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Of fact, fiction: Bush on 9/11

His morning started in a Sarasota elementary school, but accounts of the hours after the attacks carry contradictions and confusion.

By SUSAN TAYLOR MARTIN, Times Senior Correspondent
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SARASOTA - Looking back on that day, columnist Robert Plunket wonders why the president of the United States seemed among the last to know about the worst terrorist attack in American history.

Former U.S. Rep. Dan Miller wonders why communications were so bad the president had to use a cell phone to reach Washington.

And bartender Darlene Sievers wonders what Mohamed Atta, the lead hijacker, was doing in her lounge just a few weeks before Sept. 11, 2001.

On a day of unthinkable horror, President Bush's visit to a Sarasota elementary school was overshadowed by the tragedies elsewhere. Yet questions quickly arose about the president's actions that morning, along with those of the Secret Service, the agency charged with protecting him.

Until recently, the controversy over Bush's brief time in Florida has been largely confined to conspiracy-minded Internet sites. But now it has burst into prominence with Fahrenheit 9/11, the new Michael Moore film that shows a blank-looking Bush holding a children's book - My Pet Goat - for several minutes as a national disaster unfolds.

Critics of the film say it is grossly unfair to the president. Bush told the 9/11 commission, which is investigating the attacks and the government's



[AP photo]

At a Sarasota elementary school, President Bush is told of the 9/11 plane attacks by chief of staff Andrew Card.

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response, that he felt he should "project strength and calm until he could better understand what was happening."

From his testimony and that of others, a slightly fuller picture has emerged of the president's morning. The St. Petersburg Times also conducted numerous interviews and examined public records in an effort to separate fact from fiction.

But to this day the story remains fraught with confusion, contradictions and questions. Among them: How much in command was the commander in chief?

* * *

On the night of Sept. 10, Bush and his entourage stayed at the Colony Beach and Tennis Resort on Longboat Key, the narrow barrier island of luxury homes and condos fringing the Gulf of Mexico.

According to the official schedule, the motorcade was to leave the Colony at 8:30 the next morning for the drive to Emma E. Booker Elementary School, 20 minutes and a world away in a predominantly black area of Sarasota.

If the motorcade was on time or even a few minutes late, Bush would have been in his limousine, with its advanced communications, when the first plane hit the World Trade Center at 8:46 a.m. and CNN began almost immediate coverage. Yet Bush didn't learn of the crash until after he arrived at the school, where journalists' cell phones already were ringing with the news.

"It mystifies me why they didn't call the president - he's totally surrounded by state of the art communications equipment and nobody tells him," says Plunket, a Sarasota Magazine columnist waiting at the school.

Of the many accounts of how Bush learned about the first crash, the most baffling comes from the president himself. At least twice he has said that he was watching TV when the first plane hit.

"I was sitting outside the classroom waiting to go in, and I saw an airplane hit the tower," Bush told a town hall meeting in Orlando that December. "And I used to fly myself, and I said, "Well, there's one terrible pilot.' And I said it must have been a horrible accident."

Bush repeated the story a month later at a similar forum in California, even though his version seems impossible - no footage of American Airlines 11 hitting the north tower surfaced until the next day.

According to other accounts, Bush first heard the news from chief of staff Andrew Card or political adviser Karl Rove - both of whom were with him - or national security adviser Condoleezza Rice in Washington.

Miller, then a member of Congress from Bradenton, said he and others in

the receiving line were told to wait while Bush took a phone call from Rice.

When Bush came over a few minutes later, "it was nothing different from the normal, brief greeting with the president," Miller says. "I don't think he was aware at the time, maybe, of the seriousness."

Sticking to his schedule, Bush entered the classroom about 9 a.m. and, judging by a videotape of the event, seems to enjoy himself as the second-graders read aloud. Five minutes later, Card slips in and whispers in Bush's ear that a second plane has hit the trade center.

To journalists and others glued to a TV in a nearby room, the second crash was electrifying. "The feeling among the reporters - me certainly - was that this was an enormous, world-shaking event, and here I'm stuck in this school," Plunket recalls.

