

9/11: A Turning Point in the History of Aviation

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Introduction and Overview

Aircraft hijacking is a well-known phenomenon, international in scope that some speculate dates back historically to September 25, 1932, when a Panair do Brasil Sikorsky S38 amphibian was hijacked by three men (none of whom were pilots) and which crash landed in Brazil. Aircraft hijackings became much more prevalent in the 1970s and 1980s, and they continue into the present day. Some notable examples are the hijacking of Air France flight 139 during the 1976 Olympics, the mysterious, legendary case of a man popularly known as “D.B. Cooper” (November 24, 1971), who hijacked Northwest Airlines Boeing 727 (Flight 305), and who then parachuted out of the aircraft with \$200,000 in cash, and promptly disappeared, and the hijacking of a Continental Airlines DC-9 (January 11, 1987) by Norwood Emanuel, whose intention was to crash the aircraft into the White House.

Ordinary aircraft hijackings, however, were nothing when compared to the shocking and momentous events of September 11, 2001, when Islamist terrorists in commercial airliners attacked the World Trade Center in New York City, and the Pentagon outside Washington, D.C. Another airliner, whose intended target is not known, although some suspect it was the U.S. Capitol or White House, crash landed in Western Pennsylvania, Pa. In the words of Joanna Bourke, “at the beginning of the twenty-first century terrorists had demonstrated the ease with which the previous century’s great symbol of technological prowess—the aeroplane—could kill, maim, and terrify millions of people throughout the world. The ‘new warfare’ that had for many decades provoked terror in the Middle East, Africa, and the former Soviet republics now threatened Americans and Britons, fuelling a sense of fright that no one could avoid.”¹

In the aftermath, 9/11’s significance as a pivotal moment in the history of aviation has been largely forgotten in the larger context of a daring and historically significant attack on the United States. This is likewise true of the

Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor on December 7, 1941, in which the actual attack by aircraft has been subsumed into the context of a “day of infamy” and the United States’ entry into World War II. The point is that the history of aviation does have larger contexts, and these contexts are often more significant than the aviation history events that form their crux.²

In the case of 9/11, the event has given rise to a host of historical significances much larger than the actual act of terrorism. First of all, the official story has been questioned officially and unofficially. Two official investigations—the Joint Inquiry into the Terrorist Attacks of September 11, 2011 by the House Permanent Select Committee on Intelligence and the Senate Select Committee on Intelligence—and the National Commission on Terrorist Attacks Upon the United States, popularly known as the 9/11 Commission, were launched. Another notable building and fire safety investigation was the World Trade Center Disaster Study done by the National Institute of Standards and Technology, a non-regulatory branch of the U.S. Department of Commerce. The plethora of investigations, however, have not quelled charges of conspiracy some perhaps legitimate, considering the flaws in the official story, and some downright bizarre.

Finally, the events of 9/11 have produced the so-called “War on Terror,” characterized by actual wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, and by other events that have been perceived by some as placing severe restrictions on American civil liberties—the Patriot Act of 2001 and a license to use extraordinary measures, even torture (officially, “enhanced interrogation techniques”) to obtain information about terrorist threats. Finally, 9/11 has caused what might be termed a “rhetorical” war on terror, in which much of the approved discourse surrounding the event and its aftermath has tended to confirm and solidify notions of American exceptionalism and other deep-seated ideas of national identity.³

Modus Operandi

The amount information on the events that surround the terrorist attacks on September 11, 2001 is so vast and often so contradictory that attempting to present it in so short a space and time would be impossible. The National Archives in Washington, D.C. contains the records of the 9/11 Commission (officially titled the National Commission on Terrorist Attacks upon the United States), but only thirty-five percent of the Commission’s archived textual records are available to the public. A promise to open the full Commission records to the public by January 2009 has not been kept.

