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INTERVIEW OF NATIONAL SECURITY ADVISOR CONDOLEEZZA RICE  
BY  
EVAN THOMAS OF NEWSWEEK MAGAZINE

Dr. Rice's Office

1:09 P.M. EST

Q This project is half a book, basically. It will run in the year-end issue. It's our people's attempt to respond to Time's Man of the Year. (Laughter.) Every year, we have to figure out, what do we do about this? (Laughter.)

But it is a reconstruction of September 11th, and it has five characters. Predictably, Atta; a fire chief who was last seen rescuing a woman; a female burn victim who got out of Cantor Fitzgerald; a hero on Flight 93, probably Beamer or maybe the whole group. But we're going to reconstruct the last minutes on that plane. And the Vice President.

And each of these characters is a vehicle for telling a slightly larger story about either the World Trade Center or the White House or Flight 93; they will all be weaved in together. It's narrative. So it's not heavy on the analysis; it's storytelling.

DR. RICE: Yes.

Q Hopefully, minute-by-minute storytelling. It will do some foreshadowing. I mean, think of Shakespeare's five plays; the first act will be foreshadowing and the last act will be the aftermath of Act III. The climax will be late in Act III.

Roughly, each story will have probably equal space, depending -- I mean, Flight 93 may get a little bit more -- but roughly 12,000 words. So, each chunk is -- 12,000 words is a lot of words. I approached Mary about this, Mary Matalin, who was nice enough to let me in the door. She gave me a list of people. I've only seen one so far, Eric Edelman. He started this process.

And I don't want to waste your time here, so I want to try to be efficient about this.

But I need you to try to walk me through, particularly, you know, 9:00 a.m. to at least 10:30 a.m. -- that kind of chaotic period -- and deal with the questions readers are going to have about the relationship between the President and the Vice President and how that worked; the fog of war, what's happening here; the decision that the Vice President revealed about, we'll shoot down the last plane if we have to, how that was reached, people are going to want to know about that.

And any -- you know, the thing that makes these work is telling detail. You've read enough novels and histories that what makes them work and makes them real is the human telling detail, the kind of odd moment when you think to yourself, X or Y. That's really what I'm -- it's both sort of the historical record, but it's such a weird, unparalleled moment that people are very curious about what it's like to be a human being at this unparalleled moment.

One thing Eric Edelman said to me, he's speaking on background, so --

MS. PEREZ: And so are we, by the way.

Q Okay.

MS. PEREZ: Those are the ground rules we talked about with Mary.

Q One thing, one other piece -- I said to Mary, I'm not going to read the story to her, but I'm going to walk through the story and tell her everything that's in it. One, so there are no surprises; and, two, that if there are any security issues, she can -- so that's the understanding.

But let's just start, if we can. I know you are chairing a director's meeting, is it called?

DR. RICE: That's right. My staff meeting, senior directors of the NSC staff.

I had heard before I left here that the first plane had crashed into the World Trade Center. And I thought to myself: what an odd accident. And had called the President to tell him about it. And he said, what kind of plane. And they said, well, they said it's twin engine, and then a few minutes later they said, no, it's a commercial plane. And I said, that's all we know right now, Mr. President.

And then I went downstairs for my senior directors' meeting, and about -- I usually go around the table, and had about three people in. Somebody was probably in mid-sentence about -- I don't know, Burundi or something. My EA, my executive assistant

handed me a note that said a second plane had hit the World Trade Center, and I thought, this is a terrorist attack.

And so I went in to the Situation Room, and I was trying to find Don Rumsfeld. And I was trying to get word out to Colin Powell, who I knew was in Latin America. And the first thought was to get everybody here for an emergency NSC meeting. And I turned around, and a plane had hit the Pentagon. I mean, I literally just saw it on a screen behind me.

Q You saw the impact?

DR. RICE: I saw the picture. I didn't actually see the impact; when I turned around, the plane had already hit the Pentagon.

Q What kind of a screen are you looking at?

