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THE PRESIDENT

## Aides Say Bush Was One Target of Hijacked Jet

By R. W. APPLE Jr.  
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WASHINGTON, Sept. 12 — Stung by suggestions that President Bush had hurt himself politically by delaying his return to Washington on Tuesday, the White House asserted today that Mr. Bush had done so because of hard evidence that he was a target of the terrorists who hijacked airliners and slammed them into the World Trade Center and the Pentagon.

Ari Fleischer, the White House press secretary, said this afternoon that officials had "real and credible information" that the White House, not the Pentagon, had been the original target of American Airlines Flight 77, which was hijacked about 45 minutes after leaving Dulles International Airport in Virginia.

Another senior official said that after that plane hit the Pentagon, a chilling threat was phoned to the Secret Service.

"Air Force One is next," the official quoted the caller as saying. The threat was accompanied by code words that indicated knowledge of White House procedures, the official said.

Karl Rove, Mr. Bush's adviser, said in an interview this morning that Mr. Bush had twice on Tuesday — in the morning and in the early afternoon — argued strenuously that he should return immediately to the capital. Mr. Rove reported that the Secret Service insisted that the situation here was "too dangerous, too unstable" for the president to come to Washington.

"We are talking about specific and credible intelligence," Mr. Rove said, "not vague suspicions."

But neither Mr. Rove nor other officials explained why this information was not made

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public on Tuesday. Partly because it was not, Mr. Bush was criticized for spending the day traveling a zigzag route from Sarasota, Fla.; to Barksdale Air Force Base near Shreveport, La.; then to Offutt Air Force Base in Omaha; then back to Washington. He did not land at the White House until 7 p.m., almost exactly 10 hours after he learned of the first attack.

In addition, much remained unclear about the sequence of events. Some officials suggested that airplanes other than the four known to have been hijacked had in some unspecified way jeopardized the safety of President Bush.

On television, in newspapers and in animated discussions in offices across the country, Mr. Bush's conduct was compared unfavorably with that of Mayor Rudolph W. Giuliani of New York, who went to the scene of the attacks in Lower Manhattan; to John F. Kennedy, who stayed in Washington throughout the Cuban missile crisis of 1963, when many feared that nuclear war was imminent, and to Defense Secretary Donald H. Rumsfeld, who remained at the Pentagon after it was hit and for a time helped in the evacuation of the dead and wounded.

The president's conduct, said an article this morning in the staunchly conservative Boston Herald, "did not inspire confidence."

The official who reported the threat to Air Force One, speaking on condition that he not be identified, said Vice President Dick Cheney called the president early on Tuesday and urged him not to return to Washington immediately.

According to the official, Mr. Cheney, a former secretary of defense, suggested that Mr. Bush go to Offutt, which has excellent secure communications that could be used to hold a video teleconference with the National Security Council. A senior officer at the Pentagon said that a preliminary stop had been made at Barksdale because it would be unexpected by anyone tracking the president's plane.

"It would have been irresponsible of him to come back, pounding his chest, when hostile aircraft may be headed our way," the official said. "Any suggestion that he do so was ludicrous."

Still, Mr. Bush suggested exactly that at least twice, according to notes Mr. Rove took and read to a reporter this morning.

As Air Force One, flying north from Sarasota, crossed over the Florida Panhandle, Mr. Rove said, Mr. Bush made it clear that he wanted to go to Washington and nowhere else. That would have been sometime between 10 and 11 a.m., after planes had hit the two Trade Center towers and the Pentagon. The Pentagon attack, the third in the sequence, occurred at 9:45 a.m.

The other official said that Mr. Cheney was first told that the plane heading for the White House might be an airliner, private plane or helicopter loaded with explosives. But by the time Mr. Bush made his first request to return to Washington, which was rebuffed by the Secret Service, that plane was no longer any threat to the White House, since it had hit the



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Pentagon.

Another hijacked plane, United Airlines Flight 93, plunged into a field southeast of Pittsburgh about 10:10 a.m., and word of that crash took some time to seep out. The security officers may still have considered it unaccounted for, and hence a threat, when they warned the president.

But at 1:25 p.m., Mr. Rove's notes show, Mr. Bush turned to his chief of staff, Andrew H. Card Jr., as Air Force One sat on the tarmac at Barksdale, and renewed his demand to return to Washington. Mr. Rove quoted him as saying, "The people of America will expect to see me and hear from me in Washington." But the president's words, Mr. Rove said, were "saltier."

Again Mr. Bush was rebuffed. By then the Pittsburgh crash was big news on the networks, and television anchors were starting to suggest, sometimes not very gently, that Mr. Bush was absent at a time of national crisis.

So what constituted the threat at that point?

The senior official said that Mr. Cheney had originally been told there were six airliners unaccounted for, presumably including the one that crashed near Pittsburgh. It may have been headed for the White House before something — perhaps a bomb explosion on board, perhaps a cockpit struggle — stopped it.

Presumably, the five other airliners continued to be regarded as a threat, but it is not known for how long. Four were over the Atlantic, and they landed in Canada; one was inbound from South Korea, and it landed in Alaska.

Exactly what times those planes landed is not known, but the Federal Aviation Administration issued its order to clear the skies at 9:40 a.m., three and a half hours before Mr. Bush insisted to Mr. Card that he return to Washington.

Once the White House account of the threats to the president and the White House was made public today, some steam went out of the criticism of Mr. Bush. Today's comments on Capitol Hill, for example, were nearly all supportive.

Representative Randy Cunningham, a conservative Republican from California who was shot down on his 300th mission as a Navy pilot over Vietnam, said of Mr. Bush's journey on Tuesday: "It was done exactly as it should have been done. Think what would have happened if we we had lost the president."

Representative David Dreier, a moderate Republican, also from California, said, "With this news of the White House and possibly Air Force One as possible targets, it becomes very clear that he made the right decision."

Only a Republican senator from a Western state, unwilling to speak for the record because, he explained, he wanted to "maintain a united front," offered any criticism.

"The president could have overruled the security people and come back earlier, and maybe he should have," the senator said. "The Secret Service works for him, after all, and not the other way around."

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