

SEPTEMBER 11, 2001: Failures of the US Secret Service on the Morning of 9/11: A Call for Transparency

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Guest Post by Kevin Ryan, former Site Manager for Environmental Health Laboratories, a division of Underwriters Laboratories (UL). Mr. Ryan, a Chemist and laboratory manager, was fired by UL in 2004 for publicly questioning the report being drafted by the National Institute of Standards and Technology (NIST) on their World Trade Center investigation. In the intervening period, Ryan has completed additional research while his original questions, which have become increasingly important over time, remain unanswered by UL or NIST.

The U.S. Secret Service failed to do its job on September 11, 2001 in several important ways. These failures could be explained if the Secret Service had foreknowledge of the 9/11 events as they were proceeding. That possibility leads to difficult questions about how the behavior of Secret Service employees might have contributed to the success of the 9/11 terrorist attacks. Answering those questions will require the release of existing interview transcripts as well as follow-up questioning, under oath, of a few key people within the agency.

The most glaring example of Secret Service failure on 9/11 was the lack of protection for the President of the United States after it was well known that the country was facing terrorist attacks on multiple fronts. The interesting thing about this was that it was not a consistent approach. That is, the president was protected by the Secret Service in many ways that day but he was not protected from the most obvious, and apparently the most imminent, danger.

President Bush had been at risk earlier that morning when Middle-Eastern looking journalists appeared at his hotel in Sarasota, Florida claiming to have an appointment for an interview. A Secret Service agent turned them away in a move that might have saved Bush from an assassination attempt. [1]

Bush then traveled to an elementary school for a community outreach photo opportunity which had been well-publicized for several days. It was reported that "Police and Secret Service Agents were on the roof, on horseback and in every hallway" at the school. [2] Every visitor at the school was required to attend a preparation meeting two days before, and all the phone lines had been tapped. The school's principal stated - "It was the safest place in the world. If you blew your nose and it wasn't time for you to blow your nose, they knew it." [3]

The agency was protecting Bush very well, but not from terrorists in hijacked airplanes. Bush entered the classroom at 9:03 am that day, after it was widely known that the country

was under attack. As stated by authors Allan Wood and Paul Thompson:

“By that time, the Federal Aviation Administration (FAA), the North American Aerospace Defense Command (NORAD), the National Military Command Center, the Pentagon, the White House, the Secret Service, and Canada’s Strategic Command all knew that three commercial airplanes had been hijacked. They knew that one plane had been flown deliberately into the World Trade Center’s North Tower; a second plane was wildly off course and also heading toward Manhattan; and a third plane had abruptly turned around over Ohio and was flying back toward Washington, DC.” [4]

Given the widespread knowledge that terrorists were hijacking planes and that planes were crashing into buildings, the Secret Service should never have let the president enter the building where he was scheduled to be located. The situation got worse, however, because shortly after Bush sat down, he was informed by his Chief of Staff that the World Trade Center had been hit again, by a second plane. Still there was no intervention by the Secret Service to remove the president from this well-publicized location.

Either failure to protect the president, or knowledge that he was not a target

Bush remained at the school until 9:35 am, more than 35 minutes after he arrived. He even gave a televised speech during that time, letting the world know he was still there. The actions of Bush and his Secret Service detail indicate that they were not worried at all about a terrorist attack against the school. Philip Melanson, author of a book on the Secret Service, described how odd this was by writing that, in an *“unfolding terrorist attack, the procedure should have been to get the president to the closest secure location as quickly as possible.”* [5]

This failure to follow Secret Service standard procedures is a glaring discrepancy to this day and it leads to a number of important questions. Who was responsible for making the decision to leave the president and everyone in the building at risk? Were the Secret Service agents traveling with the president in contact with the agency’s offices in Washington or New York? The largest Secret Service field office in the country was located in WTC Building 7, which was evacuated by the time Bush was entering the classroom.