Some of the president's aides clearly felt the same way.

Sarasota County Sheriff Bill Balkwill, who was in the main office, said a Marine carrying Bush's phone immediately turned to him and asked, "Can you get everybody ready? We're out of here."

But no one left.

Instead, the tape shows, Bush remains seated for at least five more minutes, although his expression by turns is somber, pensive, distracted and angry. Then he loosens up a bit and even appears to linger in the classroom.

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.

A staff report of the 9/11 commission concludes that agents physically removed Cheney from the White House at 9:36 a.m. and led him into an underground shelter about 10 a.m. But the report acknowledges "conflicting evidence" on the exact time, and White House photographer David Bohrer told ABC that Cheney was evacuated just after 9 a.m. - right after the second plane hit.

That would jibe with the account of Transportation Secretary Norman Mineta, whose testimony to the commission indicates Cheney already was in the bunker when Mineta arrived about 9:20 a.m.

Mineta's account also suggests it was Cheney who was most involved in an early and dramatic decision: to shoot down any errant planes.

In his testimony, Mineta said that about 9:25 a.m. he heard an unidentified man in the bunker reporting on the progress of a plane heading toward the Pentagon.

When the plane was 10 miles out, the man "said to the vice president,

"Does the order still stand?" Mineta testified. "And the vice president whipped his neck around and said, 'Of course the order still stands.'"

Nevertheless, American Flight 77 continued on and hit the Pentagon.

The president, meanwhile, had left the classroom about 9:15 a.m. but remained in the school for 20 minutes, engaging in spotty conversations with Cheney.

"There was not an open line of communication between the president and vice president on the morning of 9/11 but rather a series of calls between the two leaders," the commission staff report says. Bush told the commission he had to use a cell phone and was frustrated by communications problems that morning.

As soon as the second plane hit, the Secret Service should have whisked Bush out of the school, an expert on the agency says.

"With an unfolding terrorist attack, the procedure should have been to get the president to the closest secure location as quickly as possible, which clearly is not a school," says Philip Melanson, author of *The Secret Service: The Hidden History of an Enigmatic Agency*. "You're safer in that presidential limo, which is bombproof and blastproof and bulletproof."

The limousine had another advantage.

"There's the idea of protecting the president and then there's the idea of command and control," Melanson says. "In the presidential limo, the communications system is almost duplicative of the White House - he can do almost anything from there but he can't do much sitting in a school."

The Secret Service says it won't comment on security measures that day until the 9/11 Commission completes its work. According to the staff report, the agency "told us they were anxious to move the president to a safe location, but did not think it was imperative for him to run out the door."

About 9:30 a.m. - still in the school and still on his original schedule - Bush stood before students, teachers and others and told them the nation had been the target of an "apparent terrorist attack."

"Unfortunately, I will be returning to Washington," he said.

Or would he? Secret Service agents and Card felt the situation in the capital was too unstable. "All witnesses agreed that the president wanted to return to Washington and only grudgingly agreed to go elsewhere," the commission staff report said.

Agents apparently toyed with the idea of taking Bush back to the Colony "because they might not be able to get the planes ready," recalls Katherine Moulton, the resort's president. She says an agent called her from the school and assured her the hotel was "fully protected against anything that

might happen."

Instead, the motorcade left the school at 9:35 a.m. and headed straight for the Sarasota airport, where Air Force One was waiting. A backup plane, a Boeing 757, was 60 miles away in Tampa.

Miller, the Bradenton congressman, hurried up the rear steps of the presidential jet while Bush went up the front. He paused in the doorway to wave to photographers, raising further questions about security that day.

Shortly before 10 a.m., Air Force One took off "like a rocket," one White House staffer recalled. Miller said he and Adam Putnam of Bartow, the only other member of the House aboard, were instructed to "buckle up tightly" and told they were going to Washington.

Some passengers later said the plane seemed to be doing big, slow circles over Sarasota, though Miller thought it flew due north for about 45 minutes. Then it turned west; he could see the beaches of the Florida Panhandle far below.

