

“We’re Kind of Hearing the Celebratory Gunfire”

Interviewee: Michael Hayden

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Project: George W. Bush Oral History Project

Michael Hayden was director of the National Security Agency (NSA) on September 11, 2001, under President George W. Bush. Hayden describes his morning as he realizes the attacks on New York’s World Trade Center were not simply accidents. He recounts ordering the evacuation of NSA staff to ensure their safety and confirming that al-Qaeda coordinated the attacks.

Michael V. Hayden: I came in, a normal day, somewhere I’ve got the schedule for that day on a little three-by-five card. My executive assistant came in 9:00-ish.

Interviewer: What time did you get in?

Hayden: Oh, 7:00. My executive assistant came into my office at 9:00 or so and said, “A plane hit the World Trade Center.” Like practically everyone else I thought an accident, probably a small plane, sport plane, hopefully there’s not much loss of life, and continue with the meeting. She came in and said, “A plane has hit the other tower.” I said, “OK, now we know what this is.” I immediately said, “Get the head of security up here,” a fellow named Kemp Ensor, and stopped my meeting. As Kemp was coming in my office door, Cindy [Farkus], the executive assistant, was coming in the other door and saying, “There are reports of explosions on the Mall,” so that was a garbled report of the plane hitting the Pentagon. Poor Kemp never even said a word. I just said, “Tell everyone, all nonessential personnel, evacuate.”

And so we started that announcement. Then the next decision we made was to get as many people as we could out of the two high-rise buildings at NSA. Blessedly, we have a big, long, low-rider three-story building, which is the original ops building. That’s actually where our operations center is. We tried to move as many people as we could there. If you’re staying, if you’re essential, let’s try to work in ops one, the low-rider building. Then I went down to the ops center and started doing what I did from there. Again, a great blessing. I had all the communications I needed. George called me about 10:30, 11:00.

Knott: George Tenet.

Hayden: Tenet, yes, and he said, “What do you have?” and I said, “It’s al-Qaeda.” He said, “Do you have proof?” I said, “Well, we’re hearing the celebratory gunfire on the network.”

End of Excerpt.

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