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INTERVIEW OF ARI FLEISCHER
BY SCOTT PELLE

Roosevelt Room

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Terrorist Attacks

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Q Before we really get going here, I want to remind you of the context that a lot of this interview is going to be seen in. Within the documentary, we will have just seen the planes hit the buildings. This is going to be bringing all of this back in sharp relief. So I want to take you back to the way that felt in those days, because it's going to be very present in the documentary.

Let's start with the morning. And, I guess, let's start with the motorcade. He's left the hotel and he's on the way to the school. Paint that picture for me.

MR. FLEISCHER: Well, it was just a routine day, and the motorcade pulled up to the school just like a motorcade pulls up anywhere. And the only difference was I got a page telling me that the World Trade Center had been hit by an airplane, and that was the only information any of us had. And, of course, our first instinct was some type of terrible accident took place and that New York City needed help.

And that was what happened. We rolled up to the school and then Carl Rove got to the President and whispered in the President's ear outside on the receiving line before he even entered the classroom about the news. And that was the President's first word.

Q So you look at your pager and it says what?

MR. FLEISCHER: The pager says the World Trade Center has been hit by an aircraft. That was about it. No context, nothing beyond that.

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Everywhere we go, there is somebody here in the White House who is constantly updating me with the latest news so we can stay on top of anything. And, as news breaks, very often all you get until more information comes through is that first headline report.

Q After you had heard from the -- after you had heard about the first airplane, a decision was made that the President was going to say something about that?

MR. FLEISCHER: That's correct. Well, even with the first report, it was a tragedy for New York and for the people who were involved. I mean, the World Trade Center had been hit, the World Trade Center was on fire. Even if it had just been a tragic accident, New York needed help. And the President was about to go into the room with the school children where he was reading and say the full resources of the federal government will be made available to New York to help them.

It was only after Andy, in the middle of the schoolroom, whispered in the President's ear, the second tower has been hit, America is under attack, did it become clear what we were dealing with.

Q How did you find out that the second airplane had it?

MR. FLEISCHER: The same way. I got a page telling me the people here in Washington whose job is to constantly monitor all the events sent me a page right away. And interestingly, I knew, Andy knew, I don't even believe the press pool that was in the room with the President knew, because if they did, I think they would have been shouting questions at the President.

But, amazingly, the one person who didn't know, of course, was the President himself. Because he's in the middle of an event with these school children, helping teach them to read. So all of America is watching this on their TV sets. And if Andy didn't exercise that judgment and make the call to whisper in the President's ear, how else would the President have known what America knew.

Q The whole world knew, but the President did not.

MR. FLEISCHER: Of course; he was in the middle of a school event.

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Q When you got the second page that said the second tower had been hit, what did you think in that moment?

MR. FLEISCHER: I instantly thought it was terrorism.

Q What you had all been thinking about and fearing for all the months of the presidency?

MR. FLEISCHER: Well, terrorism unfortunately has been a terrible problem that mostly inflicted itself on the rest of the world and on America's interests abroad. I mean, what you can never imagine as you prepare for a job like this that one day, on the President who you work for, his watch, that terrorism will become an issue that hits here at home.

As soon as I got that page telling me the second tower was hit, it immediately flashed through my mind, there can be no other explanation; it's got to be terror.

Q You tried to get a message to the President?

MR. FLEISCHER: That's right. What happened was the President was -- of course, he did not know of the second tower being hit. And I wrote on the back of a yellow legal pad, "Don't say anything yet," because I didn't want the President to go out and say anything about the resources of the government would be available, without him having knowledge that it was a terrorist attack.

There's a rule in this business that you should not speak until you've collected enough facts so you can speak from an informed basis. And, of course, the President in the middle of the event didn't have the advantage of being able to be briefed. And the only briefing he had was Andy whispering in his ear two sentences.

So I wrote on the back of a legal pad, "Don't say anything yet." I positioned myself so my back would be to the press pool and I flashed the note to the President so he would see it. And this was, of course, after Andy whispered in his ear. Because what was most important at that point was getting the President out of there and into a room where he could get back in touch with Washington and get the latest, most accurate information about the attacks.

Q And yet, even after Andy Card has whispered this terrible news in his ear, he doesn't leave?

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MR. FLEISCHER: That's right. Looking back, it just strikes me as amazing how the President could take that information and keep such a stoic, serious face. And also he remembered that he was in a roomful of little children. And I think the first thing he said was, you must be such good readers you must be in sixth grade. And he cut the event short, but he didn't want to rattle the children.

