

“I’m Going to Win a Pulitzer”

Interviewee: Daniel J. Bartlett

Interview Date: January 30–31, 2014

Project: George W. Bush Oral History Project

Dan Bartlett was President George W. Bush’s top communications aide on board Air Force One on September 11, 2001. He describes what it was like in those uncertain hours with Bush, including for a time a mistaken fear that the president’s plane was itself an active target. Bartlett also tracks the logistics of their travel that day, which involved two stops at military bases in heartland America, and, at one point, the removal of much of the traveling press corps from the plane.

Daniel J. Bartlett: We get to the airport, and a motorcade ride with the President on a good day is a pretty brisk one. This one was a really fast one. At this point we do believe we’re going back to Washington. It was only as we got to the plane—I can’t remember if we were in the air or about to take off when the next hit was the Pentagon. The decision was we were not going to Washington. I remember we were taxiing down the runway. Again, typical procedure, it’s a pretty steep ascent, but this was a dramatic ascent into the air. Pretty quickly we bank west and we’re headed not to Washington.

At this point you get fog of war type stuff. Rumsfeld goes to the scene, so he’s kind of out of commission. We have Bob Mueller [III] on literally his second day, I think, on the job as FBI Director. We’re on the phone with him before we get there. As it was documented in the 9/11 Report, the comms [communications] on Air Force One weren’t ideal. They functioned OK, but not great. They were trying to keep them open. In fact, you were talking about mobile devices. This was right at the beginning of Blackberry where there was one person, of course Karl, who had a Blackberry. He had a political Blackberry.

I remember as we’re going up he was sending notes to all our wives on his Blackberry saying, “Dan’s OK. He’ll call when he can.” He sent for each person. “He’ll call when he can. We’re all fine.” But that’s how we all communicated back to our spouses; it was Karl’s Blackberry. He was the only one who had one and was the impetus of all of us getting them very quickly thereafter.

So we go west. I remember there was a scare—this is when there was a misinterpretation of somebody using the signal of “Angel” on Air Force One. There was this fear, so we get fighter aircraft escorts. There was a mis-report about the ranch being a target. He’s trying to track down his parents, his daughters, and his wife. It’s a pretty hectic swirling activity on Air Force One. We’re getting the local coverage, so we’re seeing all this stuff.

Michael Nelson: From whatever local station you’re—

Bartlett: Yes, you’re picking them up as you go, basically, one of the nationals. We’re deciding what we’re going to do. We end up going to Barksdale Air Force Base. He is really anxious to get back. Cheney and everybody else are saying—at this point there are still hundreds of international inbound aircraft in the air. It is still too fluid of an environment. Trying to decide whether we were going to go to NORAD [North American Air Defense Command] in Colorado

or to Offutt. Ideally, we would have gone to NORAD, but the logistics were too hard to work out. To get up to NORAD you have to have helos and all that. We didn't have assets because this was an unplanned stop. That was really what prompted us to go to Offutt.

We made the decision in Barksdale that we were going to shrink the size of the traveling party significantly. We had some Congressmen with us, and we had extra staffers. We had a substantial press corps. I'll never forget, Ari and I knew we were going to cut it down to a very tight travel pool of press reporters. He said, "This is not going to go over well, because every one of those reporters is thinking, *I'm going to win a Pulitzer because I'm going to be with the President on 9/11.*"

End of excerpt.

Interview with Dan Bartlett, January 30–31, 2014, George W. Bush Oral History Project, Presidential Oral History Program, Miller Center of Public Affairs, University of Virginia. URL: <https://millercenter.org/the-presidency/presidential-oral-histories/daniel-j-bartlett-oral-history>