The Secret Service supervisor traveling with the president, who was in charge of the president’s movements that day, was Edward Maritzel. It was Maritzel who should have been in charge of the execution (or non-execution) of the emergency action protocols carried out as the attacks were proceeding. [6]

In an attempt to explain the failure to follow Secret Service procedures, the 9/11 Commission said in its report that Bush “told us his instinct was to project calm, not to have the country see an excited reaction at a moment of crisis,” and that the Secret Service “told us they were anxious to move the president to a safer location, but did not think it imperative for him to run out the door.” These official responses from the Secret Service, given in the *9/11 Commission Report* (911CR), were taken from an as-yet unreleased 2004 interview with Edward Maritzel. [7] However, the Commission said nothing about why Bush entered the classroom in the first place, when everyone in government knew that the country was under attack.

It seems possible that Maritzel’s authority was somehow overridden, because reporters

noticed that it was White House spokesman Ari Fleischer who appeared to be calling the shots while Bush sat there doing nothing. As Bush's Secret Service detail failed to protect him, Fleischer maneuvered to get his attention without alerting the press. Several reporters noticed that Fleischer had written the words "DON'T SAY ANYTHING YET" in big block letters on a paper sign and was mouthing these words to Bush as he sat there. [8]

Another apparent failure of the Secret Service was that it did not immediately request air cover for either the president's motorcade as it traveled to the airport, or for Air Force One, which took off at about 9:54. This seems to be another indication that the Secret Service knew that Bush was not in danger.

The lack of immediate request for air cover for the president's escort becomes more difficult to understand considering the 911CR's claims of "unnerving false alarm" which was a "threat against Air Force One itself." This threat was later "run down to a misunderstood communication in the hectic White House Situation Room" (p 325).

The 911CR did not cover the failure to request immediate air cover, but it did attempt to address the circuitous travels of Air Force One after it left Sarasota. Air Force One was redirected throughout the day, first to Barksdale Air Force Base (AFB) in Louisiana and then on to Nebraska. The 911CR states that the reason for this wandering about the country was that the "Lead Secret Service agent...felt strongly that the situation in Washington was too unstable for the President to return there," and although the Bush "strongly wanted to return to Washington," the Secret Service won the argument. Again, the 9/11 Commission got its information on this subject from the unreleased 2004 interview with Edward Maritzel.

Exactly why Edward Maritzel's interview has not been made publicly available is not clear. Given that it was the primary basis for the official account with regard to the failure to protect the president, it seems that the public has a right to see it. Did the Secret Service know that the president was not in danger and, if so, how did it know that?

Whatever the case might be, Maritzel's actions or lack thereof were considered appropriate because his role in protecting the president continued. On Thanksgiving in 2003, Maritzel led the team that planned and executed President Bush's covert visit to Baghdad which, at the time, "was the first operation in history that took a President of the United States into an active war zone." [9]

Today, Maritzel works at a consulting company with Ralph Basham, the former Director of the Secret Service (2003-2006), as well as another person who played a critical role in George W. Bush's travel, communications and protection. This was Joseph W. Hagin, who was Bush's deputy White House Chief of Staff for Operations (2001-2008). Mr. Hagin had previously been an assistant to Vice President George H.W. Bush, from 1981 to 1985, and then Assistant to President Bush from 1989 to 1991.

Hagin came to the George W. Bush administration after eight years as a vice president for Chiquita Brands International. Formerly called United Fruit Company, the company was mired in scandal at the time of Hagin's departure, due to an expose by the *Cincinnati Enquirer* which claimed that it mistreated the workers on its Central American plantations, polluted the environment, allowed cocaine to be brought to the United States on its ships, and bribed foreign officials.

On 9/11, Mr. Hagin had oversight responsibility for Air Force One, the White House

Communications Agency, and the Secret Service PPD. Despite these far reaching responsibilities, his name does not appear in the 911CR. Hagin was later “one of the principals responsible for planning the formation of the U.S. Department of Homeland Security.” [10] When Hurricane Katrina occurred, Hagin was the White House point person in terms of overseeing response efforts.

Either failure to protect the vice president, or reconstruction of the timeline

The 911CR states that when the Secret Service first learned of the second plane hitting the World Trade Center, it immediately initiated a number of precautionary “security enhancements around the White House complex.” [11] This would have begun at 9:03, when the entire nation witnessed Flight 175 hit the south tower on live television.

