

MEMORANDUM FOR THE RECORD

Commission Meeting with the President and Vice President of the United States
29 April 2004, 9:25-12:40

Location: Oval Office

Commission: All Commissioners and Executive Director Zelikow

White House: President, Vice President, Alberto Gonzales, Bryan Cunningham, and Tom Monheim

Drafted by: Zelikow (also consulting notes taken by other commissioners to prepare as complete a record as possible)

Reviewed by: Commissioners Ben-Veniste, Gorelick, and Roemer (as of May 12)

The meeting was preceded by a brief (5 to 10 minutes) meeting of the Chair and Vice Chair with the President, Vice President, and Chief of Staff Card.

The President and Vice President were seated in chairs in front of the fireplace. The President's demeanor throughout was relaxed. He answered questions without notes.

Commissioners and Gonzales were on sofas and chairs. Zelikow, Cunningham, and Monheim sat against the wall.

The portrait of Washington was over the fireplace, which was flanked by busts of Lincoln and Churchill. Paintings of southwestern landscapes are on the wall. It was a beautiful spring day.

Notes are not verbatim.

The President welcomed the Commission and expressed gratitude for its work. He wanted to be sure to say, at the outset, that he was extremely disappointed with the actions of the Attorney General (in publicizing documents to attack Commissioner Gorelick). The White House was not involved. He shared the Commission's concern. He was more than disappointed. He understood how the Commission felt. Government sometimes works that way. This wasn't necessary. The President added that he wanted the Commission to be able to do a good study. It should not be about blaming people. The Commission could help in studying how best to fight terror. The country was ill served by playing the blame game. The people would know about our displeasure (with Justice).

The President smilingly said he knew time was limited and he would try to answer questions briefly.

Declassified Under Authority of the
Interagency Security Classification Appeals
Panel, E.O. 13526, Sec. 5.3(b)(3)
ISCAP Appeal No. 2012-163, document 1
Declassification Date: November 9, 2022

Chairman Kean thanked the President for this meeting. He asked about the spring and summer of 2001. As the President was getting the ominous threat reports, how did he view his role?

The President said he wanted to make sure things get done. He explained how he set up the White House. He met with George Tenet every day at 8:00, right here, along with the Vice President, Condi Rice, and Andy Card. They talked about the threats of the day. They assessed them. It was a discussion, more than a briefing. First they would discuss the threat, then take up what was being done.

Condi Rice would deal with the operators. She would help organize discussion among the principals. Steve Hadley ran the Deputies Committee. He wanted to correct some misunderstanding about the Deputies. The deputies were people he knew well. He had worked with them in the campaign and in other ways. The Deputies Committee was designing strategies to be implemented.

Tenet would bring up a threat. There were a lot of them in May, June, and July. He would ask: What's being done about it? A summary on this had been prepared for him; here it is. (He showed a paper to Chairman Kean, which Kean took after the meeting with the President's permission. It is attached.)

He was being briefed on information and operations. He knew meetings were going on to take care of the threat. He was told about meetings, the development of action plans, and he saw actions taking place, such as the arrests of terrorists in places like Yemen.

Chairman Kean asked about the President's reaction to the August 6 PDB. Did he discuss it with Dr. Rice?

The President said they had a close relationship and talked all the time. But he didn't think she was in Crawford that day. They saw threats overseas. He asked CIA to analyze threats in America. There was only one reference to threats in America during my presidency to that point – and he had asked for it! Not one arrived at his desk.

The report itself was historical in nature. It said what al Qaeda was doing. He had known that since he had become President. He knew about the Cole, about the affiliates in this country. Bin Ladin had long been talking about his desire to attack America. There was some operational data on the FBI. That 70 investigations were underway was heartening, that this was taking place.

Three years ago seemed like a long time. As best he could recollect, Condi mentioned that the Yemen threat (surveillance of federal building in New York in May) had been looked into May and June. They didn't see any actionable intelligence. The article reminded that al Qaeda was dangerous, that it was a problem to be dealt with. He knew that; so his government was developing a strategy to eliminate it.

Chairman Kean asked if the President remembered seeing other intelligence about aircraft as missiles, or about Islamic extremists learning to fly.

No, the President said. The only report was the one about a potential hijacking for the release of prisoners, mentioned in the PDB of August 6.

Chairman Kean asked why the President stayed in the education event when he got word of the second plane hitting the World Trade Center.

The President said he saw the first crash. Halfway into the event, Andy (Card) walked in and whispered to him about the second plane, and that America was under attack. He was collecting his thoughts. He stayed in the event, he thought, for about 4 or 5 minutes. His instinct was to be calm, not have the country see a rattled president in a high moment. The country was under attack. He was trying to understand what that means. He was looking at the press corps and saw them on their telephones. He felt he should project calm and strength, until he could understand better what was happening.

He went out. He called the Vice President. He called Governor Pataki. He thought he also called FBI Director Mueller. He worked on the initial remarks. He thought it was important to keep his body language calm in the face of danger. As the president, he was conscious that "people react off me."

Chairman Kean asked what immediate decisions the President thought he needed to make.

The President said he was pressured to get on the plane. Made some quick remarks and blasted out of there. Asked again about decisions, the President mentioned his calls to the Vice President. He also called Condi. He wanted to check on his wife. There were all kinds of rumors. One was that the Capitol was under attack. His wife Laura was supposed to be on Capitol Hill that morning. He was concerned about his family.

He remembered the Vice President saying, 'Don't come home.' Rice said that too. It was his duty to protect the continuity of the presidency. If something happens to the President in an emergency, there would be even more chaos. The Secret Service was aware of this too.

He talked to the Vice President as he was arriving at Air Force One, or on Air Force One, about rules of engagement. The Vice President advised him not to come back. He asked him to authorize this – he (the VP) was at the PEOC then. Get in an operational position. The Vice President is rushing to the PEOC. After the Vice President gets there, the President and the Vice President talked about rules of engagement.

The President understood this from his experience in the Texas Air National Guard. He had been trained to shoot down planes. He understood generally how this worked – one plane would lock on, one would ID. He understood the consequences for the pilot, how a pilot might feel to get the order to shoot down a US airliner. It would be tough. He and

Dick discussed it. He talked about what it would be like. Yes, engage the enemy. You have the authority to shoot down an airplane.

At Air Force One, the communications were not as good as they should have been. There were all these rumors. He had heard of the fog of war. That day he saw it, firsthand. He wanted to go back to D.C. They were going to Barksdale (AFB). An Air Force colonel came to him and said Air Force One was a target. He asked the colonel: How do you know? A call to the Situation Room, he answered. There was the report about a possible attack on Crawford.

They had an open line to the PEOC, but it kept cutting off. Later the Vice President told him about the incoming aircraft. Our fighters were engaged. They were enacting his (the President's) order. Locked on. He told people (perhaps indicating Ari Fleischer) his order was now in effect.

Chairman Kean asked the Vice President if the first time he talked to the President was on his way to the PEOC, in the tunnel.

The Vice President said he would recreate this as best he can. He was in his West Wing office, with speechwriters. His secretary said the World Trade Center had been hit. They turned on the TV. Then he and the President talked, after 9:00. At 9:15 or so he and the President talked. They talked about the statement, describing an act of terror.

The Vice President said it was when the second plane hit the World Trade Center that the connection was made that this was an attack. He contacted Condi and asked her to make sure that the CSG was stood up. He watched the President's statement (from Florida). Then Secret Service agents came in and said we have to leave immediately. The agent put his hand on the back of his belt - they don't carry you but They were evacuated to the basement. They had to open the door, then there were stairs, and then into the tunnel to the PEOC.

The Vice President said he was alone in the tunnel [with the Secret Service]. He heard that a plane had been a minute or less out of Washington. That was what had triggered the Secret Service action to evacuate him. But the time had passed and nothing had happened to the White House. He later learned that this was American 77, which had flown a circle over the Washington area and then had flown into the Pentagon.

