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Terrorist Attacks

Internal Transcript

August 12, 2002

INTERVIEW OF DIRECTOR OF COMMUNICATIONS DAN BARTLETT
BY HOWARD ROSENBERG OF ABC

Room 459
Dwight D. Eisenhower Executive Office Building

1:35 P.M. EDT

Q Okay. So it's 8:46 a.m. You're already in Emma Booker Elementary School. You're -- where? In the holding room back there?

MR. BARTLETT: We are. Well, it really started as the motorcade was pulling up to the school. And each staffer has his or her own way of being notified about press developments, news developments and such -- particularly if the President is going to be exposed to the media in which he may be asked a question.

And it was almost simultaneous that myself and Ari Fleischer and Karl Rove all started getting calls and pages. Mine was from my assistant here at the White House, who said, "Dan, there's just been an incredible accident, or something; a plane has hit the World Trade Center." And like most people, it was met with disbelief or just kind of bewilderment, about how something like that could happen.

So, you know, our first instincts, obviously, is to inform the President before the President goes into the school. Karl Rove and I and some others were standing there and informed him of this -- and which, he being a former pilot, had kind of the same reaction, going, "Was it bad weather?" And they said no, apparently not. He couldn't understand it, and thought it might have been a small aircraft or something like that.

He quickly got on the phone with Condoleezza Rice before he went into his event. And this was a typical day; we were really pushing, then, the President's education message and the pending legislation before the Congress. And these events are what we call two-tier events: there's a smaller event before the general remarks that he would give. And this was going to be an opportunity for him to meet with some schoolchildren there at the school.

Just before that, we had converted one of the classrooms into a staff hold room, so the President can confer with staff or

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do whatever is necessary. And so before he went in with the children to read, he called the Situation Room and got a hold of Condi Rice, and she was saying we don't have any hard intelligence on this yet. Could be a crash, could be, you know, an accident of some sort, don't know. We can't rule anything out. "Stay on top of it," he orders. "I'm going to go in here and do this, and let's keep in touch."

So the President at that point is in the classroom with the children, and with the press, and reporters who probably don't have any information as well. We are still in the hold room, and in comes the information about the second plane hitting the second tower.

And at that point, the demeanor in the school, or at least in our room, as well as -- you could see it, the rippling effect of people being informed about what was happening. Still, most of the tone was disbelief and not knowing what was going on.

We're quickly in communication with people back at the White House. It's now clear that there is some sort of attack of some sort. We, at this point, are still not in the point of categorizing what kind of attack it was. You think, instinctively, terrorism, but with no more information than that, you're still almost in disbelief.

At that point, Secretary Card, Andy Card, the Chief of Staff, decided to go into the classroom and briefly interrupt the meeting to let the President know, the famous words, Mr. President, America is under attack, a second plane has hit the World Trade Center.

Q You remained at that time in the holding area?

MR. BARTLETT: We did. At that point, we were trying to find -- we didn't have a TV in there at that point, so we were asking -- asked the advance people to get some, to get a TV. At this point, you know, they have the secure phone there, so we're starting to have communications back to the White House.

The President is, as I said, inside the classroom. Ari Fleischer's in there, and he's informing the President -- he had written on the back of his notepad, Don't make a statement, because we don't know enough. He was standing in front of the press, to kind of give him a note, to -- let's depart, let's gather some more information. And then, if need be, we could make a response of some sort. Again, not knowing if this is the end, the beginning, whatever it may be.

Q Then there's a frame that Eric Draper has taken, where the President is sort of walking purposefully into the holding room. You're sort of over, I think, on his left, right behind him. And there's that monitor you were talking about, sort of playing in the background.

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Then the President sits at a table there, speaking on a secure phone -- I assume it's a secure phone --

MR. BARTLETT: It is.

Q -- it has a little key on it. And behind him, his back is to the television monitor. And in that television monitor is the searing image of the World Trade Center towers ablaze. And there was a really, as I say, almost iconic frame that Eric Draper snapped, where you are pointing right at that television. It's 9:25 a.m. in the morning. Do you -- can you tell me what was going on at that moment?

MR. BARTLETT: Again, I think this is -- would be the first time that the President would have seen his first images of the actual attack. He's focused on the task at hand, of talking, but I think, either just before that or just after, he does turn and look himself. And -- it's disbelief. You almost can't believe what you're seeing.

