

Air Force One arrived at Offutt at 2:50 P.M. At about 3:15, President Bush met with his principal advisers through a secure video teleconference.⁴ Rice said President Bush began the meeting with the words, “We’re at war,”⁵ and that Director of Central Intelligence George Tenet said the agency was still assessing who was responsible, but the early signs all pointed to al Qaeda.⁶ That evening the Deputies Committee returned to the pending presidential directive they had labored over during the summer.⁷

The secretary of defense directed the nation’s armed forces to Defense Condition 3, an increased state of military readiness.⁸ For the first time in history, all nonemergency civilian aircraft in the United States were grounded, stranding tens of thousands of passengers across the country. Contingency plans for the continuity of government and the evacuation of leaders had been implemented.⁹ The Pentagon had been struck; the White House or the Capitol had narrowly escaped direct attack. Extraordinary security precautions were put in place at the nation’s borders and ports.

In the late afternoon, the President overruled his aides’ continuing reluctance to have him return to Washington and ordered Air Force One back to Andrews Air Force Base. He was flown by helicopter back to the White House, passing over the still-smoldering Pentagon. At 8:30 that evening, President Bush addressed the nation from the White House. After emphasizing that the first priority was to help the injured and protect against any further attacks, he said: “We will make no distinction between the terrorists who committed these acts and those who harbor them.” He quoted Psalm 23—“though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death . . .” No American, he said, “will ever forget this day.”¹⁰

Following his speech, President Bush met again with his National Security Council (NSC), expanded to include Secretary of Transportation Norman Mineta and Joseph Allbaugh, the director of the Federal Emergency Management Agency. Secretary of State Colin Powell, who had returned from Peru after hearing of the attacks, joined the discussion. They reviewed the day’s events.¹¹

10.1 IMMEDIATE RESPONSES AT HOME

As the urgent domestic issues accumulated, White House Deputy Chief of Staff Joshua Bolten chaired a temporary “domestic consequences” group.¹² The agenda in those first days is worth noting, partly as a checklist for future crisis planners. It began with problems of how to help victims and stanch the flowing losses to the American economy, such as

- Organizing federal emergency assistance. One question was what kind of public health advice to give about the air quality in Lower Manhattan in the vicinity of the fallen buildings.¹³