In the tunnel, the Vice President said, there was a TV and a phone on the wall. He knew they were under attack. He asked operators to get the President on the phone. It took some minutes for them to do that. The TV was on. He saw a broadcast showing the Pentagon had been hit. He wondered if this was between 9:35 and 9:37.

He got the President on the phone. He told him that Washington was under attack. He strongly recommended that the President delay his return to Washington. There was no telling how much more the threat might be. The President agreed, reluctantly. The President asked the Vice President to take necessary steps and stay in close touch.

The Vice President said that while he was there in the tunnel, Condi and his wife, Lynne, joined them there. They left the tunnel then and made the long walk to the PEOC, which was under the East Wing side of the White House. They got there at about 9:40 -- 9:45, he thought. (I believe the Vice President seemed to look to Judge Gonzales for confirmation of this timing.)

The Vice President said that when he arrived in the PEOC, there were not many people there, just some of the staff. Secretary Mineta arrived at about the same time. Secretary Mineta had already instructed FAA to ground planes. He was working the aircraft problem. They tried to determine how many aircraft were still unaccounted for. Two had gone into the World Trade Center. They thought three aircraft were still out.

The Vice President remembered getting "word then that they [Air Force] were trying to cap up" over D.C. He opened up a line to the President and raised the issue of rules of engagement. He (the President) authorized shutdown. The President approved this before 10:00. Condi heard his (the Vice President's) end of the conversation.

The Vice President discussed the unaccounted flights. Reports kept coming in, some false. A plane was down on the Ohio-Kentucky border. That was false. A car bomb had gone off. That was false. This was not mentioned in the original conversation, in the tunnel, in which he recommended that the President not return to D.C., the Vice President said, but later they heard about a threat to Air Force One. That was false. That was the process. Watching TV, they saw the news from New York about the first tower going down.

Then that the first order for a shutdown came up. An officer came to him in the PEOC. Was the military authorized to shoot down an aircraft? There was a report of a plane that was 80 miles out ... Yes. They came and asked again ... Yes. This happened two or three times. The first occasion, the Vice President thought, was related to United 93.

Then they heard that an aircraft was down in Pennsylvania. The Vice President thought we'd shot it down. It took a while to sort this out. In the next half hour there were two or three occasions like this: a report of an incoming, would he reiterate authorization? Yes. In every case, though, the problem was resolved without shots being fired. Later in the day there were other reports of incidents ... a jet squawking a hijack code, a Korean Airlines jet. There was a lot of this, five reports during the day of hijacked planes. None turned out to be true.

The President remembered the confusion when he arrived that afternoon in Nebraska. He remembered coming into a room full of officers. He spoke briefly to them, that this was a tough day for America. Next, they told him about a flight coming from Madrid and asked for authorization to shoot it down. This was about two minutes after he arrived there. He told them to follow their rules of engagement. Then a few minutes later they told him the plane had landed in Madrid! A lot of confusion. It was troubling to him. It

dawned on him – there was an alert, a shoot down order, then the plane is landing in Spain? Had to look into this, a communications problem.

Chairman Kean asked, When was the first time a shoot down was authorized?

The Vice President said it was in his third call with the President. There was the call from his office, then the one in the tunnel – the one about Washington being under attack. The third call was from the PEOC, shortly after he arrived in the PEOC.

Chairman Kean asked if they were aware that aircraft had been scrambled out of Andrews AFB, outside the NORAD chain of command, under instructions from the Secret Service.

The President, surprised, asked the Chairman to repeat “ordered by the Secret Service?” The Chairman affirmed that. The President said he did not know about that.

The Vice President said there was a lot going on, including in the Situation Room. Initially Secretary Rumsfeld had not been inside the Pentagon. The Vice President talked to Secretary Rumsfeld right after the crash. Later, they spoke about Rumsfeld not having access to secure video.

The President said he tried to get Rumsfeld on the phone and they couldn't find him. He did talk to him briefly earlier, then later they couldn't find him for a period. It was frustrating. (With note of exasperation) They found the PEOC. The PEOC was his main contact. He was very frustrated about not being able to make contact with different people. He expressed this frustration to Andy (Card) on Air Force One.

The Chairman asked whether the President was concerned about the direction of the nation's defenses that day.

The President commented that there was not good television on the aircraft (Air Force One) then. They have satellite television now. They have real-time secure communications, including video.

The Vice President said some things worked well, people doing the jobs they were trained to do. The President interjected that Mineta was an example of good performance. The Vice President thought the process for continuity of government had worked pretty well. He had spent a lot of time in the 1980s on this issue, with teams located in a secure setting, working on nuclear scenarios. They were protecting the presidency. The Speaker also was taken out of town. Provisions had been made.

At about 10:05, Vice Chair Hamilton took over the questioning. He thanked the President for the meeting. He said the President's comments about the actions of the Attorney General and his staff were helpful and appreciated.

Vice Chair Hamilton then asked how well the President and Vice President thought the crisis management system had worked. He was future-oriented. Were they confident that the difficulties had been improved today?

The President said yes, but he warned that there would inevitably be confusion before matters could get sorted out. Air Force One and the PEOC were now effective. But communications then were not as good. The Commission could get experts to look at that.

A problem that had not been resolved, the President went on, was how to insure that information was accurate. On the plane he was told the ranch at Crawford was under attack. He told Andy to make sure that nobody was at the ranch, but It was important to sort that problem through. If you can get good information, then you could act on it in an orderly way, with systems in place to bring order out of disorder. Systems management could do this.

Vice Chair Hamilton asked if the situation was better now.

The President said he thought it was as good as it can get, or at least that was what he was told. They had real-time secure video communications on Air Force One. That seemed pretty modern to him.

Vice Chair Hamilton then asked if the President thought the national strategy for countering terrorism was where it needed to be.

The President said the strategy was divided into three parts.

First, he said, you had to take on the terrorist organizations. On that the situation was better than it was two years ago. The diplomacy was in better shape. Pakistan and Saudi Arabia were more willing to go after al Qaeda. International cooperation was good.

The hardest part, he thought, was to remind the American people that we're still at war. The default mode was to be passive.

On (international) intelligence cooperation, he gave it a "B." There was jealousy between nations about sharing information. He gave an example of Spanish reluctance to work with the FBI after the recent Madrid bombings.

On finances, he thought the cooperation was good.

On bringing terrorists to justice, their approach was not as tough as ours. Foreign governments were less willing to kill them, to go after them in the remote places of the world.

Our own agencies, the President said, were pretty darn robust. He thought they were under resourced at CIA. They needed to be able to conduct more operations, to go into

the caves after the terrorists. Their resources were stressed. He gave an example from Iraq, which Tenet had mentioned. The CIA was working ^{1.4(a)(c)(d)} [redacted] But that meant they could not focus as much on Zargawi ^{1.4(a)(c)(d)} [redacted]. The President said he felt strongly about the intelligence community. He observed that the first Americans in the fight in Afghanistan were intelligence operatives.

The President thought the military was better poised now to fight terror. Their forces were lighter and more lethal. They were quicker. They were reconfiguring their forces. The special operations forces were good. He had been told recently that the military was finding it hard to recruit enough people for those forces; the standards were so high.

The second part of the strategy was protection of the homeland. We need, the President said, to button up as best we can. It was very hard. The situation was better than before 9/11.

The FBI and CIA were communicating regularly. He met constantly with Director Mueller. Why didn't this happen before? There was a fear of looking like they were politicizing the FBI through such meetings. This was a "Hoover hangover." Presidents and the FBI also feared that they might jeopardize cases through such discussions. But after 9/11 he just put that aside - get Mueller in here. This was better.