And so he cut the event short, kept it so the children wouldn't know what was happening at that exact moment, and then he quickly left and went into the holding room where he got on the phone with Dr. Rice and other people to get information out of Washington.

Looking back, it still just amazes me about the way he reacted in those first instant seconds of having heard the news. I don't know how any man, woman, any leader could keep their composure the way he did and keep his thoughts together.

Q Tell me about that holding room in that moment. Paint that picture for me. It must have been chaotic.

MR. FLEISCHER: No, it wasn't chaotic. It was seeking information. The President went into the holding room, and unfortunately or fortunately, anywhere Presidents go -- and this goes back many a year -- there's a holding room that is set up in case there's ever an emergency. There's classified secure phones set up in the room. And we scarcely ever use it. It's hardly ever, ever used. On that day, we had to use it.

So the President goes into his holding room where the secure lines are set up, gets back on the phone to Washington, is talking to Dr. Rice and talking to other officials back in Washington. I believe he may have talked to the Vice President at that point, I'm not sure. And he's getting the latest information.

And still it's sketchy, because what everybody knew was what they were able to watch live on their TV screens. Additional information takes time to develop, who is responsible, how many lives may be lost, what is the status of the rescue operations. All these pieces of information take time to become clear.

So we did our best to ascertain what the information was, and the decision was made to right away cut short the event to

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Florida and return to Washington. So Dan Bartlett and I started to work on remarks for the President about what to say when he went before the larger school group to say he had to return to Washington and why.

The President talked to us about the remarks and then he wrote his own on a piece of paper, and then left the holding room after -- I don't even know, five, 10 minutes, left the holding room to go to the bigger school group to make the announcement, which was a public event, when he said that I'm leaving Washington, there's been an apparent terrorist attack on the United States. And then we flew out of that school.

Q There was a TV in the holding room.

MR. FLEISCHER: Correct.

Q Do you remember the television, do you remember the President watching it?

MR. FLEISCHER: You know, Scott, at a time like this, it's funny how you just don't remember certain things. I didn't even know there was a TV in that room until I saw pictures of it later. We didn't have time to stop and watch TV; what we were doing was trying to ascertain the information from the experts back on the phone in Washington. We didn't have time to take in the raw emotion of what everybody else in America was going through. The focus right away was learning the facts from the people back on the ground in Washington and thinking about what is it the President needed to say when he was before the larger school group, which of course would be what is the first thing he's going to say to the nation.

So the focus wasn't to stop and take in what TV was showing the American people and the world; the focus was on the President's about to address the nation, what should the President say.

Q We see the President on the secure phone in the photographs from the holding room. What was he saying?

MR. FLEISCHER: What happened, do we know who was responsible, how many lives have been lost, what's the status of the rescue effort, does New York have everything it needs, is the federal government giving it the resources it needs. It's all the human questions, the emotional questions, and then the

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mechanics of the government. Are we getting New Yorkers what they need.

Q All questions at that moment that didn't have answers.

MR. FLEISCHER: That's right. That's what happened. Everybody was still just stunned. All Americans were just watching the TV, glued to events, trying to ascertain what happened and how many lives were lost and whether or not people could be rescued. We were confident, we were able to start marshaling resources to get them to New York. The government does have good emergency responses, which unfortunately had to be put into effect.

Q Tell me about leaving the school.

MR. FLEISCHER: Well, we immediately boarded the motorcade and flew out of there. All I remember is we were going fast. And we got to the airport and boarded Air Force One and I went directly into the President's cabin. Typically, I will go back into a staff cabin, a few sections back from the President. And this time, the President motioned to me to come into his cabin and there I stayed. The President wanted me to stay there and spend the rest of the flight in his cabin. So I was able to watch what he watched, hear what he heard, and see who he spoke to on the phone.

And the President asked me to make sure that I took down everything that was said. I think he understood the gravity of what was happening, and he wanted to make certain that a record existed. And so the President asked me to take notes about everything that was done and said, and I did. I took a whole series of pretty close to verbatim notes of all the President's conversations.

Q You were in a staff vehicle in the motorcade. Just for my information, Ari, who was in the car with the President?

MR. FLEISCHER: I think the President traveled alone. The President was in his limo and he went back. And it was during the ride back that the President heard about the attack on the Pentagon.

