

THE WHITE HOUSE

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National Commission on
Terrorist Attacks

INTERVIEW OF
ASHLEY ESTES, PRESIDENT'S PERSONAL SECRETARY
BY 60 MINUTES II

West Wing

MS. ESTES: (In progress) -- I was here, and we leave our TV on most of the time. We had seen the first plane hit. And it was like everybody else thought, what a horrible accident, how could that happen? And then I guess as the second plane hit, even then it's not something you were -- (inaudible) -- or imagine. And so it didn't really click exactly what had happened.

And then I guess the thing that -- I heard a noise, like a -- kind of like a body bumping a door, or something. And at that point, I kind of looked out into a hallway and saw the Vice President with Secret Service, that are always around him, but Secret Service this time was -- had kind of lifted him up, underneath his arms, and running with him. I was like, this is not normal, and why am I still sitting here?

At that point it did definitely register that this was -- there was something more to this. I guess my phone was still ringing, because people were trying to get in touch with the President. I remember getting a phone call -- I'm almost positive it was Mayor Giuliani. It might have been Governor Pataki. It was one of the two. And they were of course trying to reach the President. And at that point it was such a hurried situation.

Q I was just going to let her finish -- pardon us, Ashley, it's just if the circulus stops, we'll be in good shape.

MS. ESTES: Where is it?

Q You did great though, that was perfect.

(Interruption to interview.)

Q I'll ask -- we'll start from here. You're watching television. You see there have been two explosions, or you think that it's maybe pilot error or something into the Trade Center.

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And then you hear something against your office job. Is it loud? Is it more than just a bump? Does it sound like a knock?

MS. ESTES: It was more of a bump, it was a definite -- somebody hitting furniture, or a door or something. You were so -- everything that had just happened, it was so unreal, that you were very aware of every noise. And so I just kind of peered around to look at what the noise was, and -- (inaudible) -- always long the hallways, and you're accustomed to seeing them. But -- and they're usually walking with the principals, but this time they had kind of put their hands underneath -- by the sides of his body, and were carrying him -- running with him.

And so it was obviously not your normal sight. And I was like, this is not at all ordinary. It was obviously something big.

Q So it was literally -- you peaked your head out the door, just to see what the noise was, and you saw --

MS. ESTES: Him just getting carried away, basically.

Q Literally they had their hands under him, and they're rushing down the hall with him.

MS. ESTES: Running with him. And so at point you knew that this was -- you always talk about in the White House, I guess, the possibility of it being a really bad day. And that's what people call it, a bad day. And I was pretty sure it was a bad day.

Q Were they saying anything, were they explaining to him what was going on?

MS. ESTES: No, it was more of -- I think these guys are obviously very well trained, and this is what they're here for. And they were doing their job.

Q Just evacuating, not -- and did they say anything to you as they ran by? Were they telling people, let's get going?

MS. ESTES: No. One thing, obviously there's a lot of caring people here, and they were worried. But their job is to protect the people that are the leaders, and we (inaudible) here, hopefully. But, no, it was just --

Q So how did you find out that there was something going on? I mean, obviously you had a sense that something was wrong, but when did someone actually come in and say, Ashley, let's go.

MS. ESTES: It was a weird day because so many -- usually there's someone that's -- there's a lot of senior staff here. But that day, in particular, there were a lot of people traveling, there were some people that were doing site surveys for different things. And so there were a lot of -- there weren't as many senior staff around that would be able to -- and my phone was ringing. And so, of course, it's my job to answer. And I answered the phone, and it was -- I wish

I could remember for sure, but so much throughout the day -- it was either Mayor Giuliani or Governor Pataki. I remember it being New York. And they were trying to get in touch with the President.

And the President at that point, I don't think I knew where he was, just like everybody. They were being very cautious. And so either -- in trying to connect them to either signal or Air Force One or something, I remember actually Scott Sforza running down the hall -- or not running, he was walking, he was very calm -- and saying, there's a plane I think headed for the White House, I think we should get out of here. And so I grabbed my purse and walked calmly downstairs. We transferred our phones to the Sit Room, knowing at least somebody at least could answer them, and then we'd find out more what you needed to do.

And we got down to the Mess, and we kind of held with everybody else.

Q Paint the picture for me of the mess.

MS. ESTES: A lot of people. And people were sitting, people were standing. There was a TV in there. And that point, there were so many different reports. There was a report -- I think I remember hearing that the EEOB was on fire, or something. And my little brother works here as well, and he works in the EEOB. And so you were obviously thinking about your safety, but you were thinking about -- somebody that you love, too.