There were still deficiencies with the FBI, but he felt their efforts are about 80% complete. The computers are more interoperable. They could share information across jurisdictions.

The Department of Homeland Security was doing a good job, the President said. Changing cultures was difficult. The response mechanisms were pretty darn good. FEMA was a good indicator, looking at their responses to storms, where they have displayed good communications. This had become much better.

The TTIC was something the Commission needed to look at. It was an interesting innovation. It was sharing knowledge, working jointly.

Vice Chair Hamilton asked if it was working well.

It was working pretty well, the President answered. The operational entities were getting closer, planning to work in the same building. We were better equipped to fight terror. He hoped the Commission would analyze how this was going and make some recommendations. He did not want to steer the report for the Commission. He hoped the Commission would look forward.

The third part of the strategy was to change the conditions that caused terror to arise. In early 2001 he and his administration had spent a lot of time on this.

They worked on establishing stronger links with Uzbekistan, to strengthen the ability to base there.

They had also worked on relations with Saudi Arabia. This was a difficult problem. Crown Prince Abdullah was unhappy about the U.S. approach toward the intifada. He did not like the U.S. position. He did not like the Mitchell plan. He did not like the Tenet plan. He was disgruntled with the United States. The Vice President had phoned him in July and could talk about that.

Pakistan was too close to the Taliban. They had to change Pakistan's behavior. But the country was smothered in congressional sanctions; there were no carrots they could use. After 9/11 this changed.

In the case of Turkey, the U.S. had supported IMF loans to strengthen stability.

With Iraq, the U.S. had a sanctions regime in place that was recruiting terrorists. Their propaganda with reports of starving Iraqi children were hurting us. The military was firing at cable and communication stations.

There were issues the U.S. had to deal with. After 9/11, there was an opportunity to strengthen the forces of democracy in the region. The enemy helped give us an opportunity. They attempted to kill Musharraf. After 9/11, Colin Powell faced Musharraf with a choice. (Gesturing at Commissioner Kerrey) You have made the point about needing to go to war. That was right, but you couldn't fight a war in Afghanistan without fighting from or next to Pakistan.

Al Qaeda tried to kill Musharraf twice. That helped him change some more. The same was true with al Qaeda and Riyadh. The U.S. warned the Saudis about a possible attack. Then came the bombings in May 2003. After that, the Saudis were better war fighters.

Vice Chair Hamilton asked if the President and Vice President had thought about ways to solve the coordination problems, whether they were looking at changing the organization of the intelligence community.

The President said yes, but he didn't want to prejudge the outcome of this Commission or the one under Robb and Silberman. One thing his advisers had made clear to him: The FBI and CIA do not want an American MI5. (Commissioners laughed. Yes, they said, they had heard that.) On intelligence sharing, the President was looking forward to the Commission's recommendations.

The Vice President said this was a hard problem. He tended to be careful about relying too much on organizational fixes. Americans tended to think of these solutions. He remembered arriving at the Pentagon and asking for an organizational chart. It covered and spilled over his whole desk. He put it in his desk drawer and never looked at it again.

The problems, he said, were with problems in analysis, with data collection, and with integration. The impact of the organizations on this People recommended giving CIA a bigger role. His friend Brent Scowcroft had recommended this. The CIA had

problems. It wasn't clear to him that the solution was to take an agency with problems and put them in charge of others.

The President emphasized that it was important to communicate with the people who were gathering the intelligence. He found that the CIA was incredibly important to him in doing his job. They had smart people producing interesting analysis. Tenet was also a good strategist. The President liked bouncing ideas off of Tenet. He had great confidence in him. George was a good war fighter. But he had to manage that building. That caused a lot of stress.

The President urged the Commission to keep in mind that the President needs to interface with the DCI and his people, like the briefers who come in. Sometimes they would have a meeting at Camp David and bring the analysts out there, talking about the enemy situation or economics. It encouraged people doing the work to have access to the President. It was important, no matter what, for the President to decide who he sees.

The Vice President added that the political community also has obligations, like the Congress. The standards that had been applied to the intelligence community had left them inclined to be risk averse. The penalties were high for getting involved in actions that might later be judged to be inappropriate. He mentioned the example of having nasty people on the CIA payroll. The officials then try to be careful; they don't take things on.

The President smilingly said he had promised not to filibuster. But he warned about being careful with the PDBs. You don't want to put them out in public, or you won't get good, candid advice. He had worked on that in trying to cooperate with the Commission and was grateful for the Commission's efforts. But he wouldn't let Capitol Hill get them.

The President said he had to get honest, open advice. Make the process more public and he wouldn't get this kind of advice. He didn't need people coming in and saying, Mr. President, you're looking beautiful today. (Commissioners laugh) He needed people who would come in and say, you're wrong.

Vice Chair Hamilton asked how they thought they could make the country less vulnerable to attack.

The President said they were trying to kill a lot of the enemy. They are killers. We had to kill them before they kill us.

Commissioner Roemer thanked the President for his meeting, recalling the President's example of bipartisanship in discussing his education initiative with Democrats and Republicans, in which the commissioner had taken part. The President would again be important in getting action on the Commission's recommendations.

Commissioner Roemer said the President seemed to have been frustrated with the process in working on counterterrorism during 2001, talking in the spring of 2001 about his exasperation with "swatting flies." The President agreed. So, Commissioner Roemer

asked, what was going on? What was the President doing to try to push the policy process?

The President said Condi is too polite. It wasn't just about swatting flies. He had wanted to know: Where's the action? I'm an impatient person, he said. I get frustrated by the slow movement of government. Our papers referred to an elimination strategy – how are we going to eliminate al Qaeda? The problems were more than this or that guy. There would be a report of a threat in Jordan. An action would be taken on that. Good, that was one problem. There would be a threat somewhere else. That was another problem. That is what he meant by flies, and that was fine. But the long-range approach – where was it?

The President repeated that it was his nature to be impatient. It was not a good quality. He added, smiling, that his wife doesn't think it is such a good quality either. He was frustrated with the process. But he understood the nature of policy development: diplomatic, financial, and military policies had to mesh. He was frustrated with the time it took to get that ready. But he was not frustrated with the response to specific threats.

The President said he knew what the deputies and other officials were doing. He knew they were developing a strategy to get rid of this danger. On the particular threats, you could move and take some action. There wasn't frustration there. His frustration was because it took so long to get a plan on his desk to eliminate the entire threat – the big strategy. He knew it was in process. It just took a long time.

Condi was his point person. He talked to her every day. He expected her to do her job. He didn't need meetings for that. He had his morning discussions (associated with the PDB briefings) with Condi, the Vice President, and Andy Card every day. He would ask: What is happening? What are you doing? She would say: I just got off the phone with Don Rumsfeld and Colin Powell. She would talk each morning to Secretary Rumsfeld and Secretary Powell. How did that experience feel? Condi got most of his frustration.

Commissioner Roemer said he wanted to ask a follow-up question. Chairman Kean said the commissioners needed to move along. The President interrupted with a smile and said, "It's my Oval Office. Go ahead."

Commissioner Roemer asked, if the process took too long, how could this be fixed?

The President cautioned that an integrated plan required a focused effort by the Deputies to develop agency plans that were "interoperable" with the plans being developed by other agencies. He started his explanation with diplomacy.

They needed diplomatic conditions to be right, he said. Uzbekistan was essential. He spoke with Putin about this in the summer of 2001. He remembered Putin complaining about Pakistan – and about Saudi Arabia – being safe havens for the terrorists, urging the need to find the source of these problems. Working with Putin was important. It would make it easier for the U.S. to base activity in the "Stans." This was hard for Russia,

historically, to accept. So he -- the President -- was frustrated; he was an impatient person. But they had to analyze how to develop the ability to act. There were many moving parts. In retrospect, perhaps he had been too impatient, given the complex nature of the task.

