

9/11 Contradictions: Bush in the Classroom on the Morning of September 11, 2001

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The official story of 9/11 is riddled with internal contradictions. One of these contradictions involves the question of how long President Bush remained in classroom in Sarasota, Florida, on the morning of 9/11.

Bush was there to publicize his education policy by being photographed listening to students read. He arrived at the school at 8:55 AM, at which time he reportedly first learned that a plane had struck one of the Twin Towers. Dismissing the crash as an accident, Bush said that they would go ahead and “do the reading thing anyway.”

Bush entered the second-grade classroom of teacher Sandra Kay Daniels at about 9:03. At about 9:06, the president’s chief of staff, Andrew Card, came in and whispered in Bush’s ear, telling him, Card later reported, “A second plane hit the second Tower. America is under attack.”

What Happened Next

Thanks to Michael Moore’s film *Fahrenheit 9/11*, which came out in 2004, the world knows what happened next: Bush remained sitting there minute after minute after minute.

Journalists, however, had reported Bush’s strange behavior much earlier. On September 1, 2002, for example, Jennifer Barrs had reported in the *Tampa Tribune* that, after Card whispered in Bush’s ear, the president picked up his book and read with the children “for eight or nine minutes.” In his 2002 book *Fighting Back*, Bill Sammon, the White House correspondent for the *Washington Times*, said that even after the reading lesson was over, Bush continued to linger, leading Sammon to dub him “the dawdler in chief.”

The White House’s First Anniversary Account

On the first anniversary of 9/11, however, the White House, with Andrew Card taking the lead, started giving a radically different account. On September 9, 2002, Card told Brian Williams on NBC News: “I pulled away from the president, and not that many seconds later, the president excused himself from the classroom, and we gathered in the holding room and talked about the situation.” In an article in the *San Francisco Chronicle* on September 11, Card said that, after he had informed Bush about the second attack, the president “looked up—it was only a matter of seconds, but it seemed like minutes. . . . And he just excused himself very politely to the teacher and to the students and he left.”

That same day, Karl Rove told Campbell Brown of NBC News:

Andy Card walked in to tell the President, and you can remember the famous photograph of him whispering in the President's ear. And the President was a little—you know, he didn't want to alarm the children. He knew the drill was coming to a close. So he waited for a few moments just to—literally—not very long at all before he came to the close, and he came into the staff room.

Also that same day, Card and Rove got ABC News, during another program that aired on the first anniversary of 9/11, to endorse their revisionist account. This program contained the following segment:

Andrew Card: I think there was a, a moment of shock and he did stare off maybe for just a second.

Charles Gibson: The President stays calm and lets the students finish.

Karl Rove: The President thought for a second or two about getting up and walking out of the room. But the drill was coming to a close and he didn't want to alarm the children.

Gibson: Instead Bush pauses, thanks the children. . . and heads for the empty classroom next door.

Help from Mrs. Daniels

Besides putting out this revisionist account, the Bush-Cheney White House also evidently enlisted support from Sandra Kay Daniels, the teacher of the second grade class at the Sarasota school. In a *Los Angeles Times* story published on September 11, 2002, she said:

I knew something was up when President Bush didn't pick up the book and participate in the lesson.... He said, 'Mrs. Daniels, I have to leave now. I am going to leave Lt. Gov. Frank Brogan here to do the speech for me.' Looking at his face, you knew something was wrong. I said a little prayer for him. He shook my hand and left.

This account by Daniels was radically different from what she had said for the aforementioned article by Jennifer Barrs, which had appeared only ten days earlier. After saying that "Bush, obviously lost in thought, forgot about the book in his lap," Barrs quoted Daniels as saying: "I couldn't gently kick him. . . . I couldn't say, 'OK, Mr. President. Pick up your book, sir. The whole world is watching.'"

Given the fact that Mrs. Daniels had given this account just ten days earlier, her revisionist account cannot be explained in terms of a bad memory. The only possible explanation appears to be that the White House had convinced her to help spread its revisionist account. What would have been the White House's motive for spreading a false account and even convincing Mrs. Daniels to help?

The Likely Motive

On the one hand, the Secret Service, which has the responsibility for protecting the president from any possible threat to his life, should have assumed, once it was clear that terrorists were going after high-value targets, that the president might have been one of those targets. As one article put it, "Bush's presence made . . . the planned reading event a

perceived target,” because “the well-publicized event at the school assured Bush’s location that day was no secret.” On the other hand, people observed that the Secret Service had not acted accordingly. The day after 9/11, Canada’s *Globe and Mail* commented: “For some reason, Secret Service agents did not hustle [Bush] away.”

