

Donald Rumsfeld

Known
and
Unknown

A MEMOIR



SENTINEL

The Agony of Surprise

When I spoke to President Bush in the Oval Office in May 2001, investment in America's national defense, as a percentage of our gross domestic product, was at its lowest level since just before Pearl Harbor. A mismatch was emerging between the President's campaign message about military needs and what was now being approved by his White House. I had recommended a \$35 billion increase over the Clinton defense budget of the year before. I would have asked for significantly more if President Bush had not made clear to me that his other initiatives—such as increased federal aid to education and tax relief—were his major priorities.

I knew that the Defense Department's resources had been stretched, but it was not until I arrived at the Pentagon and had an opportunity to survey the landscape that I realized just how bad things actually were. Shipbuilding, for one, was underfunded. In the Reagan years the United States had been planning a 600-ship Navy. After the George H. W. Bush and Clinton administrations we were at 315 ships and dropping. Military aircraft were aging; some planes were going to have to stop flying, and needed replacements were not coming along. Pay was uncompetitive.¹ The spiraling cost of health care in the military further pressured the budget. And this was before considering the costs of meeting the President's transformation agenda. I warned Bush



about the approaching budgetary crunch and the impact it would have on the military and their families. “It will not be pleasant,” I cautioned.

I urged the President to advise the White House Office of Management and Budget that national security and defense were priorities for his administration. I was concerned that OMB would not approve the increases the Department needed. There were even suggestions at OMB that we cut military force levels.²

While the impression was that things were generally calm around the globe, I reminded the President of the intelligence community’s reports: Iran was pursuing chemical, biological, and nuclear weapons; North Korea was aggressively pursuing longer-range ballistic missiles and nuclear weapons; the Chinese were increasing their military capabilities across the board. National defense could not be something that came after domestic issues.³

The President heard me out, but I soon learned that I had not been persuasive enough. Bush approved an \$18 billion increase for the department, about half of what I had recommended. I was disappointed, but others were furious. Some conservatives called Bush’s defense spending plan “inadequate and reckless” and urged that I resign in protest.⁴

By late summer I was not gaining the traction necessary to carry out the President’s plans. Not only were we not getting the funding we needed, but also a large number of his civilian nominees remained unconfirmed by the U.S. Senate. Then, that August, White House chief of staff Andy Card delivered still more bad news: With a flagging economy, revised projections from the Congressional Budget Office were showing that the deficit would be even higher than had been predicted. Card said it was likely that DoD would get an even lower level of funding than the President had previously approved.

As I encountered the expected opposition to my initiatives within the Pentagon’s five walls, there was a palpable sense that inertia was playing a winning hand. Washington turned to its favorite summer pastime: speculating about a cabinet shake-up. “There’s been talk on the Hill—generated no doubt by Rumsfeld’s detractors, a fairly large generating source up there—that he might be on the way out soon,” wrote a columnist in the *Washington Post*. The criticism centered on my plans to transform the U.S. military. The article noted that a “sweepstakes” had already begun on who might succeed me.⁵

I knew how important it was to impart a sense of urgency and seriousness of purpose within the Pentagon. The moment there was any sign that I was



backing off the reforms the President had promised, and that I was convinced were needed, they would be doomed. So I upped the ante. I gave a speech directly to the entrenched interests in the Pentagon and in Washington.

“The topic today,” I began, “is an adversary that poses a threat, a serious threat, to the security of the United States of America.”

This adversary is one of the world’s last bastions of central planning. It governs by dictating five-year plans. From a single capital, it attempts to impose its demands across time zones, continents, oceans, and beyond. With brutal consistency, it stifles free thought and crushes new ideas. It disrupts the defense of the United States and places the lives of men and women in uniform at risk. Perhaps this adversary sounds like the former Soviet Union, but that enemy is gone: Our foes are more subtle and implacable today. You may think I’m describing one of the last decrepit dictators of the world. But their day, too, is almost past, and they cannot match the strength and size of this adversary. The adversary’s closer to home. It’s the Pentagon bureaucracy. Not the people, but the processes. Not the civilians, but the systems. Not the men and women in uniform, but the uniformity of thought and action that we too often impose on them.⁶

I stated that in the Pentagon, despite an era of scarce resources taxed by mounting threats, money was disappearing into duplicative duties and bloated bureaucracy. This was not because of greed, I said, but because of gridlock. Innovation was stifled not by ill intent but by institutional inertia.

The reception my speech received was polite. I knew some in the audience agreed with me. Others did not. “RUMSFELD DECLARES WAR ON BUREAUCRACY,” read some headlines.⁷ That was fair enough.

