

More than the actual events, inaccurate government accounts of those events made it appear that the military was notified in time to respond to two of the hijackings, raising questions about the adequacy of the response. Those accounts had the effect of deflecting questions about the military's capacity to obtain timely and accurate information from its own sources. In addition, they overstated the FAA's ability to provide the military with timely and useful information that morning.

In public testimony before this Commission in May 2003, NORAD officials stated that at 9:16, NEADS received hijack notification of United 93 from the FAA.¹⁷⁵ This statement was incorrect. There was no hijack to report at 9:16. United 93 was proceeding normally at that time.

In this same public testimony, NORAD officials stated that at 9:24, NEADS received notification of the hijacking of American 77.¹⁷⁶ This statement was also incorrect. The notice NEADS received at 9:24 was that American 11 had not hit the World Trade Center and was heading for Washington, D.C.¹⁷⁷

In their testimony and in other public accounts, NORAD officials also stated that the Langley fighters were scrambled to respond to the notifications about American 77,¹⁷⁸ United 93, or both. These statements were incorrect as well. The fighters were scrambled because of the report that American 11 was heading south, as is clear not just from taped conversations at NEADS but also from taped conversations at FAA centers; contemporaneous logs compiled at NEADS, Continental Region headquarters, and NORAD; and other records. Yet this response to a phantom aircraft was not recounted in a single public timeline or statement issued by the FAA or Department of Defense. The inaccurate accounts created the impression that the Langley scramble was a logical response to an actual hijacked aircraft.

In fact, not only was the scramble prompted by the mistaken information about American 11, but NEADS never received notice that American 77 was hijacked. It was notified at 9:34 that American 77 was lost. Then, minutes later, NEADS was told that an unknown plane was 6 miles southwest of the White House. Only then did the already scrambled airplanes start moving directly toward Washington, D.C.

Thus the military did not have 14 minutes to respond to American 77, as testimony to the Commission in May 2003 suggested. It had at most one or two minutes to react to the unidentified plane approaching Washington, and the fighters were in the wrong place to be able to help. They had been responding to a report about an aircraft that did not exist.

Nor did the military have 47 minutes to respond to United 93, as would be implied by the account that it received notice of the flight's hijacking at 9:16. By the time the military learned about the flight, it had crashed.

We now turn to the role of national leadership in the events that morning.