And there was the Pentagon. I remember seeing that before we left. And that's when you were just like -- no idea what to think of next, you know. You knew it was so planned and so coordinated. You just didn't know what was coming.

Q Anything was possible at that point. There's a story that goes, everybody -- as you said, you walked calmly down to the mess, and people were waiting, they were watching TV, and more information was coming in. But there came a point where the Service came in and directed the women especially.

MS. ESTES: We had been -- I had been out in the hall, because we were still concerned about the -- you were trying to do your job, but at the same time -- (inaudible) -- but we were leaving. We went up the stairs, and we went out to West Exec. And when we got to West Exec, I remember seeing Carl Truscott, who is the head of the President's detail. And he's always the person you kind of see right behind him, very stoic, and always very calm. He was out there, for whatever reason, wasn't traveling with the President that day. And I remember him yelling at me, but still calm, take off your shoes, and run, run through the gates. That's all I remember, is just run all the way through the gates.

And so basically that's what you did, we ran.

Q You literally took off your shoes --

MS. ESTES: We literally ran.

Q -- and ran.

MS. ESTES: Yes.

Q Another staffer told me that -- it's amazing to me that people were thinking so quickly on their feet, literally -- but people were beginning to realize, because you watched on TV, how coordinated this seemed to be, that as people were taking off their shoes and running, amongst you were saying to each other --

MS. ESTES: Don't clump up. That was the one thing -- it was so horrible, and you just - you knew that whoever had done something, and could do something like that, was capable, and had thought through what would be the next step, or what would be an evacuation, how could you -- and as you were running out, you just didn't -- people were yelling, don't be near the subway, or the metro. And they just didn't want anyone clumping up. They were yelling at you, take off your badge, that way you were identifiable. I mean, as you were frantically running, you were identifiable -- so you did.

I think we got in a group of three people, and someone still yelling, go past H street, or something. And once we got past there, I remember trying to call my parents from my cell phone, and of course the coverage was -- and so I'm not getting them. And then we just ended up walking to an office building here, and kind of going in there. And they were wonderful, and let us use their phones. And obviously everybody that day was incredible.

Q I'm just going to take you back, just a little bit. If you can remember that moment -- I can't imagine -- I've had bad plane rides, but I can't imagine anything being more frightening than being told by someone you know, Secret Service, you know, get going, run, take off your shoes, get moving. What was going through your mind? What were you thinking about as you were being told by the Secret Service to get moving?

MS. ESTES: You didn't think, you just ran. It was -- you just didn't.

Q No time to think. The staffer that I was speaking of before was saying that people were even saying -- telling each other, like you said, don't group together, there may be people out in Lafayette Park looking --

MS. ESTES: Right, people were waiting for a huge group of people to be standing all together. We've all -- and obviously, working in the White House, you're very -- you know what's going on out in the world, and you've watched in Israel and you've watched -- all the suicide bombings, and things like that. And you've thought through -- at that point you knew that anything was possible, and that you just want to be careful.

Q Do you remember how far you ran? I mean, were you running for blocks? Were you running --

MS. ESTES: We probably ran to H Street.

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Q So from here, that's -- I'm just -- because this will be for an audience that's not completely familiar.

MS. ESTES: Three, four blocks. It was either H or I.

Q Plenty, you ran plenty.

MS. ESTES: Plenty.

Q Did you have high heels on that day?

MS. ESTES: Yes, I did, of course. I never wear -- I'm always pretty good about flats, or something, and I had worn serious heels that day. Needless to say, I had a few runs in the hose, things like that. I wore flats for several days after the 11th.

Q When did you -- you said you transferred the President's phones down to the Sit Room. When was the first time you spoke to or heard the President's voice that day?

MS. ESTES: I had watched him on TV, give a statement in Florida. You get such strength from him, especially if you know what kind of person he is, and just that it was -- I mean, we watched him.

Q Did you have to patch through -- did you ever actually -- I'm not certain how this works, so I'm probably asking a very dumb question. You never sort of patched through a caller, and said, Mr. President --

MS. ESTES: I did not. On the day -- normally it's very -- not very easy, but pretty easy to determine where they are and how to get in touch with them. But with all that was going on, it was -- you knew that he would not want you to be sitting there, answering the phone to find him, if you were not safe yourself, or you didn't -- he would want you to worry about yourself, and deal with it a little bit later.

Q Do you remember the first time you spoke to him personally?