Q What can you tell me about that?

MR. FLEISCHER: First, when the President got on Air Force One, he got on the phone with the Vice President. The first

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thing he said, even before he boarded, was he wanted to make certain that his wife and his children were taken care of and were safe.

He got on the phone with the Vice President and then he said, I heard about the Pentagon, it looks like we have a minor war going on here. And then the Vice President, who had already been relocated from his office in the West Wing into the secure bunker, the Vice President on an open phone line through the duration of the flight kept the President informed of all the latest developments.

Q When the President was concerned about his own family, if I recall it correctly from when we talked about this before, the President climbs the stairs into Air Force 1, enters the airplane, and finds his lead Secret Service agent in there.

MR. FLEISCHER: Exactly. The lead Secret Service agent boards the plane at the same time -- pretty much the same time the President does. And so the President goes up the ramp of the plane and his agent is either there ahead of him or right behind him.

Q And the first thing he said?

MR. FLEISCHER: Make sure my wife and my daughters are taken somewhere safe. The President understood, especially after the plane hit the -- I think it's fair to say that when we left Florida, we had no reason to expect there to be any other attacks. We thought this was an attack on our country and the two towers of the World Trade Center were hit. Never in our wildest imagination did we think there'd be more to come. And the President got the information about the Pentagon on the drive back, and then who knew what else was going to come next.

Q Tell me about taking off from Sarasota.

MR. FLEISCHER: We took off in what felt like a rocket ship. Air Force One is generally a pretty speedy plane, but this time it felt different. It just took off faster, it flew at a sharper angle upward, I don't know. I just remember it felt different from any other takeoff I've ever been on, and we rapidly climbed out of Florida on our way back to Washington. And then the President on the phone, working the phone, made the whole series of calls and evaluations about what was taking place and made several important decisions from Air Force One.

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Air Force One is set up, as a result of the Cold War, as a real command center. It's got very good communications. And in the old days, it was set up in case of a different type of emergency, a nuclear attack on the United States, to be able to be an airborne operations command center. And that it became this day.

Q And it never had been before. This was the first time.

MR. FLEISCHER: I guess that's right.

Q Tell me -- just paint the picture for me, if you would, Ari, in the President's cabin. You've just taken off. He's -- on the phone? Who's he talking to? What's he saying?

MR. FLEISCHER: He was mostly on the phone with the Vice President. He would also be on the phone with Condi, and there were several other points that he was on the phone with Secretary Rumsfeld.

But what struck me the most was the fog of war. The early information we had -- we boarded Air Force One at about 9:45 a.m. And the early information we had -- of course, now we knew the two towers had been hit, the Pentagon had been hit. But the first reports also were that there was a car bomb at the State Department, the Mall was on fire.

We had a report that there were six unidentified aircraft, unaccounted-for aircraft. We accounted for three at that moment -- of course, the plane hadn't gone down in Pennsylvania at that time. And so there were three domestic aircraft unaccounted for. We also had a report that two international flights were unaccounted for. In other words, we thought there could be five more missiles in the skies somewhere.

Then we got the report of the plane that went down, ultimately, in Pennsylvania. The first report the President got on board Air Force One was a plane was down in the vicinity of Camp David. That's how that information was first presented to the President.

Again, all this swirl of information -- the car bomb at State, widely reported on the cables and on the networks, turned out to be erroneous. The Mall on fire turned out to be erroneous. The plane, of course, crashed in Pennsylvania, not

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-- well, it was the vicinity of Camp David, but it was in Pennsylvania.

Later that day, the President got a report that there was an unidentified aircraft heading toward his ranch. We also got -- the report came in at 10:32 a.m., the President was on the phone with the Vice President, and the Vice President informed him that a call came into the White House stating that "Air Force One" -- and they used the code name for Air Force One -- "Air Force one is next." And I remember the President turned to his military aide and related that the Vice President just said that.

So it was a whole swirl of information, four pieces of which turned out to be true -- World Trade Center, Pentagon, Pennsylvania. But so many other reports are flying through the transom about other threats to our country.

Q But this was the state of the President's knowledge in that moment. That all of these things were happening.

MR. FLEISCHER: That's exactly right. And this is where you hear people say -- and I've heard the President say it -- that there is a fog of war. As things like this happen, there's this information overload, and it becomes a key part of how to plan and what to do, that the President has to sift through all the information to determine what is right, what is wrong, and make judgments based on partial knowledge.

