

Against All Enemies — Excerpt

Evacuate the White House

I ran through the West Wing to the Vice President's office, oblivious to the stares and concern that brought. I had been at a conference in the Ronald Reagan Building three blocks away when Lisa Gordon-Hagerty called to say an aircraft had struck the World Trade Center: "Until we know what this is, Dick, we should assume the worst." Lisa had been in the center of crisis coordination many times in exercises and all too often in the real world.

"Right. Activate the CSG on secure video. I'll be there in less than five," I told her as I ran to my car. The CSG was the Counterterrorism Security Group, the leaders of each of the federal government's counterterrorism and security organizations. I had chaired it since 1992. It was on a five-minute tether during business hours, twenty minutes at all other times. I looked at the clock on the dashboard. It was 9:03a.m., September 11, 2001.

As I drove up to the first White House gate Lisa called again: "The other tower was just hit." "Well, now we know who we're dealing with. I want the highest level person in Washington from each agency on-screen now, especially FAA," the Federal Aviation Administration.

As I pulled the car up to the West Wing door, Paul Kurtz, one of the White House counterterrorism team, ran up to me. "We were in the Morning Staff Meeting when we heard. Condi told me to find you fast and broke up the meeting. She's with Cheney."

Bursting in on the Vice President and Condi—Condoleezza Rice, the President's National Security Advisor—alone in Cheney's office, I caught my breath. Cheney was famously implacable, but I thought I saw a reflection of horror on his face. "What do you think?" he asked.

"It's an al Qaeda attack and they like simultaneous attacks. This may not be over."

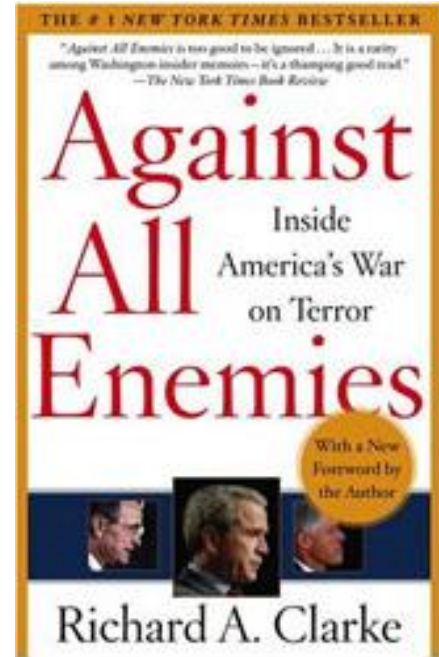
"Okay, Dick," Condi said, "you're the crisis manager, what do you recommend?" She and I had discussed what we would do if and when another terrorist attack hit. In June I had given her a checklist of things to do after an attack, in part to underline my belief that something big was coming and that we needed to go on the offensive.

"We're putting together a secure teleconference to manage the crisis," I replied. "I'd like to get the highest ranking official from each department." My mind was already racing, developing a new list of what had to be done and done now.

"Do it," the Vice President ordered.

"Secret Service wants us to go the bomb shelter," Condi added.

I nodded. "I would and . . . I would evacuate the White House."



Cheney began to gather up his papers. In his outer office the normal Secret Service presence was two agents. As I left, I counted eight, ready to move to the PEOC, the Presidential Emergency Operations Center, a bunker in the East Wing.

Just off the main floor of the Situation Room on the ground level of the West Wing is a Secure Video Conferencing Center, a clone of the Situation Room conference room except for the bank of monitors in the far wall opposite the chairman's seat. Like the conference room the Video Center is small and paneled with dark wood. The presidential seal hangs on the wall over the chair at the head of the table.

On my way through the Operations Center of the Situation Room, Ralph Seigler, the longtime Situation Room deputy director, grabbed me. "We're on the line with NORAD, on an air threat conference call." That was a procedure instituted by the North American Aerospace Defense Command during the Cold War to alert the White House when Soviet bombers got too close to U.S. airspace.