MS. ESTES: I do. He was -- he had come into the Oval. And every -- it really was -- there was no one here. Karen had come in, and she had actually gone outside to watch the helicopter come in. And for some reason, she was going to meet up with them, and didn't meet up with them. And I remember, anybody that watches the helicopter land on the South Lawn, it's incredible, and you are so aware of where you are, and you're in the White House. People don't -- it's in your backyard.

And from where I sit, you can see through the windows, every time. And you know where he's going, if he's going to the Residence or the Oval. That day though, it was just -- you knew as you watched it, you were watching just history. And as he walked across the lawn, and he was completely by himself, it was such a -- I just felt so much for him, because you knew how much he had on his shoulders at that time.

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But then as he walked in, he was so determined. His face was just not rattled at all. And he said something short. I remember it was like either, let's go, or, okay. Which -- he says things like that a lot, but he said it, and there were people -- they had been setting up in the Oval, because he was going to do the address that night from there. But they had cleared out, so that he could kind of walk in, and, obviously be in his office by himself.

And then he went to the private dining room. And then Karen and different people met up with him there, and kind of talked to him about what he was going to say that night. And then I guess as he came through -- I think he was going to the Residence, maybe to the PEOC, I'm not sure -- they were still doing all sorts of briefings in the press briefing room. I think Secretary Thompson they were -- kind of the Attorney General, they were trying to -- I was talking to an NSC press person, just out in the hall, about who was in there and what the word was, and where the President would be. And he walked through, and he had, at that point, there were several senior staff members with him. It was obviously -- my job is -- so much is it to not be around. You're helpful when you should be. I definitely just wanted to shrink into the background there, because you just wanted to be strong for him. You didn't want to be the wink link.

And I remember him stopping, and just kind of touching your arms, and being, Ashley. And it was -- he didn't even have to say, but it was -- he's just got such a big heart.

Q Meant a lot to you.

MS. ESTES: Definitely.

Q Did you -- what time -- did you stay later that evening because of the address?

MS. ESTES: We did stay later. We watched it from out here. And actually it was muted, because he was in there, and they have to leave the door just a tiny bit cracked. And we were afraid the echo of -- his sound, and being live. And he went, and they had one -- I think one meeting in the PEOC. And then one thing -- Secretary Card is wonderful, and very -- he had a complete just understanding of how hard the next couple of days were going to be, and it made no sense for everybody to stay up all night long and worry. I mean, you were going to be stressed out enough, and probably not sleep well. So we did sit here and talk. There was a lot of, what we felt like here at the White House, versus what they were hearing on the plane. But I think we probably were home by 11:00 p.m., 11:30 p.m.

Q Did you see the President out, did you -- no good night or anything? I'm just trying to --

MS. ESTES: No, he did the address. I think he came out here for a minute, and then he walked down the Colonnade, like he's done so many times. But I think just the one thing I remember is how -- usually you see him walking down the Colonnade and he's got staff, or somebody there. He was so by himself. It was just -- he just was by himself.

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Q Special day. So the next day, I can imagine your phone was pretty busy. Just give me a sense -- I'm not trying to pry into the President's private phone calls, but what kind of volume, and I can imagine everyone from the mayor, senators, world leaders.

MS. ESTES: We didn't -- I mean, obviously most of the New York congressional, and then the governor and mayor we were in constant contact with. And then with the Attorney General, the CIA Director and the FBI, Secretary Powell and Secretary Rumsfeld, everyone was -- it was a lot of staff. And we were using our secure phones, which normally we just use our regular phone. And so much changed, because you couldn't use -- it was so -- everyone was so unsure about what whoever had done this, you know, capabilities were, that you didn't feel comfortable using your Internet, or you didn't feel comfortable using a non-secure line to talk, anything about where he was or what he was doing or what the next plan was. And so there was a lot of face to face communication.

Q Now when the President wants to reach somebody, does that also come through you? Does he sort of call over to you, and say, Ashley, get me the director of CIA?

MS. ESTES: It definitely depends. He has --

Q He can do it himself.

MS. ESTES: He can do it himself. He does a lot of the time use -- we'll get somebody on the line, because especially at that time, you never knew where people were, if they were in press conferences or if they were in meetings. And so it would be easier for me to get somebody on the line probably.

Q I'm just -- there are some great anecdotes, for instance from aboard Air Force One, where you hear the President saying, get me the Vice President, I want to speak to the CIA Director. Anything like that? There was so much happening on the 12th, the 13th, the 14th, where something that sticks out in your mind, where the President said, I need to speak to X person, right now.

MS. ESTES: There were so many. I remember talking to Secretary Rumsfeld, and I mean I really -- there were just so many calls.