The NSPD being developed would not have stopped 9/11, the President said. But it was important. It might have made further attacks less likely. It helped them be ready to move after 9/11.

Commissioner Roemer suggested that the U.S. could have sent a signal, though, in responding to the attack on the U.S.S. Cole. What was the President's thinking on that?

The President said he was concerned about an empty response that Bin Ladin and others would use to propaganda advantage. They could have struck using cruise missiles or other standoff weapons, like bombers. If that had been ineffective, the enemy would have used it to show their ability to thwart U.S. technology and military might. That was just the point they wanted to emphasize. So this could have set the U.S. back much further than any advantage that would be gained from the strike. He looked at the intelligence. Hitting Bin Ladin with cruise missiles These were important individuals. But you strengthen the group if you launch missiles but do not harm them.

The President said you must use ground forces for a job like this. If you're going to go after them, you have to get people on the ground. We weren't ready yet, but we were developing a strategy to do so.

During the transition, the President said he remembered asking Tenet about the value of killing Bin Ladin. First, this would not destroy al Qaeda. Second, they never had a shot at him. The President believed that Tenet thought he (Tenet) had authority to kill Bin Ladin.

Commissioner Gorton said the Commission was deluged with conspiracy theories. He hoped the President could help them address a few of them. For example, why, after hearing of the first plane hitting the World Trade Center, did the President go ahead with the event at the school?

The President said he thought it was an accident. He recalled that he and others thought the building had been hit by a twin engine plane. He remembered thinking, what a terrible pilot.

And the news of the second building being hit?, Commissioner Gorton asked.

The President said there were no more details. He stayed in the education event for about another five minutes, he has been told. He had told us about this. He was trying to absorb the news. He remembered a child, or someone, reading. He remembered watching the press pool and noticing them talking on their phones. He realized the

country was watching his behavior. He had to send the right signals. He wanted to collect his thoughts.

Commissioner Gorton asked if the President had made a connection to the terrorists, or was worried that the school or Air Force One might be a target.

The President said no, he was not worried about that. After the event he finalized an initial public statement. There was a hustle to get it written. He talked to the Vice President about it. Eddie DiLorenzo, the head of his Secret Service protective detail, was pushing to get them out of the school and back to the plane. It was his job to protect the President.

As to Air Force One, he thinks he first heard about that threat after they were airborne. It was comforting to see the fighters pull up alongside Air Force One.

Commissioner Gorton asked if the President or the Vice President had been involved in permitting planes carrying Saudi nationals to leave after 9/11.

No, the President said. He had no idea about this until he read about it in the papers.

The Vice President also gave a negative answer (hard to hear).

The President turned to the problem of conspiracy theories. He said the Commission had a duty to make it absolutely clear that this action was perpetrated by hateful, evil people. I can't tell you, he said, how strongly I feel about this. He had seen some of the theories some people had written. Some of the things in the German press, for example, were worse than anything he had seen coming out of even the John Birch Society in Midland, Texas.

Commissioner Ben-Veniste thanked the President and Vice President for agreeing to meet with the full commission. He said that the President and the Commission were on the same team. They wanted to deal with as many of these conspiracy themes as possible. Their goal was to make the country safer.

Commissioner Ben-Veniste turned to the "summer of threats" in 2001. The Commission had met with DCI Tenet. Tenet had apparently been confused or uncertain about how often he had met with the President during August. The President was getting intelligence about specific attacks being planned.

The President interjected: Overseas.

Commissioner Ben-Veniste, continuing, said the President had commented on stimulating the writing of the August 6 PDB. The analyst had titled it: "Bin Ladin Determined to Strike in US." Had the President received information before on the potential for an attack in the United States?

None, the President answered. We were aware that Bin Ladin had sympathizers in the United States. As to cells – no one ever said that to him. There were things like Khalid Sheikh Mohammed had studied at a college in North Carolina. But he couldn't recall people walking in here (the Oval Office) and worrying about cells in the United States. Not one PDB was commenting on a threat in America. There was no actionable intelligence on such a threat – not one.

Referring to the analyst and the title of the PDB, the President stressed that he had asked for it. He couldn't remember when. And it didn't say anything about a specific attack.

If there had been a threat from a cell, they would have moved to take care of it. That never happened. He urged the Commission to read the PDB. It was a general assessment. It reaches the conclusion that Bin Ladin wants to attack us. Yeah, the President commented, he's trying to do that. So is al Qaeda.

Commissioner Ben-Veniste asked if Dr. Rice had been there in Texas when that PDB was briefed.

The President said she had not been there. But had he talked to her? Yes, at some point. Smiling, he said he talked to her at least twice a day. He did remember talking about the particular threat cited in the document on Yemenis (surveilling a federal building in New York), to learn that the Yemeni situation had been cleared up.

Talking to her about it?, Commissioner Ben-Veniste asked. Yes.

Commissioner Ben-Veniste discussed the Yemeni episode. He said a White House background briefer had put out a story that was ill serving the President -- that the Yemenis had just been a couple of tourists and the matter was put to bed. But our staff, he said, had come to some conclusions about the Yemenis. The staff, he said, had found that these two individuals had been apprehended in Manhattan, taking photos of the federal building at 26 Federal Plaza and of the building next door that also housed FBI ^{NARA Regulation for FOIA} and of the street, which included a security checkpoint. When questioned, the Yemenis had said they were taking the pictures because a co-worker in Indianapolis wanted them. The INS detained the Yemenis, who were interrogated by the FBI. Commissioner Ben-Veniste added that when the FBI attempted to locate the individual in Indianapolis, they discovered that this person was operating under an assumed name and then left abruptly, leaving behind an uncashed paycheck, shortly after the two Yemenis were detained. The FBI, he said, had continued to work on this case for two years and have never identified the man who fled.

First I've heard of it, the President said. But he said he wasn't sure that aspect ...

Commissioner Ben-Veniste said the episode stimulated the FBI in New York City to complain about the level of protection being given by the General Services Administration to government buildings. John O'Neill and Barry Mawn were involved.

The President said this was news to him.

Commissioner Ben-Veniste asked about presidents not wanting to meet, before 9/11, with the Director of the FBI because of concerns about politicization of the Bureau.

And criminal justice reasons, interfering in pending cases, the President said.

Commissioner Ben-Veniste asked if the President had asked Dr. Rice to follow up? Had she followed up?

The President said he could not recall the details. He remembered that the information in the PDB about 70 pending FBI investigations seemed good, helpful [cf. Rice]. If they found something, he wanted to know about it. If there was any information on a problem he wanted to hear about it, whether from George Tenet or Condi. If they came in and said, we've found a cell, his action would have been: Destroy it. That never happened.

Commissioner Ben-Veniste said important information in the possession of the CIA and the FBI didn't get to the President, or to Dick Clarke. He gave the examples of Moussaoui and Mihdhar and Hazmi, and Middle Eastern men learning to fly. If that had gotten to the President, perhaps there would have been some action. In meetings with Tenet, did he mention Moussaoui?

The President could not recall. He explained how these conversations went. Tenet would come in: Mr. President, we have a serious threat. He would describe it. The President would turn to him and others and say: What are we doing about it? That never happened (for a threat in the United States). No one said there was a problem domestically. The threat was overseas - that was what George said. The world is riled up; he would review the threats.

The Vice President said that some of that action had come to him. He called Saudi Arabia's Crown Prince Abdullah on July 5. He went over what was known to him about the al Qaeda and Bin Ladin threat. He said the U.S. wanted to send a team to Saudi Arabia to alert Saudi counterparts about a potential attack. Tenet was talking to Prince Turki about this. The team would come over to work on this.

The President said he thought that if there had been a serious concern in August, he would have known about it.

Commissioner Ben-Veniste commented that the domestic capabilities were principally under the Attorney General and also the Secretary of the Treasury. After receiving the August 6 PDB, had the President discussed with Attorney General Ashcroft whether it would be useful to make sure the FBI was addressing the problem?