DR. RICE: A television screen.

Q I mean, is it CNN or something?

DR. RICE: Yes. It's a television screen. And at that point, I said, principals need to stay where they are and go to their own secure facilities. And somebody grabbed me and said, you have to go to a secure facility here; the Vice President is already there.

And so I was escorted down into the bunker, in effect -- stopped for just one second to call my aunt and uncle and say, I'm all right and tell everybody, because, you know, it just occurred to me that there was going to be panic in my family when they saw these things happen.

And when I got there, the Vice President was already there, and he had already established a line to the President. Now, back in the Situation Room, I talked to the President one last time before I went to the bunker. And he had said, I'm coming back to Washington. But I had already said to him, you know, somebody had said to me, are you sure you want him to come back to Washington, because Washington is under attack.

And so I said, Mr. President, the thought now is you shouldn't come back to Washington. And he had talked to the Vice President, who had said the same thing. And so when I got to the bunker, the Vice President was there. He had already told the President that the thinking was that he shouldn't come back to Washington.

Q When you say "the thinking," who was doing this thinking?

DR. RICE: You know, the guy who works for me on -- for defense, I don't actually know if he had talked to the Vice

President about it, but we were trying to get -- when we knew that the President was going to come back, our first thought was to get fighter escorts for Air Force One. And so I had the guy who does defense policy for me over to try to figure out about fighter escorts. And that's when he said to me, are you sure you want to bring him back. And it sort of unfolded from there.

Q And then, it was after that conversation you talked to the President, who is still saying I want to come back?

DR. RICE: Right.

Q And you're saying, I don't think so.

DR. RICE: Right. You know, Washington is under attack, it's --

Q How is he responding to that? I mean, obviously people are very interested in his -- in emotional detail, in his initial reaction.

DR. RICE: Right. He was very calm. But he said, I'm coming back; and, I need to get back. And, frankly, it was a pretty confusing few minutes, because I had people pulling at my arm saying, you have to go to the bunker, and I was trying to talk to the President. It was --

Q And this is -- so it's after the Pentagon is hit -- I'm just trying to get the time line.

DR. RICE: Right. After the Pentagon is hit.

Q Edelman said that Clark -- Clark and Hadley said to him they think the Vice President should be moved. And this was before the Pentagon hit, after the second plane.

DR. RICE: Right.

Q So Edelman is actually moving down to find the Vice President.

DR. RICE: Right.

Q To tell him this. He does tell him this, and the Vice President says, no, I've got too much connectivity, I think, was the word he used. I'm not sure if that's the exact word he used. But I don't want to move, I want to stay here, because I'm wired in to the President.

DR. RICE: Yes. --We were asked two or three times, shouldn't you go someplace else. The first thing I think the Vice President did when he got there, because he already had the line up, was, establish a line to the President. Because he was talking to the President when I got to the PEOC.

*VP not leaving the PEOC*

Q Is that a video line?

DR. RICE: No, it's a phone line. It was a phone line. And he and the President were again talking about, no, the President couldn't come back. And it was just a couple of minutes after he put the phone down that a communicator from down in the bunker came over and said, there's a named threat to Air Force One.

Q Let me get this in the time line again. You are down there --

DR. RICE: I've gotten there.

Q -- the Pentagon has been hit, so it's like ten of 10:00 a.m.?

DR. RICE: Probably, yes.

Q The Pentagon is hit at 9:40 a.m.

DR. RICE: It's probably maybe ten of 10:00 a.m., 10:00 a.m., maybe, even.

Q Right. And a communicator -- what's a communicator?

DR. RICE: It's one of the military officers who work here, establishing phone lines and video lines and staying in touch with the national military command center.

Q And he comes in and you're on the PEOC.

DR. RICE: Right.

Q In the same room?

DR. RICE: Right.

Q And he comes in, and what does -- do you remember exactly what he said?