"Where's POTUS? Who have we got with him?" I asked, as we moved quickly together through the center, using the White House staff jargon for the President.

"He's in a kindergarten in Florida. Deb's with him." Deb was Navy Captain Deborah Lower, the director of the White House Situation Room. "We have a line open to her cell."

As I entered the Video Center, Lisa Gordon-Hagerty was taking the roll and I could see people rushing into studios around the city: Donald Rumsfeld at Defense and George Tenet at CIA. But at many of the sites the Principal was traveling. The Attorney General was in Milwaukee, so Larry Thompson, the Deputy, was at Justice. Rich Armitage, the number two at State, was filling in for Colin Powell, who was in Peru. Air Force Four-star General Dick Myers was filling in for the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs, Hugh Shelton, who was over the Atlantic. Bob Mueller was at the FBI, but he had just started that job.

Each Principal was supported by his or her member of the CSG and behind them staffs could be seen frantically yelling on telephones and grabbing papers. Condi Rice walked in behind me with her Deputy, Steve Hadley. "Do you want to chair this as a Principals meeting?" I asked. Rice, as National Security Advisor, chaired the Principals Committee, which consisted of the Secretaries of State and Defense, the CIA Director, the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs, and often now the Vice President.

"No. You run it." I pushed aside the chair at the head of the table and stood there, Condi visibly by my side.

"Let's begin. Calmly. We will do this in crisis mode, which means keep your microphones off unless you're speaking. If you want to speak, wave at the camera. If it's something you don't want everyone to hear, call me on the red phone."

Rice would later be criticized in the press by unnamed participants of the meeting for "just standing around." From my obviously partial perspective, she had shown courage by standing back. She knew it looked off, but she also had enough self-confidence to feel no need to be in the chair. She did not want to waste time. I thought back to the scene in this room when the Oklahoma City bombing took place. President Clinton had walked in and sat down, chairing the CSG video conference for a few minutes. While it showed high-level concern and we were glad to have him there, it would have slowed down our response if he had stayed.

"You're going to need some decisions quickly," Rice said off camera. "I'm going to the PEOC to be with the Vice President. Tell us what you need."

“What I need is an open line to Cheney and you.” I turned to my White House Fellow, Army Major Mike Fenzel. The highly competitive process that selected White House fellows had turned out some extraordinary people over the years, such as another army major named Colin Powell. “Mike,” I said, “go with Condi to the PEOC and open a secure line to me. I’ll relay the decisions we need to you.”

Fenzel was used to pressure. As a lieutenant, he had driven his Bradley Fighting Vehicle down the runway of an Iraqi air base shooting up MiGs and taking return fire. As a captain, he had led a company of infantry into war-torn Liberia and faced down a mob outside the U.S. embassy. (Eighteen months after 9/11, Fenzel would be the first man to parachute out of his C-17 in a nighttime combat jump into Iraq.)

“Okay,” I began. “Let’s start with the facts. FAA, FAA, go.” I fell into using the style of communication on tactical radio so that those listening in the other studios around town could hear who was being called on over the din in their own rooms.

Jane Garvey, the administrator of the Federal Aviation Administration, was in the chair. “The two aircraft that went in were American flight 11, a 767, and United 175, also a 767. Hijacked.”

“Jane, where’s Norm?” I asked. They were frantically looking for Norman Mineta, the Secretary of Transportation, and, like me, a rare holdover from the Clinton administration. At first, FAA could not find him. “Well, Jane, can you order aircraft down? We’re going to have to clear the airspace around Washington and New York.”

“We may have to do a lot more than that, Dick. I already put a hold on all takeoffs and landings in New York and Washington, but we have reports of eleven aircraft off course or out of communications, maybe hijacked.”

“Lisa slowly whispered, “Oh shit.” All conversation had stopped in the studios on the screens. Everyone was listening.