Q That's fine. I'll be the volume was unbelievable. But there wasn't one --

MS. ESTES: And there were a lot of calls for people that were in there meeting with him. So and so, there were always people updating information. And you would -- it was so horrible to walk in a note, because obviously it's so serious, and these important people I knew, and you're walking in and interrupting the meetings, that you were constantly walking in notes and updates.

Q It's probably like anything else. I had a job that sort of like your -- not as important, or even close to it, but you have to figure out this note means X, and he needs to see this right this moment.

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MS. ESTES: Definitely. Luckily, everybody that we work with knows that they don't want to waste anyone's time either. And so I felt pretty confident -- you definitely double check to make sure that you -- they understand what you're about to you, I'm going to walk in and interrupt. And if they said yes, you did it.

Q That makes absolute sense.

(Interruption to interview.)

Q Let's start with the phone call -- setting up of the phone call with the governor and the mayor. You helped set up that phone call?

MS. ESTES: I did. It was very complicated, because there were so many lines -- even if they said, call me on this number, you would ring and get a busy signal. There was a constant communication issue, at least in the early days. But we did set it -- we did get it to go through, and made sure that all sides could hear. The press was already assembled in the Oval kind of around him, and he took the call and talked about New York and what he was feeling.

And Mrs. Bush came at one point. A lot of times she'll come through just our little back door, and come in and check on him, or see what he's doing. But that day she was coming to meet him to go -- I think they were going to see some of the victims of the Pentagon, at the burn center. And so he was in the middle of the phone call when she came in. There's all these wires, and everything else. And so the door was open that day, so you could look in and watch him doing things live.

And I guess one of the reporters asked, how do you feel or what are you thinking about or what are you praying about. And I think when he said, "I don't think about myself right now," and he kind of teared up, watching her face, and knowing their relationship, she was so strong for him. And looking in -- and she was so proud, you could tell, as we all were proud, but just -- we get to see the side of him that so many people in the public see, but they don't fully understand. He's a wonderful leader, and so strong, but he just has the biggest heart. And for them to be able to see that he was going to do his job, but he cared what had happened. It was just -- I think that's one of the defining moments.

Q A lot of times it's difficult to see a loved one get emotional. It makes you get emotional immediately, whether it's your mom or your sister or whoever it is. Did she --

MS. ESTES: I think she just -- at that point, there were just -- I think she just wanted to be strong for him. I remember smiling at him. They have a really neat relationship, and they're always kind of joking, and there's a little bit of banter. But she just smiled at him. I know that she -- that was what he needed at that time.

Q So she was looking out that door at him?

MS. ESTES: Looking through at him. And I don't know that he was even aware that she was out here, because there was so much -- but I remember her coming back -- coming through, and they went to the back part, the study, when it was all over and people were cleaning up. I wasn't back there then.

Q Did she say anything while he was --

MS. ESTES: She didn't. She just -- you knew she was taking it all in.

Q Sure, just sort of smiled and was --

MS. ESTES: In an encouraging way.

Q -- what her husband was doing.

MS. ESTES: She knew that that's the way he felt, and it was okay.

Q Is there anything that I've left out? Is there one story that you, when you sit down with your friends, you say, you can't believe -- I mean, all of them are terrific, but is there anything I haven't asked you about? Is there -- we talked about the Vice President and we've talked about your responsibilities, we talked about the First Lady watching the President, the evacuation. Anything we've left out that you can think of?

MS. ESTES: No.

Q Let me just -- one more time and then we'll be all through. The evacuation, just so I have a better sense of sort of how it worked. You're in the mess, watching the TV, and then someone first sort of says calmly, okay, we're going to get of -- everybody is going to leave the White House?

MS. ESTES: I had been in one part of the mess, and then somebody had stuck their head in, and said, hey, can you come here, or whatever. I think it was Logan. He had been talking to the Sit Room, and we were trying to, like I said, figure out how to make sure the phones and everything was taken care of, if we were not there. And so I stepped out, and at that point, right when I stepped out and started talking to him, it's unclear exactly how it happened, but I remember people immediately started coming out of the Mess. And then there were people there just saying -- I think Hector was there -- kind of just -- and at that point it was still -- you weren't running, you were walking calmly out of the building, like they always tell you to do in an emergency or a fire. But then as we got up to the driveway that's when there were agents, and a lot of hands and you should take off your shoes and run.

Q And were they -- obviously everybody was leaving the building calmly, and then the agents were obviously being very professional.

MS. ESTES: They were not in any way panicked, but they were definitely very firm in their -- you need to take this seriously, and you need to run. Don't full around.

Q Take those shoes off and get going. Very good, Ashley, that's terrific.

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