And I instinctively just pointed at it. But at that point, the President briefly looked back at the images, but was focused on the conversations. And I think at that point, the President spoke to the Vice President in the hold there. He also spoke to Director Mueller, the Director of the FBI, to start talking about the investigation, what was happening at that point. And he also spoke to Governor Pataki of New York, to talk about the emergency efforts at that point.

Q There you are. Are you saying to the President, "Look back here, you can see" --

MR. BARTLETT: Yes. And like I said, that was the first time the President had a visual confirmation of what he had been hearing. And it didn't really -- he didn't spend a lot of time looking at it. His mind is racing forward, as far as the things we need to do in order to respond and protect the American people. But many of us in the room at that time --

And throughout this whole time, the whole day, you have these competing instincts and reactions. One is your job, and you are instinctively thinking through your mind what we need to do next, as far as making sure the President performs his job up to the standards of the American people. But at the same time, we're going through this just like every other American. And you're having the same sort of reactions any human being would when you see this.

So you find yourself throughout the day, and particularly in those early moments, of being jolted. And that's probably why I pointed at the picture, of just -- like I said, just like how every American was glued to their sets throughout that day, of disbelief. And sometimes it's difficult to compartmentalize --

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well, it's impossible to -- your personal feelings about something, and at the same time try to perform your duties, which we were forced to do.

Q And then you hot-footed it over to the airport.

MR. BARTLETT: The fastest motorcade ride I've ever been on. And they typically are fast. But this one in particular, I remember the President -- well, first we worked on the President's remarks. He gave a brief statement. At this point, we were all under the impression we were going back to Washington.

And we dive in -- we get in the motorcade beforehand, because we knew right when the President was going to finish, it was going to be quickly out the door. Like I said, there was already -- there's an incredible security presence anywhere the President goes, and particularly around Air Force One. But I could even see the redoubling of that, of a military, more of a military presence at the airport, as opposed to just a security -- of local police officers or anything like that.

And so I do remember when we got to the airport, it was a very quick departure. We got on -- off the motorcade and onto the plane. At this point, most of us, the President went straight into the Presidential cabin, which he has his personal office there, and a handful of us aides went in with him, again under the impression that we're having a quick flight back to Washington to continue to be on top of the developments as they took place.

Q Do you recall what time you got to the airport?

MR. BARTLETT: I don't.

Q Had the Pentagon been struck?

MR. BARTLETT: It's somewhere in the motorcade ride, is exactly when the Pentagon was struck.

Q So, that was 9:38 a.m. local time --

MR. BARTLETT: 9:38 a.m.

Q -- and your time, same time. So by the time you get to the airport, the Pentagon has been attacked. Suddenly, things are looking a little different. You get on the plane, and it was pretty, I understand, a pretty quick takeoff.

MR. BARTLETT: It was like taking off in a rocket. And again, for security purposes, traditionally Air Force One has a pretty quick departure and arrival. But this one was like no other that we've experienced. Many of us were not buckled in, and really had to brace ourselves to handle the impact of taking

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off. And for the first 15 minutes, it was almost straight up, and really moving at a quick pace.

Q So, certainly, there -- now both World Trade Centers have been attacked, the Pentagon has been attacked. By this point, the White House has been evacuated at least once, the Capitol evacuation is underway -- all of which you must be hearing. And a whole different dimension has been added to what appeared to be a coordinated attack on New York City; now it's unclear exactly the dimensions of that attack and how widespread it might be.

And so what's going on there in the President's cabin on Air Force One, en route -- suddenly you're banking to the west and heading for Louisiana, as opposed to heading north?

MR. BARTLETT: Well, this is where the phrase "fog of war" comes in. And you hear about it, but until you experience it, it's difficult to comprehend. But at this point, we're getting an incredible amount of raw information coming in from all different places: first, we have the TVs on in Air Force One, picking up broadcasts of what's going on. So we're getting some unfiltered reporting from either New York or, now, from Washington.

We have information coming in through the Situation Room. And we have the direct conversations the President's having with principals back at the White House -- the Vice President and Condoleezza Rice. So at this point, you don't know -- we don't know, now, the duration of this attack, how -- what is left, and if it was going to get even more severe, for lack of a better word, or if the White House was next.