DR. RICE: He said, ma'am -- to me -- there has been a named threat against Air Force One. They say there is an attack pending on -- that the next attack is against -- and then he called a code name for Air Force One.

Q He used a code name?

DR. RICE: Yes.

Q Which you're not going to tell me?

DR. RICE: Right. And the Vice President was right next to me. So if there was ever at that point any thought that the

President might come back, it was now gone, because we knew we didn't want him to land at Andrews.

And the first order of business was to try to get him to a secure location where he could operate -- the President to a secure location where he could operate.

Q Let me pull the string back, if I can, on this, because there's been so much written about this throughout. Did you guys ever figure out how this got into the system, how this gremlin crept in there?

AFI  
Threat

DR. RICE: The best we can tell, there was a call that talked about events -- something happening to the President on the ground in Florida. And that somehow got interpreted as Air Force One. And by the time it got to me, it was Air Force One. And that maybe --

Q Did they call it a crank call?

DR. RICE: I -- we don't -- look, I don't know. I don't know if it was a crank call or a real threat or -- I don't think we're going to ever know.

Q I mean, how did they know about the code name?

DR. RICE: That's why we still continue to suspect it wasn't a crank call. -- But who would have even known the code name is still beyond --



Q The threat, as far as the President on the ground, maybe they weren't using the code. Is it possible that your own communicators stuck the code in?

DR. RICE: It's possible the communicators stuck the code in. But you talk about fog of war, you know. What struck me since is people who said, well, they've now admitted that there might not have been a threat to Air Force One.

Well, you know, at 10:00 a.m. when the Pentagon has just been hit, and you're in a bunker in the White House, it doesn't actually occur to you to question the authenticity of such a call.

Q This all sounds perfectly believable to me. This got on the radar screen because Karl Rove was calling around town later in the day, so it immediately became suspect. If Rove is doing this -- (laughter) -- it has to be spin; you know, we're just in our simple world, it must be spin. Which is why it took that turn. And then, of course, it couldn't have been a real -- I don't think it could have been a real threat -- could it have been a real threat? It could have been a real threat.

DR. RICE: I mean, these people had just hit the Pentagon.

MS. PEREZ: The Trade Towers no longer exist.

DR. RICE: The Trade Towers no longer exist. We don't know whether or not there has been a car bomb at the State Department, because that's another report.

Q Yes, that was on CNN. This is sort of an interesting question: you're getting some of this stuff off of CNN, which is muddying the water even more.

DR. RICE: Right.

Q And there's no way to sort of filter that?

DR. RICE: Well, we -- for instance, the State Department threat, we called, and they said, they didn't think they had been hit. (Laughter.) But these are big buildings, you know, and was it in some other part of the building? They didn't know.

So we're down there, and the first order of business was to find a place to get the President to, and there are several possibilities -- should he go to Cheyenne Mountain, should he go to Offutt. They wanted to get him on the ground as soon as possible, because he was determined to make the first statement to the nation.

*Louisiana*

And so that's why they went to Louisiana first, to Barksdale, Louisiana.

Q Now, was there any debate about the appearance of being out of pocket -- not out of pocket, being not in Washington?

DR. RICE: It wasn't about the appearance. Later on, once the President was at a secure place, I think -- you will have to ask the Vice President -- I was still concerned about his coming back, period, that night. He was, by the time he got to Offutt, determined that he was coming back here.

Q And did you express your concern to him?

DR. RICE: Yes.

Q And how did he react to it?

DR. RICE: He said, I've got to come back, I have to be back, I've got to be in Washington. So, you know, I had done my job, which was to express concern about him.

Q And you're concerned because why? You just didn't know the nature of --

DR. RICE: Because we just -- I mean, maybe if I explain kind of what then transpired, because --

Q Yes, I'm sorry.

DR. RICE: The question of why at that moment are you worried about whether the President should come back or -- what you don't know is what's coming next. And the first -- my first thing was to get a cable, to get Rich Armitage at State to get a cable out to all posts saying, the United States government has not been decapitated. The United States government is functioning.

