

Robert J. Darling shares his experiences inside the White House on 9/11

The Speaker

Lieutenant Colonel Robert J. Darling (ret.) is a former Marine and White House Military Office Airlift Operations Liaison Officer, a position charged with organizing all logistical aspects of travel for the White House. His recent book, *24 Hours inside the President's Bunker*, details his time in the President's Emergency Operations Center on September 11, 2001.

Review Questions

CHAPTER 1: *Lt. Colonel Darling describes his professional trajectory and the Marine Corps' emphasis on, and training in, crisis management and leadership.*

1. Describe Darling's role in the White House as the Airlift Operations Officer.
2. How did this training serve Darling both before and during 9/11?

CHAPTER 2: *Darling explains the shift in his and his colleagues' perceptions of the unfolding events.*

1. What were Darling's initial thoughts about the attacks?
2. How did his sense of responsibility change when the second plane hit the World Trade Center?

CHAPTER 3: *Darling describes the scene outside the White House and his entry into the President's Emergency Operations Center (PEOC) underneath the White House.*

1. Why does Darling end up in the PEOC? How does he describe the scene outside the White House?
2. How does Vice President Cheney respond to the information that there is another hijacked plane heading towards Washington?

CHAPTER 4: *Darling elaborates on Vice President Cheney's early decision-making concerning Flight 93 and logistics around President Bush's travel.*

1. Why is it important that Vice President Cheney spoke with President Bush or Defense Secretary Rumsfeld prior to arriving in the PEOC?
2. Why does Vice President Cheney assume there will be a Congressional inquiry?

KEY REFERENCES

Airborne Warning and Control System (AWACS)

A military surveillance plane providing radar and communication support for US, NATO, and other countries' air defense forces.

Continuity of Government

A set plan to ensure the federal government continues to run smoothly in the case of a major attack or catastrophe. One aspect of this plan is the physical separation of the President, Vice President, and Speaker of House to ensure all do not become simultaneously incapacitated.

Defense Readiness Condition (DEFCON)

A system used by the US Armed Forces to indicate the current level of military alert and posture, operating on a scale of 1-5 (5 is the lowest level of alert, one is the highest). On 9/11, DEFCON 3 was instituted for the third time in United States history.

Hardened Site

A location able to withstand a catastrophic incoming attack, such as a nuclear or chemical strike. The PEOC and NMCC are examples of hardened sites.

Review Questions (continued)

CHAPTER 5: *Darling shares his impressions of White House operations and explains actions taken by President Bush.*

1. How did Vice President Cheney’s perspective of Flight 93 differ from Darling’s?
2. What classified programs did President Bush implement and what did those programs require?
3. What were Darling’s thoughts on how the emergency operations functioned on 9/11?

CHAPTER 6: *Darling offers background on a conversation between National Security Advisor Condoleezza Rice and Russian President Vladimir Putin.*

1. Why did Defense Secretary Rumsfeld think it important to move our nuclear forces to DEFCON 3?
2. What was the importance of President Putin standing down his nuclear forces?

CHAPTER 7: *Darling discusses the grounding of all commercial flights in United States airspace and communication issues with the Secretary of Defense.*

1. Why was Darling so impressed with the forced landing of all commercial flights?
2. How did Secretary Rumsfeld’s “admirable” actions cause crucial communication problems?

CHAPTER 8: *Darling describes the arrival of the President in the PEOC, the end of his long day, and his role in the days that followed.*

1. What were President Bush’s actions when he arrived at the PEOC?

Questions for Further Discussion

Darling repeatedly shares his positive impressions of Vice President Cheney’s quick decision-making on 9/11, stating that he was both “impressed and slightly shocked.” Describe the reasons behind these conflicted emotions. Would you have felt similarly? Do you agree with Cheney’s actions? Why or why not?

The United States has a specific “chain of command” that defines which officials have legal authority to carry out military actions. It also lays out strict protocols for implementing those actions. Why was this implemented? Do you think it is necessary to have it specifically defined? Why or why not?

Recommended Resources

Darling, Robert J. [24 Hours inside the President’s Bunker](#). (iUniverse, 2010)

Dwyer, J. and Flynn, K. [102 Minutes: The Untold Story of the Fight to Survive Inside the Twin Towers](#). (Times Books, 2006)

KEY REFERENCES (continued)

National Command Authority (NCA)

Defines who in our government has the legal power to order a military strike. The NCA consists of the President and the Secretary of Defense.

National Military Command Center (NMCC)

A hardened site located in the Pentagon, the NMCC the logistical and communication center for the National Command Authority and central command center for the Department of Defense

President’s Emergency Operations Center (PEOC)

A hardened site built below the East Wing of White House. Much of the White House’s coordination and response during 9/11, led by Vice President Cheney, took place here.