When I delivered that speech, I was worried, but not about my longevity in the office of the secretary of defense. I planned to serve at the pleasure of the President as long as I could be effective and not a day longer. But I was seriously concerned that we had a Department of Defense that was not ready for the challenges coming toward our country. The one thing I knew for sure was that challenges would come, and probably from unexpected sources. “The clearest and most important transformation is from a bipolar Cold War world where threats were visible and predictable to one in which they arise from multiple sources, most of which are difficult to anticipate, and many of which are impossible even to know today,” I warned.⁸ The date was September 10, 2001.



I arrived at the Pentagon the next morning recalling my time as secretary of defense twenty-five years earlier, when I had to convince skeptics on the need for more investment in the defense budget. Again I found myself trying to persuade reluctant members of Congress to increase funding. At a breakfast for nine members of the House Armed Services Committee, most expressed support for my efforts but doubted if we would be able to get the necessary votes. Republicans feared that supporting a significant defense increase could leave them politically vulnerable.*

“Sometime within the coming period,” I said, “an event somewhere in the world will be sufficiently shocking that it will remind the American people and their representatives in Washington how important it is for us to have a strong national defense.” Mine was not a particularly original statement, and I’d said a variation of it many times before. Several months earlier, in fact, I had dictated a note to myself that I intended to offer when I was next testifying before Congress. “I do not want to be sitting before this panel in a modern day version of a Pearl Harbor post-mortem as to who didn’t do what, when, where and why,” I wrote. “None of us would want to have to be back here going through that agony.”⁹

I sometimes remarked that the only thing surprising is that we continue to be surprised when a surprise occurs. In 1962, Harvard economist Thomas Schelling wrote a foreword to a book on Pearl Harbor that captured this idea perfectly. “We were so busy thinking through some ‘obvious’ Japanese moves that we neglected to hedge against the choice that they actually made,” he wrote. “There is a tendency in our planning to confuse the unfamiliar with the improbable.”¹⁰ I was so taken with his piece that I sent a copy to President Bush during our first month in office as well as to many members of Congress. I expressed the hope that the Senate Armed Services Committee would hold hearings on the subject of surprise.

As my breakfast with the members of Congress was coming to a close that September morning, my senior military assistant, Vice Admiral Edmund

* Democrats were urging that any money from a projected budget surplus be directed to a so-called, nonexistent, Social Security “lockbox.” Unlike the internet, the lockbox idea was an Al Gore invention. During the 2000 campaign, Gore and congressional Democrats used the gambit in an attempt to turn any proposal they didn’t like—such as cutting taxes to leave more of the American people’s hard-earned money with them—into an effort to raid Social Security. The whole debate struck me as absurd. There was no budget surplus for a lockbox (it was only a theoretical projection), and the last people in Congress who tended to be worried about restraining spending were the proponents of the lockbox idea. Moreover, most everyone knew that Social Security needed fundamental reforms that were willing to confront.



Giambastiani, passed me a note. An aircraft had crashed into one of the World Trade Center's twin towers in New York. It was, I assumed, a tragic accident. I said good-bye to the members of Congress, who returned to Capitol Hill, escaping by only a few minutes the traumatic scene that was about to play out at the Pentagon.

Back in my office, Giambastiani turned on the television to see the video of one of the towers burning. Putting the set on mute but glancing at it from time to time, I received an intelligence briefing from Denny Watson, my regular briefer. Her daily presentations were similar to those provided to the President each morning. Watson was a fine intelligence professional: engaged in the details and willing to pose questions to her fellow analysts. As we reviewed the threat reports from around the world, September 11 seemed to be no more or less different than any other day. From our chairs we could hear airplanes going by the building en route to Washington National Airport's runway; the flight path down the Potomac River was only hundreds of feet from my office window. Aircraft often took off and approached for landing close to the eastern side of the Pentagon.

We were a few minutes into my briefing when the scenes on the television set distracted us. A fireball was erupting from the other World Trade Center tower as a second airliner tore through the upper floors of the building. Within the seventeen minutes between the first and second plane crashes, the world passed from one period of history into another.

I watched, stunned, as the twin towers of the World Trade Center, symbols of America's economic strength, were engulfed in smoke and flames. Hundreds who were on floors above the site of the impact were trapped. As the flames rose the floors filled with asphyxiating smoke. Some people on the upper floors jumped to their deaths rather than wait for the fire to reach them. Years of increasingly brazen terrorist acts against American and Western interests had escalated to the ones that created the disaster now displayed on television screens across the globe. But they were not the last.