Another mystery of 9/11 is why Air Force One flew at least an hour without a fighter jet escort even though one had been requested before 10 a.m., according to the commission staff report. During the time the 747 was unescorted, one hijacked plane was still in the air, other planes were missing and at least one threat had been reported against Air Force One itself.

Fighters already had been scrambled to protect Washington, and jets were readily available in Florida that morning: The North American Air Defense Command had two F-15s on alert at Homestead Air Force Base near Miami and another pair at Tyndall Air Force Base, near Panama City, according to Maj. Douglas Martin.

"I can't imagine by what glitch the protection was not provided to Air Force One as soon as it took off," Melanson says. "I would have thought there'd be something in place whereby one phone call from the head of the security detail would get the fighters in the air immediately."

As Air Force One headed toward a still-secret destination, Miller and others in the VIP area got periodic updates from Rove and a White House aide. But "communications were a real problem," Miller says - the TV reception was poor and everyone had been warned not to use cell phones.

Finally, about 11:30 a.m., Miller and Putnam were summoned forward to see the president. Bush pointed out that they now had an escort - F-16s had been scrambled from a base in Texas - and said a threat had been received from someone who knew the plane's code name. (The White House later said there was no such threat.)

Bush "was very serious, very determined, much cooler than I was," Miller recalls. "It was very emotional because we just didn't know at that time the full magnitude of what was happening."

About 11:45 a.m., Air Force One landed at Barksdale Air Force Base in Louisiana, where - in contrast to the loose security in Sarasota - it was immediately surrounded by soldiers and armored equipment. Bush was driven to a secure location to tape a speech to the nation while Miller, Putnam and others waited for the backup plane from Tampa.

It would have been one of very few planes in the sky that afternoon, or for the next several days: At 9:45 a.m., Transportation Secretary Mineta had ordered all civil aircraft to land, the first shutdown of civil aviation in U.S. history.

As Miller and most other VIPs headed to Washington on the backup flight, Air Force One continued its odyssey. From Louisiana, Bush flew on to Offutt Air Force Base in Nebraska and finally back to Washington that evening.

"It was," Bush later said with remarkable understatement, "an interesting day."

* * *

Was the president ever in danger while in Florida on 9/11?

In the days and weeks after the terror attacks, news organizations in the Sarasota area reported several incidents suggesting he was. But like so many things that day, rumor often superceded reality.

One of the most tantalizing stories appeared Sept. 26 in the weekly Longboat Observer, which said Longboat Key fire Marshal Carroll Mooneyhan had overheard a "strange exchange" between a receptionist at the Colony and a security guard.

As related by Mooneyhan, a van occupied by men of Middle Eastern descent had pulled up to the Colony about 6 a.m. on Sept. 11 and said they had a "pool side" interview with the president. The Secret Service said it had no record of an interview and turned them away.

To conspiracy buffs, the incident bore an eerie resemblance to a successful ruse used 8,000 miles away in Afghanistan. On Sept. 9 - two days before the U.S. attacks - Ahmed Massoud, the pro-American leader of the Northern Alliance, had been assassinated by two men posing as journalists and carrying a bomb disguised as a TV camera.

Were the men on Longboat Key planning to kill Bush in similar fashion? The problem with this theory is that Mooneyhan denies he ever told the Observer about any men in a van seeking an interview.

"How did they get that information from me if I didn't know it?" Mooneyhan asks.

The Observer sticks by its story. All the paper and Mooneyhan agree on is that he chatted with a reporter - he says they were friends - and that both

were questioned by the Secret Service after the story appeared. (The agency wouldn't comment.) The Observer also reported that two Middle Eastern men who lived in a Longboat Key mobile home park left shortly before 9/11, saying they were going to a wedding but never came back. That aroused suspicion because "wedding" is sometimes a code word for an al-Qaida attack.

But Martin Sharkey, the deputy Longboat Key police chief, recalls that the men really had gone to a wedding in Jordan and returned "to find their names or something on TV. They called the FBI and said, 'We're not involved in anything.' I remember that was checked out and those people were back here working."