But what struck me throughout all of this, from the moment the President boarded the plane, at the moment that he said to the Vice President, "We're at war," the President knew our response was going to be we are a nation at war. And to me, that, more than anything else, set us on a course that allowed us to be so quickly victorious in Afghanistan versus al Qaeda, because everything the President did in his conversations with the Vice President, with Dr. Rice, with Secretary Rumsfeld -- there was a conversation with Secretary Rumsfeld where the President said, I'm a patient man, but pretty soon the ball will be in your court and Dick Meyers' court to clean this up.

Q The Chairman of the Joint Chiefs.

MR. FLEISCHER: The Chairman of the Joint Chiefs, Dick Meyers. The President's message to his policy makers was I'm going to be patient, but prepare for war. This won't be sanctions, this won't be an intermediate course, this won't be

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an international conference where we will eventually ratchet it up over time. The President's first mission was we are at war.

Q Within -- literally minutes.

MR. FLEISCHER: As soon as he boarded Air Force One, on his first call with the Vice President.

And I'm struck by that, because I really think that it's at moments like that that leaders set a tone that others then follow. And it doesn't have to be the way it was. It did not have to be this way. I think other leaders justifiably could have come to different conclusions. This President knew America was attacked, the World Trade Center had been demolished, lives of the American people were taken. There was no other response, other than we are a nation at war.

Q When the President on the telephone looked up to his military aide and said Air Force One is next, you must have thought, if just a moment, that you might not survive the day.

MR. FLEISCHER: No, I -- you know, when you -- the President is obviously the target of so much. But because he's the target of so much, it was probably the safest spot to be at that time. I never thought that anything would happen to Air Force One.

Threats come in, threats come and go. I never thought -- first of all, the ability for anybody to do anything to Air Force One in midair is infinitesimally small. Air Force One is very well equipped to take care of itself.

The risk was landing Air Force One at a known location -- obviously, especially with the fact that there were -- the international flights unaccounted for. After the plane went down in southern Pennsylvania, there were still two unaccounted-for domestic flights. There were still four planes that we could not yet account for. The risk was landing Air Force One at a known, predictable location like Andrews Air Force Base. The enemy had already shown an ability to land airplanes and to fix targets. Putting Air Force One down at Andrews, a predictable location, was security people's worst nightmare. And that was one of the reasons why the Vice President and Dr. Rice all recommended to the President he not return to Washington until, as Andy Card put it, the dust would settle and we could assess the threat.

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Q He didn't like that advice.

MR. FLEISCHER: No, the President didn't. At one point, he said he didn't want any tinhorn terrorist keeping him out of Washington. He wanted to get back to Washington. But as events later showed, we made a decision, the President and the Vice President were kept physically apart because of the ongoing threat risk to the continuity of government. And until events cleared in Washington, the judgment was continuity of government has to come first. And that's why the President was kept out of Washington.

Q Come on. He really said, "I don't want a tinhorn terrorist to keep me out of Washington"?

MR. FLEISCHER: Yes. That's verbatim. It's what the man said.

Q That's our President. Let me just glance at my notes here for just half a second. And obviously --

You didn't know the answer to this question before, and you may not know it now. The decision to go to Barksdale. Do you -- have you researched that since?

MR. FLEISCHER: No, I haven't. I'm still not clear.

Q How did that happen in the air, though, in terms of -- everyone thinks you're going to Washington. You've been flying in that direction for more than an hour. And then suddenly there's a left turn in Louisiana.

MR. FLEISCHER: The decision was made not to return to Washington because of the threat risk. And I don't -- I think Barksdale was chosen because obviously it's a secure military facility, and anywhere we were going to go at that point, we had no assets, we had no motorcade, we had a skeletal Secret Service crew -- security was going to be the first focus. And I just don't know if Air Force One needed to have additional refueling to handle any contingencies, what the decision was.

But we got to Barksdale, and just hustled off the airplane, went into the commanding general's office, and the President continued to get information from there. He also, at Barksdale, spoke with Governor Pataki and Mayor Giuliani. He spoke with Senator Schumer and told him that all the resources of the government would be available to help New Yorkers.

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And it was there he got the report of an unidentified aircraft coming toward the ranch, which of course also turned out to be false. And then he addressed the nation for the second time that day.

Q And the point of that speech was what?