I was still in my Pentagon office, absorbing news of the attacks in New York, when I felt the building shake. The tremor lasted no longer than a few seconds, but I knew that only something truly massive could have made hundreds of thousands of tons of concrete shudder. The small, round, wood table at which we were working, once used by General William Tecumseh Sherman, trembled. A legendary Union general who had torched his way through the South to turn the tide of the Civil War, Sherman had famously commented that "war is hell." Hell had descended on the Pentagon.



I could see nothing amiss through my office windows, so I left and moved rapidly along the E Ring, the Pentagon's outer corridor, as far as I could. I soon found myself in heavy smoke, and it was not long before I was forced to a lower floor.

An Air Force lieutenant colonel improbably emerged from a cloud of fumes looking disheveled and uncertain. As the chaos intensified and buffeted those near the scene, all I retained was an image of the horrified look on his face as he cautioned, "You can't go farther."

I headed to a nearby stairwell and down a flight of stairs toward an exit. Outside I found fresh air and a chaotic scene. For the first time I could see the clouds of black smoke rising from the west side of the building. I ran along the Pentagon's perimeter, and then saw the flames.

Hundreds of pieces of metal were scattered across the grass in front of the building. Clouds of debris, flames, and ash rose from a large blackened gash. People were scrambling away from the building, refugees from an inferno that was consuming their colleagues. Those who could ran across the grass away from the building. Those who could not were being helped. Some were wounded and burned.

It had been but a few minutes since the attack. The official first responders—local police and firefighters—had not yet arrived on the scene. A few folks from the Pentagon were there doing what they could to assist the wounded. I saw some in uniform running back into the burning building, hoping to bring more of the injured out.

"We need help over here," I heard someone say. I ran over. One young woman sitting in the grass, wounded, bruised, and a bit bloodied, looked up at me and squinted. Even though she couldn't stand she said, "I can help. I can hold an IV."

As people arrived on-site to assist, I turned back toward my office to gather what additional information I could. On my way I picked up a small, twisted piece of metal from whatever had hit the Pentagon. Minutes later I would learn from an Army officer that he had seen the unmistakable body of a silver American Airlines plane crash into the Pentagon. That piece of the aircraft has served me as a reminder of the day our building became a battleground—of the loss of life, of our country's vulnerability to terrorists, and of our duty to try to prevent more attacks of that kind.

The smoke from the crash site was spreading through the building. The smell of jet fuel and smoke trailed us down the corridor. Upon arriving back



in my office, I spoke briefly with the President. He was on Air Force One somewhere over the southeastern United States, having left an appearance at a school in Florida when the second plane hit the World Trade Center. He was anxious to learn what damage had been done by the attack on the Pentagon. I reported what information I had.

In retrospect, catastrophes inevitably raise “what ifs.” One was that the disaster could have been even worse. Most of the offices in the area of the building that was hit had recently been closed for renovations. Instead of the nearly ten thousand employees who would normally have been working near the impact site, less than half of that number were present that morning.¹¹ Further, due to the recent renovations, the new walls of the section were reinforced with steel. It had blast-resistant windows and ballistic cloth to catch shrapnel.¹² It also occurred to me that if the hijacked plane had hit the other side of the building, near the river entrance, a section that had not been renovated, much of the senior civilian and military leadership of the Department would undoubtedly have been killed.

Before long, the smoke in my office became heavy, so along with several staff members I headed to the National Military Command Center in the basement.* A complex of rooms outfitted with televisions, computer terminals, and screens tracking military activities around the world, the NMCC is a well-equipped communications hub. Despite the fires still raging in the Pentagon and sprinklers dousing wires and cables with water, our links to the outside world were functioning, although sporadically.¹³ The chairman of the Joint Chiefs, General Hugh Shelton, was in South America. The vice chairman, General Dick Myers, the man the President had recently nominated to be Shelton’s successor, had been on Capitol Hill making courtesy calls with members of the Senate Armed Services Committee. Upon learning of the attack, he rushed back to the Pentagon and joined me in the command center.

There were two sides of Dick Myers, and I came to know both well. He looked like the grown-up version of a humble high school football hero from a Norman Rockwell cover of the old *Saturday Evening Post*. But the other side of Dick Myers was one that the public did not see. He had the self-confidence, fire, independent spirit, and tenacity of a fighter pilot tested repeatedly in combat. In his early years he had been frightened of planes because he had witnessed a crash as a child. Yet he came up through the ranks of the Air

* They included: Ed Giambastiani; Jim Haynes, the Department’s general counsel; Steve Cambone, the deputy undersecretary of policy; Larry Di Rita, my special assistant; and Torie Clarke, the assistant secretary of defense for public affairs.