Not that I recall, the President said. He also didn't know whether Condi had discussed it with the Attorney General.

Commissioner Lehman said the Commission was united on trying to fix what was wrong. Its report could be a catalyst. There were things the President could not do. He hoped the Commission and the White House could consult about possible recommendations to be sure we're not working at cross-purposes. There were some big things being considered and this was an opportunity for action.

The President said the White House had been passive so far in trying to influence the Commission's recommendations. They had been silent. He had thought he would hear what this Commission recommended, and the one chaired by Senator Robb and Judge Silberman, and then move. He was hesitant to be proactive with respect to the Commission.

Commissioner Lehman urged the importance of opening up a dialogue. The President said he would consider it.

Commissioner Lehman said a big issue was the role of the Saudis. Much had been done, including some visible actions at the highest level. But there were problems of continued funding. He alluded to a recent story in the New York Times about Saudi imams preaching jihad in Iraq. He mentioned a letter Prince Bandar had sent to the Commission that did not fully acknowledge the problem. He mentioned the problem of the former al Qaeda chief financial officer, and the U.S. having not received access to him during the late 1990s. He mentioned the belief of an INS inspector who testified in January, Melendez, that there was pressure not to interfere with Saudis.

The President replied that a fundamental political question for any President was how to deal with the Saudis. There was a sort of split personality there. Some found favor with al Qaeda and the extremists, supporting their radical policies. The U.S. had to have a process to push them to change their ways.

The U.S. supported political reform. This stand had, the President commented, been widely disparaged. The last (to change) will be Saudi Arabia. The President understood that. But they were feeling the pressure.

The royal family, the President added, was not a monolith. There were splits within the family. Crown Prince Abdullah may not know what his stepbrother is doing with certain NGOs spreading hate. The family was a complex organization, with different power centers.

The President said he was worried about Saudi Arabia. He did not want it to become an al Qaeda country. Nor did he want it to form an alliance with Iran. He was not sure what else he could say, except that he was working the problem on a daily basis. There had been some progress on NGOs.

The Vice President mentioned the al Haramayn foundation.

Commissioner Lehman said the President should expect the Commission report on this subject to be harsh. If that was done at a sufficient level, it might be useful.

The President said he did not wish to justify their actions. But he said the Commission should also look at Saudi cooperation against al Qaeda inside their country.

The Vice President said he had worked on this issue during the summer of 2001 and at other times. He had talked to the President of Yemen. Saudi cooperation had increased after they were hit in Riyadh. He agreed with the President. Saudi Arabia was a complex place.

The President observed that the Crown Prince did not like the President's policy on Israel. He was really unhappy about it.

Commissioner Lehman said the intelligence issues involved more than moving the organizational boxes around. The cultural issues were more important. Good people could make the boxes work. It was easy to see organizational fixes - get rid of obstacles. Personnel was harder, to attract enough good people in a vast bureaucratic system, drawing creativity out of that.

The President said, speaking off the top of his head, that it was important to give people access to the President. Analysts should know they can tell the President what they think. If there was a meeting at Camp David, they should bring out the experts. When people feel they have access to important officials, it makes them feel better about their job.

The government did need more HUMINT. You could work on the boxes, on communication, and on budgeting. But you needed more collection. The war could be won if we can get inside their tents.

Commissioner Kerrey asked what action the President thought was required against al Qaeda. What happened on the Cole? Suppose the U.S. had been hit again, for instance, in March 2001?

The President said that, on analysis, a cruise missile strike If you could not catch Bin Ladin, it was ineffective. He was against carrying out such operations until the government had a plan to eliminate him. He could not remember when this conclusion was reached. It came from conversations with people coming in here (the White House) and maybe with Secretary Rumsfeld too.

Commissioner Kerrey said he could appreciate the President's frustration. He asked about whether military capabilities had been presented to get Bin Ladin.

No, the President said. There was not actionable intelligence, at least on Bin Ladin himself. They never saw a shot at him.

Commissioner Kerrey asked about special operations. They couldn't do a full invasion. But the Commander-in-Chief needs more options than that.

The President said he did not see good options for special operations in Afghanistan. Other military options had not been prepared. At least from the time they had started, such options weren't presented to him.

The President added, though, that special operations in Afghanistan could only work if there was a place from which to launch them. In the Afghanistan case, it took time to get 1.4(a)(d)(g) The U.S. had to get the basing option established. 1.4(a)(d)(g) 1.4(a)(d)(g)

Next, the President went on, once the team was in, where do they look? There might not be a particular spot to go to. But he didn't remember a discussion about why no other options had popped up.

The Vice President recalled that on the first night of combat operations against Afghanistan, special operations forces had gone after Mullah Omar's house. They had the location, although they did not find him there. They had gone there 1.4(a)(c)(d)(g) One of their helicopters crashed, 1.4(a)(c)(d)(g) That was what they did after 9/11. Getting 1.4(a)(c)(g) to agree to that in advance -- he didn't know how they could have done that.

Commissioner Kerrey asked if this had been discussed with 1.4(a)(d)(g) before 9/11. 1.4(a)(d)(g)

The Vice President said, not really. 1.4(a)(d)(g) 1.4(a)(d)(g)

The President said that military operations required a strategy with much more in it than just a military plan. That was discussed. That was what caused him to direct the development of an NSPD.

Commissioner Kerrey asked if the CIA had done any analysis of hijacking scenarios, analysis that might have shown up some of the security problems.

The President said he was unaware of receiving such an analysis. The President said that on July 5 Andy and Condi had called in folks from the different agencies. Looking back, he commented on weaknesses in watchlists and the lack of hardened doors on cockpits. If someone had said, here's how al Qaeda could attack -- there would have been a reaction.

Commissioner Kerrey commented that FAA was not at a heightened level of security.

The President wondered, though, what they would have done if they had increased their alert level. There had been alerts overseas. They would have been alerted here when ...

Commissioner Kerrey said the elements were there. FAA should have done the analysis.

The President said that would have been helpful.

Commissioner Kerrey turned to the intelligence budget. Since the budget numbers were classified, the public did not understand the way money was allocated. They did not understand how much money was spent on satellites or how little was spent on the CIA. They didn't understand that the DCI's budget for CIA was lower 1.4(c)

The President said the budget process did need to protect "dark" programs. He did not want to compromise capability to win the war. The Vice President, he said, had been involved in these issues.

The Vice President said this had always been a problem. The House Intelligence Committee had just wanted to show the trend in spending. Porter Goss called the Vice President for help in getting the data in order to do that. The Agency was worried about leaks ...

Commissioner Kerrey suggested at least declassifying the top line and the overall numbers for individual agencies. The President and Vice President indicated interest.

Commissioner Thompson thanked the President and Vice President for the meeting. He asked the President about the anecdote in Dick Clarke's book recounting a conversation in the White House Situation Room after 9/11 about Iraq, a conversation Clarke said he had found intimidating.

The President said he had read that page in the book. He believes he might have talked with Dick. He didn't remember. But it wasn't true the way he characterized it. The book said the conversation occurred on the evening of September 12. But the President said he had not gone to the Situation Room at all that evening. He had gone to the Pentagon. Then he had gone to the Residence. And as for the idea that he was wandering around the Situation Room alone? "I don't do that." He didn't think any president would do that, looking for something to do. He couldn't remember such a conversation. Asking about Iraq? He probably did at some point. Intimidating? He objected to that.

The President said that after the 9/11 attack he wanted to know all he could about what happened. He didn't think the conversation was on September 12. He wanted to find out the facts. He asked the Commission to remember that Saddam Hussein had given money to suiciders. He was a threat. It would be a common sense question. But he didn't believe he intimidated anybody. Shrugging, he said, I don't know, maybe I did. I don't remember. The facts are different from what the book said.

