

“I’ll Talk to You Later”

Interviewee: Ari Fleischer

Interview Date: September 29–30, 2010

Project: George W. Bush Oral History Project

On September 11, 2001, Press Secretary Ari Fleischer was coordinating press coverage of President George W. Bush’s elementary school visit, with him in Sarasota, Florida. He recollects the shifting priorities as the 9/11 terrorist attacks proceeded and the challenge of crafting the president’s message during the evolving crisis.

Ari Fleischer: We were getting out of the motorcade at the end of Booker Elementary School in Sarasota and I received a page—The page said, “World Trade Center has been hit by an airplane.” Like everybody, my first reaction was that it must have been some terrible accident; there was no indication of the size of the plane. We got to the school and the President was shaking hands with people, the superintendent, the principal, along the inside wall of the school. He got to the end of shaking hands and Karl was the first one to get to the President and whispered in the President’s ear, “The World Trade Center has been hit by an airplane.”

End of excerpt 1.

Ari Fleischer: Condi was waiting for him on the phone. She didn’t really have any information and he directed her just to monitor it, keep him apprised, and let him know what’s going on.

We talked informally—I guess somebody had wheeled in a TV at that point, so we could see the fire. Maybe it was later that you could see the fire—but he knew enough to know that the building was on fire and New York City had to fight this. He was going to say in that briefing room, as I indicated yesterday, that the federal government would make resources available to New York to help deal with the plane hitting the World Trade Center. Then he went into the schoolroom and was reading to the kids. I received a second page telling me the second tower had been hit, and I instantly knew it was terrorism—Moments later, Andy walked in and did what I said yesterday, whispered in his right ear. I wrote on the pad and then the press started to ask questions of the President. My instructions to my press advance staff were to get the press out of there as quickly as they could. The President motioned to the press that he would talk with them later. He then went into the hold. We were just working the phones—he was working the phones, Andy was working the phones—all trying to get information.

I started to write what I thought President Bush should say, because he was going to go to the gymnasium, where he had been scheduled to give a big speech to everybody outside the classroom; the bigger group was waiting for him and all the press was in there. He was going to go there, explain something about what happened to the World Trade Center, and then get to Air Force One. But I had a hard time writing it; nothing was coming to me. The President started to write, Dan started to write, and it was just cobbled together.

End of excerpt 2.