This information was obtained from the interview of Carl Truscott, who served as the Special Agent in Charge (SAIC) of the Presidential Protective Division (PPD). Truscott had primary responsibility for supervising all protective matters relating to the president, the first family and the White House. Although Truscott’s interview was not released in transcript form, a summary of the interview was made available as part of several random documents released via FOIA request to 9/11 researcher Aidan Monaghan. [12]

When the second plane hit the WTC, the Secret Service agent responsible for coordinating with the Federal Aviation Administration (FAA), Nelson Garabito, called his FAA counterpart, Terry Van Steenberg. At the time, Garabito was at the Secret Service Joint Operations Center (JOC), located in the White House.

It was reported that Van Steenberg told Garabito that two other planes were possibly hijacked, which caused Garabito to ask someone to run upstairs and pass the information on to other Secret Service agents. The 911CR states that this information was “either not passed on or was passed on but not disseminated.”

This failure relates to the question of when the vice president was evacuated from his office. If Van Steenberg’s information, given to Garabito just after 9:03 am, was passed on to those protecting the vice president, then it would become important to know why the vice president was not moved to a safer location until 9:36, as stated by the 911CR. If the information was passed on immediately, and the vice president was moved to a secure location just after 9:00 as several witnesses have suggested, then his early presence at the Presidential Emergency Operations Center (PEOC) would substantiate the important testimony of Transportation Secretary Norman Mineta. According to Mineta, Cheney was being given regular updates on the progress of the hijacked Flight 77 as it came toward Washington. [13]

The documents released by FOIA request include a timeline of “Actions of TSD” on 9/11. TSD is the Secret Service’s Technical Services Division which, among other things, operates the Secret Service’s Tigerwall air surveillance system. The TSD timeline states that at 9:18 am “SAIC Truscott learned that an aircraft had been identified en-route to the Washington area.” Therefore, we have officially prepared documentation that indicates Truscott was aware of a hijacked plane heading for Washington at least 18 minutes before the official account says the vice president was moved from his office. If this is true, the public deserves to know why the vice president not moved to safety immediately. On the other hand if he was moved earlier, that fact supports Mineta’s astonishing and important testimony.

Failure to request interceptor jets in a timely manner

As described by author Michael Ruppert, the Secret Service was getting information about the ongoing hijacking events at the same time, or before, the FAA was. This was because there was a “parallel command system in play.” [14] This parallel command system was also described by Richard Clarke, who was leading one of the response teams in the White House Situation Room (WHSR). Clarke later wrote that Brian Stafford, the Director of the Secret Service, was in the WHSR with him and was passing him information. That information, according to Clarke, came from the fact that the Secret Service had “a system that allowed them to see what FAA’s radar was seeing.”

The authoritative command system appeared to be below ground in the PEOC, where Dick Cheney was leading the activities. The TSD document released by FOIA shows that when Assistant Division Chief Spriggs arrived in the PEOC, at 9:30 am, Cheney and Rice were already there along with ten other “Presidential and Vice Presidential staff.” [15] Carl Truscott was the lead Secret Service agent in the PEOC, the one who was in coordination with Garabito, and the one who was most closely coordinating with Dick Cheney.

The FOIA-released 9/11 Commission summary of Truscott’s interview says that he escorted NSA Rice from the Situation Room to the “White House Shelter Area” where they met Cheney, who was on the phone, and Mrs. Cheney. [16] Interestingly, the official account gives a contradictory account, stating that Mrs. Cheney did not arrive at the White House for another 30 minutes or more. The FOIA documents say that Truscott led the Cheneys and Rice to the PEOC sometime before 9:30 am. SAIC Anthony Zotto, who was specifically responsible for the vice president’s safety, was in the PEOC at the time. This means that Cheney was in the PEOC at least 8 minutes before Flight 77 crashed into the Pentagon.

The documents released by the Secret Service via FOIA indicate that the Secret Service had knowledge of Flight 77 and Flight 93 and that those flights were headed toward Washington, DC. One of these documents, not well identified but apparently a timeline created by one agent to relate his experiences, indicates that the Secret Service had knowledge of “two more outstanding aircraft, not responding to the Tower, considered suspect and at least one was headed toward DC.” This was several minutes before the agent arrived at “Room 552 en route to the JOC” where the agent learned that “one of the two planes, believed to be hijacked, was approximately 5 minutes out from DC.”

