

“He Very Calmly Issued the Order”

Interviewee: Joshua Bolten

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Joshua Bolten was deputy chief of staff for policy under President George W. Bush, but was acting chief of staff in the White House on September 11, 2001, as Andrew Card was traveling that day with the president. Bolten recalls the high-level conversations that took place in the bunker beneath the White House as it became clear that multiple airplanes had been hijacked as part of the 9/11 terrorist attacks. He describes how Vice President Dick Cheney confirmed the military order to intercept United Airlines Flight 93 as it was being flown toward the nation’s capital.

Joshua Bolten: It was pretty chaotic. It became clearer that this one plane actually might be another one the terrorists had taken over. So the military aide was shuttling in saying how far out, what its trajectory was. It was headed straight for D.C. [District of Columbia]. It was 500 miles out, estimate this much time until arrival.

The military aide asked the Vice President for authority to shoot it down, to issue the order to shoot it down, which I had presumed that the President and the Vice President had talked about because that was the clear issue. If there are more planes in the air, do we take them out of the air to prevent them from doing any damage?

The Vice President very calmly gave the order to shoot down, to scramble fighter craft that were available and intercept, United Flight 93, is it?

Interviewer: I think it was 93.

Bolten: To intercept it, attempt to make contact, but if you can’t contact—I think the protocol was that they’re supposed to fly up next to it and look in the cockpit.

Interviewer: Make visual contact.

Bolten: Make visual contact. If you can’t get them diverted, take them down. So he very calmly issued the order. I remember the military aide asking twice for confirmation of the order. That might have been in the protocol as well, but I think it was also because the Vice President was so calmly issuing the order that I think the military aide thought he didn’t understand what he had been asked.

End of excerpt.

Interview 2 with Joshua Bolten, July 13, 2016, 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/joshua-bolten-oral-history-part-ii>