We're starting -- this is when you're starting to get information about unaccounted-for aircraft still in the air. We're in the point of trying to land all these planes at one time, or at least make communication with them. And at this point, I think, in these early hours, there were at one point still a dozen or so airplanes that we couldn't communicate with -- or at least the information getting to Air Force One was that we hadn't had communications.

Now, to give a good example of how, in the fog of war, how things get kind of confusing, is we have the State Department car bomb report, which is now being confirmed, when in fact it hadn't happened. But more importantly with Flight 93 -- and this is a situation where there was a plane that we were told had crashed over the eastern Kentucky border. And so we think there's now four aircraft that had crashed, and we didn't know the details of that.

Well, it turns out that was Flight 93, where the hijackers had turned off the transponder, which had not been -- and aviation officials just quickly assumed when that transponder

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went off, that means that it had crashed. And in fact, that was Flight 93 banking back to the east, and had turned off the transponder.

Q Somewhere south of Cincinnati --

MR. BARTLETT: That's correct.

Q -- and was turning. Turning east, and was being picked up at that point by military radar out of Suffrage*, Michigan, Air Force Base. And they had a flight of planes heading to intercept that plane, at least its last track that they could see.

And around this time, which would have been about 9:45 a.m., 9:50 a.m. in the morning, you're on Air Force One. You're heading up. And at that point, as I understand it, the Vice President -- around that period of time, briefed into a secure conference call that was being coordinated through the National Military Command Center, and said the President has ordered that any plane threatening Washington should be shot down.

Now, were you in the President's cabin when that discussion took place with the Vice President?

MR. BARTLETT: I was.

Shoot Down

Q Can you tell us about that?

MR. BARTLETT: Well, my understanding was that the Pentagon had authorized the flying of CAPs, basically to put aircraft up in the air to protect both Washington, D.C., and New York City for further attacks.

They called over to the Situation Room at the White House, and I believe talked to Steve Hadley, the Deputy National Security Advisor, and said, We need rules of engagement. We need to know specifically what is approved as far as if we were to encounter an incoming aircraft.

The Vice President, after conferring with aides there, called the President on Air Force One, briefed him on the situation there, and asked for -- and recommended collectively from the security staff there -- that they be given the full authorization to shoot down aircraft, knowing the type of damage they were attempting to inflict on large population centers.

The President, knowing full well that you were giving orders to potentially bring the loss of life to American civilians -- it was a very difficult one, but he took the phone call, and I do recall him saying, "You have my full authorization." And he repeated it.

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And as he was looking out the window, I just remember, it was an eerie, kind of eerie, surreal feeling up there. So quiet -- you felt safe, because you were with the President, but you're also in the air, and at one point you kind of have in you mind that we're the only aircraft besides the bad guys that are still up in the air.

And it's kind of a -- and it was interesting. I found not only the President, but all of us, looking out the windows a lot. Sometimes looking for the fighter escort and things like that, but other times you didn't know what you were looking for. You were almost hoping that you looked out there and didn't see anything.

And I just remember that there's a picture of the President on the phone, looking out the window there. And it was something that we did throughout the day, I think almost, like I said, instinctively, for reassurance of some sort.

Now, at the same time this is going on, again, right around the same time the President's giving this authorization, we have another fog of war moment where there is some sort of thought that there might have been a specific threat to Air Force One. So here we have this information. At this point, we do have fighter escorts, but it just added, obviously, to the drama of the day.

Q Is that on the way to Baton Rouge?

AFI Threat

MR. BARTLETT: That is. That is.

Q Had you heard that potential threat to Air Force One?

MR. BARTLETT: It was either -- it happened during that time. I might not have been informed about it until after we landed at Barksdale, there in Baton Rouge.

Q And most of the folks that I've talked to who were on board Air Force One that day don't describe seeing fighters until they were on their way back to Andrews from Offutt.

MR. BARTLETT: You could see them -- you couldn't see them throughout the flight from Florida to Baton Rouge, but you could -- right when we were on descent into Barksdale, if you looked back, you could see them. They were trailing us; you could see them peel off. But they were back there.

But then when we did come into the Washington, D.C., airspace later that evening, they -- I could almost see the stubble of the beards of the pilots, is how close they were. They were right on our wing tips, and we were all out there looking out the windows. And one of the pilots actually tipped his wings at us, that's how close they were to us.