Force to the highest position in our armed forces. In our private meetings, the determined, persistent man who had logged over six hundred combat flight hours in Vietnam would often emerge.

Myers and I discussed raising America's threat level to Defcon (Defense Condition) 3, an increased state of alert for the nation's armed forces, two levels short of full-scale war.*

"It's a huge move," Myers said, "but it's appropriate."¹⁴

General Myers reported that combat air patrols were now in the skies over Washington, D.C.—the first time in history this step had been taken. We also launched two fighters to protect Air Force One and were scrambling more.¹⁵

I was told that Vice President Cheney was at the White House in the underground communications facility. Colin Powell was traveling in Peru and would be returning to Washington. George Tenet was hurrying back to CIA headquarters after a breakfast meeting. President Bush was en route to Barksdale Air Force Base in Louisiana. The Secret Service, with the support of Vice President Cheney, advised Bush not to return to Washington until the situation was clarified. We were receiving unverified reports of hijacked airliners heading toward U.S. cities. Targeting the White House remained a possibility.

I looked at screens displaying the dozens of aircraft still in the air while the Federal Aviation Administration and NORAD (the North American Aerospace Defense Command) tried to determine which, if any, were hijacked planes and where they might be heading. At some point we received word that an aircraft believed to have been hijacked was down somewhere in Pennsylvania.¹⁶

Defense Department officials executed our continuity-of-government plans, according to long-established procedures, to ensure that at least some of America's leadership in all branches of the federal government would survive an enemy attack. I had been involved in planning and exercises for continuity-of-government operations during the 1980s, at the request of the Reagan administration. In those days, the plans postulated a nuclear attack by the Soviet Union. Now it was terrorist attacks that had put those plans into use for the first time in our history. The plan called for the secretary of defense to be moved out of the Pentagon rapidly to a secure location outside of Washington. But I was unwilling to be out of touch during the time it would take to relocate me to the safe site. I asked a reluctant Paul Wolfowitz, the deputy secretary of defense, and my special assistant, Larry Di Rita, to leave immediately for Site R, the Pentagon's backup headquarters, which was staffed for such an emergency.

*The last time the Defcon had been raised to that level was in 1973, during the Yom Kippur War, when I was ambassador to NATO.



It was not long before the Vice President reached me by phone. Like the rest of us, he was receiving a jumble of conflicting information. There was a report that there had been an explosion at the State Department and another of a plane crash north of Camp David, both of which proved false. A Korean Airlines aircraft was flying toward the United States with its transponder signaling the code for “hijack.” There was a report of an unidentified aircraft from Massachusetts bound for Washington, D.C., which was particularly worrisome because two of the known hijacked flights had originated in Boston.¹⁷

“There’s been at least three instances here where we’ve had reports of aircraft approaching Washington,” said Cheney. “A couple were confirmed hijack. And, pursuant to the President’s instructions I gave authorization for them to be taken out,” he added.

“Yes, I understand,” I replied. “Who did you give that direction to?”

“It was passed from here through the [operations] center at the White House,” Cheney answered.

“Has that directive been transmitted to the aircraft?”

“Yes, it has,” Cheney replied.

“So we’ve got a couple of aircraft up there that have those instructions at this present time?” I asked.

“That is correct,” Cheney answered. Then he added, “[I]t’s my understanding they’ve already taken a couple of aircraft out.”

“We can’t confirm that,” I told him. We had not received word that any U.S. military pilots had even contemplated engaging and firing on a hijacked aircraft.

“We’re told that one aircraft is down,” I added, “but we do not have a pilot report. . . .”¹⁸

As it turned out, the only other aircraft that crashed had not been shot down. It was United Airlines Flight 93, a hijacked plane that went down in a field near Shanksville, Pennsylvania. The plane’s passengers had learned in midair through private telephone calls that their hijacking was one of several terrorist operations that day. Courageous men and women onboard then fought with the hijackers and prevented them from completing their mission, which likely was targeting the White House or the Capitol.*

As a former naval aviator, I was concerned about the orders being given

* Each of the other three hijacked aircraft had five al-Qaida terrorists onboard, and the difference between four and five terrorists may have meant the difference between failure and success. In 2002, the individual believed to be the twentieth hijacker—the missing hijacker from United Flight 93—came into U.S. custody in Afghanistan. The detention and interrogation at Guantánamo Bay of the suspected terrorist, Muhammed al-Qahtani, would later become a focal point of controversy.



to the military pilots. There were no rules of engagement on the books about when and how our pilots should handle a situation in which civilian aircraft had been hijacked and might be used as missiles to attack American targets. Myers was troubled too. "I'd hate to be a pilot up there and not know exactly what I should do," I said to him.¹⁹

Myers observed that even a plane that appeared to be descending toward an airport in the Washington metropolitan area with no prior sign of hostile intent could suddenly veer off and strike any federal building in the D.C. area. By then, he said, "it's too late." Any plane within twenty miles of the White House that did not land on command, he speculated, might have to be shot down.²⁰ It was a chilling thought. A military pilot in the skies above our nation's capital, likely in his twenties or early thirties, might have to make an excruciatingly tough call. But our pilots, Myers stressed, were well trained. I had no doubt they would follow their orders if necessary, but with a prayer on their lips.

