

# 9/11: When Did Cheney Authorize the Shoot-down of Civilian Planes?

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[Consensus 9/11](#)

Theme: [Terrorism](#)

*We are offering a Series of Consensus Points from the 24-member 9/11 Consensus Panel, which presents considerable new evidence about 9/11 in the form of its 44 Consensus Points to date. The official claims regarding 9/11 are contradicted by facts that have been validated by a scientific consensus process, based on a [standard medical model of investigation](#).*

## Introduction

At 9:26 AM on 9/11, the Bush-Cheney administration ordered a national ground stop, meaning that no more civil planes were allowed to take off; and at 9:45, all planes already in the air were ordered to land.<sup>1</sup> Those orders provided the background for the possibility of an order to shoot down civilian airplanes that violated this order. There has been controversy about whether United 93 (which, the 9/11 Commission claimed, crashed in Shanksville, PA) was shot down.

## The Official Account

Vice President Cheney reached the Presidential Emergency Operations Center “shortly before 10:00.”<sup>2</sup> At 10:02, he “began receiving reports from the Secret Service of an inbound aircraft – presumably hijacked – heading towards Washington.”<sup>3</sup> Although this aircraft was United 93, the Commission said, this was not known at the time, because the military did not learn about the hijacking of this flight until after it had crashed.<sup>4</sup>

Through a military aide, Cheney gave authorization to shoot civilian airplanes down at “some time between 10:10 and 10:15,” again “probably some time between 10:12 and 10:18,” and then obtained confirmation from President Bush by 10:20.<sup>5</sup> Reporting that Richard Clarke had “ask[ed] the President for authority to shoot down aircraft,” the 9/11 Commission wrote: “Confirmation of that authority came at 10:25.”<sup>6</sup>

Shoot-down authorization came, therefore, far too late to affect the fate of United 93, which crashed at 10:03.<sup>7</sup>

## The Best Evidence

Considerable evidence indicates that the shoot-down authorization came not at some time after 10:10 but closer to 9:50, therefore early enough for the military to have shot down

United 93:

1. The fullest evidence appeared in counter-terrorism coordinator Richard Clarke's 2004 book, *Against All Enemies*.<sup>8</sup>

- Just before the Pentagon attack, Clarke wrote, he told Major Michael Fenzel, his liaison to Cheney, that he wanted authorization for "the Air Force to shoot down any aircraft – including a hijacked passenger flight – that looks like it is threatening to attack and cause large-scale death on the ground."<sup>9</sup>
- Fenzel called back rather quickly. (Clarke said: "I was amazed at the speed of the decisions coming from Cheney and, through him, from Bush.") Fenzel's call back came after the Pentagon attack but before Air Force One took off from the airport in Florida, which would mean between 9:38 and 9:55.<sup>10</sup>
- Fenzel said: "Tell the Pentagon they have authority from the President to shoot down hostile aircraft, repeat, they have authority to shoot down hostile aircraft." Clarke reported that he then said: "DOD, DOD, . . . the President has ordered the use of force against aircraft deemed to be hostile."<sup>11</sup>

2. A 2003 *U.S. News and World Report* article, discussing "President Bush's unprecedented order to shoot down any hijacked civilian airplane," stated: "Pentagon sources say Bush communicated the order to Cheney almost immediately after Flight 77 hit the Pentagon and the FAA, for the first time ever, ordered all domestic flights grounded."<sup>12</sup> This report, reinforced by the previous and following points, would put the shoot-down authorization shortly after 9:45.

3. Barbara Starr, CNN's Pentagon correspondent, said in a 2002 program reliving the events of 9/11: "It is now 9:40, and one very big problem is out there: United Airlines Flight 93 has turned off its transponder. Officials believe it is headed for Washington, D.C. . . . On a secure phone line, Vice President Cheney tells the military it has permission to shoot down any airliners threatening Washington."<sup>13</sup>

4. In 2002 and 2003, a number of military leaders stated that they received the shoot-down authorization while United 93 was still aloft.

- Colonel Robert Marr, the head of NEADS, said: "[W]e received the clearance to kill if need be."<sup>14</sup>
- General Larry Arnold, the commander of NORAD within the Continental United States, said: "I had every intention of shooting down United 93 if it continued to progress toward Washington, D.C."<sup>15</sup>
- Brigadier General Montague Winfield, the deputy director of the National Military Command Center in the Pentagon, reportedly said: "The decision was made to try to go intercept Flight 93. . . . The Vice President [said] that the President had given us permission to shoot down innocent civilian aircraft that threatened

Washington, DC.”<sup>16</sup>

In spite of all of this evidence, *The 9/11 Commission Report*, published in July 2004, declared: “By the time the military learned about [United 93], it had crashed.”<sup>17</sup> On the basis of this claim, the 9/11 Commission declared that the above-cited statements by Marr, Arnold, and Winfield were “incorrect.”<sup>18</sup>

However, besides contradicting these statements, the 9/11 Commission’s claim conflicts with an FAAmemo to the Commission of May 23, 2003.