Commissioner Thompson asked if he had talked about al Qaeda to President Clinton during the transition.

The President said that President Clinton had invited him here, to the Oval Office. He didn't remember much being said on al Qaeda. There was a lot on North Korea. That was high on the agenda. President Clinton was thinking of going to North Korea. The President felt sure President Clinton mentioned terrorism of some kind. He shrugged. He did recall that President Clinton was hot at Arafat, and told him about the disappointment with Arafat and the recent developments in the peace process.

Commissioner Thompson commented on the tendency of Americans to rely on hindsight and prepare to fight the last war. Who was responsible to insure that didn't happen?

Me, the President replied. I'm in charge of that. You have to get good people, develop a good strategy, and hope it works.

The President didn't see much point in assigning personal blame for 9/11. If the previous administration could have done something to stop it, he was sure they would have done everything in their power. The same was true for him. Nobody wants something like that to happen. They would have moved heaven and earth to stop it.

The President said he was responsible. This was the job of the President. He had to pick a good group, then expect them to do their job with the right strategy.

Killing the terrorists was the best strategy. It was the only way to do it. Kill them before they kill us. There would be no negotiations, no peace treaty with these people. They are killers, cold-blooded killers who would not hesitate for a moment. They will kill women and children. They had killed all those commuters in Madrid. If Bin Ladin had weapons of mass destruction he would likely kill more. In the short-term we had to find them.

In the long-term, the President thought the spread of freedom was the key. He had a problem with a kind of arrogance in the world, a belief that certain people can't be free. It was so condescending to think that people in poor countries, people of color, were down so low that freedom can't spread. The President strongly disagreed with this. He thought democracy and freedom were critical.

There also needed to be a strategy for the homeland, the President continued. If people thought that defensive measures were inconveniencing them now, by having to take off their shoes, wait till we go to (alert condition) Red. It was difficult to defend America. He recalled that as Governor of Texas he was familiar with the border problems, with the Mexican border. He remembered how the "mules" would bring immigrants across. People hunting in south Texas would come across piles of garbage from where groups of immigrants had stayed on their journey. But people also might be willing to walk across borders to kill.

Human intelligence had to improve in order to get actionable intelligence. If there was an attack on our watch, the President said, he would bear the responsibility for that.

He hoped the Commission would make recommendations for improving the situation without violating the constitutional rights of citizens. We can't forget why we are who we are. We can't change our love of freedom because they are out to kill us.

The President supported the Patriot Act. He did not want to abridge it and would defend it to the utmost. But he didn't want to suggest that opponents don't love America too.

Commissioner Gorelick thanked the President. She said she wanted to raise some "nits and picks." Turning back to the chronology of the morning of 9/11, she asked the Vice President when the President gave shutdown authority – when the Vice President was in the tunnel or in the PEOC?

The Vice President said that in the tunnel the conversation was general. Stay close and keep in touch. President told him to do what he needed to do. The discussion of the shutdown was in the PEOC.

Commissioner Gorelick said the staff timeline placed the Vice President in the PEOC between 955 and 1000.

The Vice President said that two logs said he arrived in the PEOC at 944. There was a confusion of times about Air Force One too. It was a pretty confusing time.

The President said: Look, he didn't give orders without my permission.

Commissioner Gorelick said that the staff thought the Vice President had conveyed the engage order between 1005 and 1015.

The Vice President said his recollection was more like 1005. After the report about an aircraft 80 miles out.

Commissioner Gorelick asked if there had been an earlier conversation than that on the need for the shutdown.

The President said he thought he had talked about that on Air Force One, or on the tarmac, or on the stairs up to the plane – he wasn't sure.

The Vice President said that after he gave the first orders he conveyed this to the President again. Then there were two or three different decisions.

The President said that he notified Ari (Fleischer) about the engagement, that Ari was aware of the second conversation on the shutdown.

Commissioner Gorelick said the Vice President's times were different from those of the Commission staff. She said it appeared that the Vice President had been given a "literal tick tock" and that we needed to be sure that the Commission staff had what you have.

Judge Gonzales said he could provide that.

Commissioner Gorelick asked if the President thought that, when he came into office, the CIA had authority to kill Bin Ladin.

The President said he was never told that they didn't. When he asked George, during the transition, can you kill him, his answer was that killing Bin Ladin wouldn't disrupt al Qaeda. It was not that he didn't have the authority to do it.

Commissioner Gorelick said that Attorney General Ashcroft had proposed getting new authorities for CIA in March 2001. Was the President aware that CIA brought new draft authorities to the White House at that time?

The President said there was never a time he had heard that CIA did not have enough authorities. If that was so, George should have said something. I would have changed it.

The President recalled that Woodward asked him about killing Bin Ladin. Look, the President said, I'm not subtle about this. He didn't know what the rules were before 9/11. After, it was no problem. Commenting on the situation before 9/11, he was uncomfortable talking about this, wondering about what the law was then, so he was stuttering, sputtering, not really answering Woodward's question, on the ground that he shouldn't discuss the assassination of a public figure. That was the context for the "blood boiling" before and after. After 3000 people had been killed, sure the situation was different, stronger. This wasn't the same as the problem before.

It was important to understand the authority, the President said. His perspective was that they could kill Bin Ladin any time - they had the authority - and they wanted to. If there was not enough authority, they had the obligation to tell him.

The President said his style was access. He and Tenet had a great relationship. Tenet was doing a good job. "I like it." Tenet is a policy guy. He is a strategic thinker. He is confident enough to say that he did not have what he needed. The President knew this was never proposed to my level. He did not know whether it was proposed to Condi.

Commissioner Gorelick asked about the morning meetings. How did that group deal with the domestic aspect of the threat?

The President said they handled everything. Citing the number of times he had been briefed before 9/11 on al Qaeda, the President said he had read every one. There was not one on a threat in America until the one he had asked for. As for the idea of reaching out to domestic agencies, Andy was to the domestic agencies what Condi was to the foreign policy side.

Commissioner Gorelick asked then whether, in a meeting like the one in July among domestic agencies, the domestic agencies were the responsibility of Andy Card, not Condi.

The President said they were working together to assemble the group needed to deal with the threats at that time. Now this was Tom Ridge. Then it was Andy.

At this point in the meeting, at about 11:45, Vice Chair Hamilton and Commissioner Kerrey took their leave, apologizing for having to leave early. The President wished them well and said he hoped Commissioner Kerrey would remain spirited. After a friendly exchange the two commissioners departed.

Looking forward, Commissioner Gorelick asked the President how he felt about the transition process, about the information flow during the transition and the amount of time it took to stand up the government to be ready.

The President suggested with a smile that it would be better to win on election day. Gorelick also asked about the absence of administration officials during August vacations. The Vice President drily commented that this assumed you want them here when you get hit.

The President mentioned the value of real-time communications. He had staff and facilities in Crawford. It was easier to work from Crawford than from Air Force One. They were better prepared to react there. But perhaps that situation was better now.

As for the transition, a candidate, the President said, is not fully aware of threats. Maybe he shouldn't be. He would recommend that CIA brief John Kerry. He wasn't sure how to calibrate this.

The transition happened pretty quickly. The problem was getting people in place. The delays were too long. He hoped it had not been the administration's fault, hoped that we got our nominations up in time. Perhaps the hearings had been delayed, he didn't know. It may make sense for some nominees not to be vetted as much as others are.

The Clinton administration had been helpful, the President said. They held meetings to pass along information. Condi met with Sandy Berger. There was a good meeting at Colin Powell's house. It was a friendly change of power. It didn't appear to have been as chilly as, for example, the Truman-Eisenhower handoff had been.

The Vice President said that in August 2001 the SVTS wasn't fully up. Now there were facilities allowing secure video teleconferencing at his home in Wyoming and at his residence on Massachusetts Avenue. NSC meetings routinely involved people at 9 or 10 sites, including General Abizaid or Jerry Bremer from Baghdad.