Echoing the earlier instructions from the President, I repeated his orders to Myers: The pilots were "weapons free," which authorized them to shoot down a plane approaching a high-value target.²¹

During an update on the situation in New York, I learned that both towers of the World Trade Center had collapsed. Many hundreds had been incinerated. Throughout lower Manhattan, truck drivers, postal workers, stockbrokers, the elderly, and schoolchildren were scrambling away from the smoke and flame. They were making desperate retreats from the dense clouds of dust and debris of the collapsing towers. Heartsick and fearful, some looked up at the sky over New York Harbor to see if more planes were coming. Families awaited word about loved ones who had gone to work that morning in the World Trade Center and had not been heard from.

As we were working at the Pentagon, smoke from the crash site was seeping into the NMCC. Our eyes became red and our throats itchy. An Arlington County firefighter reported that carbon dioxide had reached dangerous levels in much of the building. The air-conditioning was supposed to have been disabled to avoid circulating the hazardous smoke, but apparently it took some time for it to be shut down.

Myers suggested that I order the evacuation of the command center, and he argued that the staff would feel bound to remain there as long as I stayed in the building. I told him to have all nonessential personnel leave but that I intended to keep working there as long as we were able. Relocating to any of the remote sites would take at least an hour of travel and settling in, precious



moments I did not want to lose if we could keep working in the Pentagon. Eventually we moved into a smaller communications center elsewhere in the building known as Cables, which had less smoke. As the day went on, the firefighters stamped out enough of the fire so that the smoke in some portions of the building became tolerable.

Shortly after noon, I received a call from CIA Director George Tenet. From the outset of the Bush administration Tenet and I had discussed the need for a more effective strategy to combat terrorism.²² We had been preoccupied by the 2000 bombing by Islamist extremists of the USS *Cole* in a Yemeni port, an attack to which the United States had never responded. “George, what do you know that I don’t know?” I asked.²³

The information at this juncture was still uncertain.²⁴ But Tenet said the National Security Agency (NSA) had intercepted a phone call from an al-Qaida operative in Afghanistan to a phone number in the former Soviet republic of Georgia. The al-Qaida operative stated that he had “heard good news” and indicated that another airplane was about to hit its target.²⁵

An hour later I again spoke to the President, who by then had arrived at Barksdale. I briefed him on the steps we had taken and updated him on what we knew about the attack on the Pentagon.²⁶ American Airlines Flight 77—a Boeing 757—had departed Washington’s Dulles airport bound for Los Angeles at 8:20 a.m. On board were fifty-nine passengers and crew. A passenger, Barbara Olson, managed to use her cell phone to call her husband, Ted Olson, the solicitor general of the United States, to tell him that her plane was being hijacked. There were teachers onboard and students going on a field trip. The youngest passenger was a three-year-old girl named Dana Falkenberg.

The jet had come in from the west at a speed of more than five hundred miles per hour, flying precariously low over stunned drivers along Route 27. The plane screamed over the Pentagon parking lot and hit the first floor of the building’s western wall. With forty-four thousand pounds of thrust from engines at full throttle, the nose of the aircraft disintegrated as the rest of the plane continued to punch through the walls of the building—the E Ring, the D Ring, and the C Ring—at over seven hundred feet per second, clearing a path for the rest of the aircraft.²⁷ More than 181,000 pounds of aluminum and steel, jet fuel and humanity had collided with the building. The Pentagon was still standing, but the plane and everyone in it had been obliterated on impact.

Bush, frustrated at being kept so far from where he felt he belonged—in Washington—blurted out what first sprang to mind. “The United States will



hunt down and punish those responsible for these cowardly acts,” he said, an echo of his father’s words shortly after the 1983 bombing in Beirut, Lebanon. I would later offer a suggestion to the President about the word “cowardly.” The men who had gripped the controls of the aircraft and flew them into buildings at five hundred miles per hour were many things—evil, ruthless, cruel—but I felt we underestimated and misunderstood the enemy if we considered them cowards. They were Islamist fanatics dedicated to advancing their cause by killing innocents and themselves in the process, and they would not be easily intimidated or frightened, as cowards would be.