These documents confirm that the Secret Service knew that two hijacked planes were headed toward Washington during the time that Cheney and SAIC Truscott were in the PEOC, and well before Flight 77 was reported to have crashed into the Pentagon. Cheney seemed to confirm the same when he later said, on NBC’s Meet the Press — “The Secret Service has an arrangement with the FAA. They had open lines after the World Trade Center was...” — and then cut himself off.

There remains some confusion over whether the Secret Service ordered, or had the authority to order, the scrambling of interceptor jets from Andrews AFB in response to the knowledge about the incoming hijacked aircraft. Author Lynn Spencer, who NORAD Commander General Ralph Eberhart says “tells it all and tells it well,” wrote that “the Secret Service also has certain authority over the military and, in this case, the DC Guard.” [17] That is, the Secret Service had the authority to order the scrambling of interceptor jets on 9/11. And of course, with the president indisposed for a brief period, the vice president was the commander in chief of the military.

Official reports now suggest that the Secret Service made such a request, although very late in the chain of events, but that Andrews commander General David Wherley did not respond rapidly enough. The reason given is that Wherley did not recognize the Secret Service as having the authority to order jets to scramble and therefore he waited until someone in the military chain of command gave him the order. Unfortunately, General Wherley is no longer available for comment as he died in a freak train accident which was "the most deadly train crash in the history of the Washington Metropolitan Area Transit Authority." [18]

However, it is clear that Andrews AFB staff reached out to the Secret Service well before Wherley ever got involved. [19] Just after 9:05, Major Daniel Caine, the supervisor of flying at Andrews AFB, called his Secret Service contact, Kenneth Beauchamp. Caine asked "Are you guys going to need some help?" Agent Beauchamp replied "No, but I'll call you back if that changes." Beauchamp, whose 9/11-related interview is still "national security classified," never called back. Nearly 30 minutes later, when Flight 77 was coming into Washington, someone else from the Secret Service finally returned Caine's call to accept the offer of assistance. Upon answering the phone, Caine stated that he "could hear plain as day the vice president talking in the background." [20] That was when Caine's newly arrived superior, General Wherley, began spending another 80 minutes or more being confused about the chain of command, according to the official account.

Interceptor jets did not launch from Andrews AFB, which was only ten miles from the Pentagon, until 10:38 am (and those were not armed). This was more than an hour after the Pentagon was hit, almost two and a half hours after the first plane was known to be hijacked, and approximately 90 minutes after Major Caine had first offered assistance to the Secret Service.

SAIC Truscott continued as the leader of the Secret Service PPD through 2005, during the times when a gay prostitute came to the White House for overnight visits, and during the period when Jack Abramoff was visiting the White House. The White House later tried to hide the records for these visits. Truscott was also at the White House during the period when the Secret Service adopted its secretive processes for records management with regard to visitor records.

Like Marinzel, Truscott's performance on 9/11 was apparently well received as he was later promoted to Director of the ATF, another major agency of the U.S. Department of Treasury. In the end he was forced to resign in a scandal related to multiple abuses of power including sexist orders given to female employees. Truscott had friends in high places, however, and he was protected from prosecution by order of the White House. [21] Truscott went on to join ASERO Worldwide, an international security and risk management firm run by Doron Bergerbest-Eilon, who was formerly the most senior ranking security official at the Israeli Security Agency. [22]

Overall, the response of the Secret Service to the 9/11 attacks suggests foreknowledge of the events in that the agency failed to protect the president from the obvious danger posed by terrorists. That foreknowledge, combined with the failure of the Secret Service to follow-up on the offer of air support from Andrews AFB, leads to the suspicion that the agency was complicit in the attacks. Revealing the truth behind these suspicions will require that the central role players from the Secret Service and the White House, including Edward Marinzel, Ari Fleischer, Joseph Hagin, Carl Truscott, Anthony Zotto, and Kenneth Beauchamp, be examined under oath by prosecutors with subpoena power.

Notes

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- [10] Command Consulting, Bio for Joseph Hagin, <http://www.commandcg.com/en/joseph-w-hagin>
- [11] The 9/11 Commission Report, page 36
- [12] FOIA documents released by the U.S. Secret Service to Aidan Monaghan on April 23, 2010. <http://www.mediafire.com/?vydb4nxdmyy>
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