safety.

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