The background for this comment was explained by Philip Melanson, the author of a book about the Secret Service. “With an unfolding terrorist attack,” Melanson said, “the procedure should have been to get the president to the closest secure location as quickly as possible.” That this indeed would have been standard operating procedure is illustrated by the fact that, as soon as the second strike on the World Trade Center was seen on television, one agent said to Sarasota County Sheriff Bill Balkwill: “We’re out of here. Can you get everybody ready?”

But this agent’s decision was obviously overridden by some higher-level Secret Service agent, as Bush was allowed not only to remain in the classroom for seven or more minutes, but also to remain at the school for another twenty minutes. He was even allowed to deliver a television address to the nation, thereby letting everyone know that he was still at the school.

This behavior seemed especially reckless in light of reports, issued at the time, that as many as eleven planes had been hijacked. The Secret Service should have feared that one of those planes was bearing down on the school at that very moment. The Secret Service’s behavior, however, suggested that it had no fear that the school would be attacked.

This behavior by the Secret Service contrasted strongly with the response, two months earlier, to a report that Islamic terrorists might crash an airliner into the summit of industrialized nations in Genoa, Italy, in an effort to kill President Bush. The Italian government closed the airspace above Genoa and installed anti-aircraft missiles at the airport (David Sanger, *New York Times*, September 25, 2001). Even with all this protection, Bush stayed overnight on an aircraft carrier, instead of staying, like the other leaders, on a luxury ship (CNN, July 18, 2001). Why so much concern about merely possible terrorist airplane attacks in Genoa in July but no such concern in Sarasota in September, when such attacks were actually in progress?

The Secret Service’s failure to hustle Bush away seemed even stranger in light of the reports that Vice President Cheney, Condoleezza Rice, and several congressional leaders were quickly taken to safe locations. Should not protecting President Bush have been an even higher priority? As Susan Taylor Martin of the *St. Petersburg Times* put it on July 4, 2004: “One of the many unanswered questions about that day is why the Secret Service did not immediately hustle Bush to a secure location, as it apparently did with Vice President Dick Cheney.”

The fact that this question was raised immediately after 9/11, then continued to be raised, could well have been perceived by the White House as dangerous. This question did, in fact, have dangerous implications, because it could—and in some circles did—lead to the inference that Bush was not evacuated from the school because the Secret Service knew that he would *not* be targeted. The desire to stop this kind of speculation was likely behind the White House’s attempts at getting a revisionist account of Bush’s behavior instilled into the public consciousness.

The 9/11 Commission's Treatment of the Issue

The strange behavior of Bush and his Secret Service in Sarasota was of great concern to families of the 9/11 victims. One of the central questions raised by the Family Steering Committee for the 9/11 Commission was: "Why was President Bush permitted by the Secret Service to remain in the Sarasota elementary school where he was reading to children?" (That this question was asked was admitted by Thomas Kean and Lee Hamilton, the chair and vice-chair of the Commission, in their 2006 book, *Without Precedent: The Inside Story of the 9/11 Commission*, p. 54.) The 9/11 Commission, however, provided no answer. Its only response was to say: "The Secret Service told us they were anxious to move the President to a safer location, but did not think it imperative for him to run out the door" (*The 9/11 Commission Report*, p. 39). That response, however, implied that the Secret Service had only two options: (a) running the president out the door or (b) allowing him to remain at the school for another half hour. But there was a third option: The Secret Service could have simply walked the president out the door, put him in the presidential limo, and whisked him away.

The Treatment by Press

A *Wall Street Journal* story in March 2004, "Government Accounts of 9/11 Reveal Gaps, Inconsistencies," was one of the few stories in the mainstream press to report on contradictions in the official story of 9/11. When the *Journal* asked the White House about the contradictions about the Sarasota event in particular, spokesman Dan Bartlett, not trying to defend the White House's revisionist version, confirmed that Bush had remained in the classroom for at least seven minutes after receiving the report of the second crash. Bush did not leave immediately, Bartlett said, because his "instinct was not to frighten the children by rushing out of the room."

However, even if Bartlett's statement were an acceptable explanation of why Bush did not do what Card and Rove had claimed he did, the real question, which the WSJ article did not address, was why the White House, through Card, Rove, and Mrs. Daniels, had given a false account. Surely this is a question that the press in general should have explored. Especially ABC News, NBC News, the *San Francisco Chronicle*, and the *Los Angeles Times*, which had been used to spread the White House's false account, should have demanded that the White House explain why it put out a completely false account. These papers and networks owed their readers and viewers a correction and an attempt to find out why the White House had used them to spread a lie.

While discovering why the White House lied, the press should also, of course, seek to discover the answer to the original question: why the Secret Service did not immediately rush Bush to a safe location.

This essay is an abbreviated version of Chapter 1 of David Ray Griffin, 9/11 Contradictions: An Open Letter to Congress and the Press (Northampton: Olive Branch, March, 2008.

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