And then to call the Russians and say, we're going on alert, but you really shouldn't worry about that. And that's when Putin, who had been trying to call, said, not only are we not worried about that, we're standing down the exercise that we have underway.

And then I went into the central room, and the Vice President and Norm Mineta were there. And the President -- the Vice President had asked the President, on behalf of Mineta, should we ground all aviation. And Mineta had recommended that we just ground all aviation at that point.

*Grounding Aviation*

And it became an exercise in trying to account for aircraft. So if you think about it, some aircraft are landing early, because they're near major airports; some have to get diverted; and then there was some number -- and I think the number was about 22, as I remember it -- that for an extended period of time, were not accounted for.

Q An extended period of time, meaning how long?

DR. RICE: Like an hour and a half or so, where the tail numbers weren't matching up. And Norm was literally sitting there on the phone saying, you know, United 706 is headed for Memphis, but -- no, check that, it's United 607. I mean, you talk about the fog of war, when you're trying to account for civilian aircraft because you know that civilian aircraft are now the weapon of choice, you don't know where the next -- is it just Washington, is it just New York, is it about to start happening in Omaha and in Los Angeles?

And so a lot of the decisions are made in that context of what's coming next, and having no idea of what's coming next.

Q Which brings me what to do about Flight 93 and how -- when that comes into your consciousness that this is a problem?

*#93*

DR. RICE: Early.

Q The Pentagon is hit at 9:40 a.m.

DR. RICE: Right.

Q The plane makes its turn at -- a little bit before the Pentagon is hit, maybe 9:35 a.m.

DR. RICE: Right.

Q There is about a half-hour period by the time it makes its turn until the time it goes into the ground, outside of Pittsburgh.

DR. RICE: That's right. And for that half-hour, not knowing precisely what it was doing. And Rumsfeld had -- you know, the fighters had scrambled by that time. And he asked the Vice President, he said to the Vice President, I have to have a decision on rules of engagement. And the Vice President talked to the President and said, we have to talk about rules of engagement. What if the plane doesn't respond?

And I wasn't on that call; I was around. My memory of it is that the Vice President said, so, sir, do you want to give them the authority if it doesn't respond, to shoot it down. The President said, yes.

Q Did he use the words "shoot it down"?

DR. RICE: I don't know. I think he may have said "bring it down," or -- I don't remember.

Q Now, how -- again, how -- this is such an extraordinary order for the President of the United States to give the go-ahead to his own military to shoot down a commercial airliner, sort of so over the top.

DR. RICE: Yes.

Q What are people -- what are you thinking?

DR. RICE: That struck me. You know, in that kind of two hours, not much had -- you're just kind of moving through, you don't have time to think.

Q Yes.

DR. RICE: But I did think what a condition we found ourselves in, that we had given -- the President of the United States had given an order to bring down that aircraft if it had to be brought down.

The next -- you know, when it crashed, we didn't actually know, initially, whether we had brought it down or whether it had crashed. Rumsfeld, not too long after that, said that they had no information of a fighter firing on a civilian aircraft. And I think that was, frankly, a relief to everybody.

Q Did anybody say anything?

DR. RICE: I think people said, that's a relief; thank God we didn't.

Q Edelman recalls Cheney saying, the Vice President saying, I think an act of heroism has been committed. Do you remember that?

DR. RICE: I don't. I don't. I might have been in the other room.

*Other Room?*

Q You say, you know, you're just moving right through. Did you have any -- was there any palpable sense of danger when you heard that this plane was coming back to Washington? And how were you aware of it? How was it conveyed to you that it was tracking back to Washington?

*93*

DR. RICE: It was conveyed that it was on a path toward Washington. And it wasn't at that moment that anybody said "toward" -- I don't think anybody said "toward the White House," not at that moment. --A little bit later -- was it the Capitol, was it the White House, but on a path toward Washington. I think in our minds, the fact that they had already hit the Pentagon and that it made sense that the White House might be next -- in my mind it did.

