

National crisis and confusion

"Today, our nation saw evil. These acts shattered steel, but they cannot dent the steel of American resolve. We will make no distinction between the terrorists who committed these acts and those who harbor them."

— President George W. Bush



A third hijacked jetliner crashed into the Pentagon late Tuesday morning. Part of the building was closed temporarily, but the military nerve center remained operational.



New Yorkers flee debris and choking clouds of dust and soot as the World Trade Center Towers collapse after being hit by two hijacked jetliners.



Southern Manhattan was shut down Tuesday as students gathered in the city was bombarded by dust and debris from the World Trade Center buildings.

Terror strikes



Bystanders watching the rescue efforts for the first tower were struck with fear as the second tower was hit by another hijacked jetliner and collapsed.

Bush vows punishment for terrorist threats, action

WASHINGTON (AP) — A grim-faced President George W. Bush asked the nation to find comfort in the Bible as he mourned the deaths of thousands of Americans in Tuesday's atrocities and vowed to avenge their killings.

"Today, our nation saw evil," Bush said.

In his first prime-time Oval Office address, Bush said the United States would find and punish "those behind these evil acts," and any country that harbors them.

Bush spoke from the Oval Office just hours after bouncing between Florida and air bases in Louisiana and Nebraska for security reasons. Fighter jets and decoy helicopters accompanied his evening flight to Washington, D.C., and the White House, where his Marine One helicopter briefly stood vigil on the South Lawn in the event of another evacuation. The helicopter took off about 10 p.m. EDT.

With smoke still pouring out of rubble in Washington and New York, Bush declared, "These acts shattered steel, but they cannot dent the steel of American resolve."

He spoke for less than five minutes from the desk that Bill Clinton and John F. Kennedy used before him. Beside the door, a TelePrompTer operator fed Bush the words that he and his speechwriters hastened to pen just an hour earlier.

He stumbled a couple of times even as he strove to maintain a commanding air. Aides pushed an American flag and one with the presidential seal behind him for the somber occasion.

Immediately afterward, Bush joined a late-night meeting of his National Security Council and planned to remain overnight at the White House.

Bush said the government offices deserted after the bombings Tuesday would open on Wednesday.

He asked the nation to pray for the families of the victims and quoted the Book of Psalms, "And I pray they will be comforted by a power greater than any of us spoken through the ages in Psalm 23, 'Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I fear no evil for you are with me.'"

The United States received no warning of the attacks on the Pentagon and New York's World Trade Center Towers, said White House press secretary Ari Fleischer.

U.S. officials privately said they suspected terrorist Osama bin Laden, protected by Afghan government, was behind the tragedies. The Afghan government has rejected the accusations.

"We will make no distinction between the terrorists who committed these acts and those who harbor them," Bush said.

"Today, our fellow citizens, our way of life, our very freedom, came under attack in a series of deliberate and deadly terrorist acts."

"Thousands of lives were suddenly ended by evil, despicable acts of terror," Bush said.

The Oval Office addressed a third statement on the attacks, being unaware of any other he first took as a single statement went off course," Fleischer said.

He began his day in Florida, where he intended to talk about education. Two other speeches were scrapped, Bush said, including Louisiana's Barksdale Air Base and, in mid-flight, Vice President Cheney's speech to put the U.S. military on alert worldwide.

Bush made a brief stop from a Barksdale Air Base room, assuring Americans he was in regular contact with the command post in Florida. Cheney, Defense Secretary Donald H. Rumsfeld and White House national security adviser Stephen Hadley were on the line. On the line between Bush and the president told his point, "It's the fact that attacks."

Shuttled across the country in a camouflaged Humvee, Bush boarded Air Force One at 1:30 p.m. EDT for a flight to Nebraska that turned home to the U.S. Command, which is the nation's nuclear warhead three years ago, the Command also has called doomsday planes been specially equipped as a flying White House in the event of nuclear war.

Before his return to the White House at dusk, Bush was sensitive to any appearance was not at the helm.

Fleischer said Bush was in Washington, which led the crisis operation at the White House, but stands that at a time of caution must be taken.

At the first reports of New York's World Trade Center, Bush told his Sarasota school audience that he was diverted to Washington when a plane slammed into the Pentagon, and Washington was under attack.

On Capitol Hill, first Bush, who was to have debut testimony before a committee on education, tried to speak on the World Trade Center.

"Parents need to know their children everywhere in that they're safe," she said, as she and Sen. Kennedy, D-Mass., their hearing was postponed.

Mrs. Bush and a 1998 that aides were whisked to a secret location and the White House, which evacuated but for the of foreign policy and staffed the basement Room.

Fleischer said the girls, Barbara at Yale and Jenna at the University of Texas-Austin, also were in secure locations.