MR. FLEISCHER: Again, that the nation was under attack, apparent terrorism. The resources of the government are being marshaled to help New Yorkers, to help Pennsylvania, to help the Pentagon. And this will not stand.

Q At the point you came to leave Barksdale, the President did not have what he usually travels with. He did not have a Secret Service team on the ground, he did not have his motorcade, et cetera. Paint that picture for me. What did that departure look like?

MR. FLEISCHER: White House travel is such a choreographed, detailed, security-arranged event that you leave the White House -- now it's routine for staff, for the armored limos, all the cars in just the right order. There's what's called a secure package that has all the highly armed people in it.

None of that was at Barksdale, because of course it was an unplanned stop, and none of the equipment was flown in ahead of time. I'll never forget when we left Barksdale Air Force Base, the President left in what's called a camouflage up-armored Humvee -- armored vehicle, had a machine-gun turret in the top -- no machine gun present in it, but the turret was there. And as we drove on the tarmac to Air Force One, there are security police, Air Force security police with their automatic weapons out; guard dogs all over the place, facing out to the woods, looking at the fence line.

It's just a scene you don't imagine in the United States. You know, it's the type of thing that you can see sometimes if you travel abroad. All of a sudden, all of what Europe had gone through with terrorism in the '60s, the '70s, and the '80s, we were going through. And even the President's traveling motorcade was in the middle of it.

Q The flight to Offutt. What occurs then?

MR. FLEISCHER: On the flight to Offutt, the President continued to work the phones with the Vice President and the

Secretary of Defense to get information about the rescue efforts in New York, rescue efforts in the Pentagon and southwest Pennsylvania. He was preparing then for the National Security Council meeting which he called that afternoon -- that was the first session where the President was able to have everybody in one place at one time. When he was traveling on Air Force One and when he was at Barksdale, everything was still phone work, the President getting information on the phone.

One of the reasons they decided to go to Offutt was because of the communications capability there. He was able to go into one command-and-control center and have many different people on videoconferences all around, wherever he needed them to be.

Q By the time Air Force One is flying to Offutt Air Force Base, there are some themes that are emerging in the President's thinking, some important thresholds that he's already crossed.

MR. FLEISCHER: That's right. The President was already thinking there about if you harbor a terrorist, you are a terrorist. The President was thinking about -- obviously, the compassion side of all of this. I think two thoughts were racing through his mind: one is help for the people who were suffering, and two was preparing a nation for what inevitably would come next. Because I think, again, the President had made the judgment, he'll be patient, he wants to collect the information. But make no mistake, the only response America had was to go to war.

Q To put it in the context of the telephone calls, as the President is speaking to the Vice President and speaking to the Secretary of Defense, there are some clear themes already emerging within the first hours, in terms of the President's thinking. What is he saying to those men that tells us the hurdles he's already crossed?

MR. FLEISCHER: Well, let me see -- let me go back and -

Q Just tell me what your notes say, Ari.

MR. FLEISCHER: Here's what the President said on the flight out to Offutt, when he's talking to the Vice President. This is at 1:20 p.m. in the afternoon. He said, "Our focus of the National Security Council meeting should be to find these

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people and to get them." He talked about his wanting to come home. And then he said, "This administration will spend whatever is necessary to find, hunt down, destroy whoever did this."

He talked to Giuliani and Pataki on the phone. He said, "Our sympathies are with you and the people of New York. I know your heart is broken. Anything we can do to help, let us know." And then on the flight home, the President, when he's on the phone with Karen Hughes, is going over the speech that he wanted to make to the nation that night. And he said to Karen, "We will find these people and they will suffer the consequences of taking on this nation. We will do what it takes. Everyone must understand, this will not stand." And he said, "No one is going to diminish the spirit of this country."

And that became part of what he said that night. He talked about how the world is uniting against terrorism. And that became much of what he said.

And then one final scene: as the President landed at Andrews Air Force Base, on his way back to Washington, he was in Marine One, flying over the Mall. And as the Marine helicopter flies over the Mall, it banks toward the White House, and the Pentagon is plainly visible out of the left window, where the President was sitting.

And I'll never forget, the President said out loud -- no one in particular; he just said out loud -- "The mightiest building in the world is on fire. This is the 21st century of war we're now witnessing." And that was the President's first actual eye-to-eye glance with the terror that struck our country.

Q First time he'd seen it in person. The President arrives at the White House, first order of business, address to the nation.