Q Right.

DR. RICE: But I don't remember feeling any particular sense of personal danger. I do remember just thinking, what comes next, how many of these are out there. That's why tracing -- trying to track the planes -- I mean, the Vice President was literally sitting there, by hand, writing down tail numbers as Norm Mineta was relaying them.

Q Right. Yes. I've got to call Mineta.

DR. RICE: Yes. Mineta was right there in the Sit Room on the phone with the FAA the entire time.

Q Did you have any -- the FAA is not famous for being the most efficient bureaucracy in the world. Was there any impatience or any wrinkle on the -- did you have any feeling that the FAA was not coming through with the info?

DR. RICE: No. You know, it wasn't frustration at the FAA. It was frustration with the situation -- that we couldn't somehow get the tail numbers right, that we -- things kept changing. There was one moment when a plane was supposedly squawking that had left Madrid and was now on a path into Washington, and --

MS. PEREZ: Was that the one that was supposed to be flying in to San Francisco?

DR. RICE: Yes. It was one that was supposed to be coming to San Francisco from Madrid. And then, suddenly it was coming to Washington; then all of a sudden, it was back in Madrid. I mean, it was that kind of thing. And that was frustrating, because you felt you needed an orderly sense of what was actually going on. But I don't think anybody felt a sense of blame about it. Just the circumstances were very tight.

Q Do you look back -- do you think about this at all now? Are you so consumed with the day to day now that you don't have a chance to think about it? Or do you find yourself reflecting back at all on the extraordinary events?

DR. RICE: I find myself reflecting back.

Q And what comes to you? What do you -- as you try to sort through it, what are you thinking about?

DR. RICE: I still think back on the kind of moment when I realized it was a terrorist attack. I think that's the one that just kind of comes back frequently. And it's just a memory that's just there. You know, it just plays back. It doesn't play back in any particular horrific way or any particular way, it just plays back a lot.

Q Well, it was a moment that changed everything.

DR. RICE: It was a moment that changed everything. And I think the other thing that struck me a couple of times is that I'm sure the Vice President has been through many war games. I know I have. Because we're both veterans of the nuclear era.

Q Right.

DR. RICE: And I've also taught the decision simulations in every class I've ever taught. I just think it's a good way for kids to learn.

Q Sure.

DR. RICE: If you had written this scenario, people would have said it's not credible. (Laughter.) That's occurred to me time and time again.

Q How did it differ from all of those war games? How do war games differ from the real thing?

DR. RICE: In some ways, they don't. When I teach with war games, I'm always trying to remind my students that the information -- that getting information -- there are two problems with information: you never have the piece of information you most want, and you have a lot of extraneous information that you have to sort.

Q Yes.

DR. RICE: And that erroneous reports are a part of the landscape, that you have to try to put out of your head for the moment the context and just deal with what you're dealing with at that particular moment.

Like I said, I think there were some things that came directly out of nuclear war training, like, tell people the U.S. government is functioning.

Q Is that the word you used, the U.S. government has not been decapitated? Is that the jargon you used?

DR. RICE: No. I actually don't know what Rich wrote in the cable. That's the term I use because that's the term we use in nuclear war -- you've decapitated the U.S. government. He probably said the U.S. government is functioning.

Q Right.

DR. RICE: And then, you suddenly just realize, you know, it's not a game. That's the biggest revelation, it's not a game. Because there are times when -- there were times -- there still are, but there were times, particularly that day, that it felt like an out-of-body experience.

Q Right.

DR. RICE: That this couldn't actually be happening. But you just keep functioning, even though you don't really believe it's happening.

Q Yes. Edelman used that expression with me, out-of-body experience. And he mentioned, actually, in context with looking at some videotape of hitting the World Trade Center, and he quoted you as saying, it's like your worst nightmare. Does this ring a bell with you?

DR. RICE: Yes.

Q Saying this to him?

MS. PEREZ: You did say it.