I also advised the President in the days following that I believed our nation’s response should not primarily be about punishment, retribution, or retaliation. Punishing our enemies didn’t describe the range of actions we would need to take if we were to succeed in protecting the United States. The struggle that had been brought to our shores went beyond law enforcement and criminal justice. Our responsibility was to deter and dissuade others from thinking that terrorism against the United States could advance their cause. In my view, our principal motivation was self-defense, not vengeance, retaliation, or punishment. The only effective defense would be to go after the terrorists with a strong offense.

In our initial discussions with the President that day, Myers and I recommended that he order a partial call-up of the Air Force reserves to ease the strain on our pilots, since round-the-clock patrols in the skies above our country would be needed. Bush agreed and asked me to convey his thanks to the Pentagon employees who were still at their posts. He made clear that he would like to act quickly against the perpetrators of the attacks. I said we would get to work on how best to do that. “The ball will soon be in your court,” he added.

As I got off the phone, I thought again of the Beirut bombing. Ever since then, a small circle of national security experts, including George Shultz, had worried that it was only a matter of time before Muslim extremists found their way to our shores. “Terrorism is a form of warfare, and must be treated as such,” I had said back in 1984, in the aftermath of the U.S. withdrawal. “As with other forms of conflict, weakness invites aggression. Simply standing in a defensive position, absorbing blows, is not enough. Terrorism must be deterred.”²⁸ We could not stop all acts of terrorism or eliminate all casualties. But we could send a message to terrorists and to regimes that sponsored and harbored terrorists that if they continued to do so it would be at a price.

I remember observing to those with me early that afternoon that America’s



prior history in responding to terrorism had not been effective. I considered our responses to provocations and attacks by our adversaries over the last decade hesitant and, in some cases, feckless, including: letting Libya's Muammar Gaddafi off for his role in the bombing of Pan Am Flight 103; the first World Trade Center attack of 1993; the plotted assassination of George H. W. Bush by Iraqi agents the same year; America's retreat under fire in Mogadishu in 1993; the Khobar Towers bombing in Saudi Arabia in 1996; the East African embassies bombings in 1998; and the 2000 attack on the USS *Cole*. Actions and inactions by previous administrations had left the impression that the United States was leaning back, not forward.²⁹

"We can't bluster," I said to my staff. "If you cock your fist, you'd better be ready to throw it."³⁰

Time also was important. I remembered that after the terrorist massacre of Marines in Beirut, American support for the Lebanese government and for action against the terrorists waned quickly.

"One week from now," I remarked to Myers, "the willingness to act will be half of what it is now."

Myers thought differently. "I think the country's attention span will last longer this time," he said. If we didn't take the right steps to engage the American people and prepare them for the length of the war ahead, I wasn't so sure.³¹

At 3:30 p.m., President Bush convened his first National Security Council meeting following the attacks. Joining us via secure video teleconference (SVTC) from Offutt Air Force Base in Nebraska, he began by echoing some of the comments he had made to me on the phone earlier in the day. "No thugs are going to diminish the spirit of the United States," he told us. "No coward is going to hold this government at bay. We're going to find out who did this. We're going to destroy them and their resources." The President discussed what the terrorist attacks might mean for the American people. He speculated about how people would react, especially in the cities struck by the terrorists: Would they go to their jobs the next day? Would children go to school?

During the meeting, a fresh report came in of still another suspicious plane—this one coming from Madrid and scheduled to land in Philadelphia. Over the secure video, the President authorized the use of force if necessary to bring down the airliner.³²

The President insisted that the government rebound quickly after the attack. I reported that I would have the Pentagon open the following day. Not



only did the Department have a great deal of work to do, I felt it was important that the terrorists not be seen as successful in shutting down the U.S. Department of Defense.

Tenet reported that the intelligence community now believed with some confidence that Osama bin Laden's al-Qaida network was responsible for the attacks. The CIA had discovered that two of the hijackers were suspected al-Qaida operatives—including one who had been linked to the 2000 bombing of the USS *Cole*.³³ One month before 9/11, Ramzi bin al-Shibh, a senior al-Qaida lieutenant in close contact with Bin Laden, had discussed the details of the operation with Muhammed Atta, the lead hijacker. Their conversations were in a code in which they pretended to be students talking about various academic fields. What they actually talked about were which targets to hit: "architecture" meant the World Trade Center; "arts" referred to the Pentagon; "law," the Capitol building; and "politics," the White House. As he related this chilling information, Tenet warned of the possibility of additional, copycat attacks.