MR. FLEISCHER: The first order of business, the President went right away from the helicopter into the White House and into his private dining room, where Condi and Karen and Andy and I and several others were waiting, and went over, started going over the speech he was going to give that night. On the plane, he had dictated most of it to Karen. Karen and Mike Gerson worked on the speech remarks, and then they showed the President the first draft.

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Q There were some things about the draft he wasn't satisfied with.

MR. FLEISCHER: The President went through it, crossed some things off, put some things in. And this is, interestingly, where the notion of "if you harbor a terrorist, you are a terrorist," which was a major change in America's doctrine, was enunciated. The President said that to the nation that night.

And then after the speech, the President went down into the bunker, into what's called the PEOC, for the second National Security Council meeting of the day.

Q The language about not just going after the terrorists, but those who harbor them --

(Break in interview.)

Q Should I attribute all of the quotes that we talked about to you?

MR. FLEISCHER: Any way you want to do them. Either just say, "the President said," or if you want to attribute -- I think it's cleaner just to say, "the President said."

Q Yes, right. But there's a small difference between saying you were the notetaker and others on the plane heard him say. But if you're happy being the notetaker, I think it's all the better, because we know where they come from.

MR. FLEISCHER: Either way.

Q The language that America was going to go after not just the terrorists, but those who harbor them, where did that come from? It was a huge change in American policy.

MR. FLEISCHER: That was a result of work that began during the transition, and then during a National Security Council review of what to do about terrorism.

Q Months before the attacks?

MR. FLEISCHER: Months before the attacks. And that was reflected in the thinking of the National Security Council, the advice the President received. And that's why when the attack took place it wasn't as if a new debate had been launched. The President actually just immediately implemented what had been

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working its way through the National Security Council system and recommendation to the President.

I remember one meeting with members of Congress where the President put it a little differently, and he said we won't only strike the rattlesnake, we're going to strike the rancher. And that's how the President viewed this. And it was a key issue because the Taliban did make it possible for al Qaeda to take on this action. It's also one of the vital issues of our day now because those who give safe passage or harbor terrorists are now on notice. It's part of the worldwide war against terror.

Q Were you in the second NSC meeting in the PEOC that night?

MR. FLEISCHER: No.

Q Okay, all right. In the days after the attacks, one of the stops the President made was the Washington Hospital Center, went to the burn unit to see some of the people who were grievously wounded at the Pentagon. What were those scenes like?

MR. FLEISCHER: Well, this is where -- there was so much sadness on the 11th, of course, for everybody who was involved. The President was traveling. The President got his personal taste of sadness when he started visiting the families and the victims. And the President went to the Washington Hospital Center and he met the head physician there. I'll never forget the doctor greeted the President by saying, "I wish we had more patients," which is a strange thing for a doctor to say at a hospital, he wants more patients. But it was a sign of how few survivors there were from the Pentagon attack.

So the President goes in and he starts meeting with the family members and is making small talk with the relatives and saying, he's got the best care in the world here, the doctors are the best, anything we can do, and tell me about your son, tell me about your daughter. And people just take wonderful comfort in the President, and it was just such a poignant time. The President goes from room to room, visiting, and Mrs. Bush visiting the people who have been injured who are healthy enough to take a visitor, have the President there.

And part of it was light-hearted. There was one point where I remember he went in and there was somebody who wasn't in the burn ward, he was in -- people who were in a little bit

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better condition. And he was Special Forces. And the President asked him if he was a Ranger, and he looked at the President from his hospital bed and he said, "My IQ is too high to be a Ranger." I mean, he, still in the midst of all this, had the good-natured rivalry with the military.

But it was some of the saddest things to see a mother standing next to her burned son whose rescuer was standing at the side of the bed, and the burned son could barely speak to the President, but he mustered a salute, in one case. Sad day. Very touching. And the President started to personally feel the pain of the people who had lost their lives or were wounded, and of course, the trauma of the families.

Q You can see in the photographs the look on the President's face, on the First Lady's face -- they're deeply shaken by that.

MR. FLEISCHER: I don't know that any man or woman can go to any hospital and meet with these heroes and meet with these victims and meet with their loved ones and not be touched. I mean, it's part of what makes America such a great community, and it's part, also, of what, no matter who a President is, makes us such a great nation, because the Presidents do get touched and they do feel what happens to our country.

Q Let's leap ahead, Ari, to Ground Zero. The President arrives at Ground Zero. What did you see in his face, in his eyes, as he beheld this terrible calamity?