DR. RICE: Yes. I did say that. I said, this is your worst nightmare.

I think people who were in that staff meeting, who told me that -- I don't remember it very well, but they told me -- you were there -- that I stopped mid-sentence.

MS. PEREZ: You did.

Q Excuse me? Oh, when it was said to you that --

DR. RICE: Yes.

Q And you don't remember -- you were talking about Burundi or something?

DR. RICE: I don't know. I don't remember who -- which senior director was reporting.

Q And somebody is whispering into your ear?

DR. RICE: Tony handed me a note.

Q And the note said?

DR. RICE: The note said, a second plane has hit the World Trade Center.

Q And what did you do right away?

DR. RICE: I just stopped.

Q Did you get up, or did you --

DR. RICE: I said I had to go. And -- did I say that a second plane had hit, or did I just say, I have to go? I don't remember.

MS. PEREZ: You must have said it, because we all knew it right away.

Q Now, the other thing that Edelman mentioned was -- this is my last question -- tonal questions, about tones of voice. You have confusion, but Cheney is famously cool to the point of being flatlined. (Laughter.) Was that the --

DR. RICE: Yes. I don't think anybody was -- there wasn't any rushing around. People were very calm, and everybody's voice stayed modulated. About quarter of 1:00 p.m., I looked at the Vice President and I said, have you eaten? And he said, actually, no. But you know, everybody just kind of went about their business. The only frustration was that we kept having trouble getting the TV to work.

Q You're kidding.

DR. RICE: No. It was -- you know, we were having trouble with the -- some of the video link, yes.

MS. PEREZ: You were getting SVTS connections with other parts of the government, and you couldn't do the SVTS at the same time you could do the CNN.

Q What is SVTS?

DR. RICE: TV conference. So if you were trying to do the video conference, you had trouble doing TV, and that was kind of frustrating to everybody.

MS. PEREZ: It took them a little while, but they did get it together. They got it right.

DR. RICE: Right. But it was -- you know, things like that, that are totally mundane.

Q Of course. And that's what you focus on. I mean, one thing I -- I've listened to the tapes of the Cuban Missile Crisis, which are hard to hear and a lot of jargon and all that, and it's generally a lot of white men of a certain age keeping their voices very steady.

But on the last day, on the last Saturday, you can start to hear the tension and the fatigue creeping in, even though everybody's working at it, because a U2 is shot down and all that. Did you ever hear the tension creeping in? Or, I guess the flip side was, did you sense people were working at keeping modulated tones of voice? Did you feel you had to work at keeping --

DR. RICE: No, no, I didn't. I felt focused the whole time. I remember saying to somebody, we have to write everything down. You have to have a log of everything, so start keeping a log. And I went and I got one of the secretaries and said, here, sit here and keep a log.

No, it's very workmanlike, in an odd sort of way. And I don't remember really focusing in some ways on the enormity of it all until Thursday night, believe it or not. Thursday night, I went home about 11:00 p.m. and I flipped on the television, and at Buckingham Palace they were playing the American National Anthem. And that was actually the first time that I was even emotional about it.

Q Yes. A lot of people said that they -- this is so interesting. A lot of people cried for the first time, seeing that. There was some weird release thing, watching them stand -- you always want people to stand by you when you're --

DR. RICE: Right. That, for me, was -- it was a little bit of an emotional moment when the Russians said that they had stood down their exercises.

Q Tell me a little bit -- you said Putin, you were trying to reach Putin; Putin was reaching you?

DR. RICE: I was trying to reach the Defense Minister, Sergei Ivanov, and Putin was trying to reach us.

Q And did you speak to him, personally?

DR. RICE: Yes.

Q And he said -- what exercise were they doing?

DR. RICE: They were doing some military exercise.

Q And it was good to just have that reassurance that they were on your side, yes?

DR. RICE: Yes.

Q Thank you, appreciate it.

DR. RICE: Let me know if I can be of further help.

END

1:42 P.M. EST