



**FACE TIME.** Vice President Cheney with National Security Adviser Condoleezza Rice on Sept. 11, 2001

# PIECES OF THE PUZZLE

A top-secret conference call on September 11 could shed new light on the terrorist attacks

BY CHITRA RAGAVAN  
AND MARK MAZZETTI

**N**ot long after American Airlines Flight 11 slammed into the north tower of the World Trade Center, military officials in Washington initiated an “air-threat conference call.” Through the course of the day, participants included Vice President Dick Cheney, Defense Secretary Donald

Rumsfeld, and senior officials from the National Security Council (NSC), the Federal Aviation Administration (FAA), and the North American Aerospace Defense Command (NORAD). Pentagon officials familiar with the events say the conference call was broadcast over a loudspeaker inside the National Military Command Center at the Pentagon, which Rumsfeld and Gen. Richard Myers, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff,

were using as an emergency command post.

Back in May, members of the independent commission appointed to examine the September 11 attacks were informed that the conference call had been recorded. But Pentagon officials said that they had yet to transcribe the tapes. The commission’s repeated requests over the summer finally resulted in the Pentagon’s creating a classified transcript. It was forwarded to the White House on August 6, *U.S. News* has learned, so that administration officials could conduct an “executive-privilege review,” required because of Cheney’s participation in the call. The commission has been promised access to the roughly 200-page transcript, sources say. Staff Director Philip Zelikow says the transcript is just a small piece of a mammoth puzzle the commission must put together by next May from thousands of pages of government documents. “We already had the substance,” Zelikow says. “This is further detail, further corroboration.”

Commissioners say they may have to obtain the tapes themselves because the transcript is not time coded, making the task of outlining the exact sequence of events that day cumbersome.

Among the other highly classified materials recently presented to the commission: thousands of pages of transcripts of interrogations of top-tier al Qaeda leaders captured abroad and lower-level op-

## TERROR ON TAPE: ‘WE’RE TRAPPED’

**‘B**odies are just coming from out of the sky,” a man says. Another screams: “Get outside! Get the hell outside!” These are snippets of harrowing conversations recorded as hijacked planes toppled the World Trade Center on 9/11. The transcripts were released last Thursday by the Port Authority of New York and New Jersey in response to a lawsuit filed by the *New*

*York Times*, which said it needed them to gain insight into how authorities handled the crisis. Some 2,000 pages of phone calls and radio transmissions paint a picture of chaos and heroism. Often, they include the last words of officials and civilians.

The relatives of many victims opposed the release, saying it sharpens their pain. The Port Authority agreed but obeyed the court order, hoping that the media will “refrain from publishing gruesome, gratuitous, or personal de-

tails that do nothing to further this discussion.”

Excerpts are chilling. One caller in the north tower said: “We are on the 88th floor. We’re trapped. . . . The whole building is . . . coming down . . .”

Higher up, at the Windows on the World restaurant, Christine Olender, the 39-year-old assistant to the general manager, called the police: “The situation on [floor] 106 is rapidly getting worse . . . the fresh air is going down fast! I’m not exaggerating.” The officer replies, “Uh, ma’am, I know

you’re not exaggerating. We’re getting a lot of these calls. We are sending the Fire Department up as soon as possible.”

“What are we going to do for air?” she asks.

“Ma’am, the Fire Department . . .”

“Can we break a window?”

“You can do whatever you have to get to, uh, the air.”

“All right.”

About 170 staff and guests were trapped. None made it out.

