

Implement the Standard Protocol or Improvise a Defense?

Deviation from protocol determined the outcome of the 9/11 attacks.

The Commander of NORAD attested to the adequacy of the standard procedures by stating that the hijacked planes could have been intercepted had those procedures been followed.

The 9/11 Commission concluded that, “On the morning of 9/11, the existing protocol was unsuited in every respect for what was about to happen.” This claim substituted for an explanation as to why the attacks succeeded. The Commission did not explain why the standard protocols were not implemented.

On June 17, 2004 at the Commission’s last public hearing, the Commission’s Executive Director, Philip Zelikow, read, *Improvising a Homeland Defense* (Staff Statement No. 17), into the record. Its concluding sentences are:

NORAD [North American Aerospace Defense Command] and the FAA [Federal Aviation Administration] **were unprepared** for the type of attacks launched against the United States on September 11, 2001. They struggled, under difficult circumstances, **to improvise** a homeland defense against an unprecedented challenge they had never encountered and **had never trained** to meet.

Yet USA Today, just two months earlier on April 19, 2004, stated that NORAD had trained for just such events – hijacked airliners crashing into the World Trade Center and into the Pentagon.

NORAD had drills eerily like Sept. 11

Pentagon, Trade Center among imagined targets

By Steven Komarow and Tom Squitieri
USA TODAY

WASHINGTON — In the two years before the Sept. 11 attacks, the North American Aerospace Defense Command conducted exercises simulating what the White House says was unimaginable at the time: hijacked airliners used as weapons to crash into targets and cause mass casualties.

One of the imagined targets was the World Trade Center. In another exercise, jets performed a mock shootdown over the Atlantic Ocean of a jet supposedly laden with chemical poisons headed toward a target in the United States.

President Bush said at a news conference Tuesday, “Nobody in our government, at least, and I don’t think the prior government, could envision flying airplanes into buildings on such a massive scale.”

Even more compelling evidence of NORAD having been trained to meet such threats was a 9/11 Commission document entitled, “NORAD Exercises – Hijack Summary,” which revealed that the Northeast Air Defense Sector of NORAD had conducted a hijacking exercise just two days prior to 9/11/2001. The scenario, a part of the Vigilant Guardian I exercise, was for a DC-10 hijacked by “Terrorists with explosives who plan to detonate them over NYC.” The drill was held on September 9, 2001. This document is one of the Commission records, which first became available in 2009 at the U.S. National Archives.

Shortly after Mr. Zelikow had read the Commission’s conclusion that the FAA and NORAD were unprepared, NORAD Commander, General Ralph Eberhart, was questioned, at the same hearing, by Commissioner James Thompson.

MR. THOMPSON: Mr. Chairman, I really need to re-ask my question, because I think we've gotten two different answers from General Eberhart, and I want to be fair to him and have the public understand, if I might. [. . .] So let me re-ask it to give you a fair chance. **Assuming we were postured as we were then -- forget now** [. . .] would it have been physically possible, if everything had gone right in terms of communication of information and communication

of orders -- **would it still physically have been possible for the military pilots to have shot down either the plane that hit the first World Trade tower, or the plane that hit the second World Trade tower, or the plane that hit the Pentagon?**

GEN. EBERHART: Sir, I'm sorry if I misunderstood your question. I assumed in the preface to your question you assumed that FAA told us as soon as they knew.
[Note: the standard protocol of the FAA required such notifications.]

MR. THOMPSON: Right.

GEN. EBERHART: **And if that is the case, yes, we could shoot down the airplanes.**

MR. THOMPSON: All right. Thank you, general.

[Transcript, Public Hearing of the National Commission on Terrorist Attacks upon the United States, June 17, 2004, Panel I (Military Response on 9/11), pp. 58-59, 66-67]

General Ralph Eberhart was the Commander of NORAD on September 11, 2001 and at the time he gave these answers. No one has rebutted his testimony that the Air Force would have been able to intercept and shoot down the hijacked aircraft had NORAD been notified when the FAA became aware of the emergencies. However, the FAA had already submitted written testimony to the Commission that, for all but the first plane, communications about the hijacked aircraft had been made in real-time.

MR. BEN-VENISTE: [. . .] we were provided a statement which comes from FAA, which I'd like to read into the record, Mr. Chairman. And it is, I am told, authored by two individuals, high level individuals at FAA, Mr. Asmus [sic, Ms. Osmus] and Ms. Schuessler. And it's entitled, FAA Communications with NORAD on September 11th, 2001. "Within minutes after the first aircraft hit the World Trade Center, **the FAA immediately established several phone bridges that included** FAA field facilities, the FAA command center, FAA headquarters, **DOD** [Department of Defense], the Secret Service and other government agencies. The U.S. Air Force liaison to the FAA immediately joined the FAA headquarters phone bridge and established contact with NORAD on a separate line. **The FAA shared real-time information on the phone bridges about the unfolding events, including information about loss of communication with aircraft, loss of transponder signals, unauthorized changes in course, and other actions being taken by all the flights of interest, including Flight 77.** Other parties on the phone bridges in turn shared information about actions they were taken [sic, taking]. NORAD logs indicate that the FAA made formal notification about American Flight 77 at 9:24 a.m. But information about the flight was conveyed continuously during the phone bridges before the formal notification."

[Transcript, Hearing of the National Commission on Terrorist Attacks upon the United States, May 23, 2003, Civil Aviation Security, Panel 1: September 11, 2001: The Attacks and the Response]

The Commission heard testimony that the Air Force could have downed the planes, had the FAA made notifications promptly; the FAA testified that it was communicating in real-time about the events, excepting Flight AA11. [No official explanation has yet been given for the FAA's delay in notifying NORAD about AA11 (emergency condition at 8:14, notification at 8:34, crash at 8:46)].

These apparently discrepant testimonies, like many others, were ignored, not reconciled. Instead, the 9/11 Commission contradicted them. Contrary to the Commission's assertions, the existing protocols *were suited* to the occasion; the FAA and NORAD *were prepared* and *had trained* for it. The 9/11 Commission Report merely acknowledged, "The defense of U.S. airspace on 9/11 was not conducted in accord with existing training and protocols" [p. 31], but never adequately explained why those protocols were not implemented.

**Hence the Commission failed to answer one of the most basic questions,
Why were the 9/11 attacks successful?**