- This memo said that in an FAA teleconference with the military that had begun “minutes after the first aircraft hit the World Trade Center” – hence shortly after 8:46 AM – the FAA had “shared real-time information . . . about . . . all the flights of interest,”<sup>19</sup> which would have included United Flight 93.<sup>20</sup>
- 9/11 Commissioner Richard Ben-Veniste, putting the FAA memo in the Commission’s record, said that it provided evidence that the “FAA was providing information as it received it, immediately after the first crash into the Towers.”<sup>21</sup> But the 9/11 Commission dealt with this memo by simply omitting any reference to it in *The 9/11 Commission Report*.

## Conclusion

The 9/11 Commission claimed that Cheney did not issue a shoot-down authorization until 10:10 or later, whereas the evidence shows that Cheney gave the authorization by 9:50 – hence at least 20 minutes earlier than the Commission claimed. This 20-minute difference means the difference between whether military pilots could, or could not, have been ordered to shoot down United Flight 93 (which reportedly crashed at 10:03).

The Commission’s claim about the time of the shoot-down authorization was not the only part of the official account of the shoot-down authorization that was problematic: The press focused on the Bush administration’s claim that Cheney had transmitted authorization received from the President (rather than declaring it on his own, which would have been illegal), about which even the 9/11 Commission was skeptical.<sup>22</sup>

More important to the truth about 9/11, however, was the 9/11 Commission’s claim that the shoot-down authorization was not given by Cheney until 10:10 or later, hence after United 93 had crashed. This claim is contradicted by reports from Richard Clarke, *U.S. News and World Report*, Pentagon correspondent Barbara Starr, the FAA, and three military officers: Col. Marr, Gen. Arnold, and Brig. Gen. Winfield.

Moreover, the 9/11 Commission’s 10:10-or-later claim presupposed the Commission’s claim that Cheney did not enter the PEOC, where he took charge, until almost 10:00, and this claim is contradicted by abundant evidence, as shown in [Point MC-3](#).<sup>23</sup>

Any new investigation needs to ask why the 9/11 Commission made a claim about the time of Cheney’s shoot-down authorization that contradicted a great deal of evidence.

## References for Point MC-4

1. [The 9/11 Commission Report](#), 29.
2. [Ibid.](#), 40.
3. [Ibid.](#), 41.
4. [Ibid.](#), 34.
5. [Ibid.](#), 41. (The movie *United 93*, which follows the timeline of *The 9/11 Commission Report*, says that the shoot-down authorization was given at 10:18.)
6. [Ibid.](#), 37.
7. "By 10:03, when United 93 crashed in Pennsylvania, there had been no mention of its hijacking [to the military]" ([Ibid.](#), 38).
8. Richard A. Clarke, *Against All Enemies: Inside America's War on Terror* (New York: Free Press, 2004).
9. [Ibid.](#), 7.
10. Clarke reported that the call came while the President's plane was still "getting ready to take off" ([Ibid.](#), 8).
11. [Ibid.](#), 8.
12. Chitra Ragavan and Mark Mazzetti, ["Pieces of the Puzzle – A Top-Secret Conference Call on September 11 Could Shed New Light on the Terrorist Attacks,"](#) *U.S. News & World Report*, 31 August, 2003.
13. ["The Pentagon Goes to War': National Military Command Center,"](#) *American Morning with Paula Zahn*, CNN, 4 September 2002.
14. Quoted in Leslie Filson, *Air War over America: Sept. 11 Alters Face of Air Defense Mission*, Foreword by Larry K. Arnold [Public Affairs: Tyndall Air Force Base, 2003], 68). Marr also said that, after he received the shoot-down authorization, he "passed that on to the pilots" (["9/11: Interviews by Peter Jennings,"](#) ABC News, 11 September 2002.)
15. Filson, *Air War Over America*, 71.
16. ["9/11: Interviews by Peter Jennings,"](#) ABC News, September 11, 2002.
17. [The 9/11 Commission Report](#), 34.
18. [Ibid.](#)
19. [9/11 Commission Hearing](#), May 23, 2003.
20. The 9/11 Commission acknowledged that FAA headquarters had realized by 9:34 that United 93 had been hijacked ([The 9/11 Commission Report](#), 28). Also, when General Arnold was asked by the

9/11 Commission what NORAD was doing on 9/11 at 9:24 AM, he said: "Our focus was on United 93, which was being pointed out to us very aggressively, I might say, by the FAA" ([9/11 Commission Hearing](#), May 23, 2003).

21. [9/11 Commission Hearing](#), May 23, 2003.

22. In *The 9/11 Commission Report*, the Commission's scepticism is muted, limited to stating that there was no documentary evidence for the call to President Bush that, according to Cheney, he made shortly after entering the PEOC, during which Bush gave him the authorization (pp. 40-41). According to *Newsweek* magazine, however, this statement was a "watered down" version of an earlier draft, which had reflected the fact that "some on the commission staff were . . . highly skeptical of the vice president's account." That earlier draft, which evidently expressed more clearly the belief that the vice president and the president were lying, was reportedly modified after vigorous lobbying from the White House (Daniel Klaidman and Michael Hirsh, ["Who Was Really in Charge?"](#) *Newsweek*, June 20, 2004).

23. See [Consensus Point MC-3](#), "The Claim About the Time of Dick Cheney's Entry into the White House Bunker."

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