One problem is that they had been really worried about having both the President and Vice President in Washington, DC. They kept a schedule in the White House that

showed in color (he displayed the chart, with pink-shaded blocks) when both the President and Vice President would be in the White House. They tried to keep those occasions to a minimum.

The President mentioned that they had established SVTS communication with Tony Blair too, also for real-time communication. The Camp David SVTS facility was fully equipped. The President or Vice President could go up there. The continuity of government issue was very serious. It was their solemn duty to do that. They now had a better ability to communicate from Air Force One. Fortunately, he did not know yet if it would be good enough in a crisis.

The President commented, however, that there would be a certain chain of confusion in any emergency. He mentioned first learning this as a governor, dealing with hurricanes and floods. Good communications do not alleviate that.

Commissioner Fielding thanked the President for the meeting, mentioning his experience with executive privilege issues.

The President said he appreciated the Commission's help in gathering its information, done the right way. If there had not been an understanding, he wouldn't have sent her (Condi) up there. He couldn't do so without weakening the presidency. The Commission had helped a lot.

Commissioner Fielding returned to the subject of transitions. He thought they should avoid lapses. He recalled his Reagan administration experience, and the fog in March 1981 after the attempted assassination of President Reagan. Information was thrown at you. It was important for the President and Vice President to understand each other's views, in case of a contingency under the 25th Amendment.

The President, smiling, said that wasn't something the Vice President wants to spend a lot of time talking to him about. He thought they had never discussed it.

Judge Gonzales said they had discussed it once. The Vice President agreed, adding they had arranged to talk a lot among the lawyers - Al and David Addington. The President recalled the issue of defining incapacity. Judge Gonzales said this had been defined, at least on paper.

The President said there was no problem with policy continuity. The Vice President understood our process and our strategies. The Vice President understands it just like the President would.

Commissioner Fielding recalled the precedent of President Reagan's relationship with Vice President Bush, and the issue of command authority.

The President said they were in good shape there. It was an interesting topic. Having been through other administrations, the President and Vice President had to discuss these things. One had to force them to do so.

The Vice President commented that the 9/11 situation was unusual. It was better to have the President relate directly to the Secretary of Defense.

The President said the relationship with the Vice President was good in part because there was no political rivalry. Relationships differ from administration to administration. Every one was different. He didn't worry because he had a unique relationship with the Vice President. "The Vice President isn't interested in my job, and I'm not interested in his." This is important precisely for situations of emergency. "That's why I picked him." The President recalled being out in a pasture in Crawford and the Vice President came to him with the results of his vice presidential search committee. The President recalled saying to Dick, "You're it." This wasn't for when times are good. It is a decision for when times are bad. He had no idea that something like 9/11 was coming. It just turned out to be a wise reaction to his instincts.

The President added that the temptation was to pick a political hotshot, for instance someone who could deliver the South. That was a different approach, which he thought should not be used as an example.

The Vice President discussed the briefings for incoming presidents. They discussed the SIOB and nuclear weapons. The military scares the hell out of the president-elect and then they go away. He thought instead there should be a kind of short course by the military for the new civilian leadership. They should use exercises, cases, and scenarios. It should be educational. Incoming leaders don't even know what questions to ask. They ended up having to go through a crisis in order to understand what the issues were.

The President said he remembered thinking that George Tenet, briefing him, thought he was in a job interview. George was used to presidents bringing in a new person and old CIA directors going. The CIA shouldn't be political, not at all. He remembered talking to George, reading his body language, and George trying to read him. He didn't know if it changed the way he acted or not. The issue was that the CIA director shouldn't feel he is auditioning for a job.

Commissioner Fielding commented that if it felt like a test, that would be on the CIA director's mind.

Commissioner Roemer asked if the President had any recollection of Tenet's briefing on August 17, 2001.

No, the President said. He probably saw him, but didn't remember it. He didn't remember anything particular about a threat then.

Commissioner Roemer asked if Tenet had said anything then about an Islamic extremist learning to fly.

The President said no, and he thought he would have remembered that. George feels free to talk. The "PDB briefing" is actually a wider discussion, triggered by the PDB. Sometimes an item didn't merit discussion. But if you're sitting here (in the Oval Office), you cannot sit here if you're told about a threat. What's the action plan? That's the first question. Condi was on the top of her game in situations like that.

Condi, he said, had a strong personality. She had to have one to deal with people like Rumsfeld, Tenet, and Powell. Some people had wondered if she would have what it takes as a relatively young woman dealing with these 'stars.' She does. She is phenomenal, especially given this cast of 'thoroughbreds.' She is not afraid to call them to account. Some people might be intimidated by Don Rumsfeld. He's an old pro. She's not. He is so confident when he tells you things. DOD reacted to that. Condi had daily phone calls with these principals and weekly lunches.

Commissioner Roemer mentioned the Commission's visit the day before to CENTCOM and SOCOM headquarters. The need for better HUMINT had come up.

The President said he sure would like it too. Without it, you don't have the information to send troops in. There are no targets.

Commissioner Gorton asked if it was true that, before 9/11, there was no authority in DOD to shoot down hijacked planes. Was that correct?

Absolutely, the President said. The Vice President said that was also his understanding.

Commissioner Lehman referred back to an earlier question posed by Commissioner Kerrey. Presidents had asked for options on Bin Laden and had basically been offered a choice of cruise missiles on one hand and the Normandy invasion on the other. But there were other options, such as those developed in the era of state-sponsored terrorism - options using special operations forces. Commissioner Lehman talked about some of these capabilities, including the penetrating C-130 variants at Hurlbut Field. President Clinton didn't know about those, he said.

One reason for this problem, Commissioner Lehman contended, was that before Goldwater/Nichols all the chiefs would come in to brief the President. Commissioner Lehman recalled some experiences with this in the Nixon administration, and the growing concern about showing military disagreements to the President. But the President could hear diverse military perspectives on a problem. Now it was just one voice.

The President urged the Commission to remember that they were dealing with a capability to find a person. Fine. The problem, though, was that there was no larger

strategy to eliminate the whole group. He didn't remember getting briefed on the capabilities at Hurlbut.

The Vice President said he did know about those capabilities. They weren't suggested at the White House until after the U.S. had got into Afghanistan. They had tried using special operations forces to get Mullah Omar, with good information. Even then he'd left and they missed him.

The President said that, before 9/11, we weren't on a war footing either. He had recently talked to Tony Blair about this. He told him that they were being criticized for not launching a preemptive attack against Afghanistan. And they were criticized for preemptively attacking Iraq.

Blair had commented, the President recalled, that if the President had told him before 9/11 that he wanted to put forces in Afghanistan, he – Blair – would have been floored. "I would have looked at you like a nut," Blair said. There was an appetite for a 'throat slit' (killing Bin Ladin), not a war footing. A president can't force preemptive war without a cause. The country didn't like war. "I don't like it either," the President said.

The President said he was interested in getting the NSPD, though, without 9/11. He would then have had the problem of how to take on the mindset of the nation before 9/11. This would be a doctrine of striking before being struck. The Commission could see it from his perspective as a doctrine of preemption. This would seem like an ultimate act of unilateralism without a casus belli, in people's minds. It was one thing to send in a squad to do somebody in. It was another to attack al Qaeda with standoff weapons and the military.

The President repeated that the problem would have been how to implement the NSPD without another attack on America. He was prepared to take that on. But people would have argued that he had lost his mind.