MR. FLEISCHER: Well, Friday, the 14th, in many ways was the toughest, most emotional, saddest day of them all. Ten miles out, after Air Force One arrived in a military base in New Jersey, ten miles out in the helicopter you could already smell the burning of the World Trade Center from the air. And then the President went into the rubble of the World Trade Center. And I'm a New Yorker, and to see this massive building where I've had dinner at Windows On The World reduced to such a small pile, it was just heartache and gut-wrenching. It's hard to understand the enormity of it. By standing there, somehow it just didn't make sense, it couldn't be. And there is the World Trade Center just a pile, standing at the feet of the President and Mayor Giuliani and Governor Pataki.

And I remember at one moment as we stood there, a fighter jet flew overhead, which is another odd feeling. To be raised in New York, you never see fighter jets flying over Manhattan.

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And there, thank goodness, is a fighter jet keeping us free -- but a fear, there's a fighter jet keeping us free. All that is part of the scene.

Q The President was supposed to tour the wreckage for a few minutes and leave.

MR. FLEISCHER: The President stayed at the World Trade Center site longer than had been scheduled. And I just think it was something he had to see. He had to feel what New York was feeling. He had to be on the ground. And of course, as he went in and met with all the rescue workers, a lot of big, burly, dedicated, heartbroken men and women, whose only effort was to find the lost and bring them out, find the missing, there was that moment where the President was speaking, the totally unplanned moment on the top of what turned out to be a burned-out fire truck, with the megaphone, and one of them yelled at the President, "We can't hear you!"— And the President gave his now famous remarks about, I hear you, and pretty soon the whole world will hear us. And I think that captured the mood of the nation right there.

Q How did that come to be, the decision the President would make remarks off the cuff? I mean, you guys don't like that, you don't do that.

MR. FLEISCHER: It just did. The President was just surrounded by this sea of rescue workers, and one of the advance people said, these people want to hear you, they want to hear from you. And she found a bullhorn, and it was just a moment that took place. Andy Card came up to me and said, the President wants to talk to them. He's going to go right up to that spot, standing right next to that gentleman, Bob Beckwith, the firefighter, retired firefighter. And that spot was just chosen because it was an identifiable place for the President to move to. And so the President climbed up there and draped his arms around Mr. Beckwith, and speaking to the New Yorkers, he spoke to the nation.

Q Moving on ahead to the Javits Center, explain to me what the Javits Center was supposed to be, and then what it became.

MR. FLEISCHER: The Javits Center was to go up there and shake the hands and thank all the rescue workers who were also prepositioned at the Javits Center. Then the heart of it was to spend 45 minutes with some 200 families of the firefighters and

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the policemen whose relatives were missing. And this is the saddest day of my life, and for the President, it was, I think, the deepest, most emotional part of it all.

Forty-five minutes became two hours, as the President listened to each and every person's story about their relatives. There wasn't a soul in that room who thought their relatives were dead. Everyone thought they were missing. I had one family come up to me and say, my son is a Marine. If anybody can get out, it's my son. There wasn't a person in that room who didn't think differently. They all thought their relative was missing and would get out.

And people would come up to the President -- I remember this one woman came up to him with a picture of her husband, and she asked the President to sign it. And then she slid it into her Bible. A young child, a little boy, was in his uncle's arms, and he had a picture of his father. And the uncle held him up, he was eye-level with the President, and he points at a picture of his dad and says, "This is my daddy." And the President signs it, and says, "I'm sure he's going to be just fine," gives it back to the little boy.

I mean, there wasn't a dry eye in the room, including the President's. The Secret Service stood back, they just let it be a moment between the President and New Yorkers. And I just get the sense from that day, the President drew from their sorrow the strength to lead the nation to doing what was right, to remember what this was all about, and this was all about an attack that took the lives of these firemen and these policemen, husbands and wives and sons and daughters. And the President was touched by that, he got touched and felt it.

That's also where Arlene Howard, the mother of a police officer whose son died on September 11th, and they found his police shield on his body. And the police, in the police tradition, gave the shield to his mom. His mom gave her son's shield to the President, which later became the shield the President held up when he addressed the nation on September 20th.

It was just all emotion, gut-wrenching, everyone crying, and the President went through what the nation went through.

Q Where's the shield today?