Therefore, it seems reasonable to focus here on events that are germane to the aviation (or aviation historical) aspects of 9/11. In so doing I will attempt to present a snapshot of some troubling aviation-associated questions. For example, why did FBI headquarters fail to act on information that Islamic nationals were enrolling in American flight schools? In the same vein, why were the actions of the Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) and the North American Aerospace Command (NORAD) so confused on the day of the attacks and in the aftermath so contradictory that dissenters from the official story (and official investigations) suspected a cover up? Nevertheless, in my attempt to limit the research here to these elements, I have run into a welter of confusion and contradiction.

In shaping these questions I have of necessity relied on secondary sources, which I have listed alphabetically by author in the final section of the paper. I am especially indebted to: *The 9/11 Commission Report: Final Report of the National Commission on Terrorist Attacks Upon the United States*, Authorized Edition (New York: W.W. Norton, 2004); Richard A. Clarke, *Against All Enemies: Inside America's War on Terror* (New York: Free Press, 2004); Bob Graham and Jeff Nussbaum, *Intelligence Matters: The CIA, the FBI, Saudi Arabia, and the Failures of America's War on Terror* (New York: Random House, 2004); Thomas H. Kean and Lee H. Hamilton, *Without Precedent: The Inside Story of the 9/11 Commission* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2006); Philip Shenon, *The Commission: The Uncensored History of the 9/11 Investigation* (New York: Hachette Book Group, 2008); Anthony Summers and Robbyn Swan, *The Eleventh Day: The Full Story of 9/11* (New York: Ballantine Books, 2011); Paul Thompson and the Center for Cooperative Research, *The Terror Timeline: Year by Year, Day by Day, Minute by Minute: A Comprehensive Chronicle of the Road to 9/11—and America's Response* (New York: HarperCollins, 2004); Lawrence Wright, *The Looming Tower: Al Qaeda and the Road to 9/11* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2006).

The Official Story

On September 11, 2001, terrorists hijacked four airliners in the United States. American Airlines Flight 11, flying from Boston to Los Angeles, hit the North Tower of the World Trade Center in New York City at 8:46 A.M. United Airlines Flight 175, also flying from Boston to Los Angeles, hit the South Tower of the World Trade Center at 9:03 A.M. American Airlines Flight 77, flying from Dulles International Airport, in the Virginian suburbs outside of Washington, D.C. to Los Angeles, hit the Pentagon Building in Washington, D.C. at 9:37 A.M. United Airlines Flight 93, flying from Newark to San Francisco, crash landed in Shanksville, Pa at 10:03 A.M. As a result nearly three thousand persons were killed, both World Trade Center Towers were

destroyed (with World Trade Center Building 7 falling down later that day), and many questions about how and why were left unanswered or answered to nearly no one's satisfaction. As 9/11 researcher Paul Thompson has remarked 'the full truth is not known at this time [2004]—and may never be known. There remain simply too many unanswered questions too many conflicting accounts, including those of the most senior administrative officials, all the way up to President Bush himself. However, one can review what we *do* know, judge the conflicting information based on what we *do* know, and draw at least some of our own conclusions.'⁴

The Official Investigations

The Joint Inquiry into the Terrorist Attacks of September 11, 2001 by the House Permanent Select Committee on Intelligence and the Senate Select Committee on Intelligence produced a report in December 2002 after ten months of work. The Joint Inquiry concluded that "The story of Sept. 11 is one replete with failures: to share information, to coordinate with other agencies; to understand the law, follow existing rules and procedures, and use available legal authorities in order to accomplish vital goals; to devote or redirect sufficient resources and personnel to counterterrorism work; to communicate priorities clearly and effectively to I.C. [intelligence community] components; to take seriously the crucial work of strategic counterterrorism analysis; and most importantly, to rise above parochial bureaucratic interests in the name of protecting the American people from terrorist attack."⁵

A notable finding of the Joint Inquiry was that in July 2001 an FBI field office in Phoenix had reason to believe that the Al Qaeda terror network was attempting to send students to the U.S. to attend civil aviation schools. The office recommended that FBI headquarters "accumulate a list of civil aviation university/colleges around the country; establish liaison with these schools; discuss the theories contained in the Phoenix EC [Electronic Communication] with the Intelligence Community; and consider seeking authority to obtain visa information concerning individuals seeking to attend flight schools."⁶

