

Among the sources that reflect other important events of that morning, there is no documentary evidence for this call, but the relevant sources are incomplete. Others nearby who were taking notes, such as the Vice President’s chief of staff, Scooter Libby, who sat next to him, and Mrs. Cheney, did not note a call between the President and Vice President immediately after the Vice President entered the conference room.²¹⁶

At 10:02, the communicators in the shelter began receiving reports from the Secret Service of an inbound aircraft—presumably hijacked—heading toward Washington. That aircraft was United 93. The Secret Service was getting this information directly from the FAA. The FAA may have been tracking the progress of United 93 on a display that showed its projected path to Washington, not its actual radar return. Thus, the Secret Service was relying on projections and was not aware the plane was already down in Pennsylvania.²¹⁷

At some time between 10:10 and 10:15, a military aide told the Vice President and others that the aircraft was 80 miles out. Vice President Cheney was asked for authority to engage the aircraft.²¹⁸ His reaction was described by Scooter Libby as quick and decisive, “in about the time it takes a batter to decide to swing.” The Vice President authorized fighter aircraft to engage the inbound plane. He told us he based this authorization on his earlier conversation with the President. The military aide returned a few minutes later, probably between 10:12 and 10:18, and said the aircraft was 60 miles out. He again asked for authorization to engage. The Vice President again said yes.²¹⁹

At the conference room table was White House Deputy Chief of Staff Joshua Bolten. Bolten watched the exchanges and, after what he called “a quiet moment,” suggested that the Vice President get in touch with the President and confirm the engage order. Bolten told us he wanted to make sure the President was told that the Vice President had executed the order. He said he had not heard any prior discussion on the subject with the President.²²⁰

The Vice President was logged calling the President at 10:18 for a two-minute conversation that obtained the confirmation. On Air Force One, the President’s press secretary was taking notes; Ari Fleischer recorded that at 10:20, the President told him that he had authorized a shootdown of aircraft if necessary.²²¹

Minutes went by and word arrived of an aircraft down in Pennsylvania. Those in the shelter wondered if the aircraft had been shot down pursuant to this authorization.²²²

At approximately 10:30, the shelter started receiving reports of another hijacked plane, this time only 5 to 10 miles out. Believing they had only a minute or two, the Vice President again communicated the authorization to “engage or “take out” the aircraft. At 10:33, Hadley told the air threat conference call: “I need to get word to Dick Myers that our reports are there’s an inbound aircraft flying low 5 miles out. The Vice President’s guidance was we need to take them out.”²²³

Once again, there was no immediate information about the fate of the