The President observed that Commissioner Ben-Veniste seemed to be champing at the bit to ask a question, as usual. Commissioner Ben-Veniste smiled and then asked about the apparent disconnect between these decisions and the attack on the U.S.S. Cole. Bin Ladin himself had not been linked to the Cole attack. But the premise was that diplomacy was supposed to get the Taliban to "cough up that hair ball" (Bin Ladin). The Clinton administration had issued a threat to the Taliban, to hold them accountable for any other attacks. The Cole had happened in October 2000. According to the staff, by mid-December 2000 the evidence had shown beyond any doubt that al Qaeda was linked to the Cole attack.

The President said he was curious about that statement. The President said he was unaware that Clinton had made such a threat to the Taliban. The term "preliminary judgment" had been argued to him. The report he saw said they might be connected.

Commissioner Ben-Veniste referred to the evidence implicating "Khallad." He acknowledged that the CIA and FBI had not reported a conclusion, but the evidence was clear. He said that Attorney General Ashcroft had testified to concerns over the "command and control" structure of al Qaeda, and that was mystifying to him. Why was it so important to link Bin Ladin directly to the al Qaeda attack on the Cole? The problem, therefore, was whether to make good on the threat by retaliating against the Taliban.

The President said he had never said: Cough him up or I'll blast you. If he had said that, well – in that case you have to be ready to blast.

Commissioner Ben-Veniste said there was intelligence that clearly established al Qaeda's responsibility. So then the threat to retaliate against the Taliban should have been triggered by the attack on the Cole.

Judge Gonzales tried to clarify – they didn't strike the Taliban because they didn't know Bin Ladin was behind the attack?

Commissioner Lehman recalled that the FBI and CIA claimed this was not established until August (2001).

The President said Commissioner Ben-Veniste knew more about the evidence in the Cole case than he did. The commissioner had known more about the Yemeni courthouse case, and this. The President didn't remember hearing a definitive statement: They did it. At least not at his level. Was it certain at lower levels?

(Commissioner Roemer tried to interject and clarify the exchanges.) Commissioner Ben-Veniste reiterated that the staff had found that the intelligence community knew al Qaeda was clearly responsible for the Cole attack by December 12, 2000, at the latest. He agreed this had not been conveyed to the President in a report, but he wondered if the President had heard that statement – though the community was less sure about the links to al Qaeda's high command.

The President said he didn't know what that meant. It didn't come to him.

The President said he and his advisers did discuss what the appropriate response should be to the Cole attack. If the response is, say, cruise missiles, then you have to do the analysis. The enemy wants you to flinch – or put a cruise missile on a \$15 tent.

On the Taliban, the President continued, we didn't issue that threat. If you go after the Taliban, you have to eliminate the Taliban. A lesser response may mean you incapacitate Mullah Omar. But if you're wrong and miss him, you inflame the situation in an even worse way. From the enemy's perspective, if they defeat America's high technology, that's great. To them, the cruise missile is the ultimate expression of technology, opposed to the guerrilla fighter.

In other words, the President went on, unless you're real good, you're not going to get the Taliban. You must do what we did. That means a massive, smart operation. That means aircraft carriers, aircraft based in 1.4(a)(d) 1.4(a)(d) overwhelming force, refueling, and other supply. You have to wipe out the Taliban. If you just get Mullah Omar, you haven't eradicated the Taliban and you haven't eliminated al Qaeda.

Therefore, you tell the Taliban you've made a threat. They don't care. They do care if they are eliminated.

After 9/11, the President said, his blood was indeed boiling. He delivered an ultimatum to the Taliban. The Taliban did this (he used the fist up/bent arm gesture). But it served its purpose, and showed the perspective from the Commander-in-Chief.

Commissioner Gorelick raised the issue of evidence and action.

The President said the best response on the Cole was to eliminate the group, eliminate their structure. You could arrest people, and they had. He thought that perhaps they had arrested five of the seven people who had carried out the attack, though he recalled the Yemenis had let some people out and then got them back in custody. The law enforcement aspect worked OK.

The Vice President remembered that the problem in the early months was getting the FBI in to be able to do its work.

The President said that was to find the bombers and hunt for clues. He was trying to address a different question, which was how the question of responsibility for the Cole related to action against the network, not individuals. It was the question of how to bring Bin Ladin or the Taliban to account.

Commissioner Ben-Veniste asked if only 9/11 could have done that.

The President said the strategy was being developed before 9/11. He would have tried to use our power, and "our charm on preemption," without 9/11, because of the Cole.

Commissioner Gorelick said it therefore looked like the NSPD put the President in a box.

The President agreed. That is my point. But I was willing to pursue it, he said. It would not have been easy. He referred again to Prime Minister Blair's argument in their conversation earlier that day. But, he said, it was easier to make the case after 9/11. People could fully understand how different things were.

Without the attack, the President said, suppose he had gone forward with this new strategy on September 30, developing a plan to wipe out al Qaeda. People would have said, "Whoa!" But he still would have pursued it. "It would have been a lot slower, Jamie," he said. They had to develop a complex strategy. It would not have been easy.

One of the commissioners noted that they had already been meeting for three hours. The President smiled and said he wanted to go at least for three hours and five minutes.

Commissioner Ben-Veniste mentioned Condi Rice's statement that nobody had thought of using airplanes as weapons.

The President said that nobody ever told her about this possibility. He stopped himself, saying he shouldn't speak for her.

Commissioner Ben-Veniste said he thought the intelligence on this possibility had surely been available.

The President asked if the commissioner was sure about that.

Yes, Commissioner Ben-Veniste said. The intelligence community had collected a dozen instances of planned use of suicide planes. And there were the measures to protect the G-8 summit in Genoa, including a CAP over Genoa and placement of antiaircraft batteries.

The President replied that nobody had said: By the way, a vulnerability of America is Not to him or to Condi either.

As for Genoa, the President continued, they close the airspace wherever he goes. That was not a tie-in to a warning that airplanes would be used as weapons. Genoa was a war zone. They had gotten all these threats. The President remembered flying in and seeing nothing but soldiers. They drove down the streets of the city and did not see anyone but police.

The President repeated: How can a president think of a threat? You can invent a threat, because there is a no fly zone over Genoa. A president has to deal with real information.

Commissioner Ben-Veniste said that President Mubarak claimed he had warned Italian authorities about possible suicide planes.

The President said he had never heard about that. Because the airspace was closed over Genoa, he should think of aircraft hitting buildings? No. Presidents had to rely on real information. They can't be imagining things. That was why George Tenet was there every morning, with the briefer.

Chairman Kean thanked the President for a very good discussion. He thought the questioning had been good. He wished the President the best.

The President said he hoped the Commission had enjoyed the opportunity. This is not a "gotcha moment" for me or my predecessor. They weren't playing "gotcha." This was too important for America. It would be good if citizens could take this moment and convert it into something for future presidents.

The President said it had been a good experience to meet with the whole Commission. It had been good for you to see us (the President and Vice President) and see how we interface with each other. He had been criticized for saying he had looked into Putin's eyes and seen his soul. But the President thought that was important.

The President added that this was a serious business. The country was still at war. Enemies want to kill us. He worried that the election cycle might give them an excuse. Aznar had lost not because of the attack, but because of how he had handled the attack. That sent a terrible signal, though, and placed us more at risk.


Chairman Kean said a meeting like this could only happen in a democracy. The Commission would try to be practical in its approach.

The President said he looked forward to the report. The White House would try to clear the draft report as quickly as possible. It would help if they could see some chapters earlier, as they were prepared. The clearance process would move – he wanted this to get out. They would get it done.

The President quickly reviewed what he intended to say about the meeting to the press. Chairman Kean described the similar, and equally non-substantive, plan for Commission comments. The meeting then concluded.

This document is made available through the declassification efforts
and research of John Greenewald, Jr., creator of:

The Black Vault



The Black Vault is the largest online Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) document clearinghouse in the world. The research efforts here are responsible for the declassification of hundreds of thousands of pages released by the U.S. Government & Military.

Discover the Truth at: <http://www.theblackvault.com>