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MR. FLEISCHER: The President still keeps it, travels with it pretty often. He will refer to it from time to time. It's a very physical reminder of people whose lives were taken.

Q Well, what have we left out? Oh, I know, there is one scene that you painted, Ari, that I realize and that is leaving the Javits Center. And I want to capture that.

Let's pick up at the end of the Javits Center. Obviously, a tremendously moving moment for the President. But you leave the Javits Center, and what happens next in the motorcade?

MR. FLEISCHER: Well, now it's pretty late at night, and the President has gone through all of this, the nation is going through all of this. And we drive down 42nd Street. And 42nd Street in my hometown could have been Main Street in any small midwestern town. It was 15-20 people deep, holding candles, signs saying, "God bless the United States," "God bless America." Just compassion and warmth everywhere.

And we drive by the billboard at Times Square, which is going around with a sign saying, "Bush calls up 50,000 reservists." And the day that began at the National Cathedral with the playing of "The Battle Hymn of the Republic," ended going down 42nd Street, "Bush calls up 50,000 reservists," -- after all the sadness and the hugging and the love and the families, you could just feel the winds of war were blowing. And that's how we left New York.

Q One of the criticisms that day, well-informed or not, on September 11 was that the President should have come back to Washington sooner, and not hop-scotched across America.

MR. FLEISCHER: Well, looking back, even on a day of national trauma and national crisis, I guess there are some people who can't help themselves and will engage in some of the lowest cheap shots. Security, continuity of our government was on everybody's mind, and those people can live with what they accuse the President of.

Q But in terms of the security picture that day, coming back to Washington, not a good idea.

MR. FLEISCHER: The President is paid to make judgments, and his advisors are paid to make judgments based on what's good for the country, not what's good for the President's image. He did what was good for the country.

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Q Terrific.

Let me just ask you, Ari, you're charging up the stairs behind the President and you go into the President's cabin -- what does he say to you?

MR. FLEISCHER: The President wanted me to come into his cabin and then I sat down and started recording what the President was doing and saying. He said, I want you to just keep notes on everything that happens today.

Q Why?

MR. FLEISCHER: Well, I think the President understood the momentous -- the gravity of the moment, the history of the moment, and history can't exist if somebody isn't there to just take note. And the President understood that intuitively. And that's part of the presidency now. And so much of what was said on that day, I just noted, I kept track.

Q What did you do? Just give me a sense. I mean, obviously, you had a legal pad, and those are the actual notes.

MR. FLEISCHER: I had really two jobs that day. One was to give the President any advice that I thought he needed to have, and the second was to take notes, to keep track of what the President was doing and saying. And so I was able to sit in his cabin and listen to everything he said and did.

The only times that I left were when he had conversations with his wife or his father. Or at one point, he called Ted Olson on the flight back from Nebraska -- Ted Olson, whose wife was killed. And I thought for those moments, the President should be alone, have all the privacy he wanted. But other than that, I really much stayed at the President's side and was able to just keep track of what he did. And now it really forms just an interesting, historical collection of what made the President do what he did, what he said, why he said what he said, and what was going through his mind as the country went through September 11th.

Q Terrific. I appreciate all the time you've given us.

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Q The President is in town today?

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MR. FLEISCHER: He's at his physical right now. He did the Missing Children's event this morning. He's having his physical, and then he'll come back and do trade promotion authority. And then he'll be gone, he'll be a missing adult.

Q He's going to be at the ranch for how long?

MR. FLEISCHER: Gets down there tonight, and then it's 25 days he'll be based out of there. He'll probably be there for about half of it, almost through the rest of it will do a lot of travel. And then I bet you he'll have about two, hopefully, two solid weeks where he won't, hopefully, have anything interrupt on a daily basis, and he can have a vacation. But otherwise, you know the routine, the White House goes with him and he'll be traveling around.

Q What does he do on the ranch -- for two weeks?

MR. FLEISCHER: Oh, my God, he does things that probably no other mortal should do. He runs in 100-degree weather and savors it. He has the 100-degree club -- I don't know if you've heard of this thing -- 100-degree club, will give you a t-shirt and a certificate saying you ran 3 miles with the President in 100-plus weather. This morning he was ribbing people saying, the worst thing in the world is to do the run and find out it was only 99 degrees. And then you've got to come back and do it again.

Q I'll take him up on that sometime. Are you a runner?

MR. FLEISCHER: A little bit, not -- I don't know if I'll make the club.

END

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