A Sarasota TV station reported another incident: Omer Zainelabden called Sarasota police on Sept. 10 to say that a friend named "Gandi," who had made threatening remarks against the president in the past, had just arrived in town. Zainelabden, a Sudanese, then disappeared - perhaps nabbed by immigration authorities in a post 9/11 sweep of Muslim men.

But records show Zainelabden called police Sept. 11, hours after Bush left town. And Zainelabden, who had a history of heavy drinking, was still in Sarasota months later, other records show.

But while many reports were questionable at best, it soon became known that some of the 9/11 hijackers had spent time on the west coast of Florida and taken flight lessons there. That lends credibility to the account of Darlene Sievers, a longtime bartender at the Holiday Inn on Longboat Key.

Sievers was watching TV after the attacks when she was shocked to see a photograph of lead hijacker Mohamed Atta - the man she swears had been in the hotel's lounge just a few weeks before.

Atta, she recalls, came in during happy hour, sat down by himself at the bar and ordered a \$4 rum and Coke. A few minutes later another man, wearing a brown, aviator-style jacket, sat down next to Atta. He didn't speak English and didn't want anything to drink, so Atta asked for the check, left a \$20 bill, and the two men walked out together.

"I was sort of dumbfounded he left me a \$16 tip with no conversation," Sievers says. After seeing Atta on TV, Sievers told her son, who called the Sheriff's Office, which notified the FBI.

"They called me twice and did spend some time out at the Holiday Inn - I felt they were taking it seriously," she says although she never heard anything more.

The dining room manager and a waiter at the hotel, which has since been torn down, said they too had seen Atta on other occasions. It is certainly possible - Atta and Marwan Al-Shehhi, who piloted the second plane to hit the World Trade Center, trained at a flight school in Venice, just a half hour away by car.

What were the two men doing at the Holiday Inn that evening? Were they making final plans for the attacks that would transform the president's routine day in Florida into one that would forever alter his presidency?

Sievers doesn't know. But she remains convinced that one of the men was Mohamed Atta.

"I can remember people's drinks," she says, "and I'll never forget those piercing black eyes."

- Times researchers Kitty Bennett and Cathy Wos contributed to this report, which also contains information from "An Interesting Day" by Paul Thompson at the Center for Cooperative Research.

- Susan Taylor Martin can be contacted at susan@sptimes.com

The morning of 9/11 (All times a.m. unless otherwise specified)

8:30 to 8:39 - Bush motorcade leaves Colony Beach and Tennis Resort.

8:46 - American Airlines Flight 11 hits World Trade Center.

8:48 - First media reports of crash.

8:55 (approximately) - Motorcade arrives at Emma E. Booker Elementary School.

9:00 (approximately) - Bush enters classroom.

9:03 - United Airlines Flight 175 hits World Trade Center.

9:03 (approximately) - Marine carrying Bush's phone says, "We're out of here." No one leaves.

9:03 (approximately) - Secret Service takes Vice President Dick Cheney to White House bunker, according to White House photographer.

9:05-9:07 - Chief of staff Andrew Card tells Bush about second plane crash; Bush stays in classroom another five minutes.

9:15 (approximately) - Bush talks to Cheney, Rice and others.

9:20 (approximately) Transportation Secretary Norman Mineta arrives at bunker.

9:25 (approximately) - Mineta hears Cheney say "order still stands," apparently referring to shoot-down order.

9:30 - Bush speaks to teachers, students and others.

9:35 - Motorcade leaves for Sarasota airport.

9:37 - American Airlines Flight 77 hits Pentagon.

9:45 - Mineta orders all civil aircraft to land.

9:55 - Air Force One takes off from Sarasota.

10:03 - United Airlines Flight 93 crashes in Pennsylvania.

11-11:20 - Fighter jets escort Air Force One.

12:03 p.m. - Backup plane takes off from MacDill Air Force Base.

[Last modified July 4, 2004, 01:00:39]

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