The State Department reported that it had placed all U.S. embassies on heightened alert. The President said he saw the attacks not as a problem for the United States alone but as a challenge to free nations, and that it was necessary to organize a global campaign against terrorism by enlisting as many countries as possible into a large coalition. He expected help not just from our traditional allies—Britain, Germany, and France had offered immediate assistance—but from new partners. We discussed the fact that our reaction to the attack would need to have many parts, and that some of our partners might want to participate in only some of them.

Later that afternoon I spoke with Russian Defense Minister Sergei Ivanov. He sounded sad as we discussed the casualties. He pledged Russia's cooperation. As it happened, I already had a request to make. The Russian military was conducting an aircraft exercise near Alaska, and our forces were understandably sensitive now about any intrusions into American airspace. I didn't want problems to arise inadvertently between our two countries. So I asked Ivanov if he would have his military stand down. He promptly agreed to halt the exercise.

That evening also offered an opportunity for political rivals in the United States to come together, at least for a time. At the Pentagon, I met with Carl Levin, the chairman of the Senate Armed Services Committee, and John Warner, the ranking Republican. They wanted to come to the Department to express their support.

"We're foursquare with you," Warner said.



“We will be totally arm in arm,” Levin seconded, saying he looked forward to my leadership.³⁴

I was heading to a press briefing in the Pentagon and the two senators asked to attend to show their support. So at 6:42 p.m., I appeared before the Pentagon press corps with Levin, Warner, and Joint Chiefs Chairman General Hugh Shelton, who had returned from his scheduled trip. As the Pentagon burned—it would continue to burn for several days—I told reporters that the Defense Department would be open in the morning, fulfilling its responsibilities. “The Pentagon’s functioning,” I said. “It will be in business tomorrow.”³⁵ Asked about how many might have perished in the building, I replied, “It will not be a few.”

Senator Levin vowed to support efforts to “track down, root out, and relentlessly pursue terrorists, [and] states that support them and harbor them.”³⁶ When Levin was asked a question about Democratic opposition to increasing the defense budget, he replied that he and the Armed Services Committee now were united in support of the President’s defense increase.³⁷

On the evening of the attack, nations around the world were voicing support for a robust response. The German chancellor, Gerhard Schroeder, called the attacks “a declaration of war against the entire civilized world.” The French newspaper *Le Monde* declared, “We are all Americans.”³⁸

In the Middle East, friendly and unfriendly regimes were shaken by the attack, unsure of what they should say or, more to the point, unsure about what we might do. The leaders of Iran and Saudi Arabia expressed condolences.³⁹ Of course, we had yet to test if those nations would be with us when we acted against the terrorists.

Only one regime openly gloated about the attack. “The United States reaps the thorns its rulers have planted in the world,” Saddam Hussein declared from Baghdad.⁴⁰ Iraq’s state-controlled newspaper charged: “The real perpetrators [of 9/11] are within the collapsed buildings.”⁴¹ This was truly remarkable. Even the Iranian government sensed that it was bad form to poke the Great Satan in the eye as thousands of American bodies were being recovered from the rubble.

In the aftermath of the attacks, I was sensitive to comments made by foreign leaders. When President Hosni Mubarak of Egypt made a poorly chosen comment about 9/11, for example, I was not happy.⁴² I asked my staff to let me know what a government had said about the attacks whenever I met with foreign leaders. If their comments were supportive, I wanted to thank them, but, I added, “If they were harmful, I will remember that, too.”⁴³



From the Oval Office at 8:30 that evening, President Bush delivered his first formal remarks after the attack to the nation. The presence of the President in Washington was reassuring. “We will make no distinction between the terrorists who committed these acts and those who harbor them,” he announced, setting out a new declaratory policy. This was a crucial element of our strategy to do everything we reasonably could to prevent follow-on attacks. Though the President wanted to strike directly at the terrorist groups that had organized the attack, actionable intelligence was scarce. But we did know the location of the states that were instrumental in supporting the international terrorist network—and we also had the means to impose costs on those regimes. Afghanistan’s Taliban regime, Syria’s Bashar al-Assad, Iraq’s Saddam Hussein, and the clerical rulers of Iran were now on notice: Bush had announced that the costs for state support of terrorism had just gone up.

After the speech, President Bush convened a meeting of the National Security Council in the shelter underneath the White House. He reiterated his determination to end the distinction between terrorist groups and their state sponsors. Nations would have to choose, he said, and not try to live in some middle ground between terrorist warfare and respectable state sovereignty. Powell, back from Peru, said that Afghanistan and Pakistan would have to stop providing terrorists sanctuary.

As secretary of defense it was my job to advise the President, but also to interpret his guidance and ensure that it was implemented. I told the President and the NSC that, for the moment at least, the American military was not prepared to take on terrorists. A major military effort, I said, could take as many as several months to assemble. President Bush said he was eager to respond, but he wanted to ensure that our response, when it came, was appropriate and effective.

I also mulled the President’s words about attacking terrorists and the territory from which they planned and plotted attacks. Did that mean we should be planning to strike terrorist targets in nations with whom we had friendly relations? I suggested that we think about the problem more broadly. We needed to consider other nations, including Sudan, Libya, Iraq, and Iran, where terrorists had found safe haven over the years and where they might seek refuge if we were to attack al-Qaida’s hub in Afghanistan.

We had little specific intelligence to support targeting terrorist operatives themselves, I noted, so we should take action against those parts of the network that we could locate, such as the terrorists’ bank accounts and their state sponsors. If we put enough pressure on those states—and this didn’t



necessarily mean military pressure—they might feel compelled to rein in the terrorist groups they supported. This might enable us to constrain groups that our intelligence agencies couldn't locate.

Much has been written about the Bush administration's focus on Iraq after 9/11. Commentators have suggested that it was strange or obsessive for the President and his advisers to have raised questions about whether Saddam Hussein was somehow behind the attack. I have never understood the controversy. Early on, I had no idea if Iraq was or was not involved, but it would have been irresponsible for any administration not to have asked the question.

The hopes I had when I was serving as President Reagan's Middle East envoy for a more positive relationship between Iraq and the United States obviously had not been realized. It had been many years since I met with Saddam Hussein, and I knew he had not mellowed with age. America had gone to war against Iraq to liberate Kuwait from Saddam's 1990 invasion. Iraqi forces fired at American and British pilots patrolling northern and southern UN no-fly zones almost daily. From 1990 on, Iraq had been on the State Department's list of state sponsors of terrorism. Since I had worked with Paul Wolfowitz in 1998 on the Ballistic Missile Threat Commission, I knew that he had been concerned about the relationships of terrorists with regimes hostile to the United States. His knowledge of the subject of Iraq was encyclopedic. He had pressed intelligence officials about possible links between the 1993 bombing of the World Trade Center and various state sponsors of terror, including the Iraqi government. Though American intelligence analysts in the 1990s generally said that the Islamic terrorists who committed the first World Trade Center bombing were probably working without state involvement, Wolfowitz was not convinced.

I remember one commission briefing in particular, when the name first came up that would become familiar to all Americans after 9/11: a Saudi millionaire named Osama bin Laden. Bin Laden had declared a holy war against the United States, listing what he characterized as a number of "crimes and sins" committed by the U.S. government against Muslims.

"The ruling to kill the Americans and their allies—civilians and military," the fatwa stated, "is an individual duty for every Muslim who can do it in any country in which it is possible to do it." He had laid out al-Qaida's intentions to undermine America's financial and military power and to intimidate our friends and allies. These were not idle threats or the harmless rants of a madman. Al-Qaida had declared war. America had been on notice of that threat for at least three years.



During our work on the Ballistic Missile Threat Commission in the late 1990s, Wolfowitz and former Clinton CIA Director Jim Woolsey questioned CIA analysts about what the United States was doing about al-Qaida. They asked about Bin Laden's bank accounts and whether his funds had been confiscated after the East African embassy bombings. The officials gave the standard nonresponse: They would look into the matter.

As the events of the day—a day that seemed like the longest in my life—drew to a close, I returned to the Pentagon from the White House. The sky was dark but klieg lights illuminated the crash site for the rescue workers who continued to fight the flames and to search for any remaining victims in the wreckage. I called some of my team together in my office to take stock of events. Torie Clarke, the assistant secretary of defense for public affairs and the Pentagon's spokeswoman, had a blunt manner that I appreciated. "Have you called Mrs. R.?" she asked me.

By then it was approaching 11:00 p.m., more than twelve hours since the morning's attack. "No, I haven't," I answered.

Clarke bore in. "You mean you haven't talked to Joyce?"

When the Pentagon was hit, Joyce was at the Defense Intelligence Agency at Bolling Air Force Base for a briefing with the defense attachés and their spouses from around the world. I had been so engaged that day that I hadn't even thought of calling her. After almost forty-seven years of marriage, one takes some things—perhaps too many things—for granted. I had been told Joyce was taken from the meeting and that she had been informed that the Pentagon had been hit.

Clarke looked at me with the stare of a woman who was also a wife. "You son of a bitch," she blurted out.

She had a point.