According to former U.S. Senator Bob Graham (D. Fla.), one of the principle leaders of the Joint Inquiry, agent Kenneth Williams of the FBI's Phoenix office, wrote a memo to higher-ups warning them of "an inordinate number of individuals of investigative interest who are attending or who have attended civil aviation universities and colleges in the state of Arizona. The inordinate number of these individuals attending these type of schools and [the] fatwas [they have issued] . . . gives reason to believe that a coordinated effort is underway to establish a cadre of individuals who will one day be working in the

civil aviation community around the world. These individuals will be in a position in the future to conduct terror activity against civil aviation targets.” Agent Williams made specific recommendations about how the FBI should deal with the situation, but his memo was essentially ignored and FBI Headquarters failed to take any action.⁷

Just before the Joint Inquiry published its report, the National Commission on Terrorist Attacks Upon the United States (informally called the 9/11 Commission), a bipartisan group chaired by Thomas Kean (Republican) governor of New Jersey and vice-chair Lee H. Hamilton (Democrat) and former U.S. Representative from Indiana was formed in November 2002. The Commission came about largely through the work of the so-called “Jersey Girls” a group of 9/11 widows who were part of a larger 9/11 Family Steering Committee. Troubled by the lack of openness and accountability in the official narrative of 9/11, this group pressed for an independent investigation.

After nearly two years’ work, the 9/11 Commission published its report, which made many recommendations in regard to the failure of the FAA and NORAD to act promptly. Specifically, the 9/11 Commission cited “The FAA’s capabilities to take aggressive, anticipatory security measures were especially weak. Any serious policy examination of a suicide hijacking scenario, critiquing each of the layers of the security system, could have suggested changes to fix glaring vulnerabilities—expanding no-fly lists, searching passengers identified by the CAPPS screening system, deploying Federal Air Marshals domestically, hardening cockpit doors, alerting air crew to a different kind of hijacking than what they had been trained to expect, or adjusting the training of controllers and managers in the FAA and NORAD.”⁸

Moreover, in their 9/11 Commission postmortem, *Without Precedent: The Story of the 9/11 Commission*, Thomas Kean and Lee Hamilton faulted the FAA and NORAD for not being forthcoming in providing the necessary documentation to the Commission: “Telling the 9/11 ‘story in the skies’ required a detailed account of the FAA’s cooperation with the North American Aerospace Defense Command (NORAD), the joint command of the United States and Canada that defends the airspace of North America. When military jets appeared in the sky over New York and Washington on 9/11, they were under NORAD command. To understand how the FAA and NORAD worked together to protect America’s skies that day, we had to find out when the FAA notified NORAD about the hijacked aircraft, and what NORAD did with that information. Regrettably, neither the FAA nor NORAD was forthcoming or comprehensive in answering our document requests.”⁹

The Dissenters

A notable dissenter to the official narrative of 9/11 was Kristen Breitweiser, herself one of the “Jersey Girls.” Breitweiser and other members of the “Jersey Girl” group were especially dissatisfied with the 9/11 Commission’s investigations. In particular, they were skeptical about the appointment of Philip D. Zelikow as the Commission’s Executive Staff Director because they believed that his ties to the White House and the Bush Administration were too close for him to be completely impartial. Zelikow presented an apparent conflict of interest, having previously worked closely with White House National Security Advisor Condoleezza Rice, and coauthored a book with her in 1997 titled *Germany Unified and Europe Transformed: A Study in Statecraft* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1995). He had also been a member of the Bush administration’s transition team and is credited with the September 2002 document that encouraged “preemptive war,” which is thought to have been the blueprint for the United States’ attack on Iraq.¹⁰

Aside from individual dissenters like Kristen Breitweiser are organized efforts like Scholars for 9/11 Truth and Scholars for 9/11 Truth & Justice, among many others, of the MIHOP (Made It Happen on Purpose) and LIHOP (Let It Happen on Purpose) school of conspiracy theorists. These groups question everything about the official story and are dubious about the authorized version of the attacks, especially about the Pentagon and Shanksville, Pennsylvania, crashes. In the case of the Pentagon crash (Flight 77), they claim that visible evidence does not corroborate the official account and that the building must have been hit by a missile. In the case of Flight 93, they claim that because of the widespread debris trail, the aircraft had to have been shot down. They are especially skeptical about the manner in which the North and South towers and Building 7 of the World Trade Center came down. The destruction of these buildings, they claim, could only have been caused by a controlled demolition.¹¹

Many of these arguments have been brought to the public’s attention over the internet, but even more have learned of them through a series of documentary films titled *Loose Change*, written and directed by Dylan Avery, whose most recent iteration is called *Loose Change: 9/11 An America Coup*. *Loose Change* alleges that the U.S. government conspired not only to perpetrate the attacks but also to cover up the true purpose of 9/11, which the film claims was a “false flag” operation designed to make it appear that the United States had been attacked by terrorists, when in fact it was an inside job perpetrated to provide impetus for an attack on Iraq and Saddam Hussein, its dictatorial President and to advance the aims of the neoconservative Project for the New

American Century, whose aim was to establish American global supremacy militarily and diplomatically in the wake of the downfall of the Soviet Union. Among the signatories of the Project's Statement of Principle were Dick Cheney, Donald Rumsfeld, and Paul Wolfowitz, key members of the George W. Bush administration.¹²

Conclusions

While I have tried to focus on the aviation/history of aviation aspects of 9/11, the questions I have posed about them seem to always lead in other directions. (Researching 9/11 is like a giant game of Whac-A-Mole; once you think you have established a fact, a counter-fact pops up that needs to be verified and authenticated.) The event is significant for the history of aviation because of the unique way that terrorists used hijacked civilian airliners to destroy American economic and military cultural landmarks. It is also significant in another respect. How did a country like the United States, which places so much emphasis on a multitude intelligence-gathering agencies and on an organization like the United States Air Force, a substantial part of which is designed to protect the country from aerial incursions, fail to see the terrorist threat that was imminent or to direct an aerial force to ward it off?

As mentioned earlier in the paper, the event is very much like the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor on December 7, 1941. In both cases, the attacks themselves have been overtaken by the larger events they created. In the case of 9/11, the United States declared a "War on Terror," which led to lengthy military wars in Afghanistan and Iraq. The pretext for the war in Iraq—weapons of mass destruction, or WMD in the jargon, is thought to have been false because no WMDs were actually ever found there. Meanwhile these wars were highly destructive in terms of casualties to military personnel and civilians, and widespread destruction of property. As of this writing, the situation in Iraq is volatile, and the country is in turmoil as the result of Islamic State militants. The U.S. has conducted airstrikes on rebel positions and sent advisors to determine what needs to be done to stabilize the government and quell the violence.

Moreover, 9/11 has led to what has been termed a "rhetorical" war on terror. The outcome of such a war is an exaggerated American exceptionalism and collective historical amnesia. In memorializing 9/11, Americans have given it an interpretation, as David Simpson points out, that invites a dualistic interpretation and, ultimately, "emptiness." Thus, "everything becomes a possible motive: the attack may then be the result of jealousy, of 'them' wanting what we have and destroying it because they cannot have it ('they hate our

freedom’); or it may be the result of an absolute negation, of ‘them’ responding to an intransigent fundamentalism wholly foreign to our professed ethic of tolerance; or it may stem from ‘them’ being too technologically undeveloped and/or cowardly to face their enemy in open combat. *They* are secretive, cowardly, primitive, inflexible: terrorists, followers of Islam. *We* are an open society, honorable, sophisticated, and committed to the global conversation and to respectful dialogue. We stand in place and identify ourselves; they are anonymous and everywhere.” Simpson goes on to point out that these assertions will not stand up to scrutiny.¹³

Another aspect of 9/11 that is significant for historians of aviation is the fact that the event was pivotal as an act that brought about the symbolic end of American aerial hegemony. As my colleague Jenifer Van Vleck has pointed out, “it is a grim but fitting irony, then, that the deadliest act of violence ever to occur on U.S. soil involved commercial airplanes. In spite of the many ways that aviation’s meanings have changed since the late 1960s, the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, testified to its enduring significance as a symbol of U.S. global power. Al Qaeda used commercial airplanes as the chosen instruments of America’s market empire to attack the market empire at its heart, the World Trade Center. ‘Ground zero,’ the name given to the Twin Towers smoldering ruins, bears a double meaning, for those building had also been ground zero of neoliberal globalization, from whence flowed the capital and commodity trades that made the United States the wealthiest and most powerful nation on earth—and which had infuriated those, including the 9/11 hijackers, who perceived themselves as the American Century’s enemies or casualties.”¹⁴

Despite the tragedy, near and far, and the unintended consequences of 9/11, the event offers an unparalleled opportunity for current and future historians of aviation. 9/11 opens the door to a contextualized history that sees the airplane as more than a mere object of American technological supremacy or American technological idolatry, but as a significant player in the political, diplomatic, military, and social-cultural history of the United States.

Footnotes

¹Joanna Bourke, *Fear: A Cultural History* (Emeryville, Calif.: Shoemaker & Hoard, 2005).

²See especially John W. Dower, *Cultures of War: Pearl Harbor, Hiroshima, 9-11, Iraq* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2010) and Emily S. Rosenberg, *A Date Which Will Live: Pearl Harbor in American History* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2003).

³The *Introduction and Overview* section of this paper is an expansion of footnote 11 in Dominick A. Pisano, “Review Essay: New Directions for the History of Aviation,” *American Studies*, 53:3 (2014), 74.

⁴Paul Thompson and the Center for Cooperative Research, *The Terror Timeline: Year by Year, Day by Day, Minute by Minute: A Comprehensive Chronicle of the Road to 9/11* (New York: HarperCollins, 2004), 348. See also Thompson, chapter 17, “The Day of 9/11,” 345-468, for a wide-ranging timeline of the day’s events.

⁵*Joint Inquiry Into Intelligence Community Activities Before and After the Terrorist Attacks of September 11, 2001, Report of the U.S. Senate Select Committee on Intelligence and U.S. House Permanent Select Committee on Intelligence Together with Additional Views*, 13. Hereafter cited as Joint Inquiry.

⁶*Joint Inquiry*, xiii.

⁷Graham, Bob; Nussbaum, Jeff (2004-09-14), *Intelligence Matters: The CIA, the FBI, Saudi Arabia, and the Failure of America's War on Terror* (Kindle Locations 948-950). Random House Publishing Group. Kindle Edition.

⁸National Commission on Terrorist Attacks (2011-05-16). *The 9/11 Commission Report: Final Report of the National Commission on Terrorist Attacks Upon the United States* (Authorized Edition) (p. 352). W. W. Norton & Company. Kindle Edition.]

⁹Kean, Thomas H. and Hamilton, Lee H. (2006-08-15). *Without Precedent: The Story of the 9/11 Commission* (Kindle Locations 1572-1577). Knopf Doubleday Publishing Group. Kindle Edition.

¹⁰Philip Shenon, *The Commission: The Uncensored History of the 9/11 Investigation* (New York: Hachette Book Group, 2008), 127-28. See also Kristen Breitweiser, *Wake-Up Call: The Political Education of a 9/11 Widow* (New York: Warner Books, 2006.)

¹¹For claims and counterclaims on these issues, see David Dunbar and Brad Reagan, eds., *Debunking 9/11 Myths: Why Conspiracy Theories Don't Stand Up to the Facts* (New York: Hearst Books, 2011).

¹²Other notable documentaries in this genre include *9/11: Press for Truth* (2006) produced by John Duffy and others, and which features the “Jersey Girls,” and *The Power of Nightmares: The Rise of the Politics of Fear*, a three-part BBC production written and produced by Adam Curtis, and which aired in October and November of 2004. More polished but equally provocative is *Fahrenheit 9/11* (2004) directed by Michael Moore.]

¹³David Simpson, *9/11: The Culture of Commemoration* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006).

¹⁴Jenifer Van Vleck, *Empire of the Air: Aviation and the American Ascendancy* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2013, 290-91).

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