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Q And what was that feeling like, when you saw those planes literally wingtip-to-wingtip with Air Force One? First of all, what was the feeling like earlier? You felt vulnerable?

MR. BARTLETT: You feel -- there's just an incredible amount of uncertainty. As the day progressed, and the more information we were receiving -- at this point, there's a sense of in waves, that the first wave was over, of attacks.

But there was still an anxious feeling about our own security and such, particularly for returning back to Washington, D.C. But as you saw those pilots out there, all of us, including the President, I think, just -- our emotions swelled, as well as our patriotism and such, and feeling reassured by seeing those pilots out there. Seeing America's pilots on our wing tips out there was a real reassuring feeling.

Q One of the few people on board Air Force One on the flight to Omaha and then back to Andrews described it as being on a "Twilight Zone" plane -- that here was this huge, enormous vessel, and virtually no one around. Did you have the sense that you were in a bit of a cocoon up there, sort of --

MR. BARTLETT: Completely. Completely. We felt totally divorced from what was going on, probably on -- not only, obviously, on the ground in Washington and New York, but throughout the country. And it just was -- I just remember being -- at one point, there was a lot of talking over each other, people running around and trying to coordinate. But at the same time, it was quiet, it was real -- surreal out there.

And it just -- it felt -- like I said, there's parts of you knowing you're with the President, so you're safe. I had family members, of course, calling my wife and such, wondering if I was okay. And I was more worried about people back at the White House; that was the one area we felt more worried about.

And I tell you, the first time that it really, I think, hit home for many of us that this, what was happening was real was we got the information about Ted Olson's wife, who had tragically died in -- Flight 93, I believe.

Q Seventy-seven.

MR. BARTLETT: Seventy-seven, I'm sorry. And that hit home for everyone, somebody who we all knew quite well, to put a face with this act that had just happened, and knowing somebody personally -- really sunk in.

And then, when we landed at Andrews Air Force Base, got in the helicopters to go over to the White House, and seeing a deserted city, and flying right over the Pentagon with a war-zone-like atmosphere, it just -- it was a harsh reality from what we had just experienced. Because again, flying across the

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country in Air Force One and landing at first Barksdale, but then to Offutt Air Force Base, which I don't think even many living Presidents ever witness or see that place during their presidencies. And you go there, and to experience that, and then be back up in the air -- like I said, was sort of a surreal, divorced feeling from what was going on.

And then it would just -- it was like being splashed with cold water when we got off the plane and got in the helicopters and flew over what had just taken place.

Q Were you in the command center there at Offutt, during the National Security Council meeting?

MR. BARTLETT: I was not. I was in the room outside. I think just Andy Card and the President, from that standpoint, was in the room.

Q If you look back at September 11th, 2001, and you -- you've mentioned a few of those images, a few of those moments that were really etched in your memory, now a little clearer than they were as the events unfolded that day -- try to think back and tell me which one of those images, which one of those moments, for you evokes, brings back in a rush, all of the other memories of that day.

MR. BARTLETT: I think the enormity of the events, and the historic nature of the events, hit me most at the end of the day. And that was when we had just gotten back to the White House, the President had just spoken to the nation. He was still sitting behind the desk, just as the cameras had gone off just after he had just addressed the nation.

And looking back and seeing him sitting behind that desk, and then walking out into the Rose Garden, where many other Presidents who had had to make historic addresses to the nation in very trying times -- I think that's, from a historical perspective, the -- just the proportionality of what had just happened really hit home.

As far as what evokes memories of why we're proud to be Americans and such, has to be seeing how the professionals, particularly in the military and the Secret Service, operated during those critical hours. The military aide to the President, somebody who's at his side at all times, who's in charge of the nuclear codes, or coordinate anything in case of events of emergency, national emergency -- to see how calmly they did their jobs. The fighter escorts, the coordination of landing and things like that.

And seeing the Secret Service, who is an agency that obviously has to prepare for the worst, and plan and plan and plan, and anticipate. And then see these -- nobody could anticipate this, but to see them ad hoc do the things that they

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did in order to make sure that the President was secure was incredible to watch.

And then culminating with the pilots of the escorts, fighter jets, looking back at the President and giving acknowledgment to Air Force One by the tipping of the wings, was something that I'll never forget.

Q Thanks, Mr. Bartlett.

MR. BARTLETT: You bet.

END

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