—Samantha Levine

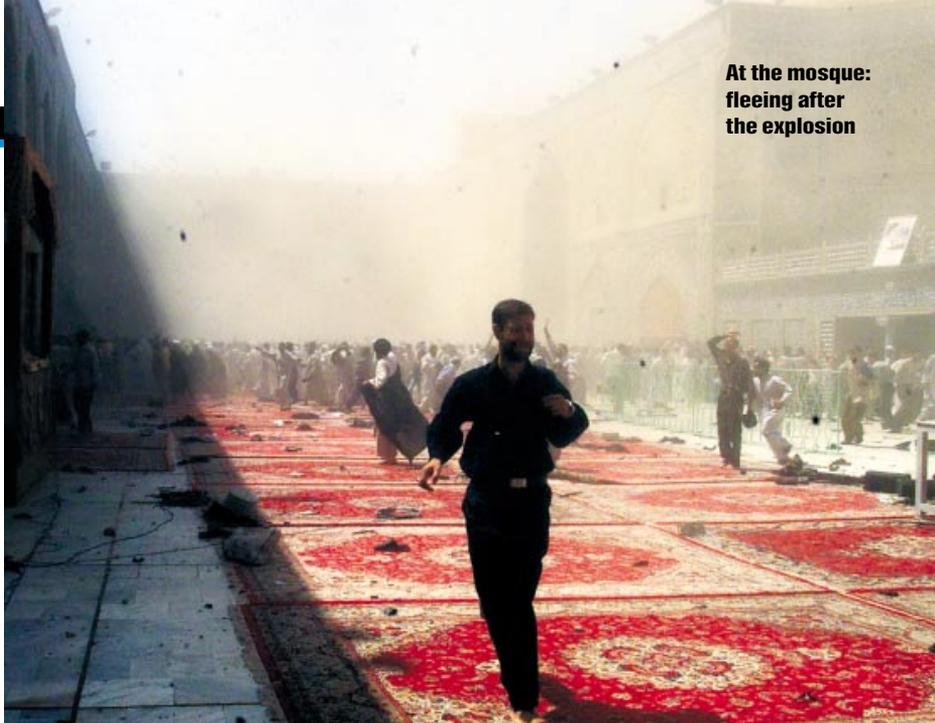
eratives held at the U.S. military barracks in Guantánamo Bay, Cuba.

Commissioners hope the transcript of the September 11 conference call is revealing on several fronts. On the morning of the terrorist attacks, NORAD's satellites, operated to detect potential airborne attacks from outside U.S. borders, were unable to monitor the airspace inside the country. The command, buried in a mountain in Colorado Springs, Colo., was dependent on radars operated by the Federal Aviation Administration for information about the four fuel-heavy aircraft hijacked by the terrorists. NORAD even had to rely on FAA satellites to track military jets inside U.S. airspace, officials say. The transcript could help explain why it took the FAA 14 minutes to notify NORAD that American Airlines Flight 77—originally bound for Los Angeles from Washington's Dulles International Airport, but way off course over West Virginia—had been hijacked and was headed back toward Washington. Could the military, in those 14 minutes, have scrambled fighter jets and diverted the plane before it slammed into the Pentagon?

**Shoot-down order.** The transcript may also shed light on the military's response to President Bush's unprecedented order to shoot down any hijacked civilian airplane. Pentagon sources say Bush communicated the order to Cheney almost immediately after Flight 77 hit the Pentagon and the FAA, for the first time ever, ordered all domestic flights grounded. "There are unanswered questions," says Richard Ben-Veniste, a commission member and former federal prosecutor, as to whether the shoot-down order "had been rehearsed for, whether it had been prepared for, and what measures were in place to protect the Capitol," believed to be the hijackers' original target for Flight 77.

Some of the questions may be raised in the commission's second interim report, due out in about two weeks. The report will offer a substantive summary of the commission's top priorities and offer an updated report card on agency cooperation. In its first interim report in July, the commissioners publicly chastised the Pentagon, FBI, CIA, and other agencies for recalcitrance. "Certainly, cooperation has improved," says Timothy Roemer, a commissioner. "But we're still seeking very critical documents from NORAD, NSC, and CIA." ●

*With Anne Bradley*



At the mosque:  
fleeing after  
the explosion

## TERROR IN A HOLY PLACE

One car bomb, lots of suspects, tensions aplenty

BY BAY FANG

**B**AGHDAD—The golden dome atop the tomb of Imam Ali shines like a beacon in the middle of Iraq's holy city of Najaf. At Friday prayers, this holiest of Shiite Muslim shrines is packed to overflowing with worshipers from near and far. On this particular Friday, over 1,000 were kneeling on prayer mats, still in mid-prayer, when a car bomb exploded along the mosque's outer wall, sending a pillar of flame high into the air. In a flash, the street was splattered with blood. Scores of Iraqis lay dead, with at least 100 wounded. Ayatollah Mohammed Baqir al-Hakim, the head of the largest Shiite political group in Iraq, had just finished an eerily prophetic sermon when he stepped into the hot afternoon sun to his death.

The attack is the deadliest in a spiral of violence and high-profile assassinations that has intensified in recent weeks. Coming just a week after the deadly bombing at the United Nations headquarters in Baghdad, the Najaf attack is putting even more pressure on the U.S.-led occupation government and the Bush administration to devise new initiatives to bring order here.



Ayatollah al-Hakim

As it has been all along, the first stumbling block for the United States is determining who or which elements are behind the attack. The list of likely suspects includes remnants of Saddam Hussein's regime seeking to discredit U.S. occupation forces and foreign terrorists affiliated with al Qaeda. But the worst-case scenario would be that Hakim's assassination is the work of a rival Shiite faction, such as that arrayed around Moktada al-Sadr, a youthful, firebrand cleric who preaches the militant establishment of an Islamic state. Shiite rivalries have been escalating, with disputes among different families in the months since Saddam's ouster. Some older ayatollahs, meanwhile, preach cooperation with the U.S.-led coalition while younger factions actively oppose the occupation. "If this has gone beyond healthy differences to assassination and car bombs," says Isam

al-Khafaji, an Iraqi-born professor who recently resigned in protest from his advisory post in the Coalition Provisional Authority, "this is the worst thing, because we are talking about the seeds of a civil war."

Hakim seemed to be aware of the many enemies he faced. In his last sermon, he issued a clear warning: "To all the Iraqi people, they should be careful and alert because



**SHOCK.** Iraqis try to hold back family members of the dead and injured as others dig through the rubble left by the car bomb.

the danger is very near to us, and we are afraid that one day our movement will be assassinated and our freedom too. Our enemies are planning to assassinate our movement.”

Hakim returned to his native Iraq from over two decades in exile in Iran on May 10. He had been one of the most effective anti-Saddam organizers through his group, the Supreme Council for the Islamic Revolution in Iraq, which has long advocated Islamic rule. Though he had previously denounced the idea of a foreign-installed government, he had become something of a moderate in the new Iraq, even beseeching Iraqis to cooperate with the U.S.-backed Iraqi Governing Council, of which his brother is a member. “He was somebody in a leadership position that you could talk to and work with,” says a defense official. “Now you lose that person.”

**Backlash.** The explosion also contributes to rising anger against coalition forces for being unable to maintain stability. Even in the immediate aftermath of the explosion, peoples’ anger was directed at the occupation forces. “There is nothing protecting us, no government, no security,” says a guard at the Najaf hospital. “What you have seen is like all the troubles everywhere in this country, and the reason is U.S. forces.”

In Washington, officials were scram-

bling for new ways to stem the violence even before the explosion in Najaf. While the Pentagon continues to insist that no more U.S. troops are needed, there is a growing consensus on the urgent need for more international peacekeepers. Officials at the State Department floated a plan to put the United Nations formally in charge of the occupation forces as long as an American general remains in command. It is unlikely they would wear the U.N.’s blue helmets, but the aim is to smooth the path for a U.N. resolution that would facilitate commitments of more international forces. The Pentagon, while not consulted ahead of time, appears to be amenable. “There is some flexibility there,” says one defense official.

That concession alone, however, is unlikely to budge most of the nations on the U.N. Security Council. Instead, Washington may simply have to give the Unit-

ed Nations some authority to help govern Iraq and shape its political future (not to mention some ability to influence the awarding of lucrative contracts). “We want a bigger U.N. role on all fronts and a clear timetable leading to the end of occupation,” says one Security Council diplomat. “The U.N. is much more experienced than the occupying powers at rebuilding a country.” A senior State Department official tells *U.S. News* that in internal administration discussions, the Pentagon and the vice president’s office are so far resisting ceding any political role to the world body. “We’re going to have to make some kind of compromise in order to get some sort of resolution through,” this official says. “There will have to be some sort of sharing.”

Carving out a role for the United Nations is becoming important not only for security but also for the overall cost of rebuilding Iraq. Paul Bremer, the U.S. official who heads up the provisional government, said last week that Iraq needs billions of dollars just to deal with the cost of rebuilding and maintaining Iraq’s shattered infrastructure in the coming year. The cost of building a new Iraq is escalating rapidly, in both dollars and blood. ●

*With Kevin Whitelaw, Mark Mazzetti, and Thomas Omestad*

**“The danger is very near to us.”**

AYATOLLAH MOHAMMED BAQIR AL-HAKIM, in his sermon at the Imam Ali